

LAICA OR NOT

The Politics Of Contemporary Art

by Hunter Drohojowska

Stanley and Elyse Grinstein are what the art community might call "important" collectors in the City of Los Angeles. Stanley Grinstein collaborated with others in the founding of Gemini, G.E.L., publishers of fine art graphics. They've both been supportive of "significant" contemporary art and, indeed, their large Span Miss house in Brentwood is fairly glutted with the stuff. So when the Grinsteins gave an open house one Sunday afternoon in November to raise funds for the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA), other concerned and comfortable patrons came to view and purchase works donated by some 30 prominent artists.

What brought them was the recognition that LAICA was just about the only game in town. Say what you want about the cultural scene in L.A., about the explosion in the number of artists and the quality of the local work, the truth is that the institutions for art in L.A. have not kept pace with the cultural growth of the city. You could ask yourself about art in L.A. and find your mind turning to *tabula rasa* — unless you knew about LAICA, and few people outside the art community do. It is not, exactly, as well known as, say, the Whitney. LAICA is probably the best and most diversified forum for contemporary art in the area — it is the only place in L.A. where one can see both the most avant garde experimental work and shows by some of the best established contemporary artists — but it has kept a low profile. A casual observer of the arts might have overlooked its very existence.

Yet, in its five year history, LAICA has shown everything from Robert Mapplethorpe's pornographic photographs of genitalia in bondage to the rather more doctrinaire paintings of William Brice. Their budget has grown from a negative balance to almost \$800,000; the staff from zero to almost 60. Its membership, however, has remained static, at around 1600. Surely the art community is larger than that. N.Y.C. tips the scales with 250,000 people registering their occupation as "artist," and the L.A. community is putatively Number Two. So why wouldn't a fractious and fragmented art community, which is supposedly so hungry for representation, lend support and join the only Institute of Contemporary Art in town?

That's what I wanted to know when I went to the Grinsteins'. In talking to artists I'd found an epidemic of LAICA-phobia and trying to diagnose the cause of this disease was like asking about the federal government: I heard rampant asperity and anger, for reasons both petty and valid. Taking a peripatetic survey at the Grinsteins', however, glass of Sebastiani in hand, wasn't much more satisfying. I heard such comments as "Do you understand now?" or "See what we mean?" and finally, "LAICA has become elitist without becoming elite."

What Sort of Kunst To Show In The Halle

In the beginning, LAICA was founded as an "alternative space." In other cities, an alternative space provides an option to the established gallery or museum space, a place where artists may exhibit non-traditional art, process, performance, conceptual video, body or nobody art. Stuff not for the walls. Usually malleable in structure, occasionally Marxist in administration, it provides an alternative to the mainstream support structure.

In Los Angeles, however, there is no mainstream. Hence, LAICA has developed as an alternative to a vacuum. They are in the unenviable position of trying to represent all the pluralist tendencies of an art scene usually divided amongst a number of organizations. The result is chronic schizophrenia as LAICA tries simultaneously to support the cutting edge of the avant-garde and give painting shows to recognized talent. As perceived by collectors and museum people, LAICA is an alternative space. As perceived by those involved with the alternative space movement, LAICA is a mini-museum, a *kunsthalle*.

LAICA's founder and director is Bob Smith and his wife, Tobi, is the director of development and finance. The nepotism inherent in this cozy arrangement is just so much guano to them, just another bitchy remark to ignore. One could see signs of the estrangement even at the pro-LAICA fundraising party. When Senator Alan Sieroty joined the party at the Grinsteins', Tobi gathered the gossiping duos and trios into a ragged semi-circle on the lawn. After a bit of posturing and speechmaking, the Senator was handed an award for his ongoing support of the arts. Something was mentioned about California's impressive legislation for the arts and a photographer behind me muttered, "That's a pretty sad commentary." An anemic applause bubbled through the crowd before we edged our way back to the bar. The Smiths and Senator Sieroty were left looking self-conscious and uncertain as to what to do next. The Smiths walked the perimeters of the party, out of touch with what should have been their own milieu. Their discomfort gradually seemed to spread, polarizing artists and collectors into little knots of suspicious acquaintances. The whole event seemed charged with the false joy of an office party.

