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Oral history interview with Marguerite Van Cook, 2016 September 19-21

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Marguerite Van Cook on September 19 and 21, 2016. The interview took place in New York, N.Y., and was conducted by Alex Fialho for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic: An Oral History Project.

Marguerite Van Cook and Alex Fialho have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ALEX FIALHO: This is Alex Fialho interviewing Marguerite Van Cook at the Visual AIDS office in New York City, New York, on September 19, 2016, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number one.

So, Marguerite, let's start at the beginning and spend some time on how you grew up. When and where were you born?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: I was born in Portsmouth, in England, on the South Coast, and I grew up there, and I spent some of my life on the Isle of Wight. My mother—when I was around 12, my mother and her boyfriend got a place in the country on the Isle of Wight, and they used to go there on the weekends. And I was a bit younger than that, maybe eight, I suppose, but I mainly remember the later years. Anyway—

ALEX FIALHO: How about your childhood? Could you describe that?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Completely garbled. Completely garbled. So my mother wasn't married, which meant things were difficult for me. She was very bourgeois woman, very strong personality, and I'd been cut off from a lot of her family because of [her] having had a child out of wedlock.

And my father was a soccer player. Had been a soccer player, first division. Had been the Captain Coach of the Royal Naval [Navy] Football team during the war, and after the war his career sort of went down somewhat, because he had given his best years to the Naval Football team during the war. After that he was a manager, and fairly quickly after my birth, I suppose five or six years old, they became estranged, and quite violently estranged, although my dad used to come to see me, under protest from my mother. So he would—she then got a job.

We moved to the Old Portsmouth—which is a very nice neighborhood. So it's in this very schizophrenic place, where my dad's a Geordie from the North of England, with a heavy Geordie accent, from a mining and shipyard worker, labor, socialist, union background. He played football for the unions when he was a kid. [They] sort of paid for people to go on strike when he used to play [on] football teams as a child. Right, phenomenal football player. Great guy, lovely guy. Drank too much. Had a great personality, from my perspective, and my mother's, like, completely the opposite. Very conservative and voted conservative. Fairly soon she was with my Uncle Bert, Mister Mac, who was a retired police officer but came from a colonial family. Had relatives who had the last governor[ship] of Bermuda, a system of governor. So they were very much in that world.

ALEX FIALHO: When you say "with," what do you mean, with your uncle?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, she lived with him, but she didn't live with him. So she had this sort of—they had a grocery shop downstairs. He did. She went to work for him, and then he courted her. But she used to say, "Well, I'll never marry him until you're 21," which was awful, because he came to hate me. And he came to hate me; he hated me pretty quickly and she would let me know that. So, yeah, it wasn't a comfortable situation for me. We had an apartment upstairs from the shop, and he lived downstairs in the shop.

And I had an older sister, who's 12 years older than me. My mother adopted her, and her father was killed at the end of—her future adoptive father was killed at the end of World War II, so she never actually met the man that was about to adopt her. Then they tried to deny my mother the adoption because she was now a widow. So she fought very hard. She [had had] my sister for two years already. So she fought to keep her and she viewed my sister as sort of her triumph. You know, the good side of things. I was, on the other hand, the representation of shame. So my sister could never do anything wrong, and everything I did was wrong.

ALEX FIALHO: These are sort of the stories you outlined a little bit in—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: In my book, yeah. I didn't go down too much of the—I didn't talk too much about my dad in that.—

ALEX FIALHO: In *The Late Child and Other Animals*.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: —in *The Late Child and Other Animals*. And I didn't want—after many years, I've tried to come to terms with my relationship with my mother and see that she was just, you know, really trying to do her best, and she did in many respects. I had a good education. I went to the high school, Portsmouth High School, which was a public school. I had been denied a place at Winchester, which is a really great public school. We were told that the secretary at my infant school—I'm sorry, I'm really garbled here—

ALEX FIALHO: That's okay.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: —at my primary school had told them that I wasn't suitable because my mother wasn't married. So they, so they killed the scholarship I'd been offered there. But I sat another exam to get into Portsmouth High School, and I got in there and I went as a—on a sliding scale. I didn't get a full scholarship there. So off I went, but throughout all of this period I had to lie and pretend that my father wasn't my father.

ALEX FIALHO: Because of the stigma around it?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Because of the stigma. So when he'd come to get me from school, for example, I'd have to pretend he wasn't actually my father. And he'd come to see me do things, and I had to—that's a really hard thing to do when you're a little child.

ALEX FIALHO: And why would you have to pretend that he wasn't your father?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Because the stigma was such that if they—so we had to pretend that my mother was a widow.

ALEX FIALHO: Oh. I see.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So there were these unspoken things going on. So he didn't exist, but when you're six, seven, eight years old, nine, 10, trying to pretend that the man who looks like you is not actually—is your uncle, and then you're basically betraying that person as well. Right?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: My mother used to say the worse thing in the world was a liar, and then forced me to lie. So at 12, she—which I didn't put in the book, because I already had the court scene—I had to go to—prior to going to the new public school, to the high school, I had to go to court and my mother adopted me. So my birth mother adopted me, formally, and I had to stand and say that, you know, I gave up my father. He was standing there. It was horrible. I'd given up my rights, so to speak, to have my father as my father. Very hard. And then I had this new birth certificate, which was as an adopted child, which didn't reflect the fact that I was born out of wedlock, I was a bastard or whatever. So that was—again this didn't really—even though it stopped a certain amount of questioning, now I'm lying; I'm in another lie.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Because now I'm saying that my mother's not my mother. That she's my adoptive mother, except for she looked like me. So now people think I'm lying and making up some story about—trying to make myself more self-important by saying I'm adopted. I mean, clearly, my mother's over there and she's my mother.

ALEX FIALHO: One quick question of verification was that your mother was with your uncle; in what sense was he your uncle? Like a different family—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: No, he wasn't really my uncle. He was, he was—

ALEX FIALHO: You would call him that?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: We—I called him my uncle because I couldn't call him "Dad"—

ALEX FIALHO: Because you couldn't call him Dad.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: —because my dad was still present for me.

ALEX FIALHO: Got you.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And I would go up and see my father, and you know, go up to Newcastle with my father occasionally on trips.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. So he was almost your stepfather, in a capacity?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: He was in all intents and purposes my stepfather. I was never really clear on whether they had relations or not because it was all kept away from me. Pretty much at a certain point they shut me out. So they used to shut the door on me and I wasn't allowed in, and it was a pretty cold environment. And my mother, when I was getting older, my mother actively tried to stop me studying because she was just like, I had to be number two at everything. If I was number one, it drew too much attention to me. But at the same time, I wanted to please my mother, so I had to really excel. So that's a really tenuous and difficult place to be when you're a child. To keep yourself under your full performance level. So that was really a—

ALEX FIALHO: —a lot of psychological balancing.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: There was so much pressure on me, the lying, the juggling, and who's important, who's not important. Constantly, this fabrication of who I was.

And then I spent a huge amount of time not at home. So I went to dance classes, which I talk a little bit about in the book, and that I went—at some point it was nearly every night I'd go to dance class. And I think my dance teacher actually knew about my real birth circumstances. Somehow I think she did. But so that took me sort of out of—so it was like a babysitting thing and a keeping-me-out-of-the-picture thing.

And when I was 12, I met this—I guess 11—I met a little French girl who was playing with a woman down the street, living, staying with her. And I was playing with her and they invited me to go back to France, and I started going to France every year. So I would basically go for the whole summer to France.

ALEX FIALHO: With your friend?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: With my friend. Which again, sort of got me out of my mother's hair, but it was a good thing. Right? It was a good thing, from my perspective, to be away and not have to deal with it all. And they didn't ask too many questions. They asked a few questions, but pretty soon they stopped asking questions. So it was better for me there. Being away from home was generally better.

And by the time I was—there was a certain point where it was so uncomfortable for me to be with my mum—and I'm calling him "Uncle Bert." He was also "Mr. Mac." Right? I called him both names. I was so uncomfortable and I was so unwelcomed with being with them that I used to stay at my friend's house. And by the time I was 14, I never went to the Isle of Wight with them anymore. I used to tell them I was staying with my friend, and I'd just stay home on my own.

ALEX FIALHO: What were your sister['s] and mother's names? Full names?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: My sister's June Mikulski now. She was June Martin then. I was born Marguerite Martin, and my mother's name was Esther Martin, Esther Elizabeth Martin. She was born Laver.

ALEX FIALHO: And how about your relationship to your mother over that time? How would you describe it?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Very fraught. I didn't really understand why she kept me at arm's length, and at a certain point she started—I mean, I felt bad for her. That's why I'm able to be more compassionate when I was writing about her, now talking about her, than I was then. Or later than that.

My sister got married when I was eight and left, and around that time my mother started having probably what you'd [call] a mental breakdown of some sort. It was really strange how it happened, because she kind of pulled herself together in public, but with me she'd get up at seven o'clock in the morning and then bring me into the bedroom and sit and talk about how terrible her life had been, how terrible my birth was, going into really terrible details about how she had me at home, and how she nearly died, and blood and, oh, my God, and then [she would –MVC] sit and cry.

ALEX FIALHO: Telling you this at a very early age?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Oh, yeah. From about eight on. When my sister left. And she'd sit and cry.

ALEX FIALHO: Where did she [your sister] go?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: She went, she stayed in Portsmouth for a while, but then her and her husband moved to Mauritius for two years. So they were gone. So she sat and cried a lot and told me these terrible stories about my birth and what she'd been through. And, then, you know, about my father being a beast and—I remembered

a lot of, I actually remember being—before I was three years old, I remember being on my potty and the scenes that were going between my father and my mother, which were pretty dramatic. And a lot of verbal abuse and violence. To a certain degree, I think it culminated when he pushed her and she went through a window, and that was sort of the end of that cycle.

But I was always late for school. The consequence of this was, I had gone through this hugely dramatic thing before I got to school, and I was always late for school by, you know, five, 10 minutes, which is a real [problem – MVC]; again, now everybody's looking at you. Why are you late? Not my fault, you know? But I'm still in trouble. So it was like that, and that went on for years, and then I just—so that was very difficult.

And the woman at my elementary school, Mrs. Vine, later Mrs. Briscoe, used to hit me a lot. And it's funny because I had just made up friends again with somebody from that time who said, "Oh, she was such a great teacher. We were so well equipped going forward." Well, she was a good teacher, but she used to pull me up to the front of the class and slap me really hard on the inside of my arms and the backs of my legs. And she'd say, "You're a dirty, filthy little girl." You know, for bad embroidery. [Laughs.] I had an issue with math for a minute. I used to get 100 percent on my math test, but I had hepatitis and then measles. I was away for about three months, and I couldn't make the quarters go [into pennies in –MVC] multiplication. She hit me every day, every day, and I just couldn't go to school anymore. And my mother went in and complained, and it made it worse.

ALEX FIALHO: And why was she hitting you? Because of your—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: I think it had to do with who I was, because she knew about this and was, just, really hard for me; still I can't get into this woman's head. But she didn't do it to anybody else. She just did it to me.

ALEX FIALHO: What era was this?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: This was around 19—how old was I—1961, '62, '63? I was in her class for three years, maybe four years.

I have a psychological glitch. I always go back to eight, because I guess that's when my sister got married and things changed. I was in this man, Mr. Edwards's, class, and I was doing quite happily in his class, and I talk about him in the book as well. And at the end of that year I was supposed to go up with everybody else, and they called my mother and said I needed to be held back a year, and my mother was sort of like, "What do you mean?" You know, "She's very bright; she's read everything in the library; how could she be not"—-so I had to sit an exam. And it was the same exam that they gave to the people who were 11, who were just leaving school, and I got 100 percent on all of it. Which then it was a lot of embarrassment. So now they've been embarrassed, and so they had to promote me. And then I spent the next, I think, four years in this class with this woman who used to hit me all the time, which wasn't good. It was an odd thing.

Sometimes I got to do things that I wanted to do. But I had moments at school where—you know, this one teacher said to me—I was doing the school play; I was in the school play, and she said to me, "You're going to ruin this like you did last year." And I was so upset, and I went and told my mother. And my mother didn't go, didn't bat for me very often, but on this occasion I was so completely freaked out that she went to the school, and of course, they completed denied any such thing. And I'm just another—I'm a troubled child that's making trouble, but I wasn't. It was said to me. So I don't really understand how prejudice at that level works, but I do, I do. So that was the first part of that. Yeah?

ALEX FIALHO: Later in your life you made a book called *Stigma,* sort of about this time. Can you can talk a little bit about the concepts of *Stigma* and how you were first reacting to that and how it was first coming to you as a young child through those experiences?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, the other side of this was, I was the caregiver to my mother and I didn't understand.

ALEX FIALHO: The emotional caregiver?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, the emotional caregiver, and she used to give me a little bit of money, pocket money, to get my lunch, and when I was at dance school on Saturdays, I would spend a couple hours scouring shops to find some present for her with the money. I would go without eating to buy my mother a present. I so desperately wanted her to love me, and it was so very difficult for her to show me any. She would pay lip service to it, but not actually show me any real affection herself, which, really, I could point to moments when she did. So this was this huge burden to carry. And my mother would always say, "Well, the gist of this is a stigma that you had." You know, "It's a stigma."

And I have a birthmark on my hip, and I always felt that this was somehow, that it's actually visible. So now you're masking; you're masking. Constantly with the mask and constantly the lying and gauging other people.

So the result of living in that state of, sort of, terror is the development of incredible empathy, incredible skill set of reading other people. And mimicking them and adapting to them. I'm very good at French; that turned into my ability to speak French. So I would do accents, and I could do all of that. I could hear people's voices and register the timber of their voice. So I have a very good ear for dialogue when I'm writing, remember every word that somebody's saying to me, because I had to catch a sound. I had to capture people's voice, and I had to capture what was being said, in case I came unraveled in a lie. In case they had detected something and I needed to shut it down.

And as I'm saying this, I think I became very friendly with the gay community very early on and so [because – MVC] we were all good at lying. [Laughs.] We hid things. Especially back then. Everybody was adept. Unless we chose not to be, in which case we went all hell-bound for leather on the other side of it.

ALEX FIALHO: It sounds incredibly complicated.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: It was; it's mind-boggling, but was asked of me. Yes, it was complicated. It was extremely complicated.

ALEX FIALHO: And how about—shoot, I lost my train of thought.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, you were asking me about *Stigma* and how I worked with that later on, and as I said, later on I worked with different ways that that might manifest. I did a performance, maybe 10 years ago, where I started reading the book *Stigma,* which was about being an adult child who had grown up as a bastard, as illegitimate. I mean, just the word "illegitimate." I have a hard time saying these words even now, because I don't think I'm illegitimate. Illegal, what? [. . . –MVC]

So I started reading this thing, and I was dressed in white, and you know, I'm kind of aware of the fact that this is sort of a woman's narrative, in a woman's voice, and it's a kind of whiny story unless you choose to make it lyrical and whatever, whatever.

So I'm sitting there reading this thing. People are either, you know, the women are glazing over with love or the guys are, like, rolling their eyes, and at a certain point I said, "Oh, shit." You know, "Oh, shit; it's showing." And I had blood coming out of the dress, like started to bleed out of the dress. And several people called ambulances. It was a very dramatic. It was in a garden setting and there was about 300, 400 people there crammed in, and so I start bleeding, and people are freaking out, running up to help me.

ALEX FIALHO: Where was the blood from?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: I had a blood bag underneath of the dress, and I popped the blood bag and I let it, you know—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: —on this white dress.

ALEX FIALHO: It was a metaphor, right.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: It was a metaphor, you know, for the stigma. But people got really upset; people really thought I was having a spontaneous bleeding from the emotion.

ALEX FIALHO: How about that issue of the child out of wedlock, or illegitimacy? I could understand how, then, it was stigmatized, but it doesn't—from my perspective as someone who's grown up a generation later perhaps, it's not as much of a stigmatized issue in my sense.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: But if you go outside of New York and you go out to the Midwest and you go into those small villages, yeah, it's still there.

ALEX FIALHO: It's still there?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: It's still there in the religious communities. And now they have this whole other rhetoric around that of, oh, the anti-abortion rhetoric is still, has all of that embedded in it. Oh, we have to supervise these women. This is about supervision, control. Oh, a woman—and what's interesting is that very rarely people talk about the effect on children. They always talk about the morality of the mother.

I remember I was watching Sally Jesse Raphael, maybe, I don't know, 20 years ago, and she had this girl—and I quite like Sally Jesse. You know, just have a relaxing afternoon, happened to have a talk show on, and she started berating this young girl who's about to have a baby. How could you shame your mother? How could you do this to your mother? How could you do this to your aunt, you know, and I was like, What the hell? It's—it was

still right there. Every time you turn on a television program.

Like all these English, lovely, which—I love them—mysteries and so forth. There's a—one of the plot lines is that there's a child born out of wedlock, and they either come back to murder their, you know, to get their rightful inheritance, or they're the reason that the woman killed herself, or they're the reason that somebody had to be killed, to keep the secret.

So this is embedded in our society as a taboo. It's still there. Nobody pays—oh, it's fine; everybody's okay with it in our daily lives, and yet there it is. It's still there. The word "bastard," it's still in play. Legal rights for children born out of wedlock, still in play. You don't have the same rights. So I mean, we're in this very liberated moment, in the City of Manhattan, but even here. It's very, it's quite near the surface.

ALEX FIALHO: Maybe let's switch gears a little bit, and I'm curious about the role of art for you growing up.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: I knew early on that I was going to be in the arts. I danced. The first thing they had me doing was dancing. Right? Well, not quite. I was singing. I was singing at the church, at the cathedral, and I was singing at the [Royal] Garrison Church, and those were both the Church of England, High Protestant, very well to do, in fact. So this is another wrinkle in my life, that I'm in this. It's not just that I'm hiding all of these things; I'm doing it in high society for Portsmouth, you know, Portsmouth cultural elite and social elite.

It turns out I had a very, very lovely voice when I was a little girl, and so they used to pay me to sing at the Garrison. And I would do matins and I would do the evensong, and people used to come to hear me sing. And at the cathedral, I was just part of the general choir, and that was just fun, but it was kind of like the—it was the cathedral crowd. You know, they had sherry afterwards. It was the local judges and naval officers and bank managers, and my best friend's father was a bank manager for a while then.

So this game that I was playing, it was high stakes, if you will. So I'm singing. Right? So I'm singing and I'm really invested in the singing. I'm taking the dancing classes. I'm extremely invested in the dancing. I know that I'm going to be a writer. I wrote my first book when I was eight.

ALEX FIALHO: What was that?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: It was an adventure story. Some kids going off and finding treasure or something, fighting the bad guys. And I did have one supporter. My Uncle Bert's mother, Nana, who actually treated me as if I was her granddaughter, was this lovely, lovely old lady, just beautiful, little birdlike woman. Just loved me, and she taught me to swim and she read my books, you know, and gave me support for that.

ALEX FIALHO: Early on?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Early on. This was my first book, when I was eight, and they were scandalized because I wrote "damn." Damn, damn, damn. "The child's written 'damn.' Oh no!" So the first book was done then. And actually, only one of the things I got away with at the Garrison [School –MVC]; I'll never understand how this happened. I was able to choreograph *Peter and the Wolf*. I did a ballet. I had everybody do the ballet, and I made the costumes. So I was doing that. And then we designed a fashion catalogue. So that was around 11; we did a magazine, which was all drawings of fashion, and I was drawing a lot. I was drawing and painting. Yeah. So yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: For the dance classes, how did you get involved in that, and then sounds like your mother was supportive in some senses or—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, my mother sent me to dance classes because Iris lived down the road, Iris Barnes, and so I used to go up to her dance school.

ALEX FIALHO: That's your French friend?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: No, that's the dance teacher.

ALEX FIALHO: Got you.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: This was all happening in this small area of Old Portsmouth. And the cathedral's at one end; the boys' grammar school was across the road, [established in –MVC] 1812. Somebody had been killed; [John] Felton had been killed in 1612 across the street or something like that.

So, yeah, the dancing. So she sent me to the dancing and I did ballet, modern, tap. And then I did festivals, and you have to learn to sing and dance. You had 10 numbers or something you did at festivals. Depending on the categories. National, song-and-dance, duet, ballet, modern, and then so you have these different costumes. But I used to go on my own. All the kids' mothers used to go and dress them up and do their makeup and do all of that, and I would be by myself. It was a bit, a bit intimidating. So, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How about visual art? You said you drew—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Oh, yes, we started with a—

ALEX FIALHO: How did you—in school, in separate classes? In what ways were you doing that?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: We did some sort of craft stuff in school. I just started drawing. I liked drawing early on. I was interested in painting and drawing, and I was making clothes for my dolls and making pretty extreme outfits and things; I made things. I was always making things, and, yeah, I painted. I had paint, so I painted.

Oh, I can tell you the very first piece I ever did, which got me in a lot of trouble. My mother painted the bedroom pink when I was two. I *vividly* remember this. And I took a pencil and I went all the way around it. Right way around the entire room, and then I took and I went back and I did another line, and I went up and curved all over it and made the sea and the hills, and then I put Noah's Ark on top of one of the hills with all the little animals walking around. My mother had a shit fit [laughs].

ALEX FIALHO: Right.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: But I was already doing, you know, installations.

ALEX FIALHO: Cool.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Right. I *loved* that. I just remember that really immediately. When you put lead into plaster, it's *fabulous*. It's a great sensation. So I knew that was pleasurable to me right away.

ALEX FIALHO: Did that feel like what you wanted to continue doing for the rest of your life in a professional way, or how did you think of yourself and your creativity as an artist as you grew up?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: As I grew up? Well, I didn't—well, so Catherine and I were in Paris, and we went to the Tuileries, and I was walking around with the Impressionists, and I'm looking at these paintings, and I remember I'm looking at them and I got very close, and I'm looking at the Renoir really up close, and I thought to myself, Shit, I can do this. I can do this? Yeah, I definitely can do this [laughs]. I'm like, This, I'm going to do this. So it was like, Yes, this is what I'm going to do. Do this. So I knew then, you know, right there, that that was going to be part of my going forward.

But I was never able to—and I still can't separate one [art] form from another. And that's why later, in the East Village, it was such a good place for me to be. I can't separate talking about choreographing *Peter and the Wolf* and making the costumes, and if I had been given my way, I would have done the backdrops. I do remember painting those as a little girl. [Are we going too –MVC] far down memory lane?

ALEX FIALHO: That's why we're here.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: But I went to this little—I went to a private school when I was three, until I was five. Mayville High School. And I had a teacher, Miss Adelaide de Penny, who was quite fabulous. And we did art classes with her, three to five; of course we did.

And I remember they said, "We want you to paint a girl." And I remember—a doll, sorry. "We want you to paint a doll." And I remember thinking, I'm three years old; this is absolutely—how the hell do they think I'm going to differentiate between a doll and a girl? And plus they gave us those ridiculously big fat paintbrushes, with that gooey paint that they gave kids.

And I thought—I was so outraged that they set us a task that was never going to be possible. So I did a girl, and I said, "It's a doll." You know? [Laughs.] And they loved it. I got a gold star.

And then we had to show color. We had to make these wooly balls, and you had to go up and you had to get a piece of wool, when you ran out of the last one, to make the wool—and the colors that they had—they wouldn't actually let you pick the colors properly. You were randomly given a piece of color, pieces of wool, and I remember thinking, This is so wrong. This is going to look like crap. I've got all the colors wrong. So I had already done all the color-coding then.

Then when I did *Seven Miles a Second,* I was going right back to then. Because they gave you the crayons, right? The Crayola, so you could do contrasting colors. You could do colors in a sequence, you know, that were all in the same purples and blues. So you had all of these options that were very either emotional or rational.

So I remember thinking that all through in Miss Skinner's class, when I was about five [laughs]. And loving some of the colors in that palette. Some brilliant blues. Really, there were some great blues in that, in the Crayola range. Right? But again, I was thinking—again it was this very big, fat brushes on the gray paper that they give

to kids, with the pots of paint, and it's like, How are you supposed to do anything with this? So that was—I was already causing trouble. I was complaining then about the medium.

ALEX FIALHO: Did you see any shows, or any other people's art as you were growing up, that influenced you memorably?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: I haven't been down these paths to think about this. Yeah, well, we used to go to everything in London. I went to all the museums.

ALEX FIALHO: At what age? And how far was Portsmouth from London?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Couple of hours. My mother would say, you know, "We'll go up to see the lights at Christmas." And she really thought it was important for me to see museums. She was a very schizophrenic woman, okay? I mean, but a bourgeois woman, let's say. She wanted me to see these things, so we went to see those things.

There was a museum in Portsmouth that I used to go to, and my friend Kate Miller, who I mentioned earlier, who is—I don't think I named her, but who went to the same school as me, the Garrison with me. She won a prize. She put two pieces in the local museum. *Cabbage Roses,* which she showed me how to do, and *Lovely Ladies*. [Laughs.] And she just sent me felt-tips from that period, which is so great, because I always wanted the felt-tips that she had.

I like Stanley Spencer hugely. I was hugely impressed with Stanley Spencer at that time, because one of his drawings was at the Portsmouth museum, very tiny museum, and I thought it was incredible, and I just loved his work. Later on, I saw more of his work and came to know about his more unorthodox lifestyle, because he lived with two women, and [I –MVC] related to him, deeply.

I'm trying to think of what I loved, because I had the Impressionists that I saw in France at 12. Early on, who did I see? Who was I loving back then?

ALEX FIALHO: Catherine was your French friend?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Catherine was my French friend, yeah. It's spelled Catherine—I'll come back to it, because it's going to pop into my head, because it's all jumbled together.

I used to go to see the *HMS Victory*. Right? Many times I was on board the *HMS Victory*, which is 18th century, and there's a lot of 18th-century painting around where I grew up. So I am very fond of 18th-century painting, and I was then. And I loved—

ALEX FIALHO: Like who?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Vigée Le Brun was, like, very sentimental choice, but you know, Joshua Reynolds. Gainsborough. Later I copied some of their paintings. Yeah, so the British portraitists from the 18th century. I loved them, loved them then. And, yeah, so it was a lot of things. When you grow up in a place that is so old—the end of my street were the fortresses that Henry VIII built, and Charles I landed and got married in the church. They sang at the Garrison church, and got married to Catherine of Braganza. My house was Braganza House. Behind my house was Lady Hamilton Cottage, who was Nelson's paramour. And I was talking about John Felton, was killed across the road, I think in 1632.

