AND I STOP
AND I TURN
AND I GO FOR A RIDE

In conversation with artists Liz Craft and Stanya Kahn, Anna Gritz probes the legacy of the exhibition *Helter Skelter, L.A. Art in the 1990s* in Los Angeles today. Almost twenty-five years later, Craft and Kahn's work continue to reveal the darkness and pleasures of West Coast banality, while urging the political potential of the abject as both subject and strategy.

Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s installation view at The Temporary Contemporary, Los Angeles, January 26–April 26, 1992. Courtesy: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Paula Goldman

The severity of some consequences can take us by surprise. Rita Valencia's protagonist in her short story, "Indecency," knows right away that something irreversibly had occurred when she erroneously uses the word "bag" in place of the word "back," an error that is actually what she calls "a leak of rotten soul juice" and that condemns her to live her slip of the pen.

"Bag—back—back—bag. It was impossible to escape the unbearable significance of the transposition. My back would henceforth be a bag."[1] Left with a weak, thin, malleable, leaking receptacle in place of what had provided her with strength and support, burden has become her backbone.

Valencia's painful story about disintegration, disgust, and uselessness speaks to the tenor that lies at the heart of Paul Schimmel's iconic exhibition and accompanying catalogue, *Helter Skelter, L.A. Art in the 1990s*. Staged at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) in early 1992, it was a time turned rough by the release of the footage of Rodney King being excessively beaten by the L.A. police, and pregnant with the tensions of the impending riots resulting from the acquittal of the police officers in question.

For his first exhibition at MOCA, Schimmel assembled sixteen Californian artists from the past three decades, such as Chris Burden, Llyn Foulkes, Mike Kelley, Liz Larner, Charles Ray, Nancy Rubin, and Manuel Ocampo; alongside a collection of fiction and poetry in the catalogue by ten L.A. underground writers, amongst them Charles Bukowski, Michelle T. Clinton, Dennis Cooper, Harry Gamboa Jr., Amy Gerstler, Rita Valencia, and Benjamin Weissman.

Provocatively conjuring the Manson murders in the title, for Schimmel, it was also about so much more that the title could convey: "a dominant myth of L.A. as a haven for cultism of all kinds, the dark underside of the standard image of L.A. as a sunny mecca of hedonism, populated by vacuous characters."[2] For him, the work in the show exposed the angst-ridden disorder of the modern soul in a *fin de siècle* Los Angeles, and a conscious countermovement to the "finish fetish" and "light and space" movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In this maelstrom, he recognizes a group of original L.A. voices independent from European trends or the markets of the east coast. Recognized values and styles appear irrelevant—taste up for debate and themes from everyday, working class, and corporate America "en vogue."

Through allowing space for the cheap thrills, kitsch, folksy aesthetics, violent transgressions, and new age narratives commonly associated with low or outsider culture, the work offers an implicated perspective on the space where irony and sincerity meet. Gritz talks to Liz Craft and Stanya Kahn about social abjection through the guise of class culture and the potential resurrection of these tropes as tools to challenge established cultural norms.

Anna Gritz is the curator at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin where she organized exhibitions with Paul Elliman, Nicholas Mangan, Margaret Honda and Lucy Skaer. Previously she held curatorial positions at the South London Gallery (SLG) and the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London, where she curated film, performance, and exhibitions and commissioned new works by artists including Juliette Blightman, Michael E. Smith, Kapwani Kiwanga, Bonnie Camplin, Sidsel Meineche Hansen, and Lis Rhodes, as well as the group exhibitions *Last Seen Entering the Biltmore*, 2014 and independently *Duh – Art and Stupidity* (co-curated with Paul Clinton) at Focal Point Gallery, 2015. Her writing has been included in *Art Monthly*; *Art Agenda*; *frieze*; *frieze d/e*; *Mousse* and *Cura*, exhibition catalogues and books. She is currently working on an exhibition with Judith Hopf, scheduled to open at KW in February 2018.

1 Valencia, Rita: "Indecency," *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*, Catherine Gudis, ed. (Los Angeles, CA: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), p. 153.

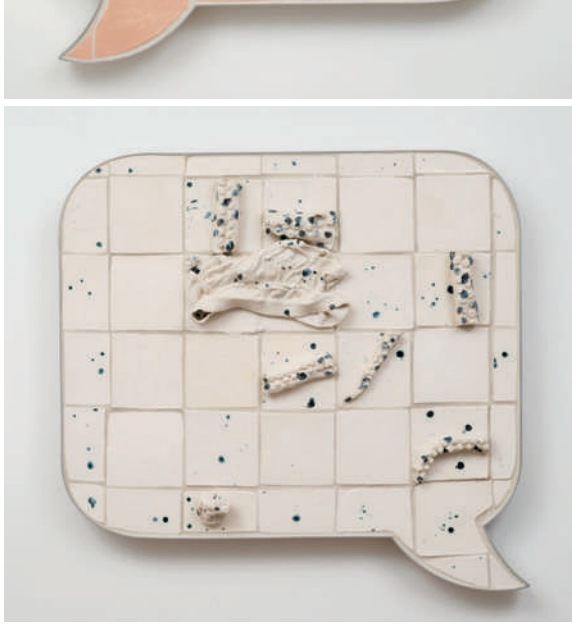
2 Schimmel, Paul: "Into the Maelstrom: L.A. Art at the End of the Century," *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s*, Catherine Gudis, ed. (Los Angeles, CA: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), p. 19.

