

## Layla Muchnik-Benali Interview Transcription

Genevieve Wagner

All right, thank you so much Layla for being here. Everyone, this is Layla Muchnik-Benali and her piece *Waving Goodbye or Hello to the Sun* is going to open at Hopkins Hall Summer Series Gallery on June 15, and if you're interested in seeing the show, you can go to [hhg.osu.edu](http://hhg.osu.edu), and you can click on the view exhibitions tab, and you can see her show. So Layla, if you can just start off by introducing yourself and briefly, explaining your project.

Layla Muchnik-Benali

Yeah, so, my name is Layla Muchnik-Benali like you said and I am finishing up my master's degree at OSU in Art Education, with a focus on Museum Education and Film Studies. And I also work full time at the Wexner Center for the Arts, as a Curatorial Assistant in film and video so juggling these things. This project is called *Waving Goodbye or Hello to the Sun*. And it's an ongoing public video project that's submission phase. So I ask the public and just the general public to submit videos of themselves, waving goodbye to the sun at sunset or hello to the sun at sunrise. I have not gotten any sunrise submissions yet, but it's possible, I'm not closed off to it. And with just the general guidelines that they should the videos should be at least three minutes long and filmed horizontally, and then I post them to the website, at [wavingtothesun.com](http://wavingtothesun.com). And I'm building sort of a collection of these submissions.

Genevieve Wagner

And so originally you had the intent of seeing like what changed about putting this exhibition, like in a physical gallery space. And so now the show is online. How was like this virtual format, you know, changed the pace to you?

Layla Muchnik-Benali

Yeah, that's such an interesting question because it's almost like the project has bounced from being virtual to physical back to virtual. It's taken many different forms. But what I think is really unique and special about having it at Hopkins Hall is sort of being able to broaden the public that sees it, the people who see it the people who are asked to participate in it, because it did exist as a website first. It existed on Vimeo first and then I realized when you had all sorts of restrictions that I wasn't interested in navigating so I've got a really good friend of mine who's a software developer and helped build this very simple website for all the videos to live. So it sort of started off as sort of an online project, and then I was interested, yes in sort of seeing what would change about it if I were to be adapted to the physical space in the Hopkins Hall gallery. And I wrote about that in my proposal and I was thinking about projection and the directions of the sun and where it's sending and where to show the things and. And of course, it's totally fine. But it's interesting to think of how that might, what, what new things can be pursued new questions can be pursued in this new online format on the Hopkins Hall, so I think being able to broaden the public who can submit is something I'm really excited to see like what will happen, will I get a submission from someone I don't know what else because so far all the submissions have at least one person in it I know, who I asked, personally, to make a video. I think it will be a

triumphant moment. So once the video who I don't recognize who I don't know how that really like that happened.

Genevieve Wagner

Yeah, yeah. I know that personally like I love going on site and playing like all the videos at once. Because I guess the formatting is so nice, and it's cool to see everyone like waving at once. So I'm hoping that like when viewers go on the website, they'll like be able to experiment with playing either all at once or playing a few different ones at once, and it's just fun to hear the audio and hear people like talking, and hear all of that just layered.

Layla Muchnik-Benali

Yeah, I think that is a really unique quality of the website that it can sort of become this dynamic play space where you can, where you can mix and match like who's going what's going on and seeing when, how long certain of them are like, there's one ending and then suddenly there's one left and then all you hear is that person so I love you have lots of experience with this.

Genevieve Wagner

So you've kind of talked a little bit about like how to submit a video. What have you learned about creating work that invites the viewer to also be the creator, so when you ask your friends to submit, or when you're going to open up submissions?

Layla Muchnik-Benali

Yeah I think it's been a really interesting learning curve for me and exercise to practice, knowing what parts of the project to let go of and what parts of the project to sort of emphasize a little bit for people. Like what do I think is important about it, what do I really want to communicate about it, is one thing. And then the other thing is, since I am asking people to cooperate with me, and to take time and energy out of their days to submit. I have to like sort of surrender part of the project to other people and I think, like that's totally what I want, but it is sort of this delicate balance this way of practicing like collaborating while also keeping trying to stay grounded in what the project is. And it's been. I've also learned a lot. I've been surprised, in a way, I've learned that people will be willing to do something like this, if I asked them, I wasn't sure how many people would report one. I was like, try it. I tried it, like, let me know how it goes. And then before I knew it I had over 20 submissions and I'm like, okay, I guess people want to try it. Yeah, that's great information.

Genevieve Wagner

Yeah, I'm really excited to split my video and see who else sends videos. So on that no describes that it needs to be at least three minutes, filmed horizontally. and then there's a link on your website correct?

