



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Nayland Blake,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorder interview with Nayland Blake on November 25 and 26, 2016. The interview took place at the home of Nayland Blake in New York City, NY and was conducted by the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic: An Oral History Project.

Nayland Blake and Alex Fialho 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

ALEX FIALHO: This is Alex Fialho interviewing Nayland Blake at Nayland's home in New York City on November 25, 2016 for the Archives of American Art Smithsonian Institution, card number one.

So let's start at the beginning and start a little bit with your childhood and your family background.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Sure.

ALEX FIALHO: Can you just tell where and when you were born and grew up?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, I was born in 1960 in New York Hospital. And grew up um, in Manhattan on the Upper West Side. Um my parents are both from New Bedford, Massachusetts and so uh during the holidays and over the summer I would often go back and stay with my grandparents. But they were in uh New York in part uh because they were an interracial couple and my mom's family objected quite strongly to her being a teenager who was pregnant by a black man. So they were basically kind of tossed out and uh escaped to New York.

ALEX FIALHO: Do you know how they met, did they meet in Massachusetts?

NAYLAND BLAKE: They did meet in Massachusetts, I don't know exactly how, they told me at one point but I don't quite remember. Um he was a bit older than her, was in, um had been uh in the uh navy and had come back uh and was um uh attending Swain School of Design, which is an art school there.

So, um you know, part of their uh trip, part of their move to New York was I think was also a little bit um about uh being an artist and uh he—one of my earliest memories is he and I making a uh drip uh painting together in the basement of the building where he was the super um and uh it's a painting that still hangs over my mom's um uh couch and I have included it in a number of exhibitions over the years.

ALEX FIALHO: Nice. How old were you when you did that?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Four.

ALEX FIALHO: Cool.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yes, so it's one of my first memories.

ALEX FIALHO: Nice. Did they encourage art for you as you were growing up?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Um yeah, I mean they, yes, they did. Um, although I often think with raising kids it's enough not to discourage them. Um so I mean for me growing up art was definitely a thing that came kind of easily to me um and uh so I think in part because they were young parents they, if something came easily to me, it meant that it was easy for them. They had a much harder time helping me uh to do things that didn't come easily to me. So I got a lot of sort of positive reinforcement um uh for you know, making things, but um it's you know that, yes, so that was in there.

And then also, growing up, um you know we would go to, uh we would go to museums a lot, we would go to the Museum of Natural History um and uh also we would go to the uh Met uh because basically you could get in for very cheap and they didn't have a lot of money and it meant that—and this is actually a story that I heard from them years later, that they would take me to the Met and uh the Met used to have a big selection of postcards um uh in the gift shop of stuff from the collection and so they would buy post cards and then use them as like flash cards with me so the next time they went to the Met they could have like this kid who could go like, "That's a Carot," and "That's a Matisse," or whatever.

Um so years later um when they sort of told me, or years later when they expressed dismay that I was going to be an art major, or that I was expressing interest in being an art major and then after that I heard that story, then I was like, "Well what do you think you're going to get with like an upbringing like that?" It's not how you raise accountants really [laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: How overall did growing up in Manhattan treat you as I guess child first?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well I think that, I mean it was a really interesting time to be growing up, you know, being born in 1960 and basically um seeing this kind of you know flowering in a way of populist creativity um that was happening that you know, down in the village and just a lot of stuff for kids that was really based around um you know events and things like the um,—remember there's the theatre company the Paperback Players that was like a theatre group um that made plays for children but they also did like sessions that were like kids improv play things. And um it was sort of the rise of uh stores like Creative Play Things and the sort of different attitude towards childrearing so there was a lot of that stuff um around me uh growing up.

And also, just, they, as I said going to museums. I remember going to see some Niki de Saint Phalle installation early on and so this idea um that museum spaces were spaces where you could uh you know, play. And you know then I was in public school uh until sixth grade. The final two years that I was in there, uh it was right at the moment that certain public schools in the city were experimenting with something called open corridor, which was a kind of progressive learning idea that students would sort of learn at their own pace. So there were a lot of or doing a lot of projects that were kind of creative projects.

Um there was,—after around, like after the time I was in second grade we had moved to a building that was a Mitchell-Lama mixed income co-opt building where my mom and my sister still live actually at this point, and that was part of a series of buildings that were built on the Upper West Side in an attempt to um transform that neighborhood. And um a lot of people who were involved in the arts, a lot of theatre people, were moving into those apartments because they were inexpensive to move into. And um, you ended up owning the apartment.

So that whole atmosphere had, you know, um had a kind of fluidity and creativity around it that I think was kind of unique.

ALEX FIALHO: Do you recall any particular exhibitions or works that impressed you at a young age?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Um, I remember um being really uh taken with, um—well I think there's a Pavel Tchelitchew painting, I think, called *Hide and Seek* in the collection of MoMA that was uh terrifying to me. Um but I also remember um being really uh fascinated um with uh MoMA's Joseph Cornell, which is the jewel box with uh the glass cubes that look like ice cubes. Um and I think overall um Cornell is probably the artist who has had the biggest impact on me on you know, uh—

ALEX FIALHO: Why is that?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well, um uh because there's sort of intimate spaces, because it's collaging and arranging and collecting. He's not a sculptor who makes form, you know. He's a sculptor of arrangement and that's very much what I am. Um and there's a way that he's, I mean you know over the years as I learn more about him, you know there's a kind of, um there's a kind of queerness and a fascination with the antique and a um uh very kind of "New York-centric" sense of him you know walking around the print shops of you know the East Village and the sort of junk shops and um picking stuff up. I mean that was the thing that was amazing about New York in the '70s is Canal Street was one long strip of like cast off machine parts and you know there's only one or two of those shops that still remain but it was sort of over flowing with interesting like junk and refuse.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. How about, you mentioned your sister. Do you have many siblings?

NAYLAND BLAKE: She's the only one. She's born 11 years after I am so um uh in part um I think that my parents were both kind of like after the sort of initial uh slip of having me, they, I think that they decided they were going to wait for a while before they had another one [laughs].

ALEX FIALHO: How about growing up in a bi-racial family in the '60s, '70s?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Um, I mean it was interesting doing that in New York because it was not, um it was unnoticeable, right. So um my extended family, you know, like I would basically stay with the grandparents on my dad's side or on my mom's side equally. It wasn't um, so it was not a discussion.

And public schools, you know the public school that I went to was pretty integrated. So again, there was not, like kids were not making an issue of it. Um it was only after, um starting junior high, I got um a scholarship to a private school and that was sort of the first time that like you know other, other kids made an issue of it.

So it's, uh I think it's one of those things, certainly for me—I'm grateful because I feel like it's provided a really unique perspective um in that, you know, generally I pass so I hear a lot of the shit that white people say when they don't think that black people are around [laughs.] Which is often pretty fucked up. Um but at the same time, it has uh provided me, you know, points of anxiety about not being black enough, being like you know, and then also ways of thinking about the way that race in this country is um really about visibility. It's about the visual um uh signifiers of race and how much of a construct it is. Um so, there's uh it's kind of been an ongoing tension.

Uh I mean, another thing I should say uh is that you know an interesting thing about—I mean the building that I grew up in was quite large so it was basically the neighborhood. Um we were on one—and floors tended to be like a sort of cul-de-sac perhaps for like if you were in a suburban neighborhood. So we started out on one floor and then after my sister was born we moved to another floor. And um uh when we moved into the second apartment uh our immediate next door neighbor was a uh gay couple. So you know, I kind of grew up seeing, like you know there were some other gay people in the building I guess uh but certainly you know, one of my mom's closest friend was the gay couple living next door. So that was an interesting experience to have also, you know.

ALEX FIALHO: Yes.

NAYLAND BLAKE: And it's part of the sort of cosmopolitan-ness of New York at that time.

ALEX FIALHO: How were you relating to school? Were you succeeding in moving from step to step or, what kind of communities were you involved in, elementary, middle, high school?

NAYLAND BLAKE: I mean, I was uh generally always a good student. Um when uh I moved to middle school, uh the school that I moved to was very small and um so we had, I mean we probably had 20 students per grade. And then um uh that school actually closed and at the end of my junior year it folded. But uh one of the things that really worked about that in high school was that um there were, um you know they didn't have enough money to hire people who were uh like, you know, city licensed teachers so the person who was teaching art was like a young women who was pretty much, you know, right out of college probably um who was like a painter who had a loft in Tribeca, and was like an actual sort of downtown for real painter teaching high school art to these kids. And so I also fell in with a group of friends um who we were all basically art nerds so our thing became about like you know the most avant garde culture that we could find. And um so it was like listening to improvised jazz and going around the avant garde festivals that Charlotte Moorman had put together and going to see films at Anthology Film Achieves. So it was like—

ALEX FIALHO: In your teenage years?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yes, yes.

ALEX FIALHO: Cool.

NAYLAND BLAKE: And so it, you know, I mean I had been part of sci-fi and comic book fandom at the same time but um, it—yes, it was really this very, very kind of specialized idea and that was sort of where I started realizing that there were like galleries in So-Ho and that you could go to them and just, you know, seeing stuff like that. Um so it was a very sort of specialist sort of upbringing.

ALEX FIALHO: Interesting. In your lecture that I listened to you, you spoke in particular to the Charlotte Moorman Avant Garde Festivals and sort of the ethos around platforms for art and community around art in that moment of the '70s as maybe one that's different from now perhaps. What did that energy contribute to you as you were growing up?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Um well, I mean a lot of things were sort of all of a piece. It's like once I could start taking the subway on my own, um you know I was able to kind of you sneak off and you know uh go see shows at galleries but also to like go to Times Square and go to Porn Theatres.

And the you know, at that point, the drinking age was 18 and basically in order to get into a Porn Theatre you had to be 18 and I was pretty tall so once I hit 15 I generally was not turned away from many of those spaces. And there also was this sort of this funny sort of overlapping nexus between um sexual culture and uh and um the art scene at that time. Um uh so you know you have people, uh like you had stuff at Franklin Furnace where there was sort of the beginnings of, you know, um sort of, um you know feminist art things being organized. Um you had,—well for example the first Broadway show that my parents took me to was the original Broadway run of *Hair*, so, which had like naked people in it. [Laughs.] and also I remember coming back from there and drawing pictures of Woof who was like the only gay character in it.

And then like the next year we went to see *Jesus Christ Superstar* and then I came back and I drew pictures of

King Herod, which he was the only gay character in there. [Laughs.] But there was this—and you know like on newsstands the underground newspapers were sort of morphing into things like *Screw* and there was like uh a tabloid that was a little bit more hard core called *Smut* and there as a gay one as well. So there was this whole range of like once you hit like '73, '74, '75 it was not so hard to like to go to a newsstand and find porn.

ALEX FIALHO: Yes.

NAYLAND BLAKE: And um and all of it had, you know, was non-glossy, and non-corporate and more sort of "do it yourself" stuff. And so I remember like we were involved in like drawing our own comics and uh putting out are own, uh and like making our own artist books, and I remember hearing about Franklin Furnace and that you could go there if you had you know copies of an artist book you'd bring one down there and they'd put it in the archive regardless of who you were. And so that sense of a kind of open um uh situation, institutions that were kind of nonhierarchical in that way was really important to me and I think also really part of the time.

And then, you know, two years, you know basically like all that stuff is going on in '75, you know '76 and then '77 you get to the first you know punk stuff showing up from, uh you know showing up from England and um that all sort of exploding in '77 and '78. And so that was also really tied into um the sort downtown art scene at the time.

ALEX FIALHO: Had you come to an emerging sense of your sexuality at that time?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Um I think that I kind of throughout was—well I guess I mean my, the joke in some ways is like the road map to my sexuality was like laid out you know somewhere between the 1966 *Batman* TV series and the *Addams Family* TV series, you know. [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: How so?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well, I mean the thing about the *Addams Family* is they were the only married TV couple from that time who are still sexually interested in each other. Like who are still constantly being passionate with each other. Um and you know they have like, they've got a, you know, uh a dungeon in their house which they call a "play room", they're like you uh know, hitting each other with whips, or putting each other on the rack. And then there's also this level of acceptance where it's like um one of them decides that they want to be a painter. You know, like there's a lot of jokes in the show of one, somebody like making a painting um and one of the other people, you know one of the other members of the family coming in and talking about how great the painting is, and the joke is supposed to be that it's some like crazy abstract painting like of course it's like ugly and weird.

Um you know and then the *Batman*, again, you've got somebody who's got like, they have the Bat Cave, they've got the dungeon in it. They have a lot of like getting captured and being rescued. There's a lot of bondage in that show. Um uh so, it was very easy to kind of read those shows in a queer way.

Um and then I think also, you know another like another key important piece of it was *Star Trek*, um and particularly Spock whose like a bi-racial character who spends all of his time, like you know, like has emotions, you know has desire but has to constantly train himself not to express it, and then you know has like these moments where he can no longer contain himself. Um you know there's something else in there uh that's kind of you know hot about that.

And again, I think like I—when I think about like seeing *Hair* or seeing you know, *Jesus Christ Superstar*—happened to be lucky enough to grow up at a time where it was not, where there was not a complete absence of any sort of gay representation, you know.

ALEX FIALHO: Yes, when you think about those characters and the different readings that come from them, are those, when you were growing up, characters that you were identifying with and then now you think that it makes natural sense that you were, or how were you relating to those characters in the moment as opposed to now thinking about them?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Um I think for the earlier situation, it was more like "that's the world I want to be in." Like and particularly with the *Addams Family*, it's like "that's the house that I want to have," you know, that has crazy stuffed animals in it, it has art everywhere and somebody can sort of take over the living room and make sculptures in it if they want. You know, that kind of acceptance was, you know, exciting to me as a kind of utopian idea and so it was more about those stories and spaces that I wanted to inhabit.

Um you know, those kind of mental terrains, and to me that kind of links back to you know installation and uh—I mean, like, the—you know, one of the lines from the *Addams Family* show is like, "their house is a museum where people come to see them." And I think about like the Museum of Natural History and the sort of art spaces as places of possibility um both, you know sensually and um—you know the other piece of this, it's a whole rich tapestry, the other piece of this is that my parents, as I was growing up was they kind of Bohemian, I mean, they

I think were attracted to aspects of the counterculture even though they themselves were not quite so much part of it.

So they had copies of like all of these Grove paperbacks, I remember growing up. So they had the Grove *Justine and Juliette* by the Marquis de Sade. They had the Grove edition of *My Secret Life* which is this Edwardian memoir. They had copies of *Psychopathia Sexualis* and Henry Miller. Um and so like I would sneak those books off the shelves. And one of the things that many of those books have in common is that they have there isn't so much of a distinction made between, like, gay and straight sex, right. And so that also was like you know there in the mix, was like sort of the dirty books that I found you know.

Uh so, you know, I would say that like by the time I hit high school um you know or when I was in my mid-teens, I was having you know sexual experiences with um men in this sort of anonymous sexual situations. Um but my romantic life was uh pretty much only with women. And when I hit, uh when I went to college, when I went to Bard, which happened in '78, um that became that much more extreme. That was when I first started having sexual experiences with women but I would still you know go into the city on occasion and you know go around to porn theatres. So I was never a big person for picking people up in bars. But um yeah, so those things sort of overlapped for uh a while.

ALEX FIALHO: As you were developing?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Before we jump into the Bard years, I'm just curious if there's anyone in particular, either teachers or maybe friends from that art nerd group that stood out as particularly influential during those early years of development?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Oh gosh, um yeah I guess I guess, I mean, you know there was sort of a core group of us uh in high school who were all pretty tight. There was this guy Jeff Preiss who is a film maker and director and cinematographer. Um his brother Cliff Preiss, who is a curator and uh music historian. Um William Hohausner who I think is a writer for cartoon shows and a guy named Benjamin Hume who is sort of uh music historian but more like uh an instrument builder and a very, very interesting guy. And the person who was our teacher in high school was a uh um women by the name of Debra Pierson who is still around, still lives in So-Ho, um and she's the painter that um I sort of told you about.

So um that's,—you know and I would say that in terms of the other big artistic impact on me, well I remember seeing *Flaming Creatures* sometime in high school um—

ALEX FIALHO: By Jack Smith?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yes, I mean because we were like avant garde film nerds and we were going to Anthology Film archives.

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs] I'm impressed.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well, and I think that Anthology also showed like Chant D'Amour. You know I mean, there were a few, I mean Kenneth Anger for sure, I know that I saw. Um and so that ended up actually having a big impact in part because years later when we started getting into the arguments,—like I was never a big fan of Vito Russo and then sort of like arguing with Hollywood with like we need more positive representations of gay people. You know to me it was like you know I didn't need narrative films with good gay people in them, they were unmoving to me because I thought like um you know, I'm much more interested in someone like Kenneth Anger, right. I'm much more interested in something that's um much more directly queer. And I don't need for it to fit into this format of um you know um conventional narrative. Um you know, I understand where that argument comes from but you know my lack of interest in it is entirely from my own skewed perspective of growing up in a very um specific cultural background.

