

OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR:  
*HOW MANY BILLBOARDS? ART IN STEAD* WRITES LOS ANGELES

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## ABSTRACT

Megan Okrand: Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear: *How Many Billboards? Art in Stead Writes Los Angeles*  
(Under the direction of John Bowles)

Often described as seventy-two suburbs in search of a city, the urban topography of Los Angeles has become synonymous with its automobile-based infrastructure. When Los Angeles's MAK Center for Art and Architecture commissioned a public project, the city's notorious urban terrain was an integral component, one that invited artists to find and "produce" the city by navigating its streets. Titled *How Many Billboards? Art In Stead*, the exhibition consisted of twenty-one billboards displayed on major public roadways throughout the city, thereby implicating commuters as exhibition's audience. Focusing on four billboards by Christina Fernandez, Kira Lynn Harris, Brandon Lattu and Allen Ruppersberg, this thesis argues that the exhibition invites a consideration of the rich cultural tapestry of the city. This thesis, moreover, will examine both the imagery and the placement of billboards to see how they produced Los Angeles as a new space, one that defied boundaries through residents' movements.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Like earlier generations of English intellectuals who taught themselves Italian in order to read Dante in the original, I learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original,”<sup>1</sup> claimed architectural critic Reyner Banham after traveling to Southern California from London in the mid-1960s. In a city where mobility outweighs monumentality<sup>2</sup>, Los Angeles sees approximately 735,000 drivers navigating the 21,000 miles of public roads and 527 miles of freeway on an average day. “Reading” this sprawling 502.7 square mile city is a diverse population of commuters who use Los Angeles’s ample infrastructure to connect themselves to opposite sides of the city and everywhere in between. Punctuating these commutes on the city roadways are thousands of outdoor advertisements capturing the attention of the multitudinous passersby.

Often described as seventy-two suburbs in search of a city, the urban topography of Los Angeles has become synonymous with its extensive freeway system partitioning the city’s staggering sprawl into distinct parts. Los Angeles’s MAK Center for Art and Architecture commissioned a citywide public project contingent upon the city’s notorious urban terrain. Within the context of this exhibition, the notion of seventy-two suburbs searching for a city suggests not a disparaging characterization of Los Angeles, as it typically does, but an invitation to find the city by navigating its streets. Titled *How Many Billboards? Art In Stead*, the 2010

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<sup>1</sup>Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

exhibition consisted of twenty-one unique billboards produced by twenty-one artists<sup>3</sup> displayed on major public roadways throughout the city, thereby positioning commuters as the exhibition's unsuspecting audience. Readers of Los Angeles were now encouraged to write Los Angeles- to produce a city. Using Los Angeles's existing urban terrain and infrastructure as sites for display, the citywide exhibition produces Los Angeles as a new space, one that makes porous established boundaries of "space" and "place" in the decentralized city through residents' movement within them.

The extensive freeway system and major thoroughfares composing Los Angeles are a fundamental encounter, and when traversing the city become as much a part of the landscape as its mountains, valleys and beaches. Yet the naturalization of the city's roadways involved considerable planning and building spanning decades. Although most American cities began to expand out from the city center to the suburbs following World War II, Los Angeles began to develop outward a generation prior. By the 1930s, streets had already been widened and expanded to accommodate the city's increasing population as well as the emergence of the now common automobile (with one in three Angelenos owning a car, the city was well on its way to solidifying itself as a car-culture capital).<sup>4</sup> City planners quickly recognized the need to construct an expressway within the city to make room for an ever-burgeoning population of commuters. Often designated as Los Angeles's first freeway, the Arroyo Seco Parkway, which

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<sup>3</sup>The list of participating artists is as follows: Kenneth Anger, Michael Asher, Jennifer Bornstein, Eileen Cowin, Christina Fernandez, Ken Gonzalez-Day, Renée Green, Kira Lynn Harris, John Knight, David Lamelas, Brandon Lattu, Daniel Joseph Martinez, Kori Newkirk, Yvonne Rainer, Martha Rosler with Josh Neufeld, Allen Ruppersberg, Allan Sekula, Susan Silton, Kerry Tribe, James Welling, and lauren woods.

<sup>4</sup>Traffic jams in the city led to the development of the 1924 "Major Traffic Street Plan for Los Angeles" which supported the expansion of existing roads and called for the construction of an expressway within Los Angeles. The plan, however, was not fully executed.

connects downtown Los Angeles with the nearby city of Pasadena along the Arroyo Seco seasonal river, opened in 1940. Also known as the Pasadena Freeway, this thoroughfare marks a shift from earlier parkways to the more modern freeway. In the following decades, construction on the Hollywood, San Bernardino, Santa Ana and Harbor Freeways had finished, the freeways together forming the major arteries through which Los Angeles traffic would follow to the planned heart of the city, its downtown corridor. Unique to Los Angeles, the advent of freeways can be viewed as an answer to the city's decentralization rather than an explanation for it.<sup>5</sup>

Though the freeways were established to aid commuters in navigating the massive city, in practice their construction contributed to the displacement of millions of Los Angeles's inhabitants, particularly those living on the city's Eastside. In a 1946 plan<sup>6</sup> proposed and approved by The Los Angeles Metropolitan Parkway Engineering Committee, an organization composed of city and planning engineers, seven freeways were designed to be routed through the residential sections of East LA, Boyle Heights and Lincoln Heights. Bisecting the multiethnic neighborhood, the construction of the freeways led to the demolition of businesses and properties, the eviction of homeowners and the disjuncture of community. Although the residents attempted to halt the project, all seven freeways were fully realized and by the 1960s, the Eastside was divided by the gargantuan concrete thoroughfares. The ever-increasing amount of infrastructure "disemboweled the inner city,"<sup>7</sup> effectively dividing the region into "dichotomous spaces." As the city currently stands, approximately 50% of Los Angeles is dedicated to traffic (this percentage

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<sup>5</sup>Roger Kiel, *Los Angeles: Globalization, Urbanization and Social Struggles*, (West Sussex, England: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 60-70.

<sup>6</sup>The proposed plan as well as the research conducted by the committee can be found in *Interregional, Regional, Metropolitan Parkways in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area*.

<sup>7</sup>Kiel, *Los Angeles*, 60.

includes freeways, streets and parking lots) meaning half of the city's space is devoted to the automobile.

In Los Angeles the freeways and far-reaching boulevards disenfranchise as often as they unite and yet their ubiquity has become an inevitable experience, "the only secular communion," according to Joan Didion, that "Los Angeles has,"<sup>8</sup> or as Banham suggests, "a special way of being alive."<sup>9</sup> With hundreds of thousands driving in the city each day, streets are the most effective sites for a citywide art exhibition to reach the widest possible audience and perhaps, more importantly, an unwitting audience. The MAK Center's impressive public art project, *How Many Billboards? Art in Stead*, premiered in February 2010 on the billboards lining the city's oft-traveled streets. Presiding over these bastions of movement, the artist-designed billboards persuasively compete with the city's attention-grabbing advertisements. Driving down a typical street in Los Angeles, one is bombarded with advertisements for all nature of desirable goods and services: A fashion designer's latest collection, the newest blockbuster movie, tickets to the next Dodgers game, even free STD testing. Appealing to the commuters asking them to buy what they are selling, the billboards fight for attention in a clamor of signs. The streets are effectively rendered as sites for consumption.

In the billboards featured for the project, there is no brand recognition, no product being pushed. The streets transform from commercial passageways to museum. "I love you too" declares a man's cropped face. His mouth, wide open, seems to shout out the four words in plain pink text suspended against a bare black background. Placed atop a nondescript storefront on the

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<sup>8</sup>Joan Didion, *The White Album*, (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1979).

<sup>9</sup>Banham, *The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 196.

