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## West Coast Camps — The artist run scenes in Los Angeles and San Francisco

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California

WEST COAST CAMPS – THE ARTIST RUN SCENES  
IN LOS ANGELES AND SAN FRANCISCO

California is home to many of the narratives that construct the American ideal reflection of itself. From the obvious frontier ideology that is pervasive in the current dot.com land rush to the ultimate myth making machine in Hollywood, these stories of meta-life styling systems speak about two incompatible cities.

Los Angeles and San Francisco are neighbours that extend the distance already manifest in miles between the cities by other means. The comparative cultural climates of these urban centres can be measured by the visual arts and their headcounts of artist run centres comparative to private galleries. If this sounds like a crass system to adopt for understanding wider spheres of culture, it is only because we would like to think that money does not really dictate culture and that our beloved “C” word (Culture) is really the uncontrollable twin of its supposedly bastard Siamese twin “C” word – Capitalism.

Los Angeles is the place in which the “return” is a manifest pre-requisite for the initiation of the venture. Galleries in this city are for the most not different and run to the same economic dictates as the movie business or the music industry. San Francisco by contrast has a visual arts culture which is informed and nurtured through a comparative lack of commercial interests invested into its art scene.

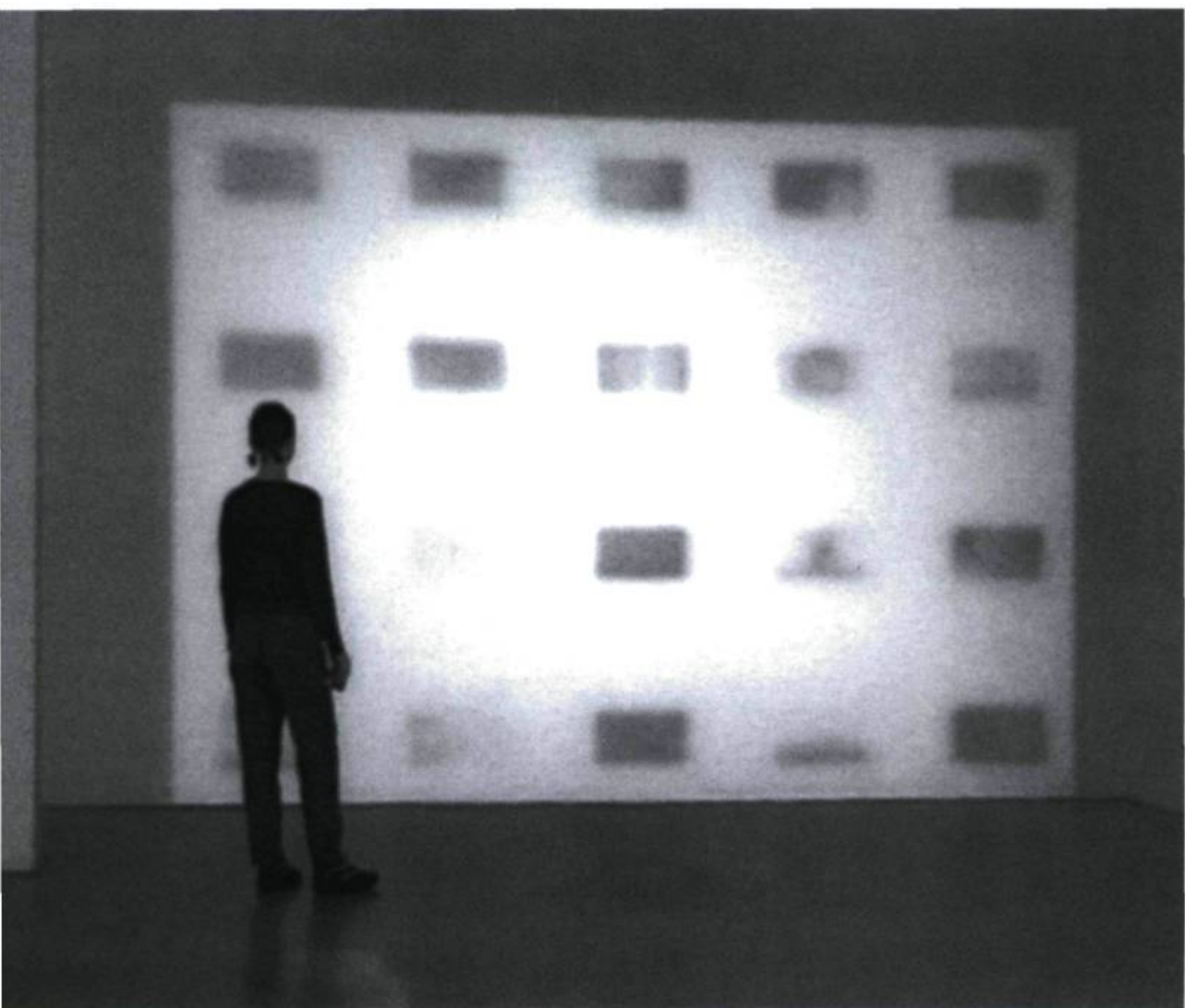
This perceived lack in private funding results in a dynamic artist run culture across medium’s both in and outside of the white walled gallery spaces of San Francisco.

