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LOOKING AT LOS ANGELES: Art & Artists on the Left Coast

Looking at Los Angeles | The California Biennial: Collectives, Conversations, and Collaborations

January 27th, 2011 by Lily Simonson



Agitprop The Third Party, 2010 Mobile interview cart: plywood, fabric, foam, amplifier, microphones, and hardware, 72 x 30 x 42 in. Installation at Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA Photograph courtesy of Colin Young-Wolff & Orange County Museum of Art

I first experienced the California Biennial in 2008 as a participant in [Mary Kelly's *Flashing Nipple Happening*](#). Kelly had recruited around five dozen young women to gear-up in black clothing and, using elaborate harnesses, strap blinking bicycle lights in front of our crotches and breasts. At the opening reception, we crouched behind walls and bushes and when Kelly gave the command, we ambushed the crowd from all sides. We were twinkling Matryoshka dolls, restaging our own restaging (from several days prior) of a 2007 restaging... of a 2005 restaging... of *The Flashing Nipple Show* street theater staged in protest of the 1971 Miss World pageant. Are you caught up yet? At the risk of sounding cliché, I have to invoke the "e" word. I cannot begin to describe how shockingly and profoundly empowering it was to careen, glowing-breast-and-crotch-first, through a museum courtyard of Campari-drinking art "insiders." Yet the happening was more about solidarity and galvanization less about mischievous upheaval. We were simultaneously tying ourselves to this activist lineage, while warmly destabilizing the staid contemporary tradition of biennials.

Though the 2008 California Biennial focused loosely on politically oriented and socially engaged practices, Kelly's was one of the only participatory works that it featured. But in the [current California Biennial](#), curated by Sarah Bancroft, collectives, collaborations, and interactive (a sometime taboo label) installations pop up throughout the exhibition. While Bancroft avoids the type of overarching curatorial themes that usually get Biennial organizers into trouble, the inclusion of numerous participatory practices is noteworthy. Perhaps the number of artists working in this way has remained steady, but they are proliferating within the walls of more traditional institutions.

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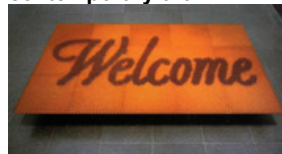
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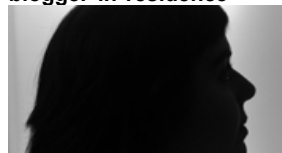
Hiroshi Sugimoto: Cabinet of Curiosities

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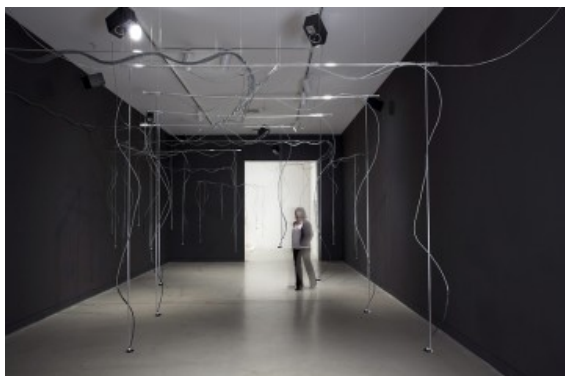
Brian Dick in collaboration with Christen Sperry-Garcia, The Nationwide Museum Mascot Project presents: "OCMAscot and Glowfittie Room," 2010. Recycled cardboard, newspaper, tissue paper, staples; piñata work by Piñata World, El Monte, California. Dimensions variable. Installation at Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA. Photograph courtesy of Colin Young-Wolff and Orange County Museum of Art.

Immediately after entering the museum, viewers can climb directly into [Brian Dick & Christen Sperry-Garcia's Glowfittie Room](#), which looks like a giant piñata, and make their own "light paintings" along its walls. If they are lucky, they will also be greeted by a giant neon papier-mâché [Museum Mascot](#), inhabited by one of the artists. Dick and Sperry-Garcia have made a number of these usually uncommissioned mascots for various museums throughout the country. The articulated impulse of the work is inclusiveness as opposed to institutional critique. But then again, the only thing more stressful and fraught than walking into a museum is walking into a giant Muppet-like creature.

