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Oral history interview with Alessandra
Moctezuma, 2020 July 22

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Alessandra Moctezuma on July 22, 2020. The interview took place at Moctezuma's home in San Diego, CA, and was conducted by Fernanda Espinosa 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

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: All right. Um, thank you so much, Alessandra, for joining me today. My name is Fernanda Espinosa, and I'm here with Alessandra Moctezuma. Um, and she is currently at her home in San Diego. And I'm—we are doing an interview for the Pandemic Project at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Um, alright.. Um, so let us get started. So we don't have a lot of time. Um, but as we discussed, we really do want to cover some of the experiences of artists and curators and people involved in the art world during this pandemic, as well as the recent uprisings and shifts in the United States. Um, so I just want to get started by asking you how you've been and how you've been coping with everything.

ALESSANDRA MOCTEZUMA: I'm doing— I'm doing pretty well. I am—I was very fortunate that I could continue my work from home. I'm a professor and curator for one of our community colleges, um, San Diego Mesa College. So I was able to continue teaching online. And it was a little bit more challenging to continue the work with artists in the gallery, but we have done some programming online. And I'm with the family that's been also lucky, and that my husband can also work from—from home as a professor and a writer, and my—my kid—my kids, my teenage twins, they, they also did the shift online. So—so we're all doing okay and have figured out new routines, um, to stay healthy and stay connected and occupied.

[00:02:00]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: That's great. Um, so I'd like to get started by asking you how you navigated your practice during this time where we've all had to be um inside or in some way or another disconnected from how we previously um moved through spaces and people—and with people. So tell me a little bit more about how you've um navigated that world.

ALESSANDRA MOCTEZUMA: Well, it was—uh for me being an artist and being a curator means being very much connected to the arts community and my student community. And so, um, one of the ways that I feel we get inspired and have those creative conversations is by seeing each other's artwork, uh inviting people to our art gallery, me going to see other exhibitions.

And—and so it was a little bit difficult when that was completely taken away from us. And so um, when the order to shut down California came to be, we were setting up a beautiful exhibition at our college and working with four women artists, two ceramicists and a painter and a sculptor. And we were so excited to have the opening, and—and we suddenly had to cancel everything. And we—my students had been helping with the installation of the artwork. They've been helping creating some of the materials for the exhibition. And so it was a big kind of disappointment, you know, to have—to put all that work and suddenly we were forced to shut everything down. And the exhibit was almost done.

[00:04:11]

So I had, I had gotten the notice that we were probably going to shut down for a period. And then very quickly it changed to—no, now we're going to shut down for the whole semester. So I went back to the college, and to my office, and to the art gallery to pick up some things. And I—as I walked into the gallery space, seeing all the artists had set up this surreal um banquet with surreal ceramic objects. And then we had this beautiful mosaic [inaudible] trees and these paintings that gave the feeling of a fantasy, you know, a fairy tale land.

And I—as I was sitting there looking at all the beautiful work and the fact that people are not going to be able to see it, I just took my iPhone and I just impromptu went live on Facebook and started narrating and showing people everything that was there and that they wouldn't be able

to come and see that week. So it was—you know, it was a—just a quick decision to just do that. And it was, of course, not perfect, but I think a lot of people just loved the fact that we were—that we were—that I was trying to deal with the situation and trying to—to at least um provide some images and—and some connection with the artwork and with the artists.

And, and later on, we've done some projects with the artists, some video um virtual interviews. But, but to me what I feel is most, you know, representative of the moment, of the uncertainty, of that just having to, you know, figure something out quickly was that impromptu video that I—that I created. And the show is called *Ludicrous Tales*. And so—and it's—it's kind of become an upside-down world. And so—and now the exhibit is like *Sleeping Beauty*. It's—it's still in the gallery. Uh, we've gone back to photograph it. But I've—all of the artists agreed to keep the show up just in the hopes that, at some point, we would be able to go and see it. And I—at this time, I don't know. It's still—you know, it's still undecided. Will we be—our campus decided to shut down for the fall, again. So everything's going to be online for the fall. Meaning that also they're not going to want to have people on campus. So how long can I keep that show up? How long will the artists be—will the artists be patient to leave that work there for the duration?

