

MAIN ST. SANTA MONICA/VENICE SHOPPING GUIDE

# L.A. WEEKLY

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## ART POWER

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WHO'S GOT IT? HOW  
ARE THEY USING IT?

by Hunter Drohojowska

**M**ost discussions about art institutions — particularly in Los Angeles — end up being about architecture. What does the new wing look like? How much did it cost? Does the design invite the public to celebrate art? Who paid for what? In this, Los Angeles isn't really different from New York or London. It's just that our art institutions are newer and, recently, they seem to be going up at an ever increasing pace.

This concentration on buildings is, of course, mindless, as it's the art inside that counts. If the art is good, you could hang it in a closet and people would still come to see it. If the work is mediocre, not even the Palace of Versailles will make it memorable. Any significant survey of institutions dedicated to art must begin, therefore, with the art inside them and, in particular, the people who decide what work gets hung.

# L.A.'S CHANGING CONTEMPORARY ART SCENE



Joy Silverman, director, LACE.

In Los Angeles, there has been a subtle but significant metamorphosis in the art world of late. The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA), and UCLA's Frederick S. Wight Gallery, remarkably, all have new leaders. Some have recently been hired, others have merely solidified positions of power. These are difficult positions to gain, and almost impossible to maintain. Being committed to contemporary art in the art world is a trout's life, an upstream swim against competing interests: the social whirl, capital campaigns, political intrigue, sexual philandering, the market — everything but art itself.

Often resented by the artists themselves, however privately, and all but ignored by the general public, these directors, curators and art administrators are the key functionaries that make the world of art exhibitions turn. Especially in contemporary art, they can help promote a new trend, to say nothing of a new artist and retard the growth of a new expression

to the point where it becomes inconsequential. By learning the preferences and tastes of these otherwise anonymous people, one can often predict what direction a museum or gallery will take under their reign. Along with the art media, they are the hidden but effective power brokers of the contemporary art world, and if someone wishes to understand that world, they had better learn a few of these names.

**T**he most topical shift in power in L.A.'s contemporary art scene took place at MOCA. On March 17, Pontus Hulten steps down to the position of founding director — leaving Richard Koshalek to assume the helm as director. Officially, Hulten is leaving to manage the cultural affairs of the 1989 World's Fair in Paris, where he previously acted as the director of the Beaubourg Museum. Unofficially, rumors abound of abrasive relations with MOCA's board of trustees. In France, and Sweden before that, Hulten, as museum director, had to answer to governmental figures and the ministry of



Dr. Edith Tanelli, director of UCLA's Frederick S. Wight Gallery.



Dan Wasis, curator, LAICA.

culture, but not to the moguls of industry and real estate who make up a board of trustees. (The museum as private club is primarily an American concept.)

L.A.'s art scene has always been defined by its wheeler-dealer art collectors. One only need recall the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu or Norton Simon's col-

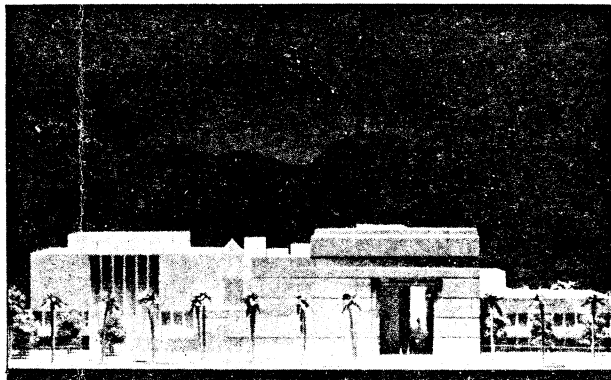
lection in Pasadena. Even in performance, the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion was a very personalized affair. These people are accustomed to giving orders, and even moonlighting as the promoters of high culture they want to extract a measure of power for their money.

