

Artists at Work: Piero Golia Andrew Berardini

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Piero Golia, *Bus (Untitled)*, 2008. Bus crashed to fit the size of the booth. 3 x 6 x 3m. Collection of Eugenio Lopez, Los Angeles. Installation: ART LA, 2008

Andrew Berardini: So I think we should talk about the-

Piero Golia: -revolution?

AB: Why don't we talk instead about the bus (*Untitled*, 2008) installed at ART LA earlier this year? In a way, this exhibition in the booth of a New York gallery, Bortolami, was your local debut. Do you consider yourself an L.A. artist?

PG: You are right. I'd never had a show in Los Angeles so I thought maybe it was the moment to do something. L.A. is not an open city. You can live here for ten years and you will never be an "L.A. artist." If you think about it, the only people who ever invited me to exhibit in an "American" show ("Uncertain States of America: American Art in the 3rd Millennium" at the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in Oslo) were Hans Ulrich Obrist, Daniel Birnbaum and Gunnar Kvavan, who are all Europeans. It was easier for me to get a green card than to be considered an L.A. artist! But I like that. Bas Jan Ader lived in Los Angeles, but he is never considered an L.A. artist.

AB: So the art fair was a chance for a lot of people who knew you in L.A. to finally see your work?

PG: A lot of people here know me as an artist, but in the end, almost nobody has seen what I do. I was interested in doing a very cold, formal piece, but I was also interested in digging into the idea of the weird space of the art fair itself - in the end, it's *not* an exhibition space. I decided to focus on completely filling the booth. It was, in a way, a kind of territorial marking, to define the space with the physicality of a sculpture. I aspired to have the biggest space in the fair, so I bought this 10-foot by 35-foot passenger bus and I decided to compress it so that it would fit into the smaller booth that was assigned to me. Fuck, if this wasn't difficult! First, we had to torch cut and remove all of the safety armor that prevents the bus from collapsing during an accident. Then we used three bulldozers to compress it. Looking at the bus now, I still think you can feel all the energy we used to press it.

AB: How big is the bus now?

PG: Now, 10-by-20. The piece came out much differently than I'd expected, and that's typical of my work. Fortunately, I don't believe in expectations! I think art is all about the experience and the process: "Let's just compress it enough to fit it in the booth."

When I first met the guys at Zacher's Automotive, where we took the bus to be compressed, they asked me how I wanted it to look and I replied, "As it happens." And that's how it looks now. I think they did a perfect job. It is just as it should be. I don't believe in art as representation. My work belongs to reality and it is affected by reality.

AB: You recently completed a project for SITE Santa Fe. There was a long article on SITE Santa Fe by Jori Finkel in *The New York Times* saying that everyone complained about the exhibition design because all these big ramps had to be built, leaving no room for the art. Jori quotes you as saying, about the ramp design, "If I don't like it, I will simply pour concrete into the entire thing," to which she replies in her article, "It was not clear if he was joking."

[AB and PG laugh]

PG: I never joke.

[More laughter]

PG: Actually, the concrete idea sounds nice and I probably did say it. I think it would have been great, but they would never have let me bury their ramp in concrete. In the end, I decided to cut the ramp. In the center of a room it simply disappeared, and you could choose either to turn back or to jump onto a giant foam mattress. An intuitive and spontaneous decision on the part of the viewer - his or her decision made the piece.

AB: You seem to have an intuitive and spontaneous approach to art.

PG: I really believe that art is life, and that's how I live - if I don't like it, I try to change it. I think that's the exciting moment, when things shape up and it's not up to the artist to shape them. It's reality.

AB: Explain further what you mean when you say that you have an intuition and then reality shapes it. What do you consider to be an event that might shape your intuition?

PG: The people I find to fabricate a piece, and bureaucracy, and life, and physics and chemistry. In the SITE work this was evident in the title of the piece, *Manifest Destiny* (2008). The title is exactly how I dreamt it. And while we were fabricating the piece, we shifted away from my original vision. By shifting, we gave a shape to the work in reality.

In a way, everything pushes this matter to become something. When I say "matter," it could be a parade, it could be marble - it could be whatever. I just believe in evolution. And I'm also a Catholic. Isn't that funny?

AB: What is this work - an action, an addition, a gesture?

