



Opposite page: Joe Goode, *Calendar of Los Angeles Artists and Their Cars*, 1969, offset print on paper, 22½ x 14".

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The Difference Engine

LIAM GILLICK

1968 IS NOT JUST A SYMBOLIC MOMENT or subject for academic study: Students were massacred, peasants were slaughtered, political figures were removed by force. And for the past forty years, we have witnessed the reassessment of those events, such that the progressives of that time have often been attacked precisely because they undercut stable value systems throughout society. Or, more specifically, because they demanded that *difference*—the specificity of histories, identities, and desires—be acknowledged at all times. They believed that difference could and should be the primary marker of a creative and democratic society, to which end they claimed solidarity with others and developed new forms of meta-identification. Yet here it becomes clear why we might want an issue of *Artforum* on the occasion of the anniversary of May '68 as opposed to, say, the anniversary of the end of the Second World War or that of the collapse of the Berlin Wall: The revisions of 1968 were both institutional and personal in nature. Amid a postwar, cold-war situation defined by class-ridden, hierarchical stasis (punctuated by explosive but isolated expressions of defiance), some individuals believed that a better set of human relationships would emerge from the permanent reassessment of positions, rather than from any singular event. That is what was fought for: a multiplication of sensitivity and doubt. And so 1968 extends beyond its boundaries, reaching out in both directions, past and future, at the same time that it cannot be discussed in political or aesthetic terms alone.

In fact, 1968 was the last instance of major change within the art context, supplying us with the critical tools we still use today. When we consider the battles over various models of theory and practice that have taken place since, it is clear that every reassessment of artistic or institutional activity has been intimately connected to precise changes from that earlier time. And so it is likely of no small significance that, for those of us who grew up in the 1970s, our earliest curators, critics, and editors were the same people who had experienced the hopes and struggles of 1968—those individuals, in other words, who recognized that the same sense of obligation and desire to alter a deeply unjust society also demands a complete rethinking of art's status and function within it. The

sustained, self-conscious, critical thinking required for action in the world was necessarily a condition for action in art; both modes of address depended on a new awareness of postcolonialism and feminism, as well as on a revised understanding of the relations of production in the face of increasing corporate power. Many institutional frameworks in art today might attempt to veil this fact, yet all of them reflect an implicit recognition of the lessons of this earlier period nonetheless. The most established museums have education programs dedicated to reaching out to multiple publics. Indeed, even the troubled recent discussions about art markets are rooted in debates initiated some forty years ago: Questions of quality are agonized over, the terms of reference are mutable, and it is hard to find a clear correlation between market exchange and artistic significance. The multifaceted language required for negotiating these configurations was arrived at in the years following '68.

Because 1968 was supposed to be about engaging real structures and not vague promises, the emergence of a new art at that time revolved around asking precise questions about organization and exchange. From that point on, a structural rethinking of cultural connections would have to be taken into account in order to understand any "work." Lawrence Weiner is exemplary in this context. His practice, essentially defined in that year with *Statements*—a sixty-four-page book containing descriptions of twenty-four works, both "general" and "specific" in premise—proposed a way to image new relationships between objects and objects and between objects and people. The artist grasped the profound potential of a praxis (rather than practice) pertaining to multiple specific locations rather than to the physical presence of an art object alone. In avoiding determination by any particular place or physical requirement, Weiner made a point about all art. At the same time, he was also putting forward a horizontal approach in keeping with the breakdown of cultural and social hierarchies.

