

A PERFORMATIVE TRIGGER: RADICALS OF IRVINE



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FREE RADICALS: EARLY ARTISTS' PERFORMANCE AT UCI

From its debut exactly fifty years ago, the University of California Irvine – one of many campuses in the research-oriented UC system – has presented itself as a center of experiment, an island of higher inquiry floating in a sea of commerce and domesticity. At no other time has experimentation been more radical, and the sea around it more vacant, than during UCI's first decade. More than its scientists, its sociologists, or even its thespians, it took the University's artists – its art teachers, to be sure, but, even more, its artist-students – to build an aesthetic, or at least an attitude, around the geographic and political anomaly that was UCI. In doing so, these eccentric rebels – some of them adopting seemingly anti-social behavior, even feigning madness – addressed themselves to the broader social tensions of the day. They were intent on shocking the Orange County middle class, to be sure, but they had bigger bourgeoisie to fry as well.

The teaching model at UCI, certainly in the arts, was the conservatory, even the “master class.” Undergraduates and graduates alike benefited from relatively intimate, discursive relationships with their instructors. The graduates in particular, already schooled to some extent in techniques and pedagogical methods and already familiar with contemporary artistic trends, could flourish in an “adult” atmosphere that regarded them as peers with their professors. They were challenged, to be sure, by the stunning lack of resources afforded them: the School of Fine Arts provided no graduate studios and very little in the way of tools or materials, so MFA candidates had to prove themselves as much through resourcefulness as through production. But for the vast majority of the graduate students, and for a significant minority of undergrads (as opposed to those equally many who fled the program in frustration and horror), this whole experience was far more instructive, useful, adventurous and, well, *fun* than the usual academy fare.

It was also a lesson in how to merge art and life. Finding an industrial space 10 miles off campus to do your thing in – and then figuring out how to bring that thing to class (or how to bring the class to the thing) – was a necessary but still enlightening exercise in dealing with the world, physically, economically, and socially. It was an art in itself, or so it seemed to these babes in the barrio. A very fine line maintained between artistic investigation and practical negotiation, befitting the tendency of art and life to mirror and overlap each other in the later 1960s and early '70s.

The artists of UCI's first decade, along with the rest of us, were living, as the Chinese curse goes, in “interesting times.” The volatility of art, politics, and life in the USA of half a century ago was inescapable; war, protest, civil unrest, and cultural metamorphosis echoed at once immediately and obliquely in artistic practice. Some art reflected the American condition; some art mocked it; some art disdained it; and some art even sought to invade, or at least infect, it. Centers of

political activity and (sometimes destructive) protest – New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Detroit – also saw marked innovation and general fervency in artistic practice.

UCI students witnessed little if any radical action, on campus or nearby. The school was no stranger to picket parades, and hosted its share of lecturer-agitators, but in this regard it couldn't hold a candle to sister schools like Berkeley or UCLA (much less east coast hotbeds such as Columbia or national flashpoints like Kent State and Jackson State). Furthermore, the UCI campus floated in splendid isolation from the bedroom communities and commercial hubs of central Orange County: the march of the condos had only just begun, and wouldn't lap at the rim of the campus for another 20 years, while the aging infrastructures of places like downtown Santa Ana and the sterile industrial parks beginning to spring up near campus were politically neutral (if perfect for studio habitation and experimentation with materials and formats). But there was no escaping the headlines; and, besides, the urban cauldron seething beneath the glossy façade of nearby Los Angeles was less than an hour's drive away. Orange County's much-vaunted conservatism, embodied in the fact that its favorite son occupied the White House, was at most a mild provocation to the radical artists in its midst, if they reacted strongly to anything immediately around them, it was the region's cozy blandness – not to mention the sterility of the campus itself. But to these artists such vacuity was not peculiar to Irvine; it characterized America as a whole. As fellow southern-California counterculturato Frank Zappa put it, “Mr. America, walk on by your schools that do not teach / Mr. America, walk on by the minds that won't be reached...,” and elsewhere, “Be a loyal plastic robot / For a world that doesn't care.” “We are the other people,” Zappa also intoned, “You're the other people, too / Found a way to get to you...”

