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Diaz and Reblando on “La Ruta: Walter Benjamin’s Last Passage”

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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Joanne Diaz and Jason Reblando, February 25, 2021

Laura Kennedy: You're tuned to 89.1 WGLT.org. I'm Laura Kennedy with this WGLT daybook. Currently showing in IWU's Wakeley gallery. It's "La Ruta: Walter Benjamin's Last Passage" featuring photos by Jason Reblando and poems by Joanne Diaz. The husband and wife, professors and artists, share an interest in the renowned cultural critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin, who in exile in 1940 made a dangerous journey across the Pyrenees in an effort to elude the Nazis. That journey resonated with Diaz and Reblando who saw echoes of Benjamin's flight in the plight of refugees today.

Jason Reblando: As a photographer, I became aware of his work during graduate school, like a lot of people do. I was particularly interested in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." It's really important to a lot of photographers... and how it describes the presence of the aura and how the... photographer's role in art... how it decreases... A piece of art's unique presence in time and space... so as photography is able to reproduce things... the aura kind of decreases. So I'm interested in that aspect of Benjamin's work.

Kennedy: Joanne, what was your interest in Walter's work?

Joanne Diaz: So, I also encountered Walter Benjamin in graduate school. He was a German-Jewish philosopher, cultural critic, reviewer, translator. He was voracious in his interests and curiosities. But he lived from much of the last few years of his life in exile. In 1939/1940, he realized, like many Jewish exiles, that he would have to leave Europe. And so, he tried to get out of France and finally he just decided to go by foot. And so, he found this woman, Lisa Fittko, who is also a German-Jewish exile and she helped him across what is now called the Fittko route. She was able to get him to cross the Pyrenees successfully but he was in very poor health. When he finally did make it to Portbou, Spain, he was told by the Spanish authorities that he would have to turn back because he had no exit visa. When he realized that, he checked into a hotel and died by suicide that night. The circumstances of his final days and his traversing of the Pyrenees was something that interested us specially while we were in Spain. So, we rented a car and traveled across the Pyrenees borders and made it to Portbou and to La Jonquera which is another really important spot for exiles.

Kennedy: Can you tell me how your collaborative process works? Do the photos come first and then Joanne you write the poems? Or do you... do you write the poems separately and Jason you choose photos that you feel mood-wise go with the poems?

Diaz: I would say yes to all of those questions. So it depends on the poem. So the first layer is... I sort of took notes as I was taking a walk- and it's a very well-marked route... We are not the first to take this route. Walter Benjamin is a beloved writer all over the world and if you look on the hike... people have sort of piled up little pebbles and various important spots along the way.

Kennedy: Is it like a pilgrimage?

Diaz: It's absolutely a pilgrimage. So I took that walk in 2018. When I returned home, I looked at all of J's prints and I started to think about his prints and how to respond to them. Sometimes I am responding in a way that is descriptive of the photo itself or its process. Sometimes I'm using the photograph as a springboard in order to meditate on either Benjamin's life or the life of Spanish refugees crossing the border, or thinking about a contemporary moment as it relates to exiles. There's all- I'm trying to be as flexible as possible in my responses to J's work.

Kennedy: The photos that are on display. They are draped in vellum? Tell me why you have vellum over the photos? What are you trying to communicate? Jason?

Reblando: We talked about this a lot as far as how to have the text and image interact with each other. We looked at lots of artists and lots of writers who collaborate or do these images/ products themselves where you can have the text adjacent to the image or it's kind of embedded in the image. Text on vinyl letters outside the image and we were kind of experimenting with a lot of things. To have the images right on top of it and to have it in a more interactive experience. I think the average person in a gallery will just kind of spend a few seconds in front of a piece of art and then absorb as much as they can and then move on. I think having the text draped over the image will kind of force the viewer to contemplate the poem, and then also interact and then lift the velum to reveal the photograph underneath. The goal was to give a lot of pause and intention for viewers to engage with both the text and the image. Just a different layer of engagement with the act- that physical act of participating in that.

Diaz: If people are in the gallery space and they are reading the poems and looking at the photos, there are a few there that they might look at and think "Wait what does this have to do with Walter Benjamin?" Right? Because sometimes I'm referring to Dante's inferno, sometimes I'm alluding to Hercules, sometimes I'm alluding to other Greek and Roman myths. When we thought about this project, we are thinking about deep history. So, not just Walter Benjamin and his flight and his exile but exile across time periods, across empires, across various authoritarian regimes and so for me I go right back to the very beginning in some of my thinking and that's in part of course responding to some of the imagery that J provided. Also the deep history of our language so I think that viewers will see a lot of the tension to etymology or word origins and that's something that for me, as a poet, is very important. But again, I was brought to that in large part because of what J was providing in the photography. It's just all there, you know.

Kennedy: I'm wondering, as two artists who are collaborating, you're also a married couple. Is it different to collaborate with your spouse than it is to collaborate with someone you are not married to? Is there maybe a short hand in there that makes things easier? Or maybe is it more difficult because you are so very close? What's that like for you?

Reblando: Joanne? (Laughs)

Kennedy: I see that neither of you wanted to answer that question! (laughs)

Diaz: Be careful how you answer. When you hang up, you still have to live with me! (laughs)

Reblando: That's right! (laughs)

Diaz: It's a pandemic after all! You can run but you can't hide!

(laughs)

Reblando: I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it a lot! People have suggested it before "Oh why don't you collaborate with Joanne" or "Joanne why don't you collaborate with Jason?" and it's the work that's most important. I think we both would say that. That's what drives the effort and I think this was a nice confluence of many events: artistically, politically, geographically and just things kind of came together really well. I mean the process itself was very similar to any collaboration as far as trying to negotiate what went with what but it was also wonderful because I trust Joanne's judgement a lot. I hope she trusts mine. She's always my best editor.

Kennedy: Joanne?

Diaz: Yeah, I enjoyed it very much and in fact I haven't collaborated with people before. I usually write my poems by myself and publish them in a solo author sort of way so it was new for me. I agree with what Jason said, he is a terrific editor of poetry and I realized I hadn't really given him that opportunity before but he made a lot of suggestions and asked questions that were great and really helped me improve the poem so that was a lot of fun. In general, I think we both had a really good time and continued to. I mean, what we are sharing at the Illinois Wesleyan Gallery is a work in progress. I don't think it's finished yet. It's still in development but it's an excerpt of what we have so far. So it's been a lot of fun.

Kennedy: You know it's interesting that you said he helped to edit your poems and he works in a visual medium. Poetry we just think of words but where you put the words on the page... there's a geography to that and a form of that- It's kind of like photography where you construct and decide where something is gonna be in a frame. So I can see how they can be connected to one another.

Diaz: They have more in common than not to be honest with you and I hear J teaching every day in the other room! Zoom academy!

Kennedy: You get a free education! (laughs)

Diaz: Yeah, seriously it's true but also the way I hear him talking about photography and how to compose something in the frame. What you leave in, what you leave out, contrast, is the same in photography as tension in a poem. You know there's all kinds of ways that we have in common in the way we talk about our work.

Kennedy: That's Joan Diaz and Jason Reblando. "La Ruta: Walter Benjamin's Last Passage" continues at IWU'S Wakeley gallery through March 11th. I'm Laura Kennedy.