

COLA20 Salon Conversation #4 Session 2

Moderated By: Kaucyila Brooke and Simon Leung
With Susan Silton

OFF CAMERA

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: I'm Kaucyila Brooke and I'm here today sharing this conversation with Simon Leung and with Susan Silton. And we're talking about feminism and LGBTQ&I issues in the visual arts and in - as it's related to COLA in Los Angeles. So I have lived in Los Angeles since 1992 and I moved here to teach at CalArts.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: And when I first started making work, I was always including something that had to do with both feminism and lesbian feminism or queer issues in my work. And in some ways, that sort of determined why I moved to Los Angeles rather than Wyoming. At the time, it wasn't really possible to live in a more rural area if you were dealing with those types of issues in - as part of the discourse of your work. So here I am.

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SUSAN SILTON: Hi, I'm Susan Silton. And I am here with the two of you. I actually grew up in Los Angeles and went to school as well in - in LA, became an artist a little later than my colleagues, but began as a graphic designer which I still do to this day, but that's taken kind of a back seat to the - the visual work that I do.

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SUSAN SILTON: But that work was defined in large measure by working with smaller arts organizations and really functioning as a - as an artist who was designing for projects that were largely identity politics related, not exclusively, but many of the - the notable projects that I did. And then my early work, which I'm sure we might talk a little bit more about as it relates to this topic, was further articulated along the lines of identity-related politics.

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SIMON LEUNG: Okay, great. I'm Simon Leung. I have lived in Los Angeles since 1982 on and off. I was educated here in New York and I still divide my time between New York and Los Angeles. I suppose I began making work related to these topics in the 1980s. I remember that I made a video for a class that Paul McCarthy taught in 1986, '87, something like that, which in a matter of a few years developed into a work that I performed in both New York and LA called Transcripts.

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SIMON LEUNG: And it was a meditation on public sex and a sort of reflection on the insufficiency in how we were thinking about both queer theory and activism in the early '90s. And I have been teaching at UC-Irvine now for seventeen years. So yeah, I very much identify with LA. Okay, we can start perhaps.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: So we have - we were thinking about how things were different in the '70s and the '80s and the '90s, and then now we're into the second decade of the 2000s. So that's the starting point. And then further extending on that, like how have the categories of LGBTQI changed over that time and expanded the discourse? And also, how have feminisms developed over the last fifty years, and how have these different

positions affected the visual arts? So that's the sort of general scope of the question. We can like jump in anyplace, right?

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SUSAN SILTON: Well, I came of age as a young lesbian also kind of, not late, but less visibly I would say. So I graduated college in '78 and I came out before I graduated. But it was - it was kind of on my own. And I think in interesting ways, one of the defining characteristics of Los Angeles is the way in which that was so spread out.

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SUSAN SILTON: I mean, one could find spaces if you wanted to, certainly. The Women's Building was one of those spaces. But I think I was rather petrified to be queer at that moment. And I would say that decade following that was more about a combination of finding myself as an artist and a designer because I - it took me a long time to find even design, and wrapped up in finding a sexuality.

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SUSAN SILTON: So I can't really speak to the '70s very - very well. I don't know what that was like here.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: I mean, I can speak to the '70s in terms of my experience of being a lesbian in the '70s, but that's - I wasn't involved in any kind of art institution and I wasn't in Los Angeles. But there - in the '70s, there was this Back-to-the-Land movement. There was also - it was like the era of androgyny, so there was kind of no - there was - it was very codified what the kind of behavior was that was possible. I mean, it - at - at the point when I came out, there was a sort of backlash against the gender polarization from the '50s and the '60s in a sense, right?

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: And - and so we were very freaked out by butch-fem relationships that we associated with heterosexuality and we had - that's the only kind of critique we had of - and anything that was kind of separated in that way between masculinity and femininity we found really threatening, because I think basically we really found masculinity threatening just full stop, you know? And I think there - I didn't know any gay men at all in the '70s. I only knew women. And actually, weirdly enough now we're in these kind of pronoun debates, or - or pronoun changes.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: We were then, too, but the only pronoun I ever used was a feminine pronoun because I was surrounded by women. And it was very - and we were changing the names of, you know, the mailman and - and, you know, the - the gender-specific titles for certain positions. All of that was really part of this huge shift that was happening in terms of understanding the history of the world and where our place was in it. And the artwork really was kind of around this stuff that we know, like sort of vaginal art and the circle and anything that was sort of phallic was - again, it was associated with masculinity.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: And it was an anathema, you know, and threatening, partly because of the experience many of us have had had in patriarchal culture, which had been so oppressive. So we were quite reactive in the way we t- threw it away. But that was very - it was also very repressive because to be a part of the group meant that you had to kind of conform to all of these things. So androgyny was the only possibility for behavior, or for your look in a sense. So nobody thought I really was a lesbian. I didn't know if I was either, you know? So they mi- you know, I'm still not sure about that.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: But you know, to conform to - to that, I had to kind of cut my hair and wear a dike vest and - and you know, in order to find somebody to sleep with, basically, you know?

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SUSAN SILTON: I mean, and I think that continued for - for at least a decade, from the '70s into - well into the '80s, don't you think?

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Yeah, I do.

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SIMON LEUNG: Well, okay. I - since I'm slightly younger, and I suppose the '80s was my decade, I want to address this in relationship to art as well as feminism and gender politics. So I think that my generation, meaning those who were - who came of age and were educated in the 1980s, a dimension of our art education was the simultaneous development within the art world.

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SIMON LEUNG: I'm thinking mostly about the [UNINTELLIGIBLE] generation, the focus on say [SOUNDS LIKE] simulacrum, the - the Reagan years and how that impacted our way of thinking about representation and theory. So you know, I'm of the generation that grew up with feminist theory, and especially psychoanalytic feminist theory.