Um but you know,—so anyway, I was going to say the other person who I think had a huge effect on me um sort of throughout those years was um Richard Foreman and um I saw his, I saw a play of his called *Dr. Selavey's Magic Theatre*. I just happened to be, like it was an off-Broadway hit and I was taken with like a youth group. We went to go see it in like '73 or something like that.

Um and then he directed a production of uh *Three Penny Opera* for Shakespeare in the Park in '75 and I saw that production like three times. And then went again with this group of art nerd friends to see other productions of his uh during those years as well. And that, I mean I don't know if you've ever seen any of his work but it's extremely disjointed, like you know, um very much like staging thought and there was you know, there was a, to my mind, a very odd, very kind of cerebral sexuality to it. Um but he is somebody whose work has always really um resonated with me. I think in part because it's so much about him like, you know, the particularities of his

stage design, his, the sort of environmental quality of it, yes, so.

ALEX FIALHO: Then moving onto to Bard, how did you make the decision to go there, were you going there as an art student and how did it affect your artwork?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well, a bunch of, specifically Jeff Preiss, but other friends of mine had gone to Bard and I basically was choosing,—when I was applying to schools I got into four places, I got into Bard, I got into Hampshire, I got into Purchase, uh and I got into Brown. And my parents wanted me to go to Brown and I was looking at it initially because I was thinking um that "oh well I can go but really study at RISD" and sort of then I found out like in talking to them that was not really possible.

So Brown was sort of off my list and then um we went and looked at Hampshire and um I was like, "Oh, okay, Hampshire, cool." And I think Hampshire didn't look enough like a real college to my parents. [Laughs.] Uh and so we, and so it came down to Bard and Purchase and I knew that Bard was actually ideologically in terms of experience a lot like Hampshire but it looked like Brown, like it had actual ivy covered buildings [laughs] so that kind of reassured my parents and I ended up getting a better deal, like a better scholarship deal at Bard than at Purchase. So that's what it sort of came down to.

I went in initially, I mean Bard has this thing where you can't really declare a major until um the end of your second year um but I went. I was under the assumption that I was going to be a film major, that's what Jeff was, and uh in a way that's what I was most interested in doing um and did a bunch of stuff in the film program in my first year. Um but then a lot of the people that I was interested in studying with left pretty quickly and uh I switched over to the art program, uh initially as a painter and then as a sculptor.

And the thing that worked about Bard, was you know, it's close enough to New York, it was basically a stealth art school. They could get anybody up to do um slide talks and the department, again, was staffed with working artists, I mean people at various points of their career but it was a real thing. And uh so, um you know I felt like I got an actually pretty good um sense of fundamentals there.

But it wasn't a pure art school and we also then to really interact with people in other disciplines and other you know sort of intellectual legacies so I'm really grateful for that. You know it's like reading and literary thought has always been super important to me and it was like, you know, there I got to engage with really smart um writers and thinkers at Bard.

You know, when I think back on the list of who we had up for slide talks or for visiting artists things it's kind of astonishing. You know we had um uh Wegman come up, we had Judy Pfaff, we had um uh um oh my gosh, Keith Haring, we brought Keith Haring up to do basically his first slide lecture, it was while he was still, like there wasn't even any gallery work, it was during the subway drawings. You know, Agnes Martin, Ross Bleckner, David Salle, Acconci, just I mean, just tons of folks. Um so you know, it was an interesting period.

ALEX FIALHO: You sort of voiced that your parents had a bit of resistance to your direction as an artist. How did that play out?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, yeah. I mean, that's one of the reasons they were you know, yeah, that was the other selling point about Bard is that you didn't have to declare a major going in so there could be a couple of years where they didn't know what I was majoring in. You know, um and by the time I did declare you know it was too late to do anything else. [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: Cool. Any particularly influential teachers at Bard?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, I mean like the teachers most important to me was a painter named Nancy Mitchnick and uh my sculptor teacher um uh Jake Grossberg. There was uh you know um uh a guy Allen Cote who was a really interesting painter. And I think one of the things that was really crucial about all of this, and this goes back to Debra in high school, is one of the big things—and particularly at that time in the '70s and early '80s—it was like you know, you were trying to figure out how to lead that life. It's like to me the thing that was enticing about being an artist was you know, yes, making stuff but also um it wasn't laid out as a career in any way that was legible. And so it was like, "Oh, this is a community that I can be in where I do not have to worry about, like, where's the achievement or where's the sort of regular career stuff." And um how you lead that life and how you, you know, um continue to respond to stuff. That's the um information I think I was really hungry for as a student um and I that's the, all of those guys are really generous with that. You know, we saw how they were like dealing with various things in their careers and just also how you continue to make things, you know.

So that's why I feel like it was very important you know um as a possibility. Um, I remember also um you know there was a bunch of, uh there was a sort of ecosystem of bands at Bard that would play local, we would play gigs on campus, um who would play various parties on campus, but also you know bands would sort of get it together enough to like play at clubs in New York so I think the first time I went to Max's was to see a Bard band

that was playing a night there. So that, there was a certain amount of back and forth between like you know the New York downtown club scene and the uh Bard thing.

Um so yeah, I think all that stuff. Um so and there's another, there's a poet Robert Kelly who was teaching up at Bard. I did an independent study with him um uh where um I had been sort of struggling with writing, or whatever anyway, I started doing an independent study with him and he is the person uh who first told me about um Kathy Acker, who is a writer who was incredibly important to me. Um and so yeah, there's um you know a lot of times the impact that you have on somebody in those situations may not directly be in the classroom but it's about stuff that happens around the classroom.

ALEX FIALHO: And what sort of work were you finding yourself making at Bard?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Um I you know, I was uh I was making very over thought paintings initially and trying to make sort of abstract paintings and I really wasn't going anywhere. And then um a couple of things happened in quick succession. Um Judy Pfaff came up and gave a slide lecture um and I saw her installation work um and then uh I saw um a show of Jonathan Borofsky's I think at the Whitney and then I was over the summer, I was living in on 46th and 11th and heard about this thing called the *Times Square Show* which is um this sort of famous show that was happening, that was organized by this group Colab. And this is a show that took over a building uh um that had been a massage parlor that just filled it like filled all four stories of it with art uh and performances and stuff that was,—like one of the things that was happening around this time, starting, really starting with punk, was the sort of flowering of graffiti and flyer culture in the late '70s. Um and uh so you know, you had stuff like Jenny Holzer but, you know, that was within an atmosphere like every lamp post was covered with like band flyers that might just as well be like conceptual pieces, you know.

Keith Haring was doing these like kind of wheat pasted you know sort of poetry things before he started doing the radiant baby drawings. And the sense of stuff on the streets that clearly had no you know had no commercial end game um that was just around um and really active and vital and you would sort of run across, like you know was while like Basquiat was doing SAMO and there was all this stuff that was happening around graffiti and flyers and art on the street. And a lot of those people ended up in the *Times Square Show*. And it really felt like this kind of amazing fun house and to sort of go back to you know like "their house is a museum" thing you know here was this amazing environment that was not neatly labeled. It was hard to figure out who made what and that really felt like all of the excitement that was happening on the street brought inside. And so that was kind of an amazing like eye opening show to me because it was so untamed.

And then a year later, and maybe it may have been eight months or something like that, there was the *New York New Wave* show at PS1, and what was really distressing about that was how it had a lot of the same people in it as the *Time Square Show* but it was like this really weird thing where suddenly everything was super cleaned up and it was like, you know, there was a lot of good work in that show but the tone of it was completely like, here was this explosion of energy of people of entertaining themselves and making something happen and "Okay, now let's domesticate it make it official" and were to say that about a PS1 show that of course this is sort of non-profit fringe-y art space at that time. But the attitude towards it was tidied up and domesticated. And so those three experiences were big influences on me and sort of lead me to start making installations and sort of taking over spaces and Bard and making things in them.

ALEX FIALHO: Of the less tidy variety?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well, I mean, yes, of the less tidy variety, except that I was making all of it so yes, there weren't wall labels and things like that, yes. But also the sort of more narrative and messy variety and the thing, the thing, that for me mentally the thing that made it click was that it was, I could relate my art making activity back to film making by saying that like all of these little things that I was making I was going to treat them like they were individual shots and then edit them together into these bigger installations. Yes, there was like one installation that was kind of about you know sort of my take on ideas in Haitian Voodoo very much based on you know reading Mya Darren and so I mean some of this was like, you know, would fall firmly under exoticism and culture appropriation [laughs] at this point but you know it was me trying to think this stuff through in college. There certainly wasn't any discussion around racial identity in the art world during that time. But you know, that was again, one of the things, you know, I mean one of the things that always really struck me about graffiti culture was that if you were, I mean the thing about tagging was like it was the only way you were going to get your name on New York City unless you were you know insanely wealthy and could have it you know put up there in gold letters. And so I always you know, there was always a kind of diversity in that felt kind of truer to me so. So yes.

ALEX FIALHO: How about the transition to CalArts, how soon after Bard did that happen?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yes, I don't even know if I was even thinking so much about graduate school, I think I was in vague terms and at the time the only graduate school you only really heard about was Yale and I mean this was

like in fall of '81 was probably when I was starting to think about it. Nancy Mitchnick, the painting teacher that I told you about, had taken a year and taught at CalArts and came back and was like, "You know, I think you would probably like this place." And so I thought like, alright, it would be great to be—you know, I had never seen California, and so "okay."

I remember going to, there was like a CAA conference happening in New York at some point. I remember going with Nancy to some like CalArts faculty party in one of the rooms and being introduced to John Baldesarri and a couple of other people and Nancy being like, "Oh yeah, there's like this guy Nayland, blah blah blah, and he's going to apply." So it was the only place that I applied to and I got in. The initial idea was that I was going to learn how to drive and then drive across country that summer [laughs] like within three months. That sort of didn't happen, I failed my driving test twice. And so I flew out and showed up. It was the first time I had ever been that far away from home and there I was in California.

ALEX FIALHO: Awesome.

NAYLAND BLAKE: It was very interesting [laughs]. CalArts culture was very different. It was like, you know they were still very much basking in the glow of sort of that first CalArts generation which was really like the painters and stuff who had come out of there and were making a lot of money in the art world at the time and sort of this second more conceptual generation was sort of just gearing up to hit. And so like Mike Kelly had just graduated a couple of years before and you know, I mean it was a very, you had people there who were quite severe as intellectuals. And I think one of the things that used to happen at CalArts, that sort of drove me nuts actually was there was a sort of unofficial blood sport of like when people would come to do slide lectures it was like the role of the students to kind of take them down. Like people would do their talk and it was you know, everybody was waiting around for someone to catch someone in a kind of logical fallacy or you know. Yeah, that was a very weird part of it.

One of the things that was different when I got out to CalArts is that nobody there, well actually two friends of mine from Bard also were going at the same time, an artist named Stacey Milgim and photographer named Hugh Crawford, so the three of us kind of arrived. We were all part of the same class but for the most part, folks out there only really knew me as queer. And so it was kind of after leaving Bard that was sort of the last time I was involved with any women sexually for like twenty some odd years. [Laughs.]

Bard had a lot of out lesbian students, oh actually I should sort of go back to this, about Bard because this is kind of an important part of it, but my friend Gerry [Gomez -NB] Pearlberg and I organized Bard's first gay and lesbian alliance and we successfully lobbied for, there was one out faculty member who agreed to teach a course in gay and lesbian history and culture, a guy by the name of John Fout, who was a historian who specialized in Germany. And that was a very, very interesting moment.

ALEX FIALHO: This the end of the '70s, early '80s?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yes, this is like early '80s. And so one of the things that was going on at that time was John was a very traditional historian and one of the big books that was circulating for among my friends was that first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and so the argument, the kind of structuralism argument sort of spilled over into examinations of, like John was very much like a gay liberationist guy and that, you know, the goal of social agitation should be for you know a kind of equal civil rights for gay and straight people.

You know, I was much more in like there's the category of the homosexual as a historical construct [laughs] and it should all be about whether there are homosexual acts but not homosexuals, and that lead to kind of like a blow up in the class. And there was another real stumbling point where when it came to the cultural part of it, I remember he had us read *The Frontrunner* and there was a real interesting generational divide because clearly this was a book that was hugely important to him but to us at ten, twenty years younger we were like, "This is horrific and homophobic," [laughs] and, "like really weird," like, "what the fuck is this," and you know he flipped out. I mean it was not his area of expertise so that's always tough when you're trying to teach something that you are so identified with and you really what your class to have the same emotional relationship to it that you do, but that was like a big sort of splitting point.

And then, so that class kind of ran aground and I don't think he ever offered it again but it was Bard's first gay and lesbian's studies class. And the next year Gerry and I took an independent study with a historian named Christine Stansell who was one of the editors of, I think it's *The Powers of Desire: Anthology* which came out of the big explosive feminist conference at Columbia in '81 where was like the whole big blow up about S&M lesbians. So Christine had sort of a role in that and I mean that was an interesting sort of, it was interesting working with her and doing readings and stuff in sort of feminist theory with her at that point.

So, well onto CalArts where, oh, okay, I got there saying because there were many more out lesbians at Bard, and very few out gay men. I mean, there were a few of them, but not many. And then at CalArts there many more guys who were out as gay.

ALEX FIALHO: Did that provide community?

NAYLAND BLAKE: It did, in some ways. You know, provided a bigger dating pool. There was not however, I don't remember any sort of organized gay and lesbian group there, so yeah, I could be wrong about that but I don't remember it. You know, there were people, we were driving into L.A. and going into bars you know a fair amount. Oh gosh, but I remember for myself trying to figure out ways of making work that were explicitly gay and so you know that was a sort of ongoing project for me and one that I was having a very difficult time actually executing because most of what was around at the time was, most of the work that was legibly gay at the time was beefcake, I mean you could tell that somebody was a gay artist because they were basically making cheesecake but they were men instead of women.

And so that was you know, I had a much more sort of conceptual bent than that, but I couldn't really figure out what to do with it and so there was some stuff, there was some work that was about notions of gay representation. Let's see if I can actually pull out, so that's part of a project from, so, well, just this picture is from a project that I did in my second year at CalArts that was me basically inhabiting sort of clone look at the time.

ALEX FIALHO: This is you, right?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: On the cover of *Behavior*.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yes, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Which is a publication that you made then or now? More recently?

NAYLAND BLAKE: No that's actually a catalogue from an exhibition from a sort of retrospective exhibition in 2009 is when that happened. But that project of doing those sort of self-portrait photos of me as a sort of clone was like part of this attempt to figure out like you know, how,—and I guess at the time the stuff I was making was all about this is my discomfort with what is being presented as a kind of gay ideal. And you know a sort of, it was always really irritating to me, that kind of skinny twink thing even though we didn't have like that language for it at the time, but I'm somebody who's always had, you know whose body whose body has always shifted a lot who has been often heavier and hairier than other men were interested in at the time and was always sort of attracted to heavier and hairier and more sort of diverse looking folks.

So you know, that was sort of an ongoing thing at CalArts was sort of trying to figure out a way, particularly because you know in the, I think this happened in the middle of my first year there, we had a new Dean, who was Catherine Lord, and you know, much of the instruction and much of what we were reading was really looking at the representationally based critique, particularly of photographic imagery around feminism. The sort of you know, so you know really looking at people like Martha Rosler and this other wave of feminist artists who had come out of CalArts.

So that, like trying to apply those lessons to an idea of gay representation was something that I don't feel like I ever really resolved at that time. And I feel like that period for me was really a period of things just kind of being a mess and a lot of stuff got made but it was like I really didn't have a clear sense of what it was I wanted to do.

ALEX FIALHO: What type of work were you making and were those the main concerns that you were trying to work through in that work at that time or did it range more widely?

NAYLAND BLAKE: I mean, I was making a lot of different stuff. I was making these big drawings and a sort of reverse painted stuff on Mylar. Some of it was really representational, you know there was some abstract painting, I was making some furniture. I didn't really,—I made one installation that was sort of like the other the earlier installations at Bard, the sort of all-over environment. It was kind of a fragmentary, it was sort of about, attempting to talk about notions of light and of enlightenment and looking at Kabbalah and I mean it was like a hash of stuff. [Laughs.] It also included me, like I wrote a rap, part of it was an audiotape with a rap, it was bad, I was bad.

ALEX FIALHO: How did Southern California treat you?

NAYLAND BLAKE: I kind of, I loved it. I mean there were things I found frustrating about L.A. but I kind of, I loved it as a climate. The things I found frustrating about L.A. was that I was so used to being a kind of wanderer in the city and discovering things and kind of having an ownership of that, and the thing about L.A. is that you never really, any place you go, you go because somebody else took you there. It's really hard to kind of wander and find stuff on your own, because even if you're driving it's like you'd see something from the road and maybe you stop and go in, like maybe it's a shop that looks sort of interesting and maybe you go and maybe it's not

interesting and you get back in your car and you keep driving. It's like there's only so many times your actually going to do that.

