



**Dennis Hopper. *Double Standard*, 1961.**

Gelatin silver print. 16 x 24 (41 x 61).

Courtesy the artist and Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York.

In Hopper's quintessential photograph of Los Angeles, the viewer sees the city from the vantage point of a driver in an automobile. The choreographed collision of the vectors formed by the tilted telephone poles, the diagonal telephone wires, and the slanting upper edge of the windshield contributes to an exuberant vertigo, so characteristic of late-twentieth-century experience in megalopolises like Los Angeles, built to be experienced in motion. Further undermining the stability of the viewer's vantage point is the substitution of the clarity of vision symbolized by a single, central vanishing point with the delirious evocation of double vision suggested by the repetition of the two Standard signs (and of the numerals they frame in the Route 66 sign), as well as the mirror inset of the driver's rear view into the reflective glass plane of the windshield.

## Conversation

# Ring of Fire: Interview with Joe Lewis and Yong Soon Min

David Joselit

**Joselit:** I'd like to start by asking each of you to describe your own work and its relationships to the focus of the studio art thematic sessions, which you've titled "Ring of Fire," for the College Art Association's Annual Conference in Los Angeles in February 1999.

**Min:** Since the mid-eighties my diverse body of work has been regarded within the rubric of identity art. Much of it deals with the intersections of history and memory, as well as the politics of representation. My installations and sculptures often employ narrative strategies that address issues of cross-cultural translation inherent within certain "isms," such as feminisms or nationalisms. In this respect, my work foregrounds questions of positionality.

**Joselit:** Could you define positionality as you understand it?

**Min:** The relationships between the center and the periphery within a postcolonial critique. A positioning that is both claimed and put in tension with a position that's ascribed.

**Lewis:** I am a poststudio, nonmedia-specific artist, which means that my work could be anything from a recipe to a photograph, performance, installation, activity, reading, or text. My interests lie in biology and cultural studies. For the past ten years I've looked at the effect of biological issues on policy positions in government. For example, the placing of toxic waste sites in underserved neighborhoods, medical experimentation of pharmaceutical companies on poor women, government research into genetics, the human genome project, and how the government has used biology and politics as a way to dominate people. Currently I am exploring how underserved populations gain access to the so-called information superhighway and the relationship of access to the aesthetic of information.

**Joselit:** Moving on to the specifics of the studio art thematic sessions for the conference, could you both talk about the theme "Ring of Fire"?

**Lewis:** I look at it in a geological, geographical, cultural sense—the section of the earth that is still in the most flux.

**Min:** I love the title. It's very provocative and, maybe for some, very enigmatic.

**Joselit:** Is it a term used to refer to the Pacific Rim?

**Lewis:** Yes. It's the area where there's the most geological activity. And it's always changing, moving, shifting.

**Joselit:** It's interesting to use a natural or geological metaphor for a series of panels that many will read as highly focused on cultural constructions. It seems to be a paradox.

**Min:** It's a great metaphor for a lot of geopolitical and cultural movements and relationships.

College Art Association's 87th Annual Conference will take place in Los Angeles, February 10–13, 1999. A preliminary program of all conference sessions, activities, and events is available on the CAA website at <[www.collegeart.org](http://www.collegeart.org)>. To receive a complimentary printed copy of this program, send a 9 x 12 in. SASE (\$1.24 domestic; \$3.80 international) to CAA Preliminary Program, College Art Association, 275 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10001.

**Lewis:** It focuses on transactions and borders, on authenticity. If the land is shifting underneath you, who shall speak?

**Min:** The title foregrounds this notion of a terrain. It highlights how geography is constructed and what's behind the increasing popularization of the notion of globalization, crossing the border, cultural flow.

**Joselit:** Do you think the discussions around globalization have conjured away geographic difference on some level?

**Min:** Yes. The way that the discourse is developing is interesting. Who's behind this popularization? Is it the transnational corporations? And how do we as cultural producers benefit from that, if at all? How do we actually participate? One thing that concerns me is to what extent this global or diasporic framework displaces whatever gains multiculturalism has made. It's easier and sexier in some ways, especially on the liberal mind, to look at troubles elsewhere, instead of in our own backyard. To what extent is it easier to bring over an artist from Southeast Asia, for example, than to have to address issues of Asian American artists? There is an interesting and intricate relationship here.

