17

And Thus Not Glowing Brightly

Noah Purifoy's Junk Modernism

Lisa Uddin

A photograph taken at the University of California–Los Angeles in 1966 introduces the junk I will consider in this essay (figure 17.1). Pictured is an installation at the art show *66 Signs of Neon*, curated by Noah Purifoy and Judson Powell and featuring sculptural works sourced from the wreckage of the August 1965 Watts rebellion that was precipitated by the police arrest of Marquette Frye for drunk driving. Frye was a recently discharged military serviceman who, like many black Angelenos, had migrated with his family from the Midwest. The focal piece of the photograph is a 14 in. × 24 in. × 60 in. assemblage work fabricated by Purifoy and composed of an upright wooden railroad crosstie, a rusted flit-gun used to kill mosquitoes, and a shattered car windshield.[1] Behind it stands a boy, peering at the object through another pane of glass that forms the building's exterior wall. Through this composition, the sculpture's title *Sudden Encounter* references at least three distinct moments of impact, each with various degrees of immediacy: the discrete moment that produced the spider-web effects of smashed glass; the event of six days of insurrection by 35,000 "rioters" with 72,0000 "close spectators" resulting in an estimated $200 million in property damage and a body count of

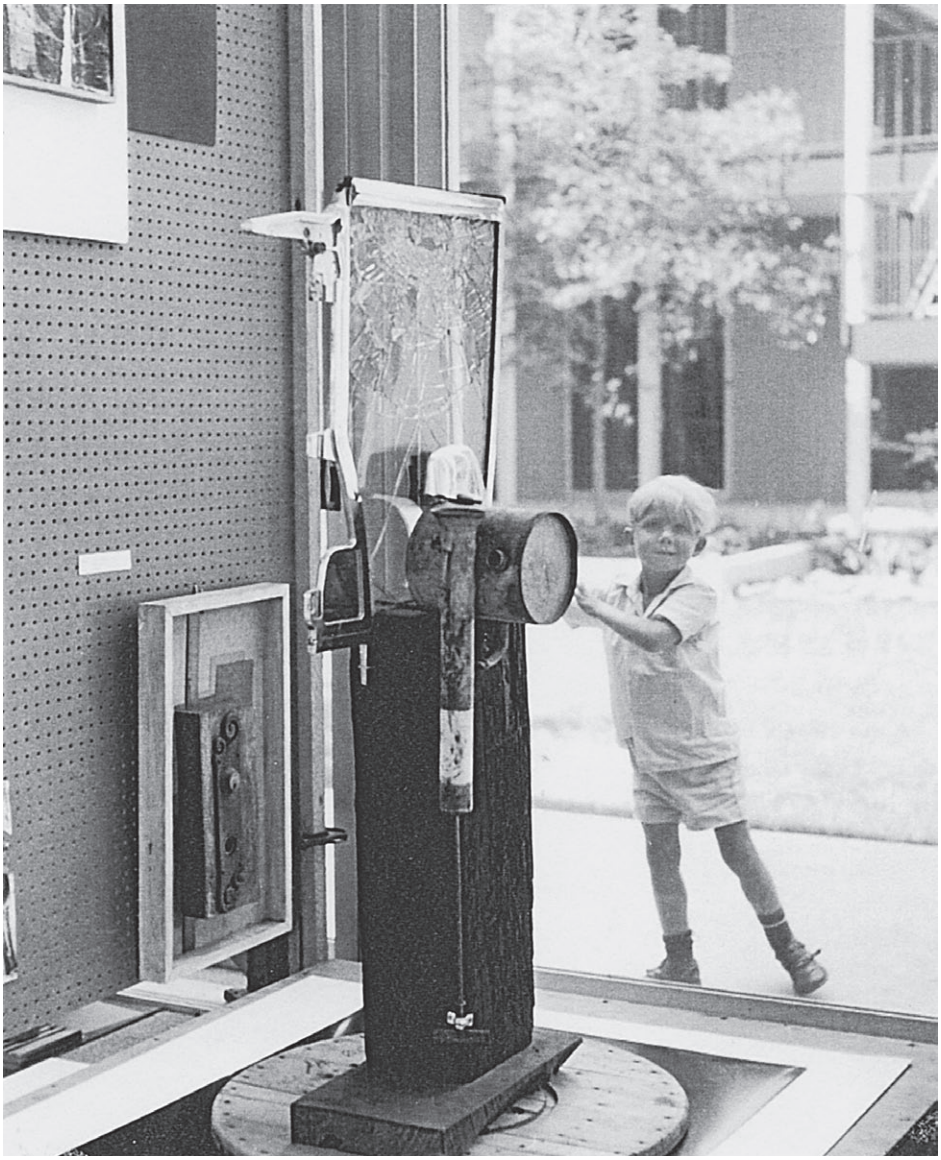

Fig. 17.1 *Sudden Encounter* at UCLA, 1966. Courtesy Noah Purifoy Foundation, 2018.

