



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Trevor Paglen,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Trevor Paglen on August 10, 2020. The interview took place in northern 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

JACOB PROCTOR: Okay, so we're recording, um. This is Jacob Proctor, uh, in Brooklyn, New York, interviewing Trevor Paglen, who is in northern California for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art's Pandemic Project. Trevor, thank you so much for speaking with us today.

TREVOR PAGLEN: Thank you so much for having me, Jacob; it's good to see you.

JACOB PROCTOR: It's good to see you too. It's been a while.

TREVOR PAGLEN: It has.

JACOB PROCTOR: I think we last saw each other in Berlin in the middle of the winter before any of this went down, um. So, I mean, the first question I wanted to ask is how are you doing and how has it been like—how has it been for you, and where were you when all of this started and how did it—how—yeah?

TREVOR PAGLEN: So, I am doing very good today, um. It's the first day, I think, where I could say that. I got—I came here to my dad's farm from New York last night, and last night was the first night I've slept in about six months or what have you [laughs], um, so it's good to be, um, out in the country. Um, I guess when the pandemic hit, or at least when that kind of American phase of it hit, I was shooting photos in New Mexico, and, um basically, just decided it was probably too dangerous to fly back to New York, so I just drove, and, um, yeah, then you know, got—arrived in New York City and everything was kind of locked down.

And, um, yeah, it's been really rough. I'm not going to lie. It's been rough kind of psychologically, in terms of being disconnected from people, disconnected from most things, um. It's been rough, you know, in that time, you know, I was putting together a show that's going to open next month, um, and sort of trying to work under those conditions of quarantine and working remotely has been really hard. Then just on top of that, the—I'm sure everybody is saying this, but just the amount of ambient fear and ambient stress, just that feeling of the built environments around you being unsafe, you know, is a kind of very baseline level of a very high-level stress, you know, and, um, so—and of course, on top of that, there's a huge amount of the economic uncertainty, you know, in the sense that, like, so many museums are closing, or so many galleries are just not going to open up again, um. So, there's—that really professional world has, in many ways, ground to a halt, and basically what's happened is that everything that kind of got put on pause starting around February, everybody's kind of been holding their breath, and like, now all those shows opened, so I'm having, like, three shows open in the next month, um, but there's nothing after that.

Like, those are all the shows that we're having, that were supposed to have already opened, but after that, there's nothing. And so, that's—so, yeah, all these things on top of each other add up to a really high amount of stress and, um, you know, having said that, also, that it's a very high level stress to just see how avoidable much of this was and just how much of this is actually completely manufactured by an incompetent leadership, you know, and a cruel leadership and just having a government that actively chooses to harm people in a situation that is already so, um, precarious and where people's livelihoods are so—in such a vulnerable place. So, I think those are a lot of different things; a lot of things piled on top of each other.

[00:05:08]

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah, it's a bit of a tsunami of badness.

TREVOR PAGLEN: Yeah.

JACOB PROCTOR: How about—how is your—because you also have a footprint in Berlin, as well.

TREVOR PAGLEN: Yeah.

JACOB PROCTOR: How are you—you haven't been there obviously?

TREVOR PAGLEN: I've not been there.

JACOB PROCTOR: I mean, that must—I know that that felt very strange for me to be sort of disconnected from, like, a big chunk of my life when I was in Berlin—when I was stuck in Berlin essentially and my friends—and so many of my friends and family were here in New York and—

TREVOR PAGLEN: Yeah, so I have a small studio in New York that I work out of, but it's—historically I've really traveled a lot for projects, whether for—on the production side, or to make them, to show them, et cetera. So, the studio in New York is where I live, but it wasn't really set up to be a place, you know, where I live [laughs]. And I have a studio in Berlin as well where most of the people that I collaborate with work, and so, obviously I wasn't able to go there, so we were trying to work remotely and, "You can do it, but that doesn't mean that it's to be done," I guess, [laughs] to quote the words of Chris Rock [laughs], you know, but yeah, so it's—we're just basically trying to work and everything is like 20 times harder. I don't know if 20 times harder, but definitely five times harder.

JACOB PROCTOR: It's a lot harder.

TREVOR PAGLEN: Yeah, so it just kind of felt like walking through some kind of, like, like I'm at like a beach that's made of really sticky sand or something like that [laughs]. It feels like that.

JACOB PROCTOR: I know the feeling 100 percent, and it's a very weird—it's like trying to do research without a library.

