

Neil Benezra interviewed by Kristin Poor, September 22, 2020

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Kristin Poor: Today is September 22, 2020. I'm Kristin Poor, and I'm here with Neil Benezra, for the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base. Neil, thanks so much for doing this.

Neil Benezra: Oh, thanks for having me.

Kristin Poor: How did you meet Joan?

Neil Benezra: I'm trying to remember, because it was seventeen years ago, but I believe, at the time I was starting to work on sound installation with other artists. I had done various gallery shows, at Dia Art Foundation, David Zwirner, Cheim & Read, all over town basically.

Neil Benezra: I believe that I was introduced formally by Barbara Clausen, who had curated the show at the Austrian Cultural Center, that I supervised. It was a group show, and I supervised all of the technical installation aspect of the show.

Neil Benezra: That was right around the same time as the Queens Museum, and I believe Barbara was friends with Joan, and mentioned that I was working on the show. At the same time, my wife, Karen Kelly knew Joan from working on publications for the Dia Art Foundation. It all kind of lined up.

Kristin Poor: What was the first project you worked with her for?

Neil Benezra: That would be the Queens Museum retrospective, and it was around 2004, I believe. It was a big show, I'm not sure how many pieces were in the show. But just thinking back, I would guess there had to be between twenty and thirty archival works that were all brought together.

Neil Benezra: A lot of them incorporate sound and video, and I was basically in charge of the sound aspect of the show.

Kristin Poor: What were some of the technical considerations for approaching sound at that exhibition?

Neil Benezra: It was complicated, because there were so many different pieces that were close together. In a museum or gallery, a big issue with sound, of course, is always that there are a lot of hard surfaces. Acoustically, it's not a great environment for sound from the beginning. Sound reflects off of a hard surface and comes right back at itself.

Neil Benezra: You get into a reverberation and echo, layers of sound. Then having multiple pieces very close to each other, the second big issue is sound traveling between the rooms. Because it reflects within the room, and then travels through each entryway, and goes into the next room.

Neil Benezra: There were a lot of technical issues or things to consider to have the best outcome considering those issues.

Kristin Poor:= What kinds of conversations did you have with Joan about those issues at the time?

Neil Benezra: It was so long ago, it's hard to remember, but I do, from working on other shows. I think my general approach is to point out what those issues are. I believe Joan recognized from having sound in similar spaces before, that those would be an issue, and that's part of the reason I was brought in to work on the sound.

Neil Benezra: She's generally pretty open to making decisions based on the technical issues that arise, and I do actually have a story on that.

Kristin Poor: Yes, I'd love to hear it.

Neil Benezra: One example, not related to sound actually, is towards the end of that show, I believe, I can't remember how long the installation was, but I think it might have been at least a week long. We traveled out to the show every day, and worked all day, and it was a pretty big crew. But for some reason, I don't know if it was due to the budget, there wasn't specifically a lighting designer that was assigned to the show.

Neil Benezra: That was something I saw Joan struggling with throughout the whole show, that she had someone to work on the sound, which for such a large show was really important. But it was equally as important, I think, to have someone

work on the lighting. I don't know if in the end, they ever resolved that, but I remember close to the end, she was pretty frustrated by not being able to adjust the lights and control the lighting in the space.

Neil Benezra:

One morning, she decided to go down to Canal Street before we started work, and she showed up with about thirty different clamp lights that you would have in a workshop, which were literally like five-dollar, aluminum dome lights. She herself went around to each piece and clamped on the clamp light onto whatever she could get near the piece.

Neil Benezra:

If there was a wooden chair with an object on it, she would clamp it to the top of the wooden chair, and position the lights herself. I believe—I'd have to look back at the photos—but I believe that's what ended up being the lighting for the show. That kind of sums up.

Kristin Poor:

That's amazing. She just took everything into her own hands.

Neil Benezra:

Exactly. I think, so that goes to show, I think when you ask about sound, and her considerations, she is very open to adjusting the situation to make the best optimal outcome with the limitations. We definitely moved around, or positioned, or made decisions as to where different pieces would be located, based on the amount of sound that would bleed into the next room.

Neil Benezra:

Within those spaces even, I think we, to a degree, decided on the angle of the piece and the ultimate volume, the playback volume. So it could have a little bit more containment for each piece, depending on where it was within the show.