So I found myself kind of frustrated by the idea that any place you know you went you were going because somebody else took you there. I remember we did go to some of the club, you know there were still some L.A. punk stuff going on at that time, like '82 to '84. But, yes, it was enjoyable. I didn't feel connected to any sort of actual gay community out there. I knew some gay people that I had met through other friends but it was not you know, there was like a gallery scene that was kind of taking off, there were a lot of young galleries that were starting up at that point in L.A., I think partially because there had been such an explosion of people out of CalArts so, like, we used to go shows at Gagolian's Gallery around Melrose which was small and goofy at that point.

ALEX FIALHO: How about CalArts in terms of community, either other artists or professors that were having an influence or that you were in immediate dialogue with.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well, certainly there was like camaraderie with other artists, you know, because really good friends with Kathe Burkhart there and Judie Bamber and Nancy [Barton], we'll fill that in later on. In terms of faculty it was really like Catherine, John Baldessari was around but it was not like a great time for him, but I you know, I was friends with an artist by the name of Larry Johnson out in L.A., super smart. And then just after me at CalArts was people who I became a lot closer to like Richard Hawkins and Cathy Opie and there's—

ALEX FIALHO: Did you meet them through CalArts or after the fact?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yea, I met them through friends who had stayed in L.A. like Larry Johnson stayed in L.A. and oh Nancy Barton is who I was thinking about. Nancy was actually a really kind of amazing connector of people. So like Lyle Ashton Harris was after my time at CalArts but I first heard about Lyle through Nancy and similarly I think I first heard about Richard through Nancy.

I know one of the other things that happened is that while I was at CalArts we brought Kathy Acker out to read and to do kind of a presentation and that was the first time I had actually met her after reading her books. And she was connected up with Dennis Cooper who was out there at that point and Dennis became another big sort of communication point. So, yeah, that was as much the people who were at CalArts after I was there as when I was there. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: What inspired the eventual move up North to the Bay Area in San Francisco?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well, when I was leaving school I was like basically, I mean there are a lot of terrifically ambitious folks at CalArts and there was a sort of momentum of what was thought of as a kind of CalArts mafia in New York at that point. And so most of the people who were graduating either wanted to move to New York and that was something else that had kind of shifted like suddenly the idea of art stars and a kind of art career had gained a kind of currency in New York certainly by '83 you started seeing all these people making a lot of money and so that, you know there was sort of that notion floating around and CalArts had a kind of heat around it as an art school.

So a lot of folks were moving back to New York and most of the other ones were staying in Los Angeles. I still didn't know how to drive, still didn't have a license and so staying in L.A. was probably not going to happen and I really didn't want to move back to New York and in part because I felt like I was seeing friends who were there like trying to kind of make it as artists and I felt like my work was not together enough to withstand those kind of forces. That it was going to be too easy for me to end up kind of trying to chase like what was supposed to be the important idea of the time. And so I wanted to be in a place where I could just work and sort of figure it out.

I mean there was a couple of things, I had a good friend from Bard named Jonathan Hammer who had moved to San Francisco and I went and sort of visited him and sort of saw what the city was like. I knew that San Francisco was the queer capital. I also knew it had good public transportation [laughs] so I didn't have to have a car. And it also seemed like a place that didn't really have an identity as a kind of like an art scene so I could kind of go and you know do my own thing for a while and not worry about it one way or another about like whether or not my career was progressing at an appropriate pace.

So that was the stuff that fueled the decision. And I had interesting conversations with, like I remember one guy in particular who was a friend of my teacher, Nancy Mitchnick's, this guy who was a kind of older collector living in L.A. and you know I had a conversation where he was like, "What are you doing? You can't move to San Francisco. They all have AIDS up there." And that was like beginning to come into parlance. You know it was, yeah, and I was like, "Well, good public transportation outweighs that." [Laughs.]

So when I graduated from CalArts I lived in L.A. for a couple of months then moved up North and ended up in a, was living in a house up in Berkeley with a couple of other guys who had graduated from Berkeley and were

friends of somebody that I knew from CalArts. One was the brother of somebody who was a friend of mine. Then I got a job at this place Just Desserts through someone who was a friend of a faculty member. Like somebody knew somebody who knew somebody that there was this place and they were generally hiring and they called up and recommended me for the job so I got that, you know I ended up getting that job. It was like working in a coffee shop and selling dessert.

The guy who hired me had a boyfriend who was very kind of connected into a particular scene at you know, in San Francisco that was connected in some ways to the art scene but not entirely, this guy Gene [Sturdevant]. He hired me and then a couple of like, now it feels like it was a month later, but it was probably more than that, I ended up going back to his place with his boyfriend, we had this sort of intense three way that was, you know, that was like unprotected sex, and shortly after that Gene was diagnosed as being positive. Then I think it was probably maybe two years later, a year and a half later that Gene died. So Gene was sort of the first guy that I knew and that was intimate with who died.

So there was like, so yeah, that was kind of like immersion in San Francisco [laughs] but you know the thing that was after living in the house in Berkeley for a little bit, I found through I guess somebody I was dating, I can't remember, but I ended up moving into a house on Russian Hill with three roommates and then that really ended up branching out into all of these things, I was there for years.

And, one of the things that really worked about San Francisco was that it really at that point had a whole influx of people who were coming into the art world there who didn't have any of the history, didn't have any of the sort of San Francisco history and so they were coming from outside and so they didn't know that they shouldn't do certain things in certain ways I guess.

And my sense of the San Francisco art scene at that point was that things were very entrenched in certain kinds of cliques and things were sort of kind of stand still. But it also had a tradition of a lot of artist run spaces, so the first work that I showed there was a place called New Langton Arts, which is an artist run nonprofit started in 1975. I showed there in '85, it was their tenth anniversary show. And basically artists who had shown in their first season picked artists to show in their tenth. I forget who picked me, I guess a guy named Jim Pomeroy who had been a teacher of mine at CalArts but who was really a, majorly a fixture in the Bay Area was the person who suggested me. And after showing there, after doing the show there, I became friendly with the folks who were running it and was asked to join their artist advisory board and started that. I went on to be on staff there eventually and curate a bunch of stuff for them then also returned to be on their board so I worked with them for a long time.

ALEX FIALHO: I think let's take a little pause here.

NAYLAND BLAKE: I think so, I feel like I flagging a little bit.

ALEX FIALHO: So we're getting into sort of the early '80s moment at this point and I'm wondering if you know or can remember your first memory of coming into contact with or hearing about HIV/AIDS as it would come to be later described.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well, I mean. You know, descriptively I was hearing about it while I was still at CalArts. I think a friend of somebody I knew there who was sort of older, somewhat older gay man, was someone heard later on was positive but really for me the real personal encounter was working at Just Desserts. And I think that I wish I could remember what the actual sort of timeframe was with Gene because there certainly was you know, it was at that point, in the epidemic where people you know, found out, you would be diagnosed with positive and often their health would deteriorate quite rapidly and quite visibly.

And I remember Gene sort of taking a bunch of time off of work then coming back and there was for me, that sort of initial sort of scare because I don't think my memory of it was that he had received his diagnosis, like he had found out that he was positive before, I can't remember if he knew before we had unprotected sex or after. If he was diagnosed after it was quite shortly after. And that was at the point where people were still very unclear about latency periods and I remember that the turnaround time on testing was like, it took like two weeks to get back results.

So I remember having that, going into some clinic for my test and having that two week period, that really fraught period.

And then there were other people who were sort around the business who were around the scene who were testing positive. It was this sort of ongoing undercurrent but it also really highlighted this way in which San Francisco was organized as a society, which is that there were these communities and groups and they basically laid over each other and did not interact, right.

So there was a sort of explosion of an art scene South of Market in San Francisco that was happening alongside

the Leather Scene down there but there was little to no communication between the two of them.

The South of Market art scene was happening alongside what was sort of the main stream gallery scene centered around Geary Street but the people who collected art from that scene had very little to do with what to do with what was happening in the artist who were nonprofits. So there was a weird way in which there was a kind of society layer in San Francisco that were the people who were kind of underwriting things like SFMoMA and to some extent the Arts Commission but they were very distinct from what was happening around the San Francisco Art Institute and around the South of Market scene and all of those things were really distinct from what was happening in the gay scene.

And even within the gay scene you were having kind of, again, a sort of generational split. And I think one of the things, one of the stories that I think has not really been told is that there was going to be a big generational break in the gay community that to a certain extent didn't happen because of AIDS.

You had the sort of gay liberation generation who built structures, you know basically built gay and lesbian organizations, built you know established gay businesses, established gay bookstores, you now built that whole sort of infrastructure and were very invested in it. And then you had a generation whose identification was much more with punk and had a sort of you know anti-authoritarian politics and a sort non-assimilationist politics.

ALEX FIALHO: The later generation.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yes, and that generation saw those institutions that the previous generation had built as being like institutions like any other institution and there were ways in which those two groups were at loggerheads prior to AIDS but that all kind of just got squashed. And I think that what you ended up seeing happening at the end of that whole cycle around Queer Nation and around those other kind of political organizing is really, would have happened ten years earlier if it had not been for HIV/AIDS.

So that social tension was kind of there, you know, that you had younger people who started getting involved in mourning something that they weren't even necessarily so invested in to begin with. But you know, mid-'80s like '84, '85 you did start to have some degree of community organizing and health response, around the epidemic but because that previous generation had actually developed a certain amount of political power within San Francisco it was very different than what was starting to happen in New York because to some extent that community was already visible.

You know, there already where three weekly gay papers in the Bay area, you know. You know, there was a you know, people had made inroads into city government. So the problem was not that the people were necessarily invisible. So there's that whole portion of it.

I guess I would say that I mean for me in terms of an identification, like so to take all this back to what I was doing at CalArts where I was sort of trying to figure out like how do you make art that speaks to a kind of gay experience and what was in the terms of the time. I think that the work that came out of gay people in response to HIV/AIDS is the thing that actually changed the terms like, like at the point that the only thing that was recognizable as gay art was basically tied to sexuality, you know was tied to sex. It was consistently dismissed as frivolous and the sort of, you know, puritan/intellectual notion that anything that is around sex is lesser than, in terms of a subject matter, was used to discount gay people as serious artists, right. They didn't really have an issue.

Once the notion of mortality and mourning surfaced as a subject matter for gay people in relationship to the epidemic then suddenly there was an entire range of expression that people were suddenly willing to look at. I mean the crass way of saying that is that once people started documenting their own dying it was like, "Oh, I guess we can take gayness serious now because it's tied to a big subject matter." I don't think it's entirely that negative and I think you had a generation of gay people working in the arts saying like, "Look if you're going to pay attention to us as victims then pay attention to what we have to say about everything, pay attention to what we have to say about our lives if you're going to pay attention to us mourning the loss of those lives".

So that I think was a really powerful moment of self-definition and changing the way in which subject matter could be thought of as gay. And I do feel like the Bay Area was one of the epicenters of that. And so, there was work around all of that, that was sort of conscious and I think work that was sort of unconscious.

But one of the things that was happening in San Francisco was that you had, as I said, a generation of people entering the art scene who didn't have the previous history. So you had Anne MacDonald, who I mentioned before who started Artspace. You had Larry Rinder becoming the curator at the University Art Museum.

ALEX FIALHO: At Berkeley.

NAYLAND BLAKE: You had new directors at SFMoMA and a new Chief Curator at SFMoMA. You had people like

Armando Rascon who started a gallery, one of the first, I think, certainly the first gallery in the Bay Area, but one of the earliest areas to show Felix Gonzalez-Torres. You had—

ALEX FIALHO: What was that gallery called?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Oh gosh.

ALEX FIALHO: No worries.

NAYLAND BLAKE: I want to say Detail but I can't remember. [Terrain Gallery.] You had John McCarren who as I said was the Director of the Arts Commission Gallery who then went on to work for Anne MacDonald's at ArtSpace. And for all these people who were starting stuff up you know San Francisco was a place where it was cheap to get space.

You could, you know, my first gallery show was at a place called Media, it was a gallery that was opened by someone who was my roommate at the time, a woman named Patricia Davidson, who you know basically started the gallery with money that she got as part of an insurance settlement after being in a kind of horrific car accident.

So it was a lot of people who were not necessarily arts professionals and not necessarily in the previously established scene setting stuff up and making things happen. I remember John, there was a show at the Arts Commission called, it was called like *Leap Frog* or something like that and the idea was that an artist picked an artist, that artist picked another artist, and that artist picked another artist. And I remember being chosen by someone, I think it was Tony Labat chose me, and I had been starting to make work that was using restraints and S&M gear and I picked Mark Chester whose house and photographic studio was across the street from New Langton Arts on Folsom Street. And Mark picked Rex, whose this illustrator and kind of erotic artist. And that was kind of a big deal you know both Mark and Rex had been around San Francisco for years but like the art world had never acknowledged them because they were, you know, making explicit queer art.

So you know, it was sort of all these people you know who were willing to look at the situation with fresh eyes and that's what really made things kind of percolate there.

ALEX FIALHO: I have a sense that your time at New Langton Arts, both that first show but then also working there was a really informative space for you, do you want to talk a little bit about the work shown and also the projects you did?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well, the show that I did there, my first show there was an installation that in a way harked back to the installations that I had been making at Bard. So in that way it was a kind of a step backward and kind of a place of frustration ultimately. But, you know, New Langton is an organization much like, Artist Space or the New Museum or Franklin Furnace, you know, all of these places that I had looked at in New York growing up.

And New Langton was part of an organization called NAAO, the National Association of Artist Organizations, that was an umbrella organization of artist run nonprofits that comprised spaces like LACE in Los Angeles, like spaces in Los Angeles, spaces in San Jose, spaces nationwide and that network of nonprofits was really the first place that was supporting a lot of this work, a lot of this sort of outsider work.

You know, the New Museum had that show that Dan Cameron curated *Extended Sensibilities* which was one of the first gay and lesbian shows and so you had, you know, again going back to me growing up in New York and finding a kind of home and a sensibility in these projects that were started by artist and were nonprofit and not gallery-driven, like New Langton, you know, San Francisco at the time was kind of a refugee at the time of those type of efforts. That's where the most interesting work was going on. It wasn't really going on in the commercial galleries there, um because they um had essentially a very conservative market um and it was really only until younger artists were getting noticed outside of San Francisco that San Francisco collectors started to take an interest in them.

Um, so all of the networking that we did through these artist-run nonprofits um, was uh, you know, ended up being the thing, that drove national attention to San Francisco at the time. Um, you know it was at a NAAO event that I first met Julie Ault, and started to hear about um, group material. Um, so you know those conduits, and then um, LACE uh, which stands for like Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, they um you know Richard Hawkins and Dennis Cooper curated a show there called *Against Nature*. And that was, again, one of the first, um places of the first clusterings of this new, uh, you know, uh gay male sensibility and brought together a group of artists who were also connected to um, people in Chicago and people in New York and this sort of um, you know, expanding sense of what people were making connections across those four cities, really came out of efforts at these nonprofits.

ALEX FIALHO: And I know *Situation*, the show you did at New Langton was important in that regard. In terms of the timeframes, how was that situated in relationship to Dan Cameron's show and *Against Nature*?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well Dan Cameron's show was way before.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah, that's what I thought.

NAYLAND BLAKE: I think Dan Cameron's show was '81, but I had like the catalogue of that show and that was like a really, um, again a sort of bellwether in terms for me in terms of uh just ideas. Um, uh I think that the timeframe was *Against Nature* and then I think that there was a show in Chicago at Randolph Street Gallery, I could be wrong about that, but certainly Chicago was where Hudson got involved in all that and Hudson was like a huge important figure in the circulation of all those ideas and of telling artist about each other.

And then *Situation* was like the third, so I think it was like L.A., Chicago, and then there was stuff happening in New York but it wasn't necessarily tied into that same thing. I think maybe there was a show at White Column's like that Bill Arning put together but that might have been a bit later.

Um, yeah, and then *Situation* was kind of, I mean by the time we got to *Situation* then Rick Jacobsen was opening up Kiki, I mean at that point we're talking early '90s.

ALEX FIALHO: Exactly.

NAYLAND BLAKE: And there was Red Dora's *Bearded Lady* and then that lead to putting together *In a Different Light* which was a show at the University Art Museum in Berkeley. But um, but really *Against Nature* was sort of like the first big grouping of all of that. And I would say that was probably, maybe it was '91.

So the other sort of important figure in all of this was the artist Tony Greene who was working for Richard Kuhlenschmidt's gallery in Los Angeles and so Tony was, I think Tony was important and maybe that's who I met Richard Hawkins through, but Tony was friends with Larry and with Dennis Cooper and then that you know, um, yeah, I think that's sort of how Tony was there in the picture. Um, and also as part of the L.A. crew was Bob Flanagan and Sherry Rose.

So, then I'm sort of trying to think about um, yeah, I mean there's a period of time you know, after Gene's death, which must have been like early '87, and then John McCarren started working for Anne and I think Anne brought General Idea out in oh gosh, '88 maybe, um and then I think John died in '89. So you know I think John was very involved in, you know, in yeah. And then what year is *AIDS Timeline*?

