



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Elyn Zimmerman,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Elyn Zimmerman on August 17th, 2020. The interview took place in Kent, Connecticut and was conducted by Matthew Simms for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Pandemic 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

MATTHEW SIMMS: We're on. All right.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: I am?

MATTHEW SIMMS: [Laughs.] You are—yeah, it says recording on there. Can you see on there a little recording thing?

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MATTHEW SIMMS: Okay. Well so thank you for agreeing to participate in this. This—I'll just say the requisite stuff. This is—I am Matthew Simms speaking via Zoom with Elyn Zimmerman who—and where are—where exactly is your home studio located?

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: My home is really New York City, but I am right—

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: —now in a rental in Kent, Connecticut.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Okay. So you're in Kent, Connecticut and it is August 17th, 2020, and this is for the Archives of American Art Smithsonian Institution, and what we're doing is we're calling this—you may come up with a better name, but it's called the Pandemic Project so far.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: Oh, dear. [Laughs.]

MATTHEW SIMMS: So—and it's because we wanted to check in with our friends such as yourself to see how are you doing in the midst of all of this. Of course, so many different things happening, disruptions, but sometimes interesting enough, I found that some people have said that, you know, there hasn't been as much disruption as you'd think. So how are you doing? How are you faring in this?

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: It's more—I think it's a little more complicated if you're the kind of—if you do the kind of artwork that depends on commissions and, you know, structures being built and—or gardens being designed or so on. It's not—it is probably very different for someone who goes to their studio and works hours every day, all day, you know? Every day of the week and so on, so that—that's a continuum. I have uh,—I feel like I hit a wall, and it's not unpleasant, it's just that it's so different. And I have been working steadily on projects for years, I mean, not—sometimes one or two at a time, sometimes there's a fallow period. Other times it gets real busy. But since January, it's like my phone's been disconnected [laughs]. It's really been—[laughs].

MATTHEW SIMMS: And is it in part because of the just malaise, the sort of feeling of being, kind of, not sure what the next step is or is that you actually feel like everybody is just hunkered down and—

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: Oh, I think—well I know things that started to be in the works got stopped. There was a park that—I was part of a team. We were finalists in the competition and the whole thing just got shut down. So, yeah.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Where was this—

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: Miami. In Miami.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Okay.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: But, um, over the years, I also do studio work, mainly drawing and photography. For the photography part of it, I usually depend on a more skilled technical assistant because I take the pictures myself but all the digital, you know, preparations—I don't know Photoshop, Lightroom, whatever they are, very well and for someone 20, 30 years younger than I am, they just zip right through it. So I've always had an assistant, and I still do, but because in—starting in March, he lives way out in Brooklyn and had to take the subway, something he didn't want to do and something I didn't want him to do.

So for three months I didn't see anybody. So again, it was like what had been a twice a week, all day event, just stopped. Listen, I am so grateful that I am—I still go to the city, but where I lived there was—there was terrible looting and it was very violent, and I—after the third night of it, I called a friend and I said, "I just don't feel safe at all. Can you see if there's a rental anywhere near you?" and she came up with this. So and I'm very grateful, and it's beautiful, and I'm happy. [inaudible].

MATTHEW SIMMS: Well, I mean, I'm fascinated in so many things that you've just said. First of all the—this idea of working with drawing, photography, you know, these are things that go right back to the earliest work that certainly I know of yours, where you were uh, working between photography and drawing in ways that were, you know, incredibly, well conceptual but also very, very experiential.

Interfacing with the light and space dialogue that was happening but pushing it in new directions. And so you are still very actively involved with photography and that relationship between—yeah.

[00:05:21]

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: I really never stopped photography and drawing. I mean, I've had episodes where I haven't done very much—[clears throat] excuse me—since I was busy with um. art—you know, sculpture projects. One second.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: Getting to be hay fever season time on the East Coast.

