



## The Roots of Radical Art at University of California, Irvine

Liz Goldner

October 14, 2015



Created in 1965, in politically conservative Orange County, the University of California, Irvine's art department rapidly became a daunting force in the advancement of radical performance and conceptual art.

This department's early teaching model included diversity, experimentation, mentorship and engagement with the larger Southern California art community. Furthermore, UCI instructors stressed attitude, intellectual inquiry and discourse, rather than practice, manual dexterity and production, art writer Peter Frank once observed. This approach mystified some students but engaged others, many of whom went on to pursue successful careers as artists, teachers and curators. And this innovative method was planted just 60 miles south of Los Angeles, in the grasslands and orange groves of what would mature into the planned community known as Irvine, CA.





Ed Boreal, "War Babies" Poster, 1961. L-R: Ed Boreal eating a watermelon, Larry Bell eating a bagel, Joe Goode eating a mackerel, and Ron Miyasharo eating with chopsticks on an American flag "tablecloth." | The art piece was on view during the 2011-2012 exhibition "Best Kept Secret: UCI and the Development of Contemporary Art in Southern California" at Laguna Art Museum. | Image: Courtesy of the artist.

At this recently opened university -- which was still young and free from historical traditions -- artist/teachers including SoCal Light and Space art movement pioneers Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman and Ed Moses counseled students, employed curious teaching methods such as having classmates put crayons between their toes, collaborated with them on performance pieces, and even partied with them. John Coplans, an Artforum magazine founder and Pasadena Art Museum curator, oversaw the school's department. The gallery and other campus buildings designed by William Pereira created a modernist environment. Several world famous artists emerged from this cauldron of creativity.

UCI's artistic legacy has been known for decades to former students, teachers and participants in the school's early events; yet it was largely forgotten by the art-viewing public -- until the 2011 Getty Foundation "Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A." initiative. As part of that initiative, "Best Kept Secret: UCI and the Development of Contemporary Art in Southern California" was displayed at Laguna Art Museum



(LAM) in 2011-2012. That exhibition provided a window into the school's formative art department, while demonstrating that it was a place of unbridled creativity where instructors challenged the limits of the formal art world, and students "were encouraged to push the boundaries of their art practice with performance, body art, video and film," according to curator Grace Kook-Anderson.

