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Fluxus and Advertising in the 1960s . . . and Now

Kevin Concannon

During December of 2001, gallery-goers in New York's Chelsea district were confronted with a rather puzzling billboard on the corner of West 26th Street and 10th Avenue: 'To express conceptual ideas write a book, don't paint'. The message was unsigned, and the billboard offered no indication of just who had put it there or why. Similar messages had appeared continuously on the same billboard (and another on West 24th Street) since

the previous February. Appropriately enough (or maybe not), the series had begun with the message 'Art is not where you think you are going to find it'.

A bit of investigation revealed that the messages are the work of French artist Patrick Mimran, whose multi-media installation, *Babel TV*, was concurrently featured at Marlborough Chelsea (where his previous two exhibitions had featured encaustic on canvas paintings).

• Patrick Mimran. From the *Chelsea Billboard Project*, 2001. Courtesy of the artist and Cultural Communications, New York



I did not want to include my name because it is not an advertising project but an art installation referring to some ideas I have about art – and trying to trigger some thoughts about it and the too general acceptance of contemporary art as it is without any debate of ideas or serious contradiction.

Mimran also observes ‘much of today’s art looks like a new “académisme” at the service of a market’.¹

Mimran’s invocation of the term ‘conceptual’, and the format of the billboard itself, calls to mind the movement by that name that emerged in the late 1960s. But while most recent histories of Conceptual art include discussion of works in advertising media as part of their broader investigations, relatively little attention has been paid to these works as a genre in and of themselves. The catalogue for *Billboard: Art on the Road*, a 1999 exhibition at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, looks at the history of artists’ use of the billboard as an artist’s medium, citing a 1968 work by Joseph Kosuth as ‘the first artist’s billboard in the United States’ (Heon et al. 1999: 61). And Anne Rorimer recently examined similar works realized in other print media in her essay ‘Siting the Page: Exhibiting Works in Publications – Some Examples of Conceptual Art in the USA’ (Rorimer 1999: 11–26).

• Geoffrey Hendricks. *Sky Billboard*, 1966. (Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street, New York).
Courtesy of the artist



If Kosuth’s works are among the best-known early artist’s billboard projects, it is Dan Graham who is best known among those artists who early on began using the pages of magazines as alternative exhibition spaces. Rorimer notes, for example:

Dan Graham began his career with his seminal *Works for the Pages of Magazines*. From 1965 until 1969 he defined the magazine page as a site of display through a variety of different means, having recognized that works of art depend on the economic support of an exhibition space as much as they do on the literal ‘backing’ of its walls.

(1999: 15)

Among Graham’s works that recognize – and critique – the economic role of the gallery in the production of art, none does so more explicitly than his *Figurative*, published in the March 1968 issue of *Harper’s Bazaar*. In spite of its 1968 publication date, Graham dates *Figurative* to 1965, and has exhibited a related work, *Scheme for Magazine Page Advertisement* annotated with this title, signed and dated 1965.

Recently, James Meyer has elucidated the precise circumstances under which Graham’s ‘ad’ appeared in *Harper’s*. The presence in *Harper’s* of such works, Meyer explains, ‘was no accident but the handiwork of Dale McConathy, the magazine’s remarkable literary editor from 1966 to 1969’ (Meyer 2001: 135). *Figurative* is nothing more than a cash register tape provided by Graham that McConathy has placed in a three-quarter-page advertising space with the caption ‘Figurative by Dan Graham’. It was McConathy who commissioned, placed, and titled the piece. Typically discussed as a work that exposes the mechanisms of both art and commerce, Meyer’s take on *Figurative*’s function in *Harper’s* is somewhat more complex.

The blatant difficulty of these interventions, their sheer awkwardness, opposed the seductive language of fashion copy. But ‘difficulty’ also had a place in a context dedicated to the consumption of the new. Simply by opposing the transparent aims of the ad, these projects

gave *Bazaar* a certain prestigious tone. At the endpoint of modernism opacity was instrumentalized; the far-out could sell. The avant-garde was allowed in the marketplace, elevating fashion through proximity; obscure artists benefited from the publicity.

(2001: 138)

Though Graham himself has made his critical intentions with these works clear, his *Figurative*, at least, offers an early example of how such a critique can be redirected in the service of its own object.

