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Barely Living with Art

The Labor of Domestic Art Spaces in Los Angeles

As a fetish of the global art and culture media in recent years, Los Angeles is typically narrated as a space of vast possibility. It's a wide-open field, they say, updating timeworn tropes of westward expansion. Look at the galleries, the outposts from New York and Europe, all these new museums and private collections cropping up. Notwithstanding the old lifestyle enticements of surf and sun, or the somewhat less-old attractions of postmodern cliché—Lynchian strangeness, the Hollywood Babylon romance, the endless play of surface and appearance, the story of the openness of L.A. becomes the story of a civilizing mission, the possibility of cultivating the Golden State's benighted folk and collector base.

But there is a secondary characterization of L.A. openness running through the glut of articles in *T Magazine*, *artnet*, *ARTNews*, *Artspace*, and the rest, an image of a young, offbeat, endogenous art scene, resourceful and playing by its own rules. The focal point of the latter—in the enthusiastic accounts of out-of-town observers and local boosters alike—would appear to be the abundance of alternative exhibition spaces and their, often quirky, ingenuity: vitrines in the lobby of Welton Becket's Equitable Life Building on Wilshire Boulevard, a tree hollow in Glendale, or up a flagpole in

San Pedro (even if only intended to be viewed on Instagram).¹ Above all, it is the domestic space that is the signal venue for exhibiting art among this *scrappy* Wild West scene.²

I'll leave the task of cataloguing every gallery in an apartment, shed, backhouse, henhouse, doghouse, and outhouse in Los Angeles in 2017 to a hardworking and as yet unborn researcher on a Pacific Standard Time show circa 2050.³ Nor am I particularly interested in sketching a typology of these spaces. While there are, of course, important differences between, say, Reserve Ames (in a carriage house in West Adams) and Five Car Garage (in a garage attached to a very expensive house in Santa Monica), or between Full Haus (an apartment gallery in Silverlake on the model of the artist-run project space) and Park View (an apartment gallery in Macarthur Park that operates like a conventional commercial gallery, only the gallerist lives there), for our purposes what matters is that all of these are located in or beside or behind residences—that they are all, in some sense, at home.

The proliferation of these kinds of spaces must be seen in part as a product of that influx of white cube galleries and the heightened attention on Los Angeles, an encampment at the margins of the gold rush. At the same time, it appears as an excess of art, as if we have simply outrun the structural capacity of the system of exhibition venues—though it might more accurately be described as an excess of artists: the surplus population of the creative class. These two features, in fact, are related.

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The arrival of large- and medium-sized galleries to L.A. and the attendant media frenzy and bout of institution building coincided with the acceleration of the so-called economic recovery. Dating from late 2009, this economic uptick assuaged the collector class, resulting in a bounce in the art market. Of course the recovery period has been marked by an exacerbation of already existing economic tendencies—high unemployment and underemployment in lousy service jobs, low growth and low productivity, and widening inequality. The gains have all gone to the rich—it's their recovery and they buy art. This of course benefits only the lucky few artists, and very few indeed have been plucked from our plucky local scene by the newly arrived galleries, which instead tend to show work for which a solid market already exists. Most artists here make due working often low-wage jobs around art—artist assistants, gallery assistants, preparators, adjunct professors—or outside of the art world altogether. While the situation isn't new, the contradictions have been heightened by the effects of the 2007 crisis and its aftermath, which we've seen manifest in art in a variety of ways.

One of these, in Los Angeles, has been the explosion of domestic galleries, many of them run by artists, or otherwise by people with some skin in the game—aspiring gallerists, writers, hangers-on.⁴ Against the gushing of those roundups of L.A.'s local scene, these spaces tell us perhaps less about community and ingenuity than they do about labor. They are a manifestation of precarity, a spatialization of current conditions of work. The domestic art space, in certain respects, bears a formal resemblance to instances of what they call “the sharing economy,” turning existing subsistence expenditures

(rent, mortgage, utilities) into opportunity costs—money into capital. As with Airbnb, the home becomes a site of entrepreneurial activity, whether profit is to be gained from sales or through the more nebulous prospects of developing your personal brand. It's the Uberization of exhibition making: an entrepreneurialism of scarcity. A far cry from the avant-garde dream of the eradication of the division between art and life, these spaces speak instead to the sinister erasure of the line between labor and leisure, between worklife and homelife, a defining feature of our current regime of self-managing, flexible, and contingent employment.