Still, that afternoon's art sale raised \$25,000, which was used as the down payment on the \$300,000 LAICA building at 2020 South Robertson. The building is just a few blocks from where the Smiths have their home but pretty far from anything else that might bring in foot traffic. But then, Smith once remarked that he didn't

want too much public attendance because the general public tends to damage the artwork and LAICA can't afford to hire guards. Its coincidental proximity to the Smiths' home has not gone unnoticed by the art community and has become another source of griping, though the Smiths' assert they took the building only because it was a very good deal, as indeed it was.

The Birth Of LAICA

When Bob Smith first started LAICA, the entire art community was excited, involved, inclined to help. The money to put out the first *JOURNAL* was raised by word of mouth alone. Collector Marcia Weisman, the sister of business and art mogul Norton Simon, convinced ABC to rent a space in Century City for only a dollar a year. It was a grass roots concept, so populist that some of the first shows carried 200 to 400 works; in Smith's words, this included a lot of "bad art," risky, untried, even awful work that would at least give a local artist some exposure. Guest curators were invited to put on exhibitions, guest editors put together the publications to avoid any aesthetic bias, meetings of the Board of Directors were open to all the dissension typical of a true democracy and proposals for exhibitions were solicited from the community. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. The space itself had a raw, unfinished, funky look — concrete floors and plaster walls. Artist Roland Reiss even remembers buying his own lights for a show, all part of the great collective spirit.

With all of that community input, however, it was tough for things to get done. The communal activities continued for about two years with Bob Smith assuming ever more control over the decisions. Smith badly wanted LAICA to survive, but as more of a quality institution. Translate that as no more "bad art." That work that LAICA shows and has shown might look pretty radical to the salesgirl at Florsheim Shoes but there is such a thing as Establishment Radical and Bob Smith started to feature it as LAICA's main attraction. He wanted to exhibit the people with *Artforum* credentials. He started to favor "recognized" talent from N.Y.C. over struggling, young, less talented artists from Venice. Predictably enough, this pissed off a lot of the local artists, especially those who had put in hours of volunteer time helping LAICA stay alive.

Policy Permutations And Angry Artists

Bob Smith found the perfect opportunity to establish LAICA's new look in 1977 when ABC tired of its philanthropy and gave notice on the dollar a year rent. LAICA was moved to its present location on Robertson, a refined, red-faced little building with gallery gray wall-to-wall and track lighting. Alumni of the early years felt betrayed by what they saw as further trappings of elitism. Many dropped their loyalty to LAICA to support such other alternative organizations as Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (L.A.C.E.), Vanguard Gallery or Foundation for Art Resources (F.A.R.), outlets for untested, local or minority art.

Members of the Women's Building were particularly alienated. They supported LAICA's early efforts until an incident with a group of feminist artists called Double X. The group sent LAICA a letter accusing it of violating the Affirmative Action Code by not hiring enough women. Bob Smith responded with a letter threatening Double X with a libel suit. LAICA was subsequently investigated by the Office of Fair Employment Practices and acquitted of the charges, but both Smith and members of Double X remain infuriated. "It didn't produce any enlightenment on my part," says Bob Smith. "Quotas are illegal. You hire a minority or a woman only when the qualifications are equal." Artist Connie Jenkins, one of the founding members of Double X says, "LAICA is allergic to reform. It has served certain people disproportionately. They don't analyze what elements aren't feeding in or what their outreach has been. They have control over a lot of public money so they should be more responsive to broad-based community needs."

Ironically, her husband, artist Tom Jenkins, defends LAICA and its accessibility to the community. "I've seen too many people come in and argue then never show up to work. It won't return to its grass roots stage. The facts of life are that if you're going to put all of your time and energy into an organization (as Bob Smith has done) then it's your organization."

It Isn't The Whitney, But . . .

