



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Matt Saunders,
2020 September 3

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Matt Saunders on September 3, 2020. The interview took place from Saunders's home in New York City, 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 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: This is Jacob Proctor speaking with Matt Saunders on September 3rd, 2020 for the Archives of American Art Pandemic Project, speaking from his apartment in Manhattan, and I'm speaking from my apartment in Brooklyn. So, Matt, thank you so much for talking with us and being here talking with me and being a part of this. I guess, like the biggest question is, you know, how has it been since all of this began, what, five—four or five months ago? Where were you when it all—when things started to really go downhill?

MATT SAUNDERS: That's a huge question.

[They laugh.]

Well, first of all, thanks for having me. So I am—I teach up at Harvard and generally move around a lot. I have a studio up there, and then I have a space in Berlin and an apartment in New York, and so my life has been kind of triangulated. I was up there in the middle of semester right before Harvard's spring break, which was when things kind of came into focus. They, you know, they sent all the students home, told them that everything is going online. And I immediately came down to New York thinking I would be teaching remotely for the semester and I could be down here. But I stayed in New York for about a week and it became clear that, um, it wasn't a great place to be in the middle of March, and I didn't have a good Internet connection.

Like, I went back up there, and I spent most of the pandemic up in Cambridge. And it's been a kind of sense of widening circles ever since. But I've said basically from March until the beginning of June was just sitting in a concrete box in a tall apartment building.

[They laugh.]

One of the main things for me is I got locked out of my studio. That's been one of the biggest impacts is that I—my main studio during the semester, I have a big space and a separate colored darkroom that I've built up in Boston, but they are—buildings belong to the university and the university shut everything down. And it took several months to get access again. So I really got kind of shut out of a big part of my ability to do anything except cook, teach online, and stew in this box in the sky.

JACOB PROCTOR: That's amazing, that's crazy that you were shut out of your studio as well. And how was—I mean, how was it teaching studio classes remotely?

MATT SAUNDERS: We could—I mean, you could spend the whole interview on that easily. I was teaching a brand-new course that I had just invented within the general education program at Harvard. So where we normally have sort of the smaller studio courses in the art department, this was a 72-person course. Studio art painting course lectures that fulfilled the general acquirement for students, so we had, you know—400 people lottery'd for it. It was a big deal course. And it turned out to have been a kind of blessing because it was super organized. So when we moved online, I spent one day shipping materials to all the students using the same shopping cart in Blick.com—

JACOB PROCTOR: [Laughs.]

MATT SAUNDERS: —shipping it to their home addresses, and then had quite a positive experience with it, actually. There was something intimate about—the lectures became somehow strangely intimate because I was sitting in my—basically my bed, like—

[They laugh.]

—talking into the computer. And I think that those—that activity, working with, you know, their very first step into art making was hard for some people, for some of the students to figure out how to set it up at home. But it became a break from all the other Zoom time and all the other things that we were doing, so I felt like the class snapped into gear at that point we had. Some people got lost. I think everybody had that experience teaching in this moment. Some students really got lost in health issues, mental health stuff was—there was a lot of care. But I felt like it was kind of energizing, but it became all-consuming for me. I mean, that's—I'm speaking as an artist and I've always balanced my own work and the teaching and I really, you know, took this two months from March until May and was 100 percent present in the teaching. And it's been tricky to come back from that first.

[00:05:04]

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MATT SAUNDERS: —having, you know, there was a dead month of not going into the studio and then even just kind of reorienting yourself. The whole world shifted and, um, I spoke about this with a lot of people, I think both through the anxieties of COVID and through all of this sense of urgency and frustration and powerlessness that maybe came up with the Black Lives Matter resurgence. A lot of artists I know who also have other roles leaned in heavily to their institutional frameworks. I saw my contact with the students and the sort of, you know—I was new to some hiring committees at Harvard at the time, and I felt like there are clear ways that I could be engaged through that role. So if I think back on that period of my life, it's a period where the balance got really skewed towards other types of service, other types of institution affiliation, which, of course, is something that I've been very fiercely protective of not becoming.

[They laugh.]

I don't trust being a company man. But in some weird moment, a feeling like that was point of contact to an ongoing institution and social space that was engaged with the world whereas the art world was shut down in my—

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MATT SAUNDERS: —experience at least, you know? I was in networks of people who were organizing—you know, I went on bike rallies in New York. You know, there were—there's a lot of activism, but in terms of art's direct role, I didn't feel like there's a way that my work could be in the public space in that time, and so it shifted me. And that was a long-winded response.

JACOB PROCTOR: No, but I mean, I think especially, I mean, as you said, if you don't—if you're shut out of your studio, then, you know, that sense of retreating to the studio is impossible and so it makes—you know.