But so where I grew up, there's this completely cultural environment. You're never away from history. You are never away from seeing, you know, art, in that respect.

ALEX FIALHO: How about some of your early educational experiences? Is there one particularly memorable one that sticks out to you? Whether creatively, or a place, or a moment in school that really worked or clicked? Or the opposite, against which you rebelled, and learned a lot?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, now I'm going to the high school, and I had a nice art teacher there, Mrs. Bogardus [ph]. She was nice to me. It was an interesting thing. I didn't understand things. So for my A Levels, they asked us to do "studies," and I didn't—nobody, I think nobody had told me that "studies" meant you look at something and analyze it before you put it into your painting. So I didn't know what it was. So I didn't know what things were.

Which, you see, was very strange, right? [Laughs.] But I liked photography at that point, and I was taking pictures. Oh, my God, I'm like—got a camera when I was about nine, I think. One Christmas day I went down and took pictures at the beach, for Christmas. God, I mean, what a child, right?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Left the house and went off by myself taking pictures for Christmas. Thank you very much. All right, yeah. Yeah. But I liked photography a lot.

ALEX FIALHO: Where did you get that camera?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: That was—they did give me that for Christmas, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: That year? And you went—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, and I went straight off and started taking pictures. But what photography was I seeing that I liked photography so much? There was a local museum, and I was looking at things. I mean, later on they had a David Hockney that I used to go and visit all the time. *Me* [*Myself*] *and My Heroes*, which I liked a lot. I like David Hockney.

Wow, I can't think of—in school I did a lot of silk-screen printing. So everything changed. I became friendly with Delphina Brennan, Delly Brennan. The Brennans were basically my second home. And she had two older brothers and a younger brother, and I'm in touch with them, most of them, still.

Delly and I ran around together and were pretty wild. And then later on I dated her brother, her older brother, who was an incredibly creative person. He went to the Royal College of Art for graphics. And he didn't get his master's, because they wanted to give it to him for fine art because they didn't think he was a graphic designer, and he refused. So we did a lot of artwork together around that time. So I don't know. I'm smiling, because I felt like I was much more grown up by this point.

Ed Brennan was this huge influence on me, this circle of friends, right, that I now had. And Ed and I got on *really* well, and we were doing—so we were doing paintings. Well, so he had all of Victor Moscuso, and we were kind of like going to be designers at that point. He went to art college a few years ahead of me, and we put—some of it's me and some of it's him.

He turned all the lights off and made these paintings—in red and blue, and red and green—that when you put the lights back on, they were like bull's eyes and shapes. They juddered, because they were oppositional colors, and where they meet, the lines move. Right? So I loved these things. And but then we were basically becoming performance people, right?

So he had a silver-painted—leather coat and a construction helmet, silver. And he used to wear red and yellow or—and red jeans, or red cords, and—or yellow cords, and yellow-and-red stripes, or blue and, you know. So we were in primary colors. We stayed in primary colors, except for silver. Right? And silver boots.

And this is Portsmouth. Back then, was pretty extreme. It was fairly out there. And there was a little crew of us that was starting to—so I was wearing all this Mister Freedom clothing, and just, like, very uber-pop. And, yeah, we were pretty rebellious, you know? So there was a lot of painting and creativity went on, at that point, that we were making things a lot. And being them.

ALEX FIALHO: Who's the "we" that you're talking about?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So it's Ed; there's—well, me and Ed at the top of this thing. But his room was kind of like—had a big house, and his bedroom was, like, the center of the group of people. So there's, like, Rodge Frye, and Sarah and Delly, and you know, Stevie Howlett, and Robbie Stanton. So people used to come there, and we had the record collection, so we used to—it was all import records. I feel like I'm going into way too much detail.

ALEX FIALHO: That's why we're here.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: But we were listening to Captain Beefheart and the Mothers of Invention and all of that underground music. And we were selling *IT*, *International Times*, on the street, which was completely insane to be doing that. Because we used to get a batch sent down from London, and we'd wander around with these things in our really completely crazy outfits, and—it didn't look that crazy. We used to wear the shortest shorts you ever, ever saw. Like, "You're kidding."

And so we were interested in the comix, right? *Really Problematic*. All of the early underground comix showed women in a really bad light, you know? Like Robert Crumb, the girls are all sexualized, and so that was a bit tricky for me to negotiate. Sex was incredibly tricky for me at a certain point, because I came from this background of danger. Right? It's dangerous beyond—extremely dangerous. But the pill came out. I was 14 when the pill came out, and so then, basically, I went and got the pill.

I had sex with Edward. It was—aw, poor Edward, I'm going to put this on tape. And we got engaged, and we had sex, and that was our first time together. So I was 16.

ALEX FIALHO: Edward?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Brennan.

ALEX FIALHO: Right. Oh, Ed. Got you, got you.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: God, I love Ed Brennan. And I missed a name out of this, Martin Botha, who really became significant. […]. I thought, even though I'm in this lovely relationship with Edward for the moment, that it was *my* duty to select *my* partners, and to control any—I did not want to be, like, selected by some guy. I wanted to be in control of that, and I did not want to not have sex because it wasn't appropriate, or there was some fake rules about it [laughs]—this is, like, around the age of 14 I theorized.

I should have sex whenever I want it, with whoever I want it. It should be my choice to have sex. Somebody could ask me, yeah. But whoever I wanted to have sex with was going to be my prerogative, and almost my duty, because I felt like women needed to take control back of their own bodies. I'd seen what happened to my mother. And wasn't rationalizing that quite yet, but at the same time, it was kind of in that mix.

It was unreasonable to think that women shouldn't have control of their own bodies, and so I had a kind of a mission, if you will, to have sex. Yeah. [Laughs.] With whoever I wanted. Now, I didn't get a chance that much, but for a while, then I did [laughs], but—because I had Edward, you know? But that was when I was—that's how I felt about it, and that's, later on, how I believed it should be.

And of course, we didn't have—you could get a shot if you got the clap. Now we had birth control *for the first time*. Right? This is incredible. This is life changing for women. I'm in the first wave of people getting birth control, that have the ability to have sex.

So to me, it was completely a moral obligation to take this opportunity to, you know, to switch the tables, reverse the gender roles that had been there all this time. I can control my destiny, right? So I'm being repetitive, but there's so many ways I looked at this thing, and—so that was where I was with that.

So this is, this is all a part of, if I could say, the way I made all my clothes at this time. I made a lot of my own clothes.

ALEX FIALHO: From what?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: I bought clothes, but I've made a lot of clothes, and I was making all these clothes, and really liked primary colors and crazy fabrics. And so a lot of who I was—I was wearing who I was. And I've always felt like it's performative, right? Who you are is performative. I don't see that as division between the art world and—your art, your performance, your life. I don't really see a boundary.

That's always been, for me, no boundary between any mediums, or your life, or how you dress yourself. And years later Terry Dowling said to me, when I was at Newcastle, he said, "You should have been photographing yourself every day, because every day you'd come in looking like something completely different."

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So—which was true later on. I did, and that was in part because I was so uncomfortable with who I was, in many respects. [Laughs.] So, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How about your relationship to Portsmouth as a city? What was its energy? How big is it? How conservative or not is it? And then how were you fitting in, or not, to that place?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: It's very conservative. At that point, it had maybe—I think it's about a half a million, spread out over the distance, probably a quarter of a million people, and a main strip with shops and a seafront. We were, you know, the trendy, weirdo little contingent. We made the scene. [Laughs.] So—sounds so crazy, but we really thought that much of ourselves. I guess we did. And I was going to see concerts, at which point, right around then—

ALEX FIALHO: There?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: —I met David Bowie; I met Lou Reed. In Portsmouth, of all things. Mick Ronson came back from David Bowie's, and came and had a sherry at my mother—with my mother.

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: He brought—it was raining after that, you know. They went on their first tour. So I told them I was from *Women's Lib* [laughs], and I wanted to do an interview with them. So I go back, and I'm, like,

16. Gonna do this interview with these guys, right? I didn't even have a piece of paper. So—but I had a fabulous coat and hat. Unbelievable.

ALEX FIALHO: That you made.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Martha Hill, Martha Hill, big swing-back. Fun-fur, turquoise-and-brown coat, with a huge painter's hat on the side of it. Anyway, it'd been in *Vanity Fair*, and I said, "I want that," and I went and bought it. It was a whole other story. So then it wouldn't stop pouring. It was raining, so they were like, "Well, we'll run you home." And so then Mick Ronson came up, because they wanted me to go with them to Leeds. They were going to Leeds the next day, and my mother, being my mother, has to—always had to outshine me, so she offered him a sherry and took him—huge personality. So, yeah. [Laughs.]

And then I met the Velvet Underground. They came. We went to a party with them. And again, I just bragged my way in. Lou Reed gave me a carton of cigarettes, because I asked for them. I said, "Are those American cigarettes?" You know, "I want them." And the next day—so we went to a party with them. And Maureen Tucker was the drummer then, and they were fabulous. We went back to the hotel and hung out with them for a bit. Delly came with me.

And the next day I was walking through the Guildhall Square, and there's an American, young American sailor there. And I'd just met an American, you know? From Portsmouth. You don't meet Americans. I hadn't met any Americans, and I thought, Well, this is interesting. I'll talk to him.

So I went over to him [laughs], and I start picking up this young American sailor. I had just been reading Henry Miller, and the *Tropic of Capricorn*, and *Tropic of Cancer*, and the female character doesn't lie, she "fabricates." Right? So I'm taking this persona on for the minute. And I went and sat in the park with this young sailor. He was from Brooklyn. And then he says—I pulled out a cigarette, and he had a lighter. Had an American lighter, the Zippo, with an American flag on it. So I said, "Oh, can I have that?" So I took his lighter away from him [laughs], and then I promised him I'd meet him that evening, and of course, I took off and I never went back. As it was, like, ever to happen?

But then Edward, it was Edward's birthday, so he got the lighter with the cigarettes. So I was like, "I got these from Lou Reed, and I got this from an American sailor. Happy birthday, baby." He was so excited. [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: How about when you say that you guys were "running the scene." What were you doing? You were going to shows and running around late at night at bars? Or what was the scene?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, we were. I mean, it was—when me and my friends decided to—you know, it's Portsmouth. It's very small, though, remember.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah, yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: When we decided that there was a bar that we were going to go to, pretty soon everybody came to the bar. So that would be our hangout. And then there was like a couple of—there was an after-hours club, and we'd go to the after-hours club, maybe. So this went on, through quite a few years, with that gang, because it's Portsmouth, and not a lot of people down there, you know?

And, yeah, and a coffee bar, and our other crowd, it was from St. John's College. We had one earlier than that; we used to go out with the grammar school boys, or the St. John's College boys. And one of my early boyfriends was Anthony Minghella, who went on to direct *The English Patient* and do a lot of other work, and won a lot of prizes. He won an Oscar. Then we stayed very close for quite a few years, and had a sort of weird, intimate relationship that was considered—because he always had somebody, and I always had somebody, but we'd sort of sleep together, sort of affectionately for—until, I think I was like about 22 the last time that he stayed at the house. But anyway.

Then he died recently, which is so sad, but—so he was there, and there was a little crowd with them. And we used to do things with them. They were arty, and that was a poetry crowd.

Where I was going with all of this was, when I said Martin Botha was important—so I'm 16—15, 16. Martin Botha was this incredibly objectionable character, who used to cite Oscar Wilde, and was very witty, and very sardonic, and very sarcastic, and loved me. And hated everybody else in the world. And he was gay. And it was sort of, like he told Edward, I think, but not many people.

So he was viciously frustrated. He was a very unattractive man. So imagine you're a gay man [laughs], God, in Portsmouth. You're singularly ugly. I mean, he was ugly, hairy, short, stocky. He had—but with this incredible mind. Brilliant, brilliant mind. Great poet, great writer, and frustrated as hell. Right? But you know, couldn't say shit to anybody.

So he'd fling, but nobody knew. Except for me, and I felt really privileged about this, because Martin and Ed and I would go out to different bars, right? And Ed, somehow Ed would come to some of them, but then Ed would sort of leave, and Martin and I would go to gay bars. And in Portsmouth at that time, we're talking some rough gay bars, honey.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And some really rough—

ALEX FIALHO: I'm shocked that there even were gay bars.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Oh, Jesus. Oh, my God. So Martin and I would go, and that carried on—and then I met my friend Mark when I was about 18, I think, and so he joined that little crowd. So the three of us would go to these gay bars. And then we went to people's houses. Everything's [gone –MVC], you know, apart from—so the gay bars. And I tried so hard to remember, to go back to it, and [everything else –MVC], it's not there anymore. But then the gay bars now are nothing like what they were then.

So this gay [laughs]—this bar was like, they were in drag, except for they had their work boots on. They put on makeup. Maybe they had a wig; maybe they didn't. They had tattoos. They were pretty hairy. Had incredible names. Phyllis was also called Syphilis; you know? [Laughs.] It was like this fucking funky little dive. And periodically sailors would come in. And the girls, boys—and these weren't spring chickens, either. Some of them were like in their 40s and 50s, and with the lamé, honey. It was unbelievable.

And Portsmouth accents are thick like this, aren't they? So they would be like, "Oh, 'allo, darling," [with an accent] "how are you? This is Phyllis." So they would grab these little boys, because they were children, you know? Sixteen-year-old sailors and whatnot, and get them over and start buying them drinks, and sometimes these kids would actually flip. [Laughs.] It's like, "Oh, my God. You didn't?" But we had—it was really fun.

And at a certain point, I had been going there—I had a crew cut; I cut my hair super short. And I was just wearing, like, big sweaters and jackets, and all of a sudden one day I said, "Can I get the key to the toilet?" And [the bartender –MVC], he looks at me and he goes, "Fuck me, ladies." Because he thought I was a boy for a long time. Thought I was Martin's boyfriend, which [was crazy –MVC], right?

But then I was still all right with them, because they were just lovely and crazy. But it was kind of a weird thing, to have been passing for a while [laughs]. An underground gay. I'm like, "Oh really?" But that was a great thing for me. And I went to some people's houses and these, like, hidden gay scenes. And again, I hate to say, the fucking straight world in Portsmouth was awful. These guys had the art books. They had the music. They actually had the pot, too, or they had the liquor. They actually had a scene in the houses, and it was like, Oh, my God.

And then, of course, you couldn't say anything to them [in public –MVC]. You could barely say you knew them on the street. Because it was—you couldn't. It was really terrifying. And I remember one [laughs]—Syphilis is in my head the most, because she followed Mark home—my other friend—one night. And he had to go back to his mother's [laughs]. Had to go back to his mother's. And he couldn't shake off Phyllis all the way home. And Phyllis just jumped on him [laughs] in front of his mother's, on [the] front of the car, and it was a whole scene. And he used to call his father, his father-in-law, his stepfather, rather—but he used to call him "pig." His mother had been a ballroom dancing champion, which in England is the big gown, yeah? So it was like this uber-kitsch weirdness going on.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: In this really disconnected place, right? And Mark was a really great artist, so he was another one of my close kindred spirits. So we—yeah. So I met him when, I want to say 17, 18, but I had been hanging around with Martin long before that.

ALEX FIALHO: What was Mark's last name?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Robertson, Robertson. Now Mark—just jumping forward slightly—later on Mark died really badly in London, and I think he, by then was, what, 25 maybe? He had this boyfriend that he picked up at a train station in London, and who he'd moved in with. And he was a lot older than him. And Mark went to the Philippines, came back, and got very sick.

And for a long time they didn't know what was wrong with him. This all predates AIDS. And so they had him at the hospital. I mean, they had him all over the place. Well, then they said, "Well, you have advanced syphilis, that you got rectally." Which was just like, What? How do you deal with that?

But in the interim, they didn't really know what was going on. They didn't look—if I didn't know better, because

of the timeline, I would think he had AIDS. He was an early, early victim of AIDS that they just didn't, they didn't identify. And it's maybe two or three, maybe three years too early for it, by the American timeline.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Because they ran—they should have picked that up. They had him in the hospital for tropical diseases. They were testing him for every fucking thing imaginable. Anyway. But he was this incredible artist. Yeah. And we did a lot of artwork together.

ALEX FIALHO: And he passed away that early from all those symptoms and more?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, yeah. Well, eventually he became a—he took heroin, and he took a heroin overdose. He was going to die horribly at any given minute. And I really, I've thought about it a lot in the years since. I really think that that's what it was.

ALEX FIALHO: How about the music and your involvement in the music scene? Later you were in a band. How did that develop?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, because I had been always singing as a child, and when I did the festivals, I had to do show tunes, right?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: [Laughs.] And then with Iris, she used to put us into these terrible pantomimes, like being Cinderella, or Aladdin, and you had to sing the regular pop songs of the day, right? So I had done all this showbiz stuff. And so 16, I see David Bowie. I see these guys, and I never for a second didn't think that I should have been on—this is why I went backstage. I just never thought I should have been in the audience. I just [laughs], I don't know why I thought that I was supposed to be on the stage. I was not supposed to be in the audience.

So I knew I was going to be on the stage. There was absolutely—if I was in the audience, I was one that was dancing really extremely, and I was a very good dancer, because you know, I was a dancer, so. And I was sort of an exhibitionist. And I was very pretty when I was young, so I was, yeah [laughs], drawn to music. I had developed this supremely weird taste with the—I knew every show tune, right? See, another reason I had the gay compadres, because I knew the gay show tunes. I knew all the show tunes better than they did. [Laughs.]

Yeah, and my mother. Oh, God. My mother, I just recap back to all, how this all plays together, really. Mark—we had to dance at the college, and we were always dressing up. We were constantly in dressing-up mode. So this is part of going to music, right? Because in England you are the persona that you put on the stage, and you become that person, and if you're inauthentic, if you are not that, a hundred percent, all the time—there's no, "I get on the stage and I dress up." You are that person. Whoever that is that you are on the stage, you have to dress and be that, forever. So there was a lot of trying on personalities; we were putting them on, taking them off, and doing these weird performances, and already doing some art performances.

So my mother used to wear these big hats and swing-backs, sort of, coats. Always these sort of swing-backs, and she walked in the fur shop for a moment. Had to have matching outfits with her always. Matching shearlings, matching leopard skin. I was like an accessory to my mother. So my mother liked Mark because she was [a big presence –MVC]. She was this big personality, and he called her "Hettie" and used to sit on her lap. And so he went as her to the college dance and he had on my mother's clothing. She lent him her clothes. Like the uber drag queens, drag queen's mother, my mother.

So the performance of my mother, right? We all performed as my mother, a little singing group. Which was an [laughs] odd performance. Can you imagine? So him and my other friend [laughs], David, all as my mother. Which is really fucking crazy. He was like seven feet tall by the time he had platforms on and my mother's giant fur coats and her hats. And, oh, my God. And her big flowers—she was a bit overwhelming, yeah. Very strong personality. So we sang as my mother as, like, an art school performance.

ALEX FIALHO: Tell me a little bit more about how the Innocents developed. What age were you then?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So I guess I was about, I don't know—we were—I went to Newcastle Polytechnic. To study graphics, fine art, right? I'm out there—

ALEX FIALHO: So this is after Portsmouth, isn't it?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So after Portsmouth. I went to foundation studies in Portsmouth. I thought I wanted to be a graphic designer for a minute. I didn't really know, never understood—

ALEX FIALHO: Foundation studies is—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: It's like—

ALEX FIALHO: —high school, after?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: No, it's art college.

ALEX FIALHO: Art college, got you.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: It's the first year in England. Everybody has to take a foundation study, and nobody ever told me anything. I never understood things. So a lot of my problems was with this. I didn't understand what was required of me. I went to Newcastle Polytechnic, for graphics, and pretty soon in the graphics department it was—I didn't fit in. And I said, "Can I go to the fine art department?" And they said, "Yes." So I went to the fine art department, and I didn't really fit in there either, but anyway. I hear about Punk; it was just starting. I was in Newcastle and in Manchester. The Sex Pistols, the Clash, and the Buzzcocks, and the Heartbreakers were playing.

So I jumped on a bus, went down there to see them, and I was like, Yeah, this is it. Then my art school had basically, around that same week, told me that I was probably going to have to do a year over. This is really embarrassing, some of this. Because while I was in Newcastle, we'd gone to this nightclub, Julie's, and they made me "Miss Julie's." I used to hang out with the guys that owned the nightclub, and part of what they gave me as a prize was to work in a boutique and get a full salary.

So while I was in art school, I decided I'd just do this job full-time. So I never went to art school, but—so yeah, I was making art and they didn't like it. And that was like, You know what? Fuck you. And—

ALEX FIALHO: How was Newcastle versus Portsmouth?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Not much different, really. It was basically a very similar thing. Except for they're all Geordies, "Haway henny" [in a Geordie accent]; that's what they are up there. And they thought I was super posh, because I had a very posh accent, you see. So I locked into my posh accent and had a very hard time in art school. To cut a long story short, everybody was trying to fuck me. All my teachers were trying to fuck me. The whole time. It was like one long maul job [with hands all over me –MVC], and sometimes I would just have sex with them because it was like, I'll get it over with. Because otherwise I'll never get any information, which is shocking to say.

People were very wrong. And I had gone to this one guy who I thought was this really super cool artist, and he photographed me and my girlfriend at his house, and his idea was that he would be our slave for the day. Without actually dressing up as a slave, right. And we would be there; he would wait on us, hand and foot, for the entire day, and then, at some point, we would start taking our clothes off, and then he'd be photographing us every, you know, 30 seconds for the entirety of this thing. And then he brought us new clothes, and we'd put the new clothes on, right. And that's fucking abusive. This is not what your, you know, the male teacher is supposed to be doing with his female students, right? When I was 14.

Okay, now I'm going back to the art world, right. Across the road from the Portsmouth Art Museum, which I loved, where they had the Stanley Spencer, was Portsmouth Art College, which was a fine art college, not the design college, and there was a girl there, Claire Mussel, who I *loved*; I mean, I actually loved her, had a crush on her in the worst way, loved this girl. She was *beautiful*; she was a great artist, and she asked me if I would be photographed. She wanted to put me in a room, and there'd be all this food, and I would be, like, eating this food and getting a bit wild; maybe I was going to take my top off, maybe not.

So this was like—I'm 14. I'm halfway through this shoot, and all of a sudden, the professors are coming in and watching this thing. It's no longer just me and Claire; these older male professors are coming in, and I'm like, "Who are you and why are you here?" But I'm 14; I don't have that mouth to—I don't have the voice to defend myself yet, right. Penny Slinger, who is a very, very—actually, pretty well known—she comes in. "Why don't you take your clothes completely off? Take your clothes completely off. Take off your underwear. Take off your clothing; take off your clothing; take off your clothing." And I thought—and I might well have done this, had it not been for this [insistence –MVC] [smacking sound].

So I'm pretty much topless with all this food over me, and then I was like, "I'm not"—and I was in my school uniform doing this. And I said, "No, you know what? No, I'm not taking my skirt off for you." Because, by this point, I was like, "Fuck you all. I'm sure the pictures are quite fabulous with me in my school uniform like this. I don't need to take my fucking skirt off." And she was like, "Take your knickers off; take your knickers off; take your knickers off." I was just 14.

So I was having this there; I'm having it at college. I had—oh, I had made a movie [laughs]. So I guess I was in that, 14, and this guy was casting a movie, and he came around, and it was, like, a really bad movie, made in Portsmouth, and I don't know what happened to him or the film. He wanted me to be naked on a beach with—no, I had to be a, like a wild mother to all these younger teenage girls. I was a little bit heavier at that moment and so—I'm—maybe I'm like 15. He wanted me to be the mother—this Earth Mother figure, right. So I'm doing this thing, and it was a really bad movie, as it turns out.

But we get to the beach and he's like, "I want you to be naked on the beach. We're going to put you on seaweed, and you're going to float out on this raft, and we're going to photograph you." So I'm like, You know what? Here we go again. It's like, Here we go again. This sexualization thing. I was okay with it, and then some guy starts taking pictures of me. As I'm standing on the beach, [but then he has –MVC] nothing to do with the shoot. I'm like, You know what? And I said to the director, "Did you give him permission to photograph me? While I'm getting dressed and undressed?" You know. "Oh, yeah, he's this"—you know. And I was like, "No. I'm underage, buddy." [Laughs.]

So meanwhile, I did this thing, and when I was in the sea and they got the shot, they just turned around, packed up their stuff, and went to the car. And I'm there, stark naked, without a blanket, without a towel, without anything, on my own, on a November beach in England. And I remember, I came up, [there was a heather heath –MVC], and I just laid down in the heather because the heather was so warm. And I just sort of went fetal, and it's like, You know what? Well, I'm getting comfort from the earth, at least.

So all of these experiences, this objectification and exploitation of me when I'm very young. And then, as I say, then by the time I get to the pill and I start to form these ideas of—it's very fraught, very hard for me. I had very bad depression.

I moved out of home when I was 16, and I had numerous jobs, and simultaneously, as I was going to high school, still in my A Levels, which is fairly stringent. And I was working in a hotel; I was working in a department store; and I was working as a barmaid. I was working in—as a chambermaid. So I was working all around, all these hours, and my mother said she would give me one pound, which is my pocket money, but she wouldn't give me any extra money to move out of home.

So I had this room that I shared with a girl, and I worked a lot of hours and I went to school, but I didn't often go to school as I should have done, because I was getting this terrible depression and anxiety. I was all right; I was okay once I went to work. I was okay in public. I didn't like being on my own, and I would go out all night, dancing all night, just until—I would be with anybody who would be with me. I just couldn't bear to be on my own, and it's quite clear to me that—which I didn't realize yet—that, well, the pressure of lying for that many years and then all of this—because it was happening a lot, the sexual engagement with me. I was sexualized very early.

I just started shutting down, but I loved being with my gay friends, and they understood exactly the double-life thing. Which was sort of great, right. So you make the art; you can hide behind the art. You can be in the art very directly, but it's always, That's a piece; that's something that you've made. Well, is that you or isn't that you? Or maybe it is you, but you can always deny that, you know? I liked film a lot, at the time. I liked film; I liked photography. I did a lot with photography around then and I got into it. I got into all that way around, talking about the art, but yeah, I just made a connection for myself there.

So by the time I—Punk, for me, was such a relief, because you didn't have to appear to be anything. It just—it was essential that you told people to go fuck themselves. So as opposed to not having a voice through much of these things, that when I was a child I should have been saying, No, I'm not going to lie. You know [laughs]. And it just kept going. Now I'm hiding things about the men at my college; I'm hiding this about this one and that one. Because I have to cover it up for them, right.

