

## PAVING THE ACCESS ROADS TO CULTURE

BY WILLIAM WILSON

On New Year's Eve, 1969, tiddy L.A. art folks had reason to feel smug. They had surfed '60s' waves of contemporary art movements from Op to Pop, from Happenings to Minimalism. A few perennial grouches were wondering what the new decade could do for an encore, but why worry?

Christmas brought books on the amusing new sensibility called Kitsch, the slightly raunchy, flip side of the coin called camp. There was a publication on "Art Povera," poor art that would involve itself in world events. After all, everything was art. There was talk of an interesting erotic art movement.

It didn't occur to anybody that these new movements would be co-opted by reality itself. The '60s' liberalism guttering on the hearth brought art a sense of all-embracing scope that threatened to dilute its identity to invisibility. Linda Lovelace and Russ Meyer could make more spectacular pornography than any still-picture artist. The Patricia Hearst case would outstrip the efforts of any performance artist, not to mention Evel Knievel.

That would become clear later. For the moment, one could bask in the secure knowledge that L.A. was the undisputed second capital of American contemporary art. Gallery Row on La Cienega Boulevard was the bustling hub of the art scene, lined with galleries of every stamp.

There were outposts in Westwood, Beverly Hills and Downtown.

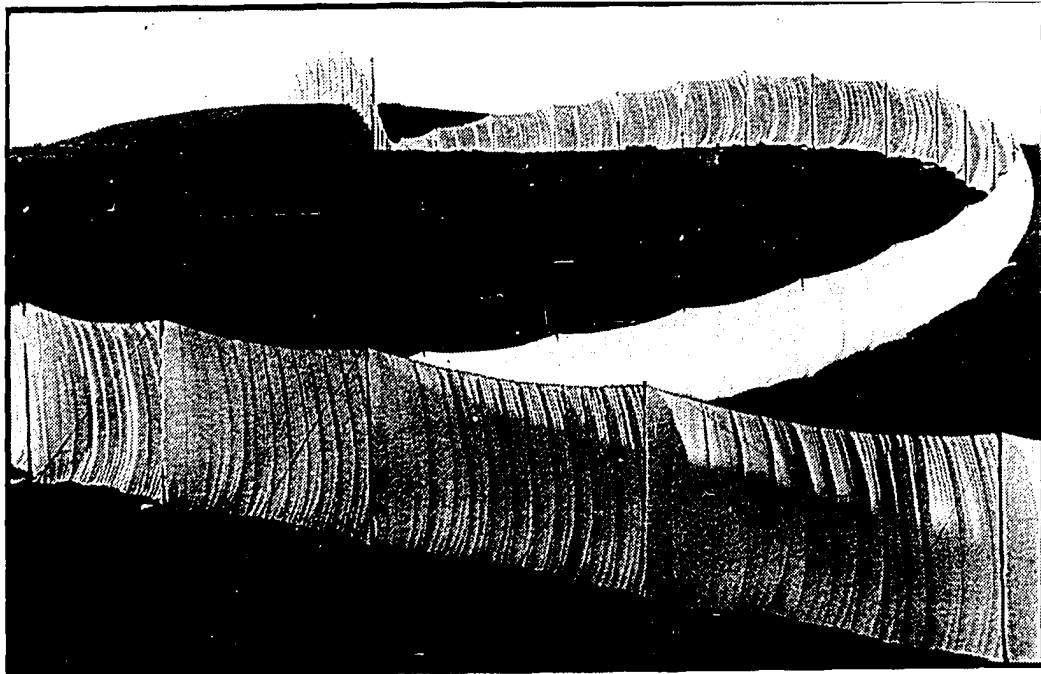
Today about one-third have gone out of business or moved off the row.

During the '70s, galleries were to close, move, shrink and open. Numerically, we came out about even (see box) but expensive La Cienega Boulevard was no longer the center. Galleries are scattered from Venice to Hollywood and Orange County operations are leaner and edged with malaise. A sense of slack has been partly taken up by new public and educational galleries (see box).

