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Oral history interview with Susan Delvalle,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Susan (Suzy) Delvalle on August 17, 2020. The interview took place at her office at Creative Capital in New York, New York 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. This is Josh T. Franco interviewing Susan Delvalle at her office at Creative Capital in New York City, on August 17, 2020, for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Suzy, thank you for talking to me for the Archives. And, uh, we really just want to know how people are, but you might want to give a little bit of background of who you are and then just tell us how you've been since March.

SUSAN DELVALLE: Um, so I serve as the president and executive director of Creative Capital. We're a national service organization supporting individual artists, um, and working in all disciplines, um, across the nation. It's really about the big, bold ideas that typical artists don't get support for. That's the realm, like, we like to work. But more importantly, we don't just provide a grant and financial support. We really provide, um, a lot of support in different ways around, um, skills-building, career advice, and coaching, but more importantly, networking opportunities with a vast array of field experts across the country, and international, to help you not just complete your project but really to think about how you navigate a thriving practice.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So since March, how has that changed or what has changed [laughs]?

SUSAN DELVALLE: Well, a lot. I mean, the fascinating thing has been is that how things come to a halt in some ways but how resilient artists are in the way that they figure out, how can I still produce my work? Where can I still show up? I was at—um, and we've all seen the waves of what that means, right, the uncertainty of suddenly having gigs put on hold, um, postponed, and now eventually just really canceled, um, and how that plays out, and how that plays out very differently. Um, some of our literary folks are like, "Oh, you know, I got my gig. I'm writing [laughs]. I'm doing okay." Um, but a lot of others, particularly the performing arts, for example, it's the other extreme of, um, really having all gigs, um, dry up. And what does that mean?

Um, I think we've learned, um, very quickly that there was an immediate need for immediate emergency funding. And, um, a really great effort came together. Seven of us got together. Literally [laughs], a few of us started reaching out on a Saturday, on a weekend, saying, "Oh, my God, what are you going to do?" "I don't know. What are you going to do?" And we were all artist support service organizations. And we're like, "Do you think we could fundraise together, create some kind of artist relief?" And, um, and the next thing you did—three weeks later, we launched with \$8 million in support. The Mellon Foundation, Warhol Foundation, and all of these fantastic organizations that said, "Yeah, sure. Let's support individual artists," and have been providing, um, \$5,000 grants to artists across the country every week. Um, but also understanding that, um, we were able to do something collectively that we would not have been able to do on our own, as individual organizations. But also that the work that we continue to do remains relevant outside of that emergency support.

And I think what Creative Capital has been able to kind of tap into is the non-monetary support that we provide on a regular basis to our artists, picking up the phone saying, "How are you doing? Where are you at? Do you know that so and so's going through the same thing? You may want to talk to each other and figure out how you maybe collectively figure it out or do something else. Or there are these types of opportunities." We very quickly created a whole resource online, on our website, for artists, whether it's, uh, emergency grants, or there were residency opportunities, or all types of other residency, whether they were geography specific, et cetera. And that became a huge resource I think. People tapped into it like never before. Um, I was proud the National Archive actually called us. They archived it as an important resource.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, that's great.

SUSAN DELVALLE: I mean I literally got a call. I'm like, "What does this mean?" I had no idea. I'm like, "Okay. Cool." Um, but it had that kind of impact. And we immediately also started thinking what other types of things could we be offering? So we started offering free online workshops around financial well-being during a crisis. How do you help plan? How do you self-organize yourself in a way that you understand how you can navigate the uncertainty? Um, but from financial planning to mental wellness as well, right, handling and understanding that we all manage this very differently, and we all have different circumstances, but we shouldn't forget the mental need, um, and managing that aspect.

So it's been a full load of, uh, free workshops that have done—have done really well. But also just sharing your work online. While it may be very natural for some artists, depending on their discipline, it's not very natural for everybody. So how do we kind of—and really, most of these are artists-to-artist, helping. Um, even our financial planner's an artist. Um, and understanding how your income fluctuates and all of these things, even more so now, um, but all of these types of resources. I think the main thing that's been interesting as we went from triage mode, from immediate need, to now understanding this is much more long-term.

