



## Even with Museums Closed, Art Finds a Way Through Public Spaces

By Jean Trinh  
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Lisa Auerbach's haiku at Ace Hotel | Courtesy of Ace Hotel DTLA

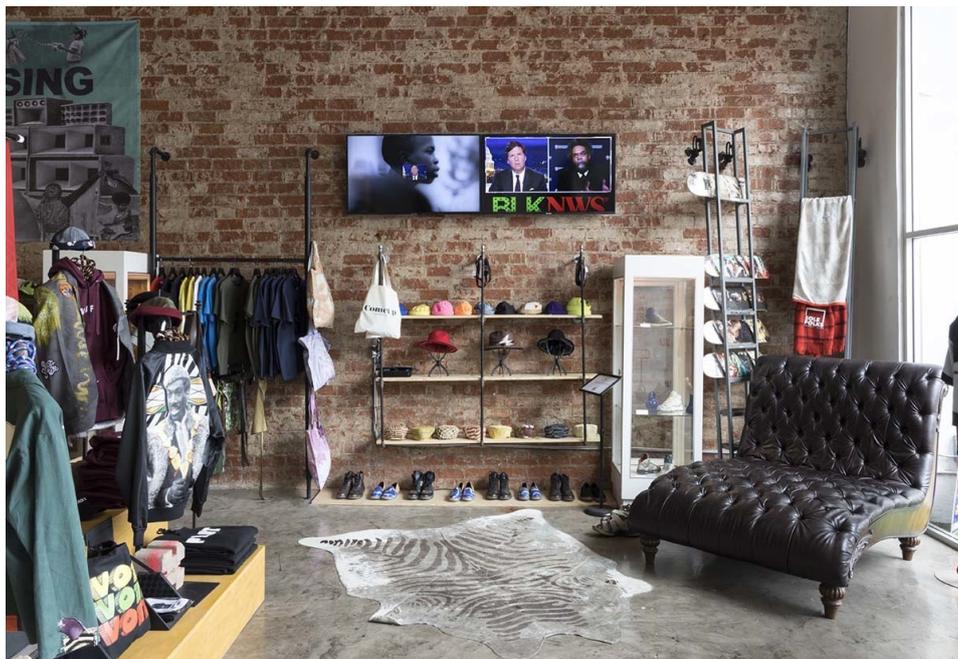
While the months-long closures of museums and performance venues have left a hole in the arts community, the urgent need to create, showcase and experience art during this turbulent year has propelled artists and curators to push through these constraints. Public-facing art has been growing in Southern California in new and surprising ways: home gardens, theater marquees, and building-walls-slash-projection-screens have become cultural hubs in the new normal. Audience engagement with art has transformed in tandem. Public art has also evolved to go beyond the physical, moving deeper into the virtual space.

## Public art in tumultuous times

Historically, art tends to move toward public spaces during stormy periods, according to Los Angeles Times art critic Christopher Knight. "In the past 100 years in American life, whenever there are periods of serious social and economic distress, there is a proliferation of publicly oriented art," he said to "Southland Sessions." "Whether it's in the 1930s with the Great Depression and the WPA [Works Progress Administration], or in the 1970s with Watergate and the economic crash, or in the present with the really unprecedented corruption of the Trump administration, which has generated an economic recession and an unprecedented health crisis. In each of those instances, publicly oriented art comes to the foreground."

In the 1970s, artists were initiating projects on their own, like conceptual artist Chris Burden buying spots on late-night TV in L.A. to run his **self-produced commercials** or **Gordon Matta-Clark cutting through buildings** in New York, Knight explained. However, he's noticed a slight difference in this cycle of public art. "Now, it seems to be much more collaborative, in a sense," he said. "There are institutions involved, there are galleries that are involved, and there are artists taking independent initiatives."

Recently, Knight drove across town to a few sites associated with artist Kahlil Joseph's "**BLKNWS®**" project, which has been presented in collaboration with the Hammer Museum for its biennial, "**Made in L.A. 2020: a version.**" Joseph's project features two-channel video presentations depicting the Black experience. The TV screens and videos are installed in Black-owned businesses, like Bloom & Plume Coffee in Westlake, Natraliart Jamaican Restaurant in Arlington Heights and Hank's Mini Market in South L.A.



