



L.A.

Undercover

A Profile of Alternative Projects

by Sue Spaid

Alternative is the alternative to not doing anything.

—Dave Muller, Founder, Three Day Weekend.

In 1996, artist and lecture-organizer Gordy Grundy asked me to speak on the topic of "how to make it as an artist," as part of an ongoing lecture series sponsored by the Barnsdall Art Center (an educational facility associated with the Los Angeles Municipal Gallery) Student Advisory Committee. Not being an artist, but having worked with hundreds of artists over the years as a gallerist and curator, I knew full well that no one person could honestly solve this conundrum. I decided instead to host a talk show titled *Trailblazing the Economies of Art*, which blended informative interviews with musical entertainment. The talk show format seemed the best way to surmount this broad topic, since this approach enabled me to interview myriad artists who have indeed employed unusual tactics to make it. By introducing each participant with the musical theme of their choice and interspersing one-on-one interviews with artist Clifford LeCuyer's remarkable musical poems, the evening proved more invigorating than the typical panel discussion. Clearly, other L.A. art enthusiasts were beginning to rethink the need for new models, because 1997 ended up being a banner year for DIY (do it yourself) activities.

What makes most of L.A.'s alternative projects different from those found in many communities is that they are funded and originated by individuals, much the way art production is. While every community offers its own definition of "alternative"—which generally begets the response "alternative to what?"—this article seeks to explore the available possibilities posed by alternative projects in L.A. in this particularly active era rather than posing a definition of alternative per se.

It should be noted that non-profit exhibition spaces like Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, Santa Monica Museum of Art, as well as about 15 local university galleries, organize exhibits of emerging artists. Much of the DIY activity that has cropped up in the past few years has been in response to programming bottlenecks, which is the direct result of a greater surplus of graduating MFAs, inadequate

funding, and bureaucratic largesse. DIY situations not only offer a greater flexibility, but they run leaner and service more artists faster. L.A. is also home to a younger generation of gallerists who represent fascinating lesser-known artists, but maintain particular financial and exhibitional commitments that organizations considered alternative here try to avoid.

Thus every possibility for alternatives entails a significant process, the chance for courageous onlookers to experience new roles as innovative organizers who discover unusual contexts for art, flexible promoters who offer deserved artists exhibition opportunities, and practical proprietors who overcome the limited aesthetic opportunities mandated by the white cube.

The Neighborly Thing to Do

In the early nineties, The American Gallery, which occupied the space next door to Al's Bar, was considered the last remnant of the eighties downtown scene that catered to the presence of artists who were still residing in downtown lofts. These days, there are many ambitious artist-run spaces downtown, as well as artist-run spaces sprinkled throughout the communities in which artists actually reside. The longest running neighborhood gallery has been Highland Park's Random Gallery, which Farid Bashid and Kate Burroughs set up in 1993 alongside their frame shop. Random has coordinated 36 shows of local L.A. artists and features mostly figurative painting. Some exhibits have included the sculptural *Mammagery: Five Women Recreate the Breast*, Michael Arata's solo exhibit *I should stay home tonight...I have bad gas*, and *In the Pocket* (an annual exhibit of portable works by up to 75 artists).

POST, one of the most successful projects in recent years, is run by Habib Kheradyar, who had been the director of the Cerritos College Gallery. When that position ended with the 1995 school year, his decision to set up an exhibition program adjacent to his studio above the defunct artist-run space Detroit proved natural.

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Collective Respons
photo by Martin

POST opened with a solo exhibit of Leonard Bravo, followed by Louanne Greenwald's crazy exploration of the artist's multiple roles as curator, artist, and "object of art." POST has originated some novel survival strategies, like presenting a solo exhibit by an artist who is included in a curated group show that's on view simultaneously. Like many artist-run spaces, it has grown to accommodate more sites, including an elevator shaft and a large room in the front of the building.

