

KILLER TEXT ON ART

artillery

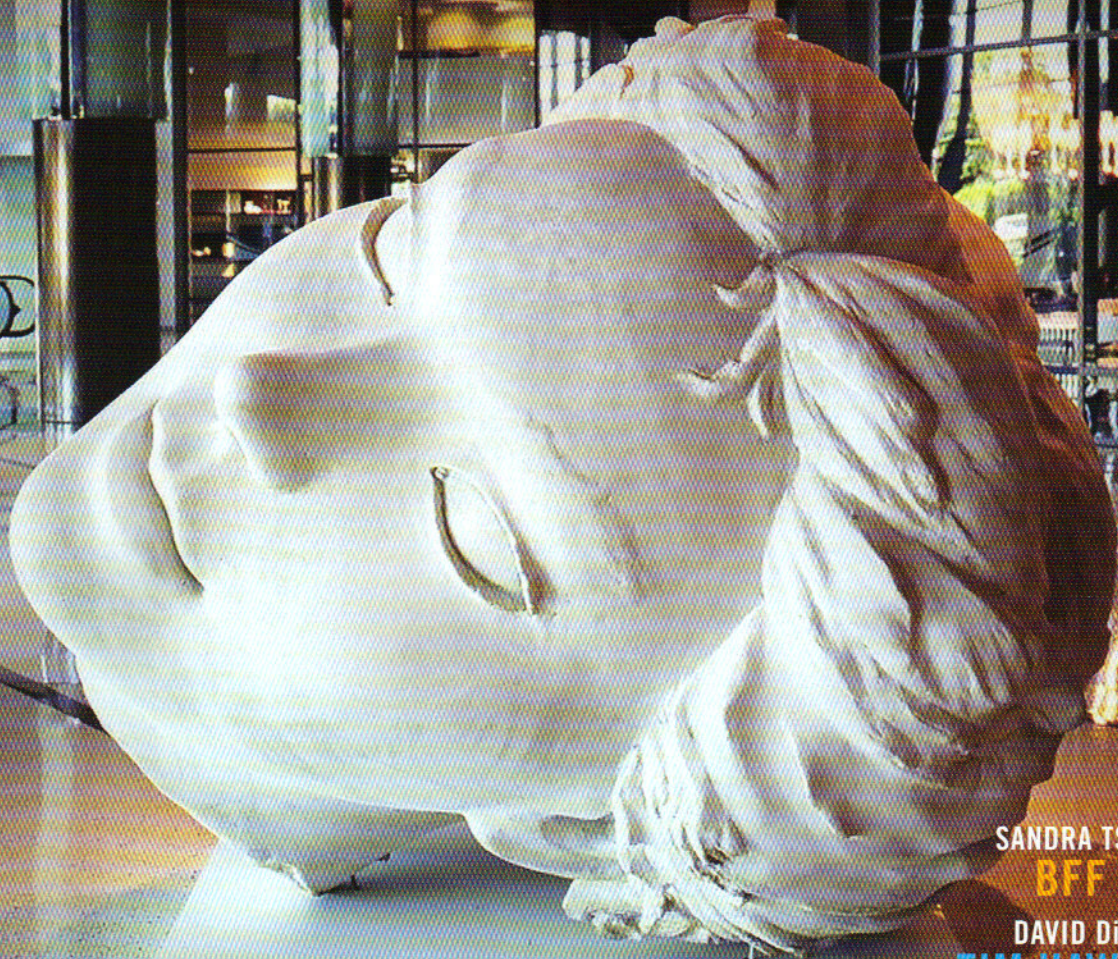
SEPARATE

CULVER CITY

CHINATOWN

REALTIES

PACIFIC DESIGN CENTER



SANDRA TSING LOH ON
BFF NADFLY

DAVID DiMICHELE ON
TIM HAWKINSON
GORKY & GEGAM

GUEST LECTURE
PAUL McCARTHY

PLUS
SUPER SUMMER SHOWS!

DESIGNS ON ART

GALLERIES SPRUCE UP THE PDC BY ANNE MARTENS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANNE MARTENS

ALTHOUGH THE DESIGN AND ART CONNECTION REMAINS BLURRY IN PRACTICE, IT IS CLEAR THAT AN EQUATION IS BEING TESTED

LAST September, almost immediately after the inaugural reception of the Pacific Design Center's Design Loves Art program, director/curator Helen Varola received a flood of proposals from gallerists and artists asking how to sign on. To add to this frenzy, a new contemporary art fair was in the works, also to be held at the iconic Blue Building in West Hollywood. At DLA's subsequent opening, the excitement was so palpable I wondered how the Design Center could have so transformed, seemingly overnight, into LA's latest mecca of cultural currency and hipness.

