



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Sheila Pepe, 2020
August 25

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Sheila Pepe on August 25, 2020. The interview took place from Pepe'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 Sheila Pepe, at her home in Brooklyn. It is August 25th, 2020. And this is the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Sheila, could you tell me just a little bit about your life since March of 2020?

SHEILA PEPE: Well, um, February 7th, uh, Carrie Moyer, my wife and sometimes collaborator, opened a show at the Portland Museum of Art in Maine called *Tabernacles for Trying Times*. So I was actually kind of taking some time off, thinking—well, uh, I—I was teaching—actually, wait a —I was teaching a quarter—some of the sequencing is a little off. It's all a little blurry, but. So the show was up, and then suddenly, the show was having to be cleaned, oddly. And then the show was going to be closed. And the show was closed.

And, uh, when we came back from the show, I was like, "I'll take a couple of weeks off. I'm going to teach a quarter at SVA, and I, literally, have nothing to do now. We worked on this for, like, a couple of years." And so I was expecting to go back out into the world and start teaching and suddenly, I was having a real lockdown, not a kind of the—my self—my first self-imposed lockdown.

So it was a disappointment at first because I, like, wasted those two weeks doing nothing [laughs]. But it got very strange very quickly. Like, we were early adopters, uh, with the masks, and the gloves, and stuff. But it didn't help me from getting it. So I got, um, a version of COVID in, um, I don't know when. It was, like, the s—I—I taught the last class, and I had to cancel the second to the last class because I was sick. So, um, April, I'm guessing, late April. And I—like, one of the things that's happened is time is completely messed up. Like, I don't know what day it is. I don't, you know, and, um, I think getting COVID made me feel, um, I'm a little, um, agoraphobic because of it, even though, like, yesterday I just came back from, um, Portland where we de-installed *Tabernacles for Trying Times*.

Um, still, as you can see, this kind of circuitous talking, which I usually do, is even more circuitous than usual [laughs] because I can't, like, I can barely make a straight line in my thoughts now. Everything's so, um, kind of embedded in this, um, uh, social space that's completely happening in a box or with earphones on or through my phone.

Um, I think the *Tabernacles* project was—there was so much about it, um, with this piece called *Parlor for the People*, that was about bringing people into the museum and making it their space. And the—*Parlor for the People* was programmed really brilliantly by the folks at, um, Portland and, in Portland, this guy, Chris Adame's just—I had met, when I had a show in Phoenix, he was there. Now he's in Portland.

Um, and they understood that we just wanted it to be a place where people gathered for whatever reason. It was definitely not art-related. There was not a necessity. I think maybe there was one program, or maybe two. But, um, just, like, a big tent, like, a place where people—using the museum as a—as a—kind of common house, um, but also knowing that ideas of spirituality and religion and, you know, the way people, um, are experiencing difference. There was some hopefulness. Like, this could be a place where a lot of different people would and could meet.

And often, I think in museums, it is where a lot of different people meet because people come to art for radically different reasons. Um, you know, some are checking in on an asset they have [laughs]. And some are—may make it, so they aren't—you know, they don't have any necessarily financial, um—and some people just like it. They just think it's fun to go to the museum and look at stuff.

[00:04:53]

Um, so all of the, like, the *Common Sense* series, which would include people knitting and deconstructing work, all the things that were hands-on and—and really sought to transform the interactivity of a museum were out, which was shocking because, um, it's just—as far as museums, it felt, like, it just pushed the museum back, like, 50 years. Like, "No touching; no nothing." No—This is not a fun place for people. This is still, you know, a quiet place where people—the guards are all in uniforms, and they put their hands behind their, um, you know, fold them behind their back and scornful and all that other stuff.

So it was a shock. I mean it was also just a shock to work on something that long and have it be closed. Luckily, they extended it and reopened it, which made me—made us feel better. And then interestingly, they didn't really have a super tech, um, division of their education or—or, um, outreach so they very quickly developed a lot of materials to go up online, which I thought was pretty amazing for such a small institution.