Westside of Los Angeles,<sup>10</sup> photographer and video artist Eileen Cowin's billboard [Figure 1] employs a familiar trope in advertising: the relationship between text and image. Yet, this combination does not sell a product or provoke a purchase, instead it confounds, begging curious viewers to ask, "to whom is he speaking?" or "why has such a private sentiment been made so public?" In capital letters, the word "ASTONISH" monopolizes Kenneth Anger's billboard [Figure 2] in garish neon orange. Splashed across "astonish" in the lower right corner is Anger's signature, swirling cursive letters in soft pink, contrasting with the bold, sans-serif font composing the word behind. While the entrancing word masters the suggestiveness "of a teaser ad intended to pique the public's curiosity about a new product,"<sup>11</sup> the modernist gesture of signing the artwork, proof of the artist's presence and the work's originality, announces the billboard not as an advertisement but as a singular work of art.

Situated on major thoroughfares with bus lines, the exhibition was designed to be accessible not only to those driving but also to those riding the city's public transit. Though the aim was to install the billboards on heavily trafficked roads, because the space was donated, the MAK Center had no knowledge of where the billboard would be placed until a couple of days prior to its installation. While the billboards largely ended up on populated roads, the artists were unable to choose the exact location for their billboard and engage with a particular site or population. Even if the artists did address a particular audience, the imagery was made available for anyone passing by to view. On display for February and March, the MAK Center estimates approximately 22,050,000 drivers and passengers witnessed the exhibition on their

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<sup>10</sup>The billboard's exact location was on Westwood Boulevard, south of Olympic Boulevard on the east of the street, facing north.

<sup>11</sup>Lisa Henry, "This Must be the Place" in *How Many Billboards? Art In Stead*, ed. Kimberli Meyer and Peter Noever, (Nürnberg, Germany: Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2010), 129.

regular commutes.<sup>12</sup> So utterly tied to site and yet so tenuously placed, the exhibition resulted in site specific works with no specific site.

To understand how *How Many Billboards?* not only grapples with the infrastructure of Los Angeles but also changes how Angelenos navigate their streets, I make distinct two essential elements of the exhibition: the billboards themselves and the streets on which they are sited, both stereotypes that have historically been associated with city. I begin by tracing the history of the billboard, exploring its use within the realm of art but also its prominence in Los Angeles's landscape. This first section of the thesis focuses on how the works included in *How Many Billboards* engage with their medium's history. I distinguish between three prominent methods employed by the exhibiting artists: appropriating the language and imagery of advertising, removing it altogether and creating imagery that deals specifically with areas of Los Angeles (which will be dealt with in greater detail in Chapter 3). Critically examining ideas of consumerism and public and private space, I analyze how the billboards in the exhibition can simultaneously conform to the subversive paradigms of "billboard art" and celebrate these commercial, outdoor sites.

The second section begins with Ed Ruscha's self-published book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* to understand how the exhibition engages with mobility in its landscape. Ruscha's 1966 book which documented every building on the Sunset Strip, allowed for mass-publication and widespread distribution giving viewers a chance to view the famed mile and a half section of Sunset Boulevard. Where Ruscha's work details the itinerant artist, *How Many Billboards* requires a moving viewer instead. I not only draw parallels between the two works' use of the

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<sup>12</sup>According to co-curator and director of the MAK Center, Kimberli Meyer, this number was arrived at based on industry calculations provided by Rick Robinson, West Coast General Manager and National Creative Director of Macdonald Media.

automobile itself and the act of driving but also analyze how their approaches differ and the implications of those differences. Considering the driver (in particular, the driver who commutes through Los Angeles regularly) as the exhibition's ideal viewer, I assert that the performative motion of driving allows for the most affective mode of engagement with the exhibition.

Bringing together the history of billboards and the notion of travel and movement that is put forth by Ruscha's book, the final most extensive section will look at how *How Many Billboards* compels the viewer to navigate through Los Angeles's urban topography and unique landscape. Using the conclusions drawn from the two previous sections alongside Henri LeFebvre's *The Production of Space*, I explore how the exhibition helps to create a socially produced landscape of Los Angeles. In doing so, I focus more closely on the billboards by Christina Fernandez, Kira Lynn Harris, Brandon Lattu and Allen Ruppertsberg, all of which draw their subject matter and imagery from distinct parts of the city. Although the billboards address very particular audiences or populations within Los Angeles, their placement across the city broadcasts the imagery for anyone and everyone. Using LeFebvre's proclamation that "(social) space is a (social) product" as a theoretical cornerstone, I analyze how both the imagery and the placement of the billboards in *How Many Billboards?* uses the very infrastructure of Los Angeles to resolve the displacement it caused.

As visual punctuation marks on the city's thoroughfares, the billboards help guide drivers and passengers in producing Los Angeles. They interrupt, forcing viewers to take pause, reconsider, question, and make connections. Forging insights about the city through which they move, drivers take their new understandings of Los Angeles on the road with them. As they drive on the city's well-traveled roads, reading Los Angeles in the original, the billboards implore them to stop simply reading and compose new sentences instead, writing a new L.A

## CHAPTER ONE: PRIVATE SPACE IN PUBLIC PLACE

Placed directly into Los Angeles's landscape, *How Many Billboards?* was also inserted into the history of the city's urban topography. In a press release for the exhibition the MAK Center explained:

The exhibition follows nearly a decade of discussion amongst city residents and officials about billboards and their environmental impact on the city of Los Angeles. *How Many Billboards?* attempts to investigate the political and artistic implications of these media surfaces that saturate the city's landscape, while also offering an alternative vision for public art display in Los Angeles, in which the city becomes the context for exhibition.<sup>13</sup>

As a city designed to be “low-rise,” streets, avenues and boulevards in Los Angeles are buttressed not by towering buildings but by billboards, encroaching on public spaces now overwhelmed by the private space of colossal outdoor advertisements. In such an auto-centric culture, public spaces in Los Angeles are often felt as transitory places, places that one drives through to get to a destination. Enveloping these public passageways, massively scaled advertisements profoundly impose themselves into the visual scenography of everyday life, making indistinct the accepted demarcation between public and private space in the city. But billboards, now so much a commonplace of urban spaces, themselves have a richly contested history.

Practically inescapable, billboards have enduringly occupied a debated role in the city's landscape. Nothing better exemplifies the billboard's fraught reputation than California Governor Pat Brown's response to the state's increasing proliferation of billboards in his second

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<sup>13</sup>The MAK Center for Art and Architecture, *How Many Billboards? Art in Stead*, 2010, Press Release.

inaugural address from 1963 where he boldly asserted, “When a man throws an empty cigarette package from an automobile in California, he is liable to a fine of \$50. When a man throws a billboard across a view, he is liable to be richly rewarded. I believe that litter and clutter can both destroy beauty.”<sup>14</sup> More than simply noting the billboard’s desecration of the landscape, Brown made their restriction a part of his political platform continuing, “I ask you, therefore, to apply strict controls on the placement of billboards. This one step alone will produce great dividends in scenic beauty which is now hidden from the people.”<sup>15</sup> This notion that the billboard acted as a scar on the landscape was echoed in Peter Blake’s scathing 1964 book, *God’s Own Junkyard*. An exploration of the planned deterioration of the United States’ landscape, the book identifies billboards that “flood our highways and dot our landscape” as the “flood of ugliness engulfing America.”<sup>16</sup> Despite the biting opposition to these large-scale, outdoor advertisements, billboards continued to be constructed alongside Los Angeles’s public roadways with little regulation. By the turn of the twenty-first century, opposition to their ubiquity within the city had reached its apogee. In 2002 the city of Los Angeles established an ordinance restricting the construction of new billboards and super graphics (massive advertisements that cover the facade of buildings). Despite various lawsuits put forth by advertising companies in the years following the ordinance, the Ninth Circuit upheld the ban and in 2010 lawsuits were filed alleging that supergraphics were unlawfully installed on twelve buildings in Los Angeles, forcing several to be removed. By the time *How Many Billboards?* premiered, approximately 5800 billboards

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<sup>14</sup>Edmund G. “Pat” Brown, “Second Inaugural Address,” January 7, 1963, <http://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/32-Pbrown02.html>

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Peter Blake, *God’s Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America’s Landscape*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 11.

lined the streets of Los Angeles.