Since 1995, Voycheck Szaszor's Spanish Kitchen, another downtown exhibition space, has been focusing exclusively on group shows like Slater Bradley's *New Memory* and *Thread*. In 1997, computer graphics designer Crosby Haffner and artist Joe Klingl opened Uber Main (www.ubermain.com), a remarkably gorgeous two-room space reminiscent of a Soho space, in their downtown loft. So far, they have sponsored two group shows, a two-person exhibit, and a memorable evening sampling Art Center grad student Jennifer Moon's delicious home-cooked insect delicacies (ants, crickets, worms, and water bug juice) and dancing amongst fascinating wall murals.

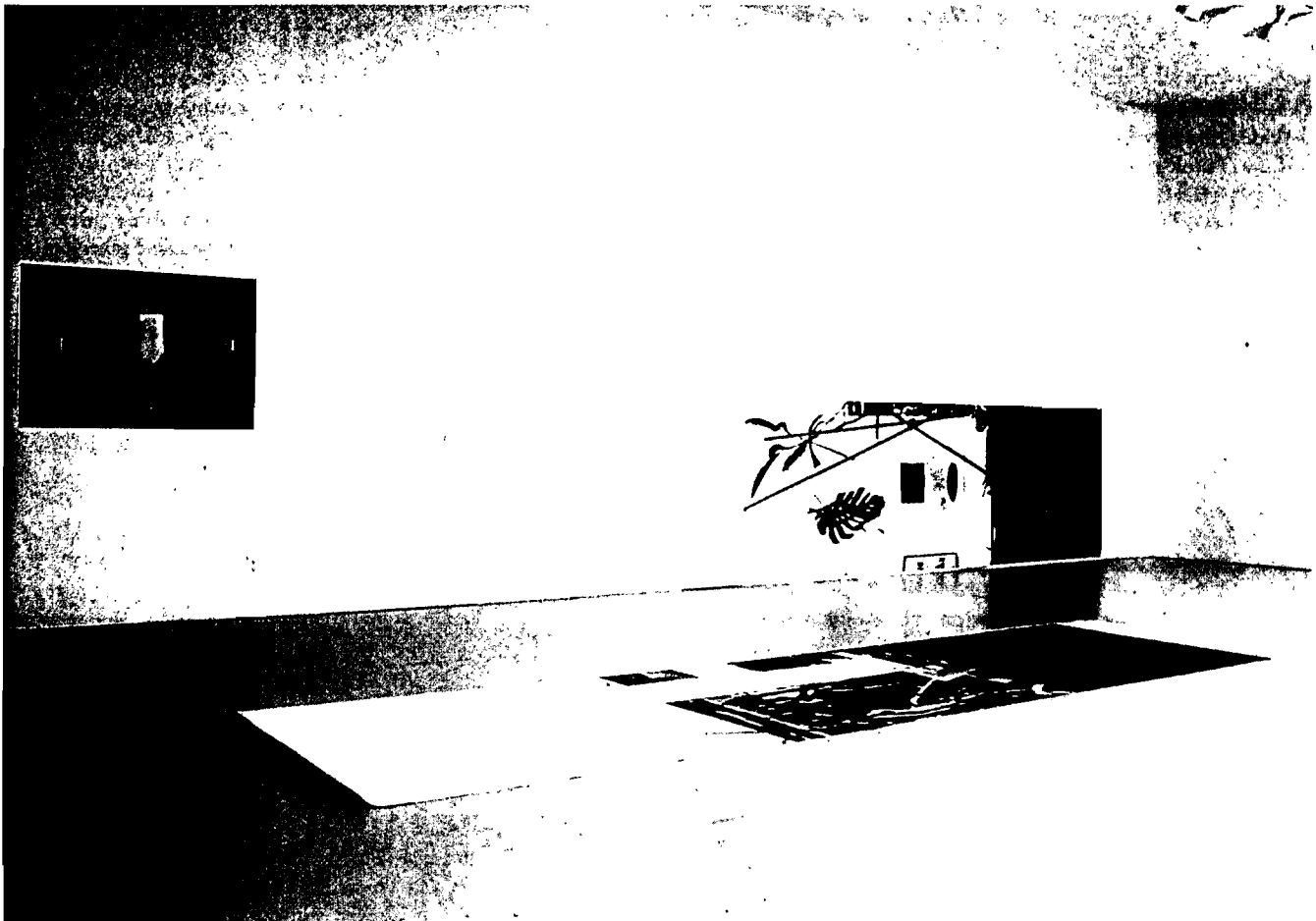
Dedicated through 1999, artist and curator John O'Brien's newest effort in the Brewery Arts Complex (an old building with 200 artist studios) at the Brewery Project (www.usc.edu/dept/finearts/slide/brewery) features exchange exhibits with European artists and group shows of recent L.A. art school graduates (organized by the respective graduate school administrations). *Travelers/E Viaggiatori*, the most recent exhibit, featured seven Umbrian artists and six L.A. artists and will eventually travel to Italy. Artist spaces in Marseille, Rome, Ljubljana, and Prague have expressed interest in doing exchange exhibits with the Brewery project. Contacts with European

