



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Kim Jones, 2020
August 15

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Kim Jones on August 15, 2020. The interview took place from Jones's home in New York City, New York, and was conducted by Melissa Ho 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

MELISSA HO: Okay. Kim. Hi, can you still hear me?

KIM JONES: Yes.

MELISSA HO: Great, um—

KIM JONES: Yes, I can still hear you.

MELISSA HO: So I'm just going to—

KIM JONES: [Coughs.]

MELISSA HO: —um, say for the record that this is Melissa Ho interviewing Kim Jones on August 15, 2020, for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. And, Kim, you're speaking to me from your home in New York City, right?

KIM JONES: Yes, yes.

MELISSA HO: Great.

KIM JONES: My apartment, yes.

MELISSA HO: [Laughs.] Well—

KIM JONES: Yes.

MELISSA HO: Um, thank you so much for making time for this. Um, why don't we start with a simple question: how have the past few months been for you?

KIM JONES: Um, stressful. Uh, but uh, actually, you know, I was thinking—I—each day I—I try to go out for a walk. Uh, you know, maybe half an hour to an hour, you know, sometimes—sometimes I go out and sit and read someplace. Uh, I live in StuyTown so it's slightly easier to walk.

But the whole thing is—the difference, of course, is I live in an apartment building and so each time I go out I—I wear a mask. I wear gloves. I am aware of, you know, touching things. I go on the elevator—aware of that. And then just aware of people as I go out even though it's not quite as bad as being in the regular city but still there's people walking around. Some people have no mask, you know. Sometimes there's kids with no mask but grown-ups too, a lot of grown-ups—

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —jogging or walking. And so I'm more aware, you know, making eye contact with people and staying a good distance, if it's possible, from them.

So that can be stressful in itself but I'm—I'm also—become—when at first I was angry each time I walked by somebody that didn't have a mask [laughs] on. But I've—it's much wiser, I think, to try to control my anger and just sort of turn away and not look at them and make sure, if I can, to make sure I'm a good distance. Which sort of saves me because it doesn't—I don't think it—obviously it doesn't do any good to, you know, rant and rave at somebody [laughs]. Just makes them angry too so—so that's part of living out here and uh—

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: —I—I'm very lucky, you know, it's like, uh, my partner is younger than I am so—and she—and she knows how to cook—

MELISSA HO: [Laughs.]

KIM JONES: —and so, uh, if I was by myself I'd be in—you know, I'd end up getting takeout or whatever and, uh, so it's—it's a lot of stress on her too to cook every night. And uh, but that—that helps too, you know, and just—also, I mean, reading, I've—you know, I've—I've always read but I've found—in the last three or four months, at least—I've read a lot more because it's almost like a way of, uh, escaping—it is a way of escaping.

MELISSA HO: Yes.

KIM JONES: And, uh, I started out with, uh, more or less, uh, crime novels, uh, because it was slightly easier to read—more fun—and—but good writers, though: uh, Tana French, uh, *Faithful Place*, is one and, uh, Kate Atkinson is another one. And from there I went on and started reading, uh, uh, George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, uh, you know, Jane Austen—

MELISSA HO: Classics.

KIM JONES: —you know, and the classics—19th centuries: you know, Dickens, *Bleak House*. But, before—like, especially *Bleak House*—I remember before that I was always kind of—I never—I never could get through it. I—I was always—

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —a little in awe of just like, oh, God, I have to read that because—

MELISSA HO: [Laughs.]

KIM JONES: —[inaudible] and also *Middlemarch* is, like, two volumes. And I read that twice but it was—I surprised myself because just by sitting down and being forced to sit for hours and find something to do—aside from making art—I got through those things. And like—like a lot of things, the more you do it, the—the easier, in a sense, it gets. And so I was—I surprised myself, I think, by being able to get through these.

Whereas before, you know, I read but not quite this much. And I've—I've read a—quite a bit actually in the last three or four months at least—maybe slightly more—uh, that I've, you know, spent time here inside—uh, not always inside. You know, I'll go outside Stuyvesant Town to go to the bank or just get things done but mostly, you know, it's being here like this, you know.

[00:05:30]

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: As you know, it's just, yeah—see the other aspect of it is, like, you know, being someplace watch most people are having to go through.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: So. [Laughs.]

MELISSA HO: Have—have you been able to make—continue making any work?

