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Oral history interview with Doug Ashford, 2016 October 14-November 3

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Doug Ashford on October 14, 2016. The interview took place in New York, N.Y., and was conducted by Theodore Kerr 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.

Doug Ashford has reviewed the transcript. 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

THEODORE KERR: My name is Ted Kerr. I'm here with Doug Ashford on October 14, 2016. We're at Doug's studio in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. We're here for the—speaking for the Smithsonian project.

Doug, I'm going to ask you again, what is your first memory?

DOUG ASHFORD: My earliest memories are available probably to me because I was born in North Africa, and then I returned there when I was three, maybe two-and-a-half or three. I have very distinct—and I—and I've characterized these in the past as a kind of a baby memory, which are—that the baby memory or the infant memory is, in a way, kind of synesthetic. So, they are, probably for most people, dreamlike, in the sense that they have multiple aspects to them. And I'm not sure if they were there the first time that I was in Morocco with my young parents—I was second born—or the second trip when I was a bit older. There was a man who danced in the street in Rabat in front of our house, and he wore a kind of overflowing costume that looked like a jester's costume, and he played the drum, and people gave him money. And I remember that. Oh, there's a fourth one. This is good we did it again.

THEODORE KERR: This is good.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah. And the second was that there was a woman—her name was Zora; I just remembered that—whose hands were—had henna patterns painted on them and who cared for me. So I remember her hands, the color of her hands, and the drawings on them, not necessarily what the drawings looked like, but that they were drawn on. And then thirdly, I remember being with her in the yard and the light—one always remembers the light of a certain place—in a tree that had large, red fruits on it, which was pomegranate tree, I'm pretty sure. The fourth memory that I just remembered was that there was a store nearby where we would go and get food, and there were gigantic bottles of Coca-Cola, bottles of Coca-Cola that, I think, were, like, a gallon, but in the shape of that old, fluted Coca-Cola form that I wanted, but didn't get. But I wanted it.

THEODORE KERR: You didn't get them?

DOUG ASHFORD: No, I don't remember getting them, no.

THEODORE KERR: And so, as we spoke about a little bit before, your family, if I remember correctly, consisted of your mother, your father, and you had three siblings in the first family unit.

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: And then one sibling when your father remarried.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yes.

THEODORE KERR: And I wonder if you want to just share with us a little bit of, like, the makeup of the family, and while doing that, share the—kind of the geography and timeline of the first, maybe, 10 years.

DOUG ASHFORD: Okay. So my father was an academic, and when I was—when they were married, I believe he was still working on his Ph.D., and I was born four years after they were married, maybe three. And in the first, sort of, five or six years of my life, my father was moving around as a developing academic, probably residencies or assistant professorships here and there. My sister was born in Indiana. The following year we were in Morocco again, so then I was probably three—no. No, we were in Morocco; then I was born; then we went back again when I was three. [. . . –DA] After the three to four in Morocco, we moved to Washington, D.C., where my dad was a professor. By the time I was six, he had gotten an appointment as a professor at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and I lived there from the age of six until 18.

THEODORE KERR: And then, in the initial telling of this, we spoke a little bit about your father. As all academics of that time, you said he had a relationship with the CIA?

DOUG ASHFORD: Particular kinds of academics. It was sort of like the cream. Like he was a Rhodes Scholar, which is this group of people who are given this year at Oxford. And I believe then that was—maybe he had met my mother, but they weren't married yet. He was approached by the then embryonic CIA and told, "We will support you financially. We will give you officer status in the military." He was at a desk job during the Korean War in Washington. And then after that, as he continued his research, either his doctoral thesis or after that was always—I don't know always. I don't know what the actual relationship was, but in communication with officers at the CIA. And it was described to me, maybe as a way to make this seem less criminal in relationship to the development of this corrupt United States government foreign policy around colonialism, but it was described to me, once I was an adolescent, that this was something that happened to most people involved in the social sciences: doing research, doing Ph.D. level work in the social sciences. There weren't that many then, and if you sort of passed a certain kind of test around ethnicity, which was not described to me too much, you were trusted ideologically and that you had no relationships to left progressive movements as a younger person. You were—I think to use the word "recruited' is maybe an over-emphasis, but you were included in a—in a—in a context of compensation. You were rewarded.

Your academic work was supported. And it was also, probably, like all those things in those days, a kind of a men's club, you know, in which your associations with it would help you professionally. So, you know, did everybody do it? I don't know. But I was told by my father that this is something that we all did. And it was described by him, also, in a kind of a—as a—as a left wing and progressive thinker, in the late-'60s and early-'70s when I was approaching adolescence, as a—not necessarily as a condition of regret, but as a kind of, like, something to describe. Like, here we all were. We were young intellectuals. We believed that the world could become a better place. We were part of this political movement that he also ascribed to, say, the election of John F. Kennedy, and this sort of idea of America as a, kind of, both harbinger and promoter of new democracy movements around the world would be best aided if we had this, like, tremendously efficient and careful intelligence network. If we actually knew—if people in the government who make policy could actually know what a labor movement in Algiers was about, then they would be able to respond supportively in the right way.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: It's ideologically not how it worked out, and I think a failure of those kind of—what's the right way to say it? Not necessarily utopian, but sort of hopeful ideas about the development of American democracy—were dashed, for him, when the Bay of Pigs happened. And I—and I have looked—dabbled in researching it a little bit since, and it's true. After the Bay of Pigs, I believe a significant percentage of people who worked for the CIA quit.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And at this point, you and your family were already in Ithaca with your dad at Cornell?

DOUG ASHFORD: I don't think so. I think the Bay of Pigs would have been late-'50s.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

DOUG ASHFORD: And then I was born, and then he probably had some affiliations with them still. And then, once he became a bonafide academic, those were probably cut all together. By 1964, '65, he and others in his community of academics in Cornell were more involved in left wing politics because of colleagues. One was Daniel Berrigan, who was the—

THEODORE KERR: Preacher—

DOUG ASHFORD: I don't know about the word "preacher," but he was the religions deacon of the—of the—of the—of the church that was part of Cornell. And Philip Berrigan, his brother, was also there, and their, I think, anti-war work is extremely well-known. There was draft resistance, so there was the adult children of colleagues of my father's who were leaving for Canada. There was a developed anti-war movement on campus. And then there was a remarkable development—I think I was nine, so this would have been '66—which was the Black Student Occupation of Willard Straight Hall and other student centers of Cornell University in the '60s. Cornell was actually unique, in that it worked very hard in the early-'60s to do recruiting of African American students. But the conditions of racism that existed locally within the actual real politics of the city of Ithaca, and then also within the university itself, led to the development of a, sort of, heightened condition of that conversation, to the point that those black students demanded certain conditions. They were not met, and there was this occupation, which was quite a remarkable event, as I remember.

My dad was involved in the mediation that resolved that as a crisis, but to the degree to which he was actually a kind of figure that adopted a kind of, like, universal objectivity—because he was always sort of very proud of the

fact that intellectual life was independent of, and needed to be maintained, as kind of an autonomous condition around partisan politics, or whether he was one of the professors who took the side of the students, I'm not completely sure. A lot of people retired right after that or were fired. The students were armed. It was a very serious kind of place, and the white-dominant fraternities were burning crosses in front of places where students were going. So the kind of symbolism of the Klan, or the conditions of white supremacy, were part of the—it's not a dialog—part of the battleground.

THEODORE KERR: And these were things that you were seeing or hearing about or both?

DOUG ASHFORD: Well, everybody in town knew about it. Well, maybe not everybody, but I also knew about it personally because my dad was not coming home for—I think there was the three week period where he didn't come home until very late at night, and they were all working. What that work was, I wish I knew.

THEODORE KERR: Right. You mentioned that your mom took you to Civil Rights marches in D.C.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, so my dad's work was work, and my mom's—as she always said, you know, "Your father was always sort of busy organizing this idea of a sort of a public program around politics. But I wanted to do direct politics." She had a double character, actually, which maybe—is always interesting, in terms of my reminiscence. And you mentioned before, at what point were you, like, looking back at this. And it was at the point where I identified as teenager as an artist. She was a Sunday painter. She was extremely encouraging that I also become an artist. And she was a weekday social activist. After my parents divorced, which we can get to, she became a—her job was to work for an organization that tried to expose racist practices in local rental agencies. That's something that maybe people have heard of, where you call and you say, "I want to rent your apartment," and then you present yourself and then you bring yourself with your roommate, and when roommates—these were all people working—was African American, and then the landlord would say, "Oh no, the apartment's going to be rented." And then you would document all this and turn it into the authorities. So, her work as a—as a—as an activist, but then also as a participant in this—in the anti-war movement, I think, was also cultural in the sense that it was the '60s, and they were probably—28—they were 40. So they were, sort of, of a larger community of people who had—who were part of a discussion, a big discussion.

THEODORE KERR: Most of the kids you grew up with, white, black, Latino, Asian?

DOUG ASHFORD: Mostly white, until you went to Ithaca High School, which was the high school for the whole town.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: In elementary school, I was in a kind of rural—not necessarily rural, but kind of a—I mean, Ithaca's such a small city; it's not necessarily a suburb, but there's a village outside of Ithaca, which was, sort of, where all the professors lived. It's also where all the fraternities and student organizations were. It's right next to Cornell. Cornell's sort of gigantic. I think it's—even then, was many thousands of students. The character of the whole city changed when summer started. But elementary school there was maybe, in a class of 25, two kids of color, and then—and no Asian—no, maybe I had one Asian friend. And then, in high school, though, it was—it was different because there was a black population of Ithaca, and it lived downtown, and it—and it's the white working class and then also the white managerial class; white intellectual class kids were all together in one place.

THEODORE KERR: And then you spoke a bit about the school that you went to that the grad students ran, it was called—is it Markle Flats?

DOUG ASHFORD: Markles, M-A-R-K-L-E-S. Markles Flats. And this we spoke about before as a kind of significant bridge, both, probably, in my own interests and between sort of—like stuff between aesthetics and politics as a—as an artist today, but also as a kind of event, illustrating event, of that particular period in American history, so—or at least in those kind of towns. I'm not alone. There were—these educational experiments were probably all around the country. There were communes that were functioning in Tompkins County, but also in other counties around universities, where people were experimenting living together communally. There were movements within school boards to change the directions of curriculum and the idea of what it means to raise children. There was an opening. I'm not sure exactly why—probably, this would have been 1972—that allowed a particular professor, I believe at Ithaca College, to recruit graduate students from Cornell and Ithaca College to start an experimental junior high school. It was probably approved as a place that would accommodate the kids who were not regular learners in other circumstances, as most of these things were, sort of as a dumping ground for the juvenile delinquents or whatever. But what happened is that a lot of kids who were interested in just hippie culture were like, "Let's go. It's going to be fun."

And that school, as I said before, was organized in a very—in a—like a radically open format in the sense that there was no consistent curriculum. That students could suggest courses that they wanted. It was a whole school

meeting held at the beginning of every semester and a kid could say, "I want to do this." And other kids could say, "That's great. Let's do it." One of the teachers would respond or not respond, and then the young teachers themselves would come up with different kinds of ideas of classes.

THEODORE KERR: What I love that you told earlier was there was not only the person who took you through the regents math quizzes that prepared you, so you didn't have to take math in high school, but also that the person who led you through a whole year of *Life* magazines.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah. So, there was a—somebody had donated, maybe just from their home, you know, like every *Life* magazine since it was—since it started. So that's 1938, I believe, so it was at least 35 years of a monthly pictorial. And, yeah, he said, "We're going to do a class from *Life* magazine." And I believed till this day that that's where my interest in the relationship between media and consciousness began. We also got this magazine in my house, and the idea of the, sort of, photographic essay was probably a big impression at the time.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And then the last thing that we should just get on tape before we move on to new stuff is the idea—or the life experience of living through your parents' divorce.

DOUG ASHFORD: Right. And you had brought it up in the earlier part of our conversation as—or maybe this is my own synthetic reorganization of how it relates, not so much to the geographical condition of me growing up, but of the, sort of, idealism and experimental social and convivial conditions that the '60s provided for my parents. I mean, also for us as children, it's hard to know how that got internalized. But, you know, from the fifth grade on, I didn't cut my hair. And the ideals that were sort of present in rock music and then also in sort of what we would know of psychedelia and of the experimentations with psychedelic drugs were sort of a big part of the—at least the desire of the future. But wait, what was the question again?

THEODORE KERR: It was about your parents' divorce.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, yeah. So there was probably some experimentation by my parents as well, and I don't know if that necessarily led to the conditions around which they finally separated, but I do know that my mother's commitment to certain ideas about love and connection were not easily achieved by my father because of his personality and his character. She always said, later on, that she divorced him—and she did ask for the divorce—in order to save us, only when pressured; it wasn't something that she advertised at the time. She was very accommodating and kind to my father throughout the process. He was financially not that kind to her, I found out later. But, in a way, I believe that that divorce, which was announced to us when my father was in sabbatical overseas, was something that, you know, was characteristic of the time. And yeah, we said this earlier. I don't think I had a friend, who was also a son or daughter of one of those academic families, whose parents' marriage was intact by the time we graduated from high school. Maybe there were a few, but it seemed to be the norm.

THEODORE KERR: Right, like disturbance and disruptions seemed the norm, as we spoke about earlier on, at every level of your existence, at the high school, family.

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, let's face it. A huge part of this was the woman's movement. And my mother was part of the consciousness raising, was meeting with women groups separately. She was what I now know was part of that sort of consciousness-raising idea in which, if we separate and if we can sort of be in a place in which will be able to describe the conditions that we live in under—you know, to keep the keywords out, we could say under "patriarchy," but, like, what it's like to live with our husbands, we will find a certain kind of common ground and realize what is built for us that is not allowing us to be us. And so I think there was a shared set of values that women, like my mother, in sort of social identification with each other, realized. So, it's funny in a way. Like is the—is the reassessment of the value of those heterosexual conditions of the normalized, nuclear family—like, once they're taken into question, is the love between two people still allowed to progress? It's unclear to me, but the way in which—like statistically, my own experience was one in which most families separated at that time, was probably due to the fact that most of the women who were involved in those marriages put something aside in order to be participants in the idea of the family. I mean, I know my mother did. She was a graduate student, too. She was developing a potential career in medicine, and she gave it up to have children.

THEODORE KERR: How do you think all of this affected friendships at the time, like your friendships? What did friendship look like?

DOUG ASHFORD: I don't know if it would have been any different than anybody else. Of course, one never really knows if one's friendships are particular. The boys that I was—the friendships that I had between elementary school and early adolescence changed around the drug culture. So, I had a particularly close friend in the fifth grade, Greg Gibian, who stayed my friend into the early part of high school, and together, as a kind of pair, we experimented as nine and 10-year-olds with things like pyrotechnics. We learned how to make explosives and blew up someone's garage and lit trees on fire and were arrested. Well, not arrested, but you know, police were

involved in our lives early on, and then, I think, as early as seventh or eighth grade, began to experiment with marijuana, and by ninth grade, were taking hallucinogens. I think probably—no, first LSD and then mushrooms and then didn't really go any farther than that. So, that idea of, like, intimacy between people, in my memory, was always part of, as I mentioned before, some kind of love economy that was, at least in my mind, idealized around the sharing of non-rational experiences through experimentations with drugs. We all read Carlos Castaneda, I think, in like—I think in, like, eighth grade, you know, and were extremely interested in this idea of both out of body and sort of changes in consciousness that that would provide—that drugs would provide.

And the intimacies associated with them, I always also thought—and I—and I said this before, I think, with a sort of tone of reticence in my voice because it's in later high school that you realize a lot of these narrations of the idea of connections and fraternity—this is [Joseph] Beuys, right—were based in a fiction that as probably—not to be too analytic about it or scholarly about it—as probably figured out, in terms of the political idealisms in the 1960s, the conditions of association that we were invested in were kind of, like, bullshit, in the sense that the drug culture was not necessarily about sharing everything because this was the point. Like if you had pot, you gave pot to everyone you knew, right? And if they had pot, they gave pot to everyone they knew. And so it seemed, at the time, to be about a kind of economy of, like—that was non-competitive and was non-ambitious because you're stoned—[laughs]—and was, like—yeah, about celebrating each other's potential in the world equally. But, by the time—I don't know—second year in high school, it was clear that there was a different economy at stake. Maybe it's because drugs were illegal.

But there was drug dealers then; there was greed; there was—like, I grew pot when I was in ninth grade. Someone stole it all, who knew me. It was part of what I thought was a situation of love and sharing, and it was not. And I believe I stopped smoking pot. It's hard to tell because anything that we do as a kid is, you know, like over determined, right? But I have a distinct memory that I was like, "This idea that I have that we're all in this together is not true. And so I'm not even going to smoke pot. I'm not going to smoke pot with them, and I'm not going to do it at all." And that ended for me, probably, when I was 15 or 16. So, what was friendship like? It was also organized around—"organized" is a bad word. It was also—it happened, you have to realize, this was in a small town. And I mentioned this in our earlier conversation, where, in those days, probably from the age of six to—yeah, all the way through high school, the parental relationship with a child was, "You're irritating me. Get out of the house." So, we were left to our own devices as kids to explore, I mean, places that, if I look back at it now, in terms of the idea of the family and the care of children today, were like crazy dangerous.

THEODORE KERR: Like what?

DOUG ASHFORD: Abandoned bridges, digging in old mines, like—construction sites, in those days, were left open. We would just go in there and play in unfinished basements, which could—I know, as someone who built houses as an adult, could have collapsed on us. The analogy was to build a fort. Like, you would build a fort out of—I mean, when you're five, you would build a fort out of your father's raincoat. When you were 12, you would build a fort out of construction debris in some abandoned site next to a golf course—in between a golf course and a dairy farm. And it would become the place where you could go and do drugs together. So this idea of, like, the rural setting; conditions of, like, long periods of time with nothing to do; tremendous senses of expectation, in terms of what the sensual and sexual results of these associations would produce, because the love economy wasn't a love economy just for affiliation, but was for pleasure, the kind of, like, leftovers of masculinity, like it was sort of competitive and dangerous, and let's climb that. Ithaca is full of geological conditions. There's gorges there, which were very dangerous. Three of my friends—well, acquaintances in the drug, sort of, world that I was in—because high school was divided into these cliques, and we were the—we were the hippies. Three of them died, probably stoned, doing completely dangerous things in these places where you could easily die because it's cliffs and rivers cutting through mountains. We would climb trees and make them bend over cliffs. We would go swimming in these places where there was no swimming and jump off cliffs into places that were potentially dangerous. There were post-'60s places where students had also, in a sense, sequestered, which were places where it wasn't legal that you were necessarily naked, but everybody was naked, particularly where you would go swimming. It was great. It was great.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, what—say a little bit about the erotics of the time, or the sensualities of the time or whatever word you would choose.

DOUG ASHFORD: Part of the idea of the commune was that there was a shared—as I understood it, even at a very young age—because I had teachers at Markles Flats who lived in communes. And I was like, "Okay, Joe, who's your wife?" And he was like, "Well, it's complicated because we're all living together, and I have a partner now, but in the past, I had another partner." And then, "Okay, Sam, so who's your wife?" And he would say, "Well, it's complicated because I love men." Right? Which was a new idea. I mean, maybe for an 11-year-old, right? There was a lot of language at the time that was sort of automatic, which was homophobic, as part of the culture, definitely part of the masculine culture, and I was a boy and identified as a boy. There were, though, those examples in the adult world already, the young adult world, of alternative sexualities. And then there's the things we're reading. We're reading *Rolling Stone*. I had the *Whole Earth Catalog* in the house, right? I was

connected to the idea of autonomous economies and then what they might produce in terms of the association between people. And let's face it, that whole narrative was at the same time commercialized. I mean, I was reading *Playboy* magazine and in *Playboy* magazine every other centerfold was, like, part of an alternative situation, or they were an art student, you know? And so that fantasy, as I've tried to describe it as authentic, was at the same time in-authentically sold to me, which is maybe part of those contradictions around the—around the '60s that led to so many different kinds of disenfranchisement and disappointment.

