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Knowing Your Place and Making Do: Radical Arts Activism in Black and Latino Los Angeles, 1968-1984

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in History of Art and Architecture

by

John Vincent Decemvirale

Committee in charge:

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September 2021

The dissertation of John Vincent Decemvirale is approved.

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September 2021

Knowing Your Place and Making Do: Radical Arts Activism in Black and Latino Los Angeles, 1968-1984

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by

John Vincent Decemvirale

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ABSTRACT

Knowing Your Place and Making Do: Radical Arts Activism in Black and Latino Los Angeles, 1968-1984

by

John Vincent Decemvirale

Building on scholarship that continues to expand the cultural topography of the city, this dissertation investigates a constellation of arts organizations founded and managed by people of color in Los Angeles from 1968-1984. Arts associations such as the Black Arts Council (1968- 1972) and grassroots art spaces like Self Help Graphics (1972-present) and the Museum of African American Art (1976-present) established the artistic networks of apprenticeship, instruction and affiliation for much of the Black and Latino artistic production since the 1960s. Equal parts activist headquarters and alternative art spaces, these groups provided exhibition opportunities for Black and Latino artists and rallied significant audiences of color to financially and ideologically support their work. Groups of like-minded Black and Latino activists and artists disillusioned with the public art museum instead founded alternative art spaces in defiance of a dominant culture's attempts at keeping aggrieved racial and ethnic communities invisible. Protesting their exclusion from the city's main museums, these groups turned churches, street corners and parking lots into temporary exhibition spaces and art studios. Through community oriented programming and exhibition making, they generated large membership constituencies and attracted audiences that reached into the thousands. By reformatting the dominant culture's products, these groups made art applicable and meaningful to demographic groups that the museum as an institution continues to neglect, ignore and misunderstand. Analyzed as a series of case studies, these art formations provide insights into

the popular uses and re-readings of the spaces, frameworks and alliances by which art has traditionally been activated, curated, exhibited and received.

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Introduction

The 1969 publicity poster for the newly constructed Pasadena Art Museum, located in the wealthy, white Los Angeles suburb of Pasadena, California, promoted a popular vision of the ideal white museum community.[1] A proposition as much as it was a reflection of reality, the poster advertised the museum as an elite space defined by modern architecture, art as well as the affluent white community for whom the museum was designed. As the advertisement clearly pronounced, the museum experience was not merely about art, but about access to an exclusive and racialized space.

In light of the new building's opening, the photographer emphasizes the museum's architecture, paying—and thereby directing—very little attention to the art collection itself. Visitors can be seen chatting with one another and advancing up the central ramp, symbolically ascending toward human progress, enlightenment, and modernity—a trajectory central to the Euro-American public art museum's own historic mission to "civilize" the world's peoples in its image. As scholars Carol Duncan and Karen Mary Davalos detail in their foundational research on American museum history, the "civilizing" and "class betterment" projects of the American public art museum model were inherited from European predecessors.[2] Likewise, the poster was arguably an advertisement directed at the American white art establishment of the late 1960s. While such projects promoted art appreciation, they also emphasized historical and assimilationist trajectories that upheld whiteness as the ideal. In such a hierarchized world

[1] See Catherine Grenier, *Catalog L.A.: Birth of an Art Capital, 1955-1985* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007), 192.

[2] Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995); Karen Mary Davalos, *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2001).

order, one was either catching up with Euro-American progress or already on the path of assimilation into the dominant culture's paradigm.

The poster is particularly intriguing for what it reveals about the subject position the museum creates through its spatialization of art history. At the top of the ramp, a white, able-bodied, upper-class, heteronormative couple occupies the privileged viewing position the museum constructs. Looking down on the camera, they are reminiscent of the royal figures in Diego Velasquez's well-known painting *Las Meninas* (1656), in which the King and Queen of Spain pose for a portrait in the artist's royal studio. Velasquez famously merged the depicted, the perceived, and the perceiver via a mirror at the back of the studio, thereby creating a position in which viewers of the painting occupy the standpoint of the king and queen themselves. The configuration of the poster's elegant couple is comparable to the royal position Velasquez portrays in his painting; in a twentieth-century iteration, the subjects occupy the superior position at the top of an American epistemic, racial, and social hierarchy. Having scaled the spiral of enlightenment, the couple present ideal humans, signaling to the viewer what it is to be cultured, historical, thinking subjects. Far from supporting a multiplicity of perspectives and bodies, this image generates a clear subject position, an ideal performance, which visitors were expected to emulate in their quest to embody white elite sophistication.

Much like sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of French public art museums in the twentieth century in his landmark critique, *Distinction* (1984), the Pasadena Art Museum worked as a stage for the performance of class distinction. As Bourdieu explains, those inducted into the Euro-American art historical frame of reference exhibit their standing as elites who both own and are reflected in the history and narratives that the museum constructs. American and European public art museums share this function. As artist and museum critic

Brian O'Doherty succinctly summarizes of fine art gallery spaces in the United States: "Never was a space, designed to accommodate the prejudices and enhance the self-image of the upper middle classes, so efficiently codified."[3]

While Bourdieu strictly focuses on class and education in his analysis, the performance of race plays an equally defining role in the production of museum spaces in the United States. The Pasadena poster might draw criticism from certain corners of the artworld today, but the link between whiteness and art museums—and the default assumption of a white subject—continues to undergird contemporary museum practice. The "traditional, core, white art audience," as the Indianapolis Museum of Art put it in a controversial public job listing in 2021, demonstrates how deeply ingrained whiteness is within the Euro-American museum imaginary.[4]

In their essay "The Arts As White Property: An Introduction to Race, Racism and the Arts in Education," arts education scholars Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez, Amelia M. Krache, and B. Stephen Carpenter, II, caution that the racial project of whiteness permeates the entirety of contemporary American museum practice. Indeed, the authors propose that the arts are "*institutionalized within structures that protect the property values of whiteness,"* and *"serve as evidence of European cultural superiority* (original italics)."[5] In no small measure, the institution of art has long reinforced the value of white identity, neighborhoods, and art collections, producing the discriminatory perceptual frameworks in which art museums

[3] Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986), 76.

[4] Alex Greenberger, "Indianapolis Museum of Art President Resigns Following Job Posting Centering 'White Art Audience," *Artnews*, February 17, 2021, https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/charles-venable-resigns-indianapolis-museum-newfields-1234583972/.

[5] Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez, Amelia M. Krache, and B. Stephen Carpenter, II, "The Arts As White Property: An Introduction to Race, Racism and the Arts in Education," in Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez, Amelia M. Krache, and B. Stephen Carpenter, II, eds, *The Palgrave Handbook of Race and the Arts in Education* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 17-18.

complicitly operate. Both through action and inaction, the museum model naturalized white superiority within the public cultural sphere by promoting and supporting the myth of the European aesthetic tradition as the global standard and singular option.

Racially segregated visions of the museum were by no means particular to white, wealthy suburban Pasadena. Still envisioned by many in the museum field as a neutral aesthetic enclosure that expertly collects, classifies, and exhibits the world's expressive artifacts, Euro-American public art museums are in practice deeply embedded with naturalized racial and social orderings. Significantly, the Euro-American public art museum assumed its powerful position as definer and judge of art through the brutal campaign of Euro-American colonialism. The public art museum was not the direct agent of physically violent imperial conquests, but it did follow in its wake, conducting the epistemic violence in which it subordinated local significance, immediacy of expression, and the intimacy of human creativity and cultural value to forge a singular conceptual framework for the art it would collect, display and discriminately define. The putative neutral aesthetic space, as such, imposed European definitions of the aesthetic and re-mapped the cultural landscape accordingly, becoming a site in support of what art historian Carolyn Dean refers to as "European aesthetic supremacy."[6]

Museum activists of the 1960s and 1970s rightfully asked what place they had in this monocultural vision of a public art museum whose foundational colonial logics had been neither acknowledged nor undone. In this dissertation, I review the history of those cultural workers who operated in communities of color, and consequently at the margins of museum and contemporary art history, from 1968 to the beginnings of the 1980s in Los Angeles: artists, activists, community curators, founders of culturally specific community art centers and

[6] Carolyn Dean, "The Trouble with (The Term) Art," *Art Journal* 65, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 24–32, 30.

museums, museum educators, museum preparators, museum guards, nuns and undocumented immigrants. They, along with their colleagues, challenged the public art museum model and insisted that its commitment to whiteness and colonial posturing as universal arbiter of culture made it inhospitable to non-white people.

Unwilling to consider itself a mechanism of colonialism, the contemporary museum field continues its attempt at reforming a dysfunctional model that has repeatedly proven over decades to be both unwilling and unable to change its assimilationist frameworks and racialized vision of cultural work. Much of the response of white museum leadership is best described, as Gaztambide-Fernandez, Krache, and Carpenter elucidate as a problem of the museum as a practice of white property. As critical race theorist Cherly Harris explains in her foundational essay defining whiteness as property, she explains: "[W]hiteness and property share a common premise – a conceptual nucleus – of a right to exclude."[7] White museum leadership has fiercely defended the museum as a white's-only space, in essence, defending the museum as white suburban homeowners defended their homes against perceived threats of non-white masses overtaking and devaluing white property. Rejecting an institutional model committed to political realities that depend upon the subordination of difference, cultural workers of color initiated their own community-based art spaces throughout the 1960s and 1970s that began the work of decoupling the paradigm of cultural work as the property of a single race.

Motivated by the ambitions of the Black and Chicano art movements, cultural workers initiated the first steps towards de-Westernizing fine art gallery museum spaces. As art historian Kellie Jones shows in *South of Pico,* her survey of Los Angeles's Black arts network, and scholars Chon Noriega and Pilar Tomkins in their exhibition *L.A. Xicano* (2011), the

[7] Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707-791, 1714.

"community art center" typology is really an umbrella term that encapsulated a range of culturally specific practices based in longer histories of resisting white epistemic, cultural, and spatial supremacy.[8] These projects took the form of collaborative months-long mural projects, week-long exhibitions in everyday commercial spaces, day-long performance art processions, as well as brick-and-mortar centers and museums. Community art spaces were not a one-size-fits-all model, as the mainstream museum proposes of its own model, but pliable sites that were highly responsive to the needs of the communities they served.

Redeploying the fine art gallery model, however, did not result in an immediate and conclusive epistemic break. Its direct effect was a profound alienation from the artworld, which despite its self-described admiration for aesthetic innovation and confrontational avant-garde gestures, deemed, as one Los Angeles art critic put it, that these organizations were beyond "the proper province of art criticism."[9] Such estimations by critics and art historians, however, misunderstood these spatial practices; it is more nuanced and accurate to consider the diversity of the work of Black and Latino space makers as art historian Shifra Goldman does in her theorization of the Chicano art space, which she lauds for creating a new "community-based cultural structure."[10]

Community-based cultural structures of the 1960s and 70s, though immensely varied and intermittent in their success, worked to generate culturally specific epistemic frameworks and morphologies in alignment with Black and Latino communities' cultural traditions and ways

[8] Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Chon A. Noriega, Terecita Romo, and Pilar Tompkins, *L.A. Xicano* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

[9] "Letter from William Wilson to David Feldman, Ricardo Valverde and Suda House, March 2, 1979," Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, CEMA 3, Department of Special Research Collections, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

[10] Shifra M. Goldman, "Response: Another Opinion on the State of Chicano Art," in *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States*, ed. Shifra Goldman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 389.

of knowing the world, and in response to the oppressive dimensions of their urban realities. As such, they did not neatly fit into European aesthetic typologies, but were a form of resistance—what decolonial scholars refer to as "de-linking" from the dominant culture's epistemic and spatial models.[11] With no immediate alternative to adopt beyond the fine art gallery space, artists began with the fine art gallery model but quickly adapted it to develop a culturally specific structure based in Black and Latino archives of knowledge and strategies of survival.

While art history and museum studies continue to mostly ignore Black and Latino art spaces, in particular labeling them as other or derivative of mainstream art museums, this dissertation proposes that these spatial practices were decolonial projects that inverted the museum paradigm to construct a cultural space in dialogue with communities and their urban realities. Not invested in the neutral, autonomous and top-down aesthetic paradigm, their work was nearly unrecognizable from the art historical/museum standpoint, which would not acknowledge that there were indeed other spatial practices and aesthetic traditions equal to their own. These cultural workers took from the dominant spatial model as much as they deviated from it, and produced an art space based on their own values, standpoints, histories, and cultural practices, which had all survived the Euro-American colonial project. This dissertation details their excavation of and re-familiarization with these archives and traditions.

With such an imposing, well-funded, and centuries-old museum tradition, museum theorists and artists have struggled defining what other options are available within the Western project of modernity outside of appropriating the dominant model. In his essay, "Enacting the Archives, Decentering the Muses," decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo posits that post-colonial governments in the Global South and Global East appropriated the museum model to

[11] See: Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

narrate what he defines as "civilizational stories that have been disavowed and arrogated by the very museum model being used."[12] The success of the project of appropriation remains inconclusive and contemporary museology continues to wrestle with the question of whether the museum model can be put to decolonial purposes. Throughout the 1960s to 1980s, however, cultural workers of color attempted to answer these questions and hit numerous obstacles in appropriating the museum model. Still working under the museum's own myth of universal applicability, cultural workers found that the fine art gallery model was not universally applicable to all people and places, despite the museum's claims.

Through four case studies in white, Black, and Latino Los Angeles, this dissertation contends that the community-based cultural structures created in Black and Latino neighborhoods from 1968 to 1984 experimented with the fine art gallery model to articulate histories subordinated by colonialism, but also experimented with the structure of art. As art historian Robert Nelson describes in his analysis of the discursive and spatial practices of art history: "In daily practice, art history engaged not one but many spaces – aesthetic, architectural, urban, social, political, religious, and so on – and thus bears within itself diverse examples of spatial narratives."[13] The same is true for museum studies, which, as a discipline, has historically struggled acknowledging that there are spatial narratives beyond the museum. The historical case studies I detail here, therefore, expand the range of historical examples, presenting a challenge to the presumed spatial dominance of the museum.

Looking beyond the traditional sites of museum studies analysis toward the spatial histories of culturally specific art spaces contributes to the work of localizing the museum's claims on

[12] Walter Mignolo, "Enacting the Archives, Decentering the Muses: The Museum of Islamic Art in Doha and the Asian Civilizations Museum in Singapore," *Ibraaz* Platform 006 (2013), 3, www.ibraaz.org/usr/library/documents/main/enacting-the-archives.pdf.

[13] Robert Nelson, "The Map of Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 79, no. 1 (March 1997): 28-40, 40.

universality. Indeed, this effort confronts a proposition that is often unspoken: that there is simply no alternative to the art museum. Envisioning themselves as part of a broader project aimed at changing society, artists of color and the founders of culturally specific art spaces reformulated the Euro-American definition of aesthetic space, to the point that it became radically responsive to the realities of Black and Brown people and consequently othered from the perspective of the white art establishment.

Focusing on the spatial narratives of those who enacted activism at the museum and those who attempted to create their own art spaces beyond its jurisdiction, generates a different set of questions and propositions about what a decolonized art space might look like. While this dissertation does not claim that a completed decolonial project is to be found in these spaces, it considers organizations like the Chicano art center Self Help Graphics and Art and the curatorial projects of Dr. Samella Lewis as initiating the process of articulating a different structure for the rituals and aesthetic traditions of people of color.

Throughout its history, but particularly in the post-war period, Los Angeles's public sphere was tightly controlled by immensely powerful civic leaders. Representational spaces like the museum were highly contested, and much like the network of places that made up the public sphere, highly monitored and racialized as white. Historian Sarah Schrank's research on post-war Los Angeles's contentious fights over art in the public sphere details the repercussions for those who deviated from the standardized image of Los Angeles as a politically and racially harmonious city of landowners. Civic leaders and city elites were notoriously anti-modern and racist, and had a long history of very public instances of censorship, media blackouts, de-

funding, and police closures by vice squads—all in the interest of ensuring the city aligned with civic leaders' vision of a racially harmonious real-estate paradise.[14]

Museums, and much of the cultural infrastructure of Los Angeles, were by their very nature racial and political in that they were placed in specific racialized neighborhoods by white civic elites highly invested in maintaining a constructed and confected image of a white, modern, Edenic Los Angeles. To this day, the city is almost entirely bereft of significant monuments or historic sites devoted to non-white histories, and civic leaders rarely acknowledge the cultural needs of non-white neighborhoods. The spatial dominance in which whiteness is legitimated as central within the museum clearly reflected the white spatial supremacy that determined so much of life in Los Angeles and the nation at large. Whiteness and aesthetic spaces have been historically inseparable in the United States.

Compton Communicative Academy founder and artist John Outterbridge succinctly characterizes the general philosophy of these culturally specific art spaces: "I mean, if we can't go inside of those institutions, then we'll do what we have to do in the outer environment."[15] Making do in the outer environment meant financial precarity and dismissal from the centers of cultural authority. Dispirited by the way in which geography and typology would ultimately exclude and invalidate their work to white art critics and art historians, the divisions between these marginalized practices have hidden their tremendous importance to contemporary museum practice.

[14] Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

[15] Richard Candida Smith, interview with John W. Outterbridge, *African-American Artists of Los Angeles: John W. Outterbridge,* Los Angeles: Department of Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles, 1993, 420.

As urban theorists have shown, race has always been a determinative factor in Los Angeles's urban history. In no way separate, the public art museum was part of this urban fabric and controlled by the powerful civic elites who formed the city. Analyzing the production of museum spaces within this context offers real and analyzable relationships between the museum and the unjust spatial practices that form Los Angeles. That nearly all of the city's museums are in the predominantly white, wealthy neighborhoods not only reflected a certain image of aesthetic cultivation, but also showed that these institutions indeed had dialectical relationships to their environment; influenced by the racial logics that formed the city as well as existing as sites that nurtured visions of a "white's only" world.

Seen side by side, Black and Latino cultural workers worked alongside their white artist colleagues, but on a different type of infrastructural and spatial work—one that was equally experimental and invested in a public art practice but focused on de-Westernizing initiatives. They broke many of the boundaries of standard museum practice, often inverting, transgressing, or exceeding the traditional boundaries of the European aesthetic and its traditional spatializations, pushing art beyond its limited geographic range in white neighborhoods.

The View From Inside The Public Art Museum

Foundational texts in museum studies and contemporary art history, such as the artist and art critic Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (1986) and museum historian Carol Duncan's *Civilizing Ritual: Inside Public Art Museums* (1995), both compendiums of their critical museum writing from the 1970s and 1980s, cracked the fixity and putative neutrality of fine art galleries and mainstream art museums by lifting the veil on aesthetic, class, gender, political, and nation-state ideologies that structured art museum

experiences. Duncan's identification of the "civic ritual" that structures the public art museum experience redefined museum studies' understandings of the universal survey museum, modern art museums and their derivative spaces, drawing attention to how museum experiences were comprised of scripts and stages, citizen performances of a specific civic and cultural script. Duncan's insights challenged the professed transparency of museum space and its claims of being a universally neutral model.[16]

In reality, what can be known and performed within Euro-American aesthetic spaces is relegated to a select range of Euro-American aesthetic rituals. The Euro-American public art museum is not a universal and timeless space, as modernist architects and museum thinkers so long proposed, but a culturally specific one, generated within a particular cultural imaginary centered in Western Europe. Philologist and art critic Thomas McEvilley, in his introduction to *Inside The White Cube*, explicitly calls out the ritualized dimension of the museum: "Such ritual spaces are symbolic reestablishments of the ancient umbilicus which, in myths worldwide, once connected heaven and earth. The connection is renewed symbolically for the purposes of the tribe or, more specifically, of that caste or party in the tribe whose special interests are ritually represented."[17]

Consequently, the single narrative of modernity that the art museum has historically spatialized, and the rituals it draws from in creating the museum experience, have fostered a purportedly free and open aesthetic space that, in reality, is defined by the cultural and geographic specificity of the Euro-American aesthetic tradition as well as by the relationship the institution has with its immediate urban environment. Within this epistemic space is a

[16] Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals.*

[17] Thomas McEvilley, "Introduction," in Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica: The Lapis Press, 1976, 1986), 8.

single European archive of Western modernity from which ways of being and knowing are drawn. To see the museum as a model, unable to oppose the larger civic, racial, and national projects it lived within, evinces the faults of the model's most fundamental proposition of aesthetic autonomy and its purported role as a public good.

As influential thinkers with a capacious understanding of how cultural workers and historians think about museum and fine art gallery spaces, Duncan and O'Doherty share opinions as to whether fine art gallery and museum spaces can, indeed, be reformed or put to other uses. They assert overlapping critiques on the limitations of fine art gallery and museum spaces to become democratic or more situational but do not identify solutions beyond the fine art gallery model. O'Doherty, a champion of alternative art spaces via his leadership position at the National Endowment for the Arts throughout the 1970s, describes the necessity of the art gallery model, which he resolved had offered a shelter for much radical aesthetic thinking but "[f]or better or worse it is the single major convention through which art is passed. What keeps it stable is the lack of alternatives . . . Genuine alternatives can not come from within this space . . .The gallery space is all we've got, and most art needs it."[18] Duncan agreed. She does not see another option; describing the positionality museums occupied in a colonized world, she concluded that they "were not founded in competition with or in opposition to important, already established ritual art spaces."[19] Duncan does not detail that the purported absence of competition or the museum's privilege as organizer, collector, and definer of art was, in fact, the aftereffect of colonialism. In the wake of colonial epistemic genocide throughout the history of the Americas, the museum model presumed a singularity that

[18] Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 80.
[19] Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 53.

consequently limited the ability to both think beyond its boundaries or see a wider range of contemporary and historic spatial models.

How the institution limits what we can see is further evidenced in Duncan's proposition to democratize the range of museum rituals. Having identified that the civilizing ritual enacted within the museum was scripted for a particular community's cultural practices, she proposes making space for other epistemologies within the institution itself. As she explains of her vision of a community-based model: communities could "test, examine and imaginatively live both older truths and possibilities for new ones . . . spaces in which communities can work out the values that identify them as communities."[20] Duncan recommends a radical aesthetic equality within the museum, one that would acknowledge the predominance of Euro-aesthetic rituals and initiate the process of making space for other practices.

The first step, therefore, was in acknowledging that the museum was itself a culturally specific art center, arguably definable as a white community art center, that refused to acknowledge the cultural specificity of its own rituals and frameworks of knowing. What sort of structural and epistemic changes were needed so that other rituals, cosmologies, and epistemologies could take place in a museum created explicitly as a stage for European and Euro-American rituals of civic, class, national, and racial distinction? What other cultural spaces were available as models outside of the range offered by Euro-American cultural modernism? Building on decolonial, feminist, Black, and Chicano theorists who have warned against the dangers of an "epistemological monoculture" that universalizes a placeless and disembodied viewer, the need to get out from under such a dominant model remains pressing in the pursuit of other futures.

[20] Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 131.

The terms of my project are much less to think through how to diversify the range of bodies that occupies the subject position of "kings and queens" that the museum produces, so to speak, than to localize the positionalities and identify the urban relationships and racial logics that constitute the museum as disconnected from its immediate environments and only able to offer an assimilationist model of cultural experiences. Can a place designed to position and orient us toward European superiority be converted into an epistemically democratic space? The issue of alternatives, however, has been severely hobbled by a limited and racialized imaginary that cannot see the range of options produced by people of color in the larger cultural landscape.

Chicano studies scholars Karen Mary Davalos, Chon Noriega, Pilar Tomkins as well as art historians Bridget Cooks and Kellie Jones have expanded Los Angeles's art historical imaginary by detailing the network of artistic practices and spaces of Black and Latino Los Angeles. Indebted to their work, this project sees this revised cultural landscape as also offering a new set of positions by which to see how the boundaries of the aesthetic are set within racial, civic, and cultural political realities. Their contributions have therefore asked that Black and Latino art spaces be considered on equal terms with the dominant culture's models, a viewpoint not possible from within the institution that insisted its production of aesthetic space was universal.

My research explores the compelling and remarkable history of Black and Latino arts organizations and museum activism of Los Angeles from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Tapping into traditions of resistance in Black feminist traditions and the Black and Chicano Arts Movement own decolonizing mandates, these efforts and projects developed innovative curatorial projects that were responsive to life in a city, oftentimes meeting their audience

where they lived, worked, shopped, and congregated, in an attempt to meet then where and as they were.

Despite imposed boundaries, these spatial practices were on equal footing with the more celebrated interrogation of the European aesthetic tradition conducted by mostly white artists within the postmodernist tradition. Art historian Hal Foster proposes that the Euro-American "anti-art" tradition was working toward an "epistemological break," as postmodern artists interrogated everyday spaces and vernacular sources and critiqued the museum as an institution from the inside.[21] The difference, however, for artists and cultural workers of color was that they were connected to a tradition of resistance to cultural modernism since its very arrival in the United States. Architectural historian Mabel Wilson has convincingly argued for the connection between the Black Museum Movement in the 1960s and the longer history of intellectual protest of white world fairs and exhibitions in the nineteenth century, which itself was part of a long-standing tradition of resistance.[22] Chicano artists also envisioned their work as opposing the colonial project of whiteness, viewing themselves within a tradition that began with the Aztec opposition to European colonialism. The defiance of European supremacy in aesthetics, history, and land was central in the minds of Black and Chicano artists.

For this reason, their work offers a valuable reservoir for contemporary museum history. Unlike their colleagues and museum critics who saw and worked from within the institution, these artists and organizations initiated new spaces in an attempt to get out from under the museum's historical and aesthetic dominance. Cultural workers of color did not operate from a position outside of modernity, but did operate at the boundaries of its aesthetic realm. I detail

[21] Hal Foster, "Postmodernism: A Preface," in Hal Foster, ed, *The Anti-Aesthetic Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), xiii.

[22] Mabel Wilson, *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

how the cultural spaces they created began the work of "de-linking" from Western epistemology and epistemic spaces, by re-connecting with ancestral knowledges, as well as with everyday practices of survival that proffered their own archives of knowledge. Their critiques were enacted beyond the museum, through their construction of alternatives, and ultimately expanded the horizon of possibility within the traditional aesthetic realm.

Diverse and complex, these spatial practices were remarkable in their ability to turn city blocks into classrooms and inhospitable urban spaces into life-affirming places. Being in the very communities they served gave these community art spaces their burdensome moniker in the art world, but also served as their source of generating new techniques for making community and art spaces that were familiar and welcoming to those who had undergone untold traumatization in white institutions. Their practice and vision of community was radically open and collaborative, offering pathways for what a more just and equitable civic cultural infrastructure could look like.

This dissertation delves into the work of community art spaces, community curating, and museum activism as methodologies for decolonizing museum and fine art gallery spaces. Their histories demonstrate sophisticated border and spatial thinking, and repeatedly, a belief in the democratic and real world effects that art can make in communities of color. Having existed as the foil to the white modernist avant-garde for nearly fifty years, these individual spatial histories contain a wealth of knowledge so necessary to expanding the current stakes of museological debates, which have been stymied by an inability to recognize that the very spaces art historians and critics have devalued lead the way toward decolonial futures.

Detaching from the dominant model and attaching to other models was not a simple or completed task. It continues into the present. Across race, class, religious, and sexual lines,

Black and Latino cultural workers were united in an attempt to radically democratize the conventions of where art happened—not just to prove that Black and Chicano neighborhoods had art, but to benefit those neighborhoods with art's capacity to form community, craft a civic identity, and add value to the mainstream perceptions of Black and Latino neighborhoods. Working-class, undocumented, and understanding of the nature of racialized urban spaces, these workers took an intrepid approach to enacting a museum without walls or a temporary gallery or classroom on street corners.

Chapter 1 revisits Dr. Samella Lewis's (b. 1924) history of activism at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LA County Museum). Lewis, an artist, art historian, and matriarch of Los Angeles's Black arts network, worked for a year, 1970–1971, at the LA County Museum. She was ultimately pressured to leave her job after seeking to desegregate the museum's art education program. This period of Los Angeles museum history has traditionally been celebrated for the museum's mounting of *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (1976), the first Black American retrospective mounted by a major American art museum. Lewis's story adds a new layer of nuance to this era of museum history, as she was part of a Black feminist tradition invested in a radical humanist and democratic project. Reframing her museum activism as a intervention within this tradition evidences that the parameters of Black arts activism were not simply about inclusion, but also about a radical democratic project that intended to expand the limited range of subject positions the museum created. Lewis and a group of supportive white-collar Black doctors, intellectuals, and celebrities led several years of protests and high-level negotiations with the museum board, from 1969 to 1974. Lewis's inability to make any headway, through goodwill or protest, left many Black activist in disbelief at the trenchant racism and sexism of the museum leadership. The concessions the

museum offered during these negotiations would ultimately be inadequate for initiating real structural changes and frameworks for sharing the authority to define meaning-making practices.

In chapter 2, I explore the theoretical dimensions of Black art spaces, focusing on the one-night Black Culture festival, initiated by LA County Museum guards and the peripatetic curatorial practices of Lewis and the Black Arts Council, an arts advocacy group founded by museum preparators Claude Booker (1938-1974) and Cecil Fergerson (1931-2013). These histories reveal how cultural workers deployed exhibitionary models throughout the city, but equally how they began to deviate from mainstream practices. Creating a museum in a mall, curating exhibitions in restaurants and bank lobbies, as well as working to visibilize Los Angeles' Black histories, Lewis and the Black Arts Council collectively created a Black curatorial department that replicated and exceeded contemporary museum practice in the belief that art had a role to play in Black freedom struggles.

In chapter 3, I explore how Self Help Graphics developed a "community-based cultural structure" in the barrios of East Los Angeles.[23] I trace the organization's spatial history back to co-founder Sister Karen Boccalero's (1933-1997, *née* Carmen Rose Boccalero, Order of St. Francis) training in the studio classroom of Sister Corita Kent (1918-1986, *nee* Frances Elizabeth Kent, Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary). Corita, as she was known, created a highly experimental and arguably decolonial art classroom whose approach to art was summarized in the department's motto: "We have not art, we do everything as well as we can."[24] A way of being an artist, as well as an intervention into Euro-American aesthetic philosophies, it defined the Immaculate Heart College Art Department and would be Self

[23] Goldman, "Response: Another Opinion," 389.
[24] See Baylis Glascock, dir., *We Have No Art*, Baylis Glascock Films, 1967.

Help's foundation. Understanding the colonial positionality embedded in fine art gallery spaces, Self Help experimented with a truly responsive form of place-making whose various successes, in the form of the multimedia procession Día de Los Muertos and their mobile art van, the Barrio Mobile Art Studio, redefined Chicano East Los Angeles within Los Angeles's civic imaginary.

In chapter 4, I propose that the lives of Self Help Graphics co-founders Carlos Bueno Poblett (1941-2001) and Antonio Ibañez Gonzalez (1949-1995) offer a link between Mexican muralism and Chicano art centers. Gay, undocumented Mexican immigrants and muralists, Ibañez y Bueno, as they referred to themselves, bring together parallel Chicano and Mexican cultural practices on both sides of the borderlands. I analyze Ibañez y Bueno's only surviving mural as a statement that links the Mexican muralist tradition to the expanded Chicano public art practice, which resulted in processions, art centers, and public art studio classrooms. Re-introducing the artists' works into contemporary debates around socially-engaged contemporary art history shifts the focus from a New York-Europe axis to a Mexico City-Los Angeles axis and arguably expands the boundaries as established from a Euro-centric perspective.

Though I review these spatial practices individually, they had notable similarities. Both Black and Chicano spatial practices were highly invested in a radically democratic public art. Understanding the cultural landscape as a battlefield over the public sphere, they claimed public spaces in the interest of countering stereotypical definitions of Black and Chicano people and the neighborhoods in which they lived, as well as used art to convert inhumane urban conditions into sites of recreation, belonging and education. The appropriation of public

spaces for convivial use was a response to the need within both Black and Latino communities, and cultural workers responded accordingly.

In the twenty-first century, artists, critics, cultural workers, historians, and museum theorists are imagining another way toward more socially engaged and democratic arts spaces. As the field arrives at a clearer understanding of the museum's damaging classificatory system, unjust aesthetic boundaries, and replication of colonial postures museums have historically produced and supported, there is a building incredulity in the possibility of reform. As visual culture historian Irit Rogoff proposes in her writings on museum culture, it is no longer feasible to believe that the European model can be perfected or that museums can continue "letting all the *others* in while remaining with an unchanging concept of ourselves."[25]

Reform remains the dominant trend within the field, but with no acknowledgement or serious study of the history of community art spaces, I argue, museums, museum studies, and criticism will not be able to move beyond the presumption that they offer the only model of aesthetic space. Instead of repeating the fight over inclusion, decolonial theorists have advocated for a democratization of epistemology and an institution that can "contain many worlds," or, as Rogoff and other cultural theorists have advocated, abandoning the museum model altogether to develop "emergent cultural organizations" formed through alternative "operating logics" that are community-based, problem-oriented, flexible, temporary, and non-governmental.[26] It is in the historical work of Black and Latino art spaces that American museum practice should begin this conversation.

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[25] Irit Rogoff, "Hit and Run—Museums and Cultural Difference," *Art Journal* 61, no.3 (Autumn 2002): 63–73, 72.

[26] Irit Rogoff, "Starting in the Middle: NGOs and Emergent Forms For Cultural Institutions," in Johanna Burton, Shannon Jackson and Dominic Willsdon, eds, *Public Servants Art and the Crisis of the Common Good* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016).

I. Self Help Graphics and Art, Inc.: The Nature of the Place, 1972-1984

In 1979, three photographers, David Feldman, Suda House and Ricardo Valverde penned a letter of inquiry to William Wilson, head art critic at the *Los Angeles Times.* They wanted to know why their exhibition, *Inner/Urban: Landscapes* had not been included in the yearly write-up of gallery openings.[27] Having mostly been ignored because they exhibited in community art spaces and in Chicano neighborhoods, the artists exhorted Wilson that the *Los Angeles Times* had "a responsibility to cover gallery openings, not only in the west side-La Cienega [sic] areas, but in the entire city."[28] The artists were particularly disheartened this time, however, because they thought their choice of venue, Self Help Graphics and Art, Inc. (Self Help), would make a difference. The Chicano art space in East Los Angeles had recently received favorable coverage in this same newspaper and the artists intended to capitalize on this break.

Self Help co-founder, Sister Mary Karen Boccalero or Sister Karen, as she was known, had been featured in a human-interest story in the paper's *Home Magazine* that same year.[29] Sister Karen, as she was known, co-founded Self Help with Mexican artists Carlos Bueno and Antonio Ibañez in 1972. During their partnership, from 1972-1976, Self Help initiated a communal art studio classroom, a mobile art studio classroom van, educational programs, a framework to facilitate local participatory activist and public art projects, and the yearly

[27] "Letter from David Feldman, Suda House, and Ricardo Valverde to William Wilson, February 23, 1979," Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, CEMA 3, Department of Special Research Collections, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA. Wilson's role in maintaining the color line of Los Angeles's white art establishment is described by art historian Bridget Cooks and the artist Carlos Almaraz. See Bridget Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011); Carlos Almaraz, "Dear Mr. Wilson" (unpublished manuscript journal, 1973) 403–06, https://icaa.mfah.org/s/es/item/1083358#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1673%2C0%2C5895%2C3299.

[28] "Letter from David Feldman."

[29] Marshall Berges, "Sister Karen Boccalero," *Los Angeles Times Home Magazine*, December 17, 1978.

multimedia procession, *Día de Los Muertos* (Day of the Dead). In 1974, the trio opened an on-site gallery, Galleria Otra Vez (Gallery Once More).

For seven years Self Help diligently worked to become a serious creative center for the visual arts, and the photographers questioned the *Los Angeles Times*' curiosity, stating: "We cannot understand why the Times [sic] has bothered to interest readers in projects/galleries such as Self Help, and then do nothing to stimulate that interest."[30] The intrigue of a white Franciscan nun working in the Chicano and Mexican barrio of East Los Angeles was titillation enough for *Home Magazine* readers, but the artists exhibited in those same spaces almost never made it into the newspaper's coveted pages of art reviews.

Wilson, a white Angelino, corroborated what the artists already knew: artistic production and exhibition in Los Angeles required certain spatial, geographic and racial features to be considered legitimate by the white art establishment. Wilson explained his reasoning in his rejection letter: "This department is governed by certain policies. The relevant section of these unwritten laws has to do with the nature of the place you are showing your work."[31] He had understood Self Help to be a "community school" and had not known about its gallery space, despite his facilitating the *Home Magazine* article on Sister Karen.[32]

Bringing Galleria Otra Vez to Wilson's attention did very little, however. He would not review any of Self Help's exhibits during his tenure, and stuck to his characterization that its community art paradigm made it one of those "worthy community efforts connected to art that

[30] "Letter from David Feldman."

[31] "Letter from William Wilson to David Feldman, Ricardo Valverde and Suda House, March 2, 1979," Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, CEMA 3, Department of Special Research Collections, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

[32] Ibid.

yet are not the proper province of art criticism."[33] Wilson's candor was all the more surprising because he presented his spatial discrimination as self-evident. From his perspective, Self Help had not yet advanced towards what he presumed was its objective of producing "exhibitions of public interest" like those he described in "reputable and established art galleries directed by arts professionals."[34]

In that same year, the unwritten laws of art criticism were written into Wilson's review of a photography exhibition hosted by Goez Art Studios and Gallery, a Chicano art space and community school in East Los Angeles. The critic applauded the organizers for splitting the exhibition into two venues and making it available to "folk both East and West of our invisible L.A. border."[35] He reported back to his readers that there was no need to risk getting lost in East Los Angeles to see a second-rate exhibition.[36] East LA was described as "a foreign country to a lot of anglo Angelenos," and he concluded that the photographs, which were all taken there, were mostly successful as "social documents," as they did not cross his threshold for becoming art.[37] Unable to separate his judgement of the works from his reading of the neighborhood, for Wilson, East Los Angeles was a liability as subject matter and as place to make and exhibit artwork.

It is in this emphasis on borders, foreign countries, natures, provinces and types of art spaces that we see how art, space, and race are imbricated in Los Angeles. Wilson's particular judgement was not just an individual prejudice, but a learned way of seeing and classifying the

[33] Ibid. The *LA Times* art critics would mostly ignore the organization's exhibitions from 1973 to 1990. For an early example of coverage, see: Dinah Berland, "On Photography: Reaching Across A Cultural Border," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 21, 1982. The paper ran announcements every year for Self Help's multimedia performance art project, Día de los Muertos, and for programming at the Vex punk rock venue held every Friday in Self Help's basement in the late 1970s.

[34] "Letter from William Wilson."

[35] William Wilson, "Photography—The State of the Art," *Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 1979.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

cultural landscape through a gaze inscribed as white, articulated and supported through institutions like the *Los Angeles Times*, public schools, television, and art museums, among others.[38] These institutions created a subject position that spoke and saw, as feminist theorist Donna Haraway has described, as if it was "seeing everything from nowhere."[39] Wilson's remarks are particularly telling because they exemplify how spatial, geographic and morphological differences have been part of the mechanisms of judgement in the visual arts and point to how the gazes of art history and art criticism are formed in and dependent on particular places.