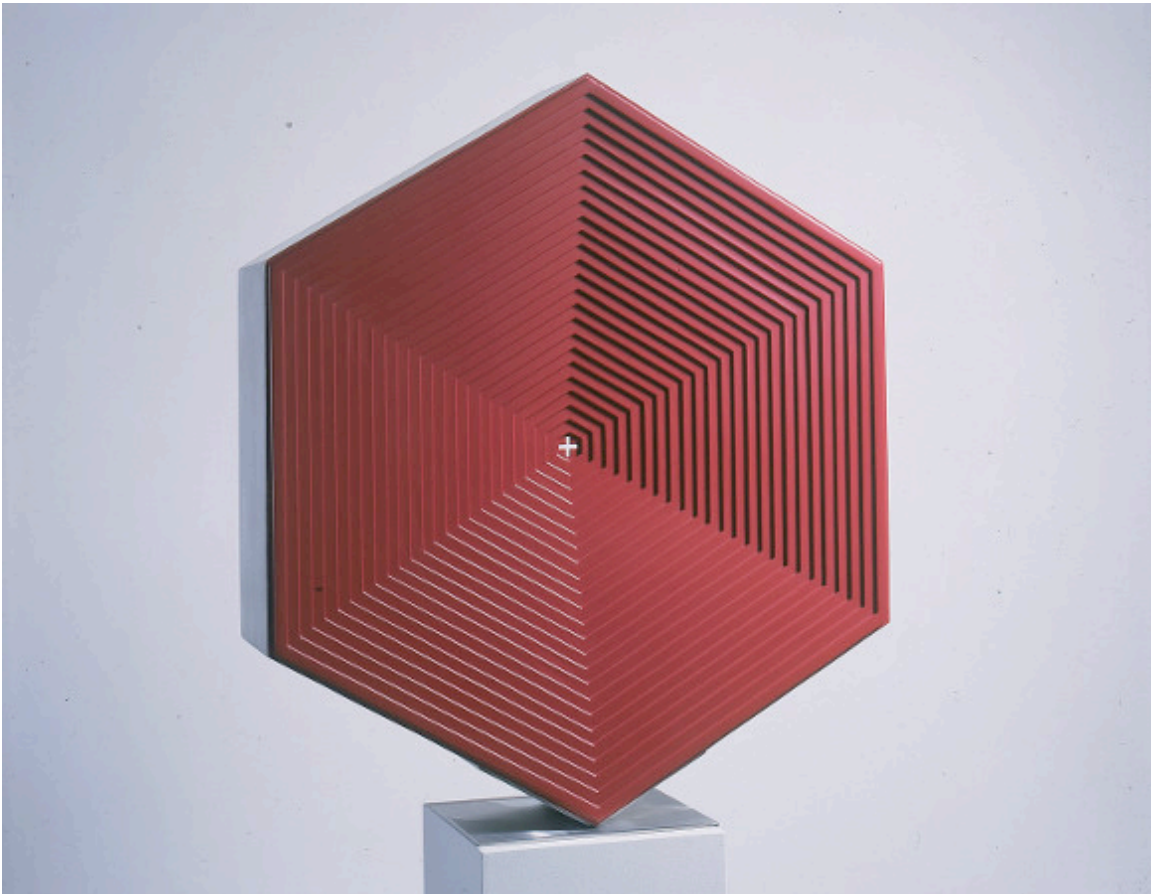


Nancy Buchanan, "Hair Piece (detail)," 1971-72. Human and poodle hair. | The art piece was on view during the 2011-2012 exhibition "Best Kept Secret: UCI and the Development of Contemporary Art in Southern California" at Laguna Art Museum. | Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

The show's title was based on UCI art school dean Jill Beck's (1995-2003) use of "Best Kept Secret" to describe the newly created school as a place that nurtured adventurous and independent students. These students included Chris Burden -- creator of the distinctive "Urban Light" sculpture at L.A. County Museum of Art -- who did several of his infamous conceptual performance pieces there: in his "[Through the Night Softly](#)" (1973), he crawled nearly naked over glass; in "Five Day Locker Piece" (1971), he was confined inside a locker for five days. Barbara T. Smith shed her suburban housewife persona, flowering into a performance artist with "Ritual Meal" (1969), a video of guests dressed in scrubs eating with surgical instruments. Nancy Buchanan (a major presence in the L.A. art world) created "Hairpiece" (1971-72), a rug-like object made from human and poodle hair. Marsha Red Adams' "Woman Bound/Woman Withdrawn" (1971) consisted of eight photographs of a naked woman in various constrained poses, over



which she hand-painted and stitched string that bound the woman. And Ronald Davis evolved from minimalist canvases to fiberglass and polyester resins, building 12-sided "dodecagon" wall sculptures, including "Round" (1969), today prized by collectors and institutions. Also in this exhibition were pieces by UCI instructors. John Mason's tall "Unfinished Arch" (1973), of traditional clay bricks, was held together without mortar; Larry Bell's "Untitled" (1969) was a large square box of vacuum-coated glass and chrome-plated metal that drew the viewer in through refracted light; and Tony DeLap's "Fawkes" (1968), a red cast fiberglass, stainless steel and acrylic hexagonal sculpture seemed to change shape as the viewer moved around it.



