

CANVASREBEL Meet Jody Zellen

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**Jody, appreciate you joining us today. We'd love to hear about a project that you've worked on that's meant a lot to you.**

**"The Unemployed"** is a data visualization that illustrates worldwide unemployment: it was on view at the Los Angeles International Airport from May – October 2019. Using data culled from online sources that list unemployment rates by country, "The Unemployed" represented the jobless as animated stick figures. The number of unemployed varies from country to country (as does the percentage of each population) ranging from a few thousand to many millions. In the installation, small figures wandered aimlessly in an empty space while the country represented changed randomly. The work was also presented on monitors where the figures moved within the confines of the shape of each country's borders. The clusters of figures metaphorically became an available labor force, as well as the visible presence of the jobless. "The Unemployed" was applauded as a thought-provoking and socially conscious art work that served as a visual exploration and commentary on the experiences and struggles of individuals facing unemployment and economic uncertainty.

The work is also a website and an iOS app. One of the most satisfying things about the project was that it has had multiple lives or forms and it can be continually updated. When Covid-19 hit, the work suddenly had a deeper resonance as unemployment rose dramatically. During Covid, the figures filled up all the available space and could hardly move within the borders of various countries. By shedding light on employment in a visually engaging and playful manner, the work prompted viewers to consider the broader implications of unemployment and the many ways Covid changed the world. Showing it at the airport also enabled travelers to take it with them on their phones to their disparate final destinations.





**Jody, before we move on to more of these sorts of questions, can you take some time to bring our readers up to speed on you and what you do?**

Throughout my career, I have gravitated to making artist's books, net art, app art and public art because I am interested in engaging with audiences outside of an art gallery. It is extremely satisfying to see others regard my bike rack (installed in 2014) on the corner of Ocean Park and 3rd Street in Santa Monica, or the glass facade at the West Valley Police Station in Reseda (2015) or my quirky line drawings on K-rails on Main Street in Santa Monica (2021), as well as my installation "The Unemployed" at the Los Angeles International Airport (2019). One of my intentions in making art has been to reach non-art audiences. In that respect, the goals I have set myself and the audiences and communities I hope to connect with are both part of the art world as well as non-art audiences—people out and about who happen upon my projects and hopefully stop to look and come away inspired and wanting to know more.

Viewer interaction and participation are integral to how I conceptualize my projects. I have created large-scale interactive works for public spaces and love to engage with emergent technologies. I consider how a user's experience on the screen can be translated into physical space and gravitate toward making installations where individual pieces can play off one another. Much of my work takes advantage of chance juxtaposition and the myriad ways meaning can be gleaned from random combinations.

Words and images culled from the news media have also long been a source for my projects. I am drawn to the poetic potential of headlines and captions juxtaposed with abstracted reductions or fragments of found images and have collected headlines and news photos for years, archiving them for use as raw material. I am captivated and often surprised by how events are depicted in the mass media. My app "News Wheel" and my daily Instagram posting "Photo News" (@photonews5) are recent examples of how I have used this content.



In 1997 I began to make art for the internet and have continued to create projects for the web since then. During the pandemic I focused on net art creating Avenue S, a new pathway on my ongoing site Ghost City. Avenue S is over 500 pages and each one filled with photographs I take walking around my neighborhood, as well as quirky animations featuring a silhouetted figure that ambles through an abstracted urban space. In addition to net art, I have also made app art (free iOS apps) beginning with Spine Sonnet in 2011. One of my goals in creating iOS apps was to make artworks designed specifically for the phone, something one could look at and interact with anytime, anywhere. My interests in technology has also led me to augmented reality and layered artworks that transformed into animations when accessed via QR codes.

I try to maintain a balance between the analogue and digital. On any given day, I might transform a drawing into an animation which then becomes the basis for an installation, which in turn becomes an app — an artwork that everyone can carry in their pocket. While my work takes context into consideration and engages with my conceptual and political concerns, I tend to create pieces that first foreground the visual and that are accessible and available to wide audiences. I aim to inspire thinking about the relationship between what is seen and what is imagined.

I am also an arts writer and write weekly reviews of local exhibitions. These live on an art exhibition listing site my partner Brian C. Moss and I created in 2013 called What's on Los Angeles.



**FREE ART: #3 of SIX**



Scan the QR code below to see the image come to life.

