An abstract geometric artwork featuring a complex arrangement of dark, rusted metal shapes. The composition includes large, stylized letters, possibly spelling 'REED', and various geometric forms like squares, circles, and triangles. A fine, dark wire mesh is superimposed over the entire scene, creating a layered, cage-like effect. The background is a light, textured surface, possibly concrete or stone, with some darker, irregular patches. The overall aesthetic is industrial and sculptural.

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD BLAIR**

# Signs

By expressive, mostly non-professional artists

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By expressive mostly non-professional artists

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Blair and Goodwin  
Inverness, California  
2023

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Rainbow and Whorehouse Sign, Near Pahrump Nevada 2008

# Introduction

I first became aware of signs when my father, the poet and linguist Hugh Ed Blair, explained the art of sign painting. He showed me the basic shapes of serif lettering, with thick ascenders and serifs, the basic roman alphabet. When I walked with him, we would look at the gold leaf on doctors’ office windows, the exacting work done by sign painters. I was amazed by the careful control these craftsman wielded. Plus they could spell. That alone was magic to a twelve year old.

I continued to marvel at the work of those who could transform letters into works of art. The Coca-Cola logo is an example of great hand lettering. I realized that people were being influenced by the shapes and grace of custom lettering, while they were reading the content, perhaps even unaware that the message came from the artist as well as the business organization.

During my interminable school days, I would practice hand-letting, even drawing billboards around the type for effect. I also admired cartoon balloon lettering style, with penmanship that was both easy to read and expressive.

Later at the High School of Music and Art, we had a typography class where we tried to set a paragraph of text before the bell rang and it was time to put the loose characters back in the type case. It was a evil plot on the part of the lazy teacher, he knew that we could never finish it, and the lesson would never proceed to printing. Still I learned about type cases, leading, (the spacing between the lines) and how to hold a pica stick.

My first adventure in publishing was printing tee shirts and posters using the silk screen process, where the stencils are made phonographically using a transparent black and white film (called Kodalith)

and a sun lamp. I would get Letraset rub down letters and try to get them spaced well enough to make the result acceptable. It was hard to make it look good – there was always a stiffness about the result.

The next revelation, which did a great deal to spark this book, came while wandering in San Francisco, I walked into the lobby of the Hyatt Regency hotel on Market Street near the Ferry building. There was a conference of sign designers and fabricators in progress, complete with lectures by industry honchos.

First was a slide show by a Las Vegas sign company, which was most impressive, signs with huge numbers of lights, installed by monster cranes; this was signage!

Next, a graphic designer, Harry Murphy, made his presentation. He showed the design work that he done for a downtown garage, each floor had signs of a different color, done in what looked to me to be big Helvetica. I thought that this was no act of design brilliance which was confirmed during the question and answer period when a young, pretty design student responded to his slide of a beautifully furnished office complete with a huge row of flat files, with neatly numbered and organized drawers. “How do you keep your office so organized?” She asked adoringly. “I don’t know what’s in the drawers” Murphy replied, “I put vinyl numbers on the drawer fronts so I look organized.” This got me thinking about all the legions of great sign painters whose work was being replaced by rub out type, plastic letters and fluorescent back lit panels, a ruination of the vibrant signage of San Francisco, indeed, the whole country by facile hacks who pretend to be making signs, but are only concerned with making

money.

What about the Italian influenced signs of North Beach, and the wonderful, mysterious calligraphy (at least to me) of Chinatown? How dare “graphic designers” ruin these traditions.

Thus was the idea for this book formed, to celebrate the signs that people made, and decorated without a clue what was taught at design schools or their knowing anything about off-the-shelf signage products. They were using their own talent and skills to announce a message to the world. Some are funny, others witty and fresh, while a few are crazy but they are original!

Another kind of undesigned signage are those messages by very large organizations, like governments, who just make revealing pronouncements without giving typography or aesthetics any consideration.

Many signs become art to my eyes, after they are modified by weathering or vandalism, particularly bullet holes in the desert.

This brings me to another sign category, signs which have been modified by graffiti artists, who either attack the original message of the sign, or otherwise use the original sign as a canvas for a completely new work.

What I added to the signs I found was juxtaposing ironic, iconic or shocking backgrounds, all found, none photo-shopped. I used my camera in the tradition of Walker Evans, Robert Frank, and other chroniclers of American vernacular culture, to intensify these resulting photographs.

