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## Reviews

Jennifer Doyle

City of Angles


Alexandra Schwartz. Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010. 336 pp., 74 b/w illus., 20 color illus., 77 b/w. $45.00, $26.95 paper


Los Angeles mythology is hard to cut through: The city has no center, no sense of history, it has no depth. It is the city that plays itself and the city that forgets itself.

Big statements about the city’s shallowness usually come from visitors: for Fredric Jameson, the Bonaventure Hotel signals a world that is all surface, no depth; Jean Baudrillard’s Los Angeles is a simulacrum—it is “no longer real,” but then again neither are “the United States surrounding it.” As Amelia Jones points out in an essay on “theoretical” Los Angeles, the disorientation ascribed to the city is a displacement for the city’s sense of displacement—the city’s diversity, its layered and quite visible history of conquest and colonization, its refusal to be legible from a New York and Eurocentric perspective have been misconceived or misdiagnosed. The nothingness that characterizes the city as “postmodern” is itself symptomatic of the speaker’s valuation of what is already there, and what is not. The city’s perspective, language, and preferred codes are all less significant in a place that used to be in Mexico and was something else before then—a place said to be slipping into the Pacific. This review is centered on different attempts to navigate theoretical and historical Los Angeles.

Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles is small, narrow, and fat—it looks and feels like a meaty city guide. Alexandra Schwartz’s portrait of an artist’s relationship with the city opens with one chapter surveying critical discourse on the Los Angeles art world, another mapping the substantial overlap between the “Venice Mafia” (as some of the Ferus Gallery artists were known), Beat culture, and the New Hollywood of the late 1960s. (The intersection of the Ferus scene and Hollywood is the focus of Hunter Drohojowska-Philp’s 2011 book: Rebels in Paradise: The Los Angeles Art Scene and the 1960s, and is also the subject of a chapter in Cécile Whiting’s Pop L.A.) Schwartz covers that ground well, especially for readers unfamiliar with the subject. The book’s most rewarding chapters, which follow, are also the most conflicted. These explore the intimate links between Ruscha’s work and discourse about Los Angeles, and the artist’s cultivation of his public persona as a member of the Ferus “studio” set.

Ruscha’s portraits of parking lots, apartment buildings, gasoline stations, and the length of the Sunset Strip are both about Los Angeles vernacular culture and part of it. Ruscha helped establish the city’s “look” in the critical imaginary. Schwartzcatalogues diverse exchanges between Ruscha and theorists of the city, including Scott Brown, Robert Venturi, Kenneth Frampton, and Reyner Banham. Banham’s Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies remains one of the most influential statements about the city. Ruscha gave Banham much to work with: iconic images of the city drained of all of the magic of the iconic subject, but also an affect that supported the author’s own investment in the city’s transformation of cosmopolitanism.

In an interview with the author staged for a BBC television documentary, Reyner Banham lores Los Angeles, the artist models a casual embrace of standardization that Banham wants to claim as typical of the city. Banham asks, “Is something a virtue?” to which Ruscha replies, “Oh yeah, definitely.” Ruscha is relaxed about the city’s lack of commitment to its own architecture. Schwartz suggests that it isn’t just Ruscha’s subject that feels Angeleno to Banham, it’s Ruscha’s disavowal of his attachment to his subject. That nonalignment mirrors what Banham understands as the city’s relationship to itself.

Schwartz squares Ruscha’s blank, depopulated canvases with the artist’s refusal of the relevance of even the most literal references of his work. Of the relationship between his work and the city, he claimed, “I could have done it anywhere” (2). For Schwartz, the artist’s persona and his work are linked by this “economy of denial,” in which his disavowal of intention or feeling either mirrors or amplifies the blank affect of the image itself. Ruscha’s “ambiguous deployment of irony” and his “ambivalent authorial position” (219) are thus defining aspects of both his persona and his work.