Though *How Many Billboards?* sought to make “the streets of Los Angeles become the walls of the exhibition, and the city itself become a large museum”<sup>17</sup> by replacing commercial messaging with artistic imagery, the controversial place of billboards formed the conceptual backdrop to the exhibition's realization. As Marshall McLuhan has argued, “the medium is the message,”<sup>18</sup> a statement that makes clear the inability to separate fully what one perceives from the discourses associated with how one perceives them. What, then, was the message of the medium used in *How Many Billboards?* at the individual and collective levels?

The exhibition's relationship to typical advertising billboards is ambivalent at best. Despite its museological rhetoric, a kind of intervention into spaces reserved for the market, *How Many Billboards?* was utterly reliant on the existing commercial apparatus within Los Angeles, its impact predicated on the success of the outdoor advertising business. Beholden to market forces (at a cost upwards of \$50,000 to rent billboard space in an area with high volumes of traffic), the actualization of the exhibition was dependent upon donated space from the various outdoor advertising companies that monopolize ad space in Los Angeles, including Clear Channel Outdoor, CBS Decaux, Regency Outdoor Advertising and Van Wagner Communication among several others.<sup>19</sup> Serving as a liaison between the MAK Center and the outdoor companies was media buyer Rick Robinson of MacDonald Media who used his connections with

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<sup>17</sup>Kimberli Meyer, The MAK Center for Art and Architecture, *How Many Billboards? Art in Stead*, 2010, Press Release.

<sup>18</sup>Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

<sup>19</sup>Kimberli Meyer, “Overview and Acknowledgments” in *How Many Billboards? Art in Stead*, 8-9.

the larger outdoor media companies to acquire donated space in dense commercial areas that would be visible to a wide audience. Although the media companies generously granted the MAK Center space, there was one important caveat: if the billboards in use were rented while the art was still on display, the art must be taken down and re-installed in another location.<sup>20</sup> Describing the working relationships between the MAK Center, Robinson and the media corporations as one of “remarkable synergy,”<sup>21</sup> consultant to the project, Sara Daleiden, recognizes the amount of coordination needed to produce the exhibition. *How Many Billboards?*, then, does not subvert the place of the advertisement in Los Angeles, touting anti-commercial sentiments by coopting the medium. It instead acknowledges the necessary collaboration between various sectors within Los Angeles and explores the “intersections and boundaries”<sup>22</sup> between art, commerce and the city of Los Angeles

### **Hung Up on Billboards**

As a whole, *How Many Billboards?* situates itself within Los Angeles’s perennial histories of urban-scaled outdoor advertising, soliciting viewers to consider critically the billboard’s place in the city. Standing high above the buzzing streets, each billboard announces itself as a new facet of these histories to be considered. The artists, who were “commissioned to create a new work that critically responded to the medium of the billboard and interpreted its role in the urban

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<sup>20</sup>Michael Asher’s billboard had to be moved to the intersection of Glendale Boulevard and Silverlake Boulevard from Sunset Boulevard and Micheltorena Street. Allen Sekula’s piece was reinstalled at Olympic Boulevard and Robertson Boulevard from Beverly Boulevard and Western Avenue.

<sup>21</sup>Sarah Daleiden, “The Making of *How Many Billboards?* A Public Art Perspective” in *How Many Billboards? Art In Stead*, 149.

<sup>22</sup>Meyer, “Overview and Acknowledgments,” 8.

landscape,”<sup>23</sup> not only grappled with the place of the billboard in Los Angeles, they also engaged with its past as an artistic medium, whether as a political statement or as a stereotype of the city. As the popularity of the automobile grew in the United States throughout the twentieth century, the billboard industry began to target potential buyers who were in transit. Growing by nearly \$156,000,000<sup>24</sup> in twenty years, from 1940 to the 1960s, advertisements were scaled to seduce motorists whose attention needed to be captured as quickly as they were traveling. The artist billboard behaves in the same way, using similar strategies to interrupt a traveler’s commute. Yet, they also interrupt the somewhat tacit engagement of the billboard by disrupting both the medium itself and the message it sends.

The billboards produced for the exhibition were not homogenous, ranging from varied subjects such as Yvonne Rainer’s presentation of a famous Marlene Dietrich quote and John Knight’s donation of billboard space to the nonprofit organization MECA (Middle Eastern Children’s Alliance) to diverse depictions like James Welling’s photogram abstraction or the photo and text collage by Allan Sekula. Yet, the billboards by Martha Rosler and Kerry Tribe perhaps most vividly depict two themes that materialized in the vast majority of the billboards: social commentary and ties to California.<sup>25</sup> Grounding her billboard [Figure 3] in California’s

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Blake, *God’s Own Junkyard*, 12. Blake took these figures from a March, 1960 *Reader’s Digest* article that states the industry’s revenue increased from \$44,700,000 per year to \$200,000,000 per year. He also cites a *New York Times* article that details car companies (General Motors and Ford in particular) as putting the most money into billboard advertising.

<sup>25</sup>Many of the participating artists including Michael Asher and James Welling are a part California’s distinct lineage of Conceptual Art stemming from California art schools’ “post-studio” approach to teaching art that encouraged explorations of new media, found objects and alternative methods of display. Several West Coast Conceptual artists/instructors such as Larry Sultan and John Baldessari utilized the medium of the billboard in their own practices. The relationship between California Conceptualism and the artists in *How Many Billboards? Art in*

shaky tectonic plates, Martha Rosler's piece presents a bold graphic of a seismic shift breaking apart California's land. Crumbling buildings- a school and a prison- sit atop each of the two splintered landmasses. White text set against the pink background reads, "Seismic Shift- CALIFORNIA IS #1 IN PRISON SPENDING, #48 IN EDUCATION." Another sentence follows, "Save our higher education system- for California and our kids!" Between the two sentences it appears as though bricks are tumbling from the school toward the prison. Yet, in light of the information provided to the viewer, the bricks can be read as banknotes. Falling through the cracks, both in the imagery of the billboard and in the idiomatic sense of the word, are the bodies of those affected by this economic injustice.

In conceptualizing their billboards, many of the artists featured in the exhibition use strategies put forth by Harriet Senie in her cogent history of billboard art, *Disturbances in the Fields of Mammon: Towards a History of Artists' Billboards*.<sup>26</sup> Avoiding the pitfalls of the art institution subduing their flagrant political statements, artists have commandeered both the visual vocabulary and sites of advertising, "prompting thoughts rather than purchases."<sup>27</sup> As works of art annexed public spaces, people and subjects pushed to the periphery were given a platform to become the focus while at the same time, a broader, more expansive, audience could be reached.

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*Stead* is detailed in Nizan Shaked's essay "The Presence of Los Angeles: Prescription and Prediction" and Lisa Henry's "This Must be the Place."

<sup>26</sup>Senie marks a preoccupation in the post-pop generation when artists used a more commercial or widely-broadcasted network, the billboard, to create art that explicitly addressed socio-political issues and appealed to a mass audience. Emerging concurrently with civil rights protests and demonstrations in the late 1960s, billboards as an artistic medium reached their pinnacle during the 80s following the Reagan administration's push toward defunding the arts and disregard of salient social issues.

<sup>27</sup>Harriet Senie, "Disturbances in the Fields of Mammon: Towards a History of Artists' Billboards," in *Billboard Art on the Road: A Retrospective Exhibition of Artist' Billboards of the Last 30 Years*, ed. Laura Steward Heon, Peggy Diggs and Joseph Thompson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999). 20.

Participating artists such as Rosler and Tribe use tactics that have historically been mobilized by artists to subvert the medium such as appropriating an already extant advertisement as in the case of *Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do* (1989), a collaboration between activist artist collective Gran Fury and ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) [Figure 4], or using a distinct lack of recognizable representations as in Felix Gonzalez-Torres's 1992 *Untitled (Bed)* [Figure 5].