But no, I was a believer. I really was a believer as a child. From being taken to Civil Rights movements with my mother, from being told by her that there was a connection between beauty and justice, quite strongly—I remember that—as a still life painter, and as someone invested in the idea of physical love as that which could remake social life. She was a big fan of, like, Virginia Woolf, for instance, and the whole Bloomsbury condition, like the beautiful watercolors that were being made while people were experimenting with who was an appropriate partner, I think, was kind of explained to me, or available to me, and then researched. And then probably experimented by me—by me in the context of these different kind of friendship assemblies. By the time we were doing LSD, we were doing LSD in large groups. We were telling our parents we were going camping. We would go out to the—name is slipping my mind, but it will come back to me—where you could swim naked in a gorge and swing on ropes and fall into the water. We were going there in the afternoon; we were dropping acid; and we were staying together all night. I mean, groups of 20, 25 people. And were we always just thinking, like, we're going to get laid? I mean, maybe we were, you know? But I—maybe in a, kind of, like, arrogant kind of way, I look back at it as more than just the simple desire for sex as a way of, like, say, getting off and more of a, kind of, an ideological alternative. Markles Flats was called the alternative educational place. This idea of the alternative was sort of endemic in everything—the family, the school situation, friendships, everything. And it's probably because it's a university town, also, I have a feeling.

THEODORE KERR: I like the word "alternative," versus the word I was using, which was "disruptive."

DOUG ASHFORD: Right.

THEODORE KERR: Because it's about these choices and these different worlds.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, but that's so interesting, Ted, because the idea of the alternative, say, as the thing that will create disruption and the commitment to disruption that people—and I felt I had to make later on in life—was, in a way, compromised by alternative, by the word "alternative." Alternative was, in the sense, too soft a term. I mean, that school, as an example, Markles Flat School, should have stayed there. Now it would be extremely useful, right, if those—the desires of those people were able to be—those teachers and those sort of, like, progressive education movements in the '60s were able to codify themselves somehow. I think they were to a degree. My children went to different kinds of schools here in New York in the '80s. And yeah, maybe I take that back. It's sort of ignorant, in terms of the history of schools, which is a whole other conversation. I think they did. I just think that the power of the federal education mandates were too strong for them to be able to be maintained in any other context other than a local context. So alternative schools—I'm thinking more like in terms of, like, say, in the 1980s; when Group Material began, there were conversations about the alternative space movement. And in many ways, I always understood the alternative space movement, in terms of its beginnings, as being disruptive, as being a replacement for the gallery system. But by the time I was 25 or 30, it was clear that it wasn't so much a replacement. It was treated as an experiment so, therefore, as a kind of feeding apparatus for the gallery system, so hence, my interest in the difference between alternative and disruptive.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, that's beautiful. And for sure, we'll come back to that. Let's introduce art into the conversation in kind of a foundational way and, you know, interviewee's choice. Do you want to share your first, like, thoughts around the first time you encountered art, or the first time you made art? Like what's more interesting for you to kind of think about or talk about?

DOUG ASHFORD: Because of this, kind of, like, intellectual home life and because my mother was a Sunday painter, it was always around. So, the people who taught art at Cornell were around me as a child. When I was 10, the Pop artist Jim Dine was a visiting scholar at Cornell and he moved in three or four houses up the block. And me—I think my youngest brother next down became close friends with his children. And their household was wilder than ours. I mean, our household was a little bit wild, in the sense that my mother was not really interested in order or cleanliness or housekeeping. The place would be tidied up if people came over, but we had a ping-pong table in the living room, that kind of a life, right? But that place, like the house was just full of Legos because Jim Dine, I think, was at the point, then, when he had a big market presence; relative to now, probably nothing, but then it was enough to have a house full of toys.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

DOUG ASHFORD: They had a—they had a—they had a—what was it? It was like an English car, a rover. Not a

Range Rover, but that company made also sedans. It was an odd-looking car in their driveway that the children were encouraged to just do whatever they wanted to. It was fantastic. This was not unknown though. Like there was another family, Greg Gibian, who I spoke about before, too, as my close friend when I was between the ages of 10 and high school. His—he had older brothers, one of whom I'm still friends with. Well, not friends with, acquaintance with here in New York. And their father somehow got a car and said, "Can we repaint this in a way that's really interesting?" And we did that psychedelic car painting job to a friend of the father's car: flowers, peace signs, things like that.

THEODORE KERR: And so these recollections are coming up after I asked about art. So did you think of these as, like, artistic endeavors or creative endeavors or making art or?

DOUG ASHFORD: No, but it's me being self-analytic, in the sense that it was always around. I mean, I know this because I teach artists. You know, like the reason people want to be artists? I know why I do. It's not one thing. It's like so over determined. So, in second grade, I made—we had a craft project, where you take toilet paper tubes, and you cut them, and you—into different sectionals, or paper towel tubes, and then you paint them. And the teacher wanted it. I distinctly remember. Her name was Ms. Spitz, and she wanted it. And she said, 'I'll buy it from you." Yeah. And I was maybe nine, maybe seven. And I went to my mother, and my mother said, "That's ridiculous," because she was a part of a kind of left wing, like aesthetic movement that would be sort of, like, one, you're a child. Two, the commodification of art is stupid. Like, three—blah, blah, blah." And I said, "No, I really—I really want to sell it to her." She said, "Well, ask her what she wants to pay."

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: Did you sell it?

DOUG ASHFORD: Then this is the thing about it—yeah, I did. And this is the thing about most people who became artists of my generation. We did it because it gave us—usually people who had other kinds of anxieties, in terms of social life—the capacity to feel strong. I mean, in a—in a kind of, like, stupidly rationalistic or psychologistic way. It allowed us to have a sort of public ego, or like—or like, for friends of mine who grew up in harsher circumstances, but me in high school, too. The fact that we could draw a lot got us attention. And I could. I'm not sure why I could. Maybe it's because I experimented with my mother or watched her. In Markles Flats, there was a beautiful, beautiful woman—I'll never forget her—who organized a class in which we would learn the academic conditions of the production of art. So that was 13. And I can keep going through these examples. And if any of them didn't happen, I probably wouldn't have gone on. And I wanted her so badly, in that adolescent way, where you don't even really know what wanting someone is, that I did everything she said. I mean, I did everything she said. So, you know, two-point perspective, three-point perspective, and exercising over and over again. What's it like to look under the chair? Over the chair? How to draw that schematically, using the ruler without—practice, practice, practice, I think, for, like, a year. I think her name was Rebecca.

And then, when I went to high school, I met—I had a friend, who is still my friend, whose father lived in Ithaca and mother lived in Boston. He [Richard Limber –DA] was also a product of this, like, insane cultural disorganization that the '60s produced. He—I had known—I had known him, but I didn't know I knew him when I was a child in elementary school. Now we were—I was a freshman, and I think he was junior in high school. And he also had very long hair, which set us apart. He also, you know, wanted to wear, I don't know, Clarks or something. Like there were dress codes that were associated, also, with this idea that you, like, didn't really fit in. You didn't do sports. You were not interested in the sort of traditional tropes of masculinity. And Richard lived with his father because he had left his mother for reasons of—I don't know. It was just too difficult. His father had been experimented on in the mental hospital when he had a breakdown with LSD, which is bizarre that that happened, too. Ken Kesey and these people on the west coast, but it also happened to people who were at Willard State Hospital, which is outside of Ithaca. His dad lived in a tent for two years. I mean, it was—you know, and then got an apartment, and Richard came to live with him. Point is, is that Richard was in love with Gauguin, and I was, too. We would copy them, and we would, I think, do drugs some times, and do this and sometimes not. And there was a direct, kind of, affiliation with another person that was based in an intense context of love and friendship that, you know, lasted right through the birth of our children, and we're still in touch. Actually, he's very good friends with my ex-wife now. She's really quite nice. And Richard had an idea—I think when we were 15—that we would sign up for a nursing class. Again, a kind of classical, traditional idea of becoming an artist.

THEODORE KERR: Did you say artist class or nursing class?

DOUG ASHFORD: No, nursing.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: So, anatomy for nurses. So there was another school in the area. It was a community college, which trained nurses, and they had cadavers. So our idea was that we could be like Michelangelo and go cut

bodies apart and draw the structure of anatomy from the viewpoint of a scientist.

THEODORE KERR: And you did it?

DOUG ASHFORD: Three months, and it was great. The best part was—they didn't let us cut the bodies because these were—when you have a cadaver for learning anatomy for health practitioners, they're already cut into pieces. And that was enough. I mean, for me, that was enough. There were like three heads, two of which had the skin taken off half of them. So they were basically, you know, display and, I mean, lecture examples.

THEODORE KERR: Can you see it in your mind's eye right now?

DOUG ASHFORD: I have the drawing still. I mean, yeah, it's completely seen in my mind's eye. And the smell is remarkable, of formaldehyde and whatever the preservatives were.

THEODORE KERR: And I want to be careful about how I ask this question because I don't want to be too presumptuous, but like, what were the—were there goals? As two people taking these classes, as thinking about yourselves as doing things that Michelangelo would do, were you thinking of being an artist as a goal?

DOUG ASHFORD: Yes.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Definitely. I mean, I think since the experience doing that kind of rigorous drawing with that teacher at Markles Flats at 13, because she was an artist. I mean, look, a lot of this stuff has to do with mentorship and, sort of, like, the appreciation of others. And it's always mixed up with desire, you know? So is it the desire for her? Is it the desire to be like her? Is it the desire to be loved by her? Is it the desire to be together? Is it the desire to be them, be with them? You know, like when you fall in love, you kind of want to like the stuff that the other person likes? I mean, I'm like that anyway. It's like, "Wow, he likes black metal. I should like black metal." Like whatever. And that—it was a goal. Again, the goal for me was confused, in a way in which it was part of the production of a certain kind of sociality. I only realized this in later life, that the model of future relationships, Group Material, my interest in being a teacher, which started in Markles Flats, started when I was 13, and continued in high school. I volunteered to teach kids when I was in high school. When I was a student at Cooper Union, there was a thing that we started [a few years before –DA] called the Saturday Program, which was meant to bring more working class students of color into Cooper because there was this New York academy that was, like, 95 percent kids from Scarsdale. But I'm drifting.

THEODORE KERR: I don't think you're drifting.

DOUG ASHFORD: Okay.

THEODORE KERR: I think—what I understand is you're working through some considerations on how and why artist and teacher and you, as an adult, were forming.

DOUG ASHFORD: Right. And so the goals, although they appeared to be scattered, really were about being a certain kind of an artist. And the figure of the artist was always linked to a notion of what's obvious about art: freedom, right? And freedom built in a way that would change as my own context of what I would know historically about what artists would do, experientially about what would happen between me and other people, as conditions for teaching or making or loving would then also be added on. So what would start as maybe a kind of fixation on a certain idea of a trained person who would be respected or loved by that teacher, right, or in love with that teacher, grew into other contexts of connection with other people, and then connection with different kind of contexts of what it would mean to have certain kinds of expertise. The amount of energy that I would devote to, say, drawing cadavers when I was 15 with Richard was similar, probably, when I went to Cooper Union second or third year, met Hans Haacke, and became involved with a group of other people in collegiality, and then sort of, like, commonness around reading, right? And it wasn't—although I was always a reader, it wasn't necessarily something that I would have thought of was part of the development of an artist when I was 15, right? It was sort of technically a craft-based idea of what an artist was. That's not completely true, because I think in high school, I was already interested in knowing what the artist knew.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Like why did they know that? Why did they believe that that was a thing? And then reading what they read, that kind of thing.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: But the idea that the artist had a certain kind of responsibility to read beyond the context of what already exists then started then. So yeah, so practice, then, reflected a desire. And in it all, you know, at

some level is the specter of professionalism. And so that I will be able to do this somehow. I have to—you have to remember, though, for people of my age in the '60s and the '70s, the idea of the professional artist was not what it is now. So there weren't that many models of people who were like—I don't know—look at Jeff Koons or somebody like that. Like there was—I guess there were art stars, for sure, but there wasn't this sort of corporate, sort of heavily financialized fashion gigantism that we have now, definitely not as teachers.

THEODORE KERR: Maybe help with the—how do you get from high school in Ithaca to Cooper Union?

DOUG ASHFORD: Richard and I—Richard Limber and I would spend all day in the art room if we could. There were two other people there. One didn't do any art; she just liked being there because her best friend Audrey Norberg also would be there all day if she could. The teacher's name was Pat Bechtold. Known then as Mrs. Bechtold, was quite open to just keeping the room. Whenever we had free time, we would go there. We would go there after class for two hours. We would go there before. We would go there for lunch. We were just always there. It was at that point—and it's that way, probably, for most kids now, too. You have a high school teacher or somebody around you that they say, "Well, you know, you should really—you should go to art school." I knew—I figured out what it was because I was—I was also going, maybe the year after that year, with Richard. Richard graduated right after then, so then I was a junior. I went to classes at Cornell. My mother, as a—as a single woman, went out with a professor at Cornell, and he became extremely important to me. Actually, when my mother died, I visited him, and I realized how important that was. Took me with him on weekends to—he was an etcher—to, like, do print making; taught me how to do etching; talked with me openly about what it meant to be an artist in the world. He had a gallery in New York. He was a more of a kind of illustration-type person.

So it was not really what I was interested in. I was already in a place in which I thought those applied arts were sort of lesser, right? Arrogant asshole, probably, come to think of it, if I was on the outside of this, because all these idealisms about social life and affection really put you in a place in which you would supposedly be in a place outside of everything else. Like everything was kind of a disappointment. I mean, I was ready to see the commodification of the artwork as a failure when I was 17, which was also kind of arrogant, when you think about it. So, yeah, there was one event after another, and it was Bechtold and Zevi Blum was the man's name who said, "Yeah. No, you can—you can and should go to art school."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Then I looked. It didn't look so interesting. And I believed I should not pay for college.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: I don't know why. And in those days, we didn't—you know, Ted, in those days, we didn't have to pay that much. If you got a regents scholarship, it was, like, half of a state college tuition, and all you had to do was, like, fairly well on the regents test. And I'd done all those in eighth grade with that crazy teacher at Markles Flats. And he did; he taught us how to ace them, not by telling us the answers, but how to do tests.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And there was Cooper Union, and it was free.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: So I don't even think I visited Cooper. I think I just said, "I want to go there."

THEODORE KERR: Had you been visiting New York anyway? Like, was New York part of your life?

DOUG ASHFORD: I had been—I had been—Richard and I hitchhiked everywhere, Boston and New York, to go and look at paintings. You could do that in the '70s, although there were a couple of close calls. I was staying—

THEODORE KERR: You're talking about hitchhiking?

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, we'd hitchhike all day, at least locally on the east coast: hitchhike to D.C., hitchhike to Boston, hitchhike to New York. I would do that alone, probably, junior year. Maybe it was senior year already. I would stay at the YMCA on 23rd Street across from the Y—it was there then. I don't know. I don't think it is anymore. And across from the Y was the Chelsea Hotel. And in the Chelsea Hotel, there were people who I would meet who would take me to Max's Kansas City as a kid, as a high school kid. I don't have that many memories of it, but I remember saying, "I need to—I need to—I need to be here." I can't. There were so many ideas about myself and about this either destructive fiction or wonderful utopic vision of social aesthetics that was not going to happen in a standard university. It was not going to happen in these rural places full of athletes and white supremacists. And little did—I know, I did know—and heteronormativitists, whatever that would be. Like this was not going to happen there. That it was a—that—I didn't see it necessarily as a radically—like, a radical identity

with any idea of sexuality, per say. But it was definitely committed to openness, and that meant getting the fuck out of Ithaca. So, there was one other school in New York that I applied to, Pratt. I got into every one, I think, pretty much. And then, I was like, "Yeah, I got into Cooper, great."

THEODORE KERR: Did Richard? Did Richard apply?

DOUG ASHFORD: He did not. He was more of a rebel than I. He was like, "I'm going to go move to Martha's Vineyard," where his grandmother had lived, "and I'm just going to make work here. And I'm going to sell it on the beach." And he's still there.

THEODORE KERR: Wow. That's interesting. And so you arrive in New York. It's the mid-'70s?

DOUG ASHFORD: It's '76, I think.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

DOUG ASHFORD: September of '76.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

DOUG ASHFORD: And then there's a whole narrative about the different kinds of disappointments and alignments that happen in an art academy in New York in the '70s, which I could just talk about for hours. What should I—oh, I could tell you one sort of dualism that's really quite wonderful because, for people of my generation—and I've talked about this before in other interviews, publicly, so this is why it's available to you probably. There are two kinds of teachers. There were the older, mostly men, who were abstract expressionists, who believed in a certain kind of atelier style of teaching. "There's no syllabus. There's no course. There's me. You talk to me, and I talk to you. I may tell you only do something with this size brush, only make this thing." But basically, there's no idea of the development or the training of the artist. To become an artist, we have to unlearn. Okay? This goes all the back, probably, to the 19th century.

And then, there were the people just a little younger than my parents—yeah, a little younger than my parents, who were—who came of age intellectually and creatively, in the '60s. So, there was Hans. There was Martha Rosler. There was P. Adams Sitney, who taught film theory. There was Lucy Lippard. There was Vito Acconci, who was a little bit younger, maybe the same age as Hans. So, there was these—in a sense, these opposing narratives, which sort of fit into the kind of context that I come out of in high school. Not just that the abstract expressionists were aesthetes because that wasn't—yeah, it fit into the opposition, but it defied its—the caricature of the opposition. Because the aesthete, Reuben Kadish, who was—grew up with Jackson Pollock, and went to Mexico with him, and Phil—come to me later—to work with David Siqueiros, who was a great communist muralist and photo documenter of the social revolutions in Mexico in the beginning of the 20th century.

But he was a committed Commie, right? Jewish intellectual, 1950s, New York City. Came from L.A., but still was, like, part of that tradition of the radical intellectual movement of the '40s and '50s. So, the aesthete was not really an aesthete. The aesthete acted like an aesthete, right, and talked about art for art's sake, but art for art's sake for a reason because, unless art is independent of other things, it won't ever be able to be truly radical, right? And then, the contextualizers were there, like Hans and Martha. Martha, less so, but Hans more fit into a confounding of the idea of the political artist because Hans, as a teacher, was obsessed with the idea of magic form. Right? I mean, here he was, the father of institutional critique, and interviewing like boards of directors to sort of, like, disentangle the politics of the institution from its economic foundations. And you would show him work, and he would say, "Some things are just magical."

THEODORE KERR: Oh, wow.

DOUG ASHFORD: Right? So, in a way, that—I didn't know it then, but I know it now. The association that I had between aesthetics and politics from the mother, the Sunday painter on the streets saying we shall—singing we shall overcome on the weekday. The person who told me that beauty has everything to do with justice was actually, part in parcel, of these other figures that I was running into as a young artist and admiring, also. So, in a sense, I guess, that kind of information about the contradictions between art and the use of art, between institutions and aesthetic desire gathered steam and gathered paradoxical steam, in a way, in the '70s, with that sort of—the educational context of Cooper.

THEODORE KERR: And that had been for you and for the people you were coming up with?

DOUG ASHFORD: It's funny. In a way, no. I mean, in a way, Cooper had this sort of team mentality. There were people on the fourth floor who studied with Hans, and they were sort of like new, conceptual artists. And then, there are the people on the sixth floor who studied with Nicholas Marsicano, and also Reuben Kadish on the fourth floor, but they were sort of the mystical versus the material, right? The mystics versus the materialists.

And I have to say, I was always in between. One of the most important artists of my life, I met then, first year at Cooper Union, Angelo Bellfatto, with whom I wrote the thing where that—I could show you—who has always retained a kind of really distinctly mythological relationship to the production of art that disdains the material world completely—the figurative.

He's—he actually, himself, is a mystic, I believe, but one that's so erudite and understands in such a tremendously detailed degree, the mythological, religious, sociological histories, and interpretations and modernity of them, that his, say, understanding of the revelatory capacity of a certain kind of absurdist comparison by—I don't know—Briton in 1940, he would sort of know the Renaissance sources, in terms of, like, ideas of poetics and revelry, then, and then also be able to maybe quote the conditions of the Roman—of the—of Renaissance scholars in Rome, looking back at antiquity, and know those contexts as well. He's probably one of the best-read people that I know.

THEODORE KERR: And he seems like an absorber.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, and he also has—and he'll admit it; he has a photographic memory.

THEODORE KERR: Is it useful or necessary to talk about the difference between magical and mystical? Is there a difference for you?

DOUG ASHFORD: I have problems with both terms, I guess. I don't know.

THEODORE KERR: I only ask because they—you used them both, and I couldn't tell if they were interchangeable or specific.

DOUG ASHFORD: No, but by mystical, maybe the better term would be metaphysical, that, for those teachers who I respected who were speaking about art as an act of autonomy, according to these sort of, like, traditions around the elevation of abstraction by expressionism in the '40s and '50s, were—would, yeah, would describe it as a sort of—as maybe a mystical experience. But we're always, in a sense, trying to push the idea of the divine into a context in which—in a larger, philosophical connotation; at least, I believe they were. This is probably formulized by other kinds of theorists, but the artists themselves—I mean, as Reuben used to say, you go to the Met with two painters who really know what they're doing, and the conversation's basically grunts, right? There's not a whole lot of conversation. He also said all the best artists are autodidacts. And he said, most importantly—and this is now reflected in contemporary theory of relative—I don't know—significance within this sort of art world, as it's known now. He said, "All artists live out of time." That is that all artists—that the art historian is your enemy.