Other members of the art community welcomed the evolution. LAICA was becoming increasingly professional in response to the paucity of exhibition platforms for contemporary art in L.A. The sloth-like exhibition policies of the modern art department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) combined with the demise of the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art (*see box*) gave LAICA the added responsibility of showing "establishment" work. LAICA has shown the work of Fred Eversley, Jasper Johns, and Ed Ruscha and next month will show the paintings of Peter Alexander, all artists who could be seen in a museum context but for the L.A.

Continued on page 8



A CETA artist with LAICA marks off areas of graffiti to sandblast

This year's CETA program is called the Artist's Secondary Skills Employment Training (ASSET) and is structured to teach artists some basic, useful skills in the fields of construction and graphics. The skills provide well-paying, part-time jobs for the artists so they can survive and continue to make art and while they're training they can provide services for other non-profit institutions at cost. Artist as worker seems a heretical concept, but it's tied to the reality of the art world today. There just aren't enough teaching positions around to provide the usual supplement to an artist's income. No one finds fault with Tobi Smith's practical abilities. As Bob Smith once said, "She's capable."

Tobi Smith herself points out her accomplishments: through CETA funding, "LAICA has put more money in the artists' pockets through employment than the NEA, the Guggenheim, the California Arts Council or any major granting source. And more than the L.A. County since its inception! With this year's budget, we will have given over one million dollars to artists, not counting administration, over the last three years."

The unfortunate twist to CETA funding is that it expands LAICA's operation in a perpetual spiral. To attract CETA funding, LAICA must continue to expand its programs: the more it expands, the more funding it needs. Now LAICA is in the process of opening a new space on Traction Avenue with CETA labor renovating the old warehouse, and turning it into another exhibition space. But what will it show? Who will handle the exhibitions? As Bob Smith says, "We always seem to take on as much as leaves us at the edge of being responsible." And sometimes LAICA crosses that edge, trying to please everybody and leaving many unsatisfied.

You Can't Please Everybody But You Can Try

This month alone, LAICA has put on an exhibiton of Tableaux, 15 on-site installations by local artists; a one-man show of Dan Douke's Super Realist carton constructions; and a performance piece by Peter Van Riper, all at the Robertson space. Downtown, LAICA has sponsored a performance by Albano Guatti and exhibitions by Cho Kawai, Richard Yokomi, and Joan Wattenabe. Senator Sieroty has donated a store front exhibition space to LAICA — downtown in his father's Eastern Columbia building — and there Carole Caroompas had installed *A Song She Sang to Herself*. The windows were blackened, but standing on tiptoe you could just see the rows of cutout cardboard men and women, suspended like so many clothespins on a line. Toward the back, a bowl of fish sat on a gilt cardtable, between two chairs. The walls of the installation were slap-dash decorated with more cardboard cutouts and iconographic symbols. An enclave of art and mystery within walking distance of Skid Row.

LAICA also publishes its Newsletter and bi-monthly *Journal*, an intelligent and serious magazine focused on the art of Southern California. If that seems like a lot of activity, it is even more so when contrasted with the one dreary exhibition of Oskar Kokoschka that has occupied LACMA's Lytton Hall for a comparable amount of time.

When Bob Smith talks about all this, he emphasizes the "accomplishments" of LAICA, meaning in part, of himself and his wife. And objectively viewed, LAICA has real accomplishments. Most of the nasty feelings toward LAICA are reactions to Bob Smith's defensiveness and his arbitrary dismissal of criticism. Smith has constantly been peppered by a lot of criticism (every artist is an art critic) but the fashion in which he's responded has robbed him of much of the acclaim he deserves and left him with a poor reputation. I saw some of this behavior myself at a board meeting last month.

A LAICA Meeting: Questions and Digressions

In 1979, after three years service, Peter Plagens resigned as Chairman of the Board of Directors, so the meeting last month had no chairman. Bob Smith was in charge and visibly irritated that the NEA had not increased LAICA's funding as an "Artists' Space" (bureaucratized for alternative space.) The NEA had given LAICA a good sized grant for museum exhibitions, however, which can't be used for LAICA's ongoing so-called "alternative programming" but will sponsor an ambitious exhibition tentatively labeled "Architctural References." According to Jim Murray, artist and director of the gallery at Mount St. Mary's, it's unusual for a single

Continued on page 69

EYE ENCOUNTERED

Contact Lenses
Hard & Soft
from \$80

Complete eyeglass dept.
from \$49

Featuring all designer frames
Sports glasses
Complete Hearing Aid Dept.

