



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Mary Ceruti, 2020
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Mary Ceruti on July 1, 2020. The interview took place in Minneapolis, Minnesota, 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 Mary Ceruti, executive director of the Walker Arts Center, at her office in Minneapolis on July 1, 2020 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Could you tell me a little bit about how these past few months have been at the Walker and Minneapolis, more generally?

MARY CERUTI: It's been quite a few four months. Um, I think that initially, uh, we closed the museum on March 13th as we were, sort of, watching what was happening around the country and that was really before, um, we had much of an outbreak here in Minnesota, yet. I think we've managed so far to keep it, um, somewhat tamped down in the pandemic, in that sense. I mean—I—we're at—I think now at 1,400 deaths and 30-some-thousand cases. So, for the state of—you know, a state our size, I think—it's—we haven't had the same kind of impact that we've seen in some other large cities around the country. Um, but, you know, the effects are the same when you shut down the museum and you move everyone to working from home. And I think that that shift was, um, surprisingly fast and, um, smooth from a technological and logistical standpoint, but I think psychologically we're only starting to understand the effects of it and the way, um, it's impacted how we think about what we're doing, um, how intentional we are about the way—who we are working with on what and all of those things.

So I think it's been stressful, but it's also been an opportunity—I mean, I was just—I've been thinking a lot—we did a quick shift on our website. And I'll be honest that our website—we were struggling with getting it where we wanted it to be, um, for a whole lot of reasons, um, from the time I arrived. And um, once we went to working from home and closing the museum and things like we've got to do more programming—we have to move more of our programming online and be more digitally engaged. And um, we put together a team, who are not necessarily the people that would normally be working on the website, to look at, sort of, what content we wanted to do, what kinds of programs. But also, we expanded it to not just think about the website, but to think about social media platforms and other ways we were engaging with people.

And so, we started working as, sort of, a team, focused on "How do we engage with people," rather than, "What's on our website." And I think that also positioned us—I mean, it's positioning us well moving forward, I think, in thinking about just finding different ways of working and getting out of our old modes. And I think when George Floyd was murdered, which um, you know, I think, obviously that's had an impact across the country and um, sparked uprisings around the country. For us, it was, you know, it was our neighborhoods and a lot of our staff live in Seward and in Powderhorn and in areas very near where George Floyd was murdered but also around Lake Street and where—and in North Minneapolis as well, but especially with our staff, more of them are in South Minneapolis, which it's been a traumatic period, you know, where people have concerns for their safety and certainly for their mental health and emotional well-being. And so—but I think having been in—you know, I think that the COVID situation both, you know, perhaps heightened all of our, um, vulnerabilities in many ways but it also, I think positioned us to make quick changes so, you know—so we were much more prepared to use our social media channels to make statements and to, um, convert our website, you know. In another, you know, week, we converted our website to foreground work from the collection and through our *Walker* reader, our magazine, to highlight the work of Black artists and to also amplify and call for support for some organizations—local organizations who are working in the community and led by Black, Indigenous, and people of color who were either, you know, working hard on the recovery-healing efforts or whose organizations had been seriously impacted and damaged, um, during the uprisings.

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BEN GILLESPIE: So, tell me a little bit about how your sense of community has shifted with—it sounds like going online has been a big turn—but also, being so rooted in the community and really leaning on and turning to those local organizations?

MARY CERUTI: Well, I think that the Walker has had, um, specific relationships with certain organizations and with different communities. It's not been consistent. Um, I'm not sure that people in Minneapolis think of the Walker as a particularly community-focused organization, um, so I appreciate that you see it that way and, um, I like that you see it that way. I think we feel like we have a lot of work to do. [Laughs.] And one of—I would say one of the best days over the last month was the weekend after George Floyd was murdered, um. We had been scheduled to start a project—to break ground on a project with an artist named Jordan Webber, who is based in Des Moines, um, who works around issues of social justice and engages communities. And um, he is particularly interested in um—well among other things, in environmental issues and environmental justice. And so, he had proposed to work—he had come—he had been in residence for the year prior and had, I think, around 80 meeting with different community organizations, mostly in North Minneapolis, um, which is a low-income neighborhood, primarily a Black neighborhood.

