



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Morgan Fisher,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Morgan Fisher on August 17, 2020. The interview took place from Fisher's home in Los Angeles, CA, 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: Okay, so, um, this is Jacob Proctor in Brooklyn, New York, and I am interviewing Morgan Fisher in his home in Los Angeles for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art's Pandemic Project. So thank you, Morgan, for, uh, speaking with me. The last time we saw each other in person was right before all of this COVID—really, it was kind of bubbling away somewhere else. And it was right before everything, um, really came to a head. So it's nice to see you well. How's it been going since, you know, March?

MORGAN FISHER: Well, for the world, not so well, but for me in my immediate personal life and in my professional life—well, in my personal life, wonderfully well within the special circumstances that now rule us. But my professional life is, um, it's very much constrained. I've had a studio very seldom, um. And now even to find a studio, I would have to be out of the house to find one and deal with people I don't really know to have to find one. And it's not as if I'm so overwhelmed with ideas that I must realize that I feel I have to go find a studio so that I can do some work. Because I tend to do work in relation to the opportunities as they come to me, because a lot of my work is, at least the painting work, is done in relation to architecture. Um, so I need to know what the specific setting is, and then in some way or another a response to that. And there have been no such invitations. So there have been no such opportunities and there have been no such needs to have a studio to do the work.

But anyway, if there were opportunities, it's more than likely that I would turn to others to actually do the fabricating.

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MORGAN FISHER: That's what happened with the show I had at Bortolami, um. I had the idea for the show sitting right here on this very sofa where I am now sitting and I—after the initial idea, which was to do paintings that had irregular—here, can you see my hands? Like irregular contours that faced each other, such that you could think of the spaces between my hands as a part of the work.

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MORGAN FISHER: So that these irregular contours would implicate the space between them, uh, within the understanding of the work. That was the idea. And I had the idea sitting right here and then I worked the whole thing out probably in about half an hour, or maybe an hour—

JACOB PROCTOR: On paper.

MORGAN FISHER: —And then—which I mean, it all came very, very quickly and then I was able to do drawings on the computer. I had to find out from Stefania Bortolami what the lengths of the walls were. The two facing walls. And then I sent her the drawings, and the show happened. And the work was fabricated in New York. I bought the paint here. So I went to a commercial paint dealer where there was a guy who would mix paint who was very skilled, and I bought the paint here there were six cans, um, or six colors, maybe two cans of each. And then went by New York—I went to New York on a truck and a man in New York did the fabricating. So I didn't see the work until two days before the show opened. But I had a grasp of what it was in its entirety, a conceptual grasp as well as a grasp in detail.

But the point is that someone else did the work. Someone else did the work. So there could be work like that, but even for that there would have to be an opportunity and there haven't been. But that's—you know, someday there will be more opportunities.

[00:04:53]

But, um, and there's another kind of work that I had been doing, which was photographs. But I was working with a photographer who has extreme skill. It's essentially tabletop photography, the subject is books. So I was working with this guy on this large, large group of photographs of books, and, um, we were interrupted when, um, Martin and I had to travel, to go to Europe in February and March, and then I would have resumed except that we have been in lockdown ever since a day or two after we got back. We got back on March 10th. And I think the lockdown began a matter of a day or two later. In any event, very soon after. So there is, there are more photographs that I would like to make working with this guy. But it would require that I'd be in the studio with him and, um, it just doesn't—it's something I would rather not do. I don't, I can't run the risk.

So there's that body—so unlike paintings, which are not—it's not as if there's an opportunity that is waiting to be fulfilled by the execution of the paintings. But the photographs are different. They're not made for a specific setting or particular vision. So I can make more. But not now.

JACOB PROCTOR: Right. So you're just stuck. You're just kind of in a holding pattern with that until—

MORGAN FISHER: I'm in a holding pattern. Exactly. However, sitting on the sofa, I did get an idea for a new film.

JACOB PROCTOR: Oh.

MORGAN FISHER: And, I'm, but, I can't shoot it now for a couple of reasons. First of all, it would require working with a 30—well, because I don't have access for the same reason I can't work with, uh, the photographer. I couldn't work with the people that I would need, whose help I would need to shoot the film. I want to shoot it on 35, so I would have to rent a Panavision camera and, um, I would have to work with a director of photography and a sound recordist and a production assistant. And, um, on a stage. Well, that would all have to be arranged.

And, um, but there are a couple of older ideas for films that I could do at the same time. And I hadn't ever gotten around to doing those because they both involved writing. So I had to be happy with what I had written. And, um, I kept wanting to make revisions and so forth. So I kept putting off doing the shooting of the film for which the idea is the oldest.