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SIMON LEUNG: So in a way, I think that the critique of representation was so dominant in my education that almost everyone in my milieu regardless of gender, we thought of ourselves as feminists. It was also during the time of AIDS. So if you're a young person, as I was, or you know, it d- you don't have to be a young person, but you know, if you are in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, you really saw firsthand the devastation that AIDS had on - in the arts community.

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SIMON LEUNG: So I, as someone who was a student in New York and LA for most of the '80s, I think that there was - there was actually a bit of a shift from when I graduated from university and then went to New York for the second time in my case in the - in the late '80s. When ACT UP was starting up in New York and my daily life was basically going to ACT UP meetings on Mondays and going to seminars on Tuesdays and Thursdays at the Whitney Program.

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SIMON LEUNG: And I think that if you had that type of experience during your formative years, you know, you sort of make - or I - at least I did - I made decisions about what my work would be and how I would go about thinking about these issues. So coinc- coincidentally, and maybe as a sort of related thing, the end of the '80s and the early '90s was also the beginning of what we now think of as queer theory.

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SIMON LEUNG: So I remember going to, for example, Yale or Rutgers when Judith Butler or Douglas Crimp were giving, you know, rather key foundational lectures about - about rethinking gender. So I guess what I'm saying is that it - it seems to me that feminis- both

feminism and queer issues and LGBTQ issues were just so part and parcel of my formation as an artist that I can't really separate them.

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SIMON LEUNG: Now having said that, I do notice something as a teacher that's changed profoundly in the last ten years or so. So once upon a time, if I were to give a lecture on [UNINTELLIGIBLE] or, you know, just twentieth century art and talk about [UNINTELLIGIBLE] c'est-la-vie, you know, talk about drag, etc., once upon a time it was something that no one really - not no one, but many of the students didn't really think it belonged to them.

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SIMON LEUNG: But I think in the last ten years or so, because of the debates and especially trans activism in the media, every student has a much more sophisticated way of dealing with these issues than they did than I did, you know, twenty or thirty years ago. So in a way, I feel that there has been a level of general knowledge saturation, which doesn't necessarily mean that we're living in an age without a lot of backlash as well. But I think that there's - there's vocabulary and there is discourse out there that's available to young people that wasn't before.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: But I think that's remarkable in a lot of ways because there was this politicization of art in the '80s that I think when I first started making art within the - within an institutional context, I mean, teachers told me I couldn't deal with politics. When I went to grad school, my colleagues took me aside and said look, Kaucylia. If you want to have a career, you've got to drop this feminist stuff and you've got to drop this queer/lesbian stuff because no one will ever take you seriously. And I think they thought they were helping me out, right? But obviously the reason why I was making art had

everything to do with what I wanted to say, and it turned out weirdly enough that they didn't have anything to say, you know?

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: They didn't have a reason to make art other than to be an artist and - and to have that kind of a life in a sense. But they didn't have this other impulse to talk about culture in a way that - that would drive them.

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SUSAN SILTON: Well, and just like you're saying, I mean, I think that the - the - the discourse has become more sophisticated because we're exposed to so much more than - than we could be then. And especially, I mean, in - in our field, you know, prior to post-structuralism, it seems as if the - the discourse was - was just not as sophisticated overall in terms of an art practice, right? I think that that opened up an entire field of conversation that couldn't happen prior to then.

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SIMON LEUNG: Yeah. I think there are other criteria that developed. And this is related to what you just mentioned, you know, in terms of - I - I don't think it's just about, you know, queer sexuality or feminism or, you know, depicting lesbian lives. I think it's - it's in fact related to generally how identity and identity politics, or as I prefer to call it, the politics of difference, developed in the late '80s. And it was brought to such a boiling point, you know, around '89 or so. So you're thinking about maybe before Jesse Helms, [UNINTELLIGIBLE], etc. etc.

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SIMON LEUNG: And that is part of a dynamic of the right wing attacking art culture in general if y- if you were to trace it, let's say, back to 1980 or so. The attack was on

modernism, was on art, you know? So you can think about [UNINTELLIGIBLE] and [UNINTELLIGIBLE] was an example. By the end of the decade, you know, people like [SOUNDS LIKE] Demado or Jesse Helms, you know, they found - they found a much more effective way of going after people like us, and that's through identity. You know, it's through religion and sexuality.

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SIMON LEUNG: So I think that that particular shift is also part of a larger dynamic, greatly facilitated by - by the pandemic of AIDS, you know, because...

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SUSAN SILTON: And by Reagan economics.

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SIMON LEUNG: Exactly. Exactly.

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SUSAN SILTON: So.

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SIMON LEUNG: And the two, of course, are very much related, you know, in the sense that - you know, I mean, it's - Reagan famously did not even utter the word AIDS until 1986, you know? So I - I think that the developments that we see come from an intellectual discourse, but it also comes from a general political sphere that we were a part of.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: The - the shutdown - this makes me think about the shutdown of the NEA. And there was - and this is something that I'm often kind of trying to bring current students up to date in because they don't even know what things were like when we actually had community art spaces in every major city in this country, and sort of regular funding for individual artist projects. And that - that's interesting because it kind of shut down - at that moment, it shut down a certain kind of practice, and there was re-trenchment to this conversation about beauty. So we're back to this idea of I was born an artist.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: I got to make art, you know, my biography as an artist, you know. All of this kind of idea about surface and beauty and - but that didn't last very long. It felt so awful to me. It felt like it was the end of this tiny little window. And even the critics, the local critics, were like celebrating the fact that they were no longer having to deal with this kind of political art, that they f- that they felt like was so horrible. And I notice now that we - those critics aren't writing that much anymore, that those critics aren't as empowered anymore. And I'm...

