

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

TUESDAY SMILLIE

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

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Transcribed by Dylan Burdette

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Michelle Esther O'Brien: Hello, my name is Michelle O'Brien, and I will be having a conversation with Tuesday Smillie 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 identified people. This is October 11th, 2019, and this is being recorded at the NYU department of Sociology. Hello Tuesday.

Tuesday Smillie: Hi Michelle. Uh,

O'Brien: Could you start off and introduce yourself?

Smillie: I, as you said, am Tuesday Smillie. I am a visual artist. I live in Brooklyn, New York, Um, yeah. I mean I'm, its—how broad an introduction to do? I feel like that's a good starting place. Uh. Yeah.

O'Brien: Where did you grow up?

Smillie: I grew up in Boston, Massachusetts. I was born in Allston, which is a neighborhood in Boston, but in a macrobiotic collective house which my parents facilitated—that my parents ran. But when I was really young, when my brother—my older brother—started kindergarten, we moved to Brookline, which is a neighboring city. It's actually surrounded on three sides by Boston but has maintained its own township to as not have to share its wealth in taxes. Which in part meant that they had a, you know, the school system was considered really good and so that was my parent's move from Boston to Brookline. So that was, yeah, that was like when I was two, so...early, yeah.

O'Brien: What was your family like?

Smillie: That's funny I hadn't really thought that I was going to talk about my family. Well, I have one older brother who I grew up with, and my mom and my dad have been around for the duration of my life. My parent split up when I was in fourth grade? I remember it, like, seeming like the end of the world when they told us. You know, I really didn't know...I knew other kids whose, like maybe only had one parent, or whose parents weren't married, but I didn't know kids who had, whose parents had divorced. But I feel like pretty quickly it became clear that they were both happier not together, and that they also, like, managed to have a pretty cordial divorce and stay in regular contact while me and my brother were in school. And we would kind of move between houses, it's sort of like a "three days here, four days there, three days here, four days there" kind of thing. Yeah so, yeah so, and it and I feel like it very quickly it was...it seemed like an actually much better situation for everybody. And then I have two stepsisters who came later. My sister Whitney was in my brother's grade in high school, and she and my brother Eric basically got my dad and her mom together. I don't really know, I feel like they talked about it before, I don't really know how planned it was. [laughter] But my brother borrowed Jean's car—no, my brother borrowed my dad's car and got into an accident coming home from a rave on New Year's day, with Whitney in the car as well as a handful of other friends. And so that was really the bombing point for my dad and my stepmom, you know, they were like "oh my god, our kids were

just in an accident on the highway, we probably need to process this together.” Yeah, fortunately no one was hurt in the accident, it was really—yeah, I don’t think there were any other cars on the road, it was really early the next morning, or the next day, yeah. But yeah, it makes for a good, you know, a good wedding story. Yeah, and then I have, right, my eldest stepsister, Vanessa, and so I, well you know I was two grades under my brother and Whitney, they moved to Brookline from Mount Vernon I think around the time that Whitney started high school. So, Vanessa also went to our high school for a couple of years, but she was older, so I never went to school with her. But she is awesome. Love her a lot...yeah.

O'Brien: What kind of work did your parents do?

Smillie: My mom was a computer coder. She was actually debugging computer code. She worked at John Hancock, and then she worked at Compuware. Yeah, she was really—she really enjoyed her job, right? She was like ‘I get to do puzzles all day,’ so I think that had some impact on my conception of how work could be, that work shouldn’t be drudgery—that you should derive some enjoyment from your paid labor. Yeah, I-it’s really funny I did not think that that much I was going to be talking about my family. But right this is like, as you said in the intro, a sort of—what was the term you used?

O'Brien: Often, they follow life course structures.

Smillie: A life course structure.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Smillie: Yeah, I don’t know...

O'Brien: We can skip past your family any time we need to

Smillie: Yeah, I mean, there’s certainly interesting material there that I like to discuss with my therapist, but I’m not sure how much of that I’m ready to have as like, public record. Yeah.

O'Brien: What were you like?

Smillie: I was, I was a super shy kid. Yeah, I feel like, yeah. I feel like the world seemed pretty scary most of the time. I don’t know, what kind of kid was I? I mean, I totally idolized my brother. He was not necessarily so excited to have a younger sibling, but like, whatever he did was definitely the coolest thing you could do. [laughter] And I feel like, right, that we had a kind of like... smart brain. My mom was working computer coding...I should stop clicking my pen...[laughter] My dad wasn’t working. So right, he like, he was a stay at home dad, and we got to spend a lot of time with him. So, there was, there was a chunk of like this kind of, getting to have outdoor adventures, going to like the arboretum in Boston, and like romping around in the woods, and, you know, kind of yeah. I don’t know, I feel like he really enjoys like, kind of like, kid spirit? So, I think it was really fun for him to have young people as kind of like playmates and peers. Yeah and

I remember being really excited about tree climbing, probably because my brother was really into tree climbing, yeah.

O'Brien: How far forward do we want to jump? Should we talk about high school? Or after high school?

Smillie: We can talk about—we can talk a little bit about high school. Right, so I went to Brookline High, and when I went to Brookline, I had a couple like, alternative programs built into the school, so there was like a, you know, inspired by, like working in vein of these like democratic school models in which students have a say in their education model. But that was channeled through the constraints of being a public school and so there were, you know, there were, right, we would have a town meeting once a week, but there were obviously things we could not change because they were state mandated. Yeah, no, actually at that time, this is like late nineties, and so Massachusetts was introducing the MCAS which is like state-wide testing, school testing that I'm pretty sure that the school funding would hinge on how students performed in the testing. It's, right, there is like a real kind of feedback loop of schools that were struggling or schools that like, need more support from the state, they would end up losing funding because they weren't performing well on the tests. And yeah there was a fair amount of like, student and teacher agitation against kind of the standardization of education, I remember that being like—to having conversations certainly in school and that you know, me and a number of my peers participated in some protests that the ACLU had organized. I did a lot of animal rights activism in my high school years. I feel like that was really kind of a gateway drug into more complex political analysis considering race and class, and a myriad of other social factors. But yeah, moved to these now like—I would participate in these weekly anti-fur protests at Macy's. What are other—there were some other campaigns...yeah... Yeah, it's weird being on public record. [laughter] You know, like I'm like oh should I talk about graffiti? Should I not talk about graffiti? Graffiti was certainly a sort of like, also a kind of door opener for me in terms of accessing a creative voice, and like making space for a kind of emotional processing that sidestepped verbal articulation or written language, that I mean, I, yeah, I definitely directly contribute to my development of that, that's really my kind of like, the root of my creative, artistic practice that was like growing out of this need for a way to communicate for things that I did know how to verbally articulate, didn't have names or words for but really like kind of enabling that sort of emotional, I don't know, emotional expression, almost like a way to sort of check in with myself about where I was at emotionally. Yeah. Yeah. Do I just talk? That's what happens in the interview? [laughter]

O'Brien: That's what happens.

Smillie: okay. Cool.

O'Brien: I mean that's very interesting, what you said,

Smillie: Yeah.

O'Brien: I mean it's about a way into your art, a way into your creative practice. So, this- through this activity there was quite, you know, grappling with some emotional and psychological issues that you couldn't grapple with otherwise.

Smillie: yeah...yeah, it was super helpful. I feel like, yeah, I'm not really sure kind of how, what, how things would've happened otherwise if I hadn't—if there hadn't been that, kind of, space, yeah. But yeah then I graduated high school, and like didn't want—didn't really know what I was doing, I didn't want to go right to college, you know, most the folks from Brookline High, most of the folks in SWS were like going right into school or were doing a year deferred and then going to school, but there's, I mean, you know, at Brookline High the majority of the folks were going to go to college.

O'Brien: SWS was a program?

