NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

LAUREN SIMKIN BURKE

Interviewer: Ric Tennenbaum

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**Ric Tennenbaum:** Hello, my name is Ric Tennenbaum, and I’ll be having a conversation with Lauren Simkin Berke for the New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is June 16, 2017, and this is being recorded at Lauren’s home in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. So Lauren, could you first just introduce yourself, age, pronouns if you want to introduce with how you describe your gender?

**Lauren Simkin Berke:** Um, hi, my name is Lauren, I uh am 20—sorry, not 20, 38 years old. I consider myself to be gender non-conforming, but since I transitioned and started hormones earlier than that was a terminology that was used, I’ve sort of always thought of myself as genderqueer, but with a very consistent gender that’s slightly masculine of center. So I tend towards not dictating how people use pronouns about me or with me when we’re in conversation, but I in print prefer to not use pronouns or to now use neutral pronouns because that’s now become sort of more standardized.

**Tennenbaum:** Gotcha. Which neutral pronouns?

**Berke:** They, them, their.

**Tennenbaum:** They, them, their. Great. Me too. Um, can you tell me about your early childhood? Maybe it’s starting with one of the first memories you have?

**Berke:** I grew up in Manhattan, and I I guess one of the earliest memories I have is being in pre-school. Um I went to a pre-school that was a part of the Episcopal Church, and there was a tiny sandbox playground, and for some reason we were convinced that there was an octopus living under the sand and spent a lot of our free time digging into the sand in the hopes of finding the octopus. I guess we would have been two or three or something like that at the time. I have no idea how we came to that conclusion.

**Tennenbaum:** Wow. Does—has an octopus kind of stayed with you?

**Berke:** Mm, not really. I mean, I like them. [Laughter]. They’re fun to draw. Well, I did just do an octopus drawing for friends that run a coffee shop for like an octopus barista sticker.

**Tennenbaum:** Oh. What about the octopus—was it like an octopus-themed café, or is that your unofficial—

**Berke:** No, the—[Laughter], the café is not an octopus café. Um, [Laughter], a couple of years ago I did a drawing booth at the Renegade Craft Fair where I gave people the option of a couple of different themes of drawings, and one of them was a roulette. Like a drawing roulette where one of the wheels was for a kind of character and one of the wheels was for a thing they would do. I don’t know, somehow it came out of that that I drew an octopus barista, and so while the original drawing was too basic and crude for actually using for the coffee shop, When they wanted to have stickers for their cold drinks, they decided that the octopus barista was the perfect image.
Tennenbaum: Can you tell me more about your pre-school? What was it like like socially with friends or anything?

Berke: I don’t have a lot of memories of the—I mean, I have friends that I, or classmates that I went to school with starting at probably age two that I went to school with through age 14. Um, but I don’t know that in terms of pre-school I remember our interactions specifically. I mean, I think that I enjoyed myself, I remember more painting and drawing than anything else.

Tennenbaum: Gotcha. Was painting and drawing something you would do at home too, or was this just like when you were in pre-school?

Berke: Um, probably both, yeah. I did it at home and at school.

Tennenbaum: Um was anybody encouraging it or supporting you in that?

Berke: Yeah, my parents were very supportive. I did a lot of other things when I was young. I wasn’t just making images. But, I spent a lot of time drawing and photocopying the drawings and making little booklets and making little coloring books and I guess I’m kind of still doing the same things that I was doing when I was three but I have like more resources and more information.

Tennenbaum: Wow, so you started at three and have just been doing it ever since?

Berke: Pretty much. I mean, school took a lot of time away from my activities. [Laughter]. And I did get a BA instead of a BFA, so like, college definitely took a lot of time away from my more direct interest. But yeah, I’ve pretty much always been doing the same thing. Puttering around and drawing things and making little books.

Tennenbaum: Are either of your parents artistically inclined, would you say?

Berke: They’re—My parents both grew up with creative instincts that were not encouraged. So my mother loved drawing, but was uh, basically told that wasn’t like a thing she could really do for like a living. So she became a lawyer. And my father went to college and studied philosophy and theater and then ended up becoming a real estate appraiser because I mean he was thinking that it would be practical, but I think in some ways it would have been more practical to go with the things he was interested in. So I think they were very encouraging because they had not been in environments where they felt encouraged. But just to note, my mother passed away, so I will probably go back and forth between tenses regarding her.

Tennenbaum: Okay. And so you were in school at this time in Manhattan?

Berke: Yeah.
Tennenbaum: Okay, was it the same school, like were you there for more than pre-school? [inaudible].

Berke: Um, I was there just for pre-school. Um we spent nine months living in the suburbs when I was three and four, so I went to a different school for part of the school year during that time and then when we came back I started at school for kindergarten that I went to through eighth grade, and then I switched to another school for high school.

Tennenbaum: Gotcha. Um, can you tell me anything, does anything stick out about your time between that kindergarten and eighth grade period?

Berke: Um that school was really amazing in terms of how uh it structured education and the hierarchy or sort of lack of hierarchy between students and teachers. Um so I didn't have any grades until I was in 9th grade. They did this thing in 6th through 8th grade where you, they had mixed grade advisee groups and you met every morning for 15 minutes and then during the middle of the day there was a reading period where you were like in a room with your advisee group doing your own individual reading that couldn't relate to any school work. And then at the end of the week you would sit down and write how you thought you had done each of your classes, and all of your teachers would do the same thing. When you came in Monday morning you would go over with your advisor what you thought had happened versus what your teachers thought had happened, and then they would, you know, if there was a discrepancy you would try to figure out what, why. Every week. [Laughter].

Tennenbaum: Wow. What was that like?

Berke: Um, I mean, I think it definitely taught a level of you know awareness of difference in realities, and also sort of paying attention to what uh I don't know, the sort of the rhythm of being in school and I don't know, not I don't know, I always thought that it was a great environment because it was much more focused on like learning content and being inquisitive and being a sort of lifelong learner as opposed to being someone who was studying for tests and like cramming information in your head that was never going to stay.

Tennenbaum: Right, you're not into taking the standardized test, [Laughter].

Berke: Yeah [Laughter] right. Um, yeah. They also did this thing where we didn't have science class through that 6th through 8th grade. You had a science lab and you went in during free periods and worked in the lab and like worked through worksheets. There was like definitely an attention towards independence and making students have academic independence, regardless of whether they wanted it or not.

Tennenbaum: Seems like you appreciated it?

Berke: Yeah, I did. I liked it a lot.
Tennenbaum: Good. Do you remember any moments of where like, that as you said difference in realities between where you thought you were and where your teachers reported where they thought you were, do you remember any times where you were like, oh.

Berke: Um, I [Laughter] I think there were definitely some moments with it was like we had a history class where I mean, I have a bunch of things that sort of seem like they fit together but I'm not 100% sure if I'm correct. We were studying, Crete and Thera. We were spending an entire semester solely studying Crete and Thera. And my teacher her family was from Greece and her brother was ill and she had to go to Athens to see him, so we were basically left on our own for a week or two and we were told to read the Iliad in the time that she was away, [Laughter]. We were in 7th grade, [Laughter].

Tennenbaum: Ouch.

Berke: Um, so it was like my first time ever having to get like whatever those sort of summary books are that teacher you like people read instead of reading the real thing. Like I had read the real thing but I couldn't understand it so I had to go to outside sources to help me understand it. And, I assume that there was some sort of discrepancy between my sense of reality and hers when she returned, but I don't know specifically if that's correct.

Tennenbaum: Mm. And so this school seems pretty progressive really?

Berke: Yeah, mm-hmm.

Tennenbaum: What's it called?

Berke: Um, it was called the Day School, but it is now called Trevor Day.

Tennenbaum: Um what else were you doing like outside of school?

Berke: I was doing ceramics classes at the 97th Street Y uh starting age five through 15 once a week. And I uh did other—I mean, during the summers I did sort of camps, at a certain point I switched over to doing more like academically directed art programs. Um, I took classes at the Art Student's League starting at age 13. Um, sculpture at the time.

Tennenbaum: Did you call it the Art Student's League?

Berke: Yes, the Art Student's League.

Tennenbaum: Okay. Um, what is that?

Berke: The Art Student's League is a very old arts institution. Um there are many sort of very famous artists where their entire art education was taking classes at the Art Student's League. I don't believe they give out any sort of certificate or degree or what have you, but it's a place in the Upper West Side that, well, I guess it's Midtown. It's 57th, between I guess Broadway and
7th. Um, they have lots of different you know like classes with live models and sculpture classes and drawing classes and painting classes and like every kind of traditional art making practice you could imagine.

**Tennenbaum:** Wow, and so you got involved in that as a young teen?

**Berke:** Yeah, 13.

**Tennenbaum:** Was it a pretty competitive environment, or?

**Berke:** No, not at all. It was very it was filled with people who you know were interested in making art and interested in other people who were making art, and it was a little odd to have a 13 year old in class, but besides the fact that I was more of a curiosity. [Laughter].

**Tennenbaum:** What was the average age?

**Berke:** Probably 50?

**Tennenbaum:** Oh.

**Berke:** [Laughter]. Yeah. I mean, it's meant for adults.

**Tennenbaum:** Gotcha. So how did you find your way in there?

**Berke:** Um in that particular case, the teacher was a sculptor who was also an expert witness in a case that my mother was putting together, so she met him through that and then found out that he was teaching this class and somehow made it possible for me to be an exception.

**Tennenbaum:** Very cool. Um, how was being in there like socially for you, being surrounded by so many older folks?

**Berke:** It was pretty normal for me. I mean, I grew up like mostly living with my mom and spending time with her friends, and for the most part I was hanging out with people who were older, so it was pretty easy.

**Tennenbaum:** Okay. Can you tell me about more about hanging out with your mom and friends?

**Berke:** Um I guess I always thought of my mother's friends as like her chosen family. She had family but the way in which she interacted with her friends seemed more like my sense of what a like a egalitarian family might feel like, whereas there were layers of expectations and like misunderstandings and like disinterest and whatnot that related to her actual family in many ways. So you know my memories of holidays and things that weren't like—we did go to family dinners or maybe like Passover or whatnot, but most of the sort of social memories of gatherings were with her friends,, whether that be she had a house on Cape Cod for like the
later part of her life. When I was younger, she had a house on Long Island so that she could be closer to her parents. But there was also a lot of time with her friends there.

**Tennenbaum:** Mm. So you said it felt like more of an egalitarian family. What's that sort of look like in the day to day when you're all hanging out? What kind of values or expectations do you feel were in the group?