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SUSAN SILTON: Well, no critics are writing like that anymore. I mean, that's part of the - I mean, I think the - the commodification of the field also began to happen in the '80s, in the late '80s coincidentally, right?

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SUSAN SILTON: So that when that happened, I think that certain structures like nonprofit organizations that had been set up to - I mean, I - and v- and very obvious here, to engage in conversations that - around feminism, around LGBTQ issues, began to wane,

you know, I mean, in- including Barnsdall, which had been showing a number of exhibitions related to the politics of identity or difference.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Yeah. I - I mean, just to correct what I was meaning was that there was this moment when the local newspaper critics and we're - we're talking about how - they wanted to talk about beauty and surface, right, that they - so they kind of - at the same time that the institutions were waning, yeah?

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SUSAN SILTON: Yeah.

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SIMON LEUNG: Maybe this is a good way to segue into the discussion of institutions, because as you were pointing out, Kaucylia, if there was a brief moment when nonprofits or alternative spaces so called were being funded, I think it's actually important and interesting to talk about the historical development of these - of various kinds of institutions, what took pLACE in the '70s, what took their pLACE to, you know, later on, etc.

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SIMON LEUNG: And it - it seems to me that it's important to discuss these pla- these venues, not all on the side of feminism or LGBTQ issues. So one thing that I - I thought was interesting was how obviously the Women's Building began in the 1970s, you know, and had a very clear feminist agenda. And it came out of a particular sociopolitical circumstance, right? So I'm also thinking...

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SUSAN SILTON: And educators.

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SIMON LEUNG: And educa- educat- educators certainly. And one of the things I - I'm interested in knowing more about because I'm doing research on some of this stuff, and I do remember [SOUNDS LIKE] LACE in the '80s, right, is that there were some alternative spaces such as LACE that was quite open to, and in a way encouraged, the simultaneous presentation of what - you know, what we might call advanced art, and also shows that dealt with identity, that dealt with desire.

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SIMON LEUNG: I remember going to performances at LACE, you know, that were queer, that were in a way very much dealing with a sort of embodied ethos. But there were also other venues. I'm thinking in particular like LICA, right, which was also, you know, showing extremely interesting advanced art. But it seems that on that side, there was a lot less thinking about identity or thinking about lived political realities that is not filtered through a thinking of form.

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SIMON LEUNG: So it seems that within LA, there were different institutions, different kinds of alternative spaces. And so Susan, do you remember some of this?

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SUSAN SILTON: And I think - well, I remember those two. I mean, again, I - I don't think I was frequenting the institutions prior to the late '80s really. LACE was certainly one of them, and it wasn't just about the discourse. It was about the genre bending, the desire to incorporate multiple genre into one space, right? But I remember the municipal art

gallery, and this was really important to my development because they - various curators would come in and curate shows.

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SUSAN SILTON: Betty Brown was among them, and she curated a show in I think it was '93 called Utopian Dialogues, in which artists, various artists, were invited to have dialogues with other people, communities, that would form the basis for projects.

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SUSAN SILTON: And that was a super interesting endeavor on her part that led me to have a group of gay men and lesbians to the house to talk about our relationships with each other in the wake of AIDS, because that had been such a contested conversation, lesbians and - and gay men, up until really the advent of AIDS, at which point those relationships were formed in very, very different ways and very positive ways that had not been visible before.

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SUSAN SILTON: So I count some - a place like Municipal Art Gallery, which in more recent years has undergone also huge transformations and fights financially to s- to just exist. But at that time, those organizations were the places, the sites that artists wanted to be in. The - the smaller institutions were the places that we wanted to develop projects, and saw that as integral to what was happening in the - in the broader living of our lives. And that's certainly waned obviously, but...

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: But I think that's important because I imagined for myself this - this trajectory which was gonna be in those kinds of spaces, in those - what they in Canada, they call them parallel galleries, right? And the commercial galleries seemed - didn't bear

any attraction to me at that time because I wasn't seeing art in those spaces that I really wanted to engage with and think about because it wasn't about those issues exactly.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: And the more experimental things in my mind that dealt with what was going on like AIDS or like other kinds of ideas about how to configure an artwork to both - both formally and conceptually, I was seeing in those kind of groundbreaking exhibitions like what you're describing or at LACE or at Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, which was for me a really important exhibition and publication place that even preceded - I was aware of those places before I even moved here in the '90s.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: But also, I was thinking there was a different relationship to the text at the time also, because we had bookstores, right? And these aren't public institutions. They're commercial institutions, but women's bookstores and...

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SIMON LEUNG: Well, they're public spaces.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: And gay bookst- gay and lesbian bookstores were huge places for me, not only to go for readings, but also to - to educate myself. And the kinds of events that went on in those places were - and things that got organized around the bookstores were really important to the discourse.

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SUSAN SILTON: Highways was also - Highways performance space was also a very important place for performance artists, as well as - and then they developed a small gallery to attract lesbian and gay ar- and gay artists spec- very specifically.

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SIMON LEUNG: I think we would be remiss not to mention the most obvious institutions in LA in terms of art, and that is art school, you know? I mean, in - in many ways, I think the impact that CalArts and UCLA, Irvine, Otis, Art Center, etc. etc., have had including the key people who populated these programs, help transform the discourse quite a bit I think. So Kaucylia, you started teaching at CalArts in '92, you said?

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Yeah, in 1992.

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SIMON LEUNG: Can you maybe talk a little bit about?