So Punk is like a breath of fresh air. It's like this huge open door of self-re-creation. Not in a way of having to be aesthetically pleasing to anybody. Quite the opposite. I'm not having to do anything that was conforming to any standards whatsoever. I loved it, and I liked it as well because it called out the bourgeois. I'm saying "bourgeois" because I had been reading Roland Barthes. I read a lot of French philosophy at that point. It called out the superficial nature of, basically, the lie that is society. It called it out. Took the veneer off of it. Took the mask off and just exposed everything. Which, for me, was, Thank you.

So the band was great. I used to go to the Vortex every night to see the bands, and I was trying to put together a band. I had a few guys that I'd been putting together bands with and it wasn't quite working. And then this girl came over to me, Sarah Hall, and said, "Do you want to start a band?" And I was like, "Yes, I'm trying to start a band." Great, well, she was—her boyfriend was Boogie; he was the road manager for the Sex Pistols. I was living in a squat at Highbury Hill, in London, and the [girl upstairs, Fiona Barry –MVC] was playing the piano, so I said, "Why don't you be in it?" And then I met Greg [Van Cook], who I married and ran around with. For really crazy

reasons, we got married. Well, I did like him for a while; can't say I didn't. And that was the band, yeah, and that was the band.

It was great. It was really good fun. We had nothing. We had nothing at all, and I have to say, of all the things that I have done, I'm probably the worst lyricist ever. I'm good at everything I do normally, except for—I couldn't write. Well, some people like my lyrics, but really they were just awful. It was not my forte. We got—was proud of them but—yes, the band was great.

And then we got a manager. And then I don't know; I don't remember exactly the order of things. We got a manager, and we were rehearsing at these rehearsal rooms, and the Clash were downstairs and that—because we knew the Clash pretty much because—we knew them. Sarah especially knew them from—we knew the Pistols and we knew the—and Sarah knew them *very* well, because she'd been in the Flowers of Romance before that. And they'd all played the Hundred Club together. They were, you know, it was a scene. It was another scene.

And she'd say, "Oh, we're going on tour on"—we were playing "Julie's Been Working"—they were playing "Julie's Been Working For The Drug Squad," and we started playing it too. So every time they finished, we picked it up and started it again and—because it has a, sort of, a cyclical piece to it. So when they finished, we'd start it, which must have been very annoying to them downstairs, to hear it. So they came up to—like, "Who's this and what are they doing?" And it was like, "Oh, it's you guys." Because they were going to come in and really chew us up.

So the Clash said, "Well, we're going on tour on Tuesday." And Sarah said, "Well, can we come?" And they said, "Yes, but we'll have to check with our manager," who was Caroline Coon, at that time. It was the Sort It Out tour, and Caroline was like, "Yes, of course." So it was us, the Slits, and the Clash, and there were more women on that tour than men. Which is awesome, never happens, *never* happens, which I loved. I *loved* the Slits, and I loved—I just remember getting on stage and cursing and just having the best time. And, like, I'm going to do this now.

I going to, you know—really fun—and some of those people were really, like, geniuses.

ALEX FIALHO: Let's take a quick pause.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, okay—

ALEX FIALHO: And then dive back into it. So tell me a little bit about the Innocents and how long you played together, the stories from that band.

[Speaking simultaneously.]

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Right, well, it's like—

ALEX FIALHO: What you learned—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, it started off—I was living with—in a *beautiful* house, and I'd better not say her name, because they were diplomats, and I don't know, it might get them into trouble in the Philippines. Because they had some of the, you know, Filipino—some very bad people. At that time it was—Marcos and his son had stayed with us. So,yeah. I was living in this lovely home. I was going up to the Vortex club, and I was dressing as a Punk and living in this pretty nice, formal house, with, as I say, the Marcos family coming to visit, and dressing as a Punk and going off to the Vortex.

I sat there on the balcony with Jamie Reid, who—I love his work so much. He's the graphic designer that did the iconic Sex Pistols cover with the Queen with the safety pin, right. So I was sitting with him, and this whole—the Punk period is really great for me, but I had no money at all.

ALEX FIALHO: What year was this?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: '77? '77—it would be easy to find this bit out because of the dates. Derek Jarman had just done *Jubilee,* which—at the Roxy. The Roxy was shutting down and the Vortex was happening, and I was living at the top of Portobello Road in Nottinghill Gate in this lovely house. Jamie Reid came over; I don't know why he was there. I don't know how I knew him, or I don't remember. Anyway, he told me, he said, "Russ Meyer is going to be in town tomorrow," and he was telling me all about the shooting, *Who Shot* [*Killed*] *Bambi?* and, "You should go," because I wanted to do films. He said, "You should go and meet Russ Meyer."

And so the next day, off I go, over to where the Sex Pistols live, and I see Russ Meyer and I go present myself to

Russ Meyer, and I'm like, "Oh, Mr. Meyer, I love your work." Which is kind of bizarre because I was feeling very harassed—the ways—"Can I come and be on your set for a day?" So he let me come with him while they were shooting *Who Shot Bambi?* Because he never left Hollywood; that was the first time he had left Hollywood, ever, and I don't think he left again after that, because that all went tits up. And Julien Temple, who I also knew at that time, finished it, and he was great.

There was this really creative group of people around, and the music thing was not just—it was more multidimensional. That these films were happening, and the clothes were being made, and you'd go down to Seditionaries [boutique], and then Boy [boutique] was across the road. So people were making—again the art comes back to a lot of the clothing, as well, in this period. Because it's so creative, right, every single aspect is embodied in the performance. I guess it's [a] very typical theater thing, except for you never get off the stage with any moment of your life. Once you are doing this, this is it. And if it's a good fit for you, you just become it.

So we had these clothes and we made the clothes, and then I pretty much lost my place at Jay-Jay's, because I had no money and I'd become—I was living there with Andrew Douglas as well. I wasn't living with him, but I had gone out with him, but now we were friends. He went on to make films, and he's won a lot of awards for his photography. We were very, very close on the art level, again a lot of art conversation happening. And so I went to live—I was actually just crashing around for a bit. And then, finally, we went—my friend Robert Crash from the Maniacs [who lived in a squat on Hughberry Hill –MVC] said, "You can't just keep crashing here with me. You can't."

So I went downstairs and I slept in the hall of the squat in, like, the garbage room, on a pile of garbage. I woke up in a garbage pile, like, Oh, shit. This is pretty bad. I need to find something. I went over the road and I knocked on this door, randomly, and said, "I need a place to live. Can I move into your squat?" Right, so there's these two guys and they're all Cockneys, real Londoners, and they'd just gotten out of jail, as it turned out. And they said, "Well, we got to have a vote, the house vote, because we don't really want any women living in here, because it always causes trouble."

But, "Well, yeah, you really should have me." Meanwhile, real cockneys, you know, "What that?" [with an accent]. And I'm all, "Hello," still quite proper then. So point of it all, their roommates come back—there's four of them living there—and they have a vote. And the vote meeting—against Mike's better judgment. I don't have a door on my room; I barely have a window. I think we put plastic up over the window.

So I'm now living with these guys that I don't know from Adam. I have no door. They were lovely to me, though; I've got to be honest. [Laughs.] I was like, Well, if I don't get raped tonight, I'm doing pretty good.

They were great. They used to make me breakfast every day, downstairs in their room that had the heat and the facilities. I used to go down in the basement and hose down with a cold hose, but now I'd be all done in my Punk thing; they'd make me breakfast; some local drug dealer would come over and give them drugs. As they were—the fact that they had this girl there.

I would go into town, go to the Vortex. I used to go for the sound check so I didn't have to pay to get in later on. It was like, just to get to know all the bands and just be there every night and I could absorb all the music. I had to learn it, learn it, learn it, learn it. What is it? Had to really be in it, and I would stay until four o'clock in the morning, and then I would have to either walk home, or I would have to try and catch a ride or—no buses, right.

It was like an hour-and-a-half walk home. That was my thing. Then I would go home and I would tell the boys everything I had seen the night before, because they never left the house.

And then they were dealing drugs there. I went into the basement one day; there was—I was hosing off. The floor was such that there was this big piece of hash under the fucking floor boards. I thought, Oh, damn it. Oh, damn it. They're going to know I found it and they might kill me. So I went up and said, "Really sorry to tell you, but I just—basement."

They had been selling umbrellas. They had dollar umbrellas on Oxford Street. This was their idea of how they were going to get into a legal career, apart from the drug dealing. Oh, God. Well, they had another little vote of whether I should actually be allowed to live, pretty much. They didn't know what to do about it. It's okay, and I would do this Scheherazade thing with them. I would come back every day and tell them, "Guess what I saw? Jimmy Pursey last night, and he was so fantastic. I saw the Sex Pistols, and Keith Moon walked in with Chrissie Hynde." And it was like, Oh, my God. You know, this, this, and this.

But then a vacancy came up in the big squat across the road, and I kind of snagged that, and I moved into the big squat, and it was in a mansion. You had hot running water and a phone, and we used to rehearse there. So Robert had all his stuff, all his amps and stuff, upstairs from the Crash—from the Maniacs, rather. His name's Robert Crash and he was in the Maniacs.

And then this girl was sleeping on the street one night, from another band that I knew, and I pulled her in. And she was Vermilion Sands. She'd done a Punk magazine [*Search and Destroy*] on the West Coast. So she was living there. She was dating—she started dating Goat, who was the sergeant at arms of the Hells Angels. And they used to come over, and we would rehearse in the front room. And we had no money, right, none. So basically, we were signing on, getting a little bit of money on the dole.

I found a broken guitar outside on the street, and I brought it back in and I glued it together, and that was the first guitar we had. And then we had a cardboard box. And Paul Simonon, from the Clash, lent Sarah his bass, so we'd put it on the cardboard box to get some volume. And then we'd bring—the drummer would come up and we would put some plastic things there. And she'd play on the plastic, and she got the sound; she was a really good drummer. And that was—we started like that.

And I found my leather jacket. It was [in a puddle –MVC] that looked like something—leather, mud, in a puddle—and I took it out of the mud and brought it up and put it in a bucket, squished it down in the bucket and was like, Oh, it's a leather jacket. My jacket. So then I decorated everything we wore. Made the clothes.

ALEX FIALHO: Who did each instrument? You were on vocals.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: This time I was singing, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Okay. And then—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Greg was on guitar. Sarah Hall played bass. Fiona Barry was keyboard. And Susie—oh, hang on. Oh, my God, she's on Facebook with me. I think it's Susie Barry, but did she get married? That's why I'm blanking. I'll remember by Wednesday. We found her because we heard somebody playing the drums at a festival, who was amazing. And didn't know it was a woman, and when we got over there and it was a woman, we were like, "Oh, we got to have her." So we poached her, but she still played with another band. [. . . –MVC] I know it seems a lot about clothes, but it *was* a lot about clothes. When you think about Punk and how much that—you know, creating these images, it's so performative. I guess now you could say that about all the gender performance things; we now have all of that language. That was so much part of the Punk thing. Really interesting.

ALEX FIALHO: Well, you were more or less a band of women.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How was that received, and what was the process there and—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, we couldn't get signed. We did finally get signed, but it was a disaster because our manager ripped us off. We just couldn't get taken seriously. It was really hard, and we did—the Clash was great, but on a bigger level, we couldn't get the press. Could not get press, at all. They were writing about the Slits, but the Slits were royalty, so it was kind of—and John Lydon, who was—I went out with Steve Jones a little bit, from the Sex Pistols. Well, I used to go home with him quite often. We'd go out, hang out; it wasn't like that, "Let's go date." No, I don't think so. And he had been dating Nora, who is Ari Up's mother, and then John Lydon, who'd been with Nora after they broke up—and they've been together ever since. So you know, Ari is 15 now, so they were, sort of, in this space. So it was a—

ALEX FIALHO: How long did you all play together?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Maybe two years, I think, in that incarnation. But by the time we—I got ripped off in New York by my manager, and it was a horrible, long story, which is sort of boring. Suffice it to say, we got here; it was a mess; there were no gigs here. He lied to us.

ALEX FIALHO: You were on tour?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: We were supposed to, but then none of it was real, and he took all of the money from the record advance, which is about £10,000—which was maybe like 50 now—and spent it. So—and he sold our equipment in England. So basically, I lost my squat the day that Margaret Thatcher got elected. The Tory government came and smashed the toilets and threw our stuff out the window. We found our passbooks in the street, and it was shocking. Dreadful people.

Anyway, yeah. So the band was great. We rehearsed at the same place as the Clash, and we had these two guy managers who—and again, I have a great affinity for Cockneys—two real East Enders. I went to their house once, and they had a very big art collection in the living room and a lot of silver. They were definitely coke dealers. And I wondered one day if they weren't fences, or if this was all just stuff that they had accumulated from, like, the coke scene. But it was such a classic rock-and-roll thing. I didn't notice any of it because it was

only after the fact that I kind of absorbed it, "Oh, you have a lot of lovely paintings." That were all dinged up. 18th-century paintings, right up my ally. [I was very naïve. –MVC]

And they helped us get on tour. Michael Dempsey helped us get on tour, the Adverts manager, and we opened for the Clash; we opened for Siouxsie and the Adverts; we opened for the Vibrators, we opened for—oh, my God—for a lot of those. Played with some of the—the Sex Pistols sometimes. We played big gigs; we played small gigs. We played with the Slits, on our own, and it was really intense. I was really quite friendly with Jimmy Pursey, who was Sham 69. I thought he was genius because he was, basically, saying what the French deconstructivists had said, out loud, on stage with a Cockney accent, with bell-bottoms, and telling them—telling his fans, "Don't go to Seditionaries and buy straight-legged trousers. It's another way of making you spend your money; it's just another hype." So he was kind of brilliant and I liked him. And he used to run us around.

And we used to play at the Hope & Anchor, which was the Grope & Wanker, and Shane MacGowan, from—the Nipple Erectors was his band then. He used to carry our stuff for us. He was like our fan roadie. And now, because he was in the Pouges, right. I saw him a few times in New York over the years, but yeah, he loved us—we loved him; he was our baby.

ALEX FIALHO: And then you came to New York—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: And what happened?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So I haven't been ripped off in New York, right. We still—Greg had been—my first husband; I am still married to him—was in a band with—and again I get into these weird circles, right—was the lead guitar player for Jayne County.

ALEX FIALHO: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: For Wayne County, when Wayne had—before Wayne's sex change, when Wayne was the DJ, and was pretty much the house band at Max's [Kansas City] through the main of the Max's years.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah, which ones, like the '70s?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: '73, '[7]4, '[7]5, I guess. So Greg had been there all through that, as a very young boy. He also went to the semifinals of the Golden Gloves, at 165, self-trained. So, little insane, okay? He had great long curls until Johnny Thunders cut all his hair off in the middle of the night, when he was sleeping.

He came to New York. So now we went to stay with his mother for a minute, and then Johnny Thunders told us we could take his apartment, which is the second time this happened, as you—Johnny gave us his place to stay on 14th Street, which was very nice of him. So we were, like, the New York people.

So Max's let us play there. So we played Max's as the Innocents, but we didn't have our real drummer. So we had different people filling in with us, which is great.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: It's all these different people. CB's [CBGB], we played at CB's, because Hilly [Kristal] was great as well. Hilly says to me, "I remember you. You're the girl that trashed the dressing room." I'm like, "How could I possibly have trashed the dressing room? Your dressing rooms are so trashed, Hilly."

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: He was like, "No, no, it was you." I was like, "No, it was not me." So we played there. We also—oh, and we played A7 a lot, Greg and I. Then our drummer would come with us. It was a guy at this point, Terry Smith, who played in a lot of bands after that as well, fairly well-known bands. He went home. Fiona finally decided she had to go back. So Greg and I just started playing, and we were playing at the A7 club a lot, which was the hard-core club.

So, and this sort of jumps forward a bit, because I had been working as a bartender. I was doing whatever, and then still doing the—trying to play, but it was harder here because people didn't know anything about who we were, really. They knew Greg, but—well, that and the fact that Jayne got really pissed off, was really super pissed off, and was actually trying to hurt me quite a few times, because she had been in love with Greg. So this has got almost nothing to do with art, but it has everything to do with art. Because with—Jayne did the play—

ALEX FIALHO: How so?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Jayne had done a play in Germany. It's the dead boyfriend, the dead junkie boyfriend that's a skeleton; well, that's supposed to be Greg, because forever—and in the book she writes such horrible things about me, just like, What? This is, I haven't seen you in 20 years. You still on this?

She was pulling walls down in nightclubs, and you know, in Dingwall's in London, and Debbie Harry was there. Jayne was supposed to play, and I was—this is, like, the same Sunday. I was there with Marianne Faithful, who I was really friendly with at that time, and Vicki de Lambray was another transgender person. And we had Ossie Clark's Rolls-Royce outside. And Jayne pitched a fit and was like, "I'm not going to play with—I'm not going to play with that bitch here. Get that bitch out of here, or I'm not going to play." So Marianne—more than once this happened—so Marianne says, "All right. Let's get in the car." So we sat outside in the Rolls-Royce with a bottle of champagne, thank you, but Jayne used to go after me *really* hard, I mean physically.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And she's not small.

ALEX FIALHO: No.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: No. It was not—and we were in Hope & Anchor and she was going to play there. Greg lost his guitar, and I borrowed a guitar from Robert Crash, a Flying V, because I wasn't even going out with Greg at this point. And I brought it over to lend him, which was really good of me, because it was a valuable, super valuable, guitar. And Jayne took the wall down, pulled down the Sheetrock wall. And was like, "Get that bitch out of here."

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah, well.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, good-bye.

ALEX FIALHO: And then you stayed in New York?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And we stayed in New York. And then in our house on 14th Street one day, Greg opened the window—

ALEX FIALHO: What year is this?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: This was like, '79, '80, '79. Greg opened the window and looked out into 14th Street. And the window in the apartment next door opened. And it was Jayne County. We were like, "Oh, my God!"

ALEX FIALHO: She lived there?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yes, she moved in next door, not related, not knowing we were there, I don't think. They had had some scenes like you wouldn't believe in London. They lived in this place on Wardour Street, on the fourth story, and this was another [apartment that Johnny Thunders originally had, in London, before the one in New York –MVC]. Greg and Jayne had moved in with Peter Crowley, and to get there you had to go through, like, a massage parlor, like a brothel. And every time you went through one of these different apartments, you had to lock the door with two keys behind you, because they were all basically illegal. And then the stairs were inside the locked-up [doors –MVC].

They had this huge scene upstairs, and it was, like, a mouse under the bed. And Jayne's going nuts; Peter Crowley got in the closet. Jayne starts screaming, and is like really attacking Greg. And then Greg lost it completely and was running around smashing shit. And I was like, Oh, my God, there's a lot of blood. He smashed the toilet, the windows, oh. So Peter Crowley came out and he said to me, "Do you see what trouble you've caused? Don't you think you should leave?" And I said, "*Yes*, I would like to leave. I can't get out. I don't have a key to get out." So [Greg and I finally –MVC] walked out, and it was at dawn, and our Punk stuff was—like, real blood on us. So a lot of just rock-and-roll stories, I mean—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah, exactly.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: —yeah, because I have a lot of that from that, because I was friends with Marianne Faithful, and I was in that scene, right? I mean the Punk scene. Patti Smith came. She had a big party. We went to that. I was with Marianne Faithful for that, and there was a scene at that. The waiter was like—to cut a long story short, Patti Smith got up and screamed at everybody, "Get rid of them! Get rid of them! Get rid of them! *These* are my friends," to me and Marianne Faithful. "*They* stay," and I was like, Oh, no, this is bad. [She] just told off the Sex Pistols and the Heartbreakers. [. . . –MVC] Patti had a shepherd's crook back then. But Marianne spent the whole dinner telling her what a good songwriter I was, which is mortifying, because as I said, I am not a good songwriter.

ALEX FIALHO: How did you find New York?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: New York was great because you could do anything you want here. As opposed to in England, where you have to prove [yourself –MVC]. So if you want to do something in England, they'll say, "Well, do you have any experience?" And you say, "No, but I could give it a try." And they're like, "No, well, until you show me that you can do it, you can't do it." Come to New York and it was, at that time, it was like, "Oh, sure. If you screw it up, it's on you, but I'll give you a shot," which is completely the opposite of what happened in England.

So I was like a kid in a candy shop here.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: It was like, Wow. I had money. I had never had any money in—in England you couldn't make any money. It was almost impossible, and here you could make money. I just remembered being on Avenue A, and I bought a coffee from—well, maybe it was Gem Spa on—no, it was Avenue A, from Ray's, and they gave me a paper bag with a stirrer, bags of sugar, a cup with a lid on it. And I just looked at this, and I was like, Wow, look at all this. There's money here. This is money. Because in England, they give you a cup with a spoon, and a chain on it, you know, and tell you not to take too much sugar.

So I was like, This wealth that's America—cigarettes were cheap. Drink was cheap. Liquor was so cheap here. All of a sudden you were in this different environment, and I'm thriving, because I've worked for all my childhood, and early adult life, apart from the Punk years. And now I'm in New York, and I'm like, I'm going to get a bartending job. I'm going to do this. I'm going to do this. I was making all this money. Shit, guys were giving me money, and I was getting these huge, ridiculous tips for sitting with somebody for 10 minutes.

So, yeah, I decided that I was going to get a place in New York, and I see in the *Village Voice* an ad for a space on Avenue A. It was a rehearsal [studio –MVC]. It had a soundproof room in it, and they wanted a little bit of key money. I went, randomly begged up $3,000 from—I had some money that I had made. Somebody lent me some money. Sold a diamond ring that I had acquired—don't ask—and so now I go in. I get this place on Avenue A. It has this rehearsal room, soundproof rehearsal room in there. So now the band has a [room –MVC]. We were made in the shade. We can rent it out. We can pay our rent, and so it's 10th Street, the corner of 10th Street and Avenue A, right.

Around the corner, Civilian Warfare, Greer Lankton's having her show. Awesome. One of the first galleries, right there, right 'round the corner. Civilian Warfare, right up my alley. It's Punk as hell. So now I'm in my space. Punk is dead to me. You know, it's over. It was—the year before, I'd said, "This is—we can't be Punk anymore. It's done. It's corrupted. We can be musicians, but we can't be that. That's over. There's no point in that."

So I set up an easel in the front of this space, and I started painting. I was painting, and I started thinking about how to do some art shows. And we were renting the rehearsal room to people. And we were playing.

The Park Inn was on Avenue A. Went to the Park Inn until closing time. Closing time, [went back –MVC]; like Wayne Kramer from the MC5, Greg would come back, all these different people. I had this guy Bobo [Charles "Bobo" Shaw], his show had played with Hendrix and Miles Davis. I mean, he's this incredible drummer, just played all night in this room. Just go in there and play, you know, cheap liquor, drink, smoke cigarettes. Wasn't really a weed scene. We just drank and played. That was really amazing. Konk came in. They used to—they booked a lot of time from us, and they were, you know, on [the song] "White Lines" [singing], da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da. That was their backing track, which they were playing there. Later on [Grandmaster] Flash used it for that.

But so Civilian's 'round the corner. I'm completely excited about the Greer Lankton thing. Greer knew Greg because of Jayne, right. So that was sort of nice, and I got to meet Greer right away, and I thought Greer Lankton was just brilliant. And now I had started painting again. I was back into painting, and drawing, and making the art, so, which was lovely. And I had the space and everything.

But I had to get rid of Greg at that point. I was like, "Greg, we are done." He was getting—he was—he's heavy duty. He's hard-going, Greg. He can be so sweet, but he was just—I couldn't deal with him, and he had developed a drug habit. And way bad, annoying. And then he had brought this old poet back, who moved in. And would scream, at the top of his lungs all day, poetry. And I was like, "You know what? I'm *going*."

So I started going to the bar, and Greg actually introduced me to James [Romberger], James that I'm with now. He said, "You guys will get along well," and we did. So it was a bit of drama about the breakup and all.

James and I went to stay at Cherry Valley [NY], Allen Ginsberg's farm, for a bit. We didn't know Allen Ginsberg. We knew the caretaker at that point. And so Greg called up and said to—you know, asked for me, found out

where we were. He's like, "Is Marguerite there?" James goes, "No, we're not here" [in a high pitched voice –MVC]. He goes, "Oh, my God," even that far away, all the way up there, you know, he's like, "No." Greg was a fierce character.

So we were in the Park Inn and just hanging out, before even this happened, and Steve Lewis from Danceteria—was producing at Danceteria—looks at us and said, "Could you curate a show?" As if we were a team.

ALEX FIALHO: You and James?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, and I said, "Yeah, of course. Of course, we could curate a show." I think maybe we had one show up in the Park Inn, right? We had an art show in the Park Inn and maybe was what led into that. And that was Seth [Tobocman], and Anton [Van Dalen] and Amelia [Faulkner], all these downtown artists. And—but real local. And, wow, who was in that show? Michael Roman. I'm trying to think who else was in that.

Anyway, so then now we go and do the East Village show. Now we go and do a Danceteria show. We do a couple of Danceteria shows. We're doing the big murals in there. I mean, the thing that happened was, we can do figurative. Which is just to say, we can do stuff that looks like something. So if somebody asks us to do something, we could pretty much knock it out pretty quickly, and we *loved* it. We loved doing these things immediately, and on the walls. It was so much my favorite thing, painting on the walls, which I've loved since I was a child. And doing big things. I was doing these huge installations, and whatever the hell it was Steve wanted, we did it.

But we were also curating people from the neighborhood. So we were getting to know all these different people. And at one point he said, "Could you do the East Village look again?" He wanted it to be a big thing of the East Village, of what's going on down here. And [there were] about 108 galleries. So we went to every single one and we asked them to give us two artists from each gallery. So then not everybody did it, but a lot of the main galleries did it, and a lot of—it was good. We got a huge amount of stuff from everybody. Almost everybody was in the show, and—

ALEX FIALHO: Like who?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Oh, my God. My mind's gone completely blank. We had people from Semaphore East. We had people from Civilian. Let's see. We had David Wojnarowicz, and I think we had Greer Lankton. I think we had Martin Wong. We had all of these—Luis Frangella, Stephen Lack, David West, TODT, Anton van Dalen. I should look this up, and I will remember more, but it was really an all-star thing, now; wasn't then, but somewhat then. Somewhat all-star. And oh, Marcus Leatherdale and Rick Roll, of course. It was the center thing, and then the external thing.

