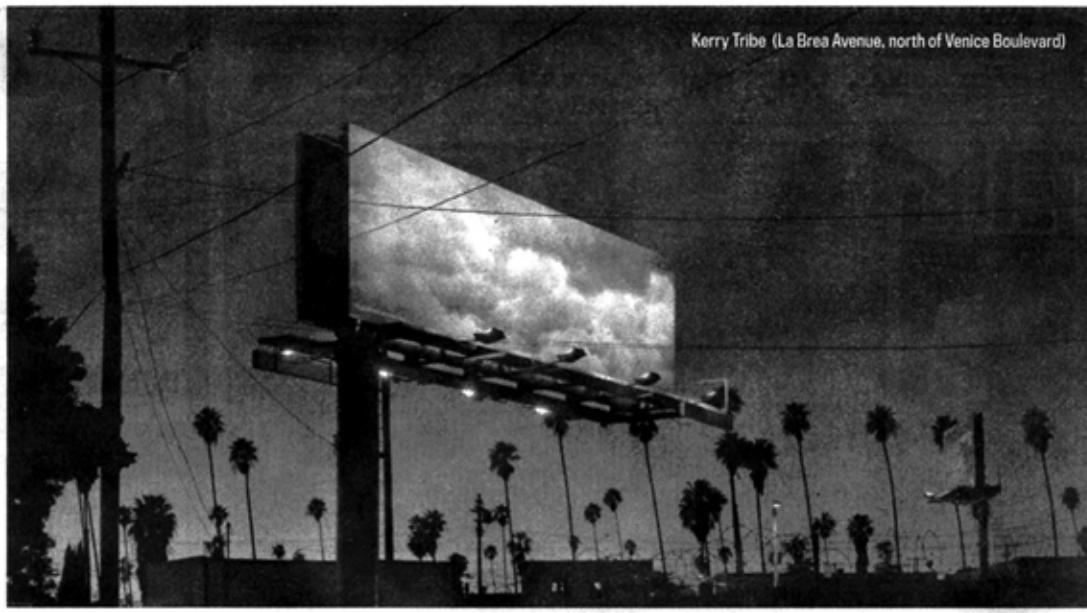
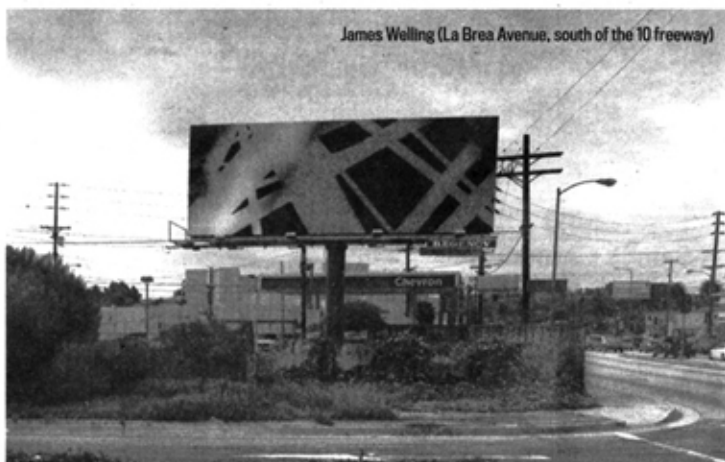


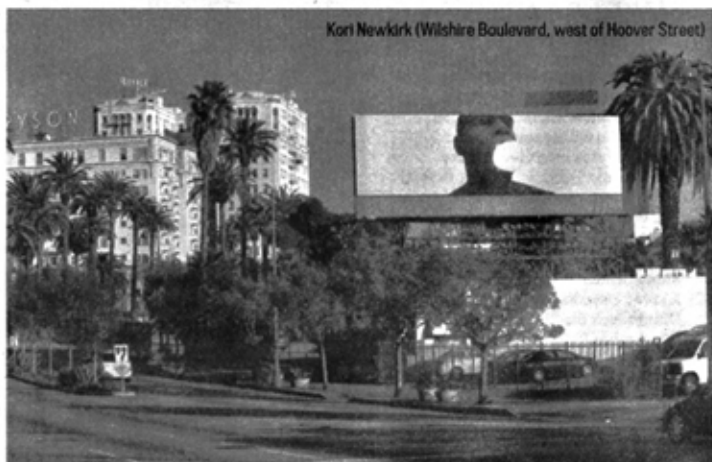
LA art



Kerry Tribe (La Brea Avenue, north of Venice Boulevard)



James Welling (La Brea Avenue, south of the 10 freeway)



Kori Newkirk (Wilshire Boulevard, west of Hoover Street)

ALL PHOTOS BY GERARD SMAULEVICH

THE BIG CANVAS

IF YOU GIVE AN ARTIST A BILLBOARD ...

