



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Sur Rodney (Sur),
2016 July 12 and 15

Funded by the Keith Haring Foundation.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Sur Rodney Sur on July 12 and 15, 2016. The interview took place in New York, N.Y., and was conducted by Theodore Kerr for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic: An Oral History Project.

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

Interview

THEODORE KERR: This is Theodore Kerr interviewing Sur Rodney (Sur) at his studio in New York, New York, on July 12, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number one. Hi Sur.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Hi.

THEODORE KERR: Let's just start with an easy one. When and where were you born?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I was born in Montreal, December 28, 1954. I'm the second child, so I have an older brother. My father is also a Montreal native, born in Montreal in the '20s. He was the middle child of five siblings, all born in Montreal. My grandparents, my paternal grandparents were from the small Caribbean islands of Saint Kitts and Saint Nevis. But they arrived in Canada through England, because they were in England. You know, being British Colonial subjects before they moved to Canada. My mother is—was also a native of Canada, and her family lineage goes back seven generations, Canadians. And I think she, from what I know of her history—it's very difficult to get a lot of information about, you know, your own family when you're black, because there's been so many ruptures and fractures in it. But as I understand it, a large part of my mother's family came up to England—came into Canada with the Loyalists as indentured servants. So they weren't part of that Underground Railroad journey. And there was a certain kind of like class thing between the people that arrived from the Underground Railroad and the people that were British subjects. And you know, so there was that played out in the black communities.

My mother's family is very middle-class, but because of her history that—don't really need to get into this interview—she was sort of like sent away. So she arrived in Canada as a young teenager. And my father, who was a photographer—not at the time. I think we was a railroad porter, and left the railroad. Worked as a musician and photographer, and built himself up quite successfully as a photographer. He's sort of like the James Van Der Zee of Montreal, at the time.

THEODORE KERR: What's your earliest memory of yourself?

SUR RODNEY SUR: My earliest memory of myself?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Crawling on the floor, trying to get my mother's attention when she was talking on the telephone.

THEODORE KERR: Where were you?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Montreal.

THEODORE KERR: In your family's home?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah, my family's home. My father wasn't around because he, you know, worked on the railroad, and then my parents were divorced before I went into kindergarten. So there's very little memories of my father being around, although I did have a relationship with him, growing up. But my parents didn't live together. So I was, you know, raised in a single—raised with my mother and my brother in a Jewish ghetto in the center of Montreal. My mother intentionally wanted—made an effort to get us housing in this Jewish ghetto, because she wanted to make sure that we got a really good education, and she knew that Jews are really strong in education, and if I went to school with Jews, I would be academically competitive. And it sort of worked, it sort of did the trick. So I went to school with all the first-generation of Holocaust survivors. I was very much a part of that community, and you know, to sort of like balance it out, my parents would send me to a black church on

Sunday, and an Indian reservation for part of the summer. And then I'd spend the rest of my time with my Jewish friends, going to the neighbor's summer camps, and all the rest of that. So that was really important, I think, when I look back now. So important to my development and my critical thinking, and my thinking about a lot of oppression.

You know, being raised with Jews who, you know, I feel were the champions of a lot of the American cultural development. Because if it weren't for a lot of the Jews, we wouldn't know about James Baldwin. We wouldn't know about a lot of jazz. We wouldn't know about a lot of things. I sort of have a Walter Mosley sort of thing with the Jews that created a little bit of a problem when I moved to the states. Particularly into the East Village, which was an old Jewish neighborhood.

And I was surprised with the anti-Semitism that I was confronted with, particularly within the black community. And being black, I was sort of like—had to do this "you have to be black or you have to be Jewish." You couldn't be both. And then the Jews were kind of confused about my acculturation thing, because I could speak some Yiddish and stuff. So I wrote about that.

There's a story that I wrote for—there's a three-volume set called *The Jews of the Lower East Side*, and in the second volume, they invited a number of artists to write about their acculturation Jewish. And I wrote my story about living in a Jewish ghetto and moving to the Lower East Side, and what I found. And recently, when I was at the New York Public Library for *The Outlaws of American Art*—something that editor included me in—I met the person who edited those volumes, who said that my story was like so unusual to him, in relation to the whole book, that it really sort of like out-stood. Because I'm sure I'm the only black person in the novel that kind of talked about it from the perspective of being acculturated as a Jew, but not really being Jewish. I think I was seven or eight years old before I discovered that I wasn't Jewish.

THEODORE KERR: When you were growing up, did your parents, both independently and together, expose you to a lot of art? Like was your dad showing you his work? Listening to his music?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well yeah, my father was very much into the culture of collecting art. Really made an effort to get us interested in art. We—you know, rather than going to movies and doing things, and we saw him on weekends, made visitation rights—he would have us working in his darkroom. That you know, then I saw sort of like a slave labor thing. I mean the first couple times it was fun, but I didn't want to spend around—I didn't want to spend my weekends working in the darkroom. I wanted to go out and do things, right? But it was a very useful experience, and brought me into understanding a lot about photography, and development of an image, and how it could be created.

So I guess that had a lot to do with informing my creative thing. I mean, there was always like a lot of music around, in terms of culture. My mother would only listen to, you know, the female jazz singers, so I listened to a lot of Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, all of that. I had an uncle that was into jazz, so there was always that kind of music, from Thelonious Monk on, playing around. And my father was kind of like the exact opposite. He was much more into like classical music. You know, the higher culture thing that he kind of wanted to instill in us, in his mind. And you know, I kind of very early got on that there was this conflict, because he was into all this classical music and classical art, but he also collected African sculpture. [Laughs.] You know? And it was, you know—so I was able to put that together. He gave me a book on Louis Braque, the kind of Cubist. And you know, just visually I was able to see the association between the African sculpture and this European kind of painting thing.

My brother was very much the artist. I was the one that was kind of pushed more into academics. So I did like all the sciences, biology and all that, and I was totally into it. And everyone figured oh, I'm going to be like a doctor or lawyer or something like that, because I had this thing for critical debate. But I really wanted to be creative, and I think that that came out with a lot of my—I think just being gay. Had a lot to do with informing the freedom that I had with that. Kind of—you know, I've been asked a lot like how did I become where I was? How did I take up the challenges? How did I decide to move in the direction that I did? And I spent years thinking about it, years ago, and I realized that being, you know, to use that expression that I've used a lot, and has been used a lot for people like me, being a "fly in the buttermilk."

I already had this sort of difference, okay? So I knew that whatever I would do or say would be unexpected from what people expected from everybody else. Right? So I think the license of being a fly in the buttermilk allowed me to feel comfortable in my difference. So I think that started a lot of it, and I just felt like I could do or be or say anything, because it didn't matter, because I was supposed to be so different anyway. I remember once going with a friend of mine, and I must have been like 10 or 11 years old—and I don't know what I was wearing, but I was wearing something, and this friend of mine wanted to like do something like I was doing. And his older brother reprimanded him and said "you can't go out looking like that." And he said "why? But like, you know, Rodney is." And his brother said "Well he can do it, but you can't." And that's when I realized that there was this noticeable difference, and I was given license to do what I wanted to do, because I could, and other people

couldn't.

So it sort of worked in reverse. So I think I just took that to the Nth degree. And because I was kind of, I guess—had this interest and training in the sciences, and you know, I was very interested in like literature and philosophy. And then I was also interested in art, and I'd study dance for a while. I was really interested in that, and I was interested in the issues of the body. And I'd realized that somehow, you know, within the arts I can embrace all of that. I didn't have to decide to go one way or the other, because you know, the arts incorporated sciences theater and all that together.

So it was inevitable for me to go there. Plus it was a way for me to feel free within my own identity as a gay person, that I discovered really, really early, without any kind of—I think there was a short period in my teenage years, where I was sort of like a little bit—maybe uncomfortable with declaring myself as completely homosexual, so I went through this bisexual phase, and I was very open about being bisexual. But I wouldn't kind of—I talked about that recently on Facebook, actually, you know.

So there you have it. So my formation, as of childhood, was very active. Involved in a lot of activities. I mean, I was into dancing, I was into my academics pretty seriously. I had a period where I went from the dancing to the gymnastics thing, and that tied in with my, you know, queerness—because I think a lot of my stuff with the gymnast had to do with the body and stuff like that. And I was falling in love with all these other gymnasts. In a very kind of teenage unbridled sexual kind of way, right? And I was also—I remember being interviewed by some students at McGill, when I was really young, as being this "out" kind of like person that was open about talking about their sexuality, and liking people of the same sex. I guess to show that you could be like queer and have these desires, and you weren't necessarily fucked up. And that was around the time that they started—they were trying to, you know, change this thing from being "queer" as a kind of psychological disorder, into some sort of normalcy.

THEODORE KERR: You spoke earlier about that kind of license to be different. I wonder what period that was in your life? Like when did you understand you had that license? What age?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I think I would really—got really clear to me in my—before puberty, with the situation with this friend me. Friend said, you know, "they can and you can't." Which was something that was echoed in reverse about things that I would do, or I told my parents. "Well they can do it, but you can't." You know? Like I had to—in other words I had to monitor everything, because I couldn't be—the impressions that I would project, and my actions and my voice, were really important and had to be monitored much more closely than my friends.

THEODORE KERR: Why?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Because my parents tried to instill in me that "they see you as different, and if you want to be able to fit in, you have to be very careful that you don't exercise this kind of difference in a way that will either threaten them, or make them feel uncomfortable." It was all about protecting myself from them, whereas they were already seeing me as different, so I was getting this double thing. Well like, "you have to sort of be like this to be more like them," and they were saying "you're already doing all this stuff different, and that's okay, because you can do it." So I was getting this sort of double thing. So I could like, you know—then it got to a point, I guess, as I got into my later teens, where I realized how I needed to kind of exercise both. Like I could be flamboyant and crazy, but when I was talking to people, I had to show that I was intelligent and cultured. Right?

So I kind of went overboard, you know. I would talk about Flaubert when I was like, you know, 16-years-old. You know, people say "what do you want to be?" "I want to be a writer." And they'd say "oh you're too young to be a writer. You haven't had enough experience." And I'm saying "what about Rimbaud?" [Laughs] You know? And they'd say "what's this little black kid, knowing about Rimbaud?" [Laughs] So I was—and that's just through, you know—all my terms, and terms of cultural information came from being in this community around Jews who were very curious about everything. So that's where I learned about jazz. That's where I learned about James Baldwin. You know, they were—you know, we used to sit around for hours and smoke pot and have these like philosophical discussions, and go to European films.

THEODORE KERR: And how did that interact with your time in school?

SUR RODNEY SUR: It was all very much meshed in. I mean I—because I was like a good student, because I enjoyed school, and I enjoyed [inaudible], I enjoyed like doing that kind of work, right? I kind of hung around with the group of smart kids, if you will. You know, they all sort of bond together, because we're all very competitive with each other. But I also had this alliance with the jocks, because I was kind of an athlete and a really good athlete. Not that interested in sports, but I did both. And I could dance, so I was popular with the girls. So I had this kind of really easy sort of well-rounded sort of thing, in terms of my social interaction, because I could go through all these different groups. And again, that had to be with "you're being different." And like people didn't do that, but I could, right? And I was always very sympathetic to the underdog, or people

who were picked on. So if somebody was too fat, they might be some kind of a geek, I'd want to know what he was about, get into his geekiness. And you know, a lot of the kids who were ostracized were also part of the smart club. They were sort of seen as a nerd, and I was friends with them.

So I moved back and forth through a lot of different territories, and my parents did it from putting me through like reservations, to black community groups, to the Jewish thing. And then the neighborhood, you know—later, as I sort of grew older, became Greek and then Portuguese. And I got like right into the Greeks, and I was into the French Canadians, because I thought the boys were really hot. You know, and like everyone was [inaudible], like "whoa." I mean they used to beat me up, and then they got tired of beating me up, because they figured I wasn't going anyway. So we became friends. You know [laughs], my tolerance level was like really high, and I was just like this really—when I think now, this really kind of like enthusiastic, open to anything, ready to take any challenge. Like the kids that I was hanging out with in school, that were the smart kids, we were the ones who were doing all the drugs. The other kids were drinking. That was alcohol. We weren't into like alcohol, we wanted to smoke a joint and sit down and talk about like Fellini or something.

THEODORE KERR: And what was life—did these friendships exist after high school as well?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well you know, there became a split, because there's something that I learned about much later, from Dorothy Williams. She wrote a book called "The History of Blacks in Montreal," going back to the 1800s. And she talked about an event that I remember, that really stuck out in my mind. There was a riot in the '60s at Concordia University, where a bunch of black students were complaining about the racism in the university, and how it was affecting their grades. And they felt they weren't being graded fairly, treated fairly, given the opportunities they should as students.

They locked themselves into, somehow, the computer lab or something, and destroyed everything, and made all these demands. Right? But in doing this—it also happened at McGill. It happened at McGill and Concordia at the same time. But I think Concordia, then, was called Sir George Williams University, and then became Concordia. In the meetings with these black students, they discovered that every one of them were there on a visa. They were blacks from the Caribbean, from the U.S., or from other places in the diaspora. And it was realized that why were there no Canadian blacks in higher education? I mean, there's enough of them that are Canadians that are black, and there was this un-sort of-written code that I discovered through this book, that they would not educate Canadian blacks in higher education. They would do it with foreigners because they were on visas, and they could throw them out of the country at any time. Right? So they didn't have to deal with them there.

So the blacks that wanted education—and then I had an uncle who was an engineer. When I thought about it, I said "oh, of course. He moved to the states to get his education." And then carried on his middle-class life in the states, and would come to visit Canada. So I guess that must have been a pattern, because I remember when I was in high school—by the time I'd hit high school, after junior high, sort of like started phasing out in terms of not being as interested in school, because it was too slow for me. You know, so I'd sit in the back of the room and read. And I thought that I was just being really quiet. My teachers would look at me with this sort of sadness in their eyes, and I figured "oh, they're looking at me with sadness because they don't understand why I've become so withdrawn."

And I didn't realize that they were noticing that I was reading in the back of the class, and not really paying attention to class. Even though I did all my exams, and pass and stuff like that. You know, because I had very good study methods. I would read in the back of the class—because I remember a teacher reprimanding a student for not paying attention, because they were reading something, and then they pointed me out and said well so am I. And the instructor says "he can. You can't." And I went, "Oh, so I guess I'm busted, and they've known about this. So they really are leaving me alone." Because they'd realized I'd pass the exam anyways.

I wouldn't do—I wouldn't really apply myself. I would just do as much as I needed to do to get by, to be left alone. I kind of retreated into my own world, which was a lot of reading and getting interested in culture, and exploring the world in my mind and through literature. And it wasn't until I read this book of Dorothy [Williams – SRS], that I realized that that look that these teachers were giving me wasn't so much about "oh it's so sad, you're withdrawn. You don't know what to do about it." It's like "you're so smart, and you could achieve so much, but there's no hopes for you, because we know that you can't." You know, without saying that. And then I was like really angry, and I said, "Really?"

I mean, not that it would have changed my life, but it became really evident when, towards the end of high school, my senior years, there were all these friends, a lot of them not as—hadn't achieved the scholarship that I had, that were going and applying to colleges and getting in and da, da, da, da, da, da. And I wasn't, because decided I wasn't going to go to college anyways. I just wanted to get out of here and do my own thing, which I did for a year.

I think I left—when I left high school, my parents said, "Well if you're not going to college, you have to go and get

a job." And I actually got a job working for a very large shipping company as an account reconciler, because I had this aptitude for math. I'm dyslexic—understand this, so a dyslexic person with an aptitude for math, because I had the strong visual association to be able to kind of work. So I did that for almost a year before they discovered that I really didn't know anything about accounting. But I was—you know, when you do any job, they kind of go through what they want you to do, and I was a very quick learner. So I would just kind of do it. And it took them a long time to figure out that I didn't understand about two columns of debits and credits, and stuff like that. But I had records of everything that I kept very neatly, but they have to go back and be reworked into this other system.

And I think it was at that time that I discovered, just through walking around downtown, that I was really fascinated by window displays and things like that. Because they were very creative, and then I decided I wanted to go to night school to take some art classes. Right? Because I wanted to get a job—I decided I wanted to leave this accounting thing, and I wanted to get a job as a window display designer. So I remember going into department stores, Ogilvy's or something, to ask if they were hiring any people [laughs], and they said "oh, do you have a portfolio?" [laughs] And that's when I decided, "Oh, I need a portfolio."

So I went to night school, and realized that I had this aptitude for drawing, and I really enjoyed it. But I never used it to get a job in window display. I used it meeting some other people that were working for a window display company, and I got a job working with that window display company. Just fortuitous through interest, and meeting these people, and talking to them, and then finding out that they could use someone. I started working with them, and one of them was going to an art school. Going to the Montreal Museum School of Art and Design, and I said, "Oh that's really interesting. Maybe I should do that." Now the thing was that my brother was already there, because he was the artist. He was in the Film Animation department, and they had a department of Interior Design, and I figured, "Oh that would be really interesting. I can design environments."

You know, I was thinking about designing environments. So I interviewed. The Dean of the college accepted me. He was very impressed that like I had this older brother that was you know, doing this amazing work, and he put me not in the design department, but in the Visual Arts department. And it took me a while before I figured out I was in the wrong department. But you know, for someone that likes assignments, I would just throw myself into it. And I kind of really loved it. It gave me room to open myself out and express myself. You know, there was a lot of conceptual art happening at the time.

The general idea was around, so I could form myself as a conceptual being, and do all these crazy things, while I was also learning about the hands-on nature of constructing a painting, and printmaking, and sculpture, and materials. They're all happening simultaneously, and that mixed in with my, you know, my previous thing with like, you know, European films and literature and philosophy, and stuff like that. It just kind of all melded in this way, and I felt I had this incredible, amazing freedom. Right? And I was kind of like a wild child there.

I was like kind of really controversial, because there was nothing that would stop me. I mean, I would do things like—there was this one project that I remember, where I'd ingested 35-millimeter slides, bits of photographs, bits of video tape, bits of film, and then I waited for it to pass through my system, and collected my feces until I noticed little bits of the material. And then I put it in a plastic bag, and I'd tack it to the walls of the school as a project. Because the whole thing was that the turd was supposed to decompose into dust, and then all the materials underneath would expose themselves. Someone was so offended that they took that down, and they called this whole thing in school. I had to explain myself. I mean you know, there was a lot of that stuff going on. I felt like "this is such incredible freedom." And I wasn't living at home anymore. I think I'd got a loan from the government so I could afford my own apartment. I was living off of Saint Lawrence, and you know, going up to the mountain and cruising every day, and walking over there to go through the thing [the cruising area on the way to art school -SRS]. So I had this really kind of idyllic petri dish, between the art thing, and the sex thing, and my freedom living with a hermaphrodite. What do they call them? There's another word, the gender where you have both genders.

THEODORE KERR: Intersex?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Intersex. I was living with someone that was intersexed. Right? And I was very extremely flamboyant. So I was living out all this stuff. Now what do you do with this crazy kid that's flamboyant, that's doing all this stuff, that has this mind and is just like, you know, is thinking that—you also have to realize that when all this was going on, culturally in music there was like Jimi Hendrix. And there was like you know, Mick Jagger wearing lipstick and stuff like that. So even though I was this sort of freak, I wasn't like unusual, because there was this reference in all that was happening with culture and music that kind of supported that. And Jimi Hendrix, being black, gave me the license to be as crazy as I wanted. So I think, had there been not have been that environment, it might have been more difficult for me. I think the licensing of the kind of my craziness still would have been there, but it would have been much more of a contrast to other things happening in society, because I remember my mother sort of going on, talking to one of her friends about Mick Jagger. She said, "Oh look at him with all those scarves. My son was miles ahead of that. He's been doing that for years." [Laughs.]

Right? I said, "Oh okay, it's [inaudible], but it doesn't freak my parents out anymore." Because they have someone else that's part of the culture, they can reference me being some. And I think that helped moderate a lot of what I might have run into, had that not have been happening at the time. So it's a matter of being in the right place at the right time.

Now, so you get this thing where there's this super-freak kid, that can be as super freaky as he wants, because he's in art school, living with this intersex person, smoking his pot, doing his drugs, hanging out with his eccentric people, hanging out in Francophone bars. This Anglophone drinking with these French Canadian boys, because I thought they were also hot and sexy. You know, so I had this really kind of crazy life. But the Dean of the school really had a thing for me, and he—guess recognized that I had something that would—he felt could be very useful, and he wanted me to teach.

So he was determined that I was going to go into academia, get my credentials, and he was going to take me to Concordia for the interview himself. Right? So I said, "Oh, okay." I mean when school was over, I didn't realize—and plus I went through on scholarships, because I kept on getting all these awards. So they took me to Concordia when I was ready to graduate Museum School, and I sat down for this interview, and they said, "Oh yes, it looks very fine," and "yes, we can accept you into the program." Now the program at Concordia was very competitive. I hadn't realized that at the time. They accept something like 80 students from 80,000 applicants or something. So it's very competitive, and I didn't realize that at the time. And they were just saying, "You can be here." Right? I think because the Dean was really making a case for me.

And I said, "Well how long do I have to be here?" And they said, "Well you have to do three years here, and then you can do a fourth year anywhere you want in the world, that'll go towards your degree." And I said, "Four years? That's like a long time. How about if I do it in two, and you can double-load my courses. And if you don't think I can handle double-load courses, ask him."

And I pointed to the Dean, right? And they said, "Well I don't know. Maybe we can do it in three," because I didn't have all the academic things, like art history and all that kind of stuff, because I was in an art school. It was basically a studio program. So part of that, I had to do all this catch-up with that. And they said, "You have to be here for three," and I'm saying, "I can't be here more than two, or I'm moving to New York." And they just said—the guy looked at me like I was crazy, and says, "Okay, move to New York." And I did, end of story.

And I think moving to New York when I did was, again, very timely. I think what happened in my life in New York could not have happened—there were a number of factors that came into place. Part of it was that the timing, and when I arrived—

THEODORE KERR: What year?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Summer of 1976. Okay? And being this like wild, ambitious kid that felt that I could have everything, I just like charged and went right into it. Now being black, and people not recognizing that I was Canadian—just thought I was another American, but there was something that I'd had that was so different, that made my interactions with people that were white not—there was something else that I had, that they weren't getting from their black friends. So I think it made them relax a little bit more, in the eye that I was so like, you know, forthcoming and easy and comfortable. Made it easier for them. They were very clear that there was something very different. They weren't saying this, but they could feel it.

And I was basically going with what I found in the neighborhood. And when I was living—because I've always lived downtown, Lower Manhattan. When I was looking for the art thing, everything was white. So those were the people that I was meeting. So those were the friends that I was making. Right? I never thought for a second that like, "where are all the black folks? Aren't there black artists?" I had no idea that there was a parallel world that was black, in the art world that was running, that I knew nothing about. Right? So it sort of went that way. And to bring myself into the art world, I started organizing exhibitions. Right? So that's how I started meeting people, when I started doing television broadcast shows, and I started meeting people that way. And then people wanted to meet me, because I was doing these shows. So I already had a grasp of all this activity, and all this thing that was happening downtown, so that when the East Village gallery thing happened, and I started working with Gracie, and I'd already had a network, and a handle on what was out there that was interesting already. That kind of moved—well Gracie had her own ideas of what was interesting, because our aesthetics and interests were really diametrically opposed. That shocked a lot of people that I was working with Gracie. Because they said, "Why are you working with her? She's so like Disney-silly-goofy, and you're so like something else." And you know, I had my reasons for doing that.

Gracie was a really good friend. She was very sincere, and honest, and a really hard worker, and I wanted to like do everything I could to make her a success. And I think because of people—all the questioning, and her not being taken seriously by people that want to be serious in the art world, just compelled me more to do everything I could to help make her successful, to prove them wrong. So that's kind of that. It was my

competitive thing coming out. "Yeah, you think she's [inaudible]? She's a great person. I really like her, and I'm going to work with her and make things happen." And it did kind of happen that way, but it wasn't really planned.

THEODORE KERR: When did you—

SUR RODNEY SUR: I mean there wasn't a strategic plan to—it just sort of like—our plan was to do something that supported our friends that was fun, that we would learn and grow from, and meet other people. We never had this plan that we were going to become this like big gallery that was going to represent artists and start making money—I mean that kind of moved into that as we were going along, and just surprised at how fast things were coming. But you know, I think it was not only the difference that I came out with people. I think a lot of it had to do with being Canadian, and it took me years to kind of figure out what made me so different, being black as a Canadian than being born in the states and being black, and the culture that's here. And I'd realized that in the U.S. there were miscegenation laws, right? So you couldn't—it was kind of like apartheid, even though there were interracial marriages. But all those interracial marriages, those people lived in the black community, because they couldn't live in the white community, right?

So the black communities have been used to dealing with white people for like a long time, more than the white community's been dealing with other blacks. But in Canada they didn't have miscegenation laws, and it plays out in my family, which is how I get this whole relationship of people that can pass, and people that are colored, and we're all together, and I have aunts and uncles that are white, and I have aunts and uncles that are black, and [inaudible]. So my whole relationship with white folks was very much in a different place. Even though racism existed, and I'd realized we're second-class citizens, I still—there was still another way that I had of relating to white folks that didn't carry the same kind of baggage in the same kind of a way that Americans did, and I think it was something that people could feel, that were white, when I was talking to them.

They couldn't say, "This is what it is." They could just say, "Oh this guy is sort of different." But it had a lot to do about that, and you know, in reverse, it also affected my relationship with a lot of black folks in the community, because when I'd run into American blacks, they'd always sort of like kind of guard themselves they were talking to me, and I'm saying, "Why are they always so guarded? What do they think I am?" I went through this for years, years having a real difficulty with breaking that guardedness that I had with every American black that I ran into. Didn't run into that when I met some from the Caribbean. Didn't run into that when I ran into Africans or other people from African diaspora. It was distinctly with African Americans. Then I said, "Okay, there's a problem here. They recognize my difference, and they don't like it." And I'm saying, "Well I can't do anything about it."

Then I remember talking to this linguist friend of mine, John Holm [J.A. Holm, a renowned linguist and friend - SRS], who's a white guy from the Midwest who's a preeminent scholar on Bohemian and Creolization of American English coming in from the black cultural thing. Right? And he's done the most amazing scholarship in that field, and it was just accepted because of his name. People just assume that this guy had to be black. No, he's a white guy from the Midwest, right? And when they discovered that, the people that were most aggressively attacking him for "who did he think he was" going into that territory, being this white guy? Sort of like the Rachel Dolezal thing. He's like, "well like wait a minute. I just fell into this fell into this [inaudible] interesting, and I've done this work that you've appreciated, but all of a sudden now I'm a white guy and it's a problem."

So I was talking to him about this problem with African Americans, and he was telling me this story that he had. And he said "you know, I have a lot of black friends that are really close, that I've had for years, but they're not black Americans. They're from the Caribbean, they're from Africa, they're from other places, and we get along really well." And then he—that's when he explained to me what my problem was, and why these black folks were so guarded. And he told me this interesting story about—as a linguist, one of the things they do in his research, to understand these things, was tapping phone conversations of black people. Right? And they do it all over the Caribbean. They did it in Canada. They did it in the U.S. I think basically those three locations. And they said, "When you were in Canada or the Caribbean, and someone was talking on the phone, you could not tell whether they were talking to a black person or a white person. Whereas in the states, if we were tape recording a black American, we knew immediately whether they're talking to a black person or a white person." Distinction's that much. And he says "you're in the category of 'not,'" you know, "so when you're engaging with these black folks, you're talking to them in the same way that you talk to your white folks. So they think that you are like being arrogant, or looking down on them, or think you're white." You know, all that kind of stuff.

And I went "wow, that's really amazing." So what happened is that—and I guess maybe I never talked about my past, being from Canada, I just kind of went with that I was living in. Now, whenever I meet African Americans, within the first five minutes, if we're getting into any kind of a talk, I drop something or infer, so that they know that I'm Canadian. And when I started doing that, even with people that I'd known that were really guarded, they immediately relaxed and said "oh, that's what it is." They would all say, "Oh, that's what it is. I thought you were

from Philadelphia."

You know about The Philadelphia Negro, right? Early capital in the states was in Philadelphia, and there was a very—you know, there was a class of educated middle-class around that whole thing, that were considered highly educated, and I guess snobs, by the rest of the world. You have the same thing happening in Washington, D.C. now that the capital's moved there. There's this whole power circle of very wealthy, affluent, middle-class black folks.

You know, you saw a lot of them in the Clarence Thomas [inaudible] thing, where people started recognizing for the first time, all over America, on the television every night, that there was this wide range of black folks, from the most conservative to the most like, you know, liberal-going, to the radical progressive on the edge. Very kind of different voices, in positions of power in Washington, and in government, that they never heard of.

