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Oral history interview with Jack Pierson, 2017 January 16-17

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Jack Pierson on 2017 January 16 and 17. The interview took place at Person's home in New York, NY, and was conducted by Alex Fialho for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic: An Oral History Project.

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

Interview

ALEX FIALHO: This is Alex Fialho interviewing Jack Pierson at Jack Pierson's home in New York City, New York, on January 16, 2017, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic, Oral History Project.

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ALEX FIALHO: Okay. So let's start at the beginning. Where were you born, and can you describe your family and upbringing a little bit?

JACK PIERSON: I was born in Plymouth, Massachusetts, which is a town that contains the smaller little town I lived in, Manomet, Massachusetts.

ALEX FIALHO: What year?

JACK PIERSON: In 1960, and I'm the fourth and last son of my parents, James L. and Jeanette Pierson. My mother was born in that town; my father came from West Virginia. There were 13 years between me and the last brother before me. So it was like a set of three kids that were—you know, young newlyweds, had three kids one after the other, and then a period of 13 years, and then me. So it had this quality of kind of being an only child, because by the time I was six, they were kind of out of the house, or, you know, lingering and providing sort of a Greek chorus of, you know, "The spoiled brat gets away with so much that we didn't." So it wasn't like I was romping with them, necessarily. It was more like, "You're going to be babysitting him," and I'm like, Ugh. That kind of thing [laughs].

But it was a small town-ish. It wasn't quite Mayberry R.F.D., but it was small in that most of the people we knew, my parents had known a long time, and, you know, a certain amount of relatives live nearby. My mother's relatives were in the distance because her family was from there and more extended, but a lot of them were old, because my mother was the same situation. I forget how many kids were in her family, but four, and then a long period, and her. So all her relatives were people that seemed much older than her. And they were around a little bit. And it's interesting only to me because I do feel connected to an older period of life through that, I think because she was connected to a much older period of life through them. So I felt like there were a certain amount of things that seemed palpable to me, even though I didn't experience them, like, you know, bootlegging and killing your own chickens for dinner and stuff like that. [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: Not so much historical events, but more a way of life?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, to me. But historical events, too, somehow. Things that they would speak in terms of, like, "the hurricane of '38," and, "Do you remember that?" "Well, no, I was all"—you know, it would just float around. This frame of reference floated around. My grandfather was a builder, so there were a lot of houses that were rental properties, and you'd go through them, and things would be stored. So I was in contact with this old stuff, and my parents kind of valued that, too. They were into old stuff, not in a connoisseur way, but just, you know, they liked the old stuff that reminded them—and so I felt like I had this sensibility early on that I liked old stuff.

I grew up across the street from the church I went to, which had a big graveyard, and so I feel like I might have had an early sense of mortality because I used to glamorize funerals and coffins. Like when a funeral would go on, or it would be across the street, and [I'd] be like, Oh, my God, there's a dead body over there in that box. The grave would be dug a week before, and then, The box is going to go in there. The cemetery was also weirdly like a little playground, too, because you could ride your bike around, and that's where we went to play.

In the summertime, it was a summer town. This is another thing that made it kind of unique. It was a beach town, where people came from the city to spend, you know, a week in the summer, or two weeks, or the whole

season maybe. And because of that, there was a snack bar that was sort of like a seafood shack/ice cream stand connected to a gas station that had been there. Every one of my family worked there, even my mother. And that was owned by the family that lived next door to the Gellers [ph], and that had this sense of—that almost was like the big city to me, even though it was, like, a block up. Like when I was young, I couldn't go to the corner by myself. You know what I mean? It was one of those rites [of passage] where, Okay, you can go get—I don't know when it was that I could first walk up there to get my own ice cream.

But across the street, on the wall around the cemetery is where the teenagers hung out, and the guys that worked at the gas station would go over there, sit on the wall, eat their lunch. So it had this sense of, even though it was not even a city block away, this corner—I don't know, things happened, or [laughs] it seemed more—and then eventually I wound up working there a couple summers myself. But all my brothers worked there, and my mother worked there; I think my father—I don't think he ever worked there, because he came [home] late and probably had his own job. He was a plumber, and he also owned the last private water company in Massachusetts. You bought your water from him. Not delivered water, but he owned the well. So there were certain neighborhoods that he serviced, and I think it was like $50 a year and you'd get your water from his well, somehow. That was one of the side jobs.

And also having the older brothers did the same thing. I thought older people were—I didn't have this language when I was young, but I glamorized them, because they were free. They had a car; they were going by themselves; they didn't have to do the things I did. They were going to the movies, or they were doing this, and it all sounded so great, somehow. And I remember sort of hating being a kid. I just wanted to be big. I don't know, I guess maybe all kids do that, but it wasn't like I was thinking, Oh, it's so great I'm a kid. It was like, When can I be like that and get out of here, have wheels, or do the things they did? Because it sounded fun, because it sounded like it was all sort of happening on the corner.

ALEX FIALHO: How about your [religious] upbringing? What—

JACK PIERSON: We were—the church was Protestant, and I went every Sunday to Sunday School, because I was kind of coerced. It was kind of coerced, but I was also [a] tiny bit of an achiever. You would get perfect attendance pins and then—first you got a pin, then you got a wreath around the pin that had two hooks to hang bars for every year you had perfect attendance in Sunday School. And I was into getting those things; I wanted—so nerdy [laughs]. I was into that.

They weren't religious really, but they went to church every Sunday. And I don't think we even said grace necessarily, except maybe at Christmas and Thanksgiving. It was a very non-blood-and-guts—you know, they never mentioned Jesus or, What would Jesus do, or—you just went to church because you went to church, and the Protestant church, or especially this one. It's a Congregationalist church. There wasn't any blood-and-guts or drama. It was just like, You're forgiven. Just don't bring it up. You're forgiven. [They laugh.] There was no talk of sin or anything dramatic. It was just a service. It's a script that finished in an hour, no bones about it. I mean, maybe not an hour.

I went back, actually. Maybe 10 years ago, I think, I had to go. And it is changed now. Now people in church, it's like they all have time to share, or they might want to tell you who to pray for or something. But when I went, it was a script and, like at 10:20, you'd be on the Lord's Prayer, boom, then 15 minutes for the sermon at the end, and you were out of there. But it gave a sense of community, and, I don't know, weird stuff that I wonder if it goes on. Like I was an acolyte for a while, which meant I'd light the candles and ring the bell. They actually had a bell that you pulled to get people, supposedly, like 10 minutes before the church started, to let—it wasn't that small a neighborhood, but it was a more symbolic thing, like, Church is going to start in 10 minutes.

So things like that seemed so—to me right now, as I'm saying it, it makes me feel, like, ancient that it could have happened to me in this—maybe there's towns where some little boy goes over and rings the bell and then lights the candles maybe, but, I mean, even at that church now, it's recorded. You don't ring the bell anymore; they just put it over a loud speaker, I think.

And I went to the little school. And I forget what my graduating class was, maybe 600, 12 years later, when you went to a bigger school farther away. But my first-grade class was probably only, like, 60 people or something like that.

ALEX FIALHO: So, suburban America?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, I guess, but it wasn't even suburb-y. Most people there didn't go into the city. Like, that was worthy of mention of, "Oh, she works in the city. She has to drive an hour a day." And that sort of indicated, like, That poor thing. Boston was really only 50 minutes away, but it seemed like, Oh, God. And city people seemed like, Oh, [muttering] poor things. You know what I mean? I guess it is suburban. I'm painting a picture like I loved it. I hated it.

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JACK PIERSON: But there were qualities that I guess stayed with me, that idea of the beach and a summer town and a rented house. I was more into kids I would meet in the summer that lived in the city than I was the local yokels. And they didn't even live in the city. They would live in, you know, what I'd call a suburb of Boston, but it still seemed like the city to us, somehow. I don't know; ask me another question. [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: What was your relationship to Plymouth?

JACK PIERSON: I did not love it, but I participated as well as I could. I think early on, I didn't think I would be a part of it. Everybody else in my family stayed there their whole lives. My next-youngest brother only recently, in the last five years, moved to Arizona, but he still comes back every summer. We weren't especially a family that moved or traveled. They go to Florida.

My family had an old relationship with Florida because my grandfather would go there in the winter, build houses down there, and so my mother would go down there. And so there was also a Florida connection. I had an old, crazy aunt that lived in Florida that we'd go to visit, so that was my first trip anyplace exotic, was Florida. And that kind of stayed with me and came back in my life to a certain extent, repeatedly.

ALEX FIALHO: Was Boston the escape?

JACK PIERSON: Boston was the first big city, yeah, that you could get to. Although I was very lucky, because I moved from that corner across the street from the cemetery and the church six miles down the road when we were 13. My mother [laughs] became obsessed with the idea that the corner was too loud and noisy, and cars zooming by all the time. Even now, you and I would not think [laughs] that it was busy or noisy or anything, but for her, she was like, "I want to get off this corner."

So we moved to a much smaller house six miles down the road that was kind of on the water. You had a view of the ocean, and it was in a little summer enclave. Basically, it should have been a summer house, but they kind of made it—winterized it—and so from the time I was 13, I lived down there. And when I was down there, one of the neighbors became this family that lived in Forest Hills Gardens here. They were from New York, and they were Jewish, and they read the *New York Times*, and they might have bought a biography of Nureyev or something. I was 13, and they had a kid that was maybe four years younger than me, and I started to play with him, and I became friendly with this family who were, like, artsy. He was a psychiatrist; she was a dancer. I was like—

ALEX FIALHO: What are their names?

JACK PIERSON: The Eshkenazis. He was from Bulgaria, and it was just everything exotic. And I made friends with them and then introduced them to my parents, and they became lifelong friends. They're still very [much] part of my family. And because I was, for all intents and purposes, a very good kid, or at least I was more an Eddie Haskell type that—I don't know if you'll get that reference, but he was the bad kid on *Leave It to Beaver* that was charming to—nobody knew he was the one that pulled the strings to be bad in the background, but was always, like, really smiling to the parents and polite and like, "Oh, how are you today?" And then he'll be like [growls].

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JACK PIERSON: And that's kind of how I was, somehow. So after a fashion, not the first year but maybe the next couple years, the husband, Azariah Eshkenazi, would go, you know, drop the kids off and the wife, and then go home in August for two weeks and work, and then come back. And I started to go to New York with him. Everybody trusted me enough to—he lived in Forest Hills, but I'd take the train into the city every day. So Boston, then, started to seem kind of square to me.

ALEX FIALHO: The train into the city—

JACK PIERSON: The F train from Forest Hills to Manhattan—

ALEX FIALHO: Ah, got you.

JACK PIERSON: —Times Square.

ALEX FIALHO: When you were staying with him?

JACK PIERSON: When I was staying with him. In a way that that was acceptable, but they wouldn't have let me jump on a bus to Boston for the day until much later.

ALEX FIALHO: How old were you when you were doing this?

JACK PIERSON: Probably 14, 15, like that.

ALEX FIALHO: And what was the reason they were letting you go to stay with him? Because you wanted to?

JACK PIERSON: Because I wanted to go to the city; I wanted to go to museums; I wanted to see Martha Graham; I wanted to go to a Broadway show. It probably was more like 16, 17—or 15, 16, 17. I'd earned enough money mowing lawns or working, like I said, at the ice cream stand that by the last two weeks of August, say, I'd have enough money to go to New York and do a few things, go to museums, buy some books, buy some new school clothes at Bloomingdale's, or something like that. And I was fascinated by New York even then, so I knew all the places that I wanted to go and all the things I wanted to look for. I was such a little weird nerd, and thinking I was really sophisticated [laughs]. But I was this little nerdy kid from the country.

ALEX FIALHO: Did your parents encourage an interest in the arts?

JACK PIERSON: No, but the Eshkenazis did. My parents didn't have an opinion either way, but my mother was very creative.

ALEX FIALHO: What was her job?

JACK PIERSON: She was a homemaker, but both of my parents had lots to do with town government in a kind of volunteer capacity. Like my mother was on the Conservation Commission, so we were always doing these do-goody, environmental things. And my father was on the Sewer Commission, which didn't sound too glamorous, but it made them seem, to me, very engaged and active and weirdly prominent somehow.

ALEX FIALHO: In Plymouth.

JACK PIERSON: Yes. Not prominent, but something. They had these things to do. So they weren't necessarily artistic, but the other thing that I feel has something to do with my sensibility is, with the love of old things, my mother, at a certain moment, bought this building called the Chapel that was the church she went to when she was little, before the church was next door to us, and ran it as an antique shop. And it became one of those things where people rented areas from her and set up their own little things, and I became kind of a flea-market picker at a young age. I learned what stuff was valuable, in a very rinky-dink way. But I could pick out, like, a few bits of Victorian stuff that I knew people liked to have, and buy it cheap and sell it higher.

ALEX FIALHO: At the antique store?

JACK PIERSON: At the antique store.

ALEX FIALHO: At the shop where your mother appraised?

JACK PIERSON: Exactly. So we'd go to flea markets on weekends, and for some reason, I was into it; we were all into it, and weirdly, my father was. He was supposedly a brilliant plumber, really a craftsman, and we would go to crafts fairs, which were big in the '70s, too.

In the '60s, I was very into Motown and the Supremes and glamorous Hollywood things, and then as I became a teenager in the '70s, I started to be more into hippie-like stuff. There was a book called *The Whole Earth Catalog* that was the bible of hippiedom, like give you recipes to make your own dandelion wine or how to raise a hive of bees. It's very now, on a certain level. I think all the stuff that goes on in Brooklyn with, like, keeping bees and running chickens is because those kids had parents that must've had this book. And it seemed to also imply pot-smoking and nudism, and I kind of went on that trip. I really got into herbs and witchcraft and, you know, hippiedom, and I thought, Oh, yes, I want to homestead and live off the land. I went full—and I still do this constantly, I think, from like, Diana Ross and the Supremes to, Yes, and a hoe pulled by an actual cow, and you get milk from the cow, and [laughs]—you know what I mean? I loved the whole thing, and survival, and living off the land, and camping.

I guess I became a Boy Scout at the same time my oldest brother was the troop leader of the Boy Scouts. I didn't really like Boy Scouts, but I did like, kind of, some of the stuff you'd learn and the idea of camping and starting fires and cooking things on a campfire. I somehow incorporated this whole sensibility into an otherwise very fey, sort of glamour-obsessed gay child. I don't know how that worked.

Then, soon after, marijuana arrived on the scene, and that changed my whole sensibility, and I had my burnout friends that were hippieish and slightly older. I always hung around with either older kids or younger kids; I wasn't really so down with my exact age group because, as a gay child, I was incredibly bullied and made a kind of a pariah amongst my own milieu. Little kids didn't know that, and teenagers didn't really know that, or they didn't care. So I found myself either with younger kids or older kids. And I still even do that today, it seems like. It's a weird thing.

ALEX FIALHO: You said "glamour-obsessed" in your youth; how did that manifest?

JACK PIERSON: Well, I was into things like—I would say my first big passions were, well, three things: Nancy Sinatra and the Supremes, and I don't know—the first 45 I ever owned that was—like, "Please get me this, please, please get me this," and they came—

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JACK PIERSON: —it was "Downtown" by Petula Clark. And so you listen to that 1,000 times, and the idea of downtown being where it's cool got into me like a big deal. And then I remember one time—my parents occasionally would go in the fall on a weekend to New York with, like, another couple, and they'd come and do things like go to a taping of *The Merv Griffin Show* or the Copacabana, and they actually saw Petula Clark at the Copacabana, and I thought I would lose my mind from it. Like, what? And then I got the whole album because they went there; they bought me the whole album.

ALEX FIALHO: You didn't go?

JACK PIERSON: I didn't go, no. I was only probably like six years old or something. I got left with the brothers. But things like that that also put the idea of the city like—oh, my God, I remember they brought back a little folder that sat on the table of the Copacabana. I was just like, What, the Copacabana, isn't that so great? [Laughs.] And probably all this stuff was going on in kind of an interior way, although my obsession leaked out to them to the point where they'd be like, "It's not normal that you care so much about these ginchy singers." That's what my mother would call them. "Go out and play with the other boys." I'd be like, "No, no, I just want to listen to this." [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: What does "ginchy" mean?

JACK PIERSON: Ginchy is like—it's a really arcane word, but in the '50s, it sort of meant—I don't think I've ever looked it up—cool but also, like, tacky—like maybe a teenager would say, Isn't this ginchy? like great. But a parent would say, That's ginchy, like it looks cheap or trashy or something.

ALEX FIALHO: Like, fresh?

JACK PIERSON: Should we look it up right now? Yeah, maybe, exactly. Weird, right?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JACK PIERSON: It's a very [laughs] arcane word, and I only encountered one other person that ever—I vibed with on it, who knew and used it, somehow, because I think it came and went really fast. But then all that switched from an obsession with Nancy Sinatra, who, when you listen to it now, you think about it now, and do the breakdown, she was kind of like the Britney Spears—she was 16 and really tough, and the songs were really much older than she should be singing. And she was really—another expression my mother would use—"horsed up," like too done-up in make-up and, "Why do you like that?" That was the first indication that there was something really wrong.

That was the other thing, the first day of school, that stayed with me to the last day of graduation, because I was kind of a loner and a lonely—I played with kids, but nobody told me [that] on the first day of school when they said, "Let's go around the room and say what you want to be when you grow up," nobody told me that the three things boys are supposed to say are fireman and astronaut or a baseball player, and I was like, "Nancy Sinatra. I would really like to be like her." [They laugh.]

And that just, like, brought the house down. And somebody the last day of school was, like, "I remember in the first grade when you said"—I mean, I was like, Oh, thanks, you know? But whatever, that was the intensity with which I thought, This is what it's all about. I was obsessed, sort of, as a six-year-old, with the whole thing.

And I left it there. I'm surprised I never became more drag queen-y—because I think I realized right away I didn't want to be a non-pretty drag, or I didn't want to be a comical drag queen. Maybe if I could've been pretty [laughs], I would have, but part of the reason I wound up loving drag so much was like, I hear you, about the whole thing. And then that switched to Diana Ross and the Supremes. And then the whole of Motown, and I became sort of a self-righteous, like, black power advocate in this small town that—I probably only ever saw three black people in my whole life until I was 15. But somehow I was like, [inaudible] black people. Black people are oppressed. I was identifying, I think, with oppression. I didn't have that clearly, but somehow that became—I love the whole story of Motown.

I would call Motown on the phone and ask if Diana Ross was there, literally, because I learned that you could—when you still had dial-up phones and Information, I learned all of a sudden that you could dial Information for

free to anyplace, which you would do by dialing one, the area code, and maybe, like—only the area code changed, and it was like 555-1212. And you could call Information for Los Angeles, which is so—as I'm describing this, it seems so nerdy, but it just seemed like, What? I can be talking to someone in Los Angeles and asking them questions? It's presumably the phone number. But when I found that out about Detroit, and I looked in the phone book, it would give the area code for Detroit; it's like, Oh, I'm going to see if I can call Motown.

And you call Information, "Can I have the number for Motown?" "Yes, just a minute, please." Eh-du-du-du-du. I was like, Wow. And then I had it, and then I had to risk everything, because you used to get an itemized bill of your long distance, and I was just like, Fuck it, I'm calling [laughs]. And they pick up, "Motown Records." And I was just, flummoxed, because I'm probably, like seven or eight, you know, sort of flummoxed on my father's desk phone. "Motown Records." Didn't know what else to say; I was like, "Is Diana Ross there?" [They laugh.] And they were like, "Who's calling, please?" And I was like, "Is she there?" Like, Is she in—is she there where you are?

[They laugh.]

And I think they were like, "Let me see—let me see," and then they put me on hold, and then I was freaking out about how much it cost, so I hung up [laughs]. And I'm sure she wasn't there. But they didn't know what to do with this. And then, you know, a month later, "What's this phone call to Detroit? Who made this?" "Oh, I don't know." I mean, [laughs] like, I don't know. Anyway, that's a nuts thing, right?

ALEX FIALHO: I like it.

JACK PIERSON: I don't think that's on record anyplace.

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.] How about sexuality? You've talked about it, but how did it figure in?

JACK PIERSON: Well, I think I just knew early on. I knew that really early on, somehow, that whatever was up was not—I mean, we weren't in a family that anything—there was no sexual talk whatsoever. My parents didn't declaim homosexuality because they didn't talk about any kind of sexuality. They never said any body parts; I never heard the word "penis." I was maybe 18 before I knew that that it was pronounced va-gina, not vag-inna, because I only ever read that word. Now a two-year-old girl would say, "Mother, my vagina is"—but in those days, I never heard anyone say that word, so I just thought, Oh, a girl's vag-inna? Or if I thought about it, that's how I thought about it. I don't even think I said it out loud until one day I might've said, "Whoa, her vag-inna"—like, "It's vagina." And I was like, "Oh, God. Okay." [They laugh.]

Anyway, but given that, I just knew. I don't know what it was I knew. I knew I liked little boys. I was thinking about that today. I guess there is always that thing that our ideas of beauty [are] culturally encoded, but I can remember thinking a little boy was beautiful when I was five years old, and nobody was, like, inculcating me in the Greek ideals or classical or symmetry or whatever it was. It was just like, This little boy is cute, and that one's not, somehow; so what is that? But I did have those things in my—had crushes, and I kind of kept them secret because I somehow just knew intuitively that wouldn't play. The Nancy Sinatra thing was just like, That's what I would choose, you know, [laughs] without even thinking about it, but something slowed me down about, like, I like him.

ALEX FIALHO: How did it play out across your adolescence? Through high school, and before?

JACK PIERSON: I don't know. I was a big player of doctor, and then in high school, I was coercive in that same Eddie Haskell way. Like, I could make it seem like an experiment or a good idea or, What if I heard this, or, How come you have pubic hair and I don't, you know, sort of thing with the older boys—not that I knew what that was, but I could get it going, somehow. And now, of course, I wish I did it more often. But it was still really scary and furtive. I was a sexual child, I would say, even though there was no—if there was any mention of sex, you could tell it was frowned upon; it wasn't encouraged in any way.

ALEX FIALHO: Let's go back over to the arts side of things. How did you meet the Eshkenazis?

JACK PIERSON: They were the down-the-hill neighbor in our summer community, kind of. They were summer residents of our community, and just, I'd have to pass their house to get to the beach, and made friends with them on the way.

ALEX FIALHO: Were there any particular museums, exhibitions that you were seeing in those early formative years that really stuck with you, in Boston or New York or otherwise?

JACK PIERSON: Well, with those summers I went to New York, I remember seeing the Mark di Suvero retrospective at the Whitney, I believe it was. And that was someone I had never heard—or maybe I did a little bit, because I would pore over art books in high school and junior high. But it seemed cool to me. For that

matter, so did Warhol, [Rauschenberg –JP] and Lichtenstein, and Jasper Johns, but it wasn't as obvious as them. So it was more of a revelation to me.

ALEX FIALHO: What wasn't as obvious?

JACK PIERSON: Well, him as a sculptor, I guess, or personality. Like, he wasn't somebody that they would cover in *Life* magazine like they would the rest of them. He wasn't part of the Pop explosion. If I did know about him, it would've been a black-and-white picture at the end of the sculpture section of contemporary art, as opposed to, like, the cover of the book with Warhol, Lichtenstein, blah, blah, blah. So I think it was like, Wow, oh, look, and they're like this, and it just becomes some junk, and wow, how do they do that? As opposed to, like, a painting. You know what a painting is, but this was my first sort of thing of, like, modern sculpture that I ever saw, and it seemed wild to me, and the materiality of it. I for some reason think I saw the Johns retrospective at the Whitney, too, but I don't know if maybe I just bought the poster for it. I would have to go back and figure out when that was and if it was a different time or something, but for some reason, I think I saw that, too.

But then I would do things like—I don't know, like I was armed with certain magazines, so I went to any—Castelli Uptown is having a show of Warhol portraits of sports figures. And I can remember just being mesmerized by like, Wow, this is here. I can have the card from this show.

All those things seemed really important to me, and I'd trot from one end of the city seeking out these things. I had lists of things to do once I got to the city. I never do that anymore, but I would just do all these things. I would get the cheapest ticket for a matinee, like of Liza Minnelli in *The Act*, and then I'd go to a matinee, you know, because that wasn't so—I wasn't in the city late at night. I was home to have dinner with the doctor, so it was, like, before dark. I wasn't going to the city at night, but I would go to all these matinees. I saw Martha Graham while she was still alive. She didn't perform, but maybe they wheeled her out. I saw stuff that I wouldn't have seen if I hadn't come here in the city in the summer, or when I was 14 and 15. I never really left her behind, but the Diana Ross obsession sort of morphed to Alice Cooper.

From Alice Cooper, I went to David Bowie, and then in the midst of all that, I got into Patti Smith. So that became a real reason to be in New York, was Patti Smith, go to the Gotham Book Mart, find these weird poetry books she had that were signed. I was into all this stuff that didn't make one iota of difference when I got back to Plymouth. Nobody knew who Patti Smith was; nobody cared. Nobody was particularly into David Bowie at that moment. It was just an indicator that you were a big fag. But I never thought of that. Di Suvero show, it's big and important, but I've always loved him ever since. It might have been the first thing I ever saw at the Whitney.

ALEX FIALHO: Sounds like you had a really strong sense of creative [laughs] and artistic interest from an early age.

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, I was just into people doing things, and I was also into ephemera and stuff that indicated someone had been there and done something.

ALEX FIALHO: How about your decision to go to art school? What inspired it, and how was it met by your family?

JACK PIERSON: In high school, I sort of started writing poetry, as people are wont to do in high school, especially morbid, melancholy people. I don't know that I ever read one out loud to my parents. But I got very involved in the literary magazine there, and I was taking a lot of literature classes, and that seemed sort of reasonable. It didn't seem extreme—"Perhaps I'll be a writer of poetry"—but it still seemed reasonable, and my mother would say, "Oh, it's writing. That would be great. You would be a great journalist." She was all about journalism, somehow, for me. That sounded okay. And so it seemed like maybe that's what I would do. And for a minute, that's what I thought I was going to do. And then I started to see what that would be like, and it didn't seem good to me once I crossed the next level out of high school, or even during high school.

I liked writing my own poetry and reading them, but I hated listening to other people [laughs] do it. So I sort of thought—I was still very practical at this time. I never had this, I am a genius artist and I must show the world. It was, Maybe I could make something that I could sell. That's where the crafts fair thing came in. I thought, Oh, I can make leather belts; I can make spoon rings; I can do all these things. I can figure this out, and I'll have a little thing, and I'll travel around and sell it. That remained an option to me [laughs] until my 20s. And I went to school and I thought, Okay, a combination of this and that—I didn't go to art school at first; I went to Hofstra University on Long Island.