thirty-four; and the convening of two postwar modernisms that are discernible in the image itself.[2]

Outside the exhibition are signs of one of those modernisms—a spatial imaginary of purity and homogeneity materialized on UCLA's 1960s campus through flat, rectilinear volumes, large windows, and an open staircase with metal railings. The appearance of the clean-cut white boy outside the glass gallery wall accentuates how this particular design vocabulary has nourished specific racial identities and opportunities, functioning not only as aesthetic violence against minoritized

people who disidentified with the conventions of white bourgeois heteropatriarchy, but also as an exercise of biopower.[3] Inside the exhibition are signs of another modernism, one calibrated toward a different genre of the human that, following Alexander Wehileye, circulates through "the miniscule movements, glimmers of hope, scraps of food, the interrupted dreams of freedom found in those spaces deemed devoid of full human life."[4] Life, in this modernism, manifests less through a normative ethos of enlightenment agency and more within the condition and form of *Sudden Encounter*—as junk.

"Junk" was a widespread descriptor for Purifoy's work, including by the artist himself. This designation has positioned him within a canon of twentieth century avant-garde art.[5] In this essay, I show how attention to the modes of Purifoy's junk practice, which spanned art making, teaching, curating, and community arts organizing, illumines the racial dynamics of architectural modernism in and of Los Angeles. Purifoy's intersections with modern architecture were somewhat latent, but nonetheless pose serious challenges to understandings of LA's architecture, design, and urban built environment in the long 1960s that make virtuous and fundamentally human the qualities of, for example, mobility, transparency, informality, simplicity, and indoor-outdoor living. These understandings, and the humanism they reproduced, sidestep how life in Watts, like other segregated spaces for nonwhite Angelenos, was subject to exploitations on which the postwar growth of the region and its primary architectural sensibilities were built, and to which Purifoy's practice spoke.[6] Re-examining this practice can also add to the social science on Watts' structural poverty and racism in this period by considering how the neighborhood's abstractions into art works, pedagogy, and exhibitions critiqued predominantly white discourses of modern architecture, offering something that I call "junk modernism."

The designation of junk modernism approaches what waste thinker Brian Thill names as "the derelict": "that immense underclass of things that have much more quickly or surreptitiously [than ruins] fallen outside of visibility and desire in our time: the indifferent, the lost, the wayward, the leaking, the ugly, the truly abject and unwanted—all the meddlesome waste caught between the things we've built up in our minds as meaningful and majestic."[7] Rather than reifying the violent connection between a junk so described and African Americans from South Central Los Angeles, I consider how this community of color was able to withstand procedures of dereliction that yoked normative architectural modernism to whiteness and ravaged urban sites and objects to blackness. These were the same conflations that fed a logic of looming extinction for people who could not or would not buy into midcentury prosperity and mass consumption. And they are conflations that, more broadly, have helped posit nonhuman waste and "wasted humans" as mounting and interchangeable byproducts of the Good Life. Purifoy's

junk modernism aimed to rework that proposition for his community and for those beyond it. Examining how that happened requires some assemblage thinking, mirroring Purifoy's own mode of artistic production and considering the many forces at play in the construction and transformation of any social formation, including race.[8] Geographer Arun Saldanha, reading Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guitarri, asks, "What are the constituent components of race?" and answers, "Potentially everything, but certainly strands of DNA, phenotypical variation, discursive practices (law, media, science), artefacts such as clothes and food, and the distribution of wealth."[9] This linked and lateral formulation acknowledges the racializing power that radiates from material things and sites—in this case, Purifoy's potent compositions, but also the bodies that interacted with them, and the built and unbuilt environment of Watts. Moreover, it helps put stress on the relations *between* the parts of Purifoy's practice rather than fetishizing those parts in ways that loop them back into economies of consumption and the historical fungibility of blackness itself.[10] In approaching the work as assemblage through and through, I sift through a multifaceted urban history that intervened into the racialized matter, and mattering, of disposability and reached for another mode of black humanity.

Before Purifoy had oriented himself to Watts, he was already living the tenuousness of LA modernism for people of color. As the first full-time black student at Chouinard Art Institute in the mid-1950s, he initially chose courses in industrial design to complement his former employment as a high school shop teacher in his home state of Alabama.[11] When the program was discontinued, he moved to fine arts but avoided drawing courses for fear of "being stuck with the human image," which to him did not capture "the essence of being."[12] Still, Purifoy was keyed into midcentury tastes for "ethnic" art and design, making and eventually selling an African ceramic head; a motif he would repeat in later design work through collages inflected with African and Asian overtones.[13]

