Conversations

Volume I

Judy's Death

Conversations, Volume I, brings together ten interviews conducted between 2023 and 2025 as part of the research and exhibition initiative of Judy's Death, alongside others developed in parallel.

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Nostalgia

Hugo Bausch Belbachir: You moved to LA in the 1990s, after leaving New York.

Chris Kraus: ’95. I’ve been completely out of New York since the early 2000s, when Sylvere left. For a while, when Sylvere was still teaching at Columbia, I went back and forth until he moved here. That was pretty much it. I mean, it’s just so intense and difficult in New York. LA is very easy if you slip into it.

H.B.B: I felt like an alien there. In a very Gothic way.

C.K: What were you thinking when you arrived?

H.B.B: I remember being there with my mother when I was around 10 or so, but as a completely different experience, of course. When I came back, I arrived with a whole mythology and was immediately confronted with something much more brutal. I guess the tension of a linear space where people try to find something meaningful within it, but where it’s rather impossible to envision anything. Everything evaporates. I guess it also has to do with the fact that America has always denied social classes.

C.K: Oh, it’s so true.

H.B.B: And a taxi driver is a second-rate actor: daydreaming amid the highway. Symmetrically, I kept on thinking about Julie Becker.

C.K: I have a friend, Ralph Coon, who’s writing her biography. He and Julie were very close. They were both addicts, although they never used together. But there was a lot of overlap in their experience, and they were friends. Ralph felt a lot of bad, a lot of guilt when Julie died, and he decided to write about her. He tracked down her parents, her brother, other family members, her ex-boyfriend, everyone.

H.B.B: Can you tell me more about them?

C.K: Her parents are really poor. Both were on welfare. Her mother is very sick now with terminal cancer, and she's been living in Hawaii for quite a long time. Her father moved down to Baja California to a beach town not far from the border. He's also living in extreme poverty, although he's an artist, and he's still making work. Ralph visited him a few times down there.

H.B.B: I guess the work came to me within the transitory landscape that constitutes the city. This sort of constant in-between; people dying of fentanyl under tents in front of a *Whole Food*. As if everything was short-lived; evanescent, fugitive. Or moving from one point to another and never getting lost, and never seeing anyone again.

C.K: Yes, it's completely disorienting. Although what you describe is fairly recent, going back to the pandemic. It was a little more orderly during Julie's lifetime. Do you know who Giovanni Intra was?

H.B.B: I don't.

C.K: Giovanni was a New Zealand artist who moved to LA in the late 1990s to do a critical theory degree at Art Center. He absolutely loved LA, and he did some incredible writing about urban and artistic ecologies here. He and Julie knew each other and did drugs together. Giovanni died of a heroin overdose in 2002, when he was just 34. We co-published a collection of his writings, *Clinic of Phantasms*, at Semiotexte last year with a New Zealand press, Bouncy Castle.

H.B.B: How did you meet Becker?

C.K: I was doing studio visits at CalArts in the late 1990s when she was a student there. We just clicked, exchanged information, and started hanging out. Although even in our friendship, talking about the work was always a big part of how we spent our time.

H.B.B: Can you describe her studio?

C.K: There was the one on Morton Street, which was underneath an old Craftsman-style bungalow near Elysian Park. She started making very large pieces while she was there. The house had a scary dark grungey basement, actually more like a crawl space, that she used as a studio. But the house I think was foreclosed, owned by a bank, and eventually they sold it and she had to move. By the early 2000s she was living in the storefront studio on Berkeley and Sunset. Which was very urban, very NYC by LA standards – an ugly traffic snarled-corner with gas stations, auto parts and convenience stores. This was before LA became impossibly gentrified and polarised … but even back then, it was one of the ugliest locations I'd ever seen in LA. The storefront was mostly a studio – she just carved out a little living space in the back with a DITY kitchen, a shower and toilet. Like an old-fashioned NYC raw loft. Julie lived under those conditions for a long time. Around the time of the move, she'd started having more difficulties, lost her gallery representation and turned to drawing because she didn't have the budget to make large-scale works at that time.

H.B.B: Did she write?

C.K: No, not so much. Not that I know of. She made videos.

H.B.B: Can you tell me about these days in LA, in the mid-1990s?

C.K: It was wide open. Nobody wanted it. The book we published recently with Semiotexte, *Reynaldo Rivera*, gives a really strong sense of that time. Rey took photos of Echo

Park house parties and Latino drag/trans bars during the late 1980s and 90s. He didn't have an art career per se, but he kept taking pictures. In the book, he and Vaginal Davis reminisce about those earlier days in LA. Rey has a profound sense of the city's shifting identity, its amnesia, the erasing of Latino culture. He's a great writer as well. For me, coming from NYC in the mid-90s, LA seemed thrilling because there was no competition. I've never liked competition. In LA at that time, it seemed like you could pretty much do anything, because nobody cared. The stakes were that low. And I think that kind of atmosphere is conducive to making art.

H.B.B: When did this shift?

C.K: Instantly. It started changing already, um – when did I write the Tiny Creatures essay? Around 2008? Everyone involved with that gallery was already aware of it then.

H.B.B: Wait, I need to close that window. It's raining again.

C.K: Yeah, no problem.

H.B.B: Anyways. We also met through this film, yours, *How To Shoot a Crime*, co-directed with Sylvère. How about those times, in New York?

C.K: New York was amazing, very similar to LA in the 90s, a place nobody wanted. I mean, of course it was always more competitive than LA but there were still some unsettled, mysterious places. But it being NYC, even amongst that legendary bohemian poverty and squalor, people were very aware of who went to which school, and of advancing themselves and their artistic careers. That didn't happen overnight, NY was like that as long as I can remember.

H.B.B: I've always been fascinated with how labor, as a concept, is infused in America. Especially in New York. A constant horror.

C.K: Right; a horror.

H.B.B: You've been going back and forth more frequently to Mexico, too.

C.K: I like going to Mexico – I've been going there to write since 2004, and over the years I've developed friendships with other artists and writers in Tijuana and Mexicali. It's nice to have at least a big toe in that world – it's a reprieve from America. The people I know in those border cities could definitely have had lives and careers in LA, but they chose to stay there, which is a very interesting thing. You know? It's like that early 20th century moment when generations of people decided to remain in New Zealand or Norway or even Chicago and make their work there. A widening of things, outside the center. Border culture on both sides of the US/Mexican border is really interesting – very street and vernacular and attuned to the realities of the globalized hyper-capitalism.

H.B.B: Do you apprehend writing differently in Mexico, or whenever you find yourself outside of the US?

C.K: I think I just write the way I'm going to write. I think about it for a long time, and then sit down to do it. But leaving the US is always such a relief. And then, I've never been good about writing at home. I'm talking to you from my office, I can do everything here except work on a book. If I'm writing a book, I need to enter a bubble, maintain one foot in that world. I think a lot of writers feel that.

H.B.B: Escaping, or looking for a context that goes against – creates a tension, let's say – within the process of writing?

C.K: The book has to be the most interesting thing in your life in order to write it – the point that's most alive. And I've found that hard to maintain in real daily life. Having very poor boundaries. Since I can't seem to maintain them, I just run away.

H.B.B: Is it the same when it comes to writing criticism?

C.K: Nah. That I can do anywhere.

H.B.B: Do you still write criticism?

C.K: Occasionally, if it's an artist I like and I want to engage with the work, I'll do it. But it's definitely less interesting to me now than writing fiction.

H.B.B: I remember you saying that it took you a while to know how to apprehend forms of contemporary art. I mean contemporary works. That you felt sort of intimidated; keeping a form of distance.

C.K: And now I enjoy it.

H.B.B: What are you working on, right now?

C.K: The novel I recently finished continues on, in a way, from Summer of Hate. The Catt and Paul characters find themselves in northern Minnesota – he's gone back to school in Addiction Studies at Hazelden/Betty Ford, she's gone with him to work on a book – and they end up buying a cabin together up north. Later, he relapses and moves up there full-time, working in social services by day, getting high nights and weekends. The book follows that struggle, and then shifts to a story I read in the local paper about three teenagers who

kidnapped and shot an acquaintance – all high on meth. I started to do a lot of research, visiting them in prison and getting to know their families and friends, pretty much everyone in that world. It was actually the third violent methamphetamine murder in this tiny location during their teenaged years.

H.B.B: A case study.

C.K: Yeah. The up north cabin is all towering pines, loons, moose and bear – but 20 miles away in the town, there's this rust-belt culture that supposedly asserted itself via Trump and MAGA. The kids really have nothing … it's multi-generational poverty and addiction, they're Reagan's spawn – their world the consequence of complete indifference, deindustrialization, contempt. Researching the book, I immersed myself in the culture of those kids.

H.B.B: Are you still in contact with them?

C.K: I've become real friends with the accomplice. We're in touch a few times a month.

H.B.B: How old are they?

C.K: At the time of the crime, the couple – a boy and a girl – were 18 and 17. The accomplice, my friend, was 19 and he'd just moved up there.

H.B.B: Where did the murder take place?

C.K: Hibbing, Minnesota. Birthplace of Bob Dylan. Did you know that? Well, not exactly his birthplace, but where he went to high school.

H.B.B (laughs): I didn't.

C.K: Yeah, I think that's funny too. And there's a Bob Dylan Museum in the cellar of the public library. But the town now is just so fucked up.

H.B.B: In the middle of nowhere.

C.K: I've always been drawn to wild, remote, forgotten northern places. I loved it there.

H.B.B: Talking about the book brings me back to *How To Shoot a Crime*. I mean; case studying. Everything that is transactional; drugs – selling, buying –, sex – a worker, a client –, committing a crime.

C.K: You're right. I thought about that film from time to time. Sylvere saw crime as a means of marking time and imposing one's own identity upon an otherwise indifferent, anonymous city. In a huge megapolis everything's always in motion, a perpetual flow, nothing sticks. But the crime stops time and motion: suddenly, an interstation space is transformed into a 'crime scene' and all this attention is paid to reconstructing events. Which is really interesting. I mean, the data is always there – pretty much anything can be reconstructed – but it's very rare that someone will invest all that attention. I used a lot of police documents in this research. They're very precise, in terms of chronology – but of course they ignore what to me is most interesting – the gestures, the conversations, how things looked and felt.

H.B.B: The contextual potential of details. Like writing poetry.

C.K: The crime does that, yes. It stops time. Traumatized all of his life by his childhood experience in Occupied France, Sylvere never felt things at first hand. So stopping time was incredibly compelling to him.

H.B.B: There's this moment in *Video Green* that I love. The one in which you mention Terrence Sellers and Mademoiselle Victoire; 'Barely conscious that they are parading within an environment, and as such, they are emanating everything important of that environment. They're emanating anxiety, longing, and fear.'

C.K: It's touching to watch that, now that Terence is no longer with us. There's a part of the film where Sylvere asks her Why do you have to be right all the time? And she says: Twenty years from now, there'll just be this video of me at 32, talking. To her, time really mattered. I didn't know Terence well, but I know that she eventually shut down her BDSM dungeon and moved out to New Mexico, to a high-desert town that for some reason attracted a bunch of 1970s Soho minimalists. It was a whole little enclave. She moved out there, and then trained as a nurse.

H.B.B: That makes sense; from dominatrix to nurse.

C.K: Yes.

H.B.B: She's fascinating, in the movie.

C.K: She wrote a book, *The Correct Sadist*, have you ever seen it? She and Kathy knew each other. Kathy Acker.

Hugo Bausch Belbachir: I've been working on Mark Morrisroe's life for the past six months, now. It's a rather strange experience; to work with ghosts. Or at least on someone you never met. Naturally, at some point, it felt evident to get in touch with you.

Ramsey McPhillips: Did you get in touch with other friends?

H.B.B: I did. By confronting this reality – breaking free from the illusions spun by mystified narratives – I've encountered anger, fractured friendships, and more. Ultimately, escaping the allure of an ideal proves to be quite challenging. It was less romantic.

R.M: They were all so competitive. Mark's group was just so mean to each other and competitive, calculating and jealous. It was amazing. But they were best friends, slept together, and did drugs together. It just was a completely different framework of association. It was really fascinating for me to see.

H.B.B: Do you remember the day you met Mark?

R.M: A friend asked me to fill in at the last minute to be a bartender at Pat Hearn's apartment, where they were throwing a party. I didn't know these people; I was just the fill-in bartender. I saw Mark's head come off on the top step. He hadn't walked up; he crawled up. Gail Thacker and Lynelle White were there too. The Star Twins as well. He had this beautiful, filthy suit on. He started at me and came dragging his leg across the table and started screaming, You're fucking gorgeous, You're going to be my next supermodel. I'm going to have your clothes off and photographed in no time. He was high on heroin. Everyone was nuts. I remember David Wojnarowicz being there, too. Mark's fixation on me became a joke as I couldn't leave, and they started auctioning off my clothes, fighting over my tie, and the

whole thing was… I mean. I remember people sitting there and laughing. When the thing was over I turned around and there was this picture by Mark of Pat's chihuahua, Chichi, exhibiting her fangs. They were trying to take my clothes off, and I went to the bedroom to get my coat and saw it moving; there was Chichi under it. I didn't get paid and went home.

I came by a few days later to get the cash. They asked me to come by the gallery. I received a call and it was Mark. They had given him my number. I didn't pick up the call. I have these recorded. I have it on my answering machine. Same crazy blah, blah, blah. You're going to fuck me, and I'm going to take a picture, and you're going to be my new supermodel, and you have to do it, over and over. I never picked up the phone — until I did. He said something like Look, I'm really famous. I know you're an artist. You need to go to the Pat Hearn gallery and look at my work. If you like my work, then you can call me. If you don't like it, then I'll leave you alone. I thought that was fair. When I walked to the gallery Pat appeared like a sort of Jackie Onassis or Morticia Addams, she just looked striking. She proceeded to take me into a room and giggled; Mark was there, with his work splayed out on the table. She closed the door behind me. Mark was in a suit, clean, behind the desk, and methodically went through his work. It was magnificent. I knew right there he was a genius. Then he said something like Now it's the tradition that the patron takes the artist to lunch. I had no money, and couldn't even afford a hamburger, so he took me to lunch.

H.B.B: New York, 1987?

R.M: Absolutely. Union Square. He proceeded to tell me his life story about his father, his upbringing, his money issues, and how he had paid through art supplies with prostitution, and his artwork, and what it meant, and that he was going to become extremely famous, and he had it all plotted out. He wanted to be a rock star and all this really magnificent stuff. And you have me, listing; a wasp from Oregon in a cowboy outfit. As a joke, he said, Well, for the cost of this meal, I think that I'm entitled to the rights to your life story, and wrote that on a napkin: I, Mark Morrisroe, give the rights to my life story to Ramsey McPhillips. I shoved it

over to him. Then he said we had to sleep together. I didn't want to. And he asked to see my work. So a couple of days later, he came over — and we slept together.

H.B.B: What a crime pusher.

R.M: He was manipulative, beautifully and terrifyingly. I was completely frightened of the whole thing just because it was the middle of the AIDS crisis, and he obviously had drug issues.

H.B.B: In the end, this encounter is a conflict; the confrontation of two antagonistic elements. It's incredible to hear you talking about this story that seems so impossible, so difficult; that required, in the end, such work, such charm, such irrational love.

R.M: I just instantly fell in love with his genius. He started taking me to these art parties, getting me dressed up in a gay caballero outfit, doing things like making me wear two pairs of jeans to make my butt look bigger. And somehow, at these parties, he would be off on the corner. No one would pay attention because he would come drunk or on heroin. I was just like a trophy cowboy. Pat was intrigued and very kind to us. She supported him. Then early on in our sleeping together, I noticed some physical things about him that were not right. His mouth seemed sour, and his skin just seemed pale. I asked him to get tested. I went with him, and it came out positive. He went on a heroin binge. Everything was brilliant before everyone got sick. It was a horror story. Mark was really, really angry. He didn't have money. No one knew what to do; we were completely lost. They had all rejected him because of his behavior, except me. I mean, it's a long-winded story.

H.B.B: Did you ever want to leave him?

R.M: I did. I said Fuck you and left for this villa in Italy, working for the World Bank. I began to feel guilty. I feel really bad that I did that. I received this call from a friend, asking me to come back. Mark was sick. He was about to die. I came back and found him on the floor, at the hospital, wrapped in some phone cords and blood. They were letting him die on that floor.

H.B.B: While everyone moved to the East Village in the early 1980s, Mark decided to establish his studio in Jersey City, outside of Manhattan. Can you talk about this place?

R.M: Mark had inherited Philip Taaffe apartment, and it was on the fourth floor of a six-story tenement building. It was nice. I guess just before I left, before Mark was hospitalized that last time, the owner of the building wanted to sell it, and he had to get rid of all the tenants. He couldn't get rid of Mark because he had HIV. There was a law that you couldn't evict someone who was sick with HIV or terminally ill, something like that. The man gutted the entire building. There were probably four apartments on every floor; you could see through all sides of this entire building except for Mark's apartment. And that's where he was. Mark was in there on morphine and sick, throwing his shit around and masturbating and still making art all the time. He just never stopped. He'd go to the bathroom and he'd hear this clutter, and he'd be in the bathtub, washing some print, dragging his leg, covered in his own feces. It just was insane. Everyone who came to visit him was forced to help him do that. That's what he wanted you to do. I need to make art. I need to make art. At that point, I was recording his life. I tried to find other people to do it, and they wouldn't do it because he was so violent, and dirty, and scary, and angry.

H.B.B: You were recording his voice?

R.M: I tape-recorded everything.

H.B.B: Can you talk about his relationship with Pat Hearn?

R.M: Pat was a very savvy dealer, and she was pacing Mark. We all knew that Mark was the ticket; he is the person who really, over the long run, had he lived, should have been the most marketable because of his prolific nature, his beautiful photographs, and what he was capable of doing. She also worked with Taaffe, and other amazing artists, of course. Jack Pierson was working for her at that time — he hadn't started his career yet. Pat, financially, completely supported Mark. That's how Mark survived when he moved to New York. She paid the bills; she would sell just enough work to support him. Marc would sell work on the side, and she'd find out about it, and she'd go and find them. She was great. I remember interviewing Pat. It happened to be the day of her diagnosis, which made it even more important for her to tell everything. More imperative, let's say; her history, her family, her work as an artist; everything.

H.B.B: Coming back to the tapes; why were you doing that?

R.M: I wanted someone to write about Mark's story, and couldn't find anyone. To gather documents. No one wanted to, and he was dying — so I did it. In his will, he left me three things: his ashes, the rights to his life story, and a particular photograph, which I was enamored with. It's called *The Single Egg Photograph*. A photogram, beautifully made. He had ripped the paper and drawn on it. He said this image was me, and that I had to take care of it; to make sure that this egg hatches and that Mark becomes famous when I'm dead. That was typically him, these types of things. Pat did a show, right after he died, and wanted to show this work. I packed it all up, and I sent it off to New York, and got this call from a man saying he received this weird thing — it was the photograph. He was a publisher who thought he had received an unsolicited document; he had ripped it up. This is so indicative of Mark's life; it almost happened, it was almost there.