-Richard Blair

Inverness, California

4/1/2023



Starting at the beginning  
Original Roman Lettering, The Coliseum, Rome 1976



Peace Now, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, 1969



Alturas County, CA

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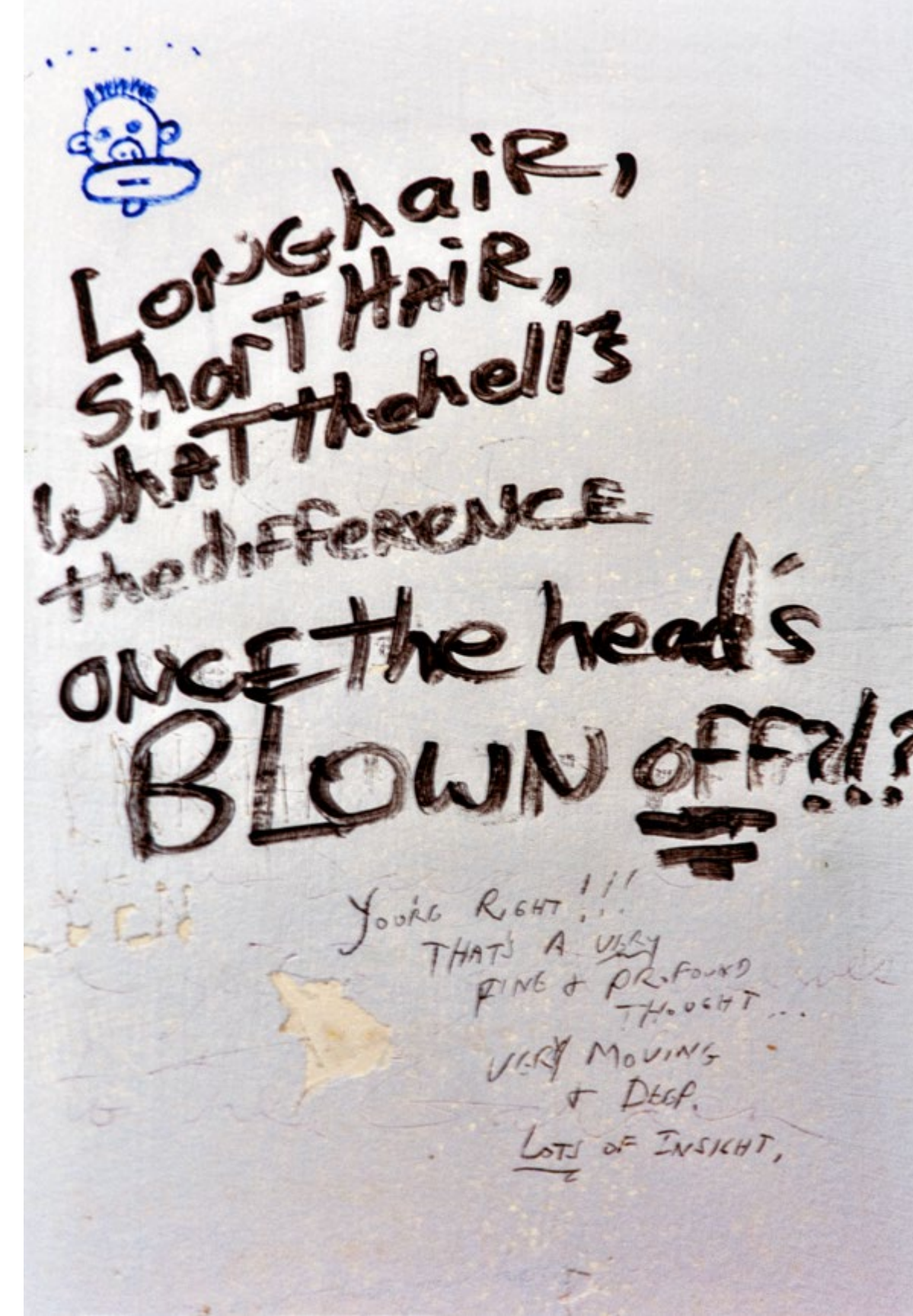
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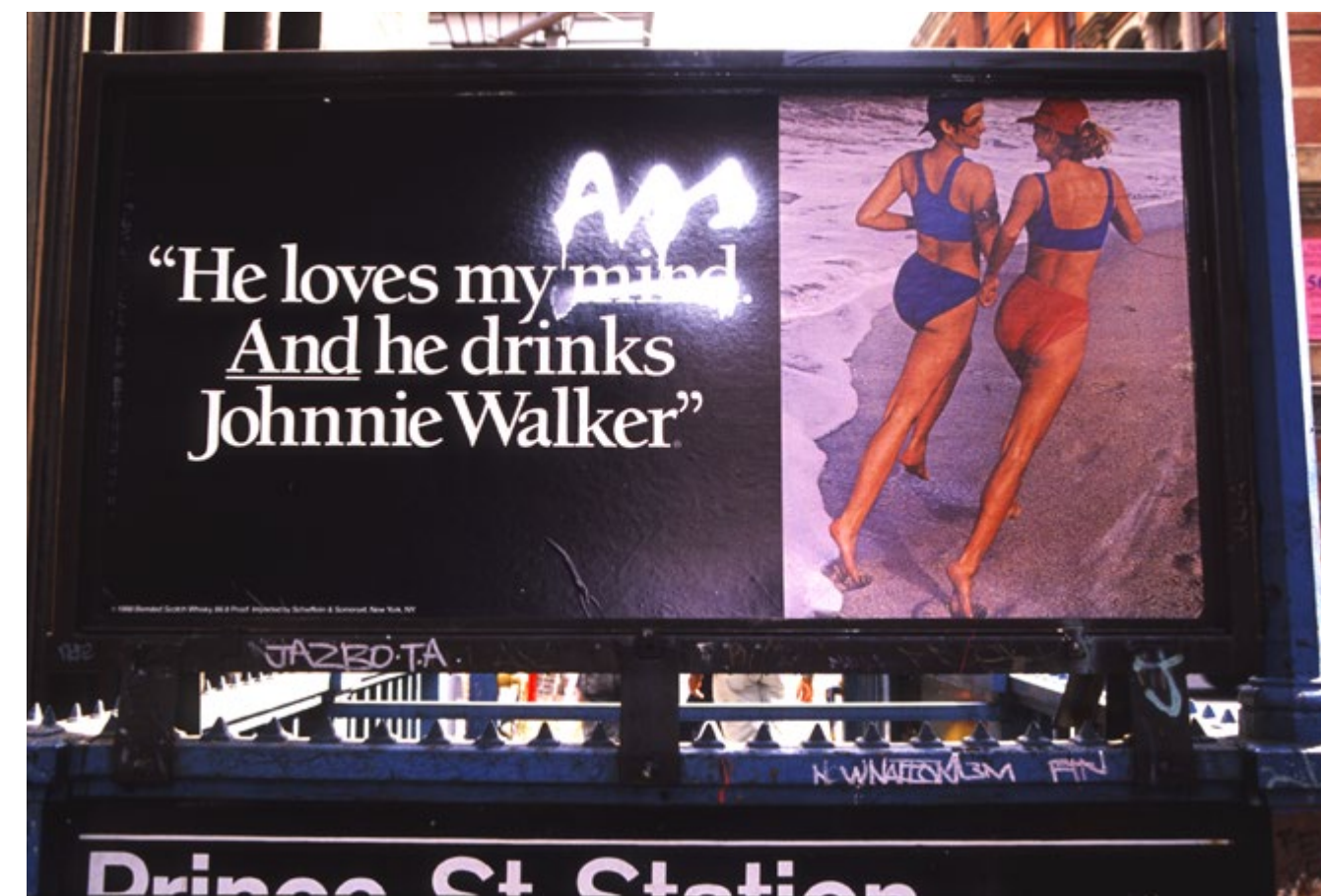
Death Valley Road Sign Bullet  
Holes



