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Oral history interview with Gabo Camnitzer,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Gabo Camnitzer on August 7, 2020. The interview took place from Camnitzer's home in Brooklyn, New York, 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: All right. This is Josh T. Franco interviewing Gabo Camnitzer at his home in Brooklyn, New York on August 7, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Uh, Gabo, thanks for taking a few minutes to talk to us—to talk to me for the Archives, and this project, um, you know, really is just about checking in on American artists in 2020, the year of pandemics, of COVID-19, surging racism, and we want to see how people are. So, how have you been since March?

GABO CAMNITZER: Um, relatively speaking, pretty well I have to say, um. I mean, all things considered, I count myself among the lucky ones I'd say, um, yeah—but, it's hard to, sort of, act like nothing horrible is happening in the world on a daily basis.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, well you've been particularly active around one of the, kind of, effects of all this which is rent, um, and the, kind of, I'll say it in hashtag form, #CancelRent, but it's a large movement—

GABO CAMNITZER: Yeah, yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It's been very visible and an important component of things. Can you talk about that a little bit?

GABO CAMNITZER: Yeah, sure. So, I mean, really the housing crisis in New York and the country, like, yeah, precedes COVID. I mean, I think it's really just a matter of that when COVID kicked into gear, it really exacerbated all the problems that were already happening, um, and during that time, like, early March, I started making graphics for the Housing Justice for All Coalition, which is a great coalition of New York-based organizations all over the state. I've been working with these questions of housing rights for years really, um.

So—I started making graphics just, like, for Instagram and stuff, and I was getting more engaged with that and then me and my partner reached out to people in our building. We live in a building that's, like, over 100 units, um—I actually—first, it was really just to see if there was need for mutual aid, you know, there were a lot of mutual aid networks popping up at that time, um. We'd only lived here less than a year. So, we didn't really know people in the building that well, um. So, we just, like—first, we put up posters, um, they got taken down by management. So then we flyer'd the building, um, and we got a decent response.

So, it started out just, like, seeing if people needed help, you know, if there were people who were sick or elderly, and then it, sort of, transitioned into, um, basically a rent strike because, at first, we wanted to see if management would offer rent relief. I mean, I think the same thing played out on a massive scale all across the city, all across the country where it's just, like, trying to see if there's going to be any kind of, like, meeting halfway with management, for the most part—I mean, there are of course exceptions, but for the most part, landlords and management companies have just, like, refused to negotiate with tenants.

So, um, instead, it escalated into a rent strike which—yeah, I mean, kind of, at every turn, we had the management, kind of, um—sorry, someone's screwing something in [laughs], um, we had management, kind of, just making the situation worse for everyone, but that would mobilize tenants further. So—but now, we have this situation where the housing courts are about to open —

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yep.

GABO CAMNITZER: —in New York—or I mean, Cuomo keeps—Andrew Cuomo, the governor, keeps extended the moratorium month by month, but—so, everyone's just, like, on tenterhooks, um, and, I mean, just thinking about how the crisis precedes COVID, like, while the moratorium applies to people who have been affected by COVID, people prior to COVID that have been, like, served eviction notices are now already in court, you know, because the moratorium doesn't apply to them. So, I mean, there's 14,000 families in New York who, I mean, families who have been served eviction notices just from, like, January, February, and beginning of March.

So, I mean, it's just—and, like, thinking about how that, I mean, it's—everything's all connected. So, like, those families who will be without housing, like, are more susceptible to all the other issues of this moment, you know. So, yeah, I mean we could talk about that the whole time.

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JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

GABO CAMNITZER: It wouldn't be enough, but—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, um, well, I think just one, you know, my important takeaway is just that, uh, you know, you're contributions with your artistic skills to the visual, you know, amplification of #CancelRent was noticed, you know, and important, and yeah, the cliff is here. We'll see what happens, but—so, one thing I want to be sure to ask you about, too, is education in this context, in the COVID 2020 context, and for two big significant different reasons. One, your college level teaching which I'll get to, but also, you as an artist. You're practicing really—is, um, you collaborate with children and you invite them into works and they are your partners in a lot of your, uh, significant artworks. Can you describe one or two of those exciting projects, and then I'm curious if that experience has given you a lens on what back-to-school is meaning for people right now?

GABO CAMNITZER: Yeah, I mean, I think, you know, as an example of project that I was working on prior to COVID which is, like, working with an after-school program in New York on the Lower East Side, 6th Street Community Center, um. I mean, it just, like, involved me going in most Fridays and collaborating with kids on this project around, like, children's movements and children's forms of protests throughout history and thinking about, like, the current climate strikes around the world and how—while they're really fantastic, they also tend to fall into certain traps of, sort of, organized demonstration that can, like, limit their impact and just, like, thinking together with children about how children in the past have found more militant and more, sort of, subversive ways of mobilizing in relation to, like, labor rights and things like that, school, student rights and so forth.