KIM JONES: Uh, not as much as I wanted to. But, uh, I mean, I have a show that's scheduled, uh, um, I think in November. Uh, but uh, um, I've—I've—I've done a little bit and I've—I—uh, I think—I think it was mostly just because I was reading so much but—but I've started making work again—like drawings—

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —like in the last week or so. And, uh, all along I—you know, I worked on my—my notebooks and smaller, uh, drawings—uh, which is good, you know. And it's, um, it—it—yeah, it just—it just helps me. It's hard to—it's—it's not quite the same as before where I—I did a lot of work but, uh—

MELISSA HO: One thing I was wondering about if—is—does the current situation, um, how does it compare to—you know, I was thinking about the—the period you had as a child, uh—

KIM JONES: Yeah.

MELISSA HO: —being confined to bed. Or—or—or anyway—

KIM JONES: Yeah.

MELISSA HO: —I think to home, right? Um—

KIM JONES: Yeah, yeah.

MELISSA HO: And—and I know that that was a—

KIM JONES: About three months in the hospital, yeah.

MELISSA HO: —yeah, in the hospital, in that home, um—

KIM JONES: Yeah.

MELISSA HO: —recuperating. Um, does this compare to—to—to—to that experience in any way?

KIM JONES: Yeah, yeah, actually it's—it does. That's—that's—that's, I think, you know, when I was a child, you know, it was, I think, about three months in the hospital—children's hospital—in L.A. and then most of the time in my bed or in a wheelchair with, uh, braces. Uh, but at that time, you know, it's like, I spent a lot of time, uh, looking out the window at—

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —the trees. And, uh—but making up my own world, uh, and—

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —you know, reading comic books, uh, and drawing cartoons and, uh, basically, this world that I could control, which is—I think I've talked about that before. And then, I think that's also, you know, even now—it's like the reading, I think especially, is a way of—to retreat and it's to hide and—but the intensity—because that's what I have and—

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: Really, you know, going to the 19th century which is—it's—I'm sure they had their problems then too, but still—

MELISSA HO: [Laughs.]

KIM JONES: —it's nice to go back there.

[They laugh.]

KIM JONES: Uh—

MELISSA HO: I know.

KIM JONES: —uh, but, uh.

MELISSA HO: So you're consciously been choosing, uh, literature that takes you away from the present moment?

KIM JONES: More or less. Except for, um, the crime novels are, like, 20th century mostly, I think, uh, but, uh.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: But, yeah, Jane Austin, you know, Dickens, you know, uh. William Boyd is a little—little later, you know, and I—I've read a lot of him. But he mostly talks about, like, you know, the—the giving of, like, the First World War and Second World War. But, uh.

Oh, also, I mean, the other slightly scary thing is—is, um, I think about 2015 or so—'14—I read—there's a British philosopher—his name is John Gray—and he wrote a very—really good book called *Straw Dogs*.

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: And it's about—he really goes after science—the whole idea—and science—the things we'll improve. I mean, things do—it does a lot of great things but the whole idea that it's going to make things—it's going to make humans better in general.

[00:10:07]

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: He also goes after, uh, religion—less so.

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: But—but, I—you know, it's been a long time since I've read it but I remember when I first read it, you know, I—I didn't think—he—he's also talks about microbes and how, you know, there's a good possibility that nuclear war—this is all really kind of depressing stuff but—

MELISSA HO: [Laughs.]

KIM JONES: —nuclear war would probably take out a good portion of our civilization. But, he said, most likely, it would be microbes that would pretty much finish us off, you know, [laughs].

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: And I remember when I read that, it was before—I mean, you know, there were SARS or all these other—

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —diseases that were going around but they weren't—they didn't really affect the U.S. or even the western world.

MELISSA HO: Right.

KIM JONES: It was mostly, you know, other places—

MELISSA HO: Right.

KIM JONES: —that, you know, [laughs] that we usually don't think too much about, necessarily.

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: And now, suddenly, you know, the—the virus is going around and suddenly it's like we're right in the spotlight. It's like it's—it's got us all. It's like it doesn't—

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —you know, it's—it's happy to take care of all of us.

[They laugh.]

MELISSA HO: Yes.

KIM JONES: And, you know, and, uh, so we're right, obviously, in the middle of it. And, you know —so now instead of them, it's me.