MATTHEW SIMMS: You know, and I hear it's raining too. Is it raining out there? Is that the—I remember here—I thought I heard from someone it's raining. Out here it's humid and a bit smokey because of forests—or the fires so.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: Here it rained all day yesterday, but it's always humid here in the end of the summer. It rains a lot. But anyway, you know, I've been working with drawing and stuff. I have to say in a curious way, I've not been inspired. This has all been—between the political dramas that we're going through and the social justice issues that are just, you know, so clear and the pandemic, um, I just feel like the world is in a crisis, you know? It's—and we're not handling, and our country's not handling it very well. I just don't feel inspired. So what I have been doing a lot of is reading. And first, I read everything I could about the pandemic including a very important book by—[clears throat] excuse me—Lori Garrett—

MATTHEW SIMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: —called *The Coming Plague*, and it's not about this pandemic but it was about Ebola and AIDS and so on. Anyway, I've just been reading a lot, you know?

MATTHEW SIMMS: Right. I thought you were going to say Camus' *The Plague* because everybody I've mentioned—

[They laugh.]

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: And then when I told someone that, they said, "Oh, well have you read the first chapter of the is it *The Decameron*? You know, the—

MATTHEW SIMMS: I think, yes. Yeah.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: You know, where they're escaping the plague in 13th century Italy and so I read that. I mean, I'll read anything so long as—anyway.

MATTHEW SIMMS: So it's a time of a kind of re-centering around some reading, picking up, you know, and also perhaps, like you said, feeling a bit like what's next, you know? What's the—what's the future hold? I think a lot of people feel that way. That sense of uncertainty.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: Right. It's a little different when you don't have children, I mean, because you hear about what young people are thinking when you have children. I do talk to my nephews and nieces but it's not the same, and I get surprised by some of the things they say to me. And maybe I'm a child of the '60s in California and I have always, you know, been a Democrat. I don't know. It's just a different world right now and, um.

MATTHEW SIMMS: That's interesting. Well, you know, one of the things that I know you've been dealing with relatively recently is the events around the National Geographic Society and the proposal at—that emerged of a pretty massive remodel of that space and—

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MATTHEW SIMMS: —of course, you have one of your most significant in my opinion, like, one of your most significant pieces, *Marabar* is a piece of permanent, outdoor, site-specific, environmental work incorporating their granite boulders, is that correct?

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: Yes.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Something that that has been there since the 1980s and all of a sudden there was this—would you mind, kind of, for people who don't know, maybe walking a little bit through what happened?

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: Sure.

MATTHEW SIMMS: How that played out?

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: In 1980 I was selected to do a sculpture for the *National Geographic*, and I worked with, at the time, a young architect named David Childs, who later became head of SOM. And David—in a lot of projects, artists are brought in but not supported by the architects, the landscape architects. These—SOM couldn't have been better. They helped me make a model, they found an engineer, they found a hydraulic engineer. I mean, I wouldn't have been able to do what I did without their support and help. And honestly, the *National Geographic* at that time was owned by the Grosvenor family.

[00:09:59]

It had been in their hands for I don't know how many generations. To say it was conservative was an understatement, and their board was fairly conservative. However, they like the idea of the rocks and one of the people in charge of—well working with the architect from the *National Geographic* side was the editor of the magazine, Bill Garrett, and he was incredibly supportive, too. So because of that, this crazy idea I had of these giant boulders cut in half, polished on the inside, you know, came to be. And honestly, um, if they hadn't been a totally private corporation, I don't think they could have—I mean, they just could afford it.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: And this is my—I had done one previous permanent thing which is very small outdoors. This was my largest piece I'd ever done, and honestly, I didn't know what I was asking of all these people. But it happened and it became, I think, very beloved and people, you know, got married in front of it and they had events around the—it was the main plaza between these three buildings, so it was it was very—it was well-used.

MATTHEW SIMMS: And we didn't mention there's a water—a key water element to it.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: Yeah.

