



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with La Tanya S. Autry,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with La Tanya S. Autry on July 31, 2020. The interview took place in Cleveland, Ohio 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: All right. This is Josh T. Franco, um, interviewing La Tanya Autry at their home of the ancestral lands of the Erie Haudenosaunee peoples, currently known as Cleveland, Ohio, um, on July 31, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. La Tanya, thank you, friend, for doing this and talking to me for the Archives. And like I said before, this is a chance to get a, sort of, check-in on a large swathe of the American art world, um. Among many things, you are the founder—co-founder with Phil Murawski [sic] [inaudible].

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: Mike Murawski

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, of #MuseumsAreNotNeutral. And so, I just want to know how you are. And as a follow-up, really wondering how that—the meaning and the uses of that hashtag have changed since March? But first, just, how have you been since March?

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: Yeah. Thank you. Thank you, Josh, so much for asking me to speak with you and for this project, which sounds really amazing. I'm honored to be a part of this, um, especially about this moment that we're in, which is extremely strange and troubling. And, you know, when—early March, when things started shutting down, like most people, I would say, I probably had no idea that this was going to go on and on for months for us, um. And so, I did think it was serious, but I didn't know how serious. And of course, I've never lived through a pandemic before or anything, um. It has been really hard, uh. One of my—a mentor of mine died in late March of COVID. Yeah, and that—you know, I was—I think that hit me, just, so hard. He's just, like, a really good person, Maurice Berger, um. You know, really important art historian and critic and writer—

JOSH T. FRANCO: I didn't realize you had worked with Maurice Berger.

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: Yeah, Maurice, like, reached out to me about my work, and so I have known him, actually, for years through social media. And I already knew his scholarship, but I didn't actually physically meet him in person. But, for years, he would send me notes. And he just, like, would encourage me, and I—you know, I would tell him about—a lot of the stuff I do, I get a lot of pushback. You know, we could talk more about the activist work I do in museums, and how hard it is. And he told me things like, you know, "But you've got people. There are people watching out for you and the work you are doing is so important." And he would tell me different things he wanted to see me write, and so, he is a really important person, and I just thought he was a good person, too, just from the, kind of, ways he would talk. And then I learned he was doing that with other people, as well.

So uh, yeah, it was really scary to hear he had died, because he had actually—I had just communicated with him a few days before on Facebook. And then—on, like, a Thursday, and then on Monday, Tuesday, I had learned that he had died. So that, you know, how quick this horrible disease is taking people, and some really good folks, um. So, yeah, after that, I really—I actually went through this weird moment of, um—not weird, but, for me, I, you know, I hadn't expected it, so that's why it felt weird um. You know, I was mourning and I just got really quiet for a while. And I realized that sometimes I was getting really anxious about things, and—about this time, um. I moved to Ohio for this fellowship. I don't have any people here, um. And so, being by myself, you know, I've met people through my job, but we're all, like, separated now. And also, let's just say I'm not really close friends with any of the people. I have no family in this whole state. So, it has felt very isolating to be here as someone who doesn't even have a driver's license and doesn't have a car, so I can't leave [laughs] because I'd have to take public transportation, so I've got no way to leave.

And I'm very worried about my health. I have asthma, um. And, you know, I worry, because I

know, um, people who already have some kind of, you know, weakness to their lungs or other, uh, things, like kidney trouble, or whatever, are more susceptible to that. And being a Black person, I don't trust these hospitals, I have to tell you the truth. I don't trust them. I don't believe they would try to save me. And I live in a city that supposedly has really great healthcare, in many ways. But who is it available to is another story. It's also a city that has got really high mortality rates for women, for Black women who are pregnant. When they go to deliver their children—and the kids, too. There's a very high infant mortality rate for Black children. So, and yet, it's a city that's got amazing healthcare, um. But it's not actually for everybody. There's that inequity, right?

And we see that with the COVID numbers as it's been going on. Native American folks, who are at the highest, um, rate of people dying from that, and then Latinx folks. So yeah, I know that this disease is killing everybody, but because of the existing, um, inequities that we all live with, it's killing some of us faster than others.