I think I wanted to be a graphic designer, and part of the logic of going to Hofstra—I was so weird and lame—Hofstra had really nice stationary, I thought, and I was like, Well, let's go here and I'll be a graphic designer. They know what they're talking about; they've got this nice typeface. And it was close to the city. I was trying to push for Pratt or Parsons or FIT even, and they were like, "No way. We're not sending you to the city on your own. Forget it." Even though they let me—I don't know what the logic was, but they somehow threw down for one year at Hofstra, which is a university campus. I don't know what the fuck I thought I was doing there, but I

took all basic first-year freshman class and language and this, but lots of art. And there, I fell in with the theater department, even though I didn't have a theater class, but somehow from being around someplace—one of them was in one of my classes, and I fell in with the whole crew there, and one of them is still my friend to this day. He was my first boyfriend.

ALEX FIALHO: What's his name?

JACK PIERSON: Rob Weiner, and he's a director at the Chinati Foundation now. But when I met him, he was directing theater in college, and he still directs theater in the community down there. But he was my first—this was a truly sophisticated Jew [laughs]—but my age and a contemporary, and he knew cool stuff and, like, saw every Woody Allen movie, and you read the review the next day, and they discussed it, and it seemed really—it was an intense little thing that I found myself, all of a sudden, I had my friends.

I wasn't such a loner, but I didn't have anybody that I was discussing movies with in Plymouth, Massachusetts. And so all of a sudden, I felt like I had fallen in with the sophisticated—they already knew who Patti Smith was; they didn't go, Ew, she looks horrible. They were into it, and then it added, and I got more—so I became really close with him and this other woman, Susan Van Allen that's also still my friend there.

But then I left that school after a year. My parents were like, "This is way too expensive. We can't afford it; I'm sorry. You have to figure something out." So I came back home. But I also made my first trip to Europe, with Rob Weiner, the August after that first year of college.

And so somehow I went to London, Paris, Venice, Athens, Greece, and Israel. The whole scheme was that we were going to a two-week art workshop in Israel. We were really serious about it. We thought we were going to this thing, and I conned my mother, and I had a certain amount—I think I did the whole month for $700. Rob was a rich kid, so he had a little money, but it wasn't—like, if I used $200 of his money, it would've been a stretch, too, I think.

But somehow, I did a whole month and went all those places for 700 bucks. My mother practically cried giving it to me, and I was furious at her for only giving me $700. That was the meanest I ever—"Are you kidding? You said you'd give me the money!" "Well, I'm giving you $700." It was a big deal [laughs] to her, and it was like, Ohh. Somehow I made it work, and that was a life lesson. That was a big deal. Nobody in my family had ever been to Europe. I guess my mother went to London once with the garden club and it was a major deal. And then I went all these places, and—what? I don't know. That was wild.

ALEX FIALHO: And then you transferred to—

JACK PIERSON: Then I came home and had to work almost for a whole year in a factory to save up the money. Maybe I took a couple of classes at a community college, Cape Cod Community College, and worked the graveyard shift in a factory for a year, getting it together and figuring out the next move.

Then I'd learned about MassArt and that it was a state school and that it was really cheap, and furthermore, I even got a little bit of a scholarship or something. It wasn't for excellence, but it was just like, You're in the state; we'll pay a certain amount of this. That was already cheap. I think it was like $700 a semester in 1980.

So I moved to Boston that September, went to MassArt, and I think I got there and I was like, Okay, I'll be a graphic designer, because they were stressing out this point. Because even that one year of me working in a —"What's going on with you?" Like, oh-oh-ohh-oh, we had such high hopes. "What are you going to do?" And I was like, "I am going to go to art school." "Art school? Ahh, you [inaudible]. You need something to fall back on," and I was like, "I'll study graphic design." And then maybe the Eshkenazis were also, you know, "I think he has real talent. Let's give it a shot." They smoothed over a lot of my eccentricities to my country parents. They made it seem reasonable, somehow. No one else was going to.

And it wasn't like I was making such fantastic things. I would make these things that were sort of Op-arty things. I wasn't a draftsman that was like, Oh, look, you know? But I could make cool-looking things, I think, or I made enough of a portfolio to get into MassArt.

I got there and started in graphic design, and all of a sudden—graphic design meant to me, like, I would design album covers. [Laughs] That's all I wanted to do. I didn't want to design brochures for, you know. But I had to start to learn to spec type and do all this hard stuff, and at that time, you still cut-and-pasted, waxed, and did all this so-and-so, oh, God. And the graphic design students were really—before the word "yuppie" was invented, they were very yuppified, you know, professionals. They were going to be graphic designers.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JACK PIERSON: [Laughs.] I did a few of those classes, enough to learn some stuff, and then drifted over into the

performance department, where I was finding more of a connection.

ALEX FIALHO: Do they have a performance department at that—

JACK PIERSON: They did. At that time, they were the only performance department in the entire world. Performance wasn't even a thing. Nobody said—like 20 people said the word "performance" in 1980. You know what I mean? And Chris Burden was the pope, somehow.

ALEX FIALHO: Was it a visual arts school, or was there also—

JACK PIERSON: It was a visual art—

ALEX FIALHO: —dance and—

JACK PIERSON: No. No, no. The performance—this was called the Studio for Interrelated Media [SIM], and it was a unique hybrid that MassArt somehow created.

ALEX FIALHO: Were there particular professors affiliated with it that—

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, there were two main guys, Donald Burgy, B-U-R-G-Y, and Harris Barron, with two Rs.

When I first went into the class, Burgy was like, "Sit"—people were sitting on the floor; there were no desks, so you just sat on the floor. And I thought Burgy was just another student somehow. He's just hanging out, and I thought he was kind of sexy, and I was like, Whoa. This is a good class. And he's still just shooting the shit, like an hour—it was maybe like a half-hour after class officially started that I realized he was the teacher, because he was just so mellow and hanging out and duh-duh-duh. [Laughs.] And then—well, Harris came in, and he was a good deal older, and then I realized, Oh, they're both the two—okay, like, I pulled it together.

And I think—wait a second. The way I got into that class was because, at that time, it was basic to art schools—or Mass Art; but I've heard since, other art schools—one of the basic foundation things that you did was make a device with which you could drop an egg and have it land on the ground, like from two stories or something, and have it land on the ground unharmed, right? Or you—do you know this?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. I've done it.

JACK PIERSON: You have?

ALEX FIALHO: In, like, summer camp or something. I don't know why, but—

JACK PIERSON: It was a basic thing—and that was a whole other class, maybe the first semester part of the graphic design foundation class. And it was an event; it was a bonding event, because everybody came and, you know, "Drop your egg."

And I was like, Oh, fuck that. And I wrote this whole—because I was still into Patti Smith then. I don't remember thinking I knew about conceptual art, but I wrote this poetic thing about, like, Listen, man, I say instead of spending time making a device—and it was all in, like, cool script and underlined and crossed out and a Xerox sort of broadside, basically like, Fuck wasting your time making an egg—what we should do is hatch the egg and watch the bird fly, like that. And that was my—and I handed it out. And those guys were there—I saw them looking at it and discussing it amongst themselves, and I heard them saying, "Who did this? This is really—this is cool." And I think I might have even said, "Oh, I did that," and they're like, "Really? And have you ever thought about taking a SIM class?" And I was like, "I don't know what that is," you know. "We think you should take it next semester. Why don't you come and join us?" So I didn't even know what the hell it was, but I just did [understand] somebody was paying attention to me.

ALEX FIALHO: What is it?

JACK PIERSON: It was performance, the Studio for Interrelated Media.

ALEX FIALHO: SIM, Studio for Interrelated—

JACK PIERSON: [. . .] It was all these freaky people that were doing performance, which meant video, which meant this, which meant whatever you wanted. The class really never fully formed. They'd show us some things, like I think Burgy showed us his recent work, and this is 1980. Since then, you know, I've seen it before, but at the time, it seemed—like he would just photograph roadkill and show you 100 slides of roadkill, and that would be—and you'd be like, What?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JACK PIERSON: [Laughs] So it was a mind-blowing thing. And I learned about Chris Burden, and you start to learn all this other stuff. And I also dovetailed quite nicely with rock and roll and the punk scene in Boston, and I was getting into that. You would hear about these performances that people did, and Laurie Anderson probably hit right at that moment, so it became more and more, Okay, this is the thing, performance art; this is what you can do. This is a thing you can do. And I was also pretty shy at that time. I was a real shoe-gazer and really introverted and shy, so I wasn't a performer, really, but I sort of grasped all those things, and I kind of became more like a producer-y type; like I could imagine what the poster would like, and I started to do a lot of the graphics for people's performances. And there I met Tabboo! [Stephen Tashjian].

ALEX FIALHO: In the SIM class.

JACK PIERSON: In the SIM class, who was doing performances and maybe playing "Downtown" and the Supremes records and dancing around in a '50s ball dress with fishnet stockings and pink high heels. And so it was kind of love at first sight. I was like, What are you? And he is probably the person that knew the word "ginchy."

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JACK PIERSON: I'm sure he is the person that knew the word "ginchy." And I just loved everything he was doing. We became fast friends and bonded on a lot of stuff. We became very close friends. And then the interesting thing that I think we found out later that year is he was the—part of his student aid or—what do you call it? Work-study job—was that he was in the office that the new portfolios came into, and he did the first edit of portfolios, the "Yes" pile for the other people to look at.

ALEX FIALHO: In admissions?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, or weighed in, somehow, as a student, and either he moved mine from the "No" pile to the "Yes" pile because—I don't know—I did new wave graphics somehow, and he thought it was cool, but he sort of was like, "Oh, I remember, you did"—because he came to my apartment, and he was like, "Oh, you did this? Oh, yeah, I put you in the acceptance pile for this thing." Because it was far-fetched somehow.

ALEX FIALHO: "This thing" being SIM?

JACK PIERSON: No, this thing being college itself, acceptance to MassArt. Yeah. He put me in the accepted pile, or one more [step] closer to being accepted. So that was a big bond with him. And I started being, like, a handmaiden to his performances, and then I sort of started creating my own, but I would be more like the Flo Ziegfeld. I'd say, "Do a performance like this," da, da, da. "I'll get performers to do a night." Or I'd create my own weird thing, but I'd have actors in it as opposed to me being on stage. We'd go to nightclubs; we'd do this; we tried to be in a rock-and-roll band. He had a rock-and-roll band called the Fucking Barbies, and I got to be in, even though I was talent-free, but I could bang on a can or something. It was that kind of—

ALEX FIALHO: Okay.

JACK PIERSON: Nobody was really playing, but he could sort of sing over this noise-music. And I also met a woman named Kathe Izzo, who—she was, you know, everything seems—when you're green and from the city—she was like the granddame of performance and the coolest girl and the most punk and the most new romantic. And then I introduced those two, and then they started a sort of love affair.

And in the midst of that, Kathy was working at this very cool café on Arlington Street in Boston, that faced Boston Common, and it was called C'est Si Bon and only—you know, they hired punk rock people, and it was the super-coolest thing in Boston at that time, or to us. And she would let me come in there and eat for free, because we're all broke and starving. She worked there behind the counter; "Come in. I'll give you some food; hang out," blah, blah, blah. She'd give me some food, and it was there—I was sitting there one afternoon, and Mark Morrisroe was the dishwasher—you know, the door with the little round window in it.

He saw me and fell head over heels in love, and she came out and she was like, "Do you know who Mark Dirt is?" and I was like, "No." She goes, "He's the dishwasher here. He's really like the biggest punk in Boston. He wants to go on a date with you. Will you do it?" I was like, "Yeah, okay." So he came out and didn't look too bad. I wasn't, you know, head over heels. I mean, he was handsome. I liked him. I was like, "Yeah, sure."

And so, "Whatever," and then that began that, because he was kind of magnetic and scary, and he was certainly the most extreme person I had ever encountered, even given Tabboo!, Kathe Izzo, and then this guy was even a little more extreme, even though when I met him he was in the midst of this dress-for-success phase, where he was reading—there was literally a book called *Dress for Success*, and you wore a red tie, and you wore Brooks Brothers shirts, and you did this thing that was going to, like, make you successful. And so he was trying to be as square as possible, even though he was still pretty much known as Mark Dirt. He wanted to phase out that name

Mark Dirt; he was Mark Morrisroe; he was going to be successful; this is how it was going to be done, and so he didn't even like any kind of—you know, he was done with punk; he was done with new wave; he just wanted to be [a very famous artist –JP].

But I dragged him back into it a little bit because those guys were—we were all still excited about it. He was done with new wave enough that he didn't even, like, know the B-52s, and so we got him back into the B-52s, because they were somebody I'd seen—as a result of being at Hofstra, I did get to come and just to go to the city for the first time and go to CBGB. We were just going to CBGB's from Hofstra, when I was there that year before, because I wanted to go to CBGB's; there was nobody to see, but it happened to be the B-52s, and that began a whole lifelong—and you know, the B-52s, on their first album, had the cover of "Downtown," and I was just like, I was home. And they came through the crowd with wig boxes and, like, What the fuck is this? In an odd way—and I was just having this discussion recently. I really think the B-52s are one of the most important things of the last 30 years. It was genius, what they were doing, and I think that became a bond; Tabboo! felt it, too. Mark Morrisroe came, too, you know, and my crowd, that's what we like, B-52s.

So it began this whole—I think the three of us gelled around that, and I had other friends, too. Like San Chopel [ph] was somebody I met the first day of art school, and she was, like, the girl figure in this. She went there, too, in a big way, and we became sort of completists about the '50s. Yeah, it started with the B-52s, who are sort of feeding us the info that it could be done, but we went wholesale into the '50s—the socks were '50s; the clothes were '50s; everything was '50s. Tabboo! would still maybe give you a punk rock bracelet or something, but we were trying to give you flawless '50s realness, somehow, and it was all available in thrift stores.

Half the day was spent thrift-storing, and half the inspiration for the performances would be something you found in a thrift store. And the records. And so in that, I'm tying that back to the whole thing of, like, my brothers grew up in the '50s, you know? I didn't really, but now I really feel like I did, because I got it so completely. We just collected all that stuff, and I think that's a thing that maybe happens to this day, as a result of college kids. The stuff that was in thrift stores was the generation before those kids had gone to college. The parents cleared out the room, and it was all in the thrift stores. And we thought it was cool. And I've seen now, kids now are into the '90s; it's 30 years ago. I don't think they do some completist thing like we were doing, or maybe there's a pocket somewhere in an art school outside of New York, but it's probably—if you go to thrift stores, it's all '90s stuff, maybe. I don't know. That's my little vague theory.

ALEX FIALHO: Makes sense to me.

JACK PIERSON: We did it wholesale. For like two years, it was the '50s; the house was the '50s; everything was the '50s; and I think it was a better version of the '50s than *American Graffiti*. It wasn't that. Do you know what I mean? It wasn't *Happy Days* or *American Graffiti*; it was a much cooler version of an authentic '50s that we loved. Ask me a question.

ALEX FIALHO: What sort of classes were you taking?

JACK PIERSON: I went full sail into SIM, which allowed me to do photography, maybe typography. Somehow I never acquired a real skill [laughs] in art school. I didn't do anything enough to—like I learned to print photography, and I learned to take pictures, I think, but I was marching to my own drum so ferociously that, at that time, in art for photography—because then that became a thing, like, Well, I'm probably not really going to be a performance artist, but I could be a photographer, because it seems like you could figure out photography.

And Mark Morrisroe was doing photography. He was doing it brilliantly, and so I had to, like, start up in his shadow, and he was even the first person ever that was like, "Well, your pictures are kind of Nan Goldin-ish," and I didn't—she wasn't a thing that you would know about, except he knew about her because she was a legend at the Museum School [School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston]. He was at the Museum School, not MassArt, which was the fancier school, but he was there on a full scholarship for utterly—you know, I don't know whether it was because he was disabled or impoverished or whatever, but he was [given] a full ride at the Museum School, which was the fancier school. MassArt was kind of like the hippie-dippie school. So that became possible in learning to take pictures.

And the other thing—the other kind of momentous event that I skipped over at Hofstra—through Rob Weiner, that first year in Hofstra, he showed me the Diane Arbus monograph. I've talked about this before, but that was a major thing to me, that book, in terms of everything: the graphic design, the pictures, the poetry of the titles. I just received it wholesale, like, Wow! What the fuck is this? A photograph can be this good, of not-famous people? Of freaks? I felt like I knew these rooms; I knew these kind of freaky people; it all had to do with the certain carny element of going to flea markets and craft. I received it; I am one of these somehow. And then I just stored that. But I was glad I had that information by the time I met Mark Morrisroe, because I might not have—it wasn't like Diane Arbus was—it was a thing you'd only know about if you were—

ALEX FIALHO: Which book in particular?

JACK PIERSON: —–in New York City. The first, it's just called *Diane Arbus;* it's got the twins on the cover. I don't know if they publish it in the same way now; I think it has a different cover. But it used to just be simple white; it was beautiful design, and I loved that. So I took that information into Boston, and I had it in the back of my mind that photography could be a thing for me, and I figured I would take the pictures for the posters I'd make for performances. Exactly like—that's one of the early—I did that picture in MassArt.

ALEX FIALHO: I've just opened the *Familiar Feelings*[*: On the Boston Group*, 2009] catalogue, and let's just peek at some of the early photos that you were taking; this is *Mark, Afternoon, Park Drive, 1980*.

JACK PIERSON: Right. This one's sideways; it should be horizontal.

ALEX FIALHO: Any thoughts on some of these portraits?

JACK PIERSON: Can you see somehow—here's the self-portrait; that's what I mean. That's Saturday night, how you would look to go out. [I am referring to *Me at Polycow, 1981.* –JP]

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. *Me at Polycow*? in the '50s.[I dressed in 1950's attire. –JP]

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, kind of like, that's how a dressed-up boy would look on a Saturday night, and Tabboo! in this room, it looks like Depression era or something. It doesn't look like 1980, does it?

ALEX FIALHO: No.

JACK PIERSON: And then there was also my whole—I was the only one of this crowd that had ever been to Paris, so I sort of put on airs about, you know, I'm into Anaïs Nin and things like that, and Parisian things. And this woman Janet became my—

ALEX FIALHO: "Into—"?

JACK PIERSON: —Anaïs Nin, I pronounce it Anaïs.

ALEX FIALHO: Okay.

JACK PIERSON: You know her, right? She's a writer.

ALEX FIALHO: No.

JACK PIERSON: You should, because she had a lot to do with the Bay Area. She was a kind of ex-pat. She was very—Kathe Izzo reminded me of Anaïs Nin; she was a free spirit, freethinker, sort of Isadora Duncan, but she wrote poetry, and she wrote erotica, and she was a lover of Henry Miller. She was sort of a bon vivant legend. So I had airs of Paris somehow, a little bit, along with that, and Janet fulfilled a lot of that for me. She's in this, and she had the '50s dress and the silhouettes.

And this was a guy named Steve Stain [ph] that was Mark's best friend, who sort of intimidated me, because they were from the earlier generation of really hardcore punk people in Boston. This is one of Tabboo!'s paintings; it was sort of AbEx-y, Rauschenberg-y. I wish I still had it.

I felt like it was taking pictures that made it look like I was part of a cool scene somehow. Even at that time, I was self-conscious enough about it—or that seemed like Paris, or it seemed like this was the life you wanted to have. And these are literally my first—I'm not saying, Oh, can you believe it, because my first pictures are so genius, but they're literally my first rolls of black and white, Black-and-White Photography 101, you know, that I showed up with.

ALEX FIALHO: At MassArt.

JACK PIERSON: At MassArt, but I had certain techniques that Mark Morrisroe would toss to me like, "You should use this"; "You should do that." And I did them all. And it made it a little bit cooler than it would have if I didn't have that advice.

ALEX FIALHO: You met him very quickly upon moving to Boston?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, probably—I got there in September, and I met him in November. And from the first date, it became 24-7 for a while. And then he met Tabboo!, and it was all folded in, and we were kind of inseparable. Everything was a combination for that while.

And then Polycow comes from the idea—he was good friends with Pat Hearn, who was the other version of Kathe Izzo, but a more severe sort of—Kathe Izzo was romantic and European, and Pat Hearn was hard-edged and

scientific, say. So he had this friend Pat Hearn that was now in Europe on a traveling scholarship, and so she was just somebody you heard about, as opposed to experienced. But when she came back, she moved into—

ALEX FIALHO: Is that her? No?

JACK PIERSON: No, that's not her.

ALEX FIALHO: It's just her essay.

JACK PIERSON: I can find you a picture if you want. I think there must be one in here. I guess maybe there's not, but you know, when I went to Mark Morrisroe's apartment, there was a really bright, clear photograph of Pat Hearn with this shaved head and bright red lipstick, in all black, on the side of the road in Provincetown in bright, summer sunlight, and maybe even a cross on her forehead, which just seemed so extreme, like, He knows this person? Even though I was so, I've been to New York, I've been to London and Paris, I was still really a country, square kid.

ALEX FIALHO: And you were 20?

JACK PIERSON: I was 20. I would be like, Wow! you know. I loved it. I was like, Well, that's like a real punk person. Shaving your head—maybe I'd bleach my hair, but she shaved her head, and this was 33 years ago. So I put all these things together.

Anyway, she was a presence before she even arrived in my life, because he would talk about her in these terms like, She's the coolest; she's the most extreme; she does this; she's in Europe now. So you have these things built up somehow—and I forget where I was going with that. Oh, she brought back this idea of Polycow, which [came from] the squat she was living in in Paris—P-A-L-I-K-A-O—and we just Americanized it to Polycow and started doing performances with that as the, "Come to Polycow."

ALEX FIALHO: That was the space that she had—

JACK PIERSON: She lived in. [It was a room at the Hemenway Hotel. –JP] She came back and lived in, and then it transferred to Janet, and we just did performances there.

ALEX FIALHO: Tell me a little more about where you lived, where you saw work, the sort of day-to-day.

JACK PIERSON: In Boston the first year—

ALEX FIALHO: Were you all proximate?

JACK PIERSON: No, it was sort of a triangle around the city until I moved in with Mark after the first—I am trying to figure now how it went. I lived in Allston when I first got there, which was a little out of this, you know, whatever, but easy to get to MassArt. Tabboo! lived down on Charles Street, I think it was, and Mark lived on Park Drive, but not in this apartment.

When I met Mark Morrisroe, he lived in a basement apartment. It was filthy, squalid, stuff on the floor everyplace, just no organization, but with photographs on the wall that were beautiful and cool—and the mattress is on the floor. And I still had affectations of a refined life, maybe romantic, but not squalid [laughs].

I think part of what made him fall in love with me was because of this country bumpkin thing. He had brochures of gay porn, and maybe I had never seen hardcore pornography before; maybe I saw sexy guys in a calendar or in *After Dark*. I was like, "Oh, my God, how can you have this? Don't you know these kids are all doped, and they're kidnapped and put on dope to do this?" And he was just like, "Are you kidding [laughs] me?" Because I really thought that. I was like, "Oh, my God, how can you have this?" [Laughs.] And he—I think that was one of things; he just loved how square I was, somehow.

ALEX FIALHO: Did he make you less square?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, yeah, yeah, then he gave me this weirdly—a whole diatribe about it that sounds so, you know, modern. And let's see, he was probably like 22, and I was 20, and he was like, "Look there are no"—you know, "We didn't grow up with any images of how to make love. Gay people didn't see—it's important to see this." Meanwhile, I didn't really [grumbling] making love, whatever.

But he gave me this, and I was like, "Oh, yeah; oh, okay." And then, of course, I was obsessed with it, but I mean, initially, I was just sort of like, Oh, my God. Can you have this? And he just had it, like, strewn around. Like he made instant coffee; I'd never seen anybody that made instant. I'm like, "Why can't you just have a percolator?" A hotplate next to the bed and a big drawer of Maxwell House. I was just like, "What? Ew!" [Laughs.] But then the next year, I became an instant coffee drinker. It just seemed all so extreme to me.

So he lived in this basement apartment in Park Drive, and then somehow, after the first year of school—which was my first year of school, Tabboo!'s last and Mark's last; they were in the same grade, whatever it was. I was a freshman.

ALEX FIALHO: Tabboo! was at your school, though, and Mark was at Museum School.

JACK PIERSON: We all decided—Mark's bright idea was for us to move to Provincetown for the summer, get jobs, and have a wild life. Because before I even met—or before maybe I introduced Mark to Tabboo!—Mark had cooked up this idea that we were going to be a performance duo called the Clam Twins, and we would sing 50 songs and perform together. And I was like—maybe I yessed him, and I sort of thought, It's nice that you think I could do that, but I really can't.

So at that point, it might have even been the impetus to introduce him to Tabboo!, like, "I won't be doing this, but you could probably do it with Tabboo!," and in fact, they did. So they started rehearsing this act called the Clam Twins. It wasn't even a drag act at first; it was more like a trench-coat or just sleazeball-looking thing, and so that became the plan. Go to Provincetown, develop the Clam Twins; you can sing on the street. You can—

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JACK PIERSON: "We'll definitely get gigs; we'll probably get a show, a weekly show." And they were horrible, you know? It was also like, What, are you kidding me? It was a horrible act [laughs]. Great in [its horribleness –JP], but it wasn't going to be in, like, a café or one of the nightclubs in Provincetown, you know what I mean? But that was the plan. Once you get out of school, I'll go rent us a place; we can split it. And I think it was like $2,500 for a one-bedroom place right in the middle of town, and that seemed like another thing that was like, "What, $2,500 for three months? How am I ever going to do that?" But you didn't have to pay—in 1980, you paid like a third, a third, and a third somehow; nothing's the same.

And he was like, "Just get the third together," because maybe now I had a job at that same café, so I was kind of making some money; I was doing graphic design. I somehow made some money while I was at school. And we rented this place and moved to Provincetown for that summer. That's where we made that movie *The Laziest Girl in Town*.

But then we came back to Boston and had no place to live. So Mark went, like a week before Labor Day, and found this place on Park Drive, which was, I think, 85 Park Drive, and we lived there, Mark and I. And then Tabboo! had to live [with us] for the first three months, in a one bedroom, and then that got, you know, everybody got bitchy and complaining; it was too hard. And he found this room over here in the Hemenway Hotel, which was the kind of Chelsea Hotel of Boston. They had made a room in the lobby that was Poly Cow, where Pat Hearn lived, but he just lived in one of them.

ALEX FIALHO: Poly Cow was in the Hotel Hemenway?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Which is where Janet lived and Pat Hearn lived?

JACK PIERSON: Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: And who else?

JACK PIERSON: Well, Tabboo! moved there, and eventually, Mark moved—when Tabboo! moved to New York, Mark moved into Tabboo!'s room, and it was like—

ALEX FIALHO: What was that place like, Hotel Hemenway? And where was it?

