



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Devon Dikeou,
2020 July 7

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Devon Dikeou on July 7, 2020. The interview took place from Dikeou's home in Denver, Colorado and was conducted by Josh T. Franco for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of Archives of American Art's the 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. Um, this is Josh T. Franco interviewing Devon Dikeou at her home in Denver, CO, on July 7, 2020, for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. And that's the scripted part and it's done.

Devon, it's really nice to see you. And thank you for doing this with us.

DEVON DIKEOU: Right on.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So, this is really just, you know, these are brief, and we want to know how people in the American art world are doing. Um, so we can start just, yeah, at the top of the questions. Tell me how these past few months have been for you since March—since the pandemic, um, hit us.

DEVON DIKEOU: Well, I suppose that's the, "How are you?" which I already answered with, "Right on," which is the wrong answer. But here we go.

[They laugh.]

DEVON DIKEOU: Okay. Um—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Move on at will.

DEVON DIKEOU: Uh, I'll go with, "Hi there." Um, I'm quoting Washington on *Welcome Back, Kotter*: "You look up what sweat hockey is." Uh, but we're all doing well and hope everyone else is doing equally well. As you can see, I'm wearing a mask but I'm going to put another one on because, like a jockey, I can put many on.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I have not seen anyone do multiple masks. This is a first. You're setting precedent.

DEVON DIKEOU: [Laughs] I can't even manage to do it. Good thing I'm not a jockey, uh, at the Kentucky Derby. Uh, but we published two masks by Romana Drdová, um, six months before the pandemic or sometime around there—maybe it's longer—I always get time screwed up. She's a terrific artist and somehow her prescient masks—She's a Czech artist, uh, which is, you know, Eastern European and you'd think, um, that masks would be more from, like, eastern cultures like Asia.

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

DEVON DIKEOU: But she, uh, she made them and maybe they help people in our world a little bit. Super cool. And that's the treasure, uh, to be given the opportunity to see many things and be able to be exposed to such creative artists—

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

DEVON DIKEOU: —and early in their career. It's part of my practice: sharing other artists with other people. And I want to share—in that kindergarten kind of way—that's not so easy at this time. And uh, yeah, there's Zoom, which we're doing. And there's FaceTime. But real interaction is hard to replace and it makes it feel really [inaudible]. And by the way, what was your first mask? No, I know the answer.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] Mine was also Romana Drdová. That I'd luckily—it was such a weird—

you know, quarantine happened. We had a lot of time at home. I started cleaning—deep cleaning and then I found my Drdová mask.

Um, can you tell us more about where I found it? It was part of a *Zing* issue—I don't remember the number. And so also, just to know, you're the founder, editor, creator of *Zing* magazine, which I've always seen as, like—when I—it's a world you enter. And I remember when I entered *Zing* world and, uh, yeah. You really are dedicated to sharing other artists' work along with yours.

DEVON DIKEOU: Uh, well, um, I met Romana in Prague and she carried me off the plane, you know, like with the little, like, card that says, "I'm looking for Devon Dikeou." [Laughs.] You know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

DEVON DIKEOU: And to my place of residency. Uh, and, uh, she, um—I had a residency with, uh, Black Cube—as a Black Cube Fellow in Prague for an exhibition at Futura. And, um, we became really, you know, good friends I would say. And, um, she—I visited her studio, which was in this, like, place far away from the center of town. And, uh, she showed me this project that she was doing, and she was hand-making these masks. And I thought—and seriously, we were just about to—it wasn't six months ago now that I think about it—but, uh, we were about to, uh, publish the magazine and I'm like, she's got to be in it. And, uh, so—and these masks have to be in it. And— [00:05:10]

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

DEVON DIKEOU: —and that was, uh, just remarkable, uh, that we did that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: When was she making masks? I—because she was making masks long before COVID hit.

DEVON DIKEOU: Yeah, she was because she's been doing residencies in Asia.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay.