**Berke:** Um they were values for like smart analysis of things, whether that be going to movies and you know discussing it afterwards or the current political situation or I spent a lot of time with my mother like talking through her cases. So a lot of my childhood was wrapped up in discussing US copyright law, [Laughter]. And, so there's a lot of that. And then there was like this sort of nice, sarcastic humor that sort of underlined all of it because we were all New Yorkers and that's what we do, [Laughter].

**Tennenbaum:** So it sounds like you felt like you were participating on the same level as them? You were [inaudible].

**Berke:** Yeah, pretty much.

**Tennenbaum:** Anything about US copyright law that you still enjoy thinking about? [Laughter].

**Berke:** I mean, I think it's sort of unusual that a commercial artist has a childhood background in copyright law because a lot of it is just not taught often or well to art students. Um, so it's very useful to have but it also is a little annoying to be the person that everyone wants to like ask because you're the only one who knows anything.

**Tennenbaum:** You become the free consultant?

**Berke:** Yeah. Um, but I think it's important that people are aware of their rights and are aware of when they're giving them away and not doing it unknowingly. I think a lot of illustrators sign contracts that they don't fully read and don't fully understand.

**Tennenbaum:** Um when your mother would talk to you through like the cases she was working with, that feel like she was preparing you for this possibility of being—

**Berke:** No, she was in the most part like just asking my opinions. She wasn't necessarily, I don't think she was—I mean, she was in certain ways trying to prepare me, where it was drilled into me at a very, very young age to be writing copyright notices on everything. And as a result, like my rebellion as a teenager and a young adult was to say well it's not actually necessary. Like, I own the copyright whether there's a copyright symbol on it or not. Like you know that, I know that, it's completely ridiculous that you're making me do this and like, it looks shitty and I don't want it, [Laughter]. But I still do it on anything I print now.

**Tennenbaum:** This is backtracking a bit, but you mentioned before you got in the Artist Student's League—
Berke: Art Student's League.

Tennenbaum: Art Student's League, you would attend weekly ceramics classes at the Y?

Berke: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Tennenbaum: Can you tell me about that time?

Berke: Sure. Um, those were uh, I mean, I started out at age five, so it was pretty rudimentary, working with clay, building by hand, and like I have a councilor examples, but I think my father has horded most of them. Um I have a sample of a pig I believe from the first or second year of my endeavors in ceramics. It's a very beautiful pig, [Laughter]. Um, I think it progresses at a certain point to working on the wheel. So then there was you know a lot of making plates and pots and vases and stuff like that. Then somehow, I don't know why I got obsessed with making coil uh pots. So I would create the walls out of coil and then smooth them down as a way to make something that was sort of like what you would make on the wheel but all sort of by hand. And I did a lot of figures, uh, from imagination, so they're all a little wonky.

Tennenbaum: What kinds of figures?

Berke: Um, some of them were busts where it was like a head and shoulders and they were like very like non-specific people. Yeah.

Tennenbaum: Gotcha. Um, okay. What about I imagine that was a space where you were with more like aged people?

Berke: Mm-hmm. Um, again, I don't really remember my classmates that much. Um, as a young person I did not find many people for whom I had an interest in—I mean, I had some friends, but I was not like, generally interested in my peers.

Tennenbaum: Mm. Did it feel like you just like weren't connecting, or do you know where that disinterest was?

Berke: I felt like they were stupid and annoying. They were focused on really superficial things, and I didn't have the patience for it. I mean, I really don't and still don't [Laughter] have the patience for it.

Tennenbaum: What would you say you were focused on then?

Berke: Um, I mean, I was a little bit freaked out from a very young age about work, like what kind of work I could do that would actually make it possible for me to pay my electric bill, let's say. Um, but I was reading and I was drawing. Mostly.
Tennenbaum: Um do you notice looking back at these different times from like the same period of eight to 15, did your work take on any themes or feelings that you can—

Berke: Um, I—there's probably more than what I remember of what I was drawing, but I was doing a lot of drawing from observation, and then I was doing this very odd stream of drawings that were sort of Escher inspired. So they were these like checkerboard landscapes with figures sort of coming out of them. Um and then I was also on occasion doing paintings or drawings based on literature that I was reading. So The Secret Garden and the Wizard of Earthsea and whatever [Laughter] it was that I was drawing, like reading at the time. Um, but there was a lot of just drawing from observation and like I guess wanting to be able to capture what I was seeing, and I didn't necessarily feel that I was doing it as well as I wanted to, so I was just very voracious about trying.

Tennenbaum: In what aspect did you feel like you were falling short?

Berke: I think it was just like a developmental like perspective and those kinds of things where I could see the discrepancy but I couldn't necessarily get—it had to be like, done. It had to be practiced out as opposed to something that I could automatically see and fix. Um, I mean, I was very young so I was perhaps a little ridiculous on my part to think I was just going to be able to do everything automatically.

Tennenbaum: How was it working with like the human form in creating these figures? If they were human.

Berke: Um, I don't—I know that I did do drawings based on images in magazines as a way to have source material, but there were a lot of figures I was drawing that were just out of my head. Um, starting in 7th grade, I was also involved in dance and choreography because my school took over another school that had a high school which had a dance program. [Laughter]. And so there was probably some correlations of like starting to take movement classes and be able to sort of improvise drawings of the human form a little better. Um when I was a freshman in high school I started doing life drawing classes. Like there was a once a week after school life drawing session at school. So that became a regular part of my life for the next eight years, which helped with getting better with the figure. [Laughter].

Tennenbaum: And so at this time between like these movement classes and picking up on life drawings, does seem like the human body became more present in your day to days, did you feel your relationship to your own,, was that being informed? How was your perspective?

Berke: Um, I don't think that my relationship to my own body was informed through the explorations of bodies in artistic forms. Um, I was just generally grumpy and frustrated with the entire puberty process. [Laughter]. It seemed like a cruel and ridiculous joke, and I I don't know that I saw it like saw clearly how frustrated at it I was. Um it was just, I was not happy in a lot of ways, and I think that was a good portion of it, of why.
Tennenbaum: Would you mind digging into more details about puberty, about what was specifically cruel about it?

Berke: Um, I started developing breasts very, very early. And I had very, very, very large breasts. So when I was in 6th grade I was the only person, like I did gymnastics and I was the only person on the team, including the 8th graders, that had any breasts. I basically looked like an adult in that respect, and everyone else looked like a child. Um and it was just not a very—it wasn’t comfortable. [Laughter]. Spent a lot of time during gymnastics practice thinking about being home and reading instead. But I tried to stick it out for a little while.

Tennenbaum: Did you—how did other students react?

Berke: Um, I mean other—there was some let’s say older kids in gymnastics that were like slightly jealous because they saw like my physical transformation as something they wanted. But like overall I think people focused more on my like skills and abilities and personality than they did on my physical appearance.

Tennenbaum: You said through this time it seemed like reading and was a nice way to recenter yourself, find some breath?

Berke: Well, I think that uh I don’t know reading was just a primary activity. It was a way to experience more than you could experience in your day to day reality.

Tennenbaum: What kind of books were you reading?

Berke: Um, it changed. There was a very distinct Lucy Maude Montgomery period and books, like all seven or eight or nine of them.

Tennenbaum: What are those like? I’m not familiar.

Berke: [Laughter]. Okay, so it starts with Anne of Green Gables. You might have heard of that maybe. It’s set in eastern Canada in the I believe the 1800s. Um like in the 1800s. Um and it’s about an orphan who gets taken in accidentally by a family. Like they think that they have said that they would take in a boy and then this girl comes and they give word to the agency that they got her from, or the orphanage or what have you, and planned to like switch her out, [Laughter], swap her out. So from day one she knows that she’s not wanted, and they—but it’s about her sort of becoming a family with those people that take her in, and her relationships with her peers and you know, through her adulthood. Going to college and figuring out what she wants to do and that kind of thing. That was one period. And then I became obsessed with Ursula K. LeGuin, who I am still obsessed with. So I read all of the—at the time there were only three Earthsea books. So it was called the Earthsea Trillogy—the Wizard of Earthsea and there were two others at the time. There are, I think, at least two more books that were written in that series. Um, novels, and then a few books of short stories like set in the same world. Um, and those are sci-fi fantasy young adult fiction that I think it’s safe to say is the original story of like a young boy learning sort of makeshift magic from the like local witch in his village, and
then becoming noticed as someone who was really gifted in magic, and then being sent to magic school where he then went from being this sort of scrappy kid that was like why is this kid here to becoming the like Grand Wizard of Earthsea. Um, there's like an arc to those stories that's kind of amazing. He, in the very, very beginning he's trying to show off to his peers, and in showing off he raises a spirit who then follows him for like the rest of his life basically. So one of the books is like him going out into the nothingness to like find the dragon to help him to figure out how to put this spirit to rest. Yeah.

**Tennenbaum:** Wow. What was that like being a young person reading those stories?

**Berke:** Um, I just thought they were brilliant. I mean, I think that Ursula K. LeGuin is brilliant and I'm glad that she's starting to get more recognition. Um, she's brilliant in her adult sci-fi and she's brilliant in her essays and I'm very thankful to have somehow sort of stumbled upon her young.

**Tennenbaum:** When you were first reading her, did it feel, like were you getting senses of hope from it? Was it just exploration?

**Berke:** It was just exploration, but I guess there was also a moodiness to it that was satisfying.

**Tennenbaum:** As in like, I feel this moodiness really gets me?

**Berke:** Yeah, yeah. Totally, yeah.

**Tennenbaum:** Cool. Um, when you say moodiness, is that like—

**Berke:** I think that childhood is challenging. You have no power. Everyone is telling you what to do. I mean, you might be in a situation where you're not being told what to do. But for the most part, you have very little resources, and I think that I was aware of that fairly early, that I was like, biding my time until I was able to have a little more agency in my life.

**Tennenbaum:** When do you think you made the transition to get out of feeling like full childhood?

**Berke:** I think probably in high school. Like I was sort of always like a little adult. So getting older has always felt like being able to be a little bit more myself and in some ways I've allowed myself to, and I don't know, uh, I don't know whether I'm like a real adult or like a normal adult, and I might always be childish in certain ways, but I've always been pretty adult-like.

**Tennenbaum:** So what was different about high school?

**Berke:** Um in high school there's the like geographic situation of going to school in a different neighborhood and a different area. I had to travel for like an hour to get to school. And, it was just sort of put me in a different place. And I was also at a Quaker school so that sort of inadvertently leads to having meditation be a part of your life, even though it's not called that,
[Laughter], because they were [inaudible] for silence twice a week so that was probably helpful. Um, and I think there were just more peers that I had things in common with than I had previously, although I did really miss the Day School in terms of the academic structure. But my classmates I was slightly more connected to once I was in high school.

