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Participants:

RUTH OWENS (visual artist)

EVA CHRISTMAS (artist)

RAVEN CRANE (filmmaker, founder of the Women of Color Film Collective)

AUSTIN ALLEN (filmmaker, professor)

MARIAM EVERSLEY (writer, journalist)

Length: 0:59:44

Preface

The following conversation was hosted at the Joni Mitchell Center. Consent was given by the participants to have their conversation recorded and transcribed.

Readers should keep in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word and are encouraged to refer directly to the original audio if possible as some interactions and utterances may not have been transcribed due to the nature of unscripted group conversations. The views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in the text belong solely to the roundtable participants and do not necessarily reflect the views of Black Lunch Table.

START OF RECORDING

MARIAM EVERSLEY: No cheating.

(Laughter)

Organizer: And this is the artist table number four.

RUTH OWENS: Okay.

(Indistinct background words)

RAVEN CRANE: Do we say our names or--.

RO: Okay, my name is Ruth Owens and I'm a visual artist here in New Orleans.

EVA CHRISTMAS: Hello my name is Eva Christmas, and I am an emerging artist

() and I am currently residing in New Orleans.

RC: Hi my name is Raven Crane and I am an emerging filmmaker and the founder of the Women of Color Film Collective in New Orleans.

AUSTIN ALLEN: Austin Allen, filmmaker, landscape architect, and teacher up at LSU and I live here in New Orleans.

ME: Mariam Eversly, I'm a journalist, writer, poet and restorative justice- person.

RO: So does anyone- (background noise) have a particular desire to talk about their question?

(Indistinct background voices)

AA: ().

RO: Oh your's is blank I'll get you another one. Oh you- you have one you want to do? Okay.

EC: I'm- I'm getting on a ().

RO: How do we want to do it, like if you feel like you want too. If you--.

ME: I saw you because--.

RO: You feel like you want to talk about something and we're on a roll.

EC: Well I think I'm going to formerly () and address that ().

RO: Okay.

ME: I can do mine, the question is- thank you, what kinds of public art do you find valuable in New Orleans?

AA: Okay. So we all- yeah.

RO: Jump in.

RC: Whenever. Whoever feels compelled, I guess I talk because now everyone is looking at me- that's like a tough question. I- I feel like I have been really inspired by some of the like the graffiti and wall art and just like murals that've been done in the city, and particularly like Exhibit B was like something that really like blew me away with what I saw happen here and just like kind of like reclaiming space a lot of times. I'm interested in and like really inspired by the art that takes like blighted buildings or spaces and then makes them a part of the community and like brings back that sense of the community, through like visual art.

(indistinct background voices)

ME: What I found really helpful about Exhibit B as well was that- it also highlighted like- the housing oppression that happened in those- in the project housing over there, and like didn't just put art over top of it- it also just- we were talking specifically like what has happened over time with like housing oppression in New Orleans.

RO: Mmm.

ME: So not erasing space by you know making art on- on that kind of property and also it made a physical space for people to go hang out, for a couple months and like hear music, and talk to people, the public art that draws people together.

RO: Yeah, yeah that's what- what I noticed about Exhibit B that it was particularly successful in bringing in people and was so well attended and I mean more attended than almost any other art- scene that I have seen around here. It's always crowded, and so that particular formula that they used- I mean the day that I went I didn't- there was

no music even, but I think that it did go- create a lot of interest, and- I think the music also helped.

EC: I think that's what's also interesting to when you think about () those sites are a means of healing, I feel like those sites that probably ought to be changed and they allow the interactor to- fully engage with what is going on in the community and to understand our private thoughts, so what is really interesting to me- a lot of the work here- is really interesting to me- because it's like Raven said about the graffiti and like there's these public spaces that they're considered defacing but there's these signs, there's these symbols () I often find that when I turn a corner I will often find something on a telephone pole, find something- talk to new nice people and then again like into the void there is just so many different () history to what's present and ().

RO: Have you seen like the little love signs--.

EC: ().

RO: --on all the telephone poles? It just warms- you get more feeling when you see that, because you know someone is out there generating that, trying to connect with you with that--.

AA: I- I- I do think that there is something to this layering that happens in that way. I- I love to see it in- like the Mardi Gras Indians, the Black Indians some places, the- the thing is that it's seen as temporary on one end but it is a kind of- relationship to time that is totally different you know and- and so- it often does not come out in the way that people think, and I think these smaller- you know kind of manifestations of it are our- our way of saying you know we're here, but not here you know and that I think is

one of the frustrations the city had- they did a study I don't know four, five years ago called The Foursee or something like that, there was the cultural- they were trying to map everything that was going on artistically in terms of the city--.

RO: Mmm hmm.

AA: -and they became absolutely frustrated with the Mardi Gras Indians because they would not tell them you know (laughter) this is my map this is where I come out, this is where I- they just wouldn't talk to them, and so they- they- you could see in that there is this expression because- that's part of the ritual for you know neighborhoods is to figure out where the art's going to bloom you know, or blossom or you know come out and- and I think there is something to that kind of- that's not fixed you know, I guess is this the best way to say it.