This points to another complex legacy of 1968: a shift in our attention from relationships among human beings toward those relationships between all human beings and the environment. Ecology is now the "acceptable" terrain for political activism, even while the green movement was developed by key '68 figures. (For



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LARRY BELL



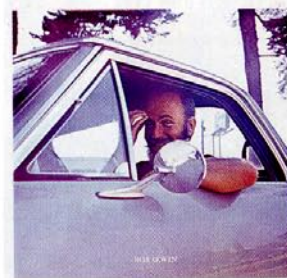
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LARRY BELL



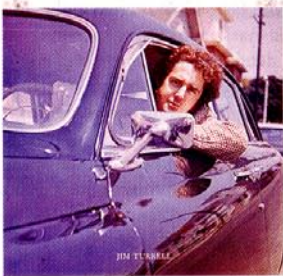
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LARRY BELL



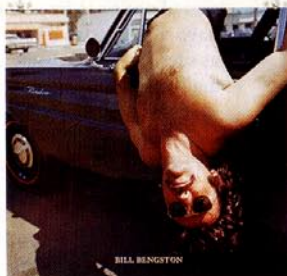
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LARRY BELL



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JIM TURRELL



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BILL BENNETT



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BILL BENNETT



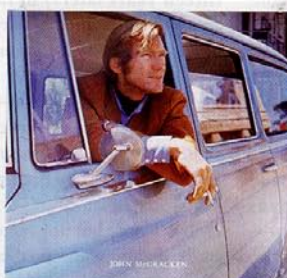
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BILL BENNETT



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PETER ALEXANDER



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JOHN McLAUGHLIN



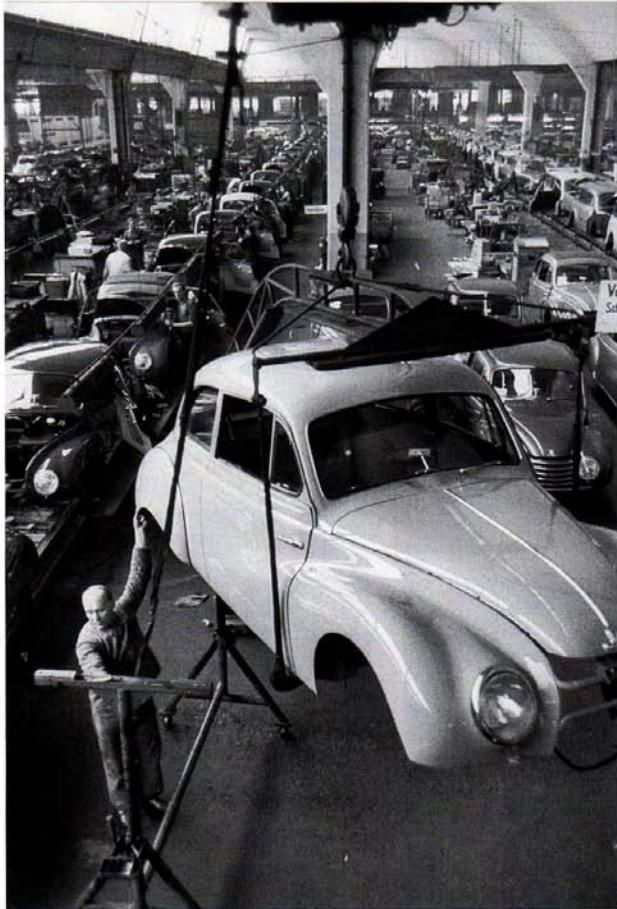
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RON DAVIS



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BOB LAMOTTE



This page: A 1954 Opel car being manufactured by DkW Auto Works, Düsseldorf, December 1, 1953. Photo: Ralph Crane/Getty Images. Opposite page: The Latin Quarter after a night of fighting between students and riot police, Paris, May 1968. Photo: Bruno Barbey.

instance, former German vice chancellor Joschka Fischer, who played a crucial role in bringing green politics to the center of power in Europe, had been a member of the group Revolutionary Struggle in the late '60s.) Understandably, few artworks from 1968 anticipate this move from political to environmental consciousness, and those that did so seem prescient only in retrospect.