As Wilson describes, his conditions for seeing art required a certain Euro-American fine art gallery spatiality. The spaces that met these conditions belonged exclusively to the Euro-American family of art spaces: universal survey museums, modern art museums, aristocratic collections, European royal palaces and Grego-Roman temples, for- and non-profit fine art galleries, and alternative art spaces. The "unwritten laws" of Wilson's profession referred to the unspoken reality that art spaces are racialized and valued according to their geographic location and model, and that despite claims of objectivity and autonomy, art was a space produced through culturally specific architecture, perceptual frameworks and ritual practices.

In her essay "The Museum As A Way Of Seeing," art historian Svetlana Alpers detailed her own experience within the museum, observing how the art historical gaze was formed

[38] The *Times* had "invented" a vision of Los Angeles as an Edenic "white spot" in the local and national imaginary. Well-known for glorifying a Spanish missionary past and promoting anti-Indigenous, anti-Black, anti-Chicano, and anti-Mexican views, the paper worked to create a "whites only" vision of the city. For a fuller description of the role the *Los Angeles Times* played in shaping life in Los Angeles, see Bill Boyarsky, *Inventing L.A.: The Chandlers and Their Times* (Santa Monica: Angel City Press, 2009); The Los Angeles Times Editorial Board, "Editorial: An Examination of *The Times'* Failures on Race, Our Apology and a Path Forward," *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 2020, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-09-27/los-angeles-times-apology-racism.

[39] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 581.

within the public art museum, a process she refers to as the "museum effect."[40] This is the practice by which art museums extract objects from their original contexts to place them into a secular European aesthetic space for studied viewing, ultimately, as Alpers concludes, "turning all objects into works of art."[41] In the grand wealth of pillaged and legally acquired objects, Alpers does not consider the epistemic violence that undergirds the "museum effect," even though the museum has been a powerful mechanism in the European colonization of space, time and being. As she argues, the "museum effect" imposed new meanings and rituals onto the world's expressive objects and erased those objects' initial contexts, therein bringing them into a European epistemology, time and space. This normalized practice, of acquiring and re-contextualizing objects from culturally specific contexts, occluded the many other cultural structures and alternative rituals used to gather and make-meaning with visual culture around the world.

Without acknowledging that this privileged way of seeing was built on this destructive practice, the museum as an enclosure, which is the model for all art space, has created an "epistemological monoculture," to borrow a phrase from Lorraine Code's eco-feminist critique of scientific spaces. [42] Such spaces can only conceive of themselves as missionary outposts of cultural and epistemic conversion. This has engendered what decolonial theorists Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez refer to as the modern museum's "enclosure of perception," whose horizon of intelligibility determines the boundaries of the province of art. It is the space where the art professional's gaze is built and based, and through a dialectical relationship with

[40] Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," in *Exhibiting Cultures*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 26.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

art historical discourse, spatializes the canon and creates the agreed upon conditions for art to happen.

In this chapter, I flip Wilson's comment, to ask the following: what was the nature of the place that Self Help Graphics created? Where did it deviate from the standard gallery-museum model and how did it achieve what Chicano urban theorists refer to as a "Chicano cultural architecture"?[43] What artistic lineages and training motivated three non-Chicano artists to found one of the most experimental forms of Chicano cultural architecture of the Chicano Art Movement?

To answer these questions, I consider the Self Help project through the lens of a spatial history that deviates from the standard ethnically-specific art space genealogies that are often narrated as beginning with the reformist settlement houses of the nineteenth century and the Works Progress Administration projects of the New Deal.[44] Instead, I propose Self Help as the merging of distinctly anti-modern and decolonial aesthetic traditions that laid the groundwork for a decade of radical spatial practice.

The Chicano art space classification tends to overgeneralize the complex alliances that formed these organizations. Collaborations often extended across a range of ethnic, racial, religious and national differences.[45] Groups like Self Help were not rooted in a narrow Chicano cultural nationalism, but instead looked to open up what Chicana cultural theorist Gloria

[43] José Luis Gamez, "Architectures of Identity in an Other LA: Postcolonial Resistance in East Los Angeles" (presentation, Oriental-Occidental: Geography, Identity, Space, Istanbul, Turkey, 2001); James Rojas, "The Chicano Moratorium and the Making of Latino Urbanism," *Common\Edge*, November 16, 2020, https://commonedge.org/the-chicano-moratorium-and-the-making-of-latino-urbanism/.

[44] For a timeline specific to culturally specific art spaces, see Elinor Bowles, *Cultural Centers of Color: Report on a National Survey* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 1992).

[45] Chon A. Noriega, Terecita Romo, and Pillar Tompkins, *L.A. Xicano* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

Anzaldúa envisioned as "a kind of 'borderland' where cultures coexist in the same site."[46] Self Help's position at the border between modern white Los Angeles and the segregated Chicano barrio not only defined the white art establishment's inability to see the organization, but also led it to misunderstand how Self Help's project attempted to de-link from the network of spaces that supported and formulated what Carolyn Dean refers to as "European aesthetic supremacy."[47] I argue that Self Help's role in the Chicano Art Movement was focused on participation, positionality, cultural politics and place based poetics.

The inability of those at the center to understand the culturally specific community art space's intentions also spoke to the decolonial tradition's capacity to break the center's rules. The artists at Self Help tested the idea that art could only function within an autonomous white art space and proposed that there could indeed be a different type of art space beyond the gallery model. The disdain for these decolonial practices, however, continues. As the reliability of once unshakable spatial and aesthetic hierarchies dissipates and increased pressure to democratize arts institutions grows, defenders of the Euro-American avant-garde tradition and art museum model worry, that it might become impossible to decipher art's purpose. Self Help's story is in many real ways an exploration into what other purposes art could serve, not just in moving beyond the white gallery-museum model, but also posing a challenge to the worldview that this particular racialized enclosure had created.

The Beginnings of Self Help: Immaculate Heart College Art Department, 1962-1967

[46] Gloria Anzaldúa, "Border Arte: Nepantla, El Lugar de la frontera," in *Chicano and Chicana Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Jennifer A. Gonzalez, C. Ondine Chavoya, Chon Noriega, and Terezita Romo (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 341–42; originally published in *La Frontera/The Border: Art about the Mexico/United States Experience*, ed. Kathryn Kanjo (San Diego: Centro Cultural de la Raza and the Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993), 107–14.

[47] Carolyn Dean, "The Trouble with (The Term) Art," *Art Journal* 65, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 24–32, 30.

For 25 years, Self Help was Sister Karen's artistic, spiritual and life's work. Her death in 1997 came as a shock to staff members who struggled for years to stabilize the organization in her absence. In crisis mode, neither the organization nor Sister Karen's religious order preserved her personal papers, books or correspondence; a great loss in understanding her thinking about art and the network of thinkers with whom she corresponded. The absence of her personal archive solidified her legacy around a somewhat one-dimensional reputation as strong-willed and brusque. She is remembered as a chain-smoking, cursing, nonconformist, "punk-rock nun" who diligently worked in and for the barrio. While accurate, this image has elided the specificities of her artistic training and aesthetic philosophy.[48] [49]

Histories of Self Help have focused on its several decades of fine-art print production initiated through the Experimental Print Atelier (1982-present) program which publicized the Los Angeles inner-city Chicano aesthetic and identity on an international stage throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The Ateliers brought local artists together with a master printmaker to produce limited edition portfolios of fine art prints. The program established, and in many senses fixed, Self Help as a Chicano printmaking center. Significantly less attention, however, has been paid to the organization's first decade. As I explore in this chapter on Sister Karen, and in Chapter 2 on Carlos Bueno and Antonio Ibañez, understanding how they made a place

[48] It is traditional practice for nuns in the Order of St. Francis of Penance and Christian Charity to have photos taken of their spiritual spaces as well as for certain nuns to have their libraries and letters saved. This did not happen for Sister Karen. Subsequent discussions of her life focus on her charity, and religious devotion as an explanation for Self Help's success. See Kristen Guzmán, "Art in the Heart of East Los Angeles," in *Self Help Graphics & Art: Art in the Heart of East Los Angeles*, ed. Colin Gunckel and Kristen Guzmán (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center, 2014); Chon Noriega, ed., *Just Another Poster? Chicano Graphic Arts in California* (Santa Barbara, CA: University Art Museum, 2002); Bolton T. Colburn and Margarita Nieto, *Across the Street: Self-Help Graphics and Chicano Art in Los Angeles* (Laguna Beach, CA: Laguna Art Museum, 1995); Linda Vallejo and Betty Ann Brown, *Día de los Muertos: A Cultural Legacy, Past, Present & Future* (Los Angeles: Self Help Graphics & Art, 2017).

[49] Betty Avila, current director of Self Help, refers to Sister Karen as a "punk rock nun," not only for her support of Chicano punk rock music, but equally for her anti-institutional attitude. Betty Avila, interview by the author October 15, 2020.

in the Chicano Art Movement first requires understanding Self Help engaged in an experimental spatial practice.

Self Help's history begins with Sister Karen's training in one of the most progressive art studios and art schools in Los Angeles in the 1960s, Immaculate Heart College (Immaculate Heart). Located in the Hollywood Hills, Immaculate Heart was founded in 1916 by the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM), a Catholic teaching order. The order's primary function was to train nuns to work in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles' large network of parochial schools. Sister Karen enrolled in 1961 and received her B.A. in Art in 1965.[50] As Sister Karen described it, her choice of major "baffled" her superiors who expected her, like most nuns in the Archdiocese, to enter into the parochial school workforce.[51] Her desire to pursue a religious life as an artist was highly unorthodox within her very conservative order and she remembered it as "a special struggle" because of the enormous pressure to conform to prescribed Catholic lifestyles.[52]

In 1962, the College's IHM sisters were radicalized by Pope John XXIII's Second Vatican Council (Vatican II). The ecumenical declaration initiated a number of liberating reforms around religious rituals and Catholic teaching. Pope John XXIII intended for the reforms to "let the sun in," to a Church that had sealed itself off from the world for centuries. The mandates sought to break from conventions that envisioned the Church as a separate province from the corrupting influences of a sinful world. The IHM Order would join other Catholic activist movements, like liberation theologists in Central and South America, in developing a socially engaged religious practice set within a modern world. Initiating a " five-

[50] "Educational files," Sister Karen Boccalero Files, Archives of the Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Christian Charity, Redwood City, CA.

[51] Berges, "Sister Karen Boccalero."

[52] Ibid.

year plan of renewal through the breakdown of barriers between secular and religious worlds" in 1963, as curator Michael Duncan has described, the IHM Order was quickly at the forefront of experimentation with age-old conventions of religious life and the liberalization of Catholic education.[53]

IHM nuns changed their age-old practice of religious life by abandoning their habits and compulsory daily prayer, embracing modern clothes and hairstyles, and expanding a traditional pedagogy to teach and acknowledge other religious and political positions outside of Church doctrine. When Sister Karen arrived on campus, she entered into the IHM Order's rethinking of the practices and purposes of religious life which they saw as their own participation with larger countercultural movements like anti-war and anti-poverty initiatives throughout 1960s America.[54]

At the center of this campus-wide rebellion was the Immaculate Heart College Art Department. The Art Department was the campus's spiritual hearth; catalyst for a homegrown Catholic activist aesthetic that blurred the boundaries between art, design, life, politics and religion.[55] Here Sister Karen studied under the Irish-American artist, instructor and nun, Sister Mary Corita Kent, known later in life as Corita. It was a unique training site where Sister Karen experienced the joys of a studio model inspired by the non-competitive and communal spirit of life in a convent. It was her induction into a socially engaged, place-based artistic tradition that would serve as her guiding philosophy for Self Help some ten years later.

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[53] Michael Duncan, "Someday is Now the Art of Corita Kent," in *Someday is Now The Art of Corita Kent*, eds. Ian Berry and Michael Duncan (Saratoga Springs, NY: The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery in association with DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2014), 15.

[54] Thomas Crow, *No Idols: The Missing Theology of Art* (Sydney, Australia: Power Publications, 2017); Kristen Gaylord, "Catholic Art and Activism in Postwar Los Angeles" in *Conflict, Identity, and Protest in American Art*, eds. Miguel de Baca and Makeda Best (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

[55] Julie Ault, *Come Alive!: The Spirited Art of Sister Corita* (London: Four Corners Books, 2006).

Corita was best known for her Pop art prints like *enriched bread* (1965) and *the juiciest tomato of all* (1964) which twisted the graphics of the capitalist consumer landscape to explore a post-Vatican II Catholic faith. Highly sought after for commissions, the success earned her the cover of the December 25, 1967 *Newsweek* where she appeared under the title "The Nun: Going Modern."[56] That same year, and partly due to Corita's fame, the IHM Order publicly clashed with their superior, Cardinal James Francis McIntyre, and were ultimately ordered by the Vatican to comply with the ultra-conservative Archbishop's patriarchal demands to reinstate certain customs. The rebellious nuns broke from the Church in 1968 to eventually form their own religious community, Immaculate Heart Community, established two years later, in 1970.[57]

As a professionally trained artist and herself and alumna of the Immaculate Heart Art Department, Corita's early silkscreens explored biblical themes in an abstract expressionist vocabulary. Her artistic practice took a dramatic turn upon seeing Andy Warhol's *Soup Cans* (1962) at the nearby and legendary Ferus Gallery, the first contemporary art gallery established in Los Angeles. In a surprise twist from an unlikely disciple, Corita explained: "coming home you saw everything like Andy Warhol."[58] As Warhol's New York City studio, known as the Factory, would become legendary in the art historical imagination, the Immaculate Heart Art Department became a hallowed place in Los Angeles' art history. Its experimental ethos with art as a way of socially engaged living inspired a younger generation of artists and made Corita

[56] Susan Dackerman, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museums, 2015), 16.

[57] For more on the IHM Rebellion, see "Religion: The Immaculate Heart Rebels," *Time* 95, February 16, 1970; Rose Pacatte, *Corita Kent: Gentle Revolutionary of the Heart* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017); Immaculate Heart Community, "About," accessed February 1, 2021, https://www.immaculateheartcommunity.org/.

[58] Cynthia Burlingham, "A Very Democratic Form: Corita Kent as Printmaker," in *Someday Is Now the Art of Corita Kent*, ed. Ian Berry and Michael Duncan (Saratoga Springs, NY: The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, 2013).

a revered figure in artistic and religious circles.[59] For Sister Karen it would be the foundational model for her own project of turning the secular and disengaged Western aesthetic tradition into a religious way of living. As she described years later, Corita was "one of the most inspiring women in the world."[60]

For Corita, seeing everything like Warhol meant elevating the common and everyday. There was a rebelliousness in Warhol that she found appealing. His refusal of aesthetic hierarchies of subject matter and media aligned with her own populist project to democratize artistic production and consumption. She felt it all squared with Vatican II's moral mandates of engagement with a modern world. Taking up Warhol's aesthetic led Corita to a way of seeing the everyday that she expanded into a conceptual project.

In one of her only published writings she summarized this core component of her aesthetic philosophy: "Creativity belongs to the artists in each of us. To create means to relate. The root meaning of the word *art* is to fit together and we do this every day."[61] Seeing art as an everyday practice opened up a position from which she began the work of stripping away the conventions of art. Through a spiritual branch of the postmodern project, Corita sought to identify and deconstruct the perceptual frameworks that made creativity a rarity within a specialized field instead of a commonly held human attribute that was already part of everyday life.

No longer spreading the Catholic faith via expressionist interpretations of biblical stories, Corita developed a means of piquing social and political consciousness. Reluctant to join the marches against the war in Vietnam or Black civil rights, she reflected years later: "No, in fact

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[59] At the December 17, 2020, LA City Planning Committee's Cultural Heritage Commission meeting to consider Corita's studio a Historic-Cultural Monument, the commission received nearly two hours of supporting testimony from a wide range of supporters, including ex-students and nuns, who repeatedly spoke of the studio as a holy place.

[60] Berges, "Sister Karen Boccalero."

[61] Corita Kent and Jan Steward, *Learning by Heart Teachings to Free the Creative Spirit* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 4–5.

I think I really had no guts at all, until it finally occurred to me that I really had my own place."[62] Warhol awakened Corita to the limitations of the perceptual framework of art, and she developed an activist printmaking and pedagogy which intended to provoke political revelations in her audience through her work.

Along with the creation of a significant international folk art collection, which reportedly filled the studio classroom, the department was a unique laboratory for democratizing art and exploring its conventions and boundaries.[63] It was summarized in a core teaching maxim Corita "borrowed from the Balinese," and was fond of repeating: "We have no art. We do everything as well as we can."[64] The motto encapsulated the Immaculate Heart Art Department's radical reimagining of an unbound human creativity that was working to disconnect from Euro-centered aesthetics and definitions.

While Corita might not have thought of it as a de-westernizing project, she was leveraging a non-western viewpoint to lift the determinant framework of a European definition of art to envision human creativity as a communal practice woven into the everyday life practices of all people. Corita's aesthetic philosophy made an enormous impact on Sister Karen whose own democratic project intended to make art pro-Chicano by whatever means necessary. As she said some 20 years later in a recorded interview, "Another thing, and I'll be quite frank with you, that's been my motivation….I like it so that people can walk up to it [an artwork] and say: Oh, this is a Latino, this is a Chicano. Oh, they are capable of doing something else aside from

[62] Bernard Galm, *Corita Kent: Oral History Transcript* (Los Angeles: Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, 1977), 71.

[63] Sister Magdalen Mary, whom Ault and Duncan define as instrumental to the early years of the IHC Art Department, was responsible for the significant international and teaching collection of folk art known as the Gloria Folk Art Collection of the Immaculate Heart College. Ricardo Reyes, Sister Mary Littel, interviews by the author, 2017. For more on the collection, see the 1975 Sotheby's auction catalogue *Gloria Folk Art Collection of the Immaculate Heart College.*

[64] See Baylis Glascock, dir., *We Have No Art*, Baylis Glascock Films, 1967.

gangs and drugs. I am going to be very frank. That is important to me as a person, because I think that's important to our society; to be able to incorporate all the gifts and talents everyone has to offer."[65] A community-driven practice, it was this type of thinking and commitment that would provide a point of commonality with the Chicano movement's own de-westernizing and pro-Chicano project.[66]

This experimental aesthetic philosophy was the motivating philosophy behind the IHC art studio classroom. Corita, as she would say, learned from her mentor the celebrated modernist designer and filmmaker Charles Eames to treat everything like an experiment and as a source.[67] This manifested in multiple assignments which looked more like instructions for conceptual art than they did homework. Corita would have students generate two hundred questions about a film, stare at objects for an hour, make a hundred drawings in a night, rearrange compositions hundreds of times or play different films side-by-side.[68] There was a focus on chance, boredom, cropping, close looking and repetition. Little has been done to consider Corita's teaching and artistic legacy in Los Angeles, but many influential artists, like Julie Ault, Larry Pittman, Pae White, Andrea Bowers, Mike Kelly, acknowledge her and the IHC Art Department as important influences on their thinking about art.

Uncomfortable and intentionally tedious, the assignments were reminiscent of the meditative exercises of a repeat visitor to the department, the experimental composer John Cage. Resembling Zen exercises, they challenged the conventions about art that students had

[65] Sister Karen Boccalero, "Sister Karen Boccalero," interview, November 14, 1991, Laguna Art Museum, Laguna, CA, accessed February 15, 2020, https://californiarevealed.org/islandora/object/cavpp:34996.

[66] Little has been done to consider Kent's teaching and artistic legacy in Los Angeles. Duncan's catalogue has done the most by including testimony from artists who acknowledge Kent and Immaculate Heart as important influences on their thinking.

[67] Ault, *Come Alive!* The connection between Corita and Charles Eames is an important theme in Ault's reading of Corita's work.

[68] Ault, *Come Alive!*; Kent and Steward, *Learning by Heart.*

internalized: the idea that there was one right way to make art, and that it was all self-expression and inspiration.[69]

One of Corita's most well-known assignments, a technique Sister Karen herself would come to rely upon at Self Help according to early participants, was based in Corita's own practice of mining the everyday visual culture of grocery stores and graphics on the street. Inventing the term "Looking sessions," students were assigned instructions for observing specific stretches of nearby Sunset Boulevard with paper frames, 35mm cameras, and empty slide cartridges.[70] The exercise expanded the very limiting frame of art onto the world outside. Focusing on perception, these various assignments were designed to break habitual ways of seeing the world and taught students that art itself was a way of seeing. It was a playful philosophy that understood art as a serious game of boundaries and frames.

Throughout the 1960s, the Art Department became a crossroads of intellectual exchange and synthesis in Los Angeles.[71] On a campus that ten years prior to Sister Karen's attendance would not have been receptive to such thinkers and activists, Corita's spirited curiosity expanded the department's capacity to showcase numerous artistic and political perspectives. Designer and filmmaker Charles Eames, experimental composer John Cage, performance artist Allan Kaprow, among other well-known thinkers and artists, all gave lectures, performances and showed films.[72] Not often considered together, it was a network of artists who saw art as a game whose rules had to be continuously remade. Or as Kaprow described of his own

[69] Ault, *Come Alive!*; Duncan, *Someday is Now.*

[70] Ault, *Come Alive!*; Duncan, *Someday is Now;* Glascock, *We Have No Art*.

[71] Scholarship has focused on Corita's national status as a printmaker. Considerably less attention has been paid to her teaching. Ault and Duncan emphasize how she saw them as two important components of the same practice. Ault, *Come Alive!*; Duncan, *Someday is Now.*

[72] Ault, *Come Alive!*

practice, they were "setting out to systematically eliminate precisely those conventions that were essential to the professional identity of art (a reverse renunciation)."[73]

While these thinkers became well-known for pushing the boundaries of art, Corita had a much more explicit social justice agenda for her provocations. Close friends with the Jesuit, anti-Vietnam War activist Daniel Berrigan, she co-published a book with him in 1969, one year after he participated in the burning of draft files with napalm in Catonsville, Maryland.[74] As Ault explains, Berrigan and Corita were very close and he spoke in the IHC Art Department numerous times. His own approach to Catholic social justice found expression in Corita's own thinking and work. Berrigan spoke of making a new, just and peaceful world as everyday work. It was a vision both artist and activists shared, in which everyone had a role to play in converting inhumane governance and unjust economic systems into what Sister Karen described as "something pro-human."[75] It clearly resonated with Sister Karen's own reaction to an art world she described as "anti-human in a way, anti-development, anti-participatory."[76]

The radical openness and engagement with a broader network of aesthetic thinking was captured in Corita's *Immaculate Heart College Art Department Rules* (c. 1965), which hung in the department.[77] It embodied the playful seriousness of the department's art philosophy and documented the multiple philosophies that fed into it. Comparable to more well-known works of conceptual art such as Sol LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1968) and John Baldessari's *Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell* (1966-68), Corita's print was both earlier, but

[73] Allan Kaprow and Jeff Kelley, eds., *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), xvii.

[74] Corita and Daniel Berrigan, *Footnotes and Headlines, A Play-Pray Book* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967).

[75] Daniel Berrigan, "Daniel Berrigan - Turning Warheads into Plowshares: How Shall We Educate People to Goodness," Youtube.com, May 14, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBcPdMi78Sk.

[76] Boccalero, "Sister Karen Boccalero."

[77] Ault, *Come Alive!*, 46.

also part of an emerging body of artworks in the 1960s that used the serial list of declarative statements about art as a vehicle for questioning art's boundaries. Unlike LeWitt and Baldessari who spoke from and poked fun at a universal, declarative voice, Corita's rules were generated from and for a particular location.

The *Rules* basic structure of ten components are reminiscent of the Judeo-Christian Ten Commandments. The block of "extra," unnumbered rules at the bottom disrupt the convention of ten and remind the reader of the need to perpetually change the rules. This disruptive playfulness is reflected in the two fonts which are rigid and compact, while the individual letters are unevenly spaced, tilting and unruly. It is a set of rules in movement which are structured in a dance-like visual effect running throughout. Order and disorder reverberate throughout an aesthetic system intended to cover the wide berth of teaching, making and living.

With a belief in productive contradictions, the advice proposes a self-disciplining (Catholic) work ethic's potential, which is balanced by a freeing Zen detachment that called for all rules to be broken (including a direct quote from Cage who drew on Zen Buddhism). Breaking rules is a very un-Catholic thing to do, but it was in this liberating and borderlands-like space that the department synthesized an aesthetic philosophy based in modern art, Catholic theology, Buddhist philosophy and anti-art philosophies.[78]

The first rule speaks to the importance of place to the department's philosophy: "RULE 1: FIND A PLACE YOU TRUST AND THEN TRY TRUSTING IT FOR A WHILE." It indicated that any place could be learned from if one could try trusting it for a while. The "viewfinder" exercises and the lessons of communal work in the studio taught students that the

[78] According to online sources, Merce Cunningham, Cage's partner and modernist dance choreographer, attributed the rules to Cage and hung a version in his dance studio. See The Art Assignment, "Art + Life Rules From a Nun," YouTube.com, March 14, 2019, https://youtu.be/IRPyql3cezo. This attribution remains an open question.

spaces of everyday life were indeed learning opportunities. The Art Department's philosophy advocated an aesthetic practice that learned to trust and even give in to a place. It was not just the ethos of the art department's communal art studio that Sister Karen also used in Self Help, it was the method for engaging, learning and trusting place which would prepare her for the transition into the spatial work she would do in the Chicano Art Movement.

Sister Karen pulled a silkscreen titled *Freeway* (1965) in her final year at IHC. It would foreshadow much of her cultural politics and the trajectory of her philosophy of place. She chose a bird's eye view of a fictional freeway intersection where seven overlapping lanes of traffic converge. Cars or cells appear to overlap at the center. The dove of the Holy Spirit floats above the meeting point and puts the print in conversation with a long art historical tradition of Italian Catholic Annunciation paintings and a more local tradition of freeway paintings. It spoke to a vision of Los Angeles as a gathering place made of many different pathways. A curious and indirect summation of her own Italian, Catholic and Angelino identities, the print concentrated on multiple veins, roads and forces coming together, unimpeded, to create a holy place. A rosy commentary on Los Angeles's urban projects, it evoked her native Boyle Heights (which was the centerpiece of freeway construction in the 1960s), the IHC Art Department and even signaled the ambition of a future Self Help Graphics as a borderlands space that supported a wide range of differences without dominance.

East Los Angeles and the Art Spaces of the Chicano Art Movement

Sister Karen's *Freeway* print depicted Los Angeles as a blessed site of unified differences, but in Chicano and Latino neighborhoods, the freeways segregated barrio residents from the rest of the city, and severely impeded free movement for a predominantly pedestrian community. As Gilbert Estrada explains in his research on freeway construction in East Los Angeles, Boyle

Heights was at the heart of the major freeway construction of the 1960s, when the 5, 10, 60, and 710 freeways (and the monstrous East LA Interchange) divided and boxed in Boyle Heights. As Estrada details, freeway construction "destroyed the city's most heterogeneous working-class communities, creating an infrastructure that promoted racially segregated communities."[79] Sister Karen would have to unlearn many of the conventions she had been taught, as the conditions in the barrio were far from the convent, campus or atelier traditions in which she trained. Moving from a bird's eye view of the city to an on the ground reality, the Boyle Heights to which she returned to was in the process of great urban and cultural change.

Born in Globe, Arizona in 1933, Carmen Boccalero moved with her mother to the Boyle Heights neighborhood in East Los Angeles when she was five years old. Boyle Heights was the "Ellis Island of the West" throughout the first half of the 20th century, and a common port of entry for newly arrived immigrants like Boccalero's Italian mother.[80] Pre-World War II Boyle Heights was dense with culturally specific stores, multiple sites of worship, and home to significant African American, Mexican American, Italian, Japanese, Jewish, Mexican and Russian communities.[81]

In the late 1940s, many of these communities diminished in number as they were redlined, while other housing opportunities opened up in different parts of the city.[82] With an influx of post-war Mexican immigrants in the 1950's, the Mexican barrio in nearby Maravilla expanded

[79] Gilbert Estrada, "If You Build It, They Will Move: The Los Angles Freeway System and the Displacement of Mexican Los Angles 1944-1972," *Southern California Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 287–315.

[80] Sister Karen Boccalero Files, Archives of the Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Christian Charity, Redwood City, CA.

[81] Rodolfo Acuña, *A Community Under Siege: A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River, 1945-1975* (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center, 1984), ix.

[82] Laura Pulido, "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no. 1 (March 2000): 12–40.

into Boyle Heights and adjoining neighborhoods.[83] Sister Karen's early life among the Italian and Italian-American community in Boyle Heights, and her subsequent alliance with the Chicano and Mexican people of Los Angeles' barrio in the 1970s, encapsulated the changing demographic history of that neighborhood in the twentieth century.

On completing her studies in Philadelphia and Europe, Sister Karen was assigned to her order's first approved off-site residence: a modern-day convent on 1168 N. Eastman Avenue in the City Terrace neighborhood of East Los Angeles.[84] Her old neighborhood had significantly changed in the 13 years since she had been away. The Chicano Movement and its cultural branch, the Chicano Art Movement, had invigorated a generation of Mexican-descended youth who were protesting, researching, claiming and fighting for Chicano civil rights.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Mexican Americans in the American Southwest brought renewed energy to the fights against anti-Mexican discrimination, law enforcement abuses and the dehumanizing effects of segregation, and the social justice fights for stolen land, labor rights and political representation. A civil rights movement composed of many vanguards, it broadly sought self-determination for Mexican-descended people through an ethno-national political project that claimed equal rights and status with the dominant Anglo culture and aspired for a Chicano nation, Aztlan.[85]

Chicano thinkers and manifestos rallied artists and intellectuals to express the Chicano experience and educate Chicanos about their "revolutionary culture."[86] Working in the belief

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[83] Acuña, *Community Under Siege*.

[84] Sister Karen Boccalero Files.

[85] For a pithy summary of Los Angeles's Chicano Movement, see: Ernesto Chavez, *Mi Raza Primero!: Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[86] Rodolfo Gonzalez and Alberto Urista, "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan," *El Grito del Norte* (Albuquerque: New Mexico), II, no. 9 (July 6, 1969): 5.

that cultural nationalism would unify Chicanos and lead to liberation from Anglo dominance, numerous texts and artworks worked to engender solidarity and political consciousness with rallying cries such as *el movimiento* (the movement), *la raza* (the race/the people), *la causa* (the cause), *el pueblo* (the city/the people). East Los Angeles' significant number of Chicano college students, and the largest Mexican descended population outside of Mexico City, made it one of the movement's hubs.

Chicano artists consistently argued that the Chicano cultural project was part of a much longer history of opposition to European colonial, imperial and epistemic dominance. For artist and theorist Rupert Garcia, cultural modernism was "not only about art and ways of seeing, it is also, in part, about the international and national subjugation of and defiance by 'non-European people'…"[87] For Garcia, and a younger generation of Chicano artists like Guillermo Gomez-Peña, being a Chicano artist was an unbroken continuation of the fight to resist colonization, and the role of a "colonized artist," was to assert that Chicanos had aesthetic traditions, histories, methods and knowledge of their own.[88]

In East Los Angeles, a generation of Chicanos had grown up in segregated neighborhoods and assimilationist public schools, and grown incredulous as to whether they could actually be both Mexican and American. Chicano artists and historians recalled histories of resistance to settler colonial domination by reviving the fashions of the 1940's Zoot Suiters and imagery of the Aztec warriors' resistance to Spanish colonization. Their activism was anti-assimilationist, confrontational and for certain groups like the Brown Berets, firmly militant. Chicano activism was the most contentious in fights over public and institutional spaces. The large-scale

[87] Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Rupert Garcia, "Turning it Around; A Conversation between Rupert Garcia and Guillermo Gomez-Peña" in *Aspects of Resistance* (New York: The Alternative Museum, 1994), 16.
[88] Ibid.

demonstrations and protests like the East LA high school walkout (1968) and the Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War (1970) were high points.

The artists of the Chicano Arts Movement were part of this spatial activism, establishing some fourteen Chicano art spaces in East Los Angeles, from 1967-1979, to serve *la raza.*[89] Their motivations were based in a national project of political and economic justice, but they were also based in a Chicano collective consciousness informed by experiences in assimilationist public schools, in hyper-policed public spaces, in negative depictions in mainstream media, and in higher education's rejection of their cultural experiences. Finding little support within these institutions, artists created their own spaces to move out from under the yoke of Euro-American aesthetic, behavioral and cultural norms.

L.A. Xicano (2011), an exhibition curated by Chon Noriega and collaborators, exemplified the ways in which Chicano artists were immensely resourceful in turning an oppressive built environment into life-affirming places. Artists converted housing projects into outdoor museums, repurposed numerous commercial buildings (a jail, a laundromat, a meatpacking building) into art galleries and schools, and converted city blocks and institutional parking lots into sites of Chicano-centered education and community-making. As much as they were tactics done out of financial necessity, they were also deviations from the orderings, definitions and practices of the Euro-American art space paradigm. They were broadening the scale of art's function from an elite network of galleries and museums to a larger spatial imaginary that intended to reimagine neighborhoods and institutions.[90]

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[89] The official number of Chicano art centers and collectives in East LA is not conclusive. See Chon A. Noriega, Terecita Romo, and Pillar Tompkins, *L.A. Xicano* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 73; Karen Mary Davalos, *Chicana/o Remix: Art and Errata Since the Sixties* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

[90] Chon A. Noriega and Pilar Tompkins, "Chicano Art in the City of Dreams A History in Nine Movements," in *L.A. Xicano,* ed. Chon A. Noriega, Terecita Romo, and Pilar Tompkins (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

Historian of Chicano art Shifra Goldman encouraged artists to re-deploy the establishment's spaces and methods for their own purposes. For Goldman, the problem was not the white art establishment's structure, but its practices. She believed, along with historian of Chicano art Thomás Ybarra-Frausto, that in Chicano hands these models and methods could create, in Goldman's worlds, "an alternative community-based cultural structure" that would nurture artistic practices that emphasized community, accessibility and regionalism.[91] As Goldman detailed: "It is not technology, style or even the art structure that is at fault – we are not opposed to the existence of galleries, museums, schools, art criticism – but to the philosophies and practices that inform them. They must be adapted to the needs of the people, in small ways and large."[92]

As Ybarra-Frausto characterized in his 1989 landmark essay, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," adapting art to the needs of the people and tapping into the practices of everyday life to do so, were at the heart of the movement's experimental spatial practices.[93] It was a large-scale project comparable to the Euro-American historical and neo-avant-garde's long-standing critiques of the autonomous and aesthetic realm created by capitalist bourgeois society's emphasis on specialization. As theorist of the avant-garde Peter Bürger characterized, the historical avant-garde claimed to be working towards the integration of art and artists into life, but only succeeded in identifying art's "normative frame of production and reception," or what came to be called, in his words, "the institution of art."[94]

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[91] Shifra M. Goldman, "A Public Voice: Fifteen Years of Chicano Posters," in *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 112.

[92] Ibid., 393.

[93] Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," in *Chicano Aesthetics: Rasquachismo* (Phoenix: Movimiento Artistico del Rio Salado, 1989).

[94] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 98, liii.

Subsequent generations of artists working in the wake of a European avant-garde made the institution of art their medium. This mostly took the form of an internal critique in which artists showed the plasticity of art's spatial and discursive components, mostly from within museum and gallery spaces, and later in "site-specific" art. Artists of the Chicano movement who had been excluded from these platforms (galleries, museums) and discourses, opted to experiment with these spatial paradigms or "the institution of art" by de-linking from their allegiance to whiteness and the ongoing colonial and conversionary legacies inherent to their model.

Bürger questioned "whether the distance between art and the praxis of life is not requisite for that free space within which alternatives to what exists become conceivable."[95] Always focused on those artists who enunciated their critique from within the designated houses of culture, as well as reinforcing a faith in the idea of a free space, it would be those at the border of this putative autonomous zone who would recognize the fundamental problems with the avant-garde's propositions, particularly for them, the limitations of the universal applicability of the Euro-American gallery and studio model, and the need to tap into an alternative spatial archive to move beyond the dominant models.

Many of the grand ambitions of Chicano art spaces folded under the harsh reality of life in the barrio. East Los Angeles was an economically deprived network of contiguous neighborhoods, divided and encaged by freeways, wracked by gang violence and high numbers of high school dropouts, high unemployment, and high rates of drug addiction, as well as an unofficial center for newly arrived Latino immigrants who often arrived with very little.[96] By

[95] Ibid., 54.
[96] Acuña, *Community Under Siege.*

1976, many of the artist-run spaces in East Los Angeles closed.[97] As Goldman summarized, "the working-class communities it wished to address did not have the economic resources to support an artistic constituency."[98]

The success of the longest running Chicano arts spaces like Goez Art Studios and Galleries, Social and Public Art Resource Center, and Self Help Graphics and Art occurred because of their development of a practice of facilitation and deployment of an alternative operational logic to the colonial practices of conversion and civilizing embedded in mainstream cultural work and gallery spaces. Art history has placed this tradition within what Chicana theoretician Laura Perez refers to as "the disciplining 'place' of minority art," even though, like its Euro-American colleagues, it also had made the institution of art its medium.[99] Once again the geography and the biases of spatial difference played a role in art historical classifications, but its location on the border would ultimately prove a great strength.

Art, Inc: A Borderlands Space

When Sister Karen returned to Los Angeles in 1972 she was assigned to work at a drug rehabilitation center and to serve as an instructor in the Immaculate Heart Art Department. With Corita's departure in 1968 and the Sisters of IHM forming their own community outside of the Church, the Art Department had lost much of its luster from its heyday in the 1960s.[100] The state of the department was likely an impetus for Sister Karen's first arts organization, Art, Inc., an unincorporated studio classroom where she taught Immaculate Heart Art Department

[97] Reasons ranged from internal conflicts, inability to find consistent or alternative sources of funding, lack of critical press coverage, inability to siphon away collectors from the mainstream art market, and the absence of the groundswell of financial support from the communities they envisioned backing their work. See Noriega and Tomkins, *L.A. Xicano*.

[98] Goldman, "A Public Voice," 389.

[99] Laura E. Perez, *Eros Ideologies: Writings on Art, Spirituality, and the Decolonial* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 28.

[100] Kristen Gaylord, "Catholic Art and Activism."

mainstays like batik, ink drawing, silkscreen and bread dough sculpture (a form of sculpting with dough that turns solid when baked).[101]

In a fortuitous meeting that same year, Sister Karen met newly arrived Mexican artists Carlos Bueno and Antonio Ibañez in a silkscreen studio in downtown Los Angeles.[102] Both intimate and artistic partners, "Ibañez y Bueno," as they signed their artworks, had trained at La Academia de San Carlos in Mexico City, Mexico. They fled the repressive political and cultural climate where their homosexuality, long-hair, and social status as artists made them likely targets for police harassment and detainment.[103] Sister Karen, in a characteristically bold and generous offer, invited the two struggling artists to live with her in the convent. The couple accepted, and the three artists developed a close friendship communicating in a mixture of English, Italian and Spanish.[104]

There is little documentation of Art, Inc., but it is clear that its primary work consisted of supporting Ibañez y Bueno's artistic practices. Sister Karen fundraised with philanthropists and foundations, financed the couple when they could not make ends meet, and housed them for a year, if not longer.[105] It was the type of support needed to give undocumented, poor, non-English language speaking artists the stability needed to produce artworks. It was also the beginnings of a radically egalitarian art space that replaced distinctions between teacher and

[101] Milton Jurado, an early Self Help participant, recalls buying *Untitled* (c. 1973), a batik attached to a piece of bamboo, from Sister Karen for $15.00. The work depicts an androgynous body made up of rapid drizzles and a solid block of turquoise with the word "YES" written down the center.