A more overt challenge to museum public relations efforts can be found across the entryway in Camillo Ontiveros' [Free Entry \(California Biennial Law\)](#). In an implicit nod to Michael Asher's [contribution](#) to the 2010 Whitney Biennial, and an overt response to the [Arizona SB1070 Law](#), Ontiveros asks the Orange County Museum to essentially racially profile its visitors, and offer free entry to anyone who might be "an alien who is unlawfully present in the United States..." The text of Ontiveros's request is displayed on the wall, followed by OCMA's response. Ultimately, the museum declined, invoking the 1959 Unruh Civil Rights Act that prohibits racial discrimination "in all business establishments." Though his proposal was not enacted, Ontiveros [explains in Art Ltd.](#), "To think about success and failure in a project predetermines its outcome...I often see myself as the middleman who presents a platform upon which things happen."

Issues surrounding immigration from Latin America to the United States permeate numerous other participatory works in the show. Current members of UCSD's [b.a.n.g. lab](#) have collaborated to engineer the [Transborder Immigrant Tool](#). Each year, more than a hundred individuals die trying to cross the desert between Mexico and the United States, mostly from dehydration and exhaustion. b.a.n.g. lab has equipped used cell phones with a program to help those undergoing the treacherous journey find water sources and stay oriented. Several examples of these devices hang on the wall of OCMA, along with a brief explanation of the project.

Wu Tsang's [Dameo Todo \(Give Me Everything\)](#) centers on the artist's long-term engagement with Los Angeles nightclub The Silver Platter, which has become a legendary nexus, and haven, for transgender Latina women. In 2008, Tsang began hosting WILDNESS, a weekly party at the Silver Platter, which drew members of the LA art community into this sanctuary for trans immigrants. Woven from interviews, performance footage, and scenes of WILDNESS, the film is ultimately a collaboration with the subjects, implicating the maker and the viewer as subjects and players in the intersection of disparate worlds.



Nina Waisman, "Between Bodies," 2010. Photo courtesy of Joshua White; Courtesy Nina

Thea Liberty Nichols, Curator & Writer, Chicago

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Waisman.net and Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA.

[Nina Waisman](#)'s installation, *Between Bodies/Tijuana* consists of a long corridor filled with tiny speakers that dangle delicately from the ceiling at varying heights. As the viewer moves through the space, different speakers activate, projecting sounds recorded by Waisman while walking through Tijuana streets. More bodies mean more cacophony, and a dance emerges between the audience and the work.

[Agitprop](#) and [Finishing School](#) both respond directly to the Biennial, creating installations that are more akin to movie sets than static artworks. Agitprop's piece consists of a booth that [David White](#) moves through the museum galleries, interviewing museum-goers about various other works in the exhibition. He records these conversations and screens them on a monitor for other viewers to contemplate. Meanwhile Finishing School also directly incorporates viewers, asking them to become actors in a fictional film about biennials, entitled *54*. While they are not shooting, visitors will find their green screen set intact, with footage of other viewers-turned-actors looping on a monitor.

San Francisco artist [David Wilson](#) and the [Los Angeles Urban Rangers](#) usher viewers off the beaten museum path and into the wilds of Orange County and downtown LA, respectively. Wilson present viewers mimeographed sheets of handwritten, carefully illustrated instructions for a magic walk around the museum rain gutter, through the gas station, across the four-lane road, and down a cute pathway into a secret wild garden, like a little treasure hunt. This weekend, the Urban Rangers will offer a [walking tour](#) exploring the terrain of downtown Los Angeles.



Allison Wiese, "Untitled (Awning)," 2010. Aluminum and canvas 144 x 90 x 180 in. approximately. Installation at Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA. Photograph courtesy of Colin Young-Wolff and Orange County Museum of Art.

Of course plenty of other works in the Biennial engage viewers in less literal ways. [Stanya Kahn](#)'s video, entitled *It's Cool, I'm Good*, deploys the disturbing character that pops up in her other videos, leading us around sketchy-scapes with her semi-schizo monologues. This time, she's physically mangled, and keeps addressing us directly through the camera with jokes and unsettling stories. [Vishal Jugdeo](#)'s work, entitled *Thought Composition with Model of the World*, spills out into the audience's physical and sonic space. Lumber, a teakettle, light bulb, string, etc. concurrently exist inside the tv monitor and around us. The figures in the video fade in and out of conversation and the kettle begins to shriek so imploringly that you instinctively reach down to turn it off. As you make your way out of the museum, an outside-in awning by [Allison Wiese](#) hangs over the exit, asking, "SO WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO NOW?" California art may or may not congeal into some unified movement, but it looks like "we" are in it together.

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