Kristin Poor:

Would you say, besides the lighting, did you talk to her about other technical aspects of the exhibition?

Neil Benezra:

I don't think so, I think it was limited to the sound. It was mainly limited to the sound, the lighting was just something I observed during the process, watching with her. I was amazed by that, that she took that on.

- Neil Benezra: It actually, I had worked for years with Richard Foreman, and he was very hands on, and it was a similar approach, where one way or another you would make the situation work. I was surprised, but I also wasn't surprised, and I appreciated that she was that flexible.
- Kristin Poor: What in general, was it like to work with her on the exhibition installation? She clearly had strong feelings about the lighting. How about other concerns in terms of how people move through the space, or anything else related to sound that you recall? Was she open to input and interpretation from others? Any general memories you have about that?
- Neil Benezra: Yeah, I think she is open to input and interpretation, but her work by the time I'm involved with any of the installation, or now what I'm doing mainly for her rather than installation, is sound editing, restoration and mixing. The work is so far along at this stage that it gets to me, that there isn't a lot of creative input. It's more technical. But on occasion, there is something that if it's a sound, or something that can help with the quality of the sound, less so than the aesthetic approach, something just [of a] technical aspect, she's definitely open to incorporating that.
- Neil Benezra: But generally, everything is in place and really, really developed and finished basically, by the time it gets to me. Now, that I'm working mainly in the studio on her sound, the idea is to, or the way I approach it, I don't know if this is her idea, but my idea is to work with her sensibility and approach. Not change it drastically, but make it the best that it possibly can be under that circumstance.
- Neil Benezra: At first, I thought that her intention was that everything should sound a little bit homemade, and that's kind of the aesthetic. At one point, I believe I asked her about, "With sound, you can drastically change the quality of the sound." Her reaction surprised me at that time, at least she said, "Oh, no, no, I want everything to sound the best it can sound."
- Neil Benezra: She is open to, although it seems like maybe her aesthetic and the work combined could begin sounding very rough, she's very open to changing the tonality of it by improving the sound.

- Kristin Poor: That's interesting. In general, how would you describe her approach to working with sound? What kinds of materials and recordings is she coming to you with?
- Neil Benezra: That's interesting. I was thinking about that, and her sound, the structure of most sound compositions—I work in film, and I also work with artists—is generally they're, generally three different components, which are some kind of a voice narration track. There're natural environmental effects, sound effects, and then there's music.
- Neil Benezra: She falls right into that category. She's not drastically doing anything unconventional in terms of that, but what she is doing is creating something poetic. When I'm working on a film, I'll often think about making the dialogue, and the voice a little bit more prominent than everything else.
- Neil Benezra: Because there's an expression in film that “dialogue is king.” Everything gets mixed around dialogue, and no matter what, you want to be able to completely understand what's being said. That's actually a big debate right now in film.
- Neil Benezra: But with her work, I kind of approach it a little bit differently. Although I think...her voice should be prominent, I kind of also think of it as a little bit of a texture between all of the other elements. It's almost like it's more poetic in a way, or there's a tone, or playing the way you might with a painting. Where there are different shades, and I think, I don't know if she would agree with this. But that's basically the approach I'm taking as far as her elements.
- Neil Benezra: It is interesting, she...thinking back over all the pieces, I think a very, very big part of the sound she creates is, well, it's a combination of things. One is the texture of her voice, which I think is very controlled and intentional. Then the rhythmic element of the sounds that she uses behind her voice.
- Neil Benezra: She'll often take objects and create a sound or a rhythm behind it. It's not necessarily a consistent rhythm, but it's often natural sound. She'll take the sound of woodblocks or sticks being hit together, or she'll take stones. Although it's a visual element, she'll be placing the object on something. It's also, I think, she definitely considers the sound that each object is making.

Neil Benezra: Then there are other layers of sound that are a little bit more abstract, like ambient and environmental sounds, which she layers and edits to overlap. It's kind of a collage technique, which is pretty common, but it's the outcome of the way she paces her voice, the objects, the music, is what makes it so kind of fluid and poetic.

Neil Benezra: My approach is always to kind of expand on that however I can, in whatever little minor way I can. It's already there though, without me even touching it, everything is coming across in that way. But you can, slightly, make things more fluid or organic in that way, also, depending on how you approach it.