And that, you know, way of working, that, kind of, long-term engagement face-to-face, like, in a room-building relationships and movement building, more broadly I think, it's facing a crisis. But so, I'm, sort of, in this period of trying to rethink, um, how those forms of being together can exist during a moment like this, you know, um. And that's, like, an ongoing, sort of, struggle to figure out. I think, like, the—this paradox that we're all, like, inhabiting, thinking about—or being forced to choose, like, whether we're going to prioritize the health of student and teachers, of children and teachers versus, like, the economy, um. I think it—I mean, really it's a false, kind of, set-up. I mean, the, um, the bigger question is, like, educational inequity, how little money is invested in the education system, but—I mean, public education system.

So, really, like, in New York which is the only major school district in the country that's planning to be in-person in less than a month which is crazy, um, like, basically these super, sort of, under-served schools are being forced to create contingency plans that really put everyone at risk, um, and when they kick up a fuss, it's the, you know, the teachers and the administrators that are being blamed rather than, you know, this neoliberal system, the austerity system that's, sort of, deprived them of the actual tools to do this in any kind of safe way, um, yeah.

So, all that is to say that, like, both—in relation to, like, my work, my artistic production, and, like, just, you know, yeah, being a parent thinking about, like, having a kid in the education system, like—it's really just trying to grapple with these larger, structural inequalities and trying to engage with them in a way that's, like, not just firefighting, you know, not just dealing with it one day at a time, but, like, actually meaningfully trying to change the whole system and going forward, like, I'm even more invested in that than I, you know, that—that's something I always felt invested in, but, like, now, I feel, like, I really feel, like, a less interest in those short-term projects that, kind of, just, like, are ameliorative [ph], but not necessarily long-term, you know, or

not necessarily thinking about structural change.

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So, yeah. Going forward, I hope to focus more and more on that, sort of, long-term structural, sort of, change.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, uh, that's an interesting shift to watch some artists make from project-based works to long-term life goals, um, but I do wonder about his particular—have you experimented with or have any thoughts to play with Zoom—like, this kind of technology with children or are you just, sort of, waiting this out to get back to that kind of work?

GABO CAMNITZER: Um, yeah. I think I'm—to an extent, at this point, I think I'm waiting it out. I have a really, sort of, complicated relationship with Zoom, I think or, like, just with telecommunications more generally [laughs] so, like, I think, like, I am, like, seriously suspicious of it as a technology. At the same time, like, I acknowledge, like, the way—ways that it addresses certain problems around accessibility and those things, but I am, to an extent, hopeful that, like, the importance of that face-to-face encounter, the importance of being in a room together, working together, touching the same objects, like, making things together can stay privileged, you know, can stay, like, a sacred space, and I think the time scale that we have of, like, hopefully having a vaccine by February or, I mean, early 2021 puts, like, an end date on this in a way that I feel, like, capable of waiting it out, you know, um.

Now, on the flip side of that, I am working in higher ed, and, like, right now, I'm, like, trying to develop a curriculum that can function within these, like, strange modalities in a way that's generative, um, but even in that capacity, like, I'm going to be teaching at UMass Dartmouth, and we're, like, developing a curriculum that will be, like, outdoors as much as possible, you know, it's, like, a very beautiful, vast campus that has, like, a lot of nature. So, we're just developing, you know, projects that will, um, engage the nature.

So—yeah, I'm not—I'm—with full awareness, in 20 years, people might, like, look back on this and think, like, oh, that was before we took, you know, Zoom, remote learning for granted and that, like, my position might be dated, but I'm still, kind of, very attached to the need to be, like, working with people in a room and, like, you know, with people that belong to your immediate community, like, your physical, material community, um, because I, like, I think that's, like, going back to the structural questions. It's, like, on that level that we can make change happen, like, it's a lot more difficult when we're, sort of, abstracted from one another and alienated from one another and our interactions are mediated through, you know, big tech companies.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, um, yes, that's worth thinking about, um. The—so, yeah, this new position at UMass Dartmouth, I want to hear more about what it is, but going back a little bit, you were teaching at Columbia the last few years, um, can you talk a bit about how it was to be so just abruptly disrupted mid-Spring semester by COVID and what that was like?

