

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Michael Fallon's Creating the Future

Tressa Berman · Wednesday, February 11th, 2015



Michael Fallon poses a key question in his decade-long retrospective of art and Los Angeles in the 1970s: *What exactly is the position of the artist in relationship to his or her art?* His exploration is part historiography and part biographical intrigue that takes the reader inside the swirl of art world personalities and the changing times that shaped them. Picking up from where the Cool School left off, Fallon hails the subsequent era as the “start of Los Angeles’ growing influence on the art world,” tracing its regional and generational routes. For example, he shows how the influence of the Ferus Gallery and its founding artists (including Ed Ruscha, Billy Al Bengston, Andy Warhol) led directly into the next series of cultural flows.

What the next generation of artists and art forms seemed to share was a break from institutional constraints and a reconfiguration of the social space. Even the landmark *Art and Technology* show that Fallon takes as his narrative launch point highlighted what the author describes as a “prism for the nascence of L.A. art scenes – as gathering point and lightening rod” (p. 34).

Space, and its social uses, figures highly in this era, as marked by the rise of both feminist art of the 1970s (most notably Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Miriam Schapiro) and the women artists of Womanhouse, many of whom, like Chicago, defected from male-dominated ‘scenes’ and art school cliques to forge their own directions. (Chicago famously broke from L.A. to launch the Feminist Art Program in Fresno before returning to L.A. with a renewed purpose.) At the same time, the ripple effects of activist artists, such as Salvador Torres coming out of Barrio Logan in San Diego, helped to forge a new Chicano/Chicana identity that intersected with the grass-roots organizing of artists and activists in East L.A. What today’s art-speak refers to as “place-making,” actually grew out of grass-roots movements, themselves lodged in the *logos* of place. Fallon is right to point to those places outside of L.A., such as San Diego, as having direct connection to the regional Chicano movement, and in their migratory relationships to Los Angeles as a place of flux. One of the ways in which Fallon’s book shows us how today’s concerns with cultural identity and place-based art forms were created in the cultural shifts of the 1970s is through the author’s keen insight into personalities and motivations that extended beyond art-making itself. Placemakers such as Salvador Torres, a major force in the creation of the historic murals of Chicano Park, continue their decades-long commitment to artistic and cultural parity – not only in claims to social spaces, but as artists in the public sphere who continue to generate community-based public art projects (S. Torres, personal communication).

These artists actually took their cues from civil rights movement – and Fallon does well to remind

the reader that many of the Post-Studio and Performance Art practices that arose in the 1970s had their origin in anti-war politics. Except that in the conceptual turn, and for artists like Chris Burden and Bas (Bastian) Jan Ader, “it was about being gone.” The erasure of the artist from the art was one way to answer the question of the artist’s relationship to his or her art. At the same time, the imprint of social movements amplified a sense of collective identity for those artists who had long been systematically excluded from institutional art forums – galleries, museums. The work was “in your face” and out of its expected places.

Unlike many art histories of the 1970s that focus on one brand of reinvention (e.g., Chicano Art, Conceptual Art), Fallon braves the current by going against it. What the Conceptualist, Feminist, Chicano/Chicana and Black Art movements he describes served to do was to decommodify art by putting attention on collectivity and process. Unlike the object-based conceptualists of earlier generations, these artists were also about eradication beyond the object. A good example of Fallon’s detailed research is in his chapter on conceptual art’s freedom from the craftsman. Referencing Baldassari’s *Cremation Project* (in which he ritually had his paintings burned in the manner the title suggests), Fallon quotes from an obscure essay by Sol LeWitt that critiqued the intuitive and purposeless of conceptual art. By this, Fallon points to the “disparity between how language operates and how objects and actions exist in the world” (p. 83).

Fallon’s tome is a literal “who’s who” of the art scenes that emerged variously in the dispersed sprawl of Los Angeles in the 1970s. Yet, certain artists and art works stand out: such as the unforgettable *Shot*, Chris Burden’s anti-war statement in which he had himself shot in the arm at close range. While Burden’s *Shot* registered as an anti-war statement about the Vietnam War, the harsher facts remain: coming of age in the first media broadcasts of killing fields abroad, while politicians, civil rights activists and students themselves were gunned down in the streets at home. This documentary witnessing is absent from Fallon’s accounts, but it no less influenced the artists who lived in its midst on a daily diet of political violence that bred the counter-cultural ethos of the 1970s before it became mainstreamed. The artwork of the times was meant to shock – as both a wake up call and a critique – but it was not the artist’s job to inform. Rather, to disrupt the status quo through new forms of social and artistic alliances – from Compton to the barrios of East L.A., and for a brief moment, even in the context of art schools themselves.

The inclusion of “low brow” aesthetics, such as Kar Kultur, merged with the intellectual outputs of art school graduates and dropouts. Whether land artists like James Turrell and his aerial flights over the landscape itself, or temporary flights of departure and return, like Chicago’s, some had to necessarily veer off before carving a new space of expression – vast, conceptual, and charged with a break-away aesthetic that remains a defining moment in the creation of the future of contemporary art in L.A. and beyond.

*Top Image: Credit to Michael Fallon*

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