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Oral history interview with John Dugdale, 2017 January 17-18

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Transcript

Preface

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

John Dugdale has reviewed the transcript and made substantial edits, corrections, and emendations which appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

THEODORE KERR: This is Ted Kerr interviewing John Dugdale at the artist's home in New York, New York on January 17, 2017 for the Archives of American Arts Smithsonian Institution, card number one.

Good afternoon, John.

JOHN DUGDALE: Good afternoon, Ted.

THEODORE KERR: Thank you for inviting me into your home and letting us ask you some questions.

JOHN DUGDALE: It's an honor.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, I mean—I think a good first question is tell me your—share with me your earliest memory.

JOHN DUGDALE: All right. You know, a lot of these questions have been asked of me hundreds of times, if not multiple dozens of times. But since this is for archival purposes, I'm going to go to right exactly where it did start, which is the proverbial getting the toy camera for a birthday. And then grabbing my sister, who is still a great model for me, and go out after lunch to my grandmother's grape arbor. I asked Kathy to stand in the grape arbor and grab a bunch of grapes, and hold them up over her head and act like the Venus de Milo. And then with her other hand, pick a grape and put near her mouth. Then I took a beautiful little black and white snapshot of that with a beam of light coming down. My first allegorical, metaphorical photograph was made at 11, maybe 12. Somewhere there—'71 or '72. It seemed so [instinctual –JD] that I didn't go out and photograph cars or baseball games or being gay. It was complete aesthetics to start with. And that—my mother called me years later, maybe 25 years later. She said, "Oh, sweetheart, I found that picture you made of Kathy." I said, "I'd like to see it." And I thought, "Where did I get the idea for the Venus de Milo at 11?" I realized that Warner Brothers cartoons really, really educated me and, unfortunately, I forgot that Venus de Milo didn't have arms, you know? That's—believe it or not, that's how it started. I don't know what happened to that little camera.

It was blue and black and gray, with 120 roll film. I also remember a picture of my young, young brother [Robert –JD] coming out of the chicken coop. My grandmother's garden with that camera was just like being in the Garden of Eden. I had both of—one of my brother and one of my sister here and the allegorical, metaphorical trademark, I guess, would come back to suit me really well.

THEODORE KERR: What about even before that? Like, what about—what's your earliest memory of—even if you were a baby or even one or two or five years old?

JOHN DUGDALE: Oh my goodness. Only wanted to be in the [art department –JD] with Shirley Binnen. My yellow fingered, wild, red-haired, loud, fun person who represented freedom to me. And all I would do is pray, starting in the second grade in Stamford, Connecticut at Heart Elementary School. I would just pray that she would choose me to help her with the giant bottles of tempera paint. Even plucking staples out of the bulletin board. Anything to get out of regular class. Starting in second grade and really revving up by third or fourth grade. I had her for all six years. And just the incredible feeling of joy when she said, "John, would you come out and help?" I spent as much time in that chicken wire cage in the basement of that school as I possibly could.

THEODORE KERR: Can you tell us a little bit about your family?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes, my mother is my hero and she was my largest supporter. She'd hang every, single thing—I guess like most mothers—that I brought home, staring day one as if it was a fine work of art. My mother and my father are—they split up when I was about eight years old. But what I can remember—I can remember a lot

about my father, but the positive thing that I remember is they never wanted me to be a mathematician or a scientist. They didn't really care where I went to college. They allowed me to follow my heart completely, you know, which includes walking through high school when I did not take any SATs. I did not take any PSATs. I basically felt like I wasn't smart enough to do that. But I did take the aptitude test. I thought, "Well, you can't really fail an aptitude test." So, I went and I took it and then the results came back and I looked at it and I slammed my hand on the desk and I said, "I knew it. I am a dummy." It came back that I should be a bricklayer—which was my Italian roots fully—or working in the restaurant industry, which I was already doing at 12. So, I had no thought of going to Harvard or Yale or any kind of academic college because I still have trouble even bothering with long division or mathematician tables.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, so your parents were supportive, it seems.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes, very.

THEODORE KERR: What were their jobs?

JOHN DUGDALE: My mother was your standard married in 1956, '57 housewife with a beautiful house full of Swedish furniture with light pink, shiny upholstery. The television—everything the Jetsons—the shiny maple floor. And she was born on the kitchen table when my grandparents got here in 1930. They were already—my grandfather was here from Calabria and like so many immigrants, slowly he brought over one person at a time. And Amelia was born in Italy and then Rena—you know, I'm not sure exactly of her birthday, but she might have been born on the boat coming over if I'm not mistaken. And my mother was born on a kitchen table on Alden Street where she would famously say, "Oh, you know I was stillborn. Your grandfather said, 'Let her go. Life's been so hard.' But he dunked me in a bucket of water and revived me." So drama. Lots and lots of drama. A lot of storytelling, a lot of hand motion. My father pretty much disappeared out of the picture and I'm culturally 150 percent Italian. My grandmother used to say my name was *Dugdale* instead of Dugdale. She never learned how to speak English. None of my cousins or my aunts or my uncles did.

And my grandmother only learned enough so that she could say the Pledge of Allegiance to get her citizenship. And then went on to have a successful time in Little Italy that I adored. It was really my haven when my parents were splitting up and, you know, I learned to hear and understand Italian perfectly, but it wasn't until later in life until I felt confident enough to speak Italian.

THEODORE KERR: Which city are we talking about?

JOHN DUGDALE: In Calabria? Or in Stamford? Stamford, Connecticut.

THEODORE KERR: Stamford, Connecticut and there was a Little Italy there?

JOHN DUGDALE: There was. Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: Do you remember it?

JOHN DUGDALE: Perfectly, every detail. One of the astonishing things that surprised myself is my memory. I can remember the flecks of mica in the stones—it was on a dead end—that were in the cement wall that were meant to stop anybody from crashing through the wall or the beards of the Irish clans that would run—let's see—from 1920 to 1960 when I was born. So they were already 40 years old. The texture of the plaster on the outside of the house. It was a four-story house, sort of a clearinghouse for the cousins. My grandmother brought over ever member of her family that she could and my grandfather's family and got them citizenship or sent them back.

THEODORE KERR: Were there lots of other kids in your home then?

JOHN DUGDALE: My sister. My famous Venus de Milo figure. She's been so cooperative with me, you know, then and from the moment my sight changed.

THEODORE KERR: She's older?

JOHN DUGDALE: Younger.

THEODORE KERR: She's younger.

JOHN DUGDALE: I'm the oldest. My sister Kathleen is the middle. She was born in 1964. And my brother Robert 1968, on the same day, we were both born on June 2nd. Me, 1960.

THEODORE KERR: Wow. And growing up did you guys rough house a lot or was it a pretty—were you guys like the Three Musketeers?

JOHN DUGDALE: No. My sister said the other day, you know, my brother says I have dolphin sense. He said, "You were always like this, you know?" They careened around and careered around fighting and someone might throw a football at me and I would just keep my arms crossed or do anything I could to possibly escape the sound of sports on TV or just to be on my own. Kind of classic, but not a loner exactly, but I never really fit in at all honestly. Except when I was in the art department. Then I felt like I was alive.

THEODORE KERR: And that was with the teacher?

JOHN DUGDALE: Shirley.

THEODORE KERR: Shirley. How do you say her last name?

JOHN DUGDALE: Binnen.

THEODORE KERR: Binnen.

JOHN DUGDALE: B-I-N-N-E-N.

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay.

JOHN DUGDALE: I got to talk to her 35 years later because I was at my friend's house in Woodstock and I mentioned Shirley Binnen—we were talking about elementary school. He said, "Did you say Shirley Binnen?" I said, "Yes, I did." And it turned out to be his cousin. So he said, "Let me call her right now." And I got on the phone with her and I said, "Do you remember me? Kathy and Robert, the Dugdales from West Broad Street?" She said, "Of course I do." I said, "It's because of you that I went to the School of Visual Arts." And we laughed our heads off. And I'm not 100 percent sure, but I'm pretty sure that she remembered me. She was my hero.

THEODORE KERR: That sounds lovely.

JOHN DUGDALE: It was lovely to talk to her and tell her what an effect she had on me.

THEODORE KERR: And you talked a little bit about the elementary school days and how the art room—the chicken wire art room was the only—

JOHN DUGDALE: Big, giant rolls of colored paper. Everything in bulk. It was a heaven for me, because everything—I remember specifically the giant jars of Tempera paint, the buckets of plaster so that you could make a mask in them if you wanted to. You could put something on that made it copper color or gold or silver that led on to a terribly unsuccessful career as a potter in 11th grade. But I can tell you about that later.

THEODORE KERR: And then what was—it sounds like maybe recess wasn't the most exciting time? Or what was it like then?

JOHN DUGDALE: No. You know it was so beautiful. I recognized early on the origins of the property that the school was built on. It was built in about 1900 or 1910. And then in one corner there was a dilapidated barn. Abandoned swing sets and so. And then in about, probably about 1955 to '60 they put something of a giant carbuncle on the front of the building. And even in my young age, I would look at think, "Why are those windows so beautiful and why is this room so welcoming and so warm—with a picture of Abraham Lincoln, the giant west clock, and then a picture of George Washington." I fixated on Abraham Lincoln from the minute I saw him. I don't know if it was the hat or the beard or the face, the features. But he came into my life very early on. I'd go—pass through, step down, and step into the new, modern building with the gym and the principal's office and I hated it. It was so very Jetsons, the new part. And it's kind of funny where I am now in my life. The fact that I would edge away from the dodge ball and go to try to see how much I could explore the dilapidated barn, which not that long after got knocked down.

And I lived in a very racially integrated—very integrated block of West Broad Street—there was Chestnut Hill and Visser Street, both of which top to bottom, there was an invisible line. Once you got to Anderson Street, there were only Italians or Italian Americans. On the other side of that street, down either of those hills, which were the only ones I wanted to go down, were all African American families. Chestnut Hill was extremely beautiful because at that time there were still some chestnut trees and I would collect up the chestnuts every day on the way home. And my mother, oh, she knew everything that I wanted to do with my hands. I cracked them open and I got some lemon pledge and I would shine them. They were like my rare wood and they sat on the 1956 giant stove in the kitchen like my jewels or my precious wood. It didn't matter what it was. You know, in third grade we had to make some sculpture of an animal from colonial times or something. So, instead of making one buffalo, I wanted to make a herd of buffalos. Complete, AAA, you know, overdo it personality. I think you're born with that. You are who you are by the time you're four. So, again, Galaxy 500 moon interior, beige exterior, super eight engine, down to Caldor's department store to get buffalo looking fun fur.

And god knows what the super structure was, but I went to school with 30 of them on a board, you know? And that went on like that for the rest of my life.

THEODORE KERR: And what were the—what were your classmates' reactions?

JOHN DUGDALE: I think they were jealous because I became the teacher's pet. I had to make a poster about immigration that my grandfather helped me with. And he kept saying, "Put in Miss America. Put in Miss America in the middle." And that—she was so reverential around the Statue of Liberty, that I did. I found this picture and I was supposed to make a 30x40 poster, but I, of course, you guessed it, taped four posters together to make a giant poster and then put 100 coats of varnish on it where I had to get a ride to school. It was too big. And then wowed the whole class and the teacher with this. It was very important for me to make my mark in a project like that. I couldn't do it just normal even if I tried.

THEODORE KERR: What was it about the project that made you want to make a positive impression?

JOHN DUGDALE: At a very young age I was hyperaware of race. And my best young friend, was named Robert Burgess and both of us couldn't pass a test if our life depended on it. And I remember passing by him in Mrs. Bailings class and looking at him and him looking to me and every time I went to the pencil sharpener I would try to steal the people's answers on the test. And we kind of shared that. Didn't really try too, too hard to know what was going on, but I do remember it was taboo to have him come to my house. And I used to lecture my mother at a young age, and I even went as far as telling her that, "Well, mom, you know, if you cut them or they get a cut their blood is the same as ours. We're the same." And then she would say things like—God bless her, but a product of her upbringing at that time, you know, in the '30s. "Excuse me." She would say, "Well, you know, I'm sorry. They just don't belong on television." And I would become infuriated and drift more in that direction. And I guess because I didn't yet identify as a gay person out at all. I hear these trans folks saying that they knew when they were in second and third grade. I knew something was up, but I knew I was better off with the outcasts of the school.

That sounds a little pathetic, but it wasn't pathetic at all. Lila Gorham was nine feet tall, and for some reason didn't care for me. A black girl who dumped a bucket of plaster on my head in fifth grade in Mrs. Vitalis' class. But those are—those are the people that I went to and that was what I craved. Or Mr. Gray [ph] rolling in the upright piano for our musical session every Thursday—excuse me—in the songbooks. I lived for that. I couldn't wait. That carried all the way through junior high school and Mrs. Catalano and into high school. And then we were going to Russia of all places, but my mother wouldn't let me because I was not allowed to leave the parameters of—that she was in charge of. No Boy Scouts, no camp, no school trips, no Russia, no Italy, no Rome with the Italian class—nothing.

THEODORE KERR: And what about playing with other kids?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah, I had my friends. Artie Robinson, Jerry Ventri, Jamie Ventri, Jeffrey Ventri, and I had wonderful neighbors. We all lived in each other's house. It was very—the end of that old school whoever's house you were at you had dinner there. There were stray kids in everybody else's house eating and then you had a day after school playing. Or being chased by bullies. I was chased a lot. Very clever in self-preservation and I guess they sensed that I was different being gay or just at that time not like them. Maybe they didn't know if I was gay or straight. I didn't know. But they would chase me all the way out. I knew all those secret ways to get back to the house. They'd chase me all the way back into the house, run into the garage, and a giant box in the garage, and pull it over me. They would run into the garage and say, "Where did he go? Where is he? He must have run that way." And then run out. So I was very good at avoiding—I could run like a gazelle when I was that age and that was the only thing that I ever could do that I was proud of in high school. Is that—when I was running a certain meter race, all I had to do was think, "Well, that's enough." Now—and I was taller than everybody else—6'1.5". And I would just say, "Now." And my legs felt like they stretched an extra foot and I could just race over the finish line. The rest of it was torture.

THEODORE KERR: Right. I wonder if you want to talk a little bit about the—either books you were reading as a kid or if you watched TV or movies?

JOHN DUGDALE: Again, personally, I didn't have to learn how to read. It seemed like I knew already. In first grade I was able to do the *See Dick Run, See Jane Run* instantly and progressed to the top of the class as far as reading and been far advanced ever since. Before you came here I'm listening to a book from the National Library of Congress. A 650-page book about Queen Victoria that I've been plowing through. It takes about 30 hours to listen to it, but as I went further in school, anything that involved reading—social studies—anything—history. It was never one book that I would take out of the Ferguson library that I walked to. It was always three or four and I would carry them with me to go visit my Aunt Amelia's house. She lived in Long Island Sound in Stamford and read, read, read, read. Shoot way ahead when I realized that I wasn't going to be able to read anymore after a certain point in the hospital I thought I was going to die. And then somebody mentioned to me

the Library of Congress and their 150,000 titles. So, I had that secret to hold on to while I got ready to leave the hospital and started my new life.

THEODORE KERR: And then what about as a kid? Was there a TV in your house?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes. There was a TV and I—still I hear Lucille Ball's voice and I feel I'm with my mother. They always watched—my mother—Ethel and Lucy and the Flintstones and—oh my goodness—the Munsters and Addams Family. They were my people. And we were not discouraged from watching TV at all. And so we played, we came inside, we watched TV for a half an hour, then we had dinner. Then if it was nice out we went back outside. And then in the morning I timed how much time my sister and I—or me, as you like it—had before I'd leave for school. Because that meant that we would be able to watch about two Warner Brothers' cartoons. And most importantly two or three Little Rascals. And I knew that when those were over it was time to leave. And then I remember I'm going to just free associate here. I remember walking—one of my favorite parts of walking to Chestnut Hill on Anderson Street, there was a clay pipe that obviously was connected to a spring somewhere. And there was eternally water dripping out of it. Dripping, dripping, always either a little more or a little less moss. And just walking to that and then turning right and walking down past the chestnut trees. I loved it actually.

There was a lot of strife in my family. A lot of shouting and fighting. A lot of terrible sadness during the divorce, you know? My mother, Rose, was born to be a housewife and trained that way and expected to be that and married to my father forever. And it just didn't work out that way in the Hugh Heffner late-'60s and *Playboy Magazine* my dad had other ideas.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Which aren't acceptable. It formed my idea about relationships very early on.

THEODORE KERR: In what way?

JOHN DUGDALE: Well, about faithfulness and truth and fidelity. It was what my mother craved deeply and because I was the oldest, being eight, I was the one who supported her in that. And then when I grew up and came to the gay community and I realized that that was out the window I was mortified. And my young relationships were disasters because I expected all of that fidelity and it was what was sexy and beautiful is what I craved. And I rearranged every relationship I was in to try to be that and they were mostly unsuccessful. You know, I always tell my sister she'd just broke up with her boyfriend. I've had seven marriages, none of which were officiated at town hall or anything, but I've had seven different tries at man-man relationship from when I was 22. And each one of them went awry with my expectations and me wanting to honor my mother's desire. I didn't know what my desire was. I didn't really understand how you could say to somebody, "Do you have a partner?" And they'd say, "Oh, we have an agreement." And then I'd say, "Well, does your partner know that you have an agreement?"

It meant a lot to me and I didn't find that—I would go out to Studio 54 and be whooping it up. I'd bring my sister, she was 12. And, you know, big beautiful men dancing on the speakers with gold lame fans and tiny bikini—gold lame bikini underwear. And then people would dance up to me and say, "How are you?" And I would say, "Oh, excellent." And I'd say, "This is how I am." And I would tell them. And that came back to help me later. But then you know what they would do is they would flee in horror, because I thought they were actually asking me how I was. And again, my speaking—my over talking, over sharing nature which I learned from Rose—in no uncertain terms came back to be a lifesaver for me.

THEODORE KERR: In what way?

JOHN DUGDALE: Well, I went blind and I—it's a little out of place this part of the story, but when I came home from the hospital, I could see a tiny bit out of the bottom of my left eye. I used to call my crescent. And someone called me. I was in the hospital for a year and someone called me and said, "Oh hi, we're looking for John Dugdale. We're looking for PWAs." And I looked at the phone and wondered what they meant. I still didn't identify as a person with AIDS. I didn't identify with it at all. And they said, "We're going to launch something called, a Day Without Art and we were wondering if you would like to come and be a speaker with the other six or seven people that are going to come to speak about being PWA artists." And I thought, "I guess so." So I invited my friend Shields to come with me, who was officially—he was writing—well, he was officially unofficially writing my secret biography. He thought I didn't know, but he was constantly jotting down notes and popping up from behind bushes and had written glorious things for *Dance Magazine* about Jerome Robbins and Martha Graham and every other stellar luminary figure of the time. And I went up to the Met, I was looking out the window, and I thought, "What am I going to say?" I had a little silver magnifying glass around my neck that I could still see out of partially. Something close, but nothing far. Got there and there was a big podium and a lot of dignitaries standing around.

And I thought, "Wow, this is pretty real." And I went up the stairs and I went to the podium. And we were about 1,000 people. It seemed like 1,000, but it was not a small crowd at all. I know now it was a crowd of 200 or 300 or 15, you know, from speaking so many places. But I went on up and they said, "Well, you'll have about 20 seconds to say something meaningful." I thought, "Twenty seconds?" I didn't even know what I was going to say. And I remember waiting, waiting—people that looked like they should have had ribbons or medals around their neck. Dignitaries like Mayor Dinkins types, you know? And he wasn't a mayor at the time, but that kind of folk. And then the person who's in charge came up and said, "Well, guess what? You're the only speaker because no one else showed up to be the PWA speaker." And then I think that—in that moment my life as an artist was born. Because I went up to the microphone, I glanced out at the crowd, and I told them I couldn't see them.

And then I went from there and I spoke about the loss of my sight. And I thought, "Oh, this is so much about me, what about them?" When I was ending the paragraph, I learned from my mother and my grandparents that stories had to have a beginning, a middle, and an end if they were going to be successful and pretty good climaxing there towards the end. Everything was mythologized and again that came to help me tremendously. And I just said, "You know, I had come to the Met when I graduated from college and the place I wanted to have my lunch in or my dinner was at the Met in the cafeteria where I had spent so much time. And that when I was finished talking I was going to turn around and with Shields' help, go up and look for my favorite, beautiful fragment of the statue of Queen Taj lips in the Egyptian section. I was going to go look at a painting of a Duke that I loved in the renaissance section. That was going to look at statuary." And I really didn't even know what I was saying, because I hadn't tried to look at any of those things since my sight—I hate to say sight loss. I always say sight change. Because I didn't lose my sight at all. And then there was an uproar—reporters around from all over the world wanted to talk about a Day Without AIDS—there's a Freudian slip for you—a Day Without Art. It was a beautiful idea I thought. Darkened lights, black fabric over one piece of work.

But [let me go –JD] back now to the end of the story—what I told them was if they had any person in their life that was sick or needed them in any way, but especially sight, because that's what I knew about, was to go and be their sight. And stay with them and don't be afraid to be with them as they go from one world to the other.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I have to say, there's so much to say about that part of my life. I couldn't have this part of my life without having that part. You know, everything was pre- and post- the hospital, which definitely doesn't stand there anymore — [it's been demolished –JD].

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay, well let's go back so we can kind of nicely build up to there.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes.

THEODORE KERR: It seems like your—the relationship between your mother and father breaking up at eight was an intense thing.

JOHN DUGDALE: It was.

THEODORE KERR: Like, what did—and you said you had some awareness that you were different already. How did their break up impact your self-awareness as this kind of self-aware 8-year-old kid?

JOHN DUGDALE: I went from being 8-years-old to being 30-years-old in that time period. What my childhood was changed forever because for some reason—maybe it was my mother including me in everything—I was [strongly aware of –JD] the breakup. Every part of it. The trying to keep them together by my mom getting her hair done and then would make breakfast in bed for my father. These are not things an 8-year-old, a 9-year-old child should be experiencing. I plotted and schemed. We went to Bloomingdale's down the hill. We picked out what she was going to wear that morning. We were trying to win him back to the family. Even my grandmother. Everyone wanted to stay with la familia because when you're Italian, you have coumare on the side, but you never leave your family. It doesn't matter what. You have your children. The woman you marry is on a pedestal. She's a goddess, she's in charge. So it was Earth shattering for all of the Italian part of the family to see this change happening. And I was hyper aware that I did not want it to change. I really just wanted to have a tight family like I imagined all of the other families on Anderson Street were.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: Can I just say—

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: [It instilled a melancholic nature in me that still reveals itself when I make pictures. Because, being very serious here because I'm telling you important things that are going to be archived for the

Smithsonian. Most of the time I'm a goofball, you know, but when I stand next to the camera that melancholy pours out of me. The only time I am sure to be quiet is when I am standing next to the camera photographing someone's beautiful soul –JD].

THEODORE KERR: And do you think that melancholy was kind of there since you were eight?

JOHN DUGDALE: I'm shaking my head yes. I do believe that deeply. It's the truth. My brother and sister I mentioned earlier, they just told me, "Well, you were never like us." You know? I guess sitting up with my mother until all hours of the night with a big cup of Lipton tea bathed in the light of the giant stove that she got at her shower- a giant white enamel stove with an atomic clock and a giant, beautiful corrugated piece of glass that shed an eerie side light. Which I'd never actually thought about. That was one of the early lighting scenarios that we learn how to do [in school. No need to say it was already easy to me –JD]. But, my dad finally moved out and he wouldn't give my mother the address because he was afraid that she was going to go and bother him or go to look for him. He only gave her the phone number. This is only one of many examples. [Starting with the letter A and two full cups of tea we scrolled through the phone book until we found "the number." We were both very proud of ourselves and felt accomplished. –JD]And we sat up till all hours of the morning with a pencil and the phone book, which was not small by any means. Stamford is not a small town—and we found this number eventually and we were elated to have that information because now we knew if there was an emergency we could find him with a phone number. That marked me in a way that gave me inspiring inner drive [to do the impossible –JD] and disaster for my life in relationships.

THEODORE KERR: Because it kind of put in play a certain way of being with a loved one?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes. It did. I was—well, I guess it was—it was not so on the surface, but I seemed to manifest people who were—that were not faithful in relationships. And again, I felt like the odd person out in that I would find myself peeking in a pocket or looking in a coat and, you know, being rewarded by finding the cocaine or the drugs for the person who was not sober, or finding pockets full of telephone numbers from people. I mean, it was very different in the West Village at that time. It infuriated me and it made me sad and I craved it also. There was a lot of therapy. [Imagine, I went to the Monster in my pajamas –JD], and I found my partner then, who I adored, and I still consider almost a blood brother. But, I found him intensely flirting with somebody and I dragged him out of the Monster by the ear, I kicked him in the ass and I followed him home. I said, "Let's go home. And I look back on that behavior, it's a wonder to me that I survived that time. I mean, I almost didn't. I had a stroke during that time, that first stroke.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, what time was that?

JOHN DUGDALE: Oh, in the thick of being with that insane, wonderful, sexy as Apollo [person named Darrell –JD] that I met when I was 26 and he was 19 at the gym. And—oh that was when the gym was a place to meet people in a really nice way, actually. A lot of beautiful things were born of being in the shower with someone. And I had been eyeing him for a long time in our aerobics class.

THEODORE KERR: In your what class?

JOHN DUGDALE: Aerobics believe it or not.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: Or "Flash Dance," or whatever that was called. You know, *Fame*, "I'm going to live forever." [They laugh.] [And finally, I was coming in. I thought, "Oh no, I missed him again." And so, I saw he was getting ready to take a shower and I was already dressed. I did the only thing any good gay guy worth his salt would do and I took my clothes off and I ran after him quietly, sort of subtly in the shower. We paid a lot of attention to each other from afar. Big smile. He went out and was washing his face and I went out and I washed my face again looking in the mirror at him through the mirror. So we got dressed, we went outside, and he said. He said, "Would you like to go for a walk and get a drink in our part of town?" I breathlessly exclaimed, "Yes— I live in our part of town." So we got a six-pack of Corona and a lime and came home and made love with each other for six hours.–JD]

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And then were together for 10 years. He stayed with me while I went blind and I stayed with him while he became sober. A beautiful love story. I'll include it in my movie someday.

THEODORE KERR: When the breakup was happening with your mother and father, were you kind of the caretaker for your—for your brother and sister?

JOHN DUGDALE: Not kind of. I was the male figure in the house. "Ask your brother, see what he thinks. Ask your

brother. Ask your brother." I went to the town hall with my grandmother and my grandfather and my Aunt Amelia. All pretty stalwart, serious people and there was a beautiful pebble glass skylight in this beaux arts masterpiece of a town hall. There was a door with the same kind of glass within the number and it was almost as if my mother was going to a death squad when she and my father went into the room. We all stood there with dark circles under our eyes, tears, silence, in a—in a row. It was like a Velazquez painting. I was very aware of the light. I'm not saying that because I'm being interviewed. I can remember the light like it was yesterday. I never even told anybody this. Then the door opened and I looked and I saw my mother and she was sad. But, she was still there. Then my father left. He actually left without ever saying good-bye. He never said good-bye. It seemed there was never a word about anything that happened while we were growing up. And we went home.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: It was something to go and witness. It wasn't just a divorce. It was the end of something. And after that ending some things became nearly unmanageable by me.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: It took lots of therapy, some fantastical people in my life to help me out from under that. Now I look at it with wonder not with sadness and I just think about that light that bathed us. No kidding. The stairwell, the brass banister, the beaux arts plaster work around the perimeter of the hall, the beautiful wooded doors with the pebble light and the beautiful gilded numbers on them. That's where everything changed when they went in that room. Something very much to be avoided by my mother. She avoided it for 10 years. Something was going to happen in that room. When she came out everything was going to be different. That's all that I knew. Boy, it sure was different. My mother was never alone before. She never had a job. We had to have all the lights on in the house at night because she was so heartbroken and also so terrified to be in the house by herself with her children. The lights stayed on for a year. Every light in every room, the porch lights, the garage light—everything. Eventually, I got her a job at the donut shop that I was working in. But you know what? She didn't even know how to make change. Rose was a very, very talented, intuitive, very common sense woman. But I made a fake cash register for her on paper and I got a bunch of paper money and some change and I'm like, "Come on, Ma. Let's practice this. Let's practice. You know, this costs $1.49, give me the change from a 10."

Then she worked at that donut shop for about five years and was so popular there that the kids from the high school that was right nearby on Strawberry Hill brought their yearbooks every year for Rose to sign. She would give them some free donuts. She had a lot of fans there. It makes my face hurt smiling when I think that time. Her big foamy white shoes and her orange and white uniform. Her hair was always so long, down past her behind, thick mane of horse's hair. Beautiful, auburn dark hair.

When she had me, in 1960, she cut her hair short for the first time. When her father Patsy saw her in the hospital with me he said, "Rose, what did you do to your hair?" And she said, "Oh, I cut it, you know, for this event." He said, "Don't ever cut it again." And she never did. She went the next 55 years without ever cutting her hair short. My sister would trim off an inch or two off the end of this mane. She could put it into a braid and roll into a beautiful bun on the back of her head [held fast by two enormous bone hairpins. –JD] And they held her hair perfectly like that. People would come up to us in the supermarket or anywhere and say, "Your hair is so beautiful" when she wore it down. It was not possible to go anywhere in public without someone commenting on how amazing her hair was.

THEODORE KERR: Was it thick like your hair is thick?

JOHN DUGDALE: It was thicker than a horse's tail. Like my hair. She died three years ago. And when I was born my hair was platinum blonde and my eyes were blue until I was about six. Then my hair darkened and my eyes turned brown, but it was still really wavy and curly. But I got to New York and I started getting short haircuts and new wave and punk and all that stuff that was so popular. In '82 I had my hair short all the time. And I'd go home. She'd say, "Sweetheart, why do you cut your hair so short? It's so beautiful." I didn't say anything. I was an art student, I was going to do what I wanted with my hair. And when she died I was sort of on the other side of needing a haircut. And then her passing was so monumental, I didn't get a haircut for a while and then I realized that I probably was not going to get a haircut. I went two years without getting a haircut and my hair grew out wild. It was wild. I couldn't even comb it. People would stop me in the street. The barber, "Oh my god, who did that to your hair?" I'm like, "No one did that. Those are genes, that's my hair. It doesn't grow down my hair, it grows out in every direction that it can think of." My doctor kept saying, "I love your white fro." You know, no one had ever seen me with that much hair. And I thought, "Well," okay, it was years. And I thought, "Well, that was for Rose." Then I cut it off.

THEODORE KERR: I'm thinking about one of your works. I think you have a self-portrait taken in the last few years. Was that during the haircut—while you didn't get a haircut? It's you in a palm leaf, I think.

JOHN DUGDALE: [Laughs.] Yes, as a matter of fact, that's the one record of my full-grown Elijah beard, which also

happened by accident. But I had so much hair on my head my face looked like Gumby, it was so thin. So I grew a beard to go with it. Then I thought—with Rey [Clarke], with that giant camera that's on the other side of the room—"We better take a picture of this. Because I don't know how much longer I'm going to be able to stand all this hair." It's really a piece of work to manage. Yeah, we took that picture and it was the most responded to self-portrait that I've done since the one of me and my mother when we got home from the hospital. It's—yeah, I don't remember what we called it. Oh, *Palm Sunday Portrait 2016*.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: And boy oh boy, people responded to that. It's extremely interesting and very nourishing when people overreact to a certain photograph. You never know how the public is going to respond.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, that one—thinking about it now in relation to your mother's death and you growing your hair seems like a way in which, like so much time and memory is imbued in this one moment and you were able to capture that.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes. It was very talismatic.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And I—it was fully a relief when they cut it off. I thought, "I can go on." You know, in my neighborhood, when someone, anyone died—but mostly the husband—the woman of the family then eternally, for the rest of their lives wore a black dress, black stockings, black shoes, a black hairnet, and the ubiquitous 18-karat gold religious medallion around the neck. I thought—I didn't do that consciously. I didn't dress in any way. I didn't identify as an Italian woman, you know? But I think that hair thing. And it was so—she encouraged me to go into giant corkscrew curls, it was fun. I felt like a Greek god.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: With my hair like that, it was very fun. You know, I didn't always feel like a Greek god so much earlier in life, but I really did feel like that after I went blonde.

THEODORE KERR: Did your mom remarry after the separation?

JOHN DUGDALE: No, as a matter of fact, staying on the hair motif, she would say for 35 or 40 years after, she'd say, "Oh, I should have gotten my hair cut and colored my hair and gotten a new husband, but I didn't do it for you kids." I'd say, "Ma, you know what? You could have really helped us out if you had gotten a partner." Instead, you know, she was the martyr mother and she'd still say things like, "Your dad stabbed me in the back." I'd look at my hand and count and say, "Mom, wasn't that 45 years ago?" Then she'd start laughing. I'd say, "You never let go of that pain?" And the answer to that question was no. It wasn't until I saw her in the morgue with the sheet wrapped around her with just her—just her face showing and her hands on her shroud, that I sensed that she was peaceful finally. The manic quality that led her to be so much fun and be one of the kids with the neighborhood, it also let her to be so dark and so heavy-hearted. That part she couldn't help really being from the southern part of Calabria, from a tiny town [named Arena –JD].

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

JOHN DUGDALE: That never—that cultural part of her never left her. I forgot what the question was, but that was my answer.

THEODORE KERR: Well, it's a perfect answer. I asked if your mom had remarried.

JOHN DUGDALE: Oh no. [Laughs.] No, no—never. We would joke about it. She'd actually say that her hymen grew back.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: My mom was like the original Earth Goddess. Had no problem talking about her body, my body, anybody's body. Sex was an open topic of discussion. She'd say, "Well, you're going down to see your girlfriend in Philly. I got to be your father. You know how to be careful?" "Yeah Ma, don't worry about it." "I don't have to tell you anything?" "No, I'm fine." She said, "Be careful." And I—she didn't have to tell me—I found out about the birds and the bees on the bridge over Mill River near the food fair. Which is where we did our shopping and sometimes stealing, because we didn't always have enough money for food. My mother's alimony to raise three children was $20 for each child a week. That's didn't go very far and led to jumping into the dumpster, the giant Goodwill dumpster to look for winter coats. Which, at the time I thought was kind of fun because I would stand on the hood of the car, push the swinging opening that was up pretty high, and jump inside, start rooting around. There was always some kind of great thing in there. A big, fun fur coat with Eskimo buttons for my

mother, or a gold belt—belted gold jacket from Caldor's that somebody threw in there that was kind of the first puffy down coat I ever saw, you know? So, I don't know what else from that time. Again, you know, I'm famous for descending into so many details I can't remember what those details [were meant for. That very nature is what enabled my work as a photographer when the sight loss came. –JD] To imagine what you look like and the color of your hair and the shape of your face.

It may be correct or not correct.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: But I never touch people to see what they look like. I find that doesn't work—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: —for me at all. Maybe if I touch your ears that has worked in the past or I put my hand on the top of your head. But details and a nearly photographic memory have saved my life.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, I mean, your details are—they paint beautiful pictures, which is interesting because you're a photographer, right? So you're working on different mediums.