JACK PIERSON: Depressing. It was on Hemenway Street, which is kind of behind Symphony Hall. And it was cool in this Diane Arbus-y, horrible hotel sort of way. The Poly Cow—Pat Hearn's room was [in] the lobby, so it had high ceilings and moldings, and it was just like a makeshift—we took a corner of the lobby and made it into what was supposed to be an office; she lived there. So that seemed grand and glamorous, and actually, the lobby had everything we wanted, the grandeur and '50s and old-school elegance, but then when you got up into the rooms, they were just horrible little rooms that you wouldn't want to find yourself living in, but they were—I mean, it was great.

ALEX FIALHO: Let's take a little pause.

JACK PIERSON: Okay.

[Audio break.]

ALEX FIALHO: So in this early-'80s moment, were you art students making work for classes and yourselves, or was there shows? Either exhibitions or more pop-up style? Was it more production, or was it more exhibition, and how did those relate at that moment?

JACK PIERSON: I was making it in the context of school because, like I said, that was my freshman year, all that stuff I'm describing so far. Those two graduated the year before we went to Provincetown, so they were done with school. Mark was going to another year of school, where he didn't take classes, but you made work and participated in the competition to win a traveling scholarship, which was what Pat Hearn was on in Paris. She had won—the Museum School had this thing called the Fifth Year, and you made a body of work that was all presented and then judged, and five winners got $10,000, I think, to travel for a year. So he went back to Boston to work on that, and we lived in this Park Drive apartment that was across the park from the museum.

The other thing I should mention about that summer in Provincetown—it was my first summer in Provincetown, which was, you know, you knew it was a cool place. I didn't even realize how gay it was. Even though I grew up down the street, we would go there once a summer for a weekend outing, and I just thought of it as a hippie town; that's why I liked it. There was psychedelia and drugs and kooky people. I didn't really get the gay thing, even though it was a known thing in my area, "Gays, fags go to Provincetown." I didn't really catch a gay vibe while I was there because we usually went to the dunes, and it was more like a jeep and a beach party sort of thing when I went with my family.

And to preface that, I didn't even love going to Provincetown with my family, because at the time, there was a—in the late '60s, there was a serial killer in Provincetown who chopped up nurses and put them in shallow graves in the dunes. And there was a big story about it in *Life* magazine, and so that was my like, "There's a serial killer there." I don't think they had caught him, right? I think it's still up in the air to who he was. Anyway, so preface to that, I was sort of like, "Oh, God, a serial killer, why do we have to go here?" when I was a kid.

So we got to Provincetown that summer, and Mark was obsessed with the serial killer and the story of the serial killer because, as you know, he—part of his legend, like, he might have been the illegitimate son of the Boston Strangler. So he had done the Boston Strangler tour of Boston, based on stuff in books.

ALEX FIALHO: Meaning revisiting locations?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, like, "This nurse lived here"; "This one did this." I don't know if the Provincetown killer actually killed nurses. I could be making that up. It seems like all serial killers killed nurses, but—and you'd go to the places. And so that summer, he began a whole—like he was reading the book about—there was a book called *In His Garden* that was the whole story of the Provincetown serial killer. So we had to go to this address where he lived and look, and, Gosh, he did this and that. So that was part of an underlying leitmotif of that summer, his investigation of the serial killer, and we were all kind of into it too.

ALEX FIALHO: It's an intense leitmotif.

JACK PIERSON: I know, but it was also—

ALEX FIALHO: P-town summer.

JACK PIERSON: They're doing the Clam Twins; I'm sort of—they did a couple of performances of that. John Waters lived in Provincetown. It was the summer *Shock Value* came out, which became a bible to all three of us. It gave the recipe for making a low-budget movie and what you had to have and the recipe for fake puke, and that's where *The Laziest Girl in Town* came on. And here's the other thing. We're all poor kids, but Mark, because of his disability and being extra poor, had Social Security, had scholarship funds. Because of his talent, he had backing from the Polaroid Corporation.

ALEX FIALHO: Which came in the form of them providing—

JACK PIERSON: —film. But also, every once in a while, a little cash, actually, I think, too. Very little, but he was kind of flush, given that he was a cripple and a punk rock; he had more money than us, so he, you know, exercised that.

So when we got to Provincetown, Tabboo! and I couldn't actually—we couldn't find—you just get a job; it's easy; there's a million jobs. You get there before Memorial Day, it'll be—well, guess what? Memorial Day came, and they were like, "We're not hiring until Fourth of July." And so we're broke, and if my mother hadn't have come down with, like, big bags of groceries, we would have been starving. But we shoplifted; we pulled mussels off the rocks to eat, shoplift a turnip. My mother brought like five pounds of peanut butter. It was a scary thing the first few months, and Mark was really kind of like, in that way, like, "You guys should get it together." And I'm like, "You have welfare." [Laughs.] You know what I mean?

I don't know. It was rough, but fun and creative, and it was also the first summer that Stephen and I met David Armstrong, who came to town, or was there already, staying with this fellow Paul Johnson, who was an old gay of Provincetown. So it was all this kind of like—I'll just take it from my perspective, but I think I was the slower of all three of us with this kind of thing. It was like, Wow. I remember meeting this fellow that David was staying with named Paul Johnson, who was a gay, but a clammer, like, "I'm not a drag queen. I'm an artist doing a real man's job," and he was older to us, in that way that people—I don't know how old he was, but he seemed like an old guy to me. And in 1980, Mark had a tattoo, which made him seem incredibly radical to me, like, "What, a tattoo? I've only ever seen this in an Diane Arbus photograph" [laughs] and this guy.

ALEX FIALHO: Where was the tattoo? What was it of?

JACK PIERSON: Mark's was on his shoulder, and it was really a rotten, hand-done thing of a rose that was supposed to reference the rose tattoo on Tennessee Williams's—and I was like, "Well, why isn't it on your chest?" But he had [laughs] it on his arm. But this guy Paul Johnson had a tattoo way down here of an apple with cursive underneath and that traditional tattoo that said, "Eddie." Like it didn't get hidden, and it said, "Eddie," and it had been there awhile; it was an old tattoo. And I just thought, Wow, he doesn't give a shit. I was still in the, you know—traumatized from being like, "You're the kid that said you wanted to be Nancy Sinatra."

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JACK PIERSON: This guy is walking around with a tattoo that says, "Eddie," and his name's Paul [laughs]. So I don't think I had a revelation of that, but there were little subtleties like that that made me, like, This is a wild place, and he just lives, and he's a clammer? He shucks clams somehow.

ALEX FIALHO: He's David Armstrong's—

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, maybe; I don't know if he's lover, mentor, friend, whatever, but David had room in his house that summer, and that's when we started meeting, hanging out with David, who had a certain amount—like, Mark promoted his legend. Mark was always kind of a little bit lording over, like, "Well, you know, David Armstrong lives in New York, and he's photographed Johnny Thunders," and blah, blah, blah, and he had an ad for the show *New York, New Wave*. They used his photograph of the Lounge Lizards, which were rock icons, or not really rock, but a New York icon. "He photographed—he knows the Lounge Lizards?" It just seemed like this big kind of thing, and then, "He had a full-page ad in *Artforum* of his photograph?"

These things all of a sudden eroded my sense of, That couldn't happen to me. This guy? That? But you're living here?—sort of all entered my conscious. I slowly began—David Armstrong is an intensely beautiful person and so kind and so sweet and so cool, and already—he's only like six years older than me, I think, but at that time, it seemed like, he lived in New York; he knows all these people, wow. It blew my mind; it was kind of a mind-blowing thing, even though he was just, like, this guy we were hanging around with.

So that summer finished; they did the Clam Twins, and the Clam Twins did a few performances, just renegade, like show up at the pizza place and do a performance until you got kicked out, sort of.

ALEX FIALHO: What were they of? What were they singing, or what were they doing?

JACK PIERSON: '50s song standards, stuff like that. It went from—

ALEX FIALHO: With a boom box or—

JACK PIERSON: —trench coat—from trench coat, yeah, maybe even a cassette player, not even a boom box. This was maybe a year before boom boxes; it was still a cassette recorder. And then the first performance was in trench coats and pencil mustaches, and then they went out in drag. And they just bombed in every joint, and it was really—Mark couldn't believe it. Like, "What? We're really good." It wasn't ironic; he thought they were really great. And they rehearsed endlessly, and it was horrible [laughs].

ALEX FIALHO: Were they good?

JACK PIERSON: No, they weren't good. It was a good performance in that it was a schism and a disruption, but he thought they were a lounge act that people would sit at a café table and watch. And it wasn't that, but in his mind, that's what it was somehow.

But you were asking about shows. Kathe Izzo had started her own kind of pop-up. She had a loft; she was going to do a show there. She brought Jack Smith from New York, which seemed like a wild thing, and I had already—I had learned about him even earlier on. So she connected. She was kind of a fame hag and a legend hag, and got Jack Smith to perform at this place. And Mark did a show of his black-and-white photographs, and they did a Clam Twin performance, which, by now, they had a rock band that played behind them, and it was pretty good,

but it was—now it was just pure punk rock or rock and roll..

It was a whole other thing, and draggier, because also, in that transition, when I first met Tabboo! that first semester of that fall, he was very against the idea of drag. Like, he would never wear a wig, because that would be ridiculous. If this was a performance, it wasn't about drag; he wasn't a drag queen; he would not wear a wig. You have to show that you're a man, and a hairy chest. But then they went full on into wigs and drag, and then it had to be a wig, and it had to be a big wig, and it had to be this and hairspray and all that, all this stuff that we were getting from John Waters's book.

ALEX FIALHO: Where did Tabboo!'s name come from?

JACK PIERSON: That came in New York. At that time, we still just called him Stephen all the time.

ALEX FIALHO: That's what I thought.

JACK PIERSON: But after the first year in New York, I feel like it came from a Connie Francis record, because that was another big thing for that whole summer, was Connie Francis, as part of the '50s thing.

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.] Is it a drag name? Tabboo!?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, but Connie Francis was the '50s icon, ginchy-girl, teeny-bopper thing, big hair, fancy dresses, you know. She was the ultimate, and really so huge, and so nowhere now; it's so sad. But you can believe how big Connie Francis was to us in the '80s, but also in the '50s. And so she was an even bigger leitmotif than the Provincetown serial killer [laughs], was Connie Francis. So where am I going with that? I think, ultimately, she had a song called "Taboo," and Tabboo! just decided that would be the right name, in New York, after—this is two years later.

ALEX FIALHO: How about that second year in Boston? You're living with Mark by now.

JACK PIERSON: I'm living with Mark, and Tabboo! for a little minute. Tabboo! moved into the Hemenway. But it was all in walking distance and—

ALEX FIALHO: What was your dynamic like with Mark?

JACK PIERSON: Well, I'm sorry to say that my self-esteem at that point was so low that I—I don't know if it was that year that the book came out, or the movie came out, but [. . .] the movie of *Prick Up Your Ears* [1987] came out, which is the [story of] Joe Orton and his lover that ultimately killed him. And I so identified with it, because it seemed like, to me at that point, like he was so vibrant and already successful, and Polaroid and money, and, "I'm doing this, and I'm doing that," and I was this, you know, "You should try this."

ALEX FIALHO: That's his voice saying, "You should try this"?

JACK PIERSON: No, I was more that. His voice is horrendous and screechy [laughs] and—but I was the frumpy, half-talented—you know, I'll do everything to help this more successful one who's so clearly a genius, by his own admission and apparently everybody around him.

ALEX FIALHO: Already by his mid-20s?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, that guy in the movie—I'm sorry, I forget his name, the guy that killed him—actually made collages, and to me, my graphic design was a no-talent thing to do, like collages, and you make all these—and then in the movie, it shows this pathetic, "Oh, he has a show of his collages," and everybody's, you know, they have to be there because Joe Orton is, like, huge.

And I so identified with that that it would make me ill, because he was also pretty mean. He was also kind of a weird Svengali—he didn't endorse any—he would say, "Oh, you're not an artist. You should just"—my mother, at this point, is now saying, "I think you should have something to fall back"—"Your mother's right; just be a graphic designer. You're not an artist." He wasn't nice to me, but I guess he loved me in this weird way. But it wasn't like he was, "Go for it, kiddo." He was more like, "Forget it," you know? "Don't bother. I'm the artist; you're not. Do your graphic design," but in that, I also know that I was feeding him a lot of information that he wouldn't have otherwise.

ALEX FIALHO: Such as?

JACK PIERSON: The European affectation, stuff like that. Even though he would visibly reject it, or vocally reject it, it would get pulled in, and that was the same thing with—I think that love of Joe Orton fed him a lot of information and gave him a lot of ideas that he just masterfully whipped into things, you know, like genius.

So that was a scary, Oh, God, moment, and that was kind of the dynamic. He was really—I don't know if full-scale abusive, but emotionally abusive; like, he knew he had this willing, low self-esteem person that would do anything for him. My self-esteem had changed to the extent of—and I was clear on it, even at the time.

Are there any early Mark Morrisroes in here? [Looking through *Familiar Feeling* book.] His—let me look at this. They don't tend to focus on his earlier work that he was making when I first met him. Yeah, there's none of his early work in here, but his early work was very clear, very sharp-focused, very lit, what I would call contemporary color photography at that moment. And yes, it came a little bit out of Nan Goldin, but—and Arbus—but it was very clear and very correctly printed and pristine and everything that color photography was supposed to be at that moment, the new color, somehow, which was part of one of the—and even though it was of punk rock people, it was high technical value. And the first one he made that used this grainy thing—which I didn't say, "Oh, go for grain," but I think the stuff I would show up with had more to do with, like, a hippie esthetic than a punk rock esthetic, and a softer focus and also, you know, like Thomas Eakins, We're into the Museum School—it got more romanticized. So the first picture he ever made in that technique that looked—

ALEX FIALHO: The Museum School's MFA-related—

JACK PIERSON: Yes. It was part of the Museum of Fine Arts, and—I don't know. I can't find it now, but the first picture he ever made that was grainy and romantic and soft-focused and sort of chiaroscuro—is that how you say that word?—was of me, and all of a sudden, it was whole new thing.

ALEX FIALHO: Which one?

JACK PIERSON: I was looking for it in there. Oh, maybe it's in this book. I feel like I just saw it someplace. This one, and that's in the crappy apartment.

ALEX FIALHO: *Jonathan*—

JACK PIERSON: Maybe the night—the morning after our first date.

ALEX FIALHO: *Jonathan (Jack Pierson), May 1, 1982*.

JACK PIERSON: Huh, could that possibly be? Am I completely wrong?

ALEX FIALHO: No, this one's 1980, *Untitled, Jonathan, circa 1980*.

JACK PIERSON: Right, this one is not—

ALEX FIALHO: This one is two years later.

JACK PIERSON: It's incorrect, I think. I would say—

ALEX FIALHO: Okay.

JACK PIERSON: My guess is. That other one could be '82; this one is more '82-ish, I think. Sometimes things are wrong. As I found in my life. So whatever, he got more romanticized and more da, da, da, da.

So that year, after we got back, the place he had been working, C'est Si Bon, had closed, and the owner started a new restaurant called 29 Newbury. It was around the corner, and it was Boston's first nouvelle cuisine, sort of very chic restaurant, and the silverware all came from, you know, the Museum of Modern Art, and it was really fancy and really posh and really just the highest tone somehow; like, Boston hadn't seen anything like it before. And because it was the same crew from that last place, we both got hired. I got hired as a busboy, and he got to work in the kitchen, because his handicap was very pronounced. He couldn't be walking around a quiet restaurant, go and do busboy shit, so he worked behind the café counter, making cappuccinos and plating desserts. That was a spectacular gig for me to have while I was still in art school because I was making a shitload of money, even as a busboy. The waiters made a lot of money, but I made a shitload of money, got your food, and that, more than even art school, became a nucleus of—everyone that worked there was creative somehow.

Everybody was an artist or a rock musician or writer or filmmaker. David Armstrong wound up working there. Tabboo! weirdly never gelled in that environment; he hated it and didn't work there. But everybody that worked there was cool and unique and sort of interesting and great, and they were hired for that reason. And then all the square Boston rich people would feel like they were cool because we're all dyed hair and jewelry and crazy stuff, but it afforded us both—I was finally making money, so I was more of an equal to him.

Because that was the other dynamic, was that he always was so taken care of, and he would make it sound like he had it together, like I said. Like, "But you get welfare. If I"—"Just get it together; get some money." And I'm

like [laughs], "Well, hell, I gotta know how to do it." But this provided money, and then things flowed easier. And then I made more money doing graphic design for performances, because even though I was in art school, I would charge money to do the graphic design, because I did have this cool style of graphic design at that time, and I was sort of into printing. I loved—I was starting, through him, to get this fame bug of like, Yeah, I want to be famous, too, a little bit.

That was never part of my whole—"I'm going to be famous" wasn't part of my teenage aspiration. I mean, I guess I glamorized fame, and I liked famous things and sort of maybe fantasized about it, but it wasn't a gut thing, like, I have to be famous. But it got into me through him and Tabboo!, because they both wanted to be famous. Then I thought, Well, that sounds like that's something you're meant to do, and I feel like I could figure it out. And so through printing, just printing 1,500 things with my name on it was like, Wow. And then they'd be wheat-pasted around town, and I'd be like, See, I'm part of the social—even though it was advertising somebody else's thing, I felt like, I'm a presence. And I got really good at that and was doing—like, I would create shows just so I could make the poster, and if somebody else was doing it, I'd get them to give me $150 for doing it, because it did sort of—I was providing this sort of thing. I don't know what it was.

So I had money, and I was involved with all those people. John Derian, who's a very successful entrepreneur with a couple of stores and a big, best-selling book right now, worked there. There's a fella named Rich Morel, who's a big music producer, who worked on *Kinky Boots*, has songs in *Kinky Boots,* and has gone on to produce Yoko Ono and da, da, da, this guy, Neal Sugarman, who was in Amy Winehouse's band. Everybody that worked there was cool, and that was also the first place we ever heard about GRID or even pre-GRID, just like—

ALEX FIALHO: That was going to be my next question.

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, and so that went around—that was the summer that that became a, like, There's this thing —

ALEX FIALHO: GRID, meaning gay-related immunodeficiency?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: What was this thing, and how did you hear about it?

JACK PIERSON: It was just, like, gossip, because everybody was basically gay, at least in the front of the room, all the waiters. The back of the room was rock-and-roll people and cooks and chefs and stuff, and, you know, everybody was sexually active. There was a lot of cocaine. It was that thing where you had too much money, and all of a sudden cocaine—it was a big cocaine—the rich people came there. The bathrooms were all black. You know, it was a known thing that it was a sort of coke den, but it had this veneer of complete sophistication. It wasn't a trashy nightclub. It was like, These are fancy, rich people. Celebrities came there, and so people—have you ever worked in a restaurant?

ALEX FIALHO: No.

JACK PIERSON: It's really important. I mean, I'm not saying you have to go back to it now, but I think restaurant work—there are certain executives that only hire people that have worked in restaurants, because it's just such a training sort of thing about how to work together and socialize. I don't know.

ALEX FIALHO: And interface with the general public or just as a team?

JACK PIERSON: And interface with the general public. I haven't done it myself, but I would like people that work for me to have worked at restaurants, or you can tell the difference between people that have and people that haven't, I think. You get the job done.

ALEX FIALHO: Its accountability and—

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, you have to—like, I still bus constantly. It's very hard for me to go to somebody's party and not empty an ashtray [laughs], you know what I mean? I just am habitually like, Let's get this cleaned up. Come on. Turn this table, sort of thing.

Anyway, everybody gossiped. Everybody talked about sex they had, this, that. This one's cute. It was really fun. It was like when people talk about college as being a party and fun. I think of college as, We went to class. We did cool things, but the real hangout thing was this job that I did at night. And the end of that year, which I'm guessing is '81—and by year, I mean from September to March, April, May—May, say—Mark won that scholarship.

ALEX FIALHO: So May '81?

JACK PIERSON: Mark won the scholarship. He had the big show, and I was—I wasn't out to my parents, but I was living with this guy, but it was still, like, a roommate-y thing.

ALEX FIALHO: To them?

JACK PIERSON: To them—and Tabboo!, you know, they looked kind of freaky and whatever. They never questioned me. It wasn't a thing. Like I said, my parents never told me about the birds and the bees, or never had a sex talk with me. Like, it was never—

ALEX FIALHO: Did they meet Mark and Tabboo! early on?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, yeah, yeah, in Provincetown. Like I said, they would—

ALEX FIALHO: I see, bring the groceries.

JACK PIERSON: They would bring the groceries, and they just thought, Oh, kooky college kids in a too-small apartment, and all living, like, well, you guys live—

ALEX FIALHO: In Provincetown?

JACK PIERSON: I think the bed—yeah, you know, whatever, blind or something. And so he had the show, won $10,000. So when I told my mother that, she was like, "What? That kid? Ten thousand—well, I would like to see, like, what would cause somebody to"—you know. This is 1982 still. My parents are—$10,000 might've been, like—probably they had to have made more than that, but it was a lot of money.

So they came to Boston to see the show, which was all these grainy, incredibly romantic nudes, somehow, that I had become so used to, and they seemed like such high art to me and so romantic and so—whatever. Yeah, there were some dicks; maybe I was so, at that point, druggy and, like, whatever, I didn't even think in terms of, Oh, my mother's going to be looking at pictures of dicks and tits. And they came in, and it's a big, crowded room, and it's an event, and you could tell from the moment of it that there's all these people—

ALEX FIALHO: Gay people or people?

JACK PIERSON: People from all over Boston. It's this thing, I think, even now. It's an event in Boston. Like you see this show at the Cyclorama of all the student work, or graduate student work, really. And he had won $10,000. It had been up awhile, and it stayed up after the—they judge it the first night, so you see who won, and then it stayed up for a week.

So they came during that point, and to me, it was all romantic and beautiful and high art. And my mother just looked at the whole thing, and she turns to me and says, "So this is your life now?" And I was like, "Well, what do you mean by that?" And she was like, "So this is your life now? Booze and dope?" And I was like, "Where are you getting that?" And she was like, "Well, you don't mean to tell me all these people come to your apartment and strip off without being on something?"

So you can see where [laughs], you know, she was like, "These people don't come to your apartment and strip off without being on something." And I was like, "Are you kidding?" [Laughs.] And in the midst of it, she's having, like, a whole breakdown, and my father's sort of standing there. I was like, "It's the naked body. It's art. I go to school and draw a nude body, you know. Don't you understand that?" "No, I did not understand that." It was an intense thing. And then my father's like, "Why do you think he goes to school?" And I was like, "Well, that's part of it. It's art. The nude body has always been"—you know. She's like, "Let me ask you something. Is Mark a homosexual?"

ALEX FIALHO: This was at the opening?

JACK PIERSON: At—yeah. [They laugh.]

I don't know where I pulled it out. She was like, "Uh." I was like, "Well, I don't—that's really none of your business." And she was like, "Well, are you? You're my business." And I was like, "Oh." Because I was so intent, even at that point of it, you know, My parents must never know. It's so interesting how, at that point, I was like, My parents must never know. And finally, I was-—for some reason, I thought it would better, but now when I think about it, it's so much worse—but I said, "I'm bisexual." [They laugh.]

Which I wasn't at all, but I thought, Oh, well, this will sound a little bit better. But really, I think it's much—it sounds much worse. Like I'm so sexual that—whatever. And it was just, like—oh, God. The rest of that day was hell, and they left. She was sobbing. We rode around. "If we get you a psychiatrist, will you go? I feel like it's something I did." My father's like, "Of course, it's you." And he wasn't even—he's not mad really.

Weirdly, my father, who always presented as the ogre and, "Daddy," and, "Oh, Daddy will be furious," he wasn't—I don't think he was shocked or offended really. It was more a way for him—it probably wasn't great, but he was—she was like, "Now, this is something that I did. Do you think I did this to you?" And I think I said, at that point, "Well, you didn't help." [Laughs.] You know what I mean? And my father was more like, "Of course you did. I told you from the get-go." It was a whole snarling—which was their dynamic anyway. But I don't think he really cared. It was just more like,

"Oh, this just proves I was right all along," if they had ever had this discussion.

Anyway, so that was that, and then I don't know that we ever discussed the dynamic of, Were there boyfriends or [is] this—it still went fairly under the radar, or not under the radar, but it just became uncomfortable. And even a couple of months later, "I asked Azariah"—who's a psychiatrist, you know, the people from Queens—

ALEX FIALHO: The Eshkenazis?

ALEX FIALHO: —the Eshkenazis, "if he thinks—he says that it's just a thing," and, you know, da, da, da.

ALEX FIALHO: This is your mother saying that?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Or is this you asking Azariah?

JACK PIERSON: No, that's her. Like, she spoke to him. He talked her down, blah, blah, blah. Should I go to a psychiatrist? Could a psychiatrist fix me, dada, dada? No, I don't think—you know, it got smoothed over, and then that's how—whatever. That happened, but the odd thing—just to backtrack, all this seems so weird and personal so—

ALEX FIALHO: That's great. Keep going.

JACK PIERSON: Maybe a year before that—I had a gay brother, Tommy, who I didn't mention, who was also part of that—

ALEX FIALHO: One of the three older—

JACK PIERSON: Of the three older brothers. He was the middle brother, and he was flaming; he was very gay. And even though, like I said, I knew I was gay from when I was six years old, I was so self-obsessed and so like, Okay, I'm the only gay in the village. I'm gay. I think I know that I'm gay, and then this means I'm gay, and that means I'm gay. And meanwhile, my brother was living this full-on gay life in the midst of our family that nobody ever mentioned, and he was gayer than gay could be. And in the town—he never left the town. He was a hairdresser. He hung around with, like, fat girls. He had cutoff shorts where the pockets stuck out and carried—at that time, the closest thing you could get to a man purse was, when you used to ride on airlines, TWA would give you a flight bag, like a shoulder bag. He would carry that. He had a bright yellow El Camino and was a hairdresser, and it never dawned on me, really, that he was gay, for some unbelievable way. [They laugh.]

And then we had—in some unbelievable way. And he brought his gay friends, and I would think, They're so cool. They wore bikinis. They read the *Valley of the Dolls*. They put on Bain de Soleil at our beach house. You know what I mean?

And they were the gayest things, and they were campy, and I would think, Wow, they're so funny. But it never occurred to me—and I would be like, I can almost see his dick in the bikini. Who wears—I never saw anybody wear a bikini bathing suit, but still it wasn't equating to me, like, These are gay guys. I was, like, I'm gay. I was so like this.

And so the year before [Mark's exhibition], my brother had attempted suicide. He was a bad alcoholic, and he had attempted suicide, and my mother was explaining it to me. She was like, "I don't know if you know this, but Tommy is a gay boy." And I was, like, "What?" [Laughs.] I remember I was like, "What?" I think I did almost a spit-take. I was like, "What?" And she was like, "Yes, so that's why, you know, it's very difficult for him."

