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Finish Fetish: Art, Artists, and Alter Egos in Los Angeles of the 1960s

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FINISH FETISH: ART, ARTISTS, AND ALTER EGOS IN LOS ANGELES OF THE 1960S

by

MONICA STEINBERG

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

This dissertation interrogates the intersection of artistic identity, humor, and Hollywood in the late twentieth century. I examine how humor, irony, and satirical self-authoring and self-representation influenced artistic development in postwar Southern California in particular, and the United States more broadly. Previous literature has primarily interpreted the artworks in question in relation to the development of urban space, technological advancements, and the shifting cultural economy of the period. I analyze instead the complex strategies operating both in tandem with and in opposition to West Coast clichés, and highlight the crossover between the art world and the Hollywood film industry. Using author-conducted interviews, archival evidence, and firsthand observation of artworks, I discuss how artists ranging from Billy Al Bengston and Ed Ruscha to Larry Bell and Judy Chicago rethought the place of humor and artistic identity in relation to their artwork; tapping the role-playing strategies of the neighboring film industry, these artists presented themselves and their work alongside a range of satirical aliases and altered egos. Rather than asserting their art world and political views through theoretical writings (as did, e.g. Donald Judd and Robert Morris), these artists used a dialect of Southern California—that of character construction—to assert an altered form of authorship and to critique the social, political, and art world orders informing the era. My project showcases the diverse ways in which artists devised strategies to both conform to and undermine the hierarchy of the art world while simultaneously and slyly addressing the socio-political state in the midst of both the Cold War and the Vietnam War.
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4.10 Raphael Soyer, Untitled 12 (Portrait of a Man), ca. 1960, Pencil and watercolor, 9 x 6 1/2”, RO Gallery, Long Island City, NY.

4.11 Willem de Kooning, Marilyn Monroe, 1954, Oil on canvas, 50 x 30”, Collection of Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, Purchase, NY.

4.12 Judy Gerowitz, Small Early Painting, 1961, Acrylic on canvas, 13 1/8 x 13 1/16”, Collection of the Artist, Belen, NM, Image courtesy of Nye + Brown, Los Angeles, CA.

4.13 Judy Gerowitz, Small Early Painting, 1961, Acrylic on canvas, 18 ½ x 20”, Collection of the Artist, Belen, NM, Image courtesy of Nye + Brown, Los Angeles, CA.

4.14 Judy Gerowitz, Small Slatted Sculpture, circa 1961, Acrylic on wood, 4 ½ x 8 x 1 ½”, Collection of the Artist, Belen, NM, Image courtesy of Nye + Brown, Los Angeles, CA.


4.17 Judy Gerowitz, Birth, 1963, Acrylic on Masonite, 8’ x 4’, Destroyed, Image courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.

4.18 Judy Gerowitz, Bigamy, 1963, Acrylic on Masonite, 8’ x 4’, Destroyed, Image courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.

4.19 Judy Gerowitz, In My Mother’s House, 1963 or 1964, Painted clay, approximately 16 x 24 x 10”, Lost or destroyed, as reproduced in Douglas McClellan, “Sculpture,” Artforum 2, no. 12 (Summer 1964): 73.

4.20 Judy Gerowitz, Thesis Exhibition Leaflet, 1964, ink on paper, approx. 2 1/2 x 2 1/2”,

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4.22 Craig Kauffman, Ferus Gallery Poster, 1962, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.

4.23 Craig Kauffman, *No. 8, 1963*, 1963, Acrylic lacquer on plastic, 80 x 42”, Private Collection, Image Courtesy of Frank Lloyd Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.


4.28 Ed Kienholz, *Back Seat Dodge ’38*, 1964, Painted fiberglass and flock, 1938 Dodge, recorded music and player, chicken wire, beer bottles, artificial grass, and cast plaster figures, 66 x 120 x 156”, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.

4.29 Judy Gerowitz, *Aluminum Rearrangeable Game Board*, 1965, Sandblasted aluminum, 18 x 18”, 12 pieces of various sizes, Collection of the Artist, Belen, NM, Image courtesy of Nye + Brown, Los Angeles, CA.

4.30 Judy Gerowitz, *Multicolor Rearrangeable Game Board*, 1965, Acrylic on wood, 18 x 18”, 12 pieces of various sizes, Collection of the Artist, Belen, NM, Image courtesy of Nye + Brown, Los Angeles, CA.


4.33 Judy Gerowitz with Minimalist Sculpture, 1968, Photograph by John Waggaman, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.


4.38 Judy Gerowitz, *Lilith (Trinity)*, 1965, Sprayed acrylic on canvas-covered plywood, 5’ 4” x 10’ 7” x 5’, Destroyed, Installation at Rolf Nelson Gallery, 1966, Image courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.


4.41 Judy Gerowitz, *Zig Zag*, 1965, Sprayed acrylic on canvas-covered plywood, dimensions unknown, Destroyed, Installation in Judy Gerowitz’s Pasadena, CA studio, Image courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.


4.43 Judy Gerowitz with *Sunset Squares*, 1966, Photographs by Jerry McMillan, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

4.44 Judy Gerowitz with *Sunset Squares*, 1966, Photographs by Jerry McMillan, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

4.46  The Rooms Company, consisting of Judy Gerowitz, Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, *Dry Ice Environment (Disappearing Environments I)*, 1967, CA, Dry ice, Century City Mall, Los Angeles, CA, Photographs courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.

4.47  The Rooms Company, consisting of Judy Gerowitz, Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, *Dry Ice Environment (Disappearing Environments I)*, 1967, CA, Dry ice, Century City Mall, Los Angeles, CA, Photographs courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.

4.48  The Rooms Company, consisting of Judy Gerowitz, Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, *Dry Ice Environment (Disappearing Environments I)*, 1967, CA, Dry ice, Century City Mall, Los Angeles, CA, Photographs courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.

4.49  The Rooms Company, consisting of Judy Gerowitz, Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, *Dry Ice Environment (Disappearing Environments II)*, 1968, Dry ice and flares, Century City Mall, Los Angeles, CA, Photographs courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.

4.50  The Rooms Company, consisting of Judy Gerowitz, Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, *Dry Ice Environment (Disappearing Environments II)*, 1968, Dry ice and flares, Century City Mall, Los Angeles, CA, Photographs courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.


4.53  Installation view of Ed Moses’s solo exhibition, Riko Mizuno Gallery, Los Angeles, 1969, Photographer unknown.


4.55  Claes Oldenburg, *Bedroom Ensemble*, 1963, Wood, vinyl, metal, artificial fur, cloth, and paper, Installation space: 3 x 6.5 x 5.25 m, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada.

4.56  Allan Kaprow, *Yard*, 1961, as installed in *Environments, Situations, Spaces* in the Sculpture Garden at Martha Jackson Gallery, New York, NY, Photograph by Ken Heyman, Allan Kaprow Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.


4.59 Allan Kaprow, *Fluids*, 1967, organized by the Pasadena Art Museum, Pasadena, CA, Photograph by Dennis Hopper, Image courtesy of The Hopper Art Trust of the Dennis Hopper Estate, Los Angeles, CA.

4.60 The Rooms Company, consisting of Judy Gerowitz, Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, *Dry Ice Environment (Disappearing Environments II)*, 1968, Dry ice and flares, Century City Mall, Los Angeles, CA, Photographs courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.

4.61 The Rooms Company, consisting of Judy Gerowitz, Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, *Dry Ice Environment (Disappearing Environments II)*, 1968, Dry ice and flares, Century City Mall, Los Angeles, CA, Photographs courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.

4.62 The Rooms Company, consisting of Judy Gerowitz, Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, *Dry Ice Environment (Disappearing Environments II)*, 1968, Dry ice and flares, Century City Mall, Los Angeles, CA, Photographs courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.

4.63 Judy Gerowitz, *Cubes and Cylinders*, 1967, 12 identical cubes and 12 identical cylinders, gold plated steel, each: 1 ½ x 1 ½ x 1 ½”, rearrangeable forms, Collection of University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, MI.

4.64 Judy Gerowitz, *I Set Gerowitz Rare Wood Blocks*, 1967, 12 rosewood blocks in canvas bag with instructions, bag: 11 ½ x 12 ¼ x 4”, edition of 12, rearrangeable forms, Collection unknown, Image courtesy of David Richards Gallery, Santa Fe, NM.

4.65 Judy Gerowitz, *Gold-Plated Game*, 1967, 12 x 12” board, 7 cylinders, Gold plated steel, Dimensions of cylinders unknown, rearrangeable forms, Collection unknown, Image courtesy of Judy Chicago, Belen, NM.


4.68 Judy Gerowitz, *Iridescent Domes #2 (Small)*, 1968, Domes: sprayed acrylic lacquer inside successive formed clear acrylic domes, 2 x 5” each, Installed size: 15 x 15 x 4”, rearrangeable forms, Collection of the Artist, Image courtesy of Nye + Brown, Los Angeles, CA.
4.69 Judy Gerowitz, *Multi-colored domes (small)*, 1968, Domes: sprayed acrylic lacquer inside successive formed clear acrylic domes, 2 x 5” each, Installed size: 15 x 15 x 4”, rearrangeable forms, Collection of the Artist, Image courtesy of Nye + Brown, Los Angeles, CA.


4.74 Craig Kauffman, *Untitled*, 1968, Acrylic and lacquer on vacuum-formed Plexiglas, 22 1/2 x 52 x 12 1/2”, Collection of Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, CA.

4.75 Judy Gerowitz, *Study for Whirling Open Domes*, 1969, Prisma color on paper, 28 x 38”, Collection of the Artist, Belen, NM.

4.76 Judy Gerowitz, *Optical Shapes #3*, 1969, Acrylic on matt board, 11 x 11”, Collection of the Artist, Belen, NM, Image courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.

4.77 Judy Gerowitz, *Pasadena Lifesavers Yellow Series #2*, 1969, Sprayed acrylic on acrylic, 60 x 60”, Collection of the Artist, Belen, NM, Image courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.


4.80 Poster advertisement for New Work by Lloyd Hamrol and Three Atmospheres by Judy Gerowitz, 1970, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

4.81 Judy Chicago, California State College Exhibition Postcard, 1970, Judy Chicago Papers,
4.82 Judy Chicago, California State College Exhibition Postcard, 1970, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.


4.84 Judy Chicago, Alona Hamilton Cooke, and Jack Glenn at Main Street Gym, Los Angeles, CA, 1970, Photographs by Jerry McMillan, Images courtesy of Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.

4.85 Judy Chicago, Alona Hamilton Cooke, and Jack Glenn at Main Street Gym, Los Angeles, CA, 1970, Photographs by Jerry McMillan, Images courtesy of Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.


C.2 George Herms at “Earful” Tap City Circus, 1972, Photograph by Jerry Maybrook, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.


C.5 Lynda Benglis, Exhibition Announcement Card, 1974, Photograph by Annie Leibovitz.


INTRODUCTION

On the back cover of a 1964 issue of *Art in America* (fig. I.1), focusing on West Coast art, is a collage (designed by the journal’s art director, Samuel N. Antupit) featuring notable figures from the California art scene: John Altoon, Ken Price, Ed Moses, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman, Billy Al Bengston, and Betty Asher, a prominent patron of L.A. artists.¹ Their images are silhouetted within five-point stars, à la Hollywood’s walk of fame, on which construction began in 1958, and nested within circles. The stars are arranged so as to orbit a reproduction of a postcard designed by Edward H. Mitchell, *A California Honeymoon, Exaggerated*, 1910, which depicts a giant orange as a hot air balloon and a newly married couple in the contraption’s basket.² The journal’s cover playfully reproduces some of those California figures who courted celebrity, and it does so in a way that suggests the means by which artists in California operated. William Claxton (1927-2008), a photographer who documented California’s music, art, and film scene, described the artists surrounding Los Angeles’s Ferus Gallery (1957-1966) as not just “making art, they were creating characters and personalities, too.”³

Indeed, a number of artists working in the L.A. area in the decades following the Second World War devised and implemented strategies of self-invention that came to define the artists themselves, and their artworks. Through publicized and altered egos, Walter Hopps, Craig Kauffman, Ed Kienholz, Billy Al Bengston, Joe Goode, Ed Ruscha, Larry Bell, and Judy

¹ *Art In America* 52, no. 3 (June 1964). The back cover is labeled: “The circle of artists on the back cover are among Bengston’s fellow-artists at Ferus.” The caption affirms the centrality of Bengston’s position within the Los Angeles scene of the 1960s, but it does so at the expense of acknowledging the other individuals within the collage. Therefore, I would like to thank Ed Moses and Rebecca Peabody for taking time to help me identify the people represented.

² The design of the back cover, consisting of evenly spaced circles revolving around a central image, formally resembles paintings by Bengston, such as *Busby* of 1963 (fig. 2.9).

Gerowitz (later known as Judy Chicago), staged situations that foregrounded the shifting identity of the artists alongside their exhibited artworks. At the same time, their various self-mocking or otherwise humorous self-portrayals conformed to the public image of the California-based artist of the postwar era as one that, as art historian Cécile Whiting describes it, “flirted with stereotypes of Southern California—babes, beaches, cars, the strip.”

Were these artists, who fashioned public personalities in tandem with their exhibited artworks, replicating the stereotype of hedonism and Hollywood-inspired narcissism that is often associated with Southern California? Or was a critical interrogation of these social norms integral to their artistic practices, such that they weren’t merely emulating, but also analyzing public image-making on the West Coast? Curator Jay Belloli reminds us that artists of the California scene “didn’t paint movie stars; at least, if they were Ed Ruscha, they dated them. They made customized cars and ultimately bought fancier ones, raced motorcycles, surfed, and did many of the things that were the pop dreams of American youth growing up in the ‘40s and ‘50s.” This tangled relationship between the art world and Hollywood raises even more pertinent questions. Why would artists on the West Coast deploy mutable, public personae to engage in artistic discourse rather publishing their ideas—as did Robert Morris, Donald Judd, and Sol LeWitt on the East Coast? Did their engagement with a culture often defined by fame distort and deconstruct the shallowness stereotypically associated with Los Angeles, or did they simply reproduce and perpetuate this platitude?

*Finish Fetish: Art, Artists, and Alter Egos of Los Angeles of the 1960s* takes as its

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4 For historical precision, I will refer to the artist currently know as Judy Chicago, as Judy Cohen when discussing her work and writings prior to August 1961, as Judy Gerowitz when unpacking her work and writings composed between summer 1961 and October 1970, and as Judy Chicago when discussing her work and writings composed after October 1970.
objective the investigation of artworks that are characterized by a highly finished and reflective
surface, and it does so with an emphasis on the ways that art made in Los Angeles in the ‘long
1960s’ was intrinsically connected to processes of self-invention. Not all of the artists whom I
examine worked throughout their careers in a mode that might be considered Finish Fetish and
not all artists associated with that cohort were notably engaged in role-playing; thus, I must note
up front that my discussion of the Finish Fetish group will not be comprehensive. For the artists
whom I profile here, however, as masters of self-authoring, they formulated public personalities
through a combination of tactics of self-representation, and discursive and pictorial
collaborations with the colleagues who portrayed them. I will argue that these artists crafted their
public identities, not to interrogate deeper questions of subjectivity and self, but to assume
specific positions from which they could enunciate their socio-political and art-world views and
affiliations.

With the exception of a few photo-based Artforum advertisements—such as Ed Ruscha’s
1967 ad-turned-wedding-announcement depicting him in bed with two women, and Judy
Gerowitz’s ads announcing her name change to Judy Chicago—portrayals of the aforementioned
artists, whether by themselves or by others, have largely been treated as transparent markers of
appearance rather than as integral aspects of artistic oeuvres. The artists discussed in this
dissertation—primarily, Bengston, Bell, and Gerowitz—all for a time constructed mirror-like
artworks while manipulating their names and physical appearance. Through photography, film,
writing, and eccentric dress, these artists would reveal themselves to the public, but do so in
disguise. They actively manipulated their public images while courting fame and developing
personae that deceptively imitated the superficial stereotypes associated with Los Angeles. I

7 Ed Ruscha, Advertisement, Artforum 5, no. 5 (January 1967): 7; Judy Chicago, “Exhibition Announcement, Jack
Glenn Gallery,” Artforum 9, no. 2 (October 1970): 20; Judy Chicago, Advertisement, Artforum 9, no. 4 (December
hope to demonstrate that the complex entanglement of artwork and what might now be called artistic branding finally turns out to be less cursorily funny, and more deeply satirical, politically engaged, and socially minded when considered alongside the artists’ artworks and ephemeral materials.

LOS ANGELES: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE CITY AND THE CINEMA

The recognition that these Los Angeles-based artists received in the 1960s resulted, in a significant part, from their strategic self-promotion. But that recognition was also part and parcel of the socio-historic climate of a city in the midst of a postwar economic boom. The West Coast had fiscally benefitted from the many aerospace industries established in the area as a result of military operations driven in part by Cold War paranoia. In the early-1950s Los Angeles was still operating under the prohibitive powers wielded by the McCarthy era’s House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). The HUAC especially targeted the motion picture industry and, as a result, many film industry professionals were blacklisted in the 1940s and 50s for their real or suspected communist ties—a classification that officially prevented them from working in the United States and forced many to relocate to other countries and/or work under pseudonyms, if they were able to work at all.

8 In the 1960s, artists on both coasts received a significant amount of publicity and exposure, but the fame enjoyed by leading New York-based artists, such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre, was greater than that of their colleagues in Los Angeles. While it is impossible to measure the exact weight of specific variables such as geography, quality of artwork, and success at self-promotion that factored into their relative legacies, the perennially more conspicuous profiles of the New York-based artists should not be taken, ipso facto, as an indication of the failure of the publicity stunts perpetrated by Los Angeles-based artists.


10 Notable blacklisted individuals include: Dalton Trumbo, a screenwriter for Roman Holiday (1953), The Brave One (1956), and Spartacus (1960); Walter Bernstein, a screenwriter for The Magnificent Seven (1960), Fail-
The visual arts, too, were subjected to officially sanctioned witch-hunts in Southern California. Non-objective artworks were generally considered a joke, if not outright communist propaganda, and in 1951 the Los Angeles City Council officially deemed modern art “offensive and nauseating,” labeling the artists working in an abstract language “tools of the Kremlin.”

The practice of using pseudonyms by blacklisted film industry professionals, as well as the suspect nature of contemporary art itself, played a large role in solidifying artistic strategies utilized by the early Los Angeles avant-garde. Specifically, Hopps, Kauffman, and Kienholz’s joint use of the pseudonym Maurice Syndell and their operation of Syndell Studio (1954-1956/57) was prompted by the political climate. Not only were visually abstract compositions credited as authored by Maurice Syndell or his Studio, but also the Studio itself organized and occasionally hosted exhibitions of visually abstract artworks.

Concurrent with the shifting political climate, Los Angeles underwent an extraordinary transformation from cultural outpost to international art center. From the late 1950s through the 1960s, contemporary art galleries—most notably Esther Robles Gallery, Felix Landau Gallery, Ferus Gallery, and Virginia Dwan Gallery—began increasingly to exhibit abstract and geometric artworks by local artists including Kauffman, Kienholz, Bengston, and Bell, among others. By 1963, the Pasadena Art Museum, under the direction of curator Walter Hopps, began organizing shows of local contemporary artists (as well as the first U.S. retrospective of Marcel Duchamp);


The satirical project emerged just as the powers wielded by the HUAC began to decline following the Senate’s December 1954 censure of Joseph McCarthy. This historical confluence ultimately leads to unanswerable questions: Was it the Committee’s weakening power that opened the door for the Syndell project to emerge? Would the Studio have pursued its prankster antics targeting the HUAC if the Committee had maintained its influence? One can only speculate.
and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which opened in 1965, became the Southwest’s largest art museum of that time. The 1965 relocation of *Artforum* from San Francisco to L.A. (before it finally settled in New York in 1967), and the surge of articles by John Coplans, Henry Hopkins, Jules Langsner, Barbara Rose, and Peter Plagens, among others, featuring the visual art of California within this journal and others such as *Art in America* and *ARTnews*, likewise signaled the rise of Los Angeles within the art world. These rapid changes encouraged Langsner and Rose to designate Los Angeles as the United States’ second art city in 1963 and 1966, respectively.\(^\text{13}\)

While contemporary art was able to flourish within L.A.’s financially viable and increasingly politically tolerant context, the film industry faced different challenges. Movie studios, actors, screenwriters, and directors were, by the end of the 1950s, free of HUAC-imposed restrictions, but cinema’s role as a provider of classic family entertainment had, by this time, been eroded by television. As historian Sharon Monteith explains, regular trips to the movies were replaced by selective and more infrequent movie-going centered around big-budget spectacles in the late 1950s and 1960s.\(^\text{14}\) Thus, it became essential for Hollywood to make any given film a media event with noteworthy stars in order to draw audiences. It followed that the 1960s were marked by a sharp rise in disposable, media-constructed celebrities, and by established icons quickly and effectively using such media to remake themselves. If the notion of the disposable celebrity can be encapsulated in Andy Warhol’s 1968 declaration that “in the future everyone will be famous for 15 minutes,” the redesign of celebrity might be exemplified

\(^{13}\) Jules Langsner, “America’s Second Art City,” *Art in America* (April 1963): 127-131; Barbara Rose, “Los Angeles: The Second City,” *Art in America* 54, no. 1 (January-February 1966): 110-115. In the 1960s, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, and Houston were all in the midst of a cultural flourishing, and while the designation of a metropolis as “second” may initially appear like patronizing praise, it nonetheless speaks to L.A.’s place within a nation brimming with cities vying for second place.

by the case of Elvis Presley who, in 1960, upon being discharged from the army after two years of service, transformed from a one of the most popular musicians of the time into one of the highest paid actors in Hollywood.\(^\text{15}\)

Film studios invested in the star system so as to remain economically viable and to foster what Monteith refers to as “the Hollywood mystique”—the allure of cinema and its stars.\(^\text{16}\) I argue that the rapid rise of celebrity culture in the 1960s, building upon the use of pseudonyms by film industry professionals in the 1950s, dramatically shaped the modes of self-presentation and public exposure employed by artists then working in Los Angeles. Bengston, Ruscha, Goode, Bell, and Gerowitz redirected forms of popular culture and marketing that were pervasive at the time. They accrued and critically manipulated celebrity status so as to engage in subtle satirical, cultural, and political critiques.

Bengston, for example, established the Artist Studio in 1960 where he produced non-objective paintings in various media ranging from oil on canvas to mirror-like, sprayed paintings on Masonite or aluminum. His exhibitions were publicized with imagery that placed the artist in various character roles ranging from a biker to an army sergeant to a gay man. Ruscha and Goode composed artworks that depicted the everyday imagery of street signs, buildings, clouds, and milk bottles. However, the artists’ publishing endeavors were often credited to their pseudonyms. Ed Ruscha invoked the names of Eddie Russia and The Information Man, while Joe Goode frequently used a Spanish translation of his name, José Bueno. Such aliases convey linguistic signifiers of different nationalities and ethnicities, and photographs of and by many of the Los Angeles artists display manipulated dress and setting to suggest certain markers of class,

\(^{15}\) Elvis had sporadically appeared in film in the 1950s; his most famous movies of the decade are *Jailhouse Rock* (1957) and *King Creole* (1958). However, 1960 marked a transition away from music and towards the movies. In 1960 he starred in two films, *G.I. Blues* and *Flaming Star*, and in 1961 appeared in *Wild in the Country* and *Blue Hawaii*. Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 24-25.

race, and profession.

Larry Bell constructed Plexiglas cubes and large glass installations that reflected and distorted the viewer’s likeness. The artist, who was largely self-taught, simultaneously developed the alter ego, Dr. Lux. Dr. Lux was an erudite persona who satirized the intellectualism that suffused the discourse surrounding then emergent Minimalist art; and Bell/Lux would frequent exhibition openings wearing an eccentric suit, false mustache, and weird glasses. In the 1960s, Judy Gerowitz developed variously scaled geometric sculptures, paintings, and installations that manipulated the viewers’ perceptions and were aesthetically aligned with the artworks of Bengston, as well as those of Robert Morris (a California-based artist until 1960, when he moved to New York). Concurrently, the artist explored strategies of self-invention and in 1970 publically adopted the name, Judy Chicago. The artist appropriated the city of her birth as her surname, and the publicity accompanying the name change, as well as the later autobiography of Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (1975), explicitly tied her oeuvre to an emerging feminist discourse.

This dissertation, then, studies how these artists addressed, and humorously redressed, the mutability of identity within an artistic scene operating in the vicinity of Hollywood, with its concomitant stage names and character performances, and with the rise of celebrity culture generally throughout the late 1950s and 1960s. One of the questions informing my investigation is how the artworks under consideration, analyzed alongside the artists’ fabricated self-images and roles, engage with the social and political environment. This question operates on the local level in terms of the form and content of individual artworks and fabricated identities as they relate to the historical context of Los Angeles. It also operates on a national level in that these practices present and represent important concatenations that draw on markers of identity
ranging from class and race to nationality and gender within the postwar climate of the United States.

**THE LARGER FIELD**

The use of alternative names as a distinct element within artistic practice is not, of course, confined to the Los Angeles avant-garde. Certain New York-based artists of the postwar era likewise cultivated alternative identities. For instance, Claes Oldenburg at times went by the moniker Ray Gun, establishing the Ray Gun Manufacturing Company which served as an umbrella for some performative aspects of his artistic practice including *The Street* of 1960, *The Store* of 1961, *Autobodies* of 1963 (performed in Los Angeles), and *The Mouse Museum-Ray Gun Wing* completed in 1977. New York critic and artist Brian O’Doherty occasionally published under the name Sigmund Bode—a combination of the names of Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and German art historian Wilhelm von Bode; from 1972 to 2008 O’Doherty signed his artwork with the pseudonym Patrick Ireland—a memorializing reference to the January 30, 1972, killing of fourteen unarmed Irish civilians by British soldiers. Artist Robert Smithson helped organize a 1967 exhibition, “Language to be Looked At and/or Things to Be Read,” at Dwan Gallery and signed the press release with the name Eton Corrasable.17 While these namesakes, which range from established aliases to casual pseudonyms, add a dimension of identity play to these artists’ oeuvres, they nonetheless operate as an extension of

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17 Eaton’s Corrasable Bond is the brand name of an erasable typing paper with a smooth, coated surface. Removing the glaze would remove the ink, and the ink of the correcting type would, as a result, be placed on an unprotected paper surface—making removal difficult a second time. Erasable paper was prone to smudging since the paper did not absorb the ink, and the pages were not very durable. Nonetheless, it grew into a familiar brand during the postwar era, and the word “corrasable” became an almost generic name for erasable typing paper itself (like Kleenex is for tissues, or Q-tip is for cotton swabs). Smithson’s use of a pseudonym is uncharacteristic of his artistic oeuvre as a whole, but it does exhibit his penchant for humor—which is also apparent in Smithson and Nancy Holt’s 1969 short film, *East Coast/West Coast.*
their work more so than as a self-conscious meditation on and manipulation of the construction of public image itself.

More recent artists have, in a comparable manner to the artists I will discuss in this dissertation, used role-playing within their practice. For example, Cindy Sherman—who began photographing herself in a variety of roles in the later 1970s—manipulated her costume, make-up, expression, and pose to transform her identity into meticulously observed characters. Nikki S. Lee—born Lee Seung-Hee in Korea in 1970, and adopting the name Nikki S. Lee when she came to New York in 1994—worked on a series titled *Projects* from 1997 until 2001, in which she donned the look of, and had herself photographed with, members of specific cultural groups (punk, yuppie, rural white Midwestern, urban Hispanic, skater, etc.). The Yes Men—founded c. 1999 by Jacques Servin who calls himself Andy Bichlbaum, and Igor Vamos who goes by Mike Bonnano—don invented personae and fictional government and/or corporate identities to engage in radical, political activism and challenge conservative ideology. While the artworks by

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18 Cherise Smith’s 2011 book, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith*, examines how a select group of artists engage with issues of identity, primarily through the performance of race and gender. Smith examines Piper’s 1970s public embodiment of the character, Mythic Being, a working-class black man; Antin’s full-time existence as a fictitious black ballerina, Eleanora Antinova, for several weeks in 1981; Smith’s 1992 constant shifting between more than twenty identities of different ages, races, and genders in the one-woman play, *Twilight: Los Angeles*; and Lee’s performances of membership in various cultural groups for her series, *Projects*. Cherise Smith’s approach primarily focuses on historicizing the politics of identity within the context of each artist’s performance. She argues that by tapping conventions such as passing, blackface, and drag, the artists engage with the constructed nature of identity itself. Smith focuses on how the artists perform signifiers of identity as the crux of their artwork; in contrast, I discuss how artists picture signifiers of identity in a manner separate from their artworks, but nonetheless related to them. Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

19 The Yes Men’s practice is, notably, more complex since it involves artists who work under pseudonyms who subsequently adopt aliases: for example, Jacques Servin, who goes by Andy Bichlbaum, posed on December 3, 2004 as Dow Chemical Representative Jude Finisterra (a name which combines the name of the patron saint of impossible causes with the earth’s end) and gave an interview on BBC World. Carrie Lambert-Beatty proposes the term “parafiction” as a category for discussing works by artists such as The Yes Men. Parafiction, she suggests, applies to processes by which artists establish believable fictions, yet enough of the fiction is revealed to expose the falsity to which viewers have been subjected. The key elements of parafiction are both the dupe and the reveal—although the exposure/confession is often not performed by the artist(s). The Los Angeles artists I discuss in this dissertation share aspects of role-playing with The Yes Men. However, the Yes Men present believable falsities for which the discovery of fallaciousness is a crucial aspect of the work; they have pseudonyms under which they work and also
Sherman, Lee, and the Yes Men deployed the artists’ bodies as both medium and subject, the artists I discuss in this dissertation activated their alternative identities as a means of politicizing their artwork. The Finish Fetish artworks remain separate from the artists’ self-representations, but I argue, nonetheless informed by them.

Thus, while the phenomenon of role-playing can be found across various fields of artistic practice, it appears that in Los Angeles—a city associated with assumed identities and considered the totemic epicenter for celebrity worship—this practice is especially concentrated in its interrogation of media-made characters. The Southern California-based artists I discuss here approach identity construction, not as individuals who know of Hollywood culture from a distance and through film, but as part of a population that lives in the shadow of the legendary site of role-playing.

LITERATURE

Interest in the history of visual art in postwar California has increased since the 1990s, as demonstrated by a surge of museum surveys and accompanying catalogues. Sunshine & Noir: Art in L.A., 1960-1997 (1997) at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebaek, Denmark, explored the art of the city as embodied in the visual dichotomy of the DayGlo colors of beach culture and the darker underbelly of the city’s high crime rate. Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000 (2000) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, as well as the accompanying catalogue, gave a sweeping survey of major artworks and movements stretching the length of the coastal state. The catalogue’s essays interrogate, for instance, the significance of the Los Angeles Watts Towers, the role of educational institutions in the development of art on

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use ludicrous pseudonyms within their work. While the fictions presented by the Los Angeles artists do, at times, engage in similar strategies, their work is concentrated less on deception and disclosure than it was on interrogating the media and the methods that establish the fictions themselves. Carrie Lambert-Beatty, “Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility,” October 129 (Summer 2009): 51-84.
the West Coast, and the interconnected nature of art and beat culture. *Catalog L.A.: Birth of an Art Capital, 1955-1985* (2007), published after the 2006 exhibition *Los Angeles 1955-1985* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, intersperses lengthy quotes from artists and other contemporaneous writers with reproductions of artworks, photographs, newspapers, posters, and other ephemera. More recently, the Getty Research Institute’s encyclopedic *Pacific Standard Time* (2011) catalogue establishes a well-researched account of art in Southern California that will surely continue to serve as a backdrop for more detailed interrogations of specific areas of artistic practice in Los Angeles.\(^\text{20}\) By contrast to the Getty’s comprehensive approach, *Finish Fetish: LA’s Cool School* (1991) organized at The Fisher Gallery, University of Southern California, and *Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface* (2011) at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, entailed more focused examinations of groups of artworks by relating their high-tech materials, bright colors, manipulation of light, and/or highly polished surfaces to contemporaneous advances in postwar technology and an engagement with phenomenology.\(^\text{21}\)

Art historians considering the artists working in Los Angeles in the postwar era as a group interpret, to varying degrees, the artwork in relation to the development of urban space, the shifting cultural economy of the period, and the fluctuating political climate of Southern California. Art critic and painter Peter Plagens’s *Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945-1972* (1974) is an early attempt to survey contemporary Californian art. His brief discussions of


Bengston, Ruscha, Goode, Bell, and Gerowitz allude to the connection between their artwork and their lifestyles in a manner that captures the zeitgeist of Los Angeles art in the 1960s. “It [the artwork] has, in short, the aroma of Los Angeles in the sixties—newness, postcard sunset color, and intimations of aerospace profundity.”

Plagens was both a participant in and an observer of the 1960s art scene, and his approach is characterized by intimacy with and nostalgia for the glory days of the previous decade. However, the book’s publication may also have spelled a sense of closure to an era of intense artistic and cultural activity, a waning of individual and civic ambition that would not be resuscitated until the 1997 opening of the palatial Getty Center.

Historian Sarah Schrank’s *Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles* (2008) argues that the heated debates over modernism in postwar California that took place among artists and civic leaders alike situate contemporary Los Angeles art within a politically charged site. She examines the interchange between avant-gardist community pockets (and especially independent art galleries) within an urban environment characterized by suburban sprawl and the predominantly conservative cultural climate of Cold War Los Angeles:

> As the city grew exponentially, and its widely publicized self-image as the paragon of American suburbia matured into a national fantasy of the good life, Los Angeles ruptured into well-documented disputes over space. […] As suburbanization, freeways, and decentralized sprawl fragmented the city, civic art, the visual form of civic culture, proved particularly contentious for diverse communities struggling for political power.

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23 It must be acknowledged that the Getty Center—long antedated by the Getty Villa (which opened in 1974)—sought to instill within Los Angeles a cultural credibility that was (and still is) largely centered on Europe, despite its recent sponsorship of the *Pacific Standard Time* initiative that helped realize exhibitions and performances in 2011 and 2012 on art in Southern California at more than sixty West Coast art institutions.
This dissertation builds on Schrank’s interrogation of the political discord apparent within urban space and shows how this tension was manifest in various formal and conceptual aspects of individual artworks, group projects, and practitioners’ acts of self-representation. In doing so, I expand on Schrank’s account to explore how avant-garde artistic practice moved beyond the conflicts endemic in the urban site to engage in social, political, and even ethical discourse.

Art historian Cécile Whiting’s Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s (2008) provides important groundwork for my examination of artists constructing objects while promoting specific public personae. Whiting focuses on how a loosely identified group of Pop artists represented the city of Los Angeles and contributed to the formation of its urban identity. She examines the relation between 1960s art and the city (i.e. the urban sprawl, highways, ocean and beach culture, dilapidated housing and aging neighborhoods, and parking lots), as well as the broader impact of Los Angeles Pop on debates about urban life. Whiting emphasizes a sense of place more so than stylistic bond and her approach is notably shaped by the efforts of Reyner Banham, whose 1971 book, Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies, examines how Los Angelenos relate to the different environments of their mobile city. Within Whiting’s second chapter, “Cruising Los Angeles,” she briefly addresses how artists “flirted with stereotypes of southern California […] to imagine themselves as a new type of regionally

25 Sarah Schrank, Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles, 65-66. Although recent style guidelines have eliminated the need for brackets around ellipses, I retain brackets in this dissertation to clarify which ellipses exist in the quoted text and which do not. This choice was made because some of the primary source materials in this study use ellipses stylistically. Those ellipses that appear within square brackets are my own insertions, while those ellipses without brackets appear in the original quoted text.
specific artist.” Discussing photographs of and by Bengston, Ruscha, Bell, and San Francisco-based Bruce Conner, Whiting argues that the artists consciously implicate themselves into the clichés about the city—the photographs site the subjects as Los Angelenos, but also work to define the image of a Los Angeles artist as one duly integrated into the urban environment. I move forward from Whiting’s analysis to explore how a particular group of artists deconstruct strategies of self-presentation in light of contemporary celebrity culture. Appropriating the marketing strategies of Hollywood, they publicized and manipulated their personae through posters, press releases, interviews, mailings, and photographs in order to marshal various relationships between themselves and their artworks; they deployed tactics that shaped and enhanced their place in the public spotlight, while simultaneously, in effect, deconstructing those marketing campaigns aimed at fabricating celebrity.

Like Whiting, art historian Alexandra Schwartz also approaches an analysis of Los Angeles art as intertwined with its urban landscape in *Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles* (2010). Schwartz’s concentrated analysis of Ruscha’s 1960s body of work effectively results in a narrower yet deeper approach to the study of postwar art in Southern California. Schwartz argues that Ruscha’s work (in paint, photography, film, and publishing) is both *about* Los Angeles vernacular culture and also *part* of it. The strength of her argument lies in the suggestion that Ruscha’s cultivated public persona is part and parcel of his artistic oeuvre. While his subject matter radiated the character of 1960s Los Angeles, the artist disavowed any attachment to his subject by maintaining that Los Angeles had little effect on his work. “Contrariness,” writes

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30 To prove Ruscha’s disavowal of Los Angeles, Schwartz cites the artist’s 1966 statement: “Being in Los Angeles has had little or no effect on my work. I could have done it anywhere. I don’t see any independent trends here. The climate isn’t that conducive to painting.” Ed Ruscha, *Art Voices* (Fall 1966): 61, quoted in Alexandra Schwartz, *Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles*, 2.
Schwartz, “is a hallmark of Ruscha’s production, in terms of both his art and his self-presentation as an artist. It typifies his strategic and persistent undermining of his own visual and verbal assertions—which I will call the economy of denial that makes his work function—which enables his art to signify in multiple and ambiguous ways.”

Schwartz expands on Ruscha’s acts of self-presentation to discuss work credited to his pseudonym, Eddie Russia, as well as his occasional invocation of the persona Information Man. Ruscha’s self-marketing engaged with various signifiers of gender, race, and class in a manner that both borrowed from and critiqued the methods and myths of Hollywood. I contextualize Schwartz’s close reading of Ruscha’s oeuvre and place him into an artistic milieu of other Los Angeles-based artists likewise interrogating signifiers of identity in a region dominated by a popular culture of role-playing and public exposure. I articulate the inter-relationships between the artwork, the urban environment, and the artistic self-branding that played out in an often humorous fashion; I aim to explain primarily how this amalgam can be seen as a series of responses to the social, political, and cultural environment of postwar Los Angeles.

HUMOR

Woven into this manuscript is an application of humor theory as a means of approaching artistic practices that are, to varying degrees, characterized by humorous stratagems. Thus, it bears outlining—a task that runs the risk of being telegraphic—the vast field of humor studies. The major difficulty in summarizing the immense body of literature on humor is that human beings find humor in situations that are so diverse that they may appear to have nothing in common, except perhaps, humor itself. Philosopher and religious studies professor John Morreall has distilled the received explanations of humor into three broader theories: the superiority

31 Alexandra Schwartz, Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles, 4.
theory, the relief theory, and the incongruity theory. Morreall focuses on summarizing the causes of laughter as a component part of the study of humor. Laughter can, and often does, result from a combination of approaches, and humor does not always result in laughter.

The superiority theory of humor, which has been explained by philosophers ranging from Plato to Aristotle to Hobbes, posits that a person experiences laughter from a feeling of superiority in comparison to those around them. According to Morreall, this theory “was given its classic statement in Hobbes, who said that laughter expresses ‘a sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.’” Superiority theory thus embodies aspects of the derisory or the hostile, and it occupies a strong role in humor that is centered on denigrations of race, class, and gender.

The relief theory was most strongly argued by Herbert Spencer in his 1911 essay, “On the Physiology of Laughter,” in which he proposes that laughter might be explained as a release—or form of relief—of pent-up, nervous energy. This approach was popularized in Sigmund Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). Freud argues that the energy released during laughter provides pleasure because it curtails the energy that would ordinarily be used to contain or repress psychic activity. Thus, in a difficult situation—say, a job interview, dissertation defense, or similarly uncomfortable circumstance—laughter would mark a release of nervous tension and energy.

The incongruity theory, which has been discussed by Kant, Schopenhauer, Pascal, and

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Bergson, posits that humorous situations are produced when one experiences something that violates one’s expectations regarding an anticipated pattern. Morreall summarizes the incongruity perspective as follows: “We live in an orderly world, where we come to expect certain patterns among things, their properties, events, etc. We laugh when we experience something that doesn’t fit into these patterns. As Pascal put it, ‘Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees.’” However, not just any incongruity can produce a humorous situation; the experience must be felt as somehow pleasant or amusing.

While the models outlined above work backward from laughter to interrogate its root cause, more recent studies shift the conversation by turning to the phenomenology of humor. Simon Critchley’s *On Humour* (2002) convincingly argues that within a humorous situation, there is “a tacit social contract at work […] namely some agreement about the social world in which we find ourselves as the implicit background to the joke. There has to be a sort of tacit consensus or implicit shared understanding as to what constitutes joking ‘for us’, as to which linguistic or visual routines are recognized as joking.” Critchley’s treatise—which goes on to address situations involving race, gender, class, and scale—argues that a shared social understanding lies at the root of humor, and that this background is necessary for any given joke, blague, prank, parody, or satire to function.

Building on the notion of social specificity as a requisite for functioning humor, philosopher Paolo Virno, in *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation* (2008), argues that humor can be a disruptive intervention within an established and implicit system of rules.

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Virno posits that a joke can introduce an aberrant application of a rule (or norm) and thus expose the inherently incommensurable and arbitrary relationship between the rule and its application. This, he argues, makes one more aware of common practices and behaviors that are, in fact, socially enforced rather than fundamentally prescribed. By disrupting previously fixed and accepted meanings and practices, humor, Virno suggests, can (but does not always) operate as a form of social innovation and can be particularly effective for activist causes.

Thus, while humor relies on social commonalities to function, it simultaneously has the potential power to subvert the status quo by opening up avenues for critical thought and dissent. The Los Angeles-based artists discussed within this dissertation occupied an ambiguous space between reinforcing stereotypes and subverting them, and from within this space, they critiqued the social and political environment. Their manipulation of public personae and of celebrity culture was rooted in practices common to the Los Angeles region, yet they used such practices to instantiate alternatives to the dominant or common sense—calling attention to issues related to race, gender, class, politics, and even religion. One of the difficulties involved in a serious engagement with clichés is that projects may employ the mechanisms of such gags while trying to undercut their offensive messages. Humor’s intended subversive possibilities are very much dependent on a viewer’s vantage point; there is a danger that the critique might not be understood, and a project may, ultimately, reinforce the very practices it set out to critique.

The brand of humor practiced by the circle of artists associated with the Finish Fetish aesthetic was anything but subtle. They relied on well-known stereotypes of the region to provoke their audiences and to gain attention. The dynamics animating the various theories outlined above might be said to have operated more or less simultaneously and to varying degrees throughout their practice. The artists under consideration favored staging incongruous
situations, as well as undermining those prejudices that underlie bigoted humor. For example, Syndell Studio and Bengston’s Artist Studio relied heavily on incongruity to play with issues related to contemporary politics. But these projects also employed well-worn class, race, and gender clichés that both exploited and destabilized humor rooted in notions of superiority. My objective within this dissertation is not to categorize the strains of humor apparent within each project but to analyze how humor functions in various artistic practices. I examine how a group of artists responded to a critical moment in history by actively, often humorously, manipulating their public personae in tandem with their conceptualization and display of artworks, and I assess how this response operated as a means of engaging with the social and political environment of Los Angeles in particular and of the United States more broadly.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter One examines the role of Syndell Studio, and its fictitious founder, Maurice Syndell, in the development and popularization of a humorous and pseudonymous artistic practice by a small coterie of artists in Los Angeles. The Studio operated from 1954 to either late 1956 or early 1957. It was named after a deceased Midwestern farmer, Maurice Sindel, and designated a ‘studio’ in order to provoke associations with the film industry and with production practices (as opposed to a gallery, which implies a site of display). Walter Hopps, Craig Kauffman, Ed Kienholz, poet-mathematician Ben Bartosh, and other Los Angeles-based art world figures collaboratively managed the Studio. Under the name of Syndell, they organized exhibitions, made and displayed artworks, and published ephemera and publicity material. The Studio’s 1955 Action I exhibition—which included abstract paintings and assemblages by many West Coast artists such as Craig Kauffman, Sonia Gechtoff, and even the eponymous Maurice Syndell—was installed in a privately owned merry-go-round building on Newcomb Pier in Santa
Monica. It resulted in the intersection of two very different groups that were operating in Los Angeles. On the one hand, a small group of artists composing advanced and non-objective postwar art, and on the other, those who considered such artworks to be a joke, if not communist propaganda—a sentiment that had at times served to bar the display of abstract works by Kauffman, Gechtoff, and others, from municipally owned sites, and which also led to an incident in which a weightlifter punched a hole in one of the paintings on view at the pier. In this chapter, I examine how the coexistence of such groups and the disparity between them created the possibility for Syndell Studio to emerge as an artist’s inside joke and an avant-garde prank.

The project was born in a climate of Cold War fears regarding Soviet spies and secret identities, and it complicated, exposed, and engaged with central issues concerning the effects of the House Un-American Activities Committee on both the film industry and the fine arts. I examine how the Studio’s use of pranks, the construction of a small body of work by a fictitious artist, the formal characteristics of the project’s publicity materials, and the exhibitions the Studio organized, contributed to the practice by which artists in Southern California manipulated their personae to critically engage with a variety of ideas and issues specific to the region (ranging from the censure of modern art to the targeting of artists and film industry professionals due to real or suspected communist ties). As there are no extant artworks signed with the name Maurice Syndell, I rely on formal descriptions provided by the Studio’s managers, ephemera and publicity material associated with the Studio, as well as sketches of exhibitions organized by the Studio that were drawn by West Coast assemblage artist Gordon Wagner. I argue that the Studio’s use of pranks and pseudonyms contributed to the increasing use of such tactics by the Los Angeles avant-garde—a strategy that would continue to develop into the 1960s and become a working method for many of the artists associated with Ferus Gallery (founded by Walter
Hopps and Ed Kienholz in 1957).

Chapter Two is largely concerned with Billy Al Bengston’s work as it developed from the late 1950s into the late 1960s, culminating in his solo show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from November 1968 to January 1969. This exhibition included highly reflective and polished paintings displaying a sergeant stripe insignia at their center, many of which were titled for films, or the stage names of actors and actresses. Also included in the exhibition was a life-size wax replica of the artist dressed in leather biking-gear that Bengston had designed, and an exhibition catalogue (designed by Ed Ruscha) that featured a sandpaper cover, nut and bolt binding, and a fictional and satirical “Authorized Biography.” I argue that Bengston’s work built on specific interventions staged by Syndell Studio, and expanded on the earlier pseudonymous practice to explore the social and political mores of the 1960s, as well as the mutability of public image and media-made celebrity intrinsic to Hollywood. To do this, the artist publicized his likeness in fictional roles ranging from army sergeant and country bumpkin to professional motorcycle racer and gay male. My narrative is structured chronologically in order to cover the artist’s many series of artworks and personae he used to broadcast each.

Bengston’s collaborations with Ed Ruscha and Joe Goode are also discussed in Chapter Two; I position their collaborative, as well as their individual artworks, as similarly interrogating contemporaneous issues through role-playing. For example, Bengston and Ruscha’s book Business Cards of 1968 (fig. 2.92) comprises twenty-one photographs documenting the artists’ role-playing as businessmen, and makes the point that people in the business world and the art world share a tendency to follow formulaic patterns of engagement and established social and professional roles. Joe Goode published a Letter to the Editor in Artforum under the name José Bueno that called attention to the fact that most of the artists associated with Ferus Gallery
happened to have the look of the Hollywood ideal: suntanned, white, male, middle class, and stripped of ethnic signifiers. I argue that these artists tied their work to their self-presentation to the point that the two were intertwined in a complex web of conflation and contradiction. Their unwillingness to clearly explain themselves reflects a larger strategy of selective and self-conscious public exposure.

Rather than developing multiple roles to suit various purposes, Larry Bell, the subject of Chapter Three, instead nurtured a single alter ego, Ben Lux, who acquired the self-conferred prenominal of Doctor in 1966 (although the artist would occasionally omit the title). I argue that Bell’s 1960s oeuvre of wall-mounted and free-standing objects comprising manipulated and mirrored glass was involved in a formal interrogation of elementary forms and of viewers’ perceptual processes, as well as a critical investigation of the nature of self-representation in Los Angeles. The opening of Bell’s retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum on the evening of April 10, 1972, was an occasion in which the artist’s interrogation of basic forms, optical effects, and public persona, converged. The exhibition introduced attendees to a selection of the artist’s paintings dating to the early 1960s which combined the painted canvas with glass and mirrors; freestanding glass cubes from the mid-1960s that were placed on Plexiglas pedestals and which rose to a height of five feet; and large, environmental sculptures from the late-1960s constructed from mirror-like panes of glass no less than eight feet high. “A viewer’s image appears, multiplies and disappears,” noted a reporter for the Los Angeles Times.38 Bell’s self-image was, likewise, multifarious. The exhibition catalogue reproduces manipulated photographs of his work with the photographic credit line, Ben Lux, and also includes a ludic statement by the artist. At the opening, Bell spent the evening as Dr. Lux dressed in a velvet jacket and silver shoes, while sporting fluffed-up hair. Billy Al Bengston adopted the role of a film celebrity and arrived with a

woman on each arm; a side room in the museum boasted three television sets broadcasting the 44th Academy Awards show that was concurrently taking place just ten miles from the museum.

In this chapter, I consider how Bell’s constructed character was informed by the role-playing of his pseudo-mentor, Billy Al Bengston, and their joint expeditions to thrift shops in Los Angeles to acquire luxury clothing (a staple of Bell’s alter ego). I also examine how Bell’s constructed alias built on and re-interpreted the strategies and alter egos of Marcel Duchamp. Bell, an ethnically Jewish artist, deployed the name Ben Lux, which is Hebrew for son of light, and thus implicated himself into the history of the HUAC’s targeting of Jewish film professionals.

Unlike her colleagues—who demonstrated flexibility and fluidity in their engagement with alternative names and personae—Judy Gerowitz, the subject of Chapter Four, fostered a constructed character that became the artist’s dominant, and even her legal, namesake in 1970: Judy Chicago. While her colleagues manipulated their public images so as to effect various social and art world critiques, Gerowitz’s transition to Chicago entailed re-branding as a means of associating her work with the feminist cause. Her October 1970 solo exhibition at California State College, Fullerton (now California State University), included highly reflective and polished artworks originally constructed under the name Judy Gerowitz. The exhibition showcased the artist’s later 1960s series of mirror-like, dome-shaped sculptures made of vacuum-formed and spray painted plastic; polished and wall-hanging sheets of acrylic board sprayed with acrylic paint; and film and photographic documentation of her outdoor

39 While there is much discussion by Ed Kienholz, Billy Al Bengston, Larry Bell, and many more, regarding the items they found and purchased within Los Angeles thrift stores of the 1950s and 1960s, there is, to date, no written history examining the phenomenon of such retail establishments in California. Nonetheless, according to the artists, props, costumes, and clothing from film and theater sets, as well as the discarded wares of the Los Angeles elite, would often end up in thrift stores. While I can, obviously, not speak to the experience of a second hand store in 1960s Los Angeles, I can confirm that resale stores in this city today continue to be stocked with customized clothing from film productions, as well as designer labels, many of which still retain the sale tags.
environmental works involving large plumes of colored smoke released at sites around California. While the artworks manipulate color, transparency, and reflection, the publicity material—including the exhibition’s text panel, an advertisement in *Artforum*, and an exhibition mailer—all announced that the artist was changing her name to Judy Chicago. The exhibition catalogue neither reproduces the artworks nor the name change announcement; instead, it is filled with quotes from prominent female writers: French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, the African-American abolitionist Sojourner Truth, and the English novelist George Eliot. Two of the women quoted in the catalogue had also changed their names: from Isabella Baumfree to Sojourner Truth, and from Mary Ann Evans to George Eliot. The exhibition was the first to frame the artist’s work and name change within an explicitly feminist context.

In this chapter, I consider how Gerowitz—the youngest of the Finish Fetish artists I discuss—underwent an informal, early 1960s mentorship with Bengston that included tutorials regarding publicity and persona, as well as spray paint techniques. While Gerowitz’s colleagues—especially Kauffman, Bengston, and Bell—had admired, emulated, and expanded on Duchamp’s construction of various aliases, Gerowitz recast the modes for assembling an artistic persona through her cohort’s examples. In the early 1960s, at a time when she was painting in a manner similar to Bengston, Gerowitz began smoking cigars, wearing mannish boots, and sporting a cropped haircut. By 1965, she had casually adopted the name Judy Chicago and also began to produce artworks that were more clearly associated with Finish Fetish. As Chicago, the artist visited galleries, patronized Barney’s Beanery (a dive bar where many L.A.-based artists socialized), and even listed her new name in the phone book. Where Bengston had put forth an “Authorized Biography” in 1968, Judy Chicago would publish an autobiography in 1975 in which she explicitly framed her Finish Fetish work of the 1960s as overtly engaging with
a feminist artistic practice—thus applying certain tactics of her colleagues as a means of moving away from them.

This dissertation explores how a group of artists who constructed mirror-like artworks simultaneously exploited the practices of character construction and branding commonplace within the Hollywood environment, and often did so with a degree of irony. Recent accounts of postwar art in Los Angeles have addressed artistic production within the city through the lens of urban space and technological advancement, and brought to light a neglected history of the California avant-garde. By considering the artworks in question alongside the artists’ extensive publicity campaigns and highly tailored self-presentations, however, I argue that they were interrogating aspects of self-invention and marketing even as they were exploring the formal and technical possibilities of plastic and spray technologies newly available on the West Coast. The artists discussed here taunted various social and political prejudices by skillfully developing public personae that actively courted diverse and dynamic interpretations.

Part and parcel with this manipulation of personae was a conspicuous linking of the artworks to the artists’ brands. The artists marketed their works by tethering the objects to their self-images. Bengston’s publicity rarely reproduces his artwork and instead places his visage in a variety of guises and backdrops; Bell’s exhibition advertisements often reproduce the artist in double as if in conversation with his alter ego; Judy Gerowitz’s advertisements of 1970 publicize her visage and her new name more than her exhibitions. Deploying the tools common to the Hollywood environment, the artists distributed press releases, composed advertising campaigns, and conducted interviews. Their readiness to brand their work with their likeness reflects a larger and more complex engagement with contemporary media culture than has heretofore been addressed. Their self-portrayals have, until now, been largely approached as mere markers of
appearance rather than as integral aspects of artistic practices. I argue instead that the artists crafted a dynamic interchange between the art object and artistic identity while teasingly, at once revealing and disguising themselves before the public.
CHAPTER 1
MAURICE SYNDELL: THE PSEUDONYM

In July 1956, a multi-media, assembled composition said to be by Maurice Syndell, but in fact constructed by Los Angeles-based artist Ed Kienholz (with assistance from others), was removed from the Los Angeles All-City Outdoor Art Festival held at Barnsdall Park in Hollywood (fig. 1.1-1.2). Municipal authorities circulated through the show to ensure artistic decency and avoid possible civic embarrassment. They identified the untitled piece as potentially offensive and requested its removal. Kienholz describes the composition, which was not photographed, as containing a curved piece of plywood with white paint and a tar-dipped ball of steel wool. The wool was interpreted by authorities to resemble female pubic hair (although Kienholz adamantly disagrees with their assessment):

Somebody, either Walter [Hopps] or Ben Bartosh, went out with steel wool, dipped the steel wool in tar, and just stuck the steel wool to this […] plywood shape, and it dripped down. And the city decided that was obscene. That was obviously a cunt, you know, pubic hair obviously. We couldn’t believe it. Walter finally withdrew it, but there was pressure. He was forced to withdraw the thing.¹

The work was removed from view and the festival continued without incident, reportedly becoming the largest municipally sponsored art show in the country—visited by 18,000 people in two and a half days.² Yet, one is left to wonder: Why would Kienholz exhibit an artwork under

the name Maurice Syndell? And why, if the work really didn’t resemble female anatomy, was it censored?

Maurice Syndell was in fact an artists’ inside joke and an avant-garde prank. Conceived in the shadow of Hollywood, Maurice Syndell was both a fictitious artist and the fake front man for Syndell Studio, which was active from 1954 to either late 1956 or early 1957. Invented by curator Walter Hopps, artist Craig Kauffman, and poet-mathematician Ben Bartosh, and realized through their work and that of others, Syndell was a pseudonym that acquired agency through a series of pranks that restaged certain Dada strategies. Under the auspices of Syndell Studio, numerous public exhibitions were mounted that taunted conservative municipal policies toward modern art. Works employing a visually abstract language were said to be authored by Maurice Syndell and were displayed in public spaces within a community that, in the mid-1950s, largely saw abstraction as a joke, if not communist propaganda.

In this chapter, I examine how the constructed identity of Maurice Syndell, which gained agency through a series of pranks, was designed to address the political, social, and art world orders that characterized conservative mid-century Los Angeles. Focusing on key exhibitions

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3 Notably, Walter Hopps and Craig Kauffman frequented San Francisco beginning in the mid-1950s while they were in high school together in Los Angeles. Syndell Studio was somewhat modeled on San Francisco’s King Ubu Gallery, which had provided an alternative site for underground art, music, plays, and poetry from 1952-1953.

4 Individuals known to have been associated with Syndell Studio and to have participated in the Syndell project include: Walter Hopps, Craig Kauffman, Ben and Betty Bartosh, James Newman, Ed Kienholz, and Michael Scoles. Scholarship often makes vague references to the project, perhaps because determining individual involvement is difficult. However, after scouring numerous oral history interviews, conversing with James Newman, with the children of Ben Bartosh (Jim Bartosh and Miesha De Megilo), and with Caroline Huber (the widow of Walter Hopps), it became clear to me that those responsible for the opening of the Studio are Hopps, Kauffman, and Bartosh. James Newman became involved in 1955, and Kienholz in 1956. Oral History Interviews: Walter Hopps, interview by Joanne Ratner, 1990, UCLA Oral History Program, Los Angeles, CA; Craig Kauffman, interview by Michael Auping, 1984, UCLA Oral History Program, Los Angeles, CA; Edward Kienholz, interview by Lawrence Weschler, 1977, Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Oral History Project, University of California, Los Angeles, CA; James Newman, interview by Paul Karlstrom, 13 May 1974, Archives of American Art, Oral History Program, Washington, DC. Author conducted interviews: James Newman, interview by author, 8 September 2011, telephone; Jim Bartosh, interview by author, 10 September 2011, e-mail correspondence; Miesha Di Meglio, interview by author, 8 September 2011, telephone; Caroline Huber, interview by author, 11 September 2011, e-mail correspondence.
and exhibition spaces, ephemeral and publicity materials, as well as secondary documentation of artworks (since there are no known extant works from Syndell Studio), this chapter examines an early and strategic use of a pseudonym by a group of contemporary artists in Los Angeles. By using humor to critique the status quo, the masterminds behind the fictional Maurice Syndell effectively produced what philosopher Simon Critchley calls a “consciousness of contingency” by revealing socially normative operations as such—that is, as culturally specific and constructed. As Critchley, author of the 2002 book *On Humour*, argues:

> The incongruities of humour both speak out of a massive congruence between joke structure and social structure, and speak against those structures by showing that they have no necessity. The anti-rite of the joke shows the sheer contingency or arbitrariness of the social rites in which we engage. By producing a consciousness of contingency, humor can change the situation in which we find ourselves, and can even have a critical function with respect to society. Hence the great importance that humor has played in social movements that have set out to criticize the established order.\(^5\)

Thus, humor can make explicit what is culturally implicit; and, as will be argued, Maurice Syndell’s role as an agent-provocateur performed a critical function by those means. But because he is fictitious, there are of course no collected papers of Maurice Syndell, and neither are there any official records. Rather the evidence of his existence, intrusions, and political and art world impact is dispersed among countless archived sources. Within newspaper articles and Los Angeles City Council records there is some documentation of the real world effects this project entailed. What becomes apparent through these many and varied documents is the degree to which Syndell intruded into the consciousness of Los Angelenos—affecting not only the development of the L.A. avant-garde but also the civic environment more broadly.

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Scholarship on the Los Angeles avant-garde typically identifies the 1957 opening of Ferus Gallery as the moment when the counter cultural art world of Los Angeles gained a voice. Discussions of the pre-Ferus era often make passing reference to endeavors such as Syndell Studio, and Kienholz’s Now Gallery, 1956-57. These ventures are repeatedly positioned as either fleeting examples of early sites of display within a larger narrative, or as stepping-stones toward Ferus. While recent publications have called attention to the presence of Marcel Duchamp on the West Coast—that is, both his artwork and his four visits to Los Angeles in 1939, 1949, 1950, and 1962-1963—and documented Los Angeles’s restrictive municipal policies toward the arts, scholars have yet to examine how the emerging avant-garde of the 1950s directly engaged with, and pranked, a city then mired in conservative values and communist paranoia. Recent

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6 It must be acknowledged that, following the completion of research for this chapter, Lucy Bradnock published an article in *Art Journal* that presented many of the until-then unpublished documents that I had located in archives at The Getty, UCLA, and the Archives of American Art. Lucy Bradnock, “Walter Hopps’s Los Angeles Pastoral,” *Art Journal* 71, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 126-136. The article places Syndell Studio and Maurice Syndell within the framework of the pastoral (by which the author means the regional and the provincial), claiming that “as early as the mid-1950s, the Los Angeles manifestation of Syndell had mobilized the tropes of the playful and the pretend, the rural and the regional, as a means to comment on the peculiar position of Los Angeles and the loaded nature of its fledgling art world.” Bradnock, 135-136. While Bradnock and I share a focus on the Studio and the ephemeral evidence of its existence, Bradnock ties the Studio’s significance to an engagement with provincial stereotypes informing the display of art in Los Angeles and gives passing reference to the issue of the author-function inherent in the project. By contrast, I situate the polemics of authorship and pseudonymous practice as an early instance of social and political engagement that would continue to inform the development of a particular subset of artistic practices within the emerging Los Angeles avant-garde of the 1960s and early 1970s. Furthermore, Bradnock constructs the Studio’s significance as an earmark within Hopps’s burgeoning curatorial career, stating, “in co-opting, rather than opposing, the cliché of the backward American Midwest […] Hopps sought to position himself at the forefront of the West Coast avant-garde.” Bradnock, 131. In other words, by appropriating the name of a Midwestern farmer, Hopps sought to embrace the provincial cliché as a signifier of his curatorial identity. I instead emphasize the collaborative character of the Studio and situate it within the polemics of Los Angeles as both a site of display, and more importantly, as a site of production.


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exhibitions and publications under the auspices of the Getty Foundation’s Pacific Standard Time Initiative—a program that helped realize exhibitions and performances in 2011 and 2012 on art in Southern California at more than sixty West Coast art institutions—have, however, spurred discussions regarding the avant-garde of Southern California. The PST Initiative has received much attention and generated valuable historical accounts of the postwar period through 1980, thus establishing an historical foundation for scholars to engage critically with the era, beyond an encyclopedic catalogue of artists, artworks, media, and techniques.

On the few occasions that Syndell Studio has been discussed at any length, writers have considered its historical position within the narrative of the Los Angeles art scene, and discussed the onomatology of the Studio’s name. The Studio is correctly said to have been named, loosely, after a deceased Midwestern farmer, Maurice Sindel, and to have played a supporting role in the early ventures of the emerging Los Angeles avant-garde. Yet these commentaries have consistently limited the significance of Syndell Studio to that of a site of display, one noteworthy especially with regard to Walter Hopps’s distinctive and distinguished curatorial career. The extant literature has generally established Hopps as the author of—or, dare I say, the artistic

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10 Maurice Sindel was an Ohio farmer and World War II veteran. In 1951, he died by stepping in front of a vehicle in which James Newman was a passenger. Newman related the event, which took place in Williams County, Ohio, to friends in Los Angeles, CA. James Newman, interview by author, 8 September 2011, telephone.
genius behind—Syndell Studio, thereby oversimplifying or suppressing the varied voices and ventures that characterized the Studio’s history. Essentially, scholars have approached the Studio by interpreting Hopps’s intentions rather than by examining how it functioned. For example, a 2002 article by Kenneth Allan was groundbreaking in its examination of the milieu in question and its associated objects. However, Allan analyzes the exhibition *Action²* organized by the Studio, and the flier that accompanied the show, only as it exists within Walter Hopps’s Syndell Studio, and within Robert ‘Baza’ Alexander’s oeuvre. This approach muffles the other voices that informed the project and defines the Studio strictly as a site for display rather than also as a site of production. In 2011, Lucy Bradnock recognized the tongue-in-cheek nature of Maurice Syndell and Syndell Studio, yet still tied their meaning to Walter Hopps’s curatorial intent—positioning this avant-garde site within a narrative of curatorial ventures rather than within a history of artist-run spaces.

In the wake of Barthes’s and Foucault’s critiques of authorship, this assigning of intent, and following from it, meaning, as it occurs in discussions of Syndell, is distinctly problematic. There were in fact multiple voices involved in the construction of this non-existent artist in whose name very real artworks were produced. So, one is left to contemplate the character, agency, and voice of the fictitious figure. To avoid the pitfalls of deconstructing the project

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12 *Action²*—pronounced “Action Squared”—was an exhibition organized by Syndell Studio and exhibited in Kienholz’s Now Gallery in 1956. It was the sequel to the Studio’s 1955 exhibition, *Action I*.
15 There are no extant artworks signed with the name Maurice Syndell, nor are there photographs that provide precise documentation. One must rely on the formal descriptions provided by Ed Kienholz, James Newman, and West Coast assemblage artist Gordon Wagner, as well as sketches by Wagner—one of which includes a drawing of music producing artwork by Maurice Syndell located in the upper left of the composition.
according to the career trajectory or the stated intent of an individual involved in Syndell’s operation, I instead examine the Studio through its manifestations in various public and private contexts, as well as through documented reactions to the project by both participants in the L.A. art scene and those operating outside of the small avant-garde community. The name, Maurice Syndell, was signed to many works of many styles, albeit, all of them non-objective. This immediately complicates attempts at attribution based on formal analysis and refuses the authority of any given author while simultaneously, as I will demonstrate in what follows, allowing an alias’ signatory to aggregate authority.

The first public manifestation of Maurice Syndell was in 1954 upon the opening of the eponymous Syndell Studio (fig. 1.3-1.4). Conceived by Walter Hopps and Craig Kauffman, who had been classmates at Eagle Rock High School in Los Angeles, with the assistance of Ben Bartosh, whom they met while attending UCLA, the Studio opened in a storefront at 11756 Gorham Boulevard in Brentwood—a neighborhood in West Los Angeles.16 The story circulating for the last half-century, which is recounted in many oral history interviews, and subsequently repeated in discussions of the Los Angeles avant-garde, is that Maurice Syndell was named after a suicidal Midwestern farmer who stepped in front of oncoming traffic. But the various narratives amount to a patchwork of different stories, with different locations (Midwest, Nebraska, Ohio), dates (1950s, 1952, 1954), name spellings (Syndel, Sindell, Syndell), and

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16 Craig Kauffman’s CV in the Craig Kauffman Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC states, “1955: Founded Syndell Studio with Ben Bartosh and Walter Hopps in West Los Angeles which had exhibitions of West Coast painters.” This is the only instance in which the opening is dated as such. In their oral history interviews within the collection of UCLA, both Kauffman and Hopps state that Syndell Studio opened in 1954—Walter Hopps, interview by Joanne Ratner, 1990; Craig Kauffman, interview by Michael Auping, 1984. Furthermore, The Getty Research Institute, Sarah Schrank’s _Art and the City_, and Kenneth Allan’s “Creating an Avant-Garde in 1950s Los Angeles” all clearly situate 1954 as the year the Studio opened. The Studio itself occupied one unit in a three-unit structure built by Culver City-based real estate tycoon W. Brier Schorr who, during his more humble years, was part of the American workforce that physically dug the Panama Canal. The space was rented for either 65, 75, or 80 dollars a month—the amount varies according to interviewee—and was located in a seedy neighborhood next to the Veterans hospital.
drivers (James Newman, Kauffman, Hopps).\textsuperscript{17} In actuality, it was an event that San Francisco Dilexi Gallery founder James Newman witnessed in Ohio in 1953, and the incident was reported in numerous Williams County, Ohio newspapers.\textsuperscript{18} As a passenger in the vehicle that killed Sindel, he related the episode to countless friends in Los Angeles, often describing it as, “just the strangest thing.”\textsuperscript{19} Hopps and Kauffman, most likely unaware of the original spelling of the name, transliterated it as Syndell.

The name, Maurice Syndell, might phonically evoke the words sin and syndicate, and even the name Marcel. While the project engaged with the social mores of the sinning McCarthy era, and was the operation of a close-knit community (a form of a syndicate), the name is more strongly associated with the legacy of Marcel Duchamp in Los Angeles. Duchamp had a strong presence in Los Angeles at mid-century due in part to his close friendship with Walter and Louise Arensberg.\textsuperscript{20} The Arensbergs’ Hollywood home not only housed an extensive library on


\textsuperscript{18} James Newman, interview by author, 8 September 2011, telephone.

\textsuperscript{19} James Newman, interview by author, 8 September 2011, telephone. Newman was completely unaware of the Syndell project until 1955 when he returned to Los Angeles from San Francisco and discovered that the Studio had been named for the deceased farmer.

\textsuperscript{20} Bonnie Clearwater’s 1991 book, \textit{West Coast Duchamp}, is the first, and only substantial, publication to examine the Dada artist’s Los Angeles presence. The text, which avoids any analytical or conceptual analysis, instead recounts Duchamp’s four Los Angeles visits and his friendship with Walter and Louise Arensberg. The Arensbergs opened their home to artists, curious individuals, various organizations, and even school groups, sharing their collection and material with a wide variety of people on the West Coast. Bonnie Clearwater, \textit{West Coast Duchamp} (Miami Beach, FL: Grassfield Press, 1991). The extent of Duchamp’s Los Angeles presence is further evinced by Ken Ross’s 1949 news article, which introduces Duchamp to readers as both a sensation and an eccentric. Ross reports, “This is the man who sent to an art exhibit a porcelain urinal entitled, ‘Fontaine’ [sic] and signed R. Mutt. When it was refused, he resigned from the executive committee. This week he renewed his friendship with…Man Ray, who, in New York, was the official head of screwball American activities.” The story details not only Duchamp’s West Coast visit, but also provides readers with an introduction to the readymades that are “not a gag but a challenge.” Ken Ross, “Duchamp, Whose ‘Nude’ Once Rocked Nation, Visiting in L. A.” \textit{Los Angeles Daily News} (23 April 1949): 5. Despite the strong presence of Duchampiana on the West Coast, the existing literature on the emergence of a Los Angeles avant-garde continues to perpetuate the myth of a naïve vanguard operating in California’s sun, sand, and surf. Literature on Maurice Syndell and later Finish Fetish endeavors in particular, has
modern art, but also displayed a rich collection of avant-garde works by Duchamp including *Nude Descending the Staircase No. 2* of 1912, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (*The Large Glass*) of 1915-23, *Why Not Sneeze, Rrose Sélavy?* of 1921, and many readymades. Duchamp frequented the Arensbergs’ home during his Los Angeles ventures and played a significant role in organizing their collection in the 1940s and 50s.

Walter Hopps first visited the Arensbergs’ as part of a Saturday enrichment class during his eleventh-grade year at Eagle Rock High School in 1949. Afterwards, he returned many times to take advantage of their extensive library and, more likely than not, became familiar with the artist’s many pseudonyms including R. Mutt and Rrose Sélavy. In fact, Hopps would go on to curate the first U.S.-based retrospective of Duchamp’s work in 1963 at the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Museum), which included 114 works and was appropriately titled, *By or of Marcel Duchamp or Rrose Sélavy*. The exhibition’s publicity poster (fig. 1.5), designed by Duchamp, appropriates his 1923 poster, *Wanted: $2,000 Reward*—itself a parody of notices issued for criminals into which Duchamp inserted his own mug shot. Both the 1923 and the 1963 posters offer financial remuneration for information leading to the arrest of the characters under whose aliases Duchamp conducts business:

> WANTED $2,000 REWARD For information leading to the arrest of George W. Welch, alias Bull, alias Pickens, etcetry, etcetry. Operated Bucket Shop in New York under name Hooke, Lyon and Cinquer. Height about 5 feet 9 inches. Weight about 180 pounds. Complexion Medium, eyes same. Known also under name Rrose Selavy

The 1963 exhibition’s title notably plays with the words “by or of,” deliberately leaving room for ambiguity regarding the creator of the image, and by extension, the creator of the works included in the retrospective. Much as Duchamp’s gesture underscored the mutable nature of the characters that he crafted for himself, so too would Hopps, as well as many of the individuals associated with the Los Angeles avant-garde art scene, fluidly shift between their legal names and their aliases.

In a 1991 interview, Hopps claims he first met Duchamp while on one of these early library excursions. Although Kauffman never visited the collection, he has repeatedly stated that he “knew all the stuff that was in it,” and that he would frequently discuss the artworks with Hopps—or as most people called him, Chico. From Hopps’s perspective, “the Arensbergs coming to Southern California gave it [the region] the cachet, the license, to do anything, even though the public and the officials were so contrary about contemporary art.”

In the back of Kauffman’s 1951 high school yearbook, housed in his collected papers at the Archives of American Art, is a page-long handwritten text by Hopps (fig. 1.6), evidently inscribed on the occasion of their graduation from Eagle Rock High School. Hopps’s text speaks of dive bars, jazz music, and excursions to San Francisco. The juvenile reminiscence is peppered with anecdotes and inside jokes that position the duo as participating in a 1950s California Beat scene characterized by jazz music and poetry readings:

Never will I forget S.F. (Point of Clarification: S.F. means San Francisco not what it could obviously be taken for, that I would want to Forget) […] What a rat I was not to tip the bar girl for that beer. Memories of the “Say When”, the interesting little Mexican

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propped against [the] wall, Slim Gaylord and six pounding fools completely without
sanity, still vibrate through my brain. (God, what a cord!).

The inscription continues in a stream-of-consciousness and includes a blacked-in square with an
asterisk—n*—redirecting the reader to a side-barred note: “A Stanford man’s opinion of a
U.C.L.A.n’s countinance [sic].” The remark quickly establishes a dichotomy between the
colloquial squares (of UCLA) versus the beats (of Stanford, just outside of San Francisco), and
the doodles that adorn the page are the names of jazz legends Dizzy Gillespie and Lennie
Tristano. This document establishes Kauffman’s early friendship with Hopps, an involvement
that would last a lifetime.

As a site of display, the Studio that Hopps and others formed in 1954 provided a space
for emerging West Coast artists to show; as a site of production, the Studio produced ephemera
publicizing shows, organized public exhibitions (outside of the Studio space), and constructed
objects authored by Maurice Syndell that were exhibited in various venues, both public and
private. The Studio’s publicity materials were either handmade or printed by Robert Alexander’s
Press BAZA. Extant handmade works consist of mail art—unsigned, discreet objects altered or
constructed by hand and distributed through the postal service. A notice for the 1956 Arthur
Richer exhibition (fig. 1.7-1.8) consists of a photograph with exhibition information handwritten
on the front of the image. This particular copy includes a note from Wallace Berman to Charles
Brittin requesting that he bring a magazine to the show’s opening. Another unique object that
was sent through the mail is a square piece of cardboard with a tri-colored circle glued to one

24 Craig Kauffman Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.
25 Life magazine brought the California Beats to nationwide attention in September 1959 in an article comparing the
midwestern town of Hutchinson, Kansas, to beatnik life in Venice, California. The article, shocking at the time of
publication, contrasts photographs of purportedly wholesome interior design and loving families to dirty mattresses,
side (fig. 1.9). The circular form is cut out of yellow paper. The lower third of the shape is painted a red-orange color, a now-faded black stripe occupies the central register, and a thin sliver of the original yellow paper inhabits the upper tier. Although the piece is unsigned, the envelope locates its point of origin as Syndell Studio, and the handwriting on the exterior of the envelope is that of Walter Hopps. These unique, unsigned, and eccentric objects situate Syndell Studio as a site of production in addition to one of display.

The hand-made works produced by the Studio, like the assemblage constructed by Kienholz that introduced this chapter, generally used an abstract vocabulary. In Los Angeles, such non-objective visual languages had been met, only a decade earlier, with censorship and public outcry. As reported in a 1947 Life magazine article, self-described “conservative artists” demonstrated outside the Los Angeles County Museum of Art when the institution exhibited “subversive art.” The Los Angeles Examiner reproduced photographs of demonstrator Roy Walker surrounded by his own naturalistic paintings, as well as signs reading: “FAKE PAINTINGS CRIMES AGAINST DECENCY,” “MUST WE LOOK AT GARBAGE?,” and “REAL ART MUST BE REINSTATED” (fig. 1.10). In October 1951 the Los Angeles City Council held a two-day hearing (fig. 1.11-1.12) to address emerging “Modern Art”—as they termed it. Specifically, Rex Brandt’s First Lift of the Sea (fig. 1.13) was said to promote

26 Interestingly, however, the postage is stamped as originating in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
27 Anonymous, “Art Battle: Conservative LA Painters Protest ‘Radicals’ Hung in Museums,” Life (16 June 1947): 40. “The sunny Sunday calm of Los Angeles was shattered a fortnight ago when irate local artists and members of three art clubs stormed the steps of the imposing Los Angeles County Museum. They were vociferously displeased with the paintings chosen to hang in the museum’s current show. Demonstrations of protesting artists are nothing new in the art world, but normally the protesters are ‘advanced’ or ‘modern’ artists fighting against being locked out by academicians. In Los Angeles, however, where normality is not normal anyway, the tradition was turned about. The museum protesters were a conservative group, which turned out pretty, recognizable paintings. They were annoyed because the show favored what they called ‘radical’ and ‘subversive’ art.” Among the artists included in the exhibition was William Brice, an artist known for his large-scale, brushy abstract paintings. William Brice, Richard Armstrong, William Brice: A Selection of Painting and Drawing, 1947-1986 exh. cat. (Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; New York, NY: Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, 1986), 77.
communism through its use of expressive brushstrokes and a barely discernible hammer and sickle-like form on the sail of the boat. The City Council officially deemed modern art “offensive and nauseating” and labeled modern artists “tools of the Kremlin.” Modern art was thus linked with communism and was banned from public display beginning in November of that year—an order that was largely ignored.

The censorship of art in Los Angeles due to the alleged connection between abstraction and communism ran counter to the ideology attached to such artworks on the East Coast of the U.S. and in the U.S.S.R. In 1950, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, also in New York, jointly published a pamphlet, “A Statement on Modern Art,” declaring that modern art is neither subversive, nor is it un-American. Serge Guilbaut contends that the development of the United States’ indigenous avant-garde depended on the political “neutrality” of the Abstract Expressionist aesthetic: “the depoliticization of the avant-garde was necessary before it could be put to political use.” It was in this way that abstraction became part of the larger process of representing the ideologies of freedom and democracy during the Cold War. The artworks became repoliticized in the propaganda war of the 1950s and were held up as proof of the creativity, intellectual freedom, and cultural power of the United States’ democratic policies as

29 Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City*, 88. In the fall of 1951, letters were sent to government offices in Los Angeles voicing two main complaints: 1) modern art contained communist content, and 2) traditional (by which I mean figurative) artists were underrepresented in city-sponsored exhibitions. City councilman Harold Harby, chairman of the Building and Safety Committee, opened an investigation and held a hearing in which artists, members of the Municipal Art Commission, and Ken Ross, the director of the city’s arts programs, were questioned about the communist infiltration of the art scene in the city. It was determined that taxpayers’ funds were being used to spread communism by exhibiting non-objective artworks, and especially works such as Brandt’s which, according to the City Council, contained subtle symbols that favored the ideologies of the U.S.S.R.