ALEX FIALHO: '91.

NAYLAND BLAKE: '91?

ALEX FIALHO: No maybe it's earlier.

NAYLAND BLAKE: I think it's a little earlier. I think it's like '89 maybe.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah, I think you're right.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, I mean, Larry, Larry Rinder. So I think that's '89 and by that point Julie and Felix were out for that, I remember meeting them and meeting Doug, hanging out with Felix a bit.

ALEX FIALHO: Doug Ashford?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Doug Ashford. Tim was much more of a star at that point. Maybe, and it might have been that Anne brought K.O.S. out to San Francisco it's hard for me to sort of keep it straight at that point. But certainly more people were circulating through. Felix did a show with Armando, I want to say maybe the name of the gallery was, it's not Details, hmm, anyway, uh it's while Ross was still alive and so they both, they were both out visiting San Francisco at some point.

ALEX FIALHO: Were you seeing a coalescing response by the end of the '80s in art to AIDS?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, what you started to have happen was I mean, you had the beginning of the quilt. You had the things that really stood out where things like food delivery, right, and home care. And um, and so that was how the response was really formulated.

Like you were hearing more about people volunteering at food banks than you were necessarily hearing about people organizing politically. And then I can't remember exactly, I mean it must have been like, like I had a conversation at some point with Tom Kalin about after the um uh, after the Gran Fury piece had gone up at the

New Museum.

ALEX FIALHO: Is that *Silence = Death*?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, yeah. There was some talk about bringing them out to New Langton to do some sort of a project, there was some sort of initial thing. And um, and yeah, um, and then there was like oh gosh, I'm trying to remember like, '89 also *Art Against AIDS on the Road* came out.

ALEX FIALHO: I didn't know it was that early.

NAYLAND BLAKE: To San Francisco, yeah, I'm pretty sure. And then, right around that time, ACT UP San Francisco started organizing. And I think it was maybe a year after that, that it split like into ACT UP San Francisco, ACT UP SF and ACT UP Golden Gate.

ALEX FIALHO: What was the reason for that?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well it's interesting that you don't know this story. So there, and I'm pretty sure that it's ACT UP Golden Gate, basically a group of, I don't know how to describe this, they were a group of leftist organizers who were I think sort of got their start in like Bob Avakian's Revolutionary Socialist Party and uh but had basically um, God how do you even describe this, they basically attach themselves to whatever cause was having the most like political heat in the street like that was going on.

So for a while it was like they were in the anti-nuclear thing, and basically their MO was that they would like you know, start showing up at meetings and basically kind of hijack the organization and they sort of did it with ACT UP SF at a certain point and then there was like a big schism and like I was long gone by that point, I think Rick was still, had still been going to ACT UP meetings around that time but, eventually ACT UP Golden Gate hitched their wagon to you know the sort of HIV denier movement, like it got, like really super weird and like—

ALEX FIALHO: And they could still use the ACT UP name in however they wanted I guess.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, and I mean so like that's one of these quirks of like Bay area politics you know that yeah, they were still calling themselves ACT UP, they were just calling themselves ACT UP Golden Gate. And I think that they're still around. I think that they are still active and still like, HIV deniers. But that was, you know that was one of those things that was like, oh, okay, this is what makes this place different than other locations than other locations right, because it was possible to have like that kind of political infighting in the midst of all of this.

Um, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How were you finding that HIV/AIDS as it became more and more prevalent was affecting your communities, particularly art and artists?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Um, well it's interesting I mean there was in some ways the kind of adjustment of behavior to like people got to the place of like you assume everyone's positive. It became odd when anybody you know died of anything else. There was the feeling in a way of San Francisco being so adrift and kind of absent from the rest of the country. I mean I think that's also maybe one of the other things that was sort of fueling this you know connection across cities, it's like, "Well, these are people who got it."

And I also believe that there was a kind of urgency at that time, um, like somebody who you know I was sort of lucky enough to show work to early on who I know also showed work around to other people was Bill Olander and I think one of the things about Bill was and Bill Arning is like this too, it's like people who will tell you about other artists and when Bill died, Bill Olander, I know that for me personally it was like, "Oh, it's important to tell other people about someone." Like it's important, no one else is going to do it. The people who know who the gay artist are if they don't do it nobody else is going to, right. And um, yeah, that became uh, that became kind of like a big part of the scene was making sure you let other people know.

I'm trying to think of who else. At a certain point, well um I, one of the things about New Langton was that they also had like a writing program, um and sort of through there I met Bob Gluck and he and I were involved for a while. And you know, Bob also had, I think was in the midst of losing one person that he had gone out with but Bob was also connected to Loring McAlpin so he had a connection to the sort of New York queer art world sort of ACT UP folks and you know he's good friends with Dennis and then and uh Lynne Tillman and Kathy Acker eventually moved out there.

So there was that, again this sort of writing component um, and along with that, I mean people who were important in that scene are like Kevin Killian and Dodie Bellamy and a lot of the organizing for things like ACT UP um and other arts events were happening around the gay bookstores in particular A Different Light bookstore

which also had like branches in New York and branches in Los Angeles and was like a sort of you know a distribution point for places in other cities.

ALEX FIALHO: How did it begin to figure into your own work?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well you know, they had like you know performances and readings. There was you know, it was a good place to pick up smart guys. It's where I met D-L Alvarez for example, was somebody who worked at A Different Life who a little crushed out on him and we ended up becoming pals and so it was like a place that you would go in the caster all the time to you know. Um, and again, it's a place where artist were working, and I'm trying to think.

So, hmm, yeah, I mean D-L would be a good person to talk to for this project.

ALEX FIALHO: How did you find that HIV/AIDS was figuring into your artworks at this stage?

NAYLAND BLAKE: I think that, I think that for me starting in the mid-'80s um we were, there was certainly this uh sense of feeling physically imperiled, a sort of you know paranoia about your own body, um about fluids, about you know, and so for me, I think in a way began externalizing all this stuff and thinking about the way that substances were having a kind of charged, a sort of charged emotional life on their own. And so uh, you know, we um, I also you know was around sort of the fringes of the leather scene in San Francisco and certainly was interested in a lot of that stuff and so I started incorporating imagery from that.

Um, and so for me the state of not really mortality but a kind of imperiled and heightened physicality was something that I started using in the work a lot more. Um, you know, the idea of safety, just certain words, the big debate over like safe sex or safer sex.

Um, the you know, the baths in San Francisco had shut down, I think before I got there. Um, so those questions about like you know public sex or anonymous sex. Um.

ALEX FIALHO: Is the, oh I thought you were about to say something else.

NAYLAND BLAKE: No go ahead.

ALEX FIALHO: Is the work like *After Veronica* with blood and semen and saliva immediate contact with that.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, exactly. And so I was making these pieces that were like preserves or sort of you know, there's a bunch of pieces from that time are like pornographic books coated in wax or in lead paint. So this idea of making like stuff that's preserved or sort of you know uh, sort of kind of mummifying things, and I think that stuff also traced back to my own experience of kind of you know picking up guys in porn book stores and uh so, you know I was very interested in the way in which a substance can just provoke an emotional response and a sort of physical response through one's projection into it.

Um, and then I think that there was, you know I started using a lot of candles or things with you know, sort of little set ups of uh arrangements of objects.

Um there's this piece that I did around that time that was a tea set that was uh you know in the container for the tea was ashes from a copy of *Philosophy in the Bedroom* by de Sade. So for me it was a lot about like, "Well how do we have these ideas and how do these ideas gain physical form and what's the difference," "What is the effect of them," either the sort of erotic nature of them or the sort of toxic nature of them. And so in that sense, yeah, it's a very kind of cerebral relationship to, to uh to the epidemic.

But I think what it in some ways is cerebral but in other ways is also very much about physicality, it's like not about trying to find representation you know. Um, and I do think that that's like I've always had a difficult time with protest art that is like, you know my feeling is always like, "Well if you want drug testing protocols changed at the CDC like don't make a painting of a sad person in a room with a bare lightbulb," it's like, "Go yell at the CDC." It's like the idea that somebody would see your painting of a sad person and somehow connect it up with a chain of action seems to me kind of naïve at best.

So yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: I think too, there's something about the way that you were talking about, prior to AIDS and its representations, work that was thought of as gay as only being related to beefcake. Instead, as you're bringing up, and what you are talking about, whether bodily fluids and questions of contact that come from that, or candles as material and the associations that we have from that, just almost like the discourse opened up around sexuality and it's intersections, with a critical discourse coming to the floor at this moment around AIDS, and it's unfortunate of course that that had to be the reason that happened. But were there other artist in your circle that you were looking to in San Francisco or elsewhere, I mean you've mentioned many, but in your very

immediate dialogue about a lot of this stuff?

NAYLAND BLAKE: You know, uh John Lindell, uh I met uh Don Moffett around that time but Don wasn't making so much work. Felix, Stephen Evans, and um oh my God I can't believe I'm blanking on the guy who was his partner's name at the time, I'm actually looking at a piece of his that I traded him with, he's the Director at uh, oh Michael Jenkins. So Michael and Stephen were partners at the time and both making work.

Uh, certainly Richard Hawkins, uh Doug Ischar, although that was a little different. Uh, so you know there were, you know there were people who were investigating the physicality of it. People who were in one way or another sort of involved in a kind of historical project around it. Um, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How about a project like Art Against AIDS, which I think you said '89 was it, when you're asked to have a more explicit relationship to HIV/AIDS, tell me a little bit about the piece that you made and how that came to be.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Um I got approached by um Ann [Philbin], Oh my God, I just blanked on that, um, she's the Director of the Hammer.

ALEX FIALHO: Now I'm blanking.

NAYLAND BLAKE: And was the Director of the Drawing Center. And before that she worked for this publicity firm Livet-Reichart which is still around, Ann.

ALEX FIALHO: You keep going with the story and I'm going to pull this up [laughter.]

NAYLAND BLAKE: Now it's just crazy. So anyway, Livet Reichard was commissioned by amfAR—

ALEX FIALHO: Philbin.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Annie Philbin, yes, to put together this *Art Against AIDS On the Road* project. And they, I don't remember exactly how she heard about me, but it was probably by somebody in New York at that point. And so, you know they laid out the project. The idea was that we were going to do stuff for billboards or bus shelters or transit things.

And so, I got picked to do something for a bus shelter and the piece I did was this uh, you know his Victorian, using this Victorian clipart of this bouquet in deep red against a black background with a text in gold that said "Don't leave me this way." You know to me it was, and the bus shelter ended up being situated across the street from San Francisco City Hall.

You know to me it was using like a pop culture phrase, you know a phrase that I had associated a lot with like going out and dancing in San Francisco and also thinking about people on the bus like coming and going. Um, and so you know it was, it I think the thing that tied it in for me with the rest of my work was that it was about a specific site and that was really, and really like thinking about a kind of location and the sort of intimacy of the bus shelter and thinking about that as a space that is out in public but is also quiet and contained.

And so I guess in some ways it kind of goes back to thinking about like, you know, what I was saying way back about stuff happening out on the streets of New York and thinking about that context. And to me it didn't really make sense to you know, it's a much more directly emotional thing than I would necessarily put in the gallery.

But I think when you put something in the gallery somebody's going to be looking at it for a lot longer and they're going to be, you know they're going to be in a very different mental space. And I think that's the thing I feel strongly about throughout all of the work, it's like understanding where the work is going to be and what you can do with that situation, like can you make a space for complexity or you know, or does it have to be direct.

ALEX FIALHO: How about a piece like a clock with another AIDS death every twelve minutes and the context there [*Every 12 Minutes*].

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, that was the stat that was floating around at the time that I made it. And that again that was something that was conceived of quite specifically, I was at that point, I mean that's probably like '92 or '93 or something, at that point you know we were all getting asked to donate things for, you know there was a lot of fundraising going on, so I wanted to come up with a multiple that I could donate to places and so I came up with the clock and that was the, it was at the time, it was like there's one AIDS death every twelve minutes. So, um, yeah, that's much more of a sort of agit prop almost out of Barbara Kruger in its look.

Again, but as an object it's about sort of trying to make that you know bridge people's experience from the abstraction to the actual clock ticking. So I think that in the stuff that is much more about my own life, there's much more of a sense of ambiguity and questioning in the way that I was approaching materials in a kind of

open ended narrative in those things that more publicly directed, it's less about that and more about a direct address.

ALEX FIALHO: Makes sense. I think let's call it a day.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Sounds good.

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ALEX FIALHO: This is Alex Fialho interviewing Nayland Blake at the artist's home in Brooklyn, New York on November 26, 2016 for the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution, card number 2.

Okay, so yesterday we got up to some of the communities you were involved in in the Bay Area, and I think we'll spend some more time in and around that. And one exhibition or context set up from prior discussion that seemed like an important one was the show *Sick Joke*—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ALEX FIALHO: —at Kiki Gallery, and I think that maybe that's a good place to kind of crack open some of the other players in the San Francisco scene around art and cultural production around HIV/AIDS.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Sure. I mean, *Sick Joke* was a bit later, and Kiki was a bit later than what we were talking about, but I mean, maybe the way to kind of lead into that is that I—one of the things I've been thinking about is that there really was a way that quite early on I think that San Francisco had the most sophisticated kind of social services response. So things like the Shanti Project and things like, you know, food delivery services for people with HIV/AIDS and the—and the kind of organizing that was around the medical community and Grace Church. So a lot of that stuff was in place relatively early, like '85, '86, and so it felt like the—in a sense, people were kind of shocked by and overwhelmed by the numbers of people who were getting sick, but there also was a kind of social network that was responding to that also. It was like people sort of knew in a—in a way what to do. So I think that's one of the reasons why the sort of ACT UP phase of activism in San Francisco was not as sustained.

But you know, I'm just sort of—I'm just remembering like, you know, at like the, you know, annual pride parade, which would become like, you know, there were just group after group of AIDS service organizations. You know, there was like a big ACT UP contingent, but then—but then there were all of these other groups that were sort of organized or—you know. And in a way, San Francisco kind of moved very quickly from the sort of the ACT UP phase to the Queer Nation phase. And so a lot of folks I think were really—I mean, by the time like Queer Nation in San Francisco, I feel like that started around late 1990. And it was, you know, organized around queer visibility, but also around a bunch of different issues, and so that seemed like a place where a lot of other people were getting involved.

So Rick Jacobsen, who started Kiki, was someone who had been involved with ACT UP, and then also with Queer Nation, and again, was somebody who was not a, you know, trained gallerist or dealer person. It was really somebody who was kind of making something up out of their own, you know, out of their own mindset, in a sense, on his own impulse. And it was a kind of, I think, thing that coalesced out of Rick's interest in queer punk, but also his connection with certain people in the club scene, and so all of it was much more freewheeling. And so, you know, *Sick Joke*, I mean, at the point that that show happened, you know, I think Rick knew he was positive at that point. I don't think—I—yeah, it was—it was later than that that he was—that he was diagnosed. So you know, the idea of doing something that was about like black humor and really, you know, jokes in relation to AIDS was coming much more out of the zine and punk scene than necessarily out of like that's their mainstream caregiver thing that was going on there.

I think the other thing that was like—I mean, I talked last time about the sort of generational split between people who were involved in institution building and people who were, you know, identified more with—more with punk, and I think that was a thing that was—kept trying to surface in various ways in San Francisco throughout the late '80s, and a lot of it was around clubs and bars. So you had—I remember there was a night at a bar called The Crystal Pistol in the Mission, I think, and that was this night that ran for a while called Fag Bar, and yeah. I mean, I wonder how much of this—I'm—I feel like I'm rambling a little bit but, you know, Loma Prieta was like in '88.

ALEX FIALHO: The earthquake.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah. And one of the things that it did was it shut down like some big thrift stores and bars, and particularly bars with back rooms, south of Market. So The Lonestar, which was the—which emerged as the bear bar, was initially sort of happening at a bar that was further downtown, but that got closed down. And—you know, and then Fag Bar started up, and then the people who started—the guys who started Fag Bar, this guy

Michael—what was his last name? Was Blue, I think? Michael Blue? Canton—maybe, I don't—I might be wrong about that. They started this night, Club Uranus at The End Up, and that was really the place where like Jerome Caja and, you know, Heklina and a bunch of other sort of alt drag queens got their starts, or at least were sort of presiding.

ALEX FIALHO: Club Uranus.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Jerome was sort of like the host of Club Uranus for a while. And so that was a lot of basically like queer sort of art-club kids who were coming along and were like, you know, really irreverent. There was like a zine that they put out called *Tantrum*. I remember that was like—a lot of it was about, you know, sort of making fun of mainstream gay life in San Francisco, and sort of the combination of like Queer Nation and that sort of club energy and stuff that was happening in the art world in some ways kind of coalesced in Rick starting Kiki. And it just so happened that he—that the place that he got, the storefront that he got was next door to something called Red Dora's Bearded Lady, which was a like lesbian teahouse. And that was also sort of like the alt lesbian hangout, and that—the two storefronts shared a sort of a yard in the back that was kind of small, little patio area.

