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Oral history interview with Sheila Hicks, 2020 July 21

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Sheila Hicks on July 21, 2020. The interview took place at Hicks's home in Paris, France, and was conducted by Ben Gillespie 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

BEN GILLESPIE: This is Ben Gillespie interviewing Sheila Hicks in her kitchen in Paris on July 21, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. What's it been like to experience and watch the pandemic from Paris?

SHEILA HICKS: What's it been like? Uh, it's horrifying because Paris, which is a vibrant, well-visited, entertaining, and exciting place to be has been, uh, evacuated. Not only the locals have remained indoors and behaved, but the borders are closed. The airports are—were—have been pretty much shut down. So we don't hear the foreign languages that we hear usually in the streets every day. In fact, you don't hear or see people in the streets during the course of March, April, May, until June. Now things are opening up, and people are wandering out, and people are sneaking across the border, coming in from different places with different kinds of pretexts of why they have to come to Paris.

Um, so I live right in the center. It's been—combined a feeling of abandonment and also relief to recuperate and have Paris back to yourself like it is sometimes when, um—when you're just in 4 o'clock in the morning and walking around your neighborhood with a few cat—stray cats and dogs. So you sort of have this double emotion, this emotion of, uh, loneliness and, uh, catastrophe and the other of *Paradise Lost* regained, of this wonderful place all to yourself. Now as far as art and artists go, I think most of them have benefited from this in a creative way. At least all of my friends, all the people I talk to have had very productive periods after they got over the initial emotional shock. Um, but now they're all starting to think in terms of the marketing, um, that surrounds the profession and the fear because all of the fairs are being canceled, all the art fairs; for instance, the Basel Art Fair, the Frieze.

You know, these are the things that enable the artists to show their work. They've been—we've been making things, you know, sort of ready to get them out and show them. And it's deadly to show them online, to tell you the truth. It's just—it's boring as can be to be looking at all these things running across the screen, you know, things that are—things that have material and that have texture, that have color, and the repetitive images and all of the knockoffs and all of the second and third and fourth generation [laughs.] It's going very quickly now. All of the—all of the usual imitations that surface within maybe a week or two or a month are happening within minutes, within hours, with the fantastic internet between here and Asia. I see my work coming and going day and night.

What's it like? It's—in the beginning, maybe it's flattering. And then it's kind of frightening. It's like running ahead of the herd of camels. And if you look back and if you trip, you're going to be stampeded by all the activity that's going to come right—and run right over you. So I wonder if I should just sit down and shut up and quit working for a while and just watch the—watch the film. I think some artists are thinking along that line. I had a conversation with one of my oldest friends who lives here in Paris on internet. She's only a few blocks away, but she sent me an email. "Help. I need 60 kilos of black wool. The Italians have lost the skirt of my sculpture, and I'm showing in Belgium in September. And I need to replace this mass of texture. Where and how can I find somebody who is open and able to supply me with material?" I sat down thinking, how can you be inventive in a case like this? You're not—you're very, very, uh, unlikely to find someone who's working right now in their factory, who's a filleter, who's a spinner, or a dyer. They're all sneaking out the door, if they can, to their country houses right now or to visit some cousin [laughs.]

[00:06:14]

So I said, why don't you take—I wrote. I didn't say. I wrote, why don't you take—I sort of thought, what would I do in her situation? I thought I'd take everything out of my closet, cut it up in strips, put it in the washing machine, and dye it black. Black is the subject of the day. Dye it and use that instead of going out and trying to shop and buy, purchase, acquire, fold in, fold inwards, and use your resources that are immediate. Open your own refrigerator, maybe your own freezer, and not worry about if you're going to be able to find fresh food at the supermarket or not. There was sort of an attitude that was brewing and, uh, developing in my neighborhood, or at least among the team of artists that I work with. I think she was offended by this email because she wrote back and said thanks with an exclamation point, like you're not much help when I need you [laughs.] But I wonder if that isn't the best help a lot of people can give to their community right now. Make it simple. Make it as simple as possible and help by not looking for complicated solutions to simple problems. That's my attitude. And that's the way things are going here in Paris. I don't know how things are going in the States, but it sounds rather violent. It sounds rather aggressive, and it sounds like gatherings are complicated in the sense that you get—there's no touch and hugging and feeling the way you do with a kind of camaraderie, when you want to join together, like at a funeral or a mourning ceremony or a manifestation where you kind of want to lock arms and walk together. There's a double complexity now, where don't touch, don't get near, don't breathe too closely to me. Stay away. Come, help, be with me, but stay over there.