Neither Graham nor Kosuth, however, can claim priority with either these media or the subversive strategies employed with them. (Indeed, claims of such priority seem to have been made, not by the artists themselves, but by others on their behalf.) Ray Johnson and Yoko Ono, as it turns out, had published advertising works implicitly critical of the gallery system and the art market as early as 1964 and 1965 respectively – and in publications widely read within the New York art community: *Village Voice* and the *New York Arts Calendar*. And Fluxus artist Geoffrey Hendricks's *Sky Billboard*, installed from April through September 1966, preceded Kosuth's by at least 2 years.

In a 1966 magazine article, Hendricks explained 'the idea of a sky billboard first came to me while I was waiting in heavy traffic to enter the Holland Tunnel. There, above the toll booths, was a huge sign – blotting out the sky – and suddenly it struck me, what would it be like if the billboard itself were painted entirely with sky?' (Hendricks 1966b: 19). And in an artist's statement from the same period, he wrote:

On March 20th Grace Glueck wrote in the *New York Times*: 'See a cloud painted on a billboard at Fifth Avenue and 42nd St., N.E. corner? It's a come-on for a one-man show at Bianchini Gallery by artist Geoffrey Hendricks who paints nothing but clouds . . .'. Miss Glueck's emphasis on commercialism was misplaced: this was not an advertisement for the show, it was an integral part of the show. The idea of using a commercial surface for an entirely noncommercial, artistic use, of course, was one of the strong appeals of the piece, and an anomaly

8 MAN SHOW
GEORGE BRECHT
GEORGE HERMS
RAY JOHNSTON
ROBIN GALLERY

• Ray Johnson. *Robin Gallery* announcement, n.d. The Estate of Ray Johnson, courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co. Photo: Brian T. Rodgers

similar to the 'dissolution' of the billboard's material solidity in intangible sky'.

(Hendricks 1966a)

Hendricks's billboard constitutes an implicit critique of consumer culture, effectively erasing what would otherwise have likely been another product pitch with an image of sky.

Earlier still, Ray Johnson advertised his purely imaginary Robin Gallery in the pages of *Village Voice* in the summer of 1964.² In addition to the *Village Voice* advertisement, Johnson mailed announcement cards for his Robin Gallery events as well.³ Critic David Bourdon explains that the Robin was a pun on the former Reuben Gallery, 'the birthplace of happenings' (Bourdon 1965: 14). Other sources suggest that the Robin was also an allusion to theft – as in 'robbing'. In a 1966 article in the inaugural issue of *Art and Artists*, William Wilson offers one such explanation of the name and a more literally comic derivation as well.

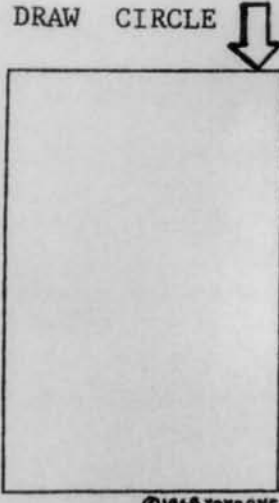
Ray Johnson invented the Robin Gallery as an answer to the Batman Gallery in San Francisco (Robin was Batman's youthful companion in the comic as we all know). The Robin Gallery not only held 'robbin' events (in October 1963, Ray Johnson and Sari Dienes stole a painting back from friends at Haverstraw), it also held (at least announced) an eight man show with only three artists, because 3 and its inverted reflection . . . make an 8.

(Wilson 1966: 54)

The seemingly endless variations of the Robin

CONCEPT ART INSTRUCTURE INSOUND

DRAW CIRCLE



©1964 YOKO ONO

YOKO ONO

IsReal Gallery

EAST 76TH STREET
 965 Madison Kan
 969 Madison Egg
 978 Madison Cor
 978 Madison Fre
 980 Madison Par

EAST 77TH STREET
 4 Castelli Galle
 47 Lefebre Galle
 47 Staempli
 987 Madison Wo
 992 Madison The
 982 Madison J. J

EAST 78TH STREET
 16 Paul Bianchin
 50 E. V. Thaw
 62 Finch Coll M

EAST 79TH STREET
 20 Paul Rosenbu
 58 Karnblee
 135 Marble Arch
 1016 Madison Pe
 1014 Madison G
 1014 Madison Si
 1018 Madison Bc
 1018 Madison W
 1018 Madison By
 1018 Madison Fa
 1035 Madison Sa
 1040 Madison Ce