Kahlil Joseph, BLKNWS®, 2018-ongoing. Two-channel fugitive newscast. Courtesy of the artist. Installation view, "Made in L.A. 2020: a version," Sole Folks, Los Angeles. | Jeff McLane

"One of the things that interest me about that is that they're all social gathering sites that have been profoundly impacted by the pandemic, when people are staying home much more and they're cautiously venturing out," Knight said. "But these are the kinds of places where they used to go. And they go back now, and that's where they have an encounter with a little chosen part. It's very specifically targeted, which is interesting. It's not a random display."

In May, **TZ Projects** independently took the initiative to curate "Going Home: a picture show," a video exhibition showcasing works of art from over 150 artists and projected in the windows of the former Taschen gallery space in Beverly Grove. When Beverly Hills Mayor Lili Bosse caught wind of their project, she asked the team to curate a similar show as part of the city's "Embrace & Celebrate Culture" initiative. In this iteration, dubbed "Visions in Light: Windows on the Wallis," TZ Projects, alongside Surface Productions, will be projecting videos on the theater windows of the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts nightly from Nov. 19-29.

"It's going to be a very diverse array of artists focusing on the power of inclusion, diversity, culture and community," said TZ Projects founder Torie Zalben. "It really represents the power of the arts to heal and stand for justice at this time, and what it means to be a human being during this pandemic, and what we're going through as a country and globally."

## **Making sense of the world through public dialog**

What makes Joseph and TZ Projects' exhibitions especially engaging and poignant is that they're dealing with the pressing issues of our time, like the Black Lives Matter movement and the pandemic. Amelia Jones, Richard A. Day professor and the vice dean of academics and research at the Roski School of Art and Design at University of Southern California (USC), says she's more interested in seeing artwork that is reflective of the current conditions we're collectively facing, rather than work being plunked in public spaces without that context.

"It would seem odd to present new works that don't somehow engage with the vicissitudes of why it has to be outside," she said.

Enrique Martínez Celaya, who is an artist and the Provost Professor of Humanities and Arts at USC, feels that this year has been unique in that we're all experiencing the most charged, complex and difficult moments that many of us have ever faced. Collectively, people are experiencing economic, racial and political issues at the same time. That's where art steps in to make sense of it all.

"I think one of the roles of art is to reflect to the community what this moment is, not necessarily a direct translation of those political conflicts and so on, but ultimately, by looking at the human condition at this moment," Martínez Celaya said. "Perhaps, in the best of cases, offer possibilities and clarity, which is sorely missed in the public dialogue. ... I think artists have a way to process experiences and reflect that back to society. Historically, we see probably the most accurate reflection of those [turbulent] moments [in art]."

Since California State University, Fullerton's **Grand Central Art Center** (GCAC) in Santa Ana has had to temporarily close to the public, director John Spiak has been using its storefronts and off-site exhibition spaces, including a patron's lawn, to showcase its exhibitions. Spiak noticed that on the first day he and his team were installing an exhibition, about 60 passersby stopped by to chat with them, and the day after, another 40.