Liz Craft, *Mi Vida Loca*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Jenny's, Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane

LIZ CRAFT IN CONVERSATION WITH ANNA GRITZ

ANNA GRITZ *Helter Skelter*, Paul Schimmel's 1992 exhibition, conjured the dark side of L.A. through visions of wasteland, violence, gore, and trauma, while posing a distinct alternative to work from the "light and space" or "finish fetish" movements. It presented a messier, more complicated, and handcrafted vision of Los Angeles art that drew on local curiosities and popular-culture phenomena such as fringe politics, B movies, cartoons, hard rock, and psychedelia. Works of yours like *The Pony* (2004), *Dancing Skeletons* (2008), and *Venice Witch* (2003) have often been associated with a similar low- or counterculture aesthetic that recalls the tropes of outsider communities of drifters, shamans, and dropouts, and the crafty, new age, kitsch, and souvenir production that supports their existence. Or as Bruce Hainley called it, "the groovy, laid-backmacramésandpaintedhandmadeseashellsahtraymagicmushroomdriftwoodlovebeadspatchouliscentedsurfwaxytanlinedstonermotherearthguitarplayingacidtriplovein."[3] Where do you find your subjects, and to what degree would you say they speak to a Californian culture at large?

LIZ CRAFT L.A. was definitely a different place back then. It was rougher. These early works were inspired by visiting Europe around 1999 or 2000 and then reflecting back onto things I would



see around L.A. or California, maybe in a Disney-esque sort of way. This body of work had a lot of clichés and stereotypes about the Wild West and Americana. The first piece that was part of the series you're talking about was *Death Rider*, started in 2001. I was thinking it would be interesting to turn a low-culture or American counter-culture image into a monumental, traditional European sculpture. This is strange now (it was up at the Hammer Museum in L.A. six months ago, after I hadn't seen it in fifteen years) because it feels like "low culture" and "alternative cultures" have been swallowed up by the mainstream.

The pony was inspired by this mural that used to be in L.A. on Sunset Boulevard, "My Little Pony," and formal abstract sculpture. The skeletons are from the Three Graces mixed with Grateful Dead, Pirates of the Caribbean, reliquaries, the Vienna Secession roof. I gather images from things I see around, collect at thrift stores, or have as memories, or from fantasizing or dreaming. Sometimes they're art historical or formal references. Then I collage them together. I guess the subject matter of this early work is really taken from the landscape and idea of what California is. My California upbringing combined with my education (many of my professors were in *Helter Skelter*) had an influence on me.

Above, from top - Liz Craft, *Dirty Laundry*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Jenny's, Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane; *Dancing Skeletons*, 2008. Courtesy: the artist

Below - *Selections from the Hammer Contemporary Collection: Liz Craft* installation view at Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2017. © Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest

AG In what way would you say that alternative cultures have been swallowed up, and what was strange about seeing *Death Rider* again after so long?

LC I thought about it more and realized that this always happens—something that is fringe at some point can get pulled into the mainstream and become something else. I guess when I saw my motorcycle piece at the Hammer right after Trump was elected, I thought, eek, this seems like a pro-America kind of artwork and it scares me. When I made it in 2001 it felt really different—it was a response to Europe and history and was kind of making fun of America. It was also allowing myself to use things I knew about.

AG Works like your *Mountain Mamas* (2003)—formless, obese, matte brown blobs, half-women half-mountains—bring together Julia Kristeva's idea of abjection as something fluid and formless, neither object nor subject, with a type of social abjection—bodies that do not function in a societally accepted way, deemed unproductive and cast away as disgusting. In that way they speak to an underbelly of society that has been deemed excludable and how social forces shape our sensations of disgust. Some of your Mamas are snow-capped mountains. What role does humor play here to deal with the abject?

LC That piece was actually inspired by a person I saw while driving. She was sitting on the sidewalk under a freeway bridge, maybe homeless. I thought she looked beautiful and amazing sitting there like a mountain, but I also felt sad for her. She reminded me of the mountains on the way to my parents' house. And I like the idea of mixing a figure and a background. I didn't really think of this piece as funny; it was more about a person in a landscape. Or person as landscape. Or the sublime.

AG Your work occupies an uncertain terrain between adoration and disgust, everyday banality and fantastical dream space. It is often not clear to me if we are encountering the objects in their native fantastical surrounding or in the lived-in banality of their circulation as folkloric motives and talismans. Maybe it is none of the above. What is their relationship to your everyday life?