RO: Yes, and I guess the graffiti isn't really fixed either, like I see it all the time, I live in- one of the projects that I've been working on is actually dealing with the New Orleans Baby Dolls--.

AA: Yeah.

RO: -and so that is another art form--.

AA: Yeah.

RO: -where it is not a fixed art form and--.

AA: Yeah.

RO: I can understand the city's frustration because I'm trying to (laughter) document them and try to follow them and try- and I'm like okay so where will y'all going to be marching 'well we're not sure yet, we're going to meet about it' and that's like four days before (laughter) and I'm like 'what? Okay, I want to be there with my camera and

get ready, so- but it is a- something that happens within the community that I want to document and I want to show again through my art to give some- some history, and- and some presence to these traditions that are not necessarily maybe as well known as the Mardi Gras Indians, or the New Orleans Baby Doll traditions.

AA: Yeah ().

RO: And- and that's you know- that's art too. Alright do you want to introduce yourself?

Mya: Hi I'm Mya.

AA: How you doing?

M: I'm an artist and () I've been writing a lot since I'm a writer. I- I didn't- I was not informed of what the event was- so I'm like still trying to--.

RO: Figure out- adjust to what's going on.

(Laughter)

M: -because I was just like some of the language was () they were just like would you like to come to this lunch and so I'm- I'm learning.

AA: Mmm hmm.

RO: Okay so we were each introducing ourselves so that the tape recorder can recognize your voice so when we start the conversation when they- archive it they know who is saying what.

M: Okay.

ME: We had a question, that we were all talking about was, and that question was what kind of public art do you find valuable in New Orleans?

M: What kind of--.

ME: What kind of public art do you find valuable in New Orleans?

M: The kind of public art that I feel is very inspiring () the city that I'm from () in India, is very- similar in terms of street- like how- people move through the streets.

RO: Mmm hmm.

M: Well that is just something that I have always been drawn to.

RO: It's interesting that you mention that first off because that's what we were just talking about, the Mardi Gras Indians and the Baby Doll Traditions here, so that's interesting that it has like a link to what's happening in India and I'm sure it's linked to what happens in Africa as- as well.

ME: Mmm.

[pause]

RO: And then we were also talking about like the graffiti that was the- on the streets. A friend of mine, Sally Heller did a big piece for Prospect and it was a piece that she put- is called linked and it was put on this metal material and she covered a whole side of a wall down on St. Claude with it, and it's just these huge links of a- like a chain. So she was just trying to say you know 'we are linked as a community, members', and so she goes home after spending you know all this time and money putting this piece up and then she came back the next day and it was- it had- had a bunch of graffiti on it and she said 'hmm, I like that' you know.

(Laughter)

RO: I think it informs my work, and- because of the graffiti she got a write up in the paper and it became like a lot of a more- of a- meaningful work. So I think that's-that's- that was an interesting way that I saw that whole thing work just a little bit ago. So is there- does anybody want to talk about another subject?

RC: Well I feel like this connects to what we've been talking about. [pause] Does a sense of civic responsibility affect formal decisions made in your studio? I feel this was kind of- the conversations we've been having was kind of- kind of headed in that direction, like what are we responsible for as artists when we are representing our subject, or like who we are trying to represent and like how we're trying to represent them I think is important, so I thought this would be a good follow up question? Does anybody- I know it's kind of a bit to process.

M: I'm sorry I've got to--.

RC: Its- does a sense of civic responsibility affect formal decisions made in your studio?

AA: Yes, yes.

RO: Is studio a metaphor?

RC: Well I feel like studio can be used loosely- we have a lot of filmmakers, we also have a lot of visual artists, I mean I'd be okay with starting this off. I mean one of the things I've been doing over the last like year and a half is like trying to get together a collective of Women of Color filmmakers. So I feel like a lot of times with the work that I try to do I want it to-have some kind of sense of civic responsibility to be- responsive to something that is maybe not always involved in, we just have like a- I feel like all the noise is only going in this corner. I feel like a lot of the work I want to do as like an artist

is like, responding to things that we don't normally have, or voices that are being like highly marginalized. So- I do like to think that- all my work is like responsive to that but- I mean, does anybody else want to talk more about that or—.

RO: I mean I'm willing. I- my work is- is- has a lot of- a combination of psychologically oriented, and- and sociologically oriented, so and- and I do- I have done a body of work about the Baby Dolls, and- and one of the pieces is a collage and- and they look like they're very happy and they're- they're joyous and everything but on top of the collages are like little pieces of text from newspapers that I've cut out from the- the problem- the problems that we've been having with the unarmed- the killings of unarmed black men by the police.

AA: Mmm hmm.