And then my second question was, "Well, what does Daddy say?" And she was like, "Well, Daddy says it's just like if he was retarded. We have to love him anyway." And I found that so touching [laughs] because—I mean, maybe it's not as touching. If you knew my father, he was so salt of the earth and such a West Virginia, coalmining, kind of, hillbilly, nice guy, whatever. Nice guy, but I had categorized him, until that moment, as an utter monster, horrible, unsophisticated, mean. And then she said that, and it just—I found it so touching. So even as wrong [laughs] as it was, I had that for a year before this thing came. So I sort of—

ALEX FIALHO: Was he a model, at all, for you, or did you talk to him about it at that point, or later?

JACK PIERSON: Not until later, but yes, he was a big model for me during the whole Supremes thing. He was the one that sort of transferred me from the Supremes into Janis Joplin. He was like, "Oh, God, the Supremes. Now listen to this." And he showed me Janis Joplin, and I was like, "Oh, horrible. It's screechy and, like, that hair." So initially, I was not having it, but he was the first one to try to inculcate me into like, It's not about the Supremes anymore. It's about Janis Joplin. And he seemed super cool to me, more than, even, the other brothers; like, he was the one—he went to the city.

He did cool things. He went to nightclubs. He'd come back. He smoked. He did all this stuff, but it wasn't equaling gay to me. It was equaling cool, city, somebody that does other stuff. I don't know why. How could that—you know, I just didn't get it somehow. He'd have bleached-blond hair—because he had gone to the Army. It was another one of those things—he had been in the Army. How could he be in the Army if you were gay? I don't know. It was all wild. And then the other thing that shocks me about it now is how integrated it was with our lifestyle and family and friends. They were all there being as gay as gay could be in the '60s in a small town with all straight, average people around them that probably—I don't know. It seems so weird to me.

Anyway, so that's when I came out, at that show with that, and then Mark went off to Paris. I still worked at the restaurant. He was having this whole life in Paris for a little while.

ALEX FIALHO: With his scholarship or with his—

JACK PIERSON: With his scholarship, and then it also—that was my first [time] I was out from under him as a harping—because that's the other thing, and I've said this maybe in interviews or in public before. I sort of traded, weirdly—considering I went from my mother and father, Mr. and Mrs., you know, American Gothic; I went to art school and met these junkie, drag queen, drug addict freaks, and it was the same exact dynamic. Like, Tabboo! weirdly is very conservative, given that he's a drag queen. The basic attitude is really conservative and—

ALEX FIALHO: In what sense?

JACK PIERSON: There's a conservative element [in the freedom of that kind of chosen family somehow –JP]. He's so outlandish, and he's a radical thinker and blah, blah, blah, but there's something very square. He comes from the same kind of thing I do. I think it's that squareness that I'm describing that I had. He's maybe a couple years older than me, but there's still something square about him in there, given that he's the freaked-out, polymorphously Tabboo! somehow. And Mark, the same thing. [He had that same conservative way of relating to others. –JP] It was like I had this harpy. Mark was the mother and, weirdly, Tabboo! was the more remote father, and—but neither of them were particularly-—it was all like, Oh, you; oh, you're good for—whatever. So it had created that same dynamic [that kept us at a distance from one another –JP].

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

JACK PIERSON: That's my take on it. And so Mark was out of the picture. Tabboo! was on his way to moving to New York.

ALEX FIALHO: Were you still together with Mark?

JACK PIERSON: Yes, supposedly, but I was very relieved to have him gone. That was the first iteration, of being relieved to have him gone.

We had moved apartments to a new place on—I wish I could remember the name. The lease ran out on 85 Park Drive, and then he was like, "You find the next apartment. I'm not doing everything." And I found this incredible, killer apartment that was insane—two fireplaces, dishwasher, this—it was so fantastic. I could only afford it because we were working at that restaurant, but it was like $485, that we split. Hardwood floors, high ceilings, like this. It was beautiful, glamorous, and incredible, and that's where that second picture, with the blond hair, was taken.

And we moved into that, and I lived there by myself. I think I still got him to pay the rent while he was gone or something. I don't know, but I was living the high life in that apartment being a high-paid busboy and doing my art stuff for school, enough to finish school. So that's—what are we now, in the second—the second or third year of school. He came back, and I don't think I was that into having him back, but he brought—it was okay.

ALEX FIALHO: Why did he do Paris?

JACK PIERSON: I think just because Pat had been there and because I was a big proponent of Paris. Paris was in my mind a lot because it just seemed like a seat of art somehow at that time. He had gone there and brought back a certain amount of information, and it was—again, all these years could be—I don't know, whatever. That's what it seems like.

And that was the last apartment I lived in before I transferred, my final year of school. Tabboo! moved to New York. Tabboo! wasn't part of that 29 [Newberry] crowd. He had started to be friendly with Pat. They started to perform together, cook up ideas together. They moved to New York together, with her husband that she had met in Paris, her first husband. He wasn't the husband then. It was, like, the boyfriend from Paris.

ALEX FIALHO: What's his name?

JACK PIERSON: [Thierry Cheverney. –JP] They all moved to New York a year in advance of all of us. I stayed working at the restaurant, having money, and then I found this—there was, at that time, this thing called the New England Consortium of Art Schools, which meant you could transfer to any of the other schools without being—I mean, you had to be accepted to the program, but you didn't have to show a portfolio or anything. So I came to Cooper Union. Even though it was free then, you just paid the tuition.

I could've gone to RISD, which was like $5,000 a semester, and still paid my MassArt thing, but Tabboo! was in New York. I wanted to get to New York, Cooper Union, so I did that. I transferred to Cooper Union, I think, in '83, and did my last year. It wasn't technically my—it took me, like, two more years to graduate with little stray classes and stuff like that, but I basically moved to New York that year to, one, move to New York. I had this thing; I've got to go because I've been accepted to this thing. So it was a thing to tell my parents, and also Mark, because I think I was like, Oh, how am I going to get rid of him, because as mean as he was to me, he was super dependent and addicted to me and—

ALEX FIALHO: —codependent, or more one way?

JACK PIERSON: I don't know. I never get the difference. Probably codependent. Like, I was a very good Gwen for him; there was a lot I could accomplish that made his life easier, and you know, we're still kind of having fun. It was pretty fun and whatever. But he could endure a crazier element than I could, or maybe even more druggie element, at that time, than I thought I could. It was just a little tougher and grittier than I could maybe bear or feel connected to or something. And so I moved to New York and left him there. And then he left that apartment and moved to Somerville, and I moved to New York.

And I think I had come early to get my own apartment, and it was a horrible, scumbag tenement, just horrible; like, the place in Boston, I was a rich person. It was kind of like this, and then it took me 30 years to get back to this in New York. It was the same price, $485, on the Lower East Side. Shit in the hallways, people selling drugs on the first floor, horrible, same price as Boston. No dishwasher, no fireplaces, no anything, but I got it, and my father moved me there.

My father brought me, with a trailer full of stuff, down to there, and when we got there, he was like, "Just leave this." Like, "Leave it all in the car. You can't stay here." And I was like, "What, are you kidding me? This is incredible that I've"—because I felt, like, Wow, I found a place for $485 [laughs] in New York City. And he was like, "You can't possibly stay here. This isn't acceptable." And I was like, "Listen, it's going to be—all I have to do is this, like, just peel up this linoleum." And I peeled up the linoleum in the kitchen, and there were—while he was down there, "just look. We'll peel up this linoleum." Under the linoleum was a set of "works," the old-fashioned kind, made out of, you know, a dropper with a pin and a rubber band. It really looked like [laughs]—and so he was like, "Oh, God. I don't know. I don't feel good about this." So he unloaded me, and then I was there. I went to school at Cooper.

ALEX FIALHO: Is GRID floating around at this point?

JACK PIERSON: Oh, yeah, I guess. Yes, probably, but I wasn't hearing it. It was just a whisper at that point. It wasn't a full-on discussion. It was just like, They say, you know, there's a—I didn't know anybody that had it. And, yeah, there was nothing. Nobody knew anything.

It was just, gay guys had it. It wasn't, like, Oh, intravenous drug user or—nothing. It was just like, Gay guys have this thing. I don't think it had a name, even after I got to New York, for a while. But then I remember being in the—even in the East Village that first, maybe, year, we felt like it was a thing, because it did—that West Village fags got. That's how dumb it seemed, like, only West Village fags would get that because they were—I don't know. There was a whole East Village/West Village thing at that point that was so strong, that I don't know if it exists in the same way today because even Chelsea isn't like that. I mean, for a minute, there was like, "Chelsea fags," but it used to be, in the early '80s, like, West, ew. They just seemed like—and if they'd come to the East Village, it would be like, Oh, he's a West Village fag.

ALEX FIALHO: It was like the clones?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, kind of like that, or something.

ALEX FIALHO: And why would they be the ones instead of the East Village fags?

JACK PIERSON: I don't know. It's an interesting thing, no? And I don't feel like I'm making it up.

ALEX FIALHO: I don't think you're making it up either, but—

JACK PIERSON: But I think that was the sensibility. We sort of just felt like, Oh, it's more a West Village fag thing than an East Village fag thing. So—

ALEX FIALHO: What was your work like at that point?

JACK PIERSON: Let's see. I came to Cooper Union, and I was trying to learn all things, like silk screening, and it was the first time I was doing color photography, in Cooper Union, because MassArt I don't even think had a color facility. Color photography was a hard, expensive thing to do, and so I think I took my first class at Cooper Union in color photography and silk screening and maybe papermaking and all things like that.

And then at night, I was hanging out. Tabboo! was a year in, and Pat Hearn was a year into New York, so they already had a milieu, and I just plugged into that and started going to the Pyramid with them and doing stuff—he knew the lay of the land and P.S., guess what? I'm probably, like, 23 and still sort of finishing my last credits of art school and still not having this idea of being famous. I was still a slow thing. I almost thought of that as, like, your job, like, oh, maybe I'll get famous, and that'll be my job, but I wasn't possessed by it, and I'm still not incredibly ambitious really. I don't have all this drive. It's something weird about me.

Anyway, but at the same time, I was 23, and so were Jean Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, who were, like, on the *Concorde* with Grace Jones already. Do you know what I mean? So it sort of seemed like, Well, I missed this boat, you know; forget it. And if I was making things, it was, like, out of old fruit crates and beer bottle caps and weird, like, folk art sort of shit. And they—and so it seemed like, Wow, I don't know what I'm going to do because this doesn't look like it's going to be famous [laughs]. I liked it. It's bits and pieces of detritus that I kind of liked, but it didn't—I was like, Oh, I'm fucked, you know, and I didn't have this flare for being on stage, which is how Tabboo! was supporting himself.

He was already really successful and in demand as a performer now. I'm like, I can't really be on stage. But he would drag me on stage, and—like, I'd owe him money, and he'd make me perform some act, so that I could get paid—I don't know, to pay him back, but I wasn't really made for the stage. I had some fun, but I was still super self-conscious. I still participated a lot considering I was completely, like, shy. And it was super fun, and I felt like part of that scene, too, but, you know, starting all over. I left Boston kind of a star of Boston, with the, Oh, he's the graphic designer. Oh, he does this. Oh, everybody loves him. I was the big fish, whatever.

ALEX FIALHO: And it was the graphic design in particular that—like the poster design?

JACK PIERSON: I think, and I guess I was fun maybe [laughs], you know. In the context of that restaurant, I got a lot of friends. We had fun. And the graphic design, yeah, it seemed like a—

ALEX FIALHO: What were the posters for, the graphic design?

JACK PIERSON: Like, performances, weird performances at MassArt.

ALEX FIALHO: Like Polycow?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, stuff like that. You know what I mean? Things that didn't have a budget to have a graphic designer do them, but—

ALEX FIALHO: What were the style of them, or what was your angle on it?

JACK PIERSON: I wish I had—

ALEX FIALHO: There's a picture.

JACK PIERSON: There is? The one I did, that one. Yeah, that was the pinnacle of it.

ALEX FIALHO: This is Jack Pierson, Kathe Izzo, *Manifesto of the Ill*, '*82*, *Familiar Feelings*.

JACK PIERSON: Right, this was her film and performance, and this is another one. Yeah, and weirdly, Tabboo! still has this, and he has it framed. It's so nice of him. He never hangs anything of mine, but he had this up the other day when I went over there for Christmas. And this was a technique. It was—I loved it. It was called a diazo machine. Do you know what that is?

ALEX FIALHO: No.

JACK PIERSON: It's how they make blueprints. You'd have to have a negative, the full size. They make blueprint negatives on acetate with ink, black rapidograph ink, and then you'd put that with the paper and feed it through this machine, a big printer, but that—it was ammonia that made it turn blue—and print onto the paper. Vapors. And I just chose a sepia instead of blueprint, and had all these big negatives made, or positives made.

I was super into Xerox art pretty early on, too. You could make prints of the prints, and then you could print with the blueprint. You can make another copy of a blueprint from the blueprint itself. So I would sit at the machine and rip them in half and put it through and go really fast and, you know, compose while it was going through, and take another one or three. And this was all handset type.

ALEX FIALHO: And then you'd wheat-paste it?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, well, this one we didn't, because it was—this one had the real allure of fine—somehow.

ALEX FIALHO: *The DADA*?

JACK PIERSON: Everything was ripped out in a kind of punk rock aesthetic, so that it looked good being wheat-pasted. And it was ripped and next to a ripped thing, so it was built in to that thing.

ALEX FIALHO: But I completely see your later sculptures in something like the graphic design.

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, right? So who knew?

ALEX FIALHO: Great. How about your time in New York—and your relationship to Boston at that point? Were you, like, moving to New York and that was the vision or—you didn't move back to Boston after you moved?

JACK PIERSON: I did.

ALEX FIALHO: You did?

JACK PIERSON: Here's what happened.

ALEX FIALHO: How did it all play out?

JACK PIERSON: And again, let's just call it the mid-'80s now because I don't know the exact year, but I feel like after about a year in New York, which maybe might've meant I finished the year at Cooper, and that was my last entitlement to school-dom. Even though I didn't graduate—I had credits to earn—I was out of school. There wasn't a whole semester to do or anything. I graduated.

ALEX FIALHO: And that's with a B.A. in fine arts or—

JACK PIERSON: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: From Mass College though?

JACK PIERSON: From Mass College of Art, not Cooper Union. And I didn't really graduate for another year, but school ended, and then I was in New York. Make it. Figure it out. And I think I got some crummy job doing—but again, in the way that crummy jobs do inform you, I got a job working at Job Lot, which was a salvage—not salvage, but, like, an overstock. It was only in New York at that time. I think now it's morphed into Odd Lots, but it was like a consolidation, big, shitty stuff cheap, and there was one downtown in Tribeca and one on Fifth Avenue. I got a job doing windows, based on this graphic design portfolio. The guy was like, "Oh, yeah, you can do this. Go ahead." And so I was this window dresser, not decorator, not like Bergdorf windows. Dresser, like, stack the product, put the price tag right next to it, you know, dada, dada.

And it was in that job that I—the first show I ever had in New York that was an official, legitimate show was of photographs, and they were pinned to the wall with these straight pins. And those banker's pins were essential to your window dressing at this joint. You did everything with these pins—I learned from this old window-dresser guy. But it was a shitty job, for maybe a little bit above minimum wage because somehow I was a manager as opposed to whatever. And I did that job, and it was brutal. It was kind of nine-to-five-y, and all my friends are in nightclubs, and it just seemed like I was such a loser. I have to get up; everybody's having eggs at 4:00, and I have to be up at 8:00 to go to some shitty job that seems kind of creative and whatever, but it was, Oh, this sucks. I hate it.

So maybe I quit that job, and the restaurant in Boston was still going strong, and it was like, "Anytime you want to come back, we'll give you shifts." So I would maybe run up to Boston for a month and work. Stay with people, and then come back with the money. And while I was up there one time, Pat Hearn called me; she's opening the gallery. "Come back to New York. You can work for me. I can give you work." And so I did graphic design for her

first couple of shows, but it ultimately turned out being too wacky, because I still had this, like, weird style. And then after a couple, she was like, "I want it to look like everybody else's" [they laugh], even though they were cool. And then I helped her paint. I did whatever I could there, but it was still—she didn't have any money, really. And then this other fellow she knew—"I have this friend, Patrick Fox. He's opening a gallery. He needs somebody to work there. Do you want to get an interview with him?" So I went and interviewed with Patrick Fox.

ALEX FIALHO: What gallery?

JACK PIERSON: Patrick Fox Gallery, and he's an interesting character, too. Somebody should–—he's not really an artist, but he's a central character of a weird, idiosyncratic world that was—like he was friends with David Armstrong. He was friends with Basquiat, Condo, Keith Haring, dada, dada. He was, like, the cool kid. His father had run Fox Theatre. There was a production company, almost like Ron Delsener, that promoted rock shows, the Fox. And that was his father, so he grew up as a teenager—and his father promoted the Rolling Stones. So he was, like, front row at the Rolling Stones when they came to New Jersey, whatever these theaters were. So he got in [at] this level, and he was a super-cool kid, and he wanted to have an art gallery, and so he had one.

And he showed all his cool friends, but it was never a business. It was kind of a—I'm going to go out on a limb here. This is all recorded. It was a front for these coke dealers, and they fed him a certain amount of cash, I think, to run the gallery and maybe be able to launder money, but it seemed legit. Like he was able to get a painting from Jean Michel, or you know, all these people would have paintings, but it wasn't ever a business thing.

But I didn't know that going to my interview in a tie, square Jonathan still. I was still Jonathan, even at this point, wore a tie, dada, dada, and he's this—drinking a vodka and like, "You're cute." You know, and he's only my age, but he's in a Stephen Sprouse suit, like maybe he'd been Stephen Sprouse's boyfriend. He was this cool cat kid that had his own gallery that had been architecturally made and really expensive and dada, dada. And he's like, "You're cute. You can have the job." Meanwhile, I'm all with a resume and [laughs], you know, and so I started working there at the desk.

And it was kind of make pretend, you know what I mean? It was like, Well, there needs to be somebody at the desk. There was not enough business for him to need anybody at the desk, but a gallery has somebody at the desk, so you be that. You're kind of cute. And I worked for him for maybe the six months of the gallery, and it was just wild. It was another level of New York that I hadn't seen. Cookie Mueller hung out, and Rene Ricard came by.

David Armstrong had moved back to Boston and was working at this restaurant. I think I even took Patrick to Boston at one point. He was going up to look at David's new pictures because maybe he'll give David a show, and he thought the restaurant was so square, and it was this whole thing. I was sort of enamored of how cool he was, because he'd been in New York awhile and he was outlandish and cool and he ran this gallery, but he was also a big, petulant baby.

And by December, after six months, he paid me some cash. I got paid cash, and it was a lump—maybe like $250—and I had reconnected. So I'd left—Mark was ostensibly over, because he now lived back in Boston, and I was doing this thing, and it's—

ALEX FIALHO: In New York?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, it seemed over, but not in an official way. There was never a talk. It was just sort of—I think I did go back one year. I don't know. We were still kind of—we were boyfriends, but not really.

At that time, downstairs at the Pyramid, this kid came up to me that was French Canadian. He was like, "Do you remember me from Provincetown?" It was only three years ago, but I still didn't remember him. And he was like, "We worked at the same restaurant." And I thought he was really cute and dreamy and sort of hippieish and—not hippie, but whatever, free-spirited in a way that I wasn't. Like, I had to know where my next meal was coming from. I became enamored. I remembered him, dada, dada. I kind of fell in love with him, but he wasn't in love with me, but he liked me a lot, and he had this idea, like, "Hey, let's go to Florida for Christmas." I was like, "How are we going to do that?" And he goes, "Oh, you can get a drive-away car." And it was like, "What's a drive-away car?" And he was like, "Oh, you know, people want their cars in Florida, so they're on a list, and you go up to this office and say you'll drive it, and they give you seven days and some gas money, and you drive it to their house in Florida." I was like, "What? That sounds—somebody's going to give you their car?" And he was like, "Yeah, no." Got the $250.

We did that, and he had his girlfriend, Chantal; there's a picture of her in there. And so I left Patrick Fox thinking, I'll be back after Christmas. And we got to Miami. What do you call it? Amphetamines were involved, and landed in Miami and then in the first week spent the whole $250. And I was just, Oh, my God. What do I do now? "Well, we'll just get jobs, man." And I was, like, "Just get jobs?" Because I'm not—I'm still kind of shy and—"Okay."

We're shit out of luck in Miami Beach in 1983, January. Couldn't afford the hotel we were in. He found us a room that was $55 a week in this beautiful old hotel with a central courtyard that the door opened on the outside and you could see the ocean from it, and it was $55 a week and we were—wow.

Then he did—he got a job right away. I eventually found a job, and I spent the next six months there. The first job I got there was also as a busboy, at a restaurant called Wolfie's that was the big, fancy, Jewish delicatessen on Miami Beach that people loved. And I walked in, and I don't know. Some Cuban waiter got the glad eye for me, because I was getting kind of more stylish and a little more peacockish at this point. So I was down in Miami Beach, and this Cuban guy loved me. He was like, "Oh, I give you the job. What's your name?" And I was like, "Jonathan." He was like, "Yonathan?" I was like, "Yonathan? Jonathan." He was like, "Yonathan?" He couldn't say it. He was like, "How about Yack? I call you Yack." And he gets the manager over, and he was, like, "This is Yack, and he's a good busboy. I know him. He's very nice," dada, dada and they gave me a job.

So I had a busboy job and this name, Jack. And I only had people call me Jack there; everybody there called me Jack. Then the boyfriend who—who I wanted to be the boyfriend—Andre [LaRoche] started calling me that. "Oh, they call you Jack. I'm calling you Jack," and everybody started calling me Jack in Miami Beach. And it was sort of destitute and fantastic and great, and I was far away from New England, Tabboo!, and Mark [Morrisoe]. I didn't feel like a loser. I felt like—it was the beach. These are cool people; like, Look at these people.

It was a real Diane Arbus world, too. All of a sudden I was in with Cubans, Marielitos, and people that would live in a $55-a-week hotel, kooky people. Miami Beach was so extreme and run-down. You can't imagine, if you've ever been there recently, what it looked like in 1983—basically vacated, boarded up, and a hellhole. And people, when you said where I lived, they'd be like, Oh, my God, you okay? And it was South Beach, you know what I mean? And I fucking loved it, and I was madly in love with him, and eventually, I eroded him down, and we did start having sex.

And he was—I just loved his free-spiritedness, and we had already done this—he'd just pick up, and he'll get a job, and the girl, Chantal, got home by going to a truck stop and just saying to a truck driver, "I'm going to New York." She got on—things like this blew my mind. I'm still 23, but I was, like, What? She's going to go to a truck stop? [Laughs.] And anyway, I felt set free, and I started photographing, because I had my sort of skills, a pretty good camera. And I photographed these people that I was encountering.

Also, drugs were involved, so I was with this druggie old crowd that lived in fleabag hotels. They were my friends. I photographed them, and I didn't have anybody say—like Andre thought I was—walked on water, you know what I mean, in terms of creativity. He just loved everything I did, and I had this new name, and I was free from any kind of anybody knowing anything about me, how shy I was, how—whatever, how I was the third person down after Mark and Tabboo!. I was just, like, the king of Miami Beach.

I'm not saying that I was having shows or knowing anybody of import, but it felt great to be on the beach for $55 a week. I had a new boyfriend. He covered the rent; "Come back whenever you want," dada, dada, so it was free and easy. And then I moved to—I got my first waiting job in a Greek diner on Lincoln Road. And I don't know. It was just like, boom, I came into my own there. All of a sudden blossomed with this whole new name. So there wasn't a conscious thing. It was just sort of a thing that happened.

And then I went on a trip across America with two of these drug buddies that I had, a beautiful woman named Christine and this [laughs] what I thought was a handicapped—you know, he was a vet and he was in a wheelchair. And he was a real character. I always thought he was in a wheelchair because he was a vet until, like, halfway through the trip across America. We're sitting in a diner having eggs, and they were like, "Oh, you ever been"—somehow, like, "Who's ever been arrested?" and they were both like,"Yeah, of course, you know, sure." And Christine was like, "Yeah, well, I got picked up once on Brickell [Avenue] for prostitution." And she made it seem like, Can you believe that? and I was like, Yeah, in a second. And then he was like, "What about you?" And I was like, "No." I was like, "Have you?" And he said, "Yeah, of course." And I said, "For what?" And he said, "You know, B&E. How do you think I wound up like this?" [Laughs.] I was just like, "What? I thought you were a Vietnam vet." [Laughs.] Anyway, it had texture. It had narrative. It had all this stuff, and they loved me, in the midst of it, because—whatever, I had a camera, because I was from New York. I was in, and it was a whole new world that didn't have anything to do with New York or anything I ever knew. And it felt great. I just fucking loved it.

We outfitted a house, or this apartment, from thrift stores. And it was also a freezing January in Miami Beach. And I don't know, that was, like, the time of my life, even though—whatever. It was squalor. I made another friend next door. I just started to have a ball, and for six months, I had a ball. And in the midst of this, I went cross-country, which seemed like, Wow, who does that, you know? Also with the drive-away car that—we flew, and then got a drive-away car back. So it just seemed so fast and loose and intense and really rich with experience. And I was no longer shy and afraid to do anything somehow.

And that becomes important only because of a couple of these pieces that were central to me being embraced by the art world, because in 1991, say, even though it's only eight years later, I had this moment where I was like, Well, what are you going to do? What's the best thing you can think of? Well, living in that room in Miami Beach was pretty good; that was good. I loved it. And so I made these two installations that tried to exactly re-create the kitchen table and the record player from that room. Like, This is Stuart, the guy in the wheelchair, and we would—

ALEX FIALHO: Christine in El Paso.

JACK PIERSON: Christine in El Paso from the road trip, this girl Rocky from Christine's room, who was—when I was photographing this girl, I thought she was a boy, and I was, like, madly in love. And I thought, Oh, my God, he's so sexy. He doesn't even know it. He looks like Matt Dillon, oh, my God. I felt like I was seeing the cock in his pants even, and then, yeah, these are the two pieces and I—

ALEX FIALHO: We're looking at the Aspen Art Museum checklist.

JACK PIERSON: Yes, exactly.

ALEX FIALHO: Re-creations of 1990s exhibitions. I'm just saying it for the record.

JACK PIERSON: Oh, okay. Anyway, I think I said to Christine, "Oh, that guy is so sexy. Do you think—will he ever get naked for me?" Again, I'm such a nerd. "Do you think he'll get naked for me?" "It's a girl. She's a girl." I was, like, "Oh, Rocky?" "Yeah, Raquel." And it was [laughs], like, "Oh, okay."