Consider an apparently innocent, celebratory project executed by Joe Goode in 1968 in Los Angeles, for which he took photographs of friends in their vehicles and then used the images as the basis for a calendar. The endeavor now seems an indirect but consequential addition to the more direct actions of the time. For Goode does not claim to be at the center of the action. He isn't on the steps of the National Autonomous University of Mexico or on the streets of Paris. Rather, he merely shows Larry Bell, Ed Ruscha, James Turrell, and others in their trucks and cars (there are at least two Porsche coupes). The calendar—modest, precise, and produced by the artist—is a representation of fact and function, a display for the merging of art and the everyday, featuring a specific community as a contingent artwork. As such, it is a work that revolves around exposing “relationships as context” and has an immediate and pragmatic use value: Despite the lack of progress reflected in Goode's choice of artists (all men, all white), his project both reveals the general mood of the time and, as a functional representation—a marker of the near future—points to a novel set of concerns. On the one hand, the images suggest a degree of contentment during a moment of profound change; but on the other, they suggest that even artists

living in the soft glow of Californian smog, aware of radical changes under way, thought it necessary to reassure everyone that there would be a 1969 at all. After all, the car—that great symbol of postwar affluence—had by that time become an object of protection and destruction at once. Automobiles were being torched and used for barricades on streets throughout the world. Those radicalized in 1968 would turn to the car factories of the '70s as potential sites for raising class consciousness and bringing about revolution. (Notably, Fischer himself worked at German carmaker Opel—part of General Motors since 1929—as an activist on the production line.) Since then, car production and acquisition have remained contested sites of nationalist projection; have represented notional freedom in the face of an increasingly controlling state; and have continued to be aesthetic markers of tastes and values—all while enduring as sites for class struggle and identification in the face of corporate consolidation and the rise and fall of state support. Today, car production is, even more than ever, deeply ingrained in our anxieties about the planet and yet remains a stylized projection.*

1968 also taught us to be profoundly skeptical about the notion of specific turning points and singular histories: Self-consciousness extended to a questioning of all apparently significant historical events, whether the traditionally celebrated discovery of an already inhabited land or the previously accepted dates of a revolutionary moment or other cultural achievement. More significant than the matter of history in the wake of '68, however, is the question of time. As artist Philippe Parreno has suggested elsewhere, it would have been better if the progressive forces of the past had expended more effort occupying time rather than space. For if the Left occupied the universities and the factories, then the Right nonetheless always seemed to have time on their side. After all, didn't President de Gaulle merely wait for May '68 to blow over? (Similarly, didn't Prime Minister Thatcher carefully time her showdown with British coal miners fifteen years later?) In fact, a paradoxical influence of 1968 in the cultural sphere is a result of its very alteration of human relationships and abandonment of concrete institutional representations of stability: Conservative institutions were perhaps no longer uncontested centers of power or sole possessors of meaningful discourse—but they were still free to continue as before. Correlatively, in the art context, one notes that efforts to provide alternative structures were always presented in the form of space rather than that of time. Indeed, *alternative* became synonymous with *space*, a zone strictly for temporary occupation.**

It is ironic but not surprising that a destabilization of power—brought about by challenging accepted histories and by the self-consciousness of actors within the cultural field—would lead to a general shift to the right in the political main-

* Goode's calendar established the timetable for a complex set of future semiotic negotiations that arguably peaked in art with Richard Prince at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York almost forty years later.

** The anxiety attending this restriction on alternative spaces of the '80s and early '90s was taken explicitly as the subject of Christian Bernard and Eric Troncy's 1991 exhibition “No Man's Time” at the Villa Arson in Nice, France, which featured Parreno's short video *No More Reality II (La Manifestation)*, from the same year. Depicting a large group of seemingly unattended children carrying banners and chanting, “No more reality,” the piece can be read as a collective projection to an earlier period, when the articulation of desire within the cultural frame might not pertain solely to the pragmatic reallocation of space.



The very reason for 1968's becoming a subject here is its status as an essentially discursive and contested moment. This fact means that we don't have to resolve the normal conservative criticism that only a few experienced 1968. As with the most dynamic, socially structured art today, the question of how many people are "present" is not the point.

sciousness. The project is inevitably incomplete. Closure is a denial of critical potential and means a return to "reality," and we don't need to read György Lukács to know where that project ends up. But even just twenty years ago, I didn't imagine that we would currently be wondering about poorly represented demographic difference within art exhibitions or looking at the same old systems of structure and control—that the notion of working collectively might still be problematic to assess within art school systems or that art fairs would have become a dominant model of exchange.

