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Experimental Impulse

L.A. Expanded: Notes from the West Coast 11 SEP A weekly column by Catherine Wagley



Unknown Artist, Performance at CalArts (date unknown). Courtesy of the CalArts Archive.

"I basically did two things with my class," said artist and teacher Michael Asher. "We took the clock out of the room and forgot about time." That quote is pinned to the wall at [RedCat](#) gallery, along with a host of other quotes from students and instructors working at California Institute of the Arts and at other emerging institutions in the 1970s, in the heyday of California

Conceptualism. Each expresses a similarly rigorous, risky but wholly idealistic idea of how to think about art: artists were “learning the techniques of thinking,” according to photographer and sculptor Barbara Bloom; there was a “sense of social change” without “aesthetic preferences,” according to architect Craig Hodgetts; “every piece we acquired made it possible for us to live another day,” according to collector Judy Spence.

At this point, it is common knowledge in art circles that CalArts of the 1970s, and the institutions many of its artists worked within, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Arts and Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions in particular, emphasized ideas over objects. Certainly, things got made, but the thinking behind those things was always the point.



An Unknown Artist, Outdoor Confab at CalArts, ca. 1971. Courtesy of the CalArts Archive

In the RedCat exhibition, called “Experimental Impulse,” thinking is the point, too. If you go, you should be prepared to sit, look, listen and watch. It’s almost more like a carefully edited research library than an art show. There are rows of tables, each with “authentic” art school chairs up against them — the kind with layers of paint and masking tape on their seats and legs — lined with print outs and images documenting different activities and performances. In one photo, taken just after the Art and Technology show Maurice Tuchman curated at LACMA, including only male artists, a group of women appear outside the museum all wearing “Maurice masks” and holding balloons that say “Where are the women minorities?” Others document gritty performances by the Kipper Kids duo, or the L.A. Cowpunk scene. Pick up

some of the telephones and you can listen to conversations about, say, reading Derrida in a CalArts course taught by artist Charles Gaines.



Allen Ruppersberg, "Al's Grand Hotel," 1971. Courtesy the artist and Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Gary Krueger. Because one of the show's curators, Thomas Lawson, edits the journal East of Borneo, an online literary component accompanies the show. You can read essays about and by conceptualists working in that era, watch footage, and browse photos. It's worth a visit, and it's worth considering whether the idealism they expressed exists now in a period that's just as anxiety-ridden as the Vietnam- and Nixon-scarred 1970s were (does the Occupy Movement suggest it does?), and, if it so, what to do with it.