



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Paul Ramírez  
Jonas, 2020 July 7

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Paul Ramírez Jonas on July 7, 2020. The interview took place at Ramírez Jonas's home in Brooklyn, 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: All right. This is Josh T. Franco interviewing Paul Ramírez Jonas at his home in Brooklyn, New York on July 7, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. All right. That's the scripted part.

Paul, thanks for taking 20 minutes out to talk to us and put this year on the record. So, we really just—you got the question cloud but we just want to know how American artists have been doing since March. So, we can just start with, how are you?

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: I'm okay, I guess. Um I mean, I'm lucky I have a job, and I continue to have a job and will probably continue to have a job in the future, and I haven't gotten sick, and no one in my immediate family has gotten sick either. So, yeah, I think that I have absolutely no complaints from—what are they called? The primary needs. It's like that whole scale of needs.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: So, I'm well, physically [laughs]—

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's good.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: —and economically, but otherwise I have a lot of different emotions about what's going on.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, and you've had some big life events happen just coincidentally doing this, but—and I want to get to it, but I do want to talk about your job, because you're a teacher besides being an artist and, like, your college which is in New York and New York's hardest hit. So, like, I know what you can say about conversations, about, you know, what the fall might look like, what happened in the spring when it was disrupted for students?

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Well, it's such an amazing moment, right? Because we've had this cascade of events happening. And um they keep coming to this thing where it's, like, a hall of mirrors where, like, COVID-19 has created, like, a health crisis and then the health crisis created an economic crisis and then the—and then now there's a, kind of, societal, political crisis and— but they all mirror each other, and I keep thinking that what's interesting is also in people's personal lives, things are being mirrored.

And, like, what I keep thinking is, like, everything you could shove under the rug before or look away or you would tolerate has suddenly become intolerable. Right? Things that were invisible because we didn't want to see, like, how much we depended on really cheap immigrant labor or undocumented labor now is glaring, you know, and in the school—the same things have happened in the school.

So, it began as, like, the opportunity of teaching remotely and how amazing actually that turned out to be. But then the financial repercussions when we reopen—if we reopen, can students afford it because I teach at a public university and most of my students—a significant amount of them pay for it as they go through working. Almost all of them go part time. At least half of their degree, we encourage them. So, that—it started to hit, and now, of course, it's 1968 all over again, you know, where the students are demanding that the faculty undergo anti-racist training, that we decolonize the program.

So when you ask me what the fall is going to look like, you know, it's gone from, can we open because of the virus then, like, how can we open with the financial free-fall of the university, and

now on top of it, it's, like—and the students, rightly so, want to burn the place down to the ground.

[They laugh.]

So—yeah.

[They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: And that—I mean, that idea of, you know, stuff that's been under the rug is coming out and, like, how we are—what—who we are as civic people and agents. That seems, like, very relevant to a lot of things you're, as an artist, your studio projects speak to. Usually more playfully, but I don't know, like, as an—yeah, just not even, like, what's new resulting from it, but has this moment—does it make you reflect differently on your existing projects based on, like, civic contracts and promises?

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Well, it's interesting because I feel, like, whenever I reimagine monuments, right? Because—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right, oh, yeah.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: —That the monuments should include our voices, that they shouldn't be these things where the status quo inscribes public space in permanent materials. So, I have the spiel that I say, you know, like, all the stone and concrete and bronze are permanent inscriptions in public space, but our voices are ephemeral and the materials should reflect our voices. And I feel, like, okay, I could put that body of work to rest because now if my work was a suggestion—[inaudible]. Now the work—what the work was about is being enacted all the time. Right? Like, Confederate monuments become just plinths with inscriptions from the public written directly on them, right? It's, like, well, that could have been one of my sculptures—

[00:05:28]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Totally.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: —at one point, you know, and—or throwing Columbus into the river. I'm, like, I should have done that as a sculpture.

[They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, that's true.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: So—but then the part about the public that's about—of my work that's interactive about trusting or how we use language to negotiate contracts, that continues to be really important, I think. I mean, I'm hoping to make a project in Philadelphia next year and now speaking with a resident of the neighborhood where it might be, and it was super interesting because she was talking how—about the homeless population, and she said, "Well, they're my neighbors because they live next door to me," and so, she was talking about how she relates to them as neighbors, and I'm, like, I'm digressing, but I'm thinking a lot about that.

It's, like, what—how amazing that this person can define—redefine the homeless as neighbors because they live next door to her, and what makes a person see a human being like that versus being a human being as almost not a human being, but a problem that needs to be removed, and in the civil—it's two different kinds of civic contracts there, right? Are you your brother's keeper or you're not your brother's keeper, and this is happening now in spades all over the country, right?

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

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Down to the mask, right? Do you wear the mask, do not wear the mask?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right, exactly, yeah. Have you been—you know, you're in New York. How—what—did you observe the marches?

