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Transcript: Reshaping Museums with Michael Govan



Guest Michael Govan with host Charlotte Burns © Museum Associates/Lacma

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Charlotte Burns: Hello, and welcome to "In Other Words." I'm your host Charlotte Burns, and today I'm in Los Angeles for a special podcast with Michael Govan, the director and CEO of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Michael Govan: Hi Charlotte. Welcome to Los Angeles. It's great to have you here.

Charlotte Burns: It's a pleasure to be here. So, I wanted to start at the beginning, Michael. You wanted to be an artist when you started out, and I was preparing for this interview and thinking: "What kind of artist would Michael Govan have been?" What kind of art were you making?

Michael Govan: Art school was a very long time ago now. I did pursue art, and I had fantastic teachers. One of the great years of my life I spent at University of California San Diego, and there were amazing people there: Allan Kaprow; David Antin; Eleanor Antin; Steve Fagin; I remember Babette Mangolte. It was a very exciting time for me. I always say that the process of going to art school is useful in life even if you don't become an artist. And I actually teach at UCLA occasionally in the art department. I think that the whole process of critique, the way you have to put yourself out there in art, where your professors and your students look at what you do and give you commentary very directly. That in and of itself is a useful

process. You don't get that in many other fields as directly.

So, not only did I meet a lot of artists at that time, but I think just having the access to that process and that way of thinking has always made it easy for me—in fact my best friends are all still artists. So, I'm certainly not an artist today, but the work I was doing, you would put it in a conceptual genre. Not as good as John Baldessari! But I was using image and text and reproductions in paintings and having a blast doing it at that time.

Charlotte Burns: Allan Kaprow was a pivot point for you.

Michael Govan: Yes. Allan Kaprow had this idea—in fact he recruited me for the program—that I should continue, and I did continue, to work on both sides: being both an artist and working in museums because, as he had proposed, the museum itself could become a kind of artwork. Now in the administrative role I play, I don't play the role of an artist, but he had that idea that the lines were blurrier. And that was something that I took to heart. It was physically impossible to do the work on both sides. Being an artist requires being bored and having lots of time occasionally, and that's not my life now.

Charlotte Burns: Right, quite the opposite.

Michael Govan: So, you can't really do both, but the idea that Allan had that the work I was doing could somehow be back and forth—and obviously a lot of the work I did had something to do with media and the idea of how all kinds of media, including museums, change the way we think about art. And an artwork is subject to its frame, which is not just its physical frame but also its frame in the world: its context, who sees it, how it is seen. Museums are part of that.

Charlotte Burns: Do you still play with that idea in your role now, the idea of the museum as a work of art?

Michael Govan: No, I don't see the museum as a work of art, but I do see the role of a museum as being a little more activist, I think, than some others. We have been in the last decade very aggressive about commissioning artworks. That's risky business for museums to commission giant artworks and not know exactly how it's going to turn out—those are reputation risks, bringing artists right into the center of things. One of the first things I did was reach out to John Baldessari, who not only helped do the scenography for our “[Magritte and Contemporary Art](#)” show that Stephanie Barron was doing, but I asked him to design our logo and image, right?

So, bringing artists in and also taking a more activist role in thinking about how you shape the program to communicate to communities. We've probably been the largest programmer of Latin American and Mexico-related art in the nation, the biggest trading partner with Mexico—that makes sense for Los Angeles. But just pushing those ideas more aggressively, I think, comes from that idea that a museum is there to be reshaped. It's not static.

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Michael Govan: The idea of art is very old, tens of thousands of years. The idea of a museum is very young, a few hundred at best. And so it makes sense to keep reshaping it. That idea of being open to change and rethinking things does come a little bit from being on the fine art side than just the art history side—and I did spend a lot of time in art history.

Charlotte Burns: It is a very different thing to be a museum director in LA than in New York or in mainland Europe. LA has always had that reputation of not embracing the arts so strongly because of Hollywood being the more dominant industry. And I've always wondered to which extent that's true and to which extent that's an inferiority complex. This is the most creative place in America, surely.

Michael Govan: A lot of the discussion about Los Angeles—one, it's just a much younger metropolis than London or New York. This museum just turned 50 years old. The Metropolitan in New York will celebrate its 150th anniversary. And of course if you go to Europe and other places, it's older still.