But on New Year's Eve, 1969, it could easily seem like the beginnings of the great second wave of the art boom. The Pasadena Museum of Modern art was brand new. In New York the Metropolitan Museum of Art had its first large-scale exhibition of modern art, "New York Painting and Sculpture 1940-1970." Gotham critics panned it, but what the heck.

The year 1970 itself offered few hints that epochal change was afoot. Claes Oldenburg created a huge dancing icebag for

ART '70/'80



Art of the '70s was as gigantic and unconventional as Christo's 1976, 23-mile "Running Fence," above, and as exquisite as Robert Graham's detailed small-scale "Torso," shown at left.

World Expo '70 in Osaka. The Bay Area was graced by two new, architecturally distinguished museums in Oakland and at UC Berkeley. Andy Warhol visited L.A. with his eccentric entourage for a retrospective at the Pasadena MOMA. The County Museum of Art presented a great exhibition surveying "The Cubist Epoch."

It was too bad about Mark Rothko killing himself in New York. Aside from that, everything was fine.

In 1971 a fissure appeared in the fault line dividing New Beginnings from Last Hurrahs. A new exhibitions hall for the Municipal Art Gallery opened in Barnsdall Park to warm murmurs of approval. The auction firm of Sotheby Parke Bernet launched an L.A. branch. Taken singly, such events were probably not of the magnitude of Israel's Tel Aviv Museum but they were encouraging signs of maturing sophistication in the Southland.

The negative side of the crack centered on contemporary art, noticeably at LACMA. The results of a massive curator-fos-

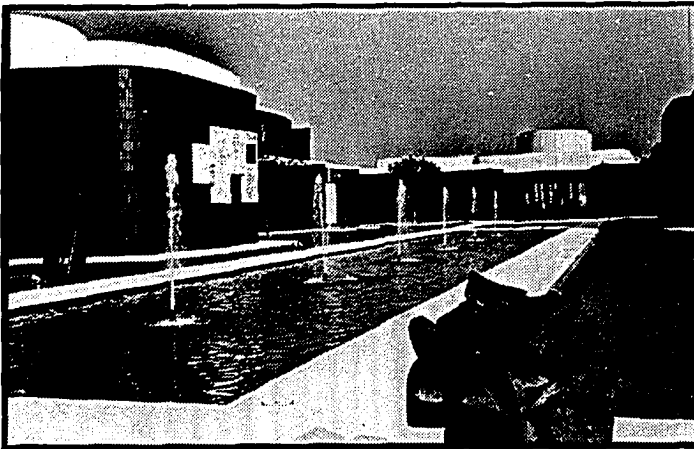
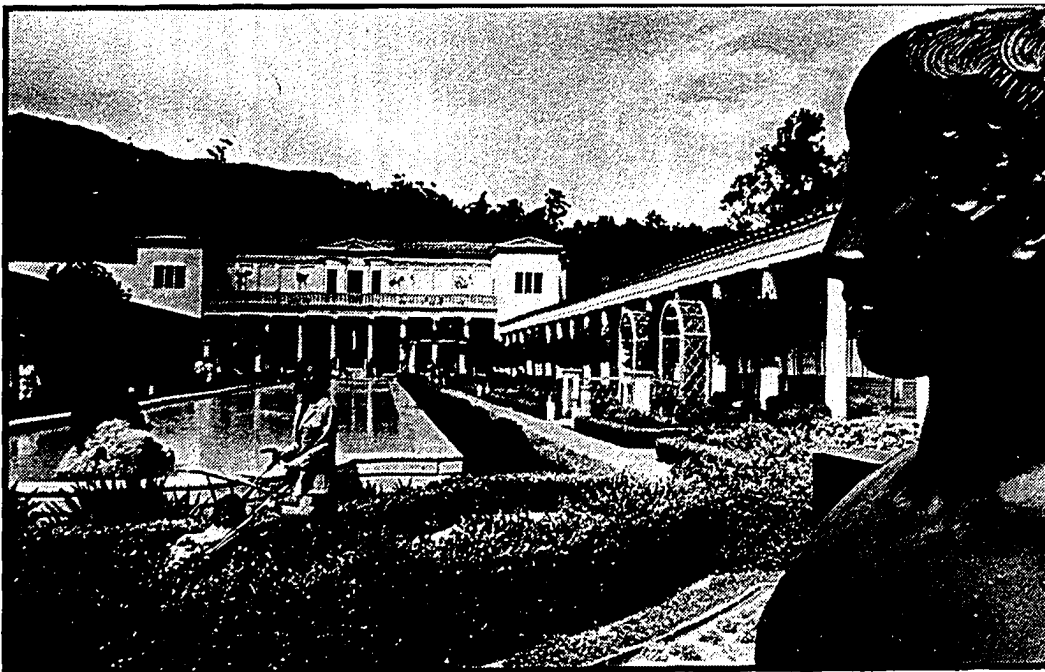
tered project called "Art and Technology" went on view. The exhibition had been several years in preparation. It involved matching contemporary artists with large companies whose facilities were to be used to produce works of art. It was all the technocratic dream of LACMA curator Maurice Tuchman. The project was expensive, time consuming and the source of bitter wrangles between artists and corporate sponsors. Documentation in the catalog was fascinating but the exhibition itself was mixed on the down side. It marked the end of large-scale risk-taking for LACMA modern art.