**Trial Fitting of Contact Lenses
at No Cost or Obligation. Call
for appt. 936-8228.**

6236 Wilshire Blvd.
At Crescent Heights

NO SHARKS

Sunset Tan. Southern California's most unique tanning salon features specially designed round tanning booths that, being private, let you tan all over. We are open every day from 9:00 am to 9:00 pm and no appointment is necessary. For information please call us at 479-3788.

THE ORIGINAL

SUNSET TAN

479-3788
1121 GLENDON AVENUE
WESTWOOD, CALIF. 90024

We use ALO-SUN® tanning cosmetics, exclusively

from page 9

ization to receive funding in these two apparently antithetical categories. It seems that even the NEA has recognized LAICA's schizophrenic status.

The meeting rambled on with digressions and suggestions from some of the newly elected or appointed members. Tobi Smith noted that Polaroid had committed funds to the establishment of a photography gallery in their downtown space. Bob Smith commented that corporate funding could only be "good PR." Jim Murray, one of the members who has been involved with LAICA long enough to contradict the Smiths with impunity, said, "You can't expect it to go unnoticed by the NEA and the community. You're getting bigger time and you can't expect that you're not going to lose something."

The comment went the way of most critical comments that night — either ignored or dismissed by Bob Smith. Certainly some ideas were entertained, but a disproportionate number seemed to be defeated as Smith defended the status quo. After three hours, members became bored, frustrated or apathetic so decisions were put off until next month's meeting. At one point, Peter Alexander suggested that LAICA focus its attentions on exhibitions. Bob Smith condescendingly maintained that LAICA's history was clearly attentive to exhibitions.

"Bob, if it were that clear, I would have known that," Alexander retorted. Joel Bass, a newcomer to the Board and to the exhibition committee added plaintively, "If I could visualize what LAICA is and where it wants to go, then I could find a way to put myself in it in some way."

Old Age Or Growing Pains?

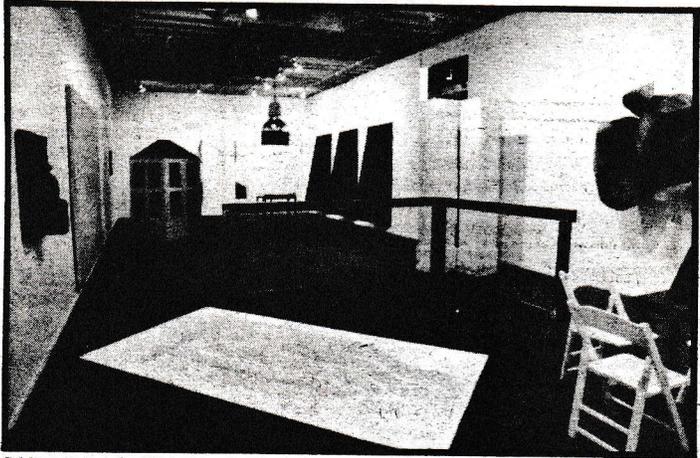
The point is that it isn't clear what LAICA is and where it wants to go, not even to the NEA. Without a chairman to direct this particular meeting it may have been less clear than usual, but communication seemed limited at best. The Smiths' active pursuit of corporate funding defines the conditions they are willing to accept in order to survive as an institution. Which may be inevitable. In the face of Proposition 9 the corporations and foundations may be the best source of monies left to the arts and in the case of Polaroid the funds were offered with few strings attached. But exactly how alternative can the programming be if Exxon or ITT is picking up the tab? Does an institution, then, turn away artists who might alienate the men with the money? If the Smiths so desperately want LAICA to survive, at what point would they draw the line if it means losing a funding source?