Smillie: Oh SWS, yeah, SWS was school within the school, that was the alternative program, the quote "democratic" alternative program within the school.

O'Brien: Right.

Smillie: Yeah the school, Brookline High, also had—there was an alternative program, OFC, which is "Opportunities for Change," and that was, that was like more of a kind of safety net for folks who were having a hard time making school work for them. I mean, I feel like it is really interesting kind of thinking about what sort of model this, that Brookline High made, as a very well-funded public school, of really like, making efforts to accommodate students in like, in a variety of—that come from a variety of places, interacting with the education in a variety of ways, yeah. But yeah but I didn't really know what I wanted to do when I graduated. There was, I mean there like, I feel like there was pressure, more so from my mom about kind of...sort of...life expectations, but not necessarily career expectations, and yeah and so I was, but I was like 'I'm just gonna go, like, wander around for a while.' And neither of my parents were excited about that, but they were both kind of like 'okay I guess that's what you're gonna do' like, so, yeah, so I like started biking across the country, and then took a bus a chunk of the way, and then I did, like, hitchhiked around the country a bunch...and I ended up out in Portland, Oregon. And I had—I knew some folks from Boston who were living out there, and you know, someone was like 'oh yeah you should come, like there's like, there's tons of kids out here doing art, you should come hang out in Portland.' And I was like 'okay' like I didn't really, like I wasn't doing anything, so I was like 'sure that sounds fun.' And I like moved into this punk house in Northeast Portland, the Tillammonster on Tillamook St. and then we all got evicted like three months later and everyone was like 'oh it's winter now, like, it's gonna rain, it's gonna be raining for the next couple months, like we're just gonna go traveling.' And I was like 'oh, I'm tired of traveling' and so I, you know, looked for other housing in Portland. And there was like—this was back, you know, this is 2001, there was like flyers on bulletin boards in cafes, and I called this house that was looking for a roommate, and they were like 'oh we found someone, but our friends are looking, so maybe you should call the Couch house?' And so, I called this other—and they were both queer houses, and I was not out as queer, or trans. But it like seemed like the place I wanted to live.

O'Brien: So, we met that year then, in 2001.

Smillie: Yeah, yeah at the Couch house. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, that was, yeah. That was when I came out, which I feel like was really nurtured by the queer community that I kind of planted myself in without really knowing why I was doing that. Yeah, it was, I mean, it, you know, this is like...there weren't a lot of other trans women in that scene, right? Like there were a number of trans masculine folks and then most of the folks I was hanging out with were like female identified, female assigned. But there was, there was a kind of, like awareness and understanding to transness that really like made a space for that to be something that could be possible for me, which is something I'm super grateful for.

O'Brien: Were you canting to an art practice while you were in Portland? Or was there community space for that? What was the cultural scene you were around?

Smillie: I mean I'm still really interested in graffiti, and then like, I started making...I mean it—my relationship with graffiti has never been a kind of, traditional, like, you know, all-city tagging like kind of motivation, but more sort of interest in like situating myself within a physical space, right? Kind of like wanting- I mean I think on some levels-wanting to assert that I existed in some way? by making public art? But then also was, you know, working on paintings at home, like I mean often with spray-paint, but also, kind of like, you know, collage, xerox, and a bunch of other kind of materials that, you know, was a sort of mix of graffiti, zine, culture...yeah. And so right so I started making these zine/ artist books that were...I mean people— lots of folks in Portland were making zines at the time. Zines-if you don't know what a zine is, a zine is-was kind of like blogs, before blogs were popular. They were like, you know, these self-produced pieces of writing and visual art. Often reproduced in black and white xerox, so kind of, you know, right? Like sort of claiming a platform, when a platform is, at that point right, like was really controlled by, you know, kind of publishing gatekeepers. Yeah so right so I was interested in this kind of like real alternative platform of zines, but also had a—like was much more interested in the sort of visual aesthetic than the inward. And so yeah, and so I started like making these zines that were kind of collaged assemblages, photographs—I had taken found images, sometimes really, you know, sparse text. and then color copied so that the zine runs would be much smaller than kind of an average run because making color copies was difficult. Yeah.

O'Brien: Could you say more of the cultural milieu of the scene, the community in Portland,

Smillie: Yeah.

O'Brien: that you were a part of?

Smillie: Yeah, yeah, the early 2000s in Portland, like I feel like there was this kind of, or at least this, right, the scene that we interacted with, there was this sort of interweaving of like queer radicalism and green anarchism, right? There was a lot of kind of, there was a sense, organizing happening. There was like folks doing tree sits, protecting trees from logging. And then there—

you know, that obviously was happening outside of the city, but there was a fair amount of kind of like support work happening within the city that—to enable these kinds of ongoing nature occupations. Yeah and I mean really, I feel like that's, right, so thinking about kind of, maybe, you know, animal rights activism as a kind of entry point into like, politics. I feel like I really got kind of schooled in intersectional queer radicalism in Portland in a way that I am super grateful for. And that happened, you know happened, largely through kind of in-person community conversations. And also, through zines! I mean zines played a really important role. But I do think, I mean I don't, like I'm not, I don't have a, I'm not super present on the internet these days, but my impression is that politics are formed differently through the removed space of the internet than through the sort of direct conversation of peers engaging with each other, right? The kind of room that there is to be like, you know, to have something you say or something you're doing be like, questioned without that being a capital "c" Callout, you know, there being a much more kind of like community holding space for a sort of development of politic, collectively. As opposed to, I mean, right, like as I said, largely in outside, but as it can appear on the internet for that sort of "it be like this," you know, like...I mean, I'm weird because of, like to feel, to have it feel like it's a top, like kinda top-down expression of politic? But there isn't really a top in the, I mean there are internet tops, but there isn't like a centralized source of the internet's of the, right, the internet, kind of like, that's one of the really amazing, bizarre, powerful things about the internet is its ability to diffuse, or in a sense diffuse, an essentialist source. Yeah. Yeah and I think, but I do feel like there was, right, there was kind of like an interior sort of question about the milieu and like this just sort of like the aesthetic, of the—there was this sort of interplay of really like serious, sincere organizing and then also like really playful engagements. Like I remember there being a, like, Valentine's Day bike ride? And people were like dressed up in valentine costumes? Like someone was wearing—what are the little candies that are shaped like hearts that are like.... Like someone was like dressed up in this heart thing with like a message written on it? and like...yeah. It was a weird moment. And I think really special. But so yeah so I like, you know, was kinda doing art stuff and getting politically schooled, and like was, I mean, pretty peripheral to any direct organizing that was happening... and was like working part time, at the tofu factory. And there was, I mean there, right, like Portland had a really high unemployment rate? I don't remember if it was like twelve percent unemployment in the early aughts. But so it was really, I mean it was really, you know, most the folks I knew worked part time and the, I bet all of you know, but the cost of living was relatively low, and so, you know, like, yeah, folks were just kind of making it work, but also it meant that there was something of a kind of flexibility to how people used their time. and it just felt, you know, it feels very different than living in New York, today. Yeah, and then after a few years, I decided to go to Oregon College of Art and Craft. And that, I mean that part was, you know, was something that my mom encouraged me to do. And I remember it being, like really feeling like a kind of big decision of like whether I could justify like spending that amount of time, or giving art that like, like letting art take that priority, you know? As opposed to doing direct organizing. I'm right now like feeling really kind of conflicted of like, this, you know, like, allowing myself to pursue these artistic endeavors, to feeling like, now I'm like self-indulgent, you know. It's not true. It's not self-indulgent. There is important work that happens through the production of culture. Go be artists. You brave, smart people.

O'Brien: So, you came, you said, you came out as trans while living at the Couch house in Portland.

Smillie: Yeah, that happened. [laughter]

O'Brien: Do you wanna say anything else about that?