Tuchman and his colleague Vane Livingston then organized an exhibition of 11 Los Angeles artists for London's state-sup-

ported exhibition hall, the Hayward Gallery on Thames embankment. A relatively unknown participant was San Deigo-based Newton Harrison. He produced a project that presumably echoed a self-sustaining sea life system in indoor tanks. It was supposed to produce an abundance of catfish which Harrison proposed to cook for exhibition visitors, especially opening night VIP's. Somehow this harmless activity wounded British sensibilities and fomented an international flap involving the RSPCA, British diplomats and celebrities who demonstrated against the "slaughter" of innocent catfish. The controversy was a farce but it was more trouble for unconventional art.

Meantime, back at LACMA, black guards and preparators were in rebellion against the institution. A group organized an exhibition of neighborhood semi-amateur black art on a tennis court. It was a symptom of growing populist demands on art institutions by those impatient with their slowness and careful selectivity.

If art was going to invade life, then life would get even by visiting its values on art. Universities disgorged MFA recipients faster than the system could or would absorb them. Art was rapidly developing a disenfranchised population who wanted the



*Institutions that played important roles in Los Angeles' art life in the '70s were the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, top photo, and the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, left*

recognition of The System but despaired of the possibility. They came to form an alternative art culture that wanted a peer-group recognition system as opposed to the standard dealer-collector-critic-curator-institution system.

One symptom of these desires was the so-called Market St. Project. It proposed to put together exhibitions using a computer system in which artists, in effect, voted each other shows. It didn't last long.

In 1972, Fredrick S. Wight retired as di-

rector of the UCLA art galleries. Wight had played a cautious but crucial role for two decades helping put the Southland on the large art map. The timing of his retirement had a certain poetic aptness. Art was off in 40 divergent directions once regarded as none of its business.

LACMA held a half-baked exhibition of local black art. The Long Beach Museum of Art hosted "Visible/Invisible," a group of women artists clearly as involved with expressing feminist concerns as with art.

Artist-entrepreneur June Wayne released a study that purported to show sex discrimination toward female artists among art critics.

To anybody who likes art and people almost as much as they dislike aggravation and politics, all this agitation sometimes appeared destructive and self-serving. Much of the individual art it promoted was mediocre or plain bad.

In the end, of course, this howl was one of pain and had bearing on real matters. Grassroots movements like the Woman's Building contributed to the morale and aesthetic improvement of the people they championed.

Meantime, it sometimes appeared that art was simply to be everything that had never been before. Illustrator Norman Rockwell was belatedly recognized as a real artist. A retrospective exhibition visited San Francisco. A group of San Francisco performance artists visited the Newport Harbor Art Museum. One managed to get arrested. People were talking about Chris Burden, a young Southland art school graduate who recently had himself shot as an art piece.