Designed to resemble a United Colors of Benetton ad campaign, Gran Fury's bus billboard *Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do* (1989) features three couples kissing. The couples, however, are not those typically represented in major advertisements. Instead, they feature pairings of more marginalized groups: an interracial couple, a lesbian couple and a gay couple. The advertisement appeared on New York City buses from June through December 1989, imbuing those riding the bus and walking down the city streets with imagery often hidden from collective view. Unlike *Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do*, *Untitled (Bed)* subverts the medium of the billboard not through appropriating consumerist imagery, but by erasing it altogether. In the first billboard commission by the Museum of Modern Art, the billboard contains a black and white photograph of an empty bed. Still possessing the bodily imprints from those who had just occupied it, the almost spectral bed seems frozen in time, always waiting for their return. No words or slogans accompany the image- the crinkled sheets and pillows of the bed take up the entirety of the billboard. An homage to his late partner who had recently succumb to AIDS, Gonzalez-Torres forces an intimate moment from his life into the line of sight of anyone who walked by the 24 locations in which the image was erected. This "double lack"- the lack of his partner and the lack of reference to advertising allows the image to be so effectively haunting.

Like *Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do*, Rosler's graphic, pseudo-public service announcement subsumes the place of advertising into a work of art, invoking the tactics of advertising: Pithy statements combined with eye-catching, memorable visuals. Co-opting private ad space for public consumption and education, Rosler subscribes to particular paradigms in advertising to have the greatest possible impact on her audience. The billboard must shock, it must appall but to effectively do so it must read as an advertisement only to disappoint. Rosler offers no solution: no URL to visit, no phone number to call. She simply offers something to contemplate. Addressing Californians, Rosler implicates her unwitting audience: while the billboard sells nothing, the exchange of money still lingers beneath the surface, forcing the commuters to respond to or at least acknowledge the unbalanced distribution of resources funded in part by their tax dollars. Using a ubiquitous, hotly contested facet of Los Angeles's constructed cityscape to make a political statement, Rosler thoroughly engages the artistic medium's political history. Not all artists in the exhibition, however, engage with the medium as a political platform. Rather, they use the billboard to explore its place in Los Angeles, to examine how the signage composes the city's urban terrain, a tradition that is itself deeply embedded within the history of art in Los Angeles.

Opening its doors in 1957, Los Angeles's Ferus Gallery was home to a tight-knit group of artists working to create a uniquely Californian aesthetic- arid blue skies, car culture, and extravagance, all things, for better or for worse, stereotypically associated with southern California became sources from which the artists drew. Putting themselves in tension with New York's well-established art scene, the Ferus gallery fashioned the personas of their West coast artists as rebellious studs. Making the perceived frivolity of the Southern Californian lifestyle the bedrock of their practice, the artists went so far as to proudly pose next to their cars for a

calendar produced by Ferus artist, Joe Goode, officially embedding themselves within Los Angeles's clichés.<sup>28</sup> This “cool school” of artists “implicated themselves in the clichés about Los Angeles that circulated in the popular media, which they took up simultaneously as the motifs of their art.”<sup>29</sup> Photographing the happenings at Ferus, Dennis Hopper perhaps most intimately records the artists working amid the slick commercial landscape of Los Angeles (the same landscape that serves as the infrastructure for *How Many Billboards?*). While the photographs document the artists simultaneously at work and at play, they also archive the city's ever-present consumerist backdrop: its signage. Capturing a coy, alluring portrait of Ed Ruscha in front of a neon sign for TV and Radio Service, Larry Bell, standing coolly with a cigarette in hand in front of billboards advertising Challenge milk and Blue Chip Stamps, and Bruce Conner surrounded by bikini-clad women in front of a wall publicizing a gymnasium named “Bruce Conner's Physical Services,” [Figures 6-8], Hopper aligns the artists' cheeky, provocative personas with Los Angeles's seductive advertising culture, making their identity inseparable from the city's commercial backdrop. In the 1961 photograph *Double Standard* [Figure 9], Hopper captures an utterly archetypal view of Los Angeles. Taken from the front seat of his car, Hopper photographs the expansive West Hollywood intersection between Santa Monica Boulevard, Melrose Avenue and Doheny Drive. The view from the front seat reveals a Standard gas station, traffic lights and billboard upon billboard lining the wide streets. Los Angeles, for Hopper as well as the Ferus artists, was a playground of signs, a consumerist paradise.

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<sup>28</sup>Howard N. Fox, “Tremors in Paradise, 1960-1980,” in *Made in California: Art, Image and Identity, 1900-2000*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2000), 193-234.

<sup>29</sup>Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2006), 63.

This preoccupation with the city signage was furthered by Banham, who asserted that, “Anyone who cares for the unique character of individual cities must see that the proliferation of advertising signs is an essential part of the character of Los Angeles; to deprive the city of them would be like depriving San Gimignano of its towers or the city of London of its Wren steeples.”<sup>30</sup> As billboards have come to represent Los Angeles as much as its sun-drenched beaches and intricate freeways and as they have also become as monumental as the Hollywood Sign, the medium has become a way for several artists in *How Many Billboards* to revel in Los Angeles stereotypes. Playing with the stereotypical Southern Californian sun, Kerry Tribe’s billboard [Figure 10] relies on its location in sun-drenched Los Angeles. Stormy grey clouds fill the entire space of the billboard, the darkening sky in the image erected flatly against its clear blue backdrop. Like *Untitled (Bed)*, Tribe’s billboard is devoid of text or slogans, offering a momentary respite from the city’s barrage of signs. As the tallest point among its built surroundings, the billboard competes not with other buildings or advertisements for the commuter’s attention but with the clear, luminous sky. Though the billboard soars into the sky, it grounds itself in Los Angeles’s clichés, relying on the structure’s overwhelming prominence in the low-rise landscape to disrupt the cloudless sky, reinforcing the fact that drivers and passengers are indeed moving under the bright West Coast sun. By addressing a cliché about Los Angeles, Tribe participates in two aspects of the history of art in L.A: the history of artists who have made tongue-in-cheek works about Southern California stereotypes and the history of those who have addressed and engaged with billboards as an instrumental part of the landscape.

Both Tribe and Rosler as well as the nineteen other artists in the exhibition, utilize the visual strategies that Senie conceptualizes and in doing so situate themselves within the history

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<sup>30</sup>Banham, *The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 121.

of the artist billboard. Yet, to remain tied to their site and have an affective impact on their viewers below, a vast majority of the billboards take on particular valances in the context of Los Angeles and California. In a landscape saturated with repetitive commercial imagery, the billboards “shatter the inevitable numbness that occurs with media overload.”<sup>31</sup> Both on billboards and as billboards, the works of art engage with the phenomenon of urban-scaled advertising in Los Angeles, at once critically exploring their history and reveling in their ubiquity.

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<sup>31</sup>Kimberli Meyer, “Speech in the City” in *How Many Billboards? Art in Stead*, 17

## CHAPTER TWO: BEHIND THE WHEEL

Although billboards often monopolize vistas of Los Angeles they are not the only private space that infiltrates Los Angeles's public sphere. In fact, in the city, "public space has been largely occupied by the quasi-private space of moving vehicles."<sup>32</sup> By the middle of the twentieth century, cars permeated middle-class American life, the familiarity of their glossy surfaces, leather interiors and chrome accents becoming an ever-present fixture not just on the roads but in both advertising and artistic production. The influence of the car was particularly felt in Los Angeles where, as previously noted, it became an almost mandatory mode of transportation to get from one end of the city to the other. As a consequence, the automobile not only altered visual culture but the means of mobility in the city of Los Angeles. For Banham, the rapid movement of vehicles essential in traveling the city defined a way of life in Los Angeles, rendering the city streets as links that bring together the region's distinct villages, ultimately coalescing into the centerless city of Los Angeles. Describing how this way of living encapsulates the identity of the city and its residents, he writes,

A domestic or sociable journey in Los Angeles does not end so much at the door of one's destination as at the off-ramp of the freeway, the mile or two of ground level streets counts as no more than the front drive of the house. In part, this is a comment on the sheer vastness of the movement pattern of Los Angeles, but more than it is an acknowledgement that the freeway system in its totality is now a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life, the fourth ecology of the Angeleno.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>*Los Angeles Plays Itself*, directed by Thom Anderson. (Los Angeles: Thom Anderson Productions, 2003).

