



Smithsonian  
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Oral history interview with RYAN! Feddersen,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with RYAN! Feddersen on September 10, 2020. The interview took place in Tacoma, WA, and was conducted by Lara Evans 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

LARA EVANS: This is Lara Evans in Santa Fe, New Mexico interviewing RYAN! Feddersen in Tacoma, Washington on September 10, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Hi, RYAN!. How are you doing?

RYAN FEDDERSEN: Hi. Um—Doing well considering, you know.

LARA EVANS: Can you tell me about what these last few weeks and months have been like for you?

RYAN FEDDERSEN: Well, um, I refer to it sometimes as time soup, um. It's been a kind of a weird, um—it's been—it's been, uh, you know, a strange, isolating thing to live through, um. I already worked from home. And, um, my, uh, husband works with me as a kind of studio manager. So we, um—our day-to-day working lives have not changed very much, um. And, uh, even though my background has initially been in, um, interactive temporary artworks in like museum, um, and public settings, I've recently moved into primarily public art, which has really long timelines, um, and, you know, it's being run by municipalities and organizations that don't pause for anything. So, um, I've just been working away on—on those projects and kind of trying to stay focused.

LARA EVANS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. So it's pretty interesting that you're working in public art. Have there been, um, impacts from that from COVID or from the—the social unrest around Black Lives Matter?

RYAN FEDDERSEN: Um, COVID doesn't—hasn't—hasn't had a lot of effect on any of the—the art projects I've been a part of, um. Like I said, a lot of the schedules are kind of long. Some of them are—the longest one out was 2023; others are 2021. Um—So, uh, while there is a lot of time, there's also been like—there's been no, um—the expectation is—is no change. The expectation is full productivity as if nothing is any different [laughs], which sometimes you can manage, and sometimes you can't because you can only control what you yourself can control. And there's a lot right now that we don't have, um, a lot of understanding of what's going to happen. So, um, largely, so far, I've been able to really, um, mitigate impacts, um. But the—the conversation with, uh, Black Lives Matter and specifically around how monuments and, um, memorials and public art projects have been used to, um, commemorate white supremacy, um, and to commemorate, um, colonialism and imperialism, uh, has been coming up a lot.

And it's something that I think about with—why I wanted to get into public art, specifically, is that there's, you know, this—this history of art being used as a tool for government and religious propaganda. But this is a tool that—that we have, that we can use to be a part of the conversation. And I wanted to, um, kind of leverage my skills to—to talk to like a larger community and to create subversive messaging that becomes part of these—like, uh, public—public discourse and the—the history of our public values, which as we can see over time, um, there's been a lot of—not even necessarily like covert, um, use of public monuments to celebrate violence and inequality. And we have the opportunity to make counterstatements.

LARA EVANS: What, um—In what ways has your work changed as a result of what's going on right now?

RYAN FEDDERSEN: Um, well, in some ways, it was already changing, uh. I became—I was known for work that was touchable and interactive. And so that, of course, has—has to change, um. I actually had an exhibit up at the Tacoma Art Museum that opened a month before COVID, uh, closed it that had a 72-foot interactive, um, mural that was contemporary Coyote stories, um.

And of course, that can't re—reopen safely, um, in this situation. And so I'm rethinking those types of projects. And I think that we'll be rethinking those kinds of things that involve, uh, community through touch, um, for a long time. But I had already been trying to shift into permanent works, to things that were interactive without requiring touching or affecting because I think that interactivity is a wonderful way to communicate on a very visceral level and to, um, have people understand really complex ideas by using action to complete, um, metaphors and symbolism.

[00:06:07]

And so that's a part that I—something that I utilize in my work that I really wanted to continue. But then thinking about, how do you reformat that when people can't touch it? Um, so I'd already been kind of exploring different options, um, where people's, um, motion or action or positioning, um, kind of like—or instigates the—the piece or the action. Like I'm working with a piece where—on environmental personhood for the Portland, um, Airport. And when you look from one vantage, it appears that you're looking at portraits of the landscape, but then, um, through lenticular optical illusion, when you become perpendicular, a giant eye appears and looks back at you, both protectively but also like confrontationally. Like as we look at the land, the land looks back at us. We're not—we're not unseen. But—so it has this element of surprise and action, but you don't have to touch it to get that; you're able to, um, interact in a different way. I'm sorry, I keep shaking my table because I'm leaning on it.