[They laugh.]

MELISSA HO: Yes.

KIM JONES: Which is something we all have to face, right?

MELISSA HO: Yeah. It's really confronting us.

KIM JONES: Yes. Yes, uh, unfortunately.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: And, you know, no.

MELISSA HO: Um, you know, I think of you, Kim, as such a—a city person. You know, walking—

KIM JONES: [Laughs].

MELISSA HO: —around the city [laughs], um.

KIM JONES: Right, right.

MELISSA HO: You know, the conversations we've had have been in restaurants and walking.

KIM JONES: Right.

MELISSA HO: Um, and—so are you—are you really confining yourself, um, within your neighborhood? Have you been, you know, out observing people or—or—or—or staying away mostly?

KIM JONES: Um, mostly I stay within Stuyvesant Town—it's like a big park.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: I mean, there's people out—a lot of people. But it's—there's a lot of trees, so it's easier to walk. But I do—every once in a while—I go outside. It's—it's mostly in the East Village area—to go to the bank or go to the post office. And, uh, to get—to get things done. And that's okay.

Because, like, usually, you know, if I go at certain points, I'm able to avoid—there's a lot more people that are, you know, walking around—especially without a mask—and so it's easier to walk across the street or to avoid them. But it's slightly more stressful if—and I haven't gone uptown or any place; mostly just, like, the East Village area.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: And I do miss—at first, I really missed—because my whole routine—you know, I met you at Veselka—that little restaurant—

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —and I would go there every morning and read the paper and sit.

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: It was like this thing that I did. And, uh, I really enjoyed—it was like that time in the morning—oh, I spent a couple hours and they were really great about that. They didn't care if I stayed there, you know, five hours, really.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: And sit and just relax before I started my day. And then the als—but I was surprised at how easy that was to just—because I knew I couldn't do it anymore. And so I stopped. You know—

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —it's the same with going to a bar every once a while, you know. I'd—I'd—every once while I'd go to Veloci's, there's—it's like a couple of bars in these [inaudible]. It was pleasant to go there and sit in the late afternoon or at night—

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —and can't do that.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: And then the other aspect is smoking cigars.

MELISSA HO: [Laughs.]

KIM JONES: And I would, you know, each—like, you know, I—I got it down—I tried to be strong—I got it down to one cigar a day.

MELISSA HO: [Laughs.]

KIM JONES: And, you know, I would no—tell myself I'm not addicted, right?

MELISSA HO: [Laughs.]

KIM JONES: But there was still this hunger for the cigar.

[They laugh.]

KIM JONES: And I stopped doing that almost immediately.

MELISSA HO: Oh, wow.

KIM JONES: And I was actually kind of surprised. I have one cigar that I bought before this happened.

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: It's sitting on my bookshelf.

[They laugh.]

KIM JONES: And I would really—I have this desire to—to smoke it but I—I understand, you know, I could do that but then it would—it might kill me, you know, because—

MELISSA HO: Right.

KIM JONES: —you know, it's respiratory. And it doesn't help to have, you know, cigar smoke in your lungs [laughs]—

[00:15:06]

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: —with all this stuff going on.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: And, you know, and I see people out there, you know, and it's a good way—yeah, I could see people in the city and just around here, you know, having a cigar or a smoke. And—and I understand that, you know, just to take care of the nerves.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: But for some reason I was—I was surprised at myself that I was able to just quit. You know, just like, okay, that's it and—

MELISSA HO: Yeah, that is amazing.

KIM JONES: It wasn't a matter of strength I think it was just, like, I realized, no, it's up to me [laughs].

MELISSA HO: Right.

KIM JONES: You know?

MELISSA HO: Sort of acceptance too, it sounds like.

KIM JONES: Yeah, accept—yeah. Just, you know, that's just the way it is, so.

MELISSA HO: Yeah. Are you the kind of person who follows the news really closely? I don't know

that you are, um—hearing you talk about how much reading you’re doing, I think a lot of people during this, um, you know, sort of shutdown period have been really glued to the computer or the phone—

KIM JONES: Yeah.

MELISSA HO: —sort of following the news. Are you immune to that? Or have you [inaudible]—

KIM JONES: No, no, I’ve—

MELISSA HO: —aversion of that?

KIM JONES: Yeah. Well, that’s it—I mean, I—I’ve actually—I’ve stopped buying newspapers, too.

