

cmagazine 113

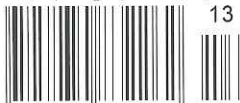
International Contemporary Art
Spring 2012

Derek Sullivan | Yael Bartana | Pacific Standard
Time | Reflecting Absence | Lands of Invention
Social Media and Art | Raqs Media Collective
CN Tower Liquidation | Ineffable Plasticity
Melanchotopia | Rural Readymade
Sky Glabush | Laurel Woodcock

Memory



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above
 Installation view of *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981*, with Richard Nixon's 1974 presidential resignation letter (in the vitrine), The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles CA, October 1, 2011–February 13, 2012
 PHOTO: BRIAN FORREST; IMAGE COURTESY OF MOCA

below
 Installation view of *Under the Big Black Sun: California Art 1974-1981*, with Jack Goldstein's 1975 *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer*, The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles CA, October 1, 2011–February 13, 2012
 PHOTO: BRIAN FORREST; IMAGE COURTESY OF MOCA

L.A. Immersion: A Conversation on Pacific Standard Time

*Pacific Standard Time: Crosscurrents in
L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950–1970,*
the Getty Center, October 1, 2011–February 5, 2012

Greetings from L.A.: Artists and Publics, 1950–1980,
the Getty Center, October 1, 2011–February 5, 2012

The Experimental Impulse,
REDCAT, November 18, 2011–January 15, 2012

Under the Big Black Sun,
MOCA, October 1, 2011–February 13, 2012

Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960–1980,
The Hammer, October 2, 2011–January 8, 2012

Edward Kienholz: Five Car Stud 1969–1972, Revisited,
LACMA, September 4, 2011–January 15, 2012

Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987,
LACMA, September 4–December 4, 2011

by Allison Collins and Eli Bornowsky

Two Vancouverites, Allison Collins and Eli Bornowsky, report to Toronto-based *C Magazine* about Pacific Standard Time, a large-scale exhibition and publishing project that attempts to reclaim an international perspective on L.A.'s art history through 60 exhibitions at multiple venues, plus publications and events, from Fall 2011 to Spring 2012 across the L.A. area. Collins and Bornowsky both visited L.A. in November and describe to each other the exhibitions they saw.

ELI BORNOWSKY (EB): My primary experience in L.A. was of space. Very large amounts of space between everything: places and neighbourhoods, people, artworks in museums. I went to the movies and I could have been 20 feet tall and it wouldn't have been a problem.

ALLISON COLLINS (AC): Similarly, my first impression of Los Angeles was of light: in a car on a sunny hot day, on the freeway. The sky seems to be infinite there. Perhaps it's a bit cliché but it is undeniable that the environment contributed to my view of the work.

EB: Something about the West Coast translates all the way from Vancouver to L.A. While visually things in L.A. are completely different from Vancouver, there is a sensibility that I attribute to the West Coast that made me feel so very comfortable.

AC: Our separate first impressions are about light and space, yet the *Pacific Standard Time* project we're talking about is attempting to expand and redefine the terms and context of the region's artistic and cultural impact beyond "Light and Space" and "Finish Fetish." While attempting to move beyond the most basic ideas about the Los Angeles art

scene the organizers of this project are employing celebrities and commercials to promote the show.

EB: I liked the celebratory aspect of it. And I enjoyed that they had celebrities to do promo ads, like Ice Cube waxing about the Eames House,¹ for example. It's fun! John Baldessari's giant disembodied head convinces Jason Schwartzman that art is great! Not just silly pop art but real important art! Though, there is also a magazine advert where Schwartzman's head escapes being covered by a blue Baldessari dot.² It annoyed me because the whole point of Baldessari's dot paintings were to obscure the figures' face so that viewers would observe other things. Of course, Schwartzman's face can never be completely covered because they need it for promotional purposes, which to my mind undermines Baldessari's project.

AC: It has also been suggested that having Bank of America as a major sponsor to promote and finance the shows undermines the work. Is it possible that these works are diminished because of where the money is coming from to fund the show?

EB: I don't think Bank of America undermines the art.

