



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Deana Haggag,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Deana Haggag on August 14, 2020. The interview took place at Haggag's home in Brooklyn, 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 Deana Haggag, president and CEO of United States Artists at her home in Brooklyn on August 14th for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Deana, how has your work changed since March of this year?

DEANA HAGGAG: I mean, the largest shift for me is actually that I'm not traveling at all. So working at United States Artists has required a tremendous amount of travel. And so being grounded in one place is very, very new for the pacing of this work.

And then the second thing is, like many other friends and colleagues, I just haven't seen my colleagues in a long time. I think we've done our best to maintain our creative momentum and flow digitally. But it does not feel the same at all.

And then lastly, very shortly after the stay at home order were declared in both New York State and Illinois and it became really clear that we were going to be in this for a little while, United States Artist partnered with six other nonprofits to launch the Artist Relief Fund, which has just like radically shifted my day to day to be in this kind of relief mode and not merit grant making mode. And then personally, I have been in a long distance relationship for three years. And, um, you know, it is a big shift to go from being long distance to spending every living waking moment with your partner in the same apartment. So that has had its benefits and its wrinkles, but I would not have it any other way. So.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well tell me a little bit more about the Artist Relief Fund, and because that's a very rapid shift from the United States Artists, which are very slow application process, and sorting out mayor grant making versus emergency responses.

DEANA HAGGAG: Yeah, yeah, I mean, yes, the pace is radically different. Um, also, what we're looking for is radically different, right? United States Artists, while nationwide and across discipline and everyone from emerging to early career all the way up to established artists are considered. In that pool we're really looking to make a time capsule of what it means to be in this moment in, you know, American culture or in art making in the United States. And so it's a very squarely merit based award. You're right, it's slow, it takes a year, we get to know those artists so intimately before decisions are made.

Whereas on the Artist Relief side, it is very fast. We fund at least a hundred artists a week. And right now we've been going for nearly five months, more or less. And we have over 125,000 applications. And so I think getting so many stories, so many quick stories, fast applications, we're not looking at artwork. We're not discerning merit. We're really just trying to find practitioners who are on the brink of something really severe financially and hoping that the \$5,000 we can wire to them instantaneously can just buy them a little bit of time to figure something out while we all work together to sort of assess the future of our field.

It's funny, I'm thinking of it now, but in some ways, I guess Artist Relief also feels like a time capsule of a particular moment in culture making, you know, except on this end it's just how vulnerable all disciplines are in the arts and how quickly the bottom fell out for sort of all of them. But, yeah, they're very, very different. They require different, um, brains, yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: And it kind of just sounds like an incredible logistical effort to figure out how to make all of that work for disbursement. Could you tell me a little bit about how fund raising has changed and if that looks different for you now?

DEANA HAGGAG: Yes, absolutely. So it's a little hard. We've also been kind of in this dual

fundraising space, both between our core work at United States Artists and our coalition work at Artist Relief.

You know this—since March, Artist Relief has raised \$15 million. Um, we've also never fundraised at that pace. And I think it really demonstrated how quickly the philanthropic community, both individuals and foundations, banded together to ensure that artists had something, while again, we're all sort of stumbling towards a very unknown future. And so I think the pacing of that was also super different. Right? Foundations and individuals that historically take weeks, months, years to cultivate and work with and align were making major investments to this fund very, very quickly. And so on one hand, I appreciate that the folks who are guardians to resources in the arts knew how to mobilize quickly.

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On USA Fellowships side. It has been harder. It's probably been the hardest year I've had on record since joining this job fundraising. For all of the obvious reasons I think we're watching the whole world sort of fall apart. You know, the need and the urgency is across every single sector. Right? I think we're watching donors put a lot of their resources back into their local communities, which is incredibly important. But for USA, as such a national org, it can be harder to justify or make a case.

I feel more motivated than ever to fundraise for United States artists because I feel like giving any artist right now an unrestricted \$50,000 grant buys them time, even in the most expensive city. And right now, the thing many of our staff are struggling to divorce is the number of artists in the United States Artists semifinalists pool who are also in the Artist Relief pool. And what do we do? And how do we think about that and what does it mean?

And I think, I mean it—we're very guided by this idea that we can help, you know, artists who need it. But I think the fundraising has been more challenging than it's ever been. And I think, I imagine in this project you're hearing that everywhere, because I think from universities to museums to small community art centers to grant making institutions, I mean, we're all going to have to buckle up for a little while. We're all figuring out what that really means for the efficacy of our work. Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: I mean, the Artist Relief Fund. It's so incredible how it came together so quickly and how it's operating at this breakneck pace and sorting things out. And it strikes me that, you know, it's an incredible coalition that came together in the midst of social isolation and with institutions that usually work on their own and have, like, pretty clearly defined venues. So I was wondering, is this helping you think through the future, and granted it's a very uncertain future, but how you want to form partnerships going forward?