The art produced by UCI students at this crucial period is characterized by two contrasting qualities: a formal individualism, one that distinguishes each artist's work, in manner and expression, from every other's; and a shared relationship to a greater public, both art public (whose response they anticipated would be agreeable, if perhaps skeptical) and wider public (which they anticipated might be titillated but would more likely be dismissive). The art of these artists at this time and place was diffident – wrapped up in its own experimental urgency and barely even concerned with getting a good grade – but yearned to connect. The extreme circumstances proposed by Chris Burden, Barbara T. Smith, Nancy Buchanan, Richard Newton, Alexis Smith, Paula Sweet, Robert Wilhite, and Bradley Smith during and just after their school days seemed to insist on a distance, certainly a profound alienation, from the audience. But that audience, as noted, bifurcated into the non-art audience – the ones who weren't going to get it, but might get productively pissed off about it – and the art (and art-professional) audience – the ones

who had seen everything up until then, and were thus going to get it but could well be surprised by it. In fact, there was a third audience: other students, especially the culturally and politically radical-minded, who might or might not get it as art, but could grasp it as something done to disturb the status quo.

For the UCI avant-garde, then, art was a depth-charge of consciousness. It was designed not to please or to placate or to win or to sell, but to change minds – well, *blow* minds. Whether these performances and these installations and these events (and the rumors they engendered) decried the societal condition of women, conjured fantasies that harked back to childhood, documented and commented on political events, or subjected the artist's own body to deprivation, humiliation, and/or calamitous insult, they sought to pop minds open, to disturb conventional thinking and question commonly held beliefs, about art and life equally. This had been a core goal of artists for almost a century at that point, but the artists at UCI rejected painting, sculpture, and other conventional artistic formats – much, in fact, as did their non-performing classmates through the fabrication of art objects with extra-artistic materials and process. (Many of these “material abstractionists” crucially assisted their performance-oriented friends in their ventures.) Having been assured, directly or indirectly, by the larger art world – including voices of authority (John Coplans, Alan Solomon, Barbara Rose, Moira Roth, Phil Leider, Hal Glicksman, and Melinda Worts, among others) who passed through UCI at crucial moments – that art need not sit still, the artists of UCI embraced the possibilities of all media in all combinations, investing that embrace with a powerful dose of the first person. Further, the emergence of a strong and organized feminist-art presence in California at this time bolstered the Irvine radicals' own sense of art as a tool for social and political change (and, with such artists as Barbara T. Smith and Nancy Buchanan, personal transformation).

They also took inspiration from artistic activity they couldn't witness but to which they had indirect access through publications, whether mainstream or alternative. The performance scene in New York and, to a lesser extent, Europe came to them through periodicals such as Artforum and Avalanche, where they were able to read about the exploits of such “art-life” artists as Vito Acconci, Adrian Piper, Les Levine, and later, Gordon Matta-Clark. The emergence of SoHo as an urban artist's colony created by artists themselves – not just an artsy neighborhood, but a transformative locus of aesthetic and social innovation – oddly mirrored the geographic anomaly and do-it-yourself ethos of UCI, and gave heart (and occasional ideas) to Irvine's artists.

At the same time, the theorists and historians who had helped shape the art department from the beginning kept their artist charges keenly aware of available historical precedents. The conference on

and around Marcel Duchamp in 1971, was a high-water mark in this education, providing an in-depth discussion (and delirious celebration) of an artist already recognized as the paterfamilias of post-existentialist art. In Duchamp, Irvine's radical artists found a figure at once performative in his Dadaist provocation, conditional in his theory of readymades, subjective in his arbitrary valorization of the mundane, and eros-positive in his iconography.