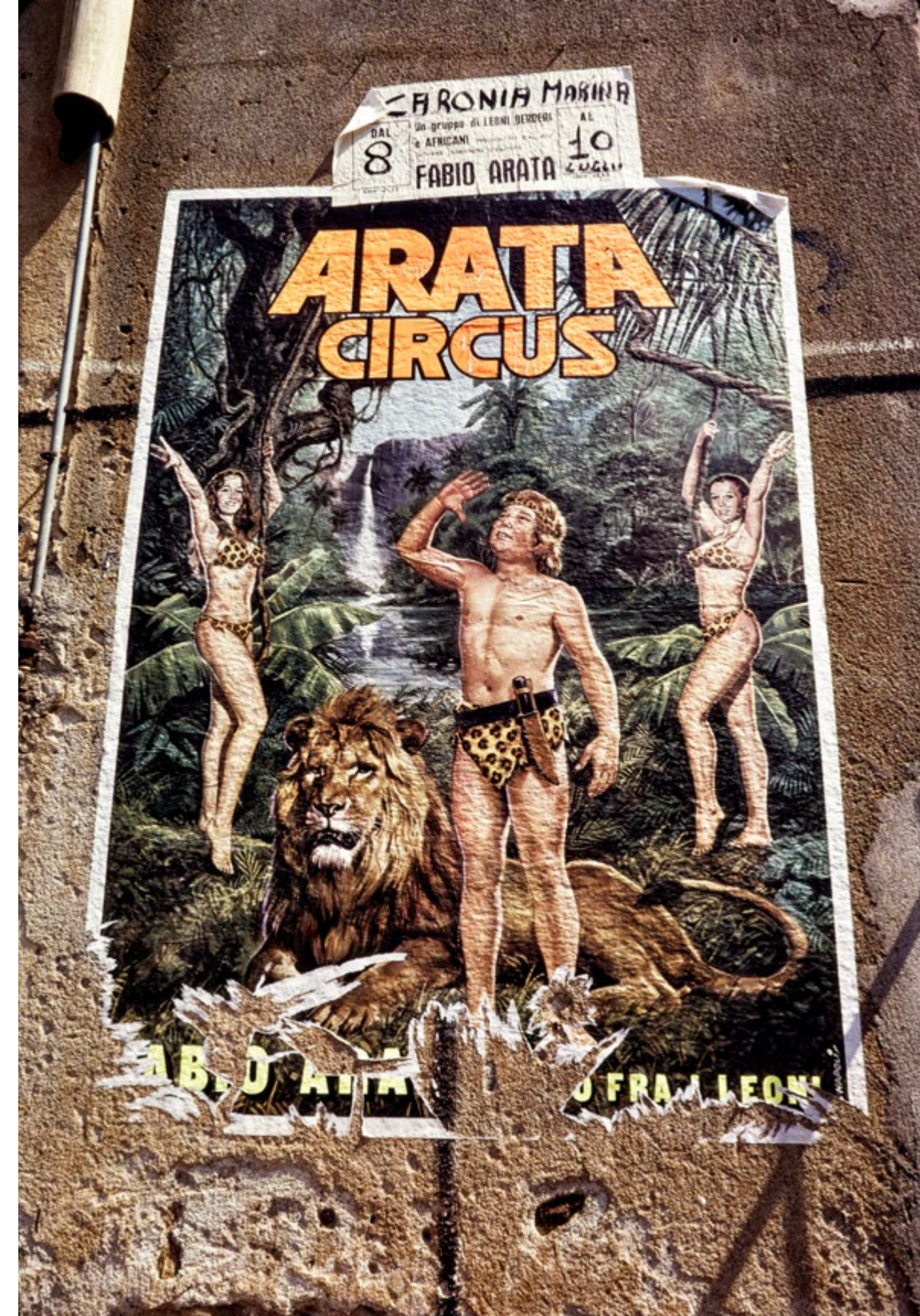
Berkeley Mens Room Graffiti



Bordello, Highway. 95, Nevada

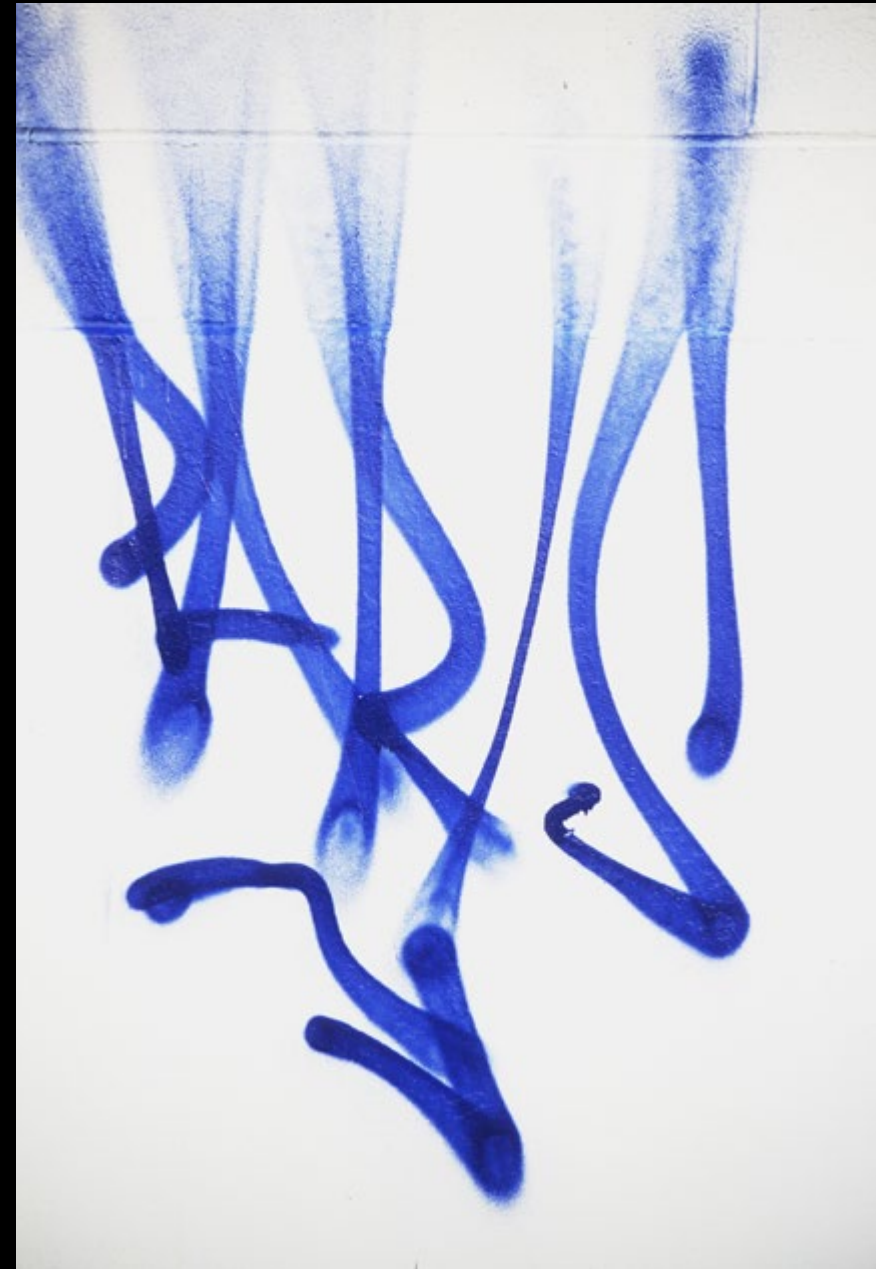


Modified Subway Sign, NYC





Chinatown, San Francisco



Spray Paint Effect, Venice, CA



Crooked Official, New Jersey



Death Valley, CA

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The Palms Motor Hotel,  
Portland Or.