30 Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City*, 88.


opposed to Russian art that was constrained to realism and bound to communist principles.\textsuperscript{33}

While Abstract Expressionism was, during the Cold War, exploited for various pro-United States propagandistic purposes, such political propaganda failed to inform the views of Los Angeles’s city government. Thus, within a West Coast environment that officially equated modernist art with subversive politics, the elusive artist and studio front man Maurice Syndell could make a statement merely by producing and displaying abstract work.

This regional paranoia concerning abstract art had explicitly affected both Craig Kauffman and Walter Hopps prior to their initiating the Syndell project. Kauffman, while still in high school, was accused of being a communist sympathizer based on a somewhat cubist drawing he composed for the senior commencement program. In a 1984 interview, he recalls: “The principal and lots of other people thought it was communistic or something…The kids looked at me like I was some kind of a creep.”\textsuperscript{34} In the same interview he proceeds to discuss the communist accusations he faced resulting from his early non-objective paintings, the uproar surrounding Rex Brandt’s sailboat painting with its supposed secret message, as well as the “strange city councilmen in those days.”\textsuperscript{35} In numerous interviews Walter Hopps, too, discusses his early adolescent experiences with censorship, and also how it affected the art scene of the West Coast.

\textsuperscript{33} Frances Stonor Saunders, “Modern Art was CIA ‘Weapon’ Revealed: How the Spy Agency Used Unwitting Artists such as Pollock and de Kooning in a Cultural Cold War,” The Independent (22 October 1995): http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/modern-art-was-cia-weapon-1578808.html

\textsuperscript{34} Craig Kauffman, interview by Michael Auping, 1984, UCLA Oral History Program, Los Angeles, CA.

\textsuperscript{35} Craig Kauffman, interview by Michael Auping, 1984, UCLA Oral History Program, Los Angeles, CA. Art historians Peter Selz and Susan Landauer explains that the charge against Brandt was the intentional concealment of a Soviet symbol consisting of a hammer and sickle within one of his landscape paintings—a symbol that subtly exhibited support for communism. They contextualize this charge with a discussion of other accusations put forth by the Los Angeles City Council. Also in 1951, artist Knud Merrid was charged with hiding maps and secret information about fortifications in his Abstract Expressionist drip paintings. Sculptor Bernard Rosenthal’s 1954 bronze American Family designed for the Los Angeles Police Administrative Building was accused of promoting subversive politics because its figures were semiabstract with generalized faces which did not display clearly defined eyes, ears, and noses. Selz and Landauer, Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond, 93.
I was a class officer and so on, and made him [Kauffman] the designer of school designs and so on, which were the kind of style of streamlined—Juan Gris perhaps, and got in a great row with the principal over these modernistic designs for high school graduation and so forth...The background of that was that it was in my senior year that the terrible grip of Cold War psychology was being showcased in my own city through the entertainment industry, and it was reflecting through the educational system right down to the public system. And that was a key factor in my motivation…right after World War II—in the late ’40s and early ’50s—the politics of the McCarthy era were very hard on art in the institutions in Southern California. Picasso and even Magritte—Magritte, who had no politics, who was, if anything, a kind of patron of the royalists—had their work taken down as being subversive and communistic in the one museum we had in Los Angeles. 36

Syndell Studio and its associates faced an environment operating under the long shadow of the Red Scare. As tensions between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. intensified after World War II, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), founded in 1938, assumed an increasing amount of power. In 1947, the Committee conducted a series of high-profile hearings claiming that communists had infiltrated all areas of American life, including the government, schools, and especially the entertainment industry. These investigations led to the blacklisting of hundreds of film industry professionals who were denied employment due to their real or suspected political beliefs. In October 1947, a group of ten screenwriters, producers, and directors, better known today as “The Hollywood Ten,” refused to testify before the HUAC regarding their supposed communist connections; they were subsequently jailed and

blacklisted.\textsuperscript{37} U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy (of Wisconsin), although not on the HUAC, rose to prominence in 1950 alleging he had a list cataloging the names of communists working in the United States. He became the most vocal advocate of the aggressive anti-communist purge and led a campaign to rid the U.S. of suspected political subversives. Following the Senate’s December 1954 censure of McCarthy the HUAC’s powers declined, but the Red Scare continued to loom over the country, and especially Hollywood.\textsuperscript{38}

Among the most famous blacklisted Hollywood professionals was American screenwriter and novelist Dalton Trumbo. Unable to work due to his suspected involvement with the Communist Party, Trumbo used the front-name “Ian McLellan Hunter” and the pseudonym “Robert Rich.”\textsuperscript{39} Hunter and Rich received Academy Awards for Best Writing for the films \textit{Roman Holiday} (1953) in 1954 and \textit{The Brave One} (1956) in 1957, respectively. The false names were reproduced on the movie posters and credited on both the screenplays and in the films’ credits. Only after the Academy Awards were conferred was it discovered, publically, that Trumbo had written the screenplays.\textsuperscript{40}

Syndell Studio emerged just as the powers wielded by the HUAC began to decline in 1954. While one can only speculate as to whether the Committee’s weakening power allowed the Syndell project to emerge, the Studio notably deployed the pseudonymous strategies used by blacklisted individuals such as Trumbo, as well as the practice of adopting a stage-name that was...

\textsuperscript{37} The group consisted of Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Edward Dmytryk, Ring Lardner Jr., John Howard Larson, Albert Maltz, Samuel Ornitz, Adrian Scott, and Dalton Trumbo—six of the ten were Jewish.

\textsuperscript{38} The HUAC’s relevance and power declined in the late 1950s and early 1960s; in 1969, it was renamed the Committee on Internal Security, and ceased operations in 1975. Thomas Patrick Doherty, \textit{Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture} (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003).

\textsuperscript{39} Ian McLellan Hunter was an English Screenwriter who agreed to front for Dalton Trumbo so the blacklisted writer could sell the screenplay for \textit{Roman Holiday} to Paramount.

\textsuperscript{40} Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, \textit{Hide in Plain Sight: The Hollywood Blacklistees in Film and Television, 1950-2002} (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Buhle and Wagner’s text follows the careers of individuals targeted by the HUAC and the effect of the blacklist on the film and television industry in both the United States and Europe.
common to many actors and actresses of the era. The pseudonym might be seen as a tool of protection, shielding the individuals responsible for the project from persecution. However, the better-known participants such as Hopps, Kauffman, and Kienholz were very public regarding their involvement. Thus, rather than constituting a safety precaution, the pseudonymous Maurice Syndell helped to establish a united front for some early avant-garde pranksters bent on provoking municipal action as a means of critiquing the prevailing, conservative environment.

In Los Angeles—as in New York—it was common for commercial galleries to be named after their founders, such as the Frank Perls Gallery, Esther-Robles Gallery, Felix Landau Gallery, and Paul Kantor Gallery. Syndell Studio, which operated under the name of a fake founder, was not a commercial gallery, though it ostensibly served some gallery-like functions. Hopps refers to it as “a very discreet laboratory,” and he explains that individuals participating in the project often lived in the back of the space—including himself and his then-wife Shirley Hopps, as well as Robert Alexander and James Newman. As a site of display, the space was nominally open by appointment to friends and critics. Art historian Gerald Nordland recalls, however, that “the place was never open. I made appointments with him [Hopps], and he never came.” Rather than calling the site a gallery, which connoted a venue for display that would be open to the public, its founders named the space a studio. In film-centric Los Angeles, the term studio connoted a movie studio more than an art studio.

The posters printed by Robert Alexander’s Press BAZA for Syndell display a variety of typefaces and designs arranged into geometric configurations (fig. 1.14-1.15). Alexander, a heroin addict, poet, artist, and founder of a small artist-collective and church called the “Temple

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41 For example: Marilyn Monroe (née Norma Jean Baker) and Mickey Rooney (né Joseph Yule).
of Man” in Venice, California—Alexander was ordained by mail in 1960—was closely involved with the Beat scene on the West Coast and his work is aesthetically informed by both *DADA Magazine* and the Surrealist VVV. Formally, the Syndell posters he designed broadly resemble and expand on the look of the artists’ work they promote. The poster for Kienholz’s exhibition displays a pseudo-Bauhaus or Constructivist aesthetic which resembles the layered and geometric turn the artist explored between 1954 and 1956, as apparent in his *Untitled* (fig. 1.16) watercolor on paper composition of 1956. Within the exhibition poster, Kienholz’s name and the dates of the exhibition are situated horizontally and printed on top of the vertically arranged text outlining the gallery’s opening days and times, “saturday and sunday afternoons weekday evenin’s [sic] by appointment.” The poster designed for Julius Wasserstein’s show adopts Wasserstein’s signature brushstroke and references the circular form that is apparent in much of his mid-1950s work (fig. 1.17).

Within Alexander’s promotional posters, the name of Syndell is often (although not always) colored red. In the poster for Kienholz’s exhibition, the name of the Studio and its limited public hours are printed in red, and a large red brushstroke covers the outlined name of Syndell in the publicity image for Wasserstein. These images play surreptitiously on the local association between an abstract visual language and communism. Contemporary anti-communist propaganda, such as the U.S. Government’s *SECRET* poster (fig. 1.18) and Scott Tissue’s expedient advertisement, *Is Your washroom breeding Bolsheviks?* (fig. 1.19), use the color red to call attention to potential communist schemes. The anti-communist posters are

The Syndell-specific look, with its Bauhaus or Constructivist aesthetic of angles and geometric forms, is more apparent in comparison to material Alexander designed and printed for other, non-Syndell events, such as the 1957 brochure that accompanied an Instant Theatre Troupe performance. The exterior cover of the folio-style brochure comprises a torn page from a braille text (fig. 1.20); the interior features circular and red-orange flower shapes separated by a vertical, middle crease (fig. 1.21). Rachel Rosenthal, founder of the experimental theatre troupe, was known to integrate improvisational movements with inventive costumes and set designs that often featured oversized flowers, fans, and feathers. The forms on the interior of the brochure incorporate some of the elements that characterized the troupe’s performances. The floral design at the center of the interior page is formally distinct from the Syndell advertisements that incorporate bold, ninety-degree angles and arguably, covert allusions to the red-communism duality.

The ephemeral material printed for and distributed by the Studio also intimates the contemporary trend towards the distribution of political propaganda. Throughout the 1950s, Walt Disney actively worked against the imagined communist threat by distributing pamphlets on how

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45 Thus far, I have located only one Syndell Studio poster that does not follow this paradigm. The publicity for Sonia Gechtoff’s 1956 show comprises a simple black and white composition in which the text is positioned both vertically and horizontally, creating multiple, cross-like axes or grids. The arrangement in no way suggests Gechtoff’s brushy, abstract and earth-toned paintings of the period.

46 Rachel Rosenthal founded the Instant Theatre Troupe in 1955. It performed for ten years, primarily in Southern California. She co-founded Womanspace Gallery in 1972 (it opened to the public in January 1973) with Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago, and in 1989 established The Rachel Rosenthal Company—a performance company that combined aspects of improvised dance, visual and sound art, and theater.
to avoid subtle communist themes in films. Leon Charles’s *How to Spot a Communist* (fig. 1.22) was a particularly popular pamphlet widely circulated along the Southern California coast. Its text incorporates scare-tactic language to encourage suspicion and also attempts to visually describe the physical and cultural traits of those espousing left-wing ideologies. It warns readers to beware of young people with guitars and long hair, yet also encourages wariness of everyone, since a communist’s “appearance may range from the ‘disheveled and slovenly’ street corner orator to the ‘nattily’ dressed Alger Hiss.” At the Studio, those distributing publicity material ranged in appearance from the slightly-rumpled Ed Kienholz (fig. 1.23)—complete with grease and paint splattered shirt and jeans and often seen in his truck emblazoned with the slogan, “Ed Kienholz: Expert”—to the “nattily dressed” Walter Hopps (fig. 1.24) sporting his trademark dark suit and skinny black tie.

Thus, the Studio might be said to have constituted a socially-specific joke in the sense that Critchley describes it: “a joke recalls us to what is shared in our everyday practices. It makes

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47 Walt Disney was a founding member of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (later shortened to Motion Picture Alliance, MPA). Ayn Rand became the intellectual spokeswoman for the MPA and her pamphlet, “Screen Guide for Americans” (1948), became the group’s manifesto and was regularly distributed by Disney and many others throughout the 1940s and 50s. The pamphlet states that its purpose is to “protect pictures from being used for Communistic purposes.” Disney had appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in October 1947 and even testified that the Screen Cartoonists Guild was “Communist-dominated and had tried to take over his studio with a view to having Mickey Mouse follow the Party line.” David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 493. As for Mickey Mouse’s red shorts, the costume was established before the rise of the red scare. The first color appearance of Mickey was in a 1932 short, *Parade of the Award Nominees*, made as the introductory film for the fifth Academy Awards banquet. In the short film the character wore green shorts and a red coat. This costume was also present in his second appearance in color in the short film, *The Band Concert* of 1935. The iconic red shorts first appeared in the character’s third color film, *Mickey’s Garden*, also of 1935, and have remained as his iconic dress ever since. Precisely why Disney did not supply the Mouse with a different pair of shorts, despite the reflective association between Bolshevism and red, is not known. Nonetheless, since the character’s likeness was established nearly a decade before Disney testified before the HUAC, perhaps one can reason that the established costume was consequently above suspicion.

48 Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City*, 112.


explicit the enormous commonality that is implicit in our social life.”51 The Studio was a space named after a fictitious founder; it both produced and occasionally displayed works that a right-wing individual was likely to consider aligned with communist ideology. While the participants faced little risk of incarceration due to the small and insider nature of the project, Syndell Studio taunted indicators of communist sympathies within Hollywood by operating a Studio, working pseudonymously, distributing suspicious publicity, and displaying visually abstract artworks.

**THE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES OF SYNDELL**

When the Studio engaged in the business of display, it did so in a manner that antagonized contemporary municipal views of modern art. Business cards created by Alexander’s Press BAZA for Syndell Studio contain a printed, non-objective and sharply angled motif divided into four quadrants and partially overlaid onto the name Syndell (fig. 1.25). The geometric arrangement is directly above the Syndell Studio address and visually connects the name of the Studio with its geographic location. Traditionally, business cards are used in the social ceremony of card exchange—a ritual that facilitates networks and connections. For example, Walt Disney’s early-career business card, printed in 1921, includes a cartoon signifying his profession, as well as text outlining his name, skills, and location, and the card would likely have included a phone number had such technology been available at that time (fig. 1.26). The Syndell business card, by contrast, reproduces a pictorial design ideologically connected with communism in Los Angeles, while omitting business hours, a contact person, and a phone number (which was common technology by the 1940s). In other words, a card tasked with efficiently conveying identifying information, is instead ineffectual and suspiciously vague. The object’s small size allows for it to be easily carried in an individual’s wallet or pocket; thus, it

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may have operated on a second and more intimate level by denoting the bearer as a card-carrying member of Syndell Studio.

Other pseudo-entrances into the business of artistic display included taking out notices in the “Art Events This Week” section of the Los Angeles Times, as well as notifying the press in order to secure exhibition reviews. One of the first exhibition announcements published by Syndell Studio was printed in the “New Exhibits” column of the September 11, 1955, issue of the Los Angeles Times: “Children’s art from Southern California nursery schools. Syndell Studios, 11756 Gorham Ave, Brentwood, tomorrow through Sept. 26.”52 In the neighboring column under “Other Events,” the Studio also publicized a talk by Gar Embry at the New School of Art titled “What kind of Self-Expression for Children.”53 This early exhibition, according to James Newman, was the most official of the site’s displays and a concerted effort in community outreach; yet, it was also a deliberate and sly jibe directed towards the prevailing opinions of modern art. The exhibition included brushy paintings composed by pre-school children, whom it would be very difficult to accuse of communist sympathies. By displaying the work of children, the show established a precedent for the display of non-objective artworks while, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, also baiting the common joke that kids could splash-out a painting just as well as Jackson Pollock.54

Julius Wasserstein’s exhibition at Syndell in 1955 prompted diametrically opposed press coverage. Arthur Miller, the local art critic for the Los Angeles Times and one of the few people to visit the Studio, wrote a joint review of an exhibition by French artist Pierre Sicard at the Los

Angeles County Museum of Art and Wasserstein’s work at Syndell.\textsuperscript{55} Regarding Sicard’s Impressionist-inspired paintings, such as Street in Los Angeles of 1955 (fig. 1.27), he writes extensively and with much-flourish: “Sicard continues the Impressionist traditions of Manet’s broad areas of color and Monet’s vibrating colors, a method suited to his inherently happy view of the world. In Los Angeles he found the night beauty of the city as seen from the hills and farther afield, the beauty of the desert.” By contrast, his review of Wasserstein’s paintings is brief and austere: “Large free-expression-type paintings by Julius Wasserstein, San Franciscan, are at the Syndell Studio […] all very abstract with no visible subjects.” The terse tone of Miller’s review is apparent when weighted against his admiration of Sicard’s work.

By contrast, Jules Langsner, a well-known American art critic who wrote for several journals and was an advocate for the avant-garde in Los Angeles, published a review in \textit{ARTnews} that speaks exuberantly about Wasserstein’s Syndell exhibition: “Wasserstein is equally at home in oil, lithography, and tempera and charcoal bringing an exuberant visuality to each medium. The skittering line, the explosive burst, the bold slash, the molten flow of color are conveyed with convincing authority.”\textsuperscript{56} Langsner refers to Wasserstein’s work as evincing a \textit{joie de vivre} in comparison to local artists “ensnared in the higher reaches of pontifical esthetics.”\textsuperscript{57} The two reviews illustrate a schism in Los Angeles between the municipally-sanctioned art world and the emerging avant-garde. Even so, regardless of occasional publicity and exhibition reviews, few people aside from those who were there on social visits or who had made prior appointments, actually managed to visit the Studio. As James Newman explained: “I was living in the back of

\textsuperscript{57} Jules Langsner, \textit{ARTnews} 54 (February 1956): 14.
the studio and Craig Kauffman and Ben Bartosh […] were operating [it], on a rather irregular basis […] The only people who ever came by were a few friends, people that came down from Topanga Canyon and mostly beatniks at that time.”

Although Syndell Studio displayed works by contemporary West Coast artists, the projects remained largely confined to a relatively small group of art world insiders, aside from the first exhibition of work by school children. Robert Alexander gave the subtitle, “Printing for Certain People,” to Press BAZA, emphasizing both the limited appeal of avant-garde work, as well as the insider nature and anonymity of the group (fig. 1.28). Artist Ken Price, poking fun at the insular character of the Los Angeles art scene (of which the Syndell Studio project was, in that respect, typical), frankly states that “if there had been a flash grease-fire at Barney’s Beanery in West Hollywood […] the entire L.A. art scene would have been wiped out.” Maurice Syndell was an inside joke that resonated within a small, avant-garde community, providing a sense of exclusivity and security in view of the larger, potentially hostile cultural environment.

As Critchley has argues:

Humour is a form of cultural insider-knowledge, and might, indeed, be said to function like a linguistic defense mechanism. Its ostensive untranslatability endows native speakers with a palpable sense of their cultural distinctiveness or even superiority. In this sense, having a common sense of humour is like sharing a secret code.

The insider nature of the joke made explicit the commonality implicit in the emerging avant-garde—it made explicit the shared secret code. While the individuals involved in the

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59 “I used to have a little business card for my printing and it said on it ‘printing for certain people.’ I never offered my services to the general public.” Robert Alexander, interview with Sandra Leonard Starr, 1986-1988, in Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art, 89.
61 Simon Critchley, On Humour, 67-68.
project were not communist-sympathizers, they were opposed to the censorship and witch-hunts resulting from an atmosphere of fear and dread. The Syndell project, through its exclusivity, united a local avant-garde. Although those involved deployed some symbols and pseudonyms associated with the Red Scare in Los Angeles, their ciphers were meant as provocation on account of political paranoia rather than the promotion of communist ideology.  

The May 1955 exhibition *Action I* was the first show organized by the Studio that took place outside of the group’s private space in Brentwood; it was also the first time an artwork attributed to Maurice Syndell was shown in a public venue. *Action I* is more commonly referred to as the merry-go-round exhibition since it was installed in the merry-go-round building at the foot of Newcomb Pier in Santa Monica. The Concert Hall Workshop, a loosely organized music workshop founded in 1951 by James Newman, Walter Hopps, and Craig Kauffman to explore their shared interest in contemporary music, jazz, and the visual arts, sponsored the exhibition, even though, according to Newman and Kauffman, the show was essentially organized under the auspices of Syndell Studio.  

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62 “One might say that the simple telling of a joke recalls us to what is shared in our everyday practices. It makes explicit the enormous commonality that is implicit in our social life […] a form of *sensus communis*. So, humor reveals the depth of what we share […] it is practically enacted theory.” Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, 18.

63 “Concert Hall Workshop Presents Action Painters of the West Coast,” 1956. Craig Kauffman Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC. The Concert Hall Workshop has a complicated history that involves university expulsions and college business ventures. Hopps and Newman, both at Stanford University, were kicked out in the first quarter because they published a particularly offensive (it included nudity) issue of *Chaparral*, the school newspaper. After being dismissed, Newman went to Oberlin and Hopps went to UCLA. Newman explains: “In ’51 I transferred to Oberlin College to study music. And I maintained my contacts with Walter Hopps and Craig Kauffman and other friends of theirs who were involved with both music and with the visual arts. And we formed a kind of loosely structured organization at that time called ‘Concert Hall Workshop.’ We were interested primarily in music at that time, especially jazz music and contemporary music of all kinds. And we maintained a certain interest in the visual arts, but that came more to the foreground in later years. In 1955 I left Oberlin, I moved to Los Angeles, re-established direct working relationships with Walter Hopps, Craig Kauffman, and several others at that time. In the spring of 1955 they [Hopps and Kauffman] had organized the first comprehensive exhibition of Abstract Expressionist painting ever held on the West Coast, called ‘Action One,’” James Newman, interview by Paul Karlstrom, 13 May 1974, Archives of American Art, Oral History Program, Washington, DC. One can only speculate as to why *Action I* was organized under the auspices of the Concert Hall Workshop. The Workshop was responsible for booking jazz gigs at various university campuses and thus, perhaps, had funds enough to sponsor the exhibition; and the show, as explained in the proceeding pages, included recorded jazz music. Nonetheless, those involved in the exhibition’s realization maintain that it was a Syndell Studio venture. Kauffman, in particular,
project was primarily the brainchild of Hopps, Kauffman, and Bartosh. Irving Blum describes the show as “something hatched by Craig Kauffman and Walter,” but as Newman explains, “at that time Walter Hopps was in the army. And although they [Hopps and Kauffman] had jointly conceived the show, along with, well, I guess a number of other people, I think it was mostly Craig and Ben Bartosh that actually went out and put the show together.” Thus, the figures instrumental in the realization of *Action I* were evidently the initial founders of Syndell Studio—Hopps, Kauffman, and Bartosh.

The exhibition’s leaflet narrates the difficulties the organizers had to navigate in order to realize the show (fig. 1.29-1.30). According to the document, they initially sought to exhibit the works in a large space on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood. However, due to the high rental cost, they instead attempted to secure a free or heavily subsidized municipal site for the exhibition, ultimately leasing the merry-go-round building on Newcomb Pier (which one may assume cost less than the original site in Hollywood). The Pier was a privately owned space—until 1974 when it was acquired by the city and renamed Santa Monica Pier—and populated with an arcade, ballroom, and much foot traffic. Rather than discussing the artwork on view, the exhibition’s leaflet instead narrates the political hurdles entailed in acquiring a venue to showcase politically emphasizes this genesis, confirming, “out of Syndell Studio, we organized the Merry-Go-Round show in 1955.”


65 James Newman, interview by Paul Karlstrom, 13 May 1974, Archives of American Art, Oral History Program, Washington, DC. Hopps explains: “I was in the army six months and twelve days.” Walter Hopps, interview by Joanne Ratner, 1990, UCLA Oral History Program, Los Angeles, CA. And Newman expands: “He was in the army for a brief period […] he figured out some means by which to escape that. I think he was in and out of Fort Ord for awhile.” The precise nature of Hopps’s military service is not known, but considering that he was simultaneously involved in the Concert Hall Workshop, Syndell Studio, and in the midst of organizing *Action I*, one may, perhaps, assume that the nature of his military service was non-traditional. Furthermore, Craig Kauffman recounts: “we mounted a show at the merry-go-round building while Walter was still in the army. So Ben Bartosh and I and my wife at the time and a few other people helped, just about did it all. I mounted it physically, and then Walter came for the opening. It was quite a show. It was really quite a nice show.” Craig Kauffman, interview by Michael Auping, 1984, UCLA Oral History Program, Los Angeles, CA.
suspect artworks, and also provides a list of the exhibiting artists. It frankly addresses the refused requests for space at municipally funded public galleries:

The show was scheduled for the frank lloyd wright pavilion at barnsdall park, hollywood. Because of pressures of certain groups in los angeles who have always been in opposition to contemporary art we found the usage of the wright pavilion unfeasible. Similar conditions were found to prevail concerning the greek theater of any municipally controlled property.66

Such restrictions stemmed from a 1951 city council decision regarding the use of city funds as they related to the arts. The result was that monies could not be used for public art exhibits or art festivals that included modernist art.67 A coffee house owner interviewed in the L.A. Times spoke frankly about the suspect nature of modern art: “The average cop thinks there is something subversive about any place with paintings on its wall. He thinks an artist is a suspicious character partly because of the way he may dress and partly because the officer holds art itself suspect.”68 These supposedly suspicious characters—the artists who are questionable due to the nature of their work—are clearly listed on the left hand side of the leaflet. Among the twenty-four artist-suspects are Sonia Gechtoff, Craig Kauffman, and Maurice Syndell.

66 “Concert Hall Workshop Presents Action Painters of the West Coast,” 1956, Craig Kauffman Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington DC. “The greek theater of any municipally controlled property” is a specific reference to The Greek Theatre (as it is officially spelled), nicknamed “The Greek.” It is a large, open space with a stage, exhibit area, and guest services located in Griffith Park, Los Angeles, CA. Although built in 1929, it had slowly deteriorated until 1950 when James Doolittle (a Los Angeles-based showman) leased the space from the city and renovated the multi-acre venue. By 1952, The Greek Theatre was hosting concerts, art exhibits, and other events. The phrase “certain groups” most likely refers to those city council members who associated avant-garde art with communist propaganda.


68 Frank Laro, “Tourists Make Beatniks Flee Coffeehouses,” Los Angeles Times (2 June 1959); quoted in Sarah Schrank, Art of the City, 112.
Visual records of the exhibition are limited to a single known photograph and two sketches (fig. 1.31-1.33). Based on these records, as well as on oral history accounts, one is able to piece together a general description of the show. For the exhibition, fabric was stretched around the wooden horses, hiding them from view, and the entire merry-go-round rotated slowly, accompanied by the rumbling of the gears, the carrousel calliope, and recordings of Dave Brubeck and other jazz musicians. In addition to the cacophony of sounds already present, John Cage’s score for twelve radios was running in a loop, amplified by speakers. In a recent conversation with Newman—the last surviving Syndell insider—it was determined that Maurice Syndell’s submission was most likely the music producing assemblage in the top left corner of a sketch by West Coast artist Gordon Wagner and was probably constructed by Ben Bartosh (fig. 1.34). Bartosh, according to Newman, was particularly enthusiastic about the project and constructed many pieces under the name of Maurice Syndell that took the form of “junk sculpture, mostly assembled, some of it had audio elements with tape recorded sound, musique concrète, collaged sound.” In the upper corner of Wagner’s sketch is a music-producing device resting on either a table or a mount. Notes emanate from the object and are suspended within the quickly drafted bars of a music score. The notes are labeled with text reading: “Harry Partche’s [sic] music,” “Chinese records played backwards,” and “Contemporary music & art.”

69 The photograph is in the collection of the Jay DeFeo Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC; the two sketches by Gordon Wagner are located in the Gordon Wagner Papers, Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles, CA.
71 James Newman, interview by author, 8 September 2011, telephone. Musique concrète (also known as concrete music) is a form of music made from an assemblage of sounds derived from everyday noises, musical recordings, instruments, voice, and the natural environment. It is not restricted to the rules of melody, harmony, rhythm, or metre and can take multiple forms.
72 Harry Partch (1901-1973), misspelled by Wagner as Harry Partche, was a California-based musician, theorist, and instrument-builder.
The exhibition was largely ignored by the news media, but heavily attended by locals, artists, students, and the Beat Crowd, with notable visits by Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. The reactions of viewers outside of the avant-garde crowd were reportedly both powerful and polemical. In a 1987 interview, Gordon Wagner describes how people, expecting to see fine art (which, in 1955 Los Angeles, meant representational work), felt duped and enraged by what they found in the merry-go-round building:

The more violent spectators were the weight [sic] lifters of muscle Beach one fellow was so furious over the way the artist had expressed himself that he bent a 1” dia [diameter] bar of steel double to vent his fury. Another weight [sic] lifter put a sign on the great “orange job” reading “out of order.” […] comments were thrown fast and furious. What are you people doing kidding. What a joke. What lunatic asylum do you represent. It was fun & stimulating.

Wagner, in a later interview, went on to discuss a specific instance in which a weightlifter—whom he sketched (fig. 1.35)—from the area in Venice known as Muscle Beach punched a hole in one of the paintings on view. In short, viewers’ reactions to the exhibition ranged from interest to hostility and reflected the problematic place of modern art in Los Angeles at mid-century.

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73 Walter Hopps, interview by Hans-Ulrich Obrist, April 1996, Houston, TX, in Hans-Ulrich Obrist Interviews, ed. Thomas Boutoux (Milan, Italy: Edizioni Charta, 2003), 424. “It attracted the most totally inclusive mix of people—Mom, Dad, the kids, and Neal Cassady and other strange characters, and the patrons of a transvestite bar nearby. I got Ginsberg, Kerouac, and those people to attend. Critics I’d never met showed up. It had a big attendance.”

74 Gordon Wagner, notebook from 1951-1955, Gordon Wagner Papers, Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles (Collection 1594), box 28 folder 2. The handwritten text is here transcribed with its original spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. While one cannot be certain what Wagner is referring to when he discusses the “orange job,” in the top right corner of his vertical sketch is a horizontal rectangle with the word “orange” written across it. Based on the context, one may infer that the rectangular outline is a hanging painting and, perhaps, was either painted orange or displayed the word, “orange.”

75 “I remember there was one […] big black painting with a hole in it, just punched through.” Gordon Wagner, interview by Richard Candida Smith, 7 February 1987, UCLA Oral History Program, Los Angeles, CA.
The show’s title, *Action I*, exhibits the trappings of a self-conscious and nuanced wordplay. Kenneth Allan argues that the title likely references Harold Rosenberg’s 1952 *ARTnews* article, “American Action Painters.” Yet, the word also recalls the iconic clap of film clapboards followed by the vocalization: action! Art historian Fred Orton, in his discussion of Abstract Expressionism, argues that the word “action” is a loaded term that carries with it the possibility of revolt and insurrection. Just as the exhibition’s title suggests the multivalent ways in which one might engage with the concept of action, the show was installed on a rotating merry-go-round (in action) and displayed, in addition to assemblages, collages, and lithographs, paintings that recorded artists’ movements and gestures on canvas.

The flier (fig. 1.36) used to advertise the show features sans-serif typeface arranged into an active design. The large, dominant “A” tips to the side and animates the word “painters”: the letter “i” is upside down so that it resembles an exclamation point, “n” is at a sharp angle, and “t” is horizontal to the picture plane. “Action of the west coast” is printed in bold letters in the upper left of the flier and is accompanied by the much smaller subtitle, “paintings collages lithographs contemporary music.” The arrangement recalls the visual vocabulary of 1920s Russian Constructivist posters notable for their geometric forms, sans-serif typefaces, extensive empty or blank spaces, and an overall dynamic design intermingling letters with non-objective shapes. Early 1920s Constructivism was intimately tied to the active promotion of communist ideology (a connection severed by the late 1920s and replaced with state-sponsored socialist realism). Its proponents advocated for an aesthetic of utilitarian forms and modern materials that would foster

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an environment conducive to the establishment of a communist collective. Thus, within the flyer, the typographical arrangement of the text, like the words themselves, conveys a sense of action and movement and formally references, and perhaps even goads, the politically charged sentiments regarding contemporary art in Los Angeles.

Less than a year after Action I, an assemblage by Maurice Syndell (constructed by Ed Kienholz, with the addition of steel wool by either Bartosh or Hopps) was compulsorily removed from the 1956 All-City Outdoor Art Festival at Barnsdall Park. Displayed in the Syndell Studio Booth at the municipally sponsored Art Festival, the piece signifies the extent to which the Maurice Syndell prank had evolved. By 1956, two years after his conception, Syndell had not only managed to operate a booth at a city-sponsored art fair, but also to provoke municipal action and censorship. The censorship itself, according to Kienholz, was more related to the municipal authorities’ view of steel wool as vulgar imagery, and the general suspicion associated with modern art, than to any convincing depiction of female anatomy.

The plot of the 1956 incident mirrored, in part, the narrative arc of the reception of Duchamp’s infamous Fountain. Fountain was submitted to the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibition in New York under the pseudonym R. Mutt. After protests, the readymade was placed behind a screened off partition of the exhibit hall. Nearly forty years later in Los Angeles, an untitled assemblage was submitted to an expansive group show under the

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79 Duchamp reasons that the work was not rejected, since a work could not be rejected from the exhibition, but that *Fountain* was instead intentionally suppressed. “The *Fountain* was simply placed behind a partition and, for the duration of the exhibition, I didn’t know where it was [...] After the exhibition, we found the *Fountain* again, behind a partition, and I retrieved it!” Marcel Duchamp, in Pierre Cabanne and Marcel Duchamp, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 55. *Fountain* was subsequently installed and photographed by Alfred Stieglitz at his gallery, 291. In 1905, Alfred Stieglitz opened “Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession” at 291 Fifth Avenue; the gallery became colloquially known as 291. In 1908, Stieglitz moved the gallery to 293 Fifth Avenue and the new space officially adopted the name 291. Katherine Hoffman, *Stieglitz: A Beginning Light* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 245.
pseudonym Maurice Syndell and was censored. Likewise parallel were the roles played by Duchamp and Kienholz in the organization of the exhibitions from which their pseudonymous works were removed. Duchamp was a member of the board of directors—which turned into a de facto jury—at the Society of Independent Artists. By submitting Fountain under a pseudonym he avoided receiving preferential treatment. His gesture revealed the conventional limits of art at the time and the latently conservative values of an institution that proclaimed an open stance toward modern art. As for Kienholz, the Municipal Arts Department of Los Angeles had hired him—for $1,000—to mount the All-City Festival. Commercial participants such as Paul Kantor and Felix Landau made it possible for the artist-run Syndell Studio to maintain a booth as well. Whereas the works shown by the commercial galleries seemingly went unquestioned, Maurice Syndell’s work in the Syndell Studio booth was ultimately censored. Hopps describes the situation as follows: “the commercial galleries […] could put in anything they wanted, which allowed us to show some really weird works from Syndell. We had work by Ben Bartosh and

80 Sarah Schrank, Art and the City, 116. Ed Kienholz “had been using a vacant theater with a double proscenium as the Now Gallery. In exchange for converting the Turnabout [theater] into a commercial movie theater, the management gave Kienholz the unused stage. After three months at the Turnabout, Kienholz was invited […] to be the city’s contractor for the annual festival […] By 1956 the All City Outdoor Art Show’s budget had tumbled to fifty-four hundred dollars, significantly less than the forty thousand dollars allotted in previous years. Near bankruptcy, the Municipal Arts Department needed a contractor who would work for cheap and Kienholz fit the bill […] paid one thousand dollars plus expenses, he organized, built, and promoted the show.” While the municipality maintained an aversion to avant-gardists, Kienholz was better known in the city in the mid-1950s as a handyman than an artist. As Walter Hopps explains, Kienholz made “a living as an all-purpose handyman. He had a good, solid pickup truck with some extra carrying beds and racks welded onto it. It had a beautifully hand-lettered sign on each side saying ‘Ed Kienholz: Expert’ and giving his phone number. ‘Expert’ was in big letters. I asked him about that and he said, ‘People can get all kinds of things screwed up around their house or their store, and they are not entirely clear who to call or what to do. People always need to have something fixed that they can’t face or are afraid costs too much. My sign is reassuring.’” Walter Hopps, “A Note from the Underworld,” 27-28.

81 Walter Hopps was responsible for inviting the commercial galleries to participate in the All-City Outdoor Art Festival, which opened a space for Syndell Studio to include works that might otherwise not have been exhibited: “As soon as Kienholz had the contract, I managed to convince him that he needed me as a partner. He actually didn’t take much convincing; he said, ‘I could use you. There are an awful lot of people I can’t stand to talk to and you’re going to have to talk to every one of them. You’re going to be in charge of all bullshit’ […] We opened a category at the festival for commercial galleries, which had never been done before or since. That created quite a lot of interest for the public, who didn’t often go to the galleries in Beverly Hills and West Hollywood. I went out of my way to invite all those galleries—Felix Landau, Paul Kantor, and the rest—and give them nice space and special treatment. I did that to establish a context so that the Syndell Studio could be included as well […] A lot of the so-called independent professional artists were really angry about that innovation.” Walter Hopps, “A Note from the Underworld,” 29.
Michael Scoles and Craig Kauffman, and even a couple of children.”

Since Kienholz was the individual responsible for mounting the festival, to which anyone could submit work, one wonders if the prank would have been so effective had he submitted the censored work under his own name. Both Kienholz and Hopps considered it absurd and farfetched that the authorities read Syndell’s assemblage as a depiction of female anatomy; thus one is left to wonder why the work was censored. I suggest that, by 1956, the name Maurice Syndell had accrued just enough notoriety that the artwork’s attribution factored into the censorship. Whether or not the authorities were aware that the name was a pseudonym is not known; but Syndell’s composition was targeted over those pieces composed by other so-called modern artists also displayed in the Syndell Booth—including Ben Bartosh (who was constructing sound-producing assemblages at that time) and Craig Kauffman (who was deeply immersed in gestural Abstract Expressionism in the mid-1950s).

The parallels with Duchamp’s Fountain notwithstanding, one is left to wonder if Kienholz was aware of the censorial precedent. Kienholz, whose participation in the Syndell project began after his introduction to Walter Hopps in 1956, has consistently framed himself as having been art historically unaware. Branding himself as an uncultured and highly masculine figure functioned well within a postwar U.S. cultural climate, where the western, somewhat cowboy-like persona of Jackson Pollock could be aggrandized. Kienholz deliberately stresses his working class background in interviews, stating in 1962, for example, “A brush is not a tool that

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82 Walter Hopps, “A Note from the Underworld,” 29.
83 While it is not known, precisely, the artworks that Paul Kantor Gallery and Felix Landau Gallery exhibited in their booths, both were known to have exhibited works by local artists working in a visually abstract language on previous occasions. Within their respective galleries, Paul Kantor had exhibited works by Richard Diebenkorn and Felix Landau displayed paintings by Sam Francis. The Syndell Studio booth, in addition to displaying a work said to be by Maurice Syndell, also included artworks by “Ben Bartosh and Michael Scoles and Craig Kauffman, and even by a couple of children.” Walter Hopps, “A Note from the Underworld,” 29.
I am naturally attuned with. But I understand an electric drill very well.”

In fact, he had studied art at both Eastern Washington College in Cheney, Washington, and Whitmore College in Spokane, Washington. In 1952/53 he moved to Los Angeles and quickly befriended Robert Alexander. In 1954 he established his first studio on Ventura Boulevard in the San Fernando Valley, later moving to Santa Monica Boulevard, and he also began visiting local galleries including Felix Landau, Paul Kantor, and Esther Robles. His involvement with individuals aware of modern art history, such as Hopps, as well as his continued engagement with the art world, distinctly problematizes the naïve persona he fostered. Not only was he an informed member of the Syndell project, but he also acted in concert with Hopps on many occasions. The two were in communication throughout the installation of the 1956 Art Fair. Hopps specifically petitioned Paul Kantor and Felix Landau to set up booths in order to facilitate the inclusion of Syndell Studio. Additionally, in 1957 Hopps and Kienholz collaboratively opened Ferus Gallery, which displayed the work of a number of artists who individually fashioned alternative personae, pseudonyms, and alter egos.

Kienholz’s assemblage, Walter Hopps Hopps Hopps Hopps of 1959 (fig. 1.37-1.38) both parodies and pays homage to the well-known curator. The piece repurposes a motor-oil advertising mascot known as the “Bardahl Man,” to which Kienholz added Hopps’s trademark glasses and skinny tie. Affixed to the figure’s left torso, and positioned so as to appear underneath his jacket, are miniature abstract paintings (reproducing works, from top to bottom,

86 The back of the assemblage is adorned with eccentric objects that, perhaps, reference aspects of Hopps’s personality: the vertically installed vertebrae of an animal (perhaps suggesting that Hopps had a colloquial backbone), a rotary telephone dial (a now-outdated art dealer’s essential tool), and a jumble of compartments holding pictures, scraps of paper, medicine bottles labeled “Get Up,” “Get Down,” and “Be On Time” (Hopps was a speed addict during the late-1950s through 1966 when he had a breakdown and spent several weeks in the psychiatric ward of Cedars-Sinai Medical Center), and a dental mold, among other objects.
by Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Jackson Pollock). The sculpture situates Hopps as a hustler selling contemporary artworks in a manner that suggests his dealings were not entirely legal or authorized. On the back of the sculpture is a list titled, “Major Artists I Want To Show,” which was composed by Hopps at Kienholz’s request. The list makes sly puns and in-jokes on the names of significant East and West Coast artists: Willem de Kooning is Willem de Conning, Jasper Johns is Jasper Cans, Philip Guston is Flip Gaston, Sam Francis is Samuel Fancyass, Franz Kline is Franz Climb, Clyfford Still is Clifford Styles, Richard Diebenkorn is Richard Deepinkorn, Joseph Cornell is Joseph Cornball, and Jackson Pollock is Jackson Potluck. The sculpture not only suggests the dubious nature of selling and displaying modern art in Los Angeles (without concern as to whether it was made by an East Coast- or West Coast-based artist), but also exhibits Hopps’s penchant for name-games.

Following *Action I, Action²* (pronounced, “action squared”) was held from September 5-28, 1956 at Kienholz’s Now Gallery in the back of the Turnabout Theatre. The Turnabout Theatre in Hollywood was established by a troupe of puppeteers (the Yale Puppeteers) in 1941 and was a staple in the entertainment business of Los Angeles until it closed in 1956—at which time Kienholz, in exchange for converting the space into a commercial movie theater, transformed the unused stages (the theatre had two) into an exhibition venue. *Action²* was organized by Walter Hopps and Robert Alexander on behalf of Syndell Studio and included many of the same artists who had exhibited at *Action I* (both Los Angeles-based and San Francisco-based artists). Kienholz explains that Walter “came to me and said, ‘We’d like to have a show.’ He had had Action I at the [Santa Monica] Pier, the ‘Merry-Go-Round’ show. And he wanted to have Action II [at the Turnabout], and they brought the stuff down from San Francisco
and hung it around the space as best they could […] That was at the time that Walter was having trouble with Syndell, so he came to me.”

While there are no known photographs of Action², numerous interviews with relevant figures describe the show as a multi-room exhibition dominated by paintings. Additionally, an entire room was filled with Robert Alexander’s collages, including dozens of compositions constructed from the cork-tips of cigarettes and Alexander’s large assemblage Blood of the Poet of 1956, which was named after Jean Cocteau’s eponymous 1930 film. While the show included a wide variety of works, it included considerably fewer artists than Action I. Many of the original participants were excluded in favor of showing multiple works by fewer contributors.

Existing literature situates Action² as one of the early successes of the emerging West Coast avant-garde. Kenneth Allan’s 2002 article argues that the exhibition and accompanying catalogue serve as proof that an avant-garde was “beginning to take root in Los Angeles.” Jules Langsner’s contemporaneous ARTnews review refers to “our local avant garde” and

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87 Edward Kienholz, interview by Lawrence Weschler, 1977, Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Oral History Project, University of California, Los Angeles, CA. The specifics of the “trouble” to which Kienholz refers were not fleshed out in the interview and consequently remain unknown. Kienholz highlights that artwork was brought from San Francisco to Los Angeles to be displayed in the exhibition; however, the exhibition included works by artists based in both San Francisco and Los Angeles.


89 Robert Alexander, interview with Sandra Leonard Starr, 1986-1988, in Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art, 84-85. “[Walter and I] were talking about the ACTION II show and where to have it. I suggested that we go over to the Now Gallery [at the Turnabout] and talk to Ed [Kienholz] […] Walter and I hung the ACTION II show. There was a room in which I had [an] environment. There were some boxes and some cork tips. I saved everybody’s cork-tipped cigarettes and cut off the tobacco end and built things out of cork tips using pins, sticking and gluing them together. I was working [on] very little [pieces] then, so this whole room was full of dozens and dozens of little things […] it was my idea to combine some words or a little poem with some sort of graphic. Blood of the Poet was a fortunate/unfortunate piece I did in 1956. It was an accident. I wish I could say I did it on purpose and stood there and bled. But I didn’t. I cut myself with a matte knife, and I stood there and was just fascinated by it.”

characterizes the artists as comprising the “Los Angeles Left Bank.” The exhibition also displayed paintings by artists working in abstract visual languages, including Jay DeFeo, Craig Kauffman, and Wally Hedrick, as well as poetry, collages and stove pipe constructions. While Langsner approaches the exhibition as a signifier of the strengthening Los Angeles avant-garde, he does so at the expense of acknowledging that more than half of the exhibiting artists were, in fact, San Francisco-based. Nonetheless, while many of the exhibiting artists had participated in *Action I* and elicited mostly negative reactions from the general public, they were here met by both a positive review and a lack of public outcry. The shift in reception was most likely due to the change of venue: the Now Gallery was a private and intimate display space visited by art world insiders, a stark contrast to a publically sited merry-go-round in Santa Monica that was frequented by the public at large.

Notably, while the exhibition was organized by Syndell Studio—which printed all accompanying publicity material and the exhibition’s catalogue—it did not include an actual artwork exhibited under the name, Maurice Syndell. The increasingly positive reception of avant-garde artworks and of an exhibition organized by Syndell Studio, yet shown in the Now Gallery, evinces the changing climate of the city over the course of 1955-1956, as well as the degree to which Syndell Studio was transforming into a more mainstream and better-known

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91 “For a glimpse of what the Los Angeles Left Bank is doing these days the place to go is the Now Gallery […] ‘Action 2,’ is co-sponsored by Syndell Studio and the Now Gallery, and offers paintings, poetry, collages and stove pipe constructions […] Julius Wasserstein and Sonia Gechtoff […] are the stars of the show.” Jules Langsner, “Local Avant-Garde,” *ARTnews* 55 (November 1956): 63. The Left Bank is the section of Paris that is historically known as the artistic part of the city and was home to artists and writers.

92 Langsner’s review continues to list the other participants as: “I.E. Alexander, Elwood Decker, J. De Feo [sic], Wally Hedrick, Gilbert Henderson, Craig Kauffman [sic], James Kelly, Gerd Koch, Paul Sarkisian and Fred Wellington.” “Local Avant-Garde,” *ARTnews* 55 (November 1956): 63. Robert Alexander often signed his poetry and artwork with the name: i.e. alexander.

93 Los Angeles-based artists included: Robert Alexander, Craig Kauffman, Paul Sarkisian, and Gerd Koch; San Francisco-based artists included: Julius Wasserstein, Sonia Gechtoff, Elwood Decker, Jay DeFeo, Wally Hedrick, and James Kelly. I can find no record of Gilbert Henderson and Fred Wellington.
operation. In other words, how a complex, inside-joke within a tight-knit circle of participants was transforming into a publicly recognizable brand name.

While the title, *Action²*, fulfills the promise of a sequel suggested by *Action I*, it also plays on the “squared” nature of the exhibition itself in three distinct ways. First, unlike *Action I*, which was exhibited on a circular merry-go-round, *Action²* took place in the rectangular space of Now Gallery (fig. 1.39). The gallery’s display area comprised the squared-off stages of the theatre in which paneled walls both exhibited the artworks and broke up the space into separate gallery rooms. Secondly, although the Now Gallery was an artist-run, alternative site—whose name was designed to convey the contemporaneity of the artwork it exhibited—it nonetheless operated as an exhibition space and under the expectations that are ascribed to the role of a gallery as a cultural site. While *Action I* was hosted at the unorthodox site of Newcomb Pier, *Action²* took place at a site established for the display of artwork—it was, colloquially, more ‘square.’ Finally, the title also alludes to the squaring (mathematically multiplying a number by itself) of action. Following the restrictions faced during the mounting of *Action I* and the censorship of the piece by Maurice Syndell at the Syndell Booth in the All-City Outdoor Art Festival, *Action²* suggests the increasing presence of Syndell-sponsored programs (three exhibitions between May 1955 and September 1956) as well as the resulting public and municipal actions (the denial of municipal exhibition space, a punched-through painting, a censored assemblage).

The publicity material and catalogue for *Action²* were printed by Robert Alexander on the floor of Syndell Studio with a five-by-seven handpress. The publicity mailings are affixed to pieces of cardboard and visually play with scale and the tensions inherent in the title of the

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94 Edward Kienholz, interview by Lawrence Weschler, 1977, Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Oral History Project, University of California, Los Angeles, CA.
95 The publicity prints are in the private collection of Caroline Huber (the widow of Walter Hopps).
exhibition. Two of the mailings are horizontally situated rectangular prints (fig. 1.40-1.41). In both, the title of the exhibition is printed in black, lowercase lettering while the notation for “squared” is printed in red. In one, the exhibition’s title, along with information concerning the site of display, is printed on top of a faint, green, non-objective print. The design mimics the motif apparent in the Syndell Studio business card, but in the Action² print, the logo is notably larger in scale in comparison to the mailing’s text. In the other, the word “LARGEST” is printed upside-down, in green, and positioned so that it crosses the entire card’s plane—perhaps suggesting an increase or enlargement of the avant-garde. The upside-down “LARGEST” additionally implies a form of reversal—and perhaps alludes to the changing climate in the city, one in which types of artwork that were once considered politically suspect, and on occasion prohibited from display, were becoming increasingly visible.

The September 1956 opening of Action² occurred nearly two years after the December 1954 censure of McCarthy. While anti-communist fanaticism continued well into the 1960s, after 1954 it lost much of its fevered pitch. Consequently, the censorious restrictions that the experimental fine arts faced in the early and mid-1950s, gradually loosened as the decade progressed. A parallel history of waning censorship is documented in film historian Peter Lev’s Transforming the Screen, 1950-1959 (2003). Lev details the censorship faced by the film industry in the early 1950s, and the waning of those restrictions after 1954. While the film industry and, as I argue, the fine arts, were still forced to navigate initiatives tasked with weeding-out possible pro-communist propaganda, the latter 1950s were characterized by gradually less stringent restrictions.⁹⁶

Another series of Action² publicity images are vertically oriented and depict images of the moon in black and white (fig. 1.42-1.43). Located in the lower portion of the moon is the address

of the exhibition, opening dates, and the title of the show, “ACTION²,” printed in red. The publicity images pair a large circular moon, with a small red square, creating a geometric contrast that, perhaps, suggests the multi-layered connotations of “square” associated with the new exhibition venue. Both the horizontal and vertical publicity designs build on a priori knowledge of the events surrounding the exhibitions and the visual rhetoric associated with the Studio. While both compositions provide the requisite exhibition information and do so in a graphic language that manipulates the scale of the text and the image in a dynamic format, the publicity images also provide a second layer of information that alludes to the increasingly “ squared” nature of the Syndell project.

Unlike the earlier Syndell projects, Action² was accompanied by a catalogue. The catalogue includes text, reproductions of artworks, and a credits page listing both Syndell Studio and the Now Gallery as the organizers of the exhibition. The catalogue is the subject of Kenneth Allan’s article, within which he discusses a specific passage printed on an interior page of the text (fig. 1.44):

WE CAN MAKE, HANG, WRECK, SHOW, sell or enjoy them, but it’s “…almost impossible for us to measure the efficacity [sic] of a work of art which we have written or painted, since true admiration…..is almost always accompanied by an insurmountable uneasiness”

In Allan’s discussion of the passage, he addresses the manifesto-like tone of the text and the use of the word “we” to suggest a united front amidst a group of very diverse artists. Additionally, he makes passing reference to the amusing nature of the statement evidenced by the misspelling of the word efficacy and the use of a fake quote.97 Walter Hopps, in a phone interview with Allan in 2002, explains that he fabricated the quote for effect. Thus, I suggest that the quote establishes an

ambivalent topography—both compounding the value of the phrase by isolating it within quotation marks while simultaneously undermining its authority through a reference to something absent. Sequestered within the quote, the words thus reveal themselves as spoken by a corporeal body while simultaneously making reference to a lack thereof (perhaps the absent body of Syndell himself).

While Allan’s focus was on the various elements manifest in the catalogue that signified the rise of the avant-garde, when approached as a product of Syndell Studio, the catalogue might also serve as a tome summarizing the collaborative work of the Studio itself. By the time the exhibition opened, Kienholz and Hopps had already begun to discuss opening a gallery together (Ferus Gallery), and Hopps was ready to close Syndell Studio.98 Thus, the “we” might also allude to the group of people responsible for organizing the exhibition (Hopps, Kienholz, Alexander)—all of whom were participants in the Syndell project—and simultaneously serve as a discussion of the efficacy (or effectiveness) of the venture. It is noteworthy that the words “MAKE, HANG, WRECK, SHOW” are capitalized, while “sell or enjoy” remain lower case; and the counterfeit quote ends with the phrase, “insurmountable uneasiness.” 99 The Studio made


99 Kenneth Allan tackles the phrase “insurmountable uneasiness” by relating it to Leo Steinberg’s suggestion that the value of contemporary art lies in its power to provoke a personal crisis and, ultimately, this anxiety is an inherent aspect of the appreciation of the new. Leo Steinberg, “Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public,” in Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1972), 3-16. However, the connection between anxiety and newness can be expanded in light of the use of humor as a means of social and political critique. The pranks and jokes perpetuated by the emerging avant-garde provoked an “insurmountable uneasiness” by exposing what humor theorist Paolo Virno refers to as “the common behavior of humankind.” Virno argues that jokes are innovative actions that can produce social change by exposing common behavior as neither inherent nor common, but rather, constructed. “Jokes perform a surprise retreat from the norm to normality, they strip the rule of authority in the name of ‘the common behavior of mankind.’” Paolo Virno, Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e); Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 120. Basically, by suggesting alternatives to the norm, jokes such as the Syndell project expose alternatives to an existing rule, and consequently produce an “insurmountable uneasiness.”
and displayed work to the bemusement, ire, and unease of authorities, and it evidently generated few sales and little public enjoyment. Walter Hopps, in a 1994 interview, frankly states: “It’s hard today to make somebody understand what the cultural milieu there was like in the early fifties […] people don’t remember the degree to which the new art was not shown, was not sold, was not written about, was not taught.” Through the collaborative Studio, those artists and individuals interested in avant-garde art became a “we.” As Critchley aptly explains, a shared sense of humor highlights a shared sense of the everyday: “Jokes are reminders of who ‘we’ are, who ‘we’ have been, and who ‘we’ might come to be.”

Duchamp posits that at “the moment the artist gets put on a pedestal, he sits at the hostess’s right hand. He’s a superior being, possessed of intangible fantasies. It’s alright by me. But it gives me a laugh.” The custom of assigning meaning by way of the artist’s body is a custom that Duchamp problematizes through his many and varied identities, and it is a practice similarly problematized by the avant-garde antics and pranks perpetuated under the name of Maurice Syndell and Syndell Studio. With no actual living body, the many and varied signatures (both figurative and literal) of Maurice Syndell make it impossible to assign marketable value to works produced by him or after him. Indeed, anyone aware of the project is capable of perpetuating the prank; Maurice Syndell was invoked as recently as 2007: the website for the 2007 Woodstock Film Festival (fig. 1.45-1.46) credits Maurice Syndell as the Cinematographer of Morgan Neville’s documentary, The Cool School. The film examines Los Angeles 1960s artists, referred to alternately as The Cool School, Finish Fetish, or the L.A. Look. Many of the

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101 Simon Critchley, On Humour, 87.
individuals associated with such labels were informed by the name games instigated by Syndell Studio in the 1950s.

Less than a month after Action² closed, the October 21, 1956, issue of the Los Angeles Times reported on the status of Syndell Studio in the “In The Galleries” section. Jules Langsner’s article re-defines the avant-garde as “AVANT-GRADE,” suggesting that the artworks on view at Syndell were both at the forefront of experimental art, and ahead of contemporary rating systems. Under the heading “AVANT-GRADE,” Langsner recommends Syndell Studio as the new “it” spot and goes on to list its exhibiting artists as “the current attraction.”¹⁰⁴

Syndell Studio’s emergence into a more mainstream art world and public awareness destabilized the insider nature of the site’s operation. Within an environment becoming less hostile towards contemporary art, the Studio was disbanded in either late 1956 or early 1957. The project was an avant-garde intervention designed, as Walter Hopps describes it, to “see what could be done to shake up and change any number of status quo situations.”¹⁰⁵ The Studio teased Los Angeles’s communist paranoia by pseudonymously displaying artworks that, in the mid-1950s, were considered tantamount to communist propaganda. The initial exclusivity of the project helped establish the limits and boundaries of an emerging avant-garde, and also provide a sense of security and community in view of the hostile cultural climate. Although Syndell Studio was a short-lived venture, it nonetheless represents an early and strategic use of a pseudonym—a strategy that developed into a working method for many artists in the 1960s associated with Ferus Gallery.

CHAPTER 2

BILLY AL BENGSTON’S ROLE-PLAYING

The first influence in Bengston’s life was uncle Earle Jean, a rangy man whose reputation in Dodge City for matching clothing failed to shake his relatives’ faith in him as the clan sage – despite the fact he had sole control of the family finances.

So, when Uncle E.J. first saw one of baby Billy’s early scribbles and prophesized the boy’s future, the family wordlessly followed his orders to anoint the child’s hand, repeat a garbled phrase at three stations of the sun and dip his privates in a poultice of powdered horse fly and muscatel. They put complete store by his prediction that the littlest Bengston was born blessed and would one day walk with angels.

Earle Jean died of the clap at 83, bequeathing the bank book and a vow to return in a different form.

Billy was then only seven but, as noted, had been greatly influenced by the man: almost daily he would recall and use some bit of E.J.’s wisdom—shut up; get out of here; always cover your tracks, etc. […] Today, Billy Al Bengston lives and works someplace in Los Angeles, his exact whereabouts a secret.¹

The above excerpt is taken from a page long text, “67X The Authorized Version: Bengston Bio,” (fig. 2.1) in the 1968 catalogue accompanying the solo show of Billy Al Bengston (b. 1934, Dodge City, KS) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA).² The biography is not part of the official catalogue. It is printed on thin, semi-transparent tracing paper

² 67x was Billy Al Bengston’s professional motorcycle racing number.
and was furtively inserted into the publication between the front flyleaf and the title page. Alan D. Shean, a Los Angeles-based cartoonist and Abstract Expressionist painter, composed the essay at Bengston’s request. The satirical biography is the rhetorical counterpart to the official catalogue text, written by curator and art historian James Monte, discussing the artist’s biography and artistic development. Bengston, displeased by the erudite and formal interpretation of his artwork, précises, “the writing […] by Jim Monte, James Monte […] was just the worst crap. So I asked my friend Al to write something and we blew it in. Much more humorous […] It’s pretty funny.” Within the satirical biography, the artist occupies the exaggerated role of a provincial bumpkin—one of many roles he would don within an artistic practice complexly involved with the enterprise of self-portrayal.

The pun-filled biography is a key aspect of this catalogue turned artist’s book, which was designed by Los Angeles-based artist Ed Ruscha (fig. 2.2). The front cover is made of high-grade brown sandpaper (100-C) with soft, pink, felt lettering that spells Billy; and the rear cover is low-grade, coarse, dark sandpaper (50-D)—the roughness of the sandpaper makes the catalogue painful to handle and contrasts, tactiley, with the fabric lettering. The entire book is bound with a double nut and bolt binding and the last pages feature grainy, black and white snapshots of “Billy” (the name inscribed also on his leather jacket) on his motorcycle: the first photograph

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3 Bengston recounts that he and Ed Ruscha inserted the biography into the catalogue immediately before delivering the texts to the museum. “They [the museum] put it [the catalogue] out and didn’t know it was in there!” Billy Al Bengston, interview with author, 26 April 2014, telephone.


5 Bengston describes the process behind the catalogue’s creation: “Originally, Ed wanted to do it in black leather. Well, there was no money for that. Then, we started going around—what can we do it out of? And he [Ed Ruscha] said— I think he came up with the sandpaper and I came up with the flocker…it came out great.” Billy Al Bengston, interview by Susan Ford Morgan, 2002. My own experience with the book was both highly tactile and quite uncomfortable: The text is very tightly bound and I had to firmly grip the rough covers of the book in order read it; but I also had to be careful not to crease or damage the pages in an effort to actually read the book.
captures the artist racing around a corner with confidence and surety (fig. 2.3), the second shows him at an increasingly dangerous angle on a motorcycle that features his racing number, “67x” (fig. 2.4), and the final photograph depicts the artist on a Thunderbike falling in the middle of a turn (fig. 2.5).

The 1968 exhibition featured forty-six artworks composed between 1958 and 1968. The show included Bengston’s early oil on canvas compositions, as well as his later sprayed paintings on either Masonite or dented metal. The show presented examples from Bengston’s Valentines series, such as Brigitte of 1959 (fig. 2.6), which is named after Brigitte Bardot and features a heart within a geometric square, as well as the Dracula series, such as Count Dracula II of 1960 (fig. 2.7), that displays an iris at the center of the canvas. Other painted works on view depicted the component parts and logos of motorcycles, such as the oil on canvas Birmingham Small Arms I (BSA) of 1961 (fig 2.8). These matte compositions were installed alongside Bengston’s highly reflective and polished works painted using an automobile spray gun. Busby of 1963 (fig. 2.9) is a large, sprayed composition on Masonite with subtly realized sergeant stripes nesting in a circle of painted spotlights. John of 1966 (fig. 2.10) and Angel and the Badman of 1967 (fig. 2.11), named after the eponymous 1947 film starring John Wayne, are examples of Bengston’s Dentos series (1965-1969) and feature lightly painted sergeant stripes on highly reflective and dented aluminum.6

The exhibition’s installation, like the catalogue that pairs an official essay with an illicit text and rough sandpaper with soft felt lettering, was organized in an eccentric manner. Architect Frank Gehry designed the installation at Bengston’s request. With the help of museum staff, Gehry painted half the gallery walls a traditional matte white and covered the other half with

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6 Valentines, Draculas, and Dentos are not official series titles; they are classifying terms that have been used since the 1960s to describe Bengston’s work displaying a painted heart or iris on canvas, or sergeant stripe insignia on canvas, Masonite, or metal.
either corrugated steel and unpainted plywood, and wooden support beams were installed in various open spaces to further divide the exhibition area.7 Bengston’s racing number, 67x, was placed above the entrance to the exhibition (fig. 2.12). Some of the gallery rooms were filled with old furniture, household lighting, and even a working television, while other areas did not include domestic features (fig. 2.13-2.14).

Bengston’s paintings and printed material were hung on various surfaces and in a variety of settings. A plywood wall displayed printed material, some of which Bengston had designed. Affixed to the wall was The Studs publicity poster that Bengston had published to advertise a group show at L.A.’s Ferus Gallery (founded in 1957 by Hopps and Kienholz), and hanging from a string was a copy of the book Business Cards (1968) which was collaboratively authored by Bengston and Ruscha (fig. 2.15). Brigitte was hung on an elevated white wall (fig. 2.16); a now-lost painting, Chaney of 1965, occupied a wall space covered with corrugated steel (fig. 2.17); and John was hung on a white wall and in close proximity to two living room chairs (one of which was inflatable) and a coffee table (fig. 2.18). A side-gallery exhibited Birmingham Small Arms I (BSA) alongside one of Bengston’s motorcycles and a full-sized wax replica of the artist

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7 The materials used to build the environment were sourced from the museum’s storage room. “There was no budget to buy materials […] So I asked them [the curators] to take me down to their storeroom, where they had piles of plywood […] I asked what they were doing with the plywood and they didn’t know, so I took it and made his [Bengston’s] exhibition […] They [the curators] thought I was going to want them painted, but I didn’t. The day that [LACMA director] Donahue finally came in to see it, I think he almost had a heart attack.” Frank Gehry, interview by Aram Moshayedi, “Decorative Arts: Billy Al Bengston and Frank Gehry discuss their 1968 collaboration at LACMA” East of Borneo (04 February 2014), retrieved from http://www.eastofborneo.org.
that was commissioned by Frank Gehry (fig. 2.19).\(^8\) The wax model was dressed in leather biker-gear that Bengston had designed and was positioned in a chained off space.\(^9\)

Reflecting on the exhibition’s use of texture, Maurice Tuchman, the former director of LACMA, describes the catalogue as a text filled with “affectionate humor,” and the exhibition as a “total installation.”\(^10\) Larry Bell suggests the exhibition was “aimed at humor and to shorten the distance between humor and the value of the paintings.”\(^11\) Frank Gehry, by contrast, draws analogies between the exhibition and the film industry: “Billy realized at an early moment how Hollywood and the media had overpowered the whole world.”\(^12\) Bengston, refusing to discuss the artwork in the show, insists instead that he only wants to “talk about all the things around it.”\(^13\) Within the gallery space, the audience was able to interact with the entire exhibition area. As viewers engaged with the environment, sat on the chairs, watched television, and wandered through the galleries, they simultaneously encountered printed publicity materials, paintings titled for Hollywood films and actors, and sprayed works that reflected and mutated viewers’

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8 Recalled Frank Gehry: “Just by accident one night at some party in Hollywood with John Altoon, I met this guy named Spoony Singh, who owned the Hollywood Wax Museum. We all got drunk, and I told him about the show, and I told him about Billy. In my mind, Billy was a big thing—I thought everybody knew who he was—but this guy didn’t have a clue who Billy was. He did it anyway, though […] I told him after the show he could put it in the Hollywood Wax Museum, but he just looked at me. I assumed he would be interested, but he wasn’t. He just made the wax figure, and that was it.” Frank Gehry, interview by Aram Moshayedi, 2014.

9 A small sculpture was placed to the side of the life-size figure. As Bengston explains: “A friend of mine who was an acolyte racer gave it to me at the show’s opening, so I put it down there. I have no idea what it is. It’s a little sculpture of me going into a turn on a motorcycle; it was his concept. I don’t even think Frank [Gehry] knew about it.” Billy Al Bengston, interview by Aram Moshayedi, 2014.


12 Frank Gehry, interview by Aram Moshayedi, 2014.

13 Billy Al Bengston, interview by Maurice Tuchman, 28 January 1987, as published in Tuchman, “The Installation of Billy Al Bengston,” in \textit{Billy Al Bengston: Paintings of Three Decades}, 46. The italics were included in the published interview.
likenesses within their mirror-like surfaces.\textsuperscript{14} The above assessments touch on the crux of Bengston’s practice, which operates by means of exaggeration, and is located at a point where humor, plausibility, and Hollywood converge. The exhibition showcased the artist’s satirical and fictional biography while the titles of the artworks categorically tied his practice to the neighboring film industry; it represented Bengston, not just as an artist, but also as a celebrity (with the attendant wax replica).

**BILLY AL BENGSTON AND FINISH FETISH**

Billy Al Bengston’s sprayed and hand-polished artworks, such as *Busby, John*, and *Angel and the Badman*, are commonly situated within a Los Angeles aesthetic sometimes referred to as the “L.A. Look,” “The Cool School,” or “L.A. Pop.”\textsuperscript{15} John Coplans, however, coined a different term to describe the 1960s work of Bengston as well as his peers including Larry Bell, Joe Goode, Craig Kauffman, and Ed Ruscha: “Fetish Finish,” or “Finish Fetish” as it would become more widely termed. Finish Fetish is distinguished by sensuously colored and immaculate

\textsuperscript{14} Bengston notes that many people, and especially the museum guards, simply spent time sitting on the couch and watching television, as if they were in their living rooms at home. Billy Al Bengston, interview by Maurice Tuchman, 28 January 1987, as published in Tuchman, “The Installation of Billy Al Bengston,” in *Billy Al Bengston: Paintings of Three Decades*, 50.

\textsuperscript{15} Artist and critic Peter Plagens refers to 1960s Los Angeles art as displaying a “L.A. Look.” The term refers generically to cool, semitechnological, industrially pretty art made in and around Los Angeles in the sixties by Larry Bell, Craig Kauffman, Ed Ruscha, Billy Al Bengston, Kenneth Price, John McCracken, Peter Alexander, DeWain Valentine, Robert Irwin, and Joe Goode, among others. The patented ‘look’ was elegance and simplicity, and the mythical material was plastic, including polyester resin, which has several attractions: permanence (indoors), an aura of difficulty and technical expertise, and preciousness (when polished) rivaling bronze or marble.” Peter Plagens, “Los Angeles—Reviews,” *Artforum* 8, no. 8 (April 1970): 84. The founding editor of *Artforum*, Philip Leider, dubbed the scene “The Cool School” in an eponymous article. The term alludes to both the formal qualities of the work, as well as the stylish and hip nature of the artists at the time: “A hatred of the superfluous, a drive toward compression, a precision of execution which extends to the production of any trifle, an impeccability of surface, and, still in reaction, a new distance between artist and work of art, between artist and viewer, achieved by jocularity, parody, the inclusion of irreverent touches and symbols, or, above all, by the precise, enclosed nature of the work of art itself.” Philip Leider, “The Cool School,” *Artpaper* 2, no. 12 (June 1964): 47. Art critic Nancy Marmer refers to artists including Bengston, Ruscha, and Goode as “L.A. Pop.” Marmer details the reception and exponential rise of Pop Art in Los Angeles and asserts that Pop more aggressively developed in Southern California than New York due to the lack of art historical precedent on the West Coast, as well as significant exhibitions that occurred in Los Angeles: Andy Warhol’s 1962 Ferus Gallery exhibition, and Marcel Duchamp’s 1963 retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Museum). She identifies L.A. Pop as, “an ascetic, mechanistic, and highly polished formalism—a style which may have learned its ironic distance and commercial sheen from Pop, but not its abstract iconography.” Nancy Marmer, “Pop Art in California,” in Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Pop Art* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1966), 148.
surfaces achieved through labor-intensive processes (in contrast to the industrially fabricated works of Donald Judd and Dan Flavin). In the catalogue accompanying the 1966 exhibition *Ten from Los Angeles* at the Seattle Art Museum, Coplans emphasizes the notions of craftsmanship and surface finish to discuss the work of the aforementioned artists:

Pristineness of surface implies what is new, as against what is old or worn, and the substitution of an ideal degree of attention to working habits… There are common underlying characteristics in the handling of media which can be isolated—for example, a pristineness of surface combined with an intense involvement with craft… A sense of ambience manifests itself in the handling of subject matter, in the overall treatment (by the incorporation of aspects of the intensely reflective quality of California light) and in the relative newness of all surfaces (Los Angeles proliferated within living memory)—for example, by the use of shiny, bright, new materials and clean surfaces.\(^\text{16}\)

Coplans’s description centers on the phrases “pristineness of surface” and “newness of all surfaces” as defining qualifiers of both the artwork and the Los Angeles environment. Throughout his description, he maintains that the pristine qualities are the result of artistic labor—craftsmanship—and the direct handling of media by artists. The industrial-looking surfaces of Finish Fetish objects belie the laborious manner in which they were made. On top of the spray-painted design, Bengston, for example, would carefully build up as many as one hundred layers of lacquer which he would then polish and rub out to create dazzling and colorful optical effects. Although few artists in Los Angeles would fulfill Coplans’s exact criteria in a straightforward manner, several artists working in the 1960s—and specifically Bengston, Larry

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Bell, and Judy Gerowitz—fused handcrafting with new technologies to construct objects displaying a pristine surface quality.  

Additional publications and exhibitions have similarly focused on the surface qualities of Bengston’s paintings. In an article devoted to Bengston’s sprayed compositions on Masonite, Coplans relates the works to “the recognizably smooth, highly polished and mirror-like surface of Netherlandish painting compared to the blurred, broken and looser brush application of the Venetians.” Critic Peter Plagens describes the works as, “reinforcing preciousness, craft, exotic surfaces, [and] visual subtleties.” Group exhibitions and accompanying catalogues similarly highlight the formal and reflective qualities of the work. The 1968 catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Transparency/Reflection* at California State College, Fullerton (now California State University), as well as the 1991 catalogue supplementing *Finish Fetish: LA’s Cool School* at the University of Southern California, position the qualities of transparency, reflection, and surface finish apparent in Bengston’s work in relation to artworks by Larry Bell, Judy Gerowitz, Craig Kauffman, and John McCracken, among others.

Art writers and curators have also addressed Bengston’s paintings as evincing a formal engagement with popular imagery and the commercial signage of Los Angeles. Lawrence Alloway included Bengston’s work in the 1963 exhibition *Six More* at LACMA—the sequel to

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17 Many art writers of the 1960s and 70s, including those discussed thus far, use the terms “Cool School,” “L.A. Look,” “Finish Fetish,” “Light and Space,” and even “L.A. Pop” interchangeably. Rather than establishing rigid boundaries or precise terminology, this situation is indicative of an artistic environment that was still in the early years of formation.


an earlier exhibition featuring the work of New York-based artists, *Six Painters and the Object*.21 The show positioned Bengston as representative of Pop Art in California, along with Joe Goode, Phillip Hefferton, Mel Ramos, Ed Ruscha, and Wayne Thiebaud. Jules Langsner, in a 1963 review, describes Bengston’s work as a distant relative of New Realism and addresses the relationship between Bengston’s painted sergeant stripe insignias and the presence of military symbols in contemporary life.22 Nancy Marmer highlights the “disparate body of Pop Art on the West Coast,” in contrast to Pop Art on the East Coast, by pinpointing Billy Al Bengston, Ed Ruscha, and Vija Celmins as representative of the move away from Abstract Expressionism and toward a more authentic and less-imitative art form.23 The 1989 exhibit and catalogue *L.A. Pop in the Sixties* features Bengston as a key figure in the West Coast Pop scene, and the 2001 exhibition catalogue *Pop Art U.S./U.K. Connections 1956-1966* places the artist’s paintings of motorcycle imagery as representative of Pop Art within a Los Angeles environment informed by intercultural exchange.24 Most significantly, Cécile Whiting’s 2008 book *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* situates Bengston’s work within an urban environment and an artistic milieu that she argues was steeped in popular culture: “Given the reputation of Los Angeles as the

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23 “It is a moot point whether the current disparate body of Pop Art on the West Coast grew logically out of its own local antecedents, out of the same nation-wide Zeitgeist or (if one takes the formal view) ‘crisis’ in art which produced the entire spectrum of post-Abstract Expressionist styles, or whether it developed rapidly after and only as a result of influences from New York…Whatever and whenever the ultimate sources, it is beyond question that in the work of such artists as Billy Al Bengston, Edward Ruscha, Joe Goode, Wayne Thiebaud, and Mel Ramos Pop Art did take root easily, early, and that it has flourished smartly, if diversely, in a milieu in which it could well have been invented.” Nancy Marmer, “Pop Art in California,” in *Pop Art*, 139-140. Marmer specifically points to Bengston’s *Birmingham Small Arms I* and *Skinny’s 21*, both of 1961, as representative of Pop Art on the West Coast.  
mecca of popular culture, Pop Art’s natural home would seem to have been Los Angeles all along.”

In recent years, writing on Bengston has called attention to the public persona the artist fostered over the course of a nearly sixty-year career. In 1988, curator Jane Livingston submitted an essay to be published in the catalogue accompanying Bengston’s retrospective, *Billy Al Bengston: Paintings of Three Decades*, jointly organized by the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston and The Oakland Museum. The pre-edited version of the essay speaks frankly about Bengston’s role in the emerging Los Angeles art scene; she identifies the peripheral position Bengston occupied in the rise of the Finish Fetish aesthetic, but the seminal and iconoclastic role he played in the historical moment. “Bengston’s role in originating the ‘Finish Fetish’ aesthetic of the moment is more peripheral, or at any rate more fleeting… [nonetheless] he seemed not only a member of but perhaps the very exemplar of an iconoclastic aesthetic movement…it is startling, therefore, to realize how transient [he] was…vis à vis the other key artists.”

Bengston has become the go-to example of a paradigmatic Los Angeles artist of the 1960s: flashy, with a larger-than-life persona, and performative in his self-presentation. His role in the formation of a community of artists around Ferus Gallery features prominently in later twentieth-, and early twenty-first century texts. Betty Turnbull’s catalogue accompanying the 1976 exhibition at the Newport Harbor Art Museum (now the Orange County Museum of Art) *The Last Time I Saw Ferus, 1957-1966* situates him as a prominent personality within the community that surrounded Ferus Gallery and included Hopps, Kienholz, Kauffman, Bell,

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26 The original essay is very detailed and lengthy, consisting of twelve and a half, typewritten pages in length. The final, printed version of the essay comprises three and a half, typewritten pages.
27 Jane Livingston, “Billy Al Bengston, Some Retrospective Thoughts by Jane Livingston,” circa 1988, Box 9, Folder 47, Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC. Those artists Livingston mentions that became better known, yet occupied a less significant role in the development of the Los Angeles avant-garde art scene, are: Robert Irwin, Larry Bell, and Ed Ruscha.
Ruscha, and Irwin, among others.\textsuperscript{28} He is similarly positioned as a key figure in the Ferus cohort in both the Gagosian Gallery’s 2009 \textit{Ferus} catalogue, as well as Kristine McKenna’s 2009 photo-history book, \textit{Ferus Gallery: A Place to Begin}.\textsuperscript{29} Most recently, the narrative established by the Getty’s \textit{Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art, 1945-1980} distinctly features the artist throughout the text as an individual intensely involved in many circles and practices.\textsuperscript{30} Despite the oft-cited nature of his existence within these historical narratives, a consideration of Bengston’s work in light of his very public self-imaging has yet to be realized.

I contend that Bengston’s artistic practice, in fact, hinges on the various and ironic roles he assumed in conjunction with his exhibited artworks. Over the decade of the 1960s he formulated numerous and exaggerated positions, and the increasing multiplicity of his characters functioned to both confuse, and invite comparison with, the Los Angeles environment more broadly. The insincerity cultivated by the artist adopted the pretense of Hollywood’s constructed personae, and also worked against the seemingly authentic and spiritual interpretations then commonly affixed to nonfigurative artistic practices.

In Los Angeles, by the end of the 1950s, the common association between abstraction and communism gave way to the more prominent discussions then taking place in New York. Abstract Expressionism became ideologically joined with the notions of formal, spiritual, and emotional authenticity. Critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, in divergent ways, endorsed modern art (by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Barnett Newman) as a direct

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
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and vivid form of authentic artistic expression.\textsuperscript{31} The artists themselves perpetuated this interpretation in interviews and artists statements.\textsuperscript{32} Bengston, by contrast, destabilized the marriage of art and authenticity by deliberately maintaining ironic distance by way of a false “Authorized Biography,” alternating accounts of historical events, and ludicrous responses to interview questions.

Yet, rather than simple irreverence, Bengston’s disingenuousness provided a recourse for his veiled support of contemporary, anti-Vietnam War politics. Southern California was the heartland for military technology companies, the presence of which had rapidly expanded in the 1950s due to the vast U.S. military expenditures of the Cold War. Likewise, many art patrons worked in the military and science-based sectors; in other words, the profits from the war were, in part, supporting the art scene. Bengston, rather than directly wedding art and protest, instead suggested such associations by posing as a military sergeant, titling his sergeant stripe paintings for filmic depictions of war and violence, and ironically responding to questions concerning the relationship between arts and activism. Such tactics make it especially contentious to conclusively link his work to the anti-war politics of the era. Because he avoided direct reference


to the Vietnam War, he was able to suggest political dissent, but do so in a manner that would not dissuade support of potential conservative patrons.

