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The Watts Towers from Eyesore to Icon:
Race and the Spaces of Outsider Art

By

Emma R. Silverman

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History of Art

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Women, Gender, and Sexuality

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Julia Bryan-Wilson, Chair
Professor Margaretta M. Lovell
Professor Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby
Professor Charles L. Briggs

Summer 2018

Abstract

The Watts Towers from Eyesore to Icon: Race and the Spaces of Outsider Art

by

Emma R. Silverman

Doctor of Philosophy in History of Art

and the Designated Emphasis in Women, Gender and Sexuality

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Julia Bryan-Wilson, Chair

Starting around 1921, Sabato (Sam) Rodia (1879–1965) began to build an unusual environment in his backyard in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. Although he had no formal training in art or architecture, Rodia used concrete-covered steel embellished with intricate mosaics of tile, shell, and glass to create a series of elaborate sculptures, including three central towers that rise nearly one hundred feet in height. For over three decades Rodia's creation received scant public recognition, and in 1954 Rodia left Los Angeles, never to return. The story of how a single individual worked alone to create such a monumental structure is awe-inspiring; however, the life the site took on after Rodia's departure is equally remarkable.

In the postwar period California's perceived provinciality relegated it to the fringes of the New York-centered art world. For many artists, the challenges of geographic liminality were compounded by racial discrimination, which systematically excluded them from local cultural institutions. Starting in the 1950s, artists and other cultural workers claimed Rodia's creation as a potent symbol of art in the margins, making and re-making its meaning as a public monument. In 1959, when the site was threatened by demolition, artists, architects, and writers in the local modernist scene rallied in its defense. They launched a successful preservation campaign, arguing for the value of the "Watts Towers" on the basis of its significance as a public artwork for modern Los Angeles. Then, in August of 1965 an episode of racially motivated police violence sparked an uprising in Watts, as residents took to the streets burning convenience stores and overturning parked cars. In the aftermath of the rebellion the Watts Towers was used as a symbol of an emerging black nationalist movement, and the community arts center at the base of the Towers became the staging ground for a black avant-garde working in assemblage. Meanwhile, in the late 1960s there was a growing revival of widespread interest in the art of untrained makers. In the mid-1970s curators who had been involved in the preservation campaign fifteen years earlier made the Watts Towers an exemplar of a new genre of making—the American folk or visionary art environment—and showcased it in museum exhibitions next to other large-scale backyard sites.

This dissertation examines how and why Rodia's creation was claimed by multiple cultural movements as an icon of modernist art in California, a landmark of black cultural renaissance, and a paragon of folk and outsider art. I trace the history of the site from its construction starting in the 1920s to its multilayered reception from the 1950s through the 1970s. In doing so, I elucidate not only the remarkable cultural history of this idiosyncratic structure, but also how, in the postwar period, vanguard artists drew from practices they perceived to be "outside" of mainstream fine art in order to expand the limitations concerning who could be an artist, what could be an art object, and where art could take place. These new practices and frameworks spread beyond Southern California, blurring the boundaries that separated high art from popular culture, and modern from folk, contributing to the increasing pluralism of American contemporary art. Yet at the same time, I argue that the incorporation of the Watts Towers into the category of "Art" was intertwined with the structure's location in the racialized urban landscape of Los Angeles, as well as the histories of colonialism that produced terms like primitive, folk, and outsider. Therefore, my study reveals not only how the recognition of the Watts Towers made the art world more inclusive, but also the racial politics of space that structure the creation and appeal of "outsider art."

This dissertation is dedicated to my partner
Sara Smith-Silverman
And to the memory of my fiercest cheerleader, my grandmother
Irene “Mimi” Silverman

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Figure 4.4. Photograph of the *Naives and Visionaries* installation showing the *Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*, 1974. Walker Art Center.

Figure 4.5. Seymour Rosen, untitled photograph of the *In Celebration of Ourselves* exhibition, 1976. SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments Archive.

Figure 4.6. Seymour Rosen, untitled photograph of the *In Celebration of Ourselves* exhibition showing photographs of the Watts Towers, 1976. SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments Archive.

Figure 4.7. Seymour Rosen, untitled photograph of the *In Celebration of Ourselves* exhibition showing Tress Prisbrey's doll, 1976. SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments Archive.

Figure 4.8. Charles Brittin, *Ferus Alley (Bob Alexander, John Reed, Wallace Berman, Juanita, Walter Hopps)*, 1957. Getty Research Institute Special Collections.

Figure 4.9. Unknown photographer, James Hampton with the *Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*, ca. early 1950s. From the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training website.

Figure 4.10. Unknown photographer, view of James Hampton's *Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly* from the alley, ca. 1964. From the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training website.

Figure 4.11. Unknown photographer, Martin Friedman and Marcel Duchamp, 1965. The Walker Art Center.

Figure 4.12. Seymour Rosen, untitled self-portrait, 1964. SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments Archive.

Figure 4.13. Seymour Rosen, untitled photograph of the exhibition *Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1962. SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments Archive.

Figure 4.14. Seymour Rosen, untitled photograph of the exhibition *I Am Alive!* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1966. SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments Archive.

Figure 4.15. Edward Kienholz, *Backseat Dodge '38*, 1964. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Figure 4.16. Allan Kaprow, *Apple Shrine*, 1960.

Figure 4.17. Unknown photographer, photograph of Clarence Schmidt's environment, ca. 1965. Scanned from Allan Kaprow, *Environments, Assemblages, Happenings*. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1966.

Figure 4.18. Jann Haworth and Peter Blake, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band Album Cover*, 1967. Circle added to indicate Rodia.

Figure 4.19. Roger Steffens, untitled photograph of young people in front of Pemabo's Peace Garden, ca. 1972. SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments Archive.

Figure 4.20. Unknown photographer, didactic panel for Grandma Prisbrey at the *Naives and Visionaries* exhibition, 1974. Walker Art Center.

Figure 4.21. Unknown photographer, photograph of Herman Rusch being interviewed in front of the fence post he constructed for the *Naives and Visionaries* exhibition, 1974. Walker Art Center.

Figure 4.22. Seymour Rosen, untitled photograph of graffiti and the Watts Towers, ca. 1960. SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments Archive.

Figure 4.23. Seymour Rosen, installation view of Rosen's photographs of graffiti at the *I Am Alive!* exhibition, ca. 1966. SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments Archive.

Figure 4.24. Seymour Rosen, photographs scanned from *In Celebration of Ourselves*, 1978.

Figure 4.25. Sheila Ruth, *Curators Nancy Angelo, Barbara Bouska, Cheri Gaulke, and Linda Norlen with the artist Grandma Prisbrey*, 1976. Otis College of Art and Design Library.

Conclusion

Figure 5.1 Screenshot of a selection of the 15,098 photographs tagged "Watts Towers" on Flickr, an online photo sharing platform.

Figure 5.2 Screenshot of the "Rancho Towers" as they appear in *Grand Theft Auto V*. Image from http://gta.wikia.com/wiki/Rancho_Towers.

Introduction

"Everyone who visits the Watts Towers comes away with one basic question: 'What are they?'"[1]

—Bud Goldstone

In a residential neighborhood in South Los Angeles, at the end of an unassuming dead-end street next to the train tracks, sits a structure of astonishing scale and beauty that has existed for nearly a century. The tops of its three triangular towers are visible from several blocks away, rising above the roofs of the single-level homes (Figure 0.1). As you turn onto 107th Street they come into focus—open latticework spires nearly one hundred feet in height with thin bands of concrete-covered steel that loop in dense layers (Figure 0.2). Their linear surfaces are covered in a skin of thousands of small ornaments pressed into the concrete—delicate white shells, ceramic tile, and shards of pottery. The colorful ornaments glimmer in the bright sun, as do glass bottles that are perched on outcroppings. The height of the towers seems to exceed the capacity of any individual builder, but the varied ornamentation extending up to into the highest rungs speaks to their handmade nature.

They stand on a triangular-shaped property surrounded by a series of smaller structures and bordered by an eight-foot-tall perimeter wall. Along the sidewalk the wall is covered in raucous mosaics of colorful fragmented tiles, lumps of melted glass that sparkle like precious gems, and hearts and waves playfully sculpted in concrete (Figure 0.3). There is a gap in the wall at the west side where an arched entrance is decorated with the bottom of green 7-Up bottles and flanked on either side with mail slots bearing the street address—1765—as well as the initials of the man who created this site—SR for Sabato, or Sam, Rodia (Figure 0.4).

If you had walked through the front gate in the years when Rodia lived on the property, you would have faced the decorated façade of his small bungalow. Turn to your right and other structures come into view, diminutive compared with the central towers but no less intricate. Throughout, everyday objects are repurposed as embellishment—a bowling ball as a decorative finial, teacup handles emerging from concrete, colorful Fiestaware fractured and arranged in a boisterous collage (Figure 0.5). There are tiered bases topped with forms like stacked fountains (Figure 0.6), an open gazebo with a circular bench inside, and stalagmite-like cones covered in green crushed glass. Conservators have discerned a total of sixteen distinct components (Figure 0.7), but in person the site flows from one element to the next. The sense of an organic whole is created by the repetition of motifs, like a heart shape, the bands that form a connective tissue between structures, and the shared ground of the colored concrete patio flowing beneath, which was inscribed with decorative forms.

[1] Quoted in Bud Goldstone and Arloa Paquin Goldstone, *The Los Angeles Watts Towers* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1997), 15.

Sam Rodia was born in Italy and immigrated to the United States at the turn of the century. He had no formal training in art or architecture, though in Los Angeles he worked as a construction worker. For reasons that remain unknown, around 1921 Rodia purchased a property in Watts, then a working-class suburb of Los Angeles, and began to build in his backyard. He toiled alone using simple tools to construct the elaborate environment, erecting the three-story towers by using the rungs as ladders and standing on one as he built the next (Figure 0.9). Much of the site was present within a decade of work, but it constantly evolved as Rodia tore down and rebuilt structures, and chipped off and re-applied ornamentation.[2] He worked steadily on the backyard structure for over thirty years, but his creation received scant public recognition beyond the occasional popular press mention of the quaint oddity in Watts. In 1954 Rodia left Los Angeles, never to return, and died in Northern California a decade later.[3]

The story of this monumental structure's creation by a single individual over thirty-four years is awe-inspiring; however, the life it took on after Rodia's departure was equally remarkable. In the postwar period California's perceived provinciality relegated it to the fringes of the New York-centered art world. For many artists, the challenges of geographic liminality were compounded by identity-based discrimination along lines of race, gender and class, which systematically excluded them from local cultural institutions. In this period, artists and other cultural workers claimed Rodia's creation as a potent symbol of art in the margins, making and re-making the site's meaning as a public monument. In 1959 when the site was threatened by demolition, artists, architects, and writers in the local modernist scene rallied in its defense. They launched a successful preservation campaign, arguing for the value of the "Watts Towers" on the basis of its significance as a public artwork for modern Los Angeles. Then, in August of 1965 an episode of racially motivated police violence sparked an uprising in Watts, as residents took to the streets burning convenience stores and overturning parked cars. In the aftermath of the rebellion the Watts Towers was used as a symbol of an emerging black nationalist movement, and the community arts center at the base of the Towers became the staging ground for a black avant-garde working in assemblage.[4] Meanwhile, in the

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[2] Neighbors attest to Rodia's building process; for instance, jazz musician Charles Mingus, who lived nearby, writes in his autobiography, "[Rodia] was always changing his ideas while he worked and tearing down what he wasn't satisfied with and starting over again, so pinnacles tall as a two storey building would rise up and disappear and rise again." See Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 36–37. As I discuss further later in this dissertation, there is scant visual documentation of the Watts Towers for the first three decades of its existence, so it is difficult to know exactly how the site evolved. However, conservator Bud Goldstone did a careful visual analysis of what the existing historic photographs for what they reveal about the changing forms of the site's structure and ornamentation; see Bud Goldstone, "Historic Photographs Report," November 1993, the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts Papers, No. 1388, Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles (hereafter cited as CSRTW MSS).

[3] Rodia moved to Martinez California, where his relatives resided, and lived there until his death on June 17, 1965. The biography I recounted briefly in this paragraph is examined in more detail, and more nuance, in the following chapter.

[4] See Cécile Whiting for a concise overview of the ways that the preservation campaign make the Watts Towers into a "modern monument," and the Watts Rebellion created an association between the Watts Towers and black cultural renaissance, in "Chapter Four: The Watts Towers as Urban Landmark," *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), especially 149–165.

late 1960s there was a growing revival of widespread interest in the art of untrained makers. In the mid-1970s curators who had been involved in the preservation campaign fifteen years earlier made the Watts Towers an exemplar of a new genre of making—the American folk or visionary art environment—and showcased it in museum exhibitions next to other large-scale backyard sites.[5]

My dissertation examines how and why the Watts Towers was claimed by multiple cultural movements as an icon of modernist art in California, a landmark of black cultural renaissance, and a paragon of folk and outsider art. I trace the site's history from its construction starting in the 1920s to its multilayered reception from the 1950s through the 1970s. In doing so, I elucidate not only the remarkable cultural history of this idiosyncratic structure, but also how, in the postwar period, vanguard artists drew from practices they perceived to be "outside" of mainstream fine art in order to expand the limitations concerning who could be an artist, what could be an art object, and where art could take place. These new practices and frameworks spread beyond Southern California, blurring the boundaries that separated high art from popular culture and modern from folk, and contributing to the increasing pluralism of American contemporary art. Yet at the same time, I argue that the incorporation of the Watts Towers into the category of "Art" was intertwined with the structure's location in the racialized urban landscape of Los Angeles, as well as the histories of colonialism that produced terms like primitive, folk, and outsider. Therefore, my study reveals both how the recognition of the Watts Towers made the art world more inclusive, but also the racial politics of space that structure the creation and appeal of "outsider art."

Intervening in the "Contested Cartography"

In 2011 the Watts Towers occupied the cover of *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945–1980,* a thick survey that asserts the importance of understanding the history of modern art in Los Angeles on its own terms (Figure 0.10). The cover depicts the Towers in a grey silhouette embossed on shiny silver foil, suggesting that it is such a ubiquitous symbol for postwar Los Angeles art that only an outline is required to reference it. However, the text inside addresses the Watts Towers as a passing reference in just a single page of the introduction.[6] *Pacific Standard Time*'s treatment of the Watts Towers is indicative of the site's position in the art historical literature. In studies of art in Los Angeles it is raised as a symbolic forbearer for the practice of professional artists, but it has rarely been examined as a subject of serious scholarship in its own right.[7]

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[5] In Chapter 4 I discuss two of these exhibitions; *Naives and Visionaries*, curated by Martin Friedman with the aid of Walter Hopps, which opened at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1974, and *In Celebration of Ourselves*, curated by Seymour Rosen at the behest of Walter Hopps and Henry T. Hopkins, which went on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1976.

[6] See Andrew Perchuk and Catherine Taft, "Chapter One: Floating Structures, Building the Modern in Postwar Los Angeles," in *Pacific Standard Time Los Angeles Art 1945–1980*, ed. Lucy Bradnock, et. al. (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2011), 5.

[7] For example, in the first book-length survey of modern art in California Peter Plagens describes the Watts Towers as an important proto-assemblage, a predecessor to "the first home-grown California modern art." See *Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), 74. The literature on assemblage made by the circle of artists around the Ferus Gallery typically raises the Watts

The dearth of scholarship reflects the challenges that the Watts Towers poses to art historical interpretation; fundamentally, the site has an uneasy relationship to the category of art. It was built by someone who did not identify as an artist, was made using non-art materials, and is located in the backyard on private property. These characteristics have invited comparisons between the Watts Towers and Disneyland, roadside attractions, and other popular spectacles, suggesting that it is a more fitting subject for a tourist guidebook than an academic monograph. As a result, some of the most in-depth accounts of the site are books and documentaries made by Watts Towers enthusiasts for a popular audience.[8] My study draws heavily from these sources' original research into Rodia's biography and the material components of the site, but given their format they do not follow the same standards of research and critical analysis as academic texts. Further, any detailed analysis of the Watts Towers' reception falls out of the scope of their focus on Rodia's life and his creation of the wondrous towers.[9]

But if the Watts Towers is not self-evidently an object of art historical enquiry, it also lacks any other clear disciplinary home. The site has been discussed in articles and chapter-long case studies written by scholars from several disciplines, which seek to define the site and claim its rightful position in cultural histories of California, studies of community standards in folk art, and analyses of the diaspora of Italian vernacular traditions. By arguing for the Watts Towers' meaning as fundamentally Californian, folk, Italian, and so on, these texts preclude any synthetic study of the site's shifting significances.[10] Italian Studies scholar Luisa del Giudice refers to the differing

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Towers as an important influence but does not go into any depth about why and how this came to be. For example see the brief mentions of the Towers in *Forty Years of California Assemblage* (Los Angeles: UCLA Wright Art Gallery, 1989), 15, 66, 76. On the other hand, studies of the black assemblage artists focus on their relationship to the Watts Towers Arts Center, rather than the towers themselves. See Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 74–90. Two exceptions to this general trend are texts by Cécile Whiting and Sarah Schrank, which I discuss below.

[8] For instance, *The Los Angeles Watts Towers* (Los Angeles, CA: The J. Paul Getty Trust, 1997) was written by Bud Goldstone and his daughter Arloa Paquin Goldstone. Bud Goldstone was integral to the preservation of the Watts Towers in 1959 as a member of the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts (hereafter CSRTW) and became a longtime conservator for the site. The documentary *I Build the Tower* (Los Angeles: Bench Movies, New Performance Distribution, 2000), DVD, 87 minutes, has been in the making in the early 1980s, and was written, directed, and produced by advocate Edward Landler and Brad Byer, Rodia's great-nephew. My study draws from both, especially Goldstone's close analyses of the material components of the Towers and *I Build the Tower*'s insights into Rodia's biography. Another popular text that has circulated widely is Leon Whiteson's *The Watts Towers* (Oakville: Mosaic Press, 1989). However, I do not draw on it as a source for this dissertation as it presents little original research.

[9] The dearth of academic literature is reflected in the frequent inaccuracies reproduced in the literature, as well as the fact that recent studies reference *I Build the Towers* for basic information on the Watts Towers rather than any scholarly source; see for example Anastasia Aukeman, *Welcome to Painterland: Bruce Connor and the Rat Bastard Protective Association* (Berkeley: University of California, 2016), 30–33.

[10] Richard Cándida Smith, *The Modern Moves West: California Artists and Democratic Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Daniel Franklin Ward, *Authenticity in the Cultural Hybrid: A Critique of the Community Paradigm in Folk Studies* (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 1990); Joseph Sciorra, "'What a Man Makes the Shoes?': Italian American Art and Philosophy in Sabato Rodia's Watts Towers," *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts: Art, Migrations, Development*, ed. del Guidice (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 183–204. I address each of the strands of the literature in more detail in the introductions to my four chapters.

perspectives of the literature as "contested cartographies"—parallel conversations about the same subject that are rarely in conversation with one another.[11] Del Giudice edited *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts: Art, Migrations, Development*, a collection of essays published in 2014 that represents the most extensive academic engagement with the Towers to date. It contains texts written by scholars from different disciplines on a range of topics, but the collection's thematic emphasis is firmly on Rodia's Italian heritage and his experiences as an immigrant.[12] The sidelining of the Watts Towers' relationship to the practices of professional artists is evident in the fact that only one of the twenty-one essays was written by an art historian, and it mainly concerns her research on art environments in Spain.[13]

This dissertation is the first book-length academic study of the Watts Towers, its longer format enabling me to place these cartographies on the same map. Art history is, I argue, an ideal discipline from which to approach the Watts Towers because it permits a close analysis of the site's material form, and also because artists have played such a key role in directing the site's shifting reception. However, I also sought to develop a methodological approach that would use the tools of my discipline while also acknowledging the ways that Watts Towers and its maker exceed conventional definitions of art and artists. Rather than claiming the Towers as the exclusive object of art history, I aim to speak to the site's ability to act as a kind of "boundary object" that travels across the borders that divide audiences and academic disciplines.[14]

This outlook on my subject is rooted in feminist and queer art history and visual culture's embrace of the low, minor, and marginal. I am inspired by writers like Roszika Parker, Griselda Pollock, Julia Bryan-Wilson, and Jack Halberstam, who analyze the ways that making practices positioned in hierarchies of value are structured by gender and other forms of social identity. These scholars' nuanced examinations of feminized practices like porcelain painting, amateur knitting, and Pixar films assert the significance of their subjects without reinforcing existing standards of high culture.[15] Following their lead, I resisted the notion of writing a monograph that extolls Rodia's virtues as a creative genius and asserts the Watts Towers' greatness through comparison to avant-garde artworks. Instead, I am interested in analyzing when the site is understood to be art, when

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[11] Luisa del Giudice, "Introduction: Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts and the Search for Common Ground," *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts: Art, Migrations, Development,* ed. Luisa Del Giudice (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 18.

[12] Del Giudice states that these topics represent an "unacceptable lacuna" in the literature on Rodia: see "Introduction," 10. The collection is a key source for my first chapter, which addresses Rodia's experiences as an Italian immigrant and their impact on his creation of the Watts Towers.

[13] The essay by an art historian is "Local Art, Global Issues" by Jo Farb Hernández. She makes astute observations about the Watts Towers' relationship to categories like assemblage and outsider art, but the majority of the text concerns the research on Spanish environments presented in more length in her book *Singular Spaces: From the Eccentric to the Extraordinary in Spanish Art Environments* (San Jose: San Jose State University Press, 2013).

[14] For a definition and discussion of boundary objects see Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer, "Institutional Ecology, 'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Invertebrate Zoology, 1907–39," *Social Studies of Science* 19 (1989): 387–420.

[15] Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1981); Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art + Textile Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017); Jack Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

it is not, and the ways that those are designations reflect Rodia's social identity, as well as those of his creation's publics. I am also attentive to the ways that the site's "low" qualities—its ornamentation, whimsy, decorativeness, and proximity to non-high art practices—contribute to its distinct visual impact.

In my concern with individuals and creative practices thought to be "outside" of the physical and social spaces of fine art, my study also intersects with scholarship on practices that fall under the rubric of self-taught, folk, and outsider art. Much of this literature has had the unfortunate tendency to foreground the biographies of deprivation that define its makers and to dwell on questions of terminology, approaches that effectively create a parallel history to that of mainstream art and reinforce the marginalization of the field.[16] However, scholars of folklore have paved the way in addressing the history of the creative production of untrained makers as fundamentally relational with that of the agents of the art world who guide their reception. Studies like Charles Briggs' history of wood carvers in New Mexico and Julia Ardery's consideration of sculptor Edgar Tolson reveal how the meaning of the term "folk art" is made through exchanges with patrons and institutions.[17] Further, their concern with careful fieldwork that foregrounds the intricacies of the local ensures that the voices of untrained makers are not obscured by narratives of appropriation. In the past decade, art historical studies have also begun to emerge that share this approach, often focusing on the ways that exchanges between untrained makers and professional artists and museum curators reveal a new aspect of seemingly well-traveled histories of modern and contemporary art.[18] I follow these paths in my study, seeking to understand how terms like *art brut*, folk, and visionary art emerge through exchanges with professional artists, which are bound by power dynamics that delimit but do not prevent individual agency.

By centering the Watts Towers as the site from which I trace these histories of exchange between insiders and outsiders, my approach deviates from studies that place the Watts Towers in relationship to culture in Los Angeles. For instance, in her book *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* art historian Cécile Whiting's adroitly delineates the

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[16] For more extensive critiques of the field along these lines see *The Artist Outsider,* eds. Michael D. Hall et al. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994); Gary Alan Fine, Fine, "Chapter 1: Creating Boundaries," in *Everyday Genius: Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[17] Charles L. Briggs, *The Wood Carvers of Córdova, New Mexico: Social Dimensions of an Artistic Revival* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980); Julia Ardery, *The Temptation: Edgar Tolson and the Genesis of Twentieth-Century Folk Art* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998). Other key folklore texts on the making of objects include Michael Owen Jones, *The Hand Made Object and Its Maker* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975) and Simon J. Bronner, *The Carver's Art: Crafting Meaning From Wood* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996). I will discuss the intersection of studies by folklorists and art historians in more detail in Chapter 4.

[18] See Katherine Jentleson, " 'Not as Rewarding as the North:' Holger Cahill's Southern Folk Art Expedition," 2013 Essay Prize, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 11, 2018, https://www.aaa.si.edu/publications/essay-prize/2013-essay-prize-katherine-jentleson; Elaine Y. Yau, "Acts of Conversion: Sister Gertrude Morgan and the Sensation of Black Folk Art, 1960–1982," (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2015); Marci Kwon, "Vernacular Modernism: Joseph Cornell and the Art of Populism" (PhD diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York, 2016). Lynne Cooke, "Boundary Trouble: Navigating Margin and Mainstream," in *Outliers and the American Avant-Garde* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2018), 3–29.

multiple discourses that amassed around the Watts Towers' meaning. However, Whiting is interested in these shifting meanings for what they reveal about how artists' representations of Los Angeles helped to transform the city into as a new center of culture.[19] Similarly, historian Sarah Schrank examines meanings associated with the Watts Towers as a route to understanding the struggle over civic culture in the postwar period.[20] Both of these texts are key sources for my considerations of the various publics who claimed the Watts Towers, it urban spatial context, and its relationship to local art scenes. And my study's focus on the Watts Towers is meant to contribute to this literature, revising the dominant narrative of postwar art in Los Angeles by placing diverse artists and movements in conversation with one another. Yet by centering the Watts Towers, rather than the city in which it resides, I take into account traditions, events, and actors that are not pertinent to culture in Los Angeles.

Instead, my dissertation foregrounds how the history of the Watts Towers uniquely illuminates the relationship between race and the spaces of "outsider" art. In contrast to most studies, which address race exclusively in regard to the site's relationship with black Angelenos after the uprising in 1965, I examine the intersection of race and space in the history of the Watts Towers from the period of its construction to its reception by diverse communities of artists and publics.[21] I show how Rodia and his creation have been multiply racialized, tracking changing conceptions of the racial status of Italian Americans alongside the Watts Towers' shifting associations with Italian, Mexican American, Anglo-American, and African American cultures.

I analyze this relationship through the Towers' site-specific qualities, as defined by Miwon Kwon in *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Kwon argues that site-specific art has three valences that can operate simultaneously: the first indicating a work's physical presence in a particular time and space, the second its critical relation to cultural frameworks imposed by the institutions of art, and the third its discursive location in relationship to a particular field of knowledge or cultural debate.[22] My examination of the Watts Towers' site-specificity makes several interrelated interventions. First, I consider the ways that aspects of the physical presence of the site, like its scale, abstraction, and ornamentation, were shaped by Rodia's identity as a working class Italian immigrant with no formal training in art or architecture, as well as his structure's backyard location in the racially segregated neighborhood of Los Angeles.[23] This approach intervenes in interpretations of the site that foreground Rodia's biography and individual motivations, overlooking the specificity of his creation's form.

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[19] Cécile Whiting, "Chapter Four: The Watts Towers as Urban Landmark," *Pop L.A.*, 141–165.
[20] Sarah Schrank, "Chapter Five: Imagining the Watts Towers," *Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles (*Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 135–164.
[21] Some key texts that I draw from to interrogate the intersection of race and space are Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xv; George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: the MIT Press, 1998).
[22] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), especially 11–31.
[23] The changing racial identity of Italians over the twentieth century is a topic that threads through a number of chapters, as I argue that it was integral to where Rodia built and how his site was understood. Numerous sources on race and urban history have contributed to my discussion of the Watts Towers' physical site-

Second, I examine how the Watts Towers' site-specificity points to, as Kwon puts it, "the social conditions of the institutional frame" of art.[24] Rodia's ability to create such a monumental structure without formal training and in a residential neighborhood far from the galleries and museums of Los Angeles was a key factor in its appeal to artists, who embraced it as a critique of the mainstream art world's exclusivity. And third, I examine the Watts Towers' discursive site-specificity in discourses about "outsider" makers and practices, both in-person and in circulating representations. This allows for a genealogy of notions, like self-taught, folk, and outsider, which investigates the politics of cultural classification and appropriation, noting that these terms carry racialized associations of primitive authenticity that bespeak their emergence alongside the appropriation of non-Western artifacts. Yet the Watts Towers' particular history also exposes the nuances involved when West Coast artists and cultural workers differently positioned along axes of identity embrace an "outsider" artwork located in an urban center. How do valuations of inside and outside change when the Watts Towers is claimed by other marginalized makers and placed alongside other devalued categories of making, like the print cultures of social movements, community art, and craft?

My study is divided into four loosely chronological chapters spanning a broad historical period, from 1920 to 1980. My first chapter addresses the period of the Watts Towers' construction in the first half of the twentieth century. I trace this history through objects like shells, ceramic tile, and 7-Up bottles, which were embedded into the Watts Towers as ornaments. This approach allows me to place Rodia's building practices in relationship with other creative production by amateurs like yard decoration, vernacular religious culture, and roadside attractions. Overall, this chapter highlights the ways in which the conditions of the Watts Towers' making were intertwined with Rodia's identity as an outsider to fine art, laying the groundwork for the reception that follows. And although biography is decidedly not my primary focus, it also establishes a timeline of Rodia's life and the Watts Towers' creation. This basic information can be difficult to substantiate, so wherever possible I endeavored to indicate in footnotes and in the body of the text why I drew certain conclusions about the history and when the evidence is inconclusive.

My second chapter examines the first wave of reception of the Watts Towers by mostly-white modernist artists, architects, and writers in Los Angeles, who transformed the site from an Italian construction worker's backyard hobby into a public artistic monument over the course of the 1950s. I maintain that their "discovery" of the site should be understood in relationship to the ways that avant-garde movements of the early twentieth-century embraced the work of untrained makers. That these discourses were revived in postwar LA modernism reveals the ways they intersected with a project of regional identity formation that played out across the racialized urban landscape.

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specificity, including Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[24] Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 26.

My third chapter considers how, in the wake of a violent uprising in Watts in 1965, black artists and makers of visual culture crafted a lasting association between the Towers and black Los Angeles. I argue that the integration of the Towers into black nationalist imagery, lessons at the community arts center, and assemblage practices played a crucial role in claiming the Watts Towers for a black public in the period 1965 and 1975. In a moment of political ideologies of separatism, a structure in Watts made without the approval or support of white-dominated cultural institutions became a powerful symbol of black cultural renaissance.

In my fourth chapter I move away from the city of Los Angeles to explore how the Watts Towers became an object that could be drawn into the modern art museum through photography. In the 1960s the practices of professional artists moved closer to those of environment builders without formal training, as such sites also came into the sights of a growing counterculture movement searching for alternative ways of living. These factors contributed to the emergence of the genre of the art environment in the folk art revival of the 1970s, which was also catalyzed by curators from Los Angeles with personal investments in the Watts Towers.

Coda—Notes on Terminology

Before proceeding into the body of my dissertation, I would like to make explicit my approach to terminology. Navigating the numerous names that have been applied to my subject and its maker was a major challenge of researching this dissertation. Rodia's birth name was recorded as Sabatino and Sabato Rodia, but in his life he was known variously as Sam, Samuel, and Simon, and his last name has appeared in print in over a dozen variations including Rodilla, Radilla, Rodio, Roden, and so on.[25] Similarly, until the early 1950s Rodia's creation was not given any proper title and was simply described with phrases like the "flashing spires," "glass towers," and "dream towers." The title "Watts Towers" started to be used in the late 1950s, to the chagrin of some of the site's artist advocates who preferred it to be known as the Rodia Towers. Today many scholars use the name *Nuestro Pueblo*, a phrase that Rodia inscribed multiple times on the central tower and over the garage.[26] One interview with Rodia from the early 1960s suggests that he might have called the site *Nuestro Pueblo*, but it is far from definitive.[27]

For the sake of clarity throughout the dissertation I chose to use the name "Sam Rodia" as this is the way that Rodia appears most frequently in public records, and it is the name used by people in his social circle in Los Angeles.[28] In addition, I elected to use

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[25] Rodia's birth documentation records his name as "Rodia Sabatino (anagrafe Sabato)"; see "Certificato di Nascita," Folder: Personal/Family Records—Certificates, Watts Towers Collection, SPACES Archive (hereafter WTC SP).
[26] For example, in her chapter "Imagining the Watts Towers," Sarah Schrank alternates between the names "Watts Towers" and "Nuestro Pueblo," as do most of the authors of the essays compiled in *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*.
[27] Rodia made this statement in an interview with William Hale and Ray Wisniewsky in 1953. A transcript of the interview is archived in Box 5, File 5, CSRTW MSS. Excepts from the interview are also printed in "Appendix A.1," *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*, 352.
[28] In an interview with folklorist Daniel Franklin Ward, Rodia's neighbor Mr. Gonzalez stated, "Everybody called him Sam." See Ward, "Authenticity in the Cultural Hybrid," 142. Rodia's friends in Long Beach,

"Watts Towers" because it is the most widely recognized name for the site, as well as the title that has used the most consistently since the 1950s.[29] However, the indeterminacy around naming is not without significance. Rodia's shifting names reflect the immigrant experience in the United States, including his inability to read or write in English. And his site's lack of a clear-cut title bespeaks the fact that it was not made as an artwork and only incorporated into arts institutions after three decades of existence.[30] Therefore, I have also attempted to note when and how terms shift, and would like readers to be aware that my decision to use consistent names does not fully reflect the complexity of this history.

Manuel and Mercedes García, called him Simon or "don Simone," but this is the only instance I have found of Rodia going by that name in social interactions. See Manuel and Mercedes García, interview with Bud Goldstone, 1963, digitized audio recording, Box 5, File 1, CSRTW MSS. A transcription of the Garcías' interview by Luisa Del Giudice is in Appendix A.11, *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*, 412–423, and an additional copy of the recording is available as an audiotape in the unsorted SPACES Archive (hereafter ACT SP). As I discuss in footnote 56, starting around 1903 Rodia's name appears on official documents and records as Sam or Samuel.

[29] Note that throughout I refer to the "Watts Towers" in the singular tense to indicate that I am referring to as a cohesive site, rather than to the three central towers in particular.

[30] Luisa Del Giudice discusses the connection between immigration and Rodia's name in more detail in "Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts: Art, Migration and Italian Imaginaries," 159–160.

Chapter One: "Glass Towers and Demon Rum":
Rodia's Ornaments, 1920 to 1950

"With seashells, broken bottles, pebbles, shattered tiles, with the discarded, the unwanted, the useless, with the debris of a machine-ridden civilization he avoided, he gave color and texture and vitality to the towers as they arose out of his inner necessity."

—Narrator, *The Towers*

A short documentary filmed in 1953 and titled simply *The Towers* offers a rare record of Rodia's construction process.[31] In an early scene the camera centers on a shard of blue pottery wedged in the gravel along the weathered trestles of the Watts train tracks. A moment later a shadow enters the frame as a man with lined hands and a wide-brimmed hat stoops to pick up the object. The lone figure is revealed to be Rodia, now in his seventies, walking along the tracks gathering materials (Figure 1.1). He returns to his house where the blue shard joins sorted piles of tile, pottery, and glass bottles on wooden tables in the narrow yard between Rodia's house and the neighbor's property. Rodia carefully picks through the trays of material to extract a desired object (Figure 1.2), his simple tools splayed across the worktable beside him—hammers, chisels, wire-cutters. Then he walks towards one of the towers and begins to climb. He uses the structure itself as a ladder, grabbing one rung and slowly pulling himself up to the next, moving stiffly but steadily skyward. A metal bucket hangs over his shoulder, suggesting the ongoing continuation of the decades-long construction project (Figure 1.3). Throughout, *The Towers* underscores the wondrous results of Rodia's labor. The camera slowly pans across the site to a score of tinkling piano music, creating a dreamy kaleidoscope of colorful structure.

The Towers was made in the early 1950s as a thesis project by students at the University of Southern California. At that point, Rodia was elderly and his backyard creation nearly in its final form, so the filmmakers were unable to capture the structure being built from the ground up. However, first-hand accounts and analysis from conservators have also revealed Rodia's construction methods. He built the skeletons of his structures out of salvaged steel, which he bent on the train tracks. The steel pieces were attached to each other with wire and wire mesh that was then packed with cement mortar. Rodia covered the steel skeleton with a thin layer of cement, often applied by hand. The cement had to be mixed to a precise consistency so that it was sticky enough to seal the objects that were pressed into it, but not so soft that it ran. Rodia then individually placed ornaments into the varied concrete surfaces—bulbous balustrade, thin rung, planar step—in a process that required a careful hand and meticulous attentiveness

[31] *The Towers*, directed by William Hale, produced by William Hale and Antonio M. Vallano (1957; Rembrandt Films). *The Towers* was re-mastered in 2010 by Over the Moon Productions, and is available online here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fp4DAnI2zUk. Note that Ray Wisniewsky assisted Hale in the early stages of the film, but he did not contribute to the final version and so he is not officially credited with its creation.

to form.[32] Over time he embellished some fifteen thousand square feet of concrete with imprinted patterns and tens of thousands of small adornments: natural pieces like shells and stones; domestic objects including teapots and ceramic figurines; architectural materials like ceramic tile and mirror glass; and industrial products such as iron slag.[33]

This chapter addresses the creation of the Watts Towers through the material histories of those objects that Rodia gathered and embedded into concrete. My examination is organized into three thematic sections spanning from around 1900 through the end of the 1940s, roughly moving chronologically and loosely following contours of Rodia's biography.[34] The first section focuses on shells and concrete in order to discuss Rodia's immigration to the United States and his relationship to Italian American vernacular practices. The second section addresses Rodia's move to Southern California and his exposure to Mexican American culture and the local Spanish Colonial Revival through his use of ceramic tile. Finally, the third section foregrounds Rodia's use of domestic objects and his creation's location in a backyard in order to examine its publics during the period of its construction.

My methodological approach in this chapter is motivated in part by the lack of verifiable source material for the period before 1950. This problem is exemplified by the narration of *The Towers*, which states that Rodia's motivation for building his backyard creation was simply, "I had it in my mind to do something big, and I did." The phrase has been repeated countless times in later accounts of the Watts Towers, and certainly it concisely distills the drive to create a lasting and monumental marker of individual accomplishment. But in longer recorded interviews not included in the final version of the documentary, the filmmakers asked Rodia a variety of pointed questions—what was

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[32] This description of Rodia's process is drawn from a number of accounts, including that of George Dumpf, an inspector for the Department of Building and Safety who observed Rodia building the Towers in the mid-to late-1940s. See Watts Towers Hearing, July 9, 1959, Box 14482, 83-85, Building and Safety Commission Board and Demolition Files, City of Los Angeles Archives (hereafter cited as BSCBDF). See also the "Preservation Plan for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts," November 1983; and Architectural Resources Group, "Evaluation and Conservation of Fissures Report for Watts Towers State Historic Park, Los Angeles, California," Ehrenkrantz Group/Building Conservation Technology, April 29, 2005.

[33] Bud Goldstone, the engineer who directed the stress test that saved the Watts Towers in 1959 and was involved in the site's ongoing preservation until his death in 2012, estimates that the Watts Towers is embellished with "11,000 pieces of whole and broken pottery; 15,000 glazed tiles; 6,000 pieces of colored bottle glass; dozens of mirrors; 10,000 seashells, abalone shells, and clamshells…" See Bud Goldstone and Arloa Goldstone, *The Los Angeles Watts Towers* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Trust, 1997), 56.

[34] As I discussed in the Introduction, given the ambiguity of the history and the existence of multiple conflicting accounts in those places where I address the events of Rodia's life, I have endeavored to document the information on which I am basing my claims and those places where the history is simply unclear. It is important to note that my rendition of Rodia's biography deviates from the two most thorough accounts—the biography written by Bud Goldstone and published in *The Los Angeles Watts Towers*, and the manuscript developed by Mae Babitz and William Emboden for a book that was never published, see untitled manuscript, Books, Plays, Films Folder 7, WTC SP. Goldstone and Babitz's historical work has been absolutely integral to my study. However, their findings were not always clearly cited, so where I could not find firm documentation or where I encountered new evidence I drew my own conclusions. I also drew from Daniel Franklin Ward's carefully cited biographical findings in "Chapter 5: The Secret of Mr. Rodia," in "Authenticity in the Cultural Hybrid: A Critique of the Community Paradigm in Folk Studies" (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 1990), 142–182, and Jo Farb Hernández's well-documented but brief account of Rodia's biography in "Watts Towers," *Raw Vision* 37 (December 2001): 32–39.

his rationale for building? What were his influences? Where did he get his materials? Did he have a name for his backyard creation? The more they pushed Rodia for straightforward information, the more cryptic and elusive he became.[35]

There are about a dozen interviews like this recorded in the 1950s and early 1960s. They reveal less about Rodia's motivations and construction methods than the disconnect between the elderly working-class Italian and the educated, white, middle-class individuals who embraced his creation. Folklorist Kathleen Stewart's analysis of an interview between a social worker and Hollie, a miner in rural Appalachia, lends insight into this dynamic. Stewart writes,

> Looking back, I can see how as the interview progressed, the two interpretive spaces had divided and drawn further apart. The counselor's language had become more instrumental and problem-solving—more removed from the logic of encounter itself—while Hollie's mired itself in the encounter, became more entrenched in the localizing strategies of encystment, immanence, encounter, and excess.[36]

Like Hollie, in response to interviews with arts professionals and their discourses of cultural capital, Rodia became his otherness. This was exacerbated by the fact that Rodia was almost exclusively interviewed in English, which he spoke brokenly throughout his life, rather than his native Italian or Spanish, which he was also likely to have spoken.[37]

The difficulty of obtaining historical information about the Watts Towers' construction from interviews is amplified by the lack of other sources on the topic. There are few extensive interviews with Rodia's friends and neighbors, who could have given the most thorough accounts of Rodia's life given his estrangement from his family.[38] A professional artist often produces transcripts from art schools, a record of public exhibitions and reviews, and written statements of his or her work. But as a working class laborer Rodia did not create such traces in official and public archives of the art world, and he was likely illiterate, so did not create any written accounts of his motivations or

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[35] See the twelve interviews transcribed in "Appendix A: Conversations with Rodia 1953–1964," in *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*, 351–423. The original interviews and transcripts are located in CSRTW MSS. In addition, a cassette audiotape recording of the interview with the Garcías is in the SPACES Archive.
[36] See Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 137.
[37] The only known interview conducted in Italian was by Claudio Segrè, who shared his impressions of the interview in a letter but did not transcribe it. See letter from Claudio Segrè to the CSRTW, January 25, 1962, in "Appendix A.6," *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*, 378–383. Later in this chapter I discuss Rodia's social connections with the Mexican American community in Los Angeles, and the fact that he likely spoke Spanish.
[38] For instance, Rodia gifted the Watts Towers to Louis Sauceda, a neighbor and friend, when he left the site in 1954. Undoubtedly Sauceda would have been a helpful source of information about Rodia, yet the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts did not interview him, and the Committee's notes refer to Saucedo simply as "the Mexican." I discuss this racial dynamic in greater length in Chapter 2. A single interview conducted in 1963 with Rodia's friends and neighbors in Long Beach, Manuel and Mercedes García, is a key source for this chapter. I drew my interpretations in this chapter largely from the audio recording in the SPACES Archive, which I believe has better sound quality than the audio recording in CSRTW MSS, and is more complete than the transcript in *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*.

creative process.[39] And only a handful of photographs and drawings of the site are known to exist before the 1950s, as I discuss later in this dissertation.

Thus, many accounts of the Watts Towers' construction analyze its history using a biographical approach, reconstructing the events in Rodia's life that motivated him to embark on such an elaborate project over an extended period of time. This history is narrated in conflicting ways depending on how the writer has interpreted Rodia's psychology based on the few known points of his biography. In some accounts he appears as an anarchist and eccentric whose resistance to convention culminated in the Watts Towers. In others he is a reformed drinker whose newfound sobriety led him to devote his energies to building his creation. Rodia sometimes appears as a sinister recluse who buried his wife under one of the towers or as an upstanding community member who allowed weddings under the towers and baptisms in the shell-covered fountains. No matter what conclusions are drawn, the biographical lens leads to an overemphasis on Rodia's individual motivations and achievement and often decontextualizes his practices from other forms of cultural production.

Biography is of course a key element of this chapter, but my focus on ornament allows me to shift focus to the conditions that enabled him to build such an extraordinary environment on his property. For though Rodia was disconnected from any community of professional artists and formal arts institutions, he was in dialogue with a diverse range of architectural and vernacular making practices. In this chapter I highlight some of these potential influences, including vernacular religious material culture, home and yard decorations, and regional architecture. In focusing on these histories, I use the interviews with Rodia in a more supplementary way, not as a direct, unmediated expression, but rather as contextual documents of particular interactions.

Ornamentation may seem an odd starting place from which to address the contexts of the Watts Towers' construction, which is usually described through the distinctive scale of the towers. For example, some scholars have compared Rodia's structures with the *gigli*—papier-mâché towers carried during the feast of St. Paulinus, which he might have observed as a child in Italy (Figure 1.4). Yet many more "everyday people" have used ornamentation than have created hundred-foot abstract towers, so ornament allows me to widen the set of influences under consideration. In addition, the small fragments offer a productive point of intersection between Rodia's individual vision and the wider historical, social, and material contexts in which he built. On the one hand, the carefully arranged objects pressed into the concrete surfaces of the site uniquely index the process its construction—an accumulation of small decisions made over the course of thirty-four years by a single creator. On the other hand, Rodia procured the objects he used as ornaments in his immediate surroundings, walking along train tracks, paying neighborhood children to bring him discarded mass-produced objects from their homes, and gathering materials at factories and construction sites. Therefore, the thousands of ornaments embedded in the Watts Towers function as a vital record of the area's material culture. They allow for a consideration of the "social life" of the things Rodia repurposed for his project, taking into account the meanings of those objects as

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[39] Many secondary sources report that Rodia was well read, and that he gleaned his information about the "great men" of history from encyclopedias. However, the Garcías reported that Rodia could not read or write, and this was confirmed by Claudio Segrè.

they were determined by politics of consumption that intertwine with but also exceed Rodia's biography.[40]

The challenge with examining ornamentation is that it is constantly shifting. Rodia would frequently work and re-work areas of ornamentation, chipping off and re-applying layers of objects and concrete.[41] The few extant representations from the 1920s through the 1940s show that ornamentation was integrated into the environment from the start but do not provide enough detail for a close analysis of its evolution (Figures 1.5 and 1.6). Further, after Rodia left the site around 1954, it underwent multiple waves of conservation, and today an estimated forty percent of the ornamentation has been altered or removed.[42] Therefore, my examination of ornamentation draws from photographs taken during Rodia's last five years at the site or in the early 1960s before any substantial conservation work had been undertaken. This leads to over-emphases of some materials—the 7 Up bottles that are widely remarked upon in the popular press were in fact added in the early 1950s as a re-application of ornament.[43] However, although my conclusions are drawn from one phase of his durational process of ornamentation, it opens up considerations as to the kinds of materials Rodia gathered and the ways that he applied them.

In centering ornamental material this chapter makes several interrelated contributions. To start, it intervenes in debates over the Watts Towers' cultural affiliations. I am indebted to the recent Italian Studies scholarship on the relationship of Rodia's building practices to the diaspora of Italian folk traditions and sensitive to Luisa Del Giudice's assertion that "very little has been said about Rodia's cultural past and his historic experience as an immigrant worker, and this lacuna is unacceptable."[44] In addition to connections to the *gigli*, Italian Studies scholars have located symbolism in the forms of the Watts Towers that they argue correspond to the Italian visual imaginary such as bell towers, obelisks, ships, and treasure.[45]

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[40] See Arjun Appadurai, "Chapter 1: Introduction: commodities and the politics of value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63.

[41] I discuss how Rodia repeated altered the Watts Towers' forms, including its ornamentation, in footnote 2. A series of photographs taken by Ann Rosener in 1952 appear to show Rodia handling a strip of ornamentation that he removed from the site. See Watts Towers/Sam Rodia (Negatives), Box 18, Folder 9, Ann Rosener papers, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries. Los Angeles County Museum of Art conservator Frank Preusser notes that the concrete and the ornamental materials on the Watts Towers absorb heat differently, occasionally causing ornaments to spontaneously fall off; this may be in part what motivated Rodia's continuous re-working of ornamentation. See Frank Preusser, conversation with author, September 2015.

[42] Architectural Resources Group, "Evaluation and Conservation of Fissures Report for Watts Towers State Historic Park, Los Angeles, California," April 29, 2005, 1.

[43] Photographs from the early 1950s show that there were few changes to the environment made between 1950 and 1954, and a Building Inspector who visited in the site in 1950 or 1951 attested that there was no new construction going on at the time. See Building Inspector Larkin's testimony, Watts Towers Hearings, July 9, 1959, Box 14482, BSCBDF.

[44] See Luisa Del Giudice, "Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts: Art, Migration, and Italian Imaginaries," in *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*, 145–182; Teresa Fiore, "Pre-Occupied Spaces: Re-Configuring the Italian Nation Through Migration" (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2002), 44–50.

[45] The *gigli* are carried during the *Festa dei Gigli*, which takes place in Nola, a town in Italy near to where Rodia was raised. I will address the *gigli* theories again in my fourth chapter. The first article to make a link

Yet these studies focus on Rodia's Italian identity to the detriment of considerations of the ways that his Italian heritage intersected with other cultural influences. In this chapter I focus on shells and their relationship to Italian cultural traditions of making but draw in a discussion of the materials placed alongside the shells. My consideration of mass-produced tile, glass bottles, and other objects allows for a recognition that Rodia was an Italian immigrant who built in the midst of a period of rapid modernization in Southern California, in close relationship to Mexican American communities, and in a context where postcards of large-scale grottoes made by German Catholics were circulating as tourist souvenirs. Thus, the range of objects embedded in the towers not only expands my focus beyond Italian cultural influences, but also breaks down any strict binary between vernacular material practices and cultural production in the modern urban landscape. Instead, this chapter illuminates histories of cultural translation and appropriation, craft practices enabled by industrialization, and the transformations of tradition in migration.

My discussion of ornament is also meant to allow for a consideration of the feminized aspects of the Watts Towers that have often been suppressed in its reception. For instance, architectural historian Reyner Banham celebrates the Watts Towers as an architectural wonder of Los Angeles, but he clarifies that the structure's scale enables it to "ris[e] above the level of plaster-gnomery or home-is-where-the-heart-shaped- flower-bed-is."[46] Banham's resistance to the conflation between the Watts Towers and mundane yard decorations points to the gendered component of the delicate and painstaking work of applying ornamentation. It expresses the fear that the Watts Towers might not be taken seriously as the great work of a genius male artist but instead dismissed as minor decoration, a grotesquely overgrown domestic adornment. In other words, champions of the Watts Towers seek to prevent its functionless beauty from taking on the negative connotations of ornament such as superfluity, artificiality, excess, and femininity.[47] In this chapter, my focus on ornament embraces the significance of the Watts Towers' whimsy and decorativeness, the repetitive and habitual nature of the labor that created it, and the fact that, for the first four decades of its existence, it was embedded in the rhythms of domestic daily life.[48] Instead of rejecting its relationship to heart-shaped flowerbeds, I place the two on a continuum to examine where there are points of connection and where they diverge.

Finally, this chapter engages questions of style that have been overlooked in part due to the dearth of scholarship from art historians. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century debates over ornament had a significant role in shaping the emerging discipline

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between the Watts Towers and the gigli was I. Posen Sheldon and Daniel Franklin Ward, "Watts Towers and the *giglio* tradition," in *Folklife Annual: 1985*, eds. Alan Jabbour and James Hardin (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1985), 143–157. This argument has since been picked up by other scholars of Italian Studies and Folklore, such as Felice Ceparano, "The *Gigli* of Nola During Rodia's times," in *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*, 125–144.

[46] Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (London: Harper & Row, 1971), 132.

[47] There is a rich literature on ornament's feminization, see for instance, *Women Artists and the Decorative Art, 1880–1935: The Gender of Ornament*, eds. Bridget Elliott and Janice Helland (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002); Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Meuthen, 1987).

[48] These issues of gender will return in my fourth chapter, which explores the Watts Towers' role in shaping the emergent categories of American outsider and contemporary folk art.

of art history, providing an object through which scholars like Alois Riegl articulated one of our discipline's key methodologies—formal analysis.[49] Throughout, I operate with a Rieglian conviction that the details of style make meaning, that style does *work*. I consider the particularities of Rodia's ornamentation—disparate objects integrated into a system of decoration with an allover aesthetic of bright color, irregular patterns, shiny materials, and a playful and dynamic sensibility. I also consider how the form of the ornaments themselves, especially the ceramic tiles, signaled histories of identity formation in the region.

Overall this chapter illuminates how the remarkable Watts Towers came to be, clarifying events in Rodia's life in relationship to the broader conditions that shaped his building practices. As will become clear, the ways that identity, geography, and aesthetics were interwoven in the making of the Watts Towers later enabled the site to be embraced by multiple publics from the 1950s through the 1970s. Therefore, the history related in this chapter also lays the foundation for the remainder of this dissertation.