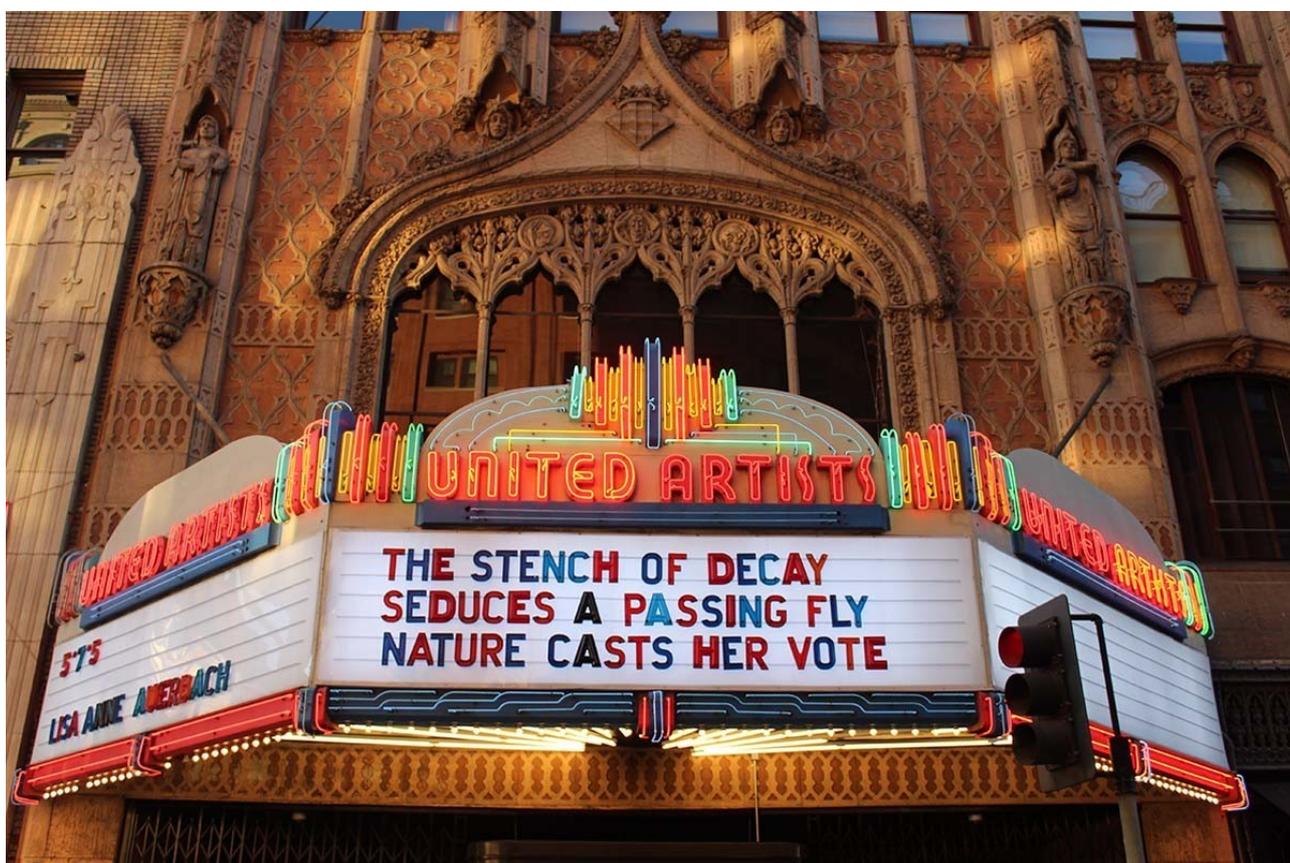
“It became like the art openings we were missing,” Spiak said. “When we have our art openings, all these people come in and just have conversations with us. We’re missing that, and I think the public’s missing that.”

He added, “People need inspiration. People need ways to still think, to challenge themselves, to experiment, to create.”

## **An opportunity for new and creative venues**

Since late September, the historic United Artists theater marquee that’s part of the **Theatre at Ace Hotel** in downtown L.A. has been adorned with a different haiku every week. Each poem for its “5 - 7 - 5” project that runs through Dec. 9 is penned by a renowned artist, from the likes of Kim Gordon to Harry Gamboa Jr. and David Horvitz.

While the artists were given free rein to write their haiku on any topic, some of the poems feel very pertinent to the current socio-political landscape. For example, textile artist Lisa Anne Auerbach’s haiku reads, “The stench of decay/Seduces a passing fly/Nature casts her vote.”



Lisa Anne Auerbach’s haiku at Ace Hotel | Courtesy of Ace Hotel DTLA

Chief Curator Warren Neidich knew a theater marquee would be the perfect canvas for his text art project when he realized these venues weren’t being used during the pandemic. He contacted the Theatre at Ace Hotel and organized a curatorial team composed of Andrew Berardini, Rita Gonzalez and Joseph Mosconi. They brought together 10 artists for “5 - 7 - 5,” the name of which is a nod to the syllable structure of a haiku.

This isn't Neidich's first rodeo curating publicly oriented art during the pandemic. In May, he co-organized "**Drive-By-Art**," an outdoor public exhibition in which artists presented video projects, paintings, sculptures and live performances in front of their homes and studios. The exhibition took people all over L.A. County, from the San Fernando Valley to South L.A. and Santa Monica. "Public art is very important and has always had a very important role in the art world and as curated spaces," Neidich said. "Because of COVID, it opened up new possibilities that were kind of underground or just under the surface ... like for instance, my Drive-By-Art show in which the artists' studios became the most important place to see art, as opposed to the gallery."

## **Art in the virtual space**

Although many cultural venues have physically closed, museums have gotten creative in taking their programming online in myriad ways: exhibition walkthroughs, panel discussions with artists and live performances on Zoom, Instagram Live and YouTube.

There's a digital component to many of Neidich's projects. "Drive-By-Art" utilized Google Maps to direct people to the exhibition sites. His "5 - 7 - 5" project will continue to exist online through news articles.

"Public art is not just something that is in the physical space and physical time; it's also a phenomena of the public spaces of the internet and the World Wide Web, and we must understand that it's public, just as much as public art," Neidich said.