Early in his career, Bengston established the pseudonym: Moondoggie. Moondoggie was the artist’s surfing persona who also constructed artworks in clay and created objects stylistically aligned with gestural, Abstract Expressionist compositions of the 1950s. Following Bengston’s introduction to Walter Hopps and Ed Kienholz, he founded the Artist Studio. Inspired by the earlier Syndell Studio project, Bengston used the Artist Studio to compose artworks and ephemera that suggested that art work in Los Angeles was as much a question of publicizing an artist’s constructed personality as it was of making art objects—a practice that distinctly influenced younger artists with whom he socialized, specifically, Larry Bell and Judy Gerowitz. The earliest works produced in the Studio were the series of Valentines and Draculas titled for actors’ stage names and character roles, and suggesting the mutability of public image. This was soon followed by Bengston’s motorcycle paintings of late 1961—and the accompanying ephemera and publicity images—that tied his public celebrity to that of a motorcycle aficionado. It was during this period that he began to sign his name 67x and/or B.A.B. The sprayed and lacquered works featuring sergeant stripes, which he began in 1962, arguably engage with political issues of the era while the ephemera and publicity materials place Bengston alongside the actor Buster Keaton—an actor whom the artist admired because of his agility and stunt work. As the 1960s progressed, Bengston would assume additional personalities including that of a country bumpkin in the biography accompanying his LACMA retrospective;

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33 Bengston was an amateur motorcycle racer and claims to have placed 1st in the amateur category at a race in Ascot Park, Gardena, California in 1964. While I can neither confirm nor deny the accuracy of this claim, Bengston’s association with the pastime was conspicuously exaggerated to the point that, for a time, it became a defining quality of his artistic brand.

34 Billy Al Bengston, interview with author, 26 April 2014, telephone.
an ironic businessman in the book *Business Cards* collaboratively authored by Bengston and Ruscha; and the guise of a gay male, which he temporarily adopted in 1971.

Bengston’s conflation of his artistic practice with mutating public personae frustrates any attempt to definitively read particular motivations and meanings into his work. The artist himself cultivated this confusion. As of December 2015, the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s online collection search still lists the artist’s name as “Billy Al Bengston” with a notation that he was born “William Bengston.” This, however, is inaccurate—his birth name is Billy Al Bengston; and at present, his self-designed website displays his surname crossed out: Billy Al Bengston.35 When asked about the confusion regarding his name, in a recent interview, Bengston simply laughed and proceeded to describe his working process as, “it’s all makeup and made-up,” quickly shifting the conversation to the elemental composition of the colors apparent in his sprayed paintings—many of which, according to him, are iridescently tinted makeup pigments derived in part from fish scales rather than the hues associated automobile pigments.36 My own sense is that his responses, as well as his answers to interview questions throughout his career, are purposely elliptical and designed to derail, but also, in their irreverence and impudence, calculated to attract attention.

**MOONDOGGIE AND CLAY, 1956-1957**

Bengston’s early ceramic works such as *Phoney Whiteware* of 1956 (fig. 2.20) and *Vase* of 1957 (fig. 2.21) prefigure the tongue-in-cheek character of his work of the 1960s. The objects engage with both craft and irony, and play with aspects of authenticity and authorship. *Phoney Whiteware* is a thick, stoneware mug made of a roughly thrown form and coarse texture. The surface of the object is covered in a white glaze subsequently inscribed with thick, rich, and

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35 Birth records for Dodge City, in Ford County, Kansas, confirm that the artist’s birth name is Billy Al Bengston.
36 Billy Al Bengston, interview with author, 26 April 2014, telephone.
seemingly spontaneous details that form an irregularly patterned surface design. The title of the work plays on the formal qualities of the mug. Whiteware is commonly known for displaying a vitreous, or glassy, formal quality, and a smooth surface that varies in color from white to off-white after fired. Bengston’s stoneware mug, however, is both rough in texture and has been glazed with a white color that poorly mimics the look of whiteware—hence the title, Phoney Whiteware, which also integrates a misspelling of the word, phony. Vase is decorated with a cross—which the artist refers to as a voodoo sign—and is part of Bengston’s so-called Voodoo series of ceramic works. Other voodoo signs include birds, human figures, stars, and triangular forms, which for Bengston, were meant to provoke a public response: “Voodoo, nonsense, it was all a game. You’d make up some definition for this thing and you’d use it [...] it was made up, totally invented [...] it’s always good to be provocative.”

Vase is not inscribed with Bengston’s name, but instead is signed Moontang—a variant of Moondoggie. In the summer of 1956 Bengston had lived on the beach at Malibu Point in a grass shack that he shared with legendary surfer Terry Tracy, a.k.a. Tubesteak. While in Malibu he began to call himself Moondoggie. The name was derived from the avant-garde, New York-based composer Louis “Moondog” Hardin (1916-1999) who, blind from the age of sixteen, was well known throughout the 1950s and 60s for his eccentric behavior—he could often be found standing on a street corner in midtown Manhattan wearing a cloak and Viking-style helmet.

Bengston had a similarly notorious presence on the beach in Malibu in the mid-1950s, to the point that he became a main character in Frederick Kohner’s 1957 novel Gidget and was played by James Darren in the eponymous 1959 movie. In the book and film, Moondoggie is the

nickname of Jeff Griffin, a Malibu surfer in his early twenties who coined the name “Gidget” (a combination of “girl midget”). Kohner describes Moondoggie as “in love with himself […] and the sharpest-looking guy this side of Baja California.” Such qualities uncannily mirror descriptions of Bengston. Credited as “Billy Al Bengston (aka Moondoggie),” the artist composed the foreword to the book *Pop Surf Culture* in 2008. In the text, he refers to the sun, sand, and surf clichés that have historically tied his surfing practice to his artistic practice, and specifically, his work in clay. Yet, rather than concede the fundamental crossover of these practices in Los Angeles, he flippantly maintains that: “[Surfing] is enjoyed with high humor. That ain’t art […] Surfing is great, so is art; don’t confuse the two.”

After spending the summer of 1956 on the beach, Bengston enrolled at the Los Angeles County Art Institute where he remained for one academic year and constructed the artworks *Phoney Whiteware* and *Vase*. While at the Institute, he participated in Peter Voulkos’s ceramics class, later describing Voulkos’s work and instructional methodology as “freewheeling experimentation” which combined aspects of jazz, Beat culture, ceramics, and painting. Voulkos’s *Untitled (Standing Jar)* of 1954-1956 (fig. 2.22) is typical of his smaller clay works from the mid-1950s. The form is rough in texture and, not unlike Bengston’s *Phoney Whiteware*,

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39 The book is written in the first person and based on the stories Kohner’s teenage daughter (Kathy Kohner) would tell her father of the surf culture of Malibu Point. Her nickname, Gidget, is a portmanteau of “girl” (she was one of the young women that surfed at Malibu Point) and “midget” (she was said to be petite in stature).
43 Billy Al Bengston, interview by Susan Larsen, 1980. Bengston’s formal education was quite nomadic. From 1953 to early 1955 he studied ceramics with Bernard Kestler at Los Angeles City College; he spent a majority of 1955 studying with Richard Diebenkorn and Sabro Hasegawa at the California College of Arts and Crafts in San Francisco; and in 1956 he studied with Peter Voulkos at the Los Angeles County Art Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design).
is covered with expressive gestures placed on top of the clay armature. While the works are notably distinct in form and surface design, they are nonetheless similar in their engagement with the clay medium as a vessel for spontaneous experimentation and expression.

Kenneth (Ken) Price—a ceramic artist who doubled as Bengston’s surfing companion—was also a student in Voulkos’s class at the Art Institute. Bengston and Price had become friends and surfing buddies in early 1953 while Bengston was working as a beach attendant at Doheny State Beach—a popular gathering spot for surfers. Bengston designed the publicity poster for Price’s first solo exhibition, which opened at Ferus Gallery in October 1961 (fig. 2.23). The advertisement features Price standing erect on a surfboard, riding a wave, and performing a T-Pose. Between his splayed hands is text reading “KENNETH PRICE” in arched, capital letters. Price’s exhibition featured his ceramic works, such as Avocado Mountain of 1959 (fig. 2.24), placed on pedestals throughout the gallery space (fig. 2.25). The objects are large, dome-shaped pots capped with small lids. Their surfaces are coarsely textured and feature bright, acid-colored glazes applied in a manner that suggests the brushstrokes of contemporary Abstract Expressionist paintings. Bengston’s publicity poster for Price’s show, rather than relating to the formal qualities of the exhibited work, instead broadcasts an image of the artist as a surfer. Pertinent information regarding the exhibition is printed in small, black lettering and hidden in the gray waves along the bottom of the poster. Rather than promoting the artwork, the advertisement markets the artist; it places Price’s body into a distinctive and defining role. Although Price did surf in the 1960s, the poster implies that his identity, and by extension, his work, is intimately

44 Billy Al Bengston, interview by Susan Larsen, 1980. In the interview, Bengston relates that Ken Price frequently “crashed” at his “Glad Pad”—a camping space on the beach.
bound to this pastime—rather than being, as the artist discusses, an exploration of clay, form, and color.45

Bengston’s persona, Moondoggie, was tied to his early engagement with both surfing and the clay medium. He would, on occasion, use the moniker when designing surfboards, such as the board he painted for a charity auction in 2005 (fig. 2.26), which is signed with the name of his surfing alter ego. However, the persona of Moondoggie took on a life of its own within Hollywood’s Gidget franchise that resulted in seven book sequels and three films.46 In a recent interview, Bengston observes: “my work is about Hollywood and humor.”47 His clay objects, which participated in the era’s efforts to dissolve the divide between ceramic craft and fine art, were also titled to suggest sly rhetorical jokes and provoke a viewer response—although the artist is not specific regarding the reactions he hoped to elicit. Bengston’s invented alias Moondoggie was subsequently re-invented by Kohner, and again reformulated for later film adaptations; his design for Price’s Ferus Gallery exhibition poster similarly participated in the practice of designing and presenting a formulated public image. This manipulation of public personae suggests that the artist, in addition to making artwork, was also participating in popular practices of the area—acting and self-promotion directed toward accruing celebrity. His early engagement with strategies of self-invention, forms of provocation, and the potential of Hollywood to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction would continue to develop throughout the late 1950s and 60s as Bengston moved away from clay and towards painting, and also shifted from surfing to motorcycle racing.

45 For a comprehensive discussion of the artist’s work and career, see: Stephanie Barron, Ken Price, et. al., Ken Price Sculpture: A Retrospective, exh. cat. (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2012).
47 Billy Al Bengston, interview with author, 26 April 2014, telephone.
In 1958, Bengston had his first solo exhibition at Ferus Gallery (fig. 2.27).\(^4\) The exhibition included paintings such as *Seegull* of 1958 (fig. 2.28), which visualizes aspects of flight and movement.\(^4\) *Seegull* is composed of bright, blue brushstrokes and broad gestures. Having spent the fall of 1955 (prior to his stint on the beach at Malibu Point) living in the Bay Area, Bengston was aware of the work of established Northern California painters such as Richard Diebenkorn and Jay DeFeo. Diebenkorn’s work, such as *Berkeley #23* of 1955 (fig. 2.29), captures in bright colors his visual impressions of the surrounding Bay Area. DeFeo’s work, such as *Untitled (Everest)* from the *Mountain* series of 1955 (fig. 2.30), can also be loosely grounded in geography. Through thickly painted areas of black, white, and gray, her composition abstractly visualizes a geologic, mountainous terrain of gorges and crevices. Bengston’s painting, however, alludes to an aerial, rather than an earthbound quality. The painting combines tactile changes between the thickly painted central form and the surrounding, thinly painted, largely tan areas. This creates a dynamic composition that suggests impressions of a bird in flight or the ruffled sound of wings visually translated into paint. The title’s wordplay further encourages viewers to conceive of the work as rooted in the process of visualizing (seeing) flight.

His second exhibition at Ferus Gallery, a joint show with Ed Kienholz in 1959 that was titled *Collage Constructions*, included Kienholz’s assemblages and Bengston’s delicate collage

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4. Ed Kienholz describes how Bengston became associated with Ferus Gallery beginning in late 1957: “While we [Ed Kienholz and Walter Hopps] were building Ferus, Bengston walked in one day and said ‘my name is Bengston and I’m going to be the world’s greatest artist.’ He said ‘come on, I’ll take you to lunch,’ so Walter and I put the tools down. We started across the street and Bengston jumped in front of a car, said ‘Halt’ and flung his arms out. We thought it was neat that he wasn’t afraid to jump in front of a car and said he was going to be the world’s greatest artist. It turns out that it isn’t true.” Edward Kienholz, interview by Lawrence Weschler, 1977, Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Oral History Project, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, 154. Bengston’s artistic practice was (and is) accompanied by a hammed-up masculine bravado; it is oftentimes difficult to tell whether he is uncritically engaging in the behavior of a privileged male or undermining such gender tropes by way of exaggerating those qualities.

4. The title of the painting, *Seegull*, is a deliberate misspelling of seagull.
works such as *Untitled (Cannes)* of 1959 (fig. 2.31). The collage is composed of subtly layered, rectangular, and torn pieces of off-white paper gathered at the center and stained with ink and watercolor. It is one of nearly a dozen intimately sized works Bengston created while on a six-month motorbike trip through Europe—primarily Italy and France—between 1958 and 1959. The effect of the work is quite different from the gesture-heavy, oil on canvas paintings he had exhibited only months earlier.  

1958 and 1959 were a transition period for Bengston; rather than drifting from one college to another (Los Angeles City College, California College of Arts and Crafts in San Francisco, Los Angeles County Art Institute), he instead left the institutional environment and began to immerse himself in the emerging avant-garde art scene of Los Angeles.

Rather than relating his paintings and collages to a trend towards gestural and non-objective compositions during the 1950s, Bengston retrospectively frames his shift in medium as a move away from clay: “It’s just that I didn’t like the ceramicists, I thought they were assholes. They continually refer to the medium rather than referring to art, and anytime you refer to the medium rather than the end result, you’re in the wrong area.” On a later occasion, he describes his decision in even harsher terms: “The fault lies not with the art but with the ceramicists. They regard it as merely a craft. They fail to set criteria. They play in the mud, unimaginatively making *things*, and that defeats them.” It is difficult to take Bengston at his word. Rather, his statements often evince an artist self-consciously aware of an interview’s potential to draw

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50 The paintings and collages Bengston exhibited at the newly-opened Ferus Gallery in the late 1950s were positively received—although the artist later dismissed his artworks of the late 1950s as “some funny AE stuff,” telegraphically referencing Abstract Expressionism. Billy Al Bengston, interview by Susan Larsen, 1980. Jules Langsner published a review of Bengston’s 1958 solo exhibition in which he refers to the artist as “gifted” and describes the paintings as “displaying a remarkable degree of authority…[Bengston] demands attention.” Jules Langsner, “This Summer in Los Angeles” *ARTnews* 57, no. 4 (Summer 1958): 58.

51 Billy Al Bengston, interview by Susan Larsen, 1980.

attention to a body of work through bizarre or inflammatory remarks. The dogmatic nature of his statements and his blatant derision of craft contradict what would become defining qualities (that is, craftsmanship and a pristine surface) of his later sprayed and lacquered paintings on Masonite and aluminum.

His early association with Kienholz and Hopps entailed an introduction to that duo’s involvement in Syndell Studio—which closed in either late 1956 or early 1957. The publicity notice for Collage Constructions (fig. 2.32-2.33), which was most likely designed by Robert Alexander, exhibits formal qualities that resemble the publicity associated with Syndell Studio. The exterior text reads: “TWO ARTISTS.” It is printed in bold typeface with capital letters, and the embellishing lines are positioned to meet at a right angle. On the interior, a vertical line cuts through the center of the page and separates a description of “COLLAGE CONSTRUCTIONS” from the exhibiting artists, “B.A. BENGSTON EDW. KIENHOLZ.” Within the publicity print, information is presented in a clear and concise manner, and the linear aesthetic of the print is somewhat analogous to the underlying geometric quality of the collages exhibited by Bengston and Kienholz. The notification is more closely aligned with Syndell Studio’s marketing aesthetic of the mid-1950s than with the nature and character of the promotional materials that would become intimately associated with Ferus Gallery—such as the poster of Ken Price on a surfboard from 1961. This early engagement with the Los Angeles avant-garde during the period of transition between Syndell Studio and Ferus Gallery introduced Bengston to experimental strategies that had been integral to the operation of the Syndell project—such as the conceptual play with the idea of a Los Angeles-based studio (exploring the local assumption that a studio

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53 Collage Constructions exhibition announcement, Box 10, Folder 19, “Exhibition Announcements,” Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.
54 Ed Kienholz’s work of late 1958 comprises low reliefs incorporating wood fragments arranged into geometric shapes and affixed to wooden panels.
implied a film studio rather than an artist’s studio), name games and a pseudonymous artistic practice, a strategic use of publicity, and subtle forms of political provocation.\textsuperscript{55} As Bengston recalls, “Syndell […] was just a throw together […] but] anyone that was around that was doing quality work.”\textsuperscript{56}

**THE ARTIST STUDIO**

In early 1960, Bengston established Artist Studio at 156 Pier Avenue in Ocean Park, later moving it to a larger space at 110 Mildred Avenue in the Venice Beach area of Los Angeles in the winter of 1964-65.\textsuperscript{57} He shared the space with Ken Price until 1962 and in the later 1960s printed letterhead reading, “ARTIST STUDIO BILLY AL BENGSTON FOUNDER” (fig. 2.34).\textsuperscript{58} The Artist Studio was both a workspace and an exhibition space—regularly displaying a rotating roster of works by Peter Alexander, Ed Ruscha, John McCracken, and others (fig. 2.35). In a 1980 interview, Bengston describes how the studio acquired its name:

> It’s another joke. When Kenny [Price] and I got our place in Ocean Park and had our telephone installed, the phone company asked, ‘What are you going to use this place for?’ and we said, ‘An artist’s studio.’ They didn’t use our names in the phone book. They just listed ‘Artist Studio,’ so I’ve been ‘Artist Studio’ since 1960.\textsuperscript{59}

The anecdote calls attention not only to the nascent state of the art scene in Los Angeles, but also to the chance and humor integral to the Studio. The notion of being an artist in Los

\textsuperscript{55} Billy Al Bengston, interview with author, 26 April 2014, telephone. Bengston relates how, when he first met Hopps and Kienholz in 1957, they were very enthusiastic about the future of Ferus Gallery and also discussed their earlier endeavors including Syndell Studio and the Now Gallery.

\textsuperscript{56} Billy Al Bengston, interview with author, 26 April 2014, telephone.


\textsuperscript{58} Letter from Billy Al Bengston to Monte Factor, LAICA, 1976, displaying letterhead “ARTIST STUDIO BILLY AL BENGSTON FOUNDER,” Box 9, Folder 16, “Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art,” Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.

\textsuperscript{59} Billy Al Bengston, interview by Susan Larsen, 1980. In fact, The Studio’s phone was answered: “Artist Studio” instead of “Billy Al Bengston” through the 1980s. At present, however, it is answered, “Billy Al’s Lab[oratory].”
Angeles was a still-developing concept in the 1960s. Most Los Angeles galleries, aside from Ferus, were showing old modernists such as Matisse, Picasso, and Cézanne. It was—and to some extent, still is—a pervasive stereotype that artists lived in New York, not provincial Los Angeles. In the same 1980 interview, Bengston is asked: “How did you know what an artist looked like, or did or was?”, he responds: “I didn’t. There was no tradition […] I was sort of the laughingstock of town.”

There were noteworthy artists in California at the time, such as Diebenkorn and Voulkos, and Bengston had studied with both of them. They engaged in an earnest investigation of the material qualities of paint and clay, respectively, and their work rejects any attempts to establish a parallel with the celebrity culture of Hollywood. Bengston’s practice, by contrast, was increasingly tapping the fakery implicit in the construction of a public image and the promotional strategies of the film industry.

Just as Syndell Studio had explored the rhetorical assumption that a studio implied a film studio rather than an artist’s studio, so too did Bengston’s Artist Studio. However, while Syndell Studio taunted censorship so as to engage with and expose the communist paranoia stitched into the conservative municipal policies of Los Angeles in the mid-1950s, Bengston’s Artist Studio of the 1960s, by contrast, suggests the ability of a film studio to alter a publicized personality and construct a plausible character. The transformative power of the studio is explored in his early series of Valentines and Draculas—displaying a centralized heart and iris icon, respectively—that were produced in the Studio and subsequently exhibited at Ferus Gallery. It was also at this time that Bengston ceased the practice of signing his name to his painted artworks, instead relying on their central emblem to indicate his authorship (a practice which continues to the

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60 Cécile Whiting summarizes the stereotype of artists in Los Angeles through a litany of questions: “What of artists who made California their home in the 1960s? Did they abandon paintbrushes for tennis rackets and surfboards […]? Did the works produced by such artists-qua-beach bums blindly emulate the superficiality and hedonism attributed to Los Angeles?” Cécile Whiting, Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s, 3.
61 Billy Al Bengston, interview by Susan Larsen, 1980.
present day). By leaving the works unsigned, yet repeating the central icons (heart, iris, and later, sergeant stripes), the paintings are easily identified as part of Bengston’s lexicon but also maintain a degree of unfixity. By withholding the signature, the artist allows for a more fluid understanding of their authorship. They are not tied to a specific role deployed by the artist, and they are not fixed to a specific name used by the artist. They remain unstable, variable, and mutable; they can be recontextualized and repositioned according to Bengston’s fluctuating self-image.

Bengston’s increasing interest in public image over the material potential of clay and paint was part and parcel of a larger trend apparent within arts training in universities and art schools around the United States in the late 1950s and 1960s. Artist Howard Singerman describes how artistic training at this time became more concerned with the conceptualization of the “artist” than with the mastery of paint, clay, bronze, or marble. Artists became, as Singerman argues, increasingly concerned about their self-presentation: “Because professionals are autonomous individual practitioners at once enacting a profession and represented by its name, professions are the site of intense self-fashioning.”

Thus, Bengston was not only part of a Los Angeles environment steeped in filmic character construction, but also part of an era in which practitioners were becoming more focused on the definition and self-presentation of the professional artist—i.e. the Artist Studio—than the mining of the material potential of various media.

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62 Bengston states that he has not signed a painting since 1958, and instead has relied on the central icons of his works (heart, iris, sergeant stripes) to function as his signature. However, the heart and iris emblems did not enter his repertoire until the winter of 1959. In response to a 1975 request to sign an artwork that had recently been purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Louis Stern, Bengston explains his practice of leaving the works unsigned, and offers the reasoning: “As I’m not in the habit of signing paintings I don’t really know how and I may not do it well.” Billy Al Bengston, letter to Mr. and Mrs. Louis Stern, February 18, 1975, Box 5, Folder 84, “Nicholas Wilder Gallery 1972-1976,” Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.

THE VALENTINES AND DRACULAS

Bengston’s second solo show at Ferus Gallery in 1960 is often referred to as the Valentines show since it opened on the evening of February 14th—and was festively decorated with balloons and streamers (fig. 2.36). The exhibition comprised oil on canvas paintings featuring a centralized heart shape. Big Hollywood of 1960 (fig. 2.37), a monumental canvas measuring 78 by 90”, loomed over the smaller paintings such as Grace of late 1959 (fig. 2.38), and Kim (fig. 2.39) of 1960. Other works were titled: Sophia, Ingrid, Eva, Marilyn, and the like. Each painting features a heart shaped symbol fixed in a tight square that floats in a monochromatic background. The artworks are geometrically balanced and incorporate a variety of hues and geometric patterns such as checkerboards or stripes. The canvases are variously thinly painted, as in Big Hollywood, heavily impastoed, as in Kim, or scrubbed to produce an almost shimmering effect in which the color appears to fade and reemerge, as in Grace.

Aside from Big Hollywood, all of the paintings’ titles allude to famous female actresses—Grace Kelly, Kim Novak, Sophia Loren, Ingrid Bergman, Eva Marie Saint, and Marilyn Monroe. The publicity poster (fig. 2.40) mimics the style of the work in the show. Printed in red—an apropos color—the poster displays a simplified version of Big Hollywood at its center which is, in turn, framed by a checkered pattern of red and white. Below the centralized image is capitalized text advertising work by “BENGSTON.” Although there are no known photographs of the Valentines show, in 2010, upon the fiftieth anniversary of the original display, Bengston recreated the exhibition at the Samuel Freeman Gallery in Los Angeles (fig. 2.41). The 2010 exhibition was dominated by Big Hollywood, as had likely also been the case with the 1960 show. The large painting was in proximity to compositions named after actresses, but using their stage names: Kim Novak rather than Marilyn Pauline Novak, Sophia Loren rather than Sofia
Villani Scicolone, and Marilyn Monroe rather than Norma Jean Baker. There is no clear correlation between the form and color of the paintings and their titles. Rather, it is the notion of the constructed nature of the actresses’ public personae and the various roles they performed that emerges from the shadow of Big Hollywood. The small, votive-like paintings become vessels for a larger examination of personae, role-playing, and fiction in Hollywood.

Art critic Jules Langsner describes the 1960 show as conveying “the Dada aspects of Hollywood.” While it is difficult to precisely identify the meaning of Langsner’s axiom, the recognition of a connection between Bengston, Dada, and Hollywood is prescient. The play of the real and the fictive operated as a crucial element in Bengston’s work, as well as the work of Duchamp and Man Ray—both of whom were associated with Los Angeles in the postwar period. While I have discussed the presence of Duchamp and his artworks in Los Angeles, it is noteworthy that Man Ray, likewise, was intimately connected with the city. He lived in Los Angeles from 1940 to 1951 and, according to Langsner, artist-dealer William Copley would call Man Ray “the DADA of us all.” Man Ray exhibited the work he made in Los Angeles in a 1948 exhibition at The Copley Galleries in Beverly Hills, California. Among the displayed works was Optical Hopes and Illusions of 1944 (fig. 2.42), which is an assemblage (in the spirit of the readymade) of a found banjo frame, ball, and mirror. Art historian Susan Anderson interprets the work as “an ominous toy that makes no sound, referring to Man Ray’s thwarted

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64 “In his current show at Ferus Gallery, Bengston manages very well indeed to convey the Dada aspects of Hollywood […] His favorite emblem, inscribed to Eva Marie or Marilyn, or one or another of Hollywood’s current love goddesses, is a Valentine heart…the Bengston wit is condensed and effective.” Jules Langsner, “Art New From Los Angeles,” ARTnews 59, no. 1 (March 1960): 51. Langsner’s statement, “the Bengston wit is condensed and effective,” seems to reference the manner by which the joke aspects of the exhibition are efficiently revealed, that is, that the artist conflates the meaning of an artist studio and a film studio. Furthermore, the paintings themselves are titled for Hollywood personae one would commonly associate with a film studio, but instead are suggested within the context of an art exhibition.

artistic aspirations and the fantasy land of Hollywood.” In the work, Anderson argues, Man Ray realizes a Dada/Surrealist metaphor for the tension between the real and the fictive and makes reference to the uncertain nature of Hollywood culture. He directly responds to the imaginary aspects of Hollywood and also the darker side of the so-called Sunshine Muse. Bengston, likewise, makes reference to the indeterminate qualities of Hollywood, its false personae, and invented narratives. The stage names of the celebrity actresses rally attention, much like they would for a film production, and the carefully tailored and painted objects occupy a specific space (or role) within the larger exhibition. Bengston conflates the meaning of an artist studio and a film studio in a manner that suggests the local precedent for treating one’s public image and character as a plastic material.

Ed Ruscha’s *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights* (fig. 2.43) likewise engages with the presence of the film industry in Los Angeles. Ruscha literally depicts, on a large scale, a famous studio logo in a flattened, sharply geometric style. The bold, red letters dominate the space and are accented by eight beams of yellow light that fill the upper left corner of the painting. The work is composed as if seen from below and is reminiscent of a movie projected onto a screen; the painting transforms the temporal experience of the 20th Century Fox logo (seen for a brief interval within a film) into a graphic sign experienced statically and in a manner reminiscent of Los Angeles’s billboard signage. Yet, the painting also makes visible the penciled-in perspectival lines that recede in a diagonal across the picture’s plane; this detail unmasks the ersatz character of the glittery logo and discloses the armature behind the façade. The works of both Ruscha and

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67 Paintings named after female actresses, and made and arranged by a male artist, beg a feminist critique. The exhibition reproduced the narrative of white male hierarchy in regard to the female body and also restaged the still-rampant gender inequality in the film industry and the fine arts. Bengston, privileged by way of his race and gender, interrogates aspects of the fictionality of the film industry, yet uncritically replicates its male domination. This is a topic widely discussed across disciplines, and while it may be tempting to expose yet another instance of the uncritical reproduction of gender inequality, it is not the central concern of this dissertation.
Bengston engage with the counterfeit qualities of Tinseltown glitz, yet Ruscha more clearly depicts the tools that prop-up the illusions while Bengston suggests the transformations a Hollywood-based studio might initiate from person to stage persona or filmic role. The Valentines emerged from the confines of the Artist Studio infused with the smoke-and-mirror transformative powers of Hollywood. Just as the characters of Hollywood public personae and their films were constructed in a studio and played-out on the silver screen, the ever-shifting roles of Bengston, as well as his artworks, were formulated in a studio and displayed (read: screened) in Ferus Gallery.

At the same time that Bengston was working on the Valentines, he also started the so-called Dracula paintings, such as *Count Dracula II* (discussed earlier, fig. 2.7) and *Count Dracula at the Chessboard* (fig. 2.44), both of 1960. The Dracula compositions consist of a centralized silhouette of an iris image nested within concentric squares of various hues. The artist positions the series as the result of happenstance. The iris icon, he claims, is derived from sugar packets he saw at Barney’s Beanery, an inexpensive café/dive bar in West Hollywood that the Ferus Gallery stable of artists would frequent (and after which Ed Kienholz based his eponymous 1965 room-sized installation). Bengston credits Ken Price for the title of the series: “Kenny Price walked in and said, ‘It looks like Count Dracula coming through a window.’ And I said, ‘That’s a hell of a lot better than an iris. That’s how that happened.’” In this particular interview, Bengston proceeds to answer subsequent questions in a voice imitating Dracula’s Transylvanian accent.

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As usual, Bengston’s ascription of happenstance in the works’ genesis is quite suspect. Historical examinations of the sugar industry in the early and mid-twentieth century U.S. have shown there is no evidence of the existence of a sugar company that used an iris logo—however, the corporate logo of C&H Sugar, a California-based sugar company, continues to incorporate a pink flower within their company logo (fig. 2.45). Nonetheless, the bearded iris, in post-World War II America, became an increasingly popular flower within the ornamental gardens of newly built suburbs with their tailored public image. The gardens, and flowers therein, were carefully manicured to publicly visualize a growing suburban middle class with both leisure time and a disposable income. While Bengston ties the naming of the Dracula series to coincidence, the title nonetheless encourages a connection to the process of transformation and the presentation of a tailored public image. Just as Dracula could transform between a bat and a man, Béla Ferenc Dezső Blaskó became Bela Lugosi, an actor who performed the role of Dracula (or various Counts) in numerous films and television series. Much like the Valentines, the Draculas suggest an engagement with mutability; and while Bengston associates the works with the idle reproduction of a piece of ephemera and a brief conversation with Price, his often-deliberate and calculated manipulation of information encourages one to think otherwise.

Bengston’s Valentines and Draculas emerged years before Andy Warhol exhibited his Campbell’s Soup series at Ferus Gallery in his first solo exhibition in July 1962, followed by a

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72 Bela Lugosi’s first role as Dracula was in the film *Dracula* (1931), and other roles include Count Mora in *Mark of the Vampire* (1935), the vampire Armand Tesla in *The Return of the Vampire* (1944), and many more.
second exhibition, which included the Elvis series, in September 1963. Warhol’s works reproduce popular subjects in a representational manner. Thirty-two Campbell’s Soup compositions, corresponding to the soup varieties Campbell’s Soup Company sold at the time, were silk-screened onto canvas and the names of the soup varieties were painted by hand using a stencil. Larger works such as *Marilyn Diptych* of 1962 (fig. 2.46) and *Double Elvis* of 1963 (fig. 2.47), appropriate images of Hollywood stars and reproduce them in a large format. The image of Marilyn Monroe is taken from a publicity photograph for the film *Niagara* (1953) and Elvis is based on an advertisement for the film *Flaming Star* (1960). Warhol, working from New York, literally represented aspects of Hollywood for an audience that was familiar with it through film but from a geographical distance. Bengston, working in the shadow of Hollywood, worked less literally and interrogated the tools and tricks used to fabricate a persona residing within the cult of celebrity for an audience that *lived* in it. While his work in clay was tied to an alternative, invented alias that was co-opted by Hollywood, Bengston’s Valentine and Dracula series participated in a larger trend toward deploying practices intrinsic to the local film industry.

The series comprises individual paintings with titles that barely (if at all) relate to the formal qualities of the work. Rather, the paintings draw on the fame of the celebrities after whom they are titled and also gesture towards the larger phenomena of the artificial and constructed nature of public personae. Just as the artworks are built-up on a blank canvas and through the

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73 Warhol’s 1963 exhibition also included a series of silk-screened Elizabeth Taylor artworks.
74 Dennis Hopper and his then-wife, actress Brooke Hayward, hosted Warhol while he was in Los Angeles for the 1963 exhibition and threw a party at their home. Warhol elaborates: “the Movie Star Party was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me […] Everybody in Hollywood I’d ever wanted to meet was there […] Marcel Duchamp was having a retrospective at the Pasadena Museum, and we were invited to that opening…All the L.A. society swells were there. Brooke and Dennis were the only ‘movie people.’” Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *Popism: The Warhol ’60s* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 41-43.
75 Bengston constructed an artwork titled *Elvis* in 1961. It is a polymer and lacquer on Masonite painting with sergeant stripes at its center. It is currently in the collection of Robert Irwin.
76 Bengston’s series of paintings visualizing aspects of mutability were, notably, begun concurrently with his early mentorship of Larry Bell, who at the time was producing glass shadow boxes and becoming increasingly engaged with forms of self-representation by way of an early form of his alter ego, Biluxo Binoni (discussed at length in Chapter Three).
application of various colors arranged into a particular pattern, so too are public personae created through an arrangement of media exposure and publicity; and just as Bengston’s irreverent and insincere statements entice and irritate, so too are media personalities constructed with an indeterminate authenticity that lures one’s attention with the illusion of access but often only discloses information designed for public consumption. When viewed in isolation, an individual painting from the Valentines or Dracula series discloses very little, but when considered in the context of the artist’s near-militant insincerity and ongoing modification of his own self-image, a painting becomes a component part within a larger artistic practice complexly involved with the treatment of public image as a mutable material deployed to accrue recognition. In essence, Bengston’s exercises in self-fashioning both analyzed the nature of media constructs while also using such knowledge to secure his own celebrity.

67x: THE MOTORCYCLE

Bengston’s third solo exhibition at Ferus opened in November 1961. Although he was in the middle of composing his sprayed and lacquered works, the exhibition consisted solely of painted oil on canvas compositions. The show was titled Billy Al Bengston – Recent Work, but it is more often referred to as the motorcycle show since it consisted entirely of imagery related to motorcycles, such as Birmingham Small Arms I (BSA) (discussed earlier, fig. 2.8), Skinny’s 21 (fig. 2.48), and Back Fender (fig. 2.49). The exhibition also included the artist’s 350cc Gold Star motorcycle (fig. 2.50). The paintings reproduce both the motorcycle in its entirety, as well as individual parts viewed in isolation: carburetor, gas tank, tachometer, and BSA insignia. Each painting (with the exception of Skinny’s 21) depicts the subject centered in the pictorial field and floating in a monochromatic background. The compositions are flat, the colors matte, and the

77 For a discussion of how celebrity is created and sustained as a market commodity, see: Graeme Turner, Understanding Celebrity (London, UK: Sage Publications, 2004).
formal aspects are simplified. Objects are shown as either perpendicular or parallel to the painted surface and thus do not incorporate the use of perspective.\textsuperscript{78}

The exhibition’s publicity poster (fig. 2.51), designed by Bengston, features the artist mid-air on a motorbike wearing goggles, a helmet, and a BSA LeBard and Underwood motorcycle t-shirt. His image floats within an oval insert at the center of an empty white background. The text above the photograph reads: “AN EXHIBITION OF RECENT WORK BY BILLY AL BENGSTON.” The poster, understood in the context of the exhibition, encouraged viewers to connect Bengston’s public image and artistic practice with that of the motorcycle subculture which he had entered earlier that year—it was in 1961 that Bengston began to competitively race on amateur tracks, paint motorcycles “for money,” as well as teach at Chouinard Art Institute.\textsuperscript{79}

Bengston claims that the 1961 Ferus exhibition was prompted by Ken Price’s decision to back-out of his upcoming show at the Gallery. He maintains that Price had been slated to premiere an exhibition of his new sculptures incorporating Bengston’s spray technique, but was unable to meet the pre-determined deadline. Therefore, Bengston was enlisted by Irving Blum (then co-running Ferus Gallery with Walter Hopps) to fill the gap in the exhibition calendar. He describes the show as happenstance, with works offered at a marketplace discount in a spirit at odds with the seriousness of the art world:

Kenny was having a show […] and he changed his mind. Irving said, “Do you want to have a show?” I was broke and everybody was complaining to me at the time about how

\textsuperscript{78} Cécile Whiting, in her discussion of Bengston’s 1961 exhibition of motorcycle paintings, mistakenly states that the show included his sprayed work, which it did not. Cécile Whiting, \textit{Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s}, 82.

\textsuperscript{79} In Bengston’s list-like chronological development through 1987, he scratched-out “as a business” and scribbled in “For Money” next to the 1961 entry listing that he began painting motorcycles. Additionally, in the same chronology, a brief section reads: “1957-69 To earn a living while painting, works at various odd jobs including carpentry, roofing, chauffeuring, motorcycle racing, and movie stunt work.” Billy Al Bengston, “Chronology,” Box 4, Folder 10, “Chronology, 1987,” Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC. I do not know the movies—if there actually are any—for which Bengston did stunt work.
expensive my paintings were—“I can’t afford these,” “I can’t do this, can’t do that.” And I said, “Sure, but how am I going to show the paintings?” because I didn’t feel the hard Masonite paintings were done and ready for a show [...] I said, “Irving, you order me 25 canvases and I’ll paint a show.” [...] I painted all these motorcycle paintings and I put them up in the gallery and I charged cheap prices for them and everybody hated them. [...] They thought I had sold out. Everybody took everything very seriously.  

The critical reaction to the show was indeed generally negative. Ed Ruscha recalls that “people were coming out of there saying, ‘God, I just think they’re bad illustrations.’ Of course, that ended up being their strength. He was doing that imagery literally before the Pop artists, or at the same time, but oblivious and quite separate from the other Pop artists.” However, the show was well received by the motorcycle community of Los Angeles and was even featured in Motorcyclist: The Riders Magazine in an article titled “BRUSH-STROKES of a 4-STROKE”: “UNDoubtedly one of the very few—if not the only—art exhibit ever featuring a motorcycle [...] Bengston’s portrayal of his BSA was more a labor of love.”

Bengston’s story of the realization of the motorcycle show is actually another construct. In fact, Price had his second solo exhibition in October 1961, immediately preceding Bengston’s motorcycle show that allegedly served as its replacement. Price’s exhibition featured his new, sprayed work and was accompanied by the poster of him performing a T-Pose on a surfboard. In a recent interview, Bengston alters the narrative: “Kenny [Price] had a show at the Ferus Gallery

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80 Billy Al Bengston, interview by Susan Larsen, 1980.
82 Anonymous, “BRUSH-STROKES of a 4-STROKE,” Motorcyclist: The Rider’s Magazine 772 (February 1962): 20. Bengston’s BSA 350cc Gold Star motorcycle, on view within the exhibition space, was a single-cylinder, four-stroke engine. A four-stroke engine means that it takes the piston four separate strokes (or rotations) to complete a single cycle: 1) gasoline intake, 2) gasoline compression, 3) production of power, 4) exhaust. This contrasts to a less powerful but lighter weight two-stroke engine that requires only two revolutions to complete a cycle. Within the motorcycle racing community, the advantages and disadvantages of a two-stroke engine (less power, less weight) vs. four-stroke engine (more power, more weight) are a hotly debated topic.
that was beautifully displayed […] I wanted to paint the show from the center of the gallery […] by the time I got the canvases and paint together, he [Price] said ‘I don’t want you to do it.’ […] I had ten days to put the show together.”

The various narratives add to the myth of the exhibition while simultaneously pointing to an absence of historical fact. Yet, present in both accounts is a discussion of the show as cheap and haphazard.

The motorcycle paintings offer a flattened and deadpan view of a machine that is associated with extreme craftsmanship and detailing. Advertisements for motorcycles generally fixate on their shimmering colors and re-enforce the masculine nature of the motor vehicle. In stark contrast, the paintings are “bad illustrations” that transform an often-fetishized machine into a frozen, flat, and prosaic everyday object. Instead of the gleaming surfaces of motorcycles, one is presented with a matte palette of paint. Not only are the paintings deadpan, but they also evince a hasty, somewhat slapdash aesthetic. Pencil marks are still visible and the paint is thinly applied. They are distinctly lacking in the obsessive and fetishized effect generally tied to motorcycle culture—and despite this, the biking community still appreciated the work.

The paintings strip away the luster, and undersell the motorcycle subculture. Lacking allusion, the works call attention to the ordinary and the mundane. They stand in stark contrast to, for example, Ed Ruscha’s painting Standard Station of 1963 (fig. 2.52). Standard Station employs banal imagery, yet stages it with a deep and exaggerated perspective accented by three beams of yellow light below the Standard sign. Thus, a roadside Standard Station is transformed into a site of Tinseltown showiness. However, in Bengston’s motorcycle compositions, the notions of action, speed, and hyper-masculinity that are often associated with the motorcycle are absent. The machine is presented flatly and reproduced without its recognizable ambiance.

83 Billy Al Bengston, interview with author, 26 April 2014, telephone.
Bengston began racing in 1961, and by 1963 he was able to enter the amateur-level racing circuit. That year, he began signing his name: “67x”—his official racing number. This autograph appears in personal correspondence with friends and colleagues. For example, the artist’s January 1, 1964, letter to Ed Moses alludes to Bengston’s fascination with Hollywood and public personae, and employs his signature 67x (fig. 2.53). “There’s a new series on the T.V. called Hollywood & The Stars that is fabulous […] There is a new club in town called The Bistro and you can go there any day of the week and see a big ☆. Love B.A.B. #67x.” The verso of the envelope containing the letter features a cut-out of Bengston’s face as the seal, and the recto is inscribed with a hand-drawn cartoon reading “BSA AIR MAIL” with wings protruding from the letter B (fig. 2.54-2.55). The letter illustrates how the artist aligned himself with his racing number; it indicates his fascination with the star system; and it suggests his desire to be identified with celebrity culture.

In the May 1967 issue of *Artforum*, a half-page advertisement (fig. 2.56) features Bengston, helmeted, twisting toward the camera, and covered in mud while attempting to keep his motorcycle upright. The photograph, which does not include his racing number, is instead inscribed at the lower right with the phrase, “Happy Trails B.A.B.” Framing the image is the inscription, “If you’re in the L.A. Basin, ask anyone about Billy Al Bengston.” The ad does not promote Bengston’s artwork or a public exhibition of it. Rather, it publicizes the personality of Billy Al Bengston. The photograph associates his public persona with publicity photos of male celebrities on motorcycles—for example, James Dean and Marlon Brando. Even the inscription, “ask anyone about Billy Al Bengston,” invites readers to test the artist’s celebrity in Los

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Angeles, yet also suggests that his fame is confined to a specific geographical region. The blatant self-promotion calls attention to the formulation of public celebrity and prompted the critic Peter Plagens to refer to the Artforum ad as “deliciously arrogant, as Billy could be.” The hyper-masculine self-portrait conveys the trappings of a white male safely, if not somewhat ironically, reproducing and perpetuating the gender stereotypes already widely distributed and consumed by way of popular film and media culture, and using such imagery to increase his personal and professional renown.

The logo, 67x, was featured throughout the artist’s 1968 LACMA retrospective: the entrance to the exhibition’s galleries was headlined with large, black lettering that spelled-out his racing number, the satirical biography that prefaces the retrospective’s catalogue is titled, “67X The Authorized Version: Bengston Bio,” and photographs reproduced within the catalogue feature the artist on his motorcycle with the racing number, publicly aligning and reinforcing the strategic association of his artistic practice with motorcycle culture. In an interview with Lawrence Weschler, Irwin affirms that, “in the middle of the Ferus period […] Billy Al Bengston was racing motorcycles […] I mean, a motorcycle can be a lot more than just a machine that runs along; it can be a whole description of a personality.”

Curator Karen Tsujimoto maintains that Bengston’s “choice of motorcycle imagery was neither sarcastic nor ironic. Rather, he painted his bike out of true respect and appreciation for

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88 I expand on this point in the conclusion of the dissertation within the context of a discussion of the collaborations between Bengston and Lynda Benglis.
the machine’s basic and honest styling.” As much as the works might evince the artist’s genuine engagement with the machine, however, this appreciation cannot be considered the only source and needs to be seen as part of a larger constellation of factors. The paintings originated from the Artist Studio, along with the Valentines and Draculas, and they were an agent for one of the many public roles propagated by Billy Al Bengston. Simultaneously, their haphazard and unapologetically unfinished state served as an ironic prequel to the highly finished and polished artworks that would premier only months later at Martha Jackson Gallery in New York, followed by another solo show at Ferus.

**THE SERGEANT STRIPES, 1962**

Building on the public association of the artist with motorcycle subculture, Bengston premiered his sprayed and lacquered work on Masonite in 1962—first in May at Martha Jackson Gallery in New York, and then in November at Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. These works, along with the role-playing inherent in the compositions and their attendant publicity, would play a seminal role for those with whom Bengston was contemporaneously engaged, primarily Larry Bell and Judy Gerowitz. The New York exhibition included compositions such as *The Big Duke* (fig. 2.57) and *Wild Bill* of 1960, and *Belle Star* of 1961. The Los Angeles show included the aforementioned paintings, as well as *Tyrone* of 1961 and *Buster* of 1962 (fig. 2.58). The works are painted on Masonite and feature the iconic symbol of the sergeant stripes, or chevrons. The signs float at the center of each work and within a sea of various colors and patterns.

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81 John D. Weber, letter to Irving Blum, Ferus Gallery, June 14, 1962, Box 5, Folders 71-72, “Martha Jackson, 1962-1969, 1979,” Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC. The letter bears the heading “Martha Jackson Gallery” and reads: “Dear Irving: I am now making arrangements for the return of Billy’s painting entitled THE BIG DUKE, which as I understand is owned by you. I am also including in this shipment BELLE STAR, which has warped so badly that we feel Billy should repair it.” It should also be noted that the identifying labels for *Big Duke* and *Zachary* were switched in James Monte’s November 1968 *Artforum* article which reprinted his 1968 exhibition catalogue essay, and this has caused some confusion regarding the appropriate title of each artwork in subsequent literature. James Monte, “Bengston in Los Angeles: The County Museum presents the artist’s first retrospective,” *Artforum* 7, no. 3 (November 1968): 36-40.
Technically innovative, the compositions exhibited a radically new painting method incorporating an automotive spray gun. The spray technique resulted in a smooth and seamlessly painted surface, as well as the incorporation of the scintillating metallic colors then commonly associated with car and motorcycle culture. The obsessive and fanatic nature of Los Angeles’s car customizing culture would be immortalized three years later in Tom Wolfe’s book *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*.\(^92\) However, rather than discussing the colors in relation to their then-popular use in customizing culture, Bengston instead stresses their relationship with the cosmetics industry. The pearlescent pigments were, according to Bengston, manufactured from a combination of fish scales, titanium, and mica, and used predominantly in cosmetics before they became popular with car customizers seeking to increase the iridescence and shimmering luster of their automobiles. This conscious re-direction from automobiles to make-up further intimates the artist’s ongoing efforts to associate his work with the qualities of mutability and role-playing.\(^93\)

On top of the sprayed surface, Bengston applied layers of lacquer (between eighty and one hundred coats) that were obsessively painted on, rubbed out, and repeated ad infinitum, until the brush strokes were nearly invisible (fig. 2.59). As a result, the works display a somewhat mirror-like surface and a luminous, almost ethereal effect. The glowing effect of the lacquer and the glossiness of the paint create the illusion of a deep space, which is at odds with the shallowness of the actual painted surface. The sergeant stripes/chevrons further complicate the pictorial depth. The signs are hand painted in oil, and thus display a degree of roughness that,

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when viewed behind layers of lacquer and on top of sprayed paint, simultaneously appear immersed within the lacquered depths of the work, as well as floating decal-like on the painting’s surface.94

Reviews of the 1962 shows focus on the artworks’ iridescently bright colors, their connection with motorcycle culture, and their glib, Hollywood-inspired titles, but they do so in a manner that trivializes such qualities. Critic Vivien Raynor’s *Arts Magazine* review of the Martha Jackson show disparagingly uses the phrase “fun art” to describe the works and compares the exhibition and Bengston’s press release, which sarcastically discusses his work as a highly disciplined investigation of geometric design, to the writings of comedic novelist Peter de Vries.95 Henry Seldis’s *Los Angeles Times* review of the Ferus show similarly notes, but with a more endearing tone, the shallow humor that informs the work: “Billy Al Bengston has transferred his love from his motorcycle to sergeants’ chevrons […] his technical tricks only point up the essential emptiness and ‘smark-aleckiness’ of these paintings […] Bengston and the boys are having lots of fun. The public need only remember that they are kidding.”96

Life magazine, known for its photographic spreads of the Hollywood elite and popular and prominent figures, published the photo-based article, “Artists take to the place: Wide open and way out,” in the October 1962 issue. The photo-based article features Robert Irwin with his surfboard, Roger Kuntz with his diving equipment, John McLaughlin playing golf, and Bengston

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94 In the summer of 1963, John Chamberlain lived in Topanga Canyon, Los Angeles and befriended Billy Al Bengston, from whom he learned the spray technique that he incorporated into his work.
95 “Fun Art: This loose category embraces…Billy Al Bengston, whose advent has scarcely enriched our culture. His paintings were accompanied by a press release that could have been supervised in spirit if not in style, by Peter de Vries.” Vivien Raynor, “New York Reports: In the Galleries, Fun Art,” *Arts Magazine* 36, no. 10 (September 1962): 50. Peter de Vries was a comedic novelist and regular contributor to *The New Yorker*. He is most noted for his satiric wit and clever wordplay evident in publications dating from the 1940s through the 1980s.
with his motorcycles, and each artist stands next to one of his artworks (fig. 2.60). Bengston is framed between glistening motorcycles in the foreground and the shimmering sergeant stripe painting *Hawaiian Eye* of 1962 (named after the eponymous television series) in the background—which was included in the 1962 Ferus exhibition. The image is captioned: “A motorcycle buff, Billy Al Bengston keeps two of the vehicles in his studio […] primed for racing at nearby tracks. Their gleaming surfaces harmonize with the dazzling images of his paintings which he produces with the aid of spray guns, oil paints, plastics and lacquer.” While the artist’s earlier efforts to engage with public persona as a plastic material (i.e. the Valentines and Draculas) exhibited a disconnect between the formal qualities of the object and Bengston’s self-presentation, the sprayed compositions establish a direct connection between his artwork, his publicized image, and his public identification with motorcycle culture.

At the center of the works that premiered in 1962 is an emblem comprising three upward-angled chevrons above three downward-sloping lines. The motif is depicted in a single color, although the color changes from work to work. Critics generally note the formal relationship between Bengston’s insignia and the mid-century Chevron Gasoline emblem (fig. 2.61), and to a lesser extent, despite the close formal similarity, the Army Master Sergeant Stripes (fig. 2.62). While John Coplans relates Bengston’s use of the Chevron symbol to the driving culture of Los Angeles, Jules Langsner positions the symbol as a celebration of military life.

The Chevron Gasoline symbol is an arrangement of three downward angled V-shapes that exhibit a strong, primary color scheme arranged from top to bottom: Blue, White, Red.

98 Fred Lyon, “Wide-Open and Way-out Painting,” 84.
While the chevron shapes are present in Bengston’s insignia, they are inverted 180 degrees and are monochromatic. Considering the association of Bengston’s work with motor vehicles, it follows that the Chevron Gasoline reference has superseded the military reference. The link is tenable, especially in view of the prominent position of Chevron’s emblem in mid-century United States commercial branding and automobile culture. It also plays a role, for instance, in Dennis Hopper’s 1961 photograph *Double Standard*, which was appropriated by Ed Ruscha to publicize his second solo exhibition at Ferus Gallery in 1964 (fig. 2.63). Just as the Chevron logo’s sleek, plastic icon glints in the sun, Bengston’s lacquer-encrusted forms featuring a similar insignia sparkle under gallery spotlights.

Yet, despite the formal harmony between Bengston’s chevrons and the Chevron Gasoline symbol, it is impossible to divorce his imagery from military connotations. The emblem quite distinctly mirrors the Army Master Sergeant Stripes’ three ascending chevron shapes placed above three descending half-moon forms. Additionally, the sign entered Bengston’s vocabulary in the wake of Cold War tensions including the 1957 launch of the USSR’s Sputnik and resulting Space Race, the 1959 Cuban Revolution and the rise of Fidel Castro, rising tensions between pro-Soviet North and pro-Western South Vietnam, and the 1960-1962 Berlin Crisis and strained relations between the U.S. and Nikita Khrushchev. Nonetheless, Bengston refuses to speak about the political associations of his work. When asked about the formal similarities between the military insignia and the artworks’ central emblem, he immediately and melodramatically refutes the suggestion. A 1979 interview with Joan Quinn, editor of *Interview* magazine, is indicative of the general tenor of Bengston’s remarks on art and politics:

Joan Quinn: Do you think art should be political?

Billy Al Bengston: I don’t think anything should be political.
JQ: You wouldn’t use your art to support any political movements?

BAB: I prefer bowel movements.  

Bengston has said repeatedly that the idea for the insignia, that he refers to as both chevrons and sergeant stripes, emerged on a return flight from Europe in conversation with fellow artist, Robert Irwin.

The chevrons came out of the blue. Irwin and I were flying back from Europe and Irwin was going on and on - you all know how Irwin can talk, for hours. I mean we’re on a twelve-hour flight that stops in Newfoundland! It’s endless and he’s going on and on about the translucency of this […] and I’m thinking oh, fuck. He says, what are you going to do? And I say, “I'm going to paint sergeant stripes.” He says ‘Huh?’ and that’s when I knew I had the right idea. Because it stopped him from talking!  

The veracity of the account is questionable, but it nonetheless maintains the illusion that Bengston’s production is casually and haphazardly conceived, rather than self-consciously constructed within a set of specific historical conditions. The artist’s evasiveness and doublespeak—which itself is often associated with political rhetoric—disguises, distorts, and introduces intentional ambiguity. Such irreverence frustrates any attempt to approach the work with candor, but it also causes (in addition to exasperation) a lingering effect; the antagonism, amusement, or annoyance is not easily forgotten. This demanding of attention may irritate or amuse (or both) but it nonetheless strategically lingers and consequently accrues, for the artist, a condition of increased fame.

The promotional poster for the Martha Jackson Gallery exhibition (fig. 2.64), which was

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designed by that gallery, contrasts to the advertisement Bengston designed for his exhibition at Ferus (fig. 2.65).\textsuperscript{102} The Martha Jackson poster reproduces a now lost sergeant stripe work. It features an artwork with a bold, checkered yellow and white center floating in a golden background. Below the reproduction, and also in bright yellow, is “BILLY AL BENGSTON,” followed by the exhibition dates and the gallery name and location. This design, like the majority of advertisements for exhibitions at Martha Jackson Gallery in New York (as well as advertisements for East Coast-based exhibitions in general during the early 1960s), features the artwork/product, rather than the artist/celebrity.\textsuperscript{103}

The promotional poster Bengston designed to advertise the 1962 Ferus Gallery exhibition features the artist as an actor performing the character of a military Sergeant. The poster comprises a still from Buster Keaton’s 1926 Civil War comedy, \textit{The General}, whose protagonist, played by Keaton, drives a steam engine and longs to join the ongoing battle, yet is denied enlistment because his job is too important. The film traces the General’s several mishaps and ironically deconstructs the devastation incurred during times of war. The image used by Bengston is not actually in the film, but it was widely circulated for commercial purposes. Bengston appropriates the publicity image and reproduces it twice. In the upper portion of the image, above the head of Buster Keaton’s character, is an inscription written by Keaton himself:

\begin{quote}
\textit{"Billy Al Bengston at Martha Jackson, Poster, 1962, Box 10, Folder 34, “Exhibition Announcements,” Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington DC.}
\textsuperscript{102} Billy Al Bengston at Martha Jackson, Poster, 1962, Box 10, Folder 34, “Exhibition Announcements,” Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington DC.
\textsuperscript{103} There are lingering questions regarding whether and how New York-based artists nurtured their roles as artist-celebrities. Andy Warhol notoriously cultivated his own celebrity through the reproduction of his likeness, as well as the likenesses of other well-known individuals; Robert Morris reproduced his likeness in a 1974 Castelli-Sonnabend exhibition poster; Lynda Benglis deployed a series of advertisements in 1973 and 1974 (during which time she was in Los Angeles) using her body as the subject matter. A study of this practice remains beyond the confines of this dissertation. Nonetheless, it bears noting that posters advertising the work of Frank Stella are generally text-based or reproduce (in part or in full) his artworks; however, the 1963 poster for his exhibition at Ferus Gallery comprises a photo of the artist posing in front of steel shutters displaying a horizontal pattern reminiscent of his artwork.
\end{quote}
“Where’s Bill? Buster Keaton.” In the lower image, Bengston’s head is pasted over the individual sporting sergeant stripes on his sleeve. The poster ties Bengston’s work to a filmic depiction of military combat; it literally places him as one of the actors in a film and alongside Keaton.

The paintings included in the 1962 exhibitions at Martha Jackson and Ferus bore the names of classic Hollywood actors and characters associated with military stories. The Big Duke is named after John Wayne (born Marion Michael Morrison) who went by the nickname Big Duke, or Duke. Wild Bill is named after the persona of the famous gunfighter James Butler Hickok who was fictionalized in various narratives and films. Belle Star is titled for the notorious nineteenth-century outlaw known as Belle Starr (Myra Maybelle Shirley Reed Star) who was immortalized in an eponymous 1941 film. Tyrone is named after actor Tyrone Power whose typecast roles were often those of a swashbuckling hero. Buster alludes, of course, to Buster Keaton (born Joseph Frank Keaton). Thus, the artworks are branded with the names of actors and characters who interpret war and conflict on the silver screen.

Therefore, the exhibitions not only continued to incorporate aspects of role-playing intrinsic to Hollywood, but also obliquely engaged with the representation of war and conflict through vague allusions to its appearance on the silver screen. Critics of the shows justifiably used phrases such as “fun art” or “smart-aleckiness” to describe Bengston’s artwork and

104 Billy Al Bengston, interview with author, 02 May 2014, email. Bengston explains that Ken Price’s girlfriend, Pat Beer, was working as a nurse on the set of one of Buster Keaton’s films—although the precise film and year eludes him. Beer requested an autograph for Bengston, and Bengston, in turn, used the autographed ephemera for his exhibition publicity.
105 During the Civil War, the military insignia for the rank of Sergeant was an inverted design of the modern sign. The earlier insignia displayed chevrons pointing downward on the lower half of the emblem. The Sergeant insignia was redesigned in 1902 and oriented with the chevrons pointing upward. William Emerson, Encyclopedia of United States Army Insignia and Uniforms (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996).
106 Bengston’s discussion of his affinity for John Wayne and Buster Keaton focuses more on their self-presentation than on their specific film roles or acting skills. Regarding Keaton, Bengston explains: “I liked his moves and his voice. He was one of the most agile people. He could shift from one thing to the next very quickly.” And regarding John Wayne: “I was disenchanted with John Wayne, but I liked the way they [the film studios] dressed him. He was a bang-up dresser.” Billy Al Bengston, interview with author, 26 April 2014, telephone.
accompanying ephemera. However, while these idioms were used to criticize the artist’s working methods, what is truly at issue is the critical value of such flippant strategies in the early 1960s.\textsuperscript{107} Glib self-representations, evasive rhetoric, and ambiguous references to politics bait interest, but the lack of a clear position closes down any attempts to engage with the works beyond mere speculation. While in New York, this strategy was lambasted, in Los Angeles it was, as Langsner said, important to remember that Bengston is “kidding.” What becomes apparent in Bengston’s work is his increasingly chameleon-like engagement with self-authoring and the use of attention-getting strategies to accrue celebrity and suggest, but not directly engage with, contemporary politics. This approach was recognized in Los Angeles where viewers were more familiar with such promotional strategies, but it did not translate to the New York critics of his 1962 exhibition. Concurrent with Bengston’s evasive foray into the intersection of art and politics, he urged Larry Bell to shorten his nickname to Ben Lux—a moniker that more closely aligns with the artist’s ethnically Jewish background and also suggests the lingering effects of Cold War anti-Semitism (expanded in Chapter Three).

**BENGSTON AND POLITICS**

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, Bengston deployed of a number of notes and statements that intermittently and ambiguously engaged with contemporary politics. In 1964 he donated a painting to an auction raising funds to contest California Proposition 14 which had

\textsuperscript{107} John Baldessari frames the situation as follows: “The conventional wisdom was that there was support from the movie industry…So there was support there I think for people like Billy Al Bengston and the whole Venice Beach crowd…Bengston just got bashed so severely in New York that he just retreated back to L.A. But they were like movie stars [in Los Angeles]. A lot of socializing and dating.” John Baldessari, interview by Amy Newman, in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974*, 118-119. Dennis Hopper and Betty Asher collected Bengston’s work in the 1960s. The Venice Beach crowd to which Baldessari refers encompasses those artists who had, at some point in their careers, maintained a studio in the Venice Beach area, including, but not limited to: Billy Al Bengston, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, Ken Price, Ed Ruscha, and DeWain Valentine. Baldessari’s allusion to the artists’ movie star status references their visibility within the popular culture of Los Angeles, such that photographs of Bengston and Ruscha can be found throughout *The Hollywood Reporter* in the star sightings section.
made it legal for property owners to refuse to rent and/or sell to “colored” people.\textsuperscript{108} Yet he was also adamantly against the 1965 White Out of the galleries on La Cienega Boulevard—also known as Gallery Row—in Los Angeles. The White Out, which was coordinated by the Los Angeles Artists’ Protest Committee, was organized to stop escalation of military action in Vietnam. The Committee encouraged galleries to cover all the works on view with white paper and also organized a protest outside LACMA in which demonstrators held posters and distributed flyers outlining their opposition to the country’s foreign policies with regard to Vietnam (fig. 2.66).\textsuperscript{109} Bengston adamantly declared that he wished to continue to exhibit his paintings and he did not want to participate in the censoring of the work because with the war going on, all the people in Orange County had money to buy his art.\textsuperscript{110} Nonetheless, the gallery, which was currently displaying the four-person show \textit{The Studs} (which took place in 1965, rather than 1964 as previous literature has posited), concealed the exhibited artworks behind white paper (fig. 2.67-2.68).\textsuperscript{111} Bengston’s actions and the imagery of his paintings complicated the issue at hand: Orange County was populated with people making money from military-related

\textsuperscript{108} California Proposition 14 was passed in 1964 and nullified the Rumford Fair Housing Act of 1963 that had made it illegal for landlords to refuse to rent or sell property to people on the basis of ethnicity, religion, sex, marital status, physical handicap, or familial status. Bengston says the auction “is the first time anybody got one of my paintings for donation.” Billy Al Bengston, interview by Art Seidenbaum, in Art Seidenbaum, \textit{“Artists Brush Up on Vote Campaign,” Los Angeles Times} (14 October 1964): D1.

\textsuperscript{109} The poster, a modified version of which was also published in the \textit{Los Angeles Free Press}, includes 174 signatories. At the top is a six-rung ladder with the word “STOP” at its base. This is followed by: “WE DISSENT” and “WE HEREBY COMMIT OURSELVES TO A FOREIGN POLICY WHICH WILL REMOVE OUR TROOPS FROM VIETNAM AND DOMINICAN REPUBLIC NOW.” Six “realities” follow, which state: the use of force cannot be used to stop the process of transition and turmoil throughout the world’s nations; that we support the right of people to express popular demand by revolution; that the actions of the United States are destroying the United Nations and Organizations of American States tasked with settling disputes and maintaining peace; that the actions taken to maintain world peace should go through the United Nations; that the struggle for freedom in the United States is weakened and made hypocritical by the country’s irresponsible actions abroad; that military intervention is “evil, immoral and illegal” and “a betrayal of our own ideals.” Anonymous, \textit{Los Angeles Free Press} (14 May 1965): 6-7. Signatories include: Peter Alexander, Larry Bell, Charles Brittin, Frank O. Gehry, Philip Leider, Al Shean, Doug Wheeler, and many more. See also: Francis Frascina, \textit{Art, Politics and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America} (Manchester, NY: Manchester University Press; New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 15-34.

\textsuperscript{110} In an interview with Francis Frascina, Charles Brittin discusses Bengston’s vocal and vociferous refusal to participate. Charles Brittin, interview by Francis Frascina 24 May 1997, in Francis Frascina, \textit{Art, Politics and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America}, 32.

\textsuperscript{111} Charles Brittin Papers, Box 5, Folder 1, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
industries. They, in turn, were supporting local artists by purchasing works. Bengston’s refusal called attention to the problematic and conflicted relationship between the rising avant-garde art scene of Los Angeles, and the increasing presence of U.S. troops in Vietnam. While the White Out, which involved the self-censoring of galleries, openly protested against increasing U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, it did not acknowledge that the profits from the war were supporting the local art scene.\footnote{The number of U.S. military personnel in South Vietnam at the end of 1964 was about 23,000, increasing to more than 183,000 by the end of 1965. William Conrad Gibbons, \textit{The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part II} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 401.}

The case of Los Angeles’s White Out invites comparison with a 1969 protest/performance by the New York-based Guerilla Art Action Group (GAAG), \textit{A Call for the Immediate Resignation of All the Rockefellers from the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art}, often referred to simply as \textit{Blood Bath}. For the action, four artists (two men and two women) gathered in a circle in MoMA’s lobby.\footnote{The artists were: Jean Toche, Jon Hendricks, Poppy Johnson, and Silviana [Goldsmith].} Without warning, they began ripping each other’s clothes and screaming incoherently as they ruptured concealed bags of blood. During the staged skirmish, they scattered leaflets condemning the Rockefellers and the museum for accepting the family’s support, such that art was being used “as a disguise, a cover for their brutal involvement in all spheres of the war machine” (fig. 2.69). The flyer outlines three points that detail the Rockefellers’ involvement with corporations producing napalm and other war munitions. Art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson argues the performance was a delivery method for the artists’ research, and the visibility of GAAG’s critique was facilitated by both the spectacle of the protest and its setting within the very institutional frame the group was critiquing.\footnote{Julia Bryan-Wilson, \textit{Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 184-187.} The GAAG engaged with the complicated and conflicted relationship between support for the arts
and the source of that support. Bengston’s (ultimately fruitless) refusal to participate in the White Out, and likewise, focus attention on the sergeant stripe icon in the middle of his paintings, pointed to the overly simplistic mission of the Los Angeles-based protests and the problematic relationship between the arts and military-related industries in the city; and had the artist been successful in his refusal, it would have also furthered his own self-interests by keeping his work visible in the midst of gathering demonstrators, news media, and casual spectators.

The article, “The Artist and Politics: A Symposium,” published in the September 1970 issue of Artforum—the draft lottery for military service in Vietnam began on December 1, 1969—comprises artists’ responses to the prompt: “A growing number of artists have begun to feel the need to respond to the deepening political crisis in America. Among these artists, however, there are serious differences concerning their relations to direct political actions […] What is your position regarding the kinds of political action that should be taken by artists?”

The article includes responses of various lengths ranging from a few sentences (Carl Andre and Billy Al Bengston), to a few paragraphs (Rosemarie Castoro and Richard Serra), to multi-page essays (Jo Baer and Donald Judd). Each response is illustrated with a reproduction of the artists’ work. The format of the article positions the writings as text panels for the art objects, as well as expressions of the artists’ political opinions. Bengston’s two-sentence response, by far the shortest contribution to the article, consists entirely of capital letters.

ANSWER. DON’T BUY AMERICAN PRODUCTS LEARN MANY LANGUAGES KEEP MONEY IN FOREIGN CURRENCY AND PASSPORT CURRENT.

Bengston’s statement, printed just below a reproduction of one of his paintings displaying the sergeant stripe insignia, suggests a connection between that motif and his advice regarding the

kinds of direct political actions that should be taken by artists. Most of the responses within the article speak to either the need for art to engage politically, or argue that art and politics should be understood separately. The article is filled with calls for political action, demands for party reform, and several references to organizations such as the Art Workers Coalition and the Citizens for Local Democracy. Bengston’s response is situated among the binary political stances and soapbox rhetoric encouraged by the prompt itself. His statement, however, assumes a flippant tone. Rather than offering counsel or a constructive course of action, he instead proposes anti-American actions and implies that readers troubled by the current political turmoil should consider leaving the U.S. The irreverent quip likewise suggests Americans’ lack of international awareness and the increasing neo-isolationism resulting from the U.S. interventionism of the 1960s and the country’s involvement in the Vietnam conflict. In the original, handwritten response Bengston concludes his submission: “MUCHO AMOUR, BILLY AL.”\footnote{118} The signatory misspelt the Spanish phrase, mucho amor, a detail that, had it been included in the article, might possibly have strengthened a reader’s awareness of the serious humor stitched into his retort and Bengston’s insinuation that Americans are not only monolingual, but also isolationist.

In 1970, a Chicago-based student, Marc Arenstein, sent a letter to Bengston: “I am presently writing a term paper on the art protests after the Democratic Convention. I would appreciate any insight into the formulation of the protest […] and your relation with the society and government of this country.”\footnote{119} Bengston’s reply: “I’m a fucking artist, not a mother fucking
polition [sic]. Best regards.”\(^{120}\) Arenstein then wrote back, “Thanks for the letter concerning your stand with politics. It proved to be the climax of my paper […] I have come to the conclusion that all fucking artists are damned honest people.”\(^{121}\) Bengston’s response to Arenstein, as preserved in the artist’s collected papers in the Archives of American Art, is a typed letter (not a carbon copy); and one may assume that it is a second copy of the letter sent to the student. Most of the correspondence Bengston donated to the Archives in 1990 consists of letters between himself (mostly carbon copies) and various museums, galleries, private patrons, and fellow artists. One may assume that, as an artist of some renown, Bengston would have received many letters from individuals interested in interviewing him. The Arenstein-Bengston exchange is thus notable not only for its closed narrative arc, but also for its uniqueness, in that it specifically calls attention to an anti-political approach, while including a misspelling of the word, politician. The misspelling, however, is a detail that leads one to question the veracity of the statement, especially considering that Bengston’s correspondence is usually distinguished by its legibility and correct grammar, and was also overseen by his assistant, Penny Little.

Bengston’s treatment of language as a mutable and capricious tool occupies an important role within his repertoire. He engages in a playful use of language and exploits and disrupts well-accepted definitions. Through role-playing (artworks titled for films and stage names, and the artist as a military sergeant), the use of insecure motifs (chevron vs. sergeant stripe), jokey and evasive responses (the interview with Joan Quinn), or written retorts with tactically placed typos (“The Artist and Politics” and the letter to Arenstein), Bengston engages in ambiguous wordplay.

Francis Frascina explains that art and signifiers of high culture in Los Angeles were “an


important activity, process and pleasure for its participants and collectors, many of whom were in the military and science-based corporations and institutes. Could artists subject this high culture to a shudder, or even more fundamentally remove it from its lovers?" Bengston carefully activates language and artwork in a manner that disrupts established meanings; he infuses his statements of political indifference/disinterest with enough doubt to suggest the opposite. It is especially contentious to conclusively link an ambiguous artistic practice and an insouciant commentary to the antiwar politics of the era. However, within an art scene dependent on the support of a community displaying heterogeneous positions, a veiled and sometimes unconvincing articulation of political dissent, although difficult to decipher, nonetheless straddles the space between a conservative art market and those individuals espousing political dissent.

**ROLE-PLAYING IN THE EXPANDED FIELD: JOE GOODE AND EDWARD RUSCHA**

Bengston also directed others in role-playing activities when he designed the 1968 exhibition and catalogue for Joe Goode and Ed Ruscha’s joint show at the Balboa Pavilion Gallery (later known as the Newport Harbor Art Museum, and now as the Orange County Museum of Art) in Newport Beach, California. The catalogue features a staged cover photograph of Goode and Ruscha riding horses and wearing cowboy hats (fig. 2.70). Although they appear at ease in the photograph, they are distinctly ill dressed for the terrain: sans chaps, riding boots, and gloves. Ruscha’s mother, Dorothy, penned the introduction to the catalogue: “They are both masters of the evasive.” For the exhibition, which included Ruscha’s books,

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124 Dorothy Ruscha, in *Joe Goode, Edward Ruscha*, not paginated. Although the introduction to the catalogue is credited to Dorothy Ruscha, Ed Ruscha’s mother, Bengston claims that Mason Williams most likely wrote the short piece. Billy Al Bengston, interview by Susan Ford Morgan, 2002.
Bengston laid out an indoor area about ten by twenty feet and filled it with sand, a beach umbrella, and a beach chair with a drink on the side. The books were strewn around the floor and in the sand. The artificial beach set suggested the leisurely pastime of reading while relaxing on the California coast, and the installation encouraged viewers to casually flip through the books rather than to treat them as untouchable art objects.\footnote{According to Bengston, the informality of the display infuriated the gallery director, Betty Gold. Billy Al Bengston, interview by Susan Ford Morgan, 2002.}

The catalogue and the exhibition were an exercise in self-representation. Publicity for Westerns such as \textit{The Appaloosa} (1966) with Marlon Brando or \textit{El Dorado} (1966) with John Wayne filled newspapers, magazines, and billboards with images of actors playing cowboys, wearing ten-gallon hats, and posed astride horses. Parodying these efforts, Bengston, through the creation of the catalogue image, mocked marketing campaigns aimed at luring crowds through dramatic depictions of the American West. Lending their faces to the project, Goode and Ruscha, in the role of actors/artists performing cowboys for the camera, appear as potential film stars, spoofing celebrity figures (Brandon and Wayne) who had similarly transformed into various characters.

However, Goode and Ruscha did not simply follow Bengston’s directorial instructions. They too fostered named and alternative roles that would appear in various design projects and printed mediums including calendars, published letters, books, and interviews. Unlike Bengston, however, their characters were not summoned in reference to their painted artworks. Goode maintained his professional, birth name when signing paintings such as \textit{Happy Birthday} of 1962 (fig. 2.71), a large, pink, monochrome painting juxtaposed with an actual milk bottle painted red and resting on the floor in front of the canvas; and \textit{Torn Cloud Painting} of 1971 (fig. 2.72), a graded, light-blue, almost shimmering composition displaying a torn first layer of canvas that
reveals a second, largely unpainted canvas beneath and evokes a depiction of ragged clouds strewn across the sky. Ruscha, similarly, continued to sign his paintings such as *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights* and *Standard Station* with his family name.

Nonetheless, Goode would frequently invoke the name of José Bueno (a Spanish translation of Joe Goode) in his graphics work and writings. Ruscha worked for *Artforum* under the nom de plume Eddie Russia (a moniker that plays with the frequent mispronunciation of his name and the lingering shadow of the McCarthy era) and also constructed the character of the Information Man to discuss faux-statistics related to his book-making practice (discussed at a later point in this chapter). While José Bueno and Eddie Russia developed as unique components within each artist’s individual practice, they also inculpated the lack of racial and/or national diversity within the largely homogenous, white, American, male scene that surrounded Ferus Gallery and the art scene of Los Angeles in general.

The prevailing depiction of racial harmony is satirized in Goode’s 1961 publicity image for the Huysman Gallery’s exhibition *War Babies* (fig. 2.73). The poster, made at a time when fellow artists endearingly referred to Goode as José Bueno, is a blatant send-up of stereotypes and features the four participating artists seated around a table covered with an American flag. The artists pose with food items typically aligned with their ethnicities: Ed Bereal holds a watermelon, Larry Bell bites into a bagel, Joe Goode grasps a can of mackerels, and Ron Miyashiro holds a bowl and chopsticks. Although designed by Goode, Jerry McMillan—a Los

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127 More specifically, the watermelon references the racist stereotype that African Americans have an unusual appetite for watermelons; the bagel alludes to the stereotypical Jewish cuisine; the mackerels refer to the Catholic practice of Friday abstinence from red meat and poultry, for which fish could be substituted; the chopsticks restage the racist stereotype that all Asians use chopsticks. See: Henry Hopkins, interview by William R. Hackman, *Sunshine & Noir: Art in L.A., 1960-1997*, by Lars Nittve and Helle Crenzien (Humlebaek, Denmark: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 1997), 148.
Angeles-based artist and photographer—took the photograph. Cécile Whiting succinctly observes that the artists are war babies. They were born in the late 1930s, and nurtured in the shadow of World War II and the Cold War, and matured in the context of the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam War. The multiracial identity of the artists, as much as the use of the flag as a tablecloth, provoked the ire of ultraconservatives who criticized the supposedly unpatriotic tenor of the poster. Popular culture historian Kirse Granat May explains: “the popular culture representation of Los Angeles youth was marked by its exclusion of minorities and non-suburban youth. If minorities were featured in magazine profiles, it was to show how California baby boomers were well equipped to carry out the democratic promise, using images that manufactured racial harmony.” Through the exaggerated display of heterogeneity (albeit, all male heterogeneity), Goode’s poster reveals the paucity of diversity, and the artificial representation of it within Los Angeles in particular, and the United States more broadly.

Goode’s nickname became increasingly visible in the early 1960s when he moved into a

128 Jerry McMillan relates that, had Ruscha not been in Europe during the show, the artist would have been included in the photograph and exhibition. Jerry McMillan, “Jerry Talks About Ed,” in Picturing Ed: Jerry McMillan’s Photographs of Ed Ruscha 1958-1972, exh. cat. (Santa Monica, CA: Craig Krull Gallery with Smart Art Press, 2004), 41.
130 Henry Hopkins, the curator for the exhibition, described the controversy surrounding War Babies as follows: “The reason that the ‘War Babies’ show created so much interest or trauma, whatever you want to call it, was that it was really tying into the McCarthy era and the John Birch period […] Somehow it got the attention of the John Birch Society. They drove me crazy with their phone calling, chastising me for using the flag like that. It brought all my social instincts to the fore, and I very patiently explained that if they were all beautiful young women in spangled costumes and football games, then they wouldn't have any qualms about it. It was only because these were some people who were multi-racial and that bothers you, and you have no business being upset by that. That’s not what America’s about. That was my political phase at the moment. The political phase was the key backing on this.” Henry Tyler Hopkins, interview by Wesley Chamberlin, 24 October & 17 December 1980, Archives of American Art Oral History Program, Washington, DC. Furthermore, Cécile Whiting notes that in the postcards and letters sent to Hopkins upon the occasion of the show, one of the mailed items refers to Hopkins as a communist. Cécile Whiting, “California War Babies: Picturing World War Two in the 1960s,” Art Journal 69 (Fall 2010): 41.
studio in Melrose, which at that time was a largely Latino area.\textsuperscript{132} In the February 1966 issue of \emph{Artforum}, under the name José Bueno, Goode published a Letter to the Editor discussing a recent review by William Wilson of Ed Ruscha’s Ferus Gallery exhibition that had opened in November 1965.\textsuperscript{133} Ruscha’s 1965 exhibition comprised paintings featuring flatly-rendered fauna placed against monochromatic backgrounds and engaging in a number of activities. \emph{Robin, Pencils} of 1965 depicts a bird searching for worms, yet amusingly catching a yellow No. 2 pencil; \emph{No Sleep} (fig. 2.74), also of 1965, portrays an image of a fish and a bird lying in a bed floating amidst a blackened space. The paintings capture a sense of the unexpected and the incongruous—they combine unlikely elements and inter-species relations in a thinly veiled indictment of the racial prejudices of the era. William Wilson’s review notes the humor apparent in Ruscha’s work, but also speaks of the resulting viewer dismay: “Without searching for meanings one can respond enthusiastically to the humor of the pictures […] One feels it might be a disservice to this work to ‘figure it out.’ Its beguilements are so rewarding as they are.”\textsuperscript{134} The paintings’ humor rests in its substitution of animals for humans, yet, the subtext (what Wilson refers to as being a disservice to the work by figuring it out) routes a viewer back to a critique of the larger racial prejudices of the era.

