



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Teresa Carbone,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Terry Carbone on September 10, 2020. The interview took place at Carbone's home in the Hudson Valley of New York and was conducted by Ben Gillespie 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

**BEN GILLESPIE:** This is Ben Gillespie interviewing Terry Carbone, Program Director of American Art at Henry Luce Foundation at her home in the Hudson Valley. It is September 10th, 2020, and this is for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project.

Terry, could you tell me about how your work at the Luce Foundation has changed since March of this year?

**TERRY CARBONE:** Sure. Um, our offices closed, um, on the 11th of March. And by the 13th I had left the city, um, to take up residence in Hudson Valley.

Um, and I began immediately to have phone calls with museum directors; I believe my very first one was with Adam Weinberg at the Whitney. Um, and those conversations were urgent, and they were also a little chaotic because at the very, very outset no one quite knew what we were facing. And those conversations continued and developed over the course of, I would say, the first three weeks of lockdown.

And they began to be a little more formulaic as museum directors, I believe, with some encouragement and direction from AAMD [Association of Art Museum Directors], um, began to devise a series of staged scenarios, um, which naively began at first with ones that were focused on weeks rather than months. So there were three-week scenarios which were followed by one-month, three-month, and six-month scenarios. And those were essentially fiscal plans but also, um, personnel plans in terms of who would remain in the buildings, uh, who would be retained at their current levels. Um, and after the first three weeks it became very apparent that the May goals, which were initially seen as worst-case scenarios, were folly. And, uh, people very rapidly started assessing their capacity to open in even June or July.

And I have to say that, uh, my heart went out to these directors in particular, uh, and administrators in general who were just dealing with, um, the complete unknown of the situation and trying to simultaneously have a plan that would be financially, fiscally responsible but also attend to their responsibilities towards staff, keeping them safe but also keeping them employed. Um, and this, don't forget, was the very early phase when the government had not yet made available the option of the PPP [paycheck protection program] loans, um, which I look at as essentially a, uh, second phase in these conversations.

So initially, I began talking with current grantees. Um, the Foundation's American Art Program has at any given time approximately 100 or 125 grantees, um, with active grants. And these were my priorities because people were of necessity reconsidering the, um, viability of project work and, um, the availability of project funding.

So we quickly made a decision within the first couple of weeks to begin our conversations by inviting museums in particular financial distress to request reallocations of funding so that they could divert project funds to short term salary support. And that was our priority. And those salaries could be project-related salaries, but they didn't have to be. We were trying to be as open-minded as possible. And, um, quickly realized they would have to be just at the discretion of the museum. So if it ended up that, um, they were prioritizing educators or frontline staff, if the salaries of, um, administrative personnel were key, or if there were curators who were not on, uh, stable, endowed funds it was really up to the museum. So I would say that the first six weeks of work were, um, very much about those reallocations.

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We spoke to, and I'm sort of a one-person program here. So, um, I personally spoke to close to 40 museums around those reallocations. We ended up having fewer museums take them than we anticipated; we made approximately, um, 12 major reallocations, um, and then moved on to the option, uh, of emergency grants. And this was in response to our board's, um, granting a permission for grants to be made in the, uh, interim periods between board meetings with the approval specifically of our, um, board chair and the foundation president. So these were, um, rapid response grants and they really were quite rapid.

So, uh, I started reaching out to other museums. There was a lot of word of mouth around who was really in need. Um, and what was really challenging was that over the years, um, the American Art Program is almost 40 years old and over the years we've worked with close to 500 museums. So there was no way we were going to be able to assist every museum in need. So, um, it was a challenging process.

Um, we were trying to, especially in the pre-PPP period, we were trying to respond to museums we'd heard or learned through our conversations, um, were really losing staff or losing capacity to retain staff, uh, rapidly, and, um, who also had significant programs in American arts. Um, so we ended up, um, by the end of May, uh, between the reallocations and the emergency grants, um, assigning, uh, well over \$3 million, um, specifically for short-term salary relief, staff retention, and other emergency operating, um, needs.

So that was, um, a breathless period of months. And, um, in the mix, um, we began to have regular—I began to have regular conversations with my colleagues at Terra and new colleagues at Art Bridges to see if we could somehow complement each other and avoid redundancies. And those conversations, uh, initially just with Terra but soon thereafter with, um, the new head of Art Bridges, um, were helpful in that the aim was to see how wide a net we could spread without duplicating efforts. Um, and those conversations worked very well. Uh, I think we were all bolstered by having conversations with, uh, each other who were in the same fix of wanting to do as much as possible with the understanding that we couldn't nearly do enough.

Um, when we started to hear about the granting of the PPP loans, which I have to say were, the whole process seemed to have been much more fruitful and rapid than we anticipated. We had to understand that some of the institutions to which we'd given emergency grants were then receiving these loans which was initially a little, um, you know, worrisome because then, uh, one had to consider whether there were people who, institutions that had not received the loans and had not received emergency grants. But the truth is that those loans were pretty much a stopgap and all the museums would have them run out by the end of July. So it was another, um, plug in the dam, if you will.

Um, but most museums were then facing, yet again at the end of July, the kind of, um, reckoning with yet another round of fiscal estimates, um, and coupled with the widespread postponements of reopenings. And so, um, you know, we're seeing more reopenings now. We were surprised when Houston opened in mid-July but that seemed to go very well. So it's kind of promising.

Um, you know, the understanding is that with the restrictions on capacity which are mostly at the 25 percent of attendance level, um, museums will be pleased to be reopened. Um, but they will not be regaining their financial footing as a result of reopening. And that's the new threat, I think, um, which is when will, um, attendance, visitorship be fully, um, resuscitated? And can museums sustain staff and operations at the necessary levels, um, until they resume their full activities, programming, uh, dining, shops, you know, all the things that contribute to the earned income?