Nicasio, CA



Cable Car Signal, SF





Fireworks Vender, Montana





Palace of Fine Arts, SF





London Shop



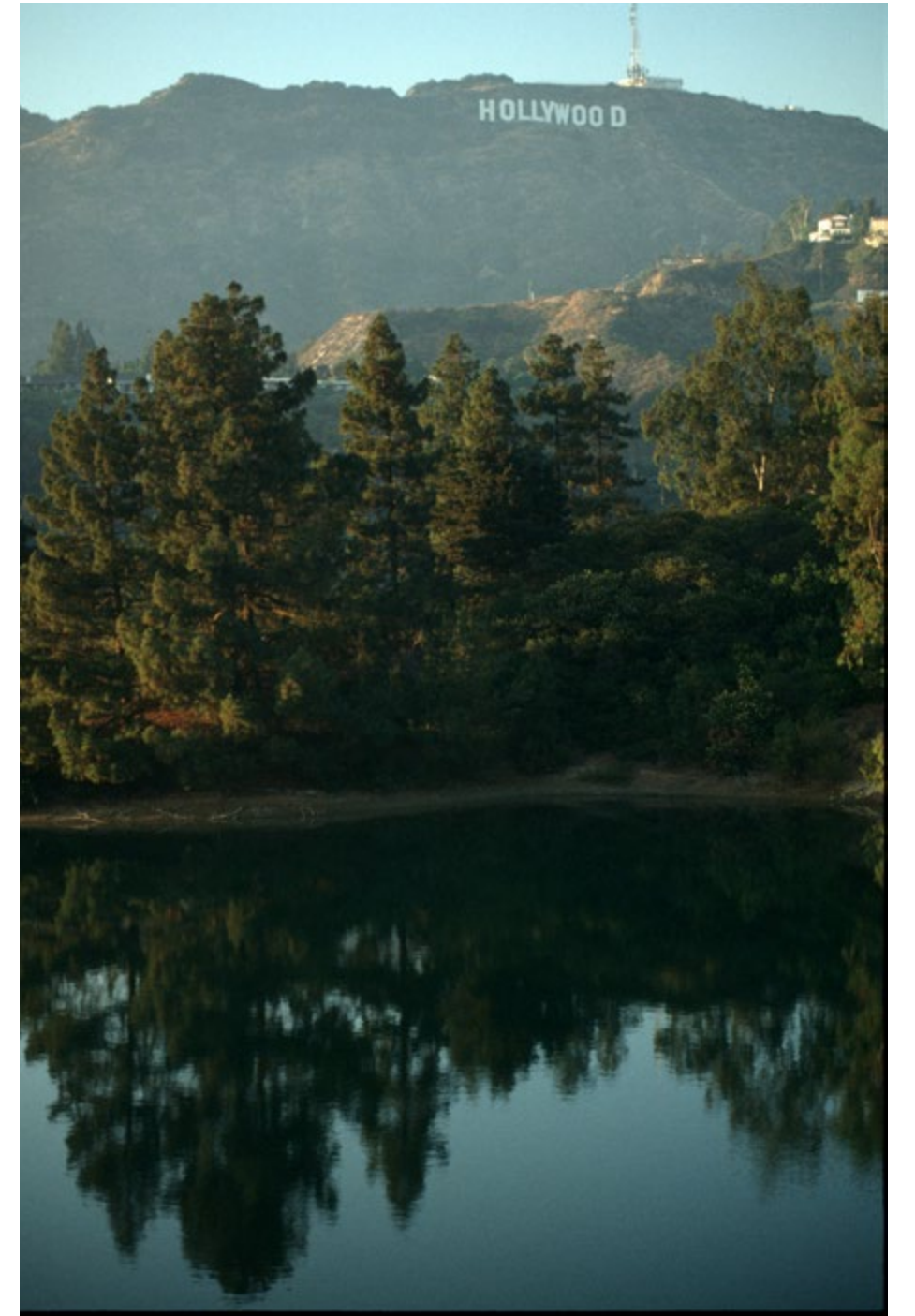
London Underground Advertisement



West Village Sign, NYC



Telegraph Ave, Berkeley





Attraction at Southern Amusement Park



Motel, Las Vegas



*Revolution!*  
Burrito Parlor Illustration



Barbara Kruger Installation, LA

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Hippie-Named Street, Oakdale, CA



