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Essential Arts: Art and pandemic — how artists and institutions are faring

By CAROLINA A. MIRANDA | COLUMNIST

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Hello from the quarantine! I'm **Carolina A. Miranda**, staff writer at the Los Angeles Times, with your weekly dose of arts news and apocalypse looks. (Hint: We're all about velvet.)

Essential image



"Untitled," 2014, an embroidery by Sula Bermúdez-Silverman, from her solo show at the California African American Museum. (Sula Bermúdez-Silverman)

Each week, I'm kicking off the newsletter with work by an artist whose show was closed due to the pandemic. This week, the work on view is by **Sula Bermúdez-Silverman**, who opened her first solo museum show in Los Angeles at the **California African American Museum** in late February, only to have it shuttered two weeks later.

Bermúdez-Silverman takes aspects of identity and turns them into art: transforming her family’s genetic data into colorful pie charts and embroidering vintage doilies with her own hair. The embroidered pieces feature words and objects, like the foot, above, which caught my attention when it came across my desk, for the ways in which it transforms mundane materials and gives them punch.

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Catch a video of the artist talking about her work on [CAAM’s website](#).

In the studio with L.A. artists

Or more like, *outside* the studio with artists. Times photographer **Jay L. Clendenin** and I teamed up to create [a socially distant photographic portfolio](#) that captures five L.A. artists at this moment in time. **Sandy Rodriguez, Devon Tsuno, Monica Majoli** and **Tanya Aguiñiga** very generously allowed us onto their driveways and into their backyards. And performance artist **Ron Athey** showed up rocking a velvet gown — mainly because he doesn’t want to die in his pajamas: “I’ll be looping in eternity in a bad look.”

Ron Athey on the Micheltorena steps in Silver Lake. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

Art of corona

The good news first: In the middle of the epidemic, artists are finding countless ways to make work and lift spirits.

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The Times' **Jessica Gelt** reports that artist **Alan Nakagawa** is putting out [an open call for haikus about coronavirus](#) for a project that he will release in collaboration with the **Orange County Museum of Art** late next month.

Noted art photographers, including **Catherine Opie**, **Stephen Shore** and **Todd Hido**, are [posting images of their quarantine experiences](#) to Instagram.



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The **Geffen Playhouse** is launching [a series of original short performances](#) titled “**Geffen Stayhouse**,” reports The Times' **Ashley Lee**. These will be posted to its website and various social media channels every Wednesday and will feature fresh work by performers such as **Jefferson Mays**, **Lauren Patten** and **Julia Sweeney**.

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In the meantime, **Skylight Theatre** has kicked off [a series of online plays](#) that are staged from various locations and streamed live. “Actors need to act, writers need to write, directors need to direct, and theaters need to keep doing what we do,” **Gary Grossman**, the theater’s producing artistic director, tells Lee.

Times theater critic **Charles McNulty** is smitten with **Patti LuPone’s** social media [dispatches from her basement](#), which he describes as “U.S.O. care packages for show queens suffering from musical comedy withdrawals.”

Patti LuPone at a rehearsal in Los Angeles in 1997. (Robert Lachman / Los Angeles Times)

Times classical music critic **Mark Swed** has been wading through [a bevy of online musical offerings](#), including a performance of Schumann's Fantasy by **Jeffrey Kahane**, **Zubin Mehta** remotely conducting three Italian tenors in their home country, and the violinist **Anne-Sophie Mutter**, who has tested positive for the virus, performing a slow movement of Beethoven's "**Harp**" with three string players in other locations.

“The Germans have long had a word for it,” he writes. “*Hausmusik*, which is exactly what the term sounds like.”

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He also reviews the video version of “**Sweet Land**,” by **the Industry**, which is now available to [view on demand for \\$14.99](#). “It is the single best deal in all of opera right now,” Swed writes, “and that is taking into account the sudden riches of free opera streams from the world’s most illustrious companies.”

For **Sean Griffin**, who runs the avant-garde company **Opera Povera**, it began as [a random idea posted to social media](#). Now more than 250 artists from around the world are gathering to perform a **Pauline Oliveros** opera online on Tuesday evening. Money raised will go to grants for U.S. musicians whose gigs were canceled by the pandemic.