MATTHEW SIMMS: That it's not just the rocks, it's about the relationship between the sort of—the what—the apparently static and this mobility of the surface of the water and all of the sound elements that are part of water as well. So it really ripped—

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: And the garden.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: The garden was part of it, too. I worked with their landscape architect, Jim Urban, who I still am in contact with. This is a really supported project, and it was dedicated in 1984.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: And yes, I think that things have changed over the last 40 years, and there is no fence or curb around the pool, and I've had in other projects where there's a pool of water had to install, you know, a shallow curb—

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: —so that kids just don't step into the water.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Right. Right.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: And I don't have a problem with that I think that's reasonable. About two years ago the *National Geographic*—no. Somewhere in the last ten years, *National Geographic* was sold to the Fox Corporation. You know, Murdoch and all those people?

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: And one part of their enterprise was siphoned off and given or sold to Disney. And that is the film and video, you know, the adventure stuff. So, um, if I can—I don't mean to take so much time—

MATTHEW SIMMS: Please.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: —but the buildings are approached through a, kind of, a narrow channel from the street. There's plantings everywhere, but you go into each building separately, and I think for security reasons, because this is still not a very high secure area in Washington, they probably wanted to do something to ensure more security, and their idea was to put in a glass pavilion. That you came from the street into the glass pavilion, and then went to the different entrances to the buildings.

And all that makes sense, but what they did was it they positioned it where the sculpture—it's title is *Marabar* is located or part of it is located, and in there—and anything in the D.C. area, you have to go through a number of different review boards. And I know about this because I was a commissioner for the Fine Art Commission for five years.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: And that was very, you know, enlightening to me. But anyway, so they did not show in their drawing—they just erased *Marabar*. The pools, rocks, the whole thing. They just erased it, and they just said we're going to put the pavilion here, and no one on the Commission—there are five people, three are appointed and two are volunteers—the two that are volunteers are architects.

Anyway, they didn't show, or they didn't say that they'd be taking down *Marabar*, and I got wind of it from this organization. It's a not-for-profit, it's been around since 1997, it's called The Cultural Landscape Foundation, and they are—their mission is to educate and to advocate to preserve existing central or important landscapes, architectural buildings, sculptures, whatever.

[00:15:08]

And they've had a very good track record. And it's headed by Charles Birnbaum, and he called me, and he said, "Do you know that, you know, they're doing this?" and I said, "No." He said, "Well, we need to get you on board. Would you want us to support you?" And they have a machine, it was really amazing. They got publicity letters from many people. They asked me to suggest people to write letters. And believe it or not, and I hardly believe it, when the Washington D.C. review board met again, Charles and the organization filed a petition, and they say they said you can't go ahead with this, and in truth, they said, "Well, you're right. They—the architects who are making this new pavilion and making the change did not provide complete information."

So a couple of months went by. They have a meeting every month and then finally at the last meeting they said to the people, "You have to either provide a new home for *Marabar*, relocate

the pavilion so it doesn't impact *Marabar*, or located it so that it envelopes *Marabar*." So I was not invited to this meeting. I don't know who the architects are. Charles and his team say they are a local, small company, that have no—they don't have a national reputation, they haven't done anything that has been written about or documented. So, it's a cheap building anyway. It's just a glass box. It's not anything but an entry pavilion, so I'm waiting to see what happens. But I was really touched by how many people wrote letters, and the different kinds of people, most of whom I knew. Some I didn't know. And it was really—well this is all at the beginning of this pandemic.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: And I, you know, I had a lot of work to do with that so.

MATTHEW SIMMS: But amazing that somehow the artist managed to prevail in the midst of all of these other, sort of, forces coming together. I think it's—I think it's stunning like you. And I do remember when you sent around the initial, kind of, alert almost. "Hey, this is happening and, you know, please support, you know, this effort to find some way to preserve, to," like you said, "possibly move or whatever it would be, but not just to, you know, ignore it. Pretend it doesn't exist." So I have to say that in the midst of all of this stuff that was happening, in some ways when that news came through, I thought oh, this is another 2020, you know, moment but look how it's turned out so far.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: So far. So far. We don't know. I mean I never count. And I have to say that I've done a lot of projects over the years, and some of the largest and some of the more significant ones have been either modified or erased. And in San Francisco, in Chicago, just gone, you know?