RO: And so it- it's- for me the psychological part comes in where I feel like I'm- deconstructing the stories that are being written. They're just exercising- exorcising them, you know like the exorcist, like exorcising them from- from my consciousness that these horrible things are happening. And I put it on top of these dancing women and a lot of people don't understand like why are you connecting those two and it's like well if- if you lived here you would understand, or if you had lived this life then you would understand like we don't- we have to have some- some joy in our lives, we have to have some- some hope in our lives and it's not just like- But this is always underlying, this is always something that's underlying so this- this- this reality that we're dealing with and so that- that gives- that's a sense of- that's how I kind of bring like a sense of civic duty into my life- into my work but I also feel like-. I- I want to be careful of being too politically correct you know, I mean I'm- I'm bringing the other side of the point here, the-

the counter argument to- I want to be very careful of that and I don't want it to be like a Hallmark card you know. Like just so devoid of any grit or bite that- that people will look at that and say you know 'what were you really thinking?' you know like, you know like they're like so what is your- your real thoughts because this looks like it's just you know- so very ba- banal, and trite and like yes we've heard this before, we want something a bit more ().

RC: Okay.

AA: I- I- I'm fascinated just as these you know questions, some of them older than decades and- and you know, they still are to be resolved, and I--.

RO: Pardon?

AA: They still are to be resolved.

RO: Yes.

AA: And- and what's fascinating me is that you- you have I think built in the African American experience, a kind of collectivity and that doesn't excluded you yeah, and (laughter) I'm just saying that- that experience of fear, really and in- in America is you have that responsibility somewhere in the back of your head, but I think it is critical that art disturbs you know and- and- and I don't mean that in- in a way that- traumatizes, but just that it disturbs the complacency and sometimes that's not seen as civic you know?

RO: Mm hmm.

AA: Sometimes that is- that is seen as outside the civic realm, but sometimes it drives that civic realm right into- you know a whole new dimension and- and- and I- I think artists played a big role, you know- it's you know and somewhere when you woke

up one day and decided that was- whatever that was you know, we kind of disturbed the universe, you know? (Laughter)

RO: Mm hmm. Right.

AA: And you can't run from it.

RO: Yeah.

AA: You can't run from it and- and you can talk your way back off the ledge a lot, and that becomes very mediocre--.

RO: Yeah.

AA: -in terms of what you're trying to say and I agree that's what you- you're basically saying and I don't want you to look at my you know art,--.

RO: Right.

AA: -and say yeah I know she's going to say one, two, three, four--.

RO: Yeah.

AA: -he's going to jump over there one, two, three, four--.

RO: Right

AA: Yeah, you know, yeah it's something--.

RO: It's not a prescription.

AA: Yeah, yeah.

RO: But that doesn't- it also doesn't also mean that it has to be like- it doesn't have to be vulgar.

AA: No.

RO: You know, it doesn't have to be shocking.

AA: No.

RO: But, you know- I don't know, I was just listening to an interview about- on NPR about the Beatles and they just wanted to do something new I mean and they did, it was new, it was different and people listened--.

AA: Mm hmm.

RO: -you know but there was nothing vulgar--.

AA: No.

RO: -about what they perform, their performance, and so I mean if- if vulgar is your thing- that's fine, if shocking is your thing I mean that's fine with me, I'm like- I pretty much- like any kind of art I mean I'm--.

AA: Mmm hmm.

RC: -kind of- like very nondiscriminatory in terms of that, but for myself I have a certain way that I want to be but I don't- you know, so I want to have a certain way that's not- not prescriptive.

AA: Yeah.

ME: It's interesting that they have the word civic, because civic implies like citizen, and being- and being like a citizen for the United States.

RO: (laughter)

ME: But artist always seems sometimes so external.

ME: Like anti-citizen.

RC: Yeah.

ME: But it's still- you still have a responsibility to people.

RC: Yeah.

ME: But I guess- the word civic and civic duty is like interesting- and I guess having also- but also does civic also kind of mean like impling for your city as well like you're part of a physical- community and you're supposed to do something for that- I don't know like there's a tension I feel like between being an artist and having- you're making art for yourself too like for me the art- I guess I also, at least for me I like to do all kinds of stuff like my poetry, the poetry that I write is very much just the thinking process that is cathartic and I hope that people can have a piece of my experience and can help somebody else, but it's not necessarily.

RO: Right.

ME: I'm not like let me do this art for this purpose--.

RC: Yeah.

ME: -or for this person or for this group of people.

RO: Because it just kind of kills it.

ME: Probably yeah.

RO: If you were so- so pointed and- and- and there was no mystery to it.

ME: Yeah, and I also feel like- for me at least just different mediums have different purposes and like different ways of interacting with people. But, I guess that civic responsibility- I'm like I'm not sure, certainly not for like this country.

(Laughter)

RC: I think that's really interesting that you mention like medium because I think that's a thing I struggle with, film is like supposed to be profitable like medium where

you're supposed to be able to give it to lots of audiences and sometimes what you may want to make is not very profitable or not very like engaging to all all kinds of different audiences because of some of their prejudices for things like that, like in certain subject matters, and then also like going off of like civic, when I hear that word civic I have a- I have a consistent habit of like redefining things and deconstructing them so for me my civic duty would be to dismantle that establishment—.