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Well, the remarkable thing about that in relationship to feminism and to queer issues is that I never - because my work had this content, right, lesbian issues or queer issues, however you want to think about it, as well as feminist issues, I was never able to kind of be in the closet. If anybody asked me what my work was about, it wasn't even a - by design, it wasn't possible for it not to come up later within an art context, right? And when I got to CalArts, there were all these other queers there and feminists, and it was obvious that I was gonna talk about those things and that I was gonna teach about those things.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: And it was an amazing experience to not have that be just a little side issue that people knew about me, that was not defining in a sense. So it was very exciting. And we - we looked around at each other and we thought wow. There's actually a critical mass of us. And the first thing that we did was organize a panel and a drag ball. And I was - I was like in heaven. I thought - I never thought this was possible. And even something like when you were talking about queer theory and the beginning of queer theory earlier? When I first heard about queer theory, I - as a sort of legitimate academic discourse, I was like oh my God.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: I never thought this would happen. I didn't feel that way about gay marriage when it happened. I didn't feel like oh my God, I never thought this would happen. I was like, why would anybody want to do this? But queer theory? When I realized that it was gonna - there was gonna be a department, there was a magazine, you could say that you were invested in queer theory, I was like oh, things couldn't get better, you know?

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SIMON LEUNG: You know, I remem- see, this is so interesting, 'cause the way we live our lives really color how we see these things, right, 'cause I remember going to ACT UP meetings in the late '80s and - and maybe a year into - and this was - this would've been '88, right? So ACT UP started in '87 and I started going in '88. And I remember by about '89 or maybe even around '89 or so, a segment of ACT UP was Queer Nation, right? So and I remember - I actually still remember all the people who were in Queer Nation. And then queer theory, the term, came after Queer Nation.

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SIMON LEUNG: So to me, there are - there are extremely explicit links between how urgent mortal issues about our friends, people in our communities who are dying, and how that transformed into a declaration of identity against the grain, in a way, by reclaiming the term queer, in - in activist milieu, and then it - at least to my mind, you know, becoming a part of academic discourse.

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SIMON LEUNG: And you know, I mean, I - I just remember going to one of the first - I think - I don't even know what they were called in those days, maybe gay and lesbian theory, or gay and lesbian conference or something like that. But one of the first ones was at Yale. I r- and I remember that - that along with everything else that was happening, there was a march. There was some sort of protest that we were a part of. Against what, I don't remember nowadays, but - but I think that there's a deep implication, you know, between theory and practice and how terms were - were later claimed, you know, like GLQ. Do you remember that magazine? I think it still exists, right?

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Yeah, that magazine was really important.

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SIMON LEUNG: Yeah.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Bec- and I - that again was like, oh my God, we have a whole magazine that's trying to deal with - and you know, I mean, and I grew up in the area of all these - era of all these publications, you know, feminist publications and gay and lesbian publications. But they weren't dealing with the sort of post-structuralist issues that

you're talking about. They weren't dealing with the sort of media critique at - at that - at that level, about psychoanalytic theory and all. You know, the links were being made and it was being - the - mobilized, right?

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SIMON LEUNG: Well, by the early '90s there was CLAGS at CUNY, you know? And I think that's very much again a - a result of the combination of activism and new academic work.

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SUSAN SILTON: You know, but going back also to the building at which - I mean, I became more entwined in - in the building simply because of having been involved with [SOUNDS LIKE] Terry and being partners with her. And that rift in the '80s between feminisms, between poststructural academic feminists and second wave feminists who had eschewed politics in favor of process, in fav- I'm sorry, I keep doing that - was - was very substantive, and - and it - it really divided.

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SUSAN SILTON: It was interesting to see how that then came back into - I mean, I don't even understand how that has res- been resolved, but it - but it did resolve.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Can you talk about your like beginning entrance into the Women's Building and what it was like, and then where - when...

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SUSAN SILTON: Well, I used to - to go to it as a reluctant, frightened, somewhat sheltered young lesbian. But then in earnest, I started to frequent it as a young designer because of

the women's graphic center. And that was instrumental for me in terms of getting typesetting at the time. So I - I used to go there quite a bit during those - during those days. And the women's graphic center was a formidable type house, not to mention place to congregate around printmaking, etc.

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SUSAN SILTON: And one couldn't feel this rift that I'm talking about at that time, which was - I'm talking about the mid '80s, so probably '84 or '85. You couldn't feel that rift yet. But certainly by the late '80s and early '90s, it was - it was very substantial and there was a kind of hostility I think, in some cases, maybe even open. I can't place specific contexts for that.

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SIMON LEUNG: You know, I - I know exactly what you mean, and I - K- Kaucylia, I think you were actually a part of this thing that happened at CalArts in the late - I want to say '97, '98? Remember the - the F-Word, yeah.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Oh, you mean the F-Word Symposium? But I - but I actually was part of this thing at the Women's Building that Susan is talking about. It was weird because I was living in Tucson at the time and I was invited to be part of this exhibition at the Women's Building, and there was a conference. And it was something like The Way We Look, the Way We See or something like that. It was - the Women's Building was trying to deal with poststructuralist theory and they had a conference and they had it at UCLA and they had all these panels.

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SIMON LEUNG: What year was this?

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SUSAN SILTON: I didn't go to that.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: You didn't go to that?

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SUSAN SILTON: No.

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Well, it must have been '87, is my guess.

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SUSAN SILTON: Really?

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KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Yeah, must have been '87. And it was right in the - and the - the resistance that you're talking about was palpable, but there was this desire by the organizers of the Women's Building to - to not have that division. And the conference was an attempt to kind of do something about that. But the weird thing is that some book I ended up in around the - a little bit later or something, put me in a - as an academic. They said, and then there are academic artists like Kaucylia Brooke. And I was like, when did I get to be an ac- what does that mean, you know, this academic, this [UNINTELLIGIBLE], right?

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SUSAN SILTON: So how do we think that kind of resolved itself in more recent years, I mean, really within the last decade? Is that a function of - do you think it's a function of the commodification of a kind of historical prowess in a way?