THEODORE KERR: That the, what? Art historian is your enemy?

DOUG ASHFORD: —is your enemy, is your enemy, that the teleological idea of the artist and their influences is a mistake. And he taught us a course, which is quite remarkable. How he got this, I don't even know because nowadays, it would be assigned to an art historian. But it was the introductory art history class for a freshman.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And he would organize these slide carousels—tantric painting.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Okay? To photographs of the structures of insect pupae and reproduction, to technological experimentation by NASA on lunar landers—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —to the sculptures of Kenneth Snelson. Do you know who he is?

THEODORE KERR: No.

DOUG ASHFORD: He invented this idea of tensegrity or something. He was a student of Buckminster Fuller's, so he built these structures with strings and sticks that would hold together. Even though it looked like it had no physical material structure, the tension of the wires around the materials would hold things up. It looks like a kind of mall trick at this point, but it was something mind-blowing.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, mind-blowing.

DOUG ASHFORD: And for young artists who were invested, as you know I was from these sort of traditionalist narratives of study—although I was so in love with Reuben, this didn't end the way that he thought, openly

against discipline, against tradition, but with an investment in the development of medium specificity. Like, that's the thing. Like, it was still about—like, you got to know what clay does.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: How am I going to find out? Go into the room. I'll see you in two months. You know, it was that sort of like idea of isolation and immersion, and again, un-learning, all right?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And—but those slide lectures, yeah, were remarkable and—oh, as I was saying, for many students, it was very difficult for them because they wanted to see how they—how the development of art led to a certain idea of sophistication, either of form or of idea, and then how they fit into it, which is also the demands many of my students have today, and I'm equally frustrated. And I bring Reuben Kadish forth in my classroom all the time as a spectral presence that resists the idea of the historitization of you as a subject.

THEODORE KERR: Can you—

DOUG ASHFORD: And I can argue about that. I can argue for that, both in terms of the idea of political subject—because the idea that you're made from the past is a mistake; otherwise, what kind of future are you going to imagine? And then, also—right? That you are not just determined by the things that built you. We know this. I mean, any queer student in my class knows this, that there's a—there's a boy in my class who was raised as Jane. He knows that he was not—you know, that was built as Jane—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —by the outside world, but he himself is not—was not allowed to do that, what he wanted to do and wanted to be. So, what's my point here? It's a kind of a—it's a kind of a—this idea of this—this idea of the autonomy of the artist has been kind of an independent figure within the constraints of normalization. Reuben never talked about it as politics, but it was a politics. And the problem for students of my generation is that all those formalisms around the development of aesthetic structure, of the idea of experience as reality, of the sort of investment in perception, philosophically, as having a certain kind of value over the organization of the world, was described by the critical aspects of the art industry as bourgeois, right, as decadent, as decorative, and all those other things. And it may have been, but it was also all those other things at the same time.

THEODORE KERR: How do you spell Reuben's last name?

DOUG ASHFORD: Kadish. K-A-D-I-S-H. And the—and the—and the part—other name in the group with Jackson Pollock was Philip Guston.

THEODORE KERR: All right. And so, you're in school. You know, you're taking these classes that are both continuing the way you were thinking, but also creating new ways of understanding the world—

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: —that you're in. But also, I assume you're making friends and going out. You're being in the world. And do you want to talk a little bit about, like—

DOUG ASHFORD: Kind of became a little bit isolated in that time, actually.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

DOUG ASHFORD: I'm not sure why. I don't know why. Let me think about that a little bit. I did no drugs.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: May have done some drinking. I was very close to Angelo.

THEODORE KERR: Are you saying Angelo or Angela?

DOUG ASHFORD: Angelo.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

DOUG ASHFORD: Bellfatto. B-E-L-L-F-A-T-T-O. Still my best friend, probably. Godfather to my children.

THEODORE KERR: My friend and I, when we say probably, that's how we say "I love you," because one time I said, "I love you, Marshal," he went, "Probably."

DOUG ASHFORD: [Laughs.] Well, you know, the thing about the best friend—the bestie, it's a funny thing because, like, we don't see each other that much, but we know everything about each other, to the degree that, when we are together, we always cry. We always cry. I mean, I always cry. I always cry when I'm with Angie because you get to a certain age, and you've just been through so many things. And things are still always so difficult, right, that you're just like, how can he still be here [laughs]? So, where was I with that?

THEODORE KERR: We were talking about isolation.

DOUG ASHFORD: Right. In a period—I don't know if it was isolated, so much. I really wanted to fall in love. This is more personal. I really—I had a couple of really—we can't—there's things that will become transcribed, and I don't want them to be transcribed.

THEODORE KERR: Okay. So, you have options, then. You can either, like—

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: —not use names, or you can say it, and we can, like—when we get the paper back, we can say that this—

DOUG ASHFORD: I was in love with very beautiful people who were very crazy.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Like, one after another.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: I think that's the best way to say it. Right? Just general.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: Stunningly beautiful. Beautiful inside and—I don't mean just that they were physically sexy, but that they were, like, remarkable. And yeah, I just wanted to work and find love.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And I think I'm not alone in this, in that certain kinds of relationships like that, they go on for long—relatively long periods of time. The conditions around—and it's the age, you know? Like, what is it? Nineteen? Like, the way that you're sort of tortured about something leads to contexts in which you—which they become crazy. Crazy. So, yeah. I guess I went out. I don't know. I got a job right away, second or third year. I was a welder for the Macy's Parade, and it was seasonal, so you would work June to something, and then work a lot in November. Maybe it was just my very last year there. And then, I continued to do that for three years after. But, I think, to go back to the thing about being isolated, I just think I was always working. I am kind of a workaholic. I'm not always working in a focused way because I'm very unsure. I listened to Malcolm Gladwell last night talk about the two artists; it's quite beautiful.

THEODORE KERR: On a podcast?

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, "The Sure and the Unsure."

THEODORE KERR: Oh, okay.

DOUG ASHFORD: The sure is Picasso, who said, "This is it. I make it. I make it again, and I make it again." It's a conceptual organization of the effect of the work, maybe not its methods or its means, like how it's built, or what you do, but you know what you want. So, you draw that satyr and that bowl, like, for a week.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Or you do 100 a day. There's no hesitation. Nothing is thrown out.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And then, there's Cézanne, right, who wanted to throw out everything. Never really thought it was good while he was working on it, and was, although focused, in terms of the material and the methods, was unsure about what it meant. So, yeah, I was a workaholic, but I didn't really know what to make or what it meant. And I'm still kind of like that, I think. I mean, the only way I'm able to have an art practice today is through the kind of, like, contingency. Like, okay, there's a show, and it's got to get done, and I'll do it. It's why

Group Material is so attractive to me because, within the collective, was the idea—within the multi-vocal, was this idea of, in a sense, not really committing to any particular result, which sounds unprofessional, but it's why that Gladwell thing made me feel so good because I don't—I actually don't think it is. I think there's a lot of really good artists; I don't consider myself a very good artist. I'm not saying that to look for compliments or whatever, but I know some great artists, but I'm okay. But there's lot of okay artists, and there's a lot of great artists, too, who are really unsure.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: And then, there's many who are just absolutely certain. And then, there's probably a boat load—like, a huge boat load, like a giant ocean liner-full of artists who just pretend they do.

THEODORE KERR: Who pretend that they're sure?

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: I have a feeling.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, now you want to do—you want to do an unofficial poll?

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah. Don't you?

THEODORE KERR: Maybe. Can we take that?

[Side conversation.]

So, maybe to this last section, let's talk about—let's get to a certain point in history. Let's kind of see if we can do this, if we can go through art school to the beginning of working with Group Material, and like, what that—

DOUG ASHFORD: It was right then. We're there.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

DOUG ASHFORD: Because we're there. Because Group Material was already in production, probably '80, '81. I graduated in '81. As a junior or as a senior—again, that's why I got the books out to check. I was a fan; I was not a member. The first year of Group Material happened on the storefront on 13th Street, and I was just an attendant. And I was also, as I mentioned before, already involved in being a teacher through the student-initiated program where, on Saturdays, we would meet with kids from public high schools to try to help them to develop the portfolio, and in a sense, a kind of entrance culture that our school demands because, as you probably know, advanced education in the United States is not necessarily racist in intention, but it's racist in effect because the conditions of education leading up to college are so disastrous that, for about—huge cohorts of Americans, young people, are not even allowed to think of the possibility of advanced education at all, let alone art school. I mean, we could probably go now out to Boys and Girls High School in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and there'll be many people there who don't even know that an art school exists.

So, Tim and I hit it off right away. Tim Rollins was, I think, already graduated a couple years before, and was already teaching in public schools. I, as a student, was involved in Saturday program, and pretty much, the year after, or right after—yes, the summer after Cooper Union, I enrolled in education courses at Hunter College, so I could get the six credits that were needed, in those days, to become eligible for temporary certification as a public school teacher in the city of New York. And you would take a test. You'd be told to make a painting in their office at the Board of Education down on Cork Street in Brooklyn.

I passed, and I was given—I don't even think that the fact I passed was registered. And in the hallway, someone said, "Is there anybody in here who wants to be an art teacher?" Because we had just had this guy—they didn't tell me, but someone just had quit at a high school—the same one that I just mentioned, Boys and Girls High School at Bedford-Stuyvesant. And I said, "I'll do it." And then did that for five years. So, the—but the interest in education and probably radical education, which also goes back to Markles Flats, obviously, was one of the things that brought Tim and I together. And then, once I was involved, I fell in love with everybody.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. Maybe unpack that a bit? Like, how did you meet? What does being in love with? Who is everybody?

DOUG ASHFORD: Well, Group Material, after its first year, had a very big group. And I think it was unclear how it was going to refocus itself after that period, but it was kind of like, a lot of people left. Some of the people who left—I think it was a man named Patrick—had the lease to the original store front on 13th Street. So, they—and

it was a "they," then, were without. There was a couple—there were many alternative and sort of street projects going on all over New York: Colab, Fashion Moda. There are fellow graduates of Cooper Union that I was close to, were involved with some, and not others. But my relationship with Tim and also Mundy [McLaughlin] and Julie, then, sort of coagulated into us being the four members of Group Material, probably by 1983. But that, I would have to check.

THEODORE KERR: Right. And we can always check later.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: It's the—your feelings and your stories and your memories are more important than the dates, unless the dates are important to you.

DOUG ASHFORD: They're not that important to me, but they're important to other people.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: Like, Julie is really, in a sense, the—she's always been the—from the beginning, she was, in the sense, the kind of—I don't use the word "spiritual" very often, but in a sense, the kind of emotional core of that group, particularly once it reformulated after that initial change in membership in the '80s. And Julie is really invested in ideas of accuracy. She would—we both, since we had people—15, 16 years later, that organized the archive, realizes that the conditions around historical memory and the way that it functions are extremely subjective. But she's like, no, there's a list. So, let's use the list. You know? And she has a better memory than I do.

THEODORE KERR: You said something so beautiful there. You connected accuracy and spirituality, at least in the assemblage that is your friend Julie.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah. She's a unique person. Have you met Julie? She should be interviewed for this.

THEODORE KERR: She is, yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: Okay, all right.

THEODORE KERR: But I wonder if you want to—is that something—is that part of the falling in love with your group that this—like, it sounds like it was a group of special people, and you all had these things that make sense now, in time and space, to care about together? Did they make sense then? Was that even a thing that you were thinking about? Like, what was the attraction? What was—what did—

DOUG ASHFORD: The attraction, in the beginning, was intellectual.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, for sure. That idea that artists would determine the conditions of the display and the consumption of their work on their own, that the gallery system had created a context of, not just exploitation of artists—it's not really about the fair labor practices necessarily—but just where art wasn't understood by people.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And this goes back, for me, to those originating adolescent ideas that aesthetics and politics make each other. Again, I could say that now, as an adult; at the time, I was not sure that the reason that I fell in love with people around the possibility of producing beautiful things and my love for them suggested the possibility of social change because we were a group, was not formulated in any kind of way, either poetically or analytically—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —to be able to say what I just said, that aesthetics and politics build each other. But yeah, I was looking for that, like, you know, the whole time, in a way. And the connection that was historical between Julie and Tim as friends, all the way back from when they were in high school, and then the sort of commitment to the idea of a practice that exists separate from you as an individual was, in a way, perfect for this kind of drive that I have for whatever reason.

THEODORE KERR: Maybe just to ground us a little bit, can you tell me, like, do you remember where you were living, who you were living with, what your place looked like?

DOUG ASHFORD: So, right after college, graduated, went to work for Macy's immediately, met the mother of my

children. Probably by the fall—by the time I was involved with Group Material as an ongoing—as ongoing work, like the word "practice" is a little bit like, whatever. But like, as ongoing work, like we were meeting, I was then living in Brooklyn in Carol Gardens, with Sarah Safford and deciding to breed.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: And before—

DOUG ASHFORD: Why are you laughing?

THEODORE KERR: Oh, I like—

DOUG ASHFORD: Because I used the word "breed?"

THEODORE KERR: Your word choices are good, interesting. Like, to describe people who—flesh eater—

DOUG ASHFORD: [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: —breed.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, yeah. I think it's because I grew up around farmers.

THEODORE KERR: And before that, you lived—did you live in the dormitories of Cooper Union?

DOUG ASHFORD: We never had dorms. Everybody had apartments.

THEODORE KERR: Ah, okay.

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, let's not start a real estate narrative of, like, of longing, but you know, when I came to New York, you could get a floor-through for $90.

THEODORE KERR: Right. And you lived with people, or not with people?

DOUG ASHFORD: In the beginning, I did, as a freshman. And then, by the time I graduated, I had an apartment. But then, yeah. I lived in Carol Gardens, and I met Sarah Safford, working at Macy's. She was—she worked in the costume department, and I was a welder.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And I invited her to move in.

THEODORE KERR: And this is when you were also building houses? You mentioned [inaudible]—

DOUG ASHFORD: No, that happened after. Because there we were in an apartment in Carol Gardens, real estate seemed relatively cheap. There was a set of programs that happened, and one that was sort of like, actually, a New York City program, where artists were invited to take over abandoned properties.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Yvonne Rainer, who I was a great fan of, was one of those artists. There were meetings. There were lots of contradictions. Yvonne ended up not doing this, but you know, New York City, at the time, you have this memory of the late-'70s and the early-'80s? I mean, half the properties were abandoned.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Well, I might be exaggerating, but where we lived, they were. And the idea that you could, like, start up with a house seemed to make sense to me, but I wasn't really sure how to do it until I became a public high school teacher. Group Material was already working. The contradictions of time and money were intense. Sarah was pregnant. I was in a stressful situation with that apartment because it wasn't really suitable for having a kid.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: I was sitting in the cafeteria at Boys and Girls High School, and my colleagues, who are mostly women and probably 80 percent African American—the school was 98 percent black, and I was complaining. And they were like, Well, you need to walk down to the Municipal Banking Society and get a loan. And I was like,

Well, I don't really want a mortgage. I remember this conversation really distinctly because it was one of those conversations about white privilege that, when they happen, you're like, oh.

And Molly Mimms was her name. Said, "Well, aren't we special? You don't want a mortgage." And I said, "What are you talking about?" And she said, "Well, my mother couldn't get a mortgage. And her mother couldn't get a mortgage. And her mother couldn't get a mortgage." And she was referring to something that, now, I know, which is the systematic disenfranchisement of African Americans from property ownership in the United States: the G.I. Bill, the organization of banking, the red lining of neighborhoods; we could do the whole list. And I was like—and I went home, and I said to Sarah—I said, you know, we should just—I should—we should figure this out. And we did, and we bought a house for $17,000 on Park Slope, which was a year salary. But who could buy a house with a year's salary now? No one. [Laughs]. I mean, the guy that works for Google, maybe, right? But yeah, it's incredible, when you think about that.

THEODORE KERR: And then, I have this romantic question. Did Group Material, like, meet in the house? Where were you all—

DOUG ASHFORD: We mostly met at—in the early—the first year after that initial large group break up—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —we met at—in Tim's house, which was on 26th Street and Lexington Avenue. And it was also where we would have shows. Then, as a group, we were invited to do projects at other alternative spaces. An early one would've been *Primer*, for Raymond Williams at Artists Space, and began to meet at other places. The following year and after that, we continually met at Mundy's. I believe that's because Tim moved in with Kate, his girlfriend at the time, Kate Pierson of the B52s. And although we met—no, we met at Tim's house, too. We couldn't meet at Julie's house.

THEODORE KERR: Because of size, or—

DOUG ASHFORD: Because of size. Julie Ault and Andre Serrano lived in an apartment that was about three feet bigger, all the way around of a bed.

THEODORE KERR: Ah.

DOUG ASHFORD: Of a bed, yeah.

THEODORE KERR: Too small.

DOUG ASHFORD: Too small. Too small. And Mundy moved, or left, and Julie took Mundy's apartment on 10th Street. So, that would've been later on in the '80s. Yeah, because by the time Julie and I were on our own—or more on our own, because the—Tim Rollins and K.O.S. really started to take a lot of momentum up. It was also intense for me. I remember one significant event, when we left for the first time we did *Documenta*. It was in 1987, I think, and we got to the airport, and we did the Kassel for *Documenta 8*. And we were leaving for the airport, and Julie forgot—we got to the airport, and Julie forgot her passport.

Julie, at the time, and she still is—such a great conversation because I get to talk about stuff we don't ever—I don't ever talk about. Because you began the conversation so biographical, in terms of origins, Julie was self-employed, then, as—and still is, definitely by nature, a psychic. And we got to the airport, and she said, "I just need everyone to be quiet, and I will find my passport." For the tape recorder's sake, that silence is Julie finding her passport. Jumped in a cab, went all the way back to East Village, made it back in time because, in those days, it's before 9-11, and you could sort of just say, "Please wait. Please wait." And then, there wasn't all that TSA apparatus. Ran up, and we got on the plane. And the only reason I tell this story is because I know that, at that point in time, she lived in 10th Street. So, yeah, we worked out of our homes.

THEODORE KERR: And what did—would you call them meetings? Would you call them hanging outs? Would you call them working togethers? What would you call it when you all came together?

DOUG ASHFORD: We called it a meeting.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: But they were often convivial and social on other levels. And I've argued this historically, and also—maybe not so much as historically, but like, to my students, that the conditions around which the aesthetic invention and—great, critical power came, was often not from the analytic idea of the synthetic meaning, but of this sort of, like, of play. Like, Tim is hilarious, right? Often to the point of ruthlessness. Like, ruthlessly hilarious. And the dilemma of the artist, in terms of all the institutions around them, was just an object of, like, ridicule, constantly, for all of us.

And out of those jokes often came projects. Like the exhibition called *Resistance (Anti-Baudrillard)* came from us making jokes about the way that this sort of East Village art scene associated itself with the theoretical ideas of this French, you know, theorist, and how kind of hilarious it was. Hilarious. It also came out of serious considerations that that—that it was able—that we were able to make fun of it because of the way that it took radical politics and made it so symbolically distant from the real work that people were doing on an everyday level that I, and all of us, were connected to, but like, I was there in Bed-Stuy, like, with a class register of 35 students, only 15 showing up because of the systemically—systemic economic disenfranchisement of a whole part of New York City that was done on purpose.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: That I got to not just witness, but try to compensate for as a public school teacher, for seven hours a day, every day. I mean, the reason that you have a register of 35 and only 15 show up isn't because they're fucking up. It's because the world is fucking them. And I mean, it was awful: murders, pregnancies. And unlike ruling class kids, who I know because my kids grew up in a relatively—in a condition of relative means and went to private schools in the '80s—or in the '90s. In those days, in this New York, if you did drugs, it's not that you were too stoned to go to school. It's that that culture brought you into a condition of such devastation so quickly and economies of, like, desperation with what it meant to be in that world that, yeah, you could not go to school. So, yeah, because people would always say that to me when asking me about what it was like. So, yeah, so drugs is a big problem, right? No, no, drugs is not a big problem because, when a kid starts to do drugs, they don't show up. It's gone. They're gone. They're in another world. They're outside of civil society. They're drained. So, the question was, again, about—

THEODORE KERR: What did meetings look like?