[Cross talk.]

MATTHEW SIMMS: And there was one that was destroyed because it was located at the World Trade Center prior—

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: Oh that was something that was [laughs] you know. The fountain that I did there and the memorial, it meant so much to the six families who lost their loved ones who were working and were killed in that initial attack. But—

MATTHEW SIMMS: In the earlier bombing in the parking garage.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: Yeah, it was in [inaudible].

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: But it was—they weren't just pulling the van into the parking garage. They did know that where they parked their van, they were hoping it was at the point where Tower One, Tower Two, and the hotel, it's right in the middle of those three things. They were hoping that it would just all cave—all of it would come caving in. It wasn't strong enough but that was their plan.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So you've had that and other works of art by other artists, you know, that the—were destroyed obviously in that as well. I mean, it was—I am—I'm looking at the time and I'm seeing that we're moving towards just a couple minutes left and I wanted to um, ask you about the award, 2016 award, the Noguchi Award that you received? Was that a, sort of, an important moment you shared with the amazing Tadao Ando?

[00:20:04]

Amazing like you. To—

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: He's one of my heroes and just to be on the stage with him. I had spent a year in Japan on a fellowship and if I hadn't—and I had learned to speak enough Japanese to get by like a five-year-old, you know, just to pick my way around the country there and—and anyway, but I decided I was going to give my acceptance speech in Japanese, which he did as well, although he understands English, he doesn't like to speak it. But I stumbled through and he was very gracious, and he says—he said it was okay [laughs]. But, yeah, that was nice. You know, it's nice to be recognized, and that was the same time—that 2016, I had an exhibition at Grounds for Sculpture, which is a place—it's in between Trenton and Princeton, New Jersey. It's a

—how many acres? Sixty acres, 70 acres, and they have a collection, and they also have workspaces for people, and it was a nice opportunity because—I don't know, it's not easy to move these things around. And they got—they were able to collect four or five of them and put them on-site. The smaller pieces I call sculptures.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Well that's—those are positive things, all positive developments hopefully to be—

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: Yeah.

MATTHEW SIMMS: —[inaudible] by others. And of course we miss you out on the West Coast, and we know that you're on the East Coast. We hope to see you more out on the West Coast when you're able to move again and, sort of—

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: I was in the process, which you might have heard from Astrid or Leda, I was looking for a place to move to because I've through over 40 west—sorry—over 40 East Coast winters.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: And I'm getting a little too old for that. And it's—I was thinking it's time to sit by the sea in Santa Monica and—

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah, yeah.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: —hang out. But right now, I don't think anybody's moving anywhere so it's a very, very strange time.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Any last words of, thoughts before we sign off?

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: Well, I kind of hope that things get better after the elections and that—I've also been really involved with the environment, you know, with conservation efforts and, I was 15 years on a conservancy board for the Land Conservancy in Columbia County where I had a house, and I learned a lot. I read a lot. I studied it. We're truly in a crisis that way, in that realm as well as political, social, social justice, and so on. And I just think the world is too precious to just, you know, toss it the way we are—

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah. Yeah.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: —with our habits and our lifestyles and so on. And I'm guilty as everybody else, but I hope something turns it around. I do.

MATTHEW SIMMS: I don't think you're alone in that hope. I think that we're all, sort of, there with you and, you know, hoping that there's to be some real change coming up in a few months, so fingers crossed. Elyn, it's been great talking to you. Thank you so much for being part of this and I'm going to go ahead and end the recording now.

ELYN ZIMMERMAN: Okay.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]