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SIMON LEUNG: Well, I actually want to back up a little bit. I want to address that. But I think we would be remiss not to talk about this without talking about this - the idea of essentialism, right, which - which was - which was key to this particular discourse. So if one were to think, let's say between 1987 when the W- Women's Building was really thinking they had to deal with poststructuralism and psychoanalysis or whatever, to let's say 1997, you know?

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SIMON LEUNG: I - I would say that this period was a period in which almost every form of political identity was put to the task of - you know, put to the test of seeing whether or not it was "essentialist", if you remember.

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SIMON LEUNG: And so in some ways, I don't think - I don't think they necessarily re- I don't think this was necessarily resolved, you know, in the sense that I don't think that - let's say psychoanalytic Lacanian feminism, and goddess-centered feminism, let's just say, you know, just to be completely crude about it for a second - necessarily resolve themselves, you know, discursively.

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SIMON LEUNG: But I think that each camp or, you know, group began to I think learn from the other and actually talked about essentialism as a form of strategy. So famously,

you know, to borrow Gayatri Spivak's term, strategic essentialism became very much a discursive modus operandi. And I - and I remember this very much, you know, with Judy Chicago's - you know, the...

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SUSAN SILTON: [UNINTELLIGIBLE].

00:40:27

SIMON LEUNG: Well, I think - well, I think that the discussion around Judy Chicago's dinner party or, you know, her work in general, right, it really, really shifted in the 1990s, you know, where there was a real attempt to recuperate that work to claim that it was not essentialist. And that was the criterion upon which good art was judged at some level.

00:40:48

SUSAN SILTON: So mid '90s, the dinner party, sexual politics, was mounted at the The Hammer. So I designed that book and Amelia, as you know, curated the show. And of course, the backlash against that project was couched in all kinds of things, but I think that it was about some of these very ideas that you're talking about because Amelia came into this as an academic. She was...

00:41:28

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: She's an art histor- art historian [UNINTELLIGIBLE], so I mean...

00:41:30

SUSAN SILTON: An art historian, and mandated by [SOUNDS LIKE] Henry Hopkins to curate this show with X amount of works by Judy Chicago. I don't know if you remember how contested that exhibition was as a result of - and this is frequently the case when

there is any kind of thematic “survey” of a group of - of anyone. There were many artists, feminist artists who were upset, and that’s kind of a typical situation, because they weren’t included.

00:42:08

SUSAN SILTON: But - but the - the project itself became critiqued along a number of lines that then a decade later, when Connie curated WACK!, had been somehow displaced. They were no longer - seemingly some of those same critiques were not - were not there, were no longer there.

00:42:42

SIMON LEUNG: WACK! was a very different show though...

00:42:44

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Well, I mean, I think it’s...

00:42:45

SIMON LEUNG: ...because it - it was international and it had a lot of conceptual work in it. It was a much bigger show.

00:42:52

SUSAN SILTON: Exactly.

00:42:53

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: But it was also a longer time - it was a longer time distance. So I mean, I think historically the - there’s a - frequently a reaction to - in a ten-year period. Maybe it’s getting tighter now. But - but the work that you just came out of, you’re resistant to and you’re trying to reformulate a new position, and you can - that - people

with a new position that are replacing the so-called old position can be quite reactive as they establish their discourse. And I think that the - the additional ten years or longer before WACK!, there were a lot of other things that took place which changed the discourse.

00:43:39

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: And I think one of them, I think it's important to talk about Spivak and to talk about postcolonial theory and - and women of color, because this is - this is the thing that sort of '70s feminism tried to but didn't successfully figure out how to diversify itself, so there were kind of parallel fe- feminisms that were being developed at the same time and different universes almost, right? And the...

00:44:06

SIMON LEUNG: That - that segues so neatly and brilliantly into our topic of intersectionality. So one - you know, one of the things that we thought that we could maybe talk about - I'll just read this - is thinking about queer people of color, thinking about race, class, immigration, displacement, assimilation, white supremacy, pinkwashing, postcolonialism, borders, all of these categories, to think about them with queerness and sexuality.

00:44:42

SUSAN SILTON: All of those issues.

00:44:44

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Well, we don't want to leave anything out, but - so at least we...

00:44:48

SIMON LEUNG: I think for many - for many people, maybe I included, you know, it's actually impossible not to think about everything together.

00:44:56

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Well, I think inclusion and to talk about inclusion is what's important about intersectionality and that's - inclusion has been something that everybody has been trying to deal with all the way along. But the - to keep opening up the categories to include more and more people is a more successful way to kind of finally deal with the - the sort of conflicts and the - in - in - in the identity categories, because if you...

00:45:31

SIMON LEUNG: Well, I think - I think intersectionality is slightly differently. I don't think about it as including more people. I think of it as - I mean, think of it in two dynamics simultaneously. One is that we're always already intersectional on some level. There's no one who is not, you know, many different things simultaneously. And some - some - some are just simply more apparent with it.

00:45:58

SIMON LEUNG: But I think another aspect that is important to think about is maybe to think through difference, and not necessarily inclusion, but an acceptance of difference and otherness that is not within one's realm, you know? So in some ways, it's - it's not so much how we're like each other, but how we're not like each other.

00:46:28

SUSAN SILTON: And how that's okay.

00:46:28

SIMON LEUNG: And that's very important to think through as an ethos and not necessarily as a group.

00:46:35

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: I think that's kind of the same thing that I mean. When I - when I use the term inclusion, I don't mean erasure of difference as much as the - the sort of struggle to have that difference recognized, which has not always been, you know, in front of us, or we haven't always had the tools to do that. So that - that makes a big difference. I mean, can you - can you be a poststructuralist and sort of give the essentialist the space to have those positions as well as - as well as, you know, question this whole even category of identity, as well as accept that it exists?

