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Oral history interview with Jose Villalobos,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Jose Villalobos on August 19, 2020. The interview took place from Villalobos's home in San Antonio, 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: All right, this is Josh T. Franco interviewing Jose Villalobos at his home in San Antonio, Texas on August 19, 2020 for the Archives of American Art for the Smithsonian's Pandemic Project. So Jose, thanks for talking to me for 20 minutes for the Archives, um, and really, we want to create a record of 2020 and its impact on the American art. So, we just start with the question how have you been since March, and you can tell us a little bit about who you are and where you are.

JOSE VILLALOBOS: Yeah, you know, well I—originally not from San Antonio, so I was born and raised in the border town of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez but yeah, I mean, it—lately, I've been surviving just like any other person. I, myself—I'm a—it's been a little [inaudible] it's been crazy because I'm used to, you know—I do installation artwork along with performance artwork and the pandemic definitely has changed a lot of things since the beginning. Um, when it all started to unfold in March, I was actually just about to start my residence at the Joan Mitchell Center in New Orleans and everything started to unfold that, you know, and we're seeing numbers just, kind of, rise very quickly, and within my fourth day that I was just there, you know, it was suspended. We were sent home.

Um, once I got home, it, you know, it was a little different. It was almost, you know—you have this great opportunity taken away from you. And I felt, like, stuck almost and, like, this weird place in-between knowing that I couldn't go anywhere. I had just come from, you know, almost losing an opportunity. I know it's still there, right, in the future, but it was, like, a—everything currently, I think it's, like, in a limbo of some sort and—um, yeah, I couldn't produce work even though I knew that I had exhibitions coming up, but a lot of those exhibitions were either postponed or cancelled. So also, that, kind of, was a crazy impact in my practice I guess. And, um, the crazier thing about it is, you know, I've had conversations with gallerists and friends about the impact that it's had as a performance artist, right, and also how are you able to use that performance during a time like this because, you know, there's a part where you get used to being in front of people, in an audience in the same room and the type of performance that I do is very cathartic and, you know, there's almost this reaction to the work that is raw and that's live and how do you transpire that during these times of quarantine is different, right—because now it's—everything's almost been flattened, right—like, everything's not the way you're currently seeing and experiencing, um you know, as artists is just seeing everything through a screen, you know.

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It, kind of, started—some things are, kind of, opening up slowly, but also there's limitations to it. But yeah, I mean it was a weird thing. It was a weird experience. It's still happening [laughs] right, and all we can do is try our best to be safe, but at the same time, I, kind of, see where things are going and, you know, this is also a year of politics. So, we have to be hyper-aware of the—of what is happening around us and major movements as well, but it has just been this rollercoaster that it's almost, you know, one thing after another, and I don't know.

It's been a little bit, It's been a little bit of all sorts of feelings during this time. But yeah, you know, it—your practice, kind of, changes, right? How do you go from being—having the accessibility to a studio space and then to working from home, and, uh, also, just your work in general. Is it shown? How is it shown? How's it being shown? You know, I've come across where there's artists doing, like, a—an exhibition but it's all, like, a virtual gallery. It's not in physical space. It's just, like, online. So, it—the work is still existing, but in these weird spaces. Something, you know, un-traditional to what we're used to, but definitely, I mean, it's been

crazy. [Laughs.]

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JOSH T. FRANCO: What have you been observing particularly there in San Antonio among the arts community or among, like, activism you're seeing in the street?

JOSE VILLALOBOS: Um, I definitely think that, um, I mean, I've seen things and I've seen them through a different lens. Right now, you know, it's, kind of, just watching it online and how a lot of things are unraveling. It's been super tough also. The one thing that I did take part of was the Black Lives Matter, um, protests—was there in person just in support, right—but, you know, everything's, kind of, just—it's a little on the calm side at the moment, but, you know, it's—we're still in this spot of that, like, the pandemic —that it's almost—some people believe it's make believe—that it's not real.

I see people not taking care of themselves or—and when you do that, you know, you see, like, the—what comes after that, right? So, it's just, like, San Antonio right after a lot of the things happened. They—in Texas in general, right? It started lifting a lot of restrictions and then we—San Antonio ourselves—went through a spike, like crazy. I mean—but as far as other things, I've just been, kind of, really taking time now to reflect on myself and a lot of things and my work and what I'm doing, really. I mean, that's, kind of, where I've been.

