

# ABSOLUT - LA INTERNATIONAL

by Hunter Drohojowska Philp

*Bouteilles et Bidon*, 1926, Jacques Villon, Louis Stern Fine Arts



*Two ladies (Mali)*, 1959, Seydou Keita, Gagosian Gallery



These days, a phrase like "international art dialog" gets tossed around without much thought given to its origins. As the ABSOLUT - L.A. International undertakes its third season as a biennial event, one might wonder about its place in the larger history of modern art.

The "international art dialog" was first essayed on a grand scale in this country by those intrepid organizers of the 1913 Armory Show. Artists Arthur

B. Davies and Walter Kuhn generated the event to introduce advanced European art to the then-provincial collectors and artists of Manhattan. Exhibiting Duchamp's *Nude Descending A Staircase* to an audience still trying to comprehend the muzzy-edged works of Renoir turned out to be catalytic in the development of modern art in America.

For all its benefits to the budding avant garde, the Armory Show was conceived as a commercial venture, (an international art fair!). Considerable profits were made, though sales benefited the European artists more than the Americans. In fact, the Europeans and their supporters were so busy proselytizing for the one true faith of modern

art, that the event can be viewed as more international art monologue than dialog.

This example from the dawn of modernism might seem quaint by today's standards. The expansive art market in far flung cities and the all-pervasive communications industry have established the fact of an international art dialog, and L.A.'s place in it underscores its own maturation as an art center.

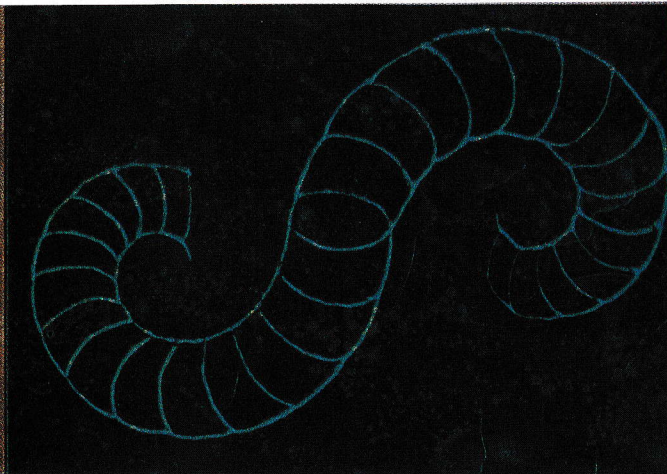
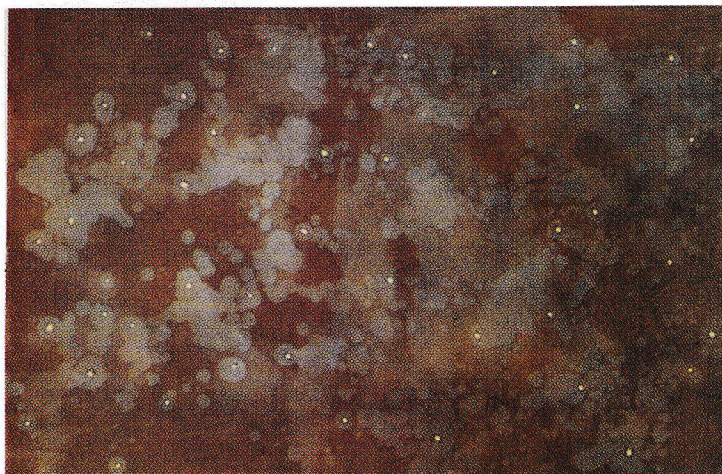
In L.A., the template for success has been to go east, way east. Since the 1970s, L.A.-based artists have recognized that they would have to win recognition and respect in Europe in order to gain acceptance with the New York art establishment. Figures like John Baldessari, mentor to so many younger artists, regularly showed his work from the '70s and the '80s in Basel, Cologne, Kassel, Vienna, Milan, Brussels, Paris and London, and thus established a base of critical and institutional support which continues today.

European curators and collectors have proved a sympathetic audience, easily accepting the Pop, Conceptual and Media influences on L.A. art. Friends and alliances made abroad meant that European artists were brought to L.A. to teach at the area's many art schools and to show at the galleries. Just as Davies'

This year's ABSOLUT L.A. International Biennial Art Invitational opens with an impressive representation of galleries, museums, special events, and panel discussions.

Organizers attracted broad support for the ambitious six week event, led by art patron and title sponsor ABSOLUT Vodka and a prestigious roster of benefactors, including Sotheby's, the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, and The Getty Conservation Institute.