As DLA marks its first anniversary, last fall's initial buzz has subsided. The fair, held in January, will re-emerge at a new venue next year. Ironically, many LA natives, including a sizable number in the art community, remain unaware or confused about the residency program of 12 to 15 participants — gallerists, artists, collectives and independent curators — on the building's second floor. The fact that DLA is so far under the radar is truly unfortunate, because the programming is fantastic. There is also the real potential, with so many art venues in one place, for the PDC to position itself as the next big art community in Los Angeles. But that can only happen if CEO Charles S. Cohen is willing to reinvent the complex's puzzling, quasi-public identity.

As an art destination, the PDC is a surreal departure from the gritty, open-air experience of walking gallery to gallery in downtown, Chinatown or Culver City. The atmosphere feels quite the opposite — clean and fluorescent-lit — as a shopping mall catering to the luxury interior design trade. Amid the polished surfaces of marble and glass, there are dozens of chic chairs, Oriental carpets and cascading chandeliers — and now, next to the stores in identical windowed showrooms, the eclectic and unpredictable offerings of art. But when the art spaces come alive during openings, you can feel an invigorating sensory overload just by walking the halls and taking in those juxtapositions.

From 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays, when the PDC and most of its galleries are open, it feels like a ghost town. The building is well worth regular visits, though — especially on those magical opening evenings — to experience DLA's extremely diverse exhibitions, performances and programs. Some of the most memorable of the past year include Paul Young's "Remote Viewing," in which you could wander a labyrinth of small, carpeted rooms to watch great videos from around the world; Roger Herman and Monique van Genderen's *Keramik*, from which I learned how truly versatile and high-concept clay can be, and Anna Homler's haunting yet humorous sound performance at d.e.n. contemporary.



Hacer's "Foxy" (an origami version of the family pet) at d.e.n. contemporary





Federico D'Orazio's inflatable paintings at Carl Berg Projects

PDC continued...

Even the less-polished or under-explained presentations are highly intriguing, cross-disciplinary experiments that can stay in your head for days. What leaps to mind are Mastadon Mesa's "The Touching Show," in which I participated in a neuroscientist-led audience performance that helped us realize the potential of our brains, and "Superfront's" hybrid, highbrow displays that mesh philosophies of architecture, design, and fine art.

Art is a commodity, just as design is; and both certainly are when associated with furnishing interiors. Thus, it seems logical to formalize connections between design and art.

In the past several years, the economic recession, hardest hitting where it began, in the housing industry, meant that many showrooms throughout the vast PDC had become vacant. Cohen, whose company owns the high-end design complex and three similar ones around the country, devised a plan to fill them with art. That seems smart, because historically, art has revitalized cities, so why not a building complex? DLA residents, who rent space free in exchange for 10 percent of art sales, contribute to the intellectual and creative cachet of an exclusive experiment. It is fortuitous for LA that Cohen chose the PDC as its initial location, since he, and Varola — his private art consultant, enlisted to head the program — are based in New York

City. Aside from being an art collector, Cohen serves as a Museum of Contemporary Art trustee, which explains both his interest in LA and why MOCA has a satellite venue at the PDC.

Without the worry of monthly overhead, DLA participants realize the incredible opportunity they have to start or continue businesses in such unstable times. For Paul Young, a filmmaker and writer who now curates video exhibitions full time, the program has given him a chance to focus on his latest career turn. For d.e.n.'s Donna Napper, who left her Culver City gallery space two years ago after acknowledging slow sales resulting from the impending economic meltdown, it's a place to continue what she loves. Janet Levy likes being part of a community of creative people whose businesses — including her own — aren't defined strictly as traditional galleries. Many residents mention the design center's international profile as a motivating factor to gain visibility beyond LA — although that goes both ways, since participants bring a high profile to the PDC, too.

DLA affords its participants the chance to innovate with less risk. For example, some galleries initially had huge showrooms on the building's upper floors, where they could install large or numerous works of art. Young rented "a big glass box" on the fourth floor. After meeting an architect connected with SCI-Arc who had a design to

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test, the two collaborated to build sculptural video screens customized to the space.

Of the DLA program he says, "We're using this as a great experiment — for the medium and for ourselves." Some of that creativity stems from adjusting to odd spaces customized for a very different type of business. See Line director Janet Levy, who once ran an art space out of a cafe aquarium, makes optimum use of floor-to-ceiling windows in her PDC showroom, strategically located near an escalator. "I curate very differently now, she says. "It's not the traditional gallery with four walls surrounding you. It's just as visible from the outside in as it is inside out. My projects have shifted and changed with the dynamics of the space."

