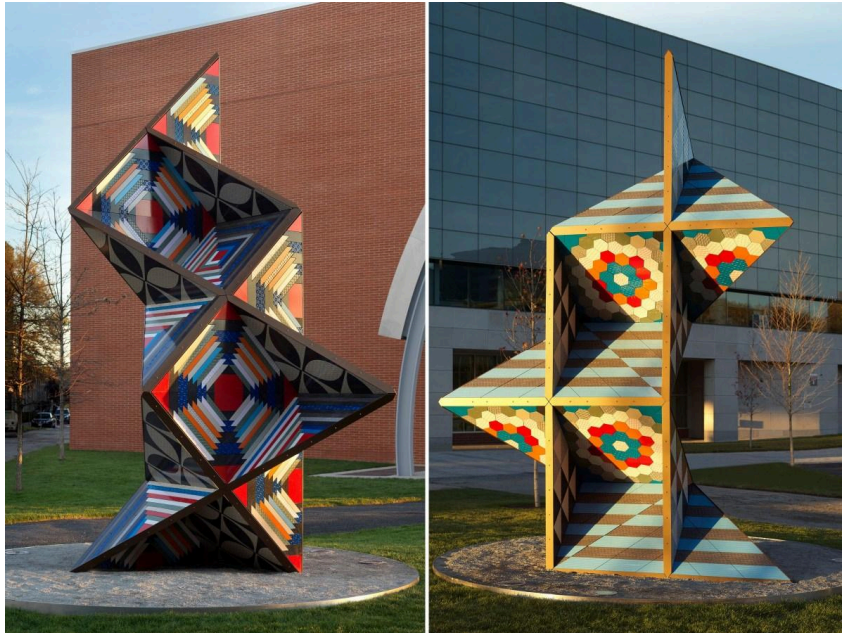


HYPERALLERGIC

Required Reading

This week: Sanford Biggers's musical sculpture, Bayard Rustin's secret antiquities, lessons from Octavia Butler, elephant autonomy, *Severance* bros are back, and much more.

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Sanford Biggers's new sculpture at MIT is something of a shapeshifter, transforming completely depending on the viewer's position. It's a fitting addition for the front lawn of the school's music building, and aptly titled "Madrigal" for a contrapuntal singing style designed for multiple interlocking voice parts. (photo by Dario Lasagni, courtesy MIT List Visual Arts Center)

▸ Bayard Rustin is remembered for his Civil Rights and queer activism, but did he also collect antiquities from across Africa in the 1950s? Curator Frederick John Lamp explains the behind-the-scenes controversy for *Transition Magazine*:

My successor as curator of African art at Yale, Barbara Plankensteiner, previously of the Vienna Museum für Völkerkunde, came with an interest in exposing plundered art, having just published

a catalogue of their large collection from the Kingdom of Benin (sacked by the British in 1897), and an interest in repatriation, which she pursued. Upon taking office at Yale in 2015, without interviewing any of the previous owners or the curators, she immediately declared the Rustin provenance “impossible.”

Correctly, she pointed out that the antiquities from Sokoto and Katsina were unknown to the international art market in the 1950s when Rustin is supposed to have collected them in Nigeria. She suggested fraud, either on the part of the Graes, or Cancro, or that if, indeed, Rustin owned them, he may have bought the Nigerian antiquities from dealers in the U.S. later in his life and did not acquire them directly from Nigeria. She declared that there was no outside confirmation of Rustin’s ownership. On the basis of her suspicions, she expunged the public record of the provenance and the labels and removed a plaque celebrating Bayard Rustin from the gallery. She then notified the Nigerian government of this now-undocumented collection, which subsequently filed a claim for repatriation. Reinstalling the entire African art collection, she returned only a few Grae objects to the display, without any labels whatsoever. To the time of this writing, the name of Bayard Rustin remains expunged in the African art display at the Yale University Art Gallery.

A close examination of the documentation on file at Yale on the Nigerian terracotta antiquities, however, complicates her conclusion. Rustin’s activity, on almost every level, ground to a halt in the 1980s when he became gravely ill and died in 1987. Plankensteiner argued that if Rustin owned them at all, he would have bought them from U.S. dealers. But, at the same time, she acknowledges that the antiquities from Sokoto and Katsina were unknown to the U.S. art market until the late 1990s. Even if he had bought them from his deathbed, this would still be more than a decade before they first hit the market in the U.S. As far as we know, no dealers in the U.S. even knew about Sokoto and Katsina antiquities until around 1999. So her proposed dating of the purchases by Rustin in the 1970s or 1980s is no more plausible than a 1950s dating, which I shall propose here.