And then there was a more—there was another idea. And I thought, fine, I'll—which involved writing. And I've pretty much written that. But no doubt I will want to change it. And I thought, "well fine, I can do those two films on the same day." They're both single take films. They're just single take films. But I would be performing, I would be reading something. And I'm not—I would not be making it up. It has to be very precise. So I have to be happy with what I've written. Um, and I don't know about you, but, uh, it's very easy for me to be less than happy with what I've written. So it's always easy to put off because I think, "well, if I let it sit it'll get better. I'll find a way to make it better." Um, so that was already two films that could be shot on the same occasion.

And now there's a third. So, again, it's a single take. Um, but the writing is much more technical. So the writing for that is much easier. And I think I've actually come very close to finishing that writing. So someday, when our troubles are over, um, I will be able to rent the camera. I have to go to Panavision in Hollywood, rent the camera. I have to pay insurance, which has to be done independently of renting—the people—Panavision, you can't get insurance through them. You have to get it separately. And then I have to go to a stage which, in fact, someone has arranged for me to have access to. And there is a director of photography who will volunteer his efforts. I just hope he still has an affiliation with the studio.

JACOB PROCTOR: [Laughs.]

[00:10:01]

MORGAN FISHER: And he's still drawing breath when the time comes. Nothing to take for granted. And then I'll be able to do these three films. Uh, in all of them it's just me talking. I'll be hoarse by the time I finish the last one. But so what?

But, um, so—but what I can be doing now is working on the catalog for the show at REDCAT. Which I had a couple of years ago, but there have been some difficulties with the catalog and I

have the opportunity, let's call it, to play a part in actually bringing the whole thing to fruition such that someday there will be something we recognize as a catalog out there in the world. So, in that sense, so being in lockdown and almost never leaving the house is for me, at least in that respect, in the sense that it gives me the time to work on the catalog, has been a good thing.

JACOB PROCTOR: Have you been—Have you felt the sort of—I mean, it's interesting because, you know, because so much of—I mean, in order—other than the writing parts and so in order to actually realize so much of your work, it relies on the expertise and participation of other people and other, you know, in lots and lots of different ways. As you were just saying, like, have you been in touch with, you know, with some of your kind of collaborators and having a sense of what their—kind of how they're feeling? Or has it really just been like a kind of isolation, uh, period?

MORGAN FISHER: Um, I'm afraid that my answer might make me seem unfeeling or uncaring about other people. Which is not the case. I'm a caring kind of guy. Um, I've been in touch with the photographer and he understands my situation perfectly. Um, so, yeah, um.

JACOB PROCTOR: So it's really a case of just needing to just wait until it's safe, essentially.

MORGAN FISHER: Yeah. Martin, yeah, the photographer's name is Martin. Martin understands it's, like—

JACOB PROCTOR: Right.

MORGAN FISHER: I mean, it was really fun to work with this guy. We were—there were many, many days in the studio and, you know, we would go have lunch and then come back and work some more. It was really fun. He's a really easy guy to work with. He's very, you know, personable. But we can't work, and he understands that. So it's not as if I need to keep the relation alive, so to speak, in the meantime.

Now on the film projects, one of my collaborators is um, my wife, it's someone I'm married to. So, I see a lot of her. [Laughs.] And I think she'll be willing to help me when the time comes. And, um, the two other collaborators are people I'm otherwise in contact with, um, for other reasons. Like one of them is—works at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Archive. And I'm in touch with him for other reasons.

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MORGAN FISHER: But actually, now that you mention it, I should ask that guy about whether the cinematographer will still be available to help out when the time comes. And, um, but thank you for reminding me.

JACOB PROCTOR: [Laughs.]

MORGAN FISHER: I should do that. This is one of the—can I just go on a bit about this? It's a little peripheral to what you're saying, but I'm reminded of it. To me, one of the very, very unfortunate things about the pandemic, and about what it seems to have brought about in terms of social interaction, is that, um, it doesn't seem to occur to people to check in with one another. At least not in my circle. It's like, "well gee." I mean Margaret and I actually have social conversations with, you know, on Facebook, or Facetime or face Zoom, or whatever it's called.

JACOB PROCTOR: [Laughs.]

MORGAN FISHER: And we really, really enjoyed them. But they're entirely—but they're social relations. Although, as it happens, um, the people we do this with are most of them are also artists. So there's like a professional quality to it. But, um, yeah I mean there are people I know—I won't mention any names—it's like, "well, gee, it would really be nice to know how they're doing."

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah.

[00:14:58]

But on the other hand, I would like to think that they're thinking exactly the same thing. But it's like, well, if I feel that way, then they might feel that way, or should, or could or—and if so, why aren't we talking to each other? But, I mean what we haven't gotten to yet is—what is truly unhappy about the present situation is that there are no openings.

