Interview

JACOB PROCTOR: Okay, so, this is Jacob Proctor from the Archives of American Art. I'm in New York City, and I'm speaking today with John Corbett, writer and curator and co-owner of Corbett vs. Dempsey, a gallery in Chicago. And he is speaking to me from what looks to me like the Corbett vs. Dempsey offices.

JOHN CORBETT: True. Hi, Jacob. Nice to see you.

JACOB PROCTOR: So, I mean, my first question—and really the big question—is A, how are you, and B, kind of, how have the last few months for you been personally and or professionally?

JOHN CORBETT: I personally am good. I'm dealing with the same, um, uncertainties and stresses and anxieties that everybody is, but personally, I'm doing okay. Made the, I think, right choice for us with my wife to adopt a dog about a month ago, and that's been a great distraction and a fantastic new element to our family [laughs]. Um, so, that was—that's been good and humanizing in a period of, yeah, social distance.

So, I'm good. The gallery's fine, gallery's doing as well as we can in this learning phase of a whole new world, and uh, we have put in place a whole bunch of new systems that are working well for us in terms of being able to keep us afloat, mostly. That's one of the key things. And to keep us going the things that we love to do.

JACOB PROCTOR: And, I mean, you—Corbett vs. Dempsey is a little bit atypical as a gallery to begin with, and that you also do—like, you have a publishing program, and you publish music, and that it really didn't start out as a commercial gallery. Um, have you—how have you—have you seen the landscape really shifting for good, or do you think that this is a—sort of a temporary—maybe long-term temporary, but for how you are thinking about operating?

JOHN CORBETT: I think this will be a permanent change in the landscape of, yeah, the gallery landscape, for sure. I think it's hard to know exactly what shape it will take, but I think this is changing the way we'll be doing business. We—it's not also out of the blue, in a certain way, the changes. There were already—let's say—take one component, for instance. A big component of, you know, small medium or upper—let's say medium-sized galleries and larger, which is the art fair component. I think that's going to change dramatically, but it had already become something that people were really wanting to rethink.

The kind of de rigueur quality that it had settled into, the fact that there was such a proliferation of fairs, et cetera, and the sense of it as being a kind of moving community of more or less the same people from one place to another. I might see you in one city, and then, a month later, see you in another city. And it—there's a routine that had settled in with that um, that I think people were having a lot of questions about it from a—kind of the function of it in relation to what we all do. It was very important for galleries our size in terms of broaching the great divide from a city like Chicago to various other high-profile, higher-density, commercial art centers. Just getting our names into people's minds, that was—that was an important aspect.

But beyond that, I mean, the expense of it, the fatigue of it, for—you know, we have six people at the gallery. For a gallery our size, the overwhelming fatigue of even just doing four or five fairs a year was taxing us in ways that are very difficult to quantify. And so, I think all of that is going to be changed forever. I don't think there will never be fairs again, but I think that they will be a different kind of animal.
JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN CORBETT: So, I think those kinds of changes are going to be—they're going to be unidirectional, and I'm—and I don't necessarily rue the day that the fair landscape changes, because it had to. For us, there's a lot of things that are—that are going on that are—this slowdown, in some ways, because we don't have the nut that someone in New York who has a gallery the size of ours—we have an 8,000-square-foot space. We had recently moved into a new space, so we'd spent a year here before all of this hit.

And that put a hardship on us because of course we had changed the amount of money that we spent on a monthly basis. But we don't have the nut that a place in New York or a place in L.A. does. Um. so, although we are still working very hard to make ends meet, we're able in the slowdown to think very deliberately about what we're doing and how we're doing it. And that has been extremely important to us in terms of all of the character of what we're—of what we're rolling out.

So, uh, we took six weeks to really roll out anything in terms of digital platform anything. Because that was very unnatural to us, it was not something that was a part of what we were about, so much. We're very much objects in space. We're material history nerds, and stuff magnets. So, for us, uh, that really took rethinking. But now that we're into it and we realize that we can do these online exhibitions that are more like digests—for us, that's going to end up being a continuous part of our program even after things have changed, quote-unquote, “back”. Once we're doing in real space exhibitions again, I think that will be a feature of things that we do—that we weren't able to do before. So, that's an extremely important part of it, and it fits the nerdy nature of what we are about.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah. Have you had any experience, either positive or negative, with the new—with all these—the kind of—the online viewing rooms that the major fairs have been doing, like Frieze and Art Basel and whatnot?