So, a lot of the issue is the youth. There wasn't a huge art history here. The creative industries have dominated Los Angeles—the commercial creative industries, certainly movies, music. I think it's a really interesting time now though because all of it has globalized. Most films aren't shot in LA anymore. There are tax credits and other reasons. It's cheaper to do it elsewhere, but the business is still centered here, the music business is still largely here. But as those have globalized, and the artists have continued to move to LA because of the investment art schools have made, the number of artists who remained in LA after art school—and now you can say there's a really big community that's not just an LA community but people moving in from all over.

So, there's now a balance, and I think the soup is really exciting in terms of the creative industries. One of the things I love about LA is that there's no hierarchy. The idea of commercial arts or non-commercial arts—I always say that we have forks and spoons in this museum. We have a lot of objects that come from culture in different ways. These are a lot of false distinctions in this idea of high art, low art or popular arts, not popular arts. Time tells what is interesting and what human beings need in terms of ideas to leap from towards their own future. The non-hierarchical fresh and new quality of LA is really fantastic.

The thing that drew me to LA was the many cultures. There are so many languages. There are great and growing cities, and you can think about Beijing and Shanghai and how many museums have been started there, and Mexico City is a super vibrant community. But LA is the most multicultural. You have everything here.

Charlotte Burns: And what were your goals when you came here?

Michael Govan: Very simply, because Lacma was a young and underdeveloped museum, because it had already been decided in the year 2000 that it might be possible to tear the museum down and rethink it, that I thought that here we could build the only real 21st-century, multicultural institution in the visual arts that would be built from scratch in a way physically but also ideologically in terms of reframing and rethinking programs and curatorial practice and how people visit museums and what the shape of the museum would be.

Part of that is that if you have such huge success and longevity as a lot of the—in the United States—East Coast institutions do with their Greco-Roman temple facades, then that's hard to change. Whereas I always joke that Lacma was made out of cardboard, so it's rearrangeable. It's a very interesting time because you can't make one of these museums again that has everything in it, from ancient Assyrian sculpture, to pre-Columbian art, to Native American art, everything to the present. It's an interesting obligation and opportunity to rethink that repository of cultural ideas in a modern metropolis like Los Angeles.

The idea is that this historical museum becomes absolutely relevant to the present and future and to the many communities that live in Los Angeles but are a mirror of the global communities. Right? It's a local-global. I spent a huge amount of time on our initiatives in Korean art and spending time in Korea, because there's more than half a million Koreans who live a stone's throw from Lacma. We've made so many friends in our exchanges with Korea and exhibitions of contemporary traditional. Hyundai recently—a Korean company—sponsored our efforts in art and technology, so there's a local-global thing happening in a really exciting way.

Charlotte Burns: What exactly are they sponsoring?

Michael Govan: Hyundai is one of the lead sponsors—and there are others, including Google and SpaceX—of our revival of the art and technology idea that was part of Lacma's history in the late '60s and early '70s to bring artists, scientists, technologists and corporations together to see what might happen. Maybe it wasn't the greatest exhibition, but the catalog, *Art and Technology*, is still one of the most sought after books of our history because there are so many experiments, some of which failed.

Out of that, Robert Irwin and James Turrell met and worked with Ed Wortz, working for NASA on the psychology of space travel and inhabitability of space. Andy Warhol did his *Rain Machine*; Robert Rauschenberg did his bubbling cauldron of mud [*Mud Muse*]. Of course, those were all white guys. And now, we're reviving it in this new era of almost 50 years later, where the corporations and the scientists are very different. We're involved in digital worlds and communications and other things.

And so, we're giving grants to artists on an annual basis. [The grants] look very different: they're from all over the world; they're from every possible point of view. These grants are up to \$25,000, which you can apply for. And it's not just about the grants; it's about pairing with technologists, scientists, and people who might work with these artists.

It's interesting how much technology is influencing art history. You can think about simple examples, like James Turrell's light works with LEDs. Right now we have on view a work by Alejandro González Iñárritu, who is most well known as a filmmaker. Right now, and for the next year, there's an installation at Lacma called *CARNE y ARENA*. You've never seen anything like this.