ALEX FIALHO: Teahouse meaning?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Meaning literally like it was like a coffee shop, tea shop. That was kind of—that was kind of the idea, like hang out.

ALEX FIALHO: A bit more daytime, as opposed to bar or—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. But I mean, you know, there was a lot of—you know, there were like—people were doing like sort of performances and readings at a lot of—you know, at both places. Rick for a while hosted a sort of nightly talk show by—hosted by Joan Jett Blakk—

ALEX FIALHO: Nice.

NAYLAND BLAKE: —who was a drag performer at the time, and—

ALEX FIALHO: I think I've seen her presidential—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: —campaign spoof.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, yeah. She campaigned for mayor for a while, and—

ALEX FIALHO: Exactly.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. She was great. She did—you know, it was like hilarious interviewing. You know, Rick had—gave Cathy Opie one of her first shows. Actually, the Bearded Lady of Red Dora's Bearded Lady is—was Harry Dodge.

ALEX FIALHO: Oh.

NAYLAND BLAKE: And so—

ALEX FIALHO: Owner or namesake?

NAYLAND BLAKE: I think kind of presiding spirit, not—I don't think—I don't know if—I don't know if Harry was ever like involved in the—in the owning of any of it. And I mean, weirdly enough, I'd reconnected with Harry years later because Harry decided to come to Bard for grad school.

ALEX FIALHO: Yes.

NAYLAND BLAKE: So that, you know, that was very cool. And yeah, so it was one of these—it's funny, there was a sort of first burst of creativity in the San Francisco art scene. I would say like around, you know, '86, '87, a lot of people like starting up projects and a lot of things happening. And then—and then about eight years later, there was like another, I would say like another big burst. And yeah, it was very much like Rick's vision, and he would do these kind of eccentric things. I think his last show was a tribute to—what was it—a tribute to Yoko Ono, so a bunch of us made pieces and I think word of it got back to Yoko, and so we got like—Rick had a—had a—like a message on his phone machine from Sean and Yoko, who were like super-excited that he was doing the show.

Somebody else who was really active in, you know, in the lesbian community there was Cecilia Dougherty, was very involved in making videos. Another really pivotal person was Kevin Killian and his partner Dodie Bellamy. You know, so there—so there was sort of all of that energy going on, and as well as the sort of cross-national realization of a sort of generation of queer artists, and I think a lot of that was what led Larry Rinder to approach me about curating *In a Different Light*. And so that was, you know, that was like a big project that—yeah. And working on that show was really—

ALEX FIALHO: At Berkeley Art Museum.

NAYLAND BLAKE: At—yes, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: In '94.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, I think it opened in '94 and ran into '95. And yeah, I mean, it was a—an attempt to both sum up a lot of the previous efforts to try to sort of make connections both historical and geographic. There was I think—one of the things that was an ongoing discussion of it was—like in formulating the show was what's the—how do we talk about HIV/AIDS, or what's the—what—you know, how is—how is that present in the show, or how does it—how does it work? And we ended up organizing the show around a series of sort of expanding ideas. So starting with—starting with *Void*.

And it was—you know, in *Void*, it was like works that were about loss and absence. So we had a piece by a Bay Area artist named Rudy Lemcke who had erased a—John Cage's score for *Four Minutes, and Thirty-Three Seconds* [4'33"]. We had a Judy Chicago piece that was about receiving criticism and feeling, you know, your, you know—feeling sort of ripped open by that and sort of—and we had a wallpaper piece by Rex Ray that was—I think it's a photogram, I think, of a semen stain. So you know, yeah, this is—this is work from the—from that section. A painting by Judie Bamber, Warhol, Jackie photographs. And we went from—it went in a series of expanding areas or expanding notions from there. So you know, it—the other section that really had the most to do with work around HIV/AIDS was in a section that we called The World. We kind of went from like *Void* to *Self* to *Other* to *Family* to, you know, to—I think it was like *Community* to *World*.

ALEX FIALHO: Drag, couple.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Right.

ALEX FIALHO: Orgy, utopia.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah. And so when we got to the *World* section, that was the—to us, the place where it was about people addressing the world, and so that sort of activist work around then. That was sort of where we—where we tried to fit it in. And you know, part of it, I think, at that point our thinking was, you know, in '94, we're looking at, you know, how can you talk about queer experience that is not entirely determined by and flattened into HIV/AIDS? And so it was, how do you actually place this within a history of ideas and try to talk about the ways in which the particular queerness of the people who were affected actually determined what the response was, and determined the ways in which this—the virus was viewed and engaged with?

So you know, I think the show received its most sustained criticism from people who were identified as like gay art critics who wanted to see something that was more immediately recognizable. And you know, I think that that's—

ALEX FIALHO: As a sensibility or a—

NAYLAND BLAKE: As a kind of roll call of like this is a gay person making gay art.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: And in a weird way, it was another weird recycling of that sort of generational argument of like, you know, is this about having a kind of essentialist identification that gets back to the gay and lesbian, you know, history class at Bard, right? It's like do you—do you treat gayness as if it's an ethnicity—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: —or do you try to talk about queerness as a mode and what it might mean for a wide range of people to have access to that thought, that type of thought? So that's kind of where it, you know, where things—where things sort of shook out. And I think that that's—you know, in a way, that is the ongoing—I don't—I don't know if confusion is the right word, but I do feel like there's that, you know—I feel like this show still stands as a very complex way of looking at how an idea functions in contemporary art.

And I'm still immensely proud of it, you know? I'm very proud of the book that was—you know, and the book

wouldn't have happened without Amy Scholder as the editor who was, you know, an editor at Citylights Books and was, you know, very close to David Wojnarowicz, and somebody who has, you know, a very interesting and complicated take on San Francisco at the time. And you know, Amy brought in a—just a huge amount of thought to the book.

And one of the things that we wanted the book to do was to also provide a kind of timeline and tool for other researchers, you know. So that's why we commissioned the essays that we did from earlier shows, and you know, I'd sort of write in the—my essay or we sort of state in the book like that we hope that the show is kind of the first, you know, the—or at least the next step in this path and like hoping that it's going to sort of expand out. And that's something that didn't happen. You know, it ended up being more the culmination of an idea than the expand, than the, you know, beginning of an idea. But I think that's what's starting to happen now is that 20 years on, it's—like, that's starting to get looked at again.

ALEX FIALHO: Do you have a sense of why it didn't, why it did feel like it culminated as opposed to opened out from there?

NAYLAND BLAKE: I think that right at that point—and if, I mean, if you start to look at like '95 and '96, like '96, you know, is—I moved back to New York, and if you look at the Bay Area, that's when the first tech boom hits, and suddenly there's a—suddenly artists are being like priced out.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: It's also at the point where the first drug cocktails are really, you know, gaining some traction, and so suddenly you start to have people who are, you know, managing, you know, living much longer with AIDS. And it starts to be regarded as a kind of chronic condition. Within the art world, you start to see the backlash against identity politics and the rise of a sort of—a new sort of generation of kind of cynical painters. Like there was a bizarre sort of embrace of wealth and polish in the art world in those years. And so suddenly, you know, suddenly it was like the early '80s all over again. [Laughs.]

And you know, in the same way that like the Whitney's *Black Male* show, right, in '94, was—ended up being kind of in some ways a culmination. You know, that they were like a series of these big shows that were like looking at a kind of, you know, flowering of activity within particular communities in relationship to the art world, and that is—you know, I think that that art is uncomfortable for folks.

ALEX FIALHO: What work did you show in *Black Male*?

NAYLAND BLAKE: I had a small installation called *Invisible Man*. It had a modified dollhouse with a video attached of me doing a little puppet performance of the play *Harvey*. There was a series of dolls, the sort of—the Little One dolls, the bisque dolls seated in a circle, and there were a couple of family photographs of me with my parents with rabbits, with like live rabbits.

So yeah, I mean, I think that there was—there was a time of retrenchment in the—in the late '90s.

ALEX FIALHO: For me, it makes complete sense knowing your sculptural practice and the importance of arrangement, I would say, as a method to think of you working as a curator and also in your work with New Langton—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ALEX FIALHO: —as programs director, and so it makes complete sense. But also, can you talk about that sort of artist-curator line that you toed, and what you got out of curating, what you found to be more at home in your role as an artist—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ALEX FIALHO: —just the back-and-forth between those two practices, if there is any—if they are even distinct in any way in your mind.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah. I mean, I feel like I'm—I mean, somebody that I admire very much once turned to me out of the blue and asked me like, "What are you here for?" And it—at—the first thing that popped out of my mouth was, "To make connections." And so for me, I think that pretty much everything I do and the thing that I'm happiest doing is showing people the connections between things, like finding the connections between ideas and showing those to people. And you know, it's like I love to introduce people to each other, you know, who I think will, you know, enjoy each other. And so I feel like I do that in my work, and that's what curating is for me.

And the thing that is pleasurable about curating is like, I don't have to make all the stuff [laughs], you know? I

mean, I also believe really directly like, you know, if I want to show you how two songs are related, well, one way to do that is for me to sing both of them, but another way for me to do that is as a DJ. And I always feel like just—it's better to just go directly to, you know, sort of, in some ways the least amount of effort. So that's the way that curating has always kind of functioned for me, and also I feel like it's better to be a resource. It's better to be of service.

And you know, I talked about how where most of the criticism of *In a Different Light* came from. You know, the artists who were included were—we didn't hear a bad thing from any artist who was included, and in fact, a number of the straight-identified artists who were included—like in the sections that they were included, they were like, "Thank you. Nobody's ever really thought about this aspect of my work before. It's something that I think about, and you know, no one's ever talked about it that way."

And so I—you know, that is—for me, the curatorial part is always kind of exciting to me, because I'd love to see how things go together, and I—you know, I have the luxury of doing it as an artist, so as an artist, I could say to—you know, I could say to Larry that, "Look, you know, the way that usually most shows are curated is somebody thinks about a theme, and then they get a bunch of artists that they think fit that theme, and then they go to those artists and they ask for work." And I want to take it in the other direction. I want to start like—you know, let's ask ourselves the question of like, "What objects do we want to see together? Like, what's—like what combination of pieces is exciting to you?" And then go from there to really think about like, "Okay, so what does this—what thematic ideas does this combination suggest to you?" And then what other things can we bring in to like tease out those connections?

But that's not really the way somebody who's trained as a curator goes about putting a show together. So you know, I get the luxury of doing it in a wacky way because my—I'm primarily identified as an artist.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. That's my sense too, in listening to your artist talk, for instance, about how content comes into your work in that it's what most people would say is almost backwards in that—you say it better than I would.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: But the work almost exists, and then you learn from it. And I want to get back to your work specifically, and I'm—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ALEX FIALHO: —just thinking about a way into that, and I'm thinking I did—have done these oral histories with people like Gregg Bordowitz and Ron Athey—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: —Gregg has video work that's almost like a video every few years.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ALEX FIALHO: And Ron has these large-scale productions, and we sort of lingered with each of those major bodies—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ALEX FIALHO: —those major works, and for you, you are incredibly prolific. You know, from watching this artist lecture, this California College of the Arts lecture, for instance, you flipped through 30 images, and that's like a year. And that's probably just the tip of the iceberg, so I'm kind of interested to open it up to you in terms of other specific works that you want to pull out from this moment, or maybe themes or motifs. How would you want to dive into the work that you made in this sort of '80s, '90s time?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I think that—well, maybe there—maybe an interesting way to kind of talk about it is to try to talk about like the sort of questions that I'm having about the work right now.

ALEX FIALHO: Cool.

NAYLAND BLAKE: And particularly like in the wake of the election, I'm really realizing like how much less I read, like and how much—and how I would like, you know, how crucial books are for me. And I talked before about like, you know, *In a Different Light* as—at—the bookstore, A Different Light bookstore, and how important it was as a place that had like performances and readings and lectures but also was like a zine distribution point. And the other thing about those bookstores is that at that time, it was a little bit like you could—like gay and lesbian

culture was actually kind of graspable as a corpus. Like, it—there—you know, those—they were not huge stores, so you could probably—you could at least go to—get a sense of like the books in your discipline.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: You know, and I kind of saw that go from in the '70s, like, you know, there were 50 books, you know, to, you know, 1,500 to 4,000. But that sense of having ideas that were in dialogue with other ideas in your community, that is something that is—that has always been kind of crucial to me, and has kind of been falling by the wayside for me in recent years, more through just sort of my habits of consuming culture than anything else.

And I do believe that for me, in terms of making work, I'm—I am in a kind of dialogue in it, even though it's not about a—like, I'm going to make this piece in response to something that this person said, but it's like in the midst of reading and kind of going through things, it's like ideas for particular forms or arrangements start to pop up, and then after I make those pieces, I go back into them and go like, "Okay, what does this remind me of? What does this look like?" You know, a certain amount of the pieces recently are because they have been improvised, they're in a way less narrative, and I feel like in that where a lot of that work in the—in the '80s and '90s, there was a much more like one-to-one correlation between—I was thinking like, okay, this in some ways kind of symbolizes this.

But the—you know, the stuff—and I—and I wish I was sort of clearer about this, but I feel like the—that what I'm trying to do with the work is to, you know, create a record of my responses to the situation that I find myself in. And when I look at that work—and we were sort of talking about this in the last session—you know, in '86 and '87, I'm responding in a very particular way to, "This is kind of what my body feels like at this moment." You know, sometimes vulnerable, sometimes permeable, tied up in substances, you know, visible and invisible, and that's sort of the first response, which is kind of physical response, like the handkerchief pieces and the water-wine-vinegar-piss pieces and the preserves. And then there's the response that starts to come out of my reading, right, and so the big installation pieces, the suite pieces, like *The Schreber Suite* in—at university art museum in '89 is a very—it's—is a very elaborate series of responses to this particular text of Daniel Paul Schreber's, and my interest in that text comes out of reading, you know, queer theory about Freud and the queer basis of paranoia, and thinking about—you know, I got interested in Schreber because I was reading Guy Hocquenghem and then that is a show that combines both objects that I made, reproductions of objects in the museum, and then works selected from the museum's collection, and it's an attempt to enact on the body of the museum a similar form of bodily distress that's described in Schreber's text, which just also was very resonant to my own physicality and the—and the ways in which homosexuality was being pathologized in the midst of the epidemic.

You know, to sort of leap to a recent project of, you know, at ICP, you know, the *Knee-deep in the Flooded Victory* project, that again was an installation that used works from ICP's collection that had stuff that I made but was also trying to talk about ICP's location in Times Square, my own history with being in Times Square. It was trying to use the spaces of the museum that are normally not thought about as spaces of intellect, so using the bathrooms, using the café, you know, basically—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: —embodiment once again. And then a series of performances of me as this fictional character sort of wandering around to the sites of where like—you know, I had gone to porn theaters and adult bookstores growing up, and so a kind of—you know, at that point, I was doing a kind of like mourning procession around to those—around to those places. And so in some ways, it's like I think that the work is now more embodied, but because it's also very much tied to my own consciousness as the connecting thread for all of it, I'm—it's—I'm not sure how legible it is [laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: In and of itself, or as a project by artist Nayland Blake?

NAYLAND BLAKE: In and of—in and of itself. But then again, I mean, you know, the people whose work has always been the most resonance to me, like people like Jack Smith or you know, I mean, in a way these are people whose experiences is bound up in fragments and in about—and so you know, maybe that isn't—maybe that isn't such a problem. I don't know. I do think that the work kind of has gone to some places that are very abstract in their—in their—in their overall form. And then also just very personal.

ALEX FIALHO: What were some of the shows that you were having late '80s, early '90s?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well, I was primarily showing at—you know, I was in a lot of group shows, so you know, I was in an early group show at 303, an early group show at American Fine Arts in New York. My first solo show in New York was in 1990 at a place—at a place called Petersberg, which was founded by Clarissa Dalrymple, who is one of the founders of Cable Gallery, and in Los Angeles, I was showing with Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery, and then worked with a couple of different galleries in San Francisco, eventually ending up at Paule Anglim. And I also did a residency in London in '92 at a place called Milch. And that was kind of a big, like, kind of amazing project. A

lot of the pieces from that project kind of disappeared because their financial situation was not really stable [laughs.] You know, '91, I was in the Whitney Biennial. I think earlier that year I was in a show at the Whitney called *Mind Over Matter*, organized by Richard Armstrong.

ALEX FIALHO: How about *The Ground Is Back* in SF, the '93 *Jerk* Artspace publication? That was accompanied by a show, or was that a book? And maybe just talk about Artspace overall a little bit too?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, I mean, I was—This is sort of off to the side, but—

ALEX FIALHO: Of course.

NAYLAND BLAKE: An interesting show maybe to look at in—and I think this was in '93 as well, was a show at SFMoMA called *Facing the Finish*, which was—which had—Jerome was in it, and I was in it, and it was a show that was like sort of I think the last exhibition in their space in civic center before they opened their—before they moved to their new building. But that was like an interesting kind of group of people who were—like James Luna was in that show. It was like a really odd grouping of people. Anyway.