Amongst the most recognised artist run spaces in downtown SF is Southern Exposure. Committed to artist run culture it recently hosted a show called *Sister Spaces* which was a group show split into 5 spaces within the gallery. Each space was curated by a “Sister” artist run gallery from countries such as Canada (YYZ Gallery), New Zealand (The Physics Room), Portugal (Ze Dos Bois) and others. This type of collective curatorship in conjunction with galleries from other countries belies an attitude which firmly places itself at the initiatory front line of artist run culture. In physical terms the Southern Exposure gallery is a generous space which was renovated from its initial use as a parts factory in the second world war. The walls run up 25 ft or so with a mezzanine area acting as a second space meaning that multiple shows are the norm.

Along with its reputation for taking and supporting innovative installation work, the gallery is able to offer an *honorarium* to the artist, ensuring that the gallery receives a high number of proposals each year to exhibit.

With the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) having pulled so much funding for the arts it meant that the first galleries to feel the pinch were the artist run spaces. Some of the most established artist run spaces closed down such as Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago. There still remain a number of government supported spaces however, especially in San Francisco with spaces such as Southern Exposure and another is “Intersection for the Arts”. Kevin Chen is the director of this space which also has a theatre attached to it where jazz and sound work is performed. The work shown here has a lineage which is certainly held up by the approachable director of the space. Known for its interest in artists who deal with socio-political themes in their work, it is one of the most respected spaces in San Francisco for its mandate and exhibition policy. By championing artists such as Conrad Atkinson, Intersection for the Arts makes a clear statement about exhibiting work by practitioners with a long track record as well as showing younger unknowns. Again, the telling remit for the space is its involvement with socially and politically oriented work. The gallery accepts proposals for exhibition and generally works sixteen to eighteen months ahead if they are working with international artists.

SF Camerawork is the established artist run space in San Francisco for image based work. Most photography based galleries have had to widen the scope of their exhibition policy’s due to the amount of artists working across disciplines, from video to Internet work to more traditional formats of photographic presentation. SF Camerawork is no different in this respect and is known for its policy of supporting fairly challenging work by emerging to mid-career artists. Once again, this is a space that still has funding from the government although it also has a number of private patrons who support the space, which also means that the gallery print up substantial glossy catalogues and books of work that has been shown in the gallery.



Rebeca Bollinger, *From animals to water everywhere*, 1999.  
Video Projection from the *Similar/Same* exhibition. Photo: Rebeca Bollinger. The LAB, San Francisco.

As with both Southern Exposure and Intersection for the Arts, Camerawork receives interest from a wide ranging national and international selection of artists who wish to show their work. Camerawork is primarily proposal driven although it does have a number of curated shows by inhouse and independent curators. Being well established doesn't mean jack however when it comes to dealing with landlords and SF Camerawork have felt the bite of dot.com companies who are consuming contracts on many of the previously underpriced rental areas in San Francisco. Subsequently, SF Camerawork have had to move from their building to share the space of the fourth high profile artist run gallery in the city.

New Langton Arts is one of the oldest artist run spaces in the USA and has shown many internationally known practitioners in its productive 26 years period. With the gallery receiving such a high number of proposals for exhibition it has meant that group shows are the regular format for presentation of national and international artists. The gallery was a large space with 4 semi-contained areas but due to the fact that SF Camerawork are moving into the space it

has meant that one of those areas has become SF Camerawork's office space. Obviously, with the two galleries sharing one space it has also meant that the programs of both have had to be cut in half which is a telling blow for the arts community in San Francisco. Heavily curated group shows will be the most likely outcome of this joint venture, with each gallery having only two slots each for 10 weeks exhibitions until the time if and when SF Camerawork find another space.