Concrete and Shell—Devotion, Labor, and Italian Identity in the Yard

Some ten thousand seashells, abalone shells and clam shells are pressed into the concrete of the Watts Towers, their organic white surfaces appearing whole amidst glittering rainbow fragments of tile, pottery, and 7 Up bottles. Shells are almost always present in tightly spaced clusters, encrusting the relatively short parapets of the West Tower and Garden Spire sculptures [Figure 0.6] and forming arches of white on the environment's exterior walls (Figure 1.7). The shells lack the vivid colors, shiny surfaces, and curiosity-provoking appeal of man-made ornamental materials. Yet the unassuming shell is a fitting starting place for an investigation of the Watts Towers' construction, as the history of its use in yard art and vernacular building practices of Catholic immigrants is intertwined with Rodia's own history of migration.

Sabato Rodia, called Sabatino by family members, was born Sabato Rodia on February 12, 1879, in Ribottoli di Serino, a small town in southern Italy twenty miles outside of Naples.[50] Rodia emigrated from Italy to the United States as a young teenager and arrived in Ellis Island around 1890.[51] His journey was part of a broader wave of European immigration to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. Italians

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[49] Alina Payne convincingly makes this argument at length in "Chapter 3: Art Historians, Objects, and Empathy," in *From Ornament to Object: Genealogies of Architectural Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 112–156; Alois Riegl, *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament*, trans. Evelyn Kain (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[50] Parish records attesting to the date of Rodia's birth can be found in the folder "Personal/Family Records—Certificates," WTC SP. Note that, like much else, this basic fact of Rodia's biography is not uncontested; his social security application from 1937 lists his birthdate as 1886; see the copy in the folder "Simon Rodia Biographical information," WTC SP. Alternately, Rodia's gravesite in Martinez, CA, lists his birthdate as 1875, following the family's recollection.

[51] For the information about naming see Jeanne Morgan, transcribed interview with Virginia Sullivan, September 11, 1983, Box 17, Folder 7, CSRTW MSS. Luisa Del Guidice estimates that Rodia immigrated between February 12, 1892 and February 12, 1893. However, this date remains ambiguous, in part because there are conflicting reports of Rodia's birth date and the age at which he emigrated, and there are no immigration documents that definitively pinpoint when he entered the United States. For a longer discussion see Del Giudice, "Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts," 1, especially footnote 4.

were the largest group to participate in this mass migration, and the majority were young men from the peasant or laborer classes who migrated in search of work.[52] They often moved frequently, pursuing low-wage labor in places where there was already an established community of Italians. All available evidence indicates that for his first two decades in the United States Rodia followed this pattern—seeking work as a farmer, watchman, and janitor and porter and living in urban communities across the country where he had family.[53] At first Rodia stayed with family members in New York and Pennsylvania, then he moved cross-country to join relatives in Seattle, Washington. There he married an Italian American woman named Lucy Ucci in 1902.[54] After the birth of their first child, Sabato and Lucy moved to San Francisco, then Oakland, California, near where Rodia's sister and her family had settled. The Rodia family was part of a boom in the population of foreign-born Italians in California, and in Oakland in particular—between 1910 and 1930 Oakland had one of the biggest Italian American populations in the state.[55] Around this time Sabato's name appears in written records as Sam or Samuel, and I will use the name Sam from this point onwards.[56]

On the East and West coasts, the urban ethnic communities where Rodia lived would have been spaces for vernacular cultural expression as Italian traditions were translated to new cultural contexts. Such vernacular practices are difficult to trace in the official historical record, but folklorist Joseph Sciorra's recent book *Built With Faith: Italian American Imagination and Catholic Material Culture in New York City* provides a detailed account of the subject. Sciorra describes how Italian Americans in New York expressed religious devotion and fostered a sense of community through *festas*, or street festivals, and temporary shrines and altars, which were placed on sidewalks, in yards, and in tenement lodgings.[57] Many of these forms of expressive culture were made by women and were ephemeral, escaping documentation except in rare photographs. However, when families moved out of the tenements and into the more spacious suburbs, Italian American men began to build permanent yard shrines on their properties, many of which

[52] Jennifer Guglielmo, "Are Italians White?" in *Are Italians White?: How Race is Made in America*, eds. Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno (New York: Routledge, 2003), 10.

[53] Rodia's occupation is listed as "farmer" on his marriage certificate in 1902. See King County, Washington. Marriage Certificate no. 7589 (1902), Rodia-Ucci. Digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed June 29, 2018. His occupation is listed as "watchman" in the 1910 Oakland census. His occupation is listed as janitor and porter in the 1917 and 1919 El Paso directories.

[54] Rodia likely had family in Seattle as his marriage certificate lists Matteo Rodia as a witness.

[55] In his study of Rodia's relationship to the diaspora of Italian cultural traditions, Kenneth Scambray notes that the Italian population in California quadrupled from 22,777 to 88,502 between 1900 and 1920. See "The Literary and Immigrant Contexts of Simon Rodia's Watts Towers," in *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*, 147.

[56] Rodia's name was listed as Sabato on his marriage certificate in 1902, but his name is recorded as Sam on his son's birth certificate from the following year. See "Certified Copy of Birth Certificate: Frank Rodia," Folder: Personal/Family Records—Certificates, WTC SP. Rodia's name is listed as Samuel on the 1910 Census, and Sam or Samuel in Bay Area newspaper articles from the 1910s, which I discuss in footnote 69.

[57] Joseph Sciorra, *Built With Faith: Italian American Imagination and Catholic Material Culture in New York City* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2015).

survive to the present day. Documentation of these structures dates to the 1920s, though they likely existed earlier.[58]

Italian American yard shrines were one manifestation of a widespread popular interest in yard decoration in the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. While garden design was once the province of the wealthy, mass production made urns, fountains, and statuary affordable for middle-class consumers. At the same time, popular magazines and books frequently featured instructions for constructing handmade yard decorations at a low cost, a sign of the persistence of domestic handicraft after industrialization. These articles were geared towards the "handyman" of the house, in publications targeted at a male audience like *Popular Mechanics*, or written for the husbands of *Good Housekeeping*'s and *Better Homes and Gardens*' female readership. The popular press thus reinforced the notion that yard decorations were a form of masculine domestic labor like home repairs and furniture building, differentiated from feminized tasks such as cooking, sewing, and interior decoration.[59]

Guides for the construction of homemade fountains, birdbaths, and other yard structures lauded the use of a newly available and easy-to-use material—concrete. The explosion of the domestic Portland Cement industry at the turn of the century enabled the non-commercial use of concrete in relatively small quantities, allowing home builders to purchase small bags of cement and combine it with local materials like river sand and lime.[60] The resulting "liquid stone" was prized for its "natural" appearance and its inexpensive cost. Concrete also allowed for relatively easy ornamentation, and popular magazines offered instructions: for example, how to decorate concrete yard fountains with tile or construct a concrete dog kennel topped with an ornamented flowerpot (Figure 1.8).[61]

Within this context of popular yard decoration, the yard shrines of Italian Americans and other European Catholics have a distinctive form—they center on religious statuary, usually the Virgin Mary, displayed in ornamented niches. While the shrines are made in widely varying styles, a common manifestation is niches made of concrete covered in tightly packed mosaics of small ornaments like shell, stone and colored glass (Figure 1.9). Similarly, decorated flowerpots and birdbaths are often placed

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[58] Sciorra notes, however, that there is evidence of vernacular freestanding chapels built prior to 1920. See Sciorra, *Built with Faith*, 14.

[59] Colleen J. Sheehy discusses this phenomenon in depth, arguing that the creation of yard art is evidence of ongoing craft production that is often overlooked in narratives about the death of craft in an era of mass production. See "Chapter 4: Creating the Domestic Landscape: The Home Handyman and Craftswoman Respond to Consumer Culture" in *The Flamingo in the Garden: American Yard Art and the Vernacular Landscape*, (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1998), 113-146, especially 120–123.

[60] The American Portland Cement industry grew rapidly after 1895, rendering the new material widely available; the number of barrels of Portland cement produced in the US increased from 990,324 barrels in 1895 to 8,482,020 barrels in 1905. See Robert W. Lesley, *History of the Portland Cement Industry in the United States* (New York: International Trade Press, Inc., 1924), 100.

[61] For example, a 1906 book describes the subdued grey of concrete as "most pleasing," and claims that it allows for urns, pots, and pedestals to be made "at a cost less than half of what they would be if carved from stone..." See Loring Underwood, *The Garden and Its Accessories* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1906), 208. For an example of instructions on how to ornament concrete see Ralph C. Davidson, *Concrete Pottery and Garden Furniture* (New York: Munn & Company, 1910). For a description of the dog kennel see "Ornamental Dog Kennel Made of Concrete," *Popular Mechanics* 21, January 1914, 105.

around the niches (Figure 1.10), as well as carefully landscaped plantings. In addition to their devotional function, these yard shrines are a display of handicraft, built by men with skills acquired through construction work, a field in which Italian American workers were prominent in the first half of the twentieth century.[62] The shrines, flowerpots, and other structures made for yards are relatively small, but there are also some examples of large-scale vernacular grottoes built by Italian Americans on church grounds. These are relatively rare, and they share the same form as the smaller shrines—figural sculptures in niches made of concrete and ornamented allover with stone and shells (Figure 1.11).[63] Whether on a flowerpot or large-scale grotto cave, the ornamentation is characterized by accretion and layering, which Sciorra argues is expressive of a Catholic aesthetic of multiplicity and embellishment.[64] It also reflects the Catholic belief in material religion—that the aesthetics of sacred spaces, and in particular lavish material ornament, should be used to inspire devotion.[65]

In addition, there is a religious significance to the ornamental materials of humble shell and stone and the allover method of their application. Shells have long been a resonant Christian symbol, associated with rebirth and pilgrimage. When used in abundance as an ornamental material, they are associated with the ancient history of grottoes, which in the Christian devotional tradition involves the creation of artificial caves as liminal sacred space out of which religious knowledge emerges. The ornamentation of grottoes is key to their presence—the word grotesque in fact derives from the word "grottesche," referring to the elaborate ornamentation of a grotto. Since the eighteenth century European yard and garden grotto makers have favored natural materials like stone and shell used in abundance to create dense surfaces that blur the boundaries between the artificial and the natural, while also expressing the depth of the builder's devotion through the evidence of sustained, repetitive labor.[66] In Europe there are elaborate grottoes built by landed gentry and popes, but the construction of grottoes has also been a folk practice for centuries.[67]

Thus, the niches of the yard shrines, when adorned with a tight grouping of shells and stone, become a sort of grotto for the religious figurines that they house: a liminal

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[62] For instance, by 1900 Italian Americans constituted twice the labor population of brick and stone masons than other ethnic and racial groups. For more on the role of Italians in the construction industry see Michael LaSorte, "Immigrant Occupations: A Comparison," in *Italian Americans: the Search for a Usable Past*, ed. Phillip V. Cannistraro and Richard N. Juliani (Staten Island: Italian American Historical Association, 1991), 84–91.
[63] See Sciorra, "Chapter Four: Multivocality and Sacred Space: The Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto in Rosebank, Staten Island," in *Built With Faith*, 121–152.
[64] Sciorra, "Chapter One: Private Devotions in Public Spaces," in *Built With Faith*, especially 30–33 and 49–53. For more on decorated flowerpots see Joseph Sciorra, "The Decorated Flowerpots of Brooklyn," *i-Italy*, October 17, 2012, http://www.iitaly.org/bloggers/34673/decorated-flowerpots-brooklyn.
[65] Catholic doctrine back to the Council of Trent (1543–1563) describes the necessity of aesthetically compelling material culture to inspire religious devotion. For more on this, see James Trilling, *Ornament: A Modern Perspective* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 80–84.
[66] For more on shells and the vernacular grotto tradition, see Barbara Brackman, "Remember the Grotto: Individual and Community," in *Backyard Visionaries: Grassroots Art in the Midwest*, eds. Barbara Brackman and Cathy Dwigans (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 94-112.
[67] For a history of the grotto form see Naomi Miller, *Heavenly Caves: Reflections on the Garden Grotto* (New York: George Braziller, 1982).

space between the natural and the sacred. On the one hand, both yard shrines and large-scale grottoes translated centuries-old Italian folk traditions of grotto building, employing a Catholic ornamentation style of accretion that stylizes natural caves. On the other hand, they were also built in the context of modern ideologies of the American yard, as well as technologies of production that made mass-produced religious statuary and Portland Cement available at a low cost.

Rodia would have been familiar with Italian American expressive culture like shrines and grottoes.[68] He grew up in the Campagnia region of Southern Italy, where folk grottoes were prevalent in the landscape.[69] He resided in Italian working-class urban neighborhoods of New York, Pennsylvania, Seattle, San Francisco and Oakland, where the yards were likely to have been decorated with handmade shrines. And Rodia attended Catholic churches at least occasionally, like the Church of Our Lady of Good Help in Seattle where he was wed, which may have had shrines or grottoes on the church grounds.[70] The figural religious imagery and cave-like forms of Italian American yard shrines and Catholic grottoes may seem to be a distant comparison to the massive scale, abstract forms, and skeletal externality of the Watts Towers. However, I argue that there are connections between the two forms of making, which are illuminated by the first ornamented concrete yard structures that Rodia is known to have built.

Rodia's building practice began after a serious rift in his personal life and a period of travel. Within a decade of their marriage Sam and Lucy separated. Sam drank and physically abused Lucy, and in 1912 she formally filed for divorce on the grounds of desertion and cruelty.[71] Sam had little to no contact with his wife and two sons for the rest of his life.[72] In 1961 Rodia's son Frank declared to an advocate of the Watts Towers who reached out to him, "Yes, I am his son. But he was not my father."[73] Lucy and the children stayed in the Bay Area, but Sam's whereabouts for the next five years are unknown—he claimed to have roamed as far as Canada and South America.

In 1917 Rodia reappears in the historical record living in El Paso, Texas. There he worked as a janitor and porter at an office building and lived with his second wife, a Mexican American woman named Benita.[74]Around 1919 Sam and Benita moved from El

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[68] Joseph Sciorra convincingly makes a similar argument for the connection between the Watts Towers and yard shrines and other manifestations of Italian American vernacular culture in "Why a Man Makes the Shoes?" *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*, 183–203.

[69] Miller describes the prevalence of grottoes in southern Italy on pages 22–23. Miller, *Heavenly Caves*, 22-23. Also, see Gertrude Robinson, "Some Cave Chapels of Southern Italy," *The Journal of Hellenistic Studies* 5, Part 2 (1930): 186–209.

[70] The Church of Our Lady of Good Help was the first Catholic church in Seattle.

[71] The 1910 census records Sam Rodia as divorced and living in Oakland with two sons—likely Sam and Lucy were at this point separated but not formally divorced. For articles on Sam's violence towards Lucy and the couple's divorce, see "Woman Amends Complaint," *The San Francisco Call* (May 19, 1909), 8; "Slap Wins Wife Divorce Decree," *The Oakland Tribune* (November 23, 1912), 14; "Divorces," *The San Francisco Call* on January 24, 1921; "Divorces," *The San Francisco Call*, January 24, 1921, 5.

[72] Sam and Lucy also had a daughter, but she died in childhood.

[73] Quoted in Goldstone and Goldstone, *The Los Angeles Watts Towers*, 41.

[74] Rodia's World War I Registration Card from 1917–1918 indicates that he was living in El Paso, and that his closest relative was Mary Venita Rodia, who also lived in El Paso. Rodia also appears in the 1918 and 1919 El Paso directories, where he is listed as a janitor at the Martin Building. See Goldstone and Goldstone, *The Los Angeles Watts Towers*, 31.

Paso to Long Beach, California, a port city south of Los Angeles.[75] Long Beach in the 1910s experienced an influx of working-class laborers like Rodia, drawn by the ample opportunities for employment in the shipyards, oil fields, and construction sites.[76] Rodia soon began working in construction as a cement finisher.[77] He and Benita occupied several different properties in Long Beach before taking up residence at 1117 Euclid Avenue around 1922.[78]

There Rodia created his first known artworks—concrete yard structures that he decorated with shells, tile, and broken glass. There is little documentation of the Rodias' Long Beach sculptures, which were bulldozed in 1961 when the property was redeveloped.[79] A single undated photograph pictures a family who lived on the property after the Rodias moved out (Figure 1.12).[80] A man and woman gaze at the camera, perched at the edge of a circular bench, a child standing between them. The bench is capped with thin arches covered in ornamental materials including shells, a hint at the towering embellished architecture that would follow. The concrete surfaces of the structure's base are decorated with the same forms as in Watts, faucet handles and other objects pressed into the wet material to create spiraling hearts and flower-like imprinted patterns. The rest of the yard is not visible, but according to neighbors Rodia also built a decorative perimeter wall, a tiled walkway, and a "merry-go-round," a sculpture with a flat wheel and a pole in the center.[81]

While these structures did not survive, other smaller-scale works remain. Rodia made them as gifts—he gave ornamented concrete flowerpots to his neighbors, the Zamorano family, before moving away from Long Beach. And in the 1930s and 40s Rodia made flower boxes for the Bethel Pentecostal Church near Watts (Figure 1.13), and ornamented flowerpots for his sister Angelina's yard during a visit to Martinez, the

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[75] The first records attesting to Sam and Benita's presence in Long Beach are the 1920 census and 1920 Long Beach directory. However, a letter of recommendation from the Markwell Building Company dated June 19, 1920 states that Rodia was employed at the company for about a year so they likely moved in 1919.

[76] There was such an influx of laborers in the period between 1900 and 1930 that there wasn't enough housing, and many tent camps sprouted up where enterprising owners would rent a platform tent and kerosene stove at low rates. See Larry L. Meyer and Patricia Kalayjian, *Long Beach, Fortune's Harbor* (Tulsa: Continental Heritage Press, 1983), 53.

[77] The 1920 census lists Rodia's profession as cement finisher, and the letter of recommendation from the Markwell Building Company in Long Beach from the same year attests to his work in the construction trade.

[78] In the 1920 directory and census Sam and Benita are listed as residing at 1204 Redondo Avenue. In the 1921 directory their address is listed at 1117 Grand Avenue. In the 1922 and 1923 Long Beach directories record their address as 1117 Euclid Avenue address. The Garcías state that Rodia built the house at Euclid Ave. This fact is not transcribed in the excerpts published in *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*, but comes from my interpretation of the audio recording of Mercedes and Manuel García, interview by Bud Goldstone, 1963, ACT SP.

[79] Mark Gladstone, "Early Rodia Art Work Destroyed," *Long Beach Independent Press–Telegram*, November 5, 1977, 11.

[80] It is unclear when this photograph was created. According to Edward Landler, a photocopy of the photograph was given to Brad Byer, Rodia's great-nephew, when he gave a public talk on the Watts Towers in the Los Angeles area. Edward Landler, telephone conversation with author, February 7, 2018.

[81] See Bud Goldstone, interview Mercedes and Manuel García, 1963, ACT SP.

small suburb of the Bay Area where she lived (Figure 1.14).[82] These structures are all made of concrete, decorated with shells, broken glass and imprinted designs.[83] They also resemble the smaller elements of the Watts Towers—the parts that are more like tiered planters, birdbaths, or fountains.

These forms in Rodia's Long Beach yard, the sculptures he gave as gifts, and the smaller elements of his Watts yard creation hewed more closely to established Italian American yard art forms—fountains, planters, and other decorative elements made from Portland Cement and embellished with an allover density of ornamentation, especially shells. To be clear, I am not arguing here that the Watts Towers should be read as a straightforward expression of Catholic religious devotion. Rodia was raised in a Catholic material culture of Italy, and his relatives and ex-wife were all Catholics. However, when he moved to California he became a Protestant, even giving sermons at tent revivals and on evangelical radio programs.[84] And in interviews conducted in his old age, Rodia stated that he did not believe in God.[85] Hence, over the course of his life Rodia's relationship to religion was conflicted and shifting. Even if we did not have this biographical information, there is little in the form of the Watts Towers itself to denote a specifically religious message. Most obviously, the site lacks the figural statuary that distinguishes almost all shrines and grottoes. The site is mostly abstract, rendering the symbolism of any discernible forms ambiguous—for example, the most common motif is a heart, which could reference the Catholic Sacred Heart, but could indicate a more general expression of love (Figure 1.15).[86] In the late 1930s a cross was perched at the top of a small tower near the front wall (Figure 1.16), but by the early 1950s it was no longer present. Rodia stated that he removed it because he did not want to glorify the greed of the church.[87]

Instead what I suggest here is that when Rodia began to build in his yard he would have drawn from the familiar forms of Italian American yard shrines and grottoes. Though not then a strict statement of Catholic faith, considering Rodia's structures in light of the shrines illuminates the way that they express both handicraft and devotion. Like other yard art builders, Rodia's project was enabled by the availability, low cost, and ease-of-use of Portland Cement. This cement was a key material for Rodia, as he

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[82] In Claudio Segré's notes about his 1962 interview that Bill Calicura, the son of Angelina Rodia Calicura (Sam's sister), tells Segré about the flowerpots at 515 Melius Ave in Martinez. Segré writes that they're in the "same collage style." See Segré letter to CSRTW, "Appendix A.6," *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*, 381.

[83] "Artwork, 1974," Box 1, Folder 3, WTC SP.

[84] An undated flyer pictured in *I Build the Tower* attests to the fact that Rodia preached on the radio as an evangelist. A magazine article claims that while living in Long Beach Rodia became a preacher with the Church of God, a Pentecostal denomination. See unknown author, "Dream Towers," *When Magazine*, March 1947, 13. In addition, Rodia later gifted ornamental planters to the Bethel Pentacostal Church near Watts, signaling his possible ongoing association with the denomination. See Goldstone and Goldstone, *The Los Angeles Watts Towers*, 35.

[85] William Hale and Ray Wisniewsky Interview with Simon Rodia, 1953, Box 5, File 5, CSRTW MSS.

[86] Another form that repeats in the towers is a cross in a circle, which could be interpreted as a sun cross or simply as a visually interesting abstract pattern that Rodia chose to repeat.

[87] The cross is visible in Charles Owen's 1939 drawing, but does not appear in photographs from the early 1950s. In 1952 Rodia stated that he took down the cross because "Christ He not crucified to build the power of the wealthy Church…the priest come by and rub hands; he think Cross justify *him*!" See Selden Rodman, "The Artist Nobody Knows," *New World Writing* 2 (1952): 156.

used it both architecturally to pack the joints connecting metal components and seal the steel armature against the elements, and sculpturally as the "glue" to embed ornaments and a substance he could mold by hand to create a variety of forms (Figure 1.17). Rodia gained the skill to handle concrete in such an innovative variety of ways through his paid work as a cement finisher, where he would have erected scaffolds, and shaped and polished cement surfaces, sometimes while suspended hundreds of feet in the air (Figure 1.18).[88] It bears stating the obvious here—the Watts Towers manifests an undeniable display of building skill.[89]

That Rodia meant the site to be read as an expression of his professional identity as a skilled workman is evidenced in two panels of the decorative wall lining the sidewalk (Figures 1.19 and 1.20). He created semi-circles of concrete with impressions of his tools, along with the date "1923" and his initials "SR". As a concrete finisher he would have been required to own these tools (Figure 1.21) and bring them to the worksite, so they would have been distinctive indicators of his trade. He also pressed horseshoes in the concrete with the points down, a traditional Italian folk practice meant to ward off bad luck or the evil eye.[90] The panels emphasize Rodia's identity as a construction worker, framing his building as a skilled, masculine pursuit despite its location in the space of the home.

In addition to his site's display of handicraft, Rodia chose to use a style of ornamentation that resonates with the devotional significance of Catholic material culture. Rather than use ornamentation sparsely or cluster it in a few areas of emphasis, nearly all of Watts Towers' many surfaces are covered in small objects or imprinted with patterns. The ornamentation extends even to parts of the site that no one else was likely to see, like the very tops of the hundred-foot towers. The ornamentation records Rodia's investment of time and care—collecting such a mass of small objects, and then applying them piece-by-piece to the surface.

The shells in particular signal dedication both because of their religious import, and because of the journeys Rodia undertook to gather them. In Long Beach shells would have been convenient materials as his house was close to beaches so replete with shells that there was a bustling shell polishing and curio manufacturing industry in the city.[91] Yet he continued to use shells as a primary ornamental material even after he moved to Watts, where the nearest coastline was fifteen miles away. Out of the tens of thousands of shells embedded in the concrete of the Watts Towers scientists have identified thirty-three species. With a few exceptions of four shells that represent solitary examples of non-local species, the thousands of remaining shells are indigenous to Southern California, and would be found in sheltered bay or lagoon environments like the bays off of Long Beach and the surrounding cities (Figure 1.22). Further, the markings on the shells show that they were collected on the beach, instead of scavenged from seafood

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[88] This description of the tasks of a cement finisher and cement finisher helper is from United States Employment Service, *Job Descriptions for the Construction Agency in Five Volumes, Volume 2*, (Washington, D.C.: US Government Print Office, 1936), 221 and 225–226.
[89] I will discuss the structure of the Watts Towers in more detail in the next chapter.
[90] See S.A. Callisen, "The Evil Eye in Italian Art," *Art Bulletin* 19, no. 3 (September 1937), 461.
[91] Walter H. Case, *The History of Long Beach and Vicinity, Volume 1* (Chicago: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1927), 325.

restaurants.[92] This means that rather than just using bottles, tile, or other materials that could be found in his neighborhood or work sites, Rodia made the effort to travel all the way to the coast to gather shells. Indeed, he repeatedly recounted walking to the beach along miles of train tracks with a sack on his back.[93] His was a pilgrimage that, if it not necessarily indicating an allegiance to Catholicism, reveals a desire to follow the precepts of its vernacular forms.

Of course, if Rodia had adhered more closely to typical yard art conventions—if he had reproduced his Long Beach yard in Watts—his creation likely would have met the same fate of the bulldozer. The Watts Towers is set apart most obviously by its scale and open, linear structure, but also by its ornamentation. Italian American yard shrines and grottoes are meant to mimic natural cave formations, and typically builders use organic ornamental materials like stone and shell, resulting in monochromatic, bulky structures. By using shells selectively alongside a panoply of other materials, Rodia broke from precedent in striking ways. In the next sections I will argue that the startling form of the Watts Towers emerged from the ways that the Italian material culture described in this section intersected with other forms, practices, and materials.

Ceramic Tile and the Racial Politics of Regional Architecture

A rainbow of fifteen thousand ceramic tile pieces adorns the Watts Towers. Many of the tiles are solid colors, but others feature intricate geometric designs. In particular, Rodia favored a heart design, which he used repeatedly throughout the site (Figure 1.23). He pressed whole tiles as well as fragments into the concrete to create neatly curved lines on thin tower bands, to line the bases of larger structures, and to decorate the entrance to his house, where two imposing peacocks—the largest complete tiles on the property—frame the front steps (Figure 1.24).[94] But a casual viewer would be most likely to encounter the tiles up close in the raucous mosaics on the wall that lines the sidewalk along 107th Street. The eight-foot wall is divided into seventeen panels, each with its own composition. In some, whole tiles form an orderly, monochromatic grid or a delicate arc made of small spots of color; in others, jagged pieces in clashing patterns are fitted tightly together like an intricate but inscrutable puzzle (Figure 1.25).

Rodia's use of tile is one of his site's most distinctive features. It contributes to the architectural feel of the site, articulating the lines of the structural bands and creating

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[92] Bruno Pernet and Paul Valentich-Scott, "Who's on Watts (Towers)? The molluscan fauna of a National Historic Landmark" (poster presentation, Western Society of Naturalists, Seaside, CA, Nov. 9, 2012). Pernet and Valentich-Scott note that the local species *Chione californiensis* is the most prevalent, though *Argopecten ventricosus* and *Tivela stultorum* are also abundant.

[93] For example in 1960 Rodia described walking from Redondo Beach to gather shells, and in 1962 Claudio Segrè reported that Rodia said that he "picked up sea shells along the beach while walking from San Pedro to Long Beach with an old cement sack on his back." See transcript of Sam Rodia, conversation with Mae Babitz and Jeanne Morgan (September 1960) and letter from Claudio Segrè to CSRTW, January 25, 1962, both located in Box 1, File 1, CSRTW MSS. Rodia's arduous journeys to gather materials like shells were also mentioned in early press coverage such as "Dream Towers," *When Magazine*, March 1947, 13.

[94] The peacock tiles were made by the Calco company. In an interview in 1953 Rodia said that they were given to him by a man from San Francisco who admired his work. William Hale and Ray Wisniewsky Interview with Simon Rodia, 1953, Box 5, File 5, CSRTW MSS.

patterns that move along the flat planes of walls. The tiles form distinctive rainbow surfaces on the Watts Towers, a variety of bright colors and geometric patterns next to one another animating the rough textures of the concrete. This tile work has been widely remarked upon for its similarity to Spanish architect Antoni Gaudí's Sagrada Familia or Parque Güell.[95] I concur that the Catalan influence on the Watts Towers is significant, but I argue that it should be considered in sources closer to Rodia's everyday life. Most studies of the Watts Towers have focused on Rodia's Italian identity, or the African American community in Watts that became closely associated with the Tower in the 1960s. However, during the period of the Watts Towers' construction Rodia was closely connected with the Mexican community in Los Angeles through his social relationships, the neighborhood where he lived, and the style of the ceramic tiles he used, which reflect the Spanish Colonial Revival in the regional architecture of Southern California.

For his first twenty years in the United States Rodia lived in Italian immigrant enclaves near family members. In the early 1910s Rodia's drinking and abuse caused a separation from his wife and children and a rift in the extended family, but he kept in touch with relatives living in Northern California throughout his life, particularly his sister Angelina.[96] However, from the late 1910s onward many of Rodia's social connections were with Mexican Americans. In El Paso Rodia resided in a neighborhood that was home to a majority Mexican American population, and during that time he married his second wife Benita Chacón, who was Mexican American.[97] They were living together when Sam began to build his first known yard structures in Long Beach. The Rodias' neighbors and close friends there were a Mexican couple, Mercedes and Manuel García. Around this time a Spanish-language flier advertised a religious sermon that Rodia gave on the radio, suggesting that he spoke Spanish. Sam and Benita divorced shortly before he moved to Watts, but for his first several years on 107th Street he had a third partner, a wife or girlfriend named Carmen who was a Mexican immigrant.[98] She

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[95] In an oft-repeated anecdote, in 1961 Bud Goldstone showed Rodia photographs of Gaudí's Sagrada Familia and asked if he had ever seen them. Rodia replied by asking if Gaudí had had help building. When he heard that Gaudí had a team of workers, he replied, "I did it myself!" Goldstone and Goldstone, *The Los Angeles Watts Towers*, 60.

[96] Rodia listed Angelina on his World War II draft registration card as the "Person who will always know your address." In addition, the family attests that Rodia occasionally visited Angelina, and sometime while he was building his environment in Watts he constructed fountains and other sculptures in her yard in Martinez. For more on Rodia's relationship with his Italian family in northern California see *I Build the Tower*, directed by Ed Landler and Brad Byer, 2016; as Rodia's grand-nephew Byer was able to collect candid family recollections not present elsewhere.

[97] The 1918 and 1919 El Paso Directories list Samuel Rodia as a janitor at the Martin Building, as does his draft card, which lists Mary Venita (likely Benita) Rodia, living at 426 S. Kansas Street. "U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995," *Ancestry.com,* accessed June 29, 2018. The 1920 El Paso census does not list 426 S. Kansas Street, but nearly every other address on S. Kansas Street was occupied by Mexican American residents. 1920 El Paso Census: Precinct 3, District 0041, 1920, Sheet 5B, *Ancestry.com*, accessed June 29, 2018.

[98] What happened to Benita is a matter of debate. The Garcías stated that Benita returned to El Paso after she and Rodia divorced. In her research for the CSRTW Mae Babitz claims to have found a newspaper article stating that Benita committed suicide, but I have not been able to verify this. See Mae Babitz and William Emboden, untitled manuscript, Books, Plays, Films Folder 7, WTC SP, 35.

reportedly left him after several years, walking out with many of his possessions.[99] Unfortunately, there is frustratingly little information about the women who lived with Rodia when he began to build ornamented concrete structures on the properties they occupied—the historical record reveals almost nothing about them except their names.

Still, Benita and Carmen's presence reminds us that where the Rodias could live, and therefore where Rodia could build his yard structures, was delimited by racial and ethnic identity. In the 1920s Italians and Mexicans had an unstable relationship to whiteness. The racial status of Italians who arrived in waves of mass migration throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially darker-skinned Southern Italians, is a matter of debate.[100] Some scholars contend that Jewish, Irish, and Southern European peoples including Italians, occupied an "in-between" status in this period, neither considered fully people of color nor fully white.[101] On the other hand, scholars like Thomas A. Guglielmo maintain that Italians were "white on arrival," as they were never the target of systematic racial discrimination. However, Guglielmo is careful to distinguish between race and color in the treatment of Italians—he writes that Italians were racially Italian, or inferior to Anglo Americans, but their color was white affording them most of the privileges of whiteness in this period.[102] On the other hand, in the early twentieth century Mexicans were generally legally classified as white, but were not afforded the privileges typically associated with whiteness; they were subject to systematic discrimination through exclusionary segregation policies in public facilities, housing, schools, and employment, and higher rates of harassment by law enforcement.[103] Some scholars have argued that this treatment was due to the ways that nationality complicates race—since many Mexicans in the United States were not citizens, they became a racialized other due to notions of foreignness that intersected with skin color.[104]

By 1928 Los Angeles had the largest Mexican population of any American city, and it also had a relatively large population of Italians for the West Coast.[105] There was intermixing between these two communities—Mexican Americans were more likely to

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[99] This story about Carmen also comes from the interview with the Garcías.

[100] Around the time of Italy's national unification in the mid-nineteenth century, Southern Italians became racialized; for instance, anthropologists argued that white northern Italians were descended from Aryan races, but southern Italians were primarily of inferior African descent. See Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 22-23; Guglielmo, "Are Italians White?" 9–11.

[101] See Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998); and Robert Orsi, "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People: Street Feste and the Problem of the Dark-Skinned Other in Italian Harlem, 1920-1990," *American Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (1992): 313–347.

[102] See Guglielmo, "Introduction" to *White on Arrival,* 3–13.

[103] Here I draw from the writing of George A. Martinez, who describes the race-based discrimination faced by Mexican Americans despite their formal legal status as white. See "Legal Construction of Race: Mexican-Americans and Whiteness," *The Harvard Latino Law Review*, 2 (1997): 321–348.

[104] George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[105] For the statistic about the Mexican population of Los Angeles see Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 24. Gloria Ricci Lothrop notes that the Italian American population of Los Angeles doubled after World War I, from 9,650 to 16,851; see "Italians of Los Angeles," 249.

intermarry with Italian Americans than most other ethnic or racial groups.[106]And Italians and Mexicans lived alongside one another in neighborhoods like Sonoratown and Chavez Ravine. Their proximity reflected the ways that they were similarly affected by housing segregation. Much of Los Angeles was restricted by racial covenants, which prevented non-white people from occupying property in certain neighborhoods (unless they were servants). The covenants sometimes specified a narrow definition of "white" that meant Anglo-American persons born in the United States. Thus, although Italians and Mexican did not face the same level of housing discrimination as African and Asian Americans, where Sam and his partners lived was constrained by their ethnic and racial identity. For instance, in one interview Rodia claimed that he had considered purchasing a property in Beverly Hills at the intersection of Santa Monica and Wilshire Boulevards. However, Beverly Hills was developed as an all-white community with especially restrictive covenants, so Rodia and his partner would not have been allowed to live there.[107]

Instead, Rodia purchased a property in the unrestricted town of Watts. Watts had come into being in the first decade of the twentieth century with the expansion of the Pacific Electric train system.[108] By 1906 the area had been nearly completely subdivided, including the irregular parcels of farmland that bordered the train right-of-way, where Rodia would later purchase his distinctive triangular lot.[109] Watts was officially incorporated as a city in 1907, one of numerous working class suburbs that sprouted up in Los Angeles in the decades before World War II. The decentralized urban geography of Los Angeles, with sprawling industrial cores linked by train and bus lines, allowed for working-class laborers to access work while owning their own plot of land. By the time Rodia arrived in 1921, Watts was home to 4,529 residents, an unusually racially diverse population of families of Greek, German, Mexican and Japanese descent, and a larger African American population than any other similarly sized town in the Los Angeles area.[110] This was in stark contrast to the white-only industrial suburbs that bordered Watts to the east; for instance, in 1922 the neighboring suburb of South Gate was nearly completely non-Hispanic white, and remained so until the 1960s.[111]

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[106] It's worth noting that they were also free to do so because of miscegenation laws that allowed Mexican Americans to intermarry with white people, while African and Asian Americans were prohibited from doing so. Constantine Panunzio, "Intermarriage in Los Angeles, 1924–33," *American Journal of Sociology* 49, no. 5 (March 1942), 701.

[107] Rodia made this statement about looking for a plot in Beverly Hills in his interview with Hale and Wisniewsky, 1953. Jerry González discusses how restrictive covenants in Beverly Hills were applied to Mexican Americans in *In Search of Mexican Beverly Hills: Latino Suburbanization in Postwar Los Angeles* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 50–52.

[108] Current-day Watts was a tract of rural farmland known as Rancho Tajauta until 1902, when the Pacific Electric Railway Company purchased a parcel of land from the Watts family in order to establish a station and rail yard there. Patricia Rae Adler, "Watts: From Suburb to Black Ghetto" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1977), 23.

[109] This history is paraphrased from MaryEllen Bell Ray's *The City of Watts, California: 1907–1926* (Los Angeles: Rising Pub, 1985). Longtime resident Alfred Belieu filed a Tract Map for this land in 1905.

[110] Adler, "Watts: From Suburb to Black Ghetto," 60.

[111] John H.M. Laslett discusses how the markedly differing racial demographics of Watts and South Gate developed in the 1920s in *Sunshine was Never Enough: Los Angeles Workers, 1880–2010* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 89–94; see also Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*, for a history of South Gate from the 1920s to the 1960s.

Watts' location enabled Sam Rodia to pursue construction work all over the city. Big Red train cars serviced the Watts Depot several blocks from their property, which was at the crux of several routes, including a line linking the Long Beach harbor with downtown Los Angeles. A 1912 *Los Angeles Times* article claimed that it was possible to catch a train from Watts to Los Angeles about every three minutes, and the Watts city council stationary proudly referred to the city as the "Hub of the Universe."[112] In addition to its central location near public transportation, Watts also had a particularly widespread reputation for affordability that might have appealed to a working-class construction worker. Starting in the first decade of the twentieth century, the Golden State Realty Company ran newspaper advertisements touting installment plans for property in Watts at just a dollar down and a dollar a week.[113] Although other communities ran similar advertisements, the Golden State Realty Company's marketing campaign was especially aggressive for Watts; so much so that it became the basis for a Broadway musical comedy-turned-feature film released in 1916, featuring the zany story of three hoboes who cook up a moneymaking scheme to develop a boomtown called Watts.[114]

Scholars typically argue that Sam Rodia purchased the property at 1765 E. 107th Street primarily because of the visibility it afforded his creation—as the towers grew in height they could be seen not only from the nearby train tracks taking commuters to and from downtown Los Angeles, but also from the other tracks with cars from Redondo Beach and San Pedro.[115] And certainly, as I will discuss in the next section, the public address of the Watts Towers is an important part of its meaning. However, I argue that we must also acknowledge the significance of the location of Rodia's property in relation to the racialized geography of Watts. That is, given Sam's close ties to the Mexican American community and the fact that he was likely living with Benita or Carmen when choosing a property to purchase, they may have moved to that street in Watts because they felt comfortable in a neighborhood where many Mexican Americans lived.

For in the early 1920s 107th Street (then called Robin Street) was located in the part of Watts known as the *colonia*, which was home to the city's robust Mexican

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[112] "Want Ten Thousand," *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 1912, Proquest. A study printed in Adler's dissertation shows that in 1925 468 people in Watts rode the Big Red Cars to employment in the central business district; see "Watts: From Suburb to Black Ghetto," 195.

[113] Enrique Avila states this phrase "a dollar down and a dollar a week" several times in an interview from 1933. See Clara Gertrude Smith, "The Development of the Mexican People in the Community of Watts" (MA thesis, University of Southern California, 1933), 8.

[114] Adler describes some of the Golden State Realty Company's advertisement tactics, which included handing out brochures and free tickets at major train stations, having horse and buggies at the ready to tour prospective buyers, and placing a plethora of newspaper advertisements, see Adler, "Watts: From Suburb to Black Ghetto," 41–42. The theater production and film "Lonesome Town" angered many residents of Watts but it helped to boost the profile of the city. See "What Publicity Did For Watts," *Los Angeles Times,* September 11, 1910, in which the unnamed author writes, "It was not pleasant to our people of Watts to be thus ridiculed, but it caused people to talk about Watts; it advertised Watts; and it aroused the spirit of the residents of Watts."

[115] Notes from Hale and Wisniewsky's 1953 interview read "Chose site for a reason: Not so much to live; but where towers could be seen, and since industry couldn't very well build here (didn't say exactly why) this was it." This statement from Rodia has been repeated in much of the literature, for instance Thomas Harrison writes that Rodia "chose the location for his Towers with their visibility utmost in his mind…" Harrison, "Without Precedent," *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*, 96.

American community. Mexican contract workers were some of the earliest residents of Watts, emigrating north to build the train lines. Many lived in the Pacific Electric company labor camps, but others bought affordable property and built homes along 107th Street and the surrounding area.[116] The *colonia* in Watts was part of a network of such communities across Los Angeles where Mexican Americans lived together, a population that grew in the 1910s and 20s as immigrants fled the unrest of the Mexican Revolution.[117] When Rodia bought his property on 107th Street there was a mix of Anglo-American and Mexican residents, but by 1930 he was the only non-Mexican resident on the block and remained so for at least a decade.[118]

It is important to attend to the Watts Towers' location in the *colonia* because of the influence of the neighborhood's material culture in the decades that Rodia worked in his backyard. Unfortunately, there are few visual or written records of the area as Mexicans were often omitted from sources like directories and local papers.[119] The most detailed account of the Watts *colonia* was written by a white reformer concerned with the ability of Mexican women to assimilate to American culture, which describes the wooden "shacks" of the neighborhood.[120] Reformers used the word "shack" to refer to the architecture of impoverished Mexican communities, describing houses built by amateurs out of unlikely materials like "brush, reeds, tin cans, old boxes and other junk."[121] Though the "Mexican shack" was a racialized term used in Southern California in this period, owner-built houses were common across working-class suburbs of Los Angeles.[122] The low cost of property in areas like Watts was due to the fact that they were unplanned, meaning that communities had few services and most properties did not already have structures on them.[123] In unplanned suburbs families often lived in temporary shelter on

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[116] Smith, "The Development of the Mexican People in the Community of Watts," 6–8.

[117] By 1921 some 35,000 Mexicans lived in communities across Los Angeles County. See Stephanie Lewthwaite, "Landscapes of Labor: Reforming the Camp and Colonia," in *Race, Place, and Reform in Mexican Los Angeles: A Transnational Perspective, 1890– 1940* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2009), 134–160.

[118] The 1920 census from shortly before Rodia moved in indicates that the street had a mix between Mexican and Anglo-American residents. However, in the 1930 and 1940 censuses Rodia appears as the street's only non-Mexican resident. The 1950 census is not yet available, but a 1956 directory shows that by the 1950s the street was populated by a majority of persons with Spanish surnames, but also some persons with non-Spanish surnames, likely African American residents.

[119] Adler, "Watts: From Suburb to Black Ghetto," 74–75. The streets of Watts were re-named when it was incorporated into Los Angeles in 1926. To avoid confusion I refer to Robin Street as 107th Street throughout.

[120] Clara Gertrude Smith's thesis is a rare record of the Mexican community of Watts in the early 1930s, but must be read through the lens of Smith's reformist and assimilationist aims. Lewthwaite ably discusses Smith's text, and the gender norms it perpetuates, on pages 148-151 of *Race, Place and Reform in Mexican Los Angeles*.

[121] Quoted in Lewthwaite, *Race, Place and Reform*, 139.

[122] Of course "shack" is a broad term that has used in many other contexts, such as in reference to the domiciles of working-class people in Appalachia. However, here I draw from Lewthwaite's argument that in this place and time officials used the terms "shack" and "Mexican shack" to indicate what they saw as "a racialized distortion of the landscape rather than as a product of exploitative commercial agriculture," 139.

[123] Becky Nicolaides notes that unplanned suburbs seemed to be preferred to planned suburbs precisely because of the flexibility they provided working class homeseekers. For instance, Torrance, a planned suburban community, grew at a slow rate in comparison to unplanned suburbs. See Becky M. Nicolaides,

their properties while they built their houses.[124] It was typical for owners to purposefully build small houses, allowing for space to grow food in gardens, raise livestock, and so on (Figure 1.26).[125] In this way, the working-class suburb acted as a bridge between rural and urban ways of life, providing a buffer of security in the face of a precarious job market, especially in the decades before the emergence of state-sponsored social programs like Social Security and unemployment benefits.

In Watts, agents urged owner building as a way to sell property at lower prices, and the irregular placement of buildings in the Sanborn Fire Maps of Watts indicate that owner-constructed buildings were prevalent.[126] Oral histories from the 1920s recorded with residents of nearby working-class suburbs attest to the lengthy and arduous process of owner building—families might live in a tent, shack, or garage for years, resuming construction on their houses as the money became available and working in the hours after the end of a long day of wage labor.[127] So, yards in working class suburbs like Watts were not simply a site of leisure, but of production and construction. And it was not unusual for working-class landowners without formal training in architecture to undertake lengthy construction projects on their properties.

When Rodia purchased the property at 1765 107th Street there was a small two-room wooden house on the site, as well as a small outbuilding, which he likely demolished to make space for his yard constructions.[128] We can imagine that, since his building project took place on a street where the number of owner-built houses doubled between 1920 and 1940, he was not the only person hammering in his off hours on long-term construction projects. Rodia's practices were certainly eccentric, but they can be viewed within the broader context of owner building during this time, especially in working-class Mexican neighborhoods, which were renowned for their re-use of non-traditional materials. And perhaps most importantly, the prevalence of vernacular building, the absence of bureaucratic oversight, and the governmental neglect of *colonias* in working-class suburbs like Watts help to justify why no government representatives interfered with Rodia's hundred-foot Towers for over three decades.[129]

My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[124] Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*, 21–29.

[125] Ibid., *My Blue Heaven*, 3–4.

[126] The California State University, Northridge has one of the most comprehensive Sanborn Map collections on the West Coast. The Watts Sanborn maps from 1922, 1928, 1929, 1930, and 1939 indicate many buildings with irregular placement, as well as the construction and reconstruction of a number of buildings in this period.

[127] Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*, 29–33.

[128] The outbuilding is pictured in the 1922, 1928, and 1929 Sanborn maps; the property is listed as two lots, 1765 on the west side where the house is located, and 1767 on the east triangular lot where the outbuilding is located. However, in the 1930 Sanborn map the "1767" was erased, both properties are listed as 1765 and the outbuilding is no longer present. It is possible that Rodia bought the other part of the property sometime between 1929 and 1930 so that he could expand his building practice and knocked down the outbuilding to make room for his structures.

[129] As I will discuss in the next chapter, government representatives started noticing the Towers in the 1940s. However, they had no official record of or response to the site until in 1957 when the Board of Building and Safety Commissioners ordered that owners "demolish and remove the dangerous tower and fire-damaged building [Rodia's house]." See the reference to that letter from 1957 (now lost) in the letter

In addition to his ability to build at a monumental scale, the material culture of the neighborhood likely influenced Rodia's use of color. He broke from Italian American conventions that dictated the use of monochromatic white or grey natural materials as ornamentation. Instead, Rodia carefully selected materials in a range of bright hues to place alongside the organic white of the shells. He favored green bottles instead of brown, almost never used clear glass, embedded pieces from a rainbow range of dishes rather than a subtle color selection, and even added pigment to concrete so that it appeared as a series of pastel blocks throughout the site (Figure 1.27). This use of prismatic colors was in sync with Mexican American vernacular cultural expressions around domestic space.[130] In the *colonia* yards of the humble wooden homes were planted with flower gardens, and brightly colored laundry hung on the lines. The interiors could be even more vibrant; one family prepared their house for a festival by decorating each room in a different color, crafting an indoor shrine festooned with flowers, and hanging piñatas filled with candy on the patios.[131]

Further, the aesthetics of Rodia's building practices were also linked with Mexican American culture not only through his overall use of color, but also through his use of the Spanish Colonial style of the geometric-patterned colorful tiles. That such tiles were an available, even abundant, material when Rodia began to build structures in his Long Beach and Watts yards is a product of historical coincidence. Just a decade earlier local tile production was much less common, and the Southern Californian potteries that were in existence produced tiles in the Californian Arts and Crafts mode—low relief and subdued colors with an emphasis on their handmade qualities.[132] Rodia used these on some sections the Towers, like the Calco tiles on either side of the front door, and in several panels of the South Wall, where the earth-toned squares are arranged in a grid (Figure 1.28).[133] We can image how different the Watts Towers would appear if Rodia used Arts and Crafts tiles all over the site.

Instead, the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego marked a turning point in the visual culture of Southern California. While preceding expositions had been regularly housed in neo-classical buildings, the architecture of the Exposition was executed in ornate Spanish Colonial Revival style—plain exterior surfaces of cement stucco, terra cotta tiled roofs, towers, domes, courtyards, and extravagant ornamental mosaics in ceramic tile. The crown jewel was the California Building, which served as the Exposition's entryway, and featured a gleaming tiled dome and tower (Figure 1.29) The California Building's tiles represented a decisive shift from subdued Arts and Crafts

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from C.E. Morris, Superintendent of Building and W.G. Pearson, Principal Building Inspector, to Sam Rodia, June 4, 1959, Box 2, Folder 2, CSRTW MSS.

[130] See cultural geographer Daniel Arreola's studies of Mexican American housescapes, which reveal that one common characteristic is exteriors are distinguished by the use of bright colors; see "Mexican American Housescapes," *The Geographical Review* 78, no. 3 (1988): 299–315.

[131] Smith, The Development of the Mexican People," 29–31.

[132] See Joseph A. Taylor, "The Handcrafted Tradition in Ceramic Tiles," in *Handmade Tiles: Designing, Making, Decorating*, ed. Frank Giorgini (New York: Lark Books, 2001), 7–18.

[133] See footnote 58 for a discussion of the peacock tiles. Some of the Arts and Crafts tiles have been identified as from the Batchelder Tile Company; see Goldstone and Goldstone, *The Los Angeles Watts Towers*, 66–68. Note that Goldstone discusses Batchelder tiles on the Central tower, but current conservators believe that these tiles were added in later conservation efforts, not by Rodia.

to bright geometry reminiscent of tile work in Spain and the regions it had colonized, like Mexico and the African Mediterranean coast.[134]

Although Mission Revival architecture had been in existence for several decades, the Panama-California Exposition made it widely popular, so much so that by the late 1920s it had become the region's signature style. The past "revived" by the Spanish Colonial Revival was largely mythological—the first European settlers in California built shingle and redwood board houses, and the Spanish missions as they actually existed were much simpler in form, a far cry from the elaborate tile work and ornate layered terraces of the Spanish Colonial Revival. Historians have argued that the popularity of this fantastical architecture was due to the way in which it enabled the region's newly arrived residents to attach a mythic past to their new home. James Rawls writes, "Although California might appear to have only recently emerged from a raw, frontier stage, the missions proved that California had an epic antiquity all its own. So it was that the primarily Anglo-Protestant population of California incongruously grafted itself onto the Latin-Catholic roots of the missions."[135]

One of the goals of the 1915 Exposition was to bring tourism and development to Southern California, and land spectators quickly picked up on the romanticized history it embodied, advertising Southern California as a Mediterranean fantasyland. However, the marketing to potential new citizens of Anglo-American descent emphasized that this was a fantasy of a colonial past in service of a present free of racialized bodies. As one booster wrote of Los Angeles,

> Here is the climate of the tropics without its perils; here is the fertility of Egypt without its fellaheen [peasant laborers]; here are the fruits and flowers of Sicily without its lazzaroni [street beggars]; here are beauties of Italy without its limited market; the sunshine of Persia without its oppressions.[136]

This approach proved to be very successful—for instance, between 1920 and 1930 1.2 million people settled in Los Angeles County, tripling the population over ten years.[137] The population boom was accompanied by a thriving construction industry, and, because many of these new buildings were in the Spanish Colonial Revival style, there was a related increase in the number of Mexican and Italian workers who were hired in construction due to their familiarity with materials like tile and stucco.[138]

Starting in the late 1930s articles described Rodia as a tile setter by trade.[139] Yet the census consistently lists his occupation as a cement finisher, a fact confirmed by his

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[134] This is also the stated influence for tile style of the Exposition as a whole. See Bertram Goodhue, "the Buildings for the Panama-California Exposition San Diego, CA," *The Architectural Review* 3 No. 4, (April 1914).

[135] James Rawls, "The California Missions as Symbol and Myth," *California History* (Fall 1992): 356.

