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Oral history interview with David Velasco,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with David Velasco on June 30, 2020. The interview took place in Velasco's car in New York, New York, and was conducted by Jacob Proctor for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JACOB PROCTOR: Record. So, um this is Jacob Proctor um in Brooklyn, New York on June 30, 2020 interviewing David Velasco, who is in Manhattan, for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of the American Art Pandemic Project. So thank you for speaking with me, David. And I guess the first question is just how are you? I mean how have the last few months been for you?

[They laugh.]

DAVID VELASCO: Um, thanks, Jacob. That's a wild question. It seems like it should be so easy to answer, but I don't know how to answer. I'm—well, first of all, I'm, you know, I'm the editor-in-chief of *Artforum* magazine. Um I've been responsible for shepherding the magazine through the past few months, and that's been both um an incredible blessing and also, you know, an immense challenge. But right now, how am I doing? I'm, you know, I'm parked on the corner of Prince and Sullivan, in front of a fire hydrant. Um, I've been staying in SoHo in a friend's apartment through most of the pandemic, driving back and forth between my boyfriend, Ryan McNamara's apartment in Williamsburg, and here.

Um, and I'm actually totally exhausted because, you know, despite the fact—or, not despite, but it's been a relentless few months. Um, I think it's—but last night in particular, I was out very late at City Hall Park where groups have set up an occupation to put pressure on the city to defund the NYPD by at least \$1 billion. Um, and I went with some friends, Nan Goldin, and her friend Thora Siemsen, who—she's been photographing throughout the pandemic, and a couple other friends. And we went and were there until maybe 2:00 a.m. in the morning or so. And then kind of got a sense that maybe we were more useful elsewhere, or awake at least, the next day. So I drove them home to various parts of the city and got back home around 4:00 a.m. So I'm a little bit less —

[00:03:26]

JACOB PROCTOR: [Laughs.]

DAVID VELASCO: —you know. I feel, I feel very inarticulate at the moment, which is—it's, you know, it's not—I don't feel like I'm in my prime moment to be doing an interview. But at the same time, it's actually probably, you know, a unique moment to catch me—

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah.

DAVID VELASCO: — because I feel like I'm very in the thick of things.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah, and how did—I mean, I'm curious from your perspective, you know, both personally and professionally, how what the shift was like from this moment of kind of just dealing with COVID, which was its own major crisis, to now, as you said, like during this much larger, you know, a whole other social—sense of social crisis?

[00:04:17]

DAVID VELASCO: You know, it's—you know it's very strange, and I have a particular position within all of this, one that I am still trying to reflect on. I'm both a relatively protected cultural figure, you know, in New York. And so the experience of COVID and quarantine was, you know, it was, it was, it was—I don't think it, you know—well, whatever. You want my unique perspective. You don't want—this was not meant to be something that speaks to [laughs] the perspective of others. But I do worry sometimes that a lot of the stories captured are of people who are able to

weather COVID in a, you know—more easily.

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DAVID VELASCO: And so I'm—I don't want that, you know. I don't—I think it's important that there's always like other stories, too. But you know that. My experience of it was strange because I, you know, if I remember, the lockdown happened not so long after *The Armory Show*. I mean, a week or two after *The Armory Show* in New York. And I remember feeling like it was kind of insane that we were even doing an art fair in the middle of Manhattan when, um, it seemed so clear that there was going to be some kind of—that it seemed so clear that it was not a good idea to be having international groups mixing in close proximity without any sort of protocols or guidance.

[00:06:10]

But that was the case in New York in early March that we were—that there was a sense that, you know, there was problems elsewhere, but it would never happen here. So you know, very quickly that all shifted. And you know, I can't remember precise dates off the top of my head, you know, but I will say I actually have had this strange—professionally it was unusual because I was, you know, my first, my first instinct as a magazine editor is to think, well, there's actually no better time to be a magazine editor than in a time of shift and crisis because you want to actually be able to participate in these conversations in meaningful ways. And you have a really great, you know, platform and set of resources to deal with it, so I felt sort of useful for a moment, which is nice [laughs.]

JACOB PROCTOR: [Laughs.]

DAVID VELASCO: In the sense that I was—in the sense that I knew that, you know, we had to turn our attention to how the art world was changing, how art might change in the moment, how people were reflecting on these changes, and, you know, I got to be there, you know. So you know, my job, which is typically very social, um, there's lots of social obligations. Any given night of the week, before the pandemic, I would have had multiple obligations, you know—

[00:08:02]

JACOB PROCTOR: Right.

DAVID VELASCO: —to attend to. So I would have gone to several openings, several dinners, several, you know, drinks with writers. I mean, it just would have been an endless cascade of things that I felt like I had to do for my job. Um, and suddenly I was relieved of that. And that I actually experienced that at first as real release. And, and release from that sense that I was also—that I was missing something somewhere. You know, it's like one thing to stay at home and not go out, but then to feel like, oh, I should be in the mix here or there just to know what's happening and be doing my job properly. I should be in on these conversations. I no longer felt like that. And it was, it was actually joyous, which is I think strange. I think I was the only person whose mood improved, especially in the early days of the pandemic, just because I felt the lifting of this great pressure.

