

by Hunter Drohojowska

For a man who'd returned to L.A. as the prodigal son, Walter Hopps looked pretty uncomfortable. The vaunted founder of the L.A. art world had spent the past year organizing a highly publicized exhibition for the Museum of Contemporary Art. It's the first show Hopps has done here since the halcyon days when he co-founded the Ferus Gallery with Ed Kienholz and served as director of the Pasadena Art Museum. Now the elite had turned out in style for the gala opening of "The Automobile and Culture."

Hopps, tall and big-chested, was dressed in khaki. Curls of wavy salt-and-pepper hair stuck out from beneath the brim of his straw fedora. Like a producer on opening night, his air was patrician and genial, but an inner antenna was calculating the mood of the crowd. Familiar faces seethed around him, welcoming him back, welcoming his new bride, Caroline Huber, too, paying them compliments both sincere and false.

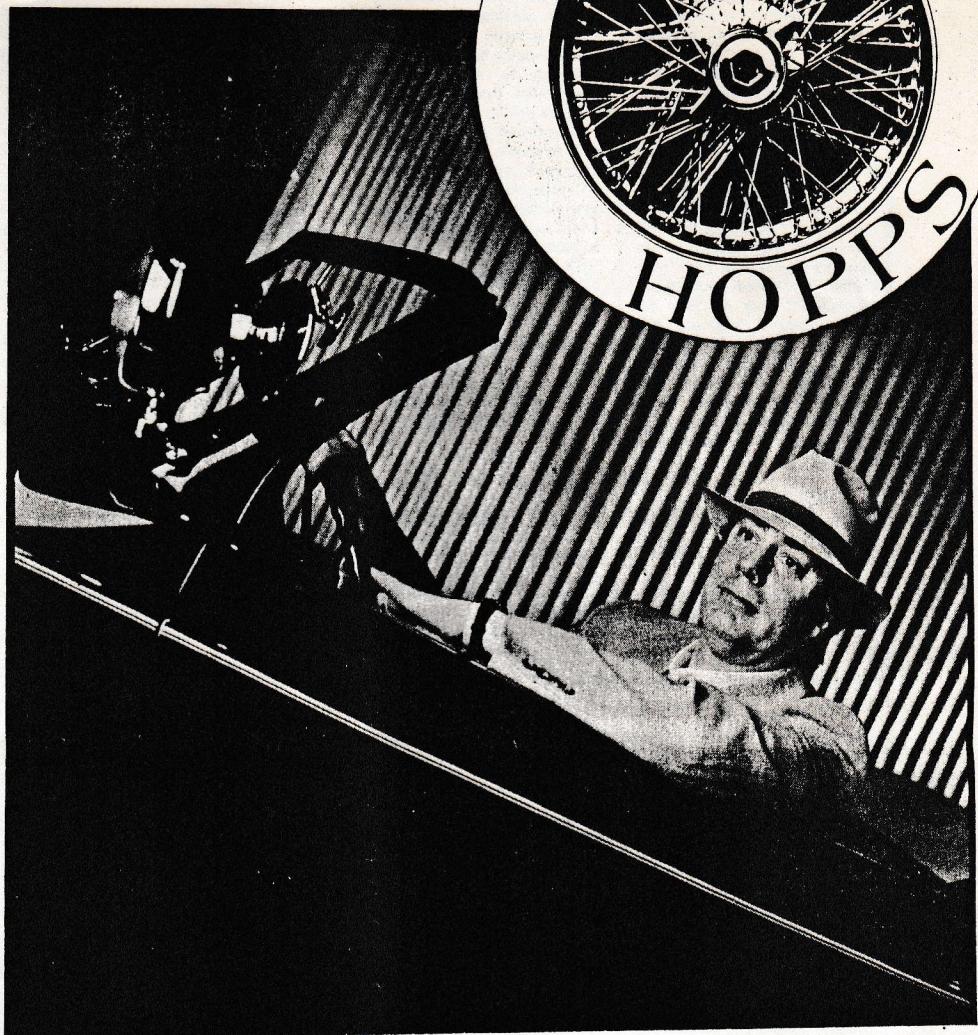
Ed Ruscha and Robert Irwin were there, both of them Ferus artists from the old days. And here were collectors he'd turned on to modern art, like Marcia Weisman, and art dealers like Paul Kantor. All in all, a thousand people were hustling and gossiping, and trying to get to all the food stalls.