And so I accrued those pictures. This is '83, by the way, but they just went in there, and I knew that they seemed cool to me, like it was a good thing and—but I didn't do anything with them until 1990.

I finally got back to New York, and then I think I went straight to Boston, because I needed some money, and I worked at that restaurant. I lived in Boston maybe for the next year, and Mark was still living in Boston. Maybe I showed him these pictures, which I had had printed at just a drugstore there. He was like, "Yeah, they're okay, but they're—you know, they're just snapshots. What are you supposed to do with those?" I was like, "Well, they can make them bigger." He was still like that. There was nothing so much to report with him.

But I worked there. I got another job during the day. I made some money. I went to Harvard Extension to finish my last three humanities or something like that that I needed to do. I probably stayed there the whole summer, made enough money to go back to New York in September and take over my—no, I actually had to live with Tabboo! for a while before I could move back into my apartment, because now there were three roommates, and I was, like, "Well, I'm on the lease. I need to get back in there." And when they finally got rid of them, I moved back there.

ALEX FIALHO: How about these two re-creations? The sculptural elements that you're using, the inspiration to re-create, what was the thought process behind them—and going back to the Miami moment.

JACK PIERSON: I guess—here's the thing. This is the second show of my life. The first show were these photographs that kind of gelled after my first trip. Even though we sped through Los Angeles that first trip, I didn't really go to Los Angeles.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah, this is at Simon Watson, is the first show?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Second show is Pat Hearn?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, and then somehow between '83 and '89, say, I forget what the fuck I did to make money. Painted houses. I came back to New York. I'm painting lofts, working for a little bit of artists, doing window—people were more advanced and could hire me for things, and it was all itinerant, but not a nine-to-five thing anymore, just like, painted lofts, do this, somebody needs—you know, Bob Gober needs somebody to carry up sheets of plywood to make his plywood—you know, $10 an hour; "Just show up here at 2:00 and work for three hours" kind of thing. Dribs and drabs like that. The photography, I went on a cross-country trip with Pat Hearn and Mary Heilmann, and they finished, and we went to the *Lightning Field*. Pat was really successful now.

ALEX FIALHO: Walter De Maria?

JACK PIERSON: Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field,* and we visited Bruce Nauman, and—

ALEX FIALHO: In person?

JACK PIERSON: In person at his place! I met Bruce Nauman in 1988, say, or '88, '89. And I was painting. I came back to New York and got a studio after Boston. Somehow, I don't know where the fuck I had the balls, but I got a studio on 42nd Street that was $500, and I split it with this fellow named Todd Eberle, who's a famous photographer now. And somehow, I don't know how I ever pulled it together, but I came up with that $250 a month and started painting again.

I had been making this weird stuff in Boston and New York out of—I went through this moment where everything I made had to be free. I couldn't spend any money on it, and it all had to be useful. I wasn't going to make art that wasn't—so that would mean to me, you could make a collage on a piece of old fruit crate, and if you put a cup hook in it, it could be a key holder, so it had a use. And they were kind of cool, and I loved them. That was all done while I worked on this loading dock in Boston. I'd go up to one of the upper floors, and it was a bank, where they keep all the records for banks in these kind of covered boxes. [. . . –JP] So I was making all this crazy, sort of folk-arty stuff, road art or something.

I was doing that, and then I started trying to make paintings, legitimate little paintings that seemed like paintings that were viable in New York somehow. And they had to do with the body and sort of a bruised body, and it was really confronting—like I would go through, Well, what are you most afraid of? Like, my skin, my acne, I don't know. I did all these paintings that were really like scarred flesh, and just really confronted it. And at the same time, I wasn't self-conscious, but they had a lot to do with the body rotting, putrescence, and I guess AIDS was really, now, a thing.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JACK PIERSON: But I wasn't necessarily thinking, This is about AIDS. It was more self-absorbed and it—

ALEX FIALHO: This is later '80s.

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, this is later, '85 to '88, I'd say. But even '89. So in the midst of this, I go—oh, it's all such wash now—but I fall madly in love with a new boy, and he's very handsome. And I also made friends with an artist, Roberto Juarez, from hanging around The Bar on Fourth Street and Second Avenue. The Bar was the other big hangout. The Pyramid was where you went to have fun, and drag queens in The Bar was where you went afterwards to pick somebody up, go home, and you know. It was the sex hangout, or it was the macho bar, and the Pyramid was the fag bar. They were both fag bars, but whatever.

And I met this handsome guy, took up with him and Roberto Juarez at the same time. Roberto Juarez was a very successful artist that showed at Robert Miller Gallery, which was a fancy, uptown gallery that was the coolest gallery I could imagine at that moment. It just seemed so imbued with chic, and everything they did was perfect, and the typography, and flawless, and they showed, like, Alice Neel and Warhol and Bruce Weber and, you know, all this cool stuff that I just loved. And Roberto Juarez, at that time, showed there. And he really thrilled to me and thought I was exciting and fun, and he was really good friends with Robert Miller.

And so in 1985—this is just, like, two years after I'd been in Miami—I started to do a little bit of really two-bit pornography. Not pornography like sex, but, like, naked guys for—one day, I met this cute boyfriend of my roommate, and I said, "You should let me photograph you naked." He's like, "Okay, I'll do it. Can I bring my friend?" And I was like, "Yeah, sure."

And so we went to the studio on 42nd Street. I had gotten my first set of lights, and I think Todd probably showed me how to use them. We took naked pictures of them, and they sort of got hard-ons as a result. And I took them in slides. It was nothing I had ever done before, and they were—they weren't trying to be art. And when they came back, the slides, I was like, These look like hot porn. These are really sexy. Oh, my God, this looks like real porn, doesn't it? Looked up *Honcho* magazine. Oh, they're right on Sixth Avenue. There might have been a phone number. "Do you—can I drop off a portfolio?" "Yeah, sure, just leave it at the desk." Leave it at the desk, go up to my studio. They call me right away. "Hey, who the fuck are you?" Or, "Do you have any more of these?" And I was like, "No, but I can make some more." And they gave me like $700 for one shoot.

And it was so fun-and-games; it was just my friends. And so then *Honcho* does—the company owned [other] magazines, and all it was was like a flavor, a texture. You could do the same guys for *Honcho*, but do them, like, fun and friendly for *Playguy*, you know what I mean? Stern and hard for *Honcho*, fun and friendly for—so I did that, and that was money, more than I could imagine. I didn't do it that much, but it became part of the cachet, "Oh, he does porn." So when Roberto told Bob Miller that—he was a very dignified, closeted, older gay—"Oh, that sounds fascinating."

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JACK PIERSON: "You say you went to Miami; you know your way around Miami? I was thinking we should take a trip there. I'd like to check it out. I've been hearing a lot about Miami. Do you know—you know the lay of the

land?" I was like "Yeah, sure." He said, "Why don't you come with Roberto, and we'll get some rooms, and you know, you can show us around Miami Beach?" And I was like "Yeah, sure." Andrew [my boyfriend –JP] was also very handsome, much more handsome than me—you noticed him. "Bring Andrew."

And so we went and stayed at this hotel, and it was all very on the up-and-up, but it was my first, Some rich guy is paying for this. And I showed [Robert Miller] Miami Beach, and he was into it. This is '85, and it's not that different than it was in '83, but it was the beginning of the boosterism, "We're going to make Miami Beach great again." And it just seemed like, "Good luck."

But a cool restaurant had moved there that, you know, people would go to from Miami Beach. There were cool people already in Miami Beach in 1985 in little pockets, but it still seemed run down. And while we were on that trip, they had also torn down that building that I lived in with the yellow rooms to build the first 25-floor condo on South Beach, way at the very end of South Beach. It was a monstrosity and a nightmare, and I thought, Oh, my God, this is horrible. And I was there even for the groundbreaking; they hadn't torn down my building yet. But that was a surreal moment. You know, they tore down my building to do it, and he was like, "I'd like to go look at one of these places in here." And so we went and looked at the penthouse, which I think was like $500,000 or something insane, on the 25th floor; the balcony's all the way around it, and I was like—I don't know, it was so tacky to me. Like when you walked in the lobby and you just, "Oh, my God, it's so tacky."

But he was like, "Well, yes, but I mean, look at these views." And, "What do you think? I mean, is there anything that could happen to make it less tacky?" And I was like, "Yeah, you'd have to move a punk rock band in for six months and let them live here, and then it would be okay." Which was not really his aesthetic [laughs], but that's what my gut reaction was: Yeah, if it was trash, it would be cool. And he bought the place that day. And we became more and more friendly. And it wasn't built; it was one of those presale sort of things. He just bought a house. Wow.

And so he was a very gracious guy, and he was also into whatever I was delivering, which wasn't that much. It wasn't sexual. Everybody thought I was having a sexual relationship with him because I was so In Like Flynn with him, but he was just sort of fascinated. Not looking at my paintings, not doing any—you know what I mean?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JACK PIERSON: I don't know what it was. Roberto liked me. Roberto got a studio while he was down there, rented a storefront. Everybody was into it. It was Miami Beach, going, "Ow!" Like, "Let's go down there." Anyway, he bought that place and—you want the whole detailed story of my life, or you'll get it in the second one?

I had the attention of this older, successful gay guy, even though he was married with a family that presented everything in the classiest way and at the highest level and was so gracious and so kind and was just into it. There wasn't anything sleazy about it. You know, he liked his handsome boys; he liked things like that, but it wasn't anything. And I had this guy's attention, and he seemed to be like, "Do you like this?" Asking me. And thinking the things I pointed out were interesting.

So anyway, he bought this place, and we started going to the flea market together on 26th Street and sort of shop—"Do you think this would be good in the Miami place?" "Yeah, it would be great." And he bought it. And then he'd buy so much stuff and then send a car to get it, and all of a sudden, I was just privy to this like, "Yeah, buy it, send a car to get it," sort of thing. And it was just a whole new—I didn't experience that before.

And Pat was having her success, and she was doing it kind of too. She was now in her own world, and she was still enthusiastic about me, and we were still friends, but she was impressed, too. Like, "You're going with Robert Miller? You know, wow. Are you having an affair with him?" "No, I'm not. I'm not." Anyway, got the place.

ALEX FIALHO: I'll look him up.

JACK PIERSON: The reason it was important to tell you, in addition, how handsome Andrew was, this boyfriend that I had, was that he left me and moved to Los Angeles and broke my heart, and I was devastated. And it was, I don't know, the devastating kind of thing where I was just dev-a-stated.

ALEX FIALHO: Okay.

JACK PIERSON: Couldn't stop thinking about it, couldn't figure out where it had gone wrong. Ugh, broken heart, and to bring a whole other thread into this, I was good friends with this girl Marilyn [ph] that I met. She was an intern at Pat Hearn. And she had been to this place in the north of Scotland called Findhorn.

Now, if you cut back to [when I was at] Hofstra, one of the movies we saw that year that seemed so intellectual and so cool was *My Dinner with Andre*. I think it was Hofstra or it was with Mark Morrisroe—and those guys were

like, "We saw *My Dinner with Andre*," or I saw it in Boston, and Mark Morrisroe was like, "Oh, it's some stupid art movie. You try to be so pretentious."

Anyway, *My Dinner with Andre* was Wally Shawn and Andre Gregory, and in it Andre Gregory describes going to Findhorn, which is this place, a garden in the north of Scotland where they believe in fairies and that the veil between the worlds is very thin, and it's a magical place where things become possible.

She had gone there to live for a couple of months, and she was my roommate at that time. She was like, "You're so fucking depressed. This is horrible. You're going to"—she took the phone, and I was broke, trying to pull together these things, and she was like, "You got to get out of this." She dials the phone, and she's like, "When they get on, say that you've received guidance that you should be there, and will they gave you a bursary."

And I like, "Received guidance that I should be there. Is a bursary possible?" And they were like, "Just a minute, please. We'll have to attune." And so they waited. "We've attuned that it would be possible for you to come, and that you could have a bursary if you'd like to come in October."

And she was like, "You've got a credit card. Buy a ticket. I'll go with you. We'll go there." And I was doing pornography, smoked, drank, so hard-bitten [laughs]. And not like—had left every bit of my hippie spirituality, living-off-the-land thing in the dust. I was fully a New York/Miami Beach drug addict now. And I was like, "Are you fucking kidding me?" And so we went. And even kicking and screaming and being just like, "Oh, are you fucking kidding me," that week revolutionized me in some way. It did something major, and I owed them $300 for it.

So cut to—I come back; I'm feeling much better. I'm feeling great because, whatever. I can't describe the whole thing to you that took place in that week, but it was like a, whoosh, crank, Yes. And the hint of it is, the last word somebody spoke to me there—she whispered in my ear, "It doesn't have to be hard. It can be easy." And things changed from there.

And so I came back, and Bob was ready to move—he was like, "The place is going to be ready December first, and I need it to be ready for my family for Christmas. Do you think you could go down there and get it together? I'll have moving vans bring all the stuff we've been getting, and you could meet them there and just set it up and get it ready and put, like, you know, silverware, da, da, da, da, just get it ready a little bit." And this was maybe November, and I was like, "How about we just rent a van, and you pay me to drive the stuff down there, and I'll do it with"—I forgot who was with me. Somebody. I had a cohort. I was like, "We'll go down and load it in. That way I—because I could use the money." And he was like, "Oh, sure, no, if you want to do that, that's no problem."

And so we got all this shit that we've been buying in the flea market for weeks and stuff of his that was really good fucking stuff. And he had left—the one genius thing that he did, based on kind of what I was saying, was that he didn't let them put down a floor. So it was just cement at—on the 25th floor of this otherwise glamourous building. It was cement floor. And I was like, "Huh?" So I got down there, and he goes, "What do you want to do?" I was like, "What if I paint this floor blue, turquoise, so it just looks like it goes out into the ocean?" "That sounds great. Do whatever you want. Just get it ready. I'm going to come with my family on Christmas. It needs to be" da, da, da.

And I went to town on it. I painted the walls Day-Glo pink. I did this; I did that, and then I lined the whole thing with coral that I pulled off the beach. It was so fucking cool and chic and unexpected and weird, mostly because he has cool stuff. And he has great taste, too. But the finishing touches were amazing. And it was because he let me do whatever the fuck I wanted. And one of the things I bought while I was at Miami Beach was this old Kodak ad that was just a snapshot this big with the Kodak logo on the bottom and then a silver frame wrapped—it was a girl on a beach in a bikini. And so that's just an impression.

And so this is still, like, '88, let's say. And I was back to the exact same place I lived five years ago, but in whole different circumstances. Still flat broke, still counting pennies to get a jar of instant coffee. But you know, every once in a while, I'd see something, and he'd send me a FedEx of $2,000 cash—like, "I saw these things," da, da, da, da, "Should I get them?" There weren't even cell phone pictures then. It was just like, "Well, if you think they're cool, get them." So it was just this intense, If I think they're cool, get them?

It was doing something to me, and I was being treated so well, getting to live here for two months by myself with my friends, and da, da, da; got Tabboo! to come paint one of the bathrooms, because he happened to be at some other situation in Miami Beach. So it all came together, and it was brilliant. And after his family showed up, he had Bruce Weber come over for lunch. And Bruce Weber said, "Wow, this place is cool. Who styled it?" And I didn't know what "styled" meant, really.

And Bob was so gracious that he was like, "Oh, Jack did everything." And he was like, "You styled it?" And I was like, "Well, what do you mean by 'styled'?" And he was like, "Well, who painted this wall pink and put those three dozen grapefruit in that big wooden bowl in front of it?" And I was like, "Well, I did." He was like, "It's really good.

If we did a shoot here, could you do even more?" And, "I'll get you a bunch of—Bob, would that be okay if we did a *Vogue* shoot here?"

And I was like, Wow. Bruce Weber was somebody, like, big to me. And that was my first time meeting him. "Well," I said, "so, but what do you really mean?" And he goes, "Well, I don't know. Maybe you'll get a surfboard or something like"—so we went to town. And he was like, "We'll do it in a couple of weeks."

And he came back, did a huge *Vogue* shoot. I got surfboards. I went to town, did it even, whatever, more so. He just was like, "Just do it even more." And so we did the shoot [laughs], and at the end of it—I owed Findhorn $300 for the week, and at the end of the shoot, which to me was like—Grace Coddington was there—I didn't know who she was. I said to Grace Coddington—do you know who that is?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JACK PIERSON: I was like, "Oh, do you—you're the one that, you know, presses the clothes and everything?" She was like, "Oh, God." [Laughs.] I didn't know anything, I—"Oh, you do all the pressing of the clothes?" [Laughs.]

And it was this whole wild *Vogue* shoot with Bruce Weber and Talisa Desoto and everything, and at the end, he was like, "Oh, that was great. Here, can I give you some money?" And he peeled out three hundred-dollar bills and gave them to me. And I––"What? For doing this?" And that was the $300 I needed to pay back Findhorn.

And it was also this endorsement of a specific kind of creativity I have from, really, whatever validated people—"validation" is the better word—it was a validation of this specific knack that I have that isn't necessarily a product, I think, and I'm saying all this with the hindsight of, you know, 30 years later. I didn't have that at the moment, but it was like, Wow. To me, at that moment, it was just like I hit the jackpot, you know? And I don't think I even connected it with, "It doesn't have to be hard. It can be easy." But I did connect it with, I got the money to pay those people back now for something that was valuable to me. And then—so you could cut it off there. And I don't think that is unrelated to the moment when these come back in.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JACK PIERSON: Which I'll try to pick up from tomorrow and remember.

ALEX FIALHO: Perfect.

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ALEX FIALHO: This is Alex Fialho interviewing Jack Pierson on January 17, 2017, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic Oral History Project, day two.

So, yesterday we left off—as you said, sort of off-record—in 1988, more or less. You were 28, and the name change—where you changed your name to Jack Pierson from Jonathan Pierson.

JACK PIERSON: Well, that happened in '83, really.

ALEX FIALHO: What was the exact story there, with Jonathan, but—oh, I see. So that was five years—that was the first Miami trip.

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, that was the first Miami trip.

ALEX FIALHO: Got you. I see. So now we're in '88, which is the second Miami trip.

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, and I had fully inhabited the name change on my arrival back in New York from that first trip. And, yeah, that name was pretty set in place for the last five years before '88. I would say it's '83 to '88. And now that I recall, I was working at Pat Hearn a bit—probably like '85 to '87, even, before '88. It's hard to remember all these things.

ALEX FIALHO: Of course.

JACK PIERSON: And having the studio at the same time. And that's how I did, maybe, afford to have the studio, was that I worked at Pat Hearn, and I could still afford to—anyway, it's '88. I've got some life experience under my belt and some confidence, I would say, and you know, sort of I was a full person at that point.

ALEX FIALHO: How did that affect the work that you began to make, continued to make?

JACK PIERSON: Well, I continued to make paintings, and I continued to do things. But I also got sidetracked. The end of the Bruce Weber story is—so, that came out in *Vogue,* and I had some tear sheets and people saw it. And all of a sudden, I began to get work as a sort of a prop stylist, or interior stylist, for hire on photo shoots. And that was a good deal more money than I had been making and less time-consuming, somehow.

And so I started to be able to have more and more time in the studio when I wasn't doing—like, I would do one gig a month that was making me as much as I used to make in a month of working at the gallery. So I just started to be in the studio every day and get more and more confident about my ideas. I still have never acquired any skills, but I have ideas [laughs]. And I just got more enthusiastic about my ideas.

And then another—I'm going to say it was probably '88 to '89, for the winter of '89, I worked. And, say, that spring, I was still making paintings. I had Simon Watson, maybe, come for the second time to see paintings, and he was like, "Uh. Okay, cool."

But before I had that scheduled, I—on the lower East Side where I still lived, there was a little photo shop that had this advertisement, "Make your memories into posters." And they would print you a 20-by-30 color photograph, in the lowest kind of quality, but it was color photo paper, for $10. And so I'm like, That looks cool, and I brought in three of them, and they all came back and they looked cool to me. And then, all of a sudden, I just—because I had this confidence—I was like, I'm going to figure out 50 pictures and spend $500 to make these pictures.

And so I went home, edited—between slides, negatives—re-photographed a couple of old black-and-white prints and just brought them all in and had it done. And they came back, and I took them to the studio, laid them all out, and it was very, Eureka, wow, I had something. Something about this process had unified kind of disparate images that were culled from the 1983 trip in Miami to the 1988 trip to Los Angeles, where I was sort of nursing a broken heart, because I left that trip with Pat Hearn and Mary Heilmann to the *Lightning Field* in Bruce Nauman's house and took a train from Albuquerque to LA and arrived in LA kind of like the old stars did.

And then when I got there, I had no money. I was staying with—pathetically, I was staying with this paramour that I was in love with, who had a new boyfriend, who wanted to be friends with me, but I was just there to sort of, I don't know, be pathetic and see Los Angeles, and he was excited about me seeing Los Angeles. So he had to work, and I just walked around.

And I had a camera, and it was kind of the last time I ever walked around LA. It's just a different perspective of things, grabbed my attention the way a snapshot like a tourist does. But in this case, it was backyards, and the sign that said "Angel Youth," and things that were basic to LA if you lived there, but I just had the feet-on-the-ground viewpoint, as opposed to the speeding-car viewpoint. And, I don't know, I loved being in LA. I was even, you know, directly in Hollywood, and it just brought a lot of my childhood dreams of glamour. And seeding in my 20-year-old fetishization of seediness right to the forefront. I photographed that, and somehow the 50 pictures told the story of a life on the sort of edges of society, but that had, you know, glimmers of hope and moments of joy, I think, as well as sadness. So they all unified in a really cool way, because of being all the same size—

ALEX FIALHO: You mean, being dictated by the size of the picture?

JACK PIERSON: It's not just the size. It was the quality of—some of them were really grainy and kind of out of focus, and they just had this—

ALEX FIALHO: Because of the poster printing?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Cool.

JACK PIERSON: Because nobody was, like, dusting, or focusing—it was like [mimics production noise], I imagine. It was probably done in a factory. But it added this patina that my early photographs had kind of intentionally, that were supposed to be, like, punk. I'm not spotting; I'm not dusting; I'm not doing any of the things that make it a fine photograph. The fineness of these was because of the low quality of them; that's what made them art, I think. But because some of them were taken with this idea that, I'm a photographer and this is a really good photograph, as well as, I just grabbed this picture, walking by. There was enough balance between, I think, those two things.

So when Simon Watson came to look at the paintings, I had them on there—"I could show you these." And he was like, "Oh, okay. Well, paintings." And I said, "I could show you these." And he was like, "Oh, what are these?" And I started putting them up on the wall with pins, and in 15 minutes, he was like, "Well, I have a spot in September. Would you like to do a show at the gallery?" "Yes."

So that was the first show. And I wouldn't say it was a shot heard around the world, but it did something. It got some people excited, and he sold some of them.

ALEX FIALHO: September—

JACK PIERSON: I would say September 1990.

I knew it was something that I hadn't seen before—or enough something that I'd seen before, and something that I hadn't seen before—it had the right mix. It brought people in. And the presentation, pinned to the wall, was wild; the imagery was strange and deeply personal. Somehow it had a real, personal thing, and had this, "What the hell's going on there?" thing. And yet it wasn't anything exciting, like, "Oh, this is the world of leather fetishists," or, "These are junkies shooting up." It was just, "What the hell? And why's that guy in a wheelchair in a hotel room?" Like, "Who's that?" Because it all just seemed to be real.

ALEX FIALHO: What was—when you're walking around LA, for instance—what was pricking you? What kinds of things were you looking for?

JACK PIERSON: Light, flowers, I don't know. And the key thing that brought it all together, and probably what made me roll the dice on the whole 50, was that, after I had finally got fed up staying at the boyfriend's, I moved to the apartment of this other friend of mine that was a photographer from LA, but that was showing in New York, named Rocky Schenck. And he is a very cool LA photographer that really worked an Old Hollywood glamour kind of thing, and had an elaborate process that made the photographs look antique. He even gave me some work while I was there, hand-coloring some of his photographs, that I was able to do. And I could stay with him and make a little money, so I stayed even longer, two weeks longer in LA, than I expected to.

His next-door neighbor was an actress who was going to a callback, it was called—which I love all the lingo for—she'd been called back a second time to an audition where she would play Lucy in the Hollywood TV movie *Lucy*, and she was on her way to it. And when we walked out in the morning, she's like, "Look," and I was like, "Oh, my God." It was like technicolor; she looked just like Lucy. And I took the picture, and I was like, "Oh, my God. It looks just like Lucy." And when the picture came back, it did, in fact, look just like Lucy, like I had taken a picture of Lucy. It did something. I was like, Well, this is real. That's a real girl; she's just on her way to work. But, it's Lucy. It looks like Lucy, but I took it, and it's 1989. Really, it looks like it was taken in, maybe grabbed in 1955 or something.

Nobody had color film, really, then. Anyway, it just did this whole, Wa-wa-wa. I loved it. And that's part of what got me—that single picture got me so excited. Now, like 10 years after that, I realized Cindy Sherman actually has a picture where she made herself look like Lucy, really early on. I had no idea about that, and I thought I sort of invented this, like, Oh, look. It's Lucy, but it's not Lucy, thing.

ALEX FIALHO: That's *The Callback*?

JACK PIERSON: *The Callback.* But that contained sort of the LA thing, as well as the photograph*Angel Youth* of the sign that's—I think it's a YMCA-like organization, where teenagers go to play basketball. But it has this sign, "Angel Youth," and it's just so, like, concrete poetry hanging off the side of the building. Everybody in LA knows that sign, but I didn't. You know, if I maybe lived there, I wouldn't have taken the picture. But I didn't, so I did. And then that seemed like something, like, Wow.

So the pictures all worked and were this sort of tone poem-y sort of thing that I learned could be great from Nan's, you know, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, which, by that time, I had probably seen at least once, somehow, and having had her book. She wasn't really in my life. She was still more of a legend—somebody I knew of, and I knew she was in my circle, but I didn't interact at that point with Nan.

The show did okay; I got a new boost of confidence, but—again, now it's going to sound like I do this kind of self-promotion all the time—but I had been working—Hilton Als was the photo editor of the *Village Voice* at that time, and he would give me little jobs to do, photography-wise, like, "Go photograph this theater company." My first job for the *Village Voice* that Hilton assigned me was, "Here's a videotape of this new TV show. We need a still from it," and it was *Seinfeld*. And I'd get paid $75. [I'd] wait on the streets, the Gem Spa, 11:00 Tuesday night—they were the first ones to get the *Voice*—I was very excited about it.

So I knew Hilton Als; the show was ending; and I finally went into his desk, and I was like, "Can't you write a, you know, a little blurb, listing about my show?" And he was like, "Yeah, okay," so he wrote a little listing. So that's my only time that Hilton's ever mentioned me. But, you know, there's a little Hilton Als listing—it was good, and it kind of summed up the show.

