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**ENACTED SITES: ART AND THE VISUALIZATION OF SPATIAL
JUSTICE IN LOS ANGELES, 1966-2014**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

VISUAL STUDIES

by

Mary M. Thomas

June 2017

The Dissertation of Mary M. Thomas is
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Abstract

Enacted Sites:

Art and the Visualization of Spatial Justice in Los Angeles, 1966-2014

Mary Thomas

For decades, art historical scholarship about Los Angeles has explored how artists engage the city's distinctive urban landscape. Much of this work, however, has privileged artists situated within a network of galleries and art institutions that represent a fraction of the artist communities housed within the city. My dissertation draws upon this foundation of work in order to expand the geographic scope of Los Angeles art history. Specifically, this dissertation considers how black and Mexican American artists in South Los Angeles developed aesthetic practices grounded in improvisation in order to respond to social and political conditions that are manifested within the built environment. By examining artworks that respond to the deleterious effects of housing segregation, freeway construction, gentrification, and anti-immigrant legislation, I argue that improvisatory aesthetic practices provided artists with a set of tools for enacting egalitarian visions of urban space within sites historically marked by inequality.

The first half of the dissertation argues that artists influenced by jazz improvisation re-envisioned the landscape of South Los Angeles in the decades following the 1965 Watts uprising before expanding on the notion of improvisation as a form of visual expression through an examination of works by Mexican-American artists who integrated conceptual art practice with elements of urban visual culture.

By drawing upon social practices that transform urban space on a human scale, such as the collection of detritus, the formation of desire paths, the production of graffiti, and the creation of vernacular urban forms, I contend that the artworks I examine suggest an alternative to monumental scale and subsequent erasure of social, economic, and ethnic difference imposed by the logics of urban planning. By analyzing how artists such as Noah Purifoy, Judson Powell, Maren Hassinger, Daniel J. Martinez, and Mario Ybarra Jr. engage with forms that are localized, spontaneous, and responsive to their environments, this dissertation offers a framework for understanding how improvisatory aesthetic practice can help enact spatial justice within the urban landscape.

For Lillian Veronica Keys

Acknowledgements

Although a completed dissertation bears the name of a single author, this project has been sustained by the diligent care and attention of many individuals. Although words are inadequate to express my gratitude, it is a great privilege to include their names here.

This dissertation could not have been realized without the support of my advisor, Professor Jennifer González, and my dissertation committee members, Professors Martin Berger, Herman Gray, and Cécile Whiting. I am especially grateful to Jennifer González not only for her belief in this project's potential from its earliest iteration, but for her kindness, candor, encouragement, and support at every step of my graduate career. Martin Berger's precision in posing questions that reveal lines of thought that I had not considered has significantly helped me to strengthen my argument. I am similarly indebted to Herman Gray for helping to point me toward improvisation as a theoretical lens, and for the way in which his feedback has helped encourage an approach to scholarship that seeks to approach generative horizons over static conclusions. Cécile Whiting's expansive knowledge of Los Angeles art history, along with supportive feedback that encouraged greater clarity of thought has made this project infinitely more rich. Beyond my dissertation committee, I have benefitted from the mentorship and guidance of Professors Maria Evangelatou and Stacy Kamehiro in my home department. Similarly, conversations with Dr. Amalia Mesa-Bains have enlivened this project, and the generosity and care that she, along with Richard Bains, and Judy Mesa have shared with me have helped to sustain this work.

Professor Adriana Zavala's leadership, advocacy, and support have inspired me to be courageous in my work. More than anything, however, the mentors named here have provided invaluable models for how to conduct oneself as a scholar whose humanity nurtures their brilliance.

Many institutions, including the University of California Santa Cruz's Graduate Division and Department of History of Art and Visual Culture have supported this project, either through funding or permitting access to their archives. These include the Wallis-Annenberg Research Grant from the University of California, which enabled access to the Century Freeway Records, a significant primary source in my second chapter. Similarly, the archival holdings of the Archives of American Art, The Huntington Library, California State University, Northridge, the Foundation for Art Resources, and the Los Angeles Nomadic Division enriched the research and writing that comprised this project. I am additionally thankful to Anne Bray, Karla Diaz, Daniel J. Martinez, Julia Meltzer, and Mario Ybarra Jr. for speaking extensively with me about their work.

One of this project's longest sources of support and encouragement has come from the Mellon Mays Program in conjunction with the Social Science Research Council. From my early days in the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship to the Graduate Initiative Program's summer conferences, writing retreats, seminars, and grants, and most recently, the Woodrow Wilson Dissertation Fellowship, I have been immensely fortunate to be part of this network and share its commitments to advancing racial equity in higher education. Amongst the many individuals who

commit their labor, talent, and intellect to the organization, the insights and advice offered by Professors Cally Waite, Shanna Benjamin, Miguel de Baca, and Maurice Stevens have proven critical and sustaining throughout my graduate career.

At my home institution, I have been immensely fortunate to be welcomed into a warm and nurturing community by a close circle of colleagues. Rachel Nelson's sharp intellect and good humor have buoyed this project. Serendipitous conversations with Erin Gray (always in distant locales) have brought excitement and a new perspective to my work. Gabrielle Greenlee and Alex Moore have brought persistent joy to the dissertation doldrums through their willingness to participate in adventurous outings and dinner parties. Angie Bonilla's friendship and cheerful spirit have always helped me to see the lighter side of academic life. Michelle Yee's infectious laughter and enthusiasm have been a persistent reminder of the delight at the heart of intellectual discovery.

A beloved network of colleagues beyond Santa Cruz has been vital throughout this journey. It has been a share this journey alongside Nicole Gervasio and to celebrate each other's triumphs whenever our paths cross. Similarly, Darren Arquero's candor, radiance, and resilience inspire me to conduct my scholarship with those attributes in mind. I am additionally humbled to be counted amongst the cohort of emerging scholars specializing in Latinx art that includes Julia Fernández, Dr. Josh Franco, and Rose Salseda. Their tenacity and brilliance inspires me to produce not only the scholarship that is needed, but that we have yet to dream of. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Josh Franco for his welcoming presence at the Archives of American

art, and the words of encouragement, and hospitality that he has shared with me on my visits to the collections. Similarly, it has been a great privilege to be Rose Salseda's collaborator, friend, and occasional accomplice. Her ingenuity, generosity, and determination perpetually leave me awestruck.

I have been immensely fortunate to have the friendship and love of a community of people who have known me long before this process began, and who have a special talent for showing me the sides of myself that are easily forgotten in the peculiar journey of completing a Ph.D. Sara McDermott and Win Wharton have not only generously shared their home with me on countless occasions, but have indulged long-winded discourses on obscure topics and trips to view artwork. Aaron and Jillian Piccirilli have become cherished members of our extended family following our journeys to the West coast. Our annual Thanksgiving celebrations will be a long-treasured memory of this time, and I am filled with delight to know that a new guest will join us at the table soon. Devin Conathan and Gail Murray have been the most wonderful long-distance besties a person could ever ask for. Their generosity, care, and Gail's willingness to hold ongoing conversations across several platforms at once make the geographic distance that separates us feel insignificant, and have filled often-lonely days with laughter and good company.

Ultimately, however, none of this would have been possible without the support of my immediate family. My mother, Frances, has encouraged my intellectual pursuits without question or hesitation. Her constant love, encouragement, humor, and cleverness have been a constant reminder that there is always joy and wonder to

be found in the world. My sister, Erica, has been the trailblazer in our family, navigating higher education, advanced degrees, moves to new cities, and has generously shared her advice and insight at every step along the way. She has encouraged me to be courageous through her own example, and at its core, this project was born from a conversation we had on the subway many years ago. Similarly, it is a great delight that this moment has coincided with Erica and Felix's marriage. It is privilege to not only gain a brother-in-law, but to be welcomed so warmly by the Sánchez family. Finally, I am infinitely thankful for the companionship and love of Ethan Samuels. His relentless support, humor, generosity, and intellect bring light and happiness to each day.

Introduction

In *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation*, Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz describe improvisation as “a democratic, human, and emancipatory practice, and that securing rights of all sorts requires people to hone their capacities to act in the world, capacities that flow from improvisation.”¹ And yet, the emancipatory aspects of improvisatory production are always already enacted within a context of constraint, according to Tracey McMullen and Judith Butler, who suggest “We wouldn’t understand improvisation if there were no rules. In other words, improvisation has to either relax the rules, break the rules, operate outside the rules, bend the rules—it exists in relation to rules, even if not in a conformist or obedient relation.”² Throughout the United States, improvisatory social practices emerge from within aggrieved communities who are disproportionately subject to social, political, and economic constraints that limit the recognition of their civil rights and access to resources that enable social and economic mobility. From within these communities, artists have sought to produce work that amplifies the presence of these social practices within the built environment. All too often, however, these works evade visibility and are easily overlooked by art historians, cultural critics, and curators due to the works’ production outside of established institutional structures and the inevitably short

¹ Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), xi.

² Tracey McMullen, “Improvisation within a Scene of Constraint: An Interview with Judith Butler,” in *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity*, eds. Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 25.

lifespans of many of these pieces. Art historical scholarship about Los Angeles has explored how artists engage the city's distinctive urban landscape.³ My dissertation draws upon this foundation of work in order to expand the geographic scope of Los Angeles art history. Specifically, I consider how artists in South Los Angeles developed aesthetic practices grounded in improvisation in order to respond to social and political conditions that are manifested within the built environment. By examining artworks that respond to the deleterious effects of housing segregation, freeway construction, gentrification, and anti-immigration policy, I argue that improvisatory aesthetic practices provided artists with a set of tools for enacting egalitarian visions of urban space within sites historically marked by inequality.

“Enacted Sites” recovers an aesthetic history that is often resigned to the margins by exploring how black and Mexican-American artists in South Los Angeles use improvisation as a tactic to claim and shape the urban landscape. This dissertation demonstrates how artworks comment on and contribute to the reconfiguration of urban space through four art projects that speak to the following questions: What does it mean to discuss South Los Angeles as a center of cultural production within the “centerless” city of Los Angeles? How can the notion of improvisation be expanded based on the kind of urban intervention this dissertation examines? How can these visual strategies be linked to other modes of improvisatory practice? I answer these

³ Notable contributions to this body of literature include Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Alexandra Schwartz, *Ed Ruscha's Los Angeles* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008).

questions by demonstrating how the confluence of improvisation with the reworking of contested landscapes points toward an aesthetic practice that is *of* the built environment while also working from *within* it to reconfigure and reimagine it.

Because this project endeavors to offer a framework for discussing art practice that directly engages the urban landscape, it inevitably requires a vocabulary that reflects not only the dynamic relationship between these works and the built environment, but an attention to the complex social, political, and cultural forces that comprise the urban palimpsest. The artworks that this project examines directly refer to visual expressions of improvisatory social practices. It is particularly important, however, to distinguish the works discussed here as art because, although the artists I examine draw upon these social practices in the conceptual or formal execution of their pieces, the aesthetic invocation of community-based social practices inevitably has different implications from the way these practices are carried out on an everyday basis. By situating these works within a larger history of art, the artists that I examine offer an aesthetic model for enacting spatial justice on a human scale that resists the adaptation of urban planning and real estate development to achieve these ends.

Privileging the visual analysis of these works allows objects that appear immediately legible, familiar, or otherwise unremarkable to be made strange. By attending to these qualities, it is not only possible to engage with these works on a more nuanced level, but to recognize their location within a broader nexus that links visual and sonic modes of improvisation as practices that enable communities to envision how space can be enacted differently. It is in the articulation of this nexus

that the disciplinary boundaries of art history and its vocabularies for categorizing aesthetic practice can be unfixed. In discussing improvisation as a social practice that extends between black and Latinx communities, this project troubles how the categories of “African American art” and “Latinx art” necessarily foreclose the possibility of this type of exchange. So too, discussing South Los Angeles similarly calls for an expanded geography of what is considered “Los Angeles art,” and examining the circulation of these images outside of this region calls for a close attention not only to the ways in which improvisatory social practices are enacted across a wide range of sites, but how these sites in turn inform the contours of these practices.

Critical studies of improvisation offer a framework for examining art that is spontaneous, ephemeral, and responsive to its surroundings.⁴ Richard Powell’s essay, “The Blues Aesthetic” offered a frame for understanding blues as an expansive practice that can not only inform visual art practice in a variety of ways, but exceed it, encompassing “an aesthetic/an artistic stance, a philosophy. Something that was not just musical but cultural. A point-of-view that one might inherit, as well as choose to embrace. A particular cultural perspective that grew out of the social condition black Americans as they entered and dealt with the modern era.”⁵ Scholarship that thinks through the intersection of visual art and improvisation have taken up questions regarding how the sonic cultures of jazz and blues music can be rendered visible and

⁴ Fischlin et. al., *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, xi.

⁵ Richard J. Powell, “The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism,” in *The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism* (Washington D.C.: Washington Project for the Arts, 1989), 19-20.

how the generative techniques that constitute improvisation (i.e. syncopation, call and response, riffing, etc) can be integrated into visual arts practice. Many scholars have discussed how visual artists integrate improvisation into their visual art practice by examining artists whose work was directly informed by their proximity to jazz and blues culture, such as Romare Bearden, Aaron Douglass, and Norman Lewis.⁶ Other scholars have examined how the influence of these musical traditions can be seen in the visual intervals in Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* or the rhythmic qualities of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings.⁷ Acknowledging that improvisatory techniques inherently produce culturally-hybrid forms and cross-cultural engagements in their introduction to the edited essay collection, *The Hearing Eye: Jazz & Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, Graham Lock and David Murray emphasize the significance of visual engagements with improvisation

⁶ See Sara Wood, " 'Pure Eye Music': Norman Lewis, Abstract Expressionism, and Bebop," in *The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, eds. Graham Lock and David Murray (Cambridge, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 95-119; Robert G. O'Meally, " 'We Used to Say 'Stashed': Romare Bearden Paints the Blues," in *The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, eds. Graham Lock and David Murray (Cambridge, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 173-193; Donna M. Cassidy, *Painting the Musical City: Jazz and Cultural Identity in American Art, 1910-1940* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).

⁷ Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Mona Hadler, "Jazz and the Visual Arts," *Arts Magazine* 57.10 (June 1983): 91-101; Mona Hadler, "Jazz and the New York School," *Representing Jazz*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 247-259;

emerging from the jazz and blues tradition as being grounded in African American experience and history.⁸

In other contexts, such as Black Mountain College, improvisation was invoked through the school's emphasis on experimentation-based practice that emphasized the role of chance and collaboration.⁹ For example, the choreographer Merce Cunningham collaborated with composer John Cage, both of whom incorporate principles of indeterminacy and chance into their creative practice. Similarly, visual artists whose work utilized spontaneously-produced abstract forms, scavenged materials, or Surrealist-inspired automatic drawing such as Elaine and Willem de Kooning, John Chamberlain, and Robert Motherwell were also associated with the school. Allan Kaprow's writings in *Assemblage, Environments, & Happenings* demonstrate a keen application of how improvisation's capacity to reconceptualize the relationship between performer and audience from hierarchy to exchange can translate to the performative space of the happening.¹⁰ Similarly, improvisation's capacity to exceed its frame (i.e. a musical composition or score) is echoed in his discussion of early installation art's desire to move beyond the enclosed space of the two-dimensional canvas.¹¹

⁸Graham Lock and David Murray, "Introduction," in *The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, eds. Graham Lock and David Murray (Cambridge, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7-8.

⁹ Eva Díaz, *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1966), 164.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 206.

Coincident with the development of aesthetic practices that exceeded traditional visual art mediums during the late 1950s and 1960s, new musical forms, such as free jazz, emerged that rejected inherited musical conventions in favor of more experimental modes of practice that drew upon an expansive set of genres. It is this shift away from the conventional and presumably fixed forms and toward the integration of eclectic and unanticipated cultural reference points into mutable and mercurial forms that this project seeks to address. In an essay on Jean-Michel Basquiat that situates his visual art in relation to musical improvisation, Robert Farris-Thompson carefully notes not only Basquiat's references to jazz and blues music, but how the artist embodied the crux between seemingly far-flung cultural influences, such as his Afro-Latinx heritage that lent itself to a fluent capacity to code-switch that not only took place linguistically, but is visible in the usage of text in his work. Similarly, Basquiat moved between the cultural enclaves of graffiti, the fine arts world, and the underground music scene through his involvement in "Gray," a noise band. It is this movement between cultural, linguistic, and aesthetic registers that points toward improvisation's generative capacities and the emergence of new forms from within them.

Another compelling component of this practice is Basquiat's creative production in relation to the particular affordances and constraints of New York City's urban landscape during the late 1970s and 1980s. In both Powell and Kaprow's writings that address art practice driven by improvisation, they acknowledge the context of everyday urban life as a significant component of the work. Powell writes,

“The personal dynamics of black urban living can also be seen as a vital part of a blues aesthetic and the guiding force for formal/contextual decision-making in art.”¹² Similarly, in relation to assemblage and installation, Kaprow discusses how “we must not suppose that these works look like a witch doctor’s magic stick or like the plaster Madonna with-roses-and-lights that appears on so many of our lawns. Sometimes simple imagery of sorts can be made out, though often it slips out of focus as quickly as it is seized upon; occasionally it bursts blatantly forth out of the nameless sludge and whirl of urban events, precisely here and when it is least expected. In fact, much of this is eminently an art of the city, and if it comes from within, the dreams of the inner man are now closely bound up with some real enough pattern observed in the externals of the streets.”¹³ Although these passages refer to different modes and contexts of improvisatory production, it is notable that both authors recognize the vernacular urban environment as a significant site and source of aesthetic production.¹⁴ It is this particular intellectual thread that “Enacted Sites” seeks to weave into a new context by examining works that simultaneously emerge from within black cultural sites that have been shaped by histories of improvisation while also innovating on the forms Kaprow examined as troubling the boundaries between art practice and everyday life.

¹² Powell, 34-5.

¹³ Kaprow, 164.

¹⁴ For scholarship that examines how New York artists responded to the transformation of the built environment by engaging its material qualities through their art practice, see Joshua Shannon, *The Disappearance of Objects: New York Art and the Rise of the Postmodern City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

Whether through the Watts Towers' creation using scavenged pieces of broken glass, concrete, and steel, or jazz clubs which functioned as spontaneous sites of integration, improvisational practices have a long history of altering the urban landscape in South Los Angeles. Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, South Los Angeles' cultural landscape has been overshadowed by the lived effects of inequality created through decades of redlining, economic disenfranchisement, and discriminatory policing. The use of terms such as "discriminatory," "repressive," or "excessive" in relation to police activity refers to a broad set of practices¹⁵ that result in a disproportionately high¹⁶ number of encounters

¹⁵ In her discussion of criminal justice and race, Katheryn Russell uses the terms "police harassment" and "police brutality" to describe encounters between black men and law enforcement. Although she defines police harassment as a range of actions that "are both lawful and unlawful" which can include "being mistaken for a criminal, being treated like a criminal, being publicly humiliated, and in some cases, being called derogatory names," and police brutality as being comprised by the "unlawful use of excessive force," she acknowledges that for many black men, each instance of police harassment carries "the potential for police brutality." Because of the often opaque legality of these actions carried out by the police and the frequency with which the boundary between harassment and brutality is blurred, I have opted to use more general terminology to refer to these activities. See Katheryn Russell, *The Color of Crime: Racial Hoaxes, Black Protectionism, Police Harassment, and Other Macroaggressions* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 33-34.

¹⁶ A 1997 report prepared by the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the National Institute of Justice stated that Latinx and black people were roughly seventy percent more likely to have contact with the police as white individuals. See Bureau of Justice Statistics and the National Institute of Justice, *Police Use of Force: Collection of National Data* (Washington D.C., 1997), 4.

<https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/puof.pdf> Last accessed May 14, 2017. Earlier reports, such as the one produced by the Kerner Commission in 1968, identified police misconduct as a significant factor in the uprisings that took place in U.S. cities earlier in the decade. See Jill Nelson, "Introduction," *Police Brutality: An Anthology*, ed. Jill Nelson (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000), 11. The 1991 Christopher Commission report later found that twenty-five percent of Los

between black and Latinx communities and law enforcement relative to Anglo Americans. In many cases, the presumption of criminality due to systematic race-based profiling results in policing tactics that dramatically restrict the activity of residents within economically-depressed¹⁷ black and Latinx communities and make individuals who appear black or Latinx more likely to be stopped by a police officer when traveling within predominantly white neighborhoods. These encounters, which are frequently characterized by verbal threats, intimidation, and the use of violent force capable of causing substantial injury or death, combined with their frequency, culminate in a collective experience of terror and trauma within black and Latinx communities.¹⁸

Angeles police officers believe that their colleagues practice racial discrimination and that such behavior results in the use of excessive force. See Russell, 37-8).

¹⁷ Robin D.G. Kelley has described the presence of police in black, Latinx, and indigenous communities as a form of “occupation, surveillance, and pacification.” See Robin D.G. Kelley, “‘Slangin’ Rocks...Palestinian Style’: Dispatches from the Occupied Zones of North America,” in *Police Brutality: An Anthology*, ed. Jill Nelson (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000), 25. He, and other scholars, have also pointed out that the high crime rate within these communities (often attributable to a lack of economic opportunity) is often used as justification for extensive policing, but that residents in these areas are also substantially more likely to be victims of crime, complicating these communities’ relationship to the police. Michelle Alexander, in her discussion of the widespread social and political disenfranchisement of African Americans within the criminal justice system, suggests that such discriminatory policing measures sometimes result in the sentencing of innocent individuals who lack the access to adequate legal counsel. See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York and London: The New Press, 2010), 58-9.

¹⁸ See Russell, *The Color of Crime*, and Nelson, ed., *Police Brutality* for data and personal accounts of encounters with the police. See also the chapter titled “Police Harassment and Brutality” in Juanita Díaz-Cotto, *Chicana Lives and Criminal Justice: Voices from El Barrio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006) for accounts from formerly-incarcerated Chicanas regarding their experience with police in Los Angeles. *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992* by Anna Deavere-Smith also features

In opposition to initiatives that seek to impose order on the city at a monumental scale, improvisation enables individuals and communities to participate in the reconfiguration of urban space from the street level. At its core, this project is concerned with how art offers a means by which individuals can shape the urban landscape.¹⁹ By centering improvisation as the strategy by which this occurs, I am interested in situating visual art amongst other creative forms, namely musical expression and vernacular architecture. My aim is to demonstrate that the means by which urban space can be enacted differently are constituted within a network of interconnected practices that exceed stylistic categorizations and designations of “fine art,” “folk art,” and “mass culture.”

Several scholars have brought improvisational theory into conversation with urban planning. For Dean C. Rowan and David P. Brown, improvisation is seen as a tool to be integrated into urban planning, despite Rowan’s acknowledgement of the qualities of “deviation” (as in, deviation from a determined plan) and “insurgency” as central to improvisatory practices and the inherent contradictions that arise when these methods are codified within urban policy.²⁰ This shift suggests a similar

monologues taken from interviews with black and Latinx individuals discussing their experience with police harassment and brutality. See Anna Deavere-Smith, *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992: A Search for American Character* (New York: Polity Books, 1994) and Anna Deavere Smith, Ezra Swerdlow, and Marc Levin. *Twilight--Los Angeles*. (Alexandria, Va.): Distributed by PBS Home Video. 2001.

¹⁹ Rosalyn Deutsche’s discussion of the complexities concerning artists whose work seeks to intervene within the public sphere and whose work seeks to enhance the “democratic” nature of public space have informed my approach to these issues. See Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

²⁰ See David P. Brown, “Lots Will Vary in the Available City,” in *The Oxford*

problematic to the one raised by Herman Gray in his discussion of the canonization of jazz through the Lincoln Center. The attempt to define, categorize, and canonize ultimately produces new forms of exclusion, and in some cases, overlooks the radical capacity of practices not recognized by institutional centers of power. In a similar vein, this project seeks to draw upon Gray's metaphor of the "road and the street" to point toward social practices that are born from the mutability and fluidity of urban landscapes and that arise from the actions and exchanges that constitute everyday life.²¹ The practices represented by the artists discussed in this project are located outside of the institutional loci of power represented by art museums. Although the artists discussed here participate in museum exhibitions and in some cases are represented by galleries, the criteria that links the works is an engagement with rendering visible the social practices that, due to their mutability and ephemerality, often go unnoticed or unseen.

This framework allows me to develop a language for describing artwork that resists categorization because it resides in the nebulous spaces between genres and historical periods. A thread that links the artists I examine is their integration of community-oriented artistic practice with conceptual art. Amidst civil rights movements in Los Angeles, artists played pivotal roles in creating institutions where none previously existed in order to serve their communities and create venues to

Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies, Vol.2, eds. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (Cambridge, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 57-76; Dean C. Rowan, "Modes and Manifestations of Improvisation in Urban Planning, Design, and Theory," *Critical Studies in Improvisation* Vol.1 No.1 (2004): 4-5.

²¹ Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 49.

show their work.²² Although the momentum of civil rights movements attracted artists who strongly identified with them, many of the artists I study use strategies of community engagement without aligning themselves with political movements or politicized identities. The other aesthetic tradition that informs the artists I examine is conceptual practice, which emphasizes art's relationship to its spatial context in order to challenge conventional modes of viewing and interacting with the art object through installation and site-specificity. The artists I discuss critique the art gallery and museum as de facto sites for encountering art. As a result, they create work that directly responds to its urban context, requiring inventive strategies for its installation, display, and documentation. As an extension of their interest in challenging modes of art viewing, these artists also expand conversations regarding medium by using scavenged and repurposed materials such as architectural wreckage, street posters, house paint, handmade signs, and aerosol spray paint to create their work. While these items are viewed as having little to no aesthetic value, their usage creates a dialogic relationship between the work and the site to which it refers. This relationship generates new strategies for contending with the urban landscape.

By focusing on South Los Angeles, this project marks a departure from literature examining the intersections between improvisation and visual art that has privileged New York City as its geographic center. Although scholars such as Clora

²² Among the numerous community-based arts organizations in Los Angeles, the Brockman Gallery in Leimert Park and Self Help Graphics are two particular notable examples. See Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins, "The Brockman Gallery and the Village," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* Vol. 30 (Spring 2012): 5-15; Colin Gunckel, ed., *Self Help Graphics and Art: Art in the Heart of East Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2005).

Bryant and Steven Isoardi have conducted detailed studies of the history of jazz in South Los Angeles, Daniel Widener's *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* offered a tangential discussion of the relationship of its improvisatory forms to other modes of cultural expression in relation to his larger argument concerning the relationship between black political sentiment and cultural production. Similarly, although individual artists from South Los Angeles have been the subjects of museum exhibitions and art historical scholarship, South Los Angeles had not been considered by art historians as a locus for substantial aesthetic production prior to the exhibition *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980*, and Kellie Jones' recent monograph, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s*.²³ This project draws upon the intellectual contributions made by this prior body of work while also seeking to recognize the interchanges and shared social practices between black and Latinx communities in South Los Angeles.

Ultimately, my dissertation traces how artists have forged new modes of working within the urban landscape that extend and amplify struggles for social justice. By situating this project in South Los Angeles, I address the lacuna of detailed studies examining artists from historically marginalized communities in light of scholarship in the discipline that favors Los Angeles artists with substantial commercial and institutional representation. My dissertation remedies these scholarly

²³ Kellie Jones, ed., *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980* (Munich: Prestel, 2011); Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

gaps by tracing a history of spatially-engaged art practice by black and Mexican-American artists in South Los Angeles. Although scholars of ethnic studies, literature, and film have studied Mexican-American and Chicana/o Art, there has been relatively little scholarship dedicated to this subject amongst art historians.²⁴ Moreover, only a small portion of this research addresses the generation of artists following the civil rights movement who address social and political conditions by incorporating urban visual culture into conceptual art practice.²⁵ I seek not only to trace improvisation as a creative practice that is shared across communities, but to expand scholarly discourse concerning Mexican-American artists who work outside of East Los Angeles, an established cultural center for this community. Most significantly, however, my dissertation generates a comparative lens that can be applied to future studies that

²⁴ An article by Adriana Zavala titled “Latin@ Art at the Intersection” examined the reasons for the slow growth of the field of Latin@ art history, the parent field that constitutes Chicana art, attributing it to the lack of specialists in this topic at the graduate level and “elitism and racial bias within the field of art history.” (137-138). See Adriana Zavala, “Latin@ Art at the Intersection,” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, Vol. 40, No.1 (Spring 2015): 125-140. Similarly, a comparative study conducted by Rose Salseda and Mary Thomas examining the representation of Latin@ art at the College Art Association Annual Conference, the American Studies Association Annual Meeting, and the Latino Studies Association Conference showed that in 2016, papers on Latinx art constituted 15.76% of all papers on art and visual culture at the American Studies Association Annual Meeting and 9.45% of papers at the Latino Studies Association Conference, compared to 1.04% of all papers at the College Art Association Annual conference. These numbers suggest that scholarly discourse on Latin@ art is disproportionately taking place outside of art history. See Rose Salseda and Mary Thomas, “Call to Action,” *U.S. Latina/o Art Forum*, August 1, 2016 (http://www.uslaf.org/pdfs/uslaf_call_2017.pdf).

²⁵ Significant contributions to this topic have been made through museum exhibitions and their corresponding catalogues, including Rita González, Howard N. Fox, and Chon Noriega, *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement*, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008); C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita González, *Asco: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective, 1972-1987*, exhibition catalogue (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2011).

address the intersections between creative practice and struggles for spatial justice within urban sites.

In “Enacted Sites,” I am invested in drawing upon the lexicon of techniques associated with improvisation that include gestures such as “call and response,” “riffing,” (i.e. the extemporaneous response to a compositional frame), syncopation, the production of sonic dissonance, and dynamic modes of listening. By examining artists whose work draws upon these techniques, this project is less concerned with adapting this lexicon for the purpose of analyzing visual art, but to offer a language for addressing artwork that responds to an urban context shaped by improvisatory practices. The first half of this project offers a historical overview of how improvisational musical practices can be seen as a generative force in Watts that have not only challenged the production of space in the neighborhood, but informs visual arts practices and approaches to recovering the community after the 1965 Watts uprising. The subsequent chapter examines a project by Maren Hassinger, a conceptual artist whose practice was informed by her collaborations with a coterie of visual artists associated with the Watts Tower Arts Center whose work drew upon improvisatory practices. Taken together, these chapters establish a foundation for considering how improvisation functions as a generative practice in situ, but also the new forms that emerge from within it. The second half of the project offers engagements with two artists whose work can be said to address the listening practices that constitute musical improvisation as well as the dissonance that it produces. In considering listening in relation to improvisation, it has been said that

musical improvisation possesses the capacity to dramatically transform the relationship between performer and audience, requiring that the listener take on an active role in the constitution of the improvisatory moment.²⁶ By examining a piece by Daniel J. Martinez as a rhythm analytical engagement with the urban landscape of Crenshaw, this ultimately suggests that Martinez engaged in a practice that aligns with the dynamic mode of listening at the heart of improvisatory practice. The final chapter looks at the shared resonances that emerge from what initially may appear as aesthetic dissonance produced by Mario Ybarra Jr.'s work that embedded images of Wilmington, California on billboards throughout Mobile, Alabama. By tracing the complex histories and shared social practices that tether the Latinx barrio to Mobile, the chapter suggests that from this perceived dissonance, new solidarities can emerge.

The first chapter, "Assemblage from the Ashes: Improvisation as Aesthetic Strategy After the Watts Uprising" charts the emergence of improvisation as an aesthetic practice in South Los Angeles. I focus on a series of sculptures spontaneously created by Noah Purifoy and Judson Powell from the detritus lining the streets of Watts after the 1965 uprising as a symbolic response to the conditions of segregation and police repression faced by the working class black community. Drawing upon Fred Moten's notion of "the break," I suggest that Purifoy and Powell's sculptures constitute an improvisatory utterance that responded to conditions of inequality in Watts. Situated within a larger history that includes the construction

²⁶ The importance of listening as an improvisatory practice is discussed in David Borgo, "Negotiating Freedom: Values and Practices in Contemporary Improvised Music," *Black Music Research Journal* Vol. 22, No.2 (Autumn 2002): 165-188 and in Fischlin et. al., *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, 231.

of the Watts Towers by Simon Rodia and jazz clubs as sites of spontaneous, if tentative, integration in the decades prior to World War II, Purifoy and Powell's sculptures functioned as a generative component of a broader creative practice that actively reshaped an urban landscape which upheld its residents' disenfranchisement.

Next, "Re-Situating the Century Freeway: Community Resistance and the Visual Politics of Vacancy in Maren Hassinger's *Pink Paths*" examines the impact of the renewed interest in improvisatory practice in Watts after 1965 on a subsequent generation of artists who addressed issues of movement and mobility within the urban landscape by merging sculpture and performance. This chapter explores how an artwork comprised of four pedestrian-created footpaths that had been painted pink complicated narratives surrounding freeway construction in Lynwood, a historically-segregated community in South Los Angeles. I argue that Maren Hassinger's *Pink Paths* function as an improvisatory site of wandering that contradicts the "rational" routing of the Century Freeway through the neighborhood. Created in the middle of a twenty-year battle over freeway construction, Hassinger's work is situated at a moment when the extended delays over the construction of the freeway produced a public backlash to the legal victories that required extensive environmental studies and replacement housing to be constructed to minimize the negative impact on surrounding communities. This backlash, which occurred through newspaper coverage and legal appeals, established a rhetoric of ruin that visually depicted Lynwood as a community defined by its devastation. Hassinger's piece, however, points to a more complex history surrounding the abandoned homes' fate, Lynwood's

history as a segregated neighborhood, and language that conflated the neighborhood's changing demographics with the slow decay of abandoned homes. I contend that Hassinger's work not only contradicts the narrative linking decline and diversification, but suggests a mode of practice that extended the improvisatory reworking of the built environment which took place in Watts into a new context.

The third chapter, "Listening for Oblivion: Urban Rhythms and Gentrification in Daniel J. Martinez's *Narrenschiff*" continues the second chapter's consideration of wandering as an improvisatory form, but locates it within a context defined by precarity and impending displacement. In *Narrenschiff (Ship of Fools)*, Daniel J. Martinez drew upon tactics of the Situationist International in Crenshaw, a neighborhood undergoing accelerated gentrification. From 2010-2013, Daniel J. Martinez undertook a *dérive* in which the artist rode city buses throughout Los Angeles for eight to ten hours a day with no destination in mind. In response to the ruptures and disparities that he noticed within the landscape, Martinez created Situationist-inspired graffiti on building facades throughout the Crenshaw neighborhood, where he lives. Rather than functioning as a call to action, the work calls attention to gentrification on a granular scale, which relies on the production of a uniform urban landscape (i.e. streetlight banners, marquees, and signage) to demarcate boundaries around the acceptable users of a given space. Using the framework of rhythmanalysis, I suggest that Martinez's bus rides enabled him to become attentive to the shifts in urban rhythms that were emblematic of the displacements occurring in Crenshaw. Returning to Fred Moten's concept of "the

break,” I suggest that Martinez’s invocation of an apocalyptic tone to describe these shifts points toward the realization of new political imaginaries in the midst of the deepening crisis catalyzed by the redevelopment of the community.

The final chapter, “Complex Mobilities: Migration and the Urban Imaginary in Mario Ybarra Jr.’s *Barrio Aesthetics*,” expands the scale of the movements examined in the preceding chapters by considering *Barrio Aesthetics*, a series of artworks depicting Wilmington, California, that were installed on billboards in Mobile, Alabama. In this chapter, I consider how the work suggests an elasticity and adaptability of the spatial practices that constitute the barrio that enables them to be recontextualized in a seemingly dissonant locale. Ybarra Jr.’s work, however, suggests that new political solidarities can emerge from within this presumed contradiction. Created in response to an immigration law that criminalized undocumented immigrants, the works embed visual markers of Latinx communities into sites where being visibly Latinx placed one at risk of deportation. Images of murals, barber shops, and street vendors speak to a history of political struggle that emerged within Latinx communities in Los Angeles, and superimposes an alternative urban landscape that exists beyond the street-level view of Mobile (and so too, the disrupted mobility of Latinxs within it). This juxtaposition of landscapes gestures toward the ability of individuals to envision new forms of social space where none exist and extends this to emerging movements for social justice led by people who are seen as existing “outside” of formal political institutions.

