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ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

PST, A to Z: 'Doin' It in Public,' 'Collaboration Labs'

October 21, 2011 | 12:00 pm

Pacific Standard Time will explore the origins of the Los Angeles art world through museum exhibitions throughout Southern California over the next six months. Times art reviewer Sharon Mizota has set the goal of seeing all of them. This is her latest report.



It has become increasingly clear, six weeks into Pacific Standard Time, that while Southern California artists and designers made some amazing objects, the intangible things they created were equally, if not more, important. This applies not just to [performance art](#), which is by its nature ephemeral, but to the Eames' legacy of [design education](#), and the [support systems](#), both creative and financial, that L.A.'s African American artists devised for themselves.

This idea is abundantly apparent in two exhibitions that look at the legacy of feminism and collaborative artistic practices: "Doin' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building" at the Otis College of Art's Ben Maltz Gallery, and "Collaboration Labs: Southern California Artists and the Artist Space Movement" at the 18th Street Arts Center. The former is a sprawling, near overwhelming presentation of artwork, documentation, posters and other ephemera from The Woman's Building, the hub of feminist art practice in Los Angeles from 1973 to 1991. The latter presents the work of five artists or pairs of artists whose work was highly collaborative and who were also involved in founding and running art spaces.

To be sure, "Doin' It in Public" covers some of the same ground as 2007's "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, but where that show was organized largely around the work of individual artists, "Doin' It in Public" highlights collaboration, not just in the development and administration of the Woman's Building -- which included galleries, workshops, classrooms, a travel agency, a bookstore and a cafe -- but as a creative strategy and a political statement.

The show opens with the origins of the building in the Feminist Art Project developed by Judy Chicago in 1970 at Fresno State College and CalArts and quickly moves into documentation of the Building's founding in 1973, near MacArthur Park. Drawn mostly from the Woman's Building archives housed at Otis, there are inspiring photos of women carrying sheets of drywall, erecting scaffolding and driving forklifts; an assortment of diplomas from the Feminist Studio Workshop, conferring a "Mistress of Feminist Art" degree; and posters from the Women's Graphic Center, including works by Patssi Valdez (of Asco), Betye Saar, Carrie Mae Weems and Alexis Smith.

One poster, advertising a course in graphic design, by Woman's Building co-founder Sheila Levrant de Brettville embodies open-ended possibility. Next to a gob of ink and a palette knife, it reads: "If this were your broadsheet, what would you say?"

In direct contrast to a male-dominated art world that stressed individual achievement and autonomy, the Woman's Building represented a radical experiment in collective empowerment. The show culminates, after winding through a curling corridor of display cases, in a more open space showcasing a number of large-scale collaborations. This includes colorful documentation of the performances of Sisters of Survival (S.O.S.), whose members wore brightly colored

nuns' habits and used the look of international semaphore to draw attention to nuclear war and disarmament. (The habits they wore can be seen in "[Los Angeles Goes Live](#)" at LACE.)

The members of Mother Art have strung a clothesline with pillowcases embroidered with exhortations that place "women's work" in a global context: "Scrub out discrimination against immigrants," "Sweep away privatization of resources." And a wonderful installation by Waitresses' founders Jeri Allyn and Anne Gauldin evokes their in situ restaurant performances of the 1980s: As you sit at a '50s-style diner table, a jukebox plays a selection of playful yet penetrating stories of forgotten figures and social inequities. (You can hear some of them [here](#).) It's the ultimate sucker punch: How about a little consciousness-raising with your soda pop?

Like "Doin' It in Public," the works in "Collaboration Labs" all have a performative aspect. And they were all produced collectively, mostly by women. Video artist John Dorr, who founded a screening room for experimental video called EZTV in 1979, is the only male artist featured, although male performers appear throughout. In photos or videos, we see them improvising in dramatic costumes in Rachel Rosenthal's "Instant Theatre" pieces from the 1950s, or getting their nude bodies taped to a wall under the supervision of Barbara T. Smith. The video documentation here of Smith's 1972 performance is a nice complement to the partial re-creation of the piece -- the broken strands of tape and the pencil outline of a body -- also currently on view at LACE. It's also interesting to compare it to Asco's "Instant Mural" ([pictured here](#)), which also plays with figurative representation.



Suzanne Lacy's and Leslie Labowitz-Starus' large-scale performances/protests about violence against women are also part of "Doin' It in Public," and have been documented elsewhere. They are examples par excellence of the unity of aesthetics and political activism.

Yet the biggest surprise in "Collaboration Labs" is how such efforts reflected innovative uses of technology -- not for technology's sake but as a means to build community. Dorr's EZTV was the first public screening room for video art and became a meeting place for ACT UP and Queer Nation; he also saw the potential for public television access, making plans for an unrealized television channel with the call letters K-GAY, broadcasting from West Hollywood.

Sherrie Rabinowitz and Kit Galloway were among the first artists to use simultaneous live video and on-the-fly editing. The show includes an incredibly detailed storyboard from their 1977 piece, "A Space with No Geographical Boundaries," in which they orchestrated live feeds from several different locations and used editing and special effects to enable, for example, two dancers in two different locations to see one another and dance together on screen.

Also on view is a recording of perhaps their best known work, 1980's "Hole In-Space," a live satellite video feed between outdoor locations in New York and L.A. in which people on either side could not only see one another but talk in real time -- long before there was an app for that.

-- Sharon Mizota

Otis College of Art and Design, Ben Maltz Gallery, 9045 Lincoln Blvd., (310) 665-6905, through Jan. 28.

Closed Sundays and Mondays. http://www.otis.edu/public_programs/ben_maltz_gallery

18th Street Arts Center, 1639 18th St., Santa Monica, (310) 453-3711, through Dec. 17. Closed Saturdays and Sundays. www.18thstreet.org

Upper photo: Installation view of The Waitresses' "American Dining: A Working Women's Moment," 1987/2011 in "Doin' It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building." Credit: Chris Warner

Middle photo: Sisters Of Survival and Marguerite Elliot, "Shovel Defense," 1982. Photograph by Sheila Ruth ©Sisters Of Survival and Marguerite Elliot

Lower photo: Rachel Rosenthal, "Instant Theater," performance, 1961-62. Photograph courtesy of artist

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