[00:05:23]

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

SUSAN DELVALLE: And now our services are starting to look a little bit differently. Our workshops are starting to look different because it is around, um, we have to figure out how some of the work can live online for a while, until it can actually be activated. Or what are other ways that we can support artists with getting the word out? Like, we've had a few artists, and their books got published. But they have no book tour. So how are we helping them connect with audiences through the online resources? But we also have artists where exhibitions just got canceled. So are there ways that we can connect them to having the show still be shown somewhere else down the line? I mean it's all of these types of things.

I think the most complicated has been for the performing artists. And a lot of them are self-organizing, thinking of different types of venue. Um, those who could, tried to figure out if they could do it outdoors. Um, I'm loving that the team has a performance coming up next weekend. They're doing it outdoors. And it's all really experimental and becoming even more so experimental at this time.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

SUSAN DELVALLE: Um, but that's it kind of in a nutshell in the way that we're—but our main thing has been to be here. I should also say most of the foundations—we are a nonprofit. We raise every single dollar to give away. But the importance of it is our foundations came to us and said, "If you need to redirect some of the funding, we understand it." And our main priority has been to paying out our ORDs their own grants. But more importantly, being less restrictive in the way that we pay it out, as well. You can use it right now for anything you need. Um, and that has been, um, a tremendous help I think for some as well, knowing that they can pay their rent, um, you know, at this time, so.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great. And, you know, we're also curious about you, as Suzy, the art worker who lives in New York right now, is coping. So things have—things that have been interesting is, like, what have you been doing at home? Have you been doing any of the sourdough kind of thing?

SUSAN DELVALLE: No sourdough. But I did do banana bread. I am not someone who cooks typically. And I am cooking, and cooking, and cooking. But I'm making it clear to everybody, I don't want to be doing this when I'm done.

[They laugh.]

Not anymore. You know, I think that's the realization, right, that we are some—for some of us, this is really hard. I'm an extrovert. I get my energy from people and seeing people, seeing artists mostly, being out and about every single night for one adventure or the other. And that has been I think the most, you know, as I call hard or difficult, in a sense, of not being able to do, um, be about. And so you're moving online, but it's not the same thing.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

SUSAN DELVALLE: And I overscheduled myself in the beginning through Zoom. But then you realize how exhausting that is because your body knows that it's not connecting to the next—to the person, right, the next human being. So now we're navigating. Now that the weather has—um, well, now, since May kind of I have been getting out and doing more things in the park. I have a friend who has a sailboat. We go sailing and those types of things. Um, I'm an island girl. I'm from the Caribbean. So being on water and in the ocean gives me life. So going to the Rockaways on the ferry has become important. It's those types of things. Um, I think we each have to kind of figure out what our risk threshold is—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

SUSAN DELVALLE: —while being still very careful. But for me, my risk threshold is I do need to see people. I do need to get out of my house, my apartment [laughs]. Um, I think the hard thing, being in New York, is if you're not living near a park, um, not being able to walk outside was really difficult for, you know, for a long time, um, and for a lot of people. Like, um, that aspect, just nature I think is restorative in so many ways, right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

SUSAN DELVALLE: Literally, this past weekend, on Saturday, there was an opening at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council with an artist, Muna Malik. And she had a fantastic project out in Battery Park, outdoors, um, this fantastic structure where she's asking everybody to put in little paper boats. Um, but this idea, what's the kind of world that we want to live in? We have an opportunity here, right. And it just kind of restores me—I say this is why I don't want to live without—have a life without artists because they're helping us navigate, think, and be inspired by, and imagine a better world, which is really exciting. And it was the first time I went to an art event.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

SUSAN DELVALLE: Um, and it was really so—and we had drinks afterwards outside [laughs], everything outside, with masks on. But it was really still this idea that, you know, we're figuring it out. And people came out. People came out, so.

[00:10:05]

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great. And are there, you know—our secretary, Lonnie Bunch, has been very clear about his observation that there are two pandemics going on in 2020: COVID-19—

SUSAN DELVALLE: Yes. Correct. Correct.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —and surging racism, especially anti-Black, but all kinds of racism.

SUSAN DELVALLE: Correct. Correct. Correct.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So being in New York, which is an epicenter of Black Lives Matter protests and other activities, what have you been observing?