Um, and he worked with an organization called Youth Farm and designed a—they, um, have secured an empty lot in North Minneapolis and he designed a community garden. So—which includes some seating and some sculptural elements but it's also like going to be a working community garden to grow food. And um, it was supposed to launch that weekend and, uh, because of supply chain issues, we couldn't get—they couldn't get the supplies, the plant material and the earth and everything to the site, and there were protests going on everywhere at that point. Um, but we moved forward and, um, did a blessing of the site with an Indigenous, uh, artist-filmmaker-curator that the Walker has a relationship with. She and Jordan had gotten together and she and another artist, Austin, um, did a blessing of the site to sort of launch the project that day.

And so, a group of us went to this empty lot on the north side where, you know, not far away, there had been, you know, massive fires and um, riots. And you know, there no longer is a grocery store nearby because it got, um, damaged in the uprising. So, to start this project—and it was the most—it was about—I think there were maybe 30 of us there and it was teenagers from this group Youth Farm, who work with, um, youth on community farming, basically, and urban farming. So, some of their program staff and then, you know, Missy and Austin and the artist, and a few artists from the neighborhood. And then, people just started stopping by who were like walking by or driving by, like, "What's going on?" And it was just—you know, it was a moment of healing. It was a moment of people coming together to do something constructive in the midst of all of this. And it was just—it was—you know, it was one of those moments when you're—you remember why you're in this, right? [Laughs.] And why you love working with artists, who are sort of thinking about ways to kind of, you know, lay the groundwork for something else, um. It was—that was probably the best day I had in the last month.

BEN GILLESPIE: Tell me a little bit more about the future of that community garden and how that fits into the Walker as it continues in 2020?

MARY CERUTI: Well, we'll continue to build it and I think, you know, next year we'll really be, you know, hopefully when we'll be able to really—you know, it'll take some flight. So, it's a multi-year project and um, I think, you know, ideally, we'll be able to do more programming and, you know, gather people there in a different way or bring that back to the Walker in ways to have those conversations. Um, but, I think the intent is really that it lives on as a community resource as much as—you know, as a work of public art.

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BEN GILLESPIE: So, beyond the web work, have there been other items from the collection or texts that have been really present to you as poignant during these times?

MARY CERUTI: Um, yeah, I mean, I guess there's a lot; there's a lot in our website right now and um, I—it's hard for me to even pull up one or another. Uh, the—I would say we brought forward a piece by Dred Scott that he had written in 2016 that I think a lot about. I have to say like, not from our collection, but I did read Adam Pendleton's piece. I guess it was on—in *ARTnews* about two weeks ago about not feeling safe. I just thought it was a very, very moving statement from an artist who has been working in the art world and clarifying sort of—actually I shouldn't even say clarifying, just being sort of, honest about what that feels like from his perspective and

that's been—I've been thinking about it a lot.

BEN GILLESPIE: I mean—yeah, there's a great deal of food for thought all over the place. And I know that you are planning to re-open on July 16th as it stands now. Could you tell me a little bit about the planning process for that?

MARY CERUTI: Sure, uh. We—you know, we've been sort of, monitoring, and in April, uh, I realized—I knew that some of the museum directors of New York were talking to each other and about, you know, coordinating and thinking through how this would work, um, and it seemed quite obvious that I was benefitting from conversations nationally, but that also—that this would—really needed to be a conversation that we had on local or regional levels. So, we've been meeting—I've been meeting with directors of cultural organizations, both museums and performing arts organizations, from around Minnesota since—I don't know when we started, sometime in April, to think this through. And I think the—we've been in conversation with the Department of Public Health, you know, with the state public health officials, with independent public health experts, um, to get sort of independent views of like what really is realistic and what do we need to be paying attention to and what do we not need to worry about. Like, what does science tell us about what we need to be doing? We've also been looking at consumer surveys, and we did our own survey of our members and audiences to find out, when would they want to come back? What would make them comfortable? Um, you know, what did they want to see when they came back? And I think, um, for the Walker, I have to confess that it is—it's especially challenging because we are a museum, but we also have a significant performing arts program and moving image program in addition to our education programming. So, we actually have all of the challenges of all the different disciplines. So, we'll be doing a phase reopening, so on July 16th is our public re-opening date. We will—we'll open the galleries to the public, but we won't—we don't have plans for any moving image or performing art programming on site through the end of the calendar year. We're—we'll continue to do some of that online and then hope—and then we'll sort of see how it goes, whether—you know, when we'll be able to bring people back into a theatre space, which is hard to know right now, honestly.

BEN GILLESPIE: So, moving forward, what are some of the lessons from the—you know, the recent surges of anti-Black racism and COVID-19, and how are those informing your grander vision for the Walker as we step forward into the second half of this year?