artists were initiated during a Fulbright to Italy in 1995 and reinforced via O'Brien's previous venture, *Myth*, which invited artists from Prague and Rome to exhibit here. In 1996, O'Brien organized an exhibit of ten L.A. artists at the Ducal Palace in Venice and invited ten Umbrian artists to do a show in L.A..

Indicative of using the resources to be found in your own backyard, a group of 21 fairly well known L.A. artists organized *The Eagle Rock Show* at the Eagle Rock Community Center. Perhaps the most notable event was the community cakewalk that accompanied this exhibit! In 1997, George's opened on the overly media-hyped Vermont strip in Los Feliz. To everyone's amazement, they managed to find artists (including Jory Felice, Sandy Hubshman, and Susan Kornfeld) who were willing to exhibit for one night only, which enabled George's to host 30 openings in 30 days between October 10 and November 8. Stay tuned for upcoming unconventional formats at George's.

In 1997, Brent Petersen, a UCLA grad student, and artist Mark Grotjahn opened Room 702, a truly elegant and well-lit space on the eastern edge of Hollywood, just below Los Feliz. Tending to focus on solo exhibits by artists still in graduate school, Room 702 opened with an exhibit by Evan Holloway, followed by San Francisco artist Scott Hewicker's op-art-inspired pastel wall paintings, and UCLA grad student Jason Meadows' fully hand-crafted redwood picnic table floating upside down.

Since February 1996, Culver City's Purple, artist Jesse Rivard's pet project, has churned out 18 group, solo, and two-person exhibits. One of the most notable 1997 solo exhibits was UCLA grad John



Collective Responses to Anonymous Pictures From the Files of Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (Lace) on the Occasion of Its 20th Anniversary, 29 May - 26 July 1998, installation view.
Photo by Martin Cox.



Annuale 1998, curated by Franklin Sirmans at Lace, 9 aug. - 20 sept. 1998, installation view. Foreground left: Ceres Madoo, *Model 1*, 1998, plaster, metal frames, foam, plastic switch. Foreground right: Ceres Madoo, *Inspected by #19*, 1998, plaster, metal frames. Background left: Kira Lynn Harris, *Untitled (Watch your step)*, 1998, mixed media. Background right: Madison Webb, *Ursa Major*, 1997, oil on paper.

Miriam Dy

Geary's *Devil Tour '94*, which comprised artifacts and prints from the video that documented his public appearances dressed in a devil's costume. Purple exhibited I.C.U. (an association of L.A. and San Francisco graffiti artists working under the umbrella of In Creative Unity), before I.C.U. launched their own space. Purple integrates music whenever possible and sometimes has D.J.s spinning during openings.