José Bueno’s response to Wilson’s suggestion that viewers avoid trying to “figure it out” is equal parts absurd and biting:

From a Mexican’s point of view, the pictures look like a little boy who has just wet his pants. Like the little boy, the paintings have the look of ‘I couldn’t help it.’ You can see a fish […] and birds who want to do the things grown-ups do. The subject is what we know

\textsuperscript{133} José Bueno, “Letter,” \emph{Artforum} 4, no. 6 (February 1966): 4.
is possible but don’t expect to see […] on first glance you think: ‘Oh, No!’ But, I’m sorry, ‘Yes!’\textsuperscript{135}

The letter, although seemingly outlandish, opens by identifying the ethnicity of its author. It then proceeds to discuss “what we know is possible but don’t expect to see.” Considering the lack of racial integration within the city, the homogeneity of Los Angeles’s contemporary art world, and specifically, the artists associated with Ferus, the letter, like the paintings, addresses a significant absence: diversity.

Yet, the artist’s use of the alias did not always specifically target instances of bigotry; he is known to have used the names of both Joe Goode and José Bueno quite interchangeably throughout his career, demonstrating the flexibility and fluidity that rests at the heart of Goode’s engagement with his alternate name. On December 15, 1968, a Signature Rally—organized by the Council of the County Museum of Art—was held in a parking lot in Rolling Hills, Los Angeles.\textsuperscript{136} The rally was organized to launch the artist’s 1969 calendar \textit{L.A. Artists in Their Cars} (fig. 2.75). The calendar, which has been exhibited under the name of both Joe Goode and José Bueno, is a parody of a pinup calendar and alludes to the fetishization of cars in the Los Angeles environment.\textsuperscript{137} It features Goode, Ed Ruscha, Billy Al Bengston, Larry Bell, and eight other male Los Angeles artists, mostly wearing sun glasses, and either smoking, drinking, or fooling around with their cars. The calendar’s Signature Rally launch involved a “pit crew” composed of the museum council, which proceeded to sell car-shaped cookies and serve beverages. Rally attendees could view the calendar cars and collect the signatures of

participating artists who attended the event, including Goode, Bengston, Bell, and Ruscha.

Another example of the artist’s vacillating use of his alternative namesake occurs within an I.O.U. agreement of April 28, 1971, between Bengston and Goode (fig. 2.76). “I, Joe Goode, hereinunder referred to as Jose [sic] Bueno (i.e. payee) agree to borrow the sum of $500 […] from Billy Al Bengston, hereinunder referred to as B.A.B. (payor).” The document describes the terms of the agreement and the rights of both parties and explicitly states that José Bueno is expected “to keep on coming to dinner and going out with BAB.” A witness signature, provided by then-unknown screenwriter Mary Agnes Donoghue, indicates the document’s authenticity. Goode and Bengston’s unconventional approach to the financial transaction is buttressed within a document whose authoritative weight dissolves into a joke. The signatories are those of the artists’ altered names, José Bueno and B.A.B. The I.O.U. presents a fascinating case study of the intersection of role-playing and official business, exhibiting the degree to which these artists were ensconced within a community of figures engaging in various name games.

Ed Ruscha similarly engaged in various role-playing activities. In 1962, Ruscha posed in his Naval Reserve Uniform for photographs taken by Jerry McMillan: Ed Ruscha Modeling for

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139 Mary Agnes Donoghue wrote the screenplay for Beaches of 1988, starring Bette Midler, and also wrote and directed Paradise of 1991, starring Melanie Griffith, Don Johnson, and Elijah Wood.

140 Goode also published a book, Water, under the name of José Bueno. The oversized book comprises fourteen prints from etchings, as well as the artist-designed cover and slipcase. The entire composition captures the shimmering hues, swirls, and nuanced reflections of water. While his more famous painted works of clouds, which similarly depict abstract interpretations of natural phenomena, are ascribed to Joe Goode, Water—generally seen as both a barrier that must be crossed when immigrating to a new country, as well as a resource whose availability and potability may define the wealth of a region—is signed by José Bueno. José Bueno, Water (Los Angeles, CA: Lapis Press, 1990). The promotional poster for the book also attributes it to José Bueno. See: Box 210-211, Folder 52, “Assorted Art Work, 1961-1981, undated,” Sam Francis Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA. Additionally, one of Goode’s prized possessions is Poster Within A Poster designed to publicize the exhibition, By or of Marcel Duchamp or Rrose Sélavy of 1963 at the Pasadena Art Museum, which he later lent to the 1991 exhibition, West Coast Duchamp. Bonnie Clearwater, West Coast Duchamp, exh. cat. (Miami Beach, FL: Grassfield Press, 1991), 127. The poster is credited in the catalogue as: “‘Marcel Duchamp: A Retrospective,’ at Pasadena Art Museum, 1963, 34 7/16 x 27 3/16 in. Edition of 300. Joe Goode, Venice, CA.”
Jerry in his Naval Reserve uniform with his painting SU (fig. 2.77) and Ed modeling for Jerry in his Naval Reserve uniform with American Flag (fig. 2.78). The images were realized at a time when fellow artists endearingly referred to Ruscha as Eddie Russia, but before the artist used the name in print—which would begin in 1965.\textsuperscript{141} The photographs were coordinated in equal parts by McMillan and Ruscha whose studios at that time were in the same building on Western Avenue in Hollywood. In \textit{Ed Ruscha...SU}, Ruscha stands in an at ease posture, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. On the wall is \textit{SU} (1958), one of his earliest word paintings, which was named after his ex-girlfriend, Su Hall. In \textit{Ed Ruscha...Flag}, Ruscha faces away from the camera, and grasping the American flag in his left arm, proceeds to kick-out his right leg so that it forms a ninety-degree angle with his body. On the back wall hangs his sailor’s hat in place of \textit{SU}. The irreverent elements within the photographs—smoking a cigarette while standing at ease and the flippant kick—are performed while dressed in a military uniform and in consort with the flag.

Art historian Alexandra Schwartz discusses how Ruscha’s savvy manipulation of his public persona is exemplified by this collaborative series of photographs from 1962. Specifically, Schwartz emphasizes that the inclusion of the painting \textit{SU} “serves as a reminder of his [Ruscha’s] heterosexuality—a noteworthy detail especially given the longstanding prominence of sailor masquerades in gay culture.”\textsuperscript{142}

In the mid-1960s, Dennis Hopper—actor, filmmaker, and photographer—photographed various Los Angeles-based art world figures including Ed Ruscha (fig. 2.79), Billy Al Bengston (fig. 2.80), Wallace Berman, Bruce Conner, Ed Kienholz, Walter Hopps, Irving Blum, and others. The photographs were, as with McMillan’s, coordinated equally by Hopper and the artist-subject. The oft-reproduced image of Ed Ruscha shows him dressed in black and with his head

\textsuperscript{141} “Ed [Ruscha] and I go way back and it was easier to call him Russia than Ruscha.” Billy Al Bengston, interview with author, 26 April 2014, telephone.

\textsuperscript{142} Alexandra Schwartz, \textit{Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles} (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 179.
turned so that the angle of his jaw parallels that of the neon V of the TV sign. The photograph
captures, as Whiting puts it, “the seductiveness of both the artist and the commercial
landscape.”¹⁴³ The image of Billy Al Bengston captures the artist looking straight at the camera
and wearing a sunhat. He was situated to the left of the composition’s center, and the bottom
portion of a woman’s polka dot bikini occupies the other half. Within Los Angeles’s various
avant-garde art and surfing communities, it was well-known that Bengston’s surfing/beach
persona, Moondoggie, had served as the model for the character of Jeff Griffin (a.k.a.
Moondoggie) in the Gidget franchise; and Hopper’s photograph of Bengston was reproduced in a
1967 article, “Art Bloom,” in Vogue magazine.¹⁴⁴ Inserted into the conversation surrounding
celebrity, Hopper’s photographs rub up against the images of celebrities and models that
populate the pages of fashion magazines. Thus, the co-authored photographs merge elements of
the entertainment business with artistic practice and in so doing, incorporate the culture of
Hollywood and celebrity that was an inherent aspect of Hopper’s, Ruscha’s, and Bengston’s
artistic practice.

Ruscha’s pseudonym, Eddie Russia, became increasingly visible in the mid-1960s when
he began working for Artforum as the head of production—the name appears in the editorial
byline in issues dating from October 1965 until the Summer of 1969.¹⁴⁵ The name, Eddie Russia,

¹⁴³ Cécile Whiting, Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s, 65.
describes his fictional character, Jeff “Moondoggie” Griffin, as suntanned and tall, but remains quite vague
regarding his specific features. James Darren, the actor who plays Griffin in the film adaptations of 1959, 1961, and
1963, like Bengston, has dark hair, but one would not confuse the two. Hopper’s photograph of the artist on the
beach teases the distinction between the fictional and the real and builds on the common knowledge within both the
art scene and the surfing scene that Bengston was the model for the character in Kohner’s book.
¹⁴⁵ Using the pseudonym, “Eddie Russia,” Ruscha began doing layouts for Artforum commencing with the October
1965 issue. At this time, Artforum’s editorial offices were located above Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. Though
Artforum moved its offices to New York in 1967, Ruscha—as Eddie Russia—continued to work for the journal in a
design/production capacity through the Summer 1969 issue. Schwartz maintains that “Ruscha, working under the
pseudonym ‘Eddie Russia,’ served as the magazine’s art director from 1966 to 1972, remaining in the role even after
the magazine moved to New York in 1967,” however, an examination of the editorial credits page in every issue of
developed in a more public capacity on the heels of Duchamp’s 1963 retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum, which Ruscha attended and at which he met the Dada figure. Ruscha has specifically credited Duchamp’s *Chocolate Grinder (No. 2)* of 1914 as a particularly influential composition due to its non-painterly approach and unconventional use of materials—thread and graphite. Included in the Duchamp retrospective was also *The Fountain* of 1917 signed with the pseudonym R. Mutt, as well as *Beautiful Breath, Veil Water* and *Why Not Sneeze, Rrose Sélavvy*, both of 1921, and both of which feature Duchamp’s female alter ego.

The moniker, Eddie Russia, operates on a number of levels. It alludes to the ongoing Cold War and anti-communist propaganda by suggesting a pro-communist, Russian name. Ruscha’s family name, as far as he can recall, was originally a Bohemian/German name, “Rusiska” which was Anglicized by his great grandfather. The name, Eddie Russia, recalls the common mispronunciation of his Anglicized name, Ruscha, and also suggests a Southern California cultural context emerging from the shadow of the McCarthy era. However, in “The Artist and Politics, A Symposium,” a contribution authored by Ed Ruscha discusses his artwork in relation to politics, or better yet, lack of politics: “I cannot seriously believe that art is the

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*Artforum* through 1972 proves otherwise (although it is possible that Ruscha continued to work for *Artforum* in an uncredited manner). Alexandra Schwartz, *Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles*, 35.

146 Neal Benezra, “Ed Ruscha: Painting and Artistic License,” in Neal Benezra and Kerry Brougher, eds., *Ed Ruscha* (Washington, DC: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2000), 147. “You were once quoted as saying: ‘If Marcel Duchamp hadn’t come along, we would have needed to invent him.’ Could you elaborate?” Elizabeth Armstrong quoting Ed Ruscha, “Interviews with Ed Ruscha and Bruce Conner,” interview by Elizabeth Armstrong, 17 June 1994, in *The Duchamp Effect*, ed. Martha Buskirk, Mignon Nixon (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 55. And the interview continues, Ed Ruscha: “The art world was ready for that revolution, and fortunately for Duchamp, he was the one who wigged us all out…he played with materials that were taboo to other artists at that time; defying convention was one of his greatest accomplishments. Plus he always looked his Sunday best.” Armstrong: “Is that important?” Ruscha: “Yes, as a way of countering expectations. We were used to paint-splattered pants and all that, and here he would always be in a suit and tie.”

147 Edward Ruscha, interview by Paul Karlstrom, 29 October 1980 & 2 October 1981, Archives of American Art Oral History Program, Washington, DC. “My grandfather, who had a different name, I think it was Rusiska at one time […] it’s Bohemian/German extraction […] my name was changed. I think my great-grandfather changed the name to Ruscha at some point.”
stooe of politics [...] I isolate myself and my work continues smoothly with no involvement in any issue [...] I don’t think an artist can do much for any cause by using his art as a weapon.”

Ruscha has long maintained that his artwork is apolitical, and states that his commercial works, as well as the photographic exploits in collaboration with McMillan and Hopper, are not artwork. Thus, it follows that his commercial work, as well as the co-authored photographs, are also not isolated from current events. Francis Frascina suggests that the seemingly apolitical nature of several artists and critics associated with Ferus Gallery was simply a façade constructed to appease potentially conservative patrons. Ruscha’s false pretense and doublespeak, like the ambiguity displayed by his colleagues, positions his work as strategically apolitical while simultaneously suggesting the opposite.

Although Ruscha composed advertisements both before and after his tenure at Artforum, during his term, the advertisements promoting the work of Ed Ruscha were arranged within the journal under the name Eddie Russia and were often composed through either conversation or collaboration with Billy Al Bengston (as is discussed at length below). While both Joe Goode and Ed Ruscha fluidly shifted between their birth names and nicknames in social contexts, in professional settings, their alternative egos and shifting personae were invoked in reference to graphic and design work. Thus, one’s effort to graft a stable character onto these artists leads one not to, but away from that goal. Many times the subject of the photograph was not the artist, but rather an image of a bricoleur, a master of self-invention and shuffled personae.

PERFORMING THE MALE: ENGAGEMENTS WITH CAMP

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149 Ed Ruscha separates his artistic practice from his commercial work. Based on her personal interviews with Ruscha, Alexandra Schwartz concludes, “He did not consider his Artforum advertisements to be part of his artistic oeuvre.” Alexandra Schwartz, Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles, 195. Furthermore, the five volume Edward Ruscha: Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings includes reproductions of Ruscha’s paintings, sketches, prints, and artists’ books, yet does not reference his commercial and design work—much of which was done under the pseudonym, Eddie Russia.
150 Francis Frascina, Art, Politics and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America, 26-29.
Amelia Jones, in her 1994 text *Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp*, interrogates how an oft-reproduced photograph (fig. 2.81) taken by Julian Wasser at the opening of the 1963 Duchamp retrospective has been used by scholars to establish the artistic lineage that connects Duchamp to Andy Warhol. Discussions of post-war American Pop Art in general, and Warhol in particular, emphasize the anti-macho persona of Duchamp and the proto-Pop character of the readymade. The readymade, Jones argues, was “anchored firmly in Duchamp […and] genetically passed down to the body/oeuvre of Warhol, who is simultaneously inseminated by the Duchampian seed of inspiration and configured as feminized, bigendered, and/or homosexual.”\(^{151}\) Jones’s discussion identifies how the discursive construction of Duchamp operates as a means of defining the development of postmodernism, as well as downplaying the highly charged sexual aspects of his work. Jones ultimately re-reads Duchamp’s readymades as aspects of Duchamp’s performance of a role, and of his self-display as a woman, Rrose Sélavy.

I would here like to re-address the photograph that establishes the aforementioned lineage and examine an alternative, Los Angeles ancestry of role-playing and jokiness that is pictured within the snapshot. In the photograph, Bengston—in the role of puppeteer—dangles a cigarette in his left hand while grasping Warhol’s chin and forcing the Pop artist’s lips into a smile. Standing next to Bengston is Dennis Hopper, and behind the trio is Irving Blum who, from 1962 to 1967, was the sole director of Ferus Gallery. I argue that Duchamp’s oeuvre in Los Angeles did not necessarily function as an authorizing force, nor did it establish or justify a lineage; but rather, his work paralleled an artistic practice already incorporating the role-playing sanctioned

by Hollywood itself, or as Bengston phrased it: “Duchamp, what a bore…I’m a Hollywood person.”

If art historical discussions emphasize the anti-macho persona of Duchamp, and the feminized, bigendered, homosexual construct of Andy Warhol, then it is necessary to address Bengston’s engagement with masculinity in his own artistic self-fashioning and role-playing. In a curious self-portrait of 1960-61 (fig. 2.82), the artist drew his head on top of that of a figure within a newspaper advertisement for women’s suits. The sketch is affixed in the back of Bengston’s “Color Code 1960-61” notebook with an adhesive sticker printed with Ferus Gallery letterhead. In the crayon and pencil self-portrait, Bengston shows himself either sticking his tongue-out at the woman facing the camera or licking her back. Regardless of the exact purpose of the exposed tongue, the sketch nonetheless captures a man in an advertisement for women’s suits. The mass-circulated image is part of an advertising campaign encouraging readers to fabricate a public image drawn in part from the styles reproduced within the newspaper. Bengston, following suit, draws his face (with a mustache) within the advertisement so that he, too, appears to be modeling the latest trend. In so doing, Bengston adopts a contemporary and fashionable look, but does so while modeling women’s clothing. The sketch pivots somewhere between misogynist pranking and unconvincing, cross-dressing self-portraiture. This ambiguity suggests a more ironic and distanced embrace of the masculine cliché than has heretofore been acknowledged—an arm’s length engagement encouraged by the inclusion of the artist’s mustache (and it is notable that this self-portrait was composed around the same time that Bengston and Gerowitz first met, a subject expanded on in Chapter Four).

152 Billy Al Bengston, interview with author, 26 April 2014, telephone.
The news ad self-portrait was formulated at a moment when the concept of camp was beginning to enter mainstream consciousness. Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” of 1964, organized around fifty-eight numbered theses, emphasizes how elements of artifice, exaggeration, and theatricality are intrinsic to camp.\(^{154}\) Camp also operates as a crucial element in various engagements with queer visualizations, exploring the dynamics of both masculine and feminine stereotypes. Bengston’s artworks and styled self-representations similarly engage with exaggeration and artifice—specifically the artifice of Hollywood. By manipulating props, setting, pose, and language, Bengston deliberately destabilized his public image such that it pivoted around forms of fabrication and fictitiousness, clichés and stereotypes, and role-playing.

Whiting and Schwartz examine Los Angeles-based artists’ self-conscious engagements with the hyper-masculine stereotype of the Southern California art world (the Ferus boy’s club). Whiting asserts that the male artists associated with Ferus “fashioned themselves as artist studs roaming the urban range. In so doing they implicated themselves in the clichés about Los Angeles.”\(^{155}\) Schwartz argues that Ruscha and the Ferus group “actively encouraged such stereotyping, differentiating themselves from their East Coast rivals by cultivating a shared public persona of the artist as a kind of badboy Hollywood star—an aggressively masculine image that became ‘branded’ with the 1964 Ferus Exhibition The Studs.”\(^{156}\) The Studs poster (fig. 2.83), around which previous arguments pivot (and which closely preceded Judy Gerowitz’s first use of the persona, Judy Chicago), is the publicity image that was used to advertise a group exhibition at Ferus. Existing literature dates the poster and exhibition to December 1964; however, the exhibition was on view during the May 1965 White Out and therefore, the poster


\(^{156}\) Alexandra Schwartz, *Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles*, 164.
was most likely designed in the spring of that year. The poster advertises: “AS A PUBLIC
SERVICE: THE STUDS.” Its typeface (known as Pinewood) incorporates macaroni-like
branches that suggest phallic forms. Below the text, and framed by sergeant stripes, is a
thumbnail image of a virile frontiersman either loading or unloading lumber from a horse drawn
cart.

While Whiting and Schwartz argue that the poster visualizes instances of male artists
engaging with Los Angeles clichés, what has yet to be acknowledged is the fact that the
exhibition and the poster—which was composed with the assistance of Ken Price—were the
brainchild of Billy Al Bengston. Ken Price, constructing a narrative of the exhibition’s
realization, later recounted:

The “Studs” was an idea of Bengston’s—it was his show—he was supposed to have a
one-man show […] but he decided to have a four-man show instead. It was two works by
four guys so there was two-by-four, or some connection to that, and it was called “The
Studs.”

Bengston’s discussion of the exhibition parallels Price’s account:

Two-by-fours are called studs and there were four of us in the studs show. We were
holding the [Ferus] gallery together as far as I could see, so we were the studs […] so
Kenny and I put a poster together and P.D. Eller printed it.

157 Photographs by Charles Brittin of the May 1965 White Out show the exterior of Ferus Gallery displaying the
poster advertising The Studs, and the interior filled with artworks covered in white paper and displaying the
ascending ladder symbol. Charles Brittin Papers, Box 5, Folder 1, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
158 Cécile Whiting, in her discussion of The Studs, mistakenly states that the graphic was the cover of a catalogue,
which it was not; it was only printed in a poster format. Cécile Whiting, Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s, 68.
159 Kenneth Price, interview by Michele De Angelus, 30 May & 2 June 1980, Archives of American Art Oral
History Program, Washington, DC.
160 Billy Al Bengston, interview by Kristine McKenna, 2004, in Kristine McKenna, The Ferus Gallery: A Place to
Begin, 281.
As Bengston recounts in a recent interview: “The Studs was especially funny at the time […] If you didn’t do things at that time to draw attention to yourself in L.A. you were very easily overlooked.”¹⁶¹ The poster is an attention-getter. It uses a textual and sexual joke that hinges on the word *stud* so that the typeface encourages one to question whether the protuberances are macaroni or semi-erect penises (which might possibly allude to a homosocial community of artists). While the exact artworks displayed in the group show are not known (since they were covered with white paper in the only known photographs), the public image of the exhibition is one that ironically engages with Southern California stereotypes.

In 1971 Bengston designed a postcard mailer announcing a show of his and Peter Alexander’s works at the Locksley Shea Gallery in Minneapolis (fig. 2.84-2.85). The mailer features a photograph by Jerry McMillan that captures the two artists wearing dinner jackets and occupying a huge bed in a luxury hotel suite. The artists recline against a plush headboard and Bengston gazes up at Alexander who is shown smoking a large cigar. The bed is in complete disarray with pillows, sheets, and newspapers strewn about and a large meal abandoned on the hotel’s food cart. On the other side of the postcard, inscribed in elegant script suggesting a wedding announcement or a save-the-date card: “Billy Al Bengston and Peter Alexander April 23 to May 13.”

The mailer was Bengston’s spin on Ruscha’s well-known, self-promoting advertisement in the January 1967 issue of *Artforum*: “Ed Ruscha says goodbye to college joys” (fig. 2.86).¹⁶² The photograph, also by Jerry McMillan, shows Ruscha in bed between two women with bared shoulders—suggesting a ménage à trois—and the advertisement also served as Ruscha’s

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¹⁶¹ Billy Al Bengston, interview with author, 26 April 2014, telephone. Bengston goes on to state that they [he, Ken Price, and P.D. Eller] only printed one hundred of the posters, and he still has most of them.

wedding announcement.\textsuperscript{163} The room is filled with sexually suggestive signifiers including rumpled sheets, used napkins/Kleenexes on one nightstand, and a lighter and burnt cigarette in an ashtray on the other.

Both advertisements build on the sexual revolution of the 1960s, but approach the subject in distinct ways.\textsuperscript{164} Ruscha’s advertisement constructs a specific public persona that embraces the stereotype of the promiscuous Southern California male. As Schwartz argues: “It was clearly designed to outrage and impress […] he and his companions sleep guiltlessly […] the artist unapologetically flaunts the new sexual freedom emerging in the United States at that time.”\textsuperscript{165} While the advertisement was designed with the intent of provoking a public reaction, there was little to no response to the visualization of a scene that simply reproduces a heterosexual encounter of a straight, white male (however, as Schwartz points out, the position of the women is distinctly more precarious). Bengston’s image, however, clearly operates in a different realm.

As Peter Alexander recounts:

The dealer that Billy and I were working with was Gordon Locksley [of Minneapolis, Minnesota…] He had the big act. And he was gay, and most of his clients were gay and this was Billy at his best. He called me up one morning and said, “Put on a dinner jacket. We’re going down to the presidential suite at the Biltmore, and Joe Goode and Ed Ruscha and Jerry McMillan are all going to take pictures of us in bed after room service.” […]  

\textsuperscript{163} Ed Ruscha and Danna Knego were married in February 1967.

\textsuperscript{164} As Schwartz points out, one can also read an address of class issues within the advertisements. The apparent luxury nature of the setting and the leisure activities of the participants—not to mention the implied college education of Ruscha’s advertisement—indicate the class of the pictured protagonists. Furthermore, in a letter from Bengston to Alexander immediately following the photo shoot, Bengston wrote: “Thanks for dinner. It was wonderful and tax deductible. Love Billy.” Billy Al Bengston, letter to Peter Alexander, July 3, 1970, Box 4, Folder 34, “Correspondence, A-An, 1968-1987,” Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC. The letter further illustrates how the artists merged seemingly absurd images with serious business and artistic practices.

\textsuperscript{165} Alexandra Schwartz, \textit{Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles}, 198.
Billy was right on. We sent the card out, and Locksley’s place was jam-packed and everything sold out.166

The expedient role-playing of the publicity image also counters the stereotype of heterosexual masculinity that informed the public personae of the Ferus studs. Unlike Ruscha’s advertisement, Bengston’s endeavor, according to Alexander, was a successful sales campaign. Bengston, discussing his motivation, stated: “I thought we [Bengston and Alexander] would spice up Minneapolis a little bit.”167 The visual stunt plays off of the presumed heterosexual nature of the Ferus community and plays into the assumed homosexual community surrounding the Locksley Gallery. It straddles the fence between blurring the boundaries of possible sexual encounters and perpetuating the most conventional position of white male privilege. Peter Alexander actually wrapped-up his discussion of the announcement card with the rhetorical question: “Was Billy good in bed? Oh, fuck, he was fabulous. The way he’s turning his head toward me, it’s like, ‘Yes, darling, what else can I do for you?’”168

**THE DENTOS, 1965-1969**

Bengston’s contribution to the 1971 exhibition promoted by the Bedfellows postcard consisted of works from his so-called Dentos series (officially titled *Cantos Indentos*). The artworks were made from dented sheets of aluminum and painted using an automotive spray gun. These were his principal focus for five years, from late 1965 to 1969, and examples include *John* of 1966 and *Angel and the Badman* of 1967—both of which introduced this chapter—as well as *Holy Smoke* of 1966 (fig. 2.87), *Big Jim McLain* of 1967 (fig. 2.88), and *Conflict* and *Hatari* of 1968. The aluminum surfaces of the works were hammered with a ball-peen hammer, wrinkled,
and on occasion, punctured. The irregular and misshapen forms were then meticulously spray painted, lacquered, and polished. The sergeant stripes remain at the center of each composition, and float in various geometric and amoeba-like forms. The beaten, rough, and scarred surfaces distinctly contrast with the iridescent and vaporous effects created by the layered and sprayed colors. The irregular surface combines with the soft and shiny polychromy to produce a dazzling and rippling effect that animates the illusionistic play of pattern, light, and shadow. In a 1970 solo show of the Dentos at Mizuno Gallery in Los Angeles, Bengston illuminated the gallery with candles, whose waxing and waning evidently presented the paintings with varying degrees of luminosity and color saturation (fig. 2.89).

The distorted quality and beaten surface of these works has engendered a critical response that discusses them as violent, malevolent, and the product of aggression.\(^\text{169}\) Susan Larsen, during an oral history interview with Bengston, notes: “They’re bent and they look as if they’d been attacked or stepped on […] Some people have described this as malevolent or violent, etc. do you see it as a—that it implies that?,” and Bengston replies: “If they do, they’re fools.” He then proceeds to discuss the reflective aspects of the work: “you come into the picture, you will see yourself—what you’ll see is parts of yourself […] that are reflected.”\(^\text{170}\) Thus, while critics place the works in relation to sculptures by Chamberlain and discuss the material violence on exhibit, Bengston steers the conversation toward the reflective and distorting surface of the artworks. Indeed, when peering into the undulating and mirrored surface of a Dentos, such as

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\(^\text{169}\) James Monte’s essay for the 1968 LACMA catalogue describes the Dentos as follows: “Neither the flayed surfaces of a de Kooning painting nor the battered auto remnants of a John Chamberlain sculpture prepare the viewer for the sinking of the senses which accompanies a first viewing of a Bengston Dentos…there remains a large residue of pathos which illuminates the very center of the visual experience.” James Monte, “Billy Al Bengston,” in *Billy Al Bengston*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1968), not paginated. Fidel Danieli’s review of the Dentos series addresses both the violence apparent in the artworks, as well as the delicacy of their painted surfaces. “Responding to the tool marks one is misled into recreating the action of violent damage…the denting transforms the paintings into floating foil tissues of remarkable delicacy.” Fidel A. Danieli, “Billy Al Bengston’s ‘Dentos’,” *Artforum* 5, no. 9 (May 1967): 25.

\(^\text{170}\) Billy Al Bengston, interview by Susan Larsen, 1980.
J.W.S. 6 (fig. 2.90), one is presented with an entirely warped reflection of one’s self and the surrounding environment. The surface of the work presents a destabilized and uncertain reflection of the viewer within the colored depths of the wall-hanging composition and the rising and falling, iridescent surface.

Officially, the series is titled *Cantos Indentos*, not Dentos. The Latin terminology is a wordplay on Barnett Newman’s 1958 to 1966 purely abstract series, *Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*—a reference to Christ’s cry on the cross, “God, Why have you forsaken me?” In 1965, just as Newman reached the end of his series, and immediately before Bengston began *Cantos Indentos*, both artists exhibited in the American Pavilion at the VIII São Paulo Art Bienal. Walter Hopps—then director of the Pasadena Art Museum—organized the pavilion. Newman (at age sixty) was selected to head the United States entry, and was joined by younger artists. The exhibition included Bengston’s *Buster* of 1962 and Barnett Newman’s *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* of 1950-51 (fig. 2.91). Bengston’s series, created in the midst of increasing U.S. military action in Vietnam, expands on Newman’s visualization of martyrdom and the tragedy of the human condition, but engages with these subjects from a distance and through reference to Hollywood interpretations of war and violence.

One of Bengston’s first completed Dentos paintings is *Holy Smoke* of early 1966—a brightly colored, shimmering, golden work in which the sergeant stripe icon occupies the center.

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171 In addition to titling his series after Barnett Newman’s work, Bengston has also discussed the older artist’s signature: “I knew Newman and I liked Newman but I could never understand how he could be so blind…I would see a big Newman and the space was just hunky Dory: clink, clank, clunk, he does them just fine. And then, inevitably, in the corner, is that rotten signature in black…What the hell is he thinking about?! I mean, it’s an awful signature and it looks like a bug in the corner.” Billy Al Bengston, interview by Susan Ford Morgan, 2002.


of the composition and floats within a clover-like form surrounded by glinting sunbursts. Subsequent works within the series, much like Bengston’s earlier lacquered and sprayed paintings, bear titles that reference Hollywood films and actors. Just as *John* and *Angel and the Badman* are named after the eponymous 1947 film starring John Wayne, *Conflict, Big Jim McLain*, and *Hatari* are similarly named after films starring John Wayne of 1936, 1952, and 1962 respectively. Indeed, most of the works within the series are titled after movies that reference Hollywood’s stylized construction of the American West, military bravery, and the actor who, according to Bengston, “made the most films.”

The Dentos series was constructed during a time of increased U.S. military presence in Vietnam (1965-1969) and ended just before the draft lottery of December 1969. The films after which the artworks are named present fictional, visual narratives that had come to define a sense of personal and national identity in America. Historian Richard Slotkin discusses how the filmic roles played by John Wayne impacted the psychology of military service personnel during the late 1960s and 1970s. Slotkin argues that John Wayne’s roles influenced how a real soldier internalized “an ideal of superhuman military bravery, skill, and invulnerability to guilt and grief, which is identified at some point with ‘John Wayne.’ The identification is not necessarily with a specific Wayne film or group of films, but with Wayne as a figure of speech, signifying the supposed perfection of soldierly masculinity.” The actor’s name entered the common speech of the era in reference to traits associated with military bravery and impossible ideals. Thus, John Wayne, the icon, became synonymous with, and complexly involved in, war-related stress disorders, commonly referred to as John Wayne Syndrome (JWS), after which Bengston’s *J.W.S.*

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174 Billy Al Bengston, interview with author, 26 April 2014, telephone.
6 is titled. When asked why the works were titled for John Wayne films, Bengston said, “I liked the way they [the film studios] dressed him. He was a bang-up dresser.” The artist’s apparently offhand response in fact calls attention to aspects of performed and public presentation (Wayne’s bang-up or stylish sense of fashion), and also indirectly suggests characteristics of the Dentos series and typical John Wayne films (violence and the physical state of being banged-up).

While Newman’s paintings typically feature one or more vertical ‘zips’ within a pictorial field, Bengston’s paintings mirror and distort the standing, vertical viewer within the reflected and undulating surface of the work. While Barnett Newman’s works allude to aspects of the human condition—specifically, according to Newman, agony and mortality—Bengston’s series suggests how one often understood such teleology through the stylized lens of Hollywood—that is, films such as John Wayne’s *The Green Berets* of 1968 which glorifies military actions rather than meditating on war’s injustices or loss of life. Thus, while publicity material associated

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\(^{176}\) Since that ideal is, in fact, impossible to live up to, ‘John Wayne Syndrome’ often took the form of excessive guilt or shame for feelings of guilt or grief, or for responding to battlefield stress with a normal mix of fear and bravery. Disillusion with the Wayne ideal, or recognition of its inapplicability in the real world of combat, could transform the heroic symbol into its opposite, a metaphor of false consciousness, pretension, and military excess, as in the statement attributed to a Marine in I Corps, ‘There are always two ways to do something—the right way and the John Wayne way. We might as well do it the right way.’ The phrase is actually a variation on the army folk-saying that distinguishes ‘the right way, the wrong way, and the army way,’ in which a symbolic ‘John Wayne’ takes the place of the military institution itself. It is also worth noting that the I Corps Marine identified the ‘John Wayne’ approach with the abandonment of successful Marine pacification campaigns (‘the right way’) in favor of the more destructive big-unit operations. While this weight of public symbolism is indeed ‘a heavy weight to lay on a movie star,’ Wayne invited such readings of his performances by his deliberate efforts to use his screen image as an instrument of political persuasion. The tendency to increasingly explicit political polemics is marked in the movement from *The Alamo* to *The Comancheros* (a 1961 ‘Mexico Western’) and *McLintock!* (1963). The culmination of his efforts in this line was reached in 1966 when, after returning from a trip to Vietnam, he decided to make *The Green Berets.*” Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-century America*, 520.

\(^{177}\) Billy Al Bengston, interview with author, 26 April 2014, telephone.

with the Dentos reproduces camp role-playing—perhaps an entertaining distraction from darker political realities—the works themselves obliquely suggest that the fictional roles presented by Hollywood often color the behavior of individuals and military personnel on the global stage.

**BUSINESS CARDS, 1968**

In 1968, Bengston and Ed Ruscha collaborated on a book project titled *Business Cards* (fig. 2.92). First, the artists designed business cards for each other as cheaply as possible and then, at a fancy dinner party, they exchanged them. Twenty-one photographs, taken by Larry Bell and Ken Price, document the protagonists’ actions and are reproduced in the thirty-two page book. The publication places the pair of artists within a seemingly objective narrative and chronicles the project’s development, from the “Conception of a business card exchange (sorry – no photo available)” to mock-ups for the cards, a weekend break from work, a presentation dinner at Bistro in Beverly Hills, and proof of the exchange of cards—which are affixed to the last pages of the book. “Business cards is a book that Ed and I did,” Bengston states, “and it’s another joke.”

Ruscha’s design for Bengston’s business card (fig. 2.93) is a standard-size format featuring Bengston’s name in red, gothic typeface, and his studio address and phone number in black, Times New Roman font. Bengston’s design for Ruscha’s card is a reproduction of a Polaroid photograph printed onto cardstock (fig. 2.94). Within the re-photographed polaroid are shards of paper containing handwritten information including: the name of the artist and a

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179 Billy Al Bengston, interview by Susan Larsen, 1980. Ed Ruscha describes *Business Cards* as follows: “It started as a joke but then we decided to go through with it. We took four months to produce a book and we each designed and produced a business card for the other in secret. I wrinkled the one I made for him all up like [one of his ‘Dento’ paintings]. We had a dinner at the Bistro in Beverly Hills and after dinner we had a very dramatic business card exchange which Larry Bell photographed with his Polaroid and good judgment […] the movies and those books have something in common. In each case there’s some harebrained story that I’m acting out.” Ed Ruscha, interview by Trina Mitchum, “A Conversation with Ed Ruscha,” *Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art Journal* (January-February 1979): 21-24; reprinted in Ed Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, Alexandra Schwartz, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 82. The movies referenced in the quote are Ruscha’s short films *Premium* of 1971 and *Miracle* of 1975.
phonetic pronunciation guide for Ruscha (“REW-SHEY”), the artist’s Hollywood address and phone number, and a descriptive qualifier: “* YOUNG ARTIST.” Below Ruscha’s information is written, in equally sized lettering, “Reproduction Rights reserved by Billy Al Bengston.” The impregnable nature and centered position of Bengston’s authorship within the card alters the function of the object. In addition to promoting the work of Ed Ruscha, the card also endorses the design work of Billy Al Bengston. Nonetheless, for practical reasons, Bengston also designed a more conventional business card for Ruscha (fig. 2.95). The supplementary card consists of three lines printed entirely in capital letters: “EDWARD RUSCHA (ED-WERD REW-SHAY) YOUNG ARTIST,” and Ruscha used the more orthodox business card throughout the 1970s.

*Business Cards* plays on a conflation of art with business, and stresses that people in the business world and the art world share a tendency to role-play. While working on the book, Bengston and Ruscha were painstakingly thorough: they opened a joint bank account at Security First National Bank in Los Angeles so they could track expenses, kept meticulous financial records, held regular meetings, and documented their progress. The result is an art object that simultaneously satirizes and takes seriously the business procedures Bengston and Ruscha acted out.

The advertising material for *Business Cards* describes the slim volume as an affordable “Adult Entertainment Book,” a phrase that is emblazoned on the invitation to “the pre-release presentation” at Frank Gehry’s studio in Brentwood, and is included in the advertisement for the

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180 The inclusion of Bengston’s signature on some else’s business card not only alludes to Bengston’s refusal to sign artworks, but lends itself to the artist’s ongoing, chameleon-like self-representation.
181 See Box 9, Folders 3-7, “Business Cards, Correspondence, Financial Materials, Notes, Printed Materials,” Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.
project that ran in the October 1968 issue of *Artforum* (fig. 2.96). The ad touts the book’s affordability (it sells for a mere ten dollars), exclusivity (the print run is limited to a thousand copies), and authenticity (the authors autograph each copy). By asserting the book’s artistic identity and positioning it as a commodity in a for-profit endeavor, Bengston and Ruscha establish a parallel between the art world and the business world. Thus, the book both satirizes and takes part in what it makes fun of: the making and marketing of art.

Nonetheless, when faced with the prospect of seriously discussing the competitive, business-like nature of the art world in an interview with Susan Larsen, Bengston instead made a joke about it: “I’d never come in and make an excuse for losing a race […] racing] was real competitive […] The art world isn’t competitive. Artists and dealers don’t even know what competition is. It’s a joke, the business. My painting never beat anybody in a turn. Painting is not a competitive sport.” Ruscha, who refers to *Business Cards* as a “caper,” also resorts to joking when discussing his book projects of the 1960s and 70s. In a 1972 interview with A.D. Coleman, Ruscha deployed the persona of the Information Man—an objective alter ego characterized by the use of quantitative rhetoric. During the interview, Ruscha, as the Information Man, refers to himself in the third person and recites a previously written text:

> The Information Man is someone who comes up to you and begins telling you stories and relates facts in your life. He came up to me and said, “Of all the books of yours that are out in public, only 171 are placed face up with nothing covering them; 2026 are in vertical positions in libraries, and 2715 are under books in stacks. The most weight on a single book is sixty-eight pounds, and that is in the city of Cologne, Germany, in a

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183 Billy Al Bengston, interview by Susan Larsen, 1980.
bookstore. Fifty-eight have been lost; fourteen have been totally destroyed by water or fire; two-hundred sixteen books could be considered badly worn. Three hundred and nineteen books are in positions between forty and fifty degrees. Eighteen of the books have been deliberately thrown away or destroyed. Fifty-three books have never been opened, most of these being newly purchased and put aside momentarily.\(^{185}\)

The fluctuation between roles was the topic mediated on in *Business Cards*. Dressed in formal jackets and ties, they performed a ritualistic exchange of cards, shook hands, and indulged in a celebratory dinner. As Schwartz argues, the ritual suggests that artists are required to perform the role of a buttoned-up businessman in order to succeed.\(^{186}\) However, the crux of the joke is that their public images—Bengston as a motorcycle racer and surfer, and Ruscha as a womanizer—were certainly not those of professional businessmen, but rather of flamboyant public personalities, or celebrities.\(^{187}\) Thus, *Business Cards* functioned as an ironic exploration and exploitation of the mutability of self-representation. The entire production, including the book, the paperwork involved in its realization, and the marketing of the product poked fun at the means by which corporate and public images were designed and presented, while simultaneously addressing the increasingly businesslike nature of the art world.\(^{188}\)

**CONCLUSION: BENGSTONLAND**

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\(^{187}\) Another example of Bengston addressing the profit-driven nature of the art world is apparent in his response to receiving a Benedictine Art Award. In a 1970 letter responding to the honor, Bengston wrote: “Thank you for considering me for a Benedictine Art Awards – my minimum price is much higher than your maximum award. Why don’t you assholes wise up and start treating artists seriously, not as an extension of your publicity department?” Billy Al Bengston, letter to Benedictine Art Awards, November 13, 1970, Box 4, Folder 45, “Correspondence, B-Bl, 1970-1987,” Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.

\(^{188}\) Notably, Robert Dowd and Phillip Hefferton, both Los Angeles-based artists, composed paintings depicting manipulated images of banknotes in the early 1960s—visualizing the notion of art and/as capital. Hefferton’s 1964 exhibition at Rolf Nelson’s gallery was even publicized with an announcement designed as a banker’s check. Their compositions pre-date Warhol’s 1962 canvases covered with monetary bills.
The degree to which Bengston’s artistic practice is tied to role-playing is documented in a newspaper photograph of 1968 (fig. 2.97), and also captured in Ed Ruscha’s word-based portrait of the artist, Bengstonland of 1976 (fig. 2.98). The Province, a Vancouver-based newspaper, reproduced a photograph of Bengston in a snazzy white suit sporting a large flower in his lapel and a handkerchief in his breast pocket. Standing in front of one of his large, sergeant stripe paintings at the opening of his Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition, the artist, with drink in hand, is seemingly charming two of the gallery’s visitors who are shown looking at him with amused expressions. The photograph’s caption reads: “The advance word on Billy Al Bengston […] was that he is ‘free, flamboyant, role-playing,’ and that’s just what guests found when they met him.”\(^{189}\)

Similarly alluding to the constructed nature of Bengston’s shifting persona is Ruscha’s portrait of him is an invented, portmanteau term: “BENGSTONLAND.” The fabricated term is shown in white, block lettering and floats in a bright, red field of color. The composition conflates the names of Bengston and Disneyland, and implies that Bengston’s public presentation is as constructed and fantastic as the Southern California theme park. Discussing the dressing up (or down) of artists posing for a camera, Peter Alexander suggests that it was the influence of “Hollywood and show biz” that engendered a culture of performance, and he continues, “everyone secretly wanted to be glamorous.”\(^{190}\)

Bengston tied his work to his self-representation to the point that the two were intertwined in a complex web of conflation and contradiction. His penchant for flamboyant publicity and his continuing unwillingness to clearly explain himself reflects a larger strategy of selective and self-conscious public exposure that worked against notions of authenticity and

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\(^{190}\) Peter Alexander, interview by Craig Krull, 15 May 1996, in Craig Krull, Photographing the LA Scene (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 1996), 15.
instead worked towards the attainment of public renown. Throughout the 1960s, Bengston used depictions of himself in the press to tweak public associations with, and understanding of his work, thus testifying to the peculiar authority that was bound up with his self-portrayal. This tactic influenced those artists interacting with him to similarly participate in an intense engagement with the process of manipulating and multiplying their public image. Ed Ruscha and Joe Goode, both independently and in collaboration with Bengston, explored the potential of alternative namesakes and public roles.

Rather than developing an individual character, Bengston instead engaged with multiple roles that were often evoked concurrently. While the surfing persona of Moondoggie was expanded by Hollywood itself, the Valentines and Draculas referenced the potential of the film industry to construct a persona. The mirror-like Sergeant Stripe compositions were informed by the artist’s quasi-military and biker roles, yet were also infused with an understanding of war and conflict as known through film rather than directly experienced. The artist’s irreverent and evasive rhetoric and ambiguous references to politics baited interest and suggested a link between his work and the antiwar politics of the era, yet maintained ironic distance in the face of a conservative art market. While posters and postcards played on the stereotype of hyper-masculinity associated with the Southern California art scene, the 1968 books presented anything but truthful hagiographic storytelling. While Bengston became best-known for his development of a technically innovative spray technique, his interrogation of mutable public personae through a deliberate manipulation of language and carefully orchestrated props and images also played a significant part within the emerging Los Angeles avant-garde. Throughout the 1960s, Bengston served as a mentor to Larry Bell and Judy Gerowitz (discussed in subsequent chapters), who similarly constructed specific, public personae. His work produced and managed the insincerity,
mutability, and staginess intrinsic to popular film culture in order to accrue celebrity and ambiguously engage with contemporary politics. While his procedures were locally specific and intelligible, his continued use of regionally specific idioms and unwillingness to fix a position, consigned his practice to a local legibility, rather than an international, or even national, audience.
CHAPTER 3

LARRY BELL’S ALTER EGO

Once an artist was having a small cocktail party for some friends. It was in celebration of his recent marriage. He brought out some kind of very expensive, hard-to-get, imported Danish cheese that he thought was fabulous. He passed a few samples of it to a few other ‘gourmets’ of fine cheese, and they tasted it. Savouring each tiny nibble, rolling their eyes back in their sockets in sheer ecstasy, they finally asked if I wanted a taste. My friend said that would be like ‘casting pearls before swine.’ We all laughed and I had my taste. As it turned out, I didn’t like the cheese.

I’m afraid that is all I can tell you about the ‘central concern of my work.’

—Larry Bell

The above statement, written by Los Angeles-based, and ethnically Jewish artist Larry Bell (b. 1939, Chicago, IL), was composed in 1967 and reprinted within the catalogue accompanying his 1972 retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum. The essay, credited to Larry Bell (although perhaps authored by his alter ego, Dr. Lux), operates as a key component within the artist’s book-turned-exhibition catalogue. The book features a rear tab with a flap binding.


2 The name of Bell’s mature alter ego, Dr. Lux, incorporates the term “Lux” in a manner that integrates several references including: luxury, light, and the artist’s use of a Widelux camera. These aspects emerged progressively throughout the 1960s and are addressed chronologically throughout this chapter. Luxury was an early, integral element of his artistic practice that emerged in 1960 and was closely tied to his relationship with Billy Al Bengston; light (lux) became a crucial aspect of his work when he began to integrate mirrored glass into his sculptures in 1962; and the artist’s use of several Widelux cameras beginning in 1968 further solidified his namesake.
that functions as the text’s cover. The front cover of the text (fig. 3.1) introduces viewers to a blurred and shadowed photograph of the artist in the distant center, where his form is either seen through, or reflected in, his large glass Untitled sculpture of 1972 (fig. 3.2). A second image of Bell hovers in the upper right of the catalogue’s cover photograph. It is a faded, nearly transparent and cropped portrait of the artist peering down at his Widelux camera. The rear cover (fig. 3.3) depicts a distorted, three-quarter-length image of the artist wearing his signature brimmed hat and dangling a smoking cigar from his mouth. The photograph is, again, blurred and appears to depict the artist as either seen through glass or reflected within it.

The forty interior pages of the catalogue are equally disorienting (fig. 3.4-3.6). Like the cover images, the photographs extend to the edge of the printed page and feature blurred and distorted views. They capture aspects of the installation and viewing process, as well as the environmental effects caused by the installed artworks. Yet, even more perplexing is the constantly shifting perspective encountered by the reader within the pages of the text itself. The interior sheets of the catalogue are chopped into half-, quarter-, and third-sized leaves, both vertically and horizontally. The borders of pages are indiscernible to the naked eye, and have to be felt and fumbled with in order to turn the page. As each leaf is turned, a new view, composed of elements of earlier images, is revealed. The credits printed on the inside of the rear cover cite “Ben Lux” as the photographer of roughly half of the images within the book (fig. 3.7).³ Ben Lux is the alter ego of Larry Bell, who most often would use the honorific, Dr. Lux, after 1966/67.

³ Larry Bell, ed. Barbara Haskell (1972), 42. Additional exhibition catalogues crediting Ben Lux as the photographer include, but are not limited to: Larry Bell, Major Works in Glass (Lincoln, NE: Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Nebraska Art Association, 1983), 24; Larry Bell and Melinda Wortz, Larry Bell: New Work (Yonkers, NY: Hudson River Museum, 1980), 87; Larry Bell, Chairs in Space: The Book of the Game (Taos, NM: Webb Design Studio, 1984), 23.
abstruse and confusing constructs. The first gallery (fig. 3.8-3.9) featured a selection of Bell’s 1960 to 1963 paintings and a significant number of his three-dimensional objects that combine the painted canvases with glass and mirrors, such as the relatively large painting *Conrad Hawk* (front, right) that contains a glass panel at its center. The second gallery highlighted his glass cubes (fig. 3.10). The space included examples of his early checkerboard cubic structures, as well as the simplified glass cubes that are vacuum metalized (coated with a thin metallic film within a vacuum chamber) and placed on Plexiglas pedestals. The third and final gallery (fig. 3.11) consisted of several large, *Untitled* environmental objects that the artist began making in late 1968. These are constructed from panes of coated glass placed at ninety-degree angles. As viewers made their way through the exhibition galleries they were presented with an increasingly disorienting and spatially confusing experience caused by and reflected within the increasing size of the glass works. These sculptures transformed the gallery into an ambiguous and shifting environment that repeatedly placed the reflection of the viewer center-stage within the ever-changing space.

While Bell’s works played with the viewers’ reflections within the space by altering or mutating their likenesses, so too did art world attendees present altered versions of themselves at the opening of the exhibition. Dressed in a blue velvet jacket and silver slippers, and sporting his signature fluffed-up hair-style, Larry Bell spent the evening as his alter ego, Dr. Lux. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported, the flamboyant and eccentric character led attendees “from cube to cube, multiple to multiple, with all the funfare of bear hugs, laughs and intimate remarks.” By coincidence, the opening event coincided with the 44th Academy Awards Ceremony taking place in downtown Los Angeles at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion (ten miles from the museum). Three television sets were placed in a side viewing room of the exhibition to accommodate patrons.

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interested in watching the awards. Also in attendance was Billy Al Bengston—Bell’s pseudo-mentor. At the opening, Bengston performed an exaggerated version of himself as a macho, Hollywood film star. He arrived with a woman on each arm and told a reporter that he was “getting their Girl Scout identifications for [...] my little black book.” The exhibition’s opening was steeped in signifiers of an art world operating in proximity to Hollywood: it was attended by artists performing various roles, it featured streaming coverage of the Academy Awards, and the works themselves displayed visual echoes of viewers’ likenesses within their reflective and transparent surfaces.

**LARRY BELL AND BI-COASTAL MINIMALISM**

Art writers have thus far approached Larry Bell’s work as a formal and critical investigation of color and light enacted through a commitment to craft and technique. Barbara Rose, for one, discusses the artist’s work as obsessively technical and surface oriented, claiming that it flaunted a fanaticism that resonated with the façade- and car-crazed culture of California. Her 1966 analysis positions Bell’s work as “the result of an effort so laborious and painstaking it is analogous to the fanaticism of makers of custom-built racing cars or to the rituals that surfers and motorcyclists go through with their equipment.” A year later she situated Bell’s cubes as the West Coast equivalent to Donald Judd’s Plexiglas and steel constructions within the exhibition *A New Aesthetic* at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art.

Exhibitions in the later twentieth and early twenty-first century have similarly perpetuated what might be termed an optical and technical approach to Bell’s work. Group shows, and their accompanying texts, including *Finish Fetish: LA’s Cool School* (1991), *The Art

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5 *French Connection* (1971), directed by William Friedkin and starring Gene Hackman, Fernando Rey, and Roy Scheider, won best picture at the 1972 Academy Awards.

6 Billy Al Bengston, as quoted in Mary Lou Loper, “A Friend is Someone at Your Art Exhibit,” H1.


of Light and Space (1993), and the Pacific Standard Time exhibition Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface (2011) situated the glass constructions within an investigative narrative that focused on aspects of perception and visual play. Solo exhibitions were likewise constructed around a materially and optically centered thesis. However, within these more focused exhibitions, evidence of Bell’s manipulation of perception and self-representation emerged as an undeniable aspect of his artistic practice. Barbara Haskell’s 1972 essay in the Pasadena Art Museum catalogue describes various ludic endeavors carried out by the artist, including his employment of a studio assistant for the sole purpose of labeling the nearly 2,000 items in his studio as Untitled. The catalogue that accompanied the 1997 Albuquerque Museum retrospective, Zones of Experience: The Art of Larry Bell, includes an essay acknowledging the existence of Dr. Lux. Titled “Strange Days: Conversations with the Doctor,” the essay includes segments of Bell’s circa 1995 interview with New Mexico-based photographer Douglas Kent Hall and specifics regarding the development of the sculptor’s alter ego. Finally, the text accompanying the 2010 exhibition Larry Bell at Le Carré d’Art, Museum of Contemporary Art in Nîmes, includes a brief, but nonetheless important acknowledgement of Bell’s photographic

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10 “A seemingly purposeless project that Bell initiated, further illustrates his attitude. I first learned about it when a plexiglass [sic] stand arrived at the museum from his studio with a label on it which read ‘Untitled—36 x 36 x 36—framed—unmounted.’ In explanation he said that he had employed an assistant to label everything in his studio, including furniture, tools, art, radios, cameras, vases, etc., with a descriptive label like the one that was attached to the plexiglass stand. In addition to labeling the approximately 2,000 items in the studio, the assistant carefully made a list of each item in a book. The project was completed in two months and the assistant left.” Barbara Haskell, “Larry Bell,” in Larry Bell (1972), 8.

11 Larry Bell, interview by Douglas Kent Hall, “Strange Days: Conversations with the Doctor,” in Larry Bell, James Moore, Ellen Landis, Dean Cushman, Douglas Kent Hall, Peter Frank, Zones of Experience: The Art of Larry Bell, exh. cat. (Albuquerque, NM: Albuquerque Museum, 1997). The precise date and year of the interview are not included in the museum’s catalogue. However, within the collected papers of Douglas Kent Hall (1938-2008) at Princeton University, the materials for the published interview are dated “circa 1995.” Douglas Kent Hall, Box 1, Folder 15, “Strange Days: Conversations with the Doctor’, circa 1995,” Douglas Kent Hall Papers, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ.
work with a Widelux camera, as well as collaborative publishing and film endeavors undertaken with Ed Ruscha.\(^{12}\)

It was James Meyer’s 2004 essay, “Another Minimalism,” that functioned as a turning point for a critical and historical approach to Larry Bell’s work. Focusing on Larry Bell’s 1965 to 1966 New York sojourn, Meyer stakes the claim that Bell’s work is the product of a bi-coastal narrative.\(^{13}\) The bi-coastal narrative—although initially emphasized within contemporaneous exhibitions such as the Jewish Museum’s *Primary Structures* show of 1966 and the Washington Gallery of Modern Art’s *A New Aesthetic* of 1967—had, by the mid 1970s, fallen away in favor of a largely New York-based Minimalist narrative. Meyer addresses the putative continental divide between East Coast and West Coast Minimalisms and dislodges the stereotype that has since defined Bell’s cubes as optically-based boxes that stand in opposition to the New York literalism of, for instance, Carl Andre’s brick constructions. Meyer proposes an understanding of the glass works that extends beyond issues of visual perception and opticality. Meyer states, however, that his essay is not the place to examine the paradoxical nature of Bell’s mirrored boxes, which pit the viewers’ reflections against their perceptions. With a view to the bi-coastal aspect of Bell’s work, I will address precisely that paradox. I position it within an artistic practice that used the mirror-like qualities of glass to distort an image of the viewer and the artist; I argue that Bell deployed his altered self-image to enter into and critique the discursive debates surrounding then-emergent Minimalist art, as well as to stress the viewer amusement and enjoyment that is an intrinsic part of his artwork.

The construction and maturation of the artist’s alter ego, Dr. Lux, was informed most notably by the alter egos of Marcel Duchamp and the public personae of Billy Al Bengston, as

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\(^{12}\) Larry Bell and Marie de Brugerolle, *Larry Bell*, exh. cat. (Dijon, France: Les Presses du Réel, 2010).

well as the role-playing encouraged by Hollywood itself; it was a key aspect of Bell’s artistic practice and influenced the reception of his work. His adoption of the title of Doctor coincided with his eighteen-month sojourn in New York (1965-66) and the development of collegial relationships with Donald Judd and John Chamberlain. Bell regularly masqueraded as the character at art related social events throughout the 1960s, and by the start of the 1970s was distributing business cards promoting the Doctor’s ability to make decisions (fig. 3.12). Bell’s generally brief artist statements (such as the aforementioned one referencing cheese), interview responses (such as his discussion with Frederick Wright that appeared in the exhibition catalogue *Transparency, Reflection, Light, Space* in 1971), and constructed dialogues between himself and his alter ego (such as “Dr. Lux and the Artist,” which was published in the catalogue accompanying the 1982 exhibition, *On the Ellipse*), directly address the earnest rhetoric that characterizes art discourse.

Bell, throughout his career, skillfully developed his public persona through a combination of acts of self-representation and collaborations with those who portrayed him—regularly deploying photography to disseminate his likeness and teasingly revealing and disguising

14 The illustrated business card is a recent iteration (acquired by the author in 2012) of Dr. Lux’s business card and the address is listed as Taos, New Mexico. Bell began his career in Los Angeles; in 1965 moved to New York; in 1966 returned to Los Angeles; and in 1973 moved to Taos (but continued to maintain a studio in Los Angeles as well). Bell states, “I just needed to control my distractions, and that’s what Taos has allowed me to do. There’s not much to do up here but work. I didn’t leave L.A. because I didn’t like it; I left L.A. because I liked it too much. I was always out playing because there were so many things to do.” Larry Bell, interview by Melinda Wortz, July 1979, as quoted in Melinda Wortz, “In Consideration,” in *Larry Bell: New Work*, exh. cat. (Yonkers, NY: The Hudson River Museum, 1980), 20.

15 Larry Bell, interview by Frederick Wright, “An Interview with Larry Bell,” in *Transparency, Reflection, Light, Space: Four Artists* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Art Galleries, 1971), 41-60. Larry Bell, “Dr. Lux and the Artist,” *On the Ellipse, Larry Bell*, exh. cat. (Newport Beach, CA: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1982), 19. In an oral history interview with Michele De Angelus, Bell discusses the New York-based artists whom he read about early in his career—challenging the common misconception that artists in 1960s Los Angeles were unaware of contemporaneous discourse. Bell followed the work of “Warhol and Stella and Judd and so on” in the early 1960s, and continues to explain how “they were getting what we [L.A.-based artists] thought was a lot of action or attention […] I always read what was going on.” Larry Bell, interview by Michele De Angelus, 25 May, 2 June, & 3 June 1980, Archives of American Art, California Oral History Project, Washington, DC. [Note: The transcript of the interview includes the above dates; however, the finding aid listed on the Archives of American Art website reads: “1980 May 25-1980 June 30.”]
himself before the public. His photographs convey an understanding of photography’s ability to conceptualize many of the ideas that animate his work. Bell’s glass constructions engage with sensory experience such that the process of seeing through the glass simultaneously blurs and questions the nature of that vision. Likewise, the artist carefully orchestrated shifting images and photographs of himself seen through or reflected within the glass medium that deny a viewer’s ability to immediately perceive the subject matter. According to Bell’s perspective as an artist from Los Angeles, “humor was everything.”16 Thus, both the glass works and the ludic writing hinge on playfully altering perceptions of the everyday and revealing various commonalities (elementary forms, new materials) that informed common praxis within the art scenes of both Los Angeles and New York. Unlike the Syndell project, wherein a politicized pseudonym was deployed by many artists, and Bengston’s practice, involving multiple, ambiguously political roles occupied by a single artist, Bell turned away from contemporary political turmoil. Instead, he developed a single alter ego through whom he entered into and critiqued the polemics of Minimalist discourse in general, while also elucidating the theatrical and amusing qualities that tended to accompany his artworks in particular.

**EARLY WORK: CARTOONS AND SHADOW BOXES**

Larry Bell’s engagement with stereotypes and his penchant for upending authority are evident in his caricatures of professors such as *Shop Teacher* and *P.E. Teacher (Female)* of 1955 (fig. 3.13).17 These early, teenage drawings highlight and satirize specific characteristics of his teachers. The drawing of the shop teacher places emphasis on his prominent, beak-like nose and protruding chin, and his right hand holds a whip, as if to draw attention to his hard-nosed personality. The sketch of the P.E. teacher features prominent calves and a scowling glare with a

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17 Larry Bell attended San Fernando High School in San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles, CA.
furrowed brow, as if to underscore the no-nonsense attitude of her persona. By pinpointing certain features and exaggerating them to the point of caricature, Bell exposed the seriousness of the figures and consequently lampooned their authority. When asked by critic Michele De Angelus about his early work, Bell replied, “I drew cartoons […] just cartoons.”\(^{18}\) Even when asked by De Angelus if his work was formally influenced by Los Angeles’s automobile culture, he continued to maintain he was not into cars, but rather: “I liked cartoons.”\(^{19}\)

Specifically, Bell was influenced by Rowland Emett, a British cartoonist and frequent contributor to *Punch, or the London Charivari*—a British weekly magazine dedicated to political satire and humorous illustration. One of Bell’s treasured possessions is the July 5, 1954, issue of *Life* that includes Emett’s illustrated essay on American culture (fig. 3.14).\(^{20}\) The printed illustrations feature spindly and colorful caricatures that both lampoon and illustrate the stereotypes of various regions of the United States including New York, the Southwest, Hollywood, and Detroit. As Bell recalls, “*Life* magazine came out with a huge color spread of them. It was so fantastic. […] I thought this guy was the best artist […] after that, I started drawing cartoons. You might say that that’s the first artistic thing I was interested in doing.”\(^{21}\) Thus, while Bell’s polished glass sculptures may formally resemble the sheen of automobile finishes, and thus the car culture of Los Angeles, it was actually an interest in caricature and cartoons that kick-started his interest in art.

With this penchant for caricature—as well as proclivity for drawing—Bell attended summer school classes at Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles on a scholarship, and later

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\(^{18}\) Larry Bell, interview by Michele De Angelus, 25 May, 2 June, & 3 June 1980, Archives of American Art, California Oral History Project, Washington, DC. [Note: The transcript of the interview includes the above dates; however, the finding aid listed on the Archives of American Art website reads: “1980 May 25-1980 June 30.”]  
\(^{19}\) Larry Bell, interview by Michele De Angelus, 1980.  
enrolled at Chouinard after graduating high school in 1958. Chouinard was the training ground for Walt Disney cartoonists, and the artist intermittently studied there, under the instruction of California-based painter and sculptor Robert Irwin, from 1958 to 1960. Bell’s initial paintings, such as *L. Bell’s House* (fig. 3.15) and *Untitled* (fig. 3.16), both of 1959, notably emulate Irwin’s early abstract style, as exemplified by a work such as *Untitled* of 1958 (fig. 3.17). Both artists’ compositions are intensely gestural and heavily impastoed with thick paint and rich color. They exhibit the animated brushstrokes and paint splashes that tie their work to the early Abstract Expressionist paintings of Willem de Kooning—whom Irwin acknowledges as influential within his artistic development. Bell credits Irwin as a significant figure within the development of his aesthetic and art historical education. “The best instructor I had there was Bob Irwin. My first semester at Chouinard was his first semester teaching at Chouinard […] he used to walk around with a pocket book on art history, reading it, so he’d have something to talk about.”

Despite Bell’s respect for Irwin, the younger artist left Chouinard in 1959—explaining that he was getting nowhere with his work, or as he phrases it, he felt as if he was “in a Looney-Toons cartoon—you know, where the coyote chases the roadrunner [but never catches him].” It was during this hiatus from school that the artist began working in a frame shop in San Fernando Valley. The experience with framing introduced Bell to the medium of glass, the cubic format,

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22 In Fall 1958, Bell enrolled at Chouinard Art Institute as a fulltime student, but by the following year he had dropped out. The artist later re-enrolled as a part time student (although the exact date of re-enrollment is not known), but permanently left school in 1960.

23 Robert Irwin: “Really the best abstract expressionist paintings ever—in my opinion the best single ones—were an at-that-time recent series of large paintings by de Kooning. And one of the things about them is that they have this quality: it’s as if they were done in ten minutes. They look utterly spontaneous. A few simple gestures just explode on the canvas. But the control is amazing! The stroke stops and the paint splashes, but with the precision of the lace on a Vermeer collar. I mean, having done those kinds of paintings and tried to get that kind of freshness, I know the guy was really a master. He really knew what he was doing. Because, believe me, it’s not easy!” Robert Irwin, interview by Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 54.

24 Larry Bell, interview by Michele De Angelus, 1980.

25 Larry Bell, as quoted by Dean Cushman, “Chouinardtime,” in *Zones of Experience: The Art of Larry Bell*, 12.
and the potential of the space between the front glass and the backing board.\textsuperscript{26} While working at the shop he made his first shadowboxes, including \textit{Untitled} (fig. 3.18) and \textit{Untitled} (fig. 3.19) of 1959. Comprising a pane of broken glass and a deep wood frame with a backing board, the seemingly empty containers are actually filled with the illusion of a warped shadow emanating from the cracked glass. This creates three different lines: the crack itself, the shadow of the crack on the back of the box, and the reflection of the shadow in the glass. Implied within this construction is also the reflection, shadow, and reflected shadow of the anticipated viewer peering into the empty box. The constructions, in a way, reference works by Joseph Cornell—which Bell had learned about in Irwin’s class—such as \textit{Habitat Group for a Shooting Gallery} of 1943 (fig. 3.20).\textsuperscript{27} However, rather than filling the boxes with worldly items that are unified by various conceptual and visual associations, Bell re-made the avant-garde composition as a vacant box in which one could observe an immaterial optical play between light, shadow, and reflection.

At the same time as Bell was fabricating his shadowboxes, he became “best-pals” with Billy Al Bengston.\textsuperscript{28} Bengston’s works at the time consisted of the Valentine and Dracula compositions. They exhibit a strong geometric quality—solid colors within a prominent, interior form. However, more than Bengston’s artistic output, it was the elder figure’s exaggerated personal style that was important. Infatuated with Bengston’s mutability, Bell relates how Bengston taught him to be aware of and competitive in his self-presentation:

Billy Al Bengston’s style totally infatuated me. He taught me to be competitive in my style, how I dressed, and to respect exaggerating […] choosing the right clothing in which to make an appearance became as much of an obsession for me as trying to be

\textsuperscript{26} Larry Bell, interview by author, 4 April 2007, e-mail correspondence.

\textsuperscript{27} Joseph Cornell would have a solo exhibition at Ferus Gallery in December 1962, almost one year prior to Bell premiering his glass works in November 1963.

\textsuperscript{28} Larry Bell, interview by author, 23 April 2007, e-mail correspondence.
unique in the studio. I found myself in thrift shops hours a day looking for shoes, hats, and the right jackets. Bengston and I had a regular rendezvous rummaging for special seven-fold Sulka ties with moire patterns, or custom Brooks Brothers sports coats.  

And he continues:

The personal style of the artists I admired and emulated affected me. Personal style meant everything to the group I hung with […] in a not superficial way the humor of my Venice [Beach] friends affected me […] Humor was everything.  

**BILUXO BINONI AND THE SQUARE, 1960-1962**

It was within an environment saturated with “personal style” and humor that the alias of Biluxo Binoni emerged—an early form of the eventual alter ego, Dr. Lux. Biluxo Binoni existed in the liminal space between a nickname and an established pseudonym. Specifically, the name Biluxo Binoni combined the term “Luxury” (changed into the alliterated, Biluxo) with the artist’s interest in song *Benoni* (misspelled as, Binoni) by The Weavers. Luxury was derived from the artist’s excessive and competitive spending habits: “Bengston and I would go on these thrift store sojourns to buy duds. If he bought one suit for ten cents, I would buy twenty. Whatever money I got I just spent. If we all went out to dinner I’d pick up the tab—even if I had no money at all. Those guys started calling me Luxury because of that extravagance.”

The Weavers’ *Benoni* premiered in 1953, and the song’s chorus repeats the lyrics, “Have you heard the story of the Benoni song?,” yet it forever withholds the actual tale. Bell was fascinated by the withholding

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30 Larry Bell, “In Reflection,” in *Zones of Experience: The Art of Larry Bell*, 54-55. Also, Dean Cushman, an artist, friend, and colleague of Larry Bell, wrote: “For a while Larry idolized Billy Al, and Bengston let him. I did not think Bengston was neat at all. I found him arrogant, controlling, and bitchy as a Sunset Boulevard queen. He frightened me, but I liked his work. I didn’t understand why Larry thought he was so great, and I still don’t.” Dean Cushman, “Chouinardtime,” in *Zones of Experience: The Art of Larry Bell*, 15.
nature of the catchy tune and would play it constantly for friends and guests.\textsuperscript{32} Judy Henske, a folk singer and songwriter with whom Bell often collaborated, put versions of the two nicknames together to form Biluxo Binoni.\textsuperscript{33}

In 1960, the artist began to sporadically appear as the character of Biluxo Binoni at gallery openings and public events; however, the persona would not fully materialize until 1962.\textsuperscript{34} During the early period (1960-62), the alias began to emerge as more than a simple namesake and gradually incorporated costumed details that suggested faux luxury, but the guise remained, throughout Bell’s career, confined to a manipulation of costume and did not extend to modes of speech or bodily movement. This development was based on factors including the Hollywood environment; an increasing engagement with the Ferus Gallery gang of Bengston, Ken Price, Ed Kienholz, Joe Goode, etcetera (who socialized at Barney’s Beanery); and a general awareness of Marcel Duchamp’s masquerade as Rrose Sélavy. Bell recalls: “I began playing that character [Biluxo Binoni…] when we’d go out to social events, like art openings and museum parties, I’d dress up in one of my thrift store suits, put on a false mustache and weird glasses, fix my hair so it stood out all over the place, and become Biluxo Benoni [\textit{sic}].”\textsuperscript{35}

In 1962, William Claxton photographed Billy Al Bengston and Larry Bell at an exhibition opening (fig. 3.21). The two clutch one another and pose for the camera with wide grins and a degree of showmanship. The photograph neither records Billy Al Bengston from Dodge City, Kansas, nor does it capture Larry Bell from Los Angeles, California, by way of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Dean Cushman, “Chouinardtime,” in \textit{Zones of Experience: The Art of Larry Bell}, 15.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Additionally, in 1960 Larry Bell was part of a rock group called “Five Bags of Shit.” It consisted of him, John Altoon, Ed Moses, Frank Gehry, and a fifth person who was a floater—sometimes Ken Price and other times Sam Francis. Bell played the twelve-string guitar, Ed Moses played the kazoo, Gehry played bicycle handlebars that had a bell, and later a toilet plunger in a pail. Frank Gehry, interview by Kristine McKenna, 2004, in Kristine McKenna, \textit{The Ferus Gallery: A Place to Begin} (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2009), 236.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Larry Bell, interview by author, 23 April 2007, e-mail correspondence.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Larry Bell, interview by Douglas Kent Hall, “Strange Days: Conversations with the Doctor,” in \textit{Zones of Experience: The Art of Larry Bell}, 24.
\end{itemize}
Chicago. Rather, the image documents the performance of their public personae. Bengston sports a leather jacket, sunglasses, and slicked-back hair that distinctly tie his image to that of Hollywood and motorcycle culture (as discussed in Chapter Two). Larry Bell is caught playing the character of Biluxo Binoni. He parades in a fancy tux with a bowtie, clenching a cigar in his mouth, and modeling the requisite fake mustache, eccentric glasses, and blown-out hair.

Concurrently with the emergence of Biluxo Binoni, Larry Bell participated in his first group show. The exhibition, organized by Henry Hopkins at the Huysman Gallery, was the infamous *War Babies* show of 1961. The exhibition became notorious for Joe Goode’s poster design inculpating the lack of diversity within the arts by way of its American-flag tablecloth and its depiction of ethnic stereotypes (as discussed in Chapter Two, fig. 2.73). In the poster, Bell is seated second from the left and is captured in the midst of staging an exaggerated interpretation of his own Jewish identity. Resting his left elbow on a table draped with the American flag, he theatrically bites into a bagel while staring at the camera with a slightly bemused look of raised eyebrows and upturned shoulders. Bell’s artistic contribution to the *War Babies* exhibition consisted of a single, visually abstract and brushy painting (now lost). Although by 1961 he had moved in the direction of streamlined, geometric compositions, he nonetheless showed one of the earlier works: “And it was the worst piece in the exhibition, weak and student-like […] it was a great lesson. It taught me that you have to hang it all out and show the stuff that’s hot.”

The group show was followed by Bell’s first solo exhibition, which opened at Ferus Gallery in March 1962 and included the paintings *Li’l Orphan Annie* (fig. 3.22) and *Little Blank Riding Hood* (fig. 3.23). The exhibition’s publicity poster (fig. 3.24) comprises simple, orange block lettering that formally suggests an artwork of geometric shapes and swatches of color. The

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show consisted of paintings composed between 1960 and 1962 that Bell refers to as “saddle paintings”—a configuration in which saddle indentations are placed on two of the corners of the canvas, thus shaping the frame into an irregular hexagon and implying the depiction of an angled, three dimensional rectangle on a two dimensional canvas. The exhibited paintings reference iconic subjects from popular culture, art, and music. *Annie* is a bright orange, right leaning color field inscribed with a beige, irregular rectangle. It alludes to the early twentieth-century comic strip *Little Orphan Annie* that features a red haired protagonist. The comic strip has been adapted into like-titled films (1932, 1938, 1982, 2014) and a Broadway musical (1977). *Little Blank Riding Hood* displays a bright red, geometric form within a yellow background and appears to twist clockwise; and the painting’s title and color directly tie the work to the iconic children’s tale.

*My Montauk* (fig. 3.25) and *Old Cotton Fields Back Home* (fig. 3.26), also included within the exhibition, make reference to prominent works of art and music. *My Montauk* is a black and white composition that gives the illusion of slanting left and is marked by a black horizontal mid-section. The title of *Montauk* pays homage to Willem de Kooning’s painting *Montauk Highway* (fig. 3.27) which Bell has described as “one of the most powerful, moving paintings I’d ever seen.” *Old Cotton Fields* displays a white form within an orange background and is titled for the famous folk song performed by The Highwaymen in 1961, a song that peaked at number thirteen on the U.S. Billboard charts that year.

Much like Bengston had titled his contemporaneous, geometrically balanced Valentine and Dracula paintings after icons of Hollywood, so too did Bell title his geometric saddle

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37 Henry Tyler Hopkins, interview by Wesley Chamberline, October 24 and December 17, 1980, Archives of American Art Oral History Program, Washington, DC. “Larry Bell was still a painter. He was doing what he called ‘saddle paintings.’ They took a kind of configuration at the top and they had a little saddle indentation. But they were Abstract Expressionist paintings, though they actually now would be more related to color-field things.”

paintings after various cultural icons (albeit from a range of sources)—Annie, Riding Hood, Willem de Kooning, and The Highwaymen. Using something akin to the visual rhetoric of figures such as Ellsworth Kelly and Josef Albers, both of whom had solo shows at Ferus Gallery in 1962, the compositions appropriate the formal language of flatness and hard-edged geometric forms. Thus, the paintings evince an artistic practice both engaging with signifiers of fame and popularity in a variety of genres while simultaneously participating in the formal trend toward non-objective painting realized through geometric forms, and chiefly, the square.

Nonetheless, considering the artist’s participation in an early 1960s counterculture lifestyle—a lifestyle represented by a variety of signifiers ranging from surfing and guitar playing to long hair and beaded necklaces—the manipulated square format of the paintings

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39 Critical reviews of the show connect the formal aspects of the artist’s works with purist abstraction and position them within a narrative that began in the early twentieth century with Kazimir Malevich. Jules Langsner discusses the artworks as “simple, skewed rectangles” that engage in a formal rhetoric of geometry: “Certainly there is nothing in the immaculate hard-edge paintings by Larry Bell at Ferus Gallery to indicate these additions to purist abstraction are the work of a young man of twenty-one. Bell usually juxtaposes an immense skewed rectangle of solid reds, oranges, or blue grays on a field of unsized canvas having a skewed shape that complements the large and commanding interior form.” Jules Langsner, “Los Angeles Letters,” *Art International* 6, no. 7 (March 1962): 51. In 2011, art historian Adrian Kohn expanded on Langsner’s perspective, arguing that Bell’s geometric paintings such as *Little Blank Riding Hood*, and the artist’s attempt to discuss them as “geometric illusionary volume,” evince an artistic practice of visual and pictorial manipulation that could not be adequately expressed in writing: “Language,” Kohn argues, “falls short of communicating the esoteric with much clarity.” While Kohn’s text was one of the first to address the paintings within the larger context of the artist’s oeuvre, the analysis mentions neither the term “saddle painting,” nor does it address the existence of Bell’s alter ego. Adrian Kohn, “Work and Words,” in Robin Clark, ed., *Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface*, exh. cat. (La Jolla, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 2011), 153-154, [151-171].

40 “The varied counterculture movement of the late 1960s was an international event, but one with a truly California flavor. Visions of California’s hippies quickly entered the national consciousness, borrowing some of its flavor from the previous decade’s Beatnik phenomenon. News coverage highlighted the more salacious details, editorializing picture choices and sensationalizing content. This was partly an attempt to marginalize the growing subculture as well as sell newspapers and magazines. It also served to school new adherents in the uniform and attitudes of the cause: long hair, beads, tie-dyed clothes. This give and take between the news media and the growing counterculture helped create the images that were widely imitated and largely Californian, although a vast majority of young Californians did not embrace the hippie lifestyle. The counterculture, as it implies, stood in stark contrast to the postwar suburban materialism widely celebrated in images of California living. Yet the media borrowed one key element of these earlier portrayals, focusing almost exclusively on the disaffected youth from the white middle class. Mass media outlets in Hollywood reacted to the sea change, quickly marching in step with the counterculture’s commercial possibilities.” Kirse Granat May, “Under the Warm California Sun: Youth Culture in the Postwar Decades,” in William Deverell and David Igler, eds., *A Companion to California History* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 397.
may also, obliquely, suggest a manipulation of the colloquial use of the term, “square.”  

In the 1950s and 60s, the term square, as well as the hand gesture that traced the shape in the air, became a popular and derogatory idiom that implied un-coolness and a white-collar, conformist lifestyle. Media coverage such as Life magazine’s September 1959 article, “Squaresville U.S.A. vs. Beatsville,” reinforced the connection between California and the avant-garde youth generation. Larry Bell—a musician, artist, notable eccentric, and friend of Walter Hopps and Craig Kauffman (who had animated the term “square” in their 1956 exhibition Action²)—was part of the burgeoning and diverse counterculture that particularly took root in California. Considering his young age—he was twenty-one at the time of his first solo show at Ferus—his interrogation of the skewed square may likewise participate in a subtle prodding that paralleled his self-presentation as Biluxo Binoni.

