Transitional Use:
A Suburban Exhibition

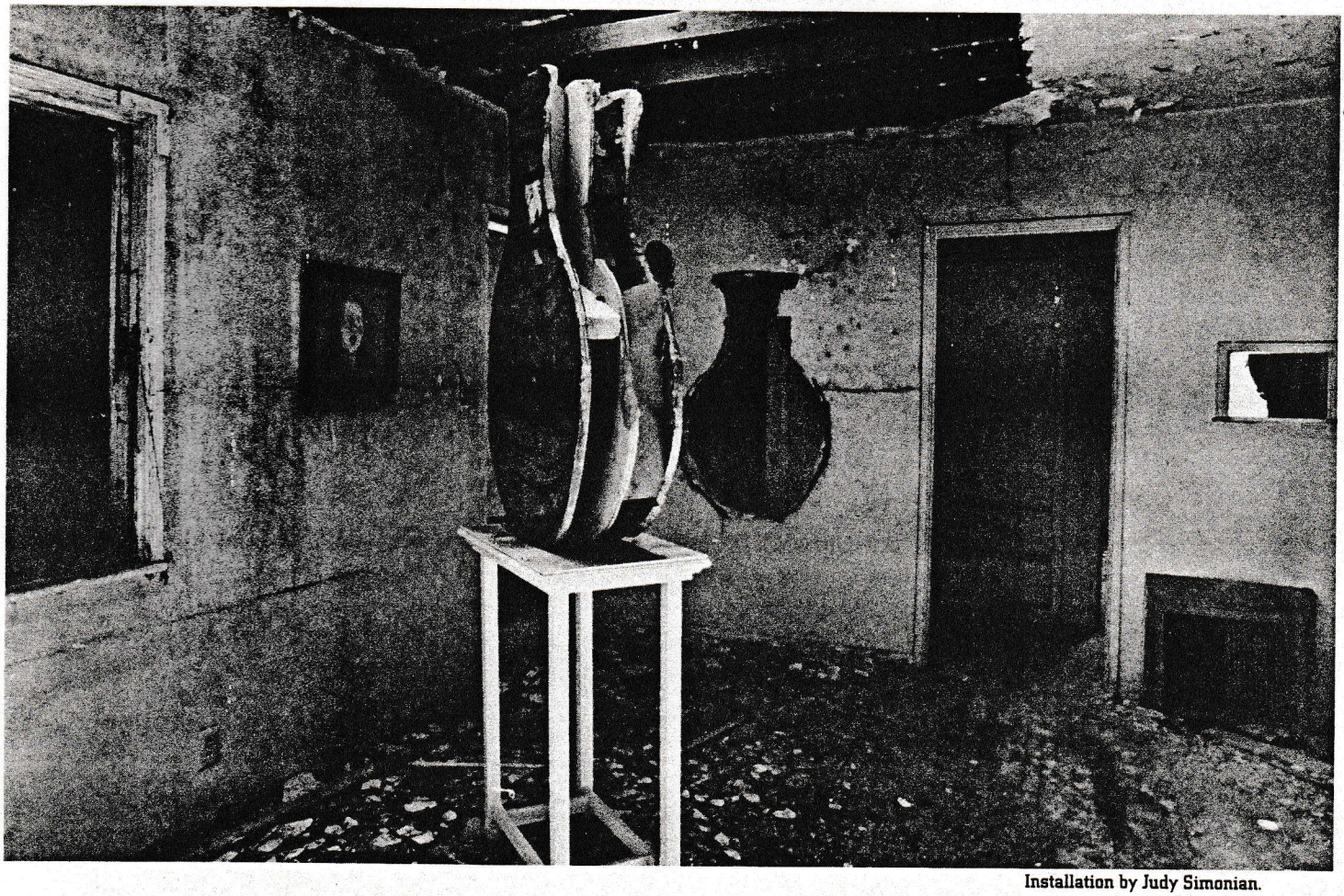
Artwork exhibited outside the limitations of the gallery system is often a political gesture, the finger usually pointing towards the nature of the art market. TRANSITIONAL USE was just such an exhibition, though the works embraced a broader range of political and social concerns. Site-specific projects by eight artists, seven from Los Angeles and one from Chicago, were installed in a corridor of tract housing in Lynwood, California which had been left abandoned and decaying for close to a decade. The California Department of Transportation had bought the property in 1968 and evacuated the area to make room for proposed Route I-105, known as the Century Freeway Transitway. However, in 1972, litigation from citizens' groups, injunctions, and environmental impact studies postponed construction of the freeway. The unoccupied homes deteriorated over the years, the land dried up. It is on this empty and unused terrain that TRANSITIONAL USE was staged by artists Melvin Ziegler, Judy Simonian, Jon Peterson, Ann Preston, Candy Lewis, Megan Williams, Mark Williams (no relation), and Maren Hassinger.