MATT SAUNDERS: I learned a lot about myself because I've always, you know—yeah. Like the—all this, I think in the past I've like joked with people that one of the attractive parts of being an artist is the travel.

JACOB PROCTOR: [Laughs.]

MATT SAUNDERS: Which is it sounds like a—a terrible thing to say. But I don't travel for holiday, but I love going weird places to do shows and things, and that's been a big—and I do have this weird life with like, I have an apartment in Berlin and New York and Cambridge, and I bounce around, and I'm always on the train. And I am on the road a lot, although, um, I know that some of that is performative and it is this quality of like everybody showing up and being on this kind of moving circuit.

JACOB PROCTOR: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I'm familiar with the circuit. [Laughs.]

MATT SAUNDERS: It actually kind of—it was great to be set free of some of the expectations of being in different places, but it was also strange to be alone in one place for the longest time, I think—

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MATT SAUNDERS: —for the last decade of my life. And I always have ways of working on the

road, I'm like very good at being in Tokyo for a month and taking materials and working on drawings. But I somehow wasn't able to do that in my own apartment. There was some—I don't have an answer for why it was, but I think that I spent the first month lying to myself and everyone who asked me and saying, "Oh, yeah, yeah. I've got materials here. I'm working. I'm making drawings."

JACOB PROCTOR: [Laughs.]

MATT SAUNDERS: [inaudible] And I think I even thought that I was intending to do that, but, um, it became really clear when I got back in the studio what a block it had been and how much welled up energy I had to get—

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah. I mean, I miss my office so much, so much more than I ever thought I would, you know. Because, you know, you think when you're—when you—I think it's a similar situation where you think, "Oh, well working from home is such, um, such a luxury." But when it's the only option that you have, it can make your world feel a little small.

MATT SAUNDERS: Yeah.

JACOB PROCTOR: I know I had a very hard time, like especially at first, like focusing and writing, you know, and working on real work at home, probably. And, you know, I was used to you being able to go into my office to do that.

MATT SAUNDERS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACOB PROCTOR: And kind of having, you know, a bit of a boundary.

MATT SAUNDERS: Yeah. I mean—Yeah. My favorite class I teach is this class called Painting, Smoking, Eating, and it's all about the kind of space of the studio. We talk about Richter's *Atlas*, but also Guston's studio in Woodstock and this idea that the contextual space of the studio it's like tuned into the world but separated out.

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MATT SAUNDERS: And it's—you know, for 10 years I've been talking about that idea with students, but then I really understood in this moment that the partitioning is super important to me. And it was taken for granted, exactly what you're saying, that it was the continuity between my living space, teaching space, and studio space that made the studio space formless. And so I guess—I don't know.

[00:10:20]

JACOB PROCTOR: Did your sense of time shift also? Like—or did this—or did the schedule of teaching kind of help to keep the days from just blending into each other?

MATT SAUNDERS: It kept the days structured. I was really grateful for that schedule. I mean, it's funny. I was really grateful for that schedule and then I had a crisis after. Because I've been—went on sabbatical, so now I'm facing completely this completely unstructured time, which normally would be organized around projects and—all of this got set aside. [Laughs.]

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah.

MATT SAUNDERS: It's hard to—I know that I'm not alone in having crisis of, um, kind of self-reflection about what role one sort of plays in the world for obvious, you know, kind of political reasons now, but even just the kind of—being unplugged for a couple months. It's not, I think—I don't know if anybody wants to just like plug back into the same socket [laughs], and nobody quite knows where the sockets are right now.

JACOB PROCTOR: [Laughs.]

MATT SAUNDERS: I mean, I'm using nobody very broadly, but—you know, I think it really remains to be seen how our economy is going to shift, who's going to reopen.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah.

MATT SAUNDERS: All of those things.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah, that's a lot of—there is—the uncertainty, I think, is a big source of a lot of people's anxiety of having—I don't know if you had like projects that were canceled or postponed, but I think that that's that sense of just not knowing—is really—you know. That's a hard thing for a lot of artists. It's a hard thing for a lot of other people as well. But I think it is—I don't—yeah, I mean, there's this question about what we get back to. Like, what's—what does it look like sort of when we do go back to some sort of semblance of normality?

MATT SAUNDERS: Yeah, this is—and this is a really self-absorbed—

[They laugh.]

—thought, but I think, you know, the art world is so active. And so, I used word performative earlier, and I do think that projects sort of self-justify themselves, either in their conceptions or half the time when you're talking about your work, you're talking about in terms of where it's going. So I feel like it's been so long since I was just making work in the studio that had no destination in mind.

