

# L.A.

## Undercover

### A Profile of Alternative Projects

by Sue Spaid

*Alternative is the alternative to not doing anything.*

—Dave Muller, Founder, Three Day Weekend.

In 1996, artist and lecture-organizer Gordy Grundy asked me to speak on the topic of "how to make it as an artist," as part of an ongoing lecture series sponsored by the Barnsdall Art Center (an educational facility associated with the Los Angeles Municipal Gallery) Student Advisory Committee. Not being an artist, but having worked with hundreds of artists over the years as a gallerist and curator, I knew full well that no one person could honestly solve this conundrum. I decided instead to host a talk show titled *Trailblazing the Economies of Art*, which blended informative interviews with musical entertainment. The talk show format seemed the best way to surmount this broad topic, since this approach enabled me to interview myriad artists who have indeed employed unusual tactics to make it. By introducing each participant with the musical theme of their choice and interspersing one-on-one interviews with artist Clifford LeCuyer's remarkable musical poems, the evening proved more invigorating than the typical panel discussion. Clearly, other L.A. art enthusiasts were beginning to rethink the need for new models, because 1997 ended up being a banner year for DIY (do it yourself) activities.

What makes most of L.A.'s alternative projects different from those found in many communities is that they are funded and originated by individuals, much the way art production is. While every community offers its own definition of "alternative"—which generally begets the response "alternative to what?"—this article seeks to explore the available possibilities posed by alternative projects in L.A. in this particularly active era rather than posing a definition of alternative per se.

It should be noted that non-profit exhibition spaces like Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, Santa Monica Museum of Art, as well as about 15 local university galleries, organize exhibits of emerging artists. Much of the DIY activity that has cropped up in the past few years has been in response to programming bottlenecks, which is the direct result of a greater surplus of graduating MFAs, inadequate

funding, and bureaucratic largesse. DIY situations not only offer a greater flexibility, but they run leaner and service more artists faster. L.A. is also home to a younger generation of gallerists who represent fascinating lesser-known artists, but maintain particular financial and exhibitional commitments that organizations considered alternative here try to avoid.

Thus every possibility for alternatives entails a significant process, the chance for courageous onlookers to experience new roles as innovative organizers who discover unusual contexts for art, flexible promoters who offer deserved artists exhibition opportunities, and practical proprietors who overcome the limited aesthetic opportunities mandated by the white cube.

#### The Neighborly Thing to Do

In the early nineties, The American Gallery, which occupied the space next door to Al's Bar, was considered the last remnant of the eighties downtown scene that catered to the presence of artists who were still residing in downtown lofts. These days, there are many ambitious artist-run spaces downtown, as well as artist-run spaces sprinkled throughout the communities in which artists actually reside. The longest running neighborhood gallery has been Highland Park's Random Gallery, which Farid Bashid and Kate Burroughs set up in 1993 alongside their frame shop. Random has coordinated 36 shows of local L.A. artists and features mostly figurative painting. Some exhibits have included the sculptural *Mammagery: Five Women Recreate the Breast*, Michael Arata's solo exhibit *I should stay home tonight...I have bad gas*, and *In the Pocket* (an annual exhibit of portable works by up to 75 artists).

POST, one of the most successful projects in recent years, is run by Habib Kheradyar, who had been the director of the Cerritos College Gallery. When that position ended with the 1995 school year, his decision to set up an exhibition program adjacent to his studio above the defunct artist-run space Detroit proved natural.

POST opened with a solo exhibit of Leonard Bravo, followed by Louanne Greenwald's crazy exploration of the artist's multiple roles as curator, artist, and "object of art." POST has originated some novel survival strategies, like presenting a solo exhibit by an artist who is included in a curated group show that's on view simultaneously. Like many artist-run spaces, it has grown to accommodate more sites, including an elevator shaft and a large room in the front of the building.

Since 1995, Voycheck Szaszor's Spanish Kitchen, another downtown exhibition space, has been focusing exclusively on group shows like Slater Bradley's *New Memory* and *Thread*. In 1997, computer graphics designer Crosby Haffner and artist Joe Klingl opened Uber Main ([www.ubermain.com](http://www.ubermain.com)), a remarkably gorgeous two-room space reminiscent of a Soho space, in their downtown loft. So far, they have sponsored two group shows, a two-person exhibit, and a memorable evening sampling Art Center grad student Jennifer Moon's delicious home-cooked insect delicacies (ants, crickets, worms, and water bug juice) and dancing amongst fascinating wall murals.

