



**Inside the Power Museum**  
**Michael Baers**

"Consider the case of a city—a space which is fashioned, shaped and invested by social activities during a finite historical period. Is this city a work or a product?"

Henri Lefebvre

"The beautiful ineffectual dreamer who comes to grief against hard facts."

James Joyce, *Ulysses*

One brisk February morning I boarded a bus in the company of Jacob Fabricius<sup>1</sup> from the stop in front of the Beverly Wilshire Hotel. We were on our way to view Olafur Eliasson's contribution to *Rent-a-bench*, a photographic depicting an undulant, moss-bedecked volcanic landscape in Iceland, placed at an un-noteworthy intersection in the city of Compton. The show was officially over, but the posters were being removed by the firm responsible in a piecemeal fashion and we hoped Eliasson's poster would still be there.

It was necessary to take the bus as the premise of *Rent-a-bench* insists that art maintain an active relationship with social space, adhering to the notion Thomas Crow has put forth that, "[conceptual art] must presuppose, at least in its imaginative reach, renewed contact with lay audiences." To determine under what conditions this "renewed contact" was accomplished—considering both tendencies toward a specialized discourse concerning artistic activity and the urban facts-on-the-ground particular to Los Angeles—was the purpose of our journey, or at least the subtext: to experience the work from its "proper" perspective within the circuitry of mass transportation; adopting the position of the "everyday user" who might be expected to sit on the benches at length, stand beside them, ponder them, and view other benches while en route. We

were heedful, however, that *Rent-a-bench's* appearance in the real world—the world of buses and cars, class difference, class separation, and the systems which regulate, contain, and facilitate their flow—was an intervention into a coded space which in itself constitutes the manifestation of the kinds of abstract theories and suppositions, the entire technical apparatus of city planning also found in books. Thus, to encounter *Rent-a-bench* whether theoretically or in concrete reality was to encounter contemporary culture, geo-politics and geo-economics in the desert of the real, so to speak, and in the process to be thrust back on the limits of cognition—what is observable, quantifiable, qualifiable by an atomized subject. In the museum or gallery it is sufficiently difficult to "see" a work of art; in the urban milieu where the neutral ground or backdrop does not exist, the possibilities for reading a work in relation to the particular attributes of a given site compound these difficulties a hundredfold.

Earlier we had ordered coffee at the Tiffany Café (affiliated, yes, with a Tiffany boutique) on *Via Rodeo*, a European-style pedestrian shopping street that achieves its simulation through cobblestone walks, some creative grading, and quantities of glazed brick. Our table, overlooking the curving staircase which gives access to the shops from Wilshire Boulevard, provided a direct view of the steady stream of tourists who were stopping to pose for pictures using the staircase, and an ornamental fountain bisecting the stairway midway up its length, as a backdrop.

Prior to sitting down at the Tiffany Cafe, we had walked up *Via Rodeo's* abbreviated length, pausing on our return to take a photo, snapped by a passing pedestrian, of the two of us in front of the Gucci store window front. This image proved unsatisfactory. Jacob then perched the camera on a trash bin and set the timer. There we were the two intrepid urban explorers full of the boundless optimism that precedes a journey. Two girls, each in sweats and flip-flops, walked up and asked that we shoot their photo. Jacob obliged, and they assumed position in the spot we had just vacated, leaning into each other so that their cheeks touched, in a pose meant to signify a long and comfortable acquaintance. Jacob then asked if he could take their photo, and instead of finding this weird or sinister, they obliged, assuming the same poses and facial expressions as before, which played again across their features without appearing the least strained or contrived.

At the cafe, we, simulated tourists that we were, watched and took pictures of other tourists posing for pictures in front of this synthetic slice of European urbanism. The thought occurred then, while Jacob was focusing on the second group of tourists to assume their position in front of the ornamental fountain, that our trip might in fact be unsuccessful in terms of subtending the author's rarefied position as "art expert" in favor of the "everyday user." I was willing enough to get on the bus, but in doing so, I was confident of failing to shed my educated middle-class upbringing, or the accumulated store of art historical knowledge at my disposal. The same might be said of *Rent-a-bench* itself, which while spanning the socio-geographic terrain of Los Angeles falls short of bridging the socio-cultural gap. One must have learned the codes in order to name visible things, to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu. The 'eye' as "a product of history reproduced by education,"<sup>12</sup> presupposes, or indicates, a particular subject, one who has spent time engaging in specific cultural practices—museum visits, concert-going, reading—all activities determined to a great degree by social origin. "The act of empathy...which is the art-lover's pleasure, presupposes an act of cognition, a decoding operation, which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code."<sup>13</sup> How the lay viewer might perceive *Rent-a-bench* is intimately wrapped up in this acquisition of culture through "insensible familiarization in the family circle," where the transmission of those codes necessary to "read" a work takes place.

