

A New Project Lets Viewers Explore All 51 Miles of the L.A. River in 51 Minutes



A still of the Los Angeles River from Kerry Tribe's *Exquisite Corpse*

Courtesy Kerry Tribe

Artist Kerry Tribe has a deeply ingrained sense of civic duty. When she noticed that the garden at her children's public elementary school was neglected, Tribe got her hands dirty and started planting. She tackled forestry issues in her Eagle Rock neighborhood by running for elected office. And when the city of Los Angeles approached her last summer to submit a project proposal for Current:LA Water, the city's first public art biennial, Tribe developed a large-scale piece that incorporates her passion for community and ecology.

For its inaugural run, Current:LA commissioned 13 artists to create 15 temporary public works of art that deal with issues surrounding water. The art will be on display in and around bodies of water throughout Los Angeles from July 16 through Aug. 14.

Focusing on the Los Angeles River as the subject of her artwork was a natural choice for Tribe, whose Glendale studio is close to its concrete banks. A former bike messenger, she has ridden on L.A.'s riverside paths for years.

Tribe's work exists at the intersection of fine art and documentary. The subjects of her pieces vary widely from one project to the next, as do the shapes the pieces take, but the common thread throughout her work is a dedication to deep and thorough research.

"Everything I do has some relationship to documentary generally," she explains. "There's usually something in the world that's of interest to me, and then a project develops. The structure of the work generally develops in tandem with the content."

For her Current:LA piece, Tribe began by studying her chosen subject. She and her assistants generated a detailed map of all 51 miles of the L.A. River. They printed the map in printer paper-sized sections, which were strung together like a snake and tacked onto a large, blank wall in her studio. Sticky notes litter the pages, marking each mile and indicating important landmarks.

The length of the river dictated the length of Tribe's piece, a linear 51-minute video tracing the river from its origins in Canoga Park to Long Beach, where it spills into the Pacific Ocean. "We're following the workflow of the river," she says. "The script for our film was really written by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers."



EXPAND^[1]

Production still from *Exquisite Corpse*

Rick LaRocca

Since they began work on the project, Tribe and her team — director of photography Sam Ketay, recordist Adrian Garcia and two studio assistants — have explored, researched, visited, examined and filmed at least some portion of every mile of the L.A. River. They have worked with a senior ecologist, interviewed members of the Urban Search and Rescue swiftwater team, befriended a homeless man who lives in the riverbed and spent a good deal of time in both a water treatment plant and a run-down trailer park. Tribe and her team filmed underwater and overwater (with the help of a drone). They also filmed a high school drill team, skateboarders and one particularly friendly duck.

Since moving to Los Angeles from the East Coast in 1999, Tribe has planted deep roots in her adopted hometown. Still, this project changed her perspective of the city she thought she knew: "I feel like I have a totally different relationship to L.A. now. I feel like my life is divided into before and after this project because exploring the river got me into so many places I otherwise never would've visited," she explains.

Tribe allowed the river itself to dictate her film's story. "Every time I went somewhere with a clear idea of what I wanted, I didn't get it. In every instance, what I did end up finding and capturing was so much better than my original plan."

The result of this flexible, exploratory research approach is "a very idiosyncratic portrait of a bunch of moments and places along the river." In her film, Tribe explores a myriad of important issues surrounding the L.A. River yet avoids turning the piece into a preachy documentary.

"The river presents us with a set of really complicated, major urban issues," she says. "My film isn't about what we need to do. It's about seeing what's there. It's like a chance operation."

Tribe named her Current:LA piece "Exquisite Corpse," a reference to a surrealist drawing game in which a disjointed portrait is created by three different artists. In its simplest version, a piece of paper is folded into thirds and each artist draws a third of a body without seeing the others' contributions. This concept mirrors the way many Angelenos experience the river: We might be familiar with one particular section near our home, workplace or favorite bike path, but other sections are out of sight and out of mind.

"For me, the river is like an exquisite corpse," Tribe explains. "It's hiding in plain sight. People will know one area really well — maybe they go up to Lake Balboa with their kids — but they

don't even know the river goes all the way down to Long Beach." With her video, viewers have an opportunity to take a virtual "drive" through the entire river in under an hour.



EXPAND^[2]

Production still from *Exquisite Corpse*

Kerry Tribe

"Exquisite Corpse" will screen every night after sundown for the duration of Current:LA. These nightly screenings, which begin at 8:30 p.m. in Sunnynook River Park, are the heart of Tribe's piece.

"I would say that the experience of the screening is the work," she explains. "In fact, about half my budget for the whole project is going to building out and running the space. It was important to me that we screen it every night of the Biennial. For me, if it's going to be public art, there has to be a kind of generous spirit and accessibility."

Sunnynook River Park occupies a sliver of land nestled between the L.A. River and I-5 ("a river of traffic") near Atwater Village. Tribe discovered it while riding her bike. It's a hidden spot. Even if you've taken your kids to the Griffith Park zipline or played soccer in the larger park on the west side of the highway, you may never have noticed the walking path, located behind the tennis courts, that accesses Sunnynook.

"We're sinking two telephone poles into the ground and hanging a 25-foot screen between them," Tribe explains. "There will be hay bales and beach chairs and, every night after sundown, little string lights will twinkle on and people will arrive and the film will screen once." During the part of the film that covers the section of river adjacent to Sunnynook, a shot of the landscape directly behind the screen appears onscreen.

Just across Riverside Boulevard from Tribe's open-air cinema is the Current:LA Hub, a central location where biennial visitors can find information about all 15 of the event's artworks, and where special programming will be held throughout the month.

Because Tribe's film screens in close proximity to the Hub, it makes for a great launching pad to the rest of the Biennial projects, many of which are located in places along the river that are highlighted in the film.

Viewings of "Exquisite Corpse" and all of the Current:LA artworks and events are free to the public — a reminder that, even in the middle of a drought at the tail end of recession, civic generosity is flowing.

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