In keeping with the car theme, nosh cuisines were identified by area streets: oysters at "Pacific Coast Highway," chop suey at "Broadway," chili at "Olvera Street." The centerpiece on each table was a curving strip of Lucite freeway, topped with a sports coupe and a few twinkling Christmas tree lights. On a small stage, some sort of Olympic disco aerobics routine was being performed, and an actor with a plastic torch was running through the crowd.

But the guests were not going in to see the show. Instead, they were being drawn by a unique spectacle across the street, where the LAPD had erected a makeshift stable full of horses trained for riot duty. "The Horse and Culture," thought Hopps, smiling to himself at the irony. He decided to check whether anybody was actually looking at the exhibition.

Since guests had to leave food and wine outside, the "Temporary Contemporary" was practically empty. Hopps wandered past the yellow and black Bugatti, admiring its handmade grace. Then came Ed Kienholz's *Backseat Dodge '38*. (Hopps calls Kienholz his "partner in crime for humanity.") Beachboy surf-tunes blared from the radio in the funky, chopped car. In the backseat, a young couple made of chicken-wire and plaster grappled toward love. Hopps looked at himself in the mirrored window of the open passenger door, and mused over the controversy created by this work of art. In 1966, this sculpture brought the County Board of Supervisors howling down on the L.A. County Museum of Art, calling the Kienholz exhibition "revolting . . . and pornographic." They made the museum station a guard by the car to prevent curious minors from looking into lust. Last year, the LACMA bought the car for a quarter of a million bucks. Times change.

Other works by Ferus artists reminded him of the past. "That's the best title in the show," chuckled Hopps at Ken Price's *Don't Think About Her When You're Trying To Drive*, a drawing of a car falling over a cliff. There was Ruscha's *Honey, I Twisted Through More Damn*



Walter Hopps brought L.A. the controversial "Automobile and Culture" show at MOCA. Lucky for him, he's used to criticism.

Traffic Today ("Ruscha has always been good on cars"), Billy Al Bengston's 1966 golden chevron "dento" on bent aluminum, and a drawing by John Altoon — a great artist, a premature death. These he likes, but Hopps is disappointed in this show. His ice-blue eyes appraise the crowd. Their reactions seem flat. The trustees look unhappy, concerned by the audience reaction. This has been scheduled as the "popular" show. "Fuck them," thinks Hopps.

Hopps is widely considered to be a brilliant, iconoclastic and unconventional museum director. He's a veteran of wild criticism and usually deals with it philosophically. But "The Automobile

and Culture" has drawn fire from all fronts, from the critics for being intellectual and from the public for being boring. As one wag observed, "Even the cars aren't very good."

Surprisingly, Hopps has disclaimed responsibility for the show, and has some harsh words of his own for MOCA. Over lunch at a sushi bar in Little Tokyo, Hopps explained the genesis of this spot-lit failure.

Originally spawned by Gerald Silk's Ph.D. dissertation, which became the principal catalog essay, the show was proposed by Hopps in 1978 to Pontus Hulten, then director of the Beaubourg Museum in Paris. In 1968, Hulten had assembled a landmark show, "The Machine

(As Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age)" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He greeted Hopps' proposal with enthusiasm.

Hulten had now taken the job as director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, seemingly the perfect location for such a show. "The original budget we discussed," says Hopps, "was \$1 million for about a thousand objects." But by the time the exhibition started to become a reality, Hulten was only a figurehead at MOCA.

"Hulten is one of the people I admire most in the world," says Hopps. "As a director, he was an extraordinary choice for L.A., but the trustees and the staff could not work out a way to make life

An Autophrenic Fantasizes: What the MOCA Show Should Have Been

Automobile and Culture." Why not? After all, this town is made possible by internal combustion. But what is really surprising about the show at the Museum of Contemporary Art is that for all the hunky-dory stuff — the neo-Dada pieces, Barney Oldfield's Ford 999 Racer, the '55 T-Bird, the Mercedes 300-SL, the '63 Corvette — it has little to do with L.A. Just imagine what L.A. experiences could have been captured by the show.