GABO CAMNITZER: Um, yeah, sure. I mean, it was nuts [laughs]. What can I say [ph]. I think anyone working at any level of education experienced a very abrupt, somewhat traumatic experience because, you know, like, you spend this time building these relationships and then suddenly, like, certain elements of those relationships are laid bare in a various, sort of, destabilizing way, you know, just, like, thinking about particularly, like, working in a private institution, just, like, that relationship—the consumer relationship that the students have just, justifiably, to their education and then suddenly I'm on this other side of the divide in terms of just, like, providing—ostensibly providing a service, you know, and just, like, being aware that—I mean particularly just going back to my stance on, you know, remote teaching, like, I'm—in my own eyes—providing something that I feel like isn't an efficient substitution, um, to what we would be having otherwise if we were in person.

So, I mean, I think, like, basically, I had, like, syllabi for the classes I was teaching that was, like, you know, I'd spent time developing, you know, years developing really, I was happy with, and suddenly, I had to tear them up and really try to develop something that functioned within the parameters of remote learning in a way that felt generative, um, and there were certain aspects that worked really well and certain aspects that, you know, didn't work at all, you know, um.

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So, it was really a learning experience. I think, like, now with the benefit of hindsight, like, I can just, like, really, sort of, expand on the things that were working and really not try to, um,

develop things that, like, won't work, you know, and I think that's partially why, at UMass Dartmouth, like, we're going to be really, sort of, leaning in to the novelty of the situation and really just, like focusing on, you know, working in the nature there and being outdoors as much as possible and really, sort of, making provisional, site-specific, um, works that engage with, like, questions of land use and, you know, working with questions of sustainability and ethical, like, use of the land.

I think, like, it'll be something very specific to the moment, but it'll be also something that, you know, hopefully will serve the students and the people teaching for the rest of their lives, you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, I mean, that's such a great resource in that area of the country to have at this time, um. Have you, uh—we just always want to know, too, about people's access to their studios, if those are separate from their homes, did COVID disrupt access to them. So, where do you work and is that still possible?

GABO CAMNITZER: Um, yeah. So, my studio is in Maspeth. I'm in Bushwick, Brooklyn and I—my studio's in Maspeth, Queens. It's, like, a 20-minute walk, um. I would say, like, yeah, that physical divide, while it's very, sort of, manageable, the, sort of, epistemological and emotional [laughs] one. It's, like, a far—far more difficult to cross. I think, like, yeah, I've only been there a handful of times, and it's usually, like, for logistical purposes rather than going to, like, work open-endedly.

That said, I have been doing some work at home, um, but, yeah, I feel, like, yeah, this period has really shaken me to the core in terms of just thinking about, like, what the purpose of artistic production is in a moment like this and, like, what my role as an artist is and, you know, I've—I guess I would say I've always had an ambivalent relationship to the studio in terms of just, like, it being a space where I work in isolation, um, something that I want to do, you know.

I've been more, particularly over the past, like, 10 years or so, more focused on collaborative projects and just, sort of, open-ended prompts that I then explore with people. So, um, I would say, like, certain hesitations or reservations I've had about, like, the studio as a model of production, like, have been enhanced. I'm sure I'll come back to it at a certain point, but just, like, the—yeah, the privilege involved in having a separate space, um, you know, while I continue to pay for it [laughs] that privilege of having that space is something I'm uncomfortable with, particularly, like, given people's relationships to housing at this moment in this city, you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, I had not thought about that, the relationship to the housing anxieties everyone's—people are having. That's interesting.

GABO CAMNITZER: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Um, in the last couple minutes here—so, you know, we're the Archives. We reasonably expect to be around as part of the Smithsonian. So, for that researcher in 100 years, um, I always think of—I like to think of them as practicing artists, but the researcher—what should they know about what it was like to be an artist in 2020?

GABO CAMNITZER: [Laughs.] Um, well first, I'm very happy that there are researchers and artists in 100 years. That's great news, um, yeah, I mean, I guess, like, hopefully looking back at this moment or this whole, like, epoch, this whole era, um, it'll, like, will seem quaint in our inability to inhabit contradiction, um, and hopefully in 100 years, like, the lessons of simplistic understandings of society will have been learned.

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I think, like, yeah, I mean, really just going back to what I was talking about with—in terms of relationship to my studio, relationship to the artistic production at this moment. It's really just, like, that feeling of, like, inhabiting contradictions that I can't reconcile, I can't, like, make sense of, you know, and I feel, like, more generally, education during this period of time—or I mean, it's probably 2000 years more at this point—has been, like, woefully inept at preparing people for inhabiting contradiction, for really understanding the contradictions that we embody.

So, I hope, like, that's something that feels dated and quaint in 100 years.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I like that. Thanks, Gabo.

GABO CAMNITZER: Thank you.

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