JOHN DUGDALE: Well, let me tell you. I'm only skimming over the surface.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: If you picked three of those I could talk to you for three hours about each one, you know?

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

JOHN DUGDALE: From a blade of grass to how many grapes were on the bunch of grapes that my sister held. It's really a natural gift [that I am so grateful for. –JD] I never did anything in the hospital, before or after. I couldn't —you know. I didn't remember anything in any special way, but I do now. Which is why it confounds people when we go to do a slide lecture somewhere. You see how old I am, I say slide lecture. [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: It's now a PowerPoint, excuse me. So we do a Power Point thing and I used to ask the audience. I'd put the title of the photograph underneath the image being projected, and I would ask audience members to please—"someone, don't make me pick on you, someone say the title so I can tell you about the photograph, because obviously I can't see it anymore." And people were very reluctant. I don't know why they were so reluctant. They didn't want to get involved, they were shy, they didn't like their voices. So, I then had someone sit on stage with me that I trusted who knew the photographs and they would murmur the title and then I could see the photograph in my mind—corner to corner, middle, center, every part of it, and describe the circumstances in which it was composed, what moment it was made, why it was made. The pictures quickly developed into an autobiographical—is that the right word? Yeah, autobiographical work.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: Load of work.

THEODORE KERR: I mean, let's go back then. We've talked a lot about your mom. Let's talk a bit about your dad. Did he remarry?

JOHN DUGDALE: Three times.

THEODORE KERR: Three times?

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I basically had no relationship with my father for two decades. [I—my dad doesn't know this, but I had no understanding the way he left our house, and the way my mother unfortunately overshared that with me. You know, I am excited about this being archived, because I don't talk about it anymore and my mother is gone and she and I experienced it together. My sister and brother heard about some of it. Not the part where my father decided that it was time for him to move out, but that it was going to be by taking one tie at a time, one shirt at a time, over a period of months. Then, he moved to the basement of our house on a cot and slept downstairs. It was terrifying to experience this. My mother would open the closet and say, "Look, he took the blue jacket, it's gone." So, I did not have too much to do with my father. He came around a little bit on a weekly visit and my mother would go into a deep despair and lock herself either in the front hallway or in the bedroom and then my father would come in. We'd have to deal with her anger afterwards. I just decided finally, the next time he was going to come I would say, "Please Dad, if you could not

come anymore—it's too much to deal with and too upsetting—the aftermath with Mom." –JD] He didn't say, "Hey, you know, I'm sorry. I feel for you. I'll be back if you need me I'm here."

He just walked away. [And so on and off we've been in communication and his latest wife has been very insistent on getting us to be friendly, but it's not really working. It's okay with me, you know? It's really okay. In my father's defense, there really was no way to penetrate the shield that Rose put up around us. I don't think my father has ever— I have a lesbian friend in my life who I've considered more my father than my father. That would be Georgine. There was also, very importantly, my dear friend Maurice Sendak of 25 years who was the patriarch in my life after my grandparents and my father disappeared. –JD] Oh my god, what a delightful human being. What a beautiful relationship that we had.

THEODORE KERR: Let's talk about the lesbian in your life and then we'll talk about Maurice. But, tell me more, like, who is she? When did she come into your life?

JOHN DUGDALE: Continuing my restaurant experience in Stamford, Connecticut, I worked at Ettaruccis, a family style Italian restaurant, and then Mr. Donut, and then on to New York to work in a long string of failing, terrible restaurants. One of whom had the pop star, Madonna. She was a terrible waitress there and nobody liked to work with her and they didn't want to go to the club to see her sing because it was terrible.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: Who knew "Like A Virgin" was going to happen. And then finally, landing—my friend Roy called me—god rest his soul—and said, "Oh, you should come up to this place where I'm working. You'll really enjoy it. It's called Café Society. It's on 20th Street and Park Avenue South and there's dancing on some nights." He said, "It's a restaurant and then it's dancing." I thought, "Oh my God, that sounds incredible." So, I'm 21 or 22, in the beginning of college and I went up. I thought there was going to be ballroom dancing, and there were going to be couples and it was going to be table-side and there was going to be some ballroom music in there, and people would go around in a circle and ballroom dance. Well, guess what? A disco ball went down, a DJ booth popped up, and it was a complete gay freak out dance party every Wednesday and Friday. So, I ended up working there a lot. I was the bar back, I was the doorman, I was the bartender, I [even worked on Ladies night out. One of the chef's name was Georgine, and we were all afraid of her. All the gay women would come in and order a T-bone steak and a Bud Light, you know? It was so silly and so classic. I can't think of the right word. It was very much, you know, girl's night out was a terror. Anyway, if you didn't pick up something from the kitchen window, and it was getting cold there, she would bang the biggest butcher knife and say, "Pick up, Mary." You know, "Pick it up now." –JD]

We were kindred spirits, because she was from Utica—which we used to call Uterus—and I was from Stamford. Two guidos fell in love with each other, you know? It's nice that a story of joy can still make my eyes fill up, not just the sad ones. We just became fast friends. She's a very serious, no nonsense gay woman. I left Café Society when Georgine opened her restaurant on Mulberry Street and I designed the interior for her. I worked there with her at her restaurant called Georgina Carmella. And then that restaurant came and went, and was superb. And then I went and worked in a four-star restaurant called Chanterelle where I got more education about how to be in the world—art world, than I did in college.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: Because Chanterelle was tiny. It was in SoHo where at that time you still had to hide your tips in your shoe to walk home through SoHo to get to my apartment that was in between Mulberry Street and Kenmare, right outside of SoHo not in—literally in no man's land. Nobody even knows where Cleveland Place is, And I went there and right away the woman, who I just saw at Christmastime, named Karen—her husband David owned the restaurant—and it was kind of described as a shiny beacon of light in SoHo, in dark SoHo at that time was—still had sculptors and painters and all sorts of alternative folks squatting in those beautiful lofts, it was about 1982.

I wanted to work in that restaurant really badly for a lot of reasons. I knew about it and I would sit across the street on top of lavender vault lights, some of them are still here and there, but I remember how uncomfortable the vault lights were, but how beautiful they were. Circular—many of them lit some portion of the basement during the daytime since the buildings were built before electricity, most of them.

So, working in that restaurant was the apex of my waitering career. I waited on Jackie Onassis and Louise Nevelson, Jesse Norman, James Levine, James Levine's brother, Carol O'Connor, , and who's the—that did all the cooking on Channel 13 in the '60s? I can't think of her name. Big, giant, tall woman. Also James Beard, Virgil Thompson, everyone—composers, young artists.

I have a nice story for this archive. Anyway, when I got there, Karen came up to me and was familiar. She said, "John, do you think that you could walk less bistro-like?" I said, "What?" She said, "Please try to walk more softly.

There's a loose board right there near table nine and if you step on it, it makes the table shake and it's really disconcerting. "Oh, by the way," she said, "the way you put the table cloth on the table, you have to stop doing that." I would waive the thing like I was on a Navy destroyer waving the thing all over like a flag because that's what you did in Little Italy. But it was not what you did at a four-star French restaurant.

And she took all of the raw edges off me. The well-spoken, polite, more gentle, more discreet person was drawn out during that time. We all had our tables that we liked to stake out. Everyone was treated like quiet art star. When Louise Nevelson would come in—she had done, not too long before that, the "what makes her a legend the most," black analog for a co-ad. And you know she would come. You'd see here coming. You'd see the babushka she'd have wrapped around her head, see her coming down Grand Street. She'd walk up three steps. There was no entryway to the restaurant. You just walked into the restaurant, a huge, beautiful honey armoire maple, I guess. It was the color of honey and shiny—armoire. She would put her arms down at her sides, and she'd let the coat slip off her back onto the floor.

Then she would walk away to sit at the table. [Everyone knew not to go near that table because she was mine. Louise seemed mythical and otherworldly to me, and I am pretty sure she never knew I was there. She was sort of like my Georgia O'Keeffe. . . . –JD]

I visited O'Keefe's home in Albuquerque. At some point I did stand on my car, but not to go in a Goodwill dumpster this time, but to see if I could pluck a plum off of Georgia O'Keeffe's tree behind the wall. When you looked out over her home you could see the gorgeous striations of color that she painted, you know, from the exposed sand layers in a nearby Canyon. Oh my God. How beautiful.

Louise only—we didn't serve soda. We were way, way above serving soda. It was more like I would be serving a $350 bottle of wine or a $50 glass of port. All these things completely changed me from the spaghetti—the spaghetti kook in to the person who was learning the history of art, but was really learning how to be graceful. And that also, again, served me in my life in a way I could not have imagined before the sight loss. And the rest of the story with Louise is that it means you wore black pants, a white shirt, no bow tie, and long aprons down to the ground, and black shoes. It was really beautiful—it was informal formality. Very, very striking and quiet. There was no music in the restaurant. It was just the sound of plates, glasses, murmuring, people proposing to each other. Jessing on, laughing and sounding like a carol of bells, cutting all through the noise of the restaurant to the waiter station. And the waiter station reminds me of something that's really important.

[My classes overlapped with Keith Haring's at the School of Visual Arts. He was very friendly. We were not friends, but we knew each other, and we were very used to each other. He rapidly, thank God, became famous with the radiant babies and the subway paintings that we were all so mystified by. We all were waiting, waiting, and wondering who did that. It was a huge mystery, and very exciting. They were everywhere. Eventually, it came out that it was him. Before we knew it, he left school, what seemed to me early. Either that, or he was a year ahead of me, but we were in the same silk screen class. He immediately became world famous, if you will. It seemed immediate, and it was. I thank God for that because he didn't stay on the planet for very much longer, but he was funny, energetic, sexy, talented, and very generous with the people that were around him. And so creative. –JD]

So, how that relates to the restaurant is wonderful story, in that he used to [attend benefits there for the Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane Dance Company. Now, God bless and rest the soul of Arnie Zane, I got to photograph them, and Bill was a fan. We had these elegant fundraising dinners to raise money for the company. –JD] We had very swanky dames from Park Avenue and lots of artists from downtown. It was fun to work at those parties. Just something a little bit different than the regular waiting on tables.

[One night, when Bill and Arnie had their annual party, I was mortified –JD] –to see Keith walking in, who, by then, was very wealthy and famous. "Oh, it's Keith." I was so embarrassed to still be waiting tables, I ran and I hid in the waiter station, where the bread and the dishes were and stuff. And I kept my back to him, and I thought, don't—I don't want to go to that side of that restaurant. Please don't make me wait on that side of the restaurant, to the other waiters. There were about four of us, five of us, maybe.

So, I was hunched over a big basket of French bread and somebody came up behind me and said, "John?" And I said, "Yes?" He said, "It's Keith." I said, reluctantly, "How are you?" He said, "I'm fine." He said, "What a fantastically beautiful restaurant this is. It must be such a pleasure to work here. It's so beautiful." And I looked at him, and all the nervousness fell away from me, and the rest of the night was actually wonderful. And that's one part of who he was, and that's my story I like to share about him.

THEODORE KERR: It's a nice story, and it kind of tells a little bit about the art world at that time, and all the differences going on. What happened to Georgie?

JOHN DUGDALE: Oh, Georgine?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, Georgine.

JOHN DUGDALE: Well, nothing. You want me to call her now?

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: She's 70 now, still working as a personal chef, making glorious food. She's a doyenne of exquisite Italian slow food. I still love her, and we may only see each other once a year for breakfast, but we exchange notes on the telephone. If we need each other, we're there for each other. We're a constant presence, spiritually and energetically for each other. And I still respect her. I'm still a little bit afraid of her.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: And I'm the only one she'll say, sometimes, "You're the only one from that time I keep up with." I said, "I know, Georgine. You're my oldest friend in New York," you know?

Let's see, 1982 to 2017. Whatever that time span is, she's been a constant in my life. As a matter of fact, she worked at a restaurant on the corner from here called Orbit. And before I completely succumbed to the virus, I got pneumonia—which I had five times, actually. And one of the first times, I was walking by the door to Orbit—the kitchen had a half door, and it was open to the outside. I saw Georgine, and I said, "Hey." I said, "I have pneumonia." And she looked at me, and she put her chin up a couple times, [very Italian.–JD] I said, "Hey." She said, "Now, we're playing hard ball. Sit down, I'll make you some pasta." And I sat outside the restaurant, and I ate that pasta and began my journey with pneumonia.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: All these things live inside of me, and it's a wonder I spent so much time thinking about making my work, my environment. It's still shocking that I'm here, and it's been 20 plus years since I escaped the *Sword of Damocles* that was sort of hanging over the community's head.

THEODORE KERR: Why do you—can you say more about that?

JOHN DUGDALE: The *Sword of Damocles*?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: [Being the golden child with the giant poster boards with a giant herd of buffalo and being the chosen one to go to the art supply room, everything I touched turned golden. –JD] When I was in seventh grade, we had to make a diorama that rolled from one side to the other, and there were some young women in that—I felt they scorned me. I don't really know why. They must have sensed that I wasn't interested, at that time, when everyone was starting to date and stuff. I made a roll, from one side to the other, very long, illustrated by magazines. A complete moving diorama in a box, to the song "Close to You" by the Carpenters. I thought it was the best thing I ever made. It had glitter and sequins. You know, all kinds of things—birds fall down from the sky every time you walk by. As a matter of fact, I just listened to some of her songs—what an enormously beautiful and talented person. Oh, my god. Wait—but, Suzanne and her friend, whose name escapes me—I knew her friend, too. They were so much more sophisticated than me, and they were listening to Tapestry, which just came out. You can help me with—

THEODORE KERR: Carol King?

JOHN DUGDALE: Carol King's unbelievably beautiful songs, but it was still way beyond me. So, I was in my "Close to You" phase still, and they were there, and never the two met. They didn't like me—when I took candle-making in seventh grade, one of them, or some of them, saw me, the only guy. And they said, "Oh, no. He's in this class?" And I was so embarrassed that I checked out of the class and never went back. But I did learn how to make candles in the sand before the class was over, where I went and made amorphous shaped candles.

Anything I could make with my hands—I was artisanal before there was Brooklyn. Before Williamsburg, I liked artisanal cheese, like from my grandmother's shop where she shopped at Jerry's. Where if you wanted ricotta cheese, you bought the container that you got once in a lifetime, which was a big, tall, silver—it looked like a milkshake container.

[You went down the hill, and there was actually sawdust on the floor, tiled floor, and it smelled good. There was cheese—beautiful cheeses hanging from the ceiling, and a beautiful ceramic counter of silver trimming. You put the can on the counter, got the scoop, filled it up with what we called pot cheese, now more commonly known as ricotta. Then we put a piece of waxed paper over the top, and snapped the rubber band on it, early inadvertent environmental awareness, –JD] and then went back up the hill to the dead end to bring it back to my grandmother. It was my joy to do anything with her. And I mean, artisanal. I love artisanal. I make jokes about

hipsters all the time, but you know, I think I was one of the original hipsters. It started in seventh grade.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: Do you know how rewarding it is to melt down a coffee can full of wax, make a hole in the sand, and pour the wax in? And then, use a stick to make the wick stay in, and then let it cool down, and then take it out of the sand? It was like archaeology.

THEODORE KERR: It sounds beautiful.

JOHN DUGDALE: It was beautiful. And guess what color that candle was? It was lavender.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: I had no idea lavender was the color of Oscar Wilde.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: You know, I'm very—I love being gay.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] That's great. That's lucky.

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It's a good thing, right?

THEODORE KERR: When did—when does—did that word come to you? Gay.

JOHN DUGDALE: Gay? Let's see. Probably pretty early on. The word "mo" was used more than gay.

THEODORE KERR: Like, M-O?

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Short for homo.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And that was in eighth grade. By that time, people had discerned that I was not dating girls, and that I kept to myself And I was so ashamed of my body that I would wear overalls, a flannel shirt, a thermal shirt, a t-shirt, and then, a guinea t-shirt. All covered by the bib of the overalls. And they all—they seemed to know that I was hiding my body because I knew that I had to hide my body. I didn't want to go and shower when it was time to go and shower. So, my PE teacher—who had to be gay, was surrounded by all these beautiful, beautiful African American young men who grew up, where I was talking about before—they were my friends in third grade, and they all seemed to be muscled and beautiful and endowed, and already gone through puberty. I hadn't even really started, and I thought, oh god, how I could I ever go in and shower with them?

So, my PE teacher, would go off somewhere and come back. I would run down the hallway and stick my hair under the water faucet, get my hair wet, shake my head, and put a towel around myself so I looked like I showered. So, I guess they knew, and I remember Grant Lynch—how do we even remember these people's names? He always sat in the farthest seat from me, and he came up, and he whispered in my ear, "Mo. Mo!" It was like, somebody was stabbing me. You know? That was when I became aware that I was definitely not part of the crowd. Because at that time, the only gay person that anybody knew was on the TV show, *Soap*.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: Billy Crystal's role What made him gay on that show? Who knew? You could never tell. He never did anything, never said anything that was gay. I would lean against the couch, my knees pulled up to my chest, waiting for something gay to happen. You know, nothing ever happened. So, you know, hearing they were gay when I got to New York. I can't—it's a funny [phenomenon –JD]. I can't quiet remember the exact moment. I do know that I didn't like the word to describe me—I didn't like it any more than the word mo. I never liked the rainbow flag—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: —you know? You know, my sister watching Gay Pride Day parade with me, when it was really something, marching with ACT UP. I told my mother, "Hey, Cathy's going to come in to town. We're going to be in a parade." Of course, she knew which parade, but we hadn't talked about anything yet.

THEODORE KERR: What year do you think that was?

JOHN DUGDALE: Early. Early.

THEODORE KERR: Like, '87?

JOHN DUGDALE: Maybe.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: I became positive about 19—probably 1983 or '84.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Which, you know, my sister knew about first. Marching down 5th Avenue with her screaming, you know, "fight back, fight AIDS." You know, being yelled at in front of St. Patrick's and stuff. I'm not any kind of activist, but whenever I did that, I did the normal thing for me, and I would burst out crying while I lay down by Wall Street, out of periphery.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I never—I went to some of the [ACT UP –JD] meetings, but they were too much for me. You know, there's a big skylight in the studio, and it's getting colder and colder. You're not cold, are you?

THEODORE KERR: No, I feel great. How about you?

JOHN DUGDALE: Okay. I'm chilly, but I like it.

THEODORE KERR: And your shirt is still—

JOHN DUGDALE: Oh, yes. Exactly. Take it out and put on long sleeve thermal shirts. My sister gave me this. And can I tell you—and anyone who ever hears this in the future, I have had, and am having such a rich life. There's so much about it. I don't know how I'm ever going to fit it into six hours. And I don't even say that as a joke because my stream of consciousness about my life. I feel like somebody else is saying it, not me. I don't even feel like I'm here, really. I consign myself to death, and I experience being with my foot on one side of that threshold. Which is one of the reasons Maurice and I meshed so beautifully because he was also very conscious of his mortality, [in his late eighties –JD]. He was not just a happy-go-lucky children's book illustrator, and he really talked about what death looked like to him [during midnight calls to my studio. He tried sometimes –JD] to be polite to [inaudible] and I'd say, "Maurice, no, you're my hero." And that went on for years. I loved him. I loved him like my father. I miss him so much. Sad moment. If I ever—well, if there ever was a time in my life when I lost my father [of choice—it would be one morning when Darrell called me from Philadelphia and asked "Are you all right? I was still half asleep. –JD] "Did you hear about Maurice? At 8:00 o'clock in the morning, he fell" I didn't hear anything yet. Don't tell me.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: Enough people had died already. You know, he wasn't supposed to die. He was engaged. He was—he had AIDS. We never talked directly about AIDS. [We talked about blindness and dying. For the record, he'd said, "Ah, you know what death looks like to me?" I said, "What? Tell me." He said, "Well, the doorbell rings, I open the door, and there's Satan. He's a black man, and he's naked. He's rippling with muscle, and he's got the devil's cape on and a trident, and he has an enormous penis. He's hard, and he asked me to suck it. Then, he wraps me in his cape and we're gone." I said to Maurice, "what a way to go." I guess he expected that I was going to be shocked, but he couldn't possibly shock me. I said, "That sounds fantastic, except you left me out of the equation. And I want to be there when Satan gets there." Then cackling I would say, "What a great talk. I love you." –JD]

And then, you know, get ready for the next time I would go to his house to bring him lunch. Or we worked on my beautiful project together where I did the Figaro pictures, which are now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. My photographs and his paintings, and we would work on those kind of projects, or he would wonder what that—he said, "How did you get such depth at such a young age?" And I told him, well, being paralyzed and near death for a long time. And P.S., rolling my hands backwards, I would stand in the beginning of the AIDS crisis, thinking, "I'm going to be the one who takes care of everyone." And I did. It was my duty to be a caretaker, right? I learned how to do that with Rose, with my siblings, who I adore. And I was going to do it with the crisis as well. And it makes want to say Marie's Crisis—name of a bar in this neighborhood that's still here—thank God there's some remnants of the actual real West Village. And it's not easy to live in a completely gay community. This is a community of artists—we can talk about that later.

But yeah, I remember standing on my porch and thinking, "I'll be there for them," never knowing that I was going to need them, and I was going to have to go from being a caretaker[to being cared for –JD]. I was going to have to learn how to be the passenger, not the driver, in the car, where I'd learned to drive when I was 14. It was

a light blue, beautiful light blue Toyota four door Corolla. You know, like a lot of kids, I used Ajax to scrub the tires, to make the white part white, and vacuumed it thousands of times, and it smelled like gasoline. It was very rinky-dink, but I adored it. But driving was your freedom at 16, and I was standing in line at the crack of dawn to get my driver's license so I could get out there.

Anyhow, I was happily taking care of my sheep, and somebody actually came from Visual Aids, up there to visit me and made some recording—I don't remember his name. He was such a great guy. It was—

THEODORE KERR: How long ago?

JOHN DUGDALE: Long time ago. Right in the beginning, where he was doing a videotape of people that were experiencing direct influence on the work from AIDS.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And I'm really ashamed that I don't remember his name, but it was a time when people were inheriting lofts and apartments that were full of artwork, and it was just thrown in the dumpsters.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: It was a sad, sad thing. Not only did parents not know their sons were gay, they didn't know they were going to die. You know? They were—coming out—it was the thing that shoved everyone out of the closet. Clearly, that's another branch of the story. I woke up one day. I was bringing water in two pails to the sheep, and halfway down the path to the barn, I stopped being able to breathe.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I bent over, and held my stomach. I still couldn't catch my breath. I put the buckets down, and I got back to the house, and I called my hero and beloved doctor for 30 years, Paul Curtis Bellman. He said, "How long before you can be here?" I said, "Well, I'm starting to catch my breath." He said, "Come here as soon as you can." I often think about these things. They influence everything, but just to have the scroll of them [unrolling in –JD] my mind.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: —and I think I hadn't done the screening viral pneumonia. And this is a seminal moment. He said, "I want to put you in the hospital." I said, "No," because going to the hospital at that time meant that you were going to die. And the cover of *the Daily News* said 16 months from first diagnosis of opportunistic adventure, which was almost always, viral pneumonia. I said, "Oh, I'll treat it at home." He said, "Well, you can do what you want, but I suggest you go to the hospital." People like Charles Ludlam were living— unbelievable playwright, a fantastic partner who was next door. I say hello to him every day. Oh, god. Everett Quinton. The theater in particular is another monument to gay. Incredible artistry. Do you know of it?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah. Paul never missed a thing there. Charles and Everett came to Chanterelle once while I was working there as a waiter, and we gave them so much food they got sick. They didn't know what hit them because David and Karen used to go to see shows there, and standing in line there was one of the greatest social moments of the month, really. If you were there, you were in the right place.

Anyway, backing up, let's see. Oh, then, there was that time I was walking down Bedford Street from the doctor's, when Georgine said, "We're playing hardball now." And you don't use that—it's a wonderful phrase to use when somebody tells you something that you really—there's nothing that you can say. If you just say, you know, we're playing hardball now. I'm with you. You know, that's all you have to say. But I started to take my I.V. meds there, and then I knew I had just enough time to get back here, into my big bed that was my vision of Darrell, before I would start to have convulsive tremoring—shaking—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: —terrible, terrible quaking. And Darrell would throw all the blankets on top of me, then the coats, and then he would lay on top of me.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Very [powerful –JD], strong, strong, beautiful man. He was in a lot of my photographs. And he would stay on top of me until the quaking passed. Doesn't sound like it can even be real, right? It sounds like a script from a movie.

THEODORE KERR: Why does it sound unreal?

JOHN DUGDALE: I don't know. Does it—did that all really happen? Was Darrell that graceful, to lay on top of me, or to throw those blankets on top of me? He was—he was only 20.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Maybe a little more by that time, but he was still a young man from the inner city that was radiant. Like Keith Haring's babies, he was radiating an aura of light and joy around him. Despite the problems that we had, he was magnificent, and is still a magnificent person. Dr. Bellman, that I mentioned a moment ago, said to me once—he said, "You know, when that Darrell walks into the room, the whole room lights up." I said, "You know, I live with that light. He's my hero and my partner, and I adore him." And that was the beginning of me being symptomatic, and having to be cared for. It took me sometime to have five bouts of pneumonia before the next thing happened.

THEODORE KERR: I feel like we have a few loose ends—

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes, we do.

THEODORE KERR: —and I've jotted them down, but it feels like we should maybe just talk about the moments leading up to you knowing that you're living with HIV?

JOHN DUGDALE: Okay. I remember, like so many gay men you've read a thousand times in *The New York Times*, when the bartender—the bald, super muscular bartender that I used to watch dancing—Western boots, and the tiniest jeans you ever saw, under the beautiful planetarium at—oh, my goodness. Good heavens, it can't be possible. The big club that we used to be—the theater—oh, my God. I am so sorry. Give me a second. It had a red carpeted ramp that you walked up. They sell all the tickets—it was the uber gay club at the time. Anyway, he—I used to see him dancing there, and the only way I knew which club it was—it was so legendary, I'm sure I'll remember it—is that I used to go the bar on Saint Avenue—and I'll get back to your question—and I would sort of sit in the shadows and watch and say, "Oh, where was I going?" Oh, it was the Fillmore East—was the original theater. And they would go and [inaudible]—what is that? And then, I finally screwed up the courage to open the door, and it was all red. And I walked up to the—oh, it was the Saint.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: —I was a much more—an Art Bar kind of a guy. The Saint was a different echelon of gay guys. And I said, "How much to get in?" And he said, "Twenty dollars." I said, "Twenty dollars? You're kidding!" He said, "Well, you know, you have to be a member, but you can come on Saturday for twenty dollars." So, I saved up to go there, and that's a different story.

But anyway, that fellow, who I used to like to watch dance in there—so petitely dancing with all his giant muscles, and probably knocked out on amyl nitrate, came in and said, "Can you believe this crazy article—only gay men are getting this cancer?" I said, "What?" I said, "That can't be possible. How could cancer know if you're gay?" And he said, "Well, here it is."

And there was the article. Eight men, or seven men come down in a cluster with sarcoma, this bizarre thing that hasn't really be around since the turn of the century. Earlier than the turn of the century. So much about gay men is marvelous; we took care of ourselves, and researched, then looked at everything from, you know, egg whites—every day lipids to drink—this is pre-diagnosis. And I thought, well, you know, I kind of knew I was going to be positive already from so much time at St. Mark's baths. I was at the tail end of the sexual revolution in 1977, '78, when I came here. And if you went out to a club and you didn't get to go home with somebody, you went to the baths—and then you crawl in the tubs. And I saw friends there. I saw friends from the restaurant, and I saw my friend with the bald head who danced at the Saint. And you went there, and I was always an observer there.

I didn't do anything too serious, sexually. I loved and fed off the energy there, seeing the mountain of naked men on top of each other, or lonely men that made me sad, sitting by themselves, with the door open and no one was paying attention to. But somewhere in there, around '85, I hooked up with a young man who didn't tell me he had been sick already, and then it turned out to be pneumonia. Another story, a different chapter. And I got tested, and the doctor said, "Well, you know, I can tell by your T-cell count that you're positive. Would you like counseling?"

I remember, I had 560 T-cells, the normal being 900 to 1200. Even allowing counseling, I thought I would be fine. I was 26. Then, I went home. I was sitting with my back to my mother when she was washing the dishes in this chair I grew up in, with my brother. And my sister's sitting there and I said, "Mom." She said, "What?" I said, "I got to tell you something." She said, "What?" I said, "I'm gay." She said, "I wondered when you were going to

tell me. Why'd you wait so long?" I said, "Well, I think that's a different matter." She said, "Well, I don't care." And I said, "Well, there's one other part." I said, "I'm HIV positive." She said, "How long have you known that?" I said, "For some time." She said, "Why didn't you tell me? I never would've let you get sick."

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

JOHN DUGDALE: I'm not sure what she would've done, or if I had gone, instead, to RISD. I was—I chose this college because of my aptitude test here in New York. SVA accepted you on your portfolio, not on your grades. They didn't care about any test that you had ever taken. And when I showed them my first photographs that I made, they were pretty startled. You know, traipsing along here slowly, giving you so much detail—well, I didn't tell you that I progressed along, through every art department. I can't draw. I can barely sign my own name. I know how to make a figure with three dimensions. I tried to make slab pottery, coil pottery, pottery on the wheel. I thought, well, this is it—I'm going to be a potter; I was terrible at it. And my friend, Ted, famously said to me at the beginning of 11th grade, "Oh, I'm going to take this photography class just for credit. Why don't you take it?" I said "Wow, sure, photography, whatever." So, I went and got in class, and the teacher there had, get this—a handlebar mustache.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: It gets better. Clogs, painted silver. Rainbow suspenders. And a car, a pacer. I don't know how old you are, but there were these horrendously odd-looking cars that were popular called pacers with big windows. In the back, a big decal on the back of a rainbow. I didn't get it. I had no context—none whatsoever. He had beautiful salt and pepper short hair, and very [twinkling –JD] blue eyes. And I was very, energetically—I was very drawn to him. Not physically, but I thought, "Wow, this is going to be something."

So, he assigned the class to—pick a photographer from any time, and we should stand and give an oral report. And I thought, a photographer? I grew up looking at *Life Magazine* and *National Geographic*. I didn't even realize that there were significant photographers. I didn't know—I thought—I don't know who I thought took the pictures.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: But it didn't dawn on me that they were out there.

So, I found Margaret Bourke White from *Life Magazine*, and I researched the living daylights out of her. And then, I liked Ross Perot, the then long-talking, graph-carrying president who ruined the election that year. I burdened my chart, and I might as well add a bunch of variety, I gave a three hour presentation about her. And I loved it. Her pictures of turbines and factories. Her picture of herself, popped out of the falcon head on the Chrysler Building. And all other kids in the class were jocks or cheerleaders, and they were blowing spitballs at each other or sleeping. Nobody else even gave a report.

And then, Michael Walden looked at me and I looked at him, and I became his project. And he used to keep the door open for me at night, illegally, so that I could get into the school and use the dark room. He encouraged me every step of the way, and started entering my photographs into contests in Connecticut. And I won every time, the blue ribbon.

THEODORE KERR: And this was in high school?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: In 11th grade. And then, in—I sailed through that class. In my joy, I found how to express myself with the camera. I said, "Oh, my god. I can make drawings with this thing. I don't need to know how to draw. I can't believe it." I went to Caldor's, which I keep saying that name over but I don't think Caldor's is a national chain store—Carl and Dorothy Bant opened this department store in Stamford that was kind of like Waldorf's but a little more updated, with things like Cool Lots and Fun for Quotes and even photo supplies—surprise. But I bought an enlarger and some felt and some trays, and [my first single lens reflex camera, a Minolta. –JD] I took my first negatives in the farm stand that I worked in Glenbrook, Connecticut. And I started printing in there.

And then, we got up to 12th grade, where we took some bus trips into Manhattan to go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see this strange creature's art—Diane Arbus. I remember sitting in a bus, and I—the kids were just excited to be in New York. I couldn't wait to get to the museum.

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: And I said to Michael Walden—I never called him Mr. Walden. I said, "I put all the felt up in the furnace room at my mother's house, and I did what you said. And I sat in there for almost an hour, to make sure I didn't see any light." And he's like, "Well, John, you must have been having some fun then!" And then, the entire bus started laughing. And I mean, looking back, I can—you know, he used to keep *Tuggy the Tugboat*. He lived in Bridgeport, Connecticut, in a tiny apartment, and he used to keep a record of *Tuggy the Tugboat* on 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to not be lonely. Bridgeport, Connecticut, can be a dreary place. Anyway, he was my favorite godfather of photography.

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: And then, in 12th grade, I took a second part of that class, and then he finally said to me, "What are you going to do after school?" I said, "I'm going to go the Culinary Institute of America. I want to be a chef." "A chef?" I said, "Yeah." And the real reason that I wanted to go there was because on the brochure of the Culinary Institute of America, it showed a guy with a chainsaw, who had just made a chainsaw swan out of a block of ice. And I thought, oh, my God. That's what I want to do. And it had nothing to do with my restaurant background, at [. . . –JD]any of the restaurants in Stanford. It had to do with making a swan, some figure out of ice with a saw. And he cited another idea. He said, "I want to give you these three brochures for the Philadelphia College of Art, the School of Visual Arts in New York, and RISD in Rhode Island, in "Providence." And he said, "I want you to pick one and which one you think you might want to go to." I said, "Oh, I don't know."

And I went home, and I looked through them, and you know, SVA, like I mentioned earlier, was the only one that didn't take grades. So, that's how I got here, through Michael.

[Side conversation.]

[Audio break.]

THEODORE KERR: Okay, welcome back.

JOHN DUGDALE: Thank you.

THEODORE KERR: Thank you. So, we have a few loose ends. Is there anywhere in particular you want to jump back into?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes. I think that after high school, it's important. When I came to New York and started going to the Pyramid Club, which was one of the Art Bars I mentioned before, and a hot bed of artistry—of every kind. Every kind of person you can imagine. A beautiful club that used to be a Polish bar, neighborhood bar, on Avenue A, I guess, across from Tompkins Square Park. I met a man there—beautiful man who was a performance artist named John Kelly, and he, a genius, became my muse. And you know, I go downstairs, and he's getting ready for a performance. He said, "I have to be alone now." And I go upstairs and wait. And then you didn't know what he was going to do, but then, the door to the—the floor had a hole in it, a trap door. And he would pop out. He had found dry cleaning wrappers and some tubes, and he turned himself into Apollo with a wire, out of cellophane. And he would dance to some Gluke music. And I thought, oh, my God. Who is that creature?

I, at that time, pretty much thought I was with the Ballet Russe, and I was the photographer. And I introduced myself to him, and his name is and was, John Kelly. Performance name—Dagmar Onassis. And we wanted to recreate all kinds of these characters, and characters from history—Marie Callas being the most famous one. And he exposed me to the great opera music of the world. And we spent hours listening to opera on the floor of my apartment on Cleveland Place. And he said, "You should meet my friends Tom and Billy." I was like, "Oh, I'd like to." They lived where? In this building, downstairs, in the garden apartment, and they owned the florist shop called Mädderlake.

THEODORE KERR: Oh.