To support his studies, Purifoy found part-time employment, including night shifts at the Douglas Aircraft defense plant, one of four major companies in the region's booming aviation industry. There he operated a shearing machine that cut metal into templates, connecting him to a staple material in the architecture of both aircraft and modern houses.[14] His subsequent job as a window trimmer found him at Cannell and Chaffin Interior Designs on Wilshire Boulevard, an LA-based firm with a distinguished clientele and an establishment take on the California modern look.[15] Interiors staged for the company's Oasis Model House circa 1954, for example, featured a moderate use of low-profile wood furnishings and floating shelves, but took more liberties with open-space living areas and industrial touches such as a built-in heat lamp over the kitchen counter.[16] Whatever ease and modern comforts were associated with the company's designs, however, did not extend to

Purifoy. Acting on his desire to be an interior designer and salesman on the floor, he took on extra weekend work hours and interacted directly with customers, for which he was eventually terminated.[17]

After graduating, Purifoy continued to struggle in the industry. He was hired at the Angelus Furniture Warehouse to design modern furniture, but the company would not manufacture his work, prompting him to return to machine operation before taking his next job—setting up more furniture for window displays, this time at the Broadway department store where he worked between 1956 and 1964. Off the clock, Purifoy pursued a partnership with fellow Chouinard alumnus and African American John H. Smith, who was the more established of the pair (figure 17.2). The arrangement led to a handful of exhibition opportunities, but ultimately proved too difficult on account of a metonymic character Purifoy called "Mrs. Jones": "I couldn't please Mrs. Jones. You know, I would go and hang the drapery and have the carpet laid and do this and that, tear out this wall and design furniture and have it custom-made and all that. But she'd keep calling me back about something wrong. Now, I couldn't endure that."[18]

Purifoy's flatlined professional trajectory in design was neither unique nor a death knell for his creative capacities. As Wendy Kaplan notes, discriminatory employment practices and attitudes made success in this sector more difficult to achieve for Latinos, Asians, and African Americans than for whites.[19] Purifoy's response was to cultivate his friendships with black Angelenos and begin a small-scale assemblage art practice at his La Brea Avenue home. At the same time, he began to study music and constructed a nine-foot cabinet for his high-fidelity sound system in line with the period craze for domestic sound equipment and its free-standing display. But whereas the latter belonged to an inventory of consumable "must haves" for the modern home, Purifoy understood his hand-built cabinet as a medium for 24-7 community building; a way for familiars and unfamiliars to come and hear "the latest sounds around" and stay until all hours.[20] This ability to bring people together became paramount to the community arts work he assumed with his colleagues in Watts, the 2.12-square-mile neighborhood located on the eastern edge of South Central Los Angeles.

Urbanists have been accustomed to identifying Watts's physical and social isolation in the postwar years, sometimes to the point of reinforcing it in their assessments of Los Angeles. For example, as a parenthetical observation to his 1971 study of LA's built environment, Reyner Banham noted that by the early 1960s "no place was more strategically ill-placed for anything, as the freeways with their different priorities threaded across the plains and left Watts always on one side." This no-place-ness was particularly harmful given that the critic defined LA's freeways and the (auto)mobility they facilitated as the essential feature of the Southern California city, "a special way of being alive" that some locals, despite the daily