PG: There is never any addition, only what is necessary. This is typical of my work. It's more about the gesture. My favorite painter is Cy Twombly because of the feeling of the gesture, because you can feel the movement of his hand when you look at the work. Every real artist has a gesture: Koons, Beuys, Pierre Huyghe - you can feel that there is someone behind the work pushing it, moving it. Aristotle talks about the difference between man, who is a "builder," and God, who is the "creator," but then there is this weird figure of the artist who is a man but is also a creator.

If you notice, in my work you can feel that all of the creative action takes place intuitively, prior to the process of building the work. The intuition is an action and then the production starts and things happen. The surface, the external part of my art, the temporal shaping of the material, is carried out by reality...

AB: I heard about a second project at SITE...

PG: I also did a "secret" permanent project at SITE. I installed a stainless steel structural column in the center of the space. The column got included in the wall and will likely be forgotten. One day, if I get a show at SITE, I'll tear all the walls down and leave my column holding up the roof of the museum, which is another kind of leap.

AB: I've been teaching an art history class lately that covers cave paintings to cathedrals. "What makes someone an artist?" and "What makes something art?" are questions central to the study of art history. According to Anthony F. Janson, the art historian whose book I'm using, art making requires an imaginative leap, a jump. There's a moment of intuition...

PG: Cave graffiti satisfied a need for representation. Art began to satisfy a need for cultural memory, but the industrial revolution diminished this need. With the advent of photography, the need for painting as a means of representation profoundly decreased. The industrial revolution in art happened in the 1920s with Man Ray and Duchamp.

AB: People point to Futurism as the first 20th century avant-garde art movement, and the Futurists were obsessed with machinery.

PG: Futurist paintings captured the feeling of the movement of machines, but I've never been a big fan of the Futurists. I see them as more important in terms of the revolution that led to Man Ray and Duchamp, Kosuth and Weiner, and then all the art from the 1990s in which the image becomes dominant. Then, at the end of the 20th century, there was a new industrial revolution in communication. I remember when I first moved to America 10 years ago I would call my mother once a week on Sundays, and that three or four-minute call cost me \$10. Now you can talk to China for six hours for 15 cents, and you can send any image you need over the Internet at no cost. I think the revolution in communication created a massive exchange of images, making them more ubiquitous than ever. Again, we've reached a moment in which artists must reevaluate their role.

AB: What about the dematerialization of the art object in the 1960s?

PG: That wasn't a poetic choice; it was a political one. Nowadays, it's a different contest. We don't need representation anymore and we don't need images anymore. We need a new art in the scale of life. Art should match the astonishing casinos in Vegas!

AB: Are you talking about art as spectacle? Entertainment does it so much better than art ever could. Art has to astonish in a way that isn't purely physical.

PG: Like the Watts Towers, Dodger Stadium or the eruption of a volcano? I stole the volcano example from Kant. I'm talking about the sublime. The eruption of a volcano is the most absolute example of the sublime for Kant, in the same way that the crowd at Dodger Stadium is an example of the sublime, or self-made monuments like the Watts Towers exemplify the sublime. Perhaps the sublime is to reality what the masterpiece is to art. Art should be connected to an experience of ecstasy. But please don't think that I am so naive or so full of myself. Maybe "breathless" is the word I'm looking for? It's all about the moment you get into the room. Don't you notice that in one second you instantly know whether it's good or bad? I've changed my opinion about art, whether I like something or I don't, but I've never had to change my opinion about whether it's good or bad - it's something you can smell. Francesco Clemente told me that once, when he was having dinner with Warhol and some other friends in Amalfi, the power went out, and he could *feel* where Warhol was in the room. That day he realized Warhol was the biggest of all of them, because he could feel his presence in the dark space. I know those guys were doing a lot of drugs, but I really believe that when I drive through New Mexico, I can feel Bruce Nauman!

AB: Did you hear he's going to be the next Venice Biennale artist for America?

PG: He deserves it.

AB: Did you like Gonzalez-Torres at the Biennale?



PG: I love the poster with the empty pillow that he made when his boyfriend died (*Untitled*, 1991). I think the two synchronized clocks they have at MoMA, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1991), is fantastic. You know I really don't normally get so excited by art. Fuck! But I remember that room at MoMA with *Perfect Lovers*, the chessboard by Orozco with all the horses, the white and gold Boetti embroidery of the thousand longest rivers in the world and a very good Matta-Clark. It's like the Michael Asher show that was up recently [at the Santa Monica Museum of Art]. It just seemed so seamless, like the transfer between art and life was almost nothing. There was no noise in the transfer. We owe a lot to artists like Asher, Beuys, James Lee Byars, Warhol and Allan Kaprow.

