Exquisite Corpse:  
The Sense of the Past In Oral Histories with California Artists¹

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"The artist who makes a likeness of a thing knows nothing about the reality but only about the appearance—that is what we said, wasn't it?"
"Yes." "But that is only half the story. Let us look at it more fully."

Plato²

The art world [is] such a funny place because it[ʼs] like a big balloon: You push real hard and it’s flexible and elastic and resilient; so you push and push and push, and all of a sudden it goes—schwoo. It takes you inside, and you can’t get out.

Edward Kienholz³

They were putting it together in intellectual, gestural terms but didn’t understand the actual physicality of a painting, how it exists in the world.

Robert Irwin⁴

This essay begins with a mystery: in the years following the Second World War, the assemblage art form inspired hundreds of artists on the West Coast to create innovative and highly moving work. Yet even with a flurry of excitement in art journals, major

¹ The “exquisite corpse” is a surrealist exercise in which a group of artists produce a collective art work by folding a piece of paper x number of ways and having each artist do a section without looking at the others’ work. When the paper is unfolded, the individual statements unite into what it is hoped will be a monstrous creature.

² Plato, The Republic, section 601 b-c (translation by Desmond Lee [Harmondsworth, England, 1974]).


museums and galleries ignored this genre for over twenty years. In the case of any given artist, individual quirks can explain failure to achieve greater fame. But when a whole tradition is negated, we are in the presence of a social phenomenon. In examining oral history interviews conducted by the UCLA Oral History Program over a twenty-year period (and to a lesser degree interviews in the collection of the Archives of American Art), I detected a possible explanation for the mystery. I noticed that assemblage artists spoke about art and society quite differently than artists associated with the more successful “L.A. Look,” and I began to wonder if these contrasting views might be a clue to the eclipse of assemblage. This curiosity led me to consider how the very specific tensions of the art community are linked to more general tensions in society.

Oral history has proven an especially powerful tool for exploring such questions. The oral history narrative, as a confluence of aesthetic, psychological, and social forces, can reveal the interactions between the interviewee’s subjectivity and the tiers of reality he or she inhabits. This general characteristic takes on a particular meaning and usefulness in interviews with artists.

When oral historians sit down with artists and turn on their tape recorders, they tap into the constant process of self-questioning that is a central dimension of creative activity. An artist needs to understand what makes one artist (her/me) successful, another (me/him) a failure. There are so many criteria that the internal polemic goes on simultaneously on multiple levels. Success is measured by quality of statement (content) and by the unique, forming beauty of the work; by shows in galleries; by placement in museums; by critical response; by the prices one’s work commands; even by the oral history interview itself, since the decision to interview an artist is itself perceived as a recognition of worth, one more award in a career that must seek out validation. Interviewee and interviewer too easily can participate in an externally generated and sustained mythologizing process, in which they both share by virtue of being part of the “art community.” The interviewer places the tape recorder in front of the interviewee and asks, “What important pieces did you do and what important thoughts did you think?” It is easy to ignore or overlook an artist’s internal struggle as he or she tries to shape individual and social

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experience into some form of harmony satisfying to those in charge of the institutions that govern success: museums, galleries, collectors, the art press, universities—and the oral historian. The lone individual has a terrible sense of powerlessness in the face of such a task, which makes it all the more difficult to discuss.

Oral history narratives thus can be viewed as concretizations of the creator's personal theories; as such they have much in common with aesthetic production. Value systems are retrospectively projected onto past events so that these take on meaning beyond their own empirical presence, and values seem justified by their grounding in "facts." This carries the speaker into the province of myth: mythic content is invested in this extra layer of meaning which is then "borrowed" by the narrator to underscore the points he/she wants to make. The same symbol can be used within the same interview to make contrasting points. For example, the special quality of light and climate in Southern California is a recurrent theme found in many interviews with California artists, but when they raise the subject more than optic qualities may be involved. The light can be described as clarifying and revelatory but also as blinding and stultifying. Light as a mythic image comes to stand in for the artist's emotional response to sociological situations—the crystallization of ideological values into experience.

Unless we consider carefully the complexity of this creation of meaning, it is easy to misread the artist's struggle. The oral history interview can seem merely a tape-recorded art rap, in which the human being who created the piece of art disappears into a social role as "magic man" (to use painter Edward Moses's phrase) or

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6 "If it is true that art is institutionalized as ideology in bourgeois society, then it does not suffice to make the contradictory structure of this ideology transparent, instead one must also ask what this ideology may conceal." Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde (Minneapolis, 1984), 14. See also Arnold Hauser, The Sociology of Art (Chicago, 1982), 11-17, 73-78, 215-242.

7 Consider assemblage artist Ed Kienholz's description of the effect one gallery owner had: "He would go to Bengston's studio, or Kenny Price's studio, or Bob Irwin's studio, or my studio, or somebody's studio, and his involvement was cosmetic in a way. 'Oh, fantastic, incredible!' They'd have another glass of wine, and he would discourage what was not salable and encourage what was. He just really took the rough corners off a lot of people. Craig Kauffman is one who Irving just really buffed down into a real saleable jewel, in a way." Monte Factor, a collector of assemblage and a close friend of Kienholz's who was sitting in on the interview session, challenged Kienholz: "Well, I think that's giving him more power than he had." Kienholz responded, "Yeah, but we were all so lonely, Monte. . . . Here was one voice who came and seemed interested. . . . We were so desperate to have some sort of reinforcement" (Kienholz interview, 298).
“engineer of perception” (to use painter and environmental artist Robert Irwin’s), enfolded as totally as the banker or the stockbroker or the real estate agent might be swallowed up by the circuits of capital. The anecdotes that make up much of oral history interviews restore the human being, but in an apparently trivialized and ritualized manner, offering stories that are exchanged among friends and serve to accentuate subgroup unity. These stories also are the means whereby the interviewee has learned to project a self-characterization acceptable to his or her peers.

Even on an informational level, it is hard to see how such material can be used to elicit information of historical value. An often-heard criticism of oral history is that the material we gather is simply “impressionistic,” and those of us who conduct oral history interviews with artists have to admit that a description of the materials and creative process involved in constructing a particular piece, however interesting it may seem, cannot substitute for the rigorous analysis that a conservationist or curator might perform in evaluating the piece itself, or what a biographer would find sifting through the drafts that an artist leaves behind in personal papers.

But there is another sense in which these limits and disadvantages may themselves suggest the real insights and unique information to be found in oral history interviews with artists, even in the seemingly trivial, inconsequential anecdotes. As Luisa Passerini has argued,

Irrelevancies and discrepancies must not be denied, but these will never be understood if we take oral sources merely as factual statements. Not having criticized the operational implications of an inherited conception of history, one may approach interviewees with the idea that their past is a pre-given fact waiting to be brought to light. These oral sources are to be considered, not as factual narratives, but as forms of culture and testimonies of the changes of these forms over time.

Though my argument concentrates on confronting directly those elements of pain and failure in an interviewee’s life, I do not want in the process to promote the myth of the artist alienated from society because of greater sensitivity. At any given period, some artists will be alienated and others will be on the same wavelength as those who make decisions on art patronage. Some artists will have greater than average sensitivity to psychological and social reality, others will have lesser or just an average amount. What is of interest to me is how “success” and “failure” act as historical categories that evolve as the social function of art changes.

See Luisa Passerini, Fascism in Popular Memory (Cambridge, 1987) for a discussion of how peer groups conventionalize narratives later repeated for oral history interviews.

Judy Baca, a muralist who paints flood channels and gym walls with teenagers and senior citizens, seemed to be arguing something strikingly similar about oral history when she started talking about the process of her interview:

You know, one thing that strikes me, as we do this interview, is the kind of relentlessness of my little mind, of how it sort of always follows in a sequence, trying the next step and the next step. I don't seem to leap off anywhere. I think all this work I have been doing is about healing, and it's about developing some kind of loving approach to the world, in which I can use my skills to heal a social environment and a physical environment. And this [the interview], now, is just another approach to the same kind of healing. And it's perhaps a little quieter, and it's healing myself.  

A little later she drew together the personal and political significance of self-expression:

In the sense of this is a fairly serious time in American history and, given that I feel powerless in any other way, you know, I feel like I need to shake my beads.  

With this in mind, and with an eye to the juggling act that artists necessarily perform in discussing and assessing their work in the oral history interview, let us return to the question of assemblage art, its appearance on the West Coast, and its relation to the development of art institutions in California.