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, and my extension of that was—is that the meetings were always relative to the lived content of the members. Mundy worked as a dancer in bars in New Jersey. Julie worked as a framer. Julie's husband, Andre Serrano, was a [second or third generation –DA] immigrant from Honduras. I mean, I think artists have always been in this place where they're between the rule—the ruling and the ruled. Actually, I know that, theoretically, because I have this, like, shtick that I give about it, where we're actually the translators of the taboo, both in terms of class and desire, for culture at large. But yeah, no. We are in the middle of all these things, and those things, and the life that we had as citizens in a city that was so devastated by late capital became not just our subject because we wanted to so the relationships between economies and art, right, and the term "cultural economy" was a big term of the time, but yeah, because it was part of our lives. I mean, as Tim said at the time, you know, the reason we started Group Material was because we were desperate. And then, I've always added to that, I mean, we were desperate for a lot of reasons: we were desperate because the art world was sort of organized in a way that was completely fictional in terms of, one, where art comes from; two, who gets to produce art and whose art gets to be valued; three, who gets to appreciate art and how they get to do that, which Group Material was clearly a response to, but also, we were desperate because society was divided.

THEODORE KERR: When you say divided, what do you picture?

DOUG ASHFORD: As artists, we were around all these people who were rich.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: When I came to Cooper Union, I didn't know what Captiva Island was. I didn't know there was boarding schools. I mean, I didn't grow up, necessarily, as a working class kid, although the actual physical economies of my family, after my parents were divorced in 1969 and until I left that house in 1976, were relatively dire because my mother did, in a sense, start over with four kids. My father's family was destitute in the '30s and '40s. He grew up without a dad, so he had that sort of working class sensibility. But where class comes from? I didn't necessarily come from a bad place. I didn't grow up in a project or anything like this. But the conditions of New York were—it was pretty concrete that there was, like, a systematic devaluation of what it meant to have a city and what it meant to have the civic potential of what a city would offer. I find this, like—these days, often, with colleagues of my same—of my generation, who wax nostalgically about all the different archaeological and urban contexts for reinvention that existed at the time. And it's true. The piers were amazing. You could walk around, and anything could happen. The streets of Lower Manhattan were full of, like, open places in which people could either have architectural access—and we used to go drink on top of the Plaza Hotel, you know?

So, in terms of surveillance and access, things were open. Architecturally, things were open, in terms of, like, place, but they were only open for certain people. They were only open for people who felt they had the right to the access of those situations. And the truth of it is, from the late-'70s until the late-'80s, early-'90s, to be a working person in New York was to live on the precipice. I mean, when I started teaching at Boys and Girls High

School, there was a guy who came to school to give us introductions to the different kinds of—as new teachers, the different kinds of medical conditions that we might enter into. And he said, "Keep in mind, there are less doctors for the 46,000 people who live in this area of Brooklyn per capita than there are in Mozambique." And the way hospitals functioned and the way emergency rooms worked and the way transportation worked and didn't worked, I mean—so, sure. We had access to everything. But for lots of people, it was awful. For the majority, it was awful.

THEODORE KERR: When do you think back, do you think that you first saw, or experienced, HIV in your job in Bed-Stuy?

DOUG ASHFORD: I experienced the way it was received. No, I first experienced HIV as illnesses in friends, and they didn't know what it was. Two friends from high school, Peter—I forgot the other guy's name; it'll come to me.

THEODORE KERR: And those were—

DOUG ASHFORD: But was sick in the early-'80s and was not clear what it was. And then, it became very clear for everyone very quickly. I don't know why that was.

THEODORE KERR: Was it in New York?

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah?

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah. Was it—why did it become so visible so soon? Maybe because of Group Material, maybe because we were connected with all of that. Bill was sick. Bill Olander—yeah, it was—maybe Bill Olander was one of the first people that I really knew. But then, Peter was also—had been ill the whole time. You know, as someone who was identified—self-identified as straight, it may have been that I was not told details right away, but I knew that things were—yeah. But I think it was, like, that way for lots of people, like even people who are close to people who—like, it wasn't—the full extent of what was at stake was not identified. Then, there was—so, there were those first sort of, like, feelings. Like, why is everybody sick? Why do I have five friends who are sick? Peter, his three friends, and his boyfriend were all sick. And then—and then, the virus was identified. So, when was that, '83?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, '82, '83.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. And you remember these moments? You remember friends getting sick? You remember it being identified and—

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: —hearing your language, it seemed fast. Like, it seemed like—

DOUG ASHFORD: It was so fast. But this is not just me.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, it was like every month. People—and then, statistics, and then reports. And then, and then, and then injustice. Like, just crazy. Like, these fucking crazy people just sort of came out of the woodwork. It's like now. It's like now. It's like, did he say that now? Like, it's just been 24 hours. Like—

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: —he's bragging that he's a rapist? Now? Like, it's 24 hours later. But then, maybe that's hindsight, too. I don't really know. It's also difficult for me—I realize this, in thinking about this interview, potentially, in that—the sense that, like, once Group Material—we were doing the project at the Dia Art Foundation. And once we decided to do work about the AIDS crisis—that's how it was described then—there began a period of research, in which things that were relatively recent to that moment became, in a sense, reevaluated very quickly. So like—so like, experiences that I would have with friends and friends of family and other people, that really quickly got relabeled and re-understood. Does that make sense?

THEODORE KERR: Absolutely.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah. Well—

THEODORE KERR: I think of AIDS as a force that breaks into history. It's like an assemblage that breaks into history, and with that is disruptive—and just changes the makeup of everything. And I think, hearing you speak it, it's saying that, like, time is different. The order of things is different.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, yeah.

THEODORE KERR: And how people interacting with each other becomes, like, different in a way that we can make sense of politically, but also different in a way that we don't have the language for.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, a lot of it has to do with the relationship that you have to death itself.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, that's a difficult topic, but it was weird, in the sense that, in the '90s, too, people in my —both of my parents died in the early-'90s, but Felix died in '96. Bill died—he was there for the opening. Why would we put the real estate—the wheel chair ramp up, which was another one of Julie's brilliant moments, so brilliant. So, this is '88. Yeah, I don't remember necessarily when Bill died. Right after, '90, '91. My mom died in —my dad died in '92, and my mom died in '94. And I don't mean to equate that, but I just feel like, as someone who was 30—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —[laughs]—I mean, it was like—I can't describe it any differently than anyone else. I mean, it was an epidemic, so we were going to funerals all the time.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I don't think you're making an equation. I think you're making relationships that help illustrate for the historical document—

DOUG ASHFORD: Right.

THEODORE KERR: —how out of time it could have felt.

DOUG ASHFORD: Right.

THEODORE KERR: Like, how do you bury your parents—

DOUG ASHFORD: Right.

THEODORE KERR: —who are supposed to die—

DOUG ASHFORD: Right.

THEODORE KERR: —when they're old.

DOUG ASHFORD: Right. How do you bury your friends?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, it also—I don't mean to get emotional about it, but at that time, because gay life was so—it just happened to me again, actually, relatively recently, three years ago. Because gay identity was so unacknowledged by so many people's families, that the condition around mourning was so repressed and fraught that the denial of death, which we all would like to have, was always mixed. But the denial of the person by the family, and it was like—it happened three years ago. A friend of mine who was HIV positive, and do we say that they died of AIDS? We don't say that anymore; do we?

THEODORE KERR: Depends. Depends on what they died of.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah. But it wasn't PCP. That's gone.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: You know? "Complications from intestinal disease." Right?

THEODORE KERR: I say that because, you know, some people with HIV die in car crashes, right?

DOUG ASHFORD: Well, yeah, no.

THEODORE KERR: You know what I mean?

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, yeah—

THEODORE KERR: So, I was just making space for that—

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, but is any physical—like, let's say, like, you had—I mean, you also smoke, but you have other kinds of cancer? Like, I don't know.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

DOUG ASHFORD: Like, it's like—

THEODORE KERR: I think it's an activist decision.

DOUG ASHFORD: —it must be complicated. Yeah, okay. So, Louis did not identify that he died of AIDS—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —when he was dying, but he died, and at the funeral—this is three years ago, Ted.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

DOUG ASHFORD: Okay? David, who lived with him for—since we were at Cooper together; this is a classmate of mine at Cooper—'94, so 20 years. And the fucking priest called him the goddamn roommate. "His good friend David and roommate."

THEODORE KERR: That's ridiculous.

DOUG ASHFORD: "His good friend and roommate David."

THEODORE KERR: Like, rage in hilarity because it's so stupid.

DOUG ASHFORD: The sister calls me—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —a year later and wants me to do something, help with the artwork because Louis had some shows. And I said, you know, did you call David?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, I was in Visual AIDS at this time, actually.

DOUG ASHFORD: And she said no. It was—did Visual AIDS work in Louis Laurita's estate?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: Okay.

THEODORE KERR: Even the denial of his—well, they tried the denial with his family.

DOUG ASHFORD: Tell me.

THEODORE KERR: Just that—so, he had works in his show around that time that Visual AIDS was associated with it—

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: —and it was just made that much more complicated because Visual AIDS—

DOUG ASHFORD: Did Visual AIDS understand that he died of AIDS?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. Yeah, because you don't work with Visual AIDS—like, if you're an artist member, you have HIV.

DOUG ASHFORD: Okay.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: I knew he was HIV positive, but again, how it's described. He didn't describe it to me that way.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

DOUG ASHFORD: And you heard the story, then?

THEODORE KERR: I mean, I think everyone has their own version of that—

DOUG ASHFORD: What happened to Lou's work?

THEODORE KERR: I don't remember it exactly because I was like, not deep in the story—

DOUG ASHFORD: That's fine; that's fine.

THEODORE KERR: —but I think it was, the family has it, and people were trying—I remember the curator was trying to get access to it, and it was made harder because his sister didn't want to give it. I think there was some complication of, like, she wanted his work to be shown, but under what circumstances? But I don't know.

DOUG ASHFORD: And I was like—and she went to Cooper, too.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Years later, a few years later. And at his funeral, you know, they do the ceremony, and then they do the burial. And there was David. And I was, like, so mad. Can't remember—I don't think I've been that angry since. And he said, "Why are you angry?" And I said, "I was just at that thing, David." And then he started crying. I don't know, man. So, yeah. HIV gave us all a way to associate, in a much broader sense, what it—what death means in relationship to identity.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And to build that into something that we feel we would have to defend and that makes me think about it.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Who do I want to be? How do I want it to be described? And then, all the subjectivities, which is maybe the values of these oral histories that enter into what would be said.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Felix's funeral, I was angry, too. Because I was like, where's all these people that he was hanging out with before, you know? But then, that just happened because of fame. That didn't happen because anybody—although there was shit with his family, too. But that didn't happen necessarily because of any kind of family denial. I'm with Felix now. I'm against religion. I'm against the law. You can be as spiritual as you want, but I'm against the law. My friend Naeem, another best friend that was with me the other day, and he's like, "Doug, we have to make this condition where we can defend Islam because this law is not what it's being depicted as." I said, I know. But I am never going to defend the religion. I do not care what you say because that shit is fucked up.

THEODORE KERR: But you think that's what creates the pain here? Like, do you think that's what prevented them—the priest from saying "his boyfriend, David?"

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah. I mean, he could have gone to the—Pope Francis. Called him, and Pope Francis would say, "I don't turn my back on anybody," right? But I don't know. Yeah, I guess there's—I know there's—I'm not stupid. I know there's dialogues within religion.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, I'm just wondering how—because I know you're not stupid, so I'm interested in your relationship between religion and social conditioning, and where they, like—like, did that man not say "his boyfriend" because of social conditions, or because of religion, or both? And is one a screen for the other one?

DOUG ASHFORD: That's a good question. I don't really know—I don't really know the answer.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, these days, these terrible days, it seems more and more that narratives of religious piety—but also, of nationalist affiliation seem more and more to be the excuses to do the utmost cruelty, over and over again.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: So—

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, I think—

DOUG ASHFORD: —it's probably just an alibi, and maybe it is just an alibi.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, I know that that man, when he said that to that other man, was not being a Christian. I know that.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: But the fact that the doctrine of—that the organized conditions around doctrine and its institutionalization within the church hierarchy doesn't just allow him to do it; it encourages him to do it. I mean —

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: —I think it's because—being raised by Communists, I was sort of, like, kept out of—or being raised by communists who were nostalgic, religious people; they were nostalgic for religion. We didn't go to church, wasn't trained in any kind of religious understandings. There were maybe Bibles in the house, but they were not discussed, read, referred to, or even visibly present.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: But you know, there's this lack—inner knowledge that human beings are more than we appear, that there are states of non-humanness, which would be previously, even to now, described as divinity that we experience all the time, all the time. So, the paradox is why the narrations and inscriptions of those ideas of the divine have to be used to torture other people because—so, best to ignore all of those inscriptions entirely. That's my—that's my statement. So, yeah, I'm against religion.

THEODORE KERR: We should wrap up.

[Side conversation.]

[END OF ashfor16_1of2_sd_tr02_m.]

Today is Thursday, November 3rd. This is tape two of an interview with artist Doug Ashford in his studio in Sunset Park, Brooklyn.

Hi, Doug.

DOUG ASHFORD: Hi. Hi, Ted.

THEODORE KERR: Today we are doing part two of the interview, and I wonder if you want to talk—where we ended off last time was, we were just getting into the beginning of your teaching, the beginning of HIV/AIDS impacting your worlds, and the beginning of the art practice as a collaborative endeavor.

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: And I wonder if you want to—I wonder if we can be a little more focused on HIV/AIDS today, and let's start by talking about, like, when did—when did AIDS—you first become conscious of HIV/AIDS in the world?

DOUG ASHFORD: You know, the thing is that there's two cloudings of the historical and the mnemonic, the memory that I was just thinking about just this weekend. One is that, as someone—well, maybe it wasn't me. Maybe it was this happened to a lot of people, where there were people around me who were ill, but it was not identified to me. And I would say that was soon after graduating from Cooper. There were two friends who were all in a poetry seminar that I was in at Cooper who became a couple after we graduated, and I think it was '84, and they were very ill. Years, and I lost track of them because right, after I graduated '82, '83, I started to work with Group Material—

THEODORE KERR: Wait. Can you say a little about those people in the poetry seminar that were ill? Like race, gender, memorable things?

DOUG ASHFORD: Oh, the name. I was going to call Angelo this weekend because—my best friend Angelo [Bellfatto], who I met when I arrived in New York four or five years earlier, has a photographic memory, and he would have remembered them. I believe one man's name was John, and then another—I don't remember his

boyfriend's name because he dropped out of the class. The rest of us—because we were reading journals with each other, there was a certain amount of connection and intimacy. There was also my best friend—one of my best friends from high school, Doug Hartman, and his best friend, [Peter; can't recall last name –DA]. I'll look this up—who was a—who was—came to New York at the same time from Ithaca. We all grew up together and were out to me and each other, obviously, in high school, so that would have been late-'70s.

THEODORE KERR: Out about their sexuality, you mean?

DOUG ASHFORD: Yes, yes. And since we were all in New York together—I guess me and Steven at first. Doug went to University of Virginia. [Peter -DA] also became ill. [. . .] [Peter –DA] also became ill two years afterwards and had the sarcoma, but maybe, you know—how do I explain this the right way? By 1988, which was four or five years later, in researching the development of the crisis and researching government indifference and inability of the medical system to respond appropriately and the ideological and political prejudice that actually, as we know now, made what would have been a relatively manageable epidemic into a health crisis, I realized afterwards that—and even to today—that there were, "Oh my god. That's what that was." Like looking back, saying, Steven was ill, but ill with what? We were speaking last time, maybe on tape or afterwards, about Louis Laurita, who I did my senior thesis show with at Cooper Union in 1981. Was Louis positive in '81? I—we didn't talk about it. He's hero status, then. My consciousness, or probably anyone's consciousness, of—as I know from researching it five years later, was, at best, probably speculative in 1983. Is that correct?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: I think that's correct.

THEODORE KERR: There's no test until '85, right?

DOUG ASHFORD: Exactly.

THEODORE KERR: And not everyone gets tested then?

DOUG ASHFORD: Right. Not everyone gets tested, and there's still speculative conversations about, if there's a virus, what the virus is. There was a conversation that I had had in the early period with another friend in the art world, whose name I don't remember, who named himself as having—as being—we didn't use the term PWA then. There was no Person With Aids. There was someone who was sick. And he talked about the Poppers, right?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And he thought that was related—that his illness was related to Poppers. So just to go back to my first statement, now that I'm 58, and it is 30, 40 years later—it's 40 years later, the relationship between what I knew and when I knew it is colored by what I learned later. And so the different relationships between fact and memory are very hazy. So, there were those—the two friends of mine at Cooper, and then there was the kind of rush of information that happened between '86 and '87. I think I met Bill Olander in 1986. Group Material had done a project at Oberlin a few years before. Bill had been there either before then or subsequently and then left, came to the New Museum, and asked to put up a project that Group Material had done that year, '85, called *Mass*.

Mass was quite distinctive in the sense that it was over 200 artists all in one show. That was then packable into two, small, two-foot by two-foot boxes. The idea was it was to sort of try to reflect that ubiquitous—ubiquity—ubiquitous-ness of mass media. And then also present the kind of collective and robust response that could happen if artists were organized into any particular moment. So what you had was images, one-foot by one-foot. We passed out these cardboard, one-foot square cards to 200 artists, and then also—maybe less than 200, actually, because there was other—there was—that's the size of a record album, so then we were also adding to that from every day, cultural detritus album covers and other kinds of cultural sources, which was the tendency of Group Material, and then, since the project of Group Material, in the first place, was to determine cultural values from, quote, low to higher art, et cetera, et cetera. But my point was—is that that project traveled to Australia, went to an alternative space in Ohio, went to an alternative space in L.A.

Somewhere along the line, Bill Olander heard of it, approached me, because in those early days of Group Material, each member of the four—the three or four of us were coordinating projects. We stopped doing that by '87. And I gave a talk at a small gathering, I believe, of other artists who were interested in alternative exhibition practices that Bill sponsored at another location when the New Museum was moving to the United States and Broadway. And we became friends. He met Julie, and the relationship, professional and personal, developed from that point. But Bill was probably positive at that time, and I was not—and I did not know until years later when we were planning and organizing *AIDS, a Case Study* as part of the *Democracy Project* at the Dia Art Foundation.

THEODORE KERR: Can you say a little bit about the—who Bill was in the art world?

DOUG ASHFORD: Who was Bill? I'll tell you who he was. For me, first of all, as a young artist in New York at the time, the art world seemed to be divided between people who had an interest in art that was now the norm, but then, maybe, 50 percent of an institutional framework, which were very athletic, muscular, competitive organizers, who were invested in younger artists as sort of aspects of caching power that built their own conditions. I mean, I have to say, Group Material is also part of that tendency in a way because, art historically speaking, although there were always curators, I think it was in the mid- to late-'80s that the idea of the curatorial as auteur, as author, began to become sort of turned into the dominant mode. And the idea of the artist as a kind of—and this is a derogatory term—sort of "content provider" to another thesis or proposal was beginning to be adopted. I mean, it depends who you read and how, but since Group Material had been doing these thematic exhibitions in spaces that we designed and organized ourselves, either public or private or within the museum, this idea of an exhibition that would be authored was, I think—and has been attributed to a great deal of these artists-run projects like Group Material from the get-go, but Bill was very much already invested in that narrative, that the exhibition was a context, around which discussion and democracy was enlivened, right, that the possibilities that the museum had was something that was part of the historical imperative.

He was quite smart, as I remember. Maybe even wrote his thesis about painting and public life in the 19th century. I think it's not—it will come to me later. So he shared this sort of late 19th-century scholarship that lots of people were invested in, cultural democracy were also invested in, which probably dates it, in terms of scholarship, all the way back to the commune in Paris at the 19th century. So his interest in Corbet and the context of art as a place in which subjective understandings of rebellion could be reconsidered was apparent, and he would speak about it. And he would also speak, and I think this is significant, about the relationship between those ideas of social change and the conditions around subjective identification, empathy, or subjective rapture. That would be the way that aesthetic organization reorganizes you individually. That narrative, not to typify him in any particular way, was probably something that—for him and for all younger artists and carriers at the time, was reinforced by popular culture: what music we liked, what context of irony and wit we were able to sort of able to incorporate into the context of our own work in the face of museological and art historical—museological and art historical reality that was so dominantly white-, male-, and heterosexual-normalizing that the idea that the—that our own, sort of, sphere would be understood as camp, or alternative, or whatever else, just seemed to be kind of a natural occurrence.