But at the same time, I also had a job to do, and so I did have something to focus my attention, which was I had to figure out very quickly what to do with the magazine to be a good index of the moment, and also to encourage thinking about it. The first thing I did was I started writing the people I know, and trust, and care about. You know, lots of writers and artists. That's my immediate instinct. And also my editors who I work with. And, you know, we just through general quick emails, you know, I—Paul who is a very great thinker based in Paris, wrote me to say that he had—he contracted COVID. And he was actually very sick. And he was the first person that I spoke with who had had it or if you knew they had it, who was definitely experiencing it as a real illness, so not just a, you know—I've had other friends who've had it who, you know, they didn't even know they had it, or it was very quick, and light. But Paul was seriously ill. And we kept in touch, and at a certain point when he got better, I just said, you know, I don't want to put undue pressure on, but I know that also that this could be an opportunity for you to reflect, and so if there's anything you'd like to say, let me know. And he ended up sending several texts over the course of the next couple of months, some longer, some shorter, one of which, *Learning From the Virus*, appears in the May/June issue. It's sort of a key essay in the package for that issue, and another one, another longer one, is actually in the July/August issue, which is set to go online tonight, and that's about revolution. Um, and so, you know, it was—that was, that was exciting to me to get to prompt and witness these people I really admire.

[00:11:32]

I remember sitting also early on before we really understood what we should be doing. But like right on the verge of the lockdown, I remember sitting in my friend, Alex Segade's apartment, and he was very anxious. And he also had a comic that he'd produced called *The Context*, which was about to be published by Primary Information. And he thought what is this, you know, what does this mean? Like, am I—is this, you know, are things still getting printed, even? You know, like he was very—he didn't really understand, like, as none of us did, what —how this would affect the things he'd been working on, and you know. He put several years into making this kind of queer, fabulous universe, that he was excited to have in the world. And, you know, he was probably—at 1:00 a.m. in the morning, we were watching bad TV, um, with some other friends, and I just asked him how quick can you make pages, you know. And he said, well, now I'm actually very good at it. I can make a comic page in, you know, a few days, or a week, or so, you know, depending. And I said—I was like, why don't you do four pages about the pandemic or, like, what you're going through from this moment. And, you know, he did. And they were also in that issue, and it's beautiful.

[00:13:06]

Um, so I felt like I had purpose. I said there's a lot of people who suddenly—whose lives have been disrupted. I can give them an occasion to do something, a reason to, uh, you know, think about this from another angle, or you know, to feel like they're doing some kind of work, and I use that opportunity. And you know, I think that that issue, the May/June issue, which is also—well, the May/June issue I think is, is one of the most beautiful issues I've had the pleasure of working on. It's really—it feels like something that feels like a chorus of, um, many voices I wanted to hear from coming together in the moment. It feels like what a magazine should be and that was incredible. You know, Jasper Johns sent us a fragment of something he was working on, which also felt kind of special. You know, we had—you know, whatever. I could talk endlessly about the individual texts, and projects, and things that emerged, and why I'm so happy about all of them. You know, but, you know, that would probably be a whole other hour.

[00:14:44]

But then, you know, but it took a lot out of us to do that issue. And also, you know, normally we would do a May issue, and then a summer issue, and take a break. This time because of the pandemic, because suddenly we're all working, you know, we were—that was all developed remotely. It was the first time that the *Artforum* staff, which is fairly huge, you know. It's like almost 20 editors and, you know, we were trying to put something together. We're used to putting something together in an office, seeing each other all the time in conversation, and suddenly we're doing it from our homes. And it was an enormous transition. Also, we dropped a lot of material. There was a lot of things that we had planned to publish that we didn't because it didn't seem relevant anymore. So we had to—and we had to commission all these new things. We had to really shift gears. Um, and so it took a huge toll. In this way, too, I think we're all really thoroughly exhausted after that, and then we had to suddenly imagine what, um, the next issue would be like, this—which is now the July/August issue. And you know, that—the closing week for that issue was the week of the curfew in New York. So you know, which of course, didn't impact us in terms of our workload, but it impacted us in terms of what I wanted to see in the issue.

[00:16:17]

You know, so I, um—near the end of—right after the May/June issue came out, you know—I'm trying to think of when this was. I had to take a road trip. Like many people, I think, I'd snapped. I had no idea, you know, what am I even doing here? You know, I'm just another body in this city, another potential vector for this—it's almost like thinking of yourself as a vector for disease. That's been a huge transition. Like, I have never been afraid of getting COVID because of what it would do to me, you know. I felt, you know, probably stupidly confident that I would experience it as, at worse, like a bad flu, you know. Maybe I would be hospitalized, maybe something terrible would happen, but that wasn't my fear, you know. And my fear was that I might spread it to other people. I might get it and unknowingly spread it to other people, which is a strange shift in thinking, I think, as just a subject in the world. [Inaudible.] And then I thought at the time [inaudible].