Home Is Where the Art Is

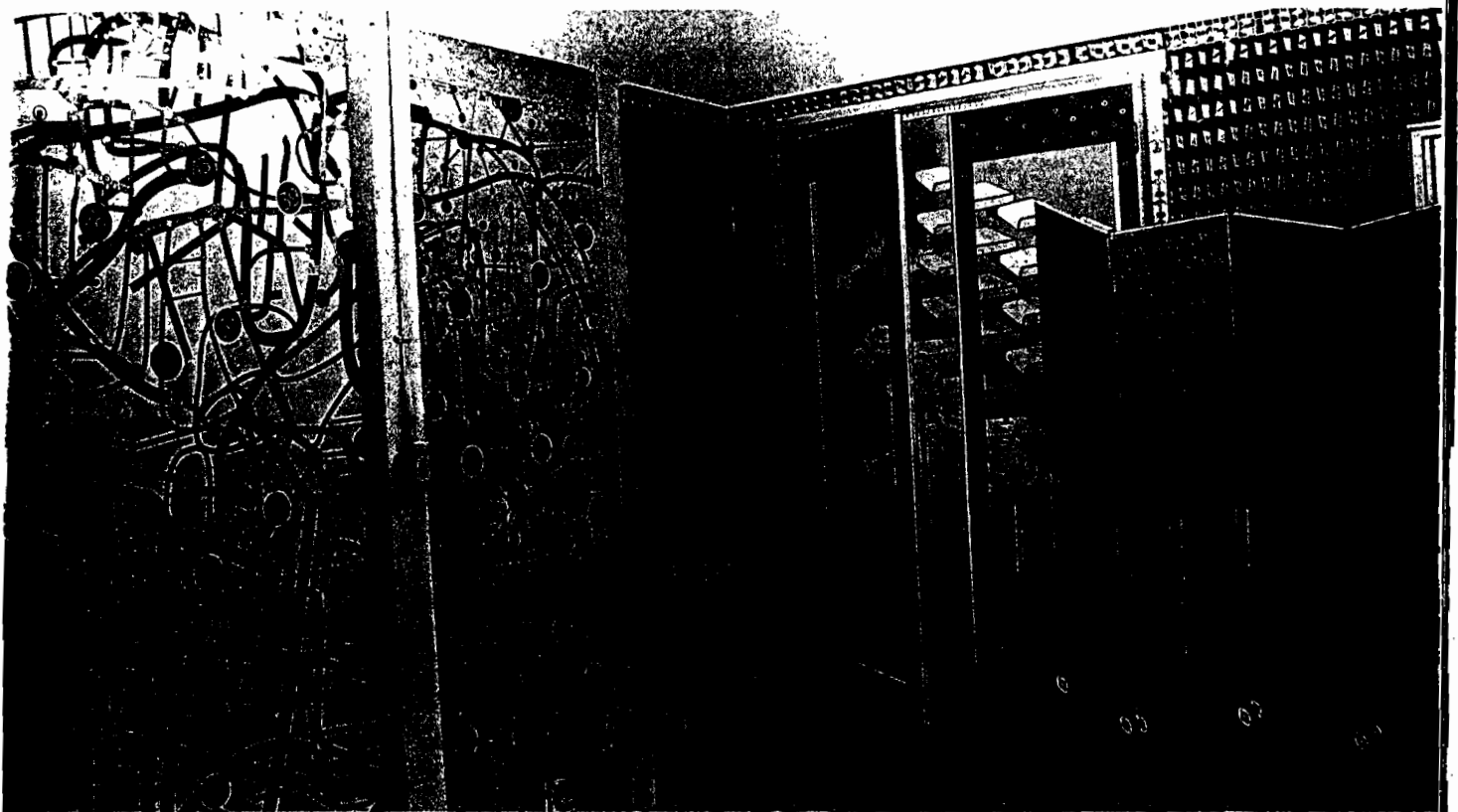
Perhaps L.A.'s most unusual and historic home/neighborhood project is the annual Fourth of July L.A. River Festival sponsored by Brett Goldstone and friends. This group effort initially began in 1982 as *Art Attack*, but by 1987 it had evolved into an annual event known as the *Steam Show*, which centered around a core group of artists whom Goldstone met while hanging around UCLA's grad studios. At one time or another, painters Steve Hurd and Monique Prieto, video artist Gina Lamb, sculptors Robert Gero and Chico MacMurtrie, and performance artists Skip Arnold and Chenoweth/Berman et al. have participated alongside *Steam Show* perennials Tim Quinn, Lauren Tova, and Roland Jack Nault. In 1996, the First L.A. River Festival took place in the Hahamungna (a.k.a. Arroyo Seco) tributary of the L.A. river, when *The Steam Show* joined efforts with Lewis MacAdams and Friends of the L.A. River. Held off-site in a vacant dirt lot, the Second L.A. River Festival included Liz Young's smile-clamped parade-inspired examination of celebrities' masochistic tendencies, Lynne Berman's loopy spacious drawings hidden inside a shack, poetry readings organized by MacAdams, music provided by The Losers and plenty of barbecued whatever. Goldstone set up a steam-powered amusement ride (a wooden boat with Maori-inspired wood carvings) and Tim Quinn positioned his kid-generated giant Knight on wheels (with chess