**Chapter One:
Assemblage from the Ashes:
Improvisation as Aesthetic Strategy After the Watts Uprising**

In the days following the Watts Uprising in 1965, artists Noah Purifoy and Judson Powell began collecting detritus that lined the streets of Watts. The following spring, the artists collaborated with several others to produce sixty-six sculptures created from the wreckage and displayed these works in an exhibition titled *66 Signs of Neon*. In relation to the Watts uprising and *66 Signs of Neon*, I am interested in considering how the destruction of the commercial landscape and the sculptures created from the resulting detritus carry what Fred Moten refers to as a “phonic substance” that constitutes a “breaking” of the commodity’s impossible speech through the shriek of urban rebellion. The uprising and the artistic engagements generated in its aftermath function as a “passionate response to passionate utterance” that constitute an “ongoing performance, [a] prefigurative scene of a (re)appropriation—the destruction and reconstruction, the improvisational recording and revaluation—of value, of the theory of value, of theories of value.”²⁷ The sculptures produce a literal revaluation of the Watts landscape at the same time that they function as a performative recording and reconfiguration of its built environment. On one level, the sculptures function as a recording of the uprising’s figurative shriek. This shriek ruptures the processes by which Watts and its residents were systematically devalued by segregationist housing and employment policies,

²⁷ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 14.

exploitation within Los Angeles' formal economy, and discriminatory real estate speculation.

Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* argues for the existence of a black avant-garde through an examination of black performance's reproductive valences. He considers the political effects generated through the phonic substance inherent in works spanning the mediums of poetry, jazz, performance, and photography and locates these effects within a larger ontology. Within it, Moten seeks to "describe the material reproductivity of black performance and to claim for this reproductivity the status of an ontological condition. This is the story of how apparent non value functions as a creator of value; it is also the story of how value animates what appears as non value."²⁸ Framing his text by considering how Frederick Douglass' recording of his Aunt Hester's scream²⁹ disrupts and contests Marx's assertion that the commodity only speaks hypothetically, Moten seeks to "show the interarticulation of the object with Marx's subjunctive figure of the commodity who speaks....[Moten's] argument starts with the historical reality of commodities who spoke—of laborers who were commodities before, as it were, the

²⁸ Moten, 18.

²⁹ In Frederick Douglass' *Narrative in the Life of an American Slave*, Douglass recall's hearing his Aunt Hester shriek at being beaten by their master upon refusing to obey an order. It is in this moment that Douglass becomes aware of his enslaved status. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. In *the Classic Slave Narratives* (New York: Mentor Books, 1987), 259.

abstraction of labor power from their bodies and who continue to pass on this material heritage across the divide that separates slavery and “freedom.”³⁰

This chapter will explore the eruptive and generative substance of the shriek as communicated through sculptural works that reference the remains of Watts’ commercial landscape. I argue that these works speak to the emergence of an aesthetic practice specific to South Los Angeles that is constituted through a symbolic reworking of the built environment in Watts through its fragmented remains. I contend that this coincides with the historical use of improvisation in South Los Angeles as a strategy for reconfiguring the urban landscape. This improvisational strategy evokes jazz’s historical capacity to integrate Watts’ urban landscape in spite of segregationist housing policy and discriminatory policing. This chapter begins by tracing the historical development of Watts leading up to the 1965 uprising. From there, I examine how the uprising and Noah Purifoy’s *66 Signs of Neon* function as improvisatory revaluations and reconfigurations of the urban landscape in Watts.

This chapter examines how the musical history of improvisation in Watts informed a set of visual arts practices that emerged in response to the Watts Uprising. In much the same way that musical improvisation subverted the constraints of the built environment, so too, improvisatory art practice offered a generative set of strategies for reconfiguring and revaluing an urban landscape presumed to be devoid of value. Moten’s idea of “the break,” offers a theoretical framework from which to consider how this revaluation takes place outside of conventional structures, enabling

³⁰ Moten, 6.

spontaneous, excessive, and indeterminate utterances (both aesthetic and political) to be formed.

Although mainstream journalists characterized the confrontation between Marquette Frye and a police officer as a singular incident that catalyzed the Watts uprising, the conditions that produced a large-scale urban rebellion were a consequence of inequalities grounded in a history of housing segregation sustained by the uneven implementation of urban infrastructure. By 1965, Watts residents found their neighborhood over-served by police surveillance³¹, lacking urban infrastructure, and disproportionately comprised of public housing projects relative to other parts of the city.

In viewing *66 Signs of Neon* in response to the uprising, it is possible to consider these works as part of a larger history in which cultural expressions grounded in improvisational practice produced sites in Watts that contested and resisted the conditions of inequity imposed by segregation and repressive policing, if

³¹ Douglas Flamming notes that police harassment of black Angelenos was a regular occurrence during the early twentieth century, and that it worsened during the 1910s and 1920s. See Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 275. Leonard Moore links worsening of police brutality after World War II as a response to the growing demands for civil rights by African Americans: "...as African Americans began to assert demands for freedom and democracy, white police officers viewed themselves as agents that existed for the protection of whites only. Although police departments were subsidized by all taxpayers, African Americans found themselves paying for fair and equitable police services that they seldom received. Thus, black residents needed the protection of the police while at the same time needing protection from the police." Although Moore refers specifically to the context of the U.S. South, African Americans in Los Angeles experienced comparable conditions. See Leonard Moore, *Black Rage in New Orleans: Police Brutality and African American Activism from World War II to Hurricane Katrina* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 2.

only temporarily. During the first decades of the twentieth century, Watts' cultural landscape was shaped by the Great Migration, and within it, visual modes of improvisation informed an emerging generation of jazz musicians who grew up in Watts. At this time, Watts emerged as a multi-ethnic working class community situated along Los Angeles' Industrial Corridor, an area bisected by Alameda Avenue featuring a high concentration of steel, meatpacking, automobile, rubber tire, chemical, and petroleum refineries.³² Working class communities were established along both sides of Alameda Avenue, a thoroughfare that would eventually serve as a physical barrier marking the boundary between white and black neighborhoods. During the first half of the twentieth century, African Americans migrated from the Jim Crow South to Los Angeles in the hope of pursuing an improved quality of life. Amongst those who relocated were numerous musicians who established a vibrant culture of jazz performance in South Los Angeles. At this time, Watts fostered a culturally rich environment: Lincoln Motion Picture Company, the first black-owned film studio, frequently filmed in Watts, and Harlem Renaissance writer Arna Bontemps, who was raised in Watts, drafted his first novel while living there.³³ By the end of World War I, Central Avenue, a main thoroughfare in a neighboring black community, was home to numerous music venues and clubs, some of which attracted

³² Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 75.

³³ Steven L. Isoardi, *The Dark Tree: Jazz and the Community Arts in Los Angeles* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 66.

elite and wealthy patrons.³⁴ Over time, the number of jazz clubs on Central Avenue and Watts grew, attracting nationally-known jazz musicians and providing venues for emerging artists such as Charles Mingus, David Bryant, and the Woodman brothers, all of whom grew up in Watts.³⁵ These individuals lived only blocks away from where Simon Rodia began constructing the Watts Towers. Charles Mingus recalls spending afternoons as a young boy bringing Rodia broken bottles and other materials that could be incorporated into their structure.³⁶ Buddy Collette, a bandleader and multi-instrument musician who spent his life in Los Angeles recalled “When we were living and going to school, we saw Simon Rodia working on the Watts Towers. Charles Mingus lived on 108th Street and the McNeely brothers on 111th, and the Towers are on 107th. So when I would be going to Mingus’s house, we’d walk right by and see Rodia. Of course, then it was only maybe a four- or five-foot wall. No towers yet. It was a great period and very productive. It seemed to be very rich in producing all kinds of talented people.”³⁷ In recollections such as these, Collette views Rodia’s improvisatory use of discarded glass bottles and tiles as part of a larger creative moment that coincided with a formative period in his life as a musician. The connection between the jazz scene in South Los Angeles and the capacity to transform the built environment would continue to evolve during World War II, as jazz clubs became sites of racial integration.

³⁴ Ibid., 67.

³⁵ Clora Bryant, et. al. eds, *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 93.

³⁶ Isoardi, 68.

³⁷ Clora Bryant, et. al., 136.

The Industrial Corridor experienced tremendous growth during World War II, when the steel industry expanded in order to meet the demands of wartime production. In response to the numerous jobs available, many black people migrated to Los Angeles, drawn not only by the availability of work but also by a reputation of the city as racially harmonious based on early twentieth-century laudatory writings by black intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois.³⁸ Upon arriving in Los Angeles, however, black migrants often faced a more complex reality. While the steel industry did welcome black employees, the positions available were disproportionately for the lowest-paid and most dangerous jobs that offered few opportunities for advancement. Additionally, while black Angelenos found the city to lack the routinized violence that characterized life in the South, housing segregation prevented their full integration as city residents.

Throughout this time, housing segregation was worsened by public housing policy that sought to alleviate housing shortages but allowed white neighborhoods to block the construction of integrated public housing within their communities. In Los Angeles, blacks employed along the industrial corridor found their housing options restricted to overcrowded black neighborhoods due to the violent resistance of white homeowners in suburbs surrounding South Central Los Angeles.³⁹ White homeowners engaged in discriminatory practices by harassing and intimidating

³⁸ Sides, 11.

³⁹ Ibid., 101. Sides writes that over twenty-six distinct tactics were used by white homeowners to exclude blacks. These tactics included cross burnings, death threats, bombings as well as payoffs and vandalism.

potential black residents and the real estate agents who represented them.⁴⁰ As a consequence of these practices, roughly five per cent of the city's area was available to black Angelenos.⁴¹ Multi-ethnic flight took place elsewhere in Los Angeles due to the housing shortage and influx of new residents, ultimately deepening the racial divide between black communities and other neighborhoods in Los Angeles. At this time, public housing initiatives struggled to mitigate the practice of residential segregation by creating integrated public housing projects. At the beginning of World War II, the City Housing Authority abided by federal guidelines which stated that the demographic composition of public housing units must match that of the neighborhood in which they were located.⁴² Due to the pervasive condition of segregation in Los Angeles, the Federal Housing Authority's policy upheld existing patterns of segregation and excluded eligible African Americans from several housing projects.⁴³ In 1943, a revised policy established a quota system on the basis of ethnicity, which permitted black Angelenos to constitute up to 15% of a housing project's total population. Due to extensive public outcry within the black

⁴⁰ Although in 1948, the Supreme Court's decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer* struck down the notion that a neighborhood could form a collective agreement prohibiting sale or rentals to blacks, a loophole permitted homeowners to sue for damages if the covenant was broken until the Supreme Court specified the illegality of the practice in the *Barrows v. Jackson* decision five years later. (Sides, 100)

⁴¹ Don Parson, *Making a Better World: Public Housing, the Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 56.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 68. Despite struggling to develop an effective policy to create integrated communities, several peacefully-integrated multi-ethnic public housing communities emerged throughout Los Angeles, including Aliso Village, Hacienda Village, and Jordan Downs, which was located in Watts.

community, the policy was overturned within six months of being established. In spite of the renegotiated policies on demographics in public housing, many white homeowners protested the construction of public housing near their neighborhoods, leading multiple projects to be relocated to Watts. During World War II, for example, three housing projects were built in Watts as semi-permanent housing for war workers.⁴⁴

Despite these conditions, newly arrived black Angelenos were able to achieve socioeconomic stability and support a vibrant cultural milieu in South Los Angeles. During this period, the neighboring black communities of Central Avenue-Furlong Tract and West Jefferson grew in kind and eventually became contiguous with Watts, forming an expansive and socioeconomically diverse black community in Los Angeles.⁴⁵ The economic opportunities for blacks during the war helped to sustain jazz clubs on Central Avenue and in Watts. However, following the end of the war and the diminished need for wartime workers, many black Angelenos lost their jobs, and were unable to find other employment, ultimately creating a large population of Watts residents living in poverty.

Despite the economic decline experienced in Watts after World War II and the subsequent closure of many jazz clubs, improvisatory musical production relocated to

⁴⁴ The three housing projects included Hacienda Village (1942), Jordan Downs (1944), and Imperial Courts (1944). Though the projects were planned as semi-permanent housing, they were later converted to permanent structures. Paul Bullock, ed, *Watts: The Aftermath: An Inside View of the Ghetto by the People of Watts* (New York: Grove Press, Inc.: 1969), 14-5.

⁴⁵ Janet Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space and Riots in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 201.

new sites within the community. By 1949, the jazz scene on Central Avenue had rapidly declined.⁴⁶ In addition to the loss of wartime employment, jazz clubs began to attract the attention of police because of their significance as integrated social spaces. The Los Angeles Police Department viewed the clubs as “dangerous” and used this as justification for the disruption of performances and the harassment of black patrons.⁴⁷ Beyond Central Avenue, musical performance appeared to thrive in Watts, though in a different context. Artist and poet Jayne Cortez described Watts in the post-war period as saturated by music, with public parks hosting numerous performances and the sounds of residents playing within their homes and garages audible from the street.⁴⁸ In some cases, private homes, such as that belonging to the pianist, Linda Hills, became a significant meeting place for future members of free jazz ensembles organized by Hills and Horace Tapscott.⁴⁹ This shift to performing in private homes and non-commercial sites can be seen as a response to the repressive climate of policing and the economic strains that the community experienced. However, Cortez’s recollection of music spilling into the streets speaks to an ongoing, though diminished, jazz presence within Watts after World War II.

The housing crisis persisted following the end of World War II, and in 1949, the U.S. Housing Act sought to provide 10,000 units of affordable housing in Los Angeles. However, in 1950, voters passed Proposition 10, which mandated that the

⁴⁶ Bryant, 132.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 132.

⁴⁸ Isoardi., 68.

⁴⁹ Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 130.

scheduling or siting of proposed public housing projects be approved via referendum.⁵⁰ Over the next five years, housing projects continued to be relocated to Watts, contributing to the concentration of low-income residents and the isolation of the working-class and unemployed black community within a small geographic area.⁵¹ By the end of the 1950s, one third of Watts residents lived in public housing, which made the community vulnerable to discriminatory policing.⁵²

The concentration of a low-income black community combined with a political stigma attached to public housing led to excessive and discriminatory policing within Watts. The rhetoric of the 1950s Red Scare cast public housing in a dubious light and linked it to communism. Under the pretense of preventing its spread, the Watts community was subject to a policy of restrictive policing under the aegis of William Parker, the Chief for the Los Angeles Police Department.⁵³ Starting in 1950, Parker encouraged a policy of “pro-active” policing which instructed officers to stop crimes before they occurred by identifying likely offenders.⁵⁴ This departmental mindset, combined with what has been referred to as a white supremacist ideology and strong anticommunist views, led the black community in Los Angeles to be criminalized and subject to police intervention.⁵⁵ As a neighborhood that housed a disproportionately impoverished black community, Watts was excessively targeted by the LAPD. The twin circumstances of inadequate

⁵⁰ Parson, 104.

⁵¹ Ibid., 120.

⁵² Bullock, 16.

⁵³ Isoardi, 47.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 47.

housing and excessive policing contributed to distress amongst residents in Watts that intensified over time.

In addition to facing inadequate housing and police harassment, Watts residents witnessed the gradual dismantling of local transportation infrastructure, the diversion of municipal funds intended for safety, sewage, and street repairs, along with the relaxation of zoning codes that prevented the encroachment of heavy industry into residential areas.⁵⁶ Amenities such as streetlights were noted to be substantially worse in Watts than downtown Los Angeles, and a report in 1964 noted the disproportionately poor standard of living in the neighborhood.⁵⁷ Additionally, Watts residents found themselves increasingly geographically restricted when the closure of the Red Car line in 1961 ended reliable public transportation throughout the greater Los Angeles area from Watts. Contracted bus services began to operate in Watts as a way to mitigate the loss of the Red Cars, but these bus lines did not maintain consistent schedules, making their use by commuters an unreliable substitute.⁵⁸ As a consequence of these changes, low-income residents of Watts and those without cars found themselves further isolated from potential employment opportunities elsewhere the city. In the midst of these conditions, however, several community-based arts organizations rooted in improvisatory practice emerged during the early 1960s. Pianist Horace Tapscott founded the Pan-Afrikan People's Arkestra, a musical collective that by 1963 had evolved and grown into the Union of God's

⁵⁶ Parson, 113.

⁵⁷ Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Boston: De Capo Press, 1995), 52.

⁵⁸ Parson, 114.

Musicians Artists Ascension, an organization that sought to advocate for equal treatment and employment opportunities for black musicians.⁵⁹ In 1964, Jayne Cortez, a poet who also involved in Watts' jazz community, established the Studio Watts Workshop.⁶⁰ That same year, Noah Purifoy also began a collaboration with Judson Powell, who was a musician at the time, and Sue Welch to establish what would become the Watts Towers Art Center.⁶¹ This early initiative drew upon Purifoy's approach to using found objects to create art.

In the years leading up to the Watts Rebellion, the community's economic exclusion further aggravated the feelings of disenfranchisement held by unemployed and working class members of the black community. Historically, discriminatory insurance and lending practices minimized the economic value attributed to real estate in Watts and prevented its residents from making stable investments.⁶² Additionally, very few storeowners in Watts lived in the neighborhood, and in some cases, business owners charged substantially higher prices in Watts than in other parts of the city.⁶³ Moreover, black civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League sought to advance their platforms by appealing to a middle-class sensibility.⁶⁴ Because this lifestyle was so far removed from their reality, Watts residents did not find these

⁵⁹ Fischlin, et. al., 46.

⁶⁰ Widener, 130.

⁶¹ "African American Artists of Los Angeles: Noah Purifoy," interview by Karen Anne Mason, 1990, Oral History Program, Special Collections, University Library, UCLA (cited hereafter as Interview with Noah Purifoy).

⁶² Horne, 222-3.

⁶³ Bullock, 19.

⁶⁴ Horne, 11.

organizations to adequately represent their political needs. Similarly, frustration grew toward the national Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. As Gerald Horne writes, “the civil rights movement had its most dramatic and substantive impact in the Deep South, not Los Angeles. For many Black Angelenos, it was disorienting to hear talk of a revolution in race relations, but to see little evidence of it in their lives. Moreover, by 1965 militant and multiracial confrontation of police brutality and other ills was disappearing.”⁶⁵

By August 11th, 1965, the community in Watts had reached a political impasse. During the previous year, Watts residents’ peaceful protests against police brutality received no response from city officials, the mayor refused to release federal anti-poverty funds that would alleviate conditions in Watts, and the Rumford Fair Housing Act had been repealed, which effectively legalized housing discrimination.⁶⁶ When a police officer pulled over 21-year-old Marquette Frye in front of his mother’s house on suspicion of driving drunk, his mother left the house to intervene. Her interaction with the officer drew the attention of others, causing a crowd to form.⁶⁷ A confrontation between the Fryes and the officers quickly developed and they were placed in police cars. A rumor emerged that an officer had assaulted Frye’s mother in the process, and the crowd grew enraged, developing into six days of violent unrest. During that time, thirty-four people were killed, over one thousand were injured, \$40 million of property damage was incurred, and 261

⁶⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁶ Ronald N. Jacobs, *Race, Media and the Crisis of Civil Society: From Watts to Rodney King*. Cambridge, U.K.; Cambridge University Press, 2000, 54.

⁶⁷ Sides, 174.

buildings, most of which were businesses, had been burned.⁶⁸ In the midst of the violence and destruction that marked the uprising, it was reported that members of the Pan-Afrikan People's Arkestra loaded a piano and musical equipment into the back of a "flatbed truck and [played on the streets]" in an effort to rein in the destruction taking place.⁶⁹

As a response to the aftermath of the uprising, *66 Signs of Neon* processed the raw emotions that had risen to the surface and the material detritus that now lined the streets of Watts in a manner that both addressed its historical landscape while adopting a politically-engaged approach to assemblage practice. In the days following the Watts uprising, Noah Purifoy and Judson Powell collected the twisted, mangled, distressed and fragmented forms lining the streets, eventually gathering over three tons of material that remained in storage until March 1966.⁷⁰ Facing unemployment following the closure of the Watts Towers Art Center, Purifoy and Powell began creating sculptures from the scavenged materials in time for the first art festival in Watts, slated to take place during the week of Easter the following month.⁷¹ Powell and Purifoy invited fellow artists Debby Brewer, Max Neufeldt, Ruth Saturensky, and Arthur Secunda to participate in creating sculptures for the show. Following their completion, the works were exhibited within the AID and Furniture Fashions Show at the Sports Center along with artwork about the uprising created by children.⁷² A

⁶⁸ Ibid., 174.

⁶⁹ Fischlin et. al., 47.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 174.

⁷¹ Interview with Noah Purifoy.

⁷² Noah Purifoy, *Junk Art: 66 Signs of Neon* (Los Angeles: 66 Signs of Neon, 1966).

catalogue titled *Junk Art: 66 Signs of Neon* accompanied the show and discussed the artworks as demonstrating the need for creative education within the community. The title for the exhibition, *66 Signs of Neon*, is taken in part from Powell and Purifoy's observation of forms created by lead dripping from destroyed neon signs.⁷³ Although the impetus for creating *66 Signs of Neon* was to contribute to the arts festival, the works function as a symbolic reworking of Watts' demolished urban landscape.

The sculptures created by Purifoy and his collaborators can be thought of as an improvisatory response to the shriek sounded by the uprising. Prior to the uprising, unemployed and working class black residents in Watts were not recognized within the formal conventions of political speech. Similarly, the utterance that the uprising represents was not immediately recognizable as such due to its distance from the Civil Rights platform promoted by Martin Luther King Jr., resulting in delayed media coverage.⁷⁴ This initial inability to recognize the uprising as an utterance that existed outside of the bounds of political speech underscores its significance as a moment where the conventions of speech are broken by a shriek. In this breaking, in this moment, the uprising constitutes an utterance that words can only partially describe. This moment resonates with Moten's meditation on the limits of language: "Words don't go there: this implies a difference between words and sounds; it suggests that words are somehow constrained by their implicit reduction to the meanings they carry—meanings inadequate to or detached from the objects or states of affairs they

⁷³ Noah Purifoy, "The Art of Communication as Creative Act," in *Junk Art: 66 Signs of Neon* (Los Angeles: 66 Signs of Neon, 1966).

⁷⁴ Jacobs, 55.

would envelop. What's also implied is an absence of inflection; a loss of mobility, slippage, bend; a missing accent or affect; the impossibility of a slur or crack and the *excess*—rather than loss—of meaning they imply.”⁷⁵ Similarly, if the uprising can be thought of as a breaking of speech, the sculptures Purifoy created function as a response to the uprising's shriek that resided in an alternative enunciatory space created by it. That the sculptures were a response to the uprising that echoed its form constitutes a refusal to participate in efforts to analyze the causes and implications of the uprising. Purifoy's intention for the works to function as “neither art show nor adjunct to the McCone Report⁷⁶,” speaks to an excess of meaning expressed through the events of the uprising. In the catalogue, Purifoy emphasizes the sculptures as a form of communication. In “The Art of Communication as a Creative Act,” Purifoy describes the uprising as a “negative outcry,” and refers to the works as the “expression of the rioting citizens.”⁷⁷ The phrasing in the essay alludes to an aural substance within the sculptures that exists beyond language. Purifoy writes that “Viewers are encouraged not to stop at description because the show is also a feeling, sometimes obscure and incapable of analysis, but it is a feeling which is in the twisted, broken forms which were the Watts Riot.”⁷⁸ This passage infers an excess of

⁷⁵ Moten, 42.

⁷⁶ The McCone Report was commissioned by Governor Pat Brown to investigate the cause of the uprising. Although the report recognized the high unemployment rate within Watts and the need for improved housing and social services, it did not acknowledge police violence as a contributing factor in the riot. Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 99.

⁷⁷ Purifoy, “The Art of Communication as Creative Act.”

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

meaning that exists outside of speech and discourages the fixing of meaning that takes place through the imposition of language.

Yael Lipschutz⁷⁹ and Ed Ruscha⁸⁰ have commented that Purifoy's later work challenges the presumed legibility of text, a concern which is present in a 1965 assemblage titled *Watts Riot*. (Fig.1) In the work, Purifoy obscures text found amongst scavenged materials, a gesture that can be read as alluding to the uprising as a conceptual breaking of speech. The work compositionally resembles a painting due to its narrow depth, and the application of paint over its surface. Like the sculptures featured in *66 Signs of Neon*, Purifoy created the work using material scavenged from the streets of Watts in the days following the uprising. The work primarily consists of an arrangement of charred, distressed, and splintered pieces of wood covered by thin layers of paint. In the uppermost portion of the work, patches of teal and dark green form its horizontal edge, and begin to dissolve into vertical drippings before a horizontal band of charred pieces of wood that form a jagged corner on the left side of the work.

Within the assemblage, these pieces show the greatest transformation from their original state, resembling the hardened aftermath of embers that have not fully burned. Below this de facto border is a rectangular expanse of wood lightly coated by whitewash. Rather than covering the distressed areas on the work, the coating makes

⁷⁹ Yael Lipschutz, "A NeoHooDoo Western: Noah Purifoy, Spirit Flash, Art, and the Desert," in *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Delmonico Publishing, 2015), 53.

⁸⁰ Ed Ruscha, "On Noah Purifoy: Ed Ruscha," in *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Delmonico Publishing, 2015), 97

them more visible, drawing attention to the inconsistencies in the grain and the warping caused by fire. Beneath the horizontal band, the whitewash suddenly darkens into a gangrenous green-yellow surrounding an area where the wood has been completely burned through, and a piece of board has been inserted into its place. Framing the board, the distorted coloration of the whitewashed wood resembles that of a pale bruise, or a wound where a scab has not yet formed after bleeding has stopped.

Beneath the burned out segment of wood, Purifoy inserted a board featuring raised letters that have been covered in black paint. (Fig.2) Though the board itself maintains a relatively smooth and consistent texture, the lettering possesses horizontal bands that stretch across each letter and maintain differing levels of relief from the surface of the board. Four letters can be identified clearly as spelling “I G N S” while a fifth, to the right of this grouping, is less legible. This moment in the work in which the viewer might want to read the grouping as spelling out “signs” presents a moment where Purifoy manipulates language in a manner that resembles the breaking of speech that Moten describes. The text slips from word to utterance and in doing so, restores the excess of meanings that the letters set in motion when spoken. *Watts Riot* isolates the letters from the meanings they otherwise carry. By removing the first letter in the sequence, Purifoy shifts the letters’ significance from reading as “signs,” perhaps in reference to the practice of making custom signage for businesses. The remaining letters form a long vowel sound that, depending on the intonation, resembles a cry or a shriek. The text emerges from a segment of the assemblage

where the fire burned through the wood completely, as if from a void created by the uprising's destructive force.

The brushwork on the piece that highlights the textural qualities and irregularities of the work demonstrates how Purifoy appears to be in “conversation” with his materials by responding to and accentuating the scavenged objects’ textual features, including their irregularities. The whitewashed boards continue beneath the burned out segment, and the apparently thin coat of paint does less to create a homogeneously covered surface than to draw attention to the tonal range in this area. The brush strokes are at times visible against the wood, revealing a range of colors that vary from pallid yellow to warm tans and pinks with gray and black patches between them. A crack originating at the bottom of the white washed segment stretches to reach the jagged edge of the horizontal band. Beneath it, black paint drippings call attention to the irregular edges of the wood pieces that form the lower portion of the work. Here, the coloration shifts dramatically, at times offering a return to the cool palette of greenish hues in the top portion of the work, at others shifting toward brighter gold tones with sporadic streaks of reddish orange. A second horizontal band frames the bottom of the whitewashed segment, much like the first, the scale-like texture of this wood displays the impact of heat, but is covered in tones ranging from gold to warm brown. Beneath this band is another patch of negative space, on the other side of which is an irregularly shaped piece of wood featuring saturated layers of paint in which teal and dark green drippings cover yellow paint and streaks of orange.

Like the lettering in the top half of the work, Purifoy obscures the text in a roundel. Unlike the lettering above, however, the words retain their meaning, carrying a moralistic overtone that takes on a greater significance when considered in relation to the disenfranchisement experienced by the black working class community in Watts. The roundel is composed of concentric circles in the lower left corner that match the color scheme of the wooden segment. On the outer edge, pale green paint draws attention to lettering spelling out the word “always” along the upper arc. Within the smaller circle, and less readily legible, is the word “be,” and along the curve forming the bottom edge of the circle, the word “careful” can be identified, despite the indistinguishable edges of the letters. The roundel implies that, despite one’s best efforts to ‘always be careful,’ employment and housing discrimination limit one’s prospects for economic stability, and the threat of racial violence posed by overzealous police officers and prejudiced civilians exists by mere virtue of being alive and black. The text can also be interpreted as a reference to the mainstream Civil Rights Movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Watts residents’ political alienation from the movement’s emphasis on middle class values.

Just as *Watts Riot* explores the frailties of language’s expressive capacity, the sculptures in *66 Signs of Neon* speak to the significance of the uprising as a conceptual breaking of speech. As an improvisatory response to the Watts uprising, the sculptures also constitute a recording of the rebellion’s material and aural implications. Underscoring their function as recorded traces of the uprising, Purifoy makes multiple references to the works as “artifacts of the Watts Riots,” and “artifacts

of tragedy.”⁸¹ The detritus lining the streets of Watts in the days following the uprising constituted material traces of the shriek it sounded. The materials Purifoy acquired while walking through Watts function as fragments of the shriek that are dramatically reconfigured and recombined to create an alternative utterance that remains outside of the formal conventions of language.

Although essays within the exhibition catalogue echo Purifoy’s desire to generate renewed support for the Watts Towers Art Center, the text offers glimpses into a larger critique of postwar consumer culture. Purifoy emphasizes the role of expressive practice as offering an alternative within a society driven by material accumulation, writing that “education through creativity is the only way left for a person to survive in this materialistic world.”⁸² Purifoy’s reference to a “materialistic world” can be understood in relation to the proliferation of mass-produced products in department stores and the images of these products that circulated in television advertisements. In *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, Lizabeth Cohen describes how, following World War II, the mass consumption of goods was linked to the protection and strengthening of democratic ideals.⁸³ Although this era is frequently portrayed using optimistic images of postwar prosperity, many African Americans were unable to enjoy full participation within this consumer society due to a wide range of discriminatory practices such the denial of loans, refusal of service by store owners, and in the case of returning veterans, the

⁸¹ Purifoy, “The Art of Communication as Creative Act.”

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 119.

inability to utilize educational and financial benefits granted by their military service.⁸⁴ The frustration and economic immobility caused by these conditions helped form the basis of boycott efforts by African Americans which linked their inability to fully participate in the consumer economy with larger struggles for rights as fully-enfranchised American citizens.⁸⁵

The uprising functions as a response to this exclusion in the sense that during the uprising, hundreds of businesses were damaged or destroyed, constituting a dramatic alteration to the commercial landscape of Watts.⁸⁶ The most dramatically impacted thoroughfare was 103rd street, the main shopping district in Watts that housed many businesses selling goods at inflated prices. The act of destroying exploitative businesses has been read as a tactic for responding to the larger condition of the black community's exclusion from post-war consumer culture. On the Watts uprising, the Situationist International wrote:

The Los Angeles blacks take modern capitalist propaganda, its publicity of abundance, literally. They want to possess now all of the objects shown and abstractly accessible because they want to use them. In this way, they are challenging their exchange-value, the commodity-reality which molds them and marshals them to its own ends, and which has preselected everything. Through theft and gift they rediscover a use that immediately refutes the oppressive rationality of the commodity, revealing its relations and even its production to be arbitrary and unnecessary.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Ibid., 171.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 174.

⁸⁶ Horne, 3.

⁸⁷ Guy Debord, "The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy," in *The Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1989), 155.

Debord describes the complex relationship between black Angelenos and the promises of capitalism. This was acutely felt by African Americans who migrated to Los Angeles during the late 1930s on the basis that the city offered a better quality of life than the Southeastern United States. However, the perception that equal opportunities for material and economic success were available to blacks was quickly dispelled upon their entry into the housing and job markets. The resultant disillusion and skepticism that developed over subsequent decades had been articulated through multiple contexts, but were relatively unsuccessful compared to the national attention to Watts that emerged in the wake of the uprising. The author also refers to widespread looting which occurred during the rebellion. By stealing items from stores during the uprising, Watts residents can be understood as taking items that had been denied to them through unfair prices or discriminatory employment practices. In doing so, residents defied conventional modes of commercial exchange and spontaneously enacted an alternative in its place. This action directly challenges the value placed not only on the items being taken, but the discrepancy between the value assigned to black workers in relation to the surplus value created through their labor. Yael Lipschutz has also linked *66 Signs of Neon* to Debord's reading of the uprising as a "rebellion against the commodity" in order to interpret the works as an act of mourning that ultimately produced a regressive experience within the artist.⁸⁸

Although this approach offers a nuanced sense of the work's significance in relation to the artist's personal experience of witnessing the uprising, analyzing the sculptures

⁸⁸ Yael Lipschutz, "66 Signs of Neon and the Transformative Art of Noah Purifoy," in *L.A. Object & David Hammons Body Prints* (New York: Tilton Gallery, 2011), 225.

as an extension of the shriek sounded by the uprising demonstrates their generative capacity. Propelled by the uprising's broken speech as a catalyst for response, this cultural regeneration takes place through the artists' usage of wreckage and other material assumed to lack value. Specifically, it is in the struggle over the assignation of value that the sculptures Purifoy produces recall Moten's assertion of the capacity of broken speech to create value in a site of presumed non-value.⁸⁹

The *Signs of Neon* sculptures produced by Purifoy and Powell recontextualize the fragments that are unrecognizable as having been created from combusted neon signs, serving as a metaphor for the rejection and destruction of an idealized consumer culture. *Neon Fragment*, by Noah Purifoy, features two pieces of lead drippings attached to metal dowels inserted into a rectangular wooden block. (Fig.3) The two fragments are flat and wide with uneven edges and surfaces. They present the viewer with an impression of brittleness and fragility due to the presumed downward force of the lead drippings on elements such as a narrow, swooping appendage that hangs from the fragment pictured on the right. Similarly, the harsh textures of the work counter assumptions of melted lead as a smooth viscous substance and perceptions of neon signs as defined by their easily legible script. The metal dowels appear to raise the neon fragments to a modest height above the wooden block. Together, the fragments create an uneven diagonal cascade descending from left to right. In the space between the two fragments, two horizontal extensions resembling wings reach toward each other, but are separated by a small gap that

⁸⁹Moten, 18.

highlights the fineness of the fragments' jagged edges. In front of the neon block, there is a third neon fragment. Like the others, the artist used a metal dowel to elevate part of the work. However, this piece rests substantially closer to the ground than its counterpart and uses what appears to be a larger neon fragment as its base. Specifically, the base of the work appears to be the result of a neon sign in which the lead drippings formed a smooth pool on the ground. Although the base appears to have an unevenly textured substance embedded within it, such as gravel, small rocks or crumbled pieces of asphalt, these textural irregularities are absorbed by the smooth surfaces of the lead. Though primarily oval-shaped, the edges of the piece ebb and taper, reflecting a slight unevenness in the shape of the pool that the drippings formed.

Although the abstracted forms used in the sculptures represent a distortion of the neon sign's clear legibility, the fragments refer back to the urban landscape of Watts. The fragment mounted on the dowel is smaller in size compared to the two that accompany it, and maintains a more symmetrical composition. The fragment is primarily square in shape with a small chip in the upper right corner and a hole near the center of the square. The right edge bears a few irregularities, including a small fracture that creates a narrow horizontal fragment. This aspect of the work possesses a smoother composition than the more elevated fragments, and alludes to Judson Powell's description of finding the fragments on the ground: "After the riots Noah and I walked around to see the aftermath. We were particularly attracted to these little mirrored pieces shining up from the ash. Neon signs had melted in the fires and

formed little jewel-like objects. We picked up buckets full of these drippings and decided ultimately to have an art show with the debris we had collected.”⁹⁰ The amorphous forms that largely constitute the sculpture have literally been shaped by their environment, underscoring the referential relationship between the sculpture and the social and historical landscape of Watts.

