

GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

PENNY ARCADE

By Sarah Dzedzic

New York, NY

December 17, 2018

Oral History Interview with Penny Arcade, December 17, 2018

Narrator(s)	Penny Arcade
Birthyear	1950
Birthplace	New Britain, Connecticut
Narrator Age	68
Interviewer	Sarah Dzedzic
Place of Interview	Penny Arcade's home on Stanton St.
Date of Interview	December 17, 2018
Duration of Interview	197 min
Number of Sessions	1
Waiver Signed/copy given	Y
Photographs	Y
Archival Format	.wav 44kHz/16bit
Archival File Names	Arcade_PennyGVSHPOralHistory_Archival.wav [2.1 GB]
MP3 File Name	Arcade_PennyGVSHPOralHistory_Access.mp3 [236 MB]
Portions Omitted from Recordings	n/a
Order in Oral Histories	38 [#4 2018]



Penny Arcade, Photo by Jasmine Hirst

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Penny Arcade

Sound-bite

“Hi, my name is Susana Ventura, but most people call me, or many people call me Penny Arcade. I am a poet, a writer, meaning an essayist and a theater writer, and I’m also an archivist and oral history maker, videographer...I’m from an oral tradition of southern Italian story telling, where every problem is described by [laughs] being told about another problem that was similar to it that had happened once before. And that’s how I made my work...I used that character work to do cultural critique. And then pretty soon I stopped having to do characters to do the cultural critique, I just started to do cultural critique. You know, for me, the ego drive to be in front of an audience is not enough. I don’t really have a performer’s ego. People who meet me in this context are never ready for when they see me on stage because I’m a very high-powered performer, and over fifty years of performing, I’ve become prismatic. Because the work just—it’s not about me, it’s about the work coming through me.”

Additional Quotes

“There’s popularity and there’s also who the gatekeepers become. And I like to say, the more popular you are, the more unpopular you become. Which has stood me in good stead, because I was never popular, so I’ve never become unpopular.” (Arcade p. 17)

“The avant-garde has never been separated from the culture. The avant-garde is part of the culture. It’s the forefront of the culture. But in the ‘70s, there was this dislocation, so that there was the dominant culture, and then there was this thing called the avant-garde. But it was—well, see, people went to university and then they either walked away from what they had learned—it was your basis, and you continued—or you stayed within that academic thing. Well, what happened in the ‘70s was the arts became academicized, right? ...But in the ‘70s, the arts became really academicized, and, you know that saying ‘they that cannot do teach,’ that was that—everybody who wanted the comfort and security of academia also wanted to be kind of cutting edge or something, you know? Which has just increased and increased and increased to some completely absurd position now where, you know, half of the academics are performative. It’s like, no, you’re not a performer!” (Arcade p. 23–24)

“So, it used to be that you came to New York and you might end up in the underground, like people are always saying, “Oh, I wish I could be in the underground, but I’m not cool enough.” Like, the underground’s not about being cool. It’s about being willing, it’s about having that interest. You know, it’s not a cool thing. It’s not like: you, yes, you, no. It’s not like that at all! You know? It’s the opposite of that. It has to do more with endurance and persistence and interest. So it’s very eclectic. You find your way into the underground because of your own eclecticism. You’re interested in certain music, certain film, certain painting, certain theater. You go to see those things. You’re reading certain books. You meet people at these events who are like you who are interested in more or less the same kinds of things, and that’s the underground. [01:35:23] And that’s always been the underground, and that’s the way it is. The underground is where bohemia intersects with the criminal world, so there’s also criminality there, there’s prostitution, there’s drugs, there’s drug addiction. There’s some kind of outsidersness, some kind of opposition to the status quo, some kind of opposition to the dominant culture. And—but what happened in the ‘70s was people started knowing these things existed, and specifically coming for that. (Arcade p. 25)

“The thing I can liken it to is the difference between somebody just becoming a performance artist because of their interest in two or three métiers. That’s what performance art was about. Performance art was not a métier in itself, it was in different—it was as specific as the different people. Like me: I’m interested in photography, I’m interested in portraiture, I’m interested in individuals, I’m interested in oral history, always have been. