

*A Remembrance of Things Past and an Eye Towards the Future:*

*the Santa Monica Museum of Art Artists' Project Series*

Karen Moss (2002)

In the summer of 1988, the Santa Monica Museum of Art first opened its doors with Previews: Art in the Raw, an inaugural series of newly commissioned, site-specific installations. The participants in Previews, a diverse group of Los Angeles-based visual and performing artists—Michael Brewster, David Bunn, Meg Cranston, Mineko Grimmer and Carl Stone, Daniel Martinez and Vin Zula Kara, Bryan Pezzone and May Sun—proposed projects for the former Edgemar Farms egg-processing plant, an expansive 8,300 square-foot warehouse originally built in 1909 and just renovated by Frank Gehry and Associates.

Selected by a distinguished group of peers including artists Michael Asher and John Baldessari; Steve Durland, editor of *High Performance*, Nora Halpern Brouger, curator of the Frederick Weisman Collection, Frans von Rossum, dean of the Cal Arts School of Music **(names?)** the artists' interdisciplinary installations and live performances each completely transformed this unique space: while a few focused on the physical or perceptual aspects of the site, others began to address the broader cultural context of Los Angeles. Some artists worked collaboratively, others worked alone, but all of intriguing, interdisciplinary projects raised the bar and set the pace for the Santa Monica Museum's ongoing Artists Projects Series for the next ten years.

While it is tempting to wear rose-colored glasses in a remembrance of things past, these experimental projects became the signature program of Santa Monica Museum of Art which was arguably one of the most vital venues in Los Angeles for younger, emerging artists to first exhibit their work or for established, mid-career artists to explore aspects of their practice, which could not be produced in a commercial gallery or in a more formal museum. The ongoing series of ephemeral installations are also a precursor to the Santa Monica Museum of Art's Project Rooms, permanent gallery spaces specifically designated for this type of artistic production..

In the early years, the Santa Monica Museum of Art functioned as a hybrid: a cross between an artist-run space and a non-collecting *kunsthalle* museum. Its founding in the late

1980s coincided with a shift in the history of Los Angeles' alternative spaces. Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) had just celebrated its ten-year anniversary, but other alternative spaces such as Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA), the Woman's Building located downtown and I.D.E.A. (Institute for Dance and Experimental Arts) in Santa Monica had long-since closed. While local art school and university galleries continued to show local and younger artists, the museum exhibitions still emphasized exhibitions of well-established national or international artists. Los Angeles County Museum of Art had terminated their New Talent Award exhibitions and the Museum of Contemporary Art often showed Southern California artists in group exhibitions or purchased their work through special acquisition programs.

The number of viable, non-commercial exhibition spaces seemed to dwindle at the very moment the reputation of Los Angeles' artists proliferated and its art schools flourished. In the early 1990s the reputations of California Institute of the Arts, Art Center and the U.C.L.A. art department soared as these schools and other colleges continued to produce a population of talented young artists. For the first time, many local artists began to exhibit in Europe, New York and elsewhere, even before showing in Los Angeles. However, there remained few opportunities for younger or under-recognized Southern California artists to exhibit more experimental work in a large, flexible gallery spaces.

The Santa Monica of Art attempted to help fill this void with the Artist Project Series, aimed to commission, produce and present new work from both younger and established artists. Compromising one-half of the year's exhibition schedule, the series quickly became the dominant program of the new fledging institution. As with the Previews, the curatorial process consisted of a committee of artists who worked in concert with the Executive Director and Director Programs to select the site-specific installations projects from invited proposals. The Artists Advisory Committee rotated periodically with a changing roster of composed primarily of those who had participated in the previous series. **(names?)**

The number of projects varied from year to year, however, when viewed over the course of time, the Artist Project Series represents a panoply of production across aesthetics and disciplines, ideas and ideologies. In some installations artists used traditional drawing, painting or

sculpture in new and unusual ways; others employed video or electronic and computer-based media. Quite a few artists focused on the formal and conceptual aspects of the architecture or the the articulation of the space (discussed in Anne Ayres' essay), while others preferred interdisciplinary and performative modes to construct autobiographical or personal histories related to cultural and political issues (discussed in Jacki Apple's essay). The projects encompassed an entire gamut of subjects and subjectivity: re-examining the nature of artistic representation; de-constructing the boundaries between high art and popular culture; investigating the institution; exploring different cultural, gender and identity politics or creating a spaces for audience participation, social action and community-engagement. The Artist Project Series, was not only a microcosm of artistic activities in Southern California during a particular point in time, it also reflects the larger preoccupations of artists working in other global locations from the early to the late 1990s.

During the ten-year period of the Artist Project Series the Santa Monica Museum of Art also presented many key monographic exhibitions, performance events and educational programs, while engaging audiences through various activities in the community. Even though the mission, leadership and address of the Museum have all shifted in recent years, the curatorial program continues to commission new work and to present outstanding artists who may not be seen in other Los Angeles area museums. The important legacy of the Artist Project Series—to present ephemeral, interdisciplinary installations within the institutional context of a contemporary art space—thrives today as the Santa Monica Museum of Art continues to plays a key role in the local, national and international cultural landscape.

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