Assemblage in the simplest terms is an art form in which the artist uses found or constructed objects for basic material, assembling the objects together in such a way that they retain a portion of their original identities. Modern assemblage art has roots both in folk art traditions and in avant-garde experiments. Simon Rodia's Watts Towers, a seminal work of assemblage on the West Coast,

11 "Interview with Judy Baca," 1986, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 82.
12 Ibid., 90.
13 The word assemblage was first used by French artist Jean Dubuffet in 1953 to describe a series of collages he was making from butterfly wings and cut paper. He subsequently used the term to describe all of his work that incorporated non-art materials. William Seitz borrowed the term in 1961 for his Art of Assemblage exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In Seitz's definition, assemblage are works that are "predominantly assembled rather than painted, drawn, modeled, or carved" and which are constructed at least in part from "prefomed natural or manufactured materials, objects, or fragments not intended as art materials" (William Seitz, The Art of Assemblage [New York, 1961], 6).
may derive from a custom of Italian tile-setters to use wastage to create fanciful decorations; the tradition reflects the understanding of many premodern cultures that everything created by human hands has power, perhaps even more so when the object becomes worthless for practical purposes and the spiritual energy invested in its creation is all that is left.\textsuperscript{14} Painters and sculptors rediscovered this ancient wisdom in the early part of this century when pioneers such as Jean Arp, Kurt Schwitters, Marcel Duchamp, and Man Ray ironically transformed mass-produced, commercial objects by assembling them into artistic statements, unique, individual, and quirky.\textsuperscript{15}

Assemblage developed into a movement in California in the decade following World War II. The visual principles of abstract expressionism combined with surrealist-inspired fantasy to create a regional genre noted for aggressive critique of a society that exalted material progress at the expense of more fundamental religious and humanistic values. Redemption is the great overriding question explored in assemblage art: what shall survive of what we are—not only as individuals, but as cultures thrown into the maw of homogenization. The styles and subjects of assemblagists were diverse, but work in the genre appears unified by a commonly felt need to comment on life in America, to break down boundaries between subject and object, reality and fantasy, life and art, literature and the visual arts. Unlike assemblage art in New York, where objects have been used more for their formal possibilities,\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} The Watts Towers are large assemblages built by Simon Rodia, an Italian immigrant tile-setter, in the backyard of his home at 1765 East 107th Street in Los Angeles. From 1921 until 1954, Rodia continued to work and improve the Towers in order to “do something for the United States because there are nice people in this country” (quoted in Seitz, \textit{The Art of Assemblage}, 77). The city planned to tear down the Towers after Rodia died, but relented after stress tests proved that Rodia’s work could easily endure more than 10,000 pounds of pressure. After twenty years of argument with historical preservationists, the art community, and the predominantly Afro-American leadership of Watts over what to do with Rodia’s legacy, the state and the city finally agreed to preserve the Watts Towers as a monument to the creative energies of people who have come to live in Los Angeles. Many West Coast assemblagists have acknowledged the impact that Rodia’s work had on them.

\textsuperscript{15} See \textit{Assemblage}, Kent Gallery (New York, 1987) and Seitz, \textit{The Art of Assemblage}.

Peter Bürger, the German theorist of the avant-garde, has stated that avant-garde work “proclaims itself an artificial construct, an artifact. To this extent, montage may be considered the fundamental principle of avant-gardiste art. The ‘fitted’ (montierte) work calls attention to the fact that it is made up of reality fragments; it breaks through the appearance (Schein) of totality.” (Bürger, \textit{Theory of the Avant-Garde}, 72).

\textsuperscript{16} See Anne Bartlett Ayres, “Berman and Kienholz: Progenitors of Los Angeles Assemblage,” in \textit{Art in Los Angeles: Seventeen Artists in the Sixties} (Los Angeles, 1981),
assemblage in California was primarily an art of content, a force for expressing rebellion, as Sandra Leonard Starr has described in the catalogue for the 1988 exhibition she curated:

For the most part, [assemblage] was an art of high moral purpose, as announced by Wallace Berman’s graffiti scrawl of Veritas (truth) over his wife’s photograph in his Panel of 1952-1955. It was an art made by people who felt themselves separated from middle-class values. In Bruce Conner’s Ratbastard #1 of 1958, we have a portrait of the artist as an inverted aesthetician, a rat-packer orphaned by society and left to make do with remains. In the face of paradox, irony becomes a useful tool. In George Herms’s The Meat Market of 1960, human and animal flesh become interchangeable commodities; in Kienholz’s Ida Franger of 1960, a mutilated torso begs for love. In 1962, Fred Mason fashioned a portrait of Marilyn Monroe as the great American dream girl enshrined in decay. There is a palpable sense of outrage in Ben Talbert’s Janus-faced 1961-62 construction The Ace. The front is a tribute to the elegant art of flying, as practiced by World War I aces (flying was a career that Talbert himself had hoped to pursue), while the back is an indictment of the military perversion of that dream, as the pilot becomes an executioner in World War II. His “target of opportunity” is a box filled with bloody dolls, the victims of the atom bomb.17

These artists were “working completely against the mainstream not only of the art around them, but also of society itself.”18 In the interview Starr conducted with him, George Herms recalled that being an artist meant having a position in society only slightly less suspect than that of a communist.19 Cameron, a feminist artist and adept of Aleister Crowley, recalled that a warrant was issued for her arrest because she shared a house with blacks.20

But California assemblage presents us with a problem: materials that appear historically focused in both form and content are put in the service of viewpoints that aim to recover humanity through the negation of history, through its transformation into myth.

15-16; also Seitz, The Art of Assemblage, 74, 76. Donald Factor in “George Herms’ Zodiac Boxes,” wrote, “There is a sensibility that seems to be, in great respect, peculiar to the West Coast, a sensibility which conceives of time as a kind of metaphysical shaper both of the artist and his attitude toward his material. This conception developed through the 1950s into a highly romantic approach to the found object, or pre-effected image. . . . One must deal with the work as a kind of object-poetry rather than as a straight-forward visual art form” (Artforum 5 [October 1966]: 48). See also Factor’s survey of West Coast assemblage, Artforum 2 (Summer 1964): 38-41.

17 Starr, Lost and Found in California, 13.
18 Ibid., 16.
19 Ibid., 13.
20 Ibid., 92.
Even Edward Kienholz, whose tableaux have focused squarely on issues like abortion, the death penalty, welfare, and race relations, stated in his oral history interview that the issues themselves were only instances of humanity's fear of being part of the cycle of natural existence: "All my work has to do with living and dying, the fear of death." Pressed on the relationship of his work to broad political concerns, Kienholz answered,

> Politics are a really murky area for me because politics are really our own abdication of our own responsibility. We hire someone to make decisions for us. We give up our own power to let someone else exercise power over us.

Since history was identified with technology and the disruptive machines of development, an answer to social and political complexities for many assemblage artists was a return to the values and imagery of pretechnological civilizations—the Tarot, the I Ching, the Cabala, Hopi kachinas, fetishes. Juxtaposed to the romance of pretechnological cultures, we find also the romance of the early industrial era. The assemblage artist layers the past of our society in such a way that the continuing survivals of preceding epochs in our own time become clearer. The discards of contemporary civilization were refashioned into prayers for the reintegration of humanity into the cosmos. "Art is Love is God" was Wallace Berman's slogan, one he coded into his pieces, often directly and sometimes through arcane symbols. Assemblages are sermons, Anne Bartlett Ayres commented, with the message: "When objects have only 'use' value, human beings are themselves reified."

Their references were arcane and usually so personal that the poetic and mystic devoured anger and protest. Still, underlying the mythic form of the content were ideas and feelings that disturbed the defenders of conventional morality. Wallace Berman was arrested in 1957 for sexual imagery in Factum Fidei. The police officer entering the gallery to make the arrest looked at the objects in the show and was heard to say in confusion, "What is this, an

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21 Kienholz interview, 342.
22 Ibid., 218.
23 See Ayres, "Berman and Kienholz"; Coplans, "Art is Love is God" (Artsforum 2[March 1964]:26-27); Merrill Greene, "Wallace Berman: Portrait of the Artist as Underground Man" (Artsforum 16 [February 1978]: 53-61); Starr, Lost and Found in California, 15, 90-91.
art show? Where is the art?"²⁵ Berman was convicted and fined $150 for violating obscenity laws, with only a few voices speaking up to defend his free speech rights. Nine years later in 1966, when the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted to close down Edward Kienholz's one-man show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on the grounds that it was "trash and filth," the situation had changed dramatically. This time major figures in the art community and the mass media strongly defended the right of the museum to be autonomous of political control. After three weeks of unsparing criticism by newspapers and local news programs, the board of supervisors backed down, and the Kienholz show proceeded, enjoying record-breaking attendance due, no doubt, to the publicity.²⁶ Nonetheless, Kienholz did not have another one-man show of his work in California in either a museum or a private gallery until 1980.