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: So—one thing—like in the morning, I’ll have breakfast and, uh, coffee. And I’d look at my phone—like, there’s the news on my phone—

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: —which I read. And that is really, uh, it can be a problem, because it just—all it just does is make me more anxious. I try to control that, too. Because I know if I—if I do it too much, it’s like—you know, I can feel myself reaching for the phone—

MELISSA HO: Yeah, mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —and this anxiety and wanting to know what’s going on. And—and I’m trying to, I don’t know, train myself, in a certain way, to just, like, you know—a few hours or certain times that I’d look at it—to make sure things are still there. And—and then try to not—just not look at it. Because I know, if I look at it too much, that also makes me anxious.

MELISSA HO: Okay.

KIM JONES: And I think I’ve read, also, that—that’s—people have talked about. Yeah, that’s a big problem with a lot of people, you know.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: They’re reading mostly the computer—they’re just going through the news, and, you know.

MELISSA HO: Yeah. Yes [laughs]. Um—

KIM JONES: And it feels like—it feels like you’re doing something, you know.

MELISSA HO: [Laughs.]

KIM JONES: And in a certain sense, maybe it is or—it’s—people are lonely. They want to hear somebody talking about things. They want to, you know, sort of think I’m not really crazy because that person also thinks the same thing—

[They laugh.]

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: —you know, is depressed or whatever. Uh, so—but I—I understand wanting to do that. But I think it’s—that also, I think, is better for the individual to try to control that if they can.

MELISSA HO: Yeah. Yeah, it’s tough. How—how do you envision your—your work—um, you know, you mentioned you have a show in the fall. How do you—

KIM JONES: Yeah.

MELISSA HO: —envision your work as this crisis continues? Um, it seems like we’re not getting a quick, um, resolution. So, um, I’m just wondering, do—do you—do you think the circumstances will be affecting or infiltrating, um, the work you’re making in the coming months?

KIM JONES: Uh, I can't—I can't really see any affect that it's had on my work. I mean, it's—I haven't done as much as I should. But, um, uh.

MELISSA HO: Well, you have such a—

KIM JONES: My work has always been kind of grim anyhow.

[They laugh.]

KIM JONES: Um, so it's just like, you know, usual. Uh, but um.

MELISSA HO: Well, as you said earlier, you have this very consistent sort of notebook practice and your drawings.

KIM JONES: The—the—yeah, well I've—I've—I've gone—which is something I've always done anyhow—it's like I've gone through certain sketchbooks and redone them and sort of brought them up to—up to date and actually made them into presentable art pieces. Uh—

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —and, uh—which is—which is good. And, uh, I don't know it's—it's—it's difficult, um, to explain it. But I—I—I—I continue doing the work. Uh, I don't know when it's going to end. I mean, I'm mo—, you know—it's—it's—hopefully, we'll vote the, uh—

[00:20:16]

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —the clown out and we'll have, like, grown-ups in there to maybe help us as real leaders [laughs].

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: But, uh, um.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: But it's—it's—it's a scary situation, obviously to—to everybody—for the world.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: I mean, it's also—it's like, you know—yeah, I don't know. It's just really—

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: —it's—we just have to deal with it.

MELISSA HO: Maybe just, um, one last question. Um—

KIM JONES: Yeah.

MELISSA HO: —what—what do you think you'll remember most from this year? Um, the, you know, the-the circumstances of the pandemic and, of course, I—being in New York, I'm sure you, um, can't help but be affected by the-the Black Lives Matters protests and so on as well.

KIM JONES: Right. Right.

MELISSA HO: Um, I mean, what do you think you'll remember from this time most?

KIM JONES: Well, what is it—I mean, it's—it's the Black Lives Matter—it's just how, I mean, that's always been a problem—the racism. And it—it seems to me there's more people that are standing up—

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —to this and trying to—and actually doing something and that's so—especially younger people.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: You know, it's—it's really, um, I think it's—it's—it's fun—it's great. It's, you know, that's—that's because they're—they're really doing something. Um—

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —even if it's, you know, marching or just doing something. And, uh, on a personal—you know, for me, it's—I think I'll probably—I was actually, I mean, kind of surprised that I've been able to read so much [laughs].