New Mexico "Trading Post" Billboard





Hawaiian sign with filled in O's



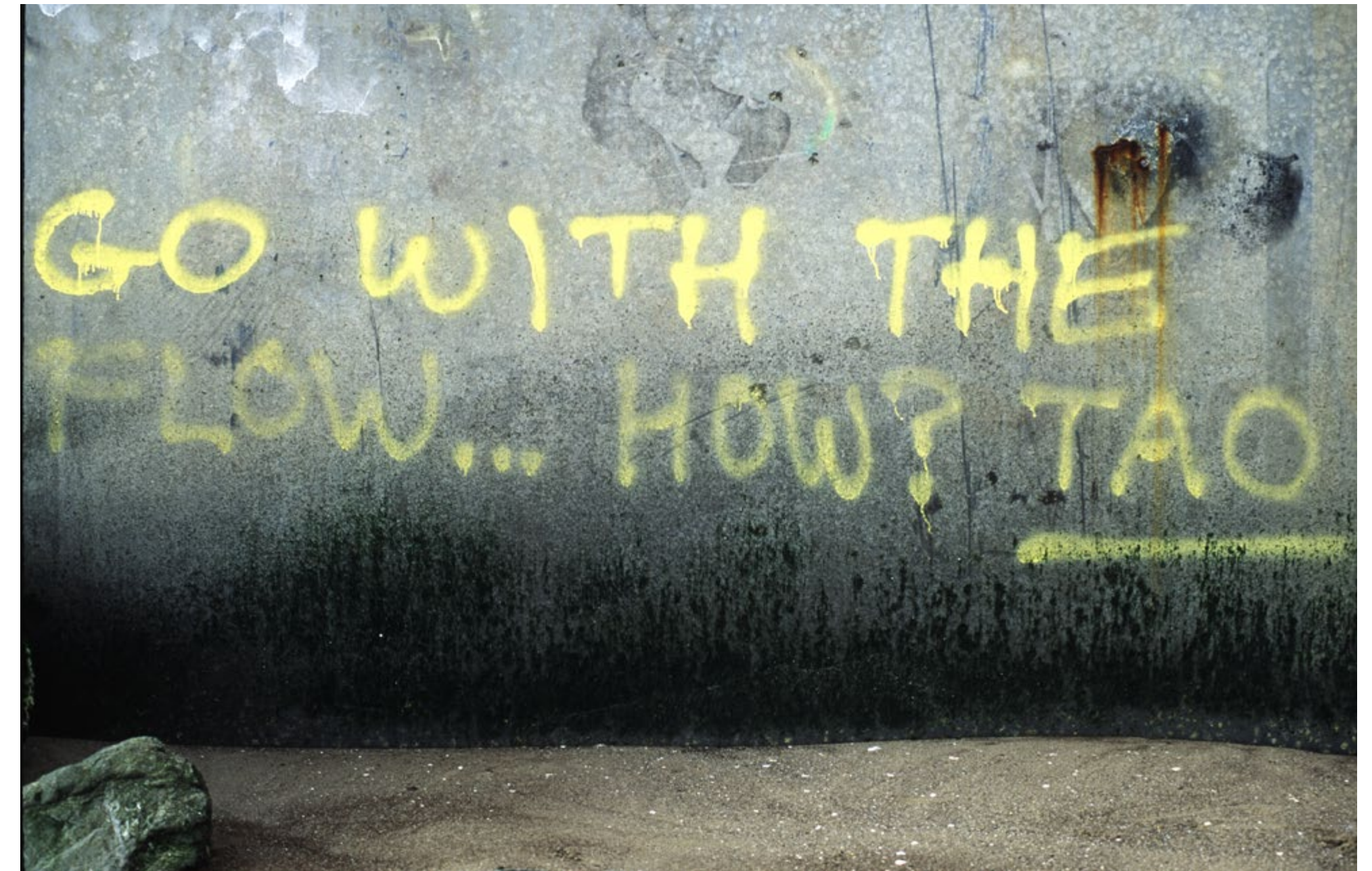
Faded Backlit Transparency, North Beach, SF



Drive-In Marriage Chapel, Tahoe, NV



Photograph of Twos



Bolinas Wall, CA

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Gas Station Sign, Point Reyes, CA