Since his arrival in L.A. in 1980, Hulten

Claudia Kunin

Claudia Kunin

had been spending progressively more time on business in Europe, which — oh happy coincidence! — meant less time with the trustees here. No doubt, he was unnerved by the fracas that escalated between the architectural committee, headed by trustees, and the architect Arata Isozaki over MOCA's building design. (After much upheaval, a design approved by most parties was unveiled last month.) In fact, the whole California Plaza project slated for downtown's Bunker Hill area, where MOCA will be located, has been in jeopardy intermittently for the last three years, due to insufficient equity from the developer. MOCA's projected opening date was postponed to 1985 or 1986. Meanwhile, an interim space called The Temporary Contemporary was put together on First Street and Central



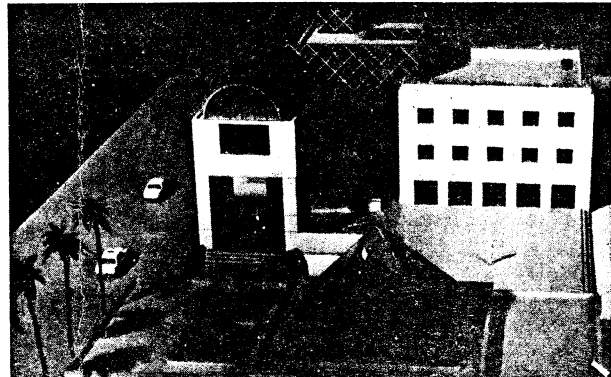
Anne Edgerton, curator, LACMA, and model of new Robert O. Anderson Building.



Richard Koshalek, director, with curators Julie Lazar and Julie Brown, of MOCA, and model of MOCA's Bunker Hill building.

Avenue in Little Tokyo. A couple of warehouses, renovated by Frank Gehry for less than \$1 million, will provide 50,000 square feet of exhibition space until MOCA opens. Hulten, however, comes from the prestigious Beaubourg, where he regularly staged blockbuster historical survey shows. A couple of warehouses may not have held sufficient panache. A World's Fair, by comparison, has plenty of panache!

On the flip side, Richard Koshalek's idea of a great time is a couple of ware-



houses. Serendipitous circumstance seems to have worked in L.A.'s favor in Koshalek's recent selection as the new director, what with The Temporary Contemporary opening in October.

Although the two worked closely together, Hulten and Koshalek could not be more different. In contrast to Hulten's soft, accented speech and his diplomatic European demeanor, Koshalek speaks with the rushed intensity of a machine gun, shooting forth ideas, comments, suggestions, questions, every which way and all at once. His dress is Ivy League —

horn-rimmed glasses and pin-striped suits — but always a tad rumpled, lending him the air of the hectic, eccentric professor. But he has a curious edge of street savvy to his personality, obvious energy, and the ability, he says, to thrive under pressure. For his sake, one hopes he's telling the truth.

Perhaps the most crucial element of Koshalek's reputation is that he is *not* an elitist, no small thing in the art world. And he has been truly innovative in making art accessible to the public. When he was director of the museum in Fort Worth,

Texas, where there were no art reviewers to publicize or analyze his shows, he bought a full page ad in the major newspaper every Sunday that served as a free, very accessible catalogue to the museum's exhibitions. Later, at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, New York, he sponsored a series of live radio shows to discuss and promote the artworks he was showing.

His biases? Koshalek says due to his architectural background, his personal taste is toward minimalist artists, and he says he feels close to a large number of artists working in this area, including Larry Bell and Robert Irwin. But Koshalek seems too much the professional to freeze anybody out of the museum whatever his personal predilections. He says his responsibility and interest is the art of the current times. "A selection process is necessary," he says, "but hopefully the selections will be fair. We can't do everything, but we can make a contribution." A fair enough statement.

Some of the already announced shows indicate the new museum, as promised, isn't simply going to mimic its director's personal tastes. The opening show will feature works from the private holdings of several international collectors, reflecting each of their points of view, and so won't

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have a minimalist perspective. Another planned extravaganza, "The Automobile and Culture," to coincide with the Olympics, obviously has broad-based popular appeal.

Now 41, Koshalek received his M.A. in architecture, then art history at the University of Minnesota. He began his career at the Walker Art Center, working with Martin Friedman, widely considered to be one of the best directors of a contemporary art museum in the country. This was followed by a year at the National Endowment for the Arts, two years as director of the Fort Worth Museum, followed by his stint at the Hudson River Museum.