**Tennenbaum:** Um so the geographic distance, you traveled an hour, you were still in Manhattan?

**Berke:** Still in Manhattan. My parents divorced when I was four, or got separated when I was four, so they lived in different places and for most of my childhood, or I guess all of my childhood after they separated, my father was on 90th Street and my mother moved around. But mostly in Yorkville in the Upper East Side. And so I was taking the bus, the public bus, down to 16th Street, and if I had been allowed to take the subway it would have taken maybe 45 minutes, maybe 35 minutes, but I wasn’t allowed by myself to take the subway so I had to take the bus.

**Tennenbaum:** Busses were deemed safer?

**Berke:** Yes.

**Tennenbaum:** Did you ever take the subway still?

**Berke:** I only, not to school. Just like with friends after school.

**Tennenbaum:** What was the area like of your high school? Did you feel connected or influenced by it?

**Berke:** Um, we didn’t—I didn’t, well, yeah, I guess so. I feel like we should have been more influenced by it than we were. Um the school is sort of in-between what might be considered Grammercy Union Square area and the Lower East Side, like sort of where all those things meet. And the area that probably had the most influence was the Lower East Side. So there was a lot of uh Polish food and pirogues and lentil soup. Very important. Um, and just generally having more freedom to roam around was nice.

**Tennenbaum:** Why was lentil soup important?

**Berke:** Because it’s tasty and it’s nourishing, [Laughter].

**Tennenbaum:** [Laughter]. Fair. Um—

**Berke:** And it’s cheap.

**Tennenbaum:** Mm.

**Berke:** As a kid, that was important. [Laughter].
Tennenbaum: Okay, so then—okay, so in high school you mentioned that's where interpersonal relationships actually meant more to you?

Berke: Mm-hmm.

Tennenbaum: Um, any in particular?

Berke: Um I have a bunch of friends that are still my friends that are friends from high school. Um, and yeah, so I have two very, very close friends that are with me from high school. One of them lives in the city and one of them lives in Oregon, so I get to see one more than the other but Dev—one of my friends is Dev Vonderin. She is a theatrical director. She's the artistic director of the Story and Performing Arts Center, and we met the first day of school where we were in a class. We were both new students in the school and one of the teachers was doing a role call and said Devora, her full name, she was going by Devora at the time, and I misheard and thought the teacher had said Laura, because often people say Laura instead of Lauren, so I thought that she was calling me when she was calling Dev, and then from there we became good friends. I don't think that was why we became good friends, but that was definitely when we met. [Laughter]. Um and Liz Harlan Furlough is a friend of mine who is a teacher and educator of high school age kids in Portland. Used to be a lay chaplain but now is just teaching, no chaplaining,, and she's a poet too. And I have other friends from high school too but those are the ones that I'm the closest too.

Tennenbaum: Nice. Um, so then moving past high school, what were you involved in?

Berke: Uh, past high school?

Tennenbaum: Yeah.

Berke: Um, I went directly into college. I went to Cornell University and was originally studying fine art in the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning. And after a year I transferred out and went into the liberal arts college there and studied anthropology for the next three years. And throughout the entire time that I was there I was living in an artistic program house called Risley, which is in a dorm that is made to be like a castle, uh, and had a black box theater and shops in the basement and it was—there's a student-run committee that made all the decisions about how mm was allocated and space was allocated, and pretty early on as a freshman there I became involved in the committee, was like a uh voted on like representative of my class there, one of two, uh and became the chair the next year of the committee and then was staff as the program assistant for the following two years, which was Cornell's terminology for what an assistant resident hall director is. For some reason, there was some dorms that were like, programming houses that were set inside other dorms, and assistant residence hall director was given as a title for that position. Like my job in those places where they didn't have their own residence hall director. And then we were called program advisors and people didn't know what that was. [Laughter].
Tennenbaum: Okay, so you stayed in the Risley Arts House, Art Collective House. Um, yet you withdrew from the arts program to pursue anthropology—

Berke: Well Risley isn't for—it's not a dorm for arts students, it's a dorm for people who are interested in the arts regardless of what their academic subject is. And the majority of people there are doing things other than fine art in their academic pursuits. So it wasn't really, they're not really connected. I mean, there certainly were a fair number of arts students and architecture students and whatnot, but, certainly a lot of chemistry students and biology students and English majors and history majors.

Tennenbaum: What drove you to so quickly pursue more organizational [inaudible].

Berke: It was accidental. Um, I mean, it feels like it was accidental. Like I really enjoyed committee. Um there was like a playfulness to it, but they still followed Robert's Rules, like, Roger's Rules that like, I forget what the context of the creation of that set of organizational rules is, but it's there was a structure to it but because the people utilizing the structure were like very smart but very silly, it was very enjoyable. Like the committee chair as like a gavel had a hockey stick with a lightning bolt on the end, and then a fairy want attached to the end of that.

Tennenbaum: [Laughter].

Berke: [Laughter]. And then so then when you were committee chair, you were like the custodian of the hockey stick. Very silly. But [Laughter], enjoyable.

Tennenbaum: Cool. Um, can you talk about your transition to anthropology, how that came about?

Berke: Um it was somewhat like practical. Like there was I think this time in the 50s where a lot of liberal arts colleges did away with their college requirements and let students just sort of do whatever they wanted without any specific sort of base that they were requiring everyone to do. And Cornell, being the stuffy, stupid place that it is, decided that they didn't want to do that, that they would create a special program where 40 students could do that and create their own programs within the liberal arts college. So I was frustrated as a fine arts student. I wasn't able to do as much as I wanted to do. I wanted to take more classes and they wouldn't let me. And so I decided to apply for the special program which required me to also submit an application to submit to switch colleges within the university. Um and I was specifically proposing to work on a project creating children's books about fine art history within a socio-political context because I was frustrated that sort of art was quite often not taught within the context it was created in. But I didn't get into the program, so [Laughter] the way I knew that I was automatically switched into arts and sciences was that we got a bill for the next semester which stated that I was now in the college of arts and sciences, [Laughter].

Tennenbaum: [Laughter].
Berke: And I decided to roll with it. I'd also applied just to like, transfer to other schools, but by that point I was too enmeshed in Risley to leave. So my requirements were wanting to find like a general humanities program that I could actually do in three years, because everything I'd done the first year which was a requirement in the Fine Art program then got counted as an elective. [Laughter]. And I did not want to be in Ithaca for more than four years. So it was like, I was interested but it was also practical.

Tennenbaum: You didn't want to be in Ithaca for more than four years.

Berke: No, I did not. [Laughter].

Tennenbaum: Why? [Laughter].

Berke: Um I think that Ithaca is a really lovely place to visit, but for me it was not a great place to live. Um, there's I mean I think—clearly I'm spoiled in a lot of ways in terms of like being in a city like New York with the resources that New York provides. Or can provide. Um, but Ithaca, even though it is technically a city, it's very, very small, and there's I don't know, I found it very frustrating in a lot of ways. I mean, at least there was a public bus system, so [Laughter] that felt a little bit like being in a real place. And I know there are lots of real places that don't have public busses, but I don't know something about it rubbed me the wrong way. I have really good friends from college who decided to live there full-time as adults, so I do go back and visit and that's much more pleasant. [Laughter].

Tennenbaum: Um so you mentioned wanting to create a children's book about art history that puts it in conversation with the socio-political context. Do you feel like your art was becoming more political then, or how you wanted to apply it?

Berke: Um, I wasn't really thinking about [Laughter] that so much. Um, I guess my personal art at the time, I don't really remember, like I was still doing life drawing, but I don't really remember like in the first couple of years like what my personal projects were. Um, I mean, it's possible that I was just like too busy to be working on—I did like summer programs where I was, I guess the summer after college I uh did a photo shoot with friends of mine from high school and then I spent the summer at the School of Visual Arts uh in a painting summer program doing large portraits, like large charcoal portraits based on those photos. So I was I guess still working on personal generated work as opposed to like things that were more political.

Tennenbaum: Gotcha. And so what kind of personal things were you exploring?

Berke: Um, I think it was uh basically just doing portraits of people that I cared about. Um, I had a breast reduction that summer. The summer between the first two years of college, and I started drawing these cartoon characters while I was in the hospital that then became a line of characters that I developed into other things including starting to do fashion like making clothes based on the clothes I was drawing on the characters, and a line of greeting cards that I self-produced and sold for awhile. Um, but those were very—those seemed separate from like
what I consider to be my art-making practices. I mean, maybe they aren't that separate, but they felt like it at the time.

**Tennenbaum:** Did you have a favorite outfit that you created from that series?

**Berke:** Um, well, I do like all those outfits. I guess my favorite outfit was, there was this top that was striped it had like, it was short-sleeved, but it had sort of the—it came out, almost like it had epaulettes. It didn’t have epaulettes, but it sort of looked pointy at the shoulder. Um and then—I guess maybe the skirt was striped and the top was red, and somehow I was able to get fabrics that like so accurately mimicked these stupid little cartoon drawings that I had done, that I was just very amused by the whole thing, [Laughter].

**Tennenbaum:** So then you actually produced the [inaudible].

**Berke:** Yeah, I produced them for, there's this thing at Cornell called Cornell Design Make, and they put on a fashion show in the spring every year. And I had a lot of friends who were involved when I was a freshman and I guess because someone had remarked on the cartoons that they would like to do those clothes for their line, I was like no you can't do that, they're mine, I'm going to do it. So I did it.

**Tennenbaum:** Okay, so uh, breast reduction surgery.

**Berke:** Mm-hmm. Um I did a like not mastectomy, just a breast reduction from I was a 36DD and it was very physically challenging. Um, so I uh, I had a reduction. It wasn't, I had some miscommunications with the doctor because we got side-railed by having a lump that I had to have removed and biopsied at the same time I was having the surgery and so it was a reduction down to a 36C even though I had tried to get her to go down to a B, [Laughter], and then uh years later I had a double mastectomy.

**Tennenbaum:** Was mastectomy something you were thinking about at the time?

**Berke:** No, at 19 it never would have occurred to me at 19. I knew that I like wanted my breasts to be much smaller, but it wouldn't have occurred to me to have them off entirely.