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I tried to stay active online, but, you know, it's here and there that I do stuff, and it's just—I don't know. It's just weird—it's like we're in a different dimension at the moment, right—and it's—I'm, like—it's—I try to stay active in certain ways, and sometimes it's very difficult. Also, I'm in the process of just creating work, too. So, you know, kind of, removes me from a lot. I—at the beginning, I was following a lot of the news and what's currently happening and trying to stay active in that way, and then I—you get so tired of all of that, and I had to give myself a break from just watching the news and, you know, being active in that way, but I mean, things are slowly starting to happen here in San Antonio, but I think that there's still a lot of work to be done for a lot of things, and we need to see that, um, you know—we need to see that people are actually working towards the better side of a lot of things.

But I think this pandemic has really highlighted a lot of things. You know, when it's coming down to institutional, um, institutional matter also, like, what people will—I guess, the way they process certain things and what they think about a lot of things and—because now we're sitting at home and were seeing all of this stuff come at us, right, and we start to begin to see a lot of things because we actually have the time to catch onto a lot of things and to listen, right—and, I mean—definitely there's some things that have come up and you're—and it's—sometimes you don't notice them, and when you get that chance to really pay attention to it, you, kind of, sit and stew there for a bit, and you're, like, "Okay", like, what can I do, right? What can I do as a person to help? Any type of movement or, um, be able to change things around to where they're they're better, right—and for the people especially that—yeah.

[00:08:39]

JOSH T. FRANCO: I'm interested in having the—this being a time to—where you have time to reflect on your practice you mentioned —

JOSE VILLALOBOS: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —and I wonder have you come into any realizations about your work or the way you go about your work because you've had this time to think without having to paint?

JOSE VILLALOBOS: Yeah. Actually, yeah, I have. I've had the —it's all, like, you know, there's a sense of, okay, like—it almost pushed me to, right? So, it's, like, okay, if work—it just depends, like, if work can't physically exist in this space, like, how can I produce work and still have that same impact, right? So, that's one thing that's definitely, kind of, surfaced out of this is, okay, now we're living. Right now, we're looking at virtual world, and how can I produce work that can be experienced because also—experienced—you know, as an installation artist, it's very different because it's—the work actually exists in a space for people to experience it all around, and you can't do that virtually and easily, right?

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And that's one thing that did surface out of it. It's, like, just the process of creating the work and switching from maybe, you know, experimenting or processing work in, like, a two dimensional manner, and also, like, performance—okay, how do I construct the video performance piece that has, I guess, the quality that a live performance piece will have. And also, to sit and research more. That's been another, kind of, you know, blessing about this whole pandemic is how, you know, giving more—giving myself more time to actually read and write and process, um, thoughts and to really collect ideas and, kind of, be, you know—being able to—putting down on the piece of paper. Sometimes, it just, kind of, like, quick, quick, quick, and we don't have the time to process a lot of things. Yeah, your work is there. Your statement is there, but how can you—how do you go further into your own practice?

And for me, it's given me that time to also being able to research a lot about my family and also, what is happening—or what was happening around the time of a lot of things and just simply reading and writing itself is—having the time to be able to just write a thought down is—has been very important and has been something that has—that I've had the time to do, and it's just—because usually a lot of my performance work has, like, either spoken word or my work itself has text and—how do I use text and now, right—and it's being able to process a lot more information.

Also, at my own pace, right? Not trying to, uh, do this in a rush or in a hurry. I think being able to have time to sit with that and really think your ideas out and your process out has been something that I've, you know, I've had the ability to do at the moment, but also, it's slowed down a lot of things. So, yeah, I mean, it—everything's happening at its own pace, but it's just—and also, I don't know this—sometimes I don't know if this is an—like, if it's a good thing that I have so much time to sit on these thoughts, right? Because, like, mental, uh, mental health is so important, too, and sometimes, like, thinking on something too long can cause a negative reaction to a lot of things then—I don't know. It's just—I mean, it's, like, a blessing and a curse at the same time.

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JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, I'm interested in what—more about what you're researching. What about your family? What parts of history? And I wonder—thinking about how much more important online resources are. Have you—has the internet provided you any, like, new archives that are digitized? What do you got? What are you researching and how are you doing it?

JOSE VILLALOBOS: Yeah, so right now, I'm, you know—I was reading a book and it was research based on the machismo in Mexico, and this is all through the eyes of a white male, and, kind of, just seeing what is picked up and how, um, these certain mannerisms and certain observations are picked up through this person's gaze, right, versus, like, on my own experience. But also, I've been researching a lot, like, information about my father, the history of how he was raised, where he comes from because he was, he was actually American. He was born here in the States, but then as a child, he was taken over to Zacatecas. So, kind of, seeing also the history of that and also, just seeing his, like, his history of growing up being a musician is very interesting to me, and, you know, there's this weird tie of, like, performance that we, kind of, have in common.

