



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with Peter Cramer and
Jack Waters, 2007 September 6-October 9**

**Funding for the interview was provided by Artists' Spaces Archives,
New York, New York. Funding for the digital preservation of this
interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures
Program of the National Park Service.**

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Peter Cramer and Jack Waters on September 6, 2007 and October 9, 2007. The interview took place at the artists' home office in New York City, New York, and was conducted by Liza Kirwin for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview was funded by Art Spaces Archives Project (AS-AP).

Peter Cramer, Jack Waters, and Liza Kirwin have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

LIZA KIRWIN: This is Liza Kirwin. I'm with Peter Cramer and Jack Waters at their home—

PETER CRAMER: Our home office.

MS. KIRWIN: Your home office. And this is an interview for Art Spaces Archives Project [AS-AP] as well as for the Archives for American Art, and it's funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. So, we thank them, first off. It's—what's the date today? September—

MR. CRAMER: Sixth.

MS. KIRWIN:—sixth, 2007. And this is the first session. I just wanted to begin with both of you talking a little bit about your early lives; where you were born, where you went to school what brought you to New York initially. So maybe start with Peter.

MR. CRAMER: Okay, well, I was born in Bennington, Vermont. Our family lived in Massachusetts and my father was a state representative from Berkshire County. We ended up moving to the Virgin Islands because of his association with Jack Kennedy and spent most of my childhood there until I went away to Deerfield Academy. And then, took one year of studies at Skidmore College, studying with Melissa Hayden, who had just retired from the New York City Ballet and then moved to Washington when she decided that she couldn't get the fine arts department to be in charge of dance. It was still part of physical-ed there at Skidmore.

So I moved to Washington and worked at the Kennedy Center and at restaurants and continued my dance training there. And in the summer of '78, I was accepted to come to New York to study at the School of American Ballet for their summer session and have been in New York ever since. I continued studying with Margaret Craske, who was the proponent of the [Enrico] Cecchetti Technique.

MS. KIRWIN: How do you spell that?

MR. CRAMER: Double C, double H—or no—double C, double T. C-E-C—Cecchetti. I don't know. I'd have to check. [Laughs]

MS. KIRWIN: All right.

MR. CRAMER: You have to Google Enrico Cecchetti. He was one of the foremost teachers of the Italian school as it was handed down from Carlo Blasis. And she had actually studied with him and she was one of the teachers that at the Metropolitan Opera Ballet. And then she had her own studio. It was part of the Manhattan School of the Dance and worked with various small companies. And then in 1981, I met Jack. We were both performing with this company downtown called the Battery Dance Company and we've been together ever since.

Once Jack staged his dancer strike—[laughs]—for, not only better wages, but Jack had been promised like choreographic opportunities within the company and they weren't really forthcoming, particularly. So we formed our own company called POOL, Performance On One Leg, and started performing in night clubs and outdoor spaces, galleries, and through that association with that milieu, particularly around the Pyramid Club here in New York on Avenue A and Jack's association with a colleague.

His fellow student, Brian Taylor, was also a part of POOL, and we did a show ABC No Rio, called the "Seven Days of Creation," which was seven days, continuously 24 hours of art, music, dance, film. Anything goes; anything happened. And that was—our initial—my initial introduction to ABC No Rio. I had never been there before. Our friends Brad Taylor and Carl George made contact with the then directors, Alan Moore, Rebecca Howland, and Robert Goldman, known as Bobby G.

And they're the ones that setup the show and since we were all part of this great milieu of artists, we did that; it was very successful and really brought a lot of people back to it because it seemed at the time—this is now 1983, and the Colab [Collaborative Projects, an artists'group] had started the gallery from the action of the "Real Estate Show." And then, you know, the generations and, you know, it was now three years later and it seemed like there was kind of a drop off in activities or even interest with some of the original artists.

So they were actually anxious to find new blood and they offered the directorship to Carl, initially, and Carl was not interested. And so—

MS. KIRWIN: Carl who?

MR. CRAMER: Carl George, who's actually—

JACK WATERS: He was part of our collective.

MS. KIRWIN: Oh.

MR. CRAMER: Yes, this is actually his studio that we use as our—

MR. WATERS: Workspace.

MR. CRAMER: [Laughs]—creative workspace.

MS. KIRWIN: Your office.

MR. CRAMER: The office and whatever, artist residence. So it was offered to us and at the time, I had lost my apartment on 9th Avenue and Jack, I think, had been, you know—I don't know exactly where. I think he was still living in Brooklyn but we all sort of ended up by the Taylors, Brad and Brian's up on 47th Street and then, you know, so we're sort of couch surfing. And when that happened, they said, oh, well you can—you know, we can't pay you but you can live in the basement. [Laughter.] So we said, oh, okay. That sounds like workable.

MR. WATERS: So it was a live-in proposition.

MS. KIRWIN: So Jack, maybe we could begin with your little bit of biographical information about where you were born and your educational background and what brought you to New York.

MR. WATERS: Well, I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and am a product of a family that were jazz aficionados and also very interested in progressive politics. And so I had a lot of artists and musicians in my home. Lots of Latin music, folk, and jazz and blues, bluegrass-type of stuff. Painters and stuff like that. And studied trumpet when I was very young, but then my interest also went towards dance and I gravitated, especially towards an area that was highly influenced by a German expressionist field called—well, that was influenced by a choreographer Mary Wigman. And she and her associate, Rudolf Laban, had established an area of dance that was very closely associated to what we would now call multidisciplinary and that was not pure dance but word, art, and installation, visual elements and projections would be as prominent as the body as media.

And in addition to that, I also studied influences of Martha Graham and eventually came here to New York to attend Julliard. And so I studied at Julliard, studied primarily [José] Limón and then mentored with a woman named Anna Sokolow, who was known among other things as being one of the early proponents of the musical "Hair" and also did a lot of dramatic and theatrical-based movement works.

And after Julliard, I continued my interest in dance. I was always interested in dance as a creative art and traditionally dance is taught as an interpretive art. So composition and choreography were always very important to me and I choreographed for my earliest training. And like the early moderns, creating dance was as important to the medium as performing the works of others. And through that, I made associations early on with Brian Taylor, who is a classmate of mine, and we formed a collective called POOL, which Peter described. And our whole premise was that we were not going to be hierarchical or singularly based but that we would perform each other's works as well as generate works collaboratively.

And along that point, Peter and I did meet because I was performing professionally with the dance company—Battery Dance Company. And we, along with Joan Karlen and Brian, Peter and myself, formed POOL and started performing in nightclubs during the early '80s, which at that time, was very vibrant in that the whole era of house music and really—formulaic entertainment—and hadn't quite set in. It was just after a period of Studio 54, when the Warhol Silver Factory and a lot of bohemian circles were still influential in the nightclub scene in New York City.

So you could actually do concert performances in a club and do classical music and this what our early club work was like. Then we started to gravitate to more cabaret style but then we also started to do interdisciplinary work and especially because Peter had been associated with a group of people who were doing a club that was involved with changing themes called Area. And so setting and installation was highly influenced into a lot of our work as a collective started to gravitate away from pure dance and into more visual art and what's now called performance art. And yes, about that time, we did our "Seven Days of Creation" show, which was watershed and we became associated with Colab. And it was really a natural baton passing because Colab's interest in social-progressive art was in sync with ours. And really for that reason, they thought that we would be the likely group to carry on the work that they had established with ABC No Rio. At that point, a lot of the founders of ABC No Rio dealing with Colab members were moving on to more traditional art world activities.

They were going into galleries and so forth. And so, we kind of crossed over. Peter and I became

members of Colab and were lucky to be a part of that and have their guidance as we started to transition ABC No Rio from more primarily visual arts to incorporating film and performance art, along with continuing the visual art tradition at ABC No Rio.

MS. KIRWIN: Could you describe that first performance project that you did at ABC No Rio?

MR. WATERS: Well, it was "Seven Days of Creation" and we took that as—because in those days, you know, themed shows were very popular and so we thought was catchy and we also thought the idea of taking one week would be a good idea. Doing something short and concise. So each day of the exhibition, the artist or group of artist changed. The entire installation changed. And the work that was performed and exhibited there was all related. We took artists that we had met from the club circuit, primarily with the Pyramid Club, which was kind of our second operating base before No Rio.

And then also, we had a very strong pedagogical bent and so we made contacts with the local elementary school. It think it was the—

MR. CRAMER: The Anna Silver [school]. I think it's PS 40 [20]. It's on Essex Street [166 Essex Street]. And we met a lovely woman there that helped us—I mean, it was—the "Seven Days of Creation" revolved around, you know, Easter. It was actually, I think, overlapping with—it went from Good Friday to Easter or something.

MR. WATERS: Something like that. I think it was actually, yes, in April. I think April.

MR. CRAMER: It sort of—

MS. KIRWIN: A Holy Week.

MR. CRAMER: Yes, it turned out to be. It was at the same time as Holy Week, so some of those themes reflected that. But the things—we went into the classroom and we did things with giant eggs and making chickens. I think I had done a chicken performance at the Jane West Hotel for Des Refusé and Club Armageddon. And so I went over there in a costume.

MS. KIRWIN: In a chicken costume?

MR. CRAMER: Yes, I had made like a big chicken head and I was sort of like a combination of the chicken being born because I had sort of like this plastic that was sort of symbolic of the egg white and a yellow, runny sheet that was supposed to be the egg yolk and—[laughter]—I think we hatched out of an egg for that.

MR. WATERS: So we had the school pleased and we were able to translate the work that we were doing in the nightclub scene to things that were interesting and appropriate.

MS. KIRWIN: Did you invite people to participate each day? How did you organize it?

MR. CRAMER: Well, we were just one of the groups. I think pretty much we were the sort of the organizing group but other curators were invited and they curated artists—

MR. WATERS: It was a kind of snowballing effect because the East Village, at that time, was a very dense community of interrelated activity. So you had like a downtown club scene: people who are artists and artistic. So basically what we would do—it was a very social process. So each day, we would either invite an artist to do whatever they wanted, which would include curating their day.

So one day, the Anna Silver day was something we had done as a group. It was Peter, myself, Brad Taylor, his brother Brian, Carl George—we were the new—

MR. CRAMER: Gordon.

MR. WATERS: Gordon Kurtti. There were like six or seven people who were really the nucleus, but then it kind of spread out. There was Christa Gamper, who at that time, was part of our POOL performing collective after we had segued pure dance into a more—and then there were people—Arlene Schloss, who had a studio on Broome Street that she called A's Salon [A-Space at 330 Broome Street] and she had worked with George Moore, who is the son of Reverend Patrick Moore from St. John the Divine. And they turned—

MR. CRAMER: Collaborated. I don't think it's Patrick but it's Reverend Moore of St. John's. Patrick is the writer.

MR. WATERS: They collaborated with Michael Keane and they had been running a series of events by the time we came on the scene, was at the Jane West Hotel. They call it Hotel Armageddon. But they also carried it at The Kitchen. I think Michael had started the first exhibition space at Westbeth, where he lived. And then Arlene, who had come from a Bauhaus tradition, I think, she had, like in the last few years, had been at the DAAD in Berlin [artists-in-residence program].

And so, they were also a very strong influence and also resource for us because there was that whole scene. So there were all of these overlapping scenes that were happening and so when we came to ABC No Rio, we were kind of like the nucleus that was able to attach to these other scenes. So that's what the "Seven Days of Creation" basically was, was providing a physical space for all of these different people, who, you know, were ostensibly diverse. Eric Bogosian, who is doing performance art and now is an actor. Steve Buscemi, who had been part of the A's/Refusé [a conjunction used in promotional material and in verbal descriptions of the collaborative entrepreneurship of Arleen Schoss's A's Salon (or A-Space, etc.) and Michael Keane and George Moore's Des Refuses: A's/Des Refusé] 99 Days performance [the reference is to the "99 nights of Performance" at the Storefront for Art and Architecture], I think, had a day at the "Seven Days of Creation." So it was kind of like a very—what would you call it? Just a fertile ground of activity and we ordered by—you know, the seven day structure was basically our ordering structure. And then, each individual or group was given that 24-hour period and at the end of that period, the entire installation changed.

MS. KIRWIN: Wow. Do you mean like the first day there was light? That kind of thing?

MR. WATERS: No, it wasn't biblical. We didn't care about—

MR. CRAMER: Yes there was—not biblical but in the sense of like the performance that we did or that I remember choreographing—not so much choreographing, but the staging was, you know, this whole sort of cosmos beginning where we're sort of all in black and everything is black and we're light very secretly as much as we can. What do you call them? Sparkles. So suddenly like plume, there are these sparklers and then suddenly the sparklers are separating and swirling around. And so the whole idea of creation is we're very much a part of the opening.

MR. WATERS: Yes, so we were thinking about the idea of religion and spirituality but not limiting it to a Christian perspective, except in as much as we're coming from this Western perspective, where our calendar is divided within these seven day, 24-hour periods. So yes, some people will take that approach. And for, I think, POOL took day one—

MR. CRAMER: Right, I think that was Good Friday.

MR. WATERS: Well, yes.

MS. KIRWIN: Who were the members of POOL at that moment when you—

MR. WATERS: Well, it's a moot point because the idea of compartmentalization.

MR. CRAMER: Because there was an open, collective so people come in and out.

MS. KIRWIN: Oh, okay.

MR. WATERS: We eschewed that.

MS. KIRWIN: Okay.

MR. WATERS: But the core members of POOL were essentially at dance training, had formal—Christa [Gamper] had also come from this Wigman tradition, who we met at the club. We met Christa at Armageddon. Peter [Cramer], Brian [Taylor], and myself would be the core members of POOL but then Carl, who had a very strong design and visual sense, would do our costumes. Brad, who was coming out of that kind of a ritual, witchy kind of perspective, as well as his brother Brian.

MR. CRAMER: Right, they were very influenced by Aleister Crowley and the whole magic tradition. But it comes from, I think, really influenced San Francisco but also was kind of in line with Madam Blavatsky and that whole interest in the occult that happened earlier in America in, I guess it was maybe the early teens or the early 20s or something.

MR. WATERS: So there were these ties that were both social and creative. Brad and Brian were brothers. Brian had gone to Julliard with me so he was dance trained. Brad did not have formal training but he was, at that time, an electrician and also had skills in construction. So Brad was a very strong support with our set building and then Carl would do costumes for us and then we would also bring them into the fold, in terms of physically performing.

MR. CRAMER: Right, we all did. I think we did that initial thing, that sort of creative thing all together and then each of us kind of did our own little pieces. I did one called Black Spring, which was based on the Henry Miller text about this is the spring that Jesus sang, the sponge to his lips, the frogs dancing. It was Miller's statement about the nuclear threat at of the time and I kind of emerge from the trapdoor. Just kind of been a butohesque thing and then got all covered in paint and was drowning in that.

Christa had met a fellow named Jonathan Prosser and they had made this thing called Laceration team. Jonathan had been a part of the Swans, which was a heavy metal, not really called metal.

MR. WATERS: They were like John Cale, noise-based band. That I think would have been influenced by [John] Cage but with a more hard—

MR. CRAMER: Oh, yes, totally industrial. It was like an industrious side.

MR. WATERS: Industrial, you know.

MR. CRAMER: I can't remember the German band that—what is it? Einstürzende Neubauten? I can't remember.

MR. WATERS: But they were very eclectic. I was very interested post-structuralist practices and so I was doing a series that I called form and meaning, where I was juxtaposing content against formal composition. So I was doing as opposed to Peter's work with tar and visceral material, was doing these very dry formal studies using movement structures in the way that Merce Cunningham would do with his balletic cannon. But taking my vocabulary from a modernist tradition and at the same time taking texts from some of the—what was it, the Cahiers du cinéma circle. The people who—

MR. CRAMER: Right, or someone like Sally Banes.

MR. WATER: Sally Banes.

MR. CRAMER: Was writing at the—

MR. WATERS: was writing about performance art. You know, what is performance art? So we were —

MR. CRAMER: That other seminal book.

MR. WATERS: So I was kind of taking this more intellectual approach, which was something that was happening, also, at the time, you know, I guess, like in the alternative space; PS 1, PS 122 circles.

MS. KIRWIN: When was your first awareness of ABC No Rio?

MR. WATERS: 1983.

MS. KIRWIN: Really? That was it.

MR. CRAMER: That was it. Yes, that was it.

MS. KIRWIN: And who was your contact there? Was it Alan or—

MR. CRAMER: It was—

MR. WATERS: Well, Bradley Eros. Aline Mare worked together with Bradley Eros. They were a couple and they worked together as the Erotic Psyche. Brad Taylor had known them in San Francisco and Hawaii. So when we told them about this idea that we wanted to do, they said, oh, ABC No Rio. And so Bradley and Aline introduced us to the whole No Rio. So Bradley and Aline were, you know, were involved with the Colab circle at that time.