RO: Mm hmm.

RC: -and really put something out there that is not- is not the normative civic duty like prescribed to a citizen. So as like a black queer woman in the United States my civic duty to me is to make sure my voice is heard and that the things I'm putting out there, like present that voice and help present other voices that aren't being represented, or are like marginalized.

RO: Mm hmm.

RC: So I think it's really interesting because yeah and I don't do a civic duty in the sense of like I'm going out and I'm only voting, and I'm paying my taxes like I feel like for me when I hear the word civic like I'm doing so much more than civic duties for also myself as well as like others--.

RO: Mm hmm.

RC: -who are not always represented as the ideal form of what being American is like. I don't know if anyone has anything to say.

RO: No, no, no I totally- go ahead.

M: I was yesterday- you said in your studio?

RC: Well yeah that's what this thing says in here

RO: Whatever your--.

AA: However define it as--.

ALL: Space. Studio.

M: I was meditating on this idea of debt, and like mother debt, a debt to my mother.

RO: Mmm hmm.

M: And so I thought of that when you said duty I guess, like kind of this- I was reading this essay by () and- she defined it as a debt to the mother, as well as a debt, that the place of the mother is.

RO: Mmm hmm.

M: And- and just like this feeling of- of wanting to- but like never being able to fulfill it, but it's like a something like it's something you can really never give back. But what it is striving towards- and so I thought of it when you said- duty, but then civic duty is a really interesting thing like engaging with the law and- [pause} Yeah.

RO: Good.

AA: Good, good. Cool.

ME: I- but that makes me think to about how the way I feel when I make art, I get concerned, I get really concerned about objectifying- whoever is in my art and making people a subject, especially because you know as a black woman and like the way that I have been objectified, I feel like I have a responsibility to whomever, whatever is like- in the art that I'm making- to make sure the way I am making and engaging is not an objectifying process and I feel like I have a- my responsibility, I guess is in my decisions

and like- trying to make my process not feel objectifying, and that I'm making something that feels like a conversation, and not like- here's my art I don't know.

RO: Yeah, I- I'm in the same boat as you I understand what you're saying.

ME: It- It also makes me anxious to, but like should I take this photograph- like--.

RO: Right.

ME: Is this objectifying?

RO: Yeah, yeah and so yeah that's a- that's a- I think that's what's going to make it interesting I mean that's how I feel, that being in like a difficult spot like that I think that's what will make the work interesting. I mean that's just how I feel, but if you're not dealing with difficult problems then like what's the point, you know.

AA: Mm hmm.

ME: Right.

RO: You know? Yeah so- so yeah I'm in the same boat, I- I mean I'm dealing with psychological and the sociological problems surrounding female sexuality.

ME: Mmm hmm.

RO: And that's like what my subject is and so I understand what you all are saying okay this is my own psychology and how it works with me but I- but you can relate to this from a- you know because we're all kind of dealing with these kind of problems and objectification is--.

ME: Mmm hmm.

RO :-a huge part of that, you know especially as a black female like you said, and that's one of the main- main subjects of my- but I don't want to get on a soap box

and preach but I also don't want to- negate anybody who wants to be a homemaker, sitting at home taking care of her children. I don't want to take agency away from her--.

ME: Mm hm.

RO: -and like say this is wrong or this is right, it's just like- I just want to represent her because those are questions that everyone is asking. It's like, I present to you, you know- this particular, specific person and how she's dealing with her sexuality.

ME: Mmm hmm.

RO: So- but I don't know how that relates to civic, because- like there can be a- you probably know what the definition of civic is. When I think of it I think of you know those cards on the Monopoly board, you know. You have your civic card you know it's like dealing with- you know the water system of the pure- how to make your community function better as a whole, and maybe that's what we're doing you know, by not representing ourselves as individuals and I'm like it's okay.

AA: And- I think that that we know that art has been marginalized out of the civic and- and- and that's I think the important thing with- we're really getting to it here is that- I mean purposefully- for a lot of reasons our- like things have been that in terms of these are the engagements that makes place, and cities, and the rest of it. And I- what I see that is encouraging is an assertion, that no we are going to redefine the civic you know, and I- and I think that's what I'm hearing from everything that you all beginning to talk about and that. I mean it excites me to see new generations be able to flip things totally on their head, in that matter of a short time period, that have been looked at as really this is not going to happen alright, this is- and it is these are like the pillars that you see in a big building down town, they're not going to move, and all of a sudden they- you

know everything's changed up and- I think that's the beauty of this- of this moment is that civic is- I mean, it's up to ya'll. I mean ya'll- ya'll are doing it in terms of- this is what civic is, you know, and I think you have to- you know, seize the opportunity to really say 'I think civic is-' you know.

RC: Yeah.

EC: Something you hear a lot is () cultivate it's- it's like it's something special, you're allowing yourself to be vulnerable, allow ourselves to show our fears--.

RO: Mm hmm.

