

The Collaborative Art World of Norm Laich

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A commercial sign painter by trade, for over 30 years Norm Laich has been the go-to fabricator for artists who want text painted in their work and need it done right. Although Laich downplays his role, telling me he considers himself merely a “freelance production assistant,” those he works with are more generous. In a short documentary produced by Pauline Stella Sanchez to accompany an ICA LA show of work Laich has had a hand in, Scott Grieger—whose 1995 wall work *United States of Anxiety*, an ominous black outline of the U.S. map with the titular phrase written inside, is in the show—notes, “I don’t think of him as an assistant at all. I think of him as another artist I work with.”

The exhibition *This Brush for Hire: Norm Laich And Many Other Artists* at the ICA LA highlights works that Laich has produced with artists over the past few decades (and in turn takes visitors on a sort of art historical romp, showcasing works from movements like conceptualism and appropriation art through the current moment). Yet the works on view, freed from a rigid art historical framework, instead are recast under the vibrant narrative of collaboration. *This Brush* features a selection of contemporary artists, mainly from L.A.—including John Baldessari, Meg Cranston, Mike Kelley, Daniel Joseph Martinez, Amanda Ross-Ho, and several others—however the show doesn’t really belong to any of them.

Curated by Cranston and Baldessari, the show does more than

recognize one of the nameless, under-appreciated fabricators working behind the scenes. It challenges the hierarchical dichotomy between fine art and craft, between idea and labor. Straddling the gulf is Laich, who has been dancing between applied and fine arts throughout his career. In addition to craft and labor, art world professionalism and trade, *This Brush* also raises issues about originality, authenticity, and value. In structuring the show around a producer as opposed to a “creator,” the curators challenge the notion of solitary artistic genius, expanding the possible range of answers to the question, “Whose work is that?”

As a teenager growing up in Detroit in the early ’70s, Laich was told by an art teacher that artists had to have a side job. “I was looking at *Artforum* magazine, and I saw images of James Rosenquist. I found out he was a sign painter in Times Square painting billboards,” Laich told me in his unpretentious Midwestern drawl at the press preview for *This Brush*. “That inspired me to get a job in Detroit for commercial sign companies. That’s where I learned how to do signs.”

Eager to get out of Detroit (where he gripes that bowling was about the only thing to do), Laich went back to school and got a degree in arts management, thinking he could possibly run an arts organization. After graduating in the early ’80s, he was drawn to L.A.’s sun-bleached, low-slung sprawl rather than the brick and steel canyons of New York, which he felt was too similar to the industrial nature and climate of Detroit. Although Laich found Detroit creatively stifling, it was where he was first exposed to proto-punk bands like MC5 and the Stooges, inspiring an affinity for that music that would only deepen once he arrived in L.A. during that city’s punk heyday. (Mike Kelley, born the year before Laich, also emerged from the same Detroit milieu, where he started his own punk-tinged band, Destroy All Monsters!, before moving out West himself.)

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Laich started working for commercial sign companies when he arrived in L.A., but was also interning at the Museum of Contemporary Art, which had just opened. The sign company the museum had hired to do their exhibition graphics was too “flaky” says Laich, so they asked him to step in, hand painting exhibition titles and silk-screening curatorial didactic panels, an opportunity that would kickstart his own business.

Around that time he also began painting show titles for galleries, which is where artists first saw him working and asked him to start hand-painting text for them. It is significant and somewhat ironic that the first artists who recruited him were conceptual artists like Lawrence Weiner and John Baldessari; artists who had been at the forefront of a movement to dematerialize the art object two decades earlier were now seeking out a master craftsman to help them fabricate their works. Notably, Laich’s process—whereby he traces designs with a tool that punches small holes in a sheet of paper, then transfers the design by taping the paper to the wall and “pouncing” the design with a bag filled with charcoal dust—dates back to the Renaissance. (At an event in conjunction with Weiner’s 2008 MOCA retrospective, Laich was asked to do a live painting of one of Weiner’s signature phrases on stage. He tells me that he recalls hecklers in the audience jeering “Down with easel painting!”, a sentiment that he attributed to students from some of the more vigorously conceptually-oriented art schools in the area.) For the conceptual artists however, employing Laich was a way to remove *their* hand from the work, an attempt to shift focus from the physical connection between artist and artwork. For Baldessari, using an actual “painter” was a sly way to play devil’s advocate, to challenge the rules of the game by blindly adhering to them. In Stella Sanchez’s film, he notes that when artists incorporate painted signage into their work, “it legitimizes the work

if there’s real paint there. You can say it’s a painting.”