I’ve been finding myself gravitating to dance videos as of late — something about music and movement without words seems really appealing at this moment. That includes [the ebullient videos](#) shared by Tony-award winning actor **Robbie Fairchild** (who used to dance with the New York City Ballet) and his roommate **Chris Jarosz**, an independent dancer and choreographer, as well [this wonderful socially distant choreography](#) from the **Martha Graham Dance Company**.

You can support the Martha Graham dancers through [their relief fund](#).

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Corona and the arts

Now the bad news: the COVID-19 pandemic continues to pummel the arts and artists economically.

The Times' **Makeda Easter** looks at how the cancellation of concerts, shoots and events has hit hard [among independent choreographers and commercial dancers](#), contract workers who often don't have benefits of any kind to fall back on. "It's the new reality for L.A.'s commercial dance world," writes Easter, "an already exclusive and fragile industry."

Kaileigh Williams of North Hollywood selects a meal from Everytable during a meal giveaway at KreativMndz Dance Academy. (Kent Nishimura / Los Angeles Times)

The **Center Theatre Group** [has suspended all shows until the fall](#) and furloughed about half of its staff through early August. Furloughed employees will continue to receive benefits and remaining staff will face paycuts. Coronavirus has been brutal for theaters: ticket sales account for more than 75% of the Center Theatre Group's annual revenue.

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The **Museum of Contemporary Art** [furloughed and instituted paycuts for most of the staff](#). About half of full-time employees were furloughed, reports The Times' **Deborah Vankin**. And director **Klaus Biesenbach** is taking a large pay cut. In an email, Biesenbach described the situation as a “slow-burning catastrophe.”

MOCA's employee union has launched [a relief fund](#) for workers who have lost their jobs.

In addition, the **Annenberg Space for Photography** in Century City has [laid off eight staffers](#), including seven full-time employees and one temp.

Andrew J. Campa looks at what the pandemic might mean for [small L.A. institutions](#), like the **Altadena Bunny Museum** and the **Valley Relics Museum**. “We have no revenue coming in, no endowment to dip into,” says Kori Capaldi, executive director of the historical **Heritage Square Museum** in Montecito Heights.

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In the Bay Area, the **Exploratorium** [cut hours, laid off part-time workers](#) and implemented furloughs and paycuts. And the **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art** is [laying off or furloughing more than 300 workers](#). In addition, director Neal Benezra and other members of management will take pay cuts.

“We have been fortunate to be able to keep our staff on full compensation for seven weeks after we closed,” wrote Benezra in a statement, “but we now have to look to the future and make the painful decision to temporarily decrease the size of our team.”

SFMOMA was among countless institutions around the country laying off workers and implementing furloughs. (Josh Edelson / AFP/Getty Images)

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In New York City, the **Whitney Museum** [laid off 76 employees](#). Plus, senior staff, including director **Adam Weinberg**, will be taking a pay cut. Weinberg said he anticipates a shortfall of at least \$7 million by the end of the fiscal year.

The **Metropolitan Museum of Art**, in the meantime, will [extend staff pay until May 2](#). Originally, they were only going to guarantee salary payments through April 4. The museum is exploring the possibility of temporarily dipping into its endowment to get it through the pandemic.

Art + Museum Transparency has been keeping track of museum layoffs around the country in a long (and growing longer) [Twitter thread](#).

Some needed relief

Numerous organizations have begun to spring into action to help offer relief to artists and organizations.

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The **J. Paul Getty Trust** created [a \\$10 million COVID-19 relief fund](#) for visual arts organizations based in L.A. County. As part of this, the **CCF Fellowship for the Visual Arts** grant will this year be repurposed as an emergency support grant for artists.

The **Warhol Foundation** is offering \$1.6 million in emergency grants to [artists in 16 U.S. cities](#) while the **Helen Frankenthaler Foundation** is [committing \\$5 million for crisis relief](#), including individual artist grants and support to organizations while they are closed.

Anonymous Was a Woman has announced [\\$250,000 in emergency grants for female artists over 40 in the U.S.](#) and L.A.'s **Women's Center for Creative Work** is offering [emergency COVID-19 health grants](#) for low-income artists living in four Southern California counties.

My colleague **Anousha Sakoui** has [a great round-up](#) of organizations assisting performers and other workers in various areas of the entertainment industry. And **Makeda Easter** comes through with [a list of resources](#) for those in the fine arts.

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The next museums

Sunday Calendar gives us a glimpse of how two rising museums will transform the cultural landscape of Los Angeles — changes that were underway before the coronavirus outbreak and will provide new places to explore once the pandemic is long behind us.