AB: Talking about art and life, I know you're planning to buy a gold mine with Pierre Huyghe. I also heard that you guys are going to produce a musical about it? I'm very curious about this project, especially the logistics and details.

PG: It's all about the experience. That is something that Pierre and I share. For a long time we've been talking about going to Alaska to look for gold. We postponed the trip for a year or two. Then, when Pierre was in L.A., we decided to buy our own gold mine here. After that, things shaped themselves. We thought, "Where the fuck are we going to get the money for this gold mine?" So we decided to produce a musical in Las Vegas about the story of the mine in order to fund the project. That's how everything started.

AB: Will you and Pierre write the songs?

PG: We have no idea what will happen. We'll start by opening an office for the mining company in Los Angeles and go from there.

AB: So opening an office is the first step. When is it going to open?

PG: Soon.

AB: When?

PG: We are trying to focus on 'now.'

AB: Where will it be located?

PG: We want a prime location, like a high-rise building. We're looking for something very specific, so it is not going to be easy to find the right place. We're considering Century City and downtown L.A. as possible search areas. It has to be magic.

AB: What's the musical going to be called?

PG: I don't know. What do you think about "Gold Diggers?"

AB: For Vegas, it can work! How much money will you need?

PG: Around \$6 million.

AB: When's the musical going to open?

PG: I don't know, and I'm very happy about that! It means we are still alive.

AB: \$6 million is a monumental amount of money.

PG: Yes, I agree! I'm very interested in the monumental.

AB: It's funny, because of the recent show at the New Museum called "Unmonumental." It seems that Rosalind Krauss sees the monument as a modernist gesture, feels that the last true monuments were modernist gestures.

PG: I've been thinking a lot about this. At the moment, many artists are making larger and larger works, but almost none are truly monumental. Monumentality has something to do with time and eternity. Art *should* be monumental.

AB: To me, the monumental artist currently *en vogue* is Richard Serra. In L.A., for example, I went to two openings at two different cultural spaces - one was at the Broad Art Center at UCLA and the other was at Segerstrom Hall in Orange County - and each

featured a *Torqued Ellipse*. The Broad Contemporary Art Museum spent almost their entire \$10 million acquisitions gift from Eli Broad on a single Richard Serra piece. It seems that every time they open a big building, and unsavory businessmen sit around the table to ask themselves, "What should we get for an art work in the plaza? What would be a real crowd pleaser?" they slap their hands together and exclaim "Richard Serra!"

PG: I love Richard Serra.

AB: Really?

PG: Yes. When they decided to rebuild the border wall between the U.S. and Mexico, I submitted a project to the Border Protection Agency. I wanted to build this Richard Serra-style steel wall with a series of passageways that randomly open once a month for only a few minutes! But I never got any answer. And remember, as I told you before, I also love Jeff Koons.

AB: If I were to associate you with other artists, Richard Serra and Jeff Koons wouldn't exactly jump to mind.

PG: That means I have to work harder.

AB: One last question: You mentioned earlier that it's reality that tempers the work of art for you, and that within that there is an element of chance, because letting reality shape the work means that reality can really fuck things up. Are you ever worried by this element of chance?

PG: Do you know that [French Enlightenment philosopher] Blaise Pascal considered faith to be a risk? He compared having faith to a kind of gambling.

When reality shapes things and chance is involved, anything can go wrong, but if that is what naturally happens, it will still be good. It's not really about chance - or, better, it is *only* about chance. It's the life of a gambler. If I make it, I'll make it big. But if I fuck up, I fuck up big, and it will be too embarrassing to be alive. It's true!

- Andrew Berardini

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Piero Golia and Fabian Marti

ISTITUTO SVIZZERO DI ROMA

Italian artist Piero Golia and Swiss artist Fabian Marti conceived of their collaboration "Ruins, Regrets and Visible Effects" in an ingenious way: an exhibition on two levels, where the main attraction was the membrane joining the inner and outer areas of an elaborate installation—a liminal space reminiscent of a "third landscape," a netherworld between natural environment and artificial construction, as formulated by landscape architect Gilles Clément. A twisting architecture of plywood arches, columns, and tunnels—designed by Marti in consultation with Golia—unraveled, like catacombs rising to the surface. The walls were colored in five different tones, reproducing the plays of shadow generally created by exhibition spotlights. The resulting environment was disorienting, not only in its initial impact, but even upon further observation.