[136] Unidentified writer quoted in Dana Barlett's *The Better City* (Los Angeles: Neuner Company, 1907), 19.

[137] Ken Starr, *Material Dreams: Southern California through the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 69.

[138] Ricardo Romo, "Work and Restlessness: Occupational and Spatial Mobility among Mexicanos in Los Angeles, 1918–1928" *Pacific Historical Review* 46, No. 2 (May 1977): 165. Gloria Ricci Lothrop, "Italians of Los Angeles: An Historical Overview," *Southern California Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 279.

[139] The earliest description of Rodia as a tile setter is in Joe Seewerker, "Nuestro Pueblo: Glass Towers and Demon Rum," *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1939, A2.

friends the Garcías.[140] That the idea of Rodia as a tile setter had such appeal perhaps speaks to the prominence of tiles on the site, and also the centrality of tiles in regional architecture. Whether as a concrete finisher or a tile setter, Rodia likely helped to construct Spanish Colonial Revival buildings. For instance, a letter of recommendation from the early 1930s reveals that Rodia was working as a cement finisher for architect Charles F. Plummer.[141] In the 1920s and 30s Plummer designed a number of elaborate Spanish Colonial Revival buildings like Schaber's Cafeteria, which opened in 1928 in downtown Los Angeles. Built for $400,000, the elaborate atmosphere of the two-story cafeteria included a mural with three beautiful Spanish women, a ten-piece orchestra that provided regular music, and extensive tile mosaics that lined the stairways and walls (Figure 1.30).[142] The tiles were made by the American Encaustic Company in, of course, an ornate Spanish Colonial Revival style.

There were nearly thirty tile companies in operation simultaneously in Southern California when Rodia began to build in the early 1920s, many easily accessible via public transportation. There are a wide range of tiles embedded into the concrete surfaces of the Watts Towers, but the Spanish Colonial Revival tiles have been widely assumed to be made by the Malibu company.[143] Nevertheless, tile origins can be definitively ascertained because of copyrights on tile molds, and my research has revealed that a significant proportion come from a different maker—the American Encaustic Company (Figure 1.31). The American Encaustic-made tiles include the scroll with heart ends that was one of Rodia's favored motifs, as well as pieces with designs like waves, blossoms erupting from a vine, and rectangular scrolls (Figure 1.32).[144] Rodia may have taken these tiles home from work sites at locations like Schaber's Cafeteria. Alternately, it is possible he traveled to American Encaustic factories to gather discarded or deformed tiles—the company had a factory in Vernon, just five miles north of the Watts Towers on the Pacific Electric train line, and in Hermosa Beach another ten miles away.[145] Or, perhaps the American Encaustic Company dumped their refuse on a beach where Rodia gathered materials.[146]

No matter how he procured them, when Rodia ornamented his structure with tiles, he was using a material that bedecked a $400,000 cafeteria in a neighborhood where the

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[140] See the 1920 Long Beach census, the 1930 and 1940 Watts censuses, and the García interview.
[141] Photocopy of letter of recommendation from Charles F. Plummer, Architect, April 14, 1932, Box 17, Folder, 7, CSRTW MSS.
[142] "New Cafeteria Project Near Opening," *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 1928, E8. Display Ad for Schaber's Cafeteria, *Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 1928, 2.
[143] See for example the discussion of Malibu tiles in Goldstone and Goldstone, *The Los Angeles Watts Towers*, 66–70.
[144] Many thanks to Joseph Taylor of the Tile Heritage Foundation for his help in identifying these tiles. Using his encyclopedic visual knowledge of ceramic tiles, Taylor suggested that the tiles on the Watts Towers were made by the American Encaustic Company. We used the THF's digital archive to match a number of American Encaustic tiles to photographs fragments embedded in the Watts Towers, and then photographed the matching tiles in the THF's physical archive, as can be seen in the diagrams in Figures 1.32 and 1.33.
[145] American Encaustic opened their Vernon factory in 1919, and the Hermosa Beach factory in 1926. See Joseph Taylor, *California Tile: The Golden Era 1910–1940: Acme to Handcraft* (Atglen: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2003).
[146] Thanks to Margaretta Lovell for drawing my attention to this possibility.

average house price was valued around $2,000.[147] Further, his use of American Encaustic tiles formed a connection between his work and the very roots of the Spanish Colonial Revival, since when American Encaustic expanded from Ohio to Southern California in 1919 they bought out the equipment and molds from the company that had produced the tiles for the Panama-California Exposition.[148] This means that the same tile designs could have been used on the dome of the California Building and on hand-built concrete towers in the backyard of a *colonia* in Watts.

In this way, Rodia's use of American Encaustic tiles exposes the contradictions of the Spanish Colonial Revival. That is, decorative ceramic tiles were costly and acted as status symbols employed to support a boosterist image of Spanish Los Angeles as a wealthy city replete with grandiose mission-style mansions and tourist hotels with pools and palm trees. Yet that fantasy landscape was built by Mexican and Italian laborers who resided in the derided "shacks" of the camps and *colonias*. In some cases the construction of the "Spanish" architecture directly caused the destruction of the communities whose culture it adopted: as for example when the Mexican and Italian neighborhood of Sonoratown was razed to build Olvera Street, a theme park-like re-creation of a pre-industrial Mexican marketplace for tourists.[149] And in the decade when Schaber's was built, a third of the Mexican population of Los Angeles was forcibly deported, repatriated, or returned to Mexico of their own accord, due to factors like declining job prospects and race-based harassment.[150]

The intertwined dynamic between Rodia's Mexican American community of neighbors, friends, and partners, and the materials of the Spanish Colonial Revival is even perpetuated in the name of Rodia's site. When the filmmakers of *The Towers* asked what he called his creation, he replied "Nuestro Pueblo."[151] The phrase, which means our town in Spanish, may also have been a reference to the original name of Los Angeles—El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles de Porciúncula. Besides Rodia's address (1765), initials (SR), and the two starting dates (1921 and 1923) the only words written on the Watts Towers are "Nuestro," "Nuestra," "Pueblo," and "Los." "Los" appears just once, in faint writing in the concrete above the garage doors, alongside "Nuestro Pueblo." The latter phrase appears multiple times in words carved and formed out of small square tiles on the lowest horizontal rung of the tallest tower. Curving around the circular tile bands, Rodia interspersed the phrase with his initials and the date "1921" so that it appears in multiple different forms, such as "1921 SR Pueblo Nuestra SR" (Figure 1.33). Rodia's inclusion of multiple versions of a Spanish-language phrase

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[147] For average house prices in Watts see Adler, "Watts: From Suburb to Black Ghetto," 237.

[148] The American Encaustic Tiling Company was founded in Ohio in 1875, and by 1919 they were the largest tile manufacturing company in the country. See Taylor, *California Tile*, 4.

[149] See William David Estrada, "Chapter Four: Homelands Remembered," *The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 109–132.

[150] Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 208. For a thorough exploration of Mexican repatriation in Los Angeles in the 1930s see Sanchez's discussion in the same text in "Chapter Ten: Where is Home?: The Dilemma of Repatriation," 208–223. For a more-in-depth examination of the dynamic between the Spanish Colonial Revival and racism against Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, see William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[151] Sam Rodia, interview with William Hale and Ray Wisniewsky, 1953, Box 5, File 5, CSRTW MSS.

indicating collective ownership of space, as well as a reference to the Spanish Pueblo at the origins of the city, demonstrates the site's ties with the Mexican community.

Yet this phrase also may have had a particular source outside of the community—a weekly column in the *Los Angeles Times* that produced vignettes on the local history of the "city of romance." The column was written and illustrated by two Anglo-Americans, but was titled "Nuestro Pueblo," perpetuating the nostalgic Spanish past of the city. In 1937 the columnists wrote an article on the Watts Towers, which was reprinted in a 1939 book version that compiled ninety-six articles on Los Angeles sites notable for their history (Mission San Gabriel, the first oil well in the area) or popular interest (a gigantic wooden fish roadside attraction, the "Witch House" of Beverly Hills). [152] The depiction of the Watts Towers in *Nuestro Pueblo* definitively places it into the latter category.

The Watts Towers is presented as a charming local curiosity built by a "jolly" but "inarticulate" immigrant.[153] The original title of the article, "Glass Towers and Demon Rum," focuses on Rodia as a goofy drunk. Quoted phrases in broken English invoke ethnic stereotypes, with Rodia exclaiming of his hobby, "Twenty years ago I am all time *borracho*—what you say dronk…Then, one day, I am forget to drink!... I build my wall so much I am forget to drink. Then I am think of towers and not to drink."[154] The article notes that Rodia is Italian, but lists his last name according to the Spanish-language spelling—Rodilla.

Rodia hung the newspaper article on his wall, and bought several copies of the *Nuestro Pueblo* book, which he proudly showed to friends and visitors. It would have been an unlikely coincidence for reporters to write about hundred-foot backyard structures with the exact same name as their column. Therefore, I believe that Rodia borrowed the name of his site from the column and book. That is, Anglos in Los Angeles appropriated the Spanish language to create a nostalgic narrative of the past, and then Rodia appropriated their use of that language and re-presented it to the people who were erased by the appropriation of their culture.

7 Up Bottles, Teacups, and Bowling Balls: The Publics of Domestic Space

Organic shells and shiny tiles contribute to the Watts Towers' visual connotations of religious material culture and architectural structure, but much of the site's whimsical appeal is in Rodia's use of everyday objects to unexpected ends. A bowling ball becomes a gargoyle perched atop a wall (Figure 1.34), glass bottles in a variety of colors form shining finials at the outer spirals of the tallest towers (Figure 1.35), and teapots sit insouciantly atop balustrades and spires. Other objects are represented by the imprints they left behind—the ornate pattern of a heating register at the base of the perimeter wall, curving hearts formed by iron gates and rug beaters pressed into the concrete ground, cobs of maize sculpted by cement poured into a cast-iron cornbread mold.

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[152] Joseph Seewerker, "Nuestro Pueblo: Glass Towers and Demon Rum," *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1939, A2; Joseph Seewerker, "Glass Towers and Demon Rum," in *Nuestro Pueblo: Los Angeles City of Romance* (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Company Press, 1940), 56.

[153] The terms "jolly" and "inarticulate" are included only in the article version of Seewerker's essay, which was slightly edited for the book version; however, the sentiment of the terms applies to both texts.

[154] Seewerker, *Nuestro Pueblo*, 56.

These objects from the material culture of the home point to the fact that the functionless structures were not simply a visual spectacle, but instead formed a space where Rodia lived out his everyday life. The front gate of the property is adorned with a colorful medley of green bottles and ceramic tiles, but it also contains two mail slots with the address written above in colored concrete, one stop in a postal worker's everyday route through the neighborhood [Figure 0.6]. Adjacent to the garden spire covered in shells is a barbeque where Rodia used charcoal to heat and manipulate glass to form new ornamental shapes, but also where he cooked food outdoors.[155] Rodia added small towers and ornamentation to his wood-frame house, and inside he might have eaten off of the same inexpensive Fiestaware he used to adorn his towers (Figure 1.36). Friends describe him sitting in front of the fireplace he ornamented like the structures outside—with a border of tile, a concrete panel with imprinted gears, swirls, and lines of shells, and alternating arcs of shell and tile.[156] And behind the imprinted panels of the garage doors is the space where Rodia would sort the materials he gathered, and where he parked his red Hudson Motor Car (Figure 1.37). For many years rumors circulated that Rodia gotten into legal trouble and buried the Hudson to escape capture; this story was substantiated in 1998 when conservators accidentally encountered the remains of the Hudson buried next to the train tracks.[157]

After Rodia left Watts in the mid-1950s the house burned down leaving only that fireplace and remnants of the front wall, spared because of the concrete Rodia added as decoration (Figure 1.38).[158] Once a part of the private space of the home, the fire revealed the fireplace to the street, making it an apt symbol of the site's transformation into a public cultural attraction after Rodia left for Martinez. By the early 1960s art classes for neighborhood children were taking place on the footprint of Rodia's house, and a gatekeeper charged admission to the thousands of tourists who came from across the United States and abroad. In the Watts Towers' current state it can be difficult to remember that, despite its monumental scale and location next to the train tracks, for the period of its construction the Watts Towers was also a domestic space. Given that Rodia's structure was built in a home space in a residential neighborhood using objects of everyday life, how should we account for its public address during the slowly unfolding decades of its construction? Put differently, who were its publics between 1921 and the early 1950s?

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[155] Goldstone and Goldstone, *The Los Angeles Watts Towers*, 56.

[156] At the time Fiestaware and the other kinds of dishware that Rodia used were inexpensive and readily available. For instance, Fiestaware was given out for free at movie theaters. For more see R. and T. Kovel, *The Kovels' Collector's Guide to American Art Pottery* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1974).

[157] For instance, the Garcías stated that Rodia drove a red Hudson and would put a siren on it to get through traffic more quickly, and then park it behind the solid concrete doors. They explained that when he got into too much trouble he buried the Hudson behind his property. This was thought by many to be part of the Rodia mythology until conservators dug up the remains of the Hudson in 1998. There are photographs of the dig that recovered the Hudson remains in the Los Angeles Country Museum of Art conservation archive.

[158] The extent to which Rodia ornamented the interior of his house in keeping with the exterior is unknown as there are no extant photographs. One neighbor attested that the floors of the bathroom, kitchen, and foyer were tiled in a similar manner to the towers. See the interview with Sarah Pelagio García who lived next door to Rodia in MaryEllen Ray Bell, *The City of Watts*, 64. However, given that the concrete parts of the house survived the fire I believe it is likely that this ornamentation was not extensive.

There has been much writing in anthropology and folklore about the yard as a liminal zone between the private and public where occupants negotiate their individual identity in relationship to broader social codes.[159] However, the particular ways that yard decorations interface with the social can vary broadly. Earlier in this chapter I discussed how the availability of concrete and the changing ideologies of the home made the construction of yard structures accessible to working-class families in early twentieth-century America as an activity that was coded masculine. I also discussed yard shrines, which occupied the yards of ethnic Italian enclaves and were meant to communicate devotion to a community of believers. Alternately, the tiles on Spanish Colonial mansions and front walks also spoke to a local audience, but communicated class status and regional identity, though in some rare cases these buildings were photographed for postcards meant to communicate the appeal of California to a broader tourist audience. Yet neither of these models exactly seems to fit the Watts Towers. It certainly has a broader public than a small-scale shrine, but also does not communicate class in the same way as the exterior of a Spanish Colonial mansion. And its scale, visible from blocks away and to the thousands of commuters on the Pacific Electric train lines, seems to indicate an intended public beyond the local community.

In this section I compare the location and ornamental materials of the Watts Towers with a type of yard building I briefly touched on in the first section of this chapter—the large-scale vernacular grotto. The Watts Towers has a direct link to such structures not through an example built by Italians, but through a site built by German Catholics in the Upper Midwest. The unlikely connection was revealed in early 1950s through *The Towers* documentary. A single scene was filmed inside Rodia's house, in a corner of the living room with the establishing shot centered on the decorated fireplace (Figure 1.39). The rest of the room was relatively spare—a phonograph sat on a small table in front of the fireplace, a simple chandelier was attached by exposed wire that hung in loops from the ceiling. Frames and bulletin boards on the white walls held collages of photographs and clippings. The camera rests in close-up to give us a view of their contents—several contain newspaper articles and photographs of Rodia's creation placed next to clippings of artworks and ads for movies, and snapshot photographs of figures too small to make out. But one ornate wooden frame surrounds a portrait of Rodia in his youth alongside a distinguishable image—a black-and-white postcard of an ornamented concrete grotto located in rural Wisconsin (Figure 1.40).

Labeled "Patriotism in Stone—Dickeyville, Wis./2-31" the small photograph pictures a curved ornamented wall, which forms an open semi-circle around a multi-tiered fountain with an eagle statue on top.[160] Along the top of the wall are scrolled forms, balustrades, and a large curved archway at the center, with a marble carved statue of a heroic figure nestled inside—his hat and robes identify him as Christopher Columbus. At either end of the wall are statues of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln standing on pedestals covered in light stone with dark stone hearts in the outline of a circle. The thick, allover ornamentation that covers the shrine translates even in a

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[159] Colleen Sheehy and Preminda Jacob, "A Dialectic of Personal and Communal Aesthetics: Paradigms of Yard Ornamentation in Northeastern America," *Journal of Popular Culture* (Winter 1992): 91–105.

[160] The photograph I analyze here is almost certainly the one spotted by Hale and Wisniewsky—the caption is the same and their film pictures it briefly though the lighting is dim.

small image: a carpet of stones and shells as well as many other objects that are impossible to discern. Besides a hint of other structures at the right of the composition, the fields behind the Patriotism Shrine stretch uninterrupted, with just a few small trees dotting the plain that forms a gentle curved horizon line against a blank expanse of sky.

When the filmmakers queried Rodia about why he hung this postcard on his wall he responded that it was a "Jo[b] I did in Wisconsin." Rodia's enigmatic response is recorded only through incomplete handwritten notes, so the specifics of his relationship to the site remain obscure.[161] In fact, the Patriotism Shrine pictured in the postcard is one of a series of structures built by German immigrant priest Father Mathias Wernerus, including a freestanding shrine to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a large-scale Grotto of Christ the King and Mary His Mother (Figure 1.41), and numerous ornamented fences, birdbaths, bird houses, and flower pots (Figure 1.42).[162] As a whole the site was called the Dickeyville Grotto, but Father Wernerus did not begin construction there until the mid-to-late 1920s, after Rodia built structures at Long Beach and bought his property in Watts. Therefore despite Rodia's claims, he almost certainly did not work on that particular site.[163]

It is possible that Rodia saw, or even worked on, a similar churchyard grotto during the period in the 1910s when his whereabouts were unaccounted for. The Dickeyville Grotto is one iteration in a broader building trend initiated by Catholic priests from Europe who were encouraged to immigrate to the United States to serve the rapidly growing Catholic immigrant communities in the burgeoning Midwest.[164] The first task of these frontier priests was to raise funds for a church and curate the parish grounds. Some chose to reimagine the grotto tradition of their native Europe for the grounds of their American parishes, creating large-scale, ornamented shrines and grottoes out of concrete. While these structures appeared all over the country, German Catholics in the Upper Midwest built large-scale grottoes with particular frequency during the first half of the

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[161] Unfortunately the original recording of this conversation has been lost, and the only evidence of Rodia claiming to work on the Dickeyville Grotto is in the paraphrased transcript of the conversation with Hale and Wisniewsky, see "Appendix A.2," *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*, 359; Box 5, File 5, CSRTW MSS.
[162] The history of the Dickyville Grotto in this section is drawn from Susan A. Niles, *Dickeyville Grotto: The Vision of Father Mathias Wernerus* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997).
[163] Some have speculated that Rodia worked on the Dickeyville Grotto from 1906 to 1910, in the years before he moved to the West Coast, and others suggest that he took on this work in the 1910s, between divorcing his wife and moving to El Paso in the late 1910s. However, Father Dobberstein only began to construct his first, smaller ornamented pieces in 1920 and started to construct the large-scale elements of the Dickeyville Grotto in 1924. Further, Dickeyville local historian Karen Reese has scoured census and church parishioner records for any trace of Rodia and found none. She also believes that Rodia never worked on the site since no descendants of grotto builders ever heard of him, and in a nearly entirely German-Catholic town the presence of a single Italian man would have been notable. Karen Reese, conversation with author, September 19, 2016. Finally, Sam stated in the interview with *The Towers* filmmakers, "Used to design flower pots at home with wire around and shells (only for presents never sold) and used to bring to boss's wife for present.' Thus he got he Dickyville monument job." This also suggests that Rodia did not work on the site, since clergy like Father Wernerus were prohibited from marrying.
[164] The phenomenon of immigrant priests is discussed in broader terms by Thomas T. McAvoy, "Americanism and Frontier Catholicism," *The Review of Politics* 5, no. 3 (1943): 275-301. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1404093; and by Thomas W. Spalding, who notes that the Catholic laity pushed the edges of the frontier, and the church had to scramble to find priests to follow them. See Spalding, "Frontier Catholicism," *The Catholic Historical Review* 77, no. 3 (1991): 470–484.

twentieth century.[165] The Upper Midwest grotto tradition can be traced to a single site—the Grotto of the Redemption in the small town of West Bend, Iowa, which was built by Father Paul Dobberstein between 1912 and 1954.[166]

Yet the image that hung on Rodia's living room wall was not a photograph or postcard from the 1910s that he might have collected at the Grotto of the Redemption or some other site. Instead, the postcard of the Patriotism Shrine dates to the early 1930s, after Rodia was well underway with the construction of his first two monumental towers. I believe that it is most likely that Rodia bought the postcard or it was given to him after he had already begun to build because of the perceived similarities between the two sites. Yet the postcard and Rodia's assertion of ownership was enough to convince *The Towers* filmmakers to write in their notes, "A photo of Sam's work. Catholic monument, in typical Rodia technique: stone, cement and tile." The Dickeyville Grotto's address to the public and ornamentation both overlap with and diverge from the Watts Towers in ways that help to elucidate the significance of the Watts Towers' location in a domestic space, Rodia's use of everyday objects, and the site's relationship to its publics.

To start, there are a number of similarities between the Dickeyville Grotto and the Watts Towers. Like Rodia, Father Wernerus began with smaller forms—concrete flowerpots ornamented with stone and shells—before moving on to large-scale structures that are ambiguously positioned between sculpture and architecture. Wernerus integrated dense allover ornamentation, but also deviated from traditional shrine and grotto practices: in particular, from those used at the Grotto of the Redemption, which was likely Wernerus's direct inspiration for his building practice.[167] Father Dobberstein had refused to use "common materials" like household glass and china on the Grotto of the Redemption, since the site was intended to transcend the everyday and create the impression that it had organically grown from nature.[168] In contrast, Father Wernerus incorporated manmade objects including colored glass, ceramic figurines, arrowheads,

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[165] The term "Upper Midwest" is typically used to refer to the geographical region encompassing Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, South and North Dakota, and upper Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Iowa. The Upper Midwest grotto tradition can be traced to a single site—the Grotto of the Redemption in the small town of West Bend, Iowa, which was built by Father Paul Dobberstein between 1912 and 1954, and was likely a direct point of inspiration for the Dickeyville Grotto. For more on Midwestern grottoes see Lisa Stone and Jim Zanzi, *Sacred Spaces and Other Places: A Guide to Grottos and Sculptural Environments in the Upper Midwest* (Chicago: The School of the Art Institute of Chicago Press, 1993). While the Midwestern Grottoes have been the subject of the most sustained research, many other sites exist across the country such as the Ave Maria Grotto in Cullman, Alabama, built by Bavarian-born Brother Joseph Zoettl between 1932 and 1958, and the Black Madonna Shrine in Pacific, Missouri, built by Polish immigrant Brother Bronislaus Luszcz from 1937 and 1960.

[166] This is the most widely cited date range for the grotto's construction; however, work continued on the Grotto after Dobberstein's death in 1954—his "right-hand man" Matt Szerensce continued construction on the grotto through 1959, at which point Father Greving took up the task of the grotto's expansion and upkeep.

[167] Wernerus never explicitly stated that Dobberstein influenced him to build the Dickeyville Grotto. However, Wernerus attended St. Francis Seminary at the same time as Dobberstein and would have seen the Our Lady of Lourdes Grotto that Dobberstein built on the grounds in 1894. Also, given the proximity of the Grotto of the Redemption and the numerous articles in the Catholic press describing it, Wernerus was almost certainly aware of the Grotto of the Redemption, even if he hadn't seen it in person.

[168] Quote from Lisa Stone, Jim Zanzi, and Earl Iversen, "In Imitation of Nature: Father P.M. Dobberstein's Grottoes in Iowa and Wisconsin," *Backyard Visionaries*, 55.

and knob balls from car gearshifts (Figure 1.43 and Figure 1.44). Finally, like the Watts Towers the Dickeyville Grotto was remarked upon for how much it seemed to stand out from the surrounding landscape. In this case, the heavily bejeweled structure forms a notable contrast to the rural, working-class surrounding landscape of rolling fields and wooden farmhouses and barns.

However, the Dickeyville Grotto's location in a churchyard, rather than the yard of a house, leads to several key differences from the Watts Towers. The first is the resources that the tie with the parish afforded Father Wernerus. In 1872 the three-acre property of the Dickeyville Grotto had been donated to the church for the nominal sum of fifty-one dollars. When Father Wernerus arrived in 1918 he had ample space to not only build a house for school children and teaching nuns, but also a series of large-scale and relatively spread out grottoes and shrine structures. Father Wernerus could also draw on the donated labor of parishioners like the blacksmith who shaped the iron skeleton of his structures, and his sister, who created the glass flowers and other details of ornamentation.[169] He also used the financial resources of the parish to obtain many of his building materials. While Father Wernerus applied some recycled objects, like soda bottles thrown by passing motorists, most of his ornaments were purchased.[170] The cost of the Dickeyville Grotto indexed the devotion of its maker —Father Wernerus explained, "no money was spared to make [the grotto] a worthy habitation of Mary and her Divine Child."[171] He is reputed to have spent $10,000 on materials for the site, though some of the most expensive pieces, like a $1,000 onyx altar, were donated.[172] The wonder of the site was amplified by the distance that materials traveled to get there—coral from the Pacific Ocean, a slab of redwood from California, Carrera marble from Italy, and so on. But the ornately decorated interior of the Holy Ghost church located adjacent to the grottoes meant that no matter how unconventional the ornamentation, it was likely to be read in the context of Catholic material culture (Figure 1.45).

This investment of time and labor created a wondrous space for the small congregation in Dickeyville, which held services in front of the site (Figure 1.46). However, it was also made for a broader public—the "pilgrims" traveling by car on the newly built highways, the infrastructure of an emerging national tourist economy.[173] In the early twentieth century, movements to increase American tourism framed it as a patriotic duty, urging citizens to "See Europe if you will, but See America First."[174] The Dickeyville Grotto was located right along Interstate Highway 61, and patriotic and religious consumption were intentionally intertwined at the site. In the souvenir booklet

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[169] Niles, *Dickeyville Grotto*, 17–18.
[170] Author unknown, "Priest Builds Unique Shrine with Own Hands," *The Rockford Register-Gazette*, Feburary 28, 1928, untitled scrapbook, Dickeyville Grotto Archives, Dickeyville, Wisconsin.
[171] Reverend M. Wernerus, *The Grottos at Dickeyville*, self-published, undated (ca. 1930).
[172] Unknown author, unknown title, *Daily American Tribune,* date unknown, untitled scrapbook, Dickeyville Grotto Archives, Dickeyville, Wisconsin.
[173] For more on yard art as roadside attraction see Sheehy, "Chapter 2: Travel, Play, and Celebration in American Landscapes," *The Flamingo in the Garden,* 34–66.
[174] Marguerite S. Schaffer argues that the modern nation state was intertwined with this touristic journey for American identity. In "Chapter 1: The Continent Spanned" she describes how the "See America First" campaign was inaugurated in 1906, and funded by Western boosters. See Schaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2001).

he wrote, Father Wernerus specified that the grotto was a work made for "God and County," a message expressed by the Patriotism in Stone Shrine and features like the Papal and United States flags placed next to each other on the grotto closest to the highway. Priests like Father Wernerus argued that such secular attractions were justified by their effect—the more crowds were drawn to entertainments like large-scale churchyard grottoes, the more likely it was that individuals would also absorb its religious messages.[175]

Even before the Dickeyville Grotto was dedicated in 1930 it was receiving thousands of visitors. The dedication itself drew tens of thousands and was attended by the governor, who gave an address.[176] After Father Wernerus's death in 1935, his creation continued to draw hordes of tourists from across the country—the priest who succeeded him claimed as many as five thousand came on Labor Day.[177] The Dickeyville Grotto promoted their attractions through publications—by 1935 two informational booklets had already been published, as well as a wide variety of photographic postcards. These materials drew tourists, but also enabled the image of the Dickeyville Grotto to circulate far beyond local contexts, to audiences who would never have the opportunity to visit in person. In addition, the publications reinforced the interpretation of Father Wernerus's unorthodox building through a Catholic religious frame, providing each structure with an explanation of how it related to more conventional Church architecture.

In contrast, the Watts Towers' location in an urban home yard meant that was the solitary project of the occupant—for the most part, Rodia worked alone and drew from what resources he amassed from his employment as a construction worker. The size of his creation was constrained to the space within the relatively small property he could afford so he had to build up, rather than out. At a certain point, in order to keep building Rodia had to rework existing structures rather than build new ones. He also could not afford to purchase ornaments as Father Wernerus did, so he gathered from what was available locally and for free.

Some of these materials were likely scavenged from trashcans or donated by neighbors—Rodia was said to have paid local children a penny to bring him old dishes. He also likely gathered his materials at the nearby factories that were rapidly manufacturing the object culture of modern home life.[178] For instance, the town of Torrance was located on the train line between Watts and Redondo Beach, where Rodia claimed to have gathered shells. Founded in 1912, by the early 1920s Torrance had become a center of industry, with factories that produced materials that Rodia utilized, such as glass and ironwork.[179] Meanwhile, Vernon was just a mile and a half north of

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[175] The "God and Country" quote is from a short essay by Father Mathias Wernerus in *The Grottos at Dickeyville*, unpaginated. Wernerus also states that "the grotto here will bring many a lost sheep to God."
[176] "20,000 Expected at Dedication of Priest's Grotto," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 13, 1930. Found in the Dickeyville Grotto archives.
[177] Article clipping from unknown source, ca. 1946 – 1956, untitled scrapbook, Dickeyville Grotto Archives, Dickeyville, Wisconsin.
[178] Of course, we do not have much solid information about where Rodia procured his materials. However, the notion that he went to industrial areas to gather materials is supported by his use of iron slag, a material that is a waste byproduct of iron smelting.
[179] Companies founded in Torrance in the 1910s included the Llewelyn Iron Works and Hurrie Window Glass Factory. See Nathan Masters, "Torrance at 100: the South Bay City's Origins as a Model Industrial

Watts and home to three hundred industrial plants by 1929. But when Rodia used broken glass and dishes, bread molds, and discarded pieces of ironwork for his ornamentation, he employed materials that didn't have any apparent value. In other words, unlike the cabinet of precious curiosities at the Dickeyville Grotto, Rodia's structure was covered with the refuse of everyday life. And, in particular, many of his materials were associated with feminized and devalued domestic tasks, like preparing meals.

Constructions of space that counterpose the private domestic realm with the public meant that in this period Rodia's site's location and his material use associated his backyard structure with personal motivations, rather than any collective meaning.[180] Further, Rodia did not provide the Watts Towers with a touristic framing that would overcome this association with his home life. He did not commissioning publications or photographs to explain its meaning or monetize its image.[181] Nor did he charge admission to visit the site, which was enclosed with walls and had a gate that could be closed, so that individuals who entered when Rodia was not home might be concerned that they were trespassing. And the Watts Towers' urban location meant it was adjacent to a train line that served local commuters going to work, rather than a highway that tourists navigated for leisure.

Therefore, while there was robust press coverage extolling the wonders of the Dickeyville Grotto for the local religious community and a broader tourist public, the Watts Towers appeared in less than a dozen popular press articles for the first three decades of its existence.[182] The anonymous press photographs support narratives about a strange wonder created by a humble man; they include portraits of Rodia, his house and front gate, and the Towers pictured in full to emphasize their awe-inspiring scale, shot head-on to simplify the structure as much as possible (Figures 1.4, 1.17, and 1.47). Meanwhile, neighbors watching the towers slowly rise, commuters who glimpsed them from the window of the Big Red train car, and those who read the local coverage of Rodia's astonishing "hobby" captured the memory of visiting the Watts Towers for a small audience of friends and family (Figures 1.4, Figure 1.48).[183] Their photographs conform to the conventions of vernacular photography—a loved one is pictured at the site, facing the camera in a close-up view or as a small figure dwarfed by the full height

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Town," *KCET: Lost LA*, October 12, 2012, accessed July 1, 2018, https://www.kcet.org/shows/lost-la/torrance-at-100-the-south-bay-citys-origins-as-a-model-industrial-town.

[180] Here I am thinking of Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere. The split between the public and private has a gendered component, see Dorothy O. Helly and Susan M. Reverby, "Introduction: Converging on History," in *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History*, Ed. Dorothy O. Helly et. al. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 1–24.

[181] In this, Rodia deviated from some other builders of large-scale backyard structures in the same period. For instance, in the next chapter I discuss the Garden of Eden, a concrete structure in a Kansas backyard built starting in 1908. Its creator S.P. Dinsmoor wrote the tourist pamphlet *Our Cabin Home*, advertised his site to passengers on the nearby train line, and courted press coverage with sensational acts like having himself entombed on-site.

[182] Known writings on the Watts Towers that predate 1951 are astonishingly rare. Despite careful searches I have only encountered eight, though there are likely more articles in papers that are un-indexed, yet to be digitized, or lost to history.

[183] The term "hobby" here references the article "Flashing Spires Built as Hobby," *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 1937, A2.

of the towers.[184] Likely there are more of these vernacular photographs from the 1920s through the end of the 1940s that have yet to appear in archives and other publicly available sources.

This doesn't mean that Rodia was a recluse or that the scale of his creation didn't receive some attention—he certainly seemed to enjoy having visitors and was proud of the public attention his site received. When the illustration of the Watts Towers was published in the book version of *Nuestro Pueblo*, Rodia purchased several copies, and the Garcías reported that Rodia offered to sign a copy for them. However, the relatively small amount of vernacular and popular press coverage of the Watts Towers indicates that Rodia's site was not widely understood as a public attraction in this period, but rather as a private cultural expression.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have considered the Watts Towers' construction with an approach that centers material histories, eschewing purely psychobiographical readings of Rodia's motivations that rely heavily on interpretation of his interviews. Instead, I traced a variety of practices that may have influenced where and how Rodia built, with a focus on his use of ornamentation—an aspect of the site's material form that is often dismissed as minor decoration rather than a significant aspect of its meaning-making. I related Rodia's use of shells and concrete to the ways that Italian immigrants translated vernacular religious culture to the United States through yard shrines and grottoes. I discussed how Rodia's connections to the Mexican American community in Los Angeles impacted where he could live and his selection of brightly colored ornaments, especially ceramic tile made in a style that indicates Anglo appropriation of Spanish colonial culture for an invented regional past. Finally, I compared Rodia's building practices to the Dickeyville Grotto, a large-scale hand built roadside attraction, and considered how the site's publics differ because of the domestic location and materials of the Watts Towers.

Thus, this section has also shown that the creation of the Watts Towers cannot be read in terms of Rodia's Italian cultural heritage alone. Instead, Rodia synthesized a variety of vernacular practices that were evolving in relationship to the modernizing American landscape in the early twentieth century, as well as skills learned from the invisibilized construction labor that made such modernity possible.[185] In the chapters that follow, artists from multiple postwar cultural movements embrace Rodia's creation as their own. Some of the connections I have highlighted here, like the site's links to Mexican American culture and to feminized practices like personal religious expression or home decoration, are later obscured by the site's new publics. Others, like Rodia's re-

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[184] For more on the conventions of everyday, or vernacular, photography see Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 57–59.

[185] Of course, it is the perception that the Watts Towers' form reflects individual labor that sets the site apart from many other modernist monuments. For instance, Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby discusses the fact that the Eiffel Tower was thought to be modern precisely because its form seemed to have sprouted straight from the drawings of its creator—civil engineer Eiffel—rather than the laboring bodies of construction workers. See *Colossal: Engineering the Suez Canal, Statue of Liberty, Eiffel Tower, and Panama Canal* (New York: Periscope Publishing, Ltd., 2012), 112.

use of mass-produced domestic objects and the Watts Towers' location in a multi-racial neighborhood without racial restrictive covenants, will become crucial to its future meanings as a polyvalent monument.

Chapter Two: "Something Big"
A Shrine to California Modernism in the 1950s

The Watts Towers appears in a vibrant color photograph on the cover of the October 1965 issue of *Artforum* magazine (Figure 2.0). Shot from a low angle the towers appear monumental, with skeletal spirals that rise against a brilliantly blue, cloudless sky. A close view of the steel armature at the left edge of the photograph confronts the viewer with the rough materiality of its concrete covering, embedded with colorful geometric tiles. Inside the pages of *Artforum* a letter from Alfred Barr, the famed former director of the New York Museum of Modern Art, praises the Watts Towers as one of the most "unforgettable" artworks in Los Angeles, the "great new cultural center of the West Coast."[186] That a backyard structure dating to the 1920s would appear prominently in a magazine devoted to cutting-edge culture is surprising. But it was even more unlikely given the fact that just fifteen years earlier there were no publicly circulating sources that ascribed the label of art to the Watts Towers, and, further, that even the ongoing existence of the site was seriously in doubt.

At the start of the 1950s Rodia was entering old age. He lived alone and had no family nearby to take over the property when he became infirm or passed away. His work had attracted some attention from the neighborhood community and local reporters. Still, it is telling that the most extensive account of the Watts Towers was in the book *Nuestro Pueblo: Los Angeles, City of Romance*, which promoted itself as a celebration of a quaint history that was rapidly fading.[187] For instance, *Nuestro Pueblo* featured an illustration of historic Marchessault Street, followed on the very next page by an image of its destruction to make way for the new Union Station. The accompanying text explains that Southern Californians "interest people from more staid sections by their mania for speed and destruction of the old [so] that something different may rise upon the site."[188] Marchessault Street had stood at the heart of the city's Old Chinatown, where Chinese residents were forcibly evicted from homes and businesses that were razed in the name of "speed."[189] Indeed, in the decades after *Nuestro Pueblo* was published, the vast majority of the sites chronicled in its pages were demolished as Los Angeles underwent a rapid process of modernization around the Second World War. Those sites located in low-income areas where people of color lived were especially vulnerable to demolition and redevelopment.

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[186] Alfred H. Barr, Jr., "Homage to Sam: Alfred H. Barr, Jr., describes his responses to the Towers at Watts," *Artforum* 4, no. 2 (October 1965): 20.

[187] Cécile Whiting notes that in its romantic nostalgia *Nuestro Pueblo* fits squarely into the boosterist literature on Southern California exemplified by Helen Hunt Jackson's novel *Ramona*, which celebrates the romantic Spanish colonial past of the region while whitewashing its present. On the whole, my discussion of Nuestro Pueblo in this section is informed by Whiting's reading of the text. See Whiting, "Chapter 4: The Watts Towers as Urban Landmark," in *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 144–149.

[188] Joseph Seewerker, "Marchessault Street" and "March of Progress," in *Nuestro Pueblo: Los Angeles City of Romance* (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Company Press, 1940), 92–95.

[189] The "March of Progress" essay does not mention this fact, but it is addressed in the blatantly racist essay "Poor, Bewildered Chinese!" on page 70, which notes that the Chinese were displaced from the old Chinatown.

In 1954 Rodia deeded 1765 E. 107th Street to his neighbor and friend Louis Sauceda. He then left Los Angeles and never returned, leaving the property unoccupied without a full-time caretaker. The house burned to the ground, and the sculptures suffered from minor vandalism. In 1957 the Los Angeles Building and Safety Department investigated the site as part of a citywide program to "clean up slum and blight conditions" in areas of the city like Watts. They ordered officials "to demolish and remove the dangerous towers and the fire-damaged building."[190] The Watts Towers seemed to be on its way to becoming a vanished site known only to local history buffs.

Instead, a group called the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts (hereafter referred to as the CSRTW) formed in 1959 to wage a high-profile campaign for the preservation of the Watts Towers, drawing unprecedented attention from local, national, and international audiences. The CSRTW was primarily made up of members of the city's creative community, including artists, architects, designers, writers, and professors. Most of these individuals were involved in local modernist movements, whether painting in a surrealist mode, making abstract sculpture, or designing sleek, minimal furniture. They did not frame the significance of the Watts Towers in terms of the cultural references discussed in the previous chapter—yard shrines and other forms of vernacular religious material culture, the aesthetics of the Spanish Colonial Revival and Mexican Los Angeles, or the spectacle of American hand-built tourist attractions like the Dickeyville Grotto. Rather, they advocated for the preservation of the Watts Towers on the basis of its value as a great work of art or architecture that reflected the conditions of modern Los Angeles. In 1959 there was a public trial to determine the fate of the Watts Towers, and a cable was attached to the tallest tower applying a load of ten thousand pounds. In the end the Towers withstood the stress test, losing only a single seashell and ensuring its continued existence.[191]

The CSRTW not only succeeded in preventing the destruction of the Watts Towers but also initiated a rapid shift in the site's meaning from local oddity to an icon of California modernism—a connection that continues into the present. The Watts Towers has been included in most surveys on the subject, from *Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast* published in 1974, to *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945–1980* published in 2011.[192] This chapter examines the process by which the Watts Towers became a work of modernist art and architecture. Why, after thirty years of neglect, did individuals who saw themselves as representing the cultural vanguard begin

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[190] Inspectors from the Building and Safety Department were aware of the Watts Towers at least as early as the mid-1940s—Building Inspector Adolph Dumpf testified in 1959 that he first became aware of the Watts Towers in 1946 when the department received a complaint about the tower. However, the Building and Safety Department didn't have any written record of the Watts Towers until the Demolition Order was issued in 1959. See Hearing Concerning 1765-69 East 107th Street (Watts Towers), July 9, 1969, Box 14482, BSCBDF, 79–90.d

[191] While this is the happy ending to the "core narrative," it was far from the end of the struggle to preserve the Watts Towers. See Jeanne Morgan, "Fifty Years of Guardianship: The Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts (CSRTW)," in in *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts: Art, Migrations, Development*, ed. del Guidice (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 225–244.

[192] See Peter Plagens, *Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); *Pacific Standard Time Los Angeles Art 1945–1980*, ed. Lucy Bradnock, et. al. (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2011).

to champion a work made by an elderly construction worker who did not, as far as we know, identify as an artist? And, given that no association with modernism existed for the first thirty years of the Watts Towers' existence, how did they forge this connection in such a relatively short span of time? I argue that the answers to these questions hinge on the way that modernists in Los Angeles combined earlier twentieth-century precedents for incorporating the creative production of untrained makers with a newfound appreciation for local urban landscape as source and subject of their creative practices.

In the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s, European surrealists and American modernist painters and designers in the Northeast "discovered" objects made by mental patients and rural peoples who followed communal traditions of making. The professional artists celebrated their discoveries not as psychological tools or ethnographic objects but as aesthetic achievements that they called *art brut* and folk art, which they used as sources of inspiration for their own creative practices. In this chapter I trace how the incorporation of the Watts Towers in the 1950s drew from these discourses of *art brut* and folk art, shaping the photographs and writing about the Watts Towers created by Man Ray, Charles Eames, the staff of *Arts & Architecture* magazine, and others. Further, I argue that these ideas had traction in the postwar period because of the ways they fit into projects to articulate a notion of a strand of modernism distinct to Los Angeles, rather than a provincial copy of what was happening in art world centers in New York or Europe.

This chapter both extends and revises previous scholarship on how the Watts Towers became a "modern monument." For instance, I build on Cécile Whiting's argument that photography was used to draw out the modernist formal qualities of the site, following the reception of American folk art in the 1920s. However, while Whiting's focus is on the Watts Towers' relationship to assemblage art in the 1960s, I consider the reception of the site between the late 1940s and end of the 1950s.[193] In doing so, I am able to tease out the nuances of competing discourses around the art of untrained makers and also to de-center assemblage artists of the Ferus Gallery from the history of the Watts Towers' reception. The Ferus Gallery artists long have had an outsized position in dominant narratives of art in Southern California, leading to the widespread conception that when Walter Hopps opened the Ferus Gallery in 1957, he created the Los Angeles art world "out of nothing."[194] Therefore, my study starts in the early 1950s and includes a wide range of cultural workers who took an interest in the Watts Towers and became involved in the campaign for its preservation.

My aim is to contribute to a richer and more diverse understanding of the eclectic variety of modernisms active in Los Angeles the 1950s. In this, I draw from historian

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[193] In this way, my chapter expands on the analysis of art historian Cécile Whiting, who argues that formalist photographs of the Watts Towers echoed the collection of American folk art starting in the 1920s; see *Pop L.A.*, 149–154. I will discuss Whiting's argument about photography's role in the reception of the Towers in more detail later in this chapter.

[194] Quoted in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974* (New York: Soho Press, 2003), 31. In *Sunshine Muse*, which was for decades the sole survey of West Coast art, Peter Plagens declares that "for Los Angeles to become an important art center, a whole new group of collectors would have to be cultivated from the ground up," which happened when the "seminal" gallery Ferus was opened in 1957; see Plagens, *Sunshine Muse*, 24.

Richard Cándida Smith, who has examined how Los Angeles' geographic marginalization and relatively late development of arts institutions resulted in an unusually pluralistic arts scene. However, I also seek to complicate Cándida Smith's conclusion that the pluralism of California modernism resulted in an exceptionally democratic modernism that dissolved divisions between cultural vanguards and an untrained artist. For instance, he writes, "The younger artists of the 1950s and 1960s who saved the Watts Towers when the city of Los Angeles proposed to tear them down understood [Rodia's] isolation [from other artists] as typical of the region rather than unusual."[195] Cándida Smith's sentiments are echoed by many other sources in the popular press, which allege that California's egalitarianism motivated professional artists' embrace of the efforts of a construction worker as their own. However, I take this to be a manifestation of a line of thinking that stretches back to Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis—the notion that the frontier conditions make California exceptionally democratic, ignoring the very real inequalities fostered by westward expansion.[196]

Therefore, although I acknowledge that some modernists championed the Watts Towers on the basis of their perceived shared marginalization, I also argue that there were significant power dynamics at play when mostly white arts professionals claimed the work of an unschooled working class artist located in a neighborhood with a majority of black and Mexican American residents. For although in this period the categories of *art brut* and folk art were often ascribed to the creative production of white makers, from their emergence they were associated with primitivism, a racialized term with roots in colonialism.[197] Further, the way that these terms were applied to the Watts Towers had to do with the changing landscape of Los Angeles and modernists' new relationship to it. I analyze this relationship, building on historian Sarah Schrank's scholarship on the relationship of the preservation of the Watts Towers to the racial politics of postwar urban restructuring.[198]

Overall, this chapter spans a set of events that have been frequently recounted unproblematically as the story of the brave artists who "saved" the Watts Towers. Italian Folklore scholar Luisa Del Guidice refers to this narrative of Watts Towers' rise from local oddity to beloved art work as the "core narrative," which is reiterated in most of the

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[195] Richard Cándida Smith, *The Modern Moves West: California Artists and Democratic Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 54. Although I disagree with this aspect of his argument, Cándida Smith has produced groundbreaking work on the Watts Towers that influenced this dissertation in several ways, including his insistence on Rodia's pivotal role in the development of modern art in California. See also Richard Cándida Smith, "Learning from Watts Towers: Assemblage and Community-Based Art in California," *Oral History*37, no. 2 (2009): 51–58 and Cándida Smith,"An Era of Grand Ambitions: Sam Rodia and California Modernism," in *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts: Art, Migrations, Development*, ed. Luisa Del Giudice, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 103–108.

[196] Fredrerick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, December 14, 1893. For more on the dark side of "frontier" mythology, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987).

[197] See David Maclagan, "Outsiders or Insiders?" and Eugene Metcalf, "From Domination to Desire: Insiders and Outsider Art," in *The Artist Outsider,* eds.. Michael D. Hall et al. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 114–123 and 212–227.

[198] Sarah Schrank, "Chapter 5: Imagining the Watts Towers," in *Art and the City,* 135–164.

writing on the site.[199] It is a story about adversity overcome, one which places the art world in a heroic role. And indeed, without the efforts of the CSRTW, it is very likely that today the Watts Towers would no longer stand. However, the triumphant preservation was enabled by the Watts Towers' movement into the realms of high culture, which involved the accrual of new meanings and the erasure of others. This process had a crucial impact in shaping the artwork we now understand to be "California modernism," but it also enabled that category to be structured by racialized exclusions.

"Something Strange and Mysterious"

From the 1920s through the late 1940s Rodia's backyard creation was part of the daily visual landscape of his Mexican neighbors in the *colonia* and other residents living nearby in Watts. It was also pictured as a charming oddity by a limited number of local and national news sources and no doubt visited by some curiosity seekers. In addition, as the decades passed, the Watts Towers gained another audience—artists involved in the thriving Central Avenue scene, the hub of black cultural production in Los Angeles from the 1930s through the 1950s, which stretched from downtown Los Angeles into Watts. A map of the neighborhood in the 1940s shows the Watts Towers' proximity to multiple jazz theaters and recording studios; for instance, the Barrelhouse nightclub, run by Johnny Otis, was just a block east of Rodia's property (Figure 2.1). Meanwhile, a few miles north on Central Avenue, modernist poets like Langston Hughes stayed at the Dunbar Hotel and gave readings at the 28th Street YMCA, and jazz musicians like Nat King Cole, Lionel Hampton, and Charles Mingus played at the many clubs (Figure 2.2).[200]

The Central Avenue scene had fewer African American visual artists and architects than musicians and poets, in part due to the open discrimination they faced in professional spaces like educational institutions, galleries, and design studios.[201] For instance, black visual artists struggled to have their work exhibited and perceived by the same standards as their contemporaries or even as fine art at all. In 1929 *Los Angeles Times* art critic Arthur Millier reviewed the first recorded show of black artists in the city, expressing disappointment that so much of the work was done in the "European tradition" and showed very few distinctively "negro qualities." Millier's favorite works in

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[199] See Luisa Del Giudice, "Introduction: Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts and the Search for Common Ground," in *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*, 1–25.

[200] As musician Lee Young explains, "Without Central Avenue there would have been no musicians, because really that was the only place you had to work at the time, the only outlet" in *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles*, ed. Clora Bryant, et al. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 73. For more on Central Avenue see also Lonnie G. Bunch, *Black Angelenos: The Afro-American in Los Angeles 1850 – 1950* (Los Angeles: The California Afro-American Museum, 1988); Reginald Chapple "From Central Avenue to Leimert park" in *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*, ed. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón, (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 60–80.

[201] In 1933 the Harmon Foundation only listed one "recognized" African American artist in all of California—Bay Area sculptor Sargent Johnson. In the 1940s just two more artists were added to the list—painters Harlan Jackson and Thelma Johnson Streat. See Judith Wilson, "How the Invisible Woman Got Herself on the Cultural Map: Black Women Artists in California" in *Art/Women/California, 1950-2000*, eds. Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 209.

the exhibitions were sculptures by untrained artists, which he describes as having "a truly primitive and exciting spirit."[202] In 1935 Beulah Woodward was the first black artist to exhibit at the Los Angeles County Museum, but her work showed in the natural history section rather than in the art galleries.[203] Opportunities for black architects were as rare, if not more so. In 1921 Paul Williams became the first black person certified as an architect anywhere west of the Mississippi. Up until the 1960s he was one of just a handful of prominent black architects in the city of Los Angeles.[204]

In this context black artists and architects were preoccupied with the challenges of gaining support and recognition at the same level as white arts professionals. Further, given that their work was labeled as primitive and anthropological by the white cultural establishment, they may not have had an incentive to promote the eccentric hobby of an untrained Italian artist. For whatever reason, the only known accounts of Central Avenue artists' impressions of the Watts Towers are oral and written testimonies from jazz musicians. Charles Mingus grew up just a couple blocks from the Watts Towers and watched with awe as Rodia built it. In his autobiography, Mingus recalls wandering the property with a date in the summer of 1931 on a day when Rodia was away "on one of his trips to collect shells and pebbles and pieces of glass down on the beaches."[205] He describes the Towers as "something strange and mysterious," explaining, "Nobody knew what it was or what it was for."[206] Mingus's account is echoed by other musicians like Buddy Colette, who stated, "Nobody said, 'There's a genius over there; this guy [Rodia] knows what he's doing.' I just think nobody had been on that level."[207] Thus, as far as we know, for Central Avenue artists the Watts Towers was an unusual and impressive local landmark, rather than something they understood as connected with their own creative practice.

The flourishing of the Central Avenue arts scene was an outcome of a shift in the racial demographics in the district where Central Avenue and Watts were located. As discussed in the previous chapter, when Rodia purchased his property in Watts in the early 1920s it was an unrestricted, multiracial working class suburb. However, in the 1930s a wave of African American migrants from the South arrived in Los Angeles as part of the Great Migration. They were confined to limited areas of the city by racial

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[202] Arthur Millier, "Negro Art Attracts," *Los Angeles Times,* December 8, 1929, 21.

[203] Thanks to Monica Jovanovich-Kelley for the insights about where Woodword exhibited at LACMA in the talk "Artists and Advocates: Beulah Woodard, Alice Gafford, and the Promotion of African-American Art in the Early 20th Century Los Angeles" paper presented at the Southeastern College Art Conference, Roanoke, VA, October 2016. For more on the white art establishment's treatment of African American artists in the prewar period see Paul Von Blum, "Before and After Watts: Black Art in Los Angeles," in *Black Los Angeles*, 243–245.

[204] See Karen E. Hudson, *Paul R. Williams: A Legacy of Style* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993).

