

## ART AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS OFTEN QUESTION CONVENTIONAL IDEAS ABOUT ART AND ART DISPLAY. THEY introduce new subjects, mediums, and approaches to making art. During the twentieth century, many artists challenged traditional ideas about painting and sculpture. They sought to explore the space where the artwork was exhibited as an integral component of the work itself. This dramatic use and embrace of space signaled a radical change from more established art forms and subjects. It was a new way for both artists and viewers to interact with an artwork.

Sometimes an artwork surrounds or engulfs the viewer. Often referred to as installations, these immersive environments are usually associated with contemporary art (artwork made after 1968). Many of these works were designed for a particular room or a specific location, drawing the viewer's attention to the physical space and the experience there. Installations often include sculpture, light, sound, video, or performance, as well as architectural, environmental, or assemblage constructions—all of which invite unique artistic and spatial interactions. Some installations also address notions of place, location, and displacement. Like much contemporary art, installations raise questions about the purpose and definition of art. They also encourage viewers to rethink their own relationship to, and experiences with, art objects.

These curriculum materials explore large-scale artworks and installations on LACMA's campus by the artists Tony Smith, Richard Serra, Chris Burden, and Jorge Pardo. These artists experiment with space, scale, and perception. Tony Smith's large geometric sculpture *Smoke* appears to rise and swell with the viewer's movement through the work. In spite of its enormous size and weight, Richard Serra's *Band* curves gracefully through the gallery. Visitors must walk in, along, and around the sculpture to experience it fully. Chris Burden's landmark *Urban Light*, made up of 202 cast-iron lampposts, serves as an entryway to the museum grounds and illuminates Wilshire Boulevard at night. And Jorge Pardo's installation of the galleries for the ancient Latin American collection questions traditional methods of art display with its innovative use of color and form.

As you look at and experience these artworks, consider:

- What are some of the different ways artists use their work to transform space?
- How does the artist's choice of material, presentation, and display affect the visitor experience? Which artwork surprised you the most? Why?
- How does the scale of the work inform the visitor experience?

## LACMA and the Visitor Experience

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Pavilion for Japanese Art, Designed by Bruce Goff, opened 1988

THE ARTWORKS AND INSTALLATIONS HIGHLIGHTED IN THESE MATERIALS DEFINE THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY Museum of Art's campus, which is undergoing a ten-year process of expansion and renovation. In the recent past, LACMA has reshaped its campus physically—through architecture, artist-designed galleries, and artwork—and metaphorically in its aspiration to be a town square within the city of Los Angeles. Like LACMA, many museums are rethinking the visitor experience and creating public spaces for active learning, engagement, dialogue, and recreation.

Art, artists, and artist-designed spaces are central to the LACMA visitor experience. From architect Bruce Goff's design of the Pavilion for Japanese Art to Jorge Pardo's installation of the galleries for ancient American art, LACMA is reshaping space and how visitors engage with artworks in the collection. The Pavilion for Japanese Art (opened 1988), for example, is uniquely designed for viewing Japanese art. Artworks are naturally illuminated by sunlight filtered through opaque fiberglass panels. The effect approximates how these works are viewed in Japan; screens may be viewed at a distance, while scrolls are presented in alcove-like settings that suggest the *tokonoma*, the traditional viewing area in a Japanese home. See the enclosed CD for additional views of the Pavilion.

The concept of designing totally immersive environments is not new. Civic spaces, places of worship, and other sites where communities gather are often thoughtfully designed to physically and emotionally affect viewers. For historical examples, consider the architectural design of Roman civic centers or Renaissance churches. For contemporary examples, think about shopping malls, theme parks, or your local farmer's market.

- Imagine you are at a theme park. Describe what you might see around you. What are the strategies used by the artists or designers to influence the visitor's experience? Alternately, think of a civic space, a place of worship, or other location that you regularly visit. What do you see, hear, smell, taste, or feel in that space?