We had people from—we didn't have Jeff Koons, but we had people from the Neo-Geo world as well, because we had people from Pat Hearn. She gave us people. Colin de Land gave us people. So I'm thinking; did we have Kembra [Pfahler] in there yet? Kembra was in some of our shows. Kembra was doing her band then. She was mainly doing the band. She hadn't really done much with the art.

And then we did our own painting, of course. And what I did a lot of the time for a lot of these shows, I was buying those wallpaper murals that you can get, and I would stencil things onto them. So I did, like, flying babies, and kind of different symbols, tanks. I did a lot of tanks. I did a lot of guns. I was doing these different things on these big backdrops, and then we were hanging the art on top of the backdrops that I was making.

So everybody was sort of getting included in the collaboration of it, yeah? And so when we did the art shows, more or less we were creating environments to hang the art in as much as we could. And we made everybody look good. That was part of the aesthetic, was this curational aspect. Seems like I did everything but tell you about my own art. It's very strange, but it's all part of it. It was all part of that process, and—

ALEX FIALHO: Did you have your own gallery at this point?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Right after this. Well, see, what happened was Sensory Evolution [Gallery] was sort of like, they didn't really want to deal with us.

ALEX FIALHO: The Evolution was—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Sensory Evolution, Steven Style. And I was with Tony Love, aka Tony Heiberg, another musician [and gossip columnist –MVC]. And somebody said, "Oh, you should do an acid show at Steven Style's gallery." And James says, "Oh, that would be brilliant." Well, so Tony went and put it in the *East Village Eye* that we were going to do a show at Steven Style's, an acid show.

And so we take the newspaper, pretty sheepishly, 'round to Steven and said, "I'm really sorry about this. We did

not tell them to put this in the paper that we're doing an acid show." He goes, "Well, you better do it." Okay, great.

So now we do *The Acid Show* at Steven Style's, which was all installation type of things, and there was a piece—we had the David Wojnarowicz, which was a collaboration with Kiki Smith, and Marion Scemama was there. I mean, we had the whole East Village crowd. I had made a mural on one wall, had a newspaper wall that was over text, some book, like de Sade or something, glued to the wall.

So every wall was like a backdrop, and then the art was hanging on top of it. And then Carlo gave us a lot of acid to give out. And we gave it out. And he continued giving it out. And Michael Roman kept giving it out. And I don't remember giving that much of it out, but a lot of acid was given out.

ALEX FIALHO: At the opening and elsewhere?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: The opening, yeah. And Martin Wong—it's this kind of thing; it's kind of a famous, stupid story now, but Martin Wong, who grew up on the West Coast, in Haight-Ashbury, we gave him six hits to give to his buddies, the graffiti crowd that was with him. And he said, "Aw." He goes, "This is going to be really weak. I come from Haight-Ashbury." So he took the whole six hits, and they were very strong. And later that evening he went away and gave away all his paintings to homeless people. Around Pitt Street, on the bridge. And Barry Blinderman the next day nearly killed us. He actually grabbed James by the throat, and he wasn't kidding. He was—because Martin was going to have a show at Semaphore East, within days, and he had to go out and buy back all of Martin Wong's paintings—

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: —from the homeless people under the bridge. So how did we get the gallery? So we did this show, and it was pretty epic.

ALEX FIALHO: Sounds epic.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Oh, it was epic, and it was great work. It was really good work. Everybody gave us the best work.

Kamikaze, the nightclub, invited us. We'd done a couple of shows with them already. They said, "Well, why don't you bring it here for the weekend?" "Bring it here for three days." Great. As it kept picking up steam, right?

So now we've got *The Acid Show* at Kamikaze for three days, and now everybody knows it. A lot of acid had been done, and the people are coming to see this thing. And three days are up. We've been out partying at this thing every night. We're walking home. We're coming along Second Avenue—and oh, we had hung a piece of Dean Savard's. And nobody would ask Dean for his art. We were the only people to ask Dean for art.

ALEX FIALHO: He ran Civilian?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: He ran Civilian Warfare with Alan Barrows, and that's where David had been showing, right, David Wojnarowicz, and Greer Lankton. So Dean was—oh, loved us, and he said, he goes, "Well, you know what? We just closed the door on Civilian Warfare. I'll give you the keys. Why don't you open the gallery there? Just move in." Right?

ALEX FIALHO: Did Civilian move?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: They moved. They moved to [Avenue B between Ninth and 10th –MVC]. They gave us the keys. So there was a piece of David's stencil on the window and stuff. So we added more stencils up there, and we took *The Acid Show* there. And we had that for a bit.

Then we did another show, and the—we had Robert Costa curate a show there, which again was—I'll have to remember the name of it. Anyway, the upshot was, we got the front page of the Sunday *Times*. It was a piece of Calvin Reid's artwork on the front cover, and I think [it was called *Start Again* –MVC]. It was hypothesizing that there had been an apocalypse, and this was the show made from the debris from the apocalypse, which is not really me, I have to say, after I think about it, but anyway.

So, yes, we got the front page of the Sunday *Times*. It was like, "Don't go to Holly Solomon. Go and see the real deal," right. So people are showing up in limos. And so we were kind of like, "Damn, we have a gallery." We can't really just walk out on this. So we were painting in the back, and then showing our work in the front. And to be honest, mainly we were selling our own work, if we sold anything at all, because we were terrible salesmen. Because we didn't care about that, and that is how we were floating things, but—

ALEX FIALHO: What was the name and why?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, we were Ground Zero, because this is Ground Zero, motherfucker. This was long before—basically, if something's going to happen in New York, it's going to happen here with us, and we're going to make it hard as a possible experience. It's going to be the toughest experience you're going to get in the art world with us, Ground Zero. Tip of the hat to Civilian, of course. So that was—because later on, couldn't really use our name in the same way.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So we had the gallery, and that was great. And then I was very keen only—not only to do [exhibitions], but I really wanted to do installation work, conceptually, [as] I said, and there weren't any places that—there was nowhere doing installations in New York yet.

They were all wall galleries, and I had a lot of anxiety about wall art, because only a limited number of people get to see it. It doesn't immerse you in the experience of the work. You have this specific type of reception when you're looking at a piece of art on the wall. People had started to break away and do sort of some sculptural things, but they were still formal, in these formal spaces. It was very reverential, and I didn't like it. I wanted to do something that flew in the face of all that and had a different set of—a different reception for the artist, for the public. And it wasn't comfortable for the public.

I liked Jean-Marie Straub's movies, and I had for a good professor Stewart Mackinnon, who was also a filmmaker, who had made a film called *Justine*. And one of the ideas that came from that was that your art shouldn't be easy for people. It shouldn't just be a pretty picture on a wall, at the most glib, but at the other extreme of that, that your public, the viewing, should be engaged, deeply engaged. It should have to work. It shouldn't just be passive. So I was taking it to this next step of actually putting them in the experience of the event.

So in that space we did a show with Robert Parker, and he brought coal in, and he was—he put up this sort of big wooden, like, forge structure. It was metalwork, and he had forged a house, this miniature house. And we had that there. It was basically a blacksmith thing going in the middle of the gallery, yeah? And all this coal everywhere, so that was tracking around everywhere. And then we had a poetry reading in there. And what we learned about making these installation spaces, they have a very deep psychic effect on people. People get very unhinged. Some people, not everybody. Some people just love it, and sail through it. But for some people, the immersion in something like that, they get very upset, and they're not able to process it correctly.

And so we had a poetry reading in there. And people put their *heads* through walls. And smashed the Sheetrock. I mean, it was really insane. The energy level got crazy. And this girl was there, and she took all the books and threw them on the floor and trashed all our new books. So the poets did this; at that point we were not so much with the poetry. Poets get too much, but that was one show we did there.

And then there were some issues, because we had to have an electric line run down, because Dean didn't pay any bills. Dean had gotten into some sort of, you know, difficulty with his personal life, with drugs maybe let's say, and people talk about it as if he's the only person who's doing drugs in the East Village ever, but, you know, "Oh, Dean was such a bad junkie." [Others weren't called out as much as him, is all. –MVC] So he didn't pay any of the bills. So we had an electric line running down from the neighbors upstairs. They were lovely, this Puerto Rican family upstairs; the super just ran us a straight line. Then I got pregnant.

And then David came around, and gave me a—I hardly knew him at that point. He had been in a benefit for Life Cafe. And he came around. Marion Scemama had told him I had gotten written up by *Paper* magazine, I think [by Brigitte Engler –MVC]. And Marion was friends with Brigitte Engler, and she told David that we were doing this incredible thing. Because we had his work in shows before I really knew him. It's interesting, I didn't know him and we had his work.

Marion told him that I was pregnant and we were doing this extreme thing, that we were doing this gallery. So he gave this as like a 50/50 split at Life Cafe. He had sold a piece for them, and he came around. He said, "Look, I heard you guys needed something and were doing something great here. And I wanted to contribute." So he gives an envelope, and I went in the back. And I looked. And it was $550, which was *huge* at that point. And I said to James, "James," [whispering] "look how much he gave us. This is crazy." But James had already said to him, "You can't just give us money. You have to have a drawing." So he had—he's giving him something for the money. He gave him a piece, and David loved that. But that was David Wojnarowicz, right?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: That was who he was. And then we all got to be good friends.

When James went around to Civilian the first time, David had been outside, and he said to James, "I'll look at your portfolio." James wanted to show him his work, and David's the one that sat and looked at James's work. And that was how that—because Dean wasn't there, and they would have given James a show. They were like, "Yeah,

you do a show here," and then—but whatever happened, it didn't quite materialize. We had our own thing going by then, so but—

ALEX FIALHO: What was your prompt? Was it always installation art that you were asking the artist to contribute when they made a show?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: I tried. I tried to get people to do installations, and as I say, there weren't any really—there was nowhere else, really, doing it. Vito Acconci, on a very different type of level of—but then again we still—pieces, you could say Nam June Paik, but it was all electronic. It was all video.

It wasn't what I was looking for. I wasn't looking for this sort of found-object thing. I was trying to get people to do more, and then they'd be like, "Well, I have this idea. I want to do such and such," and I'd say, "No, no, no. You got to go harder. Push it. What can you do more than that? Where could you take that? What is it you think would be the wrong thing to do? Do it." You know, "Whatever you want to do, we're going to stand with you, and you can do it here," which was lovely, because we made a lot of good friends. Because they were like, "Oh, I love you guys." That was the other side of that, and we had these incredibly weird and wild shows going on.

ALEX FIALHO: Cool.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah. It was really great, and—like, Mike Osterhout made *Hell*. He painted the gallery [red –MVC]. He shut off half the gallery, and he made a box. He made the room smaller. It was all red. Had red curtains. The floor was gravel. There was a flame in the middle of the room, and he put a red screen door on the gallery. So from across the park it looked like the place was on fire. So the fire department came repeatedly, and at the opening. As I said, well, these environments get people really crazy.

All the skinheads came in and sat down around the flame, and then brought Red Devil sauce and drank it. We made them bloody Marys to start off, because it's hell, right? But then they just started drinking red sauce, hot sauce, sitting around the fire. It's a little hary, you know? Because they were some really heavy-duty skinheads, but they liked us because I had been in this Punk thing, and I still periodically went and played the hard-core gigs with my band. Which was great, play with the hard-cores, right?

So I had honorary hard-core status within this. You can imagine. Yeah. So that, and then David did his installation with Richard Kern, which—they bricked off the gallery, and I had the baby in the back.

ALEX FIALHO: You had your child in the back of the gallery?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, and the thing is going constantly, "You killed me first." "Why don't you rip it up," cause it—"and write 'motherfucker' on it," because it's Karen Finley in the video with David Wojnarowicz and Lung Leg, and Karen's screaming. They were having sex in this film.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah, can you describe the installation?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: The installation, it was—when you walked into the gallery, it looked like a rubbish dump, and David had painted "24 Hour Parking" on the side of the thing. And he and Richard brought all this scuttle, this rubbish, in from the park and the streets, and put it around, and it was actually kind of dog shit and whatnot in there. It was pretty gross. And I'm going to say that they actually threw blood out there. Why did they throw blood out in that—well, anyway, I'm having a false memory maybe. And I'll tell you why after I tell you [about this –MVC].

So then in the middle, they put breeze blocks with a window in it. I smashed a window, and behind that was a Thanksgiving scene with corpses, skeletons of, like, David and the father, the mother, and I guess the brother. Oh, my God. Anyway, three skeletons there, and movie going up in the corner. And the whole thing was totally covered in blood. All the walls were covered in blood. I'm sure there was a crucifix. And then this foghorn's going *uuh, uuh* [making foghorn noise]. And the movie playing constantly over and over and over again.

So when people came in, the gallery was sort of dark in the front, and you had to go all the way down to the back to look through this window. And then people opening the door and coming in and not coming in. And then they wouldn't get as far as the window in the back because it was really—they didn't actually know where they were, right? So it was kind of—it was pretty intense. You got to love it, right?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: They bricked it off, so we couldn't actually get out from our apartment. We were living in the back. We couldn't get out. We had to go out and around to get into the—to get to the gallery. You couldn't walk through.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: You've got to—well, after that, we had been to Virginia with a group of artists to paint on the walls down there, and then when we came back a little while later, we did another. We called it *The Wrecking Crew*.

That was David Wojnarowicz, David West, Keiko Bonk, me, and James—who else was in that? I can't think—well, maybe that was—no, somebody else and I'm missing who it is—oh, Andy Soma. And we just painted all over the walls. David in his big cop hat, and—and then we're doing these flying needle-noses, like dweezil things, which were hilarious—and just writing crazy shit on the walls. And so that place—this place was, like, really gad, really gad.

We had an opening in there a few days later; people got into fights. It was—again, these environments trigger—this was *very* crazy, and very violent in some respects. I suppose not everything was. I don't know. But psychically, it disturbed people, and they got into fights.

Nick Zedd came in and did a reading of "Dear Cunt," which is a letter to Lydia Lunch about hating her so much. It was pretty graphic. But, yeah, so—and somebody charged him, because they were pissed off with his letter being so nasty. What? It's a performance, dude. Why are you being—see, these environments will get people—and then plus, they sort of knew on some level that we would be allowing people to do more than anybody else.

So we had a guy at the end of one of those nights—it might have been that night; somebody has footage of it somewhere—Rick Strange, and he came in with a chainsaw. And he had his chainsaw going, which is a little bit worrying because these people have already been, like, a little crazy in this space. And then he took a shit on the floor. Yeah. And I'm going, Oh, okay, this isn't good. Well, then he ate it. Oh, great. And then he vomited. And he's holding the chainsaw all this time, and I was just like, "James, one of us has to go and tell him he has to go." The only thing that was good about this, really, because I'm not really a body-fluid kind of performance person in that way [laughs], was that most of the audience left during his performance.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So I went over and I said, "Okay, do you mind leaving now? It's the end of the evening."

So I don't think I scheduled him. I still think it wasn't my choice. But [it was good letting people do what they want –MVC].

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And you know what? Good. Good. It was like, Well, that happened [laughs].

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. How about can you describe your first memory of what would become HIV/AIDS?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah. First real thought about it was at Avenue A in the rehearsal studio space. And Civilian was around the corner. Greer came around, and I just remember thinking about—there were little bits and pieces in the newspaper, blood transmission—they didn't know, right? They just didn't know. And I just remember thinking, Yeah, this is more than a flicker. It was like a black shadow passed over everything. You kind of knew, yeah. It was the first time I really thought, Damn it, you know, damn it.

Because really, up until then, you could have sex really, pretty much—and get a shot, right? Nothing. People getting high, no consequences. And I started to think to myself, You know what? Everybody's been getting high. How far back is this thing? What's the timeline on this?

And then in the beginning, then, when you started to read more about it, the timeline was so amorphous. Oh, you could have it for—it was all kinds of ridiculous—I think 20 years, and not know. You could have it 10 years. So now you're thinking, Jesus Christ, what's happening? It's really just really terrifying.

No, it wasn't very long. You started to—people started to get sick. It's a couple of years, and we had a couple of years' grace, kind of—but people—and then it was—oh, it was so terrible, just so terrible when it started.

ALEX FIALHO: When you say "a couple years' grace," what do you mean?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Almost as if we didn't really know what it was yet. It was *just* on the horizon. We were just catching these flickers. It was like, as I say, like black wings flew over; somebody trod on your grave. You saw this thing, but you didn't really—it hadn't been defined yet, hadn't been named yet, hadn't been identified yet.

And as time went by, you got more and more information, and it was clearer and clearer what it was. And then you started to see people getting sick, but it was—I think maybe—it was a couple of years, maybe 18 months,

really—I'm exaggerating—before we really started to see a large part of the population get sick, and then it was, gone, quick.

And it was horrible, because you kind of—and it's terrible—the way that [the] East Village was structured with the galleries, they're like little tribes. We're like, This is this little family. Gracie Mansion had—she had her artists and they kind of lived with her in her house, you know? Tim Greathouse, he had his people. Keith Davis was there; that was his house, if you like. So—and then little social circles. Those guys, there's the Pyramid; there's this—because we spent—I can't even tell you how much time we spent in the Pyramid. We were like—they used to babysit. Oh, my God, when I did the laundry, I [think] we left the baby with them in the Pyramid! Like Michael "Kitty" [Ullman] used to love to have Crosby in the afternoon. Yeah, him and Brian Butterick were so sweet. And especially Brian, all the time at this point; Hattie Hathaway—

But it was—so what you did in your mind was—and I think everybody did this: Who was I with? What did I do? Are they all right? Is this one all right? Is that one all right? And as soon as you heard somebody was getting sick, you're like, What did they do? Who did they do that with? Did I do that with them? So you have these weird [thoughts –MVC]—so it's—the anxiety's really terrible. And then you try not to have the anxiety, and then you do the lists, which I think everybody also did. You start listing the people that are—Well, if that one's got it, this one, this one, this one's going to, you know?

So these are unspoken lists that we made, and sure enough—so if you've heard somebody from a certain group of people had contracted the illness, then you kind of knew that there was a whole thing going to happen around them. All of those people were in jeopardy. Everything had fallen apart there, and things were falling apart because people who'd been the center of everything, when they fell ill or one of their close—one of their lovers, one of their friends—then they started taking care of them. They couldn't take care of the art. It was like the center fell out, so nobody's got a center.

So everywhere that we used to go to hang out, all of a sudden it's no longer—it's not available in the same way that it had been. Everybody's scared in a profound way, [but everybody's still –MVC] walking around doing their business. But this—you wake up in the night wondering what the fuck's going on. You wake up terrified in the middle of the night and try and put it out of your mind that this could happen, or this could happen, or this one.

And then the testing wasn't good; people getting tested and coming back positive; going for the next test, it was coming back negative. It happened to David. He went three times before they gave him the positive-positive. Because—and the testing took *so* long. It was miserable. It took weeks to get these results back. It was horrible. So nobody even wanted to go, because it changed everything, right?

And from the point of view of the art world, it was disastrous. And what we were doing, we were in this—before that, in the East Village, we're in this really heady, wonderful, creative, competitive, elevating—we were each *pulling* each other up. Everybody was *pulling* each other up so they're staying competitive, but in the best—it was a competition of like, "I love what you did. Can I do something as great as you?" It wasn't like, "Oh, I've got to be better than you." It was like, "I want to be there with you." It was such a great sensation.

And when you saw another gallery doing well, you just took so much—that was part of what was so terrible, was that you'd look at another group of people and they're doing well. Oh, my God, look, they're in the—they've got a full-page ad [in *Artforum* –MVC]. Look at how great they're doing. They've got a review. It's so good. The public's loving them. They're getting a little success. Now you look and it's like, Oh, my God, to these people that you've felt so connected to and so engaged with their success. And now the demise of this group and this—I mean, this thing that took away everything.

We were all young and pretty, and all of a sudden everybody's fucked. People look like they're 100 years old. Terrible things. One of Jennifer Bowen's artists—oh, my God, I've forgotten his name—who was just such a young, pretty, tall, good-looking, blond. He was *very* young. He was a bit younger than us. That's probably why I didn't—so he must have been 22, 23—impaled himself on a sword, like fell on a sword. And then other people we knew jumped out of windows. Somebody jumped out of windows onto railings. It's like, oh, my God! So there's this other—the horrific, horrific, and then you're dealing with the way that society's handling it all, is so miserable and so wretched. And so cold. So, oh, it's awful. It was awful.

Yeah, and I suppose I had been so—well, it was a second home for me [away –MVC] from my childhood. This was my family. I had people used to come over—like gay boys used to come and do my makeup and get me out of bed in the morning, take care of the baby. I had such love around me.

It was like my friend Michael; he'd be like, "You need to do your hair this morning, Madam. You can't walk out there looking like that." And I'd be like, "Okay, Michael." It's like, "I'm going to clean up the baby. Let me get Bubba. You get yourself." And somebody else will come in. "I'm going to do your hair, darling." It was great and crazy. And everything that has to do with clothing and looks—the way I sound like that, but it was all about that—and then we're going to—I'm going to walk out into the gallery. I'm going to sell people's art and I'm going to

be doing this thing, representing, right?

So I had all these lovely people around me, and Michael Von Ofak, who I loved dearly, that was the other side of some of this. He was a Yugoslavian artist. And he had been very good friends with Michael Jackson, which was sort of a weird thing. He came from the West Coast and he was here. And when he got sick, he went home [to Yugoslavia –MVC].

But one thing that used to happen, which was awful, was that—and I've thought about this a lot—after people have gotten diagnosed, sometimes they'd pick fights with you, like from *nowhere*. And I thought about it a lot. And on some level I think it's like [they just didn't want –MVC] you to be in it with them, so they distanced you. But it was *so* hard. It was so hard.

Michael came over and he slapped me, and I was like, "What?" Out of nowhere, and then he went off. Then I heard from him, and he had a last funeral before he died. He had a party, a black party. But—so that—it was like these other weird [things –MVC]—and it fractured the art world, which I know you've heard all of this before, I'm sure?

ALEX FIALHO: How did it affect you, your work, your work with the gallery?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, it was much harder to be flippant with anything at that point, right? My attitude, which had been so gung ho, if you will, Let's go for it, that didn't really—to be living with the aesthetics in the way that we had, the primary thing in your life, isn't so important. So if all you've lived for is art, making art, thinking about art, talking about art, talking about who should see it, what it should be, who should make it, who makes it well, who doesn't make it, what are they making, how are they making it, where are they making it, when are they making it—and all of a sudden, that seemed pretty frivolous. So now what's the conversation, you know? What is—so everything that happens from there on out was—

And then everything was shutting down. So many places just were gone. People weren't going out in the same way that they had. Everybody held their breath like—it was a horrible, long, breath-holding thing. And for me, for my art, I wish that I'd [done] some things differently.

I kept going—kept going for a while. I remember Luis came over and did rats all over the walls, a beautiful, beautiful piece. We had gone to Ninth Street by now, did all these rats [in the backyard, as part of a group installation show of murals –MVC]; they were really great. And then Luis was gone; it was like [snaps her fingers]—so—

ALEX FIALHO: Luis Frangella?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, Luis Frangella. He was such a good painter. He was the most—and I've said this so many times—the most elegant painter, physically, to watch. To some people, the end product is the most amazing thing about their art. With him, the *way* he painted was actually the most amazing thing, because of his incredible stroke; and he used long, long, you know, three-foot, four-foot brushes and paint big sweeping lines, and just loved paint. The paint was wonderful.

So—and he had been very close to David Wojnarowicz and had taught David a lot about painting. They collaborated on some things together. And he taught David a lot about painting that you can see in David's early work. Him and Peter Hujar—Peter Hujar was lovely. Peter Hujar went—I looked at Peter Hujar's book, with his skulls and all of his photography. And then—and that was a huge influence early on.

Beautiful. And he was there with David. He was David's friend. Peter was so kind to James. He said lovely things to James about his work. But then the last time I saw them, he was dying; he was nearly dead. And I had the baby, and of course, the baby, people couldn't come near the baby. And it was a sort of like a weird thing, because they didn't know if they were going to give the baby something, but that—I don't think that's what it was about. And at some point it flipped to they could catch something from the baby. And then David had the big painting at the end, and he had a baby in the painting, and it was like gave a little—

Because James and I were doing collaborations, some of these big narrative—of what was happening in our lives. We used to put a big canvas up and then just start working into it and have conversations and fights, and brush some things out, put things back in, and just put little, you know, like a scene would go through it. So it's like a visual conversation, if you will. And that structure—David really liked that structure. He had taken it and used it in some of his own work, which, you know, which he said thank you for, which is lovely, very flattering.

So now you're biting your tongue. It's like a—it's like biting your tongue. And should you be doing political work? I was always political. I'd always been essentially political; on some level, I had been feminist. And by '91—Tent City happened in what, '88? I think David was diagnosed around then. And somebody asked me if I would do a benefit for the homeless guys in Tompkins Square Park; they all were dying—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: —pretty much all of them. So I said, "Yeah, I'll do that." So I organized a big auction at Max Fish and—a Tent City benefit. Michael Carter helped me, and I think Leonard Abrams brought some people. And Grace Borgenicht, because James was by then showing with Grace Borgenicht [Gallery] on 57th Street. She sent down collectors, and we did this big benefit for the homeless. I was working with the homeless guys a lot; and after the auction, everybody vanished. It was just me, and then—with all this money, and so we—they moved into a squat, and then that turned into a drug scene in there. But the work I was doing had a lot to do with the homeless people and the Tent City guys; and meanwhile, my personal friends were dying sort of across the road now.

I don't know what the fuck I was thinking sometimes. I really wonder about that, but it was just *so* overwhelming. And just people wouldn't let you see them, as well. I remember I went to see one of my friends in the hospital, and I made him some artwork and I took it up there. I photographed myself as Glenda the Good Witch and took it up there, and he freaked out when I came in because he didn't have his wig on. And it was so bad that this is what he's upset about, because that—it's not just this illness was killing you, it was killing—and I've talked about identity a lot to my—what that means and how we all perform ourselves. When you're stripped of the ability to perform yourself by this disease that's taken you over, you know? And "disease" is a kind word; it's like the last indignity; it's an indignity beyond everything else. So I was more circumspect about how I interacted with people. It was just really hard. And I understand—I mean, I understand it all at this point, but yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How did you see the role of art at that moment?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, it was a weird and a wooly thing. We were doing—political, it had to be political; it had to be. You couldn't do anything else, right? You really couldn't. I mean, the ACT UP were brilliant because they were such good graphic designers, so that was like a graphic design job that they did, at the first instance. And people used themselves, so it was like using—and it's so weird that I really [feel] like I haven't described anything that we made, except for these installations, maybe. But—

ALEX FIALHO: We have time tomorrow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: This is so much about using your body, and people lying down in the street and lying down with their coffins. Well, it was a natural coffin. It's all about your body. It's what you're wearing. It's—so it's very much performance oriented at that point. I don't think you can separate it out. Anything—it had moved past, like, a demo into an art movement, like that. So everything had to be political.