So this was an eye-opener. No we're not all living in the ghettos. There aren't just a few of us, there's like a lot of us that are in this other kind of range. But there's, you know, there's a big class disparity between all communities, particularly within the black communities, and it plays out very differently than it does in the white communities, because of the race thing, access to [inaudible], all that. So I guess I was thrown into that part, and when they realized that I was Canadian, it kind of changed things. Or I have to do things, or I have to like, what they call switching up. You know, get down with something so they'd be all "Oh, okay. He's like cool, he's like a brother now." Right?

So I went through my first 15 years of being in New York, living on the Lower East Side, in a black community like this, having to deal with that. And the people that I didn't have that interaction with, because I seemed a little bit more affluent, even though I was living hand-to-mouth—I was just like [inaudible] have an appearance [inaudible], they thought I had to be a drug dealer. When I moved into this building, they figured "oh this guy has to be a drug dealer. He's like too cool, too smug, talking too right. He probably is." And then they, you know, they didn't really understand this art world thing that connected for them a lot later.

So it's kind of been a little bit of a rollercoaster ride, and then how I got involved with the black community, working for Black Arts Institution. After I left the East Village scene, I decided I wanted to use my talents to work for a black art institution. I became very militant. It was either the Studio Museum, or Kenkeleba House on the Lower East Side, and Kenkeleba House seemed a little bit more progressive. They were these Black Nationalists, and I've always been kind of fascinated with the Black Nationalists. And it was like in the neighborhood, right? So it made it kind of easier. That's when I started meeting all these people that I'd seen in the neighborhood. Few of them had ever walked into the gallery, but I knew that they were interested in the arts, but I thought they were poets and musicians. Not even talking to them, just saying, "Oh, they're an art person, but they're probably more into like poetry or music." I thought they were all jazz musicians, and when I went to Kenkeleba, I found out that a lot of them were artists who were saying "welcome home."

And this distance that they created, because you know, of the way that I presented myself to other black people. That I had the name Sur that they figured was taken on. They didn't understand that it was S-U-R. They thought I was knighting myself by the Queen, and I had—when they got the Sur is from Surrealism, and not that, then it was like cool in a whole other way. And that I was hanging around too many white people. You know, [inaudible] black people when I was the neighborhood in here, but I was hanging around too many white people. And I was married to a white woman, so whoa—between that and the "sir" and the whole—it was like just too much. And that was all processed much later, when I started meeting and recognizing that there was a segregated black community. And I was sort of like a little bit like pissed off, for a long time, that I was so profiled and none of them had ever come and talked to me. They just made all these assumptions that they carried, that probably affected my life in negative ways until [inaudible] for a long time. So I was like really kind of pissed off at that, for like a long time. But then I felt that I never would have been really fully accepted within that group, because I was like too flamboyant, and too out about my homosexuality.

And the only person that I know that's kind of—is an American, he was very flamboyant and trying to make his way in the art world, being out and gay—Fred Wilson wasn't. You know, they're all very kind of like, cool and conserved about it—was Lyle Ashton Harris. And he talked about that, about how he was persona non-grata in the black art world for years, because he was too flamboyant. And I said "yeah, that's like part of my issue as well." That's changed somewhat.

I mean, you know, the whole art world is very different now than it was then. And it's kind of interesting, because I never really—in all the time that I was involved in the East Village scene, with the few black people—you know who they all are, you could count them on one hand. I never really thought about this whole thing, about like "where are we?" I figured, you know, they were in other parts of the country, or were doing other things. I knew they were out there somewhere. So I was kind of shocked when I found out how large and strong the community was, but it was running on a parallel track that was very segregated.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, when did you find out about that parallel track, and how did you find out about that parallel track?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Through Lorraine O'Grady. I met Lorraine O'Grady in the early '80s. I think there was something at the School of Visual Arts, and how Lorraine remembers it and I remember it are slightly different, but we both remember it was at the same location. And I remember there being a panel, where they had these East Village dealers, three or four of them up on this panel, talking about the East Village, the School of Visual Arts in an auditorium. But I wasn't—Gracie, Grace Mansion, was onstage, and I was in the audience. And someone had asked her a question, and they said, "Oh I don't know, my partner Sur would be able to answer that." And she pointed to me, and I had something to say.

Now Lorraine O'Grady immediately knows "oh, there's this black guy," so she had to find out who I was. So she approached me, gave me her card, and said what I had to say was very interesting, and we should talk. So we became very sort of friendly, where we'd chat now and then. Now I think she did something called the *Black and White* show, which was kind of one of my first visits to Kenkeleba. *Artforum* had [inaudible], where she had 10 artists that were black, and 10 artists that were white, doing work in black and white. And I think *Artforum* recreated the whole thing into an article about it, like 10 years ago. Well less than, five years ago maybe, that was really big.

That kind of raised the rate of cultural currency, right? And that show was very controversial, but not discussed ever. As a matter of fact, the article that really boomed the East Village, that really made the East Village seem really viable as like a commercial thing, happened with an article that appeared in *Art in America* called "Slouching Towards Avenue D" that was written by Carlo McCormick and Walter Robinson. And it was a big article, and it was like almost overnight that all the series collectors starting coming to East Village.

The lead picture in the first half-page of that really long article was John Fekner's *Toxic Junkie*, that was a mural on Second Street. That mural was commissioned by Lorraine as part of her *Black and White* show. There was no mention that that lead thing was part of a show at Kenkeleba, and Kenkeleba, the black institution that was responsible, was not mentioned. Right? But everything else in East Village was mentioned, and I was mentioned.

Right? And I remember Lorraine wrote an article to the—wrote a letter to the *Art in America*, complaining about this, about why there was no acknowledgment of this, and obviously it's like racist, because she also talked to Carlo McCormick and Walter Robinson when she was doing that show, and introduced them to Louis Renzoni, who was in East Village articles [inaudible]—through her, and through that show, and they included those artists that they discovered in that show in the article, without ever mentioning her or the show. So she was furious.

And part of it was—part of what she had to say was, you know, there you have, you know, all this racism, but Sur's recognized. And he would not be recognized if he was not aligned with a white woman. Right? She didn't want to talk to me about that for years, and then one day she did mention to me, and I said "do you think that was lost on me? Do you really think that you believe that I believed in any way, that if I would have gone and set up my own thing in the East Village, as interesting as it might have become, that I would have had the same success if I wasn't aligned with a white person?" Right? So that sort of like, she—I guess that was—she said "oh this guy's really interesting, but he's like Canadian. He's not really like conscious [inaudible]."

At the time that this was exposed—I think this was exposed later, when she started telling me about, Just Above Midtown, and her involvement in the art world. And I said "I knew nothing about this." And that's where I learned about David Hammons, and all those people that was—before David Hammons was discovered and had his show at PS1, that launched him with that book *Rousing the Rubble*, that of course mentions none of his involvement with black institutions, or Kenkeleba house, or any of those black folks at Just Above Midtown. Right? It's completely erased. There's no mention of that anywhere in the catalog.

So by—this was all happening in the '90s, when I started finding out about Just Above Midtown, and finding out about the protest, and moving downtown. And then I found out that Fred Wilson and all these other people were part of the group. I'm saying "well I've known these people, and they were around East Village, but none of them ever really talked to me." So I sort of got more angry.

So really I found out about the Just Above Midtown thing in the '90s. And then when I started working with Kenkeleba and meeting a lot of those people, they just assumed—many of them just assumed that I was—it's a big leap. "Oh yeah, you're in the art world. You're doing this, and you've been around, and you must know about all this other stuff." And I was like, "No, I had no idea."

And they're like all shocked that I had no idea. I was saying "well how would it have an idea?" No one was talking to me. And then the attitude went, "Well if you were really interested, you would have found us." And I said, "Well I was so involved in the art world that I was involved in. My breather with looking for other blacks to communicate with, were in the literary world.

So I went right up to find out who the queer writers were, and then I found, you know, I got poked into the Black Art Collective at its very early formations, that became Other Countries, that were all part of that Marlon Riggs film, and [inaudible]. I knew all those guys, right? So I was doing this thing in the literary world, with these black gay poets musicians, that had nothing to do with the art world. The worlds didn't meet, so I was running on this parallel world, but it wasn't the black art world, it was a black literary performing thing.

And then there was this visual art, contemporary art world that I was in, that was predominantly white. Not the black end of it, and you know, that's how I explained it. I say, you know, I was getting all my groove on with the art thing, with the community that I was in, and I was getting my needs or soul for understanding myself in the world through the writers. Because I've always been involved in writing, and it was kind of really amazing when those two worlds came together.

Recently, in the last like five years, when Gregg Bordowitz did the programming at the Whitney Museum, during the *Blues for Smoke* show—where he wanted to revisit what he'd remembered the writing of Donald Woods and all those people in the '80s, and he talked about Other Countries as being a part of it, as a group that existed then, that was part of the past. And I had to—I found out about this because I was working with Lorraine O'Grady, who was very much a part of the show, so I had to follow all the programming around the show, and I discovered [inaudible] Gregg Bordowitz, whom I knew. And I called him and I said, "Gregg, you can't be saying this. They're not all dead, they're here. Would you like to meet them? Maybe want to include them as part of the program?"

He was so—then we had a meeting, and he says "I'm so embarrassed by this. I have to correct this, and yes I want to meet these guys." So he met them. A lot of them remembered him from like the '80s, and he worked with the workshop for a while. Then when he made this presentation at the Whitney Museum—that again, wanting the purview of the art world. That's my world. And all the black literary worlds are in the same room.

And Gregg Bordowitz is saying, "You know, I've organized this program, and it's become so strong, and thank you Sur Rodney (Sur), who brought me back into [inaudible] Other Countries." So all these people from the art world are looking at me and saying "Sur? What does he have to do with this other thing?" And I'm saying, "Well the worlds don't meet, but you know, I move in a lot of different worlds." And it's the one moment where those two worlds collided.

Now the literary people knew that I was a part of the art world, but that wasn't their world. They thought it was interesting. But the white art world that I was involved in didn't care, didn't know about that. They were so taken by the presentation, and a lot of the younger generation who were there said "why didn't we know about this? Why"—you know, they didn't know about *Tongues Untied*.

They didn't know about any of that stuff, and I realized "oh yeah, that was then," and it was this rupture with AIDS and sort of got lost. But they were really kind of invigorated by this, and I remember that I gave them—I think they bought 10 copies of our last journal *Rising*, the double-volume one. And they sold out in like 20 minutes after that. Gone. They never ordered more, but they got rid of them all like really, really fast. And then nothing—it kind of like petered out.

You know, I thought it would be this resurgence of all this interesting programming around these black gay writers. There's now all these queer writing that are totally mixed. I mean it's totally integrated, and it's really fascinating—that really existed in the early '90s when there was a boom in queer black literary stuff sort of happening, and then it kind of like petered out. I guess the industry sort of figured it wasn't kind of worth it, or they weren't making enough money, and it sort of disappeared. But that's a way of weaving in and out a lot. I think we've—I've kind of gone in and out of a lot of things, but.

THEODORE KERR: No. I guess it was—you gave us a lot of good information. I want to go back [inaudible] and talk a little bit—maybe help us understand how you came to meet Gracie, and what that world looked like before you met Gracie and started the gallery.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well when I moved here and was interested in the art world, there was this SoHo art world. You know, Paul Cooper, Holly Solomon, all of that. So we'd run to that, right? To see those shows. We'd [inaudible] and fight with those artists originally, but we realized it was a really closed door to us. But we would go there, just to kind of see the show and drink the wine, and then figuring out what trouble we could make. Right? And it was Midtown. And I never really went to the museums, because it took me years before I got above Fourteenth Street. I mean the museums and that were kind of boring to me. Then while this whole thing was happening in SoHo that was the established market, there were these not-for-profit spaces, right? That were way more interesting to me, like Artists Space, and there were performance things happening at The Kitchen. Then there were like a lot of these kind of loft events sort of happening. But it was like more SoHo and Tribeca, and then Arlene was doing her performance art thing on The Bowery. So there were all these places, and the clubs were doing interesting things too.

So you know, the creative energy, and the artists that I were meeting, were basically in these other alternative venues or in clubs. There were things happening even in bars and restaurants. There were things happening on the street. There was someone getting involved in the project, filming something, and you just walk over and see some people like doing something. "Hey, what are you doing?" So it was very much of a networking thing, and things were found through flyers, and we'd meet each other at the clubs, and we were all hanging at the same restaurant being crazy.

So you know, people would just see a lot of you, because they weren't buried in their cell phones, and you'd see this person every day and they look sort of interesting, and then eventually you'd find yourself in a situation where you communicate. So there's this very like buzz of people wanting to do things, and they were doing things just to do them. Or they were doing things and presenting them with—I guess the Fashion Moda, ABC No Rio, that thing was all happening at the same time as East Village. But there was just like a lot of kind of energy happening around, and I was tapping into it by—I had access to a gallery in SoHo, that just thought I was like really great, because I had all these ideas for these shows. So I'd get like a bunch of artists and do these crazy shows. And I met a lot of people, because people wanted to meet me, because they knew that I was doing something. They didn't care about leeching, but I was doing something, and everyone was looking for someone that was doing something. And everyone would like—we'd switch roles, or if something was happening, you'd pull in other people. So it was very much just through being a part of the community.

Now the gallery that I was showing in, that allowed me—that just turned over the keys, practically, and said, "Do whatever you want." Right? Was Al Hansen's brother. Al Hansen was someone [inaudible] Fluxus, and basically seen as Father of Happenings. It's given a lot to Kaprow, but I think Al Hansen deserves a lot of it too—who was living in New Jersey, and would come into town with these young ladies that he met, that he wanted to introduce to what was going on in the art, and one of them was Gracie Mansion. Well—wasn't Gracie, she was Joanne at the time. So he came to visit his brother's gallery, and told Gracie, "You have to meet this guy. He's like so terrific. He's doing all this really great fabulous stuff. He's like just so original" and stuff.

And he introduced me to Gracie. Now I don't remember meeting her at all. She remembers it distinctly, and I knew I knew Al, and yeah he'd bring people and introduce them to me. But you know, maybe she was like so mousey that she didn't really get anything. Then I think about a year later, I was organizing this other exhibition, and I had to go to this artist's studio. And when I called up to drop by his studio, he says "we have to wait, because Dirty Hair has to wash her hair." Right? Now the "Dirty Hair" who had to wash her hair was Gracie, that I was meeting again—who knew that I was coming over, and had met me earlier through Al Hansen with "this guy's really amazing."

And this amazing guy was coming over to look at artwork to put in a show. So she sort of saw me as like this person, so she wanted to make a good impression. So I met her on that second time, and she didn't again make an impression, a real impression on me. I don't know why. I guess because she was so mousey or something, I figured "well she's too shy, and she's sort of in the background." Then I guess through socialization, Gracie was around. She'd moved from New Jersey to Manhattan, and was living over on Second Avenue with some friends, and dating this artist friend of mine. So I started seeing her in kind of social situations, and I remember her feeling—oh, was it Rodney Hilton Brown before that? Okay, so I'd met Gracie "Dirty Hair" and all that, and was organizing these shows.

Buster Cleveland, who was a Neo-Dadaist from San Francisco, he was a guy that I was like stalking, and how I found Arleen Schloss and, you know, I have this whole history with him. [inaudible] this is very Godfather—was working with Gracie, who was working at a gallery on West Broadway. A print shop on West Broadway near the corner of Spring, called—it was Rodney Hilton Brown's. He sold basically Schlock posters, and Leroy Neiman, Muhammad Ali prints, right? But she was also selling Buster Cleveland's collages in a separate drawer at the same time.

And Buster had been working there, wrapping stuff for shipping, and he didn't want to do that anymore. So he told me—so he asked me if I needed a job, that I could have this job, and I could work in a SoHo gallery. And I thought, "Oh great, I'm working at SoHo and around all these artists, and around this sexy Buster Cleveland around the corner, so I'll do it." So that's when I sort of developed my friendship with Gracie. It was a working sort of thing and I, you know, brought in all my ideas. "Oh we have this window here. Why don't we start doing shows in it? Oh [inaudible], why don't we do that?"

So we did a lot of like crazy stuff that the owner of the gallery sort of allowed, because it was just so wild. And he was kind of like a wild guy, and he just sort of watched what we were doing. So I did that, and that's really how I built my alliance with Gracie, and that's when she did the *Limo Show* with Buster Cleveland, where she was selling his collage in the back seat of a limo, parked on the corner of West Broadway and Spring. And I was the person wearing the horse mask [carrying the cherries on a silver tray -SRS], serving it around. So it was like part of our social thing, connected to Buster Cleveland in SoHo, and that's kind of what started it. So I'd had this relationship with Gracie that I developed, because we worked together, and we did this crazy event.

And then she called me up one day and said, "Oh, I have this friend that I met mutually through some friends, who needs a place to stay because he can't find an apartment. He needs a couple weeks." We had an apartment, he couldn't move in for a couple weeks, so can he live with you until, you know,—because I had this apartment on St. Mark's Place. And I said, you know, "fine," you know. I'd met the guy once. I didn't like him. He was from Boston, and he was just—took one look at me and decided he wasn't having it. And now this was the guy that was going to live with me?

I'm open, Gracie seemed, you know—I wanted to help her out, so I said, "It's only for two weeks. I mean, how bad can a guy be?" It was Tim Greathouse, and we became like *Mutt and Jeff*. We became really close, did everything together. People thought we were lovers. We weren't, we were just really good friends. And we lived together for like almost three years. Right? As a matter of fact, he even moved from St. Mark's place to here, but the neighborhood became too much for him, being this white boy in this thing he felt—so then he like kind of moved out after several months.

But so I was living with Greathouse, and Greathouse was really close to Gracie. As a matter of fact, he's the one responsible for turning Joanne into Gracie. Because he says, "You're not like Joanne, you're Gracie." Like Gracie Allen from that show, which is very much like Gracie. So we started calling her Gracie. Then Tim used to give Gracie a lot of his photographs. He was very generous. He'd give—I got a lot of them, but then he'd give prints to Gracie, and Gracie would hang them in her water closet, which was a toilet in a closet. That's where she would hang it, and it started looking like a gallery, and that's how it started.

Now, when—so it was really, you know—and the whole photography thing happened, because I met Tim Greathouse, he had a camera. He was shooting all this film that he didn't know what to do with. He couldn't afford to process it, and I said, "You can process it yourself." So I got him involved—told [inaudible] he could process his film, which he's very good at it—and then got him into printing, and the printing thing lead to his whole thing with Gracie and da, da, da, da. So that's how that whole history thing was formed.

Now my becoming Gracie's partner—she had a patron that was really supportive of Gracie's projects, and used to buy a lot of work from her curated shows. Well you're talking, buying a lot of work. He's paying like a couple hundred dollars for stuff. So for \$800 he could walk out with twelve pieces. You know what I mean? So not like today. So he was a patron of Gracie's, and when she decided at some point that she couldn't do this thing in her apartment anymore, and needed to find a storefront and actually think about doing this as a business—she tried to find, get some kind of secured backing. Right? And all the people she found that were really interested in backing her, basically would like own the gallery, and she would be working for them. And it didn't work.

But Jim Stark, was his name—he's a film producer. He produced all the Jim Jarmusch films. Really liked Gracie, and felt he would make it a go. And she found this storefront that was across from the park, next to where the Life Cafe used to be. This was East Tenth Street, between—close to Avenue B. I think the rent was like \$600, and he agreed that if Gracie really wanted to do it, he would buy enough art to cover her \$600 rent every [month - SRS]. So that would take—that was the biggest thing.

Now both Gracie and I had jobs, so we threw in our money to take care of the telephone bills, and the basic function-running of the gallery, but our rent was covered. And when we opened up—oh yeah, so Gracie of course wanted me to look at the space, because Gracie could never make a decision, and she figured, "Well Sur would know, because he's done more of these shows, and he knows da, da, da, da, so I want him to see this place as well." So I met her at the storefront to look at it, with this guy that was going to help support her. And he said, "Okay Gracie, you've seen the space. What do you think Sur?" And I'm saying "wow, this is great space. We could do it, and just make it sort of do our thing."

And he said, "Great, okay. I will help you Gracie, and make this deal on one condition. That you take Sur on as a partner." Right? Now I couldn't say no. I mean, why would I say no? He's saying that he's going to let Gracie do this thing, but he wants me to be a part of it. Which was fine, because I was interested in doing that anyways. And I didn't—wasn't concerned about how I was going to live, because I had a job. So I moved from my job—when I had time, I'd work on [inaudible] and sort of negotiate, and we both did that for a while.

So it was fine, and I discovered later—you know, because I stayed very good friends with this patron, who dropped out after a while because it became too much. And we didn't need him, because the business was doing so well—was that he knew Gracie so well. He knew that she really wasn't able to make decisions. She was penny-wise and pound-foolish, and didn't have the—she was very organized, and she was a very hard worker, but she always thought in a micro way, rather than a macro way, and she didn't have the sort of business sense that I had. So he felt that if I were working with her, with my contacts in the art world and my business sort of savvy, that I would be kind of insurance for him.

And it sort of worked, and we worked very well together. You know, I really was very clear through the very beginning. I said, "Look Gracie, this is your gallery. This is your project. I know that you're committed to some of

these artists. I think you have a really good eye." And my job was, with her, to—she would run the business, she would deal with the collectors. I didn't want to deal with that. She would deal with the press. I didn't want to deal with them. I wanted to deal with the artists directly.

And you know, she'd always ask my opinion of what I thought of the artists, and how I would do it. But my job that I saw in that gallery was to take the artists that she wanted to present, and find a way to present them so that it would really go "pow." So every show we worked on, I worked very close with the artists, came up with a concept, you know. Used our imaginations to make the whole thing really look like a whole event.

So I was kind of like the aesthetic stylist of the gallery, and Gracie was the front mouth kind of funny girl, and I sort of liked that because I was able to move around a lot more with the artists, and I had more—even though people came into the gallery, they saw it as Gracie's gallery. The artists who knew that we were like partners, but in the outside world, I was just someone that was working for Gracie. Again, in that subservient position, and I told people "I have no problem being subservient to my wife." Because we were legally married, right?

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

SUR RODNEY SUR: Oh yeah. We're legally married for years. Nothing to do with a green card, which is what people sort of think.

THEODORE KERR: Oh.

SUR RODNEY SUR: It's not why we got married, right? No, we're really good friends, and we figured—you know, we have this business together. We both had our [inaudible] sunk in. We started thinking as this started rolling, what would happen if something happened to her or to me, how that would affect the business. And she had problems with her family and all of that, so—and I remember talking to our accountant about this, and the accountant said, "Do you realize if you were married, you would save \$3,000 in taxes?" Now we had a bookkeeper, someone that was filing all our things.

Now you have to realize that I was—how much of this do I want to get onto the tape [laughs]? But anyways, the—she realized that we would save \$3,000 if we were married. That's all she was thinking about, and Gracie and I said "3,000 bucks, that's \$1,500 apiece. My god, we can go to Europe for the summer." Because \$1,500 was like a lot of money for us to have in our pockets. We could get a round-trip ticket to Europe for \$400, and we'd have \$1,100 to spend.

You know, it was like a great idea, so we said, "Oh let's get married." Just like that. Went through the whole thing. I remembered we got married on a Monday, to go down to do it. And that was the thing—you have to have all these tests for syphilis and all that before, to get your marriage license. And I'd remembered we were getting married, and I didn't have our rings. And I said, "Shit."

You know, the gallery was open on Sundays, so it was like 8:00 at night. We were saying, "Oh tomorrow we're supposed to go and get married," and I said, "Oh shit, we need rings. Where am I going to find rings at 8:00 at night on a Sunday?" Right? I went running up Eighth Street, and found some—a shop that called Azuma, that sells a lot of tchotchkes and souvenirs kind of stuff, and I guess it was open late for tourists. And at the counter they had this plastic box filled with plastic rings, and one of the rings were in the shape of a nail. A bent nail forming a ring, so you were wearing like a bent nail on your finger, and I said, "Oh I'm getting nailed. Perfect."

So I bought these plastic rings [laughs], and I remember they were adjustable. And when I went to put it on Gracie's finger at the ceremony, it broke [laughs]. So we're standing there with this broken ring [laughs], and this guy's looking at us, and it was like—we didn't tell anyone that we were doing this. We just did it, right? So that we can get our \$3,000, and didn't think about it. Didn't think about it.

Then it wasn't until months later, I think, this lawyer friend of mine says, "Oh, Sur, you know, are you thinking about"—I said "I never really thought about that." I guess you know, I was paying taxes and everything, and I guess as long as you're giving money and were hiring people, they didn't really care what your thing was, because it worked into the whole sort of thing. I don't know how they were doing it. But so we were married for that period, and people didn't find out about—that we were married until the issue of *People* magazine came out, with that photo of me [with martinis on -SRS] the tray, and Gracie holding [an elegant cigarette holder -SRS], looking like I was a butler, and she looked like this fancy lady, and I had to explain that it was something that I had styled, not *People* magazine. I intentionally wanted to do that, and it was like a comment, and that's the "subservient to my wife" thing that I came out, because if people read the article, that's when it was announced that we were married. Nobody knew. So then we had this barrage of hate email about, "You married the nigger da, da, da, da." Right? And then our artists coming over to us and saying, "Oh this is really wonderful. Congratulations. Why didn't you tell us? Are you thinking of having kids?" And it's like, "Hello? Hello?" You know?

And I think what it did, the benefits of it that we'd realized, was that it made the business much stronger,

because when—because at that point we were making—this happened in '84, and by then we were starting, we were like very profiled. Seen as like, you know, the Mary Boone of the East Village and all that. Right? And Gracie and I were both celebrated and both recognized as partners in this venture, but the collectors who knew this didn't so much see like here you have these two people working, and maybe one is trying to cut the other one out, or screw the other one. And they didn't really know whether—you know, kind of don't really know. There's two people working together and they're friends, but they could kind of like—but then when they saw that we were married, there would be things, like if they would notice something with Gracie, where she seemed a little bit frazzled, they'd come to me and say, "I'm really worried about Gracie. Is she sort of okay?" Because I'd realized that as her husband, I would know that and be able to explain it, whereas before, as a partner, I might not. So it just made the business much tighter, in terms of operating with people, and also protected us in this other way, that there was some kind of a business, that we could kind of be there for each other.

I mean people are still surprised, and they go—and I say, "Well you didn't really pay much attention to this, and it's been mentioned in the press." Some of the press, several [inaudible] that we're married. But it's really kind of been played down, and we never played it up, because obviously I was doing my gay thing, and Gracie was doing her thing. And, you know, there's a whole story about that too, about her relationship, with being this like married couple and our open relationship that kind of got very interesting. But we don't need that for the Smithsonian. We can—

THEODORE KERR: Maybe another time.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: So maybe just some little facts. When did Gracie Mansion open, and when did it start to shut down?

SUR RODNEY SUR: The timeline is so—I mean, the show in her loo, with Tim Greathouse, where she got all this press and was recognized as "oh, this loo division." [inaudible] Loo division. [inaudible] loo division. That was like 1980-81. Right? Then she rented a parlor on St. Mark's Place, that was over where the—that was above where the Boy Bar used to be, on St. Mark's Place, and she did a couple of shows there. One of them being *The Famous Show*.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] What year was that?

SUR RODNEY SUR: That must have been 80—my god, this is so hard, because I was in Europe and I came back, and this thing was happening. So that might have been like the fall of '81?

THEODORE KERR: Okay. Because you just said that the loo show was in '88, but it was way earlier [inaudible].

SUR RODNEY SUR: No, it was '81.

THEODORE KERR: '81, okay.

SUR RODNEY SUR: '80 or '81.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

SUR RODNEY SUR: I think it was like the earlier part of '81, when Tim Greathouse had this show, and then I left, and she had a success of other shows that included Stephen Lack. And I was in Europe for that period, but I'd heard about it. And then when I come back in the fall, she had this space [inaudible] where she had *The Famous Show*, that had all those artists, and where she met Peter Hujar, David Wojnarowicz, and all those people. And Nicolas Moufarrege wrote about it, and blew it up like really big.

That was the first article written about the East Village Gallery thing, was Nicolas Moufarrege writing about Gracie Mansion's *Famous Show*. And those photos have been circulated. You know, what the opening looked like, with the mobs of people, and what the artwork looked like, and David Wojnarowicz's thing hanging in the ceiling. So Tim's was like the early part of 1981, and then the famous show and her salon was like at the end of the year. And then I guess in 1982, that's when she opened up her first gallery storefront.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

SUR RODNEY SUR: 1982. And then in 1983 we expanded to a second storefront, and then in 1984 we got a \$1.2 million face lift. That's what the ads in *Artforum* said. We didn't spend that much money. We—with the help of Jeffrey Deitch, who got us a loan from Citibank, built the gallery on Avenue A, that was designed by this architect Michael McDonough, that had all these slanted walls, and frieze, and moveable walls. It was like a really kind of an architecture, very high-styled wonder, and when you walked into it, you said, "Oh, this is money." That you know, kind of words better, because now that it looks like we have money, we could raise the

prices on all the art, and [inaudible] will say, "Of course, if you have this place, we will give you like \$3,000." You couldn't do that in a small storefront, right?