Alejandro puts you in the desert, on the border between the US and Mexico, in an encounter between US officials and those crossing the border. That's the simple way to describe it. There are no actors. He worked with people who actually crossed borders, and border patrols, and then created a virtual reality environment where you experience for seven minutes—plus time on either side—what it is to be there. It also has surreal elements, and it's an artwork where the narrative depends on where you move yourself because you can see it from many points of view. The purpose of it is to take that technology, which makes you feel like you're right there. And it does create a sense of empathy that you really wouldn't have—

Charlotte Burns: Do you feel anxious?

Michael Govan: You can. Some people are down on the ground. Some people can't stand up. Some people are a little bit afraid. Some people engage it directly. Everybody's response is different. We're so excited to see how people respond to it over the course of the next year. It's a nascent technology. It's one person at a time. What's interesting is you lose your sense of VR technology and you are engaged in these issues of border crossing, of those invisible that become all of the sudden visible. It is extremely powerful, and obviously incredibly topical in Los Angeles and in our world right now.

Charlotte Burns: The [Lacma] *Art + Technology Lab* is something I've been fascinated about for a while because of the things that could be quietly achieved there.

Michael Govan: We didn't require that any artist at the Lab have a product that could be shown. That wasn't the point, to say: "Here's an artwork that will be in the museum." It could be something else. We wanted to leave open the possibility for failure, because that was part of the '60s project, and there are beautiful failures. We just wanted to leave the possibility of surprise. We don't even know yet where it's going, but there are a number of projects cooking that are pretty out of the box.

Charlotte Burns: That brings us to that idea using art to forge new partnerships.

Michael Govan: We did an exhibition recently called "[Gifts of the Sultan](#)", by Linda Komaroff, our curator. It was about gift-giving hundreds of years ago, how in the Islamic world, art was the currency of diplomacy.

Now, today that's not true. It used to be that art was the center of diplomacy as well. When we think about the issues of our many cultures and difference and understanding that cultural production—whether you want to call it art or not—is still the essence of our difference and similarities. So, the museum can play a role in the diplomacy of communities, if not of nations.

Charlotte Burns: That's a really interesting way to think about it, especially with your position as being an encyclopedic museum. You say that you couldn't do that nowadays simply because you wouldn't be able to buy all of those objects?

Michael Govan: You can't make a collection of 150,000 objects of all time and place right now. It's unaffordable, too. It's funny, Lacma was kind of the last of those. Most of them were formed in the 19th-century from collections that were formed earlier.

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Michael Govan: The two youngest museums like this in the United States are the Los Angeles County Museum and [Houston Museum of Fine Arts](#), which also started not too long ago. Our collections aren't what the big museums are, but in a sense, to have those collections gives you a background, gives you real artifacts that connect to people's identities with their culture in a very direct and visceral way. But it's the program that matters. It's how it's used. It's what context it's placed in. How is it brought to the present? How do people think about it in terms of their present-day lives and their own cultural identity? See, so much that you read and think about—I think communities and issues on the headlines today are about cultural identities, different ways of thinking. Right?

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Michael Govan: You take one perspective or another perspective. You could call them political, but aren't they really cultural? In that sense, the art museum, with all these artifacts of cultural identities and ideas and beliefs—then, the question is: "What is our belief system about all of that?" The museum itself is always a statement of a belief system of a worldview. It has to be because whenever you order objects in time and space, whether by geography or time or culture, you're making a statement about your worldview.

Charlotte Burns: And you're leaving things in and taking other things out.

Michael Govan: Or leaving things out is the main thing that you've seen change. What people don't understand is how much change we've seen in that worldview. It wasn't long ago there was no African art in the Metropolitan Museum or in Lacma. How could you be an encyclopedic or universal museum without that? That's a kind of crazy idea, right?

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Michael Govan: Those things are recent. Our world views are constantly shifting. You have to take it as an awesome responsibility in an art museum that you're crafting a worldview, and so you have to think about the deepest philosophies of your views towards culture. In thinking about the museum or thinking about a new building, I don't care about a new building to have a new building. I've worked on more than a dozen museum building projects.

