



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Rita González,
2020 August 21

This interview received Federal support from the Latino Initiatives Pool,
administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center.

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Rita González on August 21, 2020. The interview took place from Gonzalez's home in Los Angeles, California, 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: Okay. This is Josh T. Franco. I'm speaking with Rita González in her home in Los Angeles on August 21, 2020 for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art's Pandemic Project. Rita, thanks so much for taking some time to talk with me for the Archives about this year.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOSH T. FRANCO: We just want to know—we want this to be a record of, um, how American artists and artworkers have been affected in 2020. So we'll just start with how have you been since March?

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Well, there's—yeah, there's been a tremendous amount of change, and at LACMA, the LA County Museum of Art, we are already embarking earlier this year on a huge, uh, institution-altering, um, landscape-altering [laughs], staff-altering, everything-altering, uh, experience with the demolition in, um, preparation for the construction of what we're calling the Geffen Galleries designed by Peter Zumthor. So there was already, um, you know, January, February a tremendous amount of, um, movement and this has been going on already for, you know, some time, moving, um, of objects to various storage facilities, moving people out of the main, uh, campus, across the street, new offices. So we already had this kind of whirlwind of change that we were going through.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Um, and then on top of that [laughs] as we figured—started to figure out, uh, and, you know, it's kind of crazy when you look back on that time of late February, early March, you know, because it just seems like—at the time it seemed like from one week to the next it was such a massive—there was such a massive shift. I was about to go on a trip to New York and participate on the panel for the Armory. I was about to go do some studio visits in, uh, Miami and give a talk, and we heard early on in California a lot of very, you know, sort of a strain of cautiousness from Gavin Newsom. And so immediately, uh, I had to cancel my trip.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Even though people, you know, colleagues across the country or especially the colleagues in Florida that I was talking with were like why—what's going on? Why [laughs]—why are you—why are you canceling? Are you sure we need to cancel it?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: So just within those two weeks and I guess that would be when we went into, uh—when the campus closed—with LACMA closed down which was I think around March 14th, March 15th. This whole set of changes, um, all of a sudden, like within a week, and then about a month or so of just trying to figure out, what does this mean to be working at home; what does it mean for the exhibition calendar; what does it mean for the calendar of exhibitions that we've got slated for the next two years, three years? And it took about a month just to figure out how is this going to impact the shows that we have up, the Luchita Hurtado show, the Julie Mehretu show, the shows that we were about to install, the Yoshitomo Nara show that we were just at the beginning of installing. Um, and Vera Lutter show, uh, that we were about to install too, you know, how this was going to impact the installation. So it took a month of just trying to figure out, like shuffling the calendars basically and figuring out what was going to happen and not knowing how long we were going to be, you know, in lockdown. I remember talking to Andrew Perchuk of the Getty around that time, again of later—a little bit later in March. And when he

said, "Oh well, the Getty doesn't plan to reopen until September," I remember, like, almost falling out of my chair and saying, "You're joking," you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah [laughs].

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Now here we are [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. I had planned to do things in August and that's not happening.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Yeah. Exactly.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Uh, I'm curious about—we wanted to document shows that are canceled so thank you for listing those. I'm also curious about, um, studio visits, and you know this new—

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —this new way of communicating is the—something that marks this year for sure. Have you engaged this—

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —for studio visits?

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Yeah, absolutely. Um, uh, keeping in touch, also, with artists. Um, in fact, you know, I had mentioned Rubén Ortiz-Torres.

[00:05:05]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RITA GONZÁLEZ: And we're planning to do a virtual visit with him because so many artists have been impacted who had—who had shows up. So he had a gallery show up in downtown LA and they basically just kind of froze that show because they couldn't plan any new shows. So the show is still up. It's just basically been up in that gallery in isolation. So we're going to have a group, one of our acquisition counsels visiting the show with him and he's going to be talking about, too, um, how he's been impacted. And in the—it's actually kind of crazy because I, um—we thought we were going to open up at the beginning of July.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RITA GONZÁLEZ: So I put together a recent acquisition show because suddenly we had a hole in the calendar in one of the spaces. And the show is called *View from Here* which, uh, is after, uh, a series of work by Christina Fernandez, um, which is kind of poignant because it's a whole series of photographs that she's taken from the inside of spaces kind of looking out.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Um, all of the spaces were, uh, a kind of result of road trips that she made around California, um, like, um, this photograph she took from the interior of, um, uh, where, um, Japanese-American were interned in Manzanar. Uh, another that she took at Noah Purifoy's Museum out in Joshua Tree. But they're all just kind of looking from interior spaces into a desert landscape or a landscape.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: And anyway, that's kind of beside the point, but the point is that we put together this show of recent acquisitions and now we're just kind of waiting to open, reopen the museum but we're going to launch by doing some conversations with a number of the artists that are in the exhibition. And a lot of them—a lot of that is just asking them like, "How are you doing? What's going on with you right now?" A lot of artists have had plans like residencies, um, exhibitions, uh, publications that have all been put on hold, maybe even are canceled, uh, like the case of these residencies, or potentially rescheduled. So it's really, you know, made for a really chaotic situation for so many, uh, art historians and artists.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. That, um—it sounds like Christina's work will resonate though with people in denser places like New York where you really can't—you really are just seeing things from your window.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You can't go out on the street.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Exactly. Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Um, which is another thing we're interested in too, how does this change in changing people's relationships to their living space and domestic space. We've been asking artists about whether they can access their studios or not. Uh, but have you—like, just being home, you know, who are you home with? Are you doing things—are you on the sourdough train or anything like that?