The architectural structure became both support and container. The exterior of this armature displayed photographic works from Marti's series "To Be Titled under the Influence," 2009, as well as ceramics created in situ during his residency at the Swiss Institute in Rome. These are objects with defined but malleable forms—distorted vases, but also ashtrays and a large dog striking a pose (*TINMLO MZL IOM RF MJTJSM*, 2009). Foregrounding the originally soft material, the artist allows his process to remain apparent: Signs of manipulation are visible and any equilibrium appears precarious. The sculptures were scattered around the structure, covered in comprehensible writing (the titles of the works), and thus attested to Marti's tenacious display of expressive freedom, an optimistic openness to free association. A duality based on the use of superimposition prevails in both the sculptures and the photographs. While the sculptures, with their black-and-white palette and glazed surfaces, become akin to images of the objects they represent, the photographs instead tend toward a sense of three-dimensionality. Combining found images or his own pictures into collages of unrelated scenes (their surfaces sometimes



Piero Golia and Fabian Marti, 2009.

covered in dust), Marti digitally scans the resulting arrangements to create photographic images of spatial ambiguity, playing with our sense of depth.

A roughly two-foot-wide opening in one of these photographs led inside the structure; crawling into the shadows amid the odor of wood, one came upon seven hidden works by Golia. The viewer unexpectedly confronted pieces such as *19 Mercedes Hood Stars Ring*, 2005, a framed, circular chain of Mercedes-Benz hood stars, and *Concrete Cube with Juicer*, 2007, a Philippe Starck fruit juicer set in concrete with its legs protruding, all created recently but rarely or never exhibited. The arrangement formed an atemporal passage through this artist's oeuvre, removed from the context of Marti's formal references to the early twentieth-century avant-gardes, with their allusions to the scientific and the subcultural. Rather, Golia's sequestered work turned inward, toward a personal past, one culled from the oxymorons and artifacts of American popular culture. Not only visible but also invisible ruins, a kind of postindustrial melancholy, remained.

—Francesco Stocchi

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

NEW YORK TALES

CHAIN REACTIONS

Andrea Bellini

THE BODY

NEW YORK is a city that feeds on chain reactions, a place of excessive — and often directionless — energy. Take, for example, Performa 05, the first biennial dedicated to performance, conceived and curated by RoseLee Goldberg. From November 3rd to November 21st, performances, concerts, video projections, and conferences took place all around the city in close succession. It was a performance even for the audience itself, jostled back and forth in the hunt for secret dinners, converted churches and private studios. It was almost impossible to follow everything in the program, and perhaps not even necessary. Ultimately, this first edition of Performa succeeded through the vitality it was able to generate thanks to the dedication of a small team which not only organized the

program but also collected the funds needed to make it a reality. Performa's significant events could be counted on one hand — which isn't necessarily a critique: the most interesting works often must be discovered amidst chaos and quantity. Memorable events included Jasper Just's hyper-technological live performance at Stephan Weiss Studio; the group exhibit "24-Hour Incidental" at the Swiss Institute, featuring works by Peter Coffin, Piero Golia, Annika Eriksson, Yoko Ono, etc.; the experimental music inspired by Christian Marclay at Eyebeam; Gelatin's improbable object-copying machine at Leo Koenig; and the Bas Jan Ader film retrospective at Anthology Film Archives. But it was Marina Abramovic who literally sacrificed herself on the altar of Performa 05. For seven nights in a row at the Guggenheim Museum, from 5pm to midnight, the artist

realized seven different performances during which she put her physical and mental fortitude to the test. In the first five, she interpreted famed historical works by Bruce Nauman (*Body Pressure*, 1974), Vito Acconci (*Seedbed*, 1972), Valie Export (*Action Pants: Genital Panic*, 1969), Gina Pane (*The Conditioning, first of three phases in 'Self-Portrait(s)'*, 1973), and Joseph Beuys (*How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965). On the sixth day, Abramovic chose instead to perform a dramatic, physically trying work of her own from 1975 (*Lips of Thomas*), and on the seventh she presented a new work, *Entering the Other Side* (2005). Abramovic's rigorous body art marathon confronted art history in a fascinating attempt to depersonalize acclaimed performances, associated from the outset with their authors, in order to assert them as true classics.