TREVOR PAGLEN: Yeah, and I think those experiences in different places are also really different, too, where I get the sense in Berlin, they're kind of like, yeah, it's kind of fine, you know, or I had another little project that I was doing with some folks in Australia, and they're just—they're like, do this, do this. I'm like, what are you talking about? Like [laughs], that's just not where things are at, so to see how, you know, uneven, you know, it is, kind of despite the fact that it's a global pandemic. It is the experiences that are very localized, as well, you know. So that's—yeah, I guess that's been a part of it.

JACOB PROCTOR: I mean, beyond the challenges of trying to collaborate with other people remotely, do you think—I mean, as you said, so much of your actual practice takes—is in the researching stages, and the travel and the photographing in remote locations and being able to be mobile, and I wonder if you've had thoughts about sort of what the future looks like in terms of whether—if a lack of mobility is a condition that we're living with for a while, whether that has any kind of direct knock-on effect on your own thinking about your work?

TREVOR PAGLEN: Yeah, I mean, I think that is the bigger question. I guess for me, there—that—this has kind of happened in three phases maybe, like in terms of the professional stuff was—like phase one is like, okay how do we stop—how much—you know, spending a bunch of money that we don't have, right, that's there's no income for? So, one is like trying to scale down a little bit, and then at the same time trying to find other projects for people to work on, because a lot of stuff was just canceled, and I didn't want to just like furlough everybody. So I was just like, okay, what are all the projects that are sort of on the backburner, in the basement, that like we were always like, "Well one day when things get slow, we'll do that?" [Laughs.]

It's kind of pulling all those out and dusting that off and then the second—and then kind of checking in. The unemployment stuff in Germany is quite different than in the U.S., so you can reduce people's hours, and the state kind of helps compensate for that, so we were just finding the right scale that we needed to be working at, so that was kind of phase one. And then phase two was trying to put this new body of work together and finishing that and thinking about well how do you fabricate something when all the fabricators are closed?

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How do you [laughs]—you know, so been going through that whole process, and then, again, I

think it's been this process of like—I guess for me, the analogy, or the metaphor, would be like trying to work underwater; like holding your breath, everything's slow, you can't really move, but you're trying to get stuff done.

Um, and then in, kind of September, like, nobody can hold their breath anymore. We need to get the shows open; we need—like regardless if it's going to be open for a day and then close back down again. All this stuff has to open, you know. And then I think right now—and this is the phase that maybe started about two or three weeks ago—is just really starting to come to grips, kind of emotionally, as well as practically about what—how to do whatever it is that I do, or will do, after September, you know.

And that's really confronting, you know, yeah, to see the degree to which the infrastructures, as well as the kind of economic and cultural environment, you know, is—but mostly, basically the institutions that you're working with, um, they've really—I guess have changed or not even necessarily actively changed, but they have to change, um, because they can't support the model that was before, and so what is it going to mean to work within that, and especially if October or so comes, it starts getting cold; people have to start going inside, if people start getting sick again. I really don't know what happens if there's another quarantine. Like, it's really hard to see much of this surviving, and that's really confronting.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah, it's a little—it's terrifying.

TREVOR PAGLEN: Yeah.

JACOB PROCTOR: I mean, I hope that there—I mean, personally I hope that we do manage to get through it without another quarantine, but in the—you know, in the sense that, I think what you are saying about the precarity of institutions or the sense that, like, the institutional model that has been kind of, more or less, functional, or at least that we are used to, if it's no longer viable, I mean, do you have thoughts about sort of what—like what could be a better option, what could work, or what might be coming?

TREVOR PAGLEN: I mean, I do, but I don't know that there's a better option, or this or that. I mean so I guess—I mean, it's kind of obvious that there's two directions that things are going in. One is everything online, everything online on one hand, and then the other one is like everything is super local; everything is super, super local; like we don't imagine ourselves as being global institutions anymore. "We," meaning, like, museums, for example, or different spaces, and neither one of those are things that I had certainly been particularly interested in, to be honest with you [laughs] or you know, kind of set up to do, and, um, so, I'm looking at some stuff and seeing what's possible.