The drippings are created from the melted lead glass that originally formed the structure of the neon sign. The sculpture’s irregular forms and opacity offers a stark contrast to the bold and legible aesthetics of the sign. That the distorted remains of a neon sign captivated Powell and Purifoy speaks to an interest in representing the conflicted relationship between Watts residents, consumerism, and its role in shaping their urban landscape. In particular, neon signs signify a spectacular expression of consumption in which signs promoting simple items or information take on an exaggerated vibrancy that demands the viewer’s glance, either through its purely radiant presence or the inclusion of features such as flashing or gradual illumination. Due to their display within commercial contexts, the melted remains of neon signs were likely found at the sites of damaged or destroyed businesses, ultimately becoming traces of their sites when recontextualized as sculptural forms. The sculpture thus functions to transfigure value: taken from the worthless remains of a neon sign, the sculpture transforms them into an aesthetic object. Within the exhibition, the sculptures created from melted neon signs were among the most commercially successful works, as Purifoy noted that all of them were purchased, one

⁹⁰ Judson Powell, “On Noah Purifoy,” *Junk Dada*, 101.

by Gregory Peck.⁹¹ The sale of these works speaks to a literal revaluation of fragments of the commercial landscape in Watts through their aesthetic reconfiguration.

Although the *Signs of Neon* were commercially successful, Purifoy and other black assemblage artists in South Los Angeles did not receive the same level of recognition as their white counterparts during this time. Prior to the uprising, the Watts Towers were lauded as a notable work of assemblage art despite Simon Rodia's disinterest in the art world. In 1961, the Watts Towers Art Center was established nearby, which later became the site where Purifoy and his collaborators created sculptures from the collected detritus. Despite the art center's close proximity to the towers and the similarity in aesthetic strategy, Purifoy and his collaborators' work did not receive the same level of critical and institutional attention as did the towers or white assemblage artists in Los Angeles.⁹² Although artists such as Wallace Berman and Edward Kienholz faced threats of censorship and backlash over their work, their black contemporaries did not have access to the same level of mainstream visibility. As noted by Lizzetta Lafalle-Collins, Purifoy's assemblage sculptures

⁹¹ Interview with Noah Purifoy.

⁹² Although the greater attention to the towers was a consequence of a successful large-scale public campaign to prevent their demolition by the city of Los Angeles, it is worthwhile to note the divergent interests of parties invested in the Watts Towers' future. Sarah Schrank writes "Once saved from the municipal wrecking ball, the towers have served as an uneasy liaison between white liberals invested in the towers' artistic merits and predominantly black community activists hoping to parley the towers into federal and state funding for local and commercial facilities." She goes on to note that the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts and the Watts Towers Art Center have been positioned as competitors for funding. See Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 148.

speak to a set of political investments distinct from those of his Anglo peers that may have impacted institutions' and critics' willingness to engage his work:

Tracing the larger group of assemblage artists from the 1930s in the United States, one discovers that avant-garde artists were part of a reality of highly structured art institutions that included dealers, galleries, critics, and museums....Artists whose works were racially charged, were viewed as incongruent with the canon because of the political overtones inherent in the early works of the late 1960s and early 1970s....Many felt that politics in work negated or compromised its aesthetic qualities. Work by black artists that made a social statement was therefore locked in the content of political art and was rarely viewed outside of a political context. It was not viewed within the canon of assemblage, even though the African-American artists shared the "off the wall" aesthetic with their white counterparts. It was marginalized to political art exhibitions that were considered a curiosity rather than a part of a sanctioned or even new art movement.⁹³

The Art of Assemblage demonstrates this aversion to addressing a social context that could be interpreted as political through its framing of the Watts Towers. Prior to the uprising, the Watts Towers were the primary landmark through which Angelenos organized their knowledge of Watts. By 1965, the towers were well known throughout Los Angeles and the United States as a significant public art site. After Simon Rodia, a working-class Italian immigrant completed the towers in 1954 and left them in the care of a neighbor, they began to deteriorate until a campaign emerged to preserve the decaying urban landmark. In 1961, the Museum of Modern Art in New York hosted *The Art of Assemblage*, an exhibition that argued for the recognition of assemblage works by artists such as Wallace Berman and Edward Kienholz as contemporary inheritors of Joseph Cornell and Marcel Duchamp's aesthetic practices. Within this historical trajectory, the curators included the Watts

⁹³ Lizzetta Lafalle-Collins, "Keeper of Traditions," *John Outterbridge: A Retrospective*, (Los Angeles: California African-American Museum, 1994), 11.

Towers as a “collage environment” representing an influential engagement with assemblage by a folk artist. In the catalogue, photographs of the towers frequently omitted their surroundings in favor of isolating its structure, forms, and aesthetic details.⁹⁴ The removal of context in these images operates in a similar capacity to the way in which assemblage sculpture relies on the isolation of objects for the works to be recognized as an aesthetic object. In particular, the artist not only needs to carefully select and arrange the discarded material, but to remove the object from its surroundings so that it can be distinguished from and elevated above refuse. The towers’ transformation from urban landmark to aesthetic object relies on their decontextualization, a decision that points to larger divergences in artistic practice between Noah Purifoy and his white contemporaries.

The exhibition catalogue for *The Art of Assemblage* defines the area surrounding the towers as marked by absence and desolation with “flat surroundings of dusty streets, one-story habitations, vacant lots, and railroad tracks that make up the drab neighborhood.”⁹⁵ When viewing the towers as part of a larger environment, however, the significance attached to them shifts substantially. For example, the towers occupy an oblong parcel of land that was shaped on one side by the former track of the Red Car Trolley. When considered in relation to this context, the towers mark a fragment of lost transportation infrastructure caused by the closure of the Red Car Trolley in 1961, a historical moment that dramatically transformed living

⁹⁴ Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2006), 154.

⁹⁵ William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, distributed by Doubleday, 1961), 77.

conditions in Watts and the residents' employment prospects that coincided with the opening of the Watts Towers Art Center and Studio Watts, two cultural organizations that sought to develop art education programs for the community.

In *Junk Art: 66 Signs of Neon*, Purifoy and his colleagues contest the aesthetic isolation of the artworks and instead emphasize their relationship to the landscape of Watts by superimposing images of the finished sculptures over photographs of detritus lining the street within the catalogue. Additionally, within the exhibition, the artists included photographs documenting the uprising by Harry Drinkwater, emphasizing the post-rebellion landscape as the catalyst for the works. By comparison, the selective inclusion of context by white artists speaks to larger patterns of exclusion within the Los Angeles art community, especially in relation to ethnicity. Within the Los Angeles art scene, Purifoy's work existed along its margins despite the parallels between his work and that of white assemblage artists.

Prior to developing *66 Signs of Neon*, Noah Purifoy utilized found materials in his art practice. Although this choice of medium coincided with similar practices taking place on the West Side of Los Angeles, Purifoy's work possessed commitments distinct from his peers, in part due to the geographic distance between black artists in South Los Angeles, mainstream art galleries in West Hollywood, and creative practice inspired by Beat culture taking place further west in Venice and Santa Monica. Although Purifoy regularly visited galleries such as those on La Cienega Boulevard, he was generally unmoved by the work on display.⁹⁶ Moreover,

⁹⁶ Interview with Noah Purifoy.

other artists of color, such as Ernesto Palomino, disidentified with the term “assemblage” to describe their work and viewed it as defined by whiteness. In Palomino’s case, he referred to his sculptural creations made from junk and found objects as *gabacho* (Anglo) art.⁹⁷

Although, much like his contemporaries, Purifoy’s work drew upon the aesthetic legacies of Dadaism and Marcel Duchamp, he sought to distance himself from them through his selection of materials and his designation of his work as “junk art.”⁹⁸ Regarding the usage of the term “junk,” in 1961, British art critic Laurence Alloway coined the term “Junk Culture” to refer to an aesthetic practice similar to assemblage. Although it is unclear whether Purifoy’s usage of the term “Junk Art” references Alloway, the critic’s definition of “Junk Culture” resonates with Purifoy’s perspective that art should facilitate communication between people.⁹⁹ Alloway writes, “The paradox of Junk Culture is that though it is the most far-out and *unpopular* art form, it is also the most democratic. It is the art which celebrates the ways in which artists are like other people, sharing objects, sharing the environment literally.”¹⁰⁰ However, a connection between Purifoy and Alloway is further troubled by the critic’s inclusion of Wallace Berman, whose approach to art practice differed from Purifoy’s, amongst the European and Anglo-American artists Alloway used to exemplify “Junk Culture.” One key difference between Purifoy’s practice and artists

⁹⁷ Jacinto Quirarte, *Mexican American Artists* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), 96.

⁹⁸ Interview with Noah Purifoy.

⁹⁹ Noah Purifoy, “The Art of Communication as a Creative Act.”

¹⁰⁰ Laurence Alloway, “Junk Culture,” *Architectural Digest* vol. 31 (March 1961): 122.

such as Wallace Berman and Edward Kienholz is in the selection of objects used. While all assemblage art uses discarded materials, the scavenged objects found by Berman and Kienholz spoke to a substantially more bourgeois frame of reference than those utilized by Purifoy. Objects such as dolls, lacquered furniture, and books refer to a clear, prior value inherent in the object, whereas the material Purifoy selected was no longer recognizable as a usable object. The designation of his work as “junk art” further emphasizes a class differentiation amongst the artists that is expressed by their use of materials as well as Purifoy’s experience in Watts. For example, in 1964, Purifoy moved to Watts to teach at the Watts Towers Art Center. Prior to that point, he had attained a comfortable degree of material success following a career as a social worker.¹⁰¹ Upon arriving in Watts, however, Purifoy sought to identify with the residents’ experience and discarded belongings he considered excessive. As an indication of Purifoy’s effort to integrate himself within the community, he allowed students to store looted goods at the Watts Towers Art Center while gathering information on conditions as the uprising took place within clear view of it.¹⁰²

Purifoy’s exposure to the social and economic inequality in Watts led him to critique the assumed purpose and relevance of art, especially in relation to class and the black community:

At the time, we didn’t verbalize much about art. We insisted that art speak for itself. Because my attitude toward that concept was that it was elite and that poor people could afford to feel that something was in and of itself because of their basic needs and dependency. So what I was insisting on verbally, as well as attracted to convey it in my work through the group effort was that it’s an

¹⁰¹ Interview with Noah Purifoy.

¹⁰² Interview with Noah Purifoy.

elitist concept to feel that art is in and of itself art. It is not in and of itself because it interrelates with the world at large. We tried to say this in “Signs of Neon.”¹⁰³

Purifoy created a linkage between the work and its audience through his usage of found materials. According to Purifoy, junk defined the landscape in Watts and spoke to the larger conditions informing life in the neighborhood. When Purifoy stated that art is “interrelated with the world,” this can be understood as not only a comment on art’s obligation to respond to the specific context of its creation, but its capacity to express broader conditions through physical materials.

As an aesthetic strategy, the transfiguration of value through the reconfiguration of urban detritus corresponded to a range of alternative value-generating practices within the sub-economies of Watts. Discussing his process of scavenging for materials after the uprising, Purifoy mentions that he and his collaborators did so alongside other residents who sifted through the materials lining the streets.¹⁰⁴ The corresponding practice of scavenging items from the detritus speaks to a parallel strategy of transfiguring value from destroyed remnants to materials that could potentially be used within the home or sold to garner supplementary income.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Purifoy, “The Art of Communication as Creative Act.”

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ “African American Artists of Los Angeles: John W. Outterbridge,” interview by Richard Cándida Smith, 1990, Oral History Program, Special Collections, University Library, UCLA (cited hereafter as Interview with John Outterbridge).

In “The Art of Communication as a Creative Act,” Purifoy describes Watts as “set down in the center of junk piled high on all sides.”¹⁰⁶ This assessment initially bears resonance to the description of Watts in *The Art of Assemblage* as “dusty,” “drab” and seemingly devoid of activity. However, in considering the image of “junk piled high on all sides” that Purifoy offers, the works in the exhibition indicate dissonance between the designated value of Watts and the potential for value to be derived, if not divined, from within it. Although the designated value of Watts is a consequence of discriminatory real estate, insurance, public housing, and infrastructural policies, the strategic use of “junk” to generate value from within the neighborhood corresponds to alternative economic practices within Watts that not only circumvented the black community’s marginalization within consumer culture but informed the improvisational reworking of the post-rebellion landscape carried out by visual and performing artists.

In the uprising’s aftermath, the improvisatory reuse of urban space was initially centralized within Watts, but expanded into other parts of South Los Angeles during the subsequent years. In 1965, the Watts Happening coffeehouse opened in an abandoned furniture store on 103rd Street, one of the most severely damaged thoroughfares, serving as a performance space and art center while also housing social service organizations.¹⁰⁷ The coffeehouse also served as the meeting place for founding members of the Watts Prophets poetry and performance collective, the New

¹⁰⁶ Purifoy, “The Art of Communication as Creative Act.”

¹⁰⁷ Widener, 96.

Art Jazz Ensemble, and the Pan-Afrikan People's Arkestra, all of which were known for their engagement with improvisational technique.¹⁰⁸

Following the exhibition of *66 Signs of Neon*, the Watts Towers Art Center was able to remain operational, hosting workshops that encouraged young people to create art from found objects. The center not only served as a space for art education, but as a locus of activity for multiple generations of practicing artists in South Los Angeles. Purifoy, Powell, and contemporaries such as John Outterbridge and Betye Saar functioned as the first generation of artists that were identified with South Los Angeles. In addition to their creative practice which used found and discarded objects to develop a new visual language to comment on social conditions, many of these artists worked to develop institutions throughout South Los Angeles that would support creative practice. The Compton Communicative Arts Academy, for example, opened by John Outterbridge in 1970, was the first cultural institution to be established in Compton, and offered classes for resources for creative practice that included both visual art and performance. The presence of an identifiable art community also informed a subsequent generation of artists that included David Hammons, Maren Hassinger, and Senga Nengudi, who formed collaborative groups such as Studio Z based in South Los Angeles.

At this time, the visual arts and improvisational performance were intertwined with ongoing efforts to rebuilt Watts. At this time, the improvisational technique used by musicians differed radically from their predecessors in that "Free jazz broke

¹⁰⁸ Isoardi, 84.

decisively with the use of popular songs as a compositional basis and took up patterns of simultaneous or collective improvisation in place of the sequential and chord-based improvisations common to bop.”¹⁰⁹ As Widener writes, this shift away from inherited forms in favor of improvising new lines resonates with efforts to conceptualize new institutional forms intended to serve the community. The confluence of improvisational practice with the reworking of a shattered landscape points toward an aesthetic strategy that is at once *of* its built environment while also working from *within* it to reconfigure and reimagine it.

It is in the breaking of the glass that separates the art object from the environment to which it refers that it becomes possible for the excesses of meaning to be returned to it. *66 Signs of Neon* speaks to a form of artistic practice that directly engages the fragments of an urban landscape, and in so doing, responds to the political conditions of the site. Ultimately, the work is emblematic of an aesthetic strategy that emerged within South Los Angeles and would continue to evolve over subsequent decades. This practice is characterized by the ways in which artists use creative forms to reframe the conditions of the built environment in a manner that amplifies the ways that marginalized communities claim the urban landscape for themselves on a daily basis. By enlarging these gestures and activities, artists not only make visible the ongoing struggles over urban space, but also reveal alternate forms for articulating one’s right to space that do not rely on the formal conventions of political speech.

¹⁰⁹ Widener, 139.

Chapter Two:
Re-Situating the Century Freeway:
Community Resistance and the Visual Politics of Vacancy in Maren Hassinger's
Pink Paths

Tucked amidst a cluster of homes is an almost pastoral expanse of grass, alternately patchy and lush, that bears a well-established footpath. In place of the grass, the path is comprised of dry, compacted dirt and sporadic rocks visible through a layer of pink paint that has been applied to its surface. (Figs. 4 and 5) The paint has a saturated pastel, almost saccharine, quality to its coloration. Against scrubs of green grass, the pink emits a faint glow that is at once warm and unnatural. Traversing the path for several hundred feet, its contours and, correspondingly, the pink tint, ebb and flow. At times, the trail carries its users past expanses of homes whose abandonment is made clear through boarded up windows, sagging roofs, and scorch marks from untended fires. At others, it terminates at a park, a field, or alternately, a front door that can no longer be opened. These paths, in a sense, trace the contours of a “ghost town” that was cleaved apart for freeway construction over a decade ago. Yet, the freeway’s looming presence can only faintly be traced by identifying the vacated homes along its proposed routing. Although the Century Freeway was eventually completed in 1992, it became a heavily embattled project when a coalition of residents, community organizers, and rights organizations filed a lawsuit to block its construction in 1972. They objected to the impacts of the freeway’s proposed route that spanned over ten communities, including Watts and Willowbrook, two predominantly African American neighborhoods that were in the midst of ongoing recovery efforts following the Watts uprising. The proposed route also crossed

through cities such as Lynwood and Inglewood that had violently resisted racial integration throughout the twentieth century, but had become desegregated by the end of the 1960s. As a result of the proposed routing, the negative impacts of the freeway's construction would disproportionately impact low-income and working-class black communities. Lynwood, the neighborhood that served as the site for *Pink Paths*, had large swaths of its residential communities scheduled for demolition to serve as one of the freeway's sites, and was seen as emblematic of the visible blight caused by the delays to freeway construction posed by the lawsuit. Although Lynwood was not the only corridor city to be depicted in this manner, it was frequently framed as one of the most heavily-devastated areas along the Century Freeway route due to the placement of the freeway as bisecting the community.¹¹⁰

A newspaper article circulates images of the damaged and decaying homes accompanied by text that reads "Only the echoes remain. The wind blows across dust and broken glass. Signs warn that respiring and loitering are forbidden where children used to play. There are mute reminders of habitation. Concrete foundations where homes once stood, houses and factories with boarded windows, indecipherable graffiti screaming transitory and secret epitaphs on stucco walls. This is the wasteland known as the Century Freeway corridor."¹¹¹ Captions include derisive references to "progress" and lamentations of loss and decline. In contrast to the certainty imposed

¹¹⁰ Larry Stammer, "Century Freeway Periled by Soaring Costs, Changing Political Climate: Swath of Desolation Marks Boundaries of Fading Dream," *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 1981, Century Freeway records, Collection no. 0228, Regional History Collections, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

¹¹¹ Stammer, "Century Freeway Periled by Soaring Costs."

by this narrative, the series of trails, titled *Pink Paths* by Maren Hassinger, points to an alternative possibility for perceiving this space, one that terminates at sites of activity as much as in spaces of decline.

This chapter explores how Maren Hassinger's *Pink Paths* trace wandering as an improvisatory act that, through the perceived illegibility and irrationality of the paths it creates, presents an alternative frame of reference for considering the controversy surrounding the Century Freeway that was localized in Lynwood, a community in South Los Angeles. By creating paths that resembled desire lines, some of which led to lively spaces, Hassinger complicates the rhetoric of ruin that constituted the majority of images of the community that circulated in the public sphere. Created in the middle of a twenty-year battle over freeway construction, Hassinger's work is situated at a moment when the extended delays over the construction of the freeway produced a public backlash to the legal victories that minimized its negative impact on surrounding communities. Contrary to the logic of efficiency that defined the modernist city, the freeway revolt in South Los Angeles revealed the actual cost of freeway construction when the social implications of its construction are more evenly distributed between communities.

In this chapter, I argue that Maren Hassinger's *Pink Paths* suggest that wandering functions as a kinetic form of improvisation that contradicts the "rational" routing of the Century Freeway through the neighborhood. Whereas the rhetoric of ruin produces sites that are always already beyond the point of redemption, Maren Hassinger's *Pink Paths* invite the piece's users to improvise other ways of perceiving

a site of ruin by invoking the act of wandering. Created as part of *Transitional Use*, an exhibition of site-specific works that took place in Lynwood, I trace how the works corresponded to a rhetoric of ruin that was articulated in legal and public discourse. This rhetoric depicted Lynwood as a community defined by its devastation. Hassinger's piece, however, points to a more complex history surrounding the abandoned homes' fate, Lynwood's exclusionary history, and language that conflated the neighborhood's changing demographics with the slow decay of abandoned homes.

Throughout this chapter, the usage of improvisation as a concept shifts from an engagement with spontaneously-produced musical and choreographic forms that informed Hassinger's collaborative practice to consider modes of nonlinear and "irrational" movement that unfix meanings attached to a site. This unfixing of meaning allows the site to be reconsidered in new and unanticipated ways and often has consequences that counter logical expectations, as in the case of the legal battles surrounding the Century Freeway. By invoking the notions of "desire lines," and "wandering" to represent these modes of movement, the focus on improvisation's role within urban space shifts from considering it as a critical response to an adaptive force that can actively reshape it. In *Pink Paths*, Hassinger delineates a space that not only marks the improvisatory gesture that wandering entails, but the piece can also be read as the creation of a setting that models the way in which improvisation comprises an ever-changing form subject to perpetual reconfiguration in response to new constraints and limitations. As such, this underscores the underlying paradox that

the moment in which improvisation is documented (and made legible) is also the moment in which the radical possibilities that it represents begin to recede. What *Pink Paths* gesture toward, however, is the shifting relationship between constraint and the improvisatory moment. By marking a site where wandering once occurred, *Pink Paths* appear to prescribe certain modes of movement. In this form, however, the possibility for wandering is renewed, as the paths now function as constraints capable of generating new improvisatory moments.

Hassinger's work not only contradicts the narrative linking decline and diversification, but suggests a mode of practice that extended the improvisatory reworking of the built environment which took place in Watts after the 1965 uprising into a new context. In detailing this trajectory, I begin by outlining a history of the Century Freeway before offering a reading of *Transitional Use* in relation to what I refer to as a "rhetoric of ruin." From there, I employ Pamela Lee's reading of Gordon Matta-Clark's aesthetic usage of defunct sites to outline how such an engagement can be performed outside of an overdetermined visual rhetoric. In reading Hassinger's piece, I consider how utilizing "propertyless" sites marks a recurring motif in her work from 1978-1982, one that functions as a setting for improvisatory kinetic activations of space. I close by considering the seemingly "nonfunctional" and "irrational" pathways in relation to Sarah Jane Cervenak's notion of wandering in an effort to locate how *Pink Paths* contradicts the logic of urban planning imposed on the community and symbolically echoes its transformation through the ensuing legal struggle.

By the time *Transitional Use* opened in 1982, the Century Freeway had been a publicly embattled project for more than a decade.¹¹² According to a report conducted by researchers at the University of California, Irvine’s Public Policy Research Organization, the Century Freeway was planned “during a period of considerable regulatory and social change which nationwide was affecting the completion of public works projects, highways in particular. The period of the Century Freeway’s early years has been called the time of the freeway revolution.”¹¹³ Eric Ávila has described the large-scale opposition to freeways that took place throughout the United States as “Freeway Revolts.”¹¹⁴ Although many of these revolts gained public attention, those led by communities with access to economic and political resources tended to be met with greater success, whereas the revolts within economically-depressed and ethnic minority communities often drew attention to the inequities posed by the freeway, but ultimately failed to halt or re-route the projects. Although Ávila has not discussed the Century Freeway in relation to this history of protest, it marks a compelling addition to this legacy, as the efforts led by a multi-faceted

¹¹² Although the 1972 lawsuit against Caltrans was the most widely-discussed response to the Century Freeway, the Freeway Fighters, a community activist group in Hawthorne, opposed the freeway routing starting in 1966. See Keith et. al. v. Volpe, Civil No. 72-355-HP (April 10, 1972), Century Freeway records, Collection no. 0228, Regional History Collections, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

¹¹³ Joseph DiMento, Jace Baker, Robert Detlefson, Dru van Henkel, Dean Hesterman, Brenda Nordenstam, “Court Intervention, The Consent Decree, and the Century Freeway: Final Report,” Century Freeway records, Collection no. 0228, Regional History Collections, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

¹¹⁴ Eric Ávila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 12.

coalition of citizens and organizations yielded large-scale state and federally-funded programs intended to mitigate the negative impacts of the Century Freeway. These programs, and the actions of these groups, however, were subject to widespread criticism due to the extensive delays they posed to the freeway's completion. It is through understanding the history surrounding the Century Freeway and opposition to it preceding the exhibition that it is possible to fully address the significance of *Transitional Use* in relation to its historical and social context.

Following the extensive construction of six major freeways through East Los Angeles during the early 1960s, Caltrans anticipated public criticism over the Century Freeway's impact on surrounding communities and conducted "extensive studies, meetings, and public hearings"¹¹⁵ in preparation of its routing from Central Avenue to the Imperial Highway, which included the creation of a multidisciplinary design team prior to its inclusion in the interstate system.¹¹⁶ By including consulting organizations and undertaking extensive studies, Caltrans sought to minimize freeway construction's negative impact on surrounding communities. Although the allocation

¹¹⁵ "History of the I-105 Glenn M. Anderson (Century) Freeway-Transitway," August 1992, Century Freeway records, Collection no. 0228, Regional History Collections, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

¹¹⁶ The multidisciplinary design team was comprised of organizations such as Gruen Associates, Development Research Associates, Bolt Beranek & Newman, Systems Associates, and Eugene Jacobs, as well as members from local agencies, the Federal Highway Administration, and Caltrans. The consulting organizations provided expertise concerning architecture, urban planning, and urban redevelopment, sociologists, economists, experts on environmental acoustics, among others. This design team produced 19 studies that addressed economic and fiscal structures, displacement of residents, mass transportation, "community facilities, traffic circulation, neighborhood environmental values, and joint use development." See "History of the I-105" Glenn M. Anderson Century Freeway-Transitway" for more.

of funding to these considerations marks a socially-conscious shift from prior freeway construction projects in Los Angeles, these early studies were conducted by organizations with little relationship to the communities along the proposed freeway corridor, and as a result, could not comprehensively understand the concerns of residents.

According to a history of the Century Freeway produced by Caltrans, Between 1969-1970, seven public design hearings were held and attended by over 5,600 people.¹¹⁷ Nine of the ten local agencies, except for Hawthorne, signed freeway agreements. A document detailing the history of the freeway states that “extensive efforts were made to communicate with the public and to solicit comments relative to community and environmental impacts” including 150 open meetings, a letter campaign sent to hundreds of people, the establishment of “a mobile information office in the project area” which was contacted by 7,000 people, the establishment of “an information and assistance office in the central portion of the corridor” which received over 10,000 individual inquiries between 1969-1971, and resources regarding information services that were available in downtown Los Angeles.¹¹⁸

In 1969, Caltrans began rights-of-way acquisition, which quickly led to allegations amongst corridor residents that the state intimidated homeowners who were reluctant to sell their properties.¹¹⁹ Other homeowners reported that they

¹¹⁷ “History of the I-105 Glenn M. Anderson (Century) Freeway-Transitway.”

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ray Hebert, “Freeway ‘to Please Everybody’ Doesn’t,” *The Los Angeles Times*, November 15, 1970, Century Freeway records, Collection no. 0228, Regional

received inadequate prices to compensate for the loss of their homes, whereas others felt that Caltrans discouraged neighbors from talking to each other about the offers they received.¹²⁰ In 1970, dissent escalated when the city of Hawthorne utilized the sole tactic available to a community to halt freeway construction after a route has been adopted by allocating \$100,000 to dispute street closures.¹²¹ At this time, the state began buying and demolishing properties in Del Aire, an area adjacent to Hawthorne, despite the city's plans to block freeway construction, leading to concerns amongst Del Aire residents that demolition in their area was occurring prematurely.¹²² At this time, the total estimated displacement caused by freeway construction was 21,000 people and 6,900 homes.¹²³

The most significant opposition to the Century Freeway came in February 1972, when four couples living within the State Right-of-Way, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Sierra Club, the Environmental Defense Fund, the Hawthorne Freeway Fighters, and the city of Hawthorne filed a class-action lawsuit against Caltrans.¹²⁴ The lawsuit argued that the

History Collections, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

¹²⁰ Barbara Riegelhaupt, "10 Year Wait for the Freeway that May Never Be," *Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 1981, Century Freeway records, Collection no. 0228, Regional History Collections, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

¹²¹ Hebert, "Freeway 'to Please Everybody' Doesn't."

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Although the lawsuit represents the creation of a coalition that brought together struggles for environmental, racial, and economic justice, the plaintiffs listed on the case represented interests that were conflicting and at times mutually exclusive.

government failed to comply with the requirements of the Federal National Environmental Policy Act and the California Environmental Quality Act of 1970, a similar piece of legislation on the state-level.¹²⁵ Multiple plaintiffs cited concerns over the freeway's negative environmental effects, and the court found that the public hearings for the freeway failed to sufficiently address the project's potential environmental impacts.¹²⁶ In addition to environmental concerns, the plaintiffs argued that the state and federal government did not comply with relocation assistance and payment requirements, which constituted a violation of the due process clause of the Fifth Amendment and that the displacement of minority residents in Watts and Willowbrook and absence of adequate replacement housing constituted a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause.¹²⁷ The lawsuit detailed the disproportionate impact on black residents in Watts and Willowbrook:

The Watts area of Los Angeles and the Willowbrook area of Los Angeles County are inhabited primarily by members of the Negro race living in comparatively inexpensive homes and low-cost rental units. Acquisition of

Hawthorne, in particular, adopted a stance typical of NIMBYism ("Not In My Back Yard") through the positioning of its opposition to the freeway as an effort to protect property values. In 1984, the Center for Law in the Public Interest would file a lawsuit against Hawthorne for refusing to allow the construction of low-income housing within its city limits.

¹²⁵ On January 1, 1970, the Federal National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) went into effect, which required the completion of Environmental Impact Statements (EIS). Although the new law did not impact ongoing projects, such as the Century Freeway, the Federal Highway Association suggested that in-progress projects be reassessed to ensure that social, environmental, and economic factors had been considered. Initially, it was found that the Century Freeway did not require an EIS due to the studies conducted by the design team.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Keith et. al. v. Volpe, Civil No. 72-355-HP (April 10, 1972), Century Freeway records, Collection no. 0228, Regional History Collections, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

rights-of-way and housing along the proposed route of the Century Freeway in these areas has caused and is continuing to cause the displacement of thousands of individuals and the destruction of approximately 2,000 units of housing, including 118 units of public housing. These individuals, the great majority of whom are poor, are forced by the actions of defendants to seek replacement housing in racially segregated neighborhoods where they have to pay inflated prices and rentals, because of the shortage of such housing.¹²⁸

This indicates that despite Caltrans' stated efforts to minimize the negative social and economic impacts of the Century Freeway, a major oversight remained which threatened to displace large swaths of a community that was in the midst of ongoing recovery efforts following the 1965 Watts Uprising.

In July 1972, the course of the Century Freeway was irrevocably altered when Judge Harry Pregerson issued a preliminary injunction that halted freeway construction until the plaintiffs' concerns regarding the environmental impact of the freeway, housing availability and adequate relocation assistance and compensation were addressed.¹²⁹ Seven years later, a consent decree was issued by Judge Pregerson. It mandated that an "Office of the Advocate for Corridor Residents" be established and funded by Caltrans and the Federal Highway Association, but be selected by the plaintiffs; that 4,200 remaining housing units be relocated and rehabilitated in the corridor under the state's supervision.¹³⁰ Advisory committees for community groups

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ The final EIS was completed in July 1977 for an eight-lane freeway and transitway for buses. The federal government granted approval for the freeway to proceed the following year.

¹³⁰ In 1981, the consent decree was amended due to concerns over the availability of funds to complete the freeway. The freeway's final design was reduced to six traffic lanes, and two bus and carpool lanes, ten transit stations with park and ride lots, ten local interchanges associated with the transit stations, two interchanges at either end of the project, landscaping and noise attenuation, relocation and rehabilitation or new

and displaced peoples were also established, along with an employment action plan with an affirmative action commitment to increase the inclusion of minority businesses and women employed on the project.¹³¹ The implementation of these initiatives marked the first time in Los Angeles freeway history that efforts were made to diminish the negative impact of freeway construction on working class and minority communities.

The following year, on May 1, 1982, ground broke in Lynwood on a project to clear a city dump so that an interchange could be constructed on the site.¹³² Four months later, on September 4, 1982, *Transitional Use* opened to the public. The exhibition took place from September 4th-30th and consisted of works created by Maren Hassinger, Candy Lewis, Jon Peterson, Ann Preston, Judith Simonian, Mark Williams, Megan Williams, and Melvin Ziegler. All of the artists, with the exception of Melvin Ziegler, chose to create pieces that functioned as site-specific works.

Candy Lewis and Jon Peterson's works addressed issues of transparency and opacity by engaging the structure and façade of the home. Candy Lewis' project incorporated optical illusions, such as the integration of mirrored picket fence placed in front of a series of chain-link fences shaped to form the structure of a home. In an

construction of at least 3,700 housing units, along with the continuation of the employment action plan and the office of the advocate.

¹³¹ "History of the I-105 Glenn M. Anderson (Century) Freeway-Transitway."

¹³² Although the clearance of the Wilco dumped marked the start of Century Freeway construction, it later became the site of controversy when the dump was discovered to be a toxic waste site and local politicians called for the removal of hazardous waste following Caltrans' reluctance to do so. See Mark A. Stein, "Caltrans Seeks New Ruling on Toxic Waste Site," *The Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 1984; and William Trombley, "Caltrans Pressured to Clear Toxic Waste," *The Los Angeles Times*, January 30, 1984.

interview with local newspapers, Lewis commented that the piece was intended to represent the loss of the ‘American dream’ of home ownership.¹³³ (Fig. 6) Jon Peterson’s work titled *Archaeological Hieroglyph House* was conceptualized as a contemporary excavation of a midcentury home. (Fig. 7) The structure’s facade was painted black and the windows, which had also been obscured, had white pictograms painted on them. On the front door, the words “Deep space” were written on it. Accompanying the home, the artist posted a sign which read “Hieroglyph House, c. 1950, Restored to its original condition, 1982.”

By contrast, Ann Preston and Judith Simonian’s pieces utilized the abandoned homes’ interiors to juxtapose the strange qualities of the empty houses against distorted renderings of familiar domestic spaces. Ann Preston’s piece was inspired by nostalgic memories of casting shadows onto a darkened bedroom wall as a child. The artist utilized cut-out images of hands to cast silhouettes onto the wall using multi-colored lights. Upon entering the space, viewers became participants in the piece by casting their own shadows onto a bedroom wall. In *Freeway Vessel*, Judith Simonian carved a form resembling a vase from an interior wall within the home. (Fig. 8) The excavated form was placed on a table in the middle of an empty room. From the side, it is possible to see the strata that comprise the interior construction of the home: layers of wood, drywall, and insulation. Simonian’s piece also included several paintings of individuals whose faces peered at the viewer throughout the home. In her

¹³³ Jan Klunder, “Freeway ‘Ghost Town’ Transfigured by Artists: Lynwood Exhibit Opens Saturday,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 12, 1982, Archives of Foundation for Art Resources.

comments on the piece, Simonian described her approach to her project as one that sought to treat the home as “a precious object.”¹³⁴

Although critics framed *Transitional Use* as an exhibition concerned with site-specificity, Melvin Ziegler and Mark Williams’ pieces demonstrated a reluctant engagement with Lynwood as a site. Instead of manipulating the structure of a home, Melvin Ziegler created a poster that featured a black and white image of the home at 11620 Nichols Street accompanied by an excerpt from Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem *Ozymandias* which read “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings/Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!/Nothing beside remains Round the decay/of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare/The lone and level sands stretch far away.” The poster was “randomly distributed” to a range of sites that did not include the Lynwood corridor.¹³⁵ Mark Williams created a series of roadside signs intended to be viewed in rapid succession, much like Burma-Shave ad campaigns that installed a series of small signs along roadsides bearing fragments of text that, when read sequentially, would reveal a rhyme or a joke. This style of advertising was common along U.S. highways beginning in the 1920s through the early 1960s. Williams’ signs included image reproductions of utopian visions for Los Angeles such as those drafted by Buckminster Fuller and Frank Lloyd Wright’s Broadacre City. Interestingly, of the works that were installed, Williams’ signs were subject to the greatest level of intervention by local residents. In some cases, signs were vandalized, whereas others

¹³⁴ Klunder, “Freeway ‘Ghost Town’ Transfigured by Artists.”