JOHN DUGDALE: And so, I met them, and they were nice. And they said, "Hey, we're doing a book. You know, you're a photographer. You're"—I was only 22. I just barely finished my first year of school. And they said, "Why don't you take some flowers for the book? You take all those nice pictures of John." I said, "I only do black and white photography." I was a snooty—

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: —art student. I said, "I only do black and white." And they said, "We can't really use black and white." And I said, "Well, I'll make some for you." So, I photographed a Tahitian woman that I knew with no clothes on, with a big hibiscus flower in between her breasts or something. They're like, "Well, they're really nice, but we really think that you should maybe come upstate and just try to take some color pictures." I said,

"Okay." So, startled about this, they said there'll be a van waiting for you on Broadway, outside of the store. They just moved to Broadway from the Madison Avenue—really city renowned. They did every flower for everything, from the, you know, the New York Public Library to Gloria Swanson. I mean, every star, reclusive or not, you know, they were the florists for them. It was a beautiful experience.

And I peek in the van, and in the back of the van were stadium seats, filled with beautiful jars of flowers. Flowers I recognized the smell of. Flowers I'd never heard of. Flowers—it was like heaven; a football stadium of flowers in the van. I threw in my camera and my bag, and I started driving upstate to a town called Rifton, which was two hours away. And it started to snow. While I was on the road, it snowed more and more. It got to be a blizzard; it started getting dark. I got off the highway, Exit 18, at New Paulson. I followed the directions, and I went on a winding, beautiful hill and dale road. Extremely curvaceous, like a roller coaster, and skidded at the ends, where I was supposed to turn to their house, and was fretting. I thought, "Oh, no. Oh, no. I'm late for my first job. They're not going to like me. Why didn't I set out sooner?" Followed a little bit more of the directions, and I pulled up to what looked like Hansel and Gretel's house.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: It was a stone house with a low, broad, beautiful roof, coming down almost to the ground, and windows sparkling with candles, smoke pouring out of the chimney. And in the snow, every fence post had a candle out, waiting for me. Burning in snow. And I thought, [inaudible], "Oh, my god—" I thought, "Oh, my God." I was astonished. And I went in and I was breathless. I was like, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so late." "You're not late. Come in." And I looked around and I saw two cocker spaniels, a tartan plaid dog pillow from L.L. Bean, some glasses of red wine, *The New York Times*, candles piled up, wax dripping all over in every window. And a roaring fireplace from 1840, where Tom was making bread. And I said, you know, "What are you doing?" And he said, "Why don't you sit down and get comfortable? Have some wine." And I thought, this is what? I thought, "People actually live like this?" This is what I dreamed of. When I looked at that barn in elementary school, I said, "I didn't know people still even lit candles like this." And my mother would put out a red or a green candle on Christmas, or a turkey candle, you know, from the supermarket at Thanksgiving, but they actually lived their life by that—by the beautiful smell of beeswax candles.

So, that moment is what I call my gay aesthetic awakening. Where I embraced my aesthetic fully, through them. And they said, "Here's your bed. It's in the barn." And we tromped toward in the barn, and a beautiful iron bed. And one table had what looked like a metropolis of beeswax candles, and scaling blue and green paint on the wainscoting. Windows that looked out across the walk to the river, and a beautiful hill, raking down at a sharp angle with a door that when you opened it, the ground was running, I don't know what degree that is, but it was really startling. The barn was part of a worker's complex, and barns for a fabric manufacturing company on an island, ruins of this company from the 18th century, in the middle of the river, across the street from the house.

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: So, I got in the bed, and Billy said, "Let me blow your candles out." And the whole room filled up with a thick cloud of smoke from the beeswax candles, and I thought I had gone to heaven. I still crave that smell, and I'm introducing Rey to all sorts of things, and we were buying beeswax candles and making a little miniature version—this is many years later, version of beeswax candles. And we'd blow them out ceremonially every night, and it incenses and cleanses the house. So, then we started taking pictures of flowers. And they said, "Here's some flowers. Have a good time." That's it. They didn't even tell me what to do. They had a couple things I needed to, but they said, "Do whatever you want." And so, I started taking some pictures, and they were pretty blah. Felt, well, these are pretty blah. And the only thing I brought up with me for light was a clip on, aluminum light from Canal Street, from, you know, outside 2,050 cents, you know, those clip on ones that you see everything? And I said, "This is pretty boring."

So, I noticed, when I was coming in, they had a beautiful sort of arts and crafts, run on light outside the door that had a yellow bug light in it. And I thought, "I'm going to get that bug light, and maybe I can make these more interesting." So, I put the bug light in the thing, and it just looked yellow. So, I thought, "Well, that's not really working either." So, let me look around the house and see what other things I can do. And I found a pair of pantyhose in a bureau that were left over from one of John Kelly's performances as Dagmar [Onassis –JD], his incredible tribute to Joni Mitchell—it's another story. And I said, "This is good." And I got some clothespins, and I pinned the pantyhose, in layers, over the bug light. And all of the sudden, had a light that looked like a renaissance painting. And because the bug lamp was so easily moved, I made everything as if it were by candle. And the end story is I did 65 pictures for them in the front and the back of the book, all in color, all my way. And that led to a beautiful, big book party where nobody ever met me before. "Oh, hi. How are you? What—you know, we love the book. We love the book. I'm the art director for this and that, and *Connoisseur* magazine, and I'm a rep for"—and so on.

And not too long after the book came out, and was very successful, art directors started to call me. Very

famously, Mary Shanahan from *Cuisine* magazine called—

[Laughs.] My dog, go sit down sir. I don't know. My guide dog, he's mad because I'm not paying much attention to him.

[Side conversation.]

I'm sorry. He's extremely loving.

THEODORE KERR: He's very sweet.

JOHN DUGDALE: He's very sweet. Okay, buddy. Sit. Down, down. Come on. That's a good boy. Stay. Stay. He'll be sleeping in another two minutes.

Mary Shanahan called me from *Cuisine* magazine and said, "We'd like to hire you to do still life." I looked at the phone in that funny and then, "Me?" She said, "We'll send you the object." You know, I didn't really even ask what it was. I thought it was going to be flowers or something really pretty. So, the messenger came and brought me a box. And I undid it, and you know what it was?

THEODORE KERR: What?

JOHN DUGDALE: It was plastic lettuce spinner.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: Yellow and sort of translucent wax. And I looked at it in horror, and I thought, "Oh, god." So, I called her and I said, "Can I do what I want to this?" And she says "You can do anything you want." So, it was around the time of *Close Encounters, of the Third Kind*, where a guy kept having at the call to make something in the shape of a mound. So, I went out and bought a whole crate of lettuce, and a water spray bottle, mister, and I made a giant mound of lettuce, and I cut a hole out of the back of the lettuce spare. And I put a light inside of it, so it looked like a spaceship, and I put it kind of on a tilt, landing on the lettuce. Well, that was the start of nine years of commercial work—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: —because [they had not heard of me –JD] yet.

I didn't follow any of the rules about making commercial work. I had none; I never even knew what I was doing. I didn't use a flash. I didn't use a strobe. I used a Tungsten light and slow film.

And I tried everything you can think of, and I—this led all the way to letting the St. Regis Penthouse, the presidential suite, for extremely beautiful high-end models like Vendela to come, and wear cashmere sweaters and pearls, and take beautiful—I taught myself how to do beauty pictures on the job. I did catalogs for Bloomingdale's, Sears, Bergdorf Goodman, Lane Bryant, the Big Boned Woman. And everything you could possibly think of. Someone called me from *The New York Times* and said, "Would you do a food photograph for the food page?" I said, "Sure, why not?" So, he said, "We have kind of a hard one, but we think maybe you could come up with a solution?" "Absolutely."

It was a piece of beautiful homemade Russian bread—the big cross, you know, on top of it. Just like you want a piece of Russian bread to look like, round. I had kind of a [inaudible] on that, god knows, suits me now. I will—don't know what I would do without it. And I went up to 86th Street; I found where the only Russian newsstand while I was in Manhattan. And I bought a Russian newspaper, and I bought some red thread. And I wrapped the newspaper with the Russian words, helter-skelter, all around, made a nest, opened it, and tied a piece of red string around it. I submitted it just in time. That led to three years of doing a page every Sunday for *The New York Times* cookbook.

It was kind of swerving my hand around. It was kind of—everything that came my way, didn't matter what it was. Some of it was not fun. Photographing 50 pairs of shoes for Ralph Lauren is not fun.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: After the 50th time, five days later, and you have to put a certain slant of light, and you have to put the right cream on the shoe—but I had a wonderful agent in Carla Grande, who was very supportive. Actually, there's a good story in there about HIV. I was upstate, where my friend Steven—I mentioned earlier, I didn't know he had AIDS. We really didn't talk about it then, all of us, very much. He came down—I'll make it short—with a very clear case of pneumonia. If he stayed up there, he was going to die. I like this part, so I'm including [it—the house –JD] had ventilated, forced air, heat at the time. And I couldn't keep him warm.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: So I made a tent out of blankets, sealing him inside. I put him in there [on a chair –JD] and turned the heat on. Even that wouldn't keep him warm from shaking. So, he came down here. He got himself over pneumonia. I took care him for seven out of the 15 years that he survived, and it was nothing at all. I felt, well, you know what? They won't take me back at the restaurant, and my dream of living in the country is dashed because this man has no family that's interested, no friends—all his friends fled, and I am— I can't leave him behind; it's not in my Christian nature.

So, I thought, I better set up a place. I did all those file photographs. I did those commercial jobs. I called up a number of agents, and they would say, "Oh, we love your flower pictures. They're so medieval and so—we like the illumination. We love them, we love them, but we don't quite know what we would do with them." I went to about seven people—they were all nice, but nobody would take me. I had one more person on notice. Steven was hacking, coughing, like he had pleurisy at the time, and really disturbing in his cough. I said, "You, go in that room and close the door. Do not come out. I'm going to have a meeting with this person here. Don't come out of there. Please," I said, "I'm trying to get us money for food and pay the rent."

So, Carla came over, and she's sitting at the front of the apartment looking at my work. [Murmuring appreciatively, –JD] the door, *ee-ow*, opened. Very scrawny Steven, in his baggy underwear, coughing, t-shirt all scraggy, sweaty, he said, "I'm thirsty." I thought, "Oh, damn." I thought, "I asked you to stay in there. Give me a break." Carla crossed the room, and Steven was coughing and she screamed, "Steven!" He screamed, "Carla!" They ran across the room, and they embraced and hugged for what seemed like an eternity. I thought, "Oh, my god, John, you cannot control the universe."

They were old friends that lost track of each other, and she looked over his shoulder and said, "Of course I'll represent you, honey." That's what led to the years of commercial work, and living with Steven all the way through, when he had dementia. And I would come home from a shoot, and I couldn't find a certain pair of shoes, and he'd say, "They're in the freezer." I'd say, "They are?" I'd go in the freezer, and my shoes would be in the freezer, full of orange rinds. I'd say, "What'd you put those orange rinds in my shoes for, Steven?" He said, "Then they're going to smell good. They're going to smell nice for you."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I came once during gay pride and I said, "Don't leave this house until I get home. Do not leave the house, all right? Promise?" He said, "I promise." Steven looked like Hercules. Blond, with a cleft chin. Extremely beautiful body. He used to wear his overalls with no shirt; it was pretty sexy. I came down Hudson Street, and there's a brouhaha going on at the corner, people fighting. It's Steven, right outside, fighting with the bartender from the women's bar, called Cubby Hole. And I said, "Okay, what is going on? What are you doing out of the house? Why are you yelling at him?" And he said, "I just wanted to buy half a tequila. She won't let me buy half a tequila. I only have enough for half." I said, "You couldn't give him half a tequila. It's gay pride day!" I wanted to say, "Can't you see who you're dealing with?" So, I took him by the scruff of the neck. I brought him back to the stairs and I said, "You stay out here, but don't go inside. Don't leave the steps. Just stay here for the rest of gay pride. Don't move; I'll get you a tequila." You know? So, there's a little taste of life at that time, when people were finding themselves, taking care of lock, stock, and barrel. I was his doctor, his nurse. I fed him. I was his insurance agent, doctor, hospital management. I nearly had a nervous breakdown taking care of him.

THEODORE KERR: Wait, can you remind me, though. Who Steven was in your life?

JOHN DUGDALE: My first partner here. Not Darrell. He came, very early on, in my boyfriend parade. My litany of boyfriends.

THEODORE KERR: I don't think you've mentioned Steven before.

JOHN DUGDALE: I thought about him, but I didn't mention it because I thought, how much can I glomp onto this tape?

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Well, I think a boyfriend that you took care of is pretty important.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes. He's a luminary in the sky now. Flaxen hair, and his cleft chin, and blue eyes. And it's a good story. I realized, after not very long, that—seeing I really didn't have a relationship because he got sick so quickly after I met him. I had to get over [the fact that he didn't tell –JD] me that he was positive. He just misled me, and I—he would have seizures, or he'd go stiff as a board, and we'd have to try to fit him in a cab to get him to the hospital. I couldn't go to a really good hospital because of—Medicaid wasn't so good. I thought I was going to lose my mind.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And I went to have a glass of lemonade right there—the bed was there. And ice actually stuck to the bottom of the glass, you know, it slid out and wet my shirt with some lemonade and ice, and I fell down to the ground and started crying.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Sobbing, in a way that felt like I was going to cough up a lung. And I thought, oh, dear, John. You better be careful. You're going to have a nervous breakdown. It's been going on for some years, seven years. And I did the unthinkable, and I tried to find a therapist.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I said—and I went to a Church—she was giving therapy to people that were somehow affected or infected by the virus. And I told her my story, briefly, and she said, "Oh, sweetheart." She said, "You don't have to live with him to continue to love him and take care of him." She said, "You have to take care of yourself." And those were words that I was not familiar with.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: Right? Maybe you could hear that from previous testimony.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: So, I went over to a place where I had been donating money to from my commercial work—Bailey House. Strikingly, it was supposed to be Uncle Charlie's Bar, downtown or whatever. It was a disaster, but they turned it into a free home, with beautiful rooms, you know, and a bathroom, and all kinds of care for people with AIDS. So, I told Steven—of course, he didn't want to go. I said, "Just around the corner. I'll be right here. I'll see you every day. I need a rest." And when I brought him there, and I left him there, I thought I was going to die.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I went outside and put my back against the wall; I slid down, and I just burst out crying. I realized I had been doing the entire staff's work there. I'd been doing the work of 10 people to take care of him. And I was free of that, but never completely free of the guilt until, finally, he burst out of his shell.[. . . –JD].

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And he became known as the Mayor of Bailey House.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: His name in German, as his dementia came on more and more, he liked to connect to the Germanic heritage that he had. He said, "My name is Stefan, not Steven." And so, the wonderful people that he [came to know at Bailey House –JD] decided his nickname was going to be Chiffon.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: You know, I'd say, "Steven," he would say, "Oh, you mean Stefan?" I said, "Yeah." He'd come down the elevator to go to lunch or something. I'd say, "Chiffon?" "Don't call me that." You know? He took his rooms that they gave him and turned them into a masterpiece of artwork. You know, really creative guy. He used to work for Steven's Towels. He lived there for a while. I'd be walking down Christopher Street to get my coffee. I hear, "John Dugdale! John Dugdale!" He would be hanging out of the window on the upper floor, screaming my name. And we'd wave to each other, he'd say, "I'm going to get myself back up to that farm sometime!" Both me and my sister have spoken of how regretful we are that we didn't check him out of Bailey house and shove him in the car and bring him upstate and just watch him to make sure that he didn't get in trouble, you know? But God rest Steven's soul.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: My mother loved him. We went to the supermarket once, and when he came home [to Connecticut –JD], he had some kind of seizure. He crashed into a wall in the supermarket, and all the cans fell down, all around him. My mother didn't miss a beat. She ran over, and she revived him, and got him up, and we got him out of there. She's so fearless.

THEODORE KERR: Oh.

JOHN DUGDALE: And I'm sure that some of that fearlessness inhabits my body still, because I walked out of Saint Vincent's into a snowstorm after being paralyzed and going blind. How do you like that?

THEODORE KERR: Great.

JOHN DUGDALE: Pretty good, eh?

THEODORE KERR: That's amazing.

JOHN DUGDALE: So, that gets you through those 10 years, from the flower book to the unwanted commercial career that I was making up to, get this, $35,000 a week. It was like, "Oh, you bought that farm. You bought that farm. Why are you buying that farm?" [. . . –JD] I thought, "I don't know, really." I bought it with tips from the restaurant. I didn't buy it with photography money. I hadn't hit gold yet. Carla said, "Honey, I'm going to get you $3,000 a day." And I said, "You're kidding." "You know, honey, I'm going to get you $5,000 a day." Eventually, she was getting me $20,000 to $30,000 a week. But I was still doing what I didn't mean to do. I came to New York to be the next Alfred Stieglitz—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: —and I was going to have someone be my Georgia O'Keeffe, sweep around in dove capes at nighttime, in this twinkling city of lights. But life seemed to take me in its own direction, as it does to everyone, no matter what you think. You are not in control of your life. You make decisions, markers along the way, but even those decisions are influenced by the universe.

And I mean, I go outside the studio on—come full circle, Mädderlake, the giant store, and they built a photo studio for rent. So, I of course, rented there all the time because then, there would be fresh flowers. I'd be around all my friends. I'd go outside and lean against the building, put my foot [against the wall –JD], you know, one knee up. And I'd look at the sky and I said, "What in hell are you doing? This is not why you came to New York." And they would go, "John, John!" You know, on a set. I'd go back in to photograph anything you could possibly imagine. You know, Barney's. The cream of the crop. If I had meant to do that, it never would've happened.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Then, somewhere along, doing that and other things, anything that had anything to do with school exactly, except I graduated. It felt like, with me already reading in first grade, I far exceeded what was expected of anyone in the fourth year of college, so much so that I felt that it was embarrassing for the other students to show their work during the, you know, you put your work up to be—

THEODORE KERR: Like, crit?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah, doing critique classes. I'd have to hold my tongue to not say, insultingly, "This is what you've come to at the end of four years?" And I mentioned it to a teacher, and she said, "John, you've got to be more patient with people. Everyone wakes up at a different time in the morning."[. . . –JD] I was going to School of Visual Arts in a car service. I didn't take the bus. You know, I spoiled myself rotten. And bought the house, and I was going back and forth to the house. Everything's going great. Darrell was living here.

Here's the segue. I was working as a docent at a farm museum called Bethpage Village, out on Long Island, who I—actually I found it, and Darrell said, "Well," he said, "mister, can you ever just look at something? Do you have to be a part of everything? You have your own farm. Why are you going to work there?" I said, "I'm not going to work there. I'm going to volunteer there because I'll learn about 19th century farm life firsthand,"

So, while there, I learned how to milk a cow. I started giving talks to inner city kids about where their food came from, and they would scream when they saw me milking the cow at 5:00pm. I led around enormous Pecheron and Morgan horses. I pulled a plow with oxen. I interpreted in the broom shop and the hat shop. I stood on the porch there in the rain, when everyone had gone home and there were no visitors to the museum and watched the way rain poured out of 19th century gutters that overshot the house and arced out like a Japanese building.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Maybe that Frank Lloyd Wright, his hotel in Japan. The gutters were spouts to make the house into a [fountain, a giant hotel that fell down after a giant earthquake–JD]..

So, anyway, I was doing that, and Darrell was working one Saturday. And I got up one morning. I didn't have any clothes on. I went to run a bath, and something akin to a locomotive hit me.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And it blew me backwards off my feet. My eyes started to spasm, and I went deaf in both ears on the floor. [To say I didn't even know what was happening would an understatement. So, I left the bath running without the plug. I crawled back to the bed, which is now on the other side of the wall. I climbed up into the bed. I felt, "This is going to pass. This is going to pass." And being deaf, I can hear one of two things. I thought, I felt—"Oh, my God," I thought. I feel like I'm under the ocean. I can hear the ocean. Or this must be a great ohm of the universe down here. This ohm sound. It was so intergalactic. And *Pow!* and one of the ears opened up and blew me sideways on the bed. It was so powerful. Then I looked up at the door and windows, and my eyes were shaking going back and forth at 180 degree arcs simultaneously, and I thought, well, this is bad. I couldn't walk, so I rolled off the bed onto the floor, and then I pulled the sheet down. And I rolled onto the sheet, and like an inchworm on my side, I contracted like a Martha Graham dance. And I contracted and extended. Contracted and I slid from that side of the apartment to this side where being a big, gay mo, I had a Bakelite phone. Whoever heard of a cell phone? The phone on a bureau connected to a wire on the wall, –JD] and I thought, I have to call Dr. Bellman. So I pulled the phone down, and it fell to the floor and crashed into a million pieces. But, shockingly, guess what? It still had a dial tone even in pieces.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: So I called Dr. Bellman, and he told me, "I'm going to send Tyrone for you. Come here right now." And I had a very, very, very serious long stroke.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: Which is called Sagital Sinus Thrombosis, which meant that right here I had a blood clot.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, wow.

JOHN DUGDALE: Over the next couple of days I became paralyzed. My eyesight, which really started to wane, but I didn't tell anybody because I was in so much terrible denial. I could see what the warning signs were, and I knew it was coming, but I didn't tell anyone. You know, I was in a terrible state of magical thinking. And, anyway, while I was in the hospital, because my immune system crashed, I counted my T-cells over the years. As they went down, down, down into only four, I thought I'll name them, so winter, spring, summer, and fall.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

JOHN DUGDALE: And I used to lay on the floor, Michelangelo pose in this circle—

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

JOHN DUGDALE: —and just be the general in my own army, and I would tell my T-cells what to do so that my body wouldn't fall apart. Around that time, before I went home for Thanksgiving, I lived with no electricity [upstate –JD] for about ten years. Here [in New York –JD], I couldn't take the electricity out of the building, but I had no lights. And, see, I took out the electricity because it was old and dangerous, and I lived by candlelight. I used no refrigerator. Everybody loved that. Clothes I washed by hand. I hung them in the kitchen near the fire—I had a wood stove. It was so blissful and beautiful, and what did I talk about that for—I forgot what that connects to. [Laughs.]

THEODORE KERR: You were talking about your four T-cells.

JOHN DUGDALE: Oh, the four T-cells. In the meantime, I would be back here in New York, and I would be going to every holistic healing thing that you could possibly think of. The healing circle where everyone laid in a circle. These things have got to have been recorded already. They're so important. [Many didn't know this was happening. In an auditorium or a gym or a stage or a gymnasium, men would lay –JD] in a circle with their heads touching, holding hands to give each other strength.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: It was so beautiful. It was just beautiful. It was Cy O'Neal, a great hero in our community—

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

JOHN DUGDALE: —and Marianne Williamson started a Center for Living, I think it was called Which then branched off into a place called Friends in Deed. Those are two very important moments in all of our lives.

THEODORE KERR: You said Cy O' Neal?

JOHN DUGDALE: Cy O' Neal. Especially Cy became a very good friend of mine. I still—she's wonderful and still with us on the planet and as elegant and wise as she ever was. And she combined Buddhism and Christianity

and modern and Post-modern and every kind of therapy. It was all about your feelings, not about your story.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: I can tell you more about going there the first time later.

THEODORE KERR: Who was the other woman you said?

JOHN DUGDALE: Marianne Williamson. More well-known; much more published. She famously wrote a *Course in Miracles*, which I didn't like, because I thought it sounded cuckoo that she got visited by a Martian or something, so I resisted her. Cy was much more down to earth.

THEODORE KERR: And it was the Center for Living that then turned into—

JOHN DUGDALE: Well, Cy broke away because she wanted to do the healing in a different way, and she started a group called Friends in Deed.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Which was famously funded by Mike Nichols—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: —the director, because Cy's husband owned O'Neal's restaurant, and she knew a lot of show business people. She brought a lot of that skill and a lot of that star power to Friends in Deed, because there was an expensive space, and sometimes everybody in there—there were 60 people all had just turned positive or something—but anyway, that's a different moment.

THEODORE KERR: Sorry. I got you off track. Sorry.

JOHN DUGDALE: No, no, no, it's good. Those things are really an important part of our history, and I know everybody must remember different things, but, boy, I can remember sitting in that room being stunned.

THEODORE KERR: No one's told me any of these stories before. I've talked to lot of people, so this is really important stuff.

JOHN DUGDALE: Fantastic. I am a vessel. I have nothing but memory—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: —about everything: walking there to Friends in Deed blind for the first time with a guide dog. Anyway, I'm going to back up a little bit and just tell you that I landed on a gurney—oh! My mother or my sister were all you know connected psychically—

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

JOHN DUGDALE: —and before this wall was built—I was a part-time carpenter. I built the studio—it didn't look like this when I came here, I assure you. Seven stewardesses lived here, and where we're sitting was a modular, indoor/outdoor carpeted seating pit.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

JOHN DUGDALE: It was like some kind of sacrifice chamber. It was a pink, Plexiglas loft bed that basically took up more than two thirds of the room, which I took down. I got a dumpster and a sledgehammer, because my Mädderlake—you see how life is so predestined.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Mädderlake, my friend's downstairs—

THEODORE KERR: Was that their last name? Mädderlake?

JOHN DUGDALE: No, Tom Pritchard and Billy Jarecki.

THEODORE KERR: Oh. And that's the flower—the floral—

JOHN DUGDALE: That's Mädderlake.

THEODORE KERR: —is called Mädderlake.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes. Mädderlake.

THEODORE KERR: Will you spell that?

JOHN DUGDALE: It's M-A—with an umlaut—

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

JOHN DUGDALE: D-D-E-R-L-A-K-E. It's with an umlaut over it, and you see it had two As. Tom was a design guy, and I said, "Why do you say Mädderlake, the color, with the umlaut. When you say Mädderlake; it's not Madderlake."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: He said, "Oh, I just like the way the umlaut looked. It needed one more thing."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: And that was on their truck, and it was their logo, and on their ribbon. They revolutionized the flower industry in New York. You know that clear plastic you get from most florists now?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: They did that first.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And, anyway, they said, "Why don't you, you know—we know you bought the farm.

All of these stories are deeply interconnected, but we have to be doing something more in two days—

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: —but I was up here having—I had a 104 degree fever.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I was hallucinating and had my legs hanging between two-by-fours off the side. It was summer in shorts. I thought I was dreaming. I opened my eyes in that state, and I saw my mother's face and my sister's face in the middle of the week at five o'clock . I thought I was dreaming, and they told me later that my mother said, "We have to go to John now. Right now." My sister said, "Now?" She said, "Now. Right now." And maybe if they didn't come up here, I would have died—

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

JOHN DUGDALE: —because by the time we got downstairs, the strokes came [in waves –JD] until the big stroke.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And they went undiagnosed at first. There was so much going on. It was very easy to fall through the cracks.

THEODORE KERR: Wait. Just to make sure that I understand: you had a series of small strokes before the stroke in your bed.

JOHN DUGDALE: I didn't know what they were.

THEODORE KERR: Oh.

JOHN DUGDALE: And I lost my balance sometimes.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: Fever came and went, and then that time my mother and sister arrived, I couldn't walk anymore. They got me down the stairs. These—I'm intertwining a little bit, because each one has such a specific

timeline.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And such a story that you'll get just the general idea of things that went on. But by the time I was outside, they were not strong enough to carry me to a cab.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: So my blessed neighbor, Mort Siegal and his wife, Judy Siegal, who was the doyenne of Post Process Photography, a teacher here in New York at—I can't think of it—RIT? No, that's—FIT.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: Anyway, somewhere she taught process, and he saw me, and he didn't say anything. He said to my mother, you know, "Mrs. Dugdale, do you want me to get my car?" And he did. I don't remember any of this, but he loaded me up in the back of the car. They got in, and off I went to St. Vincent's where, the next thing you know, I was on a gurney in the hallway freezing cold covered with a sheet, and there were hundreds—it seemed like—there must have been 30 other people there waiting for a room. Dr. Bellman is standing on one side, and my mother is standing on the other. She looked at him. She said, "Do you think he's going to be okay?"

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And he said, "We're going to do whatever we can. We don't know." That was the beginning of a yearlong stay in the hospital.

THEODORE KERR: Oh.

JOHN DUGDALE: Where they were going—where they tried to diagnose what was happening by giving me an MRI, but they were so overloaded that they forgot to give me what's called contrast, where they put an iodine in your system where they can watch the blood flow through your body. They were just taking pictures, not a flow.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: So I would go. The results would come back negative, and poor Dr. Bellman had to just guess what I had. Every once in a while I would be sitting there, and my arm, like a marionette, would raise up by itself in sort of an epileptic fit and then draw so tight to my body. I used all the strength I had left in my other arm to push it back down, which eventually led to what they call the grand mal seizure. Then my mother would come with Tupperware all the time [with the food that famously saved my life. I was interviewed by Alan Cummings for Studio 360 a couple of summers ago, and he said, "What do you attribute your miraculous recovery to? How did you do that?" I said, "I always had a Tupperware full of macaroni, bean, and olive oil. –JD]"

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: My mother put it in the nurse's refrigerator—and they knew how important it was to me. They watched it. And that's what healed me. And that's not even a joke really. It's the essence of what was there that kept me alive. Eventually, I had the grand mal seizure, and I passed out.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: Darrell and my sister and my brother—my body was going crazy. Think of a marionette out of control.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: So my sister held my mouth open. I have to say these things, because who will ever know them because I don't talk about it very often. And Darrell sat on my torso, and my brother held my legs, my sister held my arms down. My mother shouted for the nurse. And I thought that that was it.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: All done. And during that time my mother and Darrell had become like—my mother became like Darrell's mother.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And here's an African-American, hip-hop, super powerful man and my mother is sitting in the chapel. It was the chapel from the turn of the century, a little bit before, in the depths of St. Vincent's, and they sat in there together crying in each other's arms in silence in the dark, consoling each other waiting all night to see if I had died or not.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And I woke up in a different room at dawn the next morning. And there starts another part of the story. The other side was after that, because they then looked at the MRI that they took while I was out. They finally gave me contrast and saw that I had a big, whopping, marble-sized thrombosis—also known as a blood clot—in my forehead.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: Every time [the clot –JD] moved a micro millimeter, it affected some part of my body until it finally slid and my whole body went insane. My nervous system went crazy.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: You know, I woke up, and I was in a different room. Do you know this is very important for a spiritual part of my life? Coming alive, from having been an altar boy at Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church where everyone in my family since 1922 was married or funeralized. Everything happened there. All communion, all confirmation. You know, now I'm a happily practicing for 30 years Episcopalian at the beautiful Church of Saint Luke in the Fields across the street, which the bell rang one day, and I thought, "What is that?"

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I went and found it there and that's when I—so I opened my eyes, and I thought, "Where am I?" You know those beautiful—well, I call them beautiful now. I used to hate them. They're white tiled apartment buildings that are all over New York, and they have shiny, white, brick-shaped tile just covered with white tile.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Do you know what I'm saying?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: I used to hate them.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, and sometimes they have their fire escapes are white as well on the front.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah. Exactly. Well, that was a real mode in the '60s and on. I always thought they were blasphemous. [Laughs.] A terrible imitation of something beautiful that was cheap to make so they made them, but when I'm looking out the window, all I saw was pink and orange and yellow. You know, if you could see me, you know I [remember –JD] closing my eyes and shifting my head back, and I thought, "What is that?" And I opened my eyes again, and I realized it was one of those white buildings outside the window, and it was reflecting the sunrise.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And [I realized –JD] I'm still alive. It was so nice. And I thought that's so beautiful. And I asked God in that moment, I said, "Listen buddy. I need to—I want to get out of here, and I want to do something to give back." I say, "If I can stay here on earth, I'll make a bargain." I say, "If I can get outta here, I want to walk home—I was paralyzed—and I want to do something that I can give back the incredible joy that I've had in my life and incredible care and attention that's been paid to me by my dear friends and my family." Because I had many friends at the time, and some of them rose up like the wheat from the chaff, and they were stalwart, and they were present for everything. I could not have survived without them. [. . . –JD] [My body shed the clot slowly, –JD] because they gave me blood thinners.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: But it had me going very, very slow at a graceful pace. Because if they dislodged the clot, it could kill me or maim me. Because I still have my memory, and I could still talk.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: [The recovery started with severe pain in my little toe and then slowly spread up my leg all across my face, and my whole body gradually defrosted, and progress was preceded –JD] by excruciating pain. It felt like somebody was pouring boiling water on my foot. Tingling. And then I was all right with it. I learned about pain there.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And the feeling that I had when I had the stroke felt like a hatchet in my forehead, and they kept saying, "Do you want painkillers? Do you want painkillers?" And I said, "No. If I'm dying, I don't want to miss it. Don't you dare drug me up. I want you to know every moment that I experience right now is very important to me." [I became familiar with the fact that if you stay still enough, and you're in extreme pain, you become something else –JD]. Kind of like a warm flush. It's like a warmth from inside. It transcends that pain when you can't even move. You couldn't even move your head a tiny bit it was so painful. So I knew that when the pain came and the tingling, it meant that my body was coming back to life. Then, suddenly I was able to move my toes—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: —then I could move my foot. And then I could move all over, shakily of course, because my muscles were atrophied from sitting still for so long. And this is a very important moment—I was moved to another room to continue with my blood thinners. And all—my mother, Darrell, and my sister and my brother—I think my brother was there—were standing at the foot of my bed at one point after all of this had been two-thirds of the way through that year, and I said, "Why do you guys look so sad?" And they said, "Oh. We were so proud of your career."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: My eyes widened, and I looked, and I said, "Did you say you *were* proud of my career? What do you think I'm going to do when I get out of here?" I said, "What? I'm going to make pictures." They said, "What? You're going to make pictures?" I said, "Yeah, what else would I do? That's what I know how to do. I've been getting ready to do this my whole life."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: "Oh, fantastic!" And they walked out of the room happily relieved. I found that a lot of the time that I was there, I had to console people—because they came there terrified. I was their "friend"—air quotes—that they were coming to see who was dying of AIDS. They had to cautiously come through and steel themselves up and hold their breath, and I had to talk them down and say, "Sit down. I'm fine."