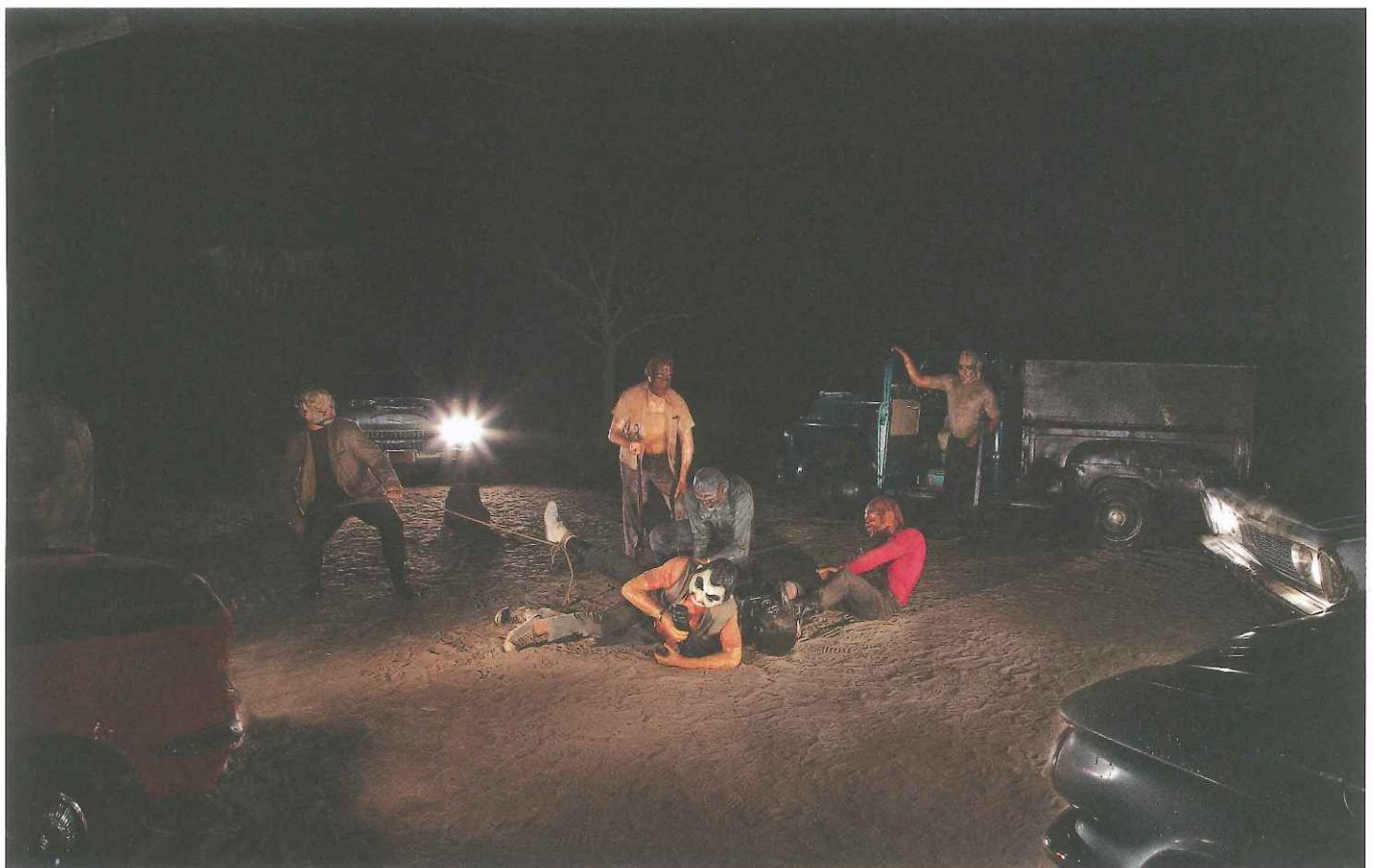
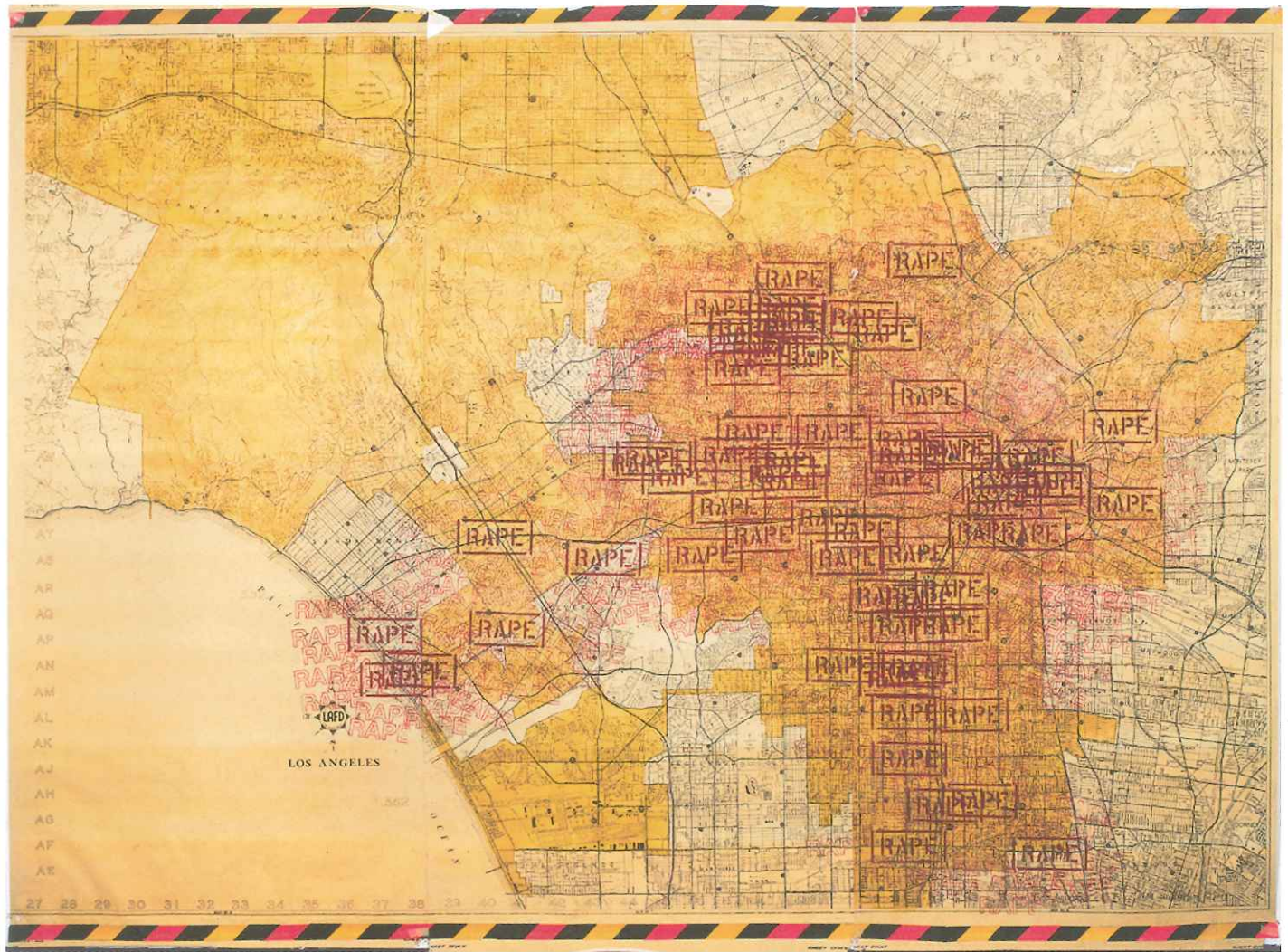
AC: What about the financial problems of America—or the world, for that matter—and the fact that art positions itself as a critiquing force, and the idea that we wouldn't be seeing the critique if it weren't for such financial support?