SUSAN DELVALLE: Well, it's, um—isn't it sad that it almost took a pandemic to have people pay attention?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

SUSAN DELVALLE: And what I mean is not the usual suspects pay attention. I am now having conversations with race with people that I never imagined doing so before. And it's fascinating. Because I'm in the arts, I think in some ways, people feel it's a safe space to have those conversations, even with me from an—you know, from a creative or whatever realm or creative platform kind of perspective. Um, but for me, what I really want to see, how much are we really waking up to this underworld that, for most people, it was like, "Oh, I had no idea." I'm like, "You had no idea because you chose not to have an idea. You chose not to pay attention. You chose not to understand where and what you were reading and what you—where you were getting your news and where you were getting your"—So, um, I'm curious to see where this leads. Does this stop—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

SUSAN DELVALLE: —once we understand what our new normal is? Or is this really going to lead to change? And I'm, um, kind of—I always [laughs]—it's you, the young people, the young generation.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Am I young?

[They laugh.]

SUSAN DELVALLE: Yes, you are, compared to me. But the idea is that it is this younger generation that are really out there. And they're out there in a way that my generation was not, um, understanding—I'm coming to terms, in a sense, with my complacency as a Latinx, you know, a Caribbean woman, you know, navigating the world. Um, it's—I'm upfront. I'm vocal. But not in the way that, you know—but I have learned to navigate and make way. And, um, in some ways, I've always been like, "Let's choose our battles carefully. Where do we want to, you know, make more noise? Where don't we?" But also understanding that as we got more responsibility, we also had more power, within the realm of working within the arts world, right. Understanding once I became president of Creative Capital, what role did I have with the responsibility that goes along with it as well? Um, so I am actually really proud that we have, in the last few years, um, we're getting applications from every single state and territories. We have diversified our artist pool tremendously. But more importantly, we're valuing the work that's coming here, that people are—that artists are applying with. They're very political and very personal.

We've always—Creative Capital has never been risk-averse. We've always supported—freedom of speech is at the core of who we are and what we do. But there is a change. And I do see there's more and more work on police brutality, but there's more and more work on identity, race, gender. I mean it's ability. It's all—people are telling their personal story, feeling, um, empowered to do so in a way that's really, really exciting. And, um, we're proud to be able to support that work. And we have seen—I mean our last two classes of awardees, I think have identified 77 percent, 76 percent as POC. That's significant, right?

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's huge.

SUSAN DELVALLE: Right. And they feel I think, in general, supported in that work and the way that we support them saying, "It's your full voice, and we need to hear it." Um, so.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. I'm glad you already brought up the issue. Being Latino, right, and being non-Black, Brown, is interesting. And I've, of course, been thinking about it a lot too. And Creative Capital, you know, runs so much programming in Spanish and, um, has seemed to always give attention to that. But have you, um, seen kind of what Black or Brown ally-ship looks like change and shift in this year? Or is it everything's been so kind of tumultuous?

SUSAN DELVALLE: My perspective is that it shouldn't be the Black and Brown lives who are driving this, right. It should be our white allies. And, um, because I—this is—it's a difficult time. And particularly, I have so much, you know, privilege in my skin color and in the way that I navigate the world. But understanding that, you know, Black skin and Brown, or darker Brown skin, don't, right, and those side of the aspects, um—and how exhausting and how, um, difficult and, you know, really painful all of this is right now. Um, so I think what is our role in the way that we help navigate some of the conversation?

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And that to me was a more interesting aspect, um, of people who, you know, I hate the word, woke, not woke, but it's like the people who you would not consider who are suddenly starting to cross the threshold, people who didn't realize their power, or their position, or their responsibility, which is really what it comes down to, in changing the discourse. Um, I'm more hopeful now for what may happen in November because I think that's where our focus should be. Um, I'm unhappy the way people are attacking Kamala Harris. But what does that mean in the sense of understanding? Whether you agree with all of her policies or not, how important is it for us to navigate a more democratic process? Um, and, you know, not to get into politics [laughs], you know, but, like, navigating some of those aspects of it.

Um, so yeah, I think more and more folks should be talking about it. I, when you ask me personally, um, that we should not be as complacent and, you know, use our voices whenever we can and wherever we can and understand that people will listen because of our function and our role. I mean, you know, um, for those of us who are not used to that aspect, I know that when I leave Creative Capital, I may lose that type of platform, but then what's—you know, how

do I navigate that going forward in whatever other roles I take on?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right. Yeah. So we're Smithsonian. We expect to be around when people—you know, how now people have been asking, what happened in 1918 with the flu—

SUSAN DELVALLE: Correct. Correct.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —we want this to be one of the documents that's there in 100 years, so people understand what happened. So speaking to American artists in 100 years, what do you think they need to know about being in the art world in the U.S. in 2020?