DEVON DIKEOU: And, uh, mask-wearing in Asia is a much more prevalent thing than, uh, here in, of occidental societies. And, uh, she, uh—and even when we were in Prague and she's putting them on at the, you know, at the pub or wherever you are. And, you know, just for me to take a snapshot, it was really interesting because it seemed so strange. And, uh, she, uh, was really prescient in all of that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. Do you want to show yours off a bit? I'm trying to see. Are there hands at the bottom?

DEVON DIKEOU: It's a hand that goes across. I may even have it upside down. [She takes off the mask and holds it up to the camera to show the design]. No. It's a hand that goes across. She has another one that is sushi.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I have the sushi one. It's hanging on the doorknob right there.

[They laugh.]

DEVON DIKEOU: Put it on!

JOSH T. FRANCO: I'll put it on, sure.

DEVON DIKEOU: [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, it was in my pocket.

DEVON DIKEOU: [Laughs.] There you go.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Good idea. This is fun.

DEVON DIKEOU: Oh, see? There you go.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I love it.

DEVON DIKEOU: Uh, and—

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

DEVON DIKEOU: —and so now we go to question two, I guess?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes, let's do it. So what do you think is missing from accounts of our current crisis?

DEVON DIKEOU: Oh, uh, well, I was going to go to question two, which is, "Tell me how the past few months weeks have been for you," but I can go—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, yes, yeah.

DEVON DIKEOU: [Laughs.] And I—selfishly, I was working with Cortney Lane Stell, uh, an independent curator—and my team, um, to produce, uh, the *Mid-Career Smear* for the past seven years. And, um, it encompasses my practice for 30 years, maybe more. And it opened just before the U.S. realized its COVID-19, uh, ordeal and, um, uh, closed, like, two weeks after. And it will reopen after Labor Day. And, um, when people feel safe and comfortable, as well as with programming. And that will be when you come out [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes, I will come to it, yeah.

DEVON DIKEOU: So, we'll have a grand, old time. Um, there you go.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Um, that's great. So, do you—what were those two weeks like? I want to, like—since it was so short, I'd love to give you a chance to inhabit it a little bit. It must have been nice to—that's the—I mean, that's a retrospective of your career so far. It's huge.

DEVON DIKEOU: It was really wonderful. The opening was great, a zillion people came. Um, there was a big band, and party, and all the brouhaha. And, um—and it was wonderful in the sense that there were a lot of people that are not necessarily involved in the art world that were there and got to see it.

And then a wonderful thing happened, there's this group of teachers, um, from the universities in the Denver, uh, Boulder metro area and they kind of have like a book club of university teachers in the art world.

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

DEVON DIKEOU: And they meet once in a while and go to, uh, shows. And they all came. That was a real highlight. And, um, at one point, we go—and they want the long tour, you know. You always start out a tour with, "how much time do you have?"

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

DEVON DIKEOU: You know. Uh, and they want the long tour which means it's, like, two hours, you know, because there's over, uh, 60 rooms, and, um, it's in two spots. A pop-up space on Colfax and at our downtown space.

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

DEVON DIKEOU: And it was going to, but not now, have a, uh, airstream for *Zing* magazine—

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

DEVON DIKEOU: —uh, where people could go and read *Zing* magazine. And, uh, so usually there's one or two rooms that you don't go in or you don't say anything about the piece because people's attention span is pretty short. And, uh, so we went into the Rolodex room, which is my Rolodex for seven zillion years. [00:10:34]

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

DEVON DIKEOU: And, uh, they're on plinths and it's kind of like a, uh, you know, a parade of Rolodexes with underneath plinths. And, um, she goes—one woman goes—it's all women, okay. There's no men. Okay.

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

DEVON DIKEOU: And so, it's—I don't know. Anyways, uh—and she says, "Are we allowed to enter?" And I'm like, "Yes, of course." "Are we allowed to touch?" "Yes, of course." Uh, she figures out that it's arranged alphabetically. And, um, she goes immediately to O. And then she finds what she's looking for. And then she goes, "May I take a picture?" And I'm like, "Yes, of course." And, uh, then she says, "Will you come and take a picture with me?" And I'm like, "Yes, of course."