MS. KIRWIN: And how did you make the transition from performing there to managing there or being so involved in the place? I wouldn't say managing, but

MR. CRAMER: Well, it was like crisis management because the building was in such a dire condition and not only where the gallery was, but situationally with the neighborhood and the neighbors upstairs and—

MS. KIRWIN: Can you describe the position that it was in at the time that you first went to ABC No Rio?

MR. CRAMER: Well, when we arrived they had the—they had the basement. There was a whole backyard that Rebecca Howland had done her Brainwash sculpture and it was a cement sculpture. And it was quite elaborate.

MR. WATERS: It was a circulating fountain that traced the economic process of energy.

MR. CRAMER: The geological to geological to economic development of oil.

MR. WATERS: From strip mining to oil processing; it was concrete done with concrete mold and fiber.

MR. CRAMER: And so, the major wall was like a geological bas-relief.

MR. WATERS: Circulating fountain.

MR. CRAMER: Like a slice of land type of thing in that it trickled down across a brain and then went into pools that had, they were surrounded by machine guns made out of concrete.

MR. WATERS: So that was the backyard. That took up the—

MR. CRAMER: These flaming turrets that were marked Exxon Mobil.

MR. WATERS: And then, the interior space, there was a big barrel which was the heating, it was the furnace.

MR. CRAMER: Oh, right. They had taken an oil drum, turned it sideways, and made it into a furnace.

MS. KIRWIN: What, like a wood-burning stove?

MR. CRAMER: Yeah, exactly, like a wood-burning stove.

MR. WATERS: I think the show that had been—oh, there was still remnants of the "Suburbia" show when we came in because I think there were still wisps of the insulation that—

MR. CRAMER: Brad Melamed?

MR. WATERS: Well, I think Brad Melamed, but—a black artist who—

MR. CRAMER: Joe Lewis.

MR. WATERS: Joe Lewis I think had done for the previous show; I think it was Suburbia. So that's what—oh, and the installation at No Rio, there would always be a residue left from a previous installation. And it was not spoken, but one would incorporate into what was coming next so that, rather than being an out-and-out change, things would kind of morph into the next.

MR. CRAMER: Right, the walls were very used and roughly plastered. There was a long, blue table that was pretty much a big work table for everybody. And then, there was the front wall of the gallery, it was glass, so you could look out onto Rivington Street. And then, there was a platform coming out of that which was the stage area. I think there was a bathroom at the top?

MR. WATERS: There was a makeshift water closet. There was the toilet that is still there actually, not the same one, but the same makeshift structure. And yeah, the walls would by and large be modeled because people would generally do things to surface the walls. And one would or would not just slap a coat of paint over it. So the walls had a tendency to take this texture that was definitely not flat or smooth by any means. And yeah, I remember there was a piece of graffiti that stayed for years and years. I—what was it—something about TV, like I hate TV. It was a heart, with a heart exed out of it. Do you remember that? [Laughter.]

MR. CRAMER: But there were certain areas where there were leaks that were coming from either the upstairs neighbors—

MR WATERS: The leak, the eternal leak—

MR. CRAMER: There was a shaft that went down the length of the building from the fourth floor.

MR. WATERS: There was the eternal leak and the eternal winter cold. You know, the wind would very literally whistle through—

MR. CRAMER: Right, it had a back window. It was kind of like a French window; they were like 12-foot windows that had a gate in front of it there which I guess they opened. But there was a big gate. And above that was a landing for the apartment—what would you call it? Just like a drain, drain area that was also causing problems. So there would be times when it rained when you would literally have a waterfall.

MR. WATERS: You would never know when you would have this waterfall flooding effect happen.

MR. CRAMER: And the basement was, when we arrived, there was a sort of a makeshift shelf area that they had been storing accumulated artworks for different projects you know that—

MS. KIRWIN: These were things that were abandoned there?

MR. WATERS: No, they were not abandoned.

MR. CRAMER: Well, yeah.

MR. WATERS: No, no, no. Alan [Moore], if you look at some of the emails that we've accumulated, if you look at the e-mail that we've accumulated just since we've begun, you know, since we've formalized the archiving process, we see—and I have Alan's notes—that they had intended. Alan, particularly—

MR. CRAMER: Alan was the great archivist.

MR. WATERS: And I don't know the others—

MR. CRAMER: Alan [Moore] and Marc Miller probably were aware of that because they knew that, you know, there was a resonance to it. I think they had already planned this, the book, ABC No Rio [ABC No Rio Dinero: The Story of a Lower East Side Art Gallery, edited by Alan Moore and Marc Miller. New York: ABC No Rio with Collaborative Projects, 1985].

MR. WATERS: They had a sense of, they had a strong sense of—and there was this kind of half-way idea that the work would possibly be useful as collateral, as a way of fundraising. So on the one hand; they knew that there was not a strong market value. But at the same time, they also knew that the artists were, even though they were very socially progressive and socially conscious and extremely critical of capitalist process, they were artists who really wanted to make their living in art. So as they were making alliance with, it was like Brooke Alexander and Jack Tilton, the various commercial galleries and the more successful venues that were, you know, established themselves in the market. They also had generated a body of work that was, if not overtly critical of art market and marketeering and real estate, and particularly real estate, were specific, were theme-specific to particular social themes like elderly care and so forth, animal shelters and so forth and so on. And so, the idea or the value of this work as a collection, as an archive, had occurred I think to Alan from

the very beginning.

MR. CRAMER: Well, they were certainly aware of like the whole Claes Oldenburg tradition of his Store that he had and they were well-educated in various practices of the art market.

MR WATERS: Kiki Smith was involved in the Colab circle. And because of her father [Tony Smith] and her sisters [twins, Bebe and Seton], they realized that there was also, you know, there was tradition. So they were very history-minded. And so, in the basement, when we came in, was where the early archives and visual collection—

MR. CRAMER: Right, the stacks of either paintings that were left after shows that people either just left there or they actually, that they may have given them directly, I'm not certain.

MR. WATERS: Sometimes, people left them. Other things people generated. Like there's a series that Kiki Smith directed that was made specifically for sale but at the same time knowing that it didn't really fit any known category of multiples. And then, there was also a Jenny Holzer series that had been done for the Colab A. More Store. So they were selling—and the Jenny Holzer series were like the early, was like an early study for what would become her Aphorisms series—

MR. CRAMER: Truisms.

MR. WATERS: Truisms.

MR. CRAMER: So this is what was physically, you know, we were sleeping there with big, fat, well-fed rats from Streit's matzo factory next door.

MR. WATERS: Luckily, we had a pit-bull. We had a brindle pitbull named Manny because the neighborhood was—

MR. CRAMER: Tough.

MR. WATERS: Really tough. It was heroin; it was the beginning of the crack epidemic—

MS. KIRWIN: Bobby G was living there prior—

MR. WATERS: Bobby G was—

MR. CRAMER: Prior to us. Bobby G was in the basement before we did.

MS. KIRWIN: And then, he moved upstairs.

MR. CRAMER: He moved upstairs.

MS. KIRWIN: Was he still upstairs when you moved downstairs, into the basement?

MR. CRAMER: Yes, he stayed. He was in the building on the second floor.

MR. WATERS: The first apartment was a family called the Acostas And the Acostas had been adopted in a lot of ways by Colab, you know, the founding artist. And unfortunately, we witnessed the deterioration of this family structure. But they were the second floor. And then, the other floors were basically empty.

MS. KIRWIN: And you moved in there when? Do you remember?

MR. CRAMER: It was the show in April and I think it was the fall of '83. I think it was the fall of '83 that we moved down there and, you know, just starting managing it. They already had a structure where Monday nights, they would have open meetings and—

MS. KIRWIN: Were you attending those before you moved in?

MR. WATERS: No. Our introduction to ABC No Rio was the "Seven Days of Creation" show. And it was, in my memory, I don't think it was all that long a lag. It almost seems that it was more immediate. But when we actually were formally engaged, it was, we met with Alan, Becky, and Bobby. And the only meeting that we had attended was to organize, to propose the Seven Days show. And then, after that, they said, well, we do Monday night meetings; this is where we take in ideas and proposals. And after that, you're on your own, except you must maintain Becky's fountain and you must placate the creditors, is how they wrote it. They actually wrote a little contract for us which we kept.

MS. KIRWIN: And who were the creditors?

MR. WATERS: Mostly the utilities, Con Ed, telephone, city of New York.

MR. CRAMER: But that was because, you know, they were only offered a month-to-month lease on the space, you know, as a compromise for their action on Delancey Street.

MS. KIRWIN: How much was that lease?

MR. WATERS: It couldn't have been more than 125 bucks.

MR. CRAMER: No, I think it was more than that.

MR. WATERS: You see, this is the essence of the record. These are what the archives. I mean, the archives have all—

MS. KIRWIN: They do have that?

MR. WATERS: Oh yeah, yeah. And this is another thing that was something they saw in common with us was that we were packrats, that we saved—not only that we saved everything, but we organized them and that was very much in keeping with this notion of historicity.

MS. KIRWIN: Even if it was a small amount, how was that money raised for the lease?

MR. CRAMER: Well, I think Colab was the—

MR. WATERS: NEA. We had NEA funding and we had New York State Comp. We inherited a funding base.

MS. KIRWIN: Why didn't ABC No Rio become Colab's exhibition space?

MR. WATERS: Because there was an avowal decision to distance themselves from ABC No Rio. There was an article that's in the book that Alan [Moore] and Marc [Miller] published that describes the attitude. But because ABC No Rio was founded by an activity that was essentially extralegal, Colab felt that it was safer to distance themselves from ABC No Rio. So although it was commonly known that ABC No Rio was the informal museum of Colab, there was no legal or formal relationship. And it was very intentional.

MR. CRAMER: And also, it wasn't just seen as an exhibition space; it was really a place like a laboratory for people to come—

MS. KIRWIN: You perceived it from the beginning as a community center or a culture center?

MR. WATERS: Yes.

MR. CRAMER: Yes, because they were doing, when you look at a lot of the drawings on paper, are all of these kids—

MR. WATERS: There were a lot of children. There was also this common interest in youth and education. And you can see from the archives; there are children's drawings. And many times, you can see an adult hand in conjunction with the children's drawings. And then, when you have oral history, when you take oral histories, then you know, especially with the Acosta children, you know —

MR. CRAMER: Yeah, there were also a lot of kids in the neighborhood. Because there's also a high school, the Marta Valle Junior High School [145 Stanton Street], that that was another thing that once we became directors, [we] were initiating programs there through what was originally their cultural council foundation, which I think sort of transformed itself into the New York Foundation.

MR. WATERS: We were acutely aware of our role as gentrifiers. And rather than take a moralistic attitude, we took a more productive attitude with saying, okay, we are like a middle-class, anglo-oriented—even though I'm African-American, my orientation is far more anglo-based than the Latino and the local community. So this idea of not usurping, on one hand, we were there because it's the only place we can afford to and we're creative individuals and we are socially conscious individuals. And so, the Colab founders, at least the consensus of Colab as we understood, we felt that it was our role and our interest to participate in a way that was not—we often refer to No Rio as a gallery. But really it was as much a workspace and an educational facility—

MR. CRAMER: A work place. The way Bobby put was, it's a place not a space.

MR. WATERS: ABC No Rio is a place, not a space.

MR. CRAMER: So that it regarded the neighborhood that it was set in and it wasn't trying to set itself off from it.

MR. WATERS: In a lot of ways, we kind of played with the idea of identity and nomenclature. I think in the phone book, the Yellow Pages, we were listed under "museums." We kind of loved that— [laughs]—but in fact, publicly, we would never represent ourselves as being exclusively or primarily an exhibition venue. So, it was a workshop and a lab. And not a lab merely for trained artists, but a lab where people who were coming from folk traditions, from naïve traditions, should feel comfortable. And that was always a tension, but also a concerted effort, as to how to reconcile and resolve this idea of professionalism and upper mobility and recognition and stature and at the same time, honor and respect something that it by and large indigenous.

MR. CRAMER: Right, and I think at this point, Colab had been so successful, you know, doing their art projects, that they really—between the "Times Square Show" and Jenny Holzer and well, of course, the "Real Estate Show," but things that they were doing: the Jenny Holzer thing with the truck, with one of the first moving video screens, things like that, that I think they had the feelings that they had done their community service and now, it was to get down to the business of really making art that still had all of those political and social references and reverberations, but they were

more directed to taking what that publicity that was accumulated and directing it to whatever ends they—

MR. WATERS: So this has become our mission with maintaining and fostering an archive because it's a very rich and very complex history of many communities and, at times, in complete philosophical and ideological opposition. So, you know, there is very often problems, problematic, but the whole idea was to not ignore or deny the problem and to be able to function and thrive, but not at the detriment of the other.

MS. KIRWIN: What were the Monday meetings like, Monday night meetings? Were they contentious?

MR. WATERS: They could be, some could be.

MR. CRAMER: Well, yeah, maybe later on as—

MS. KIRWIN: Did people from the community, the neighborhood, come?

MR. WATERS: No. The neighborhood for the most part would stay away.

MR. CRAMER: They just saw us as freaks, you know; they were just crazy people, artists.

MR. WATERS: There were people like the kids, of course, the Acostas lived there. And so, in the beginning, you know, they got sucked into the drug scene in a very bad way. But there was Felix Perez, who had been part of the whole circle before we came. And he was from the neighborhood and in fact, he left this body of family Super-8 or actually regular eight films of Delancey Street from the early '50s through the '70s.

MR. CRAMER: That's the Nelson Rockefeller and parade.

MR. WATERS: Yeah. So there were a handful of neighborhood people that would hang out. But they weren't integrated. They didn't have the kind of sense of interlocking affinity that Colab or that our group did. They were not wired for the notion of art professionalism or even social service professionalism in the sense that we were. And I think my sense, from coming from a black neighborhood in west Philadelphia, although my parents I think were unusual and different—we were always around many, many different people from different groupings—my experience and observation is that people from poor and disenfranchised communities struggle to become established and secure.

And in that sense, they emulate what I consider white, middle-class values. And because what we were doing at ABC No Rio were by and large in opposition to those values, people in the neighborhood, for the most part, were not comfortable or secure with how they perceived—you know, we were kind of in complete opposition to their development, their sense of development. At the same time, there was this sense of folk, of art as a natural practice, as something that is of creativity, of something that is a human impulse.

And so, in that sense, I think there was understanding and affinity. But as a culture, as a group, we didn't have a lot of the local community.

MR. CRAMER: No, there weren't a lot of Spanish artists; let's put it that way—

MR. WATERS: No. It was always an effort.

MR. CRAMER: Latinos or even black artists.

MR. WATERS: One of the turning events, I think, that came later, you know, I guess maybe towards the end of the '80s, was when we become friends with Felix Gonzalez-Torres. And, of course, he was also coming out of Group Material and was highly conceptual and was Cuban. And Felix was always very careful not to identify himself as a Cuban artist; he was always very clear and very conscious not to identify himself as a particularly gay artist. He was very clear and conscious about not being labeled, although he addressed many of these themes in his art. But because we had incorporated a direct—by that time, we had formalized the pedagogical relationship. And because we were funded publicly, when an artist would come in, we established a commitment that they work with local youth. We actually established—

MR. CRAMER: Which is actually what NYFA [New York Foundation for the Arts] does now. If you're given a fellowship, you have to do a community service.

MR. WATERS: An obligation to work with the schools that we had established contact with or with the neighborhood groups, so that that was part of the exhibition or performance or screening process. And Felix had come in—next door to us was an abandoned photo studio called Gus'. And for years, for the entire time we were there, we would sort of loot these amazing photos that ranged from the '40s through the '70s. And Felix loved it. Formal portraits, he basically was like a—and this is another part of our archives is the Gus photos. And so, Felix was going to create his own photo studio, like a created history. He was going to do wedding albums. And he said, they are going to look exactly like a Puerto Rican or Dominican family album, but he was going to completely create them himself. And it was going to be kind of like a joke, you know, like an art-world joke. And we had asked him to work with the kids to explain that, like why, to explain the irony. Because when the neighborhood walked in, to their eyes, they would just be seeing—

MS. KIRWIN: Puerto Rican wedding photos.

MR. WATERS: Yeah, yeah. And so, Felix was very adamant about not doing that. And I always kick myself to say that that was my biggest mistake at ABC No Rio, was kind of prohibiting Felix from doing a show there, you know.

MS. KIRWIN: So you didn't let him?

MR. CRAMER: Well, it was up to him, really, to decide.

MR. WATERS: No one was ever denied. In the Monday night meetings, people would come and they would make a proposal. And we existed as facilitators; we completely eschewed the idea that we're not curators. We did call ourselves co-directors, but we did not curate. And so, we would provide materials. We were getting funding. NEA dropped out towards Reagan's second administration, which is a whole another story. But we continued getting NYSCA [New York State Council for the Arts] funding and so, we could provide funding; we could provide various resources, and especially the tools, you know, helping people. But it was a very DIY situation. And if it was something that we were really super, super, super interested in, then we would function as administrators more actively. But if it was something that we did not particularly care for, we would just stand back and not do anything; but we never said no. Nothing was ever rejected, even at Colab.