DEANA HAGGAG: Yeah, absolutely. So A, I think so—there are seven core nonprofit partners to Artist Relief and I'm just going to name them really quickly. The Academy of American Poets, Artadia, Creative Capital, MAP Fund, Foundation for Contemporary Arts, and the National Arts Foundation alongside United States Artists. My favorite part about this is I have worked incredibly closely with six other women, most of whom I've never met before. So it's this kind of amazing, weird—we've just like hamstrung all of our orgs together to pull this off. But I do think we were able to do things none of our orgs could've done before, and we were able to be vulnerable in ways I think we're not traditionally trained. Right?

Like, we opened up our foundation books. We opened up, like, here's every asset my org brings and what piece of it makes sense in this puzzle we're trying to build to help artists make it through this very trying time. Moving forward, I actually think and, you know, one half of my trusted colleagues tell me, "yes, this is the future," and the other half say "no, it's a lot more complicated than you think." So I may be naive, but I really think merging strategies are a solution. I think that we're not—it doesn't feel like we'll ever, we will be operating at the same pace or at the same scale for many years to come. And I think that a very intense coalition building or partnerships, and then all the way up to logistical mergers, makes sense to me in the field right now as we're watching, um, folks have to downsize their programing, their fundraising capacity, their staff.

So I actually have really enjoyed the Artist Relief experience because, you know, we say that the grant is the bridge, a lot of the time, for artists. But I actually think for me personally, and I think for many of my colleagues on the fund, the act of making a coalition was also a bridge. And just like a new toolbox, like it's like someone gave me a new toolbox. And I do think we need, I don't

know, I mean, United States Artists, you know, we're often confused as a foundation but we're not. We fund raise these awards every year and right now, I mean, I think I feel very committed to doing this work, but it will be really challenging to do it without making major shifts to how we operate. And I think part of that is definitely aligning very deeply with other grant makers and finding the ways to, like, move together in step in service of artists nationally.

BEN GILLESPIE: Thinking a little bit about those, about merging and partnerships and how we go forward, could you tell me a little bit about how your personal experience of the pandemic and being at home and being rooted to one spot has adjusted your thinking about the work that you do in the United States Artists?

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DEANA HAGGAG: Yeah, so many things. Um, I have a disability. And, um, I was actually doulaged into disability by artists. I didn't always feel comfortable using the word disabled until maybe about five years ago, I started to really understand the limitations of my body, and then also the politic of disability in the ways that it is really a tremendous organizing tool and an organizing community. And a few years ago, United States Artists started working with the Ford Foundation and Mellon Foundation on a fund specifically for disabled artists nationally. We have not yet announced it, or it will come late 2020.

But, you know, as part of that work over the past two years, our team has really gotten to talk to hundreds of disabled cultural practitioners across the country. And it's been really fascinating to be doing that work in these last six months in the middle of a global health pandemic that just disproportionately affects disabled people in ways that are terrifying. It is quite actively a life and death situation for so many of the people that we care about.

And one thing I think I'm feeling is, um—I haven't quite found the language for this yet. I guess I can't quite figure out why it is that we still cannot center disability justice in the work that we are all doing. And I think that's always been a learning and the case, both on this fund and long before it, that we just weren't at a place yet as an arts community and as a country to really understand why it really matters to center disability in our work and how it benefits everyone, disabled and nondisabled. And I think something about the last six months that's been just for both my personal life and my professional life, both jarring and illuminating is wow, like, even in the midst of a global health pandemic, we still can't seem to like circle back to this core issue of if we fight for disability rights, and access and justice, we build a better world just period for everyone. And I think that part has been a little hard to reckon, because I think now in a time when everyone is working remote and living in fear, a bit of fear, either very distant or very personal to you of a global health pandemic, I can't quite figure out. Like what else will it take for us to get here?

And I think for USA, we're definitely grounding it in our organizational work and thinking about how it affects what we do forever. Beyond this fund, beyond this pandemic, just what are the changes we have to make in our personal and professional lives to be more accessible to all kinds of people? So, yeah. So I guess I've been reading a lot more even this past few months from disability justice scholars and trying to really understand it and its relationship to things like racial justice, abolition, freedom, liberation. And it's like. But it's not happening for me as much as I think it could and should. In both our art worlds and the broader public and beyond.