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

DEVON DIKEOU: All right. So this goes on. Then we leave and we get on to the next pieces. And, um, in the end, she goes—because it's—even—it's like a book group thing, you know. It's like, let's summarize what we saw, you know—

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

DEVON DIKEOU: —kind of thing. And then she goes, "I have a confession to make. I'm Yoko Ono's daughter." And I didn't even know Yoko Ono had a daughter [laughs], you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I don't think I did either. Incredible.

DEVON DIKEOU: Uh, but obviously it's from a previous engagement with someone before John Lennon, but. And she goes, "I have to"—and it was on a Saturday—and she says, "I have to—uh, I have a conversation with my mother every Saturday and she wants me to say something interesting. And today, I have something interesting to tell her." So that was kind of fun. So that was—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [inaudible] Yoko Ono in the Rolodex?

DEVON DIKEOU: What did you say?

JOSH T. FRANCO: You found Ono in the Rolodex?

DEVON DIKEOU: Yes. Well, it's not hard to get her in your Rolodex, you know—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

DEVON DIKEOU: —she's [inaudible] the Dakota, you know?

[They laugh.]

DEVON DIKEOU: I'm not, like, getting any secret information. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Of course. Yeah. That's great. What a nice story.

DEVON DIKEOU: Well—

JOSH T. FRANCO: But there's going to be many more like that when the show reopens. Um, so let's move on to the next question.

DEVON DIKEOU: Uh-huh.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Uh, which—we skipped the lessons one, but what do—so this is it. What do you think is missing from accounts of the current crisis?

DEVON DIKEOU: Hmm. Interactions, closeness, 50 ways to leave your lover, relational aesthetics. So humor, in the end, trumps it all.

DEVON DIKEOU: Everyone should laugh a little bit more. That's my thoughts.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

DEVON DIKEOU: And I'm glad you laughed.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] You know, I think a lot—I don't think the masks have seen their full potential. You sense it more than others because of Drdová. But, uh, I think a lot of comedy can happen here, right?

DEVON DIKEOU: Yes. I mean, c'mon let's make lips, go—[she moves her fingers like talking lips in front of her mask]

[They laugh.]

DEVON DIKEOU: You know? Why not?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

DEVON DIKEOU: Uh, next question.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Um, so what do you think can't be captured by standard accounts of our current crises?

DEVON DIKEOU: Huh, I didn't get that one, so.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, we'll move on to the next. So how have you felt the impact of COVID in your life?

DEVON DIKEOU: Mm, six degrees of separation. There's a sadness because everyone knows somebody who's lost somebody.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yep.

DEVON DIKEOU: Um, it's just—I—same as everyone else. I think it's, uh, just horrible. And, uh, we're—but what are we—we all have to be responsible and take care of, uh, ourselves and not have so many selfish, uh, thoughts. Hence, the mask.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And is—have you had observations about Denver? The impact, you know, as a Denver citizen, you know. You grew up there. How has Denver felt?

DEVON DIKEOU: Uh, I think Denver's pretty responsible. It's a pretty politically correct, uh, environment. Uh, maybe more rurally, there—they don't need to use masks—

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

DEVON DIKEOU: —as much as people do in Denver. And so they're not abided by as much. But I think everyone here seems to try, you know. Um, we've—I think we've entered phase three. [00:15:12]

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

DEVON DIKEOU: Uh, so you can do dine-in dining and, uh, everybody really tries to respect each other's space. Uh, but, you know, I live on a park—which we can get into later. It's coming up.

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

DEVON DIKEOU: Uh, but there, you know, is also, um, uh, other ways that people are expressing themselves.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Um, this is a—I like this question. How are you caring for yourself and your loved ones right now?

DEVON DIKEOU: Usually I'm cooking.