He added that as people are spending more time on their mobile phones and tablets, on Zoom meetings and online ordering, the digital space becomes more significant.

GCAC explored art in the digital realm with artist Pablo Helguera's **singing telegram project** that ran from April 13-May 28. Individuals were able to order free singing telegrams from Helguera and have them delivered to anyone in the world over Zoom video.

"It was at a time when we were in hardcore lockdown, like New York and Europe were completely locked down," Spiak said. "And we were really being confined to our homes. Pablo was trying to figure out ways that he could still engage with individuals on a one-on-one basis. It was a chance for people to let other people know that during this time, people were still thinking about them even though we couldn't be together."

Helguera ended up sending nearly 400 singing telegrams. While the calls were on Zoom, there was a physicality to the spaces. Helguera was singing in his daughter's room, and they would enter people's homes in a way through the computer.

They only recorded a few of the telegrams. "The whole idea was, 'This is an intimate thing, and it shouldn't be recorded,'" Spiak explained. "This is for the sender and the receiver. It's that memory that's important. It's not [about] recording it and sharing it. It's really the message from one person to another, and that's the way it should remain."

## **How audience engagement is changing with public art**

There's an interesting side effect to publicly facing art, according to Jones. "The fun part about 'Drive-By-Art' is people can just stumble upon something," she said. "And they may not even

consciously really register it. But it's always something slightly odd, [something] that's changed the landscape."

Since we're in the middle of a pandemic, many of us have had more time on our hands. It's led some of us to engage with things we normally would not have the time to do, Jones explains.

People may get a tip about outdoor art, go online, find a map and engage with it.

There is a serendipitous element to coming across TZ Projects' video projections. "What sets us apart is that it's very much community-based, and it also doesn't need to be disruptive in order to enjoy it," said TZ Projects' producer Liana Weston. "This is a show that you can drive by; it's in the middle of a city in a highly trafficked street. You can choose to leave your car and walk and see it that way, or you can see it as you pass by. It is a destination experience, but it is also very much something that should feel incorporated within your daily commute."

Community engagement with art has become stronger in these times as well. Naama Haviv, a lover of roadside attractions, launched **The Tiny** museum in front of her Highland Park home in July. Truly diminutive in size, the museum is actually a glass display case with three shelves that have housed exhibitions covering white fragility and cultural New Year traditions. However, it's the "gift shop" that rests on top of the case that has taken a life of its own within the community.

It started with rocks that Haviv glued googly eyes onto. She named them all "Dwayne" after one of her favorite actors, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. She put them in a box on top of the display case and left a note telling visitors that they could "adopt" a pet rock and take one for free. There were accompanying adoption certificates that people could fill out.

"I thought it was funny, and the neighborhood seemed to agree because that first weekend that we opened, I put 30-40 Dwaynes out there, and they were all gone," Haviv said. "And people were sending me pictures of their adopted Dwaynes."

Soon after, other people — many anonymous — started putting their own pun-filled googly-eyed items in the gift shop. There were glass pebbles named after "This American Life" host Ira Glass, domino pieces named "Fats," and sponges dubbed "Bob." After Ruth Bader Ginsberg's death, rocks decorated with her signature black-framed glasses and lace collar made their way into the gift shop.



After Ruth Bader Ginsberg's death, rocks decorated with her signature black-framed glasses and lace collar made their way into the Tiny Museum | Courtesy of Tiny Museum

"These jokes wouldn't be funny if I were making the same joke over and over again," Haviv said.

"But because complete mystery people are making these jokes, it's very funny every time."

Knight feels that when we're talking about public art venues, it's not just about the artist and the artwork; we must understand that there's an audience at the other end. He's noticed a lot of the themes in art this year have had to do with memorializing and commemorating, engaging with ideas of loss, something that has defined 2020 in many ways. And he's sensing that there's an audience searching out for this type of artwork.

"In some respects, you can see that in the groundswell of commemorative murals for Nipsey Hussle and Kobe Bryant," Knight said. "They aren't being brought to the streets; they come up from the streets. There is as much expression of the audience's desire as it is the artist's."

Jones says she thinks it's extraordinary what different things artists have been doing to try to move art outside and online. "It's really a testament to human creativity that people just don't stop," she said. "They will find ways to make art accessible, whether it's through the internet or through these kinds of public projects where you cycle or drive around. I think that's exciting. It's a really positive side of a crisis that people just continue to be creative."