AMUSING ONESELF TO DEATH

While Abramovic rescued a few renowned works from the past, Mike Kelley, at Gagosian Gallery, chose instead to revive old, largely insignificant photographic images from which he extracted a genuine popular epic. The entire exhibition at Gagosian hinges on a gesture of appropriation: Kelley initially compiled and faithfully reproduced a series of photos of high school students engaged in extracurricular activity. From these images found in high school yearbooks he derived dozens of videos, complete with soundtracks and numerous sculptures-cum-stagesets. The resulting show is a kind of musical inspired by popular American rituals — a grandiose carnival which contains everything from Halloween to Satanic imagery, from religion to Goth culture. Kelley has created a Wagnerian epopee adapted for Midwestern culture: an unsettling world in which the line between fact and fiction, myth and reason, individual memory and collective illusion is often blurred. Kelley's complex theatrical machine is at once a colorful world bubbling with life and a desert of lost souls, dancing on the brink of the abyss.

Just down the block, an exhibit at Andrea Rosen Gallery examines the relationship between drawing and writing. The gallery is filled to the ceiling with works, and while some time is required to view them all, the effort is well worth it. Among drawings by Johns, Ruscha, Kline, etc., a few surprises emerge which make this exhibition one of the most refined in its category. For example, one notices a map on the wall by the Neapolitan Futurist Francesco Cangiullo, inventor of the 'humanized alphabet' and an acclaimed practitioner of 'words-in-freedom,' followed by a small drawing by Giacomo Balla and a work by Alighiero e Boetti from the 1970s. Memories from the 1970s are also to be seen at Sean Kelly, with Rebecca Horn's "Twilight Transit" exhibition. The show provides the perfect opportunity to see the videos documenting her first performances, in which she explored the relations between the body and the object. Wearing various strange prostheses, such as long fingers and butterfly wings, the artist experimented an evocative process of bodily transformation. The installation in the main space of the gallery proves less interesting, however: a series of mechanisms, skulls, mirrors and lights allude to the vanities, but the work is lacking in both conceptual and formal complexity.

HISTORY AS CHAOS

Tom Friedman at Feature Inc. continues to revive banal items through the use of cunning craftsmanship, transforming them into fragile and delicate sculptures. In his latest solo show, Friedman presents his trademark surreal inventions — and some



From top: REBECCA HORN, *Twilight Transit*, 2005. View of the exhibition. Courtesy of Sean Kelly; GABRIEL OROZCO, *Table*, 2005. Mixed media, 84 x 229 x 342 cm each table. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery. Photo: John Berens; YAYOI KUSAMA, *Pumpkin Chess*, 2003. Hand-painted porcelain, leather and wood display case, 73 x 109 cm. Courtesy of Luhring Augustine. Opposite: MARINA ABRAMOVIC performing *Lips of Thomas* (1975) at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2005. Photo: Kathryn Carr. © The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

do indeed succeed in attaining a special state of grace, inventive beauty and lightness. The overall outcome, however, is unconvincing: when considered as an ensemble spread throughout the gallery's two rooms, his tinkerer's tricks leave a bitter aftertaste, more like the fruit of a pretentious, foolish game. The artist is at his best when he works in a limited space and follows precise reasoning, as evidenced by his chess set, featured in the "Art of Chess" exhibition at Luhring Augustine. Dealing with chess pieces, Friedman unleashes his imagination and conjures an efficient, internally coherent series of curious inventions. While his chess set comprises an ensemble of clever finds, Paul McCarthy's is the result of a more natural gesture. McCarthy produced a classically beautiful chessboard by simply gathering up everyday objects: an ashtray with a cigarette butt, a ketchup bottle, a jar of cream. Rachel Whiteread's chess set is unexpectedly playful in its allusions to modernism, while Maurizio Cattelan's — full of strange characters, from Che Guevara to Hitler — reveals a conception of 'history as chaos.'