¹³⁵ Christopher Knight, “Artworks that Fill a Corridor of Modern Ruin: Exhibition is in the Path of What Will Be the Century Freeway,” *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, September 19, 1982, Foundation for Art Resources Archives.

were removed, several of which were found being sold by a street vendor nearby. Shortly after works were modified and removed, the exhibition organizers posted a sign that read “Artworks may be altered by the environment after installation date.”

Reviews of the exhibition alluded to a recurring thematic struggle between humans and nature, a conflict that Megan Williams’ articulated in her piece. (Fig. 9) The artist installed a dead tree within a garage with a crumbling roof. Despite appearing brittle and blackened, the branches pierce through the top of the structure. The work resonates with the concept of nature returning as an insurgent, almost vengeful, force to reclaim the structural remains of the community. However, the height and expanse of the tree’s growth, which is unknown to the viewer, inspires questions surrounding the temporality of the work. Specifically, is the fully-grown and now deceased tree intended to refer to the extended period in which the homes have laid abandoned? Alternately, the tree functions as a reference to the inevitability of the homes’ fate, implying an inherent foundational instability that would have yielded destruction from within regardless of the designs laid by Caltrans. Although reviews of the exhibition frequently addressed the pieces in relation to the concept of ruins, Williams’ piece, like Hassinger’s, points toward an outcome beyond decay whereas other works in the exhibition frame the neighborhood within a context solely defined by loss and devastation.

It should not be overlooked, however, that the exhibition constituted a conceptually-rich attempt to reconsider the geographic and social demarcations of

fine art in Los Angeles.¹³⁶ Whereas site-specific works located outside of the terrain of museums and galleries, such as those produced by Gordon Matta-Clark were often only known to an exclusive audience, *Transitional Use* was organized with the intention of being accessible and compelling to residents along the Century Freeway corridor as much as it was intended to appeal to a gallery-going public. Moreover, making Lynwood the site, rather than the subject of the artwork, amplified the problematics embedded within the artists' positions as visitors to the community. Although many of the artists engaged with residents by soliciting their input throughout the installation of their pieces, Mark Williams, Jon Peterson, and Judith Simonian's works were subject to vandalism and graffiti.¹³⁷ The response of some community members to their work indicated an underlying tension that precluded the possibility of mutual understanding. Still, other artists' framing of their works, such as Candy Lewis and Jon Peterson, overlooked the social context of the neighborhood. Lewis' commentary on the work as a meditation on loss was limited by her misconception that many of the displaced in Lynwood were *not* homeowners and that the loss of this status is not indicative of a sudden shift in economic inequality, but rather that it merely reiterates patterns of dispossession and displacement that

¹³⁶ As an organization, the Foundation for Art Resources (FAR) was founded in 1977 as an institutionless art organization that sought to activate a diverse range of sites in Los Angeles through programming which included installations, exhibitions, symposia and public talks. For a history of the organization, see Sande Cohen, "Not History: Remarks on the Foundation for Art Resources, 1977-1998," in *The Sons and Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in L.A.*, David E. James, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 108-127.

¹³⁷ Hunter Drohojowska, "Transitional Use," *L.A. Weekly*, September 24-30, Vol.4 No. 43, Foundation for Art Resources Archives.

historically impacted economically marginalized and ethnic minority communities.

Moreover, as a community, Lynwood was a racially-segregated white enclave until the mid-1960s when, at the risk of being targets of violent harassment, black families began to move to the neighborhood. In Mark Williams' piece, the date indicated on the sign alludes to a time before the neighborhood was integrated. The framing of the piece as restoring the house to this time period implies a nostalgia for an 'American Dream' that was premised on exclusion—a sentiment that corresponded with the anxiety and fear that many older white homeowners experienced as Lynwood's demographics shifted over subsequent decades. A similar oversight occurred through the inclusion of cautionary signage along Mark Williams' piece following several incidents of theft and graffiti. Including a sign that equated the residents' response to the work with the environment can be read by viewers as conflating individual actions with natural forces. This can be seen as implying an "essentialized" quality to the behavior of Lynwood residents that hews to the criminalization of African Americans and Latinxs. By equating what can be read as an informal critique of Williams' piece to the often-slow decay of site-specific artworks within their natural environments, the signage appears to imply that the decline of the neighborhood is the result of changing demographics.

The fraught relationship between the works and their site speak to what is at stake when artists and viewers accustomed to socially-secluded museum and gallery spaces are asked to move beyond sites familiar to them. The organizers of the exhibition sought to facilitate this shift by establishing a visitor information office

that resembled Caltrans' attempts to engage the community throughout the process of freeway construction by establishing visitor information offices to serve residents of the freeway corridor. The office functioned as a good-faith effort to serve as a liaison to residents and visitors from other parts of the city. Most significantly, however, the scale of the exhibition necessarily demanded that viewers immerse themselves within the community, and pieces such as Hassinger, Simonian, and Preston's required that viewers engage with the works on an intimate level, by not only leaving their car to travel through the neighborhood on foot, but by looking into and entering the former homes and contending with the traces left behind by their former occupants.

Hassinger's piece in particular invited viewers to experience the neighborhood on an intimate scale familiar to the residents. Although the paths did not include any supplementary information concerning notable landmarks or meaningful sites, they generated a new form of proximity to the homes, inviting new ways of viewing the structures that troubles the narrative that implied an experience of total loss and destruction which culminate in ruins.

Of the artists, Hassinger had the greatest familiarity with creating art for a freeway site, and by virtue of previous collaborative work with Senga Nengudi, was part of an extended network of black artists affiliated with South Los Angeles. Several years prior to creating *Pink Paths*, Maren Hassinger created works that directly engaged the site of the freeway. Specifically, in 1978 and 1979, she created *Twelve Trees* and *Twelve Trees #2*, a series of sculptures made from steel rope manipulated to resemble trees with twisted, tendril-like branches. Both pieces were created as part of a highway art program sponsored by

Caltrans. The first iteration of *Twelve Trees* was located at the Vermont Avenue interchange with the Hollywood Freeway, and the subsequent version of the piece created the following year was installed at the intersection of Mulholland Drive and the Hollywood Freeway. In the work, Hassinger demonstrates a concern for the capacity of industrial materials to possess expressive qualities. Hassinger's manipulation of the steel wires transforms a material characterized by its strength and rigidity into forms that take on the expressive fluidity and fragile complexity of tree branches. In adapting a material used widely in industrial and infrastructural projects, *Twelve Trees* poses questions around the presence of nature within a landscape defined by its monumental infrastructural forms.

During this time, Hassinger expanded her aesthetic engagement with freeways to incorporate spontaneous performance and ephemeral installations through her participation in *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*. In 1978, she also performed in a collaborative piece led by Senga Nengudi titled *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* with other members of Studio Z, an artist collective that included Nengudi, David Hammons, Barbara McCullough, Ulysses Jenkins, and Franklin Parker.¹³⁸

Significantly, *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* was heavily shaped by improvisatory practices and was situated where Pico Boulevard intersects with the Harbor Freeway. To the south of the site is Exposition Park, which informally marks the boundary between Los Angeles and "South Los Angeles." Although Nengudi has spoken about the setting of the work as evoking Africa, her reference to the performance as a

¹³⁸ Nick Stillman, "Senga Nengudi's 'Ceremony for Freeway Fets' and other Los Angeles Collaborations," *East of Borneo*, December 7, 2011. <http://www.eastofborneo.org/articles/senga-nengudis-ceremony-for-freeway-fets-and-other-los-angeles-collaborations> Last accessed August 19, 2016.

unification ceremony speaks to the subtle geographical markers that distinguish South L.A. from the city's core. Through her practice incorporated spontaneously-produced musical and dance performance with Nengudi and Hammons through Studio Z, Hassinger became linked to a second generation of black Los Angeles artists who witnessed the Watts Uprising from within South Los Angeles and maintained affiliations with the Watts Towers Art Center. These experiences, in conjunction with her training in choreography and sculpture, laid the groundwork for a multi-faceted practice that *Pink Paths* would exist within.

Pink Paths was minimally-discussed in reviews of *Transitional Use*, as many writers framed the exhibition in a manner that aligned with a narrative of ruins. In her review titled "Transitional Use: A Suburban Exhibition," Hunter Drohojowska wrote "The abandoned homes seem to emit a collective sigh, as if within their desolate hulls, the memories of past residents might still dwell. Walking around the ruins, one finds occasional clues to absent personalities, a tragic atmosphere reminiscent of a contemporary Pompeii."¹³⁹ Drohojowska's review references a visceral reaction to visible loss that is placed within a voyeuristic context. For Drohojowska, the viewer does not serve so much as a witness to the losses and displacements that are inherent to freeway construction, but rather, the complex life of the community is reduced to a condition defined by loss and rendered visible. The visitor takes on the responsibility of sifting through the rubble and making meaning from it, as if the process that led to the abandonment had not taken place within their lifetime. Isolated, extracted, and

¹³⁹ Hunter Drohojowska, "Transitional Use: A Suburban Exhibition," *Art and Architecture* (1982): 12, Foundation for Art Resources Archives.

removed from history, rather than seen as part of it, the review defines Lynwood by a singular traumatic loss that is relegated to the past.

Similarly, in his review of the show for *ArtNews*, Christopher Knight wrote “The corridor is an existing ruin, while the installations—like the freeway that is to follow—have risen only to be ultimately ruined by time.”¹⁴⁰ The references to ruin made by Knight and Drohojowska correspond to a larger rhetoric of ruin that was articulated in images produced by city officials and the mainstream press in the decade preceding the exhibition. Additionally, as the result of an agreement initiated by Lynwood to prevent homes sold to Caltrans from being re-rented, a considerable number of homes scheduled for demolition were vacant for an extended period of time, attracting vandalism and other forms of criminal activity. Although the terms of the injunction prohibited additional demolition from taking place, requests to demolish individual homes were considered on a case-by-case basis, leading city officials to undertake extensive documentation efforts in order to argue for their removal.¹⁴¹

The reports were comprised of photographs and brief descriptions of the property. For example, the property listed at 11809 Wright Road in Lynwood, California stated, “substandard, fire hazard” below the image. (Fig. 10) Whereas many of the images correspond to the conventions for photographing property for the

¹⁴⁰ Christopher Knight, “Los Angeles: Art on the Move,” *ArtNews* (January 1973): 73. Foundation for Art Resources Archives.

¹⁴¹ “Downey Maps New Plan for Homes’ Removal,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 1978, Century Freeway records, Collection no. 0228, Regional History Collections, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

purpose of appraisal, the black and white photograph that accompanies it differs slightly from its counterparts featured in the report. Throughout the report, the photographs are taken from a modest distance, likely from the street in front of the home. In many of the photos, the front facade of the home is clearly visible as are the yard and curb marking the beginning of the street.

In the photo of 11809 Wright Road, however, a dense cluster of vegetation and trees occupy roughly one third of the image on either side of the home. At the top of the images, branches stretch and twist as they become less concentrated, forming a patchy web-like canopy that frames the roof of the home. The facade of the home is partially obscured by the vegetation, but segments of clapboard slats below a series of boarded-up windows are visible. In the foreground of the photograph, the canopy above creates an intricate play of shadows. While it cannot be determined or speculated that this photograph was created with a specific aesthetic intention, it marks a significant departure from the conventions for documenting homes and gestures toward a rhetoric of ruin which operates in a nebulous space between “objective” photographic documentation and aesthetically pleasurable visual objects. The photograph enters this nebulous space due to the degree to which the home is obscured in the image, thus contradicting the function of the photograph.

After the preliminary injunction was filed, the narrative of the corridor as a site defined by loss and a corresponding rhetoric of ruin was articulated and reiterated in court documents and the mainstream media as much to discredit the validity of the plaintiffs’ claims as it was to hasten the demolition of abandoned homes. In a “Notice

of Intention to Demolish Improvements” that was filed in January 1973, the state proposed the demolition of eighteen homes that were considered to pose safety hazards along the freeway corridor. The accompanying reports included photographic documentation of the homes and notes indicating their status as “substandard,” “public nuisances,” and “vandalized beyond repair.”¹⁴² In 1978, Assemblyman Bruce Young accused Judge Pregerson of creating “blight” by allowing abandoned homes to remain standing¹⁴³, and a story in the *Los Angeles Times*¹⁴⁴ covering the status of freeway construction featured photos that included captions stating “Something’s Missing,” “Emptiness,” and “No Man’s Land.”¹⁴⁴ Articles and commentary in this vein were published at regular intervals until freeway construction began in 1982.¹⁴⁵ By virtue of their familiarity with the site through media coverage prior to the exhibition, the majority of the artists in *Transitional Use* produced work that aligned with this rhetoric.

¹⁴² Keith et. al. v. Volpe, Civil No. 72-355-HP (January 31, 1973), Century Freeway records, Collection no. 0228, Regional History Collections, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

¹⁴³ “Young Says Freeway Now Up to the Federals,” *The Daily Southeast News*, March 29, 1978, A-2.

¹⁴⁴ Roxane Arnold, “Politics Decided Fate of Century Freeway: Opponents Say They Lost Support as Legal Battle Stretched Over Years,” *The Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 1978.

¹⁴⁵ For further coverage of the abandoned homes see “Judge Rejects Downey’s plan to Raze Homes,” *Downey Herald-American*, March 30, 1978; Paul McAfee, “Life in Century Freeway Corridor: ‘Hanging In’ Along Desolation Row,” *Southeast News*, April 21, 1981; Dennis McDougal, “Lynwood: Downhill on the Freeway,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1989; Riegelhaupt, “Ten Year Wait for Freeway That May Never Be”; Stammer, “Century Freeway Periled by Soaring Costs.” Coverage included within Century Freeway records, Collection no. 0228, Regional History Collections, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

In considering how artists can engage nonfunctional architectural sites, Gordon Matta-Clark's work offers a lens for reimagining defunct and "blighted" urban sites that is carried forward in *Pink Paths*. While the works in *Transitional Use* were of a substantially more modest scale and the possibilities for engagement with a derelict house differed¹⁴⁶, Matta-Clark's *Splitting* offers a generative starting point for considering how artists can intervene in sites marked by a rhetoric of ruin. (Fig. 11)

Sited in a suburb of Englewood, New Jersey, Matta-Clark created the work using a chainsaw to systematically create two parallel, vertical lines cut through the middle of a home that was tipped back onto its foundation. A compelling link between the two projects, beyond the usage of an abandoned suburban home, is that Englewood and Lynwood were on the verge of transformation that marked a radical departure from their historical use, and that the structures were both characterized as unusable, or "propertyless," as a consequence of this impending shift.

As Pamela Lee writes, "To be sure, when one speaks of a thing as a property of something else, one refers not only to the object's distinction from one's person, but implies (through the genitive 'of') an internal relation by way of possession or predication.... Property, then, is less the *extension* of one's person than the *constitution* of one's being. The accumulation of these attributes, resulting in a bundle

¹⁴⁶ Whereas the artists in *Transitional Use* accessed the homes through an agreement with Caltrans, Matta-Clark acquired the house used for *Splitting* through his art dealer, who owned the property where the house was located and hoped to resell the land at a higher price. This difference in relationship to the owners of the respective properties not only informed whether limitations were placed on the scale of the work, but also positioned Matta-Clark as aiding in the future redevelopment of the site.

of properties, configures the identity of the subject in question.”¹⁴⁷ In *Splitting* and *Transitional Use*, the homes have been converted into a propertyless state. That is to say that the sites no longer possess the traits that are constitutive of a home. In the case of Lynwood, the abandoned homes no longer possess the minimum requirements, such as access to water or heat, that constitute a viable residence according to legal requirements. In *Splitting*, Matta-Clark has rendered the infrastructural elements of the house unusable. In both cases, however, the experience of viewing art within a public context is “collapsed...onto a space conventionally regarded as private; and the categories of urban and suburban, center and periphery were likewise “defunctionalized” by the artist’s intervention.”¹⁴⁸ What occurs in the “defunctionalization” is the possibility that the meanings attached to the site (i.e. its ‘properties’) can no longer adhere, creating a space in which new meanings can be generated and attached. By asking visitors to traverse pathways that offered no frame of reference for understanding their routes and which, at times, led the visitors to locked doors, the pathways were partially defunctionalized. Even this partial defunctionalization demanded that prior meanings attached to the site fall away so that new interpretations could be generated.

If the propertyless state of the structures is the condition that generated the controversy surrounding the abandoned homes, it is also the condition that catalyzed the transformation of Lynwood to an ethnically diverse community. In considering

¹⁴⁷ Pamela Lee, *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge, M.A.: The MIT Press), 111.

¹⁴⁸ Lee, 28.

these issues, the notion of property and the condition of being propertyless must be thought as both the constitution of one's being *and* a relation constituted by ownership. By viewing these notions as bound to each other, it is possible to more carefully understand the social context surrounding *Transitional Use*.

Historically, owning property has been equated with full political and social enfranchisement. For homeowners in Watts and Willowbrook, the potential clearance of homes that had been purchased and cultivated by working-class minority homeowners marked a substantial loss of wealth held within a community that had historically struggled to accumulate monetary resources in part due to the exclusionary tactics used by communities like Lynwood during the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁴⁹ By contrast, white homeowners in Lynwood (and other segregated enclaves in South Los Angeles) used the protection of “property value” to justify the exclusion of black residents within their communities. When the Century Freeway's routing was announced, Lynwood homeowners did not anticipate the extended construction period that would ensue, and sought to primarily protect the homogenous makeup of their community by blocking the rentals of abandoned homes. As a result of the “blight” which ensued through the decay of unoccupied homes, Lynwood's property values diminished, facilitating the purchase of homes by black and Latinx families. As a result, by 1989, Lynwood's demographic composition was comprised of 38% black residents, 40% Latinx residents, 20% white residents, and 2% residents of unidentified ethnicity, meaning that the forced abandonment of

¹⁴⁹ Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles*, 75.

homes resulted in the creation of a mixed-race and economically-diverse community over twenty-five years.¹⁵⁰ This shift indicates a dismantling of Lynwood's segregationist housing history that coincided with the dismantling of its essential properties that bound whiteness to homeownership. In a sense, the rhetoric of ruin surrounding Lynwood and the nostalgia for what the community once was functions as a yearning for this exclusionary past.

An article published in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1989 documented the author's recollections of growing up in Lynwood. In it, he interviews several residents in Lynwood who witnessed the community's demographic transition. He quoted one long-term resident as saying "I just looked up one day and it was crowded...It started out as a nice bedroom community, where the children could play out front. And then I looked up one day and we all seemed up be up on top of each other." The resident's discussion of crowding appears to function as a veiled reference to racial tensions within the community that centered around "an aging retired white minority often at odds with a younger middle-class black and Latino majority." McDougal cites an incident in which a black City Councilman found a Molotov cocktail in his driveway following a ceremony renaming a street in honor of Martin Luther King Jr.¹⁵¹

Matta-Clark's subtle reworking of the rhetoric of ruin is apparent when examining an image from *Splitting* in relation to Judith Simonian's piece for *Transitional Use*. During the 1970s, Matta-Clark produced several significant

¹⁵⁰ Dennis McDougal, "Lynwood: Downhill on the Freeway."

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

projects, a period of time coinciding with major urban redevelopment projects in New York, many of which invoked a rhetoric of ruin in order to justify their construction. In the documentation of works such as *Splitting*, Matta-Clark produced dramatically-cropped images that showed the exposed raw materials constituting the buildings he sliced through, extracted, and otherwise modified. Like Matta-Clark's photographs of *Splitting*, Simonian's piece carved a vase from the interior wall of the home, making its structural material visible to the viewer and creating a negative space within the wall. By extracting a segment of the wall, Simonian performed a gesture similar to Matta-Clark's, but does so in a manner that draws upon an overdetermined art historical reference to the still life, a departure from Matta-Clark's references to abstract minimalists such as Ellsworth Kelly. However, Simonian's invocation of a domestic form within a defunct home calls to mind Gordon Matta-Clark's concept of "worklessness," in which "that which cannot be used, that which is inaccessible...may also be a potential source of social space."¹⁵²

Ceremony for Freeway Fets resonates with Matta-Clark and other artists' investment in activating unusable sites during the 1970s. As a site that is not only characterized as derelict, but that marks an informal racial boundary within the city, the overpass where the piece was sited was activated as a social space through the performance. Like Hassinger, Nengudi created the work under sponsorship of Caltrans' program for highway art and selected the site because of its architectural features and evocative qualities. Specifically, Nengudi used the cylindrical pylons as

¹⁵² Lee, 104.

monumental structures from which to hang structural forms created from pantyhose, a material that she had been using since the prior decade due to its similarity to the human body in its ability to stretch and regain its shape. Nengudi also chose the site because it possessed qualities, such as low brush, that were reminiscent of Africa for her. Nengudi envisioned the improvised site-specific performance as a unification ceremony between masculine and feminine spiritual elements. Accompanied by musicians, Hassinger performed as the female spirit and David Hammons served as her male counterpart while Nengudi performed the role of the unifying spirit. Whereas Matta-Clark delineated the spaces to be designated as social spaces, they merely function as a container for activity until they are activated through their use and occupation by individuals. Similarly, in 1970, a coalition of artists and activists occupied the space underneath a San Diego freeway overpass to protest the cancellation of a planned park in favor of a highway patrol center. Following the protest, artists began painting murals on the freeway pylons and included references to Aztlán, the mythic homeland of the Aztecs, later naming the site “Chicano Park.” Three years later, in San Francisco, artist Bonnie Sherk transformed the space underneath a freeway into a series of gardens that hosted community events as part of a piece called *The Farm*. In *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, as in other pieces activating the space of the freeway, the social is improvised within a site designated as workless and propertyless, although *Ceremony for Freeway Fets* is restricted within the temporal boundaries of the performance.

It is in the production of sites that are generative of “non-instrumental’ play,

such as *Freeway Fets* and its corresponding performance, that an entry point for understanding Hassinger's aesthetic practice can be identified. In *Pink Paths*, the paradox of usefulness and uselessness in the footpaths is that they lead to abandoned, locked, and inaccessible doors. These footpaths become what Matta-Clark characterized as "interruption" or "movement spaces" that "refuse ownership because they are illegible, ambiguous, kinetic, even." Beyond that, although the work (identified here as the application of paint to the footpath) is the result of a singular artist's conception, the site which the paint demarcates represents the collective and collaborative play of pedestrians winding through the area—it becomes a site of improvisation that once given tangible form, offers the potentiality of generating additional paths.

At the crux of producing "social space" from a workless site is an improvisatory gesture that redefines the space as such due to the emphasis on producing a site of free play. In much the same way that Matta-Clark's *Fake Estates* purchased parcels of land that had been categorized as "unusable," what is at the heart of *Pink Paths* is not merely the transformation of a site categorized as 'ruins' into a social space (although this *can* be said of the reorganization of space produced by the exhibition). *Pink Paths*, however, not only draws attention to moments of worklessness embedded throughout the site, but foregrounds a kinetic experience as a central component of the work, thus producing an at times opaque path for viewers that challenges the perceived rationality underlying freeway construction. Just as Matta-Clark's *Fake Estates* relied on the constraints imposed by adjacent property

lines to identify the small parcels of land as “interruption” or “movement” spaces, it is the visible presence of the formal pathways that not only indicates prior instances of improvisatory movement, but invites new forms of wandering to take place beyond the existing paths Hassinger painted over. *Pink Paths* ultimately marks the moment between articulation and legibility that mimics the space between the kinetic improvisation represented by the act of wandering and the definition of a path that has been forged through such movements. What Hassinger privileges in the work is wandering as a mode of kinetic improvisation, a recurring theme in her work that is linked to survival. Prior to performing in *Ceremony for Freeway Fets*, Hassinger had previously collaborated with Nengudi to kinetically-activate Nengudi’s gallery-based installation series, *R.S.V.P.* These performances were heavily improvised, a quality that Nengudi describes as significant not only to the work, but as a survival tactic held within African American communities: “When we were kicked off the boat, improvisation was the survival tool: to act in the moment, to figure something out that hadn’t been done before; to live. And the tradition goes through Jazz. Jazz is the perfect manifestation of constant improvisation. It has to be in place at all times. Constant adjustment in a hostile environment, you have to figure something out right away.”¹⁵³ Similarly, in a manifesto written by Hassinger to commemorate her and Nengudi’s collaborative practice, Hassinger writes “What was the nature of the work done together? A sense of play and improvisation was always at the core of our

¹⁵³ Noel Black, “The Improvised Body: The Reemergence of Senga Nengudi,” *Hyperallergic*, September 6, 2014. <http://hyperallergic.com/146981/the-improvised-body-the-reemergence-of-senga-nengudi/>. Accessed August 19, 2016.

process.”¹⁵⁴ The improvisatory strain from Hassinger’s collaborations with Nengudi carries forth in the element of play inherent in following an unfamiliar path that unfixes the narrative surrounding Lynwood from the rhetoric of ruin that accompanies it. By leading visitors to sites of abandon *and* activity, Hassinger challenges the presumed certainty of the neighborhood’s decline and decay, suggesting instead an alternative assessment of its present state and future trajectories yet to be pondered. *Pink Paths* traces wandering as an improvisatory form that contradicts the “logic” of the modernist city.

Most significantly, the paths that Hassinger chose to paint included informal pedestrian paths known as desire lines in addition to sanctioned walkways such as sidewalks. Desire lines, which are pedestrian-created footpaths, have been described as “...the imprints of ‘foot anarchists,’ individuals who had trodden their own routes into the landscape, regardless of the intentions of government, planners, and engineers. A desire path could be a short cut through waste ground, or across the corner of a civic garden, or down an embankment. They were expressions of free will, ‘paths with a passion,’ an alternative to the structures of railings, fences, and walls that turned individuals into powerless, apathetic automatons. On desire paths you could break out, explore, ‘feel your way across a landscape.’”¹⁵⁵

The ‘anarchic’ quality of desire lines has generated a complex relationship with urban planning. Although an early instance of the term’s use by urban planners

¹⁵⁴ Maren Hassinger, “Manifesto,” *African American Performance Art Archive*. <https://aapaa.org/tag/franklin-parker/>. Accessed August 19, 2016.

¹⁵⁵ Nicholas Crane, *Two Degrees West: A Walk Along England’s Meridian* (London: Viking Press, 1999), 131.

was as part of a report prepared by the Highway Research Board during the 1920s, it was used to refer to straight lines plotted by researchers to calculate the most direct route between an origin and destination.¹⁵⁶ However, its current usage refers to pedestrian-created footpaths that circumvent paved roads, which typically produce a more direct route than the paved pathways. At times, urban planners and landscape architects have adopted an adversarial relationship to their presence, whereas at others, desire lines have been used to shape future design plans. There are several cases documenting how desire lines have informed urban design. Most notably, throughout the redesign of Central Park during the 1980s, plans incorporated desire lines into the formal design of the park by paving over them. However, the ongoing creation of desire lines was also seen as disruptive to the park's landscape and measures were introduced to prevent additional lines from being formed through the integration of fencing and landscaping.¹⁵⁷ Formalized desire paths at times appear anomalous within a landscape defined by its symmetry and rationality, and as such, are visible indicators of the integration of pedestrians' adaptation of landscape design.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ James A. Throgmorton and Barbara Eckstein, "Desire Lines: The Chicago Area Transportation Study and the Paradox of Self in Post-War America," Published online (<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/3cities/throgeck.htm>) with selected proceedings of the 3Cities

Conference. Birmingham, England (2000).

¹⁵⁷ Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, *Rebuilding Central Park: A Management and Restoration Plan* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987).

¹⁵⁸ The concept of desire paths has also been applied to explore social phenomena, such as when individuals opt of or find alternate ways of navigating formalized systems, but have also been used as a lens for understanding online user experience.

Capable of being established within as few as fifteen traversals of a route, the scale and function of desire lines can vary widely—ranging from a brief diversion from a formal path to avoid a physical obstacle to well-worn trails that span significant distances.¹⁵⁹ Although, in many cases, desire lines create a direct route between two points, they can also be motivated by less tangible forces, such as the avoidance of superstitious landmarks. Because the logic underlying desire lines is often internal to the user, their illegibility in *Pink Paths* transforms them into a catalyst for wandering. Although the improvisatory possibility of the desire line recedes as the path becomes more clearly defined as multiple users traverse the path, new potentialities are generated as the path becomes a route, ultimately functioning as a constraint that can be improvised against. Ultimately, however, these movements remain unknown, and illegible in much the same way that the collective rationale linking the paths was unknown to *Transitional Use*'s visitors.

Sarah Jane Cervenak's *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom* explores the work of black artist-philosophers to argue that intellectual "roaming," such as daydreaming and rumination, has served as a means of

For example, a website designer can understand user-generated desire paths by analyzing a site's search queries. See Laura Nichols, "Social Desire Paths: A New Theoretical Concept to Increase the Usability of Social Science Research in Society," *Theory and Society: Renewal and Critique in Social Theory* Vol. 43 No. 6 (2014): 647-655; Carl Myhill, "Commercial Success by Looking for Desire Lines," *Computer Human Interaction, 6th Asia Pacific Conference, Rotorua, New Zealand, June 29, 2004-July 2, 2004*, edited by Masood Masoodian, Steve Jones, and Bill Rogers (New York: Springer, 2000). DOI: 10.1007/978-3-540-27795-8_30

¹⁵⁹ Kurt Kohlstedt, "Least Resistance: How Desire Lines Can Lead to Better Design," *99% Invisible*, January 25, 2016. Last accessed March 12, 2017. <http://99percentinvisible.org/article/least-resistance-desire-paths-can-lead-better-design/>

preserving freedom for populations whose mobility has been historically restricted. Cervenak critiques the tendency to “[Draw] parallels between walking and speech, using the language of enunciation, [which] implies a shared quality of discursive availability and rests on the presumption of the walker as agent” that has been put forth by theorists such as Michel de Certeau¹⁶⁰ Cervenak suggests that “because wandering exceeds the terrains of the visible and the physical and because it’s not possible to *know* and legislate the private ambulations of the spirit, anti wandering laws and acts don’t spell the end of black freedom.”¹⁶¹ Her assertion raises questions regarding the presumed accessibility of de Certeau’s claim that walking in the city sets in motion a chain of meanings constructed through the pedestrian’s movements. And yet, in considering the significance of wandering as a means of preserving freedom, the kinetic remains important.

De Certeau describes the ways in which pedestrian speech acts generate “a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden, or permitted meanings.”¹⁶² Hassinger’s work, however, traces this secondary geography in a site where its creators are unable to articulate its meanings. Moreover, because some of the pathways she painted were formed by desire lines, the intention behind their creation remains inaccessible, or otherwise irrational, to the viewer asked to traverse them. In *Pink Paths*, Maren Hassinger stages an act of wandering at a site

¹⁶⁰ Sarah Jane Cervenak, *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 4.

¹⁶¹ Cervenak, 11.

¹⁶² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 105.

whose perceived danger demanded frequent police patrols. Although Hassinger's work is technically premised upon the act of walking, the piece distances this action from De Certeau's notion of walking in the city as an enunciatory act because the meanings of the sites to which the paths lead are unavailable to viewers who are not already acquainted with the site. He writes "the operations of walking can be traced on city maps in such a way as to transcribe their paths....The trace left behind is substituted for the practice. It exhibits the (voracious) property that the geographical system has of being able to transform action into legibility".¹⁶³ Although Hassinger's piece makes a series of pathways visible, the artist does not make them legible to the viewer due to the absence of interpretive material. Because of this, the artist invited viewers to engage in the performative enactment of a site that is illegible to them. This quality joins *Pink Paths* to Matta-Clark's conception of worklessness due to the tendency of some paths to lead to a locked or otherwise inaccessible front door. While Hassinger's piece does not encourage her users to produce an enunciatory act by traversing the paths, the act of wandering does not preclude the possibility that the viewer will assign meanings to the paths. One such meaning that can be generated by the paths is the contradiction of the rhetoric of ruin due to the termination of a path at a lively shopping center nearby.

Another quality that speaks to Cervenak's argument that wandering can constitute an act of freedom is Hassinger's usage of desire lines as the site upon which to paint *Pink Paths*. Because desire lines can function as informal pathways to

¹⁶³ De Certeau, 97.

little-known features or sites of interest known only to a small group of people, the understanding of their significance is premised upon localized forms of knowledge. To those without that knowledge, the lines appear meaningless or irrational. It is this quality of desire in opposition to “logic” and “rationality” that further link *Pink Paths* and Cervenak’s notion of wandering: linking the exaltation of reason in the Enlightenment to knowledge forms that were used to justify the enslavement and subjugation of black people, Cervenak marks desire and the outward perception of ‘irrationality’ as channels that are productive of the freedom that wandering entails. She writes “...because desire often upsets the illusion of rational self-determination, desire was and is figured as antithetical to reason, belonging to the unwieldy, pathological domain of the radicalized, classed, and gendered: a physicalized domain sanctioning the most vicious of state constraints.”¹⁶⁴ The desire lines in *Pink Paths* are traces of fugitive movement within the site of the abandoned homes. Created and made visible on a human scale, they contradict the large-scale vision that constituted modernist urbanism that Eric Ávila has described as “a European invention that marked a concerted effort to *design* a rational social order through the aggressive reorganization of urban space. It reflected the state’s effort to manage the crises induced by capitalist urbanization and to advance society through enlightened architecture and planning. It enthroned the machine, not ambulatory human beings, as the arbiter of urban spatial design, and it claimed the authority of reason and science, promising to rescue humanity from its self-destructive attachments to history,

¹⁶⁴ Cervenak, 12.

community, and identity.”¹⁶⁵

The production of the modernist city relies on the rhetoric of ruin to justify the imposition of order that it represents. The winding, disconnected pathways that constitute Hassinger’s work represent a spontaneous diversion that, while, it can be followed, cannot be fully understood. The human scale, pink coloration, and contours of the paths contradict the monumental concrete linearity of freeway overpasses, echoing the extended and unpredictable delays that would ensue following the injunction granted by Judge Harry Pregerson.

Shortly after *Transitional Use* ended, vacant homes in Lynwood began to be cleared, but the construction of an interchange on a former city dump resulted in public outcry demanding that adequate toxic waste removal measures be followed to prevent further damage to the environment. Over the next nine years, the freeway would be constructed and construction on replacement housing would begin. The housing construction program would be subject to delays, budget overages, and public criticism, leading to an amended timeline for the completion of construction, and the affirmative action employment program would also be the target of questionable allegations of incompetence and mismanagement. However, despite the public controversy that plagued the Century Freeway, that the demands of communities were recognized and legally mandated speaks to a significant triumph in the history of freeway revolts. Most significantly, however, although the Century Freeway could not be stopped entirely, the extent to which the efficiency of the

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 18.

modernist city was bent and otherwise rerouted by the will of citizen coalitions has meant, in a surprising twist of logic, that an “unsuccessful” freeway revolt has determined that no future freeways will be constructed in Los Angeles.

**Chapter Three:
Listening for Oblivion:
Urban Rhythms and Gentrification in Daniel Martinez's *Narrenschiff***

In the midst of the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, Crenshaw was noted as being one of the most heavily impacted communities.¹⁶⁶ Comprised of the area between Exposition Boulevard and Slauson Avenue to the North and South, and between Van Ness and La Brea Avenue to the East and West, Crenshaw is a historically middle-class black community encompassing Leimert Park that is adjacent to the wealthy enclave of Baldwin Hills. However, despite the area's robust economic base of black-owned businesses, the community has historically struggled to gain amenities common in comparable white communities. For example, following the departure of white homeowners from the neighborhood after the Watts uprising in 1965, no new grocery stores opened in the neighborhood until April 1992, weeks before the uprisings catalyzed by the acquittal of the trial of Los Angeles Police officers who were filmed beating Rodney King the prior year.¹⁶⁷ In a gesture that anticipates the shifts currently taking place in the community, much of the recovery efforts following the 1992 uprising took the form of investments from large corporations.¹⁶⁸ In subsequent years, although black-owned businesses that remained standing after the unrest thrived and discussions regarding the community's economic recovery

¹⁶⁶ John L. Mitchell, "After the Riots: The Search for Answers: Rising from the Ashes, Crenshaw-Area Leaders Hope Community Can Rebound from Destruction," *The Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 1992.

