Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with James C. Welling, 2020 June 22

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with James Welling on June 22, 2020. The interview took place in New York, New York, and was conducted by Ben Gillespie 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

BEN GILLESPIE: This is Ben Gillespie interviewing James Welling at his home on the 22nd of June 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Um, would you like to tell me a little bit about how you've experienced 2020 so far?

JAMES WELLING: Um, let's see, I, uh, was fortunate to have a show in Paris in January, so, um, my wife and I went to Paris. Um, part of the show, the work is around antiquities, so while I was in Paris I went to the Louvre, uh, four days in a row, where I saw lots and lots of tourists, I was in contact with a lot of tourists, and I also observed a lot of Chinese tourists—I assume they were Chinese, maybe they were from other Asian countries—wearing masks. Which, um, I was aware of the pandemic at that point, or the impending pandemic, and um, but I didn't really take any precautions.

I remember my wife was feeling ill one day, so I went to a French pharmacy and, um, drew a picture of a mask, they were sold out. So that gave me a sense of, uh, anyway, what might be on the road. Then we went to London for a memorial for, uh, Peter Wollen, and, um, we—thinking back now, if we were there a few weeks later, we might have—everyone might have gotten very sick. So, you know the pandemic was sort of on our minds, but it hadn't been named. Um, I would read about it every day in the paper, but um, anyway.

Of course, retrospectively, the pandemic was on everyone's mind even in January. I remember coming back on February 1st and getting very ill, um, for four days. I'm generally in extremely good health, I don't think I've ever had the flu, um, but I was, uh, knocked out for four days coming back from Europe, and um, had to cancel my first class at Princeton, which I've never done. Anyway, um, that was the beginning. That was January and February.

BEN GILLESPIE: Okay. So, how else have you felt the impact of COVID-19 in your life? Since then?

JAMES WELLING: Oh. Well. I just, uh, in terms of the slow build-up, um, I think in mid—beginning of March, uh, Princeton cancelled its classes on a Monday. Our last class was on a Wednesday, so I went in. Very—in a way, it was very surprising and kind of shocking that almost every—in the beginning of the pandemic, almost everything that was being rolled out, seemed absolutely inconceivable. That we wouldn't be able to go to class, that, uh, we would actually be sheltering in place. There was an amazing few weeks when, you know, it dawned on me and my wife and, uh, friends that life was really, really radically changing.

That—I think that was the biggest surprise, was the—every day you think, "this can't be that bad," but it actually was. So there was a lot of, uh, you know, coming to terms in the beginning. Then, when we were essentially, um, quarantined, um, the first few weeks were, of course, very surprising and a little depressing, scary. Not a lot of information about how the virus was transmitted, so it was a lot of—not high-level fear, but lots of low-level anxiety [emergency vehicle sirens in the background].

I have to say that, when I was four years old, I, um, spent three months indoors in the summer of my fourth year with nephritis, which is a kidney disease, and, um, I was treated and, you know, survived. But my brother, who also had it, uh, we spent the entire summer indoors. My mom would make us picnics and we'd sit on the living room, on the living room rug with a blanket spread out and have a regular picnic. We weren't allowed to go outdoors for three months, and for a four-year-old, this was very, um, hard. The first few weeks of the pandemic, I said to my brother, "Reminds us of when we had nephritis because there's a lot of, you know, indoor activity." [00:04:57]

That said, I'm, um, secure enough financially that the pandemic hasn't affected me at all. So, I'm one of the very lucky people who: I'm retired from UCLA and I still teach at Princeton, I get Social Security. So, in a way, economically, the pandemic hasn't affected me. Um, I'm also someone who likes to spend a lot of time in my studio. I didn't understand exactly, uh, how time outside doing various things also was important, so now I'm spending all my time indoors, I have not been out much for three months; a few short walks, occasionally.

So, it's been a very, uh, intense time in terms of trying to get work done, always feeling like I'm not doing enough and I'm not making good use of this time. That's another idea that has popped up is "if not now, when?" So, trying to look at some of the things that I've always pushed off to the future: organizing my archives, uh, throwing work out, organizing my studio. Trying to do that now.

Um, another question would be helpful.

