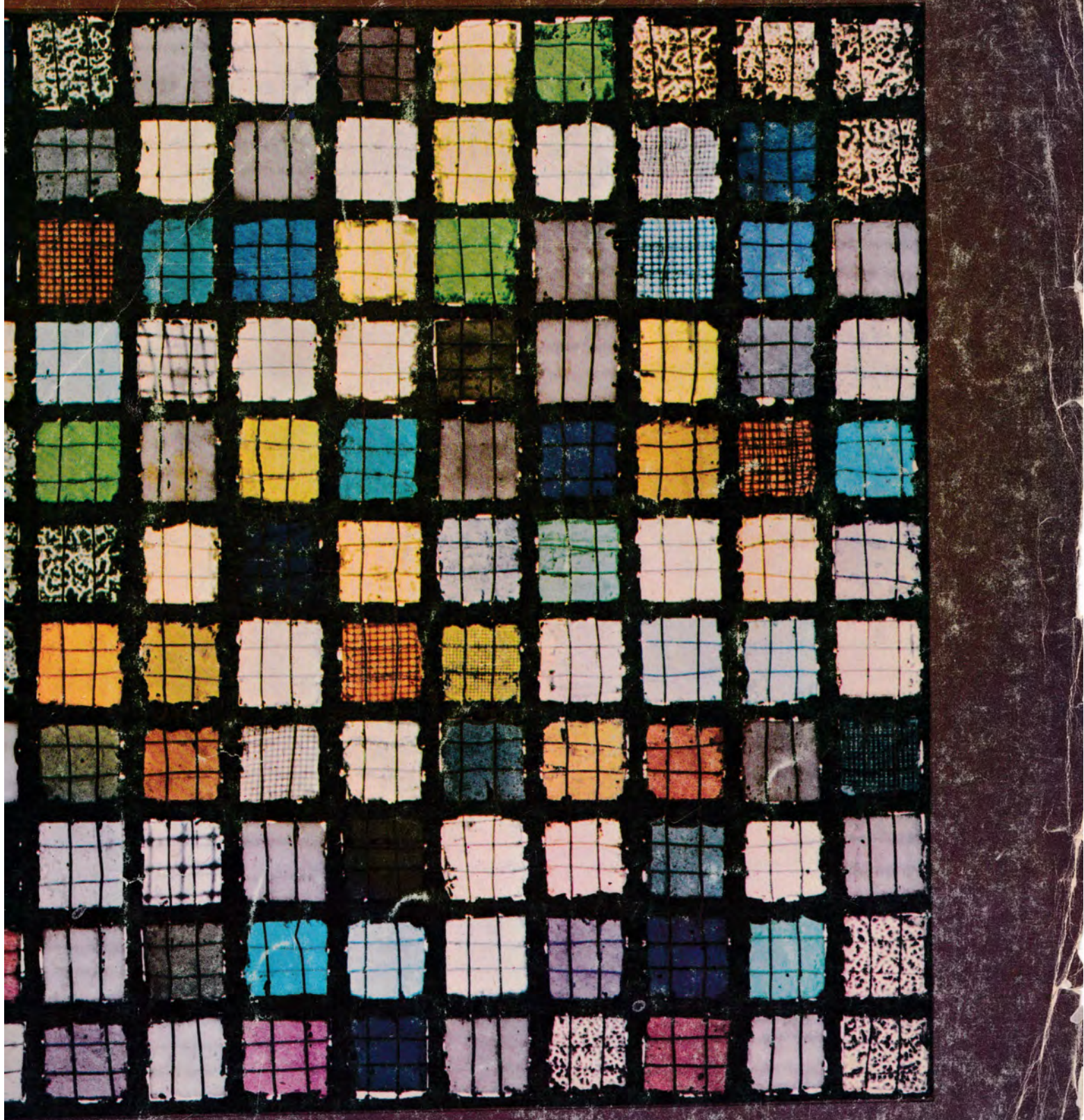


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Review: "Los Angeles: The Market Street Program," by Peter Plagens, pp 77-78

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First Fantasy (photo title): Doug Edge, Joe Ray, and Terry O'Shea.  
The exhibition consisted of photographs of cooperative activity.

## LOS ANGELES: THE MARKET STREET PROGRAM



Second Fantasy: Terry O'Shea, Joe Ray, and Doug Edge.

### PETER PLAGENS

The Market Street Program in Venice is well-intentioned, reasonable, and a seemingly practical way to reform/revitalize the public presentation of serious new art. With a basic proposal by Joshua Young, a twenty-three-year-old U.C. Irvine painting graduate, support from Robert Irwin (whose emptied, pristine studio is the initial exhibition space), Walter Hopps, and some outside technical/legal assistance, it opened a first group show of Terry O'Shea, Doug Edge, and Joe Ray.