I was more or less thinking these things uneasily, eliminating for myself the possibility of enjoying a day's diversion, working myself up, prior to the fact, over the difficulty in writing about the show, which for reasons of spatial diffusion, the variety of practices represented, and complexity of considerations to factor in evaluating even a single work had eliminated even the pleasure

one experiences in mulling over ideas before committing them to paper.

Chief among my concerns was the matter of historical precedent—that most ecumenical of preoccupation—which Crow deems, "very nearly the condition and definition of major artistic ambition...Almost every work of serious contemporary art recapitulates, on some explicit or implicit level, the historical sequence of objects to which it belongs."<sup>14</sup> If there were to be a discussion of art-historical recapitulation in *Rent-a-bench*, it would begin with Daniel Buren, specifically, the work where his device of standard stripes was thrice dispatched onto the bus benches of Los Angeles.<sup>5</sup> For Buren, in-situ work opened up spectacular space (that "dialectized, conflictive space...where the reproduction of the relations of production is achieved...by introducing into it its multiple contradictions"<sup>6</sup>) to a self-reflexive operation, replacing messages concerning consumption with a neutral device meant merely, and emphatically, to occupy space. Consequently, location itself becomes a "revelation" discovered "as a new space to be deciphered." Pointing out the role location's "fixity and its inevitability" play in providing a frame "(and the security that presupposes),"<sup>17</sup> encouraged a dehiscence of spectacle, or so Buren has speculated, through the denaturalization of capitalist space—an enframement of spectacle's enframement, so to speak.

I wondered how much this mattered now, where the articulation of advertising space has reached the point of almost total saturation. Nevertheless, Buren's early work opened up a space for certain investigations, certain modes of inquiry to follow. Thus, the modulations of the site-specific premise evident in *Rent-a-bench* makes the question Buren posed regarding his own work difficult to reframe: "What is exposed to view? What is the nature of it? The multifariousness of the locations where the proposition is visible permits us to assert the unsailable persistence which it displays in the very moment when its non-style appearance merges it with its support."<sup>8</sup> First of all, the site itself is no longer neutral—as it was when Buren initially undertook his bus bench project. It can no longer be said that the "influence of the location upon the significance of the work is as slight as that of the work upon the location,"<sup>9</sup> since, at least for a portion of the public, the site will be received as already art-historical, already situationized. But the establishment of a premise which was in itself iterative of Buren does not mean that the individual artists, some of whom had never before made a public work, were cognizant of this fact. If it could be said that works in *Rent-a-bench*, by virtue of their inclusion, operate *in some way* as an iteration of Daniel Buren (corresponding to what Gilles Deleuze has written: "to the extent that history is theatre, then repetition, along with the tragic and the comic within repetition, forms a condition of movement under which the 'actors' or the 'heroes' produce something new in history"<sup>10</sup>), one must qualify this statement. Between the premise, informed by Buren's practice and following, after a fashion, from the territory he opened up, and its submittal as a directive (to conform to certain dimensional specifications) was created the space in which this "something new in history" was allowed to appear, neither wholly dialectical nor free from interpretation as part of a teleological sequence. That is to say each work operates as an iteration of Buren, as a consequence of the curation strategy, and some do not, by virtue of having nothing to do with Buren's practice. The simple relation extant in Buren's practice between site and site-reflexivity has been replaced by a complex set of variables as a consequence of this mediated (or directed) site-specificity: *Rent-a-bench*, the premise of *Rent-a-bench*, or the instigation that would ultimately become the occasion for works that would appear as *Rent-a-bench*, sets in motion a consideration of the latter in all its manifold variations, including considerations of the language of advertising or pictorial realism or information display. One can observe works evincing an acute awareness of site (Matthew Buckingham's bench with the address of his website dealing with Los Angeles history, at the symbolically freighted intersection of Alameda and Cesar Chavez), works where specific placement was of little significance; works where it was important to address a specific, local

audience (Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset's "Homosexuals Only" bus bench situated on a strip of Santa Monica Boulevard known for gay prostitution); or works situated by virtue of a stipulation by the artist because of certain characteristics (Claus Andersen's request that his work be situated in front of a gas station or Henriette Heise's bench on PCH which depicts the ocean view directly opposite)...or pieces conceived in non-relation to their site, as was the case with Olafur Eliasson's bus bench.