Along the way his career has been marked by close working relationships with contemporary artists, and a penchant for aligning the innovative and the functional. Since his days at the Walker, he has been commissioning artists for specific projects, as exemplified at the Hudson River Museum. This was an almost bankrupt institution located in a ghetto that Koshalek managed to turn into a profitable, popular place in just four years. There, imaginatively, he commissioned light artist Dan Flavin to do the security lighting in the entrance. There was no money to build a bookstore, so Koshalek hired pop sculptor Red Grooms to design a bookstore as a sculpture, which was then paid for with NEA funds. The "sculpture" then raised even more funds through the sale of books and posters.

Commissions, or giving artists money to create specific new works, will be a sizeable part of MOCA's program. Explains Koshalek, "Commissioning makes the program more original, and the museum, more unique. It's an expression of confidence in contemporary artists and contemporary art. The emphasis is on encouraging new work by helping the artists, by providing resources and space. We see it as extending a tradition ... making sure ideas the artists are interested in now get executed and don't get lost." Statements such as this make Koshalek sound more like the devoted founder of the most idealistic alternative space than the head of a hierarchical institution and are certain to give him credibility with local artists.

Although MOCA will most likely find plusher quarters in the future, the interim space does allow greater flexibility for more risky ventures. MOCA has already commissioned an ambitious collaboration, *Stages of Performance*, with choreography by Lucinda Childs, music by John Adams, costumes by Issey Miyake, and sets by Frank Gehry, to debut in September. The event will be coordinated by Julie Lazar, curator of media and performing arts. (She is also coordinating a series of one-half hour radio programs called *The Territory of Art*, to be broadcast on National Public Radio.) Also, Julie Brown, a curator who worked with Koshalek at the Hudson River Museum, is organizing *In Context*, a series of one-person exhibitions allowing artists commissioned by MOCA to do work in whatever physical environment best suits the piece, whether it be in a publication or on a construction site. Some L.A. artists already selected include Robert Therrien, Maria Nordman, and Betye Saar. These projects reinforce the impression that MOCA under Koshalek has faith in contemporary artists and, to a surprising extent, will give them free reign.

Koshalek makes it quite clear that he intends MOCA to have a balanced program with a substantial permanent collection.

**P**erhaps the most important aspect of MOCA's presence is its effect on L.A.'s other art institutions, primarily our largest institution, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Although plans were already afoot there for a modern and contemporary wing, the announcement of MOCA excited LACMA to action. Money was quickly raised, a New York architectural firm hired, and the Robert O. Anderson Building, which will run 300 feet along Wilshire Boulevard, was quickly announced. It may even open before MOCA, in 1985. The Anderson Building, named after ARCO's chairman of the board, based on ARCO's \$3 million matching grant, will cost \$22 million, and the new wing will create 50,000 square feet of additional exhibition space. Not only will the museum's permanent collection of 20th-century art finally be on view, but a 5,000-square-foot and a 10,000-square-foot gallery will be used for changing exhibitions. Before, eight departments competed with 20th-century art for exhibition space, so the department could put on only one major exhibition per year.

Much of the additional space will be devoted to examining the modern era and its links to contemporary art. Maurice Tuchman, senior curator of 20th-century art, has described the debut exhibition, "Spiritualism and Modern Art," this way: "The show will draw connections between the occult and artists from Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich to Ad Reinhardt, Robert Irwin, and artists of 1985." He conceives of these exhibitions as the first of a series "planned to re-evaluate 20th-century art from various vantage points as impulses of artists throughout history." These ideological impulses include the confessional, experimental, decorative,

and societal. LACMA's subsequent show will be the first retrospective of David Hockney's work in America.

These shows, however, lend credence to LACMA's reputation for being a better place to see modern than contemporary art. David Hockney is contemporary, of course, and quite brilliant at that, but hardly the cutting edge of a contemporary scene. LACMA remains committed to collecting modern work and building a collection to save the past for the future. Tuchman's reasoning is the presence of modern work will strengthen the public's perspective on contemporary art.