Smillie: God, yeah, it's funny, when I like, when I was,

O'Brien: See, you keep moving away from the mic.

Smillie: I keep moving away from the mic.

O'Brien: Oh god, and also, I'm usually far away from the mic, also, I keep moving closer which makes you move farther away.

Smillie: okay, oh I see. I see.

O'Brien: Here, let's move to this corner here, let's both slide down. Maybe the corner will be some defense.

Smillie: Perfect, perfect. [laughter] Yeah, I really don't think about bio when I was like making notes for myself about what I wanted to talk about. I really was like, you know, thinking about my—the art I'm making now, but yeah, I mean I feel like, right, that I, like I didn't feel like I fit the kind of standard narratives about who a trans woman was. And granted, those standards, you know, my access to those standard narratives in the early thousands were limited. There weren't a ton of good public resources. I feel like my most—I never saw *Crying Game*, I feel like my most memorable encounter of media representation of trans people as a young person was *Silence of the Lambs*, so yeah, it didn't seem awesome, it didn't seem like a cool thing to do. But there—right, but there was this way, that like queer space in Portland had like —that genderqueer was more the terminology than, certainly than transsexual, and, but I don't really remember at that point, I mean I feel like maybe sometimes people would use the term transgender. But I feel like the majority of the language I remember was genderqueer. What do you remember?

O'Brien: I remember there being trans men.

Smillie: Yeah.

O'Brien: and genderqueer female assigned people, and a fair number of them

Smillie: Yeah.

O'Brien: Yeah. Not as many as women but a fair number.

Smillie: Yeah.

O'Brien: So, in some ways, it felt like a dynamic-expanding moment of trans identity, but not for trans women.

Smillie: Yeah, yeah, totally. Yeah, and I mean, like yeah, there were a number of ways—or I was like, is this something I was allowed to do. I remember having a conversation with our friend Adele Carpenter about like—right so I mean I also am primarily attracted to femme people? And so, I feel like that was also a point of confusion for me, where I was like “oh what does it mean to want to be femme? And to be attracted to femmes?” I remember having this conversation with Adele where I was like expressing concern basically about like appropriating gay male culture by presenting as femme and Adele was just like “you get to do whatever the fuck you wanna do.” And that, it really was like, I was like, “oh, okay.” Like I mean I think, like partially, right, that like Adele is a very charismatic person and also like I certainly, I mean, at the time and ongoing, like have a deep respect for her politic, and so I was like “oh great, if Adele says this is okay, then like, it’s definitely okay.” Yeah. Yeah, so right, there was this way that like, the community really like, made space for exploration, that like the transphobia of broader society had worked really hard to shut down. yeah. It was rough for my parents. It’s gotten easier for both of them. They’ve done a chunk of work themselves. But I, yeah, I like, you know, I totally was like “oh my god, me and my mom are gonna have this like bonding moment when I tell her,” and that’s [laughter] that’s not what happened. [laughter] Yeah. But yeah. I remember my brother, I feel like my brother was really, I mean, my brother and both my stepsisters are queer, so that was like, really great to have their support. And my brother, I remember my brother, early on, being like “yeah, at first, you know, like, this really kinda really freaked me out, like I was really nervous about it, and then I was like, well, who knows better than Tuesday, what’s best for Tuesday.” And he was like, “so I don’t understand, but I don’t think I have to, so like I’m just gonna follow your lead.” And that, like that was really huge. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, and I think also my—having, particularly for my dad, like having my stepmom—my stepmom was like, “oh great, okay” like she didn’t, you know, she had like no investment in my, like, gender being masculine. Probably in part because, you know, she, like, she came to the family later, but also because she has like, has had, had had much more kind of experience in queer worlds? So, like, her first husband was queer, and so it felt that much less terrifying for her. She was just like “oh cool, we have a, you know, we have a Tuesday now, fantastic!” So, I’m super grateful for her, also for the kind of work that she did helping my dad kind of adjust.

O'Brien: So, you went to art school, you kept making art. You decided to prioritize art, and not see it as not legitimate.

Smillie: Yeah, yeah, and I mean I feel like there’s a way that like as much as I chose art, that art chose me, right? That there’s this way, you know, like wrapped in being a teenager that was like, this was like, this was my path of sincere communication and I feel like that is kind of the best, like some of the most effective organizing we can do is to be like, radically sincere with each other. Yeah, and so that’s, like that’s right, that’s kind of what I strive to continue doing with my practice today. Yeah, should I talk about my practice now? What do I do?

O'Brien: When did you move to New York?

Smillie: Oh, I moved to New York in the end of 2007, after I graduated from OCAC in the spring of 2007, and I felt really ready to leave Portland at that point. I'd been there for seven years. I really missed, the seasons happen on the east coast, and I wanted to be in the, you know, in the art center of New York. Yeah, I moved here in 2007, I, like, found the artist, Wangechi Mutu's address, on the internet somehow, and I was like, I knew that she lived in Brooklyn, I was like "this can't really be her address, like why would she just have her address somewhere listed online?" But she—I was living in Bushwick and she was living in Bed-Stuy (Bedford–Stuyvesant), and so I like went and biked like past her house to be like "is this really her house?" and there was—right she was working on, you know, doing these paintings and collages on mylar, and there was one up in the window, like in the second floor. Because it was mylar, you could see, you know you could—like I couldn't see all of the detail of it, but you could kind of see through that there was a human figure on this piece, and I was just like "oh this is clearly, actually is her, you know, her house."

O'Brien: Could you say her name again?

Smillie: Yeah, Wangechi Mutu. And so I like, you know, made this, kind of like, fan-mail...love-letter...application, and was just like "I wanna, I want my, like I wanna help you make your dreams come true, can I work for you?" and then I started working for her, and we worked together for many, on and off, for many years. Yeah, and so yeah, right, I mean you know like moving to New York was hard, but having that, like, you know, having that like job as a kind of part of my landing here I think was super helpful in terms of being like "okay, this is a good decision for me, this is a good place for me to be."

O'Brien: What was your impression of New York, moving into it? You were drawn here as an artistic center, you said?

Smillie: Yeah, yeah it was hard to make friends. I mean I knew a handful of people before I moved here, and that definitely helped, but there's so much more time scarcity in New York than in Portland. Yeah, like I would talk to people at parties, and they're like, you know, even if we'd been introduced by mutual peers, people were kind of like "what do you want?" You know, like, and I was like "I'm just trying to talk to you, like I don't actually want anything." But I feel like people are protective of their time because we all have to work so much, you know? Which makes sense and can be hard for new folks to the city. And it's—yeah, it's definitely like a different kind of sociality than happened in Portland. But yeah, it was exciting to be here, it felt, you know, like there, yeah, I mean there was a lot of art stuff happening. And I was just excited to be in a giant city again, yeah. Yeah, but I moved three times that first year and got bedbugs so, it was also rough. [laughter] Definitely got hazed by New York [laughter] yeah...

O'Brien: Did you uncover trans community in the city at all?

Smillie: Yeah, I mean, Michelle O'Brien, who is interviewing me, had weekly dinners at her house that were really, really sweet and really great, like I feel like was also really great landing pad for

me in New York. But I feel like it kinda took me, I mean I knew, I feel like, yeah... what's the right way to word this... I mean I think that like...it's funny that I can't edit it later. [laughter] I mean it was certainly really exciting to- for there to be like trans organizing happening on a significant level in a way that I hadn't really seen before, with, you know, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, and also, I mean for me, like personally, really like amazingly gratuitous for that to, you know, for their, like, for SLP's largest fundraising event to be an art auction, and to, you know, to have kind of like merging of the trans politic and creative expression felt like, really beautiful. But I, yeah, I mean I feel like I've largely been fairly peripheral to, kind of, to trans communities? I have, I mean I have a variety of thoughts that I'd be happy to discuss with you, but I don't know if I want to discuss for, you know, the ongoing record in your public library. Hello microphone. [laughter]

O'Brien: How did your—how was your art practice evolving, in art school, and then when you moved to New York, and then your early years in New York?