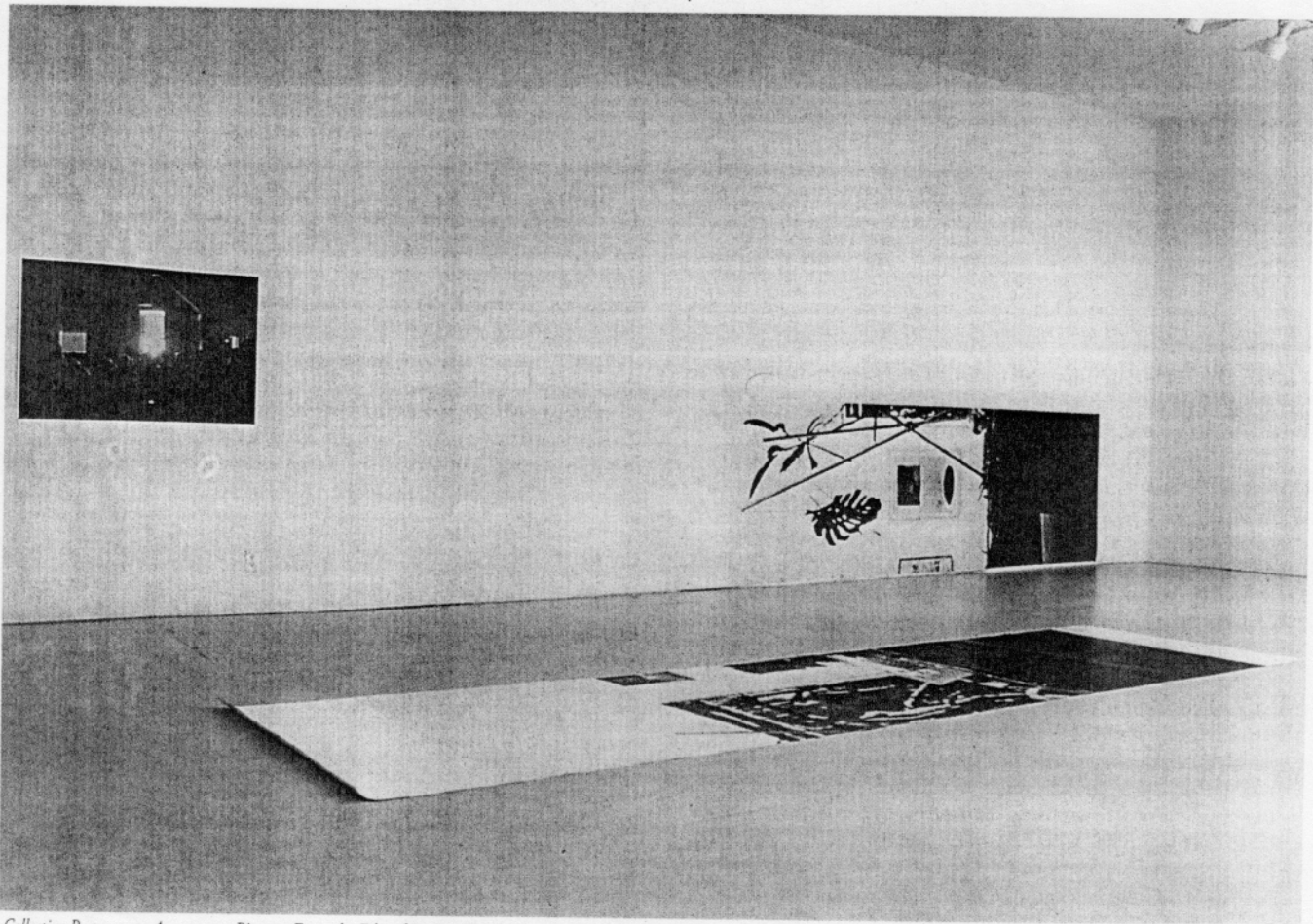
Dedicated through 1999, artist and curator John O'Brien's newest effort in the Brewery Arts Complex (an old building with 200 artist studios) at the Brewery Project ([www.usc.edu/dept/finearts/slide/brewery](http://www.usc.edu/dept/finearts/slide/brewery)) features exchange exhibits with European artists and group shows of recent L.A. art school graduates (organized by the respective graduate school administrations). *Travelers/E Viaggiatori*, the most recent exhibit, featured seven Umbrian artists and six L.A. artists and will eventually travel to Italy. Artist spaces in Marseille, Rome, Ljubljana, and Prague have expressed interest in doing exchange exhibits with the Brewery project. Contacts with European