The half-built structure near the L.A. Memorial Coliseum might resemble a “damaged Millennium Falcon undergoing repairs,” writes architecture contributor **Sam Lubell**. But it’s actually the **Lucas Museum of Narrative Art** by architect **Ma Yansong**, founder of the firm **MAD**. Lubell [profiles the architect](#), a man of few words who likens his museum structure to a shapeless cloud. His work isn’t always a hit, however. Chicago Tribune architecture critic **Blair Kamin** once likened the architect’s proposal for a Lucas museum in Chicago as “a giant lump.”

But as this [gallery of 11 buildings](#) by the architect’s MAD firm, those lumps are mysterious and intriguing. Lubell says that Ma, like Lucas, “channel a poetic past and a visionary future for inspiration.”

A rendering of Ma Yansong's design for the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art at Exposition Park. (Lucas Museum of Narrative Art)

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Also rising next to the the much-debated construction happening at the **Los Angeles County Museum of Art**, is the **Renzo Piano**-designed **Academy Museum of Motion Pictures**, which is still set to open in December. Times culture writer **Deborah Vankin** sat down with museum director **Bill Kramer** and got a preview of [what visitors will see inside the galleries.](#)

The rising Academy Museum of Motion Pictures on Feb. 7, 2020. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

See you at the movies

Times film critic **Kenneth Turan** is retiring. When our newspaper's offices were still located in downtown L.A., I had the good fortune of sitting next to Kenny, as he was known in the newsroom, and I couldn't have had a better cubicle-mate: He was perpetually good natured, and we regularly shared taco lunches.

My colleague **Justin Chang** [pays tribute to an incredible career](#). And Kenny leaves us with his list of [14 films that will offer some psychological balm](#) during these troubled times. “Because being useful as a critic ... has always been one of my guiding principles,” he writes, “it feels especially fitting that my final piece is not ruminative or filled with reminiscences but very much in that pragmatic spirit.”

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Time to get watching.

Best arts online

Matt Cooper has been blazing the keyboards to keep us up-to-date on the best culture to view while social distancing. This includes **Margaret Batjer** of the **Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra** [playing solo pieces by Bach](#) on violin, [a musical farce](#) courtesy of **London’s National Theatre** and [a new audio release](#) of Bizet’s “**Carmen**” by **L.A. Opera**.

Find Cooper’s listings on The Times’ [Things To Do: Arts & Culture](#) page on a daily basis.

Bonus: The Times has put together a guide to [everything there is to do on the internet](#). So. Much. Content.

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In my little neck of the internet woods, I'd like to recommend **Kimberly Drew's** [new newsletter](#), **Something I Saw**. Each day, she emails you a single work of art with a related story. Informative and enjoyable. There are free and subscriber versions.

Passages

Gerald Freedman, the director behind countless works of theater, including the original “**Hair**,” has [died at the age of 92](#) of kidney failure.

David C. Driskell, whose 1976 exhibition at LACMA, “**Two Centuries of Black American Art: 1750-1955**,” helped break ground in the scholarship of African American art, [has died at 88](#).

In the news

— The **California Historical Society** has been doing some great historical posts during this time, such as [this interesting piece](#) about an improvised bubonic plague hospital at a San Francisco racetrack in the early days of the 20th century.

— The **Autry Museum of the American West** has [donated its stock of personal protection equipment](#) to L.A. hospitals.

— Writer **Matt Stromberg** and curator **J. Patrice Marandel** [sound off](#) on the **LACMA** building plan.

— **Karrie Jacobs** takes on the (now-shuttered) **Rem Koolhaas** show at the

Guggenheim: “While it is encyclopedic in its aspirations, [it is Wikipedic in its execution.](#)”

- **Gia Kourlas** on how the pandemic has [affected the choreography of everyday life.](#)
- The **Getty Museum** put out a call on social media asking people to remake famous artworks using household items and the results are [clever and adorbz.](#) See the full Twitter thread [here.](#)
- **Taylor Lorenz** says [you don't have to be productive](#) during a pandemic. *Whew.*

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And last but not least ...

A [disaster dégustation](#): I write about five disaster movies and the meals to go with them — with special appearances by alien contagions, Cuban zombies and Kraft mac and cheese.

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Carolina A. Miranda is a Los Angeles Times columnist covering culture, with a focus on art and architecture.

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