RITA GONZÁLEZ: No. I have a six-year-old so it's all about [laughs]—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, school.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Yeah. He's—I can't believe he has not interrupted right now [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.] All those kinds of things have been happening on these, it's funny.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Yeah. Yeah. It's pretty chaotic.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: It's pretty chaotic.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And then what about as—being an Angeleno and observing—so the other pandemic too that our secretary, Lonnie Bunch, has identified in 2020 is the surge in racism.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Yes. Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And the things we're seeing in the streets. So what have you observed in LA or participated in?

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Well, I haven't observed—I haven't participated in any street protests just because been trying to be very cautious about exposing my relatives. My parents live here. And, um, also my sister lives here in Los Angeles too. And I—we want to keep seeing each other.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: So we try to be very careful about exposure. Um, so I didn't go to any street protests but, you know, was obviously watching online and, you know, following people who were tweeting and, you know, active on social media to see what was happening and, um, you know, I think artists wanting to participate as well by contributing in different ways. Um, what's been incredible too is artists making special prints, so the kind of activation of printmaking, uh, posters. Patrick Martinez did this, um, uh, multiple of the Pee Chee Folder and he—you know, basically if you could send the receipts, you know, show your receipts that you contributed to BLM or any number of, uh, organizations, um, that he would send, you know, one of these multiples. So artists are being, you know, incredibly generous. And a lot of it too is, you know, print, um, and multiples that they're using to kind of—not only to express themselves but also to generate fund-raising. And then of course here, um, we had been in conversation with Rafa Esparza and Cassils before, um, they ended up working a little bit more closely with MoCA. But, you know, definitely we're supportive of the big project that they did, and a lot of that came from the kind of activation, activism, fomentation that's going on with a lot of, um, LA-based, uh, especially artists of color and—

[00:10:57]

JOSH T. FRANCO: You're referring to the skywriting project.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Yeah. Exactly. Exactly.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Um, besides your role at LACMA, you're also working on an international

biennial right now. Is that right?

RITA GONZÁLEZ: No, not at the moment, no.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, you—you already were on the—

RITA GONZÁLEZ: In Gwangju?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Gwangju, yeah.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Oh yeah, that was—yeah. That was couple years ago.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay. So this is—this is done too quick. I don't know—I don't know when weeks go by.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: There no U.S. artists working—I mean U.S. curators working in an international—I mean, I don't—I don't know how it would be possible, you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's—yeah. Well, I've talked to some artists who are in—I know. It's a mess. But, um—

RITA GONZÁLEZ: I know Jamillah [James] at ICA, she was working on the new museum triennial and I don't know how that's impacted because she had done—I think she had done most of the traveling for the triennial, um, preparation. But, you know, how that's impacting the project, I have no idea. But it would be really—I mean, it would be pretty much impossible. And a lot of the biennials of course have, you know, Berlin, São Paulo, they've all been forced to delay—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: —a year. Oh, you know, what—maybe what you're thinking is I was, um, I'm on the advisory committee for Prospect—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Right.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: —that Naima Keith, and Diana Nawi, and it was supposed to happen this fall where, you know, probably I would have gotten—been getting my tickets for New Orleans right now but, um, that's going to happen next year.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you see any of these new features like the Zoom studio visit or, um, these kind of timed things, uh, like, lasting in the art world?