JACOB PROCTOR: David?

DAVID VELASCO: —the global epicenter of—yeah.

JACOB PROCTOR: You dropped out for a second.

DAVID VELASCO: Okay.

JACOB PROCTOR: I'm not sure—I lost you for about the last minute. It was very garbled.

[00:18:00]

DAVID VELASCO: It could be bad Internet.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah, okay.

DAVID VELASCO: Can you hear me now?

JACOB PROCTOR: Yes. Bad Internet is also, course, also a feature of life now.

DAVID VELASCO: Yes, totally. Well, I'm doing this off of [inaudible]. Where did I leave off?

JACOB PROCTOR: I lost you—you had just said that you were—that you had taken a road trip.

DAVID VELASCO: Got it. So I was saying that I—one of the strange things about living in the epicenter of a global pandemic is that I stopped being afraid for myself. I never was afraid, and I remain unafraid, of getting COVID for my own health. I'd become afraid of becoming a vector. You know, so being another body, and thinking of myself as another body within bodies, has, you know, I have this—I've developed like a certain kind of apt reception of my relationship to other bodies, and what that could mean. Um, and, you know, which has also been in some ways guided by my experience of the AIDS crisis, being a gay man who, you know, grew up in the, you know—in a very significant moment for—whatever. That fucked me up. A lot. But it also made me feel confident that I could digest and understand science and know when I was acting responsibly and when I wasn't.

[00:19:46]

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah.

DAVID VELASCO: At that moment, I had a—I just couldn't be in the city anymore and a friend invited me to their house down in Florida, actually. And I got in the car with my boyfriend and my dog, and we drove to Florida for, you know, about 10 days. And then we came back and as we came back news of George Floyd's murder had been, um, you know, was just starting to reach us.

It was the Tuesday or Wednesday of that week. And so as soon as I landed in New York, basically, there was a protest at Barclays, Barclays Center, on the Friday before the riots. And, you know, Ryan and I went to that protest that Friday. I don't know if it was the first one. I think there had actually been another one on Thursday night. I can't remember the whole order. But we went to that protest and it felt like there was something happening. It felt like, you know, people were fed up. It also was the first time many of us had seen people. I hadn't seen anyone, really, out in the world that I knew for months. And so suddenly, we were out and I was seeing friends, you know. From a distance, and masked, but I was seeing them.

And the next day, I remember there was a protest scheduled at Union Square. And I—it started I think at 7:00 p.m. or 8:00 p.m. I ended up driving to the city around 10:00 p.m. or 10:30 p.m. and Ryan and I parked, and walked up, and we tried to get close, and we realized that there was no way we were going to get to Union Square. There was like phalanxes of police everywhere, and moreover, there was like, you know, many, many, many, many cop cars on fire. And, you know, it was like, it was a legitimate riot. It was—and while I was there, we reached out. We started, you know, we were texting a lot of friends. I had other friends who were there. And, um, my friends Sarah Nicole Prickett and Nicole Eisenman drove in to meet us. And we just—we were there to sort of to witness. And again, it's a strange sense in the same way that like, I think, you know I have a newfound sense of my body as a potential vector. I also have a more keenly developed sense of my body as a potentially useful body if there is police violence. You know, I'm—you know, I'm a man. I'm relatively fit. I'm brown, but I, you know, I like can sometimes—I don't think I'm, you know, I'm like relatively light-skinned, I think. And that mean that, you know, I feel a little bit more obligation to—I don't know, to be at some of these protests, especially as they get—as they escalate, as the police escalate them, to be a potential barrier. And that's,

that's a new—that's just something that, you know, I think I've had a vague sense of [inaudible] before, but that's calcified in recent weeks. But so—

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah.

DAVID VELASCO: You know, that night was very strange because I felt on one hand like I was just an observer. I was like why am I here? I'm just a witness doing this. I don't really—I'm not here to actually break windows, or to actually fight the police, or set things on fire. But maybe I could be here in a meaningful way if I listen and I can tell where I'm useful.

[00:24:37]

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah.

DAVID VELASCO: And you know, I don't know that I ever, you know—I don't know if I was or wasn't useful. It was certainly—I'm glad I was there for it, um, because it was just an unusual experience, and it was unusual partly because you also got to see firsthand the way in which the police weren't there to protect anyone. You know, they were there in fact to make things worse. And it's, it's, it's you know, any—it was a sort of radicalizing experience, I have to say. But —

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah, well that's—

DAVID VELASCO: Can you hear me, by the way? Now it's raining.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah, but I was actually going to say, I think that's a perfect—I mean, given our time constraint, I think—

DAVID VELASCO: Oh, yeah.

JACOB PROCTOR: —that's actually a perfect—

DAVID VELASCO: Place to end.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah. I mean, it's really --

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]