Yeah, I mean, *Jerk* came about because Anne at Artspace started to do a series of books where she was pairing writers and artists, so there's one with Jim Goldberg, and I think that they're all designed by Rex Ray. The—and the idea—or the design notion was like sort of Little Golden Books. So mine was a collaboration with Dennis Cooper, and my thinking was I had been doing a lot of work with puppets one way or another, and so the idea was that it would be all of my pieces that related to puppets, and then Dennis would write something in relationship to it.

The—and then right around that time I did a show at Artspace which was sort of the first iteration of another one of these big suite installations called *The Philosopher Suite* that was looking at de Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, with this sort of marionette stage with these marionettes, and then there was a—I did this sort of elaborate video that was in a peep booth that was—that was sort of a combination peep booth/podium that was in the center of the space, and then there was a hand-puppet version, and I think that the first—yeah, I guess that was '93, was when we did that show. And then a year later, I did another version of it at Thread Waxing Space in New York, sort of more elaborate version.

ALEX FIALHO: Talk to me a little bit about puppets.

NAYLAND BLAKE: You know, I had been—well, there was also a kind of a piece, but kind of a big piece around that time, Wayland Flowers' puppet Madame came up for auction at a San Francisco auction house, and so I ended up buying it. I was sort of—I was kind of determined that I wanted to do something with it, and it was weird that it was just kind of like—it was part of a kind of like movie memorabilia—

ALEX FIALHO: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

NAYLAND BLAKE: —auction. And so—

ALEX FIALHO: How did that even come on your radar?

NAYLAND BLAKE: I might—you know, it's the sort of thing like I might have read something about it in the BAR, like it—like, I think that there was some notice somewhere that it was—that it was coming up. And it's not—you know, it's not his only—the only Madame puppet that he made. He made—you know, I think there were five in all. And I think one of the things about puppets is that they are this odd sort of potential. Like, once I had—once I'd—I had bought Madame, it—you know, the puppet was there in my studio for a while before I could figure out what to do with it. And it—you know, one of the things that's really creepy is that it's not painted. I mean, it is painted to some extent, but it's actually makeup on it, so it has that smell of—it has that smell of like old makeup. I really—it was like, oh, this is like, you know, my grandmother's makeup [laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: And it could rub off in a sense.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, and so—yes, yeah, certain parts of it. And we—you know, a number of us put it on, like held it, and we could all do the motions, but none of us could do the voice. And there's something about puppets that is—they are in between sculpture and actor, that they seem to have their own kind of imperative about like how they want to move and what they want to sound like, and it's not entirely determined, I think, by the operator.

ALEX FIALHO: Huh.

NAYLAND BLAKE: You know, they're not really—they're something other than an actor.

ALEX FIALHO: But not as static or impartial as a sculpture.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Right. Right. And I mean, you know, as I had said before, I think one of the things that distinguishes or that has run through my sculpture, all the way through, is that it is always sort of object-sized and not sculpture-sized. It's always about—it's—it leaves a space for people to be able to project their own bodies into some form of interaction with it.

So that piece, the piece that I ended up making with Madame, was a much more strictly like elegiac piece. It's a traveling case, so it's kind of related to all of these kit pieces that I was making, but it's this sort of traveling case that the puppet is kind of trussed up inside of, and then the packing material is shredded paper but also artificial flowers that are—that look like they're kind of aged. And I remember thinking how weird it was to like find these like silk roses that looked like they were like sort of, you know, withering to some extent. And so, you know, Wayland Flowers and bouquet flowers, and you know, that's one of those cases where it's in some ways a much more straight-ahead kind of memorial object, you know. And a piece that was much more directly, you know, much more directly about the epidemic at that point.

ALEX FIALHO: I think maybe a counterpoint piece would be—I don't know what the title off the top of my head—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ALEX FIALHO: —but *Dust*, referencing The Stud flag?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: As a more poetic take on an icon.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah. Well, and also I think it's about—I mean, you know, that it was—that piece was first displayed not that far from where The Stud was.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: You know, and so to me, that it's—

ALEX FIALHO: Where was it displayed?

NAYLAND BLAKE: In a gallery south of Market in San Francisco about like three blocks from where The Stud was. So there was a really good chance that—I mean, and you know, most of—you know, most of my friends, we all went to The Stud anyway, so—but there was a very good chance that someone who was like a gallery-goer going in to see that show would have walked by The Stud on the way there or on the way out. And to me, that idea of having something sort of hit you again outside of the—outside of the gallery space, I guess that's maybe part of what I was talking about in terms of fragments earlier on. But I mean, part of my hope for the work is that it continues to resonate down the road, like when you—after you've, you know—you might see something in one of the shows and then be reading something later on and have it make sense. And so I—you know, I guess in some ways that's me answering my own fears about legibility. [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: My hope for the work is that it continues to sort of operate in people's minds, you know, for some period of time after they've seen it. But also another part of that—another part of the, you know, flag piece was this—and that piece was made like in '80—I guess like in '86? No, no, I guess that was—I guess that was like '87, '88, something like that. And you know, part of—part of the thing at that time and a thing that continues to me in the work is, you know, making the case for our own lived experience as it is happening. Like, you know, in the art scene in San Francisco in the—in the early '80s, you know, even though everybody was like going to The Stud, no one would talk about this—like, you wouldn't put The Stud in a painting, right; you wouldn't put The Stud—you know, and there was this sort of—it goes back to the kind of class and community divide that I was talking about going on there, you know, that part of I think what we were doing at that moment in addressing an art world in San Francisco was like going like, "Look, the stuff that's around here is already good enough." Like, instead of like looking to New York for some model for like, you know, how you should be proceeding or what art—you know, at that moment, like people were like, you know, "How can we have San Francisco's version of Julian Schnabel?" or "What do we think about Julian Schnabel?" Or "We all hate Julian Schnabel." Or what like—you know—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: —this sort of weird obsession with what the art press at the time was covering, which was pretty much exclusively New York. Instead, going like, "Okay, well, look at everything that's here. Look at what's amazing here."

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: And I think that that's sort of an ongoing thing. I'm still involved in trying to get people to think about where they are physically in relationship to stuff. You know, the last show at Matthew Marks was in part about a—in part about the—you know, the fact that those galleries are there but, you know, 20 years ago, that's where like the, you know, The Spike and The Eagle and, you know, and The Lure and, you know, all of these, you know, leather bars, that's where all that stuff was located. And it's all that stuff that got, you know, that—

ALEX FIALHO: In Chelsea, and—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah. And so that, you know, trying to reawaken people to, in some ways, what I think of as like the libidinal life of the city. [Laughs.] You know [laughs]?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. As a follow-up to that in terms of both referencing or a relationship to a lived experience and also thinking about the importance of let's say it's sexuality, or libidinal—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ALEX FIALHO: —to your work. I'm thinking for instance of like the restraint-type pieces—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ALEX FIALHO: And both the making of those but also the making of those at a moment where sexuality was fraught—I would say the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis is that time and I'm curious just about both your thinking in relationship to that work, but then also your thinking about making work about sexuality in this moment, and fetish and more than just sexuality.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Community and community coming together around sexuality.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well, I mean I see what I do sexually as being coextensive with what I do in the studio. So—and I was—like, on my date last night, you know, I was—I was—I was saying to the person that I was with, I was like, "I think that there are basically two types of people. I think there are people who fuck to confirm a sense of identity and people who fuck to explore the possibilities for identity." And for me, it's also the same thing in the studio. I make work to try to understand my—like what I am and who I am in the world. And particularly in relationship to fetishism and kink, it is an exploration that takes place with partners who are helping me to that understanding. And I'm most attracted to people who are explorers in that same way. So I like to be surprised to find myself aroused by something in the same way that I like to find myself to be surprised by having done something in the studio.

You know, it's really—and in this, I think in the broadest sense, I am a child of the '60s and of the New Left in that I believe that sex is a cultural expression and that by exploring the ways in which people use sex to express their cultural identity, we can also understand how society functions. And, you know, it is a societal act. So, you know, one thing I've said recently is that I've been doing a ton of performance work over the last 10 years, but it's performance work that happens within the kink community. And in those performances, the audience and the performers are the same people. And both have made an equal investment in finding each other and in creating a, you know, a space for each other to examine themselves. And so I'm not interested in exporting that into an art context because I feel like most of the exhibition strategies for contemporary art are based around a kind of asynchronous alienation that is utterly antithetical to what those performances are about.

So [laughs] this is touching on a kind of a bigger overall idea for me, but I think that there was a radical reimagining of people's bodies in the '60s and you saw it happen in the art world in relationship to performance artists like Carolee Schneemann and Vito Acconci. At the same time, you saw the rise of BDSM culture, where a lot of times people were doing exactly the same things as was happening in galleries. But because it was happening in people's dungeons, it was not, you know, it wasn't regarded in the—in the same way. And I mean you've talked to Ron. Ron is someone who has moved back and forth between those communities.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: I think that the, you know, I started including bondage items in my work in part because I liked that idea of a sculpture that you would sort of try on, but also that the design language of BDSM is basically Bauhaus inspired. It is all about form following function. You know, the reason why there's that Breuer chair that has the—that has all of the bondage stuff on it is it's all the same stuff. It's all stainless steel. It's all leather. It's all about like coming up with a notion of functionality and eroticizing a kind of functionality. So—

ALEX FIALHO: Which is your artwork.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: The Breuer chair with the restraints on it, yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah. You know, over time, I began to then ask myself like, "Okay, well, there's a lot of chains in the work. Like, as, you know, so when I say like, you know, that the sexuality is a cultural expression and I'm trying to sort of understand who I am, you know, like what does it mean for a descendant of slaves to have an interest in bondage, right? What does it mean to have, you know, that idea about being tied up or restrained or kind of, you know, depersonalized in that way? There's, you know, in a—in, you know, what does—what does latex fetishism mean when it is basically a second black skin that, you know, is so often worn by white people? You know, what does it mean that latex is a product of colonialism, you know, that comes into Europe because of—because of, you know, of colonial exploitation and the—and farming rubber?

So, like, that stuff that has a kind of, you know, erotic life to it is also cultural and I think that that's to me the thing that is the most powerful about a figure like de Sade, right, where, like, to read de Sade's books, it's almost you can tell typographically on the page what's going on. There's either sections where people are having sex and those are, like, short paragraphs with, like, little bits of dialogue or somebody is, like, starts in on a big long, you know, explanation about, like, the notion of free will or the—or whether or not, you know, someone goes off on a sort of philosophical tear and those are, like, huge long paragraphs [laughs] right. But I think what's important about him as a writer is that—is the assertion that philosophy issues from bodies and that you can't—you can't have a world where knowledge exists independent of bodies and bodies that, like, you know, eat and shit and fuck and, you know, are not always elevated. So I think that idea is very much in what I do and I don't—I think the thing that I've always hopefully wanted to reject is to—is to not exoticize sex and serve it up to a, you know, an audience that is supposedly safe from it and it—or made safe from it because it's happening within the sanctioned space of a gallery.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: I'm much more interested in, like, you know, if we're—want to talk about sex, then let's go where sex happens. You know, and if we want to talk about social interaction or consent, then let's look at situations where that isn't, you know, hidden behind the mechanisms of art viewing.

ALEX FIALHO: Great.

[They laugh.]

Another sort of zoom out bigger picture question—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ALEX FIALHO: —that I'm just curious to have any response to is the political culture at that time being a republican for 12 years.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: And how that affected the work—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: —in an explicit way.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well, I mean—

ALEX FIALHO: Or not, but—

NAYLAND BLAKE: I, you know, I'm—this might be—this might sound kind of glib, but I think people are at their best when they are not laboring under the illusion that something better might come along. And so having, like, daily news reports of—like, I had forgotten about this until just recently, but thinking about Prop 64 in California, which was this Lyndon LaRouche-sponsored initiative, a ballot initiative in California that called for, like, you know, criminalizing people with HIV, quarantining people with HIV. Like, the—basically that these things were, like, on the ballot and that they were not outliers, that every day you had, you know, people like Helms, you know, standing up in front of congress and in front of the press describing, you know, me and my friends as filthy and beyond sympathy and, you know, beyond all hope and bestial.

And then to have someone like Reagan, you know, not up there saying, like, I agree, but certainly not saying I disagree. And having this sort of grinning, like, oh, nothing's really going on, you know, that profound sense of your government at pretty much every level actively trying to find some way to attack you made it very clear

that if you were going to have any fun, it was going to be up to you. You know, and I think things go really wrong in the art world when the—when the message goes out that's like, "You know, actually things are kind of going okay. If you actually kind of do this, if you employ this strategy, like, you can have a pretty good life doing this." And, you know, which immediately makes everybody crazy because they are immediately like, "Well, okay, then maybe I shouldn't do what I'm doing," or it's like, "Oh, wait, there's some other criteria for how I'm going to have a good time or maybe—" You know, and so in that sense, like, the extremely negative and dismissive and oppressive politics of the time made it very easy for people to be like, "Well, fuck this. Like, the people who matter to me are the ones who are, like, right around me and this is what I'm interested in looking at right now and who knows how much longer I'm going to be around, so this is what I'm going to do."

And I think that that's, you know, which is not to argue that good art comes out of oppression, but that it's harder to remember what the real issues are when you're being fed the message that for some portion of you, you could probably be okay. And I think the thing that I—that is very easy to forget is how utterly disregarded queer people were in that period, kind of at every level. You know, and I started out by talking about, like, I started out by talking about, like, the beefcake thing, you know, and trying to think about, like, what gay art would be. And really in the art world as a whole, it's, like, that was a joke. Like, anybody who was, like, you know—you know, actively thinking about, like, who was asking you to take, you know, sex seriously was a joke. And that—and in some ways, it was, like, that's where the power of so much of that work came from. It's like that's where the power of, like, those wheat pasted pieces come from.

That's, like, that's where the power of graffiti comes from. It's like you—like, after being told that this, like, this city is not for you. It's not yours. You don't, you know, it's like those acts of sort of taking it back. That is—that's where—that's where people, you know, realized their power. You know, and, you know, spaces like *Times Square*, spaces like the piers, spaces, you know, areas of the city where people just, you know, the people who were sensible and who had money, like, didn't give a fuck, like, this was, like, worth less than nothing to them, right. This was, like, the place that had failed and, you know, and I think that was one of the things that was ultimately kind of amazing about that time. It was like all of these people who had been called failures realizing power.

ALEX FIALHO: Did you have a relationship to activism in that time in that, like, Queer Nation, ACT UP protest way?

NAYLAND BLAKE: I would say, yeah. I would say, you know, sporadically. I was never the person who would organize the march. I was probably the person who would show up at the second march, you know [laughs.] And as much as I would like to, you know, believe that I was the person at the, you know, up at the barricades, no, you know, it's not really true. Again, however, you know, like, the activism looked a little different in the Bay Area, you know.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: And yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: I think let's take a little pause here.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Okay. So I think that another part of the activism piece was just all of the less visible sort of sustained effort that everybody was putting in, the number of benefits that organizations were staging, the number of, like, auctions and donation sales and, you know, contingents that people were marching with and, you know, clothing drop offs and all of that stuff that was also very much going on in the community over the years. I think that's a big piece of it that isn't always quite so visible and I do think that, you know, there was throughout all of it still levels of stratification within San Francisco as a society and as a—and as an arts scene. And I feel like we were able to shift a lot of that, partially through receiving national attention to what we were doing, like, as people outside of the Bay Area started to notice artists from the Bay Area. Like, the people who were the local people started realizing, like, oh, there was actually something going on.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: But I do, you know, I do also think that there are people in the Bay Area who didn't necessarily translate outside of it. I mean we've mentioned Jerome a couple of times. I mean the first time I saw Jerome, I was going to work. It was—it must have been, like, '86 and I was going to work at Just Desserts at the café where I was opening up, and we opened at, like, 7:00 so we had to be there at 6:00 in the marina. And I remember, like, heading, you know, heading into work at 6:00 a.m. and seeing, like, this really tall kind of gawky super messy drag queen kind of stumbling around the Safeway parking lot and, like, you know, she sort of came over and, like, you know, wanted—like, you know, wanted coffee or whatever and it was clear that, like, you know, she'd gone home with somebody [laughs] in the neighborhood the night before and was, like, making her way back home. And, you know, it was, like, immediately striking and amazing and—but the thing that was so great about Jerome throughout was how punk she was and how, like, the drag that she did was so caustic in its

relationship to things like the gay pride march. And how the, you know, looking a mess was so much a critique of the sort of, you know, fun jester-y idea of drag that was really kind of prominent in the Bay Area.

And I mentioned Doris Fish and the Sluts-A-Go-Go, and in some ways they had some ties to the *Beach Blanket Babylon* show. They were a bit, you know, they were a bit outside of that, but they were still much more sort of put together and polished as performers than Jerome was, you know. You know, one of the first nights at Club Uranus, like, was, like, Jerome and his friend Adam Kline, who was—whose drag name was, like, Rena something, like, Jell-O wrestling. And it was just, like, you know, just gross and a mess and hilarious. And so—and that in part I think was something that Jerome got from, like, going to the San Francisco Art Institute, where there was, like, an important, you know, and I don't think that Jerome—I think Jerome studied painting there, but was—but there was always a really strong performance, you know, performance art scene there.