00:47:17

SIMON LEUNG: I think - well, sometimes I think it depends on who you are. You know, for example, I think I can think of new democracy theorists who are pretty much traditional men, you know, who think about women in - in a pretty, you know, sort of sexist way. So I think it actually kind of depends on who it is. I mean, I think one - one task that we give ourselves is to continually - and maybe this is actually - this is very, very much a feminist issue and an LGBTQ type issue - is that we interrogate our own subjectivities in relationship to these forms of differences, right?

00:48:03

SIMON LEUNG: And so one of the things that I think it's very important to talk about how - is how, you know, you might, or you and I, the three of us, you know, we as a group, might have a queer identity, but that queer identity is probably different slightly, or maybe a lot different in 1990 than it is in 2017, that we - we actually keep transforming. And that is

one lesson in thinking about difference, not - not merely as the otherness of the other, but the otherness that is within ourselves.

00:48:37

SUSAN SILTON: I - and I think it's - it's inevitable that that kind of evolution happens. I mean, getting back to something I think you mentioned earlier about - or maybe not - about gay marriage, for example. This is a topic that you and I have talked about before, vis-à-vis our own skepticism of that as an institution, and yet - so I feel quite distanced from the population that sees that as a positive.

00:49:15

SUSAN SILTON: I - I see the civil rights of it as a positive result, but I don't - I question the institution and always will. And that kind of distance then, how do we - how do we - I think what you say is - is important. How do we accept difference, and yet also embrace what is - what coalesces between us?

00:49:46

SUSAN SILTON: And unfortunately, I think that that that difference has been used in more recent years to - in ways that are not as effective politically speaking, so that - that kind of divisiveness, the distancing rather than seeing a kind of coalescing, we - our - our groups become smaller in some ways, wrapped around our differences.

00:50:18

SIMON LEUNG: Are you - are you talking about mainstreaming - can you give - give some examples of what you mean by what we're losing?

00:50:29

SUSAN SILTON: By what we're losing? I'm not exactly sure if I can. I mean, I think that to some extent that where I'm feeling a push/pull is around the politics of an economic - an economics as opposed to an identity that has to do with - with sexual preference or sexual identity, and that that to me feels more like the - the place that I reside now more fully in terms of my interest.

00:51:14

SUSAN SILTON: Maybe that's a result of having been queer for so many years, but I also think that it's quite urgent to be talking about - about issues that have to - that go beyond the body as a - as a sexual body, and more as an economic body.

00:51:40

SIMON LEUNG: Kaucylia, do you think - do you think we've lost something in - you know, in the - you know, in the sort of much more widespread acceptance of, you know, queer people in the mainstream? What have we lost?

00:52:04

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: I do think we've lost something, but that - I'm - you know, as I think about it, I think it makes me sound like an old person to say it was so much better. You know? I mean...

00:52:15

SUSAN SILTON: I don't think you were saying that, actually.

00:52:17

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: But - but, yeah, but that's why I was hesitating for a minute, like I think of my parents saying, we didn't used to have to lock our doors, you know. And the -

the mainstreaming is normalizing in - in a way that m- that erases difference ultimately, and - and just becomes a personal difference rather than a political difference. And deviance gets kind of washed out of it. So maybe it's a different kind - not the pinkwashing, but the deviance one, the - the perverts get washed out, you know?

00:52:58

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: And there's a radical position if you're on the margin. So if you're no longer on the margin because you - because you've been brought to the center, then you are part of the mainstream market economy. It's this neo-liberalism thing that we've been talking about.

00:53:15

SIMON LEUNG: Yeah, I - I completely agree because I think - I mean, I just think about when I was a young person to now, not being a young person. How I conceived of a queer identity or feminist identity is very, very different from how it's talked about today, right? So - so - and I think this is actually tied to your observation about how issues of economics and class are part - you know, are in a sense much more central, you know, in your daily consciousness.

00:53:48

SIMON LEUNG: And by that, I mean I think once upon a time, or at least, you know, in my projection of that, perhaps idealization, but I don't think it's purely idealization of - of a more radical identity, is that there are aspects of how sexuality is a part of the discussion of a transformation of a society in general, right?

00:54:20

SIMON LEUNG: So in a way, to smash no- monogamy is a part of the rethinking of the nuclear family, the bourgeois ideal of - of the economic system in which we live, part and parcel of a type of critique of capitalism.

00:54:45

SIMON LEUNG: And I think that in some ways by individualizing, or at least in some ways privatizing these ways of thinking about identity, it just reminds me a great deal of how maybe someone like Foucault talks about the self - the internalizing of discipline that we construct in order to have these identities, you know, that - that the - the way in which an institution is not just a facilitation of rights such as gay marriage.

00:55:30

SIMON LEUNG: It is also a way of controlling the way that we police and think about sexuality in general.

00:55:38

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: That's exactly what I was thinking about, that policing of desire and - I mean, even Foucault in History of Sexuality, writing about privatization in - in the family home, that then - then there were walls between the parents' bedrooms and where the kids slept so that there was no idea of what the parents were doing in their room or - or the toilet becoming, you know, a private place so that - so that's something you did by yourself. One of the women that I interviewed in San Diego for - the boy mechanic for my lesbian bar project, she was the head of an AIDS healthcare organization.

00:56:22

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: She was in her 60s when I interviewed her and she said, you know, it's funny but I'm - when I think about those days, we only had one bar. And she said, it

was kind of like the Christians in the catacombs. Like everyone out - was out - out there was against us. And then we would go into this place and it was kind of dark and separate, but we would be family for each other because we needed to protect each other. And there was real, genuine connection that came out of that. So - and then it also makes me think about this other bar in Cologne which was the only place where people could, as they say now, hook up, right?

