



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Margaret Honda,
2020 August 17

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Margaret Honda on August 17, 2020. The interview took place at Honda's studio in Los Angeles, California, and was conducted by Jacob Proctor 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

MARGARET HONDA: —I realize that my name is, uh, maybe not what it should be [referring to her display name on Zoom].

JACOB PROCTOR: So, this is Jacob Proctor, uh, interviewing Margaret Honda in her studio in Los Angeles for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art's Pandemic Project. So, Margaret, thank you so much for speaking with me. Um, it's been quite a—I guess the last time we saw each other in person was in February, late February in Berlin, and then the world kind of turned upside down. So, it's nice to see you.

MARGARET HONDA: It's very nice to see you as well. And I think at the time that we did see each other, certainly the virus was working its way westward, I guess, and so we had an inkling of, you know, things going on. And I know I had planned on—I had wanted to go to northern Italy and had to postpone that trip—[laughs]

JACOB PROCTOR: [Laughs.]

MARGARET HONDA: —because northern Italy was being completely shut off at that moment. Um, and then on that particular trip to Europe, we got home, I think, the night of March 10th, and then we woke up the next morning to a news headline that the United States was about to ban all, um, incoming travel—travelers from Europe. So, it was this very strange thing of getting home just in the nick of time, but, um, but also still, you know, dealing with what was to come.

And, uh, it's been interesting and very strange, as I think it has been for everybody.

And, you know, the one thing that I try to remind myself of is that, you know, I think that, you know, my particular situation is—it's relatively stable compared to the situation of so many other people, not only in the U.S., but all over the world. You know, I'm not a refugee, I have a place to shelter myself, I can feed myself, I'm in relatively good health. And so, all of those things, I think, contribute to a person's sense of control.

And—but even so, it does feel there have been moments, especially very early on, where things felt, um, completely out of control. Because early on, nobody really understood the virus. We still don't understand it. And also, uh, and California has been—it was relatively good early on in terms of quarantining and closing things down.

But then reopening things has presented a lot of difficulties and, um, that has been a, you know, a source of, um, you know, of—really it's just been very hard for everybody because, you know, you close things down and you open things up and then, you know, you have to look at closing things down again.

Um, but I think for me and for my husband, we've basically been closed down [laughs] since March 10th.

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARGARET HONDA: And we haven't really kind of—I mean, we've been very careful. We've, you know, been staying home. And luckily, our lives before the quarantine were essentially the same. You know, we work at home, we're at home all the time, we're around each other all the time. So, there wasn't a whole lot for us to get used to in terms of, like, there was no major difference in terms of our working lives and our day to day lives.

Although, in terms of our working lives, I have to say that a lot of the, um, labs and fabricators that I rely on are still closed—

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARGARET HONDA: —and so there are projects that are in abeyance at the moment. And I just have to wait until it's possible, and I'm not too worried about that. Uh, luckily, it seems as though a lot of deadlines have kind of evaporated or they've moved. So, it's not, it's not like I'm facing any extreme difficulties. I don't know of anybody who really is, you know, in terms of their own work.

[00:05:23]

But it's also been a really good time to just sort of think about things, you know. To have time to really think in a way that I didn't before. Because I was busy, I was traveling, I was going to the lab and fabricators, and, you know, now there is time to actually really just kind of rethink a lot of things that I do and how I do them. And, you know, do I really want to get on as many airplanes as I have gotten on in the past? And all of that kind of thing.

But I don't know. I haven't really talked to a whole lot of other people about their experiences. I mean, I've—I talked to my family all the time, but they are in different lines of work. So, I don't really know what it's like for, say, a lot of artists in New York and—or even in Los Angeles, for that matter. [Laughs.] I mean, I have really taken the sort of self-isolation thing quite seriously. [Laughs.]