› Carlos Cervantes, aged 71, is on parole until his 101st birthday – under sentencing laws that were repealed decades ago. Gustavo Martínez writes about the artist’s battle with the criminal justice system and his impact on Chicano arts in New Mexico for *Prism Reports*:

Tired of dealing with a judicial system that has taken most of his life, in 2020 Cervantes applied for executive clemency from New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham. In a letter dated Dec. 28, 2020, the governor denied his application. "After thorough investigation and considering recommendations from the Parole Board Chair," the governor wrote that she "acknowledges and applauds" Cervantes' efforts to better his life.

"Applauds'?" Cervantes quipped in response to the letter. "I can't hear the applause."

Prison isn't Cervantes' whole story. He is a cultural icon, a beloved New Mexico artist who has promoted art inside and outside of prison. Although police narrative paints him as a hardened criminal, institutions like the Museum of International Folk Art recognize his contributions to art, culture, and society.

"Carlos's legacy as an artist, father, and community organizer is legendary among both Santa Fe locals and visitors," according to a statement from the museum. "His work can be seen as a testament to his experience with the often challenging system of incarceration, and a critique on how these systems disproportionately affect certain segments of society."

› Wandering through this Upstate New York sculpture park looks like walking in a wastepaper wonderland ... and now, apparently, it's for sale, writes Hannah Frishberg of the *Gothamist*:

"I just wanted to try to build as many little dwellings as I could with my friends," said Bua, an installation artist. He had one rule: Besides the fasteners, everything had to be made of found material.

Since buying the land for \$33,000 in 2006, Bua and his periodic collaborators have constructed about 30 buildings there, including the "Tower of LP Power," a two-story structure sided entirely in vinyl records; "Cicada House," a bunker built of dirt bags; a pew-filled, Tudor-style church; and a Hobbit-like, wood stove-furnished cabin where Bua has previously lived. (Today he lives with his family in nearby Palenville.)

After almost two decades of learning from and building on the land, though, Bua is ready to move on.

“It’s time to take the path of least resistance and surrender to the change, for good,” Bua said in a phone interview Thursday.

› The Getty Villa was spared from the California wildfires last month thanks to the work of 17 employees. For [*LAist*](#), Adolfo Guzman-Lopez reports on how museums in Los Angeles are sharing strategies, with more natural disasters looming:

The Getty hosted a large cultural property protection conference last September. Some of the attendees reached out to Borsay, he said, to learn first about how he and the museum were doing. Then, for details about how he and his staff helped protect the Villa from being engulfed in flames.

He said he’s been asked to make a full presentation at this year’s conference. And next week he’s talking to the Cultural Safeguard Alliance, a network formed among cultural institutions to protect cultural property.

“[I’m going to give] a basic briefing on what happened and what we did and how we protected [the Villa],” Borsay said.

But this is not the happy ending. Natural disasters are never in the city’s rearview mirror.

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass called the L.A. fires, “The Big One.” While these fires are historic in nature, the longstanding threat of a massive earthquake also looms on L.A.’s horizon.

“It’s going to be a bad day when the Big One happens. I don’t think anybody’s questioning that,” Borsay said.

› And reflecting on those devastating wildfires, more of which the climate crisis guarantees, poet and writer Hanif Abdurraqib muses on what Octavia Butler and the late beloved Nikki Giovanni can teach us about moving through a world up in flames. For the [*New Yorker*](#), he writes:

In October of 1993, shortly after “Parable of the Sower” was released, the Kinneloa wildfire tore through Southern California. It destroyed nearly two hundred buildings in Altadena and the nearby community of Kinneloa Mesa. By the time the fire began, California was at the end of a years-long drought; the winter of early 1993 was exceptionally wet, and this led to a spring of

new growth, which by October had yielded an abundance of dry grass and brush. The Kinneoloa Fire wasn't the only one that burned through Southern California that month; the Laguna Fire ignited on the same day and burned more than sixteen thousand acres, destroying hundreds of homes. But the Kinneoloa Fire is the one that hit closest to the real-life community that Butler was reimagining in "Parable of the Sower," which was released just weeks before the actual fires began. In "Sower," fire represents both finality and a kind of freedom. Its aftermath affords an opportunity to imagine a renewed world, with renewed requirements for survival.