This recuperation of an artist’s noncommittal evasion will be familiar to students of Pop art. Andy Warhol’s assertions that he was no more a mirror than a mirror, that there is meaning beyond the surface of his work, figure centrally in writing about the politics of self-branding. Whether we are talking about Warhol or Damien Hirst, this cool, deadpan stance makes a certain kind of Pop art recognizable as Pop. Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles demonstrates the difficulty of balancing out the political dimension of this side of Pop practice. Schwartz reminds us, for example, that Peter Plagens denounced Banham as a “sellout” for suppressin the defining aspects of the everyday life of Angelenos as well as the city’s more difficult realities (racism, class, etc.). This “increased, explicit recognition of the physical characteristics of the picture supports what is more important as it relates to the depicted.”
Plagens was onto something. On some level Ruscha’s work wants nothing to do with Los Angeles. But given the degree to which the city’s official discourse about itself is structured by an “economy of denial” (in the decades in question, this includes the active erasure of its Latino population and the region’s history), Ruscha’s disavowal of the city’s “guts” is what makes his work feel most Angeleno. In its deracination, the work speaks directly to the production of Los Angeles as a concept. Even given that its deadpan presentation of empty lots and apartment buildings have become synonymous with the image of the city, Ruscha’s work is less engaged by place than it is by Los Angeles as a site of erasure.

Schwartz applies pressure to this aspect of Ruscha’s aesthetic project when she turns her attention to the gender politics of his work and its environment. The chapter “Ferus Stud” is devoted to the artist’s self-fashioning as such in gallery advertisements, photographic portraits, and interviews. Schwartz makes a plausible argument for reading masculine anxiety in the persona he cultivated for himself as an art-world personality and in a range of static works—15 Girlfriends, 1955 (1972), Pansy (1966), He Enjoys the Co. of Women (1976)—as well as in his films (in which women consistently operate as distractions from the male protagonist’s “real work”). She indicates the critical route one might take to pick apart the homosociality of this work—it would be an exaggeration, however, to say that Schwartz pursues that argument herself.

Shalanimith Firestone observed that the “sexual revolution” did little more than expand the “liberated” man’s access to women, giving him license to represent his use of women as sexually progressive regardless of his commitment to a feminist politics. Ruscha’s work of the late 1960s and early 1970s illustrates the point neatly.

Positioning himself in bed between two beautiful women for a 1967 Artforum advertisement for his gallery, or producing a row of “five girlfrends” (who may or may not have been “his”) certainly plays both to the marketing of a circle of male Ferus artists as studs and to the exploration of the macho possibilites of California home. Schwartz wants the word “persona” to carve out some degree of critical distance for Ruscha. But exist posturing is hardly less sexist for being recognizable as posturing. Similarly, one is hard-put to recover Colored People (1972). How is this portrait of nappy-headed cacti not high-art minstrelsy? Ruscha’s disavowal of authorial responsibility may be a part of his “sognish charm” (some version of that phrase appears across his reception history), but it is also the posture that enables the casual reproduction of racist and sexist paradigms.

Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles actually amplified my ambivalence about the artist’s work. But better a critic address the problematic aspects of an artist’s practice than ignore them. The attention Schwartz gives to Ruscha’s social context unsettles his placid portraits of the cityscape. She helps us to feel that something has been banished from them.

Cécile Whiting’s Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s covers similar ground. Pop L.A. is both less biographical and less burdened by biographical pressure than is Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles. Whiting confidently indexes the city’s special claim on discourse about postmodern aesthetics. She is also concerned with the way that this period exerts an exceptional disciplinary force in our understanding of Los Angeles art history: the 1960s saw the organization of a contemporary art market, the dissemination of influential art magazines and journals, and the emergence of still-powerful art schools. During that decade, however, one also sees the development of “pop vernaculars” across a range of practices, some of which are recognized as Pop art (Ruscha, Hockney, Claes Oldenburg and some of which are not (the Watts Towers, Womanhouse). Whiting asks us to consider the benefits of thinking less about Pop art and more about the vernacular.

Whiting offers sustained readings of not only the usual suspects but also mid-century paintings of the city’s natural environment and rapidly changing cityscapes, as well as West Coast artists rarely considered in surveys of contemporary art. Her discussion of Llyn Foulkes’s Death Valley, USA (1965) carefully unpacks the artist’s citation of landscape photography (as he paints scenes that seem more photographic than painterly). Photography is positioned in the painting as a modern technology associated with pastness—painting becomes like photography not by virtue of appearing mechanical, but rather because it joins photography as a technology of remembering. The sublimity of the West is thus only implied, as a thing of the past and as “a glimpse of somewhere else.” (99).