"You look great; you look great." They would say. I said, "I know. You can't see blindness from the outside. And you can't see my blood clot."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: You know. [Laughs.] "Calm down. I'm going to be fine." You know—crying. And even Maurice came crying. Threw himself on the bed—on top of me. I said "Maurice, I'm going to be fine." He brought me a beautiful, stuffed Wild Thing toy and signed the foot of it—my mother stole it. [They laugh.] I said, "You can go home now. You know. I'm fine. Don't worry about me." But when my brother and sister and mom left—Robert, Cathy, Rose—I thought, "What am I going to do when I get out of here." And then there's a life pause there while I continued the really important work of getting out of there in one piece, and low and behold, it was a blizzard. Believe you me, I'm leaving out so much. It would be inappropriate for me to tell you everything—I discovered things about my sexuality at the time as a gay man. Very important. I will tell you this, because anyone can see any one of [my pictures of Darrell –JD] with his clothes off—which I'll talk about another time with you—but there was a very tall and very short nurse, Bob and Gary—male nurses. And then there was Kathleen. I knew all the nurses. I was included in their pizza parties in the middle of the night. I could never sleep.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And six people died in my room next—to me over the course of the time that I was there, and I could tell when they were rolled in by listening to them how long they were going to last. I was pretty much exactly right on the money each time, because they might be in a body bag next to me—it was like downtown Beirut. In that room there, my sister helped me learn how to walk again, and you know, they wanted me to do physical therapy, which was a joke. There was no way to have physical therapy at St Vincent's. And my sister, "You know. You better start moving before you can't move anymore." So she'd get in bed with me, take both of my arms and lean back; and she'd rock back and forth and lift my torso up and down, up and down. What she was doing intuitively was reawakening my motor memory.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: Very smart.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Not a nurse. I could sit up by myself, and then eventually, she challenged me to put my leg on the floor. Put my foot on the floor. I learned how to walk again.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I thought, "Oh. I can get back." The secret is that you have to lift your heels up. And your mind has to tell your heels lift, lift, lift, and lift. Move forward. Lift. They don't go up by themselves. You probably don't even realize that. You have to lift your heels up a thousand times every hour.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: I used my IV pole as a walker, and there were black and green checkered tiles all the way down where I was, on the seventh floor. My family came to see me every night all the way from Stanford [CT] with whatever goodies they were going to bring me. I waited with enormous expectation for them to get there. When I realized that I could walk by holding the [IV pole –JD], and if I lifted up each heel and lean forward, I can move somewhere. I went all the way down the hallway, and I waited for them to come out of the elevator. They went to the room, and I wasn't there. I said, "I'm down here."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: I did a little jig. And they said, "What are you doing down there," and I said, "Oh. I was going to play the piano in the lounge down here," and then they came down to get me and put me back in the room, but that was the start of learning how to walk again.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I watched the tiles on the floor measure my steps, and thank God for my sister being such a loving and kind and beautiful person. When the time came, they checked me out, and I said, "Darrell, I was going to walk home from here." And by that time I could walk with two canes and not on any kind of walker thing. I refused. I thought, "The more you make these things into reality, the more real they become."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Coming home, we got to about Christopher Street, and it had been this huge snow storm. There were giant mounds of snow everywhere. I said, "Hey, Darrell. You know what? I think I've proved my point. Could we take a cab the rest of the way?" [They laugh.] And we were only three blocks, right, from Christopher Street. We came home and then started yet another chapter of my life.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's amazing. I'm going to pause to plug in this.

JOHN DUGDALE: Okay.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

[Audio break.]

THEODORE KERR: So we're back. We ended where you and Darrell had just come back to the house, and it was you and the two canes.

JOHN DUGDALE: The two canes are very important, but before I forget or it's too late, I want to tell you about the discovery that I made about sexuality while I was in the hospital.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: Near death—paralyzed—going blind in a place that was nightmarish to be in by anybody's standards. Meaning the place and also the place in my life. Darrell—who exuded that light, also incredible sexuality—would come to the hospital. I started to tell you before about the two male nurses that I adored, the big, big tall one and the short one. When I saw the tall guy later on, Gary, out in the street, he says, "Hey! Looking good, man!"

THEODORE KERR: It's Bob and Gary, right?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes, Bob and Gary. What did I say?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, you said Bob and Gary.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah. Good memory. So anyway, it would be wink-wink, wink-wink all around. We called it biv-a-whacking [sic]—Darrell or the nurse would close the curtain that went around our bed, and then he would take out his beautiful [man-hood –JD], his beautiful member, and I had the guardrails up on the side of the bed—because of the seizures, they didn't want me getting hurt and falling off of the bed—and I would just look at him. He would pull his pants down and drape himself like a beautiful flower over the bed, and I would look, and my whole body would feel nourished.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: Really nourished. I realized that at that time that your sexuality is not just sex that's supposed to be clandestine, or too much or too little or just right or some rule. It was really your qi. [Your life force. It's –JD] everyone's qi, not just gay people. Because without sexuality, there would be no life.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: It rules your being. It's the essence of your energy, and Darrell helped keep me alive in that way. Not too often, but often enough that I looked forward to him. That him, with a leather jacket on—I've told very few people that story—very beautiful, snowy day. His leather jacket covered with snow. His head covered with snow, and his pants halfway down just looking at me.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: There was nothing mischievous about it. There was nothing disgusting. There was nothing wrong. I think that the nurses were thrilled that I still had that life inside of me that I knew was in my core trying to get out of that paralyzed body—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: —and more interested in that than I was worrying about going blind.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: So, then, eventually, you know what? I thought one day, "Man, it is time to get out of here. The longer you stay here, the longer you're going to be here." And the reason was [I became –JD] a guinea pig, because they couldn't figure out why I had a stroke. Was it HIV-related or not? Not HIV? So one day I got up, and I found my clothes that I had gone to the hospital in in the bottom of the closet a year later, and I took off my jammies, and I got into the clothes, and I got into bed. The nurse came in and said, "Well, where are you going?" I said, "I'm going home." She said, "No, you can't just go home. The doctor has to release you." I said, "Well, they're not going to want to release me." And so I found out about the Patient's Bill of Rights—in the drawer next to the bed, and it said I could check myself out using something called AMA, Against Medical Advice. So I asked for the forms. I said to the doctor, "In 12 hours, I'm going to sign this, and I'm going to make the nurse—I'm leaving here whether you want me to or not, so you might as well let me go now while I can go home safely." And so that's when I came home with Darrell and the snow and the canes. In my loft here, which is a small loft, but you know a lot of momentous things have happened here—

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: —and it's about—it's more than 20 feet wide, and I don't know how long it is. It's a big room. The big, wide kings pine floorboards from—maybe not kings pine. A little later. The building was built in 1828. It's the oldest building on the block, and we're in the attic in the middle of the winter, the sun is short. It's chilly in here, but I came home as happy as a clam at low tide to be back in my space. I had my two canes waving around, and I used the lines in the floor instead of the tiles at the hospital—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: —to put one foot in front of the other. Not only just for me to put my heel down but to put one foot in front of the other just like Rudolph—you know that song: you put one foot in front of the other. I learned how to be more mobile.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: I was being mobile, walking around, doing things in my pajamas, thinking about everything, and the phone rang. No, you know what, I called them—my friends, John and Billy who owned a gallery called Wessel + O'Connor. I said, "Hey! How are you?" "Where have you been?" "Oh, I've been in a hospital for a year." They said, "You have?" I said, "Yeah. I want to have a show." They said, "Really?" I told them about my story and everything, and this is another [inaudible] where it came from, and they said, "Let us think about it. We'll call you back," and I thought, "No problem." I went back to shuffling around and doing things, and they called right back, and they said, "We'd love for you to do a show, and we'd love for you to do it in six weeks." I said, "Six weeks!" I said, "I can't walk yet." "Exactly. We know you can do it." And that was sort of the Pepsi challenge for me.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: That's all I needed to hear. The third grade, triple-A giant poster personality rammed right out of my body, and I had a camera under my bed.

THEODORE KERR: In the hospital?

JOHN DUGDALE: No. Here.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: All during my commercial life—my art life hadn't started yet—I kept it under the bed in secret, because the bellows, you know the part that extends like an accordion—I bought it from a guy from his parlor because I knew I should be using an old camera, but I was afraid of it. The bellows had melded together into one solid block of tar.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: So I dragged the camera out. I found a place that would restore it, and they did. While they were busy restoring that, I was busy learning how to go down the stairs on my ass to wash my clothes downstairs. They wanted me to have a home health aide. I said, "I don't want a home health aide. I have got to do these things myself; otherwise, I'll never do them again. You cannot infantilize or enfeeble—you can't enfeeble me." I said, "There's no stopping me now." So I put the laundry on my back, and I'd go down the stairs on my butt, and then eventually I got myself back to church. [When I walked back home from church, when I walked by the corner bar –JD], if a bouncer was outside of the cubbyhole, she'd give a thumbs up, "looking good, man. Looking good." Because they were watching me progress—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I went from holding on to my mother and my sister, to the two canes holding on to just my sister, to one cane, to holding no cane. My motor skills informed my movement, [and healed my –JD] body. You don't really have to do anything. No matter what medicine—it may keep your clock ticking, but your body is self-healing. You know? You get a cut on your finger. What do you do? You put a Band-Aid on it. You don't sit around and stare at it and say, "Heal, finger. Heal." It just heals, because your body knows everything it has to know. It's incredible. It's like the bulb. We had bulbs outside that were forcing—you know, in January. Watch life happen during a dark time in January. I was saying the other day, all the information genetically is in that bulb. All you have to do is put a drop of water, and leave it alone. It will turn into a narcissus—

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

JOHN DUGDALE: —flower. Our bodies are just like that. I never made that comparison, but it's very apt. You know. I went back to the hospital after all, and I talked to people and tried to be with people who were struggling, and I told them if they let themselves not rely so much on the doctor or so much on Eastern or Western but to rely on their body, they could make great progress. Sometime progress was dying, and it's okay to die. You know, I learned that in the hospital. You can't really have your life until you know you're going to die. Every monk, every Tibetan Buddhist—it's written everywhere in every different religion—you can go all the way out to the end and then look back—you can then go back and start your life over knowing that it's finite and that everything that you do is important, and everything that you do is special. There's no one special experience; the bad ones are fantastic. Everything is learning, learning, learning. It's like aging beautifully. Your spirit doesn't need your body anymore. It starts to decay and regenerate, and then you're released from that. I know that that's true, because while I was paralyzed, I had a lot of time to feel that energy.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I was very sure that the energy that was me was not my body, because I couldn't move, but I could feel that stirring inside of me like a locomotive that wanted to come out. You want to start walking,

continued spirit, you know. And like a bird knows how to fly when it leaves the nest, you know how to walk when you're born. You're just not ready for it yet. You know? It's all so beautiful. I felt like, you know—one of the things that I told my mother in the hospital and my—everybody—I said, "I want to leave the planet without my clothes on."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I said, "I don't want any encumbrance. Could you be so kind? I don't want to wear anything." I said, "I want to leave just the way that I came. I also realized that—you know what—you come here by yourself. You choose your birth mother from somewhere in your cauldron up in the sky and you come down here and you come through her into this world, and that when it's time to leave, you go back to that world, but you go by yourself. So I thought, "Oh, God. Even with my mother next to me, my friends, my lover, my family, I'm going to have to do this by myself." I realized that early on, about midway through when they would leave at night it was very poignant, because they never knew if I was going to be alive—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: —or paralyzed or lose my voice or if I would be able to see them the next day. It was really something. I'm so proud of them for being there, and I'm so proud of myself for coming out on this side of it.

I went and had a show in San Francisco eventually. Somebody [from a magazine came up to me and they said, "Hey! We want to talk to you. –JD] Could you sit down here in the office? You know, just step away from the opening for a minute?" I said, "Sure." They asked, "Do you consider yourself an activist?" I said, "No." I said, "What do you mean? I, you know, to me, an activist is somebody who marches around with a placard." I said, "I've done a little bit of that, but I'm an artist. You know, that's why I came here." He really persisted, and I said, "Well, listen. If you insist on saying that making photographs with no sight due to HIV-related Cytomegalovirus retinitis, then I am an activist." You know, but that's as far as I'll go with it. By example, I can be an activist, and it works really well.

The thing that I saw—that sunrise that had God in it that morning—it was to share my story with people through photography. I didn't know that until Wessel and O'Connor told me, "Can you make the show in six weeks? We'll send you our friend James to work with, and I resurrected the cyanotype process. It was invented in 1842. It's sensitive to ultraviolet light. In other words, in science, it's a pre-elected process. It only uses two chemicals, iron salts and water. It uses a citric acid and iron salt with silver. I mean, you lay a negative on top of it. It comes out from the sun washed from the water. It comes out blue. So I thought, "Well, those are very easy and not very toxic. I think I'll do those."

THEODORE KERR: And what was your vision like at this time?

JOHN DUGDALE: People and editors ask me—

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: —how did you see to make a photograph? And I thought, "Well, this is pretty simple." There's sort of [. . . –JD] a mystical moment that happened during it. It was when I came home—it meaning during the entire experience—when I came home and I stopped focusing so much on walking with the canes. I remember when I got on [my bed the first time. I was dressed –JD], and I thought, "My uniform: my sweatpants and my thermal shirt." I sat down, and it was so quiet. Oh my goodness. No beeping, no screaming, no crashing, no yelling, no heart monitor thing, no plastic lines in both of my arms. Nobody washing the bed at 5 'o clock in the morning not caring that you are finally getting to your first tiny bit of sleep that you have had for the past 24 hours and clanking the mop against the metal bedframe until you're definitely awake again for the rest of the day. You know, I sat down, and I thought, "Wow. This is so beautiful." I leaned back on the bed with my feet on the floor, and I looked into the darkness, and I thought, "Oh my God. I can see my mother's face. I can see my face. I can see my hand moving in space in front of me. I can see anything." It was so exciting when I realized that my sight wasn't really my eyes.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I could sleep, and I fell asleep leaning back on the bed with my feet on the floor. I woke up like that the next day, and I felt like I had made the discovery of all time. I remember when I was little at my mother's house, it was mystifying to me that if I closed my eyes, I would think of an elephant. In the bathroom, I remember doing this. I was like, "Oh my God. I can see an elephant inside me." It was like a secret. Also at that time I discovered the tenant of photography in its most basic form: it's just—photography is just a small circle that light goes through and is projected on the other side. The light beams get collected, they go through an opening—those beams are called the circles of confusion, which is a really beautiful title. I would sit at my mother's plastic, [laminated wood table with the ever-present circular ceiling light fixture with the circular

fluorescent –JD]tubes—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: —and I realized once that, by accident, I could project a blob of light onto—

Let's move a table here. I stole it. That's why I'm not mental. [They laugh.]

If I move my hand up and down, I could focus or unfocus the [image cast on the table through the small circle made with my thumb and index finger. Like the elephant, that was an also and "oh my God moment."–JD]. That was my discovery of photography.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: You know? That's exactly what that camera does when you roll the front towards the back, back and forth. You're just congealing the light together into one place, and then the magic of when it was discovered in 1842, the first process, how do we keep that magic on a piece of paper? That's the history of photography. So —

THEODORE KERR: And did you teach yourself the history of photography?

JOHN DUGDALE: Well, I had some in high school and in college. Very good in high school, and then I immersed myself head to toe in the history of this process. When I got up off the camera—oh God. There's another Freudian slip. [They laugh.] I got up off the bed, and I came down. I thought, "How am I going to start this process for the show?" So I called my friend, Greg, and I said, "You know what? I need some people to photograph, and I don't have any idea how to go about it. Would you give me some ideas?"

He said, "No problem." By that time, the camera was back. It was repaired. Again, if you can imagine—I'm giving you the abbreviated story—he said, "[Greg sent over a list of –JD]people." So I saw a name: Giovanni. And I thought, "That's such a nice name. I'll call him first." So I could walk down the stairs by now. I went downstairs, and I sat on the steps. When he got there, he said, "Hi. I'm Giovanni." I said, "Hi, nice to meet you." I said, "Well, listen. I'm blind, and I'm beginning this journey of making a show, and I would like to know if I could photograph you. Greg said you wouldn't mind. And I was trying to convince him that it would be all right to be photographed by me, and he said, "Pa, Pa." He said, "Don't you recognize me? It's Gio." I said, "Who?" He said, "Gio. We used to date each other." [Laughs.] I said, "Oh my God." A New York moment. I said, "You're kidding?" He said, "Yeah. Don't you remember? We met on the dance floor of the Pyramid [Club]." I said, "Oh my God. You're kidding." I remembered, and he said, "Come on. Let's get to work." We came upstairs, and I started to take some pictures of him, and people then say, "Well, how did you do that?" Well, it was easy. I put him on the table, and I said, "You sit here." I still had the crescent—the retinitis stopped because in '96 the cocktail came, right?"

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And it stopped and left me with this beautiful crescent of light, a very sharp crescent. Not sort of a crescent, but beautiful. Really, the last of the waning moon. [Tilting my head back, I could still see a slice of light and image. –JD] So I jostled the camera into place, semi-focused it. I had Giovanni put a piece of tape or a book on the table, and then I would come and say, "Put this cloth over your head, and look through that here. It's going to be upside down, but you know what?" I said, "If you can look at a television and know if it's focused or not, you can look at this, just one knob. You turn this knob. Turn it back and forth, and watch it go in and out of focus. When it's as sharp as you think it could be, stop."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: So it came to that point, and he would come back up on the table. I'd come around, and I'd step away from the table with the long shutter release. [The shutter releases with little sound. Eventually, it –JD] was like playing a Stradivarius. I was using the camera as an instrument, and the pictures were extremely intimate because I would take my clothes off. Because Giovanni did, because we had already been naked together. Excuse me, this is important. The first few pictures that I took of him he had on his Gap clothes. I said, "Gio, could you take off your shirt?" And I said, "It just doesn't feel right." I pawed the ground a little bit with my foot, and I said, "Could you take your pants off?" He said, "No problem." He was actually a go-go dancer, by the way, for a group called Boots on the Box.

THEODORE KERR: Boots on a Box?

JOHN DUGDALE: Boots on the Box.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And he said, "No problem." And then, you know, needless to say, off came the underwear. Then everything was relaxed. And I thought, "Well, if you're going to be naked, Giovanni, I will be too." So here we were in here with a beautiful, warm light, and he took my place, and I went *kerplunk*, and I shot the film.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: *Kerplunk, kerplunk*. We did maybe eight frames. And that was the very birth of photographing people with their clothes off. Now, remembering, the real birth of [THIS lifetime had started –JD]. I realized I was going to make this show for Wessel + O'Connor, I better show people what I saw. I better show them what I saw, —remember I told you—I had avoided. I denied what I was seeing.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: What you see when you begin to have retinitis, you see twinkling. Well, twinkling is too creative of a word. You see ashy snow falling down in your eyes continually, morning, noon, night. Even when you're sleeping. You see snow falling, and it makes everything have spots. Right? So I thought, you know, having answered so many commercial projects before so successfully, I thought, "Well, what should I do?" I thought, "I should get some chenille that's got dots in it, and I should put it in front of some flowers and take a picture." So I got the chenille, and then I continued to drape it on everything. Anybody who walked into the studio, anything that moved I put chenille on it. And I got the picture back, and you know what? They were a great, big yuck.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: It was so awkward and so not necessary.

THEODORE KERR: Which ones? The chenille ones, not the ones with Gio?

JOHN DUGDALE: Oh, no. Gio—that was the beginning of a wonderful journey. But the spotted, flower ones. Then I thought, "Well, you saw that elephant in the bathroom; you saw the entire universe when you laid back on your bed for the first time in a year, you know, without pneumonia, without Kaposi's sarcoma, without—I forgot to tell you about that. I need to back up for one brief, tiny moment.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: KS—you should see *Angels in America*?

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

JOHN DUGDALE: Remember they're sitting on a park bench, and he's saying different, funny words, and his partner is saying, "Don't joke about this." And he's serious. He's joking about all the different ways you can say Kaposi's. And I thought, "Wow. That must be something. Then I learned at my mother's house at Thanksgiving. I was living [upstate for a long time, and I have only one small, foggy –JD] mirror there. I guess I was Amish, or yeah, in another life. Or Mennonite. I don't believe in too much reflection like—I don't know—it's weird now for all these years not seeing my reflection.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: It's a really fascinating way to be a human being to not rely on what you look like. Right?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: So Kaposi's— What was I talking about? Oh! I saw, so—anyway—I had said I hadn't seen my own reflection. I thought, "I do see fine. I see beauty. I don't see spots anymore. That part of this life is gone."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I see absolutely in my mind all the things I photographed, all the flowers, the beautiful sky. I'm a blessed person because I could see for 32 years. It would be a very different world for a [person blind from birth –JD]. I have talked to other blind people. I say, "What do you see? What do you see inside?" Sitting next to them on the bus at my first six-week guide dog program, you know.

But I then thought, "Well, fantastic. I'm just going to make pictures the way I make them." Then everybody who would come by—if the UPS guy came to the door, I would have him focus the camera for me. There was never a time when I would not want to be making a photograph from morning to night.

Darrell would bring people for me to photograph. We'd all take pictures together. Darrell would say, "I've got a great idea." [Then I would go from there. That's how it –JD] happened. I'll use a phrase I've used a million times:

like a libation from a vase, the pictures flowed out of me effortlessly. Just they poured. They must have been stored up during the time I was doing the commercial work. [Many of –JD] the photographs were based on audio notes that, pre-any kind of fancy phone, Carla, my agent, bought me a tiny tape recorder. Itty bitty, tiny tapes. And whenever something that came up that I found visual, I recorded it. I kept the recorder on my chest. –JD].

THEODORE KERR: What's an example?

JOHN DUGDALE: A picture called *A Sudden Taking*, when I had the arms up in the legs with the stroke, my mother threw the stuffing away from me in the Tupperware. And I had been hiding my arm from curling up and moving by itself for days, and the last thing I said before I blacked out was—I saw my feet up above my head, I saw my arms flailing, and I thought I said out loud, "Oh no. I'm not going to be able to stop it this time."

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

JOHN DUGDALE: So I thought when I got home, I had to note about that night, and I called my friend Joelle who was a principle dancer there with the Paul Taylor Dance Company, and I said, "Well, I want to do a picture of a seizure." I said, "Let's look in the dictionary and see what the definition of a seizure is." And it had many names. And the best one was "seizure: a sudden taking." And so I said, "Okay. It's going to be called *A Sudden Taking*. This couch was over there. Different fabric on it. You know, I had had this thing rebuilt and reupholstered about four times, and now it's time again. If this couch could talk, oh my goodness. [They laugh.] So, anyway, he lay down on his back—and he then, in his mind, started, as a dancer very aware of himself in two dimensions from dancing on stage, raising up his arms and feet, and I took a picture. And people adore that picture, and they don't really know what it's about. They don't quite equate *A Sudden Taking*—they don't quite equate *A Sudden Taking* with a stroke.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: But you know what a metatag is?

THEODORE KERR: Metatag?

JOHN DUGDALE: Metatag. In a computer, on a screen.

THEODORE KERR: Oh. Uh-huh. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: When you make a homepage for a website, and you want people to look at it, and—say you're me.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: So you put a 19th century camera cyanotype signed by Julia Margaret Cameron Henry Fox Talbot [ph]—you put in names of people and things that, if someone is searching for the birth of photography, it would bring them to my site with metatag. So I realized about five years later that these pictures that I was illustrating, because of my background in fashion and commercial photography, I was taking things that were utterly could be despondent or sad or gruesome, and I was making them into something that was beautiful. And there were metatags in there, and people would look at the pictures and start crying, or they would not make them move away from the picture, or I would go over and say, "You know what this reminds me of? What happened with my mother or my sister."

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And I realized right away—and I'll tell you about it in a minute—that what people bring to the photograph is the life of the photograph, not me making it. And they're all like that. And I've been asked a million times, "How did you land on this?" And I realized that there was nothing else that I could do, because that was the elephant that was in there. You know that was there. And then during talks I usually say to people, "Close your eyes. So I want you to close your eyes for me."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: All right? Think of the most beautiful rose that you ever saw.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: The ocean, the sun rising, a tree swaying in the breeze, what a glass of water looks like, what your foot looks like." You know, I mean, okay, right? So open hearts, open yes? You saw all those things, right? If suddenly you couldn't see tomorrow, you'd still be able to see all those things. And they wouldn't be horrible. They would be a beauty that you would find inside you that you would go to for solace if somebody was there to

help you get through that moment. Believe me, I had a lot of help. I was surrounded by people that I feel were sainted in their patience—the massage therapist who taught me how to walk about by coming here and taking off his clothes and having me take off [my clothes. Nothing sexual. He was a dance injury therapist, and he just took my foot and my leg, and moving it back, not saying anything, he would rotate it for half an hour. He would make my leg move in the socket, helping to wake up –JD] the rest of my motor memory. People like him. They were essential. You know that thing about Hillary Clinton—God bless her—about—I've never said this before—but it's a good metaphor: the town, the village, raising kids.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: This neighborhood helped me recover.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: It really did. And that just one example, with Billy and Tom downstairs leaving flowers for me outside the door. I feel very loved still, and I did feel loved then. So I felt like I had to prove to my family that I was still going to take pictures. I had to show everybody what I was capable of, and I overdid it. [They laugh.] Here we are talking today about what I'm still doing, so I made a bunch of beautiful, flower pictures and a bunch of beautiful, full-frontal, male nudes; I made a beautiful picture of my mother; I made a beautiful picture of myself; I made a beautiful picture of Darrell to honor everybody in the role that they played. And, you know, healing through beauty—if I had to put a name on it—it really helped me feel fantastic. I didn't feel less than. I felt like I was producing something that was going to give other people joy, and that was my work that God gave me. I still didn't really understand the depth of it yet, so I remember the name of Michelangelo's circular drawing. It's called *the Vitruvian Man*.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Do you know he discovered that? That the length of your arms are equal to the length of your height? He was an astonishing person. It was da Vinci, not Michelangelo, in his drawing books. *The Vitruvian Man*. I want to reproduce that photograph. I'm still waiting for the right [time to make that photograph –JD].

So I made a bunch of blue pictures, and I thought this is so important for any artist—I talk about this a lot at the talks depending on if I'm talking to 250 college students at Concordia University in Canada, or if I'm talking, like I did, to the professional women's group of photographers at the Professional Women Photographers, or PWP, if you will. And I just did that two weeks ago at Met Opera Guild in their auditorium. I tailor the talks for each group of people to see what they would be able to run with.

[Back to the show, –JD] I thought that I had to recreate the hospital room. I'm going to show them—I better show them what I went through.

THEODORE KERR: Who did you have to recreate it for did you think?

JOHN DUGDALE: Everyone.

THEODORE KERR: Everyone.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah. I needed to let them know what happened to me, because it wasn't exactly showing in the photographs. Just beautiful stuff, right?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: So I thought about it[. . . –JD] , I'm going to bring a cot in there and have a bed, and I'm going to have lights, and this, that, and the other thing. Give them the essence of Walt Whitman 19th century, the Civil War hero, you know? Eventually, what happened was, I realized each thing was superfluous. So the essence of what I wanted to show was already in the pictures. So instead of putting up a tent, I said to Billy and John, "Can I do whatever I want?" And they said, "Go for it." So I painted the walls.

[Side conversation.]

JOHN DUGDALE: Oh, thank you. I didn't even realize that it was getting dark out. Okay. We're almost done. This could be a good place to stop, because [inaudible] 42 minutes, I don't want to wear you out. You can stop at the moment after my first opening.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

JOHN DUGDALE: Okay? All right? So I was saying that—before we turn the lights on—because I can sort of tell when it gets light or dark. I can feel the sun. It's surprising—sometimes the dog lets me know it's nighttime. He's

licking his chops. He sees a little bit of dark out, and he thinks it's time to eat. [They laugh.]

[Side conversation.]

I painted the gallery stark white. So yeah, white frames. I love old glass, so I got hand-blown glass. [Laughs.] Just waiting for the dog's toenails to stop clicking on the floor. [They laugh.]

I got white frames and white liners, and I had some beautiful, old footlights, the mercury glass shades that were from the theater—from when this neighborhood used to have antique stores—and I had put them in storage. I'd put them in the cupboard. I brought those out and put in light bulbs. So essentially, when you got off the elevator, you walked right into a space that was—

[Side conversation.]

Okay. When you got off the elevator, what you were confronted with was a radiating, blue light bouncing off the white light, bouncing off the white walls, bouncing off the floor.

So I was deeply grateful and very present in what had just happened: that I had created these photographs and I couldn't believe it. So I went in, and Billy and John were in the back of the studio where they lived, and I lay down and stretched out my arms and my legs, and I just tried to be in the present moment of what I had accomplished. I felt around me, and I thought, "Oh my God. I finally had a show." I got up, and right away, the door started opening to the elevator, and within moments, there were 10 people, then there were 20, then there were 30, then there were 100, then there were 150 people, and nobody could move there were so many people in this small gallery. What they all wanted to let me know is that they were there to support me.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: It wouldn't have mattered if I had thrown up on a piece of paper, they would have come there to support my audaciousness and thinking that I could make a photograph blind. And people even—my friend Eric checked himself out of the hospital with his father and came in his hospital gown to the opening.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

JOHN DUGDALE: Maurice Sendak came. Martha Stewart came. The entire editorial staff came of *Martha Stewart*. All the magazines. All the professional people that I thought wouldn't really want to know, they all came, and I was kind of like a queen bee. Right? No pun intended with the queen bee part. I told you before that I love keeping bees. [They laugh.] In the center of these people, they all wanted to put their hand on my shoulder and say, "I'm here, John. I'm here. I'm here. We came for you. We're here. We're supporting you." And there were so many people that every time somebody touched my shoulder, I would turn to acknowledge them. I was going around in a circle in the midst of these 150 people. It was incredible. I felt like I was having a dream. And then they started to dwindle, and there was no one there. And it was just me. Billy turned the lights down, and they went in the back to get their coats so we could go out to get dinner. And you know, we had sold any number of the photographs, and it hadn't dawned on me that anybody was going to buy them. [They laugh.] I started to cry.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: I slid down the wall, and I sat with my head on my knees, crying, sobbing. And I thought, "Oh my God. What just happened? Where did my prints go? Whoa. These people. How magnificent that they came just to see my show?" Do you know that I've had 125 shows since then?

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

JOHN DUGDALE: And I have 35 pictures in the Met. I have pictures in museums all across the country. Private collections. I have pictures in museums. I mean, I was inducted into the [19th Century Royal Photographic Society –JD] , with 12 pictures. It really took off like a rocket ship from there. I'll tell you tomorrow how the speaking part of it came about. Also, very beautiful, but all of these moments were life changing. Every bit of it, but that's the moment that informed me that I was on the right track.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's beautiful. Thank you so much. I look forward to tomorrow.

JOHN DUGDALE: You're very welcome. And thank you very much. I really appreciate it.

THEODORE KERR: It's a pleasure.

JOHN DUGDALE: Good.

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THEODORE KERR: This is Theodore Kerr interviewing John Dugdale at his home in New York, New York on January 18, 2017 with the Archives of American Art Smithsonian Institution, card number two.

Hi John, nice to see you again.

JOHN DUGDALE: Ditto.

THEODORE KERR: I think we should just dig in where we were yesterday.

JOHN DUGDALE: Okay. All right. When we left off yesterday, I was leaning up against the wall sobbing, because I had not expected anyone to buy any of the photographs that I made—that I was going to give to my family and friends. Nor did I expect that anybody would get weepy—actually blowing their nose and wiping tears out of the corners of their eyes. And I thought, "Good heavens, why are they crying?" "That's *my* mother." I really felt deeply confused, and I thought, "This is so strange and not what I expected at all." Then all the pictures came home. Not that long after John and Billy from the gallery called me and they said, "Would you like to go on your first satellite show?" I said, "Well sure I'd love to."

[. . . JD] The important thing that happened, was out in Houston at the Houston Center for Photography. We brought a bunch of prints—we thought—so we hung them up, everybody liked them. And then afterwards they thrust, kind of an arcane microphone in my hand and they said, "Can you say a few words about you work?" I said, "Well sure, no problem." You know, I had already done that thing at the Met, but they didn't connect those two things. So I said, "I used a large format camera, I had people trace the back of the ground glass using my fingers." It was kind of—I don't want to use the word braille, that word's too obvious, or even use the word conceptualize, that's too collegiate—but I told them different ways I had my assistants focus. I had the center focus et cetera; it was very nuts and bolts. I said how you make a cyanotype and I said, "Thank you very much."

I gave the microphone back and it took all of about five minutes, and I was mobbed by older people from Houston that said, "I'm going to get my knitting, I'm going to get my husband to get the boat out of the dock, I'm going to start painting again." And it was a light bulb, and I thought, "Oh my God it isn't just my community, this is universal, there's loss, fear, love." All of the five food groups that are still—even with all of the technology we're bombarded with on a minute-to-minute basis—people still want to know about the basics. I thought, "Oh, so limiting, thinking of only my gay community in Saint Vincent's and Chelsea and West Village. It's much, much larger." Then, we traveled all over the country and each time I went I had more confidence in what I was supposed to do after I got out of the hospital, which was to let people know if I could do this, *you* could do anything. I mean that's the basic tenet of what I was saying.

And it was recently, now it's all these years later, that was 1995, now it's 2017. And then two weeks ago I did that at the Met, at the Opera Guild for Professional Women Photographers of New York. All I had to do was say I take the pictures blind. I don't have to say anything else, except of course there are thousands of pictures and words more, but that's the really super rewarding work that I was given to do. The pictures are beautiful by themselves, but it really packs a wallop when you realize it's not just this country, it's all over the world. Where I didn't even speak the language in some places, I was able to convey everything that people were hungering for that—but they wouldn't say that. You know, in a post-modern world and Mark Rothko, you know oh gosh there are so many names, I liked all their work, but you know, my work was understandable.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: My father used to joke, he would come to the—I forgot to say he came to the first show and somebody asked him, you know, "Why are you standing here?" He said, "Oh I like to stand in front of the pictures of my daughter so no one can see her naked." [They laugh.] But the nice thing I never had to explain the picture to my father or my mother, everything was there. And as I said yesterday, just behind [the picture –JD] there was more, and when people chose to look a little more, they got more kick back.

Did I say, yesterday, that I thought the pictures really didn't have a life until they were out in the open for people to bring their lives to? So when I showed my famous blown Venini vase, which is up there on that shelf.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I bought that in Murano when we were passing through Venice. I brought it home and we put it on a table outside on a gray day, me and my friend Mark Issacsson, and I filled it with water. We were going to put a flower in it, but then we both noticed that you could see my house reflected upside down in the vase, it became a lens. A very primitive lens, distorted because of the shape, the amphora shape of the vase. We took that picture, and I called it—my friend Mark, God rest his soul, died and I said, "Let's call this *Farmhouse Inverted in Mark Isaacson's Venini Vase*." And we called it that, and I started off with and still enjoy really

ponderous titles.

And anyway, at the show, a young woman came up to me and she said, "Oh John," she said, "I love the picture of the parish upside down in the vase." I thought—I went to correct her and I thought, "Oh good heavens, you know it is my parish." Why do I have to tell her it's my house? What on earth is the difference? If that's what she needed to see at that moment—and after that I never, ever corrected anybody. Because I could see over and over again that they were seeing themselves, or their experience in my pictures, which explained why people were weeping over the—now pretty infamous picture of me and Rose, you know?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I want to go back a little bit and ask about, what was your relationship to art while you were doing the commercial work?