H.B.B: As if there was a power upon it; something that decided otherwise.

R.M: When I came back from Italy and went to the hospital, I found Mark in that bloody pile on the floor with a person guarding him outside his door, just letting him die. As evidence of this scene, I collected the sheets, the bloody sheets, and a book, which he had across his leg. He said to me that he stuffed a suicide note up his ass so that they would find it during his autopsy. That the evening nurses had murdered him. He had thrown the vase of flowers Pat had sent to him. There were shards of glass. I thought he was dead — he looked over at me, and asked; Am I dead yet? I made a piece out of these elements, which was then presented in *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, at Artists Space.

H.B.B: Can you talk about this exhibition?

R.M: I wasn't there; my father was dying and I needed to be with him. I remember watching TV with him and seeing my work being talked about on the screen. David Wojnarowicz had given that speech, which made such a scandal.

H.B.B: What did you do after Mark's death?

R.M: My father died at the same time. I had lost these two people, and ran to Boston trying to relive Mark's life; lived in Malden — where he was born —, and got this room where they lived with Pat and Gail, in Boston. I was trying to follow a ghost. I went over his police and school reports and stole his whole medical record, which had everything from the multiple times he got syphilis to all of his tenures in there when he was shot, the bullet, and all the crazy things he said.

H.B.B: Did you find his mother?

R.M: I did. Mark forbade me to ever contact her. She was living in Florida. The last time Mark saw her was during his opening at Pat Hearn. She was drunk and high on drugs and made a huge spectacle. He never saw her again. That was in Boston when Pat was organizing exhibitions. Her name was Patricia Morrisroe.

H.B.B: What was she, to him?

R.M: Stupid. A whore, a junky.

H.B.B: Would you tell me about your last day with Mark?

R.M: He had a bed in front of a window, at the hospital. He was a cadaver; he was green, just a bone, without any flesh — but he was still fucking talking. As if it was the devil; rambling on and on. He was on morphine, and said he wanted to make sure to get his three-movie deal. I didn't understand but pretended I did. He goes; are you from the agency? I answered that I did, and he followed; Well I need to sign these documents. I took a piece of paper, placed a pen in his hand, and made him sign what would have been a document. I went to the foot of Mark's bed, and I took off the chart, which was hanging at the end of it. I took my camera and wanted to take a picture of that extraordinary moment. Mark's camera was right on the stand next to his bed — his Polaroid, the same I had. I stepped back and I caught the camera, and Mark went; *Wait, I don't want… Turn the TV off. I don't want Oprah to see this.* There was no TV. I touched the wall as if I was pressing a button on that imaginary TV. I came back, picked up his camera, stepped back, took the picture; he was dead. This picture is the exact moment Mark left. I just remember running outside.

H.B.B: Thank you, Ramsey. Thank you very much.

Hugo Bausch Belbachir: The artists you have collaborated with, or are close to — I'm thinking particularly of Dan Graham, Jutta Koether, Mike Kelley, Reena Spaulings, John Knight, etc — all have, in a way or another, practices that apply to the porosity that forms between visual art, music, performance, theater, and cinema. Yourself, for almost forever, have had a presence in a music contexts — Sonic Youth, Free Kitten, Body/Head — in the foreground of also developing a practice in painting, writing, and film. How do you see the connections that arise from this? Or perhaps do you understand these contexts as independent situations from one another?

Kim Gordon: I think – within all those you just mentioned – there's a sense of performance and space; a performative aspect in relation to space and the audience. Dan and his mirrors, and early videos; John too, who is very much involved with architecture, bringing institutional critique while having this sort of playfulness with space. Regarding myself, I simply don't know; I don't think about music when I make art, to be honest.

H.B.B: The film that led to this conversation — *Making the Nature Scene* (1985) — emphasizes the importance of this porosity; the need for film screenings in clubs and engagement in contexts involving multiple disciplines. In the film, you wander through NYC Danceteria, a club on 21st Street that attracted figures like Basquiat and Haring and showcased a who's who of great 80s acts, including Madonna, The Smiths, Run-DMC, Lounge Lizards, Sonic Youth, Nick Cave, Soft Cell, and Bauhaus, among others. Can you talk about this place?

K.G: Dancetaria was different from the other clubs because it had this megastructure idea of everything being in the same building. The ground floor was a space to play; this sort of big room. Most of the people were coming from New Jersey to dance there. The top floor was this cafe and video lounge where people hung out and just video monitors scattered around randomly. It was actually tacky, now that I think of it; the whole new wave-ish decoration. It

was a time when video art and MTV was happening. I remember this night with Michael Gira from the Swans; he was kinda seeing Madonna, but would never say it. She was sitting on his lap, looking around for someone more important, I guess. It was funny. That's my only brush with Madonna, really.

H.B.B: On what kind of occasion would you go there?

K.G: It would just depend on what band was playing.

H.B.B: New York is where, when you moved there in the early 1980s, you started doing music – even though you actually started when you were at Otis. At the very least, New York is where you felt the influence of people like Lydia Lunch, The Velvet Underground, Philip Glass, John Cage, Allen Ginsberg, and Andy Warhol. People who were actually not all musicians.

K.G : We had this noise garage band we made up for our Media Class.

H.B.B : Below the Belt, right?

K.G : Yeah. We played at this Film Festival, and this is where Mike Kelley saw us for the first time. It inspired him to start *Destroy All Monsters*. It's funny. I arrived in New York later, where I was working a few jobs. Dan Graham was one of the first people I had met, through John Knight. He brought me to a concert. I think it was Theoretical Girls. I thought that this kind of music was much more interesting in a way than punk rock, because punk rock was still simply three-chord rock, in a certain way. This no wave music was much more fractured and free, and it seemed like it was really taking apart rock. Totally deconstructing. I was really drawn to that. Then Dan asked me to start an all-girl band for one of his performance pieces.

Then I met Thurston through a girl, who I was playing with et cetera, et cetera, blah, blah, blah. (laugh).

H.B.B: (**Laugh**)**.**

K.G: Music was, I guess, or became an escape for me because I got too close to the art world, when I was working at a gallery. The ’80s were really weird in the art world. It was when things were starting to become really commercial. A bit freaky. Everything turned to painting. The newer generation looked at what conceptual artists – people like Jack Goldstein – had done, while doing it within commercial systems; objects that would sell. It was a strange time, and I thought that music wasn’t part of that yet.

H.B.B: Which gallery were you working at?

K.G: I worked for Larry Gagosian as a receptionist.

H.B.B: Couldn’t be more central than that when it comes to the commodification of art during that period.

K.G: Right.

H.B.B: To me you are more of a conceptual artist who also does music. At least, I always understood your music in relation to conceptual attitudes. You also said that you wouldn’t consider yourself a musician.

K.G: I guess I consider myself an artist who makes music or an artist who writes. In the 80’s, I simply didn’t want to work with a gallery. The gallery system and all of that, you know. That’s when I started Design Office, and did these interventions in a few people’s apartments that I

knew and then wrote about them. But it was more about being a psychological interior decorator because music was different, and allowed me to do differently.

H.B.B: Did you feel like a gallery was necessary?

K.G: I felt like that's the art career you were supposed to have. I don't know. Now I realize I have a career that suits me more. I wouldn't be happy as a conventional artist. My ideal was more to have a show. And I actually had one, at White Columns.

H.B.B: In *Girl in a Band*, you mentioned that music was central to everything, both personally and artistically. Do you still feel the same way about music when you work on films, write, or paint? Is there a kind of 'musical' impulse in your creative process?

K.G: I just don't think as much when I make music, as I said. I just do it. Whereas making art – visual arts – is a much more laborious act. I wasn't trained in music; like a lot of people, I just fell into it. It appeals to the more visceral side of me. One thing I like about playing music is just moving through space, which sounds very Californian (laugh). Your electricity is an electric guitar is affected by movement in your relation to the amplifier and all that. I like it because at times you can really get lost in it. There's no place to stay, so you have to move forward. And in art, it's easier to get stuck or, for me, to become paralyzed. Don't you think?

H.B.B: I don't know. I don't make music. But yeah; there's a way of evolving through the stage that has this sort of immediacy that doesn't exist – or cannot be manipulated – in other presentational contexts.

K.G: I was influenced by Warhol, and obviously The Velvet Underground – who I'd listen to when I was 14. One thing about pop art was about culture from the outside. Outside of the

artist. In a way, having a band and playing within more mainstream situations – although Sonic Youth was never exactly mainstream – was the next step of that very same thing.

H.B.B: You are close to what German people call 'Maskenfreiheit'; a freedom that is performed through masks. This has to do, again, with moving into different spaces. When I worked on this interview, I realized that I was quoting a lot of males. And as a matter of fact, you were surrounded by many. We named them; Graham, Kelly, Knight. Being under that specific influence also questions the masks we use.

K.G: That's true. I never thought about that.

H.B.B: Being this 'girl in a band', actually; the name of your autobiography. Something that you also mention in *Trash Drugs and Male Bonding*, or in your closeness to the Riot grrrl.

K.G: I have a band with all girls, now (laugh). Which was accidental, actually.

H.B.B: No-wave has often been associated with Sonic Youth. However, in reality, Sonic Youth drew from it without fully embracing no-wave. I feel that it's your visual art that has consistently aligned with this attitude, this anti-wave.

K.G: Right. Well, it was over. The scene was ending. It was much more nihilistic than Sonic Youth. We were definitely influenced by Glenn Branca, who used shitty guitars, and tuned differently. I did this series of names of noise bands on paintings. I liked the idea of taking something really obscure and giving it a different use function by putting it unto painting. Much like someone buying a T-shirt from a place they've never been to.

H.B.B: Like all these people wearing this Sonic Youth t-shirt without listening to Sonic Youth (laugh).

K.G: (laugh) Or walking around wearing a Nirvana shirt.

H.B.B: You also frequently wrote; on art – I have in mind this piece on Mike Kelley for Artforum – but also music. Can you tell me more about your relationship to writing; and more specifically theory?

K.G: I'm not really academic or anything. I was just trying to think of preposterous premises and then try to prove them a lot of times. But just writing for me is how I can think. I can't really think unless I'm writing. I'll read something I wrote a long time ago and go, *Wow, did I write that?* I don't know if you ever have that experience?

H.B.B: I approach writing as a sort of mechanism. A sort of painful one. Something that Dereck McCormack described as the devotion to disgust; 'I can't conceive of writing without disgust as the driving force – and as the desired effect. Writing is devotion to disgust'.

love to all.

al.

Hugo Bausch Belbachir: Could you tell me about your encounter with Alvin Baltrop, back in 2001?

Kelly Cogswell: He was hanging out at the laundromat I used to go to on First Avenue, right on the corner of First Avenue and Second Street. I think he lived nearby — maybe on Second Street — just about half a block from the laundromat. It was like his café. He'd hang out there and talk to people. I don't know if he ever actually did laundry, but he treated it like a café.

H.B.B: He had moved there in the 1980s, or probably before, and stayed there until his passing. 89 East 2nd Street. Did you know about his work when you met him, or was he just a neighbor?

K.C: I was simply the neighborhood. I would go there, do my laundry, and hang out. You would talk to people in the old days.

H.B.B: In one of your texts, you describe Baltrop as an unofficial neighborhood AIDS doctor and a Gay Daddy. Could you speak about the role he played within his community?

K.C: He would look out for the young queer kids he came across. If they had health issues, he'd try to point them in the right direction. He liked younger guys, but he was always kind of horrified by how little they knew — even about basic personal hygiene or what was normal and what wasn't. Apparently, he had been a medic when he was in the service, so he used that knowledge to help people in the neighborhood and the broader community. He just tried to help out where he could.

H.B.B: During his military service, Baltrop worked as a medic aboard a ship stationed in the Mediterranean during the Vietnam War. Among his fellow servicemen, he was regarded by some as a kind of spiritual guide, and by others as an older brother figure. Many of the photographs he produced during this period bear witness to these experiences, reflecting both his medical knowledge and his deeply empathetic engagement with those around him. This sense of intimate, community-oriented care was something he had already begun cultivating in his Bronx neighborhood, and would later expand upon in the 1980s through his presence at the piers along the Manhattan waterfront. At what point in your relationship did the photographs he had taken begin to enter into focus for you? How did you come to situate or contextualize his photographic work within your understanding of who he was?

K.C: At the time, I was co-editor and co-publisher of a small international online magazine, and I often interviewed people I encountered — people I found interesting or compelling in some way. So, I'm not entirely sure when the subject of his photography first came up. It wasn't as though he introduced himself by saying, "I'm a photographer." It just emerged gradually, and I don't have a precise memory of the moment it happened. But by the time I formally interviewed him, I was certainly aware of his work. I remember going up to his apartment — which was very small — and he showed me a selection of his photographs. He also spoke about the many images that had been destroyed by his mother, particularly those that included men.

H.B.B: What did Baltrop say about his own family, his youth in the Bronx? About his mother, Dorothy, his brother James, and his Southern roots?

K.C: Yes, absolutely. He still carried a certain amount of anger — or perhaps more accurately, a lingering sense of hurt — over his family's rejection. Even in his final years, when he was ill and dying, it was clear that his family would have preferred he simply swept everything

under the rug. Their discomfort with who he was, and with the life he had lived and documented.

H.B.B: To go back to the context of his military years, I would like to revisit a story you once recounted: that Baltrop developed a romantic relationship with a young white man named William Lee Watson, who came from a family in Alabama reportedly affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan.

K.C: This was a long time ago. Everything I knew, I wrote down. So you have almost everything I know already.

H.B.B: Your encounter with Baltrop occurred at a pivotal moment when his work, long overlooked, was starting to gain recognition — albeit modest — from certain artistic and cultural circles.

K.C: He was genuinely happy to receive some attention, but he also had reservations about it. While he did begin to gain some recognition, I'm not sure he ever received the respect he truly deserved. People saw him as this obscure artist with valuable images, but I don't think he was respected as a person in the way he should have been. His photographs were wonderful, but despite the growing attention, he wasn't fully acknowledged or valued on a personal level. There's a real difference between being noticed and being genuinely respected.

H.B.B: Did he speak to you about his lovers, Alice and Mark?

K.C: A little bit, yes. But mostly, our conversations were more like casual gossip about people in the neighborhood. We'd talk about who he was interested in, who he was sleeping with, why he probably shouldn't be involved with certain people — and yet, he'd do it anyway.

H.B.B: Could you, then, speak to the conditions of his life when you met him? I imagine illness had begun to take a central place, as he passed away two years later.

K.C: He had cancer, which went into remission for a while, but he faced many other health issues as well. He struggled terribly with diabetes, which affected his blood circulation long before the cancer took hold. Poor circulation, especially to the toes, is a common and serious problem for people with diabetes. At one point, someone gave him a pedicure that went badly wrong, resulting in a wound on one of his toes that wouldn't heal. This eventually led to an amputation. He found the whole experience horrifying — not only because of the loss itself but also because it made his life much more difficult. He lived on the fourth or fifth floor of a building, and getting around became extremely hard for him. I remember the horror of that ordeal more vividly than even the cancer. When I first met him, the cancer was apparently in remission — he was still a substantial man. But by the time he passed away, he had become much thinner and visibly diminished.

H.B.B: Do you recall who comprised his social circle during that period? It is noteworthy that, in the late 1970s, Baltrop engaged with both queer and African American activist communities. Among his works from this era is a remarkable portrait of Marsha P. Johnson, which I find important. In the 1980s, he encountered Robert Mapplethorpe, who reportedly offered him cocaine in exchange for posing — an offer Baltrop declined. Could you speak to the individuals who surrounded him at the time of your meeting?

K.C: He often spent time with another Black gay man from the neighborhood, with whom he frequently exchanged stories about their experiences with cancer — both having faced the illness themselves. They were also keenly aware and somewhat amazed that, despite the devastating impact of the AIDS epidemic on their community, they had managed to survive

while so many of their friends had been lost — a whole generation decimated. Their conversations would often drift to memories of boyfriends, sexual encounters, nights spent in clubs, heavy drinking in bars, picking up men, and then heading to the piers to engage in sex. They also fondly recalled the many beautiful men who had been part of their lives. He spoke occasionally about the Black Panthers and his involvement, although he had stepped away from that activism by then. Unfortunately, some of the photographs from that period were lost when his mother decided to destroy much of his work. But, you know, my relationship with him was not that of a historian or archivist documenting for posterity. He was my neighbor, and our conversations were those of ordinary neighbors — casual exchanges about weekend plans, how we were doing, and the usual gossip about what was happening among the people at the laundromat. His concerns were often about the men he was dating or hoped to date — sometimes men he knew he shouldn't be involved with. I remember him telling me about a relationship with a young white man he was convinced was a neo-Nazi. He would say, "I shouldn't do this. One day I'm going to wake up dead with a knife in my throat." And yet, despite the danger, he was too deeply in love with this boy to walk away.

H.B.B: You were actively involved in a significant wave of feminist activism in the 1990s with The Lesbian Avengers. Did this involvement also intersect with or influence the conversations you had?

K.C: We talked a little bit about those things. He mainly liked to talk about boys. (laughs). Food, too.

H.B.B: Was he a good cook?

K.C: He was quite a skilled cook, and since his family had Southern roots and I'm originally from Kentucky, we would often spend half an hour debating the proper way to make cornbread. I remember inviting him over for dinner and preparing a dish with shrimp that I

thought he would enjoy. Unfortunately, I ended up getting really sick afterward. I was horrified because I knew about all his health problems, and I immediately feared that I might have poisoned him. I had to call him and warn him not to eat the leftovers — I was genuinely afraid I had done him harm. But he was fine — turns out, I was the only one who got sick.

H.B.B: I see.

K.C: The conversations around his work were less about the idea of documenting, in a traditional sense, and more about his profound appreciation of beauty. He photographed the men he encountered because he found them beautiful. He went to the piers not out of a desire to make a political statement, but because he genuinely saw the male body as one of the most exquisite forms of human expression. This deep admiration was also reflected in his personal life — he simply loved men. Amidst contemporary discussions about queerness and politics, it is important to remember that the core of the gay liberation movement was the freedom to express desire openly, to live authentically within society without fear of judgment or persecution. Baltrop's ethos was very much rooted in the 1970s gay liberation spirit — not focused primarily on legal equality, but on the fundamental desire for personal freedom and self-expression. In his photographs, the young men and boys he captured are idealized, embodying an almost timeless vision of beauty and desire. They are undeniably beautiful. Yet, he does capture the violence to some extent — how could he not? When you love members of your community deeply, witnessing such brutal realities becomes unavoidable. If someone is pulled from the river after being murdered, you feel compelled to document that tragedy. The love he had for these men was inseparable from his outrage at the violence and injustice inflicted upon them. At its core, the driving force behind his photography was a profound love for gay men during the period in which he worked. Similarly, when he engaged with the Black Panthers, his connection was not only political sympathy but also a genuine love for the people who comprised his Black community.

