

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Broadway and Columbus

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0ts2j07b>

Journal

Places, 6(2)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1990-01-15

Peer reviewed

BROADWAY

AND

COLUMBUS

Columbus Avenue interrupts the orthogonal logic of San Francisco's grid. At Broadway this disruption takes on a unique identity: the jumbled mixing point of districts that are vigorously diverse.

In reading this intersection as a place unto itself, how do we unscramble all the messages coming at us? How do we attend to one conversation when three others are within earshot?

As you exit the peculiar inner-city tunnel on Broadway, driving toward downtown, you see before you, flickering in the exhaust fumes, a dazzling oasis of lights and color. Layers of open shops and restaurants spill their contents out onto the sidewalk. The cityscape is flooded to the knees with waves of cars and people.

Then, you see her—first in line among a row of impressive signs, a long and stringy figure that stretches three stories of a building. She leads you on with her blinking beacons—as you approach she looms before you, a monster with her awkward body and evil expression; she stares you down. In the distance you see the freeway, a bridge arching its spine into the blue hills across the Bay, and, once the light turns green, you make for your getaway.

The intersection of Columbus and Broadway exists as both path and destination. For through-traffic it is the junction of major arteries: another set of stop lights with special potential for delay. The trajectories of these wide streets are resolute. Distances along them are foreshortened by views of the Bay Bridge and of office towers downtown, both beckoning destinations.

To experience this place on foot is quite a different matter. The intersection is less a crossing of paths than it is a bringing together of corners. Because the intersection is hourglass shaped, its narrow waist seems to focus like a lens, drawing together disparate interests and activities on all sides: Chinatown, Italian Quarter, Red Light District and Downtown Fringe. Each character hugs the perimeter of a block, and not one street maintains a consistent identity across the common ground between. The diagonal traverse

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**As you travel along Broadway,
the effigy of Carol Doda stares
you down and leads you on.**

Photo by Larrisa Bilaniuk.