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Yeah, it's impossible not to observe the marches.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: The same way that it was impossible—I think that's what's different, perhaps, about New York and the rest of the country. One of the changes in my life that you alluded to is that we had a baby in the middle of this pandemic, which was a nerve-wracking experience. Everything from going to the doctor and then not going to the doctor anymore and doing the doctor things remotely to going to the hospital in the middle of the pandemic and delivering. All of that was supercharged, but what I was going to say is that the thing about being in New York is that you cannot avoid seeing any of these things that you and I have been talking about.

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

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: When it was just the pandemic at the beginning, the city became very quiet because of the total lockdown, but what you could hear were the ambulance sirens nonstop. Right? Because there would be so many cases per day or because we're such a dense city. I could just go for a walk and three blocks from here is a hospital, and you could see the refrigerated truck parked outside for the excess bodies. Right?

But then when the protests began, because we had a newborn, we couldn't participate and—but, you know, three times—and I don't live on a major street—three times, one of the manifestations was just making its way through Brooklyn, just went right in front of our window. Or we would go for a walk in Prospect Park with the baby and then we would bump into a manifestation.

So, both the virus of racism and the virus of COVID could not be not seen in a city like New York. And it continues, you know, it continues.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Or sometimes you just look up at the sky, and you see a police helicopter, and you'd be, like, there's a demonstration over there.

[They laugh.]

Just follow the chopper [laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. This is just interesting because I think—our tone is you—we don't—because I've gotten to know you over the last couple of years, and it just hit me how serious the tone of this conversation is, which is not—this is what the world is, I guess—anyway, side—just observation.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: No, but it's interesting because I'm trying to be a funny person, and I use humor a lot socially and in my work, but—and there's always, you know, the bane of the white Latino, like, you know, am I a person of color? No. But am I a minority? Maybe, you know? And actually, my daughter and I have had a lot of conversations about race because in her school, she is considered a person of color, and I always misunderstood that. She would get really angry at me and be, like, ah, but you're white, you know, but then she would be, like, but I don't have a choice, you know, and [inaudible] I don't get to decide that, you know, but the white majority decides that I'm a Latina, and that's the end of the story. I don't have any more say as to what I am.

[00:10:23]

So, a roundabout way of saying that I always feel, like, ah, you know, I don't really have the right because, you know, the color of my skin. I've never really had to undergo any feelings of oppression or exclusion that I know of, but I am angry, you know, and I'm usually never angry, and I'm angry about school, and I'm angry about how my colleagues are handling this moment—actually, how my colleagues are not handling this moment, how they're denying it or trying to pacify it and then I see what I've done as a professor in that institution for a couple of years, and I get angrier because I'm like, come on, it's not rocket science.

You know, have an inclusive curriculum. Every time you have a chance to hire someone, hire someone that looks like the student body, you know? It's, sort of, like a no brainer, right? Like doing the minimum is a no brainer and seeing the inability, reluctance, denial to do the minimum amount to create a more equitable society or to take this, kind of, liberal stance of, like, oh, my hands are tied. The system is too strong, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: I'm, like, that's a copout, which before I would have never had the fire in me to see it that way. Does that make any sense? Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, it does. I, like, want to—the Latino thing and your daughter and you and the differences, I mean, I just—we, you know, we—this is nice that it's us talking because I would like to hear more about what you think about, you know, it's—I think the conversation on the big scale right now has been so binary, black and white, and I think that's appropriate right now.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Right.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Black Lives Matter is the focus and good. But it is, like, figuring out my role, and I've had to think of my role as who I just am as a person, but also my role as national collector at the Archives. And I had to really realize those are distinct, to not resent the work I was being asked to do in separate positions, but anyway—we, you know [laughs]. Yeah, let's talk about Brownness—

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: The—yeah, no, it's interesting for—because before you and I could have a very intellectual conversation. What is Latin American? What is Latino? Well, what about, you know, when the United States annexed huge chunks of Mexico? I mean, what about Puerto Rico? That's more, like, a colonial imperial situation.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: But the bottom line is, Black bodies look Black, and they have received the brunt of racism in this country, and they came under the legacy of slavery. So, I think—and that's interesting because at least at school, I see great clarity among the Latin students—the Latinx students—like, they see that this is the moment to support mostly their efforts against getting rid of anti-Blackness, and—but it's a funny thing, right? Because it's not, like, depending on the color of their skin that they do not themselves—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah—

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: —it's complicated, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —you know, I think, you know, it's interesting. You say you don't really recall moments you felt it. I do because I think I have a more mestizo face than you—

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —and it's so funny that this is on Zoom, too. We've never done oral histories virtually. So, people can see our face.

[They laugh.]