EC: - also you have that intention () so that process to me is something that () because you are cultivating this for yourself () it's- it's like () you don't () and that responsibility is like a debt, so really it has so much power and love, it's an act of love, because I feel like it's not only as an act of love but as an act of pain, it's an act of sacrifice, it's an act of surrender and I think it's really interesting to me. I'll do my best to call myself an artist, I feel like calling myself an artist- I've never realized so much power in that because you are completely self defined, and self-autonomous and you are one within yourself and to a () we have a responsibility, so much responsibility not only to ourselves but to ().

RO: Like Eva I understand when you say- it's- it's so hard being an artist that is a () and people say being an artist is being vulnerable and you show your vulnerability as an artist and others can relate, and that's like- then they just have an ah ha moment, you know and it's just like yes, you know and that's the connection, so it's not just like- it's like navel gazing but- others are invited in, you know.

ME: What you said Raven also stuck out to me about like- being disruptive as a duty and I think also when I hear civic I think of like- public space in this country is just very polite, and very clean and like you know devoid of like anything that's going to make anyone remotely uncomfortable and using art to also disrupt this idea of like civic- as being as like- just being as like non-confrontational as possible, and disrupting that as well and not being- I think there is also like- within like Western ideas of art- like making art like universal. Like universal themes always piss me off, I feel like like when I was like a kid like- we didn't like reach in the can and like everyone has to read the Odyssey, and I was like why do we have to read the same damn books.

(Laughter)

ME: You know, and it's like having the like- I don't know thinking of it that way is a civic duty.

AA: Mm hmm, and--.

RO: Have you read the Odyssey?

ALL: (Laughter)

ME: Yes I did, I had to, I was like why do we all have to read the Odyssey. I hated things like that, like why is this a classic and I was like always like why do classic books- I mean I know why it's a classic book, it's like written by a white person and it's like- so annoying.

RC: It's a- it's a language so everyone's talking in the same language, but yeah let's create some new canons or some new languages.

RO: Mmm hmm.

[pause]

RO: Alright so are we done with the civic question? [pause] Alright.

AA: Well—

RO: Do you want me to talk?

AA: Or- or- or it doesn't matter.

RO: You go ahead, mine's- awful.

AA: It says describe the exhibition scene local versus international versus national presence.

RO: Well-

AA: Describe the exhibition scene, local versus international versus national presence.

[pause]

RC: There is just so many ways for- that is all over the place.

AA: (Laughter)

RC: I mean- We have the internet.

(Laughter)

RO: That's right, there you go.

AA: Yeah, there you go yeah. Good.

RC: I don't- we're sharing the room right now with someone who is actually is like a friend and inspires me, Imani, a lot of the work she's done has been about like art and like occupying spaces that are usually for the one percent in art. So when I think of this question, I think of local art, like you and you all were talking about the Mardi Gras Indians, and the Baby Dolls and that is local art that's like culture, and when I think of

like internationally like we've got like Picasso paintings or like the special like artists in like Italy who are like- they're world renowned, and known all around the world so when I like think of like art and these different tiers, I think about like who is making the art, who has access to the art that's being like- seen and so like- I just think this is like it's a really funny question it's more of like a- statement actually. But- I just, I don't know when I think of art I just think that like so going back to like communities and individuals, and like people- it really depends on like who- what art, how we define it. So going back to the definition of what is art, who are artists, are they the one percent that are like in these- in the Met or these like museums that are- high end or are they the people near the ground level doing like graffiti who are doing guerilla art, I don't- this like brings to mind so many different things. I don't know if anyone want to take this away, so I can stop rambling on.

AA: No no- it's good, it's good.

RC: But I don't- yeah, this just literally brings to mind so many images, so many like definitions of what art is, could be, and what art is.

ME: And like why does it have to be exhibition, I just mean like it's just very specific--.

RC: Mmm hmm.

ME: -like art for an exhibition is like art, I don't see a lot of art in exhibitions that's not the kind of art that I consume.

AA: It- it- one of the things that I always find fascinating about here is I think this is a collision and kind of convergence of all three at once- in New Orleans and yet New Orleans also suffers from the idea and so many places do that- if it's not here then it

must be better there you know, and- and therefore you get these hierarchies that are- are built in right away and sometimes- really kind of kill the spirit of- of what happens on you know a local basis because of the way we measure you know. Did- did you make a lot of money on that or did you do this or did you do that, did you get the publicity and- and I think it gets back to what you were saying about films, you know there- there's an assumption that if I make it as a film, then you know I need to have 200 thousand people view it within this amount of time I mean it's one of the things that drives you to it in a particular kind of way is sometimes I think is- okay I had three million viewers and that- maybe that's important, maybe it is irrelevant as hell you know and maybe that's, you know, you know I- I think that struggle is- is ongoing in that kind of way, you know.

RO: I'm- I'm going to take that question at face value and- and not ask like what is art, because obviously this question to your point Raven is not taking like the- the art that we were talking about earlier like the- the Baby Dolls, the Mardi Gras Indians, and the graffiti, and the little love things everywhere that's not taking- anything that is not being exhibited is not being addressed in this question.