MR. CRAMER: Well, especially the ones that came physically to the meetings. I mean, once it became known as a gallery, people were sending slides and submissions to, you know, for review. And those would be brought into the meeting, too, and there would be some discussion as to

whether or not they were relevant. Or what were they asking? What did they want from us?

MR. CRAMER: What do you want? This is what Colab said. When we first went, when Carl-Carl, remember, I didn't go to the first meeting; it was Carl and Brad. And they came back and said, "What do you want?" And so, they were explaining the aesthetics of the "Seven Days of Creation" and we're going to get this artist and it's going to change every day. And people were kind of like, I know, but what do you want. And they'd said say, oh, we just want it to have impact; we want it to be so good. He goes, no, how much money do you want? [Laughter.] And their jaws dropped. They were like, money? You have funding? So this was a very novel idea, the idea that you were making art and getting support for it.

But by the time, like towards our end of our direction there, we were kind of doing the same process. You know, we were mandated.

MR. CRAMER: We started getting into the grant-writing stuff and we also, I started initiating the actual incorporation for their own 501(c)(3) and the real establishment of a board in whatever capacity they functioned.

MR. WATERS: And our in-joke was ABC No Rio, career artist stepping stone. And that was the beginning of our disillusionment and our disinterest.

MS. KIRWIN: How long was your directorship at ABC No Rio?

MR. CRAMER: Well, I think by '89, I had finished the, or maybe a little earlier, I finished the incorporation process.

MR. WATERS: We incorporated them. It was later than that. It was later than that.

MR. CRAMER: Right. But I'd say about for me, in terms of my direct involvement, 1990, I would say.

MS. KIRWIN: That's quite a long time.

MR. WATERS: Well, we've never disassociated because we segued from there into the history—because there had been so many diverse populations. Even at a single time, we'd have poetry projects; we'd have new music projects going on; we'd have after-hour club events. And so, what our role started to become, because it was so problematic and troublesome with the financial and the political and the legal maintenance of the organization, that we first started doing travel projects. We did a show in Hamburg which was a five-year history or like a 10-year.

MR. CRAMER: That was 1990, I think.

MR. WATERS: 1990. And from there—

MR. CRAMER: But before that, we had gone to San Francisco to ATA [Artists' Television Access] and done sort of a travel group—

MR. WATERS: We decided that we didn't want to become overburdened with the idea of physical space because we were putting so much time and energy into maintaining and keeping that it seemed to be in complete contradiction to what our philosophy was about real estate itself. And so, rather than become a burden, we set up a structure at that point where we became, essentially, like a touring group. We found another director, Lou Acierno, who became the director. And then, we also started working on their board development because we had run ABC No Rio. And the

beginning was under Colab's auspices, their grants were coming through Colab's 501(c)(3).

Then, it transferred to an organization called Cultural Council Foundation, which was set up for that particular purpose. But at the time, we came to ABC No Rio, we had also incorporated a non-profit organization that was structured as an umbrella organization, not knowing that we'd come to No Rio, but knowing that we were functioning as a performing—

MS. KIRWIN: And this was for POOL?

MR. WATERS: This was for POOL.

MR. CRAMER: Right, Allied Productions.

MR. WATERS: We knew that our interest went beyond dance alone, any single medium. So it was a multipurpose umbrella organization. And so, we learned how to do fiscal—you know, we got a lot of management skills from being under the auspices of CCF [Cultural Council Foundations]. And we ran ABC No Rio under Allied's auspices for a number of years.

MS. KIRWIN: Allied Productions?

MR. WATERS: Allied Productions. And so, there's an overlap there. There's a similar overlap of Colab, No Rio to No Rio, Allied. But at a certain point, we realized that we were not going to be instrumental in the day-to-day operation, we began to incorporate ABC No Rio so they had their legal autonomy. And the other thing that we did—we made sure that the founders, that Bobby and Becky and Alan, stayed on the board. In the beginning, it was an unincorporated board, but the Monday night meetings became more than just a kind of amorphous gathering of community people; but we actually formulated a board structure that was specific to ABC No Rio while also running Allied Productions, which had a separate board.

MS. KIRWIN: Did you have by-laws and things?

MR. WATERS: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MS. KIRWIN: Did you first develop them or were they already in place?

MR. CRAMER: Well, we worked with volunteer lawyers for the arts. They actually shepherded us through the whole process and it was all free. I think we had to pay whatever the filing fees were, but it wasn't—

MR. WATERS: But we had already had Allied Productions, which was in place from—Allied was formed in 1981. And we came to No Rio in 1983.

MR. CRAMER: Right, and we already had our status.

MR. WATERS: Our advisors for Allied was my sister, who had worked with the director [Michelangelo] Antonioni in establishing something called the—at the time it was—the Film Fund. And now, it's the North Star Fund. And so, my sister Linda is a political and arts cultural fundraiser. And so, she helped us with structuring Allied Productions in New York. And then, we kind of maintained—it was kind of this double life in a lot of ways, multiple actually. I mean, there were so many things going on at the same time. But on the legal plane, Allied became the fiscal sponsor of ABC No Rio. And this also became a bone of contention, the transition from Colab.

I remember one of our first Monday night meetings, well, I'm kind of skipping back and forth, but the early Monday night meetings when someone came to us and said, oh, I'm so glad you're here because no one else can get a show here unless they're part of this inner circle. [Laughs.]

MS. KIRWIN: You had to have Colab connections?

MR. WATERS: Yeah.

MR. CRAMER: Yeah, there was a certain—

MR. WATERS: This was a perception. Who knows?

MR. CRAMER: This was a perception—I didn't—I wasn't so aware of it at the time, but, you know, if you just look at the catalogue, you can see just the curation and the artists involved.

MS. KIRWIN: Well, those were the people that they knew.

MR. WATERS: I think it's natural.

MR. CRAMER: Those are the people who were sort of willing to come because it really was a social milieu.

MR. WATERS: But at the same time, Colab never refused anyone. The Colab never said, no, but the arguments could become intense and it was pretty clear what the power structure was and how the power dynamics were. Even though they were informal, Colab had a president; there was someone who would be elected president from time to time. But that was a moot point because the real issue was like, if you're in the family, or if you're out of the family, and what role you played in the familial structure there. So on top of the legal structure—and I think it's like with any organization—I mean, because they are a marriage, literal marriages and blood ties as well as social relations as well as the aesthetic and philosophical and ideological bonds that it was it makes it what it is.

MS. KIRWIN: When you came in, what kind of energy did you bring that you felt was new, to Colab?

MR. CRAMER: Well.

MS. KIRWIN: I imagine they were kind of tuckered out at that point, the people who—

MR. CRAMER: They were kind of tuckered out. They were doing things mostly in galleries and, you know, they were doing things outside of No Rio, too, because of Colab's history. So you know, ABC No Rio was really just another space to function in. But we, as performers and being downtown and also queer, sort of brought this whole level of performers from the Pyramid down there. And—

MR. WATERS: But we wanted a more, a more—

MR. CRAMER: A little more international somehow.

MR. WATERS: More international, a more decided queer, gay and lesbian aesthetic, more performance-driven. We established a film program we called Naked Eye Cinema. Colab, I think, was by and large focused on visual art; they were visual artists. In fact, we came, we should talk about "Art on the Beach," because at the time, the funding and the foundation, was emphasizing this idea of interdisciplinary practice. And we had already come from this notion of not being purists in any

medium.

And No Rio, they were doing, they had the cardboard bath—

MR. CRAMER: Right, they did film programs. It was just, you know, I think that our bent was maybe not directly kind of as political on the face of it.

MR. WATERS: We were less didactic; we have politics, but we came in with a more amorphous—

MR. CRAMER: It was more, kind of, you know, definitely more kind of clubby and more colorful and you know, a little more—

MR. WATERS: Our politics are definitely not as didactic. We weren't doing things that were specifically realistic. I mean, we did "U.S. out of Central America," we did, "Art Against Apartheid." You know, we were doing—

MR. CRAMER: But those were all so national, national efforts.

MS. KIRWIN: They weren't about playing to the Lower East Side or anything.

MR. WATERS: Not as much. We were—

MR. CRAMER: Not as much, but there was a metaphor for the gentrifiers in the Spanish communities as much as the United States government was in Central America. So that was quite a powerful thing that was used by many of the artists.

MR. WATERS: But as an example, creative time was a very strong force at that point. And Battery City Park was still just a landfill. And so, they something called "Art on the Beach," where I guess it was '84 probably, '83 or '84. And this was part of our transition coming into No Rio still. And No Rio, the parameters for "Art on the Beach" was to pair an architect, a visual artist, and a theater person. And I think that what the Colab group had—the artist, I guess, was Kiki [Smith], Tom Otterness, Fiona Templeton was theater—

MR. CRAMER: I can't remember. Was it Ilona Granet? I think it was Ilona, Tom, and Fiona.

MR. WATERS: But in any case, they were all Colab members. And they all qualified for this Creative Times' structural premise. And they were supposed to do, I think, two performances. And they got one. You know, Tom had these really amazing sculptures. You know, he did these amazing sculptures. And they did one; I think it was a lot of fun. And then, they were finished. They were like, okay, that was fun. Do you guys want to—you guys are performers; do you guys want to do it? We're like, yeah, because it was big. That was like a big deal. So we kind of, you know, piggy-backed on their resources and as well as their reputation and use these installations. We completely changed the narrative.

MR. CRAMER: Right. We didn't even really use their—we just were using the beach. We kind of stayed away from their structures they were doing. I created a set.

MR. WATERS: Right, you built you own set. Right.

MR. CRAMER: There was a huge kind of like a dune practically. It was like a 30-foot bluff that was created with all of the sand. And she used that to do this amazing, you know, performance.

MR. WATERS: Right, we didn't use their—we weren't even using. You can see them in documentation—

MR. CRAMER: It was really just kind of, we were in this dance.

MR. WATERS: Yeah, it kind of used the whole, yeah—so we inherited the venue itself.

MS. KIRWIN: I'm going to put on another disk at this point.

[Break.]

MS. KIRWIN: This is the second disk on September 6, 2007. And you were talking about the beach, art on the beach project.

MR. CRAMER: Do you remember what the title of their piece was?

MR. WATERS: Which piece?

MR. CRAMER: Colab's piece.

MR. WATERS: No. But we have that. Also, we have records.

MR. CRAMER: Of course, we have flyers and posters about it.

MR. WATERS: Yeah, I don't remember. I know that there was a castle. There was a kind of play on the idea of royalty and Kiki [Smith] was the princess. [Laughter.]

MS. KIRWIN: For the things that were going on at ABC No Rio, was there an effort to get press or bring in new audiences; was that important?

MR. CRAMER: De facto, it was because there was a whole new group of people there. And people, the artists that came in, were more responsible for their own press than we were. That wasn't really our function.

MR. WATERS: But we inherited press visibility as well. Because the Real Estate Show and the "Time Square Show"—"Real Estate Show," especially, was more of a media event than an art exhibition. And so, there was attention, there was press credibility. But that, by and large, was more for Colab. And as ABC No Rio shifted and changed, there wasn't all that much—

MR. CRAMER: Right, we didn't have the same kind of track record or connections. We didn't really have—but we weren't particularly interested in pursuing it, either, because part of our—

MR. WATERS: Well, we kept a press list. We kept press lists and we sent press releases. And we tried to maintain contact. But we didn't have a press specialist. We didn't have someone. We were more focused on the event itself. So we didn't ignore it. We made sure that things were announced, but we didn't do the kind of follow up, the kind of hardcore follow up.

MR. CRAMER: Right, my little adage that I always thought was apt was that ABC No Rio doesn't produce artists; artists produce themselves. So ABC No Rio was the space on which you could do whatever in. But you were responsible for everything, from the gallery hang to the press to the reception, because there was no real funding for it; there wasn't that kind of infrastructure of staff and that type of thing.

MR. WATERS: There was no staff that was designated. It was artist run; it's all artist run.

MS. KIRWIN: It's just you and the group and people who are interested.

MR. CRAMER: Exactly. And many artists themselves; they would come in and they would become integrated once they'd done a show and then, they'd sort of stick around for a little while and be a part of that.

MR. WATERS: But like, we had an artist come in from California, which I was not—

MR. CRAMER: Right, our friend Kembra Pfahler who was also another person that was, you know, part of our milieu and had done a show called the Extremist Show, which was another show that was dealing with various manifestos. And Kembra knew this guy from California, Mike Parker—

MR. WATERS: She didn't know him; she was just interested in him. His theme was post-surf realism. And we thought it was fluff and not very important. And Kembra convinced us that the surf culture actually was like a valid aspect of the American experience. And he also was gay, which—

MR. CRAMER: And the works were homoerotic.

MR. WATERS: Were homoerotic, which of course peaked our interest once we realized that. But then, New Yorker magazine was also very intrigued. And so, he got a nice "Talk of the Town," a nice writeup in the "Talk of the Town." Walter Robinson, who was part of the Colab group was still an editor at Art in America. And so, there would be notices—

MR. CRAMER: Right, like when you did the veto vote show, the poster that I created for the show and our performances that happened at No Rio and at A Salon at Federal Plaza down at Richard Serra's Tilted Arc when they did their annual, you know, they asked, well, give us an image. And so, I was able to be included with that. So there was still this connection to—it wasn't like Colab dismissed the whole project once we took over, so there was still a lot of—

MR. WATERS: There was an overlap; there was definitely, you know, continuity.

MS. KIRWIN: Did the East Village Eye write about this?

MR. WATERS: Yeah, also there was the East Village Eye, Leonard Abrams. But again, East Village Eye was more associated with the Colab—

MR. CRAMER: Of Colab, too, but also just the development of SoHo into this new, the sort of, this merging of art and fashion and, you know, culture, with music and—

MR. WATERS: You never feel like you get enough. [Laughter.] So I think Peter's attitude is that there was not. But there, I think, is a substantial press notice. But what did shift was that it started to become less about the art and creativity and more about the real estate and what was happening about No Rio as an endangered [space]—what was it? The New York Newday, the Times, the Post—

MS. KIRWIN: Were you constantly threatened with being evicted from that space?

MR. CRAMER: Right, because of the conditions, even as a—was a commercial lease? I'm not even sure if it was a commercial lease that they were given. So the city was still responsible for maintaining—

MR. WATERS: No, it was in Becky's [Howland] name.

MR. CRAMER: So it was almost as if it were an artist's home, so that they were responsible for maintaining the building. And when they didn't do it, we wouldn't pay the rent. And so, there were lots of times where it would accumulate and we would get into these—

MR. WATERS: Because we were putting the money into the building because the city did not maintain the building and because we would not have had a facility without a functioning roof and plumbing and literally, walls, the funding that we had would go into maintaining the building. And so, we felt that the landlord was not fulfilling their obligation, the landlord being the city of New York.

MR. CRAMER: Not only to us but to their residents, because some of the conditions in the apartments were—

MR. WATERS: The residents that were left there. And so, from that point on, we were constantly fending off eviction notices. So it almost seems—I don't know what the history was—

MR. CRAMER: And there was a bit of laissez-faire attitude on the city's part, in terms of actually even trying to evict us. Because they had gotten so much bad publicity when they closed down the "Real Estate Show," which led to the giving the building that they didn't want that kind of turbulence at the time.

MR. WATERS: But we were living from eviction notice to eviction notice and meeting to meeting. There were years of conferences and meetings. We had a lawyer at one point, again through Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts. And he just thought it was the greatest thing because he normally defended the city. So he thought it would be like the most fun, you know, to go to bat for us, Charles Boulbol. But basically, what he did was he kept us from being evicted. So we never really were secure and all of our energy and focus was in just keeping the facility.

MR. CRAMER: And it was kind of like an ongoing, you know, joke among everyone that, you know, okay, No Rio is in trouble again. So everybody would rally around and there would be marches over to HBD or Cooper Square on 4th Street or down to the offices on Gold Street.

MR. WATERS: But as the cultural economics shifted as well, because the "Real Estate Show" established, you know, there was a great deal of interest in the fact that there were artists who were doing an action that was focused on education and health care and senior care and so forth. And, like, why is the city not doing this? It was an embarrassment.

MR. CRAMER: Right, they were warehousing. There was just all of this real estate that was empty, not being used.

MR. WATERS: And the press picked up on it. But then, at a certain point, it got tired of what they perceived as the same story. And also, as the real estate value in the East Village and the Lower East Side began to escalate, it became more of an issue of why should you stay? In other words, the interest in the kind of social well-being that was more prominent in the press in the '70s and early '80s shifted to a less concerned attitude, I feel.