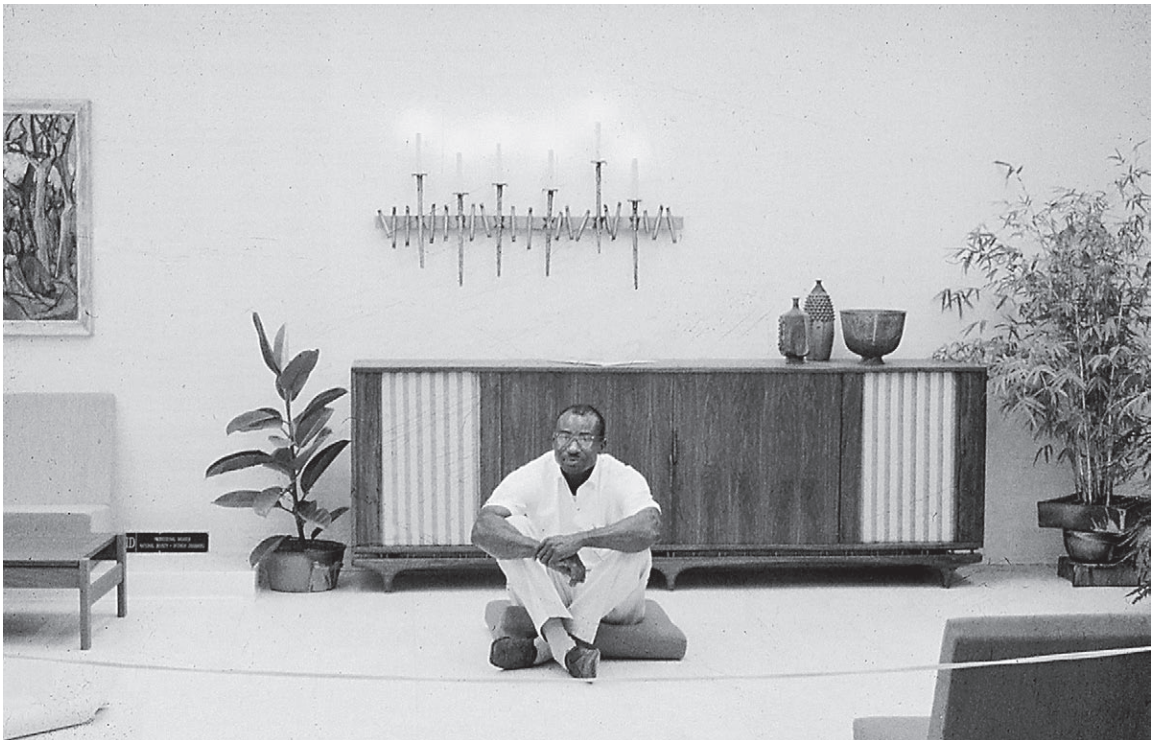

Fig. 17.2 Noah Purifoy and a high-fi cabinet designed by Purifoy and John H. Smith, n.d.

irritations of traffic, "find mystical." Watts residents were effectively cut off from such life, and with it, the city's prevailing identity as an "Autopia."[21] In addition to a lack of freeway access, deindustrialization became another mechanism of segregation. Taking their cues from a relocation trend set by the aircraft, aerospace, and electronics industries, other manufacturing firms began leaving the central city for the suburbs as early as 1963. At the same time, residents of Watts witnessed an outmigration of upwardly mobile blacks who were attempting to move into white neighborhoods. Those who were left behind struggled to secure work outside South-Central since more than half, according to one 1964 survey, were without a car.[22] The result was a concentration of black poverty that historians have characterized as a process of ghettoization familiar to other American cities.[23]

The narrative of ghettoization relies on an image of postwar Watts as a wasteland lying on the margins of a healthy modernist society. Evidence of that pathology has been well-documented and deserves some recapitulation in order to detail how the antiblackness of LA modernism took spatial form and catalyzed Purifoy's oppositional pedagogy. Poor housing conditions were part of that spatialization. During the war African Americans left the South in high numbers for the West, and with the rapid uptick in population garages and woodsheds became dwelling units minus running water, toilets, and occasionally windows. Beginning in the

mid-1950s, city officials identified these and other residential structures as substandard and razed many of them, reducing the overall housing stock. What remained were often small one-family dwellings rented at high rates to more than one family without any attention to maintenance.[24] A longtime Watts resident and activist Sonora McKeller related in 1967 that these were "rat-, roach-, and termite-infested homes—poor structures at best; houses as old as Watts with plumbing of the same vintage, and electrical fixtures and wiring so fragile that they are virtual firetraps."[25] Public housing was no better. In the postwar years, the area became, in historian Josh Sides's terms, "a dumping ground" for developments that were unwelcome in other parts of Los Angeles. These included the 184 one-story units of Hacienda Village, completed in 1942 with design credits to African American architect Paul R. Williams and Richard Neutra. Between 1953 and 1955, the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles built three more projects in Watts, including the massive 1,110-unit and 69-acre Nickerson Gardens. These developments were initially well-functioning and racially mixed, but soon transformed into the overcrowded crime-ridden complexes that became synonymous with Watts residency.[26] Nonresidential Watts was likewise marked by a notion of waste, including inadequate schools and health care facilities, and degrading encounters with local law enforcement. More concretely, residents could point to the plentiful vacant lots, the junkyards that purchased scavenged scrap, and the heaps of metal that had accumulated outside defunct foundries as signs of the city's economic restructuring. There were accumulations of household waste as well, piled on the curbs when the city's garbage trucks were slow to pick up or when they bypassed certain streets entirely.

The artist became part of this geography, and it showed in his teaching. As a cofounder and director of the Watts Towers Arts Center from 1964 to 1966, Purifoy helped establish a vibrant art education program for children and youth who lived in the community. They performed street cleanups, painted houses with supplies collected from paint stores, and practiced "being concerned about the next-door neighbor" adjacent to and across from the center's 107th Street location. Teachers also took children on walking trips to find discarded materials and objects that could be made into assemblages, emulating Purifoy's own work (figure 17.3). As he recalled, "We learned that is was rather natural and instinctive for the kids to assemble and disassemble an object, with the idea of counting the parts and so forth."[27] However innate the ability, it was honed through Purifoy's own attentiveness to the mutability of physical things and the already disassembled environment that shaped young lives in Watts. The neighborhood, in this sense, was rife with potential for how to re-present the conditions of postwar blackness in urban LA, be it through a coat of fresh paint or attention to how things are both taken apart and can come together.