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

DEVON DIKEOU: Hayley [Richardson, Director, Dikeou Collection] knows that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

DEVON DIKEOU: She gets lots of good stuff. And sharing and gardening. Uh, but even that is sort of off limits because people don't want to eat food made by somebody else. And hiking is a good thing. I think it's the underrated yoga.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It—say that again. It's overrated—

DEVON DIKEOU: It's the underrated yoga.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

DEVON DIKEOU: Hiking.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I've been going on very long walks. Like hours.

DEVON DIKEOU: Exactly.

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

DEVON DIKEOU: It really helps you feel good.

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

DEVON DIKEOU: And it cleans your mind and, um, makes you feel better and, um, is a way that you're outdoors. And, you know, uh, I just love it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

DEVON DIKEOU: You know

JOSH T. FRANCO: Can I ask what kinds of things you've been cooking?

DEVON DIKEOU: Oh, yes. Uh, I cook transparent pie, [inaudible] bread. Everyone's making bread. You can't—

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

DEVON DIKEOU: —buy yeast. You know?

[They laugh.]

DEVON DIKEOU: There's no yeast. And there's no flour.

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

DEVON DIKEOU: And, uh, chocolate sheet cake—Colorado chocolate sheet cake. And my best girlfriend growing up, Annie, wrote me uh, in the *New York Times*, uh, that, uh, they have the Colorado sheet cake recipe. And I said, "Who at the *New York Times* got the [inaudible] Country Day cookbook?" Okay, [laughs] because that's where that came from.

[They laugh.]

DEVON DIKEOU: And we're just giggling about it all the time. But, chocolate sheet cake, chocolate pie. Uh, I make a lot of pies.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great—

DEVON DIKEOU: I'm good at pie.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Nice.

DEVON DIKEOU: Uh—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Um, so let's see. What has changed for you and your work during this time?

DEVON DIKEOU: I'm following the little rule that my father taught me, call five people a day. Obviously, that analog communication is outdated, right? But now it does work even in our digital environment. Uh, I have this project called Open Art Fax Line—

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

DEVON DIKEOU: —in which people can fax in art, or what they're thinking or feeling. Number is— I had props here but—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

DEVON DIKEOU: I obviously—I lost them, [she holds up a card that reads "Open Art Fax Line Devon Dikeou 720-379-5972"] 720-379-5972. Um, originally it was done in the early '90s. And then—like now—the faxes were political—

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

DEVON DIKEOU: —because that happened at the time of, uh, Rodney King. And now we have George Floyd. And, uh, so we have things like this coming in [she holds up a fax of what looks like the front page of the *Washington Post*], "Minneapolis Officer Charged with Murder." And—

JOSH T. FRANCO: And that came to you as a fax in the project? Amazing—

DEVON DIKEOU: Yeah, people fax that in.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

DEVON DIKEOU: And so, all these faxes come into the fax machine. So very [inaudible] style, they just fall on the floor, scattered.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

DEVON DIKEOU: And, uh, there's also sentimental faxes. You know, things like uh, Christo dying.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

DEVON DIKEOU: You know, and there's also more local ones like the *Denver Post*. "For fourth night, Denver police unleash tear gas and foam bullets as marchers again defy curfew." Like that—[she holds this fax up to the camera]

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

DEVON DIKEOU: —you know. So, it's a reflection of the time. And it's kind of—Mary Barone [ph]—one of my friends—she said it's like the first Facebook, you know. People can fax in what their thoughts are.

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

DEVON DIKEOU: But I don't know. Um, but they can be artistic: you know, somebody making a drawing. Or they can be silly, you know, like a joke. [00:20:01]

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

DEVON DIKEOU: You know? [Laughs.] Like, you know, the stupidest—like, a Richard Prince joke but not even a painting.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

DEVON DIKEOU: You know? Those kind of—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

DEVON DIKEOU: Uh, and I think it's, um, important at this time of COVID to—and protests—for closure for—and closure for art somehow to be present in this analog, old way of communication, and archiving it—at this time—as it passes. It's a public diarrhea.