It is important to remember that this character emerged in an environment of increasing fear of the draft and rising political tensions associated with the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam conflict. Bell, by his own account, utilized his alternative ego as a means of escape. While he was increasingly interested in perception and self-authoring, his first solo exhibition and character development were inextricably tied to the political environment:

I saw myself going off to Vietnam, and getting shot, and thinking just as I’m dying, “I never showed those goddamn paintings.” I told the dealers that were representing Irwin and Bengston and some other friends, they were Walter Hopps and Irving Blum at the Ferus Gallery, I was in a hurry to show this work before I went into the Army, and if they didn’t want to show it, I was going to find somebody that would […] as it turned out I

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41 Notably, a manipulation of the term, square, was also galvanized by those art world participants operating Syndell Studio—specifically, the term was activated in the 1956 exhibition Action² as discussed in Chapter One.
43 Bell explains that he “hid out in a lot of places as that character.” Larry Bell, interview by Douglas Kent Hall, “Strange Days: Conversations with the Doctor,” in Zones of Experience: The Art of Larry Bell, 24.
didn’t get drafted.\textsuperscript{44}

In an era in which the possibility of being conscripted and sent to war was ever increasing, the artist felt the need to exhibit before it was too late, as well as to change his name—or hide out as someone else. Thus, while his manipulation of the square form and his public persona were grounded in an artistic environment similarly exploring a non-objective visual language and the mutability of self-image, contemporaneous political tensions may very well have galvanized the artist’s public display of his work, as well as the creation of his alter ego.\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{LUX AT THE FERUS: THE TRANSITION TO BEN LUX}

Throughout 1962, Biluxo Binoni was gradually transformed into Ben Lux; and by the start of 1963, Ben Lux emerged as a more clearly defined personage. Bell has situated the maturation of Lux as a natural evolution brought about by his interaction and friendship with Billy Al Bengston: “Billy Al shortened Luxury to Lux […] I ended up Ben Lux.”\textsuperscript{46} The shift in nomenclature occurred concurrently with formal developments in Bell’s work, as well as an art scene reacting to the increasing presence of Marcel Duchamp and the manipulation of personae by both artists and film industry professionals throughout Los Angeles.

By the close of 1962 Bell had only exhibited the saddle paintings, but during the prior year he had been working on objects that incorporate glass such as \textit{Conrad Hawk} (fig. 3.28) and \textit{Lux at the Ferus} (fig. 3.29) of 1961—both of which are constructed around the form of a skewed square. \textit{Conrad Hawk} is Bell’s first painting to incorporate glass—combining an opaque saddle

\textsuperscript{44} Larry Bell, “First Person Singular,” in \textit{Larry Bell: Works from New Mexico}, 16.
\textsuperscript{45} Notably, in January 1961, President John F. Kennedy approved the Counterinsurgency Plan for Vietnam, which encouraged the development of a strategy to defeat the North Viet Cong; furthermore, the number of U.S. military personnel in South Vietnam had increased from approximately 1,000 at the beginning 1961 to over 11,000 by the conclusion of 1962. \textit{The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History}, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 1743-1745. While the draft lottery would not go into effect until December 1969, tensions were such that it was a significant point of worry for Larry Bell.
painting with a reflective and transparent medium. Within the composition, a central square of canvas was removed and a glass panel was incorporated into the object. The glass was subsequently framed by a wide band of black acrylic paint. Barbara Haskell observes: “in Conrad Hawk, his first painting to include glass, the distinct separation between the viewer and the object begins to break down as the viewer’s image is subtly reflected by the glass and becomes a visual element of the piece.”47 The format was roughly scaled to the average height of a viewer: 66 ¼” x 66 ¾”.48 Just as the artist’s formulated personality was beginning to be realized, so too were the works beginning to call attention to the viewer’s perception and image as observable within the reflected environments of the artwork.

Lux at the Ferus expands on the qualities of Conrad Hawk and transforms the play with transparency, reflection, and viewer engagement into a sculptural format. The piece comprises glass, a household mirror, wood, and paint; and it incorporates the use of moving doors (or shutters) that can be opened and shut to adjust light, and concurrently, the strength of the reflective and transparent qualities that capture a viewer’s likeness. Yet, more tellingly, the object alludes to the presence of the character “Lux” within the Ferus crowd. Although in 1961 Bell’s alternative name was still Biluxo Binoni, Bengston’s catchy use of the nickname Lux increasingly caught on among the group of Ferus artists—hence the titling of the artwork, Lux at the Ferus. Another work that alludes to the presence of Lux as a namesake (as well as the artist’s penchant for luxury) is the tri-colored painting Lux at the Merritt Jones of early 1962 (fig. 3.30). The Merritt-Jones was an early twentieth-century luxury hotel in the same Ocean Park neighborhood as Bell’s studio. Much as the earlier paintings Annie and Riding Hood are titled for the names of fictional characters, so too do the titles of works incorporating Lux reinforce the

48 When Conrad Hawk is exhibited—at a hang height of approximately 57”—the glass center often reflects the face of the viewer.
presence of a constructed persona.

In late 1962, Marcel Duchamp visited Bell’s studio at 124 Marine Street in Ocean Park (just north of Venice Beach). Bell recalled (circa 1995):

He was a hero, a legendary person. Here was this guy, this major figure out of the history of modern art standing in my studio and he was looking at my work. Nothing like that had ever happened to me before. I didn’t know what to think. When I say I was in awe of his presence, it’s an understatement.49

The degree of awareness of and reverence for Duchamp’s celebrity status within the history of modern art expressed by Bell not only evinces his prior knowledge of Duchamp’s work, but also suggests that the elder artist may well have played a role in Bell’s developing oeuvre and fictitious persona. Yet, Bell’s understanding of Duchamp was nonetheless filtered through a Los Angeles context and the reconfiguration of various strategies of masquerade as they related to both filmic and theatrical performance. Considering Bell’s proclivity for styling himself after artists he respected, Duchamp’s stylization as Rrose Sélavy is relevant to the nature and development of Ben Lux (and, eventually, Dr. Lux). While Bell was never able to visit the Arensbergs’ world-renowned collection, the air of Southern California in the 1960s was heavy with an awareness of the prominent Dada artist.50

It was only after the personal encounter with Duchamp that Larry Bell shortened Biluxo Benoni to Ben Lux, which is Hebrew for Son of Light and also draws allusions to his increasing manipulation of reflected and refracted light, or lux.51 Duchamp discussed how he originally

51 Larry Bell, interview by author, 23 April 2007, e-mail correspondence.
wished to adopt a Hebrew name, but was unable to find a suitable one, ultimately embracing the idea of a sexual change: “I wanted to change my identity, and the first idea that came to me was to take a Jewish name […] I didn’t find a Jewish name that I especially liked, or that tempted me, and suddenly I had an idea: why not change sex?” Yet, the surname, Sélaivy, while sounding like “c’est la vie” may also be heard as “c’est Levy,” which is suggestive of an ethnically Jewish name. Bell, an ethnic Jew whose grandparents on both sides had emigrated from Russia, was not religious and his parents did not maintain a religious home. However, he has often recounted that he nonetheless “felt Jewish.” He had worked his way through art school by playing guitar, often performing in Hollywood clubs with Jewish comedian and satirist Lenny Bruce (born Leonard Alfred Schneider). Bell recalls that “because Bruce’s humor impacted all of my mentors, and I worked with him, I felt Jewish.”

The 1960s Los Angeles art scene ripened in the midst of an environment operating under

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52 Marcel Duchamp, in Pierre Cabanne and Marcel Duchamp, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 64. The character of Rose Sélavy (not yet “Rrose Sélavy”) first appeared in 1920 as the copyright holder to Fresh Widow—a readymade consisting of a miniature French window—and soon thereafter in photographs by Man Ray from 1921. Duchamp’s discussion, as published by Cabanne, does not address the original impulse to invent the alias.

53 Art historian Deborah Johnson has recently interrogated the multivalent nature of Marcel Duchamp’s female alter ego with special attention paid to the namesake’s ethnicity. Johnson takes as a starting point Duchamp’s comment: “Rose Sélaivy, born in NY. Jewish name. Change of sex—Rose being the most ugly name for my personal taste and Sélaivy the easy play on the words: that’s life.” Marcel Duchamp, quoted in Paul Matisse, Marcel Duchamp, Notes, trans. Paul Matisse (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1983), note 286. Johnson proceeds to argue: “The name Rose Sélaivy is also completely identifiable as Jewish, reducible to Rose-C’est Levy or to Rose (S)alévy. Not only is Levy among the most recognizable Jewish surnames across the globe, it is also a homonym for the most prominent Jewish name in France, Halévy. This name further establishes Rose’s status not simply as a generic Jew—a Levy—but as Ha Levi, ‘the Levite.’ This implies Rose’s status as a bat Levi—daughter of a Levite. Like her male counterpart, a bat Levi would be allowed certain rituals ordinarily inaccessible to a woman, or at least a non-Levite woman. As such, Rose was transcending multiple levels of gender proscription, and specifically linking her performance of gender transgression, her change of sex, with change of religion. As to her given name, ‘Rose’ was a common scent for inexpensive perfumes (known as rosewaters) that were then migrating from the demimonde into the middle class, and may have satisfied the wider cultural implications of the ‘ugly name’ to which Duchamp referred. However, it was also a common diminutive for the Hebrew ‘Ruth’ in the first half of the twentieth century among Ashkenazic Jews—the demographically dominant origin of American Jews. As the first female convert to Judaism in the Hebrew Bible, Ruth makes a further connection to Sélaivy that hardly seems coincidental. In becoming Rose-C’est Levy or Rose (S)alévy, Duchamp renders her multiply ‘other,’ that is, female, Jewish, androgynous, transgressive, and apostate. The name Rose is thus identified with the actual activities of her artist persona and is effectively preempted as anything but Jewish.” Deborah Johnson, “R(r)ose Sélaivy as Man Ray: Reconsidering the Alter Ego of Marcel Duchamp,” Art Journal 72, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 82.

54 Larry Bell, “In Reflection,” in Zones of Experience: The Art of Larry Bell, 55.
the long, anti-Semitic shadow of the Cold War. The lines between anti-Semitism and anti-communism were often blurred in Hollywood—as was apparent in the infamous trials of the Hollywood Ten (six of whom were Jewish), and was explored in the 1947 film, *Crossfire*. Steven Alan Carr, a media historian, describes the rise and fall of the prejudice that Jews dominated the film industry and that they exploited that hegemony for nefarious and communistic purposes. While Carr outlines how, following the Second World War, anti-Semitism declined in the United States, he also explains that both anti-communist and anti-Semitic campaigners in this period tended to presume a foreign conspiracy: “To both, the enemy was foreign and represented foreign ideals that were perceived to be inimical to the national integrity of the United States.”

The actual diversity of U.S. media and culture notwithstanding, these dual prejudices became all but interchangeable and fueled Cold War fears.

Thus, Bell was already exploring his Jewish identity when he met Duchamp in 1962. But it was only after their interaction that the artist shortened the name of his alternative namesake to Ben Lux. In October 1963, the Lux character made a grand appearance at the opening of Duchamp’s retrospective. Photographed by Julian Wasser at the exhibition’s opening, Bell is seen sporting a dress suit with a white handkerchief tucked into his breast pocket (fig. 3.31). In the photograph, the artist poses with Ben Lux’s signature fake mustache, unconventional glasses, and teased hair. Ed Ruscha described the artist’s self-fashioning at the exhibition opening as a representation of the famous Jewish comedian Groucho Marx.

Prior to the opening, Duchamp had taken part in a performance-turned-photo opportunity

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56 The exhibition, *By or of Marcel Duchamp or Rrose Sélavy*, took place at the Pasadena Art Museum from October 8—November 3, 1963.
of himself playing chess with a naked woman named Eve Babitz. This performance was enacted in front of *The Large Glass* (1915-1923), a cryptic work that formally plays with perceptual distortions in a manner not unrelated to the developing work of Larry Bell. Much as a viewer’s interaction with *The Large Glass* involves looking through, at, and being reflected within the work, Bell’s compositions similarly engage with the formal qualities of transparency and reflection.\(^{58}\) Duchamp’s work was intimately tied to the game of chess—as recently interrogated by Bradley Bailey who situates *The Large Glass* as demonstrating how Duchamp’s identification as a chess player was interconnected with his work as an artist, making the two activities aesthetically and conceptually inseparable.\(^{59}\) Bell would go on to premiere his first checkerboard sculpture (*Bette and the Giant Jewfish*) the day after Duchamp’s retrospective closed, and eventually Bell designed his own version of the game of chess in 1982, *Chairs in Space* (discussed below). Furthermore, the retrospective’s title, *By or Of Marcel Duchamp or Rrose Sélavy*, conjured ambiguity regarding the creator of the works included in the exhibition; and the show itself incorporated multiple objects associated with Rrose Sélavy, including the promotional *Poster within a Poster* and the first readymade copyrighted by “Rose Sélavy” (prior to the adoption of a double “r”), *Fresh Widow* of 1920.\(^{60}\) The opening itself was a raucous event enlivened by the attendees—including Billy Al Bengston, Andy Warhol, and Ben Lux—and it was an occasion that Bell describes as “great fun and very humorous.”\(^{61}\)

**BEN LUX AND THE 1963 SOLO SHOW**

The Pasadena Art Museum’s Duchamp retrospective closed on November 3, 1963, and

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\(^{58}\) An additional, noteworthy parallel may be established between the cracked glass in *The Large Glass* and Bell’s early shadow boxes. While Duchamp’s work features large panels of glass that were broken by accident, and retained as such by the artist, Bell’s first boxes of 1959 incorporate cracked glass that was chosen specifically for the effect of the fractures (fig. 3.18 and 3.19).


\(^{60}\) On the base of the readymade sculpture, the text reads: “Fresh Widow copyright Rose Sélavy 1920.”

\(^{61}\) Larry Bell, interview by author, 4 April 2007, e-mail correspondence.
Larry Bell’s second solo show at Ferus opened the following day—November 4, 1963. Just as Ben Lux implied aspects of Judaism (Bell’s ethnicity and the moniker) and role-playing (an altered self-presentation) in Los Angeles, so too did the work constructed by Larry Bell manipulate viewer perception. The exhibition featured paintings with mirrored centers; narrow boxes that incorporated reflective and transparent material; and glass cubes with stripes, ellipses, and checkered patterns (fig. 3.32). Specifically, it included the wall-mounted *Untitled* of 1962 (back left of installation photograph), and the sculptures *L. Bell’s House, Part II* of 1962 (fig. 3.33-3.35), *Untitled/Lux at the Big Apple* of 1963 (fig. 3.36), and *Bette and the Giant Jewfish* of 1963 (fig. 3.37).

The wall-mounted *Untitled* (no separate image available; see installation photographs: far back and left of fig. 3.32, and back of fig. 3.41) is a mirror and canvas composition that merges the saddle painting format with a reflective center. The painted canvas angles one way, while the mirrored cube at the center slants the opposite direction. Although the work is wall-mounted and flat, the reflective center creates an optically deep composition. *L. Bell’s House, Part II* features vertical stripes on the sides and top of the structure (but not the base). These stripes are interrupted by various skewed or angled squares on all except one of the side-facing walls of the cube. The piece is exhibited on a custom-made, opaque pedestal and its title positions the sculpture as the evolutionary descendant of the brushy like-titled painting, *Part I*, of 1959.

*Untitled/Lux at the Big Apple* is a glass cube that features vertical stripes interrupted by ellipses on all six sides; and it rests on a transparent pedestal. Although the cube is regularly exhibited as *Untitled*, when shown in May 1963 at Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, it was temporarily retitled *Lux at the Big Apple*.62

*Bette and the Giant Jewfish* (fig. 3.37) features a checkered pattern on all six sides of the

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cubic structure, and each side is inscribed with the standard 8 x 8 arrangement of the traditional chess or checkerboard. It is the first work by Bell to be aluminized, or vacuum coated. While the other works in the show incorporate scraped mirrors and glass, *Bette* is the product of a more complicated process that Bell had to outsource to complete. He designed the pattern, which was silkscreened onto the glass, and a company in Burbank placed the glass in a vacuum chamber and coated it with small flecks of metal that caused the exposed regions to become reflective, or mirrored, on both sides.\(^6\) The sculpture is displayed on a translucent Plexiglas pedestal and stands precisely 5’ high. While the cubes reflect a crisp, but distorted image of the viewer, the pedestal’s transparent Plexiglas material returns a hazy, shadowed reflection of the observer’s body (see, for example, fig. 3.81) while simultaneously allowing one to see through the transparent support structure to the opposite side of the base.

The exhibition’s two publicity posters feature references to aspects of the artist’s works and their playful and mutating perceptual effects (fig. 3.38), as well the distortion involved in the representation of Bell’s alternative persona (fig. 3.39). The black and white poster showcases manipulated text: a condensed “Larry” and a stretched “Bell.” The text is placed immediately above a skewed black square that alludes to the artist’s continued use of the manipulated hexagon and is simultaneously read as an angled silhouette of a cube. The simple text and form—both of which exhibit qualities of stretching and/or twisting—link the promotional poster with the formal qualities and visual effects that characterize the artist’s work.

The sepia poster, however, features neither Bell’s work, nor an image of the artist himself. Rather, it appropriates an old postcard garnered from a secondhand shop during one of the artist’s thrifting expeditions. The central image of the poster displays a man in a bowler hat and three-piece suit standing next to a human-sized Jewfish that hangs from a metal support

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6 Larry Bell, interview by Michele De Angelus, 1980.
beam. The term Jewfish is the informal designation for species of giant sea bass, one of which is commonplace off the southern coast of California. The two figures—man and fish—are framed by water in the foreground and a cadre of onlookers in the background. Above them hangs a sign reading “L. Bell” in block capital letters. The postcard-turned-publicity image was part of a running joke that placed Larry Bell as the Jewfish of Los Angeles, alluding to his Hebrew origins. The joke had also been visualized in an early 1959 photograph of Judy Henske (the musician who coined the name, Biluxo Binoni) and Bell taken by Fred Gerlach—a twelve-string guitar player—in Venice Beach, which was later appropriated as the advertising image for Bell’s 1969 exhibition at Mizuno Gallery in Los Angeles (fig. 3.40). In the early parody of the postcard, Henske faces forward with her arms positioned stiffly by her side. Bell, with gut protruding and arms and shoulders slumped forward, distorts his body to emulate the structure of the hanging Jewfish. The sculpture Bette and the Giant Jewfish, however, is named after Betty Asher who purchased the work directly from Bell’s studio prior to its November 1963 premiere at Ferus. Thus, a combination of perceptual distortion and self-authoring was apparent in the exhibited artworks highlighting various reflective and transparent qualities, as well as the promotional material used to publicize the 1963 exhibition.

Reviews of the exhibition were laudatory, if not reverential, and focus on the perceptual

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64 Larry Bell, Larry Bell, The Sixties, 19. “This title [Bette and the Giant Jewfish] came from an old postcard that was used as an announcement for my second show at the Ferus Gallery. Betty Asher purchased the piece after seeing it in my studio on Marine Street. It is the first cube using ¼ plate glass that was mitred on all sides. The pattern was applied by silkscreen, then washed off after the panels were vacuum-coated with aluminum, leaving the screened areas open for visual access to the interior.” In an interview with Michele De Angelus, Bell expanded on how the vacuum coating process related, specifically, to Bette: “The idea of the vacuum process is that you get all the air out, then you can evaporate materials so that they will go down onto the surface. If you have something in there that is full of air, when you get to the low pressure, the air starts to come slowly out of the stuff and the coatings won’t impinge on the surface, they collide with the molecules of gas coming out of the tape or whatever, you see. You couldn’t use marking tape, you had to use something else […] on the checkerboard one I silkscreened the checkerboard pattern onto the surface with transparent silk screen [sic] medium. When it dried the stuff was there and I took it to the guy and he aluminized it and then I just threw acetone over the stuff and the other stuff washed away and there was the checkerboard pattern. I don’t know if you can notice—I haven’t seen the piece in years—but the edges are a little funky around the holes, and that’s because there was some gassing coming out from just the very edge.” Larry Bell, interview by Michele De Angelus, 1980.
manipulation, mutation, and multiplication apparent in the work. Fidel Danieli’s review in *Artforum* situates the work, by way describing its fracturing effect, as playing with a viewer’s self-conceptualization and channeling strategies apparent in Duchamp’s oeuvre:

[The work] reveals distinctly the amplification of a simple but profound visual truism: a mirror reflects. And on to its frightening corollary, that two or more parallel facing glasses reflect each other endlessly […] enchanted wonderment rapidly gives way to a shocked bewilderment, amazement, and perhaps even irritation, for our very precious entity is literally fractured, shredded to ribbons, and ultimately destroyed. […] The modus operandi of Duchamp has been described as an aloof assault. The term applies with equal veracity to that of Bell.

Like the reviews, photographs of the exhibition feature the interplay of reflection and transparency, and incorporate fractured and distorted images of viewers as a key aspect within the documentation of the work. Photographs by Los Angeles-based photojournalist Frank J. Thomas showcase the artist and Irving Blum (fig. 3.41-3.42) engaging with the works. In one photograph, Bell leans against the wall, seemingly facing a splintered reflection of Irving Blum captured in *Untitled* of 1963. A second photograph features Bell and Blum in conversation around *Bette and the Giant Jewfish*, and the object in turn distorts and combines their reflections with elements of the surrounding gallery environment.

The fracturing and distorting effects of the work were structured by the 60” hang-height that was used for the exhibition’s installation. Not only were the wall-hanging pieces centered at

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65 Henry Seldis noted that Bell’s “effective manipulation of illusion and of space are not mere optical tricks […] the spectator enters the compositions through his reflection.” Seldis, “In the Galleries: Larry Bell, Grand Illusionist,” *Los Angeles Times* (11 November 1963): D10.
67 Frank J. Thomas documented the Los Angeles art scene, photographing exhibitions at Ferus Gallery, Felix Landau Gallery, The Pasadena Art Museum, individual artists’ studios, etc.
precisely 5’ (extending above and below the centering point), but also, the glass cubes reached a precise height of 60”. Consequently, the Untitled canvas and mirror composition reflected the visage of the viewer positioned a few feet away from the object—the same position one would take-up in front of a household mirror. The fractured nature of the mirror in turn presented a fractured image of the viewer. Similarly, the height of the glass cubes such as Bette, and especially its transparent pedestal, reflected the approaching viewer and served as a stand-in for the potential figure. Nonetheless, upon reaching the sculptural objects, one was able to view only a partial image of one’s reflected visage—and a distorted version of one’s image at that. This perceptual mirroring of the distorted and fragmented body within a purely geometric composition inserted the anthropomorphic into the geometric cube. Thus, spectators became engaged with the pieces, such that the process of viewing became the process of merging art and life. This union complicated the distinction between the viewer and the art object. Were the spectators distinct individuals attending an art exhibition, or were they a part of the work on display?

While the use of mirrors and glass were a byproduct of formal developments in Bell’s practice, they were also a consequence of the Bengston-Bell relationship and exaggerated self-portrayals, as well as a way of working through the concept of ersatz names and multivalent wordplays that built on a Los Angeles-filtered notion of Duchamp. Regarding his treatment of the canvas and mirrored compositions, Bell stated:

I was looking for something else to combine in the canvases so I thought I’d stick a piece of glass in one of these things to see how it looked—and it looked great. Some of the guys came over and they all said ‘wow.’ But when Bengston saw the piece he tried to discourage me from making them. They were real expensive to produce and he said ‘you
can’t afford to make these. If you could afford to make them then I would be making them.’ Finally, I’d done something that he wished he’d done, so I completely threw myself into making them.68

And later, he continued in reference to the freestanding glass cubes and pedestal:

What led me into doing the cubes was all tied in to my relationship with Bengston […] and our ideas on uniqueness, and individualism.69

While Bengston provided an opinion around which Bell pivoted, and an artistic practice with which he competed, much of Bell’s perceptual and conceptual distortion was seasoned with hints and allusions that establish a distinct connection with Duchamp’s work—the use of glass, the checkered pattern, the presentation of an alias, and the manipulation of the viewer’s reflection and understanding of space. Nonetheless, when asked directly if the pieces were designed with an awareness of Duchamp’s work, and whether the Dada artist’s example played a role in the realization of Ben Lux, Bell replied, “Maybe.”70

In late 1963, prior to the opening of his second exhibition, Bell was slowly moving out of his Ocean Park studio and into an open, light-filled space on Market Street in Venice Beach. The Market Street studio had two huge skylights and a storefront window designed to exhibit an interior space—unfortunately, the only known photograph shows just a sliver of one of the skylight’s recesses (fig. 3.43). Bell enthusiastically wrote to Moses in 1964: “The place is close to fantastic. The potential is incredible with balconys [sic] & sky lights & big doors & windows

69 Larry Bell, “First Person Singular,” in Larry Bell: Works from New Mexico, 16. Bell’s statement, “our ideas on uniqueness and individualism,” does not reference aspects of an individual artist’s hand as imprimatur of uniqueness. Rather, in the case of Bengston and Bell, it alludes to their push to construct a body of work aligned with forms of self-representation achieved through artificial means—eccentric public personae dressed in unconventional clothes and sporting interesting hairstyles.
70 Larry Bell, interview by author, 23 April 2007, e-mail correspondence.
& floor drains.” At this site, *L. Bell’s House, Part II* was completed, and by Bell’s estimation, “the corners of my studio seriously affected the architecture of my work.” While the skylights drenched the interior space with natural light, the large glass windows not only allowed the artist to peer onto the outside street scene, but also permitted pedestrians to see inside the building as well as to examine their own reflections within the storefront window. This process closely mirrors the act of looking at *L. Bell’s House, Part II* (fig. 3.44). When standing at a distance from the object, or while bending down to peer into the center of the work, a patron can 1) look into the center of the piece, 2) look through the piece to see spectators on the other side, and 3) look at his or her own reflection on the surface of the cubic structure. Bell had constructed the piece while seated—the chair is visible in the studio photograph. When seated, the artist peered into, through, and at the sculpture. He was faced with a fractured reflection of himself while simultaneously watching pedestrians watch him work, as well as examining their own reflections.

The essence of the reflection-transparency interplay is related to the process of looking at a storefront. A storefront is ostensibly designed to reproduce one’s reflection and also enable viewers to see and picture themselves wearing and/or owning the displayed items. These items could play a role in one’s presentation or construction of a public image. The implicit drama of the storefront, as it relates to Bell’s work, is captured in Dennis Hopper’s 1964 photograph of Larry Bell standing in front of a window: *Mike, The Tailor* (fig. 3.45). In the photograph, the artist poses casually in front of the store window. He is dressed to the nines with a tie, double-breasted jacket, boldly striped slacks, and black and white oxfords. Behind him, the window displays advertising signage, a photograph of John F. Kennedy, and mannequins wearing black

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71 Larry Bell, letter to Ed Moses. 16 January 1964, Ed Moses Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.
tuxes with bowties. Also visible in the reflection of the window is the rear-facing reflection of the artist, the forward-facing silhouette of a crouching Dennis Hopper with his camera, a parked Volkswagen Beetle, and other incursions from the surrounding environment. Hopper’s photograph obliquely captures the process by which Bell’s works call attention to aspects of viewer self-representation—the tailoring of personal appearance, posture, gait, dress, facial expression dress, and pose—through a manipulation of reflection and transparency.

By 1964, the figure of Ben Lux had grown into a named entity visible within the context of certain art exhibitions. The artist had solidly transposed the intrinsic practice of character construction evident on the proverbial silver screen, and tapped the acquired strategies to fabricate a persona within the contemporary art scene. In a January 1964 letter to Ed Moses—who was living in Spain at the time—Bell wrote of the success of his second solo show at Ferus (he sold five works), of the new studio, and of a custom-made tie he commissioned from a tailor in San Francisco. The letter is signed “Love Lux” and the envelope sports a line drawing of Lux wearing his new tie, a suit, and the recognizable brimmed hat (fig. 3.46). As Los Angeles-based photographer Bill Claxton recounted, Bell’s participation in various opening parties at Ferus Gallery was always accompanied by a tuxedo costume and an exaggerated self-presentation: “Larry Bell often wore one [a tuxedo]. There he’d be with a big black cigar and his hair parted down the middle, all dressed up, playing a character in the scene.”

**DR. LUX AND NEW YORK: 1965-1966**

Irving got me into a group show called *Seven New Artists*, in New York, in 1964. I moved to New York when I had my first show at Pace in 1964. I hadn’t sold more than a few pieces in my life at that point, and when I went into the gallery the day before the

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show opened Arnold Glimcher [the owner of Pace Gallery] said ‘we’ve sold everything.’

Everything. I don’t think I could’ve done that in L.A. I never sold much work here.  

In winter 1964-1965, Bell moved to New York, and by the end of 1965 he had participated in a number of group exhibitions there and elsewhere, had a third solo show in October at Ferus Gallery, and a solo show in November at Pace Gallery. It was during this eighteen-month sojourn to the East Coast that Ben Lux earned his putative doctorate; Larry Bell was christened the “wunderkind” of the L.A. art world by Barbara Rose; and the cube became both simplified in form and infinitely more complicated in construction and in its critical implications. It was in 1965 that Dr. Lux began to enter into the polemics of Minimalism through formal, social, and written intrusions.

The solo shows at Ferus and Pace (fig. 3.47-3.48) consisted of hollow, translucent cubes that were coated in a vacuum chamber with vaporized metals including silicon monoxide, bismuth, chromium, gold, and rhodium. The metallic coatings remain consistent on the four walls of each cube, but vary in composition and density from sculpture to sculpture. Thus, the works exhibit various degrees of opacity—some are nearly translucent while others are more opaque and mirror-like. Each cube is placed on a vertical Plexiglas pedestal designed so that the top of the cube reaches a height of 5’. Aside from variations in volume, color, and pattern, the pieces encourage one to see the similarities among and seriality of the objects, which in turn highlight their subtle variations. Works such as *Untitled* of 1964 (fig. 3.49) display elliptical patterns, while others such as *Untitled* of 1964 (fig. 3.50) and *Untitled* of 1965 (fig. 3.51) present multi-tonal, unbroken surfaces. As one circumambulated the sculptures in the exhibitions, the

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75 Group exhibitions from 1965 included notable shows such as: *The Responsive Eye* at MoMA, *Five at Pace* at Pace Gallery New York, and the American Pavilion at the VIII São Paulo Art Bienal.
smoothly surfaced cubes would subtly shift in hue—displaying a faint, fluctuating rainbow of color. While in Los Angeles, Bell had outsourced the vacuum coating work on his pieces (at great cost); in New York, the Pace Gallery purchased the artist a vacuum coating machine that he operated out of his Lower East Side studio—manipulating by hand (or by dial) the aluminizing gasses and metals. Although elliptical, striped, and checkered designs had dominated the works made in Los Angeles in 1964, amidst an increasing involvement in the New York scene, the cubes of late 1965 and 1966 predominantly exhibit smooth surfaces characterized by various degrees of multi-tonal, pigmented chrome that was applied within the vacuum chamber (thus allowing the aluminizing metals to evenly distribute across the sculpture’s surface). The newer works maintain the lucite pedestal, but the simplified forms focus attention on the mischievous shifts between transparency and reflection occurring within the environment of the sculptures—

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76 The narrative that led to the acquisition of the vacuum coating machine was one of interesting and odd encounters that Bell describes at length in a 1980 interview with Michele De Angelus. While Bell’s discussions of working in Los Angeles are generally filled with ease and familiarity, the endearing and eccentric account of his New York experience captures the flavor of moving to and working on the East Coast: “I shipped a bunch of work to New York for my first one-man show at the Pace Gallery, and the two largest pieces that I had sent to New York were damaged in shipping […] I figured that I might be able to get them repaired if I could find somebody who could do the coatings, and find a glazier who could replace the broken sections. Well, the Pace Gallery was all for it, and the guy pulled a wad of money out of his pocket and said, ‘Fix it,’ you know […] I found a guy out in the Bronx that would do it—it was called Ioni Research labs. I was real excited. I thought it was going to be a good place. Anyway, I went out there. It was the funkiest, seediest area over on Longfellow Avenue, near the Hunt’s Point market, and I went in there and my heart just fell right into my shoes. Because what the guy did was commercial metalizing. Like he aluminized six million cap pistols a year for some toy manufacturer, and he did novelty bottles and things like that for another toy manufacturer, you know, and I didn’t think he could do it, because how could you clean the glass in a place like this? He said—it was a German guy, a neat old guy, Ben Kieneg—‘Ve can do it. You bring the glass and ve can do it.’ […] he shut down one of those big coaters he had and had this guy Philip Garulio from Milan, no, Capri who worked for him—one of the funniest guys I ever met—he had an Italian accent just like Chico Marx. He spoke just like that, you know, and he and Ben were always jiving each other—Ben was this old Jewish guy and Philip was his major domo around there, he could do anything […] They charged me a thousand dollars. And after I paid him he said, ‘Listen, you’re crazy to spend this kind of money on it […] you should get the equipment and do it yourself. […] I got a small coater here […] we don’t use it and I’ll sell it to you.’ […] So I went back to the gallery and repaired the pieces […] I said, ‘Well, you know, this guy’s got some equipment, he wants to sell it,’ and before I could get the words out of my mouth […] they said, ‘Whatever you want, we’ll set it up and do it.’” Larry Bell, interview by Michele De Angelus, 1980. In the interview, Bell continues to discuss the instruction manual Vacuum Deposition of Thin Films and the role it played in his use of the machine, as well as how he was taught to use the chamber by Mike Glickman. Bell’s detailed and somewhat dramatic account of the machine’s acquisition is quite distinct in character from his description of the more laidback pace and casual environment of working in Los Angeles. The steep learning curve of working with extreme personalities and more pragmatic and financially-driven individuals in New York influenced the formal development of the glass cubes and also contributed to the eventual acquisition of the pre-nominal Doctor Ben Lux.
visual echoes occurring within the cube—rather than as reflected on the mirrored surface.\textsuperscript{77}

The publicity designs for the Ferus Gallery show (fig. 3.52) and the Pace Gallery exhibition (fig. 3.53) both include reproductions of a single glass cube. An enlarged photograph of a smooth, vacuum coated construction dominates the Ferus Gallery’s poster design. The viewpoint of the photograph reproduces the angle at which one would view the sculpture if standing within a couple feet of the object. The angled position of the cube and the dominating presence of the form within the frame of the poster mimic the compositional structure of Bell’s earlier saddle paintings. While the paintings present an angled view of an implied three-dimensional object, the poster presents an angled view of an actual three-dimensional object. The Pace Gallery’s advertisement, by contrast, reproduces a thumbnail sized image of an elliptically inscribed glass cube. The sculpture is placed off center, floating in a black background, and is framed by arced text mirroring the design inscribed on the reproduced work. Both exhibition announcements remove the cubes from their custom designed bases; and they focus solely on the capstone, rather than the objects in their entirety.

Yet, it is interesting that—amidst the rising tide of East Coast-based geometric, simplified, minimalist structures—the Ferus Gallery announcement reproduced the simplified cube while the New York-based Pace advertised the more ornate composition. These promotional choices—consciously or not—inscribed regional stereotypes onto the work. Ferus emphasized the New York bona fides of a Los Angeles artist by stressing the plain, geometric aspect of sculpture that resonated with objects recently exhibited in the gallery by Ellsworth

\textsuperscript{77} For a thorough examination of the technical aspects involved in aluminizing glass within a vacuum chamber, see: Ginger Elliott Smith, “Practicing Big Science: Artists, Technology, and Institutions in 1960s and 1970s Southern California” Ph.D. diss., Boston College (forthcoming).
Kelly and Frank Stella. By contrast, Pace underscored the Los Angeles identity of the work by reproducing the elliptically patterned sculpture and emphasizing the design of the cube by mimicking it in the accompanying, colorful text. That text further detailed the geographic affiliation with Los Angeles by emphasizing Bell’s Ferus Gallery ties.

Critical reviews of Bell’s work from this period—and specifically of these two solo shows—are colored by a discomfort regarding the use of technology as it relates to artistic practice and craft. Dore Ashton, commenting on Bell’s work in an early 1965 group show at Pace, emphasizes the “untouched” nature of Bell’s “cold constructions”: “Clearly the artist’s hand had little part in the industrial processes by which these glass sheets were fashioned. What is at stake is the idea successfully realized by technological aptitude.” Coplans penned both a single page article and a joint review of the Ferus and Pace exhibitions. In the stand-alone essay he discusses the pristine and technological aspects of the glass cubes and their “evanescent perceptual qualities that enrich the whole harmony, yet act at the same time to dissolve the construction into shimmering intangibility.” Buried within the purple prose is an acknowledgement of the mutating effects of the cubes’ “endlessly multiplying and constantly shifting images of the observer and the observed.” His review of the exhibitions at Ferus and Pace discuss the sculptures as displaying no “trace of the hand as a creative tool,” yet he maintains that the work was “in no way anonymous, but mysterious and subjective.” Writing about the Ferus exhibition, Don Factor emphasizes the complexity of Bell’s technical and formal manipulation of light within the “glass boxes.” He observed that the works convey, “a tougher

78 Larry Bell’s third solo exhibition at Ferus Gallery was immediately preceded by solo exhibitions of Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, and Craig Kauffman, respectively.
more esoteric concern for the nature of sculptural space and the use of the light and atmosphere […] There is little that is endearing or easy in this new work.”

Artist Mel Bochner, meanwhile, reviewing the solo show at Pace, notes how the works transformed the gallery into a stage that emphasized the contrast between the human and the mechanical: “One sees into them and through them. There is ‘nothing’ and the world is altered […] they reflect you on their faces. In a final irony, by being manifestations of technological anonymity, they sneer at craftsmanship.”

In contrast to critical reviews pivoting around a cautionary approach to the shifting nature of technology and craft, Barbara Rose, Donald Judd, and Robert Smithson present notably different perspectives that incorporate the simplified glass cubes into an emerging critical position. Barbara Rose, in her famous “Los Angeles: The Second City” article of 1966, sites Bell as a key player within Southern California and situates his work as paradigmatic of the lack of distinction between fine art and craft on the West Coast: “There is little left in Los Angeles of the traditional distinction between major and minor art. Perhaps this is so because of the strength of the craft tradition and the interest in craft as an independent esthetic [sic] end in itself […] the result has been […] that an artist of major stature such as Larry Bell is working in what looks like a minor idiom (glass boxes).”

Donald Judd’s polemical Arts Magazine article, “Specific Objects,” identifies Bell’s simplified glass cubes (along with a number of other artists’ works) as a West Coast example of a specific object—which is neither painting nor sculpture, and instead aligns more with a three-dimensional object. The term, specific object, might suggest neutrality or distance from the hand-crafted traditions of sculpture—with which Bell’s work is engaged. While Judd does not

84 Mel Bochner, “In the Galleries, Larry Bell,” Arts Magazine 4, no. 3 (January 1966): 54.
explicitly reference his own work in the body of the text, an illustration of one of his artworks is included in the essay. While the article concludes with the postscript, “the editor, not I, included the photograph of my work,” it nonetheless reinforces Judd’s advocacy for those artists of whom he approved—which, interestingly, includes many who were constructing hand-crafted works, such as: Ken Price, Tony DeLap, and Richard Smith. Judd’s efforts to valorize artworks involving new materials and strategies was a maneuver that also implicitly validated his own sizeable, serial objects constructed from Plexiglas, steel, and galvanized iron.

Robert Smithson’s article, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” discusses the artificial materials that characterize emerging work of the 1960s, arguing that Bell’s sculptures encapsulate both a manipulation of new technological materials while also exhibiting a strong degree of hyper-opulence: “The mirrored reflections in Bell’s work are contaminations of a more elusive order. His chrome-plated lattices contain a Pythagorean chaos. Reflections reflect reflections in an excessive but pristine manner.”

These discussions of Bell’s work evince its effect on the 1960s art world. In the 1965 solo exhibitions, as viewers circumambulated the nearly-human sized pieces, the cubes’ opacity and the spectator’s reflections within the structures would shift according to the angle of vision. The walls of the cubes would become increasingly opaque and almost mirror-like as the angle of view increased, and they would become more transparent the closer a viewer was to a perpendicular perspective. When objects were examined from the distance of a few feet, rather than in immediate proximity, the full body of the spectator would be momentarily confined and encased within the transparent structure. Bell has explained his transition away from the decorative surfaces of ellipses and checkered patterns and toward a smoothly applied metallic coating: “I no longer needed a pattern or picture to put on the surface. The simpler the statement,

the more clear it would be.”88 This simpler statement focuses attention beyond the surface of the cube (fig. 3.54) and onto the manipulation of perception that occurs within the mirrored environment (fig. 3.55). Instead of the distorted surface reflections of his earlier work, these simplified cubes encase a central image within the cube and return the reflection flanked by two phantoms of the central image. Essentially, the viewer is ‘cubed’ (fig. 3.56).

Like Robert Morris’s *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)* of 1965 (fig. 3.57), Bell’s transparent works establish a situation that propels one’s focus from the object to one’s perception of the space and one’s location within it. This shift foregrounds the viewer as the binding element of the artwork—mediating the perceptual experience of the object and the environment. Although both artists created sculptures that incorporate the viewer via reflection, their paths diverge at the point of perceptual manipulation. Morris’s works are situated on the ground and significantly lower in height. For example, the mirrored cubes at his 1965 solo exhibition at Green Gallery stood at a height of twenty-one inches, while the 1971 reconstructed version of *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)*, currently within the collection of the Tate Modern, measures thirty-six inches high. The lower elevation allows the mirrored sides of the cubes to dissolve the distinction between the object and the environment, reflecting the walls and floor—onto which they are directly placed. The viewer’s reflection within the mirrors is disjointed and amputated; one is able to see only the lower section of one’s body rather than the entire figure. Whereas Morris’s works segment reflections and confuse space through the placement of un-manipulated mirrored surfaces, Bell’s translucent cubes utilize manipulated surfaces to affect reflection and perception. Standing taller than Morris’s cubes, yet below average height, Bell’s cubes encourage bodily reflection through the vacuum-coated, metallic compositions. They present a play between the approaching viewer reflected within the cube, and the multiplied mirages of the viewer.

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88 Larry Bell, interview by author, 4 April 2007, e-mail correspondence.
surrounding the central reflection. The boxes multiply, rather than sever, the reflection of the spectator. This oscillation between the central reflection and phantasmal reflection(s) mirrors the artist’s self-representation. Just as Larry Bell was Ben Lux (or, in time, Dr. Lux), so too was he constructing work that presented art viewers with multiple versions of their reflections—thus encouraging viewers to become the objects of their own inquiry. This mingling of the body with geometry constructs an interesting tension. The artist presents himself through a stylized persona and ludic statements that parallel his Los Angeles-based colleagues’ exaggerated self-portrayals and that are at odds with the detached and earnest personae more typical of the New York art world of this period. Yet, Bell’s eccentric self-representation is mediated by the distorting effects of his crisp, cool, and somewhat impersonal cubes that are, nonetheless, aesthetically aligned with the works of his East Coast-based colleagues.

Discussing his 1965/66 simplified cubes, Bell declared in 1971, “what I was really interested in was the illusion in the center.”99 The formal shift from the surface distortions of the ellipse and checkered patterns to reflections that take place within the center of the evenly-coated surfaces occurred simultaneously with the development and education of Dr. Lux. Referencing H.G. Wells’s book The Invisible Man when discussing his glass works, Bell has compared himself to the character of Griffin.90 Blinded by ambition, Griffin made himself invisible and consequently experienced a surge of confidence and invincibility. Similarly, Bell recalled that, “I hid out in a lot of places as Dr. Lux”;91 and, later, “I was motivated by the desire to create objects that were unique and it was this blind ambition that was the catalyst.”92 Bell’s experience with

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90 Larry Bell, interview by author, 23 April 2007, e-mail correspondence.
92 Larry Bell, interview by author, 23 April 2007, e-mail correspondence.
the polemical New York art scene, as well as his increasing technical knowledge of vacuum coating, earned Ben Lux the self-conferred title of Doctor in 1966. The move not only implies the technical and craft-based mastery of a working process, but also suggests a mock adoption of the authority conferred by an academic education (which, of course, he did not have). Whereas the appearance of Ben Lux had been restricted to art related social events in Los Angeles, Dr. Lux became a more public figure manifest in both public and private, at large social gatherings and among small groups of New York friends, and became indistinguishable from the artist himself.⁹³

The acquisition of the title Doctor suggests (and satirizes) a number of qualifiers and stereotypes that informed the 1960s regional divide between East and West. Although the technical education associated with the vacuum coating machine earned Ben Lux credits towards his fictive doctorate, the title more significantly calls attention to conditions informing the New York art scene including age, education, and knowledge of Duchamp’s oeuvre. Born in 1939, Bell was twenty-six when his solo-show debuted at Pace in 1965. Similarly, many of the artists associated with Ferus and the Los Angeles art scene of the mid-1960s were, at the time, in their mid- to late-twenties, such as Billy Al Bengston, Ed Ruscha, and Joe Goode.⁹⁴ In New York, however, the rising stars, and specifically those with whom the artist socialized, were older (to varying degrees)—Donald Judd, Frank Stella, and John Chamberlain, born in 1928, 1936, and 1927 respectively.⁹⁵ Academic training is a second and significant qualifier that distinguishes


⁹⁴ Billy Al Bengston, b. 1934; Ed Ruscha, b. 1937; Joe Goode, b. 1937; Peter Alexander, b. 1939.

⁹⁵ See: James Meyer, “Another Minimalism,” in Ann Goldstein, ed., A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958-1968, 21. “I had made new friends out there [in New York…] John Chamberlain and Don Judd and a few other people. They were people sort of like my buddies out there [in Los Angeles] except tougher. And they had a good sense of humor and liked to jive about stuff but were real serious about their work.” Larry Bell, interview by Michele De Angelus, 1980. After Bell moved back to Los Angeles, Donald Judd would frequently stay with him when visiting the Southern California area and Judd dedicated his 1971 exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum to Bell. The
East from West. Most of the Los Angeles-based artists had sporadically attended only a post-secondary art institute. Bengston had hopped from school to school; Ruscha, Goode, and Bell had incrementally attended Chouinard Art Institute; and Los Angeles-based Finish Fetish sculptor DeWain Valentine started working straight out of high school. By contrast, the New York crowd was generally more academically trained. Donald Judd had studied at the College of William and Mary and Columbia University, Frank Stella studied at Princeton, and John Chamberlain studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and Black Mountain College. There are, however, exceptions to every generalization; for example, Carl Andre had enrolled at Kenyon College in Ohio for only a few months in 1956—yet had attended high school at Phillips Academy in Andover, MA, which houses the Addison Gallery and boasts a strong studio art program—and Dan Flavin had attended seminary school in Brooklyn, as well as sporadically studying art history at the New School for Social Research and at Columbia University, but he remained largely self-taught. Ben Lux’s self-appointed designation as a “Doctor” slyly trumps the intellectualism that suffused the Minimalist cohort and the academic discourse that surrounded emerging art in New York in the 1960s.

The art world divide between New York and Los Angeles is also addressed in Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt’s 1969 short film, *East Coast/West Coast* (fig. 3.58). The video is an improvised sketch in which Holt plays an arrogant East Coast conceptualist and Smithson a stoned, Nirvana-seeking westerner. Their role-playing pivots around the stereotypes of a bi-

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*The acquisition of the title, Doctor, could also be read as a symptom of artistic insecurity. It might have served as defense mechanism that allowed Bell to cope with feelings of inferiority in the midst of an older and more educated artistic milieu. However, I maintain that the title functioned as a satirization of stereotypes and called attention to performance (as well as the artist’s modus operandi) more than it revealed his personal insecurities.*

coastal art world. Holt underscores a systematic methodology and analytic approach to artistic practice while Smithson privileges visceral experience and intuition. Holt, for example, states, “That’s a very good idea, the concept of bicycle riding […] you could make a lot of plans for these ten bicycles, diagram them, put them in a system […] If you had an ordered approach to bicycle riding it could stimulate you. You could start to see patterns emerging.” Smithson responds, “I just want to get on a bicycle and ride man. I just want to ride all over.” He continues to emphasize the importance of affect over analysis: “I never read books; I just go out and look at the clouds,” and “Why don’t you stop thinking and start feeling?” Bell, upon moving to New York, had to confront these stereotypes. Rather than returning to the university environment, or passing himself off as academically trained, Bell instead playfully contested such coastal prejudices by Ironically assuming a title closely associated with hyper-intellectualism.

Whereas artists generally embraced Duchamp as a celebrity and artist-rebel on the West Coast, his legacy on the East Coast tended to be constructed in a more intellectually rigorous manner. This coastal division in the reception of the Dada artist parallels, in a way, the transition of Ben Lux to Dr. Lux. In California, Bell would present himself as the eccentric and rebellious Ben Lux; but in New York, he masqueraded as the flamboyant and intellectual Dr. Lux.  

Ed Ruscha has observed that on the West Coast, Duchamp’s work “wigged” people out by defying

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convention and encouraged both artists and viewers “to be a rebel.”99 Duchamp was an artist who “discovered quite a bit just through his investigation into things […] without being an intellectual […] defying convention was one of his greatest accomplishments. Plus he always looked his Sunday best […] he would always be in a suit and tie.”100 It is telling that in 1986, Dennis Hopper, when asked who significantly influenced the progression of his career, responded with: Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, James Dean, and Marcel Duchamp—thus placing Duchamp in the company of male film celebrities.101 Hopper relates how he and fellow attendees collected Duchamp’s autograph at the 1963 opening of the Dada artist’s retrospective, as if he were a Hollywood celebrity.102 Joe Goode procured Duchamp’s signature on a pink cloth napkin, as well as the autograph of Andy Warhol (who signed his name “Andy Pie”).103 Thus, an element of celebrity-worship inflected the reception of Duchamp and his work in Los Angeles. For individuals such as Ruscha, Hopper, Goode, and Bell, the Dada figure operated as an art star as well as an inspiring and encouraging force.

In New York, however, Duchamp’s oeuvre generally operated more as a set of precedents around which artists pivoted (in multiple directions) than as the output of a celebrity. For example, Judd argued in 1965 that Duchamp’s work was not sufficiently developed. He declared that the artist’s “good beginnings are fairly abundant; [but] they aren’t enough; the

100 Ed Ruscha, “Interviews with Ed Ruscha and Bruce Conner,” interview by Elizabeth Armstrong (1994), October, 56. In the interview, Ruscha continues to distinguish between artists and intellectuals in his discussion of the 1963 Duchamp retrospective: “The opening was attended by all of the artists that were on the scene at the time, and maybe some intellectuals too.”
101 Dennis Hopper, interview by Chris Hodenfield, “Citizen Hopper,” Film Comment (December 1986): 63-78; reprinted in Dennis Hopper: Interviews (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 129.
103 Dennis Hopper, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 20 March 2006, Rebels in Paradise: The Los Angeles Art Scene and the 1960s, 12.
developed thing counts.” Judd viewed Duchamp’s prizing of the intellectual over visual form as anathema to his empiricist point of view. However, he valued the readymade for what he perceived as its wholeness, that is, that it could be seen all at once and not part by part; this commitment to wholeness served as a foundation for Judd’s theory of specific objects, as well as for his own, carefully crafted artwork. Similarly, Robert Morris expanded on the Dada artist’s investigation of process. Morris created works such as Wheels (fig. 3.59) and Box with the Sound of its Own Making (fig. 3.60) that Meyer describes as a “free-wheeling examination of Duchamp’s legacy, seen through the lenses of [Jasper] Johns and [John] Cage.” According to James Meyer, Morris’s works suggest, “an open-mindedness, a willingness to experiment, quite unlike Judd’s rigorous formalism […] a wooden cube […] containing a recording of a hammer building the work [Box with the Sound of its Own Making], was a tautological reflection on its own construction. To Judd, though, it must have seemed crudely made.” Thus, for Judd, the readymade established a precedent for considering an object immediately and in its entirety, while for Morris, Duchamp provided a model for being “able to explore the different ways of letting process come in.”

Although these interpretations play to regional stereotypes—the California, easy-going, Hollywood-centric artist versus the uptight, intellectual New Yorker—they nonetheless highlight divergent ways in which Duchamp was interpreted on opposite coasts. It is precisely the meeting of these regional approaches that are foregrounded in the acculturation of Dr. Lux. In California, Duchamp was perceived as a celebrity-rebel and experimenter whose example tacitly encouraged

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105 Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” 78. See also: James Meyer, Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties, 139.
the development of Ben Lux. In New York, Duchamp’s oeuvre operated as a field of intellectual interrogation that encouraged Larry Bell to confer a doctorate upon Ben Lux.

In New York, Bell and Judd frequented one another’s studios and, as Bell described it: “Don Judd was a pal of mine.” Both artists were interested in translucent material, as can be seen in Bell’s *Untitled* of 1965 (fig. 3.61-3.62) and Judd’s notably larger *Untitled*, also of 1965 (fig. 3.63). Despite their use of some comparable materials, their processes and their approaches to criticality operated on different sides of the spectrum. Bell carefully constructed his pieces by hand, obsessing over the technical and material potential of the medium. However, he remained silent regarding the theoretical underpinnings of the work. Judd, on the other hand, had his pieces fabricated, stating that, “technology is merely to suit one’s purpose. It’s not something mysterious or something that sanctions the work.”

Donald Judd, although notorious for his flat-footed writing, nonetheless used discipline-specific discourse that was comprehensible only to a relatively small segment of society: “Three-dimensionality is not as near being simply a container as painting and sculpture have seemed to be, but it tends to that.” Larry Bell’s, or possibly Dr. Lux’s, engagement with the rhetoric initially surrounding Minimalism operated quite parodically. For example, the 1967 exhibition catalogue *A New Aesthetic*, organized by Barbara Rose, includes contributions by Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Larry Bell, and Ron Davis, among others. For the catalogue, Judd submitted portions of “Specific Objects”; Flavin selected excerpts from “Some Remarks” (1966) that center on issues of reproduction and reiteration within his fluorescent light works (and omitted most of

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108 Larry Bell, interview by author, 4 April 2007, e-mail correspondence.
110 Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” 74.
his personal reminiscences from the essay).\footnote{112} Standing in contrast to these essays, Bell’s text describes a cocktail party with expensive Danish cheese (quoted at the opening of this chapter) that, unlike Judd’s and Flavin’s contributions, was written explicitly for the catalogue. The submission plays-up the artist’s provincial, West Coast origin by establishing Bell as remote from the ‘gourmets’ of fine cheese (on both coasts)—positioning himself as uncouth and lower class.\footnote{113} The absurd nature of the artist’s statement calls attention to the language that informed contemporaneous discussions of modern art—a language that bookended his essay within the pages of the catalogue. Los Angeles-based artist Ron Davis’s essay, also written on the occasion of the exhibition, discusses how he achieved, by hand, a finish that resembles that of industrially produced vehicles, as well as how the color within his work is, “impregnated directly into the plastic material of their construction.”\footnote{114} Nonetheless, he introduces his catalogue contribution with a parenthetical acknowledgement of Bell’s essay: “(Note: They [Davis’s artworks] are not made of cheese or made to look like cheese.).”\footnote{115}

Recounting his relationship with Judd, Bell says, “We shared a lot of personal bullshit and droll humor. If there was an influence it would be in the bullshit and humor of it all.”\footnote{116} It was precisely the “bullshit” or at times complicated rhetoric surrounding discussions of Minimalism and contemporary art in the 1960s—on both coasts—that was in a way exposed through the intellectual guise and constructed authority of the Doctor. In 1971, in a catalogue

\footnote{112} “I know now that I can reiterate any part of my fluorescent light system as adequate. Elements of parts of that system simply alter in situation installation. They lack the look of a history. I sense no stylistic or structural development of any significance within my proposal—only shifts in partitive emphasis—modifying and addable without intrinsic change.” Dan Flavin, “Some Remarks,” \textit{Artforum} 5, no. 4 (December 1966): 27-29; excerpts reprinted in \textit{A New Aesthetic}, 35. Flavin’s discussion of his work is often accented with sly humor and also generally autobiographical in content. However, these characteristic elements are not included within the excerpt republished in the catalogue.

\footnote{113} Larry Bell, “Statement,” in \textit{A New Aesthetic}, 22.

\footnote{114} Ron Davis, “Statement,” in \textit{A New Aesthetic}, 27.

\footnote{115} Ron Davis, “Statement,” in \textit{A New Aesthetic}, 27.

\footnote{116} Larry Bell, interview by author, 4 April 2007, e-mail correspondence.
that includes serious discussions by Los Angeles-based artists Robert Irwin and Craig Kauffman, Bell deleted almost all of the vowels from his response (fig. 3.64). The erasure transforms his statement of purpose into an illegible testimonial that indirectly pokes fun at contemporaneous and complicated discussions concerning contemporary art. By embracing and exaggerating the illegibility (for a general audience) of discipline-specific writing, the artist subjects the earnest rhetoric of such texts to a constructed send-up.

Just as the stereotype of intellectualism is marked by academic credentials and discipline-specific rhetoric, so too is Dr. Lux marked by a caricatural accumulation of diplomas and publications. The semantics of the text signal a position vis-à-vis the conventional mobilization of the written word as a site of intellectual authority. Written work can, in general, operate as a locus of cultural privilege. Bell’s purposeful garbling of the written text signals an artistic self-representation that is critical of both art world writing, and the position of an artist that is beyond such bourgeois pretensions—despite his faux doctoral status.

**DOUBLING IN VENICE: 1966**

Bell returned to Venice in late 1966 and he continued to deploy his constructed persona in both photographed and written antics—frequently depicting himself in multiple and rebuffing any attempt to distinguish Larry Bell from the alternative character he had crafted for himself.119

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118 Adrian Kohn’s 2009 doctoral dissertation argues that the elimination of the vowels from Bell’s response evince that the artist attempted to overcome the inadequacies of discussing visual art in written form, and therefore “refused to abide by the constraints of language […] Rather than glib irony or perversity, Bell’s tactics seem to spring from genuine frustration.” Adrian Kohn, “Heightened Perception: Donald Judd, John Chamberlain, Robert Irwin, and Larry Bell, 1960-1975,” Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2009, 157-158. While Kohn’s dissertation examines the friction between the visual and the textual in Bell’s work, I look at Bell’s art objects, writings, and alter ego as interrelated.

119 By the mid-1960s, Bell had reached a level of fame that resulted in his inclusion on the cover of The Beatles’ 1967 album, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (he is in the second row framed by John Lennon holding a French horn and Ringo Starr holding a trumpet). The album cover was designed by British Pop artist Peter Blake who had briefly visited Los Angeles in 1963 when commissioned to make a series of drawings of any part of the world for which he had an affinity. The drawings are reproduced in “Peter Blake in Hollywood,” *The Sunday Times*
Solo exhibitions of 1967 at Pace in New York, Galeria Ileana Sonnabend in Paris, and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (fig. 3.65), featured the artist’s streamlined cubes developed over the preceding years. The Summer 1967 cover of *Artforum* (fig. 3.66), which reproduces a glass cube of 1966, testifies to the increasingly complex nature of the cube’s optical variance and Bell’s rising visibility within the art worlds of both Los Angeles and New York. Similarly, all three of the catalogues accompanying the exhibitions of 1967 reprint, with various alterations, the narrative concerning Danish cheese.

Specifically, the frontispiece of the catalogue accompanying the Stedelijk Museum’s exhibition does not feature a reproduction of the artist’s sculptural work in glass; rather, it features a doubled photograph of the artist (fig. 3.67). Standing with Dr. Lux’s requisite cigar and dressed in a turtleneck and checkered jacket with the earpiece of his sunglasses hanging from his breast pocket, the artist poses next to a seemingly floating poster of himself—also shown wearing a suit and smoking a cigar—signed with the valediction: “Sincerely Yours Larry Bell.” The poster, which was used as the advertisement for his 1967 exhibition at Pace Gallery (fig. 3.68), features a photograph of Bell seated in a plush, elliptically shaped chair he had scrounged from a thrift store in New York (the elliptical chair would serve as a model for his 1980s furniture series, the *de Lux* line). In the foreground of the image is a glass cube with its mirroring effects. In the middle—serving as the mediating force—is the artist with his styled hat, suit, and cigar. Rising ominously from the background is the cylindrical drum of the vacuum coating machine and the accompanying gears, buttons, peepholes, and tubes. The frontispiece of

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*Magazine* (15 November 1964): 27-31. Blake was also a good friend of David Hockney, a British Pop artist who moved to Los Angeles in December 1963.

120 The Summer 1967 issue of *Artforum* not only featured a reproduction of Larry Bell’s *Memories of Mike*, but also included Robert Morris’s “Notes on Sculpture, Part 3” in which Morris discusses Larry Bell’s work in relation to phenomenology. The Summer 1967 issue was also the first issue published from the journal’s new offices located in New York City, at 667 Madison Avenue at 60th street. Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 3,” *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (Summer 1967): 24-35.

the Stedelijk Museum’s catalogue introduces readers to the duality of self-representation inherent within the artist’s practice; and the back cover of the catalogue documents the connection between the reflective and transparent cubes and the perceptual effect of them on the viewer or artist within the space of the exhibition (fig. 3.69). The photograph, printed on purple paper, captures the artist “cubed” within the environment of his sculpture. It places his reflection on view in a manner similar to the effects the attending audiences presumably experienced within the Stedelijk Museum exhibition (although the purple coloring was restricted to the catalogue and was not present within the show).

The documentation of Larry Bell and Dr. Lux existing simultaneously became a recurring theme within the artist’s photographic and written work. These portrayals depicting him as doubled resist any attempt to distinguish one persona from another. Thus, they are as revealing of the artist’s self-conception as they are of their ostensible subject, Larry Bell. Later photographs reproduced in catalogues, journals, and used as publicity mailings translate the reflective and distorting qualities of the glasswork into a duplicitous game of documented role play—examples of which are reproduced in ARTnews (fig. 3.70) and the catalogue accompanying Bell’s retrospective at The Albuquerque Museum (fig. 3.71). Specifically, the postal mailer for the exhibition On the Ellipse, as well as the exhibition’s catalogue, feature Dr. Lux and the Artist (fig. 3.72). In this manipulated photograph, the artist is shown twice and is seated on Bell’s Sofa de Lux II of 1981—the sofa is part of Bell’s furniture series inspired by the ellipse and the chair he repurposed from a thrift store in New York. In the background hangs

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122 Bell began having constructed (by hand) limited editions of the de Lux line of furniture in 1980: The Chair de Lux, The Sofa de Lux, and The Table de Lux. “I found the first chair, the prototype for all the furniture, about 15 years ago in a junk store near my studio in New York. From the moment I bought it, I wanted to make some more of them, but I didn’t until just recently. I decided to do it because I found some artisans here in Taos, Ed Paul and David Steiner, who could do the woodwork and the upholstery, and were interested in it.” Larry Bell, “The Furniture,” in Larry Bell: New Work (1980), 64.
one of the many *Vapor Drawings* of an ellipse that Bell began to produce in the 1970s. The drawings were created by placing paper into the vacuum coating machine. On the sofa, the figure on the left is dressed in an earth-toned costume of pants, a shirt, and a vest. He faces forward and rests his head in the palm of his right hand. The figure on the right wears the same clothing with the addition of a hat and jacket. He is shown facing his accomplice and gesticulating—as if speaking. Although the viewer might infer that the somewhat flummoxed individual with his head in his hand is the Artist, and the speaking and gesticulating figure the Doctor, both are versions of Larry Bell.

In the catalogue text, a two-page essay, titled “Dr. Lux and the Artist,” takes the form of a conversation between the Artist and Dr. Lux. The first half of the conversation explores the duplicating, triplicating, and quadruplicating potential of the reflective ellipse, as well as those effects in relation to the construction of one’s public persona:

‘I’ve never faced the circle straight on,’ was Dr. Lux’s comment to the artist. […] The artist, realizing his personality was quite suited to an oblique relationship […] felt his personality suited a 40-degree oblique view. […] With the fracturing plane, the artist became engaged in speculation […] The doctor agreed there was enormous potential in the quartered 40-degree ellipse. […] ‘The possibilities are limitless,’ said the doctor. The artist didn’t understand what limitless possibilities meant.123

The second half of the essay incorporates a storybook introduction and reprints a multi-page excerpt from H.G. Wells’s collection of three short stories, *Tales of Space and Time*, as a means of explaining the “limitless possibilities” that might be realized through a slight shift in perspective and appearance. The excerpt quotes Wells’s description of the character, Mr. Morris,

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who is “one of those people who did everything that is right and proper and sensible with inevitable regularity. He always wore just the right and proper clothes.” The quoted text explores the adventures of Mr. Morris’s descendants and the limitless possibilities that might evolve from a minor adjustment or new perspective—a potentiality apparent within even the most non-descript of individuals such as Mr. Morris. Bell’s short essay concludes with three sentences: “The doctor lowered the book. The artist, lost in thought, finally spoke. ‘I still don’t understand’.” The narrative insinuates that the story itself is the product of an altered angle, situating the characters of Dr. Lux and the Artist as different components within Larry Bell’s artistic practice.

Bell’s self-interview wrests away the power of the interviewer or critic, and exaggerates the authority of the artist’s word: the dialogue is entirely directed by the artist. The discussion parodies the convention of including an artist’s interview in exhibition catalogues or art journals as a means of explaining artwork from the perspective of the artist—a practice that became increasingly popular in the 1960s, with interviews conducted by, for example, Bruce Glaser and Gene Swenson. In general, an artist interview places a large amount of agency with the interviewer: the backing of an art critic through a formal interview bestows critical legitimacy

124 The quote is from H.G. Wells’s Chapter One, “The Cure for Love,” of the short story, “A Story of the Days to Come,” originally published in Pall Mall Magazine in June 1897. The complete story was later reprinted in 1899 as part of a collection of Wells’s work printed under the title, Tales of Space and Time, which comprises three short stories and two novellas—the collected works have since appeared in countless editions. Larry Bell, “Dr. Lux and the Artist,” On the Ellipse, Larry Bell, 19-20.

125 Larry Bell, “Dr. Lux and the Artist,” On the Ellipse, Larry Bell, 20.

onto the artist’s statements and the interviewer’s questions mediate how the artist discusses the artwork.

This format was questioned as early as 1969 in an *Arts Magazine* interview moderated by the fictitious critic, Arthur R. Rose, “Four Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kosuth, and Weiner.”127 In the interview, Arthur R. Rose, a pseudonym invented by Joseph Kosuth and echoing Duchamp’s Rrose Sélavy, poses questions to each artist. However, in actuality, the participating artists posed those questions they felt would best allow them to describe their work in their own terms.128 In the 1969 interview, the artists remain concealed behind the pseudonym, and thus their satirical critique remains somewhat opaque. Bell ostensibly takes up a position in front of one of his mirroring and distorting glass structures and reveals both speakers to be himself. Bell’s self-interview blatantly appropriates the talking format, and makes no pretensions to needing anyone’s authority but his own. Bell’s discussion does away with external signs of legitimacy, yet also gestures towards that authority since one of the conversationalists is ostensibly a Doctor.

**EXPANDING THE PLAY: 1968**

The move toward a more visible presence of the Lux/Bell duality occurred in tandem with the work’s increased size beginning in 1968. Bell’s environmental installation, *Standing Wall* (destroyed, fig. 3.73), was first displayed at the Vancouver Art Gallery’s exhibition, *Los Angeles 6* (1968). As installed in the show, the piece comprised seven panes of glass placed upright in a simple, zigzag pattern. Another installation of the sculpture was displayed one year

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later at the Walker Art Center with ten large panes of glass—seven of the glass sheets were repurposed from the installation of the previous year. At the Walker Art Center, the glass was arranged into two zigzags that were placed parallel to one another and through which the viewer could walk (fig. 3.74). Just as the cubes were constructed by Bell (by hand), so too were the room-sized works installed by the artist, who, according to critic Peter Frank, “found it appropriate to arrange them in formal relationship to the rooms they occupied, as well as to one another” so that the installation interacted with the surrounding environment.\textsuperscript{129} The glass panes that comprised \textit{Standing Wall} were not aluminized within the vacuum machine. Instead, they were industrially produced, un-manipulated panels of glass. Bell, discussing the large work with John Coplans, explained that he was more interested in the effect the pieces had on viewers than he was in manipulating the coloring of the glass itself.

When the pieces get into the kind of scale I am employing then the scale of the material begins to overwhelm the spectator. […] the observer could walk around and into to [\textit{sic}] the unit and at the same time, see through it. Obviously, it will then do totally different things to the observer.\textsuperscript{130}

\textit{Standing Wall}—whose glass was later re-cut and used in vacuum coated sculptures—created an arena for perceptual discoveries while also facilitating exploration of the interdependency of viewer and object, and it did so without the tonal variations achieved through the vacuum coating process. Both versions of the sculpture expanded the potential of the glass’s reflective, transparent, and distorting qualities through a combination of ninety-degree angles and open shapes. The larger size and environmental nature of the work, according to Bell,

“incorporated the peripheral vision” of the viewer.\textsuperscript{131} Barbara Haskell described her encounter with the environmental walls: “They intentionally activate and encompass the surrounding space.”\textsuperscript{132} The expansion of the visual and the physical field of glass capitalized on the interplay of reflections and distortions in a manner that also incorporated, albeit to a lesser degree, the amusing effects of a house of mirrors. Thus, the viewer and the environment were not only reflected on the glass, but were also reproduced through secondary reflections that bounced between the two reflecting surfaces. This resulted in disorientation and an uncertainty regarding where, precisely, one stood within the exhibition space.

The work’s interaction with viewers can be seen to parallel the perceptual distortions apparent in the photograph of Marcel Duchamp and André Breton reflected in the window of Brentano’s in New York (fig. 3.75). The photograph commemorates the display case for Breton’s \textit{Arcane 17}. Visible as reflected in the window are Duchamp and Breton, facing each other on either side of a female mannequin. While the photograph has most often been used to discuss aspects of metaphorical castration and the male gaze, the image, as Amelia Jones argues, also presents a unique form of fragmentation. The two men are displaced and reproduced only through their reflections. Their heads are barely visible, and there is little that is corporeal, immediate, or fixed within the photograph.\textsuperscript{133}

The effects of the environmental works, and of Ben Lux’s photographs of himself within their reflective surfaces (fig. 3.76), operate in a manner similar to the image of Duchamp and Breton. Using a Widelux camera held at waist-height, the artist captures himself reflected within the glass (the photographs are discussed below). Both the photograph of Duchamp and Breton,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{131} Larry Bell, letter to Peter Frank, 15 August 1995, quoted in Peter Frank, “Larry Bell: Understanding the Percept,” in \textit{Zones of Experience: The Art of Larry Bell}, 32.
\item \textsuperscript{132} Barbara Haskell, “Larry Bell,” in \textit{Larry Bell} (1972), 6.
\item \textsuperscript{133} Amelia Jones, \textit{Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp} (Cambridge, England; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 84.
\end{itemize}
and the photograph by Ben Lux, serve as documentation of the fragmentation of the authorial body. Both present images of their subjects as dislocated, disembodied, and constructed as ephemeral echoes. Although Ben Lux authored the photograph of himself as Ben Lux, and Duchamp and Breton were depicted by their friend Lynn Rosenthal, both images nonetheless encourage an investigation of the acted and ephemeral nature of public presentation. Both images place the subject as removed from the corporeal: first by the camera, and second by the reflective glass; and both situate the figures as present only insofar as they exist within the visual echoes of the translucent glass.

The construction of environmental works beginning in 1968 explicitly prioritized aspects of the theatrical only a year after Michael Fried had condemned precisely those qualities in his June 1967 essay, “Art and Objecthood.”\textsuperscript{134} Literalist art, as Fried calls Minimalism, occupies a position of objecthood in that it is not autonomous—it is not sufficiently independent from its context. Such artworks engage the viewer in a theatrical relationship with the work, an experience that, Fried argues, is similar to encountering another person. This phenomenological effect—suggesting another body—is at the core of Fried’s critique: “The entities or beings encountered in everyday experience in terms that most closely approach the literalist ideals of the nonrelational, the unitary and the wholistic [\textit{sic}] are other persons.”\textsuperscript{135} “Art and Objecthood” focuses on the viewer’s experience of the work, an experience that Fried designates as, “a theatrical effect or quality—a kind of stage presence.”\textsuperscript{136} Within the essay, the works of Judd and Morris are targeted for their supposed reliance on theatricality. At the time of the essay, Bell was very much engaged with Judd and Morris and was producing cubes that reflected an image of the viewer (and were 5’ high, just below average height). However, Bell is not mentioned within the

\textsuperscript{134} Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” \textit{Artforum} 5, no. 10 (June 1967): 12-23.
\textsuperscript{135} Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 19.
\textsuperscript{136} Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 16.
context of Fried’s polemic. Recently, it was pointed out that Fried spared Bell from his scathing critique because he “liked” his freestanding, aluminized cubes.\footnote{James Meyer cites a written exchange between himself and Fried as justification for claiming that “Fried liked Bell’s practice” and therefore did not include the artist in the 1967 essay. In the letter, Fried recalls, “whatever my larger stance, I quite simply loved [Bell’s] things as gorgeous baubles—I remember saying to friends at the time that Attila the Hun or Genghis Khan…would probably have given anything (like an entire province) to own one of them!” Michael Fried, letter to James Meyer, 17 April 2003, quoted in James Meyer, “Another Minimalism,” in Ann Goldstein, ed., \textit{A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958-1968}, 44.} Considering Larry Bell’s awareness of these debates, as well as his proclivity for exaggeration, Bell’s transition toward the increasingly theatrical can be understood as a purposeful exploit: the heightened presence of the Doctor, the increased theatricality of viewer engagement, and the similarity of the glass panes to those of building windows placed the viewer’s (and the artist’s) theatrical engagement and environmental experience as a priori. The elements that became intrinsic to the realization of Bell’s larger works—which he began in 1968 and has continued to produce to this day—were precisely those qualities Michael Fried positioned as problematic during 1967.

For the catalogue accompanying the 1968 Vancouver exhibition, Bell submitted a diagrammatic sketch titled \textit{Drawing 1968} (fig. 3.77) rather than a photograph of the actual, completed sculpture (\textit{Standing Wall}); and in place of the requested artist’s portrait, he submitted a photograph of himself in full performance mode (fig. 3.78). The schematic drawing on graph paper proposes a three dimensional object, and above the various axial lines is written:

“\textsc{ARRANGEMENT OF THE RECIEVING [sic] POINT R TO THE SOURCE (RELATIVE). R IS TAKEN TO BE A GENERAL POINT IN THE X-Y PLANE WITH THE SOURCE LYING CENTRALLY AND SYMMETRICALLY TO THE Z AXIS.”}

The artist’s portrait reproduced within the text showcases Larry Bell dressed in a chic, leather trimmed white jacket, with sunglasses hanging from a white polo shirt. He stands with his right arm propped on his waist while casually holding a cigar and blowing smoke across nearly two thirds of the photograph.
The combination of the reproductions—a hand-drawn diagram and a hammed-up photograph—alludes to aspects of the staginess inherent in Bell’s artistic practice. Much like Donald Judd’s schematic drawings, such as *Untitled* of 1967 (fig. 3.79), Bell’s diagram serves as the creative construct. However, while Bell had resolutely constructed his work by hand and mapped out his working process, Judd approached his graphic studies as mechanical instructions that were meant to serve as a guide for the production (by others) of standardized forms that used industrial materials. Judd did not consider the graphic sketches finished work suitable for exhibition or presentation; rather, they were a means of recording ideas. Bell’s hand-drawn diagram, by contrast, encourages a continued association of his work with the hand-made in the face of increasingly industrially produced artworks at the end of the 1960s (e.g. Donald Judd, Tony Smith, Richard Serra); and the inclusion of a photograph capturing the artist as a performer, a showman, and a lothario associates his practice with theatricality.

Bell’s self-representation became intrinsically tied to an understanding of the theatrical nature of his work. Unlike the other catalogue reproductions of artwork and artist portraits, which include *Yellow Pyramid* by John McCracken coupled with a photograph of the artist seated in half-shadow and pensively staring into the distance, and *The Beanery* by Ed Kienholz paired with an image of the artist propped on a stool assertively addressing the camera/viewer, Bell’s combination of the hand-drawn diagram and self-stylized theatrics directly builds on notions of the hand-made and the theatrical in the wake of the push to both industrial fabrication and a prominent, critical denunciation of theatricality. The coupling of these visual representations stresses the friction between them: the sketch deploys the diagrammatic look of a

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conceptual practice, privileging the idea over material concerns, while the photograph documents an aesthetic of melodramatic imagery, favoring visualization over immaterial concept. Bell’s artworks stitch together these seemingly incompatible practices in a manner that respects both the generative concept and the essential theatricality of Minimalist environments, and does so in a manner that acknowledges the sense of fun that is inherent in the experience of his work.

At the end of 1968, after nearly two years of waiting, Bell received a custom-built room-sized vacuum coating machine that was installed in his Venice studio (fig. 3.80). The larger chamber allowed huge sheets of glass to be placed within, covered in mists of various metals, and subsequently fit with other large glass sheets to create sculptures that shifted the optical effects to an environmental scale. The earliest works to incorporate the aluminizing effects are enlarged glass cubes, such as *Untitled* of 1969 that measures 36 x 36 x 36 (fig. 3.81) and another measuring 40 x 40 x 40” (fig. 3.82). These were soon followed by expanded environmental works such as *Garst’s Mind No. 2* of 1971 (fig. 3.83) and the five panel *Untitled* of 1972 (fig. 3.84). The increase in size, combined with the optical effects of the aluminizing technique, amplify the distortions of space, orientation, and perception that were already apparent in earlier works. Barbara Haskell reasons that the aluminized glass works occupy an “ambiguous spatial existence” resulting from the lack of “perceptual separation between the sheets of glass and their illusory reflections—both are perceived as equal physical realities.” The interplay between reflection and transparency within the larger artworks makes it difficult to discern the corners of the sculptures from the corners of the exhibition space. The walls of the enlarged cubes—like the

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140. Prior to receiving the room-size vacuum coating machine at the end of 1968, Bell had been restricted to making cubes no larger than 24” square—a size restriction resulting from the dimensions of the vacuum chamber he had acquired in New York. Barbara Haskell, “Larry Bell,” in *Larry Bell* (1972), 3.

141. “There is no perceptual separation between the actual sheets of glass and their illusory reflections—both are perceived as equal physical realities. Unable to distinguish the actual three-dimensional glass panels from the series of constantly shifting illusory reflections, the walls have an ambiguous spatial existence.” Barbara Haskell, “Larry Bell,” in *Larry Bell* (1972), 6.
smaller versions—maintain equally graded, tonal surfaces on all sides. The various iterations of the walls, however, display large glass sheets coated with graded mists that vary from nearly opaque to translucent.

Like Dan Graham’s Two Cubes, One Rotated 45° of 1986 (fig. 3.85), Bell’s large glass structures are meant to be temporally and playfully experienced by viewers as they weave in and out of the jigsaw structures, and lace the pieces together with their bodies’ movement in the space. Although both works intertwine the viewer with the glass, Graham’s composition, which is sited outdoors, engages with the tensions between public and private space, as well as the shifting environmental conditions, while Bell’s delicately misted glass forms remain within the gallery’s private space and controlled environment. Two Cubes, One Rotated 45° is one of Graham’s pavilions—austere glass and steel structures that are both sculptural and architectural in form and are closely aligned with the aesthetic of commercial buildings. The work comprises two large, interpenetrating glass cubes secured with steel beams along the mitered edge and a single, omitted glass panel through which viewers may enter the structure (although this is not a prerequisite for experiencing the work). The individual glass panels of the structure maintain a consistent gradient throughout, but the opacity of that gradient varies from wall to wall such that one panel is more transparent while another is more mirror-like and opaque. Entering the work, participants are suffused into the fabric of the pavilion, as is the landscape around them. The glass becomes a transparent screen through which the audience looks, but also on which they witness their own reflection merging with the interior and exterior environment. Graham’s work

142 Dan Graham’s use of large glass walls began in the 1970s alongside performances such as Performer/Audience/Mirror (1975). In the performance, Graham faced the audience and behind him, covering the back wall (parallel to the frontal view of the audience) was a mirror reflecting the audience. Although Graham cites Larry Bell’s work as an influence, he does not elaborate on this point beyond simple acknowledgement. Dan Graham, interview by Eric de Bruyn, “Interview with Dan Graham,” (1998), in Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 96.
transmutes public and private space by replacing the one-way reflective glass of some corporate office buildings with two-way visibility.