Point being, what? The show had momentum, I felt great, and I was broke again because I had spent all the money making the pictures. But then I was sitting at home, and now I thought, The heart's still broken, and I'm

still pining over the guy in Los Angeles. The pictures are kind of reminding me of that whole thing. And, late at night—I had a sketchbook, and I wasn't a person that sketched on a daily basis, but I just started writing, like, writing things down. And I started method acting, like, What would it be like, you know—this looks like some broken-hearted loser writing in his journal about some thing. I had to do this whole as-if—I'll pretend I'm this broken-hearted loser saying the most intimate things to somebody that I'm in love with. I made about 20 or 25 of them, because all I had left was a pencil and paper at that point, in terms of making things.

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.] Economically?

JACK PIERSON: Economically. And I was, These are kind of good. They do look really like, Oh, my God. This looks like the person is really pathetic and sad and overwrought, and all these things. It takes me awhile to realize, like, I am pathetic, sad, and overwrought, but I just got it out. I put it all out on the paper and just started drawing the best I could, little things, and they start getting more poetic and more poetic, and more hard-bitten and more cynical.

And I had a stack of them, so I went into Simon Watson and was like, "Hey, what do you think about these? Look at this." And a lot of them had to do with Hollywood, because that was in the recent trip to Hollywood, so I had all this hard-bitten—as though part of the narrative was also like I was a Hollywood wannabe that got ate up and chewed out, spit out. Showed up, and it just turned—didn't turn into Sunset Boulevard; it turned into Hollywood Boulevard, kind of. So it had all this kind of narrative. Simon said, "These are great. I'm going to LA this weekend. Can I take these with me, and I'll show them to collectors?"

ALEX FIALHO: What kind of paper were they on? A white sheet of paper?

JACK PIERSON: Just sketch pad.

ALEX FIALHO: Sketch pad. Letters, or like, text—like a text sculpture that you make later?

JACK PIERSON: No, that comes later. These were just handwritten, with a kind of punk rock aesthetic, or suicide note aesthetic, or something aesthetic. I had acquired all these aesthetics through even the Mark Morrisroe—I was madly in love, also, with the book *In Cold Blood*, which to me was like a gay love story, sort of, of these two losers. And it was kind of like, This is probably what his journal looked like—not Truman Capote but one of the killers. Because he did make scrapbooks of, you know, physique pictures and stuff, and write diatribes, and I just thought, I'll make it look like that.

Anyway, Simon took them to LA, and came back and had sold like 20 of them for $100 apiece, and I got $50 for each one. A big chunk of money, and a big chunk of confidence. And I was off to the races; I bought stacks of paper and started doing them, and they kind of got better and better, and I thought, I can draw, kind of. I can kind of draw. Like, these are drawings.

And then on my way to the studio one day—this is now '89, '90—or '90. It was '90. And Times Square, 42nd Street, was being renovated. Everybody, all the buildings were being—leases were up; get the hell out.

They were starting to push my studio, everybody in my studio, out of it. The theaters were closed; the marquees were blank. And, oddly, the stuff that they were salvaging and ripping down was going to this big tent on Houston Street and Chrystie that they just set up a tent and sell the old junk. And I walked by one day, and there was a crate full of letters. And while I was there, I was like, Ah, these letters are great, because I like letters because I'm a graphic designer, and I've been writing all these word things. What could I—and I just started working right there, the same way that I do now. Pull out, This one's a good color, what could I—Stay. And I wrote the word "Stay" in red, yellow, blue, and black. It's not that exact one; that's the second one, because they were popular and I made more of them. You know, basically this—found letters.

ALEX FIALHO: This being the piece *Stay, 1991*, which is in your upcoming Aspen show.

JACK PIERSON: Yes. Good thinking. And so I did it right there on the ground, and I was with my roommate and studio-mate, who knew my financial condition. And I asked the guy, "How much for these four letters?" And he was like, "40 bucks." And I was—more than I thought, and I was like, "I think I should get these, don't you?" He was like, "No." [Laughs.] Like, "Are you crazy?" And I was like, "I bet if I get these and bring them to the studio and hang them up, I can sell them next week." And he was like, "Oh, God. We have rent to pay. Don't do it. Don't do it." And I was like, "I'm going to do it." So I bought them, brought them to the studio.

Tom Cugliani came over, who's a person I used to work with at Pat Hearn and had a gallery. And, you know, there was some momentum, and people—like, he knew how great my show was, and then there were these drawings. And he got on the phone to Eileen Cohen, who was a collector, and just kind of sold it to her over the phone. I was like, Wow, this is incredible. And so I just started acting more impulsively on ideas that I would have that maybe I would have the idea, and then never do. But, in this case, I started to.

So then I made this little stage, because I had spent so much time in nightclubs late at night and thinking, Now, why can't that be art? So the first little stage, called *Silver Jackie* was just two lengths of tinsel hung in a corner. I built the little platform myself, and aged it to look like it had been walked on a million times and was worn away—things like that. And who knows who—some cheap stripper, some drag queen—somebody was up there making that little four-foot square a Wonderworld, kind of. And then that worked really well, and I kind of thought—by now, I'm getting more smart; I know about art more; and I've been seeing shows.

My friend Rob Weiner, that I told you I met in college, was working at the Judd Foundation, so I got very schooled in Judd—not the Judd Foundation, but he was working for Judd. Judd was alive, so I'd go to that place and see all the Judds. And I would always break everything down, psychologically, like, This has to be kind of a control, even though it was meant to be nothing and there is no narrative, and it's only the materials, and the materials speak to the whole thing. I was like, This is a person that has to have art control and perfection and is probably really intense. And as much as they're coming together to indicate transcendental serenity and order, I felt like, Sheesh, this is rage, somehow.

And it's like, What if I put this really over-the-top emotional quality into minimal gestures, like hanging two strings of tinsel in the corner and making a black platform? Like, isn't that a sculpture, too, even though it's also—it really is a stage? And part of what people would respond to is, like, "Ooh. Who performed on it?" Nobody did; I made it to look like—you know what I mean. And then that worked really well and brought in more of the, like, the hard-bitten glamour that was a kind of tiny glamour; it wasn't slaying you with its material. Okay. So cut back to—I mentioned being in nightclubs a lot, around Tabboo! and the other drag queens, performance art, and putting on shows. And I was kind of more spectator than a participant, but I was a participant a little bit, too.

At that point in the late '80s, early '90s—I would say it was even pre-'90s. It must have been, like, '85 to '88, even. When you would get out of nightclubs in the East Village at—maybe you left at 2:00 or something, the first time, if you didn't stay till 4:00—Second Avenue from Eighth Street to Sixth Street was lined with vendors who would just throw down a sheet and sell all this junk on the street, like a flea market, open-air market. You could count on it every night; it started around 10:00, and it was thronging at 2:00 at night. So, music playing in your ear—da-da-da—you need a break; you're between nightclub and bar, get something, get you a pack of cigarettes at Gem Spa, or waiting for the *Village Voice* to come out—I would walk and look at these blankets, because I'm an old flea marketeer. And many of the blankets seemed to have a lot of gay content, and it was sort of like—and so I'm going back. Now I'm reversing to foreshadowing, how I got even to the snapshots, and even to the journal-like drawings. Each blanket would have, like, somebody's snapshots, somebody's old, '50s pornography, an ashtray, some Art Deco teacups, you know, a life, somehow.

And at that time, in the way that I was mentioning yesterday that I get things slowly or nerdishly, I was like, Ah, oh. This is horrible. Somebody must have stolen all this stuff—some gay guy. Should I buy it, or not? It seems bad to buy, but I kind of really want this, and I kind of really want that. This would be good, and look at that snapshot; it's so good. I bought the things. It took me awhile before I realized that it wasn't stolen, that these were, in large part—I'm not saying the whole two blocks—but in large part, part of why I was seeing so much good gay stuff that I liked, movie magazines, old movie star things, stuff that a gay guy likes, before me was that it was the contents of a dead man's apartment that had been thrown out before the parents got there, or by the landlord, or whatever; it was the full life. Here's the good things that we can maybe sell. We found this in the trash. We'll bring it here and sell it.

ALEX FIALHO: Dead man, from?

JACK PIERSON: AIDS. And so then that made it even more—I don't know. I don't know that I came to that right away. I can't even tell you that I came to it then; I might have come to it 10 years ago. I realize that, because I just sort of, you know, it's stolen, but what am I going to do? And I think that everything in life leads up to that. But part of what I was loving about—like I could spend an hour there at 2:00 in the morning looking at everything, and thinking, like, Oh, my God, who the hell is this? Look at this snapshot. It was like a record of a life, somehow, in real stuff and in real time. It wasn't a metaphor; it was a real thing. And that became part of my, I don't know, cri de cœur, or, like, initial stuff. I wanted it to not be a metaphor. I wanted it to be a real thing.

And so that's the appeal of letters in a flea market, things that look like somebody's snapshots, things that look like somebody's journal or diary, things that look like a life had been lived, somehow. And that's, I think, what I started to produce in a big way, the first couple of years of having shows. And—

ALEX FIALHO: What was the second show?

JACK PIERSON: The second show was these installations that included the stage, that included these—I never remember the exact address, these two things, *Diamond Life* and *56 Washington Avenue*, because after the stage was sort of—

ALEX FIALHO: That was Pat Hearn's show?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, that was at Pat Hearn Galleria. *Upstairs on Wooster Street*. The stage had been a success, and I got to this moment where I was like, Well, I can do whatever I want. What would I like to do most? And what would fill this space well? And I thought, Oh, well, you know, eight years ago, oh, that was the time of my life; that was youth. My youth that passed me by, but in my youth, that room in Miami was everything. And that's where it all started, so let's go back there. Let me remake that for myself to see what it was like. And so I remade that room in pieces. And then that was a real thing, like a domestic thing, and a sweet thing kind of, and a sad thing kind of. And then way—and that was by windows that had real daylight coming in. And then, in the back of the room, you walk down a ways, and there's the tiny little stage.

And then there was a cheap piece of red velvet on the wall that had an eight-by-10 glossy of the Ronettes on it, because that's another thing I like. And that created—that was a world. And there wasn't a photograph in the picture, except the Ronettes, which I didn't take; it was just, like, a publicity still. But it was photographic somehow. I knew if I photographed somebody sitting there in just the right light, you would think it was real somehow. And so I liked that whole thing, the real not real. Yet it wasn't, to me, a metaphor, because it was so real. Obviously, it's a cooked-up thing that I created, and so it is, I guess, a metaphor, but to me, it was real. And it was evidence of a life somehow. And—

ALEX FIALHO: How about jumping between mediums? Photography, drawing, sculpture—

JACK PIERSON: Well, I just sort of started to do that, partly out of economics and partly because I thought, Why the hell not? I was emboldened, and I left the idea that there was nothing you could do that was new and nothing I could do that I was particularly skilled at into this thing of like, Well, I can do whatever the fuck I want, and so I shall. And so the first few shows—these are the five solo shows in galleries, but I was being included in a lot of group shows.

And one of the key pieces that I made wasn't in a solo show, but was for an ACT UP benefit for AIDS, because AIDS was in full swing now. It's '90, '91, probably '90. I don't know when the show at Paula Cooper was. But Bob Gober, I think, curated a show to benefit ACT UP at Paula Cooper Gallery on Wooster Street, and Paula Cooper Gallery is, you know, one of the coolest galleries of Minimalism and showed Carl Andre and things like that.

And I was still living on Ridge Street and cleaning out one day, and, "Oh, can you give us a piece for this group show?" And I had a box of old porno that was my porno box that I kept in the closet, in the tomato box with a, you know, lid. It was solid. It did the trick; all the porno was in there, all the porno magazines. And it was a thing to me. But I was also like, Christ, you know, how much more do I need this? And I thought that would be such a fantastic piece, the box of porno, somebody's box of porno, because every gay guy has one, or did at that point, you know what I mean? They didn't have a cell phone; they had a box of porno. And so I just brought it to the gallery; this was my piece. And it was made a piece because it was in the context of the Paula Cooper Gallery, where people put things on the floor—Judd, Carl Andre; it was a thing on the floor, but this was a thing filled with gay porno.

ALEX FIALHO: Was it opened?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, but it was stacked, and it was also like a Joseph Beuys or, you know, a box of fat; it was just a cardboard box plopped on the ground. And it was fantastic to me; I thought it was fantastic. And the title of the piece—I called it *Old Friends*. And it worked, in some—I mean, it's old and people were into it, and I think people received it in that way, but again, it wasn't a metaphor. I called it *Old Friends*, a poetic thing. It's a metaphor—it was my box of porn. I just took it from one situation and put it in another and made it art.

ALEX FIALHO: What was that show? What else was in that show?

JACK PIERSON: I forget, whoever—I'm sure Hugh Steers; I'm sure anybody that was dealing around or that would have contributed to AIDS probably great stuff; I forget now. I was too [inaudible], but Bob Gober curated; you said yes to him.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JACK PIERSON: It was going to be at Paula Cooper, just like we were discussing. And it was no sacrifice for me on a certain level. On the one hand, Well, if they sell it, it'll make all this great money for AIDS, and if they don't, I won't mind having it back. But it did sell, I think for $5,000, which to me seemed like such a Dada gesture, you know what I mean? Imagine that, through my perversion, $5,000 was generated for AIDS [laughs]. That was, like, a badass thing.

And it became a work of art. And that has since changed hands at Sotheby's in an auction catalogue; they fucked it up by—but I kind of love it. When it changed hands at Sotheby's, they photographed it all spread out. The piece, to me, is a box of porn. If you dare to look at it, go ahead, but it was like that. But of course, it gets to Sotheby's; they want to show you the contents, like that's the main thing, so they spread all the porn out and left

the box and photographed it, in that way that Jeff Koons does, against a gray—like a gradient-gray background. Like, This is a work of art. And it's just [laughs] gay porn, you know what I mean? And then they had like a $25,000 estimate on it, or something like that, so it just seemed like I really—this is so good. And it's not a joke to me, but it is funny that like, Oh, okay, so I've circulated this thing that went from being porn I picked up on Second Avenue into an artwork. Okay, I'm done.

ALEX FIALHO: AIDS is in full swing at this point?

JACK PIERSON: AIDS is in full swing at this point, and Mark Morrisroe was the only person that I was very close to that I had—I certainly knew lots of people were dying, but I wasn't close to them, and I was, I don't know, in denial or fear. I guess it like was a sort of like, Oh, my God, AIDS. But it wasn't a thing that I really inhabited. I don't know what I thought about that.

I thought it was sad that he died, and it also didn't seem like a shock to me, somehow, like if he hadn't died of AIDS, he might have died of a drug overdose or any number of things. We had been out of touch for the last five years, because he was unruly and kind of violent at that point. Before we even knew he had AIDS, he had become kind of unhinged, thanks to drugs and alcohol. And so he wasn't really part of my life. And then all of a sudden, Oh, guess what? He has AIDS. And then that was like, Okay, well, he has AIDS. Well, let me know.

And when he really got sick—I forget when he died, '89?—I did start going to visit him. And it just seemed like more of his life to me; it seemed almost natural within his trajectory or narrative that this would happen. He went out with as much drama as he always lived, somehow. And he had a new set of friends by then. Both Pat and I went over with Tabboo! and visited him, and played games with him in his bed for a while a couple of times. And it—no, go ahead.

ALEX FIALHO: Amidst the crisis, it may have felt like it made sense within his trajectory, but I'm sure the crisis didn't feel like that made too much sense—what was your reaction to the overall shifts in lifestyle, tragedy, losing friends in their 30s, 20s?

JACK PIERSON: I think I thought—and I still do, and it's still a thing that I wrestle with in therapy—when people die, it doesn't seem to me like a surprise or the worst thing on earth. And I can remember, I don't know when—okay, here's a thing I forgot. Everybody was doing ACT UP, and I couldn't bear that, because it was so political and—I went to a couple meetings, because you just felt like you had to, and I was like, Oh, I can't bear people screaming at each other, and this and that and the intensity.

So I thought, Oh, I'd better do something. So I worked on an AIDS hotline that was developed. And you had to do kind of, like, three weeks of intake and getting you ready. And that basically involves sitting around in a circle with the other people that were trying to be trained and volunteered to do so and discussing AIDS like this, that, and suicide. I remember one night, I was the only person out of 30 that thought if somebody wants to commit suicide, they have the right. It's okay. And almost 29 people were like [snarling]. Well, I don't know. Why not? Somehow. And I felt at that moment like, Oh, God. And that generated anger towards me, but somehow they hired me, or gave me a position answering these phones.

And now suicide affects me greatly, and I really feel like it's aberrant and a big mistake, and I don't like it. But at that time, I was probably, like, 25; it just seemed like, Why the hell not? If somebody wants to commit suicide, I mean, I would try to talk them out of it; that was my job; but I don't feel like they're not entitled to it, somehow.

And so death has always seemed the same thing to me; it doesn't seem like that big a deal; you die, somehow. And that makes it out like—I question myself, How shut down am I? Or how robotic is that? But it just doesn't seem like the worst thing on earth, death. So I couldn't get as angry about people dying, and it also didn't seem so outlandish that—I had every response that you could possibly have. Like, God's punishment. Yes, I guess it is showing God's punishment. The CIA did it to kill gay guys. Yes, that's probably a distinct possibility. I believed that for a while, too; how could it not be? Yes, I bet it's that. But I also felt like, Well, if you're going to fuck 1,200 guys in your life, how can you not get a disease? You know what I mean? Most people, at that time, had fucked 1,000 guys. What do you expect? was kind of my response. And it's not like, What do you expect, you deserve to be punished. It's just sort of like, What do you expect? [Laughs.] I don't know, part of the great thing was that gay guys could fuck 1,000 guys, but part of the payback when the bill came due—Oh, you fucked 1,000 guys; you're going to get something. I don't know. Whether it was inserted by the CIA or whatever, it just increases your chances for that. So it was a mind-blowing thing that I just kind of wrestled with, but not in any public way.

ALEX FIALHO: How about the stigma or the government neglect?

JACK PIERSON: Well, the government neglect, even then, I'm like, What do you think? The government is all going to run for gay guys? It didn't seem like a shock to me. But, guess what? Out of that—in the same way that I could tell you, Oh, isn't it a circle? How the circle was completed by me going to—being depressed, going to Findhorn, borrowing $300, getting $300 from Bruce, it seems like, Yes, eureka, of course. Tragedy, loss, the full

cycle.

Gay men started talking about having sex 1,000 times. Gay men started talking about how we're being treated. Gay men organized around that; lesbians helped them. It unified gay men and lesbians. There was a unification around that that was a good thing that it occurred, because it wouldn't have happened without something that major to unify you, no? Just like this new thing that's going on now, the only upside is that maybe something will come of it.

ALEX FIALHO: President-elect Trump?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, President—that thing. So I don't know. I don't want to sound—it's all important, and I think it worked; it did something. It grabbed attention for gays; it grabbed attention for families of gays; it grabbed attention for people that never heard of a gay, you know. Yeah, it's super sad. It's as outrageous as—what do you call the thing in the '60s? The civil rights movement. It was a civil rights movement for gays. And things got better. I'm not saying it was like, Oh, we got our $300, but something happened that was positive out of it. And there was a great loss, and as I've gotten older, death freaks me out more than it did when I was little, little meaning in my 20s. I'm more freaked out by death now because it's around the corner.

And I'm more freaked out by suicide now because it just seems like, Oh, I could have figured out how to—I've never been really suicidal. And as much as I've been depressive and melancholy and really self-obsessed, I've never really been suicidal except in a slow, titrated way, like smoking and drugs and alcohol. I might have been doing a slow suicide, but I've never thought, I've got to get—this is it. I've got to kill myself. But I've felt those feelings and got through them because I can still be amused by a pretty little teacup somebody once owned. And it keeps me going a little bit, these things of the real world, or the possibility that something's going to be great, or what I might do tomorrow. So I never get that suicidal.

ALEX FIALHO: How long did you work on the AIDS hotline, and what were some of your experiences with that?

JACK PIERSON: Well, it devolved. I worked, you know, a few months.

ALEX FIALHO: What types of calls were they?

JACK PIERSON: I would get all these calls that were so infuriating—but telling—and it took me out of New York City into another world, where people would call from out of the cities and be obsessed with the idea that they had AIDS. And I would say, "Well, have you had sexual contact with a man?" "No, but I've thought about it." "Well, you can't get it from thinking about it." "No, I think I really do have it." And that was sort of beyond my capacity [laughs] to deal with, but I sort of knew what it was.

And then not all the calls were directly related to AIDS. I got a couple of horrendous calls from a retarded gay guy in a wheelchair that lived in a housing facility for retarded people with wheelchairs that was being sort of threatened, because he was gay on top of everything else. So that would be an intense thing to go home with. I got a phone call from a kid in, probably, Alabama who had stolen a *Playgirl* magazine from the 7-Eleven, and his father dragged him down there and made him stand in front with a sign that said, "I'm a fag. Spit on me." His father did that.

So those things came up more often than, you know, somebody with AIDS. I don't know that I ever spoke to somebody that, "I have AIDS and I feel"—it was always, "I think I have AIDS. What should I do? I can't go to a doctor in my hometown." "Well, have you had sex with a man?" "No." [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: Did it have an effect on your own sexuality, sexual practices, lifestyle?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, I'm sure there were—I'm trying to remember. Yes, I was sexually active, but a certain amount of this stuff wasn't hard for me to give up. And then there was part of me that was like, I don't give a shit. You know. I did practice safe sex during that time, but safe sex was something kind of natural for me because I didn't mind, you know, on-me-not-in-me; that was fine with me, and that was fun for me. And that was a big phrase, "on-me-not-in-me." And I am kind of almost more voyeuristic than I am participantistic or something. Or I can live with voyeurism, like I'm a fan of pornography; I'm a fan of the visuals, so I didn't feel deprived or like, Oh, God, I can't do this, but it was a thing.

And then, P.S., early on, I went to some clinic because, all of a sudden, I had all of these little blisters on my hand. I waited on line to see a doctor in the East Village, and I was like [breathing heavily]. And I did the whole thing. I'm like, Oh, what are these blisters? And I get into the clinic, and the doctor looks at it and he's like, "You're homosexual. You think you have AIDS?" And I was like, "Yes." And he was like, "Those are sweat bubbles," or something like that. He was like, "It's sweat bubbles; get out of here, you know. You don't have AIDS." And I was like, Phew, and just ran [laughs], and that was the last thing. So it wasn't serious to me, I do remember.

So Mark dies, and then everybody that knew him and knew that I had had sex with him five years ago were like, "Don't you want to get checked?" And I was like, "No, I feel fine." "You don't think you should get checked?" And then that would start to blow my mind, you know what I mean?

And I remember, at that time I was in Florida, and I kept jumping in the pool and starting to choke—I don't know. I'm a swimmer. I swim all the time. I do stuff, but somehow, I jump in the pool, and something would feel like I swallowed water, and I was drowning. And then somebody that day had said, "Don't you think you should get checked? You know Mark." And I was like, "That was five years ago. I'm fine. Don't worry about it." And then that, I was choking on the water, and I was like, What's that? Why am I choking? Should I get checked? I didn't get checked for two more years. I just kind of refused. It was '90; my career was taking off. I was like, No, no, no, this is all—I am fine.

And 1992, I went and had a test, for no reason other than I just felt like, Okay, I got the money, and I'm taken care of. I'm set. I can handle this. And I don't know if I did research before or whatever. I don't know if I told you. I wasn't for it or anything, like, "Should I get checked?" "Well, yeah, you know, it's probably not a bad idea." I don't know where I got the guy's name, the doctor's name, but I went and had a test. And it was at that time where you wait five days for the results. And that might have been the first time I'd been to a doctor, other than the clinic to look at my hand and get out of here; I hadn't had a physical in a million years. I went to this guy, had the test, and five days later, they're like, "Oh, could you come into the office? We can't give the results over the phone."

And I was like, "Well, why the hell not?" I was just pissed off, like, "What, I've got to go all the way back to the West Village? Just tell me." They were like, "No, I'm sorry. We can't do that." So I go; I wait, and sit up on the table with the crinkly paper. The guy looks at me and is like, "I'm sorry to tell you; you have tested positive." And I started to cry, and I kind of couldn't believe it; I was sobbing. And he stood there and looked at me, and when I stopped crying, I was like, "Well, how long have I got?" And he was like, "There's no way to say." And I was like, "Well, two weeks? Do I have two weeks?" And he was like, "It's really impossible to"—and I was like, "You can't give me two weeks?" [Laughs.] He was like, "Well, yes, I mean, hopefully, but there's—it's so—we don't know. I would hate to"—and I was like, "Can we just say two weeks?" And there was nothing wrong with me; there was no visible—I only got the test because it just seemed like, Okay, now it's time; there was nothing in me saying, Do this. And he was like, "You know, it's great that you cried. You'd be surprised. You're almost one of the first people—I've only had one other person that cried. Most people just get up and walk out."

And I was like, "Thanks, I guess." And it was just—I was stunned and in shock. I think you just went into a state of shock at the time somehow. And I don't know. I started to tell people. I wasn't, like, ashamed, I think. I mean, I kept it quiet, but I told people right away. I told people. And I was freaked out, and I got comfort from Tabboo!, and I got comfort from Linda Yablonsky, people that I knew. And then, you know, it also wasn't like the biggest deal to them. "What are you going to do?" I was just like, "Oh, it'll be okay," and Linda was like, "Let's go to the movies tonight," and I was like, "Yeah, well, as long it's something uplifting, if we go to"—it was the premiere of *Naked Lunch*. We just all of—like a virus. David Kronenberg. And it was the worst possible choice for a movie the night that you tested positive, the science fiction about a virus that's like—I don't know. But it was so bad that it was humorous. I just was like, Oh, God, I can't believe we're here. And life went on.

I found a good doctor. I think, at that moment, I had been going—okay, it takes me a minute. I had been going even before this [to see Louise Hay and Marianne Williamson –JP], because I was participating in some weird way—I don't know whether it was divided into the people that did ACT UP and the people that did Louise Hay. But Louise Hay—do you know who she was? Started having things at the Saint—healing circles. And I would go to those before—now we're going back to before I was positive. I would go to participate in the energy around healing, and also Marianne Williamson was big, and that was a thing that seems so odd now.

There were things around AIDS that we participated in as a result of AIDS, like macrobiotics; everyone I knew ate at macrobiotic restaurants and cooked macrobiotically, because many of our friends were doing that as a way to deal with AIDS. And so we did it. And so there was energy like that around it that I participated in. I went to many healing circles just to be [part of] a positive vibration or because I believed in it, and I sort of believed in that way of dealing with it, like it would have to be curing the spirit somehow.