I remember I made a piece for an ecology show, and the ecology show—I don't know anything even vaguely to do with ecology. I had Crosby. I think he was three. And I just found out one of my best girlfriends was HIV/AIDS—whatever. And so I had Crosby lay down on this piece of Sheetrock, which looked like a tombstone to me. It was like the shape of a tombstone. So I had him lay down on the thing, and I did his outline and I painted him, lovely little boy. It was a life-size piece, and the rest of it's black with some tarpaper on it. And then I just wrote this long thing on there about how my girlfriend had been diagnosed. She had a child the same age as [Crosby], and so I wrote this—how—it's this little thing about that. And so the whole thing was painted black and then with these—and then I put—I stenciled roses around it. And I put it in the ecology show, which I had absolutely shit to do with ecology, but I did it, and nobody said anything to me. Everything else *really* had to do with ecology, and [laughs]—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: —I'm parading in with this thing, and I put it there. It was okay.

I hadn't really thought about it. And later on I was making tanks so—for demos—I was pretty engaged with the homeless people and the Tent City thing, mainly because people kept asking me. And I had been making life-size tanks out of plastic bags and then vinyl and—like military tanks, right?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: We put one on wheels and we wheeled it through the streets, this tank. It's like, This is a war. And I had one that I made; I put it in Brooklyn, at Venus Flytrap, and it was a big one. And actually, I wrote "Thyroid Storm" [on the wall behind it –MVC], because [a] thyroid storm was going on. Anyway, these guys came in from a frat with dunce hats on; then they all walked around it for a minute, and then they all smacked it down and smashed it. I was just really—it was polemic.

I did a lot of tanks. I was just making tanks and pink machine guns and—out of vinyl.

ALEX FIALHO: How about for James; how was he responding?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: James was—we were all shit-scared.

He had been working with David on the comic book before David got the diagnosis, so we knew—we lost Peter already.

ALEX FIALHO: Peter Hujar?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Peter Hujar. And David—David was a funny guy. I always have to tell people this. He was also funny. But he did this Archie comic, and he did some silly things and—which are hilarious. But he—James is a really good draftsman, and so David liked his drawing and basically said, "Well, I can't draw as well as you. Do this comic with me. I'll write it and you draw it." And then so they'd been doing that, and that was supposed to be like David's life. And the idea was that it would end up happy. It was going to end up with David in a field of flowers.

And it was all good because at a certain point—he'd been hanging out with Richard Kern and Tommy [Turner]. And Tommy had copped a habit. Peter Hujar told David if he ever did drugs, he was going to, you know, he wouldn't deal with him anymore. And so David just stopped. I wrote David this long letter and I said, "You need to quit with the dark side and this shit." Because he was with Tommy, and they'd get—Tommy was going through this Satanism thing and all of this. And I said, "David, you need to come onto the light side again. Get over here, and enough with the heroin. Cross the street again." And so he was like, "Yeah, yeah, that's right." I'm like, "Come back to the"—because he's a positive force, right? Not a negative force.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Right? His past wasn't to tell people through darkness. So he says, "Yeah, that's right." So I made a—James and I had another band called Grade A, and now we had Greg back in it, Greg Van Cook, back in it because he's a really good guitar player. And Alvin Roberts from—who had been the Bad Brains, fifth Bad Brains guy, and also the roadie for the Grateful Dead, the guitar roadie. Can't make this stuff up. My life is so crazy. So I recorded this song, which was really super sweet and, like, "I could sing this song. It's beautiful; it's you." It's all high falsetto.

And David put it on his answering machine, and [the words were –MVC], "It's beautiful, so wonderful. I'm in love with you." So just an I-love-you song, right? So David had it on his answering machine, so all through, all the [Wildmon –MVC] trial and all of that, until he died, this song was on his answering machine. And he said to me, he goes, "I can't figure out how to get it off." And I was like, "Yeah, right."

He just liked it, this sparkly song that we had made for—you see, I guess we were trying to get to the light side of things. And then the next thing is, he's got his diagnosis. We were in Belgium, and he sent me a letter telling me that he'd had a positive diagnosis. He had these off-and-on diagnoses before, which was *really* hard. And then he had been diagnosed, and then he sent me a clipping of him with his coffin, performance thing that he did for ACT UP, him on the street in the newspaper and it—like an arrow, "That's me." I'm laughing because it's like, "It's me," okay.

But so, yeah, so James is working on the comic and we're all scared shitless, is the bottom line. We were just all really, really scared the whole time. And you try and do something else, and then you'd be really scared. And then you get into some sort of weird thing, doing some crazy demo. I even did a Black Panther thing during this period, which was, I did a benefit for Dhoruba bin Wahad [formerly Richard Moore].

Richard Moore had been let out of jail after 30 years in the—somebody asked me to do a benefit for him, and I'm—now I think to myself, What the hell was I thinking? Why wasn't I doing something for this other pressing thing? But then again, everything seemed to be all this government being *so* foul, so wrong, I couldn't—and if somebody asked me to do something, I was at a point where I was just, Okay, if you think I can be effective, I will do this.

So I did this fund-raiser for him. It wasn't a big, big thing, but I did it. And it got me in quite a lot of trouble, basically. I got in a lot of trouble with the government and the local police, CIA, FBI. [Laughs.] Oh, my God. I had Reverend Sharpton, and [Lenora] Fulani calling me up to bring my people on their marches. I'm like, No; I'm not coming into Harlem to march. We had to have voices, right, and to speak, and so it's advocating a lot for our homeless guys. They didn't need a lot of help, but anyway. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: I think maybe let's take a stop.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: We're good, yeah.

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ALEX FIALHO: This is Alex Fialho interviewing Marguerite Van Cook at the Visual

AIDS office in New York City, New York, on September 21th [2016], for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number two, day number two.

So Marguerite, yesterday—or, excuse me, two days ago—when we were speaking, you noted that you thought that you weren't talking necessarily too much about artworks that you were making at that moment, more just about the scene or your gallery. I'm curious about the type of work, specific works, that you were making, let's say, in the first few years that you lived in New York City. Visual art, the Innocents, I guess more visual art.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, so we were living surrounded by rubble and debris, because the East Village was a shell. And so that type of material was readily available. Therefore, we made things from what was around us—not in the way of sort of just pulling junk in for the sake of, you know, renovating junk and making it into something. No. But we were incorporating some of it into what we did already, if you will.

So I remember one of the first pieces I did was a soft-tank drawing, and it was in oil pastel, and I used turps on it to soften it down. And I think it was a monoprint; I think I did a monoprint on mathematical paper, and the frame was an abandoned window frame, but a kind of modern one, so the tank was sort of in that.

ALEX FIALHO: What do you mean by "soft tank"?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So I did a lot of work with vinyl, and bin bags, and plastic, but originally, I started drawing tanks that were not hard edged, that they had some softness to them, that they were slightly rounded. So they were slightly visually distorted, if you will.

ALEX FIALHO: Three-dimensional almost?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, so they would be coming out at you from the backdrop, yeah? And I played with sort of making them more amorphous, if you will—yeah. So, and I really liked drawing tanks at that time. And it had a metaphor of, you're just going over everything, and it's a great thing to be—we're in this rubble?

ALEX FIALHO: This is the early '80s?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: This is the early—yeah, yeah, this is very early '80s. So one of my particular tropes, if you like, was a tank. So I did tanks. I did a lot of monoprints at that point as well. I just had a big mirror and I used to roller it up and put the paper down and make monoprints, and then oftentimes I'd add—I would put this color layer in, and use turps to move it around. But you have to be very careful, because the technique, if you're using an oil-based paint and then you're using oil-based crayons and then you're adding turps—if you want to keep your lines clear, you have to be really in control of it. But I liked the way—

ALEX FIALHO: What is "turps"?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Turpentine.

ALEX FIALHO: That's what I thought, so.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, turpentine. So I liked the way that—I liked the color palette I had from the very bold oranges and blues that the oil pastels give you.

And we were working in the back of the studio, and so a lot of times in the East Village, the spaces were smaller, so the work was—had to be a little bit smaller, which is partly why, when we had the opportunity to do the bigger pieces, it was such a pleasure. But nobody was collecting the bigger pieces at that point, because everybody lived in small New York apartments. Right, so it was—that's just a weird aside. It was sort of subconsciously that we made things to fit into these spaces. And we're in these big group shows, so you made smaller works, because it was, you know, 50 people in a group show.

ALEX FIALHO: What were some of those group shows?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Oh, I think Michael Carter had a *Redtape* [magazine] show, and when we did all that, we had all those Danceteria shows that we were doing, and club shows, a lot of club shows. Oh, my goodness, where were all those—it's funny, I know I was in lots of them.

ALEX FIALHO: Are they East Village shows too?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Oh, all East Village, all East Village, all in the different little galleries that were around

there, and then the clubs, and then we did the club shows, which was our other crossover point. I think I mentioned a little bit about the club shows the other day, but one of the—a little bit later, we did, when the World opened, James and I collaborated on a mural of the Ingrès Turkish bathhouse. And we did it distorted so it was—so if you stood in one place, you could see it; it looked correct. And if you saw it in another place, it was stretched out. But it was about 20 feet high, and wrapped around three walls.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So that was upstairs in the World, which was a lovely thing, and we did installation pieces at Danceteria, which I was talking about.

We invited people to do them. James and I did a thing, which I think I spoke about a little bit. But we collaborated on a lot of work. We would take a large canvas and put it on the wall and then paint it, give it a background color, and then start a dialogue on top of that. So those would take—we would borrow all different types of people's art. So we would take abstract American, Abstract Expressionists, and you would take a little bit of their technique, a little bit from the Surrealists, and throw a little bit of that in there. Just ourselves, straight up, just painting-directly-from-your-own-experience type of thing.

And then often we'd give it a sort of thematic by giving it a title or a—one of the first ones we did was *The Fruit of Our Loins*. So that had a lot of apples on it, and it had a sort of Adam-and-Eve thing, and a war motif, that your child might be called up to go to war, because, as ever, America was in war, was in another war at the time. So we did a lot of those, and some of them were—we'd cross things out and put them in. And so we'd use our own little tropes, if you like, which we had. So I was doing guns and machine guns; I don't know why James did some ballerinas.

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: [Laughs.] He was making little ballerina stencils. So there was quite a lot of—I did a show that had to do with domestic issues, superimposed on international issues, and the neighborhood, because the environment in the East Village was so consuming, if you like. Nobody was—it was very, very local. We went outside of the neighborhood to go to clubs, but they weren't that far away usually. And I'm laughing, somebody said, "Oh, you know, these people wearing flip-flops; I hate seeing people in town wearing flip-flops." Well, the whole East Village was like our bedroom; it was like our living room. So there wasn't that division. It was like indoors, outdoors, the gallery led onto the street.

So when I did the *Cold War* show—it was called *Cold War*—again I used the big backdrops, the murals that you buy, and then I would stencil them, and I had flying babies stenciled on them.

ALEX FIALHO: And this was at Ground Zero?

ALEX FIALHO: This was at Ground Zero. But I did a lot of painting for that show as well. And I was using a specific palette, which relied very heavily on turquoises and oranges, and was in that gamut. I've painted James and Crosby a lot. So some of those paintings, I was really interested in just making a beautiful painting, so it's something about my family in that respect. But one side of the gallery said "East War," which was on the east, and the other side said "Cold War." So now it was kind of the—I went and took a photograph of the Pyramid, and the end wall—and I was like, "I want to blow it up."

ALEX FIALHO: The club?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, in the club. The street. And I wanted to blow it up and put it up and put it on the wall, and then [Tim Greathouse, who had his gallery next door, –MVC] was like, "No, you can't possibly do that." Well, we did, I did. I got a projector and I put the negative of the photograph into the slide projector, and I projected it big on this photographic paper, wall-size. And then we were completely in the dark; I had Karen Ogle, and James, and Michael Von Ofak, with buckets and sponges, and we put the developer on with brushes and sponges in the dark on the floor, and then rolled them up—

ALEX FIALHO: That size?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: That size, yeah, and then rolled it up, and took it back into the bathtub—we had a bathtub—and rinsed it [in] a bathtub, and fixed the image like that. And it was really amazing, because you could see some of the brush marks and the sponge marks on this big picture of the Pyramid.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And that was—then I hung paintings on it, because I was always putting things on top of things.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So I had a clock [painting –MVC] that came on top of that, and it was on tight Sheetrock. So I made a stencil of boots, like a pendulum, so it was a clock type of thing. And I had a tank on Sheetrock, with sort of red dripping down it, and had this pendulum of a pair of hard-core boots at the bottom in DayGlo pink. So those were sort of some of my—

ALEX FIALHO: That was '86?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: '86. So the tank, hard-core boots, those were kind of part of my little repertoire, if you like. And the other part of that was—which went back to when I was at Newcastle Polytechnic—vinyl quilting with studs in it. So I found some Sheetrock, and I quilted it with black vinyl, and put studs into it.

I was really interested in working with vinyl, and when I didn't have enough money to do that, I used bin bags. But it wasn't like—I had originally worked with the bin bags, and—I'm saying "bin bags"; black plastic bags, right? Garbage bags. And I liked that a lot, because it was so irreverent. It wasn't a sculptural material that was allowed. So for me, it was—

ALEX FIALHO: Great.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: —great. I loved it. And I made these big—I made doors with black plastic bags and tacks in them. There was an old movie that had this, that looked—it's in an old movie where Nazis are taking somebody to torture them, but it's also an extremely erotic door, going into some sort of S-and-M situation, right. So I was making these doors. At school they hated them; when I was at school [in Newcastle –MVC], they absolutely hated them. In the East Village it was great.

And then I upgraded to using actual vinyl, and that was like, Wow, these are so *What is that?* So tactile. So I liked the vinyl. I was working with vinyl, and then I started making more things out of vinyl. I made—later on I had a show and I made a full-size tank out of black vinyl; it was like a life-size tank.

And then I made the little machine guns. I had taken black vinyl and quilted it to make quite large paintings, and I embroidered them with the interiors of gun mechanisms. So that they kind of, when you put light on them, the light spread out where the sewing was. ["Radiant guns," I called them. –MVC]

And so I did quite a lot with sewing, just having to do with the fact that—I talked a lot about making my own clothes. Earlier when I was [talking] about working in a department shop, I worked in the fabric department; I could measure out—I know how to do all of that with fabric. Sewing is always—sewing and knitting—women, women sew; women knit; so it's sort of denigrating, and as soon as you use that type of material, now you're in the realm of craft, and of course, a lot of people have used it subversively in the years since. But at that time, I hadn't really seen it done in that way; I was doing my own thing, if you will.

So I was—yeah, I made the guns, so my thing was to say, "Look, this isn't so feminine; I'm making guns; I'm doing gun mechanisms," which are also sort of threatening, and erotic in their own way. So, like, tactile things, and making them soft at certain points.

And making large probisms, and the phalluses would stay erect, or you could turn them down. And it was really funny, because when I made the tanks, which I did quite a lot of, we used to watch, and men would come by, especially the very big tanks, and they'd look around, you know, and see if anybody was looking, and they'd straighten the proboscis up [laughs]. And the women would come by and give it a little tap. We just used to stand and watch; it was hilarious. So the work had its own interactive quality as well. I felt like the sewing was kind of—I wanted to tear it up a little bit with that.

So, yeah. I'm trying to see what I—but I love to paint. So I was painting all the way through this.

ALEX FIALHO: What type of imagery, if any? What type of brushstrokes?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, I painted James and Crosby a lot. I think when I [was] pregnant, I had an image that I would be sort of painting with my child on my skirt, kind of like some very, you know, elegant 18th-century image. It, of course, doesn't work like that. But all the same, I kept—they were what I was thinking about a lot of the time, you know, looking at them. And they were lovely, and that was part of my—what I was doing.

So I was working with the baby; so again, it's like another—all of a sudden I'm looking at Tiepolo, and I'm looking at all these incredibly wonderful, classical babies that are in the Rubens or the whoever's done them. And so I started doing much more complex compositions with babies and cherubs, and you know, flying, and sometimes they were more classical. Including them in—

I was quilting panels in different color vinyl, and then stenciling on them. So I did a lot of stencil work. We had to

become pretty adept with the stenciling, so we were making six-, seven-, eight-color stencils, and overlaying them in the same way that you would if you were just pulling a regular screen. So at one point I—I like process; I like process a lot—so at one point, I guess in about '87, maybe '88, I did some screen printing, but I didn't have any facilities, so again, I made the screens at home and put the solution on them. And I got in the shower with them to wash them down so I could print from them [laughs]. But I loved that process; I loved silk screen. I loved the layering and translucence.

If I had to say something about that time, I worked very largely with translucent color, and that was—I did not like to use black, unless I had to for stencils. You'd often have to use a holding line around the image. But when I'm painting, I didn't like using black, because—or the gray or the white. I refused the white as much as I could, and I refused to go to these muted colors that would muddy up this sort of clear, translucent, very vibrant colors.

So in a sense, there were two things: I was trying to think about what you do and how you think about—how I think about these things. And at different times I would say that painting can be either about trying to express your inner beauty, which I don't mean, Oh, look, I'm so lovely, but some sort of universal sense of how wonderful, you know, the excitement of the visual realm. And then other times, it's very close, because that's the sort of expression of joy. You're trying to express pain and empathy, so they're all very close; they're very closely related. So for me, the painting was having—was very affect oriented. I was really thinking about feelings, and actually trying to communicate the feelings through the act of painting.

And I would play music sometimes, but actually, the brushstrokes are elegant. I'm a dancer, so I've actually been using the brush creatively as part of this movement into the painting.

The other side of that is that I've really responded to conceptual work, and I had—when I was at art school, I had really engaged with conceptual art-making, which—the late '70s, the art world had become very, not minimal, but black and white. It was almost like it—so moving on from Sol LeWitt, who we actually showed later on, and just the idea of having conceptualized a piece of—you don't actually have to make the work; you just conceptualize it and write it down.

While Hamish Fulton was doing these long walks and producing magnificent photographs of where he'd been and the vista, and yet the idea was the walk itself. But it had—it started to become this sort of removed thing. So the physicality was no longer there; so when you made a piece that was so conceptual as that, it separated you from the physical experience, from this innate desire to move and to paint, and to make marks, and to make things with your hands. So the two things go into war with each other.

So while I was doing some of these things, there's also this idea that the creative process, the intellectual process, fights the sensory process. And where you're able to make them meet is extremely difficult and challenging. It's an old, old war; the Greeks were talking about that there's been—the rational versus the world of the feeling, the senses and sentiments. So the sublime, right? The sublime. So the painting was definitely having to do with just the urge to paint and to reflect feelings. And then I was doing this other, much more conceptual work that was trying to be smarter, if you like, was trying to be more rational in the situation that we were in, so.

ALEX FIALHO: You brought in Crosby. We haven't talked about him in a directed way, but he's been floating around the conversation. Can we talk a little bit about when and where you were in your life when you got pregnant with Crosby, and the story there?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, I got pregnant and—with James—and I don't know, I think I was around 30, and I said—I did not want to have a child later, because I didn't—my mother was 40 when she had me, so by the time I was 16—and her boyfriend was 10 years older than her; they were older. And I didn't want to have that experience with a child, so—because I think you need to be young enough to engage with your children. Which is just a personal thing; it was my particular thought.

So there were a couple of other things that happened medically around that time, and somebody said, "Oh, if you don't have this baby, then you might not have another one," which was actually bullshit, but never mind. Catholic nurse talking to me. [Laughs.] I later found out that was a load of hooey, but anyway, so I was really quite happy to have him. It was a bit difficult because we weren't really in a stable situation. But you know, there's no right time to have a child, really; I mean, there really isn't. If you are very stable, it will certainly screw that up [laughs].

So he became part of the package of what we did.

ALEX FIALHO: You said you had him at Ground Zero?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, pretty much. I was pregnant when I was at Ground Zero. And, yeah, I was, yes,

pregnant there, and we didn't have a gallery for about a month, and then we had him back on 10th street. Yeah, he lived in the back with us. We used to watch *Pee-wee's Playhouse* when he was just—he wasn't even a year old, and he so loved it. And of course, we knew the people who were involved with that.

ALEX FIALHO: Did you live in the back of the gallery, in Ground Zero, when you had a show there, at each of the spaces?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yes, yes, yeah, we did. And it was nice. It was in the back of the Limbo Lounge, which was—and the guy that had it before us was called Nico Smith, and he—basically, we talked him—he wasn't doing well with his gallery, and we did some shows, arranged some group shows. I don't quite know how. James spent a lot of time with him, and we just wound up taking that space over, so we inherited another space.

ALEX FIALHO: How about—this is sort of a twofold question—motherhood in the East Village scene?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, nobody had—there was only a few of us.

ALEX FIALHO: And how about motherhood in the age of HIV, in that '80s moment?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, in the beginning everybody was so thrilled with the baby; so he was everybody's baby. And I think I mentioned we used to take him to the Pyramid, and Michael "Kitty" and Brian used to watch him while I did the laundry next door, right.

ALEX FIALHO: What do you mean? How he would come to the Pyramid with you? How old was he when you were at the Pyramid?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Not at night, but in the afternoon, when—almost said "the girls"—when everybody was sort of getting ready, and Brian and Michael were there.

So I said, "Can you watch the baby while I go put the laundry in?" And then I'd sit with them and have like an early-afternoon cocktail with them [laughs], and—

ALEX FIALHO: —head on home.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Head on home when I took the laundry out. So that was sort of a nice thing. And my friend Michael Von Ofak used to come over and watch the baby, and he *loved* the baby. David Wojnarowicz *loved* the baby, took pictures of the baby. [Edward] Brezinski took pictures of the baby. [Laughs.] Everybody so loved him. David, I had him take Crosby out in a stroller; it's like, "David, you have to do [it] at least once; take Crosby around the block in the stroller." And off he went; he's that kind of, little bit, This is new; this is a little bit uncomfortable. So when people were kind of—people shared the baby, so it was kind of cute and nice, and he was very spoiled. And then once he was walking, he would be at the openings, run around at the openings like mad, and kick people.

ALEX FIALHO: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: One of the stories that I liked reading about, and I'd be curious to hear more about, is *The Wrecking Crew*, and that experience in Virginia with Carlo, and the big installation, and Crosby there. Take us down [to] that story [referring to the exhibition *East Village Meets East Broad Street* at the Neopolitan Gallery, Richmond, VA, 1985].

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Crosby was very small then; he was really months old. And so Carlo had got this gallery, and David drove us down, Wojnarowicz. So we went down with David, and we went to Virginia, and we were all—James and David and I were really frightened because we thought it was going to be really redneck. We went into a diner to eat, and David bought us hamburgers, and we were like, We're in, you know, hillbilly heaven down here; what are they going to make of us?

But we went to the gallery; the gallery was this *huge* place, and none of us had very much money. They didn't give us any food; they just put loads and loads of beer in the middle of the room, and bottles of liquor, right? No food. And then we were supposed to sleep somewhere, and they took us to kind of this mansion that had no furniture, and just carpets, so I said, "This is a little"—the actual physical aspect of the thing was really a little weird. So we put a blanket down in the middle of the gallery, and we put Crosby down on the blanket. And he was really too little to even, you know, to move, pretty much, so he just stayed on the blanket the whole time, and everyone was painting. So it was David Wojnarowicz, David West, Marilyn Minter, Christof Kohlhofer; Luis was there, Luis Frangella, Carlo McCormick, Tessa [Hughes-]Freeland; am I missing somebody? I think somebody was supposed to come and then they didn't.

Marilyn was smoking a lot in those days, smoking like a chimney. And her and—they kept turning all the lights off because they were doing these projections to paint, so nobody could see what they were doing. And James and I—I think everybody dropped acid; I think pretty much everybody dropped acid, maybe not Marilyn, I don't know; I think Marilyn can't have. Christof did; I'm pretty sure everybody else did. James and I were fairly nervous, to come here to this thing.

So we painted a big, maybe 50-foot-by-, I don't know, I'd say 20—this huge wall, right? Painted it grayish, and a dirty color, so it would be kind of like, at least we had made a mark on the wall with the intention of going and doing one of our kind of collaboration things. But we couldn't really get started; it was a weird [laughs]—it's a really weird situation. So David West is just like, takes off; he's going like a madman, and he's writing, "Fuck your mother, fuck your father." And they're doing needle-noses, which they would do. David's doing big cops' heads.

ALEX FIALHO: What's that, sorry?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Those are like flying weasels, so they're kind of like bumblebees with a head and a long, pointy nose, and little legs. So they would just pop up everywhere. And so people started off in their discrete spaces, and then pretty soon, it just became, like, everybody just going all over everything. And we did one of our collaborations. And I remember I did the little tiny comic in the middle of this huge thing, sat down in the corner and did this really tiny, tiny comic. Then I was doing bombs with babies sitting on them, and so we were—I think somebody's got a picture of it. Tessa said she has footage of it, but it's very dark, so I haven't seen it.

ALEX FIALHO: Cool.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: It'd be fun to see the baby.

ALEX FIALHO: Nice.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: But people kept going and sitting; they'd take turns, go sit with Crosby for a little bit. So that was really nice.

But we trashed this gallery; I mean, we trashed it. And I don't know what they expected that we were going to do, but people were drawing with pencils into the walls. We were using felt tips, and if you tried to get that out ever, that's really hard to get out of the—it'll keep coming through. It was just like, paint on the floor. It was this pristine gallery; by the time we left, it was, you know.

It wasn't actually called *The Wrecking Crew* then; maybe that was the first *Nuclear Family*, I think, but it wasn't *The Wrecking Crew*, because later, when we did one that we called *The Wrecking Crew*, Carlo was like, "Why would you call it *The Wrecking Crew*?" Because, hey, that's kind of what it is. [Although the work was terrific, exciting imagery. –MVC]

ALEX FIALHO: Because you wrecked the space.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: We kind of did, or well, psychologically we wrecked it, wrecked the tranquility of the neighborhood [laughs]. And so I was saying, when people came into these spaces afterwards, it was extremely disturbing. So those are really fun to do; they were really fun. And one of the things about that was that this group of people that we were working with—which is lovely.