So that happened in about '84. So '82, one storefront, '83 we expanded it to the second storefront and had two storefronts. '84 we moved to Avenue A, and that was like kind of the peak of it. And then by '85-86, the AIDS thing was like super evident. I mean, it had been building, but it was like really like a big thing. And then in '88 I left, and, you know, there was a whole decline. There was the stock market crash thing that happened around that time. You know, there was the running away from like this queerness thing, which you know—I'd realized that this panel that I was out at Red Bull, where they were talking about—Carlo McCormick and Walter Robinson and Marilyn Minter are talking about the fall of the East Village had to do with the four straight boys of Neo-Geo, and International With Monument. Because people got interested in this Neo-Geo movement, rather than the fun and the silliness of the East Village, that was tied in with queer and AIDS. So that was their way of forgetting it. And I'd realized that they never wanted to recognize this queerness or AIDS. They kind of separated the world.

THEODORE KERR: Who didn't want to?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well, you know, it was quite evident in this panel.

THEODORE KERR: Which panel is this? What year?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well, this happened in the last year.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Gracie Mansion was celebrated at the Red Bull studios in Chelsea, where they did a display of her favorite mementos and artwork that represented her relationship to artists. And they decided to do a panel. I can't remember the name of the panel, but it was something about going back and reminiscing about the East Village. And on the panel they invited Marilyn Minter, who Gracie and I used to represent, Walter Robinson, Carlo McCormick, myself, and Gracie.

And I insisted that I did not want to again be the only person of color on the panel, and that we needed someone else. So I invited Yasmin Ramirez—who's a scholar that used to write for the *East Village Eye*, and was a young kid [inaudible], but now she's up at El [Museo del Barrio -SRS]. She's Puerto Rican—to be the moderator. And everyone on the panel knew her and remember her from being this little kid, and now she's like a Ph.D. scholar, so she seemed perfect. But she wasn't a good moderator because all treated her like she was like this little kid anyway [laughs], right?

So there's this whole discussion with people showing all these slides of the East Village, and what they remembered in the openings, and the irascible photographs with all these people, and all the queers that had died. No one mentioned AIDS. So we're looking at this whole thing, slides and slides and reminiscing about this and that, and this and that, and this and that. And then it got to a certain point, after about an hour of reminiscing down memory lane, they started talking about how the East Village thing fell apart. How all the "fun" was taken out, and they talked about how the FUN Gallery closed, and that was the end of the "fun" and "blah blah blah blah." All that stuff we've heard before.

Then I think Marilyn Minter was talking about "Well Gracie, you didn't realize that the whole thing was over. It was over a long time before you actually recognized it, because no one was really interested in what you were doing, was going on in the East Village anymore." Because we were getting serious, and Neo-Geo, with Haim Steinbach, Jeff Koons, and all those people, that started in the East Village International With Monument, were what everyone was paying attention to. "And what you were doing was irrelevant." Okay.

So then they built up this whole case. There was this whole discussion around how International Monument was a new direction and movement, and that's where everybody went, and everyone sort of forgot about the East Village. Then I blew up, and I said, "I've been—look, I've been on this panel for over an hour now. We've been looking at all these photos. You know who all these people are. Most of them are dead, and I've not once heard anyone mention AIDS." And then there was like this kind of silence in the panel, and you could see some people in the audience sort of light up. And they said, "Oh yes, there was the AIDS thing." And then they talked a little about Nicolas Moufarrege and the project, and I'm saying "yes, we had a slide of him. He wasn't even present in that photo because he was in the hospital with AIDS, and he died a month later." And this is the person who wrote the first article about that, and you can't make this sort of connection?

So this happened towards the end, and it wound down, and my anger had me write about the experience, and what happened. In an essay that I wrote—I think I gave a copy of it to Alex—and he said, "This is amazing. I want to put this up on our website." And I've asked him to hold off, because I think that there's going to be an exhibition at the Howl Gallery in September on the *East Village Eye* where it's going to be all about the founding of the *East Village Eye* and all their art things, and they're doing a new issue—they're reissuing *East Village Eye*

in the format of the original *East Village Eye* by today, 2016, with all these stories, and I think he's considering publishing my Red Bull story about us talking about the East Village today in that, so then it will come out in that way. But, you know, it had me really thinking that there was—and I talked about this at the very end of the panel, and people were getting a little bit nervous about this, because then I realized, Oh! Yes! I'm the only queer on the panel."

[Laughter]

Right? So I'm kind of in this other position where I remember at a certain point, with the development of AIDS, there was this real kind of split in the communities where, you know, I've always talked about the East Village being driven by a bunch of gay men and the women who loved them, and if you look at all the clubs, all the events, it's always these gay men and women. And, you know, the straight guys and straight women were a part of it too, and the guys were loving it, because, you know, we were pulling in all these women that were kind of loose, because they felt like they were given some kind of power, so the guys were just waiting on the sidelines to bang them, but there was this social split where people were really kind of backing off from being around us, because they realized we were queer. [Inaudible] We were queer. We might be infected. The transmission thing wasn't if I come and hug and kiss you, sir, like kissy, kissy like we used to. So that kind of stopped. The invitations to dinners and restaurants stopped. Right? So there was a separation that started, and people started pulling away, because they recognized that it was like too queer, and they could see that certain people were sick, and it was kind of getting buzzed around, so they kind of separated themselves out from queer thing. That was happening, and they went right for this like Neo-Geo thing by these four, straight white guys that Marilyn Minter corrected me, and said three and a half, because apparently, Haim Steinbach or one of them is a switch hitter, so he's like only half a straight guy or something. But so there was that. And I started really thinking about it then. I said, "This is really their way of—this is kind of like a separation anxiety in dealing with it, so they created this kind of other thing," and then it kind of matches with the de-queering and the [inaudible] about AIDS that happened in the, you know, early '90s. You couldn't write about David Wojnarowicz and his work in relation to AIDS. They didn't want you to talk about that. You know, people forget this.

Now it's changed. You can do all that, but there was a period—a long period—where you couldn't talk about that, and I'd realized that I think that there's a lot of shame and guilt with a lot of those people from that period, because when you talk about it honestly, it implicates their role in this kind of separate—and I kind of—it's not like I understand it. You know, I understand that they had kids. They had other responsibilities, and they didn't want to be a part of it, but there's still a certain kind of treatment, and the whole de-queering thing and recognizing and stuff with AIDS that they didn't want to deal with. And when you talk about AIDS as being part of the whole destruction of the fabric of the East Village scene implicates them, and they'd rather not talk about it that way and put it onto Neo-Geo, and like I said in my article, I'm saying, when you think of the people that were really supporting us—the very prominent people in the art world, curators, museum directors, major collectors were really supporting us—so what you're saying is that they were just silly and goofy too, and didn't know what they were doing. So by saying that what we were doing was so unimportant and silly, then you're saying that all the people and the support that we had, that those people are silly too, right? Because they have to take part of the blame for the silliness? And then people have come back and said, "Well, you understand that you know, the Neo-Geo thing did become really strong, and your thing did become less important," and I'm saying if AIDS wouldn't have happened, they both would have been going along at the same time. It's not like there's only room for one kind of aesthetic. There's room for multiple aesthetics. That's what the East Village is all about, but it wasn't one kind of a thing. There were all these different things happening at the same time from conceptualism to installation to like Disney Land to like political art. It was all happening at the same time, and it was kind of fine.

But then all the stuff that was related to the real East Village stuff that they were trying to hone as a particular style was connected, when you looked at it, to queer men and AIDS, and that's what kind of killed it. And it took years and years and years and years before a lot of that would start to come up again. Like twenty years, it started coming back, and people started to be able to talk about it. And, you know, Peter Hujar, I mean, you know. How long did it take for even Peter Hujar to kind of get recognized? He had to go through the whole de-queering thing in the '90s before this stuff happened with Matthew Marks, and it's a lot of traces, and when you trace the people that were in institutions that were gay, particularly that as visual aids and what happened to them, why weren't they working with those institutions anymore? There was obviously a rupture, and it was totally connected to AIDS. The way the institutions didn't want to deal with these people anymore and their AIDS issues. They'd had enough. Right? And no one has ever talked about that story, but the people that were in it know. We remember, and when we talk about it now, it's like the people that were there don't want to remember it like that. They've just completely gone into this thing of denial. But I realize it's a way of protecting themselves from their implication in it, so I kind of understand that, but all that's just come together out of this panel. I really started to rethink this stuff again. So there you have it.

THEODORE KERR: Do you want some water?

SUR RODNEY SUR: No, I'm fine. I want a cigarette.

THEODORE KERR: Do you want to take a break?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Sure.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. Or do you want to smoke and talk?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I can do both.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

SUR RODNEY SUR: I can smoke and talk.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. Unhook your mic, and get your cigarettes. Are they here?

SUR RODNEY SUR: They're [inaudible].

THEODORE KERR: And I'm going to get a water. While you're rolling your cigarette, maybe think about, like really try to imagine the first time you even saw a hint of what was going to come when it came to HIV. Not even the first time you heard about HIV or AIDS but even like, sitting here now in 2016, if you really mind back, when's the first time that your mind alerted you that something was going on and something was going to change? And how that related to HIV?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Okay. I'm sort of a workaholic, and I'm always busy and don't have time to focus on pretty much anything but the work that I'm doing in the next thing. Right? And I think I went through pretty much most of the '80s like that, and I heard about people being sick, and I knew that AIDS was around, and I knew that it was affecting people in the clubs and on the scene, but I didn't really go out to clubs and the scene a lot, so you know, I wasn't getting those messages from people like people that were going out. People think that I was running around that stuff all the time, but I really wasn't. I had kind of more of a domestic life with lover, and I really was into doing my writing and that kind of stuff. And I think at that point, when it was really developing, and around the time that Other Countries were doing all that journal, I wasn't really active with the group. I sort of knew them, but you know, I was downtown. They were Brooklyn and uptown. And I really wasn't seeing them that much, so I wasn't kind of aligned with a lot of the work that they were doing around the devastation of the community and the writing, because I wasn't really writing at that time. At that point, I was really in the thick of like '83/'84 of this boom with the East Village and traveling, and that kind of occupied all of my time.

I remember Nicolas Moufarrege being sick and being in the hospital when you had to wear those spacesuits, and I had heard—you know, you had sort of heard about it, but it wasn't—it didn't really seriously hit me until there was this guy who lived on 10th Street that was an artist that was kind of really into me, and he was like a nice guy, and you know, he was on the block with the gallery, and he used to talk to him. And one day I saw him walking down the street, and he looked so emaciated and weak, and he was by himself. And I said, "Are you okay?" And he explained his condition and what was happening. And I said, "Yes. This is like really happening." And not only experiencing it, but it's someone that I know, and I just started thinking about how he had to live his day to day. Then it really hit me like this person has to live like this from day to day. He's out here walking on the street, and he looks like he can keel over at any second. What kind of strength does that take to go [inaudible]? Why doesn't he have anyone with him? Why—I know he lives just up the block am I not more concerned about this person that I know? It's not like hearing about someone you figure, well, someone else over there is doing something, and they have friends that are doing this, and they have friends who are doing that. You just assume that. But this was a situation where this guy had friends and people too, but he was doing this alone, and that really made an impression on me. Then I really started to think about this is what AIDS looks like.

And I think soon after that period there were a number of other artists—Keith Davis, whom I met through David Wojnarowicz—was critically important in the whole East Village thing, and it's never really talked about. We were lovers for a while. And I was lovers with him, I think, either right before he'd had his diagnosis, or he'd already been diagnosed, and to me, it didn't matter. You know, we still had our sort of relationship, and Keith was very out there with his Kapsi sarcoma scars [lesions -SRS], and he'd be riding the subway, and people would say, "What's that?" And he'd say, "It's cancer." And people would like, you know—but he had a really difficult time, and I kind of felt that he needed support. Not so much in terms of helping to do things, because he wasn't that ill yet, and he had a good support system, but he really needed like more of the emotional support. So I would do things. And I remember inviting him here over to dinner one day, and he came over, and I cooked this meal, and he ate some of it and left it on his plate, and then I started like finishing the food that was on his plate. And he just froze, because he thought of himself as such a pariah that the idea that I had no problem with eating the food off of his plate, thinking to himself, "Nothing like that has ever happened to me before." It was really kind of like this amazing thing that happened to him. It was like for a moment in his life, in all these weeks he'd been

going through this, for the first time he didn't feel like his infection really matter, and that's when I—just from that interchange—from that moment on, I'd realized a lot of what these people are going through have not only what they have to negotiate through their day to day but just their feelings about themselves and their need to feel that they can just be whatever, so I had no problem engaging in sex with people that were HIV positive, and you know, doing all that stuff, and I was the one that would have no problem with the shadow over the place and cleaning up their shit. You know in sometimes unsafe ways.

I remember when Andreas went into hospice care. I went in with him, and I just lived there. And people were like, "Don't you have some place to go? Don't you have a job?" And I'm saying, "Yeah," but this is like a serious, critical thing, and if it interrupts my life in some kind of a way, I'm here, and this is my place, and this is what I have to do. And I think, you know, again what made me able to do that where a lot of people wouldn't be able to do that—and I think it just comes to this thing about like I'm different, I can make a difference, and I can do things my way, and it doesn't matter, because I'll still be this weirdo anyways. Maybe some of that was kicking in that allowed me to do that, but I've always had this kind of compassion, and I guess it kind of goes back to when I really think about it—I haven't really thought about it this way before—my mother was a very compassionate person. If she heard about a neighbor that had some kind of a problem, whether it was a domestic abuse issue or a money thing or something, she was the first one over there trying to help them figure out how things would do. And we had some family members that were sort of like mentally challenged in a really big way, and they had two kids, one was mentally challenged. The other one wasn't. She was smart as a whip and basically was still in diapers but even in kindergarten was talking in full sentences but was keeping everything in the house in order and helping their parents do things that was just weird, so I would go over and help him. And my mother was always sending me over to places to help neighbors or help someone do something, or she'd have been really angry about something that had happened to someone who had just lost their job, and she needed to—so there was always that stuff in the background, but there was always this thing for compassion and need that I've always done and never thought anything about it, because I figured I'm in this place, and this is what needs to be done, so do it.

How, you know, I'd realized that before this whole AIDS thing, I remember talking to a girlfriend who was part of the East Village—she's moved out to the West Coast years ago—and she was talking to me about how she remembered when she had to go for an abortion when she was pregnant. I went with her, and she got her abortion, and I made sure she got home and stayed and cooked food with her and helped her set up, and that meant so much to her. I had absolutely no memory of her ever being pregnant, no memory of going to the doctor, and to her, it was a really big thing. But to me it was something that needed to be done that I didn't really think that deeply about so it was kind of in my nature anyways to be that way, and I've always been very—you know, it's a very kind of spiritual, learning, self-learning, self-healing kind of a thing, and maybe I've always kind of been into that [inaudible], and anything that I've really done in my life is really about nurturing and self-healing. My stuff with creativity, my stuff with wanting to meet people. It's all about making myself richer, making them richer culturally, intellectually. It's all about an intellectual and spiritual development. That's the thing that's really the high in life for me, and when people are losing it and don't have just the slightest basis of that, it's like you don't really have a life anymore. You may as well be dead, so those are the kinds of things that I sort of think of. You know, if someone's really sick and they can't get out of bed, well, you know, just playing music and being around and hanging and laughing is like part of those things that we need that they don't have the space for, because they're negotiating all this other stuff. And I always kind of focused on that. And that was, you know, what got me to leave the gallery, because I felt like I can't be here working and doing this stuff every day when I'm realizing that like, you know, this friend who's like two blocks away is probably lying on the floor in a puddle of his shit because he doesn't have the strength to get up and get [a glass of water or -SRS] get himself fully to the bathroom.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. Can you talk about that transition from the gallery to being more available to your friends?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Instead of going to the gallery, I was hanging out with these friends and going to visit them. I mean, my day-to-day life was changed, but I just had to be very busy organizing and doing and making sure sort of things were in the order. You know. Going to the doctor. Finding out about resources. Da, da, da, da. So it was like, you know, instead of going and finding out about a shipping company and what we were going to do with this artwork, it was just like another organizational thing to do. Another way of organizing things. It had the same element of surprise. You don't know where things are going to work. How things are going to go. And you just sort of do it. And I was doing it with people that I really got to spend more time with.

It put me in situations that, you know, somethings always been important to me. If I put myself in the situation, how am I going to grow from the experience? I've always been attracted to anything that I can get involved in that would help me grow. That was part of it. It didn't matter if I got money. It didn't matter if I got anything, but if it helped me, because my growth would make me more valuable or enriched to be able to bring that to other experiences. And also through those experiences open up other doors that were not there, which is kind of the way that it's moved in a very organic way. You know, helping these people put me in touch with certain people

that I wouldn't have been in touch with, helped me negotiate with people in the art world that I didn't negotiate with them before, so it was very different.

THEODORE KERR: Can you say more about that? What does that mean?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well, it wasn't so much about—you know, it went from the difference of trying to take artist's works and get it out there and find them homes as opposed to finding out how to preserve, archive, develop all the histories and stories around the artwork that was needed. You don't think about that when you're doing. You just want to get out there. Then you go back later if someone was interested and attach all the stories to it and what a person was thinking. You weren't really thinking about that. Now I have to think in reverse, because all the stories and the work and the source material that went around collecting the work became immediately important, because that was going to be lost. Whereas when an artist is living and doing things, you're just thinking about their next production and putting it out there, and then you can catch up with it later. So I guess it was a reversal of things, and that's what I got really interested in. Oh, okay. We're walking out of this door today, and if you come back tomorrow, what are we going to find, and what do we have to deal with? And I think about that in my own life. You know, when I leave, when I'm here with all of this stuff—some of these files I haven't looked at in twenty years. Opening file drawers, it's like I'm opening Pandora's Box. I'm always thinking about if I never come back here, and someone comes in here, and they find this stuff, what are they going to find, and what is it going to mean? And what do they have to be informed of? And what notes do I write on the back of pieces so that people know. You know, I was talking to Rock yesterday, and I said, you know, I've even written my obit. And I update it every now and then. I know it sounds morbid, but I feel that there has to be something that gets in there in the way that I want to be remembered. How it's going to be used or how it's going to be distributed is one thing, but that's kind of important, so it's really changed my whole way that I sort of see the world. Not so much what you're doing now, but the traces of what you leave behind and how they'll be understood is very important.

THEODORE KERR: So AIDS—

SUR RODNEY SUR: To me.

THEODORE KERR: —Is it fair to say that HIV/AIDS gave you a sense of the importance of impermanence and the human's role in marking their time here?

SUR RODNEY SUR: It gave me a sense of importance in people marking their time here as they recognize their time, and what was important and what was not. It's not necessarily only the material stuff, because it's still material stuff, but all the stuff that goes with it that makes you into what you are. That makes you into doing. That's the stuff that needs to be shared and passed on forever and ever and ever so that people know there was someone that existed like this. That was thinking in this kind of mode. That had this kind of relationship to their work and why they were—why work was important to them. So someone else is doing, even if they can't see the work, someone might be thinking the way that they do, and it gives them more strength. It's all about building strength in moving forward. And I think that AIDS created a certain fracture within the generational divide, because all the young kids that were kids didn't have this community of people out there that were freaks, and everyone knew about that we're looking at. There was this whole community that was happening out there that people wanted to divorce themselves for. Didn't want to hear about. Didn't want to talk about. It was too sad. It was too ugly. No, we didn't want to talk about your uncle. Yes, he was [inaudible], but we don't want to talk about that, because it's too sad. [inaudible]. So they carried all this stuff— because of the stigma around AIDS and the shame and all that sort of stuff that if AIDS wouldn't have happened, maybe there might have still been the shame with the homosexuality part of it, but the rest of it would have been still passed on in kind of a way.

Where it's been passed on basically through shame and a certain amount of shock and disrapture, because the straight community in alliance with the gay community in the larger world that felt they weren't touched by it weren't together, and it affected all their offspring that were also queer that might have needed to understand in a certain way and haven't been able to talk about it in years. You know that came out in that thing that happened at the library about a couple years ago where there was this woman that had gone back to San Francisco to take care of her gay father, and she got involved in the gay community. And he died, and she wrote a book about it. And she said that, you know, she felt that she had this alliance with the queer community with AIDS that she really couldn't talk to people about, because no one would understand. And then there were all these people in the audience that had experienced the same thing, because they hadn't been able to talk to anyone about it, and they were all in this room. And sort of mourning and I realized, wow. That's when I realized that this whole generation has a sort of separating thing.

I mean, I talk about it when I talk about going to gay bars. I've noticed in the few times that I've been to gay bars that you see basically the age demographic is very simple. They're condensed. You know. They're all like under 30, or da, da, da, da, da. You don't get that intergenerational thing that I always remember going to gay bars. There were always like, you know, every age group. Maybe not the race thing wasn't as mixed, because

that's always been a problem. And I've had to deal with that myself at gay bars, but there's this kind of split and division, so again, I see that there in this thing sort of like passed down in the same kind of way. There's a lot more interracial, intergenerational things happening because of Grindr. You know that's changed, and, you know, I've talked to a lot of old guys saying "I'm happy to get more sex now, because I can't go into a gay bar, because you know, there isn't that kind of happening, because it's afraid—they're so self-conscious, 'how am I going to look if I'm talking to this older guy, and I think maybe he's sexy.'" But you can do it on Grindr now, and it's like fine. Because it's in this enclosed, secret, private space.

THEODORE KERR: What was the reaction from people at the gallery, like Gracie, or other artists, when you started to pull away from the gallery and attend to your friends?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Disaster. Because when I announced to Gracie that I was leaving at the end of the year, she realized at that moment, the gallery could not survive without me, because I was so integral to making the whole thing. How was she going to replace that? So she sent out a call to her artists saying that the gallery was closing. And the person that got the most upset about it was David Wojnarowicz. He left and went running to PPOW. Because he knew Mysoon Rizk was working there, and he wasn't sure about PPOW, but he knew about Mysoon Rizk right? And then I said to Gracie—I said, "Gracie you have to continue." She said, "Well, how am I going to go on?" And I said, "You can do it. You can get backing. You're at the top of your game. I'll write up a business plan to find you backers," and I wrote up this business plan. And that's when I realized how much money when I—because the bookkeeper was always doing this, and now I had to do it. I had to really look at our books to find out how much money we were spending, and I figured out that to keep our doors open in the gallery, every month we had to make something like \$40,000—\$40 to \$50,000. So how much art were we selling to keep that—? And we were still pretty poor living from hand to mouth in my funky, little apartment here. Everything was run as a business expense, and that's when it really hit me how much money we needed to run a gallery.

So I built it, you know, based on the realities of the situation where I was seeing these bills coming in. And we had a backer that would cover it. And then that's when I left and Gracie moved to SoHo and found another director that would do the same things that I did—a couple of people, and it worked, and she did a number of shows and closed it after Fred Wilson, because she did a show for Wilson and couldn't get any of these collectors. She was in touch with everyone at that point. No one was interested. What Fred had told her was that he was also having a show with Metro Pictures who was interested in him at the same time. So she had her show at Gracie's where none of these collectors would come in, and then she found out about a show at Metro Pictures that happened two months after her show. She went to Metro Pictures, and all those people were at Metro Pictures trying to get into the galleries. And then she realized what the art world was really about, and she closed the gallery. Then I think after a while, she moved to her place in St. Mark's and operated there. And I'd go back and help her two or three days a week just because I knew like the functions of the gallery, the collectors, and the artists. So I helped her with that for a while, and then she moved to Chelsea, and I helped her work on that. And she'd always have backers behind her for that. So I helped her in Chelsea a little bit while I was doing this other stuff, but then I was working as an employee for her, so it was a different relationship. I didn't have to be invested in all the shit. I'd just get invested in the job that I'd have to do. And I'd talk to her as a friend and give her advice and that sort of thing, and I could write my own checks, because I still was a signatory on the accounts. When I wanted to get paid, I'd just write myself a check [laughs]. That part of it was really great. Right?

And then she eventually went back into private dealing, and again, you know, because I was friends, and it's like, "Oh, Sur. You have to sort of help me." And I'm sort of like there as like the help guy. Right? Damage control. So I worked with Gracie, but it was very privately. I wasn't public, so and Gracie worked as a private dealer, so people thought she had fallen off the face of the earth, and since '88, I wasn't really public. I was working more privately. Even when I was working with Gracie in Chelsea, I would be there some of the times but sort of tucked in the back doing things. So people thought that I'd fallen off as well. You know, I sort of got back into it from [inaudible] House, and I was married to a very high profile dealer who was representing a lot of big name artists for a while, and then I ended up marrying a Fluxus artist who was very much in the thick of things but more in Europe, because the whole Fluxus thing was happening in Europe, so it brought my whole alliance to all of that. And it was moving back and forth between, you know, doing things and helping Gracie and working with my friends, and I knew all the dealers though. Like, you know, go into a gallery, and have the dealers sitting me in their office picking my brain. You know, Gracie went about her life, and I'm still very involved in the sidelines, and I went off and did my thing.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And you mentioned David, for example, was upset about the direction that Gracie was going in—Gracie Mansion was going in—what were—

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well, that she was closing.

THEODORE KERR: That she was closing.

SUR RODNEY SUR: He was very happy with how he was representing her—well, that's not true. No artist is every happy with the dealers, because they are never doing enough, and they're not doing enough right. They could be happy in one sense, but they have their gripes. Believe me, I hear them all the time. Even with the most successful artists. So he had his gripes, but basically, Gracie was doing really well for him, and he really knew that Gracie was trustworthy, and I was trustworthy, and that gave him a certain amount of comfort. And when that was interrupted at that point in his career, he felt like the rug was being pulled out from under him, and he just blew up. And Gracie always said, "You know, if you wouldn't have left the gallery, I still would have been working David Wojnarowicz." And my mind says that if David wouldn't have left the gallery, he wouldn't be where he is now, because PPOW did a lot of things for him that you wouldn't have done in quite the same way, so and you've done other things, and you're very successful at what you're doing, so don't cry over spilled milk.

THEODORE KERR: Were there other artists that you worked with at the time that were living with HIV? Or that would later live with HIV?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Do you know that's really good. Aside from David, were there any artists that we worked with that—do you know that I've never ever thought about that before,—no! Because more than half the artists that we represented, which was unusual for that time, were women. And then all the guys were straight, which doesn't mean that with all the heroin and stuff that was going on around them, because I think that's how David got kind of infected—I think it was more of a needle thing than the—because it was connected with Nan Goldin and all that group, and there was a lot of intravenous drug use going on, and a lot of the women, Cookie Mueller and all that, you know. So no. Aside from David, I think she worked with Luis Frangella for a while, but aside from that, no.

THEODORE KERR: And were James and Marguerite represented by Gracie, or no?

SUR RODNEY SUR: No.

THEODORE KERR: No, oh.

SUR RODNEY SUR: James and Marguerite opened a gallery in one of our former storefronts on Avenue A called Ground Zero, and they were really friendly with David, and you know, so David did a show there, because he sort of wanted to help them out, which was very good, but no, we knew James and Marguerite. Gracie started representing and showing James's work when she was—maybe she did something with him in Chelsea when she had a gallery. It started there, but it started late. Like we've known James and Marguerite from the beginning. We knew like everyone. But you could only work with so many artists, right? We may have included their work in a group show at some point possibly, but we really didn't work with them. And there are no artists I can think of—wow. That's amazing. No one, except David Wojnarowicz. He was the only queer when I think of it. Everyone else in the gallery that we represented was straight. How could that be? Wow. There you have it.

THEODORE KERR: I mean, it's powerful hearing this, because hearing you speak before, I imagined that the people you were taking care of were artists in the gallery, but that's not the case. Who were the people that you were taking care of, and how did you come to care for them?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Do you know the East Village was a—we all knew each other. We were very friends. Even though we—I—didn't represent the artists, like Arch Connelly, and like, we—they were still friends. We were hanging out with them. They were hanging out with their artists. Our artists were friends with them. We were one, big happy family. We might not show them in the gallery, but we'd go to their gallery when they had shows. We'd invite them to parties. You know. The East Village scene was seen as a conglomerate, so when these museums and stuff would do shows, they picked artists from all the galleries, and we're all friends, so we'd all sort of work together. You know what I mean? And it didn't matter if—what gallery you were showing with. You were in the East Village, and we were all friends and supported each other anyway. Right? And the same thing with dealers. We were all sort of friends, so it wasn't so much about being in one gallery, put you in one camp. I mean, everyone wanted to be at Gracie Mansion simply because we got so much press. So they figured that being aligned with our gallery would be a guarantee to give them more press. And we had a bigger gallery. And we were in touch with bigger collectors. You know. Pat Hearn and International Monument. And there were second and third waves of galleries that were doing that too, but we were part of the first wave of galleries. I mean, it was like a Fun, Civilian, and Gracie Mansion that were really in touch with a lot of the really serious, high rolling collectors, particularly Fun, you know.