¹⁶⁷ John L. Mitchell, "Buyer's Market: Crenshaw Shoppers Line Up to Get in 1st Major Store Built Since Watts Riots Fueled White Flight," *The Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 1992.

¹⁶⁸ John L. Mitchell, "After the Riots"; Jube Shiver Jr., "Shell Oil Pledges \$10 Million to Rebuild L.A.," *The Los Angeles Times*, September 4, 1992.

emphasized support for locally-owned businesses, there was a noticeable inequity in Crenshaw's economic landscape, as black business owners reported an inability to access disaster relief funds following damage incurred by an earthquake in 1994.¹⁶⁹ Similarly, until the early 2000s, parts of the community lacked access to services such as regular mail delivery.¹⁷⁰ Recently, however, the profile of Crenshaw has changed rapidly, with new amenities such as light rail service, new businesses, and cultural sites under development. While these changes might appear to benefit Crenshaw, their introduction coincides with the displacement of long-term residents, which is reflected by a report that in 2016, the median home price in the community had doubled over seven years.¹⁷¹

Daniel Martinez developed *The Report of My Death is an Exaggeration; Memoirs: Of Becoming Narrenschiff* from 2010-2014, in the midst of this period in which home prices began to rise rapidly. *Narrenschiff* emerged in conjunction with a series of bus rides that Martinez took for three years beginning in February 2010. Boarding the 210 bus from the corner of Crenshaw Boulevard and Slauson Avenue, Martinez's route initially wound through Leimert Park before traveling as far as North Hollywood. (Fig.12) On other days, he took the 108/358 bus which travelled east to Pico Rivera. (Fig.13) From these durational bus rides, Martinez produced several bodies of work that were shown at the Roberts & Tilton Gallery in 2014.

¹⁶⁹ Erin J. Aubry, "Crenshaw: Redlining Charged in Quake-Aid Policy," *The Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 1994.

¹⁷⁰ Daniel Martinez, interview by the author, January 30, 2017, Los Angeles, California.

¹⁷¹ Angel Jennings, "A Backlash in Leimert Park; Black Residents Feel Sense of Loss as White Families Move In," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 10, 2017.

Acting as a morbid, oversized centerpiece, two-dozen dead bonsai trees in overturned buckets sat at the center of the gallery space. (Fig.14) On the surrounding walls and hung salon-style, were thirty-seven paintings comprised of evocative snippets of text produced on a large scale. Flanking the paintings near ground level were a series of images created using instant film documenting the artist's waste. Elsewhere in the gallery, Martinez hung a series of twelve photographs titled *Field Notes from South Los Angeles; this world is a fleshless one where madness, love and heretics are all I know*. The photographs depicted segments of the built environment in Crenshaw absent of cars or people. Within the series, eight photographs featuring graffiti-inspired textual interventions by Martinez that were reminiscent of the phrases featured in the paintings were interspersed with the remaining four images depicting the streetscape unaltered by Martinez.

Daniel J. Martinez's *Narrenschiff* serves as a compelling elaboration of Sarah Jane Cevernak's notion of wandering—in which his travels on the Los Angeles County Bus resemble the circulation of Ursa, a blues singer in Gayl Jones' novel *Corregidora*, who uses the bus as a vehicle for mental escape.¹⁷² However, in Martinez's case, the bus rides yields a different form of intellectual and philosophical wandering that enabled him to slip into and between the rhythms of an urban landscape that is undergoing a dramatic transformation. In this wandering, Martinez began to view the city buses as a contemporary realization of the “ship of fools,” an allegory initially produced within a series of 15th century woodcuts by Sebastian

¹⁷² Cervenak, 1.

Brant and later theorized by Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilization* as a mechanism of simultaneous expulsion and internment that the state relies upon as a mode of social control.¹⁷³ This realization ultimately became the namesake for the work.

From these rides, Martinez produced *Field Notes from South Los Angeles*, a series of photographs depicting the built environment in Crenshaw, which included several statements that he graffitied onto building facades. The pieces draw upon a Situationist-inspired approach to writing graffiti, but moves past it to invoke a disruptive presence within a landscape under siege by gentrification. What Martinez is critiquing extends beyond recognizing the displacement of residents as a consequence of rent increases, but suggests that the “corporate aestheticization” of the built environment requires and relies on the displacement of dispossessed populations.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Juli Carson, “The Politics of Falling,” In *Daniel Joseph Martinez: The Report of my Death is an Exaggeration; Memoirs: Of Becoming Narrenschiff* (Los Angeles: Roberts and Tilton, 2014), 12.

¹⁷⁴ The use of the term “dispossessed populations” in the context of this chapter draws upon Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou’s notion of dispossession which is described as the “processes and ideologies by which persons are disowned and abjected by normative and normalizing powers that define cultural intelligibility and that regulate the distribution of vulnerability: loss of language and community; ownership of ones’ s living body by another person, as in histories of slavery; subjection to military, imperial, and economic violence; poverty, securitarian regimes, biopolitical subjectivaiton, liberal possessive individualism, neoliberal governmentally, and precaritization.” Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 2. Also relevant to consider is David Harvey’s notion of “accumulation by dispossession,” the process which enables the ongoing accumulation of wealth in late-stage capitalism. See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Cambridge, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005). While Harvey’s discussion of “accumulation by dispossession” primarily concerns

This chapter considers *Narrenchiff* through Henri Lefebvre's analysis of the constitution of urban rhythms (what he terms rhythmanalysis) in order to argue that Martinez's textual inscriptions functioned as an intervention into the shifting rhythms that constitute the streetscapes of Crenshaw. An examination of *Narrenchiff* yields an expanded engagement with Fred Moten's discussion of "the break." By revisiting Moten's discussion of "the cut" and "the break" within the context of rhythmanalysis, it is possible to understand how Martinez's movements and interventions mimic the spatio-temporal constitution of rhythms that are embedded within the Crenshaw streetscape. This occurred because Martinez resided *within* and *between* the urban rhythms of Crenshaw, a position that confronted him with the unreal conditions of social internment¹⁷⁵ constituted by the bus in light of the removal of the dispossessed from public spaces by economic development initiatives.¹⁷⁶ In doing so, Martinez

new operations of imperialism within a global economic context, it is worthwhile to note that both Harvey and Athanasiou and Butler's discussions of dispossession emphasize the spatial context in which these processes take place.

¹⁷⁵ This notion of "social internment" emerges from a conversation with the artist concerning the social function of the bus in Los Angeles, in which he described bus passengers as disproportionately experiencing conditions of social, economic, or political immobility: "In Los Angeles, on the buses, its uneducated, lower classes, people who are in, they're existing in a state of social confusion to the point of paralysis....Everyone has a car in Los Angeles, so if you don't have a car and you're taking the bus, that tells you something right there. No one takes the bus out of convenience because there's nothing convenient about the bus. It is a non-sequitur. The idea of moving on the bus legitimately, to get somewhere, is insane." Daniel Martinez, in conversation with the author, January 30, 2017.

¹⁷⁶ A 2014 ridership survey conducted by the Los Angeles County Metro showed that bus riders are predominantly Latinx (59%) and African American (20%). The average income of bus riders in the city was \$16,377, which is approximately one third of the median household income for Los Angeles county (\$56, 241). These numbers indicate that bus riders are disproportionately represented by poor people of color. Similarly, the survey showed that 25% of bus riders had a car available to take the

evokes the strategies and tactics of the Situationists, but rather than revealing a utopian “beach beneath the street,”¹⁷⁷ the artist gestures toward catastrophic losses experienced by long-term residents in the community that were caused by gentrification and the subsequent cessation of rhythms produced by Crenshaw’s urban public culture. Viewing this as one of many rhythmic “breaks” in the constitution of urban space, I contend that Martinez reframes the neighborhood’s rapidly changing landscape within the context of the absurd and enables new modes of thought within a moment of despair. Amidst these conditions, this slippage into the urban environment’s rhythmic “breaks” creates spaces from which alternate temporalities can emerge, allowing for new spatial and political imaginaries to form.

This chapter invokes listening as a dynamic component of improvisational practice to discuss Daniel Martinez’s work. Drawing upon notions of listening that

trip and that on average, they waited an average of ten minutes to board the bus after spending eleven minutes traveling to the stop. Compared to train riders, 44% of whom had a car available, and who, had a slightly shorter combined travel and wait time before boarding the train, these numbers support Martinez’s assertion that Los Angeles bus riders have few resources and options at their disposal. See Matthew Kridler, “Results for Metro’s Biannual Onboard Survey,” *The Source: Transportation News and Views*, May 6, 2014 (<http://thesource.metro.net/2014/05/06/results-for-metros-biannual-onboard-survey/>). Last accessed March 23, 2017. The *L.A. Weekly* cited census reports that reflected these trends as part of an article that explored the stigma of bus ridership. The article also suggested that, despite the development of subway lines throughout the city, commuters are unlikely to adopt public transit unless their homes and places of work are directly connected by the transit routes. See Chris Walker, “Why Don’t White People in L.A. Ride the Bus?,” *L.A. Weekly*, June 23, 2014 (<http://www.laweekly.com/news/why-dont-white-people-in-la-take-the-bus-4802145>). Last accessed March 23, 2017.

¹⁷⁷ The graffiti interventions that Martinez produced reference graffiti produced by the Situationist International during the May 1968 uprisings. Of these pieces, a particularly well-known one read “Sous les pavés, la plage!” which is translated in English as “Beneath the paving stones, the beach!”

“asks that the creator listen and the listener create as inseparable aspects of a dialogic, unpredictable process,” I liken this to the way that Martinez’s rhythm-analytical engagement with Crenshaw’s built environment positioned him as both participant in its creation and attentive observer.¹⁷⁸ This suggests the capacity for new spaces for enacting and articulating agency to be located within the urban landscape that can only be recognized through this dynamic interplay of roles.

In Los Angeles, the bus represents a politically-fraught space that constitutes the symbolic locus of inequity in the city. As a mode of transit, the bus appears as an improbable and impractical mode of transit, but for many low-income residents of Los Angeles, it serves as the only accessible option for commuting to and from work or school. In recent history, the bus has become a site for political and aesthetic activation: during the 1990s, the Bus Riders’ Union formed in an effort to draw attention to the lack of reliable service to low-income ethnic minority communities despite the fact that these populations constituted the majority of bus ridership.¹⁷⁹ As a unique model for organizing, the union created a collective identity based on the politicization of the bus rider from the heterogeneous populations that ride the bus and utilized the often-lengthy bus rides as a venue for sharing information about the union and its efforts with passengers.¹⁸⁰ *Narrenschiff* and the formation of the union suggest a shared recognition of the bus as a site marked by social and economic dispossession. Similarly, *Narrenschiff* also corresponds to a broader history of

¹⁷⁸ Fischlin, et. al., 231.

¹⁷⁹ George Lipsitz, “Learning from Los Angeles: Another One Rides the Bus,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 56 No.3 (September 2004): 512.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 524.

engagements with public buses as a site for artistic intervention.

Adrian Piper and Marisela Norte represent two notable examples of how the bus is used in creative practice through their engagement with the bus as the site for their work. In 1971, as part of the *Catalysis* series, Adrian Piper “dressed very conservatively but stuffed a large red bath towel in the side of [her] mouth until [her] cheeks bulged to about twice their normal size, letting the rest of it hang down [her] front” while riding the bus in New York City.¹⁸¹ (Fig. 15) The performances were envisioned as a series of confrontations directed toward unsuspecting passerby in a range of contexts with the objective of causing her viewers to reconsider their relationship to their surrounding environment.¹⁸² Although both Piper and Martinez’s works are grounded in conceptual art practice, a significant distinction between the two is that Martinez’s presence was not intended to alter the dynamics within the bus. Since *Catalysis IV*, buses have also become sites for displaying public art projects such as Los Angeles Freewaves’ usage of TransitTV screens installed on all Los Angeles City Buses to screen short films as part of an initiative titled “Out the Window”¹⁸³ and the appropriation of the bus’ exterior (which is typically used for

¹⁸¹ Lucy Lippard and Adrian Piper, “Catalysis: An Interview with Adrian Piper,” *The Drama Review* Vol. 16 no.1 (March 1972): 76.

¹⁸² John Bowles, *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 162. For more on Adrian Piper’s work see Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

¹⁸³ “Out the Window” was developed following the 2008 economic recession when advertisers could no longer afford to pay to screen material on the television sets on the buses. In response to these conditions, Anne Bray, artist and director of L.A. Freewaves, collaborated with artists and non-profit artists organizations throughout the city to produce short films to be shown on the televisions. The project, which

advertising) by artists such as David Avalos, Louis Hock, and Elizabeth Sisco, as well as Barbara Kruger.¹⁸⁴ (Figs. 16 and 17) A significant departure from the appropriation of the bus' visual space is the work of East Los Angeles-based author Marisela Norte, for whom the bus functions as both the site *and* source of her creative practice.

As a writer who works across multiple genres but is most well known for her poetry, Norte portrays Los Angeles as a city that is vibrant and violent in equal measures. A lifelong resident of East Los Angeles, Norte relies on the bus for her daily commute and at times has determined the length of her poems by the amount of time it takes to arrive at her destination.¹⁸⁵ The bus has also appeared repeatedly throughout her work in pieces such as "Peeping Tom Tom Girl"¹⁸⁶ and "Best MTA

began in 2011, has, as of 2017, produced over 230 short films that range in topic from poetic reflections on different neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles, to pieces addressing public health, and examinations of workers' rights, sexism, and gender-based violence by activist groups. When the project initially launched, "Out the Window"'s content was the only material shown on the televisions. However, over time, as the economy has recovered and interest in advertising has grown, the films are currently shown once every hour, and access to airtime is partially sponsored by grants and partnerships with other non-profit organizations. See "Out the Window," *L.A. Freewaves* (<http://freewaves.org/out-the-window/>) Last accessed March 23, 2017.

¹⁸⁴ In 1989, Avalos, Hock, and Sisco installed *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation* on San Diego buses. The work was notable for the controversy it created due to its critique of the city's reliance on the labor of undocumented immigrants at a time when politicians and local media engaged in inflammatory anti-immigrant rhetoric. See Cylena Simonds, "Public Audit: An Interview with Elizabeth Sisco, Louis Hock, and David Avalos," *Afterimage* Vol. 22 (Summer 1994): 8-11.

¹⁸⁵ Michelle Habbell-Pallan, *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 53 and 60.

¹⁸⁶ Marisela Norte, *Peeping Tom Tom Girl* (El Cajon, CA: Sunbelt Publications, 2008). For a discussion of Norte's use of the bus in an earlier published version of the poem, see Habbell-Pallan.

Bus Line Number 18, yes, let's take a trip down Whittier Boulevard"¹⁸⁷ and in 2011, she produced a series of "site-specific"¹⁸⁸ poems that would flash on the bus' LED screens at five intersections that marked her daily commute.¹⁸⁹ Like Martinez, Norte was briefly affiliated with the artist collective Asco during the 1980s. Although Asco's expansive creative production spanned multiple mediums, a recurring concern throughout their practice was a direct engagement with Los Angeles' built environment, which is apparent in Norte's poems produced for "Out the Window" and *Narrenschiff*. Similarly, the projects both involve conceptual mapping of their creators' terrains, albeit in distinct ways. Whereas Norte's poetry documents her travels through the symbolic borderlands of Los Angeles, Martinez's bus rides invoked the format of a *dérive* by which the disorientation and loss of control that occurs when traveling by bus served as the catalyst for a detailed examination of Crenshaw. Moreover, as George Lipsitz writes, "Norte recognizes the bus as simultaneously a site of containment *and* connection, of incarceration *and* affiliation, of solitude *and* sociality."¹⁹⁰ For Martinez, the public bus in Los Angeles is

¹⁸⁷ Marisela Norte, "Best MTA Bus Line: The Number 18, yes, let's take a trip down Whittier Boulevard," *American Quarterly* Vol. 56 No. 3 (2004): 506-510.

¹⁸⁸ "Site-Specific Poems by Marisela Norte," *Out the Window*. <http://out-the-window.org/blog/site-specific-poems-by-marisela-norte/>. Last accessed February 25, 2017.

¹⁸⁹ The poems were displayed at the following intersections: Whittier and Atlantic Boulevard; Whittier Boulevard and Indiana Street; Broadway and 5th Street; Wilshire Boulevard and Western Avenue; Wilshire Boulevard and Fairfax Avenue. Notably, the poems were first displayed in East Los Angeles, and concluded in Mid-Wilshire. Damien Newton, "Bringing Poetry to Transit TV," *Streetsblog LA*, December 1, 2011. <http://la.streetsblog.org/2011/12/01/bringing-poetry-to-transit-tv/> Last accessed February 25, 2017.

¹⁹⁰ Lipsitz, 512.

characterized by its containment of the city's dispossessed populations. Unlike Piper and Norte, there is no element of Martinez's bus rides that he explicitly represents within *Narrenschiiff*. Rather, the bus functions as the site (and literally the *vehicle*) by which he analyzed the rhythmic constitution of Crenshaw as an urban site.

In *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, Henri Lefebvre advocated for the close study and contemplation of rhythm within urban spaces as a means for gaining a deeper understanding of the operations of everyday life. He writes, "The everyday is simultaneously the site of, the theatre for and what is at stake in a conflict between great, indestructible rhythms and the processes imposed by the socio-economic organization of production, consumption, circulation, and habitat. The analysis of everyday life shows how and why social time is itself a social product. Like all products, like space, time divides and splits itself into use and use-value on the one hand, and exchange and exchange-value on the other. On the one hand it is sold and on the other it is lived."¹⁹¹ In this, Lefebvre suggests the tempos and spaces in which life ordinarily takes place as a meaningful site for understanding and intervening in the institutional structures that constitute it. Although the bus rides that Martinez took resemble in concept the Situationists' notion of the *dérive*, their execution and the manner in which the artist articulated this experience through artwork more closely resembles a rhythmanalysis of Crenshaw's changing landscape. If the photographs documenting textual interventions and the paintings that Martinez created can be understood as glimpses into what he witnessed during his bus rides,

¹⁹¹ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore, Trans. (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 74.

the recurring themes of death, decay, and apocalypse indicate a preoccupation with these subjects as they are manifested within Crenshaw. This shift in consciousness corresponds to Lefebvre's reading of time under capitalism. He writes, "Capital has something more than maliciousness, malignancy, and malevolence about it. The wills, the wishes, of the property owners are not there for nothing: they execute. Through them, the death-dealing character of capital is accomplished, without there being either full consciousness or a clear intuition of it. It kills nature. It kills the town, turning itself back against its own bases. It kills artistic creation, creative capacity. It goes as far as threatening the last resource: nature, the fatherland, roots. It delocalizes humans."¹⁹²

Martinez subtly captures this impending desolation in a series of photographs titled *Field Notes from South Los Angeles* which portray Martinez's graffiti interventions alongside depictions of the streetscape in Crenshaw. His images of the streetscape include a store that saved itself from closure by installing a banner critiquing the economic downturn, the complex and contradictory layering of spiritual references on a liquor store's marquee, and an image of a temple for Ethiopian practitioners of Judaism with pro-Palestinian signage on the facade. (Figs. 18-20) By producing these images, Martinez notably considers the work as documenting traces of a changing landscape in the vein of Eugene Atget and Bernd and Hilla Becher, but also views the work as a visual index of what public intervention entails. On the differences within the set of photographs, he commented: "This is the same operation.

¹⁹² Ibid., 53.

It just doesn't look like it. There are spaces that have been affected by me and spaces that have not been affected by me. There is a space between that which is and that which has become. In other words, the highlight is on the transitional....In LA, this existed because these people publicly made a statement. This business was going out of business and look what they did. This is a public intervention on someone else's part. The question of public intervention becomes very interesting then."¹⁹³ However, despite the promise of these public interventions, Martinez also pointed out that many of the locations in the photographs no longer exist.¹⁹⁴

The complex relationship between loss and lamentation carries through in the photographs documenting Martinez's evocative phrases that have been graffitied onto building facades. Written in tall letters and lacking punctuation, the phrases resemble excerpts from a larger, polyvocal stream of consciousness. In one, the words "I am clear in my mind but my soul has gone mad" are inscribed on the wall of Mr. T's Meat Market. (Fig. 21) The building's facade is a smoothly-textured concrete, with subtle vertical gradations in its gray coloration that make it appear as if it has been freshly-scrubbed. Signage for the market hovers in the top third of the facade, creating an orderly parallel to the curb that has been painted as a "no parking zone" below it. Aside from the sign and Martinez's text, the facade's uniform surface is disrupted by a small rectangle of beige paint and a larger identically-colored band upon which Martinez's text has been written. The blocky composition of these areas indicate a previous attempt at graffiti removal, an irony that is gestured at by both

¹⁹³Daniel Martinez interview, January 30, 2017.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

Martinez's placement of his text as well as a small tag that has been signed onto the curb in white paint.

The building appears to represent the “impenetrable” surface of the street: windowless, closed, stretching endlessly. Several horizontal bands striate the composition of the photograph, extending this feeling of limitless horizontality. Above the warehouse's roof, a set of electrical wires run across a sky so lightly-colored that it appears blank. Beneath it, the warehouse facade is so vast that it reaches beyond the edges of the photograph. Its gray monotony is echoed by the sidewalk beneath it and the asphalt tones of the road stretch across the foreground. Within these monochrome bands, there are few disruptions, such as the red letters constituting the warehouse sign, the red-painted curb, the yellow band dividing the road, and a single white dash to indicate the existence of two lanes. The business has been in existence since 1998 and is still operational as a wholesale butcher. The utilitarian nature of the space indicates an emphasis on functionality and affordability, rather than an “artisanal” consumer experience. On the left side of the image, a payphone rests against the corner of the building, and beneath the sidewalk, discarded paper cups are visible in a gutter, as if to imply impending obsolescence.

The windowless facade, coupled with the vacant sidewalk in front of the building gives the image a feeling of stasis—the only signs of life in the image are two trees on the right edge of the photograph that have been planted within a segment of the sidewalk. A modest tree with branches hangs over a compact plant bearing wide palm fronds below it. Their placement within the frame speaks to their

constriction—an implication that the space allotted to them within this concrete expanse is insufficient—and the presence of the fronds brings to mind the palm tree’s impending extinction despite its iconic status among Los Angeles flora.¹⁹⁵ Similarly, the plants appear to represent disparate climates, implying that both cannot be adequately cultivated within the same environment. And yet—the two plants appear to persist within this landscape. Ultimately, their root systems will expand beyond their modest enclosure and in turn begin to transform the landscape by disrupting the concrete.

The words echo Martinez’s slippage into a liminal state, as the artist commented on how deeply levels of precarity witnessed on the bus affected him.¹⁹⁶ In Los Angeles, the lack of social services and public resources available in relation to the size of the populations in need typically results in few sites within which the dispossessed can reside. Within the city, the bus ultimately becomes a site of containment and encounter, and it is this element of containment that Martinez references through the title *Ship of Fools*. The split between the intellect and soul, and the loss of ‘rationality’ that occurs on an instinctive level is underscored by a recognition of the logic that governs this internal rebellion. Martinez’s text paintings and photographs function as a lamentation of the ongoing and impending losses within Crenshaw’s social landscape that are enabled by the shifting control of urban space from governmental bodies to privately-controlled civic organizations.

¹⁹⁵ Warren Tenechtin, “The Tree Huggers Landscape,” in *The Infrastructural City: Networked Ecologies in Los Angeles*, Kazys Varnelis (Barcelona: Actar, 2008), 134-5.

¹⁹⁶ Carson, 15.

The ways that the expanded privatization of public spaces has limited the range of expression possible within them echoes Lefebvre's critique of capitalism's lethal effect on artistic creation and creative capacity. One way that this occurs is through the production of ambiguously-designated public sites within neighborhoods undergoing improvements in anticipation of gentrification. Many scholars have pointed out that shopping malls have become a particularly visible example of this phenomenon: as sites that are privately-owned, yet publicly-accessible, the mall becomes a site in which the individuals' rights are obscured and the right to access the space is subject to the owner's right to refuse service.¹⁹⁷ Within urban areas that seek to encourage the growth and use of commercial thoroughfares but face the limitations posed by inadequate civic resources to address crime, outdated and broken public design elements, and the cleanliness of the street, Business Improvement Districts have become an increasingly popular mechanism by which to expand the range of services provided within urban sites by forming "...a private organization of commercial property owners that carries out public functions of financing, maintaining, and governing public space."¹⁹⁸

In Crenshaw, the Greater Leimert Park Village/Crenshaw Corridor Property Business Improvement District (GLPVCC) was established in 2003 and was renewed

¹⁹⁷ See Setha Low and Neil Smith eds., *The Politics of Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2006). See also Arlene Dávila, *Culture Works: Space, Value, and Mobility Across the Neoliberal Americas* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012) for a discussion of malls as a politicized space in Puerto Rico.

¹⁹⁸ Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2009), 127.

for an extended term in 2014.¹⁹⁹ During this time, the GLPVCC sought to “[improve] the economic and environmental vitality by increasing building occupancy and lease rates, encouraging new business development, and encouraging commerce.”²⁰⁰ The activities of the GLPVCC that supported these changes primarily take place through self-described “Clean, Safe, and Beautiful Programs.”²⁰¹ These programs are comprised of expansions of city services such as landscape maintenance, weed abatement, and trash collection. However, the programs also include tasks such as “sidewalk cleaning, graffiti removal, ‘special collections,’” and “monitoring of under construction or vacant parcels” that shift the balance of power over who has the right to the street to the discretion of organizations serving the interests of private business owners who wish to improve the value of their property.²⁰² While the descriptions of some tasks, such as “sidewalk maintenance” appear to be an extension of “landscaping,” the description also included “uniformed, radio equipped personnel [to] sweep litter, debris, and refuse” and enables “District personnel [to] pressure

¹⁹⁹ “About Us,” *Greater Leimert Park Village Crenshaw Corridor Business Improvement District*. Last accessed January 16, 2017.

<http://www.villagecorridorbid.org/about-glpvcc-bid/>

²⁰⁰ Urban Place Consulting Group, “Greater Leimert Park Village/Crenshaw Corridor Business Improvement District Management District Plan,” City Clerk for the City of Los Angeles, May 2014, 3. http://clkrep.lacity.org/onlinedocs/2013/13-0603_misc_06-04-14.pdf Last accessed January 16, 2017.

²⁰¹ According to the 2014 “Management District Plan” for the GLPVCC, the “Clean, Safe, and Beautiful” programs constituted 66% of the allocated budget for the GLPVCC. The remainder of the budget was allocated toward marketing (18%) and Administration/Reserve/City Fees (16%). The marketing component of the program primarily refers to website maintenance and the quarterly publication of a newsletter providing information on the GLPVCC and its members’ activities, whereas the “Administration/Reserve/City Fees) item line comprised administrative and accounting costs. *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

wash sidewalks.”²⁰³ The introduction of uniformed personnel for this task also functions as an informal security force that works in concert with “special collections” to monitor and remove unsanctioned food vendors and homeless populations. The domain of “special collections” is described as privately-owned trucks “...called to dispose of illegal food vendors’ inventory” that are “also dispatched to collect shopping carts and large, bulky items illegally dumped in the district.”²⁰⁴ The vague descriptions of what materials can be collected gestures to two immediate consequences of the “Clean, Safe, and Beautiful Program.” First, the program targets the visible presence of homeless people within the BID’s boundaries and seeks to remove them. Second, the use of special collections to dump carts and bulky items thus puts homeless people at risk of losing their belongings or makeshift shelter. This threat, and by extension, the risk inherent in staying within the BID’s boundaries forces homeless populations to relocate elsewhere. The loss of belongings, such as warm or otherwise protective clothing, medications, food, water, hygienic products, or material for shelter puts the homeless individual at risk of illness and potential death. Similarly, the use of private security to monitor sites that are vacant or under construction ensures that the homeless have no places of refuge within the BID—and eliminates the possibility for vacant sites to be used in other capacities as shelter by the dispossessed.

Although the “Clean, Safe, and Beautiful” programs appear to target Crenshaw’s homeless population, the initiative’s discouragement of unlicensed food

²⁰³ Ibid..

²⁰⁴ Ibid..

vendors further narrows the range of permissible activities within the street. In many cases, selling food in this manner enables undocumented immigrants to generate income without the paperwork often needed to obtain formal employment. Their economic resources frequently do not enable them to pay the fees associated with gaining a license, and their active expulsion from the street encourages their replacement by highly-polished vendors that sell “street food” from refurbished food trucks at comparatively high prices. Although subtle and likely to be seen as an aesthetic improvement, these changes enact a dramatic shift to the rhythms of the street (i.e. the patterns of sleep and wake by the homeless, the route of the food vendor along streets and into nightlife establishments, etc). While, in some cases, the BID eliminates some of the perceived risk inherent in occupying an urban space, this elimination comes at the cost of the production of a consumer monoculture in which the acceptable perceived uses of urban space are determined by their utility to private interests. As Lefebvre writes: “Capital kills social richness. It produces *private* riches, just as it pushes the *private* individual to the fore, despite it being a public monster. It increases political struggle to the extent that states and state-apparatuses bow down to it.”²⁰⁵ By substantially expanding the services offered by civic institutions, private interests represented by a BID ultimately gain the power to determine who can use public urban space. This ultimately weakens the civic institution’s capacity to regain control over that space.²⁰⁶

While other components of the “Clean, Safe, and Beautiful” programs have

²⁰⁵ Lefebvre, 54.

²⁰⁶ Zukin, 144.

clear implications for marginalized populations, the GLPVCC’s anti-graffiti initiative suggests a restrictive definition of art’s role within the urban landscape. The lack of description over what constitutes ‘graffiti’ leaves the category open to interpretation—spanning gang-related tagging to forms of visual activism such as murals and street posters. The “zero tolerance policy,” while unspecified beyond descriptions of removal efforts, implies the use of legal recourse to prosecute graffiti artists. The “zero tolerance” graffiti policy thus appears to endorse an exclusionary notion of what constitutes art—primarily in favor of those forms that rely on a model of art as a commodity to be consumed. The embrace of this model suggests that in Crenshaw, art is not only seen as a private commodity, but a commodity that operates in the interests of privatization, despite the number of community-oriented cultural organizations amongst the BID’s constituent affiliates. The contradiction inherent in this commitment becomes apparent when examining the composition of the businesses listed within the GLPVCC in relation to the membership of its board of directors.

Although the businesses listed as being affiliated with the GLPVCC are predominantly cultural institutions such as theatres, performance venues, community arts centers, galleries, and bookstores, the membership of the GLPVCC’s board of directors is predominantly comprised of real estate developers, along with Ben Caldwell, a community-based artist, Allen DiCastro, a community activist and interim director of Art + Practice with a background in banking, and Michael L. Guidry, a physician. The discrepancy between the membership of the board and the

businesses represented within the BID is relevant because a significant focus of the BID is the promotion of Leimert Park Village and Crenshaw as inviting locations to experience culture and the arts. What the tasks of the “Clean, Safe, and Beautiful” programs make clear is that in this context, the arts are not being used to advance social or political equality, despite the prominent inclusion of the Art + Practice complex within the BID. Despite its stated commitment to socially-engaged art practice and its partnership to assist foster children, the campus’ inclusion within the jurisdiction of the BID position it as a benefactor of the exclusionary practices put forth by the ongoing “Clean, Safe, and Beautiful” programs. Moreover, because the program plan does not address in clear or specific language what mechanisms are put in place to make the designated areas safer, one can assume that this function is embedded within the tasks aimed to clean and beautify these sites.

Within the context of Art + Practice, the model of socially-engaged art shifts to combine the experience of viewing art in the same site as one that provides social services, in effect further privatizing cultural space and functions provided by governmental bodies. The privatization of culture continued with the proposed²⁰⁷ move of Eso Won Bookstore into the complex from its original location on Degnan Boulevard. The bookstore, a historic landmark within Leimert Park, would not only

²⁰⁷ Although the rationale behind the decision to remain its in original location has not been discussed publicly, it is relevant to note that the move was anticipated throughout the site’s planning before the store’s owners opted not to relocate to the Art + Practice complex. Caroline A. Miranda, “Eso Won Books Isn’t Joining Mark Bradford’s Art + Practice, But There’s A New Gallery and New Partnerships,” *The Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-fred-eversley-art-practice-20161108-story.html>. Last accessed February 27, 2017.

have experienced a displacement, but also would have undergone a shift in terms of its community of users through its removal from the street to its relocation within the complex. Although the complex can be said to benefit the community by creating an infrastructure to support the arts, this infrastructure also relies on the removal of their function as democratic and publicly accessible sites. The facades and experiences that gentrification makes possible are compelling and gratifying to the users who can access them, and it is often the absence of disruptive or otherwise unpleasant experiences that go unnoticed. However, this absence is in itself a conflict, as the landscape ultimately produces and ensures the loss of difference.

It is possible to consider the loss of a diverse urban community as a shift in the rhythms of the street. When urban spaces are no longer hospitable to modes of occupying them that are not circumscribed by the behavioral patterns of consumption, the rhythm of the street's reliance on difference becomes apparent by virtue of its absence. Lefebvre's comments on the necessity of difference to rhythm can be read as a meditation on the necessary presence of *social* and *economic* difference to urban rhythms:

For there to be rhythm, there must be repetition in a movement, but not just any repetition. The monotonous return of the same, self-identical, noise no more forms a rhythm than does some moving object on its trajectory, for example a falling stone; though our ears and without doubt our brains tend to introduce a rhythm into every repetition, even completely linear ones. For there to be rhythm, strong times and weak times, which return in accordance with a rule or law—long and short times, recurring in a recognisable way, stops, silences, blanks, resumptions and intervals in accordance with regularity, must appear in a movement. Rhythm therefore brings with it a differentiated time, a qualified duration. The same can be said of repetitions, ruptures, and

resumptions.”²⁰⁸

Lefebvre implies that rhythm is as defined by the disruption of patterns as it is by their repetition. The rhythmic constitution of an urban space thus inherently relies on the presence of multiple forms of difference. These “differentiated times” are represented by populations whose presence contradicts the logic underlying the production of social order—such as street vendors and the homeless. Although an ethnically-diverse community is still present in Crenshaw, the removal of economically-dispossessed populations signals a shift toward increased economic exclusion, which will inevitably lead to the displacement of the middle-class black community that has historically constituted Crenshaw.²⁰⁹ Furthermore, it is the encounter with these differentiated times that undermines the “monotonous return of the same” endorsed by the production of privatized public sites. These collisions and disruptions become sites for conceptualizing and understanding other ways of existing within the city and the structures that sustain dramatic inequities. In the context of *Narrenschiiff*, the bus became this site of encounter for Martinez. Blurring the boundary between habit and ritual, Martinez’s bus rides uniquely situated him as

²⁰⁸ Lefebvre, 78.

²⁰⁹ The consequence of these shifts may resemble the changes that have taken place in Washington D.C.’s U-Street corridor that Brandi Thompson Summers discussed in a paper presented at the 2016 American Studies Association Annual Meeting. A historically-black community that has recently been transformed by gentrification, promotional images of the neighborhood celebrate its diverse character, but the businesses that have recently opened along a main thoroughfare primarily cater to white patrons. Similarly, Summers has noted that the spaces of public transit in the neighborhood constitute its most visibly “diverse” sites. Brandi Thompson Summers, “The Changing Face of a Black Place: Spatializing Nostalgia and Cultural Tourism,” American Studies Association Annual Meeting, November 19, 2016, Denver, Colorado.

an observer of the rhythms that constitute public transit and the shifting patterns of urban life on the street that he observed from the bus.

However, in discussing the bus as the venue through which Martinez became embedded within the rhythmic landscape of Crenshaw, it is necessary to contend with the bus as a mobile site, and the spatial context within which rhythm is enacted.

