X·TRA

Reflections on Walter Hopps in Los Angeles

Ken Allen

Ed Kienholtz, *Walter Hopps Hopps Hopps*, 1959. Mixed media, 87 x 42 x 21 in.

With Walter Hopps' passing in late March of 2005, the art world lost one of its keenest curatorial minds.[1] Hopps was an iconoclastic figure who embodied the free-wheeling climate of the "culture-boom" years of the early 1960s in which American artists and American museums seemed to carry the mantle of modernism as well as renew the avant-garde experiments begun in Europe earlier in the twentieth century. Hopps ended his career as curator of 20th century art and the founding director of the Menil Collection in Houston and as adjunct senior curator for the Guggenheim Museum in New York, but in approach and attitude he was the product of the sparse cultural landscape of postwar Los Angeles. Born in Glendale in 1932, Hopps grew up in

a period in which artistic modernism was a kind of secret history in Los Angeles, a city that saw a series of conservative backlashes against progressive ideas of many stripes during the early Cold War from abstract painting to public housing. It was this atmosphere that contributed to Hopps' lifelong commitment to cultivating a public for new and ambitious art in a way that both increased and intensified its audience. Responsible in large part for drawing attention to the burgeoning Los Angeles art world beginning in the late 1950s, Hopps' special talents might be best defined by looking back at his early career as it shifted from promoting a number of artist friends to participating in a "scene" which exemplified the particular combination of creativity and commodification that characterized the 1960s.

According to Hopps himself, he attempted to carve out a unique position within the tradition of curators and "museum men" from the beginning of his career at the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon) in the early 1960s. As he told an interviewer in 1987, "even in the Pasadena days, as I got to know Michael Fried, he would curse me, saying, 'You just aren't part of the profession at all. You're a damned anthropologist.' And I would say, 'You're damned right I am.'"[2] Hopps explained that he cultivated relationships with artists of different backgrounds and temperaments, and while he was always conscious of their distinct visual languages he attempted to remain above the fray of the kinds of value judgements often made by critics, dealers and the artists themselves. He combined a closeness and loyalty to artists with a kind of participant-observer role remarked upon by Fried, a forceful critic at the start of his career at the time.

But Fried's comment also gets at a part of Hopps' character, which grew out of his education in the sciences. Born into a family of physicians, he was home-tutored before attending the Polytechnic School in Pasadena and Eagle Rock High School, where he excelled at math and science. In 1950, he enrolled at Stanford, but left shortly thereafter to study microbiology at UCLA. His aptitude in the sciences did not limit his curiosity about the arts, however, and it was during a high school trip to see the best collection of modern art in the area, at the home of Walter and Louise Arensberg in Hollywood, that his interest was seriously piqued. Hopps made several return visits to see the tremendous examples of surrealism, cubism, the sculpture of Brancusi and especially the work of Marcel Duchamp, which particularly intrigued the young student and could be conceived as a series of experiments about the nature of art and aesthetics. As Hopps would later demonstrate when he mounted the show he was most noted for, the first career retrospective of Marcel Duchamp at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1963, the sense of an exhibit as a finely-tuned experiment, as an occasion in which bring together sensitive visual material and then to observe the interaction between art objects, ideas, artists and the public, was central to Hopps' approach. But the results of this show–a galvanized Los Angeles art world and international media attention–were preceded by a number of earlier activities in which Hopps honed his skills as an arts organizer.

Hopps' transition from college science major to arts impresario in the mid-1950s is marked by his interest in jazz and his earliest attempts to bring a wider audience to contemporary art in Los Angeles.[3] As young students, Hopps, Jim Newman (later director of the Dilexi Gallery in San Francisco) and the artist Craig Kauffman organized jazz concerts in the early 1950s under the name Concert Hall Workshop. In the summer of 1954, Hopps and Newman spent time together in San Francisco exploring the work of a group of artists, most of whom came out of the abstract expressionist milieu that had developed at the California School of Fine Arts (which became the San Francisco Institute of Art).[4] These artists, such as Hassel Smith, James Kelly, Julius Wasserstein, Roy De Forest, Sonia Gechtoff, Wally Hedrick, and Jay DeFeo, exhibited at a few dynamic

galleries in San Francisco committed to new, local work, such as the King Ubu Gallery (which later became the “6” Gallery) and the East & West Gallery. Inspired by the creative energy and dadaist spirit of these galleries and fascinated by the work of the artists they represented, Hopps wanted to bring what he found in San Francisco to Southern California. While attending UCLA around this time, he had founded a gallery in Los Angeles called Syndell Studio, which he operated with his first wife Shirley and the poet Ben Bartosh. In a bizarre building in Brentwood constructed of old telephone poles painted white, Syndell presented a mix of San Francisco and Los Angeles artists. As Hopps has remarked, Syndell functioned for him “like a discreet laboratory. I didn’t care if four or five people came, as long as there were two or three that were really engaged.”[5]