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Let us look at one artist, Gordon Wagner (1915-1987) and see, through his interview, this conversion of history into myth.

Wagner began working in assemblage in the late 1940s when he made wall pieces using throwaway scraps of wood instead of paint. He used the wood exactly as he had found it, changing neither the colors nor the textures. At first, he produced non-narrative abstractions, but the idea of giving dramatic presence to things was explicitly present in his earliest free-standing assemblage piece:

My first [assemblage] piece was a standing piece. It was a group of balls on a post from a stair balustrade and an old piece of wood with a wire hooked on the top that was beautifully shaped . . . all polychromed. There were seven pieces, and I called the piece The Seven Actors. . . . I got to thinking that all this old weathered stuff and all these polychromed pieces, they're so beautiful and they are just thrown away. If they were presented again in a new form, in sculpture, they'd take

²⁵Quoted in ibid., II. A sexually explicit drawing by the feminist artist Cameron that Berman had worked into his piece was the specific cause of Berman's show being raided by the vice squad. Nonetheless the 1964 arrest of Connor Everts for his highly symbolic and abstract Studies in Desperation indicates that Los Angeles police authorities were offended by the implications of ideas as much as by explicit representation.

²⁶The controversy over Kienholz's show began when Warren Dorn, a county supervisor running in the 1966 Republican gubernatorial primary against Ronald Reagan, tried to create an issue by trumpeting his opposition to "trash and filth" in museums. See Kienholz interview, 376-399, for Kienholz's version of the affair.
Wagner’s large assemblages create “actors” that walk the line between nostalgia and the conundrum of personality in modern society—are we the sum of the objects that surround us, or are these cast-offs possessed by the spirits of times slipped away?

The only place where you really understand about civilization is in a dump. You can go there and you can find things. It tells you whole histories of towns and people that lived there before you. . . . You go to the desert where things have been lying there for a hundred years, you'll find an old toy or an old box or a piece of metal with flowers in it and designs. . . . They etched things and they took time. They made things with flowers on them and ornaments.28

At the time of the interview Wagner was a devout Catholic, and he described the rebirth that took place in his pieces as a metaphor for his belief that death is the beginning of our real existence. There are other levels on which Wagner’s work addresses more directly (despite his own protest that he was not interested in social criticism) questions of development, abandonment, redevelopment, excess.

_Railroad Man_ is a very, very beautiful concept of how I felt about a town with another dump . . . and that’s Keeler. . . . Two hundred houses, and ten people live in the town. . . . There’s a railroad station in this town. It’s on the potash lake. . . . Now in this town it has a railroad station and it has a train, but it doesn’t have any tracks.29 That’s where I found the conductor’s hat on the top, and the brakeman’s lanterns, and the railroad spikes, and the watch, and the number 2, and the two gloves, old work gloves, one with two mules saying “Maude and Claude,” the other saying “Big Bud Warlong.” The only thing that’s not from Keeler is the [toy] train with the locomotive with two cars. That I found in Mexico. . . . It’s a very, very important piece to me because it depicts almost a human being. . . . You get thinking about that environment of where that came from, and it takes you through a whole association with the past, although you’re working in the present. So the now and building something for the future, you kind of go through the past, present, and future at once.

The nostalgia of the actual being there and the old civilization, the way it must have been and [how] the people were. You get to imagining

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28 Ibid., 154.
29 The Keeler railroad station does in fact have tracks, but they are sometimes covered by drifting brush and sand in the Panamint Valley.
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these things while you’re building, and you’re feeling this piece. There’s a feeling I can never get from people, but I can get it from objects. . . . Those objects all lived a full life, right? They were thrown out as discards. Nobody wants them anymore. . . . Yet an assemblage artist comes along, he sees these things as actors, you know, and he brings them back, puts them back into play again, gives them a new life, a new way so they can be appreciated.

I believe most of those things are waiting for [me] to come along and get it. [Not for anybody, I asked, but for you personally, Gordon Wagner?] That’s right. Because most people would pass it by. They wouldn’t have any more use for it than I would have for a Rolls-Royce car.30

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Wagner built large-scale assemblages between 1958 and 1966. They came in the aftermath of crises in his life, personal troubles he was reluctant to discuss. When he was forty-two his first wife died of cancer. Immediately afterwards, he quit his job at Rocketdyne; he had worked as an engineer for twenty years on projects such as the landing gear of the FJ-1 and the cooling mechanism for the atomic piles at Los Alamos.31 He lost touch with his children and submerged himself in the artistic underworld, living off friends and women, finally escaping to Mexico, returning to California for a few months, and bouncing back to Mexico. Mexico, Wagner said frequently, “was like walking through a giant assemblage.”32 His dreams haunted him with questions: why do we exist? what is the meaning of our accomplishments? The questions spoke to him as a grieving man and as an artist, but also addressed him as a member of society: what is the meaning of the building and the monuments and all the enterprise? is this creativity if there is no humor or joy, or respect for others? [See Figure 1]

At the heart of this conflict was the “myth” of bourgeois society: conventionality and the lack of imagination strangle the soul. Capitalism and bourgeois ideology are social facts, but nonetheless facts can become mythic when they are transformed into images

30 Wagner interview, 161-163, 163-164, 165.
31 Employment and education in engineering-related fields appears to have been common among artists in the fifties. Robert Irwin worked as a draftsman, and George Herms, Jess, Manuel Neri, and Ben Talbert were all dropouts from engineering and science college programs.
32 Wagner interview, 88; see also 168 and 232-233.
working to resolve inner conflicts. The subconscious is reborn as the mythic and irrational force confronting the rationality of economic decision-making. Wagner’s romanticization of non-Western cultures was part of this broader reaction against the society

33 "Mythical history is itself in the service of the struggle of structure against events and represents an effort of societies to annul the disturbing action of historical factors; it represents a tactic of annulling history, of deadening the effect of events" (Paul Ricoeur, "Structure and Hermeneutics," in The Conflict of Interpretations [Evanston, 1974], 44). Compare this to Donald Factor’s 1963 review of Tapiés: “He takes history and freezes it
he had been born into. Comparing Mexico and Los Angeles, he said, “I come back here [L.A.], this is just a place to sit down and do your work and not become related to much of anything, because there’s not much here to be related to. There’s no roots left in this town; they’ve all been pulled out.”

He determined that the discards he worked with were in fact totemic power objects. The pieces in an assemblage came together in an “alchemical” way. Wagner, like many others in the postwar period, studied zen. The principles of “don’t think, don’t have any mind, just do it, you know, action without any reason” describe just as readily the surrealist project of automatic writing and automatic drawing.

As an example of the interpenetration of social comment and myth let us take an assemblage Wagner made in 1986, Shot at Twenty Fathoms, a combination of a water-distorted polaroid snapshot washed up on the beach (found in his almost daily walks looking for seafront debris), a camera spool, pencils, driftwood, and most prominently a hypodermic syringe stuck into the photo. [See Figure 2] Wagner thought that the work was an icon of chaos. “Under the sea, if you were twenty fathoms down, it’s quite chaotic.” Regarding the hypodermic syringe: “I hadn’t intended it to be [social commentary]; the thing actually just worked in there beautifully. It happened to be needed. It was a good object for it, but it has nothing to do with a statement as a whole.” But then, in describing his work process on assemblages, he said, “I don’t really change the significance of the objects. The objects are still there, they just are in a different juxtaposition. As I mentioned one time before,

in space, challenging man to break it free, but with the secret knowledge of man’s ultimate inability to accomplish this, short of death” (Artforum 1/6 [June 1963]: 32-33).

Many interviews express the idea that what makes California culture unique is its mélange of Anglo-American, Mexican, Native American, and East Asian elements. This belief covers over the ethnic conflict that exists in all of California society, including the arts. Still, to see the repressive character of this ideology one must identify the element of truth in it, which is exposure to other ideas and life-styles, and understand that identification with other cultural histories provides an avenue for expressing discontent with one’s own social group. Thus, inherent in ethnic conflict in the state is a continuous crossing over and blurring of lines, resulting in a cultural life that does in fact mix elements of various cultures in a unique, distinctive manner which nevertheless denies full equality to nonwhite traditions).

Wagner interview, 232.
Ibid., 228-229.
Ibid., 218.
Ibid., 244-245.
they’re all old actors and I’ve given them a new theater.”39 He claimed he was “using object instead of words for poetry for a certain essence of the moment.”40 The final product was not a statement but “almost like an amulet or a fetish.”41

He testified to a pull towards social comment, a pull he felt imposed by outside forces and one that, at another point in the interview, he termed “collective dreams.”42 He felt he had to fight this tendency because it made his work “time-full,” something that would weaken its impact for others. In the late 1960s, however, he did become involved with support work for the American Indians:

39 Ibid., 245-246.
40 Ibid., 242.
41 Ibid., 151.
42 Ibid., 555-557.
But it wasn't really politics to me, it was sort of restoring a culture and being part of keeping this restoration from being destroyed. Instead of tearing down a Victorian house and putting up a condo, that same kind of flavor to the American Indian: it was a thing of elegance, a thing of beauty, a thing of love, a thing that we cherished from nature.

He created a box, America Needs Indians, that was unusual for him in that he used cheap plastic toys instead of finely textured, weathered objects.

That was actually that way when I found it in the dump. Everything had been melted together, and it became a wonderful piece of metamorphosis. Every kind of object in there just fused together. . . . I used that piece as a statement protesting the pollution of our deserts and our mountains and our environment with the American Indian as the last symbol of let's not do [that] any more, let's stop.

He also participated in a group show organized by Afro-American assemblagist Noah Purifoy in which sixty-six artists "sympathizing with the people of Watts" made art work from the "actual burned objects and melted things" they found in the debris of the 1965 Watts riots.

But Wagner expressed his opposition to the society in which he lived primarily through his myths of how artists should live outside of material rationality—in "power places" like Topanga Canyon, in the mountains just north of the city. Wagner lived there for ten years, when Topanga was a refuge for beat poets and artists rather than the expensive and trendy haven for the entertainment industry it would later become. Consider this story:

I got very stimulated by Topanga and by the artists who lived there. That's where I met Karl Nolde, the German expressionist. He lived across the road from me. He was the brother of Emil Nolde. But he called himself Kanol in America, Karl Kanol. . . . I could go on with stories about him for years. Incredible what he got into just living in Topanga.

One story I can tell you. . . . He lived next door to a woman who kept monkeys, who had a monkey farm up the canyon . . . The monkey-farm lady had about three hundred monkeys. She would dress up the most wonderful monkeys in clothes, all sorts of suits and neckties and shirts, and bring them down to the market in Topanga in a group. They'd go into the store and drive the storekeeper crazy. . . . The whole monkey farm burned down one day. Two monkeys got in a fight over a cigarette.

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43 Ibid., 349-350.
44 Ibid., 351.
45 Ibid., 151.
and a match and set fire to the hay. Burned the whole place down before they could do anything. . . . The fire department tried to hook up the water, but the bigger monkeys were unhooking it all the time. They were up at the fire truck putting the hats on. Like the chimps. . . . Karl was always painting, but he left his window open. One night there was a knock at the door, and there was a monkey, or two monkeys, dressed up in Lederhosen and he opened the door, and they both jumped up on him and hugged him while the other monkeys came in through the back window. They were throwing his brushes all over the studio, you know. Karl was going mad with these monkeys.6

“So that was a typical Topanga story,” he concluded, the sort of story that artists could share with each other when they got together, a story that affirmed their distance from everyday bourgeois society.47

As for his cars, that’s a whole different thing—that goes on and on and on. The things caught on fire, and he was arrested. . . . [He] got his old truck. He had to paint some house in the [San Fernando] Valley, and he’s going down the hill, and he got down there and this woman stopped dead in front of him and slammed on the brakes, and he rear-ended her. Well, when he did that, all of the paint in the truck tipped over, and the lids were off and it started running all over the floor—green, white paints, mixed. The policeman screamed at Karl to get out of the truck. And [Karl] said, “I can’t get out of the truck, I’m stuck.” And [the policeman] said, “What do you mean you’re stuck?” “Well, I’ll tell you.” “I’ll pull you out.” So [the policeman] opened the door to pull Karl out, and when he did that all the paint ran out all over the policeman’s pants and boots, completely down over his feet and legs. So Karl was again taken in that day, in Van Nuys. He had these things happen to him. One car caught on fire on the Pacific Coast Highway, in the back seat, and he had nothing to do, so he kept running over across the traffic getting sand in his hands to pour on it, to put out the fire.

I had him for a neighbor and all other kinds of eccentrically wonderful people for neighbors. Topanga was a place where you didn’t expect anybody to come in it, and the people who lived there, you didn’t expect would ever leave.48

Wagner’s Karl Nolde stories refer to an internationally accepted artist obliquely, as if to say “Hey, he’s here, hanging out with the guys, he’s just as crazy as we are: we’re not so provincial after

46Ibid., 269, 269-272.
47My analysis of interviews as an in-group cultural form draws upon the very different work done by Luisa Passerini with Italian factory workers. See Passerini, Fascism in Popular Memory, especially chapter one.
48Wagner interview, 272-273, 274.
all.” But then Wagner’s story defies credibility, which is what makes it a “typical Topanga story”: here was a place where “anything” could happen—but only that which is desired. Wagner’s account of Karl Nolde beset by monkeys in Topanga Canyon fits in with his own self-image. He is a man in the process of constructing alternative reality which can also be read as an allegory of the contemporary world. The story could be turned into a box or into a corner of an assemblage.

V

In 1971, Gordon Wagner traveled to Sweden, England, and Belgium for the first shows of his work outside the United States. Though it was depressing to discover Europe when he was almost sixty years old, he was excited to find cultures that seemed more in tune with his personal sensibility.

They live almost in the past; they talk about things that happened four hundred years ago like it happened yesterday.49

He appreciated royalty, which he defined as a fetish.

Empires balanced on a dice cube, or a whole empire balanced on a knife edge with the king and the queen and folly. There was always the chance that was all going to fall down, like a playing card castle. Playing cards. All these things became symbols.50

In England, Wagner felt that the underlying instability that he had tried to express in his work was closer to the surface. Changes appeared in his style as he incorporated European fantasy into his work:

I put [a burgher woman] into a box called the Theatre of the Upside Down, where I had her on a stage in confusion standing on an egg in the clouds. She’s looking back through endless doors, and up on the top there’s the city of Antwerp, and there’s the Schelde with the barges. But it’s all upside down. You have to turn the box over to see that it’s Antwerp and the Schelde and the water.

I really took a new look, also, from the surrealist aspect. I met a surrealist there who is probably the best living surrealist in England at the present time by the name of Conroy Maddox . . . About, oh, fifteen to twenty artists that I met, we were all stimulated by going back and really getting back into what surrealism is all about. . . . It became a renaissance to us, rebirth within us.

49 Ibid., 369.
50 Ibid., 370.
I realized that I would like to get a little purer and not use the objects and the junk. Really get into a pure form. . . . Trying to take a small environment without filling it up, and make it seem very large with only very small things so it seems monumental in a very small area . . . by reducing the scale of the objects related to the landscape.51

I asked Wagner, “You’re showing that society is absurd, but you insist you’re not criticizing it?”

Absolutely . . . I believe that the absurd is very important . . . There are too many critics, and there are not enough people who explore the absurd and laugh and enjoy it. The critic just criticizes it without enjoying it. And after all, I believe that irrational absurdity and nonsense is one of our most important elements in order to exist in this society. It’s sort of a counterforce against the negation of a lot of people who are putting things down and showing the ugliness. I want to show funny things, joy. Not from a critical aspect at all. . . . Just being part of it. I would be one of the elements within the piece.52

From the spontaneous juxtaposition of found objects, Wagner moved to careful planning of his effects and designs, a process which harkened back to his training as an engineer. He began using trompe-l’oeil, creating boxes that explored physical impossibilities, such as Separate Reflections in which a businessman dressed up to go to work is leaving home, but “he was such a disgusting person that his reflection” in the mirror refused to follow after him.53

Wagner read through works available in English by André Breton, Paul Eluard, and Robert Desnos. He studied the paintings of René Magritte and Paul Delvaux. He reexamined the precursors of the surrealists, the Decadents and the Symbolist painters.

I realized . . . that surrealism to me was beyond dada and funk. And so that’s when my change actually came. It evolved into the more narrative, like with the figure and telling something of the humor, the wit; not just found objects, but starting to fabricate the objects. It was at that time I knew I had to go beyond funk, I had to step over the boundaries. . . . I collected every bit of fragment. I still do; anything that has to do with surrealism is either filed in my cigar boxes of small drawings or small postcards into my bookcases, all surrealism. I’m still a surrealist fanatic, because there’s never going to be a death of surrealism because it was never born.54

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51 Ibid., 392-393, 393-394, 394-395; see also 412-417 for more on his shift towards surrealism.
52 Ibid., 391.
53 Ibid., 402-403.
54 Ibid., 416.
The important discovery for him was that if his work had spontaneously been surrealist, he belonged to an important trend in European art—without even knowing it. He was no longer an explorer of unmapped terrain. He had roots, extending beyond the surrealists of the twenties and thirties to Hieronymus Bosch and Peter Brueghel and whoever else mined the unconscious for imagery. [See Figure 3]

The question of Wagner's alliance to surrealism is problematic, however. Though he mythologized Breton, Max Ernst, and all artists in surrealist circles, when I pressed him to discuss this aspect of his work, it became apparent that he actually did not share many of the central concerns of classic surrealism.

Most striking was the disappearance of erotic and sexual content from his work, even though in the 1960s eroticism had been a recurring theme for him. At that time, while fully part of the California assemblagist impetus, he worked in an idiom consistent with the original surrealists' erotic language. In Majestic Memories, for example, he recreated a dancer who worked for many years in a downtown Los Angeles burlesque theater by juxtaposing perfume bottles, beads, glass knick knacks, a boa hat, phalluses, and lace that had belonged to her. It was an evocative piece: "You knew it [sex] was there, but it wasn't."55 The lithograph series Memories of the Future centered on an extended visual equation of vaginas, roller coasters, and death. Trying to explain why eroticism had disappeared from his art in the 1970s after he became a self-conscious surrealist, Wagner said,

It's an escape from everything. My art. Everything. Completely. Anything that can be tied down to a way, it's an escape from it. This is hard for some people to understand, because they're looking for a message, an erotic message, a protest message, or some kind of time-full message. In the dream state and through the context of my work, I want to make people happy, give them more humor and joy in life. People who are looking for the other have a difficult time finding that because actually they probably do not have appreciation or humor for my work. My work goes beyond face value; it goes inside, and it's up to them to find it.56

Wagner's work also completely avoided cruelty or sadism. His initial response when asked about this was to deny that the exploration of cruelty had really been central to the surrealist agenda. He admitted that Artaud and Dalí were cruel, but "Breton was really

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55 Ibid., 426.
56 Ibid., 430.
a very sensitive man, and I don’t think he was actually cruel.” But he knew personal qualities were not the point. He retreated and admitted that the surrealists under Breton were interested in cruelty, but:

Breton only had one idea, he wanted people to be free. His idea was to shake up the bourgeois in France, to make them learn something about creating from themselves. . . . He wanted people to be free, not controlled.57

Still the question remained, wasn’t the exploration of cruelty and eroticism as it actually exists in people’s subconscious in a given time and place important to the process of liberation? Yes, Wagner agreed—for Breton.

I’m interested in being aware of the fact that cruelty exists all around me, every day. We have more cruelty probably right now than we’ve

57Ibid., 432.
had in years in our society, with all of the beaten children, with... the way the poor are being neglected and the street people. The lack of interest and concern. ... I am aware of the fact that it's there, but if I were to paint it, then I'm being in a protest state, I'm not being in the world of timelessness. I'm telling you something that's either happened or is happening. Like Magritte, he can think of a thousand ideas, I remember him saying, but only one of them is a good one. He didn't want to get sidetracked by protest, hate. He made a few paintings, like *The Murder* and *The Room*, things like that, but basically he was a timeless artist.\(^{58}\)

Note how Magritte comes to stand in for Wagner at the end of this response. Wagner imposed tradition upon himself and it freed him. He could find justification for the decisions he made in his career because he followed in the footsteps of somebody universally acknowledged to be important. But I asked, "If you are a surrealist artist, aren't you interested in getting people to challenge bourgeois conventionality?"

Not really. . . [I] detach myself from tomorrow and from yesterday. Now is what is important. I realize the limitations of our society. I realize that most people aren't even bourgeois, they're just nothing. We've lost our bourgeois in America. . . . Everybody is battling against being bourgeois in California. [The bourgeois] are dead or on their last legs. . . . in rest homes or someplace.\(^{59}\)

Here, Wagner's *bourgeois* is the man in the bowler hat seen so often in Magritte paintings, the Victorian and Edwardian-era bourgeois with spats and monocles. The image is primarily visual: though obviously this style has passed away, Wagner's broader historical generalization mistakenly substitutes appearance and style for the substance of social relationships, hardly a surprising switch for a visual artist.

Spontaneity is one area where Wagner agreed fully with the original surrealist movement:

Everything has to come through spontaneity, because it's automatic. . . . You let it flow from in you out. . . . [Revision is] editing your chaos. What you can do is you can take your chaos and put it there in an automatic way, spontaneous, and then you can notice the way it's thrown down or the way it appears. There's some elements or there's lines or shapes or objects or forms that get in the way of others, so it's only a matter of moving them or removing them. You can say the

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 434.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 435-436.
whole message many times with less than with a whole lot of things
   . . . reorganizing the chaos and editing your automatic concept.\textsuperscript{60}

If Wagner's attitude is typical, we have arrived at a central
tie between surrealism and the California assemblage movement.
The appeal was methodological, though the content was different—as
it has to be since the society being criticized is different from
France or Belgium in the interwar period. The crucial connection
is that the message must not be conscious. It comes from inside
the artist and manifests itself in the nearly finished work of art
before the artist is quite sure what he or she is saying. Art is not
an intellectual process, not a mode of analysis, but a means for
expressing interior realities that are suppressed by conventional
states of life, by business-as-usual. The artistic process eliminates
momentarily the constraints that are placed on the imagination.
Wagner viewed the unconscious as the communicator to another
dimension of reality.\textsuperscript{61} A Catholic who had spent years studying
Asian and Native American religions, he had arrived at a position
that sought to move from a rational view of the world to an irra-
tional feeling of unity with divine forces. His main avenue for ap-
proaching the unconscious was the dream state, which he viewed
as a means to an end: the important thing, he believed, was for
an artist to move away from the material world, which he tended
to discuss, not surprisingly for an assemblagist, in terms of con-
crete objects.

I have no use for the material world to this day. I'm not interested in
new cars, or any of this. I'm still detached from that aspect of it, new
things. I don't own any new things. I never bought a piece of furniture
in my life, ever. I can never remember buying a new piece of furniture,
a shiny object, because I don't like shiny, glittering things.\textsuperscript{62}

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Wagner's rediscovery of surrealism was a return to and a
redefinition of a force that had affected many avant-garde Califor-
nia artists when he was a young man. Assemblagists in the 1950s
had turned away from most of the major idioms of modern art to
focus on dada and surrealism. As Sandra Leonard Starr has pointed

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 439-440.

\textsuperscript{61} Those familiar with Jean Cocteau's 1948 film, \textit{Orphée}, might recognize the parallel
to Heurtebise's radio, which seduces young poets by broadcasting poems from the underworld.

\textsuperscript{62} Wagner interview, 446.
out, surrealism was more an attitude than a style. The artist worked with the boundaries separating his or her feelings from the surrounding world, but was not fenced in by dominant theories of visual presentation. At the end of World War II, when the first assemblage artists started their experiments, there were few “blue chip” American artists and none on the West Coast.

And there were few institutional supports for these artists. Lorser Feitelson candidly admitted, in his oral history, that the only way he could make his way as an artist was to live off his parents; most of the artists he knew had some kind of support, and many of the artists of the 1950s were dependent on working wives. But poverty and rootlessness gave them a kind of freedom to see and feel and express themselves—with the vice squad as a barrier, certainly, but one that encouraged genuine heroism. Monetary stakes were low, and art really was not much of a big deal. “We all worked our asses off and nobody took anything seriously,” Kienholz recalled. Museum attendance was low, and in Los Angeles, the county art museum shared its building with the history and science collections. Art truly appeared to be out in the streets in general—in coffeehouses and bars, in improvised galleries that seldom made money, in homes and hangouts. Art was something that was personal. Art history was learned in books with startling implications for how an artist might view work. For Kienholz,

If you take a mediocre painting and take a picture of it, reduce the scale, and condense the experience of the painting down to a smaller scale, it becomes much richer. And that rich look was the criterion that I always looked toward. I was working toward a picture reproduction.