[They laugh.]

[inaudible] sit on my hands.

LARA EVANS: Are there other projects where, um, some, uh—some way that they're executed has had to change?

RYAN FEDDERSEN: Um, not yet. Um, I think that the—the biggest impact was the closure of the—the show in Tacoma. Just, it was sad after that, um, kind of amount of work and like production costs, you know, going into something and then for it to come down, um. But it's—it's not a big deal, um. But for public art, everything I was working on right now, um, can kind of just keep going as—as—as it was planned, um. I was working on a Master's in Curatorial Practice because I wanted to, um, continue to support my community by, um, being a part of making new and interesting opportunities for Native artists to work in, um. But it was an international program, and no one wants an American traveling to their country right now [laughs].

LARA EVANS: Oh no.

RYAN FEDDERSEN: So—so I—I—I decided to, uh, defer and, um, rejoin once I can feel good about physically joining the class.

LARA EVANS: Oh, so they're not adapting by doing virtual classes?

RYAN FEDDERSEN: No, um. The class has people from, uh, Norway, Germany, Denmark, Singapore, um, et cetera. And some people—like in Norway, they have, you know, less total cases than we get in a day, so—

LARA EVANS: [Laughs.] Yeah.

RYAN FEDDERSEN: They don't—they don't have—they don't have to, or they believe at this point they don't have to, change, um. And it was just a few of us can't not change. You know?

LARA EVANS: Yeah, well.

RYAN FEDDERSEN: I think it's an awkward thing that everyone's trying to figure out is like, how much do you just keep going on and hoping that you'll be able to, uh, figure things out later, and how much do you truly reformat and commit to, um, doing what we have to do in this moment?

LARA EVANS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So it sounds like things are going just fine in the—the—the professional realm. How about, um—how's it affected your personal life, your family, your household, your community?

[00:10:01]

RYAN FEDDERSEN: Um, well, uh, I was very—I'm very glad that I moved to Tacoma. We—I lived

in Seattle till about three years ago and decided to move to, um, Tacoma so that I could have a—a studio space on the property, um. And, uh, it's been—it's been wonderful being—being on the property more and getting to garden with my husband; we've got plum trees and we spent yesterday making wine.

LARA EVANS: [Laughs.]

RYAN FEDDERSEN: Um, and so on a—on a personal level, like I'm, you know, I'm very privileged to be in a beautiful space with, uh—getting to live with a loved one or three, if you count my cats, um. I have gotten to see family recently which was really nice. Um, it had been—at the beginning, I completely didn't see family at all because my—my, you know, my dad's 70 and my mom is a cancer survivor, um, and so quite, quite recent. So, um, having more exposure to them made it really, uh, good—I didn't see them for—for months. But then where they lived had a much, much higher rate of infection and I quarantined myself and I got to spend some time with my mom and sister and—and father. And it really makes you realize how much you take for granted just like the ability to spend time with your loved ones. Um, I will not waste as much time as I did when—when—when we can [laughs]—you know, when we can celebrate together again.

LARA EVANS: I was wondering if there are some things, um, that you're observing or experiencing that you think might be missing from current accounts of the crises?

RYAN FEDDERSEN: Um, on a day-to-day level, um, I think that, you know, like support in community. Um, I think it's brought us closer together with our—with our physical neighbors, um, because we're, you know, we're here and talking to each other more about like what's going on, since we're so limited, um. I think that that kind of like community support isn't always a part of the conversation because there's so much, um—you know, there's so much terrible going on that it can be hard to, um, enjoy the—the things that are also beautiful. But beyond that, on a larger scale, uh, a piece that's not enough part of the conversation is that this isn't—doesn't affect everyone equally. And I say that as a person who's, you know, doing quite—quite well with working from home and being with loved ones.

But this has been a period of time when an amazing amount of wealth has transferred up, where the rich are getting wealthier than they ever have been. And the conversation is about unemployment, not about, um, not about employers and not about like workers' rights and labor rights and the fact that we are not just resources to be exploited and tossed away, but that there should be a symbiotic relationship where, um, people are taken care of and supported. But that's not how we frame these conversations. We tend to frame them only towards one side and it often ends on the side where people are more powerless.