**Tennenbaum:** Oh, because it sounds like it was a day to day physical practicality thing?

**Berke:** Yeah.

**Tennenbaum:** Was gender in your mind at all?

**Berke:** Mm, I mean, not really. I had, I mean, that's not true. I had had throughout my entire life the experience of people perceiving me as male and then finding some marker to then identify me as female, and then they would have this like, existential crisis over their own confusion, and then dealing with that was frustrating to say the least, [Laughter]. Um so my thoughts around gender, like I never went around thinking like you know, I'm really a boy. But
I never went around thinking I'm really a girl. Like I just, it always seemed a bit, like it made more sense to me, people identifying me as male, but I also wasn't wedded to it.

**Tennenbaum:** Mm. It made more sense to you?

**Berke:** Right, [Laughter], yeah. It made more sense to me like, it seemed silly that someone would, that it would be an issue either way.

**Tennenbaum:** Mm. Yeah. Just the way you talk about it makes it sound like you're creating this like huge massive situation over how do I read this person, who is just like, that's stupid, what are you doing?

**Berke:** Yeah, I mean, it didn't make sense to me. Um, I was in an anti-oppression drama troupe when I was in college, where we wrote skits about issues of oppression and then performed them for you know community groups and student groups as a way of trying to provoke conversation. And I had a monolog that was called Two Points about like just what we were talking about, that I don't really understand why there are only two points on the scale and why you're having this like hissy fit over your own perceptions. But yeah,—

**Tennenbaum:** Um you sad for a long time you had been getting those confused readings?

**Berke:** Well I guess when I was younger it wasn't confused. When I was younger people just like the strangers on the street you know, say whoever was looking at me like oh, what an adorable boy. And that was that. It was just in passing, and no one like, I didn't correct anyone or anything, it was just like, some people read me one way and some people read me another, I guess it's pretty much the same now except I have a little more awareness and agency and possibly more acceptance of it.

**Tennenbaum:** So how did it feel in different stages from when, like, you were a younger child, through like teens to college?

**Berke:** I guess when I was younger it seemed more normal, like, to be, like I was okay with just being who I was, and not necessarily caring how people perceived me. I think with puberty it became more challenging. Um, specifically related to breasts. Because that was people have weird reactions. I mean, there definitely were people who like even with me having 36DD breasts were identifying me as male, and then like because of my voice then thinking oh, then you're female, and then having a whole existential crisis about it. Like, I don't care. [Laughter]. Can we just get on with the like whatever the thing was? [Laughter].

**Tennenbaum:** So then moving out of college—

**Berke:** Um I went directly into graduate school. I moved home to Manhattan, and I started a program at the School of Visual arts called illustration as visual essay, which is an MFA program. Um, I graduated college in 2001, so I started in grad school in 2001. Um and September 11 was my first day of official classes, supposed to be. Um so there was like this weirdness in terms of
how everyone proceeded. Like it wasn't business as usual. We definitely had a week off from classes the first week because like, I went to school but school had closed by the time I got there,, because it was, you know, like a few hours after the towers had been hit. Um, so I guess the faculty was just really stunned and didn't know how to like go forward, they certainly didn't want to just sort of go back to what they had originally planned to do. I think things were very open that first semester because everyone was in shock.

**Tennenbaum:** Can you tell me more about memories from that day?

**Berke:** Um, I had a routine, even though I hadn't started school yet, we had maybe done like an orientation one day the week before. I had a routine of going to the West Side and going to a particular coffee shop,, so I went to that coffee shop to get coffee before I went downtown, and I walked in and they had a TV set behind the counter that was usually on VH1 showing music videos, because back in the day they actually did show music videos. And they had CNN on instead. And the first tower had just been hit. And I got my coffee, I went in the back, there was another huge television with it on, and I called my mother who was on Cape Cod at the time, and I told her to turn the news on because she hadn't yet, because it was around the time she would be having her first cup of coffee too. And while we were on the phone, the second tower got hit. And it didn't occur to me that school would be cancelled. Like I just—I didn't know the severity of what was happening. I was like, just sort of in shock but I was also just in sort of school mode like it's my first day of school so I need to go to school. Um so I took the train and I went to school and I got there and the person who like runs the office and runs the school was there, but told me that the whole school was closed for the day. There was maybe two other students who had showed up. Uh and then I had to figure out how to get home. Um so I took a bus part of the way, and it was packed. Like more than a bus is ever packed. Like sardines in a bus. Like we're used to that maybe now in terms of the subways, like it was a lot more ridership on the subways than there used to be, but, I took it part of the way and then walked the rest because it was so slow and so packed, it was sort of [inaudible]—I'd also left something at the coffee shop, so I had to go back to the Upper West Side before I went home to the Upper East Side,, which led me to walk through the 85th Street Passage on Central Park, which is usually just traffic only, and it was like a sea of people. Like an exodus of people. Like I've never seen that many people in the street for something that's not like a protest. Like, it was really surreal. And then there's like the really disgusting smell, like even on the Upper East Side, you could smell the smell from downtown, which is the smell of dead bodies and burned plastic and whatever mix of things there were in that building,, for days and days and days. I mean, yeah, it was not ideal. Um, the next week when we started school, one of our classes was an illustration history class, where we were asked what our favorite children's book was. And I had this book from when I was a kid called The Alien Diaries.

**Tennenbaum:** The Alien Diaries?

**Berke:** Yes. Um, by Maris Bishofs, and no one had heard of it, and no one knew what I was talking about. And I brought it in, and I was basically told this is not a children’s book, [Laughter], but in the book there is a drawing of two planes hitting two towers. And this book is from 1985. So I think uh I don't know for sure but while I was stunned and everyone was
stunned, I wasn't actually surprised about 9/11 in the way everyone seemed to be, like, and I guess to some extent this book was a part of that because it had sort of, like it was just a thing that could happen, that ended up happening.

Tennenbaum: Was there anything else you think led to this sort of stunning lack of surprise?

Berke: Um, I've never been, well I guess I've been relatively cynical about American politics for most of my life, and so the idea that someone would take extreme measures to express their disgust with America seemed reasonable. Not reasonable that that was a good thing for them to do, but that someone in a particular context that sort of had blinders on would sort of see that as an option, that didn't seem impossible to me.

Tennenbaum: So the Alien Diaries was your favorite book.

Berke: No, it is. It is.

Tennenbaum: It is?

Berke: Yeah.

Tennenbaum: Can you tell me more about it?

Berke: Yeah, sure. I could talk about that forever, [Laughter]. Um, the Alien Diaries is a book that is from the outside looks like a composition book, and it is the diary of an alien that comes to New York to study human beings. The author of the book is a Latvian illustrator, so he was writing it as an alien in New York City but he drew it as like a cartoon alien of the extraterrestrial variety. Um, there were different sections to the book. It starts out with these ink and watercolor drawn fake photographs like snapshots. They include him going to the Brooklyn Bridge and walking through Central Park with Yoko Ono and she teaches him about haiku and going on the Barbara Walters Show, [Laughter], and lots of other adorable things. Um, there's a section about architecture and galleries and it ends with a ping-pong appendix, with ping-pong diagrams. Like, ping-pong game diagrams.

Tennenbaum: Like of different—

Berke: Like it abstracted, artistic renderings of imagined ping-pong matches. So it's uh both representational and abstract. It's not telling you a story in a linear way, but it was beautiful and it's charming and it related to my experience of the world but also from like a different perspective.

Tennenbaum: What specific aspects of it do you feel like, where you felt that resonance?

Berke: Um, I guess there is the underlying thing of my feeling the need to be studying other human beings because I don't necessarily understand a lot of the things that they do. But just
the general sort of setting of it being sort of my world. Sort of having it represented, the way the book represents New York was quite lovely as a kid.

**Tennenbaum:** Do you still think of it as a children's book?

**Berke:** I do, because for me it was a children's book, and just because—I think people saying that it's not a children's book is because they underestimate the intelligence of children, and I find that upsetting to say the least.

**Tennenbaum:** Um, and uh so I suppose back to graduate school. Um, what school was it?

**Berke:** The School of Visual Arts.

**Tennenbaum:** Um, anything remarkable about your time there?

**Berke:** Um well that program is wonderful. I had a very good time. Um, it's an unusual illustration program because it's not just a traditional illustration MFA. It's open to really anyone who does sequential work that's representational. So that could be someone doing stop-animation, someone doing cartoons, comics, children's book illustrations, fine art that's sequential, and you know, quite a wider variety than even that. So there was like, everyone did something different and did it really well, and that was sort of exciting and fantastic. Um, and from like a working standpoint, they do a really good job of teaching the basics of promoting yourself as an independent commercial artist regardless of what field you're going into. Um and I have a lot of really good friends and colleagues from that time.

**Tennenbaum:** Very cool. So it teaches you how to be professional and make a living, but also welcomes this diversity of [inaudible] art.

**Berke:** You have professionals from both the gallery world and the illustration world that are coming in to speak to you. Like, applying for grants and building your own website, and like, whether you actually send them out, they're forcing you to create promotional material that could be sent out to art directors, things that become sort of the normal part of being an illustrator or designer, you know, some kind of commercial artist. And also for are people who are just going to be doing fine art, really seeing it more as a commercial art, which it is, but people in fine art schools tend to play that down and then not teach how to do like, yes, you should get out of grad school and know how to studio practice but you should also know how to be able to show your work and sell your work. That's what you want to do.

**Tennenbaum:** Is that something you knew you wanted?

**Berke:** I knew that I uh wanted to be making art and to figure out a way to make art as a way to make a living. And I didn't necessarily know if I could do that. I never expected for my fine art work or my personal work to be the thing that made it possible for me to live. Um so illustration seemed like a good option. By the time I graduated, I thought I would be able to start a business doing like custom portraits,, which didn't work out at all. Um, and somehow, I
was a lot better at editorial illustration than I thought I would be. Um, the exercises we'd done in grad school, I didn't feel like I did very well at. Um, and it turned out that that was more just sort of a fluke of starting out than it was like an innate inability.

**Tennenbaum:** And so what would you be doing with your free time when you weren't working on school projects in grad school?

**Berke:** In grad school I would be doing two things that were not working on school projects. One was, I was making ready-to-wear clothing for a boutique in Cobble Hill. Um, so I was doing that, and I allowed myself to do one like gag comic a week when I was in grad school as procrastination. Um it was a strip that I called Fineberg, incorrectly spelled from Leslie Feinberg, but certainly an homage to Leslie Feinberg, but spelled Fine, like in place of Fein. Um, and it was about a bunch of teenagers who are very smart and very bored. Like, in high school. They were all like genderqueer female-bodied but generally androgynous characters. I had this fantasy that I would be able to get it syndicated, and then you know like help change the world [Laughter] in terms of gaining some awareness for gender diversity if you will. But that didn't happen, [Laughter].