[102] From a videotaped public discussion with Carlos Bueno at Avenue 50 on February 2000, recorded by Ricardo Munoz, January 2000, Ricardo Munoz Family Collection Archive, Los Angeles, CA.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Ibid.

[105] "Letter to the Mexican Secretary of Interior Affairs," Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, CEMA 3, Department of Special Research Collections, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

student with a convent-like collaboration.[106] As Sister Karen described two decades later in speaking about Self Help: "everybody is a participant and on very different levels. The goal of our organization is to provide opportunity and promotion."[107]

Serving Chicano and Mexican people of the barrio who did not neatly fit into traditional definitions of student, artist, participant or audience, required crossing numerous boundaries. Where the IHC Art Department had the resources of a college and a "traditional" student body, deploying a communal art studio classroom in East LA meant adapting to the needs of "untraditional" students in a built environment that offered no infrastructure for cultural events or public gatherings. It required developing a new set of skills needed for an arts organization designed to initiate the founder's own practice of facilitation and creating supportive frameworks to make everyone a participant.

Art, Inc. quickly attracted aspiring artists including Milton Jurado, a gay, undocumented Ecuadorian immigrant, and Frank Hernandez, a local Chicano. Even in this initial prototype stage, the studio was already a borderland space where multiple languages, cultures and artists of different ethnic and national backgrounds, sexual orientations, and citizenry statuses not only worked alongside one other, but found a support system in Sister Karen.

With the arrival of additional students, Sister Karen petitioned for sponsorship from various sources, and won support from the Brothers of St. Francis in the form of a rent-free floor in a building the Brothers owned. Art, Inc. moved from the garage to the third floor of a building at 2111 Brooklyn Avenue in Boyle Heights. In 1973, Sister Karen formally incorporated Self

[106] From an unpublished and undated transcribed interview of Carlos Bueno by Aleyda Rojo, Ricardo Munoz Family Collection Archive, Los Angeles, CA. Bueno referred to her as his "fairy godmother," and numerous prints made by the artist couple during these years have touching dedications testifying to their appreciation for her radical generosity.

[107] Boccalero, "Sister Karen Boccalero."

Help Graphics and Art, Inc in this same space. Maintaining their initial framework of a communal art studio classroom, Sister Karen worked as the Director, Ibañez as the Assistant Director and Bueno as the resident teaching artist. From 1972-1976, the trio remained the core members with several other artists in and out of the inner circle.

At first glance, the range of different identities among the Self Help group may make them seem like an unlikely team to create a Chicano art space. That alliance, however, was not unusual. The longest-running Chicano arts organizations in Los Angeles were founded by comparable alliances that crossed multiple forms of ethnic, sexual, racial and religious difference: Mechicano Art Center was founded by a Chicano and a Russian emigrant woman; SPARC by a Chicana, a transgender artist and a white lesbian artist; and Goez Art Studios and Galleries by two Mexican-born artists and a Chicano.[108]

Like these organizations, Self Help was a borderlands space. Anzaldúa theorized the borderlands as a place where a new consciousness emerges at the crossroads between cultural, gender, sexual and national difference, at a distance from the monocultural practices of the dominant culture.[109] It was a consciousness that could embrace the seemingly irresolvable contradictions of a white Catholic nun and a gay Mexican couple developing a Chicano art space which itself was at the border of the traditional art space paradigm. Not fully a school, gallery, or community art center, it was a fluid space that raised the roof rater, so to speak, to accommodate the aesthetic traditions, social identities and legal realities participants brought with them. The organization developed a style of cultural work that was in-between, bicultural and only possible in the periphery where either/or could give way to both/and. It was the beginning of a spatial model that both served its neighborhood and democratized the

[108] Noriega and Tompkins, *L.A. Xicano*.
[109] Anzaldúa, "Border Arte."

production of art spaces. Working between spatial paradigms, Self Help took the workable parts of the traditional gallery and art studio model and mixed them with extant Chicano spatial and cultural practices.

Radically Available: An Open Art Space

In its first decade, Self Help developed a user-defined and socially engaged art space for a wide variety of needs that exceeded the traditional boundaries of the aesthetic. Sister Karen summarized this philosophy in a recorded recollection of her work with Chicano artist Pete Tovar in the mid-1970s. Tovar proposed, and later created, a space to sell crafts at Self Help. According to Sister Karen this encapsulated Self Help's approach to cultural work, explaining: "The way Self Help works with artists is this: he [Tovar] made the proposal on paper; he had a drawing of what he wanted to do; he said this is how I think this can work; and we said we liked the idea and we are going to support it as much as possible…the basic goal was to create a place where craftspeople could come and bring their friends."[110]

Meeting minutes show that by 1975 Self Help allowed artist groups like OJO ("Eye" in Spanish) and A.U.R.A. (Artists Union for Revolutionary Arts) to hold meetings in the space.[111] OJO was a collective of Chicano photographers that consisted of Alvaro Lopez, Ricardo Valverde (noted Chicano photographer and co-author of the letter to Wilson discussed earlier in this chapter), Ibañez, and others, who worked together to create a multi-media photo exhibition about inner-city Chicano life that eventually went on to tour the country. Contacted by the LA Music Center about programming, Self Help coordinated OJO's successful outdoor

[110] Boccalero, "Sister Karen Boccalero."

[111] "Meeting Minutes March 4, 1975," Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, CEMA 3, Department of Special Research Collections, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA. Meeting minutes do not appear in Spanish again within the archive.

presentation of their photographs in the summer of 1975 on the LA Music Center's campus downtown. The installation focused on family, and included a speaker behind the photo wall that played a recording of voices attesting to what family meant to Chicanos. It was the type of project that challenged white perceptions of Chicanos as criminal, amoral and foreign.[112]

A.U.R.A. was a group of Chicano artists that consisted of Lopez, Leonard Castellanos (founder of Mechicano Art Center, another Chicano art space), and members of the Chicano artist collective Los Four, who had, as Lopez described it, "idealistic notions" about challenging the exclusionary conditions of the art world.[113] Little is known of A.U.R.A.'s work or if they went beyond informal meetings at Self Help, but they described themselves as "a city-wide artists group of 40-50 members, whose aim is to form a coalition, providing a power base for artists, as well as a communication center for artists."[114]

Although these projects were short-lived, they testified to Self Help's protean nature. The space could serve very practical needs by providing an address and institutional credibility for press releases, applications, and exhibition proposals. It was also a place to gather to envision a more equitable art world. This was characteristic of the Self Help model in this first decade where it functioned as a meeting place for Chicano art activists, a center for designing community-based art projects, a teaching studio, a center for arts education, an office to assist artists with grants and proposals, an art gallery, and an arts administrative office. Throughout the rest of the 1970s and early 1980s, it would facilitate numerous projects with non-affiliated artists, such as Carlos Almaraz's project which trained young Third Street gang members to

[112] In an interview by the author, Alvaro Lopez remembers the Music Center exhibition as 1975, which differs from 1973, as cited in Ramon Garcia, *Ricardo Valverde* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2013).

[113] Alvaro Lopez, interview by the author, July 2018.

[114] "A.U.R.A. Press Release," Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, CEMA 3, Department of Special Research Collections, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

publish a barrio newsletter; The Vex, a weekly Chicano punk rock music venue from 1979-1981 which hosted both white and Chicano bands; as well as numerous performances in its parking lot, most notably by the Chicano performance art group Asco. True to Boyle Heights' history as a place of cultural mixture and coexistence, Self Help developed a model in which Chicano, Mexican, non-Mexican Latino, White, Catholic, gay, straight, undocumented and citizen artists could coexist and collaborate.

Enacting Environment

In its very first years, artists came to Self Help freely, but everyday people did not regularly participate. Though there was an intention to increase attendance as part of a broader vision of serving the community, Alvaro Lopez, a member during these first years, recalls that it was a "struggle to get people there."[115] The art historian Shifra Goldman describes these particular struggles as a reality that was common to many Chicano art spaces: "communities were frequently not conversant with the kind of art being brought to them, and sometimes—being caught up with primary problems of survival – did not welcome it, or were indifferent to it."[116]

The issue was not just about the art, however, but about the art studio and gallery model. After two years of working in the barrio, Self Help documented that model's limitations in a set of undated meeting minutes, c. 1974/1975 titled "Mobile Art Project." The minutes listed five reasons why the group needed to develop an alternative and mobile approach:

> 1. Many E.L.A. people will not seek out normal institutions, therefore there is a need to go out and meet the people.
> - Intimidated by highly normal structure
> - Economics
> - Language barrier

[115] Lopez interview.
[116] Goldman, "A Public Voice," 389.

> 2. Lack of neighborhood meeting places which provide opportunities for people of all ages to meet and get to know one another.
> 3. E.L.A. needs a mode of expression and the most deeply rooted norm of expression in the culture is art.
> 4. In the E.L.A. community as well as in larger society there is a lack of opportunity to follow through to complete a project.
> - success in art experience may have some effect on relating
> - Low sense of self accomplishment in E.L.A. community
> 5. Lack of job opportunities for artists – need to work toward creating positions.[117]

To the arts-initiated, establishing an art gallery or art studio classroom might not seem daunting, but given the Chicano experiences detailed in these observations, creating them constituted a new cultural threshold. From the outside, Chicano and Mexican people saw the gallery and studio classroom as spaces defined by spatial, linguistic and economic barriers that indicated to them that they did not belong in either institutional or fine art spaces.

These firsthand observations spoke to the prior traumas Chicano and Mexican bodies, minds and tongues endured in disciplinary spaces like public schools, government buildings, detention centers and prisons (many of which the mobile art project would serve). Self Help began to recognize its own relation to this family of institutional spaces. Though not explicitly stated, the group's work demonstrated that Chicanos had learned the prerequisites of white spaces from their experiences in institutions that required English language proficiency, money, a certain type of education, and knowledge of ritualized ways of looking and speaking. While the Self Help model could be filled with Chicano art and artists, that alone did not necessarily make it a Chicano art space.

Realizing that there was a barrier between a practice of "inside" culture presumed by the gallery and a practice of an "outside' culture, Self Help began to formulate a cultural

[117] "Mobile Art Project," Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, CEMA 3, Department of Special Research Collections, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

architecture that facilitated both. To do this, it began to adapt and observe what urban theorists such as James Rojas and A. K. Sandoval-Strausz refer to as Latino urbanism.[118] This was the place-making of a collective Latino imaginary that Sandoval describes as "the everyday modes of city-dwelling that Latin American immigrants and their descendants created in the United States."[119]

For Rojas, urban planners bird's eye views could not see the ways people on the street interacted with the built environment nor how they made their own "enacted environment" within it.[120] Self Help began to formulate a user-controlled art space. Moving away from the top-down power dynamic embedded in art galleries, the organization moved towards smaller scale, grassroots work that no longer sought to impose what Rojas describes as a "space that controls the user."[121] Latino urbanism, a type of barrio spatiality, could consist of enacted environments such as *yardas* (yard installations), graffiti, murals, street vendors, low riders, and spontaneous congregations of people in driveways and corners, which Rojas argues, exemplifies Chicano and Mexican uses of public space.

Community art spaces' redeployment of the dominant culture's spaces was an act of resistance that gave numerous artists their first exhibitions and supported experimental projects when most institutions would not. It was also a process of what decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo refers to as "de-linking," from the frameworks of knowing created by Western

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[118] James T. Rojas, "Los Angeles — The Enacted Environment of East Los Angeles," *Places* 8, no. 3 (1993): 42–53; A. K. Sandoval-Strausz, *Barrio America: How Latino Immigrants Saved the American City* (New York: Basic Books, Hachette Book Group, 2019).

[119] A. K. Sandoval-Strausz, "The Death and Life of Public Space in Great American Cities," *Platform*, December 19, 2020, https://www.platformspace.net/home/the-death-and-life-of-public-space-in-great-american-cities.

[120] Rojas, "Los Angeles"; James Rojas, "The Chicano Moratorium and the Making of Latino Urbanism," *Common\Edge*, November 16, 2020, https://commonedge.org/the-chicano-moratorium-and-the-making-of-latino-urbanism/.

[121] Ibid.

modernity, in this case, Chicano art spaces began to de-link from the conventions of Euro-American art spaces. While there had been a hunger among artists to claim the spaces they had been denied access to, that struggle generated another set of questions, which in the rush to erect an infrastructure, there was little time to ask: Could the traditional art gallery and art studio classroom be appropriated and deployed in line with the dewesternizing ambitions of the Chicano art movement? As Self Help would deduce, the core of the problem was the belief that these models were universally applicable, empty, transparent and could or should be duplicated anywhere.

bell hooks' observations on the unfulfilled potential of the Black Arts Movement to generate a liberatory space also applies to the Chicano Arts Movement, in that this assumption of having made a clean "break from white western traditions," proved somewhat illusory as these spaces' "philosophical underpinning re-inscribed prevailing notions about the relationship between art and mass culture."[122] There was a spatial legacy, a set of rituals, points of view, biases, boundaries and frameworks for knowing that came with the space.

This was not just a Black and Chicano problem. The belief in the transparency of museum and gallery spaces befuddled the better known socially engaged artistic and curatorial projects of the white art world throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Most would internalize the museum's logic that beyond the museum horizon there was no art, culture or creativity worth acknowledging. Seeing neighborhoods of color as culturally deprived and without spaces comparable to those of the dominant culture resulted in numerous artists and curators initially treating neighborhoods of color as if they were open and empty "sites."

[122] bell hooks, *Belonging A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 128.

The mainstream failures of the 1970s and 1980s began in the restrictive view of the museum enclosure as a way of knowing the city, and ultimately attempting to convert the rest of the city into orderly, white, transparent museum space. Art critic Jeff Kelley, writing in the 1970s on the predicaments of place and art, identified the power and colonial legacies as a spatial issue early on. While he focused on individual artistic practices, his observations can be applied to the position many culturally specific art spaces assumed, often unknowingly: that the Euro-American art gallery model was a culturally produced space that ultimately led to what Kelley described as "the imposition of a kind of disembodied museum zone onto what already had been very meaningful and present before that, which was the place."[123]

This is an observation that decolonial theorists Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vasquez have also turned to, seeing the museum model as a mechanism for "reproducing the canon of modernity, its gaze, its aesthetics and worldview, without acknowledging its implications with coloniality."[124] With such conceptual baggage attached to the gallery-museum model, it would take more than just appropriation to deploy it for alternative purposes. It would take a borderlands consciousness to extend the model beyond the white art establishments model of autonomous art space towards the new vision of an art space that served and welcomed Chicano people.

Sister Karen's training as a nun and an artist in the IHC Art Department tradition, prepared her to create a space she and others could trust. As she described in her Laguna lecture of 1991: "We try to reinforce the values that are already there, part of the culture. So it's very easy to do. We try to be sure our program coincides with the tendency. Playing on that tendency, as it

[123] Jeff Kelley, "Common Work," in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1996), 24.

[124] Rosa Weavers, "Decolonial Aesthesis and the Museum An Interview with Rolando Vázquez Melken," *Stedelijk Studies* 8 (Spring 2019), https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/decolonial-aesthesis-and-the-museum/.

were."[125] Trusting a place meant learning from the improvised spaces of street vendors, low riders, itinerant theater, the expanded ecology of mural-making, and even the private altar-making practices of many Chicano and Mexican households. As art historian Thomas Ybarra-Frausto described of the Chicano Movement's critical eye on its own lived culture, artists in the movement "found strength and recovered meaning sedimented in layers of everyday life practices."[126] It was this change in point of view that brought Self Help into the Chicano movement.

An ethos of bicultural space-making began to articulate the contours and features of a Chicano art space, while also advancing the cause of democratizing the spaces of art more generally. The Chicano movement had itself been concerned with decolonizing the artist, but a majority of its spaces were concerned with art as a tool for fostering an ethnic and class consciousness that would promote and advance the Chicano revolution. Self Help, along with the network of culturally-specific art spaces, began the very difficult work of decolonizing art spaces so as to support liberatory imaginaries and practices, which were not revolutionary in the traditional sense, but were a first step in liberation from European aesthetic and spatial dominance in the arts.

Be Mas!: The Barrio Mobile Art Studio

In a group interview in 2000, Chicano artist, Vietnam veteran, and early member of Self Help, Peter Tovar, offers an insightful anecdote about Sister Karen's pedagogy. Having had his most recent body of drawings dismissed during a critique, Sister Karen pointed Tovar back outside

[125] Boccalero, "Sister Karen Boccalero."
[126] Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo."

with instructions to "look at some of the gardens and everything on Gage [Avenue]."[127] Coming across re-purposed bathtubs and used tires as planters in people's *yardas*, Tovar remembered being inspired by the resourceful attitude that underlined these working-class garden installations.

This Mexican and Chicano attitude and style, known as *rasquachismo*, was a working-class and creative worldview that made do with what was close at hand. Theorized by Ybarra-Frausto, *rasquachismo* was based in Mexican vernacular traditions that "evolved as a bicultural sensibility among Mexican Americans."[128] *Rasquachismo* was a working class sensibility or aesthetic developed in the barrios of the American Southwest and in Mexico. An everyday practice of making do in economic, social and spatial orders that devalued Chicano labor, bodies and culture, it was a way of doing that delighted in overturning orders and recycling popular culture materials.

The *rasquachi* style was a strategy that was closely associated with the Chicano theater troupe El Teatro Campesino. The troupe performed at several of Self Help's Día de Los Muertos events, starting in 1977, and was well known for using the theater to advance the aims of the United Farm Workers' boycotts and union organizing campaigns. At the end of a brochure describing the Barrio Mobile program from 1976, the group proudly announced that: "If the people could not get to the studio, then the studio had to go out into the community to reach them."[129] This was a rephrasing of a well-known quote from Luis Valdez, one of the

[127] Karen Mary Davalos and Colin Gunckel, "The Early Years, 1970-1985: An Interview with Michael Amescua, Mari Cardenas Yanez, Yreina Cervantez, Leo Limon, Peter Tovar, and Linda Vallejo," in *Self Help Graphics & Art: Art in the Heart of East Los Angeles*, ed. Colin Gunckel and Kristen Guzmán (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center, 2014).

[128] Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo," 5.

[129] "BMAS brochure," Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, CEMA 3, Department of Special Research Collections, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

founders of El Teatro Campesino: "If the Raza will not come to the theater, then the theater must go to the Raza. This in the long run will determine, the shape, style, content, spirit and form of el teatro chicano [sic]."[130] The same would also hold true for the shape, style and content of the Chicano art space.

Sister Karen sent students out into the surrounding neighborhood because she too had been trained to find extant cultural practices, styles, and objects of beauty worth engaging and observing beyond the studio. This aesthetic exercise asserted that an artist did not need to pretend to be somewhere else and that their environment was a valid source of artistic material. It was also a seeing exercise where students could learn to see their environment outside of the negative portrayals they saw in movies and heard at home and in schools.

Learning to trust the barrio also meant thinking with a bicultural sensibility. It takes a certain way of seeing the world for a vendor to turn a street into a store and a muralist to turn a wall into a classroom. It proceeds from a belief that these spaces belonged to everyone. It is what led the group to use a van to turn institutional parking lots into classrooms and the streets and main cemetery of Boyle Heights into a stage for Mexican and Chicano rituals. This practice of "making-do" led to the development of Self Help's most experimental projects: Day of the Dead and the Barrio Mobile Art Studio (Barrio Mobile). They would begin to create spaces where they mixed the local and international, white and Chicano, high art and the everyday.

The Barrio Mobile was a quintessential example of working-class Mexican and Chicano rasquachi aesthetics. Launched with a donation from the Sisters of St. Francis and an initiating grant from the Los Angeles County General Revenue Sharing Fund, Self Help initiated the

[130] Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 5.

Barrio Mobile Art Studio in August 1975.[131] The program began with the conversion of a UPS step van into a mobile art studio that had a dark room for developing photographs and film, a sink with a water hook-up, an electrical hook-up and two long, sturdy tables that unfolded from the side of the van revealing more shelves and storage space (Fig. 1). In grant applications, Sister Karen was identified as the program's Director, Ibañez the Assistant Director, and Bueno one of the teaching artists. In practice, Ibañez was the designated driver, Bueno a teaching artist and Sister Karen handled the administration from the Self Help office, where she recruited local Chicano and non-Chicano artists for the ten paid artist instructor positions.

The Barrio Mobile Art Studio's name is worth noting because unlike other artist collective spaces like Centro de Arte Publico in Los Angeles or the Royal Chicano Air Force in Sacramento, it was really a Spanglish title. Barrio Mobile Art Studio could be read in Spanish as "barrio movìl art studio." This bilingual thinking appeared in the abbreviation staff gave to the Barrio Mobile, BMAS, as in "be mas," a Spanglish imperative to "be more."[132] It was a telling shift to a Spanglish, place-based name, that made reference to something that in many white, and even Chicano imaginations, was understood as a dangerous or foreign place. It was also another indicator that the organization intended to embrace a barrio way of seeing and doing, and tapping into what literary scholar Raul Homero Villa refers to as "the cultural knowledge and practices particular to the barrio."[133]

The program began as a loosely organized series of spontaneous neighborhood visits where artists facilitated art projects or film presentations in parks and libraries. Initially intended to work with youth hanging around the block and at risk of joining gangs, the BMAS partnered

[131] "BMAS brochure."
[132] Linda Vallejo, interview by the author, January 2017.
[133] Raúl Villa, *Barrio-Logos* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 122.

with schools and gained access to sites of institutional discipline where they nurtured a Chicano consciousness situated in Mexican histories, bilingualism and Chicano role models. They nurtured subject positions and worldviews that these institutional spaces did not teach or even permit to be discussed.

From her experience as a teacher, Sister Karen had seen how young students "lose their culture and cultural values," under the tutelage of teachers who "have for years propagated the notion of Chicanos as 'culturally disadvantaged.'" whether through corporal punishment by teachers for speaking Spanish or embarrassment caused by scorn for the lunches they brought to school that were prepared for them by their families.[134] Barrio Mobile participants were offered a place within a Chicano and Mexican creative history that was presented as long standing, impressive and equivalent to the dominant culture. In a school system that did not offer such history and thereby did not offer a place in time for Chicanos, the Barrio Mobile provided the physical and abstract spaces necessary for supporting Chicano and Mexican identities that were culturally and historically grounded. Its activities were focused on art's capacity to change the way Latino people saw themselves, their neighborhoods and their histories; a first step, the art activists believed, in any sort of larger social change.

It would no doubt have been easier to initiate a program where artists entered classrooms to teach art lessons. That approach, however, would have kept their intended audience within the social relations determined by those institutional spaces, whether that was student-teacher, detainee-guard, and more generally as authority-subordinate. A barrio art studio brought a Chicano space designed through Chicano thinking to reframe experience and create a new perception of Chicanos and their neighborhoods.

[134] "BMAS brochure."

Using visual aids (books, artworks, films, photos) for the teaching component of the lessons, each session culminated in a collaboratively made artwork in forms that included puppetry, painting, silkscreen, photography, film, sculpture, and batik, among others (all media used in the IHC Art Department). Visits could last for a few hours on a single day to stretching over four days for more complex projects.

Through the course of its life between 1975 and 1984, the BMAS traveled to correctional and educational institutions: elementary schools, high schools, community colleges, summer camps, juvenile halls and probation camps, as well as government funded public service sites like senior citizen centers, teen youth centers, and housing projects.[135] Setting up in parking lots and on nearby city blocks, the program served tens of thousands of school children and residents of Los Angeles County, from Malibu to El Monte, with an emphasis on the schools in East Los Angeles. Starting in 1976, Galleria Otra Vez hosted a yearly exhibition of artworks produced by participants in the BMAS program. It was also instrumental in drumming up support and facilitating projects for kids and adults to make costumes and objects to use in Self Help's Día de Los Muertos.

Differences in Art Space: Artmobile and the Barrio Mobile Art Studio

Comparing the BMAS with Los Angeles' federally funded Artmobile project of 1967-1968 further draws out how barrio spatial thinking was crucial to the BMAS project. Described as "an art gallery on wheels," and "museumobile," the Artmobile brought two 27-foot trailers together to create two temporary art galleries that exhibited 33 local artists from a variety of

[135] Adriana Katzew, "The Barrio Mobile Art Studio: The History of an Art Education Programme for Chicanas/os and Mexican Immigrants in Los Angeles,"*Visual Inquiry: Learning & Teaching Art* 2, no. 3 (2013): 247–61.

ethnic and racial backgrounds within the trailers, and an exhibit of student work in the center. Funded under the Title I, Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, it served 61 schools "with concentrations of children from low-income families" in Los Angeles City School Districts (now Los Angeles County Unified School District). [136]

A creative mobilization of the art gallery model, the range of artists and media included were truly impressive. The exhibition brought together "architecture, design, photography, ceramics, design crafts, drawing, painting, illustration, sculpture, serigraphy, etc," which were installed in such a way as to make them all safe for transport.[137] A forward-thinking exhibition for a city that needed more than a centralized repository of culture, it showcased artists who had not been recognized by LA's mainstream art institutions, as well as a diverse range of artists who would never normally have been exhibited together.

The Artmobile was compensating for the lack of arts funding and opportunities for residents of the city to go to museums. In its manual, the program's first objective was to encourage students "to see more art exhibits in the museums and other galleries."[138] Once again part of a culturally-dominant way thinking that did not understand that low-income students had no galleries or museums in their neighborhoods to attend in 1967, nor were they welcomed or represented in the mainstream art spaces of the city, it was a type of indoctrination into the decorum of white art spaces.

As the gallery space was moved, so too did it carry with it certain culturally-specific values and ideologies. For a demographic of Chicano students who did not have the resources to study art or to make the trip to the white parts of town in which this particular type of art was

[136] "Artmobile" flyer, Charles W. White papers, 1933-1987, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid.

exhibited, the dominant culture's model of art as separated and hierarchized stood in direct opposition to Chicano cultural practices and consciousness.

The quote from the abstract expressionist Hans Hoffman on the front of the Artmobile brochure spoke from the proper province of art: "To be an artist is the most privileged existence to man. Poverty can deprive it of very little; prosperity offers no inducement to alter it." Insisting on a world and vision of art in which poverty's effects were no match for art, this claim sold not just a type of art, but a vision of the world which was not real for those who would find innumerable obstacles in pursuing such a career in the late 1960s. White art spaces could ignore the realities of poverty, but Self Help had learned from years of working in the barrio that the place-less dimension which gallery spaces subscribed to was not only a disservice to those who lived nearby, it was an imagined reality those constituencies also rejected.

The gallery model most certainly could contain diversity under a certain spatial dominance, but it continued to offer a disembodied subject position that did its seeing from the purported no-place of the gallery. Students going to the Artmobile, much like museum and gallery visitors, were treated as uniform, disembodied and unplaced.

Conclusion

Artists of the Chicano Art Movement took on the most basic spatial types -- the art studio, art classroom and art gallery -- in the belief they could be re-deployed to serve Chicano constituencies. Now looking back on these histories, one can see that the ideologies and cultural specificity of these models were never fully unpacked. This was a lesson learned through the parallel, and mostly white, alternative art space movement of the 1970's in New

York. Artists sought to break away from limiting confines of the museum, only to reproduce museum spaces and practices in other neighborhoods. As critic and alternative art space historian Martin Beck deduced of fine art galleries and alternative art spaces: "alternatives could not come from within these spaces."[139]

The spaces produced (and replicated in the United States) by European rituals and epistemologies over hundreds of years could not simply be redeployed for alternative uses because they had been designed by and for Euro-American practices, making them cultural products in their own right. Those models worked under the presumption of universal cultural authority which created the illusion that its culturally-specific model was the only option for all cultural spaces.

To challenge the art gallery, the most basic unit of the museum, would be to enact a serious emptying out of deeply imbedded ideologies, even though there appeared to be nothing there but an empty white cube. This process would be slow and remains incomplete. When Self Help attempted to impose an art gallery and art studio classroom in a Chicano neighborhood for which it was not designed, there was a mistranslation which revealed some of the hidden ideologies and limitations of Euro-American art space. Excluded and denigrated by both art history and museum studies, these spatial experiments pre-empted the current decolonial turn in museum studies by having already begun the work of de-westernization of the spaces, infrastructures and practices of art. Their work at identifying the boundaries of these spaces, and then working to further undo them, offers an important historical case study for contemporary museological debates and contemporary artists.

[139] Julie Ault, ed., *Alternative Art: New York 1965-1985* (New York: New York Drawing Center, 2009).

As the great Chicano print maker Rupert Garcia described, the artistic projects of the Chicano art movement "were by definition opposed to modernism," and as such, the spaces they made did not look like modern art spaces. This has historically worked against this tradition, devaluing Chicano art spaces as inferior, instead of recognizing them as an effort to expand the extremely limited range of "art spaces," that make up the U.S. American cultural landscape.

Latino and Latin American scholars have long argued that the museum model has failed in its ability to represent difference. A striking range of disciplines, from ethnic studies to museum studies itself, have voiced a desire for alternative spatial models and models of cultural work. As curator Mari Carmen Ramirez maintains, a core component of the problem resides in the issue of cultural authority and the need to create a class of curatorial gatekeepers who she would prefer to re-envision as "'cultural brokers,' whose function will be able to mediate between the groups they exhibit and audiences unfamiliar with the cultural traditions represented."[140] Self Help and its contemporary art spaces were part of an initiative that began to envision the spaces needed for such broker positions to be formed.

Returning to this unfinished spatial activism will open up alternative artistic postures for a more equitable art world based in brokering, bridging, and branching out. Mounting another stage of serious challenges beyond the now staid tradition of the Euro-American avant-garde or the failed attempts at diversity within Euro-American aesthetic and spatial dominance, can build from the lead of culturally-specific art centers, and their traditions of resistance embedded in everyday creative and spatial practices.

[140] Mari Carmen Ramirez, "Beyond 'The Fantastic': Framing Identity in U.S. Exhibitions of Latin American Art," *Art Journal* 51, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 60–68, 67.

As self-described barriologist Raul Villa argues, the creative everyday living of Chicano people ingeniously reflects its capacity to "reveal multiple possibilities for re-creating and re-imagining dominant urban *space* as community enabling *place.*"[141] The overlooked archives of knowledge delineating the history of Self Help offer an inventory of tools for outmaneuvering the categories and mappings which have limited our ability to envision what a more equitable and democratic arts infrastructure might look like. Reviving these histories demonstrates that there can be another way grounded in a spatial activism that promotes structures that can contain many creative traditions and worlds.

[141] Raúl Villa, *Barrio-Logos*, 208.

II. Ibañez y Bueno: Expanding Chicano-Mexican Public Art Practice

Throughout the 20th century, Chicano and Mexican murals in Los Angeles have been particularly susceptible to erasure. One of the most muraled cities in the United States, Los Angeles has also lost innumerable public murals to environmental degradation, urban renewal, legal ambiguities of ownership, public scandal fueled censorship and vandalism.[142] Sometimes, however, in the churning kaleidoscope of this ignoble canon of forgotten murals, absences come into focus.

One such story is to be found in the mural, *Maria de Los Angeles Novia de Pueblo* (Maria of Los Angeles Bride of the Town) (1974) (Fig. 2), painted by the Mexican artists and Self Help Graphics and Art co-founders, Carlos Bueno and Antonio Ibañez. Part of the artist couple's larger *Novias de Pueblo* series, "mis novias (my girlfriends)," as Bueno affectionately referred to the artists' signature images throughout the 1970s, the mural was part of a larger artistic project that took the form of silkscreens, ceramics, gourds, and even painted on the side of Self Help's mobile art studio van.[143] The artists believed the mural had been destroyed shortly after it was painted on the western wall of the Bank of America building on 3051 Wabash Avenue in the Chicano neighborhood of City Terrace. Proudly signed "Ibañez y Bueno," a shorthand for their lifelong artistic partnership, it was most likely the first public mural painted by gay undocumented immigrant artists in Los Angeles County.

Ibañez y Bueno arrived from Mexico City in January 1972 with nearly no English language facility and little to no money.[144] In their five years in Los Angeles, from 1972-1976, in

[142] Erin M. Curtis, *Murales Rebeldes!: L.A. Chicana/Chicano Murals Under Siege* (Los Angeles: Angel City Press, 2017).

[143] Quote from an unpublished and undated transcribed interview with Carlos Bueno by Aleyda Rojo, Ricardo Munoz Family Collection Archive, Los Angeles, CA.

[144] "Letter to the Mexican Secretary of Interior Affairs," Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, CEMA 3, Department of Special Research Collections, UC Santa Barbara Library, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

collaboration with Sister Karen, they initiated a series of projects including Self Help's communal art studio and gallery, the yearly Día de Los Muertos multimedia procession, a full schedule of on-site tours for schoolchildren, and they implemented the Barrio Mobile Art Studio, a modified mobile art van that brought Mexican and Chicano art lessons to public and institutional sites across Los Angeles.

Moving to City Terrace, the artist couple joined their Chicano colleagues and friends like the legendary muralists Willie Herron and Carlos Almaraz who painted some of the first Chicano murals in East Los Angeles in the early 1970s. From the bottom left corner *Maria de Los Angeles* spoke directly to Chicanos, declaring: "Alma de mis 'Novias de Pueblo' para el Barrio su nombre es Maria de los Angeles" ("Soul of my 'Novias de Pueblo' for the barrio her name is Maria of the Angels"). A testament to the artists' commitment to a Chicano countercultural sphere rooted in Mexican history, Bueno recalled decades later with great pride: "and you heard *la raza* (Mexican-descended people) comment: 'Did you know Carlos Almaraz is painting a mural on Soto? Yes, Willie Herron is painting another on so-and-so street and Carlos Bueno on the Bank of America.'"[145]

What Ibañez y Bueno offered as an allegorical vision of Los Angeles was a mixed-race everywoman with profound spiritual and historical roots. Playing with the multiple references in the city's Spanish name, El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora La Reina de Los Ángeles (The Town of Our Lady Queen of the Angels), *Maria de Los Angeles* envisioned Los Angeles as a place where oppressed histories swirled up and cultural currents collided. In its imaginative capacity as a mural, it disrupted a seemingly stable and siloed image of Los Angeles by simultaneously articulating Indigenous, Mexican and Spanish times and spaces for a barrio audience. These

[145] From an unpublished and undated transcribed interview of Carlos Bueno with Aleyda Rojo, Ricardo Munoz Family Collection Archive, Los Angeles, CA.

were histories that were barely acknowledged or memorialized in the city's civic imagination and urban landscape as these had been arranged by Euro-American settlers.

Where the major trends among their Chicano contemporaries focused on memorializing Chicano life and depicting a revolutionary Chicano body politic in motion, Ibañez y Bueno worked in a branch of the Mexican muralist tradition that focused on rural and folkloric visual vocabularies. They freely mixed Indigenous patterns and symbols which Bueno, and possibly Ibañez, informally studied in Cuernavaca and Guerrero, Mexico. Art historian Shifra Goldman described the impressive range of Mexican *artesanía* in Bueno's work: "one finds the complexity of Hispanic-Moorish *retablos*; whimsical bark paintings from Guerrero; flowered lacquer work from Michoacan; *petatillo* earthenware from Tonala; or the Talavera ware of Puebla."[146] In its highly stylized and tempestuous landscape, the mural calls forth the ancient and living symbols of Mexican Indigenous textiles, pottery and customs: *alebrijes* (mythical mixed-body animals), birds, flowers, moons, suns and arabesque vegetation. Markedly different from the Aztec and Mayan vocabularies predominant in Chicano and Mexican muralism, the couple developed a geographic, temporal and visual point of reference that was both Angelino and Mexican, ancient and contemporary.

Maria de Los Angeles lacks the political bravado (and machismo) common to many Chicano murals of the period. Yet, when placed within a developing understanding of Ibañez y Bueno as artists trained in a Mexican public art tradition, it becomes clear that the mural was part of a larger conceptual project shared by Chicano and Mexican artists. Maria is crowned by fantastic purple flowers that signal her as a participant in a Mexican village wedding and as a celebrant of the Catholic Mexican and Indigenous Día de los Muertos. Ibañez y Bueno were

[146] "Dream Worlds and Fantasies By Carlos Bueno," Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, CEMA 3, Department of Special Research Collections, UC Santa Barbara Library, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

the central facilitators between Mexico's practices and the Chicano iteration of Día de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead celebrations) started at Self Help in 1973.

The mural was painted right at the time that the Chicano Día de los Muertos was being formalized, and was possibly the first mural depiction of this aesthetic in Los Angeles. The artists linked their mural to the incipient Día de los Muertos public art performances. Even for organizations like Self Help, which explicitly chose not to take up a mural-making initiative, this connection points to the continuum between Mexican muralism and the socially engaged art projects and community art centers in Chicano Los Angeles. Reviving the memory of Ibañez y Bueno's oeuvre opens up a historical position at the intersection of Chicano muralism, Chicano social practice and Mexican public art.

Social practice historians have theorized and mapped a history of social practice from within a Euro-Russo-New York City historical axis. At the core of these genealogies is the historic avant-garde's mandate for Euro-defined art to be incorporated into everyday life. Art historian Claire Bishop, one of the foremost theoreticians of social practice, makes the historic European avant-garde's mandate a central part of her definition of social practice, which she defines as: "artists devising social situations as a dematerialized, anti-market, politically engaged project to carry on the avant-garde call to make art a more vital part of life."[147]

[147] Terminology for this artistic practice is broad. Scholars seem to have settled on "social practice" as the preferred term. As I explore in this essay, however, there may be the need to reconsider its use. I switch between Chicano social practice and public art tradition, borrowing from Anna Indych-Lopez's framing of the work of Judy Baca as a "new form of public art" in *Judith F. Baca* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2018), 47. Media and cultural historian Chon Noriega was the first to designate Sister Karen's work as a social practice. See Noriega's introductory note in "Self-Help Graphics: Tomas Benitez Talks to Harry Gamboa Jr.," in *Sons and Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in L.A.*, ed. David James (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003). For more on the debates around social practice, see Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells* (London: Verso Press, 2012); Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 1998); Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Public* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

Looking to break out of this logic based in a history of Euro-American cultural colonization, this chapter explores the aesthetic, cultural and political currents that ran along a Los Angeles-Mexico City axis. This trajectory not only questions the use of the terminology of social practice, it also reveals the Euro-American avant-garde's deeply rooted colonial positionalities, postures and logics which contemporary social practitioners inherited.

