



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Cannupa Hanska
Luger, 2020 July 13

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Cannupa Hanska Luger on July 13, 2020. The interview took place at Luger's home in Santa Fe, New Mexico, 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 Cannupa Hanska Luger at his home in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on July 13 for the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Arts Pandemic Oral History Project. So, Cannupa, thanks for doing this. And this is the question we're starting with everyone. It's 2020. There's two pandemics, COVID-19 and a lot of anti-Black racism. And we just want to know how artists are doing. So, how are you? How have you been since March?

CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER: I'm good since March. I would say that both of those pandemics were in place for a long time and they're just coming to a head right now. And, you know, I live, and I work at home, and I do a lot of traveling and a lot of movement, put together a lot of exhibitions. But for the most part, in the wake of all of this, I have developed some really needed clarity that I think the pace of our of our culture up until this kind of like forced-to-pause and shelter-in-place scenario. I feel like all of that is kind of like put into perspective certain things that the speed at which the world was moving, I couldn't grasp, really.

And I say that because I—the last two, three years, I've had a very, um, fast paced kind of kind of lifestyle that involved me working a lot in institutional spaces. And I did all of it with a conscious kind of like effort because I didn't go to grad school to be, uh, kind of like anchored within those spaces that oftentimes grad school kind of, like, you—that become accessible because you're working within those fields. Because I bypassed it, I felt like that it was important that I had to put a pause on my studio practice and focus a lot of what I colloquially would call jaw work. You know, a lot of talks.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, okay. [Laughs.]

CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER: Yeah. Yeah, exactly [laughs.] But a lot of. A lot of—becoming a lot more, I guess embedded in the social kind of aspect of art making, that the private studio practice didn't necessarily have a driving need for, you know, especially when we're talking like economics, you know, so the economics of a studio practice and, like, selling work through galleries and all of that sort of stuff can sustain you in a way. But to be involved in institutional and academic spaces, there's a lot of engagement that's involved in that. And I developed an aspect of my practice that was heavily socially engineered, you know. And so, that forced me to be out in the public travel, which was nice. It's funny because it's I guess, my—I don't know, ego self or projected, you know, self-idea of who I am is very much so like a hermit, you know. Not a social person. I enjoy the quietness of my studio and I enjoy the alone time really within that.

And I'm—I'm a father. I have two little boys, um my wife, Ginger, my son, 'io , and my sons 'io and Tsesa. All of that travel had that like—I was working towards developing security and comfort for that. But in the process, did not engage or be a part of that, because I was so busy doing the other thing that provided all of that, so I was doing all of the work but not recognizing or participating in any of the benefits of that. So, as shelter-in-place kind of came into being, I realized how incredibly privileged and fortunate I was to live out in the mountains, in the Southwest, in New Mexico.

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I'm probably about 20 minutes outside of Santa Fe and my closest neighbor is, you know, maybe 500 yards from me, you know, so there's—and we had been homeschooling my children as well. So, the social impact of, like, being closed didn't really hit us as hard as a lot of, a lot of people in the world, you know. And I got to actually really like work on a lot of things that at home that I neglected or had taken for granted, you know, it. And also, like I built my house five years ago,

but I've never finished it. So, I've got to do like I tiled my bathroom, you know, like something, that all these little things that I was, like, I have my certificate of occupancy, but we are literally living in an unfinished home, you know. I got to do a lot of that stuff and gardening and landscaping on my property. My whole property is like a slope. We live up against a mesa. And so, there's nothing flat on my property. And because of that erosion and stuff like that were kind of like real factors that building up a home on kind of changes the way the water moves and flows.

And I got to like, do the lifting of rocks and making little rock walls and seeding them and stuff like that. It's funny because all of that stuff is, you know, heavily labor intensive, but I can do it with my family and my children. And I can also, you know, I can see the physical manifestation of that effort as like metaphor for, like, building a mental foundation that I think being a part of the world and flying and traveling and never being kind of, like, I don't know, living out of a suitcase. I got really good at it. You know, I had like a travel bag that I could fit, like three pairs of pants, enough underwear for the stay. And like three t-shirts and cycled through for, like, if I was gone for two weeks or two months, I could manage it, you know, but that's like a strange way to live, you know, but you get acclimated to it and it becomes normal and also it also feeds like your ego, you know, of being like, oh, people want me to talk.