BEN GILLESPIE: Okay. Well, certainly thinking about all these ways in which you can utilize this time being back indoors, uh, have there been any particular ways in which you've documented this time or marked the return to the indoors?

JAMES WELLING: Um, so, about three weeks into the, uh, quarantine, staying indoors, I began to, um, look around for a camera. My main camera was being repaired and it was, unfortunately I had left it to be repaired, so I didn't have it, but I had a smaller Nikon that I actually really like, a digital camera, and so I began to photograph out my window, which faces East on Lafayette Street. So I began to photograph Federal Express—this is from the fifth floor, so I'm looking down. I began a project, I'm not really sure whether it will become a full-fledged body of work, but, uh, I began to photograph out my window. I began to photograph food messengers, food delivery people, pedestrians, people wearing masks, people not wearing masks. And then, uh, after the killing of George Floyd, uh, I began to document the protests that would go up and down Lafayette Street and Grand Street and Center Street outside my window. So, for the last two-and-a-half months, I've been documenting what's been happening out my window, first with COVID and then with the, uh, protests around social justice.

BEN GILLESPIE: Okay, and I've noticed some of those on your Instagram, and I was wondering if your social media engagement had changed over the course of the pandemic?

JAMES WELLING: Um, I, you know, previously on social media, I posted a lot of videos on trains and, uh, or things that interested me. I don't think—I think I—I'm posting—making fewer posts—I don't think my social media is an important gauge to, uh, my aesthetic life per se. I mean, I think I use social media the way many people do. It's not a, um, precise forum that, say an exhibition would be. It's more like a kind of look into things that I value and I find interesting, that are, you know, applicable or current, but I don't feel that: me, James Welling, my social media account, uh, is that significant in the bigger picture. That is, it's not—I know that someone like John Divola who, I'm a big fan of his work, he basically posts images of his work, and in the beginning of Instagram, I wasn't a big fan of artists who post just pictures of their work, but John, I think has turned social media into, you know, a platform for his work. I think that's very interesting, I follow a couple of other artists, um, avidly, but you know, I follow many people. Um, but I wouldn't say that my social media is that, you know, that different or important as opposed to other people. [00:10:17]

BEN GILLESPIE: Okay. Well, how do you feel about the—your sense of human connection? Has it shifted a bit during quarantine? And also with documenting what's going around you, uh, between the activities that are still going on during a pandemic as well as social justice protests.

JAMES WELLING: Well, that's a multiple question—multiple-part question. First, I think a lot of people are surprised at how they don't miss going to art openings or art events. I miss going to museums, I miss seeing shows, but, um, there are a lot of things that take away from creative time, um, social obligations. So, there's a way that the enforced, uh, solitude is not a bad thing. It, um, has, you know, separated me from, for instance my Princeton community. George Floyd's killing happened, I think after school ended in May, so we pretty much ended our Zoom—so, one of the interesting things about COVID, was the use of Zoom.

That became a way that the Princeton faculty and the visual arts program, we met every week, um, to talk about the changed landscape in our teaching, which was, you know, massive. I never in my wildest dreams ever thought I would teach quote, unquote online. When I taught at UCLA, this was something that was just beginning as a movement, and the UCLA department of art

faculty was absolutely against this, and, uh, I was, too, the idea that you could teach visual art, um, remotely. In one week, we had to, you know, leap into this new environment, learn how to use Zoom, which luckily Princeton provided for us. Luckily, Princeton provided all of my students with Photoshop, so I was able to radically transform what was previously an analog photography class to a digital photography class, and, um, just sort of forge ahead with my 10 students, most of whom lived in the East coast. But I had a student who returned to China and a student who lived in India, so the whole Zoom experience teaching—I mean that was a massive transformation.

And then, also working with the faculty every week, which was a more frequent connection than we would ever have had if we were on campus. So, the interesting thing, in answer to the first question about social relations: I got to see the insides of everyone's, um, residences, the staff and faculty, you know, where they live, what the backgrounds they chose to put up, so that was very interesting from a sociological point-of-view. Zoom etiquette, learning how to handle yourself in a Zoom meeting, so that was, you know, a fascinating, um, experience.