Scholars Karen Mary Davalos, Colin Gunckel, Anna Indych-Lopez and Chon Noriega (among others) have all called attention to the significance of Chicano social practice projects and the challenges they pose to Euro-American art history.[148] They have encouraged art historians to think of these practices as more than just predecessors or derivatives of a social practice defined by of Euro-American art history. Following the practice of Ibañez y Bueno as both literal and figurative border crossers, this chapter explores Chicano public art within the transnational and decolonial discourses of their time. Situating experiments in Chicano public art as part of an expanded legacy of Mexican muralism, as I do in this chapter, makes space to theorize this practice from a borderlands perspective that brings Los Angeles and Mexico together, similar to the imagery that Ibañez y Bueno depicted in their mural.

A branch of the Chicano Art Movement, Chicano public art expanded the traditional boundaries of muralism to develop "extra-aesthetic" roles as accompaniers, amplifiers, facilitators, bridges and stages for the communities they served. In the practice of developing these new skills and projects, a socially engaged aesthetic matured. Instead of looking to bring Euro-American art into the everyday lives of Chicanos, an arguably colonial positionality that

[148] See Colin Gunckel, "The Chicano/a Photographic: Art As Social Practice in the Chicano Movement," *American Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (June 2015): 377–12; Anna Indych-Lopez, *Judith F. Baca* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2018); Karen Mary Davalos, "Innovation Through Tradition: The Aesthetics of Día de los Muertos," in *Día de Los Muertos A Cultural Legacy, Past, Present and Future,* ed. Betty Brown and Linda Vallejo (Los Angeles: Self Help Graphics and Art, 2017); Noriega, "Self-Help Graphics."

viewed the non-white world as a cultural badlands, groups like Self Help turned to everyday Chicano cultural practices and spaces to generate community-building rituals and art projects.

Community-serving artists worked to dismantle what they viewed as the oppressive and unproductive limitations of Euro-American art and to engender another socially-engaged aesthetic option. It is within this heritage that a fuller account of Chicano public art practices is made visible: one where it is not necessary to legitimate these practices against a Euro-American standard, as they are part of what Chicana cultural theoretician Laura Perez describes as a tradition extending back to pre-Columbian frescos, scribes and glyphmakers who were tasked by their respective societies to make "old truths" and traditions "newly relevant."[149] Perez identifies the Chicano Día de los Muertos as an example of this tradition which she describes as "innovative and kindred in spirit and intent to the project of the European and Latin American avant-gardes of the World War I and II eras."[150] As Perez maintains, the Chicano tradition entailed re-connecting and re-formulating an alternative aesthetic option in a field designed around the dominance of a singular aesthetic.

Extensive interviews and previously unseen documents and artworks in private collections bring Ibañez y Bueno's life-long, socially engaged public art practice into view. Bueno described it succinctly as "working and art for the poor."[151] This commitment had historical roots in both nations, and was more experimental than making art objects for a marginalized constituency. As their contemporary, Chicana artist Judy Baca characterized of her own practice in the 1970s, an artist "could not work in a seamless way with a community" because

[149] Laura E. Perez, *Eros Ideologies: Writings on Art, Spirituality, and the Decolonial* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 31.

[150] Ibid.

[151] See Rojo interview and a videotaped recording of a public discussion with Bueno on February 2, 2000, by Ricardo Munoz at Avenue 50, Ricardo Munoz Family Collection Archive, Los Angeles, CA.

the cultural and relational infrastructure was not in place.[152] Such a seemingly simple commitment to the poor would require an experimental public art practice that took the Mexican muralists' unfinished project of "arte publico" as a starting point, and then developed the cultural infrastructure to facilitate the creation of Chicano rituals and art spaces.

Ibañez y Bueno left their mark on this stage of public art in the United States. Beginning with the Mexican art history of their time, that is, the Mexican avant-gardes of the late 1950s and the early 1970s, I identify the artist couple as a bridge to bring these expanded mural practices on both ends of the borderlands together.[153] I argue that projects like Día de los Muertos and the Barrio Mobile Art Studio, along with contemporaneous parallel projects initiated by artist collectives in Mexico City, challenge dominant understandings of social practice history. Plotting a different set of cultural-geographic points re-orients the mapping of socially-engaged art-making in the United States so as to give equal consideration to the Mexican art tradition which are some of its greatest tributaries.

Ibañez y Bueno and the Avant-Gardes of Mexico City 1958-1972

Carlos Bueno Poblett was born in 1941 in Cuernavaca, Mexico. He divided his childhood between time at his grandparents' ranch and in Mexico City, enjoying the pleasures and customs of both city and country life. He moved to Mexico City in 1958 to pursue studies as an actor and was ultimately persuaded by his family to take up another profession, enrolling at

[152] Indych-Lopez, *Judith F. Baca*, 32.

[153] In 2013, Chicano art archivist and collector Ricardo Munoz, working through the institutional framework of the East LA arts non-profit, Avenue 50, co-authored a proposal for a retrospective of Bueno's work for the J. Paul Getty Foundation's Pacific Standard Time Los Angeles/Latin America initiative. The proposal was rejected by the foundation. This was an unfortunate oversight for the Getty's city-wide initiative, which looked to highlight the artistic connections between Latin America and Los Angeles as Bueno was one of the city's best examples of South-North collaboration. "Avenue 50 Grant Proposal," Ricardo Munoz Family Collection Archive, Los Angeles, CA.

La Escuela Nacional de Artes Plasticas (San Carlos) in 1960. Attending one of Mexico's most well-known art academies where generations of muralists like David Alfaro Siqueiros had trained, he took classes in painting, muralism, live model drawing, engraving and perspective for two years, but never completed his degree.[154]

In video recordings and unpublished interview transcriptions, Bueno does not detail much about his Mexico City years or training, mentioning some of the jobs he held and noting that this was where he met his artistic and romantic partner Antonio Ibañez Gonzalez.[155] Even less is registered in the archival record about Ibañez's life. Where Bueno is poorly represented within the Self Help Graphics and Art archive, Ibañez is almost absent. Based on the few available archival materials and interviews with Bueno, it is known that Ibañez was a photographer, sat in on some classes with Bueno and was a *chilango*, a native of Mexico City. As lifelong artistic partners they were nonetheless not open about their homosexual relationship; close friends describe Bueno as repeatedly denying any sexual involvement with Ibañez.[156]

From 1958 to 1972, they lived through two distinct moments in Mexican art history: 1) the generation of artists in the 1950s and 1960s that rejected the Mexican muralist's government-affiliated model and 2) the avant-garde practices that emerged in the repressive political climate of the late 1960s and 1970s. Mexican artist and provocateur Jose Luis Cuevas' 1959 landmark text "The Cactus Curtain" describes the art world of which Bueno and Ibañez were part, and is generally considered as capturing the frustrations of a generation of Mexican artists

[154] Rojo interview and a videotaped recording of a public discussion with Bueno on February 2, 2000, by Ricardo Munoz at Avenue 50, Ricardo Munoz Family Collection Archive, Los Angeles, CA.

[155] Ibid.

[156] Milton Jurado, interview by the author January 20, 2015. Antonio Lopez Saenz, interview by the author, March 20, 2017.

in the 1950s and 1960s. According to Cuevas, artists felt conflicted and stunted behind the "cactus curtain," Cuevas' term for the self-assured and jingoistic conformity that sanctified the artistic formulas and political agendas of the Mexican School as beyond reproach. Believing that the imperatives to gesture toward revolutionary politics and the attendant government frameworks for mural commissions had become far too restrictive, artists like Cuevas chose alternative exhibition spaces and spectacular publicity tactics, turning more and more toward international avant-garde styles like Abstract Expressionism, Op art and Pop art.

Despite his disavowals, Cuevas himself built upon the mural tradition in his *Mural Efimero No.1* from 1967. The artist rented a billboard in the Zona Rosa district of Mexico City and had house painters render his design. One quarter of the mural consisted of his enormous signature, along with politically suggestive motifs in the other quadrants. The unveiling was a spectacle with rock music and television cameras on site to capture the celebrity artist unveiling his temporary mural. Experimenting with the mural's mobility as much as it was parodying the celebrity artist, it was a highly publicized event of which Ibañez y Bueno would have most likely been aware, possibly even attending its opening.

The Tlatelolco student massacres of 1968 shocked and shifted the tenor of artistic practice as the Mexican government initiated a dirty war on dissidents, students, organizers and intellectuals who protested or criticized the Diaz Ordaz government. Still professing the revolutionary ideals of the Mexican Revolution, the Mexican government began disappearing and torturing government critics, organizers of public protests, students and countercultural dissidents. The drastic shift in Mexican cultural politics from 1968 to 1972 would have potentially made Ibañez y Bueno targets of police harassment and arrest. Bueno described himself as a *jipi* (hippie) artist who sported long hair and dressed like Marlon Brando's

rebellious and leather-clad character in Laszlo Benedek's *The Wild One* (Fig. 2). Despite the experimentation and international influences within its contemporary art scene, draconian repression made Mexico City increasingly dangerous for artists exhibiting any rebellious fashions, attitudes or artworks.

The avant-garde practices of the 1960s were short-lived as the political events of the post-1968 years set the stage for a generational shift among Mexican artists who began working collectively and collaboratively on interventionist, conceptual and community art projects in the 1970s. Both intimidated by and highly critical of the government's disappearing of dissidents, some 200 artists banded together in independent groups to form a loosely organized assembly known as *Los Grupos*. Working in a nearly uncategorizable range of styles, there was a common joy in mixing political activism, institutional critique, installation, guerilla street performances and public art projects to fit particular contexts within Mexico City's politically charged cultural landscape. This break from the traditional government-structured mural model gives context to Ibañez y Bueno's Mexican aesthetic lineage, and rather than their personal liaison, might also equally account for their banding together as "Ibañez y Bueno," a philosophy of collaboration that was essential to artistic survival in Mexico City, which would later prove crucial in the comparable "war zone" of East Los Angeles.

The Peruvian-born and Mexico-based art critic Juan Acha (1916-1995) was *Los Grupos'* main theorist. Acha built his theory of ***no-objetualismo*** (non-objectualism) around the groups' ephemeral, performative and street-based practices. Familiar with many of the international artistic trends through his extensive travels, Acha saw *Los Grupos* as working to overturn what

he described as the idea of "the work of art as the unique depository of the artistic."[157]As an art theoretician attempting to articulate a decolonized Latin American art whose intention was to "to redefine art in accordance with our collective and popular interests," Acha's theories aimed at challenging the dominance of European aesthetics by turning to design and *artesania* which he described as "lo único independiente en nuestro arte (the uniquely independent in our art)."[158] As the Mexican art historian Rita Eder has described, Acha's radical re-thinking of a specifically Latin American art was based in "a broader vision in which art became one with design and popular arts," to revive an aesthetic option outside of the dominant Euro-American trends.[159]

Along with Acha, there was a strong vein of *Grupos* artists invested in a public art practice that they argued was derived from an autochthonous Mexican art history that rejected the presumptions of Euro-American influence and developmentalism. *Grupos* artist Maris Bustamante, a follower of Acha's, asserted the group's revolutionary and decolonial project by claiming her own *grupo* descended from the *Estridentismo* (Stridentism) movement of the early 20th century which redeployed popular arts and was committed to the values of the Mexican Revolution. Shifra Goldman saw a wider range of historical antecedents in a review of the work of the "Mexican Front of Cultural Workers" as *Los Grupos* were initially called. The American critic noted that some artists sought an alternative to Mexican Muralism, others

[157] Juan Acha, "Teoría y práctica de las artes no objetualistas en América Latina" (unpublished lecture, Primer Coloquio Latinoamericano Sobre Arte No Objetual, Museuo de Arte Moderno de Medellin, 1981), https://icaa.mfah.org/s/es/item/1088533#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-429%2C1527%2C857%2C480.

[158] Ibid., 7.

[159] Rita Eder, "Juan Acha: A Latin American Perspective on Art," Post Note on Art in a Global Context, Museum of Modern Art (blog), September 27, 2016, https://post.moma.org/juan-acha-a-latin-american-perspective-on-art/.

carried on in its spirit, while there were also those that "shaped to their needs two international artistic idioms, pop art and conceptual art."[160]

The proposed historical lineages of *Los Grupos* is as varied as the public art strategies the groups themselves developed. It is a generally agreed, however, that *Los Grupos* explored the alternative venues and circuits for artworks with many staging "projects outdoors in the midst of urban chaos," as Ruben Gallo, a scholar of comparative literature has characterized them.[161] The artist Felipe Ehrenberg, a member of Grupo Processo Pentágano, one of the first *Grupos* to form in 1973, described the public art ambitions as "an unusual sense of urgency to make direct connections with the man on the street and confront the conflicts imposed on him by our societies."[162] Ehrenberg would himself make a series of prints at Self Help in the 1980s and spoke of Sister Karen's work with great admiration.[163] With the government-funding model of the Mexican Muralist School no longer an option for *Los Grupos*, they brought their practices out into the open theaters of the streets of Mexico City in ways that ultimately advanced the muralist vision of a public art.

Even those like Cuevas, whose intent was to pull down the "cactus curtain," did not enact as clean a break from muralism as they proposed. Cuevas' *Mural Efímero No.1* (1967) was a mural-based performance that relied on the mural's capacity to make a unique place in which he could enact his artist-as-celebrity rock-n-roll performance. It was a practice in keeping with a more performative reading of the muralist tradition as advocated by scholars Bruce Campbell

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[160] Shifra Goldman, "Elite Artists and Popular Audiences: The Mexican Front of Cultural Workers," in *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States*, ed. Shifra Goldman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 137.

[161] Ruben Gallo, "The Mexican Pentagon: Adventures in Collectivism During the 1970s," in *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945,* ed. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 172.

[162] Felipe Ehrenberg, "In Search of a Model for Life," *ARTMargins* 1, no. 1 (February 2012), 126.

[163] Gilberto Cardenas, "Felipe Ehrenberg," Latino Studies ND, YouTube.com, January 19, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riAZBCWyxfA.

and Victor Sorrell. Both scholars argue that murals are best understood, as Sorrel describes, as a "processual undertaking involving many individuals in their conception."[164] Instead of an art historical paradigm privileging the objecthood of murals, Campbell suggests a more expansive and performative definition: a "method of muraling."[165]

"A Method of Muraling"

Muraling encapsulates the performance of making and consuming a mural in the public sphere, along with the elements that activate and support the work, like using the mural as a memorial, a starting point for protests, or a focal point for public education. Seeing a mural's socially engaged performativity transforms the putatively contained mural object into an expanded field. Moving beyond the limits of its objecthood, it becomes what Sorrel defines as a ritual site in keeping with the expanded muralist practice of Los Tres Grandes in the United States in the 1930s. In that period of American art history, the muralists made enormous advances in their public art initiative through street and publicly accessible murals but they also developed floats and workshops in support of political protests, leaving an indelible mark on the socially-engaged art history in the United States.[166]

Los Grupos members like the Tepito Arte Acá (founded in 1974), a group of painters from the Mexico City barrio of Tepito, continued this public art mandate when they used muraling as an opportunity to teach and collaborate on making murals with the residents of their

[164] Victor Alejandro Sorell, "Orozco and American Muralism: Re/viewing an Enduring Artistic Legacy," in *José Clemente Orozco in the United States, 1927-1934,* ed. Renato Gonzalez Mello and Diane Miliotes (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 2002), 277.

[165] Bruce Campbell, "An Unauthorized History of Post-Mexican School Muralism," in *Mexican Muralism A Critical History*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Leonard Folgarait and Robin Adele Greeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 266.

[166] See Barbara Haskell, *Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925-1945* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).

impoverished neighborhood. As Campbell identifies, Tepito Arte Acá, like many members of *Los Grupos*, were devoted to using art to serve, teach and foster connections with communities, as he writes, "marginal to the artworld," by developing the mural tradition's inherent performativity which blurred divisions between artist, audience and artwork, as well as expanded the range of locations in which murals were created.[167]

The mural tradition played an enormous role as both foil and progenitor to the socially engaged projects of *Los Grupos*, with artists taking various political and aesthetic positions within that history. Ibañez y Bueno would have seen — and were themselves part of — the many fronts of the post-Mexican School, as well as privy to the conceptual art and public performances taking place throughout Mexico City. Campbell and Sorrell's reframing of muralism as an expanded practice connects it to the wider range of tactics developed by *Los Grupos* and most visibly worked out by groups like Tepito Arte Acá. Placing these traditions within a public art lineage shows their interconnections, wherein the Mexican School was one stage of a larger decolonial and democratizing project.

Ibañez y Bueno left for Los Angeles one year before the first *grupo* formed in 1973. Imagining the artist couple as generating their own *grupo* in the form of Self Help Graphics gives their artistic collaboration an art historical place and political agency that could not be seen solely from the American archives where their piecemeal artistic practice has survived. This speculative connection also works to bring Self Help Graphics into conversation with *Los Grupos*. From Mexico City to East Los Angeles, the family resemblance between both sets of community art practices is notable. Both intended to break away from singular authorship, to

[167] Ibid.

work with marginalized communities, address real political issues in everyday spaces, and redefine standardized artist-community models.

Drawing upon the same formative social, political and artistic experiences as their Mexican colleagues, Ibañez y Bueno drew from a common set of Mexican cultural reservoirs and traditions to form their artistic responses to the crises they saw in their new neighborhood in Los Angeles. After their arrival in East Los Angeles, they saw that a younger generation of Chicano artists were also rebelling against but also advancing muralism. Moving from Mexico City to East Los Angeles was to re-enter into a similar set of public art debates on the other side of the border, and the artist couple brought their own knowledge of Mexican traditions and debates to the Chicano Art Movement.

The Expanded Spatiality of Chicano Muralism

Mexican muralism opened up a new set of socio-spatio-aesthetic problems and archives of knowledge for many Black and Chicano artists in the United States throughout the 20th century. U.S.-based artists did not necessarily see the work of the Mexican School as institutionalized or compromised by government support as their Mexican counterparts did. Many Black and Chicano artists viewed the Mexican muralists as heroes who developed a new model of politically-engaged artistry and had begun the complex journey of re-engaging with non-European archives of knowledge and being.[168]

According to art historians Anna Indych-Lopez and Laurance Hurlburt, when the main practitioners of the Mexican Muralist movement left Mexico in the early 1930s due to a pause in Mexican government funding, they further democratized muralism by painting some of their

[168] Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins and Shifra Goldman, *In the Spirit of Resistance: African-American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1996).

most publicly accessible murals in the United States.[169] Siqueiros painted his first street murals in Los Angeles, and taught an experimental workshop in New York City in 1936, which among other mural-based experiments, was a studio which collaboratively designed artworks, banners and floats intended for parades, memorials and protests against economic injustice.[170] The Mexican School's revolutionary rhetoric often outpaced the reality of its practices, and were differently received at home and abroad. Mexican artists were particularly critical of what they perceived as the great muralists' political contradictions while in the U.S., from a Black and Chicano perspective, their radical politics were revered.

The Mexican mural tradition was a quintessentially democratic art form for many Chicano artists of the 1970s. It offered deep connections to Post-Revolutionary Mexican politics and art history, as well as a Mexican cultural and historical imaginary from which artists drew and emulated their political positions. Subsequent generations, however, came to see the tradition as hackneyed and too reliant on a formulaic political identity and artistic vocabulary. Both Chicano and Mexican artists of the 1960s and 1970s responded critically to that tradition, but not all critiques were a simple renunciation in toto. Instead, some explored the expanded spatiality of muraling to enact rituals, programs, and collaborative projects.

The Chicano art collective Asco's early performances exemplify this tension. Criticizing what to them appeared to be a traditional and conservative artistic tradition, echoing some of their colleagues in Mexico City, they created a faux-religious procession, adopting what they perceived to be over-used figures within Chicano artistic practices, processing down Whittier Boulevard in full costume as the Virgin of Guadalupe, a mestizo and a Christmas Tree in their

[169] Laurence P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991); Indych-Lopez, *Judith F. Baca*.

[170] Laurance P. Hurlburt, "The Siqueiros Experimental Workshop: New York, 1936," *Art Journal* 35, no. 3 (1976): 237–46.

Walking Mural (1972) performance. That same year, with their characteristic irreverence, the group experimented with the mural's objecthood in their *Instant Mural* (1972), lightly taping two members of their group to a wall as a tongue-in-cheek mural.[171] Both a renunciation of muralism and a playfully antagonistic gesture, Asco was the first artist group in Los Angeles to extend the spatial and performative possibilities of muraling beyond the wall.

The mobilization of murals was not just a project for artists looking to critique the formula. Judy Baca, firmly aligned with the Mexican muralists, in particular with her role model and predecessor, David Alfaro Siqueiros, who had begun experimenting with a broader practice of muraling. Baca's collaborative muralist practice unfixed the seeming immobility of the mural into what Indych-Lopez characterizes as a "transient practice" that was part of broader Chicano network's creation of a "new form of public art."[172] Baca, as Indych-Lopez points out, re-envisioned her collaborative muralist practice more as a producer of social space, an approach that is arguably in line with Acha's inquiries into the immaterial social practices of Mexico's post-muralist generation.[173]

Chicana artist, Sandra de la Loza, speaking of this very same moment, identifies the important work Chicano murals did "at the edge of architectural space."[174] Carving out a new spatiality and social relations through the process of muraling, artists were performing spatial and artistic activism in a part of the city where both small and large-scale gatherings of Chicanos could draw police harassment or arrest. de la Loza explains the potentiality of the temporary places muraling could foster, wherein "muralists create a new context in that liminal

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[171] For more on Asco, see Ondine Chaovya and Rita Gonzalez, *Asco: Elite of the Obscure : A Retrospective, 1972-1987* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011).

[172] Indych-Lopez, *Judith F. Baca*, 39, 47.

[173] Ibid., *Judith F. Baca,* 3.

[174] Sandra de la Loza, "La Raza Cósmica an Investigation into the Space of Chicana/o Muralism," in *L.A. Xicano,* ed. Chon A. Noriega, Terecita Romo, and Pillar Tompkins (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 58.

space where the material merges with the social. Within this new space a social architecture emerges that allows for cultural recognition and regeneration, the resurfacing of suppressed imagery and knowledge, and the imagining of new subjectivities. Space is transformed into place."[175]

de la Loza's expanded muralism aligns with Sorrell's idea of a "ritualistic muralism," which he sees as epitomized in the *Wall of Respect* (1968), a mural and performance created by Black artists in Chicago celebrating Black historical and cultural achievements.[176] As de la Loza proposes, the liminal spaces of Chicano muralism were fecund reservoirs that initiated experimental cultural practices that would become central to the Chicano Art Movement. Where Asco aggressively pushed the characters or mural "material" into the real spaces of Chicano life, it would be the community art centers that built the scaffolding for public theaters that staged rituals, performances and made space for a broad range of Chicano subjectivities to be envisioned and enacted.

Where performance artists like Asco began chipping away at the materiality of muralism, and *Los Grupos* attempted to bring art "to the man on the street," the community art centers in East Los Angeles began diligently expanding the spaces and histories of muraling into permanent places where new subjectivities, imagery, and knowledge, as de la Loza describes, could be enacted and spatialized.[177] Central to expanding this social architecture were art centers like Mechicano Art Center, Goez Art Studios and Gallery, and Self Help Graphics, all of which facilitated public art works like murals, exhibitions and social practice projects. Goez Art Studios and Gallery co-founder and muralist, Joe Gonzalez, described his own "for-profit

[175] Ibid.

[176] Victor Alejandro Sorell, "Orozco and American Muralism: Re/viewing an Enduring Artistic Legacy," in Renato González Mello and Diane Miliotes, eds, *José Clemente Orozco in the United States, 1927-1934.*

[177] de la Loza, "La Raza Cósmica."

non-profit" and large-scale collaborative mural projects as "picking up" where the Mexican muralists left off.[178]

This community art space initiative took the form of different projects across the Chicano Art Movement, of which the large-scale mural projects became the best known, but the projects extended beyond muralism. As *Maria de Los Angeles* was envisioned as part of a larger project of re-envisioning Los Angeles, so did Self Help's Día de los Muertos and Barrio Mobile Art Studio continue the work of carving out public spaces and developing ritual practices to convert urban spaces into Chicano-affirming places.

The Arts of *Acompañamiento*: Día de Los Muertos and the Barrio Mobile Art Studio

From its very beginning Self Help developed a method of cultural work based in a radical ethics of care and camaraderie. Its approach to cultural work differed distinctly from the Euro-American avant-garde's preference for antagonism and deconstruction, which arguably laid the foundation for that tradition's problematic artist-community model. Artists working with that model developed community-engaged approaches such as the "drop-in" artist commissioned to collaborate with a community to produce a product, which more often than not, left those communities (and later, scholars) questioning the power dynamics of their participation. What undergirded this thinking were several assumptions about ready-made groups of people and empty spaces in need of artistic interventions, as well as the larger question as to whether or not such interventions were even needed.

Self Help's approach was rooted in what fellow Sister of St. Francis and life-long friend of Sister Karen, Sister Maria Elena, described as *acompañamiento*. An unorthodox mixture of

[178] Joe Gonzalez, interview by the author, May 20, 2018.

religious and artistic life, it was a socially engaged form of cultural work based in accompanying the cultural practices of a selected community. Sister Karen's example was so remarkable that Sister Maria Elena credits it as the model for her own religious work with indigenous women in Chiapas, Mexico.[179] Instead of devoting her life to converting the communities she served, Sister Maria Elena saw it as her religious duty to listen, learn and walk with the women in Chiapas, to accompany them on their specific fights against anti-indigeneity, and to support their struggle to keep their ways of being and knowing alive.

This model of non-proprietary support for all manner of cultural-political projects was an uncommon model within a cultural sector that values distinction and gatekeeping. For Sister Karen, it was part of her cultural political project to make art (and its institutions) pro-Chicano, a project that echoed Acha's intentions to "redefine" art from a Latin American experience. Trained in a progressive Catholic art tradition that worked to democratize art and that questioned both the legitimacy and usefulness of its orderings and classifications, Sister Karen was the inheritor of a rebellious aesthetic tradition initiated by her mentor, Sister Corita Kent, at the Immaculate Heart College (IHC) Art Department in Hollywood, CA. The now legendary IHC Art Department was the source for the collaborative studio model Self Help adopted, and provided some of its core tenets: everyone was an artist and participant, the rules that sanction and separate certain creative practices from life should be dismantled, and that art was a creative framework for relating, knowing, and changing the world.

Beginning in her place of residence in Boyle Heights, Sister Karen, in true Franciscan fashion, extended the life-affirming potentials of such a model directly to the socially and economically marginalized neighborhoods throughout East Los Angeles. Attempting to

[179] Sister Maria Elena, interview by the author, April 8, 2018.

replicate the freedom and utopian camaraderie that she felt in the IHC Art Department, she tested this philosophy beyond the safety of the convent and campus. Pushing art out of its traditional spaces to serve the poor required new skills and forfeiting models dependent on those traditional art spaces. Stepping away from the idea that cultural infrastructure was not part of an artist's work, Sister Karen began her life-long practice of accompanying the artists of the East LA barrio by erecting some of its longest lasting yet at times ephemeral, cultural architecture.

Accompaniment has a longer history in Liberation Theology, a radical theology based in Latin America Catholicism that posited every Christian's responsibility to liberate the poor from their oppression and economic dependencies, best known through the figure of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero and the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez. As Sister Karen's personal archive was never preserved, we can only rely on interviews with colleagues and her own work to describe what was either a full-on liberation theologist approach or a parallel theology she developed in practice as a Franciscan. While much can be attributed to her role as a nun, her aligning her artistic capacities with her religious values played the key role in envisioning that her art, and her role as artist, could be put to different uses.

Self Help's first few years testify to this shift. Sister Karen invited Ibañez y Bueno to live with her in the Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Christian Charity's modern day convent in City Terrace. Equally telling, the first exhibition the trio arranged in 1972 excluded Sister Karen and focused on Ibañez y Bueno's work.[180] By the time the organization moved into its first building, Sister Karen had morphed her creative capacities towards facilitating the

[180] "Art. Inc. Letter to Mr. Salem, Owner of El Mercado," Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, CEMA 3, Department of Special Research Collections, UC Santa Barbara Library, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

infrastructures of support that would become hallmark characteristics of Self Help's approach. As this new creative form of place-making grew, the traditional, studio-based artist-model she had been trained in slowly disappeared.

Accompaniment was not just for religious life. It was Sister Karen's example that informed Ibañez y Bueno's own creative practice to serve the poor. Pointing to the life of Archbishop Romero, scholars Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz have likened accompaniment to "participating with and augmenting a community of travelers on a road."[181] Accompaniment was a multi-part method of forming new methods of relating. As Tomlinson and Lipsitz explain: "accompaniment organized around the preferential option for the poor…can produce seemingly unlikely alliances, associations, affiliations, conversations and coalitions with aggrieved and excluded individuals and groups."[182] In the hands of Sister Karen and Ibañez y Bueno, accompaniment would indeed form unlikely alliances, as well as generate an innovative approach to their own role as artists which envisioned their work as facilitators for what was already there. It was an approach that resulted in one of the longest-lasting Chicano public art projects: Día de los Muertos.

Día de los Muertos is a Mexican Indigenous and Catholic Mexican ritual celebrating the life of the deceased during the first few days of November. Families visit, clean and adorn the tombs of their ancestors at night, often building altars at the cemetery or in their homes. The altar-making is common to Chicano and Mexican households, but there was no equivalent holiday-like ritual in Los Angeles. Ibañez y Bueno were important transmitters of the Mexican

[181] George Lipsitz and Barbara Tomlinson, "American Studies as Accompaniment," *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (March 2013): 1–30, 9.
[182] Ibid., 20.

tradition, but Sister Karen was also familiar with the event, having seen Charles Eames' film *Day of the Dead* (1957) at IHC.[183]

In 1973, Self Help, along with the Chicano art collectives Asco and Los Four, initiated the Chicano Día de Los Muertos. The procession of mostly elementary and college students began with a Catholic mass in Evergreen Cemetery and ended at Self Help's location on Brooklyn Avenue where participants laid marigolds on an altar commemorating the dead. Subsequent iterations expanded on this structure, eventually including elaborate floats, handmade costumes, painted faces, theater performances, live music, food and exhibitions of artworks made in the Barrio Mobile program (Fig. 3).

Día de Los Muertos began as a procession down a road. Proudly walking from the land of the dead, down the highly policed and contested Brooklyn Avenue, and arriving to a spiritual sanctuary where food, conviviality and sustenance were waiting, the event was the physical enactment of cultural accompaniment. It was an artist-facilitated, participatory performance that expanded on everyday altar practices common to many Chicano households, as well as on a Mexican holiday that existed in the memories of Mexicans who lived in East Los Angeles. Expanding and shrinking over many years in size and ambition, the event remained true to its cultural commitments: it was free and completely open to the public, it was based in commonly held cultural and ritual practices, everyone had a role, all contributions were welcome and the important part was to participate.

In subsequent years, participants drew from the art and art history lessons they received from Self Help staff on the Mesoamerican roots of Día de Los Muertos, such as the Mexican

[183] Karen Mary Davalos and Colin Gunckel, "The Early Years, 1970-1985: An Interview with Michael Amescua, Mari Cárdenas Yáñez, Yreina Cervantez, Leo Limón, Peter Tovar and Linda Vallejo," in *Self Help Graphics & Art in the Heart of East Los Angeles* (2nd ed.), ed. Colin Gunckel (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2014); Brown and Vallejo, *Día de Los Muertos*.

art works of J.G. Posada. Participants made paper flower crowns, papier-mâché skulls, wore flowers in their hair, painted their faces and dressed in a wide variety of "cholo" and zoot suit fashions; freely mixing Mexican and Chicano culture together. Turning contested public space into a large-scale participatory stage, the event reframed the barrio as a place worth celebrating. After decades of processions that drew national and international attention, the once humble procession would develop into a large-scale event that amplified Chicano culture to the world, and fortified Chicano Los Angeles as one of the country's great creative centers.

Where Asco had embodied the traditional figures of Mexican muralism and brought them off the wall, Día de los Muertos extended the mural's ritualistic potential and facilitated the public stage-work that called artists, neighbors, children and senior citizens forth to manifest Chicano community. The question of whether art could indeed make change in Chicano lives no longer revolved around how to better integrate the institution of art, but how to change traditional art space architecture to magnify and support the cultural values and creative practices that were already part of Chicano life.

Continuing A Public Art Practice in Mazatlán, Mexico

Following a now unknown disagreement with Sister Karen, Bueno and Ibañez returned to Mexico in 1976.[184] By 1981 the artist couple had permanently moved to the conservative beach town of Mazatlán, Mexico. They made a very modest living off the sale of their artworks and

[184] Details on Bueno's life are sparse between 1977 and 1981, the period when he leaves Los Angeles and eventually arrives in Mazatlan, Mexico. It is not clear how or how often Bueno crossed the border, but he did maintain relationships with artists he befriended in Los Angeles. In the *Belvedere Citizen/Eastside Journal* 44 October 29, 1980, a small article by an unknown author announces an exhibition of Bueno's work at Goez Art Studios and Galleries. Noted Chicano photographer Ricardo Valverde (written "Richardo") is credited for the photo that shows Bueno with two unknown women posed in what was most likely a play on the "bad ladies" series of work he did.

often relied on friends for financial support and loans.[185] Bueno became a well-known local figure in the small Mazatlán art scene where he continued to make individual artworks, mostly in ink. As one of the most experienced artists in the city, he remained committed to working for the poor who appeared throughout his paintings and drawings which were often given public exhibitions and presentations.

Bueno established himself as a well-known documenter and artistic ally to the male, female and transgender prostitutes and burlesque dancers who worked in the shadows of Mazatlán's tourist industry. Re-aligning his method towards a new constituency, Bueno's socially engaged practice in service to the poor and marginalized never wavered. A catalogue of the titles of the ink drawing and painting series produced after leaving Los Angeles supports this characterization of Bueno as a champion of queer histories and non-conformist gender expressivity: *Virgenes de Media Noche* (Virgins of Midnight, a reference to prostitutes), *Las Culonas* (Women with Big Asses, a series based on strippers and burlesque dancers), *Los Narcisos* (The Male Narcissists, a series of male nudes), *Las Lloronas* (Crying Cross-Dressers), *Las Mujeres Malas* (That Bad Women), *Las Puritanas* (The Women Puritans), *Los Travestis* (The Transexuals).

By this point an expert at skillfully and delicately crossing spatial and gendered boundaries, Bueno would sit at the bars in brothels and burlesque shows making sketches for works he would finish in his apartment. His own marginalized status as a gay man in both Chicano Los Angeles and Mazatlán informed his aesthetic practice which focused on rendering outsiders with dignity, and he clearly found comfort in these spaces. Always hyper-conscious of his

[185] These details are offered by Bueno's colleagues and collaborators in Mazatlan, Mexico. Antonio Lopez Saenz, interview by the author, April 9, 2018; Laura Caracol, interview by the author, April 10, 2018; Rafael Osuna, interview by the author, April 11, 2018.

audience, he continued his practice of celebrating popular cultural practices and fashions, often adding text from popular music and films so that the artworks were relatable to a larger Mexican audience.

Bueno would also continue his own teaching and public art practice, explaining in an echo of his time in Los Angeles, that he "never thought in money, but in teaching – but that my work reaches the poor."[186] In keeping with his mobile classroom pedagogy, where without funding, he initiated classrooms for those who could not financially or physically access art institutions. In 1981 he set up an arts program for a group of disabled children to learn painting and drawing, naming the group "Los Pargos (The Snappers)."[187]

On an income drawn mostly from supportive friends and sales of his artworks to tourists, he set up an art program in the El Cereso prison in 1994. Without being asked and initially offered no funds or space from the prison administrators, Bueno took the bus every week to the prison outside of town to set up an art studio classroom for a group of inmates who called themselves "Los Camaleones" (The Chameleons) (Figs. 4 and 5).[188] Some of his friends in Los Angeles, like artist Milton Jurado, accepted Bueno's invitation to come and teach at the prison. Through Bueno's coordination, the artworks produced in the prison were given exhibitions in the public plaza. The program ran until Bueno's death from lung cancer in 2001.[189]

Committed to serving the socially marginalized and those who could not afford or access educational institutions, Bueno extended the artistic practice of accompaniment in the model he learned from Sister Karen. He is still remembered for an exhibition, which spoke to his

[186] Rojo interview and a videotaped recording of a public discussion with Bueno on February 2, 2000, by Ricardo Munoz at Avenue 50, Ricardo Munoz Family Collection Archive, Los Angeles, CA.

[187] Laura Caracol, interview by the author, April 11, 2018.

[188] "Carlos Bueno," Sistema de Información Cultural, Gobierno de Mexico, December 10, 2009, http://sic.cultura.gob.mx/ficha.php?table=artista&table_id=2848.

[189] Milton Jurado, interview by the author, March 5, 2018.

commitment to the values of this method, held in Mazatlán's municipal marketplace in 1999.[190] There he hung artworks of crying transsexuals, prostitutes and naked gay men off the iron rafters above the clothes and food stands. Central to his artistic vision was a commitment to representing those who lived in the margins, whether in marketplaces or plazas, as well as making sure that those representations were accessible to those very same communities.

On 3 Calle Primera Peñuelas, just five minutes from La Plaza Machado, the main Mazatlán center, is a mural Bueno facilitated and painted. He fundraised in the impoverished "old Mazatlán" neighborhood known as el barrio de la Nevería for funds. An idyllic and Edenic scene, it resembled the languid male and female figures of his ink drawings in Los Angeles and reads: "Mural realizado por el pintor Carlos Bueno y la raza del barrio," ("Mural realized by the painter Carlos Bueno and the people of the barrio."). Below came a long list of Bueno's students and children who helped make the mural (Fig. 6). It was most likely one of his last collaborative works, and capped his lifelong practice as a public artist committed to making sure that the art was less a gift that was handed over to needy others, but more an opportunity to cultivate a collective capacity for learning, service and collaboration. As one friend commented, in the poorest house in those very same barrios, one could find a Carlos Bueno ink drawing, honored as a point of pride.[191]

Conclusion

Thanks to the work of the Los Angeles Mural Conservancy, whose website contains hundreds of digitized slide photographs and saved screen captures of the Google Maps "street view" of

[190] Laura Caracol, interview by the author, April 11, 2018.
[191] Ibid.

many of Los Angeles murals, Ibañez y Bueno's *Maria de Los Angeles* resurfaced in 2009.[192] Once an important economic hub in City Terrace, the Bank of America on Wabash Avenue where the mural was painted is now a Home Wash, Inc. Coin Laundry Lavanderia with no visible trace of the mural. Not destroyed, but haunting the location, the mural's distinctive green eye peeks out from a square of exposed building paint in a 2009 screen capture on the Conservancy's website (Fig. 7). The re-appearance of the mural is remarkable as it required the Google Maps camera to capture it during the brief window of its exposure, along with the fortuitous timing of the Mural Conservancy saving a screenshot of the location. Google Maps updates regularly and the 2020 Google Maps street view of this very same address shows a blank pink and white wall (Fig. 8).