The Lynwood area is a sad one, the manicured appearance of homes which escaped government purchase accentuating the forlorn quality of their starved neighbors. The abandoned homes seem to emit a collective sigh, as if within their desolate hulls, the memories of past residents might still dwell. Walking around the ruins, one finds occasional clues to absent personalities, a tragic atmosphere reminiscent of a contemporary Pompeii. The eerie poignancy of the situation was exemplified by Melvin Ziegler's project, which served as a form of introduction to the event. Rather than build an installation, Ziegler designed and distributed an elegant poster bearing a black and white photograph and the address of one of the vacant houses. The image was captioned with excerpts from Percy Bysshe Shelley's 19th century Romantic poem "Ozymandias," which concerns the ephemerality of man's greatest strategies, creations and best laid plans. "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings/ Look on my words, Ye Mighty, and despair!/ Nothing inside remains. Round the decay/ Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare/ The lone and level sands stretch far away." The sentiments of the poster, which views the area as a remnant of a lost people, a relic of the 20th century, recurred in the installations of Judy Simonian and Jon Peterson.

Simonian's signature vessel shape was cut out of the front, back and interior walls of a small bungalow to provide windows to her installation. Inside, a three foot tall vessel removed from the wall, papered with ornamental gold, painted with the face of a monk and mounted on a tall pedestal, stood in the living room. Other walls in the room were hung with three small, allegorical, framed paintings. In one, the face of a monk stares at his reflection in the vase; in another, he gazes out the window in anxious anticipation; in the third, a classical marble figure—a statue—cringes away from an ornamental vessel in the background. The elements combine in a puzzle that has many leads but no solutions. From each window, or even within the house, one glimpsed teasing partial views but it was impossible to grasp the installation as a whole. The vessel rising amidst the rubble of deterioration seemed a shining and precious symbol, while the images of the monk heightened the spiritual mystique of the location, allowing it to seem a place of worship. Like a bombed-out church, all gilt and dusty remains, the installation embodied both hope and despair.

Directly across the street, Peterson's pseudo-archeological discovery took on a humorous edge. The entire front and sides of the house, including the windows, were painted in flat black. Rebusses of modern hieroglyphs—such as a key, book, clock, arrow, or star—were etched in white in the windows. The front door window was inscribed with the enigmatic words "deep space," framed by lines receding into infinity. Like Simonian's project, this installation was rife with cryptic clues which Peterson chose to explain with a posted sign. "Hieroglyph House, c. 1952 Restored to its original condition in 1982. There is no translation of the hieroglyphs to date." This was to be seen as a modern excavation of a recent time, a time that often seems as foreign as LA BELLE EPOQUE. Peterson accepted the depressed area of Lynwood with a sober wit, and greeted the unpromising future with a wisecrack.