But along with this rather private endeavor, Hopps was inclined to try to bring this work to a larger public and conceived of a large survey of West Coast abstract painting called *Action*. Held in May of 1955 under the auspices of the Concert Hall Workshop group, the detailed exhibition announcement reveals Hopps’ interest and struggle to secure a public place for the exhibit. Originally conceived for a super market space on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, then slated for the Frank Lloyd Wright Pavilion (the Hollyhock House) at Barnsdall Park, the announcement states that “because of pressures of certain groups in Los Angeles who have always been in opposition to contemporary art we found the usage of the Wright Pavilion unfeasible.”[6] After proposing to use outdoor theater spaces also controlled by the city, the Action show was finally mounted on the Santa Monica Pier, in the merry-go-round building rented by Hopps for $80 for the week and therefore “subject to no pressures.”[7] Because the Concert Hall Workshop was the main sponsor of the “merry-go-round show,” as it is often called, it is not surprising that recorded jazz music was playing throughout the show, adding to the unusual mix of abstract art within the amusement park atmosphere of the pier. The flyer text states that this combination of music and visual art “implies only aesthetic compatibility, not a reciprocal relationship.”[8] Because this was the first large-scale exhibit of California “action painting” in a public venue, the show is described in the text as “an attempt to begin to provide the concepts and facilities for the exhibiting of indigenous contemporary works.”[9] The fact that this show was followed by *Action 2*(“Action squared”) the following year, which included many of the same artists but in a more refined venue, is proof that these “concepts and facilities” were beginning to take root in Los Angeles.[10]

Action 2 was the result of the collaboration between the “6” and the East & West Gallery in San Francisco and the two galleries in Los Angeles that had established themselves as places for local, avant-garde art in the year since the first Action show, Syndell Studio and Edward Kienholz’s Now Gallery in the Turnabout Theater on La Cienega, where the exhibition was actually held. The two main organizers of *Action 2*, Hopps and artist and poet Robert Alexander met through Alexander’s friend Wallace Berman, a central figure among a number of artists working in collage and assemblage outside of the network of art schools and annual city shows that constituted the most visible aspect of the Los Angeles art world at the time. The change in the size and location of the second *Action* show, and the lack of any accompanying music, marks a further refinement of the presentation of the avant-garde in Los Angeles and an interest in the attracting a different public. From the work of twenty-three artists installed in the spectacular display context of an amusement park building on a public pier to the presentation of the work of twelve artists hung in a gallery space located on La Cienega in West Hollywood — a street that was to become known as “gallery row” in the mid-1960s — *Action 2* marks a renewed ambition to carve out a new space for vanguard art within the cultural landscape of Los Angeles.[11]

Charles Brittin, Ferus Alley (Bob Alexander, John Reed, Wallace Berman, Juanita, Walter Hopps), Los Angeles, California, ca. 1957. Used with permission.

The exhibition brochure for *Action 2* was designed and printed by Robert Alexander in collaboration with Hopps and includes tipped-in, black and white photographs of paintings by Craig Kauffman, Jay DeFeo, Sonia Gechtoff and a collage by Alexander himself. These images are accompanied by a series of short, poetic statements that tellingly illuminate the spirit in which Hopps conceived of his activity in this period. As he remarked on the conception of these texts, Hopps recalled that he and Alexander "just talked it through," echoing the improvisational style of many of the works on display.[12] The introductory text, following the title page, encapsulates the mix of serious intent and bohemian attitude that surrounded the Action shows:

WE CAN MAKE, HANG, WRECK, SHOW, sell or enjoy them, but it's "….almost impossible for us to measure the efficacity [sic] of a work of art which we have written or painted, since true admiration…..is almost always accompanied by an insurmountable uneasiness"[*ellipses and capitals original*].[13]

Hopps has admitted that he invented the portion of the passage within the quotation marks, but it is printed in such a way to suggest an authoritative text has been excerpted, although the uneven ellipses and use of the incorrect "efficacity" lean toward parody. [14] Another cryptic message declares:

paintings (the other works too) demand being seen (under a variety of circumstances); sometimes they're good to trade for other things.

observe, & involve even yourself.[15]