And I think this is important, too, that Group Material's, sort of, beginnings were also based in a similar kind of idea: that we would build our own communities and that our communities are built around the context of shared concern or shared desire, and that those narrations of—well, not narrations, but this sort of capacity we have to embody that sharing came from being in a context in which our belief systems were not represented by the institutions at large. For me, as someone who lives as a heterosexual, to name that as a kind of queerness of culture and as sort of, like, politicization of desire from outside the normative is a little bit pretentious. But I don't think that it's inaccurate in the way that—it's very moving to me that my students are now able to use the narrations around queer identity as things that are outside of sexual life, but have more to do with subjective identification with difference as a value in itself. And the multiplicity of such activities that came from queer theory at the time. So this is one of the ways that memory and history, for me, are so entangled, that, in a way, I live now through the desires of students and younger artists, as a teacher, in a way in which I'm able to remember these ideas as very radical proposals from a minority position that now are available to them in a context of the development of visual form but also of subjective re-stylization of themselves. You know? In ways that are extremely moving. I wish Bill had survived to see that because he would be very, very, very happy.

THEODORE KERR: These are things that you think Bill was contributing to the art world, and this was something that you understood was part of his project?

DOUG ASHFORD: I think—and I'm not the only one to say—that Bill was maybe one of the first to try to organize the museum infrastructure on an official level to be responsive to the AIDS crisis with the Gran Fury show that he did in the summer of 1987.

MALE SPEAKER: Check him on that.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: And did you know Bill before he proposed that to Gran Fury?

DOUG ASHFORD: I think he was proposing that—well, if Gran Fury was organized—because, again, this timing, but Gran Fury was organized in spring of 1987, right? Then, probably, he was—and he was going to ACT UP meetings, probably, when they began. And he was in discussion with Group Material at the time of—I know from the *Mass* project in the fall of—no, in the winter of 1986.

THEODORE KERR: That's when he became familiar?

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, but it's probably the event that I told you about—meeting and discussing it could have been even earlier in '85.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: This can be easily checked in the Group Material archive when that exhibition, *Mass*, was organized because it was designed to fit in these boxes when it was shipped around the country and overseas and when it went to the New Museum.

THEODORE KERR: So I think the thing that's interesting, that we can't quite research, but we can use our memory is like, was there discussion around people's—how do I say this? There's a way in which people gossip about someone's sexual orientation or their anything else. At this time, do you remember people having off-the-record conversations or gossip about people's HIV status? Like, would you all have been wondering if Bill was living with HIV at the time?

DOUG ASHFORD: In '85, there was no gossip—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —for me. By the time—it was the summer of 1987 that the Dia Art Foundation met to organize the project at Dia that became the *Democracy Project* by Group Material; it was fall that that began in earnest, and by then, I knew. Oh! Bill wrote an article about Group Material in *Art in America*, and we met, and he was limping. And I asked Julie, and she said, "Yeah, no, he's positive," and I was like, as often was the case, probably not just for me, but for others, "Why didn't anyone tell me?" And then there's this other conversation, "What do you want me to do? Advertise?" So, you know, it was—it was—that was probably when I found out, but I would have to check when that article came out.

THEODORE KERR: I mean, what's beautiful and helpful about that story is that—or maybe you can kind of speak it out a little bit. Was it common or uncommon when you would see someone within the art world that showed some sort of disability or physical impairment, would HIV have been one of the top three things that you thought that could be the reason for them to be impaired or sick or looking a certain way?

DOUG ASHFORD: For me, not until not until '87, '88.

THEODORE KERR: And what's special about '87 or '88?

DOUG ASHFORD: It was when the—yeah, no, you know what it would have been? It would have been Felix. Felix had few physical symptoms until, probably, the early-'90s. But Ross, his boyfriend—and let's figure this out; it would be good to know—had bad Kaposi, had it bad, and had PCP a couple of times. That's pneumocystic pneumonia. Ross lived in Toronto. Felix would go back and forth. Felix joined Group Material in '85, '86. Probably—no, not until '87. Yeah, and then everything became very transparent very quickly. That's also probably in the late-'80s when I realized and looked for my friend Steven and found out that he was already gone. And then that's also the time when I reconnected with Doug Hartman, the friend from high school, in the, you know, '73 to '77. He was negative, but we then discussed all our friends in high school, who were either sick or not. And it's probably at that point when they—I don't know. It's like a blur; it was just, like, the funerals started. I mean, the funerals were probably happening in '85, '86, but not to my immediate friends and community.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And are you still teaching in Brooklyn during this time?

DOUG ASHFORD: No. The exact year I'm not sure, but it was right around '85—yeah, '85, '86 is when I quit full-time teaching in public high school, was the same year that we did the project at Dia.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Because I remember we did our first exhibition, which was called *Education*; we used friends of mine in the round table from Boys and Girls High School, and I was no longer there. There were these roundtables, were discussions that we organized in advance at the exhibition to inform them. So there was a friend of mine, Rodney, who was an African-American activist and teacher with me at Boys and Girls High School, and you know, by the time we were doing those conversations, I was no longer teaching there. I began part-time teaching children at Saint Ann's School, which is a private school in Brooklyn Heights. I mean, I quit the full-time job because Group Material, that last year of my appointment with the Board of Ed, did *Documenta*, and I had to miss so many days that it was clear to both me and the school that I couldn't maintain the art practice and be a full-time, public school teacher. So, I was still involved with them peripherally, with all of my colleagues and my wife and partner, Sarah Safford at the time, was in—working for Catholic Charities and organizing health narratives for teenage kids in Bushwick and in Bedford-Stuyvesant, so I was involved in the sort of daily, kind of, neighborhood work that many of us were in Brooklyn, but no longer in the high school.

THEODORE KERR: It's a leading question a bit: I'm wondering, how did HIV factor into your life outside of the art world?

DOUG ASHFORD: I don't know, Ted. I mean, the people we are speaking about—I mean, there were lots of professional acquaintances that HIV/AIDS obviously affected, but the people we are speaking about were, in a way, like, people I knew from being an artist, but they were friends outside of the art world, so there was probably cross over. There were people on my block who were ill. There were drug users. There was a whole family across the street, very angry, white family, whose—the guy shared needles with his father, and the whole thing sort of fell apart. The daughter still lives in that building and has a family, but yeah, that was awful. So, personally, yeah, it was all around us. It's also difficult because—and I don't mean to try to diminish the catastrophic nature of the crisis and the conditions of political ignorance and inadequacy that I believe, to this day, caused it, but in New York, from 1976 through '85, there were so many levels of, sort of, social and economic disenfranchisement on so many levels that the conditions, say, in my working class neighborhoods in Brooklyn and for me as a teacher in Bedford-Stuyvesant, that the idea that populations of the city would be devastated by political ignorance and inadequate sense of social—really human rights, right for health, rights for employment, rights for housing, that those narratives had taken such a stranglehold over the social fabric of the city, that it was just how we lived in New York. It's hard to describe, in a complete way, given the bizarre, sort of, bourgeois narrations of urbanity that we live in today. There are—we know—equally, if not greater—equal, if not greater, levels of power and inequity, in terms of economic and social services in the country today. But they've been exported from this immediate environment of the city, for whatever reason.

THEODORE KERR: Just to be clear, within this fabric that you're describing around human rights, HIV was an important part but one of many, interconnected things, which you are including education, poverty, drugs—

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I mean, for instance, like, for [Sarah Safford –DA], who was doing sexual education for young women in working class neighborhoods in Brooklyn, the idea that access to birth control was so inadequate was a similar kind of—the word "genocide" is too strong, but a certain kind of like enforced condition of sort of a—of sort of disenfranchisement of the body to such a degree that it led to many deaths. There were fewer, as Rodney told me—this teacher I worked with at Bed-Stuy, there were fewer physicians in Bed-Stuyvesant per capita than there were in countries like Mozambique. I mean, the city was devastated.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, and I think—and let's go back to the art world, not that these are separate worlds for you, but let's go back to the practice, the collective practice, and is all of this—and I know that it's—you've stated quite beautifully that, for you, memory is this complex thing—

DOUG ASHFORD: Also I have a bad memory; that's a way to say it.

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: In your thinking about this now, today on November 4th, do you think that this view that you have of this interconnection is what was informing the research that you all were doing and the projects you were doing and the ways in which you all situated HIV/AIDS within, kind of, larger conversations?

DOUG ASHFORD: Well, it was the basis. It was the—it was the foundational basis of the work that we did for *AIDS Timeline*, that—the conditions that turned a medical problem, potentially an epidemic, into a health crisis were cultural, political, were based on cultural context of stereotype and hatred; medical conditions around privatization and the unequal access to healthcare; governmental systems that were homophobic and organized against the rights of people who had sexual choices that didn't fit into normative ideas of a reproductive sexuality. I mean, the hatred and narrow mindedness that was we all knew since the '70s that were directed against the gay and lesbian community were the same as those who were—that were directed against the idea of reproductive rights for women, so the idea that our bodies are built only for the reproduction of the family and the state were, I think, consistent narratives in both devastations of friends—so here we go again, like, there was a relationship between the social activism of people of my generation, who, as we talked about earlier—my mother's investment in feminism in 1968 informed me of a particular idea of the rights, not just to a political representation, but to forms of desire that women were denied that was consistent with, at that point, yeah, men and women in high school who were already identifying, in the '70s, as being gay and lesbian. It was quite heroic. I look back now. People were beaten. You know? I mean, we know that they still are, but in those days, that was quite normal. And at the time, because of the milieu that I was in as—in high school, I'm starting to drift; it also did occur to me that I was in a very special place because I grew up in the university's town and the ways that people identified with each other through affection, the context of shared sexuality, I mean, it was quite unique compared to other friends of mine who were up in other places.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It's important to get that on the historical record because all times feel new and so people forget that there was people doing this stuff in the 1970s, and in a way, HIV/AIDS has a

way of erasing some gay progress that happened before the 1980s.

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, I don't know if my friends in high school were aware of the Gay Power Movement that came out of Stonewall that was happening at the same time. Maybe they were. I wasn't.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: But there was a context because of things we spoke about earlier—from Markles Flats junior high school, the young people who are instructors, the belief in certain kinds of openness about subjectivity and identity that were part of the 1960s general political and social movements that I think were, probably by the '70s, at least partially entrenched, at least in the way that we were—we all understood that we needed to treat each other. This was just part of popular culture, but maybe—I mean, we look at it day, right, Ted, and then it's like, how can you speak that way about women, and you're running for president? And how can the people around that kind of narrative still accept it and not have a certain kind of insistence? So you wonder. I was just in North Carolina, and I met with some—I spoke in a public high school class. So great. It reminded me of that. First time I've been back in the high school since the mid-'80s. I mean, as a participant. I've walked the halls, whatever. But to be in a classroom and speaking to kids—and it occurred to me, looking at them, that it was worse than when I was in high school. It's worse. And I then spoke to the arts coordinator of this high school program, and she said, "Oh no. I'm your age, and I'm a product of high school—of school integration, and the context of integration in the State of North Carolina is worse than it was before Brown vs. Board of Education, and that's 1953." So—and I guess the legislation around Brown and the effect of Brown vs. Board of Ed probably didn't take real effect for five years, but you know, it's frightening to think about, that it's people in my generation who inherited the kind of context of generosity and responsibility to human rights, that activists of the '50s and '60s produced in United States—in American culture and that, now, we're no longer producing people like me. Maybe.

THEODORE KERR: I mean, we will.

DOUG ASHFORD: Will we?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, because it's cyclical, I think.

DOUG ASHFORD: Fifty percent of the country supports a man who is a fascist. A lot of them are young.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: It's terrifying to me.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: But then we also have in this conversation—now, to bring us back to HIV/AIDS—and I said, after my talk at the museum last week in North Carolina, a number of other, older people on the board and stuff of this particular museum, Southeast Center for Contemporary Art, who have grown up in the south, said it's never been worse. And I was—I did reflect on Gay Pride movement, the ACT UP movement from the early-'80s, and then reflected back again to the economic, systemic economic disenfranchisement of New York from the early-'70s into the mid-'80s, and I'm like, you know, this is the thing with democracy. They've always been against it. They've always been against it, and it's always been this, kind of, slow arc of, those of us who are committed to the idea of democratic and participatory economies that produce life, right, that produce opportunity, and that produce beauty, is my argument as an artist, that beauty and justice live very close together, and it's no different, so I guess I could argue either side, but it's really an awful situation that we're in, but then, looking back, it was so awful in 1983 that there was conversations in Washington about tattooing people who were HIV positive. I mean, these were serious conversations between people who were professional public servants. It's no different than that, I guess. It's just the same.

THEODORE KERR: Last time we spoke about—you painted a really beautiful picture. We spoke a little bit about, like, where were the spaces that Group Material would meet, and—

DOUG ASHFORD: [Laughs.] That was when we interviewed for our grad thing? Was that—or was it—was it when NEA would come and we would go into our apartments; is that what you meant?

THEODORE KERR: No, we didn't get to that story. Do you want to tell that story?

DOUG ASHFORD: No, not necessarily. Not necessarily.

THEODORE KERR: I'm just picturing you in, like—if I remember correctly, someone's room was not much bigger than a bed.

DOUG ASHFORD: Well, that was Julie's apartment. I don't know if we want to—

THEODORE KERR: Okay. But I guess my point is—

DOUG ASHFORD: We didn't meet in Julie's apartment because it was too small to have a meeting at; that was the point.

THEODORE KERR: What I'm drawing us back to is, like, I want us to go back and think about, like, what were the ways that HIV/AIDS was introduced into Group Material as something to research, something to make work around, something to talk about?

DOUG ASHFORD: It was when we took on the *Democracy* project. We knew that we wanted to do exhibitions that existed in temporary and transitional manner. We discussed, early on, even having the exhibition space itself reflect that idea of the transition to an extreme point at which no artwork would remain on the wall, and there could be some dialogic condition between the, quote, unquote, audience and the, quote, unquote, producer and exhibition, because, obviously, meaning is produced in the interaction between the arrangement and display and production of objects and their consumption and reception by the people in the room. So this is an abstract idea about the way that art makes dialogue, and early on, we discussed, well, what if that actually had a physical manifestation in the sense that things were removed and changed by people in the ongoing—that the apparatuses of the institution or the gallery actually started to shift in relationship to people's use? So we could go in together and say, "You know, if you have that, you should have this other thing. Look, I brought it. Put this out. Take something down. Put something else up."

This is impossible when you begin with a $200,000 Joseph Beuys sculpture, all right, which was also part of our sort of agenda. So in the discussions between the three of us and Karen Ramspacher, who was a working at Dia and became a fourth member of Group Material shortly thereafter, after the Dia project, there was discussion of these ideas of democracy as something that is ongoing and shifting, and we decided to—in order to make it, in a sense, crystalize around an actual set of events, we decided that we would isolate four distinct, yet consistent, crises in democracy: one was education—because the funding and non-funding and the racist organization of educational systems, what's public and private, et cetera, seemed to be, to all of us, a consistent factor in possibilities that democracy had to offer. Today's a very good example of this, but it probably always has been. And for the founding, you know, moments of the Republic, these were serious topics for people like Thomas Jefferson. And then the second was politics and the election, where the electoral process—it was '88; we were going into a presidential election.

This became very clear that it was something that needed to be addressed. The third was cultural participation, which, in a sense, came out of our own interest in trying to decentralize and displace the idea of artistic value from the street to the museum and back again, or from the home and to the museum and back again, dating, you know, back to the '20s in terms of people's ideas of where art comes from and what's valuable about it and why institutional commissions always, at least until then, seemed to epitomize and exemplify a particular slice. You know, the museum seemed to universalize the particular, in a sense that it said it represented the most important things in the world, but it only represented particular aspects of the culture that we understood. You know, there was no James Brown in the Museum of Modern Art, right? And now there can be, right? But in those days, that was not something that was considered. And then we had the fourth one to do, and it was Julie who said, "Look. We should do now. We should do a case study of now." I thought how—if there's a crisis in democracy now, it would be the way that AIDS and HIV is not being part of the agenda of a shared and democratic struggle. So that's why we called it—for our fourth one, *A Case Study*, rather than a single word title.

THEODORE KERR: And do you remember some conversations around Julie's suggestion or your own initial, like, thoughts when she suggested it?

DOUG ASHFORD: No, it was—I think it was just her typical thing. Julie's insight that it was exactly right. She's so super smart. And it was also—I'm not actually sure it was Julie. It could have been Felix. It could have been a conversation that was on the phone before the actual meeting. It could have been collective. This often happens with Group Material, and Julie and I have had this before. She's like, "Oh no, Doug. That was your idea." And I'm like, "No, that was your idea." It's hard to know when you're an intimate, collaborative condition over years how things formulate, but it was obvious.

THEODORE KERR: I don't want to put words in your mouth, but did it seem unavoidable? Did it seem like you couldn't not address HIV/AIDS?

DOUG ASHFORD: It was unavoidable, and it was in the conversation from the very beginning. The idea that it would be sequestered into its own exhibition, I think, developed in the conversations. But, yeah, we had them—I could find this out, too, but I'm pretty sure we had them all organized as topics before we began the larger planning conversations with Gary Garrels, who was then curator. I'm not sure what his title was. There was just him; there was his helper, Karen Ramspacher; there was Karen Kelly.

THEODORE KERR: This is at Dia?

DOUG ASHFORD: At Dia. And then there was the boss who was Charlie Wright.

THEODORE KERR: And was Dia—sorry.

DOUG ASHFORD: Charlie Wright's best friend—there were three of them—Hal Foster; Charlie Wright, who ran the Dia Art Foundation; and the man who made these books, who points to the Dia, to the *Discussions in Contemporary Culture* series that Dia produced, who was a publisher, and this man, whose name I've forgotten, was HIV/AIDS positive at the time, I'm pretty sure. So, yeah, I mean, it was coming from Gary; it was coming from the director, who we never even met with—

THEODORE KERR: What do you mean it was coming from?

DOUG ASHFORD: The idea that you can't talk about democracy in 1987 without discussing its failure in the face of this social and shared problem.

THEODORE KERR: I mean, it's interesting because an organization like *Visual AIDS* pops up at the same time, because they—those four founders saw that there was a refusal within the art world to—on some level, to talk about HIV/AIDS. So, to hear you speak, it sounds like there were some within the art world that couldn't not but speak about it, and then we also know that there was huge factions that couldn't bring themselves to speak about it.

DOUG ASHFORD: Well, that had to do with our institutional affiliations; don't you think so, Ted? I mean, when we proposed *AIDS Timeline* to Lisa—yeah, wasn't Lisa at the Whitney then? Because we did two projects for the *Whitney Biennial*, one in '85 and one in '91, and I'm not sure who the person—I've confused the personnel at different times, but when we did *AIDS Timeline*, it was in, at least her or someone's interest at Whitney, that HIV/AIDS be represented in that particular biennial. And that would've—that organizational work, that desire would have been expressed to us prior to the opening, so '89, '90. Was that a minoritarian position? Was she a radical within the museum infrastructure? Probably, but I do think that anyone working in any museum in relationship to contemporary art would have at least realized that the producers of their content were disappearing, you know, and that the capacity that which they were responding to the crisis was inadequate.

But this is a hard conversation because it was all, you know, in a way, inadequate. You know? I mean, even us after—I don't want to get too ahead of the—in the chronology, but when we did *AIDS Timeline* at the Whitney, at least for myself, there was two funerals at the end. I can't remember whose they were. Felix was sick. Ross died; when did Ross die? '92, '93? And I don't know if this is an emotional response or not, but it is part of the dilemma that those of us who were trying to respond to the crisis were, in more than a dilemma, a kind of a personal disaster, that we were all in all the time, other people much more than myself, who were literally working through their own deaths, their own imminent deaths, and struggling and struggling not just to survive, but struggling to change policy. Shit. So, yeah, after the *Whitney Biennial*, years later, at least for me—at the opening, too, I was furious.

THEODORE KERR: From what?

DOUG ASHFORD: I was furious because I felt like, in a sense, we were used. I mean, it was a critic who said that, and it was Kim what's-her-name at the *Village Voice*. Or maybe she said that about the Dia Art Foundation. It was a really mean article, and it was called "Art Was Not Enough." And it was a kind of condemnation of the Group Material's investment in the, sort of—you know, this context of the art world as a place in which political work could be done, not just the changing of consciousness, but the actual reorganization of resources. Now, obviously, I didn't—you know, I'm understanding of all the paradoxes. As an artist who's worked in and outside of all kinds of institutions, academic and art, museological, whatever, but, as Felix used to say, everybody has to have their own trench. I believe he was quoting Che Guevara, which was—[laughs]—beautiful, and that—yeah, we all have our own trench and that we work in the places where we are to change the conditions of knowledge and social effect wherever we are.

