



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Caitlin Murray,
2020 July 2

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Caitlin Murray on July 1, 2020. The interview took place at Murray's home in Marfa, Texas, and was conducted by Josh T. Franco 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

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay, this is Josh T. Franco interviewing Caitlin Murray at her home in Marfa, Texas, on July 1, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institute Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. All right, that's the scripted part. We're done.

Hi, Caitlin. Thank you so much. Um, we know each other a few ways. There are multiple reasons I thought you would be great for this project, to document this crazy year for the future and these dual pandemics. We'll start first with most institutionally. I'm interested in that. So, you're director of archives and programs at Judd Foundation, which is split between New York and Marfa, and you're in Marfa. So just from that position, I would love to hear a little bit about [laughs] what's happened because of these since March for Judd Foundation.

CAITLIN MURRAY: Right, so it's been an interesting re-evaluation time period for us. Um, the big retrospective of Judd's work was open for about 12 days, um, between the end of February and the beginning of March. And—

JOSH T. FRANCO: At MoMA?

CAITLIN MURRAY: At MoMA. And we—pretty—around that time, not long after the reopening, we knew that we needed to shut down our public programs in Marfa and New York, so we've voluntarily shut down, um, our public guided visit program, which is our primary—the primary program that we host to the foundation, which provides direct access to Judd's living and working spaces in Marfa and New York. Of course, at that time, you know, the pandemic was really hitting New York very hard, um, and that has subsequently now shifted to, um, the effect that the pandemic is having on Texas. Our neighboring county to Presidio County, where we're located, Brewster, is now, I think, well over 130 cases, which is, um, quite a lot for such a remote area with a small population.

So, I think um, the foundation's response has been, uh, you know, really rapid and really um, focused on the health and human safety of our staff and um, of the communities that we participate in, both in Marfa and New York. That's been our primary concern, um. We are still, um, close to the public and working remotely, even though in Texas, we now um, could be open to the public, but we have not joined in those, um, reopening initiatives and have no concrete plans for when we will reopen. All of that is really being determined by um, caseload and metrics and really looking at um, the experts, um, and thinking through what our local health officials say is safe for um, our staff and our neighbors.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, um, as a one-time artist guide at Spring Street, I've been thinking about them a lot, but also all the historic artists' homes I visited. You know, I was reflecting on how it was—there was not a second thought about being in a small group of eight to 10 tourists going through a small, private, personal space.

CAITLIN MURRAY: Right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I've done that certainly at Judd, but at Thomas Hart Benton's home, S. P. Dinsmoor's place in Kansas—all the places that Spaces Archives supports. That's a huge ecology of places, and I'm just, you know, wondering if you all are even at this stage of planning for what those visits might look like or if they're even possible?

CAITLIN MURRAY: Right. That's a great question. I mean, direct experience has been, historically, a cornerstone of what we do, um. We are looking at different models, how we can provide a safe viewing experience that is not so tied to a guided visit model, but maybe there are opportunities

to um, host visitors through more of what we call an "open house" style. That's the kind of language that, um, Judd had kind of generated for this time period, when people are able to visit the Chinati Foundation and Judd's private living and working spaces without having a guide, but being able to still bring a level of knowledge and information while practicing social distancing and, um, keeping the group sizes very small. So, we are thinking about that, um, and that's key on our minds, but really, I think we've been taking this time to think about what we do and think about what we want to do moving forward in terms of, um, online programs.

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We pretty quickly transitioned to, um, both hosting online programs, participating in online programs, providing the kind of research and research support for online programs, and we found them to be really successful. Um, that we've been able to expand our audiences, uh, and have deepened our commitment to engaging them in partner programs, um, and that's been really productive for us. Also, just, in that we do have our New York office and our Marfa office, being able to do programs that can engage both of those communities, as well as a kind of broader Judd audience, uh, I think has been a really nice opportunity. And I think we will be taking those things that we've learned from these experiences of having to do public programs, online public programs, rather, and taking that into the future, and that will become more of what we do in general.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. I think one thing—so, last night we both were—attended or "tuned in," or whatever you say now, to Eileen Myles doing their tour of art in their home with the [Shelley & Donald] Rubin Foundation setting it all up. It was great and Eileen said something, you know, about how the audiences have shifted, and like, it's not just about numbers and reach, but like, the nature changes. And I noticed that watching some of the Instagram live things that you've done and Rainer [Judd]'s done and Flavin [Judd]'s done. Watching the comments that people—and just the kind of, like, feedback that as somebody, as an art historian—you know, you just don't think of doing. And so, watching, like, the nature of audiences change has been interesting. Have you been feeling that or observing that?