Since he came to the museum in 1969, Tuchman has been a controversial, much criticized, figure in L.A. artist circles. He has helped stamp the museum with the image of being stolidly conservative, not caring much about showing artists unacceptable to the tastes of the trustees. Until 1980 his superior as museum director was Kenneth Donahue, a scholar and devotee of 17th-century art. The current director, Earl A. Powell III, is interested primarily in 19th-century American art, but he has also collected contemporary art and has given Tuchman freer reign to put on contemporary shows, even given the lack of space and only recent support from the trustees.

The most important nod the museum has given toward the contemporary scene was the hiring of Anne Edgerton, whom Tuchman thinks is just terrific. In the last year and a half, Edgerton, as assistant curator of 20th-century art, has become the museum's contemporary art scout, functioning as a liaison between the gargantuan institution and the intimate artists' community. She's a strong supporter of contemporary art at LACMA, although she also abides by LACMA's modernist line, which, in practice, is that the museum's mandate isn't to support emerging art but forge links between modern art and contemporary art.

Edgerton has been wonderfully ferocious at this. With genuine enthusiasm, she hustles around town to gallery openings and artists' studios and has been engaging in an on-going dialogue with L.A. artists. Edgerton is so new to her job that her tastes haven't formed yet, though she likes difficult and provocative work; but her very openness

and enthusiasm is encouraging to local artists. Dealing with artists is a thankless task: if you don't hang their works, they hate you; if you give them recognition, it's never enough. Edgerton is so new and so eager, she hasn't yet been jaded.

Edgerton, 42, is a California native (she grew up in San Diego, Pomona and San Francisco), and looks the archetype — blond, slender, and tan, all year around. She is very intelligent, friendly, and is generous with her time. A major reason for her freshness is that she started her career late in life, beginning college at age 30, and graduating with an M.A. in art history from U.C. Santa Barbara in 1979. She is now finishing her Ph.D.

dissertation on the work of Arshile Gorky. A 1977 internship at the National Gallery convinced her to pursue museum work.

When she joined LACMA in August, 1981, Edgerton's first project was to work on the catalogue of the Michael and Dorothy Blankfort collection of contemporary art. Since many of the artists were local, she became familiar with the L.A. scene, and started making studio visits part of her weekly routine. She became acquainted with L.A. art history in the only way possible, by word of mouth. (It's oddly symbolic that a book on the history of art in L.A., or even California, has never been written.) Edgerton is now working with Tuchman on LACMA's June show, the "Young Talent Awards: 1963-1983," an eclectic gathering of contemporary art from a 20-year period.

LACMA, it must be noted, is a bureaucracy, with over 200 employees and 115,000 square feet of space. It is not easy to get things done there. This in mind, it's noteworthy that Edgerton has already made a dent on behalf of contemporary art. When Victor Henderson's new mural on canvas, commissioned by the California Art Council, was destined for installation in the Van Nuys State Building without the benefit of an L.A. showing, Edgerton pulled together a one-night viewing of the piece at the museum, complete with a formal opening. She is planning panel discussions at the museum in the evening, to draw in the contemporary crowd, and also wants to have a contemporary art lecture series. She says she supports performance and video art as well.

This story should indicate what she might accomplish once she really gets to know the contemporary scene: One day she happened to notice that LACMA had 22 Picassos and had just been given a Picasso bronze. She also noticed that there was an unscheduled gallery on the ground floor. Quickly, with only a few loans, she pulled together a miniature Picasso show, complete with a brochure about the period. This might not sound significant to outsiders, but in the hermetic art world, it says a lot.

The day I interviewed her, a Saturday, Edgerton had just visited 16 galleries. On LACMA's responsibility to the contemporary, Edgerton says, "My feeling about contemporary art is that we're dealing with art that is being made right now, and there's tremendous diversity and a tremendous number of things to consider. It's difficult to isolate one group and say, 'That's important.' Many things seem important and it's only with the perspective of history that the most important contemporary art shows itself. So we have to be inclusive rather than exclusive." She continued, "It's not just contemporary shows that are important to contemporary artists, either. Modern shows are very important. The Russian Avant-Garde Show has had a wide influence on artists and designers in this town. I see it when I visit studios."