MR. CRAMER: Well, I think it was just, it wasn't so much that it was—the concern was to present the city that it was pulling itself out of bankruptcy, because, you know, there was that whole thing before, drop dead, because the city failed in the early '70s and was on the verge of bankruptcy. And so, when that happened, that's when a lot of all of these buildings started being abandoned, started being torched so the landlords could get insurance money. And with the rise of the drugs

that were just flooding all of the lower, the minority and also the less economically-advantaged neighborhoods that really was a real blight. And so, the city was—I mean, this is it. I mean, now we're here, 20 years later, and the city is still trying to produce this happy face that [Rudy] Giuliani had sort of put on in terms of the whole issues of quality of life and how New York could get a hold of the crime and the drugs. And so, it's really taken that long for the city to come back.

Even with 9/11 happening, it's been a really slow process. And now that it's there, now, they move out to other neighborhoods. So now, it's in Harlem and it's out in Brooklyn and, you know, Williamsburg or in DUMBA [Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass] and all of this economic growth that's been generated has created, you know, a whole new—

MS. KIRWIN: Now, they do own the building, right?

MR. WATERS: Now, they own the building. It's very interesting irony when a group that's about anarchists are in a phase of capital development. It will be really interesting—and they're doing really well because when Peter and I and our group of people left ABC No Rio—and we did formally resign from the board and there was a period where—it was the first because we had an overlap of the founding generation. And as soon as ABC No Rio became autonomous, the people who had established it began to drop out.

MR. CRAMER: Because of the personal liability.

MR. WATERS: Because of the liability issue.

MR. CRAMER: There was no board and indemnification.

MR. WATERS: There was no indemnity insurance and so, once you've reached a certain phase of life, and you feel you have something to lose, the tendency—and also there was contention, a lot of anger that came out of just the struggle, the struggle of maintaining and surviving. And then, also, Allied Productions had been the 501(c)(3) and the fiscal management. And so, there was a generation who felt that they were distanced from the hands-on operation.

MR. CRAMER: The management of whatever income there was.

MR. WATERS: And then in our milieu's point, there was this sense of discomfort of, well, why would we hand a checkbook to the people who are not instrumental in generating the funds and don't really have any administrative knowledge or training. So there was some generational—but it was mainly burnout, you know keeping the city—the city really became the biggest predator at that point.

MR. CRAMER: Right, because even though we were involved with that, we were still doing our own performance work; it wasn't like we abandoned that.

MR. WATERS: So we incorporated them and everybody did their job—Becky, Alan—there were meetings about forming the by-laws; they were very consciously thought out. We had volunteer lawyers for the arts consulting us, but structuring was ABC No Rio should be as a legal entity was a very arduous and a very concerted effort. And that, I think, also was part of the burnout. So as soon as ABC No Rio was autonomous, the people who had founded it left. And I think my resignation letter is 1993. Everyone formally resigned from the board.

MR. CRAMER: In different stages; it wasn't like a mass—

MR. WATERS: It was not a mass exodus, which was very interesting.

MR. CRAMER: And there was always a constant kind of turnover even from year to year with different people being on the board and a lot of artists like Margaret Bazura—

MR. WATERS: Very healthy in a lot of ways because it was a transitional—

MR. CRAMER: Or someone like there was on the community board like Philip Van Aver, you know, and so there was concerted efforts to make sure there was community ties, you know, with Leonard [Abrams], ties to the press and artists and—

MR. WATERS: So there was, you know, so even amidst what would seem to be pandemonium and chaos, there was always a concerted and conscious awareness of who were where in the world, in the city, in the government.

MR. CRAMER: Mostly because of the funding requirement, really. I mean, because there was that whole shift from the business model as to how you were going to operate a non-profit. And so that really became like a new development that had to be learned and managed.

MR. WATERS: But the bottom line was that we had a lawyer who was defending us very well, but only keeping us from being evicted, never getting site control. And at one point, and a lot of it was a physical concern because the city maintained that ABC No Rio had the storefront, the basement, and the backyard, the non-residential units. There was this sense of politics that had been occurring throughout the decade of low-income residents versus artists, which is very racially driven, artists being white and residents being people of color, which I feel is also a very calculated—

MR. CRAMER: In this neighborhood, particularly.

MR. WATERS: Particularly in this neighborhood, but also—

MR. CRAMER: Because they were actually trying to develop artist housing.

MR. WATERS: So artist housing in SoHo and the Lower East side; there were many, many projects. And because, as the real estate became more valuable, and because the city, as an entity, owned a large part of the real estate, there was that there was a kind of a back and forth seesaw imbalance of power dynamics, one being people with money and resources, another being people who had established political ties, which are not particularly wealthy, but just people who had been in the city and who participate in the political process.

But then, the race card starts to become prevalent, using words like "artist housing" versus "low-income housing." And you know, there were these very clear racial dynamics. So with ABC No Rio, we had made a stipulation with the city of New York. And see, the city becomes liable because they are all elected officials. So if you violate a political mandate, then the elected officials are at risk of not being re-elected. And so, there was a mandate that ABC No Rio would occupy the non-commercial, the non-residential units. And we'd absolutely not because there were times when Pierre and I would appeal to occupy the upper floors; the city would renovate though and, you know, do really beautiful, beautiful, thorough renovations, but they would never do anything structural.

So the water would come in, the rain came in—

MR. CRAMER: Until push came to shove, literally, from next door when they—

MR. WATERS: So contractors would make, like, you know, good money. And if you had a city position, you could select the contractors; so there's a certain quid pro quo both in the contracting and in the identification of which building was up for grabs through the city. So we left with the stipulation that we would not occupy the residential units. And the problem being that if you don't maintain the building, then the building falls apart. And in the absence of finances and also, what sense would it make to finance the maintenance of a building that you don't particularly own. It's a capital issue, but still, it's a difficult one when you're funding—first of all, it's contracted for creative purposes to begin with and then, secondly, you don't own the building. And if you upgrade it, then you risk driving the value of your own rent prices, up.

So what happened after we left, you know, we left with legal representation intact. But the body, what had happened creatively, there was a matinee of hardcore music originally from San Francisco from what was called the homo-core. It was a movement of gay hardcore music. It was very short-lived on the West Coast.

MR. CRAMER: It was like anti-sexist, anti-homophobia, anti-racial.

MR. WATERS And what happened with homo-core, it developed into a more generalized pro-feminist, anti-racist movement of very, very, very young kids. And what's happened now is that those are actually literally the offspring of the founding generation, you know, Jane—

MR. CRAMER: Jane Sherry?

MR. WATERS: Not Jane Sherry; she was married to John Martin. Anyways, you know, their kids are now the current population of this hardcore matinee.

MR. CRAMER: But that's already another talking 10 or 15 years apart between homo-core and now —

MR. WATERS: But at the time that we had transitioned, they were very semi-anarchist. So we had a stipulation that we wouldn't occupy the residential units. And they had to, they did. And they completely violated the stipulation. So Charles, our lawyer, had called them and said, Jack, what are we going to do? They're violating a stip; what should I do. He was really conflicted because he was very devoted and dedicated. And I said, just do what we're doing, walk away. And although we weren't walking away in our hearts, and actually, we did legally distance ourselves. We resigned from the board of directors; we were no longer the operating management.

MS. KIRWIN: So the music groups were living in the building?

MR. CRAMER: Yeah, they took over building. And they eventually like, this is now. I don't know exactly when that actually all transpired.

MR. WATERS: It was like mid-'90s. We're only involved in ACT UP at this point, our friends are dying of AIDS. And so politically, also, our priorities are shifting in a big way.

MR. CRAMER: Our whole identity is becoming much more pronounced, more visible. Before, we were just sort of, you know, queer performers that may or may not have been exhibiting that. But once the AIDS crisis started there was no way you could ignore it. And so, even our work shifted to a degree.

MR. WATERS: Not to mention our attention. I mean, we were going to funerals all of the time; we were going to hospitals all of the time; we were taking care of our own, maintaining our own health.

We were going to demonstrations. So this really became our focus.

MR. CRAMER: Right, and there was also a distancing of generations because of that issue about, you know, the control of the purse strings and accusations of us mismanaging it. So there was certain feelings of resentment that came up because, I mean, it was so little money that it just seemed absurd that we would be able to—you know, maybe because we were actually doing these shows that took us outside of the space that we were actually diverting money, when it was really our own initiative and like, the one that happened in Hamburg, the "10 years and Seven Days" show or whatever, something like that.

MR. WATERS: At the same time, the squats were being crushed. We were having people tear, tear —

MS. KIRWIN: You couldn't reason with these people in the building?

MR. WATERS: This is the city of New York.

MS. KIRWIN: No, I mean the musicians in this building.

MR. CRAMER: No, it was there; it was there. They were actually really affected.

MR. WATERS: No, they were good. We support—well, the argument, the contention was highly emotionally charged having to do with bookkeeping and so forth and so on.

MR. CRAMER: Yeah, but we're talking about—I mean, in terms of the squatting the building—

MR. WATERS: In terms of the occupation, yeah, no, that was good. That we supported. But we were not supporting it legally. We signed a stipulation; we signed a legal stipulation saying we would not do it. So there was no way that you could support it. I suppose one could argue the point, but the lawyer was asking me what he should do, what I wanted him, what I thought he should do. And I was at that point, at a loss, and feeling more protective of him because he was saying, because for his client, basically, to violate a stipulation, if he doesn't have the wherewithal to defend it. And then, it also becomes a personal, because we had established an association with him.

I was his contact. I don't think you were really having a lot—you were really more involved with the incorporation. At that point, we actually were splitting up responsibilities. And I was like the focus for the litigation along with Lou Acierno, who was, I guess like the third, the generation of directorship after us. You know, he had the formal title of director, but we were still working cooperatively and collaboratively.

MR. CRAMER: Right and we had tried to initiate this. Was it like a committee, actually this whole queer—they were all queer artists and tried to get them to, you know, take over the whole—

MR. WATERS: And that was very short lived.

MR. CRAMER: Very short lived. Because they were also in the same situation of, you know, dealing with the AIDS crisis, I think, too. They were coming on a different level. You know, they were more just like—

MR. WATERS: Didn't have the experience. They, you know, were new to the city so they didn't really have the history of understanding what it meant to be part of a political process and what they the relationship was. They were coming as artist curator. By that time, you know, we were

engaging people as artist curators. And so, it's like, oh.

MR. CRAMER: Right as we were sort of doing the brass—[inaudible, laughter.] The first testing.

MR. WATERS: I don't think I can do that. It's interesting when you look at these archives. When you look at the letters and the correspondence, I mean, this story is all documented and in the record. When you look at the finding aid, you'll see references and you can go to ABC No Rio and see them. But as it's happening, there's not necessarily a continuity, because it's just happening.

But these are all people who are all literate and so a lot of this is—and it's also for e-mail so it's actual hardcopy correspondence, which is very lucky, I think, for ABC No Rio. At that moment when the lawyer, you know, is asking what should he stay and support this organization. I was no longer a part of it in a formal way so I really had no—I really had no basis for advising him as a real part of ABC No Rio in that respect. And so I just said, walk away and he did and the anarchists did things in their own way and it worked.

MS. KIRWIN: How did work?

MR. WATERS: Well, that you'd have to ask Steve [Englander, current director of ABC No Rio].

MS. KIRWIN: Okay.

MR. CRAMER: Because once we started doing these shows—like the fifth anniversary show was the first time that some of the work that had been found in the basement was exhibited from the various shows. And so that became the core of the archive and then we did another show in Windsor, Ontario at an art site simultaneous with an Allied [Productions] show at the Michigan Gallery in Detroit. So we had a No Rio in Canada and Allied in Detroit. And then we did another show in Hamburg so, you know, all of this work was still sort of was assembled and—

MR. WATERS: In spite of work that was originally in the basement had moved to Charas [El Bohio Cultural and Community Center, at Avenue B and East Ninth Street] and that was another one of our early assignments. Aside from maintaining the fountain and placating the predators, we also learned—Alan [Moore] taught us like archiving techniques. And then also, we had friends who worked for various collections. We learned art handling. And so, we took this collection and we would show it in these traveling shows and we'd pair the collection—what we called the permanent collection, with what was going on with No Rio at the moment.

MR. CRAMER: Right. So our works that people—then we started actually making it a concerted effort. But, you know, at the end the show, would you like to donate this so that in the event that we can, you know, that if it was sold or whatever, you know, if we were able to sell things that that would be possible. At one point after the No Rio show in Hamburg, there was a lot of interest from the—I don't remember particularly the name, but there were people interested in buying the collection.

MS. KIRWIN: The whole thing?

MR. CRAMER: Yes. Whatever it was, you know, whatever we could give them, they wanted it.

MS. KIRWIN: Lock, stock, and barrel?

MR. CRAMER: Yes and that's actually always been our premise. That the only way that it could be sold was that it remain together.

MR. WATERS: Intact. In perpetual.

MS. KIRWIN: Oh.

MR. CRAMER: And that it would, you know—and so that's why it's never sold. [Laughter.]

MR. WATERS: Even though there's more respect and value of it in Europe, because I think that European relationship is traditionally been different than American for art and creative process. We've always felt that it's really important to stay here intact.

MS. KIRWIN: Were performances also—was that a part of the traveling exhibition?

MR. WATERS: Mm-hmm.

MR. CRAMER: Yes, performances were kind of an essential part because once you have the exhibition up, that would be one way to bring people back again to, you know, so that they could see the work.

MR. WATERS: And cinema and, you know, movie image.

MR. CRAMER: Right. Music.

MR. WATERS: Music.

MR. CRAMER: Artist books.

MS. KIRWIN: With your efforts to reach out to community around ABC No Rio, what do you think were the most successful projects?

MR. CRAMER: Marta Valle [Secondary School at 145 Stanton Street] was very successful. I was able to engage Wayne Sides, who was a professional photographer and Abigail Child, who's a well-known filmmaker—avant-garde filmmaker.

MR. WATERS: Educationally, we actually had a very strong—

MR. CRAMER: Oh, yes, there was Marta Valle, where you had like a mentorship program but not only with those two artists, but also the Educational Alliance where students were going to, you know, other—

MR. WATERS: Fred Kahl came as an intern. He was at NYU's art program and he was particularly interested in education at the time so he became the head of our educational project, which is—

MR. CRAMER: On site.

MR. WATERS: On site, was funded by New York Foundation for the Arts.

MR. CRAMER: But he didn't actually get funding from them.

MR. WATERS: No, I'm saying—

MR. CRAMER: But Abigail—

MR. WATERS:—the program—

MR. CRAMER: And Abigail and Wayne, I mean, they were paid quite handsomely, I thought, at the time.

MR. WATERS: But then we had the Educational Alliance was a partner in the program and so what we did was combine resources so that the film and video component would document the—what was it, arts and education—I think it was the Educational Alliance's arts and education and they're agenda was career development.

MR. CRAMER: Right.

MR. WATERS: And so we were just the creative wing of a larger program that was coming out of the Educational Alliance.

MR. CRAMER: Right. I mean, I wrote a NYSCA [New York State Council for the Arts] grant for the Arts and Education when they had an issue. It wasn't successful. I mean, it seemed like, you know, it should be easily funded but I think they, you know, looked very carefully at the structure of the board and the economics that we're dealing with and there wasn't enough there for them.

MR. WATERS: But we adhere that to a mentorship program that we had established in-house. So the Educational Alliance, they would—you know, we would have kids going there and working with people in elderly homes.

MR. CRAMER: Right. It didn't prevent us from doing the programs any ways.

MR. WATERS: We'd just do it anyway. I mean, you know, funding or not.

MR. CRAMER: So that would have been one. I think the traveling exhibitions were really successful in developing a wider audience and dialogue with people in Germany and what else?

MR. WATERS: This is the only thing when you interview Steven [Englander] he'll give you access to the article. You know, they were actually really, really very well written articles. I think it was the New York Post on the education. We've had several educational programs and basically what happened is it developed as we went along. But there was one point that really peaked where we were combining our in-house mentorship program with a program that was going on with the Educational Alliance and funded through the New York Foundation for the Arts, which was the Arts in Education Grant. So what we basically have was the infrastructure—this educational program that was very, very cleanly and smoothly integrated into the programming at ABC No Rio.

MR. CRAMER: It was actually artist in residence.

MR. WATERS: Artist in residence.

MR. CRAMER: It wasn't really artist in education because that was still—

MR. WATERS: You're right. Artist—yes.

MR. CRAMER: Because CCF [Cultural Council Foundation] had already—they had had that—I mean, all you sponsored an artist back in like 1979 or something and it was literally because he said he needed a signature. And I had just remembered the form that he had to sign and so there was already this kind of artist in residence or artist doing community projects. So that's what that particular thing was.

MR. WATERS: Yes, because this is how we combined them because Educational Alliance would send kids to this real estate firm, Moody's like Real Estate something. But then they would also send them to a senior care center, a childcare center, and so we made the documentation of it part of our media component. And then, at the same time, I think—

MR. CRAMER: Right because at that time, we started becoming more—

MS. KIRWIN: And who would work with the kids on that?