JOHN CORBETT: We haven't really participated in any of them. We dodged a bullet in a way because this year, we were waitlisted for Basel in Switzerland. And so, not being obliged to participate in that fair meant that we weren't part of that. And we didn't do Hong Kong, and we weren't doing any of the other fairs that have happened since the pandemic kicked in. So, we haven't—we haven't done anyone—let's put it this way: We haven't done anyone else's online stuff. But it's been useful for us, watching people do that and watching them have to figure out how to work within those. And we did do—the ADAA has its own art logic donated three months of free—three months of free use of a page to all of the members of the ADAA. And so, we did one of those.

So, you know, we're getting used to it, and we're understanding what it's good for and what it's not good for. They've been—I know colleagues of mine for whom they have been very successful on both a financial level and also in terms of moving the ball forward with artist career and artist development. For us, they've been modestly successful financially, but we feel that the things that we've been doing have been very important to the lifeblood of the meaning of the gallery. So, both those things have to work in—you know, in tandem. And I think we're really just getting rolling with that we're doing.

JACOB PROCTOR: Do you think that it's—if the—if the art world sort of becomes a little bit less of this sort of traveling circus, moveable feasts kind of model, do you think that the shift online is going to have a—you know, uh, like, kind of reconfigure a little bit these kind of relationships between different centers in different cities?

With the—I mean, I guess you've already made a lot of those relationships through the in-person interaction, but I think a lot of people, myself included, are wondering, like, even if fairs do start up again at the same pace, which they probably won't, will people be interested in, you know, traveling around the world to go and walk around in a convention center with 10,000 other people?

JOHN CORBETT: I think the second of those aspects is the one that no one's going to want to do. And I wonder about—travel is a big question mark for all of us, I think. For everyone. I mean, all of my friends who are musicians are in a really desperate situation right now because, you know,
their livelihood comes from traveling around. They don't make money by making records. They make records in order to travel and to tour. And so, we're in a little bit—yeah, the reverse situation, which is, we—in order for people to see the things we want them to see in person, either they have to travel to us or we have to do a fair or a collaboration someplace so that they can come and see them. And right now, that's not possible. So, we're doing that by proxy.

It's—you know, wouldn't be my first choice. But neither would be continuing the way we were. So, I don't know—it's a good question, whether or not that kind of center periphery relationship is going to be shifted as a result of this. That would be an optimistic outcome, would be, like, okay, we understand; now, we think a little bit less of, like, New York as the center, right? Now, we spread it out. I would say that's been, you know, at least half of what we've been working on the whole time we’ve been a gallery, is just trying to flatten out how we understand the history of American art and how we understand the relationships of contemporary art.

Um, and not in an antagonist way, but in a way to say, let—can we understand these things—can we understand New York differently through seeing it in relationship, for instance, to these other fields? Which I think we can. So—but I don't know. Again, it's difficult to know, but I—that's an optimistic—

JACOB PROCTOR: And it would be interesting to see if Chicago, you know, which is a city that I know well—

JOHN CORBETT: Yeah.

JACOB PROCTOR: —and which has an amazing collector base, if that collector base, um, wasn't able to travel as much or didn't want to travel as much.

JOHN CORBETT: Yeah.

JACOB PROCTOR: What would that mean for their collecting practices?

JOHN CORBETT: That's a good question.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah.

JOHN CORBETT: Yeah. I mean, that's a good question, and it—you would see then the people who are buying things according to what I think of as real collecting, which is the urgency of understanding things, seeing them, feeling them, wanting them for your collection, as opposed to the people who are doing it because there's a name attached to it or a value attached to it and a reputation attached to it. So, there's, you know, all of that kind of stuff, which is what we and many of—many of us refer to as "trophy hunting." I mean, that's a little bit—you know, that's a reality, but in Chicago, I also think there are—there's a lower ratio of trophy collectors to collectors who really are in it because they have the bug.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah. Do you think that there are things like, in this whole moment, that in the kind of official or sort of standard, kind of broad media accounts are not—are there things that are being left out, that are going to be significant?

JOHN CORBETT: Specifically, in terms of art world stuff?

JACOB PROCTOR: Or not specifically. I mean—

JOHN CORBETT: Well, I think, not specifically, it's not like nobody's talking about this, but I think the psychological, um, repercussions of, of however many months this turns into of having very truncated, awkward social, um, relationships is going to be.