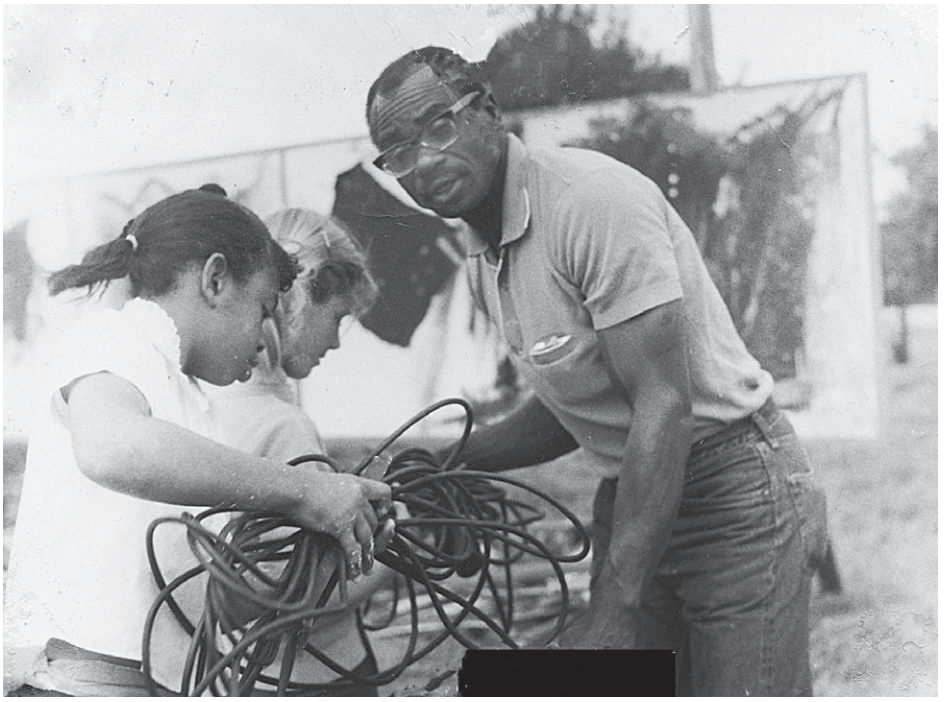

Fig. 17.3 Noah Purifoy making work with students, n.d. Photo by Irene Rosenfeld, courtesy Noah Purifoy Foundation, 2018.

As a pedagogical philosophy, Purifoy often framed junk art making as a pragmatic means to becoming more recognizably human in the wider social field: "It improved [the children's] self-image, and this would make a great deal of difference in terms of their ability and capacity to grasp whatever the objectives were, whether it was in school or out of school."[28] Stronger versions of this outlook emerged when the artist exported his curriculum to predominantly white settings. In local coverage of a two-week course at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Purifoy related that: "In junk art we take two unlike objects and put them together. . . . And you can transfer this to human experience. For two supposedly unlike human beings can come together and find they can communicate with each other contrary to what they have always been taught." The newspaper massaged this postwar picture of racial integration, commenting that Purifoy was using wood, metal, and glass in his own sculpture, having "stopped discriminating along the way."[29] While the question of which object or material stood for which human remains open, what is more certain is that teaching with junk made sense given its prevalence in the LA neighborhood that was lived and known *as* junk, and whose genres of the human were thereby obscured.

Purifoy's intimate connection to the waste of Watts intensified in the immediate aftermath of the August 1965 rebellion, beginning at the back door of the Watts Towers Arts Center. When the upheaval began, the artist and his colleagues

had unobstructed sightlines to the epicenter of the destruction: a three-block stretch of 103rd Street where forty-one buildings occupied primarily by food, liquor, furniture, and clothing stores were demolished, and which became known as "Charcoal Alley."[30] They also received direct accounts of what was happening when youth returned to the center to stash their loot.[31] After amassing three tons of debris in the form of "hunks of melted neon signs, medicine bottles embedded in the molten remains of colorful plastic raincoats, twisted bits of metal, charred wood, pieces of smashed automobiles," the process of eventually working with it was multisensory and open-ended.[32] As Purifoy recounted in the exhibition catalogue, he and Powell "gave much thought to the oddity of our found things. Often the smell of debris, as our work brought us into the vicinity of the storage area, turned our thoughts to what were and were not tragic times in Watts, and to what to do with the junk we had collected, which had begun to haunt our dreams."[33] Consider the force of the junk in this reflection. Echoing aspects of what Jane Bennett calls "thing power," the collection exceeded its assigned role as inert or useable stuff and flashed itineraries of mattering that were independent from human ones.[34] Through a pungency that was odd unto itself, the debris of the rebellion solicited the artists' attention, entering into a working relationship between (at minimum) Purifoy and Powell's bodies, work spaces, sleep spaces, and the conjugations of Watts as waste-scape. Through these relations, the artists were able to help redefine rather than reinforce Watts's "tragic times" and work on the recurrent question of how the material could reconstitute in form and significance. Purifoy pondered the same process in a poem that was issued in conjunction with *66 Signs of Neon.* Entitled "Seeing," the text expressed the mystery of the junk that occupied his environs and outlined modes of perception particular to postwar LA blackness: "But there was junk—piles of junk / All bundled up and neatly packaged / Scattered out down the railroad track / Glowing brightly in the absence of sunlight / And thus not glowing brightly." The power of these piles lay neither in their ubiquity nor tidiness, but in their capacity to shine without a light source and against reason; a riddle that may have read less so for people estranged from ideologies of endless sunshine and clear visibility. The poem continued: "Neat bright bundles pressed hard, piled high / Beer cans, shattered glass, bottle tops flat-out / Foreign objects lying there without relationship / To self or any other, aged forms/ Banked up inactivity, meaningless existence?" The non-relation of the objects, first framed as a kind of opaque autonomy, resisted points of interaction and inscriptions of meaning, but not indefinitely. Seen anew, the objects could join an amalgam of creative possibility without entirely sacrificing their initial force: "If I could see it differently / For what it is or is not / Still flat out and piled up / In another way yet the same way / I'd offer it up."[35] Thus, what might have read to some exhibition-goers as esoteric musings on artistic process was also an account of junk