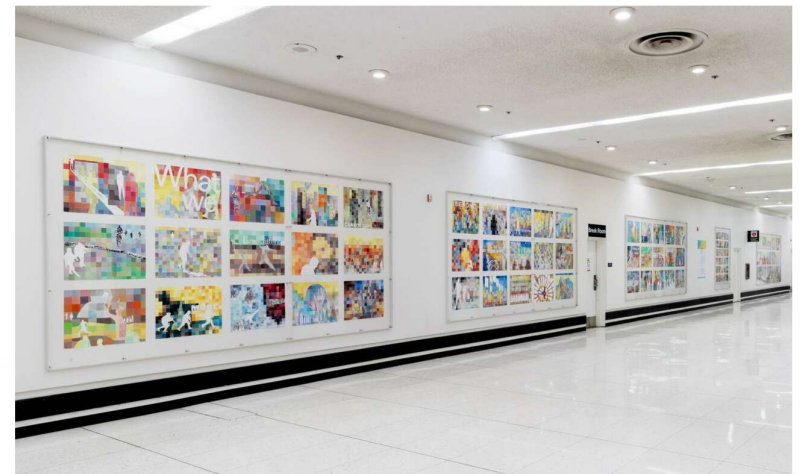


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**We'd love to hear your thoughts on NFTs. (Note: this is for education/entertainment purposes only, readers should not construe this as advice)**

At the beginning of the NFT craze, I was very excited about the concept of NFTs but was extremely let down when a drop of 250 unique artworks (short looping animations) I presented did not generate significant sales. I am proud of that body of work but now understand that to be successful in the NFT realm requires a vibrant and active social media presence and while I love making things, self promotion is not my strong suit.





### What's the most rewarding aspect of being a creative in your experience?

One of the most rewarding aspects of being an artist is the fact that I can share my works with others— be it as a public art project, a gallery exhibition, net art, app art or in an artist's book.

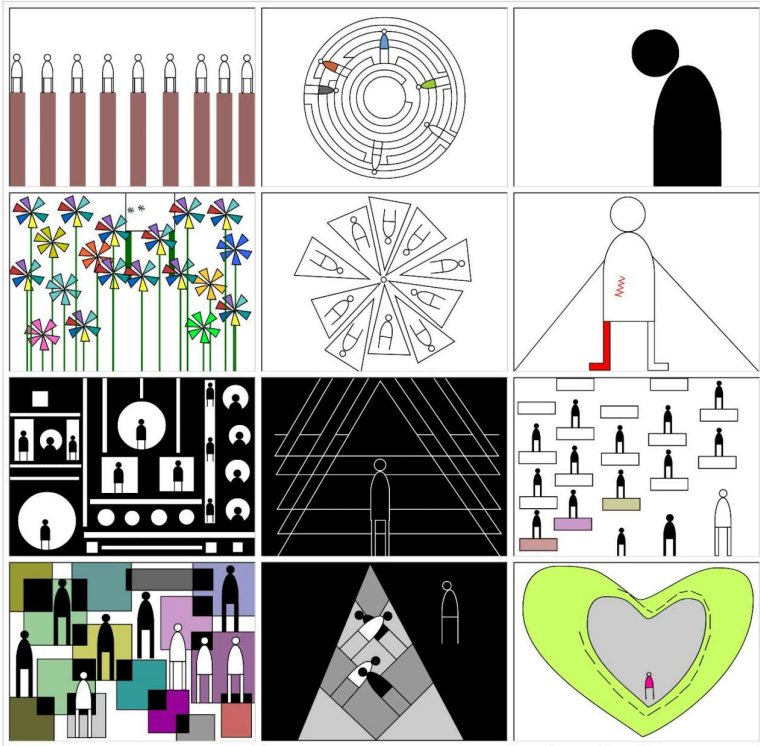
In high school when I first picked up a 35 mm camera, I created pictures in response to my environment, making abstracted cityscapes as well as photographs of entangled trees. Years later my interests segued to world events as depicted in the news media. I appropriated newspaper images and headlines to craft into collages that reflected upon how the daily bombardment of violent images desensitized us to their impact. My collages commented on the fragmentary nature of photography and their use by mass media. Today, the works I create derive from my surroundings, be it an urban or natural setting, as well as from the news media.

Over the years my practice has utilized both analog and digital platforms and many of my projects focus on ways to bring them together. While I have created drawings, paintings, photographs, animations, public art and artist's books, the exploration of where the digital and analog intersect comes into play in my interactive installations, net art and app art projects. As software has changed, I have learned new applications that allow what I create in the digital realm to become more layered and technologically sophisticated. Yet my work continues to retain an analog referent. I enjoy exploring the fluid zone between the hand made and the computer fabricated and relish how they impact and change each other. What is drawn by hand or observed through a lens provides a solid jumping off point for my digital outputs.



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