



Smithsonian  
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Oral history interview with Kay Turner, 2020  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Kay Turner on June 25, 2020. The interview took place in at Turner's home in Austin, 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: Okay, we're recording. Um, all right. This is Josh T. Franco interviewing Kay Turner at her home in Austin, Texas, on June 25, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. That's the only scripted part, Kay, of course. So, thanks for doing this, Kay, and—

KAY TURNER: I'm very pleased to be a part of it, Josh, yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, let's start out with—you're in Austin now, which is your home, but you also have another home in New York and deep roots in both, so maybe's that's a good place to start. It's definitely affected where you are, I think, the pandemic.

KAY TURNER: Yes. So, I left New York on April 3rd. I have a home there in Brooklyn in Williamsburg. Um, I had been teaching my class at NYU in the spring semester, and when we went over to virtual, um, classes, I stayed another month almost, but I was beginning to feel like I wanted to be with my partner, Mary, in Austin, and I have to admit that it was just so sad for me [ph]. The way the city came to feel at the end of March and early April was just—it was the feeling of desperation and the way that the energies, the amazing energies of the city, had just been hollowed out by the pandemic, um, and the politics around the pandemic, um, were really difficult. So, I thought I should come down to Austin for a little while. Um, I was quarantined for 14 days here with my cat, Bella [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: In a room apart from Mary?

KAY TURNER: Yes, in a little studio space that we have out back. And then, I actually thought I would be coming back a little bit sooner, but I've been—I've been kind of waiting for the infection rate to settle a little bit, and in the meanwhile, here in Texas as we do this interview on June 25th, um, the infection rate here has skyrocketed over the [laughs] past few days. So, you know, I mean, without having really good leadership on this across the board, across the country, we're all suffering a lot of uncertainty.

We're suffering a tremendous number of deaths, as everyone knows. We're up to 122,000 today, um. And it was with that, uh, issue, um, arising and becoming ever more evident in mid-April that I had my class at NYU build altars. We made virtual altars and, you know, at-home altars for the pandemic, um, and then I connected with a group of artist friends in New York, um, who were interested in—we were all interested in making memorials, um, that would emphasize the way that the administration and the president had not taken any consideration of, well, what I consider to be the presidential duty to mourn the losses of the citizenry. You know, I mean, it's a very basic act of, you know, of conscience that, you know, any president of our country should, you know, see as a solemn duty. And, you know, they'll—[laughs] I was just—you know, that was the place—we were all—you know, our anger was mounting, I think, in lots of different ways. You know, different people expressed it in different ways. For me, that was becoming just a source that I could not live with.

So, my students and I built altars. You know, you're familiar with this. But you know, one of my long-term interests, what I've written about over many years, over, you know—getting closer to 40 years now, um, is about altars, the power of vernacular altars and memorials. Um, I did my dissertation work on that on Mexican-American and women's home altars in South Texas and then a book, and I've been—you know, it's just been a very big source of my, um, work as an artist and as a scholar. So, it was a natural fit for me to want to go—want to use what I knew and what I had done, uh, previously to bring it, you know, into this current crisis. So working with a, um, number of artists from New York, old friends—Jenny Romaine, who has um, the wonderful

Great Small Works project, people in JFREJ, which is Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, an old, you know, uh, organizing group in New York, um, a new group called the Caring Majority which works on nursing home issues. We all came together and made memorials, um, one in each borough on May 19th and 20th.

[00:05:36]

And these were memorials that led to, um, a vigil that was done on May 21st and 22nd, by a loosely organized group that we all become a part of across the country called Naming the Lost. And that was a group that organized the reading of 10,000 names of the dead, uh, in a 24-hour period. So, our memorials were a lead up to that, um, that vigil and then, um, our group—that group has since somewhat dispersed because George Floyd was murdered, and new concerns arose for a number of people in Naming the Lost. Um, our group has continued, and we will be doing a series of action memorial days in the coming months around nursing home issues, uh, also inviting individuals to make memorials, um, for their own dead, or for friends who have died or—around causes that are of concern to them. So, these are going to be on the second Tuesday of the month, um, going forward, at least until September, maybe up until the time of the election. We'll see how the energy, you know—how the energy sort of stays or evaporates, you know, hard to know.

I mean, it's just been really wonderful. As—you know, it's been my way of staying connected to New York, uh, which I do consider my home. This is my second home in Austin, but my heart home and my life is kind of in New York, and it's, of course, difficult to be away from the place that you call home and that you love as much as I do love New York. So, um, anyway, this has been very much a good way to do that.

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

KAY TURNER: And yeah, I guess I kind of just blabbed away here, but, um—

JOSH T. FRANCO: No, that's great. I know the feeling of the heart home. It's like, during all of this, I've been sending even more money to Marfa, to the public radio station and the Solidarity Bonds [laughs]. It's just—you really—

KAY TURNER: Yeah, yeah, they did that great project for the restaurants.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, the Solidarity Bonds. I got—

KAY TURNER: Yeah, the Solidarity Bonds, right, right, yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: But, yeah, you really feel it. You feel yourself feeling what home is in these moments, I think.