Whiting’s individual chapters are organized spatially: the landscapes of Foulkes and Vija Celmins anchor a chapter on the natural environment as we encounter it through visual art; “Cruising Los Angeles” considers how Dennis Hopper, Ruscha, and Ed Kienholz work with urban space; “The Erotics of the Built Environment” is inspired by Hockney’s Los Angeles paintings. In her chapter on the Watts Towers, she considers the movement of that work from the truly vernacular into the monumental as it became adopted by its (ever-changing) community. A final chapter on Happenings and performance art returns to urban space, this time to consider how Allan Kaprow, Oldenburg, and Judy Chicago activate Ruscha’s streets and parking lots.

Whiting is most eloquent when she teases out the poetics of ambivalence that characterize this dialogue between art and the city. Pop L.A.’s artists are united in having insisted on the possibilities of reinventing the self and reimagining the built environment, even while pointing to the restrictions imposed by a city’s history and geography.
First conceptual Chicanx art to be exhibited at LACMA."

One recent critical project offers a vocabulary shift to neutralize the disciplinary policing that has excluded some of the most exciting art practices from art-historical view. In the introduction to the anthology which accompanies their exhibition West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1967–1977, Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner argue that contemporary art history has relied heavily on the term "avant-garde" as the primary framework for recognizing interventionist art practices. Work much from the West, however, is not in dialogue with art-historical modernism or official spaces of art. The absence of a Los Angeles museum culture throughout nearly the first three-quarters of the twentieth century affirms the practical reality observed by Auther and Lerner. This artistic vanguard is much closer to counter-culture than to a historical avant-garde. It is more bohemian, in other words, than avant-garde. This much is already visible in the shape of discourse about Los Angeles art—conversation about Ferus turns into gossip about Hopper, meditations on surfing, the Beats, and so on. (This cross-pollination making figurative or recognizably political work were routinely diagnosed as having a sentimental, uncritical attachment to their subjects or as producing "mere" propaganda.

Asco, of course, responded with Spray Paint LACMA, in which the collective "signed" the museum and declared the work to be "the

Author and Lerner describe the disciplinary chasms into which this work falls: neither the narrative of the New York avant-garde [nor] the political histories of the 1960s" can account for it (xii). From one perspective, this kind of work doesn’t look like art. It’s costing, craft, folk, psychedelia, propaganda. From another, the expressive culture of the West appears "apolitical." In fact, some of this work is dismissed as a deep retreat from the political—even though from a twenty-first-century vantage point it is indeed hard to miss the utopian gender politics of the Cockettes (the San Francisco gender-fuck" theater group that is the subject of an essay by Julia Bryan Wilson) or the expanded, anticonservative consciousness conjured in a Single Wing Tortoise Bird light show (discussed in an essay by the film scholar David James). These authors are exploring art on the edges of "non-art"—meaning work in a contiguous relationship with experiments in being. Many of the authors recover their subject’s context: Jennie Klein’s work with feminist art centers on the goddesses of feminist spiritualism;  

Suzanne Hudson drops Ansel Adams into a mineral bath at the Esalen Institute.

I am... insisting that the context in which to appreciate Adams’s production is neither the modern museum nor the modernist photographic discourse that so often justified it, but the ostensible "counterculture" on the other side of the country—a counterculture recently grasped in terms coeval with its most easily satirized iconography (of nudists, stoned musicians, etc.) (293).

For some readers, the projects indexed in West of Center will look more like cultural studies than art history. Author and Lerner respond by arguing that insofar as it can’t accommodate counterculture, this version of contemporary art history reveals a deep regional bias: countercultural movements are "centered largely in the American West" (xxix). Although San Francisco is a capital of sorts, "the phenomenon was also rural and nomadic" (xxix). Their introduction is an important intervention in the practice of American art history. Author and Lerner implicitly argue that the entire field suffers

caused by extreme heat. Far times abstract, some figures, especiallyinitiative, they can be discerned, blown, posh and chilly,

The problem is that in the pursuit of an encyclopedic "picture book" on the painting of California, we have not only ignored the social, cultural, and political histories of the state, but also the ways in which counterculture and art history have intertwined in the West, both historically and in the present day. To put it simply, the West has a different relationship to art than the East. This is not to say that art history has been irrelevant in the West, but rather that it has taken a different form. In the West, art history has been more closely linked to social and cultural movements, and has been shaped by the unique political and economic conditions of the region. This is evident in the works of artists such as Ed Ruscha, who has been instrumental in shaping our understanding of the counterculture of the 1960s. His work has been celebrated for its satirical and satirical approach to the art world, and has served as a catalyst for a new generation of artists. Ruscha’s work has been described as a "visual commentary on the culture of consumption," and has been praised for its ability to "reveal the underlying contradictions of modern society.