[00:06:58]

Um the—I went back when we were photographing the exhibit and I was so curious. Anything that you leave for a long period of time, you know, it starts gathering dust and—but there was some magic to this space. When I went and looked at the ceramics, there was no dust in anything. Everything just looked clean and pristine. I don't know how that was achieved. You know, it's like—maybe it's a magical space. And so—but it's—yeah, it's just really hard because we think of, you know, art making is not only the process, but it's that—that sharing of that work. And, and you can't really recreate virtually a reception, or you know, like that social engagement on Zoom, it's like—it's not—it's not really—it doesn't really work the same.

So that's what I'm—you know, that's one of the things that I experienced. And, and the other side of it was also my students' enthusiasm to continue the classes—our class—I teach museum studies and gallery exhibition skills class. And I had to switch modality. And we had to meet on Zoom. And we would always do behind the scenes visits to museums and art galleries and meet with museum professionals in their uh vaults or storage areas or in their work rooms in the museums. um And what I—what I did is that I reached out to all of my museum friends and colleagues, and we were able to do some of those interviews on Zoom and have the—have them come into my virtual classroom. And, and that worked actually fairly well. I even could bring some museum professionals from Los Angeles. I—I brought on artists all the way from New York to our Zoom meeting. So—so there were some surprises in that. That, and intimate conversation on Zoom, um maybe in a sense made it easier for the students to participate, uh and they felt more—you know, you always have these shy students who are so intelligent, but then afraid of asking questions, but they use the chat to ask questions.

[00:09:08]

So, so there were certain advantages. But I, I continue through this time to try to keep that connection with artists, with um museum professionals, and um I tried to follow on social media—that's one of the—with all of the problematics of social media, it's—it's—unfortunately, it's one of the few ways that you can—you can keep in touch with people on what they're doing, get a little bit of—of that, um you know, immediate, you know, connection on how their day is going, how their lives are going, what they're producing, what they're making.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yes. We could have a whole other interview about social media and surveillance. But [laughs]—

ALESSANDRA MOCTEZUMA: Yes.

[00:10:00]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: One thing I wanted to ask you in thinking about the importance of the public and your work both as an artist and as a curator is, how do you see the impact. I mean, you just mentioned basically the way you think about teaching has changed. Um, but beyond teaching, just thinking about public art um and public space, and the impact that both the public health crisis, and the crisis with racism in the United States has had on the public space—and I'm sorry, this question is so long, but I guess also thinking about public art and what's happening with monuments and arts in public.

ALESSANDRA MOCTEZUMA: So I think that this was interesting um with the—I feel that the only time I really felt comfortable going out of my house—because my husband is high risk, so we have to be extra careful. So the only time I really felt comfortable going outside was when I went to one of the protests in support of Black Lives Matter. And my—teenagers had gone to the protest, the one that happened in La Mesa.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALESSANDRA MOCTEZUMA: The first one here in the area. And I let them go by themselves just so that they would have that experience of having the agency of not being, you know, with a family, but being on their own. um And—and my husband and I also went to—you know, to some of the other protests. And um it was the first time that I was, like, in a group of people since everything has shut down. And everybody was very careful, very mindful of keeping their distance. Everybody was wearing masks. And, and the—everybody also was—had their signs which was the—our way of communicating. Because sometimes you're with a mask, you know, it's hard to speak. But the way that you're talking to each other is through those signs. And you're talking to each other, and you're talking to people who are, you know, watching. And you're talking also to people in the future, because you're presenting those images and those signs.

[00:12:36]

And also right after um the protest in La Mesa—the protest in La Mesa ended up with some of the shopping centers getting, you know, burned. And so there was a lot of storefronts that needed to be boarded up. And what happened the next day is that groups of artists, including several artists that I knew that live in that area, went out there and started helping cleaning up and painting murals and just improvising the murals. We're hopeful that we're in support of Black Lives Matter. And so you see a range of expressions. And I've always been very connected to the power of public art. And more so—I mean, I teach museum studies, but my background is really working with Judy Baca, who was one of the leading Chicana, you know, muralists whose, you know, focus is protest that engages community telling, you know, the histories that get forgotten, right? So the power of—of public art in that sense, the power of muralism is really important. So seeing all of these artists coming out and creating these pieces and the artists that participated in the protest. And more recently, there was another group of artists that have joined together to do the, um, writing in the sky, you know, with airplanes. This was Marcos Ramirez ERRE and um, um Harry Gamboa, and other artists that got together and wrote to close the detention centers and demilitarize.