No, it's kind of like the first person that I left who was really driven was Andreas Senger. Because we were lovers for a number of years. We kind of had a very bad breakup and didn't communicate with each other for like at least two, three, four—for like three or four years. We just had nothing to do with each other, and when I found out that he was sick and had been in and out of the hospital, and I knew that he was kind of isolated, alone. He was a foreigner. You know, I was in touch with—from being lovers for years—all of his network here and his network in Europe, right? So I said, "I can't like have this person who's living here in this very isolated way on a

VISA who has this problem." I sort of have to be there for him, so I walked back into his life. It completely like shocked him. And I'm sure, had I not walked into his life, he'd have been dead a lot earlier. But I think just the idea that I was there kind of made a lot of difference, so I got very involved with him. Then Tim Greathouse was having problems, but he was with a lover at the time, and there was a lot of—I was really having issues with this AZT thing. Being this poison. I could see that there was a real problem with it, and it kind of created a split with certain artists and friends I knew that were diagnosed, and my kind of talking to them about this AZT, which I wouldn't do that now, but I did then.

THEODORE KERR: You wouldn't do what now?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I wouldn't—you know, if people are going into medical treatments, I wouldn't be so forthright about my feelings about their choices unless I was asked. I'd approach it much more gracefully.

THEODORE KERR: But at the time you were outspoken about AZT?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I was much—I didn't—we were in the middle of things. I said like, "Are you sure? Don't you think this is crazy?" Which is not—in this mess of stuff. And then there were a lot of people that were getting this poor thing through ACT UP, so I was kind of moving through the fringes, and I guess my work with Andreas brought me into certain, you know, support groups that weren't ACT UP, but other groups. I started meeting—you just sort of hear about things. And when I would hear about someone, I would sort of like check in on it. You know, Keith Davis was another one that I got really very involved with. You know, Greathouse on the ins and outs with. There were a lot of artists whose names were not—are always sort of lost in all this. Then there was a period where I left for a year. I got exhausted Bern Boyle was another one. Angel Borrero. You have to go through the archive to think of the artists, and we were kind of—but, you know, I was very involved with Angel Borrero. And he had a lot of—he was kind of isolated too, because a lot of people sort of pulled away. It was like too much.

THEODORE KERR: Why do you think they pulled away?

SUR RODNEY SUR: You know—this fear with someone who was infected and being—not knowing how close or how you could work with them without being infected yourself—I think there was a lot of fear about that, and—

THEODORE KERR: And you didn't have that fear?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I didn't have that fear, because I don't know what—you know there were a couple of things that were happening. You know I thought about that: why didn't I have that fear? Because I felt, in a way, that I was going to be next. That I was going to eventually zero convert. I guess that was part of it. So part of my mind was saying, "I've been through the same kind of shit that all of these people have, and I'm probably infected anyway, so I may as well do everything that I can to do to sort of help them, because I'm going to go anyway." So there was that. Somehow playing in the back of my mind, and I was always treating myself like I was not detected yet. For years and years and years. Or that I was infected but I had something that was going to manifest itself, but it wasn't going to show up in tests. So I've always treated myself as though my health was going to be compromised when I least expected it, but even though that was going to happen, because I was in a situation for these people that were suffering that I cared for, that I felt were important [inaudible], that that's what I had to focus on at the time. So I kind of pushed this other stuff to the background, but I think at the back of my mind I was thinking that we've all been through the same kind of shit, we've all done the same stuff, so I'm probably going to be next.

THEODORE KERR: And what do you mean by the same stuff?

SUR RODNEY SUR: In terms of, you know, our interactions with drugs, sex. You know, we were all doing the same thing. We were all—I mean, maybe I wasn't fucking as many people. But it didn't matter, because a lot of people I was having sex with aren't here anymore. They basically contracted AIDS, and I was having sex with them, so it's kind of amazing that like somewhere in all those people I didn't. So, yeah, we lived under the same kind of stress. We'd done the same kind of things even before we had met. We talked about it, so we figured it would be something that eventually—I think every person that was gay that was out there that was active figured eventually it would hit them. That was the thinking for a long time, and then there was this other group of people thinking, "I'm never going to get this, so I'm not going to."

THEODORE KERR: Did you interact with those people?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah. They were like terrified? You know they kind of withdrew from people that were around too until there was some kind of real education about transmission and stuff like that that was hammered into people's heads. And then the cocktails came out, and it didn't really matter anymore, right? In like 1995 or six or something. But the period before that was pretty stressful. And there was a period where I actually left the country for almost a year. And people thought I was dead when I came back, because they knew about all this

work that I was doing with people with AIDS, and then all of a sudden, I wasn't around, so I must have been infected too. And then people started saying, "Oh." You know I started hearing—people never said directly, "Oh, I thought you were dead." But I started hearing from people that people were talking about me as if I was dead, which was kind of interesting.

THEODORE KERR: You mentioned some of the things that caring looked like. You said, you know, eating off of the same plate as a friend. You talked about—

SUR RODNEY SUR: Hugging them. Kissing them. You know, just being not afraid to touch them because they hadn't even had that. They had friends that would interact with them, but they wouldn't touch them anymore. You know, and that they sort of saw that, and the person wasn't aware of how separate their interactions was. They were, you know— and, you know, they didn't want to clean up their mess or, you know, their apartments. You know I've heard stories about someone saying, "Oh, you know. They came in and left, and I found that they left like \$20 slipped under a corner, and they must have left it there for me, but they couldn't give it to me." You know, I remember being in a store. David Wojnarowicz told me this story of when he went into a restaurant for a bodega to buy something, and they gave him his change in a paper bag, because they didn't want to, you know, I started noticing things like that. But there was really this fear of being too close. There was this obviously zoned—you didn't bury, and I think that part of it was that the people who were living with AIDS brought that upon themselves to say, "I'm infected, and I know, in your minds, that you don't want to get close to me." And the people were like, "Well, I'm not sure how close you're going to get to it," so there's this psychological barrier that they'd set. And I would just break it, and they would go like "wow."

THEODORE KERR: I've heard this, and I keep on thinking about the way in which—at art openings—like hug each other and kiss each other. Either sometimes full on the lips or on the cheek, and on the cheek. Was there even like an absence of that?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah. Oh, yeah. That's like—I talk about that in some of my writings. I remember when the collectives would come to the door and the kissy kissy and all that sort of stopped. They'd come, and they'd approach you, and they'd talk to you from a distance.

THEODORE KERR: And so did it change like what even an opening felt like? Like how did an opening feel in 1982 compared to an opening in 1988?

SUR RODNEY SUR: No difference, because basically people there at the opening were just there to party. And the people who were sick weren't showing up at the party. So you recognized that, "Oh, so and so isn't here. I heard they were in the hospital. Da, da, da, da, da, isn't it sad?" But then it'd still go on. You know, so the people that were sick sort of separated themselves and didn't want to be out that visible because they still have to—you know, then it's like when someone had contracted—was diagnosed with AIDS, they would deteriorate very quickly. There was a wasting. There was the Kaposi sarcoma. So when someone was living with AIDS, it was very visible. Even if they were just sick or skinny, you'd just assume maybe they didn't have AIDS. They had something else, but anyone that looked kind of like emaciated or something—and there's a certain energy that people carry when they sort of have that and their fear of being in public, so they weren't part of the partying. They were partying more privately and one-to-one or sitting at home dealing with their dramas. And they were talked about as something in the past, and it didn't affect the partying or the drinking or any of that really.

THEODORE KERR: Was that hard to witness—that kind of separation of the sick people?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah, that's why I left. Because I couldn't deal with it anymore. I couldn't feel like going to this party and realize these people sitting at the other end that couldn't do anything. You know, it was like, not only couldn't they do anything, but they had to—a part of it wasn't their inability and difficulty with negotiating their lives from day to day, because anyone with any kind of—I don't care if it's Parkinson's or whatever else—is going to have that. That I can kind of understand with. It was them having to deal with the burden that either feeling that people didn't care enough or that they could no longer be around people and feel the touch, or no longer da, da, da, da. And I knew that I had no qualms about offering that to them, and I guess what you get from people when you can—you know it makes it sound like, "Oh, well, you did all this work, and you sort of dragged yourself, and da, da, da, da," but the moments where the person that you're carrying for can feel a moment of something, you absorb that. It's like dealing with a little child, a little baby that can't do anything, and you see those moments where you realize you've done something for their world that's amazing. Something so simple: making a funny face. It's just kind of changed their whole world, and that gives you, as a person that's providing that, something that's really a mess.

And, you know, maybe in a way, if I have to be honest, maybe I thrived on that. Maybe there was something that I got out of that. I've never really looked at this before, but let's be honest in talking about it now. There was probably a certain kind of power. I don't know if it was power, but it was a sort of power or feeling that I can make a difference in a really significant way. Even though it didn't show itself materially, it showed itself in this

other way where we were both exchanging something that was like an epiphany. And, you know, if I have to think back, how was I able to tap into all that? And I will, actually, honestly say that all my experiences with this thing from what you get from people in exchange of energy happened from years of experimenting with LSD as a teenager, because that's when you actually see visually all those connections happening with energy. And, you know, LSD and my experience with drugs really had a big influence on me. That's when I, you know, really understood the thing about energy, and that everything has an energy, and what your energy feeds into, and da, da, da, da. On some level, that's always played a role in my feelings about a lot of things. You know, why I meditate, why I like animals and plants, because you can have a communication and energy thing with plants. You know, I talk with plants and animals, and you know, I mean they get it.

THEODORE KERR: Do you think that the virus has an energy?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yes, I actually do believe that everything that's in your body has an energy. Even the food that you take. And it all comes out in somewhat of your aura, so why I pause about that for a second—if I had to go around and feel someone's energy—could I walk into a room and feel someone's energy and be able to detect the people that are HIV positive or not? I think if I really put my thing into it, it would probably be something that would come out in the same way that comes out when I run into black folks that are passing. You know, you just know. And you can't say what exactly it is. It's just something within their thing that you can sort of feel that gives you this kind of moment where—no, you can say it—absolutely, but you are convinced to a certain degree. It's the same thing with meeting someone that's gay, you know. But we're talking about virals to internal things. We're talking about something—a virus that is going to go into a body that creates a certain type of energy or thinking, and that you project out.

I remember, at one point, making the statement to someone: "You know, whenever I meet an artist that is really energetic and really prolific and really determined to grind out a lot of work, they're probably living with AIDS." I remember—because these artists, they just got so much more prolific, you know, and have, in terms of the time that they want to spend to do the work compared to the time that they went out to do all this other stuff, was insignificance. The focus and importance just shifted, and it was so clear. And it's like this is someone that feels they have to make this work because they need to get it out there. Because they realize they have limits as opposed to someone who just wanted to do it to find out where the limits and could take time off to do all this other stuff. That was shifting. So with the production thing kind of like zoomed up until they got, you know, in a state that they got where their energy couldn't do it, and with a lot of them, there was just so much with maintaining their day to day medical health. It wasn't, you know, time to do that.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. Hearing you talk, it almost sounds like if I ask the question "does AIDS have an energy," part of the answer would be like, "Yes. Frenetic."

SUR RODNEY SUR: Hmm. Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: But I wonder if you want to add to that? Like is there a difference in how HIV or the virus feels versus how this kind of assemblage we call AIDS feels?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I don't know—I think the virus manifests itself differently in different people in terms of how it attacks and the side conditions that come out of it. And they say that if you go into the chakras of livers, it's part of the emotion [inaudible], and all that, so I think it's a little bit different depending on who it's coming through.

THEODORE KERR: You talked about your transferable skills—like you said that some of the skills that you worked on at the gallery like organizing things and taking care of shipments were transferable when you were caring for people. I wonder if you want to talk about some of those transferable skills.

SUR RODNEY SUR: I guess—well, with the artwork, I had to think more in terms of, you know, the full range of artwork, because there's like you know, there's starting to think about the creation of the artwork, of setting up my shows with artists, how they got to that, what materials and resources, what inspired them, so I wouldn't only think about the actual artwork. I would think about all the stuff that was attached to it. That was a transferable thing that sort of came from the gallery. You know, I guess just the order of following up an organization with dealing with collectors and curators, keeping logs on the order of things so I remember this person said that, and that person said that. I'd have to follow that very carefully, or it was going to be a disaster, so when I was dealing with these friends, I met doctors and would deal with them in the same way. I would keep a log of things, and I would keep communication saved: this is what I understood you to say. I'd make sure they had correspondence like I got a correspondence back so I could track things. You know, what's another example? The—you know there's a lot of logistical things—I mean, that may just be my natural ability. I think very much in terms of logistics. Okay. You're going to buy a quart of milk. What do you need? Do you need a bag? Do you need a that? Now, if you go here, you could run into this and to that. Just thinking all those things kind of through, I'm good at that. I think I got that from my mother, because she was amazing with like logistical things, so that sort of came natural to me. And I had this natural thing of wanting to put things in order. I mean,

I'm just one of those people. If I'm working at a desk, all of my papers just have to be stacked in a certain way da, da, da, da and that's very helpful. That was something I brought to the gallery, and I had to use very effectively. So there's a lot of skills that I used in the gallery that were skills that I brought in there, because it's just in my nature to be like that any way, and they were just very useful when I was working with the—you know, being very open, being both a good listener and a good yakker.

THEODORE KERR: With people that you were taking care of?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. Yeah. Was it a lot of time just hanging out in people's houses?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah. Yeah. You know, they needed that to realize that someone else was there and, you know, as they were experiencing things, that it wasn't all so much in their head, and you bounced it back to them.

THEODORE KERR: And what was—

SUR RODNEY SUR: And then also just feeding stuff back to them, because you know, they're doing all this stuff, and they're not really aware what they're doing half the time. And you have to say, "You know. You're doing a lot of this. Don't you think you should da, da, da, da?" You know. That sort of stuff. Just another person to crosscheck. Oh, I did. I didn't realize that. You know, maybe I should [inaudible].

THEODORE KERR: And what was the experience for you as people you were caring with and caring for started to pass away?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Do you know—I've not—death has never been—I don't understand why, but death has never been a difficult thing for me. I've never had—I mean, I do have a sense of loss when someone goes, but the whole passing of someone to me is like a very—it's like a spiritual thing, but it comes with a certain amount of sadness, and it comes with a certain amount of joy at the same time. I have to be honest. I feel the same way with birth. When a child is brought into the earth, I feel a certain amount of sadness. Great sadness. And then a certain amount of joy with what the kid can bring in, but it always comes with a certain amount of sadness. And the same thing with memorials, because, you know, as people were dying, I became someone that people relied on because I could go in and just do the stuff.

THEODORE KERR: What's the stuff?

SUR RODNEY SUR: You know, packing things up, organizing stuff where people were just so distraught by what had happened that they couldn't get to that. And I just never really had that. I was able to like just immediately just go into gears and take care of some people saying, "I don't know how you could do this and da, da, da, da." And then I was asked to organize memorials, and I would be the person because I didn't have that same kind of—I didn't carry the same kind of weight. I remember an incredible experience I had with a friend of mine who was—his name was Gil Rankin. He was the first black figure skater to dance with Holiday on Ice and the Ice Capades, right? He's an American from upstate New York but he was living in Paris.

And he was a lover of, actually, Andreas, who died years ago, and I met him because I kept Andreas's phone number. The number that I have is still his number, so occasionally, I get a call from someone that's calling him that found his number for years, and I answer the phone, and explain who I am, and tell them that Andreas has been dead so long, right? But Gil was one of those people, and he was in New York, and he wanted to meet me. Black man. We clicked really well, but he had a family that never accepted him being gay. And they were very religious, so he would come to New York, which he needed to eventually, because he was having problems with treatments over there and his health insurance, so he had to come here, so he was pretty isolated. And I was like—the other people that he had around him were trying to pull him back because of this stigma sort of thing, and we became very close, and I became very sort of like much a caretaker for him as well, and he was living with a friend, because he'd come over here expecting to be here for two weeks. And he ended up staying for over a year living with this guy that couldn't actually like throw him out. He was really freaked out with having him there. So I had to sort of intervene, and there was a point where he got stuck in the hospital, and I was away. And I'd heard from his friend who he was staying with. He called me and he said, "You know. Gil is in the hospital, and it's really very bad." And I said, "Well"—when I got the message, I was out of the country or something. And I came back, and I saw him in the hospital. And he was like heavy breathing, fighting to keep alive, and he must have been in the hospital doing that for days. He was an athlete. You know, a figure skater, so he had this kind of you have to push yourself past the limit. And I remember going to him in the hospital and seeing this and saying, "Gil. It's okay. You can go. It's okay to go. You're fine. You don't need to fight anymore. Everything is going to be fine." Then I remember touching him, and his breathing—he sort of stopped this sort of fighting. And he sort of looked at me—he was very aware of myself in the room, and I sat with him for a while, and then I left. And then the hospital called me, I think, like less than an hour later and said he had passed. And,

like I said, I knew he was going, but he was like needing someone to tell him he could go or something. That was like kind of an amazing experience for me. Then the revival of people when they're really sick. There's always a moment where they sort of revive, and it seems like everything's okay. But then I always know that it's right before the crash usually. Usually it's right before things go down.

But you know it's sad. All I can think of is—you know one thing when I talk about is there's a lot of friends that I've been close to that have been close to other people as well that I haven't been close to. And at their memorials it's brought a lot of us together. We know who each other are but haven't really bonded in that way. And we bonded through our relationship to the deceased in a way that has made us such tight, close friends. I mean, that's how I got close to Dirk and Jean, for example. You know was through Keith Davis who died. And there's a lot of that. There's a number of people that sort of looked at me through a distance and through my relationship with these people that had died in the memorials just kind of were able to like have a relationship with me that would have been much different without the friend having gone through what they kind of went through. But most of my experiences with meeting people and working with artists has basically been—particularly with archives through the word of mouth—someone hears Sur is doing this, and it's really kind of amazing, and so then everyone wanted me to sort of do that.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. I'm wondering—

SUR RODNEY SUR: Once they get sick they call me and say, "Oh, Sur, you know, I sort of need [inaudible]." I'm not, but I can help you with what I know.

THEODORE KERR: And so what would you do?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I would, first of all, you know, talk to them about what they were going through with the medical stuff through my experience and stuff with doctors. You know, GMHC and there was some support groups that were setting up—I would let them know about that. I would never bring up ACT UP I mean, ACT UP was kind of out there doing their thing. [inaudible] You know, talk to them about the importance of certain legal issues with that had to do with things like the healthcare proxy. You know that they were clear and things like that, and they should really be thinking about, if they had stuff, what they wanted to happen with their past. And it's like, you know I'm saying, this is something that you should have anyway. These aren't things that are necessarily connected with you being diagnosed with AIDS, but because you have AIDS you have to do all this stuff. You should have this stuff anyways. If you get hit by a car, what's going to happen to all your stuff? You need to start to think like this. Particularly now, because this is maybe a sign that there are other things in your life that you can get together, so I'd help them think some of that stuff through. I did a lot more of that kind of stuff with people, and the hands-on things were basically friends and people that I had a relationship with, and basically, there was always someone I had some kind of relationship with, and aside from that it'd be people I met through support groups, and then a lot of people, whether they were family or friends who were taking care of stuff that would kind of field off a lot of their stuff through my experience because they didn't know whether to go this way or this way. Say you go this way or this way. Kind of lay out the whole thing in terms of options. Just help them think through things. Because it can be kind of a mess. So I did like a lot of that.

THEODORE KERR: I want to return to that, but I also want to capture—you've mentioned the words support groups a few times, and I wonder if you could just say more about—what do you mean when you say support groups?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I think when I was kind of recognized as someone that was like a caregiver, there's this concern about, well, you're a caregiver, and you're spending all of your timing giving care, but you're not taking care of yourself. And there's certain things that are happening with you you're not aware of that you need to be, so maybe you need to go to some of these support groups, share your experiences of what you're going through with other people who are going through the same thing, you might recognize your patterns or things that you have da, da, da, da. So that's how it started, and I don't know who suggested that I go to these support groups. I think I had these health care aides that would come in, and that's maybe how I found out about them, because they could see. They'd walk into the situation. They could see sort of what I was doing, and I think there was a concern for myself there. And when I'd go into the hospital—this same hospital—people would talk to me about it. This guy seems to be a little too much—is he da, da, da, da? So then I sort of went to some of these support groups that ended up badly in a couple of cases. Because I would listen to these stories that some of these caregivers would have to tell, and I would just get so angry. I would blow up at them. I remember there was this one guy—it was really bad. He had a boyfriend that was a—his whole family were cops. He wasn't a cop, but his boyfriend had been diagnosed, and he didn't want anything to do with him in terms of any kind of intimacy, and his boyfriend or lover at the time was kind of really upset about this and acting out in a lot of really strange ways. Meanwhile, he was going out and like in very sneaky way having all this sex.

THEODORE KERR: The boyfriend was?

SUR RODNEY SUR: No. The caregiver was.

THEODORE KERR: The caregiver was, yeah.

SUR RODNEY SUR: And it was kind of like too much for the boyfriend, and he was kind of like—his boyfriend was getting crazier and crazier and crazier, and I was saying like, you know, it's a real problem. You really have to check yourself. You have to. You cannot. You understand that he has so much going on. Why are you doing this? And it got into this like really—that was like one situation. There were a lot of situations that were like that where I didn't like the way the caregivers were sort of thinking, or I thought it was inappropriate or selfish or something, and I would just blow up about it.

THEODORE KERR: And so these were support groups for mainly people not living with HIV who were giving care?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: To people living with HIV?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Right.

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]. And was it primarily gay men?

SUR RODNEY SUR: It was mixed. I don't know if they were all gay. Some of them would tell stories, and you would know that sort of they were gay, but I think it was a mixed group.

THEODORE KERR: And where were these—?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I guess most of them were gay. Where did I meet with those groups? Was it at the Center? Or was it at a hospital? Was it at Cabrini or something like that? Do you know this is like amazing. I can imagine being in the room, but I can't remember whether it was a room that was at the Center—maybe a gay and lesbian center, and I'm thinking it may have been at Cabrini or St. Vincent's. So I was going out to all those places.

THEODORE KERR: Were the people primarily people of color? Or white people?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I remember in the group that I was in I was the only person of color. It was downtown in the East Village. Maybe if I was in Brooklyn or in Harlem, because it was segregated people, but through my network, and I remember, you know, God's Love was delivering food at a certain point. I remember the caregivers that I came to were doing the AIDS thing for basically white. I don't remember persons of color. I remember people driving the vans as sometimes being people of color, but most of the caregivers that came through ere mostly white and mostly men. Most—pretty much gay. And a lot of them were trying to have sex with me. [Laughs.] I mean, the whole thing that was going on with the sex thing in hospitals with doctors and caregivers was really—that's a whole other sort of sordid story.

THEODORE KERR: There was a culture of caregivers and like caregivers and doctors having sex while their patient and/or loved one was in the hospital?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah, and I don't know if it was stress release, or—

THEODORE KERR: Or like a kinship? Like we're going through this?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I never really figured it out, but I know that there were situations like that where I felt like that sort of thing was encouraged, and I felt like this is not—this is bad. But I'm figuring if I was put in that situation, there were a lot of other people in that situation, or it wouldn't be happening.

THEODORE KERR: A lot of what you were talking about was that you have these ethics around caregiving or as a caregiver?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah, I do really.

THEODORE KERR: Where do you think those ethics come from?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I don't—I think it's like common sense, and just certain respect and decency for what you're doing and what you're getting compared to what you're giving. And you know all of that.

THEODORE KERR: This is session one of two sessions. And I'm wondering if—we've been talking for this period—if there's anything that you want to make sure we talk about in our next session?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Do you want to know? That's really hard. This is like the same thing that I go through when I'm on panels.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

SUR RODNEY SUR: I sort of talk. I open my mouth. And I talk, and at a certain point, I stop. And if you ask me what I talked about, I can remember points of what I brought up, but I couldn't tell you how it threads, because it's been a lot of meandering. So I don't know what I've said or what I could be saying. That I missed or what I need to talk more about. You know, I only get that if I get some kind of feedback or view of what I've already done. Then it might spark something in saying, "Oh. I haven't really." But I mean there's some things that I hadn't really thought about that I thought about for the first time in this conversation. I think I highlighted that when I was talking about it, and I haven't had this kind of conversation in like a really long time, so there's a lot of stuff that I don't quite remember and probably that I remember differently than they actually really were. And you asked me about the support group, and I'm thinking now, "Where the fuck did I go to these support groups?" I mean, I may have been to like no more than half a dozen, and I can remember this one guy that I had this fight with, but I cannot physically tell you where it was. It would have had to have been at the Center or one of the hospice centers in the hospital. I think it might have been at Cabrini or something and not the Center?

THEODORE KERR: What's Cabrini?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Cabrini Medical Center. There were—Cabrini Medical Center was over on somewhere in the teens around the Gramercy Park area. It was like a Catholic Church, and they had a really big AIDS hospice center there, so there was Cabrini and St. Vincent's were pretty much the two hospitals that dealt with all the sort of AIDS thing. More Bellevue some, but it was mostly Cabrini, and the hospice center, they had a whole floor that was dedicated to that that I gave tons of artwork for. They had this huge collection of artwork. And it closed. They didn't have a need for it in the late '90s. They weren't having that kind of thing. And I think Cabrini might be closed, because the small hospitals are closing up and merging with the large hospitals. Beth Israel. Okay. So Cabrini was very close to Beth Israel in terms of location. And I think there were certain things happening at Beth Israel as well. So pretty much all my stuff was mostly between Cabrini and St. Vincent's. I don't remember Bellevue that much. And there was something way up town near Gracie Mansion. For some reason. I don't know why a number of friends ended up there, a celebrity place. I remember visiting people up there, but St. Vincent's was big. It was really big.

THEODORE KERR: Maybe our last question for today can be what was your family back in Canada thinking, or what were some of the responses you were hearing from your family back in Canada as your life in the East Village is unfolding, and HIV/AIDS is unfolding in your life?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Do you know I was kind of like the wild child of my family, and I had an older cousin who kind of mirrored my wildness. She moved to San Francisco, and I moved to New York. And pretty much we didn't have a lot to do with our families. I mean, maybe over Christmas holidays or something, we'd go back for like a week occasionally, or, you know, I'd visit Montreal sporadically. There were years—there were like seven or eight years—where I didn't go back to Canada, because I was afraid of crossing borders because of my status thing, and that changed. That changed after a while, and then when I was involved in the art world, we were totally disconnected from it. Anyone from my family, I wasn't too interested in them anyways. I kept in touch with my parents, but they kind of didn't understand it. They were just waiting for me to tell them that I was HIV positive. I think they expected that sort of thing. They were going through their own health crisis with their age and their friends dying, so when I would talk about mine, they really didn't want to talk about the AIDS thing too much. I didn't talk about it much with them, but I knew there were horrified expecting to hear that their son had AIDS too, because he was a homosexual living in New York, right? So there really wasn't any talk about that. I had a very close friend that would make all these cracks about how he was tired of hearing about AIDS, and there were people who had stuff that was much worse than that, and everyone was giving people with AIDS all this sympathy and all this support when support should really be going to someone else and da, da, da, da, and this was when I was in the midst of being a caregiver and telling him, "This is [inaudible] telling me all this, right?" And he'd go on and on and on, and I'd say, "Well, you know that I'm working with these people being a caregiver and these are the things I'm sort of thinking about." Some went in one ear and out the other, and I have not had a conversation with him since.

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

SUR RODNEY SUR: So that's the only person that I can think of that I pretty much cut off, and pretty much everyone else wouldn't really talk about or say, "Oh yeah. That's so sad that this is happening," and then they'd change the subject.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

SUR RODNEY SUR: And I didn't feel like, you know, they were so disconnected from my life anyways that—

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

SUR RODNEY SUR: —it wasn't the kind of thing that I would get into with them.

THEODORE KERR: It didn't give you a sense of isolation?

SUR RODNEY SUR: No, because, you know, I was this gay man and was living in New York, and the queer thing was so big here, and you know, people being infected or not. I mean, it had a really big support system, I was a part of the art world, so, you know, I was very engaged with a lot of people, and I knew there were a lot of people that, you know, supported and liked me, so the family thing really didn't matter to me.

THEODORE KERR: Cool. Well, I look forward to Friday, 9 a.m.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Now are you going to listen to this to come up with some of the kind of the, because I'm—

THEODORE KERR: For next week?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Go through for Friday? I mean, is there a part two? Is there a whole list of things that you want me to get into that you didn't cover here?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, I know what I want you to talk about. Yeah.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Oh, okay.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, I definitely—like we didn't even really get into the impact of HIV on the art that was being created, or we didn't talk about Visual AIDS yet. We didn't talk about—there's actually like so much that we still could talk about.