MARY CERUTI: Yeah, I have to say at the risk of sounding like overly "Pollyanna-ish" or something, I do—as I said at the beginning, I think that the pause that COVID forced upon us—which I admit did not feel like a pause to me; I feel like I've worked more in the last four months than I did in the last 10 years. But uh, but I think in terms of pausing the actual production and execution of on-site programming, um, has given us an opportunity to think about things differently, and I think it will accelerate a lot of—I think that, plus um, the racial equity conversations going on will accelerate a lot of the change that I came here to make to begin with.

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You know, like when I got to the Walker in early 2019, I—one of the things that I had talked to the board about when I arrived and I said to the staff when I arrived is that, you know, the Walker had been through a—sort of a rough period of leadership transitions, but also, um, the situation with Scaffold and the dismantling of that sculpture and what that did to a relationship with the Indigenous community here. And I thought, "Well, you know, the Walker really does need to have a different relationship with the community, right?" And that's, um, that's why I was perhaps not as direct as I could have been when I answered your question earlier about how we think about that—those relationships. But um, I was being a little oblique when I said they haven't always been consistent or so positive. And I think that that, to me, that was actually one of the things that was interesting about coming to the Walker, was that because the institution had been through that, they actually understood the need to think about community differently. And that that was conversation I have with the board, like before I arrived. And I said, "This is why I"—you know, if I didn't feel like they were ready to have those conversations and move that in the right direction, I don't think the job would have been very interesting to me. So, I think to be here, this situation, um, between COVID and then, um, sort of post-George Floyd murder and this national conversation around race does allow us to sort of, really push forward on some things everybody knew that we needed to be addressing. It's like—they're—I don't think there's anybody in the museum field that didn't know that we have issues with race and inclusion and equity. And um, now it's just being, you know—it's just been forced to the top of the priority list in a way that it never was before. And so I'm welcoming that. I think it is all about how we decide

what's a priority and where we put our budget dollars. And this will now be the test for all of us, right? And—but I think it makes it clear to everyone in a way that maybe it was only clear to some people before.

BEN GILLESPIE: So, I'm wondering, as you start the phased re-opening, hopefully, what are you looking forward to most as things come back to some vague semblance of normalcy?

MARY CERUTI: I am really looking forward to seeing people, like, in the presence of artworks and having conversations about them live. Like I—that is just—like to be in the galleries with some other people at a nice distance. I—the other—you know, I mentioned that day that I spent with Jordan Webber on the north side, but um, you know, the other nice thing is that the Walker does have sculpture garden. So, the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden has been an incredible place, um, for moments of respite and being with art and with other people in a really—you know, because you're out doors, it's just a very comfortable, physically distanced setting that's—can still be sort of social. And that's been great. But I'm looking forward to doing that indoors with other kinds of work, um, hopefully very soon.

BEN GILLESPIE: I know you remember that wonderful Theaster Gates, what was that *Black Vessel for a Saint*, in the Minnesota Sculpture Garden?

MARY CERUTI: That is, yes.

BEN GILLESPIE: Yeah, well that is—that's tremendous. I guess sort of—to move towards wrapping it up, do you have one hope for the Walker, not just for 2020 going forward, because who knows what the next door will unlock, um? Just the—yeah, one hope moving forward from all this that has been crystalized or informed by these past four months that feel like 10 years-plus?

MARY CERUTI: I think it's that we will find a different way of working that, um, that makes the process as, uh, important and valued as the product, so that how we go about what we are doing and whose voices we're including in it and how we think about evaluating what we're doing includes a lot more people and it shifts the way we think about what success looks like.

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Um, I think that—I think there's an opportunity to really sort of turn a corner on that and be in a different place. Maybe not next year, but in three or five years, and that's exciting to me.

BEN GILLESPIE: Okay. Well, that's wonderful. Do you have any closing thoughts besides that?

MARY CERUTI: No, but just, let's just make this count, you know? It's been a really rough four months, and I think it's—it's not going to be easier, necessarily. Um, I—structural change is going to be really hard work and it's not going to be a lot of fun, but I think if we keep our eye on the ball, we can—we're going to end up in a better place and let's make it count.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, those words. Thank you very much for your time today and um, yeah, look forward to hearing more out of the Walker, as always.

MARY CERUTI: Thanks, Ben. I'll look forward to seeing these interviews too. I think it's—it's an important moment and I'm glad you are documenting it.

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