ALEX FIALHO: The team of work?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: This is a team of people, and later on Keiko came in, and Walter, but it was a very comfortable—

ALEX FIALHO: Keiko and Walter, who are they?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Keiko Bonk.

ALEX FIALHO: And Walter?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Robinson. I think he came in—I don't know how much work painting he did there, but he was sort of part of that world.

ALEX FIALHO: Okay.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Keiko definitely did. But they were lovely. This was a really comfortable group of people to be with. Who were not going to harm your work. So at the same time as they had complete—

everybody had free rein to go in and paint all over everything—there's also this comfort level where if you've done something good, people left it. We all recognized the boundaries of where you could go and where you couldn't go. And it's unusual to have that kind of comfort level.

ALEX FIALHO: How did this group, or others, or maybe specifically people like David or Carlo—you can take it however you want it—influence your work or vice versa?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, I think we all influenced each other. I think we did. We just learned from each other. I remember watching Luis Frangella painting and, I mentioned this before, how graceful his painting was. David West is just completely wild, and he's so free.

So that was a really good thing for me just to be able to free up and just run around and not feel so worried about what I was doing. I lost a lot of inhibitions about that. So that was really good, I think just the ability to have a conversation and to understand how a conversation was carrying through in the work, because there were long conversations, in a certain sense: that question and response, question and response. And we built out our repertoire of ciphers and marks, and I think there was a sort of expressionistic aspect to that that became very clear.

ALEX FIALHO: How about when you moved galleries—Ground Zero—when you moved spaces, what was the decision-making process for that? And how many different spaces did you have?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, we had three main spaces. One we got because of Dean. The next one we got because it was there; we needed a space.

ALEX FIALHO: You were losing the first one? Or why did you need the space?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: I think that we lost the first one because, I hate to say it, but Dean just didn't pay the bills. And I loved Dean Savard; I really loved him. I hate to speak ill of Dean, because he gets the short end of the stick. It's kind of like Dean is the whipping boy for a lot of things that went wrong in the East Village or that happened to—and in fact, he was brilliant. I loved what he did.

I remember being told that he had gone to one of the big art fairs, and they had turned their hotel room kind of into party central, where they were having the gallery. So everybody had rented these expensive booths at this art fair. And Dean rented a hotel room and put it all up [laughs] in the hotel room and had an opening in the hotel room, and kind of broke a lot of his East Village artists into the world like that. [. . . –MVC] And he was like that. Dean took ads out and didn't pay for them, but it was—I didn't actually have a problem with that.

ALEX FIALHO: Until you lost your gallery?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, until we lost the—I still didn't have a problem with it. It was kind of like, Oh, well, this is great; we had this. And then we went and lived—briefly—we lived in a squat down the road. We had a place across the road where we had our artwork. So we could still do things there, and we were still doing the club shows, so it wasn't—there was no, like, Oh, we don't have anything—for a minute, and then very quickly we got the other space.

So. When we were just curating these shows—and I know we were doing Danceteria a lot. I know, because we did Sensory Evolution, but we did bars and we did the Park Inn, which is a real dive on Avenue A. So it was an ongoing—and then we're doing things on the street periodically, and, yeah, there's no pause, because there were the group shows and the constant making of art and constant showing. And somewhere in the middle of this, James got picked up by Grace Borgenicht. So it was sort of a very weird thing that everybody was trying to get to Chelsea. We were doing our best *not* to get to any of these places because we [laughs] didn't want to be part of—we didn't want to turn straight, if you like; we didn't want to do that.

And Peggy Cyphers, lovely Peggy Cyphers, another one of our artists that we showed at that time, her husband was curating at Grace Borgenicht on 57th Street. And she said, "Put in a piece of James's." And Miles Manning, he said, "I don't want you to get your hopes up." You know, "You're lucky you're in this show." It's kind of the, like, "You probably won't sell anything." He sold immediately. Grace loved him, and he had a huge show up there, and all of a sudden we're on 57th Street. So.

ALEX FIALHO: Nice.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, it was kind of amazing. Crosby, he's running around in there like a rug rat. And she had Milton Avery; she had all these—Rueben Kadish she had—I mean, she was there with Pollock and all of those guys. She had a place on 10th Street, so it was like history. So it was this great history. And she was just this wonderful woman. So that was sort of—now it was a big step up for James. All of a sudden he was getting well framed [laughs].

He was extremely uncomfortable about the idea that his work is just turning into wall art. And now wouldn't be seen by a lot of people and would just be going off to wealthier homes instead of having the audience that we wanted for it. So.

ALEX FIALHO: How about the Tompkins Square riots, in that moment in the East Village?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: We were in Belgium the night of the police riot. We came back the next day.

ALEX FIALHO: Coincidentally, or did you rush back?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah. It was coincidental. We just—it was a coincidental thing that we'd missed the thing the night before.

ALEX FIALHO: What year is this?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: '88.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. That's what I thought.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Crosby had his third birthday in Brussels. And that's when David wrote and told me that he had been diagnosed. And we were doing art shows in Brussels, and we were working on our comics. We did an art show at this place, J.J. Speeltuin; it's on my resume. So we did a nice art show there, and we did a show in this big nightclub in Brussels, Beau Bruxelle. And what we did there was, again, we made collaborations. And we made a new body of work, but we also made prints of all of our artists from the gallery. And so we did a little Ground Zero show there, and I also—we made a film. I made a film in—this is bad.

ALEX FIALHO: In Brussels?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: In Brussels. Very bad. Went into McDonald's. I had this poor man, Vinney. I had him dress up, Vincent Gazda. I had him dress up as a Nazi clown and come in with a machine gun and shoot us. And then we had fake blood in the hamburgers, and Crosby—and so we—so he shoots us, and the fake blood comes out of the hamburgers, and we're—which didn't go down well, because we didn't have permission, and there had been these huge shootings in Brussels, with machine gun—people in supermarkets, quite—

So we made this little—it wasn't popular. It was not a popular thing. I never really edited that.

So we get done that, and we'd done this sort of big show, and as part of that idea, we had the wait staff at Beau Bruxelle dress up, as we call it, like an American invasion. We had them in paramilitary, kind of like sexy nurses, paramilitary, waitress-y things, I don't even know. They all had little machine guns at the bar [laughs]. Crazy. So, and again I made this giant mural on a backdrop of New York. I had several of them put together, and there was—I made stencils of hamburgers on parachutes and hot dogs flying, flying hot dogs, kind of attacking everybody. With lightning, you know, *tsho tsho tsho* [making the noise], soft drinks thrown at machine guns, and so it's like [laughs]—it was just really cool.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah. Good stencils. I have some of the stencils still. The stencils are great for—yeah, they're a really good fallback. They're a good tool that you can—

ALEX FIALHO: Why's that?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, if you can cut a stencil, you can do quite a few different things with it. Once you've got it, you can flip it; you can use it multiply; and they look amazing. They take really well on these surfaces. And we were good at it. [Laughs.] We were really good at it. So they looked incredible, and nobody could figure out how we did it so quickly, but we did. So, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: So you came back from there?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So I came back—so that was a big digression about what.

ALEX FIALHO: That's good we covered it.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: We were causing holy hell in Belgium, playing with the band, playing with the band in Belgium.

ALEX FIALHO: The Innocents?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: With the—this was our new band with Greg; we brought my ex-husband over there. Grade A. And we were playing all these—at Beau Bruxelle we played with Grade A and nearly got signed by Sade's producer.

ALEX FIALHO: Oh!

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And that sort of fell through, since Greg was being an idiot, but anyway, better not put that in this tape.

So I came back and this thing had happened and everybody is completely freaked out. And so they started, demo started up, and the neighborhood was very quickly completely occupied by the police. So a lot of streets were getting shut down; everything was getting shut down; and we were pretty much politicized in that. Even if you weren't wanting to be political, just the nature of the oppressive—this police presence was—and what they were doing was so outrageous, you had to.

So I began working with Leonard Abrams, who did the [*East Village*] *Eye* and Filippo Scrooge [ph], [and James – MVC]. We produced a magazine about the park, called the *Park Observer*. And we produced a postering campaign that was a sort of—the Park Rights Council signed off on it—and we posted these things all over. James did a really funny one of [Mayor David] Dinkins and Bill Lynch as Bill and Ted, "Bill and Ted's Terrible Adventure." So it was hilarious. And so we did these posters, and we did this magazine that was the best factual reporting we could do on what was going on. And the best numbers we could get on the homeless situation and what was going on with the people having AIDS in the park and not getting any services.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So that was that. And then they were having these marches. And pretty soon I was speaking at a lot of the marches. And pretty soon I was kind of running the marches and being a fairly major political figure in that small group in a certain corner of—so.

ALEX FIALHO: Which corner?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, we had—there was the anarchist group over here, and whenever you had a march, the anarchists would come up the front and they would try to take over your march. So I'm with working with a lot of the homeless guys, right? So they were with me. But one of the main homeless guys left and went to Chicago. And so it was political within political.

So the factions start to—so we walked, and we marched, and I spoke a lot, and I led a lot of marchers. I remember walking across Houston Street with my friend Arty, who was an ex–Black Panther. And we had like a thousand people behind us, and it was sunset, and we were just walking straight across Houston Street, and it was like, Wow. [Laughs.].

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: This is crazy; shut down—we're shutting down these places.

ALEX FIALHO: What were the issues that were at stake?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Housing. Housing, food, and Tent City was in the park. They wanted to shut that down and throw them out. They put a curfew on the park. The park had been open. That was at the core; it was the heart of the East Village. Tompkins Square Park, historically, it's always been a place for dissidents to gather, to speak, music to be played. This is a long history at the—Wigstock had been there.

So shutting this down and curfewing the park was like amputating our hands. So now that there's all these poor guys in tents in the park, in the horrible conditions—it's really cold. They haven't got anywhere to go. There's no—with all of the talk about the shelters, they wouldn't let anyone see what the shelters looked like. And there weren't enough shelters, and there was nowhere for them to go.

One day they burnt the tents down. And the next time they came to clear them out—they would just take everything out—the homeless guys set fire to their own tents. I'm saying, "the homeless guys." They had a kind of weird home there.

So then there were squats being shut down. All it sudden it just snowballed in together. The squats now became the focus of—the city government wants to clear the squats. A few years before that, when we started down there, they were trying to give you buildings. You could buy a building for a dollar? Now they were reversing those policies and evicting people.

So we were barricaded into squats at different times, and went in and did big murals in different squats. I

organized a march with the local priest and women and children because they closed down the playground. We were walking down Avenue B, and I was at the head, had Crosby, and it's little children all the way along, holding hands with their mothers, and somebody drew a gun on us. I was like, Okay, this is completely insane. Now the cops are drawing guns on women and with the priest and you women, 100, 150 women, right?

And then the police commissioner then ran in and grabbed his gun and pulled him off and was—but there was this horrible sort of stand-down situation. And they had military-style police tanks there. I mean, it was really insane. It was really, really insane. And they move you here and move you there and—

ALEX FIALHO: In response to the protesting and the—in attempt to—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah. But when the thing started, Pete Missing became the idea of focus of a lot of attention, because his band played for 10 minutes too long. And they shut it down, and then this thing erupted, and the police beat everybody. Really, terribly. At one point later on, Michael Carter got manhandled, and I took him to the hospital. And I testified for him because he got beaten up by the cops.

But so that was—then we made it. I said, "We made it." We had an artistic response to it. Simultaneously when that was happening, James had done his show up at Grace Borgenicht about the Gulf War, and painted on the walls up there and made this painting, which I think is in your archives [at Visual AIDS –AF] of Saddam Hussein kissing George Bush.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And caused a lot of problems with that. And we did a piece about George Bush's medical condition, thyroid. He had a "thyroid storm" and it was Desert Storm. And I'm just making the tanks at that time, running them around with the demos, and I had them in gallery spaces.

And at the risk of sounding insane, we were getting harassed by the police, the FBI [laughs], and the CIA, because James and I would be disruptive on so many levels, the local level, the city—we were just doing the wrong thing. With the marches was another thing, because now they were looking at you to see. And at different times—other activists will tell you this—they look at you. And they go beyond looking at you. They want you to know that they're looking at you, and they do things in your home to sort of let you know that they've been looking at you. And the point when we crossed into—

ALEX FIALHO: Like watching you?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: They're watching you and they're interfering with you. They actually come into your home and do things, like leave messages, if you will, like hide things in your house from you. But weirdly enough that, you know, you didn't leave messages of your own voice, on your own phone; you call somebody and they call back and put [your voice on your own phone –MVC] on your answering machine, you know?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Or you get these weird, "Testing, testing," and you get the, like, technology messages on your phone. And if you become involved with criticizing the president, for example, then you get to the CIA level. So we had gone into, like, investigating George Bush's health, which was extremely—he was losing it, right?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Because of his thyroid condition, he had hypo—too much. He was, like, high; he wasn't falling asleep. Anyway, I'm digressing.

So we were getting looked at for that. The *Voice* wanted me to go down to Texas and investigate his backstory. I'm like, "I'm not going to Texas." "No." No. [Laughs.] How can I do that? I won't come back, you know.

So it was many levels, and then, plus, I was doing these other things for, like, the one Black Panther, and they asked me to do a benefit for that. I was pretty politically deeply in at that point. And, as I said, my regret is that I was so much involved with how that played out that I didn't do more with ACT UP.

But I was taking care of—I mean, an anecdotal and a sort of funny story, after I'd done the benefit and I had to open a bank account and we had about $15,000, maybe $20,000, in there, [there] was nobody to spend it except for me. And these guys that were now living in the squat, because they'd actually been kicked out of the park—

ALEX FIALHO: Which benefit is this?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: The homeless, Tent City benefit in '91.

ALEX FIALHO: Okay.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And I think Jon Penley said, "We need to take these guys on a holiday; they need to go on a holiday. Woodstock's having its festival next weekend. Let's rent a van and take the homeless guys to Woodstock." Right? So I said, "Ah. Okay. Sure. You're coming, right? I'm not going to be on my own."

Famous last words. So we rent this big van and fill it up with the homeless guys: some of them I know quite well, some of them not so much. Take them up to Woodstock. And now all the activists, like the more anarchistic activists, all fall away. They actually have very nice tents, and they've got cooking equipment and everything else. [They abandoned them. –MVC] And here's just me with these homeless guys, with nothing.

So now I drive back down to Manhattan with Shelley, one of them, who had dropped some acid for the quick drive down at top speed. And we came down and we bought tarps. And then we went into Key Foods on Avenue A and bought masses of hamburger and baked beans and food. And the other thing that you have to bear in mind is, if you take 25 raging alcoholics to the country, you have to bring them something to drink [laughs]. So I loaded this thing up, picked up a few more guys, loads of liquor, and now at Woodstock with this crazy crowd of people. Well, in the interim while I was away, they met Eric Clapton.

ALEX FIALHO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: —who gave them a case of beer to tide them over. And they actually got themselves onto the stage and made some announcements about what was going on. But I might tell you, it was a pretty wild trip.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah. A pretty wild trip. [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: How about, why do you think this issue took your attention and your politicized energy, as opposed to ACT UP?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Just chronology. And that, you know, I was there; it happened in front of me.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. Because your gallery was even right on Tompkins Square, right?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, I mean, we'd just come back from Belgium, though, but this is where we lived. This is—Crosby's here, and this is our house.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: When I say—we say—there was very little—you know, I wore my flip-flops around the East Village. I barely got dressed to leave the house. So there was an outrage happening in front of me, and the AIDS crisis was there, as much as it was over there.

It was right here. My friends are getting beaten up by the police. It affected us all. And then the kids had nowhere to play. And it was like it was a—that sounds so lame, but it was more than that. It was little children seeing this violence on a consistent daily basis, and morally, you have to respond when you see something like that. It's not just a—it's sort of your obligation to respond to something that's happening in front of your children. You can't just say, "Oh, it's not happening." So we were on a—it was all happening simultaneously, but by '91 a lot had happened with ACT UP. Yeah, and we had been in Belgium, of all things, for it. It's six months in the middle of that, so it was a bit weird. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How about the role of art at all in those riots or your practices or the gallery, were those conflated?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, as I had said, one of them was that we did this big fund-raiser.

ALEX FIALHO: Exactly.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And we had loads and loads and loads of artists participating in that. We were doing murals inside of squats; we were making art inside of these places. On the walls outside it was street art, a lot of street art. Making the posters, making the flyers, so an ongoing conversation. We made the newspaper. We were just consistently creating street art, poster street art, so you're thinking in that way. And I guess in some respect, it was paralleling what was going on with ACT UP.

It wasn't a far—it was a big remove. When we did the big mural at the World, that was—everybody from ACT UP was sort of hanging out in that room. So it wasn't like, Oh, they're over here and we're over here. It was—yeah. And just, I was a Portsmouth High School girl. [Laughs.] I mean, it's my job to do these things. My civic engagement, civic duty.

ALEX FIALHO: How so?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: I was brought up in that, in the public school, where they said, "You're privileged." You know, "You're being trained to be leaders." And they did it; they did their job [laughs].

ALEX FIALHO: How did you find yourself at the front of these marches?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, it was very clear to me that people were being really ineffectual. And—[laughs].

ALEX FIALHO: That were trying to lead them, or the protests?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah. It was like nothing was happening, and so at a certain point Leonard Abrams and Filippo Scrooge and James, we were walking in an office over on Broadway, and they kind of said, "Well, you know what, let's make you be the front of this. [because of –MVC] your oratory skill set." You know, "You got this."

So I was a really good public speaker, as it turns out. And I have a very loud voice when I want to. So I was able to be heard above—I didn't need a microphone; I had a loud voice. And I used to like to torment police terribly. Yeah. I did this Mary Poppins thing, where I, like, agree with them and then ask them what to do. Like, "Oh. You would like them to pack up and bring their belongings? Come along, everybody. We're going with these nice police officers. Where should we go? Where would you like us to come?"

And they really hated me [laughs]. Later on, I was trying to get a permit to do something in the park, and I went back into the precinct, like Sixth Street, Fifth Street? And they—it was before they renovated it—so they sent me back, and I said, "Just let me just stay with the sergeant siting at the desk." And they said, "Oh, go back; go back through." They sent me back to the detective's den in the back. There's a picture of me in one of my performances in Tompkins Square Park, with darts in it. It was a really hot picture, I have to say, and I look really hot, with a mini dress and blond hair, you know. Darts in it.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: I was like, "Oh, nice. Thank you." [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So they wanted to make sure I knew.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. How long was your involvement with them?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, pretty much, once they cleaned up the park, they put a fence around it, right?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And the squat, unfortunately, the squat fell apart. I want to say it fell apart. Some of the guys got their act together, got jobs; it was enough for them to regroup and get hired. My friend Shelley Metropolitan, I ran into him one day later, and he had a job at the Met as a guard. And he said, "I turned around and I was guarding James's drawing of the riots in Tompkins Square Park in the Met."

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Which was—and he's married now, and he has—he's working as a teacher.

ALEX FIALHO: Cool.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Which is cool, right? But at that point, they had a lot of pressure from the drug dealers, and the drug dealers moved into the squat. And they used to hide when I came. Well, I bought the tarps for the roof. And I bought the heaters, and I did the electrical with them. And then it was pretty much gone. And I was going to say something about that, something creative that came out of that—anyway, it's gone for the moment.

ALEX FIALHO: How did things resolve?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, they didn't. Oh! They shut down the park. And they put a fence around it. And so that took a whole lot of other energy on our part, of arguing about them again with the curfew and now fencing the park 'round entirely with this tall [fence –MVC].

Years before, we had done an art show in the park. We'd been judges at an East Village art show inside the park. So now, they started the Park Conservancy downtown secretly. I was outraged. And then Bob Perl [laughs] and his friends started Art Around the Park. And I was like—I was so angry.

At Art Around the Park they put the canvas up, which I've done myself later, and it was right around the park on this fence that they put to keep people out of the park. And so James and I took two of the spaces and we did this big mural in protest. "We don't want to be here. This is outrageous. They're keeping us out of the park. Our art should be in the park. If you think this is like any kind of kindness to artists, you're wrong."

We had put a skull embedded in the lettering with the Nazi swastika on it. And the [laughs] people who were putting this nice art show together were trying dupe everybody into thinking, Oh, it's all art-friendly, you know. No, these were realtors shutting down the park now for real estate reasons. So one thing fed into the other. They did not like it at all. Yes, getting into more trouble with my art. It was great. I loved it.

So it was just an ongoing—we were just always putting up posters about something, painting somewhere, spray-painting something. It was just—that's what we did.

And then, I wore it on my—I painted my jackets. I might—a lot of times, I used to put like—I had nudes of myself on my jackets, which I thought was very confrontational. And it was, or the baby and James. I put it on there, and—you know. And sometimes, I just had some other, kind of more aggressive thing going on on my clothing.

ALEX FIALHO: How did HIV relate to the Tompkins Square riots?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, just in, in largely—excuse me. That this was—people were dying in the park.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And there's people—you have the film of it. The footage of that park is—people didn't know their names, and they just filmed them as random homeless guys. And a few years later, they were dead. My friend Terry T. [ph] was this incredible guy. They had to go down to city hall, and they were given an audience, right? In the mayor's office. Terry jumped on the table, on one of these long conference tables, and ran up and down. He was like six foot two inches. People were scared of Terry, but he was lovely. Ran up and down on this table, because they were just really handling you and finessing you, and—

Then we waited for meetings with city hall in January, January 1, New Year's Day. We waited for four hours, and they were supposed to come at noon. They didn't show up; they didn't show up. They kept saying they're coming. Everybody stood out there freezing, waiting for this—so by the time Terry got in there, he was like—

So later on, there was a play [*Collateral Damage*, 1991] that Shapiro—what's his name? [Leonard] Shapiro? I have to check that. And there were three parts to it. Vanessa Redgrave did one piece. There was another piece that—actually, a reading of David's text with a hospital bed and one of his monologues. And the third part was footage of the homeless guys in Tompkins Square Park.

So I had relationships with all—the first two pieces. Certainly, the David piece was—sitting in this audience watching this, I can barely contain myself. By the time the third piece came on with the film, now, these generic homeless guys are all people I know. They're not named. Then the filmmaker's name; this one's named; the speaker's named; the person who did the titles is named. They weren't named, and we knew who they were, and I was—and so did the guy who shot the footage. And I was really angry. I'm devastated, because they were half of them dead. Now you're watching your friends being further dehumanized.

And there was another thing that was disturbing, the way that people took on the *handling* of actual people's deaths, and sort of made it into some nameless thing. It was—I don't know. These people are extremely—I cried like—I cried that night. Boy, I was really upset. But—so it was all meshed together. It was all wrapped together and pretty terrible.

Yeah. I love those guys, let me tell you. Terry T. was so great. He was like a big brother to me. Not many people can say they've been sitting drinking in the park with the homeless guys. Frequently.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah, exactly.

[To the side.] No, I won't go there yet.

One thing that came up early in our conversation about your childhood was sort of the stigma of growing up,

"illegitimate child," and then, also the masking that came into your processes early. How did those things around stigma and masking come into your later life, perhaps around HIV/AIDS, perhaps not, but just those early themes that seem like they probably are through-lines to the New York life?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: That's an interesting question. You know, it's impossible to—wow. I have to think about that for a minute.

ALEX FIALHO: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] We can come back to it if you—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, let's come back to it. I could talk a little bit about—one thing that was happening was, as things were going along, I did a lot of sort of self-portraits, or quasi self-portraits, of myself being very harrowed or—and I would situate it in the past, situate it in some other situation, or relate it to something else.

It was really hard for me to talk about what was actually happening. And even found it very difficult, and I think I was just sort of referring to that to own somebody else's suffering. I didn't really know how to manage that. I suppose on some level there's this, again, this hiding behind things. So transfer something that was happening now and relate it to some pain earlier on in my life.

And so there's a sort of masking that, Oh, this problem now is actually about this problem, you know? But I did not want to lie about having AIDS, and I never denied it. What was very difficult early on was for my son, who was still in school. So he really didn't—we couldn't tell him in the first few years. We chose not to tell him. We could, but we chose not to. We told him—he was 12, and he was going to his next school. And—

ALEX FIALHO: Tell him?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, we told him that—he knew we'd been very ill. That was obvious. Well, he didn't know what we'd been ill with. Whether he sensed it, I don't know. It was really hard to have a child [and] be in the hospital. That was like—I had to put him with some friends, and they weren't necessarily the most reliable people that you would want to put your child with, but there were no choices.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. Both you and James had gotten ill?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah. I was having these really terrible headaches. I was ill for a while. I was ill. And this, well, it's all the way back into, you know, '97.

So I was having these headaches, and I had other things going on. And one night, I was hallucinating. And I looked at Crosby, and his head had turned into a balloon and floated off. And I said, "I just watched your head float off. I think I need to go to the hospital." And they looked at me like, What?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Didn't really grasp what was going on. Because I had been ill. I had been laying down, having bad colds, rashes, and just, you know, bad headaches, for months. Headaches for a month. Well, so I go to the hospital, and I get to the hospital, and by the time I got to the hospital, I was not really able to communicate properly, and when they were asking me what my address was, I knew what they were asking me, and I knew what my address was, but when I spoke, I gave them my mother's address in Portsmouth, where I grew up.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And I could—I knew, and I kept saying, "No, that's not it." So they didn't know whether I was having some sort of psychotic episode or what, and I was hallucinating fairly vividly. And so they had the psychiatrist down to see me, and then somebody did some blood work, and I had meningitis. I had cryptococcal meningitis.

And really, I was seeing all kinds of things. Paintings were coming to life.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And Mother Cabrini turned into Paul McCartney. It was like, What! I was looking at this painting, and a bicycle came in from outside the painting, and, you know. I was enjoying that at that point, but—so—

And then, I said, "Well, my husband's been having this headache." So they said, "You'd better bring him in." Well, it's not supposed to be something you can catch, right? In comes James. Yep. Meningitis, cryptococcal meningitis. And so they really didn't know if they would be able to get us to live through it.

So they're not even on the AIDS page yet. They're just looking at the meningitis, which—they're so nonplussed because we both have this thing that's not supposed to be something you can catch from each other.