JOHN DUGDALE: It was minimal. I was so exhausted by taking hundreds and hundreds of pieces of film, which drew out on either side, even though the job might have been over it was the pre-testing. The running the film through for days, the after—the presenting it to the client, I didn't do too much [of my own art –JD] at all. At that, preoccupied by taking care of people that were getting sick around me and the murmuring—you know renting fancy fashion studios, people acting like nothing was happening. It was a no-no to say anything about being HIV positive or anything. Their knowing glances, and you know, the nod of the head or something, or the dreaded phone call where somebody said, "Hey did you know so and so?" Which inevitably meant that someone else died, you know, or strangers would call me and they'd say, "I was going through [Bobby's –JD] Rolodex and we saw your name and we're trying to call everyone to let you know when the memorial service is." So, even just saying Rolodex, do you even know what a Rolodex is?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. The—it's like an old technology where all the cards were with the information.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah. So, all right so all of that going on, my mother gave me a book when I started college with the greatest hits of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And inside she wrote, "To my greatest masterpiece, on your birthday, love Mom." I lived at the Met, and in the museums and I—silent films and the Guggenheim and museums. I made a special trip to see the *David*. I saw everything that I could, thank goodness, before my sight changed. I didn't get to go to the Louvre. And so, I didn't see *the Mona Lisa*, but I had studied *the Winged Nike of Samothrace* [in a book –JD] for hours. I had beautiful art history in college. It was fantastic I got a 100 on my test. I graduated with a 6.0, I was the top 10 in my class of 600 people.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And it was effortless because I was so in my concentration. I was finally doing something that I was—I wasn't standing out like a sore thumb. I was with a bunch of very like-minded people, teachers. I was in a big city, you know, going to clubs where David Bowie might have been the DJ that night just because, just—that mythical time for me; which turns out to be kind of mythical for lots of folks who came, you know, after that. I thought it was always going to be another wave of creativity here that—that was just my crest and my wave, but with what happened to Manhattan you can't come here anymore and get an apartment for 100 dollars, like we discussed a little bit yesterday.

So the long answer to your question is, I may have out of the corner of my eye been learning about tangential things, like the narcissus flowers that opened up last May; that we're clocking the winter with. Where I was given a big bag full of narcissus bulbs to force, one box at a time to mark the calendar. But learning about the life of those flowers may have been just as good—you know as referring to that book—just as good as going to the Met.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: The real-life experience of how to make your life beautiful, how to surround yourself with beauty. And then record it as well to share it with people.

THEODORE KERR: Did you say that you did see the *David*?

JOHN DUGDALE: I did.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, do you want to talk about that experience?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah it was pretty wonderful. We had a giant camera that we toured—we did the—okay so just as a preface to that, or preamble, I had a show every year from 1995 to the year 2000, which is kind of unheard of. People were aggravated with the gallery, they felt they were giving me too much, but I think they gave me the second show almost immediately because people still thought that I was going to die. Then I surprised them, and myself, and I didn't exit the planet. I was fine being nearly blinded and, you know, you read too many of the articles and they say, "Oh working with only 20 percent of sight in one eye." And I think, "Oh gosh I wish that was the case now." But you know, I always thought mystically that I would never be able to regain this sight—

pointing at my eye—in either of my eyes if I didn't go completely blind. And experience with darkness, is actually —which is not really darkness at all, you know, so now I'm not afraid. My friend said to me, "Oh [. . . –JD], you're going to be so relieved when you lose that sight." I got angry and I scowled at the phone and I hung up, but he was absolutely correct. And when it left, I was freed to move on in my life; and not cling on so hard to the crescent moon of sight.

I had a number of shows here in New York, and then I thought, "Wow, I wonder if this is some kind of magic trick that I'm doing just because I'm surrounded by beloved friends, and in my studio where I know every crack in the floor." Until I met Billy and John and they called and they said, "We have an idea, how would you like to spend a month in Italy, and we'll travel across Italy and do the gentlemen's tour; we'll bring the camera?" I said, "That sounds fantastic!" So, we got everything all bundled up and, you know, it was a lot easier to fly with stuff then—we got a shopping basket, you know like a cart that you roll behind you to go to the grocery store? We put the giant camera in it and the giant tripod, film was loaded—they happened to know people all over Italy because their gallery started on Compo de Fiori in Rome, where they were for three years before they came back here. This is John Wessel and Billy O'Connor, who were so instrumental, the three of us created my career together. God bless them, and God rest John. I hope he's resting in peace, I miss him.

THEODORE KERR: Can you say John's last name again?

JOHN DUGDALE: John Wessel.

THEODORE KERR: Wessel?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes. And you know, you never know if you're going to turn on the TV and see John stomping around in Albany at our gay marriage rights thing, and then they'd always find him because he was very eloquently spoken. And he would be saying something that sounded so perfect, you know, I would say, "Wow there's John."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: [. . . –JD] So we eventually made our way to Florence, again going into [people's magnificent libraries. We also went in dark closets, laundry rooms, and in cellars where I could find a place to change the film without any light leaking. And it was inevitable; I saw where Oscar Wilde lived in Genoa –JD]. I touched Christopher Columbus' house. My apartment overlooked a room—we stayed in people's houses all over Italy—overlooked the Bell Tower in Genoa, oh it was something. And when we got to Florence, you know he—*David* is a completely political sculpture. It was all about the Republic versus whatever was going on at that time. He's even glancing in a direction that was symbolic of the political uproar that they were in. People threw rocks at it, and broke it when it was first made, and it was really something. You know it was almost like an ACT UP thing, that statue represented a lot of upset and uproar.

So, I photographed that one and it was way up high where it was originally placed right next to the door to their Senate, you know up high on a pedestal, very purposefully put in everyone's face. And you know, he's languid and strong, his head is down. His penis is small and exquisitely beautiful because, you know looking back to the Greek classical sculpture, a small penis was a sign of high intelligence. And larger genitalia meant that you might be stupid, or a peasant—pea santé.

And then we went to see the real *David*, because during the 1960s—or maybe before when there was pollution and stuff it was starting to damage the statue so they brought it inside for safekeeping. You go down a long hallway and there are some of his dying slave sculptures where the figures are sort of shimmying out of the stone. He didn't even have to finish them, he was such a genius. You get down to the rotunda, which is not that big, and here's this enormous sublime man standing with this scowl on his face—nearly a caricature—his face of anger and strength. You know, if— I'm not much for experimenting with drugs or drink much in my life at all—but I felt like I could see the blood coursing through the veins in the statue. And people were just walking around in silence, in circle a number of times, you know before they felt like they'd seen it enough. Then we went on from there.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's really beautiful, thank you for sharing that with me.

JOHN DUGDALE: You're welcome.

THEODORE KERR: I guess, maybe obviously, the reason why I asked is because the male body is such an important element of your work.

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: I think if you want to share just a little bit about, like, what are some of your thoughts about

representations of the male body in your work?

JOHN DUGDALE: Well I do want to represent that, and I told you yesterday that I looked in the Ferguson Library [where I grew up –JD]. I went up in the very nooks and crannies looking for male anatomy because I already knew where babies came from, but—

THEODORE KERR: Did you say the Fricks library?

JOHN DUGDALE: No, what did I say? The Ferguson—

THEODORE KERR: The Ferguson Library. Thank you.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah, where I could go [when I was 10 or 11 –JD]—where I could wear my new sandals from Caldor's, but only if I wore my socks. And I'm like, "Mom, please don't make me wear my socks to go downtown." She said, "You have to wear them, I insist." So I get down to the bottom of West Broad Street and I would take the socks off. I'd get renegade and wear the sandals with no socks, and the socks in my pocket until I got back closer to home and I'd put them back on. But I'd spend hours there.

I found beautiful anatomical books there, I didn't come across any Renaissance Art at all, and didn't know anything about any of that. I do know there's a [writhing near-naked, way larger than life, Christ –JD] behind the altar door. I was an altar boy, and like you'll hear this story from so many Roman Catholic, you know, men. That I had to really fight looking—always looking towards the figure, it was so beautifully made. Then I would think, "Oh God don't look at that," and say, you know, "God, you know just strike me dead if I can't not be looking at you in that way." And I felt like everybody knew every time I glanced in that direction. I don't know if anybody realized how erotic it was, but I know a lot of other men, you know men like me did. Right?

So I came to New York and the art history class that I had, you know they showed everything. There was no [shortage of male or female nudity –JD]. It started with *the Venus of Willendorf* and went all the way through the early 20th century. Everything, you know *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, every kind of representation of a figure you could think of. All beautiful, all inspiring. Bellini, you know male languid, sort of a mannerist male figure. The Michelangelo, the hand of David touching God—all obvious things, but so obvious because they're seminal works of art and the birth of various moments. You know, they [worked out of faith –JD] and they influenced everything in the future.

Anyway I came to New York, and you know, when I was—before I got here I was still in high school. My first impulse was to—I did a picture of myself with my hand over my face, but a shadow of my erection. I was very aware of the testosterone coursing through my body. And I went right in and I showed that to my class in high school, where it got a lot of titters and some discomfort, but my teacher Michael Welden though—well he loved it. I was—I'm not fond of, or told anybody about that picture since I made it, you know. It's at home in the basement of my mother's house. All my early work. Then we got here and I started looking at advertising and stuff—and I'm jumping forward a little bit because I think this is the most important thing—two things.

One, there's a lot of fake, gay photography in advertising. Versace pops to mind. And all his catalogs done by a photographer whom I esteem highly and I love as a friend, but at that time I didn't know him yet. I'd rail against him and say, "Oh you know what, you're going to show those two twin boys nuzzling with each other?" "Are they gay, are they straight, are they anything?" "What are they?" And so, I had not wanted anyone to have their clothes on because I told you yesterday, I didn't feel like I could sense their spirit. Then I find the male anatomy extremely beautiful. And you know what, big surprise, some people don't. Not even some gay people. It was really wonderful to watch people's reaction to those pictures. And they were—that moment of them; they were a direct response to the thinly disguised homosexuality in the advertising world at that time. I thought, "You know what, I'm going to just rip that little loincloth off that picture and I'm going to show everything." And I did show everything, one of my doctors came to the show—not my favorite one and he said, "Can I ask you a question?" I said, "Sure." He said, "How come everybody in your pictures has such large penises?" I said, "Because I like them, they're really beautiful." He turned red and walked away. Then I had women, young and old come and say, "Oh, God, we love coming to your shows because we get to see all these gorgeous, foxy men with their clothes off."

But you know, my neighbor next door I mentioned yesterday, Judy Siegal, she always had on a beautiful denim apron completely covered with photochemistry and clogs that she had since she was in Sweden [in her eighties. –JD] She put her hands on her hips and she'd clonk her clog down on the sidewalk and say, "Well, I can't believe I'm going to say, but you did it." She said, "I was looking at that picture of yours yesterday and there's a penis in it, and it wasn't the first thing that I saw, I don't know how you do it." "It was a part of the picture, I loved it." And I thought, "Wow, you know that was like Caesar's praise indeed!" She was a very stalwart, very opinionated woman, who was constantly writing op-ed pieces for *The New York Times*. She was no joke. She's still with us, next door; just her mind isn't so great right now. [That was her reaction to the pictures. –JD]

And then really the way it started, when I came home that first day I photographed Giovanni—and you know guess what, when they give you lots and lots of saline in the hospital which you are on 24 hours, seven days a week, it's sort of what they give you when they can't figure out what else to give you. You pee enormously, and continually, constantly peeing into some hideous plastic jug thing and then having to wait for somebody to take it away. So when I came home I thought, like I told you yesterday, transforming something that was brutal into something that was beautiful. I had Giovanni hold the 19th century chamber pot in front of his tally whacker, and act as if he was peeing, looking down. That was also startling—at that time people weren't quite ready for that. They had seen Mapplethorpe's work, which I'm sure gave me some kick in the pants going into the Robert Miller Gallery early, early and seeing *Man in a Polyester Suit* and nearly passing out. Do you know that picture?

THEODORE KERR: Are you talking about the Mapplethorpe of just the penis? And it's coming out of the suit?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah. Yes. I actually photographed that man's brother and lovely. It's a beautiful, extremely important picture that you know what? I couldn't make that picture now and show it [in this conservative environment –JD]. I met with so much resistance in New York. "Oh you showed the dick gallery, all those penises in your pictures." I'm like yeah, but I had just as many teacups, and just as many flowers, and just as many self-portraits and portraits of my family. You know, this is a part of my life; I'm not going to disguise it. There's no need to be coy. Once you've seen the future, which we talked about yesterday, which is shooting forward to the end of your life, you can come back and the only thing that's really important to you is what's important to you, you know?

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

JOHN DUGDALE: I reveled in surprising people, watching older people, watching my mother. A couple of great things—she came to one of the shows at Wessel + O'Connor and the previous show there had been a bunch of candy colored, highly shiny, modern framed, just penises, that's it.

THEODORE KERR: This is your show or someone else's?

JOHN DUGDALE: No!

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, someone else's.

JOHN DUGDALE: The anathema to what I was trying to do. She said, "Where's the bathroom?" I said, "You have to go all the way down that hallway"—she went, "Okay, I'll see you later." So off she went, and I didn't think anything of it, but they had hung that show—that didn't sell—down that hallway. All these Popsicle colored, brightly colored penises. Somebody called me the next day and said, "Oh man we loved your show, it was so great!" I think this is 1996, and they said, "But," I said, "What?" He said, "We felt so bad for your mother." And I said, "Why?" They said, "Because she had to walk down that hallway with all those penises in those frames." And I said, "Can I call you right back?" So I called my mother and I said, "Mom, did you notice anything unusual when you walked down that hallway to the bathroom?" She said, "No." She said, "Why?" I said, "There were all those tally whacker—her word—there were all those tally whacker pictures all the way down." She said, "Oh for God sakes, she said, I raised two boys I know what they look like." [Laughs.] And I called that guy back and I said, "You know I think it's you that has the problem with the tally whackers, not Rose." You know? So I met all kinds of response.

One last, good example, people were giving a gift in saying, [Giovanni would say –JD] "Why don't you photograph Ivan?" his best friend. I would just go, "okay fantastic, if they're interested I would love—like to. Brazilian guy, almost as perfect physically as the Adam—as Adam. And you know what's good about the statue of Adam? In the Bible, Adam is usually—it's not said outright, but he's— wait, not Adam, *David*.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

JOHN DUGDALE: David slays Goliath, and in the one hand hanging down he's got a sling with the rock, but it was always about little Goliath—or little David slinging the stone and killing the monster. Poor Michelangelo spent most of his life in torture about his carnal feelings about men. And all you have to do is look at the Sistine Chapel before they started to chip away the penises and over paint with fig leaves. As things descended back into non-freedom, which is a little bit of what I encountered here.

I went to speak at Birmingham, Alabama, at the college there. The picture that I have that I'm speaking about is called *Sun God*. And it's Ivan, who is enormously beautiful in every way, enormously beautiful. I put a big bunch of sunflowers on his shoulder, and he turned sideways and his hair glistening blonde. What you couldn't see was his deep, beautiful voice and dark green eyes. And I took that one picture, and then we took a few others, but I knew I had already taken my perfect Apollo, or my perfect David. I thought, "You know what, this is my *David*, I'm going to put this in the slide carousel and bring it down to Alabama, and I'm going to show it during the talk where there was faculty and students." Then *ching-ting* going along and everything's pretty safe, then *kaboom!*,

you know nine feet tall, this picture way in your face, but inarguably a beautiful classical figure study. There was nothing but silence and I thought, "Oh gosh, okay." There's mostly silence, I can really listen to the audience and hear murmurs, inhalations, exhalation. I can feel them leaning forward or leaning back. I can tell when they're getting restless, when they're feeling emotional. It's incredible, the energy that I can feel from people while we're experiencing the journey that I'm telling you about photographically.

And so it's all silence during Ivan's picture, and I was out in town the next day walking around and you know what? People kept approaching me, "Can I take you aside for a minute?" "Do you have any idea how grateful I am that you showed that picture yesterday?" "We don't get to see stuff like that, in that room very often; we're so thrilled." Teachers, women, men teachers, young men, young women, all races, and I thought, "Oh you know what I did the right thing." You know, it was so nice to bring that to them. And I also thought I should get off the street in case anyone was going to take a pot shot at me with a gun. You know I felt very uncomfortable [. . . –JD] , but I guess it was all a bit of activism on my part.

THEODORE KERR: I mean, yeah, it's interesting when you were talking about *David*, the creation of it, you understood the artists' intentions as a piece of activist's work. And I wonder—given what you've just said—are there other times where you can see in either the creation of your work, or how you've used your work in an activist way? In terms of HIV/AIDS or otherwise?

JOHN DUGDALE: I think blindness is a universal thing.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: It's been around since Oedipus, you know? And HIV is not a universal thing, although unfortunately it was much more so than who could have thought. Right? And I don't—as a human being who's blind, I set an example for other artists and other people. It doesn't matter what they're doing, they can be building a boat, or almost doing anything and I can inspire them to their activity. That makes me an activist in that way. It's not specifically tied to the HIV/AIDS community, although it's been generated from there. Gay men started my career. And then when I went out into the countryside, or across the country top to bottom, and I found out as I said earlier, that the pictures appealed to a certain nature in each person, and it inspired them. It was always a very Cheshire cat sort of feeling to say, "Yes I made those blind." It didn't seem odd to me at all, it seemed like the only thing that I could do. And it was—I may or may not have said that it was related to some of my, "I'll show you, 'Guido' attitude from Stamford, Connecticut." It's like, okay you think I'm done, you're going to pat me on the shoulder and leave me here in this room? Go home and be thankful that it's not you? I will surprise the living daylights out of you. And that, after I went through the worst of the crisis, that's the energy I used. The––I'll-show-you energy. I was an activist for myself.

THEODORE KERR: Mmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That makes sense. I also want to talk to you about, yesterday you talked about the dawning of your—you described beautifully the moment where your kind of gay aesthetic was born.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes.

THEODORE KERR: And then today, you spoke really beautifully about your relationship to nude men in your work.

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: And it seems to me that your approach to photographing the male body is to, kind of pull your gay aesthetic with it.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes.

THEODORE KERR: Like your work is—to use Audrey Lord, your work is erotic, not pornographic.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes. I think that's why Judy next door said, "Well you finally did it."

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: You know, it's not the first thing; it's part of the whole picture.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: And yeah, you know what? It was good practice for me to be given all those flowers; and all those objects, and all that cashmere, and all that china, and all that glass, because it's not easy to photograph a man's genitalia and have it be beautiful. Porn pictures are hard—[mine aren't not porn pictures –JD]. I got really comfortable having to adjust certain things, or make a little jiggle, or a lean, and it would become a part of the

overall experience of seeing the picture. Particularly, you can't photograph someone's penis head on, it looks like a monster. Right? [They laugh.] So there's a lot of consideration that drew on all of my earlier work in the commercial world, all those flower pictures. To present it in a way that was congruous with the rest of the beauty in the picture and not—it didn't stand out as extraneous, or they're for shock value in any way. I published them in what—the second book I published a number of them, and people just responded. I have cardboard boxes full to the top with letters from all over the country, and all over the world. "Thank you, I keep your book next to my bed, I read one page every day." They were saying thank you and behind that thank you was a thank you for showing these men this way, you know?

I still crave—I feel I need my muse to come this winter—and wake me up. You know, because I usually am deeply craving that excitement of having somebody come here. Especially now with Rey helping me really concentrate on the pictures as he takes care of the big camera. And you know, so on and so forth. They—everything was very considered, nothing was an accident.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And then I think a good follow up question is, you talked about the first time you took a picture of Gio, right?

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: You talked about how you, yourself thought, "I should be naked too."

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: And I wonder if you want to talk about, like your own relationship with your body in relationship to either photography, or just like coming into your body as a human being?

JOHN DUGDALE: Well, I remember you wanted to talk about gay influences. I knew I was gay when I was three or four, maybe five, because there was a Bugs Bunny cartoon—you know how everything goes back to Warner Brothers.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: And as a matter of fact, Warner Brothers is full of gay men and probably gay women, illustrators. Cartoons that are full of adult gay humor. Bugs Bunny in drag, oh there's so much of it in there. And there was one where there was a scrim and Bugs E. Bunny, there's a flood and a letter from the Army induction office goes down the stream and into his rabbit hole. And he's like, "oh no I got drafted into the Army."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: So, he goes to get his physical with the other army guys that are going in and guess what? They're all in their boxer shorts, and they're in a long line and the joke of the cartoon is that, you know he sees these massive shoulders and small waists, and big chests and thick legs and big feet in boxer briefs. And then Bugs Bunny comes behind the scrim and you see his rabbit ears. And it's very funny, but at nighttime I would fantasize about being there, the doctor who was examining these people who had been drafted and that was, that's my earliest memory of being completely fascinated and attracted to the male figure.

Then there was more to that question, that's how it started. Oh, so you know, I was deeply in love with my body. I didn't love it when I was in junior high school, or high school I was not athletic. I was a little overweight, and [didn't feel safe with body –JD]. But after the hospital I was so proud of my body. I thought, "It really served me well and it held up under the most trying situations of all." May I say this, since it's an archive?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I had—I never talk about this anymore because right away as I started to go out into the world [speaking –JD], I realized that it was the essence of the experience, not the actual experience. But just for the record I had five bouts of viral pneumonia. I had KS—I had discovered on Thanksgiving at my mother's house under a bright light in front of the mirror when I went to change my shirt. And I thought, "What is that on my pectoral muscle?"

THEODORE KERR: And this was before or after you were diagnosed? The KS.

JOHN DUGDALE: After.

THEODORE KERR: After.

JOHN DUGDALE: I had already been positive for ten years with nothing happening. And I thought nothing was ever going to happen. I had the stroke, I had Cytomegalovirus retinitis, I had toxoplasmosis, and I had spinal

meningitis, over the course of one and a half years.

THEODORE KERR: Ooooff.

JOHN DUGDALE: And I came home with my canes and I thought, "Wow, you know what, my body is perfect." It really—I have never abused it very much more than anybody else did in art school. And it really held up under trial. And so when people would come over, and they'd be—if they weren't Gio, who was used to—or as he was, Giovanni, he was used to being in his underwear or less in a bar, on a box and we'd already been naked together a number of times. He was fine, but not everybody was. And he would come over and say, "Oh come on, come on, it's just—take your shirt off." Or I said, "You take your clothes off in the gym all the time, this is the same, there's no difference." But when men get excited their dick can get a little hard, and even though when that would happen a little bit, it wasn't what I was looking for. Photographing an erect penis is hard, and not especially attractive. And you look at all that—is languidity a word? Or the languidness in the Sistine Chapel, you won't see anybody with a boner.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: So, eventually when I said, "Okay listen up, I'll take my clothes all the way on the other side of the camera, and nobody else was in the room." And that created some excitement for me, after being in the hospital for a year. I loved it, I felt really free. I had gotten so accustomed to the idea of leaving the planet with my clothes off. The same way I came in, right? And then suddenly they were comfortable as well. And within moments, nobody felt nude.

It was actually a nice story when the camera was here, and that 1500-watt light was on one night, and Darrell brought his friend Carlos over. So me, Darrell and Carlos were doing a picture together going around in circles who was looking through the camera and who wasn't. Way out the back windows of the studio was an apartment building. About a dozen years later, a lovely Asian man came up to me [at the gym –JD] and said, "I have a story for you." I said, "What's that?" He said, "I saw the most beautiful thing I ever saw in your apartment." I said, "What?" He said, "I saw three men in bright light walking around in circles." And he said, "I always wanted to tell you when I see you at the gym all the time." "Your photographs," he said, "are so beautiful." And I thought, "Oh my God that is fantastic!" You know, so people are more prone to come up to you individually, in private, than they are to say anything out loud in front of anybody else. But again, I was talking about the universal attraction and that's one of them. And everybody has that saying that your sex drive is your chi, you know your life force. And that's been proven to me over and over.

I showed that picture of Ivan that I was talking about, the *Sun God*, up at the Opera Guild two weeks ago and it was met with silence. But I didn't worry about that silence at all, because I knew they were just absorbing it. You still see—it's even worse now than it was. The problem with male nudity, it's worse. You have—in the Justice Building a few years ago, they had people draping cloths over the nude statue of justice with the scales, so that her breasts wouldn't show. We live in a crazy country. You go to Italy; you look in a magazine there are plenty of women with their shirts off. You go to the beach; there are people with their clothes off. We live in a terribly puritan society. And Mapplethorpe opened the door, with his beautiful, severe male nudes. But it didn't progress from there—it actually regressed.

And the end of this part of this—to tell you that Wessel + O'Connor gallery closed and they were out loud proud and gay, I feel like I brought something else to them and I legitimized them. I brought them *The New York Times*, people made films, there were big events, and 400 people would come in the height of things. In the middle of a crisis, in the middle of my 10-year career with them, they would line up out the door, down 26th Street near the corner onto 7th Avenue. Wow, I wonder where I was going to connect that to, something really special. Oh, the gallery then closed eventually and I thought, "Well if I had over a million dollars in print sales, it shouldn't be hard to get a blue ribbon gallery or a blue chip gallery, or whatever." I felt very accomplished because we sold an enormous amount of work. Sold out editions and everything, it was really something. I had any number of gallerists, famous gallerists come and I thought, "Wow they've all said hello to me at the Met, they know my work, they come and they look at all the pictures and they congratulate me and they love them." Do you know not one of them would represent me?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: One woman came from a gallery down here, very well known, very good friends with John and Billy and she came as his representative to see work. She says, "Well I know that they must have put you in the downstairs, did they force you to do all those nudes, did they make you do that down in the basement?" "Don't we have more teacup pictures?" I asked her to leave.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

JOHN DUGDALE: I had galleries from 57th Street come here and give me the brush off. And finally I called my

friend from Christie's and I said, "Could you come and spend just 20 minutes with me and tell me what's going on?" "I've been looking for a year, I thought it would be a piece of cake to walk into another gallery." And he said, "You want me to be honest with you?" I said, "Absolutely, please!" And he said, "People look at you as part of the dick gallery." I said, "What?" He said, "Your work, it's—you're going to have to wait a couple years and let things simmer down before you re-approach these people." I said, "I have news for you, I'm not going to be re-approaching anyone. I don't want to have a gallery that suggests that I was forced to make those pictures, which again are only a third of the pictures. I was busy working for Martha Stewart." [. . . –JD]I decided to represent myself. I have represented myself ever since, and it's been wonderful. I get to meet one on one with the collectors. I have a lovely gallery now in Hudson, who I asked him right off the bat when he came to see me two years ago, I said, "Do you have any problem with male frontal nudity?" He said, "No, not at all." I said, "Okay great." And my gallery in Palm Beach is a little bit more conservative, but also extremely supportive. They have to be with their clientele, but—do you have a minute for one more funny story about a nude?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, of course.

JOHN DUGDALE: I had a beautiful new [antique –JD] lens here, not this one but a different one. And then my then partner Scott came over, I said, "Would you pose for some pictures for me?" He said, "Okay." I got a nice picture of him lifting up, sort of like a dying Gaul, a little bit, you know, half in repose, half lifting up by the arm and the shoulder. With his beautiful member hanging down in just the right way, where the arc of his knee, his arm, everything was working together and made a circle in the air. Everything has to relate.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: They don't really teach composition to look at each side, each corner over and over again so you see that the whole thing is en masse working. [I had a 16-by-20 cyanotype of Scott's picture, and brought it to the Palm Beach gallery for a show. The gallerist –JD] said, "You can't expect me to show that picture?" I said, "Okay." He said, "Put it in that box." So I put it in that box, and then a collector of mine, named Barbara came and she said, "What's in that box?" [Laughs.] And I said, "Oh some pictures that we decided not to show?" And she said, "Could I see?" I lifted the lid and the one on top was the one of Scott, and she said, "How much is that?" I said, "I think these are 6,000 dollars, she said, "I want that one."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: She said, "I'm going to buy it for my husband." I said [to the gallerists "do you want to write up a bill for Barbara, one of the fabulous New York/Palm Beach antique dealers/collectors" –JD] —wonderful, and I mean, I thought that was the funniest thing ever.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And that was the first thing that sold. It went right out the door, and she didn't even bat an eyelash. Down in Palm Beach, if something doesn't cost 10,000 dollars, people don't want it.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: I mean people come in Rolls Royce to the openings to buy things. Why is it only 2500 dollars? So we made it 10,000 dollars and we sold it. No kidding.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I believe you.

JOHN DUGDALE: It's shocking. I like to give people pictures, they can't afford them and it might sit there for years on end. I just say, "Here, you know, it'd be better on your wall."

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

JOHN DUGDALE: You know, I've sold pictures to bartenders that took two years to pay them. The fanciest people you could think of, museums have called from Turkey and had a $9,000 print request. I'd be curious if they call me back, you know?

THEODORE KERR: I have—it dawns on me to ask you this question.

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: And so, you were in New York, as you've said, at a really special time. That was not only special for you, but special, for the world. And that also coincides with the dawning of the AIDS crisis that we're talking about today.

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: And something that was really important about those, that magic period and that painful period—

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: —was all of the work that was being created whether it be by Gay Men's Health Crisis, or the Brooklyn AIDS Task Force, or Gran Fury, or General Idea. And I wonder if you, even if you just kind of think in your memory, what are some visuals—like what visual culture of HIV/AIDS that you remember? And let's start before your own diagnosis, what visual AIDS culture that you remember before your diagnosis?

JOHN DUGDALE: Being repulsed by David Wojnarowicz's picture of *The Saturday Evening Post*, of the woman serving a turkey, but it was made out of hypodermic needles. JOHN DUGDALE: It scared me to death. That's the first thing that came right up on my screen in my mind. And then not too much after that, I tended to shy away from that kind of work. I had a different kind of message. So I looked at it, but you know, a good new story might represent how I feel about that time.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And then I get calls after I got known and published in magazine articles and newspapers, and what not. Somebody called me from San Francisco and he said, "You don't know me, I'm a student and I'm very similar to you. I take photographs and I'm just getting started with my real work. And I am blind in one eye, I have CMV retinitis and he said, "I almost lost all the sight in my other eye." He said, "Do you have a press agent?" I said, "No it all happened by itself." And he was being kind of angry, a little bitter, and he said, "Well—" I said, "Why don't you describe your pictures to me?" He said, "All right." He said, "I get a big piece of Plexiglass and then some Scrubbing Bubbles cleaner, and I spray the scrubbing bubble cleaner all over the Plexiglass, and then I smash my blind eye through it and push it against the Plexiglass and take a picture from the other side." I just leaned back a little bit with the phone and I felt well, you know, he called and asked me and I said, "You know you're going to scare people away, not draw them in." I said, "I prefer to draw people into my world of agony that we're all in." But not with hypodermic needles. As much as I deeply liked and appreciated David Wojnarowicz I didn't want to do it that way.

So I remember being repelled by that kind of work. I knew that if I came at it from a different angle I would have even more people to view the work, or more people to hear my story, which did absolutely explode in the beginning. You know, speaking at the Met while the—A Day Without Art wasn't started until that day, that is what I remember. I do remember that a terror and a fear and a change came with the cloak that fell on our world here, downtown.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And all the storefront galleries. It coincided with the changing of the climate in terms of real estate. It also seemed to give the larger country of people as an excuse to hate us.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I was very sad. I said to my mom, sort of in the very beginning, I said, "Mom, are you Republican or Democrat?" She said, "I'm Republican." I said, "Why?" She said, "I don't know your father always voted Republican." I said, "Did you know that the Republicans just proposed to tattoo all HIV positive men on one of their ass cheeks and put them in a concentration camp somewhere far away?" She said, "You're kidding." I said, "Yeah ma, I didn't make that up." "Okay, she said, I'm going to be voting for Bill Clinton."

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

JOHN DUGDALE: You know, so I guess I never answered that question before in that way.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I hope that was enlightening.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, it was enlightening. And then I think also the reason why I wanted to ask you specifically, is like even in my own research—it's funny a lot of the earliest AIDS prevention posters, or AIDS awareness posters, are of torsos.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes.

THEODORE KERR: And often no heads, just torsos.

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: Which, you know, dates back to Greek and Roman art.

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: And it seems like that's also an influence for you, and I wonder if you were struck by any beauty in those early years as well, or if there was any messages that you thought were—

JOHN DUGDALE: Oh yes!

THEODORE KERR: Yeah?

JOHN DUGDALE: Listen I did a beautiful documentary with my friend Karen from Canada in 1999, and they asked me about the work then and the work now. And the nude work then was salacious, and it was sexy, and it was fun and playful and horny. And then after that, you know, having experienced what I did, the body became representative as a vessel of the soul.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: It wasn't anymore just a body[. . . –JD]. . I mean, those Greeks understood the human body and the power of a beautiful human body to inspire, and to mythologize human kind. [Maybe that's why they used torsos in prevention pictures, that's where you heart is. –JD] My work afterwards had much more depth and a lot more mortality to it.

And you know, the human male torso above the pubes and below the neck is a like a beautiful landscape, just like a landscape outside with the lucky few who were blessed to be born with abs. You know? I've done thousands and thousands of sit-ups but I have what I call prophet's belly. And I just have one line through the middle near my belly button. If you were up at the Met and look at those beautiful prophets holding their bible with the little bit of cloth around their behind, you look at their bellies and they're absolutely smooth, they're not overweight, but they're not cut up like that. It's just one beautiful line from side to side that shows their age and their wisdom. And even then, when they were making those paintings they were using their bible as an excuse to show the male nude figure.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Even Praxiteles, and if it wasn't him, it was somebody around him, did a Dionysus robe in marble, delicately cloaking a female figure that you could see every bit of her body through the cloak. I can see it in my mind like I just saw it for the first time. But there were I guess considerations about that then, in a very different world where men could proudly be seen nude—in a statue, but not women yet.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And now in our time it's women who are meant to be seen, but if anybody's going to be—unless you live in an [extremely conservative time again –JD].

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I also—I love what you said that the torso's a landscape and I think your work could be part of this conversation and maybe this is intentional—

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: —but it's also a political landscape. Right? So you talked a little bit about, there's the idea of the prophet's belly, or if like famously would be a statue of Augustus that's all politics. There's nothing—

JOHN DUGDALE: I photographed that.

THEODORE KERR: Oh you did?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes, just his finger though.

THEODORE KERR: Oh what made you photograph his finger?

JOHN DUGDALE: It was beautiful and monumentally out of scale. Oh, you know I'm thinking of, did you say Constantine?

THEODORE KERR: No I said Augustus.

JOHN DUGDALE: Oh Augustus, I'm thinking of a beautiful piece of a colossal Constantine.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And no I didn't photograph Augustus, but there are pieces of that beautiful statue of Constantine outside a museum.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: That we saw on one of the seven hills of Rome, but you know when you said politic just now there was a disconnect in my mind. And you know, I was shaking my head and my finger, no, you know it's just not any place I ever came from and in any one of these shootings it never dawned on me. I didn't try to talk myself into that or let anybody else suggest that. I thought if it is a truth for somebody, fantastic. But for me the landscape of the chest is a home for the beating heart of a person, you know, more than a political statement.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I guess they were political, but I kid you not, I assure you that they were not. All I was thinking about was to make sure that the light was chiaroscuro, and the person looked just right. I didn't want anybody to doubt how beautiful—maybe that was my denial of the decay and the collapse of so many beautiful people.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Maybe I was trying to preserve that beauty any way that I could, I never thought of that before.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. There's a few places we could go right now. I could ask you some more follow-up questions.

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: Is there anything that's kind of bubbling up that you—are there any stories that you feel are good right now?