When one disillusioned artist sent out postcards announcing that LAICA's name had been changed to the "Bob and Tobi Smith Museum" hardly anyone knew it was a joke. It was too plausible. It had already happened. Now, however, it seems that Tobi is preparing to bow out. She has been training Terry Anderson in the politics of her position and is getting her license in real estate. "Bob does it (LAICA) because he's an idealist," she says. "He feels the need to serve the art community. It's difficult for me though, because I have to pay the bills at home, too. I'm going back to school to get a broker's license to have something to fall back on. I just don't think both of us can afford to be idealistic the rest of our lives."

In Defense Of An Impossible Task

Tobi may be moving on to more lucrative concerns but Bob and LAICA remain firmly committed to one another. He's delegating more responsibility to Debra Burdett, but LAICA remains his domain and without him it would most likely disappear — and it would be sorely missed. Bob Smith never forgets to mention that they would "love to share the pie," letting another institution assume some of the "responsibility" he seems to feel towards the community. But there are precious few individuals willing to take on the hard work, lousy pay and vacillating love/hate relationship with the art community that he is trying to serve.

Back at the Grinsteins', the comment that LAICA had become "elitist without becoming elite" seems an accurate description. The place is over-extended, underfunded and badly focused on what it really wants to do in the future. It's not quite



An installation by Michelangelo Pistoletto at LAICA

professional but neither is it the amateur hour. And it's still pretty much the only game in town.

There are plans for a new museum of modern art to be built as part of the Bunker Hill project downtown and LACMA is trying to match three million dollars that ARCO gave for the construction of a new modern art wing — both or either of which would significantly alter LAICA's function and perhaps return a portion of its initial flexibility. In the meantime, criticism of LAICA will continue to reign as the prevailing art gossip in Los Angeles, our own black hole of culture. ■

Classified

FREE PERSONALS

To place a four-line free personal message, simply write or type your message on a postcard and send it to the L.A. Weekly, 5325 Sunset Blvd., L.A., 90027, or use the form below. Forty letters and spaces to a line. This section is for personal messages and communications, not for selling a product or service.

Yes, Virginia there is a Santa Claus, however she has had several lucrative weeks on a film, so don't be testy with her. Think of all the delectable treats you will get.

FRANK JACKLETT — 2 days late, but nappy 51 — love Jean

Plimsoles, the arena was great, you guys are the best LA band.

I adore getting letters, does anyone out there like writing them? then drop me a mail I love music the LA club scene. Fish, 915 Bennett #2, Long Beach, CA 90804.

Mariene Baruch call Pete B.

Hild De Luca, I love you. Since we met for the first time I have been crazy about you. Now you know, be prepared. The Mystery Lover

Young punk minors unite for fun and new friends at Macambridge Park, Burbank, 3:22 noon. Minors are next to step up.

Jamie is gorgeous.

Mike in Marina: I dance with you in my dreams. Please make them reality soon. A dancing girl with a tender and loving heart.

Bill, true love can see anything through. You are my favorite bunny in the whole world and don't you forget it! Dream on to the heart of the sunrise. Buff.

Mano: Los illegals son punkes de la E.L.A. y they don't need a pen, se, Cochina.

No more memo. No more brief. No more legal writing grief.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

EXTRAS

Opening for extras & minor acting roles in upcoming movie features, TV pilots, and commercials. Need all types & ages.

Union & Non-Union.
Call **STUDIO CASTING**
For Interview & Registration
(213) 271-6147

PHOTO CONTEST
LeBOOK is looking for your photos of Los Angeles, N.Y., S.F., or other cities for our 1981 edition.

CASH PRIZES
\$100 for each feature photo, \$25 for each supporting photo used, plus a copy of LeBOOK (\$40 retail.) Rules: 8x10 glossy w. name & add. on back. Photos become property of LeBOOK. Send S.A.S.E. for unused returns. Deadline April 10. LeBOOK Photo Contest, P.O. Box 38250, L.A. 90038

A BACKGAMMON ENTHUSIAST
WOULD LIKE TO MEET

OTHER PLAYERS
BOB — 477-4402 (15-18)

FIRECRACKERS-SKYROCKETS

\$3.00 Catalogue.
Refunded on first order.
CAPITOL FIREWORKS
1805 W. Monroe
Springfield, IL 62704

NEED CASH?