Telegraph Ave, Berkeley

VENICE  
MAC HOS





Charlie Musselwhite's Harmonica Case



*This Salt is My Salt*  
Salton Sea, CA



Highway 120, CA

No fog zone





Moonie, Berkeley, CA

Point Reyes Rusted Sign

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Amsterdam Houseboat Mailbox



Red, White and Blue,  
Midwest



No Cones, London

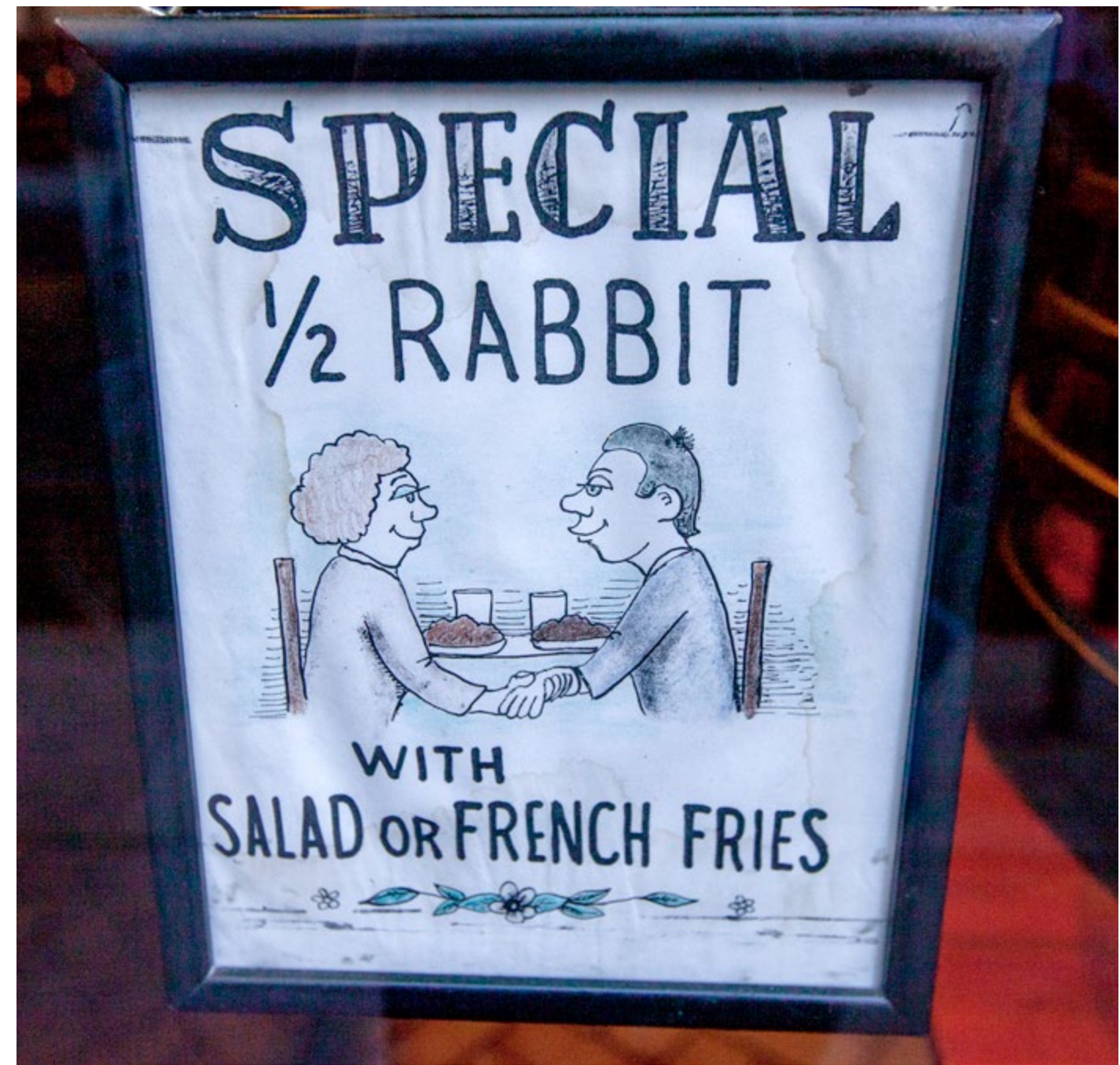


North Beach, SF



Trona, CA













NYC sign outside *United Cigar* store, 7th Ave & Christopher Street



Baja pickup truck



Paris



Mountain lion gate



Santa Cruz



Part



Emeryville, CA





London Signs (2)