artists were initiated during a Fulbright to Italy in 1995 and reinforced via O'Brien's previous venture, *Myth*, which invited artists from Prague and Rome to exhibit here. In 1996, O'Brien organized an exhibit of ten L.A. artists at the Ducal Palace in Venice and invited ten Umbrian artists to do a show in L.A..

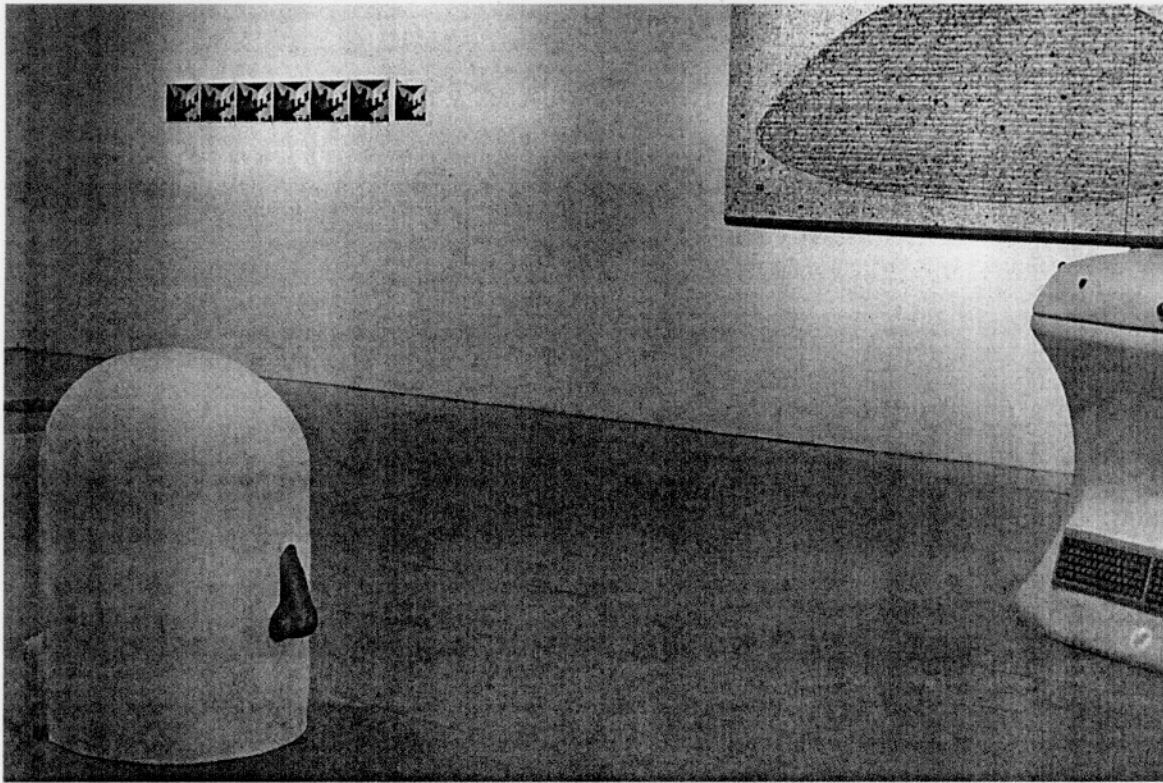
Indicative of using the resources to be found in your own backyard, a group of 21 fairly well known L.A. artists organized *The Eagle Rock Show* at the Eagle Rock Community Center. Perhaps the most notable event was the community cakewalk that accompanied this exhibit! In 1997, George's opened on the overly media-hyped Vermont strip in Los Feliz. To everyone's amazement, they managed to find artists (including Jory Felice, Sandy Hubshman, and Susan Kornfeld) who were willing to exhibit for one night only, which enabled George's to host 30 openings in 30 days between October 10 and November 8. Stay tuned for upcoming unconventional formats at George's.