Even here there is possibility for further complications, bifurcating the range of the possible: an artist who has never visited Los Angeles, knows it only through the movies and the popular imagination, might make a work based on this myth or make a site-specific work, with an imaginary relation to its site, a relation neither proximate nor disjunctive.

Within these myriad possibilities, an algebra of intent is clearly visible. *Rent-a-bench* no longer addresses an undifferentiated, general audience (as is the case with Buren's bench pieces), but a multiple audience, a plural audience. (One could say this is the re-introduction of tragedy into conceptual practice, paralleling Buren's equating of "tragedy" with compositional tension.) Being heterogeneous and polyphonic, in some cases indeterminate, modulated by any combination of combinations of variables, *Rent-a-bench's* ability to act as an index revelatory of social conditions is accomplished within this same polyphony, recalling both the fractal strategies employed by those resisting late capitalism, and also pluralism's deficits, which counter the foreclosure of the avant-garde with a corresponding foreclosure of its own, "one that absorbs radical art no less than it entertains regressive art." 11

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The bus, when it finally arrived, crawled through late-morning traffic down Wilshire. People entered the bus; people exited. The driver called out stops in a mellifluous voice. There were no benches to see. I sat, observing the ambience of late-morning traffic, accustoming myself to the unfamiliar rhythms of bus locomotion. Despite frequent stops our progress appeared to have little to do with prevailing traffic conditions, which were heavy that day. The features of my fellow passengers, bracketed by our joint condition as bus passengers, seemed especially vivid in their utter normalcy: the diminutive Chinese woman, the dapper middle-aged Black man with carefully trimmed moustache and velour shirt, the overweight man constricted by a security guard outfit a size too small...they all appeared to me as extras in a movie. As we reached the Mid-Wilshire area, bustling with lunchtime foot traffic, my perception became suffused with this feeling of a filmic narrative (even before we boarded the bus, intimations of the cinematic nature of our undertaking had been manifested in the voyeuristic triangle formed between camera, subject and observer at *Via Rodeo*). The film set itself also seemed, to my understanding, to have its own narrative, one concerning the interminable urban exegesis of growth, decline, and expansion, growth, decline and so on, which extends far out into the Mojave desert. Neither appeared as discreet events occurring in advance of a text, but precisely in the manner of a film script forcing events to conform to narrative conventions whose exigencies dictate and unify their progression. This encoding, a kind of real-time palimpsest, is intimately related to Baudrillard's notion of the "video phase," a passage from the misapprehension of self in the mirror's reflection to a mirroring achieved by the self's unconscious identification with and reflection (or refraction) in the media armature of pop culture, a technological development he claims has replaced the Lacanian mirror phase in western society:

"Hence, the academic grappling with his computer, ceaselessly correcting, reworking, and complexifying, turning the exercise into a kind of interminable psychoanalysis, memorizing everything in an effort to escape the final outcome, to delay the day of reckoning of death, and that other—fatal—moment of reckon-

ing that is writing, by forming an endless feedback loop with the machine. This is a marvelous instrument of exoteric magic. In fact all these interactions come down in the end to endless exchanges with a machine. Just look at the child sitting in front of his computer at school: do you think he has been made interactive, opened up to the world? Child and machine have merely been joined together in an integrated circuit. As for the intellectual, he has at last found the equivalent of what the teenager gets from his stereo and his walkman: a spectacular desublimation of thought, his concepts as images on a screen." 12

To extend Baudrillard's concept further, urban space is produced space, but it is also a space for producing synthetic significations, like a giant sound stage or studio back lot or theme park. One can think of this as a corollary to Baudrillard's notion of the economy of the sign where the production of the city exists as the production of the simulacrum of the city. My own notes confirm this tendency, desublimated thoughts already in concordance with their transformation into "concepts as images on a screen":

"Birds of paradise in a concrete planter. The ride becomes more like a movie as we proceed down Wilshire, approaching downtown. We are in Koreatown now, near the Ambassador Hotel. The sidewalks teem with office workers on their lunch break, purposefully moving about to and fro on the sidewalk in front of Korean b-b-q restaurants with sheer plate glass fronts. They move as if at the behest of some priggish first assistant director intent on creating the approximation of a lunch-time crowd in a polyglot city."