CAITLIN MURRAY: Yeah. I definitely feel the same way. I mean, you know, in Marfa, we're a small community. We generally have the same 75 to 100 people participating in our programs, and that's even the case in SoHo. And I think that this has been a great experience to—it's been great to widen our audience and also—[coughs] excuse me.

It's provided us with opportunity to engage a diversity of different, um, people to converse with. In some ways, it's—there's challenges to doing online programming, but there's also, you know, people who are just in their home all throughout the world. You know, they're like, "Oh yeah, I can do this conversation." And so, instead of having to fly people to New York or to Marfa, um, you know, we can talk to people that we—otherwise, it would have been, you know, cost prohibitive and travel—very difficult in terms of travel, and that's been really great. And I look forward to um, as we continue with online programming, being able to partner with other organizations, um, and partner with voices and people from other institutions that we haven't been able to do because of distance.

And I think that's a great opportunity for us and kind of where we wanted to move to anyway in terms of widening the idea of who Donald Judd is and what his concerns are. I mean, as you know, Judd was an artist who cared deeply about ecology, cared deeply about local democracy, and I think being able to bring in voices on those issues, um, from other places around the world, as well as still being, um, you know, very focused on what's happening in our communities, will be really productive for us.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, that's great. Um, I know another thing you do is field the researcher inquiries, and you're the point of access for the massive archive of personal papers Judd left behind and that the foundation has created in the past years, um. Have those—you know, we are seeing things change here in our reading room, so I'm sure things are changing for you in terms of research and how you provide it, or don't, or yeah.

CAITLIN MURRAY: No, definitely. I mean, right now, the majority of our staff is working from home, and I am working from home, uh, most of the time, so we are not facilitating on-site research requests right now. But, because we've always been a remote repository, three hours from the airport, we have really tried to make sure our remote access, um, is something that we can provide really efficiently and readily and that we're very open to.

You know, obviously we know that there is no, um, surrogate for the direct experience to Judd's work or to the materials, but um, I think as this—you know, whether it's just because we're remote or because of the issues related to the pandemic, um, we will continue to invest time and resources into being able to provide, um, remote research opportunities. And you know, I think—I think that we still have been fielding requests, not as many as normal, but I think, you know, the public programming has been really helpful with that, of kind of providing access to resources. We've been putting more of Judd's writings online. We've had a number of publications that we've worked on in the past five years that were really focused on trying to provide material from the archive to a general audience, both scholarly and just people interested in Judd.

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And now with those projects complete, I'm hoping we can really turn our attention back to completing the process of the Donald Judd papers. That's really key for us. There's still, I think, a lot of material that we have yet to really, uh, organize and make accessible. So, that's kind of where our focus is heading now, um, is to really complete that necessary work, so that even more of the papers will be accessible for researchers, and then seeing how we can, um, engage robust digitization projects to provide online access as well.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, this time has weirdly been great for all those backburner, cleaning-up-records projects. Like those—we are getting those done [laughs]. They have been waiting, and it's kind of a good thing.

CAITLIN MURRAY: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Um, so I want to pivot a little bit and talk about Marfa, you know, a little bit beyond Judd, because that's huge. And you—I was thinking—with Kay Turner who I did the previous oral history with, um, we were talking about our heart homes, and she's in Austin, which is home with her partner, but her heart home is in Brooklyn where she's lived for years. And, uh, I remember, you know—I was compelled back in early April-March—my heart home became apparent, because all of a sudden, I really needed to re-up my Marfa public radio membership and buy the solidarity bonds [laughs], like that's where I was focusing that kind of thing.

CAITLIN MURRAY: Right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: But you—you know, you're such an important figure in Marfa and you, along with Tim Johnson, run Marfa Book Company, which is such an important like nexus. And Marfa's this place that, like, connects so many people, and not just in the American art world but the global art world. That I'm wondering if you're hearing from people, um, you know, who consider Marfa a special place, like so many of us do. Are they checking on you? Are they like, "I want to come escape to you?" What's—

CAITLIN MURRAY: Yeah, it's been a complicated question. You know, we have this—we—our economy is now, um, has a large tourism focus, which has its pros and also has its cons, I think especially as we've seen during the pandemic. I think what's, you know, interesting from the Judd and Judd Foundation perspective is that, you know, we—our records reflect a time before there was tourism here, um, when it was Donald Judd, you know, making the Chinati Foundation, and we're talking about hundreds of visitors, not, you know, tens of thousands. And, I think we've been really looking back to that time which really isn't even that long ago. We're talking about maybe 10, 15 years ago and what the economy looked like then, and in keeping with Judd's spirit, thinking about sustainable economic methods for our town, ways that people can have jobs, um, and have work that allows them to be safe, that is not only service focused, um, where people can make things here, and make things that then go out into the world instead of primarily just bringing people to this place.