00:57:03

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: And the basement in that bar - it was a mixed gay and lesbian bar - was just a bunch of mattresses, right? So the - the sort of sexuality wasn't a back room. It was the lower room. And who knows what was going on there, but it was a place where people could kind of be together. I mean, that's such a different idea than having your own marriage certificate and your kids and going to the school, you know, taking your kids to the school and being kind of normalized in that way.

00:57:31

SUSAN SILTON: And we've talked about how, in my mind, the only reason that gay marriage has become sanctioned so quickly is because of its capitalist intrigue, you know? It - it's all about money. The more money that can be c- the - the more things that can be consumed, obviously that's gonna - that's gonna be prioritized in our - in our culture and it is the only reason in my mind why gay marriage has - has become so popular.

00:58:13

SIMON LEUNG: I think it's also an alibi for civil society, especially in more repressive countries, right? So - so the rights of gay people - we're not talking about Chechnya or Angola, you know? We're talking more like, let's say Israel or, you know, or - I don't know, Spain. I don't know where it is - Western democracies for the most part, that - that the

rights of - the expansion of rights for gay people becomes a type of alibi for other forms of oppression, you know?

00:58:54

SIMON LEUNG: And this is actually in the benefit, not just of capitalism, but of the power of the state, the authority of the state.

00:59:03

SUSAN SILTON: Can you say more about how it's an alibi? I don't quite understand.

00:59:08

SIMON LEUNG: When I say that it's an alibi for civil society, it means that the idea of civil society is a corollary to democracy, right? So if we have civil society that becomes a demonstration of a democratic state. I think that various nation states use the picturing of civil society without necessarily providing true democracy as a way to, in a way, control its image, but also as this internal discourse about what the country might be.

00:59:52

SIMON LEUNG: So - so if Israel, for example, promotes itself, you know, as a haven, you know, for gay lives, you know, it actually does something and - it does something in relationship to perhaps other forms of oppression that are taking place in that country. It doesn't have to be gay identity, you know?

01:00:18

SIMON LEUNG: I mean, I'm thinking also, for example, in the case of China, how art, you know, perhaps not in the last five or six years or so, but maybe throughout much of the 21st century, how art and the promotion of art and the commercialization of art and the way in which the art world was allowed to develop in a place like China was a way of

picturing that the ideals of democracy, namely modernization, you know, can take place through the imaging of art without China itself having to go through democratic modernization.

01:01:00

SUSAN SILTON: Right. But at the end of the day, even that, art in China and gay marriage here, boils down to money, to a lot of money for possible corporations, right?

01:01:18

SIMON LEUNG: I think there are certain aspects of it that is definitely about money, but I think there are other aspects of it which is really about control, you know? And in other words, I think that the reason that I say it's different in the last four or five years in China is exactly because culture, now that - now that we - you know, we basically have a plutocratic state everywhere, you know?

01:01:52

SIMON LEUNG: It is very, very acceptable to the powers that be, let's say in Hong Kong and in Beijing, to clamp down on cultural producers - I'm thinking mostly about the booksellers and publishers in Hong Kong who suddenly went missing, right - despite the protests of the people, right? So I think that there's a sense of impunity, you know, in this use of what was once the alibi, and now simply, you know, one - one of many things that can be used in - in - in the maintenance of power.

01:02:38

SIMON LEUNG: But I think - I think the way in which both feminism and queerness have been commodified and have been, in a sense, divided so that, you know, Ivanka Trump, you know, can claim her brand of feminism - and she does say that she is a feminist, you know - is exactly the type of thing that I think we've lost.

01:03:07

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Well, the - I mean, there's a current feminist wave in fashion which I've been talking about or thinking about because there's - there was Chanel's runway show. It was about three - two years ago or three years ago, which was like a feminist demo and all of the - all of the women were carrying protest signs. I don't know if you - if you followed that. And since that time, now Dior is - all their ads are, you know, women wearing these feminist t-shirts and - and it's sort of...

01:03:46

SUSAN SILTON: Kind of like the Pepsi commercial.

01:03:48

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Pretty much, pretty much. So that sort of - it's - it's - it's hitting a new kind of level of commodification within fashion. And that makes sense with Ivanka Trump.

01:03:59

SIMON LEUNG: I think - I think it's - I think about it this way. Dissent is always the first thing that is appropriated by capitalism. It is always, always the first thing, the rebel - you know, whatever you want to think about it, right? I think what is specific to this par-historical moment is the proposition that a picturing of dissent is both a commodity and something that is seen to be ironically speaking to a particular segment.

01:04:42

SIMON LEUNG: You know, in other words, dissent as a type of - to - you know, to support your - your view, commodifying dog whistle, so that you can, in a way, be many things to

many people through a particular image. And it has to be pitched at a certain level that it does its job as a - as a type of double speak.

01:05:11

SUSAN SILTON: I think about George Bailey standing in front of the bridge in *It's a Wonderful Life*, and thinking about committing suicide, jumping over the bridge, and then he sees the angel, Clarence, dropping in the water. And of course, he jumps in to save Clarence. So it - it eclipses his desire to commit suicide. And in a way, I think it's what you're saying, the nation state co-opting dissent from a neo-liberal commodified place in order to cut it off.

01:05:55

SUSAN SILTON: If it becomes mainstreamed, it loses its - some of its potency to actually change something, I - I mean, possibly.

01:06:08

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: I - I love that you bring together this bridge metaphor and jumping into the river with the mainstream, you know? It's very neat. I'm just wondering if we want to come back to Los Angeles and COLA and - and - as - maybe as a site of resistance.

01:06:25

SUSAN SILTON: Pepsi, COLA.

01:06:26

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Right?

01:06:27

SUSAN SILTON: Right.