EAST 80TH STREET
 24 Royal Athena
 1046 Madison Pit
 1055 Madison Kri
 1061 Madison Kri
 1062 Madison Ber
 1063 Madison Eli
 1063 Madison Ma
 1067 Madison AF

MATERIAL TO ORDER 3 1/4" x 2" TO 40 x 24 ABOUT \$25

CIRCLE EVENT ON LEATHER SILK GLASS CANVAS OR OTHER

IsReal Gallery **TELEPHONE OR 7 8871**

• Yoko Ono. *IsReal Gallery* advertisement, 1965. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Brian T. Rodgers

Gallery's purported etymology reflect the very nature of Johnson's work. As William Wilson explains, 'Ray would enter a word or concept, or a numeral, from one direction, but within it, would make a turn and come out at an angle one had not expected'.⁴

Bourdon's story documents the closing of this imaginary gallery and also notes that Johnson 'detests commercial art galleries', from which we might infer that perhaps these Robin Gallery ads may also be seen (like Graham's 1968 *Figurative*) as institutional critique. (Johnson would later establish – and advertise – the similarly fictional Woodpecker Gallery and Oriole Gallery.)⁵ But while Johnson's Robin ad for the 30 July 1964 issue of *Village Voice* announces one such 8-man show with no address, phone number, or dates, it is not immediately clear to the reader that the Robin

Gallery is not real (*VV*, 30 July 1964: 9). Another ad on the same page, for example, simply states 'Paintings by Beaudreau at Stanley's' (presumably an authentic exhibition), also lacking location or contact details.

Another Robin Gallery ad from the 17 September 1964 issue of *Village Voice* further confuses the question of real vs. imaginary. It states (in whole): 'Ray Johnson & other Living Americans in 38-man show at Robin Gallery, Section B2, 1st Ave & 27th St./Hours: 7–8, Mon., Wed., Fri.; 2:30–4, Tues., Thurs., weekends & holidays' (*VV*, 17 September 1964: 13). This advertisement, however, was in all likelihood placed not by Johnson, but by Andy Warhol. In his article on the closing of the Robin Gallery, Bourdon notes that when Johnson was hospitalized at Bellevue with hepatitis, 'his good friend and lifelong admirer

Andy Warhol advertised the occasion as a Robin Gallery event'.⁶ This was and remains Bellevue's address, and Johnson was hospitalized there at this time. And a letter from Bourdon to artist May Wilson lists the visiting hours at Bellevue as identical to those listed in the ad as gallery hours.⁷

While the Robin Gallery, then, seems to exist as something between an artworld in-joke and a conceptual artwork, I would argue that Yoko Ono's IsReal Gallery is clearly intended for the average reader's edification; its conceptual bent is self-evident. Ono placed a full-page display advertisement for 'Circle Events' at the *IsReal Gallery* in the March 1965 issue of the *New York Arts Calendar 2*. The advertisement offered 'circle events' on 'leather, silk, glass, canvas, or other material to order, 3 1/4" x 2" to 40 x 24, about \$250'.⁸ No address was offered, but a telephone number was included. The listings section of the magazine noted that the exhibition dates were 3–31 March, and the gallery was open 24 hours (mistakenly listing it as Israel Gallery instead of IsReal Gallery).⁹ The magazine's next issue featured another ad for the *IsReal Gallery*, this one offering 'Hole Events', also on 'leather, silk, glass, canvas, or other material to order' (NYAC 2: 7 1965). As with Johnson's Robin Gallery in the *Voice*, the IsReal Gallery, existed only on the printed page and in the minds of the artist and her readers.¹⁰ In the same March 1965 issue of the *New York Arts Calendar* in which Ono's first *IsReal Gallery* advertisement appeared, Graham had an advertisement as well – for his very real, soon-to-be-bankrupt gallery, John Daniels.¹¹

With the *IsReal Gallery* works, Ono gently pokes fun at the art market even as she attempts to sell work that challenges the notion of artistic authorship: a blank canvas to be completed by the purchaser, offered by a gallery that exists only as documentation in an art magazine. Along with this implicit critique of the art market, Ono raises the issue of object versus idea and the commodification of art, seeking to subvert the gallery system to establish a more direct, engaging relationship with her audience.

Four and a half years later, Ono created the 1969 poster action, *War is Over!*, in collaboration with John Lennon, moving from a critique of the artworld to broader political action – and a substantially broader audience. For this event, launched 15 December 1969, the couple commissioned billboards in 12 cities around the world. (In the language of each city where they were sited, the billboards declared 'War is Over!/ If You Want It/ Happy Christmas from John and Yoko'.) Strangely, the 1999 *Billboard* exhibition at MassMOCA, lacked any mention of the piece.