Bell’s large works, however, operate on a different frequency. His environmental sculptures privilege the perceptual experience while Graham’s pavilions engage with the politics of corporate transparency. Bell’s walls are stabilized with unobtrusive, clear structural glazing silicone, giving the illusion of a continuous glass structure while Graham’s pavilions are held in place with steel girders that interrupt and segment the space. The shifting tonality of Bell’s works, and their reflective, transparent, and multiplying effects, emphasize distortion and the tension between the real and the illusory while Graham’s pavilions bend perception to emphasize corporate realities; and whereas Bell acknowledges—through his writings, self-representations, and interviews—that his works engage with viewers in a playfully interactive manner, Graham maintains a sense of deadpan earnestness with regard to his works, despite the fun that often accompanies interacting with them.

My own experience with Bell’s large scale standing walls is one of disorientation coupled with an increased effort to locate and reorient myself within the space. Specifically, I spent time observing the five panel *Untitled* of 1972 (fig. 3.86) that was re-installed, in a more condensed arrangement, in the Jacobs Building at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego as part of the 2011 exhibition, *Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface*—and the work was given a completion date of ca. 1970 within the recent exhibition. The mirrored and dissolved reflections bouncing between the glass walls of the sculpture were amusing and disorienting and

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143 Larry Bell, installation instructions, undated, Larry Bell Papers, Massachusetts Institute of Technology List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA.
145 Within the exhibition, *Phenomenal: California Light, Space, Surface* (2011), as well as the accompanying catalogue, the *Untitled* glass wall piece was exhibited with the completion date of: ca. 1970.
encouraged me to search for a recognizable focal point—which became my own, full body reflection within the glass surface. Yet the act of viewing quickly became self-conscious (à la Fried’s discussion of theatricality) and even uncomfortable—I became aware that I, much like the work, was being placed on view and multiplied within the sculpture itself. After extracting myself from the visual maze, I also observed others interacting with the work. It seemed that they too experienced a sense of disorientation and enjoyment, as well as an increased sense of self-awareness. Some viewers noticeably slowed down when interacting with the sculpture—as if their movement within the space went from natural to self-conscious and intentional; others became more animated—quickly looking from one side to the other, obviously delighting in the perceptual confusion. Yet, of those that I observed, all looked at their own reflection within the glass and most proceeded to photograph their multiplied and reflected portraits (that captured them photographing themselves) within the mirrored surface; and I, as an observer, not only watched them, but also watched their many and varied reflections that rebounded and echoed between the panels of the sculpture—and many viewers used the reflective surface to both fix their hair and straighten their clothing, as well as make silly faces and strike ludicrous poses.

Thus, the large, glass walls distort perception while simultaneously placing the movement of the spectator and their various reflections on view within the sculpture. While the works call attention to the process of perceiving, they also call attention to the multi-layered public performance of the individual viewer—a viewer who is observing the artwork while simultaneously observing her or himself and others within it. Considering Bell’s penchant for dramatic display via his self-representation as Dr. Lux, his sardonic confusions of perception and public image engender an understanding of sculptural effects that likewise encourage one to
become playfully engaged with the works while being increasingly self-conscious and aware of one’s movement and appearance.

Bell has often related his large pieces to Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There.* The book is a fantastic adventure in which Alice passes through a mirror and enters a world of absurd paradoxes. Similarly, when one enters the world of Bell’s large glass constructions, one’s reflection merges with the environmental works to push perception beyond immediate comprehension—not only is one confronted by one’s reflection (the size of which changes according to proximity and the occasional *mise-en-abyme*), but also by multiple reflections that bounce off of more than one surface. In Carroll’s book, Alice plays the pawn in a game of chess in which each square represents a different situation. Similarly, experiencing Bell’s glass works entails navigating into different segments of the piece and seeing oneself surrounded by a funhouse of various reflections. The pieces disorient and confuse to such an extent that it is hard to tell where the real ends and the illusion begins. This denial of the line between reality and illusion pushes back against the literalist objects that were elevated into the Minimalist canon.

In “Specific Objects,” Donald Judd argues for the construction of literal, self-evident objects fabricated out of new materials. He valorizes industrially produced “formica, aluminum, cold-rolled steel, Plexiglas, red and common brass, and so forth,” claiming, “they are specific. If they are used directly, they are more specific […]” There is an objectivity to the obdurate identity

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146 “At one point during the Pasadena Art Museum installation, Bell announced that he wanted the exhibition dedicated to ‘Humpty Dumpty who knew the answer’ (from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*).” Barbara Haskell, “Larry Bell,” in *Larry Bell* (1972), 6. The relationship between Bell’s work and Lewis Carroll has also been discussed by: Steve Afif, “Larry Bell: Through the Looking Glass,” in *Larry Bell: Works from New Mexico* (1989), 22. James Mellow, “Through the Looking Glass,” *New York Times* (25 April 1971): 19. The novel, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, was first published in 1871. It is notable that the game of chess plays a significant role in Carroll’s book as well as in Bell’s oeuvre, and, specifically, in Bell’s *Chairs in Space* produced during the 1980s.
Judd advocates for these new materials—as is evident in his *Untitled* of 1965 (fig. 3.63)—as opposed to the more traditional marble, bronze, and wood. Yet, as both Robert Smithson and Rosalind Krauss are quick to observe, Judd’s use of Plexiglas and stainless steel produces fleeting effects and illusions. Smithson claims it is “impossible to tell what is hanging from what or what is supporting what. Ups are downs and downs are ups. An uncanny materiality inherent in the surface engulfs the basic structure.”

And Krauss suggests that while Judd “would seem to accept only that art which eschews both allusion and illusion,” his work “derive[s] its power from a heightening of illusion.” While Judd endeavored to make a literal object, his works nonetheless involve a play of color and form—engaging with a display of both open and closed volumes (constructing a transparent, but enclosed structure), as well as reflection and transparency (both of which are qualities inherent to the Plexiglas medium, while stainless steel is restricted to reflection). Judd’s theory did not always parallel his practice, yet when questioned about this fundamental contradiction, he replied, “I generally don’t think about it.”

Bell, who maintained a close relationship with Judd even after returning to Venice Beach in 1966, ironically quipped in 1972 that his vacuum coated Plexiglas works “illustrate in the most literal sense emptiness and lack of content.” Judd’s theorizing and his artistic practice did not always align—he advocated for the literal, or specific object, but constructed an illusionistic cube. Bell, by contrast, published absurd texts that suggested a lack of content while...

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147 Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” 80.
150 Donald Judd, interview by Barbara Rose, undated, Barbara Rose Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA; quoted in James Meyer, Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties, 138, n. 84. Meyer posits that the interview was probably conducted soon after the 1971 closing of Hans Haacke’s retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.
simultaneously grounding his artistic practice in an uncanny manipulation of illusion and a theatrical imaging of his persona.


Bell’s hammy self-imaging, and the overall theatrical nature of his oeuvre, reappear in Ed Ruscha’s filmic and performance-based projects. In Ruscha’s photographic book Crackers of 1969 (fig. 3.87), Bell plays the male lead—“Man.” The book is based on a short story by musician Mason Williams, “How to derive the Maximum Enjoyment from Crackers.”\(^{152}\) The story’s text is printed in tiny lettering on the interior rear cover. The book consists of more than one hundred black and white photographs that resemble film stills. They capture the exploits of Man (Larry Bell)—who is shown wearing a tux, while sporting fluffed-up hair and a fake mustache (i.e. Bell’s Ben Lux mode). The images document Man preparing a cheap hotel room prior to picking up his date, returning with a woman—presumably his date—to the hotel, convincing her to lie in the bed filled with lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, and olives, then pouring a bucket of salad dressing on her body (fig. 3.88), and subsequently leaving the woman in the bed to go in search of crackers to top the human-salad. The final photograph shows Man in a much swankier hotel room, lying alone in a ritzier bed, smiling and eating crackers.

The photographic book served as the premise for Ruscha’s 1971 film Premium that follows the same narrative, and again deploys Larry Bell as Man.\(^{153}\) The film’s plot expands on the photographic scenes. It captures Man purchasing a shopping cart full of tomatoes, lettuce,

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\(^{152}\) Mason Williams was a long-time friend of Ed Ruscha’s. They made their first trip to Los Angeles together in 1961, and Williams went on to became a musician and comedy writer for the television series the Smothers Brothers Show.

\(^{153}\) The Guggenheim Foundation awarded the project $13,000. Technically, the funds were awarded “to do a book and also to eradicate the bookworm which I’ve been having problems with.” Ed Ruscha, interview by Willoughby Sharp, “…A Kind of Huh’: An Interview with Edward Ruscha,” Avalanche 7 (Winter-Spring 1973), reprinted in Ed Ruscha, Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 72. The 16mm color film was twenty-four-minutes long; it was filmed in only five days and featured a cast of both art world and Hollywood personae.
and other salad fixings, and five one-gallon cans of dressing. He then drives to a seedy hotel and rents a room for two dollars. Upon arriving in the room, he pulls-back the covers of the bed and very carefully prepares a salad as a symmetrical arrangement of greens radiating from the center, after which he remakes the bed (fig. 3.89). The next shot captures him and Woman (played by Léon Bing, the model for fashion designer Rudi Gernreich’s topless swimsuit) being driven by a chauffeur. Man then escorts Woman to the room and asks her to undress and get into bed—which she does with some reluctance. Man proceeds to cover her in vinaigrette, only to realize that what he truly desires are crackers—Premium-brand saltines. He abandons Woman, exclaiming, “I forgot the crackers,” and the chauffeur drives him to a 24-hour market. The final scenes of the film show Man in an opulent hotel room munching on crackers and doing so with seemingly maximum enjoyment (fig. 3.90).

While the film was Ruscha’s construct, and may relate to his earlier paintings of foodstuffs such as Spam in *Actual Size* of 1962 (fig. 3.91), it is Bell who plays the role of the Premium- or luxury-seeking Man whose ultimate desire is cheap crackers. In both the book and the film, Bell—much like in his glass sculptures—is captured through the glass lens of the camera, and also visualizes himself as a member of the eccentric Hollywood glitterati. Speaking about his decision to cast Bell as Man, Ruscha said the artist was “an obvious choice because he was a friend of mine and he had a sort of comedic side to him that I thought would be good. He went to the Marcel Duchamp retrospective opening dressed like Groucho Marx!”154 The film is an ironic play on the word *Premium*. The film’s blatant sexism and clumsy transitions from field-reverse to close-up shots evince its low production value, and produce a narrative that is anything but ‘premium’ in quality. Instead it calls attention to the undeniable intersection of the Los

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Angeles art world and Hollywood’s entertainment industry: both are built on performance and masquerade. Ruscha’s decision to cast Bell, and Bell’s decision to play the role of the ironic luxury-seeker, was a move that was caught up in layers of irony, performance, and the mutating effects of not just Bell’s glass sculptures, but the lens of Hollywood itself. In essence, Man is a filmic version of Dr. Lux—a character who pointedly perpetuated the absurd clichés of the industries in which he operated and wittily critiqued them: Hollywood and the art world.

**THROUGH THE LENS: WIDELUX AND THE GAME**

Larry Bell—more explicitly than his colleagues, Hopps, Kauffman, Kienholz, Bengston, Goode, and Ruscha—revered and paid homage to Duchamp. His work (or perhaps odes) of the 1970s and 1980s attest to the importance of this Dada figure in the L.A. artist’s oeuvre. In addition to activating a transmutable instance of self-representation through the manipulated qualities of his glass sculptures, Bell also produced a series of photographs and designed a board game that builds on the playful aspects of his work, and also expands on the artistic and anarchistic (or an-artistic) practice of Duchamp. The crux of his later photographic and gaming experiments is the use of perceptual distortions to explore and expand chance and play.

_The Poker Game_ of 1970 (fig. 3.92-3.93) is a series of twenty-six black and white photographs, each 4 ¼ x 10”, that are hung horizontally in a line stretching over twenty-six feet. In the photographs, card players are seated around a table. Some wear hats, others have on jackets; some are shown in full, and others are cropped out. On the table is a rotating cast of objects including cans of beer, poker chips, glass cups, and cards. A ceiling light above produces a halo effect causing the light to radiate from the center of the table and onto the faces of the poker players—illuminating them with starkly contrasting contours and shadows. All the lines of the room and the table are curved, mutated, and bent. The individuals captured within the
picture’s frame include Los Angeles art world figures: Charles Arnoldi, Laddie John Dill, Ron Cooper, and Jim Ganzer (a.k.a. Jimmy’Z). Although never depicted, Bell’s presence is implied as the camera’s operator.

The series was the product of a practice begun in 1968, simultaneously with Bell’s move to environmental glass works. Using a Widelux panoramic camera with a swing lens that produced 140° images, the artist began to distort the view produced by the camera lens. In a sense, he thus anticipates his manipulation of viewer perception in the large works that would emerge the following year. The Widelux camera, not only by its name, but also by virtue of its potentially mutating effects, became an extension of the perceptual distortions of Dr. Lux. One of the many experiments conducted with the Widelux camera incorporated aspects of chance mediated by the artist’s body. Bell had a bio-feedback monitor built into his Borsalino Fedora, and the monitoring electrodes were attached to his ears. When his brain generated Alpha waves, the signals were sent via a transmitter to the camera shutter release (the camera was modified with a motor so the film advanced and the shutter cocked simultaneously). Bell would walk the boardwalk of Venice Beach with electrodes attached to his ears and the camera slung across his back so the Widelux would randomly record where he had been according to the readings of the bio-monitor. The camera movement, the sites, and the images recorded by the camera were random. The process removed authorial choice and replaced it with an aftereffect of biological reading—not quite a readymade, but still an image produced by “ready made” components.

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155 Bell had a total of seven Widelux cameras, each of which was modified in a different way. Larry Bell, “Of Months of Thought,” in Larry Bell, exh. cat. (Dijon, France: Les Presses du Réel, 2010), 11.
156 Existing narratives by Walter Hopps, Craig Kauffman, Dean Cushman, Billy Al Bengston, and Larry Bell himself, are consistent regarding the development of Bell’s alternative identity, Dr. Lux, throughout the 1960s. In a recent interview, Billy Al Bengston stressed that the name “Lux” has persisted to this day because Bell always had one of his Widelux cameras slung around his neck. Billy Al Bengston, interview with author, 26 April 2014, telephone.
157 Unfortunately, there are currently no known photographs taken by the bio-feedback contraption.
The chance experiments developed into a record of the regular poker games that took place in Venice—events in which a group of artists would, according to Bell, get together to “slug it out” across the table. Bell has described the game of poker as a game of skill, but a skill that he completely lacked. Consequently his engagement with the game became an engagement with chance: “I liked to play poker […] a game of pure skill (which I do not have), but during the games I always had my camera.”

The panoramic and distorted photographs of the poker game—of men seated around a table—are loosely reminiscent of the much-reproduced *Five-Way Portrait of Marcel Duchamp* of 1917 (fig. 3.94), taken at Broadway Photo Shop in New York. That shop featured a popular hinged-mirror setup that gained popularity at the turn of the twentieth century and could often be found at tourist sites and amusement parks. In the photograph, Duchamp is positioned with his back to the camera and faces a pair of hinged mirrors. The camera reproduces the image of the sitter’s back accompanied by four reflected images. The five images of Duchamp capture him sitting around a table with himself. The perceptual confusion invites viewers to question whether they are seeing the sitter or his reflection. The photograph evinces some of the humor that informs Duchamp’s subsequent work, and also immediately prefigures the fracturing of his persona into a cast of characters—the first of which, R. Mutt, would emerge that same year. While the photograph is not a readymade, its ready made components—hinges, mirrors, and transmutation—distinctly parallel the readymade vocabulary. Bell’s photographic experiments, mediated through the Widelux camera bearing the name of his alter ego, and often taken as a result of the chance readings of his Alpha waves,

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159 Larry Bell, as quoted in Marie de Brugerolle, “Larry Bell in Perspective,” in *Larry Bell*, exh. cat. (Dijon, France: Les Presses du Réel, 2010), 22.
incorporate manipulation and distortion, which parallel those characteristics apparent in the Dada artist’s work. The poker photographs, according to the artist, “have the humor and distortion that was what it felt like to play [poker].”\textsuperscript{161}

In 1982, Bell conceived of *The Game* (fig. 3.95-3.96) which took two years to realize in a playable form and was accompanied by two artist-designed books. The first book, *Chairs in Space: How the Game Evolved* was published in March 1984 and accompanied his solo exhibition at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. The second, *Chairs in Space: The Book of the Game*, published in November 1984, was released in conjunction with his solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.\textsuperscript{162}

*The Game* consists of a checkerboard table, a glass center, and small chairs. It can be played by two to four people who manipulate the movement of the game pieces (the chairs) according to a pair of dice—one red to determine the number of moves, and one white to determine the direction of the move and the rotation of the chair. The grid is a 21 x 21 arrangement and sits at precisely 50” high. Bell notes that game involves an “interplay of image

\[\text{\textsuperscript{161} Larry Bell, “Of Months of Thought,” in Larry Bell (2010), 13. The book project Animated Discourse of 1975 similarly incorporates photographs taken by Bell with a Widelux camera. The book was made in collaboration with Guy de Cointet, a French artist who had worked as a studio assistant for Bell for seven years, starting in New York and then moving with Bell back to Venice Beach. The arrangement of the photographs in the book mimics that of a horizontally laid filmstrip. However, unlike a filmstrip, the ensemble does not present a continuity of movement; rather, the vignettes comprise twenty-nine different images arranged into various orientations (upside down and right side up). According to Bell, the photographs are a visual translation of a passage from Situationist theorist Raoul Vaneigem’s 1975 treatise, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, which includes, on the back of the pamphlet, a notice stating that anyone can use the text in any way they want. The visual code was determined by Cointet and he placed a key in the back of the book that may be used to decipher the encryption—I, however, have not been successful at this, and perhaps the point of the book is the impossible and ludicrous task of deciphering it. This closely aligns with Cointet’s practice, which Bell summarizes: “I am not sure Guy’s own work had anything to do with communication. In fact, I think it was just the opposite. His act was about total silliness, the most difficult thing to communicate.” Larry Bell, in “Who Is Guy de Cointet?” *Artforum* 45, no. 10 (Summer 2007): 413. The book is a part of Cointet’s oeuvre as much as it is of Bell’s and thus, a consideration of it remains beyond the scope of this chapter. Larry Bell and Guy de Cointet, *Animated Discourse* (Venice, CA: Sure Co., 1975). In 1995, Bell published a second book, *Fractions* (Paris, France: Janninck, 1995), which addresses aspects of fracturing in relation to his own partial deafness.}

\[\text{\textsuperscript{162} Larry Bell, *Chairs in Space: How the Game Evolved* (Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, March 24-May 13, 1984); and Larry Bell, *Chairs in space: the Book of the Game* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, November 17, 1984-January 18, 1985).}\]
and reality in multiple reflections produced by eight reflecting surfaces (the interior and exterior of each of four partially mirrored glass surfaces)." \(^{163}\) When seated (and also when standing due to the height of the game board), most of the players’ fields of vision are filled by the board and the interplays of image and reality created by the multiple reflections produced by the eight reflecting surfaces of the partially-mirrored glass at the center.

As with chess, the game involves a series of rules and an endgame. The complexity of the strategies and movements extend well beyond the scope of this dissertation, so I will simply outline the endgame. The primary goal is to move one’s chair into a space outside the glass so that its reflection “inside” the miniature glass sculpture causes the illusion that it is occupying the same space (and same orientation) as the chair that permanently resides at the center. A secondary goal is to eliminate the opponent’s chair by moving one’s chair into a spot in which it (from any vantage point) appears to share the same space and orientation as the opposing chair.

The books that accompany the game outline the rules and include complex charts, term definitions, and strategic suggestions for players at various levels. The first text, *Chairs in Space: How the Game Evolved*, features a black and white checkered cover and is twenty-four pages long (fig. 3.97). The book includes a photograph of the artist staring across the game board (fig. 3.98). With his elbows on the table, left hand to his cheek, and a slightly furrowed brow, he looks directly at the camera—as if the photographer and the viewer have disturbed his concentration. The photograph (appropriately) parallels the image of Duchamp published in *Life Magazine* in the 1952 article “Dada's Daddy” (fig. 3.99).\(^{164}\) The image of Duchamp similarly captures the elder artist propped on his elbows from across the field of the game board, but while


Bell acknowledges the presence of the camera, the earlier image captures Dada’s Daddy undisturbed by the intrusion.

Bell’s book includes an essay—“How the Game Evolved”—in which he explains that the piece was first realized on a massive scale in a 1982 exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts. For the show, a single artist-designed Chair de Lux was placed in the center of the room-sized installation The Cat (a.k.a. Chairs in Space) (fig. 3.100); four corner lamps and projectors installed in the room were manipulated to create four distinct squares of light within the exhibition space. This created the illusion that multiple chairs were located throughout the room—both inside and outside the sculpture—so as to ultimately (and illusionistically) total nine chairs. An observer/participant in the life-size game was able to see others through the glass sculpture, and others could see him or her. However, one was only able to see one’s own reflection if one stood within one of the four squares of light. The artist describes it in terms of playfulness rather than subjective fracturing: “All the elements in the space merged, mixed and transmuted into one another. It was great fun for me, and for others too.”

The narrative describing the first iteration of The Game is quickly followed by a diagram of play, and game-centric rhetoric that outlines “The Symmetries” and “The Reflection Zones,” (fig. 3.101) as well as a the “Rules of the Game.” While Bell’s historical narrative frames the conception of the game as a playful and engaging exercise, the technicalities of play are much more complex, rule-filled and strategy-steeped.

The second book, Chairs in Space: The Book of The Game, is forty-seven pages long and features a brightly colored, yellow cover with a reproduction of the gaming board in the center.

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165 Larry Bell, Chairs in Space: How the Game Evolved, 5. Claire Bishop recently pointed out that although Larry Bell and Dan Graham make works with strikingly similar aesthetic experiences, the artists discuss them in completely opposite ways. Bell speaks of the “fun” of viewing his works while Graham relates his pavilions to a quasi-Lacanian exploration of split subjectivity as represented in his works’ quasi-opaque and quasi-translucent glass. This point merits further exploration, but is beyond the confines of this dissertation.
(fig. 3.102). The first paragraph of the introductory essay re-orient the participant/observer dichotomy: “I was brought up on games […] But I was lazy […] My favorite part about games has always been observing […] In my game all the participants are observers.”166 The text expands on the earlier parallels between the game and the manipulating and mutating effects of Bell’s glass sculptures. In the narrative, Bell discusses the parallels between The Game, his large-scale glass works, and H.G. Wells’s The Invisible Man.167 He relates the game of manipulating viewers’ (in)visibility to Wells’s discussion of Griffin’s experiments on his neighbor’s cat: “In the story, Griffin […] recounts how he had first tried out his invisibility process on his neighbor’s cat […] most of the cat disappeared, but ‘two little ghosts of her eyes’ were still visible.”168 The effect might be compared to that of Bell’s gradient sculptures such as the appropriately titled The Dilemma of Griffin’s Cat of 1980 (fig. 3.103) in which the lower ends of the glass are heavily coated with vaporized metal and act like a mirror, yet the gradient gradually fades to the opposite end which is clear of coating. Should an observer/participant sit within the center of the sculpture, one would see both “reflections of herself […]and] the physical properties of the coated glass […]would make] her disappear, delightfully, except for the ghostly pupils of her eyes.”169 Thus, viewers are made both visible via the mirroring effects, and invisible via the thick gradient. Observers/participants become both test subjects within Bell’s ongoing experiential and experimental research, as well as players within the (in)visibility game.

Within the Chairs in Space text, Bell deconstructs the optical process of reflection and refraction in relation to the technical aspects of The Game. Various diagrams use a profile view

167 H.G. Wells’s The Invisible Man was first published within the serialized Pearson’s Weekly in 1897; it was published as a novel later that same year.
of the artist observing a chair to deconstruct how an observer perceives (fig. 3.104). More precisely, Bell examines how a participant/observer would see a chair in relation to the process of playing the game. The chair would appear differently according to its position in relation to the mirrored and transparent glass centerpiece, as well as the location and angle of the player/observer’s point of view (the instructions encouraged players to circumambulate the playing field). The artist’s deconstruction of the qualities of transparency and reflection activated within the game were coupled with endgame strategies. Throughout the text are dozens of gridded diagrams documenting possible game board moves (fig. 3.105). Each board map is appended with explanations and tactics exploring the potential for movement, as well as the reflective qualities that result from each new position. Thus, the text operates as a digest of optical function and its subsequent manipulation. It introduces the idea of reflective and transparent play through a discussion of the disembodied eyes of Griffin’s cat; it then proceeds to explain how one sees the physical world; and it concludes by investigating strategies for playing a game that actively manipulate, twist, and confuse one’s sense of perception. The Game and its exhaustive texts transform a pastime into a multi-dimensional game that is played-out on the surface of the board and played within the visual echoes of the game pieces in relation to a player’s point of view.

Ultimately, The Game is a complex expansion of and homage to Duchamp’s engagement with chess. The first iteration of The Game was realized on the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Duchamp and Vitaly Halberstadt’s, L’Opposition et les cases conjuguées sont réconciliées (Opposition and Sister Squares Are Reconciled) of 1932. The co-authored treatise, which Duchamp and the German chess master had worked on throughout the 1920s, is written in parallel texts of French, German, and English. It includes a plethora of carefully and intricately
designed diagrams (fig. 3.106-3.107). These are printed on both sides of translucent paper so as to fully explain the many nuances of the complex game. However, the endgames discussed and strategized within the text are situations that might only arise once in a lifetime; and thus the book is neither a central, nor a significant treatise on chess. However, as art historian Francis Naumann argues, the significance of the book is not the endgame; it is the reconciliation of differences “between positions of opposition and the concept of sister squares […]or] Let us simplify: Opposition and ‘sister squares’.”170 According to Naumann, Duchamp and Halberstadt theoretically reconciled opposing entities by establishing that contradictory elements were in fact complimentary. “They represent only variant methods by which to solve essentially the same endgame situation.”171 The book is the result of Duchamp’s declaration in 1923 that he would devote himself exclusively to playing chess (that is, aside from helping Katherine Dreier organize a Kandinsky show). Duchamp designed the book’s cover, oversaw its publication, and boxed the original manuscript, diagrams, and proofs—titling the “original” The Box of 1932.172

The much-reproduced photographs of Duchamp playing chess, much like those of him as Rrose Sélavy, were highly controlled and directed. Of particular import is the presence of glass often in the vicinity of, or as an active agent in, the compositions. The Large Glass plays the part of both backdrop and agent in the infamous photograph of Duchamp playing chess with Babitz at his 1963 Pasadena Art Museum retrospective. Furthermore, upon the occasion of the retrospective, a chess game was installed within the exhibition (fig. 3.108). However, the potential for play was denied by the decision to rope off the game table and two chairs. A second

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172 Amelia Jones, Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp, 86. Duchamp went on to produce Pocket Chess Set in 1943.
oft-reproduced photograph by Arnold Rosen, *Marcel Duchamp playing chess on a sheet of glass* of 1958 (fig. 3.109) captures Duchamp seen from below and through the glass, on top of which rest game pieces. In this photograph, Duchamp himself embodies the role of a subject who is to be looked at and examined through the glass.

In *The Game* and its accompanying publications Bell expands on ideas set forth by Duchamp. *The Game*, like the roped-off chess table in the 1963 retrospective, cannot be played. It is one of an edition of three, costly works, and is also roped off due to its status as an art object (that is, unless one is granted access for scholarly or acquisition purposes). Duchamp’s 1932 text dissects an actual chess game, yet is irrelevant as a playing guidebook due to its focus on an obscure situation; by contrast Bell’s two publications not only set forth strategies for an invented game, but also extrapolate complicated endgames that only a select few, if any, would actually encounter. Thus, Bell’s intellectually rigorous and challenging gameplay is exponentially, and somewhat sardonically, even more esoteric and more absurd than Duchamp’s.

Furthermore, one can read the reconciliation explored within *L’Opposition* and *The Game* as a form of synchronicity. Just as Duchamp’s renown became intrinsically tied to Rrose Sélavy, so too did Bell’s self-representation become fundamentally entangled within Dr. Lux—to the point that even today he says, “I am living the life of Lux” and distributes business cards that confirm the Doctor’s ability to make good decisions.\(^{173}\) While Duchamp’s likeness was self-consciously constructed in reference to his chess endeavors—positing him as both author and subject—so too did Bell present himself as both artist and subject. The photographs reproduced in association with *The Game* consist of promotional stills of *Dr. Lux and the Artist* that are printed with exhibition information (fig. 3.110-3.111). The doubling encourages questions regarding what, precisely, is being toyed with in the context of *The Game*.

\(^{173}\) Larry Bell, interview by author, 17 April 2008, Jacobson Howard Gallery, New York.
The doubling of the photographic representation of the artist and his alter ego is produced in the context of a game that itself deploys multiples via both reflective and transparent qualities. The artwork and the ephemeral material used to publicize it call attention to the similarities between (or the reconciliation of) the different characters. It situates the oscillation of reflection and transparency on a game board framed by a complex set of rules and strategies; and it locates the visual qualities engendered by the glass as a component part of both the realization of the game, as well as the unfixed place of artistic and authorial conceptualization in the work of Larry Bell.

CONCLUSION

Varied and dynamic modes of self-representation coupled with an ironic and complex engagement with Minimalist discourse operate as significant elements within Larry Bell’s artistic practice. His works distort and reflect viewers’ bodies and the surrounding perceptual space and do so in tandem with the altered ego of the artist. Bell, like his colleagues, disseminated his engineered character through various means, including writing, photography, publicity posters, and a business card, as well as appearances in costume at art openings and social events. Thus, the artist activated the perceptual and playful effects of his work while engaging with and critiquing—in a manner often inflected by his understanding of Duchamp’s manipulation of identity—the foundational discourse on and elementary forms of Minimalist art.

The manipulated and manipulating glass medium, so recognizable within Bell’s oeuvre, served as both the material of his work, and as an agent of change. Art historians have thus far addressed Bell’s use of newly available technologies, his participation within a Los Angeles art scene, and the formal relationship between his pristine surfaces and the Californian car culture. However, the connections among the perceptual discoveries encouraged by his work, the artist’s
manipulation of his public image, and his ongoing dialogue with New York-based artists’
 writings and artworks remain less analyzed. His early works pivot around caricaturing figures of
 authority, such as his high school teachers, and the square as a signifier of socially normative
 behavior—as opposed to the artist’s engagement with the postwar counterculture lifestyle. These
 early intrusions were constructed in proximity to Biluxo Binoni, a persona informed by Bell’s
 relationship with Bengston and the Hollywood environment of public and performed
 personalities. His early 1960s glass work is typified by elliptical, striped, and checkered patterns,
 around which Ben Lux emerged as a more central public persona, built from Bell’s
 understanding of Duchamp, and an increased participation with Ferus Gallery’s avant-garde art
 scene. The mid-1960s streamlined and vacuum-coated cubes, constructed during and after his
 New York sojourn, place the artist in dialogue with Minimalist discourse, in all its earnestness.
 Following from Bell’s engagement with individuals such as Donald Judd, he developed the more
 academically oriented persona of Dr. Lux—a figure who humorously engaged with both the
 written and visual rhetoric of Minimalism, calling attention to the intellectualization of simple
 forms.

 Upon the artist’s return to Los Angeles, and in the wake of Fried’s discussion of literalist
 art and theatricality, Bell’s presentation of Dr. Lux became increasingly present in reference to
 his enlarged glass works, which placed viewers as performers within amusing and perceptually
 puzzling reflective and transparent environments. As the artist’s presentation and representation
 of Larry Bell and Dr. Lux became progressively indistinguishable, his engagement with
 photography, film, and games emerged as a significant aspect of his artistic production. As a
 continuation of this practice, in 1982, upon the half-century anniversary of Duchamp and
 Halberstadt’s L’Opposition, the artist realized an early version of The Game at the Detroit Art
Center, followed two years later by the fabrication of the game board and publication of instructional texts—thus mobilizing the potentially playful effects of Minimalist forms in opposition to the earnest rhetoric often used to discuss them.
Judy Gerowitz hereby devests [sic] herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance and freely chooses her own name: Judy Chicago

JUDY GEROWITZ CHICAGO
ONE MAN WOMAN SHOW AT CAL STATE FULLERTON OCTOBER 23 THRU NOVEMBER 25

The above text, taken from a full-page advertisement printed in the October 1970 issue of Artforum (fig. 4.1), and sponsored by Jack Glenn Gallery in Los Angeles, formally introduced readers to the constructed, public persona of Judy Chicago (b. 1939, Judith Sylvia Cohen). The ad features a photo printed twice—one a mirror of the other, evidently thanks to a reversed negative. The images display the artist’s butch look, with shorn hair, a bandana, dark sunglasses, and a tough expression. In the upper register of the announcement, Judy Chicago handwrote a brief narrative recounting the acquisition of her new namesake; in the lower section, she crossed-out her former name (again, by hand) and replaced it with “Chicago.” The announcement performed the dual function of both establishing a specific and public image while also publicizing a forthcoming exhibition on view at California State College, Fullerton (now California State University).

The solo exhibition showcased mostly Finish Fetish sculptural works constructed when the artist was working under the name Judy Gerowitz. Curated by Dextra Frankel, the show

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2 The Jack Glenn Gallery was established in 1969 in Corona del Mar, which is located south of downtown Los Angeles. The gallery exhibited the work of many artists associated with Finish Fetish, including, but not limited to, Judy Chicago, Peter Alexander, and Fred Eversley. The timeline of the artist’s name changes is as follows: b. 1939, Judith Sylvia Cohen; 1962, Judith Sylvia Gerowitz; October 1970, public declaration of the identity of Judith (Judy) Chicago in an exhibition and Artforum ad; 1971, Judith (Judy) Chicago becomes the artist’s legal name.
included the artist’s series of highly reflective and horizontally situated *Domes* of 1968 (fig. 4.2), the vertically hanging *Lifesavers* of 1969-1970 (fig. 4.3), and documentary photographs of various *Atmospheres* of 1969-1970 (fig. 4.4)—environmental works featuring colored smoke billowing from specially designed fireworks. Within the exhibition, viewers were presented with highly finished and brightly colored objects that glittered beneath the gallery lights. Simultaneously, the audience was reflected within the mirrored and iridescently colored surfaces of the works.

The artist-designed catalogue that accompanied the exhibition dictates that the artworks on view were to be understood within the framework of an emergent feminist discourse. Reprinted on the cover of the catalogue is the full-page photograph used in the *Artforum* advertisement (fig. 4.5). The reproduction of the enlarged portrait emphasizes the angled nature of the artist’s posture, the turn of her head over her left shoulder, and her look of both confidence and easy coolness. The portrait of the artist conveys both aloofness and surety, and the photograph is preliminary to a catalogue text filled with quotes from prominent female writers: French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, the African-American abolitionist Sojourner Truth, and the English novelist George Eliot (fig. 4.6-4.7). Two of the women quoted in the catalogue had also changed their names: from Isabella Baumfree to Sojourner Truth, and from Mary Ann Evans to George Eliot. The exhibition was the first to frame the artist’s work within an explicitly feminist context. The publicized name change and catalogue re-branded the works made by Judy

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3 The exhibition lighting was designed with the specific intention of emphasizing the shiny and reflective surfaces of the work. William Wilson’s exhibition review predominantly focuses on the artist’s name change, but also notes that the installation design complimented the exhibited artworks: “Black walls and soft spotlighting dramatize, possibly exaggerate, the qualities of three sets of geometric-abstract acrylic spray paintings in spectral hues, five sets of triple-domed table sculptures set on mirrors.” William Wilson, “Art Review: Judy Chicago Exhibition at Cal State Fullerton Gallery,” *Los Angeles Times* (2 November 1970): F14.


5 Isabella Baumfree (1797-1883) gave herself the name Sojourner Truth. Mary Ann Evans (1819-1880) did not officially change her name; however, she published under the pen name, George Eliot.
Gerowitz while she was working in the thick of the Los Angeles Finish Fetish milieu, and resituated the artworks within the oeuvre of Judy Chicago.

Reviews of the exhibition focus on the name change more so than on the exhibited artworks and express doubt regarding the feminist content of the objects on view. A review in *The Fresno Bee* notes that the opening reception was intended equally to celebrate the exhibition and to christen the artist. A follow-up article in the same newspaper expresses misgivings about the strategic and public manner in which the artist tied herself to a feminist artistic practice. “Miss Chicago […] must be one of […] the Women’s Liberation movement […] Either that or she is exploiting the movement as an attention-getting device.” And the report continues, “She is quick to explain, however, that use of a name not one’s own has been an ‘in’ thing in Los Angeles for years, and that she listed her name under Chicago in the telephone directory for a time.” William Wilson’s *Los Angeles Times* review questions the relationship between the name change and the exhibited artwork, which was more aesthetically aligned with that of male artists working in plastics, specifically Peter Alexander and Fred Eversley: “An L.A. artist formerly known as Judy Gerowitz […] recently changed her name to Judy Chicago […] Despite feminist statements in the catalog, Judy Chicago’s art bears no relationship to […] Women’s Lib.” The articles demonstrate the unexpected nature of both the name change and the artist’s proclaimed shift toward a feminist artistic practice. By 1970, Judy Gerowitz was a recognized figure within the Los Angeles Finish Fetish milieu. She had participated in the Jewish Museum’s *Primary*

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8 David Hale, “How Militant Artist Judy Chicago Got Started in Auto Painting School,” 84.
Structures exhibition of 1966, and her work had been reproduced in Time magazine.\(^{10}\) From a public perspective, the change represented an unexpected shift toward a political movement, and away from an established vein of artistic practice.

**JUDY GEROWITZ AND FINISH FETISH**

Few writers have closely examined the artworks that were produced under the name Judy Gerowitz and constructed in a style aesthetically aligned with Finish Fetish. Contemporaneous critics situate the artworks within a Los Angeles-specific aesthetic that is characterized by bright colors and highly polished surfaces. William Wilson’s numerous reviews note the “elegance” of Gerowitz’s work and emphasize the skill and craft required to achieve an immaculate surface.\(^{11}\) Peter Selz stresses the artist’s engagement with technology and the environmental effects fostered by Gerowitz’s highly reflective works: “New materials and media, new technology, are no longer ends in themselves, but are used […] as [a] means to reshape the environment and influence human responses.”\(^{12}\)

After changing her name to Judy Chicago, the artist published an autobiography, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*, in 1975, which was followed much later by a second memoir, *Beyond the Flower: The Autobiography of a Feminist Artist*, of 1996.\(^{13}\) The autobiographies position the artist’s work of the 1960s within the context of a highly personal struggle. Her series of *Domes* and *Lifesavers* are situated within a narrative that progresses toward and culminates in a feminist artistic practice. The *Domes* are termed “swollen breast” and “belly forms,” and the *Lifesavers* are described as an expression of the artist’s “sexuality and


identity.” These publications, as well as the numerous texts and films associated with later collaborative artworks such as *Womanhouse* of 1972, *The Dinner Party* of 1974-1979, and the *Holocaust Project* of 1985-1993, further solidify an understanding of the artist’s 1960s work as an early chapter within an ongoing exploration of female transformation, bodily experience, performance art, Jewish identity, social taboos, and the reclamation of female corporeality. The strongly autobiographical content of Judy Chicago’s work and writings after 1970 has encouraged researchers to approach analysis of her pre-1970s artistic production likewise from a biographical perspective. Most significantly, Gail Levin’s 2007 biography, *Becoming Judy Chicago*, expands on this trend in a highly detailed account of the artist’s life from birth until approximately 2006.

Exhibitions of the early twenty-first century have gradually revisited the work constructed under the name Judy Gerowitz and begun to situate it within an historic moment of emerging Minimalist discourse and a Los Angeles aesthetic. Group shows, and their accompanying texts, including *A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958-68* (2004) and *Pacific Standard Time: Art in Los Angeles 1945-1980* (2011), briefly situate the artist’s 1960s works within the context of Minimalism, the Jewish Museum’s *Primary Structures* exhibition of 1966, and a West Coast engagement with a structurally pared-down and colorfully expressive

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aesthetic. Solo exhibitions have approached the work of the 1960s from a more focused perspective, yet continued to locate it within a narrative of development toward a feminist artistic practice. Art historian Laura Meyer’s 1996 essay, “From Finish Fetish to Feminism: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in California Art History,” argues for the artist’s participation within, and eventual progression away from, the Finish Fetish milieu and toward the realization of The Dinner Party. Jenni Sorkin’s 2004 essay, “Minimal/Liminal: Judy Chicago and Minimalism,” positions the artist’s Minimalist work as a transitional moment within her career. Recently, the Brooklyn Museum’s 2014 exhibition, Chicago in L.A.: Judy Chicago’s Early Work, 1963-1974, surveyed the artist’s Finish Fetish work in the context of a Los Angeles environment characterized by rapid industrialization and the development of new plastic technologies. The show placed the artwork within the broader arc of the artist’s development and encouraged viewers to re-examine The Dinner Party, now permanently installed at the Brooklyn Museum, as a work that emerged from artistic experimentation with materials.

Rather than examining the artist’s 1960s work from the perspective of biography, or as endemic in a slow progression toward a feminist artistic practice, I will situate it along a timeline

20 Chicago in L.A.: Judy Chicago’s Early Work, 1963–1974, April 4-September 28, 2014, organized by Curator Catherine J. Morris, with Assistant Curator, Saisha Grayson. Although a catalogue did not accompany the exhibition, the wall texts, press release, and arrangement of artwork—often in proximity to contemporaneous photographs of the artist in her studio—encouraged one to contemplate the material aspects of the compositions, in addition to demonstrating the chronological progression of the artist’s work. An excerpt of the exhibition’s wall text reads: “Chicago pushed against unexamined traditions wherever she found them, experimenting with new materials and techniques for art-making […] As a participant in the Finish Fetish movement, which responded to the rapidly industrializing West Coast with its own brightly colored, high-gloss form of minimalism, Chicago helped establish L.A. as a center for contemporary American art.” I wish to thank Saisha Grayson for being so generous with the materials accompanying the show, as well as sharing her curatorial insight regarding the exhibition.
of shifting self-representations and name changes that engaged with a Los Angeles environment steeped in manipulating the reflective qualities of artwork and the mutability of public image.

For historical precision, I will refer to the artist as Judy Cohen when discussing her work and writings prior to August 1961, as Judy Gerowitz when unpacking the work and writings composed between summer 1961 and October 1970, and as Judy Chicago when discussing her work and writings composed after October 1970.21

Many of the artist’s Los Angeles-based colleagues engaged in name games and developed self-styled public personae throughout the 1950s and 60s—previous chapters explored the public intrusions of the pseudonym Maurice Syndell, the role-playing of Bengston, Ruscha, and Goode, and the alter ego of Larry Bell (Dr. Lux). Yet, Judy Chicago’s colleagues demonstrated both flexibility and fluidity regarding their engagement with alternative namesakes. Individuals producing work under the name Maurice Syndell simultaneously constructed artworks using their professional names (Ed Kienholz, Craig Kauffman, Ben Bartosh); Bengston’s chameleon-like public persona shifted according to context; Ruscha and Goode lithely moved between invoking their aliases and working under their birth names; and Larry Bell adopted the persona and dress of Dr. Lux while continuing to nimbly shift between

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21 This organizational strategy was used within the Brooklyn Museum exhibition, *Chicago in L.A.: Judy Chicago’s Early Work, 1963-1974* and emphasizes the artist’s shifting authorship along a timeline of artistic development. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that there are a limited number of illustrative photographs depicting viewer engagement with the reflective (and at times transparent) artworks addressed within this chapter. My discussion of the works that engage with the perceptual effects of reflection and transparency is based on: 1) available documentary photographs, 2) the artist’s descriptions of the interaction between various artworks and viewers, 3) my personal experience with the objects, 4) others’ accounts of their interactions with the works under consideration, and 5) my amateur reconstructions of certain artworks—and specifically *Gold-Plated Game* and *Cubes and Cylinders*, both of 1967, which I built using Hydrofarm reflective metalized film and cardboard tubes and children’s playing blocks, respectively (and I am grateful to Martijn, Kali, and baby Hendrik den Heijer for loaning me the playing blocks). Unlike the Finish Fetish artworks of Bengston and Bell, which have been exhibited frequently, Judy Gerowitz’s 1960s artworks are rarely exhibited and many have been lost or destroyed. Furthermore, while Bengston and Bell continued to construct works that manipulate reflection and transparency well beyond the 1960s, Judy Chicago distinctly moved away from an explicit engagement with said characteristics. Thus, while photographic documentation of the mirror-like surfaces may be found concerning the works of Bengston and Bell, such photographs are a rarity in the case of the artworks of Judy Gerowitz.
signatures. In contrast to her fellow artists, in Chicago’s case, it was the constructed persona that became the dominant, public image. Her 1975 autobiography solidified the persona of Judy Chicago and situated her earlier Finish Fetish work, constructed under the name Judy Gerowitz, within the narrative arc of a feminist artistic practice—demonstrating how she had siphoned the self-authoring and branding strategies that characterized her elder colleagues’ 1960s works and used it to establish a practice outside of the visual rhetoric that was associated with Finish Fetish. Instead of renouncing her 1960s oeuvre, the artist re-branded and re-defined her artwork along overtly feminist lines and thus placed the works within the oeuvre of the manufactured public identity of Judy Chicago. This reinvention leads one to consider not only what was erased, but also what was retrospectively added.

The artist’s engagement with Finish Fetish was comparatively brief, lasting from 1964-1970. Both before and during this period, her work pivoted around the notion of possibilities for rearrangement while also incorporating a subtle strategy of irony. Her early 1960-1961 paintings were influenced by Abstract Expressionism, and her portraits of her then-boyfriend Jerry Gerowitz consciously built on Willem de Kooning’s images of women, which she found “hilarious.” In 1961, after meeting Billy Al Bengston and marrying Jerry Gerowitz, the artist changed her last name to Gerowitz and began to paint and sculpt in a geometrically abstract visual language. Noting that the best known artists in Los Angeles frequented Barney’s Beanery—a dive bar in West Hollywood—in 1962 Gerowitz began to patronize the establishment, smoke cigars, and pose as “one of the boys.” Concurrent with this performance

22 Carolyn Kastner, the chief curator at the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, NM, has interviewed and interacted with Judy Chicago for many years in both a professional and social context; she frankly stated, “Judy Chicago is a construct, and she knows it.” Carolyn Kastner, interview by author, 26 August 2014.
23 Judy Cohen to May Cohen, 20 January 1960, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
of machismo, her work of 1962-1964 depicts rearranged and biomorphic imagery of phalluses, wombs, and other identifiable body parts. Around the end of 1963 or beginning of 1964, gallery director Rolf Nelson began referring to Gerowitz as Chicago—a nickname derived from the artist’s Chicago accent. The name caught-on among friends and she, like her artist-colleagues, began to use it in a fluid manner, eventually listing her name as Judy Chicago in the telephone book. Simultaneously, the artist began to produce a series of highly reflective geometric game boards that were rearrangeable. From late 1965-1967, at a time when she was known to friends as Judy Chicago, and professionally as Judy Gerowitz, the artist enlarged the geometric forms into room-sized installations and environmental works that appeared to segment the bodies of the viewing public. Between 1968-1970, Gerowitz investigated color systems (i.e. color wheels and charts) on highly reflective surfaces that mirrored and distorted the audience and the surrounding environment. When exhibited in 1970, the plastic works were re-branded as an explicitly feminist endeavor by way of both published advertisements and an artist-designed catalogue; and the nickname of Judy Chicago was redefined as nomenclature that defied the patriarchal practice by which a woman assumes the surname of her father or husband. Thus, the artist’s 1960s work was accompanied by an increasing engagement with forms of self-invention—strategies that skillfully developed her public persona through a combination of artwork, self-representation, and collaborations with those who portrayed her.

**JUDY COHEN: EARLY WORK AND ABSTRACTION, 1960-1961**

Judy Cohen’s early work comprises brushy, figurative paintings. Most of the paintings have been lost, and the artist is reluctant to share any photographic reproductions of works composed during her early tenure at UCLA—where she enrolled in 1957, receiving a BFA in 1962 and a MFA in 1964. Nonetheless, based on her own descriptions, others’ accounts, and
documentary photographs, it is known that her early paintings displayed an interest in portraiture and the gestural aspects of Abstraction Expressionism.

A photograph from circa 1960/1961 (fig. 4.8) captures Judy Cohen and then-boyfriend Jerry (Gerald) Gerowitz posing in front of Cohen’s early, brushy portrait of Gerowitz. The painting was composed during Cohen’s yearlong sojourn in New York during the 1959-1960 academic year. It was painted on a hardboard panel and captured Jerry Gerowitz in an unshaven state. The brushwork was quick and thick, and the strokes were choppy and abrupt. The painted visage, cut off at the top, filled most of the picture’s frame. The portrait was centered within the painted field and the nearness of the sitter to the picture’s surface effectively pushed him into the viewer’s space. The face was shown staring straight ahead with heavy eyes and slightly flared nostrils. From the black and white photographic reproduction, one can discern stark contrasts between light and dark areas within the composition, which the artist says was rendered in bright and contrasting colors.

The painting displayed the formal influence of both social realist painter Raphael Soyer and Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning. The tightly framed space was arranged in a manner comparable to certain portraits composed by Raphael Soyer, a painter with whom Cohen briefly studied at the New School for Social Research. Soyer’s paintings, such as Portrait of Artist Walter Quirt (fig. 4.9), and drawings, such as Untitled 12 (Portrait of a Man) (fig. 4.10), capture the sitter in a frontal pose gazing directly at the viewer and within the picture’s frame in

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26 Judy Chicago, interview by author, 23 July 2014, e-mail correspondence.
27 Raphael Soyer (1899-1987) was a Russian-born American painter who immigrated with his family to the United States in 1912, ultimately settling in the Bronx, NY. He studied at Cooper Union, the National Academy of Design, and the Art Students League of New York, and went on to teach at the Art Students League, the New School for Social Research, and the National Academy. In a letter to her mother, Judy Cohen wrote, “Details time—I wrote you about the New School to remind you the class meets 5 mornings a week—is a Painting/Drawing/Composition class for ‘serious’ students under a well-known New York painter—Raphael Soyer!” Judy Cohen to May Cohen, 22 September 1959, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
a close-cropped and magnified position. However, Soyer’s work is noticeably more conservative and naturalistic than Cohen’s composition, which exhibited the influence of Abstract Expressionism by way of heavy paint and animated brushstrokes.

In a January 1960 letter to her mother, May Cohen, Judy Cohen wrote that her work was “getting more abstract.” She later explained: “I’m sure you’ve heard the term Abstract Expressionism—well, that’s the kind of painting I’m doing […] I do believe it is today’s way of seeing the world and that is very important.” Upon seeing de Kooning’s *Marilyn Monroe*, she told her: “De Kooning’s series of paintings entitled ‘Woman’ […] great. He has one called ‘Marilyn Monroe’ which kept me laughing for a week.” Cohen saw de Kooning’s 1954 painting *Marilyn Monroe* (fig. 4.11) in 1959, the same year that Monroe’s film, *Some Like it Hot*, premiered. The painting, part of de Kooning’s *Woman* series, features an abstracted female figure derived from the popular culture icon. In the composition, the massive figure occupies the entire painted surface and is rendered as distorted with slashing brushstrokes and jarring colors.

Cohen, who had been living in Los Angeles since 1957, was familiar with Hollywood constructs of public personae. Marilyn Monroe (b. Norma Jean Baker) was a fabricated identity whose changed name, dyed hair, physical appearance, and styled publicity photos epitomized the ability of the media to mold a personality. The artist was fascinated by de Kooning’s painting style, as well as amused by his subject matter, which, through violent brushwork and an elaborate dynamic of breakage and joining, made strange the assembled cultural icon. While media outlets had smoothly stitched together the persona of Marilyn Monroe, de Kooning’s

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28 Judy Cohen to May Cohen, 20 January 1960, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
29 Judy Cohen to May Cohen, 30 January 1960, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
30 Judy Cohen to May Cohen, 28 December 1959, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
Marilyn Monroe fragmented and made rough those assembled pieces. Marcia Brennan explains that de Kooning was able to acknowledge the feelings and impulses that accompanied thoughts of Monroe by investing them with “a humorous or at least ironic twist.” While the work may have originated from a place of male objectification, Cohen reinterpreted it as a glib rendering of a media construct.

Cohen’s portraits from 1959 and 1960, described by fellow artist Joan D’Angelo as “visceral drawings,” rearranged signifiers of individual identity and transformed them into rough and nearly unrecognizable portraits. Cohen’s portrait of Jerry was rendered with bold strokes, distorted features, and abrupt colors, but remained significantly less abstract and aggressive than de Kooning’s contemporaneous work. Nonetheless, both paintings operate as a form of portraiture—whether of a media constructed figure, or a rendition of an individual known on an intimate level. Bound up with the concept of a portrait is the tension between the visual likeness of a sitter and the representation of a sitter’s identity. De Kooning’s and Cohen’s portraits do not convey an exact likeness of their subjects, but instead capture personae. Cohen’s fascination with de Kooning’s deconstruction of a Hollywood icon arguably suggests an early interest in the potential of a rearranged identity to intrude into the public consciousness of the art world.

During her time in New York, Cohen frequently wrote to her mother. With fairly animated prose, her letters discuss her visits to museums and galleries; her interest in de Kooning and Abstract Expressionism; the classes that she was both taking and teaching; and how her work was progressing toward abstraction yet maintaining the figure. However, in Judy Chicago’s

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31 Willem de Kooning, quoted in Selden Rodman, Conversations with Artists (New York, NY: Devin-Adaire, 1957), 104; as quoted in Marcia Brennan, Modernism’s Masculine Subjects: Matisse, the New York School, and Post-Painterly Abstraction (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 47. Brennan also points out: “Maria Prather has noted that the dealer Martha Jackson is known to have given the painting Marilyn Monroe its title.” See: Maria Prather’s catalogue essay in Willem de Kooning: Paintings exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art and Yale University Press, 1994),136, n.22.
32 Joan (Giovanna) D’Angelo Brennan to Gail Levin, 14 March 2005; quoted in Gail Levin, Becoming Judy Chicago, 93, n. 109.
1975 autobiography, she instead positions the years of 1959 and 1960 as occupied by various relationships that became difficult due to the coupling of her assertive nature and her female gender. The autobiography describes her tumultuous relationship with Jerry Gerowitz as “breaking up and going back together.”\(^{33}\) The narrative also expresses distaste with the people “from the Village, most of whom did nothing and proclaimed themselves artists of one sort or another.”\(^{34}\) The 1975 account examines the period from an interpersonal vantage point and focuses on the artist’s relationship with her family (her mother had moved to Los Angeles in the summer of 1959), Jerry Gerowitz, and various friends. While social and professional relationships are often intertwined, the text explicitly emphasizes a personal rather than a professional account. It presents a narrative that is notably different from the roughly thirty letters the artist wrote to May Cohen during the twelve months she was in New York. It must be acknowledged that one might, understandably, edit one’s self-portrayal in communications with one’s mother. However, much of Chicago’s early career (as will become apparent throughout this chapter) has been subjected to historical and biographical rearrangement, and even negation, by the artist herself.

**JUDY COHEN TO JUDY GEROWITZ: 1961**

Judy Cohen changed her name to Gerowitz in August 1961, shortly after marrying Jerry Gerowitz in June of that year. In her second, 1997 memoir, the artist states that the principal motivating factor behind the changed nomenclature was the desire to have a recognizable, professional name. “When Jerry and I were wed […] I had kept my original surname, altering it only after noticing—while doing the ‘gallery stroll’ every Saturday afternoon, which is what all


the ‘cool’ art people did—that there seemed to be too many other artists named Cohen.” This statement suggests that she was aware of the power of a distinctive name. Concurrent with the change in nomenclature, her work dramatically shifted from brushy and gestural portraits to hard-edge, geometric abstraction.

Gerowitz’s paintings, such as Untitled of late 1961 (fig. 4.12) and Untitled of 1962 (fig. 4.13), as well as her Untitled sculpture of late 1961 (fig. 4.14), are semi-symmetrical and non-objective. They display a stark, linear quality in which the color functions to separate space and define geometric shapes within the compositions. The acrylic on canvas paintings consist of a principal, circular form within which trapezoidal shapes occupy the central area. In Untitled of 1961 the colored trapezoids appear to be stacked amongst various circular forms; in the 1962 composition, the forms are arranged so they appear as angled slats at the center. Within the paintings, the warm colors of the central, angular forms visually advance while the cooler and darker hues of the surrounding space recede. The play of color and angle create the illusion that pictorial space is radiating outward from the center. The Untitled sculpture realizes a version of the trapezoidal design in three dimensions. The sculpture consists of wooden slats that are painted black and white and positioned both horizontally and vertically. At the center are triangular forms that draw a viewer’s eye. The paintings and sculpture rearrange pictorial space using geometric forms and convey an illusion of depth through line and color.

The stylistic shift toward geometric forms and away from brushy abstraction, and the placement of a central shape within the composition, was influenced by Gerowitz’s sculpture professor, Oliver Andrews, as well as by recent works by Billy Al Bengston. Andrews had joined the faculty at UCLA in 1958 and Gerowitz began studying with him in Fall 1961. Andrews’s work of the early 1960s, such as Shore Sculpture of 1963 (fig. 4.15), comprises mostly

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35 Judy Chicago, Beyond the Flower (1996), 15.
assemblages composed from various metal and wooden geometric forms. However, while the rectangles, slats, and triangles within the assemblages evince a rough, industrial quality and are held together through various welding techniques, Gerowitz’s use of the geometric shapes emphasizes a sleek quality and the ability of color to manipulate perceived depth and space. Although the direct, formal influence of Andrews on the younger artist’s development remains tenuous, Chicago credits him with encouraging her to move into a three-dimensional format and experiment with materials. 36

Billy Al Bengston, at the time a rising celebrity within the Los Angeles art scene, was hand-painting compositions such as Gregory from 1961 (fig. 4.16). Gregory is a large, lacquer and synthetic enamel painting on a square composition board. Pale yellow sergeant stripes hover at its center and are surrounded by concentric circles of brown, yellow, white, and blue. The warm and cool colors convey a sense of pictorial depth as the orange moves forward and the

36 Within the artist’s collected papers at the Schlesinger Library, there is a notable lack of primary material (such as personal correspondence) dating from the years 1961 to 1963. Thus, I am unable to confirm, from a contemporaneous perspective, the exact nature of the relationship between the artist and Oliver Andrews. Nonetheless, in 1969, Oliver Andrews recommended Judy Gerowitz for a teaching position at UCLA. The university extended an offer, which she accepted, and she began teaching there in the spring semester of 1970. Andrews discusses his interaction with the younger artist in an oral history interview conducted by George Goodwin between 1975 and 1977. In the interview, Andrews refers to the artist as Judy Chicago, despite the fact that she was working as Judy Gerowitz while under his tutelage. “When Judy was at UCLA, we did quite a lot of ceramics together. Since that time Judy went into—oh, she did plaster and concrete and plastics and wood and Fiberglass and all kinds of things.” Oliver Andrews, interview by George M. Goodwin, 1 July 1975 and 31 March 1977, Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Oral History Project, University of California, Los Angeles, CA. Judy Chicago has also credits Andrews as occupying an encouraging role within her artistic training. In 1975 she wrote: “the sculpture teacher was very encouraging and sympathetic.” Judy Chicago, Through the Flower (1975, reprint 2006), 20. In 2014, she again credits him as a significant force: “My imagery […] was clearly not in step with either Abstract Expressionism (brought to UCLA by Hans Hofmann) or the figurative tradition of Rico Lebrun, whose influence at the school was strong. My response was to immerse myself in sculpture where the teacher, Oliver Andrews, was far more supportive.” Judy Chicago, “From Judy Cohen to Judy Chicago,” in The Dinner Party: Restoring Women to History (New York, NY: Monacelli Press, 2014), 248. Still, such acknowledgements must be contextualized with the fact that Andrews facilitated Chicago’s employment at UCLA. Additionally, Gail Levin notes that although the artist began teaching at UCLA in 1970, she listed, on several resumes, inaccurate employment information stating that she taught at “California State University (1969-1971),” and on a separate resume, “Fresno State College, Asst. Professor 1969-71.” While Levin suggests that the artist “may have believed that she had started in Fresno the fall of 1969,” it remains impossible to know, precisely, the reasoning behind the inaccurate information. See Gail Levin, “Becoming Judy Chicago: Feminist Class,” in Entering the Picture: Judy Chicago, The Fresno Feminist Art Program, and the Collective Visions of Women Artists, ed. Jill Fields (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 42, n. 2.
white fades into the background. Gerowitz’s paintings, like Bengston’s, comprise predominantly circular forms on a square support. Both artists use cool and warm colors to create a sense of depth and the illusion that the central forms were floating. Although Bengston’s iconic sergeant stripe paintings would not be exhibited at Ferus until 1962, his use of the symbol was well-known throughout the Los Angeles art scene at the time.

Reflecting on the later part of her undergraduate years at UCLA, the artist positions Bengston, rather than her professors, as paradigmatic of what it meant to be an artist: “I was becoming aware of the professional art world and felt that most of my UCLA professors were not ‘real’ artists. Billy Al was the first one [real artist] I encountered.”37 She and Bengston had first met during the summer of 1961 on a Saturday afternoon gallery stroll down La Cienega Boulevard. Bengston was distinctively self-styled, with a deliberate presentation, and it is notable that this encounter preceded both the name change from Cohen to Gerowitz, as well as the artist’s formal shift to a geometric, hard-edge painting style. However, in Judy Chicago’s 1975 autobiography, she neither discusses her work, nor her increasing awareness of the “cool art people” at that time. Instead, readers are presented with a highly personal account of the strained marital dynamics between her and Jerry Gerowitz. Much of this discussion pivots around household chores, which are a central concern of the emerging feminist discourse of the 1970s: “One day, Jerry left his socks on the floor, something he had done more than once. I exploded: ‘What makes you think that because, by a biological accident, I was born with a cunt, I am supposed to pick up your socks?’”38

THE BEGINNINGS OF A REARRANGEABLE IDENTITY, 1962-1964

37 Judy Chicago, interview by author, 23 July 2014, e-mail correspondence.
38 Judy Chicago, Through the Flower (1975, reprint 2006), 22.
In June 1964, Gerowitz’s MFA thesis exhibition, installed by gallery director Rolf Nelson, opened at UCLA. The exhibition included now lost and/or destroyed paintings such as *Birth* of 1963 (fig. 4.17) and *Bigamy* of 1963 (fig. 4.18), as well as the sculpture, *In My Mother’s House* of 1963/64 (fig. 4.19).\(^{39}\) The paintings were large (8’ x 4’), acrylic on Masonite panels. Each was covered with abstract and biomorphic forms painted in a hard-edge style with bright pastel colors. The clay sculpture, although now known only through a black and white photograph, was an organic form painted in vibrant hues that evidently accentuated its undulating structure.\(^{40}\)

The show was advertised with a square, palm-sized piece of brown drawing paper stamped with exhibition information (fig. 4.20).\(^{41}\) The miniature leaflet is approximately 3” square and can easily be held in one’s hand or stuffed into a pocket. In the upper left of the handbill is the outline of a biomorphic shape that formally resembles the contours of the forms that inhabited the artist’s paintings within the exhibition. On the lower right, and positioned at an angle, is a framed informational notice (with blurred ink), “JUDITH GEROWITZ MASTERS THESIS SHOWING UCLA DICKSON ART CENTER […].” Unlike the monumentally sized

\(^{39}\) Unfortunately, I know neither when the works were destroyed, nor whether their destruction was an intentional act by the artist or an accidental loss. In anticipation of her 2012 exhibition at Nye + Brown in Los Angeles, CA (occurring concurrently with the Getty’s Pacific Standard Time Initiative, although not sponsored by it), the artist transposed the hand-painted designs of *Birth* and *Bigamy* onto spray painted car hoods titled *Birth Hood* and *Bigamy Hood* and bearing the date 1965/2011. A still existing work from her thesis show, *Flight* of 1963, currently in the collection of Dr. Gene Kassebaum and Gayathri Rajapur, Honolulu, HI (the artist misspells the collector’s name as “Kassabaum” in her 1975 autobiography), was also transposed onto a car hood, *Flight Hood*, and likewise dated 1965/2011. Saul Ostrow, “Flashbacks 1963-1971: Re-Visioning Judy Chicago,” in *Judy Chicago: Deflowered*, ed. Katherine Chan (Los Angeles, CA: Nye + Brown, 2012), 24-37.

\(^{40}\) Although the sculpture, *In My Mother’s House*, is now lost, it is described by art critic Clair Wolf as, “an organic sexuality rendered in painted plaster. Like the ‘colorform’ idea, the color also assists in defining the shapes, which are sometimes used as a bas-relief protruding from the three-dimensional surface. Her color-sense is astounding, and one senses an almost spontaneous abandon in selection.” Clair Wolfe, “Los Angeles; Painted Sculpture,” *Artforum* 2, no. 11 (May 1964): 12. The sculpture is reproduced in Douglas McClellan, “Sculpture,” *Artforum* 2, no. 12 (Summer 1964): 73.

\(^{41}\) The advertisement was also printed on silver and slightly reflective paper of the same size as the brown paper version. While there are multiple copies of the brown paper advertisement in the Judy Chicago Papers at the Schlesinger Library, there is only one copy of the advertisement on silver paper (which was, most likely, more expensive to produce and thus, probably not as widely distributed).
paintings that dominated her thesis show, the promotional leaflet is modest in size and understated in its simplicity.

In the artist’s 1975 autobiography, she describes the biomorphic works in the MFA exhibition as reproducing recognizable “phalluses, vaginas, testicles, wombs, hearts, ovaries, and other body parts.”42 Birth was reminiscent of the title and subject matter of Jackson Pollock’s Birth of 1941 (fig. 4.21).43 Pollock’s painting consists of spiraling discs and crescent shapes suggestive of pelvic areas. It is composed with dark outlines and muted colors, and highlighted with small areas of bright oranges and reds. Gerowitz’s notably larger painting featured an abstracted, mechanized, and geometric interpretation of female anatomy. Bigamy, she later explained, “held a double vagina/heart form with a broken heart below and a frozen phallus above.”44 The subject matter of the painting, she later rationalized, “was the double death of my father and husband, and the phallus was stopped in flight and prevented from uniting with the vaginal form by an inert space.”45 Gerowitz’s father had passed away in 1953 when she was a child, and Jerry Gerowitz had died in a car accident in June 1963, one year before her thesis exhibition. The artist’s descriptions of the paintings position them as works that were intimately and singularly tied to her personal experience as a daughter and a widow.

The imagery and the discussion of the work in reference to personal experience has since been expanded, most extensively by art historian Gail Levin, who situates the paintings as growing “directly out of the emotional turmoil of a young widow who had lost her husband suddenly and violently.”46 Levin also examines the negative and uncomfortable reactions expressed by some of the artist’s male instructors, one of whom, Sam Amato, did not bring his

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42 Judy Chicago, Through the Flower (1975, reprint 2006), 33.
43 Gail Levin, Becoming Judy Chicago, 103.
44 Judy Chicago, Through the Flower (1975, reprint 2006), 33.
45 Judy Chicago, Through the Flower (1975, reprint 2006), 33.
46 Gail Levin, Becoming Judy Chicago, 102.
family to the show due to the content of the paintings. Levin’s biography of Judy Chicago situates the thesis exhibition within the historical context of the early 1960s, relating it to the rippling effects of the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique*, and the contemporary fear of the “twin dangers of women’s uncontrolled sexuality and atomic power.”

Nonetheless, consideration of Gerowitz’s work alongside that of those with whom she was in conversation reveals nuances beyond a strictly feminist reading. In late 1963, after her husband had died, Gerowitz began to spend an increasing amount of time at Barney’s Beanery in the company of artists including, but not limited to, Bengston, Kienholz, Kauffman, Goode, and Bell; by her own account, she began to pose as “one of the boys” by wearing boots and smoking cigars. Surrounded by artists who were exploiting the potential of advertising to accrue recognition, as well as exploring aspects of self-representation, pseudonyms, and alter egos, Gerowitz likewise began to investigate such undertakings.

The painted and sculpted biomorphic forms within Gerowitz’s June 1963 MFA exhibition were created in the wake of, and with an awareness of the controversy surrounding, Kauffman’s so-called hockey stick paintings that premiered at Ferus Gallery in December 1962, and were exhibited for a second time in June 1963. Like Gerowitz’s leaflet printed with simplified and anatomical forms, Kauffman’s 1962 exhibition was publicized by a poster (fig. 4.22) featuring abstracted male and female organs. Kauffman’s paintings such as *No. 8* of 1963 (fig. 4.23) are brightly colored and painted on the reverse side of plastic sheets. Each sheet is

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47 Gail Levin, *Becoming Judy Chicago*, 102: “Although these events took place in the early 1960s, her male instructors responded to a powerful residue from the 1950s, when the link between the twin dangers of women’s uncontrolled sexuality and atomic power became established and marked popular culture: from the use of *bombshell* as the slang term for a sexy woman to the abbreviated two-piece swimsuits, named after the Bikini atoll, where the bomb, dropped in 1946 just after the Second World War, was said to have been decorated with a photo of the Hollywood sex symbol Rita Hayworth.”


49 Craig Kauffman exhibited his vacuum formed, plastic works at Ferus Gallery in a solo exhibition in December 1962, which was followed by a group show in June 1963.
mounted within a shallow shadow box so that the painted forms appear to hover within the frame. The paintings consist of abstracted anatomical forms suggesting copulation. Kauffman situates the paintings as an exploration of gender identity that blends Fredericks of Hollywood newspaper advertisements with Duchamp’s *Large Glass*. While critics and artists alike praised Kauffman’s work for its use of new materials and its craftsmanship, they approached the subject matter cautiously. Constance Perkins’s review in the *Los Angeles Times* describes Kauffman’s sexually suggestive forms as “provocative.” James Monte’s review of the 1963 exhibition remarks on the racy subject matter of Kauffman’s work and the unease some viewers experienced when presented with explicit content. He speaks warily of the “attenuated and passively sexual imagery,” which he positions as a “surrealist handling of […] painted forms.”

Clair Wolfe’s 1965 *Artforum* article cautiously addresses the sexual content of the mounted “organic forms” and the self-consciousness they fostered in viewers. Kauffman’s work, like Gerowitz’s later exhibition, was publicized with simplified and organic forms derived from the displayed artworks, included paintings that suggested human and biomorphic shapes, and was met with some public distress.

When Gerowitz’s MFA thesis exhibition opened, she had spent a significant amount of time socializing and networking with the artists exhibiting at Ferus. By her own account, she knew of the instances of censorship, public scandal, and extensive press coverage that had occurred over the previous decade and resulted from displays of nudity and explicitly suggestive forms: the censorship of an assemblage by Maurice Syndell (made by Ed Kienholz) at the 1956

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52 James Monte, “Exhibition at Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles” *Artforum* 2, no. 8 (February 1964): 12.

All City Outdoor Art Festival, the arrest of Wallace Berman for exhibiting “lewd and lascivious pornographic art” at Ferus in 1957, the unsettling reactions to the exhibition of Kienholz’s installation Roxy’s—a recreation of a brothel with a sculptural prostitute that gyrated when a viewer pressed the foot pedal on the work—at Ferus in 1962, and viewers’ troubled responses to Kauffman’s 1962 and 1963 exhibitions.54

Thus, biomorphic and sexual imagery was displayed by an artist well-aware of the Los Angeles environment’s history of censorship. Such historical context complicates Judy Chicago’s statements within the 1975 autobiography that position the artworks of the MFA show within an intensely personal narrative and situate them as a significant stage within her progression toward a feminist practice. These complications (bordering on contradictions) are consistent with those incongruities that might emerge as an artist re-writes, and rearranges, her own history. A notable disclaimer, in fact, precedes Chicago’s retroactive interpretations of Birth and Bigamy: “I wasn’t always conscious of the meaning of these images.”55 While an artist’s interpretation of his or her own work might understandably evolve over time, such a provision, situated within Judy Chicago’s autobiography, takes on the character of a safeguard—denying culpability if the author’s statements are shown to be historically dubious.

In late 1963, Gerowitz visited Bengston’s studio for the first time:

I visited his studio which introduced me to the type of work space a ‘serious’ artist required (and that was my goal; to be taken seriously) […] and he gave me one of the most important pieces of advice I ever received. ‘Don’t pay attention to reviews,’ he said, ‘just count the number of pictures and the column inches’ […] mostly, Billy Al provided

54 Judy Chicago, interview by author, 23 July 2014, e-mail correspondence.
55 Judy Chicago, Through the Flower (1975, reprint 2006), 27.
me with a model of what a ‘real’ artist should be […] plus I went to the motorcycle races to see him ride and hung out with him […] at Barney’s Beanery.\textsuperscript{56}

Thus, the artist credits Bengston for focusing her attention on certain elements of publicity and characteristics requisite for a serious artist within the Los Angeles environment. Her scare quotes around the adjectives “serious” and “real” emphasize their multivalent use within her description. They stress her understanding of Bengston’s serious and skillful manipulation of irony and exaggeration, and his treatment of reality as a plastic material. Bengston, in turn, remembers Gerowitz as a force to be contended with in the early 1960s Los Angeles art world: “She wasn’t just \textit{in} the art scene, she \textit{was} an art scene.”\textsuperscript{57} Similarly, Ed Bereal describes her presence at Barney’s as “a character […] hilarious.”\textsuperscript{58}

Gerowitz’s colleagues—especially Kauffman, Bengston, and Bell—had admired, emulated, and expanded on Duchamp’s construction of various identities. Gerowitz, however, recast the modes for assembling an identity through \textit{their} examples rather than Duchamp’s multifarious exploration of authorship. She did not visit the Pasadena Art Museum’s Duchamp retrospective in 1963, and maintains, even today, that his work holds no interest for her: “I had and have no interest in Marcel Duchamp and did not see his retrospective.”\textsuperscript{59} Thus, what is at issue is a pedigree once removed and filtered through Gerowitz’s elder colleagues’ interpretation of Duchamp’s oeuvre, rather than a direct engagement with his manipulation of authorship and identity.

\textsuperscript{56} Judy Chicago, interview by author, 23 July 2014, e-mail correspondence.
\textsuperscript{57} Billy Al Bengston, interview by author, 26 April 2014, telephone. In the interview, Bengston—who frequently shifts vocal intonations for dramatic effect, stressed the italicized words to emphasize the point.
\textsuperscript{58} Ed Bereal to Gail Levin, 10 February 2006; quoted in Gail Levin, \textit{Becoming Judy Chicago}, 107, n. 35.
\textsuperscript{59} Judy Chicago, interview by author, 23 July 2014, e-mail correspondence. In the interview, Ms. Chicago vehemently expresses her former and continued dislike of Duchamp’s work, writing: “By the way, I saw Duchamp’s last installation at the Philadelphia Museum and I hated it […] I still have no interest in his work.”
Notwithstanding her disdain, Duchamp’s complex involvement with self-representation and portraiture achieved through an inventory of aliases, and the response of others to his practice, is a lineage writ large within Gerowitz’s exploration of self-portrayal. Where Duchamp crossed genders to become Rrose Sélavy and destabilized his image as a male artist, and likewise, authorship and authority, Gerowitz, in a sense, crossed genders to accrue authority and become a member of the Barney’s Beanery crowd. While her appearance and conduct may have implied that she was, indeed, one of the boys, she nonetheless occupied a more gender ambiguous position: she wore men’s clothes and smoked cigars, but she also had breasts which she did not tape down. Her engagement with drag involved emulating the costume and specific behaviors of her male counterparts—a self-portrayal that extended beyond the manipulation of image by Bengston and Bell. Drag is different from cross-dressing in that the drag artist does not aim to pass as the assumed identity, but rather relies on a camp factor to amplify gender conventions. Her staginess exaggerated such conventions and, in that way, called attention to the “artifice, exaggeration” and “stylization” of gender. Camp, a strategy likewise explored by Bengston, is characterized by an incongruity and delight in “things-being-what-they-are-not.”

Gerowitz’s overstated performance as one of the boys at Barney’s Beanery existed as an element within her development as much as it drew attention to the performative attributes of identity and paralleled the varying forms of self-representation characteristic of those artists with whom she was engaged.

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60 Cross-dressing and drag are structured around two principles: 1) gender and sexual identity are composed of opposites (male/female and heterosexual/homosexual), and 2) each category is inflexible. See Marjorie Garber’s definition of cross-dressing—which reaches beyond simplistic definitions of a man wearing women’s clothing (and vice versa), and instead addresses multiple types of boundary crossings: race, religion, class, and the like. Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992).


The manipulation of gender and authorship by Duchamp, and the crafting of self-images by Bengston, Ruscha, Goode, and Bell, were realized from a position of socially dictated gender authority (that of the white male), and from a position of access to the art world. However, for Gerowitz, the stakes were higher. Her entrance into the Los Angeles art scene, and by extension, her very emergence as a successful artist/author, was contingent—as she initially perceived it—on her acceptance into a macho crowd. Thus, her use of drag and camp could be understood as, paradoxically, both an indictment of a masculinist art world and a means of entering into it.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A REFLECTIVE AND MUTATING SURFACE AND SELF-REPRESENTATION: 1964

In October 1964, Gerowitz exhibited Car Hood (fig. 4.24) in a group exhibition at Rolf Nelson Gallery. The work was painted using an automotive spray gun and features precisely and brightly delineated geometric forms on the surface of an actual 1964 Chevrolet Corvair car hood. The hood’s symmetrical design comprises concentric circles radiating from the center and an ascending swath of bright red that expands upward. The vertical boundaries of the work are accentuated with green, circular shapes painted in columnar and modular forms and abutted with pyramidal endpoints. Hanging vertically, the undulating and immaculate surface of the three-dimensional object protrudes from the wall and warps the reflections of viewers within its highly polished and mirror-like surface.

Art critic Nancy Marmer’s review of the Rolf Nelson group exhibition emphasizes the visual contrasts established between the sleek and decorative surface of Car Hood and the crushed and rusted elements of two unidentified John Chamberlain sculptures: “Judith

Gerowitz’s painted car hood also eschews any connotations of motorized power in order to play

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63 Car Hood, under the shortened title Hood, was also displayed in the La Jolla Museum of Art exhibition, Some Aspects of California Painting and Sculpture, February 18-April 11, 1965. It was exhibited in the company of works by Tony de Lapis and Wayne Thiebaud.
with the decorative surface and erotic symbolism of the automobile. […] Miss Gerowitz skillfully works on the auto metals […] and plays off oranges against blues in an excess of world’s fair zeal.”\footnote{Nancy Marmer, “Los Angeles Reviews: Group Show, Rolf Nelson Gallery,” \textit{Artforum} 3 n. 2 (November 1964): 19. Marmer’s use of the phrase, “world’s fair zeal,” draws a comparison between Judy Gerowitz’s work and the colors and spectacle that surrounded the 1964 World’s Fair that opened in New York in April of that year.} By contrast to the technical knowhow and “world’s fair zeal” apparent in Gerowitz’s work, Marmer situates Chamberlain’s sculptures as “earthbound” and conquered: “[the] untreated, peeling, rustworn metals and aged grillework are assembled together […] Built-in memories of mechanical violence are domesticated.”\footnote{Nancy Marmer, “Los Angeles Reviews: Group Show, Rolf Nelson Gallery,” 19.} The review pits the sleek and sensual aspects of \textit{Car Hood} against the rough and corroded elements of Chamberlain’s work.