The mural reappears at a crucial moment, as it adds to the initiative to identify and dislodge the disciplinary bias that has classified Self Help and its fellow Chicano public art practitioners as somehow inferior by Euro-American standards. As Perez observes, Chicano creative practices have a ghettoized place in art history where they are "always other, always marginal, and, at best, a flavor of the month."[193] These characterizations have done great damage to the Chicano community art traditions for many decades, as mainstream funders and institutions have been unwilling or unable to see these projects as working within a decolonial program invested in an entirely different set of objectives and skills from the dominant movements of Euro-American postmodernism.

As Chicano Studies scholar Colin Gunckel observes, Chicano community art practices are obligingly referenced in the literature on social practice, but they never break in to the main

[192] See "Las Novellas," Mural Conservancy website, accessed June 5, 2020, https://www.muralconservancy.org/murals/las-novellas.

[193] Perez, *Eros Ideologies*, 28.

discourse.[194] The social practice projects that scholars Bishop, Miwon Kwon and Suzanne Lacy analyze as examples in their now landmark texts overlook the community art practices developed in the 1960s and 1970s. As I maintain throughout this chapter, Chicano social practice is not just an additional history that can be easily added to the mainstream. It troubles this narrative by pointing to both the blind spots in the developing social practice history, as well as offering a decolonial model less invested in the European avant-garde model of bringing art into life, and more focused on what Gunckel described as working "to collapse the boundaries between art and life by rejecting 'art for art's sake.'"[195]

For many social practice historians there is great worry and hesitation about what this seismic shift towards a new set of cultural values means for the discipline. There is great concern about flattening critical discourse and subjectivity in the face of unprovable ethical claims of art's ability to initiate and even effect change. For those reasons, Bishop and Kwon have essentially privileged practices that resemble or replicate the avant-garde mainstays of antagonism, obfuscation and disruption, and have been less focused on those that did the work of building towards an alternative future.

Without the Chicano public art tradition, however, Euro-American social practice art history is restricted to a limited range of historical examples that make it almost impossible to see what it inherited from the Euro-American avant-garde and the public art museum. In *One Place After Another* Kwon admonishes the lack of criticality in both the practice and discourse of social practice which can, as she describes, "exacerbate uneven power relations, remarginalize (even colonize) already disenfranchised groups, depoliticize and remythify the artistic process and finally further the separation of art and life (despite claims to the

[194] Gunckel, *Self Help Graphics*.
[195] Ibid., 379.

contrary)."[196] Chicano social practice puts the avant-garde mandate into stark contrast, revealing this colonial dimension, as it confronts it with an alternative model. The successes and differences of the Chicano model seem to suggest that the avant-garde's mandate represents an inheritance from the civilizing and proselytizing missions and racialized worldviews at the heart of the Euro-American colonialism and modern museum practices.

There is a general feeling among social practice scholars that there is as of yet no real way for art historical analysis, as it currently exists, to grasp and evaluate the experiential and boundary-crossing dimensions of social practice. Performance art historian, Shannon Jackson, observing the dilemmas social practice poses to art history, directs attention away from evaluative models "that measure artistic radicality by its degree of anti-institutionality" and points towards projects that encourage and facilitate communication and dialogue through art.[197] Asking that we analyze social practice projects for their ability to "help us to imagine sustainable social institutions," Jackson's call is similar to cultural theorist George Lipsitz's reformulation of the community-based art tradition, suggesting "it is more productive to view it as a form of art-based community making."[198]

The Chicano and Mexican public art projects of the 1970s developed an alternative model for socially-committed artists in the wake of a muralist tradition which had opened up a new set of socio-spacio-aesthetic projects, ways of seeing the world and defining the aesthetic. Judging those in terms of the success of their community-building is a component of their larger project to redefine art and the artist's role in society. Much as the traditions on both sides

[196] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 6.

[197] Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Public* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 14.

[198] George Lipsitz, "Not Just Another Social Movement: Poster Art and the Movimiento Chicano," in *Just Another Poster? Chicano Graphic Arts in California*, ed. Chon Noriega (Santa Barbara, CA: University Art Museum, 2002), 84.

of the border intended to articulate distinctly Chicano or Latin American artistic identities and definitions composed from the experiences of Chicano and Mexican people, so too would these projects require new skills and rubrics of success based in community experiences and values.

Working at the roots of Chicano culture to address the lived realities of their constituency, Self Help created a new type of art space that began to de-link from the dominant culture's model based on imposition and intervention. It was this style of committed, on-the-ground work which built alliances around creative practices that were not just *for* Chicano people, but *from* a wide-range of Chicano creative practices and traditions.

Self Help had a clear understanding of what social justice work it intended for its experimentations to serve, and it built a spatial practice in service to a particular place and people. The model Self Help developed in its early years was not antagonistic, universal, or superior to the dominant culture's models, but maybe more importantly, it was an approach that made it one of the most sacred sites in the Chicano cultural imaginary.

III. A History of Black Arts Activism At the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1969-1976

In his recent 2021 HBO documentary, *Black Art: In the Absence of Light*, Sam Pollard begins his narration of Postwar African American art history with the historic exhibition *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (1976, *Two Centuries*), organized by the eminent scholar of African American art history, David Driskell, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LA County Museum). As the first retrospective overview of Black American visual art production from 1750 to the early 1960s in a major American art museum, the exhibition remains a historical cornerstone of African American art history. Described repeatedly in the documentary as a revelation by artists who saw it, as well as by those artists who experienced it through the catalogue, the exhibition re-mapped the American cultural landscape beyond the traditional boundaries of Euro-American art history. Through *Two Centuries* Driskell made an art historical place for the Black artist within American art history, and no curator or museum has since attempted to match the exhibition's ambitious historical scope.

For his documentary, Pollard relied on footage from Carlton Moss' 1976 documentary *Two Centuries of Black American Art* to depict the exhibition's curatorial process. The original Moss film was meant for a general TV audience and included a staged recreation of Driskell at work as a guest curator at the LA County Museum. In it, Driskell performs a set of seemingly mundane curatorial tasks: working with preparators, handing wall labels to the museum's director, and working on an exhibition maquette on the director's desk. The footage intended to document a historic event, but it also subsequently contributed to obfuscating the complex history of racial conflicts at the museum that preceded Driskell. Much as visual culture historian Irit Rogoff has written, the documentaries echo the narrative and impression that arts

institutions have chosen of themselves by presenting a "smooth transition from exclusion to inclusion," without acknowledging the failures of the museum paradigm or the refusal of museum leadership to enact the changes needed to address those failures.[199] Contained within the frictionless museum work environment created in the Moss film is an only partially told history of the Black arts activism that made the way for Driskell and *Two Centuries*.

Unlike the Moss and Pollard documentaries, art historians have highlighted the high-level negotiations between activists and museum leadership that brought the subordinated epistemic and racial conflicts embedded in the museum model into public view. Art historians Bridget Cooks and Kellie Jones have extensively detailed the obstinance and institutional backlash that Black arts activists endured; this study relies on their foundational research. They have rightfully highlighted the role played by the Black Arts Council, a Black arts advocacy group founded and run by Claude Booker and Cecil Fergerson, in mounting *Two Centuries*. Their scholarship details a hostile work environment, but ultimately judges the exhibition as a partial victory based on a comparison with the failures of one of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's most controversial exhibitions, *Harlem on My Mind* (1969).[200] That exhibition initiated protests from Harlem community stakeholders who objected to their exclusion from the

[199] Irit Rogoff, "Hit and Run—Museums and Cultural Difference," *Art Journal* 61, no.3 (Autumn 2002): 63–73, 66.

[200] Comparing *Two Centuries* to *Harlem on My Mind*, Cooks concludes: "*Two Centuries* provided an effective alternative model to the one offered through *Harlem on My Mind* for ways museums and Black communities could work together to incorporate Black artists. . . . Although the exhibition did not make lasting institutional change at LACMA, the life of the catalogue has made an impact in American art history." Bridget Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and American Art Museum* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 109. Also, comparing the exhibition to *Harlem On My Mind*, Jones suggests: "While there were problems with aspects of each of these exhibitions at LACMA between 1968 and 1976, the institution did some things differently, and correctly, compared to its East Coast counterparts." Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 170.

curatorial process and who criticized the anthropological lens used to interpret Harlem's history.

Using the New York museum as a reference point, *Two Centuries* did indeed appear more progressive, but for local Black activists who have been overlooked in this history, and whose perspective I reconstruct in this chapter, the exhibition was a diversionary compromise that derailed needed structural changes. The narratives constructed in the documentaries and by scholars have resulted in a characterization of the exhibition as a limited but modest improvement in race relations at an American public art museum. The LA County Museum has several webpages on its website which mix these narratives, offering a backstory of struggle that concludes in inclusion, which ultimately smooths over and conceals the unaddressed spatial conflicts undergirding fights over racial inequity.[201]

My archival research shows that scholars and filmmakers have generally overlooked the central role that Dr. Samella Lewis and the Concerned Citizens for Black Art (Concerned Citizens) played in the museum activism of this period.[202] Lewis was a respected art historian of African American art, an artist and arts educator, and became the first Black employee at the museum outside of the preparator and security departments. She had initially been approached to work at the museum as a curator in 1969, but due to the intersecting realities of

[201] The LA County Museum of Art's institutional narrative does not mention Lewis and has numerous misleading and inaccurate claims that misattribute Lewis's work and erase her historic role at the museum. Curator Howard Fox summarizes the exhibition's history as: "But the combined efforts of the ad hoc, grass-roots advocacy of the guards and the installers, as well as the social conscience exerted by the very existence of the Black Arts Council, did demonstrably bring about LACMA's organization of the first major historical exhibition of African American art at any major museum." See "Two Centuries of Black American Art at LACMA: Who's Who," accessed May 30, 2021, https://www.lacma.org/two-centuries-black-american-art-lacma-whos-who#:~:text=In%201971%2C%20LACMA%20mounted%20its,Young.

[202] In the most recent institutional history for the museum, Muchnic does not mention Lewis. See Suzanne Muchnic, *LACMA So Far: Portrait of a Museum in the Making* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, 2015).

racism and sexism among museum leadership, she was placed in the Arts Education Department to manage a children's education program.[203]

Lewis's erasure from this institutional history is compounded by the fact that she was not included in *Two Centuries;* her omission remains a historical oversight. It is particularly egregious because Lewis's classmate at Hampton University, John Biggers, was part of the exhibition, and Lewis had included Driskell (who was an artist), in *Black Artists on Art*, the first compendium of contemporary Black artists that she co-published in 1969. These minor and major exclusions have erased Lewis's contributions to one of the defining moments in African American art history.

Two Centuries was an enormous success on the national stage, yet at the same time it posed a setback locally for artists and activists like Lewis. For communities in Los Angeles, it signaled a victory for white museum leadership's ability to convert demands and traumas into meagre concessions that did not require the museum to alter any part of itself. Engaging with this history offers an opportunity to return to Lewis's unfinished project to transform the museum model. Celebrating *Two Centuries* therefore should be tempered by a retrospective look at how it was used to subvert her intent to transform the museum, how her efforts were mishandled and how she was ultimately pressured out of her job. The circumstances around this failure allowed the museum leadership to stall any other Black art exhibitions until 1993 as well as delay the hire of its first Black curator until 2009.[204]

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[203] This is based on correspondence between Donahue and Lewis, from uncatalogued files in Lewis's studio archive in her home in Los Angeles.

[204] According to "*Two Centuries of Black American Art* at LACMA (1976): Related Exhibitions," a pdf document on the museum's website, "Jacob Lawrence: The Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman Series of 1938-40" (1993) would be the next major exhibition of a Black artist at the museum. See https://www.lacma.org/sites/default/files/TwoCenturiesRelated.pdf. Franklin Sirmans was the first African American curator hired by the LA County Museum of Art. See "First African-American Curator at LA County Museum of Art," accessed May 30, 2021, https://www.scpr.org/news/2009/09/20/6452/new-lacman-curator-xwrap/ .

As Cooks notes, 1976 was a bicentennial year devoted to celebrating the nation's founding. *Two Centuries* was used as a powerful symbol of an optimistic vision of the museum's contribution to the progress the nation was making in race relations. It was also used to reinforce foundational Euro-American art museum myths -- particularly, the beliefs that the museum paradigm is universally suitable to the cultural and geographic needs of all people, that it could facilitate an equitable distribution of cultural resources, authority and spaces, and that the model being deployed was progressively working towards becoming an inclusionary and democratic institution. These unchallenged beliefs continue to define present-day conversations about the museum model's futures, which according to a recent gathering of directors of the nation's largest museums, are generally understood to be in a highly precarious position due to simultaneous financial, racial and relevancy crises.[205]

As *Two Centuries* demonstrates, the American public art museum is masterful at converting demands against its dehumanizing practices into token exhibitions, acquisitions and hires. Lewis's story is needed at this moment because it re-frames the question of racial inequity in the public art museum by reintroducing a radical critique based in experiences with challenging the museum's allegiance, some would say addiction, to the racial project of whiteness. Current debates continue to propose that dehumanizing practices can be solved with object-based exhibitions and practices. These parameters continue to determine the stakes of the discussion and divert attention from the model's core historic failures, its existence as a colonial technology deployed in the service of epistemic and aesthetic dominance. This history is an opportunity to reconsider the steps needed to work towards a radical democratic cultural practice that simultaneously dismantles the white cultural and spatial supremacy at its core,

[205] "De-Accessioning after 2020" (Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, March 17–19, 2021).

while acknowledging that the museum has never proven its willingness or ability to work toward a racially just future.

Lewis embodies a Black women's tradition of resistance in the arts which emanated from her life in New Orleans and guidance from her mentor, teacher, and fellow artist and activist, Elizabeth Catlett. Woefully undercelebrated, Catlett's printmaking, sculptures, and cultural politics remain at the edges of American art history. Together Catlett and Lewis pursued artistic careers that required them to dismantle simultaneously the structures of oppression within museums and universities that marginalized and even excluded their knowledge, and artistic and spatial claims.

Lewis's life in the arts highlights a set of questions she worked out in direct actions throughout the course of her long career: 1) What radical revisions to museum spaces and logics would be required to support and nurture Black epistemologies, ontologies and aesthetics? 2) If Euro-American art, artists and cultural workers were dependent on a segregated space for legitimacy, what did that indicate about art's bounded relationship with that space? 3) What would this segregated spatial history mean for Black audiences and cultural workers ability to conduct cultural work and create a subject position within a space designed to subordinate Black aesthetic and knowledge claims?

This chapter focuses on Lewis's museum activism as a disruptive intervention into Euro-centric worldviews and white supremacist patriarchy. I read her interventions as part of the tradition of intellectual and activist philosophies inherent in the long-standing tradition of Black women's resistance to racism and sexism. Catlett and Lewis are part of an esteemed tradition that architectural historian Mabel Wilson describes in her study of nineteenth-century Black exhibition organizers and the founders of Black cultural and history museums in the

twentieth century, who as she details, believed in their cultural work and space-making as a form of activism that was part of the larger project of Black liberation from Euro-American aesthetic, epistemic and spatial dominance. This provides a historical framework for understanding Lewis' cultural work as part of a longstanding project to create a democratic public sphere where, as Lewis said, "Culture can make you free."[206]

A Historic Museum Field Trip with Elizabeth Catlett

Segregated museum spaces and opposition to integration were standard operating procedures throughout most of the public art museum's history in the United States. Recent art historical and museum studies scholarship has focused on the activism of the late 1960s, but museum studies in general has only recently begun to address the reality of the museum's historic role as a site that taught and legitimized the technologies of racism. Theoretical and historical research continues to be needed on the model's longstanding embrace of segregation, not as an anomaly, but as part of the spatial history of the Euro-American aesthetic.

Wilson's *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums* has established a foundation for considering the long history of spatial activism inherent in Black aesthetic and intellectual traditions. She argues that the "Negro buildings" of world fairs of the nineteenth century, and the Black museum movement of the 1960 and 1970s, were both "extensions of the black counterpublic spheres."[207] Black intellectuals, activists and artists curated exhibitions to not only oppose white presentations of Black American life and history, but also to create spaces within these structures for envisioning a possible future that Wilson

[206] Leonard Wise, "Portrait of Samella," *Essence*, February 1973, 80.

[207] Mabel Wilson, *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 7.

describes as "free from Euro-American subjugation."[208] Fighting for inclusion in publicly funded national exhibitions and creating Black history museums was seen as necessary for combatting the popular dehumanizing misrepresentations of Black culture and history. As Wilson argues, the work of making exhibitions helped build a counterpublic sphere that made space for practicing and envisioning an Afrocentered world.

Just as racism structured audiences, exhibition topics, and layouts of national fairs and history museums, so too did it define the American public art museum. When nineteenth and twentieth century Black fair and exhibition organizers were granted special permission to participate in national fairs or history museum programming, they were often placed in non-exhibition spaces like basements, children's art centers, or nearby fields which highlighted their perceived inferiority and separation from primary exhibition spaces. At least in the 1960s and 1970s mainstream art museums mounted Black art exhibitions in basements, lobbies and hallways, making segregation a common reality through shared commitments to white spatial enclosures that provoked Black resistance.[209] Black artists and exhibition-makers were attentive to the relationships between art and space because the struggle to be a Black artist or curator almost always required a fight over inclusion and location.

Lewis's career is intertwined with the history of museum activism. Her first visit to an art museum in Jim Crow New Orleans is a historic event within art and museum history. It not only details the numerous obstacles standing in the way of Black artists' access to cultural resources and spaces required for pursuing careers as artists and cultural workers, but speaks to the repeated refusal of Black artists to be categorized as without an aesthetic and beyond art

[208] Ibid., 10.

[209] Jones discusses the comparable practices between the LA County Museum of Art and Whitney Museum's placement of African American artists in lobbies and basements.

history, which is what anti-Black museum exclusion effectively meant. As the history of museum activism has centered on the more well-known examples of the 1960s, Lewis's first visit to a museum is an example of a desegregationist intervention into an art museum in the American South prior to the 1960s.

In 1941, Elizabeth Catlett moved to New Orleans to teach undergraduate art classes at Dillard College where Lewis, then Samella Sanders, was a student. Catlett attended Howard University as an undergraduate and was accepted for admission to graduate study at Carnegie-Mellon, an acceptance that was rescinded when the university learned she was Black. She went on to secure an MFA at the University of Iowa in 1940, becoming the first Black artist to graduate from that program and part of a very a small group of MFA-educated Black artists in the country. In New Orleans, when she learned that the Museum of Modern Art's touring *Picasso: Forty Years of His Art* was on view at the nearby Delgado Museum of Art, Catlett decided to bring her Dillard students to see the exhibition. For nearly all of the students, including Lewis, this would be their first visit to an art museum, as well as their first in-person exposure to modern art.[210]

The Delgado Museum, however, was located in the country's largest segregated public park, City Park. Even though the museum itself was not an officially segregated space, its location made it all but impossible for non-whites to enter.[211] An island within a segregated

[210] Melanie Anne Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press 2000), 24; Samella Lewis, *The Art of Elizabeth Catlett* (Claremont, CA: Hancraft Studios, 1984); Richard Candida Smith, interview with Samella Lewis, *Image and Belief: Samella Lewis,* Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 1999), 24-25.

[211] Little is recorded about Isaac Delgado's intentions for his museum founded in 1917. Of Sephardic Jewish ancestry and born in Jamaica, his role in the New Orleans sugar trade made him a fortune. Along with the construction of a hospital and community college, the only stipulation in his gift was for the museum to be constructed on public land. See Prescott N. Dunbar, *The New Orleans Museum of Art the First Seventy-Five Years* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Kevin G. McQueeney, "Playing with Jim Crow: African American Private Parks in Early Twentieth Century" (master's thesis, University of New Orleans, 2015).

park, it offers a particularly apt example of how the problematic premise of aesthetic autonomy actually embraced anti-democratic policies as its proposed detachment ignored its own location within the racialization of city spaces. The segregation of New Orleans could be an abstract, naturalized, and unacknowledged reality within the museum, but for those who did not share in the privileges of mobility that whiteness afforded, racialized city space functioned as a very concrete and unavoidable obstruction.

As a great admirer of Picasso's work, Catlett was determined that her students would not miss the exhibition because of the museum's location within the segregated park. The decision to bring students to the museum was not taken lightly, as the local police force was well-known for maintaining the racial line and expelling trespassers.[212] The park was not integrated until 1958 through the remarkable U.S. Supreme Court case of *Detiege v. New Orleans City Park Improvement Association*, a case that began when Mr. Mandeville Detiege, a Black World War II veteran, was arrested for "seeking shade in the park while waiting for a bus."[213]

The New Orleans City Park Improvement Association managed City Park and was responsible for converting it into an idealized European landscape with imitation Greek and Roman buildings. The museum was built in 1911 in a Parthenon-inspired aesthetic, replete with urns and bas relief mimicking the exterior friezes and vases of ancient Greece. Part of park administrators' larger vision of a segregated Arcadia, the Delgado joined a neo-Roman peristyle, a small neo-"Grecian" marble temple for public performances, and a Romanesque stadium. Park and city planners would effectively crown their replication of a European landscape painting with a museum. Segregationist visions of a whites-only European-inspired park were closely linked to European landscapes collected within the museum, pointing to the

[212] Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett,* 24; Lewis, *Art of Elizabeth Catlett*, 9.
[213] McQueeney, "Playing with Jim Crow," 13.

museum's privileged role as a sacred site that imagined and supported a white supremacist world.

Details of the special arrangements Catlett made for the trip are sparse, but it was clear that she intended to exploit a flaw in the orders issued by Delgado and Park authorities. Based on interviews conducted with Catlett, art historian Melanie Herzog describes prior planning and forewarning given to park and museum authorities, noting how the faculty of the all-women's Sophie Newcomb College helped facilitate conversations about granting special permission for the Dillard group to enter the park.[214] Catlett's field trip intended to expose the museum's proposition of accessibility while surrounded by an uncrossable racial barrier. All groups came to an agreement, possibly because Catlett forced the museum and park authorities' hands by relying on the democratic mandate inherent to the public art museum itself, or even relied on Mr. Delgado's intentions that the museum be for "poor and rich alike," a directive which included no mention of race.[215]

The agreed upon solution was an elaborate choreography that ensured Black students did not step foot in the park itself and that their experience remained segregated from it.[216] Students were required to board a bus at the Dillard campus that took them directly to the museum's steps to ensure they did not set foot in the park. Scheduled to visit on a day the museum was closed to the general public, they were given a tour of the permanent collection by non-museum staff, because museum staff refused to meet the students. Once inside, students were described as moving from room to room, fascinated and joyful, encouraging one another as they encountered certain art works.[217]

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[214] Dunbar, *New Orleans,* 81; Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett*, 24.
[215] Dunbar, *New Orleans,* 81.
[216] Dunbar, *New Orleans,* 81; Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett*, 24.
[217] Lewis, *Art of Elizabeth Catlett,* 15.

In her 1985 self-published monograph on Catlett, Lewis remembered the trip with heart-felt admiration: "With a well-thought-out plan to have her students bused to the door so to step directly on the premises of the museum, she accomplished her goal and outwitted the segregationists."[218] As Lewis characterized it, Catlett's victory lay in her outwitting museum and park authorities, goading them to comply with the museum's own promise of serving the public good. In her recollections on her mentor, Lewis found even her smaller gestures inspiring; everyday acts of resistance such as Catlett's tossing the "colored only" signs in buses down the aisle when boarding. Catlett's activism was bold, everyday, and because of her familiarity with the history and rhetoric of the art world, was able to expertly exploit the museum's inconsistency and to find a blind spot in its segregationist worldview.

Catlett's actions were part of what sociologist and Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins defines as Black women's "culture of resistance."[219] Inherent in a Black feminist tradition of survival, it is centered around an Afrocentric view of the world that preserves the humanity of Black women in the face of patriarchal white supremacy. Hill Collins explains that the "culture of resistance" is an intellectual tradition of thoughtful action which has passed on ways of being, knowing and space-making for creating life-affirming standpoints "gained at the intersection of race, gender and class oppression."[220]

Catlett depicted this tradition of resistance in her best-known series of prints, *The Negro Woman* (1946-47).[221] A set of linocut prints depict the history of the "culture of resistance," which Catlett clearly saw herself as part of and which gave her actions an authority backed by

[218] Ibid., *Art of Elizabeth Catlett*, 16.
[219] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1991), 10.
[220] Ibid.
[221] Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett*, 64.

ancestral history. In the series she presents Black women playing music, hoeing fields, writing poetry, leading runaway slaves to freedom, as well as suffering the tragedies of segregation and anti-Black violence.

Visualizing this tradition of Black women's struggle, the series repeatedly implicates and asserts the Black woman as the subject by which we enter the prints, in titles such as: "I have always worked hard in America" and "I have given the world my songs." Amplifying these contributions was only one part of Catlett's work as an artist, as she would intervene against structures of oppression repeatedly and work to pass on this knowledge to a young Samella Lewis, characteristics in keeping with a Black feminist tradition. It is easy to envision Catlett and Lewis's crossing of the racial line as a bravery particular to the Black feminist tradition which might itself one day be represented in a similar series of prints.

Highly invested in theories backed by action, Catlett was conducting an important lesson in transgression for her students. Not just filling them with data, she offered a lesson in how to subvert and defy the white supremacist standpoint of park and museum authorities who did not believe in their right to access such a space. She passed down subordinated knowledge, which for her students, particularly Lewis, would be needed to pursue a career in a racist art establishment which would perpetually refuse to acknowledge her skills, accomplishments and right to stake a claim in such spaces.

In much the same way that the artists of the 1960s and 1970s focused a viewer's attention on the institutional frameworks required for art to happen, Catlett's interventions showed that she had a uniquely attuned understanding of the relationship between racist spaces and the public art museum model; an observation bell hooks would make years later in describing how

art is "overdetermined by location."[222] Catlett not only noticed this discrimination, she challenged it directly with the radical expectation that she could change an unjust social ordering. This made her not only a progenitor to the generation of artists who made museum critique their main artistic practice, but revealed that there was a radical tradition of women artists who courageously changed the spaces they critiqued.

As Lewis remembered, it was indeed a remarkable sight to see a Black woman outwit park and cultural authorities. Catlett could force white segregationists to acknowledge her humanity, here read as a right to access museum space, which is itself one of the locations where the definition of the human is created. It was an important action for Catlett and her group to make because white spatial supremacy and aesthetic dominance were indistinguishable. The trip created a temporary opening within this racio-aesthetic dominance to create the Black counter-sphere that Wilson described, one where students were not just included in a system that had tried to exclude them, but instead made a space for themselves within the museum, envisioning possible futures that were simply not allowable in a segregated world which did not acknowledge Black visual culture.

It was just enough space for the young Samella Sanders to defy the overbearing dehumanizing spaces of Jim Crow New Orleans to envision another future for herself. It was no exaggeration to say that Lewis grew up in Black spaces that distrusted white institutional spaces (they were for "sick people"), and that such an intervention was required for her to envision herself within such a world.[223] With this auspicious initiation into an artistic career, Lewis came to understand that she had a role to play in the fight for Black liberation by being

[222] bell hooks, *Art on My Mind Visual Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), 2.
[223] Candida Smith, *Image and Belief*, 25.

an artist, particularly in the very spaces designed to exclude Black aesthetic archives and knowledge.

The institutions of the American art system, however, would not see or treat Lewis or Catlett as courageous and historic figures. They were, nevertheless, part of a long tradition of radical Black resistance which was based in the everyday work of self-humanizing and space-making that made Black culture such a remarkable tool for survival. Entering the Delgado, for Lewis, was to enter into a historical lineage of resistance, and into a lifelong project which was inseparable from her everyday life. As she repeated on several occasions: "I just do what I have to do, and it happens, and then I go to the next thing….wasn't done for career objectives – it was a necessity."[224]

Catlett's Proposal for the Occupation of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Moving to Mexico in 1946, Catlett settled permanently in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where she joined the renowned graphic atelier, the Taller de Grafica Popular. She would fully commit herself to politically engaged printmaking in line with the Taller's legendary Mexican printmakers. Her outspoken political commitments and participation in protests eventually brought her to the attention of the Mexican and American governments. The U.S. government added her to the Department of States' *persona non grata* list and denied her re-entry over her communist-affiliations.[225] Returning to the United States a handful of times to visit in the 1990s, she maintained a very active correspondence with Lewis who would become the official representative for Catlett's sales and statements.

[224] Mark Benjamin Godfrey, Zoe Whitley, et al., *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (London: Tate Modern, 2017), 229.

[225] Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett*, 78-79.

Their sisterhood is documented in their voluminous uncatalogued correspondence housed at the Hampton University Museum in Hampton, Virginia. In these letters Catlett encouraged Lewis's work, inquired about her health, wrote her letters of recommendation, and drafted numerous inquiries about slides, photographs and pending payments for artworks. Managing the dynamics of an international friendship and art sales entailed a complex mixture of wires, delays, mail mix-ups and perpetually missed phone calls. It nevertheless was consistent, and Catlett's model and encouragement from Mexico served as a touchstone for Lewis throughout her life.

Among the correspondence is a document titled, "A Statement by Elizabeth Catlett to Samella Lewis," dated 1969. [226] In it, Catlett details directions for a proposed activist intervention at the LA County Museum. There is no contextual material for the statement among the files and folders, but it might have been Catlett's contribution to one of the Black arts organizations or her response to the negotiations Lewis had entered into regarding her possible hire as a curator at the museum. The statement written at the height of the Black power movement proposed an occupation of the museum premises. That plan coincided with the rising tide of art activism at the museum and was comparable to the sit-in tactics used by civil rights activists in the South.

Catlett's one-page instructions envision an activist occupation of the Los Angeles County Museum by 10,000 "raunchy" black bodies. [227] In an ingenious subversion of the very measure of museum success, high attendance, Catlett sought to fill the galleries as a way to bring the

[226] "A statement by Elizabeth Catlett sent to Samella Lewis" in "Elizabeth Catlett Book, Manuscript, Letters, Slides, Transparencies, Catalogue/brochure [sic]" unprocessed container in Samella Lewis Papers, Hampton University Museum, Hampton, VA. There is another copy of the statement in a different format in Samella Lewis's studio archive in her home in Los Angeles.

[227] Ibid.

museum to a halt and push the democratic and spatial limits of the space to a breaking point. Characteristic of her style, the intervention cut directly to the core of the white supremacist fear and logic at the heart of the American public art museum despite its own democratic mandate. Geographically distant from the outright segregation of the Delgado in New Orleans, the LA County Museum exhibited the same segregated realities as the Delgado. It was open to the public, but because of the barriers of a segregated city and the unjust concentration of arts infrastructure, the museum was effectively for whites only.

Catlett knew that 10,000 visitors would normally be considered a blockbuster turnout for an exhibition, but 10,000 Black visitors would be viewed as an outright crisis by white museum leadership. An explicitly peaceful protest, the point was to manifest the racial ideology that permeated the space and to bring the museum's segregated reality to the surface, a reality which was often hidden under the museum's Enlightenment rhetoric of transparency, freedom and education. Manifesting white fears through a democratic occupation, the highly performative action was intended to either win demands on behalf of Black communities or force museum leadership to throw protestors out and reveal that "the managers of the public art trust are not acting as men of good faith."[228]

The protest action never took place, and it is unknown how far the proposition circulated among Black art activists in Los Angeles beyond Lewis's papers. It was, however, an expert tactical move from one of the great critics of the American public art museum. Spoken from the position that Hill Collins defines as the "contradictory location where economic and political subordination created the conditions for Black women's resistance," Catlett saw the institution from a "curious outsider-within" position.[229] Trained in Euro-American artistic

[228] Ibid.
[229] Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 11.

traditions and history, but intimately familiar with the institution's logics of exclusion, Catlett could see through the transparency and into the museum's own illogic and contradictions.[230]

Catlett's ways of seeing deployed the "sidelong glance" of an Afro-diasporic positionality which art historian Krista Thomson describes as defying the white male museum gaze's ordering of the world. As Thompson describes, it is a "reoriented perception—like the light source set to the side that produces the silhouetted form—that illuminates a broader outline and context of what is seen and not seen."[231] The occupation did not intend merely to stop the museum galleries day-to-day circulation, but to do so in a way that would materialize an Afro-diasporic view of the anti-democratic and unseen racial realities that structured museum spaces. Much like her intervention at the Delgado, Catlett concretized the invisible power dynamics to theoretically leverage them as part of negotiations for access, resources and cultural authority.

Catlett's proposed protest did leave behind a highly effective model of intervention for future generations. It posed a set of aesthetic justice questions as to whether the space created by the white aesthetic tradition could indeed co-exist with Black aesthetic traditions which also were space-dependent. Would the museum go the way of the "whites only" neighborhood and require legal intervention, or would it restructure its model so as to share space? Could the museum acknowledge that the Euro-American aesthetic had been constructed in a space created by colonial dominance and whose purity and stability might actually be dependent on segregation? What more would it take for the model to acknowledge that its own objectivity,

[230] Ibid.

[231] Krista Thompson, "A Sidelong Glance: The Practice of African Diaspora Art History in the United States," *Art Journal* 70, no. 3 (2011): 6–31, 26.

as spatialized by the museum apparatus itself, was not a free and open space, but a violently asserted hierarchized ordering of the world's epistemologies?

For artists like Catlett and Lewis, the tactics developed in the fights to claim that representational and museum spaces were not separate from a Black aesthetic. Activism was indeed part of the aesthetic tradition because space was racialized and dominated by white supremacy. It is a telling detail that Black women have continuously played such an important role as activists and founders of art spaces throughout the 20ᵗʰth century. Artist activists include Margaret Burroughs, Catlett, Lewis, Faith Ringgold, Augusta Savage, and Howardena Pindell, to name some of the best known. The tradition of Black women's activism is important to return to because the privilege of not knowing or having to negotiate how race made space a prohibitive barrier was part of the cost of the art world's alliance with white patriarchal privilege.

Such spatial awareness and experiences are ultimately of the utmost importance to the current debates around museum futures. Art historian Susan Cahan has explained in her work on Black art activism in New York City that the "art world has been particularly resistant to racial equity," successfully avoiding any significant structural or staffing changes by waiting out the advances in desegregating public transportation, housing and educational institutions won by the civil rights movement.[232] The missing dimension of this seemingly intractable problem is the recurring under-theorization of the museum as a racialized space which has informed the worldviews and aesthetics formed there.

The Other Front: Concerned Citizens for Black Art

[232] Susan Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 6.

As Cooks and Jones detail, the history of Black arts activism at the LA County Museum begins with a petition from Ruth Waddy, a Black arts advocate and artist, and the renowned artist, Charles White, to celebrate the centennial of Black emancipation in 1962. The museum denied their request. It would be another nine years before it would acquiesce to activist demands for a single exhibition in the museum's Rental Gallery in the basement.

The Black Arts Council is best known for the role it played in winning commitments to these exhibitions from museum leadership, but it was not alone in this project. Two little known groups, the Committee for the Encouragement of Afro-American Art and the Concerned Citizens for Black Art (Concerned Citizens) began informal discussions with museum leadership and donors sometime in 1969. With no official letterhead and not very well-known outside of its own Black professional circle, the group was small. It included Lewis, Dr. Leon Banks, a pediatrician; Bernie Casey, an ex-Los Angeles Rams football player and artist; Dr. J. Alfred Cannon, a professor of psychology at UC Los Angeles, as well as possible crossovers from other Black arts activist organizations.[233]

In a document summarizing their work, the Concerned Citizens claimed full credit for the victories at the museum, explaining that it was: "strange to report but all the modest tokens occurring now at the museum have been due to pressure by the Committee for the Encouragement of African American Art and Concerned Citizens for Black Art."[234] This conflicts with the narrative that has credited the entirety of these successes to the work of the Black Arts Council. The achievements of the Black Arts Council, however, cannot be

[233] "The press release of January 22, 1971," in Samella S. Lewis papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA. See also "Clare Loeb - Sour Apple Tree - panel discussion of the LA County Museum of Art, guests: Dr. Samella Lewis, Al Cannon, Bernie Casey, Dr. Leon Banks," December 28, 1970, https://archive.org/details/clcmar_000034.

[234] Ibid.

overstated, as co-founder Claude Booker, was explicitly thanked in the *Two Centuries* catalogue for his contributions towards making the exhibition happen.[235]

It was more likely that battling on both fronts forced the museum to make the exhibition concession that it did. A group of Black doctors and a celebrity would have had privileged access to the Board and could apply a different type of pressure because of their class standing. The strong presence of doctors among the Concerned Citizens appears to indicate that there might have been a class division between the blue-collar Black Arts Council and the white collar Concerned Citizens, also pointing to the fact that the museum was under both internal and external pressure.

For example, Cannon had an extensive network of connections within the museum's upper echelons because of his position at UC Los Angeles. Charles M. Weisenberg, the Head of Public Relations at the Museum in the early 1970s, recalls the Concerned Citizens picketing the 1971 touring *Cubist Epoch* exhibition. No documentation has been found of this event, and Lewis and the Concerned Citizens even pointed to board members coordinating a media blackout.[236] Weisenberg recalled an incident with the chairman of the board, ex-UC Los Angeles Chancellor and CEO of the Times Mirror Company, Franklin Murphy:

> …I do recall that an African-American professor from UCLA who had been supported and promoted by Murphy was on the picket line. Murphy was particularly angered by the involvement of someone he had befriended and was going to go out on the street to confront him. I, fortunately, was standing near Murphy while this was discussed and interjected myself to point out that the protesters would have certainly notified the press and that the last thing the museum needed was photos of Murphy (wearing a tuxedo) arguing with African-Americans in front of the museum. I prevailed upon Murphy not to go outside which could have been a public relations disaster.[237]

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[235] David Driskell, *Two Centuries of American Art* (New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art / Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 10.

[236] Lewis suspected Murphy, the CEO of Time-Mirror Company, which published the *Los Angeles Times*, of suppressing the story. See "Clare Loeb - Sour Apple Tree."

[237] Charles M. Weisenberg, email message to the author, July 29, 2016.

A list of possible protest slogans in Lewis's files about the protests she staged suggest picketers might have held signs that read: "The L.A. County Museum of European Art" or "Blackness exists! Art Museum—-Blackness exists!"[238] The image of Black protestors holding similarly worded signs and disrupting one of elite white Los Angeles's newest cultural centers demonstrates how high the stakes were in the interventions staged by groups like the Concerned Citizens. The threat of bad publicity for the museum was a serious fear, as critic Suzanne Muchnic has described in her institutional history of the museum, because of the museum's prior imbroglio with the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors over charges of indecency in the 1968 Edward Kienholz retrospective.[239]

Cannon also had a relationship with Anna Bing-Arnold, one of the museum's most consistent and significant benefactors, and they had lunches to discuss the possibility of creating a council to support a collection and curator of African and African American art. Bing-Arnold spoke with Donahue about these requests and on July 28, 1970 reported back to Cannon on Donahue's response: 1) the Black Arts Council should be included in such a discussion, 2) "If the Group [sic] objectives include support of contemporary African-American artists, it could give rise to demands for a Mexican-American Council, Japanese-American Council, etc."[240] Bing-Arnold's report shows that Cannon had the ear and attention of the upper echelons of museum trustees and leadership. He was even privy to the fearful racial logics that informed the museum's refusal to collaborate.

