Driving Pacific Standard Time: How a Studio Becomes a Starbucks

A journey to discover what's become of L.A.'s art landmarks

By Ed Schad
published: September 22, 2011

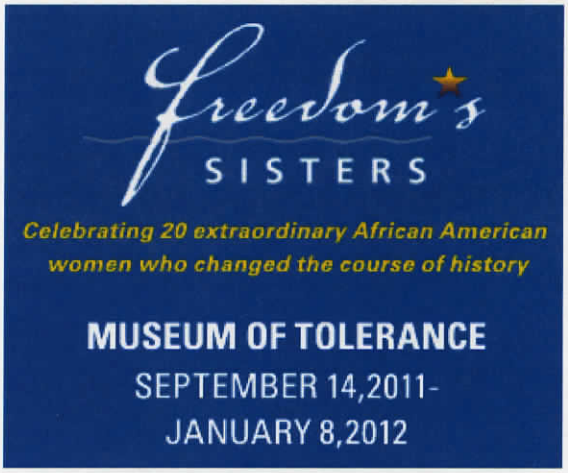


PHOTO BY TED SOQUI

The Women's Building on Spring Street in Chinatown

PHOTO BY TED SOQUI

The Mendota building on Main Street in Santa Monica, formerly the site of James Turrell's studio The Waitresses, a performance-art group that came out of the Women's Building.

Site of Dennis Hopper's *Double Standard* photograph at Santa Monica Boulevard and Melrose Performance-art group Asco's *Instant Mural* in East L.A.

Los Angeles is an ephemeral art city, with a history of ramshackle studios, temporary stagings and artworks that go into books and museums yet all but disappear from the landscape. Pivotal artist David Hammons' old second-floor dance-hall studio, for instance, where, using grease, he printed parts of his body on paper, inspiring an entire scene of artists, is now a preschool playground. The site of Allan Ruppersburg's famous 1969 Al's Café, a weekly art-happening "restaurant" offering such dishes as Simulated Burned Pine Needles à la Johnny Cash Served with a Live Fern, is a vacant lot on West Sixth Street.

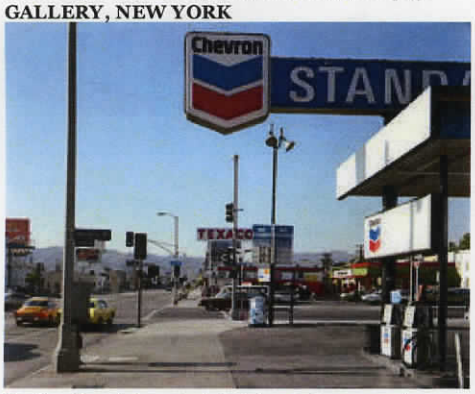
At the crest of La Cienega on Sunset, Mark di Suvero's famous, controversial 58-foot-tall Peace Tower was a platform for dozens of artworks protesting the Vietnam War. Niki de Saint Phalle, a few blocks away, set up relief sculptures filled with wet paint and shot them with a .22. Now only photos and stories. Kim Jones' walk down Wilshire dressed in sticks as his alter ego Mudman, Eleanor Antin's staged photo of a semicircle of boots on Solano Beach ... even Barney's Beanery on Holloway, the site of now-legendary late-night artist rants and antics in the 1960s, has become just another chain restaurant. What once was is now gone.

The remnants of 35 years of art in L.A. will emerge in Pacific Standard Time across 60 venues, but to dig one's bare hand into the roots of art, one must take to the road: One must drive Pacific Standard Time. So over the course of several weekends, I hopped in my Honda Civic and went afield, dipping into the lost paths of L.A. art history. I looked for what remained. When nothing remained, I imagined what once was.

PHOTO BY JOYCE DALLAL. COPYRIGHT THE WAITRESSES, WOMEN'S BUILDING IMAGE ARCHIVE, OTIS COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

The Waitresses, a performance art group that came out of the Women's Building

COURTESY OF STEPHEN SHORE AND 303 GALLERY, NEW YORK



Stephen Shore's famous photo taken at the corner of Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue

PHOTO BY TED SOQUI

The site of Stephen Shore's famous Beverly/La Brea photo, today

PHOTO BY TED SOQUI

Robert Irwin's scrim, 78 Market St., Venice

One of my first stops was a series of storefronts (numbers 74, 77 and 78) on Market Street in Venice. A stone's throw from Mao's Kitchen and now containing a bar called Nikki's, I found four white arches, leftover Italian flourishes from Abbot Kinney's mad dream to literally make Venice, Calif., like its European ancestor, full of ancient charm and canals. Kinney's vision ended with oil speculation, and once the oil was gone, in came bohemia. Market Street is significant. Galleries have periodically taken up residence there, and also artists, specifically Larry Bell and Robert Irwin, both known for using new technologies in an exploration of light and space.

It's difficult to imagine now, as one struggles to park on this beach traffic–clogged path, but Irwin painted the interior of No. 78 a flat white in 1980, and then knocked out the front wall and replaced the façade with a white scrim. You could not see the room through the scrim unless your eyes refocused. You had to wait for the effect. The scrim gave way from apparent solidity, revealing the depth of the room opening up in the light. As people passed in 1980, some saw it and some didn't. The piece remained unharmed for two weeks and then was taken down. Irwin famously took to the desert to think.