And so I had those tools for the day I tested positive, and that was the route I was going to take, was alternative. I think it was pre-AZT or anything, wasn't even in '92. I don't think there was a real—there was maybe Pentamidine or something like that. So when I finally—I was going to New Age, holistic ways of dealing with it at the Center [for Living] meetings, and at that meeting, I met a doctor that was there sort of as a plant. He was in there acting as though he believed in these things, but sort of plucking people to his practice. And he was Dr. Paul Bellman.

So I went and started to be seen by him. And he immediately put on me on Pentamidine, which was a thing to cure the pneumonia, pneumococcus, whatever. I guess my T-cells were really kind of shockingly low. And I

might've spent a fortune on New Age self-help books, just went and bought a stack of them, and just kind of look—they comforted me; I didn't read them. Part of what I told him right from the beginning is—all the language around was like, If you don't take charge of your own recovery—you know, the people that take charge of their own recovery are the ones who will have a hope of surviving. And I knew I just didn't have that in me.

So I said that to Bellman the first day. I was like, "I don't care. I'm not going to run around researching medicines and the right things and da, da, da." And he was like, "You don't have to; I'll do that for you." And so I just did what he said. I guess I did have to—the T-cells were low enough—I was sat in rooms full of people that were visibly sicker than I, hooked up to intravenous drips, and I was like, Wow. I just stayed in a kind of fog, in a state of shock. But I never really get possessed by fear that much. I think I live with a low-grade fear all through my life that is some part of my personality, but I never get "the sky is falling" fear. I just always think, It'll work out; this will work out; this could never happen. And somehow, you know, what is it? Twenty years later, more.

ALEX FIALHO: Twenty-four.

JACK PIERSON: I did what he said. I took the drugs when he said to. I went through all the first kind of drugs. I mercifully didn't have any bad side effects except for one that made you kind of shit your pants. And that was a drag.

And my career was going, so it felt like that occupied me, and I became more passionate about, you know, leaving a mark and—and actually, the work got less dark at that point than it had been. There was no more indulging in sort of over-the-top dramatics and heartbreak and stuff like that. I might be full of shit.

I fell madly in love right again with someone. And I guess probably being HIV-positive, I didn't want to have that. I was so madly in love that I didn't want to have that discussion, because I thought, I don't want anything to impede this. I have to make sure he's in love with me before I tell him. And then that was another obsessive relationship, and finally, I told him, and he wasn't in love with me anyway, and he didn't love me anymore, like I thought; well, whatever. So I did still indulge in a little drama through '93, maybe, and I still continued to make those kind of heartbroken drawings that were a blend of the guy in LA and a blend of this new guy.

I wouldn't say I was publicly out about being HIV-positive, but my friends knew. And—the '90—I was in my first Whitney Biennial; I was in my second Whitney Biennial. Around that time, I did start to become more friendly with Nan. And that whole Boston School show occurred, and that created this idea that we had been friends since the '70s, but that wasn't really true.

ALEX FIALHO: That was Lia Gangitano.

JACK PIERSON: But I knew David; there were all these connections. And now she was a part, and so it gelled around us quite nicely. She was a fan of mine; I was a fan of hers. I really loved *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, as that was a major work of art at that moment, and it allowed for me to be embraced, I think, and it gave me personal permission to deal with the subject matter I was dealing with.

But my photography became—after three years of people saying the photography was amateur and looked found—and maybe they were found snapshots—it was remarkably touching, considering the low quality and lack of expertise; that got me riled up, and I wanted to be, like, a real photographer with a capital P, and I started to make photographs that look like I know what I'm doing.

But they were kind of very beautiful and very celebratory and the flowers and—and I had to read that flowers and a picture of a young boy really meant the opposite. Like, youth would fade; flowers would fade; they're all going to die. In my mind, it was like, Look how pretty these flowers are; look at how cute this boy is [laughs]. And it ended there for my—I wasn't thinking the metaphor of beauty fades. I was just putting it out there because I thought it was great. But as I would read my own press, I was like, Oh, really, okay. That's probably—[laughs]—I guess it's probably true, but it wasn't in my first level of thought.

But I don't know, I continued to make the word pieces that became more poetic, and then I wanted—I could do whatever I want, and goddammit, nobody would ever care about my paintings. So I made those blue paintings that are in there and moved to Provincetown again.

Part of what allows me to be detached so much is the itinerancy of my whole life. I've always moved from place to place, and have intense experiences in another place, and then maybe talked about it back in New York. You kind of can't depend on me being here, but you can come visit me there. And I've always liked that. I admired it, and I went through a big Somerset Maugham period. I feel like Truman Capote did it. I felt like Tennessee Williams; I would go to Key West and write *The Rose Tattoo*. They would go here and write this. So I modeled myself after those kind of things, and it's worked.

ALEX FIALHO: Detached from?

JACK PIERSON: You know, a day-to-day community. Somehow. I don't feel like I lack a community now, but it's—I have a few communities somehow. And when I'm there, I communicate within them, and I feel them, and when I'm gone, it's, I don't, somehow.

ALEX FIALHO: Did you feel like HIV/AIDS affected your practice, either the atmosphere of the crisis at that moment or testing positive?

JACK PIERSON: No, it might have ignited me, and I can remember—cut to four years later; maybe it's like '97 or something. It's hard to—it's all one decade. In the later '90s, I went through this period—even though no sickness had come, the T-cells were low, and that seemed chilling, but there was no visible or palpable indication that anything was wrong, except that he would say, "Oh, your T-cells are low." And went on AZT. Maybe that got them back up. But I did go through this thing, Well, it's all going to end; let's have fun. And so I would up the ante on doing things quicker and more extensively. Like I maxed out credit cards now at this point; like, I would stay at hotels and, you know, really live a very high existence thinking, Well, I'm going to die. I better get it over with. And then I kind of hit a bottom with that, where all of a sudden, it was like, Fuck; it doesn't seem like I'm going to die. I've spent all this money [laughs]. What was I going to do?

But that aided me getting through that. I got more emboldened to live as fully as I possibly could, in terms of travel and continuing to do what I wanted and, you know, making the work, go someplace every time I did it, which is to my peril, too. I thought part of the genius thing that I was doing in that period was not having a signature, that my work could just go—you might not know who did it; there was nothing so signature about it. And I thought I was doing that, but really I wasn't, and it was a shock to me that the word pieces became so trademark-y or, dare I say, iconic somehow. And then I was grateful for that, but somehow, I thought, Oh, I've successfully eluded being this person that does one thing that you're identified with, but then the word pieces sort of took that over.

And they got better, because I could—I worked harder on them, and that's interesting for me to see now, compared to early on. If it didn't even look that great, and I had the letters to spell the word I wanted to spell, well, that's how it was going to have to look. But now I have tons of letters, and I can try every single R combo, you know, I want until I get the right one. And they're kind of better and more beautiful, but the early ones are kind of more raw and pathetic, and there's something great about that, too, but there's something great that I've got it so refined that they're pretty good. And I continue to make them.

On one level, it's kind of an addiction, because they're my biggest-ticket item that pays the rent and allows me to experiment with all these other things and be a painter and do this. Those things don't sell as quickly or as fast because they're not as identifiable. And I find myself still wanting to say things in that way somehow, so it's—it works for me.

ALEX FIALHO: How about a little bit around Mark's passing? You spoke about visiting him in the hospital, but what was the impact?

JACK PIERSON: I didn't—I never visited the hospital. I visited him at his house in Jersey City, which, like I was saying, he went out in true Mark Morrisroe style.

The building he was living in, the guy had kicked everybody out and was trying to renovate the building. So when you came to the door to visit him, it was a door, and it was just the structure, with no walls, except on the third floor; there were still walls around Mark's apartment. The building was vacant—the stair went to his apartment; there were no other walls in the whole four-story tenement. And it just seemed like, Oh, God, it was so crazy-looking. How can you be up there in this thing lying on a mattress? I don't know. I gave him a kiss, and I didn't—you know, you never knew whether it was going to be the last time you saw him.

I went out there a couple of times, but I never went to the hospital in Jersey City, which was a big, Gothic hospital. And I think other people write or [have] spoken––there's a good legend going around about his final moments there, but that's not part of my story. Somebody else took this story from there. I signed his quilt on the AIDS quilt [project], and we went to that March on Washington all together; that was something I did with Nan and David and Tabboo! and a bunch of people. We all went to that big March on Washington, and that was a profound experience, I would say.

ALEX FIALHO: In what sense?

JACK PIERSON: Just like you couldn't believe how big this thing was and how many people there were and—

ALEX FIALHO: The AIDS quilt?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, the AIDS quilts. And that that was the gesture. I don't think I thought that at the time; it's just coming to me now, that ragtag assemblage making up a life that you walked around and looked at

somehow. That's the monument—and it worked in a really good way; it was really profound.

And the other crazy thing that happened that night—the night before or part of the night—one organization was doing projections of all the people that had died of AIDS, and somehow there was a picture of me. I think it was a Mark Morrisroe picture of me, was in it. [Laughs.] And that was like, What? It just seemed like such a bad omen at that moment. I did get freaked out. I was like, What is that doing—I think everybody felt it. And I can't remember if that was before or after I knew I was positive, but that was a bad omen of that weekend in Washington, D.C.

ALEX FIALHO: With so many people in the visual art community dying of AIDS in the '80s and '90s, the landscape of visual art was definitely changed. Could you feel how it was changing then? Or how do you feel like it changed now that you have some time and space from that?

JACK PIERSON: I don't know if I elucidated it enough, but part of what I was telling you about, even Paul Johnson in Provincetown, meeting him. David Armstrong, to a large extent, even though he seemed so much older to me, when I was young, than I was. And there was another great queen, Jason Byron Gavann, who was mentioned a little bit in the Boston School catalogue. But they were, to me as a youth, old queens. And when I was a youth and when Tabboo! was a youth and Mark Morrisroe, we were into old queens. They held the information we wanted to know about, and told us what to listen to and how to dance the cha-cha-cha, and what it would it be like, you know. I don't know what information, but information was imparted from older queen to a younger queen. And that was of value to me, more so than the landscape of visual art.

I just think the greatest loss is life, but one of the greatest absences, rather than loss, is that whole generation of mentors. And I'm part of that generation now, so part of my interest in doing this interview, teaching young people, aside from their beauty, is I want to be that to somebody, somehow, because I feel like young people are really missing that.

Now, the scary thing to me is that I taught recently; it doesn't seem like they give a shit. We wanted to know about old things. The quilts seemed like the best metaphor for that generation, because it seemed like one of the things you were into as a gay guy was old things. I don't feel like that's really the case anymore. I could be wrong. Based on my class of five gay kids recently, they don't seem to give a shit.

I came to New York, and if I was speaking to somebody that had been at the Warhol factory, it was like, What? What was it like? You were there. And I'd go pick their brain, and like, You knew that one; you actually, what, Jackie, you know. I had all this information, and it meant something to me. I feel like the new generation, it's just, like, you know, Who cares? It's just so old. We don't care about old stuff [laughs]. I was talking about it, as I was teaching this year, to people of my generation; they were like, We were the same way when we were kids, and I was like, I really wasn't. I was into it. I wanted to know. But they were like, No, but you thought everything was like—that obsession with the '50s. I was into knowing about how it was, what it was like, and what I might do to navigate it. And I got that from old gay guys. It doesn't seem like that's the case anymore.

But I feel like I'm still here. It is the case sometimes, and I know when it's working. I just like to show up, and that's why I like tell the story in detail, because I think, every once in a while, some little detail—and this is the same for my artwork—some little detail that seems insignificant and offhand can change your life. That happened for me. So—

ALEX FIALHO: When?

JACK PIERSON: When? I don't know. It's more of a—well, the best story I have that describes it is the first time I was in Miami in '83 and broke and shit out of luck, and I had no fame, and I wasn't really producing anything. I saw that Chris Burden was speaking at the University of Miami, which was not on Miami Beach. It was like a two-hour, sort of public transportation negotiation to get over to, and I'm not a person that does hard things or—

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JACK PIERSON: You know what I mean?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JACK PIERSON: Like, I like it easy. But somehow, Chris Burden, because of SIM, I learned to revere him as, like, a God of sort of the highest integrity and rigor, and those early performances and the documentation, and I just thought, Wow, he is a really serious, ivory-tower kind of guy, even though one of those performances was all his canceled checks and things like that. All his canceled checks inhabited me enough to—like all my porn.

But I went to see him speak. I made an effort to go to this University of Miami because this guy was there, and he was just telling everything. "Then I did this, then I did that, and then I did this piece." And he said, "Oh, you

know, I got so sick of getting these budgets. Like I'd get $10,000 budgets from these museums and spend the whole thing on plywood, and then be broke and not be able to pay the rent, so this time, I used the $10,000 to buy a diamond, and I called it this, and I put it in a glass booth, hit it with a pin spot, and called it this, and then after the show was done, I had the diamond, and I could sell it, and I had some money to live on." And [laughs] that—like, Chris Burden thinks in those terms? Basically, how do I figure this out to make it work for me, and also make poetry somehow? So it did something.

I was like, Wow. It just demystified something for me, made it seem like, Oh, okay, you just do this. It was economic, and it was basic, and it was practical, and somehow, it seemed like this gave me access to, Oh, it's not like this big, otherworldly genius. It is, and then it's like, Look, let's pay the rent; how can we do it? What's the best way to do that? So that was information that he transferred by being willing to be so honest that changed my life, because somehow, all of a sudden, I got going in terms of like, Okay, I don't have to feel like a genius. I do think of myself as kind of an alchemist, but I don't have to think of myself as this like, Only few are chosen to make this thing called art. So that was like a little piece of information. I don't know.

I can't think of a similar thing from a gay guy, but I don't know, I've always liked older people, and I've always liked younger people, so it all just seems fine somehow. Some young people are still interested. It seems valuable. And part of the reason I persevere and continue to make work is maybe something will be transferred that makes somebody's life better. There was a moment, late-'90s, probably into 2000, where I just wanted to leave evidence of a well-lived life or a beautiful life, or like this guy—you know, my evidence is not dissimilar from the thrown-out stuff I found on Second Avenue, and I think that's my whole practice, as I begin to think in terms of leaving evidence of a life lived. And maybe even that's why it's so hard for me to really do a studio practice per se, even though I have a studio, and sometimes I indulge in a thing that looks like a studio practice. But I sort of want to be most interested in living, not that I live in any spectacular way. But that's what I feel like I'm best at.

ALEX FIALHO: Makes sense, looking at your work. Let's talk a little bit about your two exhibitions at Luhring Augustine in the mid-'90s.

JACK PIERSON: Okay, which came after a very raw and emotional and kind of very handmade narrative of kind of a loser in the Tom Cugliani show. And then Tom Cugliani folded and was—

ALEX FIALHO: Which ones exactly were the Tom Cugliani?

JACK PIERSON: Drawings, like draw a cigarette smoking in hand, you know, tragic, obsessive love, roses, pithy remarks. And the word piece *Helpless Hopeless*—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JACK PIERSON: —was the big, dominant thing in the room, the big X that said *Helpless Hopeless,* made out of really forlorn letters, a few cut-up photographs of Elvis Presley and Jean Harlow and elements of all this narrative, say, a narrative of decrepit glamour and broken hearts, and a lot of words and information and photographs.

Luhring Augustine, which was and is still—even at that time wasn't a startup gallery; it was a blue-chippy, very fancy, SoHo gallery at the time—offered me the show. And at that time also, I had been awarded a fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, which lasted from October to May, and perhaps the Luhring Augustine show was—I don't know when—sometime after, maybe that same spring.

I hadn't gone to Provincetown since 1980, and in 1990, '91, I started spending like 10 days or two weeks there in the summer, so whenever the Fine Arts Work Center thing—I think it was like '93 or something—I went back for the winter and worked there. And I sort of felt like, Okay, now I'm this Provincetown painter; I'm going to finally show the abstract paintings I've always wanted to show. And I also began reading about the digital revolution, not that I'm a techie or know that much, but I started to read about this coming digital revolution, and ones and zeroes, and things like that, and I thought, Well, it'd be good to make paintings; like, I could do really big photographs if we can print them digitally, and stuff like that. But I was already skipping ahead one show, and I thought, I'd better lay the groundwork for this digital painting. So I made, while I was in Provincetown, these small paintings.

I knew the best way for me to be able to make a painting was not have too many colors, so they were all going to be blue. It would be a continuation of a sort of melancholic psyche that was having the blues. It was just the blues in general, and I thought in terms of—I had the show, the pink show, planned for after it as well, but there was going to be a blue period and a pink period, because now I was an artist, and I had periods. You know, this would be my blue period, and they would be abstract. I made them all with, if not my finger, then a palette knife that approximated a finger, and they were oil sticks of—like oil paintings on paper, and I worked on them, and they were just—they were digital in that my fingers were digits. It was a simple gesture repeated.

And I worked on those at night in Provincetown. They gave me a room; they gave me a studio; and there was nothing else to do in Provincetown because it was the winter. But there was a community of artists, and we'd have potluck suppers, and I made friends with this poet, Richard McCann, who was a writer there, because half the fellowships were writing fellowships and half were visual arts fellowships. I just made this body of work and sort of listened to music and painted, and it seemed great.

Those paintings were going to comprise most of the first Luhring Augustine show, and I made oil-stick paintings and watercolor paintings. They were kind of great, and they had a lot of energy. So I put them in the show and did a set of new word pieces that looked kind of radically different than the old ones, because they were a little more modernist; they were brushed-aluminum letters and a very limited palette of black, white, and silver. One of them said "LIKE SOMEONE ALONE," and one said, "ANYONE," and then the third one, I think, at that time—and one said, "BELIEVE" and that was a very delicate one somehow. Then, to me, the most radical one in the whole show said, "GOD," and it was very tiny, a little one that said, "GOD."

And then there was a row of drawings that were just white chalk on black paper of a hand with a cigarette in it, which was my hand, smoking, and it just looked noir-ish and night and, like, black paper/white line, angsty hand.

So the whole thing added up to kind of a—and it also included the piece *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow*, which is the AIDS-iest of all the pieces because it does look like a hospital, sort of like a World War I hospital, filled with bedsheets somehow. That might have been my most overt—I did it because I just liked the materiality of the stacks of white sheets, but I did think, Oh, this is going to read hospital-y a little. But on the top of it was a little still life where it was still my kind of touchstones of like a Jean Harlow biography and a Patti Smith book of poetry and a clamshell—one of the early signature items was a clamshell ashtray, sort of a pack of cigarettes and a comb, things like a vanitas, on a certain level, and a little drawing of a word piece that I made that said, "Blue." So that whole show was kind of about prayer.

I think that came out of testing positive. I had tested positive by that time. It wasn't overt; we didn't put it in the press release. Luhring Augustine didn't know. Most people didn't know, but that was—I was praying in that show. I was praying, and I was also being an artist with a capital A; I was making paintings. I wasn't being this strange guy that wanders around Times Square and, you know, pulls together the detritus of faded glamour into surprisingly emotional works. I was being an artist with a capital A, like, Look at these paintings, baby. I made them. These are my hands making those great gestures.

It was gestural painting, but a very simple gesture. It was a beautiful show, and I loved it. Maybe there were a few photographs thrown in around that that were also kind of showbiz-y photographs. It had all the elements, but it was also this new, "I'm a painter now" show. And then the second—the pink show came, I don't know, a couple years later.

The studio in Times Square, I had finally been kicked out of. I was without a studio. There was no place to move. And guess what? I didn't need it, because I had found this process in Los Angeles, a guy that made billboards, who printed billboards for billboard people. The interface with people like that is usually really difficult for an artist, because they just do what they do, and they don't want to talk in artistic terms, and they don't want to hear your little—what you need to have happen sort of thing. But I made a contact with a guy that was into working with an artist.

So I had photographs that were of bougainvillea, kind of another early trademark of mine, against a pink wall, and I knew I was going to just have those made. They would be printed on canvas and stretched, and they would look like big paintings with a capital P. I had done a couple to test, like I did with the early photographs. I had some test runs, and I went for it and made five huge, huge—like, three maybe eight-foot-square and two six-foot-square ones, all in a pink motif, and this was going to be my rose period somehow. I felt like I laid the groundwork with the handmade, digital ones to show you, Okay, and now these are another digital—none of this I ever put in press releases. This was just all my interior dialogue. And it was this show that, you know, it was ordered, kind of like Felix Gonzalez-Torres or Jeff Koons or something like that; I ordered it, and then—

ALEX FIALHO: Meaning outsourced?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, it was—"fabricated" is the word artists like to use. It was fabricated.

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JACK PIERSON: And it was also the rose period. And I had no studio, so the second room, the kind of small, drawing-space room, I set up as my studio. And I had set up enough studios in hotels or temporary spaces that I had a way of doing it. Like, you build this table that folds up, bring a few chairs in, bring a rug. I had them lay plywood on the floor and paint it pink and maybe paint all the walls pink, and I just inhabited that as my studio. It had a box of drawings and a box of photographs and stuff I was working on and some other word pieces that didn't really apply to anything and artwork by other people—Karin Kilimnik, and Tabboo! probably had a painting

in there. I just made it, like, my comfortable studio, how I would have a studio, and it seemed quite—it kind of referred back to the early installations of the place in Miami Beach, but this was now in real time.

It wasn't even like, This is my studio. I didn't really hang out there and do a sort of Plimoth Plantation, like, Look at the artist working in his studio, but I went there frequently, and it was set up to look like that. I had no other studio, so this was my studio, and it sort of seemed like a fun joke to me, too, like I was having such expensive real estate to be my studio. But I think it worked, and in contrast, it showed these big, manufactured paintings and then a very traditional-looking artist studio.

And the word piece—the only word piece in that show outside the studio space—said across two walls, "BEING ALIVE," really huge. That was another thing that—I think I was just so happy to still be alive. Even though it was only three years later, I was feeling it, and I was successful and I was at this great gallery and things were rosy. It was a very celebratory show, that show. So that's all I want to say about that. Those are the blue and the pink shows.

ALEX FIALHO: '96 is when antiretroviral treatment becomes available for HIV and—

JACK PIERSON: Oh, really? Okay.

ALEX FIALHO: —more or less, there becomes a treatment option for many people.

JACK PIERSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALEX FIALHO: So people stopped dying at the same speed.

JACK PIERSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALEX FIALHO: How did that shift affect you as someone living with HIV?

JACK PIERSON: I guess I forget that was—was that when AZT came along, or was that when other stuff—

ALEX FIALHO: That's when the cocktail came along.

JACK PIERSON: But wasn't AZT part of the original cocktail, like AZT plus this, plus this?

ALEX FIALHO: Perhaps.

JACK PIERSON: Perhaps, I think. I don't know. There was a moment of a couple of years where the cocktail was like—it did something, but it wasn't pleasant, or sometimes—

ALEX FIALHO: Of course.

JACK PIERSON: —as I indicated before, it was sort of like, Oh, [grumbling]. But I went on it right away and things improved. But like I said, nothing was happening with—the only thing that improved was your T-cells, which I can't really feel or see or know about. But that made the doctor feel great, and I felt great. To me, the big switch was from when the meds went from making you shit your pants to not, and that happened pretty quick. I didn't have to endure too many indignities like that. But I got on one that I've been on now for 10 years, and it hasn't changed.

ALEX FIALHO: How about your relationship to mortality? If, in that '94 show, you were praying, was that in the forefront for you?

JACK PIERSON: Okay, so '96, what am I, 36? I think then I went through another period of, you know, Fuck it, and I went sort of off the rails on drugs and alcohol and really started to party hard and live hard and go for it in a big way, which all seemed to me, at the time, like I was celebrating, as opposed to panicking. It's hard for me to still relate to it as panicking, but if you really take apart drug addiction, maybe something's wrong. I haven't come to terms with that yet. But I did get a little grandiose, and I just wanted it to be a constant party for a while.

And I don't know how that played into the work at that time, but I would say the next big statement that—to me, it was a really offhand gesture, but the next big statement that kind of got critically embraced or publicly embraced was that, because, you know, I was trying to do better photography and because I was sort of achieving success, magazines began to be more interested in having me shoot things for them, and I got on this kick of doing a lot of magazine work.

Shooting celebrities, shooting male models for fashion editorials, things like that. And I quite liked it, and I did a period of, They want it to be like my art, no different somehow. And I published a few things that were like that, which meant to me, out of focus, soft; the clothes weren't in the forefront. It was more a mood and an

atmosphere, and it used all these tricks that were acceptable to an artist but weren't really "fashion editorial" at that time. And then I got sick of that, and I was like, I want these to be as good as—I don't want them to have to rest on art; I want them to be fashion or advertising or things like that if I'm going to do this. And somehow I worked enough so that I think I did that—right? I was doing mostly men, as I do now, because that's what I like to do, and that's what people like to see me do, it seems like, the most. I did some women, some cool things with women, but I had a stack of pretty good editorial pictures of men, handsome men, that looked like real editorials.

The interesting thing that happened for me in 1989—deciding to print the snapshots, Nan Goldin's being embraced, Wolfgang Tillman's being embraced—it was a snapshot aesthetic. I don't know what year, late '90s, all of a sudden, there were floods of everybody's snapshots blown up to this size. And you saw them everywhere, and they were all kind of interesting. You know what I mean? Especially if they're old, or you had any interest in life, or the colors were saturated, but there were a lot of them.

Part of the other thing that put over my career that I did not mention early on was we published a little book. My gallery in Germany, Aurel Scheibler, threw down to publish a tiny little book called *Angel Youth* that's reprinted in there. It was a little pamphlet size, around the scale of a '50s porno magazine, no text, picture after picture, juxtaposition after juxtaposition, like, What the hell's going on here? Something glamorous, something deadly, something joyful, which is what you're looking at here. [Looking at *Angel Youth*, 1992 –JP] See, this is the little desk I worked at, at the Chateau Marmont. This is my studio in Times Square, you know.

ALEX FIALHO: This is the "PIE" image and the window image from the Ireland catalogue.

JACK PIERSON: There's the sleeping boy; here's a summer in Provincetown. And that—having a printed object really works to make things look serious and to make you look at them. You know, this isn't a great picture, but it has a lot of atmosphere, and it makes you think something. And in a book, it makes you think even more.

So anyway, I had been doing these pictures for them, for editorial and advertising, and there was a stack in there; they're pretty good, but they weren't really art. They were editorial. But what had happened is everybody's snapshot aesthetic came in; every Japanese girl had a book twice as thick as that, like, of their snapshots of everything, so it sort of got snapshotted out, so I had to go beyond snapshot. I had to be good, you know. And what I found in being good was that I created the same anonymous look, like, This is just editorial. You could see it on a bus shelter or in a magazine. And it sort of erased the personality of them, and they were back to being anonymous. They weren't snapshotty, that editorial look—and so I had a stack of them.