[205] Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*, 36–40. *Beneath the Underdog* is prefaced with the caveat that some of the events depicted in the text are fictitious; however, as Krin Gabbard argues, the text should be characterized as an exaggerated autobiography rather than autofiction. For a discussion of *Beneath the Underdog*'s categorization, see Krin Gabbard, "Part II: Poet, Lyricist, Autobiographer," in *Better Git It in Your Soul: An Interpretive Biography of Charles Mingus*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 113–158.

[206] Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*, 37.

[207] Buddy Colette, interview with Steven Isoardi, 1993, Center for Oral History Research, University of California, Los Angeles (hereafter COHLA), 22.

restrictive covenants, as well as intimidation by groups like the Ku Klux Klan.[208] The Central district was one of the few unrestricted parts of the city, so by the early 1930s it was home to seventy percent of all African Americans in Los Angeles.[209] This fed the establishments at Central Avenue and increased the proportion of black residents in Watts. Then in the early 1940s Los Angeles became a center of wartime production. The resulting economic boom made Watts even more racially homogenous as white homeowners with new salaries from lucrative defense jobs moved out, and a wave of over eleven thousand newly arrived black jobseekers took their place.[210]

The city's deepening racial segregation meant that white visual artists and other cultural workers were less and less likely to encounter the Watts Towers in the course of their daily lives. Before World War II the city's visual arts scene was small and relatively conservative. There wasn't a single museum completely devoted to the arts until the 1960s.[211] Impressionistic oil painters of the "Eucalyptus School" and the watercolorists of the "California School" dominated most private establishments, creating representational images of the natural landscape of Southern California that idealized it as a Mediterranean paradise.[212] Los Angeles was also home to a small community of modernist visual artists, who advocated for themselves through the formation of organizations like the Modern Art Society. Though there was crossover between groups, artists who identified as modernists did so to draw a distinction between themselves and those who practiced regionalist oil painting. They used the term modernism to describe a range of practices from the abstraction of cubism and hardedge painting to the dream-like imagery of surrealism. While regionalist painters touted their work's California-ness, modernist visual artists tended to connect themselves with avant-garde movements taking place in Europe and often traveled abroad as part of their training.[213] Marginalized and dismissed, they found unconventional spaces to gather, exhibit, and view artwork, such as

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[208] Mike Davis discuses the convergence of covenants and Klan activity in *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990), 160–164. For more on the development of racialized space in Los Angeles, see Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

[209] As Robert M. Fogelson notes, even as early as 1930, when the population of Los Angeles was under three thousand, it was clear from a comparison of population density and city size that the city was taking on a different structure than most relatively compact American metropolises. See Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 143. Starting in the 1920s and continuing through the 1930s, there was a small influx of African American migrants fleeing the repression of the Jim Crow South; a discussion of this migration and the statistic about the African American population of South Central, see Bunch, *Black Angelenos*, 36.

[210] Between 1940 and 1944 the population of Los Angeles grew 15% percent, but the African American population grew 78%. For more on the population shifts in Watts in the early 1940s see Patricia Rae Adler, "Watts: From Suburb to Black Ghetto," (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1977), 251–265.

[211] The Los Angeles County Museum of Art opened its doors in 1965. LACMA was previously a department of the Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science and Art but officially split off in 1961.

[212] For distinctions between the two groups by an artist who was involved in the California School, see Millard Sheets, interview with Paul Karlstrom, October 1968–July 1988, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[213] For instance, sculptor Claire Falkstein discusses traveling to Europe to meet the "contemporary masters," a necessity for artists working in California in the 1940s, which she describes as isolated. See Claire Falkstein, interview with Marion Gore, 1962, KPFK 'Art Scene' Interviews, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

Jake Zeitlin's bookstore in Echo Park or the Hollywood home of Walter and Louise Arensberg.[214]

Although there were some artists of color in the majority-white regionalist and modernist artistic movements, the institutions, exhibition spaces, and informal gathering spaces of the art world were concentrated in white, middle-class neighborhoods like Hollywood. In the decentralized urban landscape of Los Angeles, an individual could circulate through these networks without ever coming within miles of the Watts Towers. Thus, with a handful of exceptions like newspaper illustrator Charles H. Owen's romantic line drawing for *Nuestro Pueblo: City of Romance*, before the 1950s visual artists and architects did not picture the Watts Towers in photographs, sketch it in their notebooks, or mention the notable local oddity in their diaries and letters.[215]

It was during this period of near-complete disregard that two of the earliest known representations of the Watts Towers were made by individuals associated with modernist movements in the city—photographs taken by surrealist photographer Man Ray in the late 1940s and by designer and architect Charles Eames in May of 1951. Little has been written about these images, in part because so little is known about the contexts in which they were made. We have no record of how Ray and Eames encountered the Watts Towers, nor any direct accounts of their rationale for picturing a structure that so many overlooked. However, I will argue that Man Ray and Charles Eames photographed the Watts Towers because of their familiarity with modernist frameworks for interpreting the art and architecture of unschooled makers—surrealist notions of *art brut*, fantastic architecture, and American folk art. These histories of *art brut,* fantastic architecture, and folk art are significant not only because of their influence on Ray and Eames' artistic practices but also because of the role they played in shaping the reception of the Watts Towers that would follow in the 1950s, which transformed the site from an eccentric hobby into an artwork associated with modernism.

Fantastic Architecture and Man Ray's Surrealist Collection

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[214] For more on the activities of modernists in this period see Victoria Dailey, "Naturally Modern," in *LA's Early Moderns: Art/Architecture/Photography*, ed. Victoria Dailey et. al. (Los Angeles: Balcony Press, 2003), 17–116. In an oral history Zeitlin discusses how his bookstore started exhibiting contemporary painters in the 1930s, when there were only a handful of galleries that would show their work. See Jake Zeitlin, interview with Joel Gardner, 1980, COHLA, 153. Jules Langsner writes that the Arensbergs' collection had a crucial influence on art in Los Angeles, giving West Coast artists a sense of continuity with European modernism and inspired new work. See Langsner, "Art News From Los Angeles," *Art News*, March 1951, 52. For more on the Arensbergs' collection and its influence see Bonnie Clearwater, ed., *West Coast Duchamp* (Miami Beach: Grassfield Press, 1991).

[215] These exceptions include a couple of visual artists who saw the Watts Towers as children and later talked about it as a point of inspiration. Jess grew up in Long Beach and recalls his father taking the family there as a child; his father was an engineer and likened it to "The Tower of Jewels" at the Panama-Pacific Exposition. Jess later returned to the site in the early 1950s with his partner Robert Duncan. See letter from Jess to Barbara Freeman, September 7, 1991, and letter from Jess to Barbara Freeman, November 5, 1991, Box 4, *Parallel Visions* Exhibition Files, Los Angeles County Museum of Art Archive. Betye Saar also watched Rodia build the Watts Towers as a child visiting her grandmother who lived in Watts. At the time she described the site as "strange castles," though later in her career she would cite them as a point of influence for her artistic practice. See Rani Singh interview with Betye Saar (March 25, 2011), Pacific Standard Time Collection, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.

Though American-born, Man Ray is usually associated with interwar dada and surrealist movements in Paris. However, in the early 1940s Ray fled the war in Europe and moved to Los Angeles, where he lived for a decade.[216] During this time Ray exhibited steadily but focused on his painting practice and exhibited in shows like the series of abstract forms based on mathematical formulas that appeared at the Copley Galleries in 1948.[217] However, Ray also took numerous photographs of his California environs that were never publicly exhibited, although they were shared with friends.[218] The photographs in this private archive capture the rotting hull of a ship on a sweeping beach in Malibu, the uncanny artifice of Hollywood sets, and a row of katsina (kachina) dolls arranged on a shelf (Figures 2.3, 2.4, 2.5).[219]

In addition, sometime in the late 1940s Man Ray ventured to Watts and created a single arresting photograph of the Watts Towers, which he printed in luminous grey tones (Figure 2.6).[220] A lone figure in the lower right-hand corner of the image faces away from the camera, his body cropped at the knees. The truncated body is small against the towers that dominate the composition—their complex linear structure dark, a silhouette in front of a blank sheet of sky. Ray also took great care in composing the photograph, cropping the left edge flush with the end of the wall and the right edge to the very limit of what can be shown without including the roof of Rodia's house while keeping the train tracks in the foreground. This cropping creates the impression of an unmarked space of modern industry, rather than residential neighborhood.

Ray also chose to photograph the Watts Towers from a vantage point across the train tracks rather than from 107th Street. In this, he deviated from every other known popular press illustration or photograph to this point, which imaged the site from the street-facing side so as to capture its ornate ornamentation and decorative forms (Figures 1.16, 2.7). In contrast, Ray's photograph shows the simple, rough panels of concrete that make up the train-facing side. The concrete plane of the wall extends across the entire composition in a continuous line, seemingly stretching far off the edges of the page.

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[216] See Lawrence Weschler, "Paradise: The Southern California Idyll of Hitler's Cultural Exiles," in *Exiles + Emigres: The Flight of European Artists From Hitler*, ed. Stephanie Barron (Los Angeles: LACMA Publications, 1991).

[217] Ray also exhibited a series of photographic portraits in 1942. However, in this period he rejected his identity as a fashion photographer and was hoping to be known primarily for this painting. For this and more discussion of Man Ray's time in Los Angeles see Dickran Tashjian, *Man Ray: Paris—LA* (Culver City: Smart Art Press, 1996).

[218] For instance, in 1941–1942 Ray collected thirteen prints of his life in California for the souvenir folio "One Sunday in California," and in 1945 he sent a New Year's greeting to friends in the form of a photograph of an assemblage of everyday objects. See Merry Forestra, "Exile in Paradise: Man Ray in Hollywood, 1940–1951," in *Perpetual Motif: The Art of Man Ray* (Washington D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1988), 273–309.

[219] Thanks to Margaretta Lovell for the observation that the photograph likely shows a nineteenth-century sailing vessel that was uncovered by a storm. Katsina is also spelled kachina; however, katsina more closely reproduces the Hopi pronunciation, so I will use that spelling alone from this point on.

[220] The provenance of this photograph is unclear, so the collector has dated it as from the 1940s. However, other photographic documentation with precise dating shows that Rodia did not add the connecting bands with bands between the Central and East towers until the late 1940s, so I date it to the late 1940s, though this is still an approximation.

Eschewing details of ornamentation in lieu of the concrete and structure, this is an architectural vision of the towers, though a dream-like one, in which the wall acts like a portal between the anonymous figure in his mundane clothing and the world of the fantastic structures.[221]

The question of what prompted Ray to take this photograph remains unanswered. Some scholars have conjectured that Ray might have identified with Rodia as a fellow cultural outsider.[222] Ray was open about his alienation from his surroundings—he referred to California as a "beautiful prison" where he would wait out his exile from France and described his attempts to exhibit in the American West as "sowing in a desert."[223] Did Ray's outsider status allow him to see the Watts Towers with fresh eyes and appreciate its value when Angeleno artists did not? Perhaps. However, I argue that an understanding of Ray's motivations for photographing the Watts Towers must also take into account surrealism's relationship to photographic practices, and in particular to dream-like photographs of structures claimed in the name of surrealist architecture.

During the interwar period in France when Man Ray was active in surrealism, the avant-garde movement developed in close relationship with ethnography. James Clifford writes that the ethnographic attitude of surrealism derived from the movement's valuation of "fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions—[used to] provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious."[224] In particular, French surrealists looked to what they understood to be "primitive" cultures to challenge the meaning-making systems of modern Europe. They collected Oceanic and African objects like masks and figurines not as anthropological artifacts but as artworks that could inspire abstract form (Figure 2.8). They also collected objects made by people they perceived to be cultural outsiders within European societies—drawings made by people in mental institutions were a popular subject (Figure 2.9). They called the work of intracultural outsiders *art brut* or "raw art" to mean art drawn directly from the unconscious, unmediated by society's conventions.[225]

Photography was a key medium of surrealist ethnography, allowing for the display and arrangements of virtual collections in journals that circulated globally.[226] For

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[221] Thank you to Dr. Richard Sandor for lending his insights about this photograph, which influenced my reading of it.
[222] See for example Sheri Bernstein, "The California Home Front 1940–1960," in *Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 167–168.
[223] The first phrase is in correspondence from Man Ray to Elsie Siegler, March 21, 1942, Box 1, Folder 4, Letters to Elsie Ray Siegler, 1942-1944, Getty Special Collections. The second quotation is from Man Ray's letter to Jules Langsner; the full remark is, "You know, I had shows all over Calif. during the 40s, and as you say, it was sowing in a desert. It will be interesting to see what happens since Calif. has been fertilized." See letter from Man Ray to Jules Langsner, April 24, 1964, Box 1, Folder: Correspondence, General, 1964 (Jan–July), Jules Langsner Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[224] James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 23, no. 4 (Oct., 1981): 540.
[225] For a history of European art and mental illness, see John M. Macgregor, *The Discovery of Art of the Insane* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), especially "Chapter 16: Psychosis and Surrealism," 271–291.
[226] Rosalind Krauss discusses the curious centrality of photography, a medium associated with realism, to surrealism, a movement concerned with that which lies beneath the real. Krauss argues that the surrealist investment in photography relates to the medium's ability to transform the real into a sign, to create an

instance, a 1929 issue of Belgian journal *Variétés* gave an accounting of the Surrealist movement in that year, assembling photographs of paintings by Joan Miró and Yves Tanguy and portraits by Man Ray (Figure 2.10). However, the issue also included photographs of indigenous art from British Columbia and drawings by Hélène Smith (a medium who heard voices from Mars).[227] Further, it was one of the first surrealist publications to feature a site that would become one of the most famous examples of surrealist architecture—the Palais Idéal (Figure 2.11). Since few French surrealists were architects, most surrealist architecture functioned like a found object—a site discovered by surrealists and claimed through photography. Surrealist architecture was thus a wide-ranging category that encompassed Gothic castles, hot-dog shaped restaurants, and the Palais Idéal—an elaborate structure built in rural France by Ferdinand Cheval, a French postman who had no formal training in art or architecture. Between 1879 and 1924 Cheval constructed the Palais Idéal around his house and yard, using cement ornamented with thousands of stones that he gathered on mail delivery routes. From the nineteenth century onwards, the Palais Idéal had been featured in the popular press as a curiosity, but it was embraced by surrealists starting in the late 1920s (Figure 2.12).[228] André Breton visited the site numerous times and lauded Cheval in his lectures and writings as "The undisputed master of mediumistic architecture and sculpture."[229] In Breton's view the Palais Idéal's dream-like forms, lack of functionality, and self-taught maker constituted a powerful antidote to the stifling rationality of modern architecture.[230]

Man Ray was almost certainly familiar with the Palais Idéal, given his close relationship with Breton and involvement in surrealist journals that published photographs of the site. Ray and the Palais Idéal were also featured together in the 1936 exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.[231] *Fantastic Art* introduced the American audiences to now-canonical surrealist and dadaist works like Meret Oppenheim's *Fur-Lined Cup*, displayed alongside "comparative material"—images made by the "insane" and children—as well as commercial and folk art. *Fantastic Art* was not the Museum of Modern Art's first foray into the art of non-professional artists—in the 1930s the institution hosted several exhibitions that explored

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image of reality as coded. See "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," *October* 19 (Winter 1981): 3–34.

[227] Katherine Conley's excellent article "Surrealism and Outsider Art: From the 'Automatic Message' to André Breton's Collection" pointed me to the contents of this issue of *Variétés* and informed my discussion of surrealism and outsider art. See Conley, "Surrealism and Outside Art," in "Surrealism and Its Others," special issue, *Yale French Studies*, no. 109 (2006): 129–143.

[228] For a thorough review of the popular and academic literature up to 1981 see Bradley Seidman, "Ferdinand Cheval, an international bibliography of books, journal articles, and television and motion picture documentaries," *Architecture Series: Bibliography #A546* (Monticello: Vance Bibliographies, August 1981). Unfortunately, Cheval has been the subject of relatively little academic writing, and even less English-language scholarship.

[229] David Pinder, *Visions of the City: Utopianism, Power, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Urbanism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 92–115.

[230] Pinder, *Visions of the City*, 110.

[231] See Alfred Barr and Georges Hugnet, eds., *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936).

folk and popular art.[232] However, *Fantastic Art* incited controversy by placing the work of avant-garde artists and amateurs alongside one another, inviting comparisons between the two.[233] And unlike the museum's exhibitions of American folk art, which showed works that reflected folk traditions and could be folded into narratives of nationalism, *Fantastic Art* reflected the European avant-garde interest in the art of untrained cultural outsiders.[234]

Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism also differed from other exhibitions of folk and popular art in its inclusion of "Fantastic architecture," a category echoing surrealist praxis that grouped Cheval's Palais Idéal, Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau, and buildings by Antoni Gaudí. The Palais Idéal was present in the exhibition and catalogue through an engraved portrait of Cheval and his creation (Figure 2.13), as well as some detail view photographs taken by surrealist photographer Denise Bellón. In 1937 Man Ray attended the *Fantastic Art* exhibition's opening in New York, and he was familiar with the catalogue.[235] Less than a decade later, having fled France for Los Angeles, he came upon the Watts Towers and photographed it.

Here I would like to suggest that Ray pictured the architecture of the Watts Towers because of the similarities with Cheval's Palais Idéal—two common working men inspired to create fantastic sculpture-architecture in their yard out of concrete embedded with ornaments. In other words, I conjecture that Ray recognized something in the foreign landscape of California that reminded him of the country and artistic community he had been exiled from and was so desperate to return to. It is possible that he shared the photograph of this remarkable structure with friends in Los Angeles' small community of modernists. But even if the photograph was kept completely private, it is the first one known to connect the Watts Towers to a Euro-American avant-garde audience. Further, it shows how the European surrealist ideas of *art brut* and fantastic architecture came to the West Coast in the 1940s through traveling museum exhibitions and émigrés like Man Ray.[236]

Charles and Ray Eames' Californian Design and American Folk Art

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[232] Exhibitions of folk, self-taught, and outsider art at the New York Museum of Modern Art in the 1930s included *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750–190*0 (1932–3), S*culpture by William Edmondson* (1937), and *American Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America* (1938).

[233] The popular press avidly covered the scandal; for some choice clippings see the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism,* MoMA Exh. #55, A. Conger Goodyear Scrapbooks, Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, NY.

[234] See Lucienne Peiry, *Art Brut: The Origins of Outsider Art*, trans. James Frank (Paris: Flammarion, 2001).

[235] Ray attended the opening of *Fantastic Art* and describes the exhibition catalogue in a letter to his niece. His presence at the opening is mentioned in "Man Ray Finds Surrealism in Roosevelt Boat," *New York Herald Tribune*, January 2, 1937 and correspondence from Man Ray to Naomi Savage, June 1, 1945, Box 1, Folder 9, Man Ray Papers, Getty Special Collections.

[236] *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* toured to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1937, and the exhibition catalogue was written up in the *Los Angeles Times* by art critic Arthur Millier; see "Brush Strokes: Surrealism Book," *Los Angeles Times*, December 12, 1937, Part III, 11.

In addition to surrealist concepts I have discussed through Man Ray's photograph, there was a related but distinct discourse around the art of untrained makers circulating in Los Angeles in the postwar period. Ten photographs taken by Charles Eames in May of 1951 point to this discourse, which had its roots in interwar American modernism and its relationship with folk art as a source of design inspiration that expressed national identity. Eames was a Midwesterner who studied at the Bauhaus-inspired Cranbrook School in Michigan. Like Man Ray, he moved to Los Angeles in the early 1940s, accompanied by his wife and close collaborator Ray Eames. Charles and Ray quickly established the Eames Office, which made crucial contributions to mid-century modernist design and architecture, though their creative experiments were wide-ranging. Their multimedia experimentation went hand in hand with the democratic aspirations of their design firm, summed up by the objective of "getting the best to the greatest number of people for the least."[237]

The Eameses were vital members of a community of Los Angeles modernist designers and architects on the rise. While modernist visual artists continued to struggle for financial and institutional support, the "California look" of furniture and homes was becoming increasingly popular.[238] This wave of attention was due in part to the influence of the local modernist magazine *Arts & Architecture*, where Charles Eames was editor and Ray Eames designed covers. In 1945 *Arts & Architecture* initiated the Case Study House Program, a challenge to architects to design and build examples of low-cost, prefabricated housing executed in a modernist style. *Arts & Architecture* then published extensive editorials on the Case Study Houses from the plans to the finished product. Charles and Ray Eames built one of the most famous examples of the program—Case Study House No. 8 (Figure 2.14).[239] The modular building, with a flat roof, exposed steel frame, and alternating panels of solid color and glass, exemplified the function, simplicity, and fluid outdoor and indoor spaces typical of California mid-century modern architecture.

However, color photographs of the Eames house published in *Life Magazine* in 1958 also showed that its interior spaces were decorated in a manner far from the sleek simplicity of the architecture (Figure 2.15). Instead, the clean lines of the space were bedecked in a medley of traditional textiles and wooden carvings, as well as low handmade chairs from India where Charles and Ray sit cross-legged at the center of the image. The objects in Case Study House No. 8 were from the Eameses' extensive collection of handmade objects, which they began to amass in the mid-1940s following the influence of their close friend and fellow Herman Miller designer Alexander Girard,

[237] Charles Eames quoted in "Sympathetic Seat," *Time* LVI, no. 2 (July 10, 1950): 46.

[238] For instance, two key institutions that supported modernist visual art in Los Angeles, Copley Galleries and the Modern Art Institute, closed in 1948 and 1949. For a discussion of the popularity of the "California Look" see Wendy Kaplan, "Chapter 1: Living in a Modern Way," in *California Design, 1930-1965: Living in a Modern Way* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011).

[239] Reyner Banham maintains that "the Case Study House program was overwhelmingly Charles and Ray Eames in foreign perceptions". See Reyner Banham, "Klarheit, Ehrlichkeit, Einfachkeit…And Wit Too!: The Case Study Houses in the World's Eyes," in *Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses*, ed. Elizabeth A.T. Smith (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 183.

whose massive folk art collection would later form the basis for the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe.[240]

The Eameses' interest in folk art was not limited to their personal taste, but was a significant aspect of their design aesthetic. Starting in 1949 the Eames-designed Herman Miller showroom in Los Angeles interspersed modernist furnishings with objects like an early American weathervane, toys, and an Etruscan pot.[241] That same year, the Eameses' contribution to *An Exhibition for Modern Living* at the Detroit Institute of the Arts featured decorations like a homemade paper kite, a Mexican mask, and Japanese tea bowls.[242] By the mid-1960s a special issue of the British journal *Architectural Design* devoted to the Eameses' modernist aesthetic asserted, "The Eames allowed us to know Girard and all the cheap Mexicana and candles available to American tourists. The Eames' [sic] made Girard respectable-pop for habitat…"[243]

The Eameses not only used folk art to accessorize modernist furniture and architecture, but also studied it to find forms that they then translated into their designs.[244] Photographs of the Eameses' design studio show crowds of objects waiting to be analyzed and integrated into new designs (Figure 2.16). In addition to the physical collections, they also amassed a massive archive of photographs that would eventually amount to some 350,000 slides of everyday objects from around the world (Figure 2.17). Starting in 1945 Charles Eames began to give slide lectures with the images, often projecting several at once on multiple screens.

In May of 1951 Charles Eames took ten photographs of the Watts Towers for his design archive. It is not known how he encountered the Watts Towers, though it is possible that he found the site at the suggestion of Man Ray, who traveled in the same art circles as Ray Eames.[245] As with Man Ray's photograph, Eames chose not to picture Rodia, his house, or the neighborhood surrounds of the Watts Towers. Instead, he focused on elements of design through close-up images, eschewing representations of the

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[240] The Eameses were already collecting folk art when they first worked with Girard in 1949, but Girard amplified their interest. In 1954 Charles Eames took photographs of Girard's folk art collection, published in *Everyday Art* 33 (Winter 1954). The Eameses and Girard also collaborated on the exhibition *Textiles and Ornamental Arts of India* in 1955, and created *Day of the Dead*, a film about Mexican culture, in 1957. For a longer discussion on their relationship see Pat Kirkham, "Functioning Decoration," *Charles and Ray Eames: Designers of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 183–184.

[241] "Furniture Show Room Designed by Charles Eames," *Arts & Architecture*, October 1949.

[242] Kirkham, "Functioning Decoration," *Charles and Ray Eames,* 184.

[243] Alison Smithson, "And now Dharmas are dying out in Japan," *Architectural Design*, September 1966, 447–448.

[244] Ray Eames explained that each object in their collection was acquired to an example of form for the study of design. See Ray Eames, interview with Ruth Bowman, July 28 1980–August 20, 1980, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[245] In unpublished notes, Jules Langsner states that he found the Towers when an unnamed friend "chanced upon" them in 1951; see the unpublished essay "Will Simon Rodia's Towers Come Tumbling Down?" Box 15, Folder 8, Jules Langsner Papers, UCLA Special Collections. Given Eames and Langsner's association through *Arts & Architecture*, and the short timeline, this friend very well may be Charles Eames. On the other hand, Man Ray and Ray Eames were both part of the "Open Circle Group" of abstract artists, which exhibited together in 1944, so he could have hear of Rodia's creation this way; for the connection between Man Ray and Ray Eames see Arthur Millier, "Abstract Art Enthusiasts Exhibit Work," *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 1944, C1.

overall scale of the Towers. In the most inclusive long shot, the structure occupies the entire composition, the bottom edge of the frame skimming the base of the wall, and the wall and towers pushing outward against the other three edges of the composition (Figure 2.18). Otherwise, Eames' photographs image details of Rodia's intricate and playful ornamentation and their relationship to the site's structure. One photograph centers on Rodia's use of teacups and fractured ceramics as they ripple around the oblong form of a balustrade on a wall. In the background a tiered base rises in shadows and radiating bands cut the negative space into fractured shards (Figure 2.19). In another image a spherical balustrade embedded with crockery is flanked by other thin spires with a heart shape and figures perched on the top (Figure 2.20). And elsewhere the gentle curves of the front wall are accented by arches of tile and shell, and behind them, a tangle of lines cropped in such a way that they refuse to resolve into any structural logic (Figure 2.21).

These photographs of the Watts Towers were placed in the category of "Photographs of structures, textures, and objects," in an archive that included hundreds of photographs of wooden tops from around the world, katsina dolls, and Day of the Dead figurines.[246] Design scholar Pat Kirkham has related the Eameses' collection of such subjects to Romanticism in American interior design, European traditions of curio cabinets, and the Arts and Crafts movement's emphasis on handmade objects.[247] However, I argue that Eameses' activities, and the ways that they were received, should also be considered in light of the American "folk art fever" of just a few decades prior.[248]

In the 1920s artists in the Northeast, such as Charles Sheeler and Elie Nadelman, collected handmade objects made according to communal traditions like Shaker furniture and German *fraktur* painting. They called this work "folk art" and integrated its abstract, decorative forms of into their own paintings, sculptures, and photographs (Figure 2.22). The New York Museum of Modern Art opened in 1929 and from the start had a commitment to both European modernism and American folk art; by the 1930s the museum hosted not only *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* but also exhibitions like *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750–1900*.[249] American modernists found in folk art a national artistic tradition that they could claim as a precedent for their work, while American modernist visual art was credited with creating an appetite for folk art.[250]

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[246] There are ten Watts Towers photographs dated to in the category "Photographs of structures, textures, and objects" in the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Collection, which are dated May 22, 1951.
[247] See Kirkham, *Charles and Ray Eames*, 168–179. Thanks also to Lorinda Roorda Bradley for the insights she generously shared with me about the Eames' folk art collecting practices. Her forthcoming PhD dissertation "The Spirit of Exhibition and Visual Pedagogy in the Work of Charles and Ray Eames" will address this topic, among others.
[248] Cahill quoted in Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 321.
[249] For more on the intertwined history of folk art and modernism in the United States see Corn, *The Great American Thing,* especially "Chapter 6: Home, Sweet Home"; Thomas Crow, *The Long March of Pop: Art, Music and Design, 1930–1995* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), especially "Chapter 1: Before Pop There Was Folk"; Elizabeth Stillinger, *A Kind of Archaeology: Collecting American Folk Art, 1876 – 1976* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011); Marci Kwon, "Vernacular Modernism: Joseph Cornell and the Art of Populism" (PhD diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York, 2016).
[250] Curator Holger Cahill, writing in the catalogue for the 1932 MoMA exhibition "American Folk Art" describes the artists in the exhibition as "in revolt against the naturalistic and impressionistic tendencies of

The nationalist cast to the preoccupation with folk art distinguished it from the European surrealist embrace of *art brut*. Both were made by makers who had no formal training in the arts, but *art brut* was produced by people perceived to be disconnected from cultures of place, like mental patients and mediums, who supposedly drew directly from the unconscious to derive their creativity. In contrast, folk art proponent and curator Holger Cahill clarified that folk art was not primitive, but "the expression of the common people, made by them and intended for their use and enjoyment."[251] In other words, it was tied into a notion of the exceptional democracy of American culture (though the objects that Cahill collected were made mostly made by white ethnic groups in the Northeast).[252] This difference in connectedness to place also led to a difference in aesthetics; in contrast to the *art brut* favored by the surrealists, which was meant to disturb cultural boundaries with its unmediated and often disturbing or bizarre imagery, collectors of folk favored works they understood to have charming or naïve characteristics, which appealed to their populist sentiments.

While there was a close connection between the visuals arts and objects characterized as folk, there was also an effort to connect design and folk forms through a Works Progress Administration program that funded the creation of the Index of American Design. Between 1935 and 1942 commercial illustrators roamed the country making intricate drawings of "decorative, useful and folk arts," including elaborate Cajun textiles, *retablo* paintings from the Southwest, and factory-produced dolls (Figure 2.23). By the end of the program, nearly twenty thousand illustrations were compiled in the index, which was intended as a resource for contemporary designers and artists and exhibited in department stores as well as art museums. One of the stated aims of the project was to "form the basis for an organic development of American design."[253]

Here I would like to suggest that the Eameses' archive of objects and photographs functioned like their own personal Index of American of Design. However, rather than illustrations that pictured the object in full, they used photography, which allowed them to fragment the form into the elements they found compelling. They compiled images and objects from across the globe organized by material category as a source of inspiration for their design projects, including those that formed the so-called "California Look."

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the nineteenth century…pioneers of modern art." See *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750–1900* (New York: Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Catalogue, 1932), 26. After the exhibition, a number of popular press articles noted that the exhibition of folk art "largely owes its popularity to its kinship with modern art." This comment is from *Waltham Mass New Tribune*, November 16, 1933. For other examples see the texts collected in the MoMA Public Information Scrapbooks, Reel 43, frame 130, MoMA Public Information Scrapbooks, MN 93043, Museum of Modern Art Archives.

[251] Holger Cahill, *American Folk Art*, 6.

[252] On the discrepancy between the nationalism of folk art and *art brut* see Jane Kallir, "Introduction: The Collector in Context," in *Self-Taught and Outsider Art: the Anthony Petullo Collection* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 3–20. The whiteness of Cahill's vision of folk art is also discussed in Katherine Jentleson " 'Not as Rewarding as the North:' Holger Cahill's Southern Folk Art Expedition, and Angela Miller, "Feedback Loop: 'Folk Art,' 'Modern Primitives,' and Modernism Between the Wars" (lecture, Boundary Trouble: The Self-Taught Artist and American Avant-Gardes symposium, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., February 2018).

[253] For more on the Index of American Design see Virginia Tuttle Clayton, ed., *Drawing on America's Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2002).

For, even though the Eameses' collection deviated from the Index of American Design in its inclusion of objects from all over the globe, its geographic range was ironically taken as evidence of its ties to regional identity. California was perceived as a frontier that absorbed and assimilated various immigrant cultures, a patchwork culture that was the apotheosis of the American Dream in the 1950s. Thus, design journals lauded Charles Eames as a true "California man" for integrating folk art to create moments of "extra-cultural surprise."[254]

Like the surrealist collection of so-called primitive objects, *art brut*, or fantastic architecture, the Eameses decontextualized the handmade objects they collected, and photography was a key medium for doing so. They distilled these objects into forms that could be translated into new contexts like décor in the Case Study House or patterns on a minimal piece of furniture. Because these objects were made by persons not trained in Euro-American high culture, there was the sense that they offered up forms that were more pure or authentic. André Breton wrote in a typically self-congratulatory statement on innocence in the art of mental patients, "These people are honest to a fault, and their naïveté has no peer but my own."[255] Similarly, Eames collected folk objects and toys as the ideal source of design because they "lac[k] self-consciousness or embarrassment."[256]

The interest in *art brut*, fantastic architecture, and folk art is generally thought to have faded from the American art world of the 1940s and 1950s. Several years after curating *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, Alfred Barr was fired from the Museum of Modern Art, in large part for his advocacy of the art of untrained makers.[257] Meanwhile, the zeitgeist that had fostered populism and regionalism in the arts was replaced by the international appeal of Abstract Expressionism. Nevertheless, though these ideas faded from dominant histories of American modern art, they did not simply vanish. Whether it was a surrealist like Man Ray recognizing a familiarly idiosyncratic site in the fantastic architecture of the towers or a designer like Charles Eames picturing the site for his compendium of folksy inspiration for regional design, these discourses were still circulating in the United States and Europe in the 1940s and early 1950s.

Arts & Architecture and "Something Big"

Shortly after Eames took his photographs, the Watts Towers broke out beyond the personal archives into the public eye of local, national, and international audiences. In July of 1951 *Arts & Architecture* featured the Watts Towers on its cover and in a multi-page article titled "Sam of Watts" (Figure 2.24). As mentioned earlier, Ray and Charles Eames were involved in the magazine, as were other prominent modernist designers and

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[254] For instance see the fashion spread photographed at the Eames house models posed in front of carved candlesticks and handmade pillow textiles in "California Ideas: Spreading East to West," *Vogue Magazine* 15, April 1954.

[255] Quoted in Conley, "Surrealism and Outsider Art," 132.

[256] Quoted in Beatriz Colomina, "The Gift: Reflections on the Eames House," in *Aesthetic Subjects*, Pamela R. Matthews and David McWhirter, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 356.

[257] In particular, Barr's dismissal had to do with his curation of a solo exhibition in 1943 of paintings by Morris Hirschfield, a tailor with no formal training in art. See Thomas Crow, *The Long March of Pop*, 3–10.

architects like Herbert Matter, Richard Neutra, and Eero Saarinen. *Arts & Architecture*'s coverage focused on design and architecture, but it also featured regular columns on music and art, as well as left-leaning political missives.[258] Therefore, while they addressed national and international trends, the magazine deliberately highlighted local innovations in modernist culture. Architectural critic Esther McCoy, who frequently wrote for the magazine, later stated *Arts & Architecture* was "the greatest source in the dissemination of information, architectural and cultural, about California."[259]

Arts & Architecture became a journal of modernist culture in 1938, but rolled out its most ambitious initiatives, like the Case Study House program, in the postwar period.[260] World War II had brought rapid industrialization, a booming population, and an influx of new artists, and as a result interest in modernism in the city grew. New groups such as the Architectural Panel formed in the late 1940s to "stimulate greater awareness of our physical environment."[261] The Architectural Panel saw itself as a cutting edge alternative to more traditional takes on architecture and hosted lectures on topics like vernacular signage in the built environment and urban detritus.[262] Further, it was made up of not only architects like Richard Neutra and Charles Eames, but people involved in the visual arts like art history students (and future curators) Walter Hopps and Henry T. Hopkins and sculptor Clare Falkstein.

Arts & Architecture's textual presentation of Watts Towers in its July 1951 issue framed it through discourses of *art brut*, fantastic architecture, and folk art, but its photographs of the site showed the aspects of its material form that resonated with modernist visions of the cityscape. Its intersection of these two elements was key to the site's appeal and rapid absorption over the next decade. Immediately, the cover design pointed to the way that the structure of the Watts Towers could be easily assimilated into the modernist aesthetics of *Arts & Architecture*. In the early 1940s Alvin Lustig, a former student of Frank Lloyd Wright and Bauhaus-inspired designer, overhauled the design of *Arts & Architecture*. He changed the logotype and set the standard for the magazine's covers—restrained compositions with a limited color palette, often with fragments of larger images cropped to create abstract shapes, and a frequent use of the grid and geometric patterns.[263] James Reed, a frequent contributor to *Arts & Architecture*, created the July 1951 cover in accordance with this aesthetic, reducing the complex elements and

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[258] For example, see Dalton Trumbo, "Minorities and the Screen," *Arts & Architecture*, February 1944, 30–31.

[259] Esther McCoy in Elizabeth A.T. Smith, ed., *Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 16.

[260] Editor John Entenza purchased *Arts & Architecture* in 1938 and transformed it from a conservative regional house-and-garden publication.

[261] Letter from Richard Wenick to Lewis Mumford, February 28, 1959, Box 1, Architectural Panel Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[262] In a letter to a friend architect Bernard Zimmerman describes the members of the Architectural Panel as "mostly young people" in the fields of architecture and allied crafts, and differentiates it from older architecture groups. See Zimmerman letter to Kenneth Ross, August 26, 1955, Architectural Panel Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[263] For more on designers like Alvin Lustig and Herbert Matter, who were crucial to the development of *Arts & Architecture*'s modernist aesthetic, see Jeremy Aynsley, "Graphic Design in California," in *Living in a Modern Way: California Design 1930–1965*, ed. Wendy Kaplan (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011), 263–287.

boisterous colors of the Watts Towers to a minimal design in muted colors.[264] A close-up image shows just the apex of three spires—the central tower pushes upward, nearly touching the red lettering of the magazine's title at the top, while the right tower is truncated by the edge of the page. Photographic manipulation flattens the towers into a flat white outline laid against a background of mottled grey. The tangle of overlapping white lines erases dimension and scale, abstracting the conical spires into a silhouette.

The cover of *Arts & Architecture* makes the Watts Towers into an ambiguous signifier. It could be the armature of a skyscraper. Or, perhaps more appropriately in a low-profile and resource-rich city like Los Angeles, an oil derrick. Or a transmission tower, crackling with energy.[265] Or something akin to the exposed frame of a Buckminster Fuller dome, a form being celebrated in the architectural press at the time.[266] Like the Eiffel Tower, the Watts Towers' substitution of geometry for mass was a visual referent for modernity.[267] Further, its open structure was particularly resonant with the modernist architecture being heralded in the pages of *Arts & Architecture*. The Case Study Houses and other designs by California modernist architects revealed the structure of buildings like "an X-ray photograph," creating fluid indoor and outdoor spaces with steel frames "exposed to become the basic element of architectural expression."[268] Often paired with glass, the steel came to seem not like a heavy industrial material but light and delicate—the use of steel in the Eames Case Study House was often described as lacy. In addition, the site's abstraction would have been read in terms of local battles over modernist visual art that were waged between modernists and the city government between 1947 and 1955. Shortly after his "Sam of Watts" article was published, Langsner was in the limelight as a vocal presence against censorship when the city council accused several modernist paintings of being subversive, degenerate, and communistic because of their use of abstraction.[269]

The ability of the Watts Towers to be reduced to such an abstract structure bespeaks aspects of Rodia's building process that differentiate his site from most large-scale concrete vernacular structures of the early twentieth century. Italian vernacular constructions like the Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto and German Midwestern sites like the Dickeyville Grotto had neither the open structure nor the vertical scale of the Watts Towers. This is due in part to the way weather impacted the construction of such long-term building projects in the wet and seasonally cold climates of New York and Wisconsin. The builders poured concrete in steel-reinforced slabs and applied

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[264] Reed designed a number of covers for *Arts & Architecture* in the early 1950s including the April 1951 and September 1953 issues, and also photographed Raphael Soriano's 1950 Case Study House.
[265] For instance, the unknown author of an early magazine article writes, "From a distance one wonders what in the world are those towers? Perhaps they are an electrical tower? Then perhaps it is something to do with the oil wells?" See "Dream Towers," *When Magazine*, March 1947, 12.
[266] See *Architectural Forum*, August 1951.
[267] My consideration of the Watts Towers' structure in this chapter is drawn from Grimaldo Grigsby's excellent study *Colossal,* especially her discussion of the Eiffel Tower on 94–121.
[268] The phrase "X-ray photograph" is quoted in Reyner Banham, "Klarheit, Ehrlichkeit, Einfachkeit…And Wit Too!." in *Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses*, ed. Elzabeth A.T. Smith (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 185. The longer quote is from Pietro Belluschi, "New Architecture," *Arts & Architecture* 70, no. 8 (August 1953): 33.
[269] Schrank, *Art and the City*, 69–70.

ornamentation onto the horizontal plane. The whole process could take place indoors, and then the completed slabs would be propped up when the weather became more amendable.[270] As a result, the basic structural elements of the grottos are solid planes, and the ornamentation has a bulky feel that does not reflect its eventual orientation in space.

In contrast, Rodia built outdoors year-round in the sunny climate of Southern California. This allowed him to build incrementally, adding each rung of the network of thin bands as he went. The lack of humidity meant that concrete dried quickly, so Rodia could embed ornaments at any angle without them falling off, and as a result his ornamentation more closely conforms to the structure of his site. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, his use of flat architectural materials like ceramic tile made his structures more streamlined than sites where the ornaments were made of natural materials like stone, such as the Palais Idéal.

Rodia's site was also distinct from the Palais Idéal and all other vernacular backyard structures of the period in that his latticework structures were not paired with figural or narrative imagery (Figure 2.25). Even those sites where untrained builders used similar techniques did not have the same level of abstraction as the Watts Towers. The Garden of Eden, built by Civil War veteran S.P. Dinsmoor in his Kansas backyard between 1901 and 1928, was one such site. Dinsmoor worked in a hot and dry climate similar to Southern California using many of the same building practices as Rodia; he formed thin concrete bands of up to 25 feet in length, wrapping steel rebar with chicken wire, which he covered in a thin coat of Portland cement (Figure 2.26). But, rather than being abstract structural components, Dinsmoor's bands are figured as "branches" that link different parts of the site, growing from the concrete "trees" around which figures are positioned in tableaus depicting populist and Biblical imagery. A concrete Adam with his foot over a serpent's head alongside Eve holding an apple were some of the most often pictured and reproduced aspects of the Garden of Eden, while the "branches" were generally taken to be insignificant to the site's meaning (Figure 2.27).[271]

Without such figures, the vertical scale of the Watts Towers' three central spires makes them the most common focal point of the site. The techniques that enabled Rodia to build at a height of nearly one hundred feet were counter-intuitive and brilliant. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Rodia did not have formal training as a sculptor, engineer, or architect, but unlike other "self-taught" builders like Father Wernerus and S.P. Dinsmoor, his profession was construction.[272] In his position as a cement finisher

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[270] Sciorra describes with process in *Built with Faith*, 135–136. Arlene Schultz at the Dickeyville Grotto also attested to the fact that this is how the Grotto was built, pointing out the seams between the slabs that were poured. Conversation with author, October 2016.

[271] For more information about the Garden of Eden see John Hachmeister, "The Garden of Eden," in *Backyard Visionaries: Grassroots Art in the Midwest*, eds. Barbara Brackman and Cathy Dwigans (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999), 29–49.

[272] The 1910 census lists Rodia as working as a watchman, his 1917 draft registration card and a 1918 directory lists him as a janitor, a 1919 directory as a porter, but then the Rodia's profession is often reported as a cement finisher in the census records from 1920 to 1940. See *1920 City of Long Beach Census: District 0087,* U.S. Federal Census, 1920, Sheet 20B, Dwelling 482, Family 485, Sam and Benita Rodia; *1930 Los Angeles City Census: District 0564*, U.S. Federal Census, 1930, Sheet 27B, Dwelling 485, Family 521, Sam Rodia; *1940 Los Angeles County Census: district/precinct*, U.S. Federal Census, 1940, sheet

Rodia would have erected scaffolding, mixed and applied mortar, and leveled and smoothed concrete.[273] A letter of recommendation from 1932 specifically lauds Rodia's "handeling [sic] and placing of both plain and reinforced concrete."[274]

Of course, many Italian American yard shrine builders were also construction workers, but the country is not dotted with Watts Towers-like sites. How Rodia acquired the knowledge to build as he did will likely never be known, but the outcome of his skilled building was a durable structure well adapted to its environmental conditions. The supports were placed into a relatively shallow base, but the complex system of braces and beams distributed the weight such that the Towers are remarkably sturdy. Rodia covered each beam of salvaged steel with metal mesh, over which he applied a thin shell of mortar—a relatively light material, but with a high level of compressive strength due to its dense ratio of cement to sand.[275] His method of tying steel pieces together with wire and mesh packed with cement, rather than welding or bolting the steel armature, also allowed his structure to achieve its towering scale through flexibility. The towers withstood natural disasters like the 1933 Long Beach earthquake by moving with the tremors, unlike many nearby masonry buildings, which were completely demolished (Figure 2.28). Indeed, the tops of the tallest towers move up to three inches in the strong Santa Ana winds, as well as bending up to inch on a daily basis towards and away from the sun.[276]

Thus the product of Rodia's building process was an open-structure, abstract, large-scale site that translated remarkably well into photographic representations. In the *Arts & Architecture* cover, as in the photograph by Man Ray, the towers become complex structural silhouettes. But cropped, close-up photographs also create numerous options for dynamic lines of geometry, which appeared in the ten black-and-white photographs taken by James Reed to illustrate the article inside of *Arts & Architecture*. Four small photographs show close-up shots of the site assembled together into a row—the tool panel, the top of a smaller spire, the arcs of shells on the fireplace, a shadow of a heart form. In other photographs radiating bands in the foreground lay in front of another tower rising in the background (Figure 2.29). These images follow the logic of Charles Eames' design archive, presenting fragments of the site as design and structure. Finally, Reed also included a couple photographs that adhered to popular press conventions—an

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11A, Dwelling 485, Samuel Rodila. All digital images, *Ancestry.com*, accessed March 27, 2017, http://ancestory.com.

[273] United States Employment Service, *Job Descriptions for the Construction Agency in Five Volumes*, (Washington, D.C.: US Government Print Office, 1936), Vol. 2 (Cement finisher), Vol. 5 (Tile setter).

[274] Charles F. Plummer, Markwell Building Company, "Letter of Recommendation," April 14, 1932, Box 17, CSRTW MSS. Reinforced concrete refers to concrete that is internally reinforced with steel.

[275] The dense cement mixture was 1: 4, cement: sand. See Inspector Prouty testimony, Watts Towers Hearings, July 9, 1959, Box 14482, BSCBDF, 29–37.

[276] The fact about the resilience of the Towers in 1933 is based on hearsay and the scant photographic documentation. However, conservators were also closely monitoring the site during the 1994 Northridge Earthquake, and it suffered surprisingly little damage. This information about the flexibility is from the groundbreaking work done by the LACMA conservation team and reported in Frank Preusser, et al., "The Development of Treatment Protocols at the Watts Towers Conservation Project," *Objects Specialty Group Postprints* 21 (2014): 346–362.

establishing shot that pictures the Towers in full with the house in the foreground and figures in front for scale, and two photographs featuring Rodia (Figure 2.30).

These images were paired with writing that provided an interpretive frame for the Watts Towers. The article is broken into two parts—the first written by an unattributed author opens quoting Rodia, "I had in my mind to do something big and I did," and provides information on Rodia's building process and the range of materials integrated into his towers.[277] The second, more interpretive section of the article was written by Jules Langsner, an art critic who often wrote for *Arts & Architecture* as well as other national publications.[278] Langsner's approach to Rodia is not overly laudatory—he uses the term "cracker barrel philosopher" to describe his subject. Still, Langsner seems to have earnestly grappled with the challenge of aesthetically analyzing such an unusual subject. His confusion is reflected in the two sets of descriptive terms he used, which were printed together in error. The text reads, "one enters a bizarre yet pleasant world, one enters a naïve, and disturbing [sic], for the ill-assorted quilt work of the textural designs lacks the discipline of a genuine folk art."[279] Though Langsner clarifies that the Watts Towers deviates too far from communal traditions of making to qualify as "genuine folk art," raising the term "folk" along with the descriptors that are frequently ascribed to it—"pleasant" and "naïve"—show that he had the history of American folk art in mind when considering how to contextualize this work. In the late 1950s he would use the term "folk art" in an unreserved manner, likely buoyed by other critics' use of the term.

In comparison with the folk art formulation, Langsner's use of the terms "bizarre" and "disturbing," and later descriptions of Rodia as "driven by impulse," seem out of place and overly harsh. However, this language signals another unnamed reference point Langsner likely drew from—the French surrealist conceptions of fantastic architecture and *art brut*. Langsner was familiar with these categories as a writer for the nationally distributed *ArtNews* magazine and as the longtime advocate for surrealist artists in Los Angeles whose work was included in the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibition.[280] Indeed, in conversations and later publications Langsner likened the Watts Towers to the

[277] The far-reaching impact of the *Arts & Architecture* coverage can be measured by the numerous spurious facts from this part of the article that were repeated time and time again until they became ingrained in the Rodia mythology; for instance, the notion that Rodia was granted permission to build by officials in Sacramento (the state government doesn't issue building permits for private property), that Rodia read the *Encyclopedia Britannica* for inspiration (he was likely illiterate), and that the tallest tower was 104 feet (it was later measured at 99 ½ feet).

[278] Jules Langsner, "Sam of Watts," *Arts & Architecture* 68, no. 7 (July, 1951): 23–25.

[279] Langsner, "Sam of Watts," 25.

[280] Langsner wrote a regular column on modern art in Los Angeles for *ArtNews* magazine, which had one of the biggest circulations of any American art publication in the 1950s. However, Langsner's column was often dropped by the editors if the issue became too crowded, indicating the low priority given to consistent coverage of art in Los Angeles. Langsner railed against this oversight, proving himself a staunch advocate for art in Southern California. See the letters between Thomas Hess to Jules Langsner, Box 1 General Correspondence, Jules Langsner Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Lorser Feitelson, Helen Lundeberg, and Knud Merrild all had work in *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*. That same year, Langsner wrote the catalogue essay for *Post-Surrealists and Other Moderns*, a local exhibition of their work at the Stanley Rose Gallery.

Palais Idéal.[281] Further, Langsners' description of the Towers as "Cambodian-like" is another indicator that he had fantastic architecture in mind—surrealists often compared the Palais Idéal with the temples of Angkor Wat in Cambodia, another favored example of fantastic architecture.[282] Thus, in this short text, Langsner vacillates between two different discourses describing the creative production of untrained makers, which have different histories and tones.

Langsner would later declare that as soon as the *Arts & Architecture* issue came out, "the towers were hailed in publications all over the world, and Sam was well on his way to becoming a mythical figure in the art world" beloved by "esthetes in a dozen countries…"[283] The swift and far-reaching effect of the *Arts & Architecture* coverage was due in part to the nature of the magazine. The culture covered was typically firmly in a modernist canon; as well, the magazine had a robust international readership, and was often a source of copy for other design and architecture publications.[284] Therefore, it bestowed a certain amount of cultural status on the Watts Towers by mere virtue of the inclusion of the site.[285] Indeed, from 1951 through 1958 local, national, and international outlets picked up the *Arts & Architecture* story, drawing an unprecedented amount of coverage to the Watts Towers.

A spate of local and national popular press articles came, many drawing directly from the *Arts & Architecture* article. This time the Watts Towers appeared in some popular press not as a hobby, but as an artwork. For example, it appeared in the Arts Section of *Time Magazine* in 1951, which quoted Langsner's statement that it was "lacking the discipline of genuine folk art" though pleasant and bizarre.[286] However, much more than *Arts & Architecture*, the popular press picked up on the nationalist narratives that had been paired with the reception of American folk art. Rodia's statement that he wanted to do "something big" became "something big for my country." Consequently, Rodia was portrayed as a hardworking immigrant who created the Watts Towers as a symbol of gratitude to his new home.[287]

Watts Towers also appeared in publications devoted to the arts—European architecture and design publications *Domus*, *Architectural Review*, and *Aujourd'Hui* to the high-end American fashion magazine *Harper's Bazaar*.[288] They used photographs by

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[281] Herbert Kahn, handwritten notes on a talk by Langsner, Box 29, Folder 2, CSRTW MSS.
[282] Pinder, *Visions of the City*, 114.
[283] Jules Langsner, "Will Simon Rodia's Towers Come Tumbling Down?" unpublished essay, Box 15 Sculptors, Folder 8: Rodia, Simon, Jules Langsner Papers, Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles.
[284] Reyner Banham discusses *Arts & Architecture*'s outsize influence on European designers and architects in "Klarheit, Ehrlichkeit, Einfachkeit…And Wit Too!." 183–195.
[285] The few exceptions include an article on local petroglyphs, and the multi-issue feature "Products of the West," which documented manufacturing plants.
[286] "Labyrinth in Watts," *Time Magazine* 58, September 3, 1951, 80–85. A *Los Angeles Times* article states that critics consider Rodia's work "'pleasant' and at the same time 'bizarre,'" clearly paraphrasing Langsner's verbiage, see "Immigrant Builds Towers to Show His Love for U.S.," June 8, 1952, Part IA, 26.
[287] See Whiting, "The Watts Towers as Urban Landmark," especially pages 144–149.
[288] L.L.P., "Le straordinarie torri di Watts," *Domus* (December 1951): 52–54; *Architectural Review,* "Sam of Watts," 111 no. 663 (March 1952): 201–203;"Les tours de Watts de Sam Rodilla a Los Angeles," *Aujourd'hui*, no. 8, June 1956, 42; Gouverneur Paulding, "Works of Faith: Sam's Towers and the Postman's Palace," *Harpers Bazaar*, December 1952.