Dennis Hopper's Double Standard photograph, Santa Monica Boulevard at Melrose Avenue, West Hollywood

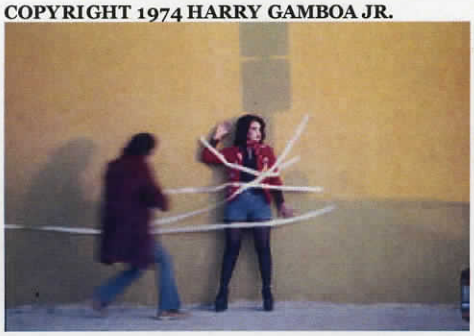
Dennis Hopper's iconic 1962 *Double Standard* photograph, an image of doubled Standard Gasoline signs, doubled streets, doubled mirror images, was taken at that weird little turn where Melrose ends at the edge of West Hollywood. I always thought Hopper was in a parked car and had staged the photo. Now I know he was in traffic, going east on Santa Monica, and that the photo was a snapshot, taken quickly before the honking started. The Standard Station — there was only one — is no longer there, but the photo comes alive when you are there. The witty convergences have all disappeared, making the instant captured by Hopper an even more poignant moment.

Stephen Shore's Beverly Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, CA, June 21, 1975, Hollywood

The opposite of Hopper's wit is the corner of Beverly and La Brea, where New Yorker Stephen Shore took this less iconic but far more important photograph. It too involves a gas station, a Chevron, which is still there, but this photo is more about ordinary Los Angeles, the reality of location. Taking his cue from the deadpan pools, apartments and buildings in Ed

78 Market St. in Venice, site of Robert Irwin's scrim piece

COPYRIGHT 1974 HARRY GAMBOA JR.



Performance art group Asco's *Instant Mural* in East L.A.

COPYRIGHT ESTATE OF RICHARD DIEBENKORN

One of Richard Diebenkorn's Ocean Park paintings

PHOTO BY TED SOQUI

Ruscha's artist books, Shore ends the dream of the West with the reality of the West. The intersection is not conducive to myths — it's too sober. Walking the spot is unremarkable, and that's Shore's point.

Asco's Instant Mural, Whittier Boulevard and Arizona Avenue, East L.A.

Myths explode further at the corner of Whittier Boulevard and Arizona Avenue in East L.A., where Asco taped themselves briefly to a wall, creating *Instant Mural* in 1974. Harry Gamboa Jr., a member of the group along with Willie Herrón III, Gronk and Patssi Valdez, wrote that the event occurred on a building found in Victor Aleman's 1971 photo, titled *Just Before the Gunfire*, showing one of the antiwar protests of the Chicano Moratorium movement in 1971.

Arizona Avenue has been expanded since then — 1971's two lanes are now four. The street is still vibrant with shops and lively street action, but the building in Aleman's photograph, a structure that must have been proud of its art deco detailing, is falling into ruin. Only a commemorative plate on the death of protester Gustav Montag marks the events of 1971.

The air must have been supercharged in 1974, the memories of the protest and the gunfire still relatively present, as the young performance artists suddenly took to the wall, rolls of tape ripping, trying to stick themselves to the surface. The artists sprung out of the tape like figures of a mural coming alive in real time, a critique of the political effectiveness of murals in and of themselves. L.A.'s history of art activism comes into focus here, its history of the disenfranchised gaining a voice.

The Women's Building, 1727 N. Spring St., Chinatown

The Women's Building, just up the I-5 freeway, north of Chinatown on Spring Street, also conjures an alternate history, one featured in an October exhibit on the topic at Otis College of Art and Design. This converted warehouse, miraculously, is still full of artists' studios. Covered in graffiti, it's run down not out of neglect but from containing people with better things to do than keep it up. Barbara T. Smith, Suzanne Lacy, Leslie Labowitz and Nancy Fried all made work here or performed here. In 1978, they raised to the roof of the building a naked lady sculpture by Kate Millet.

Chris Burden's Shoot, F-Space, 1514-F E. Edinger Ave. (address now nonexistent), Santa Ana

Industrial parks are hardly exciting even on their best days, but for another site of pivotal performance, one can drive to Santa Ana to Edinger Avenue. It is an endless blank of

Richard Diebenkorn's studio on Main Street in Santa Monica, where he created his Ocean Park paintings

warehouses and corporate outposts, parking lots and metal. Here you can imagine the shot, which must have sounded like a quick hiss, of Chris Burden's infamous *Shoot*, performed at the long-gone F-Space. On Nov. 19, 1971, Burden walked into the gallery, followed by a friend. Calling out "Ready," the friend shot him in the arm.

It feels silly to be here, in a Santa Ana industrial park, but Southern California's locations play a part in its art, breathe life and give birth to it. Burden once was asked if some of his works grew out of boredom and frustration with California, and he admitted that could be. I find a confirmation here in this warehouse city, where the shot must have been barely heard.

Richard Diebenkorn and James Turrell's studios, Ocean Park area, Santa Monica

Seeing Richard Diebenkorn's old studio at 2444 Main St. in Santa Monica, you see his Ocean Park paintings, all made there, become less and less abstract. The streets angling to the sea around the building, in the pink and pale blue light of a beach evening, recall the geometries and pastel hues of Diebenkorn's most famous works. James Turrell's studio a block south at 2671 Main, the old Mendota Hotel, is now a Starbucks and apparently, according to coffee regulars, Bill Cosby's office occupies the second floor.

A ficus tree in front has grown large, and the building is quite beautiful. In 1969, light flooded inside, and Turrell shaped and oriented it by removing windows and bits of walls to split the space, creating odd perceptual shifts.

Driving Pacific Standard Time is similar to Turrell's need "to accept the light coming through the openings." L.A. enters its art like light through that old building. L.A. art comes and goes. It's fun to see where it was, where it went, its activity now quiet, ready to flare up again.