BY ERICA ZORA WRIGHTSON

Los Angeles is not a city with time on its hands, and, as the food-service industry has discovered with the sweeping popularity of food trucks, if you want to communicate directly with an audience, it's best to meet them on the road.

The MAK Center gets it. You bring the art to the people. In their cars. MAK's new exhibition, "How Many Billboards? Art in Stead," replaces commerce with art, filling advertising space from Silver Lake to Westwood with the works of 21 contemporary artists. The show aims to transform the city's thoroughfares into museum corridors, to turn a commute into a drive-through gallery and to challenge residents to reconsider the purpose of those spaces — normally reserved for advertising — that define the Los Angeles skyline.

On one billboard near MacArthur Park, Kori Newkirk's bust towers over Wilshire Boulevard, his face strained, eyes closed, mouth stuffed with a white snowball. "I don't know what this image is fully about," says Newkirk in a video on the exhibition Web site (howmanybillboards.org). "I respond to it because of what it is and what it has the potential to be."

Angelenos are responding to it, too. Within 24 hours, Newkirk's work was tagged with graffiti. If some people find that irritating, Newkirk isn't one of them. "That's what you get when you deal with the city," he tells the *Weekly*. "It's so Los Angeles, in a way — it's so fitting. I taught high school at Manual Arts for a while and we talked a lot about what graffiti and tagging can mean in terms of putting a fingerprint and an 'I'm here as well' note on it. Not only is my voice there, but someone needs to add their voice to my voice, and I'm down with that. I have no

place to complain. In a way, we're in unison; we both have something to say and we're both putting it out there."

Public art is a rarity in Los Angeles, says MAK Center director Kimberli Meyer, cocurator (with Lisa Henry, Nizan Shaked and Gloria Sutton) of "How Many Billboards?" "We need it here. New York doesn't need it as much. There's a historical legacy here, a loose, unofficial history of L.A. conceptual pop."

The concept of artistically, as opposed to commercially, motivated images in public is an unlikely plot twist in the city's aesthetic narrative. When faced with a billboard, Angelenos obey an evolutionary instinct to identify a logo in the image — to pick Nike's swoosh out of Kerry Tribe's gray cloudscape on North La Brea, say, or recognize David LaMelas' microphone-wielding rock star on the billboard on Pico that reads, "Think of Good." While the project is self-consciously subversive, the billboards were donated by the companies that own them, including Clear Channel, Van Wagner and CBS, and each design required a corporate stamp of approval before it was mounted.

One of the more controversial pieces, by artist Lauren Woods, features two lines from an Urdu love poem. Translated into English, the text would read, "As long as the earth

and the sky last/Smile like a flower in the garden of the world," but the poem appears in Arabic, and for most, the sign is simply an image of a decorative foreign font, printed in white against a black background. "Companies were afraid of it," said Meyer during a convertible-van tour of some of the billboards. "They thought people would see that and think terrorism." After multiple refusals, Woods' piece found a home behind the Bank of America on Fairfax in a space owned by Van Wagner.

The MAK Center was promised a month's worth of billboard time, and although the artworks may be moved around, it's likely the show will remain up as long as the space is available. That could translate into record numbers of viewers: While 4,000 to 5,000 visitors pass through the Getty Center daily, an estimated 735,000 people will view the MAK exhibition every day.

The more you drive (or the longer your commute), the more billboards you'll see, and the richer the dialogue between the artworks and the ads. "Who would you like to be tonight?" reads an SBE.com Smart Luxury billboard on La Cienega. Yvonne Rainer's billboard on Pico appears to answer with a quote from Marlene Dietrich: "I look good, I know/I can't hear, I can't see/but I look good." □