**W**hile LACMA and MOCA both plan to bring first-class modern and contemporary art to the city, museums by definition work with established talent. Accomplished artists whose reputations have yet to be validated by large institutional shows must depend on galleries or alternative showcases in order to help establish their worth. Two of this city's alternative spaces, LAICA and LACE, have new leaders whose presence will affect the quality and direction of their respective programs.

LAICA, run by Bob and Tobi Smith, is still confused as to whether it is the establishment or the alternative. In the past, emerging artists have been relegated to the entrance gallery, and I can't think of any other "alternative" that would show an artist as well recognized as Laddie John Dill. Last September, however, Dan Wasil was hired as a curator when Debra Burchett became head of development. Wasil, 29, is a lanky, energetic artist who co-founded Installation Gallery, an alternative space in San Diego. Wasil describes it as small, almost a storefront, and an answer for local artists. "It was a response to the local museums, to do important things like showing nonsalable work, or political work."

Wasil graduated from San Diego State University in 1976 with a B.A. in sculpture. He still co-directs Installation by going south every other weekend. To run two alternative spaces at once indicates either tremendous commitment or craziness. Maybe both. Of course, there's a big difference between the two. At Installation, Wasil will pick the shows. At LAICA, suggestions come from the exhibition committee, from the community, and from Bob Smith, and, ultimately,

Smith approves the choices. This, however, does not seem to bother Wasil. "I'm not so concerned about the egocentric idea of something being 'my show.' Here, the concerns of the artists are uppermost. Supporting ideas that artists have is our reason for being."

In the past, says Wasil, "My leanings have been toward work that would stimulate a dialogue — provocative kinds of things. But my thinking has changed over the last year. I think you need to show emerging local art but you also need to show the ongoing work of important artists who are at a plateau of recognition for some reason." In other words, LAICA will continue as it's been doing, not surprising with such a strong figure as Smith at the helm.

But within the range of what he's permitted to do, Wasil expects to make a dent. Although a difficult interview

because he speaks elliptically and doesn't want to give specifics, Wasil says he recognizes that "Bob has a strong personality" and nevertheless feels he'll be able to influence LAICA significantly.

In the future, Wasil says, he sees LAICA showing more international art, and networking with other spaces for joint exhibitions or exchanges. He refuses to set too many limits on what he thinks LAICA can do; he talks a lot about moving LAICA "into the 21st century," and apparently he's not kidding. "I tend to ask more questions, than try to give answers. I don't have elite attitudes about it. Part of my job is to look at a lot of art and be open-minded ... to strike a balance between established artists and the lesser-known emerging artists."

Wasil selected the work of Stephen Kent Goodman, which is currently on view at LAICA, and he was responsible for the recent, very smart show featuring the manipulated photography of Sherrie Sheer, Nancy Cass and Craig Dietz. Although he might be able to encourage the exhibition of provocative work at LAICA, the place seemingly will continue as a quasi-established institution, as much museum as alternative.

**L**ACE, on the other hand, is literally managed by artists from the local community who choose the exhibitions. The director acts more as a facilitator than a curator. Last month, Marc Pally resigned as director, after three years yeoman service, to pursue his own artwork.

His replacement, Joy Silverman, was the assistant director of the respected alternative space Washington Project for the Arts, in D.C.

Silverman, only 30, is an attractive, forceful business-like woman who exudes enthusiasm and efficiency. A graduate of George Washington University with a B.A. in fine art, she made a conscious choice to go into arts administration, though she always identified with artists. Silverman coordinated a multimedia exhibition center of Native American Art for the Smithsonian Institute's Division of Performing Arts. In 1979, she joined Washington Project for Arts.

While there, Silverman developed a public art program in which 45 outdoor pieces were built in the short space of three years — a remarkable accomplishment. In addition to the inevitable fundraisers, she gathered some \$20,000 in donated materials. Always on the lookout for ways to cut costs, Silverman convinced a cement company to give the space their leftover cement for sculpture fittings and got the artists to dig the trenches. Trucks would come around at the end of the day and pour the surplus cement. Silverman was also responsible for moving Washington Project for Arts to a larger location — an abandoned, turn-of-the-century building that she had renovated, again with the help of artists and donated materials.