Despite innovative programming, it's hard to see, in concrete terms, how DLA interrelates to the rest of the PDC complex. "I do meet designers," says Napper. "That's really one of the good things about being here. But every single one of them did not know the galleries were here." At the moment, there is little connection between those who run galleries and those who operate design-based businesses. "It feels like there's this division here right now," says Cathy Stone of Another Year in LA. "But everyone's here to do business. We're here to represent artists and, hopefully, to get their work into collections and to promote their work because we think it's important. And the designers are here because they also want to make a visual statement." Having just moved into the building, Stone and her husband and business partner, David, hope to work closely with resident design companies by placing artwork in showrooms and collaborating to help clients furnish their homes — art included. This fall, Know Art/LA, a new venture formed by Anat Ebgi and Sarah Jane Bruce, may help forge such relationships. They are offering courses to introduce art novices to LA's creative communities, and will invite designers in particular to sign up for guided tours of the PDC galleries this fall. "It's almost like an olive branch that we're offering to people who aren't involved in the art world," says Bruce.

Given a title like "Design Loves Art," such synergy is implied as an important aspect of the program. The name is a reverse spin-off of Miami Basel's "Art Loves Design," an event at the prominent annual fair that grew out of the city's famed design neighborhood. But that connection doesn't quite translate to the West Coast. If the premise that binds DLA's diverse programs together seems obtuse on the surface, it does make more sense when Varola explains it:

"There's been a conversation between design and art throughout history," she says. "In the 20th century, that conversation becomes a polemic, but in actuality, the lines between disciplines are blurred. And so this program, from a curatorial point of view, is meant to address that whole issue. If an artist comes in with an interesting concept that is relational or philosophical or conceptual, I see a relationship between what the artist is doing and the context at the design center. I intentionally draw the relationship, because I'd like to push that equation."

Although the design and art connection remains blurry in practice, it is clear that an equation is being tested in the program's array of traditional and new media, cross-disciplinary philosophies, established and emerging ap-

proaches. Varola, who studied the work of Christo in graduate school, draws inspiration from his work with storefront windows. "I was fascinated with Christo then, and I'm thinking now that I'm working with these empty showroom spaces that are kind of like storefronts," says Varola. "And I'm making them into these happenings. A lot of the programming has to do with the participant involved in the making of the artwork. I think that that is an idea that still takes hold and has a lot of relevance in today's art practice."

A temporal approach certainly keeps things vibrant. What's unfortunate is that by experimenting so much with programming balance, Varola has invited tremendous turnover in the building. Participants leave after one project, three months, six months, or a year, and this is causing more harm than good for the program's integrity. Even people who are very familiar with DLA get confused; you don't know who's in the building. Other art communities experience a musical-chairs syndrome, especially in a troubled economy. But a nascent one can't afford to; it's too much risk to the crucial task of developing public awareness. This summer, at least two gallerists at the PDC, Sam Lee and Walter Maciel, were abruptly asked to vacate their storefronts. That news spread quickly in LA's tight-knit art community. Although both had other spaces in addition to their DLA showrooms — in Chinatown and Culver City, respectively — their PDC exhibitions didn't seem compromised, so the rationale still seems unclear. If anything, Lee's last exhibition inspired a curatorial collaboration with d.e.n. that resulted in two strong exhibitions under a single theme — a positive initiative, one would think.

As Varola explains from the PDC's perspective: "In the first year, we had Christopher Grimes and a lot more commercial galleries come in who had primary spaces. And I think that's where we have changed the direction. I much prefer now to have galleries that don't necessarily have another space, so that they are focusing 100 percent in energy at the PDC. So that criteria has changed. There are exceptions, of course." She acknowledges that blue-chip gallery Patrick Painter (who already had two LA locations) would soon join the program. So, too, is Fahey-Klein Gallery, for a temporary exhibition this fall. The addition of Patrick Painter will no doubt add cachet. But one has to wonder, with showrooms on the second floor that remain empty, why Lee, Maciel, Grimes, and others couldn't have been encouraged to stay on. The most vulnerable aspect of the participants' situation is that it is stated in their contracts that they can be asked to leave at any time. But collectors want to buy from stable galleries, so undermining that may not be the wisest policy.