SUR RODNEY SUR: That's interesting, because the whole impact of HIV and art didn't really start appearing until late. It certainly wasn't happening, aside from the agitprop stuff. People that were making work were just doing the stuff that they were doing. And maybe there was an undercoating to it, but it wasn't really out there like it started to become out there later in the '90s.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.] But at the time—yeah.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah. You know, they were painting flowers. They were still painting flowers.

THEODORE KERR: Right.

SUR RODNEY SUR: But maybe they'd put thorns on the roses with a little bit of blood. You know, very slight things like that might come into it, but overall, you know, Arch Connelly making his work, doing his last body of work with all these smiling faces, how does that kind of relate to the AIDS thing? And you can look at it now, and, you know, if you approach it the way that Jonathan Katz does where any—you can look at all these things and immediately code them and make these associations with AIDS, and they work if you want to make it a metaphor or kind of expounding on that, but at the time that was being created, was that anywhere in the thinking? No. Or maybe he's saying that was subliminal, and they weren't aware they were doing it. Well, if they didn't have AIDS, and they were doing that, would you—you know, it becomes a very kind of slippery slope, and unless the artists are really kind of—there's this thing with Izhar Patkin where Jonathan saying this is the first painting that goes into the AIDS thing because it looks like all these open sores and kaposi sarcoma.

Now, I know Izhar Patkin, and I don't know if when he made that he was actually thinking of AIDS or he was thinking of some other kind of disease, but then it became—gave it more cultural currency if you would say it was about AIDS. You know, so I get very suspicious about that unless an artist is directly—it's like, you know, they did that with David Wojnarowicz's *Fire in my Belly*. That had absolutely nothing to do with AIDS. I remember when David was working on that stuff. AIDS was happening, but it wasn't forefront and center to anything that he was doing with that material at the time. It was really all about the church and poverty and disparity and all that kind of stuff. And not AIDS, but you could look at it and create all this sort of stuff and relate it to AIDS, but I don't think that was the intention of the work. But it can serve the purpose of being of service to talking about art and AIDS. You know, you can do that with anything.

THEODORE KERR: Is it of service, or does it hurt?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I don't think it hurts, but it's not really what was going on at the time. And they're trying to—you know this whole approach with David's thing was that this was a direct result of what was going on at the time with AIDS, and this is how it's injected itself into the work. It's like no, you know, that became more direct later. You can actually see where it starts to happen in David's work when he gets into all that, but it wasn't happening then. Trying to think of what artist that I knew that—where they really did start to—I mean, I look at

Andreas [inaudible] who was abstract stuff. His stuff obviously became really about the AIDS thing, because he's a therapist, so all the stuff comes through the therapy. He started making all these books that were like direct references to disease and the colors he started using. And, you know, some of the paintings look sick, because he wanted them to look sick, because that's how he was feeling. That's a direct response or this thing that has all the medications. Yes, I still have. This chest is filled with AIDS medication.

THEODORE KERR: From the '80s?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: This blue chest?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah. If you open it up, you can smell it. We saved every medication that he was taking, and when you go into the hospital, you can't take your old medications with you, and so we'd throw them in this chest, right? And then there were all these medications that were prescribed that he wouldn't use. I think a lot of the AZT and stuff I would distribute if people needed certain drugs that they knew that they could take that would help them, I would provide that for them. Stuff in this chest. There's a lot of it there, and there's all the vials of all the stuff that he's taken, so it kind of represents all the chemicals that he's put in his body, and when you open that chest, it still has the chemical smell. The only thing that is in there that I've removed slowly that's completely gone is the opium drops that are a controlled substance. And every now and then, I would pull some out. Someone would say, "Do you have something for this?" I had a whole bottle of it that I treasured, and this friend had this terrible toothache, and I said, "Okay. You can take some of this." But what you do is you do like three or four drops. Drops. Eye drops, right? He figured forget the eye drops. He did like the whole dropper. Six or seven. And he was like completely out of it. And he kept on doing it. And he went through the whole bottle. I mean, I'm surprised he didn't overdose.

THEODORE KERR: Oh, on top of the chest is like a blue bust. Is that part of the work?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah, it's a—well, it's a cadaver.

THEODORE KERR: Is it connected?

SUR RODNEY SUR: No, it just sits [inaudible].

THEODORE KERR: That's okay, you're good.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Should I stop this here?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah let's stop. Oh, I'm so nervous to press stop.

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THEODORE KERR: This is Theodore Kerr interviewing Sur Rodney Sur at his studio in New York, New York on July 17th?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Fifteenth.

THEODORE KERR: Fifteenth, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Card Two. So Sur, the last time we spoke we kind of covered life up until you'd left the gallery and you were caring for your friends?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

THEODORE KERR: And you had gone away and come back and were engaged in caring for people and then also being called upon to help with memorials?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

THEODORE KERR: And I wonder if you want to talk about how you found yourself kind of caring for people's archive or becoming sort of like almost a community archivist?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well, I guess a lot of the people—several people that I was working with did—were artists. And I had conversations with them, you know, in the midst of all the stuff that we're doing about how there was a need to organize their artwork kind of in terms of just catalog it—make some sort of record of all their artwork and any notes they wanted to make about artwork and collect all the photographs they had around. And I'd have conversations with them around the pieces so I could build some kind of history behind the pieces. You know, just because I felt that after they were gone, I would have something to be able to—their family ended up getting the stuff, to give their family something so they could understand what all this stuff was. And if a gallery

were interested in their work, there'd be some material there for them to work with. You know, just doing something, constructing a simple bio with their education and all that, because a lot of them didn't have that together. I mean, now, it's very different. That's the first thing artists think of, right? Back then, we didn't think about a lot of that kind of stuff.

So that's really how it started. And I ended up acquiring a lot of material from a lot of these artists because they were afraid that it wouldn't be protected, and they knew that I would protect it. So that went on for a number of years and became exhausting. And there were—became sort of exhausting. And I guess people sort of had understood that I was doing this, so there were other people that came forward or other people that were caring for other people, and I talked to them about sort of what needed to be done. And I think at sort of like the peak of it, where I was becoming, like, really like, what do I do with all the stuff that I have and we have to find a resource for the next place, at that point, that's when I met David Hirsch and Frank Moore, who were doing this project, this—wanted to build this archive thing. And I said, "Well, that's exactly what I'm doing." And Geoff had been doing a number of stuff, so we sort of teamed up together.

And they figured they wanted to approach an organization that—were this work would be useful for some kind of project. And they approached Visual AIDS, because I think at that time, Visual AIDS was kind of like in a lull. A lot of the officers that were there were kind of getting into other things. And the direction that they'd had in the '80s and early '90s seemed to have been changing. There wasn't as—they did feel there was a need for the kind of activism that they were involved in. It sort of felt like they were repeating themselves. And I think Frank Moore approached them with this idea of like, you know, taking care of this archive and building on it.

They were, like, totally thrilled with the idea. All those meetings were held in my apartment when I lived on Two Fifth Avenue. And I think we had two or three meetings with the board then that was on Visual AIDS. And we introduced our project, and I think Frank Moore might've already been on the board at that time. And he brought in Nick Debs because I think the executive director at that time—I can't remember who it was—wanted—was ready to, like, leave. I think it was Tom Finkelppearl was on the board and Lisa Pines. I remember those two people were at the meetings. And kind of the whole mission of Visual AIDS began turning into this thing about keeping records and archiving. And then there was like, a whole, you know—brought in a whole group of other people and all the people who were originally there sort of like, left.

THEODORE KERR: Do you have a sense of—I know you weren't involved—but do you have a sense of like—or how did you understand the mission of Visual AIDS before that point?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I just knew that they were someone that managed Day Without Art and they'd done Night Without Light. And I think that their mission before that was to bring attention to the crisis in AIDS through these kinds of events. Day Without Art was one of them, Night Without Light was one of them, and then they did the Electric Blanket, which was another thing that toured. And, you know, Visual AIDS has picked up on a lot of that. You know, the touring thing with the Electric Blanket, but they weren't really doing things like programing and bring the community in. You know, all that was happening with ACT UP. So it sort of changed. Then ACT UP started, you know, morphing into something else. A lot of those people burnt out and then the cocktails came in. So it was kind of like a time where the kind of collecting and preserving the legacy of what had been there with the artists was being preserved. And it was like, really the right time to do it. And it seemed very necessary. And it's grown into what it's grown now, which is like, amazing. Amazing.

THEODORE KERR: Looking at some of the historical documents that—for Visual AIDS, there's this idea that, like, I think is interesting that you may have an idea around—the idea that an artist living with HIV dies twice. So they're facing their physical death but also the death of an artist. And is that something that you had thought about? Or is that something that you think about?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well, when I hear them saying, yes it's true, but there's also another kind of death that happens, I think. In to—what the artist is left with particularly at that time is—with a lot of them—the kind of death that they felt in their relationship with their families and certain circles of friends who kind of, you know, dissipated because they didn't want to be around. And that was really, really difficult for a lot of them to deal with. You know, it's not really until you have a crisis or until you have death that people that you fear that might kind of be there for you the most are the ones that sometimes aren't for whatever stuff they're carrying for themselves. And I see that a lot, just with all kinds of deaths [inaudible] go to family things and the things that happen with the states and people fighting, and the people you think would be the biggest problem or the coolest ones—the ones you think would be really together, the ones that go crazy and create the most disruption.

THEODORE KERR: Was it a surprise often for people that you would enter their lives at that point?

SUR RODNEY SUR: No, because when I got involved, you see—when I got involved and started doing this and left the gallery in 1988, there was already a wane in the East Village. But I had acquired such celebrity status

because we were in the media all the time and the New York Times was doing a story—they'd always get sound bites from Gracie and I—you know, we had these fabulous openings. We're representing these artists that were like, you know, really celebrated. So we're sort of like celebrities in the community. I think that by doing this, really encouraged a lot of people that sort of, like, had this idea of me or saw me from a distance, right? Were kind of nervous or felt uncomfortable or didn't know how to interact with me, that all changed around this AIDS thing. And, you know, my work and stuff with memorials, where people started to be able to get closer to me as a person, which they weren't able to before because I was surrounded by, like, you know, collectors and other dealers. So, like, how do you get to talk to Sur who's over in that table? And what do you say to him because he's like, this sort of big celebrity?

When all this was happening, I was sort of aware—I mean, Jack Waters is a perfect example. You know we watched each other from a distance for years but never had any kind of real exchange until the '90s. I think how my thing happened with Jack and Peter [Cramer] was that I wanted to make a film out of a poem that I'd written, right? And I said, "Well, you know, I—who would be really interesting? And I know that Jack Waters is doing this stuff with film." So I called him up. And that's how our thing sort of started. And, you know, we've been through a lot of talk over the years, because we have a lot of mutual friends. And I'm saying, like, how come we never really got close? And he says, "Well, you were always kind of at a distance. You were always surrounded. You felt inaccessible to a lot of us, because you were in this other world, right, that we weren't a part of. So we had to sort of watch you from a distance." And he was surprised to find out how much I was watching everyone else. Because had the gallery not have happened, I probably would have been an active part of Agency [inaudible] and a lot of this stuff that happened early on.

But I think that all the stuff that went on around the gallery and the buildup of, like, this celebrity thing kind of removed me from a lot of the community. I mean, if I wanted to talk to an artist, I could talk to anyone. They were very enthusiastically talking about me, because maybe I could do something to help them. But then a lot of them were kind of felt intimidated about doing that. And then when I started doing this stuff and working with artists and they knew that I was involved in the community in the way that I was—and the ACT UP things, so—but people knew that I was doing this other thing, and having some, you know, helpful conversations with people who were working with people with AIDS, it sort of changed the dynamic in my relationship to the community in, like, a super big way.

THEODORE KERR: There's been a few times where you've mentioned that you weren't part of ACT UP. And I wonder if you want to talk a little bit about your understanding of Act Up and what made you disinterested to maybe participate?

SUR RODNEY SUR: A lot of it sort of had to do with available time. I've always been one of these people that have used up all of my time. I've never been too idle in any way. And at the time that Act Up started, I think—ACT UP started in '87, right? And I left the gallery in '88. So I was very involved in the gallery. Didn't really have time for that. But I was talking, you know, David and all those people were—so I'd like hear all these reports about what was happening in ACT UP, right? And then I moved from the gallery thing to really working as practically a full-time care person for Andreas Senser was the most central thing, but then in other ways with other friends. So I really didn't have—you know, I needed to be with them. And they weren't kind of able to go to that, so it was just a matter of where I was in terms of placement. But the ACT UP thing didn't really—I didn't have the same sense—I felt that something urgent needed to be done, but I didn't have the same sense of anger. I knew about the isolation, and maybe, you know, with—in my own life, with my own feeling of isolation, I dealt with it very differently. So I didn't have that sort of anger. And I was kind of more of a hippie. I was more about, oh, let's love and sort of, like, hug. And that was too much about the kind of aggression.

Then, in terms of, I think at the time because of my alien status, kind of put a little bit of brakes on, like, how far I would go. Because I didn't want to deal with any kind of police or anything like that, law enforcement. So I think it was a combination of those two things. I felt more comfortable or necessary that I'd be there with these friends than go to these meetings, because there were plenty of people going to these meetings and doing things. It's not like my one body would make that much of a difference, or my single body was able to do more being with these friends.

THEODORE KERR: Did race play a factor into your understanding of ACT UP?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I never thought about the race thing at all, in terms of ACT UP. I never thought about the race thing in terms of the art world until the '90s. Then it sort of hit me. [Laughs.] I realized wow, Sur, you've really been on some kind of, like, weird cloud. You know, it never—I never thought about the racial disparities. You know, it's like I'm sort of in the same situation as Lorraine, and we both talk about this, and maybe it's why we're both friends. We were post-black before we were black. So I was sort of into this thing about—well I'm into anything and everything that I do doesn't have to [inaudible]. And I thought that the world—I could talk to people and they always respected me from where I was in any situation I was in. I never felt that I was sort of like, my thing was being compromised. If I made a statement or came forth, people really looked at what I had to

say, thought I was really intelligent, valued what I had to say. And it wasn't until the '90s that I'd realized this other thing happening. And I started getting really educated about the plights of what blacks had to deal with in the art world. And I found that out working with Kenkeleba, because I have a whole archive in history. And I started reading all this material, and then I became black at that point. [Laughs.] So I was like post-black until the mid-'90s or something.

THEODORE KERR: And I think it's important—do you want to talk about how that changed your interaction in the world of art and in the world of AIDS?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well, I—you know, how it operated in the worlds of AIDS seemed very obvious to me. But I never really thought about how to—because I wasn't in a community—most of my friends and people that I were working with, they're not people of color. They were white. Right? So my whole experience within that didn't really come up in that kind of a way, even with my caregiving and my advocating for them. You know, they were seen as like, "Oh, well, he's black. He's a social worker." Something like that. You know what I mean?

So it never really—it was kind of like, really easy. But within the art world, I got really, really, really sort of angry. And I think it started through—I said I got my degree at Kenkeleba. They have a huge archive there. They're black nationalists, so they're really interested in anything that's black. And they followed, like, for instance, all the articles that were written about African American artists. And I would go through their files and just start reading these articles and learning about all these artists. And I started recognizing that there were certain kinds of codes used when they would talk about an artist that was black, about their work. So you wouldn't even have to know—when you read a lot of the stuff over and over and over again, these certain things start to come up that I wasn't used to—it was very clear to me that they're really being talked about, and their work is really being addressed in a very different way than artists who weren't black. And that became very evident to me. And it's kind of—it's sort of like in the same way they way they talk about black athletes as opposed to white athletes. Like, I can read an article and know immediately by the way they talk about the athlete if they're a person of color, right?

So that was—there was that education that was coming up, and at the same time that that was happening, there were a lot of black artists coming into the art world that, you know—Lorna Simpson and Glenn Ligon and, you know, I knew at that point through this work—I knew about Maren Hassinger and David Hammons. So I knew that there was this parallel world running. And I actually believed that with the entrance of all these black artists into the art world that were starting to be celebrated or getting a lot of attention that things were finally going to change in, like, a really big way. And I was told, Sur, if you look at the timeline, whenever the economy dips and goes down and there's frustration, they start throwing some money at artists and people of color and giving them a little bit of attention. And as soon as the money swings back, they forget about them. We've seen this happen before.

And I said, "Well, this time is like, really different." And I really believed that. And I actually watched it happen. But then—you know, because—that's when all the multicultural stuff started really building, and institutions started using the multicultural thing as a way to get more funding. And starting to do things to bring more artists of color—just enough, just enough to sort of get things sort of moving. And then I think Dia had done this really big project called Black Popular Culture that Michelle Wallace had organized. But it was really a whole cultural thing. It didn't only cover the art world. It covered the music world and the literary world and just the position of where black people were, which was an amazing thing.

But then I tried to follow it up with a conference that I was working on with Lorraine. We put together a board of people that included Lowery Sims, who was working at the Met at that time—Thelma Golden, Michelle Wallace jumped on board. We wanted to create a conference that was specifically around the visual arts could not find any kind of funding for it anywhere. Even with this heavy board that we had, we couldn't get anywhere with it. And then I realized, well, you know, Dia had done this thing so they figured, "Okay, we did it [inaudible]. We don't need to do it." You know? So they threw their whatever—it was done. Now they could move on. And I realized—I said, this would be something that would sort of repeat itself. And it sort of, you know, still is today. I mean, the racism in the art world kind of amazed me. I remember sitting outside a studio in the museum of Franklin Sirmans'once, and I was listening to some people talking about the black gallery. And I said, "The black gallery? Is there a black gallery?" You know? And then I started—we were sitting there going through a thing and I said, "Okay. We get it. It has to be a gallery that represents more than two black artists." Three would be the tipping point. If they have three, they're consider a black art gallery, right? Which is Jack Shainman, Brent Sikkema, the Sikkema Jenkins was another one. And they're referred to as a black gallery, even though they represent a lot of white artists. I think they represent three or four. It's enough to turn it into a gallery. It's like if you have a neighborhood and it's like a white neighborhood and you have half a dozen black families living there that it almost becomes, like, on the border of danger.

THEODORE KERR: Did this lens through which you could see the art world through race inform how you could see the ways in which the art world was also dealing with HIV/AIDS?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I saw it as—you know, I always saw the AIDS thing as bigger than the art world. You know? The art world was just a small part of the people who were infected and what they have to deal with. And it was very kind of, like, a kind of different situation sort of. And, you know, the—you know, what was happening in the art world was just a microcosm of what's happening in the larger world anyway. So I just saw that way, that the whole thing with the—with people of color and AIDS was totally played out in the way that, like, race and all that stuff plays out in America. So, like, none of it surprised me.

THEODORE KERR: Were you aware of some of, like, the street art activism that was happening in the, like, the mid-'80s around HIV/AIDS? So I'm thinking specifically around, like, Silence Equals Death or then the Gran Fury work. Was this something that you were seeing and thinking about?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah, because I knew one of the people who were active in that. All the people that were part of the art world that were involved in all that, I had a—because I knew who the people were. They were friends of friends. It was part of the art thing. So anything that was happening within the arts, we could know. I had like a, practically a direct line to you. If I wasn't involved in it, I would know what was going on because that was the community I was involved with, right?

THEODORE KERR: And did it have a personal or did it have a personal impact on you, some of that work?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well, the biggest personal impact to me came through you know, my involvement and work with Other Countries. You know, because like I said, there was this thing where I was an active part of the art world, so I knew both the Gran Fury and I knew the curators I knew the people that were working in museums like, you know, Tom Finkelpearl and Philip Yenawine and Tom Sokolowski. I mean, they were all friends. People that I sort of—so I had all that information. What I didn't really have was what was happening in the communities of color and that whole world, and I got that through Other Countries. And, like, because we would write stories about what was happening in our life, and the stories were just so horrific. And, you know, when you have the race thing over the stigma of all this other stuff and then what people have to deal with to mine through the race stuff and the stigma with AIDS and then the communities they were living in and [inaudible] was just, like, really kind of—it brought me closer to all the spiritual and religious practices that were so central to the black community that I'd sort of known about, but I experienced it more through this group of black gay men that it was just, like, this other world that I would go into. And then I would go into the world of this sort of ACT UP thing that none of these guys that were writing ever talked about any of that stuff, because they were dealing with their own crisis that didn't involve, like, you know, something with ACT UP that was predominantly a bunch of, like, white gay men, right?

Even though I discovered later when I started to do the research of looking at ACT UP that there were all these affinity groups of people of color and people of color that worked inside of them that never—are never really talked about ever. There's sort of like they never existed. And that to me was like, really shocking. That plays out like things do in the larger world of the art world. They have to sort of like, separate themselves out and do their own thing for their own power, even though within the larger thing, they have very little power or what power they have is always being marginalized and stuff.

So I, you know, only came to that because all my friends that were going into ACT UP, I never started saying, "Oh, are there any, like, black folks there? What's happening?" Because I was still post-black, right? [Laughs.] Until the—until, like, I started working for Kenkeleba, which was '92, '93, and then I kind of was back into the art thing and I was less involved with the art world. But I still had friends, so that sort of like, quiet—but had I had been more involved and known what I know about the—what was going on with this parallel black art world and this earlier, like, been aware of that in the '80s from the position I was and looking at what was happening with ACT UP and all that, I would've been more interested or kind of gone into the—my contacts within the black art world to say, like, you know, why isn't anything being done about this?

I remember having a really—getting really, really upset with AA Bronson who said, "Oh, I don't know there's this thing and the blacks are so devastated, but they're doing, like, nothing. They need to get themselves together." And I was like—he actually made this book that had to do with all these African nations or something and the flags and AIDS and da,da, da, da, da, da, and at the end he felt like, "Why aren't they doing enough?" And I'm saying, "aa, you were so ignorant about where they are within the power structure. And all the other stuff that they have to deal with in their communities—there's a whole layering of stuff that they have to deal with that they're dealing with all the time, and AIDS is just thrown on top of that." You know? So you can't expect that all those other things are going to disappear and they're going to shift all their stuff. I mean, like, get real. You need to, like, throw yourself into those communities to find out about stuff that they're dealing with—violence and the health system, to start with. They're in a very different place than you are as a white guy going into the health system, okay? So they have to get past that so they can get to the other stuff. And I thought it was like, really, really unfair. Really, really unfair. I was like, really pissed off at him for, like, a long time when I saw that book.

THEODORE KERR: It was part of an exhibition. And I think it was like, cosigned by a small gallery in the Bronx, actually. But we can check on that.

SUR RODNEY SUR: But I mean, why would you do that? Why would you chastise a whole community because of your feeling of thinking about something like that? I mean, you know, we have enough shit to deal with.

THEODORE KERR: Do you feel that sometimes art and artists use their power and privilege to push an agenda they don't understand?

SUR RODNEY SUR: That's a good question. Do artists feel like with their privilege they try to push an agenda they don't understand? I think that if they're pushing the agenda, they kind of understand it, but they're not really aware of the full depth of it, in a way. Like, you know, I think a lot of my white friends are aware that racism exists. But, you know, that's one level in the larger thing. We know the larger things that are racist. But they don't understand the micro-aggressions. That's, like, something that they don't get. The little things that you're hit with every day that you sort of have to negotiate, and some of them even come from my white friends. And it's like, wait a minute, did you just, like, really say that? And then when you call them on it, they immediately pull back and get defensive. "Do you think I'm being racist? How could you? You know me." And dadadadadada. This whole thing with, like—oh my god. They call it—they have a word for it—where someone starts defending themselves when they feel attacked when they're white. There's a word for it, and I've used it. I've even sent out the document. How people react when they're at—why is my mind going blank on this?

THEODORE KERR: It's not—it's like, they get defensive, they get—

SUR RODNEY SUR: They get defensive. They don't—they can't really hear. They kind of shut down. White fragility. White fragility. It has a name and it's explained in steps. Now when I go to this thing—when I sort of read that, I went, "Wow, this is exactly what happens." And I've seen it happen repeatedly over and over and over and over and over again with a lot of my friends, but I didn't kind of know how to deal with it. So what you do is you just kind of have to like, shut down and then you get really angry because it's friends—because they're not hearing what you're saying. And they don't want to deal with you because you kind of have to work through that. But now that it's actually named, I remember sending this to a lot of my black friends. And they thought—they said, "Oh, wow, this is so right on." They thought that it was a joke. They thought that it was something that I had written up for fun to kind of make fun of how ridiculous this was. And I said, "No, this is actually something that an academic has named. And she uses this as a teaching tool in her classes." And now when I run into this confrontation with my white friends, I send them this document. I say, "You know, we had this sort of discussion. Dadadadadada. This is how I saw you respond, and I kind of understand it now, because it actually has a name. And if you read this document, you can understand it [laughs], right?"

THEODORE KERR: When you—you were talking about the document, you would read articles about black artists and you could tell through coded language that the writer was writing about a black artist, even if that was never explicit. And I wonder if you remember some of the codes or some of the words that would get used.

SUR RODNEY SUR: You know, it was the way they talked about quality. You know, that would always sort of come up, about how—because it was always measured against European kind of a thing. That was one thing. It was usually things that talked about quality or if there was something about the work that was too black, it somehow became a problem and they talk about it in sort of disparaging ways, that these people sort of needed—it was kind of talked about in a way that these people weren't educated enough to sort of understand that, you know, within the art historical thing that basically has been built around European art, that, you know, if a black person or a people of color created something that was close to that, they were not in a way being genuine and didn't have really any real talent. They were just trying to, like, mimic. It was all this thing about, like, mimicking. We couldn't be original about anything because it had to be compared to something like that that already existed. And if it wasn't then the quality standard didn't quite fit, didn't quite work up to snuff. It was something that I was thinking that would give a good example of sort of illustrating that, and then it went out of my head as I was trying to finish the thought that I was on. It'll come back around again.

THEODORE KERR: We've talked a lot about race within the art world. I wonder if we want to talk about sexuality within the art world. Did you find that these codes existed when people would talk about gay or queer or lesbian or bi or trans artists?

SUR RODNEY SUR: They didn't. Period.

THEODORE KERR: How—why?

SUR RODNEY SUR: It was—when I would bring it up, they'd say, "Oh, that's not important. It's not important." I'm saying, well it is important. It's part of the person's—part of what they're really—they didn't want to know. You couldn't even write about it. And that didn't really start happening until 2000s. I guess maybe it sort of started in the '90s, maybe in the late '90s, but before that, talking about anything that was gay or queer, even in the East

Village, I don't remember it really—well, we knew that a lot of these artists were gay. But there was never anything talked about in their work and that relationship that I can sort of remember, unless I'm like, blocking something.

THEODORE KERR: And is it true that, like, even other artists and curators and collectors, they wouldn't talk about sexuality as well?

SUR RODNEY SUR: No.

THEODORE KERR: So it was, like, across the board?

SUR RODNEY SUR: It was across the board.

THEODORE KERR: And do you think—

SUR RODNEY SUR: Just didn't because it was seen as like, not important. Or you were seen about throwing someone into, like, this ghetto. And, you know, I remember this whole thing—I remember having a discussion in the gallery where there was something where David Wojnarowicz being written about as a gay writer. Now, this was a writing thing, not the art. And Gracie turned—well see I mentioned a name [inaudible] [laughs]—said to me, "Oh, this is so—why would they write these disparaging remarks about David as a writer?" And I'm saying, "Well Alice B. Toklas, Jean Genet—I went through a whole list of "out" people that were known to be gay that could be talked about as being gay and being a writer, and why couldn't David? You know? Because it was seen as kind of like, knocking them down. And I think, you know, a lot of people's minds, you know, if you mention anything that's gay is disparaging. Or if you mention anything might be too close to black, it's like, someone says, "I don't really see you as black." Well, why not? What's wrong with, like, being black? Because there's an under thing about that—they don't want to see that because—why don't they want to see that if it was something that was great or wonderful? They'd want to mention it, right? But if you don't, it has to be because there's something about it that makes you less than you could be if they didn't see it at all.

THEODORE KERR: And an idea that circulates is that the art world was slow to react to the AIDS crisis. Is that something that you found was true?

SUR RODNEY SUR: The art world was slow—I think it was a little bit slow, but then they really got on it, because there were a lot of amazing exhibitions that were done to raise money. Mostly for amfAR. You know, amfAR had this, like, heavy arm into the art world and they produced these like, amazing book full-color reproduction catalogs of all the artwork that big-name artists and small-name artists and everyone had given them to raise money for AIDS. And I remember that starting pretty heavily from '84, '85. Maybe it was late. It was like, '86, '87 —'85, '86, '87. It was like a lot of that. There was a lot of that going on that I remember in terms of fundraising through art. But really, people felt like, "Well, I can give you a piece of art and it would raise money and then someone else would take care of it." And they weren't really involved or following up what was going on. I don't think a lot of people were doing that or even the artists really understood ACT UP unless you're really involved.