It was the conditional and the arbitrary that distinguished performance art in general and performative experiment at UCI in particular, from standard theater (much to the consternation of the theater-oriented powers-that-be at the School of Fine Arts). Even given the narrative and fictive circumstances of so many of the most significant performances realized at UCI – Barbara T. Smith's *Mass Meal*, Richard Newton's *Beggar's Banquet*, Alexis Smith's *Scheherazade* – the situational, ritualistic, open-ended approach these manifestations shared distanced them from theatrical tradition and narrative convention. They even rejected the avant-garde stage work of such radical organizations as the Living Theater and Open Theater for its teleological goals. The models' operative amongst the artists were the Happening, which its inventor, Allan Kaprow (whose presence in Southern California was becoming felt) had evolved into a much more open, structural procedure; and Fluxus events, in which open interpretation of highly poetic scores was encouraged. (Fluxus artists such as Alison Knowles, Dick Higgins, Nam June Paik, Shigeko Kubota, and Ken Friedman were also present – if briefly – in the region at this time, as founding faculty at the California Institute of the Arts.)

No radical Irvine artist embraced the conditional more thoroughly than did Chris Burden. With his *Five Day Locker Piece* – his 1971 MFA graduating show – Burden embarked upon a now-infamous and influential early career arc devoted to the exploration of “what if” – or, perhaps more to the point, “what happens when.” Burden's performances were, if anything, images rather than events, tableaux presented either in compressed time (allowing him ultimately to present them as television “commercials”) or more rarely, (e.g. *Five Day Locker Piece*) in extended, lived-in time. His works were not enacted, they were endured. In this, whether deliberately or not, he reflected the models of Fluxus propositions (from Knowles' “Make a salad” to Paik's “Crawl up the vagina of a living whale!”) and Kaprow's post-Happening notations. But, while these proto- and quasi-conceptual examples began, and often ended, with the word, Burden's performances relied only incidentally on writing; sourced in his private thought, they manifested ideas without first having them enunciated. They come down to us not as scores or play scripts but as recollections or momentous photographic captures. (Only the television pieces survive as “direct artworks.”) Indeed, there are pieces Burden realized by himself, without documenting, that, according to legend, were every bit as powerful as his public presentations. But

these experiments – neither sketches nor failures, but lost works, “Burden's Burdens” – might as well never have taken place. They never existed for anyone but their maker.

Underscoring the careful line that Burden drew between his private work and his public was his involvement in the founding of F Space, the early, highly public “performance center” established in Santa Ana in 1971. It was here that Burden staged several of his most notorious events (including Shoot), events meant for public consumption. Set up by Burden, Barbara T. Smith, and Nancy Buchanan in a storefront southeast of downtown, F Space extended the concentration of performative activity from campus a few miles south and moved the work of Irvine's first fine-arts MFA class into a larger sphere of both art and life. As mentioned, Burden's, Buchanan's, and Smith's work were very different in form, tone, concept, purpose, and means – and the other artists shown at F Space, from UCI or not, were hardly less distinctive. But they all comprised a self-defined community and shared a common need for exposure and outreach. Just as in SoHo, the establishment of an exhibition space resulted logically from the realization of performances, the fabrication of objects, and the generation of artifacts, all of which had been taking place on campus with little access to a larger audience.

Santa Ana was no art-world hub but, interestingly, F Space contributed to a growing (if hardly burgeoning) gallery and even museum scene in mid-Orange County. The Newport Harbor Museum and Jack Glenn's gallery – among the Southland's most adventurous centers of art – were already established by 1971; and, in part spurred by the (relative) success of F Space, other artist-run alternative galleries such as Newspace and Floating Wall were established. These galleries also initially exhibited UC Irvine graduates (and precocious undergraduates). As the southern California art scene evolved through the 1970s into a teeming network of discourse and activity, one incorporating schools, artists' neighborhoods, commercial and non-commercial exhibition spaces, and eccentric, semi-private initiatives, the art showcases of central Orange County became part of a wider art world, and the ex-UC Irvine students who had populated them became known in regional, national, and even international contexts. The “material abstraction” mentioned earlier – itself a phenomenon centered on UCI – became one of the dominant object-making idioms of the period in southern California. But the performative trigger pulled by a handful of UCI students back when performance art itself was a-borning pierced the arm of the entire art world. The scar is still visible.

By Peter Frank

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