I think museums probably are obsolete. I think they ought to be just done away with. Art should be made—probably just prototype art should be made and then photographed with holographic techniques . . . and then destroy it. I mean, why keep it? Why burden society with the incredible amount of shit that is collected and stored and moved and insured?

It was an art that existed in friendly if unpretentious physical and social environments for the purposes of communication with peo-
Artwork took its part in a broader dialogue that focused on ways people ought to explore their capabilities. The mythic forms it took helped to solidify a growing community of discontent that would erupt suddenly into a mass movement in the 1960s, when the cultural concerns of the avant-garde merged with the politics of the civil rights and antiwar movements.

Many of the attitudes which the assemblagists shared and propagated in the 1950s and 1960s have now percolated into wider sections of society, sometimes changing into their opposites in the process. Edward Kienholz, who collected his materials in thrift shops in the heart of Los Angeles, recalled in 1977:

> The stuff that I bought for The Beanery was just throwaway junk in 1960 and is [now] prized antiques. An antique is supposed to be one hundred years old or more, but seven years gets it pretty close to antique in the rush of today's society.

Artists found roots in junk, and the adventure at times erupted into an unformed, intuitive perception that history in any place is connected to work and the struggle to retain humanity.

The shoes [in Sir Deauville, a knight created from debris found in a burned-out beachfront bar: a lantern with melted, burned curtain forms a head over a body consisting of World War I-era children's and women's shoes] all came from Red Mountain [an abandoned mining community in the San Bernardino Mountains]. Those nails [in HTG 26, a medusa figure constructed from railroad ties and mining equipment] came from Red Mountain. Probably the wood... Gameless Game, everything, they're spindles from furniture... There's no way to play it. Because it's for people who don't play games.

But there were other currents in the art history of California. In the forty years following 1945, while assemblage was developing into one of the major forces of regional artistic life without benefit of institutional recognition or support, formal museums and galleries came to flourish, part of a broader ideological evolution through which Los Angeles emerged as the “second city of art”

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69 See Sandra Leonard Starr, “Assemblage Art in California: A Collective Memoir and Chronology, 1940-1969,” in Lost and Found in California, for a representation drawn from oral history interviews of artists’ social life and the effects it had on their work.

70 Kienholz interview, 345.

71 Wagner interview, 157.
in the United States, with this cultural stature taken as a key indicator of the region having come of age. Art was brought from the relative freedom of the periphery into the center of cultural life. There was money to be made, and in large quantities. The successful establishment of art institutions in Los Angeles led to building sprees and massive publicity. All this could not have been possible had high art not been protected and isolated by another kind of construction—a cultural and ideological wall of prestige that separated society from art as a cultural force, a wall so strong and high that even to suggest art’s accountability for its presumed social impact came to seem a sign of a profound lack of culture.

Though assemblage art was at the center of the crucial battle to gain artistic freedom from censorship, it somehow remained outside this remarkable flowering of art markets and institutions. The controversy over Kienholz’s show at the county museum in 1966 ended with the board of supervisors losing control over the museum, but the beneficiaries were not Kienholz or other assemblagists. Shows were few, and perhaps the most pivotal and fecund figure in the postwar artistic renaissance—Wallace Berman—died before getting the recognition he deserved. The battle between yahoos and culturati obscured another war, a war of attrition against the avant-garde artist waged by the guardians of high culture. The first battle was over the degree of autonomy art institutions could have; the war within the arts “community” was over the very desirability of autonomy, over the place art should have in the cultural life of the community.

To recognize the ascendant autonomy of art institutions in the postwar period is to begin to unlock the puzzle of why so many of the interviews state that there was no history of art in Los Angeles, even as these very interviews detail a rich history. The interviewees were saying, in effect, that the institutions of art were so embryonic or nonexistent that in an important sense cultural life prior to the 1950s was not really part of formal art history; the Cézanne exhibit at the Los Angeles County Fair in 1948 said more about the

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72 As a small sample, Carlos Almaraz: “In Los Angeles in 1960 there wasn’t much on in the arts. Your images and your ideas all came from New York—or Paris.” (“Interview with Carlos Almaraz,” 1986, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 40); Billy Al Bengston: “There was nothing going on in Los Angeles. Simply nothing.” (Paintbox Pioneers, “California Stories,” television program); Edward Kienholz: “When I first came to Los Angeles [in 1953], it was virgin as far as art was concerned.” (Kienholz interview, 86).
institutions of recreation than of art. Art was at the periphery, contingent upon the community at large, and had minimal self-governance except for those pockets of free space that artists created for themselves. Without denying the importance of this “prehistory,” only with the autonomy of art institutions can an art history perse be said to have begun.

viii

The growing importance of art institutions in the state led to the marginalization of assemblage artists, for reasons only indirectly grounded in their proclivity for social comment. More deeply, the assemblagists seemed peripheral because their central aesthetic concerns stood at such a distance from the primary trend in contemporary art in California (and throughout the United States): the exploration of physicality, of surface and structure. One such explorer, Robert Irwin, described in his oral history the concerns with which he struggled as a developing artist:

Everything [has] both an image and a physicality—and my interest really lay in this whole thing of physicality, in that the moment a painting took on any kind of image, the minute I could recognize it as having any relationship in nature, of any kind, to me the painting went flat. Imagery being just that for me: re-presentation. The minute it represented anything, instead of filling up or being more interesting, it did just the opposite for me—it became less interesting. Because even the line still had that referential property to it.

I was interested in terms of how one could read this actuality, this physicality, without those kinds of what I had come to consider distractions.73

A bare, lean approach to physical sensation was an important element in what came to be known as the “L.A. Look.” This term, promoted by painter and critic Peter Plagens, does not refer to a movement, nor has a particular aesthetic of the L.A. Look ever been formally defined. The artists who are usually grouped under the term—Irwin, Billy Al Bengston, Larry Bell, Craig Kauffman, John McCracken, Edward Ruscha, among others—do not use the term themselves, and their work covers a broad range of styles and techniques, from abstraction to pop art.74 Yet however elusive, there

73 Irwin interview, 25-26, 26, 27, 28-29.
is something to the grouping suggested by this term.

Susan C. Larsen has described their shared approach to art as “lean, cool, and well-crafted.” Describing the work of painter Billy Al Bengston, Larsen commented, “His paintings are as real and unromanticized as the bare facts of contemporary life: they repel sentimentality and iconographic interpretation.”75 The works have bright lush colors and use unusual materials and media such as metal, new plastics, glass, resin, and industrial pigments. [See Figures 4 and 5] The viewer can read into the L.A. Look an exuberant celebration of technology, certainly appropriate for a region where the economy is fueled by military spending, aerospace, and high technology. But one must read any message into these pieces. The works themselves are devoid of any content other than their physical presence. And compared to the baroque effusion of anecdotes and self-explanations in oral history interviews with assemblagists, interviews with the minimalists provide little beyond an accounting of bare biographical facts and a description of work methods. Their interviews are as spare and lean as their art. Robert Irwin, at one point in his interview, compared his work to a chemist’s. He then engaged in a lengthy discussion of Thomas Kuhn’s model of scientific revolution, seeing parallels for the artist if the focus were reduced to purifying paradigms for perception:

What we’re really talking about is changing the whole visual construct of how you look at the world. Because now when I walk down the street, I no longer, at least to the same degree, bring the world into focus in the same way. My whole visual structure is changed by the fact that I’m using an entirely different process of going at it. So the implications of that kind of an art are very rash—I mean, in time they have the ability to change every single thing in the culture itself. Because all of our systems—social systems, political systems, all of our institutions—are simply reasonable reflections of how our mind organizes.

Now, whether or not it’s good, bad, or indifferent, it’s much too premature for anyone like myself to even know. I’m committed to it, but . . . 76

“Toughness” is a word that frequently appears in oral history interviews with those associated with the L.A. Look. It is a word borrowed from the vocabulary of art critics, who used it to describe

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76 Irwin interview, 102, 102-103.
Figure 4: The tangible L.A. Look: Craig Kauffman, *Yellow-Blue*, acrylic on acrylic, 1965; photo courtesy the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation.