Hugo Bausch Belbachir: Perhaps we might begin with your encounter with Sigmar Polke, in 1970. You were sixteen.

Michael Krebber: Was I really 16? Maybe 17.

H.B.B: It's quite an advanced age, in any case, to be meeting Polke.

M.K: Yes, but what happened in Cologne in the second half of the sixties was more than just a lot — everything felt within reach, you just had to go for it. I had seen a Polke exhibition organized by René Block in a booth at one of the early art fairs, and I thought it was silly. Nothing else seemed silly — only this. But soon after, I met Michael Buthe, who had a large Polke drawing in his hallway and spoke highly of him. Not long after, there were two parallel Polke exhibitions, right next to each other, in the two tiny galleries of Thomas Borgmann and Michael Werner. Werner showed the two Tiber Tücher, and Borgmann exhibited a large number of drawings — an entire drawing exhibition, plus many framed works stacked in two or three piles of maybe 30 to 40 drawings each in the back room, leaning against the wall. I went there almost every day. The prices were very low, the stacks shrank daily, and the prices rose gradually. I met Polke for the first time at Michael Buthe's apartment. I asked if I could visit him in Düsseldorf, and I did. That visit was absolutely beautiful and intense — I could write a novel about it. On my second visit, Polke told me they'd be coming to Cologne that weekend. There would be a party. They'd been asked how many people they were bringing, and hadn't answered yet — but I should come. The host would be a psychologist, but he'd be fine. I had already met Benjamin Buchloh once at Rudolf Zwirner's gallery, where he worked with Birgit Küng. Through them, I had heard of Jule Lüpertz and Michael Werner, had visited them, and had started seeing Jule Lüpertz regularly at her Art Deco shop after school. And when I arrived at Heubach's *Interfunktionen* party — Heubach turned out to be the psychologist — everyone I knew was there.

The people in these different rooms in Cologne had very different political stands and stances, and it happened regularly after openings or at parties that some sat together at one table.

H.B.B: Referencing other artists has remained a profoundly important aspect of your work. I'd like you to speak to me about Markus Lüpertz, under whom you studied in Karlsruhe between 1975 and 1977.

M.K: In the midst of all this, I was thinking about where to study, and how to find a teacher who could explain all of it to me. Since Polke wasn't teaching in Hamburg at the time, I turned to Markus Lüpertz, who had just started teaching in Karlsruhe. I had met him, and he had been very direct right away, which I liked. A lot also came out of my friendship with Jule Lüpertz, a close friend of Michael Werner. One was always sitting somewhere, someone would drop by — sometimes Broodthaers and Maria Gilissen — or you'd visit Thomas Borgmann for coffee and cake, and everywhere you'd encounter fascinating works of art and hear interesting things. Borgmann, for example, told me about Balthus and the relationship between Balthus and Pierre Matisse.

I rarely spoke with Michael Werner, but when I did, those conversations were among the most important for me. They felt like the kind of teacher–student relationship I had been longing for — and I also tried to impress him. At the time, none of this was explicitly framed as "anti-modernism," but the discussions on that side always seemed to circle around something like it. Switching to Markus Lüpertz's class marked a dramatic shift — the program was *Return to Order*. But I hadn't come from anywhere yet. During that period, Polke was moving around a lot — first from Düsseldorf to Cologne, and eventually to the farmhouse in Willich.

H.B.B: Which you are also doing; moving.

M.K: I visited Willich a few times, but I couldn't quite grasp what was going on there. They were also doing mushrooms.

H.B.B: You as well?

M.K: No.

H.B.B: Too afraid?

M.K: No. I just didn't happen — when I was there.

H.B.B: I am interested in how you talk about being in different rooms, insofar as your work is very much about the experience of being among these different groups, different people—and how that impacts your body. So, I would like to know more — and I'm asking this with the awareness that the work you made at the time wasn't erased, but perhaps wasn't fully considered until later—about what you were working on back then.

M.K: At that time, I loved Polke's *Salon Pirates* painting. It had been painted for, and was meant to be installed in the back room of Jule Lüpertz's Art Deco shop — but it never got there. There was a sense that the work I was making myself at the time wasn't erased, but maybe not fully acknowledged — not yet. It wasn't "work" at that point. Later on, yes, I could say: I did that. Maybe I came to fully consider my own work at some point, but not as a success. Maybe like this: I hadn't yet managed to give back the exact amount of pleasure I had received from *Salon Pirates* and Polke's earlier works, for example.
But I was exhibiting — and trying to survive my exhibitions. Recognizing the different kinds of failures — or the differences in the quality of what didn't succeed. And that, too, led to theatrical qualities. I never gave up on what I had been looking for in the first place.

H.B.B: It's interesting, as your work is often characterized by an ideology of refusal. Especially at that time; many people wrote that you refused to show what you were doing. But in reality, in a way, you were simply waiting for it to happen. And it didn't. Not quite yet.

M.K: That's what happens when you're trying to find something. I couldn't achieve anything in Markus Lüpertz's class either. I would go browse the kitsch department at the Woolworth store in that town, and while I looked at those objects, the pain in my stomach would dissolve. I went there nearly every day, trying to stay in kitsch the whole time — but I couldn't manage it. I also didn't know about camp. Even though camp had already been around — on WDR's third TV program, in the Cologne film club, in Polke telling me about watching *Pink Flamingos* in New York, and so on — I hadn't had a name for it yet.

H.B.B: When, then?

M.K: Only in 1999. In 1977, I had slept on a bed next to a sewing machine — at the time, costumes for Jack Smith were being sewn on it. But I didn't know who Jack Smith was then. Later, I missed the chance to see him when he was in Cologne. It had also been a friend from those early days, Ernst Mitzka, who once invited him to Hamburg for I Danced with a Penguin. I only really discovered Jack Smith when I read the transcripts from a conference in Graz titled *Cross Gender, Cross Genre*, organized by Juliane Rebentisch, Diedrich Diederichsen, and Mike Kelley. That's when I saw the first Jack Smith films. Jay Sanders gave me more information and sent me the Mitchell Algus catalogue he had designed, along with articles about the legal battles over Smith's estate — a piece by J. Hoberman, among others. That's when I really got into it.

H.B.B: And then it stays.

M.K: Yes

H.B.B: Can you talk about the end of your studies?

M.K: My studies was pretty short — I only did 5 or 6 semesters and ran away. It did not have a real end.
I went to Cologne's employment office and became a gatekeeper of a large hospital complex while reading Marquis de Sade's *Juliette*. *Juliette, or Vice Amply Rewarded* is the full title. And besides, finally, I achieved a result; a painting. I somehow managed to get the telephone number of the Derneburg castle and called Baselitz to ask if he would take me in.

H.B.B: And this is when you started working for him — in his castle.

M.K: Lüpertz really helped the way. Baselitz took me in his car, driving to Derneburg the following day to introduce me to his wife, Elke. That evening, I was shown a lot of things — it was intense, and at dinner I drank a lot and loved the food and took the chance to show off as best I could. The next morning, Baselitz said I could come. I also had told Baselitz that I had just made a painting, and with this painting, my first one, I could now walk through miles of swamp. I had taken that sentence from a Kirkeby text.

H.B.B: Can you describe the painting?

MK: It was painted on a wooden board. I had a candle next to my bed because the apartment had no electricity. I used the candle as a model — a candle on a plate. I had some oil paint and applied it, but it immediately turned into mud across the surface. I scraped everything off, and only two lines remained, marking the outline of the candle. With just those two lines left, I started thinking of Immendorff's "political" paintings, which often feature stretched,

exaggerated perspectives. I began constructing a perspective for the round top of the candle, aiming to achieve a similarly stretched effect. I ran the outline line from the back, into the circle, and toward my face — until it reached my nose — and then let it ride the rest of the circle back to the starting point. Like a ride on a merry-go-round. It worked — by following the line again and again, adjusting the speed, looking with one eye, squinting, trying to stretch it more and more. The result looked modest, but it functioned. And because there was nothing else in the painting, I decided to depict a bit of the ground the candle stood on. I applied some color to the lower left and lower right corners of the board. And because the perspective at the top was already functioning, this bit of color — despite having no perspective itself — was pulled into the existing spatial effect. You'll know that phenomenon. Kiefer's paintings, for example, use precisely that — and little else. The last time I came to my apartment before moving to Derneburg, I left the wet painting out with the garbage.

H.B.B: When you say that you have put it to the garbage — knowing, consciously, that you had made it; that your body had produced it — was it in a way of saying that you could finally do it, and, therefore, do it again?

M.K: It felt strong to travel with the formula and no object. But during my year in Derneburg, I finished only one painting — and it wasn't as good as I had hoped. It didn't give me the same experience I had had with the first one. Still, I called it a real painting. After that, I couldn't finish anything anymore. I was perceiving Baselitz's paintings — and that was it. At some point, I had to move away. I unstretched the painting and folded it — to make clear that this was garbage. Garbage worth being kept.

H.B.B: Not too long after, Kippenberger enters the picture.

M.K: And something had happened while I was still in Derneburg. I visited Hamburg and reconnected with some old friends. One of them introduced me to the waiter who brought

our drinks — it was Albert Oehlen. And that's actually how things started to come together. But I still had to finish my time in Derneburg. From there, I moved to Berlin.

I liked Albert Oehlen very much. He had come out of Immendorff's Maoist organization, where he had once been in charge of stamping letters to be sent to the comrades. Albert was painting the works you now know as his early ones. They looked a bit like Schwitters' portraits and landscapes — those other works Schwitters probably traded for bread or food. And when it came to his relationship with Immendorff, Albert seemed to come from the same tribe as I did. He seemed to understand everything I said and everything I thought. I had never met anyone like him before. What's more, he was right at the center of everything that had to do with German Punk — the more interesting side of it. He taught me a lot — about music and just everything that was going on at that moment. He wrote for *Sounds*, the music magazine, and his friends, and the whole scene in Hamburg — absolutely impressive. And Polke was around. By then, he had become a professor at the Hamburg Academy. If there was any teaching happening, it was well hidden. Everything had an edge to it — aggressive, but in a good way. I first heard about Kippenberger in Hamburg, without knowing who he was. Then I met him — first in Hamburg, and later in Berlin, at the Paris Bar. I got to know him a little, before he moved to Paris.

H.B.B: Maybe you could talk a little about working for Martin. I guess, with Lüpertz, there's this idea that you have to go through him. Perhaps that was part of your process — working through someone you admire; trying to move beyond or through their influence.

M.K: Kippenberger and I were of the same generation, shaped by the same influences. The '80s had just begun. But what the Hamburg artists were doing — while it didn't match my ideals — was at least moving in that direction. That was also how I wanted to understand my relationship to Kippenberger. He regularly impressed me. In that relationship, I said or did

stupid things — but he did too; he could handle a lot — and then turn it into something. Sometimes very funny, often very low.

Slapstick. Earlier, Kippenberger and Oehlen had asked me to do a show in a space they were running in Hamburg; it would become my first exhibition. I agreed — without having anything, and without any idea of what to do. Albert had lured me in after I made an insulting remark about another Cologne painter in the room. He responded by saying that in such a case, they wouldn't go to the police; they'd just stand next to the person and do the same thing — but differently.

I made a painting again — similar to the one that had ended up in the trash, but this time a bit more complex. You can see it in my catalogue. When painting it, I had Antonius Höckelmann in mind. It also works a bit like a Guston painting. Painting it at all was once again extreme. I had imagined two jelly-like bodies floating in a liquid. I'd take a drumstick, strike each one once, and then observe the resulting movement. I managed it. And I felt strong again. And as a consequence, I expected Max Hetzler to invite me.

H.B.B: What about the other galleries in Cologne?

M.K: They were either not on the right side or not on my level, I thought. Besides, I wasn't getting any offers anyway. I had to make a choice: either go back to day jobs or work for another artist.

H.B.B: Which was Kippenberger.

M.K: It came to be Kippenberger. Cologne was full of artists at that time. I took my situation as humiliating — to work as an assistant for an artist who was same age. I asked the two in Cologne I respected: the sculptor Hubert Kiecol, and Martin Kippenberger. I asked both of them for a job for a year, and I started to work for both of them.

H.B.B: The status of the assistant — what you will later refer to as the experience of the employee — will resurface at some point with Kippenberger, as a kind of reaction to Minimal Art, which was structured around the suggestion of a certain autonomy within the work, but was, in fact, the result of the labor of employees — assistants and manufacturers — whose contributions were completely disregarded.

M.K: Kippenberger must have known Marianne Stockebrand, who at the time was director of the Kölnischer Kunstverein in Cologne. Maybe his Judd ideas came from there. But things were more complicated here; Kippenberger kept the business running—his interests, the dirty work, indeed. The complete mix — both inside and outside this "dirty" work — sometimes got on people's nerves or involved trying hard to entertain them, with often absolutely unexpected reactions and frequently spectacular failures. There was also fun. This one's for Kippenberger: his blend of enjoyment and meanness was a lot like what you find in Jesse's *Beau Brummell*.

Kippenberger praised Kurt Raab's book, written immediately after Fassbinder's death, which detailed Fassbinder's meanness and sadism in depth. I didn't want to be called an assistant; I wanted to be called an employee. I had seen that title on a business card from Broodthaers. Kippenberger agreed — but then he told everyone that I refused to be called an assistant. He made things difficult for me. I had said, "I'll work for you, but don't want to do the social stuff." He said *Okay*. Early the next afternoon, at a certain time, I was told to come to Café Broadway. This was the spot where everyone met morning and afternoon — opposite to Buchhandlung Walther König and Wolkenaer, the famous old paint and artist supply shop that no longer exists. This corner was quite the center of Cologne. I was asked to bring one complete set of Kippenberger's posters, fetch the longest ladder from Wolkenaer, and staple the posters in a line on one wall of the café, starting from the top left. The café was tiny but very tall — six or seven meters high. Getting the ladder inside was already a performance. I saw Max Hetzler and others sitting there, waiting for the act. Maybe Luhring Augustine was there too — I don't remember — but this describes the atmosphere. Kippenberger had

invited them, and I was to perform for them. I had to climb over their knees, move the ladder sideways. I did my stunt, and once on the ladder, I said a curse. That was my first job for Kippenberger.

The next challenge was driving to a Kippenberger opening in Holland with Hetzler, Gisela Capitain, and Georg Herold in the car. Suddenly, Hetzler asked, "But what about your own art, when you work for Martin?" I had to answer. I heard the clock ticking: 10, 9, 8... I kept asking myself, *What will you say?* 3, 2… I said, "My work is the work *for* Kippenberger."

H.B.B: Total masochist dedication.

M.K: Total surrender, for sure. And then the work in the studio began. I was asked to build pedestals — those related to Donald Judd. Kippenberger gave me a drawing with ten sketches and asked me to build them out of pressed wood panels — the German kind, very different from the American ones.

When finished, I was to spray-paint one side of each piece. The first one failed, the second was okay, and the third was perfect. I showed them to Kippenberger and said the first one had to be destroyed, otherwise everyone would make jokes about me. Kippenberger said no — I should cut the piece into three parts with a circular saw, as if I had made smaller pieces for the trash. Then stack the pieces on top of each other, with the object — the broomstick cast in bronze — on top. I was impressed.

H.B.B: And there is the experience of the Marquis de Sade; the confrontation between reading about sadism and its presence immediately around you, in reality.

M.K: I hear you, and I've been called a masochist a few times. Put it this way: if you have no sense for this kind of thing, you shouldn't go on stage. The feeling of being trapped was all the more real because I contributed to it. I liked the work. And the work continued through dinner and later at the bar. I always drank a lot and became increasingly enthusiastic, but

each idea triggered the next one. The more fun it was, the more I had to work the next day, and the tasks also turned out to be complicated. One night, completely drunk, I was told that I still had to go to the studio that very night to build two works. They were supposed to be picked up the next day. I had forgotten. I staggered to the studio, did the work, and went to sleep. Early the next morning, I got a call from Kippenberger, who told me he was really sorry, but I should take a look — I'd have to redo them. I had ripped the fabric in all the corners. The task was as follows: Two pieces of fabric had to be stretched. The fabric was a gingham pattern, one light blue, the other pink. But each piece was sewn together from three similar but differently sized patterns, increasing or decreasing in three steps. For each piece of fabric, I had five differently sized stretcher frames. These were laid on the fabric on the floor — the small inner one, a larger one around it, and so on, all five. Then the fabric was cut into three pieces, so you had a small piece in the center and two pieces like frames around it — a smaller and a larger one. The two frame-like outer parts were each to be stretched onto two stretcher frames, one outer and one inner. This was difficult, and I forgot exactly how I did it. In the end, you could hang these three parts inside each other on a wall and see them as one piece. The pattern visually made it appear as one. The result was rather uneven because it's impossible to stretch this precisely. But the big mistake was that I hadn't accounted for the extra inch or centimeters of fabric needed for stretching — the extra fabric folded around the stretcher bar. My pieces were a bit too small. The rips had to be repaired by backing the gingham fabric with unbleached cotton. I re-stretched it, and in the inner corners, you could see the underlying fabric. It didn't look nice.

One day, I was invited to dinner, and something felt very different — maybe it was the timing of the phone call. I went over and was asked if I could build an edition of three of one work that had been one of the most complicated, with extreme damage in the studio, and an absolutely surprising and rewarding result. I said no — that I couldn't do that again. Also, real suffering that leads to a surprising result; how could that happen again in a work I already knew, especially as an edition of three? That was somewhat the end of the work, but there was still a lot to build and finish, and others came in and helped.

H.B.B: And, in 1986, there is the first exhibition of yours — solo, organized by Martin.

M.K: Yes, and I had nothing to show, so I asked Kippenberger to give me back one idea — the sewn-together children's pants. He hadn't had them made for the *Peter* exhibition because the original plan was to hang them on a wall, and he only wanted sculptures in his show. There was more in the exhibition, but for our conversation, this is probably enough.

H.B.B: In 1990, you exhibited a painting you had created in 1978. It was only then, twelve years later, that you decided to allow it to be seen — to allow the painting to be acknowledged. I deeply admire this attitude: the longevity of your reflection, and the uninterrupted continuity of your work. A form of consciousness, perhaps—of one's own values, of one's own awareness.