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah, it's interesting that you're quite—I mean, I was going to ask you about fabri—about film labs and fabricators. But, you know, this question about travel is—actually, I think I do wonder myself what it will mean for those of us who are in industry, in parts of the art world or that rely so much, or have come to rely so much, on frequent, you know, frequent plane travel, international travel. I mean, in your case recently, like, you know, the film festival circuit is a really important—

MARGARET HONDA: Right.

JACOB PROCTOR: —part of that world. Um, you know, even if you're coming at it very much from the art—the art world side, it's still an important, uh, means of having your work shown—

MARGARET HONDA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACOB PROCTOR: —And of course, that's also a communal environment. And, um, in your work, in your film work, especially, it's very—it's basically impossible to see except in a live theatrical setting—

MARGARET HONDA: Right.

JACOB PROCTOR: —and I wonder, have you—whether you've thought about sort of what that—not so much on the production end, but on the reception end, whether that—?

MARGARET HONDA: Right. I have. I have thought about that a lot. Um, in the past, often the problem has been that people ask about my films, and then they realize that they're either 70 millimeter or 35 millimeter, and they don't have the equipment. Um, at the moment, there have been situations where people have the equipment, but then because of the pandemic, you know, theaters are not open.

And I had, when I first started making films about seven years ago, initially I thought that, um, you know, once all the projectors, you know, get taken out or there are no more projectionists, then that's the end of it for me. Uh, but then as I was working more, what I realized is that when Kodak decides to discontinue a particular stock, you know, that could be the end for me. Uh, but now I realize it's, you know, it's something, it's something both bigger and smaller than all of that.

You know, it's, um—I mean, you know, as humans, we're not, we're not at the top of the food chain. You know, it's the viruses are at the top of the food chain.

And, you know, a pandemic is something that could be the end of my films or at least the reception, and it's still possible for me to make things. Uh, the question is, how will people see them?

And I've always known from the beginning that there would be a very limited audience for my films just because they do have to be shown, you know, in a cinema. Um, and, you know, that that does limit things, you know, but I didn't—I don't really do work that's about being seen across, you know, many different platforms at any time of the day or night. You know, it's really, it's about this very physical experience of being, you know, in a theater. And not being able to do that for whatever reason, but now because of a pandemic, that, you know, that does change things.

[00:10:12]

But it's also something that I just have to accept, you know. It's the nature of the world, and there isn't—there isn't anything that I personally can do about it. But, you know, I always knew that the end of my films would probably be—come before the end of me. And I think, you know, we might be seeing that now.

Probably not, you know. I mean, I was feeling about a couple months ago, like, "Oh, you know, maybe my films are never going to screen again." Now, I think they probably will, but it would be, you know, in several years, I think.

So, you know, I mean, these are the kinds of things that I think about—[laughs]

JACOB PROCTOR: [Laughs.]

MARGARET HONDA: —That I've been spending my time thinking about. You know, it's like, what is—what is the end of things? When will that come? What will it look like?

JACOB PROCTOR: I keep thinking about—I don't know if you know the, you know, these—the photographs of the invisible cinema that Peter Kubelka designed for Anthology in the early '70s, where everyone was in their own little black cubby box, and they weren't supposed to—and for him it was that there was no one—they weren't supposed to be distracted by the people sitting next to them. But of course, now you would build that—now, maybe all cinemas will have that structure so that we can't cough on each other.

MARGARET HONDA: Right. Or—yeah, because you don't want to be breathing in someone else's air. And—but—unfortunately, I think for the films that I make, it's—I really do like for the audience to be one large—I mean, I like for people to be able to see what the rest of the audience is doing. You know, whether somebody is, you know, moving around or coughing or because my films are silent and some of them are long and things—lots of things can happen to your body, you know, in that span of time. And that, I think is a really important part of, you know, watching my films.