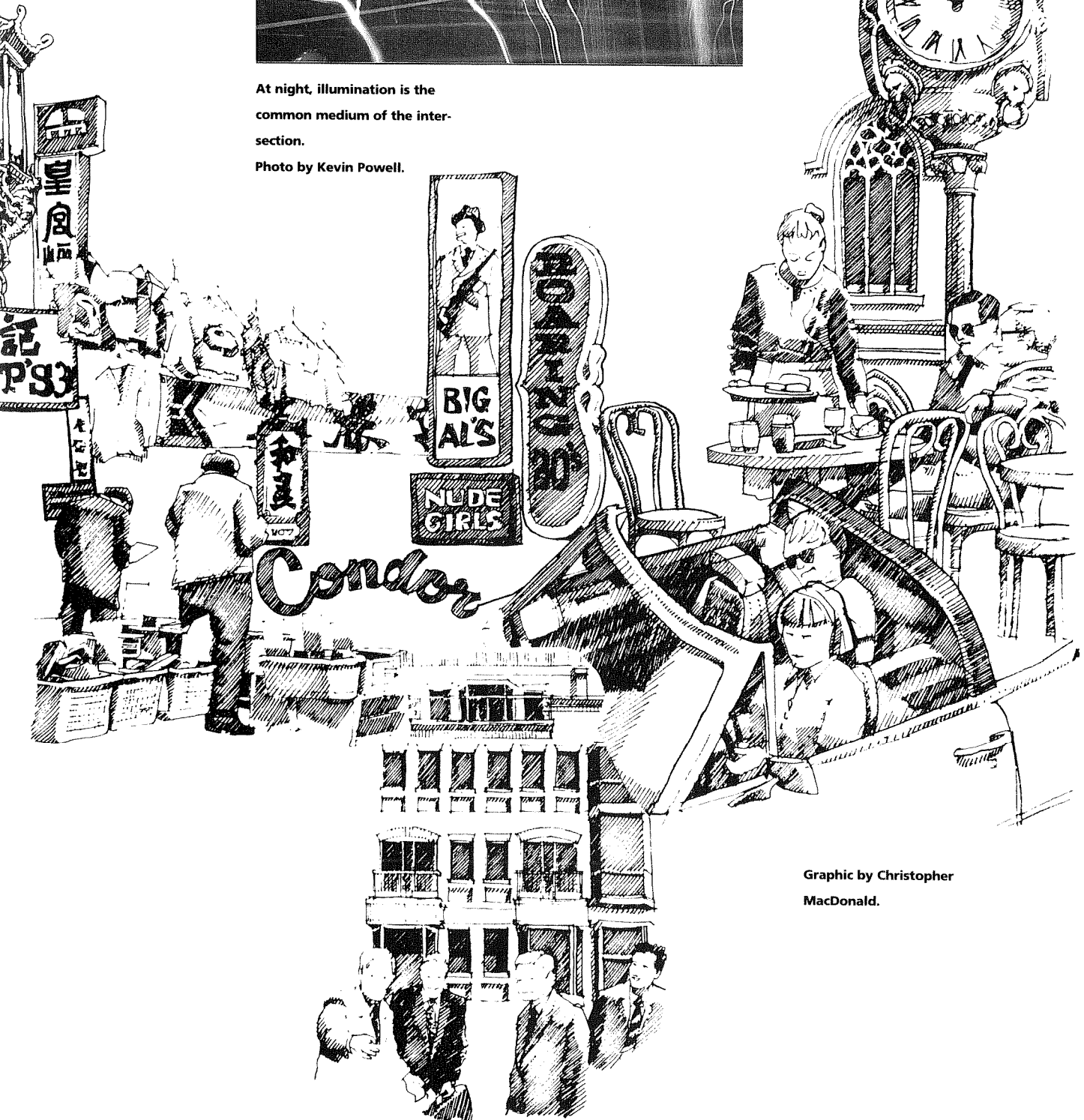
BROADWAY

**Graphic by Christopher
MacDonald.**



At night, illumination is the common medium of the intersection.

Photo by Kevin Powell.



Graphic by Christopher MacDonald.

of open space and traffic intervenes. It would be simplistic to categorize this place in exclusive terms. Experience refutes the neatly quartered intersection in favor of more complex order.

At night everything shifts. Bright signs and luminous windows ally to form a new emphatic cadence along the street. Illumination becomes the common medium of the intersection, unifying the diverse personalities through a common presentation.

Containment gives way to drama. The lighted windows and signs have an impact that upstages the buildings. Street walls, which delimit the area by day, dissolve. The intensity of lighting calls attention to detailed activities, framing them like a proscenium. The person standing at the automatic teller machine or at the newsstand is standing in a frame of light, and is an integral part of the overall performance. A steady parade of automobile headlights adds to the overall drama, while traffic lights lean out across the oblique angle of Columbus Avenue and seem to be signaling randomly.

Yet, moving between spotlights, you cannot avert your eyes from the darkness. Derelict alleys and abandoned doorways add gravity to the celebration. Variety and its choices take on a darker dimension as the back street is severed from the carnival.

Climbing up out of downtown, heading west on Columbus Avenue, you approach the intersection at the slow pace of late afternoon traffic. It is dusk, and there is activity everywhere. People in cafes reciprocate your scrutiny, chefs prepare food in kitchens exposed to the street, merchants clear their wares from the sidewalk after another day of business. On one corner there is a window display with feminist literature, books on AIDS and socialist politics and small press publications of local authors. Across the street, almost as a

rebuttal, the strip joints hit the street with the pornographic point of view, the barkers striking deals with passers-by.

A giant mural wraps around the apex of Columbus and Broadway. It provides a lexicon for the whole district. Of course it gives the conventional interpretation, somewhat dated now, of Telegraph Hill as an Adriatic fishing village. Taken at face value, the mural's capacity to structure the experience of North Beach seems limited. Its images are unsophisticated and probably biased. Only the most naive tourist would find the message satisfying or genuinely informative.

Yet this tableau speaks powerfully about local order. The structure of Columbus and Broadway is that of a collage. There are no clear boundaries here. Overlayerings and untidy juxtapositions abound. A few local entities prevail as rallying points for scattered allegiances: Molinari's deli represents the remnants of an Italian community, Carol Doda's effigy gathers behind it a scruffy retinue of bars and porn shops, and City Lights bookstore harbors the memory of the Beat Generation. Around all these a casual sifting or sorting of elements occurs, but the parts never quite coalesce.

We can also observe the picture running off the frame in all directions. The single aperture is simply too small to encompass all this. But neither is it fixed. Turning the frame of the intersection this way or that, we are able to bring one set of images into focus and relegate others to the periphery.