But it did—that said, it did feel to me afterwards that that *Biennial*—that *AIDS Timeline* should've been through the whole museum; you should've had to go to that *Biennial* in 1991 and not look at anything without seeing a statistic, without seeing part of the research that we did, which anyone could have done, to find out how much was spent on the reorganization of packaging after the poisoning of Tylenol, compared to how much was spent on HIV research at the time, which I believe was one-tenth, or even more grotesque, facts that signified the values of our governmental and official infrastructure: the amount of money spent on a B1 bomber, compared to the amount of money spent in the whole Center for Disease Control. The shame was, I think, in a way, understood on an ethical basis that there was so little—at times, it felt like there was so little that we could actually do, and the *Timeline* project was done at the Whitney in that first-floor room, which is on the left as you leave the lobby and are checked for your ticket. And the rest of the *Biennial* was in all the other floors, so it did,

in a way, feel, architecturally, not like an afterthought, but as a sequestered experience of the relationship between cultural production and the political disaster of the crisis. They should have—say it again.

THEODORE KERR: These were thoughts you had at this time?

DOUG ASHFORD: And it should have been the whole museum.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: It should have been that I couldn't look at a Tom Lawson painting, or upstairs, yeah, you wouldn't be able to look at anything without being reminded that that world, our world, in an immediate way of art and life, was not just at the vanguard of resistance, but was at the vanguard of the reception of the way that political indifference and ignorance was destroying life. So, yeah, *Visual AIDS* was correct, right, that no one was doing enough. But you also probably know from interviewing people who were involved, there were people who were just burying their friends and the people they loved. It didn't feel like anything was enough. You know? I mean, Gay Pride '93 was huge; the March on Washington, what year was that?

THEODORE KERR: There was one in '87, and then there was one in—is it '92 or '93?

DOUG ASHFORD: '92.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: It felt, wow, you know. There's momentum. And in the moments of—which I believe actually is part of the reason that—part of the value of movements towards cultural work as a political tool are also valuable. They allow us to recognize each other.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: You know? Like it's in those moments in the street and in the experience of an aesthetic moment, like a theatre condition, a club; we're dancing together, that we can—where the context between the work we feel that we have to do and the power that we have and that we can get from each other is felt.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And it's in the feelings that the facts are changed, I think.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Right? And we did that work. They did that work.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, we, they. You know. ACT UP made things change. Actually made things change, not just individually for people; it gave them the strength to work and to wake up, but it actually made it possible for other people to live.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: Man, some of them don't even know, you know, that there's drug testing for them for some cancer research that's released to them after 90 days of experimental trials that would not have happened if it wasn't for people going to the CDC and chaining themselves to radiators 30 years ago.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: But, you know. It's the same thing with the Civil Rights Movement. Right?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Like, people don't know what they know about.

THEODORE KERR: What was the impact of Ross's health on your process as a collective?

DOUG ASHFORD: It was there all the time, but Bill, too. Bill's illness progressed when we were organizing the thing at Dia. It was, in a way—and this was Julie, too. She said, you know, "We need to have a ramp." Do you know the story of the ramp?

THEODORE KERR: You should say it.

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, it wasn't—yeah, it was Bill in particular. And Bill came the day before the opening. We met with him, or maybe it was the afternoon before the actual opening. The opening was also dark. I'm not sure why.

THEODORE KERR: You mean atmospherically or, like, literally?

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, atmospherically.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, Group Material opened, and because there's many artists involved, there were usually big things. There was also, you know, the people who would just go to all openings, because they're part of this art world, whatever, hangers-on stuff, and then there's institutional people dah, dah, dah, dah—back to the ramp. And that opening was particularly dark, and I'm not quite sure why. There was kind of—yeah, a kind of an anger in the room, not an anger towards the world, but an anger towards each other that I remember feeling quite strongly and discussing it with Felix. There was some tears afterwards, but then also I think there was a shift in Felix's personal life with Ross or something. These are vague memories, so I don't know. I just remember that.

THEODORE KERR: Can you say what anger—you said that you felt anger, and what does that mean? Like at individuals?

DOUG ASHFORD: Well, this may have to do with the feelings, at the moment—and moments of mutual identification that I was just speaking about that are so beautiful and empowering, and "empowering" is a word I use really selectively because it's such a cliché word. But it is true. You know, you hold hands in front of something together, and you feel that, even though there is a crisis, there is a—and that you are being singled out for extension; you have each other. You know, so—which, in a way, is kind of a lot. That's a lot, so as much as I was speaking about the idea of a cultural event and the community of concern that gathers in it, feeling the sense of identification with each other and the possibility of future—the possibilities of the future, but that particular, yeah, opening had a dark feeling.

THEODORE KERR: I want to spend—I don't want to go past that.

DOUG ASHFORD: No, it's okay.

THEODORE KERR: It also sounds a little bit like you're saying the other side of the coin of the feelings and being together and holding hands is also, like—there was going to be—the love that circulates within that circuit, there's also going to be anger and frustration and pain.

DOUG ASHFORD: And it could be that. I mean, I don't know how to do the social psychology of this thing. Like it could be that, at those moments of mutual work—and I know this from being an activist at other levels, as well as in the art world, that, yeah, there are moments of feelings of futility—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —and then of hopelessness that, then, are probably acted out in the context with each other.

THEODORE KERR: An interpersonal—

DOUG ASHFORD: But that would—that would be me kind of speculatively being like overly psychoanalytical of a group of people.

THEODORE KERR: But you don't remember?

DOUG ASHFORD: It may just be that there were a bunch of people who came that were a bunch of pissed off club kids. You know, I don't know.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So I think you're right. We don't have to—like it was a hard time. Of course, there's going to be dark days. [Laughs.]

DOUG ASHFORD: Right. And the particular configuration of that social moment. I mean, I know this as a teacher. I'm with the same group of 30 kids; I'll walk into the room, and some days it's just going to be a disaster. There are four people in that room who are mad at their mom for whatever reason, or whoever else, and it's going to go bad.

But back to the ramp. And I don't know; maybe there's not so much to say about it. It's just that we realized that there were people in the show and people who wanted to go to the show, but then it was like Bill. Bill was in a

wheelchair, and the show was dedicated to Bill, and Bill had to come. And so, yeah, we had to have a ramp. It was sort of like practical. But one of those beautiful things in the world, right, where the practical becomes an emblem for the emotional. It happens all the time. It happens all the time in design. I mean, I try to tell my students about it. It's true, like, if you make a bed or a picture, or you put something under something to hold it up, you make structures, and you restructure your world on a personal level, and there's emotional—there's an emotional connection, or it produces emotions.

THEODORE KERR: Wouldn't you say that's exactly what a lot of Group Material's work was about and, like, specifically the *Timeline* or specifically like these projects that we're talking about?

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: It's like these really practical, dogmatic, almost boring—I say almost boring—gestures that are done with—in my mind at least, were always done with, like, extreme love but also kind of a little bit of shoulder shaking and a little bit of generosity like, "Here. We did this work. Now someone take it." It was like a relay race. You know, we're starting it, and then you're hoping other people would keep going.

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But I will—but I believe, from the beginning—and we talked about this with my early ideas in relationship to my mother, about the relationships between beauty and justice. I'm a tremendous believer in the fact, not in necessarily a mystical way, that we don't completely know the way that our desires and the way that they are organized into forms are things that transcend the practical. Right? So—oh, you know, I'm working with the *New York Times* now. There's things that happen on every page of the *New York Times* that are not just me recognizing the connection between a photograph of a dead child in Syria and a headline about the economic reorganization of Europe. Right? It's—in a sense, the relationship between the factual and the subjective is always something that we are producing in relationship to our own imaginations and our own love for each other, or love for the world, or desire not to die. I mean, it just could be really animal. You know? I'm not sure which. So those arguments in the '70s against sort of conceptual or political practices in the arts that we, or the people and my teachers, were merely journalists, doesn't really take into account the way that material culture actually functions and our relationship to material culture actually functions. Like do you remember the television show *Dallas*?

Like, there's this completely right-wing narrative of this, like, weird, financial empire, and these people in a family killing each other, as if they're Roman emperors in this crazy city in Texas. But I had friends who were watching that as men learning how to dress, learning how to do their hair, right, in a way in which they could act out when they go to a club because the aesthetic of that show was so overwhelmingly excessive, and the idea that that excessive presentation of the body was transgressively interpolated. So we don't know. Like we don't know how culture works and how it works. And so, for me, the divisions between reception and practicality are actually things that we need to be more generous with each other about. And that was the premise of Group Material, right, that feelings make facts and that facts change our feelings and that the idea around political momentum comes from experiences which are not always understood as practical. That's why I was crying when I was talking about the club. To be dancing in a place like the Saint in 1985 where people who were committed to the development—but committed just out of, like, "This has got to be great. The sex has to be great. The drugs have to be great. The night has to be great." Like, that commitment was a radical reorganization of a political sphere. I think they were linked. I mean, it's what Douglas Crimp was saying; bartenders were the first ones passing out condoms, right? I mean, were they doing that so we could still fuck, or were they doing that because they knew they were saving lives? They weren't doing that in relationship to the CDC. There was no practical—there was no poster on the wall or whatever else. So, I mean, you know, my problem is that is that, I know this now as a teacher and as an older artist, that I tend to overly generalize and make connections between things that are non-specific, but the desire for pleasure and the desire for freedom and the rights for others are linked. And it's in artwork that I have, that we can see it.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You're example of *Dallas* was really beautiful, and I wonder if you want to—

DOUG ASHFORD: I think I stole it from Felix.

THEODORE KERR: Sorry?

DOUG ASHFORD: I think I stole it from Felix.

THEODORE KERR: Say more.

DOUG ASHFORD: Well, I don't know because he says lots of things. Like I was saying the other day, "Everything in culture happens for a reason." I said that to my students, and I was like, "Oh, fuck. Felix said that." But, you know, yeah. But then, maybe he stole it from me. I don't know.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Do you remember—

DOUG ASHFORD: Do you have siblings?

THEODORE KERR: Sorry?

DOUG ASHFORD: Do you have siblings?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: So it's like that. You ever with your brother and your sisters, and you're like, "Do you remember when I burned down that garage?" And then your sibling says, "No, I did that." Or they say, "I burned down the garage," and you're like "No, you did that," or whatever.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, right. Right. I have that with friends with jokes.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, with jokes.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, but I'm always the originator of the good ones.

DOUG ASHFORD: [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: I wonder—I guess I'm interested, if you can recall—like, you've given us a kind of a snapshot of dancing; you've given us a snapshot of a group of artists committed in process of creating an exhibition. I wonder if you have a few other snapshots of AIDS and culture colliding during the late-'80s and early-'90s, anything from movies to other artist's work or music or anything?

DOUG ASHFORD: Nothing is coming to mind.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So while that's kind of churning, I wonder if you can also speak a little bit about the relationship of all these collectives with each other. Like, I don't know, Gang and Gran Fury and the Guerrilla Girls and Group Material and General Idea. Like what's—are you aware of each other's work? Are you speaking to each other?

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: Are you being inspired by each other?

DOUG ASHFORD: General Idea, back to the early—mid-'80s, maybe '84, '85, when we did a project with Bill Arning who ran—

THEODORE KERR: I'm sorry.

DOUG ASHFORD: I'll fill that in. And then—and then Gran Fury from the beginning. John Lindell and Marlene [McCarty] were in Group Material shows. Don Moffett, probably, as an artist, was, but I think it was kind of simultaneous that they formed, '87, for that project with Bill. And then—and whether they were in a Group Material show before then, probably just maybe Don. But it was—yeah, it was all at the same moment. But unofficial in the non-official levels, yeah, I think all these people were involved with each other. We worked with John. A piece that John did for Gran Fury, we put on a bus for a public project that a group called—art funding group called Art Matters did. At the same time, they did this bus project, *Kissing Doesn't Kill; Greed and Indifference Do*. There was just kind of a constant exchange with Gran Fury. They wrote a letter to the *Village Voice* after Kim wrote about *Art Project* at Dia, defending the use of the art system. I'm trying to, like, in a sense, disentangle her. Weird.

It's actually Zhdanovism people in the Soviet Union who sort of said that aesthetic forms have to be reorganized around socialist realism to only represent the crisis as it exists, not to represent political reality as it exists, and these other, kind of, speculative or poetic narrations that art is invested in or when they have no use to the revolution. It's not that Kim—Baker?—Kim Baker was representing that, I think, in any articulate way. But they used—she used Gran Fury in her argument as the artist—as a group of artists who were, like, understanding the way that the art world is not a solution. Or there are no solutions that we found in the art world, which, you know, I mean, not to go on with this argument, but it has to do with these ideas of what an art world is and whose art world, which was what Group Materials' premise was from the very beginning: who was our main forum? For whom—who gets to make art and for whom? And so the idea that you would limit its existence under present institutional framework and the apparatus you're given means that you're kind of giving up as an artist. You know, we were all in touch with each other, but I can't—what was the other groups that you—Gang not so much.

THEODORE KERR: fierce pussy? Guerrilla Girls?

DOUG ASHFORD: fierce pussy, after. Because when did fierce pussy actually do the first work? That would have been '93, '94, right? By then—yeah, I don't have memories of that.

THEODORE KERR: And do you see Group Material actually—how would you describe Group Material in relation to these other pursuits—these other groups, these other collectives?

DOUG ASHFORD: I honestly think they'd be the same.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah?

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, yeah. Artists, you know—I mean, in a generalizing kind of a way. In a Doug Ashford, kind of, generalizing way, there were groups of artist that were desperate. Group Material was desperate in the early-'80s because the art system didn't reflect what we understood as either our subjectivities or our interest in the way that art could change the world. The desperation that formed Gran Fury had to do with the immediate catastrophe of the AIDS crisis. But I think, historically speaking, artists probably always come together around the context of issues: Artists against the war in Vietnam, the Guerilla Art Action Group, the Paris Commune. I mean, you know, it goes way back. It's ahistorical of me to say that the situation is, in a sense, always the same, but it kind of fits into my interest these days in being ahistorical, so I'll defend that position, which is that artists, in a certain way, have always been the same or anyone experimenting with why things mean what they mean, and those people have always been in a place of exception. Right?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: And it doesn't mean they're better. It just means that they're allowing themselves to live in a state of exception. And that means they need other people. They do. And the work and the context of social life that they become sensitive to compel them to try to change their practices in conjunction with others. I just don't think there's an artist who's lived—they'll pretend that—because of other ideological factors, that what they're doing is not out of desperation, right? They'll pretend, like with Jeff Koons, that they're sort of part of a professional matrix that sort of functions on a kind of discursive level that's managed and understood. But pretend, like other friends of mine, that it's sort of an athletic sort of field, around which they've trained, and then they can ambitiously participate as another sort of muscular nomad within the sort of field of other nomads. I don't really believe that most people who become artists do so out of a sense of feeling, like, that it's a good place. Like all of this is—you know, it's my place because I don't fit in otherwise. But it's not like this is a real practical way for me to become a participant in the world. And I think that context of estrangement is part of all aesthetic research, and that means that the identification you have in estrangement means that you want to work together. You want to love together. You want to have erotic connection together. You want to make things happen, and you know it won't happen unless you are together.

THEODORE KERR: A practical question: what did the research for the *Timeline* look like? Like, how did you do it?

DOUG ASHFORD: We divided it up. Karen was then a member of the group. We picked four topics, so AIDS activism; governmental process and indifference, this sort of cultural milieu conditions around the development of the crisis, and then the medical histories and sort of medical infrastructure and sort of health industry's infrastructure, which would include drug companies and so forth. And we didn't stick to this necessarily because, in any one field, you would sort of then find other fields. So let's say I was working—I don't think I was. I think it was Karen who was doing the sort of medical infrastructure and healthcare system research. Once you've found out about Burroughs Wellcome's overpricing of AZT, you would also know immediately, because of where we were or going to an ACT UP meeting, that there was the "Boycott Burroughs Wellcome" stickers that were produced by ACT UP that were then taken into drugstores and stuck on—I believe it was Sudafed, which was the over-the-counter drug produced by Burroughs Wellcome, which is now a company which was eaten by another pharmaceutical giant, but—so, yeah, the way that the different kinds of research narratives or focal points crossed over was experienced by us as researchers. What was also, maybe more importantly, the point of the exhibition was that each of these different kinds of conditions was reflective of a larger, ideological failure, which I don't think it's improper to generalize as a kind of cultural deficit that America has always had in relationship to its promise.

THEODORE KERR: Again, to be really flat footed, even dig deeper, what did the research look like? Like, did it mean like going to the library?

DOUG ASHFORD: Okay. Yeah. There was library research. There was also—it was really important for us. We read that Randy—we all read the Randy Shilts book, which I think came out the year before, which we now know, not parenthetically, is full of misrepresentations, both epidemiologically and culturally, in terms of the way that crisis developed. But that said, it was a really good compendium in terms of research of the different institutional responses and when they happened. Then we got the CDC morbidity and the MMWR [Morbidity and

Mortality Weekly Report] reports, right, and tabulated them from what we could determine, which was the first medical occurrence of the virus itself as a diagnostic condition, not that the virus was isolated to be able to be treated, so I believe that would have been 1979, '81. But I could check. And then so there was research through government agencies. There was library research. And then there was, in those days, quite a remarkable thing, which was there used magazine stores. And there was one up in Times Square. I went there and through the—what's it called? There was a periodical index that was at the Cooper Union Library where I was teaching; one could do a search on when articles came up at certain times, and then those were gathered and garnered. And we purchased them. Some we couldn't buy that weren't there. Some we bought, like the first *Time Magazine* cover; the first—what was the journal in San Francisco that was the gay newspaper when it was described as "grid?" Yeah, "Mysterious Disease," I think, was the title of the article. And then—and then, let's see, what else? Yeah, through the periodical review thing, there was sort of other kinds of narrations that, then, we wanted to travel through. The Rock Hudson story was a very significant narration because it was the death of Rock Hudson that got Ronald Reagan to mention the word AIDS for the very first time, which was a kind of a resonant condition because it had to do with the—with the industry of cultural production, also, because it's Hollywood, and that Reagan came out of Hollywood, so you sort of realized, which often happens in social-political identification, that Rock Hudson could have been at the club with me at the time—do you know what I mean? Like it's only two steps away that the people who are in denial of his condition and actually have the power to change it are immediate, right there. They're just two steps away. They're like the guy sitting next to the guy at the next dinner party that you sat next to at the dinner party the night before.

And then—and then there was sort of ancillary research back—I wasn't really interested in the like—they just came from discussion. So like *The Lives of the Rich and Famous*, which was a television show, which seemed to sort of epitomize the drive for certain kind of class-based identifications. The ads—once you—once you find out how much a B1 Bomber costs, you realize, because I read *The New York Times* every day, that there were these ads by Rockwell Military conglomerate, whatever it was called, for this thing, and its shape was just overwhelmingly fascinating to Felix, but it looked like a bat, you know?

THEODORE KERR: Like a bat?

DOUG ASHFORD: It's a bat, that thing, that bomber that evades radar detection, and then *Batman* came out. It was through these correspondences, they then come through a discussion, which relates to what I was trying to say about the way that they're—even the practical organization of the column format of *The New York Times* also leads to context of misrecognition or surrealist or imaginative re-juxtaposition. This is the aesthetic way that we would work, was like, wait, Reagan was the initiation of a certain idea of a new American empire. When he is nominated, it's the same year that the *Star Wars* movie, *The Empire Strikes Back*, comes out, right. What if we put that up with the—so the different—because they're ironies, analogies, and reflections between the things that were happening that were extremely serious, and the context of sort of commentary and re-understanding that seem serendipitous, but they're not really.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: It's not really. The feeling around the desire for, like, a kind of empire-based narration of liberation that—from my perspective, that led to those films is probably part of the same kind of investment that people were able to have and a kind of weird actor being this kind of hero president. And then we know there were design moments, too, which we almost put in. There was a guy—what's his name? His student is the guy who started *Fox News*. But he was an advisor to the campaigns of Reagan—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —and Republicans in the early—

THEODORE KERR: So Roger Ailes—

DOUG ASHFORD: —'80s.

THEODORE KERR: Roger Ailes—

DOUG ASHFORD: Roger Ailes had this mentor; he was a great artist; his name was Lincoln Tobier who's done a whole show about these people in our—out in L.A. It's an example I give to my students often. But it came up in this research, also, I remember, of looking up the way that it looked, like they—the podium that Reagan stood at was redesigned by this guy; the youths in '88, which we put into the *Democracy* show at Dia, of this gigantic flag. You know, in the election of 1988, the people who were making those big flags, there was only two companies; they ran out because—I mean, you can imagine now, with Trump and Hillary running around the country, like, doing two or three of these things a day, and Reagan needed this giant flag behind him each time.