Already this fall, new occupants have moved into the PDC and will be joined by others later this season. Like Carl Berg and d.e.n., which both lost original locations elsewhere in the city, eastside gallery Another Year in LA will experience its next phase at the PDC. It's a great opportunity for David and Cathy Stone, who have continued to grow and innovate their conceptually-based program, originally nurtured in Eagle Rock. Last spring, signs of their influence were already underway with the installation of two Stephen Kaltenbach sculptures in PDC's Blue Building lobby. November will see the arrival of other DLA participants: Art Gate, an exchange program of local and international artists who will give talks, perform and exhibit;





Paul Young's "Young Projects"

and Alex Israel, a young LA-based artist who plans to create a talk show program with episodes to be released online.

As newly arrived and veteran participants dream of plans for their individual programs, Cohen and Varola have their own, too. This could eventually include sister-city exchanges between Cohen Properties' other campuses as well as foreign locales. Collaborations are being discussed with Jeffrey Deitch, MOCA's new high-profile director, to develop the campus in ways that could significantly increase public visits. As Varola — who divides her time between homes in New York and Italy — described, they want to create a "Piazza Navona," based (how closely isn't clear) on Rome's famed city square of eye-catching architecture, sculpture and ephemeral events. "We want people to come there and stay, and for it to be a meeting place," says Varola. "LA has no center. At least as someone who doesn't live there, that's the first thing I notice. It'd be great to have a place-maker."

Having visited the PDC on quite a few occasions in the last year, I am rooting for DLA's success. I believe in the integrity of its participants, who work so much harder than the corporation probably realizes. I'm also an advocate for the art-going, art-loving public, which seems a bit lost in the shuffle. It may be that Cohen and Varola have their sights set on attracting potential art collectors, patrons who could also be valuable clients for the resident design companies. But to date there needs to be an expansion of who's visiting — and that means opening up more to the public.

That's Varola's intention: "We do want to make the PDC a destination. We want to bring collectors. We want serious critics to come by and take a look at what these artists are doing. We want a critical mass to emerge. We will begin to provide more access to the public as we go along."

But for an audience, it takes a huge commitment to see these shows. It's difficult to know what is there, unless you are on mailing lists or actively check the PDC website. It's not easy to visit — something that must be overcome in a city like LA, where public transportation isn't a very valid option. The building isn't open on weekends or evenings. Thursday night openings shut down early, so there isn't much time to take everything in.

With severe limits to hours, expensive parking, and general confusion about public access — not to mention scattershot promotion — it's no wonder DLA is still relatively unknown. That can change, if the PDC offers more support for its resident galleries and artists. Design Loves Art is unique and promising. It deserves that love. ☺

(a fortune teller, a priest or a shaman) and puts you in touch with your Higher Power and Greater Self.

At the Jancar Gallery, the audience controlled the show, telling the artist Micol Hebron what we wanted to see from a long list of her past performances. I was on hand for the Hannah Wilke nod. We boys in the audience got to chew spearmint gum, sculpt a pussy and stick it onto the artist. Unfortunately, I missed the frank political discussion of the vagina, visualized with mirrors. One audience member reported that the scene got boisterous and at times a bit aggro. All it takes is one little vagina and everyone gets in a lather.

Volume Projects made a loud splash with several events, most notably a three-hour performance by Steve Roden. Scattered over several areas, Perform! Now! was a victim of Chinatown's din. Roden solved that by creating a sound wave that bridged the two worlds. Known mainly for his thoughtful, meditative and Zen-beat works, Roden stepped out of character and pumped up the volume. We love him for it.

Despite an SRO crowd on the Human Resources patio, Cal Arts tart Zackary Drucker punctuated his monologue with a laugh track, to stunning effect. He didn't need it; we were laughing anyway. The photog was doing a stand-up riff on sexual ambiguity. Like an exploding cigar, sex is always good for a loud laugh.

With Oprah's ratings in the toilet, pink-haired Margie Schnibbe could be the next daytime talk show queen. Her TV set piece featured everything but the cameras. She had a Green Room (littered beer cans) and a theme: "My Mother, My Self: Coffee, Cocktails and Narcissistic Personality Disorder." We caught her interviewing gallerist François Ghebaly. (*Artillery's* Mitchell Mulholland wanted to TiVo the show!)

Abbondanza! There was so much to see! The art-centric audience was as interesting as the performers. Our Man of the Season John Baldessari, collectors Blake Byrne and Joyce Austin, actors Natalie Portman, James Franco and a few of the *L Word* coven brought the star power down to earthly sublime.

Confused by so many actors angling for film and TV, Los Angeles has never wrapped its palm fronds around performance art. Perform! Now! will change any misconception. Perform! Now! offers a smorgasbord of the best and worst of an exciting and powerful medium. We can't wait for Season Three! ☺



Taste Of Honey, Performer Julie Tolentino, Photo by Megan Gagnon