Figure 5: Perception as revolution: Robert Irwin, *#2221 Untitled*, acrylic, lacquer on plastic, 1969; photo courtesy the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation.
art which freed both the artist and the viewer from the “tyranny of the object.” The intellectual and emotional requirements of “toughness” can be seen in painter John McLaughlin’s comments on Mondrian and Malevich:

[on Mondrian] His was a “concept” and in a sense a discipline involved to some degree with morality. To him the real content in art was “the expression of pure vitality which reality reveals through the manifestation of dynamic movement.” In this concept lies the paralyzing element of aggressive logic.

[on Malevich] These paintings are singularly devoid of intellectualization, or of any other means that we regard as reasonable means of communication. They are in their simplicity, extraordinarily compelling because of their lack of a guiding principle. In other words, all resistance to the fullest participation was removed.77

Born in 1898, John McLaughlin was a member of an older generation of Los Angeles-based minimalists, sometimes referred to as the “abstract classicists”—Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg are two other important figures in this movement that emerged in the 1930s.78 The generation of the abstract classicists exerted a tremendous influence upon the artists of the L.A. Look, though the interviews reveal a fair amount of condescension on the part of the younger generation. Both generations produced work consisting of mysterious and elusive objects that demanded neither intellectual nor emotional involvement—though they did not preclude involvement either. The works were in a sense tabulae rasae that remained incomplete until the viewer injected a personal response. A telling difference between the two generations is that while the older artists came to Los Angeles in the 1920s and 1930s because of the city’s relative isolation, the succeeding generation participated enthusiastically in the development of a booming art market that actively sought national recognition; indeed, many artists connected with the L.A. Look were highly successful in gaining critical recognition. Henry Hopkins, formerly of the Los Angeles

County Museum of Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, now director of the Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation, said on television in the spring of 1987,

I can remember innumerable evenings sitting with yellow pads, with Walter [Hopps] on one side of the room and myself on the other, listing the great artists of the world in the twentieth century. Those artists would never end until they got to Irwin and Kauffman and Moses and Bengston. Along with Brancusi and Picasso and Matisse and so forth and so on. So we clearly felt that what was spawning here was something that had something to do with the history of art.79

Much of the work after 1965 was created directly for museums: work meant for public spaces that at the same time are elite sanctums.80 It is work that, in the words of Plagens, “requires both its practitioners and viewers to address the history of art, particularly the history of painting.”81 However, the conception of history that Plagens invoked collapses when examined more closely:

It's the standard operating procedure of contemporary criticism to explain “development,” that is, how things in the past changed to get the way they are now, or how things are changing now toward what the critic guesses they’ll be in the future. This amounts to trendspotting. What painting needs, to the contrary, is an explanation of how things are the same. . . . Painting needs an explanation of how Brice Marden is after the same things that Giotto was, how Billy Al Bengston is after the same things Rembrandt was. . . . Brice Marden, Billy Al Bengston are not, to be sure, after exactly the same things that Giotto, Rembrandt were, but the similarities, though they are incredibly difficult to put into words, are more germane to the whole business of painting than the differences are.82

We return full circle to atemporality. The minimalist agenda with emphasis on formal investigation and innovation also reduced history, this time of painting, to a zero-point in time: a nunc stans without the buzz or the salvation.

80 Larry Bell discusses the dependence of artists upon museums in “Tape Recorded Interview with Larry Bell,” 1980, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. At one point, Bell stated, “Most of the stuff I did I was hoping I was going to be able to peddle to some kind of institution that could afford it and could maintain it. Because it's highly unlikely an individual could or would want to” (38).
82 Ibid., 18-19.
If intellectual currents are antihistorical, as they have been with California artists, the oral history interview can inject history back into the artist’s career and, more importantly, inject the career back into a broader understanding of history. It can do this if we confront how mythic images and anecdotes substitute for a conscious ideological overview; this can lead to an uncovering of the basic ideological tensions within the interviewee (and the interviewer as well). Yet in many cases, mythic and ideological subtexts are obscured by a collaborative myth-making process that should remind us of Thucydides’s warning that myth is a temptation to speaker and hearer alike. Both myth and ideology can be placed under the sign of desire: expressions of that which isn’t in an attempt to affirm that it is.

In this sense, sometimes the most engaging elements in an oral history interview are those passages that don’t seem to have any immediate historical application. Take for example the case of Craig Kauffman. Edward Moses lovingly called him the “little jerk,” and Edward Kienholz remembered how Kauffman’s mother came to the opening of her son’s show at the Ferus Gallery and carefully pulled out the grass growing through the cement cracks. Kauffman’s own interview is marked by his puzzlement over the sudden deflation of his career in the early 1970s. He hadn’t prepared for this, and in fact he had declined a tenure-track position in the art department at the University of California, Irvine, on the assumption that the excitement over Los Angeles art in general, and his in particular, would never end. By the time he was interviewed in 1976, he had given his eclipse considerable thought, but it is difficult to tease out statements that might suggest any awareness that what had happened to his career was related to a historical process larger than himself:

Things seemed a lot rosier and more optimistic in the late sixties.
I think the content is about other issues [other than form]: how you kind of want the world to look (in a funny way of putting it).

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83 Edward C. Moses, “Interview with Edward C. Moses,” interviewed by Sheldon Figoten, 1980, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 53-54. Moses continued, “But he was the smartest guy I’d seen around . . . the most arrogant attitude . . . like myself.”
84 Kienholz interview, 192.
I don't think I have any feelings about the world, that I'm beating any drum for how the whole world should look or something, just my corner of it.

As a matter of fact, I think you could make a very good case that the avant-garde is just sort of a moot point. Being quite honest, I really haven't seen anything new in terms of real new forms in about six years or so.86

Throughout the interview Kauffman consistently deprecated his accomplishments. Only when we glance back to what Moses and Kienholz have to say about Kauffman and examine their remarks in context can we begin to understand: their anecdotes, however trivial and inconsequential, reinforce their point that Kauffman had been insufferably cocky, not at all self-reflective or considerate, and quick to dismiss anyone who didn't achieve critical success, an easy pitfall since he scored big in the art market in his early twenties. We can see that the unexpected decline of his career had forced Kauffman to reexamine the meaning of his calling. The hidden internal polemic within the interview reads as a meditation on success and failure in the art enterprise: a question for which unfortunately the interviewer seemed to have absolutely no interest.87

Assemblage artist Gordon Wagner found a place for himself by totemically identifying with the surrealists. That was not entirely sufficient, so he further identified the surrealists with a timeless cosmic process: "I think that the Gospel and especially the Old Testament we use is probably one of the most surreal stories . . . pretty far out."88 On the basis of this identification, he found conviction that his devotion to a style deprecated by others was nonetheless worthwhile. He knew he was a rebel, but the necessity he felt to deny the society in which he lived led him also to deny the passionate social vision which, in part, empowered his work.

Images of self-representation may appear to be self-critical: Wagner referred to himself as "living in infinity"; Edward Kienholz didn't want to be boxed into being an artist—"You know, like I make art, I buy and sell some real estate, I shoot some pool, and you

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86 Ibid., 51, 65, 67, 72.
87 The concept of the "hidden internal polemic" comes from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and refers to a multivoiced argument taking place within the writings of one author. See Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics (Minneapolis, 1984) and The Dialogic Imagination (Austin, 1981).
88 Wagner interview, 522.
know, like that." Robert Irwin, whose interview dances through a dazzling variety of artistic, sociological, psychological, and religious theories, insisted throughout that he was not an intellectual. Craig Kauffman vehemently insisted that he was just playing around. But the self-criticisms of these four artists end up serving to justify their behavior by shading into variations on "otherworldliness," into rejections of means-end rationality, a specific aesthetic reaction to the logic of capitalist development. Their responses become more meaningful when viewed as the response of a generation that matured while art shifted from a community into a business enterprise replicating the hurly-burly of the stock exchange.

We are given images that validate the events of a person's life and the character that has emerged out of those events. Otherworldliness as a value creates a radical chasm between the artist and society, a chasm necessary in order to return to the "creative." The clues are a turning away from material things (especially emphasized when material things are transformed into purely spiritual objects); a belief in love as the only realizable and worthwhile goal; and an acceptance of the impermanence of this world. It is part of the romantic posture of the New Left and of the counterculture, in which artists and poets were bards.

