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Daniel Palmer.
Nicholas Knight / Courtesy of Public Art Fund

AS INDOOR SPACES FACE RESTRICTIONS, PUBLIC ART PLAYS A VITAL ROLE IN PANDEMIC-ERA NEW YORK

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FEBRUARY 12, 2021

Last year, museums, galleries, and other art institutions faced unprecedented challenges as a result of the pandemic, which precipitated months-long closures, layoffs and furloughs of staff, and a need for the strategic mitigation of crowds in their spaces. There were fewer interruptions, however, for exhibitions of outdoor works, even in a year that saw a number of significant presentations and controversies when it came to monuments, statues, and other sculptures.

To assess how the pandemic has impacted public art installations and what shows to expect in 2021, *ARTnews* interviewed Daniel S. Palmer, curator at the Public Art Fund, which has recently mounted exhibitions devoted to artists' reflections on the pandemic, photographs by Farah Al Qasimi, and sculptures by Carmen Herrera. In the Q&A below, Palmer addresses how the organization responded to the events of 2020 and what the next year might bring for art overall.

ARTnews: In the past year, museums have faced extended closures, and attendance numbers are dwindling. Has the audience for public art grown as a result?

Palmer: At Public Art Fund, we have all felt an immense responsibility to continue presenting work in public space, with so many museums and galleries closed or limiting attendance because of the pandemic. I am certain that public art has taken on a greater meaning and importance for audiences because of this. Those of us who typically sought inspiration in a museum or gallery have had to find it elsewhere. I think all New Yorkers have increasingly realized the fundamental importance of public space, and public art has been such a great way to enliven it and safely bring people together. We've been able to bring exhibitions to neighborhoods across all five boroughs that people can encounter during their daily routines (walks in the park, commuting on busses, etc.), and which bring some semblance of normalcy and beauty when we've needed it most.

Many institutions have faced difficulties mounting shows because of Covid. Did you face any specific installation- or exhibition-related challenges—logistical or otherwise—amid pandemic restrictions last year?

Thankfully, when everything else was closing, we had a number of exhibitions on view, and others were planned that we were able to successfully install throughout 2020. There were logistical challenges when some partners and fabricators were forced to close temporarily, but they were eventually able to safely reopen and we were able to finish the work, staying in close dialogue with the artists and partners via Zoom and FaceTime. When we were able to begin opening exhibitions this summer, they ended up taking on even greater meaning. “Davina Semo: Reverberation,” for instance, opened at a moment when auditory interventions characterized our collective experience, whether through the evening cheers for essential workers or the chanting voices of protesters calling out for change and the end of systemic racism. The exhibition built upon this moment, encouraging audiences to add their own contribution to our urban soundscape by ringing a bell—an apt metaphor.

Perhaps the biggest change to our exhibition schedule related to Melvin Edwards’s exhibition for City Hall Park. In dialogue with Edwards, we made the decision to shift his survey exhibition from summer 2020 to May 2021 in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and in response to protesters’ occupation of City Hall. It was a moment for us to hear the voices of the many people protesting there and throughout the city and country.

Sam Moyer’s “Doors for Doris” was our miracle show—it opened the exact day (September 16, 2020) we had been projecting for a few years, and we all felt so lucky that it didn’t encounter any problems or delays. Since the piece is at Doris C. Freedman Plaza, and is such a poignant homage to Freedman’s legacy as a pioneer for the arts and founder of Public Art Fund, I’d like to think she had something to do with the show’s success, on some cosmic level.

In what ways has the pandemic impacted your role as curator of the Public Art Fund?