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And those same groups of people who are the ones who are the essential workers. And you know, who are out there still. In addition to, of course, the people—the healthcare folks are doing important work. There's these people who are working at the grocery store and the delivery people and, you know, the construction workers, all of those people, who are Brown and Black folks. And, yeah, so it's a scary time, because I also see people, some of them—yeah, anyway. I see people constantly erasing the racial dimension of how this disease is killing people, as well. And that's, you know—so it's just a really rough time.

So, in some ways, I feel good, and I keep trying to check in with myself so I'm not, like, letting that drive me crazy in my head. So, I do these check-ins and just try to be calm. And if I feel like I'm racing a little bit, I just try to sit down, and I do try to chill. I think about Tricia Hersey's the Nap Ministry. And I just lie on the couch and be like, "I'm going to lie on the couch ten minutes." Sometimes, I fall asleep, and I never do that. But I'm doing it now more as a way to take care of myself, and a way to push back against the violence, and just not let so much of the anxiety get to me.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I love The Nap Ministry. It's so helpful [laughs.]

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: Yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: With the logic that you're talking about in hospitals and the racial aspect to treatment, it's such a—I mean, it's scary how close of an analogy that is to why Museums Are Not Neutral exists. And um, I wonder if you can talk about Museums Are Not Neutral, general background, and then about what's happened since March? It seems, from my observation, really resurged in a whole way.

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: Yeah. You know, um, Museums Are Not Neutral is a campaign. Mike Murawski, um, is out in Portland, Oregon, and we started this as a campaign in, like, August 2017. But in reality, you know, it's a movement of highlighting the lie that so many people will say. Especially who work in museums, but in other areas, too. In terms of how it's even taught, I would say. My graduate training about museums didn't really talk about the inequities so much at these institutions, the exclusionary histories. And while you, like, learn it, but they don't actually, like, really put a spotlight on it and then train students to really question these places and demand that they be, um, more than what they are. And demand that they, like—so, you know, the origins of the institutions, um, museums come from, basically, a colonialist, kind of, paradigm.

It's about going to countries and stealing peoples' stuff. Putting it in a real simplistic way. But basically, yes, grabbing hold of other peoples' things and bringing it back and, um, putting it on display. And a lot of times, these places were only open to, um, affluent folks, or rich white people, and things like that. And then, over the years, it became, um, you know—I don't want to go into the whole history of museums. I know you know it, and probably a lot of other people know it, right [laughs]? But, yeah. So, anyway.

A lot of people think that, or will say, that museums are these neutral spaces. We can't do certain kind of programming, or it has to be this—you know, it has to be—so many people have to be a part of shaping that, because we have to always be neutral. We're always, some kind of way, clean and objective. And of course, it's a lie. I mean, so many of these places' collections, they have so many stolen objects from Native people. And those objects, some of those objects

are actually, like, spirits. Those are people. Like [laughs], you know, they literally have our heads on display at, like, that Penn Museum down in Philadelphia. I just learned that. I mean, it's not really a shocker. But it is, kind of, you know? It's like a place I had gone to multiple times for certain things and did not know that they had, um, enslaved and Native peoples' actual skulls, or something—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: —in their collection. This is, you know, whatever, 2020. This has been going on forever. So yeah, I got fed up, basically. I had, you know, heard over and over about different programming I was suggesting and being told that, "Well, La Tanya, we can't do that because that sounds political. The museum is neutral." And um—over and over. And I was working in a place where, like most of these museums, unless you're working at an ethnic-specific institution, they typically tend to be all white people in charge of, like, everything at the institution. The, uh, Black and Brown folks are, like, cleaning the building and guarding the art. I mean, that's almost all the time. So, I was in a case where I was the only Black person on the curatorial team in a low-level, like, a fellowship job, right? Um, and I would be in meetings, for years, and be the only Black person.

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The only person of color, for real, not just the only Black person. The only person of color in meetings for years. And then, being told by people at that same institution that the things I was promoting were political and that they are a neutral institution. So, after dealing with that for years, I was like, "No. No more." Um, yeah. So, I was, like—I just saw that Mike had been writing and tweeting. You know, we were both on social media, and we actually knew each other through social media. And we met, I think, like, one time in person before we launched this campaign. But he had wrote something and, like, on a thread that was really pretty good. And I was like, "Oh, god, that should be on a t-shirt." I just want to wear that across my heart. I really want to come hard with that statement, because, just, no more. I'm not putting up with those lies anymore. I'm not taking it.