LC Yes, that's maybe true in many of the works. I think everyday life is complicated, and I try and show this. I feel like with language we try and tidy things up and put them in categories or simple forms so we can deal with them. We have to—otherwise the world would

be too overwhelming. But in the arts I think it's possible to show the multidimensional qualities of life.

AG The sweetness and the easy pleasure that kitsch promises is generally considered counter to what is deemed high art today. Its seductive qualities are rejected and cast to the realms of the taste of the uneducated, the lower classes, or the nouveau riche. Its appreciation demands an ignorance or rejection of established cultural traditions and values. Do you see a transgressive potential in subject matter that recalls kitsch? What can we learn from what has been deemed kitsch or abject in society?

LC I guess the wrongness of kitsch is what makes it seem so right. It's tricky, though—I guess just like anything else in art. Context and timing are so important. Yes, of course there is potential still to be transgressive and use kitsch. I think when artists use materials, images, or ideas that others are fearful of or didn't think of using, that's when it gets interesting. It doesn't necessarily have to be kitsch, though.

AG Did you see *Helter Skelter* back in the day? If yes, what was your reaction?

LC Yes, of course I went to the opening. The show was great and there was a punk-ish band playing outside, I was twenty-one and thought the whole thing was super cool. It was a big deal for the young art students. Seeing all that work was liberating, it made art seem current and worthwhile. You could do something totally messed up and twisted and it could be in a museum. Art felt like the place to be. It was as interesting as what we were studying in books, but it was in our own town happening at that time. Almost all of the artists and writers who were in it had been my teachers at some point, or I worked for them, or my friends worked for them. This of course was part of the glory of L.A. in the earlier days. All the best people taught and it was a smaller scene.

AG *Living Edge* (1997-1998), an early work by you, stages tropes of the L.A. urban grid, scenery, and architecture as a Garden of Eden. How does this portrait hold up today? And how has the idea of an abject California changed over the years, in your eyes?

LC I made that piece in a cinematic or video game sort of way. I took pieces of "landscape" and spliced or jammed them together in a loop. And you never could be in the landscape—you were always outside of it, looking in. It was from driving a lot around L.A. I don't know if L.A. physically changes too much. This was a very early work where I just chose landscape as subject and let the rest follow. I had previously been thinking about interior space, and that led to landscape.

This is something Pentti Monkkonen and I often discuss, how L.A. kind of fell apart. Got washed out. More money and more artists came, and art as business began to happen. I'm sure it was always there, but I didn't know about it, and there wasn't as much money before. In my opinion a lot of people stopped making art for other artists and began making work for collectors. Of course there is still plenty of good art being made in L.A., and a lot of cool people that I respect, but maybe new "abject" or things that are not as market friendly started being made elsewhere, like Europe. Maybe part of it back then was the good schools being here or the right teachers or the right students or the right time—there are many factors. It's only natural that things change. If they stayed the same it would be weird. There are people who are still making work that has this quality, but I don't think they get as much attention. L.A. is a nice place to make work and live, but you have to have a broader view in order to keep it interesting for yourself. I think this is probably true for anyplace.

AG Your more recent and ongoing series of ceramic speech bubbles suggest a bastardized form of vernacular digital communication that relies on the emanation of symbols, phrases, and gestures. How do you consolidate the immediacy of the messages with the handcrafted, labored surface of the tiled ceramic grid?

LC The clay material is actually very immediate. It takes preparation (not much) and some technical support after, but the action and art part is very quick, like a text or a joke or an automatic drawing or a doodle. I like this aspect, that they go together very easily for me. Also there isn't too much pressure that it has to be some great idea, since it's just a fragment. And also it's part of the space, so it could really be blank because that also is true: sometimes you don't have any ideas or anything to say.

AG There is a certain pleasure in the disturbance of a coherent identity or form in these speech bubbles. Do you think of abjection as a strategy in your work?

LC I do take pleasure in putting things together that don't seem like they should. I would like to think I'm loosening up structures, ideas or images are slipping into each other, and meaning can fall apart. I guess this is a surreal or possibly abject quality. I'm not consciously employing strategies; I like to think of it more like a game or a puzzle. Although I guess that is a strategy.

AG Images, objects, and words stand side by side in these associative communiqués. How do you see them relating to each other, and to what degree are they generated in a process of making such as texting?

LC I think I use associations among images, words, and objects to make an object dense. I let them relate however seems natural to the situation. I don't think it's a back-and-forth; it's more of a spiral.

3 Bruce Hainley, *Sane American with a Dreamin Liz Craft: Fantasy Architecture*, ed. Bettina Steinbrügge (Lüneburg, Germany: Halle für Kunst, 2006), 19.

Liz Craft (Los Angeles, 1970). Craft received her MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, and her BA from Otis Parsons. Her work has been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions worldwide, including the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Musée d' Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Halle für Kunst, Luneburg; Migros Museum, Zurich, among many others. Her work is part of public collections including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; and the Whitney Museum of American Art. She currently lives and works in New York.