So, for the November show—actually in the studio we built—you know, as many people are trying to do, thinking about how do you build an exhibition that is natively, kind of, in space as well as online. So, we took a lot of the hardware that we had been using for this performance that developed with the Kronos Quartet, where the quartet's playing; we have all these cameras and stuff set up around them that are then streaming that to a screen behind them, so we took all that hardware and are adopting it to an exhibition. Can you create an exhibition that is kind of constantly being streamed online and using—taking that very seriously, as like that—um, as a medium? As a way—in other words, you usually think about exhibitions in space; you send the photographer there; they photograph it; the documentation's online. Well, what if you don't think about it that way? What if you think about it like some cameras and some stuff and some walls and some lights and some screens [laughs] or whatever it is? You put all that stuff together.

You know, so that's one direction.

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I'm going to start kind of—a friend of mine is trying to start an experimental art school that will all be online, so I'm going to teach like an introduction to photography class on that, which is super weird; that's never been something—it didn't cross my mind as something I would ever do, um. And then I think—and then just beyond that, I'm not—I'm just thinking about what you can do and what—and how much, I guess, like, how—what kind of show I want to run, for lack of a better word, you know? Like, how big should it be? How much stuff should I be responsible for? What should the capacity be? Should I try to branch out even more?

You know, like in the studio for example, we've done a ton of work around artificial intelligence and computer vision. We built a lot of tools to be able to look at things like data sets and things

like that, so do I try to branch out and say like, okay, here's all these resources that I just build for my own work; are those going to be helpful to other people? You know, and the other hand, do you really want to support that [laughs]? It's just a lot of questions like that. In other words, what should the boundaries of this practice be? You know, and I think that that's something I really, maybe—I think that was a fun thing to think about when you didn't have to, and now that you have to [laughs], it's a lot less fun.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah, I mean, yeah, as the world becomes—as we're forced into virtuality, thinking about virtuality as so exciting and just like all the promises, you know, seem a little more—a little farther away. Are there stories, I mean—given that you are also pretty keen observer of the world around you, are there narratives that you think are getting lost in the way that the media is talking about the situation and the way that even, you know, the experts are sort of in the story that's being told?

TREVOR PAGLEN: I think to me the—again, I think this is highly uneven, you know, in terms of where people are, what neighborhoods they live in, what are their jobs, and stuff like that, but you know, for me, certainly, especially in New York, you know, um, I mean, I guess people are talking about that stress and losing your minds, especially people with kids and stuff like that, but that's really—I don't actually know how you communicate that, you know. For me, for a long time, for months, just even walking around New York City, I'm like, how are people just not melting down on the streets [laughs]? You know what I mean? Like nonstop, because I certainly felt like I was, you know. Um, and yeah, I guess, um, that sense of stress, that sense of just uncertainty is just so, like, debilitating, I think, um, and, yeah, I guess for me, that's certainly one thing where like the media that you see or the way that you—that is something that is very visceral and very affective, and it's a feeling that I don't know that can be conveyed in any other media, other than you kind of feel like [laughs] it yourself, you know.

JACOB PROCTOR: I think I told you that when I came back to New York, you know, in the middle of June, I felt like the whole city had PTSD.

TREVOR PAGLEN: Yeah.

JACOB PROCTOR: Everyone was just kind of—and it sounds like that's kind of what you're describing, is this sense that there's been a kind of psychological trauma that it's going to maybe take a lot—I don't want to put words in your mouth—but take a little while to deal, for people to figure out how to deal with it.

TREVOR PAGLEN: I think so. I think so. And I mean, for me, I'm really grateful to be able to come to California. I mean, yesterday I flew for the first time since February which is a whole, another super-weird thing, but I do—yeah, but like literally, I think nobody's sleeping. Nobody's going to be like—people are either like losing tons of weight or gaining tons of weight, or, you know, just everything is just really—yeah, I guess what I said in the beginning, which is that this level of ambient stress is so high, you know.

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And a lot of anger about the degree to which how much of it is just totally unnecessary, and this is completely the result of a refusal, you know, for our institutions to, kind of, take responsibility, or not even take responsibility, just try to even imagine helping [laughs]. Like, just not even like preventing other people from helping.

JACOB PROCTOR: Function.

TREVOR PAGLEN: Yeah, functioning, right, I guess.

JACOB PROCTOR: Well, thank you so much—

TREVOR PAGLEN: Thank you.

JACOB PROCTOR: —for taking the time. We really appreciate it, and I wish you all the best health, and I hope that we see each other again soon in person.

TREVOR PAGLEN: Beautiful, man. It's great to see you, Jacob. Take care.

JACOB PROCTOR: You too, man Ciao.

TREVOR PAGLEN: Bye-bye now.

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