So, you know, thinking about someone like Jerome or thinking about someone like, you know, D-L Alvarez, who, you know, had, you know, who I encountered initially as a writer and then as a performer. D-L was in a performance group with my partner, Philip Horvitz and a guy named Christian Huygen at the time that did a—they had a performance group called Absolut Man pussy. And, you know, in some ways, they were, you know, well, like, Justin Vivian Bond was also on the scene at that point. And again, it was sort of not so much around Club Uranus, but around Eichelbergers, which was this club that was started up by transplants from New York who were friends—I mean it was named in honor of Ethyl. In fact, I had a moment. I tried very hard to get Ethyl to come to perform at New Langton Arts and we had her booked, and there was a lot of resistance. Like, the people who were sort of, like, the straight ahead art people in our organization were like, "Well, why do we, you know, we've got drag queens here, like, why do we want another drag queen?" And, like, really kind of not getting, you know, what was amazing about Ethyl. And the—she was, like, booked to come out and was supposed to get on the plane, and then I think got the news of being cast in *Comedy of Errors* and then—and was, like, you know, freaked out and couldn't—and decided she couldn't come out.

But these friends of hers moved to the Bay Area after her death and opened a club called Eichelbergers and Justin performed there a fair amount. I think that's sort of where Kiki & Herb got their start. There was a lot of crossover between the visual art scene and the performance scene and the writing scene. You know, people were doing some of both, you know, and also, you know, making zines, and so all of that stuff was really kind of hybridized at the time. I'm trying to think of who else around there was really important in all of that. There's a guy named Michael Brown, who is a sculptor who made these kind of kinetic sculptures. He was sort of a friend of ours at New Langton and then became—was also sort of around the scene. I remember he made this, like, pinball machine that was this sort of drag queen pinball machine that was part of a AIDS benefit at a certain point.

I'm starting to forget [laughs] like, that's sort of a tangent there, but, you know, I think one of the other things that I'm reminded of is that Michael and Michael's boyfriend, whose name I'm going to forget, and myself, and Phil, and Cliff Hengst, and D-L, and Scott Hewicker. You know, once Rick Jacobson became really sick, you know, I mean, it was the thing—the other thing that people would do. It's, like, you would sort of form a kind of, like, care unit and team and it would be like, "Okay, so who, you know, so and so is, like, delivering his food. Like, who's in charge of checking in on him or who's going to, like, hang out with him?" Or, you know, that—those cycles of care that people engaged in were also just hugely important at the time and were not necessarily active, you know, it's not activism.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: It's not protest, but it's doing the work that needs to be done to care for people and I think that that's also one of the things that kind of gets lost in the midst of all this. Right? You know, just, like, showing up for folks and, you know, like, renting movies for them, stuff like that, you know, keeping to a schedule.

ALEX FIALHO: It's like holding space for them.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah. I mean in a way that's kind of become, like, a much more encompassing term.

But I feel like it's, like, people learned how to organize themselves into impromptu care teams, you know, and that was a notion that didn't really exist before that time, you know. And so in that sense, it's, like, yes, this was an artistic community. Everybody was creative and doing this stuff, but then there were also those moments of, like, you know, doing this other thing, you know, none of us really being medical professionals or knowing, you know. So there's that part of it as well.

ALEX FIALHO: How about you're speaking to—for instance, Jerome as a sort of San Francisco figure—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Figure that doesn't really translate.

ALEX FIALHO: Exactly.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: The flipside, and this is my impression, is that you were a figure who was in this sort of transnational—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ALEX FIALHO: You know, you were in dialogue with Chicago. You were in dialogue with New York. You were showing with Matthew in '93. You were a person who was thought of as San Francisco-related or San Francisco-based, but you were making connections across the United States. How were people approaching you as a San Francisco artist? How were you thinking about yourself as someone living in San Francisco in these dialogues?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well, I mean a lot of that goes back to me working at New Langton, you know.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: So I was working in a curatorial capacity, you know, I mean Armando at Terrain did, I think, Felix's first show in San Francisco, but, you know, I included, you know, one of Felix's stacks in a show, I think the next year, at New Langton. And so we were—so I mean in those situations when I was meeting with people about looking at artists that we could show or that we could bring in, I was also telling them about San Francisco artists.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: And so I think for me, again, it goes back to the thing about making connections.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: I think one of the reasons why my career proceeded in the way that it did is that I was not always—it wasn't always just about let me tell you about me and about what I do, you know. For me, it was as much about, like, you should see this artist or you should see this artist or this is going on or, you know, like, trying to make connections across cities and across communities. And that is—I mean I like to believe that that's the reason or one of the reasons why I've had the sort of career that I've had—is because, you know, that's always been part of it. It's always been about, like, trying to draw the connections between where I was and other places. You know, I think that in some ways the problem that New York has is that it is incredibly parochial, you know. You know, and it imagines that it knows everything that it's important that goes on everywhere, but, you know, it's not—it's just not true. And so I think kind of coming from this city, it allowed me to also let people know, like, there's this other thing going on. There's this other stuff, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: I see, interesting. So the fact that you were a native New Yorker who had moved elsewhere—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ALEX FIALHO: —gave you a perspective on it, but then—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, I mean I was acquainted with it and I—and at the same time, I was not cowed by it. Like, I think that, you know, the myth about New York is that if you leave, you'll miss something. It's, like, there's always just as much going on in New York as there ever is.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: It's, like, always the same level of activity and, you know, on—from the outside, it looks, like, incredibly glamorous or whatever, but I think the fact that I did not find that mystifying allowed me to be much more sort of common sensical about, like, you know, interacting with people.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. So before we look a little bit forward, I do just want to bring up bunnies as this motif that we haven't touched on.

NAYLAND BLAKE: [Laughs] Sure.

ALEX FIALHO: Maybe *Negative Bunny* as a way in for that as a work or overall.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: I feel like I can't talk to Nayland Blake for many hours and then not bring in that theme. [Laughs]

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah. I do want to say—I mean just, like, before we leave this topic too much, I'm now, like,

having, like, incredible guilt about, like, oh, well, you should think about Brett Reichman. He's, like, important in there and—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: I mean—and basically—I mean one thing that I could say is that most of the people who I thought were doing important work at that time are in *In A Different Light* [laughs]—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: —in the Bay Area. Like, we tried very hard to, like, really have a, you know, the people that we were most excited about in that show. So it's also kind of a guide to the artists in the Bay Area who we—who we thought were important. And I'm, you know, I'm—it's my failing memory that is stopping me from naming everybody [laughs] that I think is incredible.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: But, you know, we haven't talked much about Rex.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Rex was, like, a, you know, Rex Ray was, like, a really important figure there just in part because he was so, you know, he was so important as a designer. He was making visual art, but a little bit on the—on the down low, but, you know, very sardonic, very smart. D-L—

ALEX FIALHO: Designing the covers for—shoot, why can't I think of the name of the periodical? Amy Scholder. [*High Risk*]

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yes, yeah, yeah, he—yeah, I mean he did a lot of design work for *Citylights*.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: You know, there was an important show in '92, I think, at the arts commission gallery that D-L put together called Liquid Eyeliner that was about, like, this sort of new drag. And I think Jerome was in that show, very funny, really wonderful show with a lot of good Bay area people in it. So there's—I mean obviously as we go along, there's a lot of that stuff that is sort of richer and more involved. So I just want to put that there [laughs] that I'm not—I'm—there's much more that I could get to that I'm not getting to. But yeah, bunnies. Well, let's just say that at various points in my career, I've been known as, like, for a while I was known as, like, the stainless steel guy, you know, or, like, the torture guy. In fact, there's, like, I'm—there's a book by a guy named Brian D'Amato. There's, like, a novel by this guy Brian D'Amato and I'm in there as kind of a joke, like, there's—like, there's a sort of passing reference to me because of—because the book is all about sort of body horror and beauty and so he's talking about, you know, my, like, an exhibition of my torture devices and so that was my rep for a long time.

ALEX FIALHO: Where was that show?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Well, it was, like, all of the restraints, you know, all of that sort of bondage stuff that came after the substance pieces.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Like, that was sort of the first—some of the first stuff that got, like, national attention and so that was, I think in some ways, kind of my initial profile. Like, some of those things were in the *Mind Over Matter* show at the Whitney.

ALEX FIALHO: Got you. What was in the *Biennial*?

NAYLAND BLAKE: You know, I don't know if I'm going to remember because I was in three shows at the Whitney in sort of rapid succession. There was *Mind Over Matter*, the *Biennial*, and a show called *Image World*.

ALEX FIALHO: Oh, yeah. That's an important one too.

NAYLAND BLAKE: And I really kind of don't remember exactly what's in each one, and there's, like, *Blackmale*—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: —a couple of years later. So I don't remember exactly what was in the *Biennial*. Check my

privilege.

[Laughs.]

So, you know, the bunny thing got its start in part because I—in the late '80s, I was doing these performances and the performances were me reading these texts that I had edited together. And usually the texts were, like, you know, pop culture novels and kind of rants. I mean if I'm being honest, they were very, very influenced by, you know, Kathy Acker, in terms of the texts. And the reading was me in some sort of a costume, usually, like, a prom dress and I was asked to do one of these performances in Los Angeles around maybe, like, '92 or something. And I felt like the whole, like, boys in prom dress thing was pretty played out at that point, so I was trying to figure out, like, what I could use as a costume for this and I was walking down a street in Los Angeles and passed by this sort of costume rental/magic shop. And there was, like, a rabbit costume in the window and I thought, "Oh, okay." Well, this text is all, like, you know, collaged together from stuff about, like, witchcraft and devil worship, and so I'll do—and all about magic so okay, I'll wear the rabbit costume and it'll be, like, you know, rabbit out of the hat with the magician.

So I got the costume and I did the performance, and then I started to think about, like, okay, you know, what about rabbits? Like, what, you know, why did that suddenly seems so resonate to me? And I started doing some drawings and started to think about, you know, basically where I had—well, I just started to think about sort of the cultural identity of rabbits. I made this zine at the time called *Bunny Butt* and I started thinking, like, okay, well, rabbits are, you know, what are they known for? They're known for, like, shitting a lot and they're known for fucking a lot, and, you know, and, you know, gay men are, you know, associated with, like, having a lot of sex, with being promiscuous, fucking like bunnies, and the sex that they're having is anal sex so it's sort of related to shit. So I started doing these, like, drawings and pieces where the rabbits were kind of a substitute or a stand in for gay men. And then, you know, I started asking myself the question of, like, okay, but where's my, like, where do I kind of remember rabbits from? And in some ways it was, like, two places. It was, like, watching, like, Warner Brothers cartoons and watching Bugs Bunny, and my grandfather reading to me Uncle Wiggly stories and Br'er Rabbit stories.

And so I started, like, thinking about those stories and this is the grandfather on my dad's side. And so, you know, thinking about the Br'er Rabbit stories, which are essentially, like, very much associated with slavery. Uncle Remus is, this, like slave character who's in dialect telling these stories to a supposed younger white kid. And also then remembering that—so I started doing some research into that and thinking about the way in which it turns out those stories, the Uncle Remus stories, are actually West African folk tales. So Joel Chandler Harris, who wrote them, actually was—they're characters that come to the U.S. with slaves. And then I started thinking about Bugs Bunny and thinking about, like, okay, well, on one hand, like, Bugs Bunny is this gray rabbit, right. So he's sort of in between black and white. He's often, like, appearing in drag so there's a way that his sort of sexual expression is kind of fluid, but also he's often, like, singing songs and the songs that he's singing are, like, "Camptown Races" and, you know, "Dixie" and stuff—songs that are basically kind of minstrel songs. And there's a way in those cartoons of the '20s and '30s and '40s, there was still a holdover from vaudeville and minstrel performance that was sort of in the American performance vernacular and crept into those—into those cartoons.

And so I started making work that was about the relationship between, like, you know, racial ambiguity and racial fluidity and the rabbit as a sort of expression of that, of an expression of, like, a sort of dual blackness and whiteness. And the most sort of concrete expression of that was a project for the Baltimore Museum of Art that was another one of these installation projects where I had this rabbit suit. I went around. I picked objects from the museum's display that were black or white. I went around in the suit with this kind of kit on my back and did drawings of the various objects, and then took those drawings and made them into wax surrogates of the—of those objects. And then put all of those into a shrine that I built in one of the galleries and in with the shrine is a selection of objects from the museum's collection that are—that were based on a keyword search for the word rabbit. So there's things in there, like, you know, 19th century hunting paintings and African Dogon rabbit masks and a whole collection of things. This installation was working off of two texts: the play and film *Harvey* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. And there's a moment at—sort of at the climax of *Invisible Man* where the protagonist is being interrogated and he's being asked, like, who are you, who are you, and he finally says, "I am Br'er Rabbit." And *Harvey* is this play from, you know, actually roughly around the same time about a guy who has an invisible rabbit companion. And the—and the—it is a play that in many ways is about closeted homosexuality.

So there's [laughs] so this is—this is what we call, like, a very complex text. So here's this shrine. It's got these, like, surrogates, you know, of objects from the museum. It's got this curated section from the museum. I also wanted to have pictures, family photos in the shrine. So the two that I described in the—in *Black Male* were initially in this installation and I had remembered that there was, like, a photograph of me with, like, a stuffed rabbit with my—with my parents. And so I was going through the family photos to try find that. While I was doing that, I found this other photo of me from the year before where I'd been given a live rabbit for Easter. And I

remember that what happened with that rabbit is that it ended up killing itself. My grandfather built this hutch for it and it managed to, like, wedge its head into an area and, like, sort of strangle itself. So that whole big arc is to say that the, you know, the rabbit, like, the bunnies have ended up meaning all of these different things, but I didn't—it's not—I didn't access that sort of traumatic memory until I had done all of this research and sort of tracked the rabbit through all of these other locales.

ALEX FIALHO: Which you did after you initially involved it in your work in the first place.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Right, exactly. Yeah, so that idea about having—making the thing and letting the thing then—like, and then interrogating what I've made as a way of understanding where my thought actually is in relationship to stuff is the sort of engine of my work. It's, like—it is not having an idea and then expressing that idea. It is, you know, making something and then applying all of those tools of research and reflection to the thing that was made.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: To sort of suggest, like, what I actually think about something.

ALEX FIALHO: And then do iterations from that?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Develop and then it unfolds?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, and then it—and then it keeps going in these different directions. The other thing that was going on in that installation that became then kind of important to me was an attempt on my part to think about myself as a sculptor and what it might mean to engage with African modes of making, you know, as opposed to strictly European. So those surrogates that I made were based on Bowley, these sculptures that are made in Mali and I—the next show that I did at Matthew Marks in '97 was very much about trying to pull together all of these different ways of making objects based on various types of African sculpture. And—yeah, so there's a sort of—but, you know, neo-Beuysian shamanistic thing, but then there's also the notion of what if you make a sculpture where the power that it—it's about the power that it contains and how you access it rather than what it actually looks like, that the thing might not look like much, but that its importance might actually be contained within in it and where it's sort of positioned. Also that show in Baltimore was where I had sort of reconnected with AA [Bronson].

ALEX FIALHO: How was it?

NAYLAND BLAKE: They—yeah, as part of that show, they did a big AZT [azidothymidine] installation and yeah, it was really interesting. It was, like, a four person show. Ronald Jones, Cindy Sherman showing these, like, garbage photographs. General idea doing the—doing the AZT, I think they did like, you know, the week, month, and year of AZT and then my thing.

ALEX FIALHO: This isn't the same museum where Fred Wilson did his project? No?

NAYLAND BLAKE: It might be. It's—Arnold Lehman was the director there at the time who went onto be the director at the Brooklyn Museum, but—and I'm forgetting the name of the woman who actually curated all of us, who was amazing and super thoughtful [Brenda Richardson]. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Let's sort of move forward a little bit in time and talk about '96—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ALEX FIALHO: —as both the year that you moved back to New York, but also big year in sort of HIV/AIDS in that, you know, antiretrovirals became available and people started living longer.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How did that move—let's talk about both of those shifts and how it impacted your work and your life. We can break them up too.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Sure.

ALEX FIALHO: Those are very different conversations, but—

NAYLAND BLAKE: I mean—I mean I moved, you know, I feel like personally I was probably ready to move earlier than that, but my partner really wasn't. And so my sense was, like, with *In A Different Light* finishing and also I

had just finished a big commission for—like, in '95, I finished a big commission for the main branch of the San Francisco Public Library and, you know, I had done stuff at SFMoMA. It kind of felt like everything that I kind of could do in San Francisco, I had done. And I was very wary about San—like, I feel still that San Francisco is a great place for young artists and not such a great place for older artists, in part because it's—it is not—it doesn't really have a very demanding art public. Like, it has a very accepting art public which is great. So people can come up and, like, invent themselves in all these different ways, but then once you're kind of there, the expectations is kind of you do the same thing indefinitely. So everything's okay, but you keep doing the same thing. And I felt like I wanted to be in a place where there was sort of more push and pull, and so that was the—that was a big part of the decision to move back to New York. And yeah, well, as I say, it's sort of, you know, it coincided with the—with the boom and—

ALEX FIALHO: The tech boom?

