

Find the Cave, Hold the Torch Making Art Shows Since Walter Hopps

FRANKLIN SIRMANS

In any discussion of modern and contemporary art in Los Angeles, renowned curator Walter Hopps (1932–2005) must play a central role. During his nearly fifty-year career, he cofounded the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles and worked at the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Museum of Art) before going on to direct the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the Menil Collection in Houston, with stints at the National Collection of Fine Arts, Washington, D.C., and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. He was an early advocate of assemblage as both an artistic style and a genre of conceptual innovation that helped define a hallmark of modern art in California, from San Francisco to Los Angeles. From a very early age, Hopps, with fate and luck and hard work, perfectly positioned himself to be an integral force in the art world of his generation and provided a radical curatorial model.

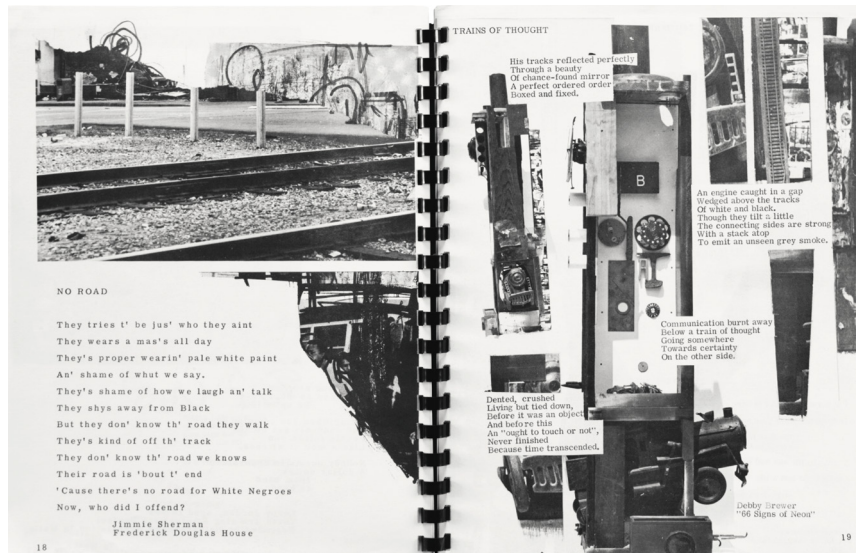
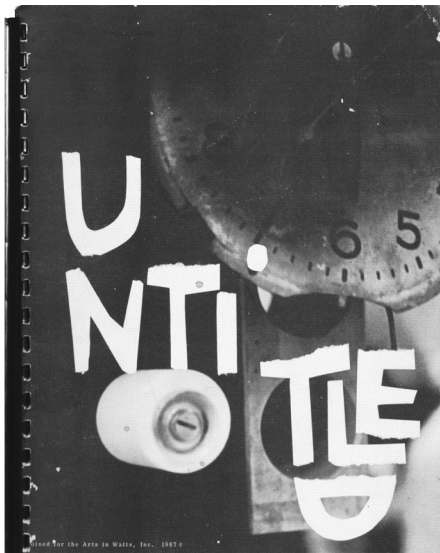
Hopps's life as a curator who came to maturation in Los Angeles is well worth deep exploration, and this essay touches on only some of the many events in a life well lived. Though I came to the guiding light late, I imagine that when curators of my generation were young and dreamed of being curators, visions of Walter Hopps danced in their heads. Known for making exhibitions that tested the boundaries of presentation practices for art and, most important, that *looked good*, Hopps had a knack for original conception and installation. He was also a supreme facilitator for artists. And he knew that was the ultimate accomplishment: being the guy charismatic enough to get artists to make their best work and to get collectors and museum bureaucrats to buy it, support it, and help him champion it intellectually. His most ardent supporter (and boss), Dominique de Menil, who hired Hopps as the founding director of the Menil Collection, eventually came to the conclusion that "he is too much a creator and a perfectionist to be at the same time a museum director."¹ Hopps's creative mind wasn't always concerned with the bottom line, or with time, for that matter. Yet his successes as a curator invariably led to promotions to director's jobs that he held on to tenuously until the inevitable firing or resignation.

His European counterpart might be Swiss curator Harald Szeemann, who was born in 1933, the year after Hopps's birth, and died a month before Hopps did in 2005. In addition to holding charisma in

spades, Szeemann, like Hopps, was known for having prickly relationships with representatives of money and bureaucracy. Szeemann more or less renounced institutions in 1969, after the Kunstmuseum Bern, his employer, couldn't get behind what he was trying to say in one of the most critically celebrated exhibitions ever, *When Attitudes Become Form*. In the same way that Hopps became identified with the deft mounting of large one-person exhibitions, Szeemann was a master of the group show.

Earlier generations of aspiring curators may have dreamed of Alfred Barr or René d'Harnoncourt and perhaps, after them, Pontus Hulten. If you were black like me, you would probably also have made a special place in those dreams for the likes of Alain Locke. Only a few dreamed of the great Jermaine MacAgy because she died young. But there is something about Hopps and Szeemann that is pivotal and revelatory to the present moment: the paths of both curators highlight the tenuous bonds between institutions and the individual practice of presenting exhibitions as a curator.² Both men came of age in the 1950s, after World War II, but were profoundly shaped by the social developments of the 1960s. In an interview with me in 1997, Szeemann likened being a curator to being an author, but most of the time he more precisely defined himself as an exhibition maker. Hopps compared it to conducting a symphony. Curator Mike Bianco calls Hopps a "cultural architect," which I like.

When people say so-and-so is an artist's artist, it is usually meant as the utmost compliment—a sign of having truly made one's mark but still being grounded enough to perhaps teach or to collaborate with other artists on special projects. One could say that Hopps was a curator's curator. From the genius idea of curating a show around a merry-go-round at the Santa Monica Pier (the 1955 *Action I*, one of his earliest efforts) to his last show, in 2005, at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, Hopps was down in the trenches working with art and artists, before, during, and after having arrived at a special place in his nascent vocation.



Untitled, published by Joined for the Arts in Watts in 1967, featured contributions from numerous artists, including Noah Purifoy. Photo by Ed Glendinning, courtesy of Charles White Archives.

BIRTH OF THE COOL³

Born in Eagle Rock, a neighborhood in northeastern Los Angeles, to parents who were doctors, Hopps had a normal youthful existence until about a year before graduating from Eagle Rock High School. In eleventh grade, he enrolled in a Saturday-morning program in the humanities. Classes were held in a classroom at the old Los Angeles Museum of History, Science and Art, but it was on a field trip to the Huntington Library in Pasadena that Hopps's interests in visual art were first piqued. Shortly after, a visit to the home of Walter and Louise Arensberg cemented his fascination with cutting-edge art. The Arensbergs had accumulated one of the most important collections of twentieth-century art at that time, most notably the work of Marcel Duchamp, and their home on Hillside Avenue in Hollywood doubled as a private museum until 1954. Also conveniently located on Hillside Avenue was Earl Stendhal, who opened his gallery in 1921 and was one of the first dealers in pre-Columbian art. In 1946 artist William Copley, who had spent a tour of duty in Italy, opened the Copley Gallery in Beverly Hills, showing René Magritte, Yves Tanguy, Joseph Cornell, and Man Ray. By the late 1940s Hopps was well exposed to first-rate works by European and American artists, non-Western artifacts, American folk art, pre-Columbian ceramics, and the contemporary work of Mexican artists such as Diego Rivera and Rufino Tamayo. It is a cross-cultural view of looking at art that would later find resonance at the Menil Collection.

Hopps's other great passion growing up was music, especially jazz, which also brought greater diversity to his upbringing. "Some of my closest friends were actually musicians, and the '40s were a great time of innovation in jazz. . . . Black jazz frightened parents; it frightened the officials. It was worse in this way than rock 'n' roll. It had a subversive quality."⁴ Hopps understood the importance of this

³"Find the Cave, Hold the Torch: Making Art Shows Since Walter Hopps" by Franklin Sirmans, from the digital archive of the exhibition *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980* at the Hammer Museum.

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history: "One of the major reconstructions, re-birth in a way, of black culture happens in the 1930s and was centered in black jazz music."⁵ He goes on to describe the growth of the underground and narcotics cultures tied to jazz in the war years en route to a conversation about the artist Wallace Berman (whom he first encountered in a jazz club), mentioning the barriers facing black musicians and the dope scandals that led to crackdowns in the north and the east, before opining on the place of Los Angeles in this history: "Southern California, with its greater Watts, its cleaner air and easier physical environment, became a haven for eastern black jazz musicians on the run. [Billie] Holiday came here, Charles Parker came here, Max Roach, and later Miles Davis. [There was] a world in old Hollywood, the Main Street area in old downtown L.A., scattered down in the black community along near the L.A. Museum . . . [and] on Adams Boulevard, Santa Barbara Avenue, the great classic jazz clubs to exist anywhere in the country outside of Chicago, New York, or Kansas City."⁶ In the early 1950s Hopps's long-standing passion for jazz blossomed into a vocation in Los Angeles, where he, Jim Newman, and Craig Kauffman had a small business booking jazz performers called Concert Hall Workshop, which lasted a few years.

By the time he graduated from high school, Hopps knew a lot, enough to recognize that the Bay Area had more to offer in terms of his passion for new, modern art, so in 1950 he went to Stanford. In San Francisco at that time, Clyfford Still represented the link to postwar abstract expressionism and had acolytes in the form of Richard Diebenkorn, David Park, and Elmer Bischoff. Hopps met Douglas and Jermaine MacAgy, art professor and curator, respectively. There were Beat poets and jazz musicians as well. Hopps's stint in northern California was short-lived, as he transferred to UCLA in the summer of 1951, but the effect was lasting. He would later champion younger Bay Area artists such as Jay DeFeo in gallery and museum exhibitions.

In 1955 Hopps married his first wife, Shirley Neilsen, at the Watts Towers. Though he never really wrote criticism for journals or newspapers, he wrote profusely, as we all must/do. And he taught. He lectured for an adult class in contemporary art at UCLA, where he was fortunate to have assembled the heirs to the Arensbergs, the future collectors of avant-garde art in Los Angeles, including Fred and Marcia Weisman, Edwin Janss, Betty Asher, and Donald and Monte Factor. Hopps instructed the first generation of serious contemporary art collectors in the city, and his "pedagogical cultivation of avant-garde philanthropy" was, as Mike Bianco has noted, "unprecedented in the Los Angeles art scene."⁷

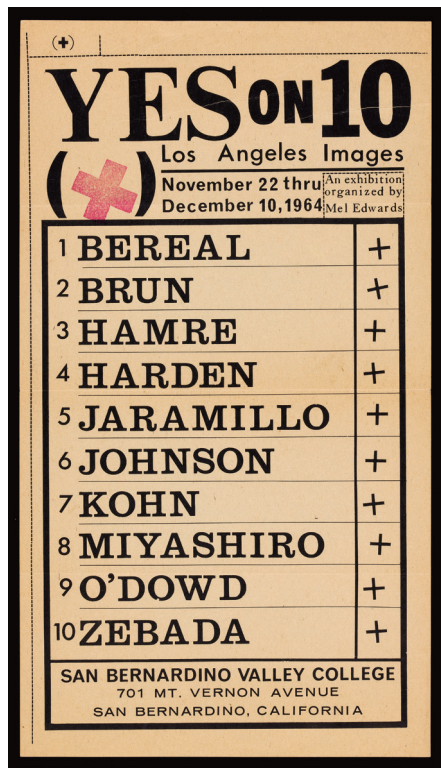
By 1955, even though he had not finished his degree, Hopps deemed himself ready for the world. His career as a curator began to find shape when he organized *Action I* (referring to Harold Rosenberg's important essay on action painting) in the carousel building at the Santa Monica Pier in May of 1955. Jumping off from his earliest curatorial interests, which would continue to occupy him for quite some

time, the show focused on California artists from the Bay Area and Los Angeles and presented some of the assemblage work that he found so interesting and unique. Hopps's curatorial innovation is already evident in his inclusion of music as an integral element of the show, having recorded jazz playing regularly, as part of the viewing process. Even at that time, for Hopps, art was something not only to be looked at but to be felt in other bodily ways as well. Shortly thereafter, with friends including artist Craig Kauffman (who went to high school with Hopps), he opened a small gallery space in Brentwood called Syndell Studio, where *Action 2* was presented in 1956, in conjunction with Edward Kienholz's Now Gallery across the street and two galleries in San Francisco. The gallery's name came from Hopps's friend and partner Jim Newman, who was driving from Omaha when he hit a pedestrian who had darted out in front of his car. The Nebraska farmer he hit was named Maurice Syndell. Kienholz later made up a story about an artist by the same name and entered works into group shows under that name.

On March 13, 1957, in collaboration and cooperation with Kienholz, Hopps opened the Ferus Gallery (named after a young artist, James Ferus, who had killed himself). The inaugural group show *Objects on the Landscape Demanding of the Eye* included works by John Altoon, Billy Al Bengston, Jay DeFeo, Sonia Gechtoff, Craig Kauffman, Edward Kienholz, Frank Lobdell, and Ed Moses. By the fall of 1958 Kienholz had sold his shares in the gallery, and Ferus began its second life with a new partner in the form of Irving Blum. Known for affecting a Cary Grant voice and demeanor, Blum was the showman the gallery had lacked. In 1960 the gallery began showing more and more New York artists and in 1962 was the first to showcase the pop work of Andy Warhol, whom Blum and Hopps had met in New York in the fall of 1961. Ferus helped galvanize the first real contemporary art scene in Los Angeles in a very short period of time, and as the gallery became more important and popular, others soon followed, including Dwan Gallery, which opened in 1959, and the short-lived Huysman Gallery, founded by Henry Hopkins in 1960 and located directly across the street from Ferus. Dwan showed European and New York avant-garde artists such as Yves Klein (in a show that Hopps helped organize), Martial Raysse, and Niki de Saint Phalle, along with Larry Rivers and Robert Rauschenberg. Hopkins, a great curator in his own right who had studied at UCLA with Hopps, produced one of the most important exhibitions in the history of Los Angeles, *War Babies*, featuring works by Larry Bell, Ed Boreal, Joe Goode, and Ron Miyashiro—all precocious recent graduates of Chouinard Art Institute. Though little remains of the works that were on view, the show has left an indelible impression thanks to the poster produced to promote the exhibition. Photographed by artist Jerry McMillan (a close early friend from Oklahoma of Goode and Ed Ruscha), the poster presents the four artists at a table covered with an American flag acting out culinary stereotypes related to their ethnic backgrounds. Bell munches on a bagel, Boreal a watermelon, and Goode a mackerel, while Miyashiro holds chopsticks.

But the diversity so humorously at play in the *War Babies* poster was more than rare to come by at that time. Bereal, the self-described “crossover figure,” says, “it was stone-cold segregation in Los Angeles. New York looked like Brazil and L.A. was Siberia.”⁸ “The only person on the scene was Charles White,” Bereal offers. “He was out there all by himself. I was the second cat; Dr. Banks was there too,” he says, referring to Dr. Leon O. Banks, who was a young collector at the time and a pediatrician dedicated to taking care of children in South Los Angeles.⁹ Bereal’s statement is telling. White’s art was of a different kind, and though he wasn’t literally “on the scene,” at least the work was known and discussed and associated with a gallery, namely Heritage Gallery, which opened in 1961 in Pacific Palisades. “I looked at and respected Charles as a more classical artist, but I was excited by what was happening in New York, the cutting edge, with all its implications. The *War Babies* show was the only time the mainstream art community ever trumpeted diversity,” says Bereal. “And I would not have been there had it not been for Walter Hopps and Ferus.” In fact, Bereal, like other young artists early in their careers, lived at Hopps’s house in Pasadena from 1961 to 1962, just before Hopps accepted the position of curator at the Pasadena Art Museum. Bereal had pedigree. “Being a student at Chouinard [1958–62], I was there at exactly the right time with exactly the right situation.”

From 1962 to 1965 Bereal was a working artist in Los Angeles before Watts caught fire and his life changed forever. “I had left the street hustlers in Riverside, and it didn’t take long for me to realize that the people in the art game were the same. They made more money, though.”¹⁰ Although Bereal had found a groove, it had to have been a less than inviting atmosphere when Hopps left the gallery and Blum took over as sole owner. Blum brought in more New York artists, and the type of happenings that once contributed to the atmosphere of Ferus—the shenanigans of the likes of Wallace Berman, which invariably got shut down by the police—was soon to be history in the increasingly commercial sphere of the gallery. And if the white counterculture was to be a diminished presence, it follows that young artists of color would also find themselves in a similar position.



Poster for the exhibition *Yes on 10*, curated by Melvin Edwards for the Little Gallery of San Bernardino Valley College, 1964. The exhibition included Ed Bereal, Virginia Jaramillo, Daniel LaRue Johnson, and Ron Miyashiro. Courtesy of Virginia Jaramillo.



Watts rebellion, Los Angeles, August 1965. Photo by Melvin Edwards, courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.

When *Artforum* moved to Los Angeles in 1962, the city's art scene garnered national visibility. *Artforum* signaled a professionalism matched by Blum's approach, but certainly it was a different view from what Hopps might have imagined. Bereal figured out a way to make it work. "I had become an expert gamer and was into exploiting the art scene for its money, its prestige, its sex, and its chemicals. My gamesmanship also allowed me to join the largest gallery in the city, which considered me to be a blue chip commodity, guaranteed to produce handsome profits and notoriety for whoever owned me at that time."¹¹ Then, on August 14, 1965, Bereal's normal routine of waking up around nine or ten in the morning, having a look outside, and working until it was time to go drinking at 10 p.m. before crashing at 2 a.m. and preparing to do it again was broken up for good. Although the rebellion in Watts had started three days earlier, it wasn't until Bereal greeted the morning on the fourteenth with a National Guardsman's jeep-mounted machine gun pointed at him that he had to reconsider his situation. "In an instant I'm no longer loved—no longer a promising up-and-coming young artist. My current series of sculptures is suddenly questionable. What was this all about? What was I all about? Was my art about anything? The police and National Guardsmen were freely running about the streets shooting/killing Blacks and others."¹² Following a line of self-questioning—"Was 'Art for

Art's Sake' too expansive an activity for me?"—Bereal answered by closing his studio, moving back home to Riverside, his mother, and his roots. As he put it, "I could no longer be who I had been anymore."¹³ Of course, after being affected and inspired by Watts, Bereal created Bodacious Buggerrilla, a political guerrilla theater group that would appear in public spaces. He continues to make art and teach.



Ed Bereal, *Mr. President*, print in the form of counterfeit money, 1960s. Photo by Tim Nighswander/IMAGING4ART, courtesy of Ron Miyashiro.

Never fully embracing the role of gallerist, Hopps soon accepted the position of curator of the Pasadena Art Museum, ushering in his phase as a “museum man.” Founded in 1922 as the Pasadena Art Institute, with a focus on nineteenth-century American and European art, the institute was transformed in 1953 when it received the bequest of about six hundred works from Galka Scheyer, including paintings by the Blue Four (Klee, Feininger, Kandinsky, and Jawlensky), among others. The following year it was christened the Pasadena Art Museum, with a focus on modernism. Scheyer’s collection, along with that of the Arensbergs, had all the roots of modernism not previously represented in Los Angeles. Hopps soaked it all up. And even though he had been promoting the art of his peers and his generation in Los Angeles, his first exhibition for the museum was devoted to one of the most pivotal artists in the European modernist tradition, Kurt Schwitters.

A FUNKY BEAT: ASSEMBLAGE FROM CALIFORNIA

Sure as one generation takes from the preceding, eventually an art scene developed in Los Angeles, and one important and original style was formed in assemblage. The discussion of modern and contemporary assemblage in California grew straight out of the context of Dada and surrealism, and Hopps was a catalyst. As curator of the groundbreaking 1962 Kurt Schwitters exhibition, Hopps demonstrated the link between European modernism and Los Angeles that was such a vital part of his curatorial vision. Although just one of Hopps’s many important projects, the Schwitters exhibition illustrates the roots of a Western modernist interpretation of assemblage, via Dada and surrealism:

“Find the Cave, Hold the Torch: Making Art Shows Since Walter Hopps” by Franklin Sirmans, from the digital archive of the exhibition *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980* at the Hammer Museum.

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To say that Kurt Schwitters was an amazingly versatile artist and anticipated much is such an absurd understatement that the remark is almost dada. Schwitters translated dada (the revolutionary “anti-art” art movement rolling at full tide by 1920) to produce what he called *Merz*. *Merz* is definitely pro-art in a frame of reference that could envision poetry, prose, typography, plastic arts of every sort, and architecture, as a total and interrelated art manifestation. . . . [Schwitters’s] pioneer developments in *collage* and assemblage techniques are taken with regard, used and extended by many artists. . . . It would seem *Merz* should be regarded as an insight to a tradition that is yet developing all around us.¹⁴

In a prescient book (and exhibition catalogue) called *Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art*, an important chronology from 1940 to 1987 is illustrated and elucidated. Those years speak volumes on the direction of modern art in Los Angeles, and the book accompanied three exhibitions that examined generational explorations of assemblage, beginning with the influential work of the German Schwitters and the American Man Ray and ending with works by quintessential Los Angeles artists Charles Ray and Chris Burden. There’s a lot of territory in between, and few artists of color. But there’s no denying the importance of Hopps’s efforts to celebrate a kind of art loosely defined as assemblage and surrounded by the chaotic energy of the Beat Generation, which left form up to interpretation and incorporated poetry, sound, music, and attitude. By presenting the work of Schwitters at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1962, Hopps helped raise consciousness around that style and way of making things. So important is assemblage to contemporary art that, according to one scholar, “in a century that stressed innovation, broke boundaries among art forms, programmatically expanded the new materials available to fine art, and made problematic the nature of art and its relation to reality, assemblage might be considered *the* characteristic art activity.”¹⁵ Then again, in 1962 the term *assemblage*, though often bandied about as a descriptive label in French, was barely known in English. *The Art of Assemblage*, organized and presented by William Seitz at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1961, traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Art (now the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) in 1962. Seitz borrowed the term from Jean Dubuffet and carefully delineated assemblage’s roots in cubism. That show was important in bringing about further examination and critical discussion of the phenomenon.

Later in 1962 Hopps organized *New Painting of Common Objects*, one of the first pop art exhibitions before that moniker was even in use. Incorporating found objects or found images taken from commercial usage, the work updated the collagist tendencies apparent in Schwitters and other early Dadaists with the conceptual wit of Duchamp. The exhibition included paintings by Andy Warhol, Wayne Thiebaud, and Roy Lichtenstein, as well as the very young Los Angeles artists Joe Goode and Ed Ruscha.

If people still couldn't follow the trajectory from Schwitters to Kienholz's assembled junk and Goode's found milk bottles to Berman's chaotic manifesto-like poetry and Ruscha's vernacular sign paintings, *New Painting of Common Objects* served to further clarify the importance of assemblage in contemporary art. Over the next few years, in 1963, 1965, and 1966, respectively, Hopps organized for the museum important retrospective exhibitions devoted to Marcel Duchamp; Jasper Johns, the biggest proponent of Neo-Dadaism, and the subject, with Schwitters, of a gallery show at Ferus five years earlier; and Joseph Cornell, another master of assemblage. With such a deep tradition in junk, is it any wonder that Los Angeles would become the home of finish fetish as well?

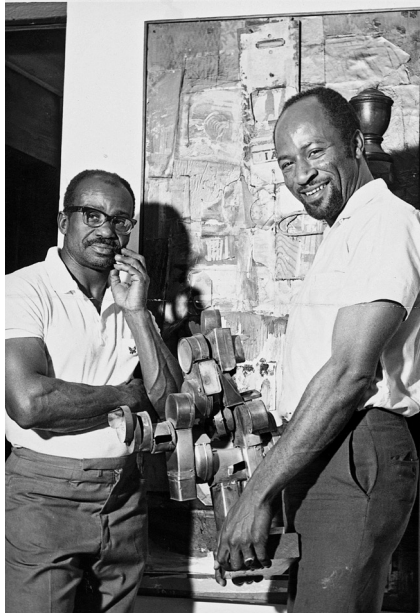
In 1965 Hopps was invited by the United States Information Agency to curate the American participation at the São Paulo Biennial. In light of the sociopolitical situation in the United States at the time, it is worth noting that the 1965 Biennial, occurring after the 1964 military coup in Brazil, was the first of successive biennials that were compromised by political repression within the country. Hopps chose to show Barnett Newman—an artist's artist, like Schwitters and Duchamp, whose influence could be felt as a barometer of contemporary art. Newman was a transformative force in abstract art, best known for his characteristic "zip," a painted line of division in his paintings. His mature work from the end of the 1940s onward can be seen as a precursor of many of the minimalist tendencies that would be coming to the fore by 1965. Hopps deftly situated Newman as the focal point, surrounded by six younger artists twenty years his junior—three from L.A. and three from New York. Among them were seminal artists of light and space, post-painterly abstraction, and minimalism such as Robert Irwin and Larry Bell from Los Angeles and Frank Stella and Donald Judd from New York.

On the heels of such important shows, Hopps was asked to serve as director of the Pasadena Art Museum when the position became open. His tenure didn't last long. In 1966, while working on the Cornell retrospective for the museum, Hopps had a breakdown and, acknowledging his abusive use of amphetamines since the late 1950s, was hospitalized for several weeks. Shortly after, he was asked to leave the museum, though he did finish the organization of the show. He left Pasadena in 1967 to work at the Institute for Policy Studies, a liberal think tank in Washington, D.C. There he participated in seminars with the likes of Stokely Carmichael and Herbert Marcuse.

Soon after, however, he accepted a position as director of the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, a young and adventurous (and short-lived) collecting institution mired in debt. After selling its eclectic art collection, which included works by Ellsworth Kelly, Grace Hartigan, and Duchamp, among others, the gallery functioned like a Kunsthalle, presenting shows as a satellite of the Corcoran Gallery of Art (Hopps became director there in 1969). His first exhibition at the Washington Gallery, in 1967, was of his old friend Kienholz, presenting works from the 1960s. The following year Hopps chose to work

with another Los Angeles artist, and the Washington Gallery of Modern Art became the first venue outside of California to exhibit Noah Purifoy's *66 Signs of Neon*, a collaborative *Gesamtkunstwerk* consisting of sixty-six assemblages made from the detritus of the Watts rebellion the previous year. With *66 Signs of Neon*, Purifoy, who was born and raised in Jim Crow Alabama and had a career in social work before becoming an artist, wanted "to tell people that if something goes up in flames it doesn't mean its life is over."¹⁶ While all assemblage builds upon the past life of an object, Purifoy's chosen materials were heavy with much more than symbolic weight. "In the forty years that followed this landmark exhibition, using debris, urban refuse, or junk as his primary sculptural material became an undeclared manifesto for Purifoy."¹⁷

It is worth noting that the rebellion in Watts was no isolated incident, and Los Angeles was only one of several cities where race was at the core of violent insurrection. But the scope of violence in Los Angeles was huge. Purifoy was teaching at the Watts Towers Arts Center with his friend and colleague the artist Judson Powell as it all started. When the dust settled, Purifoy, like Boreal, was a new man. A man who had been proud of his twelve suits and his bourgeois lifestyle had nothing short of an epiphany: "So Purifoy gets rid of his suits—gets rid of all his excess material belongings—and imposed upon himself a life of poverty."¹⁸ Purifoy, Powell, and other artists, including Gordon Wagner and Arthur Secunda, created the sixty-six works of art in a feverish spurt of energy for their first presentation at the Simon Rodia Commemorative Watts Renaissance of the Arts Festival in the spring of 1966. That the work was in the tradition of assemblage that included Rodia (who died the preceding year) was not lost on Purifoy and insightful observers. As Yael Lipschutz points out, "Specifically, in the Towers, Purifoy saw an inspiring feat of social sculpture—an unbridled, unshakable sense of creativity—and a frenetic need to communicate via materials."¹⁹ Lipschutz goes on to lucidly discuss the ties that bind Purifoy's work to Schwitters and Duchamp. Certainly, that is something that Hopps would have been thinking of in regard to the presentation of *66 Signs of Neon* in Washington. Like Schwitters's *Merzbild*, Duchamp's readymades, Joseph Beuys's *Arena*, and Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*, *66 Signs of Neon* is a monument to art making, life, and culture.



Noah Purifoy (left) and Judson Powell at 66 Signs of Neon exhibition, c. 1966. Photograph courtesy of Noah Purifoy Foundation.



66 Signs of Neon exhibition at University of California, Los Angeles, c. 1966. Photograph courtesy of Harry Drinkwater.

In 1972 Hopps was selected as the American commissioner for the Venice Biennale and chose an eclectic crew of artists, including Sam Gilliam, Ronald Davis, Keith Sonnier, Diane Arbus, and Richard Estes. After spending time traveling throughout Europe and getting fired from the Corcoran sometime along the way for “eccentric behavior,” Hopps returned to Washington and a new position as senior curator of twentieth-century American art at the National Collection of Fine Arts (NCFA, now the Smithsonian American Art Museum). One must wonder if Hopps and Szeemann met that summer, as it was one of those moments that come only once in ten years when Documenta, the large exhibition presented in Kassel, Germany, every five years, and the Venice Biennale coincide. The primary focus of Hopps’s exhibition pavilion was post-painterly abstraction in the work of Washington Color School artist Gilliam, Los Angeles-born geometric abstractionist Davis, and light artist Sonnier. A dose of street life was injected by the inclusion of Arbus and Estes. But it is interesting to consider the contrast between the American pavilion and what was happening a day trip away in Kassel, where installation and performance were new focal points, evidenced in the work of artists such as Joseph Beuys, James Lee Byars, and Hermann Nitsch. Hopps’s old friends played prominent roles in Documenta as well. Kienholz exhibited the highly politicized installation work *Five Car Stud*, about the castration of a black man at the hands of six white men. And Ruscha designed the cover of the exhibition catalogue and poster that accompanied the Kassel show.

Although performing the day-to-day duties of a museum employee was not necessarily Hopps’s best asset, curating large-scale, retrospective one-person exhibitions was still his forte. And for the

nation's bicentennial, he made the perfect choice to show the work of Robert Rauschenberg, yet another artist who relies heavily on the found object, who may in fact be described as quintessentially American in his usage of the vernacular while juxtaposing high and low. Hopps brilliantly installed the show in a reverse chronology. *Time* magazine ran a cover story, an almost unheard-of endorsement of pop cultural interest. The show traveled nationwide to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The popularity of the exhibition, however, seemingly put a big spotlight on Hopps's faults rather than on the brilliant curatorship at the heart of his undertakings. Though the details are murky, there was a falling-out between Hopps and the NCFA. Another contributing factor may also have been the fact that Hopps made time that same year to co-organize (with Henry Hopkins and Jan Butterfield) the major exhibition *Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era*, which opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in the fall of 1976 and traveled to the NCFA in the spring of 1977.

With artists ranging from Arthur and Lucia Mathews to Maria Nordman and Allen Ruppersberg, the massive show included more than one hundred artists and gives a sense of the role that Hopps's birthplace played in his curatorial work, which was one very much grounded in the world and the sociocultural rather than in the obsessively formal. It was a consistent view that engendered interesting exhibitions that looked good and had something to say, while being squarely focused on artists rather than being theme-based presentations. With this project, Hopps offers some insightful clues as to what might have played out in his mind in the process of organizing exhibitions throughout his career. Discussing the peculiar place of California and the West Coast in a conversational interview with Hopkins and Butterfield, Hopps said, "The most intact native American cultures in the United States, during the time frame that we're talking about, existed in the far west and southwest. LA and San Francisco were the closest major cities to the first extant native American culture in the country. [It is] of consequence, obviously early on, with Jackson Pollock. And it is still of consequence to a Lee Mullican. The Spanish and Mexican cultures are part of the background."²⁰ Regarding the site of his first marriage, he said, "outside the official art world, the classic case of extraordinary symbolic structure, the will to personal myth image, of course is Simon Rodia's Watts Towers. The towers emerge in the literature of the Pueblo in the 30s."²¹ In *Time* magazine, speaking of the towers, Hopps describes how they exemplify California's "crazy tradition for assemblage and the object."²² Rodia called the towers *nuestro pueblo* (our town).



Watts rebellion, Los Angeles, August 1965. Photo by Melvin Edwards, courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.



Daniel LaRue Johnson (left) and an unidentified man during the Watts rebellion, Los Angeles, August 1965. Photo by Melvin Edwards, courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates.

In some quarters it has been said that by this point the perception of Hopps was that he might have been too much of an artist's curator, perhaps too much like an artist himself—a risk taker who disdained the rules of institutional bureaucracy. Enter Dominique de Menil. At her invitation, Hopps became a consultant to the Menil Foundation in Houston around the beginning of 1980, in order to help explore plans for a new museum, of which he became founding director when it opened in 1987. Their first curatorial appointment was Jermayne MacAgy, "one of the first women to earn a Ph.D. in art history in the United States." As Hopps remembered in 2000, "I was familiar with MacAgy's work from her thematic exhibitions held in the late 1940s through the mid 1950s in San Francisco, beautiful assemblies of far-flung art and artifacts that had knocked my socks off. I knew as well of the de Menils' engagement beyond art with spiritual matters and human rights activities."²³ It was a close relationship that proved to be incredibly fruitful for nearly twenty years, until Dominique de Menil died in 1997. At the Menil Hopps carved out new niches that have become cornerstones of the modern and contemporary collection, adding important works by Joseph Cornell, Barnett Newman, Willem de Kooning, Frank Stella, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns, in addition to large collections of photographs by Walker Evans and William Christenberry. Kienholz is well represented by important early works, as are Jay DeFeo, Wallace Berman, Bruce Conner, George Herms, Ed Bernal, Joe Goode, and Larry Bell.

Of course, the story goes on from there. Hopps lived and worked and loved in Houston for many years to come. His presence is keenly felt to this day. His writings and his exhibitions are well documented and the legacy continues to grow, but at the heart of it Hopps was a humble poet who did something well. As he said, "I think of myself as being in a line of work that goes back about twenty-five thousand years. My job has been finding the cave and holding the torch."²⁴

"Find the Cave, Hold the Torch: Making Art Shows Since Walter Hopps" by Franklin Sirmans, from the digital archive of the exhibition *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980* at the Hammer Museum.

hammer.ucla.edu/now-dig-this/essays/find-the-cave-hold-the-torch

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NOTES

A number of people had a hand in this essay and allowed me to bounce ideas and questions off them, especially Kellie Jones, who gave me this opportunity. At the Menil, Geri Aramanda, Mary Kadish, Meredith Goldsmith, Michelle White, and Mary Lambrakos offered crucial advice and research. Caroline Huber Hopps, Dagny Corcoran, John Outterbridge, Lyn Kienholz, Samella Lewis, Joe Goode, Cecil Ferguson, and Ed Bereal all kindly lent their time and memories. Allison Kalt transcribed numerous interviews. Michelle Piranio's help in getting to this final edit was immeasurable. And finally, my wife, Jessica, and daughter, Stella, provided inspiration.

¹ Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles: A Touch for the Now," *New Yorker*, July 29, 1991, 33.

² For a discussion of the influence of Hopps and Szeemann on curating today, see David Levi Strauss, "The Bias of the World: Curating after Szeemann and Hopps," *Brooklyn Rail*, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2006/12/art/the-bias-of-the-world>.

³ Of course, before Kristine McKenna and Morgan Neville made their important film *The Cool School* or even before Philip Leider wrote his article "The Cool School" in *Artforum* in 1964, Miles Davis created the music of his important recording *The Birth of the Cool* in 1948 and 1949, and released the album of that name in 1957.

⁴ "Walter Hopps Hopps Hopps Talks with Hans-Ulrich Obrist," *Artforum*, February 1996, 61.

⁵ "Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era," transcription of a conversation between Hopps, Henry T. Hopkins, and Jan Butterfield, transcribed by Alberta Mayo, 44–45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷ Mike Bianco, "Ferus: 1957–1966" (master's thesis, Bard College, 2007).

⁸ Ed Bereal, conversation with the author, June 21, 2010.

⁹ Dr. Banks, as he approaches ninety, remains an important collector. He and his wife started collecting in 1955. He was on the first board of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and has a long involvement with the California African American Museum in Los Angeles, to which he gave a significant collection, including works by David Hockney (for whom Banks has been a regular subject in a series of portrait paintings since the 1960s), Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Daniel LaRue Johnson, Betye Saar, Bob Thompson, and Kienholz. He was also heavily into the work of Melvin Edwards.

¹⁰ Ed Bereal, conversation with the author, June 21, 2010.

¹¹ Ed Bereal, "I Never Gave Up," unpublished "open letter to Monte Factor," unpaginated. I am grateful to Lyn Kienholz for bringing this text to my attention.

¹² Ed Bereal, "In Search of Ms. America: An Autobiography of the Watts Years, 1965–1975," *New Observations* 92 (November–December 1992): 18–19 (special issue on Art and Politics in Los Angeles, edited by George Herms).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Walter Hopps, quoted in Kate Trauman Steinitz, *Kurt Schwitters: A Portrait from Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 114–15.

¹⁵ Anne Bartlett Ayres, "Los Angeles Modernism and the Assemblage Tradition, 1948–1962" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1983), 2.

¹⁶ Noah Purifoy, quoted by Abby Wasserman in "Noah Purifoy," (*Oakland*) *Museum of California Magazine*, Summer 1998.

17 Yael Lipschutz, "Twelve Suits and the Watts Riot: The Transformative Art of Noah Purifoy," unpublished manuscript, UCLA, Spring 2008, 2.

18 Ibid., 12.

19 Ibid., 16.

20 "Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era," transcription, 20.

21 Ibid., 34.

22 *Time*, October 15, 1965.

23 Walter Hopps, "Encountering the de Menils."

24 Tomkins, "Profiles: A Touch for the Now," 57.