Several of these conceptually-based works are included in the ICA show, most notably Baldessari’s *A Painting That Is Its Own Documentation* (1966–1968), a series of canvases across which various sign painters have written the venue and dates of each exhibition in which the work has been included. Despite attempts at uniformity, there is a wide range of lettering styles on view in the work, and the side-by-side canvases are slightly differing shades of taupe. Laich has painted a few of the entries over the years, including the newest one, painted for this exhibition. This meta-artwork announces itself as an object in a very specific milieu, one whose history and provenance are inscribed upon its surface, spelled out by the anonymous hired guns of the art world, as opposed to hidden in the back pages of an artist’s monograph.

Weiner’s contribution to *This Brush, AS LONG AS IT LASTS* (2018), is applied in large lettering across the floor, and is one of the only works made from vinyl. A linguistic vanitas, the phrase conveys a matter-of-fact acceptance of the ephemerality that goes hand-in-hand with sign painting. Signs only last as long as they are useful. Once the business closes or they become too faded, they are whitewashed or repainted. Conservation is not a priority. After they are shown, Weiner’s vinyl works are surely de-installed in crumpled wads, and escorted to the nearest trash can.

On a much more intimate scale is Daniel Joseph Martinez’s *Divine Violence* (2007), a series of metallic gold panels, onto which Laich has handpainted in black the names of groups that use violence to achieve their political goals, from the Weathermen and the Ku Klux Klan to the Taliban and the Sudanese Janjaweed. Rendered in casual, straightforward lettering, the names are presented without judgment, organized into a mesmerizing glowing, gold grid.

The crown jewel of the show has to be Mike Kelley's *Proposal for the Decoration of an Island of Conference Rooms (With Copy Room) For an Advertising Agency Designed By Frank Gehry* (1991–1992). Initially commissioned by ad firm Chiat/Day as a design for their corporate headquarters, the work is a full-scale recreation of a five-room office space. Adorning the walls, are a series of crude, irreverent cartoons—the kind you might find hanging in a mail room or another blue collar enclave in a white collar institution—blown up and plastered around the conference rooms. “If assholes could fly this place would be an airport!” reads one. Another features a child on the toilet with a roll of toilet paper above the caption, “No job is finished until the paperwork is done!” Perhaps unprepared for the way Kelley upended corporate hierarchies, the firm decided not to go ahead with the project, but the piece soon popped up in Paul Schimmel's groundbreaking 1992 MOCA exhibition, *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*. For that show and this one, Laich and assistants painted each of the cartoons onto the cubicle walls, painstakingly replicating the look of photocopied degradation, now magnified.

In parallel with the ICA exhibition, another show in town refreshingly featured Laich's personal work (rather than the works he's fabricated for others). His exhibition, *CONDEMNED*, at the Highland Park artist-run gallery Animals With Human Rights, Humans With Animal Rights (AWHRHWAR), featured four paintings spanning almost 20 years, from 1992 to 2010. They convey Laich's dry, acerbic take on contemporary American life, subverting the legibility and general cheeriness of commercial sign painting (or advertising) in favor of a darker, less facile message.

Microsoft/Acropolis (1992) juxtaposes the ancient ruin with the familiar (then new) software company logo, perhaps standing in for the tension between analog artists like himself and a new breed of digital

designers. *Condemned* (2000) depicts a classic California ranch house above which hover three prohibition symbols, each enclosing a dollar sign. Below the house, a stencil typeface spells out “Condemned,” a blunt criticism of the American Dream, the limits of which would become all too clear less than a decade later in the 2007 real estate crash. *Black 5th of July* (2002) depicts an exploding firework, painted in stark black, pressing against the edges of a round white panel. Drained of color and theatrical awe, it captures the hollowness of jingoistic revelry. The most recent work included in the exhibition was *2010* (2010), which displays the year's numerals as decaying, distorted cyphers. Laich says that he found the source image for this work in an ad for a car dealership, in which the year was formed by clouds in the sky. “I started scanning and messing with them,” he told me at AWHRHWAR shortly after installing his show. Separated from their advertising origins and manipulated, “they started turning into bones. Whenever I see something weird like that happening, I know I should pursue it.”