NAYLAND BLAKE: The tech boom in the Bay Area, which meant suddenly, like, prices got super inflated and—

ALEX FIALHO: So you got out just in time in a way.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, in a way, although I, you know, our living situation was so crazy and so particularly San Francisco that I don't think—well, I know that I wouldn't have affected us. We were living in this apartment that—in a building that was owned by this woman who in a weird way had been the patron of several generations of [laughs] Bay Area artists. Like, I got the apartment from Renny Pritikin and Judy Moran, who were the people who ran New Langton Arts, and they had gotten it from someone else who was another artist. And the—it was a storefront apartment. The rent was, like, incredibly cheap and this woman who lived upstairs was—led a very, very short of sheltered and kind of closed in life. She was amazing, very kind of formal and—but, like, you know, she never raised the rent.

And after I left, Vincent Fecteau, who had been my studio assistant, became her—took the apartment over and lived there for the rest of her life. I think he still might be there. She has died subsequently, but—so we would have been safe [laughs] because of our circumstance, but certainly our friends, like, people were getting, like, pushed out of their places and rents were just, like, ballooning just a year later. And we were all, like, really kind of shocked.

And, you know, Rick was still sick when we left. Shortly after we left, he went back to his family in Wisconsin and a few months later died, so we went to his funeral there. You know, I got here, didn't really have work, actually got a job at the Chelsea Gym [laughs] as, you know, as—working the front desk. And if you—if you know what I look like, that's an amusing proposition, but I did sort of move into kind of, like, ground zero Chelsea at that point. Oh, I guess I should say—I mean, you know, one of the other big things at that, like, in the midst of that period was the '93 March on Washington.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Which a bunch of us went out to and my partner, Phil, was—his family is from D.C. and so we all stayed with him. Rick was with us, Mike Brown, who I mentioned. There were, like, D-L, a bunch of us from San Francisco and then we were, like, connecting up with folks from New York. So there was still that sort of, you know, interconnection.

That was like a big deal. But, you know again it felt like at that point that was sort of the—almost like the waning of the queer nation moment.

ALEX FIALHO: The march.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah. And the sense that you know, even before the sort of cocktail became really, like, you know widespread, I think that there was a sense of a kind of access. Like people could—I think that there was a way that people felt like they kind of had the stage, and there was this sort of nuts and bolts work of actually getting things, like, approved and made. And you know, Clinton was in office and there was, you know, as sort of—as shitty as he was there was not the sense of somebody punching you in the face every day. And so, in a way that sense of urgency around the activism or in the sense of a kind of exclusive identification with the epidemic and sort of, you know, was fading, I think. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How did being back in New York treat you?

NAYLAND BLAKE: It was fine. I was pretty broke for a while, and basically I think what those initial years in New York were—like the first six years in New York—were really about, like, you know, cleaning up messes in a sense. Like the—like my success was not accompanied by an understanding of fiscal responsibility, and not even necessarily responsibility. It's like I didn't really know how to manage money. And so, I got a bunch of money and then I spent a bunch of money, and you know there's things like taxes. So, I moved back to New York, and

was like, "I have a lot of debt that I have to deal with, and I need to get on—I need to learn how to do that." And I got into therapy, and you know, spent ten years working with a really amazing therapist. And so, that's,—I think one thing that has really changed is that, when I have been either with, like, play partners or friends who have seroconverted in the time since I've been back in New York. There has not been this kind of immediate sort of "Okay. Rallying around. Who's the support team?" Or whatever. It's like, in a weird way, you know the change in the drug structure has sort of turned it back into individual people's responsibility. And that's a very different thing. And I think maybe some of that is the size of New York. But I think some of it is also like where we've gotten to in terms of treatment. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: In those—in the latter half of the '90s were there shows, or sort of notable career moments that you were having? Early 2000s?

NAYLAND BLAKE: Not as much. I mean things kind of quieted down. I showed, you know, sort of consistently with Matthew during that period, and some in San Francisco. I started doing more, sort of anonymous work on the street. You know I did a show called *Double Fantasy* which was very much about my relationship with Philip. And then after his death in 2004 was it, I guess. You know there were a couple of shows that were again very much about the relationship and about his death. You know I feel like in some ways there was a period where the work was much more inward. And then starting, you know, sort of starting around 2010, there's been more of these bigger projects. The Yerba Buena Project, doing the project at ICP. There have—it's sort of returned to these larger installations that are more about specific places. And as I say: since like 2006 I've been, really very active in the kink community, and so a lot of work that I do takes place there. You know I'll say that in the time since then the stuff that sort of gives me hope is a lot of the work that's coming out of the trans community. And I'm really grateful for the ways that it's provided a kind of a language and a lens for me to view the complexities of my own gender-identification. I think that we're living in a really interesting time, and I think that there has been in the past few years a kind of a resurgent queerness. It's weird to be sort of looked at as an elder. [Laughs.] I mean, I've been doing like a lot of teaching, like I started teaching in 1991 and subsequently I've taught in a lot of places, and so I have a lot of former students. But still that—well okay, so to maybe kind of to go back around to this, you know in 2002 I got hired to start this Master's program at ICP: at the International Center of Photography; and I have tried to very consciously make that program about training young artists in these skills of being of service to each other like, you know, attempting to like revive and maintain that legacy of artist-run spaces.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: That were really crucial to me. To get them to understand things like volunteerism and community building. And so, that also feels very much like an extension of my work. I mean the way that I teach and the way that I function as an administrator which is something that I never thought I would do, you know, is to be an administrator, I feel like that is again of a piece with trying in some ways to recreate the art world that I saw growing up here. You know, ICP is an artist-founded organization in the same way that the ones that were exciting to me, you know—in the '70s, it's that same generation, it was founded in '74. So, you know, I think in that way there's kind of a remarkable consistency to it [laughs].

ALEX FIALHO: How do you do that pedagogically?

NAYLAND BLAKE: In part by asking them why they want something. Like if they want to have a show, like "Well, why do you want to have it?" Or like, you know, if they want to work with this particular gallery it's like "Well, why do you want to do that, like what's the point?" You know. In part by making them work on projects together, so having them publish books together, and then bringing those books to the New York artist book fair. Through having a required internship program where they have to work with individual artists and they have to work with organizations, and a wide range of organizations. So, trying to give them different sorts of career skills so that they, you know, that they're not beholden to, you know, some dealer waving a magic wand over them in order for them to have a career. That's a big part of it. I guess in some ways it's trying to take all of the stuff that we were doing in the Bay Area, and bring that into the classroom, you know? I try to remind them that New York is not the only place, that there's a—they can end up in a lot of different places. That their responsibility is to go where they can make the work. Things like that.

ALEX FIALHO: I sort of moved us away from your thought a few minutes ago about the more individual relationship one has to HIV when they seroconvert now, than they did prior, when it became more about caregiving in a community, and I'm just curious about how that—how you, I want to maybe take us back there for a second, in how you were saying about it in relationship to play partners or friends telling you about seroconverting for instance.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ALEX FIALHO: And knowing that, is there a way that you try to at least have a community in a one-on-one

dynamic with them or, how does that sit with you, A. And then B, is there a way that you try and respond differently now?

NAYLAND BLAKE: I'm not proud of it. I think that I'm not as open-hearted as I wish I were. You know? And so—and again, I mean this is sort of coming up because here we are with this election and it is very much making me think of like "Oh, you know, we need to go back to checking in with each other and what we need." You know, asking people what they need, and asking how you can help, and asking how you can be of service. And it's—you know the prospect of it is exhausting.

[They laugh.]

And yet, it's where we are, and I hope that I will be able to show up. You know, we'll see. It's interesting to me because I've been having a lot of conversations with my students, and because of the people who I teach with, and in one way or another the epidemic has been like a big part of the curriculum. Like, you know I teach with a fair number of queer people, and we're of a certain age where it's a thing that we talk about our thing that we reference when we're talking about art or we're talking about what's going on. And up until this year—like last year I was suddenly having this thought of like "Oh you know what, like, when I was in college I kept hearing about the Spanish Civil War, and like intellectuals were like talking about it, and were vehement about it, you know? And there was a way that I knew that it was important, but I did not have any real relationship to it. And I think that for our students the AIDS crisis was kind of that. Like, it's this thing that grown-ups, you know I mean, if they're in their 20s now, they were in their teens when Obama was elected, right? So that, like, sense of, yeah yeah it was like this big thing, but it's not something you—like are you supposed to be worried about it? Like the sort of somatic bodily relationship to it that was so present for me, was not present for them. And they sort of know that it's an important thing, but they don't really know like what the feeling was like or sort of—and you know, it has been both the sort of epidemic of cop shootings in the past two years, and leading up to the Trump election has been like the time where I've been able to sort of say to them "Look, this is what the emotional tone of that time was like. This is what it felt like to have people in power treat you like you're nothing, dismiss your right to live, and actively seek to harm you on a daily basis." So it is, you know, a weird time that this is coming back around again, and I do think it's going to, you know, provoke some real changes in the art world. In the past couple of years—well, I mean I would say in the past decade the art world has become like a, you know, just a giant multi-national money laundering scheme. You know that, like, shuttles people and objects from one art fair to another, and seems remarkably divorced from, you know, people's lived experience. And so the question of like, what art—what's going to be the shake-out of that?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Now that we're experiencing another bout of utterly naked class warfare, you know? It's, you know, really going—you know, now that we have a bunch of people in charge who are not afraid to tell you that, like, the people they disagree with are losers, and worthless, and should be locked up, or you know, don't deserve to live.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: That's going to be an interesting time for the art world.

ALEX FIALHO: I remember one of the first times I saw you in public, it was on a panel for Visual AIDS' *Not Over* exhibition? It was actually on Pride Day, so while the parade was happening, and it was with each of the curators, and you were I think, the moderator of that talk, and you spoke to what you were thinking of as like market art history.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ALEX FIALHO: And the way that art history was being dictated by a market, and it was for me, I was in my early 20s at that point, sort of just this eye-opening, even, angle of approach that was blatantly true, and just a take I hadn't thought through, so I appreciated that.

And I'm just curious how you think—how do your students relate to the AIDS crisis, having not lived through it necessarily, but maybe, how you were seeing them relate to it, and then maybe now, we'll see a shift in how they relate to it. You were sort of getting to that.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah. I don't—I think they relate to it as like, a bracketed chapter in a history book.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: And in some ways, that's all to the good. Like there's a way in which, if it was still an ongoing thing in the ways that it was at that time, it would be unbearable. You know?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: But, I think for them they're starting to understand. And I really do think, you know, Black Lives Matter is their ACT UP. And it's important that it's theirs, and in the same way that the AIDS crisis didn't solve patriarchy's relationship to queerness. Like, the civil rights struggle didn't, like, solve America's relationship to race, and those things are still going to continue to cycle through in various ways. I'm, you know, I'm glad that I'm there to provide some sort of perspective for them.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: And I'm particularly glad that, well it's—I feel like it's hugely important, like, not to chide them. That's sort of a weird term to use but, I go back to my own experience of like, you know, like being around old lefties, and it's like, yes we can learn the lessons of history, but to a certain extent, only in which we can let—only to the extent we can let it be history. Like if it's the idea that we are still fighting that fight—you know, it's like my students live in a world where you're supposed to talk back to your doctor. That's not the world I grew up in. And that world exists because of ACT UP. And like, everybody lives in that world, now. Regardless of whether or not they're, you know, regardless of their, you know, relationship to HIV. That's a huge, huge difference. So, in a sense it's like, I should not be lecturing the fish that they're not treating the water they're swimming in as being important enough. [Laughs.] You know? I think one of the reasons why I'm always nudging them to work is to, you know, work as interns at organizations like Visual AIDS is precisely to show them that part of what one does as an artist is to be of service to other artists, and that like an archive and actually a relationship to history is one of the ways you can be of service. And that seems to me to be a healthier way of thinking about those stories instead of just being like, "What do you mean you don't think this is important? You should think it's important!" You know?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. I think an immediate example is that I work at Visual AIDS, and we have an intern, although he's not really an intern in the sense that he's been doing vary advanced work, but from ICP, Kaz Senju.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Who just helped us immensely on this exhibition *Everyday*, and basically single-handedly figured out the best context to display the work of nine other artists in an exhibition in a sort of menu-flip format that we had envisioned but had no technical skill set to make happen—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ALEX FIALHO: And he spent countless hours making it happen and it's these nine artists who I'd say are very underknown, and I think that that's sort of an immediate exhibit A to what you're speaking to, and it feels to—I've seen Kaz watch all this material, people like Nelson Sullivan, Ray Navarro, Carol Leigh, Luna Luis Ortiz and then also figure out the best context for it to be seen so that many others can relate to it, and just to see how involved he got, himself, into the project, and how invested in the artist's individual work as well. It's just very much to that point—

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah. Yeah I mean, and doesn't that make you get misty? I mean that's—you know that is what I mean by showing up for each other. It's like that is a thing of like, yes the state has no interest in maintaining our history, the state has no interest in telling our stories, the state has no interest in acknowledging that we were even here. It's like it has to be us—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: —and it has to be—we have to do it for the people who have no idea that they even need it. You know?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

NAYLAND BLAKE: That's ultimately what all of this work is about, and you know, it is amazing to me when I hear from someone who was like, you know, I saw *In A Different Light*, and you know, it meant this to me or, you know? Just like, people that I had no idea had seen the show or—that's hugely important, you know? And yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How do you think about—and maybe this is a wrap-up question—your art, or your practices overall in community building, as a legacy?

NAYLAND BLAKE: I mean, I think that's what we're doing, is we're leaving bread crumbs, you know? That's—and I guess it's, you know—the thing that is weird in some ways about New York or the think like, when I get off balance in thinking about what I do, it is: I get trapped into the, like "Oh, so-and-so just got this grant, like, why didn't I get it? Like, this person's having this success, why didn't I?" You know? Why didn't I get it? Like, nobody

knows what I do, it's not big, it's like, weird, it's like," you know, that whole thing is when I get into that mindset, it's like that is the most corrosive aspect of it. And you know the artists that I love, you know artists like Jack Smith, artists like Ray Johnson, artists like, you know like Cornell, it's you know, their—like really what I'm in the business of doing is being present enough in the stuff that I make so that down the road some weird kid can come along and find it, and realize that they could make something, you know? Something weird, and strange. That's really what it is.

ALEX FIALHO: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

NAYLAND BLAKE: And particularly for queer artists, it's like, yeah it is about marginalism, it is about not being on center stage, because then, like, the people who are disgusted with center stage, and are wandering around backstage to find something that they can be of use of: that's where they find you. You know? And that's the stuff that I found, and sustained me, and made me, like, you know, allowed me to have this life, and so that's, you know, that's what the work has to be an example of. And it—there are times when it can be very easy to lose track of that, I guess. And to buy into the myth that it's like, if it's not super big it's not, you know, it isn't a legacy or it doesn't, it isn't part of the conversation. But it's like, what conversation do you want to have? You want to have it with, like, you know I mean my—I do a lot of teaching in the kink community, and my joke about it is like, you know, I teach kink because I'm old and I no longer have the time to sleep with boring people. So I want there to be more smart, or interesting people around for me to fuck.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. I think the idea of conversation, too, is important to what you were talking about, because from my sense of your work, and from this long conversation is that it's not just what that kid comes and sees in your work, but also in learning about your work, your work has been so wrapped up in so many people, and so many conversations that it opens up onto the world of *In A Different Light*, and all these other names—

NAYLAND BLAKE: I hope.

ALEX FIALHO: —in conversations that we brought through.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Yeah, I hope. Yeah, and that made me think of—well, I mean, here we are we're recording this for the Smithsonian, you know, for the Archive, and it just, it makes me want to say like, "Yeah there's this other America, there's this other America that is, like, made up of like, the wacky shit that isn't polished, that isn't triumphant, and isn't, you know." But it's very strange because I've never had, my career's never been all that big in Europe, right? But I think that I am a profoundly American artist, you know? As, like, you know, my sense of possibility for myself, could not have happened in Europe. Like, I am a product of '60s social engineering, you know? Mixed income cooperative housing, like you know, a particular kind of cosmopolitan cross-racial, you know, possibility that means something in America that it did not mean in other places. And it's there in this country, and I think that there are times when the country tries to deny that it's there. And certainly like the AIDS epidemic was one of those times. But, you know, it—I don't feel a patriotism in that I feel like the nation state is essential, but I do feel a profound identification as an American, and as an American artist.

ALEX FIALHO: I think let's call it.

NAYLAND BLAKE: I think let's call it.

[They laugh.]

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