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The rest of the journey continued along these lines, from one filmic ambience to the next. It now seems unnecessary to relate much else outside of one or two salient details, noteworthy for being emblematic of the above.

We got off the bus across the street from the Claus Andersen bus bench at Long Beach and Compton Boulevard, a white field with the text, "Al-Baath as a white monochrome" written in Arabic-style lettering. Directly behind it was a Shell Station, and down the street a saffron-colored Moorish dome (which from afar I had assumed was a Black Muslim Temple) loomed from behind a high wall. On closer inspection we found the dome belonged to a graveyard chapel built during the Moorish revival period of the twenties, with crenellated battlements, leaden windows and arabesque tile work adorning the walls. Inside, the graves of people who might have lived in Compton contemporaneous with its opening—back when Compton consisted mainly of bean fields—were nowhere in evidence. Most of the graves were new, belonging preponderantly to African American men in their late teens and early twenties. Some of the markers had photographs etched on their surface in which these young men smiled up from the grass, looking as they must appeared to their families, faces wearing unguarded expressions, hands contorted in cryptic signs.

It was quiet as only graveyards can be. We walked behind the domed sanctuary, amongst the graves. Jacob taking pictures with his digital camera. Two men in grey jumpsuits—apparently groundskeepers—stood in the grass talking leisurely. There was a circular driveway and parked beside it was a young couple standing beside a blue Mazda talking quietly, gazing in the direction of a grave. They took no notice of us.

And then, walking down deserted Compton Avenue, the air smelling of grass and earth, as if we were in the country (the smell of phantom bean fields), we passed businesses with archaic metal signs advertising "Trailers For Rent" and "Compton Lawn Mower," on which a few flakes of faded paint still clung to the rusted metal, finally arriving at the intersection of Compton and Atlantic Boulevard. Olafur Eliasson's bus bench had been replaced by a poster advertising the availability of bus benches for advertising.

We were far away from the Tiffany Cafe on Via Rodeo which we had chosen as it fulfilled a

shared sense of irony and symbolic logic in charting a trajectory for our journey. Irony disguised our hope for finding this somewhere else—that is, a space not already historicized, already exoticized, already mediated, deconstructed, commodified, in short, replete. This *other* place would be site for a Buren-like dehiscence of spectacle, where commodity forms would have no recourse to evasion, offering themselves transparently as impoverished and debased versions of an ideal most closely approximated by the bourgeois consumer good. This place would also be the projection of a melancholy fantasy of authenticity which, like the old saying goes, is a nice place to visit but you wouldn't want to live there.

Crossing the street, we entered a mini-mall to have lunch at a "pretty good" Chinese restaurant, Jacob having eaten there "two or three times." As we reached the low slung complex of storefronts, a teenager emerged from a burger joint on the corner and said "What's up?" in a meaningful way. I responded in kind, but curtly, and we continued past him. It was only after we had sat down to eat that I realized his greeting wasn't meant to signify some territorial imperative or petulant challenge; not a defense of territory at all, but a greeting meant to signal the availability of illicit substances for purchase.

I wasn't able to dwell on this fact long as I was immediately confronted by technical problems related to eating lunch—a shrimp dish featuring large unshelled prawns nestled among irregular-sized pieces of sodden cabbage. Both had been cooked in a kind of sauce that managed to fuse the qualities of being sticky and being gelatinous, and the barbarity necessarily exercised over my repast displaced the embarrassment I had felt by feeling threatened by someone who only wanted to sell me drugs.

So, when Jacob asked whether "I *felt* out of place," I was startled out of my preoccupation with these culinary difficulties. I don't know what I said in the end—I recall a possible internal confusion concerning the intent of the question and my arm-wrestling with seafood, but I did make note of Jacob's response to the same question.

"No," he said, then added, "but I don't know the *codes*."