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SF Marina



Altered Amsterdam Sign



NYC







Park bench







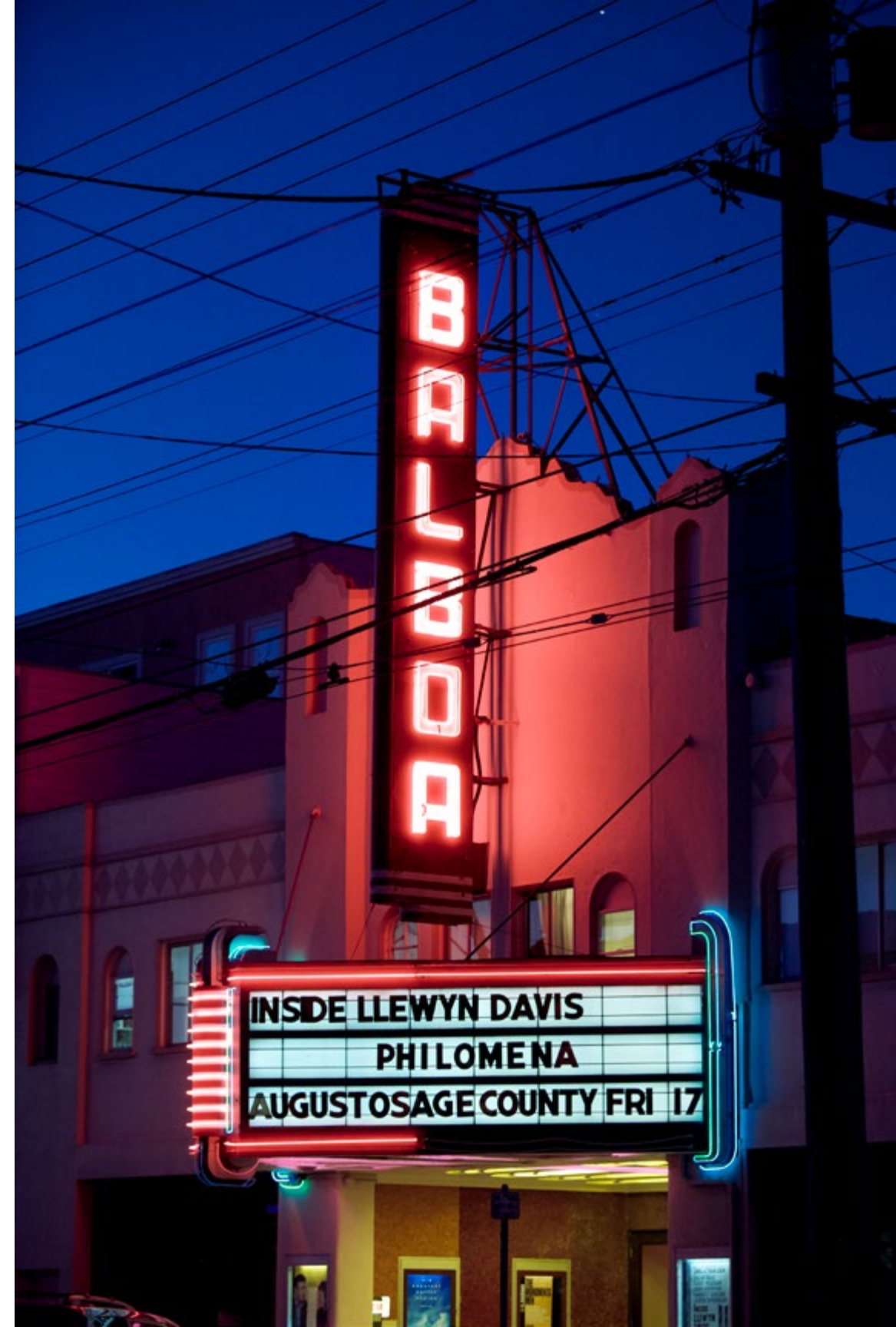
Kauai Truck



London Sign Paste Man

**FEED, SEED,  
BABY CHICKENS,  
RABBITS, DUCKS,  
ROACH & RAT POISON**

**HERE YOU FIND THE LOWEST  
PRICE IN THE WHOLE OF ITALY**







**Richard Blair** has been in a photographic frenzy for most of his adult life. Born in New York City in 1948, he has been a professional photographer since 1967 when he moved to California. Natural and urban landscapes are his first love. He was park photographer for the National Park Service based in Yosemite Valley. He received an award from the Secretary of the Interior for photography of a rescue of El Capitan. Blair photographs in all formats, from 35 to 8x10 size negatives. He works in both black and white and color, and exhibits his work through the medium of photographic books, which he designs, publishes, and prints. Here is a link to the book catalog

Richard Blair's work has been exhibited in the Brooklyn Museum, the Peabody Museum at Yale, Kaiser Hospitals, the Packard Foundation, Oakland Museum, the Bolinas Museum, the Palace of the Legion of Honor in SF, and recently in the SF Museum of Modern Art. Thirty seven of Blair's images were shown at the Asian Art Museum, in San Francisco as part of the exhibit: Bali: Art, Ritual, Performance.

He and his partner and wife, Kathleen Goodwin, share a studio at 371 Drakes View Drive, in Inverness

Here is a recent interview questionnaire Richard answered for the Bolinas Museum. **Elia Haworth**, Curator of Coastal Marin Art & History wrote the questions for an artist spotlight the museum is featuring. Bolinas Museum is posting these stories and images on Instagram. Their website is bolinasmuseum.org. The Bolinas Museum is at 48 Wharf Road, in Bolinas, CA

**Is there a particular work of art that is an inspiration to you? If so, what?**  
My photography heroes include many great ones, but a image and caption by Dorothy Lange stands out, for the use of the caption to amplify the meaning of the print. The image is: [Funeral Cortege, End of an Era. in a Small Valley Town, California 1938.](#)

**What creative project are you currently working on?**  
I'm using the Internet to display my work. I continue to photograph landscape almost every day, hoping to catch lightning in a bottle.