To be sure, profits as such might be rare at some of these alternative spaces, but the accumulation of cultural capital always has the promise of compensation built in. The example of Alice Könitz, who scored the \$100,000 Mohn Award at *Made in L.A.* 2014 for her exhibition space in a gazebo, the Los Angeles Museum of Art (LAMOA), represents one possibility for a payday. LAMOA, you might object, is a less-than-ideal example of a domestic gallery because the gazebo was set up at Könitz's studio rather than her house. Yet the studio gallery represents a logical extension of the domestic. *I live at my studio*, you often hear it said, and sometimes it's not a figure of speech. If the domestic gallery represents the suffusion of work into all corners and all hours of life, then the studio gallery closes the circle.⁵ *I not only work where I live, I work where I work.*

The poet and scholar Jasper Bernes has examined the development of art in the 1960s and '70s vis-à-vis transformations in labor processes—dematerialization in relation to deindustrialization—arguing that the work of art must be understood in dialogue with work itself.⁶ This holds

1. For a recent example of such a survey, see “Car, shed... elevator? The Los Angeles art spaces proving smaller is better,” *The Guardian*, June 30, 2017.

2. For an article promising highlights of the domestic exhibition venues of Los Angeles, see “Living with art: a look at Los Angeles' domestic gallery spaces,” *Apollo*, July 15, 2015, <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/living-with-art-a-look-at-los-angeles-domestic-gallery-spaces/>.

true for the present, of course, and we glimpse the current conditions of labor explicitly addressed in, for example, Josh Kline's 3D printed sculptures made from biometric scans of service workers and unemployed people, or Asha Schechter's *Coffee Scene* (2015), a video which juxtaposes footage from a barista competition with a Slovakian 3D modeler designing a digital cappuccino.⁷ But the work of art in the 21st century is defined, above all, by its multiplicity, its protean quality (and of course its status as a luxury good and investment opportunity). An artwork is merely that which is presented in an art context. And these contexts and modes of presentation tell us at least as much as the work of art itself. By no means dominant, the repurposed guestroom or garage is nevertheless a conspicuous aspect of how we now show and look at art, one that speaks not of openness but of closure—a *where* and *how* of exhibiting that equally exhibits the effects and responses to the twin barbarities of endless work and worklessness.

1

Kyla Hansen, *Rib Mountain* (2016) (installation view). Image courtesy of the artist and Five Car Garage. Photo: Don Lewis.

2

Laura Schawelka, *Useless Twin* (2016) (installation view). Image courtesy of the artist and Garden, Los Angeles.

3

Daniel Klaas Beckwith, *Bird Seed Drawing* (2017). Image courtesy of the artist and GAIT LA.

4

Alice Lang, *Mutha of a mutha of a mutha of a mutha* (2017) (installation view). Image courtesy of the artist and Abode Gallery.

3. Although not exclusively focused on domestic galleries, Carol Cheh has documented many of L.A.'s alternative spaces over the past few years. See, for example, "25 Alternative L.A. Art Spaces to Check Out Now," *L.A. Weekly*, May 3, 2012; "10 L.A. Art Spaces That Change Our Idea of What an Art Space Is," *L.A. Weekly*, Nov. 20, 2012; "9 New Alternative Art Spaces in L.A. to Check Out Now," *L.A. Weekly*, Mar. 6, 2014; "Run, Los Angeles Artist Spaces," in *In the Canyon, Revise the Canon*, ed. Géraldine Gourbe (Lescheraines, France: Shelter Press, 2015), 69-78.

4. This might be a good time to point out that I, too, run such a space, called Hakuna Matata, located in my back yard.

5. On the effects of endless and ubiquitous work and consumption, see Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013).

6. Jasper Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

7. For a reading of *Coffee Scene* against a complex of lifestyle and labor processes, see Jacob Stewart-Halevy, "We Have Never Been Post-Industrial," *e-flux* 84 (September 2017), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/84/152033/we-have-never-been-post-industrial/>.