And then it was time to return to Los Angeles. We bought water at the Dominguez Food Warehouse, where Polaroids of shoplifters and the merchandise seized (the photo was blurry, but one man looks as if he had been caught trying to steal two industrial-size jars of mustard) stretched the length of the liquor section, and crossed the street to catch the 45 North on Atlantic Avenue. The bench at this stop had been demolished, perhaps by a car jumping the curb or a particularly energetic vandal. Pieces of concrete and signage lay strewn across the sidewalk. Jacob commenced documenting them, careful to avoid photographing the young woman who stood leaning against the bus-stop signpost, waiting, like us, for the bus.

It came. We advanced northward through a morass of mini-malls, grocery stores, chain stores, fast food franchises, the latter of which Jacob noted were less hospitable, more carceral in design than their counterparts in Los Angeles proper—no flowered landscaping, no setback from the sidewalk, no attempts to elaborate on the basic cookie-cutter franchise design of a stucco box set in a sea of black asphalt. The flotsam of late capitalism was interrupted at intervals by older, Main Street-in-a-small-town-type-commercial strips, charming in their way, but they seemed lost, too, amongst the morass of 7-11's and Burger Kings.

It occurred to me then this hyper-commercial exploitation of the urban landscape, exemplary of the total exposure to the recodings of capital was what Baudrillard meant when he evoked a Los Angeles penetrated totally by the effects of modernity:

"Sideration. Star-blasted, horizontally by the cars, altitudinally by the plane, electronically by television, geologically by deserts, stereolithically by the megalopolis. Transpolitically by the power game, the power museum that America has become for the whole world."<sup>13</sup>

The impression was only reinforced by our arrival at the hard-edged industrial morass around the LA River and adjacent freeway networks. It was here that we spotted a particularly forlorn bus bench stranded beneath a freeway overpass, and catty-corner to a US army automotive depot. A better symbol for our journey, and perhaps for the exhibit itself, could not have been manufactured: a bus bench that fulfilled all the conditions for revealing the degradation of public space in America, and consequently, the parameters of the problem makers of public art in America must necessarily address, struggling for visibility in the oversaturated semiotic sphere of urban space, and struggling to engage in a space that has been evacuated of its public qualities, serving—at least in Los Angeles—as little more than a conduit from one private space to another.

When we got off at Whittier Boulevard in East LA, we sat waiting for the bus across from a shuttered movie theatre built in the Rococo style. It was a building reminiscent of banks I had seen in Central America, similarly florid with Spanish Colonial embellishments, their shell motif a reminder of a European dominance of the sea. One can read a city street and from it intuit a sense of its history, what Benjamin called *Jetztzeit*, the present as a moment of revelation. Soon after, our journey was over.

<sup>1</sup> Not to lose sight of the problem of precedent, it was proposed we collaborate on a text, linking the trip to a literary precedent, Franz Kafka and Max Brod's joint account of a train ride to Zurich prefaced by the announcement of the authors' intention to "turn a double light...upon the countries travelled through, and by this means to present them with a freshness and significance too often unjustly reserved for exotic regions only." (Kafka and Brod, "The First Long Train Journey"; first published in the *Herderblätter*, Prague, 1912) Due to certain logistical complications following our journey, the idea of producing a collaborative text was abandoned, and with it, any active relation between text and one of its main preoccupations—art historical iteration.\*

\* Perhaps it still maintains a relationship with Robert Smithson's "Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey".  
<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Introduction to Distinction" reproduced in "The Consumer Society Reader" (ed. Martyn J. Lee). Blackwell Publishers, Oxford: pg. 36

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*; pg. 36

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Crow, "Unwritten Histories of Conceptual Art,"; pg. 90

<sup>5</sup> Los Angeles, being the place where the idea of the sequel has been pursued with the most profligate abandon, it is surprising, in retrospect, that no artist reproduced Buren's stripes as their submission.

<sup>6</sup> Henri Lefebvre, "The Survival of Capitalism" pg. 19, 1976

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Buren, "Beware" reprinted in "Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology" (ed: Alberro & Stimson): pg. 154.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Buren, "Beware": pg. 154.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Buren, "Beware": pg. 154.

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Difference & Repetition": pg. 10

<sup>11</sup> Hal Foster, "Against Pluralism" in "Recodings", Bay Press, Port Townsend, 1985; pg. 32

<sup>12</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "America," London, Verso, 1983; pg. 36

<sup>13</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "America": pg. 27