modernism as a collaboration between oddly vibrant things and black ways of seeing that reconfigured the modalities of disposability.

The gymnasium of Watts's Markham Junior High School at 1650 E. 104th Street became the first location of *66 Signs of Neon*, featuring the work of eight artists experimenting with refuse from the uprising.[36] The show ran in early April as part of the Simon Rodia Commemorative Watts Renaissance of the Arts Festival with more than a thousand other pieces by mostly Watts-based makers, a performance of Handel's "Israel in Egypt," readings of Malcolm X's writing, and a poetry recitation by LeRoi Jones. As Kellie Jones has observed, curating *66 Signs* in this and other institutionally precarious settings marked Purifoy as a community arts organizer of exceptional strength, and Watts as a place of make-do creativity.[37] Coverage of the festival in the *Los Angeles Times* opened instead with a juxtaposition of art worldliness and the black ghetto: "It could be a scene in Beverly Hills or Pasadena: smartly-dressed people milling around displays of painting, sculpture and photography. But on Thursday this was the scene in Watts." About three thousand people attended in the first four days.[38]

Later that year, Purifoy installed *66 Signs* at the Annual Los Angeles Home Show in a sports complex, exhibiting alongside modernist furnishings and prefabricated homes in what Yael Lipschutz has interpreted as Purifoy's "most calculated attempt to critique the overblown and alienating society that surrounded him."[39] That critique hinged on an assemblage's appropriation of its modernist source material. In *Breath of Fresh Air*, for example, two joints of a stovepipe stood at thirty-six inches tall, topped with part of a roof of tar paper and tin. A metal brace held the composition up, making a parabolic arc. Richard Cándida Smith has argued that the piece formed graceful shapes associated with aluminum or other modern, high-tech materials and their state-of-the-art manipulation. In so doing, it challenged notions that "only certain materials can be sleek or that junk must be nostalgic."[40] The work's title, moreover, played on modernist mantras of space-age aesthetics as a vehicle for healthy living, while the sculpture's reproduction on the cover of the show's catalogue, collaged into and against a sepia-toned junkyard, highlighted the decidedly earthbound afterlives of those space-age materials (figure 17.4).

As *66 Signs* travelled to universities across California, including UCLA, UC Santa Cruz, and UC Berkeley, visitors' responses to the show in the exhibition guest books attested to the sense of an architectural modernism out of joint. Many expressed their frustration over what was on display. That the show was allocated to student union halls and other multipurpose spaces instead of university galleries fanned the flames.[41] In the tradition of the avant-garde, the pieces perverted the concept of art and the experience of consuming art in and of the modern city. "'Junk' is right," one person wrote, while another noted the display "definitely

Fig. 17.4 Cover of *66 Signs of Neon* catalogue, featuring *Breath of Fresh Air*. Courtesy Noah Purifoy Foundation, 2018.

degrades and ridicules 'art.'" Viewers criticized the works from their inappropriate prices ("you're kidding of course!") to their lack of skill ("Any one can go to a junk dealer and pick up all the junk that you have here.") to their sheer ugliness ("frankly, I wouldn't want many of the exhibits in my home.") One visitor felt lied to: "a normal fire doesn't melt and distort metal like that—looks more like something that might be found after an A bomb." Another put it more succinctly: "Excellent example of 'artistic deception.'" Of the few people who identified their residency in the guest books, Earnest Freeman of Watts gave a different interpretation of the exhibition, which recognized its status as rudimentary junk but was less judgmental in the assessment: "That all it can be call because that all it is, junk art. It could not be call [*sic*] anything but junk." Other respondents rejected the term entirely and its disruptive possibility by filtering the work through fantasies of liberal democratic equality ("If people could only realize that we are but people and none better than other, each doing their best") and aesthetics ("Some objects a little bitter, but its better to show it in art than in riots").[42] A handful of visitors were unhinged in their anti-black racism, including one visitor who penned a panoramic description of the show's other-than-humanness: "Scrap metal salad. Shredded newspapers. 400 frenzied orangutans hurling paint cans. Demented junkman's paradise." What these and similar reactions indicate is how Purifoy's

waste-based assemblage practice harnessed and was harnessed to a highly racialized iteration of urban Los Angeles; one enacted through, in this particular configuration, borrowed exhibition spaces, predominantly white viewing subjects, anti-junk affects, and built things that were, according to one visitor, "very expressive." This expressivity was perhaps the most potent nodal point of the show's modernist dislocations, asking visitors to consider how materials from the rubble of Watts may well have had their own truths to tell.