**Tennenbaum:** So the aim was to spread like awareness?

**Berke:** I mean, I think it was to present an alternative that seemed closer to my understanding of reality but didn't seem to be in any sort of media at the time. Um, I was somewhat inspired by Boondocks and its success and what I felt like it was doing for representation at the time, and I thought that possibly it was time that there be something like that for genderqueerness or what have you. But it was a little too early.

**Tennenbaum:** Was genderqueer the word that you were using at the time?

**Berke:** Yeah, at the time. Yeah.

**Tennenbaum:** How did you, what was your fist contact with genderqueerness in those terms with Leslie Feinberg?

**Berke:** Um, Leslie Feinberg, I mean specifically Stone Butch Blues, which it's really sad on second reading it really does not have the same kind of power [Laughter] that it does on the first reading. You have to appreciate how much I mean, it's pretty badly written, but it was so important and just continues to be so important. Um, I read that in a class my second year of college, taught by Sandra Benn, and the class was social construction of gender and sexuality. So I was part of a large list of very interesting texts that we were reading. Um I had uh been introduced to like genderqueer as a concept maybe the year prior. Although earlier than that I had I mean, I sort of knew about things that sort of came before that in terms of like you know, there's a documentary about a photographer named Loren Cameron, that I think I probably saw on TV or rented a VHS of it or something earlier, who is a trans man that transitioned quite a long time ago. Um so it was someone who is well past transition, just living as a trans man in a time when that was like a somewhat unusual thing, or an unusual thing for people to be
talking about. Um, when I was a freshman in college, Kate Bornstein came out with My Gender Workbook which because I spent a lot of time at the Bookstore, I sort of saw as soon as it came out without really knowing who Kate was. Um and then she came to do the book tour, which was really fantastic. So those were I think probably that book was a great introduction to a language to talk about genderqueerness in a more holistic way.

Tennenbaum: At this time, were you attaching your own identity to what you were reading?

Berke: Yeah, definitely. I mean, I definitely like that was the closest thing to something that made sense to me, you know, genderqueerness, that I'd seen so far. So I was happy to have at least a start to having a language to be able to identify.

Tennenbaum: And the Fineberg comic. Um, how—to what degree was it autobiographical?

Berke: It was all imagined things, but the kind of environments or the tone of the conversations certainly came out of the way in which me and my friends interacted. So it would, you know, some examples would be, one of the characters, basically like mourning or having a funeral for her Peeps, which she herself put in a microwave and exploded, yet still feeling the need to mourn them, [Laughter], and the other people not having it. Like this is ridiculous, like you put this upon yourself. There's like a darkness and a melancholy but also sort of sarcasm and humor.

Tennenbaum: You're talking about the marshmallow Peeps, right? [Laughter].


Tennenbaum: Do you feel like that's something you might do?

Berke: Exploding—well, I didn't grow up—

Tennenbaum: Like the funeral? [Laughter].

Berke: Um, maybe. I mean, I I didn't grow up with a microwave, so I didn't have the resources to do that but it's certainly a possibility that I might have a funeral for my Peeps.

Tennenbaum: Do you feel a sense of community during your grad school years in any form with you know artists genderqueerness?

Berke: Um when I was in grad school I was very focused on school, and I was very shocked by the overwhelming straightness that I was surrounded by. Like there was a very like it was bizarrely the 10%, like 10% queer, and there were only 20 people per class. There were 40 people there. And I was used to being around queer people all the time, so I would wake up every morning and before school I would go to Christopher Street and I would get coffee at a coffee shop on Christopher Street so I could at least start the day off like surrounded by queer people, then I would walk to Chelsea to go to school and be surrounded by straight [inaudible] people. [Laughter].
Tennenbaum: Can you describe your time on Christopher Street to me more in the early 2000s?

Berke: Um, I mean, mostly there was one coffee shop I was going to. I think it was called the Espresso Bar, and it was just a tiny sort of galley place where they had like, tiny little tables on one side and the rest was just the counter. Um, and I don't know that it was the best coffee I could have gotten. It was sort of an early—it was before there was a boom in the the coffee business. So it was a like barista culture now is so completely different than it was back then. Um, but it was I don't know I just uh I didn't have any really close friends that I was meeting there or what have you, it was more just to like feel like I was surrounded in a sort of queer environment as a starting point because I needed to like fortify myself a little bit. Not that there were issues at school because of me being queer and other people not, but I just wasn't used to being around so many straight people.

Tennenbaum: Would you say that just being in the presence of queer folks fortified you?

Berke: Yeah.

Tennenbaum: What was it strengthening? How has that supported you?

Berke: Um just to even out [Laughter] to feel a little more balanced and to come from a place of like reinforcing my being normal, [Laughter], and or at least the kind of normal that I wanted to be. Um, and to have that be a starting point.

Tennenbaum: How were you identifying at that time?

Berke: Um, I identified as queer, and I kind of still do. Um, and I would have said both queer and genderqueer.

Tennenbaum: So you said this was, still getting the like straight dominant, meat eating, grad school was different. So what was community like then back at Cornell?

Berke: Um, at Cornell I lived in this bubble. It was a very specific bubble. Um, while it was not completely queer, its tendencies ran towards queerness so that I used to say that one of the things I thought Risley was the best at was teaching straight men to be comfortable in dresses, which seems like a small thing but radiates out as a big thing, because then you have these adult straight males that go out into society in a very different way,, whether or not they ever actually put dresses on again, you know, who knows? Um, but we did Rocky Horror Picture Show twice a year every year and have lots of parties that involved dress-up and uh I guess it was, it felt like a very queer-centric space, even though it wasn't exclusively queer. Um when I was looking at Cornell and I went to a talk with the admissions office, they uh pointed across the street at Risley and said, that's where all the purple-haired freaks live. In the official meeting with possible, potential students. So I both knew how I would be perceived with relationship to
like the rest of the university but I also knew that it was the right place for me if I was going to be at Cornell, which I think was correct.

Tennenbaum: How did—so you mentioned the political influence that just happened, a bunch of straight men go out in dresses can be, how did, what like emotional impact did that have on you to see your peers kind of stretching accepted boundaries?

Berke: Um I think that in some ways it solidified a lot of things for me. Like I was really more intentionally wanting to not be like in costume, to always feel like authentically myself. Like I stopped wearing dresses and skirts and I stopped dressing up on Halloween because it just seemed antithetical to what I really wanted to be doing. I don't want to dress up because other people were telling me that I should dress up, I want to dress the way I want to dress, and I want to be as comfortable with myself as I can be, so I can get—it helped sort of move towards that.

Tennenbaum: Uh, so is there anything else that you want to mention that feels worthwhile? Um, up until and through your grad school years?

Berke: Hmm. I don't know. Probably not. It's possible, but I can't remember.

Tennenbaum: Okay. We can always come back. Um, so what did you do once you had graduated?

Berke: Um I started trying to get work as an illustrator and as a designer. And I spent some time doing web and print design for a small bag company, and then I decided that I sort of needed to figure out what I wanted to be doing a little more specifically and I uh I started working at this place that was called Neighbhorhoodies, where they were doing custom text on garments. And I was a head press operator. I placed the letters and heat pressed them on. Except for the plastic letters that would be their entire adhesion to the clothing and for sewn letters it would just be placing them for them, the people who were working on the machines to sew them on. Um, and while I was doing that, I was still—I was drawing Fineberg once a day, and I did single panel comic advertisements for the company, for Neighborhoodies, for the Onion, for the New York—you know for awhile the Onion actually produced real newspapers, so for the New York edition of the Onion for awhile I was doing those for them. Um, I uh what was I doing? I was working on a painting project. I started a project where the intent was to do portraits of genderqueer artists in New York City, and I only sort of got through a few people and I basically decided to stop the project because I thought it was probably more important to like figure out my own stuff than try to figure out my own stuff by doing an art project about it, and I switched to doing other kinds of projects but also I guess—I don't know. I was an organizer for a festival also around the same time, so it was like a lot of things going on at the same time.

Tennenbaum: What kind of festival?
Berke: It was called Lady Fest East 2004. It was a multi-disciplinary arts festival, uh, but I think the draw was the music. But I was the visual arts organizer.

Tennenbaum: It sounds like you were at least in contact with several other queer and genderqueer artists in the city. Did that feel like a community to you? To what extent? Were you collaborating and organizing with them?

Berke: Um, well I guess the—I got brought into Lady Fest East through my connection with Jules Roscome who is a filmmaker and painter, and Jules is the first person that I had contacted like cold, like not knowing him at all to sit for me for the portraits I was painting,, and we became friends and he—I don't remember how close we were around the time he asked if I was interested in helping with the festival but we were sort of within year or six months or whatever of hanging out and my doing these drawings of him and doing the paintings. Uh, and we've been friends since. One of his friends from college who is actually now one of my best friends, so we're like all sort of intertwined now.

Tennenbaum: So then Lady Fest East, was it—how many people were working on that festival?

Berke: Um I think that it was around, it was probably around 10 or 12 people that were organizing it. Um, we were—it had music performances, there was a fashion show, there were workshops, there was an art gallery art show, and poetry readings, and there were probably other things as well and it was all like over a three day period at multiple venues, although most of it was in one event space in Bushwick off the Morgan stop and it was at the time in 2004 the Morgan stop in Bushwick was pretty desolate. Um, and so it was I don't know, very interesting, [Laughter]. I'm not there that often, but every time I go back I'm really shocked by how gentrified and like surreal it is now compared to then. Um, yeah. I don't know.

Tennenbaum: How did you feel about the name Lady Fest?

Berke: Um it was a part of a—it was a period of time where there were these festivals happening all over the country. They were happening for years, so it was part of the history of festivals. Um we definitely had discussions about trans inclusivity and language related to that. Um at the time probably like Jules was specifically identified as trans and I was like more sort of genderqueer and not I felt like we were the ones that were sort of fighting for a discussion of specific language to make it as inclusive as possible. We did put an asterisk like after, it was like Lady Fest* 2004. And I believe the asterisk was like, sort of a not subtle way or sort of leading to more information about what the intent was. It was my last time really doing any organizing. Like it was kind of a horrendous experience overall. [Laughter].

Tennenbaum: [Laughter]. Can you give more details?

Berke: Um, [Laughter], I don't know. Um, it was very stressful. Um there were a lot of let's say strong personalities, which is good in a lot of ways but there were some people who felt there was a need to attach the festival to some very big name performers, and the only way we were able to do that was to skew the dates to a time that was sort of later in the year than we
originally intended, which made certain programming not really possible, at least in the way it was originally conceived. So there was I think frustration about how those kind of things proceeded because getting the performers with the like the fancy performers became more of a priority than sort of keeping the initial integrity of like what we were intending to do.