M.K: This wasn't as planned as it might seem. It was actually a bit more complex — and a different time. Through Kippenberger, I met the two gallerists Christian Nagel and Matthias Buck, who ran Galerie Christoph Dürr. They were the ones who produced the edition of the broomstick cast in bronze, with one of those often Judd-like sculptures added to each piece. I first met Matthias Buck when he came to Kippenberger's studio to take a look. That night, I took him to a bar, and we talked a lot — also about Munich. For example, Blinky Palermo in Munich. Nagel and Buck knew Achim Kubinski, who worked with Kosuth, and they also knew Förg. That's probably how they connected with Kippenberger. They put on some really good shows. I remember seeing a Georg Herold exhibition there that became one of my favorites for a long time. Then, unexpectedly, they invited the two assistants to do a show: Fareed Armaly, who was Kosuth's assistant, and me, Kippenberger's assistant. They embraced everything — and that's how Colin de Land came to Germany. At that point, Fareed Armaly was an important figure. He had this ability to bring things together in a way that made sense to me. He talked about a kind of art that had just started to emerge in New York. I

think he was the first to explain the work of Andrea Fraser, Peter Fend, and Mark Dion to me — without even mentioning their names at first. Soon after, they all came over — with Colin de Land. To me, he was a gallerist who played at being one. He set up a booth at the Cologne Art Fair, just like Jacques Tati had done in Playtime. In the film, it's an automobile fair, and Tati's car only arrives when the fair is already over. The AFA booth installation may have only been finished once the Art Fair closed. And Colin de Land wore clean trousers and shoes sprinkled with paint. No one should try something like that — he was too big. This later got labeled as Context Art, at least for a while.

H.B.B: And you were very much a part of that — context art.

M.K: I tried hard, but I want to stick with the original names — Fraser, Fend, Dion, AFA (American Fine Arts, Co.), and Colin de Land. And also Renée Green, who showed with Pat Hearn. Then came Christian Philipp Müller, also through Armaly. All of this kept me in check — which it did for many others too.

H.B.B: Do you mean you were trying to position yourself as part of what was called or came close to context art? Were you trying to be recognized within that circle?

M.K: There was an incident at the very beginning of this time — I think before Colin de Land or any of the artists he showed had ever visited. For my planned exhibition at Galerie Dürr, I had asked for 50 frames to be ordered. I intended to use them to display drawings I hadn't made yet. At some point, I realized I wouldn't be making them — or rather, I couldn't make them. But the frames had already been delivered. In the end, I decided the exhibition would be an empty gallery. That was the show. But I filled three of the frames with ephemera and hung them on the wall in a small room next to the main space — as a kind of commentary. All of this came as a surprise to me, and it was exhausting. At some point I

overheard someone saying that Fareed Armaly might be jealous of it, which made me proud. The conversations with Armaly continued.

I had studied the blank spaces in Buren's striped wallpaper, where he leaves out an installation that had previously existed on that wall. I thought about placeholders — an *x* in a mathematical formula, a *fig.* in Marcel Broodthaers' work, or a △ in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. Armaly talked about placeholders all the time. At the time, I was subletting from my friend Uwe Gabriel, who had been a photo retoucher before digital editing existed. Retouching was done by hand, or by exposure using light — transparent red plastic sheets as masks, blocking light from the photo paper in the darkroom. Uwe Gabriel created photos that showed an exhibition of black rectangles hanging on the walls of what looked like a gallery space. But those rectangles didn't exist — they were simply shapes cut out of red masks, and the 'exhibition' was produced by light. Fareed gave me the idea. I had told him about my struggle to produce and show works that didn't exist. He said, *But you live with a retoucher — ask Uwe*. These photos were exactly what I wanted. But I should have shown them in a presentation, in a lecture — because the problem stayed with me. I didn't want to show them framed. Framing would turn them into objects again. Then Uwe Gabriel said, *When you do a formulation of a formulation, you'll get into trouble speaking with a mathematician — they're used to things like that.* I tried to follow up for some time. The results are documented. But it was more of a struggle than a sharpening. At some point, I considered turning back to my drawers, returning to other unresolved issues. I had just done an exhibition with Nagel in Cologne, where nothing had been for sale. One consequence was that Cosima von Bonin and I couldn't pay our rent. At the time, Nagel was financing each month with the proceeds from the previous one. In that situation, Cosima and Kippenberger came up with an idea — to get the folded canvas out of the basement, the one I had taken off the stretcher when I left Derneburg. Cosima knew it. I should restretch it and show it. They also proposed a price — a very high one. Kippenberger would act as the buyer, and with that, Nagel, Cosima, and I could all pay our rent.

H.B.B: There is a moment in your life as an artist when you became very interested in absorbing the style, form, and content — of Polke and Baselitz, for example.

M.K: Absorbing style, form, and content; that is a lot to answer.

H.B.B: How would you call it? It feels like a kind of process that goes back to Lüpertz's idea of "going through him" — of being fully absorbed.

M.K: More a sort of *doubling*. It was maybe never my intention to copy anyone. I have to be careful; maybe it also was. But this here could maybe answer the question: I liked Renée Green's early work most for her use of elements in the style of Broodthaers — and she was all but an epigone. I was interested in something like that.

H.B.B: So it was about the work, not the artist? We are now leaving the body and moving towards the work, exclusively.

M.K: I can't answer. But there's my one painting — the upside-down motif —

H.B.B: The one in the manner of Baselitz?

M.K: Yes. Driving to Derneburg, Baselitz told me how, at some point, he had decided to turn things upside down. That it was a technique, not a style. He said he had encouraged others to do it too. And I said, *Okay, I'll do it.*

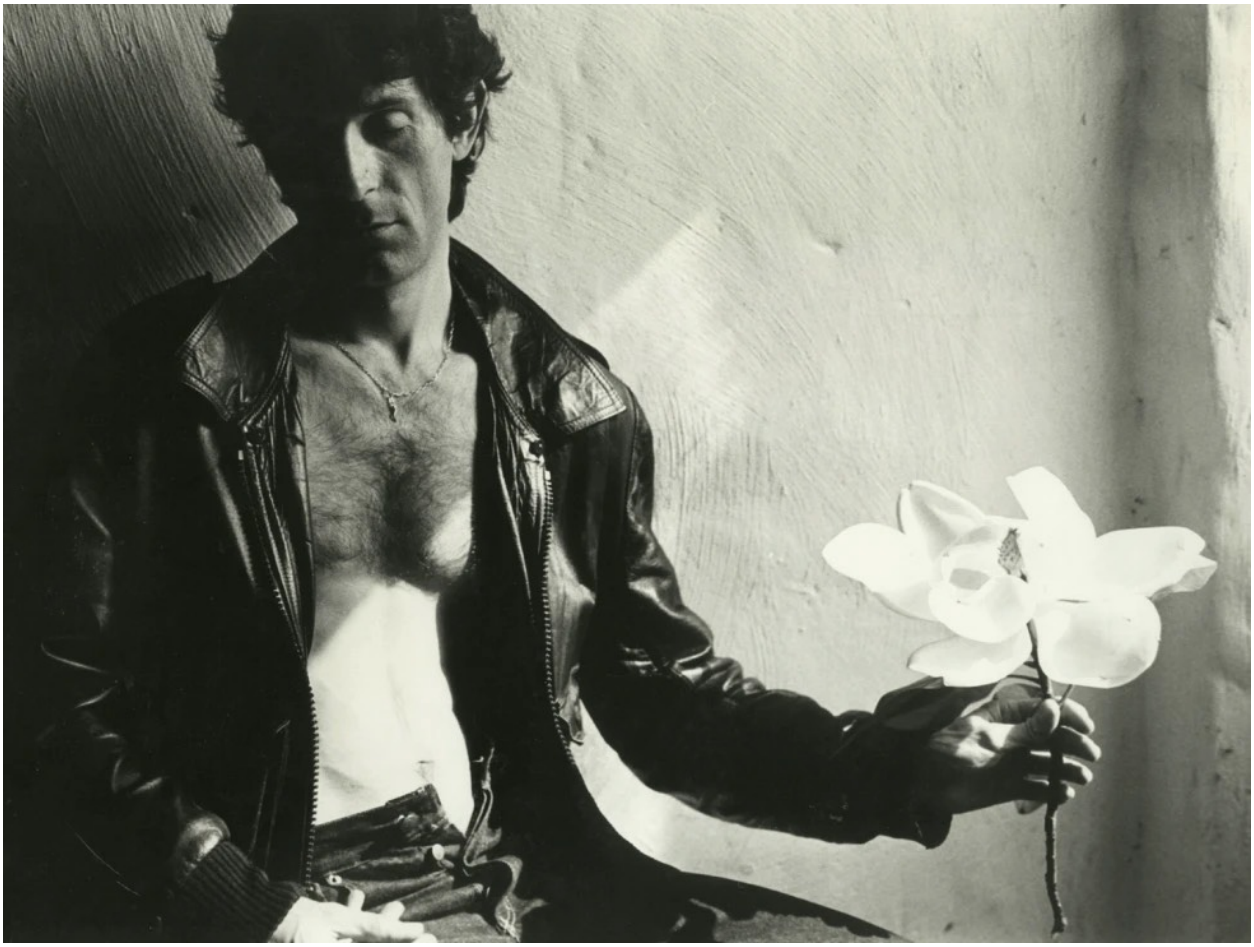
H.B.B: Michaela Eichwald has described you as an eternal student. I find it interesting because study is a system of repetition: learning, rehearsing, mastering. The pursuit of a technic, and a sensation of accomplishment. There is something eternal in that. Inevitably, it brings one into a relationship with one's own staging — and this is

precisely what your work reveals: a kind of performance of learning. One might say: to endlessly redo the gesture in order to become. Something towards maturity.

M.K: Being an eternal student — that's not so bad. I recognize the things you say. And everyone knows concepts. But at some point, one has to play. There can be intuition, as well as just *Zugzwang*. Then *Zugzwang* becomes intuition. Finally, here is the body. I'm drawn to the idea of a functioning machine — an actively functioning machine. A representation of that. All that hits my eye, in reverse motion. Not taken in, but produced. One can work with that idea. I can't do it anymore. I can. I can't do it yet. These things interest me.

H.B.B: Can you tell me about that: the cessation of the functioning machine?

M.K: I've pulled the brakes, thrown off a lot of ballast, and made some statements. I've stopped the machine, at least the one on a certain track.



Hugo Bausch Belbachir: David had a sister who lived in Paris. When he arrived, at age 24, in 1978, he went to stay at her place. She had a small studio in the 9th arrondissement, on Rue Laferrière. At that time, David planned to stay here; he was learning to speak French and trying to write a short story. Two months later, he met you. It was at night, in the now demolished Tuileries Garden, at the center of the Louvre.

Jean-Pierre Delage: At the exact spot where the Louvre Pyramid stands today. Before it was built, there was a kind of circular park — a green rotunda with bushes, trees. It was a popular gay meeting place back then. David's version is completely different. In his books, he tells it in a much more romantic way; leaning against a door of the Louvre. In truth, we met in a bush, sex in hand. We got close, started touching. Then, at one point, we shared a little kiss, just a simple peck. I asked him, "Are you okay? Do you want to stay here?" And he replied, "Je ne parle pas Français," with his strong voice. So I said, "Come on, let's get out of here." We left the garden. We talked a little. I asked if he wanted to come to my place. There was an immediate connection, really. I don't know how to explain it. The touch was like an electric spark. A flash — yes, a flash.

HBB: And everything happens very quickly; he moves in with you quickly — just a few days after your meeting.

JPD: Barely eight days later. It was me who proposed it, and he accepted immediately, without hesitation. He was fleeing the cramped studio where he lived with his sister. It was really small, and there were three of them living there: him, his sister, and her boyfriend. There are two, very beautiful photos from that time. In one, you can see him in chiaroscuro, typing on a typewriter in the shadows. It's a very soft, very quiet image. And then there's another one, taken on the studio's balcony. We're both there. Still the same chiaroscuro. You

can't really make out our faces; it's very dark. I really like that image. It reminds me of the beginning of our adventure.

HBB: At that time, David was reading Cocteau and Genet, and it was through them that he discovered Rimbaud.

JPD: He was completely fascinated, and we talked about them for hours. There was William Burroughs, along with all those other people, too.

HBB: Tell me about your day. The quotidian together.

JPD: I was working as a hairdresser, fully immersed in my job. I lived in the École Militaire neighborhood. From one of the apartment's windows, you could see the Eiffel Tower. David really liked that. An important moment for us was our trip to the Pyrénées-Orientales. It was truly significant, as David later described it as one of the most beautiful moments of his life. There was a 12th-century castle where I had taken him. We walked a lot and spent a lot of time together. Strangely, I didn't take any photos. We were walking when he pulled me into a tiny cave despite the brambles: "Come in!" We entered two small caverns, and at the back, there was a pool. We shone our light, and what did we see? Dozens of salamanders. It was an extraordinary sight. After leaving me to return to the United States, he made a small salamander as a reference to that trip. It was painted black with little yellow spikes. It left a deep impression on him. I still have the salamander at home.

There's something quite funny: when we were in the Pyrenees, he was taking photos, though I don't know if he did much with them. At one point, we went into an old, completely abandoned mine where he pressed me against a crumbling wall still marked with yellow paint. I was wearing a T-shirt, but he took his off and put it over my head, and then took the photo. He later found the photo again, and was overjoyed to have sold it to a New York magazine a year after. It was one of his first sales.

When we got back to Paris, he started working — drawing, writing. I watched him and told him, "What you're doing is incredible." He'd say, "I don't know… it's hard. I have no money." So, we made a deal. I told him: "For now, just draw. I'll support you." It helped him buy film rolls — back then, that's what he needed. It allowed him to grow, to meet people. On my end, I tried everything I could. I tried so many things.

HBB: David's return to New York is a pivotal moment in his life and work; he begins working in an advertising studio and uses the equipment there to print the mask he would use for the "Arthur Rimbaud in New York" series. During these months, David and you exchange hundreds of letters, drawings, cards, and photographs.

JPD:You have to imagine: you're deeply in love with someone, but you're separated, very far from each other. And almost every day, you receive a little note, a postcard, with a drawing, a kind word, where he tells you a bit about his struggles, about what he's going through. And I would reply to him right away. Everything I replied was exactly the same amount as what he sent me. Of course, I no longer had any of those letters. They stayed at his place in New York, and were discovered after his death. He kept them all. Deep down, I feel that we kept a very strong bond. A bond that allowed us to hope, even four years later, that one day maybe, we could finally live together. I was devastated to see him leave. Truly devastated.

HBB: In August 1979, you joined him in New York.

JPD: It was a shock. The moment I set foot on the ground, I felt the heat and a vibration under my feet. I couldn't tell if I was fantasizing or not. But truly, I felt something. A kind of vibration, as if the geography itself was vibrating. I was excited, and went to see him at his place. We restarted a relationship. It was intense; we had a very strong, very sexual connection. It was starting over, as if nothing had ever really stopped. It was so powerful. He introduced me to lots of people. I took part in rehearsals for 3 Teens Kill 4. One evening, they needed to

rent studios but didn't have much money, so they did it at night. It was cheaper. Somewhere in Midtown. The whole group was there, and at one point, David stepped down from the stage and gave me a rattle. He handed it to me saying, "When I signal you, you do this." So, I did it, twice. It was funny — the little Parisian doing that right in the middle of New York. It was a dream.

HBB: Tell me about your meeting with Hujar.

JPD: Peter Hujar was truly an important figure for him. I saw him several times. In 1982, he even accompanied me to the airport, as I was returning to Paris. At the airport, he said to me, "Here, I have a gift for you," and gave me a plastic frog. Some kind of toy that made noise when you pressed its head. I still have that thing at home. I found it funny, and it made David laugh a little too. It's quite an enigmatic gift. I'm not really sure what message he wanted to convey. I knew he had been in love with David, but David explained to me that it didn't last — only a few days. They immediately understood that he couldn't be in love because of the strong feelings he had for me.

HBB: I have read somewhere that David had forbidden you from going near The Piers. He went there himself, of course, because he knew the danger. He liked it. And naturally, the very next evening, you went there yourself secretly.

JPD: I went anyway, at night, because he was working then. I would cross all of Downtown to reach The Piers. I started from Christopher Street and made my way there. I went in. I was terrified. Really, deeply afraid. There were strange noises, people shouting — some of them seemed to be in pain. Many were having sex, too. That was the thing. The place was filthy, completely run down. There were holes in the floor where you could see the Hudson River flowing beneath. Later, I heard that two men had died there, falling through the gaps where the floor had collapsed. I went back a second time, and that was it. I told myself: enough. I

never said anything to David, of course. But deep down, I knew I didn't need to go back. It was just too dangerous.

HBB: And then, at some point, there was a break between you and David — the end of your relationship.

JPD: There was this guy called Jesse Hultberg, a very good friend of David. When he introduced me to Jesse, David said, "He really likes you." He didn't forbid me from seeing him, but he warned me: "Don't spend too much time with him." That kind of thing. Meanwhile, he was off flirting elsewhere. Classic. As for me, I wasn't particularly interested, even if Jesse was quite charming. He lives in Montpellier, now. He moved to France, I believe partly because triple therapy was so hard to access in New York at the time. In 1996, he learned that France provided much easier access to HIV treatment. He's still around. In good shape, actually.

One day Jesse came to Paris. David had given him my address, naturally. Jesse asked if he could stay with me for a few days. I said yes, but I explained my place was tiny — 45 square meters. For sleeping arrangements, I told him: either you sleep on the floor, I'll set something up, or you sleep with me. He chose to sleep with me. And that's when we made the mistake. I was tempted. I missed intimacy. And when he went back to New York, he told David all proud: "Hey, I slept with Jean-Pierre." David lost it. He completely lost it. He sent me a letter saying he thought it was time for us to stop. That killed me. It was 1984. I had slept with one of his friends, but he himself was seeing plenty of people in New York. Still, that marked the end. We stopped talking for about two, maybe three years.

Then, he called me in 1987. He said he had a plan to come back to Paris to visit his sister — and that we could see each other again. I was thrilled. He arrived in 1988. He stayed at his sister's place, which was huge — 300 square meters — because she had married a very wealthy, old-money Frenchman from the 16th arrondissement. It was weird; we weren't physically close anymore, didn't really talk for years, and I was a little afraid. I thought: if he

comes, what will happen? And did I think of him during those four years of silence? Of course I did. Constantly. I never managed to forget; David stayed with me. He had left a deep impression.

HBB: The documents you exchanged were also significant, as David drew on them in several of his works. In them, he reflects on his early exhibitions and his experience as an artist. His attitude shifts — David speaks of the sense of exclusion he felt from the outside world, of a strength he feels growing within him, and he begins to develop clear political interests. You are very central in this, too.

JPD: Yes — because I was the one pushing him, always. I encouraged him constantly. I even sent him money, more than once, tucked into envelopes, hidden between sheets of aluminum foil or wrapped in chocolate wrappers — because he told me, "You never know, customs might seize it if they find cash." And then, at some point, he told me as his work began to sell: "Stop sending money. It's okay now. I'm doing fine."

HBB: There's a photograph of you by David that I'm particularly fond of, from 1979. You're seated against a wall, shirtless beneath a leather jacket, your eyes are closed, and you're holding a large flower in your hand. Sunlight pours through a window, illuminating part of your body. The two of you were in Normandy.

JPD: David wanted to isolate himself to write. He didn't have the comfort he needed where we lived. His sister's boyfriend lent him his country house, a kind of farmhouse in Normandy, where I joined him for the weekend. He stayed there maybe ten days, but I told him not to stay too long because I missed him a lot. One day, we were walking in the nearby village, and there were trees with huge flowers. I picked the flower; he lifted me up so I could reach it. Back at the house, he took the photo. He put his leather jacket on me, and told me to get naked while I was holding the flower. I closed my eyes.