\textit{Car Hood} was the immediate result of Gerowitz’s interaction with John Chamberlain, as well as her participation in an eight-week summer auto body class in Los Angeles. As soon as Gerowitz’s thesis exhibition closed in June, the artist visited New York and spent time with Chamberlain, who was then constructing sculptures such as \textit{Miss Remember Ford} of 1964 (fig. 4.25). \textit{Miss Remember Ford} is shaped from the cut, crushed, and discarded fragments of metal gathered from automobiles and painted with an automotive spray gun—a technique Chamberlain had learned from Bengston in the summer of 1963. In addition to viewing several of Chamberlain’s works in progress, Gerowitz also became acquainted with the artist’s lifestyle, and, serendipitously, with an instance that underscored the particular authority that may be associated with a name. In a 1964 letter, Gerowitz describes the haphazard condition of Chamberlain’s car—whose bumper fell off after they drove three blocks—and how Chamberlain had gotten into a scene with police and spent the night in jail: “The cops were rather disconcerted by the hundreds of people who flocked to jail to get him out. When asked for his name, he kept
insisting he was Jackson Pollack [sic].” Chamberlain was not only working with material elements of the automobile, but also, recognizing the power invested in a name, blithely deploying a celebrity’s moniker to accrue attention and, in this case, to get out of jail.

Gerowitz returned to Los Angeles in the early summer, and in July, she casually began to go by the name “Judy Chicago” and enrolled in the auto body class. Rolf Nelson had begun to refer to the artist as Judy Chicago—a name suggested by Gerowitz’s Chicago accent—in late 1963/early 1964. Initially, Gerowitz had resisted the namesake. However, over the previous year, she had become increasingly engaged with artists manipulating artistic branding and public image. The benefits of a recognizable namesake in conjunction with one’s artistic practice were ever more apparent. Thus, while in an auto body course in the summer of 1964—a class in which she was the only female out of 250 students—she purposely adopted the name as an alternative nomenclature.

Her descriptions of the auto body class experience are replete with allusions to the odd and incongruent situations that resulted from the disproportionate gender ratio. She writes that it was “a pretty funny scene—the school. They made me wear a Mother Hubbard type smock—you know ‘Be a dyke & the world is yours’—gave me my own private bathroom (I was the only chick) there were a lot of hassles & bad scenes, but I learned a lot. The first day I was there (we went 8 wks) nobody swore. It was awful—I really had to watch my tongue.” Thus, the experience of the class was twofold. First, it encouraged the casual adoption of an early version

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66 Judy Gerowitz to Janice Johnson Lunetta, n.d., June 1964; quoted in Gail Levin, Becoming Judy Chicago, 111, n. 53.
67 Judy Chicago, interview by author, 23 July 2014, e-mail correspondence.
68 Judy Chicago, Through the Flower (1975, reprint 2006), 35-36; and Judy Chicago, interview by author, 23 July 2014, e-mail correspondence.
69 Judy Gerowitz to Janice Johnson Lunetta, n.d., June 1964; quoted in Gail Levin, Becoming Judy Chicago, 114, n. 77. Since Gerowitz’s observation regarding the lack of swearing is immediately preceded by examples of how her gender altered the class behavior, one may infer that her gender also, albeit temporarily, modified the syntax of communication.
of the alternative namesake that would emerge as the dominant image in the following decade. Second, within the class she learned a new way to fuse color and surface, gained the technical expertise requisite of car customizers, and acquired the tools to engage with the trend toward constructing artworks of both colored and reflective surfaces.

While the automotive material of Car Hood is tied to Gerowitz’s engagement with Chamberlain, the design and spray technique, and conscious acceptance of an alternative namesake is more closely aligned with the work of Bengston. Gerowitz’s composition was painted two years after the first public exhibition of Bengston’s sprayed and lacquered work at Ferus Gallery in May 1962. Comparable to Gerowitz’s Car Hood, Bengston’s exhibited paintings, such as Untitled of 1962 (fig. 4.26), were painted using an automotive spray gun and similarly feature concentric circles and a central geometric form. Yet, while the lines of Bengston’s compositions fluctuate between hard-edge and hazy, the lines of Gerowitz’s Car Hood are precise and crisp. Shortly after Car Hood was completed, Gerowitz penned a passage about Bengston: “God bless him—despite himself he taught me so much about being an artist—I had to get smashed one night in order to thank him.”

Bengston had not only established a particular paradigm for an artist in Los Angeles, but had also helped Gerowitz achieve the smooth and uninterrupted surface of her sprayed work. In the late summer of 1964 he advised her to soak herself and her working environment in water, and to use Vaseline to slick back her hair. This would prevent lint, dust, and other particles from

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70 Judy Gerowitz to Janice Johnson Lunetta, n.d., June 1964; quoted in Gail Levin, Becoming Judy Chicago, 120, n. 117. Gerowitz’s statement, “I had to get smashed one night in order to thank him,” alludes to the social politics that surrounded Bengston’s involvement in the Los Angeles art scene. He was (and is), to use Robert Irwin’s description, “very caustic and very opinionated, the king of one-liners, always zapping you at your most vulnerable point.” And Irwin continues, “Bengston was a major influence on me, that’s really true. I can say now that I absolutely dislike Bengston intensely—he’s one of the few people in the world whom I do have a real distaste for—so when I talk about his influence, it must be so.” Robert Irwin, interview by Lawrence Weschler, Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 44-45. Both Gerowitz and Irwin credit Bengston as a major influence in the progression of their artwork, and both stress that conceding such influence, due to their personal dislike of the artist, is quite difficult.
adhering to the surface of the sprayed works. While Bengston refers to feminism as “horseshit” and to Gerowitz as an artist who invaded his turf when she began to spray, he also concedes that she very successfully negotiated branding and publicity strategies to establish herself as a successful artist in profile-conscious Los Angeles. Although Gerowitz is not mentioned in Philip Leider’s June 1964 essay “The Cool School,” which includes no women and describes the emerging Los Angeles avant-garde as exuding personal confidence, jocularity, and utilizing forms of parody, she was circling the group and, much like her fellow artists, similarly engaging in a form of exaggerated public self-presentation. She was, as Bengston parses it, “a girl that acted like a boy.”

Writing retrospectively about Car Hood in her 1975 autobiography, the artist positions the work as an overt and conscious juxtaposition of male and female sexual symbolism: “The vaginal form, penetrated by a phallic arrow, was mounted on the ‘masculine’ hood of a car.” Cécile Whiting situates the abstracted imagery within Car Hood in relation to works by underground filmmaker Kenneth Anger and assemblagist Ed Kienholz—both of whom were similarly exploring the more carnal facets of Los Angeles car culture. Anger’s three-minute short film, Kustom Kar Kommandos of 1965 (fig. 4.27), features a teenage boy polishing—and caressing—a cherry-colored car with a gigantic white powder puff while the song “Dream Lover” plays in the background. Kienholz’s installation Back Seat Dodge ’38 of 1964 (fig. 4.28) shows two figures—a man formed out of chicken wire and a woman modeled in plaster—embracing in the back of a truncated vehicle and surrounded by discarded Olympia beer bottles.

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71 Billy Al Bengston, interview by author, 26 April 2014, telephone.
72 Billy Al Bengston, interview by author, 26 April 2014, telephone; and Gail Levin, Becoming Judy Chicago, 120.
73 Philip Leider, “The Cool School,” Artforum 2, no. 12 (June 1964): 47–52. In the article, Leider described The Cool School as a group exhibiting “a new distance between artist and work of art, between artist and viewer, achieved by jocularity, [and] parody.” Leider, 47.
74 Billy Al Bengston, interview by author, 26 April 2014, telephone.
75 Judy Chicago, Through the Flower (1975, reprint 2006), 36-37.
76 Cécile Whiting, Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s, 83-87.
Anger explicitly highlights the erotics of car culture through a campy representation of desire while Kienholz explores sordid realities through a grim social satire. Gerowitz’s *Car Hood* may have responded to the sensual aspects of car culture in Los Angeles, but it also participated in the separate but related push to pristine and reflective surfaces constructed in conjunction with tailored public identities. The hanging sculpture’s geometric forms, automobile and sprayed medium, and the artist’s machismo posturing and casual adoption of the guise of “Judy Chicago” situate it as also closely related to the work and strategies of those artists with whom she was in dialogue.

**PLAYING THE GAME, 1965**

Chicago recalls that, “by 1965 I was listing my name that way [as Judy Chicago] in the phone book as a sort of art world joke […] I knew that other artists were doing that, if you ‘knew’ what their underground names were you could find them. Otherwise you were out of luck.”\(^77\) While the nomenclature had first emerged as a nickname, by 1965 it had begun to exist as a published pseudonym. However, the genealogy of the namesake was constructed differently in 1970 when the artist claimed to have taken the name of her birth city because it worked against patrilineage; and, as she described it then, the new surname established her as an “independent woman.”\(^78\) Yet, despite listing her name as Judy Chicago in the phone book, she continued to exhibit and produce work under the name Judy Gerowitz.

In 1965 Gerowitz began to produce game boards with rearrangeable pieces, such as *Aluminum Rearrangeable Game Board* (fig. 4.29) and *Multicolor Rearrangeable Game Board* (fig. 4.30). *Aluminum* is composed of twelve white, sandblasted aluminum blocks of different shapes and sizes. The forms are variations on a rectangle and are placed—and played with—on a

\(^77\) Judy Chicago, interview by author, 23 July 2014, e-mail correspondence.

\(^78\) Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower* (1975, reprint 2006), 63.
monochromatic board. *Multicolor* comprises wooden blocks in three rectangular shapes. Each block is painted a solid bold color (similar to those of her 1963 paintings), and each color is reproduced on the multi-tonal and striped game board. The objects’ formal resemblance to children’s play blocks, together with the permission implicit in the title, encourages viewers to rearrange the rectangular game pieces. The artworks are accompanied by neither a set of rules nor an endgame goal; thus, they encourage an open-ended form of engagement. When played with, the blocks acquire scuffmarks and fingerprints on their polished surfaces. These early game boards have remained largely unacknowledged within the literature, and the artist has not publicly discussed them.

Gerowitz’s game boards were constructed immediately after Robert Morris’s December 1964 exhibition in New York’s Green Gallery (fig. 4.31). Seven sculptures were arranged throughout the gallery, with each structure being constructed from 2 x 4s and gray-painted plywood. The geometric forms had no extraneous elements and were devoid of surface inflection. The forms delineated the space in which they were located and, in so doing, obliged viewers to navigate around the objects while also calling attention to the physical and temporal relationship of the viewer to the space.\(^{79}\) Gerowitz, who did not attend the exhibition, instead learned of the work through photographic reproductions; specifically, a photograph of the exhibition is reproduced, in black and white, in Barbara Rose’s “Looking at American Sculpture,” published in the February 1965 issue of *Artforum* (fig. 4.32).\(^{80}\) From the photograph

\(^{79}\) It is noteworthy that Gerowitz’s game boards also formally relate to Anne Truitt’s work of the mid-1960s comprising brightly painted columns, as well as more horizontally situated forms. These works were first shown in an exhibition at André Emmerich Gallery in New York in 1963, and again, from February 24-March 15, 1965. The exhibitions of 1963 and 1965 are discussed in reviews in both *Arts Magazine* and *ARTnews*. The *ARTnews* review of 1963 includes a black and white reproduction of the exhibition installation, and the *ARTnews* review of 1965 includes a black and white reproduction of *Sea Garden* of 1964.

\(^{80}\) Barbara Rose, “Looking at American Sculpture: A series of important sculpture exhibitions in New York provide a needed view of recent developments,” *Artforum* 3, no. 5 (February 1965): 29-36. In 1965 *Artforum* was still operating out of offices located on the second floor of the building that housed Ferus Gallery (723 ½ North La
of the exhibition—which does not include a human figure for scale—it is difficult to determine the dimensions of the geometric blocks that populate the gallery space; although one can assume they are large due to their relationship to the gallery’s two windows shown in the back of the photograph, as well as the relative scale of the forms in relation to the gallery space.

While Morris’s installation had compelled the audience to move around the installed objects, Gerowitz’s game boards reverse the relationship between object and viewer. In an unused publicity photograph from 1968, Gerowitz is shown manipulating the blocks by balancing them on one another (fig. 4.33). \(^{81}\) The position of each block is contingent on the placement of the pieces to its left and right; and the objects’ own weight holds the forms together. The balanced nature of the arrangement infuses the work with a sense of playfulness and precariousness. One misplaced block could result in a visual tumbling of the low-lying structure and be accompanied by the slight auditory repercussions of the collapse—the sound of which would vary according to the material of the game board (wood or aluminum). This strategy of rescaling is one that mirrors that of an ironic undertaking, or as Simon Critchley phrases it, “satire is often a question of scale, of the familiar becoming infinitely small or grotesquely huge.” \(^{82}\) I suggest that Gerowitz’s works, in a way, realize Morris’s project on a smaller scale and also allow viewers to manipulate their component parts; and in reversing the

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81 The patterned arrangement of the blocks suggests Ronald Bladen’s *Untitled (Three Elements)* of 1965 that was installed in the Jewish Museum’s 1966 *Primary Structures* exhibition (in which Judy Gerowitz participated). The work comprises a large, three-part geometric sculpture of identical, acutely tilted elements that appear to be precariously balanced. Gerowitz’s work is also comparable to Robert Smithson’s ziggurat-like arrangements of tiered and geometric forms that he began to produce in 1966 and which were reproduced in *Artforum* as early as December 1966 in a illustrated half-page advertisement: Robert Smithson at Dwan Gallery New York, *Artforum* 5, no. 4 (December 1966): 5. While Gerowitz’s game boards precede these sculptural objects, the arrangement of the blocks on the game board may also be considered in reference to the larger, balanced constructions of Bladen and Smithson.

relationship, the works called attention to the size of Morris’s installation, and perhaps, surreptitiously intimate the scale of major works by other contemporary artists employing geometric forms (such as Ronald Bladen, Tony Smith, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Robert Irwin, and John McCracken).  

During this decade, Walter De Maria was also exploring participatory artworks in which the viewer manipulates, by hand, the component parts in a playful manner; for example, Ball Drop of 1961 (fig. 4.34), and Star, Cross, and Museum Piece (fig. 4.35). Ball Drop is a tall, columnar wooden structure with holes incised into the top and at a middle point—holes that are connected, internally, by a vertical channel hidden in the structure. Below the lower niche is a light, penciled inscription, “Place Ball in Hole Above;” following the instructions results in the ball falling from the upper niche and striking the base of the lower niche with a percussive sound that resonates within the hollow structure. Star, Cross, and Museum Piece are more intimately scaled, interactive sculptures made out of polished aluminum. Although conceived separately,

83 Mor ris has argued that viewers have a unique form of perceptual agency in relation to a minimalist object (such as his work): “The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic. It is in some way more reflexive because one’s awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships. One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context.” Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part II,” Ar tfor um 5, no. 2 (October 1966): 21. In other words, while the object renders the viewer complicit to the surrounding architecture and installed forms, it simultaneously increases the viewers’ awareness of their situated-ness—their presence—in relation to the object. See: Thierry De Duve, “Performance Here and Now: Minimal Art, a Plea for a New Genre of Theatre,” Open Letter 5-6 (Summer/Fall 1983): 255. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that in my discussion of scale, I am referring to the large and more canonical works composed by Minimalist artists, and I am fully aware that many of these individuals also constructed smaller sculptures (albeit, sculptures that often remain at the periphery of the art historical canon). For example: Tony Smith’s Untitled of 1956 (3 ¾ x 8 3/8 x 6 5/6”), John McCracken’s John of 1967 (8 ½ x 9 x 6 ¼“), Walter de Maria’s High Energy Bar and Certificate of 1966 (1 ½ x 14 x 1 ½”), and Dan Flavin’s Roses of 1962-66 (8 ½ x 5 ½”).

84 Walter De Maria’s work was also influenced by Zen philosophy and contemporary music. He was in San Francisco in the late 1950s when, according to him, “all the people in San Francisco were reading every book on Zen that came out” and in contact with John Cage who “was interested in all of the freer forms of modern music.” Walter De Maria, interview by Paul Cummings, 4 October 1972, Archives of American Art, Oral History Program, Washington, DC.

85 The symbolic associations of the shapes tend to overshadow a playful engagement with the work. It is also worth noting that in 1972, De Maria constructed Triangle, Circle, Square, which comprises the title’s three geometric forms. The participatory sculpture is made of brushed stainless steel and each form incorporates a moveable ball
they are often exhibited together. Their hollow interiors feature narrow channels that contain metal balls that evoke forms of game playing (such as Labyrinth by BRIO and Moses’ Cradle by Skor Mor). Although viewers are, today, restricted from interacting with these objects, one can imagine the friction of the ball against the metal structure, as well as the moment when it hits the side of the form, producing a metallic sound.

Much like Gerowitz’s work, De Maria’s compositions are tactile, visual, and auditory. De Maria, who had been based in San Francisco until 1960, when he moved to New York, was engaged with the visual rhetoric of rudimentary forms, yet his work, like Gerowitz’s, was designed to be handled by both himself and the potential participant. However, whereas De Maria’s works present restricted options for engagement—the placement of a ball into the upper niche, or the movement of a ball along a prescribed pathway—Gerowitz’s game boards are more open-ended. Her works, which are not accompanied by instructions, encourage forms of free play so that participants can, potentially, manipulate the blocks however they wish: stack them vertically or horizontally, shape them into a recognizable form, or simply drop the blocks onto the board and allow them to reside wherever they land.

The viewer’s autonomy in relation to Gerowitz’s artwork is the more evident by contrast with the rules and strategies that dictate audience engagement with Larry Bell’s Chairs in Space of the early 1980s. Mastery of two playbooks is a prerequisite for viewer engagement, and even then, one is only allowed to reposition the game pieces according to the chance roll of the dice. Gerowitz’s interactive artwork, by contrast, preserves viewer sovereignty by setting no limits and no endgame, and also maintaining the potential for improvisation and chance.

within the geometric shape. De Maria situates the composition, not as a form of play, but rather as inspired by the famous eighteenth-century Buddhist painting, Circle, Triangle and Square by Japanese Zen Monk Sengai Gibon.
When directly asked about the early game boards and their relationship to contemporaneous artworks, the artist acknowledged that the game boards are related to the trend towards a Minimalist aesthetic. “I saw exhibitions and was in an art world environment that influenced me […] towards a more minimal format.” However, despite the works’ engagement with an emerging Minimalist aesthetic, within her 1975 autobiography, the games are passingly mentioned in the context of Gerowitz’s relationship with fellow artist Lloyd Hamrol and situated as a visualization of various emotional hurdles: “When I made small, rearrangeable pieces […] I was trying to give my voice to my own feelings of ‘moving through’ and ‘out into’ an unfamiliar world, trying to gain control over my life.”

**ROLF NELSON GALLERY, 1966**

In January 1966 Gerowitz’s first solo exhibition opened at Rolf Nelson Gallery in Los Angeles. The exhibition included her large sculptural works from 1965: *Rainbow Pickett* (fig. 4.36-4.37), *Lilith (Trinity)* (fig. 4.38-4.39), *Sunset Squares* (fig. 4.40), and *Zig Zag* (fig. 4.41). Although all the works have since been destroyed, *Rainbow Pickett* and *Lilith (Trinity)* were remade in 2001. The colors of each unit of each of these works were matte and uniform (like the game boards), and the works were placed directly on the floor. The armature of each work was constructed from plywood and wrapped in canvas and spray-painted. Such a prolonged engagement with painting in three dimensions on canvas presents a notable contrast with

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86 Judy Chicago, interview by author, 23 July 2014, e-mail correspondence.
87 Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower* (1975, reprint 2006), 44.
88 It bears noting that Los Angeles-based assemblage artist George Herms, who was also associated with Rolf Nelson Gallery, worked under six pseudonyms: Paul Mistrie, Eric Hammerscoffer, Sid Escobar, Sigmund Fletcher, Iris Firewater, and Astropoet Moonstone. I expand on Herms’s engagement with pseudonyms in the conclusion of this dissertation.
89 Although all of the sculptures were destroyed, *Rainbow Pickett* and *Lilith (Trinity)* were remade in 2004 and have been exhibited at LewAllen Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and the Brooklyn Museum in New York.
Morris’s forms that were painted using rollers and constructed from plywood. However, Gerowitz’s continued attachment to spray-painting is comparable to the techniques of her colleagues such as Bengston, Kauffman, Bell (who used a vacuum chamber to cover his three dimensional cubes in delicate mists of color), and even Robert Irwin who began his series of three dimensional, Untitled sprayed discs in 1966.

Rainbow Pickett consisted of six trapezoidal beams that leaned from the floor to the wall at a 45-degree angle. Lilith (Trinity) was composed of three chevron-shaped forms painted the first three colors of the rainbow: red, orange, and yellow. Rainbow and Lilith both comprised multiple pieces arranged by graduated size. Although the individual components of each work did not touch, they interrelated visually in both dimension and color. Zig Zag, by contrast, consisted of a single unit and was installed in close proximity to Lilith—an arrangement that called attention to the formal angularity of both works. Sunset Squares was the largest of the sculptural works within the show. It was a rearrangeable environment consisting of four hollow squares—resembling frames—and ranging in size from three feet to over eight feet high. Each piece was painted a slightly varying shade of white that subtly separated the units by color, in addition to size. The objects were again placed directly on the floor; and the hollow, square forms paralleled the cubic exhibition space.

In his two reviews of the exhibition, critic Peter Plagens discusses the formal aspects of the works on display, but does so in gendered terms. He situates the installation as aesthetically aligned with new works being produced on the East Coast by Robert Morris and Donald Judd;

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90 Robert Morris has confirmed: “the paint was rolled on.” Robert Morris by way of Cece Rees of Castelli Gallery, interview by author, 9 May 2015, e-mail correspondence.
91 Rainbow Pickett was named after Wilson Pickett, a notable R&B, soul, and rock and roll singer and songwriter whose 1965 single, In the Midnight Hour, peaked at number one on the list of R&B singles of that year.
92 Plagens situates Rainbow Pickett as “a big, cheerful kind of painting […] installation—impeccable; fruity color […] if any single reason could be extracted for the piece’s lush way of abdicating sculptural form, it would have to be color.” Peter Plagens, “Judith Gerowitz, Rolf Nelson Gallery,” Artforum 4, no. 8 (April 1966): 14.
but, he describes the colors as “fruity,” and judges that the “strength” of the massive forms is undermined by the “little lumps, clefts and scuffs” apparent on their surface, ultimately concluding that they are too weak “to carry the burden of a hothouse classicism” and don’t “have the guts” of their New York counterparts.\(^9\) William Wilson’s review in the *Los Angeles Times*, by contrast, focuses on the sculptures’ functionality. In the aptly titled, “Viewers Part of Gerowitz Exhibit,” Wilson discusses how “Gerowitz’s constructions function like set pieces in a modern stage design. The actors—ourselves—are called upon to provide them scale and meaning. But at the same time their presence controls our movement and mood […] we feel ourselves passing through them […] as they] change from openness to constriction.”\(^9\)

The 1966 exhibition, which included multiple sculptures composed of open and closed spaces that shifted according the audience’s point of view, encouraged an intermingling of the spectator and the installation. Even Plagens, in his incredulous review, suggests that exhibition attendees should consider the works “from as many angles as possible.”\(^9\) As one moved through the space, the opaque constructions would open and close, revealing disjointed visions of the architectural space and fragmented views of fellow spectators sliced and rearranged by the objects. As both perceived and perceiving bodies, the viewers experienced the exhibition as a constantly shifting and segmented arena.

Like Morris’s Green Gallery installation, Gerowitz’s exhibition heightened a viewer’s awareness of the built space in terms of its dimensions, colors, and light.\(^9\) It also affected the audience members’ awareness of their own bodies circumnavigating the arrangements of geometric forms. Notably, Gerowitz’s exhibition opened the month prior to the publication of

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Morris’s “Notes on Sculpture, Part I.” That essay, alluding to phenomenology, argues that the new sculptural objects heighten viewer awareness at once of the work, the space, and the process of perceiving.⁹⁷ Although both artists’ exhibitions engaged with viewer perception, Morris’s exhibition comprised forms with few negative spaces (aside from a singular L-shaped form in the 1964 Green Gallery show), while Gerowitz’s objects mobilized the potential of negative space. Such segmentation encouraged one to see the body as strange, unfamiliar, and rearrangeable; and it was notably appropriate that Judy Gerowitz donned a rearranged tuxedo—from which the back was removed—for the exhibition opening.

After completing Rainbow Pickett in 1965, Gerowitz described the sculpture as a “canvas stretcher across a wooden frame—very warped space—very simple. My ideas are growing quickly now. I’m looking for a way to make sculpture as direct as a Frank Stella painting.”⁹⁸ Significantly, in January 1965, before she began working with both the small game boards and large sculpted canvas forms, Donald Judd’s “Specific Objects” was published in Arts Yearbook. There, Judd proposes that, “the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture.”⁹⁹ He specifically identifies Frank Stella’s work as paradigmatic of the new art in question: “Stella’s shaped paintings involve several important characteristics of three-dimensional work. The periphery of a piece and the lines inside correspond […] The shapes, the unity, projection, order and color are specific, aggressive and powerful.”¹⁰⁰ Judd’s descriptive assessment of emerging art trends and of Stella’s work is in line with the formal aspects of Gerowitz’s works exhibited at Rolf Nelson Gallery. Her large artworks were neither paintings nor sculptures, but were instead sculpted canvases that, like Stella’s work, unified form and color.

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⁹⁸ Judy Gerowitz to Janice Johnson and Louis Lunetta, 24 May 1965; quoted in Gail Levin, Becoming Judy Chicago, 121, n. 121.
and projected from the wall. In a sense, her works extended the stripes of Stella’s canvases into the viewer’s space and realized something analogous to his paintings in three dimensions. Her works functioned by engaging with the viewing public navigating the sightlines and space of the gallery, and also participated in the trend towards art suspended between sculpture and painting.

Yet, instead of an aggressive use of bright, often primary colors, as in the work of Judd, or the neutral gray within the work of Morris, her work was subtly spray painted with the pastel hues characteristic of her West Coast cohort—specifically Craig Kauffman, Joe Goode, and John McCracken. Soon after *Rainbow Pickett* premiered at Rolf Nelson, it was exhibited at the Jewish Museum’s 1966 exhibition *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors* in New York. As art historian James Meyer notes, “Gerowitz used a ‘Californian’ palette of pastel green, pink, lemon, and blue. Within the world of ‘Primary Structures,’ the bright hues favored by the Los Angeles contingent were an antidote to the sober tones of New Yorkers LeWitt, Morris, Smith, and Smithson.”

Thus, while Plagens had, contemporaneously, disparaged the coloring of *Rainbow Pickett* as “fruity,” these hues retrospectively became a signifier of a geographic identity when understood in contrast to East Coast contemporaries.

During the Rolf Nelson exhibition, Gerowitz commissioned Jerry McMillan to photograph her surrounded by the monumental and frame-like forms of *Sunset Squares*. Much like McMillan had snapped publicity photographs for Ruscha, Bengston, Goode, Bell, and others, and done so in a manner that connected their artistic practices to their public personae, so too did he capture a very specific image of Gerowitz. In the photographs, Gerowitz either leans against (fig. 4.42) or sits on top of (fig. 4.43-4.44) the squares and her body posture is analogous to the vertical pillars of the forms. Dressed in colors darker than the varying shades of off-white, her frame contrasts with the sculptural background. Wearing pants and a loose shirt and posing

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with her hair pulled back in a beanie cap, Chicago appears both confident and casual. Her self-presentation is that of someone who has momentarily stepped away from her artistic labor and who will return as soon as the photo session has come to a close. The gendered nature of heavy labor is also at issue within the photograph. The discrepancy in size between the artist and the enormous and rearrangeable geometry of the installation is stressed; it is implied that she both authored and installed the large works. Art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson discusses how bodily effort and labor (i.e. the use of heavy machinery, construction materials, and industrial procedures) was emphatically gendered with regard to Minimalism of the 1960s and 1970s.

While Gerowitz is shown in the company of her completed works, her image maintains the look of one temporarily interrupted, and the incongruity of size between the artist and the artworks tacitly suggests that Gerowitz possesses a large amount of bodily strength. This aspect of physicality would be expanded in McMillan’s 1970 photograph of the artist as Judy Chicago posing in a boxing ring.\(^{102}\)

**REARRANGING SCALE: ENVIRONMENTS OF 1966 AND 1967**

In 1966 and 1967 Gerowitz began a series of activities that expanded on the rearrangement and malleability implicit within the small, individual units of her earlier game boards and experienced by the viewing body in relation to the canvas-covered sculptures. Her collaborative and environmental works, such as *Feather Room* (fig. 4.45), were monumental in size and engaged in publicity and branding schemes that mimicked the tongue-in-cheek showmanship rife in the Los Angeles art scene. Simultaneously, she revisited the earlier game

\[^{102}\text{“Art making performed on an outsize scale using heavy industrial materials was understood as the domain of men. This association went beyond the sphere of art making, as blue-collar labor like construction and steel work was steeped in a rhetoric of masculinity. The construction worker, or ‘hard hat,’ was seen as paradigmatic of both the ‘working class’ and unbridled manliness.” Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 89.}^\]
boards and infused them with rarity and preciousness by, for example, covering individual pieces with gold plating.

A September 1966 article in the *Pasadena Star-News* reports: “A work of art, she [Gerowitz] feels, has most impact when it is miniature and makes a little world of its own—or is so vast in scale that it won’t comfortably fit into a man-sized world. Art that is comfortably scaled to man-sized proportions can be easily accommodated, ‘appreciated’—and ignored.” Gerowitz’s paraphrased statement was made the month prior to the publication of Robert Morris’s “Notes on Sculpture, Part II,” which argues that, in addition to a heightened awareness of the relationships among the object, the space, and the viewer, one more factor in the encounter with the new, literal objects is size. Gerowitz’s assertion addresses size as both a crucial element in the formulation of new artworks, but it also emphasizes the emphatically gendered nature of scale itself within the visual rhetoric of contemporary practice.

In August 1966, the “Rooms Company,” consisting of founding-member, Judy Gerowitz, as well as artists Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, and Roger Zimmerman, organized Feather Room at Rolf Nelson Gallery. The gallery was transformed into an immersive environment. White plastic was draped over the walls and the ceiling; and it curved and undulated according to the subtle air currents within the space. The floor of the gallery was heaped with 300 pounds of chicken feathers that were piled a foot thick. The air was filled with the strong odor of a chicken coop, contained and intensified by the insulating plastic. “You couldn’t stay in there for long,” said Hamrol, “it was just the aroma of hundreds of pounds of chicken feathers […] The smell factor.

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105 Lloyd Hamrol explains that the Company got the feathers “from a chicken plucker! There was a place in South Central. A guy used to pluck chickens for the bedding and pillow industry.” Lloyd Hamrol, interview by Glenn Phillips, 15 June 2010, retrieved from http://www.pomona.edu/museum/artists/lloyd-hamrol.html.
It was dynamic in there.”¹⁰⁶ While many visitors were reportedly repelled by the smell, those that stayed in the installation were able to crawl, throw, roll through, and sink into the mass of white feathers.

Ray Duncan, a journalist for the *Pasadena Star-News*, reported on the mission statement of the Rooms Company—“it makes rooms as a form of art”—and referred to Gerowitz’s artistic collaborators as “associates.”¹⁰⁷ The installation was credited as a production of the Rooms Company—a fictional corporation that transformed interior spaces into artworks. By designating the authorship of the collaborative work a Company, rather than a collective or a guild, the title linked their endeavor to corporate identity and commercial branding. The namesake was infused with a tongue-in-cheek pun that related installation practice to interior design. It suggested that art work (labor) in Los Angeles included publicizing an artist’s brand—or corporate identity—as much as making artworks; it also implied that art itself was just décor filling rooms.

The *Pasadena Star-News* reported on the popularity of the monumental environment, discussing that it “is being visited and recorded by television, and a French magazine has just sent its correspondent to discover what the fuss and feathers are all about.”¹⁰⁸ The work garnered wide exposure and simultaneously demonstrated Gerowitz’s aptitude at navigating marketing strategies and managing publicity—as it was she, the founder of the Rooms Company, who received much of the credit for the installation, despite its being a collaborative endeavor.

¹⁰⁶ Lloyd Hamrol, interview by Glenn Phillips, 15 June 2010. In the interview, Hamrol proceeded to laugh after describing the smell factor of Feather Room as “dynamic.”
¹⁰⁷ “It was just such a room, fashioned of curving white plastic walls and ceilings, and furnished only with chicken feathers a foot thick on the floor, that has caused a lot of talk in artistic circles lately about Judy and her associates in the Rooms Company.” Ray Duncan, “An Artist Feathers Her Nest,” 17. William Wilson also wrote a positive review: “Young L.A. vanguard artists Judy Gerowitz and Lloyd Hamrol have finally made something that this reporter can subscribe to wholeheartedly. They have filled the old Rolf Nelson Gallery with a room of their own making.” William Wilson, “Geometric Forms Float as a Cloud,” Los Angeles Times (29 August 1966): C14.
The single known photograph of the installation is an image of Judy Gerowitz dressed in a stylish coat, striking a dramatic pose, and standing within the teeming pile of feathers. As in earlier publicity photographs, she is shown in the vicinity of, and interacting with, the artwork. In the images from her January 1966 exhibition at Rolf Nelson Gallery, Gerowitz presents herself in masculinizing terms—wearing pants with her hair in a beanie and dressed as if she had only briefly paused from work. In this photograph, however, she displays a very different public image that positions her as fashionable and effeminate. The photograph associates her public image with something akin to the fashion spreads of Vogue or Vanity Fair, where women would appear wearing large, angular coats, and be theatrically posed within luxurious settings. Thus, the photo subtly suggests that one’s acts of self-representation may be all fluff and feathers. For Feather Room, the Rooms Company staged a situation that engaged with the contemporary trend toward large-scale installations. But the project also suggested that the construction of a public image was simply a matter of rearranging décor and dress. Ray Duncan began his report by proclaiming that “the fame of Judy Gerowitz of Pasadena rests in part on chicken feathers,” and Eric Orr remembers the project as “really silly.” While feathers within the pages of style magazines may have signified high fashion, in Feather Room, the rearranged décor amounted to the foul smelling feathers of fowl.

The following year, the associates of the Rooms Company, with the exclusion of Roger Zimmerman, installed Dry Ice Environment (fig. 4.46-4.48)—later re-named Disappearing Environments I and II because the work was ultimately realized in two parts. The installations utilized the properties of dry ice to transform the open plaza at Century City Mall in West Los Angeles. Beginning on December 1, 1967, the trio used 15 tons of dry ice to build low walls, 2

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ice-blocks high and rising to 22”. This labyrinthian construction stretched 110’ long and spanned an area 15’ wide. Over the following 24-hours, viewers were able to navigate the maze-like walls and walk within the icy mist that concealed their feet and ankles. In the press leading up to the opening, it was reported that the artists constructing the “disappearing sculpture […] refuse to divulge the secret to their magic.”\(^{110}\) The strategic use of publicity comprising three articles published in the *Los Angeles Times* was a clever gimmick that attracted attention to the project and infused it with a sense of anticipation and excitement.

In early January 1968, due in no small part to the enthusiastic public response to their first installation, the Rooms artists were “summoned back [by the city of Los Angeles] for a return engagement.”\(^{111}\) Using 20 tons of dry-ice blocks, the threesome built nine pyramid, or ziggurat-like structures, over the course of three days (fig. 4.49-4.50). By the time the final structure was built, the first had evaporated into a “jumble of tipsy marshmallow forms.”\(^ {112}\) Again, viewers playfully meandered amongst the smoking pylons of the constructions, and as their bodies wove in and out of the structures, participants were presented with views of one another rearranged and fractured by the smoke and slowly evaporating sculptural forms.\(^ {113}\) At dusk, the Rooms Company illuminated the fog and dry ice forms with pink road flares, essentially transforming the area into a colored and immersive environment.

An unnamed visitor to the installation explained the segmenting effect: “what makes it so weird is that you can’t see your feet through the vapor.”\(^ {114}\) The dry ice material of the project


created a mist that permeated the area and dissolved the line between the artwork and the environment; it categorically shifted focus away from the art object and towards the perception of space and the body within it. *Dry Ice Environments I* and *II* subtracted, fragmented, and rearranged portions of the participants’ bodies. By contrast, Robert Morris’s *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)* of 1965 (fig. 3.57) added and multiplied segments of viewers’ bodies. When the ziggurat forms were flooded with the pink hues of road flares, they assumed the look of the colorful, sprayed artworks closely associated with Los Angeles; the lighting transformed the recognizable, pastel aesthetic into a large scale environment. *Dry Ice Environment II* was the material and tonal opposite of Robert Smithson’s painted steel ziggurats, such as *Alogon #2* of 1966 (fig. 4.51), that, like the Rooms Company’s environment, deployed repeated, stepped pyramidal forms. Yet, unlike their New York counterparts, the Rooms Company’s environments were temporary rather than permanent; they were staged in an outdoor public space rather than an indoor private gallery; and the vapor of the dry ice seeped into and became part of the environment rather than maintaining the material edge that separated the object from the surrounding space. *Dry Ice Environment I* and *II* presented the open plaza at Century City Mall from a radically different perspective that aimed less to establish a theoretical premise for the production of new art (e.g. Morris) than to create a playful field wherein participants might realize unique, perceptual encounters.

Henry Seldis’s review in the *Los Angeles Times* places the work’s authorship with Gerowitz rather than crediting the endeavor as a collaborative undertaking by the Rooms Company. Seldis emphasizes that the Century City project exhibited Gerowitz’s “rejection of permanence as a valid artistic goal but also projected her conviction that ‘art if privately

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possessed somehow loses its power’. “Gerowitz, by contrast, contemporaneously emphasizes how “artists must aim to become the manipulators […] of technology.” Hamrol stresses that artists in Los Angeles “were all reading Artforum at the time,” and were interested in aspects of participation, e.g. Happenings. This led to the “impulse to go out and do stuff that disappeared. That’s how we [the Rooms Company] got into those dry ice environments in 1967.”

Recently, Gail Levin situated Dry Ice Environments as a project that grew from Gerowitz and Hamrol’s participation in Claes Oldenburg’s Happening, Autobodys (fig. 4.52), which took place on December 9-10, 1963, in the parking lot of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics in Los Angeles. The drive-in Happening featured an area surrounded by cars whose headlights illuminated the central area in which various actions were taking place. Gerowitz, Hamrol, and many others, donned white suits and participated in the actions within the central, lit-up space. Conversely, Donna Conwell and Glenn Phillips’s contribution to the Pacific Standard Time exhibition catalogue locates the dry ice works within the context of other Los Angeles artists engaging in the manipulation of light and space. The artworks are aesthetically aligned with Ed Moses’s 1969 exhibition at Riko Mizuno Gallery in which he removed parts of the gallery’s wall, ceiling, and roof to allow light into the space (fig. 4.53), and Mason Williams’s Sunflower in which an airplane drew a sunflower in the sky above the California desert northeast of Los Angeles (fig. 4.54). According to Conwell and Phillips, these and other works are located within the context of Light and Space art as “a symptom of the specific, unique environment in Los Angeles in which a confluence of technical, craft, and scientific industries

119 Gail Levin, Becoming Judy Chicago, 124.
made new materials available to artists at a time when they had access both to expansive definitions of art and to empty spaces in which to experiment—not only with plastics and light but also with fog, smoke, and vapors.”\textsuperscript{121}

Despite Gerowitz’s interest in merging art with the environment and creating situations that opened the space for unique perceptual discoveries, Gerowitz retrospectively reframed the *Dry Ice Environments I* and *II* from an autobiographical and personal perspective. In July 1970 (four months before her artistic practice was explicitly tied to an emerging feminist discourse), the artist ascribed to the environments a metaphorical significance that is derived from their transience: “The sculptures were a metaphor for the preciousness of life.”\textsuperscript{122} Although the works remain undiscussed in the 1975 autobiography, photographs of both installations are reproduced within the text, inaccurately dated to 1965.\textsuperscript{123}

As I see it, both *Feather Room* and *Dry Ice Environments I* and *II*, in addition to dissolving the space between the artwork and the environment, also engaged in a discrete and dryly humorous dialogue with the contemporaneous Environments and Happenings instigated by Claes Oldenburg and Allan Kaprow in both Los Angeles and New York. Environments integrate space and material, and call on the viewing public to intervene directly with the materials so that the Environment can undergo continuous development. Happenings assert the ephemeral nature of an event and intervene in spaces as temporary markers of place. Most Environments and Happenings are memorialized in documentary photographs that record their fleeting presence.

The Rooms Company and their environmental productions ironically gestured towards Claes Oldenburg’s *Bedroom Ensemble* of 1963 (fig. 4.55) constructed during his six-month Los


Angeles residency of that year and exhibited at Sidney Janis Gallery in New York in January 1964. The ensemble comprises a bed, chair, dresser, and nightstands which are shaped into a pronounced rhomboidal rather than rectangular form—resembling the sharply angled look of advertisements for home furnishings. The bed is wrapped in black-and-white vinyl; the dresser and nightstands are formed from cobalt-blue Formica; the headboard, throw pillows, and chair are covered in cheap velour mimicking zebra fur; the cylindrical lampshades are marbled; and cheap patterned fabric sold by the yard is framed and hung on the wall like a pseudo-Jackson Pollock painting.124 The environment, loosely based on the rooms of Las Tunas Isles, a Malibu hotel famous for its extravagant room décor, transforms soft furnishings into the hard, and signifiers of luxury into knock-offs that subsequently become the component parts of a valuable, environmental artwork. Both Bedroom Ensemble and the Rooms Company’s Feather Room fuse interior design with installation, and gesture towards the tension between the artificial and the actual in Los Angeles. However, while Oldenburg’s work was subcontracted to carpenters, upholsterers, and seamstresses, the Rooms Company physically installed their environment; and while Oldenburg designed a bedroom based on a corporate motel, the Rooms Company made it their company’s mission to construct spaces that resembled recent environmental artworks. The Rooms Company rearranged the titles of artist and company and, in that manner, engaged with the tensions of artistic labor as it related to environmental artworks.

In May 1961, Kaprow created Yard (fig. 4.56) by filling the sculpture garden of Martha Jackson Gallery in New York with hundreds of used tires that smelled of old rubber and tar. Within the heap of tires, five vertical, tar paper forms rose from the tire-filled space. The tar paper pillars were an unintentional detail that became part of the work—the Gallery’s sculpture

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124 Sidney Janis, a wealthy clothing manufacturer, opened his eponymous Gallery in 1948 and exhibited the work of Abstract Expressionist painters Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline.
collection couldn’t be moved for the installation of Kaprow’s *Yard*, so Kaprow covered the artworks in tar paper to prevent damage and incorporate them into the Environment.\(^{125}\) Visitors were encouraged to walk, jump, and crawl on the tires, and throw them around as they pleased. In January 1966, Kaprow published *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings*—just seven months before the Rooms Company installed *Feather Room*.\(^{126}\) The book made available hundreds of documentary photographs that recorded various Environments and Happenings, and the reproduced images underscored the bodily labor of the events and the participants’ movements within each work.

Much like *Yard, Feather Room* filled a gallery space with detritus and also filled one’s nostrils with a particular scent; and just as Kaprow had wrapped tar paper around the sculptures at Martha Jackson Gallery to protect them from damage and incorporate the forms into the Environment, so too did the Rooms Company cover the walls of Rolf Nelson with plastic sheeting to both protect them from damage and incorporate the architecture into the Environment. Both Environments encouraged participants to walk through, and concurrently sink into, the debris; and both urged people to manipulate the materials constituting the installations. However, in contrast to Kaprow’s tires, which were fairly heavy, bulky and

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\(^{125}\) Allan Kaprow had previously used tar paper in *Apple Shrine* of 1960—an Environment installed in the Judson Memorial Church’s art gallery which was realized as a labyrinth of narrow passageways created from materials including chicken wire, cardboard, tar paper, straw, and crumpled newspaper. He also incorporated tar paper in later Happenings: the script for *Chicken* of November 1962 calls for a man to demolish a tar paper chicken; the script for *Orange* of March 1964 explains that participants could, among many other actions, enter into a room covered with tar paper and lit with a single weak bulb; the script for *Self-Service* of June-September 1966, explains that tar paper should be wrapped around cars.

difficult to reposition, the feathers deployed by the Rooms Company were light, hardly containable, and fun. The feathers encouraged an increased sense of participation in that the work was accessible to individuals of many sizes, ages, and builds. Those with lesser upper body strength could easily manipulate mounds of feathers, and one did not risk a twisted ankle while wading through the down, as one might when moving from tire to tire. While Kaprow maintained artistic authorship over Yard, the ascription of Feather Room to the Rooms Company called attention to the nature of contemporary, environmental, and installation art practice as group work and an extension of interior design. Just as Kaprow had patented the terms Environments and Happenings with the 1966 publication, so too did the associates of the Rooms Company corporatize their endeavor by establishing a Company with named associates which, simultaneously, implied a group-based endeavor.

Branding as an artistic strategy was a common practice in the Los Angeles art scene of the era. Hopps, Kauffman, and Bartosh had established Syndell Studio; Bengston had founded the Artist Studio (which built on the earlier word plays inherent in Syndell); Ruscha self-published his books under the title Heavy Industry Publications (a business name that ironically alluded to the kind of labor not involved in book production). In much the same vein, the Rooms Company associated its artistic practice with both a corporate endeavor and interior decoration. When asked directly about the derivation of the Company’s title and the collaborative projects the artists pursued, Judy Chicago skirted the question: “I was interested in collaboration early on […] but I kept encountering their [male] ego-driven resistance which eventually stimulated me to move away from the male-dominated art scene.”127 Her reply maintains the narrative of her artistic progression toward a feminist artistic practice, but it does so at the expense of omitting,

127 Judy Chicago, interview by author, 23 July 2014, e-mail correspondence.
or perhaps even attempting to erase, those elements that do not comfortably fit within her constructed history.

*Dry Ice Environments* also expanded on and problematized a recent Happening instigated by Kaprow in Los Angeles in September 1967 (three months prior to the Rooms Company’s ice work). In conjunction with his fall 1967 retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum, Kaprow initiated the Happening *Fluids* (fig. 4.57-4.58): “During three days, about twenty rectangular enclosures of ice blocks (measuring about 30 feet long, 10 feet wide and 8 high) are built throughout the city. Their walls are unbroken. They are left to melt.”¹²⁸ The ice constructions were installed in the empty spaces of Los Angeles—in vacant parking lots, beneath freeways, and in unoccupied parcels of land—on the margins of the city’s car culture.¹²⁹ Documentary photographs reproduce the construction process of the various ice structures and the resulting romantic ruination of their demise. Images capture a shirtless Kaprow hauling heavy (50 lb) blocks of ice under the bright California sun (fig. 4.59), and the pools of muddy water that result from the mixture of melting ice and dirt.

By contrast, the associates of the Rooms Company restricted the *Dry Ice Environments* to the plaza at Century City Mall—a new, pristine commercial complex and an increasingly popular pedestrian site. *Dry Ice Environments* was sited at a location with heavy foot traffic and positioned to be both visible and participatory in the sense that people would encounter it and

¹²⁹ Art Historian Philip Ursprung proposes that the ice structures mimic and critique the planned obsolescence and cheap architecture that characterizes the built environment of Los Angeles. “The structure of *Fluids* obviously mimics the architecture of the museum […] The title *Fluids*, however, suggests that something is being represented in sharp contrast to the ‘timeless stability’ which one expects from such an institution.” And he continues to relate *Fluids* to the storage units and commercial distribution centers that populate the Los Angeles landscape, “such purely functional and ephemeral buildings follow the economic criteria of ‘planned obsolescence.’ Made of cheap materials and leased out under short-term rental contracts, the buildings provide maximum profit for the landowner and are doomed to be replaced after only a couple of years.” Philip Ursprung, “Monuments on the Move: Allan Kaprow’s *Fluids* (1967) and the Urban Landscape of Los Angeles,” in *Paisagem e Arte*, ed Heliana Angotti Salgueiro (São Paulo: I Coloquio Internacional de Historia da Arte, 2000), 178 and 179.
walk around and through the structure (but not touch it). While documentation of the labor involved in Fluids highlights the manual effort involved in its construction, Gerowitz, Hamrol, and Orr (along with two assistants) installed Dry Ice Environments dressed in white, sanitary, hazmat-gear that completely covered their bodies (fig. 4.60-4.62). Their labor, in contrast to that of Kaprow and his assistants, is presented as precise, clean, and scientific. Although the forms of both installations alluded to built structures, the rectangular form of Fluids was closed-off so that viewers could not enter the edifice. Both iterations of Dry Ice Environments, by contrast, could be penetrated, engaged with, and navigated—participants were encouraged to walk among the smoking pylons of the Environment. Whereas the deterioration of Fluids resulted in a mess that deterred up-close viewing, the slow decay of Dry Ice Environments gave way to a white, opaque mist through which participants were encouraged to wander, and which left no residue. The associates of the Rooms Company not only constructed an all-white mini-village that rearranged the sterile-looking space of Century City, they also created a work that encouraged a form of participation while simultaneously rearranging and segmenting the views of bodies moving within and through the ensuing mist and maze-like geometric structures. The Company’s ice environments amounted to a sanitized version of Kaprow’s recent ice structures, and were also more participatory. While Fluids represented the institutionalization of Environments and Happenings, in that it formed part of a museum retrospective of Kaprow’s work, the Company’s installation of Dry Ice Environments ironically capitalized on this recent institutionalization by placing an installation within the new corporate headquarters of Los Angeles—Century City.

Although it is difficult to determine, precisely, who contributed what to the deployment of the Rooms Company’s projects, Gerowitz received significantly more credit than her collaborators due to her supposed founding of the Company and, one might say, skill at securing
media attention. While news articles by Duncan and Wilson speak to the collaborative nature of the Environments, they nonetheless feature Gerowitz more than her associates. Retrospective accounts such as the Getty’s *Pacific Standard Time* catalogue, as well as *Catalog L.A.: Birth of an Art Capital, 1955-1985* similarly place Gerowitz as the principal author of the collaborative works; and she is credited extensively within monographic examinations of her work, including Levin’s *Becoming Judy Chicago* and art critic Saul Ostrow’s contribution the 2013 exhibition catalogue *Judy Chicago: Deflowered.*

It is impossible to verify exactly the level of Gerowitz’s contemporaneous involvement and authorship—at the expense of her collaborators—but it bears acknowledging that her augmented recognition may also be the result of her accrued public celebrity relative to that of her collaborators in the ensuing years.

**REARRANGING VALUE: THE PLAYTHINGS OF 1966 AND 1967**

Concurrent with her involvement in the Rooms Company, Gerowitz revisited the small game boards. *Cubes and Cylinders* (fig. 4.63) and *1 Set Gerowitz Rare Wood Blocks* (fig. 4.64), both of 1967, are rearrangeable, multi-piece works that can be placed, and played with, on any surface—mimicking the form and function of children’s playing blocks. Other interactive works incorporate a mirrored game board, such as *Gold Plated Game* (fig. 4.65) and *Acrylic Shapes* (fig. 4.66), also of 1967. In 1965, the artist wrote to her friends Janice Johnson and Louis Lunetta, “I’m finished with the kind of surface & craft preoccupation of the Ferus boys. It’s a

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131 I use the word “playthings” to describe those of Judy Gerowitz’s artworks that comprise multiple parts and are designed to be participatory—handled and rearranged by viewers in a manner they see fit. The objects are not games because a game implies a set of rules. The artist does not discuss these works in interviews, and they are only mentioned in passing in her autobiography as “small, rearrangeable pieces.” Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower* (1975; reprint 2006), 43-44.
dead end that leads to preciousness, & they’re really fucked up by it.”

The crudely phrased comment alludes to an increased interest in surface finish contemporaneously being explored by Bengston, Bell, and Kauffman, as well as John McCracken, Peter Alexander, Robert Irwin, and others. Gerowitz suggests that their fixation on surface perfection was more destructive than beneficial because such fanaticism was a regional interest, nurtured mostly in Los Angeles and with little consideration for the larger art world (i.e. New York).

*Cubes and Cylinders* and *Rare Wood Blocks* are both playthings without an artist-designed play board; they can be arranged and rearranged on any surface and at any location. *Cubes and Cylinders* comprises twenty-four, gold-plated steel pieces: twelve identical cubes and twelve identical cylinders. Originally called *Untitled Participation Sculpture*, the work was renamed *Cubes and Cylinders* in 2007 at the artist’s request. The individual play pieces are approximately 1 1/2” square, which was the general size of children’s playing blocks in mid-century (but such dimensions are smaller than blocks produced for children today—which are 2” square or larger). Their surface is a brilliant, gold sheen that retains the residue of players’ fingerprints while returning to the viewer a mirrored image of his or her face and, if one is holding a block, of one’s fingers. *1 Set Gerowitz Rare Wood Blocks* comprises twelve Indian rosewood blocks cut into multiple and varying geometric shapes including both symmetrical and non-symmetrical triangles, parallelograms, and rectangles. The wooden pieces are stored in a yellow canvas bag that is screen printed with the title—a format that establishes Gerowitz as a brand name, and gives her a trademark. Included with the artwork is a label of typed instructions that outline information regarding the object’s care, as well as its medium and the parameters for

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133 Beth Bahls and Alexandra Purcell, University of Michigan Museum of Art, interview by author, 6 August 2014, e-mail correspondence.
storage: “These blocks are made of Indian Rosewood wood. To enhance their beauty, they may be polished with clear Trewax. For easy packing, place square blocks in corners first.” The pieces of *Cubes and Cylinders* and *Rare Wood Blocks* can be arranged both vertically and horizontally, are easily transported, and are participatory.\(^{134}\)

*Gold Plated Game* and *Acrylic Shapes* are rearrangeable playthings consisting of repeated, vertical forms that can be moved around a mirrored game board. Although, to protect the artwork, the average art viewer is not allowed to handle the objects, potential buyers, art critics, and curators are encouraged to carefully engage with the small objects on a tactile level.\(^{135}\) *Gold Plated Game* is an arrangement of seven gold-plated cylinders of varying heights on a 12 x 12” mirrored surface. The rod-shaped pieces return a distorted reflection of the viewer and the surrounding environment. Simultaneously, multiple reflections are captured within the mirrored game board. Viewers can observe their reflections on the game board interrupted and segmented by the play pieces. Concurrently, the distorted reflections of the cylindrical forms are also reproduced within the mirrored game board—this produces a reflection that is twice removed and distorted. *Acrylic Shapes* expands the visual distortion to incorporate aspects of transparency. Within the composition, thirteen clear, acrylic forms of varying heights and shapes can be rearranged on a 24 x 24” mirror. Not only do the tubular forms incorporate an image of the viewer and re-reflect the surrounding environment within the mirrored board, they also allow a viewer—or player—to see through and beyond the translucent forms. Although the component pieces of *Gold Plated Game* and *Acrylic Shapes* can be rearranged on a horizontal plane, they also incorporate vertical play by way of their upright and reflective elements. The playthings

\(^{134}\) According to the artist, *Rare Wood Blocks* was produced as an edition of twelve; the edition number of *Cubes and Cylinders* is unknown. Judy Chicago, interview by author, 23 July 2014, e-mail correspondence.

\(^{135}\) Judy Chicago and Katie Schroeder (curatorial assistant to Judy Chicago), interview by author, 2 February 2015, e-mail correspondence.
encourage viewer participation while simultaneously incorporating aspects of the participant’s reflected body within the work.

Much as Larry Bell’s vacuum-coated and Plexiglas cubes of the 1960s incorporate the reflection of the viewer within the work, so too did the participatory objects constructed by Gerowitz. The playthings are displayed on pedestals that raise the works to a height that encourages tactile engagement as well as mirroring a disjointed reflection of the viewer’s face and body. Since the individual pieces consist of reflective materials placed at various angles, viewers are able to see their reflections broken up into segments—as in *Cubes and Cylinders*—or distorted on the rounded surfaces—as in *Acrylic Shapes*. However, by allowing viewers—albeit only a select group—to rearrange the units of each composition, the works suggest that the players are able to rearrange their own visages. This shifts a degree of agency from the manipulation of the viewer’s reflection by exhibited works to the manipulation of the viewer’s reflection according to his or her arrangement of the play pieces. The process of moving the individual play pieces could become the process of rearranging the reflection of the player.

Gerowitz, a participant within an art scene rife with mirror-like artworks distorting the image of the viewer, here places the viewer in a position to arrange those distorting devices as they see fit.

Yet, infused within the works is also a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the preciousness, or the “hands off” nature, of Finish Fetish objects. Fingerprints are highly visible on the surface of Bell’s glass constructions, as well as on DeWain Valentine’s polished discs, John McCracken’s sprayed planks, and Billy Al Bengston’s lacquer-coated paintings. The touching of those works by errant viewers, and the subsequent cleaning of the objects, is an exercise in

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136 Judy Chicago and Katie Schroeder (curatorial assistant to Judy Chicago), interview by author, 2 February 2015, e-mail correspondence. While the works were and, to the best of Judy Chicago’s knowledge, still are displayed on pedestals, the artist did not outline a precise pedestal height. Therefore the exhibiting institution determines the exact elevation of their display.
removing the accidental and the unexpected. Gerowitz’s artworks, by contrast, incorporate this process into the life of the work. Select participants are encouraged to handle the objects, thus countering the rules generally governing Finish Fetish sculptures. As directed by the artist, a cleaning to remove the evidence of participation and maintain the pristine surfaces follows the handling of the work. This creates a circuitous performance of repeated handling and cleaning—which is, according to the artist, done by a “gallery assistant or conservator,” depending on the exhibition venue.137

Gerowitz’s playthings were included in numerous exhibitions in the later 1960s.138 William Wilson, in his Los Angeles Times review of the 1968 group exhibition, Transparency/Reflection, which included Bengston, Bell, McCracken, and Gerowitz, notes that Gerowitz’s participatory compositions are “nominally formal and minimal but her tray of tubular plastic objects becomes funny and expressive as we slowly understand the human inspiration behind their icy purity.”139 Wilson reads the work as having a phallic innuendo—an interpretation that has since harmonized well with the feminist narrative into which they have been retroactively placed.140 However, beyond Wilson’s review, the playthings have remained largely unacknowledged within both exhibition reviews and art historical literature. Acrylic Shapes, initially designed to be participatory and rearrangeable, has since been situated as an

137 Judy Chicago and Katie Schroeder (curatorial assistant to Judy Chicago), interview by author, 2 February 2015, e-mail correspondence. The subject of cleaning would play a large role in feminist artistic practices in the 1970s, specifically Mierle Ukeles’s maintenance art projects such as the four actions she performed in 1973 at the Wadsworth Atheneum that both playfully and seriously explored the rigidity of professional boundaries and maintenance within the museum institution. See: Helen Molesworth, “House Work and Art Work,” October 92 (Spring 2000): 71-97.
138 Selections of the playthings were shown at: Transparency/Reflection (1968), a group exhibition at California State College, Fullerton; Plastic Paintings and Sculptures from Los Angeles (1968), a group exhibition at California State College, Los Angeles; Chicago in L.A.: Judy Chicago’s Early Work, 1963-1974 (2014), a solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. The games were also reproduced within the survey text, Julia Busch, A Decade of Sculpture: The Sixties (Philadelphia, PA: Art Alliance Press, 1974).
140 William Wilson, “Aspects of Modernity in Orange County Shows,” 52.
immovable sculpture that rests on a mirrored surface. In her autobiography published nearly a
decade later, the artist reframes the works of this period as reflecting her personal struggles:

The hard materials (plastics and metals), perfect finishes, and minimal forms in my work
of 1966 and 1967 were ‘containers’ for my hidden feelings, which flashed in the polished
surfaces, shone in the light reflections, and disappeared in the mirrored bases. I had
entirely stopped painting by 1965 and was making sculpture. My pieces were either very
small and rearrangeable, which made the viewer huge in relation to them, or were large,
simple pieces that one walked through and was dwarfed by. This duality paralleled my
own experience: in my studio, I was large and able to manipulate my own circumstances;
in the world, I was small and could get lost in values and attitudes that were hostile and
foreign to me. The small, rearrangeable pieces had another dimension that was directly
related to the struggles Lloyd and I were going through in trying to be independent while
still maintaining a close relationship.\textsuperscript{141}

I suggest, by contrast, that the playthings also entail a form of interaction related to the
contemporaneous Los Angeles environment. The works incorporate a reflected and distorted
image of the viewer. They also assimilate the qualities of preciousness and craft that were
intrinsic to 1960s Finish Fetish artistic practice. As potential viewers and players engage with the
participatory artworks, they are simultaneously rearranging their own reflections within the gold-
plated or acrylic objects. These multi-part works, and specifically, \textit{Cubes and Cylinders} and
\textit{Acrylic Shapes}—both exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum’s 2014 Judy Chicago exhibition—are
now shown behind a Plexiglas barrier due to the small, delicate, and valuable nature of the
artwork. This mode of display interferes with the artist’s participatory intentions for the work,

\textsuperscript{141} Judy Chicago, \textit{Through the Flower} (1975; reprint 2006), 43-44.
even if this participation was always somewhat partial in order to ensure the safety and longevity of the playthings.

The photograph of prominent Los Angeles art collector Betty Asher, published in conjunction with the 1969 article, “Patrons of Pop,” shows the distinguished patron surrounded by her collection (fig. 4.67).\(^{142}\) Behind her is the painting *Annie* (1962) by Ed Ruscha, and on the table in front of her are the sculptures *Pink Eraser* (1967) and *Pencil* (1966) by Vija Celmins. However, in Asher’s hands is her edition of the rosewood blocks of *1 Set Gerowitz Rare Wood Blocks*.\(^{143}\) While the artworks of Ruscha and Celmins simply hang on the wall or rest on the table, Asher is shown playing with, touching, and rearranging the wooden blocks. The text accompanying the photograph reads, “Mrs. Asher holds a re-arrangable [sic] work by Judy Gerowitz.”\(^{144}\)

While the wooden blocks formally differ from the shiny surfaces of the gold-plated and acrylic playthings, the artwork nonetheless invokes qualities of rarity and preciousness, as well as self-branding and marketing, that the artist was contemporaneously exploring. *1 Set Gerowitz Rare Wood Blocks* was produced as an edition of twelve. It uses a limited-edition strategy by restricting the number of works; due to their relative scarcity, the objects maintain value. At the same time, the blocks are available to more than one collector and thus have the potential to be more widely distributed and visible than a single work of art. The bag displays Gerowitz’s name as a trademark printed on the exterior of the case—which doubles as a consumer package—and her label is printed directly above the word “rare.” The blocks deploy what is commonly referred to as a celebrity marketing technique. They promote the artwork as a brand-name product by


\(^{143}\) Judy Chicago explained, by way of her curatorial assistant, Katie Schroeder, that “if you bought the work could you [sic, you could] move the pieces around [at will].” Judy Chicago and Katie Schroeder (curatorial assistant to Judy Chicago), interview by author, 2 February 2015, e-mail correspondence.

\(^{144}\) William Wilson, “Patrons of Pop,” A23.
linking it with a celebrity whose name adorns the label. In this way, then, Gerowitz overtly replaces the artist’s signature—a signifier of authenticity and originality—with an artist-brand and problematizes the distinction between the two. *1 Set Gerowitz Rare Wood Blocks* is an artwork that is also a limited-edition product, and it bears the artist’s name, which also operates as printed trademark. The “dead end,” as Gerowitz phrases it, of her colleagues’ preoccupation with surface perfection is directly, and ironically, confronted through playthings that manipulate aspects of viewer agency, reflection, and rearrangement while also meditating on the ambiguous differences between requisite artistic self-promotion and overt consumer branding.

**COLOR SYSTEMS, 1968-1969**

From April 28 through June 1, 1969, Gerowitz exhibited thirty sets of *Domes* at the Pasadena Art Museum. The works comprise clusters of three hemispheres that range in color from opalescent whites (fig. 4.68), to bronze, to multicolored hemispheres (fig. 4.69). Although each cluster is in principle rearrangeable, the artist nonetheless organizes the individual settings into triangular arrangements. \(^{145}\) Each group of acrylic domes is either set on a table topped with mirrored glass, or placed on top of transparent Plexiglas shadow boxes. The acrylic domes are formed from vacuum molded plastic and spray-painted on the reverse side. While each dome appears as a singular entity, the form in fact comprises three progressively larger hemispheres stacked over one another. \(^{146}\) The multiple layers of domes are encased with an acrylic bottom to which each layer is affixed. This transforms the nesting and stacked domes into a singular object. The final forms range in size from the larger 5 x 10” hemispheres to the smaller 2 x 5” shapes.

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\(^{145}\) Judy Gerowitz’s accompanying instructions dictate that the viewer could alter the arrangement of the domes on the exhibiting surface.

\(^{146}\) “I had domes blown in an industrial process in progressive sizes then laid one over another after spraying them with color which was on different layers in differing orders.” Judy Chicago, quoted in Saul Ostrow, “Flashbacks 1963-1971: Re-Visioning Judy Chicago,” in *Judy Chicago: Deflowered*, ed. Katherine Chan (Los Angeles, CA: Nye + Brown, 2012), 33, n. 2.
Accompanying the exhibition was a folio-formatted catalogue consisting of a single sheet of thick paper folded in half. The catalogue features the name “Judy Gerowitz” in stenciled lettering on its front flap and the interior is divided into a grid that is filled with hand-written text, diagrams, and photographic reproductions of the plastic domes (fig. 4.70-4.71). Sections of the interior grid are titled, “Notes on Color,” “Notes on Technique,” and “Notes on Catalogue,” and are followed by the artist’s longhand script explaining the color system she followed when spraying the domes, the techniques and materials used in their construction (spray gun, airbrush, automotive wax), as well as a discussion of the diagrams within the catalogue itself.

Reviews of the exhibition were generally positive. William Wilson’s review notes the artworks’ color “blushes with [the] ample hedonism” so characteristic of Los Angeles art and also discusses how the catalogue’s text “uses words like ‘systems’, tries to be detached, scientific.” Peter Selz discusses Gerowitz’s objects as they exist in the larger field of emerging conceptual art practice: “It is now often the idea that matters more than the object produced. New materials and media, new technology, are no longer ends in themselves but are used by most creative talents as means to reshape the environment and influence human responses. […] Gerowitz’s new stable objects, a group of medium-size tripled plastic domes […] appear reductive and systematic.”

The Domes participated in an emergent trend toward systematic modes of investigation. In the summer 1967 issue of Artforum, Sol LeWitt published “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” arguing that, “in conceptual art, the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work […] decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a

machine that makes the art.”

LeWitt’s “35 Sentences on Conceptual Art” followed in May 1969 in *Art and Language*; the article further clarifies the artist’s thinking by explaining that after “the idea of the piece is established in the artist’s mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly […] the process is mechanical and should not be tampered with.”

Furthermore, Mel Bochner’s “The Serial Attitude,” published in the December 1967 issue of *Artforum*, investigates seriality in contemporary art by first listing artworks that exemplify the notion, before proceeding to examine the trend towards systems and their resulting visual components.

These critical essays were received on the West Coast with a sense of irony. Perhaps the best known of such responses is John Baldessari’s parody of the esoteric nature of academic language and conceptual art. For *Baldessari Sings LeWitt* of 1972 (fig. 4.72) the artist filmed himself singing LeWitt’s *Sentences* to the popular tunes of “Camptown Races” and “Some Enchanted Evening.” Allen Ruppersberg took as his starting point LeWitt’s declaration that “the process is mechanical and should not be tampered with. It should run its course.”

Ruppersberg assiduously copied, by hand, word by word, Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) onto twenty, 6 x 6’ canvases. The final work, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* of 1974 (fig. 4.73), is thus a twenty-part painting on canvas about a book that is about a painting; and it is a composition that simultaneously interrogates and participates in the crossover between art and literature.

While Baldessari and Ruppersberg certainly do not characterize the entirety of the

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West Coast reception of LeWitt, they nonetheless illustrate an irony that could mark the reception of LeWitt’s writings.

Building on the trend toward systems espoused by LeWitt, Judy Gerowitz’s *Domes* use a Los Angeles-inflected visual rhetoric to methodically approach color. The formal vocabulary she employs bears a striking resemblance to Craig Kauffman’s notably larger lozenge works such as *Untitled* from 1968 (fig. 4.74). Kauffman’s work, like Gerowitz’s, is molded out of vacuum-formed plastic, spray painted on the reverse side, and spherical in form. However, while the individual and monumental lozenge forms hang on the wall and protrude into the viewer’s space, Gerowitz’s *Domes* are serially repeated, more intimately scaled, and arranged horizontally so as to reproduce a 360-degree mirrored image of the exhibition space on the surface of the convex and reflective forms. Within the *Domes*, viewers perceive themselves both reflected on the hemispheres’ surfaces, as well as reproduced in the reflected image of the sphere captured by the tabletop mirror. While the reflected space within Kauffman’s work conjures a hazy or misty environment, Gerowitz’s works are crystal clear in their reflections. Furthermore, Kauffman’s works are singular in format and uniquely colored according to the artist’s aesthetic choice. Gerowitz’s domes, by contrast, have a serial approach to color and its visual effects. The interior of the catalogue reproduces the schematic diagrams and charts that outline both the color sequence and the prescribed color placement within each dome. The *Domes* are the physical manifestation of the color diagrams in three dimensions.155

155 An additional comparison may be made between Gerowitz’s domes and the wall-mounted, convex disc artworks produced by Los Angeles-based artist Robert Irwin beginning in 1966—all of which bear the name, *Untitled*. Irwin’s disc forms are molded from acrylic resin and, like Kauffman’s works, are hung on a vertical wall. However, rather than hanging flush with the wall, they are installed to project, by means of a clear plastic tube, 24” from the wall. Each disc form is covered with multiple layers of a white paint applied using an automotive spray gun. The discs are heavily coated with paint at the center and remain only lightly painted at the periphery. Each disc is lit with four floodlights that bathe the form in artificial light—causing the boundaries of the disc, wall, light, and shadow to blur. Palpability consequently becomes distorted and a sense of indeterminacy is produced—one cannot be certain where the disc ends and the wall begins. The effect is that the disc appears to dissolve into the environment.
Gerowitz’s study of color was also explored through additional media including colored pencil on paper in *Study for Whirling Open Domes* (fig. 4.75) and *Optical Shapes #3* of 1969 (fig. 4.76), as well as on large, sprayed acrylic lacquer on acrylic board, as in *Pasadena Lifesavers Yellow Series #2*, also of 1969 (fig. 4.77). These two-dimensional compositions were originally slated to be included in the artist’s 1969 exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum; however, curator John Coplans—on the grounds of presenting an aesthetically cohesive exhibition—removed them from the show.\(^{156}\) Formally, the hand-drawn and spray-painted circular graphs use open and closed forms (hollow circles) that are mapped against a grid (a circle graph with six radii). Using a ruler, compass, and color chart, the saturation, progression, and range of pigment are methodically explored in two dimensions. While the colored pencil on paper compositions remain matte, the *Pasadena Life Savers* series of sprayed acrylic lacquer is polished so as to reflect a viewer within their colored, mirror-like surface. In the catalogue Gerowitz explains the paintings “are diagrams of the color systems used in the sculpture.”\(^{157}\)

Using spherical forms, Gerowitz established a programmatic approach complete with directions that demonstrate systematicity—that is, they provide material anchors for supporting and exploring this knowledge system. Much as LeWitt had maintained that it was crucial for his concepts to be realized as physical objects, so too was it important that Gerowitz’s investigation of color be visualized. Yet, Gerowitz’s work did not follow LeWitt’s dictates, but rather called

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\(^{156}\) Judy Chicago, interview by author, 23 July 2014, e-mail correspondence.

attention to tensions between conceptual and handcrafted art by exploring those incongruities between her work and the New York-based artist’s ongoing practice. While LeWitt employed the cubic form as the support for an exploration of systems, Gerowitz utilized the sphere; and whereas LeWitt’s works could be carried out by anyone, Gerowitz maintained a direct approach toward labor in that she both made the works herself and hand-wrote the instructional manual establishing the parameters and materials to be used in the investigation. While Baldessari had underscored the dry and humorless aspects of conceptual art by pairing LeWitt’s writing with popular tunes, and Ruppersberg followed LeWitt’s formula to its absurd end, Gerowitz reinserted the artist’s hand into a conceptual and formulaic interrogation of color. By privileging both the generative concept and craftsmanship, Gerowitz’s work realized the compatibility between emerging conceptual artistic practice and the technical expertise characteristic of Finish Fetish artworks.

Over a two-year period, the color systems of the Domes and Lifesavers were realized on an environmental scale in Atmospheres (fig. 4.78-4.79)—a series of thirteen large-scale smoke works installed between 1969 and 1970. Within the environmental works, huge plumes of color were emitted from specially designed fireworks. The columns gradually dissipated into clouds of colored smoke that blended primary and secondary colors into a variety of yellows,

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158 Such irony is established through the tension and incongruity between what one expects and what actually takes place. Yet, inherent in this tension is also an understanding of what is considered socially normal or expected as opposed to that which is not. As Critchley explains, inherent in any incongruent formula is a social contract: “There is a tacit social contract at work here, namely some agreement about the social world in which we find ourselves as the implicit background of the joke. There has to be a sort of tacit consensus or implicit shared understanding as to what constitutes joking ‘for us’, as to which linguistic or visual routines are recognized as joking. That is, in order for the incongruity of the joke to be seen as such, there has to be a congruence between joke structure and social structure—no social congruity, no comic incongruity.” Simon Critchley, On Humour, 4.

159 The thirteen Atmospheres of 1969 and early 1970 incorporated a variety of colors and were deployed throughout highly trafficked areas in California. After the artist officially changed her name to Judy Chicago and became progressively more involved in the women’s movement, the pieces were increasingly enacted in remote locations and often incorporated both the artist and nude female participants. This shift occurred simultaneously with the move of the Feminist Art Program from California State University, Fresno (organized in Spring 1970 and realized in Fall 1970) to California Institute of Arts in Los Angeles (Spring 1971).
greens, oranges, purples, and pinks—hues so characteristic of the Los Angeles art scene. Each arrangement of color was determined following the color systems and combinations visualized within the earlier work. The outdoor works realized the color charts as formless and transient, without definitive size and shape so that fixed hues transformed into a hazy blur.

The works were staged in public spaces including parks and universities throughout Southern California, as well as the reflecting pool at the Pasadena Art Museum. Viewers attending the events were surrounded by the colored and atmospheric effects of the enveloping artwork. Specifically, three Atmospheres were initiated at California State College, Fullerton (now California State University) in April 1970 as part of a joint exhibition of new works by Hamrol and Gerowitz. The poster (fig. 4.80) advertising the show features the artists rather than reproductions of their work. Stiffly posed and standing back-to-back, the artists appear solid, and object-like. Their stiff appearance ironically contrasted with the ephemeral nature of their current artistic practice—Hamrol was creating Situational Constructions that temporarily transformed spaces into immersive environments with a variety of media, while Gerowitz was detonating various Atmospheres that quickly dissolved into the surrounding environment. Nonetheless, produced only months prior to Gerowitz’s official name change and explicit association of her artistic practice with both an autobiographical and a feminist endeavor, the poster, perhaps, anticipates how the constructed identity and body of Judy Chicago would become a crucial element of her work.

In the artist’s later interviews and retrospective autobiography, Domes, Pasadena Lifesavers, and Atmospheres are yet again resituated as artworks that explore personal subject matter, but do so encoded in a language of avant-garde art. Specifically, the Domes are positioned as an exploration of the artist’s body: “With the domes I was trying to explore my
own subject matter and still embed it in a form which would make it acceptable to the male art world—the 1960s idea of formalism.\textsuperscript{160} In 1975 she expanded, “As I was still trying to ‘slip by’ in the male world and express myself without losing validation from men, I decided to use three dome shapes, the simplest forms that I could think of that had reference to my own body, breasts, fecundity, while maintaining the necessary neutrality of the art world.”\textsuperscript{161} The \textit{Pasadena Lifesavers} series in particular is situated as a direct expression of the various and gendered roles she adopted as an artist. She defines them as “representing my ‘masculine’ aggressive side, my ‘feminine’ receptive side, and the hiding of myself that I was still doing at the time […] possessing layers of symbolic meanings, which can be read if one knows how to read abstract form.”\textsuperscript{162} Finally, the \textit{Atmospheres} were aligned with feelings of personal and expressive relief that the artist felt as a result of making the paintings.\textsuperscript{163} The bodily associations visualized through the artworks have since become the lens through which they are critically and historically framed. For example, Laura Meyer situates the \textit{Domes} as, “approximating the size and shape of a human face or belly […] they evoke skin and nerve endings. The ‘superficial’ finish fetish surface is thus redefined as a zone of sensitivity, a membrane joining or separating subject and object, self and other.”\textsuperscript{164} Such an approach ignores, or perhaps even suppresses, the artist’s contemporaneous and hand-worked engagement with conceptual art and interrogation of systematic formats.

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\textsuperscript{160} Judy Chicago, “Judy Chicago Talking to Lucy Lippard,” 60.
\textsuperscript{161} Judy Chicago, \textit{Through the Flower} (1975, reprint 2006), 52.
\textsuperscript{162} And the artist continued, “Through the ‘Pasadena Lifesavers,’ I was able to emerge from the many constraints of role conditioning, for as I symbolized the various emotional states that comprised my personality, I gave myself permission to experience and express more aspects of myself.” Judy Chicago, \textit{Through the Flower} (1975, reprint 2006), 57.
\textsuperscript{163} “The ‘atmospheres’ reflected the relief that I felt as a result of making these paintings.” Judy Chicago, \textit{Through the Flower} (1975, reprint 2006), 57.
\textsuperscript{164} Laura Meyer, “From Finish Fetish to Feminism: Judy Chicago’s \textit{Dinner Party} in California Art History,” 54. I find this reading problematic because, if the works really do visualize the human face or bell, they confine that rendering to only two sizes, 5” and 10” in circumference.
\end{flushleft}
JUDY GEROWITZ HEREBY DIVESTS HERSELF: 1970

In the Fall of 1970, Judy Gerowitz publicly changed her name to Judy Chicago and announced the official name-change through both mailed postcards (fig. 4.81-4.82) and *Artforum* ads—the first of which introduced this chapter.165 The advertisements were published in the context of promoting the first exhibition that framed her work within an explicitly feminist milieu. The mailed postcard repeats the format of the October 1970 *Artforum* ad officially announcing the name-change. On the front of the white, rectangular card is a symmetrical text block reading: “JUDY GEROWITZ hereby divests herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance and freely chooses her own name JUDY CHICAGO.”166 The statement was enlarged and affixed to the wall directly across from the art gallery entrance—thus serving as the introductory text for the exhibition.

While the first media blitz had preceded the opening of the show and announced the name-change, the second *Artforum* ad (fig. 4.83) was published in December 1970, after the exhibition had closed.167 Rather than promoting the show, the advertisement instead publicizes Chicago’s constructed personality in a manner that parallels the role-playing and publicity games characteristic of the artist’s Southern California colleagues. Appearing as a full-page spread in black and white, the image visualizes her constructed persona in boxing trunks and a sweatshirt emblazoned with the name “Judy Chicago.” Sporting short-cropped hair and resting against the taut ropes of the boxing ring’s corner, Chicago poses in a way that is both cool and confident. Photographed by Jerry McMillan from a low angle, the artist gazes down at the viewer while the boxing gloves and tightly laced boots loom larger than life due to their proximity to the camera.

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165 The legal name change took several months to process, and only became official by the start of 1971.
166 On the back, in hand-written script, are specifics regarding the exhibition venue, opening hours, and length of run—October 23-November 25, 1970.
Standing on the fighting surface, but just outside the ring behind Chicago, is Alona Hamilton Cooke posing in the role of corner woman and modeling a team-Chicago t-shirt.\textsuperscript{168} Outside the fighting ring, but with one leg straddling the lower rope, is Jack Glenn, the artist’s dealer, posing as her manager and dressed in a sport coat and large checkered bowtie. In the background can be seen the rough, weathered walls of the training gym and cutout figures of male boxers in fighting stances. The scene casts the artist and her colleagues as characters in a tableau of performed roles while, as Gail Levin points out, also teasing California state law since it was then illegal for women to professionally box.\textsuperscript{169}

The photograph used in the ad was chosen from a number of different shots (fig. 4.84-4.85) of the three protagonists posed around Main Street Gym—a prominent downtown Los Angeles gym run by boxing manager Howie Steindler, after whom the character of Mickey Goldmill in the 1976 film Rocky was modeled. The photo shoot took place while the gym was open, and even though the photo’s subjects appear isolated within the space, they were in fact surrounded by boxers sparring, punching bags, and working out in front of mirrors and just beyond the picture’s frame. McMillan described the situation as intimidating and a bit scary, but maintains that Chicago’s “cool sense of humor and quick wit” got them in and out with both efficiency and success.\textsuperscript{170} In all of the photographs, Chicago is positioned at the front, followed

\textsuperscript{168} In a boxing match, the corner person is positioned at the junction of the ropes where a boxer rests between rounds. They are responsible for dispensing advice, water, towels, and administering basic medical attention to reducing swelling and stop bleeding.