And also, you know, I only got to—I don't know a lot about my father, right—because he passed away when I was 10 years old. So, I only know as much as my mom has told me, but going deeper into really, know, going through just a bunch of pictures has helped me a lot because you also discover a lot of things that maybe didn't notice, physical appearance and just a lot of things. And I have also—I have a bunch of VHSs, and I went to go—it was so hard to find a VHS player. So, it was, like, going to thrift stores for a while, and I finally found one. But I've been able to sit down and watch these videos, and they're, like, these home movies and also, like, recordings and documentation of my father performing at, like, the church —

[00:14:49]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

JOSE VILLALOBOS: Yeah, so, it's very interesting. So, I'm planning to use all of that in an exhibition that I have coming up at the Dallas Multicultural Center, and, um, it's all about the idea of the image of the father, right, because I feel that especially just growing up and having these constant reminders that, oh, this is how you're going to be just like your dad or so, like, you know—and when you separate yourself from that especially me coming out at the age of 22

I think. I can't remember, like 22, 23 years old. So, I came out later on in my life, and to, kind of, still go back and make those relations—relationships of who I am as his son but also how he was raised and what he would do, and finding out, you know, that performance aspect of what he did—because there's this video that was recorded during—it was, like, a church gathering. It was, like—so, he threw, like, a festival of some sort, and my dad would perform and he would perform, like, a comedic musician and wearing this big mustache, but also, just, like, seeing the decisions that were made were interesting.

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It's, like, he made it a point that he was portraying, like, very macho, like, rough man with a big old mustache and big sombrero. But it also, like, taught, you know—it's just seeing the different decisions that were made and how he performed is interesting to me, but there's definitely, like, a lot more things that I've, kind of, been looking into and I find fascinating. It's just also, like, the surroundings, right—like, when you see, like, a—we have discovered a couple of home videos and just discovering surroundings of, like, what the home looked like and what the aspect of the family looked like. And there's just been a lot of, like, personal research on my end. Um I do do some, you know—like I said, I've been reading some stuff here and there.

But also, I've been looking at the—this—the, like, I guess the numbers of, like, um, homophobic attacks in different areas and, like, Mexico and different cities. I just like to look into it because I, kind of—it's also an eye-opener to a lot of things, right, and it's just trying also to create a safe space as an artist for others, right? And I don't know. It's just gathering information as it comes, too, but you know, at my own pace. I'm not trying to, like, I have this project that I need to do and I'm, like redoing all the research that I need to in, like, such a short time. I'm just taking more time for myself to really, kind of, work on this specific exhibition that I have coming up.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So, you're sheltering in place with ghosts it sounds like.

JOSE VILLALOBOS: Yeah, pretty much, yeah.

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JOSH T. FRANCO: It's a great use of primary sources. Those are great primary sources to have. It sounds great.

JOSE VILLALOBOS: Yeah, yeah. And it's interesting, you know, and it's just, like, um, what I have access to and how I can use it, you know, is interesting, too. Just even the process of having a VHS, like, and having a player. You don't have that accessibility online, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

JOSE VILLALOBOS: —[inaudible] easily obtain and yeah, just even, like, photos—old photos and going through a lot of, you know—I call it crap, but it's not crap, but yeah. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. That's great. In the last couple minutes, so we expect, you know, this is a document for the future for the long term, but what do you want to tell people that maybe is not being so put out on the record about being an artist in 2020, in a hundred years?

JOSE VILLALOBOS: Yeah, I mean, I think that this is something—I think being an artist right now is important. I think it will always be important to be an artist, right—but I think that being able to be far more inclusive is important at these times, right—and I say that in the tone of which sometimes right now our only accessibility to a lot of things is online, and some people, some families and specifically people of color do not—some do not have the accessibility to even have the internet and, um, I think is really to just support in any way possible rather than obtaining, you know, something for your own personal gain.

Um, sometimes I feel that especially being a queer person of color, you become tokenized, right—and I think that we should definitely go beyond that and not do something that's to have this image of being diverse, right, because there's a lot more work that goes into it, but I mean, definitely think it's always going to be a battle. It has been a battle for the longest time, but I think if your heart is in the right place, you can definitely use your work as an artist to go against something that is bad, right, and as a sense of protest or as a sense of helping others just get through whatever they may be experiencing for sure. And it's just lending your voice to others is important.

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JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, thanks so much for doing this.

JOSE VILLALOBOS: Yeah, no problem. Thank you.

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