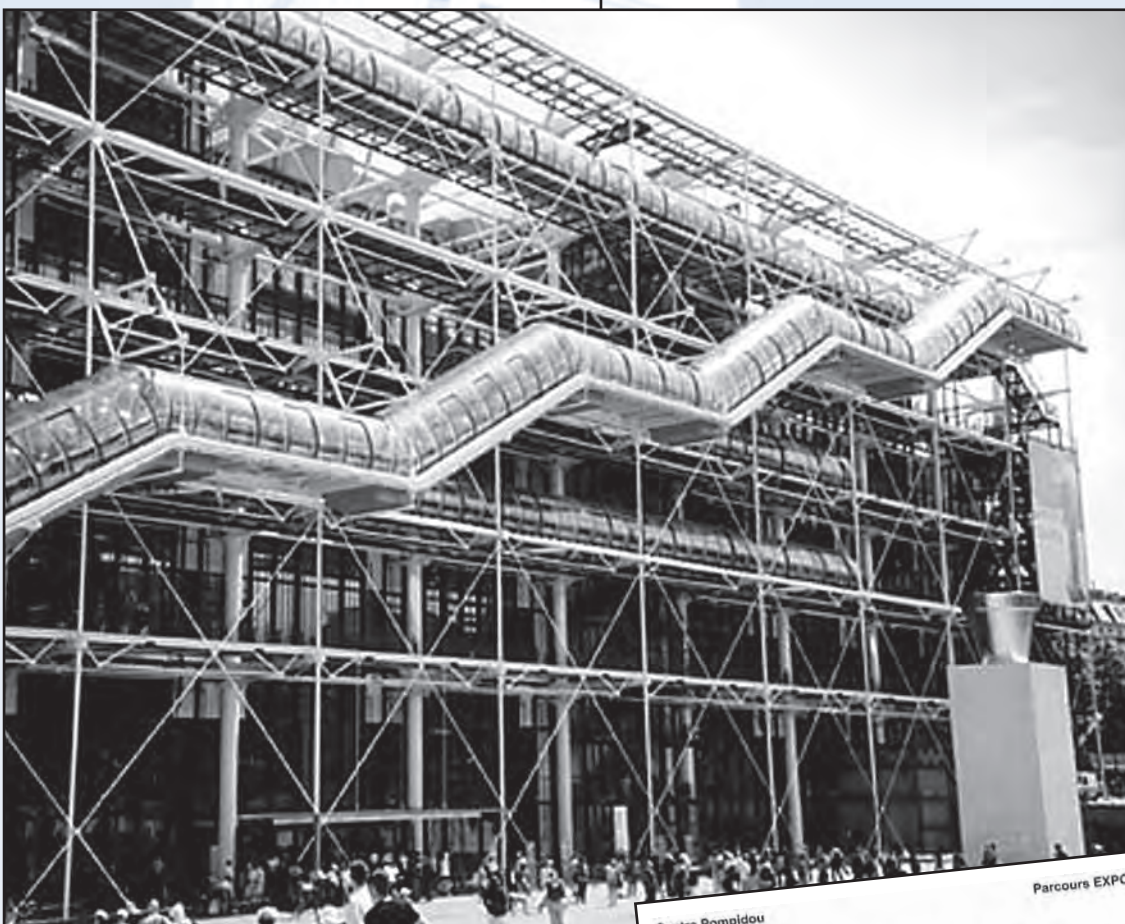


The Birth of an Art Capital

■ Los Angeles becomes a home for Contemporary artists.

By Eddy S. Feldman



Pompidou Centre in Paris.