And so, I'm going to show up and be that, you know. But is it true to who you are is like another question. So, all of this has been really helpful to kind of like ground me and make me remember what is truly important and to not forget about that when I'm wrapped up in the movement of our society, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. That collision of the jet age and what the artist's career is supposed to look like has definitely—what you're talking about. I think we all feel it. And I myself, you know, I'm on the road two weeks out of the month in a typical year, and I haven't traveled one since mid-March. And it's crazy. It's huge difference. But, you know. Yeah. So you're rooting a lot at home. I'm also, you know, Santa Fe is such an important node for decades, if not centuries, centuries. If you consider all Americans and American, it's you know, an important nexus for American art. And I'm wondering to you know, a lot of this travel takes artists away from their home communities, not just their family, but who they were in their art community at home. Are you rerooting it that way in Santa Fe? And do you see Santa Fe as kind of weathering this?

CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER: Um not. I'm not really, actually, because I have one. I'm not from this place. I'm from North Dakota. And I moved here because of its importance as a node. I moved to Santa Fe to go to school at the Institute of American Indian Arts. And that's where I got my undergrad and, um, and then from after that point, I started working within the gallery art kind of field and moving work through that whole system. And Santa Fe had a has a, you know, for Native art. It's a total apex, you know, as far as far as part of the popular culture is kind of like experience and knowledge. You know, Santa Fe is aware of its dependence on Native art as an economic driver for the city itself. And then you tie in a lot of the late modernists and what-nots, your O'Keeffes and your variety of people who come to the Southwest then and fell in love with the landscape. And there's all of that sort of stuff, but this is like where I live. My children were born in New Mexico. But I am. I am a river—I'm a river person from North Dakota, you know. And that always remains home for me. And then, my relationship to community here, I live rurally. Like, my community here is really, you know, I have peers who are who live and work here, stuff like that. But for the most part, the trajectory of my career has been outside of this space. I don't do much work in Santa Fe. Ever since I started, kind of like moving towards more national global practice. And it's fascinating to me. You know, it's fascinating to see all of that.

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The one thing I'm really pleased with is New Mexico's response to the—they because of relationship to the Indigenous population, they were very astute to what was happening and responded quickly. Just because a lot of, I mean, Navajo Nation suffered great losses from this pandemic. And a lot of it has to do with them being a part of a four, you know, their reservations, being on the four corners of four states and the landscape in which that there—that's within there. There's a lot of tourism that people escaping urban centers like went to the Southwest and parked primarily into Navajo Nation. And a lot of those folks don't have running water. But, you know, I see that a lot because it's happening up in North Dakota and South Dakota where I'm from right now. Like the state's response to the pandemic is very relaxed, but the effect of it on the Indigenous communities who don't have as much access to medical response and or—I mean, there's a lot of homes where I'm from that don't have running water, you know, or there's a whole variety of things, plus the social aspect of these communities. You know, the houses are

full of people. You know, there's very few, you know, single occupant apartments, you know. And so, just the spread of that, I feel like New Mexico did a really good job of responding to that. And that makes me happy to be a part of this state. And their, I guess, just general knowledge and acceptance and appreciation of its Indigenous population, you know? It recognizes it where a lot of the states don't. So, I appreciated that here.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great. It's good to hear about New Mexico, and is your family doing okay in Dakota?

CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER: Um, yeah, they're doing pretty good. I have it's funny. My sister's husband, they live in Phoenix. And he came down with COVID in this second kind of burst of the virus in, um, Arizona. You know, they were quick to like be everything's fine and the summer's coming and that's going to kill everything, you know. But the—my sister works in the medical field, and so she was always just keeping her knees bent, waiting for this kind of like second occurrence. And lo and behold, you know, there it is. But this is like this is that response that I'm saying that I appreciated about New Mexico compared to like, say, your Arizonas or your Nevadas, you know. Yeah, or Utahs. I guess. Sorry.

[They Laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: So, one thing I've been asking people too is what they see. I mean, whether I don't know how much media you watch that or to watch none, but what kind of mainstream accounts of what's been happening this year, what do you see that's missing?

CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER: Um, gosh. You know, I don't. Well, but I don't. I don't pay that much attention, you know. I'll get I'll get little alerts on my phone. My giant robot, you know, that's connected to everything else. But for the most part, I truly believe that, you know, most of the spaces that I can truly have any sort of change or affect change in are those spaces that I can directly touch. And so, in response to that, like, you know, there's a lot of, there are a lot of things that I think are being said, sensationalized through media, just because it is following a model of what we've developed is entertainment, you know.