In conclusion, the project of West of Center is a significant contribution to the field of art history. It challenges the traditional narrative of art history by highlighting the unique role of the West in shaping the course of art in the United States. By doing so, it offers a fresh perspective on the history of art, and reminds us of the importance of considering the social, cultural, and political contexts in which art is produced.
The question is how it’s going to be overthrown, whether by working within it, or by establishing power bases outside the system from an inferiority complex. In its endless celebrations of various New York schools, it devalues which may actually have the stronger claim on a national practice of cultural engagement.

Reading West of Center I found myself wondering how anyone could have thought the term “avant-garde” described what we look for when we turn to art in Los Angeles. Which is not to say, however, that this might not be in itself a deviantly devised to generate the effect of an avant-garde for itself. This is one subject of Chris Kraus’s collection Video Green: Los Angeles Art and the Triumph of Nothingness. These essays describe the author’s movement through spaces that are not entirely legible to each other: the contemporary art world, her life (totally interesting) sex life, and her life as an Angel (and a landlord). The book’s subtitle is somewhat misleading: Video Green is not a jeremiad casting the city as a postmodern Sodom. Kraus does zero in, however, on the hollowness of a contemporary art scene that has taken the shape of a serpent eating its tail (expensive MFA programs feeding the gallery circuit; the gallery circuit feeding the MFA system’s hegemony). This feedback loop is intensified by the nature of much of the work valued by this system:

Whereas modernism believed the artist’s life held all the magic keys to reading works of art, neoconceptualism has cooled this off and corporatized it. The artist’s own biography doesn’t matter much at all. What life? The blank the better. The life experience of the artist, if channeled into the artwork, can only impede art’s necropolitical, neoconceptual purpose. It is the biography of the institution we want to read (21–22).

One essay, “Cast Away,” limns the difficulty of working one’s way out of this system. It was inspired by a storefront window in Kraus’s neighborhood, Westlake. The shop, she explains, was on the edge of MacArthur Park and catered to its neighborhood of immigrants, shipping the things people wanted to send home. The storefront window was covered with photographs of people standing next to the boxes they’d received: proof of delivery for people who have no phone. Kraus is entranced by this display of networks of affiliation and attachment—she wants to claim it as art, or in relation to art. But she can’t, quite.

Thinking about this storefront record...

J.C.: I think it would be more creative and constructive for there to be a dialogue within the museum rather than an external dialogue which is antithetical to it. The healthy situation is one where the museum and artists are sufficiently aligned that the gift is no longer tax-deductible. All he can do is point to the rest of the materials.

w.s.: Do you have any proposals for reform?

J.C.: Exactly. They believe they are, and we do to (for the migrant, it separates). Kraus, who is writing as a critic, not as an art historian, does not approach art looking for a statement about what Los Angeles is. Instead, she tracks how art can be something that helps us to live in and with it.

I must have underlined half of “Cast Away.” Could there really have only been one Chicana in a Los Angeles classroom in the late 1990s? Could someone teaching an art class really have so little sense of sentimental practices in Chicana feminist art as to dismiss sentiment in and of itself, as if it were always naive and therefore bad? As a feminist scholar teaching at the University of California, Riverside (one of two Hispanic Serving Institutions in the UC system), perhaps it’s easy for me to forget: Yes, this is possible—but only at the kinds of places Kraus was teaching—the expensive art schools crediting with putting L.A.’s art scene on the map. California State University campuses in Fullerton and Long Beach, for example, are far more affordable, have large MFA programs, and are also Hispanic Serving Institutions.

The row of galleries along La Cienega Boulevard was just one of the “happening” places in 1970s Los Angeles. The Chicano Art Movement was in full flower: East Los Angeles galleries and collectives were both recovering a sense of art history for themselves and also making one. L.A. Xidema, edited by Chon Noriega, Terezita Romo, and Pilar Thomas Rivas, is a companion to four exhibitions of Mexican American and Chicana/o art produced through the Pacific Standard Time project. The four exhibitions offer complementary perspectives on (East) Los Angeles Art History: Art along the Mexican-American Generation at the Autry National Center of the American West honors the work of Mexican American artists working in the 1940s alongside an emergent discourse regarding Mexican American social rights; and the Invisible: Oscar Castillo, at the Fowler Museum at UCLA, surveys Castillo’s photographs of East Los Angeles life in the 1970s; Mapping Another L.A. at the Fowler Museum surveys work produced by the artist collectives that defined the Chicano Art Movement; and Mural Remixed at the Los Angeles County Museum, features Sandra de la Loza “remixing” classic murals. The story of the last exhibition is perhaps the best place for me to conclude, for it indicates the direction of both contemporary art in Los Angeles and contemporary art history.