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Oh yeah. Absolutely. I think that, you know, the online programing.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: My colleague Christine Kim has been, um, moderating and co-organizing with Naima Keith, who's our head of education, an incredible series that's called, um, "Racism Is a Public Health Issue." I think that's the supertitle. And then each one has a different, uh, focus. And we have had, you know, the largest numbers of audience, you know, audience.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Um, you know, over a thousand viewers.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Wow.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: And then that's, you know, that's just in the original. But when it's archived of course on YouTube you have, you know—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: —many more options. And yeah, I mean, I think immediately we shifted gears, shifted focus. And right now, actually the education department, I mean, typically at this moment they would be working actively on a lot of exhibitions but, um, LAUSD has turned to the education department and at LAMCA and I'm sure at other museums looking for online resources that they can share with their students. So they went into overdrive producing, um, resources that artists can use, teaching resources for visual arts teaching but—visual arts instruction but also for, you know, more art historical content but for, you know, K through 12, um, you know,

variety of approaches. So they've put so much effort into that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Um, so, well, you know, this is a document for the record where Smithsonian we reasonably expect will be around—that this will be around in 100 years say. And I've been asking people, um, what in 100 years the person who views this should know about the American art world in 2020.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Um, I think it's just been turned upside down because everything that structured it in terms of the commercial side and then in terms of, uh, institutional side but also in terms of smaller art organizations, cultural organizations, artist-run spaces, everything has been—and foundations, you know, everything has been turned upside-down. So art foundations or foundations that fund the arts reevaluating their funding, uh, priorities to museums, um, reprioritizing—or prioritizing collection shows, collection-based shows because the next few years are so insecure in terms of touring exhibitions, insecure because of loans, insecure because of budget, um, insecure because we can't travel [laughs].

[00:15:33]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: So I—all of that and then some of the facets that we've talked about how it's impacted artists detrimentally, and also new scholarship and new, uh, you know just new ideas. You know, I—it's very hard to generate new ideas right now, which is a hindrance, but on the other hand it's been really interesting for me because I've been spending a lot of time rethinking the 1990s and what was happening in Los Angeles and how it's a really generative moment in Latinx art. Um, there was a lot of crossover with urban planners and architects and the, you know, Los Angeles studies kind of emergence. So in some sense, you know, there's not been the opportunity to travel around and look for inspiration outside.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Uh, and start new lines of inquiry and research. On the other hand, it's been a good time to reevaluate [laughs] and reconsider, uh, our collection, reconsider what's here in LA, um, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. That seems to be a trend of just going deeper.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. And it will be interesting to see the impact on local artists' relationships with the museums in their city or their town.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Yes. Exactly. Exactly.

JOSH T. FRANCO: But I hear you about the, yeah, impeding new ideas because our reading room is closed [laughs]. We have a lot digitized online but, you know, our reading room is closed.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: I know. Exactly. Exactly. Or just, you know, traveling like you travel.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Exactly.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Get to go see other exhibitions domestically and internationally, going to biennials. I'm sure I would have gone to Prospect. I had hoped to go to São Paulo, you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: I just—I had hoped to do research this year and, you know, traveling and it just—it's not going to happen and it's not going to happen for the foreseeable future.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. So I think we all know there's not going to be like a magic switch that this is over even if there is a vaccine, but if there were, what would be the first thing you would—you look forward to doing?

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Getting on a plane [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Yeah.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Check on my family. Yeah. I'm—I am, you know, I spent so many years traveling in my—in my job, and I just, you know, I kind of thrive on it. I thrive on what I learn and, you know, I'll probably just buy a ticket as soon as I can and go to Mexico City [laughs], you know, tomorrow if I could, you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: But there's, you know, there's a lot of places that I would like to go. So I feel a little starved in that sense. Of course that sounds like such a, you know, um, pampered life problem or something like that but, no, it also just feeds what we do and how we approach our work.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Um, so for the last question, been wondering if, um—you know, there's a lot of reporting about everything going on obviously, but is there anything that you have noticed that's missing that you would want to put on the record about things this year?

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Um, I don't know that there's not a lot that's not on the record because what's so incredible, for example, with this, you know, moment of reckoning as they call it, is that let's say within museum structures with, um demands from different, um, departments, different, um, you know, just realms within the museum structure for parity, for transparency, for decolonization, um, all of those things have been pretty out there, um, on social media. You know, the change—what is it called? Change Museum?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Change the Museum, yeah.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Change the Museum, for example, the open letters, the, um, groups that have kind of formed. Um, I know there's—Helen Molesworth has this, like, white women's group, you know. There's sort of like a lot of these groups. But also I know we too have been on a lot of discussion with our Latinx colleagues. There's an African American curators group as well. So I feel like there's been a lot of sharing, a lot of resource sharing, a lot of platforms to, um—for descent and for critique and that those things are also reaching the ears that need to hear them and eyes that need to see them too. So that's great. The things that would have, before COVID, been behind closed doors or, like, just between me and you or just off the record, they're now so much more in the open which is so incredible.

[00:20:45]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. And you're not the first to observe that in this series.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It's very real.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, thank you so much for doing this.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Sure. Sure, sure. It was fun. It was fun to see you. I like your—is that tie-dye?

JOSH T. FRANCO: It is. I'll tell you. Let me stop recording and I'll tell you about it.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: [Laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Thank you. Thank you. Official goodbye. Thank you.

RITA GONZÁLEZ: Okay. Bye.

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