Gabriel Orozco also proves capable of installing an entire show on a tabletop. Yet, rather than playing with the paroxysmic transformation of the object, he proceeds

like a wizard, working with fresh combinations and chance events. At Marian Goodman Gallery, on the south side of the gallery, Orozco presents a generous sampling of small sculptures made during the last five years — from ceramic vases to found objects, like the series of seashells which he has delicately covered with odd, colorful geometric drawings — all arranged on two tables. Orozco's merit resides in the simplicity of his gestures, combined with a keen eye for materials and unexpected juxtapositions. But his strengths are not on display with the latest geometric abstracts paintings, which look all too familiar. Despite purported allusions to tantric and phenomenological models, the painting is static, diminishing the inventive scope and refined lightness typical of this Mexican artist.

UNCHARTED LANDS

The winner of the international competition for the new World Trade Center, Daniel Libeskind, is currently exhibiting an anthology of projects at Max Protech. While the architectural sketches have all the strengths of a visionary imagination, in more ambitious drawings Libeskind gives the impression of trying to play the artist. Uncharted lands naturally contain such

pitfalls, and Shirin Neshat falls into the same trap at Barbara Gladstone Gallery, with her film *Zarin*. The story, inspired by Shahrnush Parsipur's "Women Without Men," follows the gradual physical and mental deterioration of a young prostitute. By now, Neshat possesses all the professional equipment and know-how she could need — the photography is flawless, the directing shrewd — yet the final product is unoriginal. Venturing into narrative cinema can be risky, and the Iranian artist is most moving when the symbolic order to which she refers maintains an openness to interpretation. Among this season's young painters, it is worth mentioning David Kory at Greene Naftali Gallery. The Los Angeles artist employs a complex vocabulary — replete with references to Bonnard, Vuillard, and occasionally even Munch — yet manages to avoid getting bogged down in easy allusions. Kory transforms these diverse sources of inspiration into his own vocabulary of diaphanous landscapes and transfigured city views. ■

Andrea Bellini is U.S. editor for Flash Art.

PIERO GOLIA, *Untitled (Time Travelling)*, 2005. Performance at the Swiss Institute (the artist sleeping in the exhibition space for twenty-four hours). Courtesy of the artist.



May 3, 2009

In Los Angeles, Art That's Worth the Detour

By JORI FINKEL

LOS ANGELES

At night, it's bright enough to stop traffic. One minute cars are buzzing along Wilshire Boulevard between Fairfax and La Brea. The next they slow to a crawl, even though the stoplight is green. The attraction? An art installation consisting of some 200 salvaged cast-iron lampposts from the 1920s and '30s arranged in formation at the new entrance of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Come dusk, the lamps turn on and create a sort of flying carpet of light.



Photo: Stephanie Diani for The New York Times

Chris Burden, the artist who created the installation, "Urban Light," has compared his work to an open-air building, about the size of his studio. The museum's director, Michael Govan, has compared it to the Parthenon. It is, in any event, art on the scale of architecture. And since its introduction last year, it has become a leading example of a type of public art growing more prominent in Los Angeles: art you don't have to leave the comfort of your convertible to experience.

Although downtown Los Angeles still boasts the city's densest concentration of traditional public art — the sort of sculpture that dresses up corporate lobbies and courtyards — less likely spots in the greater metropolitan area have become home to what one could call drive-by art. A casual tour shows that this art takes many forms, going well beyond the celebrated mural tradition long associated with the city.

Two years ago, the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama planted a bed of overgrown, colorful fiberglass and ceramic tulips in a Beverly Hills park, visible from Santa Monica Boulevard and Rodeo Drive. Last year, the American artists Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger infiltrated the Sunset Strip among other locations with billboards (in Ms. Kruger's case, a video billboard), temporarily inserting their works into a thicket of movie ads, marquees, placards and other signage. This winter, the New York artist Jacob Hashimoto unveiled an aluminum-tile, tapestrylike sculpture made for the facade of the Andaz Hotel in West Hollywood, while the ubiquitous street artist Shepard Fairey created a huge mural of Lance Armstrong on the side of the Montalban Theater in Los Angeles to kick off the cyclist's coming Nike-sponsored benefit project with various A-list artists.

And this month, the Italian-born, California-based artist Piero Golia is placing an aluminum sphere atop the Standard Hotel, also in West Hollywood. The sphere will light up whenever Mr. Golia is in town and go dark when he is not — providing, he said, “a secret communication code” for friends curious about his whereabouts and something of a cipher for passers-by. “Maybe a commuter who drives past it every day will decide that it lights up on sunny days, or on rainy days — it’s a form open to urban legend,” Mr. Golia added.