<sup>33</sup>Banham, *The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 195.

Banham understands the roads as the means through which the city is encountered, not simply a journey but a destination or point of contemplation in and of themselves.

Suggesting a similar idea about this idiosyncratic way of life, *How Many Billboards?* calls for the drive to be as much a part of the exhibition as the billboards themselves. There were approximately fourteen miles between the furthest points of the exhibition<sup>34</sup> and hundreds, if not thousands, of different ways to drive past, beneath or between the billboards, endowing the peripatetic viewer with the performative act of traversing Los Angeles. Another cliché of Los Angeles, car culture is commandeered by the exhibition transforming the viewer's journey into an expansive site of viewing. Drawing from the convention (perhaps best stated by 80's new wave band Missing Persons) that, "nobody walks in L.A."<sup>35</sup>, *How Many Billboards?* sustains a long history of Angeleno art that engages with the city's fixation on the automobile, returning once again to the Ferus gallery.

### **Mobilizing Works: The Automobile as Apparatus of Engagement**

Just as Dennis Hopper's photographs addressed the inevitability of the billboard within the Los Angeles landscape, other Ferus gallery artists, such as Billy Al Bengston, Judy Chicago and, perhaps most importantly, Ed Ruscha, addressed the inevitability of its roads and the culture that it spurred. Fascinated with Los Angeles's "kustom kar culture,"<sup>36</sup> Billy Al Bengston and his student Judy Chicago created work using materials found not in a typical art studio but rather, in

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<sup>34</sup>According to the MAK Center's map of the exhibition, Allen Ruppersberg's billboard was the furthest West located at Venice Blvd and Midvale Ave while Michael Asher's was the furthest East, standing at Silver lake Blvd and Glendale Blvd.

<sup>35</sup>Missing Persons, "Walking in L.A." in *Walking in L.A.*, Capitol Records, 1982.

<sup>36</sup>The phrase "kustom kar culture" derives from Tom Wolfe's 1963 essay "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby" which brought national attention to Los Angeles's car culture.

an auto body garage. Bengston brandished spray guns to cover industrial and hardboard surfaces such as aluminum, Formica and Masonite with polymer or polyurethane<sup>37</sup> while Chicago took her engagement with car culture one step further by enrolling in an auto body school to learn how to properly spray paint cars. Though Bengston and Chicago focused on the motorized vehicle at the center of Los Angeles's car culture, Ruscha took to the city streets. His 1966 book<sup>38</sup>, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* [Figure 11], documents the artist's meticulous endeavor to photograph the Sunset Strip in its entirety, and with that, every cross-street, traffic sign, palm tree, car or motorcycle passing by, even every billboard. The book itself folds like an accordion, unfurling to suggest the spatiotemporal movement inherent in a drive. The many individual, grey-scale photographs are carefully placed together in two lines, each to respectively make a coherent "one side of the street" with the white blank space between the strips of photographs filling in for the dark concrete road.

Placing a motorized camera on the back of a slow-moving pickup truck, Ruscha shot every photograph in the length of time it took to drive down the mile and a half strip and back. The buildings were shot in Ruscha's distinctive deadpan style as the artist made his way down the street with the camera timed to record its surroundings every few seconds. The fixed point of view does not, however, suggest a disinterested confrontation with the surrounding cityscape. Rather, as Jaleh Mansoor argues, "Ruscha's inaugural use of the car as a vehicle mediating active articulation transforms the work's seeming banal facticity and initially apparent neutral

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<sup>37</sup>This was, in fact, not the first time an artist working in Los Angeles used these types of materials. In 1932 when David Alfaro Siqueiros worked on a mural at the Chouinard School, he went from using paintbrushes to using a compressor, airbrush and spray gun, granting him the ability to paint quickly over a larger surface area as the cement dried quickly under Southern California's beating sun.

<sup>38</sup>Between 1963 and 1978, Ruscha produced sixteen artist books, many of which centered on Los Angeles as their subject.

indifference. In other words, the car sets in place [...] an apparatus of engagement.”<sup>39</sup> With car and camera combined to become a single mechanism, the experience of reading the book becomes imaginatively mediated through the vehicle. In unfolding its pages, one witnesses Ruscha’s car-ride unfolding. It is through the car, then, that one comes to understand the Sunset Strip, that one comes to understand Los Angeles.

While one reads Los Angeles’s mid-century storefronts and dingbat apartments through Ruscha’s experience in the car vis-à-vis the book in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, one reads the billboards in *How Many Billboards?* by physically traveling between the works. In this reading of Los Angeles it is not the camera and the car that are combined into a single apparatus but the car and its driver.<sup>40</sup> Because billboards are scaled to attract the attention of the commuters moving rapidly below them, moving vehicles, whether a private car or a public bus, are the implicit apparatus through which they are viewed. As such, the MAK Center offered several bus tours guided by the exhibition curators and collaborated with Los Angeles’s Metropolitan Transit Authority to encourage public transit as a mode of viewing the exhibition to further engage with the public. Yet, despite the fact that Los Angeles is rooted in the tradition of mobility, and in the words of Banham, “will never be fully understood by those who cannot move fluently through its diffuse urban texture,”<sup>41</sup> it is worth noting that how one understands the city, and therefore the exhibition, largely depends on how they move through it: by public transport or by private automobile.

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<sup>39</sup>Jaleh Mansoor, “Ed Ruscha’s One Way Street,” *October* (Vol. 111 Winter 2005), 133.

<sup>40</sup>Because the billboards were planted on streets with access to public transportation, I do not want to discount that viewers not only could, but were encouraged to witness the pieces on uses. Therefore I also assert that “bus and rider” are combined into a single apparatus as well.

<sup>41</sup>Banham, *The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 5.

In spite of Los Angeles's status as the capital of car culture, not everyone in the city owns a car. The chosen mode of transportation often (although not always) reflects socio-economic status and with that, contingencies of their routes and journeys. While cars present a perceived freedom, the ability to go wherever whenever, buses have predetermined paths with distances measured by waiting times and transfers. Mobility in Los Angeles is not necessarily inherent to the automobile. Bicyclists, motorcyclists and pedestrians alike are prevalent in the city, yielding varied exposures to the exhibition. Pedestrians and bicyclists can stop to engage with the billboards for any length of time, free from the constrictions of a speed limit or keeping up with traffic while motorcyclists (and even bicyclists, to a lesser degree) have the ability weave in and out of traffic, positioning themselves for the best views. Moreover, each mode of transportation provokes a range of possibilities for individual or collective viewing, inviting the potential for conversation or introspection. In a city whose way of life "lurks in a very strange place: under the hood of the automobile,"<sup>42</sup> the vehicle itself is the central experience and while movement through the streets is key in viewing the exhibition, doing so via public transportation, on a bicycle or even as a passenger in a car, lacks a critical element: the performativity of driving

### **Moving Vehicles, Moving Viewers: The Performativity of Driving**

The act of driving through the wide asphalt boulevards became an essential direction in both Ruscha's book and the MAK Center's exhibition. Driving was not just the process in which the photographs for *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* were taken; it also determined how the images were perceived. Because the photos were taken intermittently, not everything on the strip was captured in perfect succession: halves of cars are cut off, sidewalks abruptly end, sections of buildings seem to disappear. These imperfect, fragmented images, in fact, register how one

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<sup>42</sup>Timothy Tyler, "Where the Auto Reigns Supreme," *Time*, 3 April 1972, 48.

would fleetingly view the Sunset Strip while traveling on the roads behind the wheel of a car. Driving down the street to document the building facades was an imperative prescription for the production of the piece, making the photographs a “recorded visual trace of this drive.”<sup>43</sup> In her essay, “Auto-maticity: Ed Ruscha and Performative Photography,” Margaret Iverson defines performative photography as that which “begins with an instruction or rule which is followed through with a performance”<sup>44</sup> The process of driving, of encountering the city vis-a-vis the automobile, became the performative aspect of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. While Los Angeles as a whole is filled with low-rise midcentury buildings, Ruscha’s fixed instructions designated this particular block, these particular buildings all experienced in a predetermined order by driving down Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles’s most frequently utilized mode of transportation.