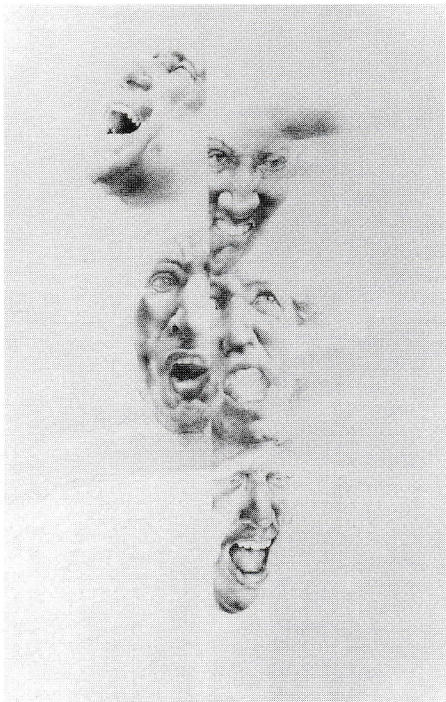
The following essay, by noted art critic and writer Hunter Drohojowska Philp, offers an insightful overview of the ABSOLUT-L.A. International and discusses its role in the history of the exchange of international art and ideas.



*First Form of the Origin*, 1996, Osmo Rauhala, Ruth Bachofner Gallery



# BIENNIAL ART INVITATIONAL



*Portrait of Winners*, Oldřich Kulhánek, Koplín Gallery



*Untitled*, 1996, Nam June Paik, The Remba Gallery

and Kuhn's contacts in Paris marked the beginning of a change in the art of New York, so the L.A. artists' and dealers' many trips to Europe came to influence both the direction and scope of art made in L.A. Although Europe initially dominated this dialog, soon the countries of the Pacific Rim and the Americas, whose immigrants were affecting every aspect of life in L.A., expanded the conversation.

This spirit of internationalism led to the creation of an L.A. art fair in 1986. When it fell victim to the recession of the early '90s, the L.A. International was born. Instead of housing the fair in the downtown convention center, with its attendant bureaucracy and expense, organizers asked the dealers to hold the exhibitions in their galleries, modeling the very nature of the city itself and turning the perceived liability of L.A.'s horizontal sprawl into an asset.

In this way, the ABSOLUT - L.A. International is unlike any other existing fair in that the art is not compromised by its presentation in the make-shift booths used

at convention centers or hotels. Instead, the art is seen in the more hospitable context of the white-walled gallery with professional lighting and appropriate space.

An educational component is considered essential to their mission of an expanded international dialog so panel discussions are scheduled with visiting international artists and critics. L.A.'s museums have supported this goal and their own internationally-oriented exhibitions—from Canadian conceptualist Jeff Wall at The Museum of Contemporary Art to German Dadaist Hannah Höch at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—are being celebrated this year as part of the larger event.

Otherwise, exhibitions are chosen by the democracy of the market place. Galleries simply invite whomever they would like to show in L.A. and there is no overriding curatorial position. This allows the widest and most unpredictable selection of styles, periods and geographical sources to be represented. In a way, it mirrors the creative chaos of the Internet, which itself was invented in L.A., and the ran-

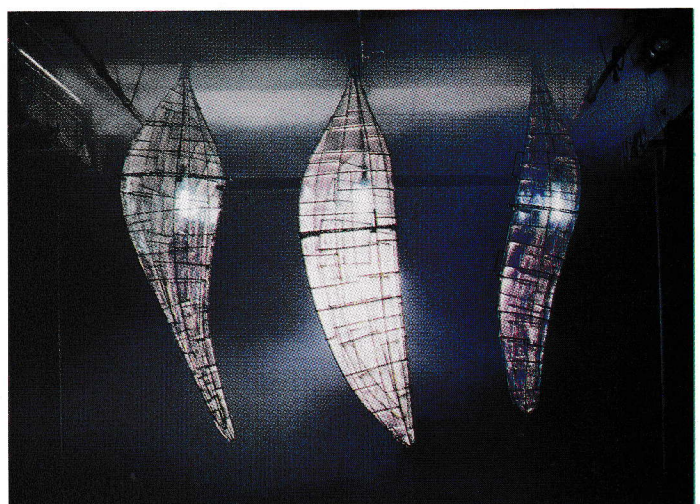
dom availability of the World Wide Web.

The L.A. International, which has its own web site, will be comprised of artists mostly from Europe, but Asia, the Americas, and Africa are also represented. The entire point of the enterprise is to introduce cultural material that would otherwise not be seen without plane tickets, hotel reservations and free time.

This year, over sixty galleries will be showing work by more than one hundred artists. There are early modern paintings by Jacques Villon and drawings by Giacometti. From the period between the 1940s and the 1960s, there will be drawings by Italian Lucio Fontana and photographs by Mali's Seydou Keita. The principles of Conceptual Art can be seen, filtered through various cultural predilections, in the sculpture of Irish artist Dorothy Cross and Canadian Roland Brener, the schematic nature paintings of Finland's Osmo Rauhala and self-portrait photographs by Germany's Katharina Sieverding. From Mexico, there are paintings of royalty by up and coming Alonzo Mateo and drawings by established master Jose Luis