Market Street's premise is this: only artists should make curatorial judgments on other artists, and the only reliable mechanism (thus far) for them is an impartial, two-dimensional matrix charting artists' estimates of their mutual similarities. So, Young solicited a first-round set of answers from 119 artists to the two questions, 1) "who are other artists working in the area?," and 2) "which artists would... (you) be most interested in showing with?" ("showing" loosely defined as any sort of concurrent artistic participation). The collected answers were heaved into a computer, and it printed a chart on which an "x" (or "1," or whatever) marks a would-like-to-show-with connection between two artists. (The process is theoretically complete only when the lists of all artists mentioned and questioned are identical, when all 102,628 serious, full-time modernists in the Basin have been polled about each other.) The data is reshuffled and reinserted a few more times to get a more coherent map of groupings (e.g., if artists W and Y disagree on only one selection of a cohort, and that difference is only two artists who are themselves pretty close, then they are rated closer together than with artist Z, whose one varying selection is way out in left field). Then the Market Street personnel go over the chart with red pencils and circle clots of "x's" as the possible group shows. The idea, a radial model of the "small world hypothesis" (everybody knows somebody who knows somebody else, etc.) is ingratiating: flexible and ongoing, with newcomers constantly being fed into the system, with possible networks of local programs extending to San Francisco, the Midwest, the East, else-

where, and, finally, usable right now by the Establishment (enough group shows to save Pasadena and the County considerable legwork and curatorial payroll).

God knows Los Angeles needs something like this, something like anything. This place has artists, by the carload, whole tribes of bushy under-twenty-fivers working their buns off down in Venice, nailing together everything out of everything, adding amendments, contradictions, and corollaries to the distant booming fiats of Morris, Bochner, Close, Poons, Heizer, Frampton, you-name-it, and reiterating the heaviest current homegrown *modus operandi* (Irwin); trying to get something on the map. The quality is negotiable and spotty, but the activity is tremendous. Alas, there's no outlet valve because there are no galleries, and there are no galleries (I guess) because there's no market, and there's no market (I guess) because, save for three or four collectors, everybody on the suit-and-tie end of the art world is more interested in drinking/buddying with artists than buying, or more interested in buying the last, scattered crumbs off Picasso's etching press than anything large, ambitious, new, and local. Thus, Molly Barnes and Eugenia Butler are closed, Irving Blum and Ace import the essential New York biggies, and the rest, brainless and eyeless, putt-putt along with a mixed bag of second-raters, leaving, as far as I can see, only Riko Mizuno to show people like Vija Celmins, Charles Arnoldi, and Greg Card. The public showplaces, their relative neglect of local artists notwithstanding, suffer too many financial/political wounds to appreciably supplant the commercial galleries. This long moan has no specific bearing, I realize, on the Market Street Program, but the program's appearance only renders the bleak surrounding landscape all the more conspicuous.

The theoretical necessities for the Market Street Program, according to "Proposal for Exhibition Program," an unfortunately turgid and soporific document by Messrs. Young, Irwin, and Hopps accompanying questionnaires and available at the showing space, are two: economics and "formal criticism." The former is obviously accurate;



Third Fantasy: Joe Ray and three women.

galleries show certain art at least in part because it might/will sell, a consideration restrictive, irrelevant, and damaging because it usually knocks off the best art. The latter, "formal criticism," is something of a red herring, couched as it is in radical bureaucratized dense enough to turn Daniel Cohn-Bendit into a Renault salesman, and it is here that the program evidences a naive assumption that a paucity of moral courage from museum and gallery people is curable by passing the buck ten-thousandfold among artists. The program's broadside tosses off several suppositions deserving specific refutation. 1) "Formal criticism is the traditional process of interpreting art based on previous historical definitions of issues and artistic merit." Answer: "previous historical definitions" can be five minutes old as well as five years, and they're by no means frozen; a slight lag between critics' heads and artists' doesn't automatically mean that Dennis Oppenheim will be subjected to Clement Greenberg's 1962 remarks on painting. The Market Street Program, as a phenomenon, is in fact "based on previous historical definitions." 2) ". . . opposing critical positions implying one position mutually exclusive of another." Answer: "critical positions" can be embellishments, clarifications, and minor corrections of one another, as well as antitheses; in fact you have to scour the earth to find a true pair of opposites. 3) "criticism adheres to a traditionally formal elitist criteria of orthodoxy with limited categories (*sic*) of 'acceptable' change in place of innovation." Answer: maybe some of the super-formalist critics, but not everybody and not by a long shot. Market