Ann Preston's installation explored magical and otherworldly experience through the use of light and shadow. Inside the darkened bedroom of a bungalow, Preston suspended cut-out photographs of hands. Blinking



Grey Crawford

Installation by Judy Simonian.

colored lights from shadeless lamps sprinkled the walls with myriad shadows in the shapes of birds and animals. Against this shifting background of dim forms, the observer's own shadow is cast; one shape amidst the penumbral puppetry. For all the special effects, however, Preston's installation had no apparent connection to the surroundings or the very concept of the exhibition. The work could have been executed anywhere.

Other artists in the exhibition were not as concerned with archeological allusions of the site as with the politics of urban change. These sympathies were covertly manifested in the work of Candy Lewis, director of the project. On a cleared lot, Lewis erected a roofless house of chain link fencing, approximately the same size of the adjacent homes. The chain link acted as an ominously protective shield, yet it was transparent. Within the house of fencing stood a single row of picket fence, mirror-coated and tilted slightly forward so as to reflect only the barren ground. A mirage effect was created and the picket fence, an icon of domesticity, seemed to disappear. The piece seemed to convey that the tranquil quality of home life was held hostage by the dictates of contemporary society. By incorporating some of the surrounding visual elements (houses in the neighborhood are often fronted by chain link and picket fences), Lewis' project was also the most formally striking in the show.

Megan Williams' installation was almost completely integrated with the area, both conceptually and visually. The work was understated to the verge of camouflage. Although it stood isolated in an open field, the piece was not as blatantly "art" as those of her peers. Williams attached dead, leafless branches to the roof of a small garage, creating the impression that a tree grew from within the structure. With its peaked roof and square body, a perfect icon of suburban architecture, the building seemed to have trapped and stunted the tree's natural growth. The piece served as a powerful metaphor for the relationship between civilization and nature, especially as juxtaposed with the surrounding vacant lots bordered by luxuriant landscaping.