JOHN DUGDALE: No, I think that's the most important thing to tell you. In going out into the country and discovering for myself in my adult life, as an artist, that what I was doing was definitely supported by, and encouraged by, and just lovingly supported by the gay community.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: From an A-list gay on Wall Street all the way down to the bartender in Brooklyn who came. I photographed one young man, very handsome. Billy called me and said, "I've got a great guy for you to photograph," which is never the real reason that I did anything. I like to have a personal connection with the person. And I—you know I thought where am I going to get my title? So over the course of, let's see, I guess 1996, or wait, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, I read all of the American transcendentalists.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And I—Emily Dickinson stood out because I could never understand her whenever I tried [earlier in my life. –JD] You know Walt Whitman was much more easy to enter into. And I absorbed *Leaves of Grass* a thousand times and the picture is about that. Emily Dickinson had one poem about a fly buzzing and then at the end of the poem she says, "I could not see the sea."

So this fellow came over, beautiful, sculptural body, just what you would want for a photograph. Lots of curvaciousness and softness to light beautifully. I took a number of pictures of him, and he was kind of blank and I was kind of blank, and I can tell these are just going to look like art porn pictures, which I never let go out of here. And then I—not desperate, but I thought, "Oh my God I've got to do something." So I said, "Can you lift your knees up and put them on the table and hold your knees." That little beautiful painting by David, of the man on the mountaintop holding his knees?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I said, "Do that." And then he did that and it still wasn't more than his beautiful thighs and his big giant ass and his shoulders and I said, "Listen I don't even know you but I've got this long shutter release, could I come and sit in between your legs?"

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

JOHN DUGDALE: He said, "Sure I would like that." So, we—he opened up his legs and I got in between, and put my back against his chest, and he put his arms around me. I put my head down, he put his head down on my neck, and I snapped the picture. That was the one piece of film that I had left, that I call *I Could Not See to See*.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And what I learned on that day, is that I had to rethink my idea about intimacy. And that there's intimacy just like the five basic food groups they talk about all the time from the Greek classical literature. Intimacy is universal, and just underneath the skin, you know, we're the same. And I was able to have that ultra-intimate [moment –JD]]with him, not even knowing him, just because I let myself go for it. And that he was so pliable and agreeable, and wanting so much to be in an important picture. So I have a beautiful 11-by-14 print of it. And at the opening it was really—I sold most of them, which is only important in that you can judge the reaction to a picture [depending on how much –JD] you sell of an edition at the opening.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: Guess what? He brought his mother [to the opening, and many friends of his took –JD] a picture of him and his mother standing in front of the picture. And I thought, "Well this is so great." This is a little bit of a melancholy thing. I was wondering at that time how was I going to have a partner? Darrell had left, I had a lot of notoriety as a photographer, but I was pretty lonely at night. I thought, how am I ever going to operate in this community without being able to see—it's all about seeing and being seen [in our community–JD]. I can create this beauty here in my studio, which I did with this fellow.

So then I screwed up every ounce of courage I could possibly find in my body and I called him up and I said, "Would you like to go out to dinner with me?" I wanted to spend more time with him, not with the camera. He said, "Sure that would be great." So Darrell, who remained my friend always, came over and said, "What's going on?" I said, "Oh I'm taking a bath, I have to get ready, I have a date tonight." He said, "You do?" He said, "Miss Thing—let me help you." [Laughs.] "You look terrible, are you going to go like that?" And he got me all ready, and he took me by the shoulder and he said, "Be careful." He said, "People are going to want to date you, not always for the right reason that you want to date them." I didn't really know what he meant. And so, my heart was fluttering and I was very excited. We went around the corner to my favorite place. We had some all right conversation, then the moment came where we walk back and he said, "Hey goodnight, thank you, that was so nice." And I felt crushed, I wanted to spend more time with him and I was longing to be intimate with someone, and the pictures that I took with him were sensual, but there was no—nothing happened, I made sure of that. Nothing ever happened more than just that sensuality for the photograph because I didn't want to have the reputation of that, you know, that I thought that would illegitimize the picture very much. But I was heartbroken when he didn't even want to come upstairs for a cup of tea, and I felt like I was a marked man. I couldn't—a lot of other gay men got better. You couldn't see their KS right away—their lungs got stronger, they got through everything, but you know what? I'm always blind.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Twenty-four hours a day, 60 minutes of every hour I am blind. I can't hide it, I don't want to, but I'm set apart—I try then going to a bar with my cane, with a bunch of my good friends and I said, "Just leave me here, just in the middle of a crowded bar full of great guys all over." Do you know not one single person came to say hello to me? I turned around in a circle with my best positive face on, I had my nice shirt on, I was in great shape at that time, and nothing. Nothing. I had a couple of other experiences like that. I stopped trying.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: I stopped it, and I thought, "Well somebody's going to come into my life they're going to have to find me, and be all right with me, you know?" I'm a handful of blind energy. The only guy I dated early on, he called my sister and said, "Boy your brother asks a lot of questions." [Laughs.] She said, "Yeah, he's very inquisitive and he's living his life to the fullest." You know, and so I think hopefully that will be an interesting aspect for anybody who wants to know what it was like then, in that world. How do you get a date when you've got KS, and you still have that stirring in your stomach? You're longing for company, and what is intimacy, you know? With the guy I just said, "Hey maybe come upstairs and hang out with me for a while." It would've been really nice.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: But it was the same thing. I would come home after the openings, at the various points where I was single, and I had just been congratulated for these pictures and I was really elevated and acknowledged for what I had been making over the course of the year. And then I would come home and sit in bed, and I would think, "Wow, it's sort of like if a tree falls in the forest." I said, "Did that just happen?" And I would think, "Oh God, I hope somebody calls and says that they like the show, I need more of that, it's helping me." People say, "I love your shows, I love your work, I love your shows, I love your work." And I would always tell them, "It's like me plugging in my cord to a 220 volt outlet because it totally nourishes me." The reaction keeps me moving along, and then I would just go to sleep and start all over again the next day. Or go to the gallery, nobody knew or recognized me, for the most part they didn't know. They were just people coming over the course of the

month. I would watch which picture they stopped at or who gathered at where, or what people went by very quickly. It was a really wonderful way to edit my work.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I still work that way, you know. I had a bunch of contact sheets, and I'd leave them on the table in no order, I'll shuffle them up, and then I'll listen and I'll watch where people slow down, and I'll say "What was that one? Or which one did you like?" And they'll say this one, and then I'll put that—oh which one did you like, that one, and by consensus I can see which one might reach people. I long to see the pictures with my own eyesight because oftentimes people would miss the picture. And I say no, no, no, that's not the picture, you know, this is the picture. But only I could know that, so I had to exist in the world in pieces if you will, and put things back together bit-by-bit and do the –JD] best as I could. I knew that there was going to have to be some amount of, let's see some disharmony maybe, in the composition or maybe somebody's toe would get cut off which was unacceptable earlier. It suddenly became okay.

THEODORE KERR: In taking the photographs?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah. So, it was very heart-wrenching to not be able to tell if something was in my view, perfect. I tell you, I chose as many people as I could, asked as many questions as I could, but even people who did photography didn't seem to be looking. They weren't really looking, they don't see. I taught all these classes and say look through the back of this camera and tell me what you see. You know I had a class of fourth graders here from PS 3 and I thought what on earth am I going to do with these kids. And it's so nice, third and fourth grade, right?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: They all came, they took off their thousands of pairs of little shoes [out on the landing–JD]. [They laugh.] My then guide dog Manly, the famous Manly, proceeded after they all got seated here on the floor in a circle, proceeded to walk in one at a time with various pairs of little tiny shoes, the kids were going crazy screaming, the teachers were laughing. I was like, "Manly say excuse me, I have to take care of the shoes," and I closed the door, and everybody was very relaxed. I had picked out a stack of cyanotypes—nothing challenging, nothing that any child's mother wouldn't want them to see, although I think every child is fine with nudity and has many more carnal feelings than their parents. They don't want to know, but they're there. Right?

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

JOHN DUGDALE: So I gave everyone a picture, I said everyone take a picture from this stack, I'm going to sit in the middle of you. The work they were going to do is since I can't see which picture; I want you to describe the picture to me until I guess which one it is.

THEODORE KERR: Amazing.

JOHN DUGDALE: Oh my God. They were so literate and so awake and it didn't take long at all for me to [know the picture –JD]. I'd say no that's one of the Roman column and they'd scream like how did you know that, it's because I look really hard. And I'd say, "If you want to be an artist, you have to continually look at things in a way that nobody else looks at them." And one of the little kids said "Hey, Mr. Dugdale, I love that medal you have around your neck, I have one too." I said "You do?" I said "What is it, let me see," he said "It's a star of David." I said "That's really beautiful," I said, "That's lighting the way for you just like the Madonna is lighting the way for me," and they had no problem with being different or in any way one from the other. One little girl was trying to vamp me, and she had on long stockings and a pleated miniskirt, and she leaned against the wall of the classroom and she said, "Hey Mr. Dugdale, I'm having a salon at my mother's house and I would like to know if you want to come." [They laugh.] I said, "I would be honored, but you know, you have to tell your teacher to invite me, and then I'll be able to come."

And then I set up the camera. I got my steps so they could reach up to [the back of the camera –JD]. I set it on the table, a beautiful vase of fully blooming something or another, you know. And I said, "Each of you have to take a turn and climb up here and look through the back of the camera," and they all were astonished because [it seemed –JD] like looking at a TV, which they could relate to. And every single person said some version of whoa, wow, oh my God, oh my God. One kid stole the entire show because he stuck his head out from underneath the cloak, and he said, "You know my dad's got a really good gig. He's a photographer." I said "What does he do," he said, "He does all the catalogs for Victoria's Secret." [They laugh.] I said, "Oh that's really good, that sounds like something you might want to do when you get older." And they left. I was so nervous and I felt that they were more open to me and my work than many adults I had met in the course of the famous, you know. It was a stellar moment here.

THEODORE KERR: Mmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. You've said this word that we take for granted but I think

you must have a lot of feelings about it, looking. How would you define looking?

JOHN DUGDALE: Well you know when you came here I was joking that people don't think I can't see. And I learned how to move gracefully through my world—which is a quote from that documentary that my ten-year assistant Dan said, [who helped me make so many pictures—"John is an artist and I am just a technician." –JD] You know what, I had a little crescent of sight—as a matter of fact it was in Hudson, New York, where my new gallery is, and I was walking down the sidewalk, and I say, "Hey there's a penny on the corner." I was like all yeah, you know, jab me in the ribs with their elbows, how can you tell there's a penny on the corner, and I said, "Because I can see the glint of copper in my eye." And we got there and there was a penny on the corner, and they said, you know, "You're joking about your sight aren't you," I said "No I'm not, you just don't look. Your—you don't have to look, so you're not looking, but if you want to be awake in your life and you want to be an aesthete or make any kind of artwork—or even if you work in your office, it would be pretty good to look at what's around you in a way that is certain." I still feel more sighted because I'm more awake and more aware, you know, by force of my blindness that at the classes I would be astonished that people are looking at an 11 by 14 piece of ground glass, but they weren't really looking. And I thought I'm glad that they're here, I hope that they can retain some of this. But I then would say to them, I use my early technique and I'd say, "Take my finger and trace for me the way that you frame these objects, you know," and I would think, "Oh gosh, you know, it's not working." And then I would ask them, "What are you—you know, what do you see? Was anything interacting with anything? Do these flowers have any relationship to that whatever?" And that was the best part of teaching, was to get people to understand that there was a living quality to objects, there was a spirit and a life to everything that moved through the camera.

But the vast majority of what I see is very unconsidered, you know. What I know about from the history of photography, I know all the masters old and recent. And it was—they're a lot of the great people and they do, you know, different types of photography than I do. Generalistic however, but my specialty is looking — I remember when I used to just imagine that —what would happen if I lost the rest of my sight? It didn't seem like it would be possible. I thought, "Oh God, you know, you tested me, and I got left with this crescent moon." I admit that is something I tell people that [through my eye –JD] I saw the aurora borealis. I said that first in Canada, because I had followers up north. You know, the blindness is caused by a neurological problem. There's nothing the matter. My retinas are scarred from the—you know [. . . –JD]. Basically like chickenpox, that everyone who had chickenpox, if their immune system goes down to a certain level, like zero, you know, a lot of things are going to happen to your body, like CMV, that you're carrying around every minute of the day, now that your body's fighting off pathogens. And the minute you don't have that system, anything can happen. So everything stopped before my macular nerve, my optic nerve was not damaged. Right? So—it's as if there's a TV screen in the front, and it shoots electronic images or electric images like a fiber optic cable to the optic nerve, which looks like a little tiny marshmallow. And then through the incredible mystery of eyesight, that goes to a place called the seat of the soul, that's what da Vinci called it. Because he cut open cadaver after cadaver trying to see where the sight went. He understood how light reflected, how it was transmitted, how it was increased by the cornea, how your eye dilated, opened and closed like a camera lens, how images were produced upside down. Newton—they all knew these things, but they didn't really know what happened, they didn't—they didn't know. So I think that [seat of the soul –JD] is the most poetic name, I'm touching the top of my head, right there is the seat of the soul.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: It's where your energy comes from that you don't know you have or that it comes into your work and you don't know where it came from. So looking is something I've thought about a lot, and that I showed off a lot [as a blind person –JD]. Sometimes I can hear something fall or move and I can say watch out that table's on the edge of—the plate is on the edge of the table.

Rey, we're watching/listening to the news, and I said, "Oh what movie are they seeing?" He said, "How'd you know they were at the movies?" I said, "Because I can hear the 1960s jingle that they would play during intermission at the drive-in movie," and it was just faint.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: But I heard that, and then got inside, didn't think anything of it, and I felt like I was at the movies. I'm no smarter than the average bear, but I'm just awake and again forced to be awake if I want to participate in my world and the rest of the world. And just doing that day after day with as much energy as I can muster, you know, if I don't fall down the stairs or something, which happens often. You know, I can continue to be that person for as long as the universe wants me to be.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I'm on borrowed time. I don't feel like I made these pictures, I feel that they were made through

me.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: You know, I'm no kind of God kook or Jesus freak or program guy or anything like that, but I know that the clarity, the vision that I had when I came home from the hospital. All I had to do was stand beside the camera, and if I couldn't know if the subject was doing what I wanted, then I did what I wanted them to do. I mirrored them. I said do this. Because people ask—how do you—you know, how did you get those pictures. I said I became them.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: You know. I mirrored back. You know when you fall in love, you think "oh my God, he made me feel love. I'm so happy, I feel so happy, I'm so happy." That person didn't make you feel anything. You have all the love endorphins in your body every minute since you were born. They're just reflecting back how much you love yourself, and you know people don't seem to get that.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: You know, I looked at them and I fell in love. So you fall in love because they feed something in your soul [that allows you –JD] to be okay with yourself. I've always loved to remind people about that. You know, and I was able to mirror back people's beauty by having my clothes off or not. And I did unconsciously at first, I would find myself moving into what I needed them to do. And I thought oh this is so easy, this is a really good trick. You know, how much fun have I had with this?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: So much, you know, it's been so incredible. I feel like I'm back now where I started.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: Pre-AIDS I thought I was going to be taking pictures of the Ballet Russe.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And I had John Kelly running around like *Afternoon of the Fawn* in the woods up in Connecticut. And then when I went on from there I had my accidental commercial career, which I did my very best to make everything look like mine, but inevitable they'd call me and say, "We want the pictures to look just like your book, but could you just do it this way." I'm like okay, do you want to take the picture or do you want me to? Then came the beautiful show that I went to, oh you had asked before what was I looking at, at that time.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And one thing I saw that changed my life is that there was [a show at the Met that I will always be jealous of the title. The show was called *The Waking Dream* which I thought, "oh lord I could have that tattooed on my forehead because that's what I feel like I'm walking through, like a somnambulist." In the show, they lit the daguerreotypes, also called the mirror of nature, invented in the 1830's, lit with fiber optic cables in a way that most, including me, had never seen before, because in their original state they were as shiny as a mirror. And there was a big Plexiglas, I suppose, a box with a thick book in it. And I went over and I looked, and there were all cyanotypes of pickles. Through no. 1, 2, 3, 4 on each page, and underneath each pickle, was a little beautiful number scrolled in pen—no. four, no. twelve, no. six. It was a farmer's genetic experiments. –JD]

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

JOHN DUGDALE: Cyanotype was a very throwaway process. It was easy. Anybody could do it. It eventually turned into the blueprint that architects used, and then that lasted up and through the sixties. And then they moved to the computer eventually and nobody uses the blueprint machine any more. But that farmer didn't mean to see the beauty in those pickles, but I thought that is it, I'm going to be a farmer photographer. [They laugh.] I live in the city but I'm going to be a farmer.

THEODORE KERR: This was during your commercial days.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah. Well I had already bought the house.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And I'm surrounded up there. I rent all the fields on my property to local farmers, and they grow

squash or corn and beans, pumpkins, all kinds of things. So the house is surrounded by plowed—[33 –JD] acres of plowed fields every spring. It's extremely beautiful, so I feel emotional. My whole body goes still when I'm there. I feel like I'm in the right place in the universe when I'm there.

I tried to be that farmer photographer for a few minutes, and then I had my stroke, and the universe reinvented me as the blind photographer. So I stepped into those shoes because that was obviously the only thing to do. I got up to the house sometimes to take pictures. I'm not always—here [in New York–JD], everywhere you went there was still some sensuality, say in the gym. [Earlier in New York, people –JD] didn't wrap themselves like mummies in their towels and do the towel ballet right? Where they're going to get you in the shower but they take the towel off and do some kind of a three-point turn—

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: —and get behind the [frosty –JD] glass before you can see them. Even with me being then almost blind, and still going to the gym across the street. They knew I couldn't see them. I was either the guy [inaudible] over a cane. They saw me fumbling around, guide dog running away sometimes, whatever. But they still hid from me. And I thought what is this shame? What on earth, you know? But I—there were still people earlier that would be happy to come over and get to know them, you know. "Oh you live where, you live right nearby" you know? Just in the slightest way so that they knew I wasn't saying, "Hey come up and see my lithos." You know, or they'd say "Are you going to photograph me? You can't see us. I said "Oh just come in I'll—show my camera," you know. And then here's what—to shoot forward into now, I really thought I gave it the office, right. I thought that having had a stroke, living through paralysis, cheering up everybody, becoming an icon in my community, and then as far away—I got an email today from a young woman whose leg was severely broken this morning, and then she had it all pinned together. She said, "I follow your story, the story of your life online, and I just walked around the block a bunch of times. It was so inspiring to know how you persevered and what you were able to accomplish. Would you be interested—I'm going to be going on a full marathon running across all the bridges in London and I'm going to be sponsored by a group that takes care of blind children. You know,[. . . –JD] would you consider sending us something, you know to sponsor me, and sign in for people at the AIDS walk."

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: So it goes that far.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: All over the place. So this summer up at the house, I went to my friend Sandy's antique shop and you know if I get too far off topic I hope you'll tell me.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

JOHN DUGDALE: But all of these things are important to be an artist, and the—you have to work to be an artist, you know. It doesn't mean you put on a beret and a smock and run around with a pallet, right? You can be that artist if you want, but I—one of the great joys of my life was going to his Quaker shop in New Paltz, New York just six miles outside of town. He moved the Quaker house from 1790 [to his property –JD] and turned it into his shop. It was very high end, beautiful glass and china, furniture— and I used to love to go there. I learned a lot about material culture from him. I used to borrow things from [Sandy's to put into *Martha Stewart* shoots for her that I did even after my sight loss. Which I still want to tell you about how present her staff was for me –JD]. And after I finally got back up to the country, a year or more later from when I got out of the hospital, I said, "Look, well, I'm not really sure if I'm even going to want to collect anything anymore, I won't be able to see it." And Sandy said, "You can still see out of the bottom of your eye." He said, "Here's a magnifying glass, go inside and have a look." So I went and with a little crescent I realized that everybody knows this but they don't know it. If I just saw the tiniest flower on the edge of the teacup, I could extrapolate from there the entire design of the whole cup.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And then just holding it in my hand, it became like a garnet or a ruby or something. It was so powerful that I can still see it. It was like laying on the bed with my feet on the floor seeing everything I could possibly imagine in my mind, you know, and knowing that my Rolodex was still active.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And this summer, you know, things normalized. I continue to buy things and photograph them and surround myself with the 19th century artifacts that I love. —I went to Sandy's shop on August 7th of this month, having thought that I had gone through the storm and that I was all done. That I had really given of

myself, that I was a good boy, my mother would say "Oh sweetheart you're such—you're so astonishing you never complain about your sight, we're so proud of you." I said "well you know, what would that do" I can be dead or doing this. This is a lot nicer. And I started to feel funny in his shop while he was showing me a beautiful tea set of silver that I like. And then I started to feel spacey, and then I felt like maybe I was feeling a little bit like I was having a dream while I was walking across the yard, and then I grabbed his face, and I kissed him four times on either cheek. We're not very demonstrative with each other, he's been my friend for 30 years. I got in the car, we're driving home, on Hillendale, down Sand Hill road outside of Rosendale. And I said "Rey do you know where the emergency room is?" He said, "I think so man." I said, "I think I'm having a stroke."

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And my foot got numb, and my leg, my arm, my shoulder, and I thought about it, and I said, "You know what Rey, I want to go home instead." He said, "Whatever you want." So we got home, went inside, things were becoming more and more obscure. Everything. I felt eventually I couldn't move my legs or my arms and my hearing was going away in my one ear and Rey's standing there [making coffee –JD], it was becoming more and more and more distant. I felt like I was receding and going inward and leaving. I felt like—and then some more time passed by, when I realized I couldn't say the words that I was thinking.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: I was becoming mute. I said, "Call Denise." He said, "Do you want to lay down on your bed?" I said, "No I don't want to lay down on my bed because all I've ever proclaimed is that I want to die here in my bed in my farmhouse." He said, "Do you want to lay down on the couch?" I said, "No." I took a picture here that looks like I'm in my coffin which is called *Long Enough*. I said, "You don't want to lay down here." He said, "Well where do you want to go?" I said, "Well I'd like to go out on the porch and sit down." And he said, "Okay let's go." So I stumbled out the porch and I sat down waiting for Denise to come from down the road. I mentioned before that I felt a gravitational pull that I had never felt when I had the first stroke, and I kept thinking, "This can't be it, I'm not ready." I said to myself "You can't leave Rey and you can't leave Denise." And I realized that when I was in that first scenario thinking [in 1993 –JD], that I was going to plan my exit, the only thing I could think of was what kind of roof are they going to put on the barn, who's going to know how to replace the original stalls for the horses and the sheep? Who's going to do that? And that kept me busy—this time years later, that was 32, now I'm 56-and-a-half—and I thought. By the time Denise got here I couldn't see her anymore. You see, I don't feel like I can't see.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I know what she looks like, I know where she was sitting, I even through some intuition knew where her hands were.

JOHN DUGDALE: And she was crying and sitting at the table, and Rey's behind me crying. It was late in the day and a beam of light was coming down on these giant 200-year-old maple trees, and it was lighting up the whole [porch like a El Greco –JD] painting. It was so—and I thought, this is so beautiful but it can't be the time. But everything was so static and still, and I saw the tunnel that one is supposed to see, but I saw two of them.

[Side conversation.]

JOHN DUGDALE: Anyway, I saw that tunnel and mist and clouds, I didn't see my grandmother or my mother or anything like that, and I thought oh isn't that—I thought interesting, isn't it binary, look at that, it's two tunnels to go down, and then I felt like I was observing the porch from the tree in the yard. I was definitely leaving.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And then the next thing I know, they were swarming over on the porch, and they took my shirt off, and then I said, "Oh you know here I am." They said "Oh we know you, you know, and we're going to put these on your chest." And they put those things on your chest that you *blam*, you know?

You see on the medical shows.].

The shock thing, I don't know, it's a defibrillator I guess. And I thought, "Oh gosh here we go." I thought—I wonder what this is going to feel like. Inside I couldn't—the chief of the fire department was kneeling next to me, holding my hands, he says "You know you're safe, it's okay to let go." And I thought—and then he said okay, and then they did the thing, and I didn't feel it. And I thought, "Oh my God, I did die. I'm done." I said, "This was the time I did the things I was supposed to do, thank God I did something." You know, but again I was just thinking, "oh my God, who's going to watch out for my partner. And the next thing I know I was waking up at the end of a very fast ambulance drive to the hospital —outside of Rhinebeck. And they said, "Can you sign this piece of paper, there's a treatment that you can okay, that if you're within three hours of having a stroke which we think

you had, we can give you this treatment, but you have—there are possible dire side effects." And I said, "Well it can't be any worse than this I thought." So I signed the paper and then I woke up and I said "Come on, when are you going to start the treatment?" and I realized that I spoke to her.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And she said, "Oh honey, she said you've been having the treatment for the last three hours." And it was like there was no time there. I said, "Really?" I felt like a statue, I felt like solid, still frozen in the middle, but able to move my mouth and my fingers. Then I started to—it was no iciness like before, and I saw Darrell and Denise smiling. Oh isn't that funny. Darrell's a Freudian slip.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

JOHN DUGDALE: I saw Rey's loving face worried and looking tired, because by then it was the middle of the night, and you know, I came back and I thought, "Well you know what John, you did this, now it's time to be a farmer photographer."

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

JOHN DUGDALE: I couldn't possibly have said what I needed to say as a blind photographer anymore. I still have things to illustrate from the original time, which I'm getting to a little at a time.

THEODORE KERR: What do you mean by the original time?

JOHN DUGDALE: When I first went to see a *Waking Dream* and I saw the pickle cyanotypes—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: —I thought I wanted to be a naive farmer photographer.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I even climbed on the roof of the house, I photographed that field from the sky. I wanted it to be like first helium balloon photographs made by Nadar over Paris in 1850. You know, I wanted to be everybody, be those people at the farm and I thought wow, you know, the city has changed so much, everything is so different, people think the AIDS crisis is over, but I just had a death defying stroke, and you know what it was caused by?

THEODORE KERR: Hmm?

JOHN DUGDALE: My meds.

THEODORE KERR: Oh really?

JOHN DUGDALE: It's an absolutely known fact that long term med use including testosterone is very likely to cause in men after a certain amount of time heart attack and serious stroke.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: So I had to go off that medicine for a little while, and I just went back on it, and my T-cells remained valid and they're strong and building again and I feel much more like myself. I thought, I can get along without testosterone, but you don't really make any at all as you age, your body doesn't make so much. When you're taking HIV meds, your body makes none. They shut down the process. And you know what, taking testosterone does not make you into a foxy horn-dog, it makes you think—testosterone is what makes you a man like estrogen makes women women. I was walking around here weeping, not feeling like myself, everything was making me cry, and I thought well I did some research and if I go and I have a sonogram of my carotid arteries, every six months they can see—it might take another 18 or 20 years to have a stroke. So I felt safe going back on the meds because they're very effective.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. Let's talk about this a bit. If I understand what you're saying correctly, you were diagnosed and then you were asymptomatic for about ten years?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes. That was the time I would stand on my porch and take care of my dear friends like Steven and Edwin and so on and so forth and I thought I'll be here for them. My part in this is going to be to care for people, and then never could I possibly have imagined that I would then need to care for my friends.

THEODORE KERR: Right. So you were around—you were in your early 20s when you were first diagnosed.

JOHN DUGDALE: Very early.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: 22, 23. And it wasn't until I was 32, 33 that I had the first symptoms.

THEODORE KERR: And was the—when you got your diagnosis, was—were the—was it a doctor, was he kind about it, do you remember the experience?

JOHN DUGDALE: He was a little clinical, and he said "you know I can see by your T-cells that you are probably positive." Then he said, "Would you like to see a therapist?" And I said, "No I'm fine." Then I went out in the street and I bumped into somebody in the street and they were like, "Oh God, I'm so relieved, I'm so relieved, I just got tested and I'm negative," and I just didn't look at him and I thought, "Well good for you."

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

JOHN DUGDALE: I said to myself "You know, I'm part of the other side now." You know there was a very, very strong line between the negative people and the positive people. Not now, it's not a problem anymore. But just the idea of how do you tell someone that you'd like to go on a date with them when you are positive. [And then you wonder, how long do you wait, do you go on three dates? –JD] And you know what I realized, I had one bad experience, and then I thought you know what, within the first minute, if I see somebody I'm interested in, I'm going to just tell them I'm positive. And if that stops them, then I didn't want to be with them anyway.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: You know, so did I answer the question?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah I think that's—and then if I remember correctly you didn't tell your mom right away. How long of a period was it between—

JOHN DUGDALE: About five years.

THEODORE KERR: About five years.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah. I would've—could've told her at any time since I was 12, but I only told my sister, you know, not about being positive but about being homosexual. And you know, she was very supportive. When I told Rose, my mother, very surprisingly, she said I wish you would've told me, I never would've let you get sick.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, what do you think she meant by that?

JOHN DUGDALE: I don't know, but my mom was kind of a mystic, and she had something in her mind that she did not convey to me, but she conveyed it to me when she brought me all those beautiful Tupperwares [at the hospital–JD] —and macaroni and beans and parmesan cheese.

THEODORE KERR: So there was five years between her knowing and then you having this stroke?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: It wasn't easy to tell her.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah?

JOHN DUGDALE: It was very hard to tell her and I thought, "Oh my gosh, she gets worried if a dog has a hiccup, look at this woman, she works hard to raise her children and I'm going blind in front of her and possibly dying." I said, "I can't do this to her. I can't do this to Cathy and Robert." I really stuck around for them.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: It was my raison d'être. I was absolutely not going to leave them while I was in the hospital. I thought of various extremely beautiful editorial ways I could kill myself.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: I thought I can't be blind; I'm an artist, a camera photographer, even worse. And I would have all—everything you think of hanging myself in overalls with bales of straw in a barn having a vial of—what is that famous, there's a group, the something, the Hemlock Society?

THEODORE KERR: I don't know.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah, they—it's a poison, I thought they'd do a picture in the parlor where I'm dressed in my best 19th century garb with my hand on the floor with the bottle of Hemlock rolling out. I thought of all these various ways, wading into the ocean and taking a deep breath, wondering what that was going to feel like.

And then either through my egotistical self-love and maybe a combination, everything is, I thought somebody's going to have to find me.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I said, "I would never do that to my family and my friends." I would never want anyone to find me that way. So they are in my mind pictures that I'll make, especially the one in the parlor. I wanted to stage my own funeral someday. In the parlor because the woman who came to the house was born there in 1910. Somebody has been living in that house on and off since about 1770. And she said, "Oh this is the parlor where we only had funerals and weddings," and I thought suddenly I've got to make the picture here.

Dr. [Paul Curtis] Bellman came up to see me the first three weeks I was there [in the hospital. –JD] They still couldn't figure out what was the matter. I think I said yesterday nobody ever expected I had a garden-variety stroke. And Dr. Bellman put his hand on my shoulder, which is a big gesture for him, he was so beleaguered with losing patients left right and center, and he said, "John," he said, "I don't know what to tell you, we can't figure out what's the matter with you, but I know about your love of the past. Just imagine that we're in 1760."

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And in that moment, I saw a big banner, a beautiful draped banner over my head that said 1760, and my head wrapped in a bandage like on *Death of Marat* in the bathtub. Do you know that picture?

THEODORE KERR: No, I don't know it.

JOHN DUGDALE: It's absolutely beautiful. He's a political figure who was assassinated while he was having a tub in his home. And there's green velvet in the picture and he's extremely handsome. He's got a beautiful turban-like bandage on his head and his arm languidly, again that word, placed there, that's a favorite posture of mine though, something that's just the word languid sounds like what is on the—onomatopoeia. [They laugh.] One of those things that the word sounds like what it is.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: So I thought of that painting, and you know what, that's still in my mind, [to do a photo after it –JD]. I haven't gotten to it, and just this morning when I was thinking about you coming here, I thought I wonder if Rey could be the one who could paint that 1760 on the banner and instead of a bed in the studio, in the country. And we'll take that picture.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: I did a version of it here, but that's a whole other story.

THEODORE KERR: I guess the—when did you first go on medication?

JOHN DUGDALE: I'll tell you the reason why I'm talking to you today.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: That's a very good question, I think important for archiving, history. There used to be a gallery —Freudian slip—there used to be a diner called Manatus on Christopher Street here and a lot of gay guys went there and I went there sometimes. It wasn't my favorite place. I could hear people's beepers beeping. They—no cell phones yet, thank God. They all had beeping med packages where every [box would beep –JD] every four hours, and they had to take some AZT, it was a mono-therapy. And guess what, they all looked like there were dying, and they were wretched and horribly scared and miserable and in pain. And they got sicker, they turned different colors and they died without a doubt they were going to die [taking that med –JD]. And I thought, everyone was pushing AZT at me, like you got to do something. I'm said I am doing something, I'm not taking anything until I know more. I said, "I'll be okay, I'll be my own immune system." And then they had DDI, the powdered thing that tasted like lemon. I mean this is—forget about all the natural things like eating raw shiitake mushrooms and drinking sort of blended together egg whites, lipids which you can go to an alternative medicine place uptown to this kind of vagabond fellow who illegally sold stuff from all over the world for the immune system. But like I said earlier, we had to take care of ourselves. There was nothing yet to do, and so I didn't take the DDI at all. And then I can go on, each mono-therapy that they came up with, 3TC, I would do it. And then

after I got out of the hospital without the cocktail, they discovered that if you took those things in combination, they work perfectly.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And because I hadn't taken any of the other ones, I was not immune to any of them. [Taking them alone, one's body became resistant to them fairly quickly, so people would take more even though it didn't work. They were so fearful, as was I. –JD] So I had a very immediate and rapid recovery of my T-cells, you know, way up, and it was kind of hard to even imagine that I had gotten so used to living without an immune system that suddenly I had one and they—all the doctors said oh young man you were so smart to not take AZT or any of these, we didn't know. And they were doing the best that they could. Did you know all that about taking the meds too early?

THEODORE KERR: I did—well I know lots of people who refused AZT because they could see people dying.

JOHN DUGDALE: Thumbs up, man. Hearing those beepers in that restaurant was all I needed to do was to look up and see those poor gentleman wasting away in torture from that terrible poison. When I was in the hospital, even the nurses still thought, you know, got to have the AZT, gotta have the AZT. And so they bring it in a Dixie cup and I say, "Oh thank you." And they'd say, "Are you okay?", and I'd say, "Yeah, I'm fine," and I dump it in my drawer in my table next to the thing. I eventually collected up a few hundred of them, and then one time the nurse came and I forgot to close the drawer, and she said, "What is that?" I said "They're my AZT." She said, "You're not taking them?" I said, "No I don't want to." And she said, "How are we going to figure out what you're—how you're doing if you don't take them?" And I said, "I'm not taking them." And she got mad and she left. Well I resisted every step of the way. Put it in my mouth, spit it out, you know, you just knew. Like all the—like you said, I think not just me—I always have to be dramatic about everything, but you know, a lot of people knew.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, I mean I think your point is well taken. A lot of people knew and a lot of people didn't know.

JOHN DUGDALE: A lot of people operated—what they still operate out of is fear.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And when you operate [out of fear –JD] about anything you're sure to not have the right experience that you want.