It's also the 30th anniversary of the ADA like you would think it would just be like all over the place. But, you know, it's hard, I think. Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: That's very difficult, like given you know, this is a time where we are all separate and these communities that have heightened terror during a time of global health crisis, that obviously affects each community very differently. And we're seeing that different communities are hit and affected differently. And how to adjust our behavior to look to see what's happening in our neighborhood, what's happening within our family. And those questions of visibility and basic care really come to the fore. And, so I guess my question to follow up on that is, how were you then caring for yourself and for your loved ones and helping to cultivate care at United States Artists?

DEANA HAGGAG: You know, so at home, I think we have—my, when the pandemic first hit, my boyfriend's brother and his two small children moved in with us. And so I think the experience of living with a four and a six year old brought with it moments of extreme frenzy, but also, like, kind of deep care, because everything has to stop when kids need things in very specific ways.

So I do appreciate the early days of this, first three months of just understanding that someone in my house mattered more than me was this weird frame of like care.

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Cooking and reading have been really important and I have only been reading, like, very juicy fiction. And just like novels and like I was there, you know, I'm like just deeply in the storytelling space and cooking. I never cooked I was horrible at it before this and I think it's been really nice to challenge myself at a new skill. And I think the pandemic felt so unsolvable and everything felt so hard and at least once a week I could sit down to—I can make a galette, like, I can just, it will happen. I will physically see it come out. It's a goal I can accomplish. So those have been really, really deeply important.

Ways that I've been hard to take care for myself have been, I have some mobility issues. So it's been challenging to—I miss taking really long walks. I miss, um, being able to use certain equipment safely. Like, there's things I just can't do at the scale of my house. And for a while, Brooklyn felt a little scary to navigate. People weren't always wearing masks. And so it was a little scary to sort of venture out.

At United States Artists I think we're trying to figure out how to do it, but it has been hard rendering Artist Relief has definitely been challenging. None of us are trained to do this kind of, like, aid work very viscerally. We've had Fridays off. We've tried to separate work life, but it has not been easy. And I think we're trying to just stay in touch with each other about what everyone needs. We generally have a very lax sick and vacation policy. We are generally pretty tender with each other, so I've watch that definitely maintained and I appreciate our staff endlessly for doing that for each other, but it hasn't actually been easy to find the balance. But I, you know, I feel like many of us are, I don't know if you're also going—I think many people are having a hard time figuring out how to unplug from work without the traditions of commuting, seeing your friends. It's just a little challenging. And I think Artist Relief make some of us feel like we can't take a pause because someone is in a very desperate and dire state on the other side of that pause. Yea.

BEN GILLESPIE: And just by way of wrapping up, thinking about the many threads we've touched on. What lessons do you think you'll carry with you going forward from 2020 and its endless crises?

DEANA HAGGAG: I don't know what the lesson is, but this can't be the world we rebuild from here. We can't have hundreds of thousands of people just have their entire stability just, poof, gone in like in an instant. I think my biggest, biggest lesson from this is coalition. And I actually think moving forward, I hope and I—that the best way to move forward is coalition and is also cross industry. It's really, really hard to be alive in the United States. And it shouldn't be this hard and it shouldn't feel like people's lives are literally on the line because of one—in the course of just a matter of minutes, weeks, days, it's too much.

And I feel like, you know, I look at our pool and I wonder, what can we do to help artists? How do we how do we make this more sustainable for our sector? And I don't have any answers. But I look at our pool and I go, wow, if we just had a better health care system, we wouldn't have half these artists. If we just had better unemployment insurances we wouldn't have half these people.

And so I think I think our work moving forward is deeply, deeply political. It is deeply steeped in a kind of advocacy for the living, working person, irrespective of our fields. And I think the only way to move things at that scale is coalition. And in my dream of dreams, something like Artist Relief would work upwards with lots of other industries so that we can build a better world.

And then the last thing is, I will never again regret—oh, my God, I'm never going to, like, skip plans ever again. I'm never going to tell someone I'm coming to a party and the last minute not show. Like I'm going to enjoy—savor every party as soon as this ends. But yeah, I also think I can't walk away now thinking about various ways to be more accessible to lots of populations. In the pandemic we did it. Right? We're essentially operating in lots of ways that are accessible. And I want to hold onto those things and both my personal professional life moving forward.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, thank you very much for speaking with me today.

DEANA HAGGAG: Thank you.

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BEN GILLESPIE: Very excited to invite you to something that you can't decline.

DEANA HAGGAG: No, I'm really into it. Thank you. Have a wonderful day.

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