But I really think there was more that could have been done in—you know, the amfAR thing I guess was a token way of them feeling that something had to be done, because they could feel the presence of stuff going on. But really, there was a lot more. And that's why I had to leave the gallery. Because I realized that I was doing my day-to-day thing and there was no time for me to think or do anything about what was happening with AIDS. And it kind of bothered me that there wasn't enough being done. I mean, I felt like, you know, the galleries—I mean, in one way they could have been opening up, you know, some kind of care centers or requiring space for having support groups, providing—I think that—did we become a drop-off place for food for God's Love We Deliver or something? I mean, there are a lot of things like that that could have been made where the galleries could have networked to help the community, and there was nothing like that happening. They didn't respond at all. Except for raising money for, like, amfAR.

THEODORE KERR: Why do you think they didn't respond?

SUR RODNEY SUR: They had too much work to do. They were all about making money and promoting their artists, right? I mean, that's what the drive was. And it's a very stressful kind of situation to keep on top of it. Like, I didn't realize until I wrote up a business plan for the gallery to actually find out how much money we needed to keep our doors open from month to month. And it was something like \$50,000 or \$60,000. And that's, like, low end. So if we're spending \$50,000 or \$60,000 a month, that means we have to sell \$120,000 worth of art. Right? To keep that sort of going. That's like, a lot. And we were able to do it and sustain that. It's sort of amazing to me. Because it seemed like we never really had enough. We were just always kind of just like, covering our asses. And we were operating at a low end, so when I saw how we were operating, I could imagine what the 52nd Street galleries and SoHo galleries had to deal with, right? And it's still sort of like that. It's like you really have to go at it full-time.

But still, even within that, there's always a way that more can be done. And I don't think there was a consciousness of doing that. I think maybe some of the whole stigma and fear about, you know, if galleries maybe felt like if they did something more about AIDS or brought people like that into the gallery, would people be afraid to walk into the galleries? Because, you know, there was a lot of ignorance about how stuff was. That might have played into it some way. But to me, it didn't matter. If we all got infected and we all went down, that's what needed to happen. Right? That's always been my attitude. But to sort of get people, to sort of think like that, you know, I expected to be—I didn't expect to live into my 30s when I was a younger kid. I said I'm too wild, I'm too flamboyant, I'm too out and I'm black. And someone's just going to, like, bump me off. I just sort of expected it to happen. And then when I was in my 30s and I was still alive and I went and like, wow, this is like, amazing. And I think a lot of that stuff played into my attitude about not being concerned. I mean, I already felt bad that my life was probably going to go to like, a hell in a handbag? Is that right? I don't know what that expression is anyway? Hell in a handbag?

THEODORE KERR: Or hand-basket? I don't know. I prefer handbag.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Right. [Laughs.] I think that somehow I saw my life that way, so I felt like it didn't really matter. I could go out and do stuff and it really wouldn't care. That's when I was angry. That's shifted now when I started getting involved with helping friends taking care of them. Had I got into [inaudible], now I'm very protective of myself, because I've realized if I don't protect myself and make sure that I'm in kind of a shape, all of this stuff that I have and all this stuff that I have—I have work to do. And I need to make sure that that gets the right places and make sure people understand stuff and make sure that I can still be here for Geoff and make sure that I can still be here for Gracie.

So I've gotten more into taking care of myself. I don't have this reckless thing. I had much more of a reckless thing in my 20s and 30s right up until—I guess the whole responsibility thing kicked in with the gallery, when we started [inaudible]. So I guess it was like, by the mid-'80s I was really into this thing of, "I have to be responsible because I have to keep this thing going because it relies"—I felt like it was so much determined from myself. So that kind of happened around '84. Prior to '84 I just didn't care. I would've jumped into anything. But the—then we're thinking about the AIDS thing happened later, where I felt there was—you know, at a stage where I just said, you know, I felt that I had stuff to protect. And what I had to protect at that time was the business and my relationship to Gracie. And I took care of that by writing this business plan so I can remove myself from it and then go back into this other caring stuff. But I left with nothing. The amazing thing was that in the business plan, you couldn't believe this. In the business plan that we wrote up, it was revised and Gracie tweaked it.

When she got the backing, this was—would have been 1989—I was offered a salary of \$70,000 a year plus expenses. That was more money—that's like, more money than I make in five years now. You know? I mean, it was like a lot of money. And I turned that down because my friends were more important. You know? I couldn't, like, what? You know, my friends were important to me because I felt a lot of my ability to really accomplish and be able to really do the things or create the things that I really wanted to have happen—a lot of these friends were like, very much a part of that. And the thing that was most disturbing to me about it was that—and this is talked about a lot. I mean, Carlo McCormick has actually written about it, too—is that it was amazing that people that got infected—it was almost like you had this whole group of people and they were, like, particular people that were really stellar. I mean, they were the people that could walk into a room and make things happen. They were the people that if there was something crazy going on, they would be right in there and be able to do it. They were strategically positioned within the community and had a certain kind of respect that they could create the kind of—galvanize the kind of support that was needed. And those were the people that went first.

And it was like, almost like there was some sort of master plan where they said, "Oh, yeah, there's one over there and there's one over there. Dadadadada." And with each of those people that were knocked out, it knocked out a whole community of stuff. And then the people that remained were like, kind of looking around for the next leader. I mean, not all of them went, but then it was multiple stress on the people that were there. And a lot of them just sort of like, got burnt out. And that was really sad, and I still think about them, thinking, "Who made this thing?" It's like too—it's too crazy. Anyway.

THEODORE KERR: Did you feel that there was a dip—how did that impact the art community or the communities that you were a part of? That loss of that kind of exciting, connected, high-capacity person?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I think it affected more the queer people in the community than the straight people, in a big way. Because when I got involved in this whole East Village thing and I moved to New York—I'd say I moved to New York in '76. I was 22 years old. Right? So, you know, we have a lot of kind of energy and do a lot of crazy things. And you're doing it with all your friends and this whole thing of being gay and straight and all that in that community didn't really matter. We didn't really care. We're just like, our crazy selves, and we weren't really divided in that way until AIDS came about.

I think a lot of the people that weren't gay at a certain point figured they had to become more mature, so they

wanted to have families, and they dadadadadada. That's where their concern was focused. They went down and got jobs because they had a family to support, and they moved in that way. Where the queers who really were rolling things and really the engine that created the East Village scene—I talk about that over and over and over again. The whole thing that built up from the clubs to the galleries to the events were driven by gay men and women. And I talk about that all of the time, and I challenge anyone who was around—I'm saying, "Find some spot where something was happening?" And who was behind it? It was a gay man or a woman and usually their alliance. Look at these states of all these big gay men that died. Who were the people that are running it? Women. Right? Because there's been this alliance. We went to these memorials. Who were the people that spoke in a way that was a kind of passion and fullness that you didn't get from any—it was always the women. I mean, there's some kind of—this alliance that gay men have with their women friends is like, so special and so unique, and you really sort of picked that up at the memorials. It was kind of evident in a lot of the estates of a lot of these artists. And, you know, also you know, with a lot of the dealers, a lot of women dealers had really close relationship with these gay men, being the older ones like Holly Solomon and all that.

So that was kind of really important. But I think the people that were gay really took a hit and really recognized that a lot of their stuff had been pulled away, and they would have to do a lot more work to get back to where they were before. I mean, from what I understand is the dance world was thrown back 20 years with the people that died, because all that history and development is lost, completely lost, and had to be rebuilt and reconstituted from what was left behind and the generation that would come behind. But they didn't have—there was this transferring of information in the art—with the advancement in the dance world that was now lost that the generation that came before them would never be able to find, because it wasn't—you know, they're trying to piece it together to get people some kind of a sense that—you know, it will be years before it comes back to that. I think the thing within the gay thing is moved in so many different directions. It's kind of built itself up in such a way with the—what they call the creating of a world of a hetero—of a homo normal or the homo—

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, homonormative or heteronormative.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah, it's kind of disgusting.

THEODORE KERR: It was remarkable to hear you talking about the dance world and the kind of generational hit that they took. Because the word that you didn't use that seems kind of important is, like, it's hard to archive dance. Or dance is not a practice that has the same archival capacities as art. And I wonder—if you want to talk a little bit about the role of the archive in those early days as you understand them. Like, what was it to be creating—it's a broad question. What was it to be creating an archive within the art world as people were dying?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well, it was easy. I don't think it was really that difficult. Because you move in, you collect as much art as you could that was usually there and grab it and do something with it. You can't do that with dance. You know? There's all these things of archiving now with dance and performance that are needing new ways of opening and archiving stuff. As a matter of fact, I'm talking to a group next week about archiving performance and the kinds of things it can do.

But there are, you know, ways of doing it with—when you're dealing with the visual arts, it's kind of much easier, because you're like, looking at actual stuff that exists. And, you know, you can record it pretty quickly on film. So the first stage, if you can't actually physically keep the—take the work to be able to preserve it in some way, you know, the visual document's going to be captured really easily within a photograph.

THEODORE KERR: You said that you would, you know, enter into someone's home, you'd be invited in and you would help create like a bio and a story behind the artwork to give it context for when they passed away. And then it sounds like also you'd collect the artwork. And where did these things exist? Where did those papers exist? Where did that artwork go?

SUR RODNEY SUR: They usually kind of stayed with the artists. I mean, a lot of them had to do with conversations with the artist about their work, because it's a lot of stuff that you find, you don't really understand or a lot of things that the artists don't realize that they talk about with their own art. And then you realize, aha, you know? You can see how this ties in with this particular artist, that group, and that's how you begin to group things together. I mean, when you have a collection of something, it's much stronger than the things that are sort of isolated. So I was very interested in those stories and how things came together and what other artists they were interested in to look for keys to illuminate their work more. That's really what it was about. It's about providing keys or directions for people that come to it later to consider when they're looking at that artist's work—what they were looking at, what they were thinking of, what was important to them, why they created the piece, what they think they want to accomplish with the work that they're doing. You know? All that kind of stuff that you can only get from the artists.

So a lot of it was really, like, talking. Some of the information is in my head. Some of it I would use in my writing. Some of it I would write out and, you know, keep with their bios, creating artist statements and that sort of thing.

And that stuff basically lived with whoever was left to take their archives. Some of them I collected myself, because people think about their families in New York City and they sort of—and it wasn't done through wills. They usually give me the stuff so that it wasn't around after they died, you know? I have journals and diaries from a number of artists that talk about their whole life, but I haven't even really looked at a lot of them. But at some point I'll have to go down and really examine that. It's been, like, too hard. And as a matter of that, and time. But it was just to make it easier for the family. And even if they didn't do anything with it, at least they'd be able to have through the records that I'd keep created, have some understanding of what this child that they had that was doing this crazy stuff, what it meant to them. What it was about because they couldn't really talk to their family would just say, "Oh, they're doing this crazy stuff."

So it was a two-fold family, more for the family and friends of theirs to sort of understand that. And in understanding that, the hope's what would be that they would have more of a sense of how valuable the artists—the work was and just keep it and preserve it for whatever. Now, I've had some terrible experiences. I'm thinking of one in particular with an artist that I felt was so important—Alex Greenfield—he was a painter. He's in the Visual AIDS archive. I thought the work that he was doing was so important within the canon of contemporary art and all that in a really big way. And there were a couple of very big galleries who were interested and recognized that immediately, right? And I kind of explained to the family—couldn't understand the work, because it was very minimal and he was painting stripes. Right? So how could stripes become such a big boom but, you know, it's very complicated with how he was constructing them, what he was doing, how it fit into some of the—like Agnes Martin, but was kind of not Agnes Martin but taking Agnes Martin into something else. There was a lot of stuff that you could weave into this work that was really amazing, and the guy that—Alex was like, very, very—really knew his history and stuff.

And there was some very high-profile galleries that I managed to get interested in him. I said, "Wow." You know? They're seeing this right away. But they lost interest, because there wasn't enough work. They needed to really do something with the work. They needed to have a bulk of it to really do it, and there wasn't enough there. You know? So that sort of petered out. But I told the family—I said, "Look, you have to hold on to this because this is like, really important work historically. And I think at some point we'll find something we can do with it or someone who's doing some kind of research that can illuminate that. And we need examples of it to be around." Well, they kept it in their garage for a couple of years, you know, sort of in touch with them for a couple of years. And then the time sense would get longer and longer and longer. And then I think it was a period of a window of like, five or six years after that where there was an opportunity for me to kind of do something with the work in a really interesting way. And I contacted the family—they couldn't deal with having the work. They didn't think it was—they had it for too long, they couldn't afford—so they just like, dumped everything.

THEODORE KERR: That's hard to hear.

SUR RODNEY SUR: I know. And that happens a lot. That happens a lot. Or things that were — people will keep or hold on to certain things, if they can. But then they destroy all the other material that's in the archive that sort of bothers them. Like, I remember when Keith Davis died, he had this amazing collection of pornography that were all in polaroids he would take together. I mean, it was really—and plus material that [inaudible] supportive material. It was like, a thing aside from the work that he was doing. And I was asked to go over his story—it was really awful because he'd broken up with a lover and they'd shared this loft together. And they'd broken up, and they'd made this agreement that the partner that left wanted a certain amount of money from—for leaving the loft because he felt that he had certain investment in it. So he was paid the money. It was an agreement between them but it wasn't, like, set up as a legal document.

So when this ex-lover found out that he had died, he came back and said, "I own that loft. And I want everything out of there in, like, 48 hours." So his family had to fly in from Oregon, and we had to pack up that loft. And it was huge. It was like, a 2,000 square foot space, right? And he had a lot of stuff because he was sort of like a collector and stuff of artwork, and the studio was used to store a lot of work. David Wojnarowicz stuff and a lot of artists. So we have to go there, do this stuff. And I remember his parents were over there, and they were going through all this stuff, and I was supposed to come over and help. And I think I couldn't get there at a particular time—I showed up two hours later. And that was one of the things I was thinking of. I said, "I have to get this collection of porn because it's really valuable all together. The parents had cut everything up and destroyed it because they were so freaked out that this stuff existed."

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

SUR RODNEY SUR: You know, I had the same thing happen with another artist who had a lot of very explicit—he was kind of into the SM scene, and leather and he had a lot of material that he collected. That was very valuable on the market out there and it was discovered by the executor and amongst it there were some photographs of me in costumes. So that's how they knew that I'd known about something so they called me up and wanted me to explain this. So I gave him an explanation. I said, "This is a creative project. It's all like a stage set, we were like making this film." And I try to talk and he says, "Yeah right." So he says, "Well I'm incinerating all this stuff."

Right. And I said, "Please don't. Let me come over there right now and I'll throw everything into garbage bags and take it away and it will be gone and you won't have to think about it again." Well he was raising money, the executor was trying to raise money for his Alma Mater to create a scholarship fund in his name.

THEODORE KERR: In whose name?

SUR RODNEY SUR: In the name of this—

THEODORE KERR: The artist or the—

SUR RODNEY SUR: The artist.

THEODORE KERR: Okay.

SUR RODNEY SUR: The name of the artist. Right. Wanted to set up a scholarship fund at his Alma Mater, in his name, that was his goal. Do you know that the money that was raised for that—85 percent of that money, building up that scholarship fund, came from my getting rid of and disposing and selling all that material he was going to incinerate. Distributing to the Tom of Finland Foundation, the Leather Archives in Chicago. You know, people on the scene that were, you know, knew of this guy and what he had and gave me, like, serious money for a lot of that stuff and that all went into a scholarship fund. I mean, some of it was pretty freaky stuff. I kept lists of all the stuff that I had and some of the people that I met through that. Because there's this whole community that I didn't know that well, but I knew somewhat through him, so I could find the people that could turn me on to other people. And I remember telling the executor, I said, "You know all that stuff you're going to throw out, remember this and that? Well here's the check for what I got for that for a scholarship fund."

THEODORE KERR: It seems to me, in the memories that you're sharing that AIDS kind of exposed so much within the art world and it kind of brought to the surface the different tensions that nobody was talking about. So when you were—

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah that's kind of interesting. But yeah. It did. And it exposed the realities of people's lives. I mean, you know, one thing that people don't talk about is the thing with drugs. They always connect this thing with AIDS with sex. There was a lot of it that was going on through intravenous drug use. Heroin and intravenous and drugs were a big thing in the art world, I mean super big. And I talk about when I lived on St. Mark's Place for years, right? And then I moved here in 1981 when it was still, like, an open air drug market, right. And there were very few people in the art world that were known that lived this far over. I mean, there were a few artists that I got to meet later. But I was living here and then on the corner there was a McDermott and McGough, who lived upstairs to Nicolas Moufarrege who lived in the storefront right across street from the laundry mat, and I think Uzi Parnes had the Chandelier Club here, and then ABC was over on the next block, and they were, like, really in nowhere zone. So, you know, we sort of knew each other, and we were known in the art world. But when I would see all these other people in the art world that I recognized, down here and all the artist's, I figure, if they are not coming to visit me or they're not going to visit Nicolas or the poofs [a term Rene Ricard used when referring to McDermott and McGough -SRS] they're down here to score. And they, you know this whole silence when you're doing this [inaudible] crack den you sort of recognize someone you know, so you figure you don't really have to talk about it, you don't even have to talk to them, because you know that you're not going to talk about that when you're outside.

So a lot of these people that were down here, scoring their drugs, just assumed I was down here doing the same, they did know that I lived here. They thought that I lived, if you can believe it, I've heard this from people, in the Modern Art Towers. "Oh come on sir, you're a celebrity regular, you're making all this money, you're always in the press, you're not living"—and when they found out I was living down here it was like, really? So I, kind of, recognized how big—I sort of knew and had heard about it, and I knew the circles of people that were around. Which groups were doing which drugs, and more of it, in particularly the heroin thing that was kind of pervasive. And a lot of the AIDS stuff happened through the intravenous drug thing. I think that might have been how David got infected. And I trace that to the kind of social—I was very aware of the social groupings and who was hanging out with who, right. And the drug thing really kept certain people together, and David was a part of a certain group that had a certain number of women, who also got infected, and I'm sure that it was more through the drug thing than the sex thing. But people don't talk about that because I'm talking about drugs in the art world.

THEODORE KERR: You think it's easier to talk about sex in the art world now, than drugs?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah. Oh yeah. Although it's sort of like, you know, because sex you can sort of talk about as just like a guilty pleasure. But drugs are more of a shame, right? So people don't want to talk about that and it kind of throws you in a shadow of something else. But I say that—you know, I wanted to do this whole thing about the art worlds and social networks, completely aligned through drugs and sex in the art world. The things that people don't want to talk about. You could follow or do this whole sort of mapping of things.

You know, there's this other thing. I'm reading, now, about Julius Eastman who was an experimental music composer that died in the 1990s. But he was very, very big in that scene I knew nothing about him. He died—we're not sure if he had AIDS when he died. Because I'm reading his biography now and that's sort of very unclear. But they talked about something in the thing that really resonated with me. It's like how did I, you know, as a freak. How was I able to live my whole life being out there as a freak? You know, it's sort of a more conservative business, but I was a pretty flamboyant and outrageous before all that stuff happened. And they said something in this book about Julius Eastman being in the experimental music world that was predominantly white, but the thing that brought him into the world wasn't—being black was something that was definitely something that was not part of that world, but he came in through the queer thing. And I realized that a lot of people of color, that move into the wilder edge of the arts that are predominantly dominated by whites, are usually queer. And the straight ones become part of this whole segregation thing.

So when I think about, you know, the black art world and the parallel track, there was a certain kind of life, and not cool to be as open flamboyant as you are. And I think, I may have talked about this earlier, and I think that even if I was interested in the black art world, they never would have had me as out and as crazy and as flamboyant as I was, because it was like too much. I mean Fred Wilson and all those other people they knew were gay but they were, you know, looked normal. I didn't. You know, I put mascara on my eyelashes and stuff like that it's like—

THEODORE KERR: I want to go back a little bit. What was the first thing you did with Visual AIDS? What was the first project?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I think curating *The First Ten*, working on that.

THEODORE KERR: Can you—

SUR RODNEY SUR: I remember—Now I never got credit for curating that and I don't think I was part of curatorial thing at all. How I got involved in that project was that they had this show that they want to do, they had a venue, but how were they going to get the art to the gallery because there were a lot of big pieces that needed to be coordinated. Well that's where I come in. I had a gallery, I knew art shippers, da, da, da, da, da, da, da. I said, "Okay I can set the whole thing up." I found an art shipper that was willing to do it, right. And when he found out what it was doing for him, and because I always had this really good alliance with the service people and anything. I had always been very good about that, maybe that comes from my class, sort of thing. You know, the truckers, the maintenance people, the installers. I treated them like they were the most valuable people in the world, and they never got that from anyone else. So when I needed something, I called them up, if it was a jam they'd say, "Okay, Sur, you need this for you, I'll figure out a way to make this happen."

So I always got a lot of support, and it help the gallery a lot. It helped a lot of the things I wanted to do, because people were sort of supportive of me because they realized I was supportive of them and treated them like—and some of them would even [inaudible], "You know sir you are the only one that comes in and when we deliver art work or something like that, that treats us like normal people and don't look down at us," right. So I called this art shipper up, who picked up all this work and did all the rounds and went all the way up to the Bronx and all the way out to Brooklyn and brought all this stuff in and delivered it to the gallery, for free. Because he thought that what I was doing, with this thing with AIDS was so important that he couldn't charge us, and it took him—I think it went over two days, it wasn't a big show but the transport and the various points that he had to pick up and get it to within certain times were a lot of work. And he was always really pissed off because he never got a thank you letter from Visual AIDS. [Laughs.] I remember that, he told me about this like year's later but I hadn't thought about it. I mean I thanked him, but he never got anything from the organization. Also this guy was a really great guy. He talked about moving—He should write about moving art because he's moved everyone. Told me this story about moving Arch Connelly's studio and Arch didn't have any money said "Oh yeah, well you know, you can come take any of the art that you want, but I have to move the studio." So he had this collection of Arch Connelly's that I helped him sell later.

No, I think that was the very first thing. Then the next thing that happened after that—So that was the first project, but I wasn't really involved in curating it at all, that was mostly David Hirsch and someone else, but in talking about how we I got involved in this chipping thing because I said I could sort of handled that. The next thing would have been the show that happened in Boston, right? Because Frank Moore, David Hirsch, and I got involved—David Hirsch sort of fell out the way, because the [inaudible], but I don't want to get into all the stuff with David Hirsch. Was coordinating all the stuff and actually selecting the artists and doing studio visits around that show in Boston, [uintelligible] it's, like a really big deal. And then the next thing after that was really big was a show that we did at Artists Space was, A Living Testament of the Blood Fairies?

THEODORE KERR: Blood Fairies. Yeah.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Right. And then we did part of it in Printed Matter. That was then on Wooster St it was in the

Dia Building [unintelligible]. So we something at Artists Space and the second part of it at Printed Matter, and that's when Barbra Hunt had just arrived from London was looking for things to go. And she said that when she saw that show at Printed Matter that Geoff and I put together, I think Frank was more involved in the Artists Space, but the Printed Matter was more Geoff and I. When she saw that show she realized that she had to work for this organization. And then she became the executive director. Right?

THEODORE KERR: Do you remember that exhibition? The blood fairy one?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Very well. Very Well. It was kind of—we really did an amazing job. Because they had all these display cases, right. Which is right up my alley so I could show all the archival stuff. We had a lot of wall space, we did this window display where we did Brian Buczak anarchy surrender installation of the window. It was like a very, very strong show. So was the one that we did at Artists Space. It was just like really, the best thing ever. Definitely measures up to *Not Over*.

THEODORE KERR: Where did the idea for blood fairy come from? Like can you say a little bit about your curatorial vision?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well the curatorial vision was to show artist that we are doing work around HIV and AIDS that we felt were really important, you know. We really wanted to make a statement to show that this work really was saying something, was really important. So it was basically like any curatorial stuff, you know, we had to make decisions on what we felt was like better or stronger and drowned out a show. It was very sort of right down to where we wanted to hang curtains. It was very, very thought out. But there was a lot of great art to choose from it wasn't like we were starving. There was a lot of stuff out there. It was like amazing. So there was no problem with finding work. I remember—the thing I remember the most is moving in—I'm not remembering the name of this artist, who made this huge jar filled with honey.

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

SUR RODNEY SUR: It was like this gigantic bell jar filled with honey and there was something carved on the outside, I can't remember who that was. But I think Valerie Caris was a part of that show. There was one artist, I remember, that was a woman, and we selected all this art work and we realized there was one of the pieces we couldn't fit in and she was—I mean all the artists in the show were really represented. She had a lot of wall space, practically her own area of the gallery with all this stuff, and she, liked, freaked out, because we pulled this one piece out. I mean she really tried to pull this, "You're making my life miserable," sort of guilty trip. Which we just had to pull back and say, "Well that's on you. You should be really thankful for the way you are represented." That was also the show, I think, that we had that crazy thing with Copy Berg. Where he had—we had this fax machine. And his partner was in his apartment faxing all these drawings—every day that the gallery was open his partner was faxing Copy Berg's drawing. And they were just lying on the floor, falling from the ceiling, these drawings were just spread on the floor and people could come in and take these faxes and take these drawings away.

THEODORE KERR: Amazing.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: When did you—

SUR RODNEY SUR: [inaudible]

THEODORE KERR: Sorry, were you going to say something?

SUR RODNEY SUR: No, I was saying that I really miss Copy. He's kind of like, he should be something that resuscitated—I mean he made some of them—I had a piece of his in the, *Not Over* show, the thing with all the pills dropping, was sort of like a very cartoony stuff. But, you know, he is someone I think about that should like, become a poster child for artist creating work around HIV and AIDS. Because he was doing it in a very direct way really, really early, and he was also a high profile person because he was the first person to reverse his dishonorable discharge in the military for being gay.

THEODORE KERR: Why do you think that he is someone who hasn't become that poster boy?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Because he's dead. And he never really found his way into the art world in a significant way and he's just like another artist that's in there. I don't even think his work comes up in a lot of the gallery things that I've seen. That's like kind of shocking to me. We did organize a retro—a sort of a mini retrospective of his work at a museum in New Jersey, that Visual AIDS was a part of. And I remember going up to Long Island to get to the Hamptons to pick up that piece from his partner. Did you know Copy at all? That was probably after your period right?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Copy, his partners name was Dub.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

SUR RODNEY SUR: D-U-B, Copy and Dub. Great Guys.

THEODORE KERR: When did you first start to see artists making work about HIV?

SUR RODNEY SUR: When did I first start seeing actual work? I saw a lot of writing.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

SUR RODNEY SUR: About artists. You know, David Wojnarowicz and the other countries were doing a lot around that. But actual art work around the AIDS thing. Well, you know, Andreas was doing a lot of stuff directly around HIV and AIDS that didn't really go anywhere, wasn't shown outside of Visual AIDS things. But while I was looking at his work was there anyone else? And that was like 1986, 1987, 1988. It seems that all the artists I knew that had AIDS weren't really dealing with it in their work. Maybe Keith Haring had done some kind of a drawing that I might of seen something like that early because he probably did some stuff indirectly. But people weren't really making work around HIV and AIDS. I think that happened later.

Copy Berg, who I met through Visual AIDS had obviously being doing it for a while. And what I'm thinking even looking at work that was being done in the archive. I mean, that's when I discovered there people like, Valerie Caris, and stuff like that that were doing stuff directly around HIV and AIDS in their work. I remember talking to Jack and Peter with their kind of a project "Short Memory / No History" and I thought was something they had started in the 1980s and they said no the late 1990s is when that started. But, no. Most of the stuff that I found by the artists that were doing stuff that was working directly with that, didn't happen until after I started working with Visual AIDS. And like Jonathan says, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and people like that were kind of like using codes in their works, so that it didn't—we didn't exactly read it that way. But there was something in it that could be exposed, major realist is what is. And like, you know, he says—Jonathan said that Felix goes he couldn't make work that was explicit and direct because he'd never be able to get into the institutions so he had to create work where it was kind of like hidden within the work so he could invade the museums like a virus.

THEODORE KERR: What was the impact, or what did you see as the impact of something like Day With(out) Art?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I thought it was amazing in the way that it started and the kinds of things that were done in the early days of Day With(out) Art. Amazing. I mean it really, kind of made an impact and anyone on that day that was anywhere around the art world really, really had to think about it. You know where the museums were covering art works. And that's kind of, it's become about something else it's more like an event, so it's become more of like a community event. More than something that reaches to the public at large like the earlier days without art did. And it would be nice if it would sort of get back to that. But, you know again there's this need, where like we really don't need it it's not really that big of a problem because bodies don't walk like that.