Layla Muchnik-Benali

Totally so if you go to [wavingtothesun.com](http://wavingtothesun.com) and then look in the top right there should be a button that says submit, and it'll take you to a Google form. You should be able to attach a file to

the Google form it does ask a few questions like name and location, and all also asked for consent, if the person consents to having their name and location be included with the video and I do think that's important, and want to make sure that if people don't want that information out there that they have the option to not. I also encourage people if there's any sort of barrier to accessibility with this project, if there's a desire to participate but there's something I have not thought of that is preventing people from participating or if someone doesn't have a video camera or folding films, I also encourage people to email me directly and my email is on the website. So we can figure out a solution because I don't want anyone to be unable to participate. So, nothing can't be worked out.

Genevieve Wagner

Awesome. Um, and so we do Goodbye or Hello to the sun has a lot to do with power and then it breaks down like hierarchies of film and making it super accessible because you can record a video on your phone. Um, can you further elaborate on like how the project's used to break down barriers?

Layla Muchnik-Benali

Totally. I mean, I think. I think that question of power is so central to everything that I've been thinking about and doing in grad school in general, I think something that's important with this project in terms of the question of power I think for me is how small the action is how it's an action you can do on a daily scale. It's something you do within a small period of time that you can do over and over, in theory you don't always have to build yourself, but it's something that can be done on a daily scale and I think that power and hierarchies and oppression is built on a daily scale as well. It's something that takes place, as we know it doesn't change doesn't happen overnight like we know this because we see protests happening right now every day, they don't just happen once and then it's over, they have been there, they've been happening for days, and they will continue to happen, hopefully for much more many more days. So, I think, in asking people to do an action that is small that can be repeated that can be done on a daily scale. I've asked people to think about what is possible to do on a daily scale in many different ways and it could be the sort of meditative act, that sort of healing for the person who doesn't but it could also be a moment to reflect on. Just like a broader how you fit into like a broader structure and asking yourself every day like what am I doing today, that, that helps, even if it's small, even if it's a tiny small thing like what am I doing today that where I can educate myself where I can, or, or take an action that might be rebellious, or it might be vulnerable or might be strange, but I think the practice of sort of how I relate to power and also being within a sort of academic institution and trying to navigate, trying to navigate like an academic world, which is deeply concerned, like in art education and museum education and film studies, we talk about power we talk about museums as colonial institutions we talk about oppression and social justice. And we have those conversations, but there for me is a very challenging paradox in having these really important and vital conversations about inequality within a space that is still grappling with its own gatekeeping and its own closed doors and its own ivory tower-ness where to contribute to academia, you need to like do a certain thing and like publish in a certain way and write in a certain way. And it's a challenging paradox. It's not

one that I think I have any answers to or pretend to like, know how to solve, but I think this project did emerge out of, out of a longstanding, for me, internal dilemma, like being in an academic institution being in grad school, and caring a lot about breaking down a system dismantling a system, while also being within it is, is challenging. So I sort of took this route, as a way to kind of center myself and try to just think in a different way it's sort of, it was a very intuitive process. It's hard to put like a logic behind it, in a way. But, yeah, that was a very long answer.

Genevieve Wagner

That was all beautifully though put that it was beautiful. Um, I think right now I'm really inspired, just like in the world we're living in right now just to make like small actions, because that's the only way change can actually happen. So this piece really inspires you to do that and also like you being from a certain academic background but making your final like thesis piece like really fun and whimsical but also a deeply like thought out art piece, and something that you really are breaking the barrier of like what is normal in the academic world so I applaud you for that. Yeah. Yeah, and so a major component of the piece is focused on greeting or saying goodbye to the sun, and like just what drew you to focus on this action, specifically?

Layla Muchnik-Benali

Yeah, I think that's another one of those elements of the project that started off quite intuitive and so to try to reverse engineer logic becomes a big challenge but a very important challenge something I should be striving to be able to articulate, but I think it started off as an experiment for myself. I started doing them by myself I did not envision this as a collaborative project in the beginning or even as my thesis like I did not think this would be my final product for school, this was something I was doing explicitly to balance school, actually it was something I wanted in the beginning to keep separate because I was like this is something that's healing me and grounding me as grad school demands and expect these things over here. And so I started the way that sort of got that ball rolling was in late summer last year I was just trying to take time for myself by going to watch the sunset on a regular basis on campus from parking lot rooftops and I wasn't filming anything in the beginning I was just going and reading or watching or talking to friends on the phone and just taking what was useful about the sunset is that it was this consistent reminder to take that time for myself it's almost like an alarm it's like okay sun's setting it's time to leave my house I just put down the book it's time to put down, close the computer, like, you gotta go, gotta go. It only happens once a day I mean, I guess it rises in the morning but that's all for the day so. And so it was sort of a cue for me to like, breathe. Take a minute. And it really started off just no filming, no action, and then I started to make like small video experiments, I started bringing my phone and started just seeing like, what, what kind of images I could make in the spaces like what again an intuitive process that was hard to justify in some ways just experimenting, I guess, yeah and then it's sort of one day I think I waved to the sun just to see how it felt like I just did it. And I was like, oh, I think that might, this might be something I would want to do for longer and I think it was almost funny to me in the beginning, like I thought there was an element of humor where I was like, if someone works with goodbye to the sun, it would take a while because this time takes a while to set right it's not like when you