Trade your records at Music Odyssey, 11910 Wilshire WLA 477-2523 open 7 days

VACATION IN THE BRITISH ISLES or EUROPE this summer for \$20 through our Home Exchange Scheme which offers an economical and interesting alternative to the routine of a package tour. Write for further details to Cleavel Agencies BCM BOX 8622 London WC1V 6XX England.

Earn Cash

BE A PLASMA DONOR
Earn up to \$82 per mo. for a few hrs.
Mention this ad first time for bonus.

\$8 PER DONATION
BIO-MEDICS
6433 Sunset Blvd.

463-2182 HLYWD, CA M-F 7:30-2:30
NEW DONORS 7:30-2:00 Please

IS YOUR CAT an Einstein? Free cat I.Q. test score when you return score sheet. I'm writing an article on cat intelligence. C. Berd, #102, 7723 Willoughby, Los Angeles, CA 90046 (15)

Attractive man, 26, will financial assist lady in exchange for a couple hours of company. Discreet and safely Write Suite 1417, 256 S. Robertson, Beverly Hills, CA 90211. (15)

FURNITURE

Mattress and Foundation
Twin \$67 set-new-Queen \$127 set
Full \$77 set-new-King \$147 set

Sofa bed-new-twin or full \$169
Sofa-loveseat-new-herculon \$169
Bunkbed-new-w/mattr. \$169

Dinette sets • Bedroom sets • Tables
Lamps • Bookcases • Corner groups

Jason's Furniture 462-8716

5434 Santa Monica Blvd. M-F 10:30-7 p.m.
L.A. (1/2 block west of Hollywood Fwy.) Sat. 10-6 p.m.
Sun. 12-5 p.m.

NEED CREDIT?

Get Visa or Master Charge with
NO CREDIT CHECK!

It's simple, legal. Plus other credit secrets. Why pay **EXPENSIVE FEES** for credit information? Send a self-addressed stamped envelope to:

Inflation Reports
Dept. LW-1
PO Box 60148, LA, CA 90060

GAY ACTORS
Consciousness-raising group. Gay Community Services Cir. 1213 N. Highland, Hollywood. Call Prince 934-1906. (9-12)

ASTROLOGY RESEARCH SUBJECTS WANTED!

Receive your personal chart & profile including love, money & job prospects. Send time, place & date of birth plus \$1 for processing to P.R.E., 7825 Sepulveda, Van Nuys, CA 91405.

UNEASY MAKING FRIENDS? Learn how to make lasting friendships in 10 simple steps. Mail \$2 to Nat. Remedies 2210 Wilshire Blvd. (447E), S.M., CA 90403. (15,16)

VETERANS DISCHARGE UP-GRADE

and other services
746-6315

514 W. Adams Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90007

(8-11)

WOODY ALLEN DREAMS

Author coming to L.A. in May to interview persons who've dreamed about Allen. Send address & tel. now to: Dr. Burton, 113 Washington Place, New York, N.Y. 10014. (16-19)

SOLIDARITY WITH ZIMBABWE CHIEF U.N. REPRESENTATIVE OF ZANU

(Zimbabwe African National Union and representative from the **National Black Human Rights Coalition**.)

Sunday, March 23, 7:30 p.m.

2936 W. 8th St. LA \$2.50 donation info 933-0105 (16)

C.J. JUNG INSTITUTE OF L.A.

Will present the 4th annual **KIEFFER E. FRANZ MEMORIAL CONFERENCE**

On April 11, 12 & 13 at Mount St. Mary's College. The title of this year's conference is **Relationship: images of wounding & healing**

For Reserv. and Info. **Call 556-1193** (16-18)

OUTSIDE PEN PALS NEEDED FOR LONELY GAYS INSIDE.

Write Gay Community Services Cir. 1213 N. Highland, LA 90038 (17)

Want to run a classified? Charge it. The L.A. Weekly now accepts MasterCard, Charge or Visa for your convenience. Call 462-6911.