It is special, but as, you know—as you know, we have an elderly population that really needs to be taken care of and protected. We don't have a hospital here, um. We have—exceedingly high levels of the population are uninsured, and so, we have a lot of real challenges that don't always get expressed in the news about Marfa, as you know, um, and I think—I've been particularly um, impressed with how Judd Foundation, in particular Rainer and Flavin Judd, Judd's daughter and son, have been thinking about our relationship to the community during this pandemic and knowing that we are one small part of a larger ecosystem and that we really need to take our role in bringing people to the town, um, very seriously and really letting people know that right

now, it's not a safe time to be traveling to Marfa, um, and that our ability to provide, I think, some public programming and connection to this place without having people physically be here, uh, has been one contribution, and frankly, just staying closed, um, I think has been a contribution that we can bring. Sometimes not doing something is as powerful as doing something, I think, especially when, you know, we know that staying closed is really crucial to, um, fighting the uptick in this pandemic.

[00:15:07]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

CAITLIN MURRAY: [inaudible] I will say, Marfa is also a strange place in terms of world events, because you—you know, you have these connections with all these great friends, um, and artists throughout the world, but you kind of—you're in a rural place. And there aren't the same kinds of activities when it comes to um, direct action and participation and civic activities. It's on a much, kind of, smaller, more like one-to-one community scale. And there's something very beautiful about that. There's something that can also make you feel, um—you know, you do feel remote from these really important actions, in terms of, you know, the Black Lives Matter movement in particular. And so, I think for all of us, we have to think about what we can be doing from this space, um, because we don't have the opportunities to be going to protests as a lot of our friends do. And so, I think—that's always been a little bit of a struggle, at least for me living here. It's kind of, um, knowing what's going on, but feeling distance from it and having to find a way to participate that still feels meaningful.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. I hadn't thought—it would take a lot of effort to get to a march [laughs].

CAITLIN MURRAY: Right, yeah. There was a Black Lives Matter march in Alpine, which is really wonderful, and I know that a lot of—there was a lot of participation in Presidio as well, so it is happening, um, and that's something to be exceedingly grateful for, um. But then also thinking about, you know, the specifics of our community here in Marfa and how the intersections of Black Lives Matter with other questions about economics and the lives of um, our friends and neighbors, uh, who are people of color in this community.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Um, so these go so quickly. This is crazy. I'm used to like two days of conversation [laughs]. So, in the last few minutes, what do you think's been missing from accounts of both pandemics, of both crises, around race and COVID?

CAITLIN MURRAY: Oh, gosh. What's been missing from both accounts? You know, this has—I think it's been really interesting. I will say, in Marfa, there is a level of anger that's come out, um, in our, kind of, social media communities, um. We have an online Marfa group, and I have noticed a lot more anger, and this anger is being, you know, directed at questions of gentrification, questions of local versus nonlocal, of tourists, and so on, and these are questions that have been omnipresent in our community. The level of anger, I think, has um risen, and I think it's been interesting to see the, kind of call for people to stop being angry.

Um, I think that anger, in this instance, is really important to be able to express and that it is a step towards moving to direct action, and so it's been kind of—I think for me, what's been missing a little bit in our community and what I hope can be fostered are—is the ability for people to voice their anger and their frustration, and, um, even if it isn't coming out exactly in, you know, a way that is "productive" or "useful." I think it—I think people feeling like they have a voice is really key, in both the—to the questions of Black Lives Matter and the questions of the pandemic um, and to being able to share their experience and be heard. Um, and I think it's important for everyone to be able to sit in discomfort in this and let people speak and be angry, um, if that's the emotion that's coming out.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, that's perfect.

CAITLIN MURRAY: Okay.

JOSH T. FRANCO: An important thing to end on. Thank you, Caitlin.

CAITLIN MURRAY: Thank you, Josh. It's been a pleasure. [00:19:39]

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