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: This is the Brown spectrum here. That's funny. So—okay, I don't want to talk too much me. So, we have seven minutes. These are so—

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Oh my God.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I know. Okay, I'm going to focus on some questions about this moment. This has been interesting. What do you think's been missing from accounts of the two pandemics happening now, COVID and racism?

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Well, it seems the usual, right? The thing that always seems a little bit missing in the United States at least, is, like, seeing how everything—at least in my eyes because I tend to see things very much as in a, kind of, Marxist class thing. Right? That the big unmentionable is extractive capitalism right, and it's, like, why are social services so gutted, you know? Why is our health care—like, we don't really have it, you know, like, we can't mount a response because we don't have national health care. So, it's all piecemeal You know, how—so, like, Cuomo, the governor of New York can be fantastic and say how he's going to take all these disparate hospitals and explain the [inaudible] to work together, but he won't talk about why are they desperate, you know? Why are hospitals, even corporations, for profit, you know?

[00:15:21]

So, that's, I think, what's—and you can tie that right back to race, right. I think that—or back to that the essential workers are paid so little, you know? I think that's the glue on everything, and I feel like no one wants to touch that too much.

[They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Maybe it's deep under the rug still.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Yeah—still under the rug.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Maybe we—

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Yeah, still under the rug [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: I know. We have to get it out. Another thing we want to know about is how people's access to their studios have changed. If they have studios apart from home, can they get to them? I know you work at school a lot.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Yeah—no, my studio is in a municipal building, so it's technically—well, technically, it was never shut down. However, we were also asked not to leave home for unnecessary reason. So, I decided really early on that making art was not an essential thing. So through phase one, I didn't go to my studio, and now, we're in phase three starting two days ago, and I went to the studio yesterday, but also tied to, like, the pregnancy and the baby, and we were crazy careful not to get sick because it was very unclear what COVID would or could do to the gestation of the baby. So, I just I went to the studio once before the lockdown, got some papers, got some pens, and I don't know if that right now is the moment to make art to tell you the truth.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. What did it feel like to go back?

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Oh, it was funny because everything was, like—it's, like, those movies, you know, where there's, like—and there's still, like, crumbs on the desk from where someone was having breakfast.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

[They laugh.]

Like, the preciously preserved artist studio the most [inaudible]

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Yeah—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: —it was, like—right, like—

[They laugh.]

—because it's not, like, I left one day and thinking I got to leave it tidy because I'm never coming back for months and months just, you know.

[They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, oh man. So, what about your home there? Have you—has your relationship to your home changed? I bet you value your roof access most importantly.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Oh my God, yes. We value the roof access, and I went a little bit crazy, right? So, like, I set a little irrigation system. Again, back to, like, pandemic and baby. It was, like, once the baby's born, we're not going to have time to water, you know. So, like—but also, like, many Americans, we all went a little bit homesteading crazy where, like, let's start seeds from home and the windowsill, you know, and let's grow more edible plants.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I've been dying my own clothes [laughs].

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: You've been dying your own clothes. My daughter, Indra's, been making clothes and adapting things, and we've been learning new ways of cooking because you get so tired of your own cooking, right? So, you're, like, well, let's try to make something Thai, you

know, and so, we've been spending a lot of time at home, and my partner, Deborah Fisher, is the founder of a very fierce organization called Blade of Grass, and they are working online. So—and now, they've decided to permanently work remotely. So, they closed their office. So, we have to make space for a home office for her and—but it's great. It's, like, the kitchen—the dining room table sometimes has this thing of, like, a sewing project of my daughters and then make some drawings that I'm working on, and so, there's also remnants of a meal and something Debra's working on. So, this relatively small dining room table has become a, like, this weird forum—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] Interdisciplinary—

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Yeah [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: —room. Okay, we have a couple minutes left. What would you—so, you know, the Archives—we're doing these—lots of institutions are creating content right now—

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —the difference for us is that we're always—our audience—we think of so much as a hundred years in the future audience. So, from that perspective, what would you—what's the important thing to let people know about being an artist at this time?

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Well, maybe the most interesting thing is something my friend Patrick told me at the very beginning of this when the museums were shutting down and the galleries are shutting down, and he's, like, isn't it amazing the whole art world can shut down, but we're still artists—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: —and it was such a simple thing, but it's, like, right. Your identity as artists is actually separate from these institutions that present art, and I think that's always the hopeful I always say that the great thing about being an artist is you can make art, and you're an artist, but if you're an actor and the theaters are closed [inaudible]—

[00:20:15]

JOSH T. FRANCO: You froze, too. Are we back?

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's—I mean, also this technology is the new thing in all of our lives—right—and the freezes.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: But let's just consider that the closing line that you don't have to have the institution to be an artist.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: That's right.

[They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Thank you, Paul.

PAUL RAMÍREZ JONAS: Thank you—oh, 20 minutes.

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