And so, yeah, we launched it and we both thought, um, that it would go on for about a month. And what we didn't realize is that, you know, a lot of people had had it with this, kind of, claim of neutrality. And the violence that that claim does, who it's ignoring, right? And so, um, yeah. And then it just kind of took off and it became, really, something that globally, around the world, people have embraced. And what's awesome is that, you know, I put the hashtag in front of the Museums Are Not Neutral, and this discussion happens a lot, especially on Twitter and also Instagram. If people are just running with it—I mean, we don't actually shape it so much. And we don't really try to claim it, because—I mean, we did claim it, in the way that we started the campaign, but we don't claim that we thought of the idea that museums are not neutral [laughs.]

Because, of course, you know, um, activists, we know, at least 50 years ago or so—or yeah, I guess it was 50 years ago. Artists in the late '60s, early '70s, were really going hard at these museums and, you know, highlighting the racism in places like the Whitney and the MET—

JOSH T. FRANCO: The Lloyd?

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: Yeah, right, MOMA. Like, they were—and there was protests. And, um, some important things happened, but really not enough. It's really sad to see, because not enough has happened, actually, to change these places. And then, of course, before them, there were people who were highlighting the racism of these institutions. So, yeah. We don't claim that we—like, we thought of the concept, of course. Because it's just a fact, what it is. It's just that we put it on a t-shirt.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. It always makes me feel, like, immediately—and it still—it just makes you feel like you have backup, you know?

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: As a person of color in a museum. You're like, "Oh, I can—we can see each other, because of this hashtag"—

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: I love that. Yeah, that's what I feel. I feel like, you see your people. Like, I saw somebody at the airport once, in Houston or wherever, and I was like, "Oh my god, I got a

person. Thank you." You know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: And especially being in a museum, I felt very alone a lot of times. And, like I said, I often was the only person of color in the space. And I felt very alone, only Black person. And uh, it doesn't mean that other people aren't whatever, but often, people don't speak up. You know, they don't say anything. So, I don't know what's going on in their head. And they don't speak up against, um, the racism, and just, the lies that they're hearing in these institutions. So, this is just one of those ways that I can put this on and be like, "This is what I'm about."

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: And it is a way to communicate with people when you see them from afar. And yeah, like you said, at this moment—so that was like three years ago. Many moments we would sit and go, "I don't know; we should maybe let the campaign go now." You know? Like, is it over? We don't know. And there would be increased interest from people from all over about, "Hey, you got more of those shirts? Because I am doing this." And, "Libraries aren't neutral, too." And, "Archives aren't neutral."

JOSH T. FRANCO: Archives.

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: [Laughs.] Yeah. You know? And they would say, and I'm like, "Yeah, I guess you guys should come out with your own shirts." Like, go for it. Just put, "Archives Are Not Neutral." Go for it. So, the energy was still there. And then, of course, when COVID happened, really hit, and these museums start closing. And what we've seen, with so many of the staff, especially in the front—the front facing staff, right, who tend to be, typically, again, besides for, you know, cleaning the building and guarding the art, sometimes they have more diversity in terms of the people who are visitor engagement, visitor experience kind of folks, right? So, the front of house workers. Those people tend to be—you'll have some people—Black folks, Indigenous folks, Latinx folks. Probably not enough of any of these people, but that's where they tend to be, in the education department, and those people. So, their jobs, in so many museums, they just start hacking away at the education departments.

And yeah, so Museums Are Not Neutral kind of came back as people start—it was already always percolating, but at this moment it came very strong about, like, whose jobs are being cut? And how, like, what we—when we think about what a museum is, how is it that you don't think education is vital? Especially now that any kind of programming you're doing is mainly coming out through these digital platforms?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: And the people who are most, probably, adept at being able to do that work are those people in the education departments. And so, yeah. Museums Are Not Neutral kind of came back, and Mike and I decided to, um—what we do is, we donate the proceeds from the sales of these shirts. They don't go to us; they go to different community organizations. And, you know, we've changed them up over time. We've done um—Southern Poverty Law Center was one of them when we first started. Community Foundation of Flint; helping out for children, especially, who have experienced health issues because of the water, the poisoned water. But now, we are actually using the proceeds to support the Museum Workers' Speak. The relief fund—the museum workers' relief fund. Which is helping for people who have been laid off from their jobs, from museum jobs.