In 1997, Brent Petersen, a UCLA grad student, and artist Mark Grotjahn opened Room 702, a truly elegant and well-lit space on the eastern edge of Hollywood, just below Los Feliz. Tending to focus on solo exhibits by artists still in graduate school, Room 702 opened with an exhibit by Evan Holloway, followed by San Francisco artist Scott Hewicker's op-art-inspired pastel wall paintings, and UCLA grad student Jason Meadows' fully hand-crafted redwood picnic table floating upside down.

Since February 1996, Culver City's Purple, artist Jesse Rivard's pet project, has churned out 18 group, solo, and two-person exhibits. One of the most notable 1997 solo exhibits was UCLA grad John



*Collective Responses to Anonymous Pictures From the Files of Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (Lace)* on the Occasion of Its 20th Anniversary, 29 May - 26 July 1998, installation view. Photo by Martin Cox.



*Annuale 1998*, curated by Franklin Sirmans at LACE, 9 aug. - 20 sept. 1998, installation view. Foreground left: Ceres Madoo, *Model 1*, 1998, plaster, metal frames, foam, plastic switch. Foreground right: Ceres Madoo, *Inspected by #19*, 1998, plaster, metal frames. Background left: Kira Lynn Harris, *Untitled (Watch your step)*, 1998, mixed media. Background right: Madison Webb, *Urna Major*, 1997, oil on paper.

Geary's *Devil Tour '94*, which comprised artifacts and prints from the video that documented his public appearances dressed in a devil's costume. Purple exhibited I.C.U. (an association of L.A. and San Francisco graffiti artists working under the umbrella of In Creative Unity), before I.C.U. launched their own space. Purple integrates music whenever possible and sometimes has D.J.s spinning during openings.

#### Home Is Where the Art Is

Perhaps L.A.'s most unusual and historic home/neighborhood project is the annual Fourth of July L.A. River Festival sponsored by Brett Goldstone and friends. This group effort initially began in 1982 as *Art Attack*, but by 1987 it had evolved into an annual event known as the *Steam Show*, which centered around a core group of artists whom Goldstone met while hanging around UCLA's grad studios. At one time or another, painters Steve Hurd and Monique Prieto, video artist Gina Lamb, sculptors Robert Gero and Chico MacMurtrie, and performance artists Skip Arnold and Chenoweth/Berman et al. have participated alongside *Steam Show* perennials Tim Quinn, Lauren Tova, and Roland Jack Nault. In 1996, the First L.A. River Festival took place in the Hahamungna (a.k.a. Arroyo Seco) tributary of the L.A. river, when *The Steam Show* joined efforts with Lewis MacAdams and Friends of the L.A. River. Held off-site in a vacant dirt lot, the Second L.A. River Festival included Liz Young's smile-clamped parade-inspired examination of celebrities' masochistic tendencies, Lynne Berman's loopy spacious drawings hidden inside a shack, poetry readings organized by MacAdams, music provided by The Losers and plenty of barbecued whatever. Goldstone set up a steam-powered amusement ride (a wooden boat with Maori-inspired wood carvings) and Tim Quinn positioned his kid-generated giant Knight on wheels (with chess

pawns sitting on shelves bouncing as the kids moved). Literally hundreds turn out every year for this time-tested extended-family gathering.

Given the number of people who have generously transformed their living quarters into exhibition spaces throughout the nineties, one could say that this has been the decade of the home gallery in L.A.. Many more artists not only presented their first solo exhibits in someone's home, but got reviewed and made sales! L.A.'s most enduring example is Kenneth Riddle's Bliss, which celebrated its tenth anniversary in 1997 with a wide-ranging exhibit of 46 artists at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibits. Since 1987, Bliss has hosted about 36 exhibits involving 65 artists in at least two rooms of his lovely California craftsmen-style home in Pasadena. Jorge Pardo's gallery debut inaugurated Bliss, and since then artists like Jennifer Steinkamp, Sally Elesby, and Adam Ross have presented solo exhibits of their work. Given its Pasadena location, it has turned into a natural outpost for Art Center grads and artists looking for a more intimate setting for their work.