## Contemporary Art Practice

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THE LARGE-SCALE SCULPTURE AND INSTALLATIONS INCLUDED IN THIS RESOURCE ARE PART OF A TRADITION of contemporary art practice. Beginning in the late 1960s, artists questioned long-held assumptions about what defined a work of art. They embraced new ways to design, execute, and display their works.

Minimalist artists (working in the 1960s to the mid-1970s) rejected representational painting in favor of simple, often geometric, three-dimensional objects. Minimalist works, frequently made from humble industrial materials, challenged traditional notions of craftsmanship, the illusion of spatial depth, and the idea that a work of art must be one of a kind. Minimalist artists also sought to produce work that engaged with the surrounding space. Art has long been made to be looked at, but these artists wanted to involve the viewer in a more physical way, acknowledging that the perception of the work shifts as the viewer moves. Freestanding works such as Tony Smith's *Smoke*, for instance, sit directly on the floor rather than on pedestals, inviting viewers to consider the physical artwork as well as the space around it, and how the work relates to the specific site.

During the 1960s and 1970s, a number of Southern California artists—inspired by local physical, social, and technological environments—experimented with perceptual and phenomenological concerns. Often called "light and space" artists, their work utilized high-tech materials such as plastics, resins, and coated glass to create works that seem to transcend solidity and gravity. These artworks become one with their surroundings; it is difficult to perceive where the art ends and the environment begins. Artist Robert Irwin was a pivotal figure in this movement. See examples of his work, such as *Untitled* (1966–67) and *Palm Garden Installation* (2008), on the enclosed CD.

Artists of the 1960s and 1970s also turned their attention to the natural environment, its processes, and the land itself as a vehicle for artistic expression. Artists began moving art out of studios and galleries and into the landscape, sometimes actually engaging the land as a sculptural medium. This type of art became known as *earthworks* or *land art*. One of the best-known earthworks is Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970). It is a 1,500-foot-long, 15-foot-wide spiral formation (composed of 6,650 tons of rock) that projects into Utah's Great Salt Lake. (See [ubu.com/film/smithson\\_spiral.html](http://ubu.com/film/smithson_spiral.html) for a documentary video.) Another well-known earthwork was Christo's *Running Fence* (1972–76). The temporary installation consisted of an 18-foot-high structure made from white nylon fabric strung on steel cables between posts. The work formed an undulating white line through twenty-four miles of countryside in Northern California's Sonoma and Marin counties.

- Consider drawing, painting, sculpture, and printmaking. What are some of the traditional materials used to create this art? Contemporary artists often combine traditional materials with nontraditional materials, or use traditional materials in nontraditional ways.
- How do you usually view a work of art? On walls or in cases? While contemporary paintings may hang on walls, many artists have experimented with less conventional presentations, as you'll see in the following artworks. How might a nontraditional display change your experience of an artwork?

# Smoke

, 1967, FABRICATED 2005  
TONY SMITH (UNITED STATES, 1912–1980)

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**A** MONUMENTAL, MULTIFACETED SCULPTURE BY THE American artist Tony Smith greets visitors to the Ahmanson Building at LACMA. Titled *Smoke*, the geometric structure is 24 feet high and 48 feet wide. It is composed of forty-five extended octahedrons, or eight-sided modules. In the upper part of the sculpture, they are assembled in hexagonal formations like those found in a honeycomb. The sculpture's placement in the center of a four-story atrium allows viewers to see it from multiple angles—from below, from above, and from many sides.

- Imagine you could view this sculpture from different vantage points. What might you see when standing below or under it? What might you see from above, looking through its many open spaces? Would your impression of the sculpture change with your point of view? Look at the images of the sculpture on the enclosed CD and sketch what you see, capturing the positive and negative spaces.
- How does the sculpture interact with its environment? Consider its placement in the four-story atrium.