JACOB PROCTOR: And the phenomenology of film spectatorship is going to be forever changed. [Laughs.] I think—

MARGARET HONDA: I think it—I think it will be. There may be moments where, you know, we can go back. I know the Arsenal in Berlin had reopened their theaters, um, back in June, but I think with, you know, social distancing in terms of the seating and so forth. Uh, so, I think in some parts of the world, there are attempts being made, you know, to try to have screenings in theaters, which I think is fantastic. Um, to be living in the United States right now, to be thinking about that is a little terrifying. But, um, you know, at some point, I hope, you know, that there will be—there will be a time when we can go back into a theater and see a film.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah, I hope so, too. Um, you know, in LA, I don't have—I mean, I've spent this time either in Europe or in New York. Um, how are people taking it in LA? I mean, I know that you said that you've been—you've really been taking it seriously and, you know, staying in and, um, like, actually sheltering in place, as it were. Um, but in terms of the media and, you know, your sense of the world, kind of the world outside, do you, you know, do you feel like—? You know, I was saying that in New York it feels there's an extremely high level of, like, really acute anxiety —

MARGARET HONDA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACOB PROCTOR: —and I'm curious whether, I mean, LA is such a—New York is such a city of close-packed areas—

MARGARET HONDA: Sure.

JACOB PROCTOR: —and LA is a much more, you know, it's not that way. [Cross talk.]

MARGARET HONDA: Well, I think that, you know, that's the difference between, you know, feeling something as acutely as you do in New York, uh, and not feeling it so much here in Los Angeles, because it still is a city where you get in your car and you drive someplace. And, um, so, you don't really have a sense of what other people, you know, are feeling or thinking. Uh, they're, you know, they're—it's really hard to tell how seriously people take things unless you actually talk to them or if you see somebody out, you know, wearing a mask, you know, or wearing a mask and gloves. Um, then you know somebody is taking things seriously. Uh, but then there are lots of people who don't wear masks when they go out and there's still, you know, the chance of them actually running into somebody is fairly great.

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Um, and I think after Memorial Day, which is when Los Angeles went into stage two of the reopening, uh, that's when the infection levels started to rise, because, um, you know, restaurants and bars started to reopen, uh, barbers and, you know, hairdressers. And, you know, people, I think—I think if you adhered really strongly to guidelines of wearing a mask and, um, you know, keeping your distance, that certainly helped and would have prevented a lot of spread.

But I think one of the things that I think might be happening, and I spoke with a friend about this, is that there's this term lockdown, you know—

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARGARET HONDA: —which implies—as opposed to quarantine, you know, lockdown seems to come from a sort of, you know, incarceration. And so, people feel like, you know, something has been taken away from them or they've been, you know, locked up literally. Whereas quarantine is a term that really, you know, comes—it involves or it makes you thi—puts you more in mind of a medical situation.

And I think when, you know, so much of, um, the reporting has involved this term lockdown. And so, when things start to move from stage to stage of reopening, I think, you know, people automatically just feel like, "Oh," you know, "We're free. We're not under lockdown anymore." You know, maybe not thinking, well, even though we're not strictly under lockdown, you know, there are still these other guidelines that we need to adhere to.

And, you know, my friend and I were wondering if the term quarantine had been used more frequently, if that would have made any difference at all. You know, if people would have understood, like, okay, the quarantine is still going on, although we are opening up a few more things. But, you know, because the quarantine is still on, you know, you do still need to wear masks and observe distancing.

And, um, so I think perhaps all over the world, you know, this could be a situation where people, um, you know, you hear the term lockdown, and when, you know, you hear that lockdown has ended, you think that everything is okay. When, in fact, you know, it—nothing could be further from the truth. It's really not okay. And you have this enormous responsibility to try to keep things, you know, as okay as possible.

Uh, but in—I mean, I know that's a very roundabout way of answering your question, but I think it's just in Los Angeles, there's just a very different, um—like, you don't run into strangers quite as much—

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARGARET HONDA: —as you might in New York. Um, and also, I haven't really been going out very much, you know, I've been getting deliveries and things like that, so.