And whatever year this is—you have to look; maybe it's the early 2000s now—I was feeling very neglected, and nobody was caring about what I did, and then suddenly, a Whitney Biennial curator called up and said, "We'd like to come to your studio." And when they came into the studio, they were like, "It seems unmistakable, your—we've been putting together the Biennial; your influence is unmistakable, and we really think you should be in it. What have you got to show us?" At that time, I was making paintings—

ALEX FIALHO: What curators?

JACK PIERSON: Don't have it, being that I didn't know. She went on to run the Kitchen awhile back. This is why I don't have a bigger career, because I don't remember curators' names and collectors' names.

I was making these paintings out in the desert, because the other big thing that happened in 2000—this has to be post-2000 now, because in 2000 I bought a house in the California desert, in 29 Palms, and made some work out there that was very, like, black and white and sort of skulls and mountain things and sort of scary looking, and I tried to show her that. She was like, "Sorry, I've got enough Goth imagery going on; everybody on earth is painting skulls these days." She wasn't interested. And there was a stack of these photographs, you know, on my thing. She was like, "What are these?" It didn't just come off the cuff; I had been looking at all these pictures and thinking, How do I make sense of these? How do I make these work? I want them to be art, but they're not art. And I said, "What if I ever just—it's so nerdy, but what if I called them self-portraits?"

This isn't my brilliant idea. I'm pretty sure gay guys since the dawn of photography have been calling a picture of a sexier guy that they took a self-portrait. But I had never called any—I had only called one piece before in my life a self-portrait, and it was actually a collage about James Dean. So I had never—the original selfies, I just called "Me, Someplace." It wasn't like "Self-Portrait," because self-portrait was too grandiose. I said, "I was thinking of calling these self-portraits," and she was like, "Really?" At this point, they're only like this big. "Really? That seems really interesting." I was like, "Yeah, you're right, yeah. It's interesting. Cool, right?" [They laugh.]

And she was like, "Well, I'd like to include these. How are you going to do them?" and I was like, "You know, kind of big and frame them and, you know, be cool. I've got this new way we print, a different kind of digital"—whatever people were printing by Epson at that point. I was like, "Yeah." She goes, "Well, we'd like to include

some of these."

And so then that got me all energized. I was going to be in a Biennial with these pictures. And they're kind of hunky guys, but one in particular stood out, which is this photograph of a very young boy, nude, holding an axe, and that's what gave it the sense of realism, because you don't maybe know that that wasn't me. But it looked very American pictorial, a young, beautiful boy holding an axe just seemed like symbolism. It wasn't an editorial; that was a real picture from my life, a friend's kid, at my house in the desert, but somehow it gelled all these other ones that I had done for editorial that were basically handsome male models, or even movie stars.

And somehow I got this whole thing—I forget whether we were on the record or off. I have a feeling off the record. But I had this whole sort of disdain for photography in series somehow. I thought it was a sort of lame construct that made everything seem more serious than it was, like, I'm working on my series of this. But somehow—it was almost as a joke or a cynical sort of thing, Oh, this is my series of self-portraits, and they'll all be the same size, and they're going to be framed elaborately and beautifully, and you're going to think, This frame is exquisite, and really look like more than—like this is Art somehow. But the imagery was advertising, basically.

And there was still—I have a finesse, and it looked cooler than Cindy Sherman, quite frankly, but it was that kind of thing that I was going for, photography with a capital P, photography that was as good as painting, this big, framed elaborately, like, boom. And then number them, you know, like *Self-Portrait Number One*, *Self-Portrait*—it just all seemed like I was kind of making fun of this thing that people do. I thought, It needs a really intellectual essay. I had been to Croatia to do a little show in Croatia at the time, and I met this intellectual woman who worked at the University of Ljubljana, and I contacted her because I—it was all kind of part of this wry thing, I'll have a very—a Czechoslovakian intellectual from a university write the—and she was into it, and I was into it, too. But it's one of those things that was a sort of masterminded thing—I don't know, like I just did the whole thing to make it like people do, you know, which was nothing I usually did.

Usually, I was just like, "Okay, here it is. Go ahead. Do with it what you will." But this was a, "Let's make it look like this." We did a really serious catalogue of it that was hardcover and looked serious, and they were in the Whitney Biennial, so, endorsement. And they kind of ate it up. It was like [mimics eating]. I'm not saying it was a huge, commercial success, but it was the last time I got written about in the *New York Times* in a big way with a photograph. They went for it. It was good. So even though I was kind of being sarcastic at the time, I wasn't saying that, but that's what I was kind of doing. It worked. It was a thing that worked and now stays in, and you know, guess what? That was probably 2000 or 2001.

And I will blow my own horn because so many times I just try to be, Oh, well, whatever. Now Roe Ethridge and Collier Schorr are trying to do editorial as art, but sorry, I was there in 2001. And even though I'm saying it went over big and got embraced, it wasn't like it got embraced by *Artforum* or *Parkett* or whatever. Now all of a sudden, it seems like Roe Ethridge and Collier Schorr are inventing the crossover between editorial and art. It's my one little [laughs] bit of bitterness.

But it worked, and I thought I did something really interesting. In addition to the whole gay psychology of it and identifying yourself better than you are and aspirational, whatever, that worked. But that was also—I'm trying to figure out how I got there. I was telling you, at that point, I was sort of peaking in a very louse, drug-addled, and alcohol-fueled idea, so even that cynicism that came from there went into that, but it worked. It is sincere in there someplace, but that's probably what got me so, like, Yeah, do this, it'll be a hoot. But it worked. Okay, now what?

ALEX FIALHO: Let's talk a little bit about the LA show that's pretty recent, that you spoke to as being sort of one of the better projects you've worked on in the recent past.

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, okay, because—I do one other one before that, and I don't know where it figures—I don't think it came before this in the timeline. Next up, right around that time, my dear friend, Pat Hearn—who I'd become very close with through summers in Provincetown and through friendships with her and her husband, Colin de Land [. . .]—became ill with cancer. And that was the first death that I responded to in a kind of mature way. It was affecting me. It was slow; it was painful; and I was scared for her. It seemed unimaginable, and I didn't want it to happen. And then it did.

By then, I was at Cheim Read gallery. They had a space on 23rd Street that I had had a show in, and then they moved. They moved to a new space that was, in my mind, very cold, very—I mean, it was glamorous and austere, but it didn't have character. I may say that now, and it's still the same gallery. I found it an intimidating space, and I was 40, so this is the year 2000, because it was the year I turned 40. And I just didn't know how to operate within that space, because it didn't seem to hold a word piece well. It seems geared towards paintings. They do beautiful shows; just my own personal thing was like, How can I work with this space? So I did a show in my 40th year—I think—in 2000, was there a show at Cheim Read in there?

ALEX FIALHO: Yes.

JACK PIERSON: And it was my first show in their new space, which was very, like I say, austere and intimidating, very grand. So I went back, and Pat had died, and I was obsessed kind of with Johnnie Ray and—the album I played, because it was Colin's favorite, too, was Joan Baez's *Diamonds and Rust*, which has a version of "Danny Boy" on it, which is the traditional song sung at an Irish funeral. She was Irish. It's a beautiful version of "Danny Boy" that Joan Baez sings. And that was all the elements, and plus I was super into Charlie Chaplin at the time, too, so there were a few Charlie Chaplin—anyway, the main thrust of that show was that it was a big deal, and the biggest thing I had ever attempted was, I went back to the stage motif.

When you entered the gallery, you walked into the lobby, and there's a big, beautiful, chapel-like room where one single object usually is hung, or [inaudible], because you walk in, and soaring ceilings. I made this strange still life that was all metaphor, and it was called *A Portrait of the Artist in His 40th Year*. It had this head, and it was laden with beach-shell necklaces, and it had a horse from a carousel lying on an old, decrepit couch, an old trunk and some books, and a David Hockney etching—all these things that were indications of style and sort of a new level of the last 20 years of, like, Now I'm a rich aesthete, sort of, as opposed to a beach bum. But still, it was still beach bum-y in there someplace.

You saw that, and then, when you went into the main gallery through this door, I built a stage that you had to step two steps up onto, and it was just a black stage that went across the whole back of the gallery. So in order to enter the gallery, you had to walk on this stage, and it was a big stage, but there was no tinsel curtain. But the trick was, and the big thing that I was advancing, was that there was some kind of light beam or something—somebody else figured it out for me—that when you walked through the door, applause would well up, and it was the final encore music of Judy Garland at Carnegie Hall. So it's playing "Somewhere over the Rainbow," just the instrumental, and people are madly applauding for you as you're on this stage, and I'm thinking of the viewer having the same sense of being intimidated in a Chelsea gallery and then being thrust out onto this stage.

Then the rest of the gallery had, like, a makeup mirror, and the word pieces were all phrases from "Danny Boy," and that was kind of my portrait of myself at 40, an homage to Pat, and also a relationship to the early, tiny little four-foot-square stage, and now I hit this big stage, and it was all—but it was over, on a certain level [laughs]. It was the end as opposed to—and that was a great show. That was a pretty [laughs]—it was an expensive amount of plywood, somehow, that didn't go anywhere. But I thought it was a good show, and there were a few paintings in the back, and there was one huge word piece that said "Christ" because it also—at that time, I thought that was the most transgressive thing; to invoke Christ in the contemporary art world seemed like a very transgressive act. So that was a good, big show, almost at the same time as, maybe, the other things were in the Whitney.

ALEX FIALHO: 2004 was the Whitney, and 2000 was Cheim Read.

JACK PIERSON: Oh, really?

ALEX FIALHO: You've been in three Whitney Biennials, right?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah. All right. How did I get those paintings then? I must have kept doing those black-and-white paintings because they—

ALEX FIALHO: Unless maybe 2003 was Cheim Read?

JACK PIERSON: Oh, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Is the show you're describing your second Cheim Read show?

JACK PIERSON: Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And so maybe I did the self-portrait at the age of 40—well, I don't know. Whatever. I get confused. But I feel like the paintings that wound up being in Cheim Read are the ones I tried to get in the Whitney Biennial and they didn't want; they wanted the photographs. Anyway, so cut to—that's 2000—

ALEX FIALHO: What did you show in the '93 and '95 Biennials?

JACK PIERSON: The '93 Biennial had 30-by-40—which is what the 20-by-30 pictures morphed to, the first photographs—but the new, upscale, vibrant, beautiful color photographs of, you know, more Paris than Miami Beach and roses and flowers, and it was, again, a celebration of kind of the good life, but then also this very humble picture of my parents in the midst of it. And then one of the installations from Pat Hearn, the record player, sat next to a window and was painted on the wall, and in that room, believe it or not, was me, Elizabeth Peyton, and Raymond Pettibon, all in the same—am I wrong? No, the self-portraits were in the room with Elizabeth Peyton and David Hockney.

ALEX FIALHO: In 2004?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah. But as much as I got press in the *New York Times* for those pictures, I never got mentioned in any of the stuff in the Biennial, and the room with Elizabeth Peyton and Hockney was like—it was like they were in it by themselves. [They laugh.] They got all the attention, but I was in the same room.

ALEX FIALHO: The *New York Times* wrote a piece about the book [*Self Portrait*, 2003 published by Cheim & Read –JP].

JACK PIERSON: The book, exactly, right, which cemented the whole thing, I guess.

ALEX FIALHO: How about the '95 Biennial?

JACK PIERSON: The '95 Biennial was a big, huge digital painting, three panels. I guess it might have been like 18 feet by six feet, but in three different panels, and it was kind of—it was another big, blown-up selfie with flowers on each side and then a big middle panel of a horizon, the ocean, and it was like a huge billboard, and it was called *I Am a Lonely Painter, I Live in a Box of Paint*. That also went unnoticed in the Biennial [laughs], as far as I was concerned.

[They laugh.]

ALEX FIALHO: There's a lot happening in the Biennials. It's hard to—

JACK PIERSON: Yeah. But it was a cool piece, and it was a single piece. I got a whole 18-foot wall for it. It was great. Klaus Kertess, who just recently died, curated that Biennial, and my friend Peter Cain was in it, who also died suddenly—

ALEX FIALHO: I love his work.

JACK PIERSON: —in the midst of all that, not of AIDS.

ALEX FIALHO: How about LA, *End of the World*? More recent?

JACK PIERSON: More recently, my gallery in LA, Regen Projects, which I've had a number of shows with, too, in the last 30 years, moved to a huge new, as people are wont to do, space.

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JACK PIERSON: Big, renovated, massive space that, when I saw, I had no idea how I would inhabit it. And Shaun Regen, my dear friend over the years, who lost her husband almost a year—a year before Pat Hearn died, he died, so we bonded, got even closer over that, and then Colin died, too. And she wanted me to do a show there. She was like, "I want you to do a show in January for the new space." And she was telling me this, maybe, in June, and it was like, "No, there's no fucking way. I don't have anything. I can't—what am I going to do?" "We can divide the space; you can do whatever you want. It doesn't have to be big." And I was like, "No, it can't be done; sorry, it can't be done." I was like, "I can't—forget it. I'll think of something, but don't count on January. Forget it." She just kept—she said, "Oh, I don't want you to say no yet. You'll think of something, and it'll be great."

ALEX FIALHO: This is Shaun Regen?

JACK PIERSON: Shaun Regen. November, she's in New York, and she wants to have breakfast with me. She's like, "Well, your show's in January; what are you going to do?" and I was like, "I told you I wasn't doing a show. I couldn't do that!" And "Oh, you know"—

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JACK PIERSON: "I can't do this!" "You're kidding. Really? You really won't do it?" and I was like, "Absolutely not." So we left the breakfast, and she was like, "Okay." As I left the breakfast, I just felt like, Well, it wouldn't be the end of the world to try to do something. How am I going to do this? And then, boom, all of a sudden, I felt like, What if you—the end of the world? Meanwhile, it's like 2000—I think this is 2002. It's well after 2000, which was supposed to be the end of the world, right? Maybe even in the 2010s.

ALEX FIALHO: 2010?

JACK PIERSON: Right. Anyway, all of a sudden, I felt like, in that huge space, wouldn't it be great to make huge letters? And aren't I kind of like enamored *and* sick of these huge statements that people are making, like, Everything's massive and can you believe it? This was built and cranes were, you know—and Richard Serra and

like big, macho artists that do these big fucking things, and I've always done the little things I can do myself or have made for me. And so I was like, What if it just said, right across the whole gallery, "The End of the World," and you could even walk around it and look up at it and walk through the letters? It would look like a set from, I don't know, the *Cher Show* or *Shindig* or, like, any '60s show. It would just say that. And, well, okay, what if that happened? I could build it in the desert; I have this house in the desert with tons of space. We could build it. It would be right near LA. It could be kind of crappy and, you know, but solid.

And I had been teaching that year; Jim Hodges hired me to be a visiting artist at the Yale sculpture department, and while I was there, I met this kid that I thought was a really cool artist and really interesting.

ALEX FIALHO: Okay.

JACK PIERSON: He had transferred to the Yale sculpture department from a very sophisticated engineering program at Rochester. The story is brilliant of this kid, Pete Moran, and also not revealed to me until the whole trajectory of my project played out and we were actually working together. But I had met him; I thought he was interesting; and I knew he was super smart.

ALEX FIALHO: Okay.

JACK PIERSON: And—

ALEX FIALHO: Pete Moran?

JACK PIERSON: Pete Moran. He had graduated from Yale that year, and he was floating around, and so somehow, I got back on—I was walking away from the restaurant, and I called Shaun on her cell phone; I was like, "Okay, what about this? It says, 'The End of the World,' as tall as the gallery is, three feet deep, built out of plywood, painted silver. We'll do it in the desert. How does that sound to you?" "Sounds great!"

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JACK PIERSON: I was like, "It's going to cost a lot of money. Are you going to pay for it? I can't pay for any of it." She was like, "Yes, just do it." And at that point, I did think, Oh, I could get my desert folk to put it together if I needed to. But then I had this bright idea: Pete Moran. So I called Pete Moran, and I said the same thing. I was like, "Pete, what are you doing?" He goes—

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

JACK PIERSON: —"Oh, I'm not doing anything. I'm living at"—he was like, "Oh, I don't know." I said, "Have you got the next couple of months free? Do you want to work for me?" And he said, "Yeah, sure, tell me what's up."

I said, "I want to do this piece in Regen Projects' new space, and I want it to be as tall as the ceilings"—I don't know what the ceilings are; I think she told me 14 feet—"They need to be 14 feet high; I want them like three feet deep, made out of plywood, and, you know, figure it out so they won't fall over and kill anybody." And I said, "Do you have a friend? You can move out to my house in the desert; we'll go to Home Depot and buy the plywood, some silver paint, and then they'll have them picked up and brought into the gallery." He was like, "Oh, yeah, sure, we can figure that out."

He goes, "Oh, I can see"—he's the kind of kid who's already on the phone; he's looking—he's like, "Oh, I see the Regen's door online. Well, we have to figure out if it's going to fit in the door. Okay, the door's"—I was like, "How do you know how tall the door frame"—"Well, I can judge by the people in the picture that it's this, and then you do this, and"—he was like, "Okay, well, if they're 14 feet tall, I don't know if the W's going to fit without two pieces, but"—already, just first conversation, and he was like, "Okay, well, let me look into this." He calls me back in 15 minutes; he goes, "You know, I could build this myself, but I found this place"—

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JACK PIERSON: —"in San Fernando Valley that does things like this, and I've talked to them"—

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JACK PIERSON: —"and they said they think they can do it, you know, by January, and they'll install it and do all that, and I can oversee the whole thing and do the design. It's going to take this many, you know, sheets of plywood and this blah, blah, blah, and it'll probably cost"—I think—"they're going to get back to me with an estimate, but just based on plywood and so on, it's going to cost, probably, like $70,000." And I was like, "What?" This is in like 20 minutes. I mean, I'm madly in love, not in an obsessive way, but I'm madly in love with Pete Moran at this moment. My idea was, "Go stay at my house in the desert and build it outside, and we'll figure it out." He had it all figured out. He masterminded the whole thing. He saw the whole project through.

My last little magical touch was that I wanted a battery-operated record player that also had the needle that would go back and forth once it finished the record. He found one of those; it was in total disrepair. He totally repaired it. It played one song, called "Just a Dream," by Jimmy Clanton, who's the nerdiest of the '50s singers. Behind this huge thing that said "The End of the World" as big as it could be was this tiny little record player playing this very lachrymose song, and the word "SAD," really tiny, sat on the wall behind it. The finishing touch for me—again, one of these things where it's just like, Wouldn't this be cool? And I really want to do it, is a huge painting of Little Richard, and I got the—so the whole thing was done. It was under control.

There was a lot of work. We went to the huge factory that was making these things and making, you know, rides at Universal Studios and the lobbies of Vegas hotels, saw the whole thing, so I was really having the experience of this, like, Richard Serra/Matthew Barney mega-production, big fucking deal, in capital letters, thing. And then the morning that they had to ship, they loaded flatbed trucks and it just—again, a spoof. It's an experience I wanted to have. It did feel cool to be like, Wow, [grumbling] 16 guys loading them up, doing this, figuring it out, blah, blah, blah. And there were a lot of tough little details that I ironed out myself and that made it fine. The beveled corners; we used the back side of the plywood, so it was lousier plywood than they would have ever used. I had to get them to buy the lousiest, most knotty plywood.

Anyway, it was a big, fun production, and the story I'm not telling is all the Pete Moran story as I got to know him, which is fascinating, and the opposite of what I was saying. That's how many years ago now, 10?

ALEX FIALHO: Six.

JACK PIERSON: Six. And in that six years—I don't know if there's a difference between Yale and Cooper Union or whatever; I guess some people are just enthusiastic, and some people aren't. But Pete Moran is this engineer that was at the highest military clearance you could have in the government, and part of his story was, as he was telling it to me, that he was plucked out of his class at—you know, there's lots of details. He was plucked out of his engineering class at Rochester by the military, like, "We want you to work for us," and he worked for them. And as he describes it, they would push things in front of him, questions, and he would answer them.

It didn't dawn on him—he says people like him obsessively answer questions and have to figure it out—and it didn't dawn on him till he was asked to present a paper at the biggest Pentagon meeting in the—you know, these are the brass—and as he got up to the lectern, he saw somebody else's notes open, and he's not a—this isn't a bullshit story; he's a real person, this kid. He's so fucking great, and he says there's a list of, like, the most valuable resources to, let's just say, the military-industrial complex at this moment, and his name was on it. Suddenly, he realized that everything he was doing was to kill people, and so he made his presentation, closed it up, went back to Rochester, transferred out, changed all his classes to poetry, and then transferred to the Yale sculpture department the next year as a graduate student and became an artist.

So as he's telling me this story in LA at a restaurant, I'm like, "So doesn't that mean that they're probably still watching you?" and he was like, "Yeah, probably." And I was like, "And so what do they think you're doing with this old fag in LA?" [Laughs.] Like, "Why are repairing a little record player for this old fag in LA?" [Laughs.] I was like, "This is insane!" and he was like, "Well, maybe they're not, but you know, could easily be." But he devoted himself so fully to that project and made it so easy for me, and it was so cool. His enthusiasm made it cool, too.

And then the icing on the cake, a little LA paper covered it. I had another friend who's a bigwig at Lionsgate film; he's the advertising vice-president. I said, The ad for this should be really cool, so I went to my friend Tim Palin and I said, "Could you make me an ad that looks like a blockbuster, apocalyptic movie that is called *The End of the World* and put me in the ad?" And he was like, "Yeah, sure, come over; I'll take a picture." He took my picture for like 10 frames—right?—one afternoon, like, "Just stand there." He, of course, made it all up in, like, you know, a vest and gave me a gun and just shot like this, and in three hours, he sent back this ad that looked so much like an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie or a—can you find it there? Yeah. [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: That's you?

JACK PIERSON: Yeah, that's me. [Laughs.] In like a half an hour, it was done. This is what they look like. And so that was the—

ALEX FIALHO: That's incredible.

JACK PIERSON: That was the *Artforum* ad. And then the press release of that show—I don't know where it can be found—is kind of a masterwork of my own writing that was—a couple of times, I've done really good press releases that expose all my fears and bitterness [laughs], and I don't know if you can get your hands on that. I don't know that I have a copy of it. I just depend on them having it. But the press release is a tour de force, too.

And so—oh, I forgot the big picture of Little Richard. Out of the blue, you turn—you see this whole thing, and then when you turn back to leave the gallery, there's a huge 10-foot-by-eight-foot painting, hand-done painting, that I

did the night before, of Little Richard really screaming his brains out and looking crazy. The only way it fits in, for me, is that at the beginning of rock and roll they would say, "This rock and roll is going to be the end of the world!" I just had to have that picture of Little Richard. It's one of my favorite things I ever did, and now Dan Colen, the artist, owns it, because he liked it, too.

I would say that—have I had shows since? Yeah, I did another show similar to that in Paris, only the words were "Hope Dreams You," and they were not in a line; they were as though crumbled ruins. It was a much smaller space, and they were packed in there. You walked it around it sort of like you were going through the Acropolis or some ruins, and you couldn't really see what it said. You had to figure it out. It wasn't as direct as "The End of the World" across the stage. So I had that experience of doing a big-scale, high-production thing like that.

ALEX FIALHO: Great story, too.

JACK PIERSON: [Laughs.] Thanks.

ALEX FIALHO: I think we should look to wrap up—

JACK PIERSON: Okay.

ALEX FIALHO: —and a question I have that maybe is a wrap-up or at least gets us towards a wrap-up is, how would you like you and your art to be viewed in the future?

JACK PIERSON: I've been, in the last couple of years, very blithe about that as well, because I'm not so concerned with—I made my will a couple of years ago. I never had one before. Somehow, it got ground into me, like, You're being very irresponsible, and it's a big mistake not to have a will. So I went in and quickly did a will.

I'm not interested in a foundation. I'm not interested in my work existing in perpetuity. It's in enough museums that it's going to be there someplace. Maybe they'll de-accession it. Who the fuck knows? Can't control stuff like that. I don't make enough work so that there's a great estate to work with. Practically everything I make, I sell, or it's not sellable. So I'm not really concerned with the legacy in those terms or a foundation to promote my work further in the future. I don't really care.

It's just the same way as I said earlier: I don't really care about death, or I don't believe in it, or I'm pretty set. There's enough ephemera. That's all I ever wanted to do, was leave a bunch of ephemera that somebody might find at a flea market in a small town and say, "What? This guy looks like he had a pretty good one, naked boys running around the beach." It's kind of all I think about it. You know, I will get little resentments and bitterness about not being acknowledged for some things that I did that then become standard. I figure the right people know, somehow. It's not in me to—I'm not preparing for a grand legacy, and I'm interested in—was it you I was telling about meeting Mary Wilson?

ALEX FIALHO: When?

JACK PIERSON: She was one of the Supremes.

ALEX FIALHO: No.

JACK PIERSON: No. I'm interested in also-rans and has-beens and people that were there and not Diana Ross. I love Diana Ross, but I love Mary Wilson, the other Supreme in the background, too. And so it's not false modesty, and I don't think it's low self-esteem, but I'm perfectly content to have been here and to have left something to interpret and maybe figure out and maybe glean something from.

Little things matter to me, little, transitional things. Little asides somehow are as important as big things, so just the fact that I was this, well, you know, gay guy that knew some stuff and figured out how to pull it all together into a narrative and enjoy my life while I was doing it is enough somehow. It's one of the gay "things."

And you were asking, What about the generation that got lost? Well, here's another theory I had on that one. When I was a kid in 1980 in Provincetown, one of the first things I noticed was there were a bunch of—I don't know how old they were; I'm going to say they were older fags than me—that their life was, they lived in Key West in the winter and waited tables, and they lived in Provincetown in the summer and waited tables, and that's what they did. They were on the beach. They had a good life. Who knows if their life was good? That whole generation of [gays that just wanted to get by and have fun], that was enough. I don't know, you're young. Does that thing still exist? It seems like now everybody's a go-getter to me or wants it all or wants more. Is there a service class of gays that just go—like, there's no more Key West. I guess maybe Fort Lauderdale. Do you know what I mean?

ALEX FIALHO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JACK PIERSON: But there was a something that that was going to be your life. Like, follow the sun. On a certain level, that should have been my life, but I figured out something else that still allows me to follow the sun, and I like it. But I admired that life. As a young person, I thought, Wow, that's pretty good. It wasn't like I thought, Oh, these poor loser waiters. I thought, Wow, they've got it figured out. But then I got more frames of reference; like, there are grand livers that follow the sun, and sort of I got my foot in that—on that highway or airway or something. I figured it out, and if anybody else wants to figure it out, maybe they can learn it from me or a little part of it from me, or maybe I can leave some hint that you can have a good life, I think.

ALEX FIALHO: I think let's call it an oral history.

JACK PIERSON: Okay.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]