While, in the critical literature, the strategy of advertising intervention as an art medium seems to emerge along with Conceptual art around 1968 (with the conception of Graham's *Figurative* attributed to 1965), it seems quite clearly to have surfaced in fact within the Fluxus orbit at least as

• Yoko Ono and John Lennon. *War is Over!* subway poster, Paris, 1969. Courtesy Lenono Photo Archive. Photo: Robert Young





• Dieter Roth. Advertisement placed in the *Luzerner Stadtanzeiger*, 12 January 1972, as part of an ongoing series in which he placed two advertisements weekly for a period of 1½ years. In 1973 he bound these newspapers together to create his artist's book, *der Tränensee* (*The Lake of Tears*). Reproduced courtesy of the Dieter Roth Estate, collection of Jon and Joanne Hendricks.

early as 1964. And artists in and around Fluxus continue to mine this vein to the present day.

Dieter Roth upped the ante for the genre in the spring of 1971, creating a work of epic scale when he purchased advertising space in the *Luzerner Stadtanzeiger* (Lucerne, Switzerland) at the rate of two placements per week for a period of 1½ years. Ann Goldstein describes his purpose as 'publishing a series of silly, nonsensical, grammatically improper German sentences' that 'progressively grew more serious and sentimental' (Goldstein 1984: 15). When the nature of Roth's texts shifted after the first year, becoming more 'long-winded' as Ina Conzen describes them, the newspaper's editors put a stop to the project two-thirds of the way through:

The recent texts as well as the manuscripts submitted for coming editions differ sharply from the decidedly short puns and wordplay of the advertisements submitted a year ago. Equally, negative reactions from our readership, too, have become more numerous. But regardless of any readers' feedback, what is ultimately the point is that the current texts are simply too much for the public.

(cited in Conzen 2000: 84; translated by Bram Opstelten)

In 1973, Roth assembled the complete series (at least those ads that the newspaper had actually published) as an artist's book, *der Tränensee* (*The Lake of Tears*) composed of a year's worth of newspapers bound together (Roth 1973).

Around the same time, Endre Tót placed an advertisement in the *Bergdorfer Tagblatt* (Bergdorf, Switzerland) composed almost entirely of 'O's in various fonts and sizes, typeset to resemble a regular advertisement – of 'nothing'. At the very bottom of the ad, Tót included his name, address, and telephone number. A similar ad appeared in the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph* on 13 July 1973, in conjunction with the *Fluxshoe* exhibition at its Blackburn, England venue. In addition to his 'nothing' series, Tót produced another ad series,



• Endre Tót. *I Am Glad if I Can Insert an Advertisement*, 1976. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Brian T. Rodgers

I am glad if... One such work appears in the 14 September 1976 edition of *PZC* (Middelburg, Holland). The ad simply reads 'I am glad if I can insert an advertisement'. Tót continued this series in a variety of different advertising media. His *TÓTa!JOYS* (1979) documents various incarnations: the artist holding a sign that says 'I am glad if I can hold this in my hand'; posters on walls that read 'I am glad if I can advertise on posters'; and an

ook slaapk
Te veel om
blouson of
leuke ruw
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Schipper.
muiden, 's-
Duitzenden kort
in september n
1976. Deagew. i
grootste en goe
ning. Hoogstra
zaak. Bij koop r
open. Nu kopen



electronic billboard in Berlin that reads 'I am glad I can advertise on electric billboard' (Tót 1979: np).

Fluxus artist Larry Miller placed an advertisement in the 'Classified' section of the *New York Review of Books* in October 1973: 'What I need is a thrill, I think. L. Miller, NYR, Box 6542'. An interactive piece, the letters of response completed the work. While *Thrill* yielded written replies, Miller's attempt to extend the advertising event format into real time met with less success. The following year, Miller placed another ad in the *New York Review*, this one reading 'Alloy. I need assistance in making a 4-dimensional art-object. Anyone interested can meet me at the 23rd Street point of the Flatiron Bldg, under "ASTRA" at 1:00 PM, Sept. 14, 21, or 28. Larry Miller' (see Miller 1986). Having placed the ad twice, once in June and again in September, Miller waited at the appointed hour a total of six times, yet received no approaches.