And it looks like I'm gearing up to teach again in the Fall online, even if Princeton comes back, I'm—because I'm 69 years old. Even though I'm in fantastic health, in my opinion, I just don't want to risk commuting down to Princeton and teaching. So, um, the whole Zoom experience—now I've, you know, I don't have a lot of close friends that I see very frequently. My wife has many more friends that she is always on the phone with or meeting up every week with. [00:15:00]

My life, socially, consists of my teaching and meeting with—occasionally meeting with people from my gallery, David Zwirner gallery, um, and occasionally seeing friends, but it's a lot more isolated, say, than my wife's. Interestingly, I now have a Tuesday Zoom call with another friend in England, who I got to know a lot better in January, when I was over there, and now we meet every Tuesday and converse and, uh, look at trains online, but mostly it's conversation about what's going on in our lives and our teaching and so in an interesting way I also have a standing Zoom call now with my brother once a week, which is—um, previously I would see him every couple months. I mean, we enjoy each other's company, but, um, now we speak more often. And I have another standing call with someone every couple of weeks, an art historian. So, even though face-to-face, direct personal contact has been eliminated, I'm keeping in touch, to some extent, in a different and more—it's a different way.

You know, around questions of, you know, coming out of the social justice movement, Princeton, as I said, ended before this happened, so my class, um, my students in my analog/digital photography class, were mostly working on issues around pandemic. How can we make art in a pandemic and not have it be about that to some extent? So, school let out and then the rallies and, uh, movement started, so I really didn't have to deal with that in teaching.

Other ways that I'm sort of involved with issues around Black Lives Matter and social justice is I'm on the board of a foundation, The Foundation for Contemporary Art[s], which over the last few years has really tried to improve, with board members, um, getting a diverse board and also extending the reach of the foundation into other communities that it hadn't reached before. And so basically, the board has been interested in [ph] and the staff have been working on, but the killing of George Floyd and defund the police and all of the, um, demonstrations have really caused the foundation to start thinking about: A) should we issue a statement in support of social justice? And B) How can we change our core values statement and possibly, um, deal with issues around that?

So, I've been involved in a couple of phone calls and I've been thinking a lot about, um, exclusivity in visual art, maybe it's elitism, questions around experimentality, which the Foundation for Contemporary Art[s] prioritizes experimental work. So, thinking a lot about that. And, um, the foundation has been doing a really good job at reaching out to former recipients of their large grants and talking to them about how the foundation is perceived and we're getting feedback from them. So, my interaction with questions around social justice is as a—someone who's listening to a lot of this and watching, um, thinking about what the foundation should do, but I'm not an active participant. I'm someone who's actually learning a lot.

BEN GILLESPIE: All right, well I guess to sort of wrap it up: um, what memories or lessons do you think are the most urgent to document in this moment?

JAMES WELLING: Oh, I forgot to mention the whole experience of clean air. The Green New Deal arrived many years too early, and now it's disappearing. [00:20:00]

I don't know, you know, I think, you know, my perspective on the pandemic and the protests, since I haven't participated in any because I'm worried about my health, um, my experience has been one that has been minimally impacted. I've been conceptually impacted, not being able to visit family members or travel, but still with a big backlog of work. So, I think the impact for someone like me has been, I want to say minimal. But it would be very interesting to talk to an artist who has a straight job, a younger artist who then finds themselves with lots of time on their hands and how to deal with that. Um, I don't know, are you able to reach out to younger artists? I imagine you're probably—your cutoff is probably toward more professional people who are not, you know, struggling to make a living.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, part of this project is expanding the range a little bit to—

JAMES WELLING: Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: —to talk to younger artists or less established.

JAMES WELLING: Absolutely, that's, like, super important, because, yeah, as I said at the beginning, I am financially stable, my life, you know, it's been a relief in a certain sense, not to have to deal with certain social obligations. So, I'm making hopefully good use of the studio time, I'm trying to read up on issues around social justice and Black aesthetics, so I'm probably the person who the pandemic has affected the least—or, my class of artists, who are financially secure, so I would really, um, hope that you can find other younger artists, and I could help provide you with some names if you'd like, um, very young artists, and you know, other artists who are still working away at straight jobs, non-teaching jobs.

BEN GILLESPIE: Thank you. Yeah. That would be wonderful. Well, I'd like to thank you and we can mark this as the end of the interview.

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