

# 2015 National Signage Research & Education Conference (NSREC) Presentation Details

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**Topic: “The Zeon Files: A Celebration and Creative Re-use of Route 66 Road Signs”**

**Presenters: Ellen Babcock**

Ellen Babcock draws inspiration from landscapes and from panoply of materials, often scavenged or re-used, for her sculptures and public art projects. She has exhibited at numerous New Mexico and California venues, including the New Mexico Museum of Art in Santa Fe, and the San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery in San Francisco. Ellen became Assistant Professor of Sculpture at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque in 2009, and in the same year founded Friends of the Orphan Signs (FOS) an organization that sites collaboratively produced public art in abandoned signage. FOS has created numerous public artworks and events, and has received funding from many sources including the National Endowment for the Arts. The FOS project, Revivir, a neon sign/artwork, received the Americans for the Arts Outstanding Public Art Project award in 2012. Babcock is co-author of an upcoming publication by UNM press, titled *The Zeon Files*, that features reproductions of a collection of mid century route 66 sign design drawings, a history of sign production in the southwest, and an account of current creative reuse of old road signs.

## **Abstract:**

Ellen Babcock, an artist interested in the potential to install public artwork in abandoned road signs in Albuquerque, discovered three file drawers of project records on pallets outside the old Zeon building, placed under a tree in an exasperated and hasty attempt to appease the fire marshal. The bulky drawers contained hundreds of yellowing envelopes that served as the business records of the company from 1955 to the late 1970's. As well as storing correspondence with customers, dozens of these envelopes contained lovely, delicate, colored-pencil-on-vellum working sketches. Eager to prevent additional damage to these artworks, Babcock convinced Zeon's owners to allow her to bring them out of the elements and eventually to donate the collection, with full copyright, to the Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections at the UNM University Libraries.

Most of the drawings of this collection are of signs that are no longer extant, and for which little or no other documentation has been uncovered. Thus they may be the only records of this culturally significant body of commercial artwork, and are a visually rich archive of imagery typical of an innovative and exuberant era of American sign making. The period of time from the early 1950's until the early 1970's was a relatively unregulated era of roadside sign making in the Southwest. It preceded the ubiquity of franchising and the consequent reliance by businesses on outdoor advertising based on brand name recognition created by television advertising campaigns. Unique designs that were eye-catching to motorists because of their irregular shapes, dynamic compositions and neon flashing light eventually became supplanted by the simplified, instantly recognizable icons of major chains. Less expensive, and easier to maintain plastic sign substrates eventually replaced steel, aluminum, neon and glass.

Because of the general appeal of this visually striking and historically significant collection of Americana to both the scholars and inhabitants of a region of the country formed along Route 66, we expect the

audience that this collection will serve to be broad. Most files include records on prices, site addresses, working drawings, sheet metal orders, and business correspondence. Many include site photographs, and thus the files may serve as a source material for research into mid-century business, architectural, and urban topics.