Photo: Photo simulation courtesy of the artist and Laxart Public Art Initiatives

The globe should, he said, be visible from several blocks away. “I think in a way more or less everybody will see it, but I don’t know who will notice it.”

The globe is not the only artwork here designed to make drivers do a double-take in their rear-view mirror. While some public artworks announce themselves prominently, in the spirit of the Hollywood sign perched high above the city or Simon Rodia’s soaring monuments of Watts Towers, others, like Mr. Golia’s, are in a sense camouflaged by their surroundings. They are artistic gestures that can blend into or complicate their environments, more along the lines of Tony DeLap’s powerful but often unnoticed steel beam from 1990 that arches over Wilshire Boulevard where Santa Monica borders Brentwood. Such artworks can be mistaken for architectural elements, city infrastructure, signage or advertising. (Or, as with Mr. Fairey’s new mural, which sports a small Nike logo, the projects can visibly bridge art and commerce from the start.)

This sort of ambiguity creates a challenge for anyone working on public art projects in the urban sprawl that is Los Angeles. “How do you insert contemporary art into a landscape already saturated with so many commercial signs?” asked Emi Fontana, a former Milan gallerist who commissioned the projects by Ms. Sherman and Ms. Kruger last year under the auspices of her nonprofit public art firm, West of Rome.

She compares today’s driver in Los Angeles to the flâneur in Baudelaire’s Paris — the poetic soul who strolls through a city in order to take it all in. “The difference with cars,” she said, “is that the speed changes the aesthetic experience of the city. Instead of Baudelaire’s city of modernity, L.A. is really a city of supermodernity.”

In the case of Ms. Sherman billboards, which featured Hollywood-inspired images from the artist’s celebrated “Untitled Film Stills” series and were placed near actual movie billboards, the line between art and entertainment was deliberately blurred. With Ms. Kruger’s video, which ended with a visual message to “please stop texting” (before the state passed a law to this effect), the artist co-opted a bold direct-address technique associated with advertising to make motorists sit up.

Lauri Firstenberg, the curator who facilitated Mr. Golia’s project through her nonprofit gallery LAX Art, has also worked with artists drawn to billboards “as a mode of public address; they’re interested in playing with the language of advertising,” she said. She has produced temporary billboards by Mark Bradford, Daniel Joseph Martinez, Ruben Ochoa and other artists who seek to reach beyond the typical gallery audience.

More recently, she produced a billboard by Raymond Pettibon, still up on Sunset Boulevard, featuring his 1989 drawing of a man walking, hunched over, away from the viewer. Above him the text reads, "I thought California would be different."

Ms. Firstenberg said that Los Angeles was only now finding its footing in terms of public art. "There is still so much that can be done here," she said. "I think aside from the muralist tradition, the history of public art here is just not as rich or ripe as New York, Chicago, Paris or London."

New York, for example, had a wealth of public art (mainly monuments commemorating civic leaders and Civil War heroes) before it had a wealth of museums. And the city now has two major nonprofit groups in this sphere, Public Art Fund and Creative Time. Founded in the 1970s, both have raised money for artists' projects, lobbied politicians and worked within municipal building codes for decades.

Los Angeles does not have equivalent organizations. But the city has a "one percent for art" program, overseen by the Department of Cultural Affairs, that requires developers of large projects to spend a fraction of their buildings' value on art. And it has a new crop of contemporary art curators like Ms. Firstenberg and Ms. Fontana who are willing to work within the system, however bureaucratic. It has, for instance, taken Mr. Golia's team of engineers and architects two years and several plan revisions to meet local building codes, turning Ms. Firstenberg, in her own estimation, from "an idealist into a realist."

Another major player is Merry Norris, an art consultant who says that her commissions can run over five years "with many starts and stops." She oversaw the Hashimoto sculpture for the Andaz hotel as well as a 2007 April Greiman mural (of a super-sized bowl of rice) on the facade of a building in Koreatown, typically working with developers under the "one percent" program. She credits this municipal fee with "raising the level of activity" and "opening up numerous possibilities" for public art in the city.

Meanwhile, For Your Art, an event producer and public relations firm, is busy plotting out public art offerings for a new online map (foryourart.com). Bettina Korek, the founder of For Your Art, said she favored an online, easy-to-update format because the public art landscape evolves so quickly. She also spoke of organizing an event in June at the Kusama tulip sculpture to coincide with the Gagosian Gallery's bicoastal show of the artist. "We should all think of these sites," she said, "as places to hold events, to gather, to meet."