Kristin Poor: Is she coming to you—I recognize that it probably varies from project to project, because you've worked with her in different ways over the years—but is she coming to you with these separate recordings that you then sit together and piece together into this collage? Or are they already roughly cut together with a video, for example, and then you are making these modifications in the way that you describe?

Neil Benezra: They're already completely together.

Kristin Poor: Ok.

Neil Benezra: She spends a lot of time, I believe in the editorial process. I'm only guessing, but it seems from the way the material looks when it comes to me, that there's been a lot of, there's been a process of trying things out, moving them around to get to the point that they're at.

Neil Benezra: She usually has an assistant in the studio that she works with on developing the sound with the picture. Which is common...a lot of...because all of the tools, especially now, are so accessible. I think she records the video herself, some we worked on a couple of pieces, probably six or seven years ago, that I think she filmed in Halifax, in her cabin. It looked as if she just set up a video camera and performed in front of the camera. Then brought—I would imagine she brings it back to the studio—and adds additional layers of sound, or music, or whatever she feels she needs to, to finish.

Kristin Poor: You mentioned that you once recreated an early piece from scratch—

Neil Benezra: Yes, it was *Juniper Tree*. I'm not exactly sure why it was being recreated. I feel like I might have asked her at the time, and it just was either not in her possession or in existence anymore. She had to show it somewhere. What she did was send me a CD of all of the audio elements that were in the piece, and then a list of directions on how it should be put together when things start, when they stop.

Neil Benezra: I can't remember if there were different layers in that piece, but it was pretty straightforward. I reconstructed out of her original elements, the piece and gave it back to her. I can't remember, I don't think there were actually any revisions on that, it might have been simple enough that I was able to just re-edit, improve on the sound a little bit, and give it back to her.

Kristin Poor: That's interesting. Did you talk to her at all about what it was like to go back to the original form of the sound, or...

Neil Benezra: I didn't, no, no, not at the time, I didn't. I probably should have.

Kristin Poor: I wonder if that was for a *Juniper Tree* installation somewhere?

Neil Benezra: I'm not sure. I could probably, I have some notes for it that might have the date on it.

Kristin Poor: What are some of the other installations that you've worked with her for...you mentioned you did some of her gallery installations over the years?

Neil Benezra: I did. We did a couple of, right after the Queens Museum. We did two shows for her gallery. One of them, let me see...

Kristin Poor: Neil, could you say that again? You did two shows for her gallery? Is that what you said?

Neil Benezra: Yeah, two shows for, in the next couple of years that were her shows at Yvon Lambert. I'm not sure offhand the title of the shows, but they were similar in construction to the

issues that we had at the Queens Museum. One of them, I believe, had three or four pieces running simultaneously. I had to design a sound system for the space that controlled each piece that would feed it the sound.

Neil Benezra: They had a technician there that was in charge of the video, I think there were a couple of big projections. When you walked through the space, you walked right from one to the next. They were all basically within one gallery space.

Neil Benezra: We had subdivided the one space with a few partitions that...I believe at the time I recommended how to build the walls, so they would somewhat contain the sound. But in that kind of space, if the room is open, the sound's going to travel around anyway. At that time, there weren't speakers that had much control over that either. I think now there are some that would give you a little more control.

Neil Benezra: It was very similar, both shows were very similar in the setup, and the issues, to what we had at the Queens Museum. Then there were maybe one or two shows after that, which I had anything to do with the sound installation. Then after that point, I kind of slowed down on my gallery installation, and stuck to working in the studio.

Neil Benezra: I think by that point, I had already worked on some of the mixing of the pieces that were going in the show. Then from there, it just continued on that front, where they would send me material. There's actually, probably in all of these years, I think I've only sat down once with her for a session, where we worked in the studio together.

Neil Benezra: Otherwise, it's generally, most of the editing is done in her studio with her assistant. For a long time, it was David Dempewolf, have you—

Kristin Poor: Yes, yes.

Neil Benezra: Yeah, so for years, it was David Dempewolf, and now I believe it's David Sherman, who's working on it...I'm also working with him, with Nan Goldin, who has very similar kind of issues, and construction.

Kristin Poor: What do you remember about that one session where you were together in the same room while you were working on the sound edit?

Neil Benezra: I remember, I think I wanted to show Joan an idea that I had for kind of adding sound to the piece that we were working on. She was totally receptive to it, and listened and said she really liked the idea, but that it wasn't what fit with the piece. That's a good example of that. I think everything is pretty much fully formed by the time it leaves her studio, and it's completely...