The Newport director Tom Garver resigned for a post in San Francisco and Gerald Nordland moved to direct the UCLA galleries.

Nineteen seventy-three lasted 12 months but it sums up fairly quickly as more of the same. Picasso died at 91. In New York, arriviste collector Robert Scull sold his holding at auction for \$2 million-plus, to the intense aggravation of artists he had bought cheap and sold dear. The event hallmarked moves to gain artists a share of the accrual value of their works. Out here the banner has been carried by such groups as Artists for Economic Action and Artists Equity.

A scandal over mismanagement of Mark Rothko's estate was boiling into the

Watergate of the art world in a decade pocked with art scandal.

Back home, the inventory of everything as art droned on, sometimes amusingly. Are clocks art? Are bottles art?

Why not?

Such a cheerfully anarchic attitude makes some people understandably nervous. By year's end it was possible to observe a reaching out for something solid, traditional and secure. The County Museum presented the Ganz Collection of American Art, and a splendid Winslow Homer exhibition. Andrew Wyeth's art visited San Francisco and the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art was up to its coccyx in trouble.

Nineteen-seventy-four was the memorable year that the fates threw art in California a plot twist worthy of O. Henry. Pasadena Museum of Modern Art delivered itself into the hands of collector Norton Simon, effectively ending its function as a stylish, high-profile showcase for modern art in the West.

Concerned parties were so busy mourning the loss it actually took several years to sort out the positive significance of events in '74.

The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden opened in Washington, D.C., after controversy, in a doughnut-shaped bunker. More retrospective regret in California. Hirshhorn had once flirted seriously with ideas of housing his massive modern collections here.

Somehow the fact that we had *not* lost the Simon collections was overshadowed by dismay at the PMOMA collapse. Thus

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the significance of other events was diluted.

Malibu's J. Paul Getty Museum opened in new quarters, a Disneyland-like reconstruction of a Roman villa that mixed re-creations with authentic art. It drew some critical risibility and serious objection but the plant inspires affection and pleases crowds. In 1976 the museum became Getty's principle heir, potentially the richest museum in the country. Its decorative and painting collections have improved noticeably. Curator of antiquities Jiri Frel made solid and spectacular purchases like the Getty Bronze and a marble head by Scopas. Today, nobody is laughing and every strapped institution dreams of a philanthropic Getty.

UCLA opened doubled exhibition space in the new Fredrick S. Wight art galleries. Today, exhibitions of modern and contemporary art there are fairly rare. Space is dominated by usually excellent ethnic and tribal art exhibitions by the Museum of Cultural History, prints showings from the Grunwald Center for Graphic Arts and the annual exhibition of the UCLA Art Council. Nordland departed in 1977 and the galleries remain, quite happily, evidently, without a full-time director.

It all added up to a switch so spectacular only Nostradamus could have seen it coming. Swinging, trendy, exciting Lotusland had suddenly thrown the revelers out of the hall and sunk roots into history. Between Getty, Simon, Huntington, UCLA and LACMA galleries we were getting the history of art together. Acquisitions deemed impossible in the '60s continue to roll steadily into institutions.

Meanwhile, a large and talented population of artists wandered in the streets, a good many in rebellion against the system. What happened to the revolution? It was institutionalized—which is just what it wanted.

The L.A. Institute of Contemporary art opened as a self-help "alternative" institution. It provides a showcase for performance, video, conceptual and off-the-wall art forms. The Municipal Art Gallery at Barnsdall Park provides valuable service in showing everything from local potential to senior accomplishment without regard to race, creed, gender or, as far as I know, sexual preference. Otis/Parsons Gallery plans vanguard exchanges with New York since its recent absorption by Parsons School of Design.

With one massive reservation, the dawn of the '80s is promising. Outlying Newport Harbor and La Jolla museums devoted to the art of our times make solid contributions since reactivating after movings and refurbishings.

The recent probability of two new modern museums in central L.A. is bracing. The reservation of course here in Proposition 13 Land, is money. Projects will cost tens of millions to realize, launch and operate. It's obvious that if

the world's general troubles get worse, the lot of contemporary art is unlikely to get better even if crisis improves the product.