What's interesting is—what does it mean to reorganize artifacts in a museum and a program, and how does a building change the way people view art? This new building, for me, is mostly about program. Most of the collections—90% of it—is on one level. Because I know in existing buildings, half as many people go to the second floor as the first floor, and half as many people again go to the third floor, and half as many people go to the fourth. So, whatever you put on the fourth floor—right now, we have Islamic art on the fourth floor—less people go.

Charlotte Burns: Right. They don't make it there.

Michael Govan: Modern art's on the first floor—more people go. It's pretty simple. One obvious thing is to flatten it all and to put it on one level, so that's the—

Charlotte Burns: And you have no front or back, as well.

Michael Govan: And, again, to not have a façade. A façade is a key element of the recognition of an art museum and the cartoon of what an art museum looks like. This art museum has no front and no back, as much not to have one culture in the front as not to have any culture in the back. So, the non-hierarchical, horizontal organization—for me—is essential to a worldview about culture. And its edges are all transparent. That’s a big sign, right. That if there’s glass all around the edges of the museum that you can look in, and you can look out.

Charlotte Govan: Right.

Michael Govan: Again, the model of a museum generally is stone walls. Even the windows are blocked. That in itself—no front; no back; the horizontality; the transparency—represents a different worldview about the artifacts and their arrangement than the standard 19th-century trope of what an art museum looks like.

Charlotte Burns: Can I ask you a question about the light just on a practical level? If you have glass all over the building, does that change what you can display?

Michael Govan: If you have glass on the outside of the building, it changes what you can show in the galleries on the outside of the building, not the galleries that are inside of that. The building is carefully designed so that there are galleries that have sidelight and the transparency to the outside. Then there are galleries that have absolute light control where it’s only electric or glimpses out a door. Then you have inner galleries where you have light control, but the potential for some natural light. So, you have really three types of galleries. One of the important things, though, is that if you go for a lowest common denominator—which is no windows and just a white box—then the big loser, for example, is sculpture that loves light.

It loves sidelight. Sidelight is one of the most beautiful things. We live with sidelight all the time in our domestic environments. Half of what’s in Lacma’s collection is not light sensitive. The key to a great museum is not to come up with the ideal gallery. There is no ideal gallery. The idea is to come up with a variety of galleries—

Charlotte Burns: That you can repurpose.

Michael Govan: —that provide different kinds of opportunities for our works and people.

Charlotte Burns: You’re going to open this in 2023 to coincide with the subway.

Michael Govan: The long-term plan always has been that the current main Lacma facilities that were built in the ‘60s and the ‘80s have such liabilities in them in terms of seismic retrofit and everything else, that it really is pretty much as expensive to repair them as to replace them. So, the strategy was to build additions first: [BCAM](#) and the [Resnick Pavilion](#).

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Michael Govan: So, we have 100,000 [square feet]—we doubled our square footage. And then the idea was that we would start tearing down half of the doubled museum and replace those ailing facilities with this one new building, so four buildings would be replaced by one designed by Peter Zumthor. The idea is to start construction in late 2019. Hopefully the museum of motion pictures, which is the [Academy Museum](#) of Motion Pictures on the other side of campus, will be open, then we close our buildings, and in 2023 we reopen the old half of Lacma as new Lacma at the time same that the subway stop here opens right on the corner. So, it’ll be a dramatic change: a new cinema museum; the [[Petersen Automotive Museum](#)] has been upgraded; there are upgrades and plans for the [Natural History Museum](#); the [Page Museum](#) at the [La Brea] Tar Pits; and Lacma will have completely transformed itself. And you’ll have a subway public transportation at the center of all of that.

Charlotte Burns: And this is an interesting thing for an Angeleno, albeit not native, to do—replace a car park with a belief in the public transport system.

Michael Govan: Yes. We will have parking. We are replacing our parking for now, but there are going to be dramatic changes. I’ve heard the statistic that LA is spending more on public transportation than any city, and it’s pretty extraordinary what’s happening. [Measure M](#) passed recently, which provides a small additional tax that really will create great transportation infrastructure in Los Angeles. So, you can see, in the next 20 years LA will go from maybe one of the worst cities in terms of traffic and transportation and could end up being one of the best, especially if autonomous vehicles and mass transit and all that work together as imagined.

