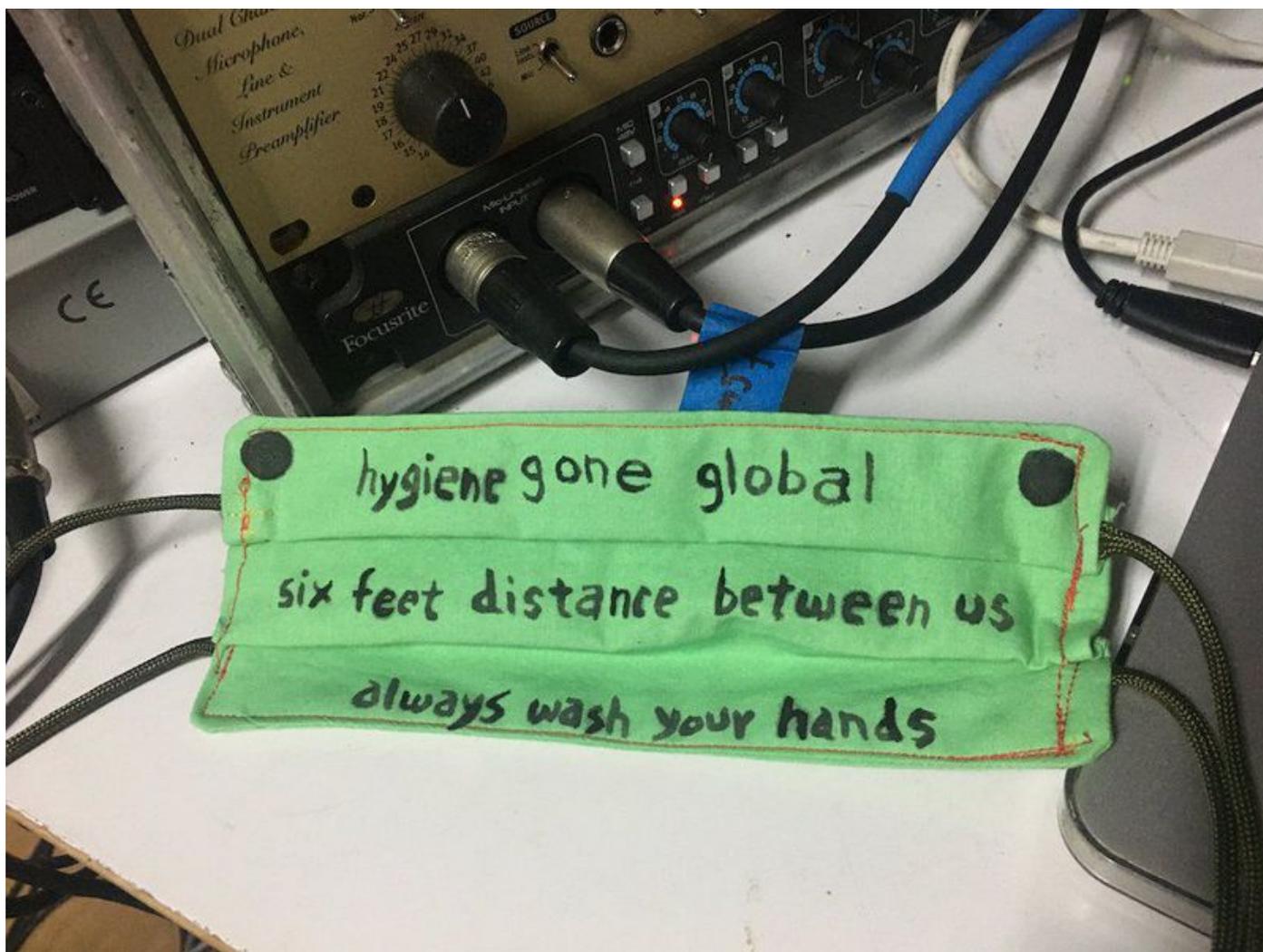


COVID-19

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This Sound Artist Is Asking People to Record COVID-19 Haikus

Called “Social Distancing, Haiku and You,” Alan Nakagawa’s project will result in a sound collage that interweaves a multitude of voices



The deadline to submit a haiku for the "Social Distancing, Haiku and You" project is April 16. (Courtesy of Alan Nakagawa)

By [Jennifer Nalewicki](#)
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With most brick-and-mortar museums shuttered due to COVID-19, cultural institutions across the world have had to get crafty with their offerings. One of the latest projects to come out of this uncertain time is a collaboration between the [Orange County Museum of Art \(OCMA\)](#) and Los Angeles-based sound artist [Alan Nakagawa](#).

In late March, the Santa Ana, California, museum reached out to Nakagawa and challenged him to come up with an interactive initiative that people could take part in from home.

Dubbed “[Social Distancing, Haiku and You](#),” the project asks participants to write and digitally record haikus inspired by their own personal experiences during the pandemic. Upon receiving the digital recordings, Nakagawa will use Pro Tools software to create a sound collage that interweaves the multitude of voices into a single composition.

Nakagawa, who had his first-ever [solo exhibition](#) at OCMA last year, tells *Smithsonian* that the museum realized “people were getting tired of looking at their computer screens and decided it wanted to collaborate with sound artists instead.”

The beauty of the project is that people don’t need to have a literary background to participate. Simply put, a [haiku](#) is an unrhymed Japanese poem spread across three lines that contain five, seven and five syllables, respectively. Finished haikus are comprised of 17 syllables. April also happens to be [National Poetry Month](#)—meaning, in other words, that the COVID-19 haiku challenge couldn’t have come at a [better time](#).

Speaking with [Hyperallergic](#)’s Elisa Wouk Almino, Nakagawa describes the haiku as a “forgiving platform” that allows writers to be both “nonsensical” and “surreal.” By creating the sound collage, the artist hopes to convey a sense of the “collective experience” caused by the pandemic’s “paradigm shift.”

Poetry lovers started submitting compositions soon after the museum’s announcement. Nakagawa estimates that he has received about 80 haikus so far. One that particularly resonated with him was written by an elementary school student. It reads:

We are very scared

We miss our friends very much

We love everyone

Another submission highlighted by [Hyperallergic](#) states:

I am 6 feet from
insanity, but I still
have TP and wine

Nakagawa, who also happens to be a trained drummer, says he chose the haiku as the project’s literary form because of its simplicity and approachability. He likens writing a haiku to creating music.

“It’s similar to the idea that music is not the notes, but the space between the notes,” the artist says. “I could teach you a rock beat, but the reason my beat and your beat would be different is because the way we approach the space between those notes is different. For the haiku, each person’s approach to those 17 syllables is going to be different, along with their language, descriptions and observations.”

He adds, “We’re all dealing with this pandemic, and in a sense that’s the note, but we’re all having a different experience. To me that is the space between the notes. The beauty of the haiku is that it’s inherently more about what’s *not* said than what is said.”

Nakagawa says that he hopes the “cathartic experience” will help people feel a little more centered during this anxiety-ridden time.

“I’m not sure what the final piece will be like, and what one person’s haiku will sound like amidst the other haikus,” he notes. “Sometimes moments can be a little more comforting when you know you’re not alone.”

To submit a typed haiku and recording of your work (most smartphones come equipped with a voice recording app), email info@ocma.net. The deadline for submissions is April 16, and the finished composition will be released April 23.

About Jennifer Nalewcki

Jennifer Nalewicki is a Brooklyn-based journalist. Her articles have been published in *The New York Times*, *Scientific American*, *Popular Mechanics*, *United Hemispheres* and more. You can find more of her work at .