**Lewis:** Others, especially cybernauts, would contend that cyberspace has replaced globalism because it is omnipresent—for those who have the money to buy the hardware to hook into the flow of information. As a cybernaut you can become anyone you want. The language used by cybernauts reflects the enthusiasm of the frontier, but it is a way to be completely removed from the actuality of the pain and suffering that colonization and colonialism and conquering and mercantilism created. That discourse is being created in a space completely unfamiliar with the past twenty years of cultural activity—by people who have had no contact with those who've been involved in that struggle and discourse.

**Joselit:** Are you referring to the struggle identified as multiculturalism or identity politics?

**Lewis:** Yes, and “place.”

**Joselit:** So then you agree on some level with Yong Soon that the term “globalization” is enabling but also has this danger of leaving out groups who have worked hard to be played in?

**Lewis:** Absolutely.

**Joselit:** This issue that you're articulating between globalization, on the one hand, and material struggles rooted in the local, on the other, is represented intensively in the panels you've selected for the conference. How do you see the conference functioning within these debates? What do you want participants to come away with in terms of their engagement with these terms?

**Min:** To pose a lot of questions. The relationships of the global and the local—more specifically, some of the panels that address the recent phenomenon of the international biennial proliferation, for instance—were of particular interest to me. And not necessarily from a cynical vantage point, because out of this new situation may arise new possibilities. But they are always tempered, or in tension with, other considerations.

**Joselit:** Do you feel that creating a program is an activist project that spurs the development of certain areas of work? To what degree do you want the conference to be provocative?

**Lewis:** I would like it to be very provocative. The theme creates situations. It tries to be porous enough to accept traditional scholarship and have it clash with nontraditional scholarship.

**Min:** I hope that the theme isn't perceived proscriptively. It is a springboard to induce people to look at what they've been doing from a specific perspective, with a different lens. We were also operating under a certain mandate as well, because CAA had boycotted California because of the passage of Proposition 187 and later Proposition 209.

**Lewis:** Proposition 187 took away funds for undocumented people for education, health care, food, and so on—any federally funded programs at the state level. Then 209 removed all affirmative-action criteria from state programs. But after the CAA Board decided to boycott California, a lot of things started to happen in Los Angeles, and many of our constituents live in this area. The Getty had some interest in having the conference here, as did MOCA, LACMA, and the art schools. So we rescinded the boycott with the proviso that the conference focus on the issues that initially motivated the boycott.

**Joselit:** The issue of the border emerges in many interesting ways in the sessions. There's the geographical, in that Southern California is a borderland—to Asia, to Latin America, and so on. There's also a technological-perceptual crossing of borders with virtual reality. There's a disciplinary crossing, in that interdisciplinary work is encouraged in both your panels and the art history ones. And then there's intermedia. Could you comment on how these different levels relate—particularly whether you think that the focus on intermedia is linked to these fascinations or engagements with globalized culture?

**Min:** Certainly my own work is invested in a desire for a multidisciplinary perspective. And if you look at artistic or cultural production globally, there is a lot of blurring of disciplinary or aesthetic boundaries. There's a preponderance of installation work, for example, that mixes many different materials and visual languages. I hope that we don't slip into binary ways of viewing works as encoded either formally or for Otherness, in which never the twain shall meet. I also hope that some of the panels address to what extent those kinds of border crossings are actually policed. What are the controls that either permit a border crossing or defer or mediate it?

**Lewis:** We'd like to cross the border; we'd like to have that interaction.

David Joselit's book *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp, 1910–1941* was recently published by MIT Press. He teaches modern art history at the University of California, Irvine.

Joe Lewis is a CAA board member and chair of the Department of Art, California State University, Northridge. He has exhibited widely and writes about art with regularity.

Yong Soon Min teaches art at the University of California, Irvine. She was a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Artist Grant in New Genre (1989–90). She currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Korean American Museum and the College Art Association.