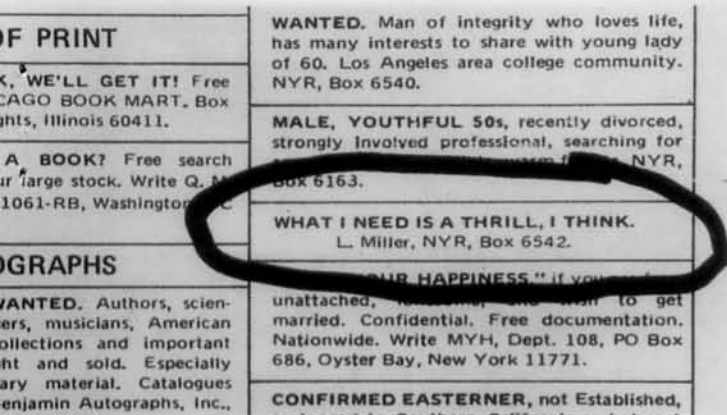
In the 1980s and increasingly in the 1990s, arts councils and public art concerns began to organize curated exhibitions in various types of advertising spaces, ranging from billboards and print ads in newspapers and magazines to short-format works for television.¹² And while representing an important shift from the *direct* interventions of artists that characterized *early* works in the genre, they still seemed to operate outside the conventional institutions of art.

One such project was organized by Vienna's museum in progress in 1994–5. Called *Vital Use*,

and produced in the pages of *Der Standard* (Vienna), a daily newspaper, Yoko Ono and John Lennon's *War Is Over!* was among the projects it presented [see <http://mip.at/en/projekte/15-content.html>]. Interestingly, the page appears much as it did when Ono and Lennon ran it in the *New York Times* on 21 December 1969 as part of their original *War Is Over!* campaign, realized, of course, without institutional backing of any kind. The museum in progress also presented a newspaper piece by Dieter Roth: 'A Lifetime of 61 Years', a 'do-it-yourself novel' translated in 1995/6 for the museum in progress according to a recipe by Roth. The series of ad placements, inserted between August 1995 and March 1996, were continuing extracts from his do-it-yourself novel, *A Lifetime of 50 Years* from 1990. According to the artist's instructions, underlined words from his 1990 text were replaced by film titles or titles of TV programs that appeared on the same page [see <http://mip.at/en/werke/221.html>]. The museum in progress continues to produce such advertising interventions, typically with the sponsorship of the various media outlets in which the interventions appear. (A Dan Graham work appeared in the series in 1995.)

The curated series of interventions, interestingly, seems to have a Flux-related precedent itself. David Det Hompson, in collaboration with Billy Apple and Clive Phillpot, developed such a scheme in 1981. The plan, originally known as *Bound Space*, and later retitled *Page Work*, projected the purchase of space in such newspapers and magazines as *Christianity Today*, *Kivans Monthly*, *Soldier of Fortune*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*, to be offered to artists for pageworks. Hompson even developed a logo for the project. The plan depended upon the support of subscribers who would receive notifications of upcoming placements for their membership fees. Additional funding would be raised through the sale of archivally boxed collections of uncirculated copies of the original magazines. Bibliographic and editorial notation would also be included (Det Hompson 1981).

* Larry Miller. *Thrill*, 1973. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Brian T. Rodgers



From the guerilla interventions of artists in and around Fluxus seeking to escape the constricted spaces of the gallery, advertising intervention has been adopted as a strategy of public art favored by non-museum curatorial concerns – and ultimately recuperated by the museum itself.