So those correspondences became a kind of a—how do I say this the right way?—a sort of irrational base of

research, like one thing would lead to the next and then—or associative context of research, which made us have to leave the more strict demarcations of assignments that we gave each other—Karen does this; Doug does this; Felix does this; Julie does this—and enter into a more kind of an open field. The original list of facts was then understood to be a text that would be in the gallery. I would call this the eighth *Timeline* text, and it's—there was a number of versions because it got redone each time we did the *Timeline* in—through four different iterations, including the one that we did for *Visual AIDS* in art magazines, and was then, therefore, constantly re-edited. But there's stuff that was, you know, in the beginning that also was kind of representative of this idea of trying to find a kind of cultural condition that expressed the way America is just so fucked up sometimes. There was a show; it was even in the late-'70s, which we put at the very—at the beginning of the very first *Timeline* in Berkeley. It was a television program; they were having it on a stage. It was produced as if it was a variety show, like *Ed Sullivan*. But what they had was people whose lives were exceptional—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —who transcended trauma, but, like, were paralyzed but were able to paint.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Or who were trapped somewhere but still were able to save their children. And they would have some documentary footage, almost like a kind of a nature show, you know, like here's the wombat in the woods. And then here he is on stage alive, yay. Ostensibly, this was a very celebratory thing about, like, identifying, through the media of television, with trauma. But it also presented a certain kind of—how do we say this? A certain kind of a—of an exploitation narrative, right, of difference without—in a way in which—from my perspective, anyway, was part and parcel of the way that sort of psychologically, in terms of a social psychology, we're still, in the United States, unable to understand difference is relative to ourselves, rather than as that which is some other—although, you poor soul. And actually, the way that empathy is a kind of failed emotional condition for producing social identification because the empathetic response is always—seems to be one of replacement, you know? And I can't remember the name of the show, but when I go into this, I'll write it down again because I still think it's really an important moment. I think it just ran for two years. But yeah, it was about trauma. It was sort of a show that spectacularized trauma.

THEODORE KERR: And so with the research, you guys would go and then recombine—

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: —and share what you had?

DOUG ASHFORD: Well they fit—they had to fit chronologically because of the sort of premise, right? And even though the exhibition is chronologically organized, in terms of 1979, to the moment that the show opened, 1991, it would have been, at the *Biennial*, 1990, and at Berkeley.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Which is the first time we did it.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: That—so, yeah, it had to fit chronologically. The facts had to be organized chronologically. And at every year, there is a—the year is written on the wall; the line is put on the wall. And every year was the morbidity report for that time, which is significant and actually quite remarkable to be able to experience, spatially, in an architectural setting.

THEODORE KERR: Why?

DOUG ASHFORD: Because—well, because of the way that the epidemiological work is done, which is amount of cases, amount of new cases, and amount of deaths. So if you walk through the room really quickly, and you just looked at those numbers, you could see that the context of death was way ahead of the response, and for periods of time that, if you compare it to the other facts that were on the wall, like the CDC's response to the—to the Legionnaire's disease, the CDC's response to the Tylenol crisis, I mean, all the packaging in the United States was changed in two weeks, Ted. I mean, it was like—it was like—and it was crazy. Like, there we were, like people were dying; there was no one in the hospital for—to be able to do jack shit for anybody. And there were these—other kinds of gigantic social and economic responses to other health conditions. Sorry, I get mad. You know all the whole story, so why get mad [laughs]? Maybe that's the dark matter of our emotional life in relationship to political activism. Like, we're all mad.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Still mad.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: So, yeah, the research would cross over.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And then—I'm still really moved by that idea that there was a—there was a darkness at the opening. And I wonder if you want to talk about the opening at Berkeley. Like can you remember the opening at Berkeley? Can you remember—?

DOUG ASHFORD: It was more kindhearted. It was in another city. There was anger from us, I think. We tried to do—we did do another project over—because *AIDS Timeline* was a—not necessarily a remaking, but it was reflective of a timeline that we had produced as an exhibition in the late-'80s, as part of Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America. It's a great context of display because, at that time in dealing with the U.S. intervention in the politics of the hemisphere, you could see the 80-year trajectory of this sort of militarization of other governments and the resistance of the United States against human rights movements throughout the hemisphere. And then you could compare it to different kinds of aesthetic formations out of time.

So the gallery turns into something that seems teleological; starts here, ends here. But actually, the kind of cultural context around which those ideas are formed, or those forms are produced, you can see in the objects, it is consistent—a consistent, a sort of—a sort of resounding back-and-forth through time. So it becomes kind of cyclical. And with the—with *AIDS*—with *AIDS Timeline*, the first one at Berkeley, it was more of a straight line. It worked extremely well in terms of the presentation of the historical. But at the same time, we had also reflected back to a project that we had done in the mid-'80s called *DAZIBAO*. And we went out in the street weeks before the opening, and we interviewed people on the campus at Berkeley about how AIDS has affected them.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And this early-'92, right? And like it was crazy until like—like 80 percent of the students said, "Well, it doesn't affect me at all. I'm not gay." And I'm like—I mean—so I shouldn't say, at the opening, we were mad; I just remember being upset. One, students were not there, but that might have been the institutional organization who invites who and what; I don't know.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Two, that it was in a university setting, so we had built up—it was more sort of information-heavy, given the idea that, in context of the university, there would be certain more kind of analytic organization of a viewer and more of a sort of research condition around which people would have the patience to read a lot of shit on the wall. But then, back to the dark feelings, there was a sort of, like, a resentment, like here you are in a university. Here are these young people, who are the inheritors of the conditions around which you are struggling against. And I mean, we can only sort of say, well, they were allowed to be ignorant, or it's the educational system, which I still say. But the idea that you would be active emotionally, sexually, in 1992 and not be thinking about this is insane. Like they would say, "I'm not sexually active," or whatever. And it's sort of like, what does that even have to do with it when the people around you are positive, or things are happening to them, and their conditions around the access to health and economic infrastructure is so indiscreetly oppressive?

THEODORE KERR: So how—

DOUG ASHFORD: So, yeah, there was—there was that; there was—if we go back to that analogy, to anger in relationship to activism and the beauty of producing in the art world, or the idea of producing context of beauty that become activists, activating, that was, maybe, an example.

THEODORE KERR: But also, how about that comment, "I'm not gay." You're a person who describes yourself as someone who's living as a heterosexual. How—

DOUG ASHFORD: I always have.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] I know.

DOUG ASHFORD: I only slept with a man [once –DA].

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: Congratulations. How do—how were you met in spaces? Because public imagination and public history would suggest that there were times where conversations about HIV/AIDS were largely happening in gay or gay-ish spaces.

DOUG ASHFORD: That's ridiculous. I mean, I was teaching in public high school. There was a common—the problem is that the context—and as someone who was in both—but most gay men that I knew were also in both. I mean, they—if they were out to their families, they weren't then going home. We were then working as educational activists in communities that were ostensibly heteronormative. And so they were faced with the same kind of context. But I can give one example, which was—which was—I was—yeah, so I was still teaching when the crisis happened because this—I went to my principal at Boys and Girls High School, and I said, "We have no active health relationship to these students. They fuck like weasels," okay? When—I know it. You know it. They're kids. They should be! I mean, I didn't say that.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

DOUG ASHFORD: Because this idea of a sex-positive narrative of health education at the time, although I was supportive of it, was extremely difficult and—in the community at the time. And you know what that principal said? "Tuskegee. I'm not passing out condoms. Tuskegee." And I'm like, "Dude, this is a mistake." Instead, he said he wanted HIV testing for the cafeteria workers. Do you remember that? The people were afraid of the people who were handling food.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, that's a lot that you just said.

DOUG ASHFORD: Right?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: And my students were like—were like—because I would talk about it. And they were like, oh yeah, no I don't want that. You know, so—all these homophobic narratives got—you know. And there were kids, who I would have identified and identified with, whatever my own lifestyle was, as a queer young men.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Women maybe—yeah, women, too. And, yeah, but, "We've got to get those guys out of the cafeteria." I don't know why but it was the cafeteria. And I said—and I said, "You're not going to get the disease that way. What's the matter with you?"

THEODORE KERR: Right, but a whole—

DOUG ASHFORD: And they're like, but what about mosquitoes? And there was a guy—who was he?—who did health education with the PWA Coalition with Michael Callen. And he had a great mind. Okay, "Wait, can I get HIV from a mosquito?" And the answer, only if—only if you have unprotected sex with it.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] I mean, I do think that there is a whole through-line in the American story of HIV/AIDS, where kids in school are used as a distraction to talk about the other ways in which we should be talking about HIV. Ryan White being the most obvious example.

DOUG ASHFORD: And horrifying example.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

DOUG ASHFORD: Well, and that we know now that—I was just in North Carolina; they're organizing this heterosexist declaration of this—of identity—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —that goes against any progressive work that's happened in the last five years in terms of the maintenance of the bathroom in the interest of protecting our girls, our young girls.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: [Laughs.] There are no rapists who dress up, who wear a dress.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, yeah, no, the child is always—is always inflicted upon us as that kind of ammo morale in which the worst sentiments of ignorance and hatred get to be inflicted upon everybody else.

THEODORE KERR: I'm going to push us—oh, I actually have a question about the *Timeline*. So in my own work, both artistically but then also organizationally, the *Timeline* is such a—like both Group Material. But just like the genre of the *Timeline* is such an important, almost mandatory aspect of HIV/AIDS. And I wonder if you've noticed

that and if you have any thoughts about why there seems—like a timeline is so—it's so compulsory when it comes to HIV in a way that it's not compulsory when we talk about cancer, when we talk about—I don't know—any other health concern.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yes, but it is compulsory when we talk about conditions around the development of society's response to the rights of individuals because, for instance, the idea that Jim Crow legislation that isolated the conditions of African Americans as economically disenfranchising the south was relatively new. It didn't exist in 1880, but it did exist in 1920.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Right? That it was not part of the narrative, at least in terms of the ideological organization of the ideology of slavery, right, but was, in terms of the idea of a free, black human being in the United States. It was a compensatory narrative. It was a compensatory idea of political oppression that was developed afterwards. This was a history that I just was introduced to. And so to write that timeline is like—it was like mind-blowing when you think of the Black Lives Matter movement, right? That the idea that the—that a context of forced incarceration and a police state that's oppressive of the black liberation struggle isn't just, like, this—isn't just like the ghost of slavery, but it's actually a much more recent and modern invention, I think, is similar. Health—there are politics of cancer, particularly the cancer that afflicts women, I'm sure, because anything associated with reproductive health, in general, I think, probably has certain kinds of more obscure context of the political imagination, particularly in terms of imaging. This is a field that I know not—don't know that much about. But an old friend did that work. Like how we imagine a woman's body—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —and how we—and how we picture a woman's body—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —formed a lot of the conditions around reproductive, medical context, in general. But I think cancer, as an example, is not necessarily real because the health disaster associated with cancer isn't necessarily one that was inflicted upon us because of economic profit and political gain.

THEODORE KERR: Right, and I think that's—

DOUG ASHFORD: I say that, and then I realize, no, that's not necessarily true because the relationship between smoking and cancer, for instance, we know is a history of—that was inflicted upon us through pressure groups, that things were known about cigarettes in the '50s, and that was—and you could do a timeline on that.

THEODORE KERR: Right but the important word in the sentence you just said is "could." All of these examples, you could, but there's a way in which, like, if you go to an AIDS website for information, you're going to be met—whether you're going to the CDC, or you're going to Visual AIDS, or you're going to Gay Men's Health Crisis, or you're going whatever, you're always met with this seemingly compulsory timeline.

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: And I think that you actually did touch on the difference. It's also because, within the history of HIV/AIDS, there's an understanding that, unlike other illnesses get—that get kind of coded as "natural," and I'm using quotation marks.

DOUG ASHFORD: Right, yeah, yeah.

THEODORE KERR: Or just like part of the human body's function of breaking down—

DOUG ASHFORD: Right.

THEODORE KERR: —AIDS has always been understood as something that's been weaponized. And there's a—

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: —spectrum from, like, the people who think that government created it, to those who understand that the government just exasperated what could have been a manageable thing and turned it into a crisis.

DOUG ASHFORD: People still feel the government created it?

THEODORE KERR: Sorry?

DOUG ASHFORD: Do people still feel the government created it?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: As a—as a—as a biological agent and then being experimented on people in Africa? Is that the way the conspiracy theory still works?

THEODORE KERR: I think it depends on who you talk to.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: And I think an important question to your question is, like, do people still think that, and they've just thought it for 30, 40 years, or are there people born after '96 who just come to that conclusion somehow?

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: And I think there's different answers there. And—

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: —then there's differences like, sure, some people think it's about Africa. Some people think it's about African Americans. Some people think it's about gay people. Some people, you know—

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: And then it gets into AIDS denialism and then it gets—

DOUG ASHFORD: Exactly.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: Right, right.

THEODORE KERR: But I guess, I just wanted to hear your thoughts on the *Timeline* and also to think, is there anything in the moment that you all were creating the *Timeline* that a time—like, is a timeline, not a relic of the time in which you all were creating it, but was that a hot genre at the time or was—

DOUG ASHFORD: No.

THEODORE KERR: No.

DOUG ASHFORD: I don't think it was. And it was actually a joke for Felix whenever we—like, a few years later, when we saw a timeline in another exhibition.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And I remember Felix going, and he'd say, "Hey, did you see so and so?" And, "Did you see that thing?" And I said yeah, and he said, "Great idea, right?" [Laughs.] But Felix had a kind of proprietary idea over the use of the timeline as an exhibition, as a display device.

THEODORE KERR: Right, because what did he call his? He didn't call his "timelines." They were called—I'm thinking of the billboard.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, it's not coming back to me now.

THEODORE KERR: No, me neither. But it's a strange—

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: —turn of phrase.

DOUG ASHFORD: But the timeline was—I mean, we had used the timeline in '87, '88 for this—for the—for that project for Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America. And Julie and I were both involved in the organization of that overall project as well. And that timeline came from another artist, Bill Allen who had produced a set of posters for our subway were—the—a project called *Subculture* in 1984.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: If it could have been, in which he took the same photograph of an American soldier holding a gun to a face of someone dressed as if they were in South or Central America. That was a little, sort of, typifying and sort of cliché, but it worked. And next to that photograph was a country and a date, and there were 84 of them, one for each military—physical military intervention in the Untied State's military as a—as an empire building—intervention in another country: Dominican Republic, Cuba, Brazil, you know, 1898, 1877, Nicaragua 1864, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. So what's a way to say this? I guess, the idea of—that there was a historical progression that leads up to a particular moment, then that particular moment that you're living in feels like it's without precedent or without background, is, I think, the condition of the *Timeline* and its use. Keep in mind, as a public school teacher, every classroom has this timeline, right, and I think in the early-'80s, that was our inspiration. Felix's investment in an—in terms of his own practice, five or six years later, I don't think, was influenced by Group Material necessarily—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —and that earlier work that we're involved in with the—with the Central American sort of historitization or with this particular artist, Bill Allen, because it's just too esoteric an example to really know. But for Bill and for Group Material, this was one of the activist and graphic expressions that the committee, in solidarity with the people of El Salvador, used, and most, I think, solidarity organizations in the early- to mid-'80s who were working against the military expansionist policies in the United States were using, that the idea that you are seeing, on the cover of *The New York Times*, people killed in El Salvador by death squads that are funded by the CIA is not new, right?

And so—and so, yeah, there was a list that's been put out. This would have been back when we did *Luchar!* '82, '83. And Group Material shared an office with the Committee for International Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. So that idea of a—of an unknown chronology that leads to the present, I think, it's just—it's just part of the historical consciousness.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

DOUG ASHFORD: It's part of historical material. And keep in mind, we were called Group Material, right? So I mean, this idea of a materialist investment in the way culture worked was part of the—of the beginning. But this proprietary idea that Felix had about Group Material's timeline, in particular, was just completely part of his personality. I was like, come on; they know, like there were books on timelines that were put out in the '70s. And the back of *Harper's Magazine* always had this list of sort of facts and when they happened—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —you know, for decades—I don't know if it was for decades, but it was through the entire time I was a young teacher. So, yeah, the idea of historical relativity is not something that we owned or was particularly new. I think it's a way—and the reason that it's used probably still, in terms of those same websites about the history of AIDS and HIV, was that—was the idea that there were forces, like you said, that not necessarily weaponized it, but made what was a medical disaster into an epidemic and a social crisis.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. I also think that, as someone who benefits from these timelines, there's also interesting things we can glean. So it seems—it seems to me that these flashpoints, which are, like, '87, '96, 2008, 2012, are actually the culmination of scientific biomedical advancements that have been long-practiced by people on the frontlines, become codified through approval, and then that, in the zeitgeist, happens at the same as a cultural and conscious change. So '87 is when AZT is approved.

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: But that's also when ACT UP forms, and that's also, even in in your own—in your own sharing today—when things speed up, right? And then the next big leap is '96 with the release of medication and what I see as the beginning of the second silence. So a period of around 12 years, where after, you know, almost 10 years of accelerated and very intense AIDS culture production, dissemination, and discussion, it then drops from '96 to 2008.

DOUG ASHFORD: Right. And then my other question would be, would there be a correlation between that and the way that people narrate their own relationships to desire?

THEODORE KERR: Say—

DOUG ASHFORD: Like the idea of being a gay man in 1978 was completely different than being a gay man in 1988 to being now, right, where you—where the idea of being queer identified and living in the relationships with two people who identify as different genders, the idea of being a multi-gendered, you know—like my students tell me I'm a bronie, you know, like what's that, you know [laughs]? Do you know what a bronie is?

[They laugh.]

Right?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: I didn't know what it was. And so the expansion of the sort of subjective definitions of selves in relationship to the development of the different kinds of consciousness-es that, then, lead to actual health policy, I actually think there's a relationship there as well.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. And—

DOUG ASHFORD: And ACT UP was key in this, in terms of there were discussions there about who was or who was not, right, part of a particular cohort, part of a particular condition of possible struggle. What is the role of empathy? Who is who, and what, was, in a sense, kind of opened up, I believe, because of the idea that we are being killed—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —we are being killed by this thing. And I—and that was—to go back to this idea of the—of the anger at Berkeley, like, when someone says to you, like, "I'm not them."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: It's a disaster.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: Right?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: And then if you are "them," right, what kind of health policies come out of the idea that you are "them?"

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Right?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And, you know, I mean, leads us back to now. Michelle asked these—Michelle Obama walking around, saying, "There's no them. Them is us."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: You know, and it sounds so radical now.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I think your desire point is very important, too, because even the biomedical things also may change desire, right, like in 2012, prep is approved, and that changes desire. The same within '96 when the meds came out; that changed desire and not just sexual desire, but like people's desire around life changes when they're no longer going to die or when the community around them is no longer dying.

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: And I think that's a good way to kind of get back into, like, your timeline and Group Material's timeline. Like what was '96 for you?

DOUG ASHFORD: Well, I had some personal disaster at that point, too. So it's very hard. I mean, I—between '92 and '94, both my parents died. And by '96, my marriage was falling apart. The guardian to my children was dying of breast cancer. Felix died in January. My nephew was killed by a car right outside the—his front yard. It was sort of like everything was falling apart. So I don't mean to personalize it, necessarily, Ted, but between '94 and '99, there was a five-year period of my life in which I kind of abandoned reality, and I did it through drinking and drugs.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And I did it through a certain kind of investment in a professional—I worked a whole lot. I traveled a whole lot, and I kind of—I think I left reality. There are things I really don't remember from that period because I was high.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And what about your relationship to Julie and to Karen and even—

DOUG ASHFORD: Karen kind of drifted out of Group Material in the—in the—earlier on in the '90s. So—and by '94, ['9]5, Felix was really ill. Julie and I kept going into the project, another one of the *DAZIBAOs,* in Boston together, the two of us. We did sort of re-presentation of some Group Material work in Barcelona for a friend of ours who was a curator there, Jorge. Yeah, I don't know. It was—it was—you know, this is more of a personal moment—personal situation around reorganization. I didn't really get it back together again until '99.

THEODORE KERR: What did that look like?

DOUG ASHFORD: I don't know. We applied for certain kinds of work, and I started this studio practice, to a degree, you know, on a kind of private level. I reorganized stuff. Julie and I—I got divorced; I got another house. I met someone. You know, things in life that bring us back.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: As my ex-wife and great friend Sarah Safford says, "I came to my senses," which is a great phrase; isn't it?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Because the idea that it's your senses that can be the thing [laughs].

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: And your sensitivities, so I mean, I could try to remember some specific things, but it was—yeah, it was a bad—it was a—in retrospect, a bad period.