AA: Mmm.

RO: So if they are only addressing the question of the art that has been exhibited then- in terms of a local level you know you have Julia Street which is definitely one percent- driven, and funded, and whatever and there is like the St. Claude area which is a- a lot more, I guess you could put it in more of like an Avant Garde category and- and its burgeoning and it is like definitely thriving, and I know we're always going to compare ourselves to New York but I think that the visual culture in- on St. Claude and everything is- is going to give it a run for its money, and then in terms of national, yeah of course

you are going to look at New York, international I mean, you know. [pause] There's you know the art superstars- like the Venice Biennale I mean it's- I- I've been to it, and I mean it is definitely one of my absolute favorite things to do. It's just- it's like taking Julia Street and St. Claude from every- all these countries and putting it together so it's- it's- it's absolutely a- it's absolutely a- a smorgasbord of a- but they do have the Damien Hursts and like the huge superstars but they also have you know () you know, and so there's a little bit of both of them on the international scale. But I mean to make it to that international scale is like you have to be- is like- win--.

UNKNOWN: American Idol

RO: -you know.

RO: You're supposed to be huge. But I'm not sure like what the- what the point of that question is either.

AA: Mmm.

RO: Like-.

RC: It also feel like for me as a- child of the internet, like when I think of international too like I consume international things online.

RO: Yeah.

RC: And I don't know even know like exactly how that figures into the answer.

RO: Yeah.

RC: But I feel like I can travel in my bed you know?

RO: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

RC: On the internet, or on Tumblr and like looking up things.

RO: Yes so maybe these distinctions are--.

AA: Balance.

RC: They're not for me.

RO: They're not important anymore.

RC: I wouldn't say they're not important, but they're a bit more fluid because I have so much access.

RO: Yeah.

AA: So a film I love to show, you know in- in class like it's got no now, but I- I still think it has something to it in terms of- it is Exit Through the Gift Shop.

RC: Oh yeah.

AA: Which I think, starts a series of questions about that kind of organization thing you know I- I- I- I see a question like that coming from that kind of- you know, what are we up to you know kind of-.

[pause]

RO: Alright no one liked that question let's move on.

AA: Okay.

(Laughter)

RO: Did you want to- formulate- are you ready?

EC: I think you guys support- this is a whole symbiosis of everything.

RO: That- that you want to talk about?

EC: I thought we could start on ().

RO: Okay.

EC: ().

RO: Good. Okay. Alright so this one says what is your experience with affirmative action in hiring and (laughter) exhibiting, well that's why-

RC: What is the last part, in hiring and --.

RO: And exhibiting.

(Laughter)

RO: I'm sorry I didn't--.

ME: I don't even know if I even want to answer that. Are you going to talk about that?

NFY: I'm going to get a little more food ().

RO: You need some sustenance.

(Laughter)

RC: Does anyone else want to take that away- I don't even- or do you need a second.

RC: Yeah.

AA: I- I don't mind I mean it's just- I mean- you know years of seeing the same thing I mean in- in terms of it's a struggle, I think and it's a struggle as in these institutions that create- you know are in constant redefining of what is you know diversity, what is you know- what is to be affirmed and- the thing the thing I like is, uh, Ta-Nehisi Coates' article in The Atlantic on reparations. Cause I think it set the tone of what that question really is about, which is who- what is owed and how it is owed and the implications about how it's owed, and of all cities that you know have that- has this

issue, this city has it- in a major kind of way. I do a lot in Haiti and so you realize that- I mean, so much of this is Haitian, and yet it could never be recognized as that just as it could never be recognized as African influences in- in Louisiana, at least at this point you know it's- it's just it's a struggle and so then it kicks back into it--.

RO: Can you expound on when you say this is Haiti?

AA: So in 1804, the population became fifty percent Haitian in New Orleans, most people don't make that connection that when- the Haitian revolution happened, slaves and free Haitians came here in droves, influenced the architecture. This is often not seen as that, but it is you know very much, everything in terms of infrastructure has that implication that when you go to Haiti you can see it, and you go like 'oh that is why they did this', the shotgun, the Creole cottage, the way we do streets, all that stuff you know was transfixed in- into this- this place, and- yet you know, for the very nature of what was going on you can't you know, you can't say well, you know you really made this happen. You know you really made this happen, you know you couldn't do that you know and- and I think that's- so you have these layers of it and when they- when they pop up, that's when we want to affirm you know that there isn't some accident in placing this down that needs to happen. In other words you know more hiring, more this, more that, more that you know in terms of it, and that's why I go back to this article because I think it was one of the- with the younger generation really- stating the case, that you know- you can affirm greater expectations out of a whole society that really- not only really can include more African Americans, but even maybe have a more honest look at the whole picture you know. Which I think opens a lot of doors the more you are honest about it. ()

RO: I think- I think you hit the nail on the head, it's like are you looking at this honestly?

AA: Yeah.