**Tennenbaum:** Seems like you weren’t too keen on these performers?

**Berke:** No, no, no, no, no.

**Tennenbaum:** Or centering—

**Berke:** No, I don’t have an issue with the performers. It was more the, the prioritizing the like a headliner as opposed to like being able to have exactly the festival we wanted.

**Tennenbaum:** So what were these like primary programs and intentions, because you said that there is this history?

**Berke:** Um I think it was uh it’s a festival that I believe came out of sort of feminist punk queer music and spaces. Um, wanting to have to create a space where people would be able to learn from each other and enjoy each other’s creativity and find a place to be able to show their work and not feel the pressures of sort of mainstream stupidity. At least that was my sense.

**Tennenbaum:** So sort of like egalitarian access for artists and participants?

**Berke:** Yeah.

**Tennenbaum:** So you said that was like your last time organizing.

**Berke:** Yeah, I think so. Um, I was very burned out, and it was just very exhausting and I had like, other sort of things that happened during the course of my being exhausted by it that weren’t that great. Um, they were so stupid but like, I had like a fly infestation in my apartment at the same time, and the refrigerator broke, and the only place in my apartment that had a door to like close yourself off was the bathroom, so I slept in the bathroom because of the flies. Because there was like construction somewhere else in the building and somehow they—it was just all very sort of exhausting, stressful, not fun times that like, while the festival was only part of it, it was the part I could clearly say like I’m, this is not good for me to be continuing to put myself in this situation where I’m going to be this anxious.

**Tennenbaum:** And so uh was there anything else going on at this time in your life?

**Berke:** Um, I was in like an an on again off again relationship with someone who is a very good friend of mine now. Um, we’ve uh we dated some in our 20s and we dated some in our 30s and now we’re just doing the not dating thing. Um, and I think there was like a merging of college friend groups. Like my college friend group and his college friend group. Not because of us, but because of other factors. Um so that was sort of interesting to sort of have my social groups
sort of expand in certain ways. Um, and those are all people who are like a regular part of my life now. So it was definitely an important time for that.

**Tennenbaum:** You always like to have this influx of interpersonal relationships?

**Berke:** Um it was interesting and it was fun and it was, it was certainly interesting to like watch my friends interacting with new people. Um, I mean, I certainly feel like my world is better for having this sort of new set of people in it, so I'm glad for it.

**Tennenbaum:** Was this also a situation like mostly queer leaning folks?

**Berke:** All queer folks.

**Tennenbaum:** All queer folks.

**Berke:** Oh no, it's—no, even the straight people are queer. Those straight people are queer. I mean, they're straight people, but they're into, no, I guess kind of queer, [Laughter].

**Tennenbaum:** Very queer. Cool. So were you engaging with other queer people outside of your [inaudible] friend group, or was that your main social base?

**Berke:** Um that was definitely my main social base, but my—I was, I guess I had other queer friends through like, it seems weird but like, nightlife stuff. Like I've never really been someone who—I don't drink, and I don't necessarily like bars and whatnot, but my early 20s I very intentionally forced myself to be in that kind of environment, at least to try and sort of teach myself to be able to manage being in those kind of environments. Um, and I have a fair number of friends that I know specifically only through sort of that time, people who are you know, party promotors and people I met because they were doing the door at parties where I was like selling t-shirts and whatnot. I, but they were all queer events.

**Tennenbaum:** Did you have a regular bar at that time? The times when you did go out and try to [inaudible].

**Berke:** Well, I guess early in my 20s there was this bar called Meow Mix, which was I guess infamous. [Laughter]. Um, and they had an event, they started having an event called Trans-Am, which I think was pretty much one of the first like transmasculine parties that was happening in New York. Um, and then I also had friends who were, I had a friend who was a photographer who was working at a party called Snapshot, which one of the organizers—I guess at this point probably both of the organizers are trans, but one of them at the time was out as trans. So I was often going to Trans-Am, and other friends of mine were also, and I was asked at a certain point whether I wanted to exhibit at Snapshot, which is a kind of thing where it's kind of ridiculous. Like you go, like you set it up, and it's like only up for when the party is happening. So I had to be there at 2:00 am when the party ended to take it down and take everything home. But I went to Snapshot not just when I was showing, sort of as a part of my
like masochistic trying to like [Laughter] teach myself to be in social situations. Um but I certainly have as I said a lot of friends and acquaintances that I know from that time.

**Tennenbaum:** Um, what were those Trans-Am parties like?

**Berke:** Um, they were really fun. I mean, it was like, it was uh, it was like, what felt like the beginning of uh FtM community in New York, which like before had just been like maybe groups of people, but we didn't feel like a community, so it did help sort of the beginning of feeling like there was a community. Um, and Meow Mix was a very tiny bar, but it was, it had a lot of character, so it was I don't know.

**Tennenbaum:** You said it gave you the feeling of like the beginning of a community. Did you feel like it was an actual FtM community?

**Berke:** When I was in my 2os, there was, it seemed like a fairly wide network of people who were transitioning around the same time who were around my age. So I, so it did. Um, I'm not necessarily like great friends with all those people, but I definitely felt like—it felt like a more distinct community than it had before and now I guess there's this I don't know it's just a completely difficult world now than it was then. So at that time, trans anything wouldn't have been something that like a random person on the street would have any awareness of. So there was something like special in the insularness of it. Um, although I know that's not something you can like, maintain. It's worth it to work through this period to hopefully get to a place where we're going to actually have access to everything that we should have access to.

**Tennenbaum:** So would, in these party settings, what kind of conversations were going on? Like what conversations were you having?

**Berke:** I mean, I think that it was I mean, pretty normal just every day kind of stuff. It wasn't, we weren't having political conversations for the most part. I mean, it was people talking about what projects they were working on. A lot of them were, a lot of my acquaintances from that time were involved in writing and theater and performance and drag and, which sort of taught me about what current things were happening.

**Tennenbaum:** Was this the only place where you would be able to gather with other people or—

**Berke:** Um, not necessarily. I mean, it was just a place that was it seemed like one of the first places that was organizing for a purely social setting, that was specifically aimed towards transmasculine folks.

**Tennenbaum:** At the beginning of the interview, uh, you mentioned hormones. Um, do—was, when you started going to Tans-Am parties in your early 2os, were you thinking about hormones, or did you start?
Berke: No, I think I was really resistant at the idea of transitioning myself. Like I was like really trying to stick with like being just sticking with how things were but trying to work with my body and figure out a way to be okay without doing anything. I had top surgery first before hormones. Um, and even when I had top surgery wasn't sure that I was going to go on hormones. Um.

Tennenbaum: When did you have top surgery?

Berke: Mm, when I was 27. No, yeah, 27. Then I started hormones when I was 28. Um, so it definitely, like I think it occurred to other people that probably I would want to go on hormones and even that, but I was like no, I don't think that's going to happen. [Laughter]. And I think part of it was like just because puberty was so horrible, the idea of like going through a second puberty seems like horrible. [Laughter]. Like, [Laughter]. Um, yeah. So. Fun times, [Laughter].

Tennenbaum: How was it, getting access to medical—

Berke: It was, for surgery it was not—it was pretty easy. Um, I made the choice to use the same surgeon that I had with my original surgery,, and I could have gone to one of the like three people that like everyone was going to, but I didn't feel comfortable like going to a city I didn't know to like, be in a hotel while I was then having surgery. I don't know, it just seemed like too disconnected from my reality, and I'd rather sort of be able to go home afterwards. Um, I mean, I trusted the doctor. She's a very good surgeon, so it wasn't—it was more a matter of her having to do research because she hadn't done that particular surgery before. Um, and then with hormones, I was given,, I think some bad information initially. Um, regarding Callen-Lorde's policies, so I was originally going to a doctor sort of not affiliated with any institution who was very nice in a lot of ways, but I mean, I think I went to him for a couple of years and then I switched to Callen-Lorde, which has been really fantastic.

Tennenbaum: And so how did you get information about—what informed where you went?

Berke: I originally was focused on—I didn't want to have to go to a therapist and get a letter saying that I had a mental disorder in order to get hormones. Like I found that really offensive, and I was really against it. So I went to a therapist to have a therapist sort of on call in case I ended up losing my shit when I started hormones, which didn't end up happening, but I wanted to like have someone there in case that I met with and sort of knew beforehand to like have as backup. Um and she recommended the doctor I ended up going to for hormones. And then I guess I was getting hormones from like a Canadian pharmacy, like generic hormones because they were so expensive. It was incredibly expensive,, just getting it from the pharmacy here. Um, and then they were like backordered for months. For like a period of months, and it was a really tricky time because my mother was dying at the same time. So I'm like taking care of my mother,, and trying and going month to month paying full price for hormones that would be a lot less otherwise. And Callen-Lorde pharmacy had the cheapest price you could possibly get, but you could only go if you were seeing a doctor there. So, at a certain point I—after my mother died and I came back to the city, I then finally got a doctor at Callen-Lorde and switched to them.
Tennenbaum: Was your mother aware that you were taking hormones?

Berke: Yes.

Tennenbaum: How was your relationship with your mother and your father throughout your 20s?

Berke: Um, I was very close with my mother, and I have a good relationship with my father but it's somewhat distant. Like it's not like distance-distance, like, emotionally distant because he is focused on other things. Which is, he has an eight year old that he's taking care of, so it's understandable. Um, my parents were very good about being supportive throughout every part of my transition, although my mother did sort of secretly go to therapy without telling anyone. [Laughter]. Um and she went through this like imagined narrative where she thought she was going to be like losing her daughter and, and then at some point realized that like I was the same person and she was very insistent upon—she could see very clearly that like I was in the middle. That I wasn't like becoming a boy in like this very distinct way. Um, but she could see how much more comfortable I was, and I think she would be really pleased with the current state of like awareness for gender-nonconformity and non-binary identities, as a thing that was sort of recognized in a more mainstream way, because she was definitely sort of pushing me towards that.

Tennenbaum: So in what kinds of perception were you picking up that she saw you as somewhere in the middle?

Berke: By her saying so.

Tennenbaum: Oh, right.

Berke: Directly. [Laughter]. I mean, she wasn't subtle. [Laughter].

Tennenbaum: [Laughter].

Berke: Um, and I mean, my father uh I think, like I don't know a day or two after I told him that I was going to start hormones like called me up to tell me like he just wanted me to know that like I should know that like that trans people were probably the best people basically. Like some
sort of combination. Something like that. It was very sweet, but unnecessary, [Laughter]. Because clearly I know that. [Laughter].