pawns sitting on shelves bouncing as the kids moved). Literally hundreds turn out every year for this time-tested extended-family gathering.

Given the number of people who have generously transformed their living quarters into exhibition spaces throughout the nineties, one could say that this has been the decade of the home gallery in L.A.. Many more artists not only presented their first solo exhibits in someone's home, but got reviewed and made sales! L.A.'s most enduring example is Kenneth Riddle's *Bliss*, which celebrated its tenth anniversary in 1997 with a wide-ranging exhibit of 46 artists at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibits. Since 1987, *Bliss* has hosted about 36 exhibits involving 65 artists in at least two rooms of his lovely California craftsmen-style home in Pasadena. Jorge Pardo's gallery debut inaugurated *Bliss*, and since then artists like Jennifer Steinkamp, Sally Elesby, and Adam Ross have presented solo exhibits of their work. Given its Pasadena location, it has turned into a natural outpost for Art Center grads and artists looking for a more intimate setting for their work.

In 1991, Russell Crotty and Laura Gruenther opened the Guest Room, which enabled a diverse range of artists, such as Kevin Sullivan, Kathy Chenoweth, and Francis Stark, to present their first solo exhibits in their home's guest room. The very next year, Rory Devine launched TRI, which was originally meant to feature shows of one work by three artists, but actually became notorious for much larger group shows such as *The Laura Show*, which featured many women named Laura; *Not Men*, which presented eight women painters; the novel *Tri-sexual*, and several solo shows. By 1993, TRI had evolved into a commercial venue at a new site and gave Kevin Hanley, Lutz Bacher, and Trudie Reiss, among others, their first L.A. solo shows. Brian Butler followed suit with 1301, a home gallery on the ground floor of his Santa Monica apartment.

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Miriam Dym, *New Planning* (April 1998), paintings, foam and fluorescent lights. Post Gallery, L. A.

Today's home galleries are quite efficient, as proprietors specify their boundaries — most have limited hours or are open only by appointment. Most proprietors hold regular jobs and the home galleries serve to mobilize the particular communities that support a specific home gallery's program. Artist Dave Muller's Three Day Weekend, which makes use of the dozens of annually occurring three and four-day holidays, is perhaps the most adaptive home gallery, since it began in his downtown studio in 1994, relocated to his house in 1995, and recently moved to his new studio. Three Day Weekend occurs spontaneously, avoids systematic programming, and enjoys the flexibility to take hiatus because it has been designed with survival in mind. Muller considers "the short-coming of alternative spaces" to be that "they seem inherently limited, because people don't seem to be able to figure out how to grow organically as their lifestyles change." He believes that as long as people still hold criticisms of the existing institutions, there's no reason to dump the projects and assume the institutions. Moreover, one can't criticize the institutions without providing alternative examples. Being on the road for his job has proved a boon rather than a thorn and has enabled Muller to mount shows in Tokyo, Hamburg, Vienna, Malmö, and most recently, London. Visitors to Three Day Weekend can expect to partake in some project like coloring Easter eggs or working on drawings.