I got into this big fight with someone, I think it was Jonathan Ned Katz. Was it Jonathan Ned Katz? When there was a Gran Fury show at 80 Washington Square Gallery. I went to look at the show and there was some talk about it on Facebook. And I said, "You know, I look at that work, but there's something—it seems like so tame and nostalgic. You don't see that work, it doesn't have nearly the same impact that it did at the time when it was being created. Where it really hit me. Now it just becomes, it kind of blends in. I'm saying I guess what's missing are like a bunch of bodies lying in the corner and like some ambulance with the thing spinning around. Would be an element that I would drop into the show to kind of shake people up into urgency." But Jonathan, "How can you talk about bodies like that. You don't know what I've been through. I - I - I." So I was like someone coming from outer space that didn't know what I was saying. "Jonathan I have dealt with as much as this as you've have. And I think that the statement that I made resonated with a lot of people that were around at that time and if you're offended by it fine." And he got really crazy on me, and I think I blocked him.

THEODORE KERR: I think we're going to go here soon enough, but I want to capture just a little bit more of like this kind of period that doesn't get discussed much. Which is like from—for me from like 1996 to like 2010. There was still some cultural production that was going on there, a lot of Visual AIDS shows were happening then, a lot of artists were still creating work, but I think there's like limited historical record about that. And I guess what I'm hoping to talk to you about, a little bit is what did you see happen in the art world after the introduction of life saving medication.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Do you know I should be able to rattle off this at the top of my head. But that was really why I was interested in writing the text that I did for the *Art AIDS America* catalog, because they wanted to look at the history of exhibitions around HIV and AIDS. That's when I started doing this research. And I, you know,

recognized very quickly I'm saying, you know, there's like this job and that job and some really interesting shows. But then as it moved forward and I looked at the whole picture if you take Visual AIDS out you have hardly anything.

THEODORE KERR: Sorry say that again louder.

SUR RODNEY SUR: You have hardly anything. If you remove Visual AIDS and the programming and the kinds of things that institute, you have big gaps where nothing is happening. And that kind of, like, shocked me. I didn't talk, you know I was kind of a little bit sad that I thought about it later, but I didn't talk the about oral history project.

THEODORE KERR: Which one?

SUR RODNEY SUR: The ACT UP Oral History Project, which is like amazing, that was so valuable to my research. That's how I discovered all these black collectives. Was going through all the stuff. And I'm saying like, "Why isn't this known? Why am I hearing this? This history project really needs to be out there. People in the community really need to know more." But no the institutions didn't want to deal with that. That happened really early, because a lot of those people that were working for AIDS, like Tom Finkelpearl, Philip and all that were kind of squeezed I think out of the organizations they were working for because of their whole alliance. And strategic pushing of this agenda in part of AIDS and institutions got tired of it.

THEODORE KERR: The larger non-AIDS institutions is that what you're saying?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yes.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

SUR RODNEY SUR: The larger art world institutions and museums didn't want to know for it. You know, maybe they did their kind of like some kind of like fundraiser thing to help amFAR, or—but they really didn't you know—it made people too uncomfortable. You know how they are about that.

THEODORE KERR: And then what about the people you knew. Did you still—were there still people making artwork about HIV? Or were there still artists still becoming newly diagnosed talking about their experiences?

SUR RODNEY SUR: There weren't artists making—I never remember artist making work about H—When we did those blood fairy shows that was what the mid-'90s that was some of that happened right before the cocktail thing. And the artists that we were showing—seems to me there was a lot of medical stuff. People—there was conceptual stuff that was referenced AIDS, there was Copy that was being really direct. And the other artists were doing interesting work but I don't remember it having a specific dialogue about AIDS. That started really building later with the generation that came afterwards, because they were much more angrier and they saw a lot more stuff and they were freaked out. So then it started entering that way. But I mean I think you know when a florist painted flowers they still painted flowers. Maybe they put more red in them because they saw more blood or something. Or maybe put the blood on to a thorn. It was all sort of very soft and coded, that way. Or it became very personal. My memory is like what are you talking about 20 to 25 years ago, right. Maybe so it's really kind of slow. I sort of have to go back and look at that period. Maybe there's a lot being done in photography, because that's easy. You know there was a lot of documentation of what would be around. So there would be a record you could say, well here, here is an example right through journalism. But through painting and sculpture, you know even in my research Karen Finley was really out there. But that was kind of unusual even then. And Hunter Reynolds.

THEODORE KERR: But those were earlier.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Those were some of the early things.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, I'm really interested in that period of 1996 to when the younger generation came up. And I think there was just like, I do think of it as the second silence. There was just like this people have—people were tired or people—I say went it from a public experience to a private experience.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: And I think it was personal, but I think people just—yeah. I'm just wondering how we can still find it somewhere. And I think you're right. Visual AIDS is the only—Visual AIDS for me is the only place where you can see material proof that people were still making work about HIV and that new artists were getting, I mean that artists were getting newly diagnosed and yeah.

SUR RODNEY SUR: There definitely wasn't any kind of interest in the institutions of showing that stuff. It was very hard.

THEODORE KERR: Was there a backlash against it?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I know there was a backlash that happened earlier before the cocktails, but when we were doing some of those shows people didn't—sort of really weren't that interested. Oh [inaudible]. The institutions that—Actually I think you could kind of get some institutional more there, but during the silence period it became really impossible. And then I think, I talked about my time, I try to think about that because after the cocktails everything was about like South Africa, right. The official place brought the show over to South Africa. And that was—it was hard.

THEODORE KERR: When did you see that silence end? Or when did you start to see the silence starting to end.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Oh my god. Trying to think of what was happening in my own life in that period of 1996. There was 9/11 right? That was 2001 right?

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

SUR RODNEY SUR: So that was the beginning of that. Then you moved into. I guess the only way I could be able to see that, because I can't—my memory bank of stuff that happened five years ago even ten years ago kind of gets blended. I would have to look at my timeline to see what I'd found in the research, because I probably would have—because I did create a chart of the flow of all the exhibitions I could find. And I think I colored them so you could see where they sort of slow down, build up, then slow down again. So modern memory is the point where it started emerging in a really big way again.

THEODORE KERR: But what about, even in your own life, like when did you notice young people wanting to talk to you about HIV again?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I guess it was a little before I started curating the *Not Over* show with Kris Nuzzi because I think there was a period where I sort of—I left the board, I left working with Visual AIDS in 2012. Well the Visual AIDS show was in 2013 the *Not Over* show was in 2012 or 2013 I can't even remember.

THEODORE KERR: I remember it being 2012 but someone the other night said 2013.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah. I only left the board before then like either a year or something before that. So I guess it was right about the time when Geoff and I left there was a lot more stuff coming on about artists being really interested in talking about that and it kind of like really gelled with me in a real way. With the doing the *Not Over* show and I had to talk to the artists and make studio visits. I could really write a book on that experience.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah let's talk about that now. So how did the *Not Over* show come to be?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well Visual AIDS asked me if I was interested in curating a show for the 25th anniversary. And I said forget it, too much work, don't—I mean I like the idea but I don't know if I can really put the time into that. And they said well we have someone who's really efficient that can help you and it's Kris. I said well if I have someone picking up a lot of the stuff then maybe it could work. And Kris and I just sort of like clicked, right? And I think the original thing is what we started was what I said, "Well, you know, it's this really interesting thing because we really have to start with what's happening today, right?" So I want to visit and find out what's going so that we could get a handle on what we want to do with the show. And in doing that and having these conversations with these artists at some point it kicked in, and I said, "You know, that a lot of these artist are the same age as the artists that I remember talking to in the '80s that were doing the show that became infected. They were all about the age of the artists I was talking to. I said, "You know, that's sort of like really interesting."

Kind of picked up that really quickly and I'm thinking like oh feel like going back in time and the artists are really the same age. So then I got into conversations with them to find out what they actually knew about that period. I think I asked every artist I said, like "What artist do you remember from the '80s, or something like that, that you feel were really big or important to you or that you felt were doing some amazing work?", and they would always mention the same three artists. Let's see like Keith Haring, Felix Gonzalez-Torres came up, David Wojnarowicz would come up and I think that was it. That was pretty much it. Then when I talked to Charles Long he started talking about you know people like Sylvester, Marsha P. Johnson, who weren't really artists but were part of that culture, that were black and he's just trying to hold on to. It's very kind of really interesting. And then I would start mentioning names of artists and they never heard of them. And then I'd try to tell them, who the artist was and how they were important, and how could you not know who John Sex was, and he, you know, he—popular culture [inaudible] nothing, but blank. So I said, "Well I have to have something with John Sex's show." And that's how I got, what's his name interested in going to the archives to look at—and then he was completely blown away, because he—so I kind of did that with all the artists, and it was amazing to me, you know. And then I really realized that there was a gap here, this whole separation, because so much of the history was lost because of the shaming, the homosexuality, and the death of the East Village that AIDS had a lot to do

with that they don't really know about that stuff. And so that was shocking to me so I tried to bring that stuff that didn't really know and artist that they didn't really know into the show so that they could sort of see them. So that's really what we're trying to do with that show. Bring artists that were around in the '80s that sort of had a name that weren't really as familiar as they should be to the younger group and show kind of what was happening today.

THEODORE KERR: And how did that turn out?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Oh, it was great. I mean it turned out—you know and also there was some art work in the show but there was also part of it that was also—I got into integrating a lot of archival material and ephemera into the show. And I wanted stuff that people would have that they could take away, and I knew that video was a necessary part of it. So it was really kind of effective. And I think out of that show that's when I met Helaine [Gawlica] that works at Hemispheric Institute who said that's how she met me through that show. Because she is an archivist and realized she'd always wanted to do shows and how to present artwork and mix it in with archival matter and stuff like that. She said, I was so successful with that show that we became good friends just out of the cause of that, she was so impressed. And then she did a show at the La MaMa after that was it Split Britches, or no it was—what's her name from the wild café?

THEODORE KERR: Oh the playwright?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Woman. Yeah, she did a show of her's and she kind of used a lot of the thinking of my approach to the artwork to create that show. But she said that she got a lot of the ideas and thinking how to do that through seeing my show. But it was amazing and I'll never forget that when Holland Cotter wrote that view and Nelson was so excited about it and I said, "I want someone else to write it because Holland doesn't really count for me because we're really good friends and really supportive of Geoff and I. Although I liked his last line where he said, "Run and go see this show," at the end so it was kind of a celebratory thing. So it really was a very good thing and did create a bump in the show in the visibility, which is what we want things like that to do. But because Holland's a friend doesn't mean as much as someone else coming along and sort of doing it, right. And then someone sent me a framed copy of that hard copy [laughs].

THEODORE KERR: L.J. Roberts. Yeah L.J. Roberts sent two or three. What was it like for you to meet these general—like you'd spoken about that gap in information, but did you have any feelings about meeting these people for whom—they didn't experience the crisis in New York first hand, but they were making work about HIV/AIDS how was that experience for you?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well what was the most interesting thing about that experience for me that was really great and it helped me realize why there is such a sort of fracture—I'm obviously from that generation, I talk a little bit with my background. So right away I think, oh yeah it's one of those people that's experience anything and what is he going to think about my work. But the idea that I showed a real interest in what they were doing I got a feeling that wasn't something that happens to them a lot when they talk to people from my generation about things. Because we are so use to talking at them, right. Rather than being interested in what they're doing and let them talk to us, even though some of it sort of sounds stupid. And we have these knee jerk about this is sort of crazy and you can't. It's coming out of something and I think it's sort of really important to sort of hear that.

So I loved it and the more you were open to listening to them and opening to what they wanted to do, the better it was. Like there was a lot of work on that show that, you know, when I talk to the artist I'd sort of see that they had an idea and they wanted to do this or they were working on something and so it was sort of selected. But then it would change because they were working on it so I wouldn't know what it would like when it went in the gallery. But my feeling is that, you know, a lot of curators would have said, "No you can't, we need this because this is what I'm thinking." And to me what I've learned is if you have an artist—because I, you know, a creative person at work who was trained as an artist. You can be working on something and have this idea, and once you get into it all these other things start to happen. And it starts to take all these twists and turns. And I've always been encouraging of all those twists and turns because I know that you're going to get to a place, particularly if the artist is getting excited about those twist, you have to go with it. You can't like put the brakes on because you don't know where it's going to end up. You hope it's going to end up in some place good, but I really believe that if you start making them feel insecure about going someplace then it's kind of like—you just have to let them go because they'll know when they get there and if they can get really excited about it then it's going to make—it's—the end result is going to be something that's going to be exciting and that's exactly what happened.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. I think one of the most powerful things that you and Kris did, is you let artists of any age have their own experience about HIV.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah, you know, and also talking to them you know what—Carlo Quispe, and I have that get back to him on that. He had that piece that was that thing about this guy that was in the military that got

addicted to crystal meth and then came back and started doing all these going to all these crystal parties and doing all that. And was on the phone with his friend and they were talking about, you know, their experience within sexting and partying, and the crisis. That all the—I talked about this—the word dialogue that came out of there were all out of a Larry Kramer speech, that he gave. And I said this is so wacky to take Larry Kramer's speech and stick it in because he was so like—you have to like stop the sexting because you're killing each other, in to this very active thing. I thought you know was so brilliant. I don't know I need to get a little bit of cash and just buy it from him. Not to—just to preserve it because I'm afraid somethings going to happen to it, you know. I'm really interested in—I mean that was my thing with Visual AIDS. When that piece that Nancer did about like—Bring my Fucking Friends Back. I thought was so important I had to have that piece I said I don't want an [inaudible] but you have to buy this piece from her, right. And they have it up in the office and that like really kind of blew me away.

But I had such great experiences with that show, with meeting these artists. And also—even more so, you know, the event that happened afterwards after the opening with Hi Tiger in that garden that was a magic moment, that was really a magic moment. Because you had some of these people that were like from the older generation and some of them that were just around that were older hanging out in the garden with all these young kids—and there was this kind of—and this thing with the music that was really like a magic moment in that garden. It's had a lot of magic moments.

THEODORE KERR: Sur why does it matter that it was magical?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Because I think when you have these magical moments the people that are a part of it absorb something. And I think it does something to the cells in the body even when you leave it. It—I don't know, recharges or re-something or creates some kind of like hope that was always there but sort of lost. It just rekindles all that stuff and that's like so important. Just to put that kind of energy out there to see that happen, because it does some reparative stuff within the body, that people aren't even aware are happening maybe. You know, because they are too focused on the other stuff. But it definitely does create some kind of restorative health in a spiritual, psychic level that's really important. I mean, Derek realizes that, that's what he's doing the Hi Tiger thing. He says that's the only way I can create an artwork people can look at it and try to sort of think about that. But if I'm creating an environment where people can share a space and feel that moment of a connection with something. He's creating some kind of reparative stuff and is also doing that for himself too, as a performer.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. I think as someone who worked at Visual AIDS during that time, and as an artist who was in that show. What I saw for a lot of artists too, of various ages is they went from feeling isolated in their caring about HIV, to feeling like they were part of a larger movement that was in the present that had a lineage. Right? So someone like Charles Long, or Vincent Chevalier or Kia LaBeija or HomoCats—why can't I remember Homo Cats first name? What's his name?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Oh I know who you mean. He did the book thing with his, with all the writing in it.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah. J. Morrison

SUR RODNEY SUR: J. Morrison [James Morrison -SRS], right.

THEODORE KERR: So all those artists have been making work about HIV, you know for 10 years, and feeling like weirdos or like that they were afflicted with this desire to create work about HIV and then what not over did was it legitimize that there was a reason that they were making that work. And then like you say the opening and the Hi Tiger party was this intergenerational mingling where there is the restorative work but also bridges were made. So there was a—

SUR RODNEY SUR: But, you know, there's something really interesting that happened at that show. And I thought about it, it was kind of amazing to me. You know, artists are in the show when their like, like the idea of being in the show, but there was a level of excitement with some of these artists in the show that they were in this show, this big—that was like way over the top. And I'm saying like yeah, okay, it's show and I understand that's really great but it was like—it was—you're kind of explaining more of what sort of what was happening around all that I hadn't really realized. But they were like over they were practically in tears that their stuff was up there on the wall and the show was so amazing, they were like—but for me, what was really interesting for me, that I hadn't known, is I'd realized, I've organized those worked on those exhibitions with Geoff and Frank Moore in the early, no they were in the '90s right.

THEODORE KERR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

SUR RODNEY SUR: 1993, 1994, 1995 somewhere in then. So there's like a 15-year gap or something before I worked in the not over show. Now in that window of time I've met a lot of artists who sort of knew, oh yeah he's Sur, he works in Visual AIDS, and oh yeah, maybe they knew that I organize these exhibitions before, but they

haven't really seen them. And yeah I heard that he was someone that was involved in the East Village scene but I really wasn't there. So when I organize this exhibition a lot of these artists were saying, "Wow Sur this is amazing." And to me it wasn't so amazing because I said, I had so much experience with organizing and installing shows that I have almost an intuitive sense of what would work and what wouldn't work and how to kind of put a show together in a cohesive way. And Kris was like amazing. She has an amazing eye. Like sometimes I'd be like Oh, da, da, da, and she'd go what about this and that. And I'd go why couldn't I go there, it's like right there because my head was moving. So she's like—I'd definitely like to do another show with her again, she's like amazing.

But I think it—for me it kind of brought all these people who hadn't really seen the work that I'd done that were seeing it for the first time and then it's like oh wow this is amazing, I get it right. And I kept on saying that I'd been doing this stuff for years. I had a gallery for 10 years, I curated these shows for Visual AIDS. But I realized that they had not—they were like too young or didn't know about that and they were actually just beginning to realize me for the first part with that stuff. So that something that was unexpected to me that was like wow, I forgot about that, of course they kind of wouldn't know.

So that was the one thing out of the show that kind of brought me, in a real way to a lot of those artists who had just sort of seen me and weren't really clear. Now they said oh he really can do something and this is what he makes it look like. And the biggest, biggest surprise that came out of that show to me was—well one thing that was really, but was it the biggest. Yeah, I could say maybe it was. Was Karen Finley. When I talked to her about getting that sandbox and it took months and months where nothing was happening. And I remember she actually didn't bring it over until we were installing. And I said it's not going to happen, right. And then she brought it into the gallery and she talked about why it had taken so long. And it was such an emotional thing for her because it brought back so much stuff that she psychically couldn't deal with it. And she was afraid in how it would be used or integrated into this exhibition because she's kind of blocked herself. And even though we've known each other for years, and it was like Karen, you know, I wouldn't do something with this work, I understand that it's very loaded work and I wouldn't present it in any way that wouldn't kind of like honor that. And she just says well I'm going to have to leave it in your hands and I'm going to have to do it and I'll come tomorrow to the preview to meet people.

And then she came to the preview and actually got to meet these younger artists and she was so blown—I mean for her to realize that it was younger artists that were really doing work and committed to it in the same way that she was. And she was kind of an island by herself and so was Hunter Reynolds, right. Really meant so much to her and then she was like so thankful that I had brought her into this so that she was like a part of this whole experience that was happening. And she, I think, videotaped the opening and interviewed a lot of people, a lot of the younger artists that meant a lot to her. And what it got her to do was to revisit a lot of her older stuff and then out of that she did the thing at the Abrams center right. And she wanted me to see that show. And in the program she actually admits that this is all happening through my experience with Sur Rodney Sur and I'm so thankful for him for making me revisit this stuff again and it kind of went from there. And she's come up recently, because she's in the show with the sandbox again.

THEODORE KERR: Which show?

SUR RODNEY SUR: The "Art AIDS America" show.

THEODORE KERR: Oh okay.

SUR RODNEY SUR: And they have her sandbox there but it's sort of thrown up against the wall. I mean there's things I want to go and tweak certain things in that show because I can't help it. I'm just saying well if you only did this or if you did—because it's not quite, it just looks like a box pushed up against a wall with this thing thrown above it. It was like, "Here it is," and let's move on. And that bothered me about it because that piece was like so loaded. But she was also at the deeper dive show that opens to the public today at Leslie Lohman. And she discovered Brian Buczak work from the '80s. She said, "Why did I not know anything about this person? How could I not? This work is amazing. He's my new favorite—my new favorite—my new favorite painter." And she wants to get work of his and she wants to sort of do stuff, and da, da, da, da, da, da. And then of course she's like flabbergasted that like I'm connected to—she found out this connection to Geoff, so that was really interesting to her and then I'm kind of connected and da, da, da, da, da, da. So we have to do that pick up a bunch of catalogs and dumb them, and Bryans catalogs and leave them off at the gallery.

THEODORE KERR: About the not over show. One thing that I thought was amazing was that you never stop tweaking it. The whole run of the show it seemed you were always, it was always in a slight state of flux and I wonder if that was intentional or—?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Tweaking it? There were things with the video that we had problems setting up. So I was always fussing with that. Jack and Peter's thing—oh my god I love those guys. I just came in and said, "Here's

your space! Go to it guys do your magic," and they did it. But I did that with a lot of artists. I think that was a part of the success of the show you could sort of feel that. Tweaking I remember I was concerned a lot about Martin Wong piece because it was slightly damaged and I was afraid that maybe I had damaged it in the shipping. There was a lot of fussing with that. There was a shelf that kept on like—

THEODORE KERR: Warping down.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah. I remember fussing with that. I don't know. Tweaking?

THEODORE KERR: I guess another way to ask this question is what is, kind of, what is your mission statement as a curator? What are some of the guiding principles that you think makes you a successful and powerful curator?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Remember you have to be excited about the stuff you're presenting. I think it's the stability to have a lot of true trust, faith in the artist that you're working with. I think a lot of curators kind of have this idea of something they see or they want from an artist and they get stuck there. And they get like really resistant to the artist changing or doing something with it because it breaks their kind of thing that they need for their whatever—the statement that they want to make. I don't do that. I kind of always see, you know, I see doing shows with an artist as a collaborative venture basically. You know, I have these ideas that I want to do. I want to have a feedback with the artist with what they want to do. This is how I want to install it. Do you have some ideas? How do you feel that this looks? Let me see if you can try this. You know, that's how we got into the thing with Aldrin when he was doing his piece, and I said it needs a blue stripe. Why don't we try this and see how it looks. And he was sort of thrilled, you know. But like working with the artist to not like just take their work and just do a thing with them. I want them to be clear on what I'm doing and why I'm doing it, and how they sort of think about. And if there's some sort of resistance I'd say, "Can we try it and just look at it. And then if you have a problem with it we'll work something else out." Because I never like presenting an artist in any kind of a way where they do not feel as good about it as I do. And if it means I have to give something up for that, I mean, hey, you know. In the long run it's going to—in the long run it's going to have way more of an impact on the artist represented in the show than myself. And I recognize that, because people are a going to remember—they might remember that I did the show. And they're going to remember the great things about it that they like and the things they didn't like.

But the artist is represented in that show, so much of this stuff it's going to impact the way the public will see that work. So it's really important that the artists be involved and how their stuff is represented. I mean to give you an example, the other person I know absolutely works that way is Lia Gangitano of Participant Inc. If the artist says that wall needs to come down or you need to take out your storefront and I want it built with wood, she would do it. I would too. You know, it's crazy, but somehow you realize that by going there it's just bringing something else into the show that can be really special and, you know, you'll just deal with the problems later.

THEODORE KERR: I have to admit it was a total leading question, because my—one of the favorite aspects I had of that exhibition was that it modeled the belief that I have that any culture about HIV, has to mirror the experience of HIV. So it has to be communicative between two people, like there has to be a collaboration. You're right there has to be a sharing of something. And then it also has to be messy. Right. The virus creates chaos in a body so I think the artwork has to create or the culture product has to create a kind of chaos and then I think also it has to there has to be some like if—you use this word so beautifully. There has to be some key—compromise involved because the virus literally compromises the body. And so the people involved in creating the culture also have to do some compromising so that they can—they have to live differently in the face of the virus. And I think not over—what is an amazing example of this on multiple levels, you and Kris's collaboration and then your collaboration with the artists, and then also the way that the show—that the exhibition, like, created this beautiful chaos and it brought people together, so much intimacy. There was a moment at the opening where Vincent Chevalier wanted to meet Karen Finley, and Karen Finley wanted to meet this young man who had made work about HIV who was living with HIV. And they looked each other in the eye and the whole world just stopped. And they connected, and I could feel Karen thinking about the men she knew 20, 30 years ago, and I knew that Vincent wasn't seeing famous Karen Finley, but he was seeing a kindred spirit or something.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Oh my god, I love that guy. Well, you know, I mean, him and Virgil, and they know each other. They never met each other, but their friends on Facebook, right?

THEODORE KERR: Yeah.

SUR RODNEY SUR: I don't know if I could handle being in a room with both those guys in the same room. It's too much. It's too much.

THEODORE KERR: But what do you think it is about Vincent's work that's exciting?

SUR RODNEY SUR: His mind. I get—the thing is, you know, there are people that like art, but artists are a

problem for them. And there's some people that like art and like artists. I like artists. That's what turns me on, and then the artwork that they're making, you know, I could not always necessarily be crazy about it, but I really like artists and their minds and the way they go to that. And I think that has a lot to do with why I'm so into the sharing thing because, like, kind of tripping on them. But Vincent has this kind of mind, and the way that it works, it's just such a complete turn on to me. You know, the call and response thing. Like, I'm always putting these things in this Facebook thing to sort of, like, provoke him. And the stuff that he comes back with are like amazing. I wonder what his dad thinks of him because he's really good friends with his dad, and I know his dad [inaudible] all my calls. I never said anything about his dad. I wish he wouldn't have thrown away that blonde wig.

THEODORE KERR: You're talking about the blonde wig he wears in the video?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah. That's the first thing I said to him when I met him. I said, "Where's the wig?"

THEODORE KERR: From "How Did You Know You Had AIDS?" Or "When Did You Figure Out You Had AIDS?"

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah.

THEODORE KERR: I also bring up Vincent because his poster, which wasn't in the *Not Over* show but relates to what we're talking about. Him and Ian Bradley-Perrin made a poster for AIDS Action Now Toronto, and it said, "Your Nostalgia's Killing Me."

SUR RODNEY SUR: Oh, I remember that. I talked about that in the last chapter of my essay, and then over thing. I said, "You know, Vincent, it's all about you. That's why I'm writing this," and I opened it with this hypertext, right, that he told me—when I sent him the catalogue, because I really wanted to have it, because I'd written about him, and he said that when he got the catalogue and saw what I had written and the use of hypertext because he was ready to take it down, he said that brought something to him to realize how important it was, and he decided to leave it up, and he said the catalogue arrived just in time.

THEODORE KERR: For you as someone who has been involved in this work in various worlds for a long time, like, what's the role of nostalgia for you in the conversation around Art and AIDS?

SUR RODNEY SUR: It's so important. It's really important. We all have our nostalgia. Vincent in 10 or 20 years from now is going to have his nostalgia and realize that there's something that was happening with him at a particular age in this thing that was really important that needs to be illuminated again, right? And, you know, so I think that the nostalgia thing informs a lot of stuff. It doesn't only, you know, you always—with nostalgia you're always filtering, right? So you're taking out all the stuff that was terrible around it and only bringing up the stuff that was good, and then making it much more glorious than it actually really was. But I think that's important for legacy in a big way, and we all have nostalgia, and I think we need to, like, treasure our nostalgia. I don't think it's a bad thing, but I understood the message that they were creating with that. I really do, and I think that that is something that needed—should have been hammered into the heads of the people that were creating the show because there was very little about—

THEODORE KERR: Which show?

SUR RODNEY SUR: The *Art AIDS America* show. About now it all seems so nostalgic and buried in this somewhat kind of stuff and this new artist, but I wish it were more opened to be able to communicate to the generation and they could feel like they were more part of this rather than looking back. I really do. And I felt that a lot of the work that was represented in that show by the well-known artists should have been some of it. There should have been more of it in the catalogue, and then more stuff by what's going on now to really bring to the public at large that this is still vital and really active in the community that's existing right now, not, like, you know, well, there's all this stuff in the past and it's kind of interesting, and here's someone that's doing something, but they're just trying to, like, follow something in the past and so on.

I mean, it's so vitally important that what's happening now is highlighted in a really big way or people—I think that's what's going to get people really into talking about this and dealing with this again are what's happening now, not what happened back then when they can say "Well, that was then," and sort of forget about it. And there's predominance of that in the show. And the stuff that is dealing a little bit with now, like Kia's work and stuff like that sort of gets drowned out by this other stuff. And that should be the reverse. We should see some of the stuff nostalgia in the past, and reference to go to it, but it should really be about like where we are today and where the people that are doing this and what are they thinking, and the panels should be about people that are speaking about their experiences right now so that people that don't ever think about AIDS can say, "Hey, wow, I didn't realize all this was happening." You don't get any of that from the show. And I think, like, that it's a big loss. You know, for some reason the curator from Chicago, because it's going there next, I sat with a dinner, and he was, like, really prompting me for stuff. He was, like, really super interested in me. And I said, "You're never going to see me in Chicago because I won't go to Chicago ever." Right?