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you attend any support groups or did you—yeah?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yes. I mentioned that I went to the healing circle where we did all kinds of kooky things like falling into each other's arms and lying on the floor in the shape of a flower with our heads touching and ohm-ed and awed and did primal scream rage. Stuff like that with a lot of men who suddenly had a lot in common besides just being gay. You know, the same guys I saw at the Anvil, you know, or in the meat packing district coming and going from sex clubs, which I adored going to those places just to see a drag queen show on the bar. And then go downstairs and see guys doing all kinds of unmentionable things in the dark having the time of their life.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: And then suddenly you see them at the healing circle, and the healing circle turned into the center for living, and the Center for Living turned into Friends in Deed, where you were allowed to talk about your feelings about becoming positive or your experience of any life-threatening illness in a safe, clean, beautiful environment. On Broadway, on the fifth floor of a beautiful building with the elegant and incredibly knowledgeable Cy, who I mentioned yesterday.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: So I went there, get this, because I thought, "How am I going to meet guys?"

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I'm going to go where there are all these foxy positive guys. And then I got there, and I thought "wow, how am I going to even have my life?" forget about it. So she finally said at the end, "Does anybody else want to share?" And I forced my arm to go up, and I said, "Hey my name is John, and I'm here because I just lost 90 percent of my sight and I have no idea how I'm going to exist or operate within my community." And I was mobbed by people afterwards wanting to take me out to lunch.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: I thought, "you know what, you were all really nice but I don't want to go out to lunch with you." I want to lay in bed with you and hold you in my arms, you know, that's what I was looking for. But the share became kind of famous afterwards, Cy later said it was the most forthright and honest sharing that she ever heard. So I went there for six years, and I undid a lot. First Karen at Chanterelle, the four-star restaurant, she undid me walking like I was in a bistro and flapping the table cloth like I was on a navy destroyer, and then Cy taught me how to think about things from the other side.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: "You know, you mad honey, be mad, you're afraid, be afraid." You know, she just turned me on my ear and as it went on in life I realized that she was just mixing and blending together all the great tenets of Buddhism and Christianity, Judaism, everything together. All the best and most powerful parts. And it wasn't always sort of "hey you're going to leave here feeling better," but you know she encouraged you. You're feeling lonely? Well good for you, enjoy, indulge the loneliness. Go on and play a sad song until it passes. You know, it was really anathema to how I had thought you should behave as an adult.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: It helped me tremendously. And then I was in a small group there, you know, if you were one of the chosen folks, you got to go into a small group with Cy. And I don't think the people in the small group liked me very much, because I had complained about "oh no, the paint is peeling off the wall [in my parlor in my country house, –JD]" and thinking that "oh poor you, I'm like you don't understand, my entire world is visual." Martha Stewart has been in this room while I was working. Do you know I wanted to tell you—

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: That I really didn't know what my life was going to be like. I did, I don't know what, 25 covers for Martha. I got to know the whole staff, my best friend was one of the editors there. And she trusts me enough to say, "you know what, we want to do a story about the history of ribbons," say or something like that, and then she just let me be. Everything was always fine. They did the collecting story, we gave her ideas for collecting stories. I really love her. I saw her on the street recently; it was like having a school—high school reunion.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And after I got out of the hospital, they were going to do a story about a china that I love called pink lustreware that was made in the 1820s in Sunderland. And I was still taking IV every day, and you know what?

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: They were so freaking cool. They—I took down the plant that was hanging on the porch, they all went on the other side. I told them what I would like to do, and I then had to start my four hours of IV. I sat there like a king on a throne on my bench with my arm receiving that fluid, and they would just come around every time they had a Polaroid for me to check. I'd say you know if you'd just move that over a little bit or you're too close or you're too far away and guess what, that particular piece won a design award.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And they never even blinked an eye. When I was in the hospital, if it wasn't Martha, somebody from that group of people sent me flowers. My friend Anne sent a message every day with something beautiful in it, like one ripe pear in a bag.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's beautiful.

JOHN DUGDALE: You know, I consider myself very lucky. But you know, there were beautiful moments of light in the unknown there. There always are really, you know. It's like Eurydice coming out from Hades and whoever that is—is it Apollo, Dionysus—he's not supposed to look at her, and he sings and sings and sings until the gods of hell down there say okay we can't take it anymore, you can have her back, but don't look at her until you get out of here. And so she's saying to him—oh it's a beautiful opera by Gluck. You know "love me or why did you come and get me?" I could have stayed in hell, and he's thinking don't look back, don't look back, and then he can't, his heart is breaking, and he looks over his shoulder into the darkness and he sees her and she disappears back down into hell. And I would think sometimes, believe it or not. that if I look back too hard and I didn't look forward, I would disintegrate.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: I can't be who I was, those things led me to be who I am now, and I'm not—I never thought I

would have another stroke, but now I have a whole other take on what it means to be me. And what it means, what is important to you, at what time in your life.

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. We've talked a lot about spirituality without saying that word.

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: I think we've even talked a little bit about religion, but do you want talk a little bit about how —

JOHN DUGDALE: No, I wouldn't mind, because God unfortunately is a dirty word.

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

JOHN DUGDALE: New York society, people just don't talk about it or they think you're acting bad, or you're like I said earlier, a Jesus freak. Or "oh God, I hate God," they said, "I hate God," Do you hate God or do you hate your idea of God?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: You know, are you still rebelling against the Vatican? Wasn't that when you were 12 and you were an altar boy? Isn't it when you first came to New York and realized how backwards so much of the church was, the church isn't God.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: God is carbon and light, the stars, the black hole, the mystery of life is God. What on earth are you worried about? So, practicing Roman Catholic, lots of incense, a lot of pomp and circumstance, and I moved into this apartment and I ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, three times a day, I heard this beautiful bell right out of the back here where my bed is. I followed it around the corner and I found the beautiful brick building, very plain, built in 1820 called St. Luke in the Fields. I thought wow, there seems to be something going on in there, let me go in and sit down. So, I went and sat down and my beloved friend, God rest her soul, Mother McGreevy was giving a sermon, and they had just gotten new chairs. The church had burned to the ground in the early eighties, the interior of it got set on fire by some homeless people. They rebuilt it and it's absolute pure, Anglican severity. No decorations, just two wooden Angels and clear glass. It was—I thought "Oh my God, it's so beautiful in here," And then she gave her homily and she said oh you know, "we bless babies and we bless these chairs and we bless the sacristy, why don't we bless gay union," and I felt like I had put my hand over my head, God was going to put a bolt of lightning to the ceiling and singe everybody to death. I couldn't believe that there was someone in clerical robes saying the word gay. Oh my God, and I thought I found my home.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Because—High Anglican church, tons of incense, lots of beautiful liturgy, a lot of singing and processing, and the whole place had been sort of reorganized after the fire, by gay men, and then guess what, it wasn't a gay church. It had babies, old people, single women, straight women, gay women, gay men, gay couples, gay triples, leather guys, and everybody extremely serious about the Book of Common Prayer. Which I did research back to the 15th century. I found my home there. I tell whomever wants to know that I merely am born at this moment in this place with that place around the corner, and the methodology I used to express my belief in the universe happens to be High Anglican at St. Luke in the Fields. In my interior feeling that I have about the universe comes out there with the ceremony, the lent every year, or the time of cleansing like Yom Kippur, the joy of a New Year, with Easter being there at midnight by candlelight with the bishop. Oh it's so beautiful, it's so nourishing, and when I was in the hospital, I kept saying to my mother we got to get out of here, and hear the organ again. We have to get out of here to hear David Schuler play the organ again, our musical director's highly—oh my God, he is a being from another planet, his taste in music is so astonishingly beautiful. I've learned so much there about the history of music. So, I go to the Episcopalian church because I like the music. Well sure you do because God is music. There is music in the stratosphere that we—it's there all the time, you only have to reach up and touch it to access it —to empower you. And so I did at the two-cane stage me and my mom went around the corner, and went and sat right in the same pew where I still sit. I can sort of feel where she sat and where I sat and when the organ started playing the prelude, well you guessed it, [laughs] we both start to cry. And we were sitting there sobbing in joy at being there, breathing the same air, and she was so funny, you know, because in the Roman Catholic church, you're not even supposed to go near the host after it's blessed. And—they are— [at Saint Luke's –JD] everything's so crazy you can do whatever you want. We've got a cross gender lay Eucharistic minister. It's really beautiful and open, and the people taking the wine, dipping the host. [My mother said –JD] "I'm not touching the host, you know, you're not supposed to touch that."

My mother had the kind of faith that when I was at her house once when I was an adult, she opened up the

cabinet above the sink and it was piled high with bread crusts. I said, "Mom what on earth is up there?" She said, "Oh it's all the bread that we didn't eat." I said, "Yeah but why? She said, "It's holy." I said, "Mom it's not holy until it's sanctified during the process in church." And she said, "I can't bring myself to throw it away." And I said, "Well do you sometimes, because it looks like it's overflowing." She goes, "Yeah but I kiss it before I throw it away." I say all right, you know. I'm absorbing these things, her own mystical, magical thinking, her almost pagan feeling about religion, I inherited that. Everybody who sits in St. Luke's thinks about God in a different way.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And the famous saying is God or *your definition of God* is the 12-step way. I [found myself saying that to a lot to my friends –JD] as they become sober in their life, but anybody can be alcoholic and not drink.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: You know, you can be a dry alcoholic—instead of saying I reach for a drink, you can say that I reached for myself, that wasn't working, and then focus on that, shine some light on that. So anyway, we sat there sobbing and crying and everything and everybody got to know my mother and she ran up to the altar, she grabbed that cup and she took [the host in her hand and she dunked it in wine like she ate it –JD]. [They laugh.] I changed my mind, she said, "Yeah," she said, "I wasn't going to miss that." And that there has been my—I organized my early coming home around the church calendar. It gave me structure and understanding and I learned how to pray, you know, not the way that you think, and that is my definition of my spirit. If I had been raised at a synagogue, I would have practiced studying the Torah. And I don't think any of it is any different from anything else where there's—it's all energy and all the carbon, even Joni Mitchell says you know we are billion-year-old carbon stardust, right. You ever think about when you look up at the sky, and you see the stars, of course you know now it's the moon reflecting the sun lighting the stars, or is it—what is that?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: So I used to think in third grade, okay, if I'm in Stamford, and Stamford is in Fairfield County, and Fairfield County is in Connecticut, and Connecticut is on the eastern sea board, and the eastern sea board is attached to the continent, and the continent is floating on top of the water in the—on the earth. Where is the earth? We're in the galaxy, where's the galaxy? I used to drive myself crazy with that question, Like where are we, you know? And I asked the priest once when I was young, I said, "If God made everything who made God?" And you know what, he slapped me, and he said, "That's the divine mystery." And I thought wow that was a very good answer. [Laughs.] You know, and I don't have to know anymore because even Steven Hawking doesn't know and said "well there must be God there *or your definition of God* because we can't explain it."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Isn't that great?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: You can call somebody up in a millisecond on your whatever device, but you still can't know where light came from.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: The big boom, big bang, what made that? Where was that before it blew up? Isn't it a neat thing to think about?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: That's religion, you know. So that's my spirituality's homegrown. It's in everything, the objects, every object that I want it to be—it is then imbued with an energy and a spirit that I think are in my pictures.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. Do you want to connect the idea of beauty and the spirit a bit?

JOHN DUGDALE: Well yeah, the what is more—is your—I did a picture called *The Oversoul.*

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And that was because I was reading Ralph Waldo Emerson for that particular show in 1998, and he talked about the oversoul. He diagnosed or identified the subconscious way before anybody else in the late 1830s, and he called it the oversoul. I thought, oh goodness, you know, I've had the feeling of my soul leaving

my body during those seizures and just [recently –JD] on the porch, and I'm telling you I am a very grounded individual. I'm not hokey pokey or kooky or anything, but I'm telling you, your body is only containing you. You aren't your body, you know, you will maybe come back as a tulip or something.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Or who knows what, but you—the energy that created you doesn't disappear, it can't. You know, ask Albert Einstein about the theory of relativity that everything exists at the same time, right? So the things that I photograph, that I collect that make their way into my life, I revere very, very much—especially glass because of its fragility and its strength. I have loads of glass that are waiting for me to photograph[. . . –JD] . For the 1998 show I did a picture called *The Oversoul* and I put this couch that I'm sitting on, this fainting couch, in the middle of the room, and I had the skylight and my beloved assistant and friend Yanis help me—or James, one of these wonderful people who helped me. I laid down, I had learned how to do ghost pictures, which were very popular in the late 19th century. Mary Lincoln loved them famously and séances and stuff and I thought what would be better than to give my—honor my soul that served me so well in the hospital and kept me brave and strong, and I'm going to give myself a bunch of lilies.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: So, I laid down on the couch, and behind me is me, a ghostlike image of myself transparent, bending over to honor my oversoul. And that beauty like I just said, the teacup or the jar or the bowl or the vase or the candlestick, they're made out of the same—

THEODORE KERR: [Sneezes.] Excuse me.

JOHN DUGDALE: God bless you.

THEODORE KERR: Thank you.

JOHN DUGDALE: They're made out of the same thing as us, just the molecules are rearranged. So you cannot tell me that the candlestick I have—a Queen Anne candlestick from 1720—that's all dented isn't imbued with life. Who touched that? I remember when I bought it, when I first started collecting, I kept saying to my friend James on Greenwich Avenue, I said, "is this really from 1720?"

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: He said—I said "It only cost $20 and it's that old?" You're kidding. He said no, he said he always gave me something for a great price. Like those are—those light green bowls up there are all from the 1820s, they're finger bowls. And somebody revered those bowls enough that one of them broke.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And they didn't throw things away, and like the Chinese, if a beautiful Ming dynasty vase broke, they didn't throw it away.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

JOHN DUGDALE: It was too powerful. They repaired it with gold tape.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And they made it—I'm smiling big time—they made it more powerful and more valuable in its broken state than it was in its original state, and I've often felt like that. That I'm more powerful now, than I was then by far.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Who knows, I might still be photographing shoes or cupcakes or something. Who knows what I would have done if this didn't happen, thank God it happened. You know, so I still have that candlestick next to my bed, and it's falling down all the time, knocking it off the candle-stand, and it's all dented. I'm putting my molecules into it. And I religiously shine it up every time I do the big cleanup of the house, you know. There's another picture that's a really good example that told me how intelligent my viewers, my viewership, that sounds like TV. I did a picture on the Janicula, one of the seven hills of Rome, at the American Academy in Rome where we had permission to photograph the grounds. We went all up and went in, we went inside and there was a gravel enclosure with a beautiful male torso to the left, and I said "oh my goodness, there's what I want to photograph here." It had big iron straps crisscrossing, it had been all broken, and somebody had put it back together in ancient times with straps of metal, where the heart was broken. It's in my book, I'll show you.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: And it's called *Roman Torso*—well I think it's just called *Roman Torso* but I thought oh this is so clever, I'm going to show people that this is how I feel. I better put in the title that it's me and that we're all—we all have repairs and restoration of some kind or another that hold us together to still be us, right?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And I made a big, big, big invitation and put it on the cover, and I didn't have to tell a soul what it meant. And we sold out from the invitation—we sold the whole edition before the show started.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And you know, their spirituality in work and that it's there for everyone to see just because God blessed certain people to see a little more, so they can share the joy of creating something that didn't exist before. It's a great thing I coated a piece of paper with some very inexpensive chemistry, and then I sell it for a trazillion dollars, and it didn't even exist to me before, I'm making blue paper that—out of my imagination and from reading Whitman,, Thoreau and Emerson and exploring the otherworldly part of life on a continual daily basis, even when I'm watching TV. Like there's no time when you're not awake.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. Let's talk about literature, because it plays such a huge role in your work.

JOHN DUGDALE: Enormous. Music and literature.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Literature, especially as I mentioned yesterday, there was never a time in my very young life when I didn't have two books under each arm from the library. And when I was in the hospital and I found out about the book on tape program, which may be canceled depending on our new political environment.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: They've got their eyes on that, MLS service, can you imagine.

THEODORE KERR: Wow, I didn't know that.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah. Well along with PBS and NPR they want to get rid of everything that makes our life beautiful and enriches us.

So anyway, I got these and I thought oh my God, this is incredible, I can read a 900-page book without even having to see the words.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I took a picture called *The Clandestine Mind,* about the loss of [being able to read. In the picture, I'm reading a book as a ghost, the book is upside down. I talk about, in my book, the miracle of symbols on a page that create words in your mind that then create a picture in your mind –JD]. It's really miraculous, and I don't have to miss that because all these beautiful people recorded these words for me. I did some research, and one at a time, and I found Emerson and Thoreau and Whitman, but I couldn't find—did I just say Dickinson? I couldn't find Emily Dickinson.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And I did some probing and looking and suddenly there was a place in Princeton that was a research library. And I found all, I love to say, 1776 of her poems, and I read them twice over the course of a year, and I kept a notebook with me and a giant magic marker like something you'd do graffiti with. Because I could still see that, and every night I have interrupted sleep because I'd fall asleep listening to those. I mentioned synesthesia yesterday, and I don't know if this is real or not, but synesthesia, which I've read a lot and heard a lot about, is when people see a number and they hear—they see a number and then see color.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: The color instantly appears in their mind. Well I had that with words with images. And when I hear a phrase, it barely finishes before the image appears in my mind. Then because I've always been—I don't go out and look for photographs, I never did, I was always a studio photographer, I wanted to create my world in front of the camera, even in high school. I would hear a sentence, like "I could not see to see."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And then it would go into the vault, and then when that young fellow was here, it was like, oh, here, then now. Here. The titles are so important that I finally decided that this year for the next show, which actually is in two years, I'm going to make beautiful brass plaques with a title engraved, and I'm going to attach it permanently to each frame. Because oftentimes people just don't get it. The—it's so studied; the titles give birth to the pictures, and the pictures were given birth by the prose. You know, I mean I don't know. I went to Emily Dickinson's house; did I tell you that?

THEODORE KERR: No.

JOHN DUGDALE: Maurice Sendak, who adored her and helped me to hear her. You know, I tried all my life to hear her, and I couldn't until finally I heard every word as if she was speaking to me.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And Maurice called and said, "Listen, I'm going to go to Amherst. I'm going to visit Emily Dickinson's house. Do you want to come?" I said, "Oh man, I'll be there. When are we leaving?" And we went to her house in a big, black car; we got there, Maurice in his older years and me looking around, and oh, there's Emily Dickinson's piano —that her sister-in-law I believe—well, maybe not her in sister-in-law, somebody in town––I can't think of her name––came and played the piano for her every week became my—I had a show every year, I was trying to tell you about, but I saw the place where she would sit on the steps in the hall of her house —I saw the exact door that she would crack open that was near the pianoforte and that she would never see the woman that played the music over a 15- or 16-year period, but after she heard the music, she'd scribble down a little bit of prose on a scrap of paper, get a flower from the beautiful glass house that her brother built, because eventually, she didn't even want to go anywhere, not only in society; she didn't even want to go outside unprotected. I think maybe she was so sensitive to the universe and even the air around her that she couldn't go outside. There was nothing the matter with her. She was a highly developed being.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And I thought, "Oh, she's here somewhere. I'm going to find her." I did a picture for that in 1999 for the Emily Dickinson show, and I called it the *Unanswered Question* after the Charles Ives' five minute piece by that name—mirror images that gets so astonishing. If you listen to that sometime it's very beautiful, and it's beautiful—

THEODORE KERR: Say it again.

JOHN DUGDALE: Oh, *the Unanswered Question* by Charles Ives. And it's just like life; it's going along; it sounds fine, and then something horrifying interrupts it, and then it goes back to normal. And then something—it was so before its time, just like her, that it seemed like they went together. And as I traipsed around the house with the guide, she said, "This is where she wrote her poems," and it was a little desk with a little book on it, and it looked like a sparrow had jumped around on the book. The letters were unintelligible.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And she had taken those pieces of paper and folded them up into little booklets that she sewed together. She made up the word "fascicle." She often made up words that suited better the prose that she was writing and while she's not even here in front of her own book you know. Where is she? And then we went to–– across the pine stand, we went to her grave, and I took a picture in front of her grave. And we went to her sister-in-law's. That house hadn't been restored yet. It was famously photographed by Annie Leibovitz.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: A beautiful book came out, but I think she missed the point a tiny bit. They're very beautiful pictures of discarded white gloves and stuff. But Maurice said, "I want to go upstairs and see the room of their little boy who died." Her nephew passed away early and he was kind of beloved in town and could speak Greek already when he was six. On his way to being a little genius, so when he died, they closed the door to his room, and they never opened it again ever. And the woman downstairs said, "Oh, yeah, we're just getting ready to clean up this place and renovate it," and I thought, "Oh, dear God, thank God we got here now." And Maurice said, "Can we go upstairs now?" "Oh, absolutely not, it's off-limits. The stairs are too rickety; we don't have insurance for this." I pulled her aside, and I said, "Do you know that this is the premiere children's book author, beloved around the world, in this country, for speaking to children and adults together?" I said, "You can't tell me"—I said, "I'm a part-time carpenter; I know how to walk up those stairs where we won't be in any danger." I said, "He wants to see Todd's room." I said, "Maurice, press yourself against the wall and come up sideways. Stay close to the wall where it's still perfectly attached." We went down the hall, and we opened the door, and

it's under the eaves of the room. His blankets were still on the bed.

THEODORE KERR: Oof.

JOHN DUGDALE: Toys were on the floor, rocking horse, and then the most touching thing is that from *Ladies Home Journal* or *Harper's Bazaar,* he had cut out a bunch of beautiful pictures and then shellacked them to the closet door.

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

JOHN DUGDALE: There was still soot on the windows that––from the coal stove that they heated his room with. It was so small in there, eventually—actually, quickly—me and Maurice ended up with our backs to each other, pressing against each other. I said, "Maurice, you have to get out of here." He said, "Let's get out of here," and we went downstairs. You know, he then didn't die that long after that, but I'm so thankful to that woman, because a dream of his—he was not afraid of mortality. He wasn't afraid of children's knowledge that they have. He wasn't afraid—he never talked down to them. He upset adults, but the children loved it. He had a little boy falling in *In The Night Kitchen*—falling from the ceiling upside-down with a little, tiny, abstract sketch of where his little, tiny penis was, and you know, this Caldecott winner—the librarians in the country, they put stickers in the books over that, and that enraged Maurice. You know? Anyway, he was a good friend to have at that time, as we explored our mortality at almost 50 years apart, you know.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, you should—I don't know how you guys met.

JOHN DUGDALE: It's kind of funny, actually. My friend—the through-line for everything in life. My friend Mark Isaacson that I mentioned before, who owned a beautiful furniture shop here, had a Venini vase from 1920, the really valuable ones, and you know, he came upstate. That's the one that we photographed together to make the upside-down house, slash, parish into that picture that is now in the Whitney. I forgot to—and he said to me one day, "Oh, I have this friend who's an illustrator named Maurice Sendak." And I said, "Well, you know, I know him," because my cousins were younger. He was popular after I had already grown up pretty much from the––he said, "Well, he wants to do a Herman Melville novel, and he's looking for someone to work with to do the figure studies for him to draw from." Remember I told you that I was working as a docent in farm museum?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: I had to wear Broadfall trousers and a beautiful period straw hat and blousy, Long Island, mid-19th Century farmer shirt and old boots and stuff, because I was usually going to be on the farm interpreting farm life at the time. I'd drive all the way back on the BQE. I had an appointment to meet him at the coffee shop where I had my heart broken by–– oh never mind—and I got—I was a little late because of the traffic, and I thought, "Oh, no, I'm not going to have enough time to go home and change into my regular clothes."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: I said, "I can't keep the, you know, superstar of children's book illustration waiting for me." So I walk in the door, and I look at him; he looks at me, and he said, "Are you John?" I said, "Are you Maurice?"

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: He said, "Yes." Then he said, "Do you always dress this way?" [They laugh.] I said, "Well, a lot of the time I do, but I couldn't get home to change." He said, "Oh, you should sit down," and within that nanosecond, we became dear friends. Then he came up to the house because he was doing a book called *Pierre* and his publisher would let him do whatever the heck he wanted, as long as he would make one children's book every year. That was their agreement. So they funded him wildly to print these books that—he had Herman Melville's bill of sale for the original book. He had an enormous collection of ephemera around literature and painting and illustration. He said, "Can you get me some models and costumes, and we'll act the whole thing out?" So my sister, my friend Kay, my friend Steven, and Darrell came up, and there was lots of nudity and a lot of hysteria and all sorts of things. Maurice sat in the middle of the parlor, spitting, directing, yelling, "No!" you know. He had done recently Rosie on Broadway; the Holocaust—he made a musical about the Holocaust. You know, nobody wanted him to, and he was relentless.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: So we made all those pictures, and I kind of didn't feel that good. And you know what I realized? I had pneumonia when I was taking them, which is why I felt so drained. So we made all the pictures; he made all the illustrations, and he painted me as the main character, Pierre, with a top hat on, as a giant, lumbering across the Lower East Side in the 19th Century.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: And on. Then more years went by, and he called me up and said, "Oh, they told me I have cancer." I said, "Let me go out and sit under the tree. I'm here for you," you know, "let's just be together during this. I'll be with you every step of the way." He called me back a week later: "You know, I don't have cancer." I said, "Maurice, I'm going to kill you." I said, "You better say this for real, because I've been in a lot of energetic places to send you my support." And then he did die, eventually, and I remember that I told you that Darrell called me from Philadelphia to tell me. About a year later, I got an email, and it was from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A wonderful fellow there, [Malcolm Daniels, –JD] said, "We've just purchased 35 of your photographs from the Maurice Sendak estate, as well as some very mysterious silver prints." Boy, it's great to record these things. Thank you again. "Can you come up and talk to us about them?" I said, "Hey, no problem." So I said—I was trying to impress Rey, because we just met, and he was supposed to be my assistant. That's before we became—whatever we are. You know what, we're partners, and we're lovers, and we're roommates, and it's the first time in my life I've had a relationship that I'm attracted to a person, but it's not based on that. It's fantastic. It's the first time in my life, ever, that I didn't have great sex with somebody and then say, "Hey, you want to be my boyfriend?" It's a big difference. So anyway, I wanted to impress him. I said, "You want to come up to the Met with me? I'll be meeting with the photo department and talking about these pictures." He said, "Sure, man." [Laughs.] We said "man." He makes me say "man."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: And when I met him, like, real rough dude, hand-rolled cigarettes behind his ear. I'm taking some beautiful photographs of him. I took 50 of them the first summer that I knew him, 50 or 70 beautiful pictures.

THEODORE KERR: Who? Of Maurice?

JOHN DUGDALE: No, of Rey.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, of Rey.

JOHN DUGDALE: I photographed Maurice, too. I stood behind Maurice, my back to the camera, my behind showing, and Maurice's beautiful, piercing black eyes. That was a great portrait. He said, "I hate doing this." I said, "I know, but you know, you're going to want these someday," and they came out beautifully. He wore a black shirt, and he looked, for all intents and purposes, like a philosopher or like Walt Whitman might have looked.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And anyway, we went up to the Met, went through a secret door in a hallway, and then we're, boom, inside of an industrially lit room full of boxes and files and shelves of photographs. They plopped a big box of photographs down on the table, and they started to ask me about them. I said, "Well, I did that for *Pierre*, and this came from the Emily Dickinson show; we went to there together." I fleshed out all the stories, and then, you know, who doesn't want to be in the Met, right?

THEODORE KERR: Right. [Laughs.].

JOHN DUGDALE: Guess what? I didn't feel anything. I saw all the pictures in the box. I said, "That's it?" And we went back down the hallway, out the secret wall; we turned—just like a haunted house—and boom, back in the stream of people. I said, "What do you want to do now?" He said, "I don't know." And I said, "Well, you like Rodin. Do you want to go see some Rodin sculptures? They're right down there." So we went to see those and he said, "Yeah, man, they're beautiful." I said, "Yeah, they're pretty beautiful, aren't they?" I said, "What should we do now?" He said, "I don't know." I said, "Well, come on, you've got to help me." He said, "Why don't we go up on the roof?" and I said, "On the roof? I didn't know you could go on the roof." I kind of had heard that somewhere, but it was—I was busy trying to stay alive.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: So we went up on the roof, and I looked in every direction at the beautiful autumnal landscape of New York, which it looks pretty beautiful from the top of the Met, I've got to tell you. And he said, "Hey, man, you want a glass of wine?" I said, "Wine? There's wine up here?" He said, "Yeah, there's wine." I said, "I'll wait right here." So he went off and got a glass of wine. It doesn't take too much to make me looped, right?

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: So we have a glass of wine, and then I said, "Well, it's pretty good, you know." We saw this

beautiful—watched the sun setting, And I said, "I know how I want to exit." When we were talking to the curator who bought the photographs and had been courting Maurice to buy them for a long time, Maurice had a room in his house that was beautifully—had this shade of lilac trees outside and it was always cool and sort of misty in that room. He never hung any of my photographs, but he had 99 of them all in a row around the floor, on the floor, in an otherwise empty room, and a closet full of them up to the top. That's where they came from and how they got there. He'd come to every show and say, "Which picture should I buy?" and I would tell him. But it was never about that. He was my hero and my inspiration and my patriarch. The fact that he supported me by buying prints was really coincidental to what other gifts we had for each other. Right? So then Rey said, "Well, how do you want to go?" I said, "I want to go out backwards through the new Greek wing," because the curator had told us that Maurice had said, "I'm going to walk out of here for the last time"—when he was there the last time he was alive in the Met. He said, "I'm going to walk backwards, so I look at all the butts of all the statues. I don't want to see them front; I want to see them from behind." So me and Rey, as is when you first meet somebody that you're strongly attracted to, were pretty excited to be together, and now, for all posterity, I'm going to tell you this. I took a quarter of a Viagra before I went to the museum, and I wasn't quite sure why, but you always have to follow your instincts. So, while we were walking at the end of the day in the Met, backwards, looking at all these voluptuous Greek statues of these men, both of our pants—him, no Viagra—tented out.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: And we walked right through there with very noticeable—I think that saying, "a tent," says it all.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: Got in the cab, slouched back, and were all over each other. We got in a car crash in the taxi on the way down, but we laughed the whole time because it was more fun to be in the car together. We weren't living together yet. But that's how I got into the Met. And listen to this: before that, they had bought pictures of mine that they had liked, just because they liked them. The curator knew Mark Isaacson, and when she saw his vase at the show, she said, "We have to have this for the permanent collection; we love that picture of you with the spectacles. We'd like to have that one," a different year. And somebody called me to say, "Hey, did you know you're in a show at the Met?" They said, "Your self-portrait is right next to Chuck Close's." I said, "Really?" I thought, Chuck Close, who's that? You know, I knew the name.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I could only think of Glenn Close.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: And I got a bunch of friends together; we drove down in the evening that the Met was open, and we all fanned out to find where—the show was called *The Mirror Image*, you know, the history of self-portraiture.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And we looked and looked and got there, and I was thinking, where's mine? And it was a little picture, and I walked up to it and looked at it, and you know what? It was the same thing; you know what I felt? Nothing. Well, there is it. There's that giant Chuck Close, right next to Chuck Close. They must think pretty highly of this, and it didn't take me very long. I said, "You know what? Let's go down, I still haven't seen the Greek wing yet." This is pre-Rey. And I thought, you know, it's a little bit tired out by now, but the true experience of life is the journey.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: It's not the destination. It's the getting there that is the story, and that's where the life happens. And then, well, I thought, my only dream in college was to have a picture in a show at the Met. It seemed so impossible. I had no idea how I was going to get there. You know, half blind and during a plague—

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: —in our world. You know, I realized that I was part of a larger history of plagues to have struck mankind at all times, and it happened that it just fell on gay people, mostly. It seemed so strange, you know, but we have reasons for that. And I thought to myself, "I'm going to have set a new goal." And I thought, "What could be the most ridiculous thing that I could accomplish?" And I thought, "I would like to have, in the photo department, in the Howard Gillman Photo Department that I was in the opening of—I want to have a one-man show there in the Met with all my photographs." And I left. I thought, "This is good." I reset with the goal. And I

thought, "I hope it takes me a long, long time to get there. I'm not going to try to get there. I know I'll land there when I'm supposed to. You know." So I've gotten to experience a lot of my dreams, you know, in a way that I couldn't have imagined if I had tried to. It never would have worked. You know. It just can't.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. There's a few things I want to talk about before we go—

JOHN DUGDALE: Good. I'm all yours.

THEODORE KERR: —okay. Do you need to take a break or anything?

JOHN DUGDALE: No, no.

THEODORE KERR: No? Okay. I guess the—we've touched on it a little bit—

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: —but we might as well be specific.

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: Let's talk about the realities of living long-term—

JOHN DUGDALE: Okay.

THEODORE KERR: —with HIV. You've talked a little bit about the medical realities of it and that's related to your stroke, but I wonder if you want to talk about the social aspects or the physical aspects, or anything other?

JOHN DUGDALE: Well, you know, what I was really surprised about—HIV/AIDS and that experience, as medical and all that, means blind to me.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: That is my signature effect—affect—that I had from being positive at that time without any treatment. All I needed to do was to raise my T-cells up from 50 to 70, and I never would have lost my sight.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: But what they were doing then was trying, with a club, to bash down each symptom instead of strengthening the immune system.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: All I needed was a few more, but it was not the way history was going to write itself. Then I came out, and I went into my first show and my first––you know, all my revelations about being blind. Well, what I didn't know was that, year after year, as it finished going away, and I became—I remember turning to Dan [Levine –JD] downstairs, and I said, "Dan, if one more part of this goes away, I'm going to be completely blind." And he, so wonderfully, didn't say anything, and we just walked to lunch. But with every single year that passed, I have a different perception of myself as a human being, as an artist, as a partner, as a citizen of these United States. It's not the same. It's not the same for anybody, but it's acute for me, because I'm still blind every year, but I'm a different person. We all are.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And that is kind of the legacy of having gone through that experience. I was so surprised and I thought, "Well, blind is not just blind." Because I mentioned the Aurora Borealis before, but I always make sure to tell people––it just happened just now. I have something that looks like the moon rising, that is part of my optic nerve, which is circular firing and traveling across my inner vision. I close my eyes, and I see sparkling light. In the center, I see an orange glowing orb and a purple orb and then orange center and beautiful purple, violet, bright blue. It never goes away, because it's neurological. It's not visual. And someone was standing in front of one of my pictures at the first show, and they said, "Did you know that blue—all these blue pictures—have a high state of enlightenment that you can reach as a Buddhist." I said, "Geez. I didn't know that." And she was talking about the Blue Pearl. I thought of all the yoga posters that I ever saw with some swami with lots of hands with the blue spot on the forehead and that's what they were going after. And you know I have to be really careful what I tell people, so I don't sound too grandiose or ridiculous, but I see that spot every day. I'm seeing it right now. Where your face is, I see that spot. It's covering your face, and it's sparkling, flashing. You know what color snow looks like on TV? That's what else I see, right there, that orb, and then everywhere else around it are 1,000 little pinpoints of all the colors you can think of, and then occasionally, the white moon

crescent floating across—sometimes crossing over to them—It just happened again. And it went there, and then it went there.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I have silicon oil in my eyes, so when I bend my head, my retina moves. Even though it's not working anymore, it's causing some sensation in there. So I thought blindness was going to be dark, but it's not dark. I've come to love it, and it's really fun to horrify people—

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: —and then tell them all the beautiful things I see in there––like the Aurora Borealis and the Blue Pearl of Wisdom.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. Do you ever think of picking up a pencil, or—

JOHN DUGDALE: Nah.