Many people feel alienated from the art context precisely because they imagine it to be a field of supersubjectivity and excessive self-consciousness around identity, or even one of tokenism. The fact that "we" know that this is not the whole story does not mean that the project of "making things right" is over. 1968 was the ideologically expressed version of extended adolescence that starts with the Nouvelle Vague, moves through the Rolling Stones, and continues with the contemporary recognition that we must still provide and maintain experimental spaces. 1968 took place in the center of what we now call the postwar/cold-war period, twenty years after the end of World War II and twenty years before the end of the Soviet Union. It provided us with the ability to articulate parallel questions to "ourselves and others" about the status of art, ideas, and connections within the culture. Increased differentiation and reconfigured models of our connections to one another and to the environment—ecological awareness, in other words—are processes that produce new relationships rather than clearly definable results. Indeed, the very reason for 1968's becoming a subject in this magazine is its status as an essentially discursive and contested moment. This fact means that we don't have to resolve the normal conservative criticism that only a few experienced 1968. As with the most dynamic, socially structured art today, the question of how many people are "present" is not the point. In this case, the increasing specificity of work and the increasing multiplication of events operate with parallel potential. Presence or absence is sublimated by a particular combination of social momentum, individual dynamics, intense self-critique, and a constant assessment of how close one may or may not be to the center of action.

And herein might lie our problem today. Much in the way that it did for Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin when they were directing *Tout va bien* in 1972—a film operating as a parodic exposé of the battles and desire of its recent past—for us the idea that a moment in time can promise potential is an enduring mirage that accounts for 1968's schizophrenic lure. The idea that all relationships have to be reassessed and that a permanent form of self-conscious critique has to replace and challenge the hierarchies of the past is a project that still exists as an analytic phantom structure, one that will keep returning as long as specific power structures maneuver over the desire for true difference to be acknowledged and reproduced. Exhaustive, exhausting, and necessarily inconclusive, multiple expressions of 1968, whether conscious or unconscious, will have to suffice until the next coalition of discontent. □

VERSIONS OF LIAM GILLICK'S CAREER SURVEY, "THREE PERSPECTIVES AND A SHORT SCENARIO," RECENTLY APPEARED AT THE WITTE DE WITH CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART IN ROTTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS, AND AT THE KUNSTHALLE ZÜRICH; UPCOMING VENUES INCLUDE THE KUNSTVEREIN MÜNICH (JULY 25–SEPT. 21) AND THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, CHICAGO (OCT. 3, 2009–JAN. 3, 2010). AN EXHIBITION OF HIS WORK IS ALSO ON VIEW AT CASEY KAPLAN, NEW YORK, MAY 8–JUNE 14.

stream. Questioning hierarchies led to anxieties, opportunism, and genuine fear as traditional sites of production in the West were dismantled, and more zones of daily life (including the ecological field, with its emergent markets in carbon credits and green technologies) became absorbed within speculative models of exchange. Yet all this activity—which coincided with the end of the Soviet system and the growth of so-called consensus politics—has still taken place within a context where the necessity to recognize multiple identities and parallel histories has generally been accepted by all sides in developed parliamentary democracies. In art, this key dynamic and concept have led to a context that is, as Donald Judd predicted it would be, increasingly "specific." (For every artists' collective that offers information in lieu of a fourth estate no longer meeting its obligations, there is a small painting of a unicorn basking in the light of three glowing suns.) This matter is at the root of many anxieties about the legacy of 1968, because in some ways it is the most profound expression of difference: Post-nineteenth-century art has always been marked by a refusal to accept standard forms of representation and assessment; a deep skepticism of consensus is embedded in the modernist project of critical reflection, and yet this allows for an endlessly increasing ideological diversity (and what we might still call enlightened celebration of the other), since collective doubt finds articulation in multiplying expressions of the personal and the overtly political. The promise of 1968 is a system of systems that are mutually expressible even when some appear to transgress the more controlling model of third-way political con-