James Reed and Charles Eames or images made in the same idiom as *Arts & Architecture*—black and white photographs that emphasized the structure of the towers and excised figures and the neighborhood context.[289] Further, all of these articles contextualized the Watts Towers as fantastic architecture through comparisons to other works in the category. Most aligned Watts Towers with the Palais Idéal—*Harper's Bazaar* did this most directly in the article "Works of Faith," which paired an essay and photograph on both sites together. *Domus*, an Italian journal, compared the Watts Towers to the work of another fantastic architect—Antoni Gaudí.

In sum, the startling impact of the *Arts & Architecture* coverage was the result of several factors. First, the nature of the publication allowed it to reach an international audience of cultural elites. Second, the black and white photographs in the issue, taken by a photographer who also imaged Case Study Houses, showed that the towers could be translated into mobile representations, which were both visually arresting and akin to the aesthetics of urban Los Angeles. As Cécile Whiting and Sarah Schrank have argued, these photographs made the Watts Towers into a modernist object by excising its neighborhood context and distilling it to its formal qualities.[290] Third, the surrealist discourses of *art brut* and fantastic architecture and those of American folk art provided conceptual framing for the site, which connected it to modernism and also narratives of national and regional identity. Thus, the reception of the Watts Towers began to mold its meaning as an artwork. However, in 1959 the site would ricochet to even higher levels of national and international fame as the result of its embrace by the circle of modernists in Los Angeles.

Discovering the Towers

In 1952 Langsner wrote a letter to his friend Selden Rodman and asked if on Rodman's recent visit to Los Angeles he had noticed how "a community, the art community to be specific, is taking shape, how we are subtly, but surely moving from so many molecules accidentally bumping into each other to an interknit group."[291] On Rodman's trip he and Langsner had visited the Watts Towers, along with June Wayne, an artist who was collaborating with Langsner on a public education class called "Modern Art and You" (Figure 2.31).[292] The alignment of the trip to the Watts Towers and Langsner's revelation about the increasing coalescence of a local arts scene is, I argue, no coincidence. If *Arts & Architecture*'s Case Study House program and campaigns against the censorship of abstract art were two forces that drew together modernists in Los Angeles in the immediate postwar period, then Watts Towers was another catalyst for this

[289] The article in *Aujourd'hui* was a rare exception in that it included color photographs, though it kept the same general aesthetic as the rest. *Domus* used Eames' photographs, *Architectural Review* and *Westward* also used at least one photograph by James Reed. See "Sam of Watts," *Architectural Review*; Eileen Peck Winchell, "Sam Rodia's Wonderful Towers," *Westward* (July 1952): 12–17.
[290] Whiting, *Pop L.A.*, 154.
[291] Letter from Jules Langsner to Selden Rodman, April 7, 1952, Box 1, "Correspondence, General, Circa 1952," Jules Langsner Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[292] In 1960 Wayne founded the Tamarind Lithography Workshop, which played a big role in the American printmaking revival.

solidification. Between 1951 and 1958, a period when more images were circulating in public than ever before, modernists in Los Angeles were not content to read about the Watts Towers in the pages of *Arts & Architecture*. Instead, they journeyed to the site, some traveling as far as thirty miles. They wrote about their experience of seeing the towers in letters to friends and journal entries and photographed each other standing in front of it.

The Watts Towers' liminal space between architecture and sculpture and idiosyncratic form made it appealing to individuals with different approaches to the aesthetics of space. Its structure and design features intrigued architectural photographers and critics who had cut their teeth on the Case Study House project, such as Marvin Rand and Esther McCoy.[293] Around 1957 McCoy visited the site with Mexican architect Juan O'Gorman, and photographed him standing in front of it. O'Gorman was a proponent of mosaics in modernist architecture and had recently completed a massive mosaic on the functionalist edifice of National Autonomous University's Central Library in Mexico City, so he likely found the Watts Towers intriguing (Figure 2.32).[294] The site's immersive environmental qualities also attracted European avant-garde artists in exile like Kate Steinitz, a German Jewish Dada artist who fled the Nazis in the late 1930s. A former collaborator of Kurt Schwitters, Steinitz, upon seeing the Watts Towers' environmental scale and organic forms, compared it with Schwitters' work, especially his room-sized construction the *Merzbau*.[295] Younger artists associated with the Beat scene and Ferus Gallery like Walter Hopps and Charles Brittin were moved by Rodia's use of discarded materials in sculptural configurations. Brittin short a series of close-ups of the sculptures and also of children playing in a field of debris by the train tracks (Figures 2.33, 2.34).

In this way, the Watts Towers became a kind of "shrine" for a community that had no dedicated art museum, manifesting the principles of modernist art for its devotees. This term shrine was used by a range of persons, including Walter Hopps, who married art historian Shirley Nielsen in front of the Towers in 1955.[296] Interestingly, the use of the Watts Towers as a surrogate church gestures toward some of the connections that I traced in the first chapter, which linked Rodia's building practices with vernacular material culture like yard shrines and grotto roadside attractions. The religious terminology was later echoed by Alfred Barr, who visited the site in 1965 with local surrealist Lorser Feitelson. He called the Towers one of Los Angeles' two unforgettable shrines, the other

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[293] Seymour Rosen, interview with Jo Farb Hernández, November 2, 2000, WTCT SP.

[294] Letter from Juan O'Gorman to Esther McCoy, Dec 29, 1956, Box 27, Folder 13, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. O'Gorman related use of mosaics to Mexican popular history, so he might have read the Watts Towers differently than most artists in Los Angeles.

[295] Letter from Kate Steintiz to Peter Selz, March 20, 1959, Box 8, Folder 4, Mae Babitz Papers, Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles (hereafter cited as Babitz MSS). In the same location, see also the statement by Kate Steinitz where she describes the site as "a three dimensional realization of what my old friend, the philosophic dadaist, Schwitters had done on 5 x 7 collages, from trivial materials, converting them into a microcosm of sphere and color."

[296] Hopps is quoted referring to the Watts Towers as "a shrine to modern art in Los Angeles" in "Assemblage at the Frontier," *Time* magazine, 86, no.16 (October 15, 1965): 106. Hopps relates an anecdote about being married at the towers in *The Dream Colony: A Life in Art*, ed. Deborah Treisman, interviews by Anne Doran (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2017), 60.

being the La Brea Tar Pits. Barr then named Rodia "Saint Simon" and wrote that he wished that Rodia had been able to meet that other mystic forbearer of modernist art "Saint Kurt" (Kurt Schwitters).[297]

Barr also described the process of seeing the Watts Towers as involving a long, time-consuming journey that traversed "a flat, forlorn and endless cityscape…" In the art press, the process of driving to experience the towers in situ was repeatedly referred to a "pilgrimage," implying an arduous journey of length to a holy site that was not part of the seeker's daily life.[298] Other artists used words that were more pointed than "forlorn" to describe the Towers environments like "slum," "ghetto," and simply, a "negro neighborhood."[299] These impressions underscore the fact that most of the modernist pilgrims to the Watts Towers shared something in common—they were outsiders to the part of the city where Rodia's property was located. They did not live in Watts, or even South Central, and they were mostly white and college-educated.

These aspects of their identity shaped their reactions to the neighborhood as they first encountered it in the 1950s. At that time the *colonia* area where 107th Street was located was equally divided between Mexican and black residents, and Watts as a whole was home to a majority African American population.[300] There had also been a recent downward trend in the class position of residents of Watts. In large part this is due to the Housing Authority, which used federal slum clearance funds to construct three new housing projects in the early 1950s just a mile north of Rodia's property. The projects created low-income housing for nearly 10,000 people in a town of less than 26,000.[301] Meanwhile, racially restrictive covenants were definitively voided in 1953, allowing more well-off black families to move to better neighborhoods.[302] Yet the Pacific Electric Train and trolley car systems were nearly defunct, leaving those without access to cars trapped without economic opportunity. And the vibrant Central Avenue jazz scene that had brought creatives to the neighborhood had been rapidly fading since the late 1940s due to police crackdowns on interracial performance spaces.[303]

This racialized geography, which had been an obstacle to viewing the Towers in the prewar period, became part of its allure in the 1950s. When they came up on the Watts Towers it was, in the words of Municipal Arts Department director Kenneth Ross, "like discovering an unknown treasure in a secret cave or someplace."[304] The perceived contrast between the "depressing" surroundings of Watts and Rodia's creation amplified

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[297] Letter from Alfred H. Barr, Jr. to Kate Steinitz, July 20, 1965, WTC SP.
[298] Other texts that used the term pilgrimage included *Aujourd'hui*, no. 8, June 1956, 42 and L.L.P., "Le straordinarie torri di Watts," *Domus* (December 1951): 52–54.
[299] As an example, see Selden Rodman's use of the term "no-man's land" and his description of Watts in "The Artist Nobody Knows," *New World Writing* 2 (1952): 156.
[300] Adler, "Watts: From Suburb to Black Ghetto," 263. In 1930 and 1940 all of the residents of 107th Street besides Rodia had Spanish surnames. However, the 1956 Watts Directory recorded a mixture of Spanish and non-Spanish surnames. Given the demographics of Watts the non-Spanish surnames likely belonged to African American residents.
[301] Adler, "Watts: From Suburb to Black Ghetto," 293.
[302] Ibid., 301.
[303] Daniel Widener, *Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 60–62.
[304] Kenneth Ross interview by Seymour Rosen, March 19, 1986, WTCT SP.

the sense of the miraculous encounter with the site.[305] It was precisely the Towers' location in a space so unexpected to these viewers, so far from the spaces they would usually occupy to make or view art that gave them the sense of a mystical discovery. And it gave them a sense of their own regional specialness—California was truly a place where modern art could sprout up anywhere.

Of course, at the start of this chapter I discussed how neighbors and members of the black creative community at Central Avenue had been well aware of the Towers' existence for decades. For them the site was not an "unknown treasure" but rather somewhere they went on a date or saw on the way to their favorite jazz club. Therefore, it is important to recognize how these modernists' narratives of encounter are predicated on the notion that the work has not been properly known until the moment of discovery, erasing and to some extent invalidating existing meanings. Though such discovery narratives are to some extent present in most artists' biographies, they are especially pronounced in the reception of the art of untrained makers.

Objects characterized as primitive, *art brut*, fantastic architecture, and folk art are the kinds of work that by definition are made by people who do not identify as professional artists and are not making their objects for an institutional arts space. Additionally, the factors of identity—race, class, gender, ability, and so on—that are common to unschooled artists also constrain their ability to determine their own public narratives about their work. Their work requires an agent of "discovery" to make it legible as art by writing about it, photographing it, and collecting it to be exhibited in galleries and museums.[306] This movement of meanings and objects often has a power dynamic: the arts expert has the authority to ascribe meanings, while those involved in the object's original context do not.

This act of discovery was made simpler by Rodia's absence from the site several years after the *Arts & Architecture* article came out. On February 9, 1954, at the age of seventy-six, Rodia signed a will leaving all of his possessions to his young neighbor Louis H. Sauceda. Sauceda lived a couple doors down from Rodia at 1720 E 107th Street, and his father and Rodia had been longtime friends.[307] Soon afterwards Rodia moved to Martinez, a suburb of the Bay Area, where his sister Angelina and her family were living.[308] As with so many other aspects of his biography, the question of why Rodia would leave his creation after so many years of devoted labor has never been definitively answered. Rodia's relatives have suggested that he suffered a stroke and was isolated, incapacitated in the house for days. Faced with the prospect of getting sick or dying alone, he made the decision to live nearer to family.[309] Others have written that Rodia was

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[305] The adjective "depressing" is from Kate Steinitz letter to Peter Selz, March 30, 1959, Box 8, Folder 2, MB MSS.

[306] For on this "discovery" dynamic see Jennifer Jane Marshall, "Find-and-Seek: Discovery, narratives, Americanization, and Other Tales of Genius in Modern American Folk Art," *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, 52–63; Cara Zimmerman's analysis of discovery narratives of self-taught at in "Formulaic narrative in outsider art: The containment of Martin Ramirez and the classification of Thornton Dial," (M.A. thesis, University of Delaware, 2009)

[307] A copy of the will is located in Box 10, Folder 3, MB MSS.

[308] For more on Rodia's life after he moved to Martinez, see the interviews with his family and friends there in *I Build the Tower*, directed by Ed Landler and Brad Byer, 2016, DVD.

[309] This is the explanation given by Rodia's family members in interviews in *I Build the Tower*.

put off by the changing demographics of his neighborhood. One woman who visited the site in 1953 and found it crowded with tourists surmised that Rodia got tired of receiving so many guests.[310] Whatever the reason, by the fall of 1955 Rodia was gone, and multiple stories of what happened to him were quickly concocted.[311] Some said he went back to Italy, Massachusetts, or Detroit, and still others claimed that Rodia had died.[312]

Consequently, those who visited the Watts Towers after 1954 could form interpretations of the site without engaging with the complexities of Rodia as an individual. They viewed his soaring towers and dynamic mosaics without encountering his ruminations on the ethics of the church, his misogynistic attitudes towards women, and his cryptic responses to their questions about his site's meaning. Also, without Rodia living on the property it was subject to vandalism, and his house burned down around 1957. Without the house and its domestic associations it was easier to perceive the site as less of a backyard on private property, and more like public monument; in this way, Rodia's absence also created the perception of a vacuum of ownership.

Bill Cartwright soon stepped in to fill this gap. He was a filmmaker who learned about the Watts Towers when his college roommate at the University of Southern California made *The Towers* documentary in 1953. In 1958 Cartwright decided to drop by to see the Watts Towers and found Rodia's house in ashes and the site vandalized. He decided to purchase it, recruiting his friend actor Nick King to go in on the deal. They found that Louis Sauceda had sold the property to a man named José Montoya, who worked at a local dairy. With Montoya's young daughter acting as translator, Cartwright and King bought the property on the spot for the low price of $3,000 with the plan to build a caretaker's house on the property where King would live.[313]

The racial dynamics of this exchange are worth noting. In the 1950s African Americans in Los Angeles were finally able to choose where to live without the limitation of restrictive covenants, but frequently were targeted for violence when they purchased homes in majority white neighborhoods—bricks hurled through windows and flaming "K"s burned on lawns.[314] Yet Cartwright and King, two young white men, easily purchased a property in a neighborhood that had been systematically neglected so that

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[310] Donawayne Tanner saw Rodia's property on a popular local television program hosted by Paul Coates in 1953. She visited the Towers and found Rodia to be friendly, but reports that "Thanks to Paul Coates and the word of mouth advertising by Coates' followers, Sam Rodilla [sic] was soon having so many visitors that he no longer enjoyed them. He moved away…" See the untitled essay by Donawayne Tanner, December 20, 1970, Box 9, Folder 2, MB MSS.

[311] Paul V. Coates reported Rodia's absence in "Confidential File," *Mirror-News*, October 4, 1955, 6.

[312] Anais Nin wrote a fanciful story about Rodia for *Westways* where Rodia leaves because he has vowed to be buried in Italy, which she drafted in untitled diary, Box 28: Diary 1957, Anais Nin Papers, UCLA Special Collections; Kate Steinitz suggests Massachusetts in a letter to Peter Selz, March 20, 1959, Box 8, Folder 4, Babitz MSS; Detroit is mentioned in *Aujourd'hui*, no. 8, June 1956, 42. There seems to have been some lingering confusion as to Rodia's whereabouts—for example the author of a short article in 1957 assumes Rodia is still living there, explaining "He frequently disappears for a time, then returns to take up where he left off." See "Watts Towers…a fantasy of steel spires," *Sunset Magazine* (February 1957).

[313] The historical narrative in this paragraph is summarized from Seymour Rosen, interview with William Cartwright, October 16, 2002, and Seymour Rosen, interview with Nicolas King, August 18, 1985, ATC SP.

[314] See for example "Friends Volunteer to Stand Guard as Violence Spreads," *California Eagle*, September 10, 1959, 1.

property was heavily devalued. And they could imagine King occupying the property because there was no barrier to white occupancy in neighborhoods of color. Further, King and Cartwright didn't seem to have looked to the site's previous owners for information about its history; in later accounts Montoya and Sauceda's roles are mostly disregarded, and they are rarely referred to by name, but instead simply as "the Mexicans" who were short-lived owners of the site.[315] Therefore, race was integral to both the psychological and monetary ownership over the site; if modernists had believed the Watts Towers to be a shrine made for arts audiences in particular, now members of their ranks actually owned the site.

Urban Junk—From Preservation Struggle to Masterpiece of Assemblage

In February of 1959 Cartwright reached out to his friend Jim Elliott, a curator at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, to help with the preservation of the Watts Towers. A small group rapidly assembled to help make the site a public cultural resource, including Bernard Rosenthal, an architect and member of the Architectural Panel, Kate Steinitz, the former Dada artist and Schwitters collaborator, and Walter Hopps, by then the curator of the Ferus Gallery.[316] Shortly thereafter Cartwright and King went to city government for permission to build a caretaker's house on the property and discovered that they had triggered the demolition order against the Watts Towers to re-open. Suddenly, their long-term plan for preservation became a concentrated, high-stakes campaign. Daily meetings were held, some with up to sixty participants. In late April the ad-hoc group took on the official name of the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts.[317]

The CSRTW was led by arts professionals and, specifically, the modernists who had spent the last eight years becoming acquainted with and developing a sense of ownership over the Watts Towers. The presence of modernists was so prominent that several years later a reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times* would complain that he had not gotten enough credit for his involvement because "it is popular to forget that support that came from outside vanguard circles."[318] As in the 1920s and 1930s, surrealists had claimed *art brut* and untrained artists like Ferdinand Cheval to show the lineage of their movement, and vanguard artists in the United States turned to Shaker furniture and other American folk arts to make a case for the distinctiveness of American modernism. So the group not only advocated for the Watts Towers, but also for misunderstood vanguard art in the city of Los Angeles.

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[315] This fact was brought up by a concerned citizen in a letter to the CSRTW who was indignant that "no thanks was made to these Mexicans who kept these towers protected and preserved for us up to now." See letter from Carmen B. Litch (sp?) to the CSRTW, July 1, 1959, Box 1, Folder 3, CSRTW MSS.
[316] Elliott brought the idea to the newly formed organization Art Historians of Southern California, where found these willing supporters. See letter from Jim Elliott to William Cartwright, March 5, 1959, Box 1, Folder 3, CSRTW MSS.
[317] Essay on the history of the CSRTW. Box 8, Folder 3, Mae Babitz MSS.
[318] Letter from Henry Seldis to Mae Babitz, July 1, 1966, WTC SP, accessed July 10, 2018, http://spacesarchives.org/resources/simon-rodia-watts-towers/.

The group decided to initiate a letter-writing campaign to city officials and the popular press to convince them that the Towers should be preserved. The CSRTW decided defining the Watts Towers as a sculptural work of art, rather than architecture, might help save it.[319] The content of the many letters written by CSRTW members and their supporters reveal how they advocated for Rodia's creation as an artwork with a close tie to regional identity. A telegram to a city bureaucrats signed by over a dozen galleries in the city maintained, "The Towers represent one of the truly great works of art indigenous to our locale," adding, "A city as important as Los Angeles but as lacking in cultural points of interest simply cannot afford to lose the Watts Towers."[320] Alternately, one writer argued with a comparison to the work of Bernard Rosenthal, whose sculpture had threatened with destruction by the city government several years earlier. He wrote, "[The Watts Towers] is not a building to be lived in but modern, hollow, decorative "see through" sculpture preceding Rosenthal's modern sculpture by thirty years."[321]

As the campaign went on, Jim Elliott wrote to a friend describing it as a battle of "enthusiastic amateurs against the now embattled professionals."[322] Of course, Elliott was a curator at the only art museum in the city so the use of the term "amateur" here is a reflection the CSRTW's sense of being on the outside of city bureaucracy and perhaps also the mainstream culture in the city. However, it's important to note that though modernists in Los Angeles were marginalized by the city government and their distance from New York, they also benefitted from CSRTW members' status and social connections. For instance, Kate Steinitz was widely respected for her involvement with European avant-garde movements and friendship with Schwitters, as well as her work as a librarian of a DaVinci library. She became a key figure in the campaign, writing to her vast network of connections and successfully garnering statements of support from curators at the Museum of Modern Art and Guggenheim Museums in New York, as well as from internationally renowned figures like architect Buckminster Fuller and writer Aldous Huxley.[323] Her letters appealing for support described the Watts Towers as a combination of Buckminster Fuller, Antoni Gaudí, and Kurt Schwitters, an achievement that could be installed in the sculpture garden at the Museum of Modern Art.[324]

The locations of the CSRTW's meetings also reflected the composition of the group; they took place at modernist haunts like Jacob Zeitlin's bookstore and Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock House in Barnsdall Park. Former members have confirmed that the group was nearly entirely white, and after mapping the addresses of members who signed in to a meeting in April of 1959, I found that with only a single exception all of the members lived on the Westside, in Hollywood, or near to universities like the Claremont Colleges (Figure 2.35). This isn't to say that Watts citizens did not participate at all. For instance, some participated in letter-writing campaign, like Mrs. Fay Craddock wrote on behalf of the residents of Watts living between 103rd and 107th Streets, "Since,

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[319] Mae Babitz, untitled essay on the history of the CSRTW, Box 8, Folder 3, MB MSS.
[320] Telegram to Councilman John Gibson, June 25, 1959, Box 1, Folder 1, CSRTW MSS.
[321] Letter from T. Marvin Hatley to Councilman John Gibson, undated, CSRTW MSS.
[322] Letter from Jim Elliott to Peter Selz, June 18, 1959, WTC SP, accessed July 10, 2018, http://spacesarchives.org/resources/simon-rodia-watts-towers/.
[323] Mae Babitz, essay on the history of the CSRTW, undated, Box 8, Folder 3, MB MSS.
[324] Letter from Kate Steintiz to Peter Selz, March 20, 1959, Box 8, Folder 4, MB MSS.

as a group in the lower income bracket, we have too few works of beauty in our midst, and so would sorely miss this wonderful work of genius if it is taken from us."[325] The CSRTW also held a meeting at the Will Rogers auditorium in Watts to drum up community support for the effort. However, overall the campaign for the Watts Towers' preservation was run by people who did not live in Watts, based on arguments for the Towers' value to the artistic community rather than to the residents of Watts.

The CSRTW brought their arguments about the site's aesthetic value to the official hearings on the fate of the Watts Towers. CSRTW lawyer Jack Levine attempted to argue that the Los Angeles Building Code should not be applied to the nearly hundred-foot towers, which he argued, could not defined as a building "by any stretch of the imagination."[326] However, city representatives maintained that the Rodia's creation was under the Commission's jurisdiction because it was a "structure."[327] H.L. Manley, the Chief of the Conservation Bureau, went even further, calling the Watts Towers a "thing," stating, "I was completely astonished that the City of Los Angeles Building Department would allow anybody to build such a thing…In my opinion, the workmanship demonstrated by the towers is very poor."[328]

Ultimately, the preservation of the Watts Towers was ensured not with statements from art museum curators, but through the solidity of its structure when it passed the stress test on October 10, 1959. Nevertheless, the CSRTW's campaign had exponentially amplified the existing public for the Watts Towers, bringing attention from the national and international art world. It also re-framed the Watts Towers as art, while unifying and bringing attention to modernists in Los Angeles. Further, after the campaign Cartwright and King passed along the property to the CSRTW, which became the legal owners of the site and the conduit for much of the information about the Watts Towers.

The Watts Towers' new connection to modernist art was evidenced two years later in 1961, when the New York Museum of Art hosted *The Art of Assemblage*, an exhibition of 250 objects curated by William C. Seitz. Seitz's particular use of the term "assemblage" in the exhibition was new, as he repurposed it from Dubuffet to refer to,

> …collage art made by fastening together cut or torn pieces of paper, clippings from newspapers, photographs, bits of cloth, fragments of wood, metal or other such materials, shells or stone, or even objects such as knives and forks, chairs and tables, parts of dolls and mannequins, and automobile fenders.[329]

The wordiness of Seitz's description indicates that, although "assemblage" is now a canonical term, at the time it was still very much in formation and was defined as much by the selection of works included in the show as by Seitz's text. *The Art of Assemblage* was meant to place the contemporary trend toward assemblage art in a historical context,

[325] Letter from Fay Craddock to Councilman John Gibson, undated, Box 1, Folder 1, CSRTW MSS.
[326] Jack Levine Testimony, Hearing Concerning 1765-69 East 107th Street (WATTS TOWERS), July 6, 1959, Box 14482, Folder for 1765 E. 107th Street, BSCBDF, 6–7.
[327] Building Inspector O.A. Bussard states, "It is not a building. It is a structure." Bussard Testimony, Commissioners Hearing Concerning 1765-69 East 107th Street (WATTS TOWERS), July 7, 1959, BSCBDF, 15.
[328] H.L. Manley Testimony, Commissioners Hearing Concerning 1765-69 East 107th Street (WATTS TOWERS), July 7, 1959, BSCBDF, 10 & 34.
[329] Elizabeth Shaw, *Art of Assemblage* Press Release, July 3, 1961, Museum of Modern Art Press Release, accessed July 10, 2018, https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_326250.pdf.

locating assemblage's development in a succession of avant-garde movements that began with Picasso's cubist collages in the early 1910s and ran through dadaist and surrealist movements. In doing so, *The Art of Assemblage* re-exhibited many artworks that had been shown in the *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism* exhibition over three decades prior.

Of course, *Fantastic Art* had also included a substantial amount of "comparative material" that didn't fit easily into the category of museum-worthy art, like imagery made by children and institutionalized persons, folk art, commercial art, and fantastic architecture. In his research for the exhibition, Seitz looked to a wide range of potential sources for assemblage, including indigenous art, the folk art exhibitions at Museum of Modern Art in the 1930s, and the Palais Idéal.[330] He initially planned to include such "precursory material," but it in the end only one such work made it into the final show—the Watts Towers.[331] Kate Steinitz had offered to send sculptural pieces for exhibition, like an ornamented door, but Seitz preferred the Towers mediated through photography as the Palais Idéal and other forms of fantastic architecture had been thirty years prior.[332] The final catalogue featured four black and white photographs and two in color—allocating more photographs to the Watts Towers than any other work in the show (Figure 2.36).[333]

This surfeit of photographic documentation was possible because of the support of the Ferus Gallery and other artists in Los Angeles. Seitz had written them asking for contributions to cover photography costs that the Museum of Modern Art wouldn't, shrewdly framing his ask on the basis of the Watts Towers' "importance to the city of Los Angeles."[334] Their support shows how the Watts Towers was used to raise the profile of art in Los Angeles. *The Art of Assemblage* included a handful of artists in California, including a work made by Man Ray while he was living in Los Angeles and assemblages by Bruce Connor and Ed Kienholz. However, on the whole it upheld a Europe- and New York-centric view of art history. Even in the section that opens with a description of the Watts Towers, in which Seitz argues that assemblage is a particularly urban sort of art form, Seitz fails to mention Los Angeles in a list of important city art centers that he rattles off before crowning New York the paradigmatic "symbol of modern existence."[335] Yet the conspicuous presence of the Watts Towers made Los Angeles a much more central presence in the history of assemblage than it would have otherwise been.

Los Angeles modernists' fervent support of the Watts Towers' inclusion in *The Art of Assemblage* was an inverse of the controversy around *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, when Katherine Dreier, president of the surrealist Société Anonyme, spoke out against the exhibition's mixture of trained and untrained artists. She alleged that

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[330] See *Art of Assemblage* research files, Box 17, Folder 2, William Seitz Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[331] William Seitz, "Collage and the Object," undated, Box 2, Folder 1, Art of Assemblage Files, EXHS Series 695.12, Special Collections, New York Museum of Modern Art Archives.
[332] Letter from Kate Steinitz to William C. Seitz, February 14, 1961, Box 2, Folder 22, Art of Assemblage Files, EXHS Series 695.12, New York Museum of Modern Art Archives.
[333] Thanks to Cécile Whiting for initially pointing my attention to this.
[334] Letter from William C. Seitz to Irving Blum, May 5, 1961, Box 2, Folder 12, Art of Assemblage Files, EXHS Series 695.12, New York Museum of Modern Art Archives.
[335] William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), 74.

Barr's curatorial choices held surrealism "up to the derision of the public, by making a pot-pourri [sic] of sane, insane and children's works."[336] That Ferus Gallery artists did not feel the same has to do with two differences. First, their geographic marginality and the strong tie between the Watts Towers and regional identity brought more acclaim than derision. And second, unlike Barr, Seitz kept the Watts Towers separate from the other works in the show. He placed the site in a separate section from the rest of the works, one in which he considers the role of environmental factors on artists' production. And the text is contradictory, in one place stating, "Some of the finest assemblages are the work of primitives and folk artists," but later claiming, "To dismiss this unique creation as a quaint folly—as one more bizarre production of an eccentric folk artist—would be an error…"[337] This notion of the Watts Towers as a kind of "proto-assemblage" aligned but always slightly separate from the work of professional artists, reflects the discomfort institutions felt in completely erasing boundaries between the untrained, or folk artist, and the trained modernist artist. The division would be further deepened in the 1970s, when the Watts Towers became a key work in an emerging canon of American contemporary folk and outsider art.

Conclusion

Over the course of the 1950s the meaning of the Watts Towers changed in profound ways, transforming from an Italian construction worker's backyard hobby to a proto-assemblage environmental artwork owned by a group of modernists in Los Angeles. In this chapter I have argued that this process of incorporation can't just be told as a story of California modernism's democratic exceptionalism. Instead, I argue that it must be put in historical context of previous vanguard movements' incorporation of the work of untrained makers as these discourses intersected with a project of regional identity formation that played out across the racialized urban landscape. I focused on the earliest known reception of the Watts Towers tracing how it unfolded from the first photographs taken by Ray, Eames, and Reed to local modernists' impulse to journey to Watts and view the site in person, leading them to purchase the property on which it stood and advocate for it in the court of law. Ultimately, I contend that the Watts Towers played a key role in solidifying a notion of a regional Californian modernism, but also it reveals some of the exclusions that structured the movement and led to the tensions existing today between the African American and Latino neighbors who live in community with the Watts Towers and the mostly white agents of the art world who are determined to act as the site's guardians.

These elisions can also be found in the October 1965 issue of *Artforum* with the Watts Towers on the cover, which opened this chapter. The issue likely got its start with Alfred Barr's visit to Los Angeles in July of 1965. Shortly afterwards, Barr wrote to Kate Steinitz rapturously describing his impressions of the Watts Towers. A couple days later, on July sixteenth, Rodia passed away in a nursing home in Martinez. He was buried in a

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[336] "Exhibits by Insane Anger Surrealist," *The New York Times*, January 19, 1937. Found in Conger A. Goodyear scrapbook, *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibition, New York Museum of Modern Art Archives.
[337] Seitz, 72 and 78–79.

family plot, with a small funeral service that was attended by the few who knew him in life, including CSRTW members Nick King and Seymour Rosen, who acted as pallbearers.[338] Meanwhile, he was memorialized in obituaries that appeared in newspapers across the country, and public services were held on site at the Towers.[339] But in a handwritten postscript added to the bottom of his letter to Steintiz, Barr wrote that he was disappointed that the *New York Times* had run just such a "perfunctory" obituary for a man he held in such high esteem.[340]

Barr ameliorated this oversight several months later when his homage to Rodia was published in *Artforum*, giving Rodia credit for creating an artwork so important to the city of Los Angeles. However, readers likely brought another association to the magazine's discussion of the Watts Towers, one which went unmentioned in any the *Artforum* coverage—the violent uprising that had taken place over a week in August 1965 and brought national infamy to Watts.[341] As I will examine in the next chapter, the racial politics of appropriation underwent a radical shift when the Watts Towers was claimed by black artists and political movements in the aftermath of that 1965 Rebellion.

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[338] Sam Rodia Funeral Guest Book photocopies, Box 17, Folder 7, CSRTW MSS.

[339] "Simon Rodia Memorial Service Set," *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 1965, II 8.

[340] Barr's letter was dated July 20, but a handwritten postscript at the bottom notes that Barr had discovered that Rodia had died after having the letter typed. Letter from Alfred H. Barr, Jr. to Kate Steinitz, July 20, 1965, Box 6, NP MSS.

[341] Francis Frascina notes the timing of the *Artforum* cover in relation to the Watts Rebellion, and criticizes *Artforum* for its depoliticization of the Watts Towers. See *Art, politics, and dissent: Aspects of the art left in sixties America* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), 45–47.

Chapter Three: "Nation Time"
The Watts Towers and Black Cultural Uprising after 1965

The 1973 documentary *Wattstax* records a soul concert performed in front of an enthusiastic crowd of nearly 100,000 people at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. The Wattstax concert was billed as a "celebration of blackness" and the "black Woodstock."[342] It commemorated an urban uprising that took place in the summer of 1965—the Watts Rebellion, a week of arson and looting in South Central Los Angeles sparked by an episode of police violence. The film's poster represents the energy of the event with psychedelic fonts and a bright color palette of purple, green, orange, and brown (Figure 3.1). At the center, photographic silhouettes of the concert's performers are collaged in a pyramid, with Isaac Hayes at the top. Hayes belts into the microphone, perhaps singing his famous theme from the movie *Shaft*, which won an Academy Award earlier that year.[343] Directly below Hayes is the Reverend Jesse Jackson, surrounded by Richard Pryor, the Staples Sisters, Rufus Thomas, and others. Behind the figures an image of the crowd in mustard and brown creates a thick horizon against the white of the poster. And emerging from the crowd, behind Hayes' left shoulder, is the Watts Towers. The triangular spires of the three central towers echo the arrangement of performers as well as the three elongated letter t's of the concert title.[344]

The poster inserts the Watts Towers into the space of the Memorial Coliseum, despite its physical location miles away. This visual geography not only works to connect the concert to Watts but also indicates the Watts Towers' rise as a symbol of black culture after the Rebellion. In the same decade that *Wattstax* posters were displayed outside of movie theaters, the Watts Towers was also included in tours of black historical landmarks in Los Angeles, featured prominently in Blaxploitation films (Figure 3.2), and favored as a destination of celebrities like Jermaine Jackson and Bill Cosby.[345] The presence of black artists like Noah Purifoy, Senga Nengudi, and David Hammonds at the Watts Towers Arts Center further cemented the connection between the Rodia's creation and black art and culture in Los Angeles. The lasting power of this association is reflected in the common assumption that the builder of the Watts Towers was African

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[342] The phrase "celebration of Blackness" comes from William Earl Berry, "How Watts Festival Renews Black Unity," *Jet* Magazine (September 14, 1972), 52–57.

[343] "Theme from *Shaft*" received the Academy Award for Best Original Song in 1972, making Issac Hayes the third African American to receive an Academy award, after Hattie McDaniel and Sidney Poitier.

[344] My discussion of this poster is informed by Donna Murch's reading in "The Many Meanings of Watts: Black Power, Wattstax, and the Carceral State," *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2012): 37–40.

[345] "Tour Will Honor Black Historical Landmarks," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Feb. 9, 1976; Blaxploitation films featuring the Watts Towers include *Melinda* (1972), *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* (1976), and *Abar, the First Black Superman* (1977); see the photograph of Jermaine Jackson at the Watts Towers in *Ebony* (December 1973), 146. Harold L. Williams, the former director of the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts, notes that Cosby was a consistent supporter of the Watts Towers and attended public events there in the late 1960s; see Harold L. Williams, interview by Wesley H. Henderson, 1993, COHLA, 156–157.

American—a notion frequently encountered by staff at the Watts Towers Art Center and by myself in the course of writing this dissertation.[346]

Rather than frame this narrative as a misunderstanding to be corrected, in this chapter I take the notion of a black Rodia as a marker of the lasting impact of a new cultural meaning that was created around the Watts Towers after 1965. In their studies of the shifting discourses around the Watts Towers, Sarah Schrank and Cécile Whiting have asserted that the Watts Towers emerged as a "touchstone of black cultural pride" in the late 1960s.[347] I build on Schrank and Whiting's arguments in order to construct a close analysis of why and how this meaning came to be attached to the site. In particular, I argue that art and visual culture played a crucial role in claiming the Watts Towers for a black public in the decade after the Rebellion. In the timespan between 1965 and 1975 black cultural nationalism took hold in Watts, community art centers flourished in South Central, and black artists changed by their experience in the uprising started to make assemblage sculpture. The integration of the Watts Towers into these new forms of cultural expression was key to its transformation from a structure whose location in a majority African American neighborhood seemed to be incidental to its meaning as a monument inextricable from that community.

In some ways the meaning making processes I discuss in this chapter echo those of the previous, in that Rodia's outsider status, which appealed to California modernists who felt themselves to be on the fringes of the art world, also made the site a powerful symbol for black Angelenos. However, their relationship to marginalization was also distinct since black artists and cultural workers who claimed the Watts Towers after the Rebellion were motivated in part by a history of race-based exclusion from the cultural institutions and monuments in Los Angeles and beyond. As I discussed in the previous chapter, art by African Americans was rarely exhibited in the city's museums and mainstream galleries, and exhibition spaces devoted to black art didn't emerge until the early 1960s.[348] Further, there were very few black architects and monuments devoted to African American history in the city.[349] Therefore, this study of the Watts Towers offers an example of one successful strategy in the face of such cultural exclusion—the reformulation of the meaning of an existing monument. At a moment when black Los Angeles, and Watts in particular, was being analyzed, evaluated, and represented by outsiders, the Watts Towers proved a powerful tool with which to mobilize representational counter narratives.

This close examination of the way that artists interacted with the Watts Towers also sheds new light on the rich history of black art and culture in Los Angeles in the

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[346] In the introduction to *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*, Luisa Del Guidice discusses the widely held belief that the builder of the Towers was African American (19). Judson Powell, who has been involved with the Watts Towers Arts Center since the 1960s, confirms that this is a common understanding among visitors and residents of the neighborhood, as does Mark Steven Greenfield, the director of the Watts Towers Art Center from 1993 to 2005. Powell, interview by Emma Silverman, March 8, 2018, and Greenfield conversation with author, January 18, 2018.

[347] Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City* and Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.* For quote see Whiting, 163.

[348] See Paul Von Blum, "Before and After Watts: Black Art in Los Angeles," 243–245.

[349] Dolores Hayden discusses the long-overdue preservation efforts in the 1990s to preserve the city's black history like Biddy Mason's Homestead; see *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).

1960s and 70s. In recent decades an increasing number of exhibitions and academic books have emerged to chronicle this period, including bringing long-overdue attention to artists who were closely associated with the Watts Towers and its arts center, such as Noah Purifoy and John Outterbridge.[350] The history of the Watts Towers Arts Center itself was the subject of an exhibition catalogue and chronicled in a thesis on black cultural centers that formed after 1965.[351] In addition, while accounts of the Black Arts Movement have long focused on literature, several recent texts on visual art's role in the movement address Los Angeles.[352] Yet the Watts Towers remains a marginal figure in the histories, which are divided between literatures of fine art, political imagery, and organizational histories.

This chapter takes the Watts Towers as its through line in order to link these accounts by drawing together different realms of art making. It examines the multiple tactics used to claim the Watts Towers—abstract and realist visual forms, the political imagery of nationalism and integration, art made for galleries, and imagery in children's books. In other words, if Watts Towers became a monument to black culture in the decade after the 1965, this chapter emphasizes that "black culture" is a contested terrain, one that was negotiated in this period through representations of the Watts Towers. As I will show, Rodia's lack of formal training and disconnect from elite institutions made his creation a resonant site from which to form a new culture not beholden to the dominant white culture, as well as to challenge the boundaries that delineated who could make art, and where.

Finally, as the events of August 1965 unfolded, and in the years following, the mainstream white press called the episode "the Watts Riots," a name that indicated the actions were a pointless and destructive outburst of anger. However, the black press and residents of Watts used different terms like "rebellion," "uprising," and "revolt" to signal their meaning as a tactic that drew attention to legitimate political grievances, such as racial discrimination, economic neglect, and police brutality.[353] Throughout this chapter I used the terms "rebellion" and "uprising" and hope to show how the Towers became an important symbol of self-determination and pride, which combated mainstream press representations of Watts as a place of mindless rioters and senseless violence.

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[350] Texts that are particularly influential on this chapter are Widener, *Black Arts West* and Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); *Now Dig This!: Art & Black Los Angeles 1960–1980*, ed. Kellie Jones, exhibition catalogue (New York: Delmonico Books-Prestel, 2011); *L.A. Object & David Hammons Body Prints*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Tilton Gallery, 2011).

[351] *Civic Virtue: The Impact of the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery and the Watts Towers Arts Center*, ed. Pilar Tompkins Rivas (City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs), 2011; Nathan Rosenberger, "Art in the Ashes: Class, Race, Urban Geography, and Los Angeles's Postwar Black Art Centers," (MA Thesis: California State University, Long Beach, 2011).

[352] *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, ed. Lisa Gail Collins et. al. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006); James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

[353] For more in the terminology of riot versus rebellion see Heather Ann Thompson, "Urban Uprisings: Riots or Rebellions," in *The Columbia Guide to American in the 1960s*, ed. David Farber and Beth Bailey (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 109–116.

Laying the Ground: The Watts Towers from the early 1960s to the Watts Rebellion

Until the mid-1960s any association between black culture and the Watts Towers was rare to nonexistent. As discussed in the previous chapter, a number of black jazz musicians grew up in the neighborhood and witnessed Rodia building his towers, but they did not connect Rodia's activities with their own cultural expression.[354] After Rodia left the Watts Towers in 1954, the neighbors who took over custodianship of the site, Louis Sauceda and José Montoya, were Mexican American. When two young white artists bought the property in 1959, the campaign for the preservation of the site coalesced multiple communities of modernists in Los Angeles to form the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts, but most of these individuals were white. And, though the Committee convincingly made the argument that the unsolicited creation of an individual on his private property was a monument belonging to "Los Angeles," their vision of the city centered the experience of white Angelenos. Therefore, while mainstream white newspapers like the *Los Angeles Times* and *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* covered the 1959 campaign for the preservation of the Watts Towers with dozens of articles, the two largest African American newspapers in the city, the *California Eagle* and *Los Angeles Sentinel*, declined to feature the story.[355]

In the early 1960s the community of Watts began to forge a new relationship with the Watts Towers when the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts instituted summer art classes for local children. In the summer of 1961 sixty children gathered in a makeshift classroom under a tarp set up on the footprint of Rodia's house (Figure 3.3).[356] The classes continued for the next several years, slowly increasing in size and reach, and in 1964 the committee purchased a small house several doors down 107th Street. They hired African American artist Noah Purifoy to look after it, and, along with local teacher and activist Sue Welch and musician Judson Powell, they co-founded the Watts Towers Arts Center.[357] The Arts Center emerged amidst a new flourishing of cultural and political activity in the neighborhood after the decade-long lull following the decline of Central Avenue—that same year the Studio Watts Workshop was established a couple blocks from the Towers, and Horace Tapscott's jazz collective, the Underground Music

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[354] Jazz musicians who saw the Watts Towers being built include Charles Mingus, Cecil McNeely, Buddy Colette, and Horace Tapscott. Betye Saar also observed Rodia building the towers in her childhood. Mingus' account is in his autobiography *Beneath the Underdog,* McNeely, Colette, and Tapscott mention it in their oral histories with COHLA, and Saar discusses the topic in her interview in the Pacific Standard Time Collection.

[355] For instance, on October 11th the headline on the second page of the *Los Angeles Times* read "Famous Towers Pass Strength Tests," while a second article by art critic Henry Seldis asserted that the test had proven Rodia's "Innate Genius and Astounding Inventiveness." In contrast, no mention at all of the successful preservation of the Watts Towers appeared in the *Eagle* or *Sentinel*. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the *South End Bee*, a smaller African American paper that covered South Los Angeles did run some selective coverage related to events in the neighborhood.

[356] "Children Exhibit Art to Help Watts Towers," *Los Angeles Times,* August 28, 1961, B32.

[357] Although Noah Purifoy was hired as the director of the Arts Center and is often credited as its sole founder, he emphasizes the collaboration between himself and Welch and Powell as co-founders, along with teachers Debbie Brewer and Lucille Krasne. See Noah Purifoy interview by Karen Anne Mason, 1992, COHLA, 59.

Association, performed free concerts around the neighborhood.[358] In April 1965 the Arts Center staff helped the Student Committee for the Improvement in Watts, which had been holding regular meetings under the towers, to organize an event called Operation Teacup—a cleanup campaign to fix and paint the houses on 107th Street that culminated in a block party (Figure 3.4). On August 2 of that year, the Arts Center kicked off a summer program for teenagers.[359] Thus, between 1961 and the first half of 1965, the Arts Center was slowly making the Towers into a space of community gathering and ownership.[360]

However, the civil unrest in the summer of 1965 rapidly catapulted the Watts Towers into a new symbolic status, tying it more closely to Watts than ever before. On August 11, a young black man named Marquette Frye was arrested by a white California Highway Patrolman in a neighborhood adjacent to Watts. The crowd that gathered around the site of the arrest refused to disperse and threw rocks and bottles at the police. Their actions were rooted in anger over a decade of police brutality by the Los Angeles Police Department under the helm of the notoriously racist chief of police William Parker.[361] Word spread and more people poured into the streets, looting and setting fire to white-owned businesses and turning over cars. Over the next six days, tens of thousands would participate across South Central Los Angeles, an area of over forty-six square miles, resulting in an estimated $200 million of property damage. The epicenter of the action became 103rd Street, a commercial thoroughfare just four blocks from the Watts Towers. Forty-one buildings were destroyed, earning the area the nickname "Charcoal Alley," but the Towers emerged from the Rebellion unharmed.[362]

The reason for this was twofold. To start, participants in the Rebellion targeted businesses as a result of longstanding grievances over the subpar goods they sold at artificially inflated prices; therefore few homes, libraries, or churches were destroyed.[363] Further, the art center's reputation in the community likely contributed to its treatment; though white teachers left Watts at the outbreak of the uprising, the Arts Center remained open throughout. Judson Powell recalls, "I was inside the Watts Towers in the gazebo doing art classes during the riots. We had kids running all around outside with mattresses and things like that. But we had our classes going while all the madness was going on around us..."[364] The teachers even allowed students to stash their loot around the Towers.

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[358] Horace Tapscott describes the flourishing art scene in Watts in the early 1960s in Horace Tapscott interview with Steven L. Isoardi, 1993, COHLA, 303–308.
[359] Sue Welch and Judson Powell, interview by Malik Gaines, June 25, 2010, "Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960–1980, Pacific Standard Time Collection, Special Collections, Getty Research Institute, 6.
[360] John Outterbridge affirmed that the Arts Center was already an important presence in the community by 1965, stating, "It had sensibility and directive and vision, and we're saying well before the rebellion of 1965." John Outterbridge interview by Richard Cándida Smith, ca. 1989–1990, COHLA, 465.
[361] For more on Parker and police brutality in the LAPD see Martin Schiesl, "Behind the Shield: Social Discontent and the Los Angeles Police since 1950," in *City of Promise: Race and Historical Change in Los Angeles,* ed. Martin Schiesl and Mark M. Dodge, 137–74.
[362] For more on the Uprising see Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville, VA: Da Capo Press, 1995),
[363] Horne, 1 and 106–112.
[364] Powell interview by Gaines, 8.

Noah Purifoy saw this as evidence that the Towers Arts Center had become "a refuge" for the young people of Watts.[365]

Powell describes the first couple days of the uprising as a carnival atmosphere, where people took home whatever they wanted and there were no police.[366] But by the weekend the situation turned as sixteen thousand police and members of the National Guard were deployed to the streets of Los Angeles. Thirty-four people died, the majority shot by police, and over three thousand were arrested before the uprising ended on the seventeenth.[367] Sensational journalistic coverage from mainstream newspapers across the nation drew on anti-black racist stereotypes, depicting the rioters as savage, unlawful, and animalistic and quoting Chief Parker's statement comparing them to "monkeys in a zoo."[368] Articles were accompanied by plentiful photographs showing roaring fire, armed guardsmen, and widespread looting (Figure 3.5).[369]

Watts appeared in the coverage again and again—despite the spread of the week's events over an area larger than San Francisco, Watts was used as spatial shorthand for the Rebellion (Figure 3.6).[370] Harvey Claybrook, the manager of a department store that was burned in the uprising, explained, "The communications on the radio and television continued to say Watts, Watts, Watts. They got Watts clear out to where I live in the city of Compton. And I think they built up such an idea in the people's mind that this was happening in Watts…"[371] The press likely used Watts as a specific spatial association for the Rebellion because it conveniently built on existing local stereotypes. Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver would later explain that before the Rebellion Watts was a "place of shame," synonymous with an epithet like "country" because many of its residents were poor recent migrants from the South.[372] As a result, a neighborhood that had a relatively low profile, even to many in Los Angeles, quickly became synonymous with black civil unrest in the national imaginary.

The Watts Towers did not fit easily into the press narratives of the Rebellion, and it was generally not included in the immediate coverage, though the site was occasionally mentioned as a neighborhood landmark.[373] In addition, one local newspaper featured an

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[365] Purifoy interview by Mason, 65.

[366] Powell interview by Gaines, 21.

[367] This is the end date set by the McCone Commission. It is not without dispute, as I discuss later in this chapter.

[368] Jill Eddy surveys the press coverage of the Rebellion and notes the frequent use of animal metaphors as well as other racist terminology in "Real-Time News: Covering the Watts Riots and the Chicago Convention," in *Troubled Pasts: New and the Collective Memory of Social Unrest* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006), 22–58.

[369] This *Time* magazine cover is representative of the imagery in the mainstream white press. I include it here in part for the contrast it provides to the imagery utilizing the Watts Towers that was produced after the Rebellion.

[370] The map shows how far riot activities were dispersed beyond Watts, which is limited to the lower-right corner of the map.

[371] Harvey Claybrook testimony, "Violence in the City: An End or Beginning?" McCone Commission Report, Volume V, 18. See also Welsh interview by Gaines, 22.

[372] Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York, NY: Dell, 1970), 38.

[373] For newspaper articles that use the Watts Towers as a landmark to orient the reader to the neighborhood see "Watts: A Crowded Harlem Still Grows," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, August 15, 1965; John Burks,

aerial photograph that showed the Watts Towers in the foreground with plumes of smoke from 103rd Street behind it, which was re-printed the following year in the book *Black Riot in Los Angeles: The Story of the Watts Tragedy* (Figure 3.7).[374] However, in the years after 1965 artists, photographers, and other makers of visual culture would use the Watts Towers to represent the new visions of culture in the neighborhood in the wake of the Rebellion.

Social Reform Imagery—Rodia As Teacher

An outpouring of attention immediately followed the "riot" as Watts became the focus of dozens of think pieces and academic studies.[375] It drew increased public attention to the problems of racialized poverty in the inner cities; for instance, one Gallup poll in October of 1965 showed that Civil Rights had abruptly taken precedence over the Vietnam War as the top public concern.[376] The surge of attention coincided with the federal government's War on Poverty programs, which pumped funds into social programs as a panacea for the urban uprisings in the inner cities during the 1960s. Watts was the recipient of such funds and became the target of social reformers who flooded into the neighborhood to establish new programs. Meanwhile, arts education programs in black neighborhoods across the country used Watts as a cautionary example that justified the funds allocated to their programs.[377]

The Watts Towers took on a greater role in the aftermath of the Rebellion as the national popular press, which had covered the dramatic preservation of the Watts Towers just five years earlier, pointed to the monumental rise of the towers as a beacon of hope and way forward for the neighborhood. These articles did not laud the ongoing work being done at the Arts Center by community members and artists. Instead, they amplified the contrast between the Watts Towers and surrounding community, holding Rodia up as a kind of moral lesson for his neighbors.[378] An article by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* provides an example of this narrative. It opens by describing the Watts Towers as a "ray of light" amidst the "depressing hopelessness" of Watts. The unnamed author goes on to explain, "The Negroes in the squalid area nearby have viewed [the towers] with hostility,

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"Towers Unscathed by Watts Violence," *Oakland Tribune*, August 18, 1965, 2; Russell Kirk, "To the Point: The Revolution in Watts," *Danville Register*, August 22, 1965, 6-A.

[374] Spencer Crump, *Black Riot in Los Angeles: The Story of the Watts Tragedy* (Los Angeles, CA: Trans-Anglo Books, 1966).

[375] Gerald Horne describes social science studies of Watts as a kind of "cottage industry" after the Rebellion. For a more in-depth description see *Fire this Time*, 36–40.

[376] Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time*, 41.

[377] For example, in the article "Why It Isn't Likely to Happen Here" the chairman of HARI-YOU, a community arts organization in New York, argues that their city will not be another Watts because of the work HARI-YOU has done to alleviate the conditions that lead to riots. See *New Pittsburgh Courier,* August 28, 1965, 1.