For one, how about an exhibit to clear up the mystery of where all those stolen Blaupunkt stereos go after they exit through the slashed tops of your Rabbit convertibles. Imagine all of them installed in one giant bunny car and tuned to different stations. (Heavy aural imagery, *n'est-ce pas?*)

Or why not a performance piece on valet parking, another local blight. The logic of hostage out one's wheels would make an excellent subject for an avant-garde opera *buffa*. The diva, arriving at a Melrose eatery in her almost restored '66 Mustang, is greeted by a narrow-hipped Lothario whose recitative dislodges her from her mount, whereupon he spirits the vehicle away. She encounters the Jon Vickers of the purple-hair-six-earrings-to-the-

lobe set within; the two sing a duet in praise of their respective mechanics as she feels him out for a possible role in the MTV version of *Die Fledermaus*.

Following this interlude, the two find themselves outside, where the basso leading man comes to the diva's rescue, providing a bag of gold pieces to ransom back the ponycar from its captor. She drives off in the direction of Beverly Center, leaving the leading man to sing a dirge-like aria after he notices that the now enriched attendant has smashed the right rear fender of his 1954 Aero Willys Bermuda hardtop. The whole ensemble comes back with a chorus of "This Contract Limits Our Liability . . . Please Read It" as he sets off to find a body shop that can match the original turquoise paint. *Bel canto* with mudflaps.

And what of the West Hollywood melodramas of love, betrayal and retribution played out in jaunty Jeeps parked across the street from Probe and Greg's Blue Dot? The perfect subject for a Lichtenstein-style love and heartbreak comic panel.

Speaking of cultural aberrations, the ultimate L.A. car/culture exposition should also include some representation of the anal-compulsive "detailing"

phenomenon. In the tradition of Sisyphus, these unfortunate use toothbrushes to polish their mag wheels, Q-Tips to rout out dust from under chrome trim, and enough Armorall to make even Fritz Mondale less dull. But, like painting a bridge or working out with Jane, they only have to do it all over again lest they let their efforts go to rot everytime an inversion layer settles on their T-tops.

Other suggestions for future utopian gallery shows: subject a '59 Buick to extremely high temperatures and see if it comes out looking like a '60 (Art Fein's theory, not mine). Or a "sound-art" display of the stuff that accumulates on the floorboards of randomly selected cars; my current carpet collection includes two empty Tab cans, one badly mangled Book of Mormon (used by the previous owner to shore up a defective front seat), a broken cassette box, two cigar rings, sand, last week's Weekly opened to a page with an x-ray of someone's large intestine, a melted copy of The Fleshtones' *Hex-breaker* album, a key chain in the shape of the numeral "1" from E&L Auto Tow Service on S. Valencia, and several Security Pacific Readysteller stubs showing progressively more anemic balances. Oops, almost omitted

the three dried-up pens, the Safeway Double-Up Bingo game card and the "ZZ Top For President" bumper sticker.

Of course, autoeroticism would also make a fine exhibit. An oral history of the reclining seat's place in the sexual revolution and counterrevolution of the 50's would be a superb audio-visual piece. The effect of van sales on motels with hourly rates could be graphed out on a woodcut. The Freudian implications of bumper bullets (a/k/a "Dagmars"), especially the rubber-tipped ones on '57 Cadillacs, would make for a stimulating display as would a hologram representing the XKE envy of Porsche owners or the back-to-the-womb sensibility of the typical (brushless, please) car wash. And we haven't even mentioned the er, labial grill configuration of the Edsel. And let's not forget the very libertine attitude evinced by the Dodge Dart Swinger.

What of the human side of automobiles and culture? Like dogs, cars tend to reflect their owners' personalities. There's not much we can add about the "Porsche type" that hasn't already been mentioned in the hemorrhoid joke that made the rounds a few years back, but the defiant nerdism of Datsun Honey

Bee owners deserves some attention. There's also the absent-minded professor look of a VW Squareback or a '60s Volvo, and the "I'm Bad, I'm Nationwide" message of a '75 Eldorado with blackout windows is a certain winner.