The balance of the decade was passed in sorting chaos into an orderly but noticeably changed pattern. Feminist, black and Chicano revolts became academic historical survey exhibitions at LACMA.

The Bicentennial functioned to underline womens' claims to artistic legitimacy with quilt exhibitions that rivaled abstract painting. It will be impossible to look back this New Year's Eve without the consciousness that women artists made the '70s look better.

In 1976, San Francisco's Asian Museum hosted "The Chinese Exhibition." It was our first glimpse of the grandiose "Treasures" exhibitions that peaked in '78 the decade's Grand Finale year.

They are huge crowd-pleasers, often educational and draw massive federal indemnities and corporate funding. Despite the fact that they have created all manner of problems for host museums, they will probably be with us in the '80s. They are safe, prestigious, and serve the ends of international cultural diplomacy.

The trouble with the elephantine growth of institutions and exhibitions is that they tend to diminish the significance of the individual sensibility, the private gallery, the solitary artist.

This decade produced a large, highly competent second generation L.A. vanguard. A few names register individual excellence in the mind—Laddie Dill, Guy Dill, Don Sorensen, Vija Celmins, Jean St. Pierre, Tom Wudl, and Tom Holste are among them. Most remain a blur after 10 years. This is partly because many conform to established main-stream styles. But a significant part of the problem has simply been insufficient exposure. The art world has been so preoccupied with its reorganization and survival as a mechanism that the jury is still out on the product.

Guessing by generalities, one sees a changed role for the '80s artist. Some will continue to expand present positions bordering on other disciplines until they disappear into those activities. The performance artist will get better and become a card-carrying theater person. This would be fine, since many borderline-discipline artists at the moment are only distinguished by their amateurism.

Given the continuation of present trends toward high competence, low originality and hunger for government and corporate financial support, the '80s artist is likely to become more a defender of the Establishment and status quo than an innovative outsider. But artists have a history of surprising us and I hope to God they do this time.

Meantime, the artists who have kept us awake in the '70s have been given short shrift in the decade and in this essay about it. One cannot face the final New Year's of the '70s without registering gratitude, albeit poorly.

For continuing growth and excellence in boggy times a saalam to Frank Stella, Richard Diebenkorn, Isamu Noguchi, Ed Moses, Peter Alexander and Joe Goode.

To realists and new realists who captured a chunk of the American sensibility in the '70s, a toast to George Segal, Duane Hanson, John DeAndrea, Richard Estes, Chuck Close, Terry Schoonhoven, Jim Doolin, Joyce Treiman and Don Lagerberg, who happens to be my best friend and quietly helped launch a local revival of portraiture.

To Sol LeWitt and Robert Irwin To Sol LeWitt for making conceptualism clear.

For making big art that combines the gee-whiz-golly impressiveness of M.L. Rushmore with real expressive eloquence hoist one to Christo, Michael Heizer, Richard Serra and Larry Bell.

For raising craftsmanship to the level of art, a goblet of Perrier to Robert Helm, Neda Al-Hilali and Ken Price.

To Lynda Benglis for shocking the unshockable critics by appearing nude in Artforum.

To miniaturists and poets for keeping the delicate imagination in tune, profound haiku verses to Roland Reiss, Bruce Houston, Anne and Patrick Poirier, Marvin Harden, Alexis Smith, Agnes Martin and Robert Graham, who belongs in several categories.

To Saul Steinberg and H. C. Westermann for obvious reasons.

To Joseph Beuys, Hans Haacke, Masami Teraoka and Ben Sakoguchi for eloquence, anger and social criticism.

To narrative artists who managed to tell us something a beaker of bubbly to Duane Michals, Allan Ruppersberg, Terry Allen, William Wylie and Robert Cumming, who is especially funny.

One should always celebrate eccentrics and metaphysicians. Let Alfred Jensen and Bob Bates stand for the whole. Now I feel better. But I know I've left somebody out . . . To George Orwell. May he be dead wrong. □