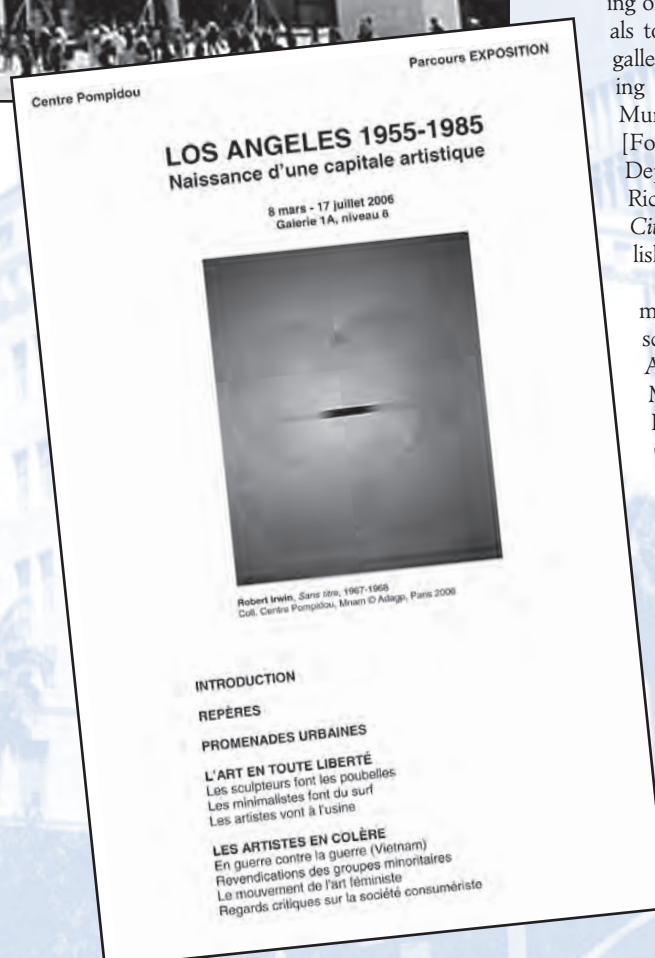
The substance of this article by Eddy S. Feldman encompasses a 30-year period in Los Angeles from 1955 through 1985. That era



Guest columnist,
Eddy Feldman.

was when contemporary art made its entrance and impact on the world, and, Los Angeles being Los Angeles, the art was immediately at the forefront. During that time, Mr. Feldman was a former member and President of the Los Angeles City Board of Municipal Arts Commissioners. This article was originally published in the Los Angeles City Historical Society Newsletter, February 2009.

— Hynda



"LOS ANGELES 1955-1985 The birth of an art capital" program.

Photos courtesy the Security Pacific Collection, Los Angeles Public Library Photo Archive, Carolyn Cole, director

The title of this article is the title of a remarkable historical event involving the City, which occurred not here but in Paris, France, in 2006.

From the beginning of the last century, the City officially concerned itself with the beauty of the city, its neighborhoods, and, indeed, of the citizenry itself. On Nov. 2, 1903, the City Council resolved that there be created a Public Art Committee of five, "including one or two women," taken from lists supplied by public organizations "that are at work for the betterment of the City."

The resolution declared, in part,

"That the duties of this Public Art Committee should be as follows: "To work for the gradual elimination of ugliness from the conspicuous parts of the city.

"To study into methods used in Eastern and European Municipalities for rendering the city more beautiful.

"To pass upon plans for public buildings and other public undertakings from the point of view of art."

On Jan. 23, 1905, the title of the Public Art Committee was changed to the Municipal Art Commission. The first members, appointed by Mayor Owen McAleer were Major E.F.C. Klokke, Mrs. Sumner P. Hunt, Mr. W.J. Washburn, Mr. John Parkinson and Mr. Fielding J. Stilson.

In its report for 1904, the Commission offered as its first endorsement and recommendation that it "believes the time has come when this city should possess an Art Gallery for the housing of objects of art, and urges all organizations and individuals to co-operate with the Art Commission in securing this gallery." However, it would not be until March 31, 1971, during the term of Mayor Sam Yorty, that the City's own Municipal Art Gallery would be dedicated in Barnsdall Park. [For a fuller description of the history of the Municipal Art(s) Department and its successor, Cultural Affairs, see Gloria Ricci Lothrop's Chapter 18 in *The Development of Los Angeles City Government, an Institutional History, 1850-2000*, published by the Los Angeles City Historical Society, 2007.]

In the intervening years, the greater Los Angeles community of artists and art lovers was not waiting around. Art schools were active, and museums including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Museum); the Hammer Museum; the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens; and the Museum of Contemporary Art; among others, had gained worldwide respect.