Additional exhibitions of Purifoy's work suggest other versions of junk modernism, each a pointed response to LA modernism's anti-blackness, but increasingly uncertain as feasible forms of black humanity. For example, the American Cement Corporation of Los Angeles hosted *66 Signs* at their 1966 annual meeting. As per usual, Purifoy mounted documentary photographs of the rebellion's outbreak and aftermath as backdrops to the assemblages, setting up his terms for discussion. The corporation set up its terms as well. In his address, President James P. Giles forecasted steep growth for US cities and conveyed urgency for an urban plan and building schedule that would accommodate it. Anything less meant letting cities continue on their own: "and be forever damned by the unfortunate millions who inherit our shapeless, aimless, non-cities, 'our slurbs—our sloppy, sleazy, slovenly, slipshod, semi-cities,' as Professor Wheaton of the Institute of Urban and Regional Development, University of California, calls them."[43] Near this industrial-academic discourse of urban dystopia, whose vocabulary pulled from older anxieties over slums and slum dwellers, stood—quite literally—sculptures of damaged materials and objects from South Central Los Angeles. At a narrow angle, the projects were similar. Like Purifoy, with his openness to the dormant capacities of metal and glass, Giles shared the immediate goal "to probe the basic nature of cement in search for ways to make it an even more versatile construction material." But any affinities were fleeting, given his expressed interest in coordinating efforts of "the presently fragmented elements of our society indispensable to building better cities—those in government at all levels, the building and planning professions, higher education and private industry." Not surprisingly, organizations like the Watts Towers Arts Center were not included in the sectors identified as instrumental to urban improvement, nor was Purifoy's practice cited as a model for this agenda. Instead, American Cement leadership praised the space program for accomplishing "a well-defined objective desired by the bulk of the population," and in an act of social conscience, financed the publication of the *66 Signs* catalogue.[44]

After the university and American Cement Corporation shows, the uncertainties of how Purifoy's practice might prompt critique and reinvention only escalated. In 1971, the artist turned his focus to an installation at the Brockman Gallery, the LA art space dedicated to African American artists since 1967. Purifoy had

exhibited there previously with David Hammons, and in a group show run out of a high-end furniture store in Central LA.[45] By contrast, the 1971 exhibition replicated a squalid apartment in the upstairs section of the gallery. Purifoy culled from the junk pile to construct an "environmental experience" that chewed up and spit out any inkling of a livable midcentury modernist interior (figure 17.5). *Art Magazine*'s description of the work is worth quoting at length:

> The viewer climbs the back stairs and enters the living quarters through the back hall, stepping around overflowing trash cans, and dirty brooms and mops, past a filthy bathroom sink and toilet, and stockings dangling overhead. The array in the next room is even more appalling. In every corner dirty clothes are piled high. Greasy food in take-out containers mingles with styrofoam cups and cigarette butts. Seemingly holding the walls together is a patchwork pastiche of wallpaper samples and newspapers. Huddled beneath blankets on mattresses on the floor, approximately eight bodies lie motionless beneath the staring eye of a blank but turned on TV screen. Meanwhile on the bed behind the TV, two bodies mechanically writhe up and down. The bedside table is adorned with empty bottles; a red light is near the window. Above the bed a calendar Christ at the Last Supper surveys the scene. A recording of a variety of ghetto noises, from children fighting to a telephone ringing without response, complete the tableau.[46]

Against ideals of domestic Southern California as light-filled, straightforward, and clean, Purifoy's installation, with its malfunctioning, dirty people and things, re-spatialized the abject underbelly of middle-class whiteness to convey "the very essence of poverty and the way black people live."[47]

Although enlisting visitors into provocative three-dimensional spaces was a common practice in the art world of the 1970s, it was not a popular strategy in the efforts to regenerate Watts after 1965. For example, the Watts Summer Festival launched in 1966 as a hybrid of black revolutionaries who understood the event as a precursor to armed revolt and a moderate strand of community workers invested in cultural revitalization.[48] Some of those moderates intersected with the HUD-funded Urban Workshop aimed at, according to one participant, "transform[ing] a despairing community into a landmark of human progress" via projects like landscape development, debris cleanup, and playground construction.[49] Purifoy made his contributions on this front as well. In 1968, he and Powell assisted an urban antipoverty plan by constructing a model for a library and art gallery, to be attached to a pilot community center in Watts.[50] These projects, whether self-consciously radical or more modest versions of urban-environmental reform, were antithetical to Purifoy's Brockman Gallery piece, which carried the bleakest of titles: *Niggers Ain't Never Ever Gonna Be Nothin'—All They Want to Do is Drink + Fuck.* This was another junk-centric co-mingling with LA anti-blackness, a dwell-

Fig. 17.5 Material used in *Niggers Ain't Never Ever Gonna Be Nothin'–All They Want to Do is Drink + Fuck*, 1971. Courtesy Noah Purifoy Foundation, 2018.

ing within it, but now without suggestions on how to translate wastedness into something else.