[00:14:25]

So artists were—I believe artists are always at the forefront of bringing attention to these issues. It's just that sometimes we don't notice. You know, when life is normal, when you can go party, have fun, all of these efforts sometimes are not—you know, are not visible. But I think in this time where we are all spectators shot in our homes, I think then these actions as there are telecasts and broadcasts and um presented in social media, they have had a pretty wide reach within—the rallies within the activist and artist communities.

And so, so that, that is pretty inspiring and exciting. And that also—and at the same time, you know, you have this idea, this—some artist friends I know, they were like, "We're introverts. We're—we'd rather just be in our studios," and yeah, that's one type of artists. But there's another type of artists that always wants to be connected and—you know, connected with the community and try to change things.

And so um, so with the— with the monuments, it was interesting. You know, these monuments that are being taken down, and there were some monuments of Christopher Columbus, that one was taken down here in Chula Vista. But those monuments never really spoke about people or community. You know, those monuments were just kind of a celebration of these figures in history that are very problematic and that are representing our kind of status quo that has kept other people oppressed and exploited.

[00:16:15]

But the counterpoint of that is this, you know, mural movement, this—and—and to me, it also—a lot of it, you can connect back to the WPA and the Mexican muralist that were using this as a voice to speak out for the—we know for the—for the people who are the most oppressed. And so it's interesting that kind of this counterpoint of these effigies of—you know, of misguided like

power being taken down on the rise of these um popular, you know, images, murals. Sometimes they—it was not only - in, in New York, there were several artist friends that were also boarding up the buildings and putting up murals. So it was really an interesting counterpoint between those two things. So that's I think some of the things that I've been thinking about, um, during this time.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So I have um two more questions that I want to make sure I asked you before our time is up. Um, and kind of to continue on the same line of thought, I'm wondering how you see your work as an activist and as a—as a curator, as a teacher in—in any of your practices. How do you see it going forward um in ways that are different from, from before?

[00:17:45]

ALESSANDRA MOCTEZUMA: Well, I think that—I realized that I've always made it a very important part of my work as a curator, as an artist to kind of elevate the voices of fellow artists of color, you know, Black artists, artists that were speaking about social justice issues. So if you—if I look back at my 20 years curating at Mesa College, you know, so many of those artists are artists that, that speak to those kinds of topics that are very relevant today. But that have always been in my mind, because there's somebody who came to this country who's Mexican, who's an immigrant, um who's a woman, you know, who had friends in Los Angeles who were from all over, and um I'm connected more with their experiences than—and that their experiences of kind of like an elite in—and so you know—and my parents were very highly educated. You know, they were part of kind of the arts in Mexico, but they also instilled in me an appreciation of art that is from the people as opposed to only this division of like the high art.

So I—so I think that I'm trying to figure out, okay, so I've done this—I think I've done a fairly good job of—in trying to present this artwork, albeit if it's a setting that might be—might not have the—you know, the audience, the large audience that you might have in a museum. You know, it's a college gallery, and yet, the conversations that we have with the students are—have been amazing. You know, in February, we had a show that dealt with slavery—with the effects of slavery with—on artists who was talking about—it's just like police brutality. And the students were so engaged with this exhibit. And when I saw all of those same students participating in this protest, I understood why having that forum to talk about these things was so important. So as a curator in an—in an academic setting, I can—you know, I can do that job of presenting things. But what else can I do? And a lot of my students in the museums have lost their jobs. They've been furloughed. Some of them have been laid off from their positions because of the museums closing down.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:20:14]

ALESSANDRA MOCTEZUMA: And um I'm trying to emphasize. So I'm going to shift focus to emphasize also more of the work in, in community arts organizations. Because um, I think even though—you know, I love going to a museum. I love looking at the history of art. I love looking at art from other places. I also love going to the small community art center and seeing the work of, you know, an outsider artist or an indigenous artist. And I, and I would like to find a way to advocate more for the lesser known community arts organizations. I think Jacobin had an article the other about—you know, is it—is it possible to have um kind of a culture, you know, supportive of our culture from the left.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALESSANDRA MOCTEZUMA: And I think that, that everything is always relegated either to the world of academia, or sometimes it's relegated to a world of institutional critique, which is very important, obviously. It's like taking down those sculptures, right?

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALESSANDRA MOCTEZUMA: But on the other hand, I feel that a lot of the same academics don't know about these small community arts nonprofits that have been doing the work. You know, how many people know that there's a—that they're trying to do a museum of Chicano Park? You know?