HBB: Did David talk to you about his illness when he returned to Paris in 1988?

JPD: No. He said nothing. Of course, I knew — I knew about Hujar's death, and all the others. I understood. I was deeply shocked when I heard about his passing. No one warned me. I don't even remember how I found out — maybe a month after. I thought, this can't be true. I was completely overwhelmed… even though I knew it was inevitable.

HBB: You speak of a tremendous love — something incredibly intense.

JPD: I remember when we were in bed, we would talk for hours — he would tell me about his youth, his father who beat him, about hustling as a teenager, etc. For hours. It was crazy. He had found someone to talk to. You know, I truly believe it's possible to love several people in a lifetime. He's the one who left the deepest mark on my life. He was complete. It's the biggest thing that happened — the strongest thing.

Hugo Bausch Belbachir: I had prepared a few questions, you know. I had things in mind before meeting you. And a few days ago, Donald Trump was re-elected, and now I feel incapable of thinking about anything else but that.

Tom Burr: It definitely impacts me. And we've been through moments like this before — many crises. But I think one of the hardest things for people my age (I was born in 1963), and perhaps even more so for people older than me- particularly women, queer people, and people of color who've fought these battles before — is that we thought we had secured certain rights and protections. We thought there were political milestones we wouldn't have to fight for again. But clearly, that's not the case. History isn't linear. Politics aren't linear. There's always a constant cycle progress often feels offset by just as powerful forces of regression and destruction. It's discouraging, devastating in fact. I'm still processing it.

H.B.B: I wonder if this — fascism, and its implementation — makes us forget. Makes us leave the spaces we occupy.

T.B: I think that's something we're still figuring out. Over the past few years, I've found myself looking back. Not exactly to revisit the past, but to reassess it. I've been reflecting on my career, what I've done versus what I still want to do. It's probably a common experience for someone in my position. Someone who's experienced quite a lot but still feels they have much more to offer. I'm not sure I'd use the term mid-career; that's a sort of lazy label. But the pandemic, along with other personal factors, made me want to take more control over my own narrative and how my work is perceived in the art world, and how it fits within the broader field. So, I've been reevaluating my past work, figuring out how it could resonate in the present and future. That's part of why I created the Torrington Project, which is wrapping up this month. It was a way for me to examine how my earlier works fit into today's world. For example, one exhibition I did in New York in 1995, called *42nd Street Structures*, was deeply political; it responded to real-time events happening in New York City at that time.

Back then, the mayor was Rudy Giuliani, who, years later, became a key figure in Trump's administration. In 1995, Giuliani led a moral crackdown on the city, aiming to rid it of anything related to the sex industry; peep shows, sex shops, prostitution, burlesque, and pornography. This moral crusade wasn't just about "cleaning up" the city; it was tied to a broader neoliberal agenda, where politics and personal profit became intertwined. Giuliani called it the *Quality of Life Campaign* — presented as a way to make the city safer for families. But, of course, it was also clearing the way for real estate development, especially in the areas around Times Square. That was the first time I became fully aware of how political agendas could be driven by real estate interests and profiteering. Now, looking back, I see how issues like this one — seemingly about morality or safety — are often more about profit. Take the issue of abortion, for instance, and a woman's right to control her own body. I don't believe most Americans are actually against abortion, it's become a political weapon, used as a wedge by conservatives to divide and coerce. It's mobilized as a symbol, not a deeply held moral conviction. The same strategies apply to the crisis in Gaza, where the focus of the Trump administration specifically isn't on moral or religious concerns; it is about profit, and waterfront property development. This is all a very complicated answer to your question, but I think it's connected to this larger arc of history, this cyclical return of old crises, many of which I've been personally witnessing and reflecting on in my life and through my work. We often think we're at the tipping point of a crisis, but it keeps accelerating, not slowing down.

H.B.B: I find it fascinating how your work engages with the past while simultaneously grounding itself in the present moment, a certain 'looking over the shoulder' quality to it. Conceptually, your practice is built on the deliberate exercise of memory, particularly in the way you reference both minimal and conceptual languages that preceded you, while simultaneously re-quoting and re-contextualizing your own earlier works within the ongoing flow of others. To something that is lost. Not necessarily in a nostalgic or envious sense, but perhaps in the way that absence and erasure become elements. I wonder how this act of remembering — this invocation of the past — affects your work

today. Does the memory of these earlier systems, or your earlier practices, hold a different significance now than when you were initially engaged with them? Has your relationship to the anterior evolved, particularly in relation to the more practical methodologies you once employed?

T.B: There are a number of ways I can dive into that, and from a number of different directions. I remember when I was younger, I was always hyper-aware of wanting to be an artist.

H.B.B: You always knew?

T.B: Not always, but I knew there was a choice that I made. I knew I wanted to be an artistic person, but it wasn't obvious to me what my talent was. Even at that age, I found that a dubious characterization of an artist; someone who is talented. I was more interested in the role that an artist played in society.

H.B.B: Did you know what it was?

T.B: I had some clues. I grew up in New Haven, Connecticut, and attended the public-school system. In high school, I attended a regional arts education program, and that's when I started spending a lot of time around the Yale University campus. Many of the people I knew, especially the older ones, were connected to Yale in some way — some were graduate students, others were involved in the art department. This was in the late 1970s. And it was this group of people I wanted to be a part of. The idea of becoming an artist became very strong for me, and I was determined to make that happen. It wasn't about having some natural talent, or being good at painting or drawing necessarily, it went a bit deeper than that. I wasn't pushed into this path by others because of my skills. I wanted the life of an artist. I saw the artist as someone close to a poet; someone who embodies the political voice

and conscience of a culture, and who challenges that culture as well. It also had to do with the time and place. This would have been around 1978 to 1981. The program was taught by graduate students — people who were a few years older than me, but they seemed so much older, in a different orbit that I wanted access to. Yet, they were young, too, figuring things out. It was a formative time for me, but it meant I skipped over a lot of the technical steps that others might have gone through to become artists. For example, I never learned to draw in the traditional sense, and I didn't have much interest in that, except for architectural drawing. I loved making collages, building furniture for my room, and playing with space. And I also kept extensive journals, with writing and drawings and collages all filling the pages together. Those were the things I really enjoyed, and I still recognize them in myself today.

H.B.B: You haven't changed?

T.B: No, not in that sense. There's a core there that I absolutely recognize.

H.B.B: Then, you were right.

T.B: I think so. But it was a bit ahead of its time. I had trouble getting into art school because I didn't have the foundational skills they expected from students. So, I took a year off after high school to study classical drawing. I would take the train into New York in the later afternoons after my day job, to The Art Students League on 57th Street. But by the time I was 17 or 18, I had already discovered artists like Robert Smithson, Andy Warhol, Eva Hesse, and Georgia O'Keeffe. They became my heroes. I was drawn to O'Keeffe not so much for her paintings, but for her persona; the way she lived, how she was photographed by Alfred Stieglitz, her house, her clothes. These things fascinated me.

H.B.B: A sort of attitude.

T.B: Absolutely; a self-styled attitude. For a long time, I was embarrassed by this. I thought it was superficial, that I was too focused on the external. But eventually, I realized it was a key part of how I navigate the world. I appropriate other people's postures and identities. And for me, this was also a queer reaction to the world. I didn't have the traditional family structure to guide me, so I looked to other figures for a sense of direction; figures who could show me what was possible for me to become. I would often fantasize about myself as an older artist. When I was younger, I wanted to be the artist who had accumulated experience, who could look back on a long career. And now, I think I'm at that point. But I didn't anticipate all the fears and anxieties that would come with aging, and with living generally. I only wanted to be older when I was young. There's this brief period — maybe in your 30s and 40s — when you feel like you're exactly where you want to be, where your biology and your aspirations align. Of course, you always want to accomplish more, but you start to feel a sense of fulfillment. But I've always had certain goals for my work that didn't involve producing just an object. Even before I had the critical framework to understand what an 'autonomous object' was, I had an inclination against that idea. I was more interested in how objects related to their context, how they functioned within a space, rather than being isolated or static. These were very youthful inclinations of mine.

H.B.B: There's a queer sensibility in this approach; shifting perceptions and disrupting norms, often in subtle ways. Queerness isn't just about identity; it's about flipping expectations, making things feel strange or other, and challenging conventional views. The work doesn't announce itself as 'other,' but quietly shifts how we see things, especially those often overlooked or dismissed. It's this kind of subterranean sensibility — operating between spaces, where meaning emerges from the margins. It's about adoring and flipping things at once, making them new and unfamiliar, like queerness itself.

T.B: Right. There's a way of reading the room that's crucial. I'm one of those people who can read the room. Do you know what I mean?

H.B.B: A survival skill. Walking into a space and instinctively knowing where the danger lies and where you're safe. Just knowing. Which, ultimately, is queer.

T.B: Yes. I think it is a queer thing. Learning an inner survival strategy; knowing where you're safe and where you are not. Not everyone can do it because not everyone needs to. It's interesting — maybe that's one of the reasons I became a contextual artist or a site- specific artist or at least someone with those tendencies. It's tied to this awareness of space and context. I think it has everything to do with my interest in artists like Robert Smithson and taking that interest and filtering it through my own body, my own consciousness. There's a richness in self-reflection that only interests me if I can make it relevant to others. I've never been interested in reflecting on myself in isolation. Yes, like everyone else, I feel unique — that's how it feels — but that's not enough for me in the end. I need to make my experiences and my self- reflection matter in a way that's not neutral or taken for granted. It needs to be something that can be dissected and pulled apart and that reflects conditions, not something just to be consumed whole. For a while, my work was deliberately absent of a personal figure or image. I didn't want to be visible within it; I wanted my presence to be implied. I intentionally removed the figure, shifting the focus to the context and the viewer's experience.

H.B.B: Is this systematic referencing of other figures part of the reason your work engages with the suggestive? In a way, your work exists beyond the body, and we'll discuss this more later, but does invoking figures — like Genet — help emphasize the opposite of the literal?

T.B: I think, yes. I think what was really critical for me at that time, coming out of being a student in the 1980s, was living through the emergence of the AIDS crisis and being taught by feminists, primarily. Those were the instructors I gravitated towards in art school — not exclusively women, but mostly. Feminism became my toolbox. It shaped my approach, and that's part of why I became so interested in appropriation. It made sense to me, in relation to how I was already thinking. It wasn't about me; it was about you. Don't look at me. Don't position me. Don't control me. I was drawn to this idea of camouflage, role-playing, drag — things I saw in the work of artists like Barbara Kruger, Sherry Levine. They were reflecting certain figures and cultures back to us.

H.B.B: Were you already aware of these artists at the time?

T.B: When I went to the School of Visual Arts, these were the people who were on my radar. The first year at SVA was pretty tough for me because it was a foundation year, and I didn't have much choice over the people I worked with. The school, at the time, was a very conservative institution. It's not that it wasn't a good school — it's just that it was the only art school I could get into, and I had a strong reaction to it. It's a for-profit school with a large commercial art department, but I eventually found in the Fine Arts department a group of extraordinary people. At the time, I gravitated toward people coming out of what we now call the Pictures Generation; artists who were working in photo-based or post-studio practices, a lot of them, again, women. Craig Owens was there as well, and became a friend and a major force in my life. Honestly, I'm not sure I would be doing what I'm doing now if it wasn't for Craig. He gave me incredible faith that I was on the right path. He was the one who really ushered me and several of my friends toward the Whitney Independent Study Program. Craig was deeply involved with the ISP, as was Barbara Kruger. That connection opened up a whole new set of opportunities for me and my peers. The ISP was an incredible program. It helped shape a lot of artists of my generation.

H.B.B: Can you talk about Craig and the people you were surrounded with, or perhaps who had this impact on you?

T.B: Craig was the editor of *Art in America* at the time, which was a prominent position at a very commercial magazine. There was nothing particularly alternative about it, and I think that's something important to remember. Craig was close friends with Barbara Kruger, Sherry Levine, Dara Birnbaum, Louise Lawler, Gary Indiana — that whole crowd. It was a specific group, a network of sorts. I think, like Barbara, Craig was interested in trying to infiltrate the dominant art apparatus, and market. This is a big distinction, for example, from someone like Benjamin Buchloh, who represented a different camp altogether. Craig and Barbara saw value in engaging with the mainstream art world, rather than rejecting it outright. Barbara's move to Mary Boone Gallery was a big, big deal. I want to say it was in 1987, and prior to that, Boone's roster had been dominated by male painters. When she took on Barbara Kruger, it caused quite a stir. Some people saw it as exciting; others thought it was a gesture of selling out. I remember having mixed feelings at the time. On the one hand, I thought it was glamorous — the idea of feminism ascending into the mainstream, making a significant impact. I found it thrilling. I also worked with Dara Birnbaum for several years during that period, and observed the deep ambivalence that she and her close friend Dan Graham had towards the commercial gallery world at the time.

H.B.B: As an assistant?

T.B: Yeah, I worked as a student assistant for a few years during that period. I remember that we often had discussions about how the art market was becoming increasingly dominant; how overbearing it was starting to feel. This was in '85, 86', 87... In hindsight, it almost seems charming compared to what it has become now. But back then, it really felt like this monster force was emerging. It was a reflection of what was happening politically and economically in the '80s; Reagan, Thatcher, all of these things that we now take for granted as part of the

political landscape we lived through. It was an era-defining shift. I think this moment marked a significant break in the feminism of that time. I had instructors who were aligned with an earlier, more Marxist-based feminism, one that was far more suspicious of the market and sought to stay outside of it. But then there was the presence of the more psychoanalytic, Lacanian feminists, who decided to engage directly with the system, to infiltrate it. Craig was a part of that group too. He championed these figures, writing about them in pivotal essays. These pieces were often published in *Art in America*, which was a much more populist, accessible magazine compared to *October*, which was more niche and theoretical.

H.B.B: Was there a sense of provocation from Owens in doing that?

T.B: I think in some ways there was. Or a form of humor. Maybe of humor, yes. But also about Let's take the bull by the horns in some ways.

H.B.B: And infiltrate.

T.B: Yes, a wrangling directly with the institutions at hand. Who knows where Craig would have gone with that. We don't know.

H.B.B: When reflecting on the theoretical landscape of that time, figures like Rosalind Krauss, Walter Benjamin, and even Burlow come to mind. But I would argue that Craig Owens occupies a unique position in this discourse. Looking back 40 years, it becomes clear that Owens was instrumental in introducing a more nuanced framework that integrated feminist theories — particularly those emerging from the second wave — and simultaneously foregrounded queerness and sexuality within the broader theoretical conversation about art. His work was, in many ways, a response to the more strictly formalist, structuralist, and pragmatic paradigms that dominated ambient art theory and criticism. Owens transcended the purely theoretical by incorporating a

materiality and corporeality — something physically grounded — that redefined how we understand forms in a postmodern context.

T.B: What Craig did, I think — and I believe you're touching on this, especially in relation to postmodernism — was he introduced the concept of stake. That idea came through feminism. What's your stake in this? What's your stake in culture? What's your position? It's not neutral. There was a lot of debate at the time, particularly in architecture, about postmodernism being viewed purely as a stylistic shift. It was seen as simply about historical references, stylistic movements, and decor versus modernism—all those kinds of reflections. But Craig was more interested in the political stakes of postmodernism. I think this is where he diverged from someone like Hal Foster, who, at the time, was more focused on formal aspects. Craig was interested in what these movements meant politically, in terms of real stakes, and in terms of actual bodies. That perspective was grounded in his own subjective position, which he eventually found a voice for. He used feminism as a vehicle to articulate that. I think it was in his essay *Outlaws: Gay Men in Feminism* that he starts to talk more directly about his investment in a political postmodernism that engages queerness. Not just as an intellectual exercise or a parlor game, but one that had real, political consequences. That was a revelation for me; seeing Craig engage with postmodernism in that way. Douglas was also part of that group, but he removed himself from that context. He wasn't in that school environment. I only knew him later, and it was through Act Up. So, my relationship with Douglas was very different. It wasn't as formative as the early years I spent with Craig. Our initial relationship was when I was 19 or 20, and I think those formative years were pivotal in shaping my understanding of these ideas.

H.B.B: Was Craig an activist?

T.B: Not in the same way as Douglas.

H.B.B: Were you? If there's a specific way of thinking about that... I mean, Craig is an activist in posterity.

T.B: I think, at the time, I probably would have said yes, because I was very interested in the breakdown between what art could do versus what we now consider activism. But, looking back, I feel that my personal life and my work didn't necessarily merge in the way it did for some people. For example, I went to Act Up meetings and participated in those actions, but my work was operating in a different way. It was important to me then, and it still is, but in hindsight, I think it's crucial to acknowledge those artists who did fully merge art and activism. I think I had to sort through that tension, and that's something I'm still processing. One reason I was drawn to that separation was because of the way the body was being used at the time, especially the queer body. The queer body was so heavily mobilized in visual culture, particularly through rapid, iconic visual tactics — like posters and public actions. I didn't want to be part of that oversimplified, commodified image of the gay body. Also, I think my position as a queer, white man made me question my own relationship to these images. I had certain desires to connect my work to physical spaces rather than simply having the gaze placed on me. Later, I came to realize that it wasn't a mistake to have distanced myself from that gaze, but it needed to be complicated or layered upon. Around the year 2000, I started shifting the lens toward myself more directly. Maybe it was because I had gained some attention with my work by that point, and people wanted to know if my art was about me — about my personal attributes and experience. I felt a need to navigate that expectation. I wanted to orchestrate the way my identity was understood, rather than having it defined for me. This led me to think a lot about surrogates — other figures I could use in my work. I started returning to more childlike inclinations about who I identified with, who were the figures in my life I felt connected to? Who was in the family structure I wanted to create in my work? I thought a lot about directors like Fassbinder and Cassavetes, who often worked with a recurring cast of characters. I wanted to create my own ensemble of characters. It wasn't something I delineated in a super tight way; it was more of an accumulation that

occurred over time. One of those figures was Genet, a person I had been aware of since my childhood, from my years in New Haven. He became a kind of symbolic figure for me, even before I understood what his writings were about. He fascinated me, and in a way, he still does. But there were others, too; many figures who helped me shift my own persona as well as the framework of what I was doing with my work, and I've continued to explore this idea of identity, persona, and representation. It's a way of navigating the personal, the public, and the political all at once.

H.B.B: Returning to the idea of what provokes, I'd like to focus on two pieces, *Circa '77* and *A Movie Theater Seat in the Box*. Both works explore the tension between presence and absence, and how the missing or erased elements in space or history become a key part of their conceptual impact. These absences—whether the park in *Circa '77* or the detached movie theater seat in *A Movie Theater Seat in the Box*— ask us to reconsider what is no longer there, and to reflect on how what's gone shapes our understanding of the imminent; the potential of what might have been or could still be.