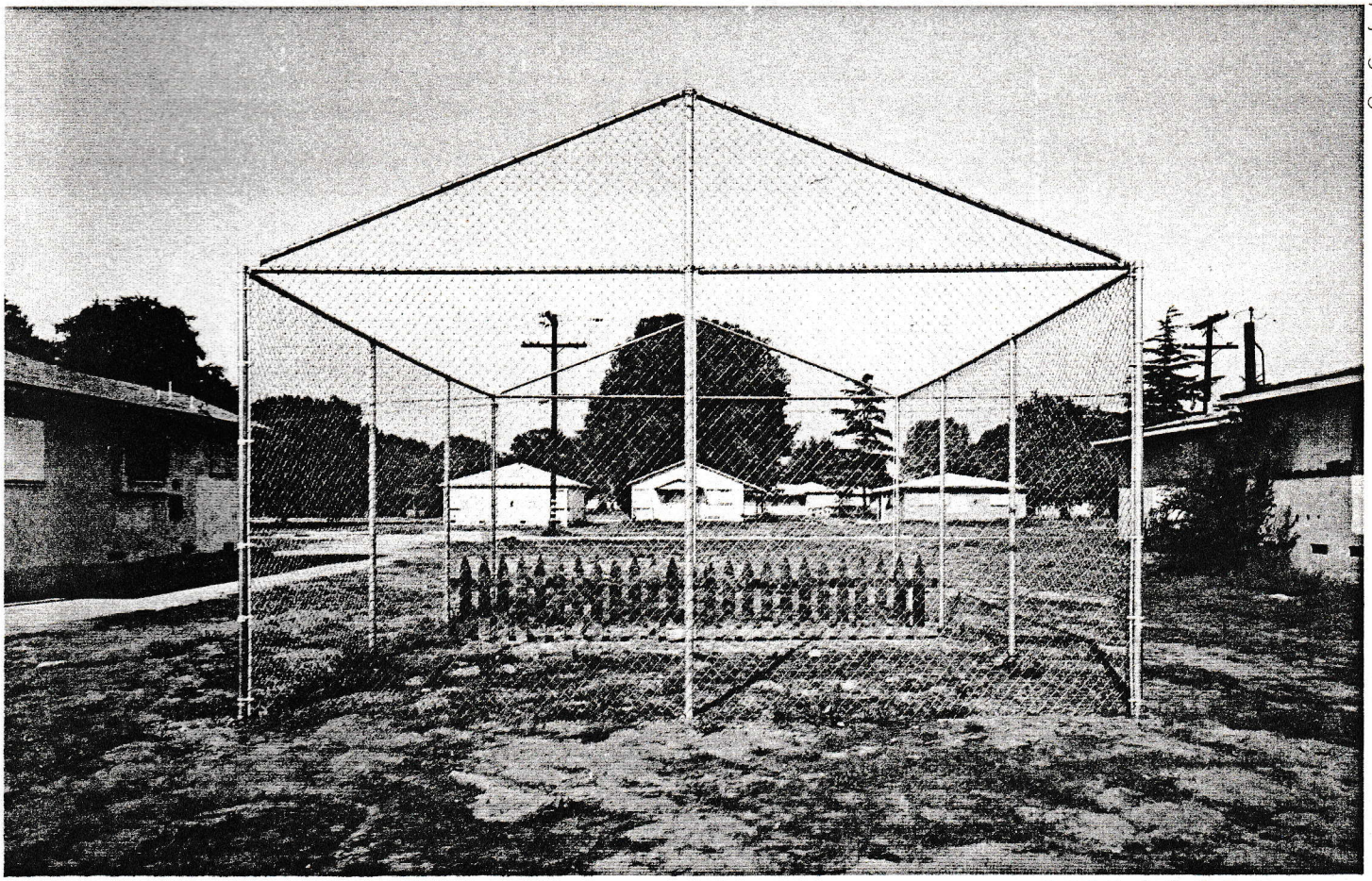
Mark Williams also confronted the issues of urban development in a series of black and white photographs which were mounted "Burma Shave-style" along the main road. One would drive by examples of utopian city plans past, present, and future. These included a rendering of Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City (a model suburb project which was never built), an urban image from the 1920s film JUST IMAGINE, and a photo of the monorail hotel at Disneyworld. An examination of these dreamy drawings and photographs, whether ficticious or fantastic, illuminated the disparity between the societal plans and results. All represented utopian dreams gone astray. The sheer mass of these signs permitted little chance of being overlooked, and they weren't; within one week of installation, six were stolen. Three were recovered and replaced, and then two of those were stolen again. (Other vandalism included some broken windows at Peterson's as well as some graffiti questioning the validity of the art sprayed on the houses of both Peterson and Simonian.)

Aside from such minor incidents, the neighborhood of Lynwood seemed to accept the art. Maren Hassinger's piece reinforced the connections between the desolated and occupied areas. She painted four sidewalks a bright fuschia in the places where the two zones were linked.

TRANSITIONAL USE has lived up to its title. Construction on Route I-105 began in the Lynwood area this fall and the empty houses should be demolished in the next two years. Officials predict completion of the first usable section by 1990, the entire 17.2 miles by 1993. The freeway will extend east from the intersection of Imperial and Sepulveda Boulevards in El Segundo to the San Gabriel River Freeway, Route I-605, in Norwalk. The six-lane freeway will be divided by a wide center transitway to be used by buses and car pools or by a light rail system. (The decision as to which will be adopted may remain in limbo until 1985.) The freeway will move people and goods from the primarily residential area in the east, near Norwalk, Downey, and Lynwood, to the heavy industrial areas in the west, as well as to Los Angeles International Airport and the harbor. When completed, the freeway is projected to carry some 180,000 vehicles per day, and will cost more than $1.5 billion. TRANSITIONAL USE illustrated a few of the hidden, additional costs of progress.

TRANSITIONAL USE was funded by a $2800 grant from the local Foundation for Art Resources (FAR).

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA is Art Editor of the *LA Weekly* and a contributor to *Art Forum* and *Art in America*.



Grey Crawford

Installation by Candy Lewis.