So, okay, now we're in there, and it's probably—really miserable thing. Meningitis. Very painful, miserable thing. So they start—they had these experimental things they were giving us, and at a certain point within that, they tested us for HIV/AIDS, and came back, and this guy sat next to me and he said, "Well," he was so overly dramatic, but not really. He's like, "Oh, now, the misery begins." And it's like, Oh, thanks for sharing, sitting there with—No, I'm not going to do this with you.

And so, yeah, then James, too, he went. We're sitting in the hospital. First of all, we're just trying to get through the meningitis, so that was—and while I was sitting there, once they had sort of got that under control—and I was allergic to Bactrim, and I blew up like—oh, I mean, it's—if it could go wrong, it went wrong. Whatever it was, it was completely insane.

I sat there and I started doing embroidery, because I was like, I have to keep—I can't just sit here and do nothing. So I was embroidering a Gauguin scene. I was just freehanding it from the book in front of me. So, yeah, so we were there for quite a long time.

And then, it was just at the start; they had just found the first—they'd just found Viread [prescription drug] and they gave us that, and we started to respond. But our [T-cells –MVC] were down. We had like a 64, I think, hundred. We were like—

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah. So—I don't usually talk about that very much, because, essentially, I'm still here.

So for me to complain about it, when I lost people [who] had no choice, no chance. Because they were thinking, Oh, Crixevan [prescription drug]. You're going to be really sick taking this. And I just thought, No, no. I'm going to be alive taking this. It's irrelevant. I mean, you've got to take a lot of pills. Big deal.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So, yeah. So I don't know how we got there, to that point. It's just—

ALEX FIALHO: We were talking about, I think, the masking, and the stigma—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yes. So then there was a certain amount of—

ALEX FIALHO: That was '97, you said?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, '97. So not sharing it with my son for a couple of years, not sharing it with his public, and making choices about how you present this, or how don't you present it, or—you know. So if anybody asked me, I told them; but I didn't go out of my way to tell people. And then, at some point—and different magazines asked me if I wanted to talk to them, which I'm fine to do.

But that following year, when I came out of the hospital, I was so weak, and I lost so much weight. I got really thin. Not as thin as I was going to get, but—I couldn't hold a paintbrush. And I had two flowerpots, and I started—I painted the flowerpots, just to be able to try and pick up the brush and start working with that. And then I had my garden, which I'm really fond of, on Sixth Street and Avenue B, community garden. So I planted bulbs; and then I started painting my garden. And the idea was, it was like King Arthur; your health is tied to the land, right?

So if—I thought if I could get through this first winter, from this first moment, then, I'll—so I set little goals, and I did a lot of paintings, which was non-typical, of gardens, of the garden. I'd take my easel over there, and they got bigger and bigger, the paintings I did there, and paint the garden, and just spend days in there, and really literally recuperating, and—because painting's extremely physical.

And then I would listen to Gerard Manley Hopkins poetry, and paint, and think about Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetry, for whatever reason. I remember somebody said, "Oh, it's sensuous, not sensual." But I disagree. I think it's fairly erotic. Anyway, so I'm in this—feeling myself in there. Nature's a theme in my work. It has always been of interest to me. And I've always felt most comfortable in the country like that, or in the sea. So that was restorative, if you like. So I painted a lot there. And I was going to say something else, and I've forgotten about it, but—oh, yeah, just, again, I go back to that idea of, it's very physical.

And one thing people don't know, because I also sort of—I swam a lot, and I was fairly athletic when I was a kid, although I have bad eyesight. I couldn't hit a ball. You have to be fairly physically fit, in some respects, to paint well, for me. Not everybody. I mean, there are people who paint who barely make any motion. But for me, I

actually, I would feel the muscles in my arm and my shoulder, and holding a brush up, not to put your hand down on the canvas, to do the finer pieces, this is all physical energy.

[Blower in the background.]

So it's a really physical experience, not being well and trying to do that.

And I did a notebook through that. I had a layout pad that I worked in, so I'd do little bits and—like little ideas, in the layout pad. And I tried to conceptualize the illness as something that I could see beauty in. And I did try to do that, because I had to have it live within me. It's like, can't hate something that's now part of yourself.

So I was trying to really work with that, and it doesn't work very well. I'll be honest. But I tried to go through that process. And it was an interesting moment.

ALEX FIALHO: What was that like for you to be not well, and trying to create, and having perhaps conflicting feelings there?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, it is conflicting feelings, of course. And one of the things that happens—and I'm just talking about how sexual I was, and all of a sudden you can't be that. And so that—so beauty, eroticism, physicality, that all goes into your work. That's who you are. You're channeling that directly into your work. That's who you are. Now, all of a sudden, you're cut off from that, because you cannot have that—you don't have the *right* to seduce people. You don't have the *right* to flirt. It's dangerous. You cannot. Now, you do have the right to flirt, of course, but in that moment, in your mind, all of a sudden, there's this huge wrench. And I talked about this before, when we did that talk [for Living Positive & Long-Term Surviving: An Artist Perspective, a Visual AIDS program, 2015 –AF].

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: You—a million ways we interact with other people, and we flirt with them. Just buying your coffee. Just, you use your physicality. You use your sexuality. You use your charm. And now, it's like, this is a lie. This is not here. I can't do that. I'm not allowed to do that. So there's a weird mask going on there.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So now you've really shut down. You really don't know what to do with it; you don't know quite where to go, and it's, like, constantly. And then, if you've lost a lot of weight, which I did, not so much the first time, but I was ill. I looked ill. Everybody can read it. So now there's this other layer of hiding behind—you can't hide. You're now starting to think everybody's seeing it, so going out is fairly traumatic.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: It's a traumatic event. Especially, one minute, you're bouncing around—for me, I was fairly attractive; I was very attractive at one point—and now, I'm not. It's like, *Boom*. Here's these two worlds. That's ended. So now when you try and—so now, the self-portrait, of course, becomes something completely different. Can't do that person. That person can't be there.

Even just, what does it mean when you try and—and as I say, to me, there was this incredibly sensual, not just sensuous, act in painting. And now there's some, you know, distance between me and that.

At a certain point, I found a lot of refuge in the painting; I allowed myself to have that. I started painting in oil. I'd been painting in acrylics for a long time. Oil painting's much easier to work with than acrylic. Everybody thinks it's the opposite. So easy. It gives you so much ability to move things around. So I was working with that, and I did a show, which was portraits of people I knew; and then, I had their DNA, and this was in 2001.

I was working on it through that period, painting people I knew in a more lifelike, in a more refined, painterly way. And I had the DNA, and I had a molecule of what the essence might be. Sort of played with the idea of, if you invited somebody to be recreated in the future, what would they—how would they want themselves represented? What would they want in this—well, how would you signal, if they found this in 1,000 years, that this person was a journalist, or this person was a painter, or this person was, you know, this? So I was working with that, and, of course, really, I framed it in the public sense of it being about genetics, and genetic engineering, and genetic reproduction. But in many respects, it's, how do you preserve yourself? How do you preserve your friends? And then it had this sort of memorial quality to it.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow. [Affirmative.]

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: But, yeah, and who do you choose? That was one of the things, was the idea of preserving people in painting. Who do you choose? Who do you save if you can only save a few people? And the

drugs were so expensive, and it was much more of a thing—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So I was worried about that. And then nine-one-one [9/11] happened when my show was up. The second day my show was up, nine-one-one happened, so it got shut down, basically, because we were below 14th Street, right?

ALEX FIALHO: 9/11?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: They shut everything down. Yeah. And all these people were coming into the gallery who had been in the World Trade Center. And so the work now took on another layer of mourning.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So it was really, really hard on me, because I had—instead of producing something beautiful that was trying to cope with this, and here I got hit again with this other funerary aspect.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah, yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And the odds of people's DNA in them—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And so—

ALEX FIALHO: Let's take a pause and—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: —and dive into that.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah.

[Audio break.]

ALEX FIALHO: So let's stay for a minute on that exhibition from 2001 and talk about the work in and of itself first. Where was the show, and what did you show?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, it was called Phillip Allen Gallery, and it was, again, my landlady had a space, and we talked her into making it into a gallery. So she was—so then we told her who to show. And it was mainly people that came out of her buildings, because there were so many artists there. But I did the show there, and that was on wood, fine wood, not expensive wood, but fine-surfaced wood. It was all oil. And I—

ALEX FIALHO: What was the gallery? I'm sorry, I didn't write it.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Phillip Allen.

ALEX FIALHO: Okay.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, so I had—sorry, I just lost my train of thought there. So I was painting on wood, and I did a lot of the underpainting in blue, as opposed to brown. Normally, you use a burnt sienna to do a lifelike flesh color, but I was using the blue, which hearkened back to a lot of years before, and it brings out a different, more ethereal tone. Not everybody has that in their skin tone, so I couldn't do it for everybody, but where I could, I used it.

It was an interesting thing to do portraiture straightforwardly, and to make people look good, as opposed to making them look bad. Because this was the idea of, if they were to come back, you would want them to be seen in the future at their best. So it's a sort of—it's a weird idea. What would happen? Which traits would you enhance if you were to come back? And the idea of, who would you save? And if there's insurance on your loved ones, who do you insure?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Does a businessman insure his wife, or the trophy wife? I don't know. Which of his children? Obviously, that has a much broader—

What happens if we hang onto—whose DNA do we sample? And then, as I was doing that show, there was

actually somebody selling celebrity DNA. Jennifer Lopez was available. And do you make sex slaves? So it was an interesting show. I had a lot of—you know. So for me, it was interesting. But, of course, underneath all of that is, I lost people, and I wanted to preserve—an attempt at, you know, I could have saved them. How could I have saved them? So there's always that regret that—the timeline.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: We couldn't save them. I've thought a million times, What if somebody had not taken the drugs that they took that were so toxic? Would that have bought them any time?

ALEX FIALHO: Who did you paint?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, that was so—that was Harry from Max Fish, Harry Drudz [Max Fish bartender], Carlo McCormick, Ingrid Dinter, Crosby, James. Who else was in there? Sur Rodney (Sur). He's got—I gave him the painting. I had him with his shirt off. It was brilliant. And I—I can't think. Who else would I do? It was people from different walks of life. But sort of from my circle, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How did you make the DNA?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, how I represented—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: —that was with plastic strips. I printed the paper onto plastic so it was translucent, because I wanted it to communicate to people that it had been made eternal. Right, plastic. And then I also put it into little pots that were—like the Dead Sea Scrolls were in earthenware pots. That was sort of one of the things that actually survived, because technology's pretty frail. So I was putting the DNA in the pots so that they would—and, of course, really, the molecules, [it's] whimsy, really. But what does that look like?

And sometimes I gave the boys pink, and sometimes, I gave the girls blue. So it was these very soft, pastel colors, which were all about gender, and they all had the gender mixed up, and some of them had a bit of blue and pink. I don't think anybody caught that at all, so—but that was there. Everything was in these gender-specific colors. Yeah, which is my fun, for me.

ALEX FIALHO: And then 9/11 happened?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Then 9/11 happened, and basically, nobody could get to the show except for people who were already down there.

And people who would come in—because it had this—it was a very lovely show with these—it was meant to be very light. I didn't use any dark backgrounds. And it was a very ethereal show already. And it was somewhere between—a cross between what a showroom would be if you were going to preserve somebody's DNA. Where would you go? I almost—I wanted to have a nurse there. But the environment was sort of this very calm environment, so people were coming in who had been traumatized, and sitting in the gallery, and crying, and it was really terrible again.

Yeah. And it was a little bit, it was like, Oh, sugar, I just made this beautiful show, talking about this kind of death, this kind of immortalizing, saving people, and these people, they've just lost people, and would we save them? And there's always that in your heart, isn't there?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: I'm very drawn to history, which is—the dissertation I'm about to work on is based on—is set in the 18th century. French women writers in the 18th century. My focus is political economics, which nobody has done yet, because they don't usually think that women [were] political economists back then. It hasn't been looked for, but it's there.

ALEX FIALHO: Let's talk a little bit about that project. Zoom forward.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: We're in 2016.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, so I'm doing—I'm working on my dissertation for my French Ph.D. I passed my orals. I'd been to Columbia [University] and did a master's—

ALEX FIALHO: In poetry?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: —did a B.A. Yeah, I did a B.A. in English there. I wrote poetry. I won the Van Rensselaer Poetry Prize when I was at Columbia, which is like—

ALEX FIALHO: The big one.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: —the big one, yeah. It's a very nice prize to win. And that surprised me. I know I'm a good poet, but I didn't expect to win it. So that was lovely. And then I found out I had—it's like my things that related to illness with me—the day I found out I won that, I just had my appendix out.

ALEX FIALHO: Oh, wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So I said, Oh, I gave up my appendix, and I got this lovely prize. I was coming out of my drug thing. And so that was a lovely thing, to win that.

And then I did my master's thesis on Wordsworth through a political-economic lens, if you like, sort of examining his role and the way he writes about women in his poetry, and unpacking that, de-shaming them, right? Because it's not his intension, in my opinion. I don't want to go into it too much.

And then, now, I've been at CUNY Graduate Center, and I've done my orals, and I write about film, as well. But I'm doing this moment, and I think it—again, I started looking at 18th-century woman painters, and I was really interested in that, and I have always been. I like the way they paint, and I like everything to do with the French Revolution as well, because I'm a hell-raiser myself, and it suits me to be in that moment.

And they're so interested in what they—everything around them has to do with what they look like and what's going on and this leveling out of society, which—I'm always interested in how people come from the bottom up, but also from the top down. Marie Antoinette is wearing, everybody says, this shepherd's dress; it's actually a peasant outfit. They sort of rehabilitate the peasants so they can become voting citizens. So the economy of that period is this Montesquieu, this Adam Smith, and the French women writers are writing in response to that in their novels, which is, sort of—my work is unpacking that.

ALEX FIALHO: What's the political economist angle of it?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, you know, 18th-century ties. Adam Smith, and again, this goes, actually, back into my own work as an artist. Adam Smith wrote *The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* and I hope I got that right.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And basically, him and Rousseau, they're tying morality and ethics and feelings to money and capitalism, which is so far from how we think about it today. So [Smith] actually believed that it was going to be a good thing, in many respects, while Rousseau started to see that it wasn't, right. Rousseau saying no. Rousseau was also killing the art. Adam Smith is perceiving this as being progressive, for the 18th century, is generally progressive. And then you have Montesquieu, the French economist, who has this theory of *doux commerce,* which is to say that commerce, in the broader sense of conversation, as well as trade, brings peace. So international trade is therefore a good thing, and the more you trade, the less there'll be war.

And if it—and then [Bernard] Mandeville, who says private vice is public virtues, which is to say that everybody's petty vices and vanities drive the economy. And so they'll work harder and they'll be productive because they want to have what he's got in this one, and that society as a whole will move forward, and the economy will flourish, and everybody's living standards will go up. So it's a very unusual set of ideas, and all of it tied to feelings and affects and aesthetics as motives of how this operates. That man is essentially sympathetic, empathetic, as opposed to a Hobbesian view of man as creature. So I like it. It's an interesting moment to be there.

And here are these women, who are 50 percent of the population or more, [who] are viewed as peripheral to the economy, even though they are actually writing and speaking. For example, Françoise de Graffigny in *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* is speaking directly to Montesquieu's Persian letters and formulating an economic theory. She's only seen as a philosopher, at best, and they don't look for that in it, but it's there. Isabelle de Charrière, she has theories embedded in her novels. So.

ALEX FIALHO: And what's the process by which you're researching and then dissertating?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, this is a—complete immersions. I go to museums and I look at—amongst other things, I look at paintings. And reread paintings, because typically, people—this is the same as always with gender—people read and gender what they're looking at before they actually pay attention to what they're looking at. Although [there are] developed theories that follow along specific lines of gender. So historians are not free of that.

What I try to do is look at things with a fresher eye, contextualize what I'm seeing. So I'm doing close reading; I'm looking at history. You obviously have to have a really good working knowledge of political economics the preceding years. So basically, I went back to the 12th century, and I've tracked trade and commerce through that period to understand it, and I've—so I read. I've read a lot.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: As you can imagine. And then now it's bringing my own insights and trying to see—reread something a lot for the economic signals that are embedded in the text, which are pretty much on the surface. And that's not to say that these are—economics are like domestic economics. Although that shouldn't be taken as minimal. And again, for me, very significant that, the laws around bastardy, the economics of that. At certain points, divorce laws, property laws are all on a shifting scale. Who can have what? So, inheritance laws. So it's a sort of—still reflecting in current times, consistently reflecting in current times. As I think I said yesterday, the old taboos around bastardy, which were embedded into the legal laws, are still there. Gender? Things are so gendered.

ALEX FIALHO: Let's talk a little bit about your time at Columbia, too.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: That was really fun. And I did some plays while I was up there, and I worked with some people. We did a play—

ALEX FIALHO: What time frame, and what was your project?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So, well, I did a play in, I think, 2000—wait a minute. 2010. Somewhere in there, 2011. With David Gerson, and we did—and I've just forgotten the name of it, but I will remember it in a second. But essentially it was—I had the lead, and it wasn't an actual Columbia production, but he just wanted—he was a Columbia student, and he just wanted to do a production. And he'd gotten his hands on the rights to do the play, and I—and it was a—we performed it in the round, and I basically was the lead, and I was on stage for about two hours. And I wanted to know whether I could carry something like that.

Now what the hell was it called? It wasn't called *Faith*. Was it called *Faith*? I'll remember it in a minute; I'll Google myself and I'll tell you. But this was about a woman who lost her son to terrorism. She was a college professor, an atheist, and she loses her son to terrorism, and then she has a sort of quasi-religious experience under laboratory conditions. So she goes to have a—anyway it was a really interesting thing for me to do.

ALEX FIALHO: *On Religion.*

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: *On Religion.* Yeah. And—

ALEX FIALHO: 2007.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: 2007. Longer ago than I thought. But that was one of the first times I really tried to do a major theater piece that was serious. I got some nice bits of review for that as well, thank you. And—which was very nice, always. But that was really an interesting thing for me to do, because you push yourself a little bit. Because I was also a little bit anxious about my memory. And inhabiting it and inhabiting another body, right. And being so public.

One of the reviews said, "Rail-thin [righteous" –MVC], and I thought, Oh, "rail-thin righteous," and then, Yeah, okay. But not like unhealthily rail thin, no, it's—it was good. I used it in the role. So we adapt, right; we adapt to these things. And so I loved that, and I loved being there and doing the writing and being with these creative people doing writing up there. Getting information.

And then I basically think when I started, when I went back to school, I was about 21 mentally. And I'm now about, what is it, like 10 years aged; I must be about 31 now in the mind, right?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. So we're sort of going back in talking—just sort of covering some projects we want to be sure to cover on the record.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: How about *Funky Shui*?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, *Funky Shui* it is. So again, after 9/11.

ALEX FIALHO: 2003, at the Prosper Gallery?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yes, I was—I wanted to fix New York. Feng shui, right, is—you put these things up in

the corners of the thing. So I had some very big ideas that I was going to make some very big pieces of sculpture, because I'm never faint hearted. If I can make it bigger, I will, generally speaking.

And then it morphed a little bit into, I started filming, and I was using video and referencing some of the things that I loved, like Agnès Varda's *Cléo from 5 to 7*, *L'Étranger*, the film that was a really old Camus, made with, I think, Marcello Mastroianni. But there's a scene where the woman's walking through the—so I was using these different things.

And there's one scene in that where I had made—I made this wraith costume, and—so I had different people in the wraith costume. And I filmed James as Dirk Bogarde, who had appeared in *Death in Venice*, with the wraith behind him. Because we were in the—we were very much aware of a plague and our mortality. So it's a reference there that there's constantly this, you know, figure going through. So again, when I think about things, it's like when we think about masking things. I didn't really directly speak about AIDS, but I'm speaking about AIDS. It happened to be that my trigger was 9/11. I'm still doing the same work. It's—but I just didn't—sometimes I can't even realize that I'm doing it; it's just constantly there. And I—

ALEX FIALHO: What is the work?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: The work is, it's remembering people, remembering just that that shadow of death is there, or—and now it's in this white ghostly form. Kind of lovely, it's okay in some respects, but this idea that this plague is just sitting behind us the whole time. Because it's really not over. It's still there, and that's why part of—like the *Death in Venice*. It doesn't matter what the plague is that takes your loved ones, that inhabits your world. It's the same horror. It has that same pain.

And if you communicate that pain with some sort of lyricism—because it's almost impossible to do without trying to contain it in some way. You can't just—it would just be a bloody mess on the floor if you didn't. You have to try and represent *how* you're coming to terms with it. And I think I said this before. Trying to embrace the disease in some way that doesn't decimate the object of the disease, which is to say, I—can't be so hateful that it's disfigured people that you loved in your memory. You have to have that—your life, that spirituality, and I'm not particularly religious in that sense, but I have to have that. Behind everything. It has to become something more—they have to be remembered in a more beautiful way without actually saying, It's okay, because it's not okay, you know? [Love is still love. –MVC]

So the frailty, just keep going on with your life, and it just keeps going, it's—when you're just going and you're doing things, and yet here's this thing hovering around behind you. And I think that's the work of literature and art, to sort of hold those things suspended in a timeless fashion, where time is frozen, but in movement.

There's a poem by Tennyson and he says something about "the nail fell from the door." And it—the phrase implies the nail fell once, but it fell—it's continually falling, and that's—when you're trying to speak of this memory of people, they were dead, but they're still present; it's still a presence. They're not dead, because they're with you, yeah? So I made the stills of that and I photographed—

And coming back to where I made the big murals, I just bought the big murals; now I was making them myself. And I chose not to use—I actually just used commercial printers, which people weren't really doing then. I found domestic printers, and I sent my work to them. But I photographed people in places that were in the Lower East Side, but I changed the setting sufficiently to make it ambiguous, that it could've been anywhere. It could've been, you know, Rome; it could've been France; it could've been England; it could've been just—it's just a garden with this figure going through it, or the colors have sort of—so that was part of that, and I'm getting very windy about that, but—

My figure in that movie, she's wearing a Stephen Sprouse men's suit and an Yves Saint Laurent scarf. So—and sunglasses. And so she had to look the glamour of Jackie Onassis, right, the Americanism, but then she also has this other—what's this other alienness [of the headscarf –MVC]? So we were in the middle of 9/11, right, as I'm thinking, What does it mean if this other Arab figure—but of course, it's whatever it is. So I've de-gendered her somewhat and played around with that, because Yves Saint Laurent always put his women in men's suits, right. So there's that going on. And yeah, so that was—so I had a lot of fun with that.

And I shot things—and I altered the lighting in a lot of it, and I played with some of it in post-production. But I also painted from my own, when I would do it myself, paint it myself, like with [gad –MVC] colors. So everybody thought they were done in the After Effects, but they weren't; they were just straight in the camera. They just shot stuff straight, and it looked like it had been digitally messed with, but it wasn't. So I kind of liked that. It was a fun thing to do.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: It seems like you're always playing with processes.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: And saturation and levels of color and—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, I love color, and which is sort of how I came to do the David thing. Then I'm, like, a colorist.

ALEX FIALHO: Let's talk about that for a little while.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So that came to me sort of accidentally. James had another—we had our health things going on. James had another job coming. [… –MVC] I knew what David had said to me about my own painting. He'd looked at some paintings and, "I liked that; I like that and I like that." So—

ALEX FIALHO: So this is your comic book with David—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, with—

ALEX FIALHO: David Wojnarowicz, *7 Miles a Second*.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yes, *7 Miles a Second*, yeah. And James Romberger. And—

ALEX FIALHO: What was each person's role, and how did that develop?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: James and—David wanted James to do a comic with him, right. And so this was before David had been diagnosed, and it was going to be—have a happy ending, which I think I already mentioned a little bit. But James and David got together to plan this thing.

David just had loads and loads of piles of pages, and James took the pages. David typed up these things, and cut them, and then Sellotaped [British brand of transparent tape] them back together since he had this really long scroll. And then he'd sit with David and say, "What about this, this, and this?" And the two of them would chew over it and say, "Okay, I like this," and James would cut David's texts up and mix them up together and, you know? So and they got on very well. They'd they go sit at David's and do that.

And of course, then the Reverend Wildman stuff was all happening, because this took quite a lot of—we didn't anticipate that David was going to die; it wasn't any great rush to do it. It was a labor-intensive thing. And so a lot was going on.

So they did the first part, and James did the second, did the drawing for the second part. Even instead of talking to David, he drew it while we were in Belgium, because that gave us a little break from New York. We did a lot of work there; we worked a lot in Belgium. And then, as I said, David had his diagnosis while we were in Belgium. And—

ALEX FIALHO: His HIV-positive diagnosis?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah. Yeah, he'd had—he tested positive, then negative, then positive, so it was really horrible.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Because the testing was so bad at that time, it wasn't always reliable. People were getting wrong—they were getting wrong results; it was really nasty. So you had one positive. But then, just to be sure, did the second one; came back negative; third one positive, you know. And then people were having to be retested. So it was a whole nightmare.

So the third part, David was dead. Tom Rauffenbart gave James the diaries, his diaries, and James culled from David's diaries. Which is horrible. I keep saying this word "horrible." I guess it's one word for all of this. Poor James, poor David. I mean, David's dead; that's about as bad as it can get. Had a horrible time dying, and now James is reading his close friend's diaries and being immersed in this terribly sad thing. And to me, I thought James was really brave to manage to work with the material and not lose the plot sort of thing.

ALEX FIALHO: At what point is he reworking with this material?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: After David's dead; it was about a year afterwards.

ALEX FIALHO: Okay.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, it was about a year. I think it's a year, give or take.

So he did the drawings, and then he got another job, another comic book to do, and he said to me, "Oh," you know, "why don't—how about you do a page just to see what you'd do?" So I did a page, and he said, "Well, this is really nothing I would've done, nothing like this." And, "Do you want to try a few more pages?" So I did a few more pages, and he was like, "Just go for it. This is much more interesting than anything I would've done."

And so it was a very daunting thing to do, because I didn't want to let him down. James is one thing; David, I couldn't let David down. But meanwhile I didn't have any feedback, obviously, from him. So I just thought, Well, I'm going to make this as tough as I can, and I'm going to do something that speaks to the work and speaks to the material. I don't think it needs to be like anything else. I don't think it looked like any other comic.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Since then, people have done a little bit of, sort of taken some of that work, but at the time nothing looked like it at all, and they were completely—it was a completely shocking thing that I was doing.