Smillie: I mean I think, well, like definitely moving to New York, the work got smaller, because I was working out of my apartment, and so the scale, you know, the space was really cheap in Portland, so I had, like I had a dedicated studio in the basement of the house that I lived in. but I think, I mean I think, more interestingly, right, that there, that like, the thesis work that I did at CAC, like was very much about kind of, like it was a sort of, personal, autobiographical, like exploration of my experience with the navigation of gender identity, and that I feel like was really, again, really helpful, I mean, yeah, in my kind of personal growth and personal development but that I think ultimately is not—it just doesn't feel like the most interesting subject matter for me at this point in my life, in my career, and so, right, there's a way that like a lot of the work that I make now, while engages with a trans-feminist politic and engages with, certainly with, lineage, or legacy of trans activism that like, I really am not interested in kind of delving into, or pointing to the specific of trans experience. And that is in part because there, I feel like there, is a sort of obsessive consumptive fascination with trans people, both in the mainstream media and in the medical industry that I'm not interested in like participating in. And also because I feel like, right, that there, that I'm not really interested in delineating, you know, making parameters for, making boundaries for, marking the inclusions and exclusions of what trans experience is supposed to be, or looks like, or should be. You know, and I'm much more interested in like open-ended politic that is focused on making sure that everyone's needs are met regardless of social location. And so that kind of nuance of—trans experience just doesn't, for me, just doesn't feel like the most interesting or compelling way to engage people around questions of how we like are all navigating and negotiating power in our daily lives, yeah.

O'Brien: Can you tell us how you came to that? What the, sort of process of evolution was? It sounds like it was concurrent with your move to New York in some ways.

Smillie: Yeah, that's a good question. I mean I think, I think that part of—partially, like for my, given my own social location, right, that as a white, upper-middle class trans woman, like I have a significant amount of privilege. And so, you know, there's a way that like, to be spotlighting my experience feels indulgent, you know, and feels like, not really productive in terms of actually engaging with systems of power that are endangering trans people, right, that I feel largely

buffered from the most extreme forms of violence and transphobia enacted by the state, and socially, through my whiteness and my class privilege. And so, right, so like, partially, like, I don't, yeah, I don't want to be, like...I don't know what the word is, but the sort of like...well, like navigating the medical industry sucks and I feel like there's much more pressing concerns and violences on, you know, being thrust on people that merit much more attention. Yeah, but yeah, I'm not really, I mean yeah, I think, I feel like, that, right, it's, you know, that just like, as my politic has changed through interaction with my peers, the... Yeah I don't know, I can't think of a specific terming what I'm for, for that. But yeah, but I do feel like at this point, right, that, I mean I do, right, there are lot—a lot of my works do engage with the Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries as forebearers for the current trans justice organizing that is happening. And then that, like, that feels super important to me in terms of like finding some kind grounding, finding some kind of history out of the sort of like erasure of trans history and like the whitewashing of, you know, gay and queer movements. But yeah, but I think, like I think I guess with like, like I guess at this point I kind of see that the artwork functioning and like—serving a couple functions, right, and one is that it continues to be a space for me to like explore and work, like work through things and to sort of have an emotional, like—like to let my emotional world inform my cognitive thinking. But then also, like I want, you know, I want to be holding and honoring the trans forebearers who came before us, and particularly like, you know, folks who, well... it's so.... This thing is so weird. Yeah, I mean folks who until recently have really been written out of our histories, of political histories. But, and so, the, right, so there is a way that I want, like that I am, when I'm making the works, that I am thinking about the works speaking to both to queer and trans viewers specifically and like, politicized queer and trans viewers. But I also feel really aware that that is not the majority of the people who are in art spaces, or interacting with artwork? And so I also am really interested in kind of, navigating open-endedness that leaves the work accessible and invites—there's an invitation to folks from a variety of social locations and a variety of politics and, right, that there's a kind of, an invitation, a hopefully, like a level of enticement to the viewer to engage with the work, right? And that's something that I do through kind of like a careful crafting of the work, a careful composition and consideration of composition, I know, color, and how the work is physically put together, right, that I, like I want people to look at the work, and I want to reward them looking. But then also that I like particularly, for the works that have text, that I want like, that I want the works to challenge the viewer to consider each of our relationships to power, what that means, you know, in hierarchical structure, what that means in power that's moving horizontally, right, that I feel like I'm interested in that kind of open-ended invitation that makes space for folks from all kinds of social locations to be able to be critically self-reflexive. And I'm interested in that like, the sort of specificity of this like, of like a loving, critical self-reflection as a like a potentially really powerful political tool, right, there are, you know, these really real and dangerous institutions and architectures that are enacting systemic violence, like the prison industrial complex, and that they are enabled by individuals, right? You know, that like, each of our positioning that like allows these institutions to continue plays as much role as the institutions themselves. So, right, like I'm not advocating for the kind of like self-reflection instead of direct organizing? But they're both important. And again, right, that this is kind of the calling that, you know, that I feel like art had invited me to...is to be working through these channels. There's something about like thinking about critical self-reflection as like as a kind of love. And that like, I think, I mean I like kind of

touched on this earlier, however I think that there's like...I feel like this is already starting to shift, but I mean, in kind of online cultures it feels like the kind of callout culture like, to me, feels really dangerous because I feel like they were alienating potential allies instead of working to collectively build a politic. But I think that right I think that the idea of critique, whether that's off of critique or whether that's internal, personal critique or external critique, can feel really terrifying, and I think that like, I think that there's something about dyslexia, right, I'm dyslexic, I like had a really hard time learning how to read. And like, I was like, in, at Brookline schools was able to get like specialized attention for dyslexia, it was something called the learning center, when I was, you know, in second grade that I went to, and so there's this way that I actually feel like and I feel like this is something that comes up with friends while I'm like working on something and I ask for feedback, and really I'm asking for rigorous critique. I think people like, people can kind of shy away from that, because it, like it can feel scary, but there's a way in my head that actually feels like a kind of love, right, and that it's like, you know, the like...there's something about like being in the learning center, and like, right, like, feeling like I was working twice as hard as the other students and was doing worse than everyone else. And then like, having this specialized attention that like, was not like "oh you're doing great, congratulations," but was like really like sincerely digging into where the problem points were, like where I was getting stuck and why—like what was giving me, what was preventing me from being able to like understand what these letters were supposed to be doing together. So yeah, so, I feel like I have a kind of emotional affinity for a sort of like rigorous critical reading that if, yeah, that it feels, that it, like it feels like it, right, that it's actually about like all of us being able to do better. Yeah. Yes.

O'Brien: Okay. We're back from a short break, and I have a lot more questions, but before we get into that, you mentioned that this was hard. Do you want to say a little bit about what's challenging about what's challenging about doing an interview about your life on the permanent public record?

Smillie: [laughter] I mean, well it's like it's weird because it's not really a conversation, as you invited, I'm just rambling, but then, yeah, there isn't, I mean, you know, as someone who's fond of critique, I don't get to go back and revise, and you know, like, tweak for sentence structure so the smart point is extra underlined and all the ums are cut out, yeah so it feels a little uncomfortable. I don't know...

O'Brien: Are you scared of anything in particular?