01:06:28

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Right, a different kind of COLA. And the - as far as I know, COLA hasn't changed in its scale over the years, but certainly Los Angeles has changed in its scale in terms of - because of the institutional framework of all the artists that we're encouraging to sort of launch themselves here.

01:06:55

SIMON LEUNG: And maybe just the demographics of Los Angeles.

01:06:56

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Yes, exactly, right? So - but it - it's interesting that it kind of stays the same scale and still exists here. And I know that sometimes it's difficult to continue to justify arts funding, but it - I think if you look at what you see in this exhibition as you go through the timeline, you can see that there isn't one COLA, right? But it is a - it is a place where artists who are resisting this kind of com- this kind of commodification and mainstreaming do have the possibility to produce their objects. They're - they're engaging with an audience, and I think that's really an important...

01:07:43

SUSAN SILTON: COLA has not always shown at the Municipal Art Gallery. I remember its - several iterations. I don't exactly remember where. I was just talking about this...

01:07:55

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: The Hammer?

01:07:56

SUSAN SILTON: ...with Tom [SOUNDS LIKE] Nectal.

01:07:57

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: The Hammer. I saw a COLA show at The Hammer.

01:07:59

SUSAN SILTON: Was there one at Skirball as well?

01:08:02

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: I think so, because there was a renovation going on here, so I think it was here originally, and then there was a renovation. And the first ones, I learned today, you didn't apply to. You were selected. So they - they made a change, and I guess then you could start applying with projects, right?

01:08:25

SUSAN SILTON: Here's where I - I would I - I mean, I would like to say one thing, you know, publicly, which is that I - what I hope for COLA's future as well as other institutions, grant-granting institutions that I've either been awarded by or observed over a number of years. What I hope for - for all of these institutions is that it continues to - that they continue to support artists who aren't necessarily recognized already.

01:09:05

SUSAN SILTON: Because in recent years I've noticed the way in which jurors are invited to be part of grant-making entities, and they tend to - not always, but frequently - support the artists who are already highly visible. Now when I got the grant, I - I was not highly visible, but I - I was - obviously there was accomplishment there.

01:09:46

SUSAN SILTON: But I'd like to - to make sure that that continues, because I think that the danger, as with the waning of smaller arts institutions, nonprofits, and the commodifying or the - the sort of capitalizing of nonprofits, the danger is that those who are funded can - or - or those who are - who - are already very visible.

01:10:16

SUSAN SILTON: And I think that we all succumb to some of those ideas that we are passed down from a neo-liberal perspective that we want to support those who are really successful. And I think sometimes still, success and recognition are obviously very different things, right? I mean, you can [UNINTELLIGIBLE].

01:10:42

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Well, there's a - yeah, that's kind of connected to the branding. Institutions need to brand themselves by having household name artists associated with them to justify their position. That's the thing that seems really possible when it's a democratic - when it's part of the city and part of the city's budget, is that - at least in LA, at this point there - there does - there is a real desire to recognize difference. And that's partly what's making people talk about it as a sanctuary city, people celebrating.

01:11:21

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Maybe - maybe this is a different kind of branding, but I don't think it's such a bad kind of branding to think oh, yeah, well, we've got all these different populations and there are different concerns. And all of that can be brought to the table within an art context, and that seems really important. So I think that COLA has successfully functioned that way and given us the space to both see that and be that.

01:11:54

SUSAN SILTON: I know it's one of the - the highlights of - of...

01:11:55

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: It's one of the - it's one of the...

01:11:57

SUSAN SILTON: ...this - this grant and this project, which has been a long-term project, has been one of the few that has consistently backed artists of - of difference.

01:12:14

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: And even at a certain point, I remember LACE and - and some of the other nonprofits, they didn't have this funding from the NEA anymore, and I thought of them. They - they kind of shifted what they were doing. They became like stepping stone galleries, stepping stone spaces where you could move from them into a commercial gallery, because the only place to move was to a commercial gallery because you'd never be shown in a museum unless you had gallery repres- representation. So.

01:12:46

SIMON LEUNG: That was the critique of alternative spaces that I knew in the 1980s, for example, Artist Space in New York or LACE in LA, which - which is really - I think which goes deeper into a discussion about the way alternatives were structured. In a sense, there weren't many different systems.

01:13:17

SIMON LEUNG: There was a major system, and the stepping stone gallery idea was something that I think many artists and many curators also thought about as the normal, you know? But that was what I was familiar with as a critique in the '80s. I - I don't know.

I mean, I think that what's so different, if - what feels very different to me today is that the art world is so much bigger than it once was, right?

01:13:56

SIMON LEUNG: So I think that social practice artists, for example, are not necessarily even thinking about galleries.

01:14:08

SIMON LEUNG: And - and in some ways, even - you know, even though I really haven't functioned as a gallery artist for, I don't know, twenty years or more, I think that, you know, I'm somebody who actually kind of - I kind of like galleries even though I don't show in them and I don't really make work for galleries because they do demonstrate a very limited, you know, granted, very limited idea of - of place, you know, that people can go into.

01:14:47

SIMON LEUNG: But - but I've - I've noticed that in the last, I don't know, fifteen years or so, there are really different kinds - different kinds of spaces that are functioning as art spaces. Yeah, so this is one of them perhaps, hopefully. I don't know. I'm not sure.

01:15:09

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. I think...

01:15:13

SUSAN SILTON: We can have our own art space right here, the three of us.

01:15:15

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: I think we've made - we've made a kind of cluster. We've made a cluster.

01:15:19

SIMON LEUNG: Somewhere there's a place for us.

01:15:23

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Thank you. Thank you for coming.

01:15:24

SIMON LEUNG: On that note. Yay, we did it.

01:15:25

SUSAN SILTON: Thank you. Thank you so much.

01:15:27

KAUCYLIA BROOKE: Thank you, Simon.

OFF CAMERA

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]