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MORGAN FISHER: You can't go out and expect to see people and catch up and just have the kind of casual social interactions which, to my mind, are an absolutely crucial part of a professional life. It's not just about doing work, or writing about your work, or defending your work in some abstract way. It's about getting out there and, you know, being in that world and seeing other people who were in that world. Margaret and I have not been to an opening since March 10th when we got back. And, um, so there are all these people whom we know and like and we have not seen them. And some of these people are people that I would be—that I have a relationship with just outside of the casual relationships, I'm going to—I've seen them at openings. I mean, I would consider them friends. And, um—

JACOB PROCTOR: You see them every month.

MORGAN FISHER: Yeah. But, um, yeah so that's something I truly, truly miss. I mean, really. And I think it's a great [inaudible] I mean, to what extent this might be damaging? To the, to the art world as we know it. To the—I just, I have no idea.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah, it's a really interesting point, actually, because I feel the same thing. And I've actually—I have been to a few socially distanced masked, you know, very, low, low capacity openings, um, and it's really different. Even for people that you are close with already, it's a very—and I think it's interesting that you say that because, um, because it is a very—it's an important part of being for a lot of people, I mean, obviously for you. Being an artist, part of that is being part of a community or a scene, in a way, even if you don't put it in those terms. But it's about being a part of a group that has a shared, um, you know, it's like an affinity group. And what—

MORGAN FISHER: That, yeah, and it's not just about being, like, a scenester or making a scene. It really is about, you know, as you confirm to others that they're in this world, they confirm to you. And, um, you know they—so it's this relation of reciprocity through just being in each other's presence. And that for us has vanished. I don't know when we will ever go to an opening ever again. Maybe not until there is a vaccine. I don't know.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah. That's a very sobering thought, you know, because I don't think any of us really know.

MORGAN FISHER: But yeah, I mean, really—and one of the wonderful things about openings is how unpredictable you are. You don't know who will show up.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah.

MORGAN FISHER: And someone that you—someone from—who you would be really, really glad to see and it would never enter your mind that they would even have heard about the show, and then show up. It's, yeah, you know, like walk through some galleries, you know, being invited to give a talk in a museum show, and then they—the museum publicizes it. So people that you—it would never occur to you to tell about you're doing something like this, show up. And it's like, "oh my gosh!" And you're so happy to see someone. [Laughs.]

JACOB PROCTOR: And somehow the Zoom—um, the community, the communal experience of Zoom is not that.

MORGAN FISHER: No, there aren't any surprises on Zoom, are there? I mean, maybe that's—it's possible in theory, but—

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah, I think it is possible in theory, but I have not seen it either.

MORGAN FISHER: Oh, gosh.

JACOB PROCTOR: What are we going to tell—I mean, what are people gonna to think? You know, a hundred years from now, when they look back at this moment and, you know, and sort of the art world and in the United States, around the world.

[00:20:06]

MORGAN FISHER: I just don't know. Oh, you haven't asked this, but I feel it's okay to bring it up because it's related. Um. I was invited to be in two film festivals late last spring. And I had committed to going to both of them.

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah.

MORGAN FISHER: So, um, we would have come home from Europe in early March. And then we would have gone back. We would have gone back to Oberhausen.

JACOB PROCTOR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MORGAN FISHER: And then we would have some time in between. And then we would have gone to a film festival in Spain. And both the events were canceled. And, um, it's a very great shame because the event at Oberhausen was basically like a retrospective. Which I was very loath to miss out on. And they asked me—and furthermore, I have a very old painting. A painting as a single object, contrary to my now current tendency. I have a painting that I made in 1963 or 1964, in a show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rome. And originally, Margaret and I had thought we would go back to Europe, there would be Oberhausen, and then there's the film festival in Spain, and then we would go to Rome and I would give a talk.

Well, for—and the two film festivals were canceled. The opening for the show in Rome was postponed. Um, I mean, I would have given a talk—on the original schedule, I would have given a talk like the first week after the show opened. Um, none of that ever happened, there was an opening, but it was in earlier—it was either in late July or August. But, I'm not going to see the show. I'm not going to see the show. And it's just, it's so, so sad. I've seen photographs of some of the installation of the show, it's extremely ambitious. There's work of all kinds, all, you know, different scales, different modalities, there's installation, sculpture, text. It looks like an absolutely amazing show, and I will not see it.

And that just it makes me so sad because among other things, showing up is a way of expressing your gratitude that this curator put you in the show. Well, all I can say is—to write an email to the curator and say, "it looks like an absolutely beautiful show. Thank you so much for including me. And I only wish I could see it." But that's not the same as showing up.

JACOB PROCTOR: No, it is not. But I think it's going to be awhile before we can all show up again. Well, thank you, um, for taking the time to talk with me and to sort of give us a sense of how it's going. Um, so we really appreciate it.

MORGAN FISHER: Have I said enough, Jacob? I mean—

JACOB PROCTOR: Yeah.

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