A product of performative photography, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* tracks the movements of the itinerant artist, traversing the streets of Los Angeles. Like the performative process of Ruscha’s book, *How Many Billboards*, as previously noted, also requires movement through the streets. The performative aspect within *How Many Billboards* rests not upon the artist, however, but upon the viewer. It is through their habitual movement on the streets of Los Angeles that they encounter the exhibition. In a 2000 study of driving behavior in Los Angeles, sociologist Jack Katz finds that drivers become emotionally invested in their movements, explaining that driving can be,

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<sup>43</sup>Mansoor, “Ed Ruscha’s One Way Street,” 130.

<sup>44</sup>Margaret Iverson, “Automaticity: Ruscha and Performative Photography,” in *Photography after Conceptual Art*, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iverson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 15.

a prime field for the study of what Michel de Certeau called the ‘tactics’ of contemporary everyday life. Many people develop what they regard as particularly shrewd ways of moving around society. These include carefully choosing streets that one knows carry little traffic, sneakily cutting across corner gas stations to beat traffic lights, discreetly using another car as a ‘screen’ in order to merge onto a highway, passing through an intersection, and brazenly doubling back to avoid the queue in a left-turn lane, and such triumphs of motoring chutzpah as following in the smooth-flowing wake of an ambulance as it cuts through bottled traffic.<sup>45</sup>

As driving has become an increasingly inescapable mode of living in Los Angeles, its residents have found ways to navigate the city, creating patterns that are meaningful, or at least convenient, to them. Through these established movements, drivers carve out their own space in Los Angeles and thus, despite the perceived freedom of driving, the innumerable paths and countless roads one could take to get anywhere in the city, L.A becomes understood through these limited courses.

When the repeated motions of the daily commute become nearly committed to muscle memory, the visual markers or cues as reminders of when to switch lanes or where to turn left are no longer required and the focus on surroundings begins to dwindle. This low-level interaction with the environment made possible through the tactics of driving in the city is in part how the billboards can have an impact on the driver. The accidental encounter of these billboards through the driver’s habitual movements can jostle them out of their fixed visual trance, interrupting their commute. Say, for example, a driver commutes from the hills of Silver Lake across town to West Hollywood. Wanting to avoid the gridlock of Sunset Boulevard and knowing, as any good Angeleno would, that Melrose would have bumper-to-bumper traffic

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<sup>45</sup>Jack Katz, *How Emotions Work*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 36.

during rush hour, the driver follows Bette Davis's infamous advice, "take Fountain."<sup>46</sup> In their tactical movements navigating the city, they unexpectedly encounter Michael Asher's reproduction of the 1959 Volkswagen campaign "Think small" conspicuously reduced to a quarter of the size of the billboard [Figure 12] as well as Renée Green's enigmatic still of a grey seascape with shadowed, nebulous figures in the foreground and hints of land in the distance accompanied by an equally enigmatic phrase: Strangers Begin Again Native Strangers Hosting.<sup>47</sup> [Figure 13]. The billboards disrupt the driver's well-established, familiar drive, infiltrating their field of vision with peculiar imagery ordinarily unseen.

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<sup>46</sup>This was in response to when Johnny Carson asked the actress for advice on, "The best way a Hollywood starlet could get into Hollywood."

<sup>47</sup>The image derives from a 2009 film project by Green titled *Endless Dreams and Water Between*.

### CHAPTER THREE: LOS ANGELES PRODUCES ITSELF

The profusion of billboards and endlessly gridded terrain, Los Angeles's perceived evils, have rendered the city an unmatched metropolis predicated upon mobility and commercialism by the likes of "chic debunkers of anti-L.A. mythology"<sup>48</sup> such as Reyner Banham. Yet, for art critic Peter Plagens, this favorable response to the city, both in spite and because of the city's constructed landscape, dismisses "the guts of L.A." The problems the majority of Angelenos encounter: utter dependence on the automobile, the construction of streets and freeways that slash any hope of community, even the "daily grind, the millionfold smalltime commercial transactions, the lives of the workers, and shopkeepers, police and criminals, housewives and teachers and unemployed and elderly in favor of the few immediate features which apparently distinguish them from other cities,"<sup>49</sup> are overlooked. The streets may be omnipresent conveniences but they are also sites of estrangement. The billboards may be Los Angeles's monuments but they also interrupt public space. Plagens' criticism, while biting, is not bunk. Space, in Los Angeles, developed in such a way that the "diversity of the city's everyday" can be hidden behind the façade of mid-century buildings, passed over when glancing out the car window, speeding down the asphalt terrain.

Located on La Cienega Boulevard just north of the 10 Freeway, Kira Lynn Harris's billboard [Figure 14] stands approximately seventeen miles from the towers it depicts. Harris renders the three spires of Watts Towers soaring toward the sky, almost off the billboard so that

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<sup>48</sup>Peter Plagens, "Los Angeles: The Ecology of Evil," in *Art Forum* (December 1972), 67.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*

the viewer is looking at them from worm's eye view. Next to the towers, the Harris repeats the words "art" and "community" over and over forming various distinct phrases: art as community, community as art, the art of community, community is art. The towers were hand-built by Italian immigrant Simon Rodia in his backyard, created from junk found within the neighborhood of Watts over a period spanning 30 years, from 1921 through 1954. What once was rubble abandoned on the vast streets of Los Angeles were now assembled objects gleaming under the West Coast sun for all to discover, memorialized into a locus for community. The tallest point amongst the low laying landscape of vacant lots, train tracks and paltry one-story homes, Watts Towers became a compiled North Star. Poetically echoing the process of their construction, the towers were established as a site for assembly throughout the 1960s. By the dawn of the decade, Watts had developed into an economically disadvantaged neighborhood and in an effort to conserve the towers and enhance the welfare of its surrounding community, the Watts Towers Art Center opened on the grounds of Rodia's former residence, offering art classes for locals. Witnesses to the devastation of the 1966 uprising and 1992 riots,<sup>50</sup> Watts Towers managed to escape the violence unscathed, having been protected by neighbors. Despite the fact that the towers were no longer the gathering space for the idyllic "our town"<sup>51</sup> that Rodia had built them for; they had become the center for a ravaged community as both a symbol for a unified black movement and a bastion to enact political and social rehabilitation in Watts. Selecting two

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<sup>50</sup>The dates refer to the 1966 Watts Riots and 1992 Rodney King Riots respectively. To read more about each refer to: Thomas Pynchon, "A Journey into the Mind of Watts," *New York Times Magazine*, (June, 12, 1966) and the Los Angeles Times produced *Understanding the Riots: Before and After the Rodney King Case* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Times Syndicate Books, 1996).

<sup>51</sup>This is in reference to the words "Nuestro Pueblo" that were spelled out on the structure's west tower.

simple words to invoke the tumultuous history of Watts, Harris's billboard proclaims that community empowerment becomes an art-practice and art becomes a mode of neighborhood redevelopment.

In Henri LeFebvre's magnum opus, *The Production of Space*, the Marxist geographer contends, "to change life [...] we must first change space."<sup>52</sup> Space, he argues, is socially produced, not an empty container to be filled but rather, an ongoing set of operations that are produced and reproduced through an exchange of social relations. Los Angeles itself is continually produced and reproduced by the interactions, or lack thereof, between the city's vastly diverse communities made distinct by the roads and freeways configuring them. Because space is determined through a set of interrelationships, a shift in the relationships can disrupt how space is produced and therefore changes how space is lived. For space to be changed, a new space, one LeFebvre terms "differential space," must rise through the cracks. Taking advantage of the mobility of Los Angeles and its residents' habitual movement through the city streets, *How Many Billboards?* uses the city's constructed landscape, its billboards and its roads, to insert a differential space and thereby produce a new, more inclusive, Los Angeles. The 2.12 square mile neighborhood of Watts, a community marginalized by its turbulent history and kept alienated by the freeways bordering it and train tracks running through it were now inserted into Los Angeles's far more affluent West Side.