Neil Benezra: Whereas with other artists I have much more of a collaborative, creative process. Working with Joan is very, very structured, and she completely creates the piece beginning to end.

Kristin Poor: I wanted to ask when you were talking about the installations, and the solutions that you've come up with, on the ones that you've worked with her on. Are any of those solutions, you would say, particular to her work?

Neil Benezra: The installations?

Kristin Poor: Mm-hmm. Some of the solutions that you're describing, in terms of...or maybe some of the problems specific to her work.

Neil Benezra: No, I don't think so. They're general across the board, sound and video in galleries. There isn't anything unique to them. Basically, the sound installation part is very, very straightforward and simple. She's not particularly experimenting with...some people I work with, they're trying to work with how sound travels in space, it moves around the gallery, how immersive the sound work is, her work is more straightforward. There's a speaker in a room that's usually...I think they're often attached to an object, like there might be a television it's playing out of or a couple of speakers within the space. But it's not specific to her work or process, I don't think. It's not unique in that way.

Kristin Poor: What sense do you have of her approach to sound in video, in exhibitions, performance installations in general? You describe her having a very clear sense of what she wants. Any other thoughts about that?

Neil Benezra: I think it's...the interesting thing...two interesting things that I already mentioned. One is kind of the, to me, at least the poetic nature of the sound. That there [are], I think, really

considered tonalities that she's working with. Some of it comes almost across as improvisation, but I feel like it's kind of like jazz, where there's very structured kind of improvisation within the video.

Neil Benezra:

There's a lot of diegetic sound, sound that she's making within the world of the video that plays an important part. But it's kind of a counter to her voice. To me, the most interesting thing is kind of the construction, and the textures within the video, within the sound.

Kristin Poor:

That's very interesting, especially the part about it seeming improvisational, but actually being quite intentional. Because we're hearing that a lot too from people who've worked with her in developing the performances.

Neil Benezra:

I think it's like, in a way, it's almost like I was saying, like jazz, where there's something, there's a structure that the performers are giving. I think she has a very strong outline, she writes the text, and she has a clear scene that she's working in, and something that she wants to, a story that she wants to tell from beginning to end.

Neil Benezra:

That's all very structured, and straightforward. But then within that, I think, my impression is that she leaves herself a lot of room, and there are elements that she knows are going to happen, but the way they happen, how she's hitting a block together, how many times it repeats, is less important than, I think, the texture that brings to what's going on.

Kristin Poor:

This poetic quality that you talked about, it's very interesting. Based on your experience, what advice would you give to conservators, installers and other audiovisual experts who will install her exhibitions in the future?

Neil Benezra:

That's a good question. That's an issue with a lot of artists I'm working with, that the technology keeps changing, and often they're using the technology of the moment, and that is only available for so many years. I think some of her work does rely visually on the technology also. If there's a certain type of monitor that's in a piece, you can't necessarily change that to today's flat screen monitor and have the same effect.

Neil Benezra: I think it's important to be able to have someone on board that can deal with those issues, and maintain the work in that sense, so that the equipment could survive. Then the issue of the long-term, the medium that it's on, if it's analog tape or if it's digital, that is constantly changing also.

Neil Benezra: Being able to maintain those elements, if it's important that something is on tape or digital, and how it's going to transfer and how it's going to survive over the years. As far as the installation within a space, it really is a very common problem that museums and galleries don't really consider sound as an important part, visually, of what's going on in a gallery.

Neil Benezra: For example, if you go to a movie theater, the space is acoustically designed for optimum sound, the treatment is considered, the walls, how absorbent they are, the type of frequencies that stand within the room, how to break those up. But in a gallery, it's more, the visual aspect is way, way more important most of the time. Occasionally you'll see a room that's treated, but generally they're not.

Neil Benezra: One way that we also dealt with improving the sound within the space is mixing the sound in the space. Every room that you're in has different technical issues. For example, you could be in a big room that has a very, very long delay, and sound takes a long time to get to the back wall, hits off from the back wall, and then comes back in a certain amount of time to the listener, so it becomes an echo.

Neil Benezra: Frequencies within that sound will get stuck in a certain part of the room and vibrate. If you mix the sound within the space to deal with those issues, you could reduce the amount of problems within the space. There aren't always technicians on hand that can deal with that technical aspect of sound, but it's important to think about, rather than just plugging something in and turning it on within a room. You might be able to improve the quality of the sound by fifty percent if you understand how to deal with those issues.