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

DEVON DIKEOU: Absolutely.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Fantastic. Um, so we only have a couple minutes left. Do you have a question you really liked, to want to respond to, of the remaining ones?

DEVON DIKEOU: Okay, let's go to the next one.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Sure. Um, so what has changed—oh, we did that one. What draws your attention? So has the way your attention gets drawn changed?

DEVON DIKEOU: And then I have one more that I must do.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Please.

DEVON DIKEOU: I watch TV 24/7.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

DEVON DIKEOU: *I Dream of Jeannie* is on my TV schedule. In fact, I think it's on right now.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

DEVON DIKEOU: And I'm missing it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

DEVON DIKEOU: Uh, think about background—mostly all the characters—but most of all, think of Jeannie in a bottle quarantined for two thousand years and freed by Captain Nelson. He's not yet a [inaudible].

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

DEVON DIKEOU: In one particular episode, Jeannie, in her bottle, is accidentally given to the Russians and it becomes a national crisis. But she saves our democracy—

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

DEVON DIKEOU: —uh, without anyone knowing, including Dr. Bellows.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow. I love that idea for her as the hero.

DEVON DIKEOU: Yes, okay, my next question that I want to do is: how do you envision as the crisis continues?

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

DEVON DIKEOU: Okay, you ready?

JOSH T. FRANCO: I'm ready.

DEVON DIKEOU: [inaudible] and Maude. [sings] Lady Godiva was a freedom rider. She didn't care if the whole world looked. Joan of Arc with the Lord to guide her. She was a sister who really cooked. Isadora was the first bra-burner. Ain't ya glad she showed up? Oh yeah! And when the country was fallin' apart Betsy Ross got it all sewed up.

And then there's Maude. And then there's Maude. And then there's Maude. And then there's Maude. And then there's Maude. And then there's Maude. And then there's that old compromising, enterprising, anything but tranquilizing. Right on Maude!

Okay [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: I got my lighter out for you [holds lighter up to the camera].

[They laugh.]

DEVON DIKEOU: And then, uh, I'm just—I want to just finish with this. Uh, I was working [laughs] in, you know—aside from all my, uh, '70s sitcoms that are normally our base—I was working on a series of videos for the *Mid-Career Smear* that didn't come into fruition. Um, and one of the concepts was that the video backgrounds were, of, news programming. It didn't matter who it is: it's *Hannity*, uh, *AM Joy*, uh, *Morning Joy*—uh, excuse me, *Morning Joe*; uh, it, uh, you know, whoever it was—you know, *Rachel Maddow*, uh, *NBC News*, *CBS News*. So all the backgrounds behind them. Um, but it would just be the backgrounds without the—

JOSH T. FRANCO: I love that.

DEVON DIKEOU: —commentator. And, like, very Jack Goldstein; you know, taking these, like, images that are on, uh, in the background, uh, that you don't think about. And I didn't manage to make it. But now Zoom has done it for me and you can choose your own background. Uh, or she's opened the curated ones Zoom could give you.

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

DEVON DIKEOU: And, um, even the commentators are now venturing their thoughts about colleague's interviews—uh, interviewee's, uh, curatorial choices of books, art, and even pineapples. In between is now more relevant than ever.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Absolutely. That's a perfect line to end on, I think, Devon.

DEVON DIKEOU: I had a better one but that's okay. That's okay.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, do you want to give it?

DEVON DIKEOU: No.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay.

DEVON DIKEOU: No, um, I'm happy with how everything went, so.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Perfect. Well thank you so much.

DEVON DIKEOU: [inaudible.] It's my first time on Zoom. And, um, I was very nervous, and you made me feel very at ease so thank you. [00:25:00]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, my pleasure. So I'm going to stop recording but I'm not hanging up. But I'm going to stop recording now.

DEVON DIKEOU: Okay.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]