In 1996, artist and all-around pep leader Laura Paddock organized two neighborhood-oriented exhibits in her Pasadena home, a practice that she sporadically continues in her Eagle Rock quarters. In the summer of 1996, curator Virginia Rutledge initiated Bunny Yeager LA, a garage space that sporadically sponsors solo exhibits of unknown works by known artists like Boris Mihailov and Mike Bidlo. Kimberli Meyer recently installed work in the same space, which is alternatively organized by Ren Wang as Chuck. Still further

south, Charles Parson recently established Marilyn, an apt name for a site (Miss Monroe was actually photographed there in the fifties) in which Parson's refurbished garage is totally dedicated to video and performance.

Several home galleries are more regular in their attempts to provide serious alternatives. In 1997, Sarah Gavlak, an unabashed commercial dealer who participates in art fairs and the secondary market, opened Sarah Gavlak Projects to exhibit artists such as Dean Sameshima, Kathleen Johnson, and Susan Lutz. The works exhibited at Gavlak Projects spread throughout her home, a previous Jorge Pardo-designed residence, from her living room to her bedroom and into her bathroom, and mingle along the way with the yellow, purple, and orange-red remnants of Pardo's decor.

Jane Hart purchased her Beachwood Canyon home in 1997 with an eye to designating the entire second story as the exhibition space for Lemon Sky, a project Hart currently organizes with Bill Radawec, a collaborator in the early nineties two-home site Domestic Setting. Lemon Sky opened with a solo exhibit by New York artist Alyson Sholtz that included a mesmerizing video and a related installation of small crushable objects that extended from the wall inside the house out onto the deck. Particularly interested in installations that address some aspect of the domestic in connection with the space, Lemon Sky's upcoming exhibits include Phyllis Green's modular investigations of Hart's home's scale and Jonathan Williams' site-specific painting installation. Not surprisingly, the more intimate site of a home gallery opening lends an atmosphere that becomes essential to the show's vitality.

Member Sponsored

In addition to the variety of artist-run and home galleries, there are several non-profit organizations that make vital contributions to the

art community even though artistic production is not necessarily their main focus. For example, the Foundation for Art Resources (FAR), which was founded in 1977 by three gallerists (Claire Copley, Connie Lewallen, and Morgan Thomas) to support the efforts of explicitly "non-commercial" art, has undertaken many roles over the decades depending on its board of directors' interests (see their website at www.arts.ucsb.edu/far/). In the early nineties, it was best known for Art Talk Art, a longstanding, regularly occurring series of provocative lectures by such leading lights as Michel Foucault, Ingrid Sischy, Yve-Alain Bois, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Thomas McEvilley. Several additional FAR arms have adapted to fill the gap left by a lack of exhibitional possibilities. In 1992, FAR sponsored *FAR BAZAAR*, a massive exhibitional extravaganza that overflowed two floors of the abandoned Federal Reserve Building. The response was so overwhelming that it followed in 1994 with the second *FAR BAZAAR* that took place at the BINGO building alongside the Brewery art complex near downtown.

After a three-year hiatus, FAR organized *SAFARI* in an abandoned zoo in Griffith Park. Works in the recent extravaganza proved most successful when artists adapted their works to take advantage of the zoo's particular accommodations (barred cages, grassy knolls and hills, bear grottos and lion dens, etc.), rather than its purpose, which made most works too zoo-specific. Near the end of the trail, an unbelievably solemn Claudia Bucher—considering how many poked her to find out whether she was real—rested comfortably in a human-size cocoon that hung precariously from a tree.

Alternatively, SITE, founded by Lise Patt, began in 1987 as a way for artists to meet one another and to organize critiques in their Culver City Helms Bakery Building location. Not entirely satisfied with being limited to a critical forum, SITE transformed their critique space into an exhibition site, which lasted for a few years until they moved to a giant exhibition space on 7th Street downtown when Patt left. Since then, SITE has sponsored juried shows, curated exhibits, and presented solo shows of members' works. Forced to relocate in 1996, SITE moved to a space in the Brewery art complex. In 1997, Christel Dillbohner and Melissa Altschuler invited seven Umbrian artists to exhibit with seven L.A. artists at SITE, and the exhibit then traveled to the Palazzo dei Consoli in Gubbio, Italy.