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MATT SAUNDERS: And so it's a romantic silver lining to all this that you suddenly have all this time—setting aside being locked out of the studio and all the other stuff, you know, I was excited to have all this time to be working on what I want to be working on. But so much of context—of contemporary art is so contextual now that I think work that's made in general or without a clear sense of a context often is missing the kind of boundaries to push off or some, you know, structures. And so when I talk about a kind of existential crisis, part—about what my work is for, that's like being alone with oneself, getting into things that are not specifically like meant or pre-conditioned for this or that exhibition. And then wondering if when people finally see it, if they'll care [laughs], if they're even there. You know, it's like it's almost back to being like feelings I remember as a student when there was no outlet.

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MATT SAUNDERS: And just working on what seemed compelling to you, and you sort of believe in yourself. It's been a really long time since I've had that much space between a public showing and that—things in the studio. I have much more work than nobody's seen or even thought about seeing or even heard about from me—

JACOB PROCTOR: [Laughs.]

MATT SAUNDERS: —before, and it's like weirdly disconcerting. You wonder if—it's also great. I mean, I do feel like this has been a kind of a super difficult time, but I think it's doing really important work in our society and institutions, in terms of, you know, hopefully leading to other much needed change, but I think we'll all somehow be formed by this time and—

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah.

[00:15:02]

[Cross talk.]

MATT SAUNDERS: The stumbling block to use the [inaudible].

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah, like what are we going to tell, like, the artists, you know, of, you know, 100 years from now about, you know, like about this time, like, what are we going to—how are we going to be—sort of articulate it? And I think that, yeah, it is interesting like, I think that there—I've been struck in my conversations with a lot of people that people have found silver—like sort of weird moments of—or elements of positive. You know, maybe only in hindsight, you know, where people weren't feeling—you know, we're now—we're talking in September. No one was feeling positive about anything in March or April or May, but think as we're starting to move in a little bit—it's not in the rearview mirror yet, but it feels at least, I think in this part of the country, like in New York, it feels a little bit less, um, of an immediate existential threat now than it did. And I'm curious if you have thoughts about—are there narratives—are there other narratives that kind of have been overlooked in all of this? That, you know, whether that's—I mean, I don't know. Of course, because they're overlooked.

You know, this is a thread that I feel like I'm—I've been sort of seeing little bits of sort of like

what—the things that people managed to do as part of it, whether it's like a coping mechanism or like the—turning their efforts in some kind of positive—you know, sort of positive direction, like as you did with teaching and sort of institutional service work. It's not really a question. [Laughs.]

MATT SAUNDERS: I don't know, and this is probably not your question at all. I teach in a very privileged place, and we were able to mail students supplies and—

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MATT SAUNDERS: —the university sent computers and iPads to people who needed them. And, um, lingering behind all that, of course, is the great sense of like what the access to the technology and the resources means when it's not right at hand. And so one of the things that's laid bare is that kinds of access in which we all know, but it's being experienced on different fronts. The battlegrounds are different. The places where it's clearly seen are different. And I feel hyper aware of that and hyper aware of the—like the studio wars that were going on, especially before 2008, you know, like of the materialism of the art world in the sense of like conspicuous apparatus, [laughs] conspicuous access, whether it was travel, whether it was other things, that was really part of the narrative, which feels—when you look at it closely, it feels so wrong, so ethically wrong.

And I—you know, even just looking at the public programing of different institutions and the way that—you know—or the way that our classes were able to bring in crazy visitors. The silver lining for teaching online was you could Zoom in the most extravagant—

[They laugh.]

—or most interesting, most far flung, you know, the budget for being a visitor shifted to just pay for the time and the honorarium of the visitor, and you get away from all this demonstrative air travel and stuff like that.

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MATT SAUNDERS: And I wonder if the art world will catch up with that. I wonder—

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MATT SAUNDERS: —if we will. I wonder, like, who is getting access right now that wouldn't have had access before to some of these mainstream conversations. But then also how people's kind of experience of changed material circumstances will shift their behavior. Yeah. For—I mean, we're all wondering about—I was on a—a collector invited me to join this UBS roundtable about online art fairs.

JACOB PROCTOR: Ah.

MATT SAUNDERS: Super fascinating.

JACOB PROCTOR: [Laughs.]

MATT SAUNDERS: It was like a Zoominar, whatever you call it, and there was a lot of discussion from people saying, "Clearly, this is the future, but we needed something to kill the past, and COVID has done it." [Laughs.] Like, COVID has killed the insistence on the art fair and now we can move into a more rational economy.

JACOB PROCTOR: Wow.

[00:20:04]

MATT SAUNDERS: So, you know, it was quite intense and from different criteria, and I was—I keep thinking about that moment. I certainly have nothing profound to say about it. I keep thinking about that sense of like the moment that shifts—that accelerates things in the direction they're already going.

JACOB PROCTOR: Wow. Well, I think that's actually a perfect closure [laughs] for this. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me. And—

MATT SAUNDERS: Always good to talk to you. Yeah.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah. Thanks.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]