**Do you have any rituals related to your creative practice?**  
Photographic rituals are many. I wish I could say 'click' and the image would be saved, but in practice a lot of tools must be assembled and carried, and much thought given. When I am working a certain level of concentration and happiness can happen which I am very proud to experience. It is a cosmic thrill to get an image that takes much skill, reflexes, and lady luck.

**Who has been instrumental in supporting your art practice?**  
Kathleen Goodwin!

**What role does community play in your creativity**  
Not too much of the Point Reyes community as a whole, individuals here, yes. My community is the world of fine art photography. Other artists, museums, certainly serious art publications are the community I work for in my head. Image makers also are influenced by the deluge of media around them.

**How does coastal Marin or the Bay Area influence you as an artist?**  
As one of the best landscape photographers here, it is the canvas that I use, plus the Bay Area is a hot pot of genius, nice to tap into if I can.

**What do you turn to for inspiration?**  
Music. especially jazz. Always looking for *amazing*...

**What has your studio practice taught you about the kind of person you are?**  
Slothful perhaps! My sister and Kathleen say that I work hard, but I wish that I could have done more.

**What are you reading, listening to, and/or cooking that are comforting during this time?**  
I cook out of Bon Appetit magazine, listening to music via KCSM and Apple Music, and I read the NY Times a lot - when I can stand it! Herman Hesse had the right idea with sheltered art communities in times of evil. in *The Glass Bead Game*.

**How is COVID-19 affecting your creative process and your art?**  
Actually for me it has been great to be forced to concentrate on studio chores. I am grateful for the deep time. It is sort of a reversion to a younger past, when there seemed to be time to dig into things.

**Why is living with art in our homes important for our daily lives?**  
I have a simple answer: It is being human to live with art, and inhuman not to.

**What is one lesson you have learned from life?**  
I'll defer this answer to my now-deceased friend Sandy Jacobs, then a 90 year old artist from Inverness. He said, "the only thing I have learned in my whole life is to have the sun warm my skin when I get up." Work hard, don't get hurt.

**When did art come into your life?**  
I was always the class artist, at 5 years old I was mass-producing drawings of steam-shovels.

**What do you draw strength and reassurance from?**  
My mother and father. She was a great fighter (for social justice), and he was a total genius, a much-loved poet, and a taoist sage.