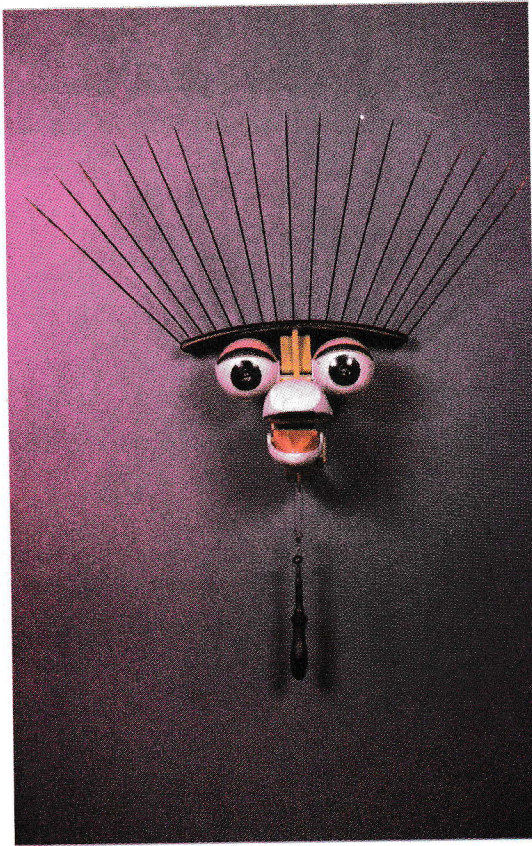


*Magnetismo y melancolía*, 1996, Cisco Jiménez, Felsen Gallery



*Epikrisis*, 1995, S. Lindfors, Patricia Correia Gallery





*Ghost of Teddy*, Roland Brener, William Turner Gallery



*Mae-Filbo*, Rosana Palazyan, Iturralde Gallery

Cuevas. Post World War II furniture from France will meet the steel and fiberglass installations of Finnish artist Stefan Lindfors.

Some of the artists are featured in the Venice Biennale, Documenta X or Sculpture Projects in Munster, all taking place this summer, while others are getting their first break; there are artists who have long since passed away and artists who are in their twenties; artists of all classes come from the developed West as well as third world countries.

This absence of structure, confinement, predictability or definition — all of which characterize the larger Los Angeles — is the essence of the L.A. International and critical to its success.

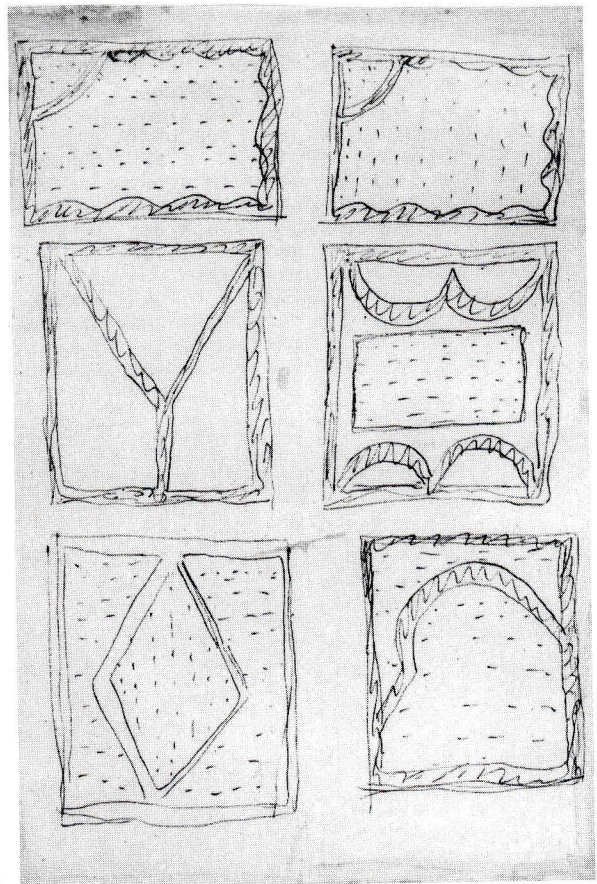
An international art fair can be viewed as the product of the global marketplace which itself is the result of new technologies. It is a world that was unimaginable to Davies and Kuhn, who sailed several days to get

to Paris and relied on letters of introduction and mutual friends to see the work of Matisse, Picasso and Duchamp. Today, such images are faxed, e-mailed or video-conferenced. Still, the impulse toward an exchange of ideas remains very much the same as earlier in the century. The international art world operates like a village, albeit a global village, and art fairs are occasions for artists, dealers, curators, educators, collectors and critics to access the ground level social information that has not yet been regimented into corporate protocol.

Despite chat rooms and computerized dating services, relationships between people tend to be established the old fashioned way — over a vodka martini or a cup of coffee. The international art dialog comes down to an artist in L.A. asking an artist from Winnipeg about the shaping of fiberglass, a critic from Dublin asking a critic from East L.A. about their similar mural culture, or a dealer from Vienna buying a sheaf of drawings from a small downtown gallery. This is international art dialog at its most specific, least grandiose and, therefore, most meaningful. Entering the twenty-first century, plus ça change. ■



*Untitled*, Edouard Pruliere, Robert Berman Gallery



*Studi per "Concetti spaziali"*, 1960, Lucio Fontana, PaceWildenstein