w.s.: Because of the false values imposed by people who aren’t interested in the artist for the general good of the culture?
In an interview with Chon Noriega, de la Loza points out that in spite of the fact that murals are one of the defining features of the Los Angeles cityscape, "the Chicana/o mural is rarely mentioned or acknowledged as a legitimate art form within L.A.'s art institutions." Between 1970 and 1980, Nancy Tovar took hundreds of photographs of Raza-oriented mural art. De la Loza describes Tovar's slides as "mind-blowing" (they are now housed at UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center, which also produced L.A. Xicano). "The popular view of muralism tended to focus on figurative and narrative works with more visually identifiable 'Chicano' and political themes" (190). Tovar, however, tracked down much more diverse and experimental history of the mural. As an artist, de la Loza was humbled and inspired. Set the disciplinary erasure of this rich practice alongside the city's failure to restore or conserve existing murals, its moratorium on new ones, and its multimillion dollar anti-graffiti program (which erases murals by covering tags with grey paint), and you have a sense of what historians and artists are up against. De la Loza's visual "remix" of Tovar's archive at LACMA pulls the mural from the street into the gallery, one as an echo of the other's history. Are the murals she cites not art because instead of engaging the museum visitors with delusional textbooks and a racist police force? Or because they expressed love for the dead, or longing for home?

Generations of Los Angeles artists have been working through the myriad ways in which forms of cultural expression are policed—suppressed, forgotten, criminalized. Because so much of the work described by L.A. Xicano is so deeply engaged with the city and the fight for social justice, this collection offers the best point of entry for those new to the idea of Los Angeles. One essay on artists of the 1940s and 1950s engages the relationship between modernist impulses of the period and social engagement; others survey the history of East L.A. galleries and the visions of the city produced by artist collaborations. The book's illustrations reveal an art history as full of people as flat is of a sense of place. In her essay on the "social sublime" to describe the density of this work and also the intense emotional impact it can have. The term is meant to signal the scale of the social change many of these artists sought to bring about.

This work takes us "to the edge of the known and the unknown" to suggest "the possibility of another self" (61). Any of these terms might also be used to describe the city itself.

5. Plagens's Sunshine Muse: Contemporary Art on the West Coast (New York: Praeger, 1974), commissioned as a history of West Coast modernism, excludes any discussion of protest art and culture through which he might access this side of Los Angeles's artistic and cultural life.
6. For a feminist perspective on the "stud" posture in relation to popular discourse about sexual liberation, see Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution (New York: Bantam, 1970), 142, where she writes, "The rhetoric of sexual revolution, if it brought no improvements for women, proved to have great value for men. By convincing women that the usual female games and demands were despicable, unfair, prudish, old-fashioned, puritanical, and self-destructive, a new reservoir of available females was created to expand the tight supply of goods available for traditional sexual exploitation, disarming women of even the little protection they have so painfully acquired."
8. LACMA absorbed this incident into the framing narrative of its 2008 exhibition Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement. See, for example, curator Rita Gonzalez’s discussion of ASCO’s history in Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and University of California Press, 2008), 15,
10. For a comprehensive discussion of key figures in an experimental cinema from Los Angeles, see David James, The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
11. Sandra de la Loza is also the author of Pochos in LA and has peered into the white plan (or the of movements to throw it open, and the days of the extermination, the slums, and the two passages where the shall as as in the same speed as the same speed as the same speed. The landscape has a particular kind of complexity this canvas of larger, of the cheery, and of the unexpected, and the impossible. The impossible is in the canvas, and the unexpected canvas of larger, of the cheery, and of the impossible. The impossible is in the canvas, and the unexpected canvas of larger, of the cheery, and of the impossible. The impossible is in the canvas, and the unexpected canvas of larger, of the cheery, and of the impossible. The impossible is in the canvas, and the unexpected canvas of larger, of the cheery, and of the impossible. The impossible is in the canvas, and the unexpected canvas of larger, of the cheery, and of the impossible. 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