KAY TURNER: Yes, I know, that's really true.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Um, Zoom, you know, this virtual engagement has, you know, reached a new level because of the —COVID, and that's—I mean, we would never have done oral—we never considered doing oral histories virtually, but I'm intrigued by the mention of virtual altars. And I just want to know more about, how do you go about starting and making a virtual altar?

KAY TURNER: Well, okay, so, well we did it in—for my class, we did it in two ways. Everybody made an individual altar at home, photographed it, and then we put it, you know, in a PowerPoint and showed it in our class and talked about each individual one and what the elements of it were. Some people made altars directed at the pandemic itself, to try to push it back, you know, use kind of the magical means. Um, others made very interesting, uh, altars out of masks and gloves and you know, detergents, things that they had at hand, because a number of my students were, um, you know, they were kind of—they were in dormitory rooms. Once—if they were on campus anyway, they were kind of isolated into those rooms, so they didn't [laughs]—made really amazing things out of very little. But, there was one student who was in New Mexico, um, out near Georgia O'Keefe's um, place, and she made a very elaborate, you know—she got a bunch of stuff from people in town and made a very elaborate altar using Guadalupe's image and others, and she's a native Texan, so she kind of—she had the format down.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

KAY TURNER: But then, at the very end of our class, we also used Google Docs. This one student, Bee [ph], she said, oh, we can—you know, we were supposed to build an altar, a personal altar, as part of the class, um, that we were not able to do, and she said, "Well, we can build it through Google Docs," so she created a platform, and we took pictures of our images and then put them onto the altar platform and decorated it with little things and stuff like that. And, you know, it's very primitive, but it's very cool, because it's actually—it is all the objects that people wanted to put on, but in little, tiny, you know, sort of tiles that sit on this platform. And I'll send it to you. I'll send you a picture of it.

[00:10:43]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah that'd be awesome.

KAY TURNER: It's very cool. Yeah, because I'm thinking that, you know, I might try to do—when I get back to New York, I've written to Bee [ph], this student, and I said, you know, I'm thinking of doing more with that project, you know, to see if we could enhance it a little bit and put it out there for people to do, because it's, um—I don't think people really think of making virtual altars in Google Docs, but, you know, anything is possible, you know, these days.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah.

KAY TURNER: The pandemic has made us very creative, that's for sure, you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes, absolutely [laughs], yeah definitely.

KAY TURNER: Made us very creative.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, um, so, you—I know you sent me some pictures of some things happening in New York, and I'm going to try to screen share those if you want to describe what they are while I do that.

KAY TURNER: Sure. These are some pictures of the memorials that we made in May.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So how are you—do you have team members in, um, New York, like on the ground there?

KAY TURNER: Yes, mm-hmm [affirmative], we just had—in fact, I just came out of a meeting with them before I came to you, because we are continuing to, um—we're organizing again to—all of us kind of went into a little bit of a hiatus after George Floyd's murder and went into other, um, other projects, but, um, some of us are now coming back, and this group is reconstituting because we really want to do something around the, um, the nursing home catastrophe, and we also want to use the memorial format. We want to teach people about the memorial format as something that they can do to honor, um, and remember people in their families or neighborhoods and that kind of thing.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I don't think I can bring—it doesn't look like I can bring them up, so we'll just describe them. They're outdoors, often people putting things up against a chain link fence and attaching them.

KAY TURNER: Yes, we made templates.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I see butterflies and names.

KAY TURNER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. We decided that for those memorials we wanted to create templates that people could use. We used masks as one symbol. We used, um, butterflies as another, you know, hearts and hands, um, gloved hands. Some of the templates were of gloved hands holding, uh, hearts, and in each of those templates was a place where a name could be written. So, what happened was that we got, from, um, from the Naming the Lost vigil group that was collecting names, we got names from them for our different zip codes in the Bronx, in Brooklyn, and Manhattan, Staten Island, and Queens, and then began a process of making, um, name plates for those people. And we used the idea—there was a lot of talk at that point about who was essential and who was not. That was one kind of one way that we focused the work because we felt that Trump didn't consider any of the dead to be essential, um, so we used the word—our tagline for every person whose name was put into a memorial was "Essential" and—to mark the essential loss of essential people. And so, it was really, you know—it was kind of a names not numbers project, a mourning, not denial project.