Because the locations of the billboards were not revealed to the artists and the MAK Center until mere days before installation, both parties could not anticipate where the billboards would end up and, therefore, which larger community would be their primary audience. This, however, did not deter artists from representing specific societal groups within Los Angeles resulting in

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<sup>52</sup>Henri LeFebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 190.

localized, nuanced imagery broadcasted on the towering billboards sited in diverse parts of the city. By bringing Los Angeles's marginalized East-side into the center of the city, it's ailing suburbs into the heart of Hollywood, and the elitist art world into everybody's line of vision, Los Angeles's space and therefore Los Angeles's life begins to change, if only for a passing moment.

Making use of the billboard as site for advertisement, Brandon Lattu created a massive classified ad [Figure 15]. The billboard is split into distinct parts of image and text. A black Cadillac with a "for-sale" sign posted on its rear window takes up the left side of the billboard. Accompanying the image is text, quick and to the point, describing the car for sale, it's cost and contact information:

1994 Cadillac Fleetwood. Black-on-black brougham package, 5.7 liter V8 LT1 260HP. 179K Miles. Chrome Rims. Leather Interior. Custom airbags w/ hydraulic hoses. Minor dent in passenger door. Car was \$39K new. Asking \$5500 OBO. Call 323 691 7975. Leave Message.

On Los Angeles's Eastside, the 1994 Cadillac Fleetwood is representative of a derivation of Los Angeles's car culture unique to the East Side Mexican American community. Often the only affordable cars available, these older, used vehicles were passionately repaired and transformed into customized chrome expressions of their identities. Embellished with spray paint and modified with hydraulics, Cadillac Fleetwoods and Chevy Impalas were revamped to ride low and slow on the streets of L.A. Deemed lowriders, these cars became an opportunity for the Chicano community to proudly make visible an ignored populace, "co-opting an American icon"<sup>53</sup> not to assimilate but to stand out. By including the phone number, Lattu invites participation; interested buyers or intrigued commuters could call and inquire about the lowrider. The billboard, then, not only inserts East Side Chicano culture into the center of the city, but

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<sup>53</sup>Judith Baca quoted in James Sterngold, "Making the Jalopy an Ethnic Banner; How the Lowrider evolved from Ethnic Revolt to Art Form" in *New York Times*, 19, February 2000. Print.

appeals for commuters to introduce themselves to a different community, allowing this change of space to become a two-way street.

Los Angeles's oldest and easternmost community, El Sereno, as it currently stands is a derelict yet historical 4.0 square mile neighborhood with around 45,000 residents bordered by Interstate 10 and multiple train tracks. In her billboard [Figure 16], Christina Fernandez juxtaposes two photographs of the neighborhood taken ten months apart. The square-format photograph on the left depicts a lush vista, houses nestled between idyllic, rolling green hills. Blocking what would have otherwise been an unobstructed view of the neighborhood in the foreground of the panorama is a Coldwell Banker Brokerage sign. Just beyond the sign, presiding over the hill is an overturned loveseat, recently abandoned by its owners. The photograph on the right, taken months later, depicts a close up of the same vista, ravaged by time and the neighborhood's ever-declining socio-economic situation, hinted at by the "For Sale" sign in the other image. In this image, the loveseat becomes the central focus, its torn up fabric bleached by the sun, surrounded by brown weeds and overgrown foliage dried out from the summer sun. Erected in Hollywood, where the multi-billion dollar industry that in part runs the city infiltrates everywhere from the sidewalks (in the form of the Hollywood Walk of Fame) to the mountainside (the famed Hollywood Sign) the oft-forgotten, fledgling suburbs are forced into view.

Cleverly addressing the Los Angeles art world's unique history, Allen Ruppersberg's billboard [Figure 17] functions as an unofficial advertisement for the 2011 Getty-sponsored arts initiative, *Pacific Standard Time*. The large-scale project spanned art institutions across Southern California and included exhibitions, performances and publications dedicated to postwar art in Los Angeles. In his billboard, Ruppersberg presents the phrases "Pacific Standard

Time” and “Coming Soon” with an image of an exhibition catalog in between. Using the catalog for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s acclaimed *Art and Technology Program, 1967-71*, a program that encouraged collaboration between artists and technology corporations, Ruppertsberg edited the cover. Replacing the portraits of the artists, scientists and corporate leaders who had participated in the original project with “photographs from his own personal archive and library of artists active in Los Angeles during the 1960s and ‘70s,”<sup>54</sup> (artists who were prominently featured in *Pacific Standard Time*), Ruppertsberg condensed Southern California’s art history into a single image. Like Lattu’s billboard, which invited viewers to call the phone number provided, Ruppertsberg’s invites commuters into Los Angeles’s bastion of art culture: the museum. Yet in stark contrast to those represented in the billboards by Lattu, Fernandez and Harris, Ruppertsberg’s does not depict a neighborhood or community disenfranchised by its city. Rather, it illustrates an institution that, although often unintentionally, does the disenfranchising. Out of the museum and onto the streets, the highfalutin even alienating art world is made more accessible as its works of art and history are “released into the wild, into precisely the place where modern urban nomads spend time en masse.”<sup>55</sup> Per Harris’s words, art, once again, becomes part of the community and the community a part of art.

The daily grind and guts of LA begin to be inserted into the cityscape, advertised on the billboards, driven past by commuters going about their every day. Using the infrastructure that conceals the realities behind Banham’s “gilded version”<sup>56</sup> of Los Angeles, *How Many Billboards?* obliges drivers to see parts of the multifaceted city blocked from view through their

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<sup>54</sup>Kimberli Meyer, “Allen Ruppertsberg” in *How Many Billboards? Art in Stead*, 82.

<sup>55</sup>Peter Noever, “Art and the City” in *How Many Billboards? Art in Stead*, 6.

<sup>56</sup>Plagens, “The Ecology of Evil,” 76.

habitual movements. So, while Plagens asserts that, “short of a Revolution” Los Angeles’s evils can be redressed only through, “the kind of hardcore planning Banham despises; we need to get the cars off the freeways and replace them with thousands of free propane buses (which would probably cost less than building more freeways, patrolling them, and picking up after crashes,)”<sup>57</sup> the exhibition insists otherwise. Instead of overhauling the infrastructure that has come to define the city and the means of moving about it, *How Many Billboards?* uses Los Angeles to produce itself.

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

## CONCLUSION: OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR

In the 1991 film, *L.A. Story*, Steve Martin plays Harris K. Telemacher, a TV weatherman bored with his life in cliché-ridden Los Angeles: its traffic, earthquakes, ditsy and vanity-obsessed residents and almost perfectly predictable “seventy- two and sunny” weather. The film’s action is set off after a fantastical encounter with a billboard. When driving home on the freeway one evening, Harris’s car breaks down, forcing him to pull over on the shoulder beneath an electronic billboard. Much to his surprise, the sign begins to write messages to him, informing Harris that “L.A wants to help you,”<sup>58</sup> before offering varying sorts of cryptic advice. Despite Harris’s utter disillusionment with the city, it is Los Angeles in its most archetypal form that propels him to change his life.

Like the film, *How Many Billboards? Art In Stead* mobilizes Los Angeles stereotypes, advertising them not as obstacles of the city to overcome but as essential characteristics that contribute to Los Angeles’s identity. While the billboards in the exhibition do not address the viewers as directly as the electronic sign addresses Harris in *L.A. Story*, they spell out messages to the residents of Los Angeles just the same imploring drivers, passengers and pedestrians to reconsider the city through which they move. Whether in the form of abstracted imagery, pure text or a combination of the two, the billboards use their iconic status in the Los Angeles landscape to grant marginalized communities the chance to be written back into the city and empower commuters to do the writing. L.A does, indeed, want to help.