Kristin Poor: Within the specific spaces. That's great advice. Are there any memories of Joan's exhibitions or installations or performances that you've seen over the years that stand out in particular?

Neil Benezra: Mainly the ones that I've been involved in. One that we haven't talked about is actually the performance at Dia:Beacon, *The Shape, the Scent, and the Smell* [sic] of *Things*.

Kristin Poor: ...*"The Feel of Things."*

Neil Benezra: The feel of things. I wasn't involved in that performance live, but I did attend it, and that had exactly the acoustic issues we're talking about. The technician [for] that show, Patrick Heilman, who you might want to also talk with, because I believe he was involved in a few of Joan's performances at Dia, when he was working there. He was the head technician.

Neil Benezra: That performance was recorded by Patrick. It was a multitrack recording. That was both Joan's live performance, her movements and manipulating objects, and then prerecorded elements, and a live score by Jason Moran.

Neil Benezra: I think it was about a year later, Joan asked me if I would want to mix the elements from that live performance. I'm not sure if anything ever happened with it, if it was... I think at the time it was for a DVD. I'm not sure if that was ever actually created, but—

Kristin Poor: Yes, it was a DVD, I think that came with the book that—

Neil Benezra: Oh, really?

Kristin Poor: ...Karen made for Dia.

Neil Benezra: Well, that makes sense. I should know that, shouldn't I?

Kristin Poor: Not necessarily, but I think that's where it ended up.

Neil Benezra: For that, Patrick had made a multitrack recording, I can't remember how many microphones there were, but I would imagine anywhere from eight to sixteen different microphones within the space. There were probably a few around Jason's performance, one, like a contact microphone on the piano, something, probably a stereo microphone away. Then they had, I remember there was sound recorded very distant in the audience. It captured the

quality of that whole space, which is a very cavernous, huge concrete space.

Kristin Poor:

Yes.

Neil Benezra:

The worst possible sound environment to record. Then I think the actors, there were a couple of performers on stage with Joan, that each had individual microphones, and she had a microphone, and then there was a microphone set up for whatever objects she was moving around. It ended up being a pretty complex mixing project. Especially considering that the quality of the sound in the space was not what you would hope for when you're making a recording.

Neil Benezra:

That's pretty memorable, it's something I went to, I had no idea that I would eventually work on, and then it came to me later. It was an exciting project, because there's both Joan and Jason, who are both incredible.

Kristin Poor:

I feel like there's some music from that on one of Jason's albums too.

Kristin Poor:

I wonder if those came from the live recording, or if they did that later, that would be interesting to know.

Neil Benezra:

That would be interesting.

Kristin Poor:

You've recommended Patrick Heilman, and then of course, David Sherman and David Dempewolf as potential people, for us to talk to. Is there anyone else that you think would be good for us to interview?

Neil Benezra:

There's one more that might be great, Rachel Mason. Do you know Rachel Mason?

Kristin Poor:

Is she an artist also?

Neil Benezra:

She's an artist, and now she's a filmmaker, actually. She just had a film that was on Netflix and nominated for an Emmy.

Kristin Poor:

Oh, wow.

Neil Benezra: It's on Netflix. I haven't watched it yet, but it's about her parents owned a bookshop, when she was growing up, a pornography bookshop. Both video and kind of a cultural hub for the [19]70s. She was, I believe, during the Queens Museum show, I believe she was Joan's assistant, and worked with her for a few years after that.

Kristin Poor: I think that's great, thank you.

Neil Benezra: I can...I probably have her email, or she's on Facebook also.
Kristin Poor: Is there anything else that we missed that you wanted to talk about?

Neil Benezra: Gotta look through my notes. No, not particularly, I can email you if I think of anything.

Kristin Poor: Absolutely.

Neil Benezra: I'll send you some photos, I'll track down some photos. I know I have some, and I might even have some of the...from the Yvon Lambert shows as well.

Kristin Poor: That would be great, we'd love to see those. Neil, thank you so much, this has been really interesting.

Neil Benezra: Oh, thank you. It's been fun.

This transcript is intended to provide an accessible form of interview audio content. It has been edited for factual accuracy and clarity. Any alterations are noted with brackets.