T.B: *Circa '77* was a piece I created in 1995 for an exhibition in Zurich, part of a larger body of work I started in the late '80s. Influenced by Robert Smithson's essay *Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape*, I was inspired by his exploration of Central Park's Ramble and the diverse groups who used that area. My early works focused on parks in New York and Europe, looking at these spaces not just as landscapes, but as social spaces shaped by various communities, especially queer identities and practices like gay cruising. Rather than celebrating cruising in isolation, I explored how it intersected with other park activities — birdwatching, police presence, maintenance work, and how these overlapping social practices defined the park. In the '90s, I expanded on these ideas, especially in Zurich's Platzspitz Park, which had become Europe's largest needle park in part due to Switzerland's hands-off approach to the drug trade and use at the time. In 1993–1995, the Swiss government cracked down on the park, which was the prompt for our exhibition at Kunsthalle Zurich, where I

worked with Christian Philipp Müller, Ursula Biemann, and Mark Dion. Our goal was to explore the park's transformation from a haven for drug use to its sanitized, 'cleaned- up' state. For my piece, I reimagined the park before it became associated with heroin and the notoriety of that moment, and instead reconstructing a forgotten history of queer cruising in the '70s, which had been erased by its later reputation. With limited archival material, I relied on oral histories and details from people who had worked in the park to recreate its earlier landscape. *Circa '77* was an attempt to reveal how different histories and communities intersect in public spaces. The work has been exhibited a few times since this original incarnation in 1995.

A Movie Theater Seat in the Box was part of my 1997 exhibition *Stainless* at American Fine Arts in New York, somewhat consciously following my 1995 show *42nd Street Structures*. While *42nd Street* explored cinematic spaces erased by the *Quality of Life Campaign* we talked about earlier, the work in *Stainless* approached the theme from a more theatrical, fantastical perspective. I was influenced by Fassbinder, particularly his use of cinematic artifice and heightened theatricality. The piece *A Movie Theater Seat in the Box* symbolized a growing sense of solipsism and the erasure of public spaces, a theme that now feels prescient in our increasingly privatized and enclosed world. The seats were from a group of burnt orange theater chairs I had salvaged in Chicago for an installation I made there the year before, for a group show, where it formed a sort of viewing situation in relation to the screening of Derek Jarman's final film Blue. After the exhibition, I transported the works back to New York, dismantled them, and reworked the components into new pieces for the exhibition Stainless. This process of reimagining or reworking earlier works reflected my ongoing interest in the afterlife of art, how pieces evolve over time, and the connections between them. The original work from the Chicago show was called *Approximation of a Chicago Style Blue Movie House (Bijou)*, and this became the foundation for the new works of which *Movie Theater in a Box* was one. The seats found a new life, extending the narrative of their original context into something new.

H.B.B: I also think of what is displaced, removed, lost — and this sense these two works have been so important for me. What is constituted in the limit, the boundary; the intangible. What can — in the context of architecture, mapping, and events—or cannot take place. I think of the references you establish regarding parks, cinemas, theaters; passages. Inevitably, I understand something explicitly sexual. Explicitly criminal too. Because homosexuality has to do with the criminal. Architecture understands that.

T.B: I made a project called *Unearthing The Public Restroom* in 1994, a series of photographs of public restrooms in Lower Manhattan that were closed due to the AIDS crisis. These spaces, though unsafe in many ways, were essential for marginalized people; homeless individuals, drug users, sex workers — offering a kind of refuge. The AIDS crisis gave cities a pretext to shut them down, erasing these "unsafe safe spaces" from the urban landscape. This intersection of public health, social control, and the erasure of certain communities interested me enormously. It reminded me of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, a public sculpture that became a space for people to drink, have sex, and escape authority's gaze. I've always been wary of just celebrating these spaces, because to do so would ignore how desire works in relation to power and restriction. Sometimes I've been drawn to fetishizing authority or danger, but I never lose sight of the complex dynamics at play in these spaces of negotiation.

H.B.B: You think you have?

T.B: Well, I think even... I mean, I have my critics, but I don't know if it should be a criticism, talking about my reductive language necessarily fetishizes certain things.

H.B.B: I don't necessarily understand your work in terms of fetish.

T.B: It doesn't sound familiar to me either. Do you know what I mean? Yes, I understand the argument to an extent, but it doesn't ring true and I suspect there's another agenda at play ... but again, it doesn't feel familiar or close to what I am doing.

H.B.B: Rather, there is something about the obsessional; the latent distance one takes when confronted to another thing stimulating your own desire to partake. An adoration, in fact.

T.B: I like the way you've phrased this. When I talk about these issues, I'm also engaging with themes of objecthood, collecting, and our relationship to objects within specific contexts. My work has always emphasized the idea that you shouldn't forget where you are, that you're not just anywhere. The context — whether it's a room, a space, or an institution — has its own hierarchies, expectations, and often, commercial interests. This is part of the equation in my work. But there's an instinct to remove the object from its context. For example, I once did a show called *Put Down* in Cologne, where I created three reconstructed horse stables. These were based on actual horse stables, but scaled down to be more human-sized, though not entirely. Alongside the stables, I placed three sculptural works made from horse tack — reins, saddles, stirrups, straps, chains — all sourced from standard horse equipment supply. A lot of people immediately associated the work with human sexual fetishism, and BDSM, which of course I had anticipated, expected even. But I was more interested in exploring the deeper connection between the domestication of animals, the control that comes with domestic space, and how these relationships get sexualized or perceived as perverse. I was aware of that response and curious about it, because, and this is just my take, the fetishization often comes from a heterosexual perspective. When you understand desire outside of heterosexuality or normative frameworks, it takes on a different kind of quality. It can become more fantastical. The role of fetishism isn't the same when experienced by someone with heterosexual desires versus someone with homosexual desires. The fetish, in that context, becomes something tied to symbols, signs, and the anticipation of them — infused with a sense of fear, provocation,

and imagination. It's a different kind of fetish altogether. I think that's the way my work implies desire — not in a heterosexual way, but in a way that challenges and redefines that heteronormativity. At the same time, though, I've never focused solely on queerness in my work. A lot of people read my work through that lens, but I think it's complicated to label it as 'queer' in any isolated or singular sense. Honestly, I'm not sure what queerness even is in any fixed state, because it's a fluid, ever- evolving concept. And most meaningful as a form of method or approach...

H.B.B: I'm interested in exploring this connection further, particularly your relationship to the accidental, which we touched on earlier. You've also frequently mentioned the concept of anticipation, which strikes me as crucial to your work. You've stated that you knew who you wanted to become, and that, in a sense, you became that person. This raises questions about the role of the accidental, particularly in a more conditional sense, as I see it. There is, of course, an underlying notion of control within your work, but control itself is not absolute. It operates alongside the recognition that encounters and events — both within and outside of the work — can unfold unexpectedly. I believe this is something that Craig Owens, too, would have acknowledged; the importance of what happens outside of the controlled space of the artwork, in the realms of chance, encounter, and serendipity.

T.B: I've never been a person who says that the work is up for interpretation. And at the same time, I've never related to work, I should say, that is just a free for all. That, to me, again, is about not having a stake, not not having a position, which I find very important.

H.B.B: Is this driven by a matter of clarity?

T.B: As a matter of reality, yes.

H.B.B: As a duty?

T.B: No, I wouldn't say it's a duty, so much as I just don't find it interesting. I'm not attracted to it. If I don't see a stake in something, I lose interest. I'm drawn to self-consciousness, even to the point of it becoming almost pathological. I'm fascinated by the struggle of being hyper-aware of who you are and where you are, even if you don't fully understand everything. That tension interests me. At the same time, for what I want to do, it's important that my work has multiple layers, multiple ways through it. I've always wanted to create work that unfolds over time, that reveals its meaning gradually, not something that can be consumed all at once. I want the work to shift, to change with context. I think a lot about site-specificity; how works evolve, how they change when they move from space to space, and how their original meanings are carried along with them. My next project will deal with this even more. So, the accidental reading of my work, or the interpretations I didn't anticipate, is something I've become more open to. I'm interested in that. At the same time, I like to play a role in how my work is understood. I remember someone telling me early on in my life, 'Someone's going to write about your work — it might as well be you.' I enjoy taking part in that narrative, in sharing those anecdotes. I'm interested in the kind of informal history that circulates; gossip, really. For example, I can tell you something about a piece, and you might pass it on, and it spreads, but it's not official art history. Still, it becomes part of the story of the work. We all grew up learning personal details about iconic figures, like Picasso's many wives for instance, and that was considered relevant, that was considered art history. But when it comes to other subjects or artists, the personal is often deemed irrelevant on the one hand, or cumbersome and challenging on the other. That's something I'm aware of; people will want to map a personal history around me, and I'm okay with that. It's part of the culture of art history and how it works. And, just to clarify something I said earlier: I don't want to suggest that I became exactly what I wanted to become. Not at all. There's always a tension between intention and outcome, and the role of the accident as you suggested. And regarding the idea of accidents, I never could have imagined the amount of pain I would go

through in my life. I didn't foresee how hard it would be, how incredibly complex living would be. I'm really tired of hearing artists constantly express how grateful they are—like, 'I'm so grateful to be in this group show' or 'I'm so grateful to be showing here.' I don't really care about that. But I am grateful that I was fortunate enough to build some elasticity into my practice. It became a survival tactic, I suppose. It allowed me to process and make something of all the loss and pain I've experienced. So yes, I am grateful that I survived. My work, not just in response to the AIDS crisis but to other parts of my life as well, has helped me a lot. It's allowed me to react, to make sense of things, and to record my experiences. At the same time, it's also made me an agent of that recording.

H.B.B: Can you talk about your relationship to writing?

T.B: I've always written a lot. I had a deep inner life when I was younger, shaped by a complicated family situation that pushed me to be alone a lot. I grew up in a home surrounded by illness and it prompted me to both look outwards, for escape routes, but also inwards. I thrived in that alone space, and writing to myself became very sustaining. Later, when I started making art, it shifted from my specific personal feelings outwards to the work itself. I transitioned from writing journals to creating work that captured those emotions, and mobilized them. Writing, more than drawing, was how I visualized things. I never felt I could draw well enough to express myself fully, but writing allowed me to describe and imagine. I was also drawn to poetry; how language and physicality intersect. Craig (Owens) and others from my generation saw writing as part of artistic practice. Not all artists write, but when I was in school, the lines between artist, writer, and curator were being questioned. There's a current trend, especially with the rise of the far right, where people insist that an artist must be the sole maker of their work, and everyone needs to stay in their lanes; artists make and writers write. It's part of the culture's desire for the artist to remain an isolated creator, separate from the larger processes of production. But I've always been someone who

can’t stop thinking about my work, and its many phases and contexts, continually considering every detail.

H.B.B: Is it good thing?

T.B: It is what it is. (laugh) What I find compelling about Ryman — and that work we talked about before this interview, the one at Dia: Beacon — is that his paintings don’t stop at the frame. They extend beyond, engaging with the wall, the space, the people moving through it. They acknowledge everything around them. It reminds me of a restaurant in London called St. John’s, known for its ‘Nose to Tail’ cooking philosophy. It’s about considering the whole beast, every part, and I think that’s how I approach my work; thinking about all aspects, not just the isolated piece. For me, this approach has political significance. It resists compartmentalization, resisting the idea that artists should distance themselves from the broader systems at play.


Manhattan Br
EASTERN

Hugo Bausch Belbachir: Where are you now?

Eileen Myles: In my house in Marfa. I've basically been here since mid-January. I came here for a residency in 2015, and I really liked it, so I found a very cheap house and bought it. It's been my getaway for when I don't want to be in New York City.

HBB: In 1992 you ran for president of the United States, claiming to be the candidate of women, of lesbians, of queers, of anyone who made less than 50,000 dollars a year, of those who were dying of AIDS, and of those who were dying on the streets. It's an important moment in that it underlines the beauty in misery, in our misery; in what was — and still is — impossible today. What do you think about that moment, thirty years later?

EM: In our context, it actually feels very fresh because having run for president is one of those things that never goes away, and it's often brought up in a sort of jokey way. In the past, it would just be a part of my biography I didn't always want to talk about. But when I got involved with issues in New York City — such as, the parks and trees and public spaces—I started to understand and remember how much I enjoyed working collectively with people and having something to talk about that wasn't so immediately involved with me personally, and finding a whole different energy and taking on a particular problem with a particular group of people. It seems to me that anytime I've gotten vividly involved with any political cause, the outlying issues of how it has to do with every other political cause becomes really interesting. I think it flipped me back into a way in which I feel very pleased and proud and simply connected to the person who felt, in 1991, that it was a good idea to run for president because then and now it represented a certain way of throwing up my hands. There had been so much activism, and there had been some gains at that time. People felt like it could be a better moment. Then there was the election and it seemed clear that we were going to get Clinton, which was not a good thing. It seemed possible that we were going to get something

radical, even progressive, and instead we got a middle step. So, I feel very excited by and close to the person who ran for president.

HBB: Do you still think that it was a good idea?

EM: I think it was a great idea. As an artist, the act of deflection is always powerful. To even think about what else we can do with our small platform as artists and writers and to also think about what kind of currency we've created. By becoming an artist or writer, it seems like you've carved a little hole into the culture and you have some room to speak. But then, the question is: what do you say?

HBB: You've also said that "protest and poetry are respectively a language," common to an action you put in place. It reminds me of Jenny Holzer's early interventions in New York in the 1970s. In this way you don't write, you act. How do you situate activism in your writing process? When did it manifest itself and how do these concepts relate to each other?

EM: When people started to die of AIDS in the 1980s, it immediately entered into my work. It was just part of the landscape of the world I lived in — my social world and my immediate friend network. It was just a fact at the time. I had so many friends who were in Act Up. I wasn't really a member of that. I went to a few of their actions, but I didn't feel like I needed to be there or wanted to be there. People were always getting up very early in the morning, and I'm not really good at that. Anytime I've ever had to get on a bus and go to Washington Square to protest or get up early and go down to Wall Street, it was like I was half out of my body with exhaustion and I didn't know how to connect to the collectivity of it. I didn't feel it. And so, I always felt like the best thing I could do was with however political facts leaked into my work . I never had any second thoughts about whether my work was political or not. I thought — to the extent that I think about these things — that they will be a presence in

my work. That's always been the case. It really was. But recently it changed since I have become sort of prominent as a writer or a public intellectual or personality or poet, and I can use that very directly. But I realized I'm only allowed to speak about certain things, about my turf. I have my poetry published in *The New Yorker*. I've written for *New York Magazine*. I've been in all these magazines as a presence and as a writer. But when I approached them around a more political topic that had to do with New York and public space, they would not let me speak. Is it the degree of specialization that the media is engaged in? That somehow you're not equipped to do certain things? Or is it that they are so literally wrapped up in real estate in New York City that they can't allow those stories to be written? Nobody else is writing them either!

HBB: I remember that text you wrote and published on *Art Forum* recently, which is about the demolition of Manhattan's East River Park.

EM: Right, but *Art Forum* is different. It's not the *New York Times* or *New York Magazine* or *The New Yorker*. It's not general interest. General interest is terrified to lose their sponsors.

HBB: Do you feel that these topics are still being covered up by the media and those who own them?

EM: I just think that the media is more owned. It's more of a silencing mechanism than I ever understood it to be. *The New Yorker* can run a story about a young homeless boy that raises pigeons and goes to East River Park and has a relationship with them, but we can't talk about the destruction of the park itself. It's there anecdotally, but not literally. I think that the media of New York City is so in bed with money and real estate — I guess it was just as frightening during Bush when we realized that the White House and the media were completely controlled by right-wing talking points that there was no way to get through. New York City in many ways is even worse. The same forces controlling the city are

controlling the media, and we are in a strangely censored place. Money runs everything in this country. You have "freedom of speech" but only as long as you're talking about certain things.

HBB: I feel like this is very specific to New York City. The history of the city is based on real estate investment, the attraction of fortunes, and political and economic superpowers. Today even more than before. The city is designed around a real estate dictatorship, and some streets do not see any sunlight during the day as the nearby buildings have become higher and higher. You could say that New York is the prime example of a history of destruction. How do you understand that, seeing as you're living there and have been for more than forty years? You've also lived in the same apartment the entire time, right?

EM: I got an apartment when I was 27, and it's still my apartment. It was very funny this year because, for much of the year, I was 72 years old and I thought "I'd rather be 27." And now we're 72.

HBB: East Village, right?

EM: Yeah. It's kind of unbelievable and small and cheap and well-situated. It's kind of like having a perfect little hotel room in New York.

HBB: Can you tell me more about your neighborhood?

EM: Initially, I moved to the Upper West Side because I had friends there. But shortly afterward it seemed like all the poets lived in the East Village, and it was even cheaper. So, I moved to the East Village in 1977. It was very Puerto Rican and Ukrainian with lots of drugs. Everyone was in bands or were poets and artists. It was remarkable because everybody I knew

lived in the neighborhood. It was that simple. You lived a very local life. The art world was mostly in Soho and then, in the 80s, it was in the East Village for about ten years. It was very much our neighborhood. It was pretty remarkable, pretty queer. It was great.

HBB: In the East Village between the 1970s and 1980s, there was people like David Wojnarowicz, Nan Goldin, Kathy Acker, Cookie Mueller, Mark Morrisroe, and Allen Ginsberg. You have also said that NYC at that time was incredible because everyone was what they dreamed of being; waitresses were dancers and cab drivers wrote movies, and you had to believe them because it was true. Everything was possible. At this time, you started attending St. Mark's Church, where you met John Giorno. Could you tell me about those years and their importance?

EM: Mark Morrisroe was actually from Boston. He maybe spent ten minutes in New York. But he's the one everyone got their ideas from. He was the leader of the pack. I think I met Allen when I was 25. There were these Puerto Rican playwrights who were showing their work at the Public Theater. It was like they were suddenly discovered. And there were Puerto Rican poets who were part of that, too. But while the playwrights could move to a larger platform, the poets did what poets do, which is make a space. This space called the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, which still exists. It was coordinated by Miguel Algarín, who lived in the neighborhood. It was kind of a hot poetry spot. Anyways, because some of the poets were young gay men who were very attractive, it attracted Burroughs, and Ginsberg. And, of course, that attracted us who were white kid poets from the Poetry Project. I think I read some stuff and Alan Ginsberg came running up to me and was like, "who are you?" I was young, I was cute, and I looked like a cute boy. Somehow, I slipped through, even though they were not really into women, or women producing stuff. Giorno always had his eye on what was happening and was producing records. I was on several of his. I met Robert Mapplethorpe, who took my picture for Giorno's record.

HBB: Would you hang out with Robert?

EM: No, I was too shy. He seemed to dwell in a very particular world, and it wasn't my world, which was shooting pool in Ukrainian bars and drinking beer and going to poetry readings. I didn't have the same kind of desire for art world fame. Frankly, I was a little intimidated by it. And sexuality is also a huge deal. I experienced my sexuality as something that made me a part of something else. I didn't even understand some of the codes in certain nightclubs where there were plenty of lesbians. I just couldn't read them. I didn't know how to be a lesbian that way. I had to keep it simple.