People are not incorrect about Octavia Butler predicting the future, but they're not always clear about what kind of future she was envisioning. It's not the fires or drug use or tumbling literacy rates that she invented—all of those problems were simply there for her to see. What "Sower" imagines, rather, is a future in which surviving the seemingly unsurvivable requires people to show some emotional dexterity, some ability to surrender whatever selfishness they've been harboring and see if they have something that someone else needs. This is the starting point of mutual aid: *What do I have that someone else may need?* Butler's work is outlining a future where posing that question is a requirement. "Sower" isn't just about a time and a fire and a place; it's about people deciding what kind of apocalypse they are going to have, and then deciding how to live in its aftermath.

▸ For [*Columbia Journalism Review*](#), Sacha Biazzo shares an illuminating interview with Marisa Kabas, who first reported on the US government's grant and loan freeze last week:

Have mainstream media outlets properly credited your reporting?

Some have, some haven't. The *Washington Post* was the first major outlet to confirm my reporting, and they credited me, which I appreciated. The *New York Times* initially didn't, but after I reached out to the reporter, they added a reference, which was a pleasant surprise. Overall, I've received more credit than independent journalists typically do when they break news.

How do you perceive the current media coverage of President Trump's administration?

Many outlets aren't equipped to handle this moment because they're still so worried and they are clinging to traditional norms taught in journalism schools or traditional media institutions.

They are not comfortable with breaking the rulebook, even in the face of clear and present fascism. I don't know what it will take for them to completely take off the gloves and fight alongside all of us. A lot of journalists argue that their role isn't to advocate, that that's not their job. But if your job isn't to inform people in a way that will help them, then I don't really understand what your job is.

▸ While animal rights activists have a reputation for ignoring human rights, a Colorado ruling that elephants cannot challenge their own detention at a zoo is renewing questions about zookeeping, writes Colleen Slevin for the *Associated Press*:

The group argued that the Colorado elephants, born in the wild in Africa, have shown signs of brain damage because the zoo is essentially a prison for such intelligent and social creatures, known to roam for miles a day. It wanted the animals released to one of the two accredited elephant sanctuaries in the United States because the group does not think they can no longer live in the wild.

The zoo argued moving the elephants and potentially placing them with new animals would be cruel at their age, possibly causing unnecessary stress. It said they were not used to being in larger herds and, based on the zoo's observations, the elephants don't have the skills or desire to join one.

In a statement, the Nonhuman Rights Project said the latest ruling "perpetuates a clear injustice" and predicted future courts would reject the idea that only humans have a right to liberty.

▸ Blurbs on book covers are the literary equivalent of rec letters: ubiquitous and lowkey BS. *LitHub's* James Folda breaks down Simon & Schuster's move to drop required blurbs and whether it'll make a difference:

I mostly agree with the points he's making, and he's right to question the state of the blurb. I'm especially sympathetic that blurbing is something we all feel beholden to. No one really likes them, but they're assumed by authors, editors, agents, everyone. I also appreciate that this is coming from him. Lincoln Michel wrote a good piece that notes that Manning's anti-blurb note is from someone who can actually change things, not a "disingenuous" complaint from a

“bestselling and/or award-winning authors who, having reached a place where blurbs no longer helped their career, decided the practice should end.”

Manning’s overall desire to re-weight blurbs is admirable too: if blurbs are no longer expected, perhaps they’ll start to mean something again.

The big problem with this initiative is that it’s not really clear that anything is changing. Manning says S&S never had a blurb policy, and he makes clear that they might still run blurbs if they need to. And I wonder how this will actually work for his authors. As Matt Bell noted, the most well-connected writers are still going to be leveraging their networks to make sales and get reviews, blurb or not.

› The way the *Papua New Guinea Courier* is both funnier and has more of a backbone than most American publications right now:



(screenshot via @olufemiotaiwo.bsky.social on Bluesky)