



Smithsonian  
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Oral history interview with Cory Arcangel,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Cory Arcangel on August 14, 2020. The interview took place at Arcangel's home in Stavanger, Norway, and was conducted by Jacob Proctor 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

JACOB PROCTOR: Okay. So this is—

CORY ARCANGEL: Okay, so continue.

JACOB PROCTOR: So this is Jacob Proctor interviewing Corey Arcangel, uh, from his home in Stavanger, Norway, uh, for the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art's Oral History Pandemic Project. And this is August 14, 2020. So, Cory, thank you so much for talking with us or with me for this project. Um, I guess the big question, I mean, you've been in—you've been outside the U.S. for the full length of the pandemic. And, I mean, I guess the big question is, how are you? And how has it been for you and your family and your studio and—

CORY ARCANGEL: Yeah, that is—

JACOB PROCTOR: It's a big question.

CORY ARCANGEL: Yeah [laughs]. That's a really big question. Yeah, I was in New York City up until two weeks before, um, the pandemic kind of was really on people's radar. I mean, it was in New York City in February; people had it, but it wasn't—it wasn't yet—uh, I guess people weren't—people weren't paying attention enough to realize what was happening.

JACOB PROCTOR: Uh-huh [affirmative].

CORY ARCANGEL: We came back in February, the end of February. And then, um, just two weeks later then Norway was kind of locked down. Anyway, uh, we're doing—I mean, good, my family is doing good. We're here in Stavanger, Norway, on the southwest coast of Norway. Norway was really super active in their response, it happened right away. And Norway has like a really specific culture and structure that means that when the prime minister like gives directions, like the entire country from top to bottom, like a Christmas tree, follows the directions. And also, Norway doesn't have a lot of people; there's a lot of space. And um, Norwegians aren't—so they don't like to get so close to each other anyway. So things, um, here—things have been—so it was like, um,—it's been pretty good here in Stavanger. Oslo's a different but in general, Norway handled it really well. You know, professionally, though, my studio is still in New York. So when I left New York five years ago, I left in a kind of hurry and I just left my studio running because it didn't make any sense to dismantle it. And over the last five years, me and my studio learned to work remotely.

And so, the studio is the thing that has been complicated because it's been closed—physically, been closed since March. And I think for me the priority has been actually mostly on the kind of health and well-being of the people, my staff. Like just trying to understand what they're going through and how to—how to just run the studio at the same time as dealing with all the kind of anxiety. So, yeah, anxiety and, you know, my staff kind of dispersed around the United States, um. And, um, so, yeah, this is like, um—this is like a very long and complicated answer. So it's—

JACOB PROCTOR: Well, it's a long—it's a complicated situation [laughs].

CORY ARCANGEL: Yeah. I would say at this point, it disrupted my studio more than it disrupted my personal life, um, because like after two months of like pretty hard quarantine, Norway basically went back to normal. You wouldn't really be able to know anything—so much was different. But then, again, at the same time I'm going to work during the week and I'm negotiating, uh, yeah, my studio life, which, um, which is complicated, though what I will say is, when I was in New York in January and February, my—the three young people who work for me,

they decided or we decided together that they no longer wanted to go to the studio anyway, anymore. So we already kind of like conceptually and were already in the process of kind of dismantling our physical space when corona hit. So we weren't really caught flat-footed in terms of infrastructure, we had already kind of moved everything to the Cloud.

[00:05:07]

JACOB PROCTOR: Oh, wow.

CORY ARCANGEL: And that's just because they didn't want to—I guess they're a different generation than me, or than us.

JACOB PROCTOR: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Yeah.

CORY ARCANGEL: And they just plugged it in. They are like, why should we go to the office anymore? Like why? Why are we spending 40 minutes on the subway one way and then 40 minutes home and parking and lunch? And yeah, it made a lot of sense to me. And now, of course, it makes a lot of sense to everyone, I'm sure, because I think a lot of people like working from home.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah. Although, I mean, depends on whether those people have children or not. [Laughs.]

CORY ARCANGEL: Yeah, yeah.

JACOB PROCTOR: [Laughs.] Or whether they're students.