I’ve always been inspired by my work as a curator, which I view as fundamentally about having meaningful conversations with artists and helping them share their work with diverse audiences in an accessible way. The pandemic has deepened my exchange with the brilliant artists I’ve been in dialogue with, in part because the circumstances have made us all reflect upon the meaning and intention of what we do and how we live in the world. I’ve been so impressed by each artist’s commitment to their work, and their understanding of the social role their art plays in the world. Despite the pandemic, I’ve been absolutely inspired by the artists who have been so resolute and devoted to sharing their work during this important moment, and by the profound discussions that have been highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement. The importance of dialogue these past months has become so evident—I’m pleased that Public Art Fund has been able to continue expanding the conversation to public audiences through our artists talks series that we host with the Cooper Union, which includes programs with Davina Semo, Sam Moyer, Stan Douglas, and more to come this spring and summer.

Will there be more public art projects in New York in a post-pandemic era?

I certainly hope so! We’ve been so delighted that more and more people have come to expect artworks by the world’s most important artists to be a fundamental part of a thriving city like ours. This has led to major infrastructure projects bringing us onboard for our expertise to commission permanent public art works, like the incredible works by Elmgreen & Dragset, Stan Douglas, and Kehinde Wiley at Moynihan Train Hall; and Laura Owens, Sarah Sze, Jeppe Hein, and Sabine Hornig at LaGuardia Airport’s new Terminal B. More widely, we’ve been partnering with JCDecaux since 2017 to bring work to all corners of the city. This gives us a lot more opportunity to showcase the work of so many great artists in even more places, which feels important knowing that fewer people are traveling across the boroughs. Our partnership with JCDecaux has grown throughout these past years, and on February 24, 2021, we’ll present “Awol Erizku: New Visions for Iris” to audiences in New York City and Chicago concurrently for the first time. We’ve also been traveling our exhibitions beyond New York City, which has created a special opportunity to reach wider audiences. Currently, “Carmen Herrera: Estructuras Monumentales” is on view at Buffalo Bayou Park, which marks the Houston debut of Carmen’s public sculpture.

Will any of Public Art Fund’s exhibitions this year directly address the historic events of 2020?

Our “Art on the Grid” group exhibition on JCDecaux bus shelters did that by providing artists with a platform to respond to 2020’s historic events. In different ways, each of our 2021 exhibitions is informed by the events and experiences of 2020, with several focusing on moving toward a more just, equitable, optimistic future. Awol Erizku’s exhibition comes to mind—the photographs he took for the show were created in 2020, many of them during the pandemic. He’s created a new suite of 13 stunning photographs that will be displayed on bus shelters in all five boroughs of New York and many parts of Chicago, too. The show was inspired by the recent birth of his daughter, Iris, and has a forward-looking orientation. He used the opportunity to reflect on the moment, but also as an opportunity to create images with a striking visual language that could serve as a prompt for his future conversations with her about difficult subjects around identity, religion, and the challenges of this era.

What else is slated for Public Art Fund’s 2021 season?

“Melvin Edwards: Brighter Days” will open on May 4. The title pretty much says it all! We are honored to be able to work on this important show with Mel. I’ve admired his sculpture since I was in college at Rutgers, where he taught. The show will be a thematic survey of his work, from 1970 to the present, focused especially on the broken chain motif, which feels particularly poignant today. He’ll debut a new monumental work in the show as well.

We’re very excited to showcase breakout works by Claudia Wieser at Brooklyn Bridge Park in July, where a cluster of towering sculptures will create an immersive, stage-like environment that reflects the surrounding architecture; Martine Gutierrez will present a series of new portraits of figures from history who personify resilience, leadership, authority, and strength on hundreds of JCDecaux bus shelters in New York and Chicago in August; and Gillian Wearing will share a cast bronze monument to the groundbreaking photographer Diane Arbus that will be on view at Doris C. Freedman Plaza starting this October.

Broadly speaking, what do you think will be the role of public art in New York in the next few years?

I think that art has always been a means to work through the important issues that society needs to confront, and I am sure it will continue to be. I think that art in public space is one of the most vital [ways] to do that, especially when our world has become so fractured. I personally feel excited about the role of all art in the next few years. I think that the pandemic has forced us to reconsider our priorities. For me, it has reiterated that art is one of the most essential things in life, and to share it with others is the only way I know.