The absence of translation made it difficult for the audience to connect with Purifoy's work in the way the artist had hoped. *Los Angeles Times* art critic William Wilson, for instance, refused to comply with the bleakness, maintaining that Purifoy's "ghetto apartment" was "less an art work than a desperate fact" and, therefore, "the most effective piece of black protest art" he had seen thus far; a willful, recuperative reading of an artist who understood protest as secondary to the creative process.[51] Other visitors, meanwhile, declined the total environmental experience. As Purifoy recalled, most people did not move through the length of the space, preferring to turn around somewhere near the midpoint. Even Alonzo Davis, codirector of the gallery, "behaved like everyone else, in a way" by avoiding the installation and keeping others away until it was completely assembled.[52]

The critical and creative prospects for junk modernism were further strained when Purifoy's work was solicited by the US Office of Information for an exhibition at the 1972 German Industries Fair in Berlin. The show highlighted the varied possibilities of garbage for an international audience. Purifoy submitted four sculptures. Art by Edward Kienholz, Robert Rauchenberg, and John Chamberlain

was also on view. Rounding out the exhibition were informational displays and live demonstrations about waste management and sustainable furniture. Southern California was heavily represented therein, with designs by Gere Kavanaugh, LA-based companies Environmental Concepts and Huddle Environments, and the Easy Edges furniture line of corrugated cardboard chairs by Frank Gehry.[53]

This was odd and difficult company for Purifoy's work, partly because of the design world he had abandoned a decade prior and partly because of the exhibition's indeterminate framing of garbage. English translations of the organizing theme ranged from "Garbage—the Need to Recycle" to "Garbage Needs Recycling" to "Garbage Is Beautiful."[54] In all versions, garbage took center stage, emphasized by the accumulation of junk that occupied the central exhibition space. The third translation, however, suggests ways in which the focal issue could be racialized for English speakers familiar with the rallying cry "Black Is Beautiful," by substituting "black" for "garbage" and letting the connotations fly. Even without the slippage, Purifoy's pieces were the only works attributed to a black Angeleno and as such were differently located from those of his peers. Not all garbage was created equal nor equally. Purifoy's assemblages emerged from his sustained experience of a disposability whose forms and intensities were distinct from those evoked in Kienholz's countercultural commentaries on the inhumanities of modern life or in Gehry's playful, low-risk explorations with cheap, plentiful cardboard from the comforts of his Santa Monica office. It was a disposability underscored by one report that headlined "U.S. Exhibition at Berlin Fair is Trash," and published six equally sized photographs of Purifoy's junk art. One of those photographs pictured the smashed windshield of *Sudden Encounter*, and through it, the artist's portrait in three-quarter view, as if to suggest that trash, however striking, was an epistemological frame for Purifoy.[55] Even the deployment of beauty as an aesthetic to re-know and re-value waste was a no-win scenario for his art, with its ties to an anti-beauty assemblage tradition. More significantly, Purifoy's versatile practice was an expression of the ongoing living conditions of postwar Watts for which black activists had already argued beauty was small recompense.[56]

Given its myriad vulnerabilities, what then can be said of junk modernism as a viable genre of black humanity? To what extent did Purifoy's multiple movements contra the whiteness of architectural modernism lose their promise in the long shadows of postwar Los Angeles and a postmodern turn to junk that would have and produce different stakes?[57] In a 1973 letter to Sue Welch, a close friend and colleague from the Watts Towers Arts Center's early years, the artist reflected on the struggle to improve black lives in the city. Eight years had passed since the Watts rebellion. The letter expressed frustration with the absence of change in the neighborhood, its enduring status as America's archetypal ghetto, and a post-rebellion LA divided between "art for art's sake" and gang warfare. Purifoy's balm

was the community of makers who had ties to the center and a sense that art's contribution to the struggle lay in its process more than its marketable product. Then, in a moment of reckoning with his racial position, he wrote: "I am a long ways from resolving my blackness. I am still body oriented. And to whatever extent we are, it is to this extent we are unable. My solution to this problem (personal) is a strange one. But I think ultimately it is the solution to the whole problem of human relation."[58] For Purifoy, a resolved and flourishing blackness meant getting over the human figure and continuing a practice of making with the stuff of urban waste, which was the work of becoming differently human and our work of learning how to know it.