Tennenbaum: Um, do you remember the first time your mother told you that?

Berke: Um, not particularly. I mean, it was no. No. Probably sometime in the first year of my taking hormones, but, like I would just be guessing.

Tennenbaum: Um, and then so by this time you were in your late 20s what was work life for you?

Berke: I was well I guess I had my first solo show in 2008, early 2008, it was a part of a fellowship at a gallery called [inaudible]. And so I was doing work and I had the fellowship and I was doing illustration work. I got into illustration work in 2005 or 2006, somewhere around there, and I was working pretty regularly. Um, I did a residency at a very unusual art space in North Carolina called Elsewhere that's a living museum in a space that used to be a thrift store. The grandson of the thrift store's owner decided to try and order the things and then invite artists in to make work out of the stuff that was left over from the store. And it's been going for about 15 years now. It's pretty spectacular.

Tennenbaum: What did it look like when you were living there?

Berke: Um, I would say compared to how it's now, it was pretty scrappy. Um, it was, I mean, it's an overwhelming amount of stuff, but it's beautiful and colorful and playful and full of wonder. Um, the scrappiness comes from like the practical things, like at the time I was there there was no like central air or central heating, there was one bathroom and it was just like a toilet and a sink on the first floor. Um, and a shower in the back alley. And the choices for showering were either to shower in the back alley or to go to the local Y. But I was like, six months on hormones and I just didn't feel comfortable going to a Y. In North Carolina. I would not now either, [Laughter]. Um, so I got very familiar with the back alley shower, [Laughter]. Um, they have since uh I've been there done sort of a structural renovations where the roofs are now actually properly stable and they have like multiple bathrooms on multiple floors, and are like up to code, like whereas before they sort of would not have been. Um, and I think that that changes people's experience of it, [Laughter], because there was something special about it sort of. It's almost like camping inside of this like shell of an abandoned space. It wasn't abandoned, but like it had sort of that feeling.

Tennenbaum: A few times you've mentioned like a silliness, playfulness, as an important aspect in the spaces you've been working in.

Berke: I do. I think that people do not appreciate play enough. And like, productive play as a part of work, and not just as about how you entertain yourself. Um, I think that there's like a—people think of it as a thing that's just for kids or a thing that's just for like when you're not doing serious endeavors, but I think if you include play in all of your endeavors that the results are more interesting.
Tennenbaum: So in your day to day is this your workspace? Your home?

Berke: Mm-hmm.

Tennenbaum: How do you incorporate play?

Berke: Um, I would say I mean, much of my time is some combination of like play and futzing and puttering around and I usually have multiple projects happening in different parts of the studio. Um, and some of them are sort of more in need of attention immediately and some things are more like me just futzing around. Like, a good example of play is that last spring I decided to teach myself frame animation in Photoshop, because I became afraid. I had friends who had been given jobs for the New York Times, and they had been asked in addition to their regular illustration whether they could do a small, short GIF for the online presence of the article. And I didn't want to be asked that question not having known how to do it originally. Like I wanted to like, be able to say yes I can do it as opposed to saying yes, I can do it, and then teach myself then when I have to do something in a day. So I taught myself frame animation, and I realized I'd always sort of wanted to do stop-animation, but I found like figuring it out seemed really confusing, and now I realize I can use the same process for stop-animation as I've been using for the frame animation. So I started building puppets for stop animation, and I've mostly been photographing them. But there's like no reason for them, other than for me like obsessing and playing. Like there's no like—I've used them for some, for one photo series that was published in a literary magazine, but like for the most part they're just like the product of play and silliness, but there is like, they have taken on a life of their own, and people seem to enjoy them on the Instagrams.

Tennenbaum: So then you do have—it sounds like you have built yourself a social media presence?

Berke: Yes.

Tennenbaum: Um, how is that, and how does that intersect with queerness, if it does?

Berke: Um, I mean, it intersects with queerness as far as you know, every so often, depending on what is going on, I may sort of create sort of hand-drawn, lettered things as like a part of sort of movement of [inaudible] that might be—like that might be usable by other people. Whether that's a protect trans youth image or things about, I don't know. Bathrooms or things about, whatever, I've definitely sort of put things out there that are sort of related to queerness, but it's not like an, it's not the majority of what I'm putting out. I'm usually just showing process, in-progress work things. Um, I just did a comic about bathrooms that's going to be in a thing called Resist. It's a publication that was first created to be handed out at the Women's Marches after Inauguration Day in July. Um, and it was done in sort of a newspaper tabloid format, but it was all political comics, and this time they're doing it in comic book form to be released July 4.
Tennenbaum: That's awesome. This July 4?

Berke: This July 4, yes.

Tennenbaum: 2017. Very cool. Um, do you feel like when you're looking for or when you're taking commissions and doing illustrations, do you feel like you're read as an illustrator? Do you think your trans queerness is [inaudible]—

Berke: Um, I'm definitely read as an illustrator. In illustration, very rarely are you interacting in person with the people you're working with. You're all sort of through e-mail. It's often through e-mail, and you might go to some networking things where you might meet someone in person, but you could work for someone for five or 10 years and not have ever met them in person, or even possibly spoken with them on the phone. So I have somehow lucked into certain like queer, feminist, and trans jobs without art directors actually knowing that I was queer or trans when they were hiring me. Um, I have you know a couple of friends that are art directors that have hired me for publications where it was specifically trans-related and probably the fact that they know that I'm trans is related to how they hired me, but that's been the outlier.

Tennenbaum: Gotcha. Um, are there any projects that you feel like you've had to turn down for political reasons, or it just didn't fit you?

Berke: Um, I definitely had like problematic situations in terms of representations of gender where I was being forced to represent gender in an extremely stereotypical way. Um, after multiple tries. Like I would sort of always sort of edge on the very edge of that to be only just as stereotypical as I was willing to go that they would find acceptable, but uh that's been very frustrating. Um, I've certainly had jobs where I didn't, when I was signed up to do the job, didn't know the full story of what was happening, because my rep was sort of setting it up, and you know, if it's a really good climate sometimes you just go with it, where thankfully I didn't fully get the job. I was just doing sort of preliminary sketches for something where someone else was hired, and I was thankful because I wouldn't have actually wanted to do it in the end.

Tennenbaum: What happened to Fineberg?

Berke: I did Fineberg for a number of years, and I have someone helping me try to get it syndicated. And the response I was getting from the syndicates was that they all really loved it, that it sort of represented everything they really loved from like their early days of loving comics, but they were never going to be able to publish it. Like, just never.

Tennenbaum: Why is that?

Berke: I don't know. So I just—I was frustrated with certain things about my inability to like—I wasn't able to find certain solutions to certain things about the comics that I—so I wasn't like completely happy with them, but I was also really frustrated that I wasn't able to find a home in print for them. We did get published in a German zine, but [Laughter]. Like, uh, that doesn't have the kind of effect that I was hoping for, [Laughter]. Um so I stopped around I think 2005.
Tennenbaum: Have you—are you thinking at all or have you thought about bringing them back?

Berke: I've thought about it. I mean, it's definitely a possibility. Um, I've done two comics that were in the publication Resist that I mentioned earlier, which was sort of my first forays back into doing comics after quite a long period of not doing them. Um, so I’m not sure if Fineberg in it's original style and incarnation would even make sense now. I mean, I guess it does, but I think it would have to be reimagined because it's just a very different climate and a very different sort of language around a lot of things.

Tennenbaum: Um, can you dig more into what those specific differences are, or how you might revamp it?

Berke: I think that if Fineberg were created now and set now, there would have to be more explicit discourse and self-awareness around gender as opposed to just presenting a different kind of look and feel to how particular characters are expressing their gender. I think there would have to be—it wouldn't be something you could just show in their sort of clothing and style and gesture. It would probably have to be more spoken, because I think we live in a time where there is language to talk about it in an everyday kind of way,, whether people are doing it or not I don't know. Um, but that it would—that would have to be reflected in some way in the comic, and that would change the kind of conversations that were happening, which were kind of just these like snarky ones.

Tennenbaum: Um any specific like words that have come up? When you talk about language, what language are you referring to?

Berke: Um, I mean I'm talking about like trans identity politics and terminology. Like literally the terms people use have like, at the time I was draing Fineberg, like it was a normal thing for trans people to identify as a transsexual, and that wasn't like the term that was sort of pushed away. And that actually makes sense to me because the thing that transitioned for me were my hormones, which is my hormonal sex. My gender has been the same the entire time. I never transitioned my gender. Um, so it would just be like having to sort of rethink those things because they sort of were created in a time that just had a different lexicon.

Tennenbaum: So if you produced that in 2017, you don't think you would use transsexual?

Berke: I mean, I don't think—I don't know if any of the characters, I don't know if they're trans. Like they were—I mean, I really did conceive them as extremely androgynous girls. Um, and I don't know if that's because that's how I perceived myself at the time or because that's just who they are. I mean, they certainly, the characters represented parts of me because whenever you're creating anything, that's what happens, [Laughter]. Um, but I don't know who they are in 2017.
Tennenbaum: Is there any media, books, comics, TV, music, that you've been taking in lately that you think like, does similar work?

Berke: Um, you mean in terms of gender, or?

Tennenbaum: Sure. Yeah. Like there's like stuff that you like?

Berke: Stuff that I like. Hmm. I don't know. Um, I mean, I guess it's easy for me to sort of see how certain things are problematic in almost everything, [Laughter], so it's not like there's anything that is just purely fantastic without having some layer of complication. Um, I you know, I don't know.

Tennenbaum: Can you tell me about any uh projects you're working on now? [inaudible]

Berke: Sure. Um, I am working, or I'm about to have a show in August, again at AIR. Um, they're all portraits of my mother, and I've been working on a book to hopefully have printed to coincide with when the show comes out that will be what's in the show, plus a bunch of other things that I made around the same time. So we will have the portraits. It will have a list of 20 lessons I learned from my other, and a bunch of drawings of her stuff that are some things that are just a part of my everyday that I use, and some things that I just sort of collected into some kind of an archive. Um, I have other projects going on. I'm working on portrait illustrations for a book, or two books really, and I just did a spot illustration for Virginia Quarterly Review, which will hopefully be the start of a working on spots for this particular column that they do every issue.

Tennenbaum: What is a spot illustration?

Berke: A very small illustration. It—different publications define it in different ways, but generally it's considered something that's like smaller than a quarter-page illustration. In this case it's like, an inch.

Tennenbaum: Um, so you said included in the book you have to bring with the gallery show is the 20 lessons you learned from your mother. Um, could you give me a little preview if you're willing to?