Smillie: With this interview-

O'Brien: Yeah. [laughter]

Smillie: or just in general? [laughter] I mean there's something about, like, just having a record that—I mean I think like most of... I mean like right, like you know, I want, like I want my politic to sound good, obviously, but I think most of the kind of actual concern about like what to say and what not to say is more kind of like... questions about disclosure about other folks. And like see even just that statement, like I don't, it's not that I want my politic to sound good, it's that I

want my politic to be well articulated, like and even just thinking about like when a spoken interview is transcribed, how, you know, the different shape, the different like, words mean different things when you read them and when you hear someone speak them, right, that there's like, intonation, and like, pause, and whatever the changes kind of the meaning but, like, if you just read the phrase, "I want my politic to sound good," like I sound like a politician, you know, but like what I actually want is to be sincerely conveying like, my heartfelt opinions in an accurate and articulate way. But yeah, I mean I'm sure there, you know, like, we don't want to fuck up... [laughter] yeah.

O'Brien: Tell me about your sort of evolving art community when you moved to New York, like what was the trajectory of your engagement with other artist, other artists' engagement with you...the sort of movement of people starting to look at your work in different sorts of spaces... Can you tell us about your relationship to art community?

Smillie: Yeah, I mean I think, like, I feel like all, I mean as I kind of said a couple times, about sort of like my evolving politic growing from community dialogue, right, and I think about my artwork as an extension of my politic, and so that, you know, there's like, there—I feel like they're very interwoven. And there are particular projects, like "Reflecting Light into The Unshadow," which is a broad body of work that engages writings by Ursula K. Le Guin that happened over a long period of time, and like part of why I feel like that body of work is so strong is because there was space to have these conversations with my community, you know, and right, that like, and like thinking about these texts and making artwork that reflects this one way of thinking about it and then I'm talking about it with my friend because I'm excited about it, and they're asking me questions, and bringing up things that I haven't thought of yet, so that like, the work gets to grow because I'm having this engagement, and not even necessarily exclusively with other artists, but just with, you know, with critically engaged, smart peers, and so I'm super grateful for that and I feel like we're—there's this kind of perpetual myth of like, the lone genius, and it's like, no one is doing anything on their own, like ever, anything productive, you know, like all of this is growing out of like so much collective labor and thinking and heart. But in terms of engaging with other artists I mean I feel like right, that, you know, my... like everything just happens through...like through people you know and people who have seen your work, and respect your work, and understand what you're doing. And so, for me, right, like a big turning point was showing work at the museum in Trigger, and that, you know, I had never shown work at a museum before. I like had had a solo show at a, like, queer community center in Philadelphia was my, you know, was the kind of previous, like, big show I had, and it was a project that, like Tourmaline was one of people the curators were talking to early on, and she was like "oh you need to look at Tuesday's work" and yeah that's what I know a bit, like just through kind of peer recommendation of like that that show happened, and then having, you know, having work in, at the new museum kind of opened the door for all of these other opportunities, so I mean yeah, you know, in that way it feels very much that like any kind of artistic trajectory is going to grow out of like a kind of peer support. Thank you, Tourmaline.

O'Brien: So, the community support has grown since you moved to New York,

Smillie: Yeah.

O'Brien: Has it changed in other ways?

Smillie: Yeah. I mean in so many ways. [laughter] I mean, partially, I think it, right, it is just the, like, New York is, like has made itself a art epicenter, and so being in art spaces here, you know, the like, peers or connections you're going to make have like, have the potential to have an impact that wouldn't happen in Portland or a smaller city. But I mean I feel like, I don't know, like I feel like, like radical queers making art, you know, like that was happening in Portland and it like, right, that work was not necessarily recognized by art institutions and was like super informative for me in my making process. Yeah, I mean right, there's something about the kind of like, the sort of power of the center reinforcing itself as the center, you know, but then there also is like, flexibility that can happen in non-centers, because they're not the center.

O'Brien: You mentioned a job as an artist's assistant when you moved to New York? How have you made a living?

Smillie: Yeah, I worked with Wangechi Mutu over, I mean I guess the last gig we did together was winter 2016-2017, so we, you know, we've had a kind of, like, working relationship on and off for those ten years. And I also worked at the Ali Forney Center, which is a queer and trans, homeless youth center, and so I worked in one of their housing facilities for a number of years. And I also worked for a window display studio, as the office manager for Bergen Pride. Yeah. Yeah. I don't know, different, I mean yeah, there's like, there's sort of a...the creative industry in New York is wide and diverse and there's lots of opportunities for folks to plug themselves into different situations, but those networks are often not like... how that happens is you, you know, usually through someone who knows someone, can be a really hard thing for folks who do not have some kind of in to access. And then I just recently finished a museum studies grad program at City College, and that program, I went to that program thinking about arts administration, collections management as like a good work opportunity. And then I was really like I started in 2016 and then the Trigger show happened, you know I started in the spring, and then the Trigger show happened in the fall. I thought I was going to take a break from art stuff, and was like going to get career, get jobby-job squared away, but then the show started happening. So, I've been figuring out how to juggle both. I just finished the grad program, and now I'm sort of, right, like kind of, think about what, how to proceed, and what makes sense, yeah. Yeah, it's expensive to live here. [laughter]

O'Brien: How long were you at Ali Forney Center.

Smillie: I think I was there like three years? I think? Two or three? Yeah, yeah and that work, I mean that work was like, it was really taxing, you know we worked twelve hour shifts, and it was like, there's a weird thing about kind of that like, that kind of direct service provide where there's a lot of down time, right? And, but then there's always the potential for drama, and so there's this weird kind of like, right, like not having a task that's, you know, a task that's right in front of your face that can be completed, but sort of just like, hanging out and being peripherally on watch

like all the time...yeah I found it taxing. And then Wangechi, you know, Wangechi was continuing to get more and more attention and she needed more support in her studio and so I moved from working part time for her and for Ali Forney to working full time for her. Yeah. But yeah, Ali Forney is providing really crucial services for young folks in need. If you have some money, you might want to give it to them.

O'Brien: How has it been starting, you mentioned, the show at the new museum, or like opening like a lot of avenues, a lot more relationships and shows, and a lot more tension work, I mean in some ways you've become pretty well known, as trans artists go, in a fairly short span of time, a few years. What has that been like for you, emotionally, in terms of the rhythm and dynamics of your life?

Smillie: Yeah, it's been interesting, I mean it's really, it feels really exciting to have people interested and excited about the work, you know, and to be able to have a platform for sharing the work feels really good. It's funny, I find myself kind of perpetually, right, like someone will contact me about a show, and that, like I feel like I'm always, like, I always start off really kind of wary about their like, their politic, or what they, you know, what their show is doing or isn't, often, more often, isn't doing, and then I feel like it's usually not until like halfway through the show has actually, you know, the exhibition has been up for half of its running time, and I'm like "oh this person is really on my team and like really gets me," but I do have this kind of guarded reserve where, I'm, you know, that like, I mean, I think some of that is kind of coming out of like the 2014 quote unquote "transgender tipping point/ tripping point," of, right, of like, transness feeling like a hot topic but not really trusting the attention that is, that the media is giving to it is actually in trans people's best interest. Yeah, and I think also that it's, right, that, you know, that so much of how I think about my creative practice is nested in, like, in a transfeminist politic that like, when folks from outside a radical queer community approach me and are interested in the work, I'm kind of skeptical of like, I'm like, what do you, like what do you see, what do you think the work is doing, what, why is this interesting to you? You know? But I have, it has been really rewarding to kind of find repeatedly that those concerns have been ill-founded. Yeah, and I mean art, you know, art plays a really weird, important role socially, you know, since, like, well for a long time, but, you know, since the sixties at least, and certainly with the culture world wars, that there has been a kind of, like, ongoing potential for artwork to sort of guide a broader, like, politic and at times, a broader social opinion. So yeah, being able to connect with people who are interested in being powerful in that way in some way and are in curatorial positions is, it's really exciting, and I feel like, right, this now is really kind of a special opportunity.

O'Brien: Tell us a little bit about the economics of the art scene? So, like are you—

Smillie: Yeah...