Still, as *Los Angeles Times* art critic Christopher Knight observed, "Beyond the art world, say the words 'L.A. art,' and most people will give you one of two responses: A blank stare, which conveys the conventional wisdom lurking inside Woody Allen's stale joke about California culture being mostly found in yogurt; or a puzzled look, which telegraphs a common tendency to shrink Los Angeles into Hollywood, followed by a snotty refusal even to consider movies and TV as products of artists' sensibilities.

"L.A. art? Yeah, right." [March 15, 2006]

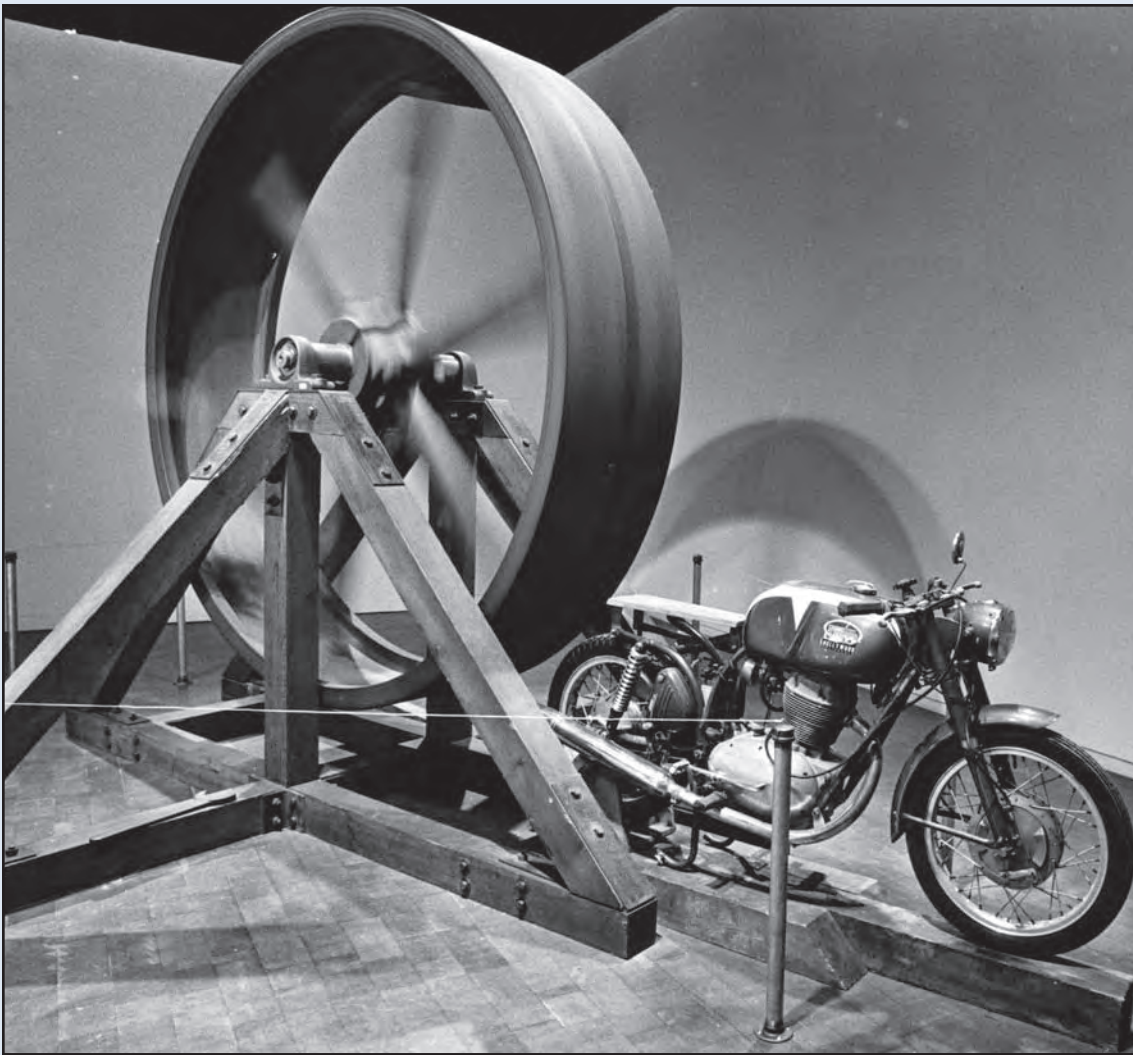
One person seeking to bring greater recognition to the Los Angeles art scene has been the indefatigable Lyn Kienholz, former wife of the already widely known and -appreciated artist, Edward Kienholz, and President of California/International Arts Foundation in Los Angeles. At a breakfast in Paris in 2001, she was presented by Alfred Pacquemont, Director of the Musée National d'Art Moderne of

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



by Hynda Rudd,
City Archivist (Retired),
and Club Member



Chris Burden, *Big Wheels* (1988).