Moten contends that space and time are inextricably bound within rhythm:

The spatio-temporal constitution of ritual raises ambiguities as well. On the one hand ritual is durative. The structure and dance of its positions is ongoing, part of an annulus that seems unopposed to the uninterrupted process of the everyday against which it would be defined. But what of the punctuality of the endlessly/daily repeated event. This punctuality is, too, of ritual, and ritual thus lends punctuality the aura of ceremony: the *special* occasion. There is, then, a temporal contradiction in the opposition of ritual and nonritual, one that activates in both terms a juxtaposition that is manifest as the traumatic/celebratory and obsessional rhythmic breakage of the everyday and that implies a directionality of time—a spatio-temporal constitution—that transforms rhythm into a double determination: of position or movement, on the one hand, and syntagmic order on the other.²¹⁰

When Moten discusses the “spatio-temporal constitution” of rhythm, he suggests that rhythm not only happens in time, but that it simultaneously occurs in space as well. In considering Martinez’s bus rides as an engagement with urban rhythm, it is necessary to address the mobile context of the bus not only as its own rhythmic space, but as a site that in turn situates Martinez within a complex network of urban rhythms. By riding the bus for ten hours at a time, Martinez amplified what would normally be part of a commute or a set of errands to an activity that stretched beyond an average workday. In doing so, he developed a familiarity with the rhythms enclosed within the space of the bus as well as an awareness of the rhythmic intervals on the street

²¹⁰ Moten, 49.

that coincided with the movements of the bus from one stop to the next. Tied to this familiarity, however, is an attention to the absence of the return of certain rhythms over a period of time, an indication of changes to the conditions of life within Crenshaw. However, it is only through Martinez's recurring, durational bus rides that the ordinary space of the bus could become defamiliarized enough to begin tracing the network of rhythms surrounding it. This process, and the subsequent effects of the bus rides can be understood as reminiscent of a *dérive*.

According to Guy Debord, "In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there."²¹¹ Taking the form of bus rides, Martinez's *dérives* took on the quality of recurring rituals, in that for three years, he boarded a bus that stopped near his home and rode it for ten hours. Per Debord, the *dérive*'s objective can move between studying "a terrain or to emotionally disorient oneself. It should not be forgotten that these two aspects of *dérives* overlap in so many ways that it is impossible to isolate one of them in a pure state." Based on Martinez's description of this time period, the effects of his excursions resembled those of the *dérive* due to the emotional disorientation that he experienced through the close study of Crenshaw's landscape. However, the weekly frequency of Martinez's rides, their ten-hour duration, and the multiple-year period over which they took place distance the bus rides from the extra-ordinary quality of the *dérive*. To some extent,

²¹¹ Guy Debord, "Theory of the *Dérive*," in *Situationist International Anthology*, Ken Knabb, ed. and trans. (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006).

the novel effects of the *dérive* become quotidian as the movement it entails becomes absorbed into routine. Similarly, as Martinez's rhythmic movement of his everyday routines became disrupted by his weekly excursions, he merges with new rhythmic strains within the city. And yet, Martinez never becomes fully acclimated or re-acclimated into either as a consequence of inhabiting and moving between multiple spatio-temporal urban rhythms. Residing within the space between rhythms echoes Martinez's position as both participant and observer within the space of the bus.

Martinez's positionality and the form of the bus ride situates Martinez at the intersection between two sites for experiencing and witnessing the city's rhythms: "He who walks down the street, over there, is immersed in the multiplicity of noises, murmurs, rhythms (including those of the body, but does he pay attention, except at the moment of crossing the street, when he has to calculate roughly the number of his steps?). By contrast, from the window, the noises distinguish themselves, the flows separate out, rhythms respond to one another."²¹² Rather than walking down the street, Martinez is immersed within the soundscape of the titular "Ship of Fools" upon which he rides, but does so while observing a constantly-shifting set of rhythmic vignettes from the window of the bus. Although in motion, its moments of pause (at stops, in traffic) enable Martinez glimpses into the rhythms embedded within a range of geographic sites in Crenshaw (and beyond) and the repetition of routes enabled him to identify their particular strains, distinguish their patterns of regularity (or irregularity), but also to notice their cessation. This cessation is a consequence of

²¹² Lefebvre, 28.

policies intended to “beautify” the street by removing the economically dispossessed.

The development of laws targeting homeless and poor populations relies on a logic that understands that inequality is especially troubling when it is visible or otherwise unavoidable. This logic operates on the same principle as the “Ship of Fools,” a site of social internment which contains the ‘mad’ or otherwise ‘criminal’ within a structure that renders them visible and discernible only to each other. That the ship is constantly in motion prevents their presence from becoming a recognizable fixture within the landscape. As a result, in *Narrenschiff*, the missing people, as in the “Ship of Fools” take on an almost spectral presence that recalls Fred Moten’s discussion of temporal breaks and spectrality. What Martinez achieves through his text inscriptions is a breaking of time that engenders a new relationship to Crenshaw’s urban landscape. As Moten writes, “The rhythm of in/visibility is cut time: phantasmic interruptions and fascinations. Stories are propelled by this formation of inhabitable temporal breaks; they are driven by the time they inhabit, violently reproducing, iconizing, improvising themselves.”²¹³ Throughout *Field Notes from South Los Angeles*, Martinez documents streetscapes within Crenshaw that are strikingly absent of humans. The framing of the image presents the viewer with an excerpt of the urban landscape that appears at once familiar and strange. The photograph itself, as a static image, offers the viewer a temporal break within the landscape. In fact, nothing appears to be in motion in these images, creating an impression of motionlessness that is disrupted by the appearance of Martinez’s text

²¹³ Moten, 72.

inscriptions. The inscriptions display phrases such as “A civil war is coming, be sure you’re on the right side”; “Death comes to us all”; “Before my time is done I will look on your corpse and smile”; “The casualties of a diseased society”; “I absolutely believe in god and I hate the fucker”; and “Commit acts of random kindness.” The inscriptions appear as if they are voicing an omniscient presence, giving them a spectral, almost haunting quality within the landscape.

Their presence along empty streets at once laments the displacement of the homeless and other economically-precarious populations while suggesting imminent upheavals and conflict on a larger scale. The text inscriptions ultimately produce a visual contradiction that invokes the displaced even as they are invisible, forming what Moten refers to as a “phantasmic interruption.” The application of the text to the surface of the wall in turn produces a disruption of the processes enacted by the “Clean, Safe, and Beautiful” program that systematically removes people from public spaces.

In producing the textual interventions, Martinez drew upon techniques that have long been used by graffiti writers—namely, he executed the work at night and documented it several hours later during the brief window between its execution and erasure. Although in discussing these pieces, Martinez notes the significance of graffiti as a mode of urban visual culture with a long history in Crenshaw²¹⁴, the work does not draw upon the motifs typically associated with Los Angeles graffiti, such as the production of elaborate lettering that blurs the boundary between image and text

²¹⁴ Daniel Martinez interview, January 30, 2017.

or the production of individual, scripted tags produced on a small scale.²¹⁵ (Fig. 22) It is relevant to note that within the context of Chicana art in Los Angeles, graffiti occupied a complex position, as the use of aerosols was initially discouraged by mural artists due to the negative connotations of gang affiliation and criminality that accompanied graffiti production.²¹⁶ However, some artists, such as Chaz Bojórquez, successfully translated their use of graffiti aesthetics between public contexts, gallery spaces, and commercial production.²¹⁷ Similarly, in 1972 *Spraypaint LACMA* was a conceptual intervention by Asco in which Harry Gamboa Jr, Willie Herrón, and Gronk tagged the museum's façade as a means of challenging a museum employee's statement that dismissed Chicana art production as vandalism.²¹⁸ (Fig. 23) Although these instances represent moments where graffiti became legible within a fine arts

²¹⁵ For more on this topic see Steve Grody, *Graffiti L.A.: Street Styles and Art* (New York: Abrams, 2006); Jerry and Sally Romotsky, "L.A. Human Scale: street art of Los Angeles," *Journal of Popular Culture* 10, no. 3 (Winter 1976): 665-661; Jerry and Sally Romotsky, "Placas and Murals," *Arts in Society* Vol.2 No.2 (Summer-Fall 1974): 286-299; Marcos Sánchez-Tranquilino, "Space, Power, and Youth Culture: Mexican American Graffiti and Chicano murals in East Los Angeles," in *Looking High and Low: Art and Cultural Identity*, ed. Brenda Jo Bright and Liza Blackwell (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995), 55-88.

²¹⁶ Guisela LaTorre, *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 102.

²¹⁷ Charles "Chaz" Bojórquez, interview with Karen Davalos, September 25, 27, and 28, and October 2, 2007, Los Angeles, California. CSRC Oral Histories Series, no. 5. Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2013.

²¹⁸ C. Ondine Chavoya, "Internal Exiles: The Interventionist Public and Performance Art of Asco," in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 193-4; Harry Gamboa Jr., "In the City of Angels, Chameleons, and Phantoms: Asco, A Case Study of Chicano Art in Urban Tones (or Asco Was a Four-Member Word), in *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985*, eds. Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano (Los Angeles: University of California Wight Art Gallery, 1991), 125.

context for a specific set of artists, it cannot fully account for the multiplicity of interventions that take place within everyday contexts and by taggers who are only known locally. Similarly, it is important to note that since the 1970s, Los Angeles graffiti prevention laws have undergone repeated cycles of intensification in which graffiti is more harshly penalized in conjunction with efforts to control gang activity.²¹⁹ In laying out this abbreviated history, it is important to clarify that although this mode of visual production is a prominent element of the built environment within which Martinez intervened, it is not an aesthetic history within which he aligns himself. This is apparent in the manner Martinez executed his interventions, which more closely resembles graffiti produced by the Situationists during the May 1968 uprisings, ultimately creating what Moten refers to as an “inhabitable temporal break.” (Fig. 24)

²¹⁹ In a study of the effects of a 2011 injunction that targeting members of the MTA tagging crew in Los Angeles, Kelly P. Welch discusses the use of gang injunctions as a mode of criminalizing graffiti in Los Angeles, which the author cites as in use by city police as early as the 1980s. It is also relevant to note that in this piece, the author indicates an ambiguity over the classification of criminal gang affiliation and affiliation with a tagging crew. See Kelly P. Welch, “Graffiti and the Constitution, A First Amendment Analysis of the Los Angeles Tagging Crew Injunction,” *Southern California Law Review* Vol. 85, No. 1 (2011): 205-245. The use of these injunctions corresponded to citywide crime prevention efforts that became known as “Operation Hammer,” which, while officially adopted by that name in 1987, were undertaken in anticipation of the 1984 Olympic Games. The range of police activities under this initiative targeted Mexican-American and African-American communities in East and South Los Angeles, creating conditions of military occupation within these neighborhoods and promoting gang sweeps that culminated in a dramatic increase in incidents of police brutality and arrests that disproportionately impacted these populations. For more on “Operation Hammer,” see Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

Written in large script and left unsigned, the texts do not seek to claim an individual's ownership of the streetscape in the same manner that a tag or *placa* might. Martinez's pieces and those produced by the Situationists share an implied lack of "aesthetic" in the execution of the text, which ultimately resembles rushed and informal handwriting that has been produced at a large scale. However, in both cases, the manner in which the graffiti was documented had an overarching logic. In the case of the SI, the photographs appear to be taken with the intention of evoking the vantage point of their writer, which does not allow for environmental context to be included. Martinez situates the text within its immediate surroundings by taking the photographs in the middle of the street, as if from a car or bus.

Despite these visual differences, Martinez shares some elements of the Situationists' perspective regarding the use and significance of graffiti. In her discussion of Situationist graffiti, Frances Stracey calls attention to its eventual destruction as a meaningful aspect of these works:

Far from inert or fixed, street graffiti interacts precariously with the already dirtied and constantly changing conditions of its everyday supports, and like the inconstant form of a palimpsest, it can be effaced or re-inscribed. It is a potentially open-ended and infinitely mutable strategy to reclaim the streets from below, but also a text on the point of ruination. But graffiti's propensity to fall into ruin was itself a positive factor in terms of the Situationists' self-appointed task—to build on the ruins of the spectacle. Damage was a sign of, and site for, the possibility of reconstruction, proof that no situation is eternally given or fixed, but, on the contrary, historically contingent, impermanent, fallible and mutable.²²⁰

²²⁰ Frances Stracey, *Constructed Situations: A New History of the Situationist International* (London, U.K. and Chicago: Pluto Press, 2014), 77.

Just as the Situationists embraced graffiti's intrinsic ties to ruin, Martinez's pieces are visibly situated within the ongoing cycles of creation and destruction within the South Los Angeles landscape. Many of the photographs reveal his pieces super-imposed over the abstracted outlines of graffiti removal efforts. Martinez's text not only points to the inherent conflict between graffiti writers and municipal efforts to minimize their presence, but gestures toward his own work as representing a layer of a much larger and complex palimpsest. Although the documentation of the piece assures its (partial) survival, the visible presence of the erased graffiti not only points to the achievement of a particular kind of ruin, but also Martinez's role in revealing the perpetual mutability of the landscape.

This perpetual mutability relies on the production of "inhabitable temporal breaks" that come into being through improvisation, and as Moten infers, enable its reproduction as well. These qualities of inhabitability and interruption within invisibility draw upon the Situationists' notion of the "constructed situation," an ephemeral opening that allows for new spatial and social relations to be enacted. Constructed situations are described as having a "transient, momentary temporality"²²¹ that exists only as a "lived experience, a living nexus."²²² This notion of a constructed situation offers a framework for understanding the spatial and social relations enacted through Martinez's text inscriptions. The moment in which Martinez created the text inscriptions is reminiscent of a constructed situation. As a momentary intervention, Martinez manifests a new set of social and spatial relations

²²¹ Ibid., 9.

²²² Ibid., 14.

that contradict the BID's demarcation of public space. However, the graffiti carries a secondary set of implications that respond directly to the use of infrastructural forms to eliminate the traces of economic and ethnic difference from within the urban landscape.

In considering the implications of Martinez's textual inscriptions, Frances Stracey's reading of Situationist International graffiti as enacting a revolutionary subjectivity offers a reference point for considering the ways in which Martinez's pieces converge and consciously diverge from the graffiti produced by the Situationists. While Martinez's work does reference Situationist tactics in many ways, his work ultimately generates a distinct outcome. As Stracey writes, the Situationists sought to produce or liberate a radical subject that they believed had been repressed. The graffiti, and the performative embodiment of the uprising that occurs through its photographic documentation, sought to return a 'repressed radical subjectivity' that represented "all that the spectacle must negate in order to establish itself...error, excess, vandalism, riots, festivals, the irregular."²²³ In *Narrenschiff*, Martinez's graffiti pieces call forth a subject that overwhelmingly speaks in nihilistic tones that reference madness, coming war, and an apocalyptic outlook. The content of the phrases, in conjunction with their articulation through graffiti, appear to share the Situationist graffiti's function of "speaking from the perspective of the censored" that constitute "forms of counter-spectacle that occupy the position of the outlawed and

²²³ Ibid., 86.

marginalized.”²²⁴ In the context of Martinez’s piece, graffiti is linked to outlawed and marginalized bodies that possess a dramatically different set of implications from the “outlaw” status that Debord references. Rather, Martinez’s graffiti, and to a greater extent, the markings which indicate the erasure of previous work, imply a graffiti writer who is raced and criminalized by municipal authorities due to the presumptive connections between the production of graffiti and an affiliation with a gang. Graffiti elimination and prevention efforts disproportionately criminalize young people from poor communities.²²⁵ State laws have also changed to make graffiti more easily punishable as a felony if the damage appears to exceed \$400²²⁶, and citywide graffiti prevention efforts have involved the creation of a surveillance database which tracks taggers and increases the likelihood and severity of their sentence if they are found guilty.²²⁷ It is relevant to note that a felony can have severe consequences for convicted individuals, often making it difficult to find adequate employment and resulting in the loss of voting rights, which inevitably enlarges the scale of individual’s economic and civic disenfranchisement.

Although the work does not explicitly reference this context, the heightened severity of these penalties speaks to an increasing imbalance of power over the built environment—in which individuals are disproportionately penalized for altering its

²²⁴ Ibid., 89.

²²⁵ See Susan Phillips, *Wallbangin’: Graffiti and Gangs in L.A.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) for a detailed study on graffiti’s significance within gang culture in ethnic minority communities.

²²⁶ California Penal Code 594, 2002.

²²⁷ “L.A. Launches Graffiti-Tracking Program Using Smart Phones,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 2011. <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2011/03/la-launches-graffiti-tracking-program-using-smartphones.html> Last accessed January 17, 2017.

surfaces while large corporations—such as Madison Square Garden Corporation—privatize large swaths of public outdoor space through both advertising and the production of entertainment districts.²²⁸ The ultimate consequence of these shifts is the production of seemingly pristine urban sites that appear impenetrable (i.e. the production of the ‘fortress’ in the shape of a shopping mall). However, these sites rely on the production of space that appears inviting to those capable of consuming in appropriate and prescribed manners, but in which the presence of private security forces and surveillance acts as a deterrent to the poor and the dispossessed. Ultimately, this produces a site of containment that eliminates the discomfort of interacting with the dispossessed, which inevitably does not register as an indication of the impending erosion of individual rights in other capacities.

Within this context, graffiti plays a specific role in the disruption of the urban landscape, and Martinez’s particular “anti-aesthetic” distinguishes it from street art or tagging as stylized forms that have been co-opted and compromised in the production of “sanctioned” graffiti for commercial purposes. This series in particular has a distinct appearance from previous works where Martinez utilized the formal language of urban signage as the platform for his work. In 1989, Martinez produced *Don’t Bite the Hand that Feeds You*, a billboard installed at the intersection of Pico Boulevard and Barrington Avenue in Los Angeles. (Fig. 25) The piece displayed two dogs snarling at each other over meat being ladled out by a disembodied arm with the titular text superimposed above it. The dish between the dogs appears at once

²²⁸ Carson, 10.

grotesque and excessive. The piece, which was installed as part of “ArtBulletin,” a program that solicited proposals from artists to be installed on billboards, which was sponsored by Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions and Patrick Media Group. The following year, Martinez was commissioned to create a project for Seattle’s downtown commercial district as part of a city-sponsored public art program. The piece consisted of banners attached to light posts which displayed questions related to class inequality and generated a response from a local business association who claimed that the public’s rights had been violated since their consent had not been obtained before the artist disguised his personal political views as art.²²⁹ (Fig. 26)

Similarly, in *This Isa Nice Neighborhood*, a proposal for a public art project that would coincide with the completion of the Moscone Center in San Francisco, the artist created an arch that displayed text reading “This Isa Nice Neighborhood” in English during the day, and in the evening, displayed the text using neon signs in Spanish and Chinese to face the surrounding Spanish- and Chinese-speaking communities in the Mission District and Chinatown. (Fig. 27) The proposal ultimately garnered substantial public backlash from multiple stakeholders in the project, some of whom found the use of neon signs to invite a garish “Las Vegas” aesthetic to San Francisco, but as Coco Fusco writes, “...no critic openly admitted that the crux of the problem with the art project lay in the artists having presented the

²²⁹ Coco Fusco, “My Kind of Conversation,” in *The Things You See When You Don’t Have a Grenade!* (Santa Monica: Smart Art Press, 1996), 23.

city with a phrase and design that deconstructed the double-speak of urban ‘revitalization.’”²³⁰

That Martinez chose to utilize graffiti in *Field Notes from South Los Angeles* speaks to a compelling departure from his previous work. Whereas Martinez opted to détourn structures that have been used as mechanisms to delimit or demarcate public space, this piece suggests a rejection of these forms. Johana Londoño has written about how the formation of an “Urban Enterprise Zone” (UEZ) in Union City, New Jersey, produced a set of guidelines for local business owners that diminished the visible presence of *Latinidad* within its commercial thoroughfares. This shift toward an “aesthetic consensus” discouraged the use of signage that did not align with the UEZ’s designated palette or typography and discouraged the use of storefronts and sidewalks as semi-public social spaces.²³¹ Most significantly, Londoño notes that in the midst of changes intended to promote economic development, the occasional memorial statue dedicated to Latinx history in Union City anticipates the eventual displacement of the Latinx community through gentrification. These shifts are echoed by Sharon Zukin’s discussion of Mayor Giuliani’s removal of street vendors in Harlem as a precursor to the displacement of black business owners and residents through urban redevelopment policies that made the neighborhood attractive to white

²³⁰ Fusco, 24.

²³¹ Johana Londoño, “The Latinization and Renewal of Union City, New Jersey,” in *Latino Urbanism: The Politics of Planning, Policy, and Redevelopment*, David R. Diaz and Rodolfo D. Torres, eds. (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 58-9.

homeowners during the early 2000s.²³² In both cases, the production of an “aesthetically cohesive” landscape is directly tied to the loss of social space. In *Quality of Life* and *This Isa Nice Neighborhood*, Martinez’s use of municipal signage functioned as a catalyst within sites that sought to minimize or disguise the inequalities that lay under the surface of the street. In Crenshaw, however, the site of *Narrenschiff*, Martinez’s text characterizes the landscape as one that is under siege, and is already an active conflict zone. In using the medium of graffiti, Martinez consciously shifts away from the formal languages that ultimately render the vernacular transformation of urban space into public space within Crenshaw invisible.

Whereas Martinez’s previous work attempted to transform the destructive infrastructures of the contemporary city into sites for provocation, the slices of Crenshaw’s streetscape that he presented in *Field Notes from South Los Angeles* are presented in a deadpan manner—their quiet facades and muted colors of cement and stuccoed surfaces are juxtaposed against the provocative texts inscribed on them.²³³ Similarly, the recurring patches created by graffiti removal efforts superimposed patches of abstract, shapeless forms onto otherwise ‘rational’ surfaces. The text itself takes on the quality of a shriek—invoking a consciousness and a reality that initially appears unlikely, but that becomes increasingly visible to the viewer. It is this rupture within the urban landscape that has the capacity to create an alternative space of reality—in which the voice of the “madman” is no longer contained within the Ship of Fools, but is made visible on the street. Unlike the Situationists’ graffiti that invited

²³² Zukin, 77-79.

²³³ Interview with Daniel Martinez.

viewers to find the beach beneath the paving stones, Martinez suggests that a horrific reality lay just out of sight through his recurring invocations of death and apocalypse.

Restless spirits appear to haunt Martinez's urban landscape. The text-paintings that accompanied the photographs make reference to corpses, cadavers, the reanimated dead, ghosts, and decay. Juli Carson frames the work as the anticipation of "a neoliberal tsunami." She writes, "When a real tsunami hits, the effect is a world crumbling around you, the ground dissolving your feet into an infinite sinkhole. Offering no sense of figure versus ground nor a secure position within linear time and dimensional space, this is the space of death, if not of pure madness. For just as one's world collapses, so does the self. Analogously, in neighborhoods hit by neoliberal tsunamis, the streets are filled with drifting zombies—those who don't know they're dead—or rambling madmen cursing the gods for everything they've lost."²³⁴ In discussing the texts that Martinez writes on the surfaces of the neighborhood, Carson describes them as "a ghost haunting the streets of Crenshaw."²³⁵ These allusions to death and decay suggest that the work is situated within an apocalyptic moment—an inference that is made clear by Martinez's excerpts from an essay examining "the lure of the apocalypse" on Hashima Island, a deserted island off the coast of Nagasaki that was home to a thriving coal industry until 1974.²³⁶ (Fig. 28) It is in this particular moment, however, that Michael Brenson has suggested that Martinez's work finds its

²³⁴ Carson, 12.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

²³⁶ Jonathan Jones, "Hashima Island and the Lure of the Apocalypse," *The Guardian*, July 5, 2013. Last accessed January 16, 2017.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/05/hashima-island-google-street-view>

greatest resonance:

The moment just before extinction may be *the* Martinez moment. Throughout his work, this is the moment when it is clear something dire has happened and disappearance is imminent. In the starkness of the encounter with the end of a body or place, however, what is extraneous falls away, and the potential arises for unanticipated consciousness and communication. Martinez's work argues that the willingness to remain suspended in this moment is now a prerequisite for imagining an alternative to a world so numbed by scripted patterns of acting and thinking that it can do little more than reiterate structures of failure....With the help of erudition, contamination, absurdity, and hilarious and ghoulish laughter, Martinez makes this moment before extinction active, *alive*—a site *outside institutions*, in which reaction can be replaced by response, and the augurs and envoys of death, including obsolescence, can be spoken.²³⁷

Martinez's bus rides constituted a suspension of the moment before extinction that occurred through watching it unfold repeatedly. In this moment that is at once between rhythm and suspended within it, Martinez gestures toward the apocalyptic moment as one in which this unfolding (and the mechanisms that enable it) will finally end. This reach toward oblivion in turn invokes what appears to be absurd as an appropriate response. However, in *Narrenschiff*, it is not *just* the apocalyptic moment that viewers are confronted with, but rather, a coalescence of forces that this moment evokes and generates. It is not merely the capacity to become "suspended" in this moment that enables one to imagine alternatives, but the active slippage into a space between madness and rationality, and reality and the unreal. The work actively locates and coalesces the "breaks" which create an improvisatory space of intellectual and existential free fall and furthermore resituates these tactics within communities that are historically marginalized and dispossessed while refusing to designate these

²³⁷ Michael Brenson, "The Poetics of Insult," in *Daniel Martinez: A Life of Disobedience* (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 14.

tactics as “essential” modes of survival to a specific cultural experience or context. It is not merely that all possibilities have been renewed in the moment that Martinez enacts, but rather, a temporal and spatial manifestation of “the break” that Moten describes. In light of conditions in which economic and political forces coalesce to produce a colossal wave that would appear to overwhelm the individual’s capacity to withstand its force, *Narrenchiff* suggests a slippage into breaks within the urban landscape that have long evaded the rhythms of its production by civic authorities.

A thematic preoccupation with temporality becomes apparent when considering the exhibition of *Field Notes from South Los Angeles* within *Narrenchiff*. In addition to displaying the photographs from *Field Notes from South Los Angeles*, the works were exhibited alongside thirty-seven sixty-inch-tall text paintings that contained fragments of text reminiscent of the graffiti interventions Martinez produced. Placed near the floor of the gallery, at the edge of the text paintings were small polaroid shots of the artist’s excreta marked with indications of time spanning from “Day 1” to “Day 46368.” (Fig. 29) The timeline doesn’t correspond to an overarching logic as it can neither align with the span of Martinez’s life or the timeframe during which the work was created, indicating the presence of rhythms that cannot be determined or named within linear notions of time. At the center of the gallery, Martinez placed an arrangement of withered and dead bonsai plants that had been placed on overturned paint buckets. In discussing the range of work displayed within the exhibition, Martinez remarked that the pieces collectively represent “Multiple systems operating concurrently in support of each other and in

contrast to each other. They are systems that are aiding and challenging each other simultaneously. There is not one system that takes priority over any other system....They are a replica of the infrastructures that we use as social systems and political systems of governance. Its the same multiple systems operating simultaneously that are incongruous.”²³⁸ In this incongruity and the tension that exists between the systems Martinez presents his viewers with multiple temporalities, and by extension, multiple rhythms of emergence and decline become apparent.

If *Field Notes from South Los Angeles* and the withered bonsai trees represent modes of loss that have been realized following a protracted period of decline, the show leaves the viewer at an uncertain precipice. In a comment on the sites represented in the photographs, Martinez stated: “These are geopolitical structures that are already in place. I’m only amplifying them by intervening where I see fit and photographing what exists as I see fit and then mixing them into a kind of semiotic cocktail that is by its nature confusing. I’m not sure that clarity and resolution are the goal. That purposeful confusion and/or sleight of hand, you might say, are equally as useful in creating a kind of dynamic that is historically informed that then catapults what exists here into a much more politically-active space than it would do on its own.”²³⁹ In photographing sites and modes of urban visual culture that are increasingly absent within Crenshaw (and many other cities throughout the United States), Martinez suggests to the viewer losses to urban public culture and life that can be read as having apocalyptic implications for dispossessed communities. In the

²³⁸ Interview with Daniel Martinez.

²³⁹ Ibid.

shadow of these losses, however, is a gesture toward the inevitability of evolution and experimentation as modes of survival in the midst of devastation. This is made tangible in the photograph of the Magic Outlet furniture store, or the temple for Ethiopians who practice Judaism: in sites where despair from rejection and threats to one's survival appear inevitable, new possibilities emerge that Martinez refers to as "gestures of consequence" in which individuals "put everything on the line for the possibility that things could be re-examined."²⁴⁰ Likening this to the May 1968 uprisings, he describes it as "the passage of a brief moment in time" suggesting that "maybe that's all that it was, and maybe its all that it requires" to invoke rhythmic modes that can produce other, unrealized ways of enacting, moving through, and surviving within urban space.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

Chapter Four:
Complex Mobilities:
Migration and the Urban Imaginary in Mario Ybarra Jr.'s *Barrio Aesthetics*

In Karen Tei Yamashita's novel, *Tropic of Orange*, the Tropic of Cancer, the dividing line between the northern and southern hemispheres, appears as a thin, silken thread that becomes unfixed.²⁴² After this occurs, it hangs in the air, is pulled taut, entangles people within it, and most significantly, is dragged across the U.S. Mexico Border, bringing with it the spontaneous free flow of people from one side to the other. In much the same way that Yamashita's text drags the U.S. Mexico border beyond national boundaries, Mario Ybarra Jr.'s 2014 series titled *Barrio Aesthetics* places an accumulated history of shifting borders in opposition to the trajectory of westward expansion. The work, which was part of a traveling exhibition series titled "The Manifest Destiny Billboard Project," inserts images depicting Latinx neighborhoods in South Los Angeles onto billboards in Mobile, Alabama. Although this directional shift from west to east can initially be read as an ironic rebuttal of the concept of Manifest Destiny, which claimed that Americans were divinely authorized to settle and claim land until they reached the edge of the continent, including the annexation of the northern half of Mexico in 1848, Ybarra Jr.'s series positions *Barrio Aesthetics* at the crux between multiple histories and experiences of mobility, spanning the 19th century through contemporary immigration politics. I argue that beyond serving as the series title, Ybarra Jr. presents "barrio aesthetics" not as a stylistic category, but as a dynamic set of strategies that have the capacity to

²⁴² Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 1997).

introduce new forms of spatiality into the urban landscape. After contextualizing Ybarra Jr.'s work and the Manifest Destiny Billboard project, I relate the imagery in *Barrio Aesthetics* to James Rojas' notion of the enacted environment in order to discuss how a street-level viewer is positioned as a critical response to the implications of automobility in Los Angeles. From there, I examine how Ybarra Jr.'s usage of the term "barrio aesthetics" complicates how the *barrio* (neighborhood) is rendered as a fixed geographic and cultural space, and instead locates the concept as a mobile set of strategies that carry unique implications dependent on the politics of mobility in a given site. Specifically, I contend that when installed in Mobile, Alabama, Ybarra Jr.'s re-situation of the pedestrian as a key figure in the remaking of urban space functions as a response to anti-immigrant legislation that made driving a precarious act for undocumented immigrants. By embedding the work into this fraught landscape that generated community opposition to the law, *Barrio Aesthetics* can be read as the visual amplification of an emerging political movement.

This chapter takes up the visual dissonance produced by the intersection of two seemingly irreconcilable landscapes. As Nathaniel Mackey suggests, the troubling of presumed categories that emerges from the production of (sonic) dissonance through musical improvisation is ultimately generative of new forms.²⁴³ The images of Wilmington, California that were installed in Mobile, Alabama suggest a visual language of the vernacular urban landscape shared between Latinx and African American communities despite representing radically different political and

²⁴³ Nathaniel Mackey, "The Paracritical Hinge," in *The Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 210.

cultural contexts. And yet, from this juxtaposition, it becomes apparent how social practices extend across the two communities, generating new forms of political solidarity.

Artistic engagements with the commercial aesthetics of billboard art extend back to the 1960s, when Pop artist James Rosenquist adapted the scale and graphic qualities of billboards for display in museums and gallery spaces. Early works such as *F-111* consisted of several large panels that, at 11 feet high and 40 feet wide, approximated the size of a standard billboard, and drew upon his experience working as a commercial billboard painter.²⁴⁴ (Fig. 30) Although Rosenquist's work constitutes an early engagement with the scale and visual impact of billboard graphics, the work ultimately transformed the interior of the gallery space, rather than functioning as an artistic intervention that used the billboard as an urban form, which other artists would address in subsequent decades. In 1991, in a gesture that echoed the efforts of activist groups such as ACT-UP to draw attention to the AIDS crisis by appropriating advertising space, Félix González Torres displayed *Untitled* on billboards throughout New York City. Depicting the empty, unmade bed that González-Torres and his partner, Ross Laycock shared prior to Laycock's death, the work enlarged a moment of private grief into a public meditation on collective loss. (Fig. 31) The work shifts the relation of "private space" to the publicly visible site of the billboard: rather than

²⁴⁴ Throughout the 1950s, Rosenquist worked intermittently as a commercial billboard painter throughout the Midwest in Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North Dakota, as well as in New York City. Michael Lobel, *James Rosenquist: Pop Art, Politics, and History in the 1960s* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 9-10.

displaying material promoting mass-produced goods in a site owned by a media conglomerate, the work claims the site in order to enlarge the intimacy and loss represented by the private domestic space of the bed. The loss referenced by the work is specific to the trauma of AIDS within the queer community, but when situated on the billboard, is presented as universally recognizable. Whereas González-Torres' *Untitled* disrupts the visual language of advertising, Barbara Kruger's work draws upon its visual tropes to critique the power dynamics inherent in mass consumerism and popular culture. (Fig. 32) Mimicking the visual appeal of advertising, Kruger inserts feminist and political commentary (assertions that are often seen as "private views" by corporations) using striking text superimposed over repurposed photographs, thus inviting viewers to reassess how the popular imagery they encounter has political implications, despite appearing devoid of social concerns.

Similarly, the Manifest Destiny Billboard Project is a poignant moment within a larger history of exhibitions and projects that address the billboard as the designated site for art. Significant projects include the 1977 display of Ed Ruscha's *Back of Hollywood* in San Francisco, MASS MoCA's 1999 show titled *Billboard: Art on the Road*, a retrospective that highlighted notable works among the 14 exhibitions and 282 works that preceded it. 2010's *How Many Billboards?*, consisted of 21 works by artists such as Michael Asher and Martha Rosler that were commissioned by the MAK Center for Art and Architecture and installed throughout Los Angeles. Although these exhibitions and projects constitute a small fraction of the work that has been installed on billboards, they represent important touchstones for considering

how artists and curators have engaged these structures in ways that challenge aesthetic and political conventions.

The Manifest Destiny Billboard project, of which *Barrio Aesthetics* was a part, marks a particularly ambitious contribution to this history. The project, which was envisioned and executed by non-profit arts organization the Los Angeles Nomadic Division, invited ten artists including Sanford Biggers and John Baldessari to install works on billboards in ten cities along Interstate-10. In 2013, the first installation took place in Jacksonville, Florida, and the series concluded two years later in Los Angeles. Throughout the series, each installation was conceived of as a “chapter” that responded to the particularities of the artist’s chosen site, as well as the broader thematic of territorial expansion. For the second chapter in the series, the artist chose Mobile, Alabama for his installation site.

For Ybarra Jr., the decision to install the series in Mobile, Alabama was partially motivated by his personal history with the South. During his early life, his father and grandfather worked in the naval shipyards in the Port of Los Angeles until the contracts overseeing the construction of ships were relocated to the Gulf Coast. As a result, Ybarra Jr.’s father relocated to Biloxi, Mississippi, where the artist visited him during breaks from school with members of his extended family.²⁴⁵ It was during a weekend trip to Mobile that Ybarra Jr. encountered his first experience of being designated as ethnically “other” while visiting an arcade during the mid-1980s when he was around thirteen years old. Describing the moment as “like a scene from a

²⁴⁵ Personal Interview with Mario Ybarra Jr., June 26, 2015.

film,” he attributes the visible reaction of the other patrons to the city’s predominantly Anglo and African American demographic composition, suggesting that the other patrons had no frame of reference for encountering someone of Mexican descent.²⁴⁶ This experience, which he describes as formative, had the effect of immobilizing the artist. He realized that his capacity to “codeswitch to get into where [he] needed to get into” in Wilmington had been lost, and that, “in Mobile, [his] skin color really meant something” precisely because it was not legible within the city’s demographic composition.²⁴⁷ Over the subsequent decades, Mobile has undergone a dramatic transformation. Echoing shifts throughout Alabama and the Southeastern United States that began in the 1990s, Latinx residents now constitute a significant and rapidly growing portion of the population.