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Um, there were a few museums that surprised us with a lack of need owing to the fact that, oddly enough [laughs], they've never been able to rely on earned income. So, um, it was a lesson in sort of the range of, uh, fiscal arrangements at various institutions.

Um, and of course, in the mix we were inundated with requests for alterations to projects, whether they were extensions or postponements of exhibitions, um, cancellations of exhibition tours. And all that was, like, a sort of ongoing thread of conversations, um, underneath all of the activity around emergency support. Um, and we were, um, uniformly approving of whatever revisions to project plans were necessary.

Um, I think that particularly in the realm of loans and tours, um, museums experienced an extraordinary level of collegiality and mutual support that I hope will continue [laughs]. Um, that was a positive outcome. Um, no one was able to return loans. Um, no one was able to, um, approve of couriers. Um, it was, you know, this is something that may in fact impact the operation of projects at least in the short-term.

BEN GILLESPIE: All right. And so I'm hearing about just this incredible mobilization effort to find out where the need is, to get the need there.

TERRY CARBONE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BEN GILLESPIE: Um, how do you see the operations of the Luce Foundation changing in the wake of this? And, what are sort of the legacies of the 2020 crisis? And how, not to say you administer the grants, but how you're going to select and design grant programs?

TERRY CARBONE: Well, you know, it's a good question. And it's one that we're working out on a day-to-day basis. Um, one of the things we did do because we did have a regular June board meeting and there were grants that were slated to be made for, um, major projects including, um, reinstallations, we had deep study projects. And what we did was, um, essentially, to, uh, reclaim some of that funding for emergency grants, we cut those projects in half, basically, for their funding knowing that they would have slow starts, at any rate.

Um, you know, at any given time we are in conversation about the following year. Um, so there was already a tentative lineup for 2021 grants. And, of course, the majority of those were project based. Um, we will be reevaluating those on a case-by-case basis. And the reevaluation will include considering the financial stability of the organizations we were hoping to sponsor in terms of projects. Um, I don't think we will be moving ahead with non-urgent projects.

Um, we certainly will resume when our coffers are refilled in the new year because they're virtually empty at this point. Um, we will resume some emergency grantmaking. To what extent remains to be determined. We are not making an arbitrary decision but will rather base our decisions on what we understand to be the needs as of the New Year.

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Um, you know, the, initially the longest scenarios were through the end of 2020. So people are going to be reformulating; uh, they had calculated their deficits for the fiscal year. They will, my guess is, be revising those upward.

We will probably begin another round of conversations. We will have to, um, return to evaluate all of our live projects for viability and, uh, completion dates. Um, I will hope to make new project grants when we can understand that the projects are truly viable. I think that, um, we want to be optimistic, but we also have to be realistic. So in the short-term, meaning the next year and a half, if our funds are better used to just stabilize institutions and their staffs, we are willing to forego the sort of, uh, excitement and rewards of project work.

Um, I will say that we did move ahead with our annual loan exhibition competition this year much reduced, about half of the funding we normally, um, dedicate to that process. Um, we normally spend between, um, \$1-and-a-half and \$2 million on the loan exhibition grants every year and we cut that in half. Um, we're going to be spending just slightly, very slightly over \$1 million. That was a huge, um, curtailing of that effort, which is an important one in the field. But we had to be realistic. Um, and, you know, the timelines of these projected exhibitions, um, will be fluid, I expect. Um, and we'll be fairly liberal around that.

But, um, we moved ahead with that because the understanding is that renewed visitorship is much more likely to be driven by special exhibitions than by permanent collections right now. Um, and I think, um, we're seeing that in the results. For example, with the reopening of the Met there's been a lot of buzz around the Jacob Lawrence show; that's a driver of attendance there. So we didn't want to take away from museums the capacity to attract visitors with special exhibitions. But we had to be realistic about how much money we were going to put toward that. So I suspect there will be another round of special exhibition funding next year, some project funding. But I do expect that, um, we may yet again, uh, dedicate two or even \$3 million to emergency funding next year. It really remains to be seen.

BEN GILLESPIE: And just, uh, to bring this to a close, I'm wondering what would you want researchers 50 years, 100 years from now to know about this particular moment and this sort of,

this uh, these interlocking crises within the American art world and within—

TERRY CARBONE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BEN GILLESPIE: —the United States?

TERRY CARBONE: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. They have been interlocking between just the health risks, the financial catastrophe, and, you know, a reckoning with, um, the need to revise practices in museums in response to the anti-racism movement. And, um, and understanding that the lack of capacity of museums right now is making the latter of those three terribly difficult.

Um, I think it will be seen as a turning point in museum practice for a lot of reasons. I think museums will need to revise operational practices that have become just kind of rote. Whether they are, um, you know, the highly ambitious, uh, loan exhibitions, um, or, um, means of making collections accessible. I think there are a lot of good questions that will have arisen out of this. I just, um, and I've been pleased to see the willingness of a lot of museums take on the challenges as well as they can at this moment.

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Um, but it will also be, um, it will also be a time when we lose, unfortunately, some members of the museum community whether they are, you know, museums that don't come out of this, financially speaking. Um, and that's my greatest worry. Um, I do think there will be some very positive, accelerated responses to necessary, you know, the necessary challenges around the way we work. Um, I just worry that, uh, with communities being hit so hard we've yet to even see the impact of the, um, inevitable declines in municipal funding for public museums. That's what we're about to see with the resolving of fiscal, city, state, and federal budgets. That's very scary. So I will, um, hold my breath for those museums that are on the brink and hope that somehow they can pull through, uh, and continue good work that they do.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, I will hold my breath with you. And, uh, thank you very much for speaking with me today.

TERRY CARBONE: Thank you, Ben.

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