Raymond Pettibon, a portrait (1999).

the Centre Pompidou, with the idea that it was time – after its exhibitions such as “Paris-New York,” “Paris-Berlin” and “Paris-Moscow” – to devote space to showing “the extent and individuality of this fertile yet still under appreciated artistic breeding ground.”

Ms. Kienholz agreed enthusiastically and provided the contacts with Los Angeles artists. (The California/International Arts Foundation will soon publish an encyclopedia, *L.A. and Artists Before 1980*.)

Catherine Grenier, an independent curator working for the French Ministry of Culture, was retained to bring the project to life. Acting on a list supplied by Ms. Kienholz, Ms. Grenier, after three years, assembled in some 20 galleries on the Centre Pompidou's top floor about 350 works by 85 artists, including paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, films, videos, artists' books and performance artifacts, all made between 1955 and 1985.

The time frame chosen, according to Ms. Grenier, “dates from the mid-'50s, when artistic Los Angeles was still a provincial outpost,” and to the 1980s, when “more and better museums, the development of new networks of galleries and collectors, and the prestige of its schools turned L.A. into a front-rank international art centre.”

Attending the opening of this momentous affair on behalf of the City of Los Angeles was a large delegation of artists; collectors; gallery owners; staff and members of the Cultural Affairs Department and Commissioners; and members of the press and academicians; all chaired by City Councilperson Janice Hahn. And recognizing that this event would enhance the perception of Los Angeles as a great tourist destination was L.A. Inc.'s Visitors Bureau, which helped coordinate the several events that surrounded the exhibition, including a dinner at the residence of the American Ambassador to France, and a visit by Madame Georges Pompidou herself.

Damon Willick, Assistant Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History at Loyola Marymount University, who was also in attendance, observed in *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly*, Winter, 2007, that:

“The opportunity to see Los Angeles's canonical artists together is a rare treat, and the heavy hitters all make their appearances. Great examples of work by John Baldessari, Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston, Chris Burden, Vija Celmins, Judy Chicago, Richard Diebenkorn, Sam Francis, David Hammons, David Hockney, Robert Irwin, Mike Kelley, Ed Kienholz, Paul McCarthy, Raymond Pettibon, Charles Ray and Ed Ruscha highlight the exhibition. It is uncommon to

be able to see such artists' best work together, and, though Los Angeles art aficionados will undoubtedly complain about the exclusion of such artists as Sister Mary Corita Kent, Maria Nordman, Richard Pettibone, Gordon Wagner, Peter Voulkos, Robert Williams and others, Grenier has selected many artists that challenge and expand the existing canons of L.A. art history.”

The catalog of the exhibition itself is quite spectacular, with its the reproduction of many of the exhibits, its textual support, composition, length (383 pages) and weight (5 pounds, three ounces).

Attendance was said to be the second highest in the history of the Centre, with a long line surrounding the Centre during a heavy rain on day one.

The Pompidou exhibition was again in the news when the Centre recently announced that artist Craig Kauffman's

vacuum-formed Plexiglas wall relief, which had crashed to the floor July 15, 2006, breaking the lower left corner into a dozen pieces, would pay LACMA the insured value of the piece, \$60,000. According to art critic Suzanne Muchnic, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, on Nov. 27, LACMA will buy a new version of the work. (Another piece by Peter Alexander had fallen off a wall shortly before the show opened.)

Surely, this validation by the Pompidou Centre of Los Angeles' claims to artistic maturity must be a source of pride to our community and should be appropriately memorialized – in these pages, at least. It is fitting to record, also, that Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, on Jan. 6, announced that January was “L.A. Arts Month,” calling the City, “the Venice of the 21st century.” (*Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 7.)



Ed Ruscha with civic leaders Eli and Edith Broad.