\textsuperscript{169} Gail Levin, Becoming Judy Chicago, 2. This law was repealed in 1976. The boxing violation was a construction of the photo-shoot—as the artist did not box, not even recreationally. Judy Chicago and Katie Schroeder (curatorial assistant to Judy Chicago), interview by author, 2 February 2015, e-mail correspondence. While Bengston strategically used images of himself on a motorcycle to construct a public image, he also rode and raced the machines. By contrast, Chicago invoked an entirely fictitious pursuit to visualize her public image.

\textsuperscript{170} Jerry McMillan, untitled essay, in Craig Krull, Photographing the L.A. Art Scene, 1955-1975 (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 1996), 78. The idea to capture the artist as a boxer, according to Jerry McMillan, originated as follows: “In 1970, I was at the deli up the street from my studio with Joe Goode telling him I had to do something for Judy Gerowitz and that she was changing her last name to Chicago. We had both known her for years, and our discussion around what a scrapper she was [led me to think]—maybe I should dress her like a boxer? I called Jack Glenn at his gallery and asked him to talk to Judy about the idea. Judy liked the idea […] on the day of the shoot,
immediately by Cooke. Glenn remains in the background either leaning against a wall or propped against the fighting ring. One of the unpublished photographs locates the trio at the gym’s entrance and features the artist posed as if triumphant with her right fist elevated and left hand on her hip; another shows her seated on a stool in the corner of the ring as if resting between rounds. Yet, it is the composition of converging ropes leading a viewer’s eye toward Chicago that was ultimately chosen to visualize the character for media distribution.

**CONCLUSION**

Within the early oeuvre of Judy Gerowitz, character performance coupled with an ironic engagement with contemporaneous art world politics was a salient element of her artistic practice. Her works engaged with a rearrangement of forms, identity, and the body, and did so on a variety of scales and often in tandem with the manipulation of viewers’ reflections. Like her Finish Fetish colleagues, she manipulated media distribution to establish a public persona through printed advertisements and, like Billy Al Bengston, she published a tailored biography that established a specific public image and narrative account of her work.

These aspects of role-playing and dry humor would continue to inform the work of Judy Chicago’s post-1970 projects such as the collaborative *Womanhouse* (1972), an installation that encouraged viewers and participants to investigate and challenge the roles historically assigned to middle-class women in the U.S., as well as the dark, comedic performance of *Cock and Cunt Play* (1972), which investigated stereotyped and patriarchal divisions of labor. Her explicitly feminist work and its relationship to performance, and to a lesser extent irony, has been extensively discussed by artists and art historians.¹⁷¹ Less analyzed is the way in which, in the

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¹⁷¹ Amelia Jones, Suzanne Lacy, Karen LeCocq, Gail Levin, Laura Meyer, Moira Roth, Faith Wilding, Nancy Youdelman, and many others (see footnote 15). Specifically, Amelia Jones summarizes: “Chicago promoted […] the
midst of engaging with spray-painting techniques and a Finish Fetish aesthetic, she also explored the benefits of a unique namesake as connected to an artistic practice—first by changing her name from Cohen to Gerowitz in 1961, followed by embracing the name Judy Chicago as a friendly nickname in 1964/65 and listing the namesake in the telephone book, and finally, legally changing her surname to Chicago in 1970. When, in 1970, she explicitly tied her work to an emerging feminist discourse she also moved away from the stylistic qualities that had associated her work with Finish Fetish—namely, highly polished and mirror-like surfaces combined with the visual rhetoric of Minimalist forms. The qualities that had characterized her peers’ engagement with both Los Angeles Minimalism and self-authoring—such as Bengston’s role-playing coupled with his engagement with Hollywood and polished surfaces, and Bell’s construction of an alter ego in tandem with highly reflective and transparent glass constructions—were siphoned by Chicago as a tool for establishing a feminist artistic practice intimately tied to her artistic identity, but ultimately separated from the formal characteristics of Minimalism. While published accounts of Chicago’s work focus on her production after 1970, as I have suggested here, the artist’s pre-1970s work also pivoted around self-representation, rearrangement, and a dry sense of humor. Like her colleagues, she used depictions of herself in the press to manipulate the public’s understanding of her work; as a continuation of this practice, her 1960s work was re-branded and positioned to operate in the service of the construction of a public identity and a feminist art practice—thus mobilizing the strategies of her colleagues in order to move away from them.

CONCLUSION

By multiplying their personae through pseudonyms, photographs, discursive anecdotes, films, and the occasional performance, Walter Hopps, Craig Kauffman, Ed Kienholz, Ben Bartosh, Billy Al Bengston, Ed Ruscha, Joe Goode, Larry Bell, and Judy Gerowitz revisited precedents set by Marcel Duchamp and (ab)used practices intrinsic to their Hollywood-steeped environment. The seemingly innocuous projects enacted under the pseudonym Maurice Syndell took on a radical pitch within the politically conservative environment of postwar Los Angeles. The chameleon-like roles assumed by Bengston varied from the shallowly narcissistic (his use of the surfing pseudonym Moondoggie) to the conceivably activist (his self-presentation as a military sergeant). Both Syndell and Bengston operated studios—Syndell Studio and Artist Studio, respectively—which loosely associated their sites of production with the neighboring Hollywood studios and their devotion to fiction and invention. Yet, while the Syndell Studio project was conceived more with a view to the politics of the McCarthy era (by way of using pseudonyms and thus referring to blacklisted Hollywood figures), the Artist Studio shifted the focus away from politics and towards the mutability of identity by suggesting the character transformations that might occur within a film studio.

My analysis of the artworks, exhibitions, and ephemera associated with Syndell Studio is dependent upon the interpretation and interrogation of second-hand documentation of objects and events. When historical accounts presented a contradiction (a case in point being the origin of the name, Maurice Syndell) such ambiguities could be resolved through additional research. Ambiguity and contradiction, however, are traits deeply embedded within Bengston’s artistic practice of the 1960s and at times it is impossible to determine the exact nature of events (a case
in point being the so-called motorcycle show of November 1961). What rapidly becomes evident is that in addition to transforming himself, Bengston was also, in effect, disrupting and unsettling future discussions of the historical moment in which he operated. While his forays into role-playing became both inspiration for, and interwoven with, the artistic practices of those with whom he collaborated—specifically, Ed Ruscha, who invoked the name of Eddie Russia in his commercial work and the Information Man in reference to his publications, and Joe Goode, who published under the pseudonym José Bueno—his work and elliptical accounts of events were perpetually directed toward an inability to ever fix an individual identity and a stable historical account. In short, Bengston courted diverse interpretations as part of his legacy and inspired in those with whom he worked a similarly dynamic exchange between exposure and withdrawal.

The oeuvres of Larry Bell and Judy Gerowitz—both mentees of Bengston—evince narrower, more streamlined approaches to role-playing. Both artists constructed artworks with transparent and mirror-like surfaces that place the viewer in a position to consider his or her own self-image. Bell’s oeuvre includes materials ranging from mirrors to Plexiglas; his work incorporates the viewer’s reflection as an integral aspect of his variously scaled structures. Gerowitz’s playing blocks, as well as her larger sculptures, encourage viewers to consider possibilities of rearrangement and of self-stylization. Furthermore, a large element of these artists’ practices was the development of a singular, alternative identity. Larry Bell’s development of Dr. Lux occurred alongside an intensification of his interest in perceptual manipulation via reflection, transparency, and distortion, as well as his interaction with both Bengston and Donald Judd. The development of the persona of Judy Chicago by Gerowitz was realized within an environment—that of both Hollywood and a masculinist art scene—replete with branding strategies and alternative names. Her focus on sculptural mutability and
rearrangement throughout the 1960s culminated, in a sense, in the 1975 autobiography that both constructed and consolidated the existence of Judy Chicago. As opposed to the Syndell project, which amounted to a politicized pseudonym used by many individuals, and Bengston’s practice, which comprised multiple roles occupied by a single artist, Bell and Gerowitz each developed a single, defined, and distinct persona. While Bell’s Dr. Lux satirized the at times erudite character of emerging debates over Minimalism, as well as alluded to his acquired technical prowess and knowledge of the vacuum coating process (a skill set that would not ordinarily warrant a doctorate), Gerowitz’s Chicago critiqued the hyper-masculinity of the Los Angeles art world and co-opted branding and publicity strategies so as to move her artistic practice in a more politicized direction away from her Finish Fetish colleagues.

What becomes apparent from a consideration of these artists and artworks are the particular forms of authority bound up with the artists’ self-authoring. Rather than merely emulating or appropriating the identity ploys of Duchamp—whose work under various aliases was widely known within the Los Angeles art world—the artists infused socially-specific humor and contemporary concerns (McCarthy era paranoia, fictionality, celebrity, U.S. presence in Vietnam, Minimalist art discourse, feminist discourse) into their name games. Most previous historical narratives isolate Finish Fetish objects as an interrogation of formal and technical elements ranging from translucency and reflection to new materials and elementary forms. Such analyses are largely based on attention to the intersections of art and place; specifically, the Los Angeles avant-garde is often understood as developing in a manner uniquely influenced by an environment that merged the beach with the metropolis, and which was intimately tied to the postwar economic boom—including new spray and plastic technologies that were being developed in Southern California. However, I have expanded those accounts so as to situate the
artworks and the artists within a more specific social and political context. In so doing, I have examined the artists’ engagement with Hollywood; their subtle or overt jokiness; and the integral role that ephemera played in defining their artistic oeuvres and provocative actions.

OTHER LOS ANGELES PERSONAE

Given the ubiquity of identity manipulation amongst a specific coterie of Los Angeles artists, one is left to ponder whether and how this phenomenon was also present outside of those individuals associated with Finish Fetish. Indeed, while researching the identity games of the Finish Fetish group, I realized that many California-based artists, as well as New York-based artists temporarily residing on the West Coast during the late 1950s through the 1970s, likewise developed pseudonyms and public personae. These include, but are not limited to, Wallace Berman, George Herms, Bruce Conner, Asco, Lynda Benglis, and Eleanor Antin.¹

Wallace Berman credited various photographs and poems to his pseudonym, Pantale Xantos, in publications issued by his colleagues, as well as in Semina—a hand-printed, loose-leaf, collaborative art and poetry journal organized by Berman and consisting of nine issues distributed between 1955 and 1964.² Assemblage artist George Herms developed six known aliases (and possibly more): Paul Mistrie, Eric Hammerscoffer, Sid Escobar, Sigmund Fletcher, Iris Firewater, and Astropoet Moonstone.³ Bruce Conner produced artwork under the monikers

¹ Other examples might include: Lynn Hershman’s character Roberta Breitmore and Allen Ruppersberg’s writings as Al Reed.
³ Presently, little has been written on George Herms and only two of his aliases, Paul Mistrie and Eric Hammerscoffer, have been mentioned (by which I mean appeared in either a label or a single sentence) in an academic publication. Paul Mistrie is noted in Rebecca Peabody, Andrew Perchuk, Glenn Phillips, and Rani Singh, eds., Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art, 1945-1980, exh. cat. (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011), 81. Eric Hammerscoffer is noted in Sandra Leonard Starr, ed., Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art, exh. cat. (Santa Monica, CA: James Corcoran Gallery, 1988), 85; George Herms and Seraphin Gallery, George Herms: Then and Now, Fifty Years of Assemblage, exh. cat. (Philadelphia, PA: Seraphin Gallery; New York, NY: ACA Galleries, 2002), 85. My compilation of Herms’s six pseudonyms is based on research conducted at the Getty Research Center in the George Herms Papers, Special Collections, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
BOMBHEAD, Emily Feather, Diogenes Lucero, Anonymous, Anonymouse, Justin Kase, and The Dennis Hopper One Man Show. He also conceived of a convention wherein people with the name Bruce Conner would come together and wear buttons emblazoned with “I AM BRUCE CONNER, I AM NOT BRUCE CONNER.” The Chicano art collective, Asco (1972-1987)—named for a Spanish translation of “vomit” or “disgust”—consisted of four core members: Harry Gamboa, Jr., Gronk (b. Glugio Nicandro), Willie Herrón, and Patssi Valdez. They staged performances, graffiti actions, and composed photographs and ephemera that placed their bodies into fictitious roles and highlighted racial and class disparities. For example, their No Movies (begun in 1973) presented stills of fictional Chicano films that were never produced and also included sections for No Movie awards, No Movie stars, and No Movie scripts. Lynda Benglis, a New York-based artist, taught at California Institute of the Arts in the spring of 1973 and subsequently stayed in Los Angeles for four years. From mid-1973 through 1974 she deployed four consecutive advertisements—two postcards and two Artforum ads—in which she deliberately manipulated her public persona and signifiers of gender. Eleanor Antin documented her role-playing in a series of photographs and videos that established her four selves: Eleanora Antinova (a black ballerina), King of Solana Beach, Little Nurse Eleanor, and a black movie star. Antin’s characters became hybrids of autobiography and fiction and called attention to the qualifiers

4 Bruce Conner’s pseudonyms have been acknowledged in various texts including, but not limited to Bruce Conner and The Walker Art Center, 2000 BC: The Bruce Conner Story Part II (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1999); Kevin Hatch and Bruce Conner, Looking for Bruce Conner (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Jack Rasmussen and Bruce Conner, After Bruce Conner: Anonymous, Anonymouse, and Emily Feather (Washington, DC: American University Museum, 2005).


7 In addition to Cherise Smith’s Enacting Others, also of import is Eleanor Antin, Huey Copeland, Malik Gaines, Alexandro Segade, Henry M. Sayre, and Emily Liebert, Multiple Occupancy: Eleanor Antin's "selves" (New York, NY: Wallach Art Gallery, 2013).
of sex, age, talent, time, and space—the categorical limitations of the freedom of choice. These artists altered their personae, and as with the identity games of those associated with Finish Fetish, challenged conventional notions of authorship by deliberately destabilizing their public identity for a variety of political and conceptual gains.\(^8\)

An interrogation of all these artists’ artworks and humorous role-playing strategies is beyond the confines of this dissertation. However, I would here like to conclude by indicating how my own line of inquiry could be expanded through a brief discussion of a few works by George Herms and Lynda Benglis. One of the many pseudonyms employed by George Herms was Paul Mistrie—a name that phonically suggests both mystery and palmistry—and this identity emerged in 1960 within the midst of a Cold War climate colored by secrecy. Like his colleagues, Herms traded in names and identities, and easily shifted between his birth name and his alias. Herms was close friends with Wallace Berman and Walter Hopps, and was keenly aware of the name games prevalent within both of their practices. On occasion, Herms would sign an artwork or poem with one of his pseudonyms. His assemblage, *Astro Poet* of 1962 (fig. C.1), for example, consists of a small bookshelf filled with a peculiar arrangement of objects including everything from a saw and a plastic doll to a gourd and newspaper clippings. The composition is signed on the left hand side in large, capital letters, “PAUL MISTRIE.” The manipulation of the signature adroitly invites viewers to contemplate the meaning of the work and the identity of its author, and feeds the air of mystery surrounding the object and the eccentric collection of items displayed within.

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8 This, of course, took place within an historical climate concerned with the constructed character of authorship itself. Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author,” appeared first in English in *Aspen*, no. 5/6 (1967), and then in French in *Manteia*, no. 5 (1968), and was closely followed by Michel Foucault’s lecture, “What is an Author?” in February at the Société Française de philosophie, before its publication in French in *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie*, 63, no. 3 (July-September 1969).
On several occasions, Herms was photographed wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with his assumed name (fig. C.2). He publicized some of his Tap City Circus endeavors—fundraising and carnivalesque events and raffles organized to raise money to stave off his frequent eviction notices—using that alias. Beginning in 1965, and held roughly every eighteen months through 1972, Herms’s Circuses used a raffle system to award ticket holders a choice of prizes. Those with the winning numbers could choose from a variety of Herms’s prints, drawings, and books, and had the option of forgoing the artwork in favor of dousing the artist with a watering hose. In the photograph taken on the occasion of his 1972 Circus, Herms can be seen, with a full beard and long hair, wearing a t-shirt with bright, capitalized lettering, “PAUL MISTRIE TOPANGA FLASH” (he lived in Topanga Canyon, Los Angeles). His arms are raised to the height of his face, and his index fingers point inward to frame his ear, although they unintentionally frame his left cheek instead. He stands below a hand-drawn sign reading “EARFUL IN HERE” with arrows pointing in the direction of his ear. The artist’s use of the word, earful, is in fact a wordplay on the word raffle (other alternative terms used between 1965 and 1972 in reference to the Circus’s raffle event include: roofle, baffle, waffle, and rawful).

In 1975, reflecting on fifteen years of shuffled identities and invented personae, Herms developed a paragraph-long history for each of his alternative namesakes. His hand-written description of Paul Mistrie reads like a list of enigmatic appearing and disappearing acts.

Paul Mistrie began work in 1960 in Northern California dictionary born—his work was exhibited in the Object Makers show at Pomona 1961. His poems appeared in Floating Bears 1964 Paul Mistrie is mentioned also in Kirby Doyle’s novel ‘Happiness Bastard’

He surfaced again in Topanga Canyon in late sixties playing softball. Recently he has

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9 The t-shirt was, in fact, made by Wallace Berman on the occasion of his organization of a baseball team—exact date unknown. George Herms, commentary while viewing his films, 23 February 2004, Modern Art in Los Angeles, videorecording, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
appeared in Theatre Pieces from Mount Holyoke to Pasadena Museum of Art wherein he swings a mean ten foot pole streaming mirrorized mylar.\(^{10}\)

Ruminating on the instances in which Mistrie materialized—as well as the manifestation of his five other pseudonyms within similarly arranged biographies—the artist instinctively turns to exhibition history to recapture the supposed evidence of his pseudonym’s existence. The gesture serves as a testament to Herms’s regard for his many aliases, and also reveals something of the peculiar authority bound up with constructions of authorship and artistic identity. The written profiles are directed toward the task of historicizing and documenting the intrusions of fictitious persons, yet they also serve as confessions regarding the fabricated and non-existent status of those characters—their presence within a compilation of invented personae betrays their absence in reality.

The sheer multiplicity of identities that Herms assumed invites comparison with Bengston’s role-playing endeavors. Or, one might compare Herms’s posing in character as Paul Mistrie to the many photographic images of Larry Bell as Dr. Lux. However, unlike Bengston and Bell, Herms did not site himself within Los Angeles’s celebrity culture. The images of Bengston and Bell in various roles circulating in magazines and newspapers were taken by the likes of Edward Hopper, artist/photographer Jerry McMillan, and other magazine and newspaper photographers. By contrast, photographs of Herms role-playing were for more personal use and, on occasion, would be distributed to a small group of friends by way of inviting them to an upcoming Circus. The images of Herms were taken, moreover, not by commercial or

\(^{10}\) Orthography as in original. George Herms, Paul Mistrie biography, George Herms Papers, Special Collections, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA, box 83, folder 18. The phrase “dictionary born” presents an interesting puzzle regarding the origins of the name. Mistrie is Romanian for brick trowel or mason’s trowel—a point-nosed trowel for spreading mortar on bricks or concrete blocks—but this is not an item used within George Herms’s oeuvre. It may allude to Jackson Pollock’s use of a trowel, in addition to sticks and knives, to compose paintings; or it may reference the method by which the name Dada was coined—that is, by flipping through a dictionary. This is a point that merits further research and lies beyond the scope of this dissertation.
professional photographers, but by friends such as Wallace Berman and, in the case of the 1972 photograph, Jerry Maybrook—an acquaintance of Herms, and anything but a professional photographer.

While the manner in which these artists were photographed certainly relates to their respective status or levels of success within the art world, it is also tied to the character of their artistic practices and pseudonymous games. Instead of deconstructing celebrity and manipulating signifiers of fame, Herms—as evinced by the Paul Mistrie pseudonym itself—was more deeply immersed in cultivating a sense of enigma. He enacted and subsequently pictured his different characters as a way to explore the means by which one might work as someone else, and to deepen the esoteric qualities of his work—an action that, in a sense, paralleled the air of mystery nurtured by the Syndell project.

Lynda Benglis, between mid-1973 and late-1974, deployed four photographic advertisements that placed her body within a multipronged publicity campaign through which she promoted her work and fashioned her public persona. The first, an announcement card distributed in July and December 1973 (fig. C.3), is a studio portrait of the artist as a child dressed in a boy’s Greek costume (her family is of Greek origin); the second, published in *Artforum* in April 1974 (fig. C.4), depicts the artist in a black and white photograph leaning against a car with her short hair plastered back; the third is a long, colored postcard in which she appears in a cutie pinup pose looking coyly over her shoulder and nude except for her jeans around her calves and over platform boots (fig. C.5); the fourth is the now-infamous two-page “centerfold” ad in the November issue of *Artforum* (fig. C.6) showing the artist sporting a gigantic double-dildo (the ad is a response to Robert Morris’s Castelli-
Sonnabend exhibition poster that is also reproduced within an article discussing Morris’s work in the September 1974 issue).11

The advertisement of April 1974 (the second of her series) sited the artist as embedded within a Los Angeles environment of role-playing, automobiles, and machismo. In the full-page black and white ad, Benglis casually leans against the driver’s side of her Porsche with her right hand resting on the car’s roof and her left arm akimbo off of her hip. She is androgynous in appearance, dressed in tight jeans, a printed dress shirt with an angular collar, and a dark, fitted blazer. Her body is turned toward the camera, head slightly angled, and face expressionless. Her eyes are hidden behind large, dark Aviator sunglasses, and her hair is tightly plastered against her head. The rooftops of two apartment buildings rise above a cinderblock wall in the background of the photograph. The image is framed with capitalized lettering announcing her forthcoming show of metallized knots at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York.

Historian Sarah Schrank and art historian Susan Richmond both suggest that the advertisement is redolent of the ads published in the pages of Artforum during the 1960s by Los Angeles artists, as well as Joe Goode’s 1969 calendar L.A. Artists in Their Cars that includes snapshots of Goode, Ruscha, Bengston, Bell, and eight other male L.A. artists, mostly wearing sunglasses, and either smoking, drinking, or fooling around with their cars.12 Benglis’s snapshot,
indeed, captures the artist posing in a manner that suggests the posturing of her Los Angeles-based colleagues. However, the ad is more than a faithful imitation of the practice by which contemporary artists used provocative imagery to promote their artwork. Rather, it represents a meticulous engagement with the structures of self-promotion intrinsic to her new environment. While Los Angeles-based artists deployed stereotypes of the region to analyze the nature of public-image making, Benglis re-cast their model, and sutured onto it an interrogation of originality and reproduction, as well as tropes of gender. The ad is part and parcel of a body of work produced while the artist was living in Los Angeles and it invites suspicion that her appropriation of the L.A. Look (which itself was appropriated from an environment of Hollywood and DayGlo colors), is less a blatant copying, than a critical re-assembling of her self-image.

Benglis had first become involved with the Los Angeles art scene in April 1971 while installing her work in the Walker Art Center’s Edward Larrabee Barnes building (which opened in May of that year). There she met Robert Irwin and Larry Bell—who were likewise installing their sculptural objects in the museum’s new structure—and “was very taken with their humor and wit.”

Moving to Los Angeles in 1973 to teach at CalArts, she quickly connected with Bengston and L.A.-based fabricator Jack Brogan. Bengston, she has said, was “one of the first people I met after I got there […] Billy Al would have big parties.”

Studying Bengston’s weekly calendars in the Archives of American Art, one can see that the two met quite frequently beginning in the

and Richmond’s passing reference to the advertisement was preceded by Lucy Lippard’s assertion that the ad playfully parodies the California culture of cars and motorcycles with which many of Benglis’s male, L.A.-based colleagues identified at the time. Lucy R. Lippard, “Making Up: Role-Playing and Transformation in Women’s Art,” (1975), reprinted in Lippard, From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 104.

Lynda Benglis, interview by Alma Ruiz, “‘It was exciting just being there…’, Lynda Benglis in California,” The Curve, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (11 August 2011), retrieved from http://sites.moca.org/thecurve/page/23/.

Lynda Benglis, interview by Alma Ruiz, 2011.
summer of 1973, and on a nearly weekly basis starting in April 1974 and extending through the fall of that year (a timeline concurrent with Benglis’s series of notorious advertisements).\textsuperscript{15}

While in Los Angeles, Benglis also began working closely with Jack Brogan—a fabricator responsible for helping produce (as well as conserve) artworks incorporating various plastic and spray technologies that were conceived by Robert Irwin, DeWain Valentine, Craig Kauffman, Peter Alexander, and Larry Bell. Benglis first met Brogan through Robert Irwin in June 1973 when she was researching how to metallize the cloth-based knots she was then constructing. Together, they realized Benglis’s first metallized knot, \textit{Lambda} of 1972-1973 (fig. C.7), which is, by way of a spray gun and compressed air, coated in a thin layer of shimmering and slightly reflective aluminum—an aesthetic that parallels the formal qualities of many of the Venice Beach-based artists with whom she was then engaged.\textsuperscript{16}

The photographic ad from April 1974 publicizing the exhibition of her metallized knots is, appropriately, an image of the artist executing a role: “It was my \textit{macharina} [a pun on the word “macho”] number! [...] I wanted to present myself in all roles, but in a joke manner.”\textsuperscript{17} The photographer, Marcia Resnick, a New York-based artist completing her MFA at CalArts, describes the character construction that accompanied Benglis’s Los Angeles sojourn: “When Linda [sic] came to teach at CalArts, she too was transitioning from the NYC lifestyle to the very different life in sunny California. She created a new persona for herself. She slicked her short hair back, wore stylish men’s suits and most importantly bought herself a new yellow Porsche [...] She

\textsuperscript{15} Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.
\textsuperscript{17} Lynda Benglis, quoted in Dorothy Seiberling, “The New Sexual Frankness: Good-by to Hearts and Flowers,” \textit{New York Magazine} 8, no. 7 (17 February 1975): 42.
asked me to take the photograph. The moment seemed like a initiation in which she reified her new role.”

While Benglis’s self-representation followed in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp and other members of the historical avant-gardes, it also, and more precisely, developed within a Los Angeles arena marked by a specific mode of artistic self-fashioning. For Benglis, L.A. was as much about “movie stars and Hollywood” as it was about artists interrogating the publicity and character construction that permeated the city. The methods by which Benglis propagated her persona invite comparison with Bengston and Ruscha’s professionally photographed and staged shenanigans that place the protagonists into roles including a gay man and a cowboy, respectively.

Yet, most compelling is a comparison between Chicago’s two-part series that establishes both her new identity and her masculine persona and Benglis’s four-part sequence of self-authoring images. Both artists call attention to the artificial or constructed character of signifiers of masculinity and femininity (such as clothing, hairstyle, posture). Chicago’s December 1970 photographic ad (taken by Jerry McMillan) places her inside a boxing gym and outside of the recognizable markers of the Los Angeles region, a gesture that is analogous with the artist’s redirection of her work away from her male colleagues and towards a feminist cause. Benglis’s later April 1974 ad, however, places the artist in front of a car and under the California sun, consequently siting the temporarily transplanted New Yorker within this geographical region and imaging her as both building on and critiquing the ritualistic self-representations of Los Angeles artists and their associated automobiles and machismo. Both artists were skilled at manipulating the media and their public statements were carefully choreographed and imaged by skilled photographers. Chicago, and also Larry Bell, imaged themselves, albeit ironically, in a more assimilationist manner. They removed many of the regional-

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18 Marcia Resnick, interview with author, 30 August 2015, email.
19 Lynda Benglis, interview by Alma Ruiz, 2011.
signifiers that would have identified them as Los Angeles artists (cars, the beach, references to Hollywood). Benglis, however, intensifies the level of pastiche by building on an established history of machismo posturing and role-playing and positions her likeness surrounded by signifiers of the California locale. As a master of the game, she recognized, and was also troubled by, the important role public persona played within the art market.20

In conclusion, this dissertation has examined the means by which certain artists working in Los Angeles wedded the construction of their artwork with the activation of their personae. This examination expands the discourse of identity and role-playing by exposing the critical value of these seemingly innocuous public personae. Rejecting accounts of the artists’ apparently uncritical participation in a Los Angeles environment informed by celebrity culture and a sun, sand, and surf mentality, I argue that their artworks, in the context of their acts of self-invention, self-fashioning, and branding strategies, are critical elements of their oeuvres. The individuals discussed here used a Los Angeles dialect—that of profile-raising publicity stunts and character constructions. They did so as a means of engaging with the dialectics of the postwar era that ranged from the communist witch hunts of the Cold War to the emerging feminist discourses of the 1970s.

20 “Benglis also points out that her Artforum images was intended to be a cryptic but metaphoric indictment of the media’s exploitation and dishonesty, especially as it had propped up Richard Nixon during the 1973-74 Watergate scandal and had suppressed his lies and deceptions. Disturbed by the exclusively sexual reading of the [November 1974] Artforum image, Benglis subsequently produced two related videos that attempted to shift its metaphoric associations toward more explicit references to media duplicity and ruthless greed by invoking the sleight of hand of magic (How’s Tricks, 1976) and the exploitation of those vulnerable cultural oddities who, like artists, seek to uphold a moral position within a corrupt society (The Amazing Bow-Wow, 1976-77).” Jayne Wark, Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America (Montreal, Que.: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006), 235, n. 32.
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Oxford University Press, 1972.


ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure I.1
*Art In America* 52, no. 3 (June 1964): back cover. Clockwise from right corner: John Altoon, Ken Price, Ed Moses, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman, Billy Al Bengston, and Betty Asher.
Figure 1.1
All-City Outdoor Art Festival in Barnsdall Park, Hollywood, 1956, Photograph by Seymour Rosen, Seymour Rosen Archives, SPACES, Aptos, CA.
Figure 1.2
All-City Outdoor Art Festival in Barnsdall Park, Hollywood, 1956, Photograph by Seymour Rosen, Seymour Rosen Archives, SPACES, Aptos, CA.
Figure 1.3
Exterior view of Syndell Studio, Arthur Richer in window, 1956. Photo by Charles Brittin, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 1.4
Interior view of Syndell Studio, Arthur Richer exhibition at Syndell Studio, 1956, Photo by Charles Brittin, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 1.5
Marcel Duchamp, *Poster within a Poster*, lithograph mounted on board, 34 7/16 x 27 3/8”, Collection of Joe Goode, Los Angeles, CA.
Dear Craig (what the hell?) —

Of quite a few people I have known at "good old Eagle Rock" some will never rest in peace with their thoughts often on unfulfilled dreams. This seems to be a complicated sort of beauty that none have been and I hope always will be the very best of friends.

Never will I forget S.F. (hint of clarification?)
S.F. means San Francisco not what it could obviously be taken for, that I would want to forget.

That share! Those hips — stand before the lighted floor brick bar, — What a neat I was to not stop the bar girl for the beer. Memories of the "Say when!" the interesting little Mexican raped against wall — slim Galrand and six paroles fools completely without sanity, still vibrate through my brain. (God what a Choval!) In a more tasteful while I remember the variations of Linalo, Dave Bowden etc. It all seems

(not get sentimental) very interesting & wonderful.

S.C. or O.C.L.A. or just a point in space and time — what does it matter? This is only the beginning of a long life of an infinite number of experiences. The best of success in everything. I hope and I think we will always be around to share or at least of experiences. So as into the future's calming flow —

(please this is enough.)

With.Thanks.

Chico Hopps

Eagle Rock High School, Walter 'Chico' Hopps's inscription, Craig Kauffman Papers, Archives of America Art, Washington, DC.
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Figure 1.9
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Figure 1.10
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Rex Brandt, *First Lift of the Sea*, 1949, Oil on Canvas, 66 x 91.4cm, Collection of the Estate of Rex Brandt, Laguna Beach, CA.
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Ed Kienholz, 1958, Photograph by Seymour Rosen, Seymour Rosen Archives, SPACES, Aptos, CA.
Figure 1.24
Walter Hopps, 1960, Photographer unknown, Image courtesy of Nancy Reddin Kienholz, as reproduced in Kristine McKenna, *The Ferus Gallery: A Place to Begin* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2009), 49.
Figure 1.25
Robert Alexander/Press BAZA, Syndell Studio Business Card, Charles Brittin Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 1.26
Walt Disney, Business Card, c. 1921, Collection of the Disney Family Museum, San Francisco, CA.
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Figure 1.28
Robert Alexander/Press BAZA, Business card for Press Baza, c. 1955, Charles Brittin Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
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Adelie Landis
Paul Wonner
Bill Brown
Robert Craig Kauffman
Hassel Smith
James Budd Dixon
Relf Case
Madeleine Dimond
Gilbert Henderson
Larry Compton
J. DeFeo
Wally Hedrick
David Stiles
Richard Diebenkorn
Roy De Forest
Richard Brodney
Julius Wasserstein
Jack Lowe
Paul Sarkisian
Maurice Syndell
Phil Roeber
James Corbett

Figure 1.30
Detail: Concert Hall Workshop Presents Action Painters of the West Coast, Leaflet, 1955, Craig Kauffman Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.
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Photograph of *Action I* exhibition, May 1955, Photographer unknown, Jay DeFeo Papers, Archives of America Art, Washington, DC.
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Gordon Wagner, Sketch “Action Painters,” 1955, Gordon Wagner Papers, UCLA Department of Special Collections, Los Angeles, CA.
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Gordon Wagner, Sketch “Merry-go-round bldg,” 1955, Gordon Wagner Papers, UCLA Department of Special Collections, Los Angeles, CA.
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Gordon Wagner, Detail of work attributed to Maurice Syndell, in Sketch “Merry-go-round bldg.,” 1955, Gordon Wagner Papers, UCLA Department of Special Collections, Los Angeles, CA.
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Gordon Wagner, Detail of Muscle Beach weight lifter, in Sketch “Merry-go-round bldg.,” 1955, Gordon Wagner Papers, UCLA Department of Special Collections, Los Angeles, CA.
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Figure 1.37
Edward Kienholz, *Walter Hopps Hopps Hopps*, 1959, Paint and resin on wood, printed color reproductions, ink on paper, vertebrae, telephone parts, candy, dental molds, metal, pencil, and leather, 87 x 42 x 21”, The Menil Collection, Houston, TX.
Figure 1.38
Edward Kienholz, Detail of verso, *Walter Hopps Hopps Hopps*, 1959, Paint and resin on wood, printed color reproductions, ink on paper, vertebrae, telephone parts, candy, dental molds, metal, pencil, and leather, 87 x 42 x 21”, The Menil Collection, Houston, TX.
Figure 1.39
Figure 1.40
Robert Alexander/Press BAZA, Publicity image for Action², 1956, Collection of Caroline Huber, Houston, TX.
Figure 1.41
Robert Alexander/Press BAZA, Publicity image for Action², 1956, Collection of Caroline Huber, Houston, TX.
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Robert Alexander/Press BAZA, Publicity image for *Action²*, 1956, Collection of Caroline Huber, Houston, TX.
Figure 1.43
Robert Alexander/Press BAZA, Publicity image for *Action²*, 1956, Collection of Caroline Huber, Houston, TX.
WE CAN MAKE, HANG, WRECK, SHOW,
sell or enjoy them, but it's "... almost impossible
for us to measure the efficacy of a work of art
which we have written or painted, since true
admiration. ... is almost always accompanied by an
insurmountable uneasiness"

Figure 1.44
SYNOPSIS:
If ever a case were to be made that a unique contribution to the modern art movement was conceived in Los Angeles in the 1940’s and born in the infamous Funus Gallery, “The Cool School” does so convincingly. A stellar array of artists, John Alto, Frank Gehry, Ed Moses, Ed Ruscha, Ed Kienholz and a host of others, reminisce about the early days. Art offers the possibility of love with strangers,” intones Walter Hopps, visionary co-founder of the Ferus. Later joined by partner Irving Blum, his polar opposite, the Ferus books the notion of the supremacy of the New York art scene. The very birth of Los Angeles, it’s lack of history, becomes the inspiration for a whole generation of renegades. Punctuated with dismissive asides from New York’s Ivan Karp, these artists crash through the barriers of convention, leaving behind a fresh, new legacy that endures to this day. “The Cool School” is a film for lovers of art. (Barbara Pekras, A.G.E.)

BIO:
Morgan Neville is an award-winning documentary filmmaker who specializes in history and cultural subjects. Through a series of films on important music subjects (including “The Bill Building, Sam Phillips and Sun Records, Nat King Cole, Brian Wilson, Lelie & Bolles, The Highwaymen and Bert Bacharaad), Neville has sought to document the songwriters and producers who helped shape 20th century music, including the Grammy-nominated “Muddy Waters Can’t Be Satisfied” and the Emmy-winning “Frank Williams: Monky York Blues.” He recently directed “Rasputin Yourself: The Stax Records Story” for PBS. His first theatrical documentary was the award-winning feature “Shotgun Freeway: Drives Thru Lost L.A.” “The Cool School” is the second film in his L.A. trilogy, to be followed next by “Sunshine Noir Crime Fiction in the City of Angels.”

MAIN CREDITS:

Executive Producer(s): Cesil Moses
Producer(s): Morgan Neville, Kristine McKenna
Director(s): Morgan Neville
Screenwriter(s): Morgan Neville, Kristine McKenna
Cinematographer(s): Maurice Sydell
Editor(s): Ohio Perkel, Dylan Robertson
Composer(s)/Music: Dan Crane, William Ungerman
Sound Editor(s): Michael Kovalski

CONTACT INFO:
Visit Website

courtesy of
Arthouse Films

Figure 1.45
Woodstock Film Festival, “The Cool School, Directed by Morgan Neville”
WoodstockFilmFestival.com
Figure 1.46
Detail, Woodstock Film Festival, “The Cool School, Directed by Morgan Neville”
WoodstockFilmFestival.com
“Sheee . . . I’ll make that skinny kid wear his tongue like a necklace.”
—Neil Keen

The first influence in Bengston’s life was uncle Earle Jean, a rangy man whose reputation in Dodge City for matching clothes failed to shake his relatives’ faith in him as the clan sage—despite the fact he had sole control of the family finances.

So, when Uncle E. J. first saw one of baby Billy’s early sombreros and prophesied the boy’s future, the family loosely followed his orders to anoint the child’s hand, repeat a garbled phrase at three stations of the sun and dip his privates in a pail of powdered horsefly and muscatate. They put complete store by his prediction that the fearless Bengston was born blessed and would one day walk with angels.

Earle Jean died of the clap at 83, bequeathing the bank book and a vow to return in a different form.

Billy was then only seven but, as noted, had been greatly influenced by the man: almost daily he would recall and use some bit of E. J.’s wisdom—shut up; get out of here; always cover your tracks; etc.

With his share of the estate, he opened the first art gallery in town and was responsible for the discovery of Pollock, De Kooning, Klein and Running Cloud, most of whom went on to affirm Billy’s early faith.

The adolescent years are sketchy, but it is known that Bengston was athletically inclined. In high school he divided his time between art, gymnastics and senior problems, earning his letter in each. He thrilled in folkways, learning not from books but from PEOPLE such things as the relevance of the lunar cycle. He was, by age 16, known throughout the town—lo, even beyond, where news traveled by drum—far the size of his pecadillo.

He had countless friends and admirers among the street people and in the local corridors of power. (Freely translated his Indian name, “Gurn Wi-Che” means “Maker of Things.”) He received achievement awards and tokens of esteem as most of us receive bills. He was hosted and toasted variously as “The Wunderkind of Dodge City City,” the “Kansas Kiwaiis Kahaleitik,” and as a consistent winner of “Best Dressed.”

But he had heard of exciting things happening on the West Coast and decided to “light” out for Los Angeles. Above a podium of his own design, Billy led the town and the crowd not “Adieu,” but “Goodbye.” Then he went down to the leaves, pushed off on a raft of his own design, cast off to the sea, and, from there, surfed the currents to CA.

Dazzling and effortlessly he was at the hub of Los Angeles art. Those were the formative years, when Monday night on La Cienega meant the remnants were closed, a collector was someone who picked up the garbage, and Bengston actually grew to 90% of his adult height.

If during this period that Billy Al met the mysterious “Mrs. X,” who was to become his secret benefactor, forever unseen, it is rumored she was horribly scarred in a bizarre incident during the ’40s while assisting the Shoe-Stomp (S.S.) Division of the O.P.A. in a wartime escapade. (Guessing the truth soon became one of those cliché games at “Barneys,” a club of the seas.) A clue to the truth might be found in Bengston’s action paintings of that period: huge works, they set the art world in a tumult.

News travels fast, collectors came to mock and left with pictures. With the clan which has become his hallmark, Billy shrewdly invested his profit in shoes. Helplessly, his peers wondered how it was possible to afford a ’47 Indian, a Cushman Delinovator and a Roll-a-sage panel truck.

There followed a rapid series of successes. He won the Bijou Pro Campionship Prize, the Hawai Latitude, Sallican Majors Festival, the St. Buffalo Copa Palo Uno and Flash Grant.

His studio in the Delancy Quarter became a gathering place for notables. The vivacious Alice Marco soon became hostess ex-officio, preparing memorable meals and generally keeping the mammoth space tidy. (Lucianna had a weakness for her polio-meet, and she always kept a bowl of lime Jello at the ready for Giaccometti.) Miss Marco doubled as secretary, sorting the endless line of collectors and callers. She established a schedule which today is rigidly followed by Lady T., the seamy Miss from suburban Tulara who shields Bengston from the public.

From that period until 1960, Billy worked mainly in leather, completing a remarkable series of flexible village which was recently purchased, by the Bates Foundation for an undisclosed sum.

The travel afforded him by that sale is largely responsible for the pieces in the present exhibit. (About this work it has been widely reported that—“Though the pictorial field itself, being resistant to more than the most schematically elemental kind of conventional particularization (drawing) it is actually pretty much the source of the present lift in painted abstraction.” This is disputed by some.)

Nevertheless, the so-called “Woozie” period in not to be short-sold. With those works, Bengston proved it was possible to summarize an “emotion-phistic” characteristic without pandering to quiescent demands of a prolonged ethic.

He also bought a new truck.

Today, Billy Al Bengston lives and works somewhere in Los Angeles, his exact whereabouts a secret. In recent years he has taken great pains to protect his privacy, stymieing the social diversions and neglecting a raft of invitations. Some rumors have it that he is studying the movies, others vaguely suggest he was haphazardly discovered in a spray-booth tragedy. Whatever, he is withdrawn into a shell of inaccessibility and we shall simply have to be patient. Sustaining us to the hope that further work will appear, and the knowledge that, when it does, it will reveal another tempe sans-tobio into the Bengston mystique. Alan D. Shean, Dec. 1967.

Figure 2.1
Figure 2.2
Figure 2.3
Figure 2.4
Figure 2.5
Figure 2.6
Billy Al Bengston, *Brigitte*, 1959, Oil on canvas, 17 x 13”, Formerly in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Irving Blum, Los Angeles, CA, Current collection unknown.
Figure 2.7
Billy Al Bengston, *Count Dracula II*, 1960, Oil on canvas, 28 1/8 x 18 1/8”, Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA.
Figure 2.8
Billy Al Bengston, *Birmingham Small Arms I (BSA)*, 1961, Oil on canvas, 34 ½ x 37”, Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA.
Figure 2.9
Billy Al Bengston, *Busby*, 1963, Sprayed polymer and lacquer on Masonite, 80 x 60”, Collection unknown, Image courtesy of Kayne Griffin Corcoran Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.10
Figure 2.11
Figure 2.12
Installation photograph of entrance, *Billy Al Bengston* at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1968, Exhibition installation designed by Frank Gehry in collaboration with Billy Al Bengston, Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.13
Installation photograph, Billy Al Bengston at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1968. On left of the photograph: Billy Al Bengston, *Alfalfa*, 1964, Oil, polymer, and lacquer on Masonite, 46 ¾” x 31 ¾”, Formerly in the collection of Sterling Holloway, South Laguna Beach, CA, Current collection unknown, Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
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Installation photograph, *Billy Al Bengston* at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1968,
Photograph includes ephemeral materials, publicity mailings, and artists’ books, Photograph
courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.16
Installation photograph, *Billy Al Bengston* at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1968. In the upper left of the photograph: Billy Al Bengston, *Brigitte*, 1959, Oil on canvas, 17 x 13”, Formerly in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Irving Blum, Los Angeles, CA. Current collection unknown. In the back left of the photograph: Billy Al Bengston, *Busby*, 1963, Sprayed polymer and lacquer on Masonite, 80 x 60”, Collection unknown. Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.17
Installation photograph, *Billy Al Bengston* at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1968. In the center of the photograph: Billy Al Bengston, *Chaney*, 1965, Oil and lacquer on Masonite, 80 x 45 ¾”, Formerly in the collection of Sterling Holloway, South Laguna Beach, CA, Current collection unknown, Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
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Figure 2.19
Figure 2.20
Figure 2.21
Billy Al Bengston, signed “Moontang,” Vase, 1957, Black, brown, and white glazed stoneware, 9 ¾” high, Collection unknown.
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Peter Voulkos, *Untitled (Standing Jar)*, 1954-1956, Stoneware, 22 ½ x 16 x 17”, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
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Kenneth Price Ferus Gallery Mailer, 1961, Design by Billy Al Bengston, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.24
Figure 2.25
Installation photograph of Kenneth Price exhibition at Ferus Gallery, 1961, Photograph by Seymour Rosen, Seymour Rosen Archives, SPACES, Aptos, CA.
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Figure 2.27
Billy Al Bengston at the opening of his exhibition at Ferus Gallery, 1958, Photograph by Seymour Rosen, Seymour Rosen Archives, SPACES, Aptos, CA.
Figure 2.28
Figure 2.29
Figure 2.30
Jay DeFeo, Untitled (Everest), from the Mountain series, 1955, Oil on canvas, 100 5/8 x 74 1/4”, Oakland Museum of California, Oakland, CA.
Figure 2.31
Billy Al Bengston, *Untitled (Cannes)*, 1959, Collage with fabric, ink, and watercolor, 12 3/8 x 9 ½”, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.32
Billy Al Bengston and Edward Kienholz Ferus Gallery Mailer, 1959, Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.
Figure 2.33
Billy Al Bengston and Edward Kienholz Ferus Gallery Mailer, 1959, Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.
November 7, 1976

Monte Factor, President of the Board
Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art
12345 Ocean Drive
Los Angeles, California 90065

Dear Monte:

I have objectively appraised my performance for the last few months on the Board at LAICA and I see that I have been unable to put in the time necessary to do a good job. It is for this reason, and the imminent prospect of an even tighter personal work schedule, that I feel I must tender my resignation. I do this with regret and hope that you will call on me in the future to work on smaller projects.

Please express my regrets to the members of the board and staff of LAICA. I offer my sincerest good wishes to all of you for a job well done and well worth doing.

Warmest regards,

Billy Al Bengston

Figure 2.34
Figure 2.35
An exhibition at Billy Al Bengston’s Artist Studio, with works by Ed Ruscha, Peter Alexander, and John McCracken, 1970, Photograph by Billy Al Bengston, Photograph courtesy of Artist Studio, Venice, CA.
Figure 2.36
Billy Al Bengston decorating Ferus Gallery for the opening of the Valentine show, 1960, Photographer unknown, Photograph courtesy of Billy Al Bengston, Venice, CA.
Figure 2.37
Billy Al Bengston, *Big Hollywood*, 1960, Oil on canvas, 78 x 90”, Collection of Artist Studio, Venice, CA, Photograph courtesy of Samuel Freeman Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.38
Billy Al Bengston, *Grace*, 1959, Oil on canvas, Framed: 49 ¾ x 42 ½ x 2”, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.39
Billy Al Bengston, *Kim*, 1960, Oil on canvas, 10 ¼ x 10 ¼”, Collection of Ed Ruscha, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.40
Billy Al Bengston Ferus Gallery Mailer, 1961, Design by Billy Al Bengston, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.41
Installation photographs, recreation of *Billy Al Bengston at Ferus 1960*, February 14, 2010, Samuel Freeman Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, Photograph courtesy of Samuel Freeman Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.42
Man Ray, *Optical Hopes and Illusions*, 1944, banjo frame, ball, mirror, 28” high, current collection unknown.
Figure 2.43
Figure 2.44
Billy Al Bengston, *Count Dracula at the Chessboard*, 1960, Oil on canvas, 18” x 16”, Private Collection.
Figure 2.45
C & H Sugar Box, c. 1950s.
Figure 2.46

Overall dimensions: 80 7/8×114”, Tate, London, UK.
Figure 2.47
Figure 2.48
Figure 2.49
Billy Al Bengston, *Back Fender*, 1961, Oil on canvas, 36 ¾ x 34 ¾ x 1 ½”, Collection of Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.50
AN EXHIBITION OF RECENT WORK BY BILLY AL BENGSTON
MONDAY, NOVEMBER 13th UNTIL SATURDAY, DECEMBER 2nd
AT THE FERUS GALLERY 723 NORTH LA CIENEGA BOULEVARD
LOS ANGELES 69, CALIF. • OPENING NOVEMBER 13th 8 UNTIL 10 P.M.

Figure 2.51
Billy Al Bengston Ferus Gallery Mailer, 1961, Design by Billy Al Bengston, Charles Brittin Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.52
Ed Ruscha, Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas, 1963, Oil on canvas, 64 ½ x 121 ¾”, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH.
Figure 2.53
Figure 2.54-2.55
Figure 2.56
Figure 2.57
Figure 2.58
Billy Al Bengston, *Buster*, 1962, Oil and sprayed lacquer on Masonite, 60 ¾ x 60”, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA.
Figure 2.59
Billy Al Bengston, photograph by Marvin Silver, 1963.
A confirmed golfer, John McLaughlin applies the same "pure concentration" to his game as to his paintings, one of which stands on San Clemente links. McLaughlin plays twice a week, spends rest of his time composing abstractions which, he hopes, will "induce contemplation."

A motorcycle buff, Billy Al Bengston keeps two of the vehicles in his studio at Ocean Beach, prized for racing at nearby tracks. Their glimmering surfaces harmonize with the dazzling images of his paintings which he produces with the aid of spray guns, oil paints, plastics and lacquer.

An expert skindiver, Roger Kuntz explores the waters of Crystal Cove, often sniffs seafood for his family. His paintings, however, are inspired largely by landlubber scenes—the curves, shadows and traffic signals of freeway networks and tunnels, which he flattens into abstract patterns.

Figure 2.60
Figure 2.61
Standard Station, California.
Figure 2.62
Master Sergeant Stripes.
Figure 2.63
Figure 2.64
Figure 2.65
Billy Al Bengston Ferus Gallery Mailer, 1962, Design by Billy Al Bengston, Charles Brittin Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.66
Artists’ protest poster and manifesto, "Stop: We Dissent," 1965, Designed by Hardy Hanson, Charles Brittin Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.67
Ferus Gallery, May 15, 1965, Photograph by Charles Brittin, Charles Brittin Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.68
Ferus Gallery, May 15, 1965, Photograph by Charles Brittin, Charles Brittin Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
A CALL FOR THE IMMEDIATE RESIGNATION OF ALL THE ROCKEFELLERS FROM THE BOARD
OF TRUSTEES OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

There is a group of extremely wealthy people who are using art as a means of self-glorification and as a form of social acceptability. They use art as a disguise, a cover for their brutal involvement in all spheres of the war machine.

These people seek to appease their guilt with gifts of blood money and donations of works of art to the Museum of Modern Art. To an artist's feel that there is no moral justification whatsoever for the Museum of Modern Art to exist at all if it must rely solely on the continued acceptance of dirty money. By accepting money from these wealthy people, the museum in destroying the integrity of art.

These people have been in actual control of the museum's policies since its founding. With this power they have been able to manipulate artists' ideas; sterilize art of any form of social protest and indictment of the oppressive forces in society; and therefore render art totally irrelevant to the existing social crisis.

1. According to Ferdinand Lundberg in his book, The Rich and the Super-Rich, the Rockefellers own 65% of the Standard Oil Corporations. In 1966, according to Seymour M. Hersh in his book, Chemical and Biological Warfare, the Standard Oil Corporation of California — which is a special interest of David Rockefeller (Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art) — leased one of its plants to United Technology Center (UTC) for the specific purpose of manufacturing napalm.

2. According to Lundberg, the Rockefeller brothers own 20% of the McDonnell Aircraft Corporation (manufacturers of the Phantom and Banhoo jet fighters which were used in the Korean War). According to Hersh, the McDonnell Corporation has been deeply involved in chemical and biological warfare research.

3. According to George Thayer in his book, The War Business, the Chase Manhattan Bank (of which David Rockefeller is Chairman of the Board) — as well as the McDonnell Aircraft Corporation and North American Airlines (two Rockefeller interests) — are represented on the committee of the Defense Industry Advisory Council (DIAC) which serves as a liaison group between the domestic arms manufacturers and the International Logistics Negotiations (ILN) which reports directly to the International Security Affairs Division in the Pentagon.

Therefore we demand the immediate resignation of all the Rockefellers from the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art.

New York, November 10, 1969
GUERRILLA ART ACTION GROUP
Jon Hendricks
Jean Toche

Figure 2.69
Figure 2.70
Figure 2.71
Figure 2.72
Joe Goode, *Torn Cloud Painting 73*, 1972, Oil on canvas, 72 x 96", Collection of the Artist, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.73
Poster for *War Babies*, Huysman Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, 1961, Poster created by Jerry McMillan (photographer) and Joe Goode (design), Image courtesy of Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.
Figure 2.74
Figure 2.75
April 28, 1971

I, Joe Goode, hereinafter referred to as Jose Bueno (I.e. payee) agree to borrow the sum of $500 (five hundred American dollars and no cents) from Billy Al Bengston, hereinafter referred to as B.A.B. (payor) for an unspecified amount of time with the further understanding that it (said contract) will in no way whatsoever jeopardize or impair my friendship and relationship in general with B.A.B.

Jose Bueno

Wherefore I, further agree to keep on coming to dinners and going out with B.A.B even if it takes a little longer than anticipated to reimburse the payor. I, the payee, Jose Bueno, or Joe Goode agree to the conditions stipulated above as my signature below denotes:

[Signature]

Joe Goode, payee
(Jose Bueno)

[Signature]

Mary Frances Donoghue
Witness

4-28-71

[Signature]

4-28-71

Figure 2.76
Figure 2.77

Ed Ruscha Modeling for Jerry in his Naval Reserve uniform with his painting SU, 1962,
Photograph by Jerry McMillan.
Figure 2.78
*Ed modeling for Jerry in his Naval Reserve uniform with American Flag, 1962,* Photograph by Jerry McMillan.
Figure 2.79
Ed Ruscha, 1964, Photograph by Dennis Hopper, Image courtesy of The Hopper Art Trust of the Dennis Hopper Estate, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.80
Billy Al Bengston, 1964, Photograph by Dennis Hopper, Image courtesy of The Hopper Art Trust of the Dennis Hopper Estate, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.81
Andy Warhol, Billy Al Bengston, and Dennis Hopper at 1963 Marcel Duchamp retrospective at Pasadena Art Museum, Photograph by Julian Wasser.
Figure 2.82
Billy Al Bengston, Altered newspaper advertisement for women’s clothing, 1960-61, Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.
Figure 2.83
*The Studs* Ferus Gallery Poster, 1965 (inaccurately dated to 1964 in existing literature), Design by Billy Al Bengston, Hal Glicksman Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.84-2.85
Billy Al Bengston and Peter Alexander, Locksley Shea Gallery, Minneapolis, MN, 1971, front and back of postcard, Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.
Figure 2.86
Figure 2.87
Figure 2.88
Billy Al Bengston, *Big Jim McLain*, 1967, Polyurethane and lacquer on aluminum, 60 x 58”, Collection of Joan and Jack Quinn, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 2.89
Installation photograph, Billy Al Bengston at Mizuno Gallery, 1970, Photograph by Billy Al Bengston, Billy Al Bengston Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.
Figure 2.90
Figure 2.91
Figure 2.92
Figure 2.93

Figure 2.94
Figure 2.95
Figure 2.96
Figure 2.97

The advance word on Billy Al Bengston, whose one-man exhibition of paintings is currently at the Vancouver Art Gallery, was that he is “free, flamboyant, role-playing,” and that’s just what guests found when they met him. With the white-suited Billy Al are, left to right, Page Samis and Mr. and Mrs. Fred Douglas.
Figure 2.98
Figure 3.1
Figure 3.2
Larry Bell, *Untitled*, 1972, Installation at the Pasadena Art Museum, 1972, Photograph by Patricia Faure, Photograph courtesy of the estate of Patricia Faure and the Norton Simon Museum Archives, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.3
Figure 3.4-3.6
Photography
Steve Kahn — pp. 8, 9, 24, 25.
Frank Thomas — pp. 2, 3, 7.
Andee Cohn — pp. 12, 13.

Book Design
John Coy & Assc.

Printing
Triangle Lithograph Company. Los Angeles.

Figure 3.7
Figure 3.8-3.9
Figure 3.10
Figure 3.11
Figure 3.12
Dr. Lux Business Card, undated, Cardstock, 3 ½ x 2”, Collection of the Author.
Figure 3.13
Larry Bell, *Teachers* (detail), 1955, Ink on newsprint, entire sheet: 17 x 14”, Collection of the Artist, Venice, CA.
Figure 3.14
Figure 3.15
Larry Bell, *L. Bell’s House*, 1959, Oil on canvas, 48 x 60”, Private Collection, Image courtesy of Frank Lloyd Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.16
Larry Bell, *Untitled*, 1959, Oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 39 1/2”, Collection of the Artist, Venice, CA, Image courtesy of Frank Lloyd Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.17
Figure 3.18
Larry Bell, *Untitled*, 1959, Cracked glass, gold paint, wood, mirror, 11 x 12 x 4”, Collection of the Artist, Venice, CA, Image courtesy of Frank Lloyd Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.19
Larry Bell, *Untitled*, 1959, Glass box with blue paper and cracked glass, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.20
Joseph Cornell, *Habitat Group for a Shooting Gallery*, 1943, Mixed Media, 15 ½ x 11 1/8 x 4 ¼”, Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA.
Figure 3.21
Billy Al Bengston and Larry Bell at an exhibition opening, 1962, Photograph by William Claxton, Location unknown.
Figure 3.22
Larry Bell, *Li’l Orphan Annie*, 1960, Oil on canvas, 96 x 122”, Collection of the Artist, Venice, CA, Image courtesy of Frank Lloyd Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.23
Figure 3.24
Larry Bell Ferus Gallery Mailer, 1962, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.25
Figure 3.26
Larry Bell, *Old Cotton Fields Back Home*, 1962, Acrylic on canvas, 65 x 65”, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Willem de Kooning, *Montauk Highway*, 1958, Oil and combined media on heavy paper mounted on canvas, 59 x 48”, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.28
Larry Bell, *Conrad Hawk*, 1961, Acrylic on canvas with glass, $66 \frac{1}{4} \times 66 \times 3 \frac{3}{4}$”, Menil Collection, Houston, TX.
Figure 3.29
Larry Bell, *Lux at the Ferus*, 1961, Glass, household mirror, wood and paint, 13 x 11 ¾ x 4 7/8”, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.30
Figure 3.31
Larry Bell at opening reception of 1963 Marcel Duchamp Retrospective, Pasadena Art Museum, Photograph by Julian Wasser, Image courtesy of Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.
Figure 3.32
Figure 3.33-3.35
Larry Bell, *L. Bell’s House, Part II*, 1962, Mirrored glass and wood on Formica base, 25 x 25 x 25”, Private Collection, Images courtesy of Frank Lloyd Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.36
Figure 3.37
Figure 3.38
Figure 3.39
Larry Bell Ferus Gallery Mailer, 1963, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.40
Figure 3.41
Figure 3.42
Figure 3.43
Larry Bell in his Market Street studio in Venice, CA, 1963, Collection of the artist, Image courtesy of Marvin Silver and Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.
Figure 3.44
Larry Bell in his Market Street studio in Venice, CA, 1963, Collection of the artist, Image courtesy of Marvin Silver and Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.
Figure 3.45
Larry Bell in front of “Mike, The Tailor”, 1964. Photograph by Dennis Hopper, Image courtesy of The Hopper Art Trust of the Dennis Hopper Estate, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.46
Figure 3.47
Larry Bell, Pace Gallery Exhibition, 1965, Photographs by Howard Harrison, Images courtesy of Pace Gallery, New York, NY.
Figure 3.48
Larry Bell, Pace Gallery Exhibition, 1965, Photographs by Howard Harrison, Images courtesy of Pace Gallery, New York, NY.
Figure 3.49
Larry Bell, *Untitled*, 1964, Coated glass with chrome-plated brass frame, 14 ¼ x 14 ¼ x 14 ¼”, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA.
Figure 3.50
Figure 3.51
Larry Bell, *Untitled*, 1965, Glass coated with silicon monoxide and chrome, 14 x 14 x 14”
Collection of the artist, Venice, CA, Image courtesy of Frank Lloyd Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.52
Larry Bell Ferus Gallery Mailer, 1965, Irving Blum Gallery and Ferus Gallery Announcements, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.
Figure 3.53
“Larry Bell at Pace Gallery,” *Artforum* 4, no. 3 (November 1965): rear cover.
Figure 3.54
Figure 3.55
Figure 3.56
Figure 3.57
Figure 3.58
Figure 3.59
Figure 3.60
Robert Morris, *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, 1961, Wood and internal speaker, Wooden Cube: 9 ¾ x 9 ¾ x 9 ¾"; Overall: 46 x 9 ¾ x 9 ¾", Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA.
Figure 3.61-3.62
Larry Bell, *Untitled*, 1966 (2 views), Cacuum coated glass, Cube: 12 1/8 x 12 1/8 x 12 1/8”, Base (not pictured) 46 5/8 x 12 3/8 x 12 3/8”, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.63
Figure 3.64
Figure 3.65
Figure 3.66
*Artforum* 5, no. 10 (Summer 1967): front cover. Illustration of Larry Bell, *Memories of Mike*, 1966, Coated glass and metal frame, 23 ½ x 23 ½ x 23 ½”, Collection of Arnold Glimcher, NY.
Figure 3.67
Figure 3.68
Figure 3.69
Figure 3.70
“Portrait of Bell and Dr. Lux with Furniture de Lux,” ARTnews 81, no. 4 (April 1982): front cover.
Figure 3.71
Figure 3.72
Figure 3.73
Figure 3.74
Figure 3.75
André Breton and Marcel Duchamp, window installation for the publication of Breton’s *Arcane 17*, Brentano’s, New York City, 1945, Photograph by Lynn Rosenthal, Private collection, Image courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA. Duchamp and Breton are visible as reflected in the window.
Figure 3.76
ARRANGEMENT OF THE RECEIVING POINT $R$ TO THE SOURCE (RELATIVE). $R$ IS TAKEN TO BE A GENERAL POINT IN THE $x-y$ PLANE WITH THE SOURCE LYING CENTRALLY AND SYMMETRICALLY TO THE $z$ AXIS.

Figure 3.77
Figure 3.78
Larry Bell, Photograph by Jerry McMillan, as reproduced in *Los Angeles 6*, exh. cat. (Vancouver, Canada: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1968), 10.
Figure 3.79
Figure 3.80
Larry Bell’s studio, 1970, Photo by Larry Bell, Image courtesy of Billy Al Bengston, Venice, CA.
Figure 3.81
Figure 3.82
Figure 3.83
Figure 3.84
Larry Bell, *Untitled*, 1972, Installation at the Pasadena Art Museum, 1972, Photograph by Patricia Faure, Photograph courtesy of the estate of Patricia Faure and the Norton Simon Museum Archives, Los Angeles, CA. Note: Larry Bell is the individuals standing to the right of center wearing a hat.
Figure 3.85
Dan Graham, Two Cubes, One Rotated 45°, 1986, Armor metal, glass, mirror, 7’ 4 1/2” x 13’ 9 2/5” x 9’ 10 1/10”, Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain Nord Pas-de-Calais, France.
Figure 3.86
Figure 3.87
Figure 3.88
Figure 3.89
Ed Ruscha, *Premium*, 1971, video (color, sound), 24 minutes, Film and Television Archive, University of California, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.90
Ed Ruscha, *Premium*, 1971, video (color, sound), 24 minutes, Film and Television Archive, University of California, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.91
Ed Ruscha, *Actual Size*, 1962, Oil on canvas, 67 1/16 x 72 1/16”, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.92
Figure 3.93
Figure 3.94
*Portrait multiple de Marcel Duchamp (Five-way Portrait of Marcel Duchamp)*, 1917, Photographer unknown, Photo postcard, 3 ½ x 5 ¼”, Private collection, Image courtesy of Francis M. Naumann Fine Art, New York, NY.
Figure 3.95
Figure 3.96
Figure 3.97
Figure 3.98
Figure 3.99
Figure 3.100
Larry Bell, The Cat (also called Chairs in Space), installation at Detroit Institute of Arts with Corner lamps and Chairs de Lux IV, 1982, Photograph by Thomas P. Vinetz, Image courtesy of Frank Lloyd Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 3.101
Figure 3.102
Figure 3.103
Larry Bell, *The Dilemma of Griffin’s Cat*, 1980, ½” plate glass coated with Inconel, 12 panels each 10’ x 5’, overall floor space approximately 17 x 17’, San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, TX.
To begin with, how do we see an object? Rays of light bounce off the object, enter our eyes, and are focused on the retinas by the lenses, creating a two-dimensional picture of the object in each eye. Our brain combines those two images and provides us with a three-dimensional image of the object.

Most people know that from an object a mirror creates the illusion of another object, one that “isn’t really there”—an image. How does it do this? As we’ve just said, some rays of light bounce off the object and travel straight into the eye. Other rays bounce off the object, and off a mirror, and then enter the eye. The rays bounce off the mirror according to the “Law of Reflection”: the angle of incidence “I” (the angle between the incident ray and a line perpendicular to the mirror) is equal to the angle of reflection “R” (the angle between the reflected ray and that perpendicular line).

The rays create a picture that looks just like the original object and appears to be just as far behind the mirror as the object is in front of it. There is, however, a subtle difference between object and mirror-image, as we all know: you brush your teeth with your left hand, but that mirror person seems to be a righty.

Figure 3.104
Several things are worth noting. One is that the only squares from which a contestant can win are those on the same row (or vertical) as the square of the Target Chair. A win is not possible from any square, however, except when the Player Chair is Crossing with the Target Chair.

Chairs' chances depend very strongly on the relative orientation of Player and Target Chairs. For example, the Player-Chair’s “crossed” diagram has 0 wins to win on one-third of the throw. On the other hand, when the chairs are antiparallel, the chances drop to just over 1%, and they drop even more when the chairs are parallel.

The chances are best near or at the target image. Try to get on the same row or column as a target image, crossed with it, and as close to it as possible.

When opponent is in a favorable position, and you throw doubles, and you have no winning move, think about spacing his position by setting the Target Chair. You’ll want to set here your chair’s row in relation to the target image, and you’ll want to understand how your chair and its images relate to the images of your opponent’s chair. In the beginning I think it’s best to observe and move instinctively, but later, after gaining experience, there are a truly infinite number of effective relationships. But there are only 30 possible combinations of the dice, so we have some discipline in our pens. These 30 moves are used it determined by the strategy of each player.

Figure 3.105
Figure 3.106-3.107

*L’Opposition et les cases conjuguées sont réconciliées* (Opposition and Sister Squares Are Reconciled), 1932, cover and interior, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA.
Figure 3.108
*By or of Marcel Duchamp or Rrose Sélavy*, Pasadena Art Museum, 1963, Photograph by Frank J. Thomas, Image courtesy of the Frank J. Thomas Archives, Portland, OR.
Figure 3.109
Marcel Duchamp, 1958, Photograph by Arnold Rosenberg, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
Figure 3.110-3.111
Figure 4.1
Figure 4.2
Figure 4.3
Figure 4.4
Judy Gerowitz, Purple Atmosphere #4, Santa Barbara, CA, 1969, Fireworks, Photograph by John Waggaman, Image courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.
Figure 4.5
Judy Chicago: Painting, Sculpture, Photographs of Atmospheres, exh. cat. (Fullerton, CA: California State College, Fullerton, 1970), front cover.
Figure 4.6

Figure 4.7

Figure 4.8
Figure 4.9
Figure 4.10
Raphael Soyer, *Untitled 12 (Portrait of a Man)*, ca. 1960, Pencil and watercolor, 9 x 6 1/2”, RO Gallery, Long Island City, NY.
Figure 4.11
Figure 4.12
Figure 4.13
Judy Gerowitz, *Small Early Painting*, 1961, Acrylic on canvas, 18 ½ x 20”, Collection of the Artist, Belen, NM, Image courtesy of Nye + Brown, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 4.14
Judy Gerowitz, Small Slatted Sculpture, circa 1961, Acrylic on wood, 4 ½ x 8 x 1 ½”, Collection of the Artist, Belen, NM, Image courtesy of Nye + Brown, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 4.15
Figure 4.16
Figure 4.17
Judy Gerowitz, Birth, 1963, Acrylic on Masonite, 8’ x 4’. Destroyed, Image courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.
Figure 4.18
Judy Gerowitz, *Bigamy*, 1963, Acrylic on Masonite, 8’ x 4’, Destroyed, Image courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.
Figure 4.19
Judy Gerowitz, *In My Mother’s House*, 1963 or 1964, Painted clay, approximately 16 x 24 x 10”
Lost or destroyed, as reproduced in Douglas McClellan, “Sculpture,” *Artforum* 2, no. 12 (Summer 1964): 73.
Figure 4.20
Judy Gerowitz, Thesis Exhibition Leaflet, 1964, ink on paper, approx. 2 1/2 x 2 1/2”, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
Figure 4.21
Figure 4.22
Craig Kauffman, Ferus Gallery Poster, 1962, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
Craig Kauffman, No. 8, 1963, 1963, Acrylic lacquer on plastic, 80 x 42”, Private Collection, Image Courtesy of Frank Lloyd Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.
Figure 4.24
Figure 4.25
Figure 4.26
Billy Al Bengston, *Untitled*, 1962, Nitrocellulose lacquer and acrylic on Masonite, 9 x 7”, Collection of the Artist, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 4.27
Figure 4.28
Ed Kienholz, *Back Seat Dodge ’38*, 1964, Painted fiberglass and flock, 1938 Dodge, recorded music and player, chicken wire, beer bottles, artificial grass, and cast plaster figures, 66 x 120 x 156”, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 4.29
Judy Gerowitz, *Aluminum Rearrangeable Game Board*, 1965, Sandblasted aluminum, 18 x 18”, 12 pieces of various sizes, Collection of the Artist, Belen, NM, Image courtesy of Nye + Brown, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 4.30
Judy Gerowitz, *Multicolor Rearrangeable Game Board*, 1965, Acrylic on wood, 18 x 18”, 12 pieces of various sizes, Collection of the Artist, Belen, NM, Image courtesy of Nye + Brown, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 4.31
I think, obviously enough, to teach or to question certain very basic ideas about art, its meaning, and function. The most overtly didactic of the artists I have been discussing, his formulation of issues is in many ways the sharpest. I like particularly the way in which he subverts the “purist” reading one would normally give to such geometric arrangements by interpreting a content that jars and does not mesh with any geometric interpretation. He does this first of all by changing normal scale, and not relating one part to another as, say, Diller would, as well as by relating the pieces to the wall and floors of the room they are in. Having no parts, they are only one continuous, oversized volume. Thus, they look like clodhose objects, (with vague references to basic structural units like door frames enhancing this impression). But if they are objects, they have no function; even if they are sculpture they may have no function greater than focusing the attention on fundamental principles. (What does this say about the role of art in a utilitarian culture?) I don’t think it is exaggerating to see Morris as posing such questions as: what is the function of the artist? What are the bases of sculpture? What is structure, what is construction and what is their relationship? (This involvement with process and with the very act of creating or making, is part of Morris’s total statement, as evidenced as well in his smaller, more complex, but finally less subtle, lead pieces.) Ultimately, of course, he questions the limits of art and the very activity of the artist. Such a gloss on a body of work makes it seem so full of extra-visual ideas that the visual expressiveness must of necessity be limited. Yet that is not quite the case in Morris’s work, and finally it is what makes his art so challenging and elusive. Like Lichtenstein’s paintings that are overburdened by the weight of art history, Morris’s sculpture manages to survive the theoretical load it must bear and to remain, as art, elegant and expressive—again, more so, in my opinion, in these demanding plywood pieces than in the elaborate metal, lead and glass works which tend to drown in the rich complex of ideas that animate them.

Figure 4.32
Figure 4.33
Judy Gerowitz with Minimalist Sculpture, 1968, Photograph by John Waggaman, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
Figure 4.34
Figure 4.35
Figure 4.36
Figure 4.37
Figure 4.38
Judy Gerowitz, *Lilith (Trinity)*, 1965, Sprayed acrylic on canvas-covered plywood, 5’ 4” x 10’ 7” x 5’, Destroyed, Installation at Rolf Nelson Gallery, 1966, Image courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.
Figure 4.39
Figure 4.40
Judy Gerowitz, *Sunset Squares*, 1965, Latex paint on canvas-covered plywood, four structures, height ranges from 3’ to larger than 8’, Destroyed, Installation at Rolf Nelson Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, 1966.¹

¹ The installation view of *Sunset Squares* at Rolf Nelson Gallery was also reproduced in Ann Goldstein, ed. *A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958-1968*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 190. The image label incorrectly reported the height of the smallest square as 2’.
Figure 4.41
Judy Gerowitz, *Zig Zag*, 1965, Sprayed acrylic on canvas-covered plywood, dimensions unknown, Destroyed, Installation in Judy Gerowitz’s Pasadena, CA studio, Image courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.
Figure 4.42
Figure 4.43
Judy Gerowitz with *Sunset Squares*, 1966, Photographs by Jerry McMillan, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
Figure 4.44
Judy Gerowitz with *Sunset Squares*, 1966, Photographs by Jerry McMillan, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
Figure 4.45
Figure 4.46
The Rooms Company, consisting of Judy Gerowitz, Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, *Dry Ice Environment (Disappearing Environments I)*, 1967, CA, Dry ice, Century City Mall, Los Angeles, CA, Photographs courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.
Figure 4.47
The Rooms Company, consisting of Judy Gerowitz, Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, *Dry Ice Environment (Disappearing Environments I)*, 1967, CA, Dry ice, Century City Mall, Los Angeles, CA, Photographs courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.
Figure 4.48
The Rooms Company, consisting of Judy Gerowitz, Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, *Dry Ice Environment (Disappearing Environments I)*, 1967, CA, Dry ice, Century City Mall, Los Angeles, CA, Photographs courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.
Figure 4.49
The Rooms Company, consisting of Judy Gerowitz, Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, *Dry Ice Environment (Disappearing Environments II)*, 1968, Dry ice and flares, Century City Mall, Los Angeles, CA, Photographs courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.
Figure 4.50
The Rooms Company, consisting of Judy Gerowitz, Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, *Dry Ice Environment (Disappearing Environments II)*, 1968, Dry ice and flares, Century City Mall, Los Angeles, CA, Photographs courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.
Figure 4.51
Figure 4.52
Figure 4.53
Figure 4.54
Figure 4.55
Claes Oldenburg, *Bedroom Ensemble*, 1963, Wood, vinyl, metal, artificial fur, cloth, and paper, Installation space: 3 x 6.5 x 5.25 m, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada.
Figure 4.56
Figure 4.57
Figure 4.58
Figure 4.59
Allan Kaprow, *Fluids*, 1967, organized by the Pasadena Art Museum, Pasadena, CA. Photograph by Dennis Hopper, Image courtesy of The Hopper Art Trust of the Dennis Hopper Estate, Los Angeles, CA.
The Rooms Company, consisting of Judy Gerowitz, Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, *Dry Ice Environment (Disappearing Environments II)*, 1968, Dry ice and flares, Century City Mall, Los Angeles, CA, Photographs courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.
Figure 4.61
The Rooms Company, consisting of Judy Gerowitz, Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, *Dry Ice Environment (Disappearing Environments II)*, 1968, Dry ice and flares, Century City Mall, Los Angeles, CA, Photographs courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.
Figure 4.62
The Rooms Company, consisting of Judy Gerowitz, Lloyd Hamrol, Eric Orr, *Dry Ice Environment (Disappearing Environments II)*, 1968, Dry ice and flares, Century City Mall, Los Angeles, CA, Photographs courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.
Figure 4.63
Judy Gerowitz, *Cubes and Cylinders*, 1967, 12 identical cubes and 12 identical cylinders, gold plated steel, each: 1 ½ x 1 ½ x 1 ½”, rearrangeable forms, Collection of University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, MI.
Judy Gerowitz, *1 Set Gerowitz Rare Wood Blocks*, 1967, 12 rosewood blocks in canvas bag with instructions, bag: 11 ½ x 12 ¼ x 4", edition of 12, rearrangeable forms, Collection unknown, Image courtesy of David Richards Gallery, Santa Fe, NM.
Figure 4.65
Judy Gerowitz, *Gold-Plated Game*, 1967, 12 x 12” board, 7 cylinders, Gold plated steel, Dimensions of cylinders unknown, rearrangeable forms, Collection unknown, Image courtesy of Judy Chicago, Belen, NM.
Figure 4.66
Figure 4.67
Figure 4.68
Judy Gerowitz, *Iridescent Domes #2 (Small)*, 1968, Domes: sprayed acrylic lacquer inside successive formed clear acrylic domes, 2 x 5” each, Installed size: 15 x 15 x 4”, rearrangeable forms, Collection of the Artist, Image courtesy of Nye + Brown, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 4.69  
Judy Gerowitz, *Multi-colored domes (small)*, 1968, Domes: sprayed acrylic lacquer inside successive formed clear acrylic domes, 2 x 5” each, Installed size: 15 x 15 x 4”, rearrangeable forms, Collection of the Artist, Image courtesy of Nye + Brown, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure 4.70
Figure 4.71
Figure 4.72
Figure 4.73
Figure 4.74
Craig Kauffman, *Untitled*, 1968, Acrylic and lacquer on vacuum-formed Plexiglas, 22 1/2 x 52 x 12 1/2”, Collection of Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, CA.
Figure 4.75
Figure 4.76
Judy Gerowitz, *Optical Shapes #3*, 1969, Acrylic on matt board, 11 x 11”, Collection of the Artist, Belen, NM, Image courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.
Figure 4.77
Judy Gerowitz, *Pasadena Lifesavers Yellow Series #2*, 1969, Sprayed acrylic on acrylic, 60 x 60”, Collection of the Artist, Belen, NM, Image courtesy of Through the Flower Archives, Belen, NM.
Figure 4.78
Figure 4.79
Figure 4.80
Poster advertisement for New Work by Lloyd Hamrol and Three Atmospheres by Judy Gerowitz, 1970, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
Figure 4.81
Judy Chicago, California State College Exhibition Postcard, 1970, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
Figure 4.82
Judy Chicago, California State College Exhibition Postcard, 1970, Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
Figure 4.83
Figure 4.84
Judy Chicago, Alona Hamilton Cooke, and Jack Glenn at Main Street Gym, Los Angeles, CA, 1970, Photographs by Jerry McMillan, Images courtesy of Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.
Figure 4.85
Judy Chicago, Alona Hamilton Cooke, and Jack Glenn at Main Street Gym, Los Angeles, CA, 1970, Photographs by Jerry McMillan, Images courtesy of Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.
Figure C.1
George Herms, Astro Poet, 1962, mixed media, 49 x 17 x 11”, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA.
Figure C.2
George Herms at “Earful” Tap City Circus, 1972, Photograph by Jerry Maybrook, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.
LYNDA BENGLIS
at
THE CLOCKTOWER
108 Leonard Street (at Broadway)
opening Thursday, December 6
through January 20
Thurs 1–6, Fri & Sat 1–6

Figure C.3
Figure C.4
Figure C.5
Lynda Benglis, Exhibition Announcement Card, 1974, Photograph by Annie Leibovitz.
Figure C.6
Figure C.7