THEODORE KERR: Right. And—

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, I felt okay at the time. And I actually don't regret—I want to be—and I want to be emphatic here. I'm not a moralizer. I don't regret a lot of the experiences that I had over that period of my life. I loved in a lot of different ways than I thought I could. I experienced context of extreme abandon in proximity to death that I think is actually quite generative. It's hard to argue for, in today's culture, in which everything is affirmational and healthy all the fucking time. I had experiences with people who I'm still very close with that would not have happened without those kind of desperate behaviors. But it's not a lifestyle that you can keep up, I don't think. But I would have to ask other people who seem to have done it.

THEODORE KERR: This seems like a cliché question, and we can move on if it doesn't seem helpful. But do you think that the—that the mania and the production level that HIV/AIDS and the urgency that HIV/AIDS gave to you and to Group Material, do you think that this period of not being in your senses is any way relational to the urgency that AIDS created in the culture and in your own life?

DOUG ASHFORD: Oh yeah, I think so. And I don't think I'm alone. We buried a lot of people. We felt we had to live in the moment, right? And the sort of false consistencies of a normalizing lifestyle, I think, were relatively easy to reject. There were a lot of extreme behaviors all around me. And I would argue that they are, as we discussed before, a kind of—that they were driven, not just by circumstances in a kind of neurotic way, but they had a certain kind of generosity to them. I believe that. And even if they ended up being destructive on a personal level, or self-destructive on a personal level, as I said, I'm not—it's very difficult for me to be moralizing about certain kinds of certain—today, very prevalent narrations of addiction or of self-destruction. Often, these discussions seem to be extremely hierarchical. And they're privileging, in terms of creating certain narrations of victimization or self-victimization that I just think are not really part of the way these things actually work through us. But that said, I didn't want to lose any chances for connection to things, even if they were risky, and I wasn't alone.

THEODORE KERR: I mean, that's a very big word.

DOUG ASHFORD: What?

THEODORE KERR: "Risky."

DOUG ASHFORD: "Risky?"

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah. And in that sense, it was irresponsible. It was irresponsible to my children.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: It was.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: It was because it created absences—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —that were unfair. And it's—yeah, and then my children are adults now, and I know the affect I had on them. And I know that you can't compensate. There is no compensation when you're gone, when someone needs you. So—

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: —it's—yeah, it's just the way that things happen. But to say that it's related particularly to our—my generation's experience of the AIDS crisis, also, might be another way to sort of generalize something. I mean, there was a war in the '60s, you know? There was the experimentation that people—that happened after World War I. I mean, I'm not a cultural historian, and maybe to generalize is wrong, but if you returned to Paris in 1920, a third of the male population was disfigured. A third, right, were like really messed up. Like, so would you not want to drink absinthe every day and, like, celebrate whatever body was next to you that was whole? Like, in whatever way you could, as desperately and intensely and as long as possible? Like that, I think—to celebrate that in an overt way seems irresponsible. But to acknowledge its humanness, I think, is also responsible. So it's one of those paradoxes.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, and—

DOUG ASHFORD: So was it—was it HIV/AIDS? Was it just me? Was it how humans are? Like the desire to feel close in the conditions of loss are normal.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right. I—

DOUG ASHFORD: To exercise them in ways that are irresponsible towards other people, like my children, were wrong, right? But the differentiation between the two is difficult.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: I think anybody, hopefully, would allow anyone the—an understanding in those—situations.

THEODORE KERR: Well, and I say this with generosity, it—you're not alone in it, like the rate of crystal meth use within the gay male community after the release of meds in '96 skyrockets. So like almost a second epidemic—

DOUG ASHFORD: [Laughs.] Oh yeah, [inaudible].

THEODORE KERR: A second epidemic—

DOUG ASHFORD: That's good.

THEODORE KERR: —happens that when people who—

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: —quote, unquote, survived HIV/AIDS are now—their life chances are—their life chances were then being reduced by a crystal meth addiction.

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: Which was then fueling an HIV—an HIV—

DOUG ASHFORD: —re-emergence.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, or not even—

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: —re-emergence, right?

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: But, yeah, so all this is to say is that, both culturally production-wise and interpersonally around drugs and pleasure, that the period from '96 to around 2008 is one of, like, people—I think of the pendulum swinging the other way, to put it just one way.

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So fascinating—

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: —that it's so difficult for us as humans to be fully as expansive as our desire mandates and—somehow come up against the—these conditions of causing pain in our self and others.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. It's also—

DOUG ASHFORD: I'm wondering how, you know—

THEODORE KERR: It's also a period of after—of intense output, right, of—

DOUG ASHFORD: Right.

THEODORE KERR: —also thinking about others, of also creating—

DOUG ASHFORD: —saving lives.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: So—

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: —there's just—it's also about balance. And not everyone lives this life, right, like—

DOUG ASHFORD: No. Sure.

THEODORE KERR: —the whole United States' population definitely did not react to HIV/AIDS and then go a period of balance from all that reaction—[laughs]—you know. Patti Smith moved [laughs]—

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: —to give one example.

DOUG ASHFORD: But there's, like, these teenagers in the south now, you know, who, if you think about it, their relationship to abstinence also, in a way, might be a kind of inverse reflection in terms of paranoia about—that I—conditions around which HIV developed in their parents as distant and ignorant spectators.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: But then that's—I wondered about that, too. I was having a conversation about that the other day with—in North Carolina, also, because the evolution of marriage equity implies that there is more and more, not empathy, but sort of like—and not acceptance because it's not so much about tolerance. It's like—it's more like, if you talk to certain kinds of people who are still have—are homophobic, they're like, "Let them do what they want."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Right? There's a kind of like a—a kind of like, why would I—why would you—why would you want that to be something that I am supposed to interfere with?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: The Pope, you know—the head of the Catholic Church said that on an airplane. He said, "Well,

who am I to say that someone shouldn't be with someone else?"

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: But what was my point there? My point was, like, that I still wonder about the—yeah, the way that people—with these teenagers—because someone was talking about it, that there's tremendous promiscuity. There's very little access to birth control in some of these contexts. So there's—from this particular health educator's standpoint, there's a great deal of non-reproductive sexual activity. Like blow jobs are just like—you just do blow jobs all the time.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: It's not considered a big deal. And from her perspective, the idea that this was not understood as sexual was very limiting to the young women's—imagination about what sexual politics should be like—that they also have rights to pleasure and that they have the right to certain kinds of connection.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, that was really interesting. And I'm sort of thinking, what's that a reaction to?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Because I also remember—my brother worked for the CDC. And at the end of it, he sort of, like—I'm like, yeah, but, Dave, I'm—everybody's not so sure that oral sex is not conducive to spreading the virus.

THEODORE KERR: When did you say this? When was this conversation?

DOUG ASHFORD: I don't know; was that '93?

THEODORE KERR: Oh, okay.

DOUG ASHFORD: You think?

THEODORE KERR: I'm interested—

DOUG ASHFORD: Now the CDC's policy was still—

THEODORE KERR: Right.

DOUG ASHFORD: —right, that there was—that we don't have that conversation.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

DOUG ASHFORD: It's just, here's what safe sex is.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Condom use, dah, dah, dah, dah, and there's no other kind of conversation.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And then there was a reaction, as I remember, which was, like, if you just tell everybody not to do this, if you can't figure out other kinds of sex-positive conversations to be able to have about the lives people are actually living with the possibility of transmission, then you're failing your—you're failing your—constituencies.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Because they'll think you're lying, and then no one will do anything.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Or they'll do everything.

DOUG ASHFORD: Do you remember that? Yeah, exactly [laughs]; they'll do everything. They won't do anything it depends; they'll do everything they want.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: Do you remember that conversation?

THEODORE KERR: Well, I remember growing up in a—

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: —period of gray zone around oral sex and—

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: —a vanguard position, which is the one that I—that I took on, was that it's fine.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: And I remember being like the—a proponent of that in my friends' groups—

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: —and that being controversial.

DOUG ASHFORD: What do we know now?

THEODORE KERR: Sorry?

DOUG ASHFORD: It was—it was fine.

THEODORE KERR: It is fine.

DOUG ASHFORD: It is fine.

THEODORE KERR: It is fine.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah. So it's weird that there's this weird, sort of, Christian-inflected ideas about sexual behaviors. Or I guess, if they're—if they're having anal sex as teenagers all the time, then it's not—but I didn't get to that level of conversation with this woman because—

THEODORE KERR: Right. I mean, we do know that that's like a form of birth control amongst teens—

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: —is anal sex, yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: Well, then and also the—

THEODORE KERR: And—

DOUG ASHFORD: —woman is still a virgin.

THEODORE KERR: Right. And virginity means—

DOUG ASHFORD: And she's get to go to this thing with her dad when she marries. I mean, it's all—

THEODORE KERR: Oh, my God, I swear to God.

DOUG ASHFORD: —[inaudible]. It's a crazy—but the only reason that I bring it up is because it seems to be a reflection of an investment in certain extreme ideas of the use of the body and that—and a kind of dark and even psychoanalytically, really perverse, narrations of sexuality—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —that's going on within this Christian, ostensibly sexually repressive, community that is also reflective of a certain kind of extremism.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, and—

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, if these teenagers are having all-night, anal sex like, you know, porn star sex—

THEODORE KERR: Right.

DOUG ASHFORD: —in like—in like the hinterlands of Winston-Salem—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —it's not necessarily because of the narrations that we were invested in politically in the '80s and '90s about HIV/AIDS, but it is reflective of a larger idea of sexuality that I think is very contemporary. And I don't know how to talk about it anymore than that.

THEODORE KERR: Well, Anthony Petro, like a Christian historian—

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: —kind of from Boston University—

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: —wrote a book, and he talks about how, for the Christian right, there was nothing about HIV/AIDS that was interesting to the Christian right. They just saw it as a—as a—kind of an umbrella opportunity to gain back the losses that they'd suffered in the 20 years prior to the '80s.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: So [inaudible].

DOUG ASHFORD: With the feminist movement.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: Right.

THEODORE KERR: And HIV/AIDS was kind of like a scare tactic to get everyone back online.

DOUG ASHFORD: Right.

THEODORE KERR: And so I think that's a much more helpful way to think about HIV/AIDS. I don't think the church fathers were that invested in HIV/AIDS because they had their own relationship to it. But as a—as an organizing tool it was very helpful.

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: So—

DOUG ASHFORD: So the main thing is that those church fathers from the '70s and '80s, and knowing the scandals around them, Jimmy Swaggart, et cetera, et cetera, are invested in repression—in order for them to be able to have a certain kind of desire narrative that would be acted out in the—in the interest of being—of criminalizing themselves.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: So, again, I don't mean to be so psychoanalytic about it, but there's a kind of overall narrative around the—that exists in a lot of different areas, where the criminalization and the guilt associated with desire has become more and more of an official kind of motivating force.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: All children see porn.

THEODORE KERR: Yep.

DOUG ASHFORD: And so they see the most stylized idea—of the physical connection between bodies—that you can imagine.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: You know?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And I'm not saying that I'm interested in censorship or anything, but it does mean that there's a—a kind of a—and maybe it's consistent. There's a bizarre sort of anti-morality that's at stake in people's investment in the idea of physical pleasure.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. I mean, this is where Audre Lorde is helpful, right.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: We don't—I don't agree with censorship either, but what could be helpful is to just name things what they are.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: To name the difference between pornography and the erotic.

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: To say, like, that's not sex; that is—

DOUG ASHFORD: Right.

THEODORE KERR: —pornography, and it's—it is what it is.

DOUG ASHFORD: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: And this is the erotic, and this is sex, and they all exist together.

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: And let's not conflate them.

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: We're moving—we're in the present right now, so let's be in the present right now. So I think, as part of an iconic, canonical collective, you must get approached often—this is an example—to talk about the work that you all did around HIV/AIDS. And I wonder, what is that experience of revisitation like for you?

DOUG ASHFORD: It's different. It's—it depends on the person. This is delightful, but it's you, Ted.

THEODORE KERR: Right [laughs]. Thanks.

[They laugh.]

THEODORE KERR: Maybe give some examples of what the re-visitation looks like to you, in different ways.

DOUG ASHFORD: Well, there's all this—there's many, many Ph.D. theses. Or I don't know many, many, but at least two a year probably. There's research inquiries from people doing curatorial studies, I think for curators in particular. It's not necessarily the HIV/AIDS work, per se. But it's ideas about temporality in the organization of the exhibition, the notion of the museum as a site for public identification. This thing I'm into, also, where the model of the room exists as a kind of an abstract organization of democracy.

THEODORE KERR: A model of the room exists—

DOUG ASHFORD: The room exists as a model of democracy.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Right? Which is—was part of the way that I try to organize for myself the aesthetic effect of Group Materials' shows, even though they were very much based on the factual.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, what is a dynamic exhibition? It's a shape. You know? So what's it like to revisit them? It's difficult. I mean, I would have to say that Julie and I are—I think, both share in this, is that we're delighted when people rework our work. But it's also—it's also very difficult because we each have our new work. We're helped by the amazing Marvin—

THEODORE KERR: —Taylor?

DOUG ASHFORD: —Taylor at the Fales Collection. And the fact that the artwork is now available for anyone to look at on a—through that wonderful managed apparatus of perception and organization of an archive, so it's eased by that. But that's all sort of technical. Emotionally, it's difficult for me because the context of that—of the work that we did together is—I mean, I was crying a minute ago. It's full of feelings of loss now. Not just in terms of the people, Felix, Bill, Steven, but the context and the dynamism of the interpersonal and intimate relationships that desperation produces. This is also [inaudible], speaking about the past, you know. Like someone could say, what do you want about your life to last, you know, or your work?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: They said that. So what about the work do you want to have last?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Laughs.]

DOUG ASHFORD: I don't care about the work. I want to last. [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: What do you mean? What's "you?"

DOUG ASHFORD: Well, when they ask me, exactly, like people, in terms of the professional life, people identify us, now, with our work.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: A close friend of both of ours—and when Felix died, said, "Don't worry, his—the work will live forever." I said, "Fuck you." Don't give a shit.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: You know? I don't care about that.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: So yeah, revisiting the past is like that.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, you experience it, the context of regret, but then also a context around which we are all expected to live through the professional contents that are—of our—of our—the meaning of our lives to others, which as you know, because you've interviewed all these people, is not our lives—really.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, it's a part, but it's not really our lives.

THEODORE KERR: Right. It's not at all.

DOUG ASHFORD: No.

THEODORE KERR: Do you feel yourself witnessing the overall cultural revisitation that's happening right now with HIV—

DOUG ASHFORD: What?

THEODORE KERR: —and the early responses?

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: In what way do you mean, though, specifically?

THEODORE KERR: I mean, my work is focused on the ways in which, specifically, documentaries and art exhibitions—

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: —are revisiting HIV/AIDS and the narrowness, often, of those revisitations—and how these revisitations are being read as—are being simply accepted as history and not being interrogated enough. And I find that endlessly fascinating and I—I'm fascinated by the stories we tell and the stories we don't tell and then how that impacts the work we do and don't do. And I can't imagine you're not without thoughts.

DOUG ASHFORD: I think I'm—I don't see it as any different, I guess. I mean, once the—like, say for our Group Material in particular, if we take that as a case study, the histories that have been written and rewritten through it, even with the wonderful work that Julie did and the two of us did on the archive through their show and tell book have, at first, seemed to be kind of destabilizing, or it would say Group Material can be understood only as an activist organization or only as the kind of, like—having curatorial impact, or so and so forth. For me, the abstract paintings that I'm doing are really what, at least from my certain perspective, the work wasn't really about.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And so—yeah, let 1,000 flowers bloom.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: You know, let everybody make what they want of it. Like it's—

THEODORE KERR: Right.

DOUG ASHFORD: I—in one sense.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

DOUG ASHFORD: But I think that, from a certain perspective, the way that the exhibitions about the exhibitions and so forth—

THEODORE KERR: I have to write something down that you said.

DOUG ASHFORD: That's okay. Move on could be—could be frustrating. I don't know. I guess I'm looking at institutions these days as an older person, as—without that many expectations. And I'm very happy with little, tiny things.

THEODORE KERR: That's beautiful. Do you ever—have you or do you ever consider the virus as—like, as an organizing principle or as a metaphor, or what are your actual thoughts and feelings and imagination and creative juices around the actual human immunodeficiency virus?

DOUG ASHFORD: Well, it would be metaphoric, right? Do you mean something quite like bizarre, that it was an opportunity? No?

THEODORE KERR: I mean—

DOUG ASHFORD: I mean, all crises prevent—create these opportunities.

THEODORE KERR: Well—

DOUG ASHFORD: All catastrophes show things about humans that are quite remarkable.

THEODORE KERR: I don't even mean that deep. I mean—

DOUG ASHFORD: Oh.

THEODORE KERR: —like, when you described the creation of the Group Material *AIDS Timeline*—

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: —it doesn't sound dissimilar to how a virus—to how the virus works in the body.

DOUG ASHFORD: Right.

THEODORE KERR: You know, like it—it's put in—

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: —and it wants to survive, so it splits, recombines and creates a strain. And in a way a timeline is a strain.

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: And I just—

DOUG ASHFORD: I agree. I agree, but I do—I think it's a metaphor.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: And that—and I'm—and I'm suspicious of metaphors—

THEODORE KERR: Why?

DOUG ASHFORD: —in principle. Because I think they allow us to create a certain kind of connections that, then, overshadow other connections that don't have as literally a figurative kind of relationship.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: In other words, you're sure *AIDS Timeline* would develop, as if it was a virus, but it would also develop, as if it was a bomb.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Or it could develop, as if it was the realization of a kind of musical effect—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: —you know? So that's one of the reasons that, now, I'm so interested in abstraction—because the things that are not figuratively recognizable as analogs to other things are actually the places I feel that we make more difficult connections to the social meaning that drives possibilities—both subjectively and collectively.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: This is a kind of an old—sort of old-fashioned idea, early-modernist idea, but one that I'm quite attached to now. Did *AIDS Timeline* time develop as if it was a virus? Sure. But it also developed as if it was an afterthought, I mean, probably, also. And it would depend on the—on the matrix of interpretation that was then being applied to the work. Memories like that, you know? Like why do I remember certain things—or how I remember them, is often through association.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: You know the famous Proustian Madeleine. But it's often—it's also just as likely that, if not corresponding to any sensual or alliterative connection, that it's like the opposite of it then.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Right?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And—or in disgust, you figure out pleasure as much as in pleasure. You know that—psychologically. Because fear and desire, they're like this, right, which probably is an explanation of that whole—the dark stuff of the past that we were trying to talk about before.

THEODORE KERR: Is it okay that I ask you one last question about your work?

DOUG ASHFORD: Sure.

[Side conversation.]

THEODORE KERR: So a through line in these two interviews has been, actually, magazines. So the *Life* magazines when you were in school.

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Oh yeah.

THEODORE KERR: And then the magazines where you're doing the research. And then your—

[Cross talk.]

DOUG ASHFORD: The newspaper where I work now.

THEODORE KERR: And I—if you just want to say anything about that that's wonderful. But I also would love to hear you think through the ways in which—you were talking about the layout of a newspaper and the associations that happen or don't happen and how you think about that in the digital age when, you know, sometimes, even when someone's doing archival work, they're not even looking at an old newspaper page; they're just pulling up one, single article—

DOUG ASHFORD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: —in isolation. So—

DOUG ASHFORD: I want to be—I don't want to be the nostalgic person.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

DOUG ASHFORD: But I kind of have the feeling.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: And—of the nostalgic person, which is that physical iterations of the recording and management of knowledge and history were ones that, from my generation, enabled, or even encouraged, associative, or even schizophrenic, identification. So like the card catalog in the library, there were fingerprints on them. So you could look at the whole drawer as a—as a kind of a long cube, and there were dark areas.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: Is that, like, the Yelp five stars? It didn't mean—it's not really like that, you know? And then, as I was saying before, the page of the newspaper, the idea that there could be a photograph of a girl running away from a bomb and an article about the school board in New York City, and they're 12 inches away, and you could see the school board conversation as if it was a kind of a bombing. You know, talk about metaphor and analogy and associative thinking. Like it's all over that stuff.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUG ASHFORD: It's a very beautiful idea that the—that the—that the eighth grade school teacher, who brought in those *Life* magazines when I was 13, was invested in the same imaginary process that produced *AIDS Timeline*. Not that I'm the author of it, but that imaginary process of the reconfiguration of history, the idea of collage, was foundational to all of Group Material, right, in that you could take the past and cut it up and make the future. It's very artful—but it's definitely part of the way that visual thinking provides the—a sense of hopefulness.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Thank you. Do—is there anything you want to—

DOUG ASHFORD: No, man, we talked for three hours.

THEODORE KERR: I know.

DOUG ASHFORD: [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: Thank you for everything.

DOUG ASHFORD: Thank you.

[Side conversation.]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]