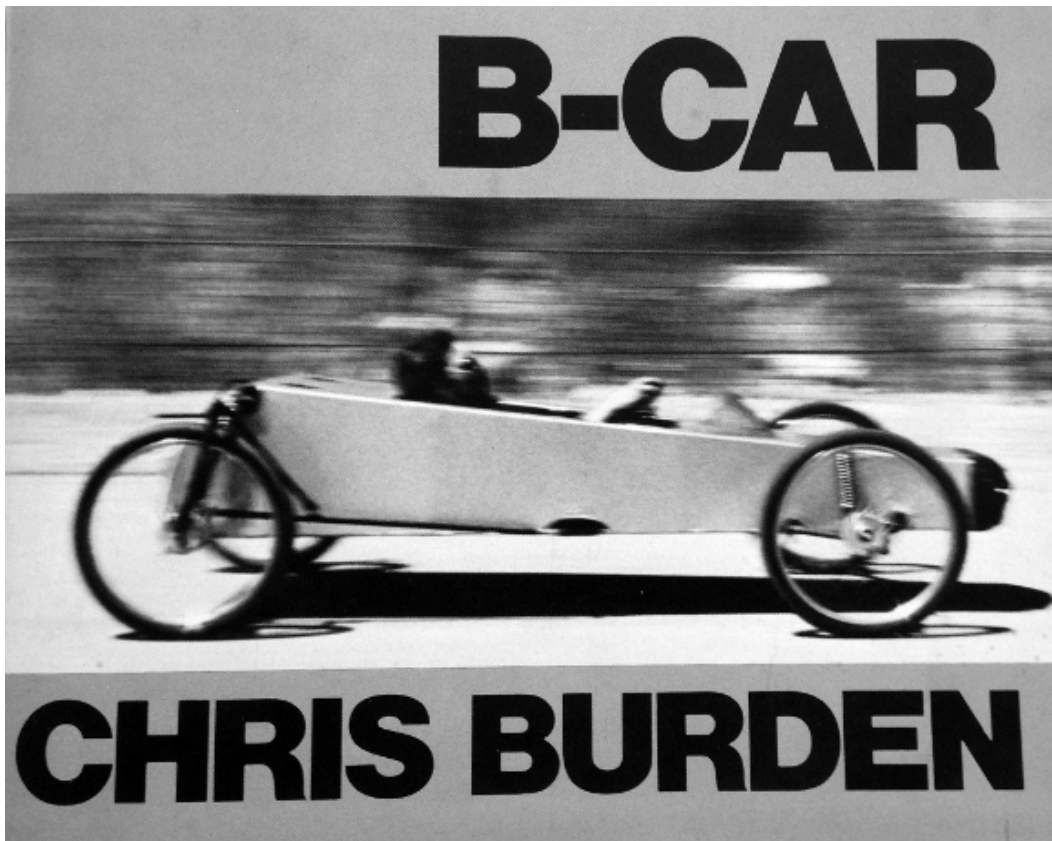
Tony DeLap, "Fawkes," 1968. Cast fiberglass, stainless steel, acrylic and lacquer. 35 x 28 x 7 3/8 inches. | The art piece was on view during the 2011-2012 exhibition "Best Kept Secret: UCI and the Development of Contemporary Art in Southern California" at Laguna Art Museum. | Photo: Gene Ogami, courtesy of the artist.

Lapping at the heels of that groundbreaking show, "A Performative Trigger: Radicals of Irvine," at UC Irvine features conceptual and performance pieces that are altogether more radical than those in the LAM exhibition. Co-curator of "Trigger," Juli Carson, UCI Professor of Art History, explained at this show's



October opening that the title is a pun about Burden's famous 1971 performance piece, "Shoot," in which he had an assistant shoot him in his arm. Carson added that the title also emphasizes UCI's role in "triggering" performance art. In a prepared statement, she wrote, "A Performative Trigger is both a tribute to Chris Burden and homage to our first illustrious students who founded the university art department's international reputation for experimentation and innovation. The importance of this historical material formed the basis for a literature about alternative artworks, as well as documented revolutionary performance work by UCI artists."

Marilyn Nix, also co-curator of that show -- who consulted for "Best Kept Secret" -- said, "The UCI environment encouraged experimentation along with new definitions of art, while the art object was secondary to a specific work. UCI artists often worked in new media rather than in traditional painting and sculpture, and materials included the artist's body." "Trigger," comprised of original drawings, installations, videos, photographs, documentation and ephemera, demonstrates that several early UCI graduates, while not as famous as Burden -- who passed away last May -- were nearly as outrageous in their early work.



Chris Burden, "B-Car," 1977. "B-Car: The Story of Chris Burden's Bicycle Car" with text by Chris Burden and Alexis Smith. | The art piece is on display at exhibition "A Performative Trigger: Radicals of Irvine." | Image: Courtesy of Marilyn Nix.



Dozens of former UCI art students attended the opening of "Trigger." And while it had been decades since most of these colleagues were together, they felt a strong kinship as they greeted each other and perused the 40-plus year old works in the show. Here were conceptual and performance pieces by Irvine graduates Burden, Buchanan, Richard Newton, Alexis Smith, Barbara T. Smith, Bradley Smith and Robert Wilhite.

Looking at the artworks, Marsha Red Adams, a 1972 MFA UC Irvine grad, waxed nostalgic about her four years at the school. "I hadn't intended to go there," she said. But personal issues mandated that she attend. Adams said she thrived at UCI because, "I realized that the artist/teachers focused on how to conceptualize art, rather than on making art." Her four years there, she added, were an unformed, curious time, with a curriculum characterized by open-ended projects and classes in which students decided what artistic disciplines to pursue.