MR. CRAMER: We would directly or Fred Kahl, is part of it because he knew photography and video was, you know, the VHS was just started.

MR. WATERS: But we'd assign whatever artist was in residence and ABC No Rio would—you know, I think at—[inaudible]—we did a fashion show there at one point and there was—

MR. CRAMER: But that was early on though. I mean, later—I'm just trying to think of who in particular would have been a good example of like artists that, you know, that came in and actually did, you know, something.

MR. WATERS: In residence.

MR. CRAMER: In residence or even just because we had had this structure of the students coming to the gallery that they would, you know—

MS. KIRWIN: Did you ever work with Tim Rollins—

MR. WATERS: Not directly but we were very aware of what he was—

MR. CRAMER: But he was in the south Bronx.

MR. WATERS:—with K.O.S. [Kids of Survival]. Well, see this—

MR. CRAMER: That's worlds away.

MS. KIRWIN: That's way far away. [Laughter.]

MR. CRAMER: That is. It is.

MR. WATERS: Yes and no but also, Fashion Moda was in the south Bronx and—

MR. CRAMER: Right.

MS. KIRWIN: Yes, I wanted to ask about Fashion Moda and whether there cross-pollination or, you know—

MR. CRAMER: I think Stefan [Eins, founder of Fashion Moda] was on the board for something.

MR. WATERS: Stefan Eins was on the board of directors of ABC No Rio and I think he still is associated on a board level with Colab. And Stefan I guess he built Fashion Moda and so we did a number of projects with Stefan. I don't—

MR. CRAMER: I was a kind of constant cross—

MR. WATERS: Cross over.

MR. CRAMER:—pollination and just—

MR. WATERS: Yes.

MR. CRAMER:—the graffiti culture because we had graffiti shows at No Rio and he was even more involved with that than we were.

MR. WATERS: And there were so many things going on that there were many things that we didn't have physical contact with so there would be things happening with—who was that guy, James [Poppitz]—he had done a show at ABC No Rio and he was doing a dual-exhibition at Fashion Moda. So things like that. There's always been this association of ABC No Rio/Fashion Moda.

MR. CRAMER: Yes, I think it was—Stefan was a member of Colab, too.

MR. WATERS: Yes.

MR. CRAMER: So, I mean, there was—I mean, it's not like we didn't know of what each of us was doing.

MR. WATERS: But when you talk to other people and you see the literature, you start to get a clearer picture. At least a different picture of what's happening in our memory.

[Laughter.]

MR. WATERS: It will be really interesting to see.

MR. CRAMER: Yes, it was definitely, you know, sex and drugs and rock and roll and graffiti and, you know, just this—that high. You know, I think it—when was the High-Low Show—["High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture" at the Museum of Modern Art in 1990]

MS. KIRWIN: High-Low Show.

MR. CRAMER:—at MOMA?

MS. KIRWIN: Well, that was in the '90s.

MR. CRAMER: The '90s, but, you know, it was already like 10 years after this had been fomenting, you know, since, you know, the fall of the city and just like people because there were these areas where people could move into neighborhoods where things were cheaper. You had a lot of this cross-country cultural, you know, meetings and experimentation.

MR. WATERS: We would always tend to be ahead of the curve but not recognized for it because there's no vocabulary for it yet.

MR. CRAMER: Right. Well, that's—

MR. WATERS: It's always the case.

MR. CRAMER: It's always been the case.

MR. WATERS: Yes and you can only see it in retrospect.

MS. KIRWIN: But what's an example of that that you feel was ahead of the curve that nobody recognized at the moment?

MR. CRAMER: Well, street art like graffiti art and how that manifested in like zines and what do you see, you know, like—

MS. KIRWIN: Didn't ABC No Rio have it's own zine?

MR. WATERS: They've had zines from time to time.

MR. CRAMER: They've had zines, yes. Later, they actually—now they have a huge zine library.

MR. WATERS: This against arts. When the hardcore matinee starts to become a culture.

MS. KIRWIN: Okay. That's a little later.

MR. CRAMER: Right, because that's part of the whole punk aesthetic and, you know.

MR. WATERS: Yes. Even the word zine doesn't really start to become prevalent until like towards the end of our tenure.

MR. CRAMER: Right, I mean it had been established, obviously with the a—I don't know where the term originates but to me, I identify it with this kind of punk—

MR. WATERS: Fan zine.

MR. CRAMER: Yes, maybe from originally fan-zine but, you know, obviously that's the difference between—and actually, that's interesting because it was because of Reagan that there was this kind of shift to like this whole kind of cultural shift that came from the West Coast and started to—it kind of established itself, which was more interested in kind of like the legacy of the Warhol Foundation—you know, not the foundation but the whole Factory. And so, there was this kind of constantly keeping that history of New York alive and that sort of was coming—sort of also pollinating with the graffiti culture and then you have people like Jean Michel Basquiat.

But I would say the street culture like street art, was really—is an example of that. And now you have like someone like the Deitch Project, which, you know, the artist like swoon or, you know—I don't know. Who else I can think of, particularly? But a number of the younger artists at Deitch Projects are all kind of about this skateboard culture or, you know, graffiti, street art.

MR. WATERS: You know, even then I was surprised. I was looking at the publication that Alan Moore and Marc Miller put together and very surprised to see a review of the "Time Square Show" by Jeffrey Deitch, who I thought had surfaced relatively recently. And then to find that, oh, he's been around—[laughs]—for a while. So you have people who are aware of these things but they don't really start to become visible or prominent so—I think that might be an example where it doesn't really hit the cultural mark in terms of being visible and known but it comes. And when I say ABC No —

MR. CRAMER: Well, in the sense that it doesn't move into the commercial realm. Like that's what's taken—

MR. WATERS: Popular realm. The popular realm. And when I say ABC No Rio, I don't mean ABC No Rio as an organization or as a physical space, but I do include Fashion Moda and Group Material

and PAD/D [Political Art Documentation/ Distribution, an activist group], you know, and like organizations.

MR. CRAMER: Paper Tiger.

MR. WATERS: Paper Tiger because they're all part of the same—they really are very much part of the same counter-culture.

MR. CRAMER: I mean, it's really curious to me that there has been no real major show against the war in Iraq from the artists' community, you know, and I think that is just so profound. Like the cultural shift. Like what has caused that? Have we become so enamored of celebrity or youth so that you can just spiral out of any kind of history that exists? It's disconcerting.

MR. WATERS: Well, it's a shift in culture in general that it's not—and I think a lot of it is economically predicated. Whereas in the '80s, political art was a very strong part of art, was a niche, almost for better or worse. And you don't really have that anymore in the same way that the clubs have shifted. Where you don't do concert dance or concert—you know, you don't have John Cage or John Cale or, you know, you don't—I mean, we would do visual art exhibitions at Danceateria and, okay, work we can damage. [Laughter.] But they—

MR. CRAMER: Luckily it was insured. [Laughter.]

MR. WATERS: Yes, everything was insured.

MR. CRAMER: The artists were actually able—

MS. KIRWIN: They made more money.

MR. CRAMER: They made money because they wouldn't have if some of the piece just wouldn't have been sold.

MR. WATERS: We actually made money.

[Laughs.]

MR. WATERS: But there was interest. The club managers and promoters, not only interested as a draw knowing that the artist community was the patronage and would bring in additional patronage, but they actually had a sensitivity and a sensibility about things where there was actual interest and I think it shows something about the cultural shift now, where we've got to the point where it's not even on the map. It's not even a question.

MR. CRAMER: I mean, that's our perspective given the neighborhood that we live in and the people that we are seeing. Of course, there are many other communities that are engaged in a more direct way.

MS. KIRWIN: How do you think your personal politics—both of you, you grew up in politically aware family and you certainly did too, with your father's involvement in government, how did your personal politics influence what went on at ABC No Rio?

MR. CRAMER: I think that there were overlaps. You know, there were parallel lines in terms of the social activism in the community, like civic involvement that kind of overlapped and cross-crossed and, you know, they weren't always—sometimes they were rubbing up against each other.

MR. WATERS: We definitely brought a queer visibility and a queer sensitivity because as Peter was saying, at one point, we actually made a concerted effort to establish a queer administration. This was like during the ACT UP, Queer Nation period and it didn't work. It was short lived. But around the same time, we had a conversation with Steven [Englander], and I don't mind saying this publicly because I think it's very important, and he was talking about an artist and he used the word "art fag," you know, which is a weird word. And I questioned him about it and he said, oh, that's not homophobic, like I don't mean anything about it, it just means like somebody that like is like weak.

But there's sexual implication there. Like "fag" is like a word that people use to demean homosexuals and it was interesting because from his perspective, it wasn't pejorative at all. It was just something that people said. And then later, I think after this anarchist changeover had happened, they found a letter from one of the directors that we had installed, Dirk Hauska, you know, who had come from Hamburg. And his letter was like I can't deal with this any more or you know, with the flooding and things falling apart and the legal stuff.

And so someone who was actually doing a zine documentation that said, oh, well, the word at No Rio is that you guys don't know anything about construction. You don't know how to do—when actually, we had done the plumbing. Brad had one like electrical upgrading. But they found this letter and so my impression was that oh, like this is like—

MR. CRAMER: Like we weren't like the macho, you know—

MR. WATERS: Right. They were like these faggy—

MR. CRAMER: We weren't going to take care of this stuff. [Laughs.]

MR. WATERS: Like these like faggy—like they don't anything about like physical and labor.

MR. CRAMER: Like we can decorate. We can't, you know, we can't repair. [Laughter.]

MR. WATERS: And I think it's a problem in the left in general, you know. I think with feminism and queer rights, it always become separate from a general political agenda. I would like to think that we have had an effect of making people more aware of queer identity politics as an essential and an important and integrated it into the politics of the left.

MR. CRAMER: Of the times when, you know, when there things like Grand Fury and ACT UP and Queer Nation, you know, all of these groups that were really—or even GLAAD [Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation], I guess could even be include in that. Where there was like, you know, okay we're not getting treated—they're treating us as pariahs and, you know, we're going to make a stand. They did some incredible actions that were still influential and, you know, when they happened in terms of zaps [refers to the flooding of phone and fax lines as a political action] or even like when the convention was here.

You know how some of those things re-emerged because there was a like a 10-year period where it was like everything was all about ACT UP. And then once the drugs started working and there was the access to it, there was a falling off from that. And so then, with the escalation of the war and Bush coming into office—

MR. WATERS: So while we were there, we actually were doing shows. We did the Heal Benefit, which was a nutritional response to the AIDS epidemic.

MR. CRAMER: Health education. We did a series on it.

MR. WATERS: We did "Out and Exposed," which was bring young queer-identified artist to No Rio. In fact, that was the impetus for this administration that we had started. So we were actually incorporating that into the programming and so as far as having an effect of our political sensitivity, I would like to think that we have caused an effect on a level of consciousness and I believe that there is an artist, Seth Tobacman), who is a very strong community organizer and housing activist, and he has a very strong associations to the current administration, the administration that came after us. And his consciousness is definitely developed in terms of recognizing queer identity and queer rights as being valid. He works with young people that we have worked with more recently and so I feel that, yes, that has been demonstrated effect.

MS. KIRWIN: And lasting effect.

MR. WATERS: Yes.

[Break.]

LIZA KIRWIN: Okay, this is Liza Kirwin. I am interviewing Jack Waters and Peter Cramer, at their home office on Second Street in the East Village, and it's October 9th, 2007.

And so I listened to the interviews and I did have some questions. And I looked at that CD you sent, thanks very much, both CDs very helpful, especially your outline of the generations.

MR. WATERS: Oh good, I'm glad that was useful.

MS. KIRWIN: Yeah, and I want to talk a little bit about the way you have described it, the second period of the history of ABC No Rio where you come in with—

MR. WATERS: This is a thing that we do for CAA [College Art Association].

MS. KIRWIN: Yeah, looks like this.

MR. CRAMER: Right, I recognize the graphic.

MS. KIRWIN: I just had—I thought I summed it up very well, but if you could elaborate on some—just taking a look at it, just elaborate on some of the highlights there, the beginning of the Naked Eye Cinema and how that came about and what that was, and how often it was. And some of those other things that you've listed there.

MR. WATERS: Okay. Let's do a tag-team style, Peter, so let me do the Naked Eye Cinema and then I'll try and be brief and as concise as possible.

MR. CRAMER: Okay.

MS. KIRWIN: Well, you don't need to be.

MR. WATERS: Oh, okay. Yeah.

MR. CRAMER: Well, I mean, it's going to be—

MR. WATERS: Naked Eye Cinema. What happened was that when we came to ABC No Rio, as I'd mentioned before, even though there was a cross-disciplinary activity happening there, you know, they had already had music and poetry as well as visual art; primary structure was focusing on the visual arts.

When we came into ABC No Rio, by that point our interest had segued from dance into performance, and then was going into film production. And we decided that the best way we were novices, and we were initially working in Super-8. Video was a relatively new format, and so we did use video as an element in our film work but it was primarily Super-8, but it did include 16 mm and video. So we thought that the best way for us to learn about the form was to present much in the way, I found out later, the way that Cahiers du cinéma grew in France before us had decided in order to come to a more thorough means of critical awareness of cinema was to actually practice it and do it.

So we started Naked Eye Cinema, and we had always decided that it was not going to be limited to ABC No Rio as a location or even as a program, but that ABC No Rio would be the locus, would be the base. And so we set up a structure, we wanted to have repeat screenings, and because there was so much activity at ABC No Rio rather than limit it to the facility on 156 Rivington Street, we would repeat the screenings four times within a month, at ABC No Rio, something called New Morning Books which was run by Richard R. Mijo—

MR. CRAMER: No, Embargo.

MR. WATERS: I'm sorry, Embargo Books Limited.

MR. CRAMER: On Rivington Street also.

MR. WATERS: Richard, who had been a forerunner of ABC No Rio at that point, and was a visual artist and also a poet; and then Leslie Loew's Studio, on Nine Clinton Street.

And so the primary facilitators, we called ourselves co-directors of Naked Eye Cinema, was me and Leslie. And so we would combine the programs with the works that we created and they were just very novice-based. But then we'd also go to Donnell Media Center, Women Make Movies, Janus Films, you know, we had a New York filmmakers co-op. So we would get—it was a very broad-based, from classic cinema, experimental, avant-garde cinema, mainstream features, and we would mix that with the little films that we were making ourselves. So that was Naked Eye Cinema.

You know, after that it kind of spread and we would do the programs throughout the United States and internationally.

MR. CRAMER: I would say that Jack was making a distinction about our period and No Rio's. No Rio was—they didn't, you know, the Colab people were making films and it was—

MR. WATERS: Oh yeah. Christof Kohlhofer in Rio.

MR. CRAMER: And also Potato Wolf [an artists' cable TV show produced by Colab] was a part of that. They're celebrating their 25th anniversary, I think this week, with the anthology film archive.

MR. WATERS: You also found the Potato Wolf clips on the Internet, right, just last week? You saw camera, something of cameras?

MR. CRAMER: Yeah, this new online thing called UbuWeb, I don't know if you've heard of it. But someone who's on the board of directors at Anthologies, one of the people that's doing that; I emailed Alan to find out if he knew about it and he knew.

But let's see, looking back at this—I think we covered the Anna Silver [PS 20, 166 Essex Street], the elementary school—

MS. KIRWIN: Yeah, we talked about that last time.

How about this panel at the school of fine arts, with Anton van Dalen?

MR. CRAMER: Yes, Anton still and was teaching at the time at the School of Visual Arts. And I can't remember what the title of the whole, you know, meeting or, you know, panel was about but it was essentially about, you know, this huge boom of media and focusing on the East Village arts scene and—

MR. WATERS: The East Village art boom, basically.

MR. CRAMER: What that was, you know, what that meant for the neighborhood and, you know, the forces of gentrification and the rising of apartments.

MR. WATERS: So Anton set up a panel at SVA to talk about what this meant because there are all of these galleries that were setting up, commercial galleries that were run by artists that were decidedly commercial. But because Anton was coming from Colab and from ABC No Rio, which had this awareness of social politics, he wanted to create a forum where that could be discussed.

MR. CRAMER: It was what, Carlo?

MR. WATER: Carlo McCormick, Gracie Mansion, New Math Gallery, I think was there by then, Fun Gallery was represented there; all of the galleries that were, like, part of this East Village art scene.

And I don't think by that time the article—I think one of the preliminary articles that had appeared started in the East Village Eye. I think Carlo had written an article heralding the East Village art boom, and then he wrote that with Walter Robinson [Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick, "Slouching Toward Avenue D," *Art in America* (Summer 1984)], who at the time was—

MR. CRAMER: Right, that was not in the Eye.

MS. KIRWIN: That was *Art in America*.

MR. WATERS: No, it was *Art in America*. So it was kind of this collaboration between *Art in America* and the East Village Eye. And then it kind of filtered out into the *New York Times* and just like the media at-large.