MELISSA HO: Mm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: You know, I think—I think it's just, uh—and it's—I think it's being forced to sit down for a few hours. And I—you know, it's like, I'm so used to in, like, the city, every five minutes you get up and walk around. And, you know, the city's, you know—there's people always around and, you know. So this whole attitude is this—very few people walking around and the people that are walking around, you're—you're afraid of, in a certain sense, because you don't know what's—what they have.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: And so you're aware of, you know, somebody walking towards you. Even asking for change, you know, you don't want to get near anybody.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: And, you know—and even if you know somebody you just, like—my friend, Megan, is much more friendly when it's mostly just people that live in the building that we know. But even then you keep a safe distance. But you know, but, uh—and so it's—it's being forced to sit down and read.

[They laugh.]

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: And escape.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: And—which adds, you know—it's terrible—terrible time but it's—that, for me, is a real plus. And I think that's probably one of the things that I'll remember most. Is—it's a—a growing experience for me [laughs] now, you know.

MELISSA HO: I wonder how many pages you'll have read by the—by the time we come—

KIM JONES: I'm trying to—

MELISSA HO: —to the other side.

KIM JONES: [Coughs] This is, uh, yeah, I'm trying to—because of Megan, this—you know, I'm just real slack about all this sometimes but—

MELISSA HO: [Laughs.]

KIM JONES: —but I'm trying—I'm trying to—I'm writing down the—the people—the writers that I've read: oddly enough, mostly women, which—

MELISSA HO: Interesting.

KIM JONES: —really—yes.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: Uh, well, Hilary Mantel.

MELISSA HO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

KIM JONES: Uh, Jane Austen, of course, uh, well, Raymond Chandler, but, uh, Dorothy Hughes, uh, Kate Atkinson, Tana French—those Tana French/Kate Atkins—Atkinson's were the first ones that I read. And they're actually—they're really—they're—they're really good writers.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: And it's mostly crime—all crime. But those were—I—maybe I went through—I think I read those—I think I read them all twice. And then I started going into the more classic writers: you know, Hilary Mantel, uh, Jane Austen, you know, Dickens. Uh, but, uh.

[00:25:08]

MELISSA HO: And are these books you already own and just hadn't picked up? Or are you getting —

KIM JONES: I—

MELISSA HO: —them from the library or—

KIM JONES: I—

MELISSA HO: —ordering them?

KIM JONES: I—right before it started, I—I started—because we sort of knew something was happening by around January when—

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —Megan, of course, was much more aware of what was going on. You know, we were going to go out to dinner and we decided to—we had to cancel it because even then we realized—we weren't wearing a mask—but we realized going inside of a restaurant was probably not a good idea.

MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: And, uh, that's when the bookstores were still open. So that's why I bought—

MELISSA HO: Ahh [affirmative].

KIM JONES: —a lot of these, uh, crime novels. And then, because Megan's a real reader, we have—and I also have, like, a lot of these novels. So just, you know, going through the bookshelf and —

[They laugh.]

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: —reading them.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: And, uh, you know—but, uh, yeah, and—and they're all—they're all, you know—the—the great thing for me, also, is just, uh, I would always sort of—it wasn't anything but my insecurity about reading, you know?

MELISSA HO: Hmm [affirmative].

KIM JONES: I've read but it wasn't, like—I think there was some part of me that was afraid. It's like drawing or anything: you know, the more you get by—you get past the being afraid of things and just draw. But I think it's—it's similar to reading—it's like, I just—I was forced to read and so I just—the more I read, the-the easier it was in certain ways.

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KIM JONES: The more I wanted to read actually. And a good—a good—a good experience for me [laughs].

MELISSA HO: Yeah. Yeah, that's great.

KIM JONES: You know.

MELISSA HO: Well, Kim, is there anything else you want to share, uh, for the record before we finish up here?

KIM JONES: No, except it's really nice to talk to you. You know, I've done most of the talking but, uh—

MELISSA HO: [Laughs.]

KIM JONES: —it's really nice to hear your voice.

MELISSA HO: It's really good to hear your voice, too. Um, okay, I'm going to—I'm going to stop recording but I'm—

KIM JONES: Okay.

MELISSA HO: —but I'm not hanging up. Just hold on.

[They laugh.]

KIM JONES: Okay. Okay.

MELISSA HO: Hold on.

[END OF jones20_1of1_digvid.mp4]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]