Outside of the immediate downtown vicinity is the aptly named "Lab" which resides on the peripheral ring of the artist run scene and consequently undertakes what may be considered as more edgy or arsy (depending on your take) projects as a result. This attitude carries through to the directors of The Lab, who differ from the other spaces in that they put their best arse forward and then disappear back into their offices. If the staff's communication skills are not all they could be, The Lab certainly attempts to cross pollinate ideas and practitioners and thus creates dialogues between genres which may not exist in the same space otherwise. Sound artists work features on



a fairly regular basis in event based and longer duration shows at the gallery as does work by other marginalised groups. Electronic based media work and Performance also has a place in this gallery and again the gallery accepts proposals for solo and group shows and has a small *honorarium* for the artists working with them.

Travelling back into the centre of San Francisco's downtown where its huge homeless population is at its most apparent, The Luggage Store is a gallery which is completely aware of its position culturally, socially and geographically speaking. One of the only galleries to actively seek off-site projects which deal with the nature of the surrounding social disparity, the Luggage Store is run by a pair of enigmatic directors who also run a good line in harnessed sarcasm. This is probably a pre-requisite for running a gallery in the area they do and actually making it feel as though it has a committed worth to those who live around it. This is a tough one to pull off and that they do with humour is worth a thousand standardised and franchised commercial galleries replete with gurning "deskho" (male or female face of the gallery... usually sitting behind a wooden desk and who smiles at everything irrelevant of context or content). Recently, the Luggage Store exhibited the Altoids curated show, which had selectors such as David Byrne involved with it as well as other well known curators. The group show mandate is again in effect here and it is rare for them to have solo shows, although they do invite proposals for both.

Residencies in San Francisco are often paid for with the most high profile example offered at the Headlands Centre for the Arts. The Centre has good facilities and a number of committed staff who cater for the needs of those staying there. The only drawback for UK artists is that the centre has reciprocal relationships with many institutions and geographic areas such as certain states in the USA. The UK is not one of the related areas which makes it more difficult to set up residencies but this should not negate researching the possibilities.

The other high profile residency especially for installation artists was the Capp St Residency, which has now been incorporated into the CCAC program, given that Capp St no longer has a physical space to realise the work made through the residency.

And so down to Los Angeles with its commercial art camps which deal in the irony of existing in the home of the American dream making machine of Hollywood. To say this economy of cultural cool is bankrupt is to underline the fact that *the Beach* is not a good movie... but hey, they both make money and keep the directors of both the galleries and the movies in work and condos.

The most famous art camp is Bergamont Station, with its 30-40 galleries sitting side by side in a shopping mall style. Many of the highly closeted and wealthy private galleries exist here along side a couple of spaces, such as Track16, which receive proposals. On the whole, however, it feels like a social experiment in the art worlds version of Skinners Box, with living room sized paintings and photographs on every wall.

This said, it would be unfair to overlook the artist run spaces and organisations which do undertake interventive and challenging projects. One of those actually exists at Bergamont Station, although it is not a traditional gallery space but rather in the guard shack at the gates through which one enters the art camp. Curated by Jennifer Katell, it only takes video work, which is shown on a monitor behind the shack's window. There are also a few commercial galleries undertaking interesting projects and artists which are not proposal driven, such as Post Gallery and the Susan Veilmetter gallery.

A good example of one of the few artist run spaces which exists in LA is Side Street Projects which recently moved from its location in Santa Monica into the heart of downtown and onto the edge of Skid Row. The move is a highly ambitious re-location into an area known for its substance based addiction and homeless population. There was a question as to whether the gallery would still attract its audience given the new location, but it appears to have been a fear fuelled assumption given that the numbers attending shows are up. The new space at Side Street also includes a huge basement area, which they are trying to turn into photographic studio's, digital based media studio's and a woodshop, so that artists can prepare their work on-site and show it in the large space above. Side Street runs on an amazingly low budget, given what they manage to and hope to achieve and its success is often due to the work and help of its directors, volunteers and board members. Funding for artist run spaces in LA is minimal and thus other artist led activities such as "At the Brewery project" are open for 3 or 4 days in the week but do accept proposals from national and international artists. That said, the Los Angeles art scene is very insular and does not often look outside of its own perimeter for shows. Out of a listing of 80 galleries there was one group show of Austrian artists back in september 2000, which according to artists such as Alan Sekula is indicative of LA's self obsessed culture. Long live Hollywood.

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