EB: Critical art versus money is a silly loop. The only way I know out of it is to recognize that art wins over money every time. I mean ART. Maybe the celebrity adverts were a compromise, but for the sake of art I think it was worth it.

AC: One thing that's struck me is how important it is to consider the idea of provincialism in these exhibitions. PST is built on the specificity of place, and consciously positioned as a counterpoint to New York. Many of the exhibitions contain narratives that remain ardently local, yet the project as a whole is undertaken in order to claim some kind of ownership over global importance.

EB: Maybe? I don't know what provincialism could be or not be. Artists make art.

AC: Provincial art is supposed to be less informed or impacted by global trends and thus not "mature." The



above
 Suzanne Lacy, *Three Weeks in May*, 1977, panel, map of Los Angeles,
 RAPE stamps in red, 229 cm x 112 cm, collection of the artist,
 PHOTO: GRANT MUDFORD; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

below
 Edward Kienholz, *Five Car Stud*, 1969-1972, revisited installation view,
 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, September 4, 2011 - January 15, 2012.
 PHOTO: TOM VINETZ; KIENHOLZ; COURTESY OF L.A. LOUVER, VENICE, CA
 AND THE PACE GALLERY, NEW YORK

idea is antiquated. It made more sense when we thought that New York was the centre of the art world but that's not the case anymore—if it ever was. Centres remain important places of gathering and commerce, but can't encompass all types of meaning.

EB: I know what you mean, but there is provincial Saskatchewan and there is provincial Los Angeles. New York held all the cards for a long time. Now we can call them out on it! Nevertheless, New York has great collections, and they have European art. The historical collections in L.A. aren't that interesting. However, I am more interested in artists making their work. Maybe they flourish from learning about the history of art globally, or maybe they are isolated. You can still tell if it's great art or not. Artists in PST have even suggested that their isolation, or provincialism, was fundamental to the development of their work.

AC: So then, PST makes great art from the region more visible.

EB: Yes.

AC: Yes, in an overwhelming way. There are 60 exhibitions in PST, and a large number of catalogues. It's impossible to see everything, and trying to see even a portion of the exhibitions in a short schedule is too much. The Getty show *Crosscurrents* is positioned as the centrepiece for all of the other exhibitions, each of which is imagined as further threads of research. There are a great many previously lesser-known artists, like Asco, who have come into wider knowledge through the project, which is the strength of the project, in my opinion. And there is something to be said for its size. While we each saw a lot of the same shows, and neither of us could see all of them, I think it's fair to say that *Under the Big Black Sun* (UTBBS) left the strongest impression.

EB: *UTBBS* was about pluralism, and was meant to keep the period open and pluralistic rather than canonical. It's an attempt to show that period of L.A. art as a precursor to New York postmodernism and eventually the globalization of art. (I'm paraphrasing here from the catalogue essay "California Pluralism and the Birth of the Postmodern Movement" by Paul Schimmel).

That said, my first impression of *UTBBS* was the large role conceptual art played.

It was brutal, like an attack. Hardcore didactic art from the 70s. Photo and text. There was far more reading than one would care to do. I don't necessarily mean text panels by the curators: it was right in the work itself. There was a whole section of photo essays and didactic artworks about harsh issues like rape and violence and racism and war. It was too intense. There was a mezzanine level filled with hardcore issues-based art and then underneath, on the lower level, was Paul McCarthy stuffing raw sausages into his mouth and shorts (*Sailor's Meat*, 1975). McCarthy was visually compelling, very graphic and entertaining, but it seemed silly in relation to these seriously cold idea artworks. I left with bad vibes and I suppose that was the point. Fortunately, Jack Goldstein's *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer* (1975), with the roaring lion film loop saved the day. It's so beautiful and meditative. What I would consider a proper kind of artistic appropriation: stealing something from Hollywood and making it better. Goldstein made it big in New York, by the way.

I was also taken with how grand the issues were that artists were dealing with: the Vietnam War, Nixon, racism, riots, the energy crisis, for example. Canada doesn't display its issues in such a massive and grandiose way. *UTBBS* obviously wanted to show how California artists were addressing national issues.

AC: Even if you somehow missed this political purpose in the first object of the exhibition, Nixon's resignation letter, this curatorial purpose is made clear in the essay by Paul Schimmel. The starting point of the exhibition, 1974, was marked out with Nixon's resignation letter and *Reagan Tape* (1981) by Allan Sekula, in which footage of statements of hollow sounding "American values" made by Reagan at his inauguration were cut into clips from his previous acting roles, marking the conclusion. The curatorial work leans hard on cultural critique, and arranges art in the service of that thesis. When I see shows with such a strong focus I always wonder if the work is being manipulated to serve a curatorial goal.