O'Brien: Do you sell work occasionally? Do you—

Smillie: The work's all for sale!

O'Brien: like do a lot of other like what—how often are artists living off their work? How are these institutions funded and supported? Like what enables this world to keep going?

Smillie: Yeah, yeah it's a real intentionally mysterious...you know like I feel like a lot of these questions are intentionally kind of shrouded in mystery, I mean certainly part of the art world's function is to act as a tax shelter for the extremely wealthy. That's not the only thing that art can do but it is one thing it is concretely doing. And, right, and, you know, there's been a lot of attention recently on the Kanders who was on the board at the Whitney Museum, who like, runs, ran, run a company making tear gas and other military equipment. And yeah, that's right, this could be these kind of questions about what, you know, while though, you know, while boards theoretically don't have any say over the creative expression of an institution, inevitably, they provide a significant amount of the funding for these institutions and their, like their, opinions are going to matter, and so there's this really weird, kind of in between space, where, right, where like where art really does, or has the potential to be like a really vocal social, political venue, or avenue. And at the same time, is, you know, that is not, honestly, steered by, but potentially controlled by the uber wealthy.

O'Brien: At least enabled by.

Smillie: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, but yeah, selling work, I mean I don't, yeah, I mean I... Some people sell work and make lots of money and... I don't know, I don't know a lot of like, a lot of my immediate peers, folks who I knew, like who I was in community with before we started getting art attention are not at a place where we're supporting ourselves with our art, or, are but in a very kind of tenuous, precarious way. Yeah, and I, I mean I've been trying to kind of think about how to like... getting married to a gallery, what that means, and who, what, like which galleries would be a good fit, how to pursue that, it, like, it, again, all feels very intentionally kind of cloaked in mystery how any of this stuff happens. I have gotten, you know, I have sold some work, but I certainly am not able to support myself through my work yet. Yeah, and then, I mean, and it's a weird kind of question because, and not a weird question that you asked but a weird sort of position to be in, because I don't really want to be relying on my artwork for my income, you know, I don't want to have that pressure on my creative practice. I don't want to subconsciously be knowing that I have to be paying rent next month or next year and that I need to make a series of works that are going to be saleable, I want to have like a flexibility to be making the work that feels most important to make at that moment. And it also feels really appealing to be able to, like, be an artist full time, and not be juggling other work, so, I don't know, I think this next year, I'm very happy, like, just finished my last credit for school this summer, I guess I technically graduated at the beginning of this spring. I haven't gotten my diploma, I haven't—do you get a diploma when you graduate grad school? I don't know.

O'Brien: You do, yes.

Smillie: Oh, okay. I haven't got my diploma yet, but my department head said he would vouch for me when I was applying for jobs, so I think I'm good. So, yeah, I think this next year is going to

reveal a lot in terms of how it ends up making sense to kind of balance other incomes and having the flexibility to be able to jump at artistic opportunities when they present themselves.

O'Brien: The artists I know who make a living from income all receive grants from European and Canadian nations.

Smillie: [laughter] Yeah.

O'Brien: They're not—they're able to survive by being outside of the US.

Smillie: Yeah.

O'Brien: But I gather, if you're going to make a living in the US, New York is the one and only place to have that shot.

Smillie: Yeah, or LA.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Smillie: Yeah. Yeah.

O'Brien: It sounds like that your participation in this show at the New Museum was really a pivot for you. Can you tell us about the piece you had in that show? Or the work you had in that show?

Smillie: Yeah, yeah, I had five textile works in that show that I referred to as banners, and these are large scale textile collages, with ready-made, using ready-made fabrics that are in dialogue with protest signage. And then there were three small broadside prints that also had text, or small scale twelve-point text, and then some kind of like abstract imagery.

O'Brien: I love the banners.

Smillie: What do you want me to say about them?

O'Brien: What were they about?

Smillie: Well, there was, they covered a fair amount of ground, but, right, I think, I mean particularly, well with all the works, the banners and the broadsides, being text-based works, like I feel like these works are the works that are most explicitly kind of challenging viewers to be considering each of our relationships to power, and so there's one banner that had like relatively small text, it would—I mean, most of the banners, it's funny, because this is audio, you're not looking at pictures. Most of the banners are not really march-able, like they don't really, they, right, they've been designed for the contemplative space of the gallery and not for like very quick attention span of street protest. So, they're, right, I mean they're in dialogue with protest signs, but they're doing something else. They function differently than protest signage does. So, often

that means, right, that text is...the legibility of the text is challenged, sometimes that means that the text is really small. In one of these banners, entitled "Sometimes," there was dark grey text on a black background. And so, for the piece again, there's like two-inch-tall text that runs across the upper-left corner of the banner that says "the razor blades we've swallowed will cut us again as we cough them up to cut each other." And then there's like a, right, a kind of beige, grey horizontal swatch of fabric that's layered with a, like, a suit lining, a kind of like, like white and navy stiped suit lining material that is at like an uneven angle that makes like diagonal, these diagonal lines across the work, and then there's a panel to the right of that that's white canvas and has silver metallic paint and is layered with this bright orange fabric, and then there are these little stitches, these little details of embroidery floss stitching that run in lines parallel to the in-strengthening of the suit lining that kind of evoke, or point to- they're certainly not like explicit-depictions of a kind of nod to, you know, the potential of what a cut from a razor blade would look like. Yeah and that, I mean, that work is very much about, right, like thinking about the internalization of systems of power, and right, that we have been steeped in since birth in our culture, and how I think about the ways that we can and do leverage those systems for our own short term gain, and the way that that leveraging ultimately harms us as well as the people that we are targeting. And specifically, with that work I am thinking about, right, like enacting power, to having into systemic power imbalances that don't necessarily have to align with hierarchical differentiations of power, right, that like these acts are something that can happen horizontally just as easily as happening top down. The work that I was referencing that's—should I—is this good? I should just talk about the work?

O'Brien: Yeah, I mean, it's great!

Smillie: [laughter] Cool, cool [laughter] yeah the work, "Sometimes," that I mentioned before, is maybe—oh no I guess, "Gender Screaming Genitals" is the most like banner-banner one, but "Sometimes" looks a lot like a banner, it's, you know, it's a kind of a black horizontal canvas that's then layered with different pieces of black fabric so there's this kind of subtle patchwork, accumulation that happens on the surface of the canvas, and then there's a swatch of t-shirt material and black lace that hangs off, kind of just right, or just left of center from the bottom of the banner. And so, it, right, it has like, it has this very familiar shape to a protest banner, but then is not a, you know, is, it is signaling that it is also something other than a protest banner. And this one has really large text, which right, as I said, is charcoal grey on a black background so the legibility is... I mean it's not hard to read, but it's not, you know, it's not red text on a black-ground or white text on a black-ground. There is still a kind of invitation to, like, to slow the reader down. And so that, and that text reads, "we fuck up sometimes," and the text is like a little too large for the banner, it's like it gets a little jammed at the end, and then sometimes is really small, or, not really small, but is much smaller than "we fuck up" in the lower right corner. And that work is part of the larger body of work "Reflecting Light into the Unshadow," which engages writing by Ursula K. Le Guin, but as it stands, on its own, right, it's like thinking about the potential that we all have to like, make fucking mistakes, and like challenging the reader, challenging the viewer to, like to not let that potential stand in the way of making, of taking chances and taking risks but also to not, kind of, deny or like write over or shadow mistakes when they happen. Like there's like a challenge to claim our mistakes that happens with that work. I was gonna say