And so this, I believe chronologically, was a precursor. But the panel itself took this much more of a kind of like a celebratory flavor. Most of the people involved weren't that critically focused. They were just kind of happy, you know, to be recognized.

MR. CRAMER: Riding the wave. [Laughter.]

MR. WATERS: So we were kind of like the Cassandras. We were the ones who were kind of saying well, this is how gentrification works and this is actually what our participation might—

MR. CRAMER: Right. We did that as representatives, not of our own work particularly, but of ABC No Rio because that would have been the whole thrust; not the entire thrust of their action on Delancey Street, so that's something—we were there representing ABC No Rio so it was an interesting thing for us to suddenly take that on. I mean, to be critically aware and at the same time as performers in the small milieu of the Pyramid Club and, you know, going to these art openings that were a part of it. But I think once we took on the helm at No Rio we were, you know, that's the

stance that we were taking.

MR. WATERS: And that event also was something that kind of crystallized, in a way, our position as these kind of insider-outsiders in the whole East Village scene because I think that what the response from people seemed to be was that we were being holier-than-thou. And there was feedback afterwards that ABC No Rio got public grants, and so we didn't have to worry about earned money so we could criticize and talk about that whereas, you know, other people had to work for their money type of thing.

Anton felt kind of bad about it. He apologized, actually, because he felt that we were being ganged up on because most of the people were all participatory in a more commercial way. But for us it was really more of an eye-opener. I mean, we did feel a little bit on the side.

MS. KIRWIN: Was there anyone there, other than ABC No Rio, that you felt were in your camp?

MR. WATERS: Yes and no. Gracie [Mansion]—I mean, we were friends—

MR. CRAMER: Although I don't think there were other non-profits represented on the panel.

MR. WATERS: But because the way the community was set up, I think we talked before about how the club scene was this other arena where people met and worked and socialized. So Gracie, Sur Rodney (Sur), and who else—I think not at that time but actually decades later, we were able to reassess what was happening in their minds, and we kind of found out that they kind of had the same feelings that we did as being like on the outside of things. So that while we were kind of feeling like oh, okay, here we are like these social progressives or whatever, and they were kind of feeling, well, they were being marginalized as well from the art market itself.

So in other words, they were seeing themselves as struggling and innovative much in the way that we were. But at the time, it didn't really feel like we had anyone in our camp because it was PAD/D, which was not there—

MS. KIRWIN: Were they there? Oh, they weren't there.

MR. WATERS: No, Group Material was not there.

MR. CRAMER: I don't think Group Material existed then, but—

MR. WATERS: Maybe not, yeah.

But then the other people who had preceded us and were working along these sociopolitical lines, wasn't. It was very much this panel that was talking about like, new commercial galleries in the East Village, new galleries. And we kind of represented the un-commercial side, and I think that was what Anton felt was a limitation of it as a panel was just having us.

MR. CRAMER: Right. I think our criticism were that they were complacent in the media, you know, hype that was going on and that they weren't being critical, and so they took it as an attack on them. They felt that they did not have control over it but they also realized what it was doing was facilitating their commercial aspirations. So I think that was part of the conflict.

MR. WATERS: But if you talk to Walter [Robinson] and you talk to Carlo [McCormick] and you talk to Sur, I think it would also be illuminating, you know, just to get their perspectives, especially on that event.

Also, we made a recording of the panel which I since digitized, so this is another element that's in ABC No Rio's archive.

MS. KIRWIN: Oh, cool. Good.

MR. CRAMER: Right. In the October magazine that—Cara Ryan and Rosalyn Krause [Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, "The Fine Art of Gentrification," October 31 (Winter 1984)], was a reiteration of a lot of these same ideas.

MS. KIRWIN: That was the—on gentrification?

MR. CRAMER: "The Fine Art of Gentrification."

And that's about—that sort of covers this.

MR. WATERS: Yeah, that's basically—that would definitely be emblematic of the shift.

MS. KIRWIN: And this time period, with this shift, you say it's moving away from strictly visual arts. But were there art exhibitions at ABC No Rio during this period?

MR. WATERS: Oh, absolutely. I think what Peter's saying is really important because it wasn't the actual activity that changed so much as the attitude about the activity. And I think that what happened was that, rather than ABC No Rio being seen as primarily a gallery or a museum, it started to be more concertedly viewed as a venue for multiple venues.

And yes, we very much continued the visual art exhibition, and in fact relied on mature—[Richard] Armijo, Bobby G, Becky Howland, and Alan Moore as advisors on this context with the previous generation so that it wasn't a breach as much as it was a continuation and a development of what had been going on previously.

MR. CRAMER: Right, there were those two—I think we kind of touched on the two exhibitions, the "Art Against Apartheid" and "The U.S. out of Central America" were two of the larger ones that happened.

MS. KIRWIN: When you note exhibitions there, was there somebody there watching it all day long, or did you just leave it and the doors were open? How did it work?

MR. CRAMER: Yes, there was always someone there.

MR. WATERS: It was always a DIY situation, you know, there was always this understanding that the artists would be the managers. So we were kind of overseers and facilitators, and whenever it wasn't possible then of course, we would be there to maintain gallery hours. But we always, always, always emphasized that this is your space now, and this is your show.

MR. CRAMER: Right, your responsibility for keeping it open, keeping it clean.

MR. WATERS: And since they were a collective, it just kind of became part of this organic process because there were group shows and then, depending on the exhibition and what the organizing structure was for that particular exhibition, they would bring in their own infrastructure. And then we would exist as this over-structure in order to make sure that things were visible and safe.

MS. KIRWIN: And then there was the third period, open-mike bad actors, etc.?

MR. WATERS: So what happened was then there was an influx of people from the Northwest coast. This was like the era of, what was it, grunge, like the beginning of like the whole grunge scene.

MS. KIRWIN: 1985 to '88.

MR. WATERS: '85, '88 approximately. And—

MS. KIRWIN: Were you still living there then?

MR. CRAMER: No, '85 we moved to Second Street.

MR. WATERS: So this was at the turning over—this was like, I guess, yeah, the third transfer. And then, when I say it, it has to be taken very broadly because it was never like, okay, now it's yours type of thing. There's always an overlap and always a retention—

MR. CRAMER: Right, it was like an open system, because the day-to-day stuff was taken on by the people that were there during the exhibitions in terms of opening and closing.

MR. WATERS: Open Mike was Matthew Courtney, who I think came in from Portland—was it Portland or somewhere, not—

MR. CRAMER: Seattle?

MR. WATERS: Seattle. You know, just like this Portland-Seattle group. And Matthew came first and he did the Open Mike. And basically, it was exactly that.

MS. KIRWIN: Uh-huh. Is this just once a week?

MR. WATERS: Once a week, it was Sunday. Sunday had been traditionally the spoken-word day;

MR. CRAMER: Right, that was the Sal Salasin [poetry curator], he[Courtney?] was the one that started like the Sunday programs. And then that moved to Dorothy Friedman and Gary Azon took over that, and then it kind of segued into Matthew's taking over later evening slot—

MR. WATERS: But before the Sal Salasin period, there was poesía y música, you know, there's a poetry and music—

MR. CRAMER: Right, but that goes back to the collaborative projects, too, and that may have—

MR. WATERS: Goes back to Colab. But it was a kind of Sunday—I don't know whether that was somehow Sunday became the day for spoken-word. And so in the daytime would be poetry and the Sal Salasin had come over from the St. Mark's Poetry Project, and they were kind of a splint—you know, they would splinter from a poetry project which, interestingly enough as I remember, Sal felt like there was a gay mafia at the poetry project. And ABC No Rio became this venue for people who, in his mind, were not allowed to have time at the poetry project.

And it was kind of funny because we hadn't really developed this concerted gay, queer politic at that point, so it's really funny that we should have been, you know, the foundation or the refuge for people who felt that they were ostracized from something that they felt was like, queer-limited. Again, you know, this is what was Sal's representation of it because there were also several gay poets, particularly—

MR. CRAMER: Right, but the people that run it, I mean, I don't—the person Ed Friedman that was there when I used to work at Danspace Project [at St. Mark's Church], the dance, you know, section of St. Mark's Church. And Ed I, you know, didn't strike me as queer and I don't really know if there was, you know, I'm just wondering where that came out of Sal's mind.

MR. WATERS: Well, there was—was it Bru Dye was the head of the Poetry Project at that point? I don't know, you know what I mean.

MR. CRAMER: I think it's probably just because there was an emphasis on the whole [Allen] Ginsberg School, Gregory Corso, you know, people that were known as queer and whether that was something within the poetry community was still the focus because they were a success, I don't know.

MR. WATERS: I mean, a lot of it I think has to do with just the nature of gender and homophobia where people, you know, kind of see communities and groups that look like are alining along certain gender lines and then feel like, well, I'm out of it and this is why I'm not getting—who knows.

MS. KIRWIN: Maybe they weren't good poets. [Laughter.]

MR. WATERS: Yeah, that would be—it would be the subject of a really interesting study that way.

But the open-mike is then, again, when this influx from the West Coast came in. Matthew Courtney started it. And aesthetically, it started to diverge from what had been happening previously, where there was much more of an interest and attention to commercial entertainment media.

Well, we felt that it was a showcase—I mean, it felt very showcased.

MR. CRAMER: Well, it became a showcase but the pieces, some of them, were kind of cabaret-oriented, you know, with the song-and-dance type of thing. But there were more performance-oriented things so it was a combination of—

MS. KIRWIN: Anybody could just show up?

MR. CRAMER: Yeah, just show up and—

MR. WATERS: Anyone could show up. And I think what it was, I mean, it was something that our group—I mean, it was me, Peter, Carl George, Brad Taylor, Kembra—like we had our own little collective and nucleus. And we didn't really, you know, at that point we became more managerial than participatory in the open-mike scene because it was a scene unto itself. And we kind of saw MTV coming in and just kind of this interest in the East Village now getting away from exclusively the visual art boom into more of like a spoken word, music, who was it, Michelle Shocked, I think came out of the whole open-mike era.

And so, yeah, there started to be more interest from the recording industry, from the television industry because at this point, then, music video also started to become viable.

MR. CRAMER: Right, a number of these people actually worked for—

MR. WATERS: Broadcast arts. Broadway arts.

MR. CRAMER: Which we're doing like, the Claymation stuff and working with Pee-wee Herman's [Paul Reubens] Playhouse, and so that was—

MR. WATERS: Matthew became a persona. Matthew did, like, a bunch of commercials for MTV; you know, he really became this figure. And so I think, in our mind, this is where we sort of say, oh, okay, well this is not exactly what we're interested in. Not that we weren't interested in it because, you know, we were, of course always interested in being involved in that kind of visibility and that kind of representation, but in terms of what we felt was more catering, in a lot of ways, to more entertainment.

MS. KIRWIN: Did a lot of people come to these open-mike sessions? Was there a big audience?

MR. CRAMER: Well, it was a big audience because there were a lot of people that wanted to perform. [Laughter.]

MS. KIRWIN: They were all performing? [Laughter.]

MR. CRAMER: Essentially.

MR. WATERS: Yeah, yeah. [Laughter.]

MR. CRAMER: So it became this very camaraderie feeling of everyone sort of getting their moment. And I could not say that after a few of them that I kept attending. But no, they were very popular and they wanted to take it on the road and move it into other spaces—

MR. WATERS: And it was interesting because in a way, that was one of the—it wasn't that it totally diverged from what our interests and our philosophy was because as Peter said, there was little distinction between audience and performer the performers were audiences for themselves and that was the scene. In that sense, it was very solid and very stable and very well-attended.

I think my feeling was, I remember there was one point where it's like, if we didn't like something, if something wasn't interesting, we would be very vocal in letting people know we'd hiss, or boo. And Matthew was very well-behaved. And so after a performance we'd clap whether you liked it or not, you know, just to be nice. And we felt like, oh, okay, well that's different. That's different. [Laughter.]

And then the Bad Actors came immediately on their tail. They all knew each other from the West Coast. So this is Dean Mathiesen who at the time, I think, was very close friends with Courtney Love and her whole scene, you know, that whole grunge music scene. And this is before she was, you know, very well-known and well before Kurt Cobain. And so Bad Actors was more of a performance group. In a lot of ways, they were more transgressive than the open-mike.

MR. CRAMER: Right, that was even later. That was like an after-hours scene mostly in the basement.

MR. WATERS: So they were concurrent.

MS. KIRWIN: What did they do?

MR. CRAMER: They would just—well, not just in the basement, but they would put up installations and they would just, you know, have music and it was sort of a scene. I think it was, without casting any dispersions on anyone, but I think there was because of the drugs in the neighborhood I think it was kind of like a chill-out place for people that were-

MR. WATERS: They were more sexual; Bad Actors was more sexual, more transgressive sexual. I remember there was one character—there was Dean, there was what was his name, I can't

remember his name, you know, like a nickname. But there was one character they called Shitty Baby, you know, and they'd cover themselves with chocolate. And Shitty Baby would have a diaper and a playpen and they'd basically do this, like, you know, mud like—

MR. CRAMER: Kind of like a Mike Kelly kind of—food. Food orgy.

MR. WATERS: Then there was another performance I remember, where they were having—they had this very polite dinner table; they were all sitting down at this dinner table setup. And they're passing the butter or whatever, and then at the end of the skit, they stand up and there were these dildos sticking up from the chair.

And then also, it was very cross-gender there were like women and men and there was very little distinction. This is when, like, this idea of—

MR. CRAMER: It was the beginning of the whole rise in the club world of club kids, where there was like even further outrageousness of how you looked; there was influence by Lee Bowery coming out of London, the London scene was, you know—

MR. WATERS: Yeah, Lee Bowery would come—

MR. CRAMER: There was an influence coming from London at this time, the music scene. At this point it was kind of, you know, No Rio was very much becoming a cross-current for music as well. So there was, I think, at this time is when the music scene starts to come on and do the whole Saturday afternoon or whenever the hardcore matinees came up. That might be the next section—

MR. WATERS: So schedule-wise these Sunday in the afternoon poetry, like, you know, poetry reading. Early evening, open-mike, which was more performance spoken-word-oriented, you know, something music. And then after-hours, Bad Actors; and Bad Actors—they would do things intermittently. They were not like, part of the Sunday lineup—

MS. KIRWIN: Not every Sunday.

MR. WATERS: Yeah, but—

MR. CRAMER: Right, it wasn't even on Sundays.

MR. WATERS: In fact, they set up a club. We had something they called Z Club, and we were doing a renegade club kitty-corner to ABC No Rio, at this big former institute—

MR. CRAMER: Solidaridad Humana .

MR. WATERS: We called it Solidaridad Humana , now it's known as—

MR. CRAMER: Soto Velez [Clemente Soto Velez Cultural and Educational Center, 107 Suffolk Street]. It's that big school building on Rivington and Suffolk.

MR. WATERS: So that would be very hip-hop, like, the hip-hop oriented. But then Z Club, at No Rio's basement would be tiny, you know, run by Bad Actors. And that would be this more transgressive scene; and there is where I first saw Lee Bowery close-up, and Courtney Love close-up. Things that blew me—I mean, it's like we kind of thought we were, like, really off-the-wall and wildly transgressive, and then yo, you know, here come these people from the West Coast. It was like, Lee with like pinning his costumes to his face with safety pins and Courtney, with the door blowing open

and this like, insane, like thing demanding heroin. Then of course everyone going oh, Courtney's here; they all knew here from the West Coast. It was like the queen has arrived.

MR. CRAMER: The hole is here.

[Laughter.]

MR. WATERS: The hole has opened.

MR. CRAMER: The hole has arrived.

MR. WATERS: And that was very little. You know, it was very—compared to the poetry readings and the open-mike, there would be maybe a handful of people, you know, very, very after-hours, clubby, very select. But then later they'd congregate at Danceteria or—what was the place that was the church.

MR. CRAMER: At Sin Club—

MR. WATERS: Yeah, they'd have bigger clubs. But then No Rio, Bad Actors, Z Club scene was much more like, more of a, you know, like a lounge for the inner circle of this particular contingent. Which, in turn, was connected to the industry through broadcast—they would work as receptionists and as assistants, and so forth and so on.

MS. KIRWIN: In the daytime?

MR. WATERS: Yeah, yeah. That was their day job.

MR. CRAMER: They could hold jobs.

[Laughter.]

MR. WATERS: They could hold jobs. This is another thing that kind of distinguished—

MR. CRAMER: So long as you were a creative person, you could hold down a job that—[laughter]—that's beginning also like, the whole computer technology. Like, that was coinciding with just the ease of how quickly you could do a lot of these—the animation.

MR. WATERS: Broadcast—yeah, because they also did the Pee-wee Herman, they did the—so it's an interesting connection because there you have these people who are very transgressive and working on this stuff, but in a way I feel like they were also feeding the industry in a way because if you remember in the Pee-wee Herman show, there were a lot of like, tongue-in-cheek in-jokes that were allowed to be—

MR. CRAMER: Let's not talk about Pee-wee Herman, okay? Let history take care of Pee-wee Herman. Let's get back to the brass tacks of ABC No Rio.