Hopps and Alexander may be referring to Kienholz's penchant of bartering art work for services here, but the last line emphasizes the kind of democratic, open-ended aesthetic experience which the show was designed to offer. The most radical aspect of the show was a gesture of pure dadaist aggression performed by Alexander when he knocked a hole in the gallery wall clean through to the alley behind the building and pulled in the tall weeds and vines that were growing there, leaving them sticking into the exhibit space.[16] This piece, a precursor to later alterations of museum and gallery spaces of the 1960s, was surely meant to represent the anarchical spirit of the "outlaws," as he liked to identify Wallace Berman and himself, and one with which Hopps still identified years later.[17]

But these two shows preceded the endeavor for which Hopps is most remembered in the LA art world, the founding of the Ferus Gallery with Edward Kienholz in 1957. Kienholz's 1959 piece,*Walter Hopps, Hopps, Hopps*, is a cunning assemblage portrait of his business partner, but one which literally embodies the contradictions that Ferus quickly came to represent as the contemporary art market developed in Los Angeles. In this piece, Kienholz altered a popular gas station advertisement of the time, the Bardahl Man, to make a unique contribution to the modernist tradition of dealer portraits. Hopps is represented as a street hustler hawking paintings from under his jacket as if they were hot merchandise. He shows off mini-paintings by Willem deKooning, Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock, in order from top to bottom. The reverse of the figure reveals a series of compartments containing various notes and items pertaining to Hopps' work as a dealer. In the box behind his head, for instance, can be found a long list entitled, "Major Artists I Want to Show," which doesn't include a single local artist, but consists of puns on the names of major New York artists such as, "Willem de Conning," "Franz Climb," "Jasper Cans," "Adolph Gothis," "Robert Nothingwell" and "Jackson Potluck." Other compartments are labeled "Important People w/influence or money" and "Competitors and Other Un-informed Types." According to Hopps, Kienholz was criticizing his preference for New York School painters over any of the Los Angeles artists he represented, including Kienholz himself.[18]

The piece is striking in its indictment of the local and national art worlds within which Los Angeles artists such as Kienholz had a stake. As Hopps's founding partner in the Ferus Gallery, only Kienholz could make such a biting caricature and perhaps only he was willing to challenge the shift in the gallery's direction, from a cooperative arrangement devoted to the California avant-garde to a commercial endeavor positioning itself to represent New York artists in Los Angeles. As a new partner and director of Ferus, Irving Blum imposed a vision of the gallery that was resisted by many of its artists. He urged Hopps to streamline their operation by reducing the roster of California artists and to widen the scope of the enterprise by utilizing his East Coast connections in order to arrange joint representation for New York artists in Los Angeles. In this, Ferus would be competing with other local galleries that showed New York painting, but the cache and notoriety the gallery had developed through its support of local avant-garde artists gave it an edge that would be fully exploited as the 1960s unfolded. Ultimately, Blum's blueprint made the gallery into the centerpiece of the rapid rise of a new Los Angeles art market in the 1960s. So the figure in Kienholz's dealer portrait, although unmistakably Hopps in his horn rimmed glasses and black coat and thin tie, can also be seen as a representation of Irving Blum's influence on the gallery. Shortly after this piece was made in 1959, in fact, Ferus opened the 1960 season with a show entitled *14 New York Artists* that included works by deKooning, Kline, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, Hoffman, Motherwell and others. This was the first time Ferus had shown work other than that by Los Angeles and San Francisco artists. By this time, the gallery had moved across the street in a new, more

professional space designed by Blum. As Hopps remarked at a recent museum talk, the new Ferus space "was slicker than deer guts on a door knob."[19]

Kienholz's portrait ultimately represents Hopps' greater ambitions as a new Los Angeles art scene got off the ground in the early 1960s. It shows him as the tireless promoter of contemporary art which he was, carefully cultivating a collecting public through art history courses he gave at UCLA Extension, that helped introduce the avant-garde to collectors such as Betty Asher, Monte Factor, Fred and Marcia Weisman, and Ed Janss. After leaving Ferus and consulting at the Pasadena Art Museum where he officially became a curator in 1962 and then director in 1964, Hopps went on to mount many groundbreaking shows, including an early survey of pop art, *New Paintings of Common Objects* and the Duchamp retrospective in 1963. Picked to curate the U.S. section of the Sao Paolo Biennial in 1965, one of the first extensions of the international art fair beyond Europe, Hopps' earlier efforts were beginning to pay off. He would continually face resistance from more conservative members of museum boards, however, and never alter his idiosyncratic working hours and sometimes autocratic management style which lead him to leave jobs in Los Angeles and later Washington D.C.. In a 1965 column in Frontier magazine, Philip Leider (then editor of L.A.-based *Artforum*) provided a sense of just exactly how valuable Hopps was to the Los Angeles art community in this period:

> The Duchamp exhibition climaxed almost a decade of the most intense activity on behalf of the contemporary art scene by Hopps. Practically living in studios in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles, Hopps acted as a kind of one-man liaison between avant-garde artists in the three cities. His friendship with countless artists, including Rauschenberg, Johns, Conner, Diebenkorn, Kienholz, et. al., extends to the earliest days of their careers, and as curator at the Pasadena museum, he exhibited young artists such as Ruscha and Goode before they had ever been seen in commercial galleries. He was instrumental in the development of many private collections of contemporary art in Los Angeles, and to this moment he can be credited, by coaxing, cajoling, teaching and demanding, with bringing more important contemporary art into Southern California than any other single figure.[20]

Having returned to the area for his first local project in decades, Hopps passed away shortly after celebrating the opening of a tremendous survey of the assemblage work of George Herms he curated at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in March. As Doug Harvey noted in his *LA Weekly*review of the show, "It isn't very often you get to orchestrate your own requiem, but Walter Hopps–who once compared curating to conducting a symphony–has managed it neatly."[21] Herms was one of Hopps' oldest friends and a member of the original group of "outlaws," who pushed the boundaries of the Los Angeles art world in the 50s and 60s with gritty and poetic, found-object sculpture that embraced the lived experience of the jazz, drugs, sex and love which defined the era. As a tribute to the spirit in which Hopps began his career in Los Angeles, nothing could have been more fitting.

Ken Allan received his Ph.D. in Art History at the University of Chicago in June 2005 with a dissertation on the relationship between artistic practice and social space in postwar L.A. entitled, "Making the Scene: Assemblage, Pop Art and Locality in 1960s Los Angeles."

FOOTNOTES

1. Support for the preparation of this article was provided by an ACLS Dissertation Fellowship in American Art, with funding from the Henry Luce Foundation.↲
2. "Pasadena Art Museum: Walter Hopps," Joanne L. Ratner, interviewer, October 11, 1987, Department of Special Collections, Oral History Program, University Research Library, University of California Los Angeles, 1990, p. 36.↲

3. For a more detailed reading of Hopps' activities and his collaboration with Robert Alexander and Wallace Berman in this period, see my "Creating An Avant-Garde in 1950s Los Angeles: Robert Alexander's Hand-Printed Gallery Brochure in the Archives of American Art," Archives of American Art Journal, Vol. 42, Nos. 3-4, 2002.↲
4. Much of this account of the history of the period leading up to the Action show is drawn from the "James Newman Oral History Interview," Paul Karlstrom, interviewer, May 13, 1974, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.↲
5. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, "Walter Hopps hopps hoppsoart curator," Artforum, February 1996.↲
6. Action exhibition flyer, Craig Kauffman papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.↲
7. Ibid.↲
8. Ibid.↲
9. Ibid.↲
10. The artists included in Action were James Kelly, Sonia Gechtoff, Adelie Landis, Paul Wonner, Bill Brown, Robert Craig Kauffman, Hassel Smith, James Bud Nixon, Relf Case, Madeleine Diamond, Gilbert Henderson, Larry Compton, J. DeFeo, Wally Hedrick, David Stiles, Richard Diebenkorn, Roy De Forest, Richard Brodney, Julius Wasserstein, Jack Lowe, Paul Sarkisian, Phil Rober, and James Corbett.↲
11. The artists included in Action 2 were Fred Wellington, Paul Sarkisian, James Kelly, Gilbert Henderson, Sonia Gechtoff, Elwood Decker, Julius Wasserstein, Gerd Koch, Robert Craig Kauffman, Wally Hedrick, J. DeFeo, and i.e. alexander. Robert Alexander often signed his poetry and artwork with the name "i. e. alexander."↲
12. Walter Hopps, telephone interview with the author, March 25, 2002.↲
13. Action 2 exhibition brochure, Sonia Gechtoff papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.↲
14. Walter Hopps, telephone interview with the author, March 25, 2002.↲
15. Action 2 exhibition brochure, Sonia Gechtoff papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.↲
16. Walter Hopps, telephone interview with the author, March 25, 2002.↲
17. Robert Alexander quoted in Sandra Leonard Starr, Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art (Santa Monica: James Corcoran Gallery, 1988), p. 82.↲
18. Walter Hopps, Kienholz: A Retrospective (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996), p. 32.↲
19. Walter Hopps, "Walter Hopps and George Herms in Conversation," March 8, 2005, Santa Monica Museum of Art.↲
20. Philip Leider, "Culture and Culture-Boom," Frontier, April 1965, p. 25.↲
21. Doug Harvery, "Herms the Messenger, Hopps Down the Rabbit Hole," LA Weekly, April 15-21, 2005, p. 38↲