## Natural Forms

Despite the sculpture's geometric structure, the aluminum lattice appears to rise and swell as viewers move through the work. The geometric shapes, openness, and expansiveness of the sculpture reflect the artist's lifelong exploration of patterns found in nature. Smith called his artworks "presences" rather than "sculptures." The *Los Angeles Times* art critic Christopher Knight addressed this idea in a 2008 review, describing the artwork as a dynamic, "shape-shifting" sculpture that appears from one position to "rise on hind legs" and from another "to stretch out like a cat in sunshine."

- How would you describe this sculpture? Write a caption for the artwork using descriptive language, metaphors, or similes.
- *Smoke* is painted a muted black. How does the solid color draw your attention to the shape(s) of the sculpture?

## The Heart of the Museum

*Smoke* is one of Smith's largest works—and the only large-scale piece conceived specifically for an interior space. It was erected once before as a painted plywood mock-up in a 1967 exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. The sculpture appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in October 1967 with the headline "Sculptor Tony Smith: Art Outgrows the Museum." This artwork illustrates the transition of sculpture in the mid-1960s from a solid object viewers can move around to more monumental works that viewers can move within and through.

- Despite its large scale, there is a light quality to *Smoke*. In what ways does this sculpture represent the element of smoke? Consider line, shape, color, negative space, and scale. Compare and contrast the lightness of *Smoke* with the heaviness of Richard Serra's *Band*.

Although Tony Smith died in 1980, his wife, Jane, succeeded in having all of her husband's designs made into permanent works of art. In 2005, the sculpture was re-created by the artist's estate in painted aluminum and then pieced together in 2008 in the Ahmanson Building at LACMA. Kiki Smith, a sculptor and one of Tony Smith's daughters, worked with her father to make the model for *Smoke*. She says of the sculpture, "It seems to function like a heart for the museum." View the construction of the sculpture at LACMA at [lacma.org/art/ScreeningRoom](http://lacma.org/art/ScreeningRoom) or on the enclosed CD.

- How does a heart function? Think about the heart's physical role as the center of the circulatory system. It produces a life-sustaining rhythm. The heart is also related to our emotional response. Look again at *Smoke* and consider how it functions as a heart for the museum. Create a visual or written response to the work.



Tony Smith (United States, 1912–1980)

*Smoke*, 1967, fabricated 2005

Painted aluminum, 290 x 564 x 396 in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, made possible by The Beldegrun Family's  
gift to LACMA in honor of Rebecka Beldegrun's birthday (M.2010.49)

© Tony Smith Estate, photo © 2010 Museum Associates/LACMA

# **Band**, 2006

RICHARD SERRA (UNITED STATES, B. 1939)

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**A**LMOST 13 FEET TALL, 70 FEET LONG, AND WEIGHING 200 tons, this massive steel sculpture curves gracefully through the first-floor gallery of the Broad Contemporary Art Museum at LACMA. The band of steel bends and curves, leaning inward and outward as it forms four cavities that are similar in plan but different in surface. *Band* is constructed of rolled Cor-Ten steel, which is designed to weather over time and produce a rustlike appearance. Look carefully at the sculpture's walls and notice the surface texture, the subtle color changes, and the seams where the immense pieces fit together. Artist Richard Serra spent nearly two-and-a-half years developing and engineering this artwork and has said that he is more interested in shaping space than in making objects.

- Imagine what it would be like to walk in and around this artwork. What might you think about as you move around it? What images or words come to mind?

## **Walking Through Art**

In order to fully see and experience this gigantic sculpture, visitors must move in and around it, walking the length of the entire gallery space. The artwork creates new spaces within the architecture of the room and invites multiple interpretations. Some say standing close to the sculpture and looking up produces the sense of being deep inside a cavern. Others feel engulfed or disoriented by the scale of the sculpture. And for some, the variegated, rust-colored surfaces and gigantic plates of towering steel evoke the hull of a ship.

- Can you look at this artwork in the same way that you might look at a painting? Or at Chris Burden's *Urban Light*? Why or why not?

