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Cultural creativity of urban places can be explained by reference to each city's position within a hierarchy of regional milieux. To say that every city has a different history is not different than saying that each city is a different place, because place stores the actions of past generations in the landscape. To be creative is to change the environment around us. Great creativity changes not only the local environment, but that of the globe.

My subject today is Los Angeles, a unique and infamous milieu, thanks to the Hollywood movie industry. Of course, Hollywood movies changed the global environment. The burst of creative energy centered in Los Angeles from about 1910 to 1950 erected an enormous global institution of commercial culture. But commercial culture is limited by the profit motive of capitalism. The antagonist of commercial culture is critical culture—what we usually call “fine art.” As the cultural form of capitalism, commercial culture is oriented toward pleasure and the affirmation of the social status quo. We can posit a formula: commercial culture takes what is situated and local, and transforms it into a relatively universal commodity that can be circulated globally. Critical culture, in the period of advanced capitalism, takes what is generic and globally circulated, and transforms it into something situated and antagonistic to the operation of the market. The antagonism takes many forms, but must contain the central element of calling into question the legitimacy of the cultural status quo—which in the twentieth century has been commercial culture.

This is only a broad outline of the dynamic at work. Los Angeles is both a

rightful capital city of cultural capitalism, and the eventual locus of the most important break in Western aesthetic form since the Renaissance. To support this strident claim, I will tell the story of two streams in the creative visual culture of Los Angeles. One stream grows from commercial culture and is represented here by the work of two photographers: George Hurrell and Julius Shulman. The other emerged as a direct critique, not only of the commercial culture which became its immediate subject, but also of the institution of aesthetics itself. This second, critical stream, is represented in this presentation by the artists Edward Kienholz, Ed Ruscha, Robert Heinecken, and Robbert Flick.

Part I: Hurrell, Shulman, and Abstraction

George Hurrell is credited with the invention of “glamour photography” in Hollywood during the early 1930s. Julius Shulman is one of three great American architectural photographers of the 20th century. The other two were William Hedrich of Chicago and Ezra Stoller of New York City. Together, they invented the genre, but Shulman established the most distinctive style: so distinctive that his photography ultimately transcended its original purpose as commercial graphics and is now considered a major contribution to the art of photography. Working separately and apparently unknown to each other in Los Angeles of the 1930s, Hurrell and Shulman developed a very similar style, of rectilinear abstraction, strong contrasts, and fine grain, and precise, razor-sharp focus. Both prolific and widely respected, Hurrell and Shulman left a deep impact. Hurrell’s photography was an essential ingredient in the construction of many actors’s public identity. Joan Crawford and Rita Hayworth preferred the persona

that Hurrell established in his portraits. Likewise, Shulman was the image-maker for the modernist architects Richard Neutra, Rudolph Schindler, and the wider circle of modernists associated with the Case Study House program. Southern California Modernism, as it now known, was a classic case of a regional milieu of cultural creativity, and Shulman was primarily responsible for its visual representation. Hurrell and Shulman left an imprint not only on the Los Angeles regional culture, but on the culture industry headquartered in Los Angeles. That impact projected their shared style globally, broadcasting a distinct vision of Los Angeles and its creative milieu.

George Hurrell revolutionized Hollywood still photography, minting the “Glamour” genre almost instantly. He did with sculptural lighting learned from an earlier career as a painter. Still portrait photography in Hollywood was emphatically not a post-production practice for “publicity.” Quite the contrary. Hurrell explained in 1969 that the classic-era movie industry (circa 1930s-40s) manufactured stars *from* still photographs:

It all started with the stills—the buildup, the exploitation, feeling out the public. I’m not saying this just to make myself more important. They would start with stills, no matter who it was, they would have a stills session when they arrived, from that they would make up their minds....And then they would go to the producer, whether it was Jack Warner or L.B. Mayer—you know, the top man, not just the intermediary. Then, if they felt something was there, they would do a screen test.” (Hurrell/Kobal, p. 9).

George Hurrell’s style set the industry standard. His portraits of the stars of classic-era Hollywood transformed the unique individuals working for the motion

picture industry into transcendent deities: made-up, lit, and re-touched until their individuality was effaced and replaced by a manufactured persona. Hollywood thus occupies a contradictory position in the cultural creativity of Los Angeles. As a place and a site, it has been a powerful creative milieu. But the unique and particular serve there as inputs, raw materials. The outputs are abstract commodities. A very similar process can be seen in the rise of Southern California Modernism as an image shaped by Julius Shulman.

Julius Shulman was born on 10 October 1910 in Brooklyn, New York, the third of four children born to Yetta and Max Shulman, both Russian-born Jewish immigrants. In 1920, Shulman's father, persuaded by a relative that great opportunities lay on the Pacific Coast, arranged yet another major move, to Los Angeles. The Shulmans opened the New York Dry Goods store on Brooklyn Avenue (Now Cesar Chavez Ave.) As these names imply, Boyle Heights was heavily populated by New York migrants. This was a major Jewish immigrant settlement area in Los Angeles, although not exclusively so. It was a major "melting pot," and Julius remembers his second boyhood community as a diverse meeting ground of Asians, African Americans, and Europeans of all nationalities. At that time Boyle Heights was still on the eastern fringes of the Los Angeles metropolis (Julius remembers the pervasive scent of orange blossoms), and the Shulmans were at the leading edge of a massive wave of migrants to the region during the Boom of the 1920s. Encouraged by a high school photography class, Julius roamed 1920s Los Angeles practicing his hobby. He entered the first class of the new Westwood campus of the University of California at Los

Angeles (UCLA) in 1929, taking courses in a wide variety of subjects but not finding a focus. A chance encounter with the modernist architect Richard Neutra landed the talented amateur photographer with a professional role. Shulman effectively earned his apprenticeship with Richard Neutra, and the two developed a very close professional relationship which lasted until the latter's death in 1970. Neutra introduced him to the modernist architectural movement, to other leading architects in search of a good photographer, and to magazine editors. Leading architects such as R.M. Schindler coached the neophyte Shulman on the critical requirements of architectural photography (such as lighting), and Shulman seems to have learned very fast indeed. By 1937 his work was already much in demand, and by the time of World War II he had fully established a busy architectural photography business. His success in translating the three-dimensional spaces of architecture to the two-dimensional space of photography earned him fame far beyond Los Angeles and his client list is a "who's who" of every great architect of the twentieth century, including Oscar Niemayer, Mies Van de Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright. In fact, Shulman was one of the inventors of this profession. Until the 1930s, architects usually took their own photographs, or commissioned unspecialized photographers to do so.

During the 1940s Shulman also became a central figure in the circle of modernists who published in John Entenza's *Arts & Architecture*. Entenza transformed this once-regional journal into one of the most exciting venues for the modernist movement, especially during the 1950s. In 1943-45 Entenza launched the Case Study House program (1945-1962), which sought to

demonstrate the viability of low-cost residential housing designs on modernist principles: industrial materials (steel, glass, fiberglass), absence of traditional decoration, and open integration with the natural setting. Although the Case Study House program served primarily wealthier clients and failed to achieve its social democratic goals, it did produce many masterpieces of post World War II design. Among them, Ray and Charles Eames, Case Study # 8 (Eames House, 1950) Pierre Koenig's Case Study #21 (1958) and #22 (Stahl Residence, 1960). Shulman's images were the primary means of representing these Case Study houses to the public, and remain the primary archive for studying the movement today.

By the 1950s and 1960s Shulman's images nearly dominated the pages of the magazine trade, playing a pivotal role in the promotion of modernism as an architectural style through mass-market magazine such as *Life*, *Look*, *Time*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and *House and Garden*. Shulman by the 1950s had full-time field and lab assistants, producing images from at least one assignment per day. He not only enjoyed the reputation as Southern California's image-maker, but also became a major avatar of modernist architecture in the Midwest. His images of Iowa architect Ray Crites and Kansas architects Ramey and Himes secured their reputations in the New York-based national magazines.

Southern California Modernism ranks as one of the major contributions of Los Angeles to global culture. Its apogee, from the 1920s through the 1950s, is a clear example of the cultural creativity of cities. It is important to recognize that it

was an achievement built from key global sources. Neutra and Schindler were students of Otto Wagner and Adolph Loos in Vienna; both apprenticed with Frank Lloyd Wright before moving to Los Angeles. Schindler was in charge of Frank Lloyd Wright's Los Angeles office while Wright was in Tokyo designing the Imperial Hotel, and the historical examples of Japanese minimalism exerted a profound impact on all three men: Wright, Schindler, and Neutra. The influence of Katsura Palace is visible throughout Neutra's vast opus. Southern California Modernism was also derived from the rectilinear minimalism of Spanish-Mexican adobes, which Irving Gill transformed into modernist boxes. Arguably, however, the diverse styles of the Southern California modernists were unified by the "constructed view" of Shulman's 4x5 Synar view camera. Ironically, the strong social reform agenda of Richard Neutra, Gregory Ain, and John Entenza was muted and commercialized by Entenza's Case Study House program, which served as a vehicle for advertising the new industrial materials of structural steel, fiberglass, plywood, and glass block. Shulman's most powerful tool of unification over these architects, manufacturers and builders was that of rectilinear abstraction. That, in turn, drew on the universal grid of global capitalism, which, like Shulman's photography, dulls the edges of local cultural creativity. Vienna, Japan, and Latin America met in Los Angeles, America's supermarket, where Shulman reframed his subjects with an eye toward universalizing them in an endless geometrical grid symbolizing the triumph of Enlightenment rationality and also the reign of the pure commodity.

Part II: The Critical Counterculture and The Photographic Moment

The moment of triumph for the commercial modernist visual culture of Los Angeles arrived in and around the year 1960: the year that glamour was elevated to the White House by Jack and Jackie Kennedy, and the year of Shulman's most influential image, the "two girls" photograph of the Stahl Residence by Pierre Koenig, called Case Study #22. But 1960 was also the breakthrough moment of emergence for the revolutionary critical art that eventually made Los Angeles a major capital city of the fine arts. The story here shifts dramatically from the corporate world to that of the Beats, who rejected everything about corporate, conformist, Cold War commercial culture of the 1950s. The central figures in this drama were Walter Hopps, Edward Keinholz, and Ed Ruscha. To appreciate their cultural creativity in the transformation of the critical visual arts, it is necessary to step back and consider longer trends in Western aesthetics.

First, it is important to remember that the formal study of "art" as a separate and distinct realm of experience centered on the concept of beauty only began around 1750, when Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten coined the term "aesthetics" with his book *Aesthetica*. Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, and others then reinforced Baumgarten's contention that the evaluation of forms was a singular, sensual, emotive, and spiritual kind of consciousness, categorically different than analytical and other types of cognition. The (artificial, I would argue) separation of aesthetics from everyday, scientific and practical life, is of course part of the story of the Enlightenment and Romantic era, which reached its apogee in the Euro-American modernist movement of the 1890s-1940s. The

apogee of that movement, in turn, can be found when the “capital” of the Western art world shifted in the 1940s from Paris to New York City in the brief reign of Abstract Expressionism.

By the 1940s, Clement Greenberg and his circle of critics (especially Harold Rosenberg) and artists (Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Franz Klein, Mark Rothko), mounted a powerful assault on representational and figurative art, completing the aesthetic movement by theorizing and producing an art that referred only to form. Most significantly for the purposes of this essay, Greenberg ruthlessly ridiculed the Albertian compositional rules of perspective--“fictive space”--as antithetical to artistic value, and exalted “flatness” as the proper form of visual art.¹ “From Giotto to Courbet,” writes Greenberg, “the painter’s first task had been to hollow out an illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface. One looked through this surface as through a proscenium into a stage. Modernism has rendered this stage shallower and shallower until now its backdrop has become the same as its curtain, which has now become all that the painter has left to work on.”² The abstract expressionists were, at the same time, culminating an attack on history itself. Heroically eschewing representation and referentiality, they sought a pure present devoid of history or context. “Frank Stella’s painting is not symbolic,” the Minimalist sculptor Carl André explained in 1959: “His stripes are the paths of brush on canvas. These paths lead only into

¹ Clement Greenberg, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture,” *Partisan Review* (April 1948), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: the Collected Essays and Criticism*, Ed. John O’Brien. Vol. 2 *Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) , pp. 221-225. Quotation at 222.

² Clement Greenberg, “Abstract, Representational, and so forth,” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 136.

painting.”³ The point I want to make here is that while the New York School saw itself as truly revolutionary—breaking even with the play of perspectives and the residue of figuration in Picasso’s work to produce forms divorced from any existing or possible object—they were actually still part of Baumgartian aesthetics: producing uniquely valuable objects of beauty, pure art that spoke directly to the sensual, emotional and spiritual consciousness.

The decline of the New York School and its pure abstractions came about thanks to a remarkable irony that bedeviled photography since its invention in the 1840s. Until the exhaustion of the New York School’s abstractionist agenda, artistic practice in photography had been limited to imitation of easel painting. Photographic aspirants to the title “artist,” from Alfred Stieglitz’s pictorialism to Laszlo Mohy-Nagy’s photograms and the technical formalism of Brett Weston and Ansel Adams, were playing the same game that Baumgarten had institutionalized: the production of beautiful, framed objects that could escape history and exist primarily in the rarified realm of the senses. But their superb artworks were snubbed by the art market, fetching ridiculously low prices relative to easel paintings until at least the 1970s. The reason? The reign of the Baumgartian paradigm left no place at the top for an industrial process. Fine, critical art needed to proceed, in that paradigm, from the unique talents and vision of the individual genius. By the neo-classical rules, photography could never be fully appreciated as a genre of fine art. Until, that is, the Baumgartian paradigm was overthrown by the rise of a countercultural critique, which forced a

³ Quoted in Thierry de Duve, “The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas,” in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945-1964* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1990): 244-310. Quotation at 245.

re-evaluation of aestheticism in visual art.

The Baumgartian paradigm defined art as transcendent and universal in its beauty. While photography can conform to that goal (as Stieglitz, Adams, and many other photographers have shown), it is also a machine for recording the utterly mundane, quotidian world of the everyday. It should be no surprise, then, that the overthrow of Baumgartian aesthetics arose from the two capitals of popular-cultural photographic modernism: Paris and Los Angeles. From Paris, Guy Debord helped to found “situationist” art, in his new journal *Internationale Situationniste*. His article in the first 1958 issue, “Theses on Cultural Revolution,” he characterized “traditional art” (by which term he included all of the modernists, including Picasso and the Abstract Expressionists) in this way: “The degree of aesthetic success is thus measured by a beauty inseparable from duration, and tending even to lay claim to eternity.” The “Situationist goal” he proposed as alternative “is immediate participation in a passionate abundance of life, through the variation of fleeting moments resolutely arranged. The success of these moments can only be their passing effect.”⁴

Independently, Los Angeles bohemians circled around Walter Hopps, an extraordinary art critic, teacher, gallerist, and curator who became active in the 1950s as a go-between, promoting the New York avant-garde on the West Coast, and fostering the avant-garde community in Los Angeles through the Syndell Gallery (1952) and the Ferus Gallery, which he co-founded in with Edward

⁴ Quoted in Thomas McDonough, “Fluid Spaces: Constant and the Situationist Critique of Architecture,” in Catherine de Zegher and Mark Wigley, *The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architectures from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2001), pp. 93-104, quotation at p. 93.

Kienholz in 1957. Shaped by a reaction to the repressive atmosphere of McCarthyite America and the even more reactionary public culture of Los Angeles, Hopps and the artists he fostered, such as Kienholz, Wallace Berman, Craig Kauffman, and Ed Ruscha, built on their mutual admiration for the Surrealists and experimented with found and everyday forms, embracing popular culture as raw material, and rejecting the aesthetic tradition, producing intentionally “ugly” art, epitomized by Kienholz’s influential 1959-61 sculpture family, “John Doe,” “Jane Doe,” and “Boy, Son of John Doe.”

One of the most important moments in the development of the Los Angeles avant-garde was the appearance of Edward Ruscha’s photographic work, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963) and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966). These intentionally unaesthetic uses of the camera initially confounded the art critics. For *Every Building*, Ruscha mounted a motor-driven 35-mm camera in his pick-up truck and shot mechanically, in a mockery of Hollywood tracking cameras. The book is composed of a single, 27-foot long accordion-folded page, with the north and south sides of Sunset printed in continuous montage. Caption text records the address of every building, and no other text is offered for explanation.

As the implications of Ruscha’s photographic work began to sink in, the impact was profound. He had, at long last, liberated fine art photography from the standards of easel painting, and recast the camera as a tool that no longer claimed elevation above the situated plain of historical landscapes. The unaesthetic camera returned to the industrial world to redeem the artistic content

of the everyday.

Ruscha's now-famous intervention should be seen in the context of the "happenings" organized by other members of the LA scene, such as Dennis Hopper's ice sculptures. Ruscha returned to painting and print-making after only a few photographic experiments, but continued the thematic of his art through many works that make the standardization of commercial culture, particularly of commercial architecture and graphic design, his central concern. Ruscha's exaggerated perspective lines in his Standard gas station paintings can be read as a parody of the entire Renaissance tradition of perspective painting, and also of the rectilinear minimalist and industrial-style architecture of the Southern California Modernists—the movement represented by the photography of Julius Shulman.

Los Angeles rapidly became the center of a revolution in the very understanding of fine art photography. Robert Heinecken, John Baldassare, and their students rapidly institutionalized the basic idea that the subject of photography could be photographic popular culture itself. In 1970 Robert Heinecken was the first artist hired to teach photography on the fine arts side of a major American school of fine art: the UCLA School of Fine Arts. Until then, art schools taught photography in their commercial design programs. His slogan became a mantra to hundreds of art students over the next three decades: "A photograph is not a 'picture' of something, but is an object about something."⁵ Heinecken's artworks are primarily composed of found images in magazines: he

⁵ Mark Alice Durant, *Robert Heinecken: A Material History*. (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, 2003), p. 8.

rarely used a camera.

Thanks to the transformation of photographic art, the artistic visual force of a photograph can now be appreciated as fully situated. In the critical fine arts, it is no longer a method of depicting the world, an Albertian window, but rather it has taken the shallow and abstracting world of commercial art as the subject about which it is an object. Only after this development was made by Ruscha and Heineken could photography stand independently from easel painting.

The conceptual art movement that emerged from the circle of Hopps and Keinholz became institutionalized by the early 1970s in the new school founded, ironically enough, by Walt Disney: CalArts (California Institute of the Arts). There, an influential set of teachers, John Baldessari, Michael Asher, and Douglas Heubner produced a wave of radical artists, known as the “CalArts Mafia” who took the New York scene by storm in the 1970s. But these artists were largely absorbed by the “Art World” scene of New York. The magazine ArtForum was founded in Los Angeles as an alternative venue, by Hopps and others, but moved to New York in the early 1970s as it became the new mainstream, serving mainly to reproduce the “art market.”

Avant-gardes in the fine arts have always been absorbed by the establishment and commodified to the point where their original critical force is lost. But that familiar cycle of innovation and normalization is not the most effective measure of the changing cultural creativity of cities. The obsession with innovation is a modernist fetish: traditional is always bad in those terms. But modernism's perpetual revolution is also an attack on history and a function of

commercial capitalism's ceaseless search for new products to expand market share. I suggest that the critical arts, to remain critical, need to do far more than break with tradition, or merely to overthrow yesterday's innovators (made traditional by the newest innovators). Instead, they need to engage and challenge the world-affirming grid of the commercial commodity circulation. That universalizing abstraction both ties the globe together and effaces its local, regional particularisms.

One of Heinecken's most important students, Robbert Flick, fully enlarged the lessons of both Ruscha and Heinecken, in his vast grids of video-captured images along the streetscapes of Los Angeles. Unlike Ruscha's experiments, however, Flick's grids function both as systematic empirical record of the landscape of the everyday, and as visual compositions that fold the metropolis into new shapes and patterns that are invisible to passersby. Flick's work intersects the lived with the imagined at multiple scales, confounding the distinction between art and evidence. In the art of Robbert Flick, several generations of cultural creativity can be observed. These creative patterns only make sense in regional contexts. Cultural creativity is not a free-floating phenomenon but one that is always attached to places, local, regional, and global. And the creative artists in those spaces have always been engaged with the institutions that literally take place.