Silverman's plans for LACE echo her past. She'd like to find a larger space, where LACE could put on exhibitions and performance simultaneously, and she'd like to start a public art program. A good

organizer with tremendous commitment — you have to be selfless to marry another alternative space director, as she did, because you're always near poverty — Silverman's track record indicates she'll probably accomplish this.

In Washington, Silverman showed L.A. artists Jon Peterson, Judy Simonian, Chris Burden and Stephen Seemayer, so she is somewhat familiar with the art community here. She's also been at every recent opening and party that I've attended, though she's been in town only four weeks, so she's making an effort to know it even better. Of her role, she muses, "It's important in any artist's space to take the burden from the artist and provide as much support as possible in terms of fundraising and technical equipment."

LACE has consistently exhibited untested and controversial work and Silverman declares an interest in seeing it continue along the same path. "The mission of LACE," she states, "is to give new artists doing risky work a chance. It doesn't eliminate a well-known artist doing work that can't be shown in a gallery or museum. LACE is also committed to that."

**A**n area quite divorced from either museums or their alternatives is the university gallery. For more than five years, since the departure of Gerald Nordland, UCLA's Frederick S. Wight Gallery has been in limbo while the university postponed hiring a new director. The appointment last summer of Dr. Edith Tonelli signals important change.

A willowy beauty who's just 33, Tonelli is smart and dedicated, with a formidable education. She is also reserved, with an academic inclination and a somewhat authoritarian presence. One who knows what she wants and gets it done, a rare enough quality in the art world. Tonelli sees potential for the gallery: use the film department, use the music department, use the philosophy department or whatever, and coordinate each exhibition in many directions. This is a first-rate strategy, and there aren't many who are doing this.

Tonelli got her B.A. in American Studies, art history and literature from

Vassar, and her M.A. in painting and printmaking from Hunter College. Laughing, she says, "And finding out I couldn't make a living at that, I went to Boston University for my Ph.D. in American Studies, in art history, literature, and history."

She did an internship at the Boston Museum of Fine Art during the bicentennial years, 1975 to 1977, and the experience directed her toward museum work. Then she served as the director of the De Cordova Museum outside Boston. Before coming to L.A., she was the director of the gallery at the University of Maryland and an assistant professor of art history. A good example of her drawing from the resources of different university departments is the current Wight Gallery Michael Snow exhibition, featuring an artist who works in diverse media. Tonelli coordinated weekly screenings of his films through the UCLA film archives, as well as a performance with musician and composer Henry Kaiser to take place at the

gallery on March 18.

Tonelli is also interested in soliciting guest curators; she asked Donald Kuspit to choose paintings and write the catalogue for "New Figuration," the only exhibition of German neo-expressionist painting to come to L.A. Although she has inherited a schedule of shows, next year she has plans to bring out Laurie Anderson and Iannis Kounellis.

Asked why she chose a university gallery rather than a museum position, Tonelli notes, "The Wight Gallery has as much potential as any sort of medium-sized private institution. Also I enjoy teaching and being a part of an academic community."

Tonelli does not, however, see the Wight Gallery as a showcase for local or emerging artists, pointing out that "there are already places that show regional art." To this end, she says she will concentrate on national shows. "I want to bring things that can't be seen in L.A., shows that LACMA might not be able to take." She explains, "We're large and professional enough to do a big show, but

small enough to do something very quickly. It's a unique situation." (Her "New Figuration" show came together in a remarkable five months.)

Tonelli argues that such flexibility allows the gallery to bring the most current art in the world to the attention of L.A. "The main thing is a balance of programming, from historical exhibitions that can respond to an institution of faculty and students to contemporary shows."

**T**hese are a few of the people whom I think brighten the possibilities of art in L.A. Their arrival constitutes good news. One problem, however, is that it doesn't matter how many terrific exhibitions they put on if the public never hears about it. Unfortunately, L.A.'s art media lags even farther behind its institutions. As long as L.A. is dependent upon the inane coverage in most of the local magazines, and scanty reviews in the national press, it scarcely matters how fine the art might be. Art today is universally seen first, and sometimes only, through the media — a subject for an upcoming issue. ■