SUSAN DELVALLE: That we're finally in a place where more artists' voices are being heard, that are truly representative of a wider array of artists voices around the country. And I think that's a really good thing. Um, I think we're much more, um, what do I call that, um, discipline—I mean nobody's really paying attention to one discipline or the other. I think artists are navigating across disciplines in a way that's really exciting as well. And the work is—you know, when it shows up, it's such more—much more multifaceted, um, which I think is exciting. Um, but I also think, in a sense, of, um, a lot of things that we may not—a lot of work that we may not have considered art, and that aspect and the way that we define is also opening up and amplifying, which is also kind of really exciting. Um, venues are being—you know, we thought of and, you know, what is an appropriate venue is becoming, in a certain way, much more fluid and flexible aspect as well. Um, so it seems to me that—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Do you have an example?

SUSAN DELVALLE: —crises like this actually push even more and make them more visible.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Do you have an example of a project that might not have been called art in 2019 that we're calling art now [laughs]?

SUSAN DELVALLE: Well, not specifically to this, but let me think of, um, so an artist who considers it part of his practice, right. Fallen Fruit, I don't know if you know him, that's a duo, um, and David and Austin. And they, for example, what they do is they go into communities and actually plant an orchard. But it's with community involvement. It's because the idea is that they're coming in saying, "Would you value this? Would this be of interest? Um, how do you get your food? What's your access like? Um, do you tend to your own gardens? Do you have the"—I mean it's really just kind of like the coming together around fruit as a way of feeding, of nurturing.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

SUSAN DELVALLE: And that's where family stories are bringing communities together. And the community then comes together, organizes themselves, and they then run these orchards. Is that typically what someone would have considered art? But it's these artists who bring that creative process to the mix and build this project. And they're now—they've traveled across the country and internationally and are building places—I mean they went into New Orleans right after Katrina, right. And then saying, "What could we do that would be something of value?" But also, through their, um, work with the community, they really bring out the personal stories. Um, and that's what kind of becomes the art, right. And, um, it's those kind of anecdotal stories that get shared forward. We're also—we understand a little bit more about our humanity or, in some cases, lack thereof. Um, but as an example, I mean I also like to use Dread Scott as an example. When he first started, we supported him in 2000, which was our first year of grants. And his work was about racism and police brutality, then, 20 years ago.

[00:19:59]

At that time, a lot of people would not have considered what he was doing art and in the way that he was developing and presenting it. Today, everybody—you know, I don't know how many artists are now working within that realm. So just that idea also of how things change, how we change our perception, what we think is important. Um, we just had a donor call us, maybe a year ago, saying, "Do you support, you know, artists working in race, and police brutality, and things like that?" [Laughs.] Yeah. We've been doing that for 20 years, right. But again, it's this idea of—my main thing that's coming out of this COVID aspect is we've always understood the advocacy we need to do around artists. And the ideas of—they are really—there is no civil society without artists is how I see it. They help us navigate these uncertain times. But more importantly, we all value—we're all going online and consuming all of this work. But we don't

consider the creator of that work. And more importantly, the artists are not considered a valid profession. How do we change that perception within this country that being an artist is a profession, a profession we should value.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

SUSAN DELVALLE: And it doesn't just have value when it's going to Netflix, right. It should—we should be considering the full realm of that creative practice. Um, and that to me has become even more apparent, our need for advocating. So this idea of universal health care, I look at it from a perspective of the artist that, you know, often don't have this aspect. So when we think of universal health care, when we—how do we navigate some of our need to advocate on behalf of the artist to the larger advocacy? Um, unemployment insurance, I mean it's just—some of the basic human needs I think.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

SUSAN DELVALLE: Um, so anyway, that's my—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Inaudible]. So thank you. Thank you for this.

SUSAN DELVALLE: So I hope that was helpful.

JOSH T. FRANCO: This is great. This is for the record. And it's totally worth it. Thank you, Suzy.

SUSAN DELVALLE: Thank you, Josh [laughs].

[00:22:02]

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