THEODORE KERR: Why?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I've had this—I've had it for a long time. I developed this thing that I was terrified of going to Chicago because I thought if I ever went to Chicago something terrible would happen to me. Right? Just put that in my head. And I always believed in my life that I never wanted to test it because I never wanted to go there and something terrible happened, and say, "This is what I was afraid of." So I've just avoided it. You know, and there's a lot of stuff happening in Chicago. I have great friends there. I mean, Geoff was just in this Charlotte Moorman show that I would love to go to Chicago to see. He was on this panel talking about queer Fluxus that was never ever, ever been discussed before with David Getsy, who I've really gotten to mining the stuff, and there were other scholars that were interested in the subject, and I really felt that would have been important for me to be there, but I wouldn't go because it was in Chicago.

THEODORE KERR: I support you in doing what you need to do to not.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Charles Ryan's in Chicago. You know, I'd love to go there and see him again. I mean meeting him was like super big for me.

THEODORE KERR: Why?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I was needing this—just his whole experience of how he comes to the AIDS the thing working in the worker and then wanting to do the work and the work that he did and the piece that he made for the show, I have to say, to me was another thing. I mean that and Carlo Quispe piece, I said I should have these. But just the whole experience of working with him in the show, his response to seeing his work in the show, his response to see how I displayed it, and the conversations that I've had with him and his interest in mining all this territory was like, you know, something totally unique to me. And it was great to see that there was this young artist and this visual artist and kind of involved in AIDS activism and thinking about these sort of things that I sort of popped into my head every now and then. When you see someone that's really thinking and invested in them was like really big for me.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, Charles has said that exhibition helped him, like, he's long been on the fence about can he understand himself as an artist, and being part of that exhibition, you helped him understand himself as an artist, but then also you communicated to other curators, this is an artist.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah. When I looked at his work, it was obviously that here was someone that was trying to find something. And a lot of it I thought was so sloppy and messy. I had to just let myself go "this is part of the ascetic, it being sloppy and messy, and it's okay." Right? But the ideas and what he's trying to find his way through is, like, so rich and so deep and so complicated and so many levels that it's—I mean, you know, I get turned on to Charles in the same way that I do Vincent. The way their mind works is such a turn on to me. You know, I don't want to, like, I just want to, like, be a fly on the wall watching Vincent sitting there playing on Twitter. That gets my rocks off. You know what I mean? I just want to be in a room and have a conversation with Charles about what he's mining about culture and stuff like that. That to me is like a big turn. That's where I get my orgasms [intellectually, not physically -SRS]. I don't know where I get it from Virgil yet. I just want to, like, follow him around [laughs].

THEODORE KERR: What—

SUR RODNEY SUR: It hasn't hit the point where—I shouldn't be saying this. I'm beginning to [inaudible].

THEODORE KERR: What do you think is, like, some important ideas that both Vincent and Charles are working through? Because you're talking about how excited you are about their mind, but maybe for the record, let us know, like, what are some of the thoughts that are exciting that's coming from them? Or that they're trying to work through?

SUR RODNEY SUR: It's the frustration of being frustrated with things that are going on in the world and what they're seeing and trying to find a way to channel that. And finding a way to channel that and having—trying to find people that can, number one, want to look at it, want to support it because it's so personal and so crazy, and, like, every kind of response to it becomes sort of an affront because it's so deeply personal. Right? But, you know, when you're making that kind of art it's so connected to your life. It's like an artist's that wasn't affected that was doing work about their family. You know, the intimate relationships with their family and putting it out there becomes really—

THEODORE KERR: Is there one idea of Vincent's that sticks with you? Or one thought puzzle that he's working through that sticks to you?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I think his humor. You know, it's like really something that's, like, how he can take something and reduce it down to some line and, like, make a joke about it.

THEODORE KERR: And this is on social media you're talking about?

SUR RODNEY SUR: On social media and even—well, I sort of think of his work—he kind of throws you into this other world. You know, I think one of the most amazing films that he's done is this piece called *Roundabout* where he's riding a bicycle around and around the sign that says—there's a sign that says "This Way Out." Something about a direction, and when you follow the direction, in following you need up spinning around in circles, and it goes for 20 minutes, and all you see is the same thing sort of moving and changing, moving and changing.

That piece is, like, so outstanding for me. And he is just, like, so surprised that I'm so into this piece because he likes it too, but it hasn't gotten, like, you know, as much attention as his other work. I said I'd like to do a whole installation around just that one piece. I mean, I think it could hold a whole space in itself. And you have to be with the piece and the duration of the piece and experience it in a way that hits you viscerally after a while that you have to—there's a certain moment in it where you just kind of go into this other world that transcends and breaks into something else. And I think that his sense of timing and realize how much is needed. He's very sensitive to that. He's very sensitive person. I mean, sensitivity is something that also, you know, I really get touched by these guys that are very opinionated and have all these radical ideas, but you know that under all that there's this like really sensitive kind of, you know—Virgil has that, too. Immediately there's this kind of undercurrent of this really subtle sense of sensitivity where he's felling everything even though he comes out, but he's really sort of sensitive to that. And, you know, I think artists feel that sort of stuff maybe more deeply than someone who's just, like, looking, trying to isolate the art form the artist. I can't, like, really separate the two.

THEODORE KERR: You mentioned the word "now" a few times, and I'm wondering through your vantage point what do you think is happening now at this intersection of Art and AIDS?

SUR RODNEY SUR: What do I think is happening now? I think there's a lot of people now that are living through experiences privately, and I think that these artists that are creating work about this stuff is having the artists that are—the people that are living with it, whether they're artists or not feel something, and opening—this is my hope, and I think it inevitably might happen if there's enough of it, open the doors to all the people that are living with this to be able to be a little bit more open about it because that has to sort of happen, and people have to be aware of. It's like, you know, it's the thing of being queer, which is why I think queer people have to come out because people that are not experiencing this have to realize there's a lot more of us out there and you'd been interacting with us, and you can sort of see sort of like something else and be more open to being interested in our experiences, right, and what we're sort of going through so that we can make changes happen more easily. Even if you're not actively doing it, understanding or understanding of it for everyone will make moving forward and making changes much easier than if there's a silence about it, and people won't have to think about it or talk about it.

And I think the artists doing that now and making that more visible is good for the whole culture at large. And that's what they say about art can change things, that's where the change can happen. And I think artists can do it in a way that can draw these people out of their shells, out of their privacy, even if they're only—even if they only want to do it for themselves, they can bring other people into it through this art that people are doing and create the dialogue that way. That's why I think Visual AIDS is so important. You know, it's like I had this conversation with someone body the other day. They said, "Oh, I met someone that's really interested in art and wants to do all these things with artists and has all this money and he doesn't know what he should do with it." I simply said, "Give it to Visual AIDS." You know, that's, like, really sort of urgent right now.

And then the other organization to think of that's as big as Visual AIDS for me, has always been, is Black Lives Matter now. So I have another group to throw in there. And there's a lot of things that are going on, a lot of activists' groups that I think are really important that I really support, but this whole thing with AIDS has to open itself up more because it's too ever present still, and I think that more people need to be aware of that so it'll sit in their consciousness every day and in their interactions with people. It's like, you know, you're dealing with someone and they're acting sort of crazy. You don't know what kind of trauma they're dealing with in their lives. You really don't. So you have to give them a space to say they're not just a crazy or bad person. They maybe just dealt with some shit, and it's coming out in this other way.

THEODORE KERR: What do you think the connections are between HIV/AIDS and Black Lives Matter?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I think it's just this fight to get people to wake up to something that's happening that they're in denial about. I mean, they know that AIDS is happening and that it's a problem, but the urgency of all the stigma and the not wanting to talk about it and all these not really understanding the depths and dynamics of it to change just the way that they respond to things and the way that they are open to hearing things needs to start happening. So they're both kind of doing the same thing. You know, yeah, we know about the [inaudible] and we know about people—but it's really, you know, enough is enough. We really have to understand about

how that's not only affecting our lives, the people that are affected, but it's also affecting your lives.

I mean, racism is affecting white people in a way that's really having a negative that they have never really have to think about, right? And you can break it down even in terms of dollars and cents, which people have. And since people are so concerned with money and all that, like, you know. I mean, just in a social way. If people were more open and embracing of each other and we were all more happy then just our daily lives would be so much fuller. I mean, I'd rather deal with someone that's like happier or feel respected in somewhat than to have to deal with someone who's just mining that they know that they're really kind of shit on but have to sort of make do to make things move along.

THEODORE KERR: A lot of people living long term with HIV or people who have been part of the community living with HIV for a long time talk about PTSD or trauma, and I wonder if you think what the role of art is in dealing with collective trauma or community PTSD?

SUR RODNEY SUR: You know, I think again the more that it's kind of out there, particularly if it's presented in ways that can draw people in it just brings people that maybe don't feel that they're directly affected in it, it just brings them more into being in touch with their humanness, you know, and what they are. And in a way their responsibility with contributing in their own silent way, even though they think they're not, to a lot of the stuff that's going on. You know, much silence makes much noise, and in a way about being silent you're sort of, like, condoning something, you know.

When you see something happen and you see someone being harassed and you just sort of say, "Oh, wow, that's, like, really awful," and walk away. You have to say something, you know? And you think that just by saying something I think the perpetrator even though they have whatever their kind of bullying ways, kind of feeds into their thing, and they need to be getting that constantly. So I think it's our role in terms of being out there in the world to be more open, to try and communicate more, to have more passion, and to try to understand more about why things are fucked up and the way they were with the people—particularly with the people that are sort of like screwed up, that they think are screwed up. In this space is a lot of black folks that just if they only listen to the police they wouldn't be dead. It's kind of more complicated than that, and it's all based on sort of a history, you know. It's like we haven't learned. Again, it's like, you know, short memory, no history. We forget that we're seeing things happen and it's like well, this has happened before. This isn't the first time that this has happened. You know, when all the videos started happening with the police brutality, people were going, "I can't believe this! This is just so awful!" I'm saying we've been screaming about this for, like, how many years? I mean, this has been going on forever. This isn't kind of new.

The same thing with like Donald Trump right now. People are saying, "Can you imagine?" I'm saying the Donald Trumps have been out there all my life, and there's a lot of them. You know, maybe I've experienced it more directly because I'm black, so it gets layered on, and they have a more of—they feel they can expose themselves more easily through me, through my difference whereas you have to wait for another kind of situation before you realize that it sort of rises up. But, you know, I bring it out. So that's why you should support Black Lives Matter because they'll pull out all the stuff and people that you're not really recognizing. I was going to say the same thing with AIDS. I mean, you know, if that were to come up more and there was more visibility for artists working on this it would give many more people a way to be able to get into the discussion or to take an interest in or be more understanding of people that they—that are going through the situation they know about but won't really talk about it.

THEODORE KERR: Last night we both attended an event about caretaking and creativity around HIV/AIDS. And one of the things that was clear is that caretaking doesn't stop when a life stops. Caretaking continues.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Right.

THEODORE KERR: And I wonder if you want to talk a little bit about what it means to be a caretaker of archives or what it means to take care of someone after they die.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well, basically you're taking care of this person's, like, legacy, right? And in a way if you were close to them you become the closest representation of that person that people have. So it bonds you to the people around them in like a very different way. And also I think it's made me, you know, a little bit more compassionate and tolerant in a way.

THEODORE KERR: What do you mean?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I mean I think, you know, when something really upset me before, I would sort of—the first response is to just like go at it, right? That's the first thing. So you sort of get that out, but then I realize that's not the end of it. You can't just do that and leave it alone and feel you done it. You have to constantly go back at it, and every time you go back at it it begins to open up into other areas. And then, you know, even on Facebook I'll sometimes put something out, and I'm realizing, well, you know, it's kind of nice that you're putting out, but

it's all your stuff, and you have to sort of, like, look back at yourself and why you're putting that stuff out, and how you need to kind of take care more of what you're putting out. But I wouldn't get there. I need to put it out to be able to get there to realize that I need to get there. Because it's very reflective.

That's why I talk about my stuff on Facebook. It's really a reflection of me and it's a way of seeing myself over the thing. And then I go back and sort of review things ever now and then because I do follow my posts and saying, "Well, this is a thread of what I've been through for the last month." Like, how am I taking care of myself in this situation? Am I just going to continually be someone that's going to blah, blah, blah, blah about something? Okay, let's go back and revisit this. But how can we open it up more to become sort of, like—but I guess I recognize whatever I put out there it's like criticism. When you're reading a critic's work it's often saying more about the critic than about what they're writing about. And it's the same thing when I put stuff out. I'm obviously saying a lot more about myself than what I'm putting out, and then when I review it I'm saying is this the way I want people to see me? And in this very sort of flat way and maybe I need to sort of, like, take more care in looking at myself and reexamine myself more closely to find out where—how I'm putting stuff and why I feel the need to put it out in that way. So it becomes a very self-critical thing, and I think the self-critical thing becomes part of, like, airing.

THEODORE KERR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

SUR RODNEY SUR: Does that sort of—yeah.

THEODORE KERR: Do you think—how do you think that relates to the holder of archives?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Okay. I got lost in something because now I'm beginning to think about that you asked me a question originally that was phrased so well, and I'm lost in it because I feel that I sort of took a part of it and went off some place and made it more about something that wasn't really getting into what you were really asking. And you're asking me to think about how my caring has played into my work with archives in maintaining them and holding them sort of forward. I guess I sort of feel like I'm—trying to use—you know, someone that is taking care of, like, a lot of pets, and they need to be nurtured. People need to—I need to make people aware that I'm, like, taking care of the stuff, and the eventual resources that I'm constantly thinking about how to kind of place or transfer this material. So there's a lot of stuff that goes into looking.

Because I'm thinking if something happens to me tomorrow and I have all this stuff and all this stuff needs to be put in archives, I really spend time and constantly revisiting, "Okay, what do I do with these journals of this artist that I have? They need to—what kind of makes the most sense? How can I use them? How can I get them out there? Who should I be talking to that might have some kind of ideas?" So I jump in and out of that a lot. And then some of the conversations that I have with people just end up bringing up more stuff. "Oh, these journals. Well, I have this whole thing of journals that I don't know what to do with them. So maybe you can take them." Right? And I'll say, "Okay, I'll take them because I'm working on this other thing and maybe I have others that I can sort of do something with them as a group."

THEODORE KERR: So you really see care about, like, if we follow the line of what you've said, it's about, like, receiving it and helping it shape a legacy or help that person who's maybe no longer with us be understood in the culture?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Right.

THEODORE KERR: And then it's about making sure that those things are maintained. And then it's about how do you make sure that it goes—it's almost how does it transition into broader circulation.

SUR RODNEY SUR: How does it transition into broader circulation or what home can I find for it? Where can it go? Not that I have to do the broader circulation, but to find a home or a repository for it where I know my pet is safe or I know my thing is safe and going to have a happy home. You know, where's the happy home for this stuff? I don't really know. So I'm constantly looking for happy homes. And it can't be—I don't want to stick it with someone. I know that there are people who would take care of this sort of things, but that's just kind of perpetuating the problem that I have. It needs to be some kind of way of finding a happy home. Or, you know, with Visual AIDS was creating some kind of a happy home where some of this stuff could be deposited, right? Or using some way the stuff that I have to turn it into something that could become whether it's money or something to be used to help create a happy home. You know, it's constantly trying to work all that stuff through.

THEODORE KERR: Is there something specific about the archives of artists living with HIV that determined the best home for their stuff to go?

SUR RODNEY SUR: No, it's really sort of a case by case basis. But, you know, I remember being invited to this thing on archiving and artist work. It was out on Long Island. It was an invitation thing, and I was invited to one

of them. And there were a lot of artists there saying, "Well, what's going to happen to my—to all of my stuff in my archive? And I think I need to know. I need to know where to put it."

And then I stood up and said something very bold. And this is all in some kind of transcript. They transcribed the whole thing. I said, "I want you to make a case for me for why your archive and what you have as an artist is so important and needs to be preserved. I understand that it's important to you while you're alive, but after you're gone, why is what you have so important?" And the people were, like, so shocked that I sort of said that.

And then I sort of backed up and said, you know, "Individually maybe it's not so important because there's other stuff that are kind of like maybe replicate or represent what you have in an effective way. So they don't really need your stuff, right?" But then I think what I tried to get them to encourage is I think you need to think about this in a collective way, like find other people who have resources and legacy and build it as a collective of stuff. And that's much richer than your thing alone, and I think that if you have a group of things and you can deposit an archive as a group under one thing it will be much stronger than, you know, you have to have some kind of case.

I mean, I think with the archives that I have and the material that I have, in a way I was very selective about the stuff that I felt was really important and I can make a case for why I feel this specific thing is really important. Within the large thing I really feel that it's filling some kind of a hole either because in some cases it's because of the actual person's represented and their place already in history. So it's kind of filling out some of that. And in other cases it's something that's kind of has some qualities about it that are compiled in a way that are so extraordinary in what they can reveal coming from all these different things together in a nice, neat place that they're so loaded in an informative way and so accessible and necessary to people being able to understand certain things. In other words, they've done it better than someone else trying and I have it here and here's an example of it, right? But then it can't be through one thing. It has to be through a collection of things.

I mean, you look at Andreas's *Bookworks*. You know, I have his whole library here. You look at one or two of them and say that's kind of interesting. You know, you can put one or two in an archive. It doesn't mean anything, but I have like hundreds of them, and when you look at the whole thing together it kind of builds on something that's really quite extraordinary. It's not that it's just all dumped into this one or two pieces. It's dumped into like a hundred pieces that really kind of create a whole thinking about, you know, art and culture and the things he's talking about in these books that are really rich. And I think it's because of not only its quality but because of the quantity that makes it very attractive.

THEODORE KERR: Is this line of thinking something you were thinking about in those first moments of being invited in to people's homes in the late-'80s and early-'90s as people were dying?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I was just thinking of organizing the stuff in the way that would be helpful to anyone, not necessarily me, that needed to move it forward. I was thinking more in terms of a gallery or a curator that wanted to look at stuff. Well, here's something you can give them to help them understand collective the work, and it was organized in a way that they could get an idea of what was there without having, you know, quantifying sort of stuff. "Oh, you have a couple of nice paintings. Let me see." "Well, there's one over here. Let me see if I can find another one over here."

I need to gather the information into one place so someone can look at it and say, "Oh, there's, like, you know, 50 paintings than took like and 30 drawings." Now we can go and find them rather than going in there blind and saying, "Well, five or 10 or something or whatever subject." I just organized that in a way so that it was very easy and accessible for people to get very quickly what they needed to get out of it. So it was kind of a timesaver thing, and also when you're looking at a whole global—not global, a range of things that you can structure in some kind of a way where you can kind of get a better sense of what the artist was doing with their work, and you don't really find that until you—it's like, you know, going to someone's wardrobe where they have a lot of clothes. And, like, well, what kind of style? And it's not until you start pulling those clothes and say, "That's a really interesting. I noticed I have a serious pattern of blue stuff happening here," and you'd never would have realized that until you put all your clothes and starting thinking about it.

It's the same thing with art. You start kind of cataloguing it and then you realize there's all these threads, whether it's like subject or something that you hadn't really looked at when you it was there when you seen one or two works because they were just very different, but then you're seeing things sort of come together. And that's really what it's about. It's, like, what is driving this work? What can you see in this work? What is the most evident in this work? And then we start to catalogue it that helps you inform what makes most sense in terms of having a happy home. When it's just all scattered, you know, you can't just dump it on someone and let them figure it out. So it's just to, you know, that's part of the like the understanding what we have left. Maybe start cataloguing it you can kind of see things you wouldn't see when you're looking at it in a very long term way, piece by piece, you're trying to figure it out.

THEODORE KERR: So when in Long Island you said to that person you have to make a case, you weren't saying justify your existence. You were saying get to know your work and tell me what's being saved and put it in context.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Yeah, yeah. Why it's important to be saved that—I said I really understand why it's important to be saved while you're alive, because that's you being able to go back and mine and follow your whole thing, but once you're gone why it is important to me? Or what is there actually in there that is so important or different without being redundant to, like, everything else that's out there? You have to build it into something, and, you know, some of that goes into the work and the biography, and, you know, becomes sort of amazing that if you see someone that's coming from where you least expected that created this work. The whole story between how they got to the work and making that work illuminates the work in some place very differently than someone came from someplace else and might have been making the same work. It's all part of the same story. So the personal, their life, their interactions, where their living, and all that. You know, I could see someone doing a painting in New York and then going to Borneo and see someone doing similar work, and the person in Borneo just seemed to illuminate itself more because of the conditions in the environment, and that makes it really special. Like how is this happening in Borneo? I mean, I could understand why it's happening with this person in New York, and that's interesting, but there's another layer of something else that's happening when you find it where you don't expect to find it. And that becomes part of the narrative.

THEODORE KERR: Do you think it's an artist's job to archive themselves?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I think all artists should be archiving themselves, yeah. One of the most incredible archives that I've seen is Hunter Reynolds's. And I said, "Hunter, how did you learn to archive your work?" He said, "I went to a talk that Adrian Piper gave about archiving your work." And she says, "I follow what I learned from her with everything I created." It's like amazing. It's like amazing. It's all in [inaudible] now.

THEODORE KERR: What makes it amazing?

SUR RODNEY SUR: What he's done is he's taken every project that he works on. He keeps everything with that project. Number one, if he buys materials he keeps records of the materials: what he bought, where he bought it, how much he paid for it, all the receipts, right? Then he puts down notes of anything he was thinking about that went into the piece. Any of the research materials, an article that made it, he'll cut that out and put it in the piece. Any correspondence that he had with someone about that work. Any studio visit that he had with someone had to say something about it was a note that was put in with that piece. You know, and then of course all the things where it's been shown, how it's been photographed da, da, da, da, da, da, da.

So that, I mean, there's so much information about each piece that if someone wanted to reconstruct the piece, they have everything. If he uses a piece of fabric he'll cut a piece of fabric and say, "This is what the fabric looked like. This is the source of where I got it in case you're worried about, like, is there something in this fabric that's different from a fabric that might be similar but isn't the same, but if you want the same here's the supplier." You know, so you get everything you can really construct pretty much of any of his pieces as close to the original as you need to. So it's informative for that for people that might want to restore something, but it's also fascinating to understand the piece. It's not only the work that you're seeing, but it's all the stuff that goes on outside, all the collection, all the thinking, all the source material that you were looking at, you know, at the time what was happening in the world at the time that you were thinking of making that piece, it's all there.

And that's amazing because usually people will have a journal over here, and, yeah, maybe they wrote something in a journal over here. They had a conversation with someone and it's in this letter here. And, yeah, I remember someone handing me a letter, but keep it all together. If you get a letter you would take it and say, "Oh, this is a conversation I had with someone" or they're writing about what they remembered from this piece, and put it with the piece so that it was like the whole extant record.

It's like they're doing stuff with performance now where they're thinking it's not only the performance that's important, but it's also the audience because it's a live piece and they're starting to record stuff that the audience had to—what the audience—people in the audience actually experienced in the piece become important in the archiving of the piece as much as the piece itself. And I sort of think about a lot of that with art. I mean, what was the environment that allowed this piece to come to fruition? What happened in your life to make you create this piece? What was the climate happening around you that made this piece easier or more difficult? I mean, you know, think about all that stuff when you see the piece, but if someone says, "Oh, I was making this piece, and it was like, you know, in the middle of, like, you know, being on fire, someone being shot, you know." It's interesting to know that.

THEODORE KERR: That's so important because I think what you're also saying is, like, art will tell us one story about the AIDS crisis, the ongoing AIDS crisis, and the archive will tell us an even more rich and fuller story of the ongoing AIDS crisis.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I mean, there's so much that I've transferred to people orally, like when I think about the, you know, David Wojnarowicz, which is *Fire in My Belly* when he was in Mexico shooting all that stuff, and it's really nothing at all to do with AIDS. But I think that was one of the trips where he went down where he had a friend of his that was on heroine that he was trying to get cold turkey, and, you know. So all that stuff that he was feeling was kind of filtering in some way through something that was driving him in his thinking to deal with some of the stuff that he dealt with in that film. It sort of just makes you go "uh-huh" because there's always something going on in the immediate environment that filters through what you're going through. It's either a reaction to or a way of getting away from. You're either going more into it or you're trying to find a way to pull yourself more out of it, which is why I feel, you know, there are a lot of artists that were affected by AIDS in the early days that didn't want to do stuff about the crisis. They wanted to do stuff that was previous or they had stuff that was lovely that they could have because that was a healing thing for them.

THEODORE KERR: So we can also see the impact of the AIDS crisis on, like, what isn't being done. There's something about absence that's important.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Oh, yeah. Yeah. And how do you—the absence of something and how they fill that in. It's like filling in holes.

THEODORE KERR: Yeah, yeah. That's really beautiful. And an archive can do that to a degree.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. That's why I'm so buried in them. There's so much you can find in archives that illuminate your thinking about the artists, their production, or about the specific works of art that are very informative. And it's all about, like, illuminating things. It's like, you know, look at some of the piece of art and look at it one way, and then when you understand the person's gay you can say, "Oh, well, you know, it's quite clear." But you don't know that you don't kind of get to that, or someone that's, you know. I mean, Hope is doing all these photographs where she was, like, peeling off the skin of the film. So she was leaving the paper, and they were very fragile and sort of ripped and stuff like that. And they were very beautiful abstract photos in experimental photography. But all that came out of being raped and abused. And it was her way of dealing with the rape and abuse that she could talk about that, but when you put that layering over looking at these things it really gets, like, wow, this is, like, super heavy. It's not just this beautiful kind of experimental work. It's actually coming out of her working through this other stuff.

THEODORE KERR: Do you believe that we can end AIDS?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Of course. Absolutely. I mean, it's amazing the kinds of stuff that we can do. Can we end global warming? We can slow it down, and I think that, you know, the Earth has an amazing recuperative reparative things, and if we do certain things it will—the other stuff will start to kick in, which they found when they started, like, you know—I think there was a story that I read some place about a lake or some body of water that was, like, completely contaminated, and they tried to do this stuff to restore it. And they figured it might help or it could help or would slow it down, and it was, you know, kind of became this restorative thing. And what happened with it was amazing because naturally what it was sort of bad it just started doing its own thing. So yeah—so I think that what's possible is way beyond anything a lot of us ever imagined. And AIDS ending, absolutely.

THEODORE KERR: And what's the role of art in ending AIDS?

SUR RODNEY SUR: I think the role of art, again, is just creating something and creating the space for it to be visible for more people to see it because I think it makes dialoguing more easy. It gives people a way to go in and talk about something. Or a way to go in and think about something that they hadn't been thinking about as much before. And I think when they think about stuff they hadn't thought about as much before they'll come across some things and I think it changes their attitude or their experience with something. Even if they're keeping it all to themselves, I figure it triggers something and it has an effect on the way that they interact with some things, and I think that art has an amazing power to do that.

THEODORE KERR: Earlier you used this beautiful line. It was something about like "it catalogues what's left behind." And when AIDS is over, what's going to be left behind?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Well, what's going to be left behind is a record of all the experiences and what was actually done to change it and all the problems within it. So when another thing comes along that's sort of similar, we have some kind of a map to realize how we can change things, right? And I think that, you know, historically there's been a lot of things that have happened and all those records have been lost or buried or destroyed, and we find out that we're having to start over and invent the wheel again. And someone comes along and says, "Hey, you know, this is the same thing that happened here." I mean, you run into a lot of that particularly in America, in the U.S. because they don't study history in a way where they go around the world and understand other cultures and how they operate. It's only about America and what America's done and the rest of the world. They call it social studies, right, not history. You go to college then you can start studying history, but they don't

teach it in elementary school and high school. And I think that, you know, that's part of what we're caught up in here. You know, the healthcare is a perfect example. You know, we have to figure out how are we going to make our healthcare work. Well, if you look at models around the world, it's not like people haven't been through this before and how they've overcome it, and you can use some of that to try to help guide you through this.

Or, you know, the thing with fascism. You know, I mean, if people know more about history they would understand the kind of language and how fascism begins to take over. And if you don't know that history you hear things going on and you—you just think, "Oh, they're crazy." You don't know what they mean. Well, we've seen this before, right? And if you know more about history you can go around the world and find countries where you see the same sort of thing happening and this is what it leads to. People in Europe and all that understand that. Americans, well, you know, that's over there. It has nothing to do with us. Well, it does because we're humans living on the planet and our brain cells don't work differently than they do any place else, and, you know, there's always going to be a thing about power. People are hungry for power. And there will always be abuse of a certain group, and, you know, it's always been worked out in some kind of a way, but, you know, they say history repeats itself, but you don't know that if it ever existed you don't know what to do with it.

THEODORE KERR: Any last words for the interview?

SUR RODNEY SUR: No, not really. Just sort of thinking about—I mean, our off topic/on topic was kind of 50/50, right? Because I kept drifting off into this other stuff.

THEODORE KERR: No, I think it was 80/20.

SUR RODNEY SUR: Oh, okay, good.

THEODORE KERR: Should we end it?

SUR RODNEY SUR: Sure.

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