In these works' direct and pointed critique of American exceptionalism and late Capitalism, there is a connection to Laich's punk roots in Detroit and L.A. Although his handiwork could be seen at three L.A. venues simultaneously this summer (he also worked with Gary Simmons to produce Simmons' lobby-filling installation *Fade to Black* at the California African American Museum), Laich maintains a certain ambivalence towards the market in his practice. He told me that he charges the same for commercial clients as he does for artists, sometimes more for commercial clients since he enjoys working for artists more. The final value of the completed artwork—whether it's in the hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars—doesn't seem to enter the equation. When I asked him if he ever makes suggestions to clients on design or typefaces, he remarks, “that happens more with galleries.



Pauline Stella Sanchez, video still from *This Brush for Hire: Norm Laich and Many Other Artists* (2018). Image courtesy of the artist and Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA).

Mike Kelley, *Proposal for the Decoration of an Island of Conference Room (With Copy Room) for an Advertising Agency Designed by Frank Gehry* (1991-1992). Image courtesy of the artist and Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. Photo: Brian Forrest/ICA LA.



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Norm Laich, *Eastern Skinny Poke* (2017).
 Enamel mural on gallery façade,
 dimensions variable. Image courtesy
 of the artist and AWHRHVAR.
 Photo: Jason Gowans.

Norm Laich, *CONDEMNED* (2018)
 (installation view). Image courtesy
 of the artist and AWHRHVAR.
 Photo: Jason Gowans.

They want to use conservative type styles because they want to look like a bank.” Still, he doesn’t seem resentful for the financial success that some of the artists he’s worked for have achieved. “That’s the game,” he says, and it’s a game he seems happy to sit out.

Alongside the biting skepticism of Laich’s work, there is a youthful energy, exuberance, and humor. The one work that bears his name in the ICA show is a small, green panel with a squiggly edge that resembles a burger stand menu, listing prices for burgers, fries, and shakes in brightly colored text. Squeezed between the items and the prices, Laich has painted vertically in black the words “Never Die,” an absurdist, almost subliminal encouragement to persevere, to kick against the pricks. One could imagine one of Kelley’s copy room staffers finding reassurance in these words.

Generations of artists have attacked the institution, the preciousness of the art object, and the cult of solitary artistic genius, only to have their attempts co-opted, canonized, and monetized by the market. By showcasing Laich’s egoless collaborations, *This Brush* may do more to challenge the notion of art as luxury commodity, instead privileging process and partnership. Laich’s general disregard for the market that fuels the art world can in a sense be seen as a radical attack on the system. *This Brush* may not present solutions to the myriad issues that exist around labor and authorship in the art world, but it offers a refreshing framework through which to view art and the work that goes into it.

The artists who run AWHRHWAR met Laich as art students, when they hired him to install vinyl letters for their thesis shows. Over the following decade, a fruitful working relationship and friendship has developed and when they opened the space last year, he designed their logo and painted a mural of a shadowy cowboy on the façade of their building. Their decision to mount a show of his work

seems less opportunistic, and more driven out of deep admiration and a sense of camaraderie. Laich’s work, and the work he does for others, reveals a parallel, horizontally structured art world, one that is not defined by networks of collectors, auction records, and jet-setting curators. This offers a refreshing perspective: maybe the rules don’t need to be imposed from the top, but can bubble up from the nexus of labor, collaboration, and kinship. The art world can be what you make it.

This Brush for Hire: Norm Laich and Many Other Artists is on view at the ICA Los Angeles from June 2–September 2, 2018, and *CONDEMNED* was on view at AWHRHWAR from July 5–July 28, 2018.

Matthew Stromberg is a freelance arts writer based in Los Angeles. In addition to *Carla*, he has contributed to *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Guardian*, *KCET Artbound*, *Hyperallergic*, *Artsy*, *Frieze*, *Terremoto*, and *Daily Serving*.