One imagines the early days: a traveler arriving at William Squire Clark's Wharf, the "Stone Pier," and walking westward, up the steep hill of Broadway, past boarding houses and saloons, past the Broadway Primary School, past the city's first synagogue, past the Broadway



A mural wraps around the apex of Broadway and Columbus...



...and permits a voyeurism that is reciprocal between street and apartment above.

Photo by Larrisa Bilaniuk.

*German Methodist Episcopal Church, past the Broadway Jail, and, turning right onto Montgomery Avenue (now Columbus Avenue), heading for a plateau with a ragged park, later named Washington Square. Or perhaps the traveler would turn left at Kearny, a block before Montgomery Avenue, and head one block south to the Barbary Coast, that block of Pacific Avenue between Kearny and Grant that provided the liberal entertainment described in Herbert Ashbury's *The Barbary Coast* and portrayed in the movie *San Francisco*.*

Wearing blinders of purpose as we move, we catch the cues provided for a swift passage from goal to goal. Our understanding of "place" stops short of

the street-wall at colorful, Plexiglass masks. These signs are fast food for thought. They allow us to negotiate daily life as though in a gaseous chamber of floating meanings—architecture for the few glances we may afford at 30 miles per hour.

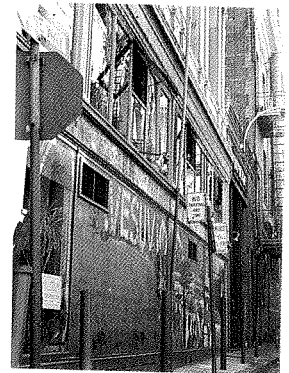
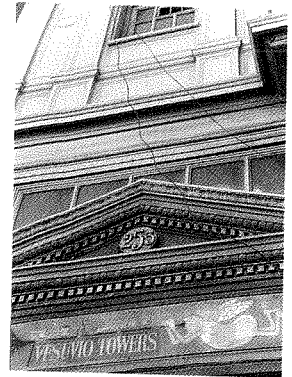
Whole facades are rendered as billboards, cropped, filtered and labeled by our appetite for immediate consumption. Most clearly, the mural at the corner provokes these dual interpretations of surface: masonry hotel and painted image. Both occupy the same skin yet make no accommodations for each other. Windows cut uneasy fragments from the collage: the painting treats built form as a single canvas. Perhaps we see the building better now that it is obscured.

Signs stripped of their meaning become simply architecture. To western eyes, the dense, red, green and yellow calligraphy of Chinatown reveals only a rich embroidery of ornament. Strip joint emblems sized to be seen from afar become hovering canopies for the pedestrian.

Here, penetrating the northeast recesses of the corner, the back room of a bar. A strip parlor acrid with ample disinfectant. A woman bends ninety degrees from the waist and shakes; she is on a carpeted platform surrounded on three sides by damaged tables and mostly empty chairs. She is wearing high beeled shoes, some makeup, and a wig of dyed blond hair. She is naked to the eye, but nude to the imagination. Here, two lonely men in jacket and tie and career-cut hair are red and purple in the shadows. Silent, but one does not have to listen hard to hear their howl. Up the street I have just seen a wizened Chinese man chop foreign roots, exhort shopping women and kick a ragged cat, all this simultaneous.

Voyeurism here is both institutionalized (night clubs and fish bowl cafes) and spontaneous (overheard conversations and upper-story residential windows). It nurtures an exploration of the possibilities of your own life by allowing you to explore those of other people. Because you can visually penetrate the building walls so easily, so frequently, it is easy to imagine their internal workings and to see the accretions of individuated life.