We talk about homelessness but not in the same sentence as we talk about golden parachutes, but they're completely related and intertwined, um. Unregulated wealth growth creates, um, inequity and problems for people in communities that are—never even—me, like I've—I've never even met a truly like wealthy person. Like we're so completely segregated, um. And I think that more of our conversation at this time should be about, like, what's happening at the top with people who are controlling these resources. What are—what are they getting away with right now? How much are they looting from the public coffers? And, um, what can we do about it for systemic change?

[00:15:03]

LARA EVANS: Do you have any suggestions?

RYAN FEDDERSEN: [Laughs.] Um, not one I'm going to say on a—

LARA EVANS: Okay.

RYAN FEDDERSEN:—[inaudible] site.

[They laugh.]

LARA EVANS: Contact you privately [laughs]. Just kidding [laughs]. Um, how do you feel about the space you're quarantined in and, um, your—your sense of home and, um, and your studio right now?

RYAN FEDDERSEN: Um, I'm definitely like—I'm fairly new to this space; like, um, I said, um, I

moved just under three years ago now; uh, eight months of it has been in quarantine here or in stay at home, um. And so for me, it's actually been like a time of like bonding with this space. And I had—I haven't had a period where I haven't traveled in a long time to like actually just like be only in one place. It made me realize how disruptive traveling was, even though, um, there was always like an allure about learning about new places and people, um. But it's been—it's been nice being home and we're getting a lot more productivity out of our—out of our land and out of our, um, fruit trees and, um, growing more of our own food, which is, um—using this extra time to be more productive for ourselves, um, is also, um—has been a positive experience.

LARA EVANS: Um—What—what do you miss and what do you look forward to?

RYAN FEDDERSEN: Um, I never thought I would say this; it's so out of character for me. But I do miss hugging friends. I miss—the fact that like we can't touch people. And that you can sometimes see people, but you can't be intimate, uh. I miss—I miss hosting; I miss being a good host because that, you know, that spirit of generosity to those you love is so satisfying. And it's hard keeping a distance, um. So I'm looking forward to when we can spend time with each other again, without having to be so careful.

LARA EVANS: Are there things going on now that are—are helping satisfy at least partly some of—of those, um, longings for connection, either with artistic community or your—your physical community that you're in right now or your cultural community?

RYAN FEDDERSEN: Um—Some—a lot of those things, um. I hadn't done any like social Zoom calls, um. I've had to do a little bit of like meetings this way before. Now everybody wants to do them all the time for business; I'm doing like 14 a week sometimes, um. But I hadn't done any socially. And so, um, it has been nice to, like, reconnect with friends who—

LARA EVANS: Uh-oh. It froze.

RYAN FEDDERSEN: Now you froze.

LARA EVANS: No, I—I heard you.

RYAN FEDDERSEN: Okay. Um—

LARA EVANS: I think we're back [laughs].

RYAN FEDDERSEN: Um—Yeah, connecting with people who are farther away has been something that I've started doing now that I didn't used to before. And it's been nice connecting with both friends who live across the country and, in some cases, making [iPhone alarm sounds] new friends across the world, um. We started a—a D&D game with some people in New Zealand, um. And then when they got out of quarantine, they're like, "See ya."

[They laugh.]

That was—that was, a lot of, um—that was really nice. And I also did a—a virtual residency [*Contingencies of Care*] with, um—that, uh UBC Kelowna was co-organizing with OCAD [Ontario College of Art and Design University] and it brought together 100 artists, um virtually.

LARA EVANS: Wow.

RYAN FEDDERSEN: It had been planned as a physical residency and then they reformatted with their masters classes and then brought in invited artists to participate and be part of the discussions. And, um, I really—I really realized that there's a lot of opportunity in, um, virtual connections. Like I felt like I got to know a lot of people and I got to know about their practices and got to kind of dig in, in some ways that you don't always get to in, um, in-person studio visits because people were generating so much content, um. So I think that that was a productive art community experience, for sure.

[00:20:25]

LARA EVANS: Fabulous. That's great. Um—I want to really thank you for joining me here today to talk about how things are going.

RYAN FEDDERSEN: Thank you, Lara.

LARA EVANS: Thank you. All right. Have a wonderful evening.

RYAN FEDDERSEN: All right. [00:20:56]

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