RO: It's really looking at this honestly, because- you can disavow the entire past and just have like a- a small microscopic view on what- what is happening right now--.

AA: Right.

RO: -in the world again just totally forget about what had happened before and that's what- I think that the opponents of the affirmative action want to do.

AA: Yeah.

RO: And then don't- don't understand what is owed.

AA: (Laughter)

RO: And it goes along with the-the-. The capitalistic ideas of like it's- it's me first and- and- and doing this at any cost.

AA: Mmm hmm.

RO: And it's a- a dehumanizing cost.

AA: Mm hmm.

RO: And so sometimes, you know I hear that all of- all of our social problems are economically- based. You know that it definitely seems like it's that way with the affirmative action.

AA: Mm hmm.

[pause]

RC: Yeah I think it's really interesting that you mentioned the African influence in the city because there is like- there is part- like of a huge culture and like a huge amount of African American people here but like most of the population seems to be impoverished, like a lot the work I've done has been through the school system and I've seen this first hand, and like they've been living in the city so long, their roots are here, like they are really like settled into this city but the city is not always giving back so much. As an outsider person like I'm often like analyzing my perspective as a transplant because I'm not native to the city and just trying to figure out where I fit into that narrative, and how I can like not perpetuate that narrative, but in fact like actually make a positive- like impact that like helps those people around me, by like bridging those communities. But that is like a thing I noticed like moving here like young, for college very like wide eyed and like moving from Houston I was not used to just noticing how many poor black people- how many black people I saw working jobs that were like usually jobs that are like mostly like still in Houston like not acceptable and given to like immigrants, like mostly Latino immigrants. So it was just like very strange to see that power structure still very much alive and well and just so like it- it- all- all around me. Like one of my first memories of being in that city was going to Camellia Grill and just being really creeped out and not having quite the language for like why I was so disturbed and by the power dynamics and interactions that I saw happening in this restaurant from the mostly like black staff and these like fifties – like just being like really creeped out and not knowing like why I was. Now at this point I've like, I've been living here for about like six and a half years like really starting to gather the language to

understand what I saw happening in the city, and just like figuring out like I'm trying to- kind of- what was the original question? The affirmative action--.

(Laughter)

RO: Fall back.

RC: Just figuring out the- like things like how like black people from here will tell me that people don't want to hire them, because they are from here. Like literally, like the new organizations that come into the city will not hire the people if they are from here. Like that is- like that is to me that is just so unfathomable to like think something like that is appropriate and to also go ahead and like classify people in a way that just makes them seem lesser even though you are in their city that they have been in so long.

RO: I think what they're talking to, when they say they don't want to hire someone that's from here – is that they're talking about--.

(Laughter)

RO: About the- About the lack of opportunities, I mean the lack of preparation, the lack of access to schools, the- the lack of- exposure to different things- Is anyone here from here?

AA: I'm not from here.

(Laughter)

ME: No.

EC: ().

RO: Oh

EC: () it's a constant question ().

RC: What is your-?

EC: My parentage? Well I'm black because my father, my father completely was like dismissive of his son's () and my mother because- my mother () passed down () that she learned from her mother () so I think part of my journey not only as an artist but as like a person of color () from- here () it's such an integral part of who I am, my identity- it is very distressing to my process to access my heritage through an online system() to pay money through a capitalist system paying for access to my heritage () specific part of libraries that we don't have access to. So I find it frustrating when I can't () information then it's something that will go to waste () because of that lack of ().

AA: Mmm hmm.

EC: () something that has been erased, erased from existence because of that thought process ().

RO: Yeah we are all in a dilemma state, like we have- yeah. We- we don't know where- where we came from- and a lot of people don't know where they are going, or you know and it's- it's useful to- you know, to keep us there--.

AA: Mm hmm.

RO: -off- off balance, and it's definitely a useful strategy and you know, disavowing affirmative action is definitely part of that- that strategy, you know it comes up what like every- it's- it's in the news again you know, every- four or five years about like okay, was it like the University of Texas that was just recently--.

RC: Oh yeah.

RO: That girl you know. One that--.

AA: Just like--.

ME: That angry little redhead.

RO: Yeah.

ME: Yeah.

RC: There was also that incident connected to the bleach balloons they were throwing - there were students who were literally throwing bleach balloons at like POC students, that was like a thing, because they were like angry about the affirmative action.

ME: One thing about affirmative action that I feel like the iteration we have now of affirmative action and that kind of results in tokenizing and like having this scattered POC like in white places. But I think, at least from my understanding of it, affirmative action was supposed to be was something that was supposed to be more like reparations and not like tokenizing, not like--.

AA: Exactly.

ME: It's now more like safety valve so you feel like you have somewhat a sense of access, but I feel like the way it's molded my life is like- as a token.

RO: A token, wow.

ME: Being tokenized especially because I've had a lot of access to education, so they were 'oh you get to be in this white place and then you get to- represent black people and we as white people can feel better because we have you, being lonely in this place.'

(Laughter)

ME: That's what affirmative action has done in my life.

RO: Yeah.