wave goodbye to your friend and it's like a quick wave, to wave goodbye to the sun would demand a longer attention span. And so, I think I made my first waving video just to see how long I would go, basically, like, just to see if that was an image I was interested in or an action I was interested in, and that I noticed that it made me feel more aware of my relationship to the sun, I noticed that everything so more aware of their relationship to the day. And I was like, this feels good I'm gonna keep doing it. And then I was talking to friends about it and I was like I did this thing, I waved goodbye to the sun, and they were like wow that's sort of funny and interesting and I was like, yeah, do you want to make one? And then it sort of grew kind of organically, in a way. So, I think, to answer your question or directly. It was a result of that the action and the objects of the sun resulted out of what was there, what was available to me. Like, I didn't, I was just that was what I engaging in at that time. And a result of experimentation and sort of playing around with what things felt like so.

Genevieve Wagner

It's cool to hear like the intuitive like background of how you created this piece, and when I first saw it like I definitely felt like a balance of like humor, and also like wow. That's really sweet and that's really deep and meditative but also funny.

Layla Muchnik-Benali

I'm glad it's still funny because I think, yeah, this point I'm like, I thought about it so much that it no longer makes me like laugh in any way or think it's not funny anymore I'm just like okay waving, who's next who's got that next video, so nice to hear that it did sort of still happen.

Genevieve Wagner

And so speaking of technology in your undergraduate research, you've explored the intersections between morality and technology. And so in your piece at Hopkins Hall, I would say you harness technology in a way that connects people obviously and so how do you think technology and social media can unite us, especially during times like these?

Layla Muchnik-Benali

I when I saw that question I was like wow she googled me and saw that. I because I don't really think about my thesis that much anymore and there's this element of like, oh, that was a long time ago I don't know how much I agree with everything I wrote in there, but I think that I totally agree this, like the connections are totally like I see them too and in terms of the role of technology and oh, man, we could have a whole symposium about that. But I think right now. I mean, the way that technology is being harnessed, both to organize protests is, like, I don't think that's a news has, I haven't been able to watch a live stream of any of the protests through very many official news routes, the livestreams that I have watched, the resources that I have been able to find almost always through these smaller, more independent and different visual social media accounts, who are just like sharing their resources, the ability to livestream, etc. And so, I thought it was interesting because on Tuesday, there was that blackout Tuesday thing where people were posting those black squares and I saw all this dialogue around that happening about how that was actually potentially erasing a resource for people who were in the streets

who needed access to that #blacklivesmatter, to be able to know where to go, what to do. Because that information is not circulating in official like, like state sanctioned I guess avenues and so people are really relying on social media right now as an organizing tool. The flipside of that is that technology is also being used in a way like by riot police and law enforcement to, to, what's the word, to interrupt protests to gather data to track people down, to interrupt organizing and so I think, I think technology has this ability to unite but it's also something that can be used for many different ends, and it's not necessarily, really, it really reflects more on on who is using it more than on technology itself like what happens. I think also something we're seeing in this moment is a breaking down of the division between like the internet and life like real life, like I think that's something that, that we like to believe is true like when you're online you're somehow not in real life or when you're in real life you're offline, but more than ever I think right now we're seeing that we're literally always online like we need to be the online and the offline, whatever that means are always feeding into each other. That one doesn't exist without the other anymore.

Genevieve Wagner

They're interconnected. And there are people who can't be like in real life, or like do what they want to do in real life because of safety and stuff. And so you need to be online. Yeah, it's such an interesting time, and I feel like technology, like in social media especially is such a new tool. And like the way we're using it and we're learning so much about it every day and like, how can it be used to you know to fight for justice and then to organize. So, yeah, thank you so much for such a well thought out answer. I really appreciate that. So, a question about your time at Urban Arts Space, so I understand that you interned there shortly. And working through a university run gallery, what did you learn about the intersections between art and education, especially at the gallery that's such a large university?