THEODORE KERR: —no?

JOHN DUGDALE: I'm so bad at it.

THEODORE KERR: You think so? What does that mean?

JOHN DUGDALE: A pencil to draw?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: Or write?

THEODORE KERR: That's funny. In our––all of our hours of conversation, I've never heard you say something like that, that you'd be bad at it.

JOHN DUGDALE: Oh, yeah. No, I can't draw [laughs].

THEODORE KERR: But do you think—

JOHN DUGDALE: I don't even know if that's what you meant, but I just jumped on that question.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: What did you mean?

THEODORE KERR: I guess––I think photography is one way that you're sharing the inner beauty and the outer beauty, but I wonder if there's other—hearing you talk about what you're seeing or what the neurological impact is—I just—I was curious if there's other ways you want to share that?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah. As a matter of fact, it was because of you that a topic came up yesterday, and I told Rey about that 50 pages I wrote for that symposium book that I like the way it opened up very poetically, and that was very me, but by the time it got sifted through and edited and spoken in other words, it didn't seem like me anymore. I said, "I'm going to make another book like the one that I made for my 40th birthday where it's pictures and my words."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Lightly edited by who? By my friend Shields Remine, then my sister read the transcript, and she said, "Did you say that word?" I said, "No." She said, "Would you mind if I edited this for you?" And she went with a pencil, and she ran through all 40 pages, and she said, "You didn't say this either, did you?" I said, "No, Kathy. You should always be my editor. Who knows me better?" And she put it all into my colloquial, bad syntax, and people loved it.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And people said, "Oh, we've never seen a photo book that we enjoyed to have so much writing in"—I was audacious enough to write a paragraph about each photograph. And people said, "It's so wonderful to know where they came from; it's so different. We love it." That's the one they keep near the bed, and beautiful

reviews. We had—it was my birthday—my 40th birthday, the book was presented to the public, and we'd already sold—I don't know, what?—1,700 of them out of 2,000? And it was really, really something. But guess what? I'm now 56. I'm going to be 60, and I think by the time I'm 60 I'll have another version of that book, and it'll be larger. Much larger. You know. And it'll have what I know now that I was so astonished by then, as cured and mellowed and [things having –JD] been more understood by me, but I still can say why each picture was made and what the genesis and the origin was, and I can stick some poetry in there and do that. And I think that I'm always, essentially, first and foremost, a photographer. And that I love the medium as much as the first time I experienced it. My grandmother's grape arbor with my sister—and I don't—I occasionally think of a film. Like I've had a thing in my mind. I've been working on it now 10 years. It's a documentary with my friend John Spellos.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And I have so many ideas that pop into my mind that I kind of tell him, and he enjoys hearing them, but they don't quite fit into this film. So I might make more of a film from my mind, and one of the scenes would be a teacup on a saucer being put down, and then a teapot coming, pouring the tea into the teacup, but then the tea overflowing the cup into the saucer right across the table, and then dripping across the floor. And then that would be it. You know. Show those things, you know. There's a bed in the attic that's got beautiful light, and just to show my feet touching the floor and my body reclining with just the slightest movement would be a shot.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: You know. It would be like a Cocteau film.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Like *Beauty and the Beast* burned its way into my mind when I saw it the first time, and I mean, something with that kind of magic. You know, Diana with the bow and the gold coins. It just—I tell all my students, "Look at film."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: You know, and so if there was another medium, I already have a movie in my mind from what I feel and what I hear and what I know things look like. And it doesn't have to have a narrative exactly.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

JOHN DUGDALE: It would just be a collection of visuals.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I—in all the talking about all the exhibitions, we never talked—we talked a little bit about what your friends would say or even strangers who had enjoyed it—

JOHN DUGDALE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

THEODORE KERR: —but I wondered were there any reviews or writings about your work that you appreciated or that stuck with you?

JOHN DUGDALE: All of them.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: All of them. They're all here. As a matter of fact, I started to do some archiving. It seems that this is going to be the winter of archiving, and I have about a 1,000 pieces of paper—magazine articles—I was reviewed in *The New York Times* on Thanksgiving Day on two pages and a half.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Top to bottom and a big banner headline across the top that said "Blind Photographer Finds His Way Home."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And that was a favorite, and it was supposed to be about the house, but my friend who wrote it, Mark—I can't think of all these names I'm trying to think of—he said, "Well, I'm astonished." He said, "It was supposed to be about your house, but it became about your life."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And I said, "Well, there's really no difference. The house is my outer skin. It's my second skin, where I went in my mind to be safe when I was sick first." You know. And my mother used to say, "I should have never let you buy that house." I'm like why? She said, "It's just too big for you." It's got 16 rooms. And they're not big. Some are small; some are big, and they're all in various states of decay. And speaking of decay, a really beautiful, sort of, new age magazine with an art director that I knew once upon a time, saw my work, and she wrote a story about it. She said, "Make no mistake. John's pictures are about decay." And that thrilled me. About the passing of everything, uncontrollable passing. I mean, Rey decided that we were always going to have a hug every night, because we're both kind of a couple of dudes, man. [They laugh.] We're not like kissy-poo and stuff. We don't hold hands. We don't do any public displays of affection, but we do each other. So we have this hug every night. And even if we just touch fingers together like on the Sistine Chapel, we laugh [They laugh.]. And I'm like, "That's all you're getting tonight." But we make contact, and I always think, "Oh my God. Another day went by." They're going by so fast. They go by faster and faster and faster. And everyone will tell you that as they age, and then you have the wisdom of each year; hopefully you retain some of it to bring forward. I don't see any reason why I couldn't die while I was hanging onto the camera. You know? I still have more that I even don't know what I don't know yet. You know. More things to illustrate from 1994.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

JOHN DUGDALE: The sign—1760s sign. I had been deeply gifted by people writing about my work. At first it was, "Hey. There's a blind photographer." I've been on the BBC. I've been on NPR. I've been on Channel 13. They showed my documentary 10 times. I was in the pizzeria, and this guy said, "Hey. You make the blue pictures!" I said, "Yeah. I make-a the blue pictures." [They laugh.] "Oh! I saw you on Channel 13!" I thought, "Oh my God." This went to 48 gay film festivals around the world ending finally in Thessaloniki—which is hard to say without lisping—Greece.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And an enormous amount of feedback. Here's a visual that I had when I was in the hospital and paralyzed. I really––I didn't set my bar too high, and I thought, my visual was—this is so corny—that, you know, at the end of the Pride Day Parade down near the Washington Arch, they put that huge arch of purple balloons?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Did you ever see that?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Beautiful arch and balloons, and I always that was silly. But in my fantasy in the hospital, I thought that I would be at the head of the parade with my arms up with Dikes on Bikes behind me with their shirts [off, revving up their engines, and I would roll my wheelchair towards that arch –JD]. And that would be a celebratory moment, and people would clap. And I'm not embarrassed to tell you, it was very useful to think of that while I was in the 100th hour in the MRI machine and my body was convulsing. Or I was trying to get some sleep, which is impossible, with people forcing me to take medicine, or they wanted me to get a port in my chest, which I refused to do. And one nurse said to me, "You know, you're going to have to take this medicine for the rest of your life?" I said, "Who told you that?" I said, "Get out of my room." I was really ferocious with people. I said, "If you try to give me that port one more time—you're like a bunch of vampires—I'm going to have you reported to someone." Because they would try to sell them to me to make money.

So that—we're going—that arch was the first thing. And the applause, which is a little embarrassing—it was something that felt nourishing. I wanted people to acknowledge how hard I was working to not be the sort of, you know, pro forma—if that's the right phrase—the cookie cutter, dead-16-months-after-first-diagnosis person.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Cy just said, "Don't read the newspaper anymore. Do not even look at the headlines. That's not your reality." I said, "You know. It sure isn't." And I stopped. This is how––I have to stop watching the news now. Because my reality is not what's going to happen on Friday when we inaugurate—oh—the 45th president? The 46th president of these United States.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

JOHN DUGDALE: Right? And then my friend from Karen—my friend from Canada named Karen—called me and said, "Oh, I want to interview you at the gallery that you're in," and I said, "Okay, you're driving me crazy. Okay. Okay. I've done this too much. All right." I said, "You have an hour." She came, and then she called me back, and

she said, "I want to do a film about you. I said, "Well, okay. I'm not"—I didn't know how to say no. She was so nice.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: Karen Murphy, and I can get you a copy of it if you'd like to see it.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, please.

JOHN DUGDALE: And so we started making the film, and you know, it was really intrusive and really fun. Really, for 16 straight days of my life, I had a camera trained on me. And I'm happy to have recorded where I was at that moment on my way to a show having a cup of coffee in the street before I walked up. You know, it was a big, emblematic moment when I walked on my own to the gallery, to the opening. I was like, look at you walking in the door. When Christopher Reeve came, we took the doors down, so he could come in with his gigantic—

THEODORE KERR: ––wheelchair? No?

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah. His wheelchair that was driven by his wife. And we went around looking through the whole show. Did I tell you this already?

THEODORE KERR: Nope.

JOHN DUGDALE: [Laughs.] And Robin Williams bought that for him because insurance wouldn't buy it, and also the huge van—he came a little bit early. My partner then was the director of the Christopher Reeve Foundation, and me and Christopher had a lot that we could identify about, and we were laughing, laughing. A couple of times, his beautiful wife ran over my foot with his four-ton machine. We were just bent over laughing. Christopher would take a big draw on his oxygen tank, and he would laugh, and we were laughing. They bought a bunch of pictures, which they put all over their house. You know, so it was that kind of thing that I was walking to. It was never dull for a moment.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And I gave the same amount of energy and love to every single person that came—I made sure. My sister and brother would stand in a couple places and put me at the end of the line. And they would control people, because they knew everybody wanted to say hello. And I wanted to say hello, and it was hard not to talk to anyone for too long. But Kathy and Robert would move the line along, which was quite long, and make sure everybody got a chance. There's always a few people who monopolize your air, and so—we––Billy, we had a signal, and if I needed to stop talking to somebody, I would tug on my ear like Carol Burnett.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: And he would know to come over and say, "I need you over here for a moment."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.].

JOHN DUGDALE: We managed those things like MGM musicals.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: Those openings, it was so fun. All right. So Karen made the film. It was called *Life's Evening Hour*, which is also a book that I was working on at that time. And the film and the book came out simultaneously. It was a gay film festival at—the 8th Street Playhouse showed the film. You know, the linking together of things just happens by accident, Ted. Listen to this: so we go in the thing. I'm a nervous wreck. I think, "Oh dear God. I just bared my soul on film, and now I have to watch it with people I don't know."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: So we sat in the middle. My father came. No. My father didn't—my mother, my sister, my brother, and Lawrence came. We sat in the middle of the auditorium. There were about 350 people.

THEODORE KERR: Wait. Who's Laurence?

JOHN DUGDALE: Oh. He was my partner—

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

JOHN DUGDALE: —for a little while. I told you I had a litany of trial and errors.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.] Okay.

JOHN DUGDALE: All of whom I still love, and all of whom I loved deeply at that moment, and I still do. I don't know why people can't stay in love with each other as time goes on and life changes. I miss them. And, yeah, anyway. So the show—the film—people are laughing at the right time; they're blowing their nose at the right time. You know. And then when the film was over, the whole auditorium stood up and started applauding. And I thought, "Here it is. Here it is. Thank you." You know, thank you, for acknowledging what I just went through, and it was amazing. Then Karen came and said, "Does anybody here in the audience want to say something up here about the film?" Somebody jumped up and ran right down to the microphone and said, "My name is Giovanni, and I'm the first one he photographed when he got out of the hospital."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: I just want to tell you that those dreams can come—I hate to say that dreams can come true. It's, sort of, so over the rainbow—but, right? But you can't even say visualization now—you can't even say that word without sounding worn out. Your prayers are your reality. You know, your worries are your prayers, and they're your joy. And the prayer is what you're thinking about intensely at any moment in your life. Right? So there I was. I didn't thank God. I didn't do the corny thing about going to the balloons on Gay Pride Day, but I still—the Pride Day Parade has changed into a corporate mess —but I still get a tear in my eye when I hear whistles and the drums and people screaming. I stand up along the corner outside of the church. In 1999, they asked me—they asked, "We want to have a big Gay Pride Week here. Would you make a picture for us?" I said, "I'd love to." So I came home. I said, "Darrell, I need you to be the hand of God in this picture," because in Latin in the chapel behind the altar, it says something, something, something, and then it says "Christ, Our Liberator."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And so I had Darrell's arm coming down into the picture and my hand coming up with my gay pinkie sticking out—which I didn't realize. And we did this picture, and they were really happy with it. And they made fans with image because it was hot out.

THEODORE KERR: Amazing.

JOHN DUGDALE: I went into the church that day, and to my astonishment, they blew it up to 12 feet tall and 9 feet wide, and they put it on the alter.

THEODORE KERR: Whew.

JOHN DUGDALE: You ready for some goosebumps? I could still see a little bit, and I looked up 5th Avenue, and I saw 40 people carrying 4x6-foot posters of that picture on poles waving it around in the air. And I thought, I've died and gone to heaven. This picture has taken on a life of its own. So we went to the gay psalm, Evensong, which was really always so beautiful, because you hear—you know, there's feather boas falling apart into puddles of beer and sparkles and screaming lesbians and every kind of gay person you ever thought of—you know, gay witches, NAMBLA, Parents of Gay, PFLAG. You name it. Sage, Senior Action in a Gay Environment. It's fantastic. It's not quite as tumultuous as it was before gay marriage and before gay people were kind of stylish. Which they may not be after the inauguration, so enjoy it now.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And, anyway, I sat down in my pew right where I always sat, where my mother and me sat—my mother and I. What would you say? Would you say my mother and me, or my mother and I?

THEODORE KERR: Oh, I'm not the one to ask.

JOHN DUGDALE: Oh, okay. I say something different every time.

THEODORE KERR: Good.

JOHN DUGDALE: I think I know which one is wrong, but it's the one I was taught was more formal. My mother and I sat in that pew, and then—oh my God, the rector who was visiting for Gay Pride Day went up to the podium, and the sermon was about my picture.

THEODORE KERR: Oh wow.

JOHN DUGDALE: It was such an, "Oh wow," moment. I wanted to crawl underneath the—my whole body felt, like, molten with pride and embarrassment. I felt so shy. I wanted to crawl under the pew and stay there until he was done, and then, guess what? This is—I started to tell you about this before, that pictures take on a life of their own, right? And someone brought home their fans, and their cards, and the poster, and everything else, and

then I got a call from Richard McKeon —that's the pastor who gave the sermon. And he said, "Listen." He said, "I want to ask you a question. We have a lovely woman in our parish who I"—you know, [he's a priest in this church Washington Irving built the 1840s when he lived up in Terry Town. And Father McKeon –JD] said, "The family saw your picture, and they know about your story, and their mother is going to have her breast removed, and she wanted to know if she could carry one of the cards with her into the operating room to give her strength." I said, "Of course she can." A little later, the family got together some money, and they asked, "Is there an actual print we can buy?" I said, "Of course there is. You can have the print," but I charged them for it, because I knew they went through a lot of trouble to raise the money for it. And they said, "Well, we're going to have an installation of the picture. You can meet her if you come here. She's fine. She sailed right through the surgery." This is in the documentary that I made with Karen.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And I went. And, just like any good Episcopalian church, they had hymns, smoke—they installed a picture in one of the chapels. Everyone was clapping and singing; the bell started ringing. I felt like––my legs felt like Jell-O under my body. And I thought this is so magnificent. Do you remember that I told you that the pictures just aren't about pictures?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: They're about life in every way. Right? Then afterwards, they said, "Well, here she is." And I looked at her, and she looked at me, and we just hugged each other. She said, "I'm so happy to meet you." I said, "You can't know what I feel right now holding you." And that was that.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: It's all—it's in the—that exact moment—was caught on film.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: It's so beautiful, and I just—you know what? I am not a gay person to her. I'm just a person. That's what I talk about, being non-politic. You know. She didn't look at me and say, "Wow. You're from Gay Tribe in the West Village." She said, "You gave me that picture of God as you saw God, and it helped me have my breast removed." You know.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: It was really something.

THEODORE KERR: Does that make you think of the Joni Mitchell lyric about carbon? Like just the recombination of our cells and it can do that magic?

JOHN DUGDALE: We are ourselves, and we are everybody else. There's no—Buddhism—there's no difference between you and me. A beautiful vision of heaven, or the other world, for some Buddhists that I read about, is like a fisherman's net in the sky covering the whole universe. And in that net are all faceted jewels—every different kind that you could think of—and in the center, is a very bright jewel that's exploding with light.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And the light, on the facets of each of the stones, is reflecting that light, and then other facets of each stone are reflecting that light, and none of those stones could exist in their beauty without that one light that is enervating the entire group of gems. And I thought, oh man. That is for me. I don't think that's Episcopalian, but I love it. So that's mixed in with my potpourri of spirituality. How beautiful is that? I mean, not only is that the sun reflecting on the stars. You can think of them as emeralds and rubies and diamonds and aqua marines, and God knows what. So, yeah, that is really—this is a—great. To have this amount of time to talk to you is such a luxury, because I've gone a little deeper with some of these thoughts, and I love, more than anything in the world, being a gay man.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I wouldn't change anything, not AIDS, not any of the scary, painful moments that I had or anything that happened. I would never change it. And my mother used to say to me, "Oh, sweetheart. You know, if I could give you my eyes, I would." And I said, "Mom, I don't [need –JD] your eyes. I am having this journey." "I wouldn't want them." And I said, "You'd be interrupting my journey." And she said, "Oh, if you can just get back a flicker of sight before I die, I would be so happy." I said, "Mom, first of all, I hope you're not going anywhere too soon, and if there's supposed to be a flicker, there will be."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: It's not––we're not in charge of that. You know. There is that moon. There is that crossing I have—that flicker. And––you know, all the time.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I want to ask you about something that you said before we were recording yesterday. You talked about—you said, "Uh oh. I'm going to get in trouble for this one," and you were talking about, like, the idea of AIDS art, or your kind of––the way you see yourself in relation to that.

JOHN DUGDALE: Well, I don't. [They laugh.] And that's been a problem with some of my friends, who are also artists, and one in particular whose name shall remain not pronounced, because I love him, and we've been friends since we were 22. And he called me up and said, "Do you want to come with me to this show? I think that you're going to be in it." And I said, "Oh, I asked to not be in that show." But somebody put it in any way, and it was the Jewish museum over there somewhere.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Near University Place, and I said, "I don't know if I want to go." And he said, "Oh, you should come." And we got there, and he said, "I have to confess something to you," and I said, "What?" And he said, "The reason I wanted you to come is that I know it will end up on Facebook if you come with me." And I said, "That's why you invited me? I haven't seen you in so long." And sure enough, I got there, and what I had not wanted them to show, which they called me, and I said, "It's not strong enough," you know? What they wanted to show were two of the fans that had "Christ, Our Liberator" on them. But they were so poorly reproduced; I thought that it's just not up to my standards. So we got our picture taken, Facebook, and oh, you know. All the talk about the crisis and everything, and people were so happy. Oh my God. The people from the school, to have gay people come there and show their artwork about AIDS and everything else, they were very—they gave a talk—they were very, very—as they should be—very—breaking down some real barriers there at the temple, right? The school, the Jewish college. Then he called me a little bit later, and he said, "I'm going up to this big lecture uptown at some good, swanky place," and he said, "It's all about why we have so much trouble working as people with HIV, you know, how it's changed our lives, and it's, you know, really hard to be an artist with HIV." I'm say, "Okay. You know what? Count me out." I said, "I can't take it anymore." I said, "Being HIV-positive made me an artist. Losing my sight made me say what I needed to say in the world in this short time," and I'm here. I said, "I cannot use that as an excuse. It makes me crazy." I said, "No, thank you." You know, he hasn't talked to me since.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And that's—I've been honest about that. And I revere and I respect people's journey as artists with AIDS. I respect David Wojnarowicz making those hypodermic needle pictures, which in my mind, were the first thing that sort of got some attention from the Pyramid, you know, and broke out into the larger consciousness. They were so shockingly well realized, you know. Just beautiful, but I––again, I was repulsed by it also.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And it wasn't for me. It wasn't my message, and I never hid it. And I'll tell anybody I'm gay. You can if you want to. And, also, I have to say, I don't––being HIV-positive is not the first thing that I tell people, because I don't want to be corralled into a group or have something expected of me because of my—the sero-status of my blood. That's not what identifies me. The effect of it did, but the actual thing has no power over me. It had a lot of power before. I know I'm going to die, but my worst worry—my worst prayer about not going blind happened. You know. And it was all the stepping stone for me to move on to a higher consciousness. Because I was a stubborn Guido, and because I just defied the odds, it was a little bit of luck that I made the right choices, that I was guided well, and that I knew when not to follow advice that I sailed through there. And having been taught how to mythologize things as a child at my grandmother's table on Sundays at dinner, I knew how to have everything––have a beginning, middle, and an end, you know, so that things were a complete thought? People would never wonder—how did that end? Or how can you talk about that that way? But I told you yesterday, you know, there's got to be a climactic moment just before the resolving end of the story, and you know, you have every day of your life. I truly, deeply believe it is a microcosm of your entire life.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: You know, the seven ages of man that you see, the Krishna's that used to drag this giant thing around with them, you still can see it in Washington Square Park in the summer with all the orange-robed monks with their bells, and then they have the baby. A little taller, up, up, up to the apex of a grown man, and then down, down, down, back to being small. And that happens every day when you wake up. You're in your infancy, and each part of the day is your middle age, your grown age, and then the subsiding back down until you fall

asleep again.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: It is a day. I had to learn how to be okay with that, because every time I closed my eyes there, I was never really sure. A, if I was going to wake up, or B, what I was going to see. You know? So did AIDS affect me personally? Absolutely. Did it affect my friends? Did it change the course of my life? Absolutely. Am I a political artist? Only if you want me to be. But I would never proclaim myself. There's nothing the matter with being political at all. Thank God people would chain themselves to the NIH, and people put a giant condom over some building down there and got things on a fast track for approval. ACT UP, you know, got other groups in the country—if women would come around breast cancer the aggressive way that men came around AIDS—excuse me—you know, they might move along and get out of the business of breast cancer and cure these women. I don't think they have to have breast cancer anymore. The horror—that kind of horror of having to have part of your body lopped off. I wish they had a little sprinkling of the original guys from ACT UP. I think they did take a clue from us, but anybody—Jerry Lewis did it with the Jerry Lewis Telethon. You know, he raised money. He chose that to be his life's work after being in those films, you know. And on and on, there's a through line in my life, but we're also full of lines. Do you know it's not any accident that you are here talking to me out of all the people that could have been?

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: You know. I feel so comfortable with you. Rey described you after you left. I said, "What does he look like?" I said, "I think he was pretty good looking. I think he has red hair." I said, "He seemed very nice. What a nice nature he has." He said, "Maybe he can be a friend."

THEODORE KERR: Nice. Good. I hope so.

JOHN DUGDALE: It's so beautiful, right? I mean, you have to remember to be human all the time, if you can. Listen, I get pretty grouchy [laughs]. We ran out of coffee yesterday.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Woke up this morning. Blue Cross, Blue Shield mysteriously cancelled my account this month.

THEODORE KERR: Oh.

JOHN DUGDALE: Which costs me $1,447.86 every month—

THEODORE KERR: Oh.

JOHN DUGDALE: —and I think every time I pay it, I think, "Oh my God, Mary. Are you out of your mind?" But guess what? The stroke cost me $125,000, 90 percent of which was paid by Blue Cross.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Is it any mystery that they tried to cancel me? If Rey wouldn't have been watching the computer, I wouldn't have seen the thing that said, you know, we're stopping your automatic payments from your account—

THEODORE KERR: Wow.

JOHN DUGDALE: —with no explanation. I had had them do this to me once before. I'm one of 15 people in the country that still had this tradition-plus wraparound. And poor Blue Cross Blue Shield—ha ha—they're losing money, because, even though I'm paying all that, I still costed them a fortune. My hospital bill was $350,000. Okay? So, anyway, the reason I'm saying that is I woke up this morning, and I talked to somebody yesterday and said, "You have to tell me what's going on." She said, "You have a 30-day grace period before it's cancelled. I don't know why they did this. Call me on Tuesday." My sister said, "Tuesday?" She said, "You want me to call them?" She said, "You call them tomorrow morning, or I will." So I woke up at 5:00 o'clock this morning. Got up. I'm reading about my crazy book of 650 pages, two more hours to go about Queen Victoria. Then I came down, clumped down from the bed, and went, I said, "Oh no. There's no more coffee." I thought, "What am I going to do now?" So I thought about Blue Cross, Blue Shield, and I think I had a physical withdrawal. That coffee in the morning—I am an addict. I'm addicted to caffeine, and I can feel––I had to go two months with no caffeine after the stroke. I also once went three years with no coffee, but you know what? It's possible that it causes—it helps you—it causes anti-cancer activity in your body. And it tastes good. And it's organic. So I'm just saying, you know, that made me really grouchy this morning.

Then we went ahead—went out for breakfast, because it was already getting so late, and you were on your way.

And you know, I've been really looking forward to seeing you, and it's not because I haven't been interviewed 1,000 different times in 1,000 different ways across the globe, but each time I do it, it's really a gift for me, you know, to remember where I just was, meaning just yesterday was 20 years ago, and where I am now, you know. Am I really going to be a formal photographer?

You know, my neighbor Judy who said, "I can't really see the penis first in those nudes," she came to my first show, and she, again, put her hands on her hips as she was want to do, and said, "Well [laughs]." She said, "You tried to be old fashioned, but you couldn't do it, could you?" [They laugh.] I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "You're a child of the 20th century. There's no way that you can divorce your visual activity in your mind from what you grew up with." I thought, "Oh my God. Right again." And then I came to revel in the fact that my pictures were not pastiches or not old and tiny. You know. Were they post-whatever? Who knows? You know. I don't want to put a name on everything then. They were reviewed lovingly and very honestly in the *Village Voice* and the first double-page spread. I was the first person who ever had a full-frontal male nude published in the *Village Voice*.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: The *Village Voice* was a big thing then. It's where you found your apartment; it's where you got your culture; it's where you read about medicine. You know. It's where you read about theater, film. Sort of a pretty big deal to be interviewed for that, but I guess I was just mentioning that because being awake all the time, you would die. It's exhausting, but we're in that rare space for these two visits, and I'll, you know, always treasure them, because I don't take anything for granted. Nothing. You know. How can you? Even being a friend of a person who might have nearly died or did die, you realize how transient everything is. The waking dream, you know? It's like an illusion. Can I tell you one more thing?

THEODORE KERR: Of course.

JOHN DUGDALE: Okay. My friend came to visit me, at that completely blind, one evening from Woodstock, and she brought ingredients for supper, and we made supper. And she said, "I brought a bottle of rosé wine. Do you want some?" I said, "I don't feel like it, and I'm fine." And I used to live with no electricity, all by candlelight. My mother said, "You can't go back to that house unless you put in a furnace, get a refrigerator, and get electricity."

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: So I did, but I did it my way. And I got a wood refrigerator; I got all carbon filament lamps that look life fireflies. And anyway, so [she came over, and we cooked dinner. She saw a candle with beeswax. Big beeswax candlestick –JD]. She put the candle on the table, lit it; she drank the wine. She drank the whole bottle of wine, which I guess was easy to do on a summer night, and she didn't tell me that she had lit that candle. I had a cat at the time, so she left. I gave her a hug, and I went upstairs to bed with the dog and cat next to me in the bed. My cat named Midnuit and my dog Manley. I had gotten my first guide dog, my big, tough buddy, and I started to smell something funny, and I thought, "Oh. Maybe it's wind blowing down the fireplace." And I turned over, and I thought, "Oh. I'm so comfortable. I like this book that I'm listening to." Then I smelled some more of that smell. And I thought, "Oh. That's a little bit weird smell for the fireplace back puffing." I thought, "Oh, for God sakes." So in my underwear, I went downstairs, and when I got to the bottom of the stairs, and when I looked up, the entire dining room was in flames.

THEODORE KERR: Oh!

JOHN DUGDALE: Burning, burning, crackling, burning. And I immediately, I knew what happened. I reach forward in the flames, and I saw that the candlestick had fallen over.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: Probably knocked over by the cat and probably down to the stub, but was still hot enough for the wax to dribble out across the table, and it set the tablecloth on fire. Then the fire went off of the tablecloth onto the pillows and onto the 200-year-old chairs that I had there. And then those caught on fire. And the flames were going right up to the ceiling. It's a low-ceilinged room, so my first instinct was to get the pillows out of the rooms. Kind of a gay thing to think, right? So here I'm like flambé, running out of the house in my underwear with one pillow after another that were bursting outside onto the grass, feathers going everywhere still on fire. One, two, three, four. Oh no. The chairs. So then one, two, three, four in and out of the screen door and interior door with the chairs on the fire. My beloved, 200-year old, Windsor chairs burning up in flames, and I never realize that the top of a table was on fire and that the flames—I was having less and less space to be in. I thought, "There's a fire extinguisher about three yards from here," so I took one stride towards it, and I started to feel like I was going to pass out.

The fumes were so strong. I thought, "Oh, boy. You know what? No fire extinguisher. Call 911. So I backtracked

below the flames, and I called and I said, "9-1-1. There's a fire in my house." And they said, "Where are you?" I said, "I'm in the house." They said, "Get out of the house immediately." I said, "I have to get my pets." They said, "Get out of the house immediately." And so, of course, I ran back up the stairs, and I—Manley was so lazy, I had to drag him out of the house. I didn't know where the cat was, but I got him outside, and I thought, "The cat's going to have to take care of herself." And I went outside, and I went in the corner where there's a fence pretty far away from the house. Maybe the length of this apartment. Maybe from here to the door, and I could hear everything burning up, that sound that you only hear in the movies or on the news, and I thought, "Wow. The house is burning up." And I was—my back arced over, the dog in between my legs, and the cat on my shoulder.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: She found her way out of the house. And what I sensed most at the time—two things, that arc—you see that arc in my work a lot, and that all through the ages, bending down to something in reverence or arching your back, it releases energy. It's a sign of respect. It's a sign of holiness, you know. And it's powerful. Even ISIS and the Egyptian––and the American Indian—a female in an arced position, the universe is on her belly; Romulus and Remus hanging from the she-wolf's belly, the two wolves, you know. And on and on, and I thought, "Wow." I thought, "This is incredible. In two minutes, the piano is going to fall through the parlor, and I'm going to hear the sound of a 170-year-old piano crashing to the floor. They're going to come, and all the windows are going to blow out." So it seemed like an eternity, but the thing that I felt the most—this is God's honest truth—were the stars over my head, and I kind of smiled, and I thought, "Oh my God. You don't really own anything. You don't own even your sight, your notoriety from your work. You only are visiting. It's temporary. The house is temporary. It's just an illusion that you bought all these things and that you worked so hard for 30 years to make it look like this." And it was very easy to let go of, and it was directly related to the arc of being in the hospital when I thought, "Well, you know what? Dying is not a failure. It's just another way to end things. It's not wrong."

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: And it seemed like an eternity, but then there was a fire engine that came down the driveway. I could hear the sirens, one in one town, and one in the other, and ringing from either side, and it seemed very surreal and abstract. And then the firemen came, and I said, "Well, I'm over here. I'm in the corner. I'm blind." He said, "I know. I cut your lawn a couple years ago. I know you're blind. Where's the fire?" I said, "Downstairs. Down those stairs." And he walked to the house, and he ran back out, and he called for more fire engines to come. And then they all came and started dragging hoses across the yard and stuff, and I thought, "Well, it's still only a matter of time before they start axing out the windows with the chopping"—always thought firemen like to chop up everything.

They put the fire out, and eventually, the guy came out, still with me crouching down and really sensing the arc of the universe and the arc of my back mirroring each other and feeling like, you know, I mean, you could hear 1,000 times that things are an illusion or owning something is only temporary, you know, and not just stuff. Owning yourself. The way you behave in your life, how you trick yourself or reward yourself into doing the work that you know that you should be doing. I said, "Well, what's the story?" He said, "You're really lucky." He said, "All the furniture burned up. There's some damage, but we seemed to have contained it to that one room." I said, "You're kidding?" He said, "Yeah, but you can't go back in the house." So they stayed until dawn, and they put big fans in all of the rooms and blew all the hot air out and the smoke. The whole house smelled like a Virginia ham. And I thought, "Oh, I don't want to go downstairs." You know. I thought it was going to be underwater and damaged and horrible. And I, of course, was happy that the house didn't collapse, by then I had become detached. I've never felt the same about it since.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN DUGDALE: I don't let it own me. I'm temporarily owning it and getting an enormous amount of joy from it and sharing it and being in it amongst stuff and school and so on and so forth. I went to sleep, and the next morning I sat at the top of the stairs, and it really smelled like I was in a butcher shop that had just smoked a dozen hams. And I thought, "Okay, John. Just hold your nose, and go downstairs, and see what it looks like." The 18th century cupboards that I built in, floors that I made by hand from scratch, and you know what? There was a big burn mark on the floor about that big, and all the paint on the table—you know what Rust-Oleum paint is?

THEODORE KERR: Uh-uh [negative].

JOHN DUGDALE: It's an oil-based paint that's meant to be waterproof. And the table that was there had apparently been painted in Rust-Oleum paint and was the reason that the entire room, corner to corner, the vapors from the paint were on fire. Busy setting other things on fire. By the time––it was good for me that I caught it, but what was really astonishing and is really beautiful—you want to see how beauty follows me through my life—on the table that was on fire was a vase of lilacs—

THEODORE KERR: Ha!

JOHN DUGDALE: —that didn't get knocked over. They were fresh as a daisy, bright, clean just like the day before when I had picked them for the dinner.

THEODORE KERR: Amazing!

JOHN DUGDALE: Amazing! And I looked. They weren't even moved from where they were.

THEODORE KERR: That's beautiful.

JOHN DUGDALE: And I called up the fire company, Montville Fire Company—I said, "You guys, you didn't even disturb the vase of flowers on the table. I'll owe you guys forever," you know. That was the same guy that came and held my hand when I was having the stroke. The same fire chief. [Dog walks over.] You either have really bad breath, or you're farting.

THEODORE KERR: [Laughs.]

JOHN DUGDALE: You know, here for all posterity, my guide dog has decided, again, that—day two, it's time for me to pay attention to him, because it's probably getting dark, which means only one thing to him.

THEODORE KERR: It's true though. It's perfect timing.

JOHN DUGDALE: Yeah, he knows.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: They're very prescient.

THEODORE KERR: Is there anything—that's a beautiful story to end on. Is there anything?

JOHN DUGDALE: I'm happy to end with that. It sums up everything.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: You know. It's been very easy to talk to you.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, it's been a pleasure.

JOHN DUGDALE: Oh good.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

JOHN DUGDALE: Well, me too.

[Side conversation.]

THEODORE KERR: No, you're fine. Thank you, John. Have a good day.

JOHN DUGDALE: Thank you very much, Ted. This has been extremely lovely experience.

THEODORE KERR: Agreed.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]