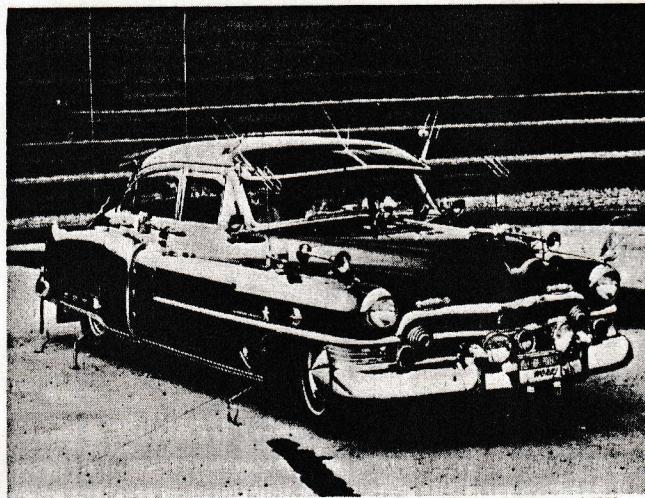
The socially responsible Honda Accord, which is never seen with personalized plates (though a weathered Anderson might be present on some older models), is a must, as is the Trans-Am adorned with the KLOS rock-star sticker and with raised white letter tires that announce, "As a matter of fact, I do own the whole damn road" and let one and all know that a moron is most likely behind the wheel. A pink '57 Rambler tells you that its owner has a houseful of wrought-iron furniture and several original big-eyed children Keane paintings.

The SoCal environment, then, is an organic Automobile and Culture show that any museum should be happy to house and display.

So next time let's have some more imagination from Walter Hopps.

Bob Merlis is an expert on cars, and writes about them for a variety of national publications.

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James Roche's The Bicentennial Welfare Cadillac, 1976: modified and decorated 1950 4-door sedan.

when the Pasadena, the most progressive museum on the West Coast, went bankrupt. The new building was sold to Norton Simon to house his Old Master collection. The modern works were put in the basement or sold. Bad blood remained between the trustees of PAM and Hopps. (Hopps was even sued for \$9 million by the museum's architects over some allegedly slanderous remarks he made. It cost him \$35,000, but the case was dismissed and "they didn't get one penny.") Some

of these same people are now trustees of MOCA.

Hopps, at 52, calls himself a "die-hard Californian," and he still feels territorial about the city. His family came here with the Gold Rush, and his Western loyalties are such that his first child will be named after the state. "My family were all doctors or men called by God — frontier preachers." Hopps falls somewhere between the two, possessing

an encyclopedic, scientific mind combined with an orator's tone. He invokes hellfire and damnation against ignorance in the art world. Ever since he was a child in Eagle Rock, he claims, he's witnessed recurring self-destructive tendencies in the L.A. art world, as in the case of the Arensbergs.

At 15, on a school trip, Hopps visited the Hollywood mansion of Walter and Louise Arensberg. Their collection of Dadaist, Surrealist and Cubist art was one of the finest in the country. "Everything from Mondrian to Magritte," recalls Hopps. "I was amazed, especially when it dawned on me that the artwork and the library were the principal pursuits of the adults who lived there. The difference between what was there and what was in the outside world was startlingly apparent." The following week, Hopps returned alone and pleaded to see the collection again. And again. On one of his visits, he met Marcel Duchamp, who left a lasting imprint on his life.

The Arensbergs dreamed of founding a modern museum here. In 1950, they offered to give their collection to both the L.A. County Museum of Art and UCLA, and both turned it down. "They [LACMA & UCLA] hated modern art; they just couldn't believe it meant anything. Remember, this is after World War II, past the zenith of MOMA's activities in New York. But it didn't mean anything here."

The Arensberg Collection was given to the Philadelphia Museum of Modern Art in 1954. Hopps shakes his head with his preacher's vehemence. "The ultimate stupidity."

Hopps' unconventional vision was established from his earliest years. In third grade, he met Craig Kauffman, an artist who later showed at Hopps' galleries. "I taught him how to draw airplanes and

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supportable for him here. I consider losing him a cultural disaster. They have no one of that imagination or stature now . . . There are some small-minded people on the board of MOCA, but that's a personal matter between me and them."