Did you notice the way the heads of state greeted each other in Brussels yesterday at the European community meetings with a knock of the elbows, and then sitting across the tables, and instead of linking and helping, shouting and pounding the table and insulting one another and intimidating one another and saying, if we're all in this wagon together, don't grab the hay and run. We're supposed to be filling the wagon with hail—with hay. Hail, that's not bad either. We're supposed to be filling the wagon the common way, with hay, for everyone's benefit and not everybody thinking what they can grab and run with. I don't—do you—I don't know; do you feel—looking at it from the States, if I may ask, that the Europeans are pulling together or that they're going to manage to pull it together?

[00:10:11]

BEN GILLESPIE: I think looking from the States, it always feels like the Europeans will manage to pull together a little better than we might in some circumstances. Um, but there definitely is a sense of, um, how are we going to harness resources? How are we going to pull them? How are we going to pull them together? And, uh, I think it's—you know, it's really compelling what you described about that internal resourcefulness, about the, you know, this is a time when we're in our homes and this is a chance to reexamine what we have and how we can use it. And, um, you know, thinking about dying everything black, if that's what you need, going through their fridge, and um, I was wondering if—so, how—in addition to offering advice for your friends, how has it affected your work? This sort of—this different resourcefulness while you're in the studio in Paris?

SHEILA HICKS: I've, uh, spent more time alone in my studio telling people, don't come in. Don't take the public transport. Don't risk your life to, you know, come to work. Stay home. So that meant I regained my studio back quietly, and I could look in all the corners and all of the cupboards and move all the books. And I've gained so much pleasure in rediscovering things that I completely forgot I had. And I'm beginning to realize that at my age, my memory is sort of touch and go. Now I should—I suppose I should be worried about that, but I'm really enjoying it because it's a whole new life of discovery again, where I find things, and I think, I wonder where that comes from. And then I'm sleeping and I wake up in the morning; I remember where it came from, came from Afghanistan. Ah, when I was with a friend and we were on our way to Istanbul. And I was—this kind of how it's affecting me as an artist and with my work, it's a new lease on life. I'm sort of re-furrowing into channels and tunnels where my memory's completely blocked out a lot of things. And now I'm kind of recuperating and even dozens of books that I haven't read that I remember putting on bookshelves and then shoving other books in front, I'm finding them again. I'm finding them again, and this time around, I think I'm going to read them.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, that's—and it's certainly wonderful to have that newness and to have the time and the space to explore these things and to open books—a new one for the first time. Has that been affecting your schedule for shows, which I'm guessing has been delayed? Because I know you had a big 2020 slate of shows coming up. So how have those been affected or shifted or are there things you want to change now?

SHEILA HICKS: Uh, I don't mean to be snide, but I gained a lot of time. Nothing's been canceled.

It's been delayed, postponed. That means we can do a better catalog. It means we can find photographs that we didn't even want to bother to try and recuperate or to—or to document. That means we can really exploit and explore the archives, where before, we were slamming things together to meet deadlines. So, so far, so good. I'm trying to think if there's been any show canceled. No. There are people telling me they've got a lot of problems with budgets and with, um, logistics and coordination. And so they tend to ring me or come to my door because I have a reputation for being a problem solver, instead of a problem maker. And that must be because I'm foreign, American, and they think or they imagine I have some kind of special channel to, uh, facilitators to facilitate things. It's just that I come from a background where my grandfather had a general store in a little town.