This voyeurism is reciprocal between street and apartment above. The windows of residential hotels become two-way apertures through which domestic life is framed for public scrutiny and street life is staged for the residents. There is little connec-



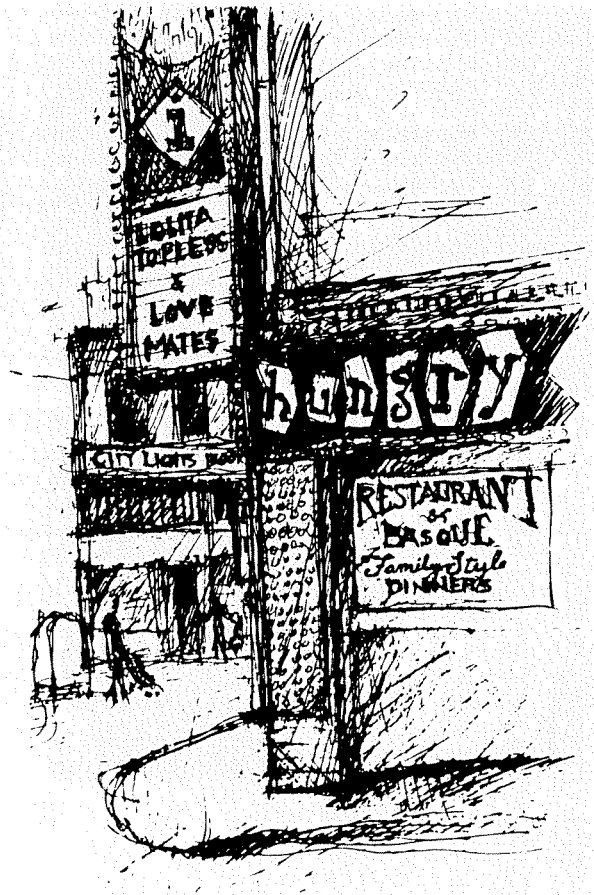
Overlays and untidy juxtapositions abound; the parts never quite seem to coalesce.

Photos by Larrisa Bilaniuk.



The colorful calligraphy of Chinatown provides a rich embroidery.

Photo by Larrisa Bilaniuk.



tion between individuals and address—entrances to the residential hotels are surreptitiously slipped between business fronts, lobbies are hidden from view one story above the street—which provides the anonymity needed to keep the show uninhibited.

On the street, the vigor of commerce brings this exploration into the realm of the physical: the voyeur becomes the participant. The way that businesses present themselves is loud, engaging and exhibitionistic.

*My sympathies are with the cod, floating
fin-to-fin in just enough soupy water.
Standing before the Hong Kong Market,
I can't help smiling at our encounter.
Destined for someone's dinner, no two fish
seem quite the same, while each draws
breath and maybe returns a critical gaze.*

All rituals confer or confirm membership; baptisms especially so. Name-giving separates object from context but can also consign it to a group or class. In this way, to name something expresses and facilitates possession.

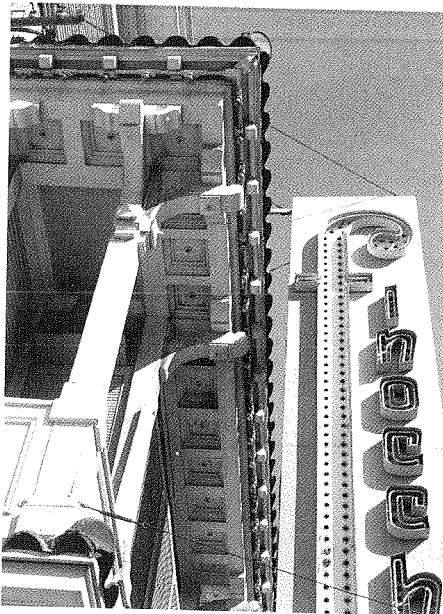
When a street name connotes possession, placing the name on a map elevates the connotation to a seemingly incontrovertible fact. Reality is often less conclusive. Jack Kerouac Lane separates Vesuvio's Bar from City Lights but the spectacle of drunken poets is left to the imagination. Instead the Chinese-American museum quietly takes up residence.

Street processions express ritual ownership. The Columbus Day Parade, an Asian funeral cortege, or a rowdy, spontaneous assembly of football fans; all pass this way. Their presence is intense, enhanced by slogans, anthems, uniforms and banners. Yet ritual possession is fleeting. Weekday traffic neither anticipates nor recalls these celebrations.