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALESSANDRA MOCTEZUMA: And the history of Chicano Park. And that they need the funding. And that they need the support. Um, and there's an—there's always this inequity in that—the big organizations. You know, the big museums have access to the powers that be. You know, they have the big—the wealthy board members. But the small community arts organizations, they don't necessarily. So I'm trying to figure out as an—as a somebody who knows this and who does have connections with a broad number of artists, community arts organizations, but also knows people in museums, I also know people in this city, how can I advocate, you know, for these smaller institutions. And also because I feel that, you know, historically sometimes big organizations—I remember when I was an artist, if you showed in a museum, the museum was like, "Well, we are not going to pay you, because we're already giving you this presence in the museum." And—

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALESSANDRA MOCTEZUMA: —and that is very—that's a big, big—a huge issue and a problem. And I think it's changing. I think younger artists are realizing that that's not the case. On the other hand, you have small community arts organizations who—you know, who try to find funds to—you know, to pay some to an artist.

And so I, at this time where, yeah, I don't get to go to the arts events, I want to focus more on how can I—how can I help shift that paradigm, you know, of—how can we support better art across the board, an art that is also, you know, coming from the streets, coming from community? And how can we channel the funds that are available for art?

[00:23:14]

You know, the greatest thing was when we had the new deal in the WPA, and there was a huge—during the—just to resolve the issues of the depression, you know, FDR decided to—you know, to fund the arts and to support artists. And so I feel that we so much need something like that, because the NEA is—you know, the amount that we get from the NEA and other government funding agencies is very small. And again, a lot of it is not as distributed as well. You know, the community organizations might not have the professionalism or the grant writer that can write that grant, you know, to get the money. So now that I have time to—you know, to consider and to help and to train my students, I'm just going to try to fit some of those things in.

[00:24:08]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes. And, and to your answer, it's been amazing to see so many of these very autonomous community organizations create huge networks of mutual aid within weeks of the crisis. Um, and I—yes, I totally agree with you that that's really important. Um, and just to end our conversation, I wanted to make sure I asked you if you've been creating or writing anything during these last few months that um you would want to share about.

ALESSANDRA MOCTEZUMA: Sure. Yes. So, I have been—you know, I was busy to transition to online. We also had to get certified to teach online. So it's been pretty—I've worked probably more hours during this time than other times. But I did do a few sketches and images that were reflecting on the political issues. So I did some images that reflected on, you know, supporting our essential workers and the wearing of masks and another kind of critique of the administration's, you know, lack of leadership with the situation. And they're mostly being in the way of quick sketches. I really love political cartoons and also political posters. Another aspect of what I teach in my Chicano art class, besides the murals, is also, you know, posters. So I did make one—some of these images as examples for my students, because I wanted them to create posters that were relevant to the moment. So I wanted to just show them something that I had done. And also, I wanted them to not be so afraid of creating something with very rudimentary materials, because—unfortunately, I don't have a studio. You know, I don't really—I really focus so much in curating that I've never really set up a proper studio. But I'm still—I have a hidden sketchbook underneath my pillow, you know, [laughs] that I go in there and I quickly sketch things. And then I post them on social media because I also never go—do the work of like submitting for exhibits or things like that. I just post them on my own social media and get them out that way. And actually, you know, it was nice because one of them was, was picked up by a peace and justice organization, and they—you know, they shared it. And so I'd still—but whatever I had created did speak to them. But they're very modest. But I love artists like Posada, you know, who created like the quick, you know, illustrations for the newspapers. I, I love to just do something in the moment as a kind of critique and a journal of the time. So that's

basically what I've been doing.

[00:27:10]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Great. Um, well, thank you so much. Is there—before I stop recording, is there anything that I didn't ask you that you would like to document in this interview?

ALESSANDRA MOCTEZUMA: Um, I think that that's great. I think that, I think that you gave me opportunities to talk about a lot of these things. I just wish there was a better way to keep connected, um, with—you know, with the artists, that we had, you know, better ways to have deep conversations. Like I said, social media is like the only way that you do it. But it's not really appropriate and not a, not a good, you know, platform for true dialogue. So—so, yeah. So that's my hope that as we continue on this lockdown situation that we—you know, that we figure out new strategies to connect.

[00:28:07]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Great. Thank you so much, Alessandra.

ALESSANDRA MOCTEZUMA: You're welcome.

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