I ran around and I bought—I couldn't find the colors that I wanted, and I found them going into children's paint boxes. So I just was buying, every time I saw a kids' paint box, buying these cheap watercolors. Because they had some of these colors that it's taboo for grownups. Grownups, you can't buy them for grownups; you can only have these brilliant pinks and really wrong blues and—and there was a color that David used in his own work; it was a Utrecht paint, and I tried to buy it in Belgium. I couldn't find it anywhere. Just I couldn't find it, and there was nowhere to get it. But I wanted that color, and so then I found it in these kids' paint boxes. So as I was using the kids' paint boxes, and I—

When James and, of course, [Crosby –MVC] were going to sleep in the living room, and I go in the bedroom to work at night, I would work all night.

So I was having—sort of structuring different pieces of the story with a certain palette. And sometimes it was the real colors; like the downstairs at Nathan's was these horrible [gad –MVC] colors of, you know, the red, yellow, and green. I knew that because we shot our reggae band shots down there because it was the colors of the Jamaican flag. But then I put the woman in this bright pink to interact wrongly with the thing, and I had to pick an outfit for David. I had to pick David's recognizable costumes, to try to put him in his own clothes as much as I could. Except for we wanted him in a red T-shirt for some moments, because that was what David used in his own work.

And then sometimes I took pieces from David's work. There was a part where he walks into the water, and I did the map coloring around the rocks. Just it's small, but it's there. This stray-dog section is bleached out. It's like I knew that neighborhood and I've been up there. I've been there and been dehydrated myself. So that's my own experience.

And New York has a lot of colors that we bypass; we bypass the colors. When you're on the subway, there was—like the poles on Second Avenue. They were bright purple and these really strange blues, and they were all painted over because people had graffitied them. And in these really loud colors. I mean, they're there in our daily lives and we walk past them. So I put them back in.

And then sometimes I just played with color and—each piece has a different narrative and each piece has a different color sensation. I use the color emotionally. So it has to do—it has a resonance that has to do with tapping emotion. I've written a lot about color theory and—at different times after that.

ALEX FIALHO: What else about your process with that is worth talking about?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, I played Gene Pitney some nights and cried and got drunk, because it was really over the top to do it. Especially when I was trying to get right inside of places that David and I had been. His story is so terrible, and my own childhood, you started to hear, wasn't, you know, stellar, which is part of why David and I were friends.

And so that's really trying to get inside of David's texts and where he—what he saw, and the people we knew—and so I'd get pretty upset. Since sometimes I'm sitting there painting, and I'm having a good old sob, drinking, have to sit there, play music, play some really stupid music. Sometimes I played music to trigger myself to get into this other head, because I just couldn't go there. Because it was really trying to summon, get back in touch with him and really understand his words.

And then the other part of that is that one doesn't want to over—you have to enhance the language with the drawing and the color; you don't want to fight the text. You don't want to diminish the text. So you really want to do things that are going to push the text forward.

And that's part of it with comics; it's sort of this collaborative thing, or it's a multidimensional thing in the same way that film is. You have to think in all these different layers, and you're coming to it—comics are more structured than film, than underground film at least, because you're working within this contained space. It begins with a color; it begins here and it ends here. What's the narrative of that going to be with the color? If it's horror that you're talking about, what are the limits of what you can show before it's unbearable?

And at times with that, there's like—we had issues with showing David as the child looking through the door at the prostitute who's got the scars. Because we couldn't really show David as a child, so I put the focus onto the woman's scars. But James and I stayed in some of those hotels. We were out there and staying in them; it was, oh, man. We went to places and opened the bedding, and it was just, like, full of vomit, and it was just, Oh, my God, where are you now? And the doors are cut off at the bottom. So that's—and even with the David, some of the David stuff, some of it's a little bit from us, so we're squishing in stories a little bit.

ALEX FIALHO: Anything else about David to have on record?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Just, he gave James the jacket that's in that book. He had this brown leather jacket, which he said was his "invisible jacket." Right. So he could wear this jacket, and people wouldn't notice him. Because they would come to openings early and leave early, just come in and then be gone, right. And he'd watch people and hear things. And so he had this brown leather jacket and his jeans, and he was, you know. And so at some point he gave the jacket to James. He said, "Here, this—you need it; smarten up." This thing was so beaten up it was—and he's giving it to James to, like, smarten him up. No, David, this isn't going to work. But that was lovely of him; he gave him this jacket that he had worn all the time.

And so when we did the book, we photographed that for the inside—the first one, the one we did with DC, we photographed that with—and pushed the photography, to make it [have] more contrast. And it looks like an elephant. And he had that elephant skeleton in his house that Karen Finley gave him.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. What was that?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: It was a baby elephant skeleton, and there's a Polaroid of it, I think, in the first version of the book. So in the book, I have him in that jacket, as well as it's there, so. But, yeah, he gave that jacket to James.

ALEX FIALHO: Do you still have it?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Where is it?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: In my storage. Yeah. David, that jacket. But it looked like an elephant.

But selling the book was really hard. Just to say, when were with Grace Borgenicht, her husband was [friends with –MVC] Randolph Hearst, Jr., John Randolph Hearst, Jr. And—is it John? William Randolph Hearst. We'll check it. He sent it to all the publishers that he knew, and—his name was Binky, Bunky—and it was coming back, "I'm sorry, Bunky; we can't use it; very interesting but can't publish it." Can't publish it. He had a stack of rejection letters.

And then Jenette Kahn saw it at Exit; Exit Art sent it—sent Jenette Kahn from DC Comics to see the show of the black and whites at P.P.O.W. And she said, "Yeah, I'm telling them to just do it as is. Whatever you tell them to do." And that was sort of the rare moment that we did get to do exactly what we wanted. Or it wouldn't have been done if she hadn't had the courage to do that. So, yeah. But they—I talked about David already.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: He was so sweet to us. Can't think of what to say about him. He had that very deep voice, and he could be very funny. And James said—there was an article somebody in the *Voice* wrote after he died: "David never drove." I'm like, What are you talking about? David drove all the time. And when we—the second version, we put him driving with all the junk that he had on the front of his dashboard, because he had all these figurines and things, and James always used to say, "If you stop, that's going to go on your forehead. You're going to wind up with Goofy on your forehead," you know. But he had so much junk. So he was kind of a funny guy. But he loved driving. He was totally a road-trip guy. David, road trip, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Cool.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Always driving. And just the last thing about that, the film that went to—that was pulled; there's no extant film of what it actually was originally.

ALEX FIALHO: Is this *Fire in the Belly*?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah. It's not what it was.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. Although you showed some of the early material.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, we've had—

ALEX FIALHO: That informed that project at Ground Zero.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yes, yeah. Yeah, but we had *You Killed Me First*; but James was over at David's and saw the finished version, and he felt sick. He said it was—and I watched this thing and I was, like, sick. It was so moving and moving around and so crazy.

ALEX FIALHO: This is *You Killed Me First*?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: No, this was *Fire in My Belly—Where Evil Dwells*, and that has me with Crosby running around in it. Crosby's in his stroller. And Tommy Turner grabs Crosby when he's a baby.

ALEX FIALHO: That's a David video?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: That's a David movie, with Tommy Turner, yeah. *Where Evil Dwells*. Yeah, and that's quite epic, the beginning of that's really epic. Everybody was tied up to a train—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: —an abandoned train. They're all upside down in bandages and naked, and there we are, me and my little baby, running around in hell, with the flames. And I'm saying, "Is this is going to be all right? We're not going to blow up any minute, are we?" "Oh, no, survival research has that—oh, no." All of a sudden I'm in the middle of this, and it's like, *Boom!* And I've got the baby. I really was running [laughs].

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. How about Grade A? Let's talk a little bit about that.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, Grade A was really, you know, Do we have to get Greg back in? He'd been living with Felix Pène du Bois, the granddaughter of the elder Pène du Bois.

And so we decided we were going to do some recording, so we then we got that band back together. And one of the places that was really special for us was, we played at Cave Canem; it was a house band. And Cave Canem later turned into Lucky Cheng's, right, and it was Hayne Suthon [who] was there running that.

But, so with that place, it was kind of one of those—it was a casualty early on with the whole AIDS thing. Because it had a swimming pool. A bathhouse downstairs, and you just used to get in the bathhouse, and it was kind of like, No, you can't have it. And then they drained it, and we actually played in the drained bath. But it was all—the bartenders were all transsexuals and we just, when it closed at 4:00, then we'd just stay there all night.

Really crazy, because you could just run from one side of the street to another entrance. It was like a warren that you could run in and out and go all the way through. Yeah, so I was—it was the house band. And by this time, it was just not doing Punk; we were doing much more.

ALEX FIALHO: Cool.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Much more song songs. And that's how one of the recordings with them, that we made, actually, in Belgium, wound up on David's answering machine. From that band. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How do you see yourself now looking back, in terms of dance, singing, performing, painting, gallery-making? Is it all one practice? Do they feel discrete?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: No, and I write, as well. I mean, I do poetry, yeah, writing as well. So never—and then I was acting, and doing some sort of more crazy acting.

ALEX FIALHO: You've sort of done most traditional mediums, almost.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yes, yeah, and a few not-so-traditional ones [laughs].

ALEX FIALHO: Yes, true. And probably none of them traditionally.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: No. Kind of not. Exactly. I think it's all part of the same narrative, really. I do. And that's partly what was going on in the East Village back then and why we were friends with David. He was

making films. He was doing writing. He was making the art. He was playing in bands. That was—that moment allowed us to do a lot of different things. And here I am, this many years later, still doing all these things. Sometimes gets me into trouble, as people want to, you know, pigeonhole you.

It's like, "Oh, I didn't—oh, you're an actor, no." That's part of all of this thing, part of how you tell these stories. The last ones that I was doing with Nessa Norich, who trained at Jacques Lecoq—she teaches at Barnard, when she chooses to. We did a *Hamlet*. And I was Gertrude. But I played her like Joan Collins. But because of the nature of Jacques Lecoq, it's all body language. So it was incredibly [mimes physical movement]—so where our religion had been all memory and cerebral, this was all gag jokes, which is great when you're, you know, 21. But at this point in my life, I'm there with all these kids.

We went to New Orleans and were doing these plays down there. And they were like, "Oh, now we're going to do our exercises." [Laughs.] It's like, "Well, we want to carry you like this, and you're going to be carried like this." Then I did a version of "Rich Bitch" by Die Antwoord. But it was with my own lyrics. So it was *really* fun. So it sort of comes back circle. I get to do my Punk thing back in here with some dancing and all of this. So it's kind of back in there.

ALEX FIALHO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And a little bit of feminism and a little bit of—

ALEX FIALHO: Do you like any of them best?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Do I like any of them best? No. Sometimes I like to write. Sometimes I really—I jones for painting, sometimes. When I wasn't painting for a long time, I really started to ache to paint. But I do like taking pictures. I do like making the big prints. I love doing it because I get such a kick out of just the color of it all.

So if I had to say, it's the color. I love the color; I love the texture. And I love freaking people out [laughs]. Which is, shake it up, you know. So all of these practices, in the end, have, like, want to make people see something they hadn't seen before, in a different way. And oftentimes, to be disruptive. Like when I made people cry when I was a little girl when I sang, I can make them cry now with my painting. So it's—

ALEX FIALHO: Different approaches.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Different approaches.

ALEX FIALHO: For our last little bit here, I want to sort of return to the themes of HIV/AIDS. You were fantastic in sharing your perspective on your artwork on a panel that Visual AIDS did in 2015 called Living Positive & Long-Term Surviving: An Artist Perspective. And I just would be interested to hear again about your perspective on long-term surviving with HIV.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, you have to adapt. You have to adapt to it. And there's a concrete choice whether you'll make that who you are as an artist or whether you allow it to just be the subtext of who you are as an artist. You can't *not* have it there. The physicality is very challenging. It knocks out part of your—we talked about it before—the sexuality, just the rights to sexuality, physically changes you. So all of a sudden I did a series which had to do with body morphing. I photographed myself, and I changed myself into a frog, and I changed the shape of my body digitally.

ALEX FIALHO: What's that series and when?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Around 2003, I guess. I'll have to check. But again, it had to do with nature. And what year did we go to the Camargue? What year's *Funky Shui*?

ALEX FIALHO: 2003.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So it had to be around 2004. Because I was working with some of the imagery from the Camargue. Because we went to—I wanted to go to the Camargue—

ALEX FIALHO: What's the Camargue?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Oh, no, this is *Stigma,* so it had to be, like, 2005, because I did another film where everybody's in 18th-century clothes.

We rented a farmhouse in the Camargue, in the south of France, which is where they have the wild white horses running. And flamingos. It's a nature conserve—nature reserve. And so I rented this 18th-century farmhouse down there. And I did this—shot another movie that's in 18th-century clothes, loosely. And it's like a secret

happens, and basically, a woman telling her son that she's dying. Which is part of this narrative. What's the secret that she's telling him? What is it that she passes on? What is it that she gives to her son?

So it was kind of intense for Crosby to shoot this, because it's me, James, and Crosby, you know, working with the family. So we're shooting this thing down there. And while I was there, I did some photography of myself, and I changed the shape of my body. And I put it in with some of the imagery that I shot down in the south of France in these rice fields, with the horses going along. So that was actually *Antoinelle*; the short film was called *Antoinelle*. I still have footage that I want to work with from that.

But that was essentially about a legacy. What is it that you leave? What are you telling people? And how to do you communicate that? And how do you do your death?

I did two things. I shot myself dying gracefully, and then I shot myself dying kind of terribly, jittery and comedically. Which is—it's more of a tip of the hat to the East Village, right? With Manhattan Loves Suicides [band] and all of that stuff. I think that's the right name. I'm terrible. I probably—and I used the quirky death in one sequence that I did. But I'll probably reshoot it with the calmer death sequence as well.

So it goes to living with this disease that, again, it seeps into everything. And one of the ways I had to deal with talking to my son, who I think was about 17 for that? It's very, very difficult to talk to your child about that. And how does he come to have his own sexuality and feel safe? Most kids don't have that in their lives. Most kids don't grow up in a household where both their parents are ill. And ill with something—I mean, nobody wants to talk about cancer, but this, you really can't talk about it.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And even if you don't care about the actual disease, it's a real showstopper. You can't say in passing, "Oh, by the way, I have HIV/AIDS." Because the next thing out of somebody's mouth, just FYI, is always, "How did you get it?" And you're just like, "Well, I was having sex with monkeys in Africa." What? "How did I get it? I don't know. Whatever. None of your business, really." Sometimes I tell them that.

But so that's—is it worth that much energy being spent on something that you don't really care to waste all that time on? So I'll talk about it specifically to talk about it. For somebody who's interested in hearing it, not just to interrupt my daily life. It doesn't make sense. So, but you use it. You use those emotions. You use all the feelings that you've had as a result of that, and the empathy, of course. You live with something like this, you do tend to have empathy.

People who have—and the other side of it is, of course, as I've regained—I've haven't regained everything physically. At the moment I'm doing yoga; I swim a lot. And kind of lost the belly I had for a while. Put a little bit of weight on my arms. I never was a heavy person. So your physicality is constantly there. It's a reminder that you have to work extra hard on.

And so when somebody's telling you—as you get older, from my perspective, I've had a lot of friends who've had cancer. I've lost people to cancer now, which is so bizarre, because I lost so many friends when they were young. And now older people are dying, and they're telling me about it as if it's the first time I'm hearing about death.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: But I know all about it.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And to some extent, I just feel it does throw you back, when you remember people couldn't get in to see their loved ones, and how lucky we are that we've broken down so many boundaries. And we began talking about this—I mentioned the fact that my friend that died in England all those years ago, before this all began, had this very difficult-to-diagnose illness. And that comes back to me and I think, Was that it? It's still with me. What could I have done?

So you just have to go forward with it, I suppose. And yet, here's your obligation. One of the things that's very confusing, in a sense, is that we go and speak at the comic—we've been to Flame Con, which is the gay thing. Just coming to terms with the fact that they can all be out. That they can have an open life. AIDS is the last thing on their minds. They don't even remember it, half of them. And I'm still here as a last representative of that moment.

And wondering whether or not I should be speaking to them about that, or just celebrating the fact of their changed condition, that their social condition is so much better. Still not perfect, far from it, of course. It's so

much better. And sometimes I want to say, When I was a young girl, we were in a—I was with drag queens in bars in Portsmouth that you wouldn't—oh, my God, we thought we were going to get killed walking down the street. It was like, you couldn't. People got beaten up. I have several friends who got nearly beaten to death. So it's a challenge. And you've just got to love them. I love the babies, I do. I love my my gay children, my straight children; I love them.

ALEX FIALHO: How about long-term surviving with a partner? With James?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, that's been a good thing, to have somebody that you can actually eat meals with when you've got to take tablets together. Or that—although he's been terrified over the years, because I had different things happen to me at different times. I had a hysterectomy fairly early on. It was not a good thing the way it all panned out; it was just another cancer scare from all these side diseases that kept happening over the years.

So he was terrified by that. He's had some heart issues that are definitely related. So we still are in it, but we get to take our pills together. So we cook together. So we get through it together; we can talk together. We're able to support each other. And we don't have much of a sex life because first of all, it was forbidden to us in the very first instance. And then, when you get out of practice [laughs]—because you turn that side of your personality off.

ALEX FIALHO: Forbidden to you in what sense?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, in the beginning, you couldn't have sex with anybody else that was infected.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: You know—

ALEX FIALHO: Because?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And it's been a long time since we've come to say, Well, probably not going to transmit. And it's like, Oh, my God, if you're a zero positive, you have, well, you have no—God, I'm just like, lost the train—if your blood count is, you know, so it's very difficult, in that respect.

So—but we get along together, and we do the art together, and we're like—so that's what we see going forward. We'll continue to make the art. But we do regret that we lost that—because we were really, we were very drawn to each other. I don't want to be too graphic about how drawn together we were, but we were—it's one of our motifs, was rabbits. We were like rabbits. Oh, my God. And so that was really a hard thing to let go of. It was really, really hard.

And it's just a terrible thing when you don't look how you looked. And that, it sounds so shallow, and of course, it is shallow, but it isn't, you know?

ALEX FIALHO: It's reality.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: It's reality, and so I've been talking about how much—the masks are there. Who you are. So for me, I was being a pretty girl, right? Hid the fact that I was smarter than all get[-out], because I was also, growing up, I was really clever. Which is not necessarily something that people want in a woman.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah, so there's masks, right? Took me a lot of years to let people know just how clever I am.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: [Laughs.] That sounds—it's not meant to be vain. It's just a fact. I sort of knew when I was 18, and then, it was like, didn't work. Didn't play out well. But these are all things that everybody has to deal with. But when you lose—the idea that you're not—you can't depend on your body, also, it's an incredibly challenging idea. For a woman, there's a moment where you come to puberty and your body changes and you're no longer able to compete with men physically.

And it's a shock. Because as a child I could race; I could swim; I could climb with any of the boys. All of a sudden, I realize I'm never going to pick up 300 pounds; that's not happening. I'm not going to bench press. I can't do a press-up. Then so, but you come into your body; it's hard. Very hard. I had a hard time growing into a woman's body. Then I get used to it; I sort of get it to where I want it. Damn me, I lose it; it's gone.

So then I lose 10 years of actually wanting to go out socially. People took pictures of me, and it was horrible. You did *not* want your picture taken. And then you forget what you look like. So you let somebody take your picture, and then it's just crushing to see what you are. To see that you're that. It's sort of enraging and just horrifying. That your body let you down.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. How about the topic of women and HIV, generally? Or women living with HIV, specifically?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, I know very few women that have HIV. It doesn't come up. The women I knew that died—I mean, I did know people that died.

ALEX FIALHO: Who are those people?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Cookie Mueller and several friends. And I kept one's secret for many, many years. Her son was friends with my son. And she told me immediately, but she didn't want her son to know. And I don't think he knew until very far on. And then she had a baby while she, much later. She accepted the risk because she wanted to have another child with her husband. And so that was, that's really [scary –MVC].

It's really [scary –MVC]. It's really hard to wrap your head around making that choice.

ALEX FIALHO: Which choice?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: To have a baby. When you're HIV-positive.

ALEX FIALHO: Yes.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And of course, there were better drugs for it, but still you just—but she wanted that. Her husband wanted that. So, but there's not many women that are very vocal about having AIDS. And then the other side of it, it gets—it's a gay disease, sometimes? So you're kind of excluded from your own narrative.

ALEX FIALHO: How so?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Just because it's—wow, I've said so many times. Because it affected the gay community and so, rightly, so they gather together to fight for their own survival. But within that fighting, all of a sudden there's women over here. So [there are –MVC] some groups of black women, but there's not many white women that have AIDS or that are visible with AIDS.

And the other thing that happens is, I get invitations from well-meaning medical providers, groups who are serving populations with AIDS. Who invite me to do spaghetti art, macaroni art. "Oh, come and join us for a day," as if I'm completely idiotic, have no education, let's say. Or that I must be a heroin addict. Or I must be a sex worker or—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Which, that's fine. But the assumption is, if you're a sex worker, obviously, you have no education. So I don't want to go make macaroni art with people. So then people are looking down on you as somehow inferior to them socially, and had enough of that when I was a child, by the way.

ALEX FIALHO: Do you consider yourself vocal or visible as a woman living with AIDS, HIV?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, sometimes I do, and sometimes I do interviews and I will speak publicly. And I'm in magazines, and it's out there. It's on the internet. Pretty big. The irony of it is, and this has happened as well, oftentimes people will Google me for one thing or another and they see that I'm with an AIDS organization, or that I'm in a magazine, and they assume that I'm doing a fund-raiser. Which I think is sort of an interesting thing.

So, "Oh, you're in that magazine. Oh, so you did that benefit?" No, yes, no. So that kind of thing. Because you're not perceived as somebody that should have this disease. Which I think is also sort of a weird thing. And it's like, How much energy am I now going to spend—there's the article. Read the article. I've just said all of this in the article and—and so leads to more prejudices that we—I mean, James and I were talking about maybe doing some bigger projects around this. Because we feel like we've been visible up to a point, but not as visible as we could be.

ALEX FIALHO: What would those look like?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Well, that would be what we're—that's what we'd be formulating. And whether we would do it together. We're thinking about maybe he does—he wants to do a comic about his experience. And then we were talking about if I did that experience, simultaneous experience, from my perspective, what would

that look like?

ALEX FIALHO: Sounds great.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: How would that work out?

ALEX FIALHO: The experience of living with HIV?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah. Yeah. And what did it mean to us? Because it's different for both of us, you know?

ALEX FIALHO: Definitely.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And it was terrible for him sometimes when I was—while I was being ill, I sort of had an idea of where I was. Because I never actually thought I was going to die. It's just not me. Oh, I'm going to do this. Well, I did—occasionally I thought I was going to die, but by and large, I'm pressing through.

And he's looking at it like, She could be dead. Which is horrible. So when he had his heart attack, I was pretty shaken up. So I ran out and joined a lot of—went back to my old societies and put myself on some committees again. Because I just thought, If I'm sitting by myself when he's gone, I'll just be dead. I won't make it. I need to get out back into the world. Then, of course, as he got better, I'm like, Oh, God, I'm on all these committees again. [Laughs.] How can I get off of them? But anyway.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. And for him, too, I'm sure, in a—I don't want to say "similar" way, because it's very different, but he's not in the demographic that would be associated with living with HIV.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: No.

ALEX FIALHO: You know?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: No. He isn't.

ALEX FIALHO: As a white man, partnered with a woman.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yes. Yes. And it's just—it's, yes, you're right. The funny thing is with him, though, because—and it was sort of like Greg that I was first married to; God knows what his sexuality is at the end of the day.

Who knows? [Laughs.] Because he played with Jayne County, he was always asked to be in gay bands. And with James, because he worked with David, he's always in, like, four or five gay comics now.

ALEX FIALHO: Because he's worked with David, yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Because he's worked with David. So everybody just asks—because nobody else will do them, by the way. That's the other side of it. And the same way with the guitar playing. Nobody would join these bands. Because it was like, Oh, no, can't be in that. God bless Greg for that, that he would always, like, go for it. And James, too. It's like, Oh, that could ruin your career. Well, maybe so. Whatever.

ALEX FIALHO: Or make it.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Or make it. Yeah. Well, it's not a determining factor.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Just, gives us poison and a little smile and like, Oh, okay.

ALEX FIALHO: This is kind of a big question to end on, but I'm just curious in thinking about, you just said "career," or, we're on the record, in what ways do you think of legacy, or do you think of being remembered as an artist? Or achievement: What are you most proud of? What do you think you've left behind, or will leave behind, in terms of your creative output?

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: It's hard to know. Two things. One, James always says to me, "Why do you do these performances? They're not on film; they're not anywhere." I love doing theater things. And he's like, oh, I do an installation. That's not something that you can keep, right? So it's ephemeral. So that's all gone.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So I sort of, part of me says, No, well, I don't really care about that because I'm doing

it now. So that's [like] with a band. I didn't even—I'm the only one—I didn't even make records. I didn't care. I didn't think it was necessary to be that.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Now, probably the most accessible thing is writing. So whatever texts I leave, not all of which are out there or even completed or thought about, those would probably survive me. And I don't know, actually. I don't really see myself like that. And I don't think I've finished my work yet. I really haven't finished my work yet. It's just, it's kind of great; it's kind of like, Great, you just hit 30, 31. I'm ready to go now. I still have a little clarity that I didn't have when I was younger. And the up side of—

ALEX FIALHO: Thirty-one in academic years, because you started—

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: In academic years, yeah, because I started there. So, yes, I have all of this clarity that I didn't have for a lot of—I had like 20 years of not having a clue what I was doing. Just doing it and thinking I knew what I was doing, but just, basically, going, I'm not afraid to jump into anything, and if it seems like it's the right thing to do, I will do it. And I will do things that will get me into trouble.

And I quite like that at this point, and so maybe just being part of a community would be, you know, one of a gang.

ALEX FIALHO: Great. I think we've done a good job of spelling that gang out and getting to know it.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: Yeah. Yeah. I think so. You know what, I was just going to say my son has picked up that torch, and what I really love is that he was putting on these big hip-hop shows.

ALEX FIALHO: Okay.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: So I get to meet all his friends. And we did the family show.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. At HOWL! [Festival].

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: At HOWL! We're hoping we're going to do some more family work together like that.

ALEX FIALHO: Cool.

MARGUERITE VAN COOK: And he does—he raps; he writes; he does everything. Takes pictures. He's like us. And maybe it's not just the community; it's the larger family. We made a larger family.

ALEX FIALHO: Great.

[END OF vancoo16_2of2_sd_track02]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]