## **Innovation and Experimentation**

Like many other artists of his generation, Serra turned to unconventional, industrial materials to express his artistic vision. Serra's early work in the 1960s focused on steel and lead, materials that he had worked with as a youth in West Coast steel mills and shipyards. The artist later began to focus on large-scale work that is best experienced over time, including site-specific works created for distinct architectural, urban, or landscape settings. Serra's recent work includes monumental sculptures such as *Band*, which the artist developed in a series of lead models built in an inch-to-foot scale. He then partnered with a steel mill in Germany to manufacture the artwork. Seven workers used cranes and harnesses to move each panel of the artwork into its current location here at LACMA. There is no welding involved with this sculpture; the whole piece relies on gravity and impeccable construction, with each piece balancing against the others.

- Serra is interested in using familiar geometric shapes to create unusual geometries. Create your own artwork, combining geometric shapes in new or unexpected ways.



Richard Serra (United States, b. 1939)  
*Band*, 2006  
Steel, 153 x 846 x 440 in.  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds  
provided by Eli and Edythe L. Broad (M.2007.122)  
© Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York  
Photo © 2010 Museum Associates/LACMA

# Urban Light<sup>2008</sup>

CHRIS BURDEN (UNITED STATES, B. 1946)

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VISITORS TO LACMA OFTEN WALK RIGHT THROUGH or around artist Chris Burden's *Urban Light* sculpture to enter the museum campus. Burden created this monumental sculpture from 202 cast-iron lamps that once lit the streets of Los Angeles. The lamps are arranged in strict formation; the tallest, at about 30 feet, stand in the center, while the smallest lamps (about 20 feet tall) are at the edges of the sculpture. The bases display elaborate floral and geometric patterns, while the fluted shafts and glass globes that cap the street-lights have been meticulously cleaned, painted, and refurbished to glow. This much-photographed artwork has fast become an iconic landmark of Los Angeles.

- Visitors are encouraged to walk in and around this installation of streetlamps. Imagine what it would be like to walk through the rows. Consider the scale of the work and the way in which it is situated in a public place along a major boulevard.
- In what ways might this work be different if you experienced it during the day versus at night, when the lamps are illuminated?

## L.A. Stories/Histories

Chris Burden bought the first lamppost in this work at the Rose Bowl flea market in Pasadena; collecting and restoring streetlamps soon became an obsession. He hired contractor Anna Justice, who helped locate the lamps and recast missing iron parts. The lampposts were then carefully sandblasted before being painted a neutral gray. After the lamps were restored, Burden had them completely rewired to meet modern electrical code and function. The sculpture is installed at LACMA's entrance on Wilshire Boulevard, where it lights up in the evening (powered by solar energy) and turns off late at night.

- The artist's use of repetition and seriality is significant to this work—each lamppost is part of a series. How might this work be different if there were fewer lamps or if they were arranged in a different way?

The lamps date from the early twentieth century, a time of prosperity and tremendous population growth for Los Angeles. To accommodate the influx of new people, the city expanded. Every new area chose its own streetlight design. Among the prettiest designs are the "rose poles" from Pasadena, named for their floral ornamentation. Lampposts from Anaheim, California, have a big letter A on the base. There are seventeen different styles of lights included in the sculpture.

- If you were to collect objects from L.A.'s history, what would you choose? Why? Where and how would you display your collection?

## Lots of Lights

Visitors to the museum describe their experience with *Urban Light* in different ways. The sculpture reminds some people of walking through Greek columns or a cathedral. Others say the lamps look like a platoon of soldiers ready to march. When the lamps are lit at night, Burden describes the artwork "as a building with a roof of light" or architecture without walls. View the enclosed CD to see a range of photographs of this artwork or visit flickr.com and search for "Urban Light."

- Can you identify a pattern in the way the lampposts are arranged? How would you arrange this collection of lampposts? How might that change the way people understood or related to this work?
- Light is a traditional element in art, often used to draw the viewer's attention to specific areas of a composition. How is light used in this work? What is this work illuminating or shedding light on?