Charlotte Burns: It’s quite crazy to think this area will look so different in less than a decade. There aren’t very many metropolises that you can say that about in the West.

Michael Govan: I think that’s one of the exciting things about LA and part of also what attracted me to even just these blocks, except for literally the building we’re sitting in. Over the 25 years—and this was a 25-year plan when I thought about how long it takes for things to change on that level—almost everything will have changed, almost everything physically on

Wilshire Boulevard. It's pretty exciting to see that dramatic change. And you're right: there aren't other cities that will look as different in 20 years as Los Angeles will.

Charlotte Burns: You came here with your vision, and you excited people here and people outside of LA. But in terms of actually buying into the vision, how far are you along in the fundraising?

Michael Govan: Well, everything needs funding, all ambitious plans. We have already raised a lot of money, as you know. We've built buildings, commissioned art works and acquired art works. We've acquired I think something like 40,000 artworks in the last—30,000 to 40,000—in the last decade. The new project is slated to be about \$650m, inclusive of construction and every other cost: soft-cost planning, demolition, and all the other things, financing. And we're about halfway there on that. I think previously we raised something like \$300m—there's \$300m raised and pledged to the new campaign, and we have about \$350m left to go to make the new building a reality.

Charlotte Burns: Is it harder or easier once you've got over the halfway point?

Michael Govan: You know, it's interesting. Los Angeles is a very different environment for philanthropy. I think it's done really well in education growing fast in philanthropy, healthcare. Culture has lagged. Everybody's pronounced a reason why culture has lagged in Los Angeles. Part of it is just that it takes time, and there have to be leaders. It's very different when J. Paul Getty leaves a huge fortune to a museum with his name, and it's all his, versus a public institution like Lacma or like Moca where it's a community effort, where everybody's contributing. I would say that LA's strengths are clearly its creativity. It is the place where you can remake yourself as an individual. There's no limit on that. Probably its weakness at the same time is its sense of community: that doing things together in a very transient, dispersed creative community is not the easiest thing. My job is to bring people together, to do something together. That's a little harder here.

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Michael Govan: But then there's all the other good things: the creativity, the no rules, doing things that you couldn't do otherwise. So, it's all in balance, it's a great thing. And I have no doubt that this community is continuing to grow in its sense of a commitment to better itself.

Charlotte Burns: Do you feel that it has to come from the local community, or do you get support from other places in America?

Michael Govan: Yes, that's a question. Mostly art museums, symphonies—most of the money comes locally. I mean, there are exceptions. But most of the big dollars come locally, either from government or from lottery, and I think that's true. So, we have corporations around the world, from Hyundai Corporation to foundations, Ford Foundation or others that are national foundations. But the big dollars almost always come from the locality. Maybe New York's been a little bit different on that, but certainly in other metropolises in the US, it's mostly been local.

Charlotte Burns: Can I ask you a question now about sharing? Because you talked a bit in an interview you did in the New York Times about sharing the collection. And obviously, if you're closing buildings, you're going to have to do something with your collection, and I wondered if those two things are related?

Michael Govan: Well, I have talked a little about sharing. I'm beginning to think more and more that these systems of collections held under one roof with one administration might not be the most efficient way to go. Recently our [acquisition of the Mapplethorpe Estate and Archive](#), jointly with the Getty—and that was a case where neither of us were strong enough to draw that gift because we didn't have the photographic conservation and scholarly resources specifically in photography, or cold storage; they didn't have the outlet of galleries and programming in 20th-century art. And the combination of Getty's amazing resources in photography technically, and our global and community reach and our programs of art from all eras, but modern and contemporary, was a perfect fit. So, that gift was made from New York to Los Angeles because there was no one else in the nation that had that together. But it took two of us.

Charlotte Burns: Together you were stronger.

Michael Govan: We'd been working with film independents to construct out film programs. We just signed a collaborative agreement with the [Autry Museum](#), which includes the contents of the Autry Museum of the West and the former Museum of the Southwest with a lot of Native American artworks. And we're going to treat our collections together as almost one collection in terms of scholarship and exhibition.