MR. WATERS: But in terms of connections, this is what, like, the Bad Actors was on a larger scale.

MS. KIRWIN: Yeah. Sounds scary, actually, like this dark—

MR. WATERS: Yeah, it's kind of scary—

MR. CRAMER: Well, just because—well, this is what coincides with like, the increase in the drug

trafficking was going on, was beginning now of the policing of it. So now you have this very—

MS. KIRWIN: Was ABC No Rio raided for drugs?

MR. CRAMER: No, it was never—

MR. WATERS: No, unfortunately.

MR. CRAMER: No, it was too easy to do it—to pick up people on the street, you know. It was the beginning of this CP—like this crime-prevention unit they initiated, I think under [David] Dinkins [Mayor of New York City from 1990 through 1993].

MR. WATERS: This is what they called a red zone.

MR. CRAMER: Yeah, they made it a red zone.

MR. WATERS: This was always the drug trafficking.

MR. CRAMER: So if you were—if you had no—you had to have, if you were picked up without your ID or you had to have an ID and that type of thing.

MR. WATERS: People would come up in limousines, like very highly-placed people, you know, to score their drugs. Like, right off of the Williamsburg Bridge. And at this point, the whole drug scene had become so blatant and then as, like, development was starting to come in the whole era of complacency within the police department, they had to make a show, at least a show, of control and management.

So ABC No Rio, being located practically right on that strip, became a locus. But as far as being, like, a venue, no. I think there was always an awareness that No Rio was an art and a cultural facility, marginal as it was, transgressive as it was.

MR. CRAMER: Right, and maybe something to do with who was going there because you were not, mostly, you were not Latino or black. And that's really the whole, you know—

MR. WATERS:—and they were white, predominantly white.

MR. CRAMER:—profiling was directed at.

MS. KIRWIN: How did people find out about these events at this time? Was it—say, open-mike. Was it just word-of-mouth?

MR. CRAMER: Word-of-mouth; they made flyers. I think it was just—it was a very, kind of, tight neighborhood and a very fluid scene. And also things would get notices in the press listings and things like that so it wasn't—things were not happening in a vacuum.

MS. KIRWIN: This is the fourth period.

Now, were you—you were still very much involved or not at this point? You were.

MR. WATERS: I think at this point I was more involved. Peter had started to become more focused on his day job, such as it was, at Danspace at St. Mark's Church. So I think Peter's still on the board of directors, along with Brad and other people.

MR. CRAMER: Right, we're still getting their 501(c)(3); we're dealing with the building. The building came under attack—not so much under attack, but in the sense that next door, the building was being renovated. They had small bulldozers in there about as tall as a person and as wide, and they put the adjoining wall, the shared wall. And so then this became a whole thing of the city trying to come in and evict us because it was unsafe.

MR. WATERS: So Peter's still on the board of directors at this point, and his primary activity is getting ABC No Rio's 501(c)(3), along with Alan Moore, Rebecca Howland, and the other remaining board members. And this is when we brought in Lou Acierno as the active director.

MR. CRAMER: Right, and how did Lou come in? Lou was a friend of Matthew's?

MR. WATERS: We interviewed him. We did a call, we did a call. We had actually sent out an announcement looking for a director, and Lou had been working with the group, a video group—

MR. CRAMER: Cult X?

MR. WATERS: No, no. Lou's Rehab video [group].

MS. KIRWIN: Was this a paid position?

[Laughter.]

MR. CRAMER: They could live in the building.

MR. WATERS: Yeah, but the exchange from No Rio—

MR. CRAMER: But they didn't have to live in the basement.

[Laughter.]

MR. WATERS: Yeah, traditionally the exchange for directing No Rio was having a place to live.

MS. KIRWIN: That can be very significant.

MR. WATERS: Yes, in New York City, as real estate starts to become more expensive, rents start to become higher. At this point, it's no longer the basement; you know, as we have lived in, but we had started occupying the upper floors.

Bobby G, at that point, went to Cologne.

MR. CRAMER: Right, Bobby G had lived in the third-floor apartment, and—

MR. WATERS:—throughout the whole previous period, throughout our whole time.

MR. CRAMER: But that was something he managed to get when the building was offered to No Rio, I don't know—

MR. WATERS: We don't know. I mean, this is another ongoing controversy—the whole idea of Bobby G's residence in the building because the building itself is earmarked for lower-income, you know, which I think mentioned before, kind of had these racial overtones, meaning Puerto Rican, African American and so forth. So somehow Bobby G had moved from the basement. Bobby was co-director with Becky and Alan, but Bobby was the in-house director. He moved from the basement to

the apartment shortly before we arrived, and stayed there for this whole period.

So now, at this point, Bobby is out of New York and going to Cologne.

MR. CRAMER: Right, and we're using—the apartment is now being used as the living space for Lou, the director.

MR. WATERS: So that was his reciprocation, was having this apartment in Bobby G's assets.

MR. CRAMER: Right, and this is what we were talking about with the whole, kind of, rise of the Internet and realizing what that meant in terms of being able to have more fluid spaces so you weren't stuck at No Rio.

And so this whole traveling thing that Lou developed—

MR. WATERS: So Lou Acierno came in, he brought a partner-assistant, what was his name. He was a musician—

MR. CRAMER: Doug Henderson?

MR. WATERS: No, young guy, really cute. He worked with—oh, I think the joke was that he was Betsy's Johnson. Shea, David Shea. Remember David Shea?

MR. CRAMER: Right.

MR. WATERS: So Lou and David Shea were the co-directors that came in after us because the Bad Actors, you know, they were really more program people. And so, Lou came in and then this was like a conscious transfer of directorship and then I stayed as Allied Productions because at this time, they're still under the legal auspices of Allied Productions and at the same time, we constitute the board of directors. So I am basically working very closely with Lou, David, and Peter is more instrumental in developing their own 501(c)3 with the assistance of Becky. I think Bobby is already in Cologne at this point.

MR. CRAMER: And all they did was sign it.

MR. WATERS: No, no. They researched. I mean, this is also in the records. You know, these are also—when you see the archives, everyone's letters—all of the correspondence, the board minutes are all there. I'm the one who reads them over and over again. I keep in touch. It's very easy to forget and I think Peter doesn't remember as vividly because at this point, he's really more—there was a lot of research. I think we got our volunteer lawyers for the Arts, which people orchestrated, but everyone contributed towards developing bylaws.

MS. KIRWIN: When you developed the by-laws, did you look to any other artists's spaces as models?

MR. WATERS: We looked to our own [Allied Productions]. We looked to—I think there was a—

MS. KIRWIN: Did you talk to—

MR. WATERS:—a template that even volunteered lawyers—

MS. KIRWIN:—Fashion Moda or Franklin Furnace or any of these places?

MR. WATERS: We didn't need to because we had incorporated Allied as an umbrella organization. A multipurpose, umbrella organization. But then also, ABC No Rio had a very well-developed structure. So Allied was much more legalistic in that sense and ABC No Rio was—

MR. CRAMER: I mean, I'd have to look at the terms of—I don't even remember what their—

MS. KIRWIN: I was just wondering if you, you know, said, oh well, maybe they had a good thing going and we should talk to them or—

MR. WATERS: Well, this is where the lawyers come in. I can't remember what the firm is. I would also have to look at the record. But there are also people who are knowledgeable. You know, they're coming from Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts and they work within the arts and so they're the ones who are taking our ideas and our wishes and desires and putting them into concise legal terms.

But because we wanted ABC No Rio to be as open as possible. We're coming from the Monday night meetings but at the same time, we want some kind of stability. And then, also all our conflicts start coming up.

MR. CRAMER: Right. There was always this idea that whenever you created your bylaws, they were to be as open as possible so that you could be flexible. But that's really as much as I remember. And in talking to other people about, you know, that, I think it was really, you know, using what we had as the Allied example and also, what Volunteer Lawyers was offering us.

MR. WATERS: But we were so very much controlling ABC No Rio on a board level and I can say from my part, it was very conscious. And if you look at the correspondence and the record trail, you can see that we definitely trumped people. We had the board stacked so that we were able to make sure that it didn't go—because the thing about ABC No Rio, as it developed a reputation and name, everyone would want to use ABC No and we would have discussion with Bad Actors, with Open Mike, where they'd want to do an event at this place and at that place as "ABC No Rio" and we would say, "No." And we didn't have any legal basis to do that but once we incorporated and had a functional board—

MR. CRAMER: Well, it wasn't even the incorporation. It had to do with the fact that ABC No Rio was a space. It was a specific location and that's what it was. If you wanted to do another event you would come up with another name. If you wanted to draw on the fact that you were doing the programming at No Rio and you have a problem with it, of course, but there was something that came off as kind of opportunistic in using the history of No Rio, where it seemed like it wasn't quite so representational of what No Rio was philosophically, because things were shifting. And so it was really only in the instance of, as far as I know, in one instance with Open Mike with Matthew.

MR. WATERS: Mid-Matthew.

MR. CRAMER: Yes, I think wasn't really terribly, you know—

MR. WATERS: Well, it's not terribly contentious in terms of that but it was and it came up. And at this period, what's happening now, is you have these two simultaneous conditions of control. One being social and the other becoming legal. So the social aspect being people who had seniority and respect. So we looked up to the founding directors. At the same time, we saw that their priorities and agendas were beginning to shift and then we also were starting to develop our own respect.

MR. CRAMER: Right, we were trying to also bring in people that we thought were like minded. Like people from like Cheap Art, like Esther Kaplan.

MR. WATERS: Esther Kaplan.

MR. CRAMER: We brought in or also like Leonard Abrams, who is one of the original publishers of the East Village Eye and was great friends with all the Colab people, other artists, like Nancy Sullivan. We had Philip Van Aver, who would be very kind of close liaison with the community board. Robin Goldsmith—

MR. WATERS: Robin's not on the board—oh, yes, she was. You're right.

MR. CRAMER: Right and that was kind of—I mean, she was—

MR. WATERS: This is the board of directors that is Allied.

MR. CRAMER: You know, those are just some of the examples over this period of trying to develop the board more as we are trying to get the 501(c)3. We thought, well, maybe it should be more stable and this is what it is going to be working towards.

MR. WATERS: But we also have Brad Taylor, Peter, myself, Carl George. Like people who we had worked with prior to coming to ABC No Rio, which constituted a majority. So whether we were a 501(c)3 or not. We would run things by consensus. When there was conflict, it would become a vote and we have the majority.

MS. KIRWIN: That's a good way to run your board.

MR. WATERS: Yes. We're always deferring to Robert's Rules [of order] without necessarily letting it be an absolute sticking point.

MS. KIRWIN: How did you feel when the book came out about ABC No Rio, it was fairly young in the history of the organization.

MR. CRAMER: Well, we were kind of excited that it was—I mean, that we were included in it, I guess, and that it wasn't just focusing on ABC No Rio so if you had just picked up the book and all you knew about was ABC No Rio, it gave you a whole purview of the East Village and the music scene and everything else that—

MR. WATERS: When it came out, it was controversial because it was funded, like a lot of stuff, from program funds. We never really had general operating funds, and so that was—

MR. CRAMER: I thought it was all done through collaborative projects.

MR. WATERS: No, if you look at—

MR. CRAMER: But—okay.

MR. WATERS: Becky had problems, even Alan's own generation had reservations about how it was funded. So, that—so on one level, as Peter's saying, we thought was really great and really important, but then in a—on a pragmatic level it was like, okay we're spending money for this that's supposed to be going to artist fees and program expenses and so forth. So, there was contention, but that was overridden by the idea that everyone felt it was important.

Alan was very successful with conveying the idea that a book is lasting and what we found out subsequently was that Alan had always had this intention of an archive, from the very beginning,

and publication. He didn't necessarily communicate that thoroughly, but he always operated with that, you know, and later, you know, has his doctorate in art history. So, this is what we're going through as going, well this is great—you know, this is great, like, there's a book and it's been very inclusive and we'll all be represented and it will also have like this very broad—it's not going to be limited to ABC No Rio, but the whole East Village, downtown, and the time and the period itself. So, this is the conflict, is just like the financing, like the economics of it versus the historical value of it.

MR. CRAMER: And also, there was kind of the timing of it because it kind of cut off at a particular point and then it was actually published. So there's like a two or three lap, so there were a lot of, you know, there may have been people who felt, you know, that they were being left out and so there was that kind of thing. But, you know, I think it was a good thing for No Rio, and I think it came out when we were doing this seventh anniversary show. I think it—

MR. WATERS: That was City Gallery, I think, '85.

MR. CRAMER: I thought it was the seventh one when we did the thing at the Saint and we had the simultaneous show at Piezo Electric which was like a we—1985.

MR. WATERS: Yeah, so I think this is simultaneous with the City Gallery, which is our first major anniversary retrospective. That, I think, came later, but I can't be sure.

MR. CRAMER: You're saying this was published in '85. And it came out in '85?

MR. WATERS: So, in this book we're the new generation—in this book, we are the new generation, you know.

MR. CRAMER: Right, so and then, with Lou, Lou was doing his—did the touring activities with Cult Ex, and I think we kind of touched on this, but we went to San Francisco to ATA [Artists' Television Access] and presented performances and video and some things that were directly related to ABC No Rio and then, you know, showing Lou's—the Rehab video [group] and—

MR. WATERS: So, they brought in—his infrastructure was his Rehab video—

MS. KIRWIN: He was a video guy?

MR. WATERS: Yeah, yeah, yeah, he I think had majored in the media studies, I guess, I'm not sure, but he was doing video at NYU and he had Rick, I can't remember his last name, [and his girlfriend] Aki Tsumagari (sp.), I think, and there were four or five people that produced his rehab video. And Lou had a very similar aesthetic to ours, and in fact, as I remember it like the kicker was at his interview he said, well I'm going to do this anyway. I'm going to be doing this kind of work anyway.

MS. KIRWIN: Might as well do it here—[laughs].

MR. WATERS: Right, whether you hire me or not, you know, because it's like we're not really offering a salary. And so it was like that idea of proactive where you're like, oh, that's it, you know, perfect. So, Lou came in as the active director. I was a very, very, very, very, very close advisor to him. Peter was supervising their whole legal, you know, the just them developing their autonomy as a legal organization, but then at the same time we're still very connected on the board level.

MR. CRAMER: So, this is where Steve [Englander] comes in; Steve is an associate of Lou's and that leads once, you know, this is again—the other reason that the whole idea of touring was important was because there was so many problems with the building, you know, and this sort of

contentiousness of that.

MR. WATERS: What's happening is the burnout factor is starting to accelerate, so rather than taking like two years or three years, it's now only a year. So Lou, after running No Rio, starts to realize, oh, like most of what I'm doing is legal and political; I'm more interested—and by the way, why are we so obsessed and overly concerned with this physical space? So, this is where he starts assigning the directorship to sub-directors and coming in with a functional staff. And so, Lou has David Shea for a while, in the beginning, but then he brings in Steve Englander and then starts to institute an active touring program, so we go to Hamburg; we go to San Francisco; we go to Bowdoin College.

And they start—I think, Fly comes in, Lou starts to develop this idea of exchange so that while we're traveling, we bring people, other people in to run the space and then we have this thing so that space itself starts to become moot. So, we're able to provide a physical locus for similar collectivist, socially progressive, creative groupings. I think there's purple people—something, these people from Toronto had come, were occupying this space while we were in Germany, and then a woman, Fly, who was working in digital media as well as cartooning. Fly accompanied us in Hamburg and so, what Lou is starting to do is now transfer the directorship so that he becomes the director of touring programs and Steve starts to become the in house, de facto director.

Meanwhile, we're forming ABC No Rio is forming its legal autonomy, but then socially everything is starting to fall apart.

MS. KIRWIN: By legal autonomy, you say they're separating from Allied Productions?

MR. WATERS: Yes.

MR. CRAMER: Right.

MR. WATERS: Yeah, yeah, because ABC No Rio is operating under Allied's umbrella; their accountants system is going through Allied's books, and then, you know, there's a shared board of—there's an overlap on the board of directors. So, they're establishing legal autonomy as a separate organization, but it's not quite separate because you still have these social connections and you still have these board overlaps going on. So, it's a very—it's a very contentious period.

MS. KIRWIN: So, that way you have a tic-tac-toe board—[on the graphic for CAA talk]?

MR. WATERS: I don't know.

MR. CRAMER: I think it had to do with the exit for the Cult Ex, I'm not sure.

MR. WATERS: He called it Cult Ex. And—

MR. CRAMER: That was supposed to be—

MR. WATERS: Cult Ex was an—

MS. KIRWIN: Nobody's winning here—[laughter].