JACOB PROCTOR: Uh, I think that that's actually—that your point about the language and—

MARGARET HONDA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACOB PROCTOR: —essentially the terminology that we use is, uh, I think that's, uh, very astute. I think that it is—I mean, from my from my experience, I think it bears, you know, it bears out your thesis, um, in that in Germany, they very much didn't—they didn't call it a lockdown.

MARGARET HONDA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACOB PROCTOR: I mean, it was described as a quarantine.

MARGARET HONDA: Yeah.

JACOB PROCTOR: And it was more—and, you know, nobody was enjoying themselves, but I think it does convey the public health, uh, importance, the significance as a—as a health measure.

MARGARET HONDA: Right.

JACOB PROCTOR: It's not—as opposed to the sort of feeling as if you're, yeah, as you said, as if you're being put in prison—

MARGARET HONDA: Yeah. Well, if you look at the difference between, you know, the leadership in Germany versus in the U.S., then you can understand, you know, where the emphasis comes from. And.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah. It's a very—it's a very perplexing, uh, situation that we find ourselves in. Um, I wanted to ask, just kind of by way of wrapping up, if there are, you know, I think that you, you know—sort of along the lines of the use of terminology, whether there are narratives that you kind of see that aren't getting told in this, that you think are going to emerge as being important, um, after the fact. I think your point about terminology is very much on—we will look back and think about those kinds of things.

[00:20:18]

MARGARET HONDA: Uh. I'm not sure. Other than the question of terminology, I feel like I don't have enough of a handle on all of the sort of more localized things that are happening, which I kind of feel are really at the heart of the situation. I mean, we certainly read in the media or see in the media, um, you know, the larger scale implications of what's happening.

Uh, but then, you know, there are, um, there are smaller kind of neighborhood things that I think are just incredibly important. Like in parts of Los Angeles, um, people have set up these things called community refrigerators. Which, um you know, maybe somebody will run, um, the electrical cord into a shop or, you know, someone's, you know, grocery store or whatever. And people from the neighborhood will bring food and put it in the refrigerator and it's available to anybody who needs it.

And this is extremely important at a time when, you know, food banks are really struggling, and a lot of families with school age children who rely on school breakfast and lunch programs aren't getting those needs met. Uh, and it's also, you know, you have to actually travel to go someplace to get to a food bank, whereas this, you know, might be, like, a block away—

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARGARET HONDA: —from where you are. If you're, you know, a senior citizen and you need to rely on—you don't drive, for example, and you need to rely on people to drive you places, but those people have suddenly started going back to work. And, you know, if it's close enough to you, then you can walk and get something to eat.

And, I think this type of thing is, you know, it's just so—it's so important and, you know, I have read about this in *The Los Angeles Times*, and I'm sure that other types of things are happening all over the country, all over the world, really. Um, you know, just, I think, to see how, you know, how people are looking out for each other, I think is something that is, you know, those are the stories that I think are not getting out maybe as much as they should. And hopefully, you know, will become part of the history of this moment, because, you know, these are literally the lifesaving things that people can do for each other.

Um, but that's kind of the only other—I mean, just, you know, just very sort of localized things are the things that I think people are able to participate in, uh, you know, able to contribute to, you know to reap benefits from, uh, you know, in a way that, you know, like, our—certainly the federal government is not going to be there for you—

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARGARET HONDA: —at the moment, but, you know, your neighbors will be.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah.

MARGARET HONDA: And I think that's—you know, that's really, I think that's maybe, you know, the thing that comes out of this, for me at least.

JACOB PROCTOR: Well, that is a very, I think, I think that's a very hopeful way of putting it. Uh, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me and talk to us. Uh, and we really appreciate, um, you being with us.

MARGARET HONDA: Oh, you're very welcome. Uh, thank you very much for asking. And, um, you know, best of luck with all of your other interviews.

JACOB PROCTOR: Thanks.

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