Hopps is being paid a modest \$5,000 for organizing the show. "I consider this a gift, giving my time and energy to make it right," he says. But he has been restrained by the budget of the nascent institution. "The difficulty of getting and managing monies is a problem here."

One criticism of the show has been that many of the offered works are minor. Barely represented are the Futurists, who turned the car into an icon and the notion of speed into a manifesto. "The clout of the institution was not sufficient to get the loans. That's the reality. Assuming I do have the clout, it's hard for me to be putting on the screws for an organization that didn't even have climate control until just before the show opened. LACMA made it extremely hard to get the Kienholz and the Warhol, claiming a lack of climate control. I think that was internece rivalry."

MOCA director Richard Koshailek expressed surprise at Hopps' remarks. "He never said anything to me. He seemed pleased. I think Walter's losing his nerve."

Hopps' frustrations may well be rooted in his last professional experience in L.A. as director of the Pasadena Art Museum. By 1967, the trustees of the museum decided the collection should be moved from its home in an old Chinese-style mansion to a new modern building, more appropriate to a growing collection of modern art. Hopps fought the decision, claiming the museum couldn't afford it. When the trustees approved a submitted design, Hopps claims, he "went crazy" and checked into a mental hospital for six weeks to fight a serious depression. He was forced to resign.

Seven years later, Hopps was vindicated

as chronically late, sometimes not showing up at all.

Hal Glicksman, who had worked as preparator at Pasadena, followed Hopps east as assistant director of the Corcoran. Eventually, Glicksman had buttons made up for the staff that read "Walter will be here in 20 minutes." "He was so crazy," says Glicksman. "There would be weeks on end when he wouldn't want to communicate, and the trustees would go nuts. Usually, they were the jerks on the board. The people who knew something about art he could talk to. A lot of it is high principles, but they were expressed with the trustees as clashes." For one show, Hopps exhibited any artist who came to the space during a 36-hour period.

In 1976, Hopps' former professor, Dr. Joshua Taylor, hired him as curator of 20th-century art for the Smithsonian, but the pace was too slow for Hopps. He proposed Robert Rauschenberg as the American artist for the Bicentennial, "which caused all sorts of problems because of his bisexuality . . . We got him on the cover of Time magazine. I didn't hear one official comment, though. They were so upset that on the wonderful collage of things from his life that he did for the cover of the magazine, he was stroking a boy in a bathing suit. The fools failed to inquire, but the boy was Rauschenberg's son."

The Smithsonian was too bureaucratic and too methodical for Hopps' mercurial temperament. In 1982, however, the wealthy Texas collector Dominique de Menil offered him the coveted position of director of the Menil Foundation. It promises to be a good marriage. Hopps will be the director of the museum, which is being built to house an incomparable collection of modern art, a collection thick with the Surrealism so dear to Hopps' taste, e.g. Magritte, Ernst, Cornell. In addition there are Rothkos, Kleins, Mattas.

"As long as the work gets done," says Hopps, "there are no rules or regulations as to how or when. Our official personnel policy is that there is no personnel policy." Nothing could be more suited to Hopps' needs. As one former employee said, Hopps has "an artistic sensibility. No one could ever accuse him of being a bureaucrat; he doesn't fit with structures that are set up."

While this drives museum people mad, Hopps is the darling of the artists' community. Sculptor Rockne Krebs called him "an artist who makes shows." John Baldessari said, "I think he's the most fascinating museum director in the country. He has an artist's temperament and comes up with ideas that no one else seems to think of."

An example of these ideas is a game Hopps plays with himself. "When people think of an artist as unexplicable, I try to think of how it might have been without him. That's a game I play. Cezanne, for instance, makes me antsy and jumpy. He's an extremely interesting artist, but I just like to think of how we could do without him."

De Menil, according to many, values an artistic temperament. What she values even more is the "eye." The "eye" is what separates an academic from a visionary. Even Hopps' detractors have to admit that he has that. "He has the eye," said Glicksman. "He has given first shows to an unbelievable number of important artists. He had 'perfect pitch.' It's an old fashioned notion, but he is incredible. That's a rare commodity, and some people will put up with anything for that." ■

For a review of "The Automobile and Culture" see Art Seen on page 51.

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