

BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Dissertation

**DO IT YOURSELVES:  
ALTERNATIVE SPACES AND THE RISE OF CONTEMPORARY ART  
IN LOS ANGELES, 1970-1990**

by

**JORDAN KARNEY CHAIM**

B.A., Brandeis University, 2006  
M.A., Boston University, 2014

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

2020

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CONTEMPORARY ART IN LOS ANGELES, 1970-1990**

**JORDAN KARNEY CHAIM**

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2020

Major Professor: Gregory Williams, Associate Professor of History of Art & Architecture

**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines the development of alternative spaces in Los Angeles from 1970 to 1990. In the absence of museum support during the 1970s, artists in Los Angeles—many of whom were women, queer, racially diverse, young, politically active, and pushing the boundaries of new media—began to create organizations to provide the resources they lacked. I argue that this flourishing network of alternative spaces became one of Los Angeles’s most significant art-historical developments in the latter half of the twentieth century. This emergent contemporary art scene was defined largely in opposition to the city’s principal cultural repository, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), and formed the primary support structure for contemporary artists and exhibitions between the 1974 closure of the Pasadena Art Museum and the launch of the Museum of Contemporary Art’s (MOCA) exhibition program in 1983. The resulting complex of artist-run organizations laid the groundwork for the rebranding of Los Angeles as a capital of contemporary art and culture in the twenty-first century.

My study is divided into three chapters, each of which focuses on the history and legacy of a different alternative institution. Chapter one examines the Woman’s Building (1973-1991) through this feminist institution’s exhibition and pedagogical programs, with a focus on the Feminist Studio Workshop (1973-1981). Members of the Woman’s

Building sought to transform their Los Angeles community by educating both the women who came there to study and the audiences that encountered their work. The second chapter traces the history of LAICA (Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, 1974-1987), which became the city's first non-profit exhibition space dedicated to contemporary art. Through its exhibitions and publication, *Journal*, LAICA validated and disseminated Southern California's artistic production to national and international audiences. The third chapter introduces LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 1978-present), which emerged out of a community mural program to become the preeminent laboratory for experimental art in Los Angeles. The diverse group of artists who founded LACE established a democratically operated organization that prioritized artistic freedom. These three institutions anchored a network of alternative spaces that transformed the cultural landscape in Los Angeles.