EB: Curatorially manipulated or not, it is apparent in the works themselves that those were important issues that the artists felt deeply.

AC: *UTBBS* had a few cross-over artists with the *Crosscurrents* exhibition but many of the artists represented there were quite absent in *UTBBS*.

The missing "Light and Space" artists are perhaps excluded for a more cogent curatorial premise of pluralism. So, we could say manipulated, or selected.

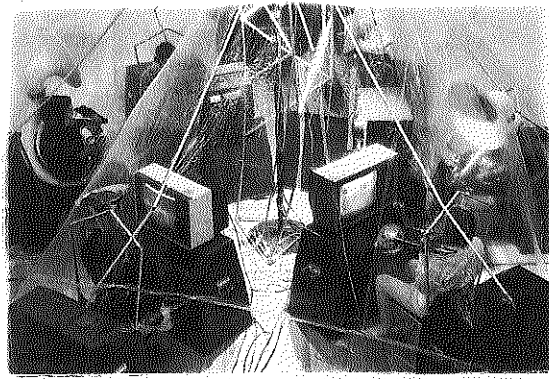
EB: Well, Larry Bell, for example, didn't make art about "issues." Judy Chicago was in both shows and seemed to make art about issues and also just darn beautiful things.³ Her beach painting in *Crosscurrents* was bonkers. It may be the best beach painting ever (*Big Blue Pink*, from the *Flesh Gardens* series, 1971).⁴ Painting and sculpture were reserved for *Crosscurrents*, which stopped at 1970. *UTBBS* picks up a few years later, in 1974, and suddenly we have mostly conceptual art. To be sure, canonical art forms were being radically challenged at the time.

AC: There were over 130 artists and 500 artworks in *UTBBS*. The weight of political history evident in the first "row" of works evoked empty promises and failure, disfigured politicians, failed monuments, and marked a political turning point for America. The exhibition design also directly counteracted any aesthetic expanse of light and space. The gallery windows were covered with black transparent plastic that blocked out the daylight, and it took hours to go through, or more if you wanted to watch all of the videos. The whole experience was one of immersion in a dark dystopia.

The *Crosscurrents* exhibition proposes an art historical canon, and so *UTBBS* positions itself post- or counter to that. It narrowed things down through time of production yet the result was as wide as L.A. itself. As an argument about the pluralism of art production it certainly is effective, but maybe the works themselves suffered a little bit. Like a flea market of meaning.

EB: Some of the works suffered on purpose; they were flagellant. That was my least favourite part of the conceptual art presented there. Of course, there is the idea that the work was an attack against the art being made in New York, and it coincided with a general attempt to dematerialize art during that time. Unfortunately, when the poetry disappears, there's nothing left but criticism, even cynicism. Peter Reiss' *Selections from Severely and Profoundly Retarded Individuals* (1978–79), Karen Finley's *Deathcakes and Autism* (1980), and Suzanne Lacy's *Three Weeks in May* (1977) come to mind.

AC: *Three Weeks in May* was intensely charged. I listened for a while. It calls to mind also Kienholz's *Five Car Stud* (1969–72), mounted at LACMA. The two have similar impacts, in terms of how they attempted to report on the horrors of political and social realities that were elsewhere escaping representation. Lacy's large panels of a map of Los Angeles upon which was stamped "RAPE" at points where assaults had occurred was as much a document of abuse as it is an object. The incidents were recorded over three weeks while the panels were installed outside of L.A.'s City Hall. The piece includes a sound recording of Lacy reading police reports for some 90 assaults, which were previously broadcast over police band radio. The words were chilling: "Sunset and Vine. Victim robbed and raped on the bus by driver after falling asleep when all other passengers had departed."



But I would like to get into the history aspect of PST. Both REDCAT's *Experimental Impulse* and the Getty's *Greeting From Los Angeles* were comprised of ephemera and interviews and spoke clearly to the info-display and historical aspects involved in this reorientation of history. They were the most "archival" in their display aesthetic. There was a conscious choice at REDCAT not to show a single piece of art, focusing instead on anecdotal histories stemming from CalArts. These point to the PST project's overall goal of reorienting memory, as well as making history physical. That exhibition involved the curatorial students. Courses were taught about the material, and this to me reflects how much source material and research labour went into building survey exhibitions.