In 1991, Russell Crotty and Laura Gruenther opened the Guest Room, which enabled a diverse range of artists, such as Kevin Sullivan, Kathy Chenoweth, and Francis Stark, to present their first solo exhibits in their home's guest room. The very next year, Rory Devine launched TRI, which was originally meant to feature shows of one work by three artists, but actually became notorious for much larger group shows such as *The Laura Show*, which featured many women named Laura; *Not Men*, which presented eight women painters; the novel *Tri-sexual*, and several solo shows. By 1993, TRI had evolved into a commercial venue at a new site and gave Kevin Hanley, Lutz Bacher, and Trudie Reiss, among others, their first L.A. solo shows. Brian Butler followed suit with 1301, a home gallery on the ground floor of his Santa Monica apartment.



Miriam Dym, *New Planning* (April 1998), paintings, foam and fluorescent lights. Post Gallery, L. A.

Today's home galleries are quite efficient, as proprietors specify their boundaries — most have limited hours or are open only by appointment. Most proprietors hold regular jobs and the home galleries serve to mobilize the particular communities that support a specific home gallery's program. Artist Dave Muller's Three Day Weekend, which makes use of the dozens of annually occurring three and four-day holidays, is perhaps the most adaptive home gallery, since it began in his downtown studio in 1994, relocated to his house in 1995, and recently moved to his new studio. Three Day Weekend occurs spontaneously, avoids systematic programming, and enjoys the flexibility to take hiatus because it has been designed with survival in mind. Muller considers "the short-coming of alternative spaces" to be that "they seem inherently limited, because people don't seem to be able to figure out how to grow organically as their lifestyles change." He believes that as long as people still hold criticisms of the existing institutions, there's no reason to dump the projects and assume the institutions. Moreover, one can't criticize the institutions without providing alternative examples. Being on the road for his job has proved a boon rather than a thorn and has enabled Muller to mount shows in Tokyo, Hamburg, Vienna, Malmö, and most recently, London. Visitors to Three Day Weekend can expect to partake in some project like coloring Easter eggs or working on drawings.

In 1996, artist and all-around pep leader Laura Paddock organized two neighborhood-oriented exhibits in her Pasadena home, a practice that she sporadically continues in her Eagle Rock quarters. In the summer of 1996, curator Virginia Rutledge initiated Bunny Yeager LA, a garage space that sporadically sponsors solo exhibits of unknown works by known artists like Boris Mihalov and Mike Bidlo. Kimberli Meyer recently installed work in the same space, which is alternatively organized by Ren Wang as Chuck. Still further

south, Charles Parson recently established Marilyn, an apt name for a site (Miss Monroe was actually photographed there in the fifties) in which Parson's refurbished garage is totally dedicated to video and performance.

Several home galleries are more regular in their attempts to provide serious alternatives. In 1997, Sarah Gavlak, an unabashed commercial dealer who participates in art fairs and the secondary market, opened Sarah Gavlak Projects to exhibit artists such as Dean Sameshima, Kathleen Johnson, and Susan Lutz. The works exhibited at Gavlak Projects spread throughout her home, a previous Jorge Pardo-designed residence, from her living room to her bedroom and into her bathroom, and mingle along the way with the yellow, purple, and orange-red remnants of Pardo's decor.

Jane Hart purchased her Beachwood Canyon home in 1997 with an eye to designating the entire second story as the exhibition space for Lemon Sky, a project Hart currently organizes with Bill Radawec, a collaborator in the early nineties two-home site Domestic Setting. Lemon Sky opened with a solo exhibit by New York artist Alyson Shotz that included a mesmerizing video and a related installation of small crushable objects that extended from the wall inside the house out onto the deck. Particularly interested in installations that address some aspect of the domestic in connection with the space, Lemon Sky's upcoming exhibits include Phyllis Green's modular investigations of Hart's home's scale and Jonathan Williams' site-specific painting installation. Not surprisingly, the more intimate site of a home gallery opening lends an atmosphere that becomes essential to the show's vitality.

#### Member Sponsored

In addition to the variety of artist-run and home galleries, there are several non-profit organizations that make vital contributions to the