Um, at the time, leading up to Memorial Day, when we weren't even sure—I mean, as you know, we weren't even sure that Trump was going to, you know, mention the almost 100,000 dead at that point, um, during Memorial Day, but Pelosi and Schumer did go to him, and he, in a very sort of offhand way, put flags at half-mast for a few days before Memorial Day, but never announced it, never made—you know, never emphasized it so anyway.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

[00:14:58]

KAY TURNER: So anyway, so that was the purpose of those memorials. And they became a place. For example, our memorial in Brooklyn is still active right now. It's over by Greenwood Cemetery and people have continued to bring, um, names to attach. They've taken their own—they've gone home with their kids and made little butterflies on, you know, pieces of paper and stuff like that, and they brought them back. So, all of those memorials, we used fences because we felt like the fence line would be a great place to attach banners and, um, these little templates. So, they were a little bit unconventional in terms of the memorial kind of thing that you and I are used to, um, in the Mexican tradition, but um, but they worked very well, and they were very active in, uh—very active in the Bronx and in Brooklyn.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

KAY TURNER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: The other thing that you did—that you organized via Facebook that was so fun to watch was the, uh—it was joint—you know, I think altars and the way you utilize them are so often about mourning, but turning mourning into joy or at least communal—a sense of communal-ness. But that New York sing-along really did end up being very much about joy, and you could kind of watch people. So, I watched and you see the gallery view, every Brady Bunch, you know, windows with humans in them—

KAY TURNER: Right, right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —and, uh, people holding up their New York coffee cups or objects that identify them as New Yorkers and then you led them in New York themed songs.

KAY TURNER: Yeah, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you want to talk about that a little?

KAY TURNER: Well, I—so for many years—and actually this was something that came out of September 11th. After September 11th, the following year in 2002, I started what I called the September 11th Sing, and I just gathered people in Washington Square Park, friends, and we would—I wrote some songs about New York, some of which you heard in this Facebook live thing last Sunday, um, but we would just gather under the arch, and we would face where the towers had been, and we would sing our New York songs, and then we would go drinking, and that was our September 11th.

Um, and I did that for like 10 years until—every September 11th until the memorial was, uh, opened downtown. It was a way of giving people a place to come together. Again, you know, a lot of the projects I do are based in some irritation or complaint that I have, so I just felt like, at that time, that the city was not doing a very good job helping survivors on September 11th: all of us who had been there, who lived to see another day, and had been traumatized by the event, and then of course traumatized by the politics that, you know, proceeded thereafter. So, that was—that was the reason for doing that. So in terms of this pandemic, in terms of some of the things I've already discussed about the administration, um, you know, New York was so hard hit, and New York was also treated poorly in lots of ways, especially in March and April. Um, it was the epicenter of the pandemic. It was kind of, you know—um, I think, certain people were, you know, gleeful about that. Of course, New York is going to be the epicenter, because it's full of all the weirdos and queers and artists and nut balls.

And you know, so I just started to feel like maybe one thing I could do—I was also missing New York a lot, so I thought I would get together this group of women, who I've known for many, many years. I do a solstice celebration every winter for the winter solstice and these—everyone that was in this thing on Facebook live are women who come to that solstice celebration where we always finish it by burning—we make a big fire on the roof of my apartment [laughs], an

illegal fire, and we burn our past, you know, whatever happened in the past, like good, you know, uh—like good witches do. And uh, we always sing the song "We Are the People of New York," [bells or music faintly in the background] which I wrote in 2001 for this—after September 11th. So, we sing, [sings] "We are the people of New York; we are the people of New York. We're so happy to serve you. It's our pleasure to serve you." And it's based in the Greek coffee cup, the blue and white coffee cup.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, that's why they had the cups, yeah.

KAY TURNER: Yeah, so that's why they had the cups, you know, so we sang that song, a couple of others. And it was just really—it was meant to create a little bit of Zoom mayhem, you know, um, just insisting that we could kind of break through, you know—break through the tile wall, you know, and come right out into your world and get people to sing along and there was, you know—I heard from lots of friends afterwards and strangers, who I didn't know, that they really enjoyed singing along and all that kind of thing. It was a great connector to New York and yeah.

[00:20:24]

JOSH T. FRANCO: So, for the last question—these are so quick.

KAY TURNER: Okay.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What—I'm trying to think. I don't know who else would ask you this, so I'll ask you. Who are the goddesses that are most active right now, or most pissed off, or who we should be calling on?

KAY TURNER: Oh, well, I think that—you know, I think a lot of the, um—the goddesses of, you know, of justice are, you know, are really, really pissed off. So, you know, I mean, you have your, you know—I think also the mother goddesses are really, you know, kind of pissed off, so Yemaya, you know, Guadalupe, Tonantzin, you know, Oshun, um, you know, I think that, um, you know, Hera—um, you know, I don't know. I just can't imagine that most of the goddesses aren't [laughs] really wanting to intervene at this point. You know, of course, I have a special love for Hecate, who um, is really considered to be a dark goddess, but she is also a transformer, and you know, one of the things that you do for her—you know, a devotee to Hecate brings garbage and refuse [alarm sounds in the background] and trash, um, to a crossroads and places it there because it will be transformed into something new at a crossroads, um. So, you know, we're at a crossroads.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, that's what I was going to say.

KAY TURNER: Get out the garbage, bring out the garbage, you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It's Hecate time, yeah, let's do it.

[They laugh.]

KAY TURNER: Put it in the crossroads and hope for a better day.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I love it. I'm going to stop us right there. Thank you, Kay.

KAY TURNER: You're welcome, Josh.

[00:22:37]

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