something... was it about “Sometimes”? Oh, well so right, in thinking about like, the banners functioning differently in the gallery than in the street, right, there’s a way that, you know, street protests, often when I approach protest, like I am trying to establish my position to their politic before I’m interacting with anybody directly, and there’s this kind of like binary positioning that’s built into industry protest. And, right, and the like, sign, then therefore tends to be really declarative and also tends to be really kind of simplified, and right, and often reducing really complex concepts to soundbites. And so, I’m interested, and I’m interested in the kind of urgency and intensity of protest signage. But I want to think about what can happen with that intensity in a contemplative space of the gallery, right, that the viewers come into a gallery usually with a willingness to spend some time with what they’re looking at, to consider the content, whereas on the street, right, I feel like, you got maybe two seconds of, you know, you’re reading something for two seconds, then you’re looking at something else. But in the gallery, there’s kind of an expectation, there’s an invitation to spend time. And so I want to like leverage that willingness on the part of the viewer to not only think about what the work is doing, but then also to, right, to think about how the work questions, or the question that the work is prompting relate to each of our own individual positionings in the world. Oh, yeah, and then also with like challenging the legibility of the text, right, they’re, I mean, these are visual artworks, they’re not written, they’re not films, they’re not texts—they do contain text, but there’s always a risk that viewers will read the work instead of look at the work, right, and that that kind of understanding of information in the written form versus the visual processing happens really differently. I think this is also something that I, like, feel aware of as someone who is dyslexic, and also as someone who, right, like as a teenager was using art to explore things that I didn’t, could not articulate, did not have words or even like a articulated understanding for, and so I’m interested in this, the like invitation to internal process that artwork, visual artwork does for me, kind of automatically. And so then, right, so then having, like having text is a very proper way to sort of prompt or point viewers in a direction, but I don’t want the viewer just to read, I want the viewer to look and to read. And so, there’s also this kind of careful attention to the construction of the work that—it rewards a close looking. Yeah, there’s a lot going on with the banners. Those are just two. [laughter]

O'Brien: So, I want to ask more questions about your... rest of your life, but before I do, is there anything you want to say about your art practice and relationship to art communities and art industries?

Smillie: I don’t think so? We’ll get my notes. I mean I think more than, like... Well I guess I’ll say something about, like thinking about transfeminism as a verb, instead of as a noun, which, right, I feel like ties to how I was just describing the work that, or the invitation that I see these artworks kind of presenting to viewers, and so I, right, when I think about transfeminism, [laughter] Michelle told me that I could not write answers to questions before the interview, so I just have to turn off my phone so that she doesn’t think I was reading from my notes I need. So yeah, so when I, right, so when I think about transfeminism, Emi Koyama has this really great, like broad-reaching definition of transfeminism which, without reading the quote, I believe is along the lines of ‘transfeminism is a movement for and by trans women who see their liberation inextricably linked to all women and beyond.’ That might actually be a direct quote, I’m not sure, fact-check

it. And so right, I love this kind of like, the broad reach of that definition of what's politic is, right, that it doesn't attempt to delineate specific individual issues, but—and is like, fundamentally about liberation, and I, like I totally, I am yeah, I am totally into this definition of transfeminism. And I think, like, when I use the word though, what I'm actually talking about is the kind of like critical self-reflective process that I've been talking about throughout this interview, this kind of like, rigorous, loving, critical autocritique. And I think that that's, like, I think that that's like what, like when I think about transfeminism as a verb, that's, like that's what it is, right, and it, you know, that like more so than like a bullet list of agenda items, right that it's a way of moving though the world that enables love and sincere engagement with each other and like the kind of room for potential like, never-ending growth. Yeah, and I hope, and yeah, right, and it's, so the, you know, the hope is that that's like, that the, my artwork can invite that into the world in some capacity. 'Kay.

O'Brien: So, tell us about your romantic life.

Smillie: My romantic life!

O'Brien: Yeah, you haven't mentioned a word about—

Smillie: Oh my god!

O'Brien: it this whole time, have you've been...

Smillie: [laughter] Yeah...[laughter]

O'Brien: During this long life arc, are you dating people? You mentioned being attracted to femmes in the early 2000s in Portland.

Smillie: [laughter] Yeah.

O'Brien: Did that go anywhere?

Smillie: [laughter] I dated some people. I am in a partnership with Kirsten Rossi, who is a magical and fantastic and filmmaker and a rigorous critical thinker. And we, it's kind of, I mean, it's sort of debatable when our relationship started, but she moved to New York in 2010, so we could be in the same city. And before that, we were doing some like casual dating in Portland, and some long-distance dating after I moved. Yeah, she's really special. I don't know, what else could I say? And see, this is why interviews where you ramble are weird, it's because like I'm used to conversations.

O'Brien: Somewhere between a conversation and a essay format or memoir or something. Yeah.

Smillie: Totally. Yeah. Yeah?

O'Brien: What have your living situations been like over the years?

Smillie: I've lived in a variety of collective houses, or apartments with roommates that were more, some more, some less, collectivized. Yeah, I think, I mean certainly in Portland, that was like a kind of common cohabitation format, which I feel like, you know, like roughly translates to how it seems like a lot of folks cohabitate in New York. I currently live with Kirsten and I have a roommate named Connie, and Connie has a small dog named Daisy, and that is kind of that best roommate equation you can have. You get to live with a small dog but not be responsible for a small dog. It's pretty dreamy. Yeah, when I got bedbugs the first time, that first year in New York- I think I've had them three times now- I really was like 'I don't know what, I don't know how, and I don't know what's going to happen, I don't know what to do.' And I like threw out a bunch of furniture, and I probably didn't need to but you kind of don't really... I didn't really know, and I feel like there was less information about bedbugs maybe about bedbugs in 2007, 2008 than there is now. At least I have a routine, since that happened three times. But yeah I moved, right, I had moved into a building that was infested, and so like our, you know, they showed up in our apartment, and we had our apartment treated, and then they came back like three months later. And then we were talking to our neighbors, and they were like "oh they won't help them," and we were like "oh okay...we should move." [laughter] But I was scared, you know there's this fear of like being a contaminant with bedbugs. They're really stressful. I don't know why. I don't know what it is about the kind of psychology of having bedbugs, but it's a very taxing experience. But my friend Sergio Rodriguez was like "oh yeah, you should just move in with me and my dad." And I was like "are you sure about that, like what if I bring bedbugs" and he was like "Oh, it's cool, my dad's a super, so like he'll be able to take care of it, but also, he's convinced that we can't have them." And I was like "cool, I'm going to still, like treat everything I possibly can." And he was like "yeah, that's great." And that was really, really beautiful. I got to live with Serge and with Roddy. I think I was there for three of four years. And yeah, and just having, right, so having this kind of community support in this like situation where I really didn't know what I was going to do, to have a peer just take me under his wing like that was really heartwarming. Thanks Serge, thanks Roddy.

O'Brien: It seems like you're—when you talked about your politics, it seems like a fair bit pivots around race and class, and I'm wondering a little bit about sort of how like... and you've referenced a lot of people in your life, I'm wondering about how, you know, New York and a lot of places are so deeply segregated that lines, communities occasionally are multiracial, but in very class segregated—other communities are—people live very racially segregated lives and I'm wondering if you could say a little bit about how the sort of multiracial—the degree of multiracial character, multiclass character in your life now, or like how segregation plays out, and a little bit about the sort of composition dynamic of art communities, or queer communities you're a part of.

Smillie: Yeah, that's a great question. I feel like, in my experience in queer communities, both in New York and in Portland, that there is like a potential to sidestep on some of these segregating factors. And that doesn't mean that that like, always happens in a way that feels good, or right, or that there isn't the potential to kind of end up re-articulating power dynamics that are very

familiar to our culture. But I do feel like, I feel like that there is something in a kind of like, in like, others search for a longing that happens in queer space that can allow for a greater level of class and racial integration than often happens in other social spaces in the US. Yeah, and I think, that, right, that like my introduction to New York was, like was through, primarily though queers of color, so that has also, like, you know, channeled, or affected who I was in community with, who I was, you know, getting to know and reaching out to and like, right, like, having proximity to. Yeah, I mean there's a lot to unpack there. Like I do...I don't know, I mean I think as the queer communities that I am part of age, I feel like that there's like, maybe just less socialization in general? Right, that like folks are hanging out with partners more, and partying less, and sleeping more, including myself, Grandma Smillie. And so, I feel like, right, that there is kind of like a narrowing of social spaces that seems to have occurred over the course of the last five years for me. Yeah. Is there a part in particular—there was a couple prompts to your question, is there a part that I have not touched on that...