I've been travelling in the United States. After arriving in a place like L.A., I began to wonder whether or not art-making in America is of a different order than in Canada, or if art-making in L.A. is any different than anywhere else. Finally, I think we must acknowledge that it is the history that is different; both what happened locally and the perspectives and experiences artists in L.A. had of what was happening elsewhere. In that sense, PST is a large social-history project and it tackles the mega-exhibition as a series of stories about the past. It uses the possibility of exhibition-making as a strategy mainly for immersion in cultural history. It left an immense impression of L.A., and if we look at it for that, I think PST was very successful.

EB: I suppose there is something to be said for being blunt. Obviously, the issue is impossible to stomach. Artists are good at taking those things up when others won't.

AC: Kienholz's *Five Car Stud* also deployed a kind of frozen spectacle in its approach to representing horrifying cultural problems. It seemed so appropriate to use the tableau as a way to deal with lynching and the horrifying history of racism being addressed. It was an immersive experience.

EB: We have barely scratched the surface of PST. It's micro/macro problem. Focusing on the art movements in general may overlook individual enigmatic works, but addressing individual works may disregard the massive context.

EB: It was certainly more spectacular than some of the other works mentioned. Being immersed in the installation was very effective, and finding the man's tortured torso filled with water in which letters spelling "nigger" were floating out of order was upsetting to say the least, but it also resonated poetically. The other approaches to social issues I mentioned didn't resonate that way for me.

EB: Los Angeles is full of amazing things and I skipped looking through archives and interviews in favour of sunshine and the Huntington Gardens, which were amazing. I would happily return to nature as a point of reference for art. I am wondering, for example, what the tension between West Coast conceptual art and nature could be?

AC: Well, this brings us back to light and space and the L.A. environment.

AC: Well, spectacle, like image, is a big part of PST. I think it is a case of artists taking on political struggle through their work as producers as well as observers of that which they desire to see change, socially and culturally. Varying degrees and sorts of artistic strategies became necessary under the social and political conditions. Chauncey Hare's photographs from the series *This Was Corporate America* (1976–81) was a great example of that.

EB: But what about conceptual art? Certainly West Coast conceptual art made a deeper historical mark than light and space art. Can we formulate a theory about conceptual art, nature and the idea that artists on the west coast were isolated from other central (New York) developments in art? I don't think PST addresses anything like that, but it has certainly encouraged me to formulate my own theses.

AC: I've been thinking about the intended mark of the exhibition as

Eli Bornowsky is an artist who lives and works in Vancouver. He is represented by Blanket Gallery, with solo exhibitions in 2007, 2008 and 2011. In 2011, he was commissioned to create a new work for The Walrus magazine. Other exhibitions include Walking, Square, Cylinder, Plane at the Western Front (2010) and the group show Enacting Abstraction at the Vancouver Art Gallery (2009). He holds a BFA in Visual Arts from Emily Carr University (2005) and has been shortlisted three times for the RBC painting competition.

Allison Collins is an independent curator and writer based in Vancouver. Her recent projects have included ARCLines, a series of profiles on the origins of Vancouver's artist-run centres, Suspicious Futures, a retrospective exhibition of the work of Canadian video artist Susan Britton created for Viape, opening at PLATFORM, Winnipeg in March 2012. She is currently researching structural film and video, as a residency and forthcoming exhibition at VIVO Media Arts Centre, Vancouver. She holds a BFA from the University of Ottawa and an MFA in Curatorial Studies from the University of British Columbia.

ENDNOTES

- 1 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRWatw_ZEQI
- 2 http://4.bp.blogspot.com/fgobGqb4VuA/TcdwqCgnlVI/AAAAAAAAABg/1Thvmc_agbE/s320/2-Baldessari-two-opponents-blueyellow.jpg
- 3 MOCA: http://www.moca.org/black_sun/artwork/judy-chicago-rejection-quintet-1974/
- 4 Getty: <http://www.getty.edu/pacificstandardtime/explore-the-era/worksofart/big-blue-pink-from-the-flesh-gardens-series/>

above
An intermedia performance
at CalArts, 1983
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE
CALARTS ARCHIVE