



Support Structures

Alice Könitz and LAMOA

After dark on the second Saturday of April, a small crowd on Occidental College's dimly-lit campus sat waiting for something to happen. Many of them knew each other—it had the ease of a friendly gathering. The group faced a 14-foot wide structure that could have passed for a tasteful shed. In fact, it was the Los Angeles Museum of Art (LAMOA), an exhibition structure with removable walls, built by artist Alice Könitz in 2012. At quarter past 8 p.m., artist Isabell Spengler and her collaborator, Priyanka Ram, emerged from behind the structure, both of them wearing handmade headdresses. Footage shot by Spengler played out across the museum's facade, showing a forest and a starlet (named Starlight, according to the press release) in a blue sleep mask, while Spengler and Ram provided a live soundtrack of electronic music and reverberating words whispered into microphones.

Inside, Spengler had divided LAMOA into two chambers, one light and one dark. Each held a vanity, a set of bejeweled slippers and a pack of "Hollywood" gum. A two-way mirror separated them. This snug world had the precision of a well-planned stage set, in contrast the loosely formed performance happening outside.

This is the second to last LAMOA show on Occidental's campus. After artist Neha Choski exhibits in May, Könitz will dismantle

the museum as she decides where, if anywhere, it should live next. When it does go into hibernation this summer, what we'll be missing is the quiet, constant reminder it's been for the past five years: that an art object can be inherently generous, built and maintained to support the practices of others.

LAMOA officially opened in December 2012, in the paved lot outside of Könitz's former Eagle Rock studio. Eight months prior, Könitz launched a fundraising campaign on Hatchfund.org, proposing a 9 x 14 foot space with removable walls, four skylights, solar panels, and bricks to elevate and protect it from potential rain. Artists would be "invited to present their work in a way that best suits them."

LAMOA arrived at a moment when art museums in Los Angeles were under intense scrutiny. LACMA had just invested in Michael Heizer's *Levitated Mass*, a \$10 million dollar monument centered around a big boulder, reaffirming its interest in the monolithically impressive (and inviting criticism of its use of resources). Chief curator Paul Schimmel had just left MOCA, and all the artist board members resigned in protest, thus—temporarily—ending the institution's run as an "artists museum," a title it acquired at its 1979 founding. In his thorough *Artforum* tribute to the Museum of Public Fiction (the now nomadic project Lauren Mackler started in Highland Park in 2010), Michael Ned Holte mentioned both LAMOA and the Underground Museum as "fellow micro institutions" that rose up during MOCA's period of apparent chaos, unhindered by "administrative bureaucracies and

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status-conscious boards.” They are “far more nimble” than typical museums.¹ “It’s not an answer to the problems that our big museums have, but it is an alternative,” Könitz told writer Travis Diehl in April 2013.² Her museum proposes that artists can validate each other’s projects by building platforms of their own, rather than waiting or angling for institutional attention.

The early LAMOA exhibitions on the lot outside Könitz’s studio tended to be modular, responding to and even mirroring the museum’s architecture. This gave the shows noticeable visual resonance with Könitz’s own studio work: rough-edged, often-functional objects that riffed lightly on mid-century design. Katie Grinnan’s *F.Y.I.* (2013), a neon-green metal infrastructure that vaguely resembled a jungle gym, held files Grinnan compiled with help of friends and family. Visitors could sit on purple exercise machine seats and read info organized by topic (“Bugs,” “Catasterism”). Shortly after, Sonia Leimer installed a series of metal tables, each smaller than the next, with intentionally dry collages of dollar bills or vintage buildings placed under glass surfaces. At the show’s end, Leimer and Könitz jumped through the breakaway glass they’d installed along LAMOA’s easternmost wall.

Events at the museum felt insular—this was a project for a community—but not pretentious. Openings could be like tailgates. Könitz also still posts all the press releases on a Wordpress blog where fonts change according to projects and functionality trumps polish.

Sometimes when artists open spaces, they necessarily hone their personas to best promote their projects. Or, as with Maurizio Cattelan and his satirically miniature

Wrong Gallery, the space becomes an extension of an artist’s persona. In Könitz’s case, her personal practice has become difficult to distinguish from LAMOA, as the museum itself is her work. When she participated in the Hammer Museum’s *Made in L.A.* biennial in 2014, LAMOA was listed in the program, not Könitz; she served as the museum proprietor. The \$100,000 Mohn Award, given to one artist in the biennial, went to the museum, according to the jury’s statement, which referred to Könitz as its creator, though the award also included the publication of a monograph chronicling her work since 1993.

Her 2016 solo exhibition at Commonwealth & Council in Koreatown—which she called *Commonwealth*, conflating her show with the space hosting it—did not include the museum but instead consisted of what she called “social, site-specific sculptures.” The night of the opening, a concierge manned the modular, geometric, Mondrian-colored kiosk in the main gallery, handing out snacks through perfectly round holes. In the gallery’s office, Könitz left behind *DS [Display System] #3* (2016), an attractive steel and glass display case that held colorful and clownish figurines by artist Paul Gellman (aka Tall Paul).