[238] "Los Angeles County Art Museum Protest," Samella S. Lewis papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

[239] Muchnic, *LACMA So Far*, 45.

[240] "Los Angeles County Art Museum Protest."

These fears recalled the purpose of Catlett's museum occupation which intended to provoke and make visible white supremacist fears, like those of Donahue and Bing-Arnold. The fear of non-white masses demanding their fair share of county museum resources, which Catlett had tapped into with her activist instructions, was feared as a real threat to white cultural authority. While not necessarily surprising, the lack of self-awareness in such an anti-democratic reasoning, and the frankness of an alliance with whiteness, further emphasizes that the museum model has not simply been the victim of a racialized landscape, but rather embraced and protected its role as a sanctuary for white identity.

Piecing Together a Historic Hire: Lewis Joins the LA County Museum of Art

As of 1969, the museum was fielding internal and external demands for a Black curator and for Black art exhibitions from the Concerned Citizens and the Black Arts Council. Both groups claimed they recommended Lewis to the museum. Fergerson attributes Lewis's hiring to her appearance in the Black Arts Council's lecture series that same year, but Lewis had been on Cannon's radar prior to this event.[241] All of the correspondence between Lewis and Donahue regarding the offer of employment were cc'ed to Cannon and Banks, indicating that they were directly involved with the process.[242]

The first Black employee to be hired in a front of house position, Lewis was uniquely qualified for this highly political and contested experiment. At Hampton College where she received her BA in Art, she worked under the art education theorist Viktor Lowenfeld, whose *Creative and Mental Growth* (1947) defined modern arts education pedagogy in the first half

[241] Karen Ann Mason, interview with Cecil Fergerson, *African American Artists of Los Angeles Cecil Fergerson* (Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Oral History Research, 1996), 241.

[242] "Los Angeles County Art Museum Protest."

of the twentieth century. She went on to study at The Ohio State University, receiving her Ph.D. in Fine Arts and Art History in 1951, the first Black woman in the country to do so.[243] Working as an art history professor at numerous universities for several decades, she published some of the first scholarship in African American art history, later writing significant monographs on Elizabeth Catlett, Richmond Barthé and Jacob Lawrence.[244] Moving to Los Angeles in the late 1960s and working as a professor at Cal State Dominguez Hills, she was a local and ideal candidate.

The archivists who compiled the official selection of Lewis's papers for her donation to the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript and Rare Books Library at Emory University left behind documents in the attic of her art studio in Los Angeles which are critical to understanding this historic hire.[245] Donahue initiated conversations with Lewis in May 1969 regarding the possibility of hiring her as an "Associate Curator of Art."[246] The job title was fitting, considering she would have been one of the only curators with a PhD at the museum, but it was also vague, in that it reflected leadership's inability to specify or acknowledging her area of expertise.

In a "follow-up" letter from August 1969, Lewis inquired about the promised details regarding the curatorial position, explaining that based on prior phone discussions she had not renewed her contract as a professor of art history at Cal State Dominguez Hills, anticipating

[243] Ferris Olin, "Collecting and the Cultural Politics of Race and Community Survival: Samella Sanders Lewis" *Aurora: The Journal of the History of Art* IV (2003): 201–17.

[244] Ibid.

[245] Much of the LA County Museum of Art's archives were damaged and destroyed in an off-site water accident in 1992. These letters in Lewis's studio attic are the only institutional documents detailing this historic hire. The Special Collections at the Getty Research Institute holds the most substantial collection of materials related to the curators who worked at the museum during the 1960s and 1970s. There are no materials regarding Lewis in the Hal Glicksman Papers, circa 1927-2010 and Maurice Tuchman Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.

[246] See correspondence between Lewis and Donahue in Samella Lewis studio archive, unprocessed materials, Los Angeles, CA.

she would "join the Museum staff in the very near future."[247] In a letter dated September 1969, Donahue rescinded the curatorial position and replaced it with a vaguely worded position described as: "coordinating the educational activities of the Museum."[248] Implying some sort of authority in keeping with her education and experience, the position was again demoted in January 1970 to Arts Education Coordinator, a junior position managing the Junior Art Workshop, the museum's educational program for children.

Despite the fact that the museum initially approached Lewis as a scholar, the correspondence documents the unraveling of that offer. Unable to imagine her as a cultural authority or as someone working to produce exhibitions, or maybe more fearful of how Lewis would disrupt the presumed legitimacy of a white curatorial department who passed judgement on non-white cultures, she was tossed between departments until a place was found for her that was in line with museum leadership's sexist and racist worldviews. The position to work with children was belittling of her intellectual work and recalled white perceptions of Black women as mammies who raised children for white families. The Junior Arts Workshop was conducted in the basement underneath the Bing Auditorium, which meant that Lewis would be separated from museum staff and out of public view. In keeping with her Black feminist ethics, however, Lewis would turn this insult into an opportunity.

The diminishing opportunities outlined in Donahue's correspondence most likely originated in the Curatorial and Education departments, particularly because Lewis had qualifications in both departments. Donahue was seen as a capable administrator, but according to an ex-museum employee who worked with Donahue, he "avoided arguments and stayed out

[247] Ibid.
[248] Ibid.

of the spotlight."[249] It is possible that he agreed to hire Lewis, offered her the position, but then had to change course when his proposal was met with resistance.

The museum's decision-making authority was said to reside in the curatorial department. As Cooks has thoroughly documented, the LA County Museum curators voted down mounting a Black art exhibition in the early 1970s, and the museum board overrode the curatorial department's veto by commissioning Driskell to curate the exhibition. Members of the curatorial team, including head curator Maurice Tuchman, refused to attend exhibition planning and introductory meetings with Driskell.[250] When *Two Centuries* opened, a curator of American art and the head of the Education Department resigned, citing the exhibition in their list of grievances.[251] Years later, Fergerson would sue the museum in an effort to override racist and classist opposition to his being hired as a curatorial assistant, despite his significant curatorial experience organizing off-site exhibitions, as well as his decades of experience at the museum in numerous curatorial-adjacent roles.[252]

As Lewis recalled following a trip she coordinated for the artist Jacob Lawrence in 1970, Tuchman, well-known for curating numerous groundbreaking exhibitions (many of which focused on white men), remarked to Lewis that "any little white boy" could do what Lawrence did.[253] Tuchman had also become notorious in Chicano circles for his response to young

[249] Muchnic, *LACMA So Far*, 5. Charles M. Weisenberg, head of the LA County Museum's Public Relations department remembered: "When I took the job at LACMA the director of the museum, Kenneth Donahue, expressed a great interest in reaching out to the black and brown (my words not his) communities and was interested in my background with the public library whose clientele was very different from that of the museum. Once I was at the museum I did not find Donahue or others seriously interested in reaching out beyond the upscale Westside community that provided much of the support for the museum." Charles M. Weisenberg, email message to the author, July 29, 2016.

[250] Tuchman "refused to attend Driskell's presentation," see Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness*, 98.

[251] See ibid. 99: "Donelson Hoopes, curator of American art, and Ruth Bowman, director of education, resigned from their posts, citing the Board's decision to mount *Two Centuries*."

[252] Jones, *South of Pico*, 171.

[253] Candida Smith, *Image and Belief*, 191.

Chicano artists inquiring about the possibility of an exhibition at the museum in the early 1970s, to which he replied: "Chicanos do not make art, they are in gangs."[254]

Much as Black Americans had made life livable in spaces designed by segregationist city planners and civic leaders, Lewis would turn confinement into what Hill Collins refers to as "Black female sphere of influence."[255] It was a type of place-making, as she describes, based in an Afrocentric worldview which offered a standpoint from which to defy the segregated realities imposed in the museum so as to work toward a radical democratic vision of the museum space which sought "to actualize a humanist vision of community."[256]

Lewis very quickly turned the insult into an opportunity to desegregate the museum. In the May 1970 *LACMA Members' Calendar* there is an out-of-the-ordinary entry entitled: "A New Direction for the Junior Arts Workshop."[257] Lewis lays out in it the pedagogical and geographic changes she intended to make in the program now under her management. Billed as an experimental arts education program for teachers and students, she detailed her plan to professionalize the program, partnering with local colleges to move towards a more child-focused arts pedagogy in line with the Lowenfeld method of student-directed arts pedagogy.

In what we can now read as a declaration to desegregate the program, the text reads: "It is an acknowledged goal of this program to reach, especially, Los Angeles County children whose environment have in the past prevented a relationship of the sort the Junior Arts Workshop will now offer."[258] Lewis sought to expand the geographical areas the museum served to include those people who, much like herself, were not envisioned as belonging there.

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[254] The ASCO art collective has repeatedly spoken of instances of outright bias from Tuchman. The conceptual artist, photographer and lecturer, Harry Gamboa, often recites this quotation in public talks.

[255] Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 39.

[256] Ibid.

[257] *May 1970 LACMA Members' Calendar*, Balch Archive and Research Library, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.

[258] Ibid.

With great nuance, she emphasized geography instead of race, knowing that Los Angeles was a highly segregated city. Intending to ensure a geographically diverse audience, the brief article explains: "To make possible student participation from *all* areas of the community, applications will be processed by a Selection Committee representing the cooperating institutions. [original italics]"[259]

Twenty-nine years after Lewis's first museum visit with Catlett, she used her new position to continue the democratic work that her mentor had initiated with her at the Delgado museum. Like that intervention in Jim Crow New Orleans, Lewis intended to push the institution to fulfill its own democratic mandate and serve all of Los Angeles County. Despite being a nearly impossible task in such an enormous city, it showed the limitations of the settler European colonial model as it had been historically deployed. Understanding the gap in the museum's proposition of serving the county, Lewis emphasized serving "*all* areas of the community," which in a highly segregated city like Los Angeles meant the communities outside of the white Westside.

To ensure that the program would proceed as intended, Lewis found allies among docents and wealthy donors, who raised funds to pay for students who could not afford the stated fees and unstated transportation costs. In a letter dated August 30, 1970, Julie Raskoff, a museum docent, discusses sponsoring and arranging for the transportation of two Black school children from South Los Angeles housing projects, roughly 45-60 minutes away by car: William Brooks, who lived in the Avalon Gardens Housing Project in Green Meadows, and Gregory Coleman, who lived in Westmont. In her letter of support for the program Raskoff noted: "Both families report enthusiastically that it was a marvelous experience for their

[259] Ibid.

children, and that there were immense benefits both artistically and in their lives generally."[260] Through such sponsorship by sympathetic white patrons, Lewis desegregated the Junior Arts Workshop. Much as Catlett had done for Lewis, she would set up a system to help Black students overcome the barriers a segregated city imposed to accessing the museum.

Following up with the students of the Junior Art Workshop has proven difficult, but in her oral history Lewis explains that a young Alison Saar, daughter of the artist Betye Saar, was part of this initial cohort.[261] The younger Saar went on to become a well-known and accomplished sculptor who would later study with Lewis at Scripps College in nearby Pomona where Lewis went on to become a tenured professor of art history. Saar clearly had a remarkable role model in her mother, but as Lewis recalls, she advised the younger Saar "to help her move into the direction where I thought she wanted to go."[262] In a remarkable lineage, from New Orleans to Los Angeles, across some forty years, the spatial activism that opened up new social horizons for Lewis, would continue unabated, once again for another young, aspiring Black woman artist.

Enrollment in the Junior Art Workshop generally consisted of students from households closest to the museum in neighborhoods like Beverly Hills and Hollywood. As Lewis recalled, the Workshop was patronized by parents who "were using the museum as a place for their children to go and learn about art, but it was not a place where they wanted them to mix with so-called minorities."[263] White mothers lodged complaints about Black children in

[260] "Correspondence 1970-1971,"mella S. Lewis papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

[261] Samella Lewis and Richard Candida Smith, *Image and Belief: Samella Lewis,* Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 2013), 37, https://archive.org/details/imagebeliefsamel00lewi.

[262] Ibid.

[263] Ibid, 190.

the Workshop.[264] Lewis was pressured to change course by unnamed museum leadership personnel which caused great stress to her health and led her to resign her post. In her resignation letter of December 1970, submitted after a single year as Coordinator, she did not mention the issue, instead citing the original failure: the museum's refusal to support her scholarship and curatorial work in African American art history.[265]

Benny Andrews, a New York-based painter and leader of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, a Black arts activist group protesting and challenging the Metropolitan Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art during this very same period, wrote to Lewis: "We think that you made a wise move in resigning your position at the Museum…especially when finding the situation was undermining your health."[266] Support came as well from her colleague and friend, the painter of the Great Black Migrations, Jacob Lawrence who wrote: "We can appreciate your dilemma at the Museum – but know, that with your resourcefulness – that all will work out well – whatever your decision. We do know that the Los Angeles County Museum is very fortunate to have a person such as yourself on its staff…"[267]

In the thirty years that would follow her resignation, Lewis would establish Los Angeles's first museum of African American art, an international Black arts journal, three art galleries, and amass a substantial collection of African, Caribbean and African American art which she subsequently donated to museums across the country. Her scholarship, institution building, and collecting were breathtaking in their range, particularly since it was all accomplished with grants and her own salary as a professor. In no uncertain terms, if Lewis had received

[264] Ibid.

[265] See resignation letter in "Correspondence 1970-1971," Samella S. Lewis papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

[266] Ibid.

[267] "Correspondence 1952-1969," Samella S. Lewis papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

institutional support she would have developed one the finest museum collections of art of the African diaspora in the country, curated historic exhibitions and made the museum a center for Black art historical scholarship. On seeing her begin to change the racial order of the institution, however, the museum slowly pushed her out in the hopes she would be forgotten.

Approaches to Museum Activism: The Reed, The Oak and the Igloo

Lewis's "resignation" initiated a fierce response from the Concerned Citizens who were offended that she had been "subjected to an atmosphere of repression, racism and intolerance," and "hounded out of her job," putting "her health in jeopardy."[268] What they had seen as a modest and sensible start towards a larger desegregation project was treated as a threat by museum leadership who instead hid, contained, and ultimately removed Lewis. The Concerned Citizens insisted that the museum had caused serious harm in its mishandling of Lewis's tenure and their complaint provoked various verbal assurances from the institution between 1970-1974.[269]

Reintroducing here this event and the activism it would initiate, reframes the current dominant narrative which has centered the Black Arts Council as successfully pressuring the museum leadership for three Black art exhibitions curated by guest curators: *Three Graphic Artists* (1971), *Los Angeles 1972: A Panorama of Black Artists* (1972), and *Two Centuries* (1976).[270] From the perspective of the Concerned Citizens, the trilogy of exhibitions was a strategy of appeasement that slowly subverted the upper hand they were currently holding due

[268] "Printed Materials, Los Angeles County Museum of Art 1970-194," Charles W. White papers, 1933-1987, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

[269] The press release of January 22, 1971 narrates the history of the formation of the group. See "Los Angeles County Art Museum Protest," Samella S. Lewis papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

[270] Cooks and Jones rely on the Karen Ann Mason interview with Fergerson, *African American Artists.*

to the museum's most recent failures with Lewis. The exhibitions served three purposes in opposition to their demands: to publicly show that the museum was interested in integration, to stall the Concerned Citizens and to make concessions in the form of objects and exhibitions instead of with spaces and staff.

The first exhibition, *Three Graphic Artists* (1971) included works on paper by three Black male artists: David Hammons, Timothy Washington, and Charles White. It was presented in the museum's art rental gallery in the basement, under the Bing Auditorium, near the Junior Arts Workshop. The placement of the first Black art exhibition in the museum's basement hallway underscored the spatial problem manifest in the museum's educational battles. Seeing a repeat of the same containment strategy used with Lewis, Concerned Citizens demanded a meeting with the Board of Trustees and submitted a list of eleven demands.[271] They believed that Black artists and activists had to maintain a united front in negotiations with the museum to win a place in all of the museum's affairs so as to make an autonomous and permanent place for Black cultural affairs.

In their submitted list of demands they intended to shift the museum towards "a new museum concept," one that would work towards racial equity from within by creating equal opportunity programs for staff and a curatorial department devoted to African and African-American art history.[272] Having no faith in white leadership's ability to share space or co-exist, Concerned Citizens understood that changes had to happen from the board of trustees to the bureaucratic realities of creating an equitable system for hiring independent contractors. To ensure a permanent space in the museum while this decolonizing project took place, they

[271] "Letter to the LA County Museum of Art Board of Trustees," Samella S. Lewis papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.
[272] Ibid.

requested an African and African American curatorial office, and began to build an internal apprenticeship system "to ensure availability of training and education of black museum employees and equitable representation of Black people in professional positions."[273]

In their same letter to the board, Concerned Citizens listed their grievances with the upcoming *Three Graphics Artists* exhibition: its location in the Rental Gallery, small budget, the awkward curatorial premise that paired one of America's greatest artists—Charles White—with much younger artists, the absence of a Black curator, and the refusal to use the word "Black" in the exhibition title. The exhibition would be the first exhibition of Black artists at the museum, but, as these details signaled, the exhibition was really a minor concession that barely met 1/11 of the Concerned Citizen's demands. As a conciliatory gesture, Lewis even offered to curate "an exhibition on nationally prominent African Americans, for example, Lawrence, White and Romare Bearden," an offer which the museum rejected.[274] This signaled the beginning of the switching of narratives which would bury Lewis's story and the leverage she held at this critical juncture with the historic firsts in exhibition and museum history the trilogy of exhibitions afforded.

The Brockman and Heritage Galleries (which represented all three of the exhibiting artists) lent works to the exhibition. The museum made its first acquisitions of Black artists by acquiring three works from the exhibition for the permanent collection. From the exhibiting artists' perspective, it did appear as if their host was making serious concessions in the form of space and money. White did not mind the conditions for the exhibition. In interviews with curator Ilene Forte, he discusses wanting "to help the young brothers," and expresses some

[273] "Awake," Samella Lewis papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

[274] Ilene Susan Forte, "Charles White's Art and Activism in Southern California," in *Charles White A Retrospective* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2018), 134.

surprise at the "polit-buro" style orders given by the Concerned Citizens for artists to fall in line.[275] Lewis's life-long commitment to Catlett might have played a role in the distance between the groups. Catlett had divorced White in a somewhat contentious break-up and that may also have been part of the decision to take up the exhibition opportunities instead of aligning themselves with Lewis's fight. The exhibition of three male artists once again denied Lewis the opportunity to exhibit her work. Tensions ran so high that the Concerned Citizens picketed the first exhibition of Black artists at the museum on its opening night.

White was one of the country's best known artists and this incident is reminiscent of his 1946 drawing, *Can A Negro Study Law in Texas*. The charcoal drawing on paper accompanied an article in the *New Masses* on Heman Sweatt, a Black applicant who had been denied entrance to the University of Texas School of Law because of his race.[276] White depicts a monumental Sweatt behind a rod-iron fence that is tipped by sharp and elegant finials that direct the viewer's gaze to the top of the law school's steps where three white administrators cower, cartoonishly conspiring and fearfully eyeing the would-be intruder on the other side of the fence. Sweatt is intensely focused, a book held firmly in his left hand extends out towards the viewer balancing the white light in his right hand that will strike down the obstacles in his way. A sanctuary of higher learning and accreditation, the law school itself is rendered as a Greco-Roman temple, the signature architectural style of elite American educational and cultural institutions, but it could just have easily been a museum.

There are undated hand written index cards in White's personal papers, most likely made by White's second wife, Frances, along with a typed summary of those notes detailing

[275] Forte, "Charles White's Art," 135.
[276] Ibid., 197.

White's involvement in the activism around *Three Graphic Artists.*[277] This evidence portrays the Concerned Citizens as a small group with radical and unrealistic demands whose approach to the museum was flawed and who unfairly protested the exhibition. At the end of these notes is an article from the February 1971 *National Geographic*. The final hand written note reads: "Charles clipped this wonderful description of the Eskimo 'a marvel of adaptation to a fierce environment' to underscore his philosophic approach to the Museum and the 'Concerned Citizens.'"[278] Under "Eskimo Life A Struggle for Survival" three paragraphs are bracketed in pen and begin: "Experience has taught him that flexibility is more effective than force in the fight for survival, that the way of the reed is better than that of the oak…Lost in a blizzard, an Eskimo does not plunge ahead but — fully aware of the snow's insulating qualities — builds an igloo for shelter and waits it out."[279] It is without question that White was a veteran navigator in a racist art world. He clearly identified with the flexible way of the reed as a survival tactic. Finding the Concerned Citizens' approach to the museum unrealistic, he participated in the exhibition in the belief that staging it was ultimately a substantial enough concession by the Museum that would help younger artists survive in a hostile climate.

In retrospect, it becomes clear that White's reading could not see the limitations of his approach. The Concerned Citizens were intent on changing the museum because they believed that the way it was organized made no space for Black cultural authority and by extension, artists. While the museum could tolerate the objects made by Black culture, it would not accept the Black practitioners and cultural caretakers who supported and preserved that culture. Whether an autochthonous art space could be made and maintained within the institution was

[277] Black Arts Council Folder 1969-1975, Charles W. White papers, 1933-1987, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
[278] Ibid.
[279] Ibid.

Concerned Citizens' proposed experiment. The Concerned Citizens were radical in their demands, predicting: "The Museum will fail and must fail if it continues its present attitude."[280]

Of the eleven demands made by the Concerned Citizens, according to the history they drafted, only a "few [were] taken under advisement and only one agreed upon."[281] The one agreed upon demand, which was later reversed based on it being deemed "illegal," was the establishment of an Equal Opportunities Committee.[282] Such a committee was not one of the explicit demands on the group's list and is only referenced in the document describing the group's history. Its name indicates that it was a catch-all committee covering a number of the demands in the petition to create a centralized committee that would ensure racial equity and generate training and educational opportunities for those employees of color that already worked at the museum to move up the ranks.

This program may account for the story of museum guard, Stanley Swinger. In 1973, Swinger appeared on Clare Spark Loeb's weekly radio show, *Sour Apple Tree* on KPFK, where she interviewed local and national art figures and cultural workers. Swinger joined a broadcast about *African Textiles and Decorative Arts,* an exhibition that originated at the Museum of Modern Art in 1972. The exhibition began its national tour at the LA County Museum, and Loeb invited the curators responsible for the show's West Coast presentation on to her radio program. Swinger introduced himself as a curatorial assistant at the LA County Museum who was working towards his MA degree in African Art at UCLA. Speaking only a few times during the broadcast, his narrative pairs with Fergerson's recollection that Swinger "was no longer a guard. He became not a curatorial assistant in job title, but in like an apprentice

[280] "Press release of January 22, 1971," Samella Lewis papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.
[281] Ibid.
[282] Ibid.

program that I'm sure the museum hoped would die out and which did. He didn't pursue it."[283] It would have made Swinger the first Black employee to work in the curatorial department.

If Swinger was indeed part of an internal apprenticeship program facilitated by an Equal Opportunities Committee, it would have been the first of its kind and a unique concession made within the national museum landscape. Of equal importance was the committee's approach that broke from the museum's social hierarchy by viewing Black staff as capable of advancement and worthy of apprenticeship. Once again, the LA County Museum had initiated a program and a hire with enormous potential, only to let such efforts fade away.

Concerned Citizens felt the need to refuse any concessions that were not structural, because compromise would deny them the autonomous space and equal funding that they believed they needed to make a worthy place within the museum by generating a Black art counter-sphere which they believed would ultimately change the institution. It was a vision that would not accept the museum's proposition that it would solve its allegiance to white cultural supremacy by diversifying a few of its acquisitions and exhibitions, especially when the Concerned Citizens were committed to dismantling the legitimacy of a segregated and monocultural space as an universal ideal. Decolonizing the museum meant opening a space for Black cultural workers to begin the work of contesting the presumed universality of Euro-American rituals, aesthetic values and hierarchies by establishing a counter public space.

In *The Production of Space,* philosopher Henri Lefebvre speaks of a "trial by space" in which the values of different peoples of the world come in conflict with one another in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world. Lefebvre suggests "groups, classes, or fractions of classes cannot constitute themselves, or recognize one another, as 'subjects' unless

[283] Mason, *African American Artists*, 158.

they generate (or produce) a space. Ideas, representations or values which do not succeed in making their mark on space, and thus generating (or producing) an appropriate morphology, will lose all pith and become mere signs, resolve themselves into abstract descriptions, or mutate into fantasies."[284] As the story of Black art activism at the LA County Museum makes clear, the failure to create a Black art space that would put the white art space on trial further contributed to the dominant culture's universal presumptions and judgements that there were no Black artists, curators or audiences worth pursuing.

This left open the question of whether a Black art space would be a morphology comparable to the Euro-American model or would require an experimental process to produce an aesthetic space constructed from an Afrocentric standpoint. What would have happened, as Anna Bing-Arnold related, if a Black Arts Council, a Mexican-American Arts Council, and a Japanese-American Arts Council had indeed demanded space at the museum to make Black, Mexican-American, Japanese-American art spaces? Such a project has never manifested, but it might indeed be the most immediate step in challenging white aesthetic dominance in the public art museum.

Conclusion

During and beyond the 1970s, unresolved conflicts over segregated art museum spaces and opposition to desegregation were buried under a rhetoric of progress. As Cahan astutely describes in her history of New York-based museum racial politics: "Thus as soon as artists of color began to actively seek their place in major museums, progress became mired in what has been called 'the quality debate,' a debate about whether or not such discrimination existed at all. The practice of racism on the part of individual curators, directors, or trustees was

[284] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1974, 1991), 416.

legitimated as just that: a series of individual judgment calls, not institutional policy."[285] As museum activism scholarship builds, the failed project of racial equity in the public art museum appears, as Cahan details, as not just a series of idiosyncratic race relations in different cities, but as a recurring pattern within the public art museum model as it has been deployed across the United States.

In a recorded interview in 1970 of a *Sour Apple Tree* broadcast, Lewis and the other members of Concerned Citizens wondered out loud what future the institution, specifically the LA County Museum, had for Black communities if the entirety of their collections and spaces were devoted to constructing and performing whiteness. Noting that when Black children visited they did not see their ancestors nor any connections to their Black experiences, Lewis concluded that within such a space "the only thing he [a visitor] can hope to be is white."[286] It was a damning conclusion that was based in the repeated rejections of her own efforts to make a space for Black self-actualization and Afrocentric worldviews in the face of such epistemic violence.

Still ruminating on white obstruction to Black self-actualization in the public sphere years later, Lewis returned to these themes in her painting, *Barrier* (2004). A white figure with a Trojan helmet holds out an exaggerated arm to block a Black child. The white figure's arm is just above the girl's head and we see an innocent and piercing look as she gazes up at the faceless figure. The young girl is both kept in her niche and prevented from entering the space of the white figure. Forty years after her time at the LA County Museum, the painting summarizes Lewis's own historic traumas with white cultural spaces, as well as the ongoing

[285] Susan Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 6.

[286] "Clare Loeb - Sour Apple Tree ."

realities that artists and cultural workers of color continue to endure in finding a place in a white cultural establishment.

The activist archive recounted in this chapter opens up another perspective on what Rogoff refers to as "multicultural management of inclusiveness," which is at the heart of contemporary museum practice.[287] As non-white constituencies increased their claims on museum space throughout the 1970s, museums all over the country handled diversity in a managerial framework wherein non-white others were allowed in, Rogoff argues, maintaining an unchanging concept of themselves. She adds that "Museums' encounters with cultural difference are in a sense an opportunity to contract rather than to expand, to contract the staunch belief system that organizes, classifies, locates and judges everything from the prevailing perspective of the West."[288] It is for this very reason that the issue of space and whether or not the public art museum model can co-exist with non-white voices and practices is much more than an issue of inclusion, but calls out the need to address the unnamed whiteness which continues to define itself as the organizer and judge of the world's cultures.

Without a place in the museum in which Black cultural authorities could enact and develop their own spatio-aesthetic practices, museums could not escape the dominant particulars masquerading as universalized truths or the racialized subject positions at the heart of the production of their spaces. Whether or not the museum can be confronted with a more permanent and larger Black arts morphology remains an outstanding question. However, to dislodge the "prevailing perspective" will require other morphologies from the Euro-American art museum, and this will by necessity result in a messy and conflictual process over boundaries, determinations of quality and a decolonization of the senses.

[287] Rogoff, "Hit and Run," 72.
[288] Ibid.

Much as Catlett posed in her activist intervention, the American public art museum continues to struggle with her fundamental question: what is wrong with the way we go "about urging people to seek culture in that public place set aside for that purpose?" It was a question that had also been on the mind of the sociologist and historian W.E.B. Du Bois. With tremendous foresight, he had already seen the costs of a segregated future in the post-bellum American cultural landscape. What he identified was a pressing need for places where races mixed and communicated to form what he called a "community of intellectual life."[289] He envisioned a "point of transference where the thoughts and feelings of one race can come into direct contact and sympathy with thoughts and feelings of the other."[290]

Museums have abdicated their responsibilities in answering this call to create such a place. The next step as Rogoff cautions, will not be a smooth transition to inclusion, but rather the uncertainty that feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey has described "as the detour through a no-man's land or threshold area of counter-myth and counter-symbolisation that is necessary."[291] It is the space of transformation where terms and customs are made foreign as they are confronted with previously unseen alternatives and only partially defined futures.

[289] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm

[290] Ibid.

[291] Laura Mulvey, "Myth, Narrative, and Historical Experience," *History Workshop Journal* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 3–19.

IV. You Might Not Need Walls to Catch the Spirits: Black Art Spaces in Los Angeles 1968-1984

In 2019, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art assured the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors that while the museum would invest $750 million dollars into a new building on Wilshire Boulevard, it also planned to open several satellite locations in underserved neighborhoods.[292] Public opinion on the museum's capital campaign was mixed according to public petitions and emails, but the museum's public relations campaign, which emphasized decentralization, won the County Supervisors' unanimous approval.[293] The green light released $125 million tax-payer dollars for construction costs and signaled the clearance of the museum's final political hurdle.

For a majority of the residents of LA County, for whom it could take over an hour and a half to reach the museum, it was an unfair trade-off. The entirety of the County' investment went into the wealthy, white Westside neighborhoods surrounding the museum, while neighborhoods of color were given only a verbal agreement that the museum would some day address the county's inequitable distribution of cultural infrastructure. The LA County Museum's control of the negotiations, however, was so complete, that it was able to include its failure to serve marginalized neighborhoods as part of its bargaining strategy. In effect, the entire offer of satellite spaces underscored the ineffectiveness of a centralized repository of visual culture in a megalopolis like Los Angeles.

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[292] Deborah Vankin,"LACMA Gets the OK on New Home," *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 2019; The Times Editorial Staff, "Take LACMA and Put It In South L.A.? Great Idea," *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 2018; Jori Finkel, "Lacma [sic] Seeks to Expand Its Footprint Into South Los Angeles," *The New York Times*, January 24, 2018.

[293] Antonio Pacheco, "LACMA is planning to launch up to five satellite campuses throughout L.A. County," *The Architectural Paper*, July 13, 2018, thttps://www.archpaper.com/2018/07/lacma-planning-five-satellite-campuses-throughout-county/.

The LA County Museum's proposition that decentralization was the city's only option was based on a distorted view of the city's cultural landscape. Los Angeles is home to the largest network of culturally specific community art spaces and museums in the country, but the museum's proposition made no gesture toward recognition of, supporting, or working with this network.[294] Instead, the LA County Museum was recentered as the universally applicable remedy to the accessibility problem that it not only had a hand in creating, but had openly ignored for decades. The massive reinvestment into the museum model ultimately reinforced the museum's way of seeing the city and fortified the proposition that the traditional public art museum paradigm was the answer to the county's visual culture needs.

Museum critics, and even museum leadership across the country, have acknowledged that the mainstream public art museum model cannot singularly serve the infrastructural and multi-cultural needs of modern American cities. In 1967, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's capital campaign for an expansion into Central Park proposed decentralization to the New York City Planning Commission as a concession to critics who said the museum did not serve the more ethnically diverse boroughs beyond Manhattan. As an experimental proposition in the late 1960s, the Metropolitan supported community arts projects until its own expansion was completed.[295] Spanning more than fifty years and both coasts of the country, the satellite and decentralizing proposals are mostly an admission of the museum model's inability to outmaneuver the segregated city spaces it has been folded into.

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[294] Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Carl Grodach, "Displaying and Celebrating the 'Other': A Study of the Mission Scope and Roles of Ethnic Museums in Los Angeles," *The Public Historian* 26, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 49–71.

[295] Art historian Susan Cahan maintains: "In retrospect it is hard not to see the museum's outreach activities as a tactic devised to appease critics of the museum's expansion projects – its Master Plan – which outlived its usefulness in the board's eyes once those plans were realized." Cahan, *Mounting Frustration,* 256.

The idea of a decentralized institution has deep roots within American museum history. In his series *The New Museum* (1917), early 20th century library and museum reformer, John Cotton Dana, envisioned a branch-system of community-focused museums. Dana, however, opposed the reproduction of fine art gallery spaces because he believed the "European idea of a museum" was oppressive as it oriented viewers towards Europe and fostered a vision of the American landscape as culturally barren.[296] The subsequent proliferation of the European model entrenched colonial definitions, mappings and epistemologies, wherein visitors were instructed and encouraged to think and sense as if they were indeed in Europe. Following in the wake of the larger colonial project of westward expansion, the European public art museum model, as Dana feared, would become the dominant paradigm and the "only illustrations of the museum idea."[297]

Dana was one of the founders of the modern library branch system and was ultimately more successful in democratizing public libraries than public museums, but his trenchant critique repeatedly emphasized the need to challenge the expansion of the European fine art gallery system, as well as the Eurocentric worldview it fostered. The perpetuation of this world view might be the museum's most damaging legacy, as the institution trains visitors as Dana warned, to look "with open scorn on the products of American artists and artisans."[298] As the most recent Los Angeles County proposal for decentralization makes clear, the exclusionary view created in the museum applies to the culturally specific art spaces and community art centers that were themselves created in response to the museum's monocultural worldview.

[296] John Cotton Dana, "The Gloom of the Museum," in *Reinventing the Museum The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012), 22.
[297] Ibid.
[298] Dana, "Gloom of the Museum," 22.

Art historian Huey Copeland and Afro-pessimist theorist Frank Wilderson, in a 2017 discussion on the limitations of the museum model's devotion to educational and representational work, recalled Dana's one-hundred year old concern. The scholars wondered: "What would it mean to imagine alternative spaces or modes of thinking both within and beyond the museum?" [299] The scholars were not interested in a more equitable distribution of cultural spaces, but instead were in search of a model, as Copeland explained, to "plot the possibilities of the truly revolutionary and the radically decolonial."[300] In effect, the scholars were asking for a decolonial spatial practice that could evade colonial definitions, as well as tap in to alternative spatial imaginaries by which to generate models beyond the museum's limiting cultural architecture.

This abbreviated summary of the range of positions on museum futures points to the ongoing need for spatial histories beyond the museum. In *South of Pico* art historian Kellie Jones has countered the myopic cultural mapping that centered white Los Angeles and its institutions by meticulously plotting the Black arts network of galleries, museums and community art spaces in South Los Angeles. Unwilling to wait for white museum leadership to realize the debilitating flaws in the museum model, Black cultural workers from the 1940's onward, expanded a Black countersphere to support Black creative production working against the discriminatory practices and narratives of mainstream cultural institutions.

Jones characterized this tradition Black activist tradition into two categories: "integrationist," such as those who attempted to integrate the LA County Museum, and

[299] Huey Copeland and Frank B. Wilderson III, "Red, Black, and Blue: The National Museum of African American History and Culture and the National Museum of the American Indian," *Artforum* 56, no. 1 (September 2017), https://www.artforum.com/print/201707/red-black-and-blue-the-national-museum-of-african-american-history-and-culture-and-the-national-museum-of-the-american-indian-70457.

[300] Ibid.

"autochthonous," referring to those who independently developed Black art galleries, museums and community art centers.[301] Building on Jones' research, I deviate from this binary characterization, by delving into three Black art space case studies. These Black art activist events and spaces repeatedly deviated from standard mainstream museum practices and did so because they were working towards what Dana succinctly phrased as "other illustrations of the museum idea."[302]

This chapter begins with the one-night, museum guard-organized Black Culture Festival at the LA County Museum in 1968 which initiated a momentary vision of an Afrocentered art space. The festival made an enormous impact on Los Angeles' Black arts community and changed the consciousness of two Black museum preparators who went on to establish the Black Arts Council, an activist and peripatetic curatorial office that would expand the traditional boundaries of fine art curating. The chapter concludes with an overview of Samella Lewis's curatorial practice which opened up new forms of cultural and spatial work based in Afrodiasporic aesthetics and customs.

I contend that these projects were developing spaces to think outside of the museum paradigm in the interest of decolonizing Euro-American aesthetics, cultural mappings of the city, and traditional definitions of curatorial work. Focusing on practitioners that worked in the disciplinary blind spots of museum studies and art history, the chapter considers how Black art space makers embodied, mobilized, and ultimately transformed the traditional museum model to engender a range of alternative spatial practices that were based in Afrodiasporic cultural practices and spatial histories.

[301] Jones, *South of Pico*, 139.
[302] Dana, "Gloom of the Museum," 22.

Black spatial practices developed over centuries in response to consistent threats of white violence, as well as in response to racial enclosures like the plantation, segregated public transportation, segregated housing and the museum.[303] Reframing these projects within the history of spatial activism of the Black aesthetic tradition that stretched back to the nineteenth century changes the frame of reference that has seen them as imitations of the dominant culture's model, identifying them instead as what architectural historian Mario Gooden describes as the "liberative space-making" at the heart of Black American history.[304]

Black museum and community art space makers did not see themselves making satellite locations with Black art, but rather de-linking from dominant models in search of an alternative spatial practice invested in making liberated aesthetic spaces free from the art historical gazes in museums where Black constituents were repeatedly told they had no place or which repeatedly fixed Black American creativity within colonial orderings and cultural hierarchies.

A Black Culture Festival: Enacting A Black Art Space

Black intellectuals and exhibition organizers from the nineteenth century onward fought to produce a Black countersphere in opposition to the dehumanizing narratives elaborated in white mainstream representational sites such as world fairs and museums. Architectural historian Mabel Wilson's foundational research has traced a through line from the construction of "Negro buildings" at national and international fairs of the 19th century to the Black history and culture museums built in Detroit, Chicago and Philadelphia in the 1960s. Wilson's work opens up a new field of inquiry in museum studies, and in particular for the public art museum,

[303] Mario Gooden, *Dark Space* (New York: The Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation Columbia University, 2016).
[304] Ibid.

as she defines a tradition of "Negro buildings," and counter-exhibitions created by Black cultural workers. As Wilson argues, "Negro buildings" and Black culture and history museums were a form of activist place-making in the interest of furthering the project of Black liberation.[305] Wilson's research shows the embeddedness of a history of promulgating anti-Black narratives in support of white supremacy and the disempowering agenda of racialized capitalism within representational and exhibition spaces.