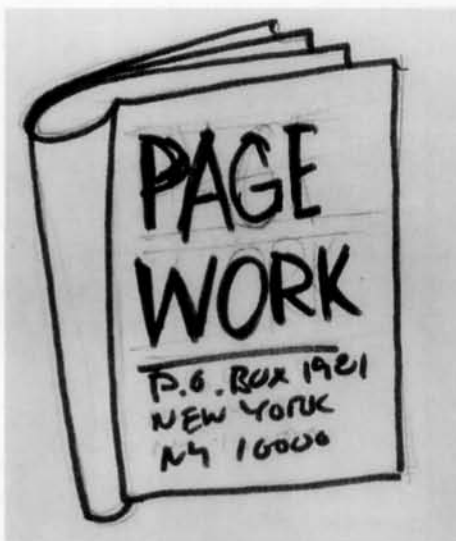
Early last year, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art launched their '2001 Brand Awareness Campaign', developed for MOCA by mega-advertising agency Chiat Day. As MOCA director Jeremy Strick told National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, 'In a way, the campaign is MOCA labels L.A.' (Bowers 2001). Sixty site-specific billboards throughout the city provide museum labels for a variety of everyday places and situations. A billboard above a strip club, for example, offers 'Nudes, 2001. Bodies, dimensions variable'. It is 'on loan' from MOCA. What museum officials cite as an extension of the 'art into life aesthetic', however, a local weekly publication refers to as 'second-rate '60s conceptual art'.¹³ It seems, in fact, though, that 'recuperated Fluxart' would be a more appropriate slander. But perhaps such dubious honors are best left unclaimed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- 1 Patrick Mimran, personal communication with the author, 29 January 2002.
- 2 Donna De Salvo dates the creation of the Robin Gallery to 1961, the date she assigns to Johnson's first mailed announcements for the gallery (see Donna De Salvo 1999: 21–2).
- 3 In my own research, I have thus far found no Robin



• Davi Det Hompson. Logo design for *Page Work*, 1981. Courtesy Nancy K. Thompson for the Estate of Davi Det Hompson. Photo: Brian T. Rodgers

Gallery announcements post-marked earlier than 1964.

4 William S. Wilson, personal communication with the author, 2 February 2000.

5 The Woodpecker Gallery appears soon after the Robin's demise. A society column notes that Johnson 'an artist with the Woodpecker Galleries, New York City, visited artist May Wilson . . .'. See Brenda Cooper, 'Tilghman Social News', *Star-Democrat* (Easton, Maryland), 6 October 1965. The item was apparently submitted by William S. Wilson. The Oriole Gallery was apparently 'established' in 1968. A letter from Johnson to William S. Wilson, dated 18 July 1968, begins: 'The Robin-Woodpecker is now the *Oriole Gallery*'. Courtesy William S. Wilson Archive, New York.

6 Bourdon (1965: 14). William S.

Wilson, in conversation with the author, speculates that it is likely that Bourdon himself placed the ad.

7 Correspondence between Bourdon and May Wilson in the William S. Wilson Archives, New York.

8 An error in the paste-up of the ad resulted in the transposition of the first and second lines, so that the ad actually reads 'material to order, 3 $\frac{1}{4}$ " \times 2" to 40 \times 24, about \$250 circle events on leather, silk, glass, canvas, or other'. This error was corrected in the next month's ad.

9 The listing actually offered an 'address' of 'PO Box NY 10025', confusing the city and zip code with the post office box number, which was not provided. The typesetter – or perhaps the copyeditor – mistook the gallery name for 'Israel', which is how it was cited in the chronological list of openings as well as the alphabetical listing of galleries.

10 In 1966, Tony Cox (to whom Ono was then married) distributed a 'Prospectus' for the 'Is-Real Gallery Incorporated' with a budget for the rental and operation of an actual gallery in which the installation of *The Stone*, first presented at the Judson Gallery in March 1966, was to have a 'permanent home'. While the prospectus promised an early June opening, the project was never brought to fruition. In a conversation with the author on 28 April 1999, Ono stated that Cox simply appropriated the name for an unrelated venture. The document's past-tense reference to the Judson Gallery installation and promise of an early June opening place it within a two-month period between the end of March and the end of

May, 1966 – at least one year after the IsReal ads were placed in the *New York Arts Calendar*. A copy of this document is held in the Jean Brown Archives at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

11 In a personal communication with the author on 1 March 1999 Graham stated that he was unaware of Ono's ads.

12 For billboard exhibitions see the chronology in *Billboard: Art on the Road*. The earliest example appears to be 1979, but earlier public projects documented in the book's chronology include billboards, among other media. An example of a television project is *Do It TV*, organized by Vienna's museum in progress and broadcast on Austrian national television (ORF) between December 1995 and March 1996. For details, see their web site [<http://mip.at/en/projekte/15-content.html> (accessed 18 March 2001)].

13 For the 'art into life' analogy, see Strick quoted in Jeannine Stein's 'In So Many Words', *Los Angeles Times*, 4 January 2001, p. E-2. The critical comments are in Doug Harvey, 'Art & Commerce: At an Intersection Near You', *LA Weekly*, 19–25 January 2001.

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• *Nudes*, from the '2001 Brand Awareness Campaign', Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001. Courtesy Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art