So, I'm thinking more and more that we need to make collections and cultural institutions more permeable. We're all in this together. I think that we all have strengths and weaknesses. There is a little bit of that "our museum" or "our organization" that is necessary to raise money. There is a sense of ownership that's required, but maybe that's smothered a little bit of the potential for permeability and sharing. So, it's a balance. I think we've tried to push toward collaboration. We are talking about our artworks right now. We're involved in a lot of experimental ideas in terms of branches, putting Lacma into

communities.

Charlotte Burns: Are you thinking about building in South Los Angeles?

Michael Govan: It was reported recently that we've had very good meetings with Rec and Parks Board and the City of Los Angeles about a building in South Los Angeles. Prior to that we've been involved in many programs in communities from North Hollywood, Compton—the Irvine Foundation has been a partner in that. We've had mobile film labs where veterans make movies. We actually have been running the space at Charles White Elementary School in MacArthur Park, just down the road, as a collaborative art gallery with contemporary artwork. The [first project](#) was Mark Bradford and Ruben Ochoa, and the kids and objects from our collections. But you couldn't get into that space because you had to go through the Principal's office. The LA County just gave us a grant, and in the fall we will be opening that space to the public for free on the weekends, to the big public in MacArthur Park. Kids can bring their parents. These are major exhibitions. These are museum quality exhibitions at an elementary school.

That's led to the thinking of those audiences that are all over Los Angeles. Because LA is a spread out city, it's just not true that people travel to every neighborhood, and that everyone can get to Lacma. The idea of a de-centered museum in a de-centered metropolis is emerging as a strong idea. You could literally run a space in South Los Angeles, and then run a space in San Fernando Valley. There would be no overlap in audiences between Wilshire Boulevard, San Fernando Valley and South Los Angeles. None. You think about it: "Oh, do you have to send your collection *abroad* to have it seen by different people?"

Charlotte Burns: It's so interesting.

Michael Govan: No, maybe you just have to send it over the hill or down the avenue far enough in this spread out place. Yes, we're talking with the community there about whether it would make sense to put a branch of Lacma in South Los Angeles where we could bring collections, but also internship programs, our huge education programs, our collaboration with schools.

That's a different way of sharing and thinking. There need to be more conversations between big organizations and small. I often find that the small institutions are light on their feet and more innovative than we are as big institutions. So, the more partnerships we can make with small institutions—we can share our infrastructure, they can share their ideas—more can be done.

Charlotte Burns: I used to work with Anthony d'Offay on forming [Artist Rooms](#). The idea at the time then was very unusual because in England there's no encouragement of philanthropy through the tax system like there is in the US. But the idea of Scotland and England sharing a collection between two museums, and how you do that—there were so many different possible solutions to that and possible problems. Now Artists Rooms rolls all the way through the UK.

This idea of sharing, I do think it can change the world. If you allow people access to great art that they can just go to locally, then it can change the way people think about their culture.

Michael Govan: Art is very connected to people's own sense of identity. One of the things we try to do with the art museum is embrace the power of difference. If you want to solve problems, look at possible futures, then you need different ways of looking at things.

Actually, to get different ways of looking at things, cultures have to grow up in a little bit of isolation. If everybody's altogether thinking the same way, then that's not going to be very diverse in terms of options for possible futures.

Charlotte Burns: If everybody looked the same, we'd get tired of looking at each other, like Daft Punk says.

Michael Govan: Yes, right. So, instead of thinking about everyone being the same and hunkering down with those who are like us, the museum is a proposal that there's a splendor and opportunity in difference. There are many ideas embedded in other ways of looking at the world and other cultures and different identities. Who says that it's great to be all the same? That seems to be a very boring world. It seems like we need to find ways to negotiate difference to create many possible futures for us to consider. Closing borders and keeping people out and stopping exchange are the absolute worst things we can do to secure our own future.

The best thing would be to engage all those possibilities and to be able to exchange. It's an old idea. It's not a new idea. We have the tools to do it in technology and travel. The museum is a place of that exchange.