Street thinks any this-instead-of-that judgments emanate from hooded, recluse bishops in cold stone towers, and would eliminate the problem the way Pilate did, washing its hands on paper towels made from print-outs. 4) "The premise of innovation and formal criticism are, by definition, mutually exclusive." Answer: innovation in fact depends on formalist criticism, for if it were total and uninterpreted, we'd never know it was supposed to be art. Market Street thinks that a curator/dealer's opinion of what/whom to show is grounded in "formalist criticism" and should be replaced by "criteria established by the community of artists themselves." In actuality, these community criteria presently amount to a questionnaire supplied by the *outside*; moreover, artists' opinions about mutual similarities are no more devoid of "formalist criticism" than anyone else's, and stirring them briskly into a succotash of tens of thousands of "x's" doesn't negate it. In short, there's no cybernetic substitute for the right guy's saying, "This may look like shit to you, and it sure as hell won't sell, but I believe in it and I'm gonna show it."

To be fair to the spirit of Market Street (honestly attempting to help artists by getting more of them shown somewhat free of unnecessary pressures), there have bubbled up certain criticisms likewise deserving of rebuttal. First, there's an idea Market Street is Joshua Young's Conceptual art (Robert Irwin included Young, a nonartist, in Hopps' recent bring-a-date Corcoran Biennial); Young says that is somebody else's *reductio ad absurdum* application of "anything can be art" and is incorrect. Second, there's a rumor

that Market Street is stalking-horse market research for the fat cats, which is hard to see since no audience is polled and artists buy little art. Third, there's a feeling the computer is making quality judgments; though I despair the announced intent of *nobody* making quality judgments, it hasn't gone this far. Lastly, since the very existence of Market Street implies the museums and galleries haven't done their jobs, there are predictable, anguished cries that Market Street is intent on overthrow. Young says that although he'd like to see several different exhibition spaces show other mapped groups, the program has "no pretensions of solution, just an experiment in technique to see what the problems are." True to that, Market Street will issue, at season's end, a catalogue including the charted input, biographical information on artists, and photos of work shown.

On the basis of personnel, the first two shows (one up, one announced) are incredibly predictable: three good, but not All-Pro resin casters, and a covey of militant women. Perhaps this substantiates the program's detractors who said that fancy hardware/software would furnish you the same old/new people you'd have gotten from lithe curators studio-tripping or buzzing over bourbon in Bel Air. On the other hand, it could be said that *this* time the shows, being the results of "community criteria," are untainted by cozy politics. On the other other hand, only the art counts, and a simon-pure aegis no more enhances it than backroom deals would detract from it. O'Shea, Edge, and Ray have in common a) resin sculpture as a previous, predominant medium, b) a semihairy, Temple Street mien, and c) the fact that, although known and shown to an extent (Edge at Cirrus, O'Shea at the Long Beach Museum, and Ray in the County's "Young Artists"), all are on the fringes of "making it"; it's easy to see why they chose each other. But, on the surface, it's not so easy to see why they're the first show. Indeed, given the imposed egalitarianism of the mapped groups, you wonder how Market Street conjures up shows out of theory at all. Young admits that there were extra-computer considerations: the least known groups first, Venice types

and artists with personal connections with Young excluded for the first few shows (to allay cries of "fix!"), and who could and would show on time.

The first exhibition is pretty thin stuff, a halfway Conceptual take on the very idea of participating together: seven framed photographs documenting 1) a tacky, Buñuel-like banquet for/with the three, 2) a Hell's Angel dress-up caper with a chopper, and 3) individual fantasies (Ray in a poker game with three nude chicks — he's dealing, he's chomping on a phallic stogie, he's clothed, and the show was threatened with feminist pickets; Edge cocooned in a magnificent dragster; O'Shea just himself in a sensitive portrait). The structural point of the show seems to be the austere ghostliness of the gallery sparsely spotted with small echoes of what took place during the *real* creative acts (all happening in the gallery). Remember, "the canvas is an arena in which to act"? Well, now it's the arena is an arena in which to act, and those who come to the show have missed the show, get it? Beneath that, there's a lot of pernicious, erroneous propaganda about artists being terribly interesting in themselves . . . through their ordinariness ("Gee, these perceptive, highly trained vanguard fellows are just regular, funky, football-watching, card-playing, hard-drinking grease jockeys just like the dropouts down the street"). Yecch. What is at work and what, I think, Market Street didn't plan on, is a dialectical application of physics' "uncertainty principle"; observation of a phenomena changes the phenomena observed. In this case, Market Street's open, democratic, anticritical procedures are, rather than neutral toward the artists mapped/shown, influential in the sense that they obviously encourage heretofore object-makers to engage in dematerialized, quasi-theatrical, autobiographical, jokey forms of art. If the trend continues over several shows, Market Street will have to decide whether that's good or bad, and that, friends, is a decision of "formal criticism." Nevertheless Market Street promises a kind of barometer of what the art community thinks about itself, and a chance to show it without having to sell it.