MR. WATERS: Cult Ex was an abbreviation for cultural exchange, but at the same time it alludes to this kind of punk, underground idea of a mysterious cult, and I guess like a Generation X reference. This is all Lou's idea, you know, he's really coming up with these really, really, amazing ideas and

constructs for how he sees ABC No Rio going.

MS. KIRWIN: And this is the last one in your group, but I had a question about that, the hardcore—

MR. CRAMER: Hardcore matinee.

MS. KIRWIN: Hardcore matinee, is that—that's the dominant program at this time?

MR. CRAMER: Well, I don't know if it was the only one.

MR. WATERS: Not the only one; that was a very short-lived period, now ACT UP and Queer Nation start to become these very, very significant, important—

MS. KIRWIN: This is 1992 to '94?

MR. WATERS: So all our friends start dying. We're getting sick, we're starting to become political, you know, AIDS politics, queer politics. And so there's a very, very short-lived period where we have Dirk Hauska, George Towne, Jocelyn Taylor who are young people, people in their early '20s and we installed them as ABC No Rio's director. I think Lou has gone by then; Lou's kind of like fallen to the wayside. Bobby came back from Cologne—

MS. KIRWIN: And he wanted to live there again?

MR. WATERS: Yes, as you can imagine, we start having this microcosm of these like real estate battles within ABC No Rio and so we lose Lou in the fallout, and this is where we establish this queer directorship. But there's so many problems, both from outside and within, that it doesn't really last very long. I guess Jocelyn was performance director—

MR. CRAMER: Right, Dirk was from Germany and so, he wasn't like a legal person; Jocelyn was very much interested in developing her, you know, her art practice and George as well, and they were all just kind of probably recently finishing SVA [School of Visual Arts] maybe and—

MR. WATERS: Well, yeah, they came in, we did a show called "Out and Exposed" and this is how we met them because we knew them, they're the younger contingent of ACT UP/Queer Nation, Jocelyn had run the Clit Club with Julie Tolentino. George is like part of, you know, these young people who are involved in this radical activist movement of Queer Nation and ACT UP. Dirk we met through the Mix Festival, which I think then was still the New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival. And Dirk had also run the Hamburg Lesbian and Gay Film Festival.

MR. CRAMER: Yeah, I think that's how we met him.

MR. WATERS: So, Dirk is the active director and then these other guys are his staff and this is where we start actually dividing it into specific per Jocelyn's performance, George's visual art—I don't know if we had Shari Frilot, you know, was in that group, Alex—

MR. CRAMER: She was friends with Jocelyn, wasn't she?

MR. WATERS: Well, Sherry was in the "Out and Exposed Show"—

MR. CRAMER: Oh, okay, so—

MR. WATERS: You know, which we did at ABC No Rio, and then we repeated it at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center, but you know they had formed—they pretty much had formed like their

own nucleus. They were their own group. And then we kind of supported that by establishing them as this directorship—why don't we just organize them, why don't you run ABC No Rio? And it was very short lived.

MS. KIRWIN: How long?

MR. WATERS: May—

MS. KIRWIN: Why was it so short?

MR. WATERS: Well, because the city is now actively trying to move ABC No Rio out of the building aggressively. There's this incident Peter alluded to where the foundation of the building is damaged due to construction work that's going on in the adjacent building that shares a support wall. So the physical problems that we dealt with like the leak, the cold, you know, are exasperated by like these aggressive legal eviction notices. So, we're still going to meetings, you know, this is the other thing that we're doing, we're going to meetings. Lou is coming to conferences and meetings.

MR. CRAMER: With HDP [Department of Housing, Preservation and Development] and—

MR. WATERS: But these guys, it's just too much; they're young, and it's not just their age; it's that they don't—they haven't come up through New York social politics, so they don't have the chops.

MR. CRAMER: Most of the queer thing is so much in the West Village, like the whole, somehow the East Village somehow, I don't know whether this is so set in stone, but there seems to be this sort of East-West kind of mentality and they're—I don't know, there weren't there—I mean, there's no gay center in the East Side, there weren't that many gay bars, particularly in the East Village so I wondered whether or not that might have had—

MR. WATERS: The number, there was so many reasons.

MR. CRAMER: And there was also still, still, you know, this kind of—

MR. WATERS: AIDS is devastating; AIDS is devastating; it's devastating—

MR. CRAMER: It's still a rough neighborhood.

MR. WATERS: You have this second Reagan administration which is de-funding, and there's another—

MR. CRAMER: No, this is no—Reagan's long gone.

MR. WATERS: No, no, but I'm saying his results, he's established—

MR. CRAMER: But this is Bush.

MR. WATERS: No, I know, but what I'm saying is that the NEA now is now actively de-funding and not funding people on ideological grounds.

MR. CRAMER: Right, on the—

MR. WATERS: Sexual material, overt political material.

MR. CRAMER: Ethnicity, homosexuality, right.

MS. KIRWIN: So, they just couldn't deal with it?

MR. WATERS: No, it's too much. It was—

MR. CRAMER: Well, it was—I mean, as I said the last time, that was just, that became easier to make the attacks on already a marginalized group than, you know, arts spaces which they were trying to encourage, but those spaces were also reacting to all of this activity and, you know, the war in Central America and the apartheid and everything. So that was a later backlash in a way to control that funding and also what was being eventually put out by non-profit spaces because after the culture wars, like you could feel like the whole door closing on anything avant-garde, anything too explicit, anything too wild, you know, it was just—

MR. WATERS: Yes, big time. You can look at our archives and if you track the NEA funding, NYSCA funded and continues to fund ABC consistently, but on the national level, from a—who is it, Holz? Who is the director that Reagan installed? It's the one who—

MR. CRAMER: Frank Hodson [NEA chairman from 1981 to 1989].

MR. WATERS: Hodson, Chairman—

MR. CRAMER: It went from Nancy Hanks to Frank Hodson and Hodson was that one that was charge with, like, starting the clear foresting [laughs].

MR. WATERS: So, if you look at ABC No Rio's archive and then you track all of the alternative spaces throughout the country and you see who had been receiving consistent funding and who at that point where the funding stops. And when you're receiving such limited funding to begin with, what the policy of NEA had previously been was to send a warning. So, in other words, if they thought that the programming wasn't going in the direction that they thought, they would reduce funding and then there would be communication.

MS. KIRWIN: You'd have time to regroup or something.

MR. WATERS: Yeah, what happened with these little alternative spaces that were largely, you know, highly socio-politically driven and also highly people of color, you know, there's places in Texas, even at Charas/El Bohio [Community Center]—is this is before the NEA Seven, this is before, you know, this is part of the culture wars. What happens is the funding stops and so—

MR. CRAMER: Right, it's all part of the culture wars but a lot of people just—it all became—

MR. WATERS: It's not construed—

MR. CRAMER:—focused on the sexual content and—

MR. WATERS: It's not construed as culture wars because what happens is that the reason for the de-funding is de-funded on quality, on the basis of quality. The administration is not strong enough at this point to present ideological reasons, this comes later. But what they say is, oh, the quality of the work has dropped. You're not being funded. But if you look at whose work, where the quality, you see very clearly a pattern going on. And this doesn't really become part of the public record until spaces like artist space, like—you know, like the so-called alternative spaces start to become affected: Karen [Finley], Tim Miller and so forth and so on, when their grants stop, this—[snaps fingers]—this is when you have more because these little spaces, they don't have the wherewithal because they—

MR. CRAMER: That's how they use the individual because they attack mostly the individuals or the individuals themselves have to counter the suit because if they were going to be denied funding, the artists themselves have to create the legal context to fight it.

MR. WATERS: And you'll see correspondence between, with Emily [Ruben]- I think Emily, she was running a group called Slut Buckets at Charas and she was the one who actually brought this to my attention. She had done research to see who was being de-funded at this period that preceded the whole so-called "culture wars." But we didn't have the resources to organize and we also sent letters out to these more well-funded spaces, this is before their funding is cut, they do not respond. They do not see themselves as being part—and because this is how ABC No Rio and organizations like ABC No Rio have existed, if you're going to look at it linearly, underneath these more established white spaces, white-box spaces.

So, you know, there was an effort and this is what my energy is while we have this administration going, is putting my efforts into keeping the legal battle over, you know, keeping from being evicted, but also trying to mobilize like some kind of inter-organizational—but these organizations have probably already closed because they've lost their funding. And the more established organizations are not interested until their funds start to be cut. So, this is what I think is also important about No Rio's archives.

Also with the whole AS-AP [Art Spaces Archives Project] incentive is that if there is access to these records and researchers will be able to put the story together themselves. So, now this is just my opinion and my observation, but from my memory, this is what I'm actively looking at and working on.

MS. KIRWIN: Didn't Artist Spaces—didn't they lose their funding when they did the exhibition "Witnesses Against Our Vanishing" [in 1989] and there was a lawsuit against David Wojnarowicz's pieces in the catalogue?

MR. WATERS: Right, and then there's also the Franklin Furnace debacle, Carnival Knowledge, which Martha [Wilson, founder] handles very interestingly, because she says fine, don't give us the funding. But she had already established an infrastructure where there is like financial and economic strength through their own archives.

MR. CRAMER: Right, so this is the shift to a more kind of corporate model, now that the groups have been kind of put into that idea of like this is how you have to use the business world as your model.

MS. KIRWIN: Yeah, the non-profits, you've got to raise your funds, you can't rely on federal dollars.

MR. CRAMER: Exactly.

MR. WATERS: Among this basis, which I think Franklin Furnace is on an equal level fiscally and organizationally and in terms of their clout and visibility, Franklin Furnace is the sole organization that refuses, that says, "We're going to program as we like." And okay, in the process, they lose their physical space, but that becomes an asset too, because she's also able to—

MR. CRAMER: They didn't lose it; they sold it.

MR. WATERS: They sold it under duress.

MR. CRAMER: No, I don't think so. They decided that they wanted to take a new direction.

MR. WATERS: You talk to Martha and find out. They start getting complaint—noise complaints. They start getting complaints from the fire department that this is—this is in the aftermath and the fallout of the "Carnival Knowledge" show.

MR. CRAMER: The rise of Tribeca. [Laughter.]

MR. WATERS: But they own the space, so they're able to leverage that in such a way that they can continue their programming, doesn't really shift; as opposed to other people's programming, which now starts to self-censor.

But back to the question, why this administration was so short-lived, it's a lot. It's AIDS; it's the economics; it's the politics that's going on. It's the legal duress.

MR. CRAMER: Right, and also the working with Steve, and I think this sort of straight male kind of versus the queer thing played itself out.

MR. WATERS: You know, in the activist community where there is lack of—

MR. CRAMER: I mean, I don't mean to isolate Steve in particular, but even within I think the hardcore matinee thing, there is—

MR. WATERS: So everything falls apart. The organization is now legal, but there is no one there. But as you brought up, the hardcore matinee is what's happening. And this is the beauty of it, I think, is that there is a need for this kind of marginal, transgressive, alternative, oppositional activity. And it's done through this hardcore music scene, which is feminist, which is—if not homo—is clearly and concertedly anti-homophobic.

MR. CRAMER: Well, it switches.

MR. WATERS: Right, it starts with that and then it becomes more developed as just like pure hardcore. But then there is that mandate that comes in.

MR. CRAMER: That may be a somewhat overlap of those two things, because I don't think that was—

MR. WATERS: There's a mandate that comes in of no racist, no sexist, no homophobic—so it becomes very broad. It becomes a much more broader scene of youth-driven music that is also socially and politically conscious. And they have a space and they're not following the dictates—at this point, we have withdrawn. I think the date of my resignation letter I believe is 1995, something like that. But this is also on the record. Everyone's resignation letters are on the record. So you could actually see the process of transference so that it becomes like a truly anarchist organization.

MR. CRAMER: And they take over and they squat the building and—

MS. KIRWIN: And then they buy the building.

MR. CRAMER: And then eventually after many more years of negotiation—

MR. WATERS: The collection, the archives is always maintained. These archives are still located at Charas at this time.

MR. CRAMER: No, oh at that particular time.

MS. KIRWIN: Oh, they moved back.

MR. WATERS: Eventually, when we lose Charas, then we have to move.

MR. CRAMER: Right when Charas is sold when Giuliani comes in and starts to sell off anything that is available, be they empty lots, be they lots with gardens on them, be they school buildings. This is what happens and it becomes this whole—I mean, it's the first—isn't it the first time, I think, a Republican is elected in New York City in, I don't know how long historically. But this is the turning point for New York too, because in that efforts to continue all of the developments that have been going on with like Dinkins bringing down crime with this policing and things like that, that Giuliani is able to build on that, and then make it more about this quality of life where you're getting rid of the squeegee people and wherever you see a broken glass, you're fixing it type of thing.

MR. WATERS: But throughout this internal conflict, what you have happening at ABC No Rio is seeing the hardcore movement come in—the hardcore matinee activity coming in—as both the metaphorical and the literal offspring of the founding directors. So there is contention and there is conflict, but then there is also continuity. I think Jane Dickson recently said—

MR. CRAMER: Well, that might be a stretch.

MR. WATERS: No, Jane's son—

MS. KIRWIN: Jane's son was involved?

MR. WATERS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. KIRWIN: The second generation.

MR. WATERS: Yeah, yeah, yeah, so as the founding collectives start to move into different areas of culture, their children are actually active and consistent within the walls.

MR. CRAMER: Right, I guess I'm just looking at the distinction between squatting for living purposes and squatting unoccupied space for a different kind of activity.

MR. WATERS: Well, what I'm talking about is something that is bigger than the physical space. So then, you have people like Jane—other people's kids as well—

MR. CRAMER: But the ideas of those actions are

MR. WATERS: Who are basically growing up at ABC No Rio, and in a lot of ways, like a lot of generational gaps—like the parents are not necessarily—it's not an active repoire even necessarily, but there are kids. They are our kids. So we kind of witness this and this is how the archives become really important, because there is always this attention—and I credit Alan and his contemporaries with seeing that from the very beginning of saying, we're doing something really interesting and really important and really different. Let's keep a record of it. And so, throughout all of the craziness, this is the kind of continuity.

MR. CRAMER: Right, but No Rio is then—since probably before '92, whatever records that they have kept are really their own; like we have no longer involved in keeping those kinds of records once we were no longer directors.

MR. WATERS: Yes our period is very specific. I mean, we are kind of taking over from inception to the time that we're not physically involved in the day-to-day operation.

MS. KIRWIN: Well, I hope that this interview fills in some gaps. It certainly, I think it's a really fascinating social history, political history of a space. And I don't know, I don't have anything more. Do you have anything more to add to the story.

MR. WATERS: No, no, no, it's difficult for us not to digress because we're just seeing so many of these connections between larger over structures and this tiny little hole in the wall on Rivington Street.

MS. KIRWIN: Well, it was more than that.

MR. WATERS: Yeah, I think so.

MR. CRAMER: Right, especially if they're going to tear it down and rebuild it.

MR. WATERS: Well, it will be really interesting to see how the anarchists handle—

MS. KIRWIN: Right, what are your feelings about that?

MR. CRAMER: Well, I think—I don't know. I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing. I mean, I think it's not—

MS. KIRWIN: It's not the same thing.

MR. CRAMER: Yeah, it's not really for us to decide.

MR. WATERS: Nor should it be, yeah.

MR. CRAMER: Because I think that the culture has changed, the area has changed. By doing that—

MR. WATERS: I'm interested to see how an avowed anarchistic, oppositional subculture handles a phase of capital development. And so far, they've been doing really well, and, I have to say, better than we would have done. And I think it's because of that, because of that sense of refusal and opposition that just takes it up a notch from what we were willing and able to deal with.

MR. CRAMER: Right, they'll be able to build on that. And I think that the programming and the aesthetic will still continue. But it will be whether or not you'll be having building-wide transformations of the space that's been going on, I don't think—they'll have to have more money or something.

MR. WATERS: My hope—and this is fairly recent—is that ABC No Rio will house its own archive, because for a long time, we thought, oh, what institution will be best to physically host these archives? And now, I'm starting to say, well, why not at the space? Why not—if they are rebuilding it—whether they have the wherewithal right now; I don't think they are at a point now where they are able to focus on that as a primary agenda. And this is what I feel my role is, is staying in there to support and help them to show them how important it is for longevity and for continuity to be able to physically and economically use these historical documents.

MS. KIRWIN: To be able to refer to them while the organization is still alive.

MR. WATERS: Yes. Well, and I think the organization probably will continue—I mean, this is the

thing that I think is interesting. When you think of nomenclature and labeling, where you have like a name of a place, but it substantially changes. I mean, look at the Ballets Russes—you have the Ballet Russe in Monte Carlo and the Ballet Russe—and they're all coming from the same base, but it's not the same Ballet Russe. And I think this is the same kind of struggle that we started to look at early on where you have the name ABC No Rio. But then, where it is the same and whether it should be the same is all part of the ongoing dialogue.

MS. KIRWIN: Well, thank you. Thanks very much. Okay, I think we made it all on one this time. I don't know how to turn it off.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...January 31, 2008