Serendipitously greeting those driving down Los Angeles’s landmark roads, the billboards

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<sup>58</sup>*L.A. Story*, directed by Mick Jackson (1991; Culver City, CA: TriStar Pictures).

compel Angelenos to give their commutes a second look. Perhaps idling briefly to view the billboard a millisecond longer or quickly glancing up while moving along with the swift flow of traffic, the drivers' routines are interrupted. Although the works themselves are experienced in a passing moment, the billboards resonate as enigmatic disturbances in the field of commercial imagery, intervening into Los Angeles's everyday, bringing distinct communities closer together, and changing the way the city is understood. Looking into the side view mirror for one last glance, the billboards as well as the streets of Los Angeles begin to recede into the distance. Yet despite the dwindling size of the cityscape, the driver is reminded as they look into their side-view that the objects in mirror, the diverse communities of Los Angeles, are closer than they appear.

## IMAGES



Figure 1  
Eileen Cowin, *Untitled*. 2010. Installation view at Westwood Blvd, south of Olympic Blvd, on the east side of the street, facing north. Photo: Gerard Smulevich.



Figure 2:  
Kenneth Anger, *Untitled*, 2010. Installation view at Beverly Dr, north of Pico Blvd, on the west side of the street, facing southeast. Photo: Gerard Smulevich.



Figure 3:  
Martha Rosler with Josh Neufeld, *Untitled*. 2010. Installation view at Sunset Blvd, west of  
Cahuenga Blvd, on the north side of the street, facing east. Photo: Gerard Smulevich.



Figure 4:  
Gran Fury with ACT UP, *Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do.* 1989.



Figure 5:

Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Untitled (Bed)*. 1991. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Installation view at 11th Avenue and 38th Street, Manhattan (February 20–March 18, 2012), as part of *Print/Out*, The Museum of Modern Art, February 19–May 14, 2012. Photo: David Allison



Figure 6:  
Dennis Hopper, *Ed Ruscha*. 1964. Gelatin silver print.



Figure 7:  
Dennis Hopper, *Larry Bell*. 1964. Gelatin silver print.



Figure 8:  
Dennis Hopper, *Bruce Conner's Physical Services*. 1964. Gelatin silver print.



Figure 9:  
Dennis Hopper, *Double Standard*. 1961. Gelatin silver print.



Figure 10:  
Kerry Tribe, *Untitled*. 2010. Installation View: La Brea Ave, north of Venice Blvd, on the east side of the street, facing north. Photo: Gerard Smulevich

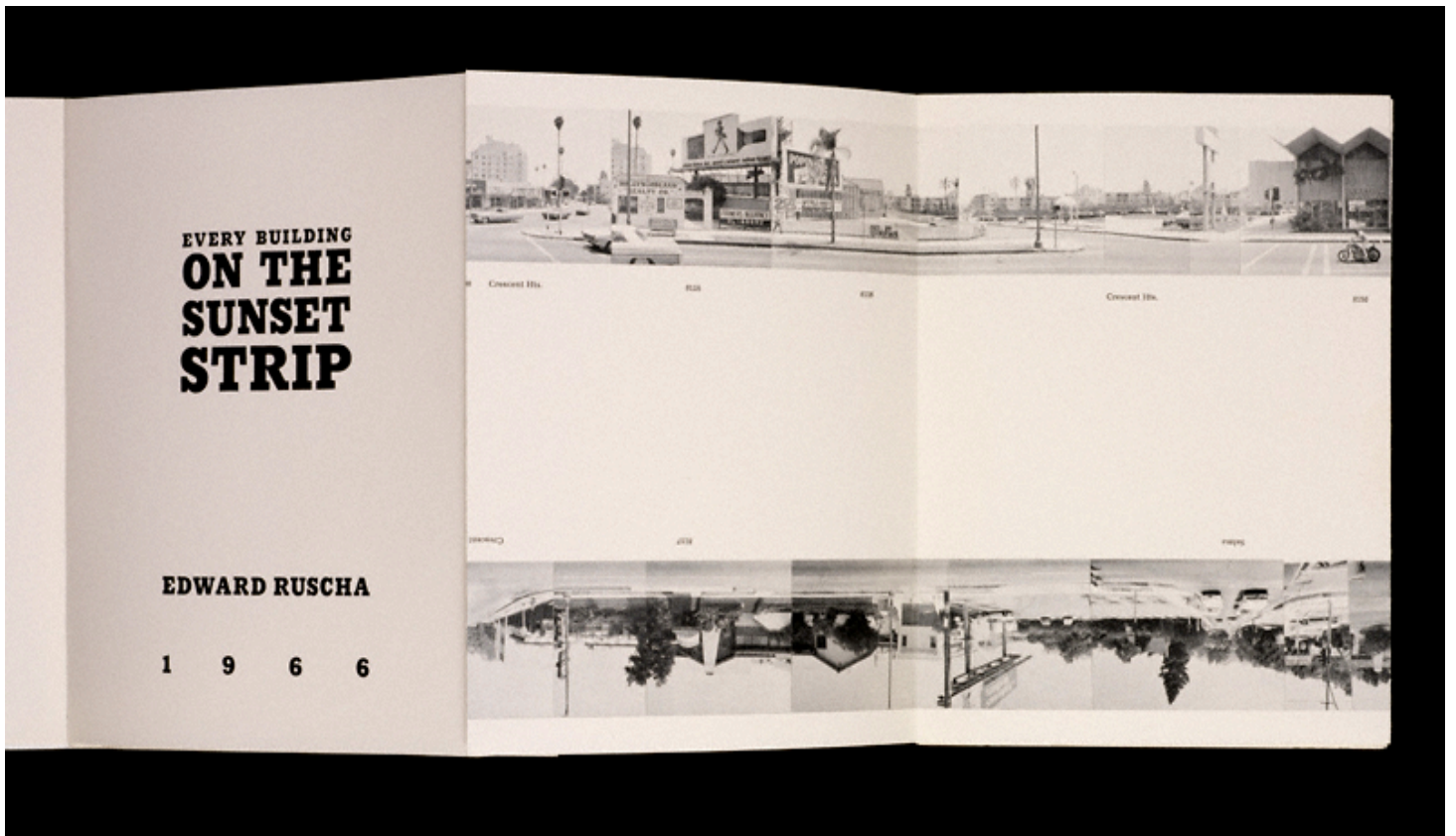


Figure 11:  
Ed Ruscha, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. 1966. Self published book. Open unfolded. Offset lithograph on paper. The Getty Research Institute.



Figure 12:  
Michael Asher, *Untitled*. 2010. Installation view at Glendale Blvd, north of Silverlake Blvd, on the west side of the street, facing south. Photo: Gerard Smulevich



Figure 13:  
Renée Green, *Untitled*. 2010. Installation View at La Brea Ave, north of Lexington, on the west side of the street, facing south. Photo: Gerard Smulevich



Figure 14:  
Kira Lynn Harris, *Untitled*. 2010. Installation view at La Cienega Blvd, north of the 10 Freeway (Cadillac Ave), on the west side of the street, facing south. Photo: Gerard Smulevich.



Figure 15:  
 Brandon Lattu, *Untitled*. 2010. Installation view at Fairfax Ave, south of Pico Blvd, on the west side of the street, facing northwest. Photo: Gerard Smulevich.



Figure 16:  
Christina Fernandez, *Untitled*. 2010. Installation view at Hollywood Blvd, west of Bronson Ave,  
on the south side of the street, facing west. Photo: Gerard Smulevich.



Figure 17:  
Allen Ruppersberg, *Untitled*. 2010. Installation view at Venice Blvd, west of Midvale Ave, on  
the north side of the street, facing east. Photo: Gerard Smulevich.

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