Under the direction of Karen Atkinson, Side Street Projects, an artist-run venture in the 18th Street Arts Complex since 1992, has mainly been known for supporting artists in the production, exhibition, and distribution of art. However, Side Street Projects will be hosting *Gathering Voices: curatorial perspectives*, an ongoing debate (1997-2000) that canvasses alternatives to traditional curatorial strategies and exhibitional structures, as well as the changing structure of museums and galleries (for more information, e-mail: sidest@ix.netcom.com).

Vacancy

Organizing exhibits in hotels is another popular L.A. endeavor. In response to the rather conventional works being shown at the Chateau Marmont's Grammercy International, curators Kathy Chenoweth and Lynne Berman invited about 30 artists to present installations in Inglewood's Lotus Motel over a weekend toward the end of 1995. In 1997, Dean Sameshima's Popular Mechanics organized *Hollywood Premiere*, which involved about 75 artists in the production of a massive theatrical display of truly entertaining hotel room installations, live performances, and experimental music held at the Hollywood Premiere Motel. Seasoned artists like Liz Lerner, Nayland Blake, Simon Leung, and Richard Hawkins participated, which lends credence to the view that alternative projects need not be just for those awaiting gallery representation. A few days later, Michael Arata and Leonard Bravo inaugurated One Night Stand, which presented a group show of artists in the Farmer's Daughter

Motel. Despite its name, One Night Stand has become a recurring project that features group shows on a regular basis, and it's grown to encompass multiple rooms.

The Office Worker's Opiate

In 1992, Mark Wehby organized several exhibits in Office for Art, a small office located in the Beverly Boulevard Arts Complex. In 1997, several galleries have sprung up in office spaces. In July, Rhonda Saboff opened DiRT in the office next door to her studio. She has since expanded her operation to two more offices. In addition to group shows that played off the themes of Fourth of July and Halloween, DiRT sponsored *Chicks with Dicks*, a wacky collaborative project by Jeff Kaisershot and Pamela Goldblum that featured dozens of dolls whose members, limbs, and breasts had undergone very elaborate and finely rendered reconstructive surgeries. Marsea Goldberg runs New Image Art in an office down the hall from DiRT. New Image Art has mostly organized group exhibits, but did feature an installation and performance by Liz Young. Robert Miller and UCLA grad student Martin de Razo operate Miller Fine Art, two second-floor office spaces where group shows have been organized to complement solo exhibits of artists like Chris Pate and Anders Lansing.

The thousands of workers who wait in line daily to renew their driver's license and take exams at the Hollywood DMV are in for a treat through 1998. Jamie Bush and Michele Schroeder have organized *While U Wait*, a series of six-week exhibits that begins with *Time Travel*, an exhibit curated collaboratively by Michelle Guy, Soo Kim, Karen Reitzel, and Brent Zerger, and is followed by their independent curatorial endeavors.

Digging the Gig

Despite the view that the alternative situations are merely transitional exhibitional opportunities for artists awaiting gallery representation, artists on all levels benefit by the openness and spontaneity of unusual settings. If one buys the view that each new project leads to another, one's future work can't help but benefit from the excitement and discovery brought on by some wacky project. In fact, the most useful projects are often those that force one to push boundaries or adapt one's work in ways that one wouldn't ordinarily consider. In contrast to the expectation of a four week show, artists might benefit by adapting a music world attitude, as typified by musicians who carry in and arrange a truck full of cumbersome equipment, even if only for a night, because they dig the gig. Since every alternative space has its own audience, a show that travels from one space to another within the same community might generate a wider audience.

In a nutshell, with many available venues in the Los Angeles area, artists who buckle down finally have a genuine opportunity to exhibit the work they've developed. So, seek out these sites or do some studio visits and start your own! At the risk of sounding corny, don't get under a rock...get into action!

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