Um, so there was a lot of living of it online, through videos, and social media, and stuff. Um, but in—in general, the, you know, depopulation of the city, getting sick, the masking, the looking at a lot of art online, doing crits online, and now—you know, being completely offended by it when it started, that this is impossible. I'm doing a lot of it. And it seems to be working out okay. And, um, which gives me pause. But I think it's just my way of coping. It's a lot to take in. I mean I haven't really made much. I'm working on parts of things for a new piece that I have, um, a deadline for. And I wasn't making anything for a while. It—it was—um, I did a couple of interviews, one that'll go to press, one—lots of things online, volunteering my time a lot, working—looking for work, really, in a crazy way, um, uh, like, suddenly realizing money might be an issue [laughs].

Um, so a lot of, um, what I'd call, like, duck-and-cover activity. A lot of the same feeling that I had right after 9/11, but there was nothing to see. I think that's—or smell, or—it was—it was completely invisible, this COVID thing. And it's also all over the world in these very strange and, um, bizarre ways that, um, really highlight the socioeconomic, political worlds that we live in, which I find quite fascinating. I mean then, you know, finding out that mostly people in the city who were Black and Brown are dying. It was like, "Oh, that's it. That's the proof. That's crazy."

And then Mr. Floyd died. And, um, and we were—Carrie had just test—tested positive. But she was—you know, it was after I was recovering and had antibodies. And she tested positive, but she was asymptomatic, and we had to be supe—super locked down. And so that's, like, the two weeks that most of the, um, marches were. And we couldn't go anywhere. So that was frustrating and also another kind of alienating moment of having to stay inside in effort not to make anybody else sick, which is really—it's really strange. It's like, "Are you doing this so you don't get sick or so you don't get anybody else sick?" That's a very—that—it's like a Mobius strip that I think a lot about.

But I think I've used the time to study a lot. I've read a lot of books, um, a lot about, um, Black American history. I normally read a lot about world history, and, um, anthropology, and, um, a lot of—science is one of my things, but, um, ancient histories, and then understanding how they relate to—they're food for my work. But it's also food for understanding the roots of different, like, understanding white supremacy through reading people like John Locke and—and other [laughs], um, British, um, individualists [laughs], and, um—and, um, and looking at the founders, and just doing a lot of work owning my whiteness and starting to really get better lenses, uh, for me to see the world through this augmented subjectivity, which is embarrassing, at best.

[00:10:14]

Um, it's tragic I mean to understand what I grew up with in terms of thinking what was real and what was not real, or. Um, you know, I'm born in '59. So I'm the kid who, you know, sang "amber waves of grain" every morning at, um, after the Pledge of Allegiance, in my Girl Scout uniform. You know, we're Italian-Americans who got as white as possible as soon as possible because my parents had a little bit of trouble. They were born in the '20s. So they were always afraid for us, um [laughs], whether it was the depression, being Italian, being Catholic. I don't really know what it was, uh, maybe World War II, uh, the atomic bomb. Yeah. They were always afraid, and I never understood what they were talking about until now. It's an age thing perhaps.

Um, but so I was spending a lot of time thinking and some time knitting, and working, and reading, and reaching out to people who—through Zoom, or Skype, or whatever it is, um. Some

friends I have old Skype relationships with, so we stick to Skype. It's funny, the, um, the ballooning of the, um, the online infrastructure and the loss of, um, physicality is—it's depress—I mean I'm kind of depressed. I am depressed. I'm technically depressed. But I'm—also feel probably, um, with the election, a little hopeless. But, um, but I—I'm not—didn't anticipate living in this world at this point.

And there are times when I think about, um, what—I try to think about what the role of art is. I mean it's really profoundly affected me. So I—I know it's probably the best thing I do [laughs]. Um, and—but I don't have—what I had before was this, like, incessant desire to, like, just push, and push, and push and, you know, find another gig, or do more, or. I just think I have things coming up, and I'll go much slower. And—and I like slower. I'm reminded that slower could be—I spend a lot less when I do slower, which is really interesting.