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We'll have to see what those—what those repercussions are. I'm fearful about that. I think that spills over into the other—the more art world specific aspect of it, which is, I'm concerned about artists right now, not just in terms of them being able to make enough money to make a living—but that's of course a huge concern—but also in terms of what this does to them in a broader sense. What—how they walk away from this understanding the value of what they do.

And I think we have to maybe get a little deeper than just seeing that. It's easy to say art is so important right now. You know, I mean, that's—of course, I believe that. I—we—all of us do. Otherwise, we wouldn't be doing what we do. But feeling that urgency, feeling the necessity of
that, and understanding why it's important, why it's necessary. In what way does it inform the texture of our lives? The—that can have a positive, healing, disruptive, uh, revolutionary impact. I mean, all of those things. But we—doing that in a way that is not superficial, understanding—those are the things I'm concerned about because I think right now it's very difficult to think straight about those kinds of things and to—and to think deeply.

Um, also, because we're on screens all the time. I mean, because we're so wedded to slightly unfamiliar ways of being—I mean, it's like, a whole bunch of old folks like us, or older folks. You're not as old as I am, but older folks like us have suddenly been forced to live and communicate the way young people do.

[They laugh.]

JACOB PROCTOR: It's true.

JOHN CORBETT: It's like—it's rough. It's square pegs and round holes. And—

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah.

JOHN CORBETT: And it's doing something to us, I think, psychologically. So, I don't know. And I think all of that has to do with, you know, what will the relationships be ultimately between artists and galleries, um, for instance? How will that relationship be—continue to be um, an ethical one, one that makes the kinds of sense that it needs to make in order for this infrastructure to work the way that it does? I think we'll end up having to really face those issues. What is a gallery for? What is a—you know, what is all of this? And especially then, to loop it one more time. What is all of that in relation to public institutions?

If the—if the aim of our job has been for a long time as gallerists—has um, been to be agents for artists with the ultimate aim of having their work interpreted by and ultimately, probably residing in institutional contexts where they—it can be preserved and understood for decades and centuries. If those institutions start to really have serious problems with acquisition, with—and they falter, then what are we doing? Then, what—then, we become car salesmen, the car salesmen we've always sought not to seem like. And that ends up being a very big concern. So, I don't know. Those are off the cuff things I'm thinking about.

JACOB PROCTOR: Those are all very real—I think, very real possibilities and very real concerns. I mean, have you already—has it already changed the way that you interact with or kind of relate to the artists that you represent? Like, because I know, like—for example, you know, not everybody is so comfortable talking on, you know—yes, you guys, you—the gallery—you represent artists of very different generations. And I know that not everyone is equally comfortable on social—on—you know, with iPhones and—

JOHN CORBETT: Yeah.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah, and Zooming, and this-ing and that-ing.

JOHN CORBETT: I—you know, it has. In a weird way, it's forced the issue in a—in a—in an unexpected manner, which is that we're communicating more and more frequently and more regularly with all of our artists.

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JACOB PROCTOR: Interesting.

JOHN CORBETT: And I think that's um, —you know, that's also right out of the gate when this became—when it was—we were in this period of incredible uncertainty in mid-March. Implicitly, instinctively, I understand my job right now is to get ahold of all of my artists and take their temperature and see where they are and support them. Psychologically, as much as any. And then, anything beyond that—and then, also to help them—I mean, I had one artist that I really had to help sort of walk through decisions that they were about to make that were going to be life-changing decisions that might have been disastrous. And they were panicking.

Right? So—and it all had to do with money, and it had to do with, how am I going to make—they were in a period of transition. And they needed support. And I knew that. I knew that I had to get in touch. And so, in some ways, it's actually made us closer with those artists. And so, I appreciate that uh, fact. I think it's a—it's—you know, I mean, if we're looking for silver linings,
I'll take them where I can find them. This has made me feel much closer to the artists we work with and incredibly, incredibly thankful to be working with a staff who I personally love and who I trust and who I look forward to being on the phone with more or less on a daily basis under these incredibly bizarre circumstances.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah. It has been a crazy, crazy time. Um well, thank you for taking the time to talk with me. I wish you and all of your staff, who I—all of whom I admire and respect and like personally very much—so, please give them all my best, and, yeah, stay safe.

JOHN CORBETT: Thanks, Jacob. Yeah. Stay in touch.

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