Ybarra Jr.’s father’s migration to Mississippi can be attributed to larger patterns that redirected immigration trajectories to the South. The relocation of shipyard labor to the Gulf Coast coincided with the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986, which shifted border-crossing points to remote areas within the deserts of Arizona and New Mexico due to increased security at border checkpoints in areas such as San Diego and El Paso.²⁴⁸ The increased risks in crossing the border, combined with a new pathway to legal residence if immigrants could provide evidence that they had resided and worked in the United States for at

²⁴⁶ Mario Ybarra Jr. “Manifest Destiny Culminating Weekend Artist Panel” Los Angeles Nomadic Division, Santa Monica, CA, June 27, 2015.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Mary E. Odem and Elaine Lacy, “Introduction,” in *Latino Immigrants and the Transformation of the U.S. South*, eds. Mary E. Odem and Elaine Lacy (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2009), xvi.

least five years, encouraged longer stays and permanent relocation within the U.S.²⁴⁹ During the 1990s, employers in the South began to actively encourage Latinx residents and immigrants to relocate as a way to remedy labor shortages in industries such as carpet manufacturing, food processing, agriculture, and construction. Initially, laborers were recruited from states such as Texas and California through measures that included free bus tickets that transported them directly to manufacturing sites.²⁵⁰ Over time, workers were recruited directly from Mexico and Central America as well. The South initially appeared to be a hospitable region to immigrants seeking work due to the large number of skilled and semi-skilled jobs available, the low cost of living, and the relative lack of anti-immigrant sentiment compared to that taking place in cities such as San Diego.²⁵¹ During this initial phase of migration, the vast majority of immigrants were men who were either single or left their families in their places of origin.

As Barbara Ellen Smith and Jamie Winders have written, the singular male body is often cast as the “desirable immigrant laborer” who possesses a range of

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Raymond A. Mohl, “Globalization and Latin American Immigration in Alabama,” in *Latino Immigrants and the Transformation of the U.S. South*, eds. Mary E. Odem and Elaine Lacy (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 54-5.

²⁵¹ Odem and Lacy, xvi. During the 1980s, discourse regarding immigration in San Diego adopted a xenophobic and nativist slant, with media, law enforcement, and border patrol actively promoting and practicing the criminalization and profiling of undocumented immigrants. For more on this see Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the “Illegal Alien” and the making of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).

qualities that meets the demands of neoliberal economic restructuring.²⁵² These laboring figures are viewed as “hypermobile” in their ability to work anywhere at any time, as “restless but ready bodies”; “reliable” and in a state of “constant readiness” who are “willing to be on time and remain on the job until dismissed”; “disposable” in their capacity to “disappear from site/sight when business is slack”; “productive,” insofar as they are “never sick, late or interrupted by life’s demands” and who can work “to the limits of human endurance because tomorrow, there may be no work at all” and finally, “affordable” on account of not being required to meet threshold standards for minimum, let alone living wages.²⁵³ These qualities are driven by concerns over dismissal and retaliation through the potential of deportation. As Smith and Winders note, these conditions actively work against the dynamics of social reproduction that enable stable social networks to form within immigrant communities.²⁵⁴

In opposition to the figure of the male laborer, the arrival of women and families often promote the conditions of social reproduction through a publicly visible and permanent presence: “While the laboring immigrant body coded as male and *temporary* is ‘ghost-like’ and fleetingly present on worksites in construction, landscaping, and other sectors across the South, the reproducing immigrant body coded as female and *permanent* is difficult to contain, lingering in grocery stores,

²⁵² Barbara Ellen Smith and Jamie Winders, “‘We’re Here to Stay’: Economic Restructuring, Latino Migration, and Place-Making in the US South,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* Vol. 33 No.1 (January 2008): 63.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 63-4.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

playgrounds, health clinics, and other public—but, nonetheless, *domestic*—spaces.”²⁵⁵

The appearance of the permanent immigrant body in public spaces is often coupled with increased retaliation to this model of labor. When these conditions align with fears over economic precarity amongst low-wage citizen laborers, this anxiety translates into a backlash targeting immigrants. In Alabama, this began as early as 1990, when voters passed an amendment to the state constitution making English the official state language, which led to conflicts over the state’s obligation to provide bilingual services and forms.²⁵⁶ In 1997 and 1998, white supremacist organizations held anti-immigrant protests. In the early 2000s, politicians Jeff Sessions, Richard Shelby, and Governor Bob Riley made immigration part of their state platform, coinciding with failed attempts to pass state legislation denying services to immigrants and dedicating resources to train state troopers to enforce federal immigration laws.²⁵⁷

In laying out this timeline, my intention is to contextualize the passage of HB 56 in 2011 within a larger history of Latinx migration to the South. Similarly as anti-immigrant sentiment informed state policies, local infrastructures formed to provide Latinx immigrants with access to services and informal social networks that could be politically mobilized. These infrastructures included the establishment of churches such as the Catholic Hispanic Ministry of Mobile, partnerships with the NAACP in Birmingham, public health clinics, cultural centers, Mexican grocery stores, soccer

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 66.

²⁵⁶ Mohl, 59.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

clubs, as well as bilingual newspapers and Spanish talk radio published and aired throughout Alabama.²⁵⁸ What the creation of these structures suggest in light of anti-immigrant sentiment is the production of a Latinx public sphere—and public discourse—that counters repressive legislative efforts that seek to minimize the permanence and visibility of Latinx communities within Alabama.

The visible articulation of a Latinx public sphere is a recurring theme in Ybarra Jr.'s work. One of his early pieces, *Go Tell It #1*, pictures the artist standing on the roof of a stuccoed suburban home holding a megaphone with a fist raised in the air. (Fig. 33) The artist, whose hair is long, and who wears a bowling shirt and camouflage-print cargo shorts, looks past the camera into the distance. The front yard stretches across the immediate foreground, and there is no trace of other figures present. Josh Kun has discussed the visual paradox inherent in the piece—that the man is speaking into a megaphone but is muted by the medium of the work.²⁵⁹ It is impossible to determine what he is saying or to whom he is speaking—and yet—the piece presents the viewer with an image recalling iconic representations of protest through his raised fist and the striking presence of a solitary figure standing against (unseen) opposition. While there is an element of humor in the image of the man speaking into a bullhorn to no discernible audience, the piece's ambiguity suggests the capacity for political action to emerge in the most unlikely places, such as the suburbs.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Josh Kun, "The New Chicano Movement," *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, January 9, 2005.

In 2004, the work was featured as part of “Public Speaking,” an exhibition of artworks on billboards that was sponsored by Clockshop, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit arts organization. The piece was displayed for one month at 6150 Wilshire Boulevard—in close proximity to the stretch of museums along “Miracle Mile.” In its adapted form for display on the billboard, the work was cropped dramatically, leaving only the edge of the roof, its adjacent greenery, and Ybarra Jr. visible. (Fig. 34) When installed on the billboard, this created the impression that the figure with the megaphone was standing amongst the urban structures surrounding it. The work’s impact is further enhanced by its disruptive qualities—Ybarra Jr.’s figure remains relatively close to the size of a human compared to the scale of the graphics surrounding the piece, and the billboard itself was positioned against the flow of traffic on the street, creating a visual disruption within the urban landscape.²⁶⁰ The larger exhibition series sought to respond to the declining number of shared public spaces, the “encroachment of corporate influence/state surveillance of them,” and the shift toward the model of the artist as entrepreneur as a result of diminished public funding for the arts by “[generating] a momentary shared public dialogue and space.”²⁶¹ *Go Tell It #1* participates within this larger objective by “[asking] the viewer to fill in its dissenting message, or its reason for dissent, or perhaps for some, why dissent seems gratuitous (or even unpatriotic).”²⁶² In this way, the work corresponds to Rita González’s notion of the “conceptually political” due to the

²⁶⁰ Personal interview with Julia Meltzer, November 17, 2014.

²⁶¹ Alan Gilbert, “Transparency Troubles,” *Public Speaking*, (Los Angeles: Clockshop, , 2004), n.p.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

manner in which the complexity of the work's aesthetic concept intertwines with political conditions, but is not identified as part of a larger activist movement.²⁶³ However, I suggest that throughout works that engage images of urban landscapes, Ybarra Jr. suggests its potential for dynamic and spontaneous activation, as indicated by the transformation of a modest home's roof into a platform from which to rally unseen masses. Ybarra Jr.'s use of everyday landscapes within which to assert this claim is echoed by his engagement with the built environment in *Barrio Aesthetics*. In considering the images that Ybarra Jr. presents in *Barrio Aesthetics*, it is pertinent to address the question of what constitutes a barrio and whether a definable aesthetic exists within it.

Barrio Aesthetics operates in the vein of the conceptually political through its exploration of the tactics by which individuals engage the urban environment and how space can be invested with cultural meaning in the midst of political and social repression. These tactics demonstrate that it is not merely the presence of physical structures that constitute the urban landscape, but rather that urban space is shaped by the ways that individuals engage and use these structures. Using the term "enacted environment," urban planner James Rojas describes these practices as emblematic of East Los Angeles, a predominantly Mexican-American community.²⁶⁴ He writes that graffiti, murals, yard shrines, and street vendors produce social spaces that carry

²⁶³ Rita González, "Strangeways Here we Come," *Recent Pasts: Art in Southern California from the 90s to Now*. Ed. John C. Welchman. Southern California Consortium of Art Schools Symposium. Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2004, 95.

²⁶⁴ James Rojas, "The Enacted Environment of East Los Angeles," *Places* vol.8 no.3, 53.

political significance that can only be understood from the vantage point of a pedestrian; whereas when viewed from a moving car, the visual density of East Los Angeles' enacted environment becomes illegible.²⁶⁵ By centering the pedestrian's vantage point, Rojas and Ybarra Jr. refute visual conventions in the representation of Los Angeles that collapse the image of the city onto images of its freeway system, characterized in work by artists such as Edward Burtynsky. (Fig. 35) In his scholarship tracing the history of freeway revolts, Eric Ávila argues that aerial depictions of Los Angeles freeways function as representations of power relations in the city.²⁶⁶ Similarly, although the work renders an element of the cityscape in exacting detail, this takes place at a distance and at the loss of being able to place figures within this landscape. In a sense, the work delivers the city's space without specificity of place. Or, to put it differently: 'there is no *there* there.' The implications of this are particularly significant in relation to the history of freeways in Los Angeles and their constructions' impact on East Los Angeles. Just as the structure of the freeway lifts the driver above East LA's visual landscape, images such as Burtynsky's obscure its visual presence in a manner that resonates with the politics of mobility in Los Angeles.

The centrality of the street-level perspective to the enacted environment marks it as a critical response to looking practices generated by the dominant condition of automobility in Los Angeles, the history of which is emblematic of Doreen Massey's

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Eric Ávila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

notion of the “politics of mobility.”²⁶⁷ For example, the decision to locate freeways in a working-class ethnic minority neighborhood and the resulting displacement of many residents is representative of power relations that determine who moves by choice and who bears the impact of these movements, either through their own displacement, or migration by necessity. This marks the politics of mobility as unstable and uneven; their expression is contingent not only historically, but socially as well. Specifically, the siting of the freeway as transportation infrastructure marked the spatial fragmentation of a previously contiguous community and resulted in the loss of homes and businesses. This dramatically transformed the urban environment for the residents who remained. However, I maintain that, while the negative impacts of freeway construction are by no means insignificant, that the politics of mobility that informed their construction do not solely determine the individuals’ capacity to find new ways to work within and against them.

The visual implications of the politics of mobility coalesce in sites such as freeway onramps that lift drivers above the neighborhoods that were disrupted for their construction, obscuring the street-level urban landscape from view. These dynamics have contributed to the production of the barrio as a complex site marked by disenfranchisement and cultural redemption. The enacted environment functions as a mechanism for reconciling the conditions imposed by urban policy derived from the aerial view of the city with practices that mitigate the deleterious impacts of these politics, and in some cases, allows for the repurposing and reconfiguration of urban

²⁶⁷ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 150

materials and sites considered to be worthless. In examining the history of the barrio, it becomes apparent that these practices are interwoven within the production of the barrio as an urban site.

Scholars have explored the notion of the barrio as a social space that can be traced as far back as the 1870s in Los Angeles.²⁶⁸ In this literature, barrios are socially-constructed spaces that are formed through the exercise of power by external forces, but which, internally, functions as a site for the production of meaningful place-based cultural identity.²⁶⁹ Conditions such as freeway construction, segregated housing and urban redevelopment often produce the barrio as a working-class enclave that, due to its demographic composition, is easily targeted by city authorities for aggressive policing practices. However, amidst these conditions and documented through the emergence of community-based organizations that integrate aesthetic production with political activism in locales such as San Diego's Logan Heights and East Los Angeles, the barrio can function as a site of contestation, community formation, and cultural reclamation.

The production of the barrio as a countersite relies on tactics and acts that span a vast scale of activity, but which are grounded in the enactment of a site that contradicts the social and political mechanisms that attempt to isolate the barrio as an

²⁶⁸ See Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850-1890: A Social History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

²⁶⁹ Raul Homero Villa, *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 5.

impoverished site and restrict the mobility and rights of its residents. Villa describes this tension between marginalization by external forces and affirmation within the barrio's internal community through the terms "barrioization" and "barriology":

Manifesting alternative needs and interests from those of the dominant public sphere, the expressive practices of barrio's social and cultural reproduction—from the mundane exercises of daily-round and leisure activities to the formal articulation of community defensive goals in organizational forums and discursive media—reveal multiple possibilities for re-creating and re-imagining dominant urban *space* as community-enabling *place*. Thus, they contribute to a cumulative 'anti-discipline' that subverts the totalizing impulse of the dominant social space containing the barrios. Collectively, these community-sustaining practices constitute a tactical ethos (and aesthetic) of *barriology* ever engaged in counterpoint to external barrioization.²⁷⁰

In describing characteristics that constitute a barrio, geographic specificity and the presence of activities that contest the conditions that produce it emerge as two significant qualities. Amongst the activities that enable the barrio to be reclaimed from within, cultural, and more specifically, visual and artistic endeavors emerge as a significant component of what Villa describes as "barriology."²⁷¹ Thus, within the

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 6.

²⁷¹ The notion of reclamation holds a significant place within Chicana/o cultural history spanning the subjugation of indigenous peoples during the Spanish conquest, the annexation of Mexico in 1848, the imposition of spiritual and linguistic practices, and the dismissal of aesthetic motifs that do not align with Western notions of beauty. Chicana/o artists and scholars have endeavored to not only relocate that which has been obscured within their cultural history, but to affirm the value of cultural expressions that have been repressed and used to justify their subjugation, discrimination, and exclusion. Exhibitions such as *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation*, *Art of the Other Mexico: Sources and Meanings*, and *Ceremony of Spirit: Nature and Memory in Contemporary Latino Art*, and *The Road to Aztlán: Art from a Mythic Homeland* addressed this thematic concern throughout the exhibition structure and the inclusion of artists whose work engages with it. Similarly, the essays "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and "Domesticana: The Sensibility Chicana *Rasquache*" by Amalia Mesa-Bains mark

barrio, visual and aesthetic culture significantly counteracts the external production of the barrio as a marginalized space.

An examination of cultural expressions linked to barriology and the enacted environment as critical responses to the external production of the barrio raises questions over how the barrio is visually demarcated. Again, it is useful to reference Villa when he writes that these forms emerge in a context of “denial and affirmation” in which “Otherness and public invisibility [are] socially imposed upon Chicanos.”²⁷² With this in mind, it is possible to view the barrio as demarcated by disruptive structures that produce erasures and absences, the most poignant example being the total demolition of Chavez Ravine and the construction of Dodger Stadium on its site.²⁷³ In Logan Heights in San Diego, the production of the barrio occurred as a result of successive phases of erasure. For example, the rezoning of Logan Heights to allow industrial development diminished the community’s spatial cohesion, and the subsequent closure of factories and warehouses several decades later led to large swaths of abandoned and unused parcels of land.²⁷⁴ Similarly, the construction of

significant scholarly contributions to this topic. See Ybarra-Frausto, “Rasquachismo: a Chicano sensibility,” in *Chicano Aesthetics : Rasquachismo* (Phoenix, AZ.: MARS, Movimiento Artístico del Río Salado, 1989), 5-8 and Mesa-Bains, “*Domesticana: The Sensibility Chicana Rasquache*” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* Vol. 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 157-167.

²⁷² Villa, 109.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 80-2. See also Rodolfo Acuña, *A Community Under Siege: A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River, 1945-1975* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Research Center, 1984) and Ricardo Romo, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

²⁷⁴ Eric Ávila, “Turning Structure into Culture: Reclaiming the Freeway in San Diego’s Chicano Park,” in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, and Future*, James W. Coe, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O’Malley, eds. (Chicago

freeways dramatically altered the scale of the built environment from accommodating pedestrian bodies to privileging automobiles. This shift ultimately led to inattention to sites that cars could not access, such as the space underneath freeway overpasses, and produced further absences within the landscape. In East Los Angeles, where seven freeways were built during the 1950s and 1960s, Helena Maria Viramontes depicts the freeway as a “total assault on human sensation and perception” that localizes the processes of erasure enacted by the freeway onto the bodies of East Los Angeles residents, not only through pollution, and visual obstruction, but the imposition of visually-homogenous structures.²⁷⁵

Across these sites, artists have produced work that seeks to counteract these absences and erasures. In Logan Heights, the establishment of Chicano Park and the expansive mural program on the pylons supporting the freeway overpasses produced a space that could be occupied and used by pedestrians, and the artwork disrupted the uniformity imposed by the freeway’s structural presence. Similarly, in Chavez Ravine, Sandra de la Loza’s commemorative plaque produced in conjunction with the Pocho Research Society’s *Operation Invisible Monument* marked and commemorated the site of the community.²⁷⁶ (Figs 36 and 37) Furthermore, as James Rojas points out, on an informal level, street vendors and sidewalk sales not only disrupt the visual

and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 270. For a discussion of the founding of Chicano Park, see Eva Cockcroft, “The Story of Chicano Park,” *Aztlán* Vol. 15 No.1 (1984): 79-103.

²⁷⁵ Ávila, *The Folklore of the Freeway*, 83. See also Helena Maria Viramontes, *Their Dogs Came with Them* (New York: Atria Books, 2007).

²⁷⁶ Sandra de la Loza, *The Pocho Research Society Field Guide to L.A.: Monuments and Murals of Erased and Invisible Histories* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2011), 16-17.

uniformity of the landscape, but rescale it for pedestrian use while reappropriating its structures.²⁷⁷ The tactics represented by *barriology* and the enacted environment thus operate against this regime of erasure, instead working to re-scale the built environment for usage by pedestrians and to insert visual *recuerdos* (memories) into a landscape marked by loss.

Although East Los Angeles is an emblematic site for considering the role of aesthetics in the enactment of *barriology*, attempting to locate a cohesive aesthetic amidst artist-led attempts to render an alternative spatial imaginary of East Los Angeles merely diminishes the range of artistic production that has taken place within it. For example, the category of muralism was internally contested due to conflicting discourses over iconography, medium, and social impact.²⁷⁸ Moreover, only considering muralism overlooks the performative re-enactments of space by artist collectives such as the Chicano group *Asco*, who serve as one example of the intersections among the punk scene in East Los Angeles and conceptual art practice. Similarly, the work of artists such as Chaz Bojórquez and Gilbert Luján is representative of studio-based practice that translated the vernacular visual culture of East Los Angeles into a fine arts context.²⁷⁹ In considering how to describe a “barrio aesthetic,” many of the practices listed above draw upon the strategies of

²⁷⁷ Rojas, 44.

²⁷⁸ See Guisela LaTorre, *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).

²⁷⁹ See *Asco: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective, 1982-1987*, eds. Rita González and C. Ondine Chavoya (Berlin, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2011; Colin Gunckel, “Vexing Questions: Rethinking the History of East LA Punk,” *Aztán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* Vol. 37, No. 2 (Fall 2012): 127-156; *Los Four/Murals of Aztlan*, dir. James Tartan, Chicano Cinema and Media Art Series, 2004.

rasquachismo, which Tomás Ybarra-Frausto defines as a cultural and aesthetic sensibility grounded in the experience of “*los de abajo*” (those from below) that makes use of what is at hand and available, and in doing so, challenges hegemonic notions of taste and beauty.²⁸⁰

Although Ybarra Jr.’s usage of the term “barrio aesthetics” for the title of his series would seem to imply that the billboards constitute a taxonomy of the motifs that define the barrio as a visual environment, this concept holds greater significance when read as a generative visual practice. Namely, the idea of “barrio aesthetics” is closely aligned with Villa’s notion of *barriology* as “culturally affirming spatial practice”²⁸¹ and Ybarra-Frausto’s discussion of *rasquachismo* as an “aesthetic strategy” derived from an “improvisational attitude” that “recodes and moves outside established boundaries” rather than a prescribed stylistic category.²⁸² Ybarra Jr.’s photographs can be understood as offering a nexus between the critical spatial practices that *barriology* entails and the visual elements aligned with *rasquachismo*. Ultimately, what is described as a barrio aesthetic is really a “barrio spatio-aesthetic”, which refers not only to visual traces of practices that produce social spaces within the barrio, but also the ways in which these practices possess a generative capacity when located in new sites. For example, Ybarra-Frausto discusses how *rasquachismo* emerges from the context of the barrio and that it is a set of practices that produce cultural recordings that are inherently hybrid. It is important to note that when Chicano

²⁸⁰ Ybarra-Frausto, 5.

²⁸¹ Villa, 8.

²⁸² Ybarra-Frausto, 5-6.

art moves into other cultural contexts, such as the mainstream fine arts museum, additional modes of recoding take place that inevitably alters the space of the museum. This occurs in Ybarra Jr.'s placement of the works in Mobile, Alabama. The photographs already imply a triangulation of cultural influences that are removed from the context of East Los Angeles, which some might consider to be the predominant locus for siting "barrio aesthetics." Ybarra Jr. relocates these cultural influences a second time over, but does so in a manner that suggests the production of new modes of cultural recognition within the landscape. Similarly, barrio aesthetics functions in a dynamic and adaptable capacity that contradicts restrictive notions of beauty and relies on alternative forms of knowledge and social capital to suggest other forms of cultural possibility both within and outside of the barrio. It is this quality that enables the "barrio aesthetic" to reclaim space outside of the geographic context of the barrio, and in doing so, allows the notion of the barrio to become an elastic site that can be reassembled and reconstituted in new ways that in turn transforms the context within which it is located.

Throughout *Barrio Aesthetics*, Ybarra Jr. enlarges the visible traces of the enacted environment that immerse the pedestrian viewer but are easily obscured from a moving car. Imagery of a group of mariachis paused on a plaza and an old car evoke Rojas' descriptions of the enacted environment in East Los Angeles. It is important to note, however that the majority of Ybarra Jr.'s images depict Wilmington, a predominantly Latinx community in South Los Angeles. This geographic shift away

from East Los Angeles not only underscores the cultural specificity of the enacted environment, but suggests a mobile quality to the practices that comprise it.

One of the series' images depicts a mural in Wilmington being restored. The work, which wraps around all four walls of El Mercadito Market, a locally-owned Latinx grocery store that was established around 1900 and offers fresh *pupusas* and *menudo*. The mural depicts historical moments and imagery that resonate with local and transnational experience. (Fig. 38) For example, the image of the eagle, a reference to the Mexican flag, breaks the chain of a laborer. In this context, the eagle not only references Mexican heritage but the United Farmworkers, which featured the eagle on their flag. The nopal cactus, seen above the doorway, is a recurring motif within Chicana art. The plant is indigenous to Mexico, and its capacity to thrive in an unforgiving climate not only functions as a symbol of cultural resilience, but the trek across the desert that many immigrants undertake. The right side of the mural features a portrait of Emiliano Zapata, a leader in indigenous struggles for autonomy over land during the Mexican Revolution in 1910. Last, the two pairs of men on either side of the doorway depict a conflict between rival gang members and its resolution. Interestingly, although the mural does not include women in its composition, the photograph shows two women restoring it, suggesting a troubled relationship between masculinist claims to public space and the often-invisible labor of women in maintaining sites of public memory.

The images draw upon a visual language for depicting struggles over space and civil rights that resonate with imagery featured in murals created during the

1970s in East Los Angeles. Art historians such as Eva Cockcroft, Shifra Goldman, and Guisela Latorre have discussed how the production of murals in East Los Angeles reclaimed urban space and served as visual elaborations of political sentiments underlying the Chicano Civil Rights Movement at a time when Mexican-Americans were subject to over-policing and political repression.²⁸³ The mural at El Mercado, painted in 1979, is a contemporary of works such as the murals created in Estrada Courts in 1973 and Judy Baca's *Great Wall of Los Angeles*, which began in 1974. Both projects share references to local and transnational histories over the loss of territory, connecting them and El Mercado's mural to political expressions that exist outside of formal politics. Moreover, Ybarra Jr.'s usage of the mural in a new context underscores how the social space represented by the barrio is transformed and retranslated when it is made mobile through the practice of barrio aesthetics.

Within Mobile and other Southeastern states that have recently become sites of Latinx immigration, the notion of the barrio is not constituted in a way that is recognizable in relation to how it has been conceived in the Southwestern United States. Jose Gámez suggests that the spatial constitution of the barrio in East Los Angeles and the visual urban vernacular produced on a human scale that is affiliated with it largely relies on the presence of a stable, established community of

²⁸³ Edward J. Escobar discusses how the Los Angeles Police Department's efforts to repress the Chicano Civil Rights Movement ultimately galvanized Mexican-Americans in East Los Angeles to join *el movimiento* who had experienced police harassment and brutality on an individual basis. See Edward J. Escobar, "The Dialectics of Repression: The Los Angeles Police Department and the Chicano Movement, 1968-1971," *The Journal of American History* Vol. 79, No. 4 (March 1993): 1483-1514.

homeowners. He contrasts images of James Rojas' notion of the enacted environment as generative of social space against a community of migrants from Puebla, Mexico in Los Angeles:

Unlike the semipublic *yarda* found in much of East Los Angeles, which serves to personalize and extend the space of the house into the public realm of the city, the domestic landscapes of many migrants do not publicly project a sense of the residents' identity....the social life and activity of the house has been relocated from the front to the rear, thereby leaving the edge of the residential site that would engage the sidewalk untouched....Thus the front facade of the house projects an anonymous image, and the resultant privacy serves to keep the residents out of sight—lending a form of invisibility that actually affords the residents a modest amount of psychological security.²⁸⁴

Describing this as an “invisible landscape,” that is sporadically activated as a makeshift and temporary semi-public social space, he suggests that this kind of spatial enactment bears similarities to the invisible landscape occupied by migrants in Charlotte, North Carolina who live outside of the city center in suburban homes that were foreclosed upon during the 2008 housing crisis. Like the Puebla migrants, the migrant community in Charlotte does not modify their yard with decorations or other ornamentation, in part to avoid undue attention but also as a consequence of the architectural features of homes in the Southeast that make it difficult to modify the facade. However, within this invisible landscape he has noted “evidence of an emerging Latina/o public realm.... For example, taco trucks have often occupied nondescript urban spaces in ways that actually help to articulate a new form of public social space. They might occupy an edge of a typical suburban shopping strip,

²⁸⁴ José S.L. Gámez, “A Pair of Queens: La Reina de Los Angeles, the Queen City of Charlotte, and the New (Latin) American South,” in *Latino Urbanism: The Politics of Planning, Policy, and Redevelopment*, eds. Rodolfo D. Torres and David R. Diaz (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), 116.

thereby creating an active boundary to a formerly ill-defined urban space. In this sense, they have not only created a new edge condition, which helps to formalize and support a social space, but also activate that edge through the introduction of culturally focused commerce that attracts both pedestrians and motorists.”²⁸⁵ He describes this enactment of space as the production of a “prototopia,” an “emergent socio-spatial zone” that is the result of “hybrid urbanism rooted in the performance of a traveling, translated, and transformed set of cultural expressions.”²⁸⁶

Like Rojas’ assertion that the enacted environment can only be known on a human scale and Gámez’s examination of emergent Latinx public space as a “prototopia,” Ybarra Jr.’s photographs communicate a proximity that reveals visible traces of how urban space is modified through the community’s use of it. In viewing Ybarra Jr.’s image more closely, it is apparent that several women are actively working on the restoration of the mural. With this in mind, the enacted environment is emblematic of a process by which the urban landscape is created, modified, and remade from day to day rather than a singular object. Ybarra Jr.’s photographs, however, beg the question of what the precise relationship of *Barrio Aesthetics* is to its surroundings. Whereas the enacted environment implies the existence of a continuous urban context, *Barrio Aesthetics* presents the viewer with truncated and enigmatic images of urban space. Whereas Rosenquist’s billboard-sized images are enclosed by the galleries whose space they fill, the edges of Ybarra Jr.’s images become less apparent through their recontextualization on billboards along Interstate-

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 121-2.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 126.

10 in Mobile, Alabama. This allows the work to become embedded within a new urban context.

The notion of a prototopia and the conditions of urban life for migrants in Charlotte are relevant to considering the production of a Latinx urban landscape in Mobile. For example, in Alabama, the public sphere for the Latinx community had been constituted through media forms such as newspapers and radio, suggesting an inevitable expansion into physical space, a shift that Ybarra Jr. makes tangible through his billboard installations. A significant component of this shift, however, is how the notion of “the barrio” is reshaped within this site as a fragmented and multi-sited conceptual map. Describing Latinized communities in Nashville, Jamie Winders contrasts long-term Anglo residents’ conception of their neighborhood against those of Latinx migrants. Many of the Anglo residents perceived the neighborhood in literal terms as a geographically bounded space within which an understanding of its history and the changes it has undergone function as criteria for belonging within it.²⁸⁷ By comparison, Latinx migrants who were relative newcomers responded to questions regarding how they defined their neighborhood by describing a range of geographically-distinct sites that were meaningful to them²⁸⁸, such as their workplace,

²⁸⁷ Jamie Winders, “Re-Placing Southern Geographies: The Role of Latino Migration in Transforming the South, its Identities, and Its Study,” *Southeastern Geographer* Vol. 51 No.2 (Summer 2011): 345.

²⁸⁸ While the fragmented conceptual maps of Winders’ subjects can be seen as a consequence of their relative unfamiliarity with the area, this fragmentation may also be indicative of sites in which Latinx immigrants perceive themselves as safe from harassment. Similarly, although the length of time that a person has resided within a particular community may inform the level of detail that they include in their conceptual map of a site, Dolores Hayden cites a comparative study by Kevin Lynch

the homes of friends, and spaces beyond the city itself.²⁸⁹ In this context, as in Mobile and Charlotte, the geographic boundaries of the barrio cannot be sustained or reproduced. By installing the billboards along and near Interstate-10, Ybarra Jr. mimicked the fragmented notion of the neighborhood held by Latinx migrants and embedded within the landscape a secondary fragmented geography of Latinx neighborhoods in Los Angeles. The billboard locations span significant distances within Mobile and the surrounding areas, with three of the pieces located across the Mobile Bay in the town of Daphne. (Fig. 39) This fragmentation and relocation widens the frame for *Barrio Aesthetics* to be considered as a set of visual strategies that push against the politics of mobility in Alabama and how notions of “belonging” are spatially constituted.

In Mobile, Alabama, anti-immigrant rhetoric has shaped the contingencies of mobility for Latinxs over the last six years. This coincided with the state’s struggle to restore its economy after the 2008 economic downturn and a growing population of immigrants from Mexico and Central America to the Southeastern United States during the previous decade. These conditions took the form of Alabama HB 56, which passed in 2011 and mandated that law enforcement officers had the right to determine the immigration status of a person if the officer suspected that the individual was an undocumented immigrant. Although the law made daily activities

of conceptual maps that showed that ethnic minority and economically-depressed individuals were claimed a more limited and sparse geographic terrain in their maps than their more affluent Anglo counterparts. See Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 27. See also Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960).

²⁸⁹ Winders, 345.

such as accessing public benefits, applying for jobs, renting property, and attending school into criminal acts for undocumented immigrants that necessitated their deportation, Latinx citizens in Alabama felt the consequences of the law as well.²⁹⁰ As a result of immigration discourse in the United States that has racialized undocumented immigrants as Latinx, persons of this ethnicity are more likely to be questioned by police regarding their immigration status due to their skin color or spoken language.²⁹¹ This thrust Latinx citizens into a position of hypervisibility alongside undocumented people due to a historically entrenched black-and-white racial binary in Alabama. As a result of HB 56, the ways in which the politics of mobility manifested themselves depended on one's citizenship status and ethnicity. For undocumented immigrants, quotidian acts became fraught with the possibility of deportation, and the sites of automobility were especially marked by fear and trauma due to the likelihood of being pulled over while driving, making the placement of Ybarra Jr.'s works along a freeway particularly relevant within this political context.

Although certain provisions of the law were repealed in 2011, HB 56 was notable not only because it was (at that time) the harshest immigration bill to be passed in the United States, but also due to the oppositional response it generated. Megan Conley describes how in Alabama, this not only took the form of statewide marches, but the formation of local initiatives, such as door-to-door canvassers

²⁹⁰ Megan Conley, "In Times of Uncertainty: The Great Recession, Immigration Enforcement, and Latino Immigrants in Alabama," in *Immigrant Vulnerability and Resilience*, Lorenzo Cachón and María Aysa-Lastra, eds. (Basel: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 153.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 151.

providing information on immigrants rights, and the formation of people's committees within individual communities.²⁹² While Ybarra Jr.'s series references this context of political repression and resistance and links it to the way that Rojas views the enacted environment as a political gesture that takes place outside of the dimensions of formal politics, such as voting and legislation²⁹³, one billboard depicting a barbershop suggests a poignant conception of barrio aesthetics as a spatial practice that is not only generative of social space within a hostile landscape, but which is recognizable in two distinct cultural contexts, endowing the viewer with the capacity to "codeswitch." (Figs. 40 and 41) Although most viewers would recognize the façade as a barbershop, its resonance as a culturally-specific social space is particularly legible to Latinx and African American viewers. Because of this, and the absence of markers identifying its clientele, Ybarra Jr.'s image invites viewers to move between its multiple registers of meaning.

Displayed near an interstate onramp, the billboard depicts a building facade painted with bold diagonal red, white, and blue stripes. The work hovers above the beige awning of an anonymous brick building. The stripes identify it as a barbershop, a masculine social space that has cultural resonance for African American and Latinx men that has been explored in previous works by Ybarra Jr. and by artists such as Pepón Osorio. (Figs. 42 and 43) In 2007, Ybarra Jr. installed *Sweeney Tate* at the Tate Modern in London as part of an exhibition titled "The World as Stage." The installation functions as a hybrid reimagining of a gallery space converted from a

²⁹² Ibid., 158.

²⁹³ Rojas, 53.

barbershop in Chinatown and an actual barbershop within which Ybarra Jr. staged a competition between his personal hairstylist and two barbers local to London. The aesthetic motifs of the barbershop appear in an exaggerated form with a wall comprised of dramatic red, white, and blue diagonal striping functioning as the threshold into the space which is enclosed by three viridian-hued walls. The striping, coupled with the black-and-white checkerboard flooring, function as the barbershop's most striking and recurring visual emblems. Hung above the mirror facing the chairs is a rendering of the Tate Modern that has been retrofitted with a barber's pole. On either side of the rendering is a panel of the diagonal striping and the black-and-white checkerboard pattern. Along the mirror, a panel of the diagonal striping separates the workstations designated by red vinyl chairs and serves as a backdrop upon which a selection of photographs of men, heads tilted down, showcase new haircuts. Similarly, on the walls, the vernacular graphics of the barbershop reappear—the diagonal striping once again serves as the backdrop upon which two versions of a cartoonish man are shown: under a heading indicating “before,” he stands with untamed hair. This man is faced by his counterpart, “after,” whose hair is combed and styled to appear suave. Within the piece, Ybarra Jr. inserts references to Mexican culture through the placement of three chairs in red, white, and green as a makeshift waiting area. The white chair, which stands in the middle, bears the symbol of the Mexican flag, suggesting a gesture on Ybarra Jr.'s part to hybridize the installation site. Ybarra Jr.'s description of the barbershop as “a space of contemplation and transformation” that function as “small worlds that are essentially stages for life”

recalls the significance of the barbershop as a cultural site and as a space of self-fashioning that was explored by Pepón Osorio in the 1994 installation *En La Barbería No Se Lloro*.²⁹⁴

Installed in the predominantly Puerto Rican community in the Frog Hollow neighborhood of Hartford Connecticut, Osorio's piece explores the barbershop as a social space in which the parameters of acceptable masculine behavior are defined and reproduced by boys and men.²⁹⁵ The exterior evokes graphically-vivid facades of neighborhood barbershops through its painted icons of a barbershop pole, comb, clippers, scissors, and a man looking into a handheld mirror as he awaits his hair to be cut. The interior space is densely ornamented with tightly-arranged portraits of men hung over pink floral wallpaper in the waiting area. Within the haircutting stations, chairs upholstered in a deep red fabric are covered with lace, miniature figurines, and greenery hanging vertically from the mirrors to separate each station. In the mirror, Osorio embedded videos of men performing normative heterosexual masculine behavior while monitors attached to the chairs' headrests played recordings of men weeping.²⁹⁶ Like Osorio, Ybarra Jr.'s piece makes subtle references to the codification of masculinity and its titular reference to the hyper-brutal character of Sweeney Todd suggests an association with the barbershop as the site of trauma and violence. However, it is particularly significant that within this context, both *Sweeney*

²⁹⁴ "TateShots: Mario Ybarra Jr.," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxyvzdl6sl8>. Last accessed February 14, 2017.