Themes of self-representation tie into personal myths, life goals, and found meaning. Themes of self-representation also provide keys to defining and interpreting an artist's aesthetic approach, since in these narrative accounts the artist's life itself is turned into an aesthetic product. They allow us to begin to define ways in which the events of a life transform into artistic inspiration and productions, since we are dealing with parallel reactions to critically important events in artists' lives. In this case, the severing of the self from hegemonic social (historical) processes, the attempt to preserve the self in a guise of irrationality, leads us back to one of the themes critics have found in both assemblage and perceptual art: these works delve into the meaning of the self in a rapidly changing society. Assemblagists find the self in the spontaneous moment of creation, while minimalists have found the self in a stratum of perception that occurs in theory prior to cognition. In both cases, the self is

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89 Kienholz interview, 397.
posed against history and society, and aesthetics is grasped as an escape from the inexorability of social formation.90

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The aestheticist focus that came to dominate the art institutions of California is part of a larger aestheticist culture in which the individual is turned into a self-created work of art, or so he might think. I quoted Wagner’s Topanga stories at some length because their eccentricity illustrates how dreams of individual success can take many forms beside the commercial. In this context, the separation of the art community from society at large helps turns art into a “trip,” a pastime that provides identity and structure amidst the demise of more traditional social ties. Self-chosen affinity groups for self-made humans—in the aesthetic sense—congregate, affirming the existential value of their choice, the social underpinnings of what we call “taste.” We are in the realm of contemporary culture that Félix Guattari has described:

Throughout its many historical transformations, capitalism has always combined two fundamental processes: first the destruction of social territories, collective identities, and traditional value systems (this is what I call deterritorialization); then the recomposition, by the most artificial methods imaginable, of personological categories, patterns of power and models of submission, which are, if not formally similar to those that have been destroyed, at least homothetical from the point of view of their function. This last practice is what I call reterritorialization.

As the deterritorializing revolutions, linked to the development of science, technology, and the arts, sweep everything before them, a compulsion toward subjective reterritorializing emerges. And the antagonism between the two is aggravated by the fantastic growth of communications and the treatment of information, as these later focus their deterritorializing effects upon human faculties such as memory, perception, understanding and imagination, etc.91

Atemporality, then, may not be simply a peculiar quirk of Californian society or of artists. Its ubiquity in California art-

90 Compare this with Claude Lévi-Strauss’s posing of totemic thought against historical: “There is a sort of fundamental antipathy between history and systems of classification. This perhaps explains what one is tempted to call the ‘totemic void,’ for in the bounds of the great civilizations of Europe and Asia there is a remarkable absence of anything which might have reference to totemism, even in the form of remains. The reason is surely that the latter have elected to explain themselves by history and that this undertaking is incompatible with that of classifying things and beings (natural and social) by means of finite groups” (The Savage Mind [Chicago, 1966], 232).

community interviews makes it a symbol for forces invisible in
the interview precisely because they were alien to the intellectual
discourse of the artists or their community. But because those forces
were part of the life experience of the interviewees, their effects
can be traced between the lines. The triumph of myth over history
in the interviews thus is not evidence that California lacks history,
even in the arts, where so much history is intimately connected
with the process of making money and therefore anything but
romantic and more than a little bit vulgar. It is indeed remarkable:
here is a society which possesses an active cultural life, but both
the “establishment” and the “avant-garde” traditions have exclu-
ded consideration of how that society earns its keep. How it dreams
(or better, a simulacrum of how it might dream) is a constant topic,
as is the environment—light, space, freeways, gas stations, pop ar-
chitecture, neon sunsets. But still so much is excluded. How an
ideology and a mythology developed that can accomplish such an
impressive feat is part of the study of the relationship of subjec-
tivity and political-economic life. The argument that California has
“no history” is one of the mechanisms that exclude society from
art and replace history with myth. While this ideology cannot sti-
dle struggle (nor any ideology, since all societies seem to have their
ways of frustrating human beings), it can channel the struggle into
the realm of dreams, and into lonely, individual battles like those
so often described in interviews with these artists.

I began this essay with a mystery: why was one of the most
intriguing and fruitful movements in California art ignored by major
institutions for two decades. I suggested as a working hypothesis
that the answer might be found in the propensity of assemblage
art to criticize society. That immediately brought us to a second
mystery: how could the art of this genre be termed critique if oral
histories with assemblage artists reveal a widespread hostility to
social perspectives? I argued that myth had assumed the role of
history, both personal and social, and therefore historical critique
would be expressed most easily in the form of ahistorical, totemic
thought. Assemblage emerged in a time when art institutions in
the state were weak. Artists, who were largely poor, worked and
lived in situations where direct contact between each other and
with enthusiastic supporters was more important than the feeble
commercial outlets for their work. Art had become a vehicle for communication on all sorts of subjects and was intended to have a transcending effect—as Wallace Berman put it, “Art is Love is God.” A person who allowed him- or herself to be moved by art would escape the traps of “straight” society and lead a better life. One of the most important aspects of the movement was an unrelenting critique of bourgeois, commercial society in order to sustain a continuing independence from a world that was irrelevant and oppressive to “creative” people. A conservative age created its own radical opposition, but one based on aesthetics rather than a social theory.

At the same time, however, art institutions were expanding and strengthening. Art was no longer to be judged as a form of civic improvement or recreation. Its growing prestige could be measured by the importance of purely formalist criteria. Absence of social function or statement became, for a period of time, an absolute virtue. Though assemblage artwork often had purely formal excellence, only now being adequately acknowledged, its biting social comment was inseparable from the way the pieces were viewed. Assemblage art called into question the very desirability of the autonomy and prestige that art institutions were seeking and gaining. Because of the priority of content over form in California assemblage, the work could be excluded on philosophical grounds. Peter Plagens’s assessment of the critical triumph of the L.A. Look over assemblage reads like a papal excommunication:

To keep something good going we need both a carrot and a stick . . . The carrot was optimism, a gauzy faith in an amalgam of high technology and zen consciousness: if we could get rid of our appetite for all those nasty, dusty, gnarly, heavy, corny objets d’art, and if we could wean ourselves from such hoary materials as oil paint, bronze and welded steel, to polyester resin, nylon scrim and “pure” light and space, contemporary art could get us to the next astral plane.  

Exclusion of assemblage was made easier by the antipathy to and ineptness for commerce of many first-generation assemblage artists, not to mention all too frequent, all too human personal problems with alcohol and drugs. Nonetheless, assemblage did not die—in part because the genre had developed somewhat independently of the art market, in part because it touched a nerve across generations so that younger artists were inspired to continue

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Exquisite Corpse

the evolution of assemblage, and in part because smaller local museums and community art centers continued to exhibit and promote the work. The distinctions in exhibition policies of local, often state-arts-council-funded venues and the major museums are beyond the scope of this essay, though this would provide an interesting case study for examining how different American cultural life might be were the center of power shifted somewhat from the art market and museums dependent upon corporate patrons to a system of state funding as found in Canada and most Western European countries. I must also note that some of the most compelling contemporary assemblage is being created by Afro-American, Latino, and Asian-American artists, a development realizing and expanding the multicultural promise found in the work of the first generation. [See Figure 6]

Figure 6: Assemblage as intercultural dialogue: John Outterbridge, Aesthetics of Urban Blight, mixed media, 1987-88; photo courtesy California Afro-American Museum.

All that can be asked of a work of art is that it speak to people. Once its voice is heard, then its place can be determined—not eternally, perhaps, as the artist may have hoped, but for so long as the social conditions, the human relations that provoked the piece in the first place, can be understood. It was in this sense that
Kienholz tried to define how he wanted his work to be received:

It's one man's attempt to understand himself better. And in the sense that I'm human, maybe solutions or even questions that I come upon can be applicable, hopefully, to other people in other times.93

Assemblage remains an exciting art form because what the genre allows to be said about our society is still relevant, a point underscored by its ongoing "maverick" status. Despite the inclusion of a few stars of the first generation into the collections of major museums, contemporary assemblage work continues to be largely tangential to the major centers of power in the art market. It may be that when artists and their work are looked at again in a historical as well as aesthetic context, our culture may readjust its sense of what works are meaningful and which are not. But that process implies placing California, or any other society's, art into a tradition that is proper to itself, one that illuminates experience so that people can understand better the forces that structure their lives, where the understanding of the object coincides with the understanding of self and of being.

93Kienholz interview, 345.