Of course, for some working in this realm, getting Angelenos to leave their cars is the ultimate sign of success. By that measure, Mr. Burden's "Urban Light" installation could already be considered a blockbuster. Cyclists use it as a meeting point; tourists use it as a place to pose. The museum found so many images of it cropping up on Flickr that it organized its own amateur photography contest this winter.

But Mr. Burden shares credit for the work's appeal, surmising that viewers are drawn to the ornate lamppost designs from Los Angeles in the 1920s and '30s out of nostalgia for a more optimistic period in California history.

"There was just no need to put this much work into a fixture when a telephone pole and a wooden arm would have done the trick," he said. "To me the lamps are a form of public art in themselves, making the infrastructure of the city so rich with design and ornamentation."

Piero Golia

Dreamer, realist

By Holly Myers

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It's not easy to get a straight answer out of Piero Golia. A spry, wiry Neapolitan with a full brown beard and eyes that rarely stop laughing, he is a consummate talker, given to rambling, heavily accented anecdotes that tend to bypass a question altogether, only to swing round and pick it up again at some unlikely moment, or else veer into a sort of philosophizing that eventually serves

to illuminate the question's fundamental irrelevance. His talk weaves sincerity and irony, audacity and self-deprecation in unpredictable measure, such that one never knows quite where one stands. It would be irritating, perhaps, if it were not so thoroughly entertaining.

When I first met Golia, last fall, and asked about his background, he replied: "I'm a chemical engineer. And then for money I became an artist. Yeah, it's weird because everybody does the opposite, I don't know why. Because it's like — I'm a loser, I can't do nothing else, and you have to make money. You work from home, so why not? I mean, the alternative is phone sex or making, you know, little bead necklaces. But China destroyed the market for working at home. India destroyed customer service and phone sex, so in America you can just be an artist."

The funny thing is that most of what he says turns out to be true, and it's typically the most outlandish stories he's especially serious about. Like, say, rowing across the Adriatic Sea to become the first illegal Italian immigrant in Albania. Or disappearing from New York, where he was living at the time, with nothing but a tremendous quantity of cash and getting his assistant to pose as his mother and convince the Italian consulate to investigate his whereabouts, only to reappear in Copenhagen a month later. (When I ask how he managed to cross the Atlantic without a passport, he replies simply: "bribery.") Or smashing a 35-foot bus down to the dimensions of a 20-foot booth at Art LA in January. Or opening a phony Beverly Hills office from which to produce a lavish Las Vegas musical in order to finance the acquisition of a gold mine in Nevada. (This last project, a collaboration with French artist Pierre Huyghe, is currently in the works — they've gotten as far as the office.)

Golia, who was born in 1974 and moved to L.A. six years ago, is the sort of artist the nonart world tends to shake its head at in bewilderment. His work eschews traditional media, hinges largely on the force of his personality and tends to involve large quantities of money, necessitating a coterie of indulgent dealers (he currently has five) and thriving in the rarefied world of the biennial (SITE Santa Fe and the Orange County Museum's California Biennial are the most imminent). "Conceptual bullshit," he (ironically?) characterizes it. As is often the case in his conversation, however, the logic tends to sweep around and land you somewhere you might not have expected — closer to life, in many ways, than to the hermetic sphere of the art world.

"When I went to Santa Fe, I got very depressed," he says. (Imagine this in a rolling, lilting Neapolitan accent.) "I saw this couple, they went into a store and they bought a painting. A shitty painting. They weren't art collectors, they just saw it in a window, like you see a sweater — you go in, you buy it, you leave. And that

made me very depressed because I was, like, no one will never fucking do this with my work. Like, who the fuck is going to pass by and say, 'Oh, dear, what do you think about this? That's so cool, let's get it home!'

"Then something weird happened. This Mexican guy who bought the bus promised me that he didn't know who the artist was when he bought the piece. He didn't ask nothing — nothing! So that was, like, Oh, maybe I'm not completely wrong. And that's what I like about the mine, the musical — they are completely readable. Like if you say to your cousin who doesn't give a fuck, who doesn't even know Jeff Koons, he's going to say, Well, fuck, maybe I can come to work in the mine! It's like Vegas, it completely belongs to reality, it's so weird — when fiction becomes more real than art, you know?"