Layla Muchnik-Benali

I think what's amazing about Urban Arts Space and Hopkins Hall Gallery is that it is so student run. I think that is such an exciting and cool element of Urban Arts Space and Hopkins Hall and I remember I was, I think the only graduate student there that summer. And I was kind of like, oh, I'm not used to being around, I'm not used to being the only grad student anymore, but this is a situation in which I'm the only grad student. But I almost felt like, at first I was kind of like, oh no, am I gonna seem old and serious or something. And am I going to be really out of place but I felt that every undergrad who I've met who works at Urban Arts Space and Hopkins Hall was just like miles ahead of me somehow. Like, even now I'm like wow you're literally running a gallery. Oh, I'm sorry. And I think that Urban Arts Space, and Hopkins Hall have both do a really good job of empowering their student workers to really take the lead and to learn and to be active participants. There's no taking a backseat at Urban Arts Space. So I think that's kind of a really effective way to merge etiquette for like the art, art gallery space and education because we can talk about, we could talk about like what it means to gace virtual exhibition and it's a different thing to actually organize one. And it's a different thing to think about in a classroom setting what programming can be and it's another thing to have to deal with the logistics of designing a program and implementing it and seeing it through to completion, you know, and

you need both. I'm not saying that one is like better or worse, I think you need both. But I think Urban Arts Space seems to really provide this amazing space for students to get those hands-on experiences to put that sort of theory and reading and talking into practice, and then take those experiences back and think about them in the classroom. So, I think, I really feel like I learned a lot. I felt I was empowered to pursue projects I cared about and empowered to be independent at Urban Arts Space and that's more than a lot of galleries can say for their student workers.

Genevieve Wagner

I'm really glad yeah I feel the same way like hearing you talk about that it's kind of like doing a co-op in way because you've learned so much about like art in your classes if you're an art student, and then you get to actually apply like what you're learning to work which is really cool.

Layla Muchnik-Benali

Hey, you're an art student, right?

Genevieve Wagner

Yeah, so it's crazy it's learned so much about like, you know, installing work, and then understanding like the interpersonal relationship between like the curator and the proprietor and stuff and like the people who are actually putting the art in the gallery and then artists and all of that is just like, super interesting so yeah I'm learning a lot about just communication and like being able to present the artwork in the best way for the artist. One final question for you, Layla. So you've described this project, Waving Goodbye or Hello to the Sun as the backbone of your research as a graduate student, what have you, what have been some like major takeaways and things you've learned through this project, especially as like your thesis?

Layla Muchnik-Benali

Well yeah, I this is a very helpful conversation to be having right now because I'm still like writing the written portion and I'm gonna have to defend at the end of June and I feel like they're gonna ask me this question also. I think, things I've learned in pursuing this project, as my as my thesis, it's technically a non thesis project but I think of it, I think that it has a lot of the same experiences in the thesis in a way because I think everybody at a certain point is kind of like, okay, I love my research I love the topic that I've chosen but I'm so ready for it to be over, like, I'm so ready to be able to move on to the next thing or something like that and so I think I feel that way right now, but I know that that is a temporary state and the time, but entering back towards your question. I think I've learned to sort of, in a way, to trust my gut, because I was, I was gonna try and do like a research like a thesis that was destined for publication and everything inside me was like, you don't want to do that like, like Layla stop you actually don't want to do that and I was like, no, but I have to I'm in grad school like I signed up for this, this is what I have to do. And then eventually it became clear that that wasn't gonna happen. I just like I was feeling more excited and interested and curious about what this project could become. what pursuing an arts based practice for research would become. And so I think of it as sort of a research process like researching and, like if we think of research as just inquiry as just asking a

question or asking many questions, and and following those questions and seeing where they take you, then I do think that, like, a lot of my process behind this project has been an act of research and in a way it's sort of taught me that research can look like a lot of things, and it doesn't have to just be like a 50 page bibliography. That is extremely valuable and hard work and I, and I really validate that but I think I was hungry for models that might be different, that might, that might propose like alternatives to that so I think I've learned that research can be a lot of things and and research can take can take on many shapes and could happen on different scales, as well, if we're going back to that notion of scale. So that might be my biggest takeaway for now. I'm sure I'm sure that answer will change wildly.

Genevieve Wagner

Thank you for that. Thank you so much Layla for talking today. Everybody can check out Layla's show starting on June 15. If you're interested in submitting your own video, check out her website. So, thank you so much Layla.

Layla Muchnik-Benali

Genevieve I really appreciated your work and time and collaborating has been a joy.