Berke: Sure [Laughter]. Um, the first lesson is jobs you hate are helpful in figuring out what you don't want to do in the future. Um, the second lesson is love is in and of itself not enough to sustain a successful relationship. Sorry. [Laughter]. Um, probably the silliest is that upon retirement one should not expect that the Jim Henson Company will make a puppet in your likeness, though it has been known to happen.

Tennenbaum: [Laughter]. Is that an aspiration for you?

Berke: No, but they did—they made a puppet of my mom.
Tennenbaum: No kidding.

Berke: Yeah.

Tennenbaum: Wow.

Berke: Um, and I think the most practical, but also silly, is that there can always be more scallions in a scallion pancake. Always.

Tennenbaum: Mm-hmm.

Berke: So, very important lessons.

Tennenbaum: And, the portraits. How many portraits are there? What’s the period of the work that you have in them?

Berke: Um, the portraits, there are seven of them, and they are mostly based on photographs, some from her childhood, some from when I was a kid that my father took, and then, at least one from sort of when I was in my 20s when I—from photos I took myself. Um, but half of them are diptychs where the left half is a portrait based on the photograph, and the right side is a replica of some of her to-do lists.

Tennenbaum: How has it been working on those?

Berke: It's been good. I had sort of assumed that at some point I would start making work about her, but I had like, wanted to wait until it was like, not an incredibly raw thing to doing because it would just be too painful. Um, and I also didn't know whether the work would be interesting to other people because I'm used to doing previously pretty much all of my paintings and all of my work has related to working from found photographs of strangers or just like, from flea markets and antique shops and there's something interesting about those things but they're not sort of personally sort of related to me. It's more just an extended exploration of people. Um, so I didn't know if people would react well to these paintings, but so far the studio visits I've had have shown that people find them interesting even though they're just portraits of my mother, [Laughter].

Tennenbaum: Um so you're talking about the exploration of found things as like a city of people. Um, it seems like this is something you've been doing for a long, long time.

Berke: [Laughter] yeah.

Tennenbaum: And I think as you said earlier, because you don't understand how—

Berke: Well, that's not necessarily why I started doing the paintings and drawings from the found photographs. I just sort of happened into them. Like I sort of bought a few photos at a flea market, and then I ended up drawing them, and then I started drawing a lot of them, which
led me to having to collect more photographs. And I started a daily practice, so I was doing one
drawing a day from a found photograph for like, over 10 years, which you know, maybe I have
1,600 drawings from that process, and I used those drawings to make other work. Um, and I
thought of it as like an ethnographic study about how people document themselves and how
people create a mythology of self, and a mythology of family, and a mythology of the cohesive
history.

Tennenbaum: Do you have a sense of how you do that for yourself?

Berke: Um, I mean, to some extent, but I think that it's sort of hard, it's a little more challenging
to see that in oneself.

Tennenbaum: Is there anything else right now that you're thinking of that you would like to
share?

Berke: Mm.

Tennenbaum: Maybe about where you're at now or at any other time?

Berke: No. I mean, not that there isn't anything I don't want to share—I can't think of anything.

Tennenbaum: Okay. Um, maybe uh do—it seems like working on art in many different forms
is like, and play as work uh takes up the majority of your time?

Berke: Yes.

Tennenbaum: Um, any other hobbies you have going right now?

Berke: Uh, I mean, I do bake a fair amount [Laughter]. Um, I recently taught myself how to
make pita bread, which was exciting. The first few rounds were tasty but my yeast was
apparently old and it didn't rise, so it didn't make a pocket. Then I thought maybe pockets don't
get created on their own, but it was because of my yeast. Um, and cookies. I made biscuits for
the first time last week which is exciting. Vegan biscuits. Um, I you know, I make a fair amount
of merchandise to like sell online but also to sell in a shop,, in the Columbia Waterfront District
of Brooklyn, which is sort of in-between Carol Gardens and Redhook. And—


Berke: Um, well, books and zines and tote bags. Um, pinback buttons, post cards, greeting
cards, calendars, posters, and nose keyrings.

Tennenbaum: Nose keyrings? [Laughter].

Berke: Yes.
Tennenbaum: Okay, so I [Laughter]—

Berke: [Laughter].

Tennenbaum: Is it like a keyring shaped as a nose?

Berke: Yeah.

Tennenbaum: Or, okay. So not a keyring you store on like—

Berke: Yeah, you, it's a sculpture of a nose that is the decoration on a keyring.

Tennenbaum: Cool. Um, any reason behind it?

Berke: Uh, I was making noses as ornaments and it just—it sort of morphed into that being a thing to try. People seem to like it, although no one seems to buy it, [Laughter].

Tennenbaum: So are the keys hooked around—like, do they look like nose jewelry, or?

Berke: No, there's an actual ring that is attached to it, so you would have the keys on the ring, and then the nose would come down half of the ring.

Tennenbaum: Awesome. Oh, I almost forgot. So you've been living in this building in Williamsburg for 10 years, you said?

Berke: Yes.

Tennenbaum: Um, can you talk to me about the changes and how you feel about the changes?

Berke: Um, so I have to say that when I moved here it was, I mean, the process of gentrification was already happening, and it was very clear that things were changing and they were changing rapidly. But I do not think there was any way to anticipate that it was going to change into what it has changed into, which is sort of like a mini-Manhattan in certain ways. I think the sense of how teacher-supported were going was that it was maybe going to be something like SoHo, but that because of the access, because the access to Manhattan was what it was, that it could never be the way it was or the way it is in Manhattan, and I moved here because I wanted like more space and more light and to sort of be in a place where you had more access to the sky, like, because I’d been living in Manhattan my entire life and I, I know that's not that far away, but it still felt like a world away, but still like having the resource of all the things in Manhattan. I didn't realize what the change in the population was going to be like and it's been, you know, pretty upsetting, specifically with related to tourism. I've, in the early years of extreme tourism, like when they started writing about Williamsburg in tourist books. Um, I felt like I was like an animal at the zoo, and people were coming to watch me in my natural habitat like while I was in a coffee shop working. And I still feel that to some extent, but it's like eased off a little bit. Um, I mean, it's a very unaffordable place for a lot of people to live. There is some mix of
economic backgrounds like within the neighborhood but the lower end of the spectrum is sort of getting pushed out and when that really happens to the full extent that it can I think that it's going to be an incredibly boring, stupid place to live. I mean, I've sort of toyed with the idea of moving for years, but I just have so much stuff, there's a lot of stress related to the practicality of making that happen.

**Tennenbaum:** What was it like when you first moved here? Like what kinds of people were around, what was the vibe, what kind of activities were going on?

**Berke:** Uh, it was—this specific part of Williamsburg I'm in was a lot more residential. Like we were a block away from a main drag, but there wasn't any sort of—there weren't like bars and restaurants and music venues and, there was like maybe a couple of venues, but there really weren't that many [sneeze] excuse me. Um, one of the things that I really loved about Williamsburg at that time was I felt like there was a very wide spectrum of gender expressions by people that didn't have anything to do with, it really didn't have to do with queerness in a direct way. Like there were a lot of straight people that were performing gender in very unusual ways that was just very lovely, in addition to there being queer people who were also genderqueer and trans. Um—

**Tennenbaum:** What kinds of expressions would you see?

**Berke:** I just think like, flamboyantness and femininity and androgyny and having that not be like just something that queer people were doing. And that was like comforting in a way, like this is possible. Like it would be nice if this were like, sustainable. [Laughter]. Um, and I didn't feel like I was surrounded by like people who in all likelihood like were in frats like when they were in college. Like there was a period where like Williamsburg really actually felt like you were like in a frat party, and there were like, people in their 20s walking around with their parents trying to like prove to them that like it was okay for them to live her. Like we were at like parent's weekend or something. [Laughter]. It was really upsetting. [Laughter].

**Tennenbaum:** Around what years did that start happening? The frat years?

**Berke:** Um, I would say like around probably 2010. 2011, something like that.

**Tennenbaum:** And where—how would you characterize it now in 2017?

**Berke:** I think that it's sort of mellowed out, but I mean, it's partially just people sort of getting older, like it's—there's a smaller percentage of artists, a smaller percentage of queer people, a lot more straight people or like people who are like on very traditional sort of life narratives, whether they're queer or not. Um, so like people who are like having babies and like just doing all the things that they were told they were supposed to do, which if they're happy with is great, but it was not exactly what I signed up for. [Laughter].

**Tennenbaum:** Thank you for that.
Berke: You're welcome.

Tennenbaum: Um, perhaps my last question is the second lesson I believe you learned from your mom that you told me was that love itself is not enough to sustain a relationship.

Berke: A successful relationship.

Tennenbaum: A successful relationship. Um, is that something you wanted to elaborate on?

Berke: Um, my parents separated when I was four, and they got divorced several years later. And there's no way for me to like really know how I felt about it sort of at the time. I think that I was fine, although you know, yeah, as I said there's no way for me to actually know. What I was very clear on throughout my childhood and adulthood was that the reason for them getting separated and divorced was never about the fact that they didn't love each other. Um, I had a lot of friends growing up who just thought the idea of my parents together was ridiculous. Like that they couldn't understand how they could have possibly ever been married or possibly ever loved each other, and they never stopped loving each other. It just wasn't, there were other factors involved that made it not possible for them to have a successful relationship. Um, and so I just don't have this idea that like love conquers all and love is the thing that will make everything okay. Like that's—like love is great and you should love as much as and as freely as is possible. But to think that it will supersede like the like practical, functional things that make life work is unrealistic.

Tennenbaum: Gotcha. Um, have you been seeing that play out, especially in any of your relationships?

Berke: Um, I think that I am aware more of the work involved in maintaining relationships than other people sometimes are. Like, accept and recognize that it does take work and sort of assess whether, you know, what your capabilities are and try to communicate that as clearly as possible. Whereas some people think that they should not have to do any work for things to like, move along. Which is pretty unrealistic in my perspective.

Tennenbaum: Um, any final remarks? Um, any feelings about this interview being part of an oral community archive for New York City?

Berke: Well, I think that uh it's important to have as many kinds and as diverse as possible a record of trans experience. I feel like there's this—there are a very small group of narratives that are sort of replayed over and over again in mainstream media about trans identities and those stories only relate to a very slim spectrum of the actual lived experiences of trans people. So while I'm not exactly someone who loves talking or talking about myself, I do think it's important to have diverse representation, so I'm happy to be a part of this project.

Tennenbaum: Thank you so much for contributing.

Berke: You're welcome.