HBB: Writing for you was also a technique of dissociation. You've said that reading, as opposed to writing, is a trans act; so much so that reading was only about reading men — for whom the history of literature is unfairly dedicated. And that reading is to extract oneself from one's body for a subject not identifying with the male subject. Writing, and writing lesbian narratives, including your own, allowed you to affirm yourself as your own subject, as the other. Could you tell me about that?

EM: I think I was creating a utopia in the writing that I didn't live in, because the spaces where I found myself weren't that expansive. I mean, I didn't see how my location and my sexuality could open it. I had a limited vision of it. So, I think the writing was ahead of me. I didn't see any borders in writing. And it was always that way. The literary world felt dominated by gay men or straight men for so long, and I think I was always traveling as an exception, so I wanted to be in a world that was mine, even if I had to invent it and yet I didn't want to leave the art world that I was interested in. And that was poetry. There's a lot of contradictions. I met people like Rene Ricard or Peter Schjeldahl because I was a poet and they liked my work and even wanted approval of their own poetry. It was funny. They both wanted to be in my little poetry magazine. I was like, "who me?" And then they would introduce me to people and try and get me to live in a bigger world. I was fearful and I didn't

know that I belonged there. So, I was always bumping against these worlds, going to Club 57 and the Mudd Club and all these places, but I didn't know that they were mine. They weren't yet.

HBB: Do you still feel that tension today?

EM: No. It's like that joke from the 80s, that the only real cure for homosexuality is fame because suddenly nobody cares what you are. And I feel like that's the way it worked for me because I've become so much more known. All these people whom I brushed against, it's almost like we now have a history that we didn't really have. I knew Sonic Youth. I certainly knew them as a band, and I would go hear them play. We were all in the Kiev in the middle of the night. But then by the aughts, we became friends and suddenly it just was one continuous past. I think that's very funny. It's like everybody knows me now and I was always there and I was always in the room, but now in a different way. By being recognized, I am part of the party. It's very funny. I've met Patti Smith several times, but we have no friendship at all. I don't think she's interested in dykes. I mean she's even written that. Probably because she seems like one.

HBB: Really?

EM: The thing is lesbians affiliate with her. But it doesn't work both ways. Everybody identifies with Patti, but Patti doesn't identify with everybody. One time I was at a reading at St. Mark'sChurch and Richard Hell was there. We were standing in a circle, and then Richard looked up and said, pointing at me and Patti, "do you two know each other?" Patti didn't look at me. She looked down and was like, "yeah, we met in the old days."

HBB: Funny way to not meet.

EM: Right? You throw it in the past. It was sort of the opposite of everybody else because everybody else acts like we're friends now, and we were friends in the old days. But Patti just says it happened then so we don't need to meet now. I guess she doesn't want to waste time.

HBB: There is a sort of generational battle for who gets to inherit all this history from the 1970s and 1980s. Do you know what I mean?

EM: The thing is, as people die, nobody can say whether you were in the room or not. And that's why I feel like I've tried to be very clear about it. I was in the room, but I was just passing through. I was an anonymous kid. I was not a star. I heard Patti play. I heard Sonic Youth play. I heard Television. I knew John Giorno pretty well by the end of his life, and I had known him since I was a kid, and he was always friendly, but still, I was a dyke. He was interested in gay men, so there were rules, and I understood them.

HBB: And NYC is different today. The landscape has changed and no longer leaves the same opportunities for artists. Today you are committed to changes taking place in the city, to the real estate investment that is demolishing its poetic potential. Last spring you stood with a group of activists around what used to be the last cherry tree in a park along Cherry Street and campaigned against the transformation of East River Park. Could you tell me about these struggles?

EM: Honestly, I feel like the things I've been to lately are more ceremonial. We lost half of that public park already. Early on, the work was about bringing people to the park and walking them around, showing them what would be lost, and now the focus is on what remains. Literally fetishizing a single tree that you know is 100 years old that they're going to cut down to put a sewer in. I'm part of a very small group of people who were there. We were and are resisting, and we're still trying to get attention. Yet it doesn't work.

HBB: Have you, since the beginning of the movement, managed to engage in conversations with the representatives of these transformations or with the representatives of the city?

EM: No. When the mayor was running for office, his campaign sounded like he heard us, but once he came into power, the issue didn't exist anymore. He's completely wedded to real estate. He's crazy on so many levels. He has said that he has been appointed to be the mayor of New York by God, and he's there by divine right. He doesn't think there needs to be any separation between church and state and that it's a mistake to stop prayers. I mean, he's really crazy. Corrupted all the way through.

HBB: East River Park is a symbolic place for you, where you came to run in the 1980s after learning that your friends were dying, one after another, of AIDS-related illnesses. The park holds that memory, that pain. How do you feel about seeing these landscapes disappear today?

EM: It's so weird. New York is obviously a microcosm of the world and the country. New York has never had any respect for history or its own history. New York has always been notoriously capable of knocking down beautiful buildings and neighborhoods and having no sentimentality whatsoever. There's no notion of pastness. Even the landmark commissions in New York iscompletely corrupt. People are fighting to change that right now, but I don't know if it's possible. Around Penn Station, they want to change the train station. And of course, there was a glorious old train station that they knocked down, and now they want to change the station again, but they also want to destroy the whole neighborhood in order to put up tall buildings that we don't need. I learned that the deal of destroying something and building something over is where the money is. It's not about the thing arriving, existing, or being used. That's not what we're doing here. Even in relationship to our park, it isn't about a park. It's just about the deals being made so that somebody gets the gig and gets to undo that

park and build something new. That's the excitement. It's part of the larger planetary condition of human beings exterminating human beings without even thinking about it. It starts with the poorest. It starts with the living conditions of the poorest and eradicating whatever they want in poor neighborhoods. In New York City, we have Central Park and Prospect Park. These are big, beautiful, abundant green parks, but they're actually private. Not for who can use them, but they are funded by private conservancies in rich neighborhoods.

HBB: Would you stay in New York? What kind of future do you see in this city?

EM: Unless something radically changes, I imagine myself staying there for the rest of my life. This becomes a smaller statement the older you get, which is very funny. But the city, to me, is a device. It's like my phone. It's like a way that I get music delivered. It still is the place I go to, where my friends are, where the galleries are, where the rituals are, the rituals of friendship. It's still a hotspot that I return to and need and want, while not being deluded about how it's a place lacking any kind of consideration for human beings and how they live. It's vile. It's simply vile. But we aren't and there's still a lot of us.

HBB: What are the next actions you would like to implement?

EM: Well, I'm involved. I am friends with the same activist community although people are dispersed. I get information. People are trying to get environmental specialists to come, they are still fighting for the second half of the park. But there isn't a clear action right now. I know that I'm at a loss. My friends who are in the city are meeting and they're doing things. They're doing small actions. I guess I'm mostly thinking about what bigger piece this small piece connects to and how can we fight that. I feel like it's not exactly a relief, but we're all participating in an understanding of the situation with our park being part of a larger systemic violation of human life, plant life, and animal life that's being widely perpetrated. I

don't know what the right action is right now, or even for the longer period of time, though we're living in it. My first thought had been that I would write something and that that would change things. And that's when I realized that I didn't have access to the right platform for this subject. It became about large collective actions, and we did those. There were a few little blips in the media but we got very little attention. Then I think the ways that I've gotten attention in the recent past have been almost nostalgic. Like that piece in the New York Times of me hugging a tree. I hate that picture.

HBB: Why?

EM: It's pathetic in a negative sense. That tree is still there and "my" part of the park is still there but probably not for long. I felt like it was a photograph of me holding onto something that was doomed to be destroyed. I didn't feel great about it. Then they just talked about me in a way I've been talked about a hundred times in the media without really talking about what the story really was.

HBB: I get that, and that's why it also remains beautiful. In my personal activism, I always understood my position within uselessness. Not that I had to consider the changes my actions would lead to but the importance of my presence. Of me being there.

EM: I like the word useless. I find that to be true, and I feel like it is the next stage in a way. And then it may be that there's some new way of conceptualizing uselessness that becomes another action. I'm open to it, finding out what that is. Before they started destroying this park, I was part of a group and we were doing actions, and then I was just interested in anything I heard about, any small gathering of people, I would just go to it. I thought this was my new activity. If I heard people meeting in front of the governor's office on Third Avenue that had anything to do with the environment or trees, I'd go. I would show up and it

would be these old weirdos, these people who had been doing it for decades. This one's from the Bronx. This one's from Staten Island. There was also this older woman who I knew from the group that I'm in — she's probably not older than me — who is straight and lives a different life. I think of her as this older lady, and we took the subway together. She knew all the politicians and had clearly been doing this for a while. I asked her, "Tell me about the really good struggles you've been in. What are the ones that were really successful?" She looked at me and said, "you never win." I was stunned. I couldn't even take it in. She goes, "that's not why we're here." And I think that's true. You just do the right thing nakedly in the world. And I want to do more, and I will as soon I can see what it is. It's so interesting and so horrifying. As is everything that is happening everywhere.

Hugo Bausch Belbachir: Cesar, your first encounter with Sean, was in Los Angeles' Candelija in 1987, right?

Cesar Padilla: I had seen Sean a few times because you go to shows and you see people and you're just curious about who they are. But that particular evening was a really fun club, and actually the very first club to ever pay homage to the 1970s. It was just 70s music all night long. What I remember was Sean on a bicycle with a little sissy bar. I don't know if it was a wig or her hair, but there were champagne flutes in it, presumably done with wire to be floating in the air. I don't know how she achieved the look. It's just sort of my memory, my romantic memory of Sean just riding away on the bicycle.

H.B.B: Does it still exist?

C.P: No. This was the 80s, honey. Nothing's around from the 80s.

H.B.B: What was your first encounter with Sean, Michael?

Michael Bullock: I met Sean at a house party that I guess Cesar brought both of us to. Immediately we were in the bathroom doing coke and other drugs together. It felt like we had known each other forever. Instant friendship without too many questions.

C.P: It was pretty amazing because we were at the party and Michael and Sean just disappeared for quite some time. And we're all like, "Where the fuck did they go?" Of course they were in the bathroom.

H.B.B: When was this?

M.B: 2007, I think.

C.P: Debaucherous times.

H.B.B: You met her quite late then, Michael. I mean, related to everything that is mentioned in her diaries, and things that naturally followed in the 1980s.

M.B: It was the kind of friendship where you're just present with each other in the parties that you're going to. We didn't really know too much about each other's lives, and I had no idea about his history. I didn't know about Glue. I didn't know that he was a punk musician. When I met him, he was more in this art phase. I eventually found out that he was part of Gelitin and was collaborating as a backup dancer in a band. He didn't really look back with me. He never asserted himself as someone who had done a lot of important things.

C.P: I think that's just the nature of being a polymath. I'm one of those people who also just goes from different parties and creative ventures. You just always move forward. You never really look back. Sean definitely had that; visions of grandeur that just became true.

H.B.B: Queer-punk cartographies are quite complex to discern as they're often mapped within already-organized margins. Who and what made this culture exciting in Los Angeles in these years?

C.P: LA was probably the gayest of all the major cities in terms of punks. You have everybody from Ron Athey to Rozz Williams, you had The Screamers, Craig Lee. You had all these people who are the foundation of a movement in Los Angeles, and most of them were gay, although none of us went around screaming we're gay or anything. We all just coexisted together, creating with straights and those who were in the middle. Queer punk is a term that I feel exists now as a way to define us, but I don't feel like we were looking for definition back then.

M.B: I think the reason why queer punk is talked about now is that, at the beginning, punk was societal outsiders coming from different realms. And a lot of society's outsiders were gay, so a lot of the energy of punk was gay energy. But then with regards to the later incarnation of punk, as like a straight white male thing, it's important to now look back and identify that gay and queer people had a big role in creating the genre, because that genre is still understood mostly as white, straight, and masculine.

C.P: But at the time, that wasn't the case. We were just not. I've never hung out in exclusive gay environments and queer punk environments. I was hanging out with creative people, like-minded people, and outsiders. As Michael said, you don't fit in, so you find your crew of people that don't fit in.

H.B.B: Do you remember the first time you read the journal?

C.P: I realized I had something special in my hands. The prose is what immediately caught me; how concise and beautiful his language was. I went and got a copy of Henry Miller's Sexus and read the entire 600 pages of it, because there were moments in Sean's diary where I felt that I couldn't tell him apart from Henry Miller. A queer, gay, 14-year-old black kid and a 60-year-old [white] American man of letters. The most important man of American letters. And I couldn't tell them apart.

H.B.B: And I guess for you, Michael, who met Sean quite late on, this might have come with a sense of discovery or thrilling shock.

M.B: I remember that Cesar gathered us together and we had a kind of memorial reading. It was with a few other close friends. We read the book and we all laughed through it. The next day, I texted Caesar and said that the book is of value to more people than just us. It's a

comprehensive, funny, well written diary, dealing with gender identity, sexual experiences, and racial politics. Everything that we encounter in the diary speaks to our current moment, even though it's from 1979. And dealing with gay adolescent sexuality is something that is so rare. Culturally, we haven't really looked at queer adolescent sexuality. It's a bit a taboo. So, it's like something that we have been able to look at for the first time.

C.P: One of the things we talked about was that if we had released this book five years ago, when we first wanted to put it out, it wouldn't have hit like it hits now. It wouldn't have resonated. But times have changed tremendously. And it's amazing that all of those topics that Michael just said are in a book that's 44 years old, and it's been waiting for us. A show like Euphoria, for example, has made it completely possible to discuss adolescent sex. It's real. It happened. And this document is extremely transgressive. Because being 14 is transgressive for some people. It was transgressive for me. There are people who live a transgressive youth, and you can't deny it, you can't push it away and hide it. This book is a celebration because it reads so happily and shamelessly.

M.B: All mainstream gay success stories are about discovering you're gay and overcoming. It's like this constant narrative. Having sexual restraint and then being celebrated for having sexual restraint. What the mainstream allows to be successful in gay culture are these narratives that don't really resonate with my experience of being gay; the freedom I had and the joy. Even though there was a lot of fear in crossing these boundaries, there was also a lot of fulfillment, excitement, and pleasure. I think Sean speaks to all of those things in a way that both me and Caesar had never seen before in any coming of age gay text.

C.P: In the history of literature of coming of age, there's nothing that speaks to us that much, because in this one it's real. There's no romanticism. There's no looking back and writing about your life. This is Sean DeLear, 14 years old, trying to dig a hole in a wall to suck some dick.

M.B: So many coming of age books are about this big romance or falling in love with the right teenager. Sean fell in love with 200 people.

H.B.B: Right.

M.B: And that was reality. Truer to reality than what we're sold and what ends up being successful mainstream narratives about romance and sex.

C.P: There's no tortured arc in this book other than you gotta get out and be yourself. But he does it in such a celebratory way that never feels tortured.

H.B.B: Cesar, in your closing text for the edition, you also speak of Sean as someone who benefited "from both sides of the fence" — someone who brought together all the importance of a life by doubles, perhaps even multiples, playing with every asset that was composed within him.

C.P: When you have to get out, you have to get out. Nothing is going to change that. And that's what the drive of this book is. You simply realize that this man got out. He lived the life he wanted to live. He wanted to be a superstar. He wanted to be an actor. He did it all. The arc of the book is a triumph when you see the narrative all the way through to the end.

H.B.B: You said that these diaries were written with no clear literary pretensions and that it couldn't be likened to a writing project because the writing is so immediate. And yet one could defend the work as an autobiographical poem.

C.P: But is he conscious of it being poetry? The sentences to me are so beautiful and simple because it's how the brain is functioning when you're writing in a diary. Like: you switch,

you suck some dick, then you have to take a test, and all of a sudden somebody is a bitch. He's just capturing the day in a couple of paragraphs. It's like you want to get it in before you go to bed. You want to get it all in, and you're not elaborating. It's just very direct and so simple. The precision of his language just blows my mind.

H.B.B: What's left of those years of cruising in the hills behind Hollywood?

C.P: The world is different. You have some stupid app that tells you where to jerk off in a corner with somebody. Like, Sniffies.

M.B: Sniffies! It enhances cruising.

C.P: I don't know, there's something about looking for a park bathroom and doing it all by yourself without some fucking app telling you some old man's waiting there for you to come in there and jerk off. The mystery of life has disappeared with technology. Mystery and danger are elements that have disappeared from our vernacular. In many ways, we were hunting for danger. There was something compelling us to find these bushes, these restrooms, to dig a hole in a wall that doesn't exist anymore.

M.B: I wouldn't say it totally doesn't exist. I feel like there's cruising culture that is still alive. It's different, and for better and worse, I think that there's a lot more options and ways to connect digitally. I think that Caesar is right in the energy of meeting someone, the immediacy of meeting someone on the street and feeling the chemistry between you and knowing whether it's going to work immediately or not. If it's just going to be satisfying for that moment, trying things out, and not like vetting before you try something out.

C.P: One of the sexiest places I ever went to in my life was the old train station in Lisbon, Portugal in the 1980s. That has all disappeared. They're still repressed men, but you can get what you want now without having to walk into danger and mysteries.

M.B: Hugo, how old were you when you first used Grindr?

H.B.B: I don't know. I guess I was 18. I was living in the countryside and it was the only way for me to meet queer people. It wasn't so much about sex.

M.B: Right.

H.B.B: What else did you discover in her apartment that brings light to this story?

M.B: I think there were more diaries from the 80s. The other exciting thing is that Markus Zizenbacher just finished a documentary on Sean's life that's going to be released to film festivals next year. They've gone back and found lots of footage of Sean over the years. The videos from Glue and interviews with all the different people of Sean's life, including me and Caesar.

H.B.B: What is your last memory of Sean?

C.P: God, what is my last memory? That's a good question. I don't know. I have to think about that. I don't think I know the answer.

M.B: I feel like Cesar, me, and Sean had a beer on the Lower East Side, maybe a year before he passed away. I do remember taking him to The Cock the last time he was in New York, but I can't remember specifically when it was.

C.P: I remember that everybody was at The Cock and someone got arrested, and that Sean lost her phone. I stayed home that night, but I got all the phone calls. That might have been the last time. I don't know. It was always scandalous. Sean stayed with me a number of times in New York, so they all kind of blur together.

M.B: I guess you don't remember when someone suddenly passes away. We really thought he'd be with us for many more decades.

C.P: Sometimes you take those last minutes for granted and you don't realize it's the last time you're going to see a person.

H.B.B: Do you dream about her?

C.P: On my flight from Vienna to Paris, after carrying the diary with me and helping clean up the apartment she lived in, I fell asleep. In my dream, Sean was my flight attendant, in a midnight blue Jackie O, 60s flight attendant uniform, with a matching pillbox hat, and fake eyelashes. I woke up crying on the plane because I realized that Sean was going to be with me my whole life. It was a very defining moment for me. I'm getting emotional now. By arriving in Vienna and taking care of dealing with the cremation and the mortician and everybody... [Cries] Sorry. God, I look terrible today. Anyway. I knew that Sean had my back forever.