CORY ARCANGEL: That, of course—I'm skipping the—yeah, the child part. That—I guess I'm making it sound more rosy than it was. I think without—yeah, it was a lot of months without childcare. And that was—that was intense, really intense, really hard. I mean, it's basically, and—I'm going all over the place, Jacob; is that okay. Like I'm really—

JACOB PROCTOR: It's fine. Yeah. CORY ARCANGEL: —swerving. I think like—anyway, I gave you a little kind of broad, rosy picture. But like now what I'm trying to remember—like the first few months, it was like when you're in hard—when it was like hard quarantine, it's just a little bit like just accomplishing one thing a week—like without childcare and with—when you're like full geared-up going to get groceries and everyone is like stressed out of their mind and you're not leaving your apartment, just accomplishing one thing a week was like a miracle. And by accomplishing something, I mean like maybe responding to some emails, you know, or um, sending off an image to a magazine. Like it was the kind of—the ability to—what would have been called to be productive was just totally different. And that—that was—and that was like for weeks and weeks and months and months, you know. And so me and my studio were kind of all working together, learning this new world of washing your hands, like it just—everything took so much time all of a sudden. Yeah. And cooking. Like so much cooking.

[They laugh.]

You know, and so that, I think—it was like—it was just very strange from one day to the other, like for everything to shut off. And—yeah, and for me, I mean I feel like I've been doing whatever process led to me being an artist and having a studio, it was 20 years of stable structures, stable—a relatively stable industry. And it—all that, you know, along with all the difficulties that I'm talking about of like productivity—all those structures that kind of vanished or evaporated or are in the process of evaporating. So just—I don't know, like, everything became amorphous. Does that make sense?

JACOB PROCTOR: Absolutely. I mean, I felt—I mean, I spent also, you know, the hard—the months of hard quarantine in Europe—I mean, I was in Berlin, so it was very different from New York. But yeah, I found the same, exactly the same. You know, when you're—

CORY ARCANGEL: Yeah.

JACOB PROCTOR: It felt a little bit like right after you have a baby and like time ceases to have any meaning for a while.

CORY ARCANGEL: Yes.

JACOB PROCTOR: Because every day just kind of blurs into the next and you don't get anything

done.

[They laugh.]

CORY ARCANGEL: It's a really good point. Yeah. Like, yeah, having a baby. And although for me, it was like my daughter was old enough. So we were sleeping, which was interesting. Like because when you first have a baby, you're not sleeping and—

JACOB PROCTOR: Right.

CORY ARCANGEL: And so it—but it was exactly like that, except like you might be sleeping a little bit more. Yeah, the days would just tumble around. And it felt like the rhythm was that of vacation, where you like, you eat and then you rest and then you start cooking and then you eat —

JACOB PROCTOR: [Laughs.]

CORY ARCANGEL: —and then you rest for an hour and then you start cooking and then you rest. You know? And, um, yeah. And then, you know, uh—and then, you know, we moved. Me and my wife and my daughter moved in the middle of that. And that was—that I think helped us a lot because we moved around the corner. It was hard quarantine and we—so what we did was we just—we took two boxes a day and we rolled them over on a trolley. So every day we took a little bit out of our old apartment and put it into our new apartment. And we did that for almost a month. And that somehow helped us like have some kind of task, like a goal and a task and something to do and somewhere to go that was easy. Because we just walked down the middle of the street and then took a right. And so, um, at the same time, we were doing that. But, um—but yeah, no, eventually my studio came back online. Like all—I have three people who work in various part-time roles. And like eventually by—see, so even the months are hard to keep track of, you know. Like it's going to be almost a whole—like it'll be soon like the winter again. Like a whole year will have evaporated basically, I think. That will be like how it will be perceived.

[00:10:46]

JACOB PROCTOR: Uh-huh [affirmative].

CORY ARCANGEL: And, um, so when did we start? Maybe it was May or June that we actually started—like kindergarten opened up again in Norway. And I was able to start coming to the office and then we like produced a couple—like we had a couple victories. And at that point, a victory was just like project—like do something new and meet a deadline with another organization out —like some other organization—you know, like. And we had a couple—like we did a mix tape for Issue Project Room, and we did an ad campaign for Louis Vuitton. And they just felt like just like enormous, huge victories. Like they felt really—it felt really good to be able —and like—so we were working a lot slower but maybe with more purpose and more focus than we had ever—like, than we had ever worked. And so that was that was kind of eye opening for, I think, me and my office. Because I think we had been doing—I think we had just been caught up for so long in like deadline, art fair, deadline, plane. Like we—that we found some new pace that seemed like healthier. I don't know. Like there was a really good thing that happened, that came out of it, where we found some kind of —like all the deadlines basically vanished. Like shows vanished. Like a lot of—

JACOB PROCTOR: Because all the institutions were shut down also.