O'Brien: No, no, that seems about right.

Smillie: Cool.

O'Brien: Yeah.

Smillie: Yeah.

O'Brien: Do you think you're staying in New York?

Smillie: I don't know. I feel like New York is very challenging, but I also, like it's hard to imagine living somewhere else. Particularly, at this stage of artist recognition it seems kind of silly to leave. But it also is super expensive and super taxing for me to be here at this point, again, as, you know, as I feel older, have less energy, I feel like it takes a lot of energy to do basic things here, like laundry and groceries, that are just easier to do in cities that are less dense and have a slightly slower pace. So, I don't think I'll stay forever, but I have no idea where I would go, or how I would do that. [laughter] Yeah.

O'Brien: Do you have hopes for where your art practice will go?

Smillie: You know, I feel like this is something I should be more deliberate about. It certainly has felt great to get recognition for my practice, but I haven't really kind of laid out goals or benchmarks for what I, yeah, for what I want it to look like. But I think that would be super valuable in terms of manifesting. [laughter] So that seems like some good homework. [laughter]

O'Brien: Yeah, and you're—do you have any thoughts about where, sort of the more, I guess, trans-artistic practice or trans-artistic community might be going?

Smillie: Yeah, that's an interesting question. I mean I think I'm kind of resistant to a trans-artistic practice. Again, in like, wanting to kind of point way from a delineation of what qualifies as trans,

what makes something trans, what is a trans practice. But, I mean, I do think, right, that the attention that has happened in the last couple years, including the sort of attention from the Stonewall 50 that just happened this last summer, has been really beneficial for a lot of emerging trans artists in New York, and yeah I'm really excited to see what we all are doing in 10 years. But right, but then, you know, the like, right, those practices are like really divergent from each other in terms of medium, in terms of content. Like I feel like there are certain themes that are, that seem of mutual interest, but again like yeah, you know, delineating too tightly what that, what would define a trans practice feels kind of precarious. Yeah.

O'Brien: It doesn't have to be defined; it goes somewhere...

Smillie: Totally. Yeah. Yeah, lets go somewhere.

O'Brien: Yeah, any other closing thoughts you want to share, or?

Smillie: I had a note about—and I mean I feel like this maybe part of why the interview, this interview structure is funny is because, like we know each other, and so I'm more used to having conversations with you. But also, because like, I know that you are incredibly smart and incisive and insightful, and so it feels a little bit funny to like be blabbing at you, when I'm like "but what does Michelle think about that, but what does Michelle think about that? I'm sure she has some really good points to make right now, why isn't she sharing them?" Yeah, so, I look forward to being discussed with you about all the things I just blabbed at you at.

O'Brien: Anytime, I would love to.

Smillie: But also, and I, you know, if you want to discuss them now on tape, this question, that I had that like, when I was sort of thinking about, sort of right, like what I see parts of my practice doing, I was just thinking about the kind of, the sort of juxtaposition of the erasure of trans history and then this, and then what I've figured as this kind of obsessive fascination with trans people, and like I guess thinking about, kind of, you know, right, that if we had this like 2014- I'm making air quotes here for- "trans tipping point" but then that there's been this kind of series of like trans media moments that have happened over the decades that something that I think Susan Stryker has talked about, Chris Vargas has talked about in artist talks. And so yeah, and so thinking about, kind of like, what does, yeah like, what does it mean to be simultaneously like feeling this erasure of history, but also to have these moments of hypervisibility. And I, yeah, I mean I think like, I think the thing that I am left with is kind of, right, the way that it feels like that hypervisibility just does actually have anything to do with like seeing, understanding, or caring about trans people, right, that it's this kind of spectacle? But it does feel weird that it also feels like there is this real, like...I mean and that like historical erasure, the violence of historical erasure like can really easily nest with that kind of like fascinating, like that outside fascination. But yeah there is something that feels just curious about the, kind of, the way that those two just mirror each other, or run side by side to each other. What do you think?

O'Brien: Well that's certainly a preoccupation of this project.

Smillie: Oh, great.

O'Brien: You know, the sort of, trying to think about narrativizing, or talking about our lives in ways that might run counter to the inherited narratives that are a big part of the tipping point. And thinking about the complexity and dynamics of folks' lives. And, you know, certainly, that some of the art scenes that, like, you play a role in, are dealing with this very critically, very technically. I've been less pessimistic, and less paranoid I guess? in that I think that what we're fighting for is liberation and part of that is like, universal well-being, and collective care, and transformed politics, and economics, and society to get there, and like, you know, of course we're not there, like we're in a long term struggle. You know, we're in a long-term struggle that unfolds over time. And I think there's a critical tension to how every step forward is like two steps back, and sometimes it is, definitely sometimes it is. And sometimes it's not. Like sometimes, you know, like we have complex contradictory moments that are qualitative improvements over what we had not long ago. And they're uneven qualitative improvements, you know, certainly like the triumph of gay rights has meant very little as welfare states have been gutted, increasing scale of mass incarceration, lots of other very serious social problems that poor queer but that poor queer people have also made their praxis, and they're not marriage, they're not, you know, but they're in other ways, like, that like I've been very moved, for example, how much the trans tipping point has been really shaped by a number of very smart black trans women,

Smillie: Yeah.

O'Brien: for example.

Smillie: Absolutely.

O'Brien: And that is really quite touching, you know. And, yeah, and it feels like, and then, you know, in an ongoing way, that what, like how Stonewall was understood or talked about, like there are billions of dollars involved in Stonewall globally, and hundreds of millions of dollars here in New York, and, you know, a huge amount that's really, very heavily dominated by like, class privilege and men and some very destructive femmes, but like the speaker series that I helped be part of the library, like I felt like we had a little moment of being able to get some money-

Smillie: yeah, right.

O'Brien: for some really good conversations that I was really quite moved to be a part of. And figuring out how to capitalize on that, how to build on that, and of course, that money is all gone now, like there's no support at all anymore. But like, those, the conversations that we had counted for something, right, counted for something really substantive. And I don't think we have to be like naïvely optimistic, or like widely ignore all of the ongoing problems in order to be like, we are building the fragments of like a different kind of way of being with each other, and trans people have been building that for a long time, and the scale of that and that, and the

irreversibility of that is taking on a different shape in the present, and that's part of why I put so much work into these therapies,

Smillie: Yeah.

O'Brien: that I think they really do count for something.

Smillie: Absolutely.

O'Brien: And you do it in your art practice.

Smillie: Yeah.

O'Brien: Like, you make art, like you don't just back down.

Smillie: Yeah. Thank you for that. That was really eloquent and beautiful and inspiring.

O'Brien: Yeah. I'm more optimistic than a lot of people.

Smillie: Yeah.

O'Brien: I mean I, you know, I'm a communism or barbarism kind of person, so like, we either have to get out of this, or it's going to get very bad.

Smillie: Yeah.

O'Brien: But like, what trans people are doing in the last decade is one of the most promising things for the future of the world.

Smillie: Yeah, yeah. I'm, yeah, I want to carry that frame with me. [laughter]

O'Brien: Well thank you for talking, Tuesday.

Smillie: Yeah. Thanks for asking questions and having me.

O'Brien: Oh, yeah. It was a pleasure.