²⁹⁵ Jennifer González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 179.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

Tate and *En La Barbería No Se Llorá* are cast as culturally-specific sites that are generative of social bonds within a community that can take on intimate dimensions. It is this dynamic function of the barbershop that carries forth in Ybarra Jr.'s usage of the facade in *Barrio Aesthetics*.

It is additionally relevant to acknowledge that the barbershop also functions as a social space within African American communities. As referenced by Ybarra Jr. in his comments regarding his capacity to “codeswitch” between different communities, the artist grew up in the multi-racial context of Wilmington. By installing the photograph of the barbershop in Mobile, Ybarra Jr. references the barbershop as a meaningful social space within the Latinx community but also positions it within a context in which it would be recognized as such by African Americans in Mobile. Many scholars have addressed the social, political, and historical significance of hair within the African American community, and artists such as Kori Newkirk and Mark Bradford have explored the material and spatial dimensions of black salons and barbershops in their work. (Figs. 44 and 45) Bryant Keith Alexander has conducted an ethnographic analysis of black barbershops as cultural sites. Much like Osorio, in recalling childhood visits to the barber, Alexander references feelings of anxiety in entering the space, and in a gesture that stretches beyond specific geographic sites and time periods, Alexander's study threads memories of his childhood barbershop in New Orleans into his experiences as a participant-observer at his barbershop in

Pasadena, California.²⁹⁷ In both sites, he locates the barbershop as “...a cultural space marked by ritual and cultural enactments. These are performances of recognition that offer a sense of comfort—in handshakes, verbal greetings, language, the nature of talk, social play, and the acknowledged awareness and concern of issues relative to ‘the Black community.’”²⁹⁸ Significantly, Alexander frames the task of locating a barbershop as a “...test of establishing community....A place where I could not only get my hair cut or cared for but also achieve affinity in the assumption and desire that the hair care professional and his community of clients were black.”²⁹⁹ Finding a black barbershop represents the ability to be recognized as a member of a larger community in a site where he may otherwise be considered as an “outsider” on the basis of physical characteristics that imply ethnic difference.³⁰⁰ For Alexander, he casts the barbershop as more than a communal site, but also as one in which issues of political concern that span local and national scales are discussed.

In considering the appearance of Ybarra Jr.’s barbershop in Mobile, it is possible to extrapolate the significance that the space can hold to a community of Latinx men amidst threats of detention and deportation. Similarly, the appearance of the barbershop as a distinctly “masculine” space recalls the body of the single male

²⁹⁷ Bryant Keith Alexander, “Fading, Twisting, and Weaving: An Interpretive Ethnography of the Black Barbershop/Salon as Cultural Space,” in *Scorched Earth: Mark Bradford*, ed., Connie Butler (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2015), 130-1.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

³⁰⁰ Many Anglo hairstylists lack the training and technical skill to adequately care for and style the range of textures that black mens’ and womens’ hair can have. As a result, attempting to have ones’ hair styled in a generic salon may result in discomfort and harm.

immigrant and his embodiment of the neoliberal laborer. However, within the space of the barbershop, a transformative process takes place in which the restless body is given an opportunity to rest, to be cared for, and to engage in an act that promotes their social reproduction. Whereas Smith and Winders gendered the processes of social reproduction as feminine, the barbershop functions as a compelling countersite. In a manner that echoes Alexander's search for a black barbershop as a critical stage in establishing a sense of belonging, so too, finding a barbershop in which Spanish is spoken and staff and fellow patrons can provide information regarding how to navigate the precarities of life as an undocumented immigrant marks a moment of inclusion within an unfamiliar and potentially hostile terrain.

The shared function that the barbershop holds between these communities also forms a nexus between groups that are framed as being in opposition to each other when the site of the barbershop appears on a billboard in Mobile. Specifically, scholars have discussed political rhetoric that casts undocumented laborers as "stealing" jobs from low-wage workers, many of whom in Alabama have historically been African American. However, studies have contradicted this narrative, citing that undocumented laborers fill positions that are undesirable with high turnover rates.³⁰¹ With this in mind, the barbershop billboard can be seen as not only suggesting an imagined solidarity between two communities, but referencing the capacity of discourse contained within culturally-designated social spaces to generate political action in public sites. In Ybarra Jr.'s piece, the interior of the shop, which is visible

³⁰¹ Mohl, 60.

from the street through the open doorway, implies porosity between private and public spaces that Rojas discusses as characteristic of the enacted environment. He describes how storeowners open windows or place wares onto the street in order to merge the space of the store with social space. Similarly, he describes how boundary markers, such as fences surrounding homes, become designated sites of interaction. As a result, a threshold becomes a site in which the public and private intersect with social space, thus extending the politicized space of the enacted environment.

This extension can be observed in the patriotic overtones present in the façade's stripes, which call to mind democratic ideals of equality and justice. The intersection of public and private spaces in the barbershop marks it as a politically generative site due to its porous quality. Specifically, as a social space where information and news are exchanged, the barbershop can be seen as a natural extension of canvassing sites where informational pamphlets can be easily distributed. For undocumented men, who were at the greatest risk of being profiled while driving, the barbershop becomes a site for exchanging stories and information regarding encounters with police.

In addition to the enacted landscape depicted within the photograph, the artwork extends beyond its frame to engage the landscape surrounding the billboard's structure. A line of palm trees appears to disrupt the composition of the photograph, but in situ, they align with the billboard's vertical scaffolding and nearby telephone poles. Similarly, the space of the sidewalk that would extend from the lower horizontal edge of the piece is met by the flat roof of a nearby structure, creating an

imagined extension of the social space depicted by Ybarra Jr. By installing artwork on billboards, Ybarra Jr. participates in loosening private interests' control over the cityscape. Rather than viewing advertisements that demonstrate commerce's capacity to monetize the built environment, Ybarra Jr. replaces the visual culture of consumption with imagery of public culture that emerges from an experience of exclusion from the loci of corporate wealth and power. If billboards can be understood as the localized equivalent of skyscrapers that serve as visual emblems of corporate power, Ybarra Jr.'s images represent methods of operating not merely in their shadow, but outside of their purview. By displaying these images on the billboards, Ybarra Jr. enlarges the sites that make it possible to subsist and survive despite economic systems that increasingly disenfranchise and exploit low-wage and undocumented laborers. When viewing the images from a car, they appear as a momentary disruption of the driver's visual field that quickly recedes from view. Pedestrians, however, experience a more prolonged viewing of the image and upon arriving at the billboard, gain a more acute sense of its visual features' scale in relation to its surroundings. In some cases, they can even find elements, such as ladders or built-in scaffolding, that provide access to the structure for maintenance, further collapsing the scale to that of a human. Although the barbershop depicted in the photograph references an urban vernacular specific to Los Angeles which stands in stark contrast to the monotonous utilitarian landscape that now surrounds it, the placement of the work and the dissolution of its edges troubles the presumed irreconcilability of the two landscapes.

The landscapes of Mobile and Wilmington initially appear irreconcilable due to the perceived political and social differences between the two sites. On one level, Ybarra Jr. suggests the capacity for political solidarity between African Americans and Latinxs that emerges from a recognition of strategies of cultural survival shared between the two communities. On another level, the works function as a rejection of xenophobia's insidious presence in each site. The Southeastern United States is often cast as the most isolated region within the country, meaning that whereas other states have become increasingly culturally diverse, the South has remained predominantly Anglo and African American, making the region particularly vulnerable to xenophobic discourse.³⁰² However, legislation targeting undocumented immigrants such as Proposition 187³⁰³, which passed in California in 1994, and H.R. 4437, the "Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act"³⁰⁴ which

³⁰² Helen B. Marrow, *New Destination Dreaming: Immigration, Race, and Legal Status in the Rural American South* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 2.

³⁰³ Provisions of Proposition 187 included the denial of public health services and public education to undocumented immigrants and a requirement that law enforcement officers must interrogate the citizenship status of any arrestees who may be undocumented immigrants. After the bill was passed, it faced multiple legal challenges to its constitutionality. A permanent injunction was issued in December 1994. It was found to be unconstitutional in 1997 and voided two years later. See "CA's Anti-Immigrant Proposition is Voided, Ending State's Five-Year Battle with ACLU, Rights Groups," *American Civil Liberties Union*, July 29, 1999 (<https://www.aclu.org/news/cas-anti-immigrant-proposition-187-voided-ending-states-five-year-battle-aclu-rights-groups>) Last accessed March 21, 2017. Interestingly, the political mobilization surrounding this issue by Latinx communities is seen as one factor that contributed to the shift of California to being politically-aligned with the Democratic party.

³⁰⁴ H.R. 4437's provisions included the criminalization of violations of federal immigration law in a dramatic curtailment of rights to immigrants that had been granted through the 1986 Immigration Control and Reform Act (IRCA) and allotted

was passed by the United States House of Representatives in 2005, suggest that these discourses maintain political traction not only in states that are both more liberal and considerably more diverse, but throughout the United States. Consequently, the large-scale mobilizations against these initiatives that were catalyzed on state and national levels in both Los Angeles and Mobile suggests a recognition of migration as an inherent right rather than a criminal act, and point toward the emergence of a political consciousness that links seemingly disparate sites and communities in unanticipated ways.³⁰⁵

In one sense, the billboard creates an alternative urban vernacular that exists beyond the street-level view of Mobile (and so too, the disrupted mobility of Latinxs within it). In another sense, the billboard embeds within the space of automobility a culturally-specific set of signs that not only gesture toward the growing visibility of Latinxs in the South, but links this to a broader history of struggle that spans multiple sites. Specifically, because the enacted environment re-centers pedestrian activity, it possesses the capacity to substantially reconfigure the dynamics of the urban landscape that have been shaped by the contingencies of mobility. By embedding

resources to the construction of additional fencing at the U.S.-Mexico Border. One of the largest protests in response to the bill was La Gran Marcha, in which over 500,000 people in Los Angeles participated. See Angel Tenez “Purpose,” *La Gran Marcha 2006*, April 6, 2006. <http://www.granmarcha.org/purpose.html> Last accessed March 21, 2017.

³⁰⁵ Scott Saul notes that in South Los Angeles, multi-ethnic political alliances between African American, Latinx, and Asian American communities indicate the emergence of a new political reality. See Scott Saul, “Gente-fication on Demand: The Cultural Redevelopment of South Los Angeles,” in *Post-Ghetto: Reimagining South Los Angeles*, Josh Sides, ed. (Berkeley and San Marino, CA: University of California Press and the Huntington Library, 2012), 147-172.

these images into the urban landscape of Mobile, Alabama, Ybarra Jr. is not equating the urban vernacular of Mobile with Los Angeles barrios or merely creating a puzzling visual contradiction. Rather, within the context of the Manifest Destiny Billboard Project, Ybarra Jr. introduces an alternate trajectory that responds to westward expansion's legacy. As a result, *Barrio Aesthetics* snags and pulls national boundaries, visually anticipating their renegotiation amidst a nascent political movement in Mobile.

Conclusion

By bringing the work of Noah Purifoy, Maren Hassinger, Daniel Martinez, and Mario Ybarra Jr. into the frame of this dissertation, my objective is not merely to trace how these artists have claimed urban space throughout South Los Angeles and beyond its environs. These artists, and the works that they have produced, are also linked by a complex network of movements across vastly differing scales. This project opened with a discussion of musical forms and artwork that emerged from the cultural shifts inaugurated by the Great Migration. It closes with an examination of immigrant communities that are forming in regions that were vacated by large numbers of African Americans during that time period, a resonance that is echoed by the fact that Snow Hill, Alabama, Noah Purifoy's birthplace is less than two hundred miles away from where Ybarra Jr. installed *Barrio Aesthetics*. While that occurrence is a mere coincidence, it underlies an interest in examining how shared claims to space can reveal social practices that extend across distinct communities, and how these practices can be rendered visible and politically meaningful in response to the constraints imposed upon aggrieved and vulnerable populations.

At its core, this project is one that seeks to understand how agency can be enacted within the built environment, whether on the scale of an individual or a community. Examining this question through the analysis of art and visual culture is particularly urgent at this time, at a moment when federal support for the arts is imperiled, cultural institutions rely increasingly on corporate sponsorship, and art spaces are all too often implicated in the displacement of vulnerable communities

from urban spaces. It was crucial that at this stage, this project look beyond practices that are named as “Socially-engaged art” in order to articulate some of the ways in which artists have captured, elaborated, and reformulated modes of improvisational practice developed within South Los Angeles’ cultural landscape that reflect the heterogenous nature of its community. In *Dangerous Crossroads*, George Lipsitz described how Baldemar Huerta, a Tejano musician who played under multiple names, developed a fluid musical identity that developed from working alongside African Americans in migrant field camps. He also described Pat and Lolly Vargas, two Chicano musicians whose musical sensibilities were influenced by that of their classmates, the majority of whose families were part of the Great Migration.³⁰⁶ Examples abound of the cultural references exchanged between Black and Latinx musicians, but very little art historical writing reflects this dynamic relationship that links the two communities. By using the language of improvisation, this project not only seeks to begin tracing these moments of intersection, exchange, and shared social practice, but also to suggest not only new tactics by which more equitable spaces can be enacted, but the significance of these sites, even if they are only realized on a small scale or temporary basis. It is in this spirit that I seek to demonstrate how improvisation “teaches us to make ‘a way’ out of ‘no way’ by cultivating the capacity to discern hidden elements of possibility, hope, and promise in even the most discouraging circumstances. Improvisers work with the tools they have in the arenas that are open to them, in order to imbue the world with the

³⁰⁶ George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 64-5.

possibility of making right things happen.”³⁰⁷ In a political moment that is marked by despair and uncertainty, the improvisational practices articulated in the work of Purifoy, Hassinger, Martinez, and Ybarra Jr. offer meaningful strategies for working against these constraints in the pursuit of greater equity and freedom.

³⁰⁷ Fischlin, et. al., xii.

Illustrations

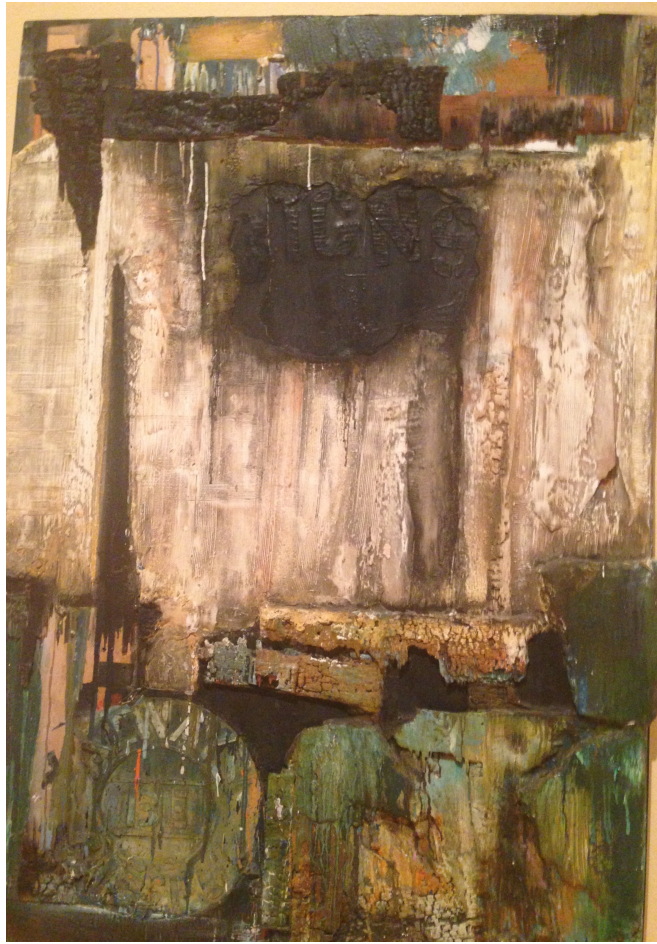


Figure 1. *Watts Riot*. Noah Purifoy. Mixed media assemblage. 1965. Approximately 3' x 4'. California African-American Museum.



Figure 2. Detail, *Watts Riot*

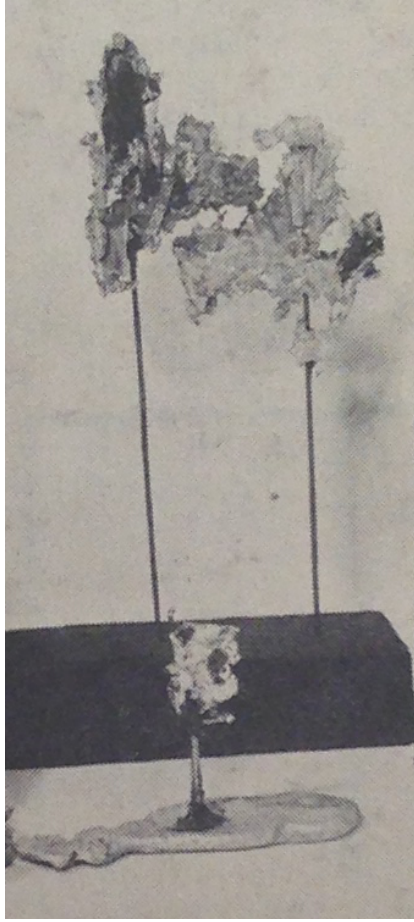


Figure 3. *Neon Fragment*. Noah Purifoy. Mixed media assemblage. 1965. Noah Purifoy Papers. Smithsonian Archives of American Art.



Figure 4. Maren Hassinger. *Pink Paths*. Pink paint applied to ground. 10' x 200'. 1982.



Figure 5. Maren Hassinger. *Pink Paths*. Pink paint applied to ground. 10'x 200.' 1982.

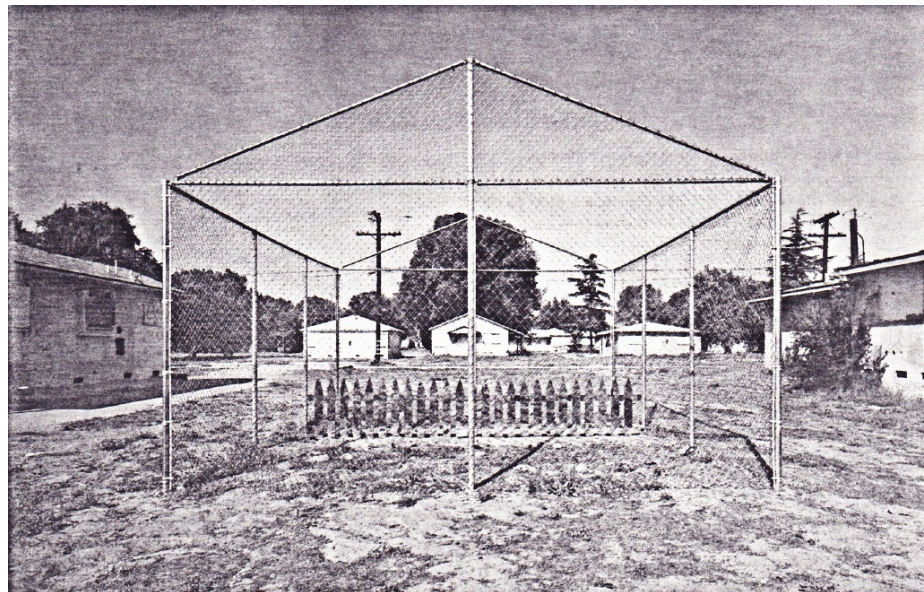


Figure 6. Candy Lewis. Chain-link fencing and mirrors. 1982.

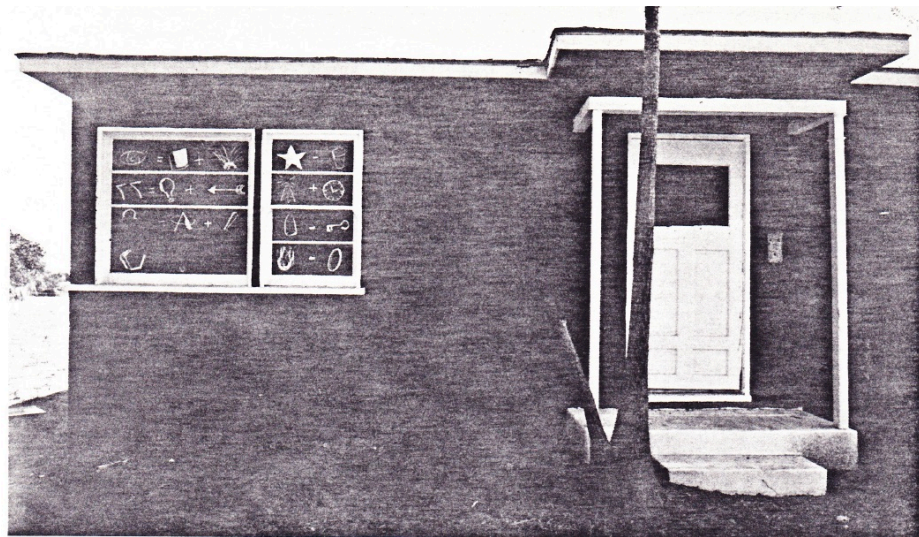


Figure 7. Jon Peterson. *Archaeological Hieroglyph House*. Mixed media. 1982.

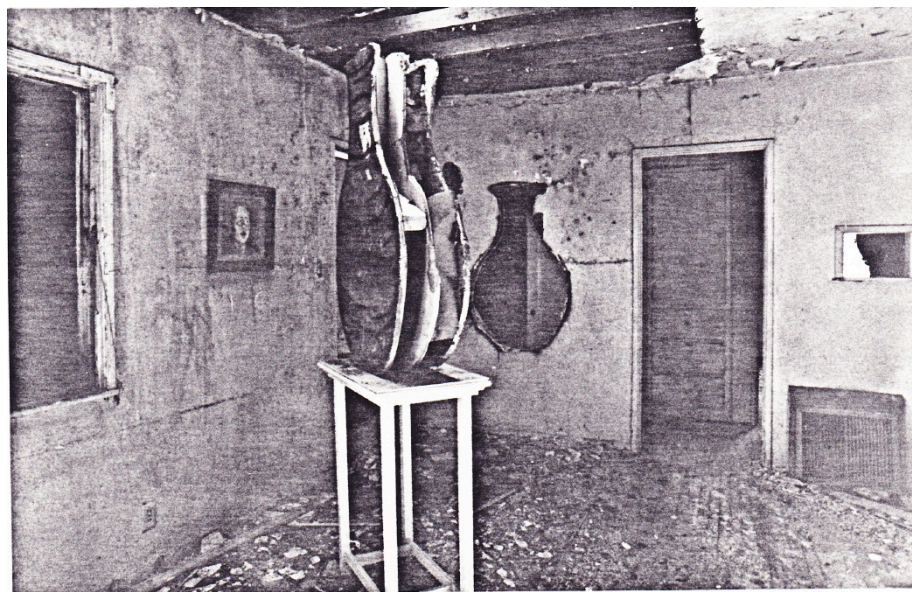


Figure 8. Judith Simonian. *Freeway Vessel*. Mixed media. 1982.



Figure 9. Megan Williams. *Untitled*. Mixed media. 1982.

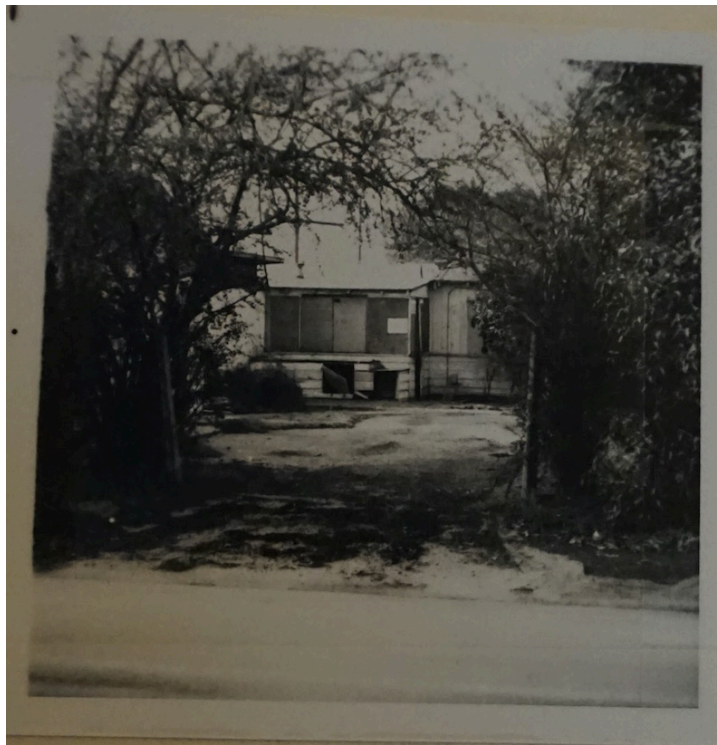


Figure 10. Photograph of 11809 Wright Road, Lynwood, California. “Notice of Intention to Demolish Improvements,” Keith et. al. v. Volpe, Civil No. 72-355-HP (January 31, 1973), Century Freeway records, Collection no. 0228, Regional History Collections, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.



Figure 11. Gordon Matta-Clark. *Splitting*. Gelatin silver print. 1974.

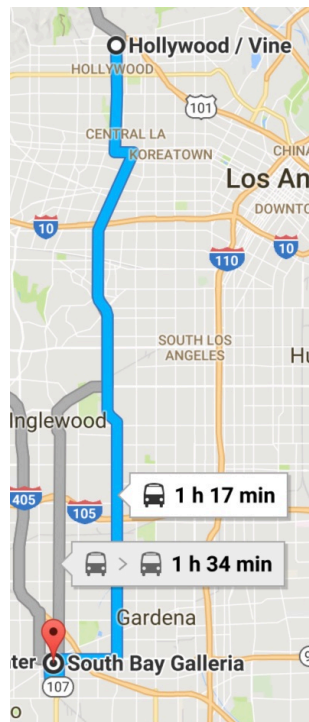


Figure 12. Map of Los Angeles County Bus route 210.

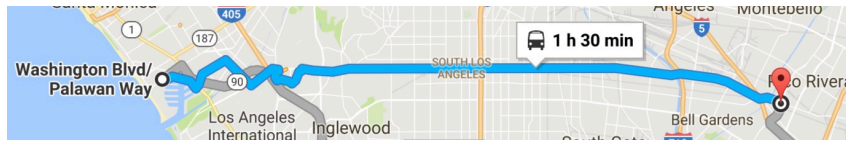


Figure 13. Map of Los Angeles County Bus route 108/358.



Figure 14. Installation shot of *Narrenschiff*. Roberts and Tilton. Los Angeles, CA. 2014.



Figure 15. Adrian Piper. *Catalysis IV*. Photograph of performance piece. 1970-1.



Figure 16. David Avalos, Louis Hock, and Elizabeth Sisco. *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation*. Mixed media. 1988.



Figure 17. Barbara Kruger. *School Bus*. 1997.



Figure 18. Daniel Martinez. *Field Notes from South Los Angeles: This World is a Fleshless One Where Madness, Love, and Heretics are All I Know*. Pigment print on Canson Infinity Baryata. 13.43 x 24 in (34.11 x 60.96 cm). 2013.



Figure 19. Daniel Martinez. *Field Notes from South Los Angeles: This World is a Fleshless One Where Madness, Love, and Heretics are All I Know*. Pigment print on Canson Infinity Baryata. 13.43 x 24 in (34.11 x 60.96 cm). 2013.



Figure 20. Daniel Martinez. *Field Notes from South Los Angeles: This World is a Fleshless One Where Madness, Love, and Heretics are All I Know*. Pigment print on Canson Infinity Baryata. 13.43 x 24 in (34.11 x 60.96 cm). 2013.



Figure 21. Daniel Martinez. *I Am Clear in My Mind But My Soul Has Gone Mad*. Pigment print on Canson Infinity Baryata. 13.43 x 24 in (34.11 x 60.96 cm). 2013.



Figure 22. Man One. Unnamed mural that resembles stylized graffiti text. No date. Image courtesy of <http://www.manone.com>.



Figure 23. Asco. *Spraypaint LACMA*. Photograph of intervention. Photograph by Harry Gamboa Jr. 1972.



Figure 24. “Sous Le Pavés, Le Plage!” (Under the paving stones, the beach!”. May 1968 graffiti. Paris.



Figure 25. Daniel Martinez. *Don't Bite the Hand That Feeds You*. Billboard. 1989.



Figure 26. Daniel Martinez. *Quality of Life*. Seattle. 1990-1991.

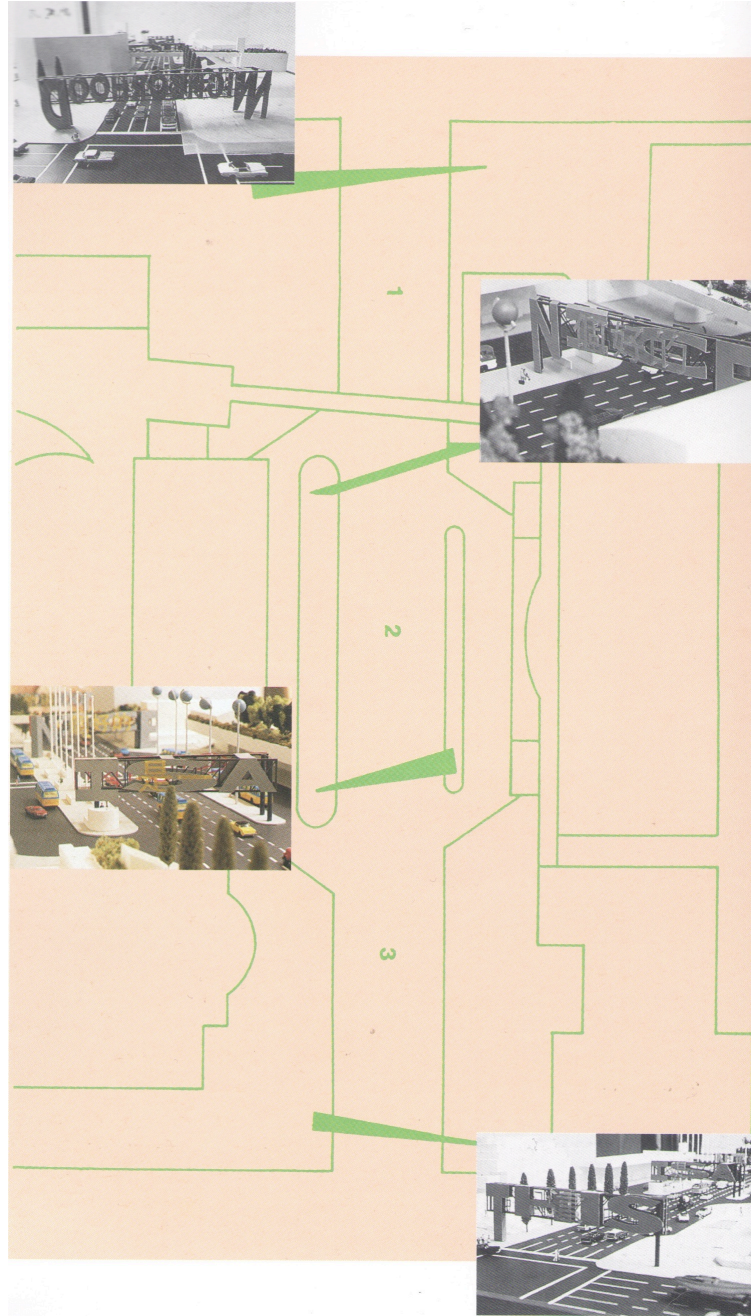


Figure 27. Daniel Martinez, Renée Petropoulos, and Roger F. White. *This Isa Nice Neighborhood*. Proposal for Moscone Center, San Francisco. 1991-1995.



Figure 28. Daniel Martinez. *Imagine the Very Worst....* Acrylic enamel on wood. 60” x 60.” 2013.

Day 4181

Day 17711



Figure 29. Daniel Martinez. *Confessions of the Flesh: Self-Portraits*. Polaroid photographs. 2012-2013.



Figure 30. James Rosenquist. *F-111*. Oil on canvas with aluminum. 10' x 86.' 1964-5.



Figure 31. Félix González-Torres. *Untitled*. Billboard installed in Manhattan. 1991.



Figure 32. Barbara Kruger. *Untitled (Surveillance Is Your Busywork)*. Billboard. 1985.



Figure 33. Mario Ybarra Jr. *Go Tell It #1*. Chromogenic color print. 48" x 60." 2001.



Figure 34. Installation shot of *Go Tell It #1* during “Public Speaking.” 2004.



Figure 35. Edward Burtynsky. *Highway #1, Intersection 105 & 110, Los Angeles*. Chromogenic print. 2003.



Figure 36. Sandra de la Loza and the Pocho Research Society of Erased and Invisible History. *The Displacement of the Displaced: Invisible Monument #3*. Plaque. 2002.



Figure 37. Sandra de la Loza and the Pocho Research Society of Erased and Invisible History. *The Displacement of the Displaced: Invisible Monument #3*. Installation shot. 2002.



Figure 38. Mario Ybarra Jr. *Barrio Aesthetics (El Mercadito Market)*. Billboard. 2013. Image courtesy Honor Fraser Gallery.

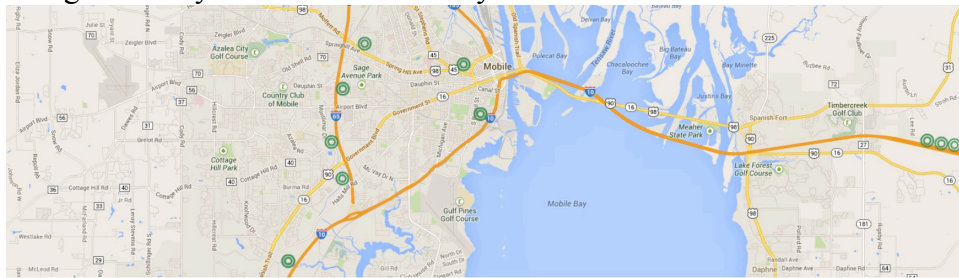


Figure 39. Map of *Barrio Aesthetics* billboard locations. Green circles indicate locations of murals.



Figure 40. Mario Ybarra Jr. *Barrio Aesthetics (Barbershop)*. Billboard. 2013.



Figure 41. Mario Ybarra Jr. *Barrio Aesthetics (Barbershop)*. Billboard. Installation shot. 2013.



Figure 42. Mario Ybarra Jr. *Sweeney Tate*. 2007. Installation view at the Tate Modern, London, UK.



Figure 43. Pepón Osorio. *En la Barbería No Se Lloro*. Mixed media installation. 1994.



Figure 44. Kori Newkirk. *Legacy*. Mixed media installation. 1999.



Figure 45. Mark Bradford. *Miss China Silk*. 4 C-Prints. 2005.

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