Charlotte Burns: What did you learn about globalization under Tom Krens? You first met Tom when you were a student at Williams. Then you went on to be his deputy director when—I think—you were 25 at the Guggenheim in New York, which is quite an achievement. Tom, at that time, was changing museums in the sense of: "Build and they will come," or "Take it to the people," or "You can spread the Guggenheim through the world." Some of those were tremendous successes. Some of them were failed experiments. What did you learn?

Michael Govan: Well, yes, I don't know if it was an achievement. It was more of an accident that I was there at that time. I was still trying to go to art school. The great thing about that time and that thinking was that the world is a big world. There are literally even different systems of funding culture. In Europe, it's mostly government funding. In the US, it's mostly private funding. So, to build bridges and modules of exchange would be interesting and an increasingly globalized world, right?

Now, it's probably fair to say that the success of the Bilbao Project, for example, other than the extraordinary architecture by Frank Gehry, has been the local success: that Bilbao has embraced it. It has raised the stakes, the identity, the opportunities of that place because they had a chance to cut their contract with the Guggenheim, and they didn't because, upon reflection, it has been really a great program. Its success has been that local success.

Obviously, it's also very difficult to operate across borders of countries because of legalities and issues. Every multi-national corporation knows that, and museums don't really have the infrastructure for thinking that way. One of the things Tom presented was, again: museums will keep changing. There's no absolutely perfect frame. Art keeps changing. Museums are always running behind art and artists to keep up with. Other projects that I have been involved with like [Dia:Beacon](#) and others have been—well, we had to reshape the museum around the art. You can't just have the museum fixed and then assume everybody's going to build everything—

Charlotte Burns: Dia too is this idea of the pilgrimage. You get on the train at Grand Central, take that beautiful ride up the Hudson, and then get to Dia and have this calm, contemplative, life-changing experience at Dia.

Michael Govan: Which came from this idea that artists were the ones leading that idea that they would be responsible for the frame of the experience as well as the objects within it. Taking that extreme was Land art where you put it way outside of any reference to an urban environment and the museum, for sure. You construct an experience where you determine, select the site and build something in relation to that: emptiness; distance; light; space; all those things. You can bring some of that learning back to the museum by having artists involved at Dia:Beacon. People may not know that On Kawara put charcoal under the floor because that's the way you would build a Japanese temple. He designed the wall and its zigzag and the placement of the paintings.

All of that's part of that broad way of thinking. The Guggenheim has been very advanced in at least being open to any possibility of change that the future may be different, and I definitely learned that. Here in Los Angeles, you don't need to branch out to Bilbao just given this specific museum and this specific place if there's a whole other community that's within Los Angeles. There are many ways to take that idea. They're not all about globalization.

Charlotte Burns: Can you tell me also about [Watts Towers](#)?

Michael Govan: Several years ago, we got involved in the very complicated issue of the restoration of the Watts Towers, which are continually deteriorating. Even though their bones are strong, pieces were falling off. There have been many aspects of treatment, variously treating it as a building, or as a sculpture. For years now, we've been developing the technologies and the approach for a larger restoration that we hope to begin this year. It's in collaboration with the City of Los Angeles that manages the site. We've worked with the neighborhoods there. The Watts Towers is one of the greatest artworks, not just in Los Angeles, but anywhere in the United States. It was built by somebody who certainly didn't go to art school and has been witness to some of the most extraordinary events of history. Think about the Watts Rebellion. We just did a [show of Noah Purifoy](#) that included pieces of the "66 Signs of Neon" exhibition, which was made from the remnants of the Watts Rebellion or the Watts Riot, as you describe it.

All those histories are intertwined. We own a painting by Roberto Matta, a South American artist, painted in Paris when he saw on television what was going on in Watts and then painted his painting on the scale of *Guernica* about that event. It's called [Burn, Baby, Burn](#) (1965-66). It's a huge painting in our galleries right now.

There's so many national and local and international stories intertwined in this little short history of LA, and the Watts Towers is a fantastic object that has been both witness to history, is beautiful in and of itself, and needs a lot of TLC. So, we've been trying to do that for a long time and I think in the next couple of years you'll see amazing progress.

Charlotte Burns: Well, Michael, it's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you so much for joining us.

Michael Govan: You're welcome, Charlotte. It's nice to have you in Los Angeles. Look around, there's a lot to see.