M.B: Usually, you make peace with someone's death, you go to the funeral with your friends, and it's kind of over. And then your memory starts to slip. To have this experience where we were engaged for the last couple of years with this book brought him back to life. He's a really good role model. Can you imagine? You're in Simi Valley, where all the LAPD lives. Your parents decide to be the first black family to ever move there, and so you are literally the first black queer kid to ever grow up in this area. On top of that, your parents are Evangelical. And instead of it being like, "I want to kill myself" every day, you are out there having the

time of your life making it work for you in a big way. That part is so inspiring to me. I'm remembering this passage now in which he's like "I cannot believe how popular I am."

C.P: I love that. "Everybody's going to sign my yearbook."

Hugo Bausch Belbachir : What I found interesting when I engaged in my research on Queercore is that I found myself studying something else than Queercore, or its musical phenomena. To be more precise; I ended up suggesting queer narratives where they were possibly hidden. Somehow, and for the past 400 years, Queercore was a mystery, and then a surprise, when understood within punk movements. This brings us back to a continuous position regarding queer histories, which is working with concealed pieces of evidence. So this was immediately very political, in the same way that the etymology of 'punk' takes its roots within the same as 'faggot'. When I was thinking about this interview, I was mainly occupied with thoughts about the epistemological approach that *J.D.s* structured. Maybe I should simply ask you about the context of *J.D.s*' debuts.

Bruce LaBruce: Well, where should I begin? There were several people, either in the punk scene or peripheral to it, that were doing fanzines really early on, in the mid-1980s. One of them was called *Fags and Faggotry* which was done by a more gay-identified man, doing political and pornographic content. In a way, you probably need to start with *The Body Politic* which was a gay Marxist publication distributed for free in Toronto's gay bars in the 70's and 80's. It was very political and directed towards activism as a kind of direct intervention. These were the people that had been politicized by the sexual revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, and the more nascent gay liberation movement that had underpinnings of feminism and black activism, too. That gay thing was becoming more political while also being, already by the mid-1980s, more of a white, middle-class movement. So my friends and I, who already were in the punk scene or in some kind of underground, were very disillusioned by this gay orthodox scene controlled by white, middle-class narratives, as it was exhibiting elements of racism, misogyny, and classism. We were very much opposed to that, and that's why we turned to punk and started our first homocore fanzine. My friend Candy had one too, called *Dr. Smith*, which was more overtly punk and had a lot of subtextual homosexual content, or subtext. Then we found that the punk movement had the same problems as the mainstream

gay movement, and felt like we were alienated by both subcultures and caught in the middle. That's what *J.D.s* was about, as well as homocore, originally. In the gay world, lesbians and gays were very much separated, and there weren't a lot of social or political alliances between us. We were very much insistent on being more diverse and interested in some sort of coalition, between gays, lesbians, and trans, as well as racial inclusivity. We would have people of color on our covers and stuff like that. This is all the way back to the late 1980s. The other notable thing is that G.B. Jones and I created *J.D.s* as some kind of narrative, or meta-narrative – you could also say 'fake news' – that we were a full-fledged underground movement that was already established, with hundreds of members, creating a sort of havoc or upheaval in Toronto. It really started with me and a couple of my female friends making it seem like we were a big gang. Some people believed it, and then a lot of others started, in other cities, doing the same thing, as we were sending our fanzines and movies to the, let's say, five big punk fanzines. We also used to put ads, and then they would write articles about us. There was Vaginal Davis in Los Angeles with *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Magazine*, who also used to work with Rick Castro, who did Shrimp. He was also doing a lot of underground gay leather photography and fashion. There was also Linda Simpson in New York doing *My Comrade*, which was more of a drag fanzine. Then, later, this guy from San Fransisco, Tom Jennings, started a fanzine named *Homocore*. I can't really remember when it turned into *Queercore*, because I was always ambivalent towards the term 'queer,' mainly because it had already been coopted by the end of the 1980s. It had a political connotation that was a little more orthodox than what we were doing. We were more in the spirit of the Situationists and Anarcho-Syndicalists. The queer movement itself was a radical left moment, but also more of a mainstream or political strategy organized with the fantasy of existing within the system, as opposed to us. We were radically underground and dealing with pornographic, almost terrorist imagery, and being about promoting an idea of homosexuals as criminals, something that embraces its criminality and the censorship and the hostility directed towards it, something that we cultivated in a kind of aggressive, punk way. So that's a long-winded explanation.

H.B.B: I remember this text by Guy Hocquenghem that was published in Semiotext(e)'s *Hatred of Capitalism*, which was titled *We all can't die in bed*, or something like that. Anyways, it's about Pasolini's death on this desert beach next to Rome, in Ostia, as a manifesto on homosexual meta-criminality and lethal destiny. I mean it's kind of silly talking about Guy Hocquenghem today for so many reasons, but this text makes so much sense when it comes to the context of homosexualities in the 1970s. In a way *J.D.s* also stood against Cocteau or Wilde, fancy fags let's say, and opened its questioning on queers as a group of misfits, punks, junkies, and hustlers.

B.L: Well, we were in a way forced to have our bars in rough parts of town, on the waterfront, or somewhere with that energy. Gay bars were repositories for all sorts of misfits and criminals; people who just got out of jail, people hiding from the law, sex workers, and all the people who didn't fit anywhere else either: gays and transgenders, people of color. We would all congregate in these places, and this formed a sort of loose community that was more aligned with what Punk was doing in the late 80's, at least in Toronto – people being transgressive. I remember that the Southern California Punk scene was very queer. It had a lot of queer bands that were not aligned with the gay movement per se, but had queer members, like The Germs and Darby Crash, The Bags, Catholic Discipline, all those kinds of bands that had queer members but were more aligned with punk aesthetics and politics.

H.B.B: There's also an ambivalence around these aesthetics as emptied from their, let's say, original political meaning. At some point you started presenting yourselves as The New Lavenders Panthers, referring to Raymond Broshears's self-harmed, queer militia.

B.L: Yes, and which is referencing the Black Panthers themselves.

H.B.B: It's also a rigorous vocabulary; The New Homosexual Revolution, The Gay Rebels, Juvenile Delinquents, The Sex Rebels, The Teen Gangs. It's perverting perverted references.

B.L: Any kind of subversive or subcultural movement, we were interested in. That's why we were so much into pornography, as it was essentially oppositional to the dominant sexual order. My partner G.B. Jones was obsessed with Bubblegum music and bands. Candy, especially Candy, was completely into comics, and so we were kind of trying to channel these target audiences; young kids, teens who may be queer and not know it or not knowing how to express it, in big cities or smaller ones, and trying to tap into that kind of natural, spontaneous youth rebellion. There was also this other fanzine called Hide that was about Situationist détournement and similar strategies. I remember that Candy drew a series of comics that were based on skater characters and skate culture, which we were very much into. You know, we were obsessed with movies like *Crime in the Streets*, *Wild in the Streets*, and stuff like that, gangs, prostitution, street hustlers. They played a big part in this. I started dating a hustler whom I guess was my first boyfriend, even though he was straight and had a girlfriend. Later he became a neo-Nazi skinhead, and we broke up after he beat me up.

H.B.B: I've regularly come to the conclusion that Queercore was more of an imprecise rhythm depending on class and historical conjunctions, instead of being an organized movement.

B.L: You're right. It was almost like a collective in a way, but not so organized. We were heavily influenced by Warhol's Factory. This was before any of Warhol's films were widely seen or known, but somehow we were really aware of that scene, but influenced by producing a more politicized punk version than what he had done. The Factory was almost like a squat, and people just hung out there all the time. It was very social and pornographic, challenging all the conventions not just of the dominant order, but also the conventions of

cinema by making experimental work that was decidedly noncommercial, kind of anti-corporate. For me, it was always the hustler bars that were a kind of a nexus of communities, and where I would meet people I'd put in my films. There was a particular bar in Toronto called Sneakers, which closed I think in 2008. Again, this was where I would meet a lot of people that just got out of jail, or who got out of the army and were kind of disillusioned, and a lot of them were sex workers, obviously. So this was the community, and this is always important to form those allegiances that could then be turned into some kind of activism.

H.B.B: Where would you watch pornography back then?

B.L: There were dedicated porn cinemas in Toronto. There was one called The Metro that was open until about eight years ago or something. It's now like a rock climbing gym.

H.B.B: (**laugh**) **This makes sense.**

B.L – laugh: Well, I always thought they should mix porn and rock climbing. This would be a brilliant combination. Porn projected on the walls while people are climbing on them.

H.B.B: That's a good idea.

B.L: I know! That's where I used to premiere all my movies and everything. But to be honest, I was never a huge porn guy. I never followed it super seriously. I was more into the 1960s avant-garde; Peter Berlin, Wakefield Poole, Peter de Rome, Fred Halsted – all those kinds of people who made truly avant-garde films while their main function was pornography. Then, of course, other avant-garde films pushed me to do pornographic work; Jack Smith, Kurt McDowell, Warhol and Morrissey, John Waters. That was the underground, which doesn't exist in any kind of way today, at least in Western countries, and with the internet, which has kind of rendered the underground superfluous. It's very difficult to talk about the difference

between when we started *Queercore*, or *J.D.s,* and today's context because it's a different world, really. For us, it was also about found porn, and the way we consumed porn was dramatically different. It was more of a communal experience; going to movie theaters and watching porn collectively. It was about having sex in public while watching porn on the screen. Then you would also find porn in alternative bookstores, in basements, where you could find bins with old Super 8 porn films that were really cheap, and I would splice them into my experimental movies. Certain people knew about these underground films and would pass copies of them to each other. It was much more exciting. Sex was more exciting, more about cruising in public parks and toilets. So when I made my first experimental feature film, in the early 1990s, I put myself in it, performing sex, it was called *No Skin Of My Ass*, with my boyfriend at the time playing the skinhead. This was not found pornography anymore but, you know, making my own pornography for the first time, putting myself in that position, in a very dramatic way. It was very taboo and more shocking than it would be today, I think. I felt like I was using porn for political purposes as well as for pleasure, being naughty and sexy. It was also traumatic; suddenly, people would look down on you for being a pornographer. I mean, that's also something we embraced, somehow. That's one of the ways we used porn in a political context: we would project queer porn in straight punk clubs or venues in order to shock them. I mean, they were really pretty sexually conventional.

H.B.B: I also want to talk about cinema. It took me a while to understand why I was so fascinated with 1940's, 1950's Hollywood cinema, or to understand that directors were mainly closeted fags portraying queer narratives through heterosexual scripts. Which is why, I guess, queers often identify with figures such as Marilyn Monroe, Lauren Bacall, or Rita Hayworth, right?

B.L: (laugh) I mean, obviously.

H.B.B: *J.D.s* is also about that, I mean, the figure of James Dean or J.D Salinger; dramatically perverted cinematographic symbols.

B.L: I was in film school at York University while working on *J.D.s*, and my main teacher, or mentor was Robin Wood. He was already quite famous, being the favorite film critic of Godard, Truffaut, and Chabrol. He was a Marxist feminist leftist that had written books on Hitchcock and Hawks. When I met him, he had just come out of the closet, within the last five or seven years, after having been married to a woman and had kids. He came out after writing *Responsibilities of the Gay Film Critic*, which was an important article that made him quite radical. So his colleagues and students, like me, were then obsessed with classical Hollywood cinema for that particular reason. Today is Howard Hawks' birthday by the way, and Wood dedicated an entire book to Hawks and his "homosexual subtext." I combined this idea of queer Hollywood with *J.D.s*, a kind of collage of hardcore punk and classical or romantic Hollywood cinema and gay porn, all in a very dialectical way. I mean, mashing things together that aren't supposed to go together. I made a film called *Slam*, which is an underground Super 8 film where I went to a hardcore show and shot all these sweaty shirtless punks being very homoerotic with each other. Then I spliced that together with found gay porn, like mainstream gay porn, and then put a Carpenters' soundtrack to it. And so it was like the combination of those three things, intuitively forming a weird dialectical way of presenting our own cosmology.

H.B.B: It's funny that you mention that it's Hawks' birthday today. You also have this frenetic habit of posting about birthdays, on your Instagram. When I was speaking about perverted figures it was also in that way of referring to others as a way of discovering, or referring to yourself, if that makes sense. There's this thing throughout *J.D.s* of honoring figures, like Peter Berlin or The Prince of Homosexuals, conceived as ceremonies.

B.L : I mean, he was the first person we declared as Prince of The Homosexuals. We were ironically referencing how the gays love pageants and beauty contests. Regarding the birthdays I sort of do it in a Kenneth Anger's "Hollywood Babylon" kind of way, which has to do with sexploitation, being irreverent or blasphemous. For example, on Twitter, on someone's birthday, I'll often post a nude picture of them. It's a bit different from Anger because I use it more as a visual kind of strategy of queering and outing.

H.B.B: Isn't it harder to post pornographic content now on Twitter?

B.L: No, not yet. No. They keep talking about it but I haven't seen it happen. The only thing that happened to me recently was after I posted a picture of that black actor that went nude in a Broadway play. Somebody in the audience took a video of him with their phone and posted it, and it went viral. Anyways, it was immediately taken down after I posted it, as he's trying to suppress it, because it was taken without is permission or something. To me, it is frightening that they have the technology to do that, but besides this, I haven't had any trouble posting extremely pornographic references on Twitter. But I think it's probably coming. I mean, even my most recent film, Saint-Narcisse, which isn't sexually explicit, was taken off and removed from Amazon Prime for "offensive" content after being available on the platform for six months.

H.B.B: I've discovered explicit gay content on Twitter only recently. I was more into Tumblr at some point when I was younger.

B.L: Tumblr was super hardcore because that's where you'd find the slammers who would all be slamming meth together on multiple video screens, and all sorts of other extreme kinky stuff. Twitter is almost mainstream porn industry by comparison.

H.B.B: I loved Tumblr so much as it was mainly stolen images that were reinterpreting this idea that somehow was highly expressed within *J.D.s*, of perverted contents. I remember blogs chronologically posting images of Chavs, middle-class white teenagers, straight guys, or any other source of content with a sense of hacking and revenge.

B.L: It was almost like the last gasp of the underground, in a way, because you really had to dig for what you were looking for. It wasn't a message board, so it wasn't as public as Twitter. What makes the porn aspect of Twitter interesting is that it's a public forum. So I can publish extremely pornographic posts, and everyone sees that. All my followers see it, and anyone can see it. It's the most kind of accessible and public porn forum.

H.B.B: Yes, you really had to spend hours digging into reposts and finding specific accounts, and meta-contents. There's still explicit content on it now, but it's definitely different than what it used to be in, like, 2014.

B.L : Oh, Tumblr is over. It's a dead space.

H.B.B: OnlyFans really took the monopoly of these practices, while globalizing them.

B.L: It's a different world from the one I knew in the 1980s. When I was appearing sexually in my movies, I never thought about it as a way of putting myself in front of a globalized audience. It was for small cinemas, punk bars, and so for limited audiences. You know, me being kind of picked up by the film festival circuit and starting to be screened internationally was an upheaval in my life that caused havoc amongst all my friends and kind of divided the people around me. Now, with OnlyFans, now, it's about the democratization of porn, where it's not such a taboo anymore and everyone is willing to do it. I mean, it's a schizophrenic time where you have moral forces that are trying to squelch, censure, and eliminate certain

kinds of sexual representations, while at the same time you have really free and extreme avenues of sexual expression. So it's like a big schizophrenic divide.

H.B.B: Going back to *J.D.s*, how were the parties?

B.L: We used to have crazy parties. That was part of the fun. We would get people drunk and take pictures of them. There was kind of a wild aspect to what we did. It was also about juvenile delinquents and so hard-partying, and hard fucking. I would have parties where people would end up having public sex. There was this party I organized for one of my films that was part of the Toronto Film Festival, in a gallery, where people were having sex in public. That was *J.D.s* trademark.

H.B.B: Can you tell me about the context of these gatherings; you navigating these decades?

B.L: I have lived my gay life pre-liberation, liberation, and post-liberation, so it was about going through phases. At the same time, I lived my life pre-internet and pre-social media and pre-digital, and then transitioned. It's been a wild ride going through those transformations. The gay movements, or any kind of liberation movements, were more underground and interconnected, I would say. In the 1990s, in the East Village, every bar could have a dark room. It was really part of the culture. I would hang out with Terry Richardson and other people who became notorious for pushing the limits of sexual representation, or the line between orthodox art and porn. My work has always been about that: something that is too pornographic for the mainstream art world, and too arty for the mainstream porn world. It has always been about being in the middle, a twilight area.

H.B.B: What about the end of *J.D.s* in 1991? In our first emails, you told me about this 'zine war', and today's mystified conceptions around collectives.

B.L: I think queercore had become incredibly idealized, or romanticized on a certain level. Today, there's a lot of nostalgia for it, which is really unfortunate. I mean, for one thing, fanzines were meant to be disposable, and that was the point of making these cheap publications. They weren't really meant to be archived. The current academic interest in elaborating theses and dissertations around it is pretty much what we stood against, in a sense of not being coopted by institutions or institutional figures. Anyways. I stopped because of that, in some ways, but not mainly. The movement became fractured and factionalized, and there were more exciting things happening. I think it also fits with my personal idea of revolution, something that is doomed to failure that remains important not in what it ultimately achieved, but for the revolutionary moment itself. I felt very ambivalent about its cooptation, and I started feeling that it was taking the wrong turn.

H.B.B: Are you nostalgic yourself?

B.L: I don't have a lot of nostalgia for it, no. I'm fond of what I did at that time, at that moment, but I don't feel so into the institutional interest it's getting. Although I do appreciate archives and I do appreciate Queer archives, I understand the importance of that, it's still funny because fanzines weren't really meant to last forever. But to relegate it to nostalgia is a kind of trivializing of it, or a diminishing of it, because I still feel like I try to continue the spirit of it, when I was working on J.D.s, in my work today, in my films and photographs, and writings. My work has the same punk, homocore ethos that we developed during those years.

H.B.B: As a way of keeping it alive?

B.L: Keeping it alive in that way, absolutely.

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Images, in chronological order: Chris Kraus, *In Order To Pass*, 1982; Megan 'Montana' Smith, *Mark and the Gloves*, 1979; Kim Gordon, *Making The Nature Scene*, 1985; Detail from a letter sent by Alvin Baltrop to his mother, Dorothy Mae Baltrop; *Michael Krebber, Albert Oehlen*, 1980; David Wojnarowicz, *Jean Pierre D. Normandie, France (Male series)*, 1980; Tom Burr, *Deep Purple*, 2000/2019; *Eileen Myles and the cherry tree*, 2021; *Sean DeLear*, 1988; Bruce LaBruce and Candy Parker, *Bruce and Pepper Wayne Gacy's Home Movies*, 1988.