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And so, the entertainment factor is the factor that everybody focuses on. And that is the like the graphic or brutal or violent or pitiful, you know, aspects of all of these sorts of movements. But from my experience, being in some of those spaces, you know, trying to affect change directly on the front of some of these lines, what I recognize is, for the most part, what is being documented and shared through media is 15 percent of what's actually happening. And there's a lot of beautiful, connected and empathetic and compassionate responses that aren't being celebrated in response to how we engage with what media shares with us. So, it perpetuates this idea of so much of this being a struggle, you know, and doesn't celebrate the incredible changes and efforts and movements of people in response to that partnership. You know, we are we are human beings subject to difficult circumstances, but we are not the difficult circumstance, you know. And so, watching us respond to that and I think is some of the most beautiful aspects of us. And I don't know if it's being amplified in any sort of way through media. You know, as future generations look back at this time through the video blogs of our experience, I hope that they don't miss the fact that there has been incredible growth and compassion and empathy between people and cultures and mechanisms and systems that we participate in, you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And I think not for everyone, but for a lot of people and sectors. The idea of what productivity is has changed for the better. And hopefully, that's permanent change. So that's work—

CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Especially for artists who are expected to come and speak and be on planes all the time. You know, what's going to take that space will be interesting. Do you have any guesses?

CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER: Well, I mean, the thing that's most interesting to me is that for since the development of the institution and the center for cataloging like variances and the world, you know, for the most part, these have become the hubs for where culture lives, you know, and the, that idea is void, you know. It's empty. The only thing that fills the space is the echo of where culture lives, you know. And it's in constant flux and constant change. And I think the

flexibility in the movement, the adaptability of artists and just human beings in general, I think is going to come to a to a head and that like power dynamic between, um, artists being dependent on museums and institutions to show their work. I think we're becoming every year it becomes more and more, um, uh, understood that they can only share the echo of that, you know. And they can't actually share it in real time. And what's happening. So anything that we see in any sort of exhibition is at least a year old. And the speed at which we experience information, that's like a lifetime. You know, like a year old exhibition is uh. . . That's some old stuff according to that time, you know—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [inaudible] light travel time.

CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER: Right. Right. And just at the speed of thought. Right? Like, this is the thing. We're having a conversation right now via a satellite. You know, this conversation would have taken weeks in, you know, 20 years ago. And I don't know, just all of that sort of stuff is becoming um—as we're adapting too, these new kind of ways of communication and in response to that, I think it's also putting a lot of pressure and weight on the brick and mortar of our society. You know, those ships don't turn. You know they are too heavy. Whereas we can veer, you know, careening at breakneck speed towards a cliff. We have the flexibility to move and adapt and respond without a tremendous, you know, catastrophe. And as an artist like I'm a single individual and I can survive a scraped knee. You know, I can survive, like stopping dead and rolling into the dirt, whereas the mechanisms that we've developed as a society, those structures will topple and never be again, you know, to adapt that quickly.

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And I think that also shifts the importance of what an artist is or what a human is as a contributor to where culture lives, you know, versus like having to go to a museum or institution just to experience that. We share it instantly on our social media feeds. And there's a lag with all of that. You know, like we put our best foot forward under those models that we use, this new infrastructure of culture and share, you know, which is the internet. It's a baby. And it hasn't developed fully yet. And right—and it's also got to deal with people like me who were born before the internet. I'm deeply—I believe that my 87 to 90 percent of all trolls on the internet are my age or older. You know, they're—they don't know how to bond to an open dialog. You know, they're—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Inaudible.]

CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER: Just—yeah, just hide out and talk shit. Like, that's my generation stuff. You know, hopefully we can get past that and not, like, mess up the internet in the process. [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: My partner is a Gen Xer and I know about the talking shit. So in the last we'll wrap up here, what do you want to tell the artists in 100 years about what it was like to be an American artist in 2020?

CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER: Yeah, well, there was a place called America. I want to start with that [they laugh.] And it was an experiment, you know, it was an experiment—that was desperate. It was a desperate experiment. And it was built on a lot of brutality. And, but a lot of that brutality was learned. America was an experiment to try to alleviate all of that pressure and that tension, but hurt people, hurt people. And 2020, we were really taking a hard, close look at the effect of that on each other and on the environment. And, you know, hopefully you're living in the in the calm after the wake of this moment in 100 years. But I don't—I think it took about 500 years to get to the place that we are, and I don't expect change to happen radically overnight. I think it takes time. And like any good aspect of community and society, there should be consensus developed rather than majority rule. And consensus takes time. So, you know, at this point in history, I think it's important that we begin to talk to one another and actually use all of the incredible technology that we have to develop better protocols for communication. We're not—I'm not going to survive this. I'm not going to live in the beautiful place that I can imagine in my head. But I will die trying. You know, I will die trying. Because I believe in us. And I know that we will survive this.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Awesome. I'm going to end it right there. Thanks, Cannupa.

CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER: Yeah.

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