Um, and, you know, I just need more stamina, I think. I don't know how many people experience this, but one of the big, um, the big sort of after-experiences of COVID is I—I still can't smell some things properly. Um, I'm not sure if that will ever come back, or. Or—And I taste things very differently. Like, I used to hate oat milk in my coffee. Now I love oat milk in my coffee. Like, I [laughs] [crosstalk].

BEN GILLESPIE: Are you sure that's not just Brooklyn?

SHEILA PEPE: No, I know. I mean Carrie was oat milk, and I was milk, cow milk. Um, but now, I don't know why, I like this better and other things like that. But, um [laughs], soy milk would be okay too, but I'm not supposed to eat that much soy. Almond milk, no. Almonds are for eating, I'm sorry, or cereal.

But, um, I'm really tired. Like, I—the fatigue aspect of it is—and that's how it manifests. My COVID was, like, not a—it was like, more like a really, really bad bronchitis. But I slept like, some might say, I was in a coma. But I thought it was sleeping for, like, two weeks straight. Like, I just couldn't get up.

So I don't know why, but now, I just feel that way still. And, um, it's getting better. Like, de-installing was good exercise. But it's going to take some time for the physical part to be manifest in a meaningful way and not feel so, um—um, reined in, um, by what is and isn't happening out there. It's so funny how, um, visibility—like, being visible is very daunting.

[00:15:01]

Um, it's probably the, you know, the nuclear—you know, it feels like the bomb of the 21st century. Like, it's invisible. It could hurt you. And some people are building a bomb shelter. And other people are like, "Oh, it's fine." You know, mask, no mask. Yeah, I don't know.

BEN GILLESPIE: It's—it's interesting to think about the—so *Tabernacles for Trying Times*—and—

SHEILA PEPE: Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE:—and we see so many museums do this in different ways with different innovations, of reimagining how to bring people together. And it always has to do with space. Like, you get people in the same space; you can have a conversation. And all of a sudden, we can't be in the same space. Or if we can be in the same space, it's really mediated. Um, and so I guess I was—I was wondering a bit about that. But looking at the clock now, I think I'm going to ask my—my other question, um, towards the end about, so thinking about the temporality that you—you're describing, um, and the fatigue, and the slowing down of things—

SHEILA PEPE: Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE:—um, I also wanted to think about the—the speed of making things by hand, um, and the sort of the inherent slowness of that, and, um—

SHEILA PEPE: [Laughs.]

BEN GILLESPIE:—building large things versus—so we have—I feel, like, in my own home life and what I hear from others in isolation, it feels so slow. It feels like time has just unspooled. But then we connect instantaneously on the internet, and everything online feels like it's going a million miles an hour, um.

SHEILA PEPE: I've adapted to feeling like, um, this is normal. Like, this is normal. I'm, like, I—I

have a hard time having a regular phone call now. It's either text or this. It's, like, why would you not see the face if you could, you know? Um, but I am, I—this is a lot like, you know, the summer of my childhood, summers of my childhood, where I was, um, by the time I was 10, both my siblings were out of the house. And my parents were, you know, a bit older, and, you know, had either working, cleaning house, or doing something. And I was off on my own little private thing, building with blocks, or coloring books, or digging a hole on the outside. You know, like, I spent hours by myself just thinking and making things.

So it—I think, for me, I feel like it's the new normal, but the old normal of like, "Oh, this is how time should go. This is how it should pass." So that, you know, on the other hand, yeah, making—knitting something or cro—knitting and crocheting something for a huge installation takes months and months of nonstop working. I'm not doing that anymore. I'm doing it a little. And I'm watching a lot of Criterion Channel. And I have a new game on my phone that I play. And then I stop and listen to a book, which is normally how I do it, and, um, and just sit and listen or, you know, knit—knit or crochet and listen, or.