And I think the farmers came in, and we'd ask him for things, and he wouldn't have what they're asking for. But he had an imagination of how they could get, or find, or make something, of something you might have in the back room that would serve the purpose. And I'm getting that here. I'm getting it here. In this crisis, a few will come to me and say, what happens now? We've lost the sponsor for this and this show. We've got to save it. It's going to be a good show. Who can we—[laughs] who can we attack? Who can give us the money for this show? Who can find some sympathetic reason to want to do this show and not feel like their second choice? You know that they're being approached because someone else bailed out. Now, it's okay to be second choice. Someone else bailed out. It's not humiliating. They lost it. Pick up the ball and run with it.

[00:16:12]

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, those sorts of opportunities to problem solve, I was wondering about the—because your career has been so international and your studio is so international. And how does that sense of community evolve to that, even if it's just you in the studio? How are those ideas coming together?

SHEILA HICKS: I don't think that people come to my studio because of me. They come because it's near the Metro Odéon in Paris. [Laughs.] And that it's a good place to squat and do any other thing that they want to do. Like you did when you were in Paris. You know, do their research, visit shows, get into the archives of all these fabulous, neglected corners of the Clooney, you know, of museums that have accumulated a lot of dust and also been misfiled; a lot of people find everything in Paris exciting because so many things are misfiled. It's because of the multiple languages, the multiple ways of thinking about languages and how it—where to file things. I think in the States, it's easier. Everything has a kind of system, and it's in English, and everyone adapts to English. Here, almost everybody speaks a second and probably third language. So their brain circuits are moving in parallel orbits, often simultaneously, which leads to a lot of misfiling, misinterpretation, misinformation, poetry, metaphors. You know, it's very, very funny. It's very, very funny.

BEN GILLESPIE: Absolutely, and how—the communication within your studio, how has that been? How has that changed during the pandemic and your idea of being social with these other creative people in Paris, by Odéon.

SHEILA HICKS: How has it changed, the last three months?

BEN GILLESPIE: Yes.

SHEILA HICKS: Well, I've told people to stay home, do your own work. And now they're coming in and they're bringing me and showing me what they're doing. You know, what they've been doing. It's, um—whereas before, they always said, I am neglecting my own work because I don't have time. This time, you have—now you have time. You have time for your own work. You know, get on with it. These are the big problems facing artists. Let's say, just out of [speaks French], let's say age 20 to 30. Let's get on with it. Distractions, babies, relationships, travels, all these things interfere with taking a deep dive into your own concerns or at least trying to define your own concerns. Now it's, um, been easier for people to sit and define their own concerns. I think—I know they say that a lot of psychologists and psychiatrists are getting a lot of business these days, but, um, a lot of people are taking the time to get—to get it together for themselves.

Are you?

BEN GILLESPIE: I'm not sure we're getting it together would look like for me, but [laughs] I do find myself taking more time, which is good. Um, I guess, sort of by way of closing, is there anything you're looking forward to specifically after the end of the pandemic, or is there, I guess,

on the other side, is there something you'll miss? Will you miss this this period of isolation and internal resourcefulness?

[00:20:24]

SHEILA HICKS: I don't think of the pandemic ending. Over here in my neighborhood, we don't think of it as ending. We think it's ongoing. We think it's part of our future. It's not a like now, one, two, three, and, you know, it's over. Not at all. All my grandchildren are trying to go into different universities, different schools, different things. I don't think it's like one, two, three and okay, now we can get back to normal. I don't think so. I think the whole thing's ongoing. It's a ship that's been pushed out to sea, but it doesn't have a port that it's heading to. It's just trying to float out to sea as best it can.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, and do you have any other closing thoughts?

SHEILA HICKS: You mean a little more gay?

[They laugh.]

Learn to swim.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, that's great. Thank you very much.

SHEILA HICKS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], ciao.

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