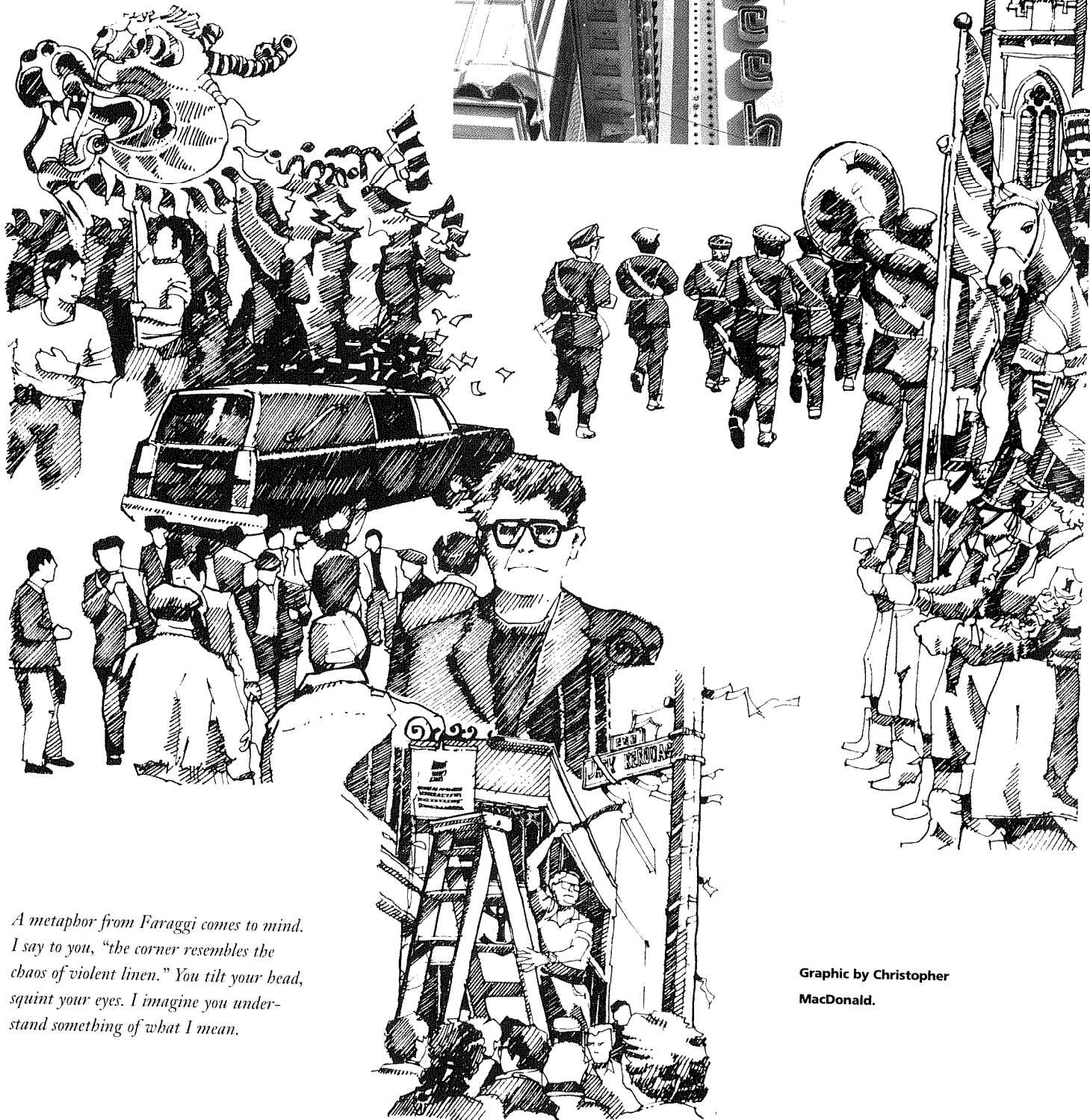
Place names and street festivals tolerate inclusion. These appropriations are permissive; ownership remains in contention despite an undiluted sense of participation and belonging.

Columbus and Broadway challenges the common perception of America: the intersection is not a melting pot. Instead, it is like a shuffled deck of cards, where each element retains its own identity no matter what lies next to it.

Seeking to understand Columbus and Broadway you look for a handle, something to help you grasp the thing as a whole, to help you "make sense," to bring into immediate focus what it is that makes this corner a place, probably the most memorable intersection in San Francisco.



Signs stripped of their meaning
become architecture.
Photo by Larrisa Bilaniuk.



A metaphor from Faraggi comes to mind. I say to you, "the corner resembles the chaos of violent linen." You tilt your head, squint your eyes. I imagine you understand something of what I mean.

Graphic by Christopher
MacDonald.