So it's, um, you know, I'll catch myself just staring out—staring out the back door or backyard or something, like, just doing—trying this—I mean I think it takes a tremendous amount of energy to understand how it is we are here, not just because of COVID, and keep track of—I mean we don't have any one reliable source or, you know, clearinghouse of information that doesn't feel completely politicized, so. And that may have always been true, but at least you had one place that was suspect in a particular way and then other places you could compare with it. You know, not a million, zillion things on the internet, and then, you know, the seven newspapers you have to read, and then the White House or not the White House, definitely not the White House. But however that goes, whatever you believe, um, it's—it's like that. It's, like, believe. It's not think anymore [laughs]. So, um, it's definitely headspace. And, um—and that's the kind of thing that can let me, like, work, like, knowing something, being—feeling sure or somewhat sure, wanting to try something out with a purpose and knowing there'll be a convergence around it that's physical because I've chosen to make physical things.

[00:19:59]

There was a path when I was making video, and I was like, "No. I'm going to make handmade things," in the '90s—in the late '90s, um, where I think, um, yeah, that labor is—it's—I don't know what that labor is about anymore if it's just—it's really, like, you know, the chopping down of the tree, or the clapping, or the whatever. It's very much of a, um—um—it's a—it's a—um, unnamable. There's—I can't answer the question. And in a way, I think that's very fruitful. I think it's a good time—to, um, just go to the studio every day and act—or—act like it's normal, for me, would, like, blow my mind because I need a—a foundational set, a—a premise, to work. Um, then, it's about community and people getting together to work, and to engage, and, um, to touch things, literally, to walk through things, perhaps, or. Um, we made these chairs and pillows and no touching, no pillows, no transfer. It's crazy. Um, I mean and what it does is it takes the—for all the trouble that museums have seen lately, they're kind of my place because they—they're a public space. And with most cases, um, some kind of membership, it's really fairly inexpensive, i—ironically, [inaudible] if you plan to go a lot. Um, so it seems like a—well, in—in D.C., they're all for free because they're all ours.

But, um, that idea that you—that it would be a kind of public forum for stuff and people who, like, stuff, um, doesn't exist right now in the same way. I mean this show is going to—um, a portion of this show is going to show up at the Museum of Art and Design in, um, New York, in January. And all of the interactive parts have to go, like, the chairs and the pillows, have to go up on plinths, so that they—people know that they're not to be sat in, which in a design museum [laughs] kind of makes sense, I guess. But it was [inaudible] just [inaudible] what it was not, what we wanted it to be. So, um, it's sad. I—You know, I don't want the physical to go away.

Um, I mean I guess the antidote was there was a—there was a march in—in Brooklyn to, um, kind of mark Fourth of July as a way to honor, um, Black and Indigenous people and all of the work they've done, their—the heroes and sheroes of our, um, of our collective Brooklyn landscape, whatever. And, um, I made—I organized the making of these big fists, and peace signs, these hands that come out of the poster. And I wasn't really that great yet. I wasn't really—didn't have that much energy yet. But I just did it with these other women, it was, and this one guy. And we were just like, "Okay, let's do it. We've got four days." And we produced I think, um, 50, these big things. And it was like, "Wow. We did that." In a short amount of time, and it just came together. And then I went home and slept for three days.

Um, but I think it's that kind of thing. It's like, "Oh, there's an opportunity to make something that's for good. Okay. Here we go." Masks on, distanced, you know. Don't touch the same stuff. Everybody's wearing gloves. Um, I think those kind of projects seem right. And it was the right kind of project for me. It was, like, spearheaded by, um, a Black filmmaker, whose name I'm forgetting right now [Chanelle Elaine]. But just, like, a total powerhouse. It was—it was a great idea. Um, and it was, like, really, really keen kind of leadership with lots of—these filmmakers work in a totally different way. So there's, like, there's this whole network place of people who do all sorts of things. And they just show up to do things because they have those skills. So, um, it's not very precious, the way we might be as artists [laughs].

BEN GILLESPIE: Yeah. Well, I would like to thank you for sharing your very precious time and—

SHEILA PEPE: [Laughs.]

BEN GILLESPIE:—um, for speaking with me today. And I hope you get to rest and get some of that energy back. And I know that there are amazing projects on the way. So thank you very much.

SHEILA PEPE: Thank you [laughs]. [00:25:00]

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