Richard Newton, a curly headed guy with a dry sense of humor, attended the show's opening. He discussed his installation/performance "Cantina" (1972) in which he filled a 40-by-40-foot room with cans that he and a friend crushed with their "Nam" boots. Then he invited friends to dance wildly on the cans while loud raucous music was played. "The sound in that room was deafening and you couldn't even hear the music," he remarked gleefully. In a recent performance, he recited an Al Pacino speech from "Scarface," held in an El Salvador swap meet, where Newton drowned out the exhibitors, who had their boom boxes turned to high volume.



Marcia Hafif, "Nancy Buchanan, UCI Graduate Student," 1969-1971. Photograph. 8 x 10 inches. | The art piece was on view during the 2011-2012 exhibition "Best Kept Secret: UCI and the Development of Contemporary Art in Southern California" at Laguna Art Museum. | Photo ©

Marcia Hafif, courtesy of the artist.

Charming gray-haired 84-year-old Barbara T. Smith, older than most early UCI students, was there also. When asked about her lifelong obsession with sexually adventurous performance pieces, she smiled broadly, and proclaimed that she hasn't modified her attitude, but she also believes in some "straight-laced" values such as "love." Photographs of her 1970 performance, "The Freize," at UCI, featured three nude people who she laboriously taped to the wall.

Buchanan, also in attendance, remarked that she was "glad that I came here where I was exposed to art as an experience." Her several pastel pencil drawings, created at UCI, featured erotic to nearly pornographic scenes, and depictions of dreams. Robert Wilhite, whose performance pieces are documented only by photos, created eight installations at UCI in which he had the audience close their eyes, while he described the artworks in detail. While he never made these pieces, he met a participant years later who so thoroughly envisioned the artist's description that he thought he had seen the physical work. Wilhite went on to build art objects out of wood, including a prototype of the bomb dropped over Nagasaki. Burden was also at the opening -- in spirit. Videos of his work included "Through the Night Softly," "Shoot," several "commercials," really performance pieces, and an early interview with him in which he sports his lifelong bowl haircut.



Marsha Red Adams, "Woman Bound/Woman Withdrawn," 1971. Hand-painted and stitched photograph, gelatin silver print. 14 x 11 inches each, overall dimension 14 x 90 inches. | The art piece was on view during the 2011-2012 exhibition "Best Kept Secret: UCI and the Development of Contemporary Art in Southern California" at Laguna Art Museum. | Image: Courtesy of the artist.

Adams, along with dozens of fellow students, went on to pursue flourishing careers as artists and teachers in California and beyond. But the 1972 grad readily admits that her knowledge of painting, drawing and photography was self-taught during and after she left UCI, and that learning to create art was based on an education emphasizing how to think rather than on how to make art. After leaving Orange County, she moved to the Bay Area, teaching at Humboldt State University, working as a preparator at



San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and as head of the fine art photography/multi-media program at Sonoma State University. She continues to create performances, installations and photograms/cameraless images.

Peter Frank, a ubiquitous presence in the SoCal art world, has written extensively about the early days of UCI's art department. He observes that the students there created work characterized by formal individualism, along with a shared relationship to a greater public. These performances and installations, he explains, addressed the day's issues including the societal condition of women, obsessions with childhood fantasies and political events. They also used the artist's own body in situations of deprivation, humiliation, and/or calamitous insult. In the end, these performances and conceptual pieces proved, he wrote, "to pop minds open, to disturb conventional thinking and question commonly held beliefs about art and life equally."



Richard Newton, "Keep Out film still," 1972. Super 8mm, B&W and color, sound, 2:48 min. The Irvine Company, Bank of America, and the Republicans come to the neighborhood and put up the unwelcome sign. | The art piece is on display at exhibition "A Performative Trigger: Radicals of Irvine."





Bradley Smith performance Colombia in Hollywood ca. 1979. | The art piece is on display at exhibition "A Performative Trigger: Radicals of Irvine." | Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



Paula Sweet on the Rocks, 1970. | The art piece is on display at exhibition "A Performative Trigger: Radicals of Irvine." | Photo: Christopher Hill, courtesy of Paula Sweet.

*"A Performative Trigger: Radicals of Irvine" curated by Juli Carson and Marilyn Nix is on view October 3 - December 12, 2015 at University of California at Irvine's University Art Gallery at the Claire Trevor School of the Arts.*