ME: And in terms of art to, it's like 'oh you get to be in this art class, interview the one black artists when they come, photograph you guys, get you on the website.'

RO: Right, right, right. You know run with it.

ME: Yeah.

RO: Run with it because you've been blessed, actually you know. You've been blessed, there are a lot of people that have been- who are not in that situation and so just take it and run with it that's all you can do, what else are you going to do? You know like you sat there are so many people that like, like you say people won't hire them, people from New Orleans, people who graduated from McDonald's you know. Did not get a good education, cannot speak the same language. You are- you are already- you know behind, you started off that way. So what, you know what, when I tell- I consider myself lucky too I mean- I was- I was educated in the Department of Defense, you know neither of my parents- had money to send me to a private school etcetera or to get a good education, so I was- when my father was in the army I applied to the Department of Defense so I did get a good education I did. I was able to have that opportunity but I tell my kids you know, you know you're blessed. You were lucky, that- you know that- and I was- I was lucky too, I got a free ride to Carleton College, because of affirmative action I mean a lot of people didn't. But- you know and that's why everyone gets so upset that- that they're going to try take it away.

AA: Yeah.

RO: I definitely wouldn't be here.

AA: Yeah. I- I- I liked where you were going in terms of talking about- trying to find those kinds of roots and not quite figuring out all the things that are in play in terms of it, but I think it's an important journey that we go through here in- in this country, alright? Which is that there's so much not said alright? That and the way it- it makes you bound and determined to search, but on the other hand it also allows you the freedom to construct you know (laughter) and- and- and you should do- to me, both things you know and I mean you know, you- you won't tell me, well fine that these are the first three chapters of me and these are you know the ones I know and- and—.

RO: Constructions of self? Construct yourself.

AA: Yes, yes and you know and I- I think they have to feel that and you- you have that and that's the blessed, (laughter) you know and what she's talking about you- you- you're blessed with that freedom to say you know, this is what I know whatever, and this is what I can imagine I know.

RO: So that brings us back to the Odyssey.

(Laughter)

RO: Searching you know, for who you are. I didn't read it by the way.

(Laughter)

RO: I know what it's about. [pause] So do ya'll think that identity politics is still- I mean it seems like that's what we all are talking about right here. Still a thing.

ME: I hate that word.

All: Yeah.

M: It's difficult you know, how do you define that word--.

ME: How did- Yeah I'm not sure how you define can find that offensive a word but you can do it (laughter).

RO: You can't say it, you can't say the word, but you can do it.

RC: Yeah well I'm just like how do you define- like to me that's a term like that something you would find when I was younger I heard but it is not so like something you hear now like how do you define identity politics, when were you with, like what does that mean, or what?

RO: Well it's searching for yourself, I mean it's not I mean I guess what you are referring to like- okay like the feminism and then the you know the AIDS crisis and all of that, you know you're finding yourself in- in those realms but- was- was that what you were--.

RC: No I was just trying to figure out like what the term identity- because I think when I heard it- it kind of triggered me a little, and I wasn't sure if I like really agreed with like what that term meant, and so I was just trying to understand how, how- how that's is defined, I don't--.

RO: It can be different.

RC: I just think for me my brain was reaching for like how to define it and like- respond back to that term I think that's what I'm saying, if that makes any sense.

ME: Is the way that identity politics was- is not just a word like- Marxists wanted a word to talk about, when people who are not white men want to talk about the way that like inequality affects them and it's not just about class, like 'oh this is identity politics like--'.

RO: Okay.

ME: Which is just the way--.

RC: Is just putting it in a certain category.

ME: Yeah, but in like doing so also marginalizes that that experience of oppression which is particular to them and it's not universal and when we talk about class, this is a universal conversation that we can all have but when they want to talk about their issues it's identity politics. Which is just the way I think of that word which might not be the way that everybody thinks of it.

RC: Uh huh.

ME: That is just the way the word came to me, and how I was taught what that word meant.

RO: I see, so- so you wouldn't say identity politics if- when you're talking about like what we were talking about?

ME: Not really.

RO: Do you really just say identity or what do you say?

RC: I'm not sure if like identity I like ().

EC: And then to me ().

RO: Pardon?

EC: () a generation () to me () has to change ().

RO: we're running out of time sorry.

EC: -shifting () because like there is so many ways to define yourself outside the binary itself and that construct, so I feel like to me in terms of identity, how I

classify myself I have various multi-dimensions of who I am as a being so I don't think identity--.

RO: You find that's too confined.

EC: It's too confined. It's just too- limiting. It's too limiting.

ME: Something- also in opposition to whiteness and maleness, is what it implies sometimes. Like you have an identity because you are not part of the norm.

EC: Exactly.

RO: It bothers you too.

ME: Another part of that term for me is an othering.

RO: Pardon?

ME: It's been othering, it's like--.

RO: Yeah.

ME: For me, ways that it has been wielded by universals--.

END OF RECORDING

Transcribed by Skye Allan 7/9/2016

To be copyedited.