Chris Burden (United States, b. 1946)

*Urban Light*, 2008

202 restored cast-iron streetlamps, dimensions variable

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, made possible by The Gordon Family  
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© Chris Burden, photo © 2010 Museum Associates/LACMA

# Art of the Ancient Americas Galleries

INSTALLATION DESIGN BY JORGE PARDO (CUBA, ACTIVE UNITED STATES, B. 1963)

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VISITORS TO THE ANCIENT AMERICAN GALLERIES AT LACMA are presented with an unusual and surprising display. Wooden cabinetry undulates around the perimeter of the galleries, encasing small groups of pre-Columbian artworks. The pedestal tops and display cases' interiors are painted lime green, sandy brown, citrus orange, and other tropical or neutral colors. Taffeta curtains in similar colors echo the rippling casework, visually lowering the room's high ceilings and softening the room's boundaries. Pendant lamps with drooping organic shapes hang in a line down the center of the space.

- View the images of the installation on the enclosed CD. How would you describe this space? What words or images come to mind?

## Pushing the Boundaries

Los Angeles-based artist Jorge Pardo was commissioned by LACMA to reinstall the pre-Columbian collection, which includes an array of objects from the major civilizations of ancient Mexico. Pardo is known for pushing the boundaries between art, architecture, and design. Together with his studio, he collaborated with the museum's director, curators, architects, and designers to create an intimate viewing experience that highlights LACMA's collection. The bold galleries debuted in September 2008.

Pardo has fused sculpture and cabinetry in his wavy wooden cases that seem to ripple with movement. The display cases are laser-cut organic forms built from thick, stacked sheets of medium-density fiberboard (an engineered wood product) with even spacing between the more than seventy layers. The ten pendant lamps that adorn the three galleries are made of perforated, laser-cut plastic and echo the colors of the fabric "skirt" overhead. Lamps, in a variety of forms, are a trademark of Pardo's work as a sculptor.

This unique gallery design envelops both artworks and visitors and sharply contrasts with the standardized, rectangular display cases usually

found in museums. A temporary installation, this project was conceived as an experiment to create interest and dialogue about Latin American art from ancient to modern times.

- How does the artist's choice of color and form affect the viewer's experience? How might this unusual presentation encourage visitors to see the artworks in new or different ways? How might the installation be perceived as distracting or disorienting?

## Artists & Museum Design

This installation reflects LACMA's recent tradition of inviting artists to collaborate with the museum on exhibition design. Santa Monica-based artist John Baldessari designed the installation for the 2006 exhibition *Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images*. He playfully turned the galleries—and the visitor experience—upside down. He covered the floor in a Magritte-style carpet printed with fluffy white clouds in a blue sky and papered the ceiling, where the sky should be, with images of freeway intersections.

Similarly, Los Angeles-based artist Robert Irwin was commissioned by the museum to transform the exterior of the campus. Irwin's site-specific *Palm Garden* is a total environmental work that travels across and unifies the west side of the LACMA campus. It is possible for viewers to walk right through, under, and around *Palm Garden* and not even notice it. This tradition of collaboration and artist-designed spaces continues with other museum projects, including Viennese artist Franz West's design of the Art of the Pacific galleries and more.

- Take a close look at your surroundings, both inside and outdoors. Select a space in your home, school, or neighborhood to reinstall. What materials would you use? What colors would you select and why? How will your artistic choices change the space and your and others' interaction with it?




*Art of the Ancient Americas Galleries*

Installation design by Jorge Pardo (Cuba, active United States, b. 1963)

The galleries for the ancient Americas were designed in collaboration with Jorge Pardo Sculpture and made possible with the generous support of the David Bohnett Foundation, Ramiro and Gabriela Garza, Eugenio Lopez Alonzo, and Ann Tenenbaum and Thomas H. Lee. Photo © 2010 Museum Associates/LACMA

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