As an architectural historian, Wilson focuses on the built component of this tradition, but as I detail in Chapter 3, interventions into representational and symbolic spaces were also ephemeral events like Elizabeth Catlett's field trip to the Delgado Museum of Art or Samella Lewis's own attempts at desegregating the Los Angeles County Museum. Within this history of ephemeral interventions, the Black Culture Festival at the Los Angeles County Museum stands out for its scale and its deviation from museum customs. Existing only one night, the festival changed a site traditionally devoted to the performance of class distinction, cultural assimilation and the normalization of racialized social hierarchies into what art historian Robert Farris Thompson described in another context as a "socially binding" Black space.[306]

With the traumas of the Watts Rebellion still fresh in the civic imaginary and the museum looking to expand a very humble permanent collection, the LA County Museum organized its first exhibition of African art: *Sculpture of Black Africa: The Paul Tishman Collection* (October 1968 - January 5, 1969). Paul Tishman, a New York-based real estate and construction mogul, had assembled one of the most significant holdings of West and Central African sculpture in the United States. Pursuing such an outstanding collection was an

[305] Mabel Wilson, *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

[306] Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 2010).

institutional priority for the museum, particularly in the area of non-western art, as a majority of the permanent collection's treasures were temporary loans from business tycoon Norton Simon's highly sought-after European paintings collection.[307]

The opportunity to work with the Tishman collection attracted noted historians of African art Roy Sieber and Arnold Rubin as curators. They produced a handsomely installed exhibition and a well-researched catalogue, and were probably responsible for the impressive public programs in the museum's auditorium. Programming consisted of African and African American music, dance, fashion, folk tales, a documentary film on African sculpture and a "Symposium on African Art and Music." The wide range of events took place mostly on weekends between the hours of 11:00am - 9:00pm in the Leo S. Bing auditorium and were minimally priced, between 50 cents and $4.00 for tickets.[308]

The exhibition and programming were a test-run to see if the LA County Museum could house and promote Tishman's collection. The underlying assumption by the white museum leadership was that Black audiences would attend the exhibition because it presented objects related to their African ancestry. When only a small audience materialized, it put the potential donation into jeopardy. Tishman reportedly witnessed this poor showing and expressed his irritation over the low attendance numbers.[309] He seemed particularly perplexed that there was no Black audience. On a tour of the exhibition that he gave to a crew of mostly Black museum

[307] Muchnic, *LACMA so Far,* 4, 97.

[308] "Sculpture of Black Africa poster," Frances E. Williams Papers, 1965-1995, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles, CA.

[309] See Bridget Cooks's extensive description of the festival in *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and American Art Museum* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011). Tishman was probably not impressed by the museum's overall handling of the exhibit as he would later sell his collection to the Walt Disney Company, who would in turn donate it as the founding collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC. See Cecil Fergerson's discussion regarding Tishman's reaction: Karen Ann Mason, interview with Fergerson, *African American Artists,* 152–53.

guards, he explained that it was "their responsibility to get their families and friends to the museum," a claim the guards took very seriously.[310]

Tishman was actually pointing to the limits of the museum model's capacity to serve demographics beyond the museum's immediate white Westside neighborhood. Desiring African art objects, but uninterested in living next to, working with, or sharing space with Black people, the museum thus turned to the guards as their only Black constituency, and quite possibly one of the largest concentrations of Black workers within the highly segregated mid-Wilshire neighborhood. Tishman was ultimately demanding the museum broker a relationship with Los Angeles' Black communities to prove that his collection would serve those communities. This resulted in a cultural event in which the museum was temporarily turned into a somewhat open container, wherein the policing of Euro-aesthetic customs and frameworks for knowing were loosened, for a mostly unimpeded night of Black cultural practices organized by Black people for a predominantly Black audience.[311] Although never again replicated, the experiment spoke to an alternative purpose the museum model could serve, one in which different cultural groups used the museum like a community-owned space where they could perform a range of cultural practices to make and celebrate community in ways that they determined by themselves and for themselves.

Eighteen museum guards organized A Black Culture Festival on the night of December 28, 1968. Utilizing the entirety of the museum campus, from staff offices to the outdoor plaza, the event attracted 4,000 visitors who attended during the hours of 7:30 PM to 1:30 AM, and

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[310] Sharon E. Fay, "Black Culture Festival: Some Firsts At the Museum of Art," *Los Angeles Times*, December 31, 1968.

[311] Whether the guards approached the museum to hold an event or vice versa is not clear. In his oral history, Cecil Fergerson remembers LA County Museum of Art public relations director Charles M. Weisenberg as the liaison between the guards and museum administrators. Weisenberg was not yet working at the museum. He began his position in 1970. Charles M. Weisenberg, email message to the author, August 2, 2016.

converted the museum into multiple stages for dialogues, performances and guard-led educational experiences.[312] In no uncertain terms, the organizers humanized the museum with a Black sociability that differed from the museum's traditional formats. This humanizing intention was best evidenced by the placement of Black beauty queens at the entrance to every pavilion and in the Great Hall. Beauty and Homecoming Queens from California State University Los Angeles, UC Los Angeles, the University of Southern California, Miss Watts Community Beautiful, and the Watts Festival Queen greeted and spoke with visitors. The Black queens symbolically represented the range of Black neighborhoods from which many of the night's visitors would have been visiting from, but on any other night most likely would not make the drive to attend a museum event in which they might normally be the only non-white people. An emphatic manifestation of the "Black is Beautiful" motto that epitomized the late 1960s, the reliance on Black beauty queens was an effort to make a Black space where Black fashion, natural hairstyles and everyday conversation and ways of being could also take place.

Carolyn Webb, the UCLA Homecoming Queen of 1968, remembers enacting her own public pedagogy in her role as a greeter. Wearing Afro-inspired fashion "especially designed and fabricated for this event,"[313] Webb recalled relying on her dress as a conversation starter for initiating a discussion of African and African American history with visitors. In offering female bodies as an enticement or gesture of welcome, the festival was clearly a heterosexual male vision of its time and place: despite its radicality, the festival was not free of sexism.

[312] "A Black Culture Festival Program," Special Collections, Balch Archive and Research Library, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.

[313] Carolyn Webb, email and phone conversation with the author, October 16, 2016. Webb remembers Westwood business owners pulling in-kind support of her queenship, which usually entailed free dresses, a car, and other perks. She recalls having to fundraise on her own.

Webb made sure, however, that her role was not just as a smiling mannequin and she used her body and fashion statement to initiate conversations that ventured into some of the more difficult topics related to her experience with discrimination as the first Black beauty queen at UCLA.[314]

The main stage for the night was in the Great Hall, a multi-storied atrium that opened up into the permanent collection galleries of the Ahmanson Building. Television producer and actor of *Hogan's Heroes* fame Ivan Dixon acted as a master of ceremonies, introducing musical, comedy, and dance acts, as well as celebrating the guards who organized the event. Museum guards Stanley Swinger and Wiley Williams gave tours of the Tishman exhibition in the Special Exhibitions building and unnamed guards conducted hourly, back-of-the-house tours of the staff offices in the lower levels of the Bing Building where a documentary film on African masks screened every hour. "Afro-inspired" fashion shows were held on the third-floor patio of the Special Exhibitions building and "African-inspired" musical and dance performances were held on the Norton Simon Plaza, as well as on every floor of the Ahmanson building.[315] In total, there were 18 live performances by 11 different groups across the museum campus.[316]

Organized by the museum's predominantly Black guards, the multimedia festival momentarily manifested a Black working-class vision of a cultural space within the museum's architecture. Festival organizers did not own the objects in the African art exhibition around which they enacted the festival, but they did symbolically claim them. Guards contested the decontextualization of African objects by claiming the authority to speak knowledgably about

[314] Ibid.
[315] Ibid.
[316] Ibid.

these works, as well as claiming the authority to activate their African cultural heritage via performances that they chose. As greeters, tour guides and authors and designers of promotional materials, the festival's creators announced their intention to create bonds of affectively charged solidarity among all visitors, as well as facilitating a connection between Black visitors and their cultural patrimony through musical performances, conversations, dances and fashions, instead of the more normalized practices in which an imposed distance and decontextualization created an experience in line with European aesthetic standards.

At the bottom of the museum staff hierarchy, guards have historically been ignored, even though they perform one of the museum's most critical aesthetic functions: they police the aesthetic boundary that divides art from our everyday worlds. More than most curators, museum guards spend nearly all of their work hours with artworks, listen to numerous arts education lectures, as well as overhear privileged curatorial conversations. Over the course of many years working in these spaces, guards actually receive an informal education on art, and as the festival shows, an insight into the potentialities of these spaces.

One of the public art museum's greatest critics, the contemporary African American artist Fred Wilson, amplified the museum guards' presence and place in his installation *Guarded View* (1991). Five headless brown mannequins don the uniforms worn by museum guards in each of the major museums in New York City during the 1980s and 1990s. Putting their actions and roles on display disrupted the museum space's racialized social hierarchy in which the position of guard was anonymous and invisible as faceless extensions and human framers of the museum's structuring of art spaces. Invited to the Whitney Museum of American Art as part of a public program accompanying an exhibition that included his installation, Wilson dressed up as a museum guard for a tour he planned to give and found that museum staff that

he knew personally did not recognize him while he was in uniform. Some museum visitors complained and notified museum staff at the front desk that a guard had gone "crazy" and was initiating conversations with visitors and leading a tour of the exhibition, an obvious disruption of the hidden social scripts and racial roles that frame public art museum experiences.[317]

For some visitors, Wilson's performance as a Black guard stepping out of his role and place at the bottom of the hierarchy to perform eloquent verbal commentary on artwork was disruptive and worth reporting. But Wilson's critique also pointed to the potential guards have to be instructors in a space often presented as free and open, although it is structured by a particular art historical visual regime that requires an introduction to a certain way of seeing. Wilson's mannequins have traditionally been interpreted as posed in various states of guarding and cautioning, but placing them in conversation with the Black Culture Festival makes the mannequin's gestures readable as lecturing and educating, which is a very familiar reality to any art museum visitor who has ever been secreted bits of unsanctioned interpretation or art historical facts from a museum guard.

Expanding the Range of Performances in Exhibition Practices

A Black Culture Festival could have confined its activities to the auditorium during more traditional opening hours as the original program of events which accompanied the Tishman exhibition did. Granted broad cultural authority, the festival organizers did not have complete control of the space or of the objects. Even though the festival was still within the museum's architectural framework, the guards organized an event that temporarily changed the museum's function, if only for a few hours in the middle of the night. Based on their own cultural

[317] "Audio Guide Stop for Fred Wilson, Guarded View, 1991," Whitney Museum of American Art website, http://whitney.org/WatchAndListen?play_id=496. See Thelma Golden's description of the performance in Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer Life of Color* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 154.

preferences and the knowledge they accumulated at the museum, guards proposed new frameworks for viewing and making meaning with African objects; practices which challenged the epistemic dominance of colonial definitions and boundaries established in exhibition and curatorial customs.

As art historian of African art, Polly Nooter Roberts emphasizes in her analysis of landmark exhibitions of African art in the 2000s, curators of African art began to experiment with exhibition practices to consider "video, field photography, first voices in labels, audio guides, and the creation of environments to enhance the experience of objects that were almost always intended to be performed and corporeal."[318] Curators of the 2000s wrestled with placing African art objects within European categories and the epistemic framework of the fine art gallery space, leading Nooter Roberts to recall an outstanding tension embedded within the exhibition format: "How do we convey the energy and dynamism of the arts in motion, as Robert Farris Thompson asked so long ago (1974)?"[319]

The guards offered an implicit initial answer to the queries guiding both Farris Thompson and Nooter Roberts. A Black Culture Festival disrupted the re-contextualization of African art objects within a European epistemic order, challenging their confinement as static aesthetic objects that fit within colonial frameworks for seeing. The guards proposed that the static exhibition space designed for disembodied aesthetic contemplation in all actuality required their participation as African-descended peoples. African expressive objects exceeded the exhibition format's limited sensorium in that these objects required an embodiment so as to be activated and understood by performers and audiences.

[318] Mary (Polly) Nooter Roberts, "Tradition is Always Now: African Arts and the Curatorial Turn," *African Arts* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 1, 4–7, 5.
[319] Ibid.

By claiming the roles of educators, curators and performers, the festival tapped into the exhibition model's potential for a wider range of rituals and performances, what Nooter Roberts defined as the fine art gallery as a "place of potentiality from a performative and experiential standpoint."[320] Wilson made a similar point in *Guarded View*, emphasizing the reality that the view constructed in exhibition spaces was policed, and that one way out and towards new futures was in the embodiment and performance of knowledge by bodies the racialized museum space had traditionally ignored. Both Wilson and the guards were reminding viewers that the museum space was a contested forum, and that Black epistemologies indeed had a right to experiment with the Black body's capacity to activate and understand art objects without the policed boundaries, customs and imposed distances of what Euro-American art history determined as proper aesthetic practices.

This epistemic proposition was further emphasized in the festival's photo-collage flyer designed by museum guard and festival co-organizer Stanley Swinger. At the bottom of the invitation, a Janus image of Sergeant William Knight, the originator of the festival, faces both left and right. He wears his LA County Museum uniform while his backward-facing counterpart wears an African mask. The guards and guests were prohibited by custom from wearing any of the masks in the exhibition or facilitating any sort of embodied re-activation of these artworks, but as plainly stated on the flyer, this was the theoretical dimension of their proposal and the purpose of their curatorial project: to re-connect a Black constituency with their own heritage, in their own way, which according to the traditions of the Afro-diaspora, required an embodiment and physical reacquainting with the objects.

[320] Ibid.

Through this provocative image the guards demonstrated that they not only understood the connection between African history and a living Black culture, but embodied it, and despite the museum's proposition of cultural authority, they also had knowledges and cultural practices they could bring to the galleries; not just to passively educate, but to bring about powerful changes of consciousness to Black visitors by way of an open space in which they felt they could freely be. The momentary event was a forceful assertion that Los Angeles's Black constituency had as much a right to a place in the museum as the sculpture of their ancestors. The outstanding question was whether the museum could treat such a Black constituency not as objects, but as humans with cultural practices and knowledge worth making space for. As the guards perceived it, to activate an exhibition of African objects would require not only a violation of traditional Euro-American separations of the senses and media boundaries, but also an expansion of the range of performances, scripts and social relations the museum had traditionally permitted as meaningful.

From the perspective of museum leadership, the festival succeeded because it was an innovative form of outreach, but for many attendees the festival was a revelation that refuted misconceptions that Black Americans were not interested in art or museum work. The temporary occupation and re-purposing of the entire museum campus to perform a range of Afro-diasporic cultural practices was a sophisticated presentation which contested the premise that audiences could only learn and experience these objects in one culturally-specific way. Guards challenged the museum's narrowly defined vision of who belonged, its traditional uses as a space for white elite distinction, and disproved the commonly held proposition that Black Americans did not have an artistic or corresponding epistemic framework in which to understand it. The festival was ultimately a vision of what the museum could possibly look

like on any given day of the week: an open space in which multiple constituencies could enact their own cultural practices on their own terms.

The Festival: A Coda

The festival lived on in a curious self-portrait by the young artist David Hammons in Samella Lewis and Ruth Waddy's *Black Artists on Art* (1969), the first compendium of contemporary Black art history. Sitting on the floor below a window in what might be assumed to be his studio, Hammons faces the camera with his thumb covering his mouth and his eyes closed or in an intense squint. Part of the poster for A Black Culture Festival is visible against the wall next to him. A prominent member of the Los Angeles art scene in 1968, Hammons might have attended the festival and decided the souvenir was important enough to include in his self-portrait. Or, it may have simply been part of the visual ephemera that lived in his studio. It might have even informed Hammons' legendary series of prints made by using his and other peoples' bodies as matrices to imprint shapes onto paper to create human forms. Works such as *Body Print with Burn Mask* (1969) and *Body Print* (1976) look explicitly like African masks. The theme of doubleness also appears throughout the series, pointing to a possible connection with the festival's own proposition about the Black body as the link between an ancestral Africa and a present day Black America.

The Black Arts Council As A Museum Without Walls

Inspired by how Black visitors, performers, and guards temporarily converted the museum into a Black cultural space, LA County Museum preparators Claude Booker and Cecil Fergerson established the Black Arts Council (1969-1974), a Black arts advocacy and peripatetic curatorial office. Mimicking the name of official museum councils, which were often made up of wealthy collectors, the Black Arts Council consisted of artists, cultural workers, gallerists,

museum guards, museum preparators, clergy and members of other Black arts advocacy groups.[321] Membership was said to range into the thousands, but it was Booker and Fergerson who ran the daily operations and implemented its programming.

Scholars have focused on the Black Arts Council's activism and programming at the LA County Museum because, as its organizers explained, the council intended to keep up the pressure on museum leadership that the festival initiated.[322] In the wake of the festival's enormous success, the Black Arts Council took up its cultural political campaign and insisted that the museum was a county-owned space and that Black cultural workers had a right to use the space on their own terms. The festival's legacy signaled numerous possible futures, ultimately leaving unresolved the question of what a liberated Black art space would look like in practice, as well as what would be required to make the mainstream museum model a more democratic framework where different cultural practices, and the corresponding spaces they produced, could co-exist.

As art historian Bridget Cooks has thoroughly described in *Exhibiting Blackness*, her foundational text on Black art exhibitions in major American art museums, the Black Arts Council's museum-based activism was the direct result of the visionary work of the festival.[323] The impact, however, also changed how Booker and Fergerson saw themselves, the institution they worked for and their positions within it. In sum, it changed their consciousness. Having worked for decades as janitors and preparators, and privy to the informal learning opportunities those positions afforded, the festival inspired them to not only fight for a share of the museum, but also to believe in themselves as capable of curating their own projects. Informally trained,

[321] "Black Arts Council Lectures, 1969-1971," Special Collections, Balch Archive and Research Library, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
[322] Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness*, 91; Jones, *South of Pico*.
[323] Ibid.

they bucked the presumption that they needed museum credentials to facilitate cultural experiences. They used their museum skills to enact a Black curatorial department, what Fergerson referred to later in his career as "community curating."[324]

Taped into assemblage artist Noah Purifoy's scrapbook in the Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C. is an eight-page Black Arts Council membership brochure dating from circa 1971.[325] On the cover of the brochure is a reproduction of an anti-Vietnam print from Los Angeles artist Timothy Washington's *VIETNAM Graphics* series (1970), depicting a Black male body branded with the word "Vietnam" and clutching his heart. Behind the open-mouthed figure is a halo, hole or Afro that frames deep-socketed eyes set within a gaunt and pained expression. A highly political image, it spoke directly to the toll of the Vietnam war on Black Americans, while also announcing the council's engagement with contemporary politics. Where museum brochures from this period might display a European portrait or Persian rug, as the covers of the LA County Museum of Art's Membership Calendars from this period do, the Black Arts Council was announcing that it did not share the belief in the museum's putative neutrality. Within the brochure, there was also a complete breakdown of the organization's revenue and expenses. This radical transparency was another deviation from standard museum practice which often purported transparency, but whose internal machinations were mostly unknown to the general public.

According to the brochure, which is one of the only documents in institutional archives offering a detailed historical overview of the organization's work, from July 1969 to December

[324] Edward J. Boyer, "Black Artists in Watts Find an Icon in Former Curator," *Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 1991. For more on Fergerson's extensive curatorial history, see Libby Clark, "His Efforts Broadened the Arts Field for Minorities in L.A.; Cecil Fergerson, 'Beloved' Community Curator - Truly A Renaissance Man Living Legend," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 8, 2001.

[325] "Black Arts Council Membership Pamphlet" in Join for the Arts Scrapbook, Noah Purifoy Papers, 1935-1998, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

1970, the Council organized two tours at the LA County Museum of Art; seven Black artists lectures with four accompanying 16mm film screenings; a Christmas sale of artworks; one artist-led children's program; three art history lectures; three student field trips to the La Jolla Art Museum in La Jolla, CA; one arts festival; and eight art exhibitions. Not all of the programs list attendance, but of the numbers listed in the brochure, the Black Arts Council's events reached 11,343 people, although the number is probably significantly higher as only a third of the events have attendance figures.[326]

Funded by revenue generated from donations, membership dues, art and book sales, fees for commissioned exhibitions, as well as Booker and Fergerson's own monetary donations and volunteered time, the Black Arts Council duplicated a full museum program in the course of 17 months. Despite keeping their full-time jobs, the museum preparators coordinated all of their organization's fundraising, membership, budget-keeping, curating, installation, and arts education programming.[327] In a moment when the LA County Museum was refusing to support Lewis's project to bring Black students into the museum's educational programs, the council's community curating brought a Black art museum to Black neighborhoods like Compton, Exposition Park, Vermont Square, Watts and Willowbrook.[328]

Combatting the absence of Black representation at the LA County Museum and the museum's lack of interest in the cultural lives of Black Angelenos, the council bused some 440 school children to the La Jolla Art Museum to visit *Dimensions of Black,* an overlooked milestone retrospective of Afrodiasporic art history curated by art historian and University of California San Diego professor Jehanne Teilhet.[329] The retrospective originated out of

[326] Ibid.
[327] Ibid; Mason, interview with Fergerson, *African American Artists,* 202.
[328] Black Arts Council Membership Pamphlet.
[329] Jehanne Teilhet, ed., *Dimensions of Black* (La Jolla, CA: Robert Stearns and Peter Waasdorp), 1970.

Teilhet's undergraduate art history class and Lewis contributed to it as a research consultant. The exhibition, and remarkable catalogue, offered an overview of Black creative production in the United States that brought together African and African American artworks, preceding the LA County Museum's own U.S. American-centered *Two Centuries of Black American Art* by six years.[330] With no comparable exhibition in Los Angeles at the time, the council bused hundreds of students outside of the county as a corrective to the limited programming offered by the county's museum.

The range of exhibitions the Black Arts Councils curated was impressive. From a "tactile sculpture exhibit" for blind children to an exhibit of Black contemporary artists that toured 30 Security Pacific National Bank lobbies throughout California, their community curating aimed at geographic diversity and exhibitions for a range of abilities.[331] At Julie's Restaurant, a functioning restaurant located near the University of Southern California in South Los Angeles, the Black Arts Council curated an exhibition of works from members' collections that included, according to the promotional pamphlet, "eleven drawings and oils by the great Henry O. Tanner (1859-1937)."[332] Tanner, who trained under Thomas Eakins at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, and relocated to Paris in the nineteenth century, was one of the best known African American painters in American art history. The LA County Museum held two of the master's works, but they were reportedly not ever on view, a point of contention noted by both Lewis and Fergerson. As Fergerson recalled from his time as an installer: "I had worked at the museum all those years, and I had no idea [Henry O.] Tanner was a black man. I had handled his art a thousand times from storage to storage to storage to storage. There was

[330] Ibid.
[331] "Black Arts Council Membership Pamphlet."
[332] Ibid.

no exhibit."[333] The quote speaks to the museum as a site where race was everywhere taught, but nowhere explicitly referenced. It also documented the art historical knowledge Fergerson garnered during his time as a preparator, which he would later develop outside of the museum.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the metaphor "museum without walls" appeared across both art historical and community art discourses, though it was used differently by each group. The "museum without walls" concept entered the American art discourse with the 1957 English translation of French art historian Andre Malraux's *Le Musée Imaginaire*, the first volume of his *Psychologie de l'art* (1947-1950) trilogy.[334] As art historian Rosalind Krauss explains, the translation was much too literal for a "master conceit" that characterized the "purely conceptual space of the human faculties: imagination, cognition, judgement."[335] Malraux defined the imaginary museum as a paper museum, where he could expand the museum paradigm's intention to accumulate the world's cultural objects. Malraux, himself a colonial plunderer, had created a corresponding colonial fantasy in which a book would contain the world's creative production under the idea of a universal language of art.[336] Despite its deep roots in the European colonial imaginary, in the hands of Black cultural workers in Los Angeles, the museum without walls became a concrete and decolonial practice.

Sculptor and founder of the Compton Communicative Arts Academy, John Outterbridge, used the museum without walls conceit to characterize the work of community-based cultural workers of the early 1970s in Los Angeles: "In other words, to consider the outer environment as the museum without walls. I mean, if we can't go inside of those institutions, then we'll do

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[333] Fergerson, *African American Artists*, 249–50.

[334] Walter Grasskamp, *The Book on the Floor Andre Malraux and the Imaginary Museum* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2016), 6.

[335] Rosalind Krauss, "Postmodernism's Museum without Walls," in *Thinking About Exhibitions,* eds. Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg, and Sandy Nairne (New York: Routledge, 1996), 241.

[336] See Grasskamp's description of Malraux's arrest for attempting to steal tons of temple sculptures in French colonial Indochina. Grasskamp*, Book on the Floor.*

what we have to do in the outer environment."[337] For the Black Arts Council, that meant a community curating of contemporary and historical art exhibitions and a robust arts educational program as Fergerson described: "anywhere we could: shopping malls, schools, alleys, fields, tennis courts, anyplace that we could get a space."[338] Taking the frameworks and practices that made up the museum, the council manifested a museum without walls across multiple locations both out of necessity and for the democratic mandate inherent to their curating which sought to meet a Black constituency where they lived and worked.

In fact, Booker and Fergerson engineered movable walls they referred to as a "modules," which they transported from location to location to present the exhibitions they curated.[339] Both Booker and Fergerson worked at the LA County Museum for decades, with Fergerson slowly moving up the ranks from janitor to a curatorial assistantship in 1972, a position he was only able to assume because of a successful lawsuit against the museum.[340] He proudly described in his oral history how he learned the "slick kind of presentation," from his years of work as a preparator, and used those skills "[d]ifferently but using that same expertise in the presentation."[341] As practical as movable walls were for a project that wanted to democratize curatorial practice, they were also an infrastructural lifeline to the repeated rejections the council faced when they were invited by Black student organizations to present Black arts exhibitions on campus to only find immovable opposition from campus museums and art galleries.[342]

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[337] Richard Candida Smith, *African-American Artists of Los Angeles: John W. Outterbridge* (Los Angeles: Department of Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles, 1993), 420.

[338] Fergerson, *African American Artists*, 346.

[339] Ibid., 347. Lewis named one of her galleries Gallery Tanner. The Black Arts Council created a Tanner award for excellence in service to Black artists.

[340] Jones, *South of Pico*.

[341] Fergerson, *African American Artists*, 340.

[342] Ibid., 164.

The Biddy Mason Cultural Center and the First AME Church

Unable to hold their meetings or events at the LA County Museum, the Black Arts Council found a venue for their first meetings in the Congregational Church of Christian Fellowship. The church's minister, Reverend James Hargett, was a civil rights activist and offered early support to the organization.[343] This partnership did not last very long, but Hargett did assemble a committee to assist with early Black Arts Council programming, and the church was the venue for the council's first lecture by watercolorist, draughtsman and curator, William Pajaud.

The Black church offered a shelter to the Black Arts Council in its first year, but it would also offer the organization a historic model of Black space-making. In his explorations into the "liberative space-making" tradition inherent to the Black American history, architectural historian Mario Gooden questions the architecture of the best-known Black art and culture museums' "superficial 'africanisms' and token symbols of a mythological African heritage," as suspect and evasive of their potential to support Black liberation through what he determines as a needed translation of "the Black American experience into spatial forms, and to create alternative spaces for creative expression and affirmation of daily life in American society."[344] Doubtful of the work that the architecture of Black cultural institutions do when they incorporate symbols like kente cloth or ziggurats into their facades, Gooden questions whether a Black American architecture can create the type of "subversive space-making" that has often been required to not only make a Black space in a white supremacist United States, but equally to make an epistemic space to think and sense the world differently.

[343] Black Arts Council Pamphlet.
[344] Gooden, *Dark Space*, 102.

For many spatial theorists, the Black church is the quintessential example of such a space-making. The survival of Black churches in the United States required negotiating the everyday realities of white supremacist violence and the constant threat of destruction to any type of Black building. Particularly in its earliest years, Black Churches moved between visibility and underground practices, sometimes able to take the form of a fixed location and other times existing as temporary congregations in brush arbors created in fields and forests. An adaptive space designed for spiritual survival in a world molded by racist violence, it functioned as a safe haven throughout American history for Black Americans, as well as served a range of educational and cultural functions.[345]

A site for Black liberation from its very beginnings, the Black church adapted a Christian theology used to justify white supremacy and Black dehumanization into a site for generating Black self-worth and spiritual deliverance. It is within this tradition of "liberative space-making," to return to Gooden's phrasing, that the Black Art Council's work takes on its full shape as a liberatory and subversive cultural work, that sought to generate another cultural space through a form of community-based curating that was deeply connected to a radical democratic vision. Much as Gooden described of the church's creation of a Black liberation theology, the Black Arts Council would begin developing, for a Black audience, "'another' technology that could speak to ontological questions related [to] their experience, subjectivity and identity."[346]

John Outterbridge, a Black Arts Council member, characterized the organization's work as part of the "underground concerned about Afro-centric art and culture."[347] It was not just

[345] Gooden, *Dark Space*; George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).
[346] Gooden, 102.
[347] Outterbridge, quoted in Boyer, "Black Artists in Watts."

Outterbridge who described cultural work in Los Angeles with Black spatial metaphors. Fergerson repeatedly described the LA County Museum as a "plantation" in his oral history.[348] These perspectives offer a counter-hegemonic perspective to the museum's mapping of Los Angeles' cultural landscape. Envisioning their work as underground and away from the "master's house" was to reset the landscape from fixed to contested. It also helps reframe their work as less an attempt to duplicate the museum model, as much as it was a form of cultural space-making that was part of a long tradition of clandestine cultural and spiritual meetings.

In the course of its community curating, the council developed an alternative way of seeing outside of the mappings and fictions constructed by the museum. Leaving the museum meant learning to see the city as full of potential, and to redefine cultural work as not just curating and exhibiting objects to attract audiences, but a form of cultural work that was responsive to the racialized urban realities of their audiences. The democratic curatorial ethics that the council practiced was invested in meeting their audience where they were, both geographically and ontologically. One did not have to travel far distances, learn to see correctly or assume one had to perform culture in a certain way. Shedding the museum worldview built in to the art gallery model at a rapid clip, the council turned toward the memorialization and activation of certain Black places and historic events within the city.

Little has been preserved in institutional archives that detail the Black Arts Council civic projects, but according to Stan Sanders, a lawyer and member, the council raised funds for an intended memorial by John Riddle to commemorate the Watts Rebellion.[349] With no official civic memorial to the mostly Black lives lost during the uprising, the Black Arts Council

[348] Fergerson, *African American Artists,* 341. See also Edward J. Boyer, "Black Artists in Watts."

[349] Stan Sanders, email message to author, February 9, 2016; Stan Sanders, phone conversation with the author, February 10, 2016.

decided to stake a place within the civic imaginary and the city's main historical narratives. As Fergerson explained about the disastrous distortions a segregated city could have on the civic imagination: "Black Los Angeles is not just South Central, but equally at the core of the city's history and historical center."[350]

Intending to claim that place at the center of the city's history, Fergerson co-founded the non-profit Federation of Black History and Arts (the Federation) in 1970 with his mentor, Nola Ewing. Ewing was responsible for leading the fight to save the Dunbar Hotel, the only hotel that would accommodate Black guests in segregated Los Angeles at the turn of the twentieth century, as well as Los Angeles' oldest Black church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME Church) on 8th and Towne Street founded by city matriarch Biddy Mason. The Federation consisted of well-known Black arts and culture advocates such as Alfred Cannon, Ruth Waddy, and Harriette Pajaud.[351] Concerned with preserving Black historic sites, the Black Arts Council was most likely in charge of thinking through the arts dimension of the Federation's work.

In January 1971, the Federation successfully petitioned for Cultural Heritage Landmark status for the AME Church.[352] Registered as Historic Monument No. 71, the AME congregation would move to its current location on Harvard Boulevard and the Federation proposed turning the old church into the Biddy Mason Cultural Center, or as it was described on a promotional pamphlet: "the first Black historic-Cultural Monument West of the Mississippi."[353] Mason, a midwife and one of early Los Angeles' most significant land holders,

[350] Fergerson, *African American Artists*.
[351] Ibid., 219, 315.
[352] V W M [sic], "Group Honors B. Mason," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 3, 1971.
[353] "Biddy Mason Center Brochure, Federation of Black History and Arts, Inc., c. 1972," Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company Records, Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California Los Angeles, https://calisphere.org/item/16d8ab22-8fc4-4a26-9708-b9dff33346d6/.

arrived as a slave and won her freedom in a Los Angeles courtroom.[354] Fergerson was highly invested in continuing Mason's liberatory project by reclaiming the church and reviving her legacy.

The Federation's vision for the center was grand. Right in the heart of downtown, the city's most protected (and policed) center of commercial and cultural activity, the Federation planned on creating a library, archive, art galleries, performing arts space, kitchen and a training program for Black personnel. The campaign specified that the "existing stage" would be used for performing arts, and that a culinary arts department would "explore contributions of Black people to the world's larder."[355] The pamphlet summarized the project as a "living museum – a museum of *people* being themselves and becoming what they can be, what they must be if we are to commemorate the spirit of Biddy Mason."[356]

Returning to this specific church was a reclamation of a historic site but it was also to reclaim a form of knowledge. A form of Black space-making that put knowledge, aesthetics, and theology in the service of people, as well as a model for a protean space which catered to both body and mind. Fergerson described the wide range of functions the historic AME Church served: "a cultural spot, the cultural building to serve the needs of the African Americans in Los Angeles in the early twentieth century. They had concerts, plays, and the whole nine yards at the African Methodist church. We had a meeting there, and one of our first priorities was to try to save the Methodist church from being destroyed on the edge of town at the time, which was the original site of the African Methodist church."[357]

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[354] For more on Mason, see Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997).

[355] Ibid.

[356] Ibid.

[357] Mason, *African American Artists*, 321.

Pasted in Noah Purifoy's scrapbook is a Polaroid photograph of a model made of the AME Church by Outterbridge in 1972. The caption describes the life-size model of the original AME Church as "for local TV show Black Omnibus, commissioned by Claude Booker of the Black Arts Council."[358] The large model is a very precise replica of the church surrounded by what appears to be an outdoor historical exhibition presenting documents from Mason's life and church history. Along the perimeter are enlarged photos of Mason, deeds most likely related to her extensive real estate holdings or her emancipation documents, a photo of the church's congregation, and a photo of an unknown male figure.

The AME Church burned down in 1972 and it is unclear if the Outterbridge model was made before or after the church's tragic destruction. It is easy to imagine that the model probably functioned as a maquette to generate excitement and funds for its conversion into the Biddy Mason Cultural Center. The maquette and the public exhibition detailed the aspirations, and the sophistication, of what the Black Arts Council's community curating could have been. Highly experimental, invested in an expanded range of cultural services aimed at serving minds and bodies, it was a radical form of curatorial practice in a city that had a highly contentious relationship with modern art and public art practices. Moving beyond the museum and deploying a museum without walls showed the council that the museum was itself a producer of a highly specialized aesthetic space, which they replicated. Seeing that the model was insufficient, they expanded their curatorial practice as to preserve historic places and even revive those histories in the interest of generating a decolonial cultural work to radically support a fuller range of human needs.

[358] "Join for the Arts Scrapbook," Noah Purifoy Papers, 1935-1998, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

Samella Lewis's Curatorial Projects

After being pushed out of the LA County Museum, Samella Lewis accepted a position as professor of non-western art at Scripps College in Claremont, CA in 1971. Scripps became her institutional base as she developed what Kellie Jones characterized as "Samella Lewis Ink," a mobile one-woman center of art historical and cultural production.[359] From 1971 to her retirement as a tenured professor in 1984, Lewis established two art galleries, a publishing house, the Museum of African American Art (MAAA), the *International Review of African American Art*, as well as curating numerous exhibitions across the city. Much of Lewis's career has been celebrated for its numerous groundbreaking "firsts," such as her being the first Black woman to receive a PhD in Art History, but there has been less focused attention to the anti-racist work and her repeated inclusion of performances in her curatorial practice.

With no infrastructural support beyond Scripps as her underwriter for grants, Lewis still developed an enormously productive curatorial practice that began with the two galleries she established, Gallery Tanner (named after Henry O. Tanner) and The Gallery, which ran for about five years. To avoid complications between her for-profit and non-profit projects, she left the galleries behind to establish her own museum. Founded in 1976, the Museum of African American Art worked as a mobile curatorial department for eight years before it moved into its permanent and current location on the third floor of the May Company (now Macy's) in the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza.[360] The year 1976 is worth noting as it was the same year as the LA County Museum's *Two Centuries* opened. *Two Centuries* was the first Black

[359] Jones, *South of Pico*, 172.

[360] See Jones for a thorough overview of Lewis's scholarship. See also Olin, "Collecting and the Cultural Politics."

American art retrospective at a major American art museum, but Lewis countered it with the creation of the first museum devoted exclusively to African American art on the West coast.

Beginning as a museum without walls, the MAAA, which early on was mostly Lewis, curated exhibitions in bank lobbies, university galleries and senior citizens centers. Even when Lewis had established the MAAA as a permanent place in the mall, she continued to credit her itinerant curatorial projects as part of the museum's mission. In keeping with the larger trend among Black curatorial work in the city, Lewis's curating repeatedly worked to democratize and humanize the fine art gallery model. Within her archives at Emory University in Atlanta, GA, and Hampton University Museum in Hampton, VA, there is little documentation or installation photographs for these early exhibitions. What has survived is mostly known through corresponding publicity materials and recollections in oral histories wherein the inclusion of performances and a broader range of expressive objects were key characteristics of her most ambitious projects.

One such project was a week-long exhibition for Black History Week, *The Development of the Derogatory Images of Black People in America From Slavery to the Present* (1975) at The Gallery on Pico Boulevard. An exhibit of the memorabilia collection of collectors Mary Kimbrough and Jackie Ryan, according to its exhibition announcement, it consisted of "early American pictures, ceramic pieces and books, depicting stereotypes of Black people."[361] The exhibition transgressed Euro-American art history's standard definitions of what constituted art objects and instead turned the space into an anti-racist site. Created by a Black woman curator speaking to a Black audience, the show presented the painful everydayness of dehumanizing Black visual culture in the United States. Furthermore, it implicated white

[361] "The Gallery Exhibition Flyer," Samella S. Lewis papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

audiences who might have grown up with or still had such objects in their own homes. The nearby Pasadena swap meet, which Betye Saar often mined for materials for her assemblages, was a depository of racist Americana which had up until fairly recently made up the domestic interiors of local Angelenos.

A counter-exhibition composed of the objects that made up the everyday visual culture for many white Americans, the exhibition addressed a worldview that took no special notice of a stereotypical Sambo figure holding a fruit bowl. Intending to reassert some control over these objects, Lewis redeployed the exhibition format's practice of decontextualization to break these objects out of their everydayness and open them up to renewed scrutiny. Through the exhibition Lewis challenged a racialized way of seeing that went mostly unacknowledged within mainstream exhibition practices. Now under her authority, Lewis was transforming traditional definitions of cultural work into an activist intervention that was exploring the everyday ways in which race permeated American life.

Fergerson spoke of how this genre of exhibition was unique to Black art spaces. As he explained: "There are no other institutions that are going to do the stereotype art that came out of the early 1900s, when America built a whole industry with stereotyped art—the Aunt Jemima's syrup, the Uncle Ben's rice, the Gold Dust soap, the sheet music that came out of that era."[362] It was a telling observation, that spoke to the self-imposed limited range of curatorial projects that mainstream museums supported, as well as the numerous benefits such politically-engaged curating served in unpacking how particular ways of seeing and perceiving are based in the normalization of anti-Blackness, as well as challenging the presumed racial innocence of vision. Drawing from an alternative archive, the exhibition generated discomfort, pain and

[362] Mason, *African American Artists*, 365.

implicated the makers and purchasers of such objects. The curating was more accurately described as an unflinching truth telling that was impossible in mainstream art spaces which purported to be both politically and racially neutral.

Racist memorabilia was a concern shared by both Lewis and Saar. While not often discussed as colleagues, they both believed in the importance of facing up to such objects so as to defuse their harmful intentions. Where Saar's now well-known assemblage, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972), reclaimed the stereotypical mammy as a revolutionary figure, Lewis was also participating in a comparable project, liberating a specialized aesthetic seeing from its attachment to museum space, which was itself a place where a highly racialized way of seeing was constructed.

The relationship between Lewis and Saar is worth further investigation considering that they were close colleagues. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Lewis was Alison Saar's teacher and exhibited Betye Saar's work on multiple occasions. Saar and Lewis worked together on *Black Mirror*, an exhibition at the Womanspace Gallery in 1973.[363] The exhibition was the product of a brief partnership between Lewis, Saar and Womanspace, a cooperative gallery devoted to supporting and exhibiting women artists. It was one of Lewis and Saar's only projects with the gallery before the artists departed due to a lack of interest and support from their white feminist colleagues. The exhibition stood out, however, for the range of performances that were brought in to accompany the group show of Black women artists. As Jones describes of the project: "Not only were there artists on hand to discuss their work at points during the run of the show, but numerous events offered a wide array of perspectives on African American cultures, from dance and theater to film and poetry."[364]

[363] See Jones for further details on the *Black Mirror* exhibition. Jones, *South of Pico.*
[364] Ibid. 120.

Similar to the Black Culture Festival, the artist-curators were relying on performances to change the social dynamics and space of the exhibition. Considering Lewis and Saar's investment in African and Afrodiasporic rituals, the exhibition was part of their own experimentations with the range of customs and rituals that traditionally define how visitors behave, think and see within fine art exhibition spaces. Looking to activate a range of senses that were traditionally ignored, as well as to emphasize the site as a space of creation, the exhibition served soul food dishes in the gallery, offered hair braiding sessions and the creation of jewelry.[365] As part of a liberatory project, they were beginning the work of decolonizing the customs of the fine art gallery space so as to generate the rituals necessary for communal frameworks of meaning-making.

This point was further emphasized in Saar's *Spirit Catcher* (1977), a free-standing, rattan wood, assemblage work, that as scholars have noted, recalled the spires of Simon Rodia's *Watts Towers*. The assemblage artwork was an amalgam of spiritual objects and symbols collected in Saar's travels, particularly those gathered from her 1976 trip to Dakar to attend the first World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, a trip which Lewis coordinated. A seminal assemblage work within Saar's practice, its first iteration was dedicated to Lewis.[366] For Saar, the *Spirit Catcher* was an altar for an undefined ritual, as she explained: "I may have a Crescent and Star mixed with a cross or a Jewish star. The basis in the pieces is that man has a need for some kind of ritual."[367] Saar explained further in Suzanne Bauman's film, *Spirit Catcher: the Art of Betye Saar,* that the sculpture was to be used to "gain power over" the

[365] Ibid.

[366] Karen Ann Mason, *African American Artists of Los Angeles Betye Saar* (Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Oral History Research, 1996), 121.

[367] Jessica Dallow, "Reclaiming Histories: Betye and Alison Saar, Feminism and the Representation of Black Womanhood," *Feminist Studies* 30, no.1 (Spring, 2004): 74–113, 86.

spirits caught within its net.[368] There was an unfulfilled ritual dimension that the work pointed towards as Saar explained: "I don't have time to get into the ritual part of it, of making it work."[369]

Much like her contemporaries Senga Nengudi and Houston Conwill, Saar's practice gestured toward the revival and adaptation of Afrodiasporic rituals, but unlike her colleagues, she did not offer the ritual. The directive of "making it work" was intentionally open-ended, as the *Spirit Catcher* contained numerous religious symbols and was imbued with objects from a number of countries. With no directions, or accompanying performances like those enacted by Nengudi and Conwill, it left the question of what sorts of rituals, new, existing or both, were required to activate the work. And most importantly, it left open the question as to whether the fine art gallery space, with its epistemic and material restrictions, could be the sort of space in which other rituals could be enacted?

In a photograph taken at Lewis's retirement celebration at Scripps in 1984, she poses proudly with *Spirit Catcher* in the background. In keeping with Saar's expansion from assemblage objects to installations, *Spirit Catcher* claimed one of the walls with what appears to be both angular and curvilinear shapes possibly made from wood. The installation created an altar, to use Saar's language, where a range of singers, poets, and dancers performed in celebration of Lewis' retirement. These were all spirits, so to speak, that Lewis had nurtured throughout her own career.

Cataloguing her steadfast commitment to serving Black communities, feminist scholar, curator and Lewis biographer, Ferris Olin saw in her a "a new prototype of a cultural

[368] Suzanne Bauman, dir., *Spirit Catcher: The Art of Betye Saar* (WNET, New York Public Media 1977).
[369] Ibid.

worker."[370] Relying on Saar's own combining of Lewis and the *Spirit Catcher*, what would it mean to reconceive of Lewis' curatorial work and exhibition-making as a practice of catching spirits? If classifying her work as "curatorial" or "exhibition-making," ultimately fixes her cultural work within the categories of the European tradition, did the model of a spirit catcher, which resonated with Afrodiasporic traditions, but equally spoke to a wider range of spiritual practices, make for a better frame of analysis in considering Lewis's work? For example, could such a change in a curatorial paradigm more readily facilitate practices like Lewis's derogatory images exhibition which sought to capture, control and eventually cast out the hateful intentions of racist memorabilia? What could it mean to envision cultural work, as *Spirit Catcher* does, as a form of space-making that requires an intertwining of culturally specific symbols and materials so as to create an open and free space that was also highly structured and capable of facilitating all rituals? Brought together, Lewis and Saar generate numerous questions around what a truly decolonized aesthetic space might look like, one that was no longer based in keeping things in or out, but in a mobile altar making framework for catching spirits.

With more research needed to fully detail the range of Lewis's decolonial project it was in her teaching and curating that she explored the question of rituals. Her influence as an instructor in this sense is not very well researched, though it is fair to conjecture that exploring the connection between Afrodiasporic rituals as a site of experimentation was a core component of her teaching. It is a proposition supported not only by her life-long support of artists like Saar and Conwill, and visible in her own curating, but readable in the legacy of her students like the aforementioned art historian, Polly Nooter Roberts, and the artist William

[370] Olin, "Collecting and the Cultural Politics," 217.

Walker who co-organized the mural-performance, *The Wall of Respect* (1967) one of the first collaboratively created murals in the United States whose creation was accompanied by a full program of Black poetry readings and musical performances.

The Museum of African American Art

In a 1984 photograph captured by the *Los Angeles Times*, Lewis and MAAA Director, M.J. Hewitt stand in the middle of their soon to be completed museum, proudly smiling into the camera.[371] Cardboard boxes and tool boxes are scattered throughout and installers work on final touches for the museum's opening. In Hewitt's hand is a copy of an issue of the *International Review of African American Art*, the publication that the two artists, curators and educators founded and edited. They were standing within the physical and discursive Black art sphere that they built and they were echoed in Eldzier Cortor's *Room V* (1948) leaning against the pillar behind them. A masterwork of the Chicago-based artist, it depicted an elongated Black woman (modeled off Cortor's studies of Gullah Geechee women) contemplating her reflection in a room seemingly all her own. The photograph memorialized the two women and placed them within a long tradition of museum founders posing in and with their collections, a tradition which in the United States stretched back to *The Artist in his Museum* (1822), the well-known self-portrait of Charles Wilson Peale lifting a curtain and welcoming visitors and viewers into his museum.

[371] "Museum of African American Art in Los Angeles founder, Samella Lewis and director Mary Jane Hewitt amongst construction of museum, 1984," Los Angeles Times Photographic Archives, Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Library, UC Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, Calisphere, accessed June 1, 2021, https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/21198/zz0002shdx/.

The Plaza where the museum is located is in one of Los Angeles' oldest commercial mall spaces and one of the busiest commercial districts in South Los Angeles. In no uncertain terms, it democratized the traditional museum model by bringing it into the commercial spaces of everyday shoppers and visitors. To get to the museum, one enters what is now the main Macy's department store entrance and follows the standard commercial department store pathway up a central escalator to the third floor. Flanked by displays of clothes and shoes, one ascends the escalator at the heart of the building, where people move between commercial worlds. The museum announces itself with a simple sign tucked behind what is now a display of mattresses, but in prior decades, was a floor devoted to linens and electronics.[372] While there are signs announcing the museum, it is not necessarily part of the standard trajectory of the everyday shopper and many stumble upon it in the course of their shopping.[373] Building a museum into a mall harkened back to the intentions of the Biddy Mason Cultural Center, to create "a museum of *people* being themselves."[374]

Passing through the small hallway the museum space consists of a lobby with a front desk flanked by an entrance announcing the gift store on the right and a relatively spacious exhibition hall to the left. There are no grand architectural gestures or symbolic passageways that designate that one is crossing a liminal marker into another world. Despite its near indistinguishability from the Macy's store itself, there is a surprising shift and change of attitude on moving from the commercial sphere to the aesthetic.

Often overlooked, the museum's history is a testament to Lewis's vision, an unfinished project, as well as evidence of a state-level failure to support grassroots art spaces. Part of the

[372] Ibid., 206.
[373] Ibid.
[374] Biddy Mason Cultural Center Pamphlet.

reason for the museum not being better known was because of an unresolved disagreement with the California African American Museum (CAAM). Founded in 1977, CAAM quickly entered into conversations with the MAAA about a possible division of work. Their initial agreement that the MAAA would handle art and CAAM would work exclusively in history, fell apart before CAAM opened its building in 1981.

Archival documentation for the MAAA's programming consists mostly of promotional materials and pamphlets advertising exhibitions which ranged from topics such as the Harlem Renaissance, artist teachers, and *Spaces*, curated by Saar, an exhibition focusing on public artworks.[375] Working with a very modest budget, and on Lewis's donated time in her retirement, the organization struggled to find the funding to match its larger collecting and exhibition ambitions. The opening of CAAM's building in Exposition Park further eclipsed the little known and often forgotten museum project. The museum in the mall remains a planted seed that has still not found the proper conditions to fulfill the potential its founder envisioned. As Black community stakeholders living in the surrounding neighborhoods around the Crenshaw Baldwin Hills Plaza currently organize to fight gentrification, and possibly even purchase the mall, there has never been a more opportune time for County reinvestment into one of the city's oldest grassroots Black art spaces.

The Museum of African American Art at the Los Angeles County Fair

Working as a curator at large for the MAAA, Lewis curated her most ambitious project at the Los Angeles County Fair in 1983: *Artists of the Eighties* and *Magic, Myths and Visions – African Images in the New World*. The pendant exhibitions were the culmination of several

[375] "Museum of African American Art Exhibitions" Folder, Samella S. Lewis papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

years of international research into the creative practices of the African diaspora in the Caribbean and South America. Lewis relied on the extensive network she developed during her trips to organize, what the exhibition invitation referred to, as a "diasporan exhibition."[376] Publicized as the first exhibition of its kind at the LA County Fair, it was one of the first major exhibitions connecting African American artistic practices with an international Afro-diasporic creative tradition.

Magic, Myths and Visions exhibited the work of Awagi Anakil (Suriname), Raimundo Cardoso (Brazil), Inez Seima Cardoso (Brazil), Carybe (Brazil), Pedro Makako (Brazil), Nike Olaniyi (Nigeria), Zatata Olivella (Colombia), Howard Smith (United States), and Domingo Terciliano (Brazil). It was paired with *Artists of the Eighties*, which consisted strictly of Black American artists: Catti, Houston Conwill, W. Bing Davis, Charles Dickson, Margo Humphrey, Arturo Lindsay, Robert J. Martin, James Phillips, and Milton Sherrill. Together the two exhibitions centered Black American artistic production within a transnational creative network and history that extended throughout the Northern and Southern hemispheres. At the height of her curating, Lewis made a forceful statement that there was a living Afrodiasporic aesthetic tradition with centuries-old roots in the Americas which African American artists were both part of and turning to for spiritual and aesthetic guidance.

In a taped conversation about her research trip to Surinam, Lewis explained her fascination with the maroon settlements and the traditional African dances and cultural practices that were adapted and maintained there.[377] A video recording shot for a local Los Angeles TV news

[376] *Artists of the Eighties* and *Magic, Myths and Visions – African Images in the New World* invitation, Samella S. Lewis papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

[377] Untitled Audio, Samella S. Lewis papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

station documents that the exhibitions were inaugurated by Afrodiasporic rituals and dances.[378] The practitioners were flown in, quite possibly from the maroon cultures Lewis visited in Surinam. Practitioners performed certain water-based rituals in the exhibition space, utilizing some of the exhibited objects in the ceremonies. [379]

The artists in *Magic, Myths and Visions* were flown to Los Angeles to demonstrate their artistic process for the duration of the exhibition.[380] Artists sat at workbenches set within steel frames with mirrors hanging above their stations to reflect the artist's hands to the stream of visitors that passed them. Artists worked in batik, wood carving and painting and the exhibit gave equal attention to the process of creation, as it did to the aesthetic contemplation of the objects. Once again utilizing performances, Lewis staged the artists so as to make them available to visitors as a source of knowledge on their craft and home countries. The innovative curating expanded the range of learning opportunities, while also correcting popular misconceptions that artists were predominantly white: a misconception that fairs and museum had themselves had a history in constructing.

As the scholars studying world's and national fairs and museums have repeatedly shown, representational spaces have often been sites where mainstream ideas about race were both reflected and taught. Exhibition and fair organizers paid and used Black bodies to perform white supremacist caricatures of African or African American life. A long and ugly history of farcical African villages and nostalgic recreations of plantation life permeated fairs and museums, working to support white supremacist racial definitions and hierarchies that

[378] Unedited Video From Unspecified Local News Station, Samella S. Lewis papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.
[379] Ibid.
[380] Ibid.

positioned non-Western cultures as primitive, backwards and childish.[381] Much as Lewis' memorabilia exhibition dissected the ongoing role of race in everyday life, so too did the LA County Fair exhibitions correct the exhibition model's own historic participation in creating the belief that Black culture was inferior, and that it did not produce artists, artworks or knowledge. By framing Afrodiasporic artistic process as alive, as well as being taught by Black bodies, the exhibition performed multiple dimension of symbolic work for an audience that was more than likely unfamiliar with such practices.

Conclusion

In her exploration of the challenges that Afrodiasporic art history poses to art history's allegiance to European notions of modernity and art, Krista Thompson warns against situating Black cultural achievements within colonial classifications and Enlightenment rhetoric. As Thompson argues, to do so is to misunderstand these creative practices, and to limit understandings of how "African diasporic peoples often embodied, expanded on, or evinced the limits of these concepts."[382] Relying on Black aesthetic traditions, the cultural workers reviewed in this chapter adapted and democratized a European aesthetic tradition in response to the everyday needs of Black Americans in a highly racialized landscape. Los Angeles Black cultural workers brought new meaning to the art historical conceit of a "museum without walls," as they worked to knock off the yoke of a colonized aesthetic tradition and engender a free space to practice Afrodiasporic ways of being and knowing. Working away from the dominant center, practitioners generated numerous questions about cultural authority, museum

[381] See Wilson and Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

[382] Krista Thompson, "A Sidelong Glance: The Practice of African Diaspora Art History in the United States," *Art Journal* 70, no. 3 (2011): 21.

architecture and experimental approaches to working with Afrodiasporic archives. While their ephemerality and spatial differences have diminished their importance in the eyes of mainstream art history, I believe that those deviations offer a foothold for future work in decolonizing aesthetics and the corresponding and highly specialized spaces where art happens.

As Fergerson described about the Black curatorial projects in Los Angeles: "we have to realize that the art centers in this city are not like typical art centers, in the black community.…they also act as cultural institutions because of the void left by the majority culture institutions not to include the contributions of the African American. So these centers also become museum-type centers because of the eradication of black contributions."[383] Fergerson's description of Black place-making as "museum-type centers" speaks to their in-between status as projects working towards fulfilling other needs and clearing spaces to envision other futures and models where those who had once been deemed as other, can also be free to be centered.

As decolonial theorists Rolando Vazquez and Walter Mignolo detail in their critiques of the museum paradigm, the stakes over who controls symbolic spaces like the public art museum are enormously high because they evidence a fight over "the possibilities for experiencing the world," as Vasquez characterizes it.[384] The project of decolonizing aesthetics is also a spatial matter, and while the possibility of the museum model to decolonize continues to be debated within contemporary artistic practice and museum activist circles, it will not be

[383] Fergerson, *African American Artists*, 365.

[384] Rosa Wevers, "Decolonial Aesthesis and the Museum An Interview with Rolando Vázquez Melken," *Stedelijk Studies* 8 (Spring 2019), https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/decolonial-aesthesis-and-the-museum/.

the mainstream centers that will generate significant changes, but rather they will emanate from the spatial practices of those who both know and been marginalized by those institutions.

Conclusion: "To Be a Co-Worker in the Kingdom of Culture"

In 2015, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation released its well-publicized demographic museum survey, "The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey." The report detailed the highly segregated and classist structure of the museum world, in which decision-making museum staff—like curators, heads of department, and decision-making staff—were, according to the report, "84 percent white non-Hispanic, four percent African American, six percent Asian, three percent Hispanic, and three percent two or more races."[385] The report grimly confirmed a social order of ruling white elites, with people of color making up a majority of the Faciltiies, Security, and Finance departments. These statistics starkly communicate the place of people of color in the museum imaginary: helpers, cleaners, workers, guards.

The Mellon report determined that there was an "overrepresentation" of whites within the museum field and the statistics made national art world news. The report was so well-publicized that the New York Department of Cultural Affairs and, later, the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors, commissioned their own reports citing the Mellon report as an impetus.[386] Los Angeles's Board of Supervisors (pushed by Supervisors Hilda L. Solis and Mark Ridley-Thomas) directed the Executive Director of the Los Angeles County Art Commission to generate recommendations and compile best practices to analyze how Los Angeles people of

[385] Roger Schonfeld, Mariet Westermann, Liam Sweeney, "The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey," Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, accessed May 10, 2021, https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/ba/99/ba99e53a-48d5-4038-80e1-66f9ba1c020e/awmf_museum_diversity_report_aamd_7-28-15.pdf.

[386] Roger Schonfeld and Liam Sweeney, "Diversity in the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs Community," Ithaka S+R, accessed May 10, 2021, https://sr.ithaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/SR_Report_Diversity_New_York_City_DCLA_12716.pdf; Tim Dang, Helen Hernandez and Maria Rosario Jackson, "LA County Arts Report Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative," Los Angeles County Arts Commission, accessed May 10, 2021, https://www.lacountyarts.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/lacac17ceiireportfinal.pdf.

color are not represented within cultural institutions across Los Angeles County. That directive resulted in a comprehensive study that detailed many of the disparities of funding and the unequal access to resources common to non-white neighborhoods. Little actual change to funding and resources were initiated, however, and the Mellon Foundation released a second report, "Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018," detailing the very limited and "uneven progress" of the diversity project within museum leadership—in particular within curatorial departments.[387]

These reports are important data markers that give concrete numbers to the racial disparities of the museum world. Seeing the issue as a statistical problem, however, ignores the historical actions that have formed the museum's contemporary segregated realities and implies that the problem can be solved by improving demographic percentages in a bean-counting style of diversity management. The Samella Lewis and LA County Museum debacle detailed in Chapter 1 is a reminder that the terms of this debate can not be singularly set by white cultural leadership. It is, after all, the white museum leadership class which supported a vision of the museum as a segregated space. The complexion of the nation's cultural workers, in effect, is a result of the structure that white Americans built and maintained.

The Mellon reports were a vindication for those who have criticized and protested the composition of the museum field for decades. The purview, however, of the reports re-centered attention on diversity management and the pipelines that feed museum staff. Such a limited reading of the problem is not only ahistorical, but also re-creates the disciplinary blind spot—or, better said, the highly racialized cultural mappings that altogether miss the spaces and

[387] Mariët Westermann, Roger Schonfeld, Liam Sweeney, "Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018," Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, accessed May 10, 2021 2018, https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/b1/21/b1211ce7-5478-4a06-92df-3c88fa472446/sr-mellon-report-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-01282019.pdf.

practices of people and artists of color. It remains a pressing concern to situate the problem of museum diversity within an expanded mapping of the cultural landscape which includes culturally specific art spaces and curatorial projects. Museum Hue, a Black, Indigenous and people of color art advocacy group, recently developed a nation-wide map documenting culturally specific art spaces, as their enduring invisibilization remains conspicuous amid museum efforts to reform.[388] In alternative mappings like the one Museum Hue offers, the cultural landscape is evidently already diverse.

Now, much as in the 1960s and 1970s, cries for racial justice are at the forefront of American cultural politics. It appears, however, in keeping with American museum history, that the institution might once again wait out larger societal demands. While some hope that the public art museum will be pulled into the stream of social change, history has repeatedly shown that the institution is a skilled angler at avoiding powerful cultural currents that would require it relinquish its powerful position as cultural arbiter.

The old ways of conducting museum business, however, are increasingly less feasible. Attendance is decreasing, donor pools are aging, and the self-evident reasons as to why art and museums are important have also evaporated in the face of the demands of the systematically excluded. In response to injustice both without and within, the museum field is re-defining its goals and practices, most recently by one of the country's most prestigious art institutions, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. The National Gallery of Art has initiated a rebranding campaign for a more local and inclusive vision, as captured in its new motto: "Of

[388] See: "A directory of culturally-responsive museums," Museum Hue, accessed May 10, 2021, https://www.museumhue.com/hue-museums.

the nation. For the people."[389] The spirit of that motto, as this dissertation explicates, of creating an arts institution in service of a plurivocal body politic, was very much on the minds of cultural workers of color in the 1960s and 1970s who were working on a more intimate scale.

Museum management has, in many ways, treated diversity as a problem that can be solved by slowly incorporating people of color into various museum departments and boards, without enacting real change in the institution's model, practices or property-based cultural paradigm. While pipelines and accessibility are serious obstacles that need imaginative solutions, reformist rhetoric can easily assuage the responsibility that the very model has played as an exclusionary mechanism that has historically served whites, and once again re-centers the discussion on the promise of the institution's capacity to serve a multicultural U.S. American society.

A more radical proposition, and one I believe challenges the paradigm of museum studies, requires further research into the histories of the art spaces created by people of color, as well as the more temporary curatorial projects they initiated. Broadening the range of case studies will broaden the range of approaches and historical vantages points by which to see the problem. In effect, until there are art spaces created by people of color that can offer historical and economic validation to the art they exhibit, independent of the mainstream museums, the range of possible mainstream institutional reforms is limited to a fine tuning of the museum system's management of difference.

[389] Taylor Dafoe, "The National Gallery of Art Reopened Today with a New Brand Identity – and New Leadership on the Horizon," artnet.net, May 14, 2021, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/national-gallery-art-new-brand-identity-leadership-1969243.

The question of reform is arguably a question of how to increase the number of people of color into an unchanged white world system and does not ask the more difficult questions regarding the ongoing and foundational legacy of colonialism in museum practice or the systemic denial of access to museum spaces to people of color. The museum problem is striking, not for its newness, but rather for how old it is. The sociologist, historian and critic of American society, W.E.B. Du Bois wondered in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), whether there was a place for Black people in the United States which would not require that they deny their African heritage. Perceived by whites as a "Negro problem," the issue resonates with the current state of the museum field which has externalized its own discrimination as a "diversity" problem. Du Bois, speaking of the seemingly impossible position of the Black American, explained:

> He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face…This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius.[390]

For Du Bois, the question of survival, not just for Black life in the United States, but equally for the nation, was a cultural problem at the heart of the dominant culture. While Du Bois was speaking of a cultural sphere well-beyond the smaller province of the museum, the museum also had a responsibility to work towards such an ideal. A communal project where the goal was not to better integrate people of color into white museum positions and realities, but to develop a museum practice based in a radical and collaboratively formed cultural equality. Rephrasing Du Bois, could people of color become co-workers with their white

[390] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm.

peers in the kingdom of culture as it was currently structured? Or does it remain an assimilationist project, ever more skilled at bringing in bodies of color but never acknowledging the role white museum leadership has historically played in structuring our unjust cultural landscape?

Asking that cultural workers of color come into these situations as solutions, is not just a burden on those workers, but maintains an untenable power dynamic, in which those at the center refuse to share authority and once again determine what change will look like. The museum remains highly invested in its own definition of cultural work, in which whites are the capable and exclusive managers of the cultural heritage of the world. It does so, in part, because if museum leadership did not occupy the position of managing and presenting the world's culture, the European aesthetic tradition would become another aesthetic option with just as much or little claim on authority as non-white cultures. This fear of joining subordinated positionalities is at the heart of museum leadership's refusal to enact radical changes in redistributing cultural authority.

This dissertation has sought to expand and deepen the understanding of the work of artists and cultural workers of color and culturally specific art spaces, in part, to give historical nuance to the perennial problem of museum segregation. The perspective offered by these histories is critical to our current debates, as the field is arguably at the beginning of acknowledging that there are other models of cultural work and space-making, like culturally specific art museums and community art centers, that also deserve a voice in this discussion. Such a wider and more historic view of the "demographic problem" shows that the current approaches, and even the way the problem is posited, continues to conceal the diverse network of cultural spaces that

have existed for decades and supported artistic practices and exhibitions in communities of color.

What will be required to change the terms of this conversation? I have relied on decolonial theory that advise a two-part plan: 1) localize the museum's claims on universality, 2) recognize other epistemic and spatial models so as to de-link to other epistemic (and spatial) options.[391] Under such terms, what follows would be a radical redistribution of resources and authority, to the point that those spaces once denigrated, would have as much cultural and economic authority as their mainstream counterparts because they would be acknowledged as co-equal options. Such a paradigmatic shift, as aspirational as it might be, will only come from a forthright reckoning with the museum's colonial past and a commitment to make a place premised on collaboration.

Yet, despite museum leadership's efforts, Black and Latino art spaces already rendered a verdict on museum reform as insufficient. Why should there be a re-investment in a model based in serving a white elite constituency, when there are already radically responsive art spaces and community art centers that have refused to wait for the museum field to share their resources? Is it not the network of arts organizations originated in communities of color that already do the work that the museum proclaims to one day be able to do?

As the Black and Latino art space tradition shows, to serve Black and Latino constituencies would require a radical set of changes to the spatial logics of the mainstream museum. Maybe none more important than dismantling the museum viewpoints and art historical mappings which have de-valued Black and Latino art production under Euro-American aesthetic standards. It is in the authority gained in this position of superiority that has made sharing

[391] Mignolo, *Darker Side.*

power so difficult because culture is perceived within an exclusionary paradigm of white property.

A younger generation of Black and Latino artists in Los Angeles within the last ten years has made the issue of art spaces and community art centers a core component of their practices. Los Angeles-based, Latinx artist Rafa Esparza, working in sculpture, murals, painting, and performance, has revived adobe brick making techniques and buildings in an attempt to reclaim ancestral Mexican and Mexican Indigenous knowledge. Creating hand-made adobe bricks through a process they learned from their family, Esparza erects free-standing adobe structures as gallery spaces. Most recently at the Whitney Museum of American Art's *2017 Whitney Biennial*, Esparza created *Figure Ground: Beyond the White Field* (2017), an adobe bricked room that overtook the museum's white cube gallery space. Esparza invited colleagues to exhibit their own work within the artist's commissioned installation. Both challenging and working within white spatiality, Esparza's situates the audience within a different type of space, suggesting even, that the artworks they often exhibit in these spaces also requires a culturally specific space that is not the Euro-American modernist white gallery.

In the historically Black neighborhood of Crenshaw, an artist collective consisting of Patrisse Cullors, Alexandre Dorriz, and Noé Olivas have established the Crenshaw Dairy Mart, a refurbished dairy turned socially-engaged art project that offers a wide-ranging public art program throughout the city. With the Crenshaw Dairy Mart as his base, co-director Noé Olivas has created *Domingo Project, A.K.A. Untitled Space, A.K.A. Rolling Social Sculpture* (2011), a converted Chevrolet step-van, which according to the Crenshaw Dairy Mart website, has been used for a multiplicity of community-building practices, such as: "gift shop, coffee shop, lounge space, a space for pedagogy, experimental art space, performance space and even

back to its original purpose as a delivery truck."[392] In a neighborhood that can lack many of the commercial spaces common to white neighborhoods, *Domingo Project* works as a mobile and protean art space that is responsive to the near-absence of Los Angeles County-funded arts infrastructure in South Los Angeles. Much like their predecessors in the 1960s and 1970s, contemporary artists continue creating innovative forms of socially-engaged art projects and community-focused art spaces that are directly linked to the historic models and spatial tactics reviewed in this dissertation.

Artist Lauren Halsey, also working in in South Los Angeles, founded Summaeverythang Community Center in March 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. As she describes of the center: "I started thinking of ways to engage the ideologies and thesis of the community center with the community, outside of the physical space."[393] Her project distributes food to hundreds of families in need in Watts, South Central, and Compton, but is equally concerned with providing sustenance to both body and mind. The center supports a range of creative practices, as Halsey describes: "I began it as a space to support and sustain all sorts of intelligence in the hood—from academic to intellectual. Summaeverythang. Capoeira, tutoring, artmaking, film programs, gardening, field trips, etc."[394] In keeping with a tradition of user-defined spaces in both Black and Latino Los Angeles art history, Summaeverythang continues a tradition of community-responsive art projects which intentionally blur the boundaries between cultural work, social work and the aesthetic. This is not a continuation of a community art center tradition in that Halsey inherited her project or even knew her

[392] "Domingo Project," Crenshaw Dairy Mart, accessed May 10, 2021, https://www.crenshawdairymart.com/publicart.

[393] "About," Crenshaw Dairy Mart, accessed May 10, 2021, https://www.crenshawdairymart.com/publicart https://summaeverythang.org.

[394] Ibid.

predecessors, but moreover, the continuation of an approach which understands how the urban and aesthetic are connected, and how the segregated and geographically discriminatory art world requires such radical aesthetic projects.

Artists of color like Esparza, Halsey, and Olivas are reinvigorating the movement to break away from the dominant morphologies and centers of the art world—not simply for distance from white standards, but because their artistic visions require new structures. Notably, many of their tactics, aspirations, and values replicate the historic models and approaches detailed in this dissertation. The contemporary art world and museums cannot afford to ignore these contemporary practices, not because they should claim and collect them, but because the resources that typically go into mainstream museum spaces should be more equally distributed to assist these art projects and cultural workers who continue to do the type of socially-engaged cultural work the museum has promised for fifty years.

Artists of color, and the institutions that support them, suffer when scholars, foundations, and museums create a "diversity problem" because the cultural field is already diverse—just not within the houses of culture created in support of Euro-American aesthetic dominance. These contemporary examples are reminders to mainstream cultural leaders that artists of color, resourceful and innovative, have once again initiated their own culturally specific art space network in support of another vision of the artist-community relationship. As a discipline, art history and museum practice cannot afford to overlook this type of boundary-crossing work again. As I have argued, expanding the historical antecedents of contemporary debates on museum futures beyond the museum shows how limited the project of diversifying the museum is in the face of a living and diverse range of artistic projects and practices taking place on streets, in the gaps and on the edge of the discipline.

In exploring the wide range of community art centers and culturally specific museums it becomes increasingly clear that artists and cultural workers attempted to re-situate situated knowledges into new contexts. The historic successes and failures of their experiments are needed knowledge to broaden the range of art historical precedents, as well as offer other types of blueprints and inspiration for those artists and cultural workers who continue the project of re-envisioning Euro-American aesthetic spaces in the interest of serving their communities' needs. Recovering these histories gives a fuller historical overview of the limits of the museum paradigm and directs us towards alternative mappings and visions.

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Figures

Figure 1. "Barrio Mobile Art Studio," c. 1976, photograph, Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, CEMA 3, Department of Special Research Collections, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA. (Calisphere, https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/hb5779p1t7/)

Figure 2. Unknown photographer, *Maria de Los Angeles Novia de Pueblo* mural, 1974, photograph, Milton Antonio Jurado Collection, Los Angeles, CA.

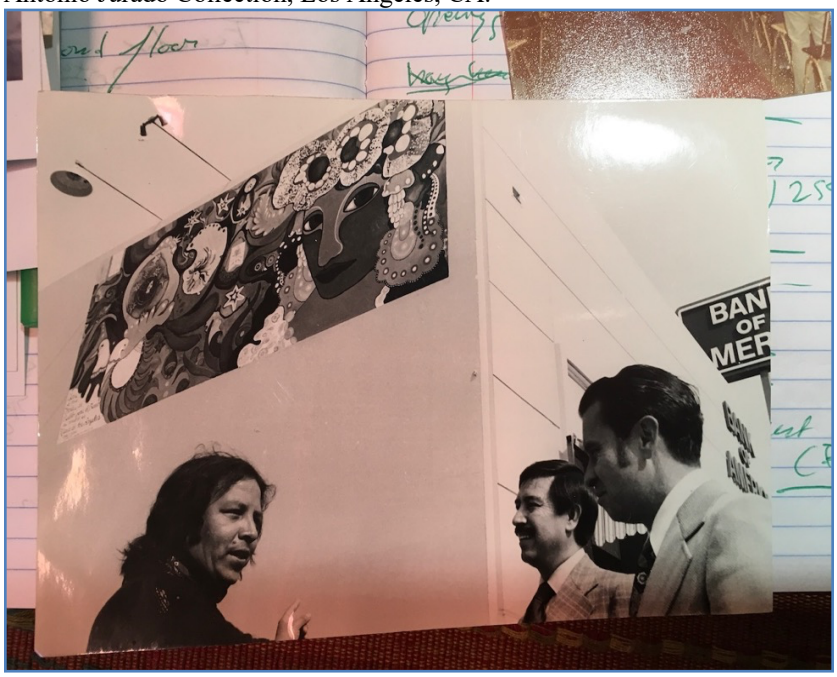

Figure 3. Unknown photographer, Day of the Dead '77 Celebration, 1977, photograph, Self Help Graphics and Art Archives, CEMA 3, Department of Special Research Collections, UC Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA. (Calisphere, https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/hb0p300421/)

Figure 4. Unknown photographer, Carlos Bueno working with a member of Los Camaleones, c. 1994, photograph, Collection of Laura Caracol, Mazatlan, Mexico.

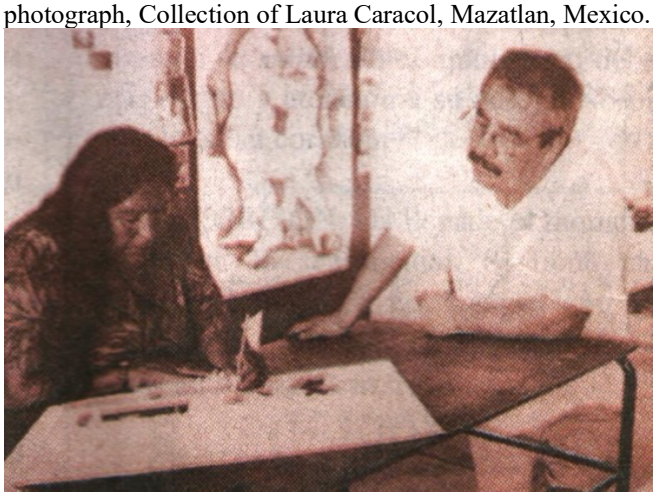

Figure 5. Unknown photographer, Los Camaleones Studio at El Cereso Prison, c. 1994, photograph, Collection of Laura Caracol, Mazatlan, Mexico.

Figure 6. Carlos Bueno y la Raza del Barrio, Untitled, c. 2000, Mazatlan, Mexico. Photograph taken by author.

Figure 7. Screen capture of the 3051 Wabash Avenue, Google Maps, 2009, link saved on Mural Conservancy website: https://www.google.com/maps/@34.049498,-118.1956379,3a,75y,89.04h,94.18t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sHx0kjPz1rO8prdfzfOKAww!2e0!7i13312!8i6656?hl=en

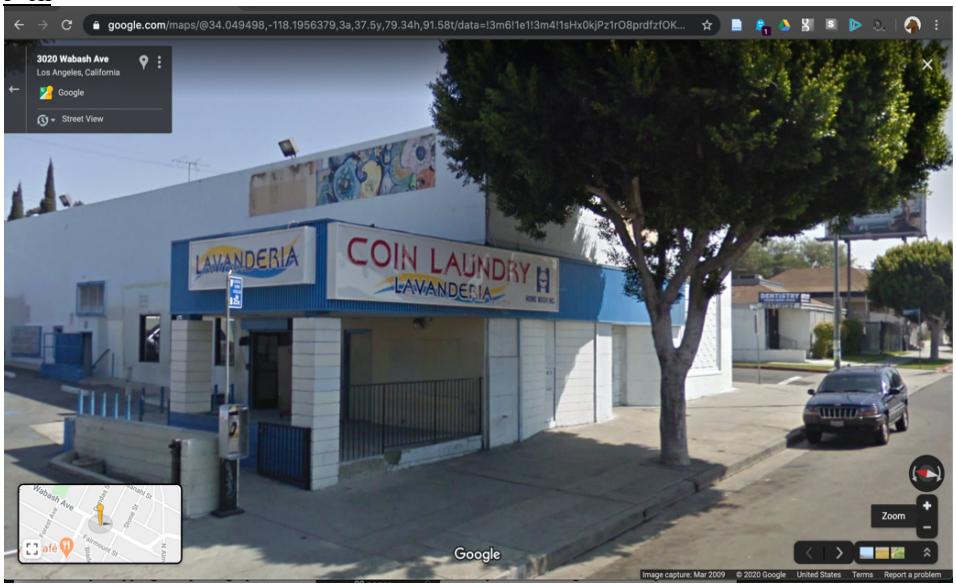

Figure 8. Screen capture of 3051 Wabash Avenue, Google Maps, 2020, https://www.google.com/maps/place/3051+Wabash+Ave,+Los+Angeles,+CA+90063/@34.0494613,-118.1956826,3a,75y,71.22h,88.34t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sF30dNXrT-VcI12Qi8cI34g!2e0!7i16384!8i8192!4m5!3m4!1s0x80c2c5e54952de15:0xcf66313b665f91a0!8m2!3d34.0496295!4d-118.1952605