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JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. You know, our Secretary at Smithsonian, Lonnie Bunch, has very clearly stated that there's two pandemics, at least, happening. One is COVID. One is the—not new, but the real surge in anti-Black racism happening simultaneously. And I am curious, because they're both very savvy social media campaigns, have you seen an intersection between Museums Are Not Neutral and Black Lives Matter?

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: You know, that's interesting. Um, I have not, I would say. I would say I've seen, in a way, yes, but not as much as, probably, it could be.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: They definitely go together, because, like, we were just saying. Like, who's, especially, being hit hard? Who are those people who are out there, still delivering stuff? Who are those Amazon delivery workers and UPS workers, and stuff? Lots of Black folks. Um, and definitely Latinx folks out there, still doing that work. And, you know, I think that's an interesting thing. So, one of the things I want to do with Museums Are Not Neutral—And I'm dealing with so much stuff at the same time, so I always have these plans that they kind of get pushed back because I have so much work to do. I'm still not done with my dissertation.

[They laugh.]

Anyway.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Come over. I'll cook for you. You finish. For, like, a month.

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: I know. Yeah, it's ridiculous. I've got so many projects going on. But anyway, one of the things I want to do is start launching some talks with Museums Are Not Neutral people. I just put out, like, a roll call a few weeks ago, going, "Who are the Ohio Museums Are Not Neutral people?" And just to start doing some conversations, and really talking about this moment that we're in. And thinking about what we need, and doing that intersection of looking at, right, that violence that's going on, um, and a little bit more awareness or something. I don't know if it's—it's definitely not enough awareness about what's going on with the racism in this country, the anti-Blackness. But it's under a certain kind of lens and spotlight right now.

And I've actually been planning to do some kind of Twitter chats. I just haven't, had the moment—I sometimes wish somebody else was organizing and I could just show up, because I'm like, really can't keep organizing all these things. I have a lot going on. And I should not be organizing more things, because I need to be writing my chapter, which is on the same—or, my chapters. It's on the same kind of thing about anti-Blackness, about lynching imagery and everything.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Well, that'll be cool to see. But, yeah, focus. You know, whatever you need. You know you've got friends. But um, the other thing about this new era is, things are happening by Zoom now. [Inaudible] oral history's by Zoom, for instance. So, this technology's new. And one of the things is it lets us see people's, like, homes and private spaces. And just as the last question, in the last couple minutes, I really want to know both about that portrait of the woman behind you and the banner on the other side. Um, *Unbought and Unbossed*.

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: Oh. Yeah. So, this is Nina Simone. Love this.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, right.

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: It's by Makeba Rainey. And um, I learned about her, I think, on Instagram or something. And she makes these really cool digital, kind of, collage pieces. In general, I would say, it makes me think of Ramone Bearden's work. And in general, not, like, really close. But in general, I think there's some kind of connection there. I actually have several pieces by her, and I've bought them as gifts for people and stuff. So I love that. And Nina Simone, of course, is, you know, brilliant, important, Black musician, singer, activist. So, yeah. I feel good having her next to me.

And then, this piece, *Unbought and Unbossed*, behind me, is um, from this person—I actually don't remember her real name, like, her whole name. I know her Instagram name is rayoandhoney. And she does these really cool, kind of, Black liberation banners. And this is a quote from Shirley Chisholm. And yeah, I saw it and I was like, "I've got to have that." Yeah, like, first woman—first Black person to run for president, and just, you know, one of those freedom fighters.

So yes, I have a lot of art in my home, which actually feels good to be around, and a lot of Black women, freedom fighters. I love to, like, have them with me. It's like, the strength I get from ancestors. They're right here. And, it's also, like, contemporary artists, um, you know, contemporary Black women artists who are making amazing work, and I get to live with it and see it every day. So yeah, thank you for asking about that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's the dream, right? To live with that work?

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, well, thank you La Tanya. I'm going to stop recording. I'm not hanging

up, though. But thanks so much

LA TANYA S. AUTRY: Okay. Thank you, Josh.

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