By this point, LAMOA had temporarily inhabited three different institutions. After its time at the Hammer in 2014, where it appeared more stationary and object-like than it did elsewhere, it moved to the Armory Center for the Arts. It lived inside the galleries there for six months, as part of an exhibition called *The Fifth Wall*, a show inside a show with its own “independent programming” (Olivia Booth hung glass cylinders from rods; Tobjorn Vejvi’s sculpted busts became the set

1. Michael Ned Holte, “Systems of Belief,” *Artforum*, February 2016.

2. As Told to Travis Diehl, “Alice Könitz talks about the Los Angeles Museum of Art,” *Artforum.com*, February 2, 2013, <https://www.artforum.com/words/id=39474>.

for a sound performance). At the start of 2015, LAMOA returned to a different lot in Eagle Rock—Könitz had left her former studio—and, in September 2015, it moved to the lawn outside the library at Occidental College (“award-winning work,” the college’s PR department called it in a public announcement).

Sitting outside on campus grass, it felt more like public art, incidental and not precious. In summer 2016, it hosted a performance by Paul Gellman based on his satirical memoir/script, *The Real Art Hangers of Cheviot Hills*. Ruby Neri built the accompanying installation, which mostly consisted of loosely painted Hellenic figures (chiseled nudes, angels). As part of Scott Cassidy’s installation of an inverted “white house” suspended from LAMOA’s roof, the museum hosted a comedy night. It wasn’t obvious how stand-up related to the show, except that Cassidy’s work is funny and his white house included little holes through which you could see dioramas: a bureaucratic machine built of cardboard boxes that said “no one cares.” Comedy night happened in Occidental’s amphitheater, and Cassidy’s wife, Maria Bamford of Netflix’ *Lady Dynamite*, headlined. Her semi-celebrity presence barely altered LAMOA’s small-scale, relaxed mood. Fans of the museum and friends of the performers attended; a few college students wandered in.

Since Könitz built LAMOA, the art world in Los Angeles has expanded to include four more collector-run museums and a growing number of transplanted blue-chip galleries from the East Coast and Europe. MOCA’s new regime hasn’t actually been as inclusive or rigorous as we’d dreamed—fashion designer Rick Owens; market-established Doug Aitken; Carl Andre; and two shows of work by

reenlisted board member, Cathy Opie. Alt spaces aren’t immune to the angling that growth invites. When Arturo Bandini started hosting shows in a Highland Park back lot, the setting had physical similarities to LAMOA’s early exhibitions: visitors found themselves behind a studio complex, looking at art in a shed-shaped construction. But within a year, Arturo Bandini was hosting a pseudo art fair of their own, facilitating market dynamics if from a satirical or alt position.

That LAMOA and its peers (the Museum of Public Fiction in particular) predated and perhaps anticipated this newest shift toward professionalism in our local scene makes their contributions more precious. The need for other platforms grows in proportion to the homogeneity that upward mobility invites. Certainly other alt and artist run spaces have contributed to a generous ethos in recent years (Chin’s Push comes to mind), but LAMOA was in itself built to make supporting each other structurally feasible.

In a 2014 interview, Könitz cited two artist-made museums as influences: Marcel Broodthaer’s Musée d’Art de Modern, an itinerant archive that fluctuated according to the artist’s whims; and Claes Oldenburg’s Mouse Museum, a Mickey-shaped structure that mostly held his own work.³ Both were experiments in taking on and reshaping power of the institution; neither relied that much on others. Broodthaers, for instance, played artist, curator, and director. LAMOA too has self-appointed authority and the agility to blur boundaries, but it wouldn’t have been nearly as interesting had it not morphed in response to many artists’ visions. The project, always limited by its founder’s network, may not be an

3. “Alice Könitz on micro museums and the Los Angeles Museum of Art,” *L.A. Forum, Delirious L.A.*, 2014, <http://alicekonitz.com/pages/la-forum-delirious-la-2014/>.





answer, as Könitz said four years ago, to the problems and exclusivities of our institutions. But if enough artists become infrastructure for the art worlds they believe in, such problems may become besides the point.

1

Sharp Elbows (2015)
(installation view). Image
courtesy of Los Angeles
Museum of Art.

2

Los Angeles Museum of Art
(2017) (installation view). Image
courtesy of the Hammer
Museum, Los Angeles.
Photo: Brian Forrest

3

Los Angeles Museum of Art
(2017) (installation view). Image
courtesy of the Hammer
Museum, Los Angeles.
Photo: Brian Forrest

4

Kelly Coats and Kathleen Kim,
Get Back (2014). Musical
performance, Los Angeles
Museum of Art at The Armory
Center for the Arts. Image
courtesy of Armory Center for
the Arts.

5

Gabrielle Jennings, *Start by
Discarding* (2016) (installation
view). Los Angeles Museum
of Art at Occidental College.
Image courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Rachel Bank.