CORY ARCANGEL: Yeah, exactly. So institutions were shut down. We were supposed to have a show in Shanghai in March, that got canceled in February, so that got—because the pandemic first hit China in late—yeah, like December, January, February. Yeah, we were supposed to have a show in that—like we had—our schedule was stacked for almost a year-and-a-half and everything evaporated during the year. And all that room—I don't know. Like there was a good—I'm trying to explain was like a good thing that came out of it. Because we had space finally. For me, the first space that I probably had, I mean, maybe in 10 years, you know.

JACOB PROCTOR: Uh-huh [affirmative].

CORY ARCANGEL: I took some time off after my show at the Whitney to have some—but I hadn't — So it was kind of good in a way.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah. The lack of—sort of the short circuiting of continuous partial awareness

to other people. [Laughs.]

CORY ARCANGEL: Yeah. Yeah.

JACOB PROCTOR: To cite one of your previous exhibition titles.

CORY ARCANGEL: Yeah. And I think like—I think also yeah, totally like—and the industry, like the industry that—the industry also changed so much over the last 10 years. And then when it's constantly changing, you don't realize how much it's changed. And since I was inside like the galleries all got so big and then they're all emailing you like a million requests a week. And everything just like sped up, sped up, sped up, sped up. And so in that respect, it's been really good for like—to have it shut off like that, I think that was definitely a—I mean, it's a plus for the work, it's not a plus for the industry. It's—I don't know what'll happen to a lot of parts of the industry.

There—there—with everything good that I'm saying, I should caveat it with saying that there is like this existential dread like behind everything. You know. Any—like money, like, uh, health, like—so it's just this weird thing. And like it's kind of negotiating—yeah, you're like, you're just—it's just trying to negotiate everything at the same time. Like, uh, what am I trying to say? Like, yeah. Like at the beginning, you're just—first, you're worried about your health and staying healthy. And then, like all these things that you didn't have to worry about all of a sudden are, like—these fundamental things are a worry. And so then in order to—like, to work on top of that is like super complicated. And that's why I'm saying like these victories that we had felt so significant because they're on top of all this just complete mess. Does that make sense?

[00:15:33]

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah. You're having—I mean, everyone—or not everyone, but a lot of people had to—when you have to essentially rethink all the most basic aspects of your life.

CORY ARCANGEL: Yeah [laughs].

JACOB PROCTOR: Things that you just do completely unconsciously and automatically as a normally high functioning adult, uh, when even those things you have to relearn, then it makes everything on top of them feel like that much more.

CORY ARCANGEL: Yeah.

JACOB PROCTOR: You know, it's like walking and chewing gum, if you have to relearn to walk also.

CORY ARCANGEL: Yeah, exactly. Like playing guitar and singing at the same time.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah.

CORY ARCANGEL: And yeah, especially because it's like I've been doing this like, professionally like for 20—or almost 20 years. And so, everything was so second nature to me, to have it all kind of break apart was really kind of—really eye-opening experience. You know, like, uh—and it's not only like breaking apart like my own day-to-day idea of like, what am I doing? But also, yeah, the industry's breaking apart, like galleries are vanishing, institutions are vanishing, um. Like, you know, people are all of a sudden becoming hyper aware of internet art, which is like—so there are also like good things that are happening.

And like—so all these things are just shifting, you know? I mean, overall, I feel like I regard—without—with, of course, this existential dread and this physical stuff. Like the art, like my ideas of art—and I've been feeling like pretty—more positive than I had before. I feel like all this uncertainty creates like opportunities somehow. And it feels a lot like it did when I started. Like, um, it just seems like everything is open all of a sudden and, like anything is possible because there are like—like anything is possible now in a way because the infrastructure is uncertain. Like the infrastructure of contemporary art is so uncertain right now, is that—which I think means for me it's easier to think that anything is possible, and you could just do anything right now. Because there are—there is no magnet; there is not much of a magnet to kind of suck on, to kind of—magnet being like—there's not like a river to just jump into and go with the flow anymore. Like—so that I've been feeling pretty good about. Like I feel like it's all opening and everything's open again [laughs].

JACOB PROCTOR: I think that's a perfect—that's actually a perfect way to wrap up. I think that's—

CORY ARCANGEL: Okay.

JACOB PROCTOR: It is—It's a very interesting moment. And I think, actually, that you're one of the only people that I've heard phrase it in an optimistic way, that way. And so I think that's super interesting.

CORY ARCANGEL: I mean, maybe it's because I'm in beautiful, tiny southwest Norway [laughs].

JACOB PROCTOR: Well, maybe it's because you have perspective [laughs].

CORY ARCANGEL: Well, yeah. I mean—actually that's—I mean we can wrap it up where you wanted to wrap it up. But that's something I learned being in Norway for five years. They have a—they're so far away from the—

[00:19:25]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]