[378] For examples of this narrative in addition to the one mentioned below see "Spires Unharmed," *The Fresno Bee*, December 22, 1965, 45 and Michael Redington, "Establishment of the Pillar," *The Guardian*, August 17, 1965, 7. It's worth noting that there was also an AP story that ran in many newspapers across the nation sharply contrasting the "capricious and joyful" Watts Towers and the "dreary" and "devastated" conditions in Watts; see Dave Smith, "Christmas? What's That? Residents in Watts Ask," *Arizona Daily Star*, December 24, 1965, 18.

as the playthings of an eccentric white man," but now there is a change, as they are looked to as a demonstration of "what can be accomplished by one man, impoverished, unlettered and alone, through hard work and single-minded devotion to the task he set himself."[379]

This description of Rodia as a kind of model citizen contrasts to the depictions of Rodia in earlier decades, which played up his foreignness and ethnic identity. It was made possible by the ethnic pluralism of the 1950s, which allowed Italians and other European ethnic groups to assimilate into whiteness. Their assimilation was used as evidence of the inferiority of non-whites, whose failure to achieve similar levels of success was attributed to their deficient characters rather than discriminatory political and economic structures.[380]

While the *St. Louis Dispatch* talked about Rodia's relationship to the population of Watts in general, after the Rebellion texts and images of Rodia as a kind of teacher or patriarchal figure to the children of the neighborhood began to appear. This imagery, mostly made by white people outside of the neighborhood, was meant to indicate art's potential to motivate social uplift and bridge the gap between black and white. The article "Sam Rodia and the Children of Watts," which ran in *Westways* magazine in August of 1967, is a good example. The author of this article asserted that children have a special understanding of Rodia's work—while adults stand around as if in a museum, "the children seem to know immediately where they are and what fun awaits them."[381] His article was paired with photographs of children parading in front and roaming the interior of the site.

On the other hand, the 1968 children's book *Beautiful Junk: A Story of the Watts Towers* imaged this supposed innate connection between Rodia and child viewers of the Watts Towers directly. The story, written by Jon Madian, creates a fictional narrative of an encounter between Rodia and a young black boy named Charlie. Initially skeptical, Rodia teaches Charlie the beauty of the "junk" in his neighborhood, and the story ends with Charlie offering to help Rodia construct his next sculpture. Strikingly, Madian's text is accompanied by rich black-and-white photographs by Barbara Jacobs and Lou Jacobs Jr., a photojournalist who been part of a circle of modernists that included Man Ray in the late 1940s and early 1950s.[382] Actors playing the parts of Rodia and Charlie are staged on and around the Towers, performing the narrative as if in a film. The Rodia stand-in has a Santa Claus-like beard and slightly plump stature, softening Rodia's edges.

In one illustration they sit at the base of one of the towers, Charlie smiling with his hands resting on Rodia's knees as Rodia instructs him (Figure 3.8). In another, Charlie is shown enmeshed in the site, having climbed up a tower, and sat on its rungs, far above the ground (Figure 3.9). *Beautiful Junk* creates the impression of a seamless world occupied by these two actors, one where Rodia acted as a benevolent patriarch to

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[379] Symbol of the Possible," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 29, 1966, 2C.
[380] For more on this see Jennifer Guglielmo, "Introduction: White Lies, Dark Truths," in *Are Italians White?: How Race is Made in America* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003); Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).
[381] Robert S. Bryan, "Sam Rodia and the Children of Watts," *Westways* 59, no. 8 (August 1967): 3–6.
[382] "Developing the Scene: Artists' Portraits in Photographs," undated, Accessed July 12, 2018, http://tobeycmossgallery.com/jacoblou.html.

the youth of the neighborhood. Though mostly fabricated, the perception of the truth-value of photography meant that *Beautiful Junk* was not always understood to be a work of fiction. A 1968 review of the book in the *Los Angeles Times* noted that the story was "of course" fictional, but the book was used in schools for decades afterwards as an authoritative source on the history of the Towers.[383]

The depictions of Rodia's special relationship with children in "Sam Rodia and the Children of Watts" and *Beautiful Junk* may come as a surprise. It's true that numerous accounts describe Rodia paying local children to bring him broken dishes and other refuse to use as building materials. However, there wasn't any evidence that Rodia was especially fond of children; after all, he had abandoned his sons, and never showed any interest in seeing them or reconciling with them.[384] Further children were not central to the public image of the Towers before this period. In the trial for the Towers' preservation the Building and Safety Department cited danger to children as a key justification for the demolition of the Towers, but the city's general neglect of facilities for neighborhood children undermined this claim. After 1965 the growth of the Arts Center certainly amplified the purported connection between Rodia and the youth of Watts, as I discuss later in this chapter.

However, the emphasis on children's special relationship to the Watts Towers also relies on historical links between art by untrained makers and children's art. Avant-garde artists led the way in the acceptance of children's art, looking to it as a way of unlearning the alienation of cultural conditioning. The same artists who were interested in the art of children also collected folk art, as both were thought to share the "innocent eye," a naïve developmental state not yet formed by culture, and therefore thought to be purer and more authentic.[385] For instance, the curator of the Index of American Design stated that folk art represented "a regression to childhood" and was "child art on an adult level."[386] Therefore, Rodia lack of formal training and creation of a monumental structure

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[383] William S. Murphy, "L.A.'s Past and the Watts Towers," The Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles, CA), July 28, 1968, 147. See for example, a letter to the *Los Angeles Times* written by a public schoolteacher who assigned her students *Beautiful Junk* in order to understand the history of the Towers before taking field trips there. Doris Spivak, "Watts Towers, *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 1980, 42. The plot of *Beautiful Junk* was also loosely re-told in the television feature *Daniel and the Towers* in 1987.

[384] See Frank Rodia's statement, "Yes, I am his son. But he was not my father," quoted in Goldstone and Goldstone, *The Los Angeles Watts Towers*, 41. Significantly, Rodia's children never played any role in the preservation, and ongoing legacy of their father's creation.

[385] For instance, Alfred Stieglitz showed children's art at the 291 Gallery, Bauhaus artists borrowed visual exercises from elementary schools, and Alfred Barr placed children's art and the art of untrained makers together alongside surrealism and dada in the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibition in 1936. For more on the avant-garde and children's art see Jonathan Fineberg, *Discovering Child Art: Essays on Childhood, Primitivism, and Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Howard Singerman, "Chapter 4: Innocence and Form," *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American Academy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 97–124.

[386] Erwin O. Christensen Quoted in "What is American Folk Art?: A Symposium," *Folk Art in America: Painting and Sculpture*, ed. Jack T. Erickson (New York: Mayflower Books, 1979), 14–15. This notion of folk artists as adults who are simply lower on the developmental scale, including the scale of artistic skill, has persisted in texts like John Michael Vlach, *Plain Painters: Making Sense of American Folk Art* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988). In it, Vlach argues that folk painting is not real folk art because of its medium and lack of tradition, and thus such painters should be understood as simply unskilled. In her incisive review of Vlach's text, Margaretta M. Lovell refutes this notion, arguing that it is

supposedly "without conscious choice" was thought to be an artistic innocent expression that children could uniquely appreciate.[387]

The politics of texts like "Sam Rodia and the Children in Watts" and *Beautiful Junk* become clear when compared with the other imagery of children in Watts that was circulating in the late 1960s, which stoked white fears of another uprising. For instance, on July 15, 1966, *Life Magazine* ran a special section entitled "Watts: Still Seething." The cover was an image of young members of the black cultural nationalist organization US, which I will discuss more in the next section. The four boys march in a line wearing matching lemon yellow sweatshirts adorned with an image of a lion clenching a futuristic African face in its jaws.[388] Behind them Ngao Damu, an adult member of US, stands with his mouth open in a shout. The child in the front of the line has a solemn expression, his mouth set in a line. With the words "still seething" above the row of boys' faces, the implication is these children are a threatening force, a child army being trained by radicals in militancy and violence. Another photograph shows a teenager sitting on a street corner smoking and four small children holding hands in front of a store with graffiti reading "burn" and "blood brother" scrawled across it (Figure 3.10).

Interestingly, another set of photographs taken for the article, which *Life* chose not to publish, have recently been made public. They include two images of teenage boys at the Watts Towers (Figure 3.11). In these photographs the young men are dressed stylishly in bright colors that harmonize with the rainbow hues of the Towers' ornamentation. They pose causally on a mosaicked concrete bench or admire the towers with faces of wonder. That the magazine chose to run photographs where children look hardened and tough over such humanizing images shows how representations of black children were being mobilized in the press to represent the threat of the "ghetto" rather than inspire empathy.

Furthermore, it shows the ability of the Watts Towers to create a context of beauty and wonder that disrupts typical narratives about the violence of the ghetto. It is this capacity that made the scenes of social amelioration between Rodia and his creation, or Rodia himself, and the children of Watts so effective. Therefore, when "Sam Rodia and the Children in Watts" and *Beautiful Junk* came out they were combatting negative press representations of black children in Watts, as well as negative stereotypes of African American children in the media as a whole. This is reflected in the fact that Madian's text ended up on lists recommending children's books with sensitive depictions of black children.[389] However, though these kinds of text and images humanized black children, their reliance on Rodia as a patriarchal reformer who could transform the Watts youngsters into model citizens still carried troubling paternalistic connotations. This is apparent in a review of *Beautiful Junk* that describes it as a story in which Rodia

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more productive to understand the so-called "plain painters" as following a different visual code—one that emphasized memory over illusion. See "Folk Painting--An Oxymoron or a Threat to Folk Orthodoxy?" *American Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (March 1990): 153–160.

[387] The quote about Rodia creating without any conscious intention is from Selden Rodman, "The Artist Nobody Knows," *New World Writing*, 154.

[388] The sweatshirt design is akin to the Afrofuturist aesthetic that I discuss later in this chapter.

[389] See for example, *Beautiful Junk*'s inclusion in articles such as Mary Bresnahan, "Selecting Sensitive and Sensible Books About Blacks," *The Reading Teacher*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (October 1976), 16–20.

introduces an "aimlessly destructive Negro boy" to the idea that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.[390] While this imagery was being produced by mostly white writers and photographers outside the community, black artists, activists, and neighbors laid claim to the Watts Towers as a symbol that could be re-made on their own terms.

Cultural Revolution and the Watts Towers

In the years after the Rebellion, Watts experienced a cultural renaissance as new arts organizations were established, existing organizations expanded their programs, and artists flocked to the neighborhood. As one reporter put it, "From without and within, the muses seem to be chasing Watts…"[391] The rise of black nationalism as the dominant political and cultural movement in Watts was a key factor in this outpouring of cultural expression. This section examines how black nationalism took hold in the neighborhood, why its adherents integrated an Italian's eccentric creation into the imagery of black pride, and the visual strategies they used to frame the Watts Towers' meaning in this new context.

Black nationalism is an ideology that advocates for economic and political autonomy and cultural pride.[392] Its strong presence in Watts after 1965 was part of a national shift from the assimilationist Civil Rights movement to the separatist Black Power Movement.[393] However, there were also local causes—in particular, the police assault on the Muslim Brotherhood Temple in Watts on August 18, a day after the ostensible end of the Rebellion. Police acted on an anonymous tip that there were firearms stored in temple, opening fire without warning and arresting those within. Their failure to locate any firearms, the brutality of such a shooting on a space of religious worship, and the general distrust of the LAPD created the commonly held belief that the assault was an act of retribution for the uprising. As Gerald Horne argues in *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s*, the effect was to reinforce the power of the black nationalist Nation of Islam in Watts, as they came to be seen as the force behind the Rebellion even though the uprising had in fact been decentralized and spontaneous.[394]

Compounding growing support within the neighborhood, Watts' new symbolic status after the Rebellion made a target of organizing for emerging black nationalist

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[390] Kirkus Review, "Beautiful Junk," September 19, 1968, https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/jon-madian/beautiful-junk-a-story-of-the-watts-towers/.
[391] Art Seidenbaum, "Cultural Approach to Watts," *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1965: D1.
[392] This condensed definition obviously cannot capture the complexity of black nationalism. For a thorough historical overview of black nationalism in the United States see William L. Van Debrug, "Introduction," in *Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1997), 1–18.
[393] In 1965 Bayard Rustin wrote an influential essay on this topic in which he argues that the movement must move from desegregation struggles to address underlying economic structures (though Rustin is in favor of a coalitional rather than a separatist strategy). See "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement," *Commentary,* February 1, 1965, https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/from-protest-to-politics-the-future-of-the-civil-rights-movement/.
[394] The anonymous tip was placed by an informant, who later claimed that he was instructed to do so by the LAPD. This impression of the Nation of Islam was further reinforced when Marquette Frye joined shortly after the Rebellion. See Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time*, 126–133.

groups across Los Angeles. In addition to the Nation of Islam, a major group active in Watts was the US Organization, which formed in the fall of 1965. US promoted cultural nationalism—the idea that political revolution must be preceded by a cultural revolution. In an interview on Pacifica radio in 1966, the leader of US Mualana Ron Karenga elucidated the group's perspective,

> …we define culture as revolutionary—the overturning of ideas set down by men who never concerned themselves with our problems or were not even conscious of our existence. And the substitution of positive creative values so that we can get the ecstatic joy of saying 'we did this'—not someone else, but we did this.[395]

US spearheaded a number of programs across the city dedicated to imbuing black Angelenos with Afro-centric cultural values, including Swahili lessons in schools and public performances by the Taifa Dance Troupe, whose dancers who wore African-style clothing and performed African folk songs and traditional dances. In addition, the organization formed new holidays to celebrate black culture including Kwanzaa, Malcolm X Day, and Uhuru Day, which took place on August 11 and commemorated the Watts Rebellion.[396]

US Organization's agenda also had an outlet in an annual cultural event in Watts, which coalesced various political interests to nurture community solidarity and change the negative media narrative—the Watts Summer Festival.[397] Mualana Ron Karenga was one of the founding members of the festival, which was organized by an alliance of antipoverty and black nationalist groups both to commemorate the Rebellion and prevent the emergence of another one. The first Watts Summer Festival took place in August 1966, a week of events that consisted of performances, vendors selling food and clothes, exhibitions of art and crafts, and a parade down Central Avenue. Although the Grand Marshall of the first parade was Sargent Shriver, the head of the federal government's War on Poverty, the Festival had a strong cultural nationalist orientation—Karenga gave a talk on separatism, black South African musician Hugh Masakela played songs in Swahili, African dance troupes performed, and goods for sale included African textiles and Afro-centric art.[398] This proved to be a powerful platform for cultural nationalism—in 1966 the festival drew a crowd of 35,000, and the next year 130,000 attended.[399]

The Watts Towers and the Watts Towers Arts Center were not formally associated with the Watts Summer Festival, in part because the CSRTW made a

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[395] Mualana Ron Karenga, quoted in Clay Carson, "A Talk with Ron Karenga Watts Black Nationalist," *Los Angeles Free Press*, 3, no. 35 (September 2, 1966): 1 & 12.

[396] For more on US's cultural programs see Scott Brown, "Chapter 4: The Politics of Culture: The US Organization and the Quest for Black Unity," *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, the US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003), 74–106.

[397] As Judson Powell put it in his mission statement for the Watts Summer Festival, "Watts in 1965 was an area being suddenly thrust and exposed to international infamy. All the socially destructive elements were described in great detail by the public media… Nothing at all was transmitted to the outside communities about the CREATIVE ELEMENTS in the area." See "Mission Statement," undated, Jeanne Morgan Papers, SPACES Archive.

[398] For more on the Festival in general, see Taylor, "Rise and Fall of the Watts Summer Festival," and Robert Bauman, "We're From Watts…*Mighty, Mighty Watts*!" in *Race and the War on Poverty: From Watts to East L.A.* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), especially 81–85.

[399] Taylor, 64.

conscious effort to avoid the festival's radical politics. Harold Williams, the president of the Committee from 1966 to 1970, explains that the festival "did become much too political. We were just not a political group of folks, and we steered clear of that."[400] Instead, the Arts Center hosted associated events, like a basketball exhibition and daily showings of films about Rodia in 1967, and received festivalgoers who came to Watts in part for the opportunity to tour the Towers.[401] In addition, on an individual level a number of current and former members of the CSRTW and the Arts Center were closely involved in festival organization—Noah Purifoy was involved in the festival between 1966 and 1974, and he was assisted by committee member Beata Inaya in 1969.[402]

Beyond any formal connections with the Watts Towers Arts Center, the image of the Watts Towers itself was mobilized in publications that furthered the Watts Summer Festival's cultural nationalist ideology. In 1967 festival organizers created a brochure for attendees with a schedule of events, articles, and advertisements for local businesses, with a cover that offers a striking example of this kind of imagery (Figure 3.12). The composition is dominated by two vertical photographs placed side by side in tones of grey and black on a sepia background. On the right is a portrait of Muhammad Ali, the champion heavyweight boxer, who was also, by the summer of 1967, a political icon. Just a few months before the Watts Summer Festival, Ali made headlines when he was convicted of draft evasion for refusing to serve in the Vietnam War. He argued for conscientious objector status due to his Muslim faith, but he also made clear that he believed African Americans' enemies were not the Vietnamese, but racist white people in their own nation.[403] In the photograph on the cover of the Watts Summer Festival, Ali appears in his role as a public figure, dressed in a suit and tie rather than his boxing attire. His gaze is cast downwards, an introspective expression on his face.

Following Ali's line of sight, the viewer's attention is drawn to the photograph that occupies the left side of the page. There, the apexes of two overlapping towers are photographically centered, rising toward the words at the top of page. The high contrast of the photograph emphasizes a sense of dynamic spiraling in the towers' structure, motioning upwards to the words "Watts Summer Festival" at the top of the page, and below them, centered in black on a thin band of white, the phrase "Pride and Progress." The image is spare in its use of text—the only other words present are additional caption at the bottom of the page identifying Ali and indicating that he will serve as the Grand Marshall of the festival parade. The Watts Towers are left unlabeled, suggesting that the festival organizers assumed the viewer would have already been familiar with them.

The juxtaposition of the Muhammad Ali and the towers in this image is also one of a number of uses of the Watts Towers in print culture that tied the site to the cultural

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[400] Williams interview by Henderson, 164.

[401] "Stars Light Up Watts Festival: Dignitaries Open Watts' Gala Week," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Aug 10, 1967; "Tourists Can Combine Towers with Festival," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Aug 6, 1970.

[402] Purifoy interview by Mason, 114; Maggie Savoy, "Watts Art Festival: Connoisseur Lends a Hand," *Los Angeles Times*, August 6, 1969, D5.

[403] Famously, Ali stated "My conscience won't let me shoot my brother, or some darker people, or some poor hungry people in the mud for big powerful America. They never called me nigger." For more on the relationship between Ali's anti-war stance and his religion see David K. Wiggins, "Victory for Allah," in *Muhammad Ali: The People's Champ*, 88–116 (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

nationalist politics of the festival. For example, around the same time a small-press magazine called *Many Ways to Beauty* featured the Watts Towers on the cover of its second issue as a tribute to the Watts Summer Festival (Figure 3.13). The four photographs of the site are collaged without supplementary text; printed in color, the images capture the rhythmic color of the Towers' ornamentation and play of its patterns against the cloud-dappled sky. Inside the hand-lettered magazine are short beauty articles with a political slant; for instance, a profile of Zawadie, a designer showing at the Watts Summer Festival, explains, "The purpose of her designs is to beautify Afro-American women at a minimum of cost and improve the pride of Black women in original African designs which are comfortable and practical" (Figure 3.14).[404] The poster for the Wattstax concert, of course, also utilized a manipulated photograph of the Watts Towers, and the event was a fundraiser for the Watts Summer Festival.

I want to emphasize here that these examples were part of a broader field of print culture emerging from South Central Los Angeles in the period that sought to wrest representation of the area away from a mainstream press that depicted the residents of Watts at worst as a violent threat and at best as troubled children who needed to be guided by white benefactors.[405] But in creating their own representations of the neighborhood, what would have motivated black Angelenos to repeatedly mobilize the image of the Watts Towers in brochures, magazines and posters for the Watts Summer Festival (Figure 3.15)? It was an event meant to give the black community of Watts the opportunity to say, in the words of Karenga, "we did this," at a moment when proponents of cultural nationalism encouraged black artists to reject white models, values, and standards.[406] Why, then, use as a prominent symbol a structure that was built by an Italian, located in a historically Mexican section of Watts, praised by the gatekeepers of elite culture, and owned by a nonprofit organization mainly comprised of white people who did not live in the neighborhood? Why not draw from Watts' proud history as part of the Central Avenue scene, the hub of black culture in Los Angeles for decades? We could imagine a photograph that referenced that history of local creativity as the ground upon which the festival was built, like a photograph of the exterior of the Dunbar Hotel, where W.E.B. DuBois stayed and Billie Holiday sang. Alternately, an image of an Egyptian pyramid would have gestured to the African past of the black community in Watts.

I argue that the use of the Watts Towers in this imagery hinged on several factors. The first is the way that the Towers functions as an identifier unmistakably linked to the geography of the neighborhood. In an area where governmental and economic neglect meant there were no public monuments, natural features, or distinguished architecture, the Watts Towers was one of the few distinct structures for the designer to draw on.

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[404] Unknown author, *Many Ways to Beauty*, ca. 1967, Box 7, Folder 2, MB MSS, 25.

[405] This dynamic was later mirrored in the Black Panther Party's creation of a robust set of posters and a newspaper to wrest control of their image from the hostile mainstream press. See Leigh Raiford's discussion in "Chapter 3: Attached First by Sight," *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

[406] Karenga quoted Carson, "A Talk with Ron Karenga Watts Black Nationalist," 1. For a key argument about the necessity of rejecting white standards see James T. Stewart, "The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist," in *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, ed. Leroi Jones, et. al. (New York: William & Morrow Company, Inc., 1968), 10.

Further, the appearance of the Towers could specify Watts for the festival's multiple audiences. It was immediately recognizable to community members who used the monumental towers as a landmark for navigating their daily life and to a broader public in Los Angeles, especially white cultural elites, who had become familiar with the image of the Watts Towers through its many representations in the 1959 preservation campaign, the 1962 photography exhibition at LACMA, and so on.

The second reason for the appeal of the Towers' image is that though Rodia was white, he was also widely known as an outsider, as someone who was disconnected from the formal institutions of the art world that discriminated against black artists. Rodia hadn't needed the attention or approval of white cultural elites to engage in his creative practice, though they embraced it belatedly. Instead, he made something monumental with no outside financial support, using many materials gathered in his immediate surroundings. At the moment when the US Organization was organizing cultural programming developed in and geared towards the Los Angeles black community in concert with the broader national fomentation of the Black Arts Movement, Rodia's self-determination would have been appealing. Further, the push to reject white aesthetic standards meant that cultural nationalists integrated a number forms of making that fell outside of conventional definitions of fine art, such as murals, church decorations, and traditional African dances.[407] As one artist put it, this expanded range of practices were meant to allow "the black community [to] become a museum unto itself."[408] The Watts Towers was in accord with this, a form of making that made the community into a space for art appreciation and used materials and techniques that pushed against the narrow range of European/Western art.

Third, the abstraction of the Watts Towers was also a boon for the nationalist visual culture of the Watts Summer Festival. This may seem counter-intuitive, given that cultural nationalism built on earlier twentieth-century notions of what Darby English terms "black representational space"—the idea that artists should participate in the struggle for the uplift of the black community by creating positive figural representations of blackness.[409] Therefore, we might have guessed that abstraction of the Watts Towers, which allowed white modernists to liken it to the work of Kurt Schwitters and Antoní Gaudi, would have been a deterrent. However, the abstraction of the Watts Towers also meant that the site did not conjure raced bodies, unlike, say, the Carrera marble statue of Christopher Columbus in the Dickeyville Grotto.

In fact, I contend that the abstract material form of the Watts Towers was particularly suited to speak to the disparate tones and temporalities encompassed by the Watts Summer Festival, as well as the cultural nationalist moment in Watts at the time. That is, on one hand, the festival was a historical commemoration of an event that had

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[407] For example, Purifoy notes that when he curated the art section of the festival for nine years they would show objects no other galleries would like "church art," meaning art made by worshippers to decorate churches. See Purifoy interview by Mason, 114.

[408] Robert Taylor, "Wall-To-Wall Boston: A New Way to Look at the City," *Boston Sunday Globe*, October 26, 1969, 14. For more on Black Power murals see Alan Barnett, *Community Murals: The People's Art* (New York: Alliance Press, 1984).

[409] Darby English, "Chapter 1: Beyond Black Representational Space," *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

resulted in death and destruction, the aftereffects of which were still being felt by a black community that mourned loved ones amidst rubble and ruined buildings that were never rebuilt. On the other hand, the Watts Summer Festival was also an event that promoted the celebration of black culture and community through uplift, bringing into existence a positive vision of Watts' present and future. This complexity is reflected in the *Wattstax* documentary; the film intercuts celebratory performances and fiery speeches delivering visions of the future with somber interviews about community members' experiences in the Rebellion and footage of the destruction that remained in the streets of Watts in 1972.

Watts Towers materializes the multiple co-existing conditions of the summer festival. Built in Watts' earliest days as an independent municipality, Rodia's creation is a point of continuity with the neighborhood's history.[410] For longtime residents, it forms a backdrop to childhood memories of visiting their grandparents, walking to school with friends, and first dates.[411] In those memories and in the Towers' resulting form, aspects of Rodia's building practices would have also pointed to a preindustrial past because of his use of simple non-mechanized tools and the fact that he built alone. Further, in images, like the 1967 festival brochure, the Towers is cropped to show only the tops of two spires, with lighting that makes them into dark silhouettes. Rather than display the solid, playful, and colorful aspects of the site, this image emphasizes the spiny, skeletal nature of its towers. They are somber, not dissimilar to a building that had burned down to its bones, conjuring notions of memory and even ruin.

Yet if the Watts Towers is a structure reduced to its bones, they are bones that still stand strong. That is a fact that festivalgoers navigating the week's events, brochure in hand, would not have been able to escape—because of the flat geography and low-rise buildings in Watts, the tower spires were clearly visible from the parade route, as well as Will Rogers Park where festival exhibitions and performances took place (Figure 3.16). Those who lived in the neighborhood might look at the towers and remember the fire in the mid-1950s that destroyed Rodia's house in a "big sheet of flame," but left the rest of the Watts Towers unharmed, its concrete, steel, and ornamental materials impervious to fire.[412] Others who read newspaper accounts or gathered in crowds to watch as city officials tried to pull down the Watts Towers in 1959 would recall that the city's crane bent before the towers did.[413] In other words, the existence of the Watts Towers in the present is a testament to its ability to endure, despite repeated proximity to destruction.

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[410] Rodia started to build the Watts Towers around 1921, and Watts was incorporated into Los Angeles in 1926.

[411] See oral histories with Betye Saar, Horace Tapscott, and Charles Mingus.

[412] The source of the fire is unknown, though some have suggested it was started by squatters, or by kids playing with a firework. It took place sometime between when Rodia left the site in 1954, and when the city served José Montoya a demolition order in 1957. The quotation is from a neighbor who watched Rodia's house burn. See Jeanne Morgan, "A Confrontation with the Towers," unpublished article, page 3, Box 1 Folder 2, Jeanne Morgan Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[413] See newspaper coverage of the stress test like Al Thrasher, "Famous Watts Towers Pass Stress Test," *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 1959, A4; "Sam Rodia Built Well, His Towers Defy Torture Test," *Long Beach Independent Press-Telegram*, October 11, 1959, A8. A good overview of the stress test is in Board of Building and Safety Commissioners, "Statement Regarding 1765–69 East 107th Street," November 12, 1959, Box 29, Folder 1, CSRTW MSS.

Beyond mere survival, the idiosyncratic, abstract structure points energetically into the future. The vertical bands of the towers are strong lines that merge in a sharp point, the dynamic loops radiating around them creating a powerful sense of upward motion. Stretching upwards, they seem to be taking off into the sky, spaceship-like.

In sum, the Watts Towers is a structure that can simultaneously stand for a black past, present, and future—honoring ruin, testifying to perseverance, and driving uplift. I argue that the Watts Towers' structure conjures a temporality of synchronicity that resonates with Afrofuturism. This is not to say the people who made the imagery around the Watts Towers would have called it Afrofuturism—the term wasn't even invented until the 1990s—but in the 1960s musicians like Sun Ra and others had begun to conjure images of space that they integrated into a black aesthetic. As scholar Alondra Nelson writes, Afrofuturism rejects temporalities of linear progress that position blackness in a primitive past, in a binary with technology and the future. Instead, it produces a vision of a black future that does not disavow its African past, embracing synchronicity.[414] What I am arguing is that the Afrofuturist-like synchronicity made the Watts Towers a potent symbol for the Watts Summer Festival, one that could speak to particularities of political aspirations related to Watts in the decade after the 1965 Rebellion.

The abstraction of the Watts Towers was often paired with figural imagery to cement the connection between the structure's Afrofuturist temporality with the black community. This use of figuration is distinct from the imagery of social reformers in that it pairs black adults with the Towers, rather than children. At first the imagery featured celebrities like Muhammad Ali and the performers of Wattstax, but in later flyers for festivals in Watts images of jazz musicians, drummers garbed in traditional African dress, and black drummers for the Union army were juxtaposed with the spires (Figure 3.16). Yet unlike the photographs of *Beautiful Junk*, which create a seamless perception of Rodia and black children occupying the site in the same space and time, these figures are collaged with visible seams and disjuncture as well as deviations in scale that belie any illusion that they occupy the same space and time. In this way, the effect of the collages is to allow for multiple temporalities in the same image. This is the logic of the Wattstax poster, where the sequential time of the performances are combined in a single pyramid of figures, together with the space and time of the rainbow-colored Watts Towers hovering above the crowd. The photographic collage works on two levels—it both uses the objectivity of photography to attest to the experience of being at the concert, and its visible disjunctures surrender the notion that the poster shows some sort of unmediated truth, instead entering a space of imagined community.[415]

Print culture like small-press magazines and flyers for the Watts Summer Festival may have had a relatively local circulation, but the Wattstax poster ran as a newspaper ad across the country, and the documentary itself was widely seen and even nominated for a

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[414] See Alondra Nelson, "Introduction: Future Texts," *Social Text*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2002): 1–15.

[415] My discussion of the multiple temporalities of collage here is influenced by Leigh Raiford's analysis of Emory Douglas's imagery for the Black Panther Party Newspaper. Raiford notes that unlike the imagery of SNCC, which sought to use the truth value of photography to show the unmediated truth of their political struggle, Douglas used collage that mixed photography and drawing to both reveal the truth of oppression and comment on the unreliability of photography, which was being using in the mainstream press to smear the Panthers. See Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare*, 197–208.

Golden Globe award. It opens with comedian Richard Pryor in a dark room, soberly explaining to the camera that the Wattstax concert was "a soulful expression of the black experience." As the screen goes dark funk music kicks in and the opening titles appear, overlaid on top of shots of the Watts Towers. The camera pans over its brightly colored surfaces lingering on details of ornamentation before zooming out to show the structure's location in the broader landscape of Watts. Later in the documentary recordings of the Wattstax concert are interspersed with footage from the streets of Watts in 1973, and also imagery related to the black freedom struggle from the eighteenth-century abolitionist print *Description of a Slave Ship* to Gary Rickson's recently painted Black Arts Movement mural *Africa is the Beginning*. One scene from the concert shows the Reverend Jesse Jackson clad in a dashiki and addressing a rousing speech to the crowd, that concluded in a call and response. "What time is it?" Jackson cried, and in response the crowd of one hundred thousand responded as one, "Nation time!" I've suggested in this section that despite its Italian maker, after the Watts Rebellion the Watts Towers was mobilized as a powerful symbol of the multiple temporalities suggested by this nation time—the past linked to Africa, the present rubble on the streets of Watts, and the future space of togetherness hinted at in its swirling colors and spaceship-like arcs, as well as in the presence of over one hundred thousand African Americans dancing to soul and funk bands.

Self-Determination and Assemblage: Creating With What You Have Around You

In the fall of 1965 the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts sent out a letter to their supporters announcing, "Watts Towers Kids need your help!" The text explained,

> Looking around Watts after the August riots, we realized that all the agencies and groups coming in to help were starting from scratch…we, on the contrary, have been here many years and are so established that our programs are working night and day, and the Watts Towers Arts Center is jumping with activity and productive work.[416]

This missive indicates how the relatively small, low profile arts center at the Towers began to take on an increased importance after August of 1965.[417] For the previous four years the community arts programs had been a relatively minor focus of the CSRTW, which had left the teachers to their own devices as it concentrated on organizing traveling educational programs about Rodia's life and creative practice, and making the Towers a gathering space for professional artists in LA.[418]

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[416] Watts Towers Art Center Flyer, ca. 1965, Box 716843, Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts, Folder 1, City of Los Angeles Archives.
[417] My discussion of the dynamics at the Watts Towers Arts Center in this section is informed by Nathan C. Rosenberger, "Chapter 2: 'Whatever it is, it is phenomenal' or 'Raceriotland:' the Watts Towers Arts Center and a community's struggle for identity, dignity, and place," *Art in the Ashes: Class, Race, Urban Geography, and Los Angeles's Postwar Black Art Centers* (MA thesis, California State University, Long Beach, 2016), 49–110.
[418] For example, in July 1965 the site had hosted sculptors from the California International Sculpture Symposium, and served as a backdrop for a photo-shoot of Pop Art banners to be exhibited in a Beverly

However, after the rebellion the attentions of the CSRTW turned to the Watts Towers Arts Center, with the intent of providing "help to the Ghetto."[419] Unlike many the new arts organizations that emerged in the late 1960s, the Watts Towers Arts Center was a privately owned institution and did not receive the War on Poverty funds, though it was the recipient of attention from wealthy benefactors from other parts of the city.[420] For some members of the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts the growing emphasis on the arts center created tension between the well being of the Towers and the needs of the people in the neighborhood, as they debated how much energy and financial support should go to ensuring Rodia's legacy and maintaining his creation, and how much should go to the providing programs for the community.[421] Concerns about reconciling the two priorities might have been amplified by a letter the CSRTW received from an irate white tourist in 1966. He described how he had been confronted by hostile black teenagers while photographing the Watts Towers and declared, "[The youths] are bad for the 'Towers."[422]

Despite these perceived challenges, in the decade after the rebellion the Watts Towers Art Center did not simply become a vehicle for white charity, a social service organization that happened to have an artwork on site. Instead, the Watts Towers and the Arts Center sparked a junk art movement where children's education and avant-garde practices developed hand in hand. I argue that this outcome was the result of two intertwined factors; first, the way that the rebellion politicized black professional artists, and second, the ability of the Watts Towers to speak both to a democratic creativity accessible without the support of institutions, as well as to avant-garde sculptural lineages.

The practices of black professional artists shifted after the Watts Rebellion because the week's events had implicated the African American community in Los Angeles far beyond the individuals who participated. The Los Angeles Police Department and National Guard designated a huge swath of Los Angeles home to African American residents as part of the riot zone, meaning they "could not guarantee the safety" of anyone in that area. In some places law enforcement set up perimeters, stopping and harassing any person of color who attempted to drive into a white neighborhood.[423] Even those who weren't physically endangered could be caught up in the symbolism of the moment through photographs in the popular press. As a result, many black artists in Los

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Hills Gallery. See "Could It Be That Someone's Jousting?" *Los Angeles Times HOME Magazine*, August 1, 1965.

[419] Letter from Mae Babitz to Buckminster Fuller, January 10, 1968, Box 167, Folder 1, Buckminster Fuller Papers, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries.

[420] Jeanne Morgan, "My Life With The Watts Towers," unpublished manuscript. Box 1, Folder 2, Jeanne Morgan Papers, Archive of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 3.

[421] Jeanne Morgan discusses this tension in "Fifty Years of Guardianship: CSRTW," *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts,* 228–229.

[422] Letter from Carl Jakubowski to the Committee for the Preservation of Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts, March 25, 1966, Folder: Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts, WTC SP.

[423] Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*, 322–325.

Angeles were moved to re-reconcile their identities as artists and their racial identity, leading them to take up new forms of art making.[424]

Ed Bereal's experience, as he recounted in an interview in 2016, is a stark example of this shift. By 1965 Bereal had achieved a measure of success in the mainstream white art world of Los Angeles—he was featured in the controversial exhibition *War Babies* in 1961, and was subsequently represented by the Dwan Gallery. However, the week of the Rebellion the National Guard was stationed outside of his apartment at Crenshaw and Venice, and one morning he opened the door to find a National Guardsman with a gun aimed at him. Bereal was unharmed, but came away with the revelation that no matter what his level fame in the art world it would never protect him from the dangers of living in a racist society as a black man. Bereal explains, "If William [Wilson, L.A. Times art critic] was standing in front of me trying to block that bullet. If Irving Blum was standing in front of it. If Walter [Hopps] was there—good, old, beautiful Walter, all that shit between me and that gun, I'd still be dead." Further, Bereal was dismayed to realize that the mostly white art world in which he had been embedded took little notice of the rebellion. Soon after, he quit the Dwan Gallery, closed his studio, and started create political theater about racism.[425]

As for Bereal, the Watts Rebellion was a pivotal moment for Noah Purifoy, the director of the Watts Towers Arts Center. Purifoy was a graduate of Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles, had worked in interior design, and 1964 begun to make collages and assemblages with African motifs.[426] However, he maintained that it was the Rebellion that made him into an artist, both his close proximity to the violence as he stood behind the bejeweled walls of Rodia's creation and watched flames rise on nearby 103rd Street, but also his actions in the days and months afterwards.[427] The process that Purifoy understood as making him into an artist involved not only his experiences at the Watts Towers Arts Center during the unrest, but also what took place shortly afterward. In the days after the Rebellion, Purifoy and his art center colleague Judson Powell wandered through the streets of Watts to assess the damage, taking in the charred debris, smashed glass, and goods from stores strewn on the sidewalks (Figure 3.17). The materials that accumulated on the street captivated them, so Purifoy and Powell began to collect items and bring them back to the arts center. Over a period of months the storage areas where students had stashed their loot during the uprising came to hold "three tons" of matter collected from the streets. Purifoy admitted, "Despite the involvement of running an art school, we gave much thought to the oddity of our found things…[they] had begun to haunt our dreams."[428]

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[424] Eric Priestly, "The Spirit of Art and Social Change: 1965 – 2002," *Watts: Art and Social Change in Los Angeles, 1965–2002* (Milwaukee: Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, 2003), 22.
[425] Ed Bereal interviewed by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, February 13, 2016, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
[426] For an excellent discussion of Purifoy's interior design work and how it expands conceptions of California mid-century modern design see Yael R. Lipschutz, "Chapter 1: Birth of the Cool," in "Noah Purifoy: Through the Fire" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2013), 6–45.
[427] Purifoy explains "I had a beret and all. I ate cheese and drank wine, but I wasn't an artist yet until Watts. That made me an artist." See Purifoy interview by Mason, 108.
[428] Noah Purifoy, *Junk Art: 66 Signs of Neon* (Los Angeles: self-published, 1966), n.p.

Later that fall Purifoy broke his leg, and when he returned after six weeks he found that the CSRTW had replaced him over disagreements regarding his approach to art education. The Committee wanted the Arts Center to become a professional arts school geared to people beyond the neighborhood while Purifoy was focused on the self-worth of children in the neighborhood.[429] Judson Powell continued to work at the Art Center but the spring of 1966 programming went on hold, as the arts center no longer had the funds to operate.[430] With their energies freed, Purifoy and Powell turned their attention to the material they had amassed from the streets of Watts, fashioning it into found object, or junk, sculptures. The first works they made used drippings from melted neon signs that had congealed into jewel-like objects. Inspired, Purifoy and Powell invited six other artists from around Los Angeles to create sixty-six sculptures out of the junk, a collective project they titled *66 Signs of Neon*.[431]

The resulting artworks varied in size, though united by common materials. There were small works like ones by Deborah Brewer, which integrated charred photographs of black children's faces, charred nails and safety pins, and a piece of wood painted a disquieting shade of red (Figure 3.18). Purifoy's *Sir Watts* was a headless suit of armor with a transparent chest panel. A hole was cut in the panel like a gaping wound, out of which gushed a waterfall of safety pins (Figure 3.19). Other works included large hunks of metal, a small assemblage of spoons, and a partial reconstruction of a bathroom. In April of 1966 *66 Signs of Neon* was first shown at the Simon Rodia Commemorative Watts Renaissance Festival of the Arts, a community arts festival held at a local high school. Over the next three years the work went on to be shown at the Watts Summer Festival, and university campus centers and galleries across the state, country, and abroad. Some pieces fell apart and others were sold, and new artists contributed to the evolving exhibition as time passed.[432]

Although for many years *66 Signs of Neon* was overlooked, in the past decade a number of scholars have placed a renewed focus on the exhibition. It is most frequently discussed for the ways that it demonstrates Purifoy's approach to assemblage—he perceived junk sculpture as a way of creating certain social relations rather than as a discrete art object. Purifoy believed that junk sculpture was a fundamentally democratic medium, for as it transformed throwaway material into something valuable, so devalued

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[429] Purifoy discussed being let go from the Arts Center in the interview by Mason, 60–78, and Sue Welch affirms his version of the events in the interview by Gaines, 7. Schrank helpfully discusses a dispute over the CSRTW's proposed plan to redevelop the arts center to become a credential-granting art school in the spring of 1965, a plan that Purifoy and Powell opposed. Obviously such plans never came to fruition, but it was indicative of the split between the CSRTW and the art center instructors. See *Art and the City*, 149–151.

[430] Purifoy describes the lack of funds the fact that the lull in programming in Noah Purifoy, "'66' Philosophy: See Old Things in New Ways," *Quarterly Report on Aspects of Creativity*, January–March 1967, 2, Box 1, Folder 3, Noah Purifoy Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter NPP MSS).

[431] The artists who contributed to *66 Signs of Neon* are Debbie Brewer, Arthur Secunda, Gordon Wagner, Max Neufeldt, Ruth Saturnesky (Charu Colorado), and Leon Saulter.

[432] Sir Watts also traveled to Germany as part of a United States Information Agency exhibition about recycling. See letter from USIA to Noah Purifoy, November 22, 1972 and other correspondence in Box 6, Noah Purifoy Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

people who made it could transform their lives.[433] Art historians Cécile Whiting and Kellie Jones have also remarked on the ways that Purifoy differed from white Ferus Gallery artists like Ed Kienholz, in that Kienholz roamed the city searching out his materials, while Purifoy urged students and artists to find materials in their own neighborhood.[434] The Watts Towers is mentioned as a key point of inspiration for *66 Signs of Neon*, but its particular relationship to the exhibition and Purifoy's practice have not been elucidated in depth.

I contend that a closer look at the Watts Towers is key to understanding how a junk art movement fomented in Watts, not the least because the site was crucial to the formulation of *66 Signs of Neon*. Purifoy and Powell's decision to walk the streets gathering junk after the rebellion was not a radical new act, but an extension of a pedagogical approach they had developed at the Arts Center, inspired by Rodia's building practices; for the past couple years they had been taking children on field trips in the neighborhood to gather materials and incorporate them into sculptures.[435] Further, Purifoy's original vision for *66 Signs of Neon* was as a "garden" of junk sculptures around the Watts Towers. A photograph of Deborah Brewer's *Sunflowers*, pieces of scrap metal growing from the dirt by the train tracks across from the Towers hints at how this concept might have manifested (Figure 3.20). We can imagine an alternate *66 Signs of Neon* where sixty-six junk sculptures were installed in and around Rodia's creation, the fluid lines of twisted hunks of metal against the structural geometry of the towers, a small collage with burnt edges tucked in a corner next to a rainbow mosaic of tiles. Instead the works ended up at Markham Junior High School, and other indoor spaces far from the Watts Towers. Nevertheless, though they were not physically linked Purifoy placed the artists who participated in *66 Signs of Neon* in the lineage of the Watts Towers, stating, "These artists constitute [Rodia's] posterity for they are unique children of their age…"[436] Around the same time that he organized *66 Signs of Neon* he was also making small-press magazines with collages incorporating poetry, photographs of the residents of Watts, and images of the Watts Towers (3.21).

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[433] For instance, Purifoy writes that the junk sculptures in *66 Signs of Neon* were meant "to demonstrate to the community an existing fact: If the community of Watts found itself in the midst of something—something like junk—value could be placed on it to far exceed the few cents paid at the junk yards on Monday morning…Our idea was to direct the attention toward the creative aspect of existence rather than the destructive aspect. We were trying to say to the community at large that, 'It is through art education and creative endeavor that the self is arrived at and affirmed.'" See "'66' Philosophy: See Old Things in New Ways," 3, Box 1, Folder 3, NPP MSS.

[434] Whiting, *Pop L.A.*, 158–163, and Jones, *South of Pico*, 78–86. For further discussion of *66 Signs of Neon* see Cándida Smith, *The Modern Moves West*, Schrank, *Art and the City*, 154–156; Yael R. Lipschutz, "*66 Signs of Neon* and the Transformative Art of Noah Purifoy," *L.A. Object and David Hammons Body Prints* (New York: Tilton Gallery, 2011); Mary M. Thomas, "Chapter 1: Assemblage from the Ashes: Improvisation as Aesthetic Strategy after the Watts Uprising," "Enacted Sites: Art and the Visualization of Spatial Justice in Los Angeles, 1966–2014" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2017), 21–57.

[435] Purifoy interview with Mason, 60.

[436] Purifoy quoted in Joyce Widoff, "Out of the Ashes…Art and Understanding," *The Courier-Journal*, August 13, 1968, 39. Writing an article about Watts for New York Magazine, Thomas Pynchon visited the festival at Markham Junior High and echoed this sentiment, calling the assemblages "in the Simon Rodia Tradition." See "A Journey Into the Mind of Watts," *New York Magazine*, June 12, 1966, accessed July 14, 2018, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/18/reviews/pynchon-watts.html?_r=1.

The Watts Towers was, I argue, an important point of influence on Purifoy and other black assemblage artists not only because it was made of repurposed junk, but because of its site specificity in Watts. For white modernists the Watts Towers was outside of the spaces of culture, as well as the spaces where most of them lived and socialized, so they formed their identity around the pilgrimage to discover it. For black artists and community in Watts it was and had been for decades part of their daily landscape of living. In other words, it had been part of everyday creative making practices that fell below the level of "art" as recognized by the arbiters of culture.[437] Therefore, the Watts Towers was not outside *of* the community, it was outside *with* them.

The Watts Towers' location in a residential backyard in Watts positioned it not only outside of the institutions of the art world, but it was also on the margins of the mainstream culture of the city. This was not the Los Angeles of Hollywood, but a part of the city that had been systematically neglected, and the status of the people in a neighborhood had an effect on its material culture of its spaces. Purifoy recognized that junk was not an evenly distributed and inevitable byproduct of the urban cityscape, but that it accumulated in certain neighborhoods based on the class and race of the inhabitants. He declared, "I'll bet you in Watts you can see the highest pile of debris, steel, metal, tires and litter in the world. It's where the whole community of Los Angeles throws its waste."[438] Therefore, the transformation of the junk into art objects, objects of value, had a particular political valence. As Purifoy explained, that "junk art" is fitting for Watts, saying, "That's what this community is—junk. People walk over junk here every day."[439] That is, its materiality could refer to populations of people who were marginalized without the use of figuration. This was key for Purifoy, as he was committed to the language of abstraction—he had refused to draw in art school because he didn't want to get "stuck" with the human image, which he thought could not express "the essence of being."[440]

66 Signs of Neon's extended tour enabled it to impact the practices of black artists nationwide. For instance at the symposium "The Black Artist in America" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969, Romare Bearden moderated a lively debate between artists like Hale Woodruff and Sam Gilliam over the definition and utility of the category "Black Art." Gilliam raised the example of *66 Signs of Neon* as evidence of an exhibition that functioned both sociologically, because of its thematic content, and aesthetically, because of its use of assemblage forms—he had likely seen the show when

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[437] In this making distinction between art and creativity, I draw from Powell and Purifoy's theories on the subject. For instance, Powell asserts that "we didn't comply with any of the definitions of art at the time, nor do we now. We have no desire to be artists, we desire to be a teacher of creativity." See Judson Powell interview with author, March 19, 2018, 6. Similarly, Purifoy writes, "It becomes obvious that by definition art and creativity are two different words. They connect in a product called art and the act of producing art, called creativity. Thus creativity becomes possible without an end result. Good examples are creative conversation, creative living." See Noah Purifoy, "66 Signs of Neon," *Quarterly Report on Aspects of Creativity*, April–June 1967, 1, Box 1, Folder, 3, NPP MSS.

[438] Barbara Gold, "Artists Create From the Debris of Watts," *The Baltimore Sun*, May 26, 1968, 97.

[439] Art Berman, "Watts Easter Week Art Festival Puts Riot Debris to Cultural Uses," *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 1966.

[440] Purifoy interviewed by Mason, 86.

it traveled to Washington D.C.[441] Though it's difficult to know exactly what artists around the country were drawing from the exhibition, certainly we can imagine that for black artists working in abstraction like Gilliam, *66 Signs of Neon* resonated as a model that engaged racial politics without the use of figuration.

66 Signs of Neon also had a significant impact closer to home; it changed the direction of children's education at the Watts Towers Arts Center. Though Purifoy was technically no longer employed by the Arts Center when he developed the show, Powell continued to work there for decades. From the start, the pedagogy of the Arts Center had integrated the Watts Towers as the subject of drawing assignments and so on (Figure 3.22), and as I mentioned earlier teachers had begun to design pedagogy around found objects well before the rebellion. However, Powell explains that it was *66 Signs of Neon* that established a strong association between the Watts Towers Arts Center and junk. Curtis Tann, who became the Arts Center director in 1967, advanced the connection. In 1975 John Outterbridge took over the directorship and stayed in the position for decades. He was an assemblage artist himself, and established galleries for practicing artists.[442]

This association between the Watts Towers Arts Center and assemblage attracted a younger generation of artists who were interested in non-figural practices. Senga Nengudi volunteered at the Watts Towers Arts Center from 1965 to 1966, and again in the late 1970s, at the same time as David Hammons. Kellie Jones argues that Nengudi and Hammons drew from the non-figural content of assemblage to pursue conceptual and performance strategies.[443] Both are associated with New York and its black avant-garde scene there as much as they are linked with Los Angeles. This spread of artists influenced by their time at the Watts Towers Arts Center made junk art into, in Powell's words, "a faith that travels." He explains that even in the present day, "You can't come to the Watts Towers Arts Center without thinking—junk… the bottom line was and remains to utilize material no one else wants."[444]

Conclusion

The mainstream media made Watts synonymous with the unrest that had taken place in August of 1965, and created an image of the neighborhood that was associated with violence, danger, and the threat of black bodies out of control. In response black Angelenos struggled to re-take ownership over Watts on a material and symbolic level. Political campaigns were launched like the Freedom City Movement, which organized

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[441] Sam Gilliam, "The Black Artist in America: A Symposium," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 27, no. 5 (January 1969): 256.

[442] In 1975 the CSRTW deeded the Watts Towers and Arts Center to the City of Los Angeles. Outterbridge became the director of the Arts Center and the official "caretaker" of the Watts Towers, a position he held until 1992. For more on his role at the Watts Towers Arts Center see Jeffrey Herr, "A Conversation with John Outterbridge," in *Civic Virtue*, 119–129.

[443] Here I am drawing from the argument posed by Kellie Jones that artists like David Hammons and Senga Nengudi drew from "contemporary bricoleurs" like Noah Purifoy, but integrated them into a more conceptual and performance-based practice. See "Black West, Thoughts on Art in LA," in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, ed. Lisa Gail Collins, et. al. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), especially 58–65.

[444] Powell interview with author, March 18, 2018.

for Watts to secede from Los Angeles as an independent black municipality.[445] And culture became a crucial avenue through which to re-code the meaning of the space of Watts both through events like the Watts Summer Festival, and, as I have argued in this chapter, through the mobilization of the Watts Towers. The site became a nexus point between different kinds of imagery that today seem to be at odds— the social harmony of reformism, separatist imagery of cultural nationalism, and the abstract materialism of assemblage sculpture. Yet it was through the production of this variety of different kinds of visual culture and aesthetic strategies that the connection between the Towers and the black community in Watts was forged in the 1960s, which continues so vividly into the present.

In 1972 Noah Purifoy left his position in Watts, and for a number of years he worked in social service and arts administration for the city. Then in 1989 he moved to a rural area west of Los Angeles near Joshua Tree National Park. Purifoy began to build a monumental landscape of assemblage sculptures in the open air and sun of the desert landscape, which he worked on for the next fifteen years until his death in 2004. In his old age, Purifoy's marginalization from the art world and his work's non-institutional location caused him to be described as an outsider or folk environment builder.[446] In the next chapter I will discuss how the Watts Towers played a key role in the creation of the genre of art environments by untrained makers, which enabled large-scale sculptural and architectural work to be institutionalized as part of the 1970s folk art revival.

[445] Scot Brown, *Fighting for US*, 80–81.

[446] For example see Purifoy's inclusion in John Maizels, *Fantasy Words* (Köln: Taschen, 2007), 144–147, a text that I discuss in the next chapter in relationship to the genre of the folk/visionary art environment. However, the scholarship of the past decade has effectively argued that Purifoy belongs in a mainstream canon rather than being classified as an outsider artist. For more on Purifoy's Joshua Tree environment see *Noah Purifoy: Outside and In the Open*, ed. Lizetta LeFalle-Collins, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles, CA: California African American Museum, 1998); *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada*, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2015).

Chapter Four: "Extraordinary Structures": Environments, Museums, and the 1970s Folk Revival

"If a man who has not labelled [sic] himself an artist happens to produce a work of art, he is likely to cause a lot of confusion and inconvenience."[447]

—Calvin Trillin, *The New Yorker*, 1965

Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s the Watts Towers was incorporated into multiple artistic discourses as Californian modern art, assemblage, and a monument to black culture. However, it never lost its association with historical terms that described the work of untrained makers, especially folk art. No matter how ardently *Art of Assemblage* curator William C. Seitz argued that "to dismiss this unique creation [the Watts Towers] as a quaint folly—one more bizarre production of an eccentric folk artist—would be an error," the disparity between Rodia and most professional artists remained salient to the site's popular and art world reception.[448] Yet before the 1970s the Watts Towers did not fit standard definitions of American folk art, which had been defined in the interwar period as an expression of the nation's pre-industrial past made by anonymous makers drawing from legible cultural traditions.[449] Therefore, the Watts Towers' folkiness was often mentioned but then qualified for its contemporaneity and perceived singularity. For instance, when an exhibition of photographs of the Watts Towers was shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1962, the catalogue essay explained that the Towers "are indeed folk art because they were made by an untutored artist. But unlike other folk artists Simon had no established examples to work from, no guidance but his own inventiveness."[450]

The catalogue essay goes on to liken Rodia to Ferdinand Cheval, the untrained builder of the Palais Idéal, who was his most commonly cited artistic correlate [Figures 2.12 and 2.13].[451] These two works were sometimes grouped together under the rubric of

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[447] Calvin Trillin, "I Know I Want To Do Something," *The New Yorker*, May 29, 1965, 72.

[448] William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, 78.

[449] Holger Cahill played a crucial role in creating this definition of folk art as anonymously-made, pre-industrial cultural production with exhibitions like *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750–1900* at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1932. For more on the definition and institutionalization of folk art in the interwar period see Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Elizabeth Stillinger, *A Kind of Archaeology: Collecting American Folk Art, 1876 –1976* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).

[450] Paul Laporte, *Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1962), 23.

[451] The comparisons with the Palais Idéal are numerous and include "Sam of Watts," *Architectural Review* 111, no. 663 (March 1952): 201–203; Gouverneur Paulding, "Works of Faith: Sam's Towers and the Postman's Palace," *Harpers Bazaar* (December 1952); Jules Langsner, "Fantasy in Steel, Concrete and Broken Bottles," *Arts & Architecture* 76, no. 9 (September 1959): 27–28.

fantastic architecture, but that term never gained wide circulation in the United States, perhaps in part because it gathered together artists who were divergent in social positioning, such as avant-garde artist Kurt Schwitters, visionary architect Buckminster Fuller, and untrained working-class artists like Rodia and Cheval.[452] Most often the Watts Towers and Palais Idéal were invoked as two remarkable sites that testified to the expression of extraordinary creativity in their respective nations. Notably, virtually no comparisons were ever made between Rodia's creation and any other American backyard architectural or sculptural work until the late 1960s, even though some sites like the Garden of Eden in Kansas had been written about extensively as tourist attractions in the popular press starting in the 1910s.[453]

The Watts Towers' relationship to the categories describing the art of untrained makers, and to large scale sites beyond the Palais Idéal, changed considerably in the late 1960s as a widespread fascination with the art of untrained makers began to foment and then flourished in the following decade. As folklorist Julia Ardery outlined in her insightful study *The Temptation: Edgar Tolson and the Genesis of Twentieth-Century Folk Art*, a number of structural factors sparked the American public's interest in practices that were often called folk art. These included the increase in governmental support through the recently founded National Endowment for the Arts, nationalism at the moment of the 1976 Bicentennial, and an increasingly lucrative American art market that created demand for newly "discovered" artworks.[454] These dynamics also fed new attention from scholars—in the 1960s folklorists, long concerned with oral and written language, turned their sights to analyses of tradition in hand made objects.[455]

However, in the institutions of the art world, the kinds of artists and artworks that garnered attention in the 1970s were distinct from the earlier twentieth-century American folk art revival. That is, although 1970s curators and collectors were still invested in the maker's lack of formal training and disconnect from the institutions and networks of the

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[452] See for example Kate Trauman Steintiz, "Fantastic Architecture: The Simon Rodia Towers of Watts," *L'Arte*, (1959) and "Fantastic Architecture," *Artforum* 1, no. 3 (August 1962): 17–19. Given that the term originated in European surrealism it is perhaps unsurprising that "fantastic architecture" was more often used by European writers like Steinitz and Ulrich Conrads and Hans G. Sperlich, *Phantastische Architektur* (Hatje, 1960).

[453] I have not been able to find a single public comparison between the Watts Towers and an American site that pre-dates the early 1960s, with the exception of Hale and Wisniewsky's notes upon finding the postcard of the Dickeyville Grotto hung on the walls of Rodia's house. However, this connection was not included in their documentary and was never made public as far as I can tell. Early popular press articles on the Garden of Eden include "'Garden of Eden' in Cement,'" *Scientific American*, CXI, no. 22 (November 28, 1914): 444, and "American Flag is Made of Colored Concrete," *Popular Mechanics Magazine*, June 1915, 873.

[454] See Julia S. Ardery, "Chapter 3: The Counterculture and 'The Woodcarver,'" in *The Temptation: Edgar Tolson and the Genesis of Twentieth-Century Folk Art* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), especially 145–158.

[455] Michael Owen Jones discusses this shift, writing that as late as 1960 a state of the field of folklore noted with alarm that, "This work [folk art] has largely fallen to museum people, who follow it as a collateral interest…" See *Exploring Folk Art: Twenty Years of Thought on Craft, Work and Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987), 5. Influential early studies that directed the attention of folklorists to material culture were Henry Glassie, *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968); Michael Owen Jones, *The Hand Made Object and Its Maker* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

art world, they were not as concerned with the presence of legible cultural traditions and championed works made in the recent past by living artists. This shift required modifications in terminology; in a 1970 exhibition at the Museum of American Folk Art curated by eclectic collector Herbert W. Hemphill, Jr., "folk art" became "twentieth-century folk art," advancing Hemphill's belief that "most people think American folk art ended sometime in the 1920s or 1930s but that just isn't so. There is still a lot of good folk art being produced right now."[456] Hemphill's exhibition not only revised the chronological emphasis but also encompassed handicrafts derived from consumer-driven popular culture and singular creations without a legible traditional source (Figure 4.1).[457] Meanwhile, in 1972 scholar Roger Cardinal published a book coining the term "outsider art" as the English-language equivalent of *art brut* and expanded the *art brut* canon beyond mental patients to a wider range of makers perceived to be on the margins of culture.[458] In addition to twentieth-century folk art and outsider art, terms like visionary, naïve, and even primitive also circulated in the 1970s to describe singular works made in the recent past.

While new kinds of subjects like macramé weavings and tattoo art were moving into the museum, the re-definition of categories allowed the inclusion of a wider set of makers not only in terms of age, but also racial identity.[459] Interwar definitions of folk art brought attention to some artists of color like African American sculptor William Edmondson, but curators like Holger Cahill in particular presented a canon of objects made primarily by members of white ethnic groups in the Northeast.[460] Further, the 1970s revival of interest in the art of untrained makers coincided with the movements of people of color advocating for more racial diversity in institutions, motivating the organization of unprecedented exhibitions like *Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980*.[461] But while the work of self-taught artists of color received new exposure the audiences who flocked to

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[456] Herbert W. Hemphill, Jr. quoted in, "Folk Art Alive and Kicking," *The Tampa Times*, November 4, 1970, 7-B.

[457] Hemphill's 1970 exhibition *Twentieth-Century American Folk Art and Artists* featured paintings by Morris Hirschfield, carvings by Edgar Tolson, and hand-painted commercial signs. In the early 1970s he would also curate a number of exhibitions at the American Folk Art Museum on non-traditional folk art themes like macramé and the occult. It should be noted that Hemphill's wide-ranging re-definition of folk art was not accepted by all parties, as I discuss further later in this chapter.

[458] Roger Cardinal, *Outsider Art* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972). For an excellent recent analysis of the field of outsider art that addresses the Watts Towers' place in it, see Daniel Wojick, *Outsider Art: Visionary Worlds and Trauma* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016).

[459] Macramé and tattoo art were the subjects of exhibitions curated by Herbert W. Hemphill Jr. at the American Folk Art Museum in the early 1970s.

[460] For more on Edmondson, see *The Art of William Edmondson*, exhibition catalogue (Nashville: Cheekwood Museum of Art, 1981). I also address Edmondson, and black artists' reception of his work, in footnote 557. Several scholars have discussed the whiteness of Cahill's vision of folk art; see Katherine Jentleson " 'Not as Rewarding as the North:' Holger Cahill's Southern Folk Art Expedition, and Angela Miller, "Feedback Loop: 'Folk Art,' 'Modern Primitives,' and Modernism Between the Wars." Cahill's vision of folk art did not immediately die out in the 1970s; see Simon J. Bronner's allegation that the 1974 Whitney Museum exhibition *The Flowering of American Folk Art 1776–1876* only represented the culture of white middle-class New Englanders in "In Search of American Tradition," *Folk Nation: Folklore in the Creation of American Tradition* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2002), 3.

[461] See John Beardsley and Jane Livingston, *Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980,* exhibition catalogue (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983).

see their work, as well as the advocates, curators, and collectors who promoted it, remained majority white.[462]

Thus, though twentieth-century art by untrained makers had had virtually no institutional presence before 1970, over the course of that decade it was the subject of numerous exhibitions, examined in scholarly texts, and sold in dedicated galleries, expanding the range of practices and makers incorporated into the institutions and social networks of art.[463]As the field grew, the Watts Towers was often invoked as an unusually well known example of these newly formed categories. This had to do with its relatively early "discovery"—over a decade before the term "twentieth-century folk art" was in widespread usage, the International Association of Art Critics had sent public letter in 1959 to the mayor of Los Angeles decrying the Watts Towers' proposed destruction and describing the site as "a paramount achievement of twentieth-century folk art in the United States."[464] The Watts Towers was also one of just two American artworks added to the European canon by Roger Cardinal in *Outsider Art*, cementing its centrality to that category as well.[465] Therefore, it is not surprising that the site was included in a number of surveys of twentieth-century art by untrained makers that were published in the 1970s, like the book version of Hemphill's exhibition and a tome on American folk sculpture.[466]

Moreover, I argue the reception of the Watts Towers in the late 1950s had several less apparent long-term effects, which played a crucial role in the creation and institutionalization of a new genre of cultural production by untrained makers in the 1970s. Called "art environments," the genre encompassed large-scale sculptural and architectural works built in the twentieth century, typically over a long duration of time and in the maker's home or yard. The Garden of Eden, Dickeyville Grotto, and other sites that came to occupy this category had rarely, if ever, been considered artworks or exhibited in art museums before as they had fallen outside of the purview of earlier

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[462] For a discussion of the racial dynamics between the majority white arts professionals and self-taught artists of color, see Gary Alan Fine, *Everyday Genius*, 106–113. Though Fine's study is rooted in careful ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the early 2000s, many of the individuals he profiles in his study got their start in collecting folk art in the 1970s.

[463] This point about the lack of institutional presence is from Ardery, who notes that even the American Folk Art Museum, which began to include twentieth-century work in 1966, only had a scant 450 members before 1970 and most of them were collectors of traditional folk art; see "The Counterculture and 'The Woodcarver,'" 174.

[464] See the repetition of this quoted phrase in numerous newspaper articles including "Watts Towers Declared Unsafe," *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 1959, 4; "Joseph Laitin, "Should Watt's Towers Be Razed or Saved?" *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, September 30, 1959, 3F.

[465] Cardinal, *Outsider Art,* 170–172. The other American example of outsider art was another environmental work—Clarence Schmidt's *House of Mirrors*, discussed later in this chapter. Daniel Wojcik discusses the importance environments to outsider art, stating that they "…remain central to the fields conceptual core. These often monumental environments, constructed by self-taught individuals, are considered by many to exemplify the outsider genre." See Wojcik, *Outsider Art*, 141, and for a full discussion of the environmental genre as it exists today, see "Chapter Four: Vernacular Environments," 141–193.

[466] See Herbert W. Hemphill, Jr. and Julia Weissman, *Twentieth-Century American Folk Art and Artists* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1974), 66–69; Robert Charles Bishop, *American Folk Sculpture*. (New York: E.P. Dutton Co., 1974); Elinor Lander Horwitz, *Contemporary American Folk Artists* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1975), 132–134.

definitions of art by untrained makers. And for the first time the Watts Towers appeared alongside other large-scale American sites, and Rodia gained contemporaries other than Cheval.

In this chapter I will trace several of these effects that unfolded over the 1960s and made such a situation possible. First was the way that the Watts Towers was embraced for its relevance to contemporary practice, inspiring artists in Los Angeles to create sculptures out of found objects and junk and making the Watts Towers into an object that could be drawn into the modern art museum through photography. And second was the way that the artist-led preservation campaign brought the Watts Towers to the attention of a popular audience and, as the 1960s progressed, into the sights of the growing counterculture movement. And perhaps most importantly, interactions between the Watts Towers and Los Angeles modernists who claimed it as a treasured artistic site in the 1950s produced curators with personal investments in advocating for large-scale, self-taught art in the 1970s. In previous chapters I detailed the Watts Towers' influence on the practices of artists, which spread beyond Los Angeles and impacted the development of modern and contemporary art. However, in the 1950s Los Angeles also produced a generation of visionary curators who studied at the University of California or were involved in the local arts scene, and who went on to shape the agendas of institutions across the country.

In the mid-1970s two exhibitions curated by current or former Angelenos introduced and defined the genre of the self-taught art environment: *Naives and Visionaries*, which went on view at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1974, and *In Celebration of Ourselves*, which showed at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1976. Both exhibitions featured the Watts Towers, and both were developed by individuals who had personal histories with the Watts Towers—Martin Friedman and Seymour Rosen, who were the respective curators, and Walter Hopps, who worked at the Smithsonian American Art Museum at the time but played a key role in instigating both shows.

In part because untrained artists often lack the cultural capital to frame their own professional identity, exhibitions have placed an outsized role in defining the field of folk and outsider art. They act as forms of knowledge making, emerging out of particular historical imperatives and creating new pathways of understanding while foreclosing others. I contend that a consideration of the two exhibitions together reveals significant information about how the category of self-taught art environments was formulated and defined.[467] On the whole *Naives and Visionaries* has shaped the scholarship on art environments today by crafting a canon around singularity and biography, while *In Celebration of Ourselves* presented art environments in a spectrum of making with street art and graffiti, an approach that has mostly been forgotten. Yet, in comparing the approaches Friedman and Rosen used to frame the genre of environments, we can see the

[467] Here, I follow the methodology of Lynne Cooke in "Boundary Trouble," as she writes "In a field whose history has been fundamentally shaped by exhibitions, and whose initial disciplinary formulations were made within a museum context, it is critical to deconstruct institutional and curatorial methodologies." Cooke, "Boundary Trouble: Navigating Margin and Mainstream," in *Outliers and the American Avant-Garde* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2018), 5.

impact of discrepancies in terminology and the methods of bringing site-specific environments into the space of the gallery.

My examination in this chapter is meant to shed light on the thriving contemporary market for the art of untrained makers, which has been recently been featured in major exhibitions in venues like the Venice Biennale, the National Gallery, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.[468] However, it is a category of making that remains under debate, represented in the ongoing "term warfare" over what to call the field—outsider art, folk art, self-taught art, visionary art, outlier art, and so on.[469] Further, since the 1970s the ethics of the field have been a matter of vigorous debate. Some argue that the incorporation of the art of untrained makers promotes a politics of equality in the art world in part by illuminating the too-often unacknowledged impact they have had on the history of modern and contemporary art. Yet others contend that the existence of categories that define makers as outsider or folk is inherently othering or primitivistic in its logic, enforcing the marginalization of those it purports to celebrate.[470] Anthropologist Kenneth Ames maintains, "The construct called outsider art threatens [Western society's collective soul] by promoting inhumane values."[471]

Political critiques of categories like self-taught, folk, and outsider art have been levied time and time again, yet the appeal of such work, and the categories' framing in terms of the makers' marginalization from the mainstream art world, persists. This chapter's close examination of the Watts Towers' role in the creation of the genre of self-taught environment in the 1970s is intended to reveal some of the motivations that drive the ongoing vitality of the market for art by untrained makers. Further, many studies consider the work of untrained makers as defined by biography, rather than a focus on the art objects themselves. By highlighting the particular institutional history of art environments, I consider how large-scale works raise particular questions about the translation of site-specificity and lived experience into art institutions in ways that are distinct from the issues raised by small portable objects.

Curatorial Connections and Exhibiting Environments

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[468] The central pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale was installed with the exhibition "*Il Palazzo Enciclopedico* (The Encyclopedic Palace)," curated by Massimiliano Gioni, which placed the work of professional and self-taught artists side-by-side; the exhibition *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* is on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. from January 28 to May 13, 2018; *History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift*, an exhibition of black self-taught art, is on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art from May 22 to September 23, 2018. For a guide to galleries, museum collections, and other sources for American art by untrained makers from the twentieth to twenty-first centuries, see Betty-Carol Sellen, *Self-Taught, Outsider and Folk Art: A Guide to American Artists, Locations and Resources, Third Edition* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, 2016).

[469] For more on the "term warfare" of the field see Gary Allen Fine, "Chapter 1: Creating Boundaries," in *Everyday Genius: Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), especially 18–33.

[470] For example, see James Elkins, "Naïfs, Faux-Naïfs, Faux Faux-Naïfs, Would-Be-Faux-Naïfs: There is No Such Thing As Outsider Art," in *Inner Worlds Outside*, ed. John Thompson (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 71–79.

[471] The statement by Kenneth Ames is from "Outside Outsider Art," *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture,* eds. Cardinal et al., (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 253–272.

Naives and Visionaries opened at the Walker Art Center in December of 1974. The interior of the gallery was covered with planes of wood painted grey, a loose approximation of barn siding. The lighting was dim, allowing the large projections mounted on the wall to glow, phantasmagoric forms in vivid colors that conjured the presence of nine sites located across the country into the same small space (Figure 4.2). On one side the rainbow-tiled walls and hundred-foot spires of the Watts Towers rose against a cloudless southern California sky. In a corner of the room the Garden of Eden's concrete log cabin and figural tableaus emerged, entwined with the greenery of rural Kansas (Figure 4.3). Across the room the patchwork wooden beams and dense assemblages of the House of Mirrors were nestled amongst bare branches in upstate New York. In total, the exhibition displayed nine sites scattered across the country: the Watts Towers and Tressa Prisbrey's Bottle Village in California; S.P. Dinsmoor's Garden of Eden, Molehill by Louis Wippich, Prairie Moon by Herman Rusch, the Concrete Park by Fred Smith, and Jesse Howard's painted signs in the Midwest; the *Throne of the Third Heaven* by James Hampton and Clarence Schmidt's House of Mirrors on the East Coast.

Around the color projections, pools of light revealed additional documentation in the form of large black and white photographs, as well as paintings and sculptures extracted from some of the sites. The *Throne of the Third Heaven* was the centerpiece, presented in its near-entirety on a low stage (Figure 4.4), but there were also junk sculptures made with white plaster masks, figural concrete statues, and a painted concrete fencepost. After *Naives and Visionaries* closed at the Walker in 1975, the exhibition's photographic component, accompanied in some locations by Jesse Howard's signs, traveled to a half dozen locations. In total, *Naives and Visionaries* was seen by over 200,000 people and inspired a spate of articles in the popular press.[472] The Walker also published a lengthy exhibition catalogue with texts detailing the history of each site, prefaced with an essay by curator Martin Friedman, which analyzed the qualities that define such works as a group. *Naives and Visionaries* has been widely cited as a major moment in the institutional history of self-taught art environments, as it was the first major exhibition to gather together multiple examples of large-scale art by untrained makers.[473]

Two years later *In Celebration of Ourselves* went on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It displayed over thirty art environments alongside hundreds of photographs of other kinds of "contemporary folk art in California"—murals, tattoos, custom car designs, cultural festivals (Figure 4.5). Nearly one thousand images were shown in small photographs mounted on a tan backdrop and hung on the gallery walls,

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[472] The Amon Carter Museum and La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art showed Jesse Howard's signs, but it's unclear where else the signs were or weren't exhibited. At the Walker the attendance was 70,000 people, and its viewership at the Dayton Art Institute was 11,550, the Worcester Art Museum was 90,325, the Amon Carter Museum was 6,000, the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art was 10,614, the Art Museum of South Texas was 6,327, and the Flint Institute of Arts was 8,000. Admission statistics are from Exhibition Files, SPACES Archive, Aptos, California.

[473] For instance, Lynne Cooke details *Naives and Visionaries* in her survey of important exhibitions in the field; see "Boundary Trouble," 15.

with more displayed on cardboard dividers in the center of the room.[474] The space was brightly lit, with white walls and high ceilings. Four categories structured the exhibition, three of which were fairly broad—Fine Arts in the Streets (murals, neon signs, public sculpture), Community and Participatory Events (swap meets, parades, destruction derbies), and Personal Statements (costumes, tattoos, decorated cars). The fourth category was the only one that indicated a discrete genre of making—Monumental Environments. However, it was the category most prominently featured in press releases about the exhibition and subsequently in the popular press.[475] Rosen incorporated thirty-four environments in California to exhibit, from the Watts Towers (Figure 4.6) to the Bottle Village and Romano Gabriel's wooden yard sculptures.[476]

Amongst the photo documentation *In Celebration of Ourselves* displayed some three-dimensional objects, including elements of environments like a costumed baby doll from Tressa Prisbrey's Bottle Village (Figure 4.7) and the painted signs in the Peace Garden created by Peter Mason Bond, who called himself Pemabo. The show also included a table of marijuana paraphernalia, a mannequin covered with hand-drawn tattoos, and motorcycle tanks painted with elaborate decorations. The show only ran for about a month, did not tour, and garnered only minimal press and a few reviews.[477] The catalogue was printed three years later in 1979 with a popular press as primarily a book of photographs, captioned with short descriptions written by Rosen. The environment builders moved even further to the forefront in the catalogue, as they were the only makers to be named in headings and were discussed in an additional essay. The book may have had more traction than the exhibition, but on the whole *In Celebration of Ourselves* has been forgotten.

The individuals who organized these exhibitions, Walter Hopps, Martin Friedman, Henry T. Hopkins, and Seymour Rosen, had lived in Los Angeles in the 1950s were all white men from middle-class backgrounds, and part of the social circles of vanguard modernists that gathered around the Art Department at the University of

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[474] The museum's return of loan form for Seymour Rosen lists 827 photographs as well as two slide carousels that were used in the exhibition. See SFMM Loan Form, November 1976, In Celebration of Ourselves Exhibition Files, Museum Archives, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA (hereafter ICOO).

[475] For example, the exhibition press release includes five paragraphs detailing environments and just two describing other subjects featured by the exhibition. See San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Press Release, "In Celebration of Ourselves: California," 1976, ICOO; for an example of a popular press article that focuses on the environments see "'In Celebration' of Californians: Oddball Exhibition Opens," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, December 14, 1976, E-20.

[476] Rosen states that he included thirty-four environments in the show in his interview with Jo Farb Hernández, November 3, 2000, ACT SP.

[477] *Naives and Visionaries* received coverage from a number of art critics, one of whom lauded the exhibition as "the most extraordinary art experience I've had in years"; see Emily Genauer, *New York Post*, January 15, 1975, 32. In contrast, *In Celebration of Ourselves* was written up in a number of general interest pieces, which I discuss in footnote 541, but the critical reviews were scant. Rosen mentioned that a negative review ran in the *Los Angeles Times*, but I have not been able to locate it; see Rosen interview with Hernández, ACT SP. The only other coverage written by a critic that I have been able to locate is a positive article by Beth Coffelt, "The Man Who Has Everything Else," *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle and Examiner*, December 12, 1976, 10–16. Coffelt also wrote the introduction to the *In Celebration of Ourselves* catalogue.

California, Los Angeles and the Ferus Gallery. As young students, teachers, and artists, they had formative experiences with the Watts Towers. These interactions, I argue, shaped their investments in their later careers as curators and arts educators at institutions across the country, informing their recognition of large-scale work by untrained makers as *art*. And further, though they categorized it as "folk" or "visionary," they understood such work to belong in museums of modern and contemporary art, rather than solely in institutions dedicated to folk art, craft, or anthropology.

In this section I will trace how these curators' and educators' personal experiences with the Watts Towers led them to develop these exhibitions. My intent is both to illuminate how personal commitments drove the institutionalization of this field and also to lay the groundwork for my analysis of how Martin Friedman and Seymour Rosen's differing engagements with Watts Towers led them to curate exhibitions that defined the self-taught "environment" in distinct but overlapping ways. Histories of the field of folk art have tended to highlight figures who became singularly devoted to advocating for the creative production of untrained makers, like Michael Hall or Herbert W. Hemphill, Jr.[478] Yet of the four individuals whom I have discussed here only one—Seymour Rosen—is typically associated with the field of self-taught, folk, and outsider art. The others—Hopps, Friedman, and Hopkins—were curators at major institutions whose careers were mostly concerned with white male artists who are today canonical to histories of modern and contemporary art. They all played a role in transforming the museum into a space for new art, but as my discussion will show, the question of whether contemporary art included untrained makers was still being negotiated. Thus, as mainstream curators were shaping the categories we now know as self-taught, folk, and visionary art in the 1970s, art by untrained makers was also shaping mainstream curatorial practices in less apparent but more pervasive ways than have been previously accounted for.

My discussion begins with Walter Hopps, the individual whose connection with *Naives and Visionaries* or *In Celebration of Ourselves* is perhaps the least apparent. He was not an official curator for either exhibition, did not work for the institutions where they took place, and did not even author a single catalogue essay; yet he acted as a bridge between the two exhibitions and played a crucial role in instigating both. Hopps is renowned for his pivotal role in developing the arts scene in Southern California and for his curatorial career, which brought contemporary art into museums at a time when they typically showcased historical works.[479] It is less widely known that Hopps' career in the arts was intertwined with his support for the Watts Towers. He was born and raised in Los Angeles and encountered the Watts Towers in his teenage years, possibly by reading the "Sam of Watts" article in A*rts & Architecture*, or through his involvement in the city's jazz scene and friendship with musicians like Charles Mingus, who had grown up

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[478] See for example Ardery's discussion of Hall's influence in *The Temptation*, especially 158–173; Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, *Made With Passion: The Hemphill Folk Art Collection* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990).

[479] For instance, critic Roberta Smith wrote in Hopps' obituary that he "contributed significantly to the emergence of the museum as a place to show new art." See "Walter Hopps, 72, Curator with a Flair for the Modern, Is Dead," *New York Times*, March 23, 2005, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/23/arts/design/walter-hopps-72-curator-with-a-flair-for-the-modern-is-dead.html.

near to the Towers.[480] As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Hopps became so fond of the site that in 1955 he was married in front of it, and even claimed that Rodia served as a witness to the event.[481]

Two years later Hopps founded the Ferus Gallery, an act that has been described as creating the Los Angeles art scene "out of nothing" (Figure 4.8).[482] Ferus played a role in promoting vanguard artists from across the country; for instance, the gallery hosted the first exhibition of Andy Warhol's soup can prints in 1961. In 1962 Hopps became the director of the Pasadena Art Museum where he organized the first American retrospectives of Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Cornell. For the latter, an article in the *New York Times* proclaimed him "the most gifted museum man on the West Coast (and, in the field of contemporary art, possibly in the nation)."[483] In the late 1960s Hopps left California, and in the 1970s he worked at several institutions in Washington D.C. and New York, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum (then called the National Collection of Fine Arts, hereafter written as the Smithsonian) where he put on a major retrospective of Robert Rauschenberg.[484]

At the same that he developed his career as a curator of contemporary art, Hopps also consistently acted as an advocate for the Watts Towers. Hopps was one of the first individuals to get involved in the campaign for the Watts Towers' preservation and spoke at the hearings against the site's destruction in 1959.[485] In a rare public statement given on the occasion of Rodia's death in 1965, Hopps declared, "During all my life the Towers, and the act of that man in making them, have meant (and do still mean to me) more than

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[480] In the UCLA oral history Hopps explains that he had been an avid reader of *Arts & Architecture* since high school. Hopps also lived with Mingus in Topanga Canyon in the mid-1950s. At the time he had started the organization the Concert Hall Workshop and arranged jazz concerts with Mingus and other artists at Oberlin College and in Los Angeles. See Walter Hopps, *The Dream Colony: A Life in Art*, ed. Deborah Treisman (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 58 and 277. See also Hopps, "Chapter Two," *The Dream Colony*, 10–11 for a discussion of jazz artists in Watts who watched Rodia build in the 1940s and 50s.

[481] Hopps, *The Dream Colony*, 60. Hopps and Shirley Nielsen were married in 1955, while Rodia had deeded the property to Sauceda and, by most accounts, reunited with relatives in Martinez in 1954. It is unclear whether Rodia's presence is attributable to an artistic license on Hopps' part or if the anecdote should revise the timeline of Rodia's departure from Los Angeles.

[482] Phillip Leider, founder of *Artforum*, quoted in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974* (New York: Soho Press, 2003), 31. For more on Hopps' impact on art in Los Angeles see Ken Allen, "Reflections on Walter Hopps in Los Angeles," *X-Tra* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2015), accessed June 19, 2018, http://x-traonline.org/article/reflections-on-walter-hopps-in-los-angeles/.

[483] Phillip Leider, "Cornell: Extravagant Liberties Within Circumscribed Aims," *New York Times*, January 15, 1967, D29.

[484] For more on Hopps' career see Walter Hopps interview with Joanne L. Ratner, 1990, COHLA; Calvin Tompkins, "A Touch for the Now (Walter Hopps)," *The New Yorker*, July 29, 1991, 33–57; Franklin Sirmans, "Find the Cave, Hold the Torch: Making Art Shows Since Walter Hopps," *Now Dig This! Digital Archive*, The Hammer Museum, accessed June 19, 2018, https://hammer.ucla.edu/now-dig-this/essays/find-the-cave-hold-the-torch/.

[485] Before Cartwright and King even discovered the demolition order, James Elliott brought the idea of turning the Towers into a public site to the newly formed organization Art Historians of Southern California, where he found willing supporters including Walter Hopps. The testimonies at these hearings were not preserved, but in a blurb for the *Los Angeles Free Press* published on the occasion of Rodia's death Hopps states, "I've never had anything I wanted to say about the Towers in public, except at the hearings when the city tried to destroy them." See Art Kunkin, "One Year of the Free Press," *Los Angeles Free Press*, July 23, 1965, 1.

any other structure in the entire area…the thing that shines brightest in my entire native area. Simon Rodia's life has been and will be deeply meaningful to me."[486] Even after moving to Washington D.C., he continued to provide behind-the-scenes support for the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts until at least the mid-1970s.[487]

Hopps' history with the Watts Towers did not only motivate his personal advocacy for the site, but also his commitment to the inclusion of large-scale art by untrained makers in museum collections and exhibitions. For instance, in 1964 Smithsonian Deputy Director Harry Lowe read a newspaper article about an elaborate tinfoil tableau made by a janitor named James Hampton called the *Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly* (Figure 4.9). Hampton had recently passed away, and since *Throne of the Third Heaven* was constructed in a rented garage its future was in doubt (Figure 4.10). Like Cartwright and King had done five years prior, Lowe paid the rent on the garage, enabling him to collect the artwork himself and save it from destruction. He owned it for several years without knowing exactly what it was or what to do with it.

In the late 1960s Lowe approached Hopps about using the *Throne of the Third Heaven* for a fund-raising party for the Gallery of Modern Art, where Hopps was working at the time. Hopps appreciated the aesthetic value of the *Throne of the Third Heaven* because of his personal connection to the Watts Towers and later explained that he recognized the *Throne* was "an extraordinary work—not something for decoration at parties."[488] In recognition of its value Hopps went to the Smithsonian director, a longtime personal friend, and successfully entreated him to add the *Throne of the Third Heaven* to the museum's collection. It became one of the museum's first major acquisitions of twentieth-century self-taught art, an area that would become a collecting specialty later in the century.[489]

Then in the early 1970s, while acting as director at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Hopps began to explore the possibility of curating an exhibition of works like the *Throne*

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[486] Kunkin, "One Year of the Free Press," 1.

[487] For example, in 1966 Kate Steintiz asked Hopps to write a short essay on the Watts Towers based on a presentation he made to the County Art Council, see letter from Kate Steinitz to CSRTW friends, 1966. That year Hopps also assisted CSRTW members with connections and support as they sought funding from the NEA in Washington D.C., letter from unknown (possibly Mae Babitz) to Lucille Krasne, November 18, 1966, and letter from Mae Babitz to Lucille Krasne, November 26, 1966, Box 716843, Folder 20, Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts, Los Angeles City Archives and Records Center. And in 1974 Mae Babitz of the CSRTW asked Hopps to get the Smithsonian to fund a book on the Watts Towers, see letter from Mae Babitz to Walter Hopps, February 24, 1974, Box 9, Folder 2, Babitz MSS.

[488] Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, who worked with Hopps at Smithsonian, explains "…[Hopps] very much appreciated [the *Throne*] in part because of his history with the preservation of the Watts Towers." Hartigan interview in video recording, "Tribute to Walter Hopps," Pacific Standard Time Collection, Special Collections, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.

[489] The anecdote about Hopps' role in the Smithsonian's collection of the *Throne* is from Hopps, *The Dream Colony*, 235–236. According to the article by Sarah Booth Conroy, "Laborer's Foil Shrine," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, June 27, 1971, F1 and F4, Smithsonian curator Harry Lowe became aware of the piece after reading Godfrey Hodgson's article "A Tinsel Heaven That Faith Built," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, December 20, 1964, E6. The *Washington Post* also ran an article several days earlier—see Ramon Geremia, "Tinsel, Mystery Are Sole Legacy of Lonely Man's Strange Vision," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, December 15, 1964, C2.

of the Third Heaven and the Watts Towers. He reasoned that since previous examinations of untrained artists had focused on paintings by artists like Grandma Moses, art museums should "expand that literature and public presentation into some of the great environmental structures and architectural fantasies achieved by naive or untaught artists in this country…"[490] Hopps was fired in 1972 so the exhibition never came to be, but he was hired by the Smithsonian shortly thereafter. He began to plan an exhibition of "visionary environments" featuring the Watts Towers and the *Throne of the Third Heaven*.[491] The Smithsonian had recently publicly exhibited the *Throne of the Third Heaven* for the first time and it became a popular hit—the national press coverage featured lengthy write-ups and multiple photographs of the unusual work.[492]

The display of the *Throne of the Third Heaven* also piqued the interests of curators who wanted to borrow it for their own institutions.[493] One of these was Martin Friedman, who began as a curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis before becoming its director in 1961 (Figure 4.11). Friedman transformed the Walker from a sleepy regional museum to a national center of modern art—in the early 1970s he organized exhibitions with artists like Robert Rauschenberg, Larry Bell, and Louise Nevelson.[494] Although Friedman is associated with the Midwest due to his long tenure at the Walker, he spent his formative years in Los Angeles. In the late 1940s and 1950s Friedman and Hopps had been part of the same "insolent gang" of young people studying art at the University of California, Los Angeles.[495] Friedman and his wife Mickey were also friends with Charles and Ray Eames and no doubt aware of their folk art collecting practices.[496] After receiving his MFA in 1949, Friedman spent the next six years teaching art in local schools, including Jordan High School in Watts, where he met Rodia and

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[490] Walter Hopps interviewed by Ruth Bowman, December 12, 1971, WYNC Archives: 8797, http://www.wnyc.org/story/walter-hopps/.

[491] Letter from Adelyn Breeskin to Martin Freidman, January 14, 1971, Box 40, Folder 11, *Naives and Visionaries* Exhibition Files, Walker Art Center Archive (hereafter cited as NVE MSS). Lynda Roscoe Hartigan stated that when she began as an intern at the National Collection in 1971 Hopps gave her the choice of researching Rodia or Hampton, so likely he was thinking of featuring both in his exhibition of visionary environments. See video recording, "Tribute to Walter Hopps," Pacific Standard Time Collection.

[492] Newspapers in over a dozen states ran stories about the exhibition, with headlines, articles, and photographs that emphasized the Throne over other works. See for example "Rescued Art of Laborer Ready for Public Show," *Dayton Daily News*, June 27, 1971, 17A; "Primitive American Folk Art Goes on Public Display Today," *Greenville News*, June 27, 1971, 10C.

[493] Articles like Booth Conroy's "Laborer's Foil Shrine" report that curators at the Walker Art Center, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York reached out about exhibiting the *Throne of the Third Heaven* after it went on view at the Smithsonian.

[494] Margalit Fox, "Martin Friedman, Whose Vision Shaped Walker Art Center, Dies at 90," *The New York Times*, May 13, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/14/arts/design/martin-friedman-whose-vision-shaped-walker-art-center-dies-at-90.html.

[495] Hopps interview by Ratner.

[496] The year after *Naives and Visionaries*, Mickey Friedman curated a Herman Miller exhibition at the Walker. Her correspondence with Charles and Ray Eames makes reference to their longstanding friendship from the "old Los Angeles days"; see Box 52, Folders 11 and 12, Nelson/Eames/Girard/Propst: The Design Process at Herman Miller Exhibition Files, Walker Art Center Archive.

watched him build the Towers.[497] Although Friedman communicated at length about the after-effects of this experience, it likely motivated his interest in displaying the *Throne*, especially since the popular press coverage at the time compared the tinfoil tableau to the Watts Towers.[498]

After sending a first letter of interest in 1971, Friedman got back in touch with Smithsonian staff in 1973 about creating a group exhibition centered around Hampton's *Throne* and featuring other "extraordinary structures of great expressive power and beauty."[499] Hopps became Friedman's primary point of contact and they worked together to develop the exhibition that would become *Naives and Visionaries*. Hopps helped Friedman gather information on the Watts Towers, which Friedman considered one of the most significant examples of the art environment genre.[500] He connected Friedman with the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts and with Seymour Rosen who provided photographs for the exhibition. He also facilitated the loan of Hampton's *Throne*, which became the unofficial centerpiece of the exhibition. The piece was delicate, and Hartigan explains that the Smithsonian "wasn't all that eager to get [the *Throne*] out of storage and figure it out and send it off to this show. But Walter really championed this piece going to the Walker Arts Center."[501] Hopps was originally slated to provide catalogue essays on the two pieces, though given his notorious inability to finish exhibition catalogues it is perhaps not surprising that in the end he did not contribute any writing, nor did he end up curating his own exhibition at the Smithsonian.[502]

Around the same time that he was in conversation with Friedman, Hopps was also working on an exhibition of Californian art with another part of the circle at UCLA in the 1950s—Henry T. Hopkins.[503] Hopkins had run the Huysman Gallery across the street from Ferus and then took up a series of museum positions before becoming the director of the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1974. Hopkins would change the museum's name to the Museum of Modern Art two years later, reflecting the tenor of his directorship, which significantly expanded the museum's holdings and exhibitions of modern and

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[497] Friedman talks about this experience in his lecture "Individuals and Grand Eccentrics," audio recording, Dec 10, 1974, Track 6, NVE MSS.

[498] In longer versions of Booth Conroy's article, curator Harry Lowe was quoted as saying, "I think it is the most wonderful art work. I believe it is certainly comparable with Watts Tower [sic]..." See for example "Unusual Treasures," *Lansing State Journal*, July 25, 1971, B-6.

[499] In his first letters from 1971, Friedman writes to Harry Lowe about the possibility of an exhibition on William Edmondson or James Hampton's *Throne of the Third Heaven*. See correspondence in Box 40, Folder 11, NVE MSS.

[500] Letter from Friedman to Richard Rhodes, April 16, 1974, Box 38, Folder 6, NVE MSS.

[501] Roscoe Hartigan interview in "Tribute to Walter Hopps," Pacific Standard Time.

[502] Martin Friedman confirms that Hopps will write the essays on Hampton and Rodia in conjunction with Hartigan and Babitz in letter to Walter Hopps, April 22, 1974, Box 38 Folder 6, NVE MSS. In the end, Hartigan wrote on the *Throne of the Third Heaven*, and Mae Babtiz from the CSRTW wrote on the Watts Towers, though her essay was rejected for not being scholarly enough. Instead, Friedman decided to include an excerpt from an essay by Calvin Trillin originally published in *The New Yorker*, May 29, 1965, 72–120.

[503] Friedman left Los Angeles in 1956, and Hopkins arrived in 1957 so there was not much of an overlap between them. However, Hopkins was certainly aware of Friedman and mentions him in a list of mentors he met at UCLA. See Henry T. Hopkins, interview by Joanne L. Ratner, July 12, 1995, COHLA.

contemporary art. In 1974 Hopkins and Hopps began to plan a series of biennial exhibitions organized around the main show *Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era,* an unprecedented historical survey of twentieth-century modernism in California.

Hopkins' catalogue essay for the exhibition mentioned the Watts Towers in a section on art in 1930s, referring to the site as "that amazing monument to the strength of the individual will…"[504] However, perhaps because of its status outside the official art world, Hopps and Hopkins ultimately decided that the Watts Towers would be best placed in *California Eccentrics*, one of a series of smaller exhibitions put on in conjunction with the main show.[505] What exactly they envisioned for the exhibition is a bit vague, though in early notes and budgets the title of the exhibition frequently appears as *California Eccentrics: Watts Towers*, indicating that they were committed to the Watts Towers as its centerpiece. These supplementary shows were curated by others, so Hopkins and Hopps reached out to Seymour Rosen to act as curator of *California Eccentrics* in the capacity of folk art expert (Figure 4.12).[506]

Hopps and Hopkins had a long history with Rosen from their time in Los Angeles. Like Hopps, Rosen had encountered the Watts Towers as a teenager when he interned for photographer Marvin Rand, who took him to see the site. In the mid-1950s, Rosen became part of the circle of artists around the Ferus Gallery. He and friend Ed Kienholz would roam the city collecting junk while Rosen photographed everyday cultural manifestations that interested him, like painted cars and church fronts. At the end of the decade Rosen was drafted into the army, but when he heard about the campaign to preserve the Watts Towers in 1959 he left the service and became deeply involved with the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts. Rosen extensively photographed the Watts Towers site, creating photographs that the Committee used in slide shows for educational presentations about Rodia's creation.

Curator William Seitz included some of Rosen's photographs of the Towers in the Art of Assemblage exhibition in 1961.[507] This, and a conversation with Walter Hopps, who told Rosen that his photographs of the Towers and street culture were actually documentation of "some great folk art," inspired Rosen to make the photographic collection his cause.[508] Hopkins, who was Rosen's friend and a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, helped him get his work shown there, first in 1962 with an exhibition of his Watts Towers photographs (Figure 4.13).[509] In 1966 Hopkins also helped

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[504] Henry T. Hopkins, "Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era," in *Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1977), 31.
[505] These exhibitions were organized around topics like murals, San Francisco rock poster art, architecture, and "California Eccentrics."
[506] See letter from Henry T. Hopkins to John Spencer, NEA Director, August 8, 1974, Carton 2, Folder 44, Painting and Sculpture in California Exhibition Files, Museum Archives, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
[507] William C. Seitz to Seymour Rosen, January 12, 1961, Folder 22, Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Records #695-696, Museum of Modern Art Archives.
[508] Transcript, Seymour Rosen interview by Alan Bassing, November 29, 1972, 1. Seymour Rosen Personal Files, SPACES Archive.
[509] Hopkins interview.

him to put on the exhibition *I Am Alive!* in LACMA's children's gallery (Figure 4.14).[510] It featured Rosen's photographs of "contemporary folk art," which was described in the museum press release as "cars, motorcycles, storefronts, churches and gang markings; contemporary environment, including leaves, the human body and events, and actual objects such as breads, kitchen tools and forms of junk."[511] The photographs of environments included the Watts Towers, and the "actual objects" were all scavenged within a ten-mile radius of the museum.

Then in 1971 Rosen successfully applied for a National Endowment grant through the Studio Watts Workshop to develop exhibitions around contemporary folk art.[512] Rosen used the grant money to travel to California, taking three to four thousand photographs of graffiti, decorated cars, and some monumental environments.[513] He began to drive around the country giving educational talks. In 1974 Hopps put Rosen in touch with Friedman, and he provided photographs of the Watts Towers and the Bottle Village for *Naives and Visionaries*. Therefore when Hopkins and Hopps reached out to Rosen to curate *California Eccentrics,* they had over a decade of familiarity with, and advocacy for, Rosen's photographic collection of "folk art," which had its genesis in his pictures of the Watts Towers. Rosen recalled that Hopkins and Hopps approached him with a broad mandate, simply asking him to fill the gallery with the kind of popular and visual culture that did not fit into the other exhibitions.[514]

These exhibitions in San Francisco and Minneapolis came to be because of museum professionals' histories with the Watts Towers from their youth in Los Angeles. Although they both featured the Watts Towers as a key work and focused on the new category of folk or visionary art environment, I will show that the ways that Friedman and Rosen defined the category and presented the works varied based on how they differently responded to the phenomenon that had generated interest in large-scale works, as well as their own personal experiences with the Watts Towers.

Vanguard Environments and Countercultural Authenticity

In the previous section I linked curators' encounters with the Watts Towers and the campaign for its preservation with their desire to curate exhibitions that tried to grapple with the site's existence as part of a genre of large-scale cultural production by untrained makers. It begs the question—what accounts for the delay of a decade or two between the phenomena? In the 1950s all four were young and at the start of their careers, but by the 1960s Hopps, Friedman and Hopkins all held positions as museum directors, and Rosen had already collected a significant amount of photographic

[510] Rosen emphasized that if he hadn't known staff at the museum like Hopkins personally *I Am Alive!* would never have happened. See Rosen interview by Bassing, 2–5.
[511] "Seymour Rosen Exhibition Scheduled at Los Angeles County Museum of Art," Press Release, Correspondence 1970–1977 Folder, SPACES Organizational Files, SPACES Archive (hereafter SP ORG).
[512] Letter from the Studio Watts Workshop to Thomas W. Leavitt, March 31, 1971, Correspondence 1970–1977 Folder, SP ORG.
[513] Letter from J. Michael Crowe to Michael S. Sherman, Esq., October 25, 1974, Correspondence 1970–1977 Folder, SP ORG.
[514] See Beth Coffelt, "The Man Who Has Everything," *California Living Magazine*, *San Francisco Sunday Examiner* and *San Francisco Chronicle,* December 12, 1976; Rosen interview by Hernández.

material.[515] So why did these exhibitions first take place in the 1970s? In part, this timeframe aligns with the factors that enabled the growth of the broader interest in twentieth-century art by untrained makers in the United States. For instance, the National Endowment for the Arts provided the grant that enabled Rosen's first major collection of photographic documentation of contemporary folk art in 1971, and it also funded the Biennial exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art including *In Celebration of Ourselves*.[516] And a number of institutions agreed to host *Naives and Visionaries* in 1975 and 1976, after Friedman reached out with letters that argued that the exhibition would be a fitting addition to their Biennial programming.

However, I argue that there were also factors specific to the interest in self-taught environments that were particular to the genre of making. Martin Friedman noted both in a public lecture for *Naives and Visionaries*. He devoted a significant portion of the lecture to assemblage and environmental art, such as Ed Kienholz's sculpture *Backseat Dodge '38* (Figure 4.15), as he argued that modern art made audiences "receptive" to the self-taught sites in his exhibition. He also noted that the currency of *Naives and Visionaries* was due to the fact that, "We periodically return to populist roots; we are experiencing such a period in society today; hence, the popularity of folk art, country music, indigenous American forms..."[517] These trends in vanguard art towards the spatial, and the counterculture's interest in more authentic ways of living affected both exhibitions in several ways.

First, both used the term "environments" to describe their subject. This word was new—in the campaign for the preservation of the Watts Towers in the 1950s the site had been referred to as "fantastic architecture" and a "sculptural monument," but never as an environment. Friedman and Rosen likely borrowed "environment" from vanguard artists like Allan Kaprow, who began to use the term in the late 1950s to describe a genre of work aligned with assemblages but differentiated by size. Kaprow explained, "Assemblages may be handled or walked around, while Environments must be walked into."[518] Kaprow also selected the term environment in part because he felt it to be more associated with "the real world" than installation, which implied the institutional frame of the gallery.[519] His environments included *Apple Shrine* from 1960, a room-sized work filled with a labyrinth made of shredded and crumpled newspaper, ripped cardboard, and chicken wire (Figure 4.16). At the center of the environment, a wooden structure hung from the ceiling, filled with real and plastic apples. Viewers were invited to navigate the labyrinth and select the apple of their choice, either the edible version or the simulacra.

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[515] Hopps was the director of the Pasadena Art Museum between 1961 and 1967, Friedman became the director of the Walker Art Center in 1961, and Henry T. Hopkins became the director of the Museum Modern Art in Fort Worth, Texas in 1968.

[516] See Ardery, "Counterculture and 'The Woodcarver.'" The National Endowment for the Arts played an especially important role in the research and display of environmental art. For instance, as discussed earlier they funded Rosen's photographic research of "contemporary folk art" in 1971 and the exhibition of Clarence Schmidt organized by William Lipke and Gregg Blasdel in 1976, and in 1977 the NEA matched the Kohler Foundation's funds to preserve Fred Smith's Concrete Park.

[517] Martin Friedman, Lecture "Individuals and Grand Eccentrics," Dec 10, 1974, Audio File Track 6, NVE.

[518] Allan Kaprow, *Assemblages, Environments & Happenings* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1966), 159.

[519] Kaprow quoted in Helen Kontova and Giancarlo Politi, "Allan Kaprow Happens to Be an Artist," *Art in America* 25, no. 162 (April 1992): 92.

The interactive aspects of *Apple Shrine* points to another aspect of Kaprow's concept of environments–they were often the site of happenings, or participatory actions.

The year before Alan Kaprow made *Apple Shrine*, early in his conception of the art environment, an artist friend took him to the upstate New York town of Woodstock to view an unusual site. An elderly construction worker named Clarence Schmidt had transformed his property—covering his house with cracked glass and building on it free form until it grew from one to five stories and creating an elaborate forest of structures and junk sculptures out of found objects on the hillside in front of his house.[520] Kaprow admired Schmidt's creation not only for its complexity, but also because its location in the space of the home and the duration of its making seemed to blur the boundary between art and life. Kaprow later described it as "a lifetime Happening" taking place in a "lifetime Environment."[521] In 1965 Kaprow set out his theories about the art he had been developing in the book *Environments, Assemblages and Happenings*. He placed photographs of *Apple Shrine* and pieces by other trained artists like Claes Oldenberg and Jim Dine next to photographs of Schmidt's property. Though Schmidt's work had previously been referred to as "primitive art" and "folk art," Kaprow labeled it an environment without any modifier to indicate that Schmidt was untrained (Figure 4.17).[522]

I raise Kaprow here not to make him the definitive example, but to point to the reciprocal nature of these exchanges. Artists in Los Angeles were inspired by the Watts Towers to arrange everyday objects or junk into artworks, and they recognized the Watts Towers because they were already doing so. The Watts Towers declared the originary work of Californian assemblage art, and also the category of assemblage helped the Watts Towers to gain legibility in the art world. Similarly, Schmidt's creation may have helped Kaprow to solidify his theories of the art environment, while his term environment helped Schmidt's work and other sites to be understood as part of a genre of art making.

Friedman's introductory catalogue essay for *Naives and Visionaries* defines an "environment" in terms similar to Kaprow: as a work that operates on a particular scale, it must both occupy a large amount of space and be comprised of "many complex, interrelated parts."[523] Rosen does not define the term, but uses the modifier "monumental" to indicate that the scale is the key component of the environments. If we consider their personal histories with the Watts Towers, the utility of this modifier becomes clear as a term that could speak to both sculptural and architectural qualities, as well as connoting a dwelling place. Driving through the flat, low-rise landscape of Watts, Friedman and Rosen would have observed the Watts Towers' architectural features—the steel-reinforced concrete structure, its ten-story height, the building-like towers, domes, and walls. These were often imaged in popular press photographs that emphasized the structural monumentality of the Towers. But having viewed Rodia's creation up close,

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[520] Memorandum from B.F. (maybe B.H. Friedman?) to C.E. (Carol Eliel)/MT (Maurice Tuchman)/RL (?), May 16, 1991, Box 4, Parallel Visions, LACMA.
[521] Allan Kaprow, *Assemblages, Environments & Happenings*, 193.
[522] These terms were used by art critic Lawrence Alloway and Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Henry Geldzahler in the article by David Goodrich, "Miracle on a Mountain," *Saturday Evening Post*, September 12, 1964, 22.
[523] Friedman, "Introduction," *Naives and Visionaries* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1974), 7.

they would also have perceived that the Watts Towers contains many smaller sculptural elements, which were not always so apparent in public representations. Rosen was attuned to these minor elements, as is evidenced in his many close up photographs. However, Friedman was as well: in his correspondence for the exhibition he was able to write out a detailed list of these elements, like the form that is colloquially known as the "ship" with its colorful tiered base that sprouts stacked pedestals, spindly columns, and playful loops.[524] And finally, both Rosen and Friedman visited the site before the wider waves of national reception hit, when Rodia's house still stood and he still lived amongst his creation. Therefore they had an understanding of the site as an environment for living.

Of course when the Watts Towers was displayed in San Francisco and Minneapolis, Rosen and Friedman had to figure out a way to translate their embodied experiences of the site into the space of the gallery. This points to a major challenge of collecting and displaying environments by untrained makers—their site-specificity meant that although smaller components could sometimes be extracted and put on view, most often the complete environments could not be physically moved. That Rosen and Friedman both turned to photography to represent the Watts Towers and other environments points to another shift that had taken place in the previous decade—the rise of time-based innovations like conceptual, performance and land art, which were often translated into galleries and museums through photography. Indeed, photographic documentation became a shared aesthetic strategy that linked various kinds of experimental processes in the 1960s and 70s. As art historian Jeff Wall discusses, this work parodied photojournalism, but eschewed technical skill—it was meant to look amateur, like non-art.[525] Artists claimed that the art wasn't the photograph itself, but the ephemeral action or setting that was pictured. Thus, by the mid-1970s it had become feasible that audiences would accept a museum exhibition that put documentation of an art object on view, rather than the object itself.

In addition to these art world changes, professional artists' embrace of untrained artists also overlapped with a rising interest from dissident subcultures. In the 1960s the black community in Watts had pushed against dominant value systems through social movements that mobilized culture to valorize denigrated non-white and folk cultural traditions. Simultaneously young people, especially college-educated white people, were similarly rejecting the status quo through their cultural affiliations, turning away from elite culture towards a search for meaning in handmade objects and "the simple life." Later termed the counterculture, their search for such forms led them to non-Western cultures, the "universal truths" revealed through psychedelics, and art made by people with no formal training.[526]

The new forms of art like assemblage, happenings, and environments had a lot of overlap with aspects of the counterculture. For example, Seitz stated, "Assemblage has

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[524] Martin Friedman, "Walker Art Center Staff Reactions to Watts Towers Article by Mae Babitz," undated, Box 38, Folder 8, NVE.

[525] Jeff Wall, "Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography In, or as, Conceptual Art," *Reconsidering the Object of Art*, Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, eds., (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 266.

[526] The term counterculture was first popularized by Theodore Roszak in *The Making of the Counterculture* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1969).

become, temporarily at least, the language of impatient, hypercritical and anarchist young artists…" The vernacular repertoire includes beat and Zen hot rods, mescaline experiences and faded flowers, photographic bumps and grinds, the *poubelle* (trash can), juke boxes, and hydrogen explosions."[527] Happenings on the East and West Coasts overlapped with poetry readings and other Beat culture events, like *Action 1*, an exhibition organized by Walter Hopps in 1955 where paintings were mounted on the merry-go-round at the Santa Monica Pier, and Allen Ginsberg performed poetry readings. Nevertheless, in the mid-1960s happenings became associated with the music and psychedelic drug-filled events of the hippie counterculture. By 1967 Kaprow himself noted that the happenings had become a "household word" and distinguished the "watered-down" music festival-like happening from the other, more avant-garde forms. But he also wrote that it was part of the contemporary search for identity and meaning.[528]

A similar migration happened with environments. The campaign for the preservation of the Watts Towers in 1959 had of course drawn in Ferus Gallery artists who were engaged in the Beat counterculture. Seymour Rosen gave slideshows of photographs of the Watts Towers set to jazz music at Venice coffeehouses in 1957 and 1958.[529] But as Beat culture evolved into the counterculture, the Watts Towers continued to speak to anti-authoritarian values of the day. In 1965 the one year-anniversary issue of the counterculture newspaper the *Los Angeles Free Press* was a special on the Watts Towers because, editors wrote, Rodia's solitary and unconventional work uniquely represented the paper in a way nothing else could.[530] At the same time, alternative newspapers across the country like the *East Village Other* advertised photographs of the site for purchase by their readers.[531] The Watts Towers was admired by rock musicians like Jerry Garcia, whose visit in the mid-1960s triggered an epiphany about the importance of improvisation—that the Grateful Dead should try to make something "flowing and dynamic" that couldn't be torn down.[532] In 1967 Sam Rodia appeared on the cover of the album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* next to Bob Dylan (Figure 4.18).[533]

In addition, the Watts Towers' architectural qualities related it to the search for alternative ways of living. Buckminster Fuller, whose designs inspired such communal

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[527] Seitz quoted in Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and Effervescent Body* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 88–89. Thanks to Marci Kwon for bringing attention to this quote remark in her excellent dissertation "Vernacular Modernism: Joseph Cornell and the Art of Populism" (PhD diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York, 2016), 207–208.

[528] Allan Kaprow, "Pinpointing Happenings (1967)," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 84–89.

[529] Rosen interview by González.

[530] Kunkin, "One Year of the Free Press," 1.

[531] For instance, see the classifieds section of *The East Village Other* 1, no. 10, March/April 1966, 16.

[532] See *Long Strange Trip*, directed by Amir Bar-Lev (2017; Amazon Video), Digital Streaming File.

[533] The iconic cover was designed by American sculptor Jann Haworth and her partner British artist Peter Blake, who created life-sized silhouettes of sixty figures staged around the Beatles. Haworth, who grew up in Hollywood, chose to include a number of figures from California including Marlon Brando, artists Larry Bell and Wallace Berman, and Sabato Rodia—Haworth was a fan of the Watts Towers. Email from Jann Haworth, December 13, 2017. For more on the album cover and its relationship to Pop Art see Thomas Crow, "The Absconded Subject of Pop," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics, Absconding* 55/56 (Spring/Autumn 2009): 11–12.

living experiments as Drop City and publications like the *Whole Earth Catalogue*, was a long-time public supporter of the Watts Towers.[534] In an era when young people occupied self-built domes, houseboats, and mud and straw houses, Rodia's building techniques earned him a place in publications like Lloyd Kahn's *Shelter*, a *Whole Earth* spin-off.[535]

Rodia was not the only person to receive such attention; in the 1960s the work of elderly environment builders became current to the countercultural youth searching for a nonconformist, authentic way of living. Pemabo started to build a garden of painted signs and hubcaps in his San Francisco yard in the 1940s, and published screeds on religion and politics in the 1950s.[536] But Pemabo's work gained a new audience in the 1960s when, as *Rolling Stone* magazine reported, crowds of young hippies journeyed up from Haight Ashbury to marvel at the octogenarian's painted messages of peace in his yard (Figure 4.19).[537] And Clarence Schmidt's environment was not only visited by Allan Kaprow, but, as the 1960s progressed, by musicians like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez and LSD pioneer Timothy Leary.[538] Schmidt was even featured in the 1968 quasi-documentary *You Are What You Eat*, which aimed to capture the counterculture for a mass audience, as a kind of patriarch to the young hippies who populate the film.[539]

Friedman's public lecture indicated that he was aware that the counterculture had created popular interest in the subject of *Naives and Visionaries*, and this theory was borne out in reviews that compared the exhibition to the *Whole Earth Catalogue*, as well as the *Naives and Visionaries* catalogue's brisk sales at University bookstores in particular.[540] Rosen courted the counterculture even more directly, alluding to it with his statement that the exhibition was "designed to show that special freedom and experimentation that Californians express outside of the traditional arts…" He included photographs of hippie festivals, displayed an extensive marijuana paraphernalia collection, and in addition to traditional curatorial lectures, staged Tattoo, Van, and Costume and Hair Days when visitors with tattoos, decorated vans, or costumes and unusual hairdos could get into the exhibition for free. They also had the option to be photographed and included in the show. An Associated Press article that ran in other states showed how the exhibition was framed in terms of California as home to the

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[534] Buckminster Fuller gave public statements around the time of the preservation campaign and continued to work as an advocate from behind the scenes: for example, by sending letters of support to museums and the National Endowment for the Arts on behalf of the CSRTW in 1968. See Box 170, Folder 6, Buckminster Fuller Papers, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries. One of the last interviews Buckminster Fuller gave was about the Watts Towers; see interview with Brad Byer, *I Build the Tower* DVD extra.

[535] Lloyd Kahn, *Shelter* (Bolinas: Shelter Publications, 1973), 96–97.

[536] Pemabo, *The Trio of Disaster: Theological, Political, Academic* (Self Published, 1959).

[537] Thomas Albright, "Visuals: Peter M. Bond," *Rolling Stone*, May 3, 1969, accessed June 19, 2018, http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/visuals-19690503.

[538] William C. Lipke, "The Perception of Primitivism," in *Clarence Schmidt* (Burlington: The Robert Hull Fleming Museum, University of Vermont, 1975), 110.

[539] For the description of Schmidt as patriarch see "'Psycho-Delicasy' Film in Woodstock," *The Kingston Daily Freeman*, March 15, 1969, 27.

[540] For the comparison to the *Whole Earth Catalogue* see John Pastier, "Birds Do It, Bees Do It…" *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 1974, 11. This fact about the bookstores is mentioned in a letter from Martin Friedman to Leland Payton, May 22, 1975, Box 23, Folder 14, Martin Friedman Papers, Walker Art Center Archives.

counterculture, with dubious headlines like "Californians Say It's Art" and "California's Odd Lifestyles."[541] A writer in an Oklahoma paper added that the show was, "purest California. That, in itself, tells a lot. As a race, Californians are a bit unusual themselves. Free spirits. Unconventional."[542]

From Singular Visions to Urban Folk Dreams

While Friedman and Rosen shared the term environment, the use of photographs to bring site-specific works into the gallery, and a link to the counterculture, they used different categorical definitions of the work of untrained makers, which led to different curatorial strategies. Friedman, of course, chose to pair the term "naïve," describing makers who had no formal training in the arts, with "visionary," meaning someone touched by inspiration, whose work flows unmediated from dreams, visions, or religious inspiration.[543] However, these were terms that indicated the untrained nature of the makers but set against the communal traditions of the folk artist. As Friedman clarified in his introductory essay to the exhibition catalogue, "the often chaotic creations of the visionary 'environmentalist' artists whose work is illustrated here are not folk art—they are individualistic not collective expressions; they are fundamentally symbolic, not utilitarian…"[544] The catalogue was also initially meant to contain a longer essay by Herbert W. Hemphill Jr. on the distinction between American folk art traditions and the naïve and visionary environment builders, though it was eventually scrapped.[545]

Friedman's insistence that naïve and visionary environments are "unique and isolated" may have been informed by his encounter with the Watts Towers in the early 1950s, in the context of a neighborhood that was at that point home to a majority African American population.[546] Friedman would have been aware of the sharp contrast between the hundred-foot, tiled Watts Towers and the low-rise, wooden bungalows of the surrounding neighborhood. And though Friedman taught at Jordan High School, he moved to Minneapolis years before the Towers was embraced as a symbol of the black community in Watts. I would like to conjecture here that Friedman's sense of Rodia as cut off from Italian culture and making forms that had no correlate or audience in his immediate surroundings shaped how he defined the makers of his exhibition two decades later.

Friedman upheld the distinction between "naives and visionaries" and folk artists through his careful selection of a small canon of nine environments that most embodied the desired traits. He rejected any site that was too closely linked to religious traditions,

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[541] See "'Californians Say It's Art," *The Sioux City Journal*, January 5, 1977, A12; "California's Odd Lifestyles," *The Montgomery Advertiser*, January 13, 1977, 27.
[542] Tom Sharrock, "Around the Hub," *Lawton Morning Press*, January 8, 1977, 1.
[543] In much of the correspondence for *Naives and Visionaries* Friedman had used another term, "grass-roots," which was the chosen descriptor of Gregg Blasdel. It's not clear exactly why Friedman swapped grass-roots out for naives and visionaries, though I conjecture that it had to do at least in part because the term grass-roots' strong regional association with the rural Midwest made it unsuitable for works in urban locations like the *Throne of the Third Heaven* or the Watts Towers.
[544] Martin Friedman, "Introduction," 7–8.
[545] See Friedman's correspondence with Hemphill and Weissmann, Box 38, Folder 6, NVE MSS.
[546] The quoted phrase is from Friedman, "Introduction," 7.

like the Dickeyville Grotto, and even works like a rectangular bottle house, which he deemed too "calculated" to be truly naïve because of its adherence to widespread bottle house construction practices.[547] Friedman also included a wide geographical spread and sites made from a range of materials, rather than highlighting regional trends such as in the Upper Midwest where direct lines of influence link a number of large-scale concrete environments.[548]

Beyond the selection of works, Friedman organized *Naives and Visionaries* by maker. Unusually for an art museum, he hung didactic panels with a photograph and biography of each artist underscoring the importance of the individual to the work (Figure 4.20). Works by a single artist were grouped together, a practice Friedman referred to as giving each artist their "own environment." Meanwhile, the dark lighting, neutral colors of the gallery walls, and relatively few images for each site help to make the sites legible and discrete. The large-format of the photographs helped to impress upon the viewer the scope of these works, but the inclusion of a number of three-dimensional elements was also key to the way the exhibition elucidated scale; as art historian Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby notes in her study of monumental landmarks, scale is not a stable referent, but comparative.[549] In a photograph the size of the odd and complex forms of the visionary environments did not always translate, especially since the photographs of the works cropped out much of the context around them. However, the sprawling presence of *Throne of the Third Heaven* gave viewers a taste of how the other environments might have occupied the space of the gallery, while components like the life-size concrete figures made by Fred Smith gave them a referent by which to gauge the size of the forms pictured in the photographic representations. The inclusion of physical components in the gallery also made the environments into art objects that could be collected. Of course, the *Throne of the Third Heaven* had already been acquisitioned in full, and Friedman went so far as to commission Herman Rusch to re-create one of his fence posts for inclusion in the exhibition (Figure 4.21). Thus, the show's framing of "naïve and visionary environments" perpetuates the notion that they are singular expressions of a self-contained, immersive world, suppressing lines of influence and parallels between sites. It also puts them in the frame of an artwork, able to be at least to some extent decontextualized and re-contextualized in the space of the museum.

Singularity is, I argue, key to the way that *Naives and Visionaries* defines its environments as "American." Of course, they are all built within the borders of the United States, dispersed across the country. But in his essay, Friedman presents them as authentic alternatives to roadside culture, paeans to a national ideology of individualism. What made them so was the maker's individualism and that they build these singular large-scale structures in their home space. But what are the terms by which you could achieve such access? All of the environment builders in the exhibition were white men, with the exception of Tressa Prisbrey, the only woman, and James Hampton, the only person of color and the only artist who was racially marked in the catalogue, described as

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[547] Friedman to Jim Roche, May 22, 1974, Box 38, Folder 6, NVE MSS.
[548] For a careful history of the connections between sites in the Upper Midwest see Jim Zanzi and Lisa Stone, *Sacred Spaces and Other Places: A Guide to Grottos and Sculptural Environments in the Upper Midwest* (Chicago: School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1993).
[549] See Grimaldo Grigsby's discussion of scale in *Colossal*, especially 17.

a "black visionary." We might note that, historically, white men have been able to own and control property inside and outside the home, enabling them to have the permanence of architecture and to be located in rural areas and still be visible on a road trip. This framing of American naïve and visionary environments as a disconnected monumental vision thus reveals how triumphant individualism and national egalitarianism is easier to achieve for some than others.

Naives and Visionaries had presented a small canon of works primarily made by white artists in rural areas, which were very carefully extracted from a range of similar practices to become exemplars of the category. In contrast, though *In Celebration of Ourselves* highlighted monumental environments as their own genre of making, the exhibition also situated the decoration of house and yard within a wide spectrum of non-institutional making practices. And, in particular, much of the comparative material pictured urban environmental practices made by people of color. This was in part due to the fact that many of Rosen's photographs had been gathered through the NEA grant and the Studio Watts Workshop, which was meant "to identify certain areas of people-oriented, indigenous folk art and to have this material available to museums; hopefully each community would have a repository of what their community is about."[550] For that project Rosen concentrated on photographing San Francisco and Los Angeles, capturing Korean parades, Chicano murals and festivals like Day of the Dead, and hand painted signs on black-owned storefronts.

That Rosen would place such materials together came out of experiences with art education in South and East Los Angeles, which he got involved with through his advocacy for the Watts Towers. Like most members of the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts, Rosen was white, from a middle-class background, and lived in the central part of the city, near Hollywood. But, unlike most, Rosen did not simply photograph the Towers a handful of times then participate in the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts meetings on the Westside. Instead, he spent extended periods of time in Watts, starting with the six-month period when he created hundreds of photographs of the site and its neighborhood surroundings for the exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

One of the photographs exhibited at LACMA in 1962 shows how Rosen's practice of photographing the Towers in the neighborhood helped him to become more aware of other visual practices in the landscape. (Figure 4.22). The dark horizontal bands of multiple train tracks split the vertical composition. In the foreground debris by the tracks catches the light, while in the middle ground a geometric box is spray-painted with the name "Roy." Each letter is plainly written on a slight angle, giving it a jaunty feel. At the mid-level of the photograph is the neighborhood beyond the train tracks, an impression of houses and trees of the neighborhood behind. Rising above are the Watts Towers, but at this angle they are both mysterious and less monumental than in most other photographs. Bifurcated by a telephone pole in between, the photograph creates a conversation between the graffiti and the towers behind.[551]

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[550] Rosen interview by Bassing, 18.

[551] For example, in 1972 Rosen explained that people saying "I Am Alive" meant "kids marking by themselves, kids doing graffiti on walls, up to somebody like Simon Rodia, who spent thirty-three years doing the Watts Towers." Rosen interview by Bassing, 2.

In the mid-1960s, Rosen continued to be involved in Watts by volunteering at the Watts Towers Arts Center with projects like Operation Teacup and participated in discussions about how to best reach students at the art center, advocating for encouraging creative practices that were already going on like graffiti and instilling a greater sensitivity for the visual interest of the environment.[552] In this period Rosen also began to photograph graffiti extensively and presented these images in *I Am Alive!* in 1966 (Figure 4.23). That exhibition earned him a position in the Junior Arts Council, where he used his archive of contemporary folk art to develop programming for schoolchildren in Los Angeles, in part through connections with the Studio Watts Workshop. His students deepened his understanding of the graffiti's meaning as gang markers, teaching him that the spray-painted phrases were strategies to express ownership over space and that being able to read them enabled one to safely navigate urban space riven by gang territories.[553] When Rosen won the grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1971, he worked with a photographer who was Chicano and used graffiti in his artwork, so they went to East Los Angeles to document it.[554]

Today, graffiti is typically categorized as "street art" rather than folk art, but photographs like this show how they could have been linked. Rosen also included photographs of art and artists who later crossed over into categories of mainstream contemporary art. For instance, in the "Costumes" section of the *In Celebration of Ourselves* catalogue there is a silhouette of a smiling man wearing face paint and a festooned bowler hat (Figure 4.24). The caption explains that the costume was part of a "happening" called *Stations of the Cross*; in fact, the picture shows Gronk, a member of the Chicano art collective Asco. *Stations of the Cross* was one of the group's earliest public performances, where they carried a cardboard cross down a busy boulevard in East Los Angeles, then performed "last rites" in front of a marine recruiting station.[555]

Stations of the Cross was one of a number of performances that Rosen documented in the 1970s, including works by Robert Rauschenberg, Judy Chicago, and Nicki de Saint Phalle.[556] That *In Celebration of Ourselves* features a photograph from an Asco performance, but leaves out the more established white artists indicates the ways that Asco's racial identity placed them outside the bounds of institutional definitions of art in the 1970s. This exclusion was made explicit in 1972 when Asco member Harry Gamboa, Jr. met with a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to urge him to include more Chicano art in the museum's exhibitions. Accounts of the curator's exact response vary—he may have responded that Chicanos only make folk art, that Chicanos

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[552] See Jeanne Morgan, "Meeting at Noah Purifoy's House," November 2, 1965, Box 716843, Folder 18, Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts, City Archives and Records Center, City of Los Angeles.
[553] In his oral history Rosen explains that city planners were putting a park in Watts in a location that many would have to cross several gang territories to access, so it wouldn't get as much use as it could. Rosen Interview by Bassing, 7.
[554] Ibid, 19–20.
[555] Thanks to Jez Flores for the identification of Gronk. For more on Asco see Flores' forthcoming PhD dissertation "Camp as a Weapon: Chicano Identity and Asco's Aesthetics of Resistance" (PhD diss., University of California Berkeley, 2019), and *ASCO: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective 1972–1987*, eds. C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011).
[556] For instance, Rosen also documented Asco's interruption of Day of the Dead festival at Evergreen Cemetery in 1974.

only make graffiti, or that they "are in gangs, they don't make art." However, the implication was clearly that, as Chon Noriega has written, in the eyes of the museum Chicano art was a "categorical impossibility."[557]

In Celebration of Ourselves' inclusion of Asco, as well as artists and groups like Judy Baca and Self-Help Graphics, as some of the only named makers in the show was likely a response to the exclusion of Chicanx art and culture from other parts of the California biennial exhibition. Though *Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era* brought new attention to twentieth-century Californian art and featured nearly two hundred artists, the vast majority of artists were white men. This fact was not unremarked upon at the time: artists June Wayne and Joyce Treiman wrote a public letter of protest about the very small proportion of women and artists of color, stating that the lack of diversity "misleads the public and contaminates the view of these times for future researchers of the literature."[558] Hopps and Hopkins did try to recognize a wider range of practices with the side exhibitions—like *In Celebration of Ourselves* and a program of mural painting—but with smaller budgets and gallery space, and no plan to tour these exhibitions, there was a clear hierarchy.

Thus, *In Celebration of Ourselves* illustrates the ambivalent relationship of artists of color to categories like folk art. In Chapter Three I discussed how artists in Watts drew from suppressed African cultural traditions to craft a distinct black culture within the United States as part of a separatist political strategy. But when artists of color try to enter mainstream white institutions, the label of folk, visionary, or outsider can be applied to either bar them from entry or contain them in a category separate from mainstream art. For instance, in 1937 the Museum of Modern Art staged its first solo exhibition dedicated to a black artist, sculptor William Edmondson. However, Edmondson was not part of a vanguard cultural movement like the Harlem Renaissance, but was an untrained stone carver who lived in rural Tennessee. Scholars like Bridget Cooks have argued that Edmondson's lack of formal training and disconnect from the art world allowed the Museum of Modern Art to position him as a primitive antecedent to modern art, rather than a relevant contemporary.[559] Similar issues would arise several years after *In Celebration of Ourselves*, when the major exhibition *Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980* was organized by the Corcoran and toured nationally. The exhibition put on view

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[557] Chon Noriega, "Your Art Disgusts Me: Early Asco 1971–75," *east of borneo*, November 18, 2010, https://eastofborneo.org/articles/your-art-disgusts-me-early-asco-1971-75/. More broadly, Tomas Ybarra-Frausto discusses the strategies of artists in the Chicano movement, writing that a primary aim was to demonstrate that Mexican Americans were "active generators of culture" rather than "passive receptors." However, this did not mean rejecting vernacular traditions, but integrating them into new formats. See Ybarra-Frausto, "The Chicano Movement/The Movement of Chicano Art," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1991).

[558] June Wayne and Joyce Treiman, "A Southern View of 'The Modern Era,'" *San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle*, November 14, 1976.

[559] See Bridget Cooks, "Chapter 1: Negro Art in the Museum," in *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans in the American Art Museum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), especially 17–33.

work that had been overlooked by art museums, but again scholars and contemporary artists argued that to label art by black artists as folk was a form of social control.[560]

Folk art was also distinguished from fine art by a focus on how it functioned in a social context, and this is something that Rosen perpetuated: he would later write that he approached the sites not as an artist, but as an archivist or anthropologist.[561] In contrast to the dim lighting, grey walls, and large-format images of *Naives and Visionaries*, the small photographs put more of a focus on thorough documentation than aesthetic impact. Further, Rosen worked with Fred Usher to design the exhibition components to be portable so that Rosen could do educational tours with them after *In Celebration of Ourselves* closed. This was noted by one *Los Angeles Times* critic, who panned the exhibition's uninspiring photographs and curatorial aesthetic.[562]

In sum, the terminological distinctions between the two exhibitions indicated vastly differing approaches to the subject matter. Friedman was taking a small number of sites and making them into aesthetically compelling art objects and their creators into exceptional artists that could belong in the museum. Rosen's approach was in some ways more radical. He took folk art to its full democratic extent to mean that anyone could be an artist and anything could be art. Rosen ran newspaper articles inviting Californians to send in snapshots of things they had made to be included in the exhibition.[563] He later stated that his favorite thing about the exhibition was that museumgoers wrote to him saying his exhibition inspired them to go out and make their own folk art.[564] But as a result his exhibition was more anthropological and documentary, and he still ran into the problems of the way that institutions differently valued art based on the racial identity of its makers.

The Self-Taught Art Environment as Genre, Then and Now

Naives and Visionaries and *In Celebration of Ourselves* had several immediate and long-term outcomes. *Naives and Visionaries*, in particular, set precedents for the museum display of large-scale environments by untrained makers, which were quickly followed by other institutions. The *Throne of the Third Heaven*'s display at the Walker proved that the complex piece could tour, and it went on to be shown at numerous other institutions including at the Whitney's biennial exhibition in 1976. That same year Rosen's photographs of Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village also traveled to the Venice Biennale, which was organized around the theme "*Ambiente, parteciapazione, strutture culturali*," translated into English as "Environment, Participation, Cultural Structures." Germano Celant curated the central exhibition, which explored the idea of environments in the visual arts from 1912 to 1976 by recreating famous art environments and placing them next to documentation of contemporary environments by professional artists like Allan Kaprow, Claus Oldenberg, and Christo. However, Clement also included

[560] The most famous text critiquing the exhibition was Eugene W. Metcalf's "Black Art, Folk Art, and Social Control," *Winterthur Portfolio* 18, no. 4 (Winter, 1983): 271–289.
[561] Seymour Rosen undated handwritten letter, Correspondence 1977–1980 Folder, SP ORG.
[562] Rosen, interview by Hernández.
[563] "Snapshots Solicited by Museum," *The Petaluma Argus-C*ourier, December 18, 1976, 6B.
[564] Rosen, interview by Hernández.

environmental works by untrained makers, whom he referred to as "the naives and visionaries," indicating his familiarity with the Walker Art Center exhibition. In this way images of the Bottle Village ended up hung on the wall next to a recreation of El Lissitzsky's *Proun Room*.[565]

In addition to an increased interest by curators in featuring the environments in exhibitions, *Naives and Visionaries* also helped to get elements of the sites into the permanent collections of arts institutions. While *Naives and Visionaries* was still on view, the Kansas City Art Institute agreed to add Jesse Howard's signs to their permanent collection. Further, in 1975 Friedman assisted his co-curator Gregg Blasdel with a solo exhibition of Clarence Schmidt. The increased exposure of Schmidt's work enabled Blasdel and his collaborator William Lipke to successfully make the case that the Smithsonian should purchase a half dozen of Schmidt's assemblages for their permanent collection, aided by support of Walter Hopps and Linda Roscoe Hartigan.[566]

In addition, both *Naives and Visionaries* and *In Celebration of Ourselves* were successful in granting folk or visionary environments more cultural capital, which helped local groups make the case for their preservation. For instance, as the *Naives and Visionaries* exhibition was still touring, the Bottle Village was slated for destruction and Friedman wrote letters in support, citing its inclusion in the exhibition as proof of its artistic merit.[567] Further, in the process of doing research for the exhibition, Rosen became aware not only of the many environments scattered across California, but also of their precarity.[568] Many of the makers were elderly or had recently passed away, and several sites were threatened by imminent destruction. After *In Celebration of Ourselves* Rosen never curated another museum exhibition, but instead in the spring of 1978 he formed the nonprofit SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments, geared toward the documentation and preservation of what he called folk art environments.[569] Rosen believed that these sites' preservation relied on the development of folk art environments as a genre. As he wrote,

> We are the only ones promoting the genre itself, as opposed to somebody who can write the most thoughtful and interesting thing about a particular site to have it filed away with a whole bunch of other Masters Thesises [sic] to be lost forever to the world.[570]

Since the late 1980s a number of books have been released that explore the genre of art environment by untrained makers: most are large-format books written for a popular audience, with glossy color photographs of sites paired with the biographies of their

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[565] Letter from Germano Celant to Seymour Rosen, April 15, 1976, Correspondence 1977–1980 Folder, SP ORG.
[566] Letter from William Lipke to Martin Friedman, February 19, 1976. Box 38, Folder 3, NVE.
[567] Letter from Martin Friedman to the Ventura County Board of Supervisors, March 24, 1975, Box 37, NVE.
[568] Rosen discusses this growing awareness in Beth Coffelt, "The Man Who Has Everything" and in Art Seidenbaum, "A Negative History of Eccentricity," *Los Angeles Times*, September 5, 1976, 26.
[569] Another one of the SPACES founding members was Allen Porter, a graphic designer who had done all of the designs for the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts. SPACES organizational statement, undated (1978?), Correspondence 1977 – 1980 Folder, SP ORG.
[570] "Seymour + Diane Discussing History," undated, ACT SP.

makers, and some are more academic, but the literature on the whole is geared towards documentation and description rather than analysis.[571]

The tension between folk (defined by community standards) and visionary, grass roots, or outsider that was exemplified in the contrast between *Naives and Visionaries* and *In Celebration of Ourselves* has persisted in the field. In the 1970s folklorists critiqued the category of "folk art" that had emerged through the work of arts professionals in the previous decade. They questioned how folk practices defined by the anonymity of the maker and community standards could coexist with self-taught work by makers whose work expressed a seemingly individual aesthetic vision at odds with cultural community around it.[572] In these debates, the Watts Towers and other environments were often held up as exemplars of a work that had been erroneously characterized as folk art, which should more properly categorized as contemporary art. However, other folklorists pointed to the ways that the isolation of the environments' aesthetics was overstated and the continuities of tradition that they embodied. For instance, the Watts Towers was linked to the towers carried in the traditional *Gigli* festival in the part of Italy where Rodia was raised.[573] These debates linger, as art historians often privilege the unique vision of the maker and folklorists the recognition of cultural continuity.[574]

Finally, perceptive readers will have already noted that the curators who put together these exhibitions and most of the environment builders they featured are male. Tressa Prisbrey was the only woman out of the nine artists featured in *Naives and*

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[571] Roger Manley and Mark Stone, *Self-Made Worlds: Visionary Folk Art Environments* (New York: Aperture, 1997); Zanzi and Stone, *Sacred Spaces and Other Places;* John Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers 1995); Barbara Brackman and Cathy Dwigans, eds., *Backyard Visionaries: Grassroots Art in the Midwest* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999) John Maizels et al., *Fantasy Worlds* (Los Angeles: Taschen, 2007); Leslie Umberger, *Sublime Spaces and Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007); and Jo Farb Hernández, *Singular Spaces: From the Eccentric to the Extraordinary in Spanish Art Environments* (San Jose: San Jose State University Press, 2013).

[572] For instance, 1977 the Winterthur Conference on American Art erupted in a contentious debate between the "moldy figs," who were more aligned with folklore and defined folk art as preindustrial culture by anonymous makers and the "Plastic Pink Flamingos," who were more often art historians and curators and defined folk art as a living tradition that encompassed kitsch and popular culture. For an overview of the Winterthur debate of 1977 see Owen Jones, *Exploring Folk Art*, 59–61.

[573] An article that offers the Watts Towers as an example of specious folk art is John Michael Vlach, "American Folk Art: Questions and Quandaries," *Winterthur Portfolio* 15, n.o. 4 (Winter 1980): 345–355. The breakthrough text on the connection between the Watts Towers and the Gigli is I. Shelden Posen and Daniel Franklin Ward, "Watts Towers and the *Giglio* Tradition," in *Folklife Annual I* (Washington, D.C.: American Folklife Center, 1985), 145–157. Texts that argue for the importance of understanding the Watts Towers in terms of folk traditions rather than as a singular artistic expression with no precedent include Franklin Ward, "Chapter 5: The Secret of Mr. Rodia," in "Authenticity in the Cultural Hybrid," 142–182; Wojcik, 144–158; essays by del Giudice and Sciorra, and other Italian Studies scholars in *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*.

[574] For a good overview of these debates see Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr., "The Politics of the Past in American Folk Art History," in *Folk Art and Art Worlds*, ed. John Michael Vlach and Simon J. Bronner (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1986) 27–52; Joan M. Benedetti, "Who Are the Folk in Folk Art? Inside and Outside the Cultural Context," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 8.

Visionaries, and of the sixteen environments included in the catalogue for *In Celebration of Ourselves,* only one has a solo female creator—again Prisbrey's Bottle Village—as well as one where a wife and husband worked together.[575] This gender imbalance is, I argue, linked to the way that Rosen and Friedman defined "environments" as monumental sites that could be encountered by a passing car, rather than requiring entry to a residence; their formative experiences with the Watts Towers may have influenced them in the creation of these provisions of scale and visibility. However, the historical relationship of gender to space meant that this definition typically excluded women, who were less likely to have economic or social control over the use of the private property where they lived, and especially over the yard, which, among other uses, had served a space of masculine "handyman" activity since the early twentieth century.[576] Further, Friedman's stipulation that environments be "singular" in their aesthetic form defined the visionary environment defined against the "unexceptional" creative work already taking place in the domestic realm, such as decorating and handicrafts: in other words, women's-work.[577]

Yet at the same time that the interest the outdoor creations built by older white men on their properties led to the creation of the genre of the art environment, women in the feminist art movement began to seek out a historical lineage, or "herstory," of women artists. Though they recovered the work of some professionals, they quickly recognized that women had been systematically excluded from the institutions of art and architecture. They embraced devalued crafts practices like china painting, knitting, sewing, and so on, made by anonymous women without formal training for the space of the home.[578]

In January of 1976, between the original opening of *Naives and Visionaries* and the opening of *In Celebration of Ourselves* later that year, students at the Feminist Studio Workshop hosted Prisbrey's first solo exhibition at the Woman's Building, a separatist space for women artists in Los Angeles (Figure 4.25). The display featured photographs of the Bottle Village taken by a member of the Feminist Studio Workshop, as well as Prisbrey's recreation of the Bottle Village's boisterous, colorful forms—bottles embedded in concrete, pencils splayed out in a radius, and plastic dolls raised on spikes. Crucially the artists at the Woman's Building claimed that Prisbrey's work was "distinctly feminine" and belonged "in the tradition of quilts and crafts." They made this argument in part through the works it was exhibited alongside: in one adjacent gallery

[575] The wife and husband environment is Possum Trot by Ruby and Calvin Black.

[576] For instance banks required a man to cosign all credit applications made by women, such as home loans, until 1974, when the Equal Credit Opportunity Act passed in the United States. The association of yard art with masculine "handyman" work is discussed in Colleen J. Sheehy, *The Flamingo in the Garden,* 120–123.

[577] For instance, Roger Cardinal later defined the outsider environment as creative work that "strikes an unmistakable note of singularity." See "The Vulnerability of Outsider Architecture," *Southern Quarterly* 39, no. 1–2 (Fall/Winter 2000/2001): 177.

[578] There is much literature on this topic; see for example Linda Nochlin. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? (1971)," reprinted in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 229–233; Mirra Bank, *Anonymous Was a Woman* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979); Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, "Chapter Two: Crafty women and the hierarchy of the arts," in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Pandora Press, 1981) 50–81.

there was documentation of an early vision of women's space, the Women's Building at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, and in another, an exhibition of historical handicrafts like embroidery and quilts.[579] They also argued that Prisbrey's use of objects like glass bottles and toothbrushes spoke to her site's re-interpretation of the everyday life of the home; an argument similar to the one I made about Rodia's ornamentation in Chapter 1.

Despite the similarities between the two sites, feminist artists pointed out that a frequent negative comparison was made between the Bottle Village and the "phallic" Watts Towers. They alleged that the Bottle Village had been unappreciated in part because you had to "go inside to experience the beauty."[580] The Feminist Studio Workshop students' comments cannily expose the gendered aspect of the reception of the Watts Towers, and other environments by male builders. That is, the scale of the towers was made to stand in for Rodia's labor—equated with the accomplishment of its creator, as well as the prowess of the nation in which it was built. Therefore patriotic narratives that portrayed Rodia as a humble immigrant who overcomes adversity to "do something big" for his new country, inspired by "great men" like Marco Polo, Columbus, and Galileo relied on the perceived masculinity of his aesthetic accomplishment. Rodia's comparison to such heroic figures is in stark contrast to the paternalistic reception of Prisbrey, who was in all three exhibitions referred to as "Grandma" Prisbrey rather than by her first name, Tressa.

The example I discuss here is in some ways specific to environments, but can be extrapolated to other kinds of creative practices characterized under the rubric of self-taught folk and outsider art. The dictates that makers must be socially isolated and create with an aesthetic of singularity has meant that male "outsider artists" outnumber women significantly, by an estimated ratio of three-to-one.[581] As one scholar puts it, "The disproportionate number of men, however, is really a result of gender-definition politics and exhibition practices that privilege art-type work above domestic utilitarian and decorative objects."[582] I have concentrated on gender here, but there are of course other ways that the definitions Friedman and Rosen set forth in their exhibitions delimited the field of environment builders along lines of identity. In looking at how these exhibitions come together, my aim was to traces how these categories were built as well as to reveal other alternative pathways to understanding, which have been foreclosed.

<u>Conclusion</u>

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[579] Press Release, February 27, 1976, Women's Building Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[580] Remark by Cheri Gaulke in Michelle Moravec, "Fictive Families of History Makers: Historiocity at the Los Angeles Woman's Building," in *Doin' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building*, ed. Cheri Gaulke (Los Angeles: Otis College of Art and Design, 2011), 73.

[581] Gary Alan Fine, *Everyday Genius*, 22.

[582] Bernard Herman and Colin Rhodes, "Canons, Collections, and the Contemporary Turn in Outsider Art," in "*Great and Mighty Things": Outsider Art from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection,* eds. Ann Percy and Cara Zimmerman, (Philadelphia: PHiladelphia Museum of Art, 2013), 248.

In this chapter I have argued that the Watts Towers played a crucial role in the creation of the genre of art environments by untrained makers in the 1970s. I considered how the Towers' "discovery" by modernists in the 1950s was implicated in developments in the art world and popular culture that made such large-scale, durational structures appealing. I also traced the experiences of four curators of modern and contemporary art whose personal interactions with the Watts Towers fostered an investment in the collection and display of such work in art museums. In this way, the qualities of "outsiderness" that appealed to marginalized artists in Los Angeles in the 1950s and 1960s became codified as the grounds for institutional absorption in the following decade, shifting Watts Towers' site from Los Angeles to Rodia himself. However, this new framework did not replace the two that had gone before. Instead it has become a third layer of meaning that accrued around the site, intermingling with Rodia's accretions of concrete and ornament, and contributing to the Watts Towers' remarkable polyvalence as a public monument.

Conclusion

Since its creation the Watts Towers has hovered on the margins of respectable Art History. It is used as a symbol and widely referenced as a point of influence, but has been the subject of little academic study in its own right. This dissertation has made the argument that the Watts Towers should not be an eccentric footnote to art's histories. Instead, I have traced how artists have made and re-made the Watts Towers' meaning, enabling it to become a monument that speaks to multiple publics simultaneously as a symbol of the triumph of the margins. In turn, the site's appeal to different communities of culture makers uniquely reveals the racial geographies of the dialectic between vernacular practices and arts institutions. Thus, the history of the site helps us understand both how the influence of "outsider" artists, practice and spaces expanded the boundaries of American art in the postwar period, but also the way that the embrace of the "outside" perpetuated hierarchies of inequality along more subtle axes.

In the remainder of this conclusion I would like to gesture towards some issues outside of this dissertation's scope, as well as my hopes for its effect on the future stewardship of the site. This study focused on three primary discourses that emerged between 1950 and 1980 to link the Watts Towers with the practices of artists and other cultural workers—modernism and assemblage, black art, and self-taught, folk, and outsider art. However, throughout this dissertation I have also gestured towards other potential meanings that I believe are resonant yet have not been prominent in the Watts Towers' reception. I would like to briefly highlight several here that I believe merit attention and future scholarship.

The first is the Watts Towers' relationship with the Latino community and culture in Los Angeles. I discussed this most topic most thoroughly in Chapter One, making the argument that Rodia's social networks and neighborhood community with Mexican Americans likely impacted where and how he built, including his use of bright colors, Spanish Colonial Revival tiles, and the inscription of the phrase *Nuestro Pueblo*. Yet the association with Mexican culture very quickly vanished when the Towers was "discovered" by white modernist artists, who were not aware of the neighborhood's history and glossed over the three years when the Watts Towers was owned by Sauceda and Montoya, referring to them simply as "the Mexicans," or as "derelict" custodians of the site.[583] But we can imagine some sort of alternate timeline where Cartwright and King never purchased the site and instead Montoya established his Tower Tacos business as planned, making the Watts Towers into vernacular commercial architecture, like a more eccentric version of a hot-dog-shaped hot dog stand.[584] Perhaps the taco stand could have made it a landmark of the Latino community, and Asco could have performed *Stations of the Cross* along 107th Street.

An understanding of the Watts Towers' relationship with Latino culture has only become more necessary in recent years as South Central Los Angeles, now re-branded

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[583] For example Jeffrey Herr states, "Montoya's custodianship was as derelict as Sauceda's" in Herr, "A Custody Case: Ownership of Rodia's Towers," in *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts: Art, Migrations, Development,* ed. Luisa Del Giudice (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 246.
[584] Nick King explains that before he and Cartwright bought the site Montoya intended to open a stand called Tower Tacos. See King, interview by Seymour Rosen, August 18, 1985, ACT SP.

South Los Angeles, is now home to seventy percent Latino residents, mostly immigrants from Mexico and Central America.[585] This demographic shift has caused friction between black and Latino residents over a sense of ownership of the neighborhood, and the Watts Towers Arts Center in particular. For instance, in 2001 Alex Donis, a painter and teacher at the Center, was offered an exhibition of his work in the center's gallery. He created a show called "War," with paintings of members of the Los Angeles Police Department and gang members dancing together in homoerotic scenes. The exhibition was cancelled before it even opened because of outcry from community groups and fear that it would provoke violence. Art historian Richard Meyer writes about this episode as censorship, a part of the ongoing legacy of the Culture Wars and related to the work's queer content. However, he also notes that one of the objections to the exhibition was that Donis was Guatemalan-American and lived on the West Side, so he was considered an outsider to members of the black community in Watts who had worked at the Arts Center for decades.[586] Scholarship on the impact of Latino culture on the Watts Towers might help to ameliorate this tension, highlighting that the site has been and can continue to be significant to both communities.

In addition, another meaning that has not been foregrounded by the reception or explored in scholarship is the ways in which the Watts Towers is related to domestic placemaking and to practices that are typically gendered female. On the whole, Rodia and his creation have been described in masculine terms of the monumental and heroic and in terms of the Towers rather than other parts of the site. In contrast, in Chapter One I approached the Watts Towers' construction through the theme of ornament, foregrounding feminized qualities like beauty and decoration. I also considered how the Watts Towers' location in a backyard, the private space of a home, differentiated its public address from that of the Dickeyville Grotto, which was built in a churchyard. And in Chapter Four I briefly described the exhibition of the Bottle Village at the Women's Building in 1976, which aligned the construction of a backyard environment with the history of women's making practices in the home. But a thorough analysis of gender and space is sorely need, both in relationship to the Watts Towers in particular and to the male-dominated category of self-taught art environments in general. Such an examination would increase our understanding of the implications of the gendered divisions that separate categories like self-taught, folk, and outsider from craft and the decorative arts.

Finally, since my study ends around 1980 I do not address the new modes of visual engagement that have evolved since then as a result of digital technologies. For the first thirty years of its existence Rodia's creation was imaged in less than a dozen publicly circulating representations. But today it is an extremely popular subject of vernacular photography, and viewers can easily scroll through tens of thousands of images posted online (Figure 5.1). New conceptualizations of the Watts Towers' relationship to space have also emerged through virtual modeling programs that mimic the towers' complex structure, drone cameras that reveal perspectives not visible to the naked eye, and videos on platforms like YouTube, which allow audiences around the

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[585] Jennifer Medina, "In Years Since the Riots, a Changed Complexion in South Central, *New York Times*, April 24, 2012. Accessed June 23, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/25/us/in-south-los-angeles-a-changed-complexion-since-the-riots.html.

[586] Richard Meyer, "After the Culture Wars," *Art Papers* 28, No. 6 (November/December 2004): 29–33.

globe to navigate the streets of South Los Angeles with gang members who use the Towers as a landmark in their territory.[587] Digital recreations of the Watts Towers have also been included in a number of video games, such as the crime game *Grand Theft Auto V*. It was released in 2013 and featured a virtual world populated with the landscape and landmarks of California and Nevada. The Watts Towers stand-in is the "Rancho Towers," and players drive there when they play a cab driver dropping off tourists or when they are on a mission to collect spaceship parts, one of which is hidden at the base of the Towers (Figure 5.2).[588]

The existence of these significances—the connection to Latino culture, gender studies of domestic placemaking, and digital technologies for visualizing space—evince the Watts Towers' ability to be generative of a wide range of meanings. My hope is that in writing a book-length study of the Watts Towers' construction and reception this dissertation provides a solid historical foundation that can allow for studies of such under-examined meanings. In addition, my intent is that this study will also be useful in ongoing conversations about the proper conservation and stewardship of the site. Clearly, I have not addressed the Watts Towers' material form in such detail that it would be of use to conservators, and the nearly fifty years of persistent struggle to preserve the site has been, for the most part, outside of the purview of this study.[589]

Yet the ways that cultural meanings are assigned to the Watts Towers significantly shape its material form. For instance, in the 1970s the contractor working on the conservation of the Watts Towers ordered workers to chip off the loose ornamentation and re-apply it as they wished, explaining "It's folk art. We're folks."[590] On the other hand, in 2005 an eight-foot fence was built around the site out of concerns about vandalism, treating the site like an artwork to be protected from damage above all else. But this has radically changed the visibility of the space, which is no longer visible as a whole without the conspicuous barrier of the fence. The Watts Towers is now cordoned off from its surroundings and you must pay to enter or view it through the narrow gaps between metal bars.[591]

Today, the future of the Watts Towers' conservation is impacted by the fact that many of the artists and practices discussed in this dissertation are moving toward the center of mainstream art institutions and histories. When the Watts Towers was first

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[587] For instance, Paul A. Harris compares the ways that virtual architectural models and the Watts Towers' structure embody philosopher Gilles Deleuze's notion of the fold. See Harris, "To See With the Mind and Think Through the Eye," in *Deleuze and Space*, eds. Ian Buchanan et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005). For an example of a drone video, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7XDie01bd4, and for an example of a gang video, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MFE-5WnCd0E.

[588] For more about the world-building of Grand Theft Auto and its political critique see Dennis Redmond, "Grand Theft Video: Running and Gunning for the U.S. Empire," in *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays*, ed. Nate Garrelts (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers: 2006), 104–114.

[589] For a good overview of the preservation struggles see Jeanne Morgan, "Fifty Years of Guardianship: The Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts (CSRTW)," in *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts*, 225–244.

[590] Quoted in email from Jeanne Morgan to Lisa Stone, February 14, 2008, Unsorted, Jeanne Morgan Papers, SPACES.

[591] Jeanne Morgan, "Before and After" unpublished manuscript, undated, unsorted, Jeanne Morgan Papers, SPACES .

"discovered" in the 1950s Los Angeles was solidly a provincial outlier to New York and Europe. It didn't have a museum dedicated solely to art until the 1960s, and for over three decades Peter Plagen's *Sunshine Muse*, published in 1973, was the only survey of postwar art in Los Angeles (and elsewhere on the West Coast). Artists of color like Noah Purifoy, Judson Powell, and others at the Watts Towers Arts Center were doubly marginalized by geography and race. Yet today Los Angeles boasts over a dozen art museums and, according to one recent study, more artists per capita than any other American city, and there have been a spate of recent academic texts and museum exhibitions on the subject.[592] Further, black artists in Los Angeles have received long-overdue attention in the last decade from books like Kellie Jones' *South of Pico* and exhibitions like Noah Purifoy's recent solo show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.[593] Meanwhile, art by untrained makers is having a moment of renaissance with major museum exhibitions and, perhaps for the first time, an emergence of art historical scholarship, prompting critics to ask, "Has outsider art finally arrived on the inside?"[594]

The interest in such subjects means that after decades of relative neglect the art world has turned its attention to the Watts Towers and its surrounding region. In 2010 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art took the lead on the conservation of the Watts Towers.[595] The museum's team, led by the late Frank Preusser, has done excellent work in developing effective conservation treatments with great sensitivity to the particular conditions of the Watts Towers' unusual structure.[596] As I write this conclusion, it is the summer of 2018 and the Watts Towers is closed to the public while a three-year restoration project takes place, though the Watts Towers Arts Center continues to lead tours outside its walls. Meanwhile, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art has recently announced plans to open a satellite campus in South Central Los Angeles, with the goal of reaching out to underserved communities.[597]

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[592] For the data about artists per capita see Richard Florida, "America's Leading Art Hubs," *CityLab*, December 7, 2017, accessed June 28, 2018, https://www.citylab.com/life/ 2017/12/americas-leading-art-hubs/547769/.

[593] The exhibition *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada* was on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art between June 5, 2015 and January 3, 2016.

[594] Lynne Cooke suggests that the emergence of academic scholarship on the subject of self-taught, folk and outsider art sets this moment of interest in the topic apart from earlier revivals. See Cooke, "Boundary Trouble: Navigating Margin and Mainstream," *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, 6–7. The quote is from Catherine Fox, "With 'Outliers' at the High and Souls Grown Deep at the Met, has outsider art finally arrived on the inside?," *ArtsATL*, June 19, 2018, accessed June 28, 2018, http://artsatl.com/outliers-high-souls-grown-deep-met-outsider-art-finally-arrive-inside/.

[595] Press Release, "LACMA Announces Partnership to Preserve Historic Watts Towers," October 21, 2010, LACMA, accessed June 23, 2018, http://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/watts-towers.

[596] In the fall of 2015 I wrote a conservation history report on a part of the site for the LACMA conservation team and was fortunate enough to observe their thoughtful and innovative work. One of the team's most important discoveries was that the structure moved daily, which meant that inflexible conservation treatments applied to cracks that were meant to fix structural decay were actually causing it. See Frank Preusser et al., "The Development of Treatment Protocols At the Watts Towers Conservation Project," *Objects Specialty Group Postprints* 21 (2014): 345–362.

[597] Jori Finkel, "Lacma Seeks to Expand Its Footprint into South Los Angeles," *New York Times*, January 24, 2018, accessed June 21, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/24/ arts/design/lacma-south-los-angeles-michael-govan.html.

LACMA's expansion to South Los Angeles and leadership on the conservation of the Watts Towers is a source of concern to some in the Watts community. As with many American cities, gentrification is rapidly transforming the urban landscape of Los Angeles. Recent high-profile battles have been waged between longtime residents of color in low-income neighborhoods and newly established art galleries, which are seen as harbingers of impending "renewal."[598] Some fear that the Watts Towers, a symbol of individualism and resistance, could ironically become a vehicle for the influx of capital and displacement of South Los Angeles' current residents.

The focus of my dissertation on the history before 1980 prevents me from speaking directly to the intricacies of the current situation; however, I hope that my study can inform it, especially in two key ways. First, I have argued for an understanding of Watts Towers' history as inextricably intertwined with the racial politics of space in Los Angeles. Those shifting dynamics must be closely attended to in any interaction with the site. In other words, conservation treatments cannot simply be applied as if the Watts Towers existed in a sculpture garden, but with awareness that the Watts Towers is embedded in an evolving neighborhood context where the power dynamic is often skewed heavily in favor of arts professionals. And second, my study has made the argument that what is significant about the Watts Towers is not only its astonishing aesthetic form and the facts of its construction, but also the ways that it has come to mean so much, in so many ways, because its status "outside" of the elite art cultures made it accessible to diverse groups of people. Therefore, I maintain that any long-term plans for the site should not only attend to physical conservation but to the preservation of the Watts Towers' histories with multiple communities in Watts, Los Angeles, and beyond, so that those legacies of connection might continue and serve as a resource for future generations.

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[598] See Alexander Nazaryan, "The 'Artwashing' of America: The Battle for the Soul of Los Angeles Against Gentrification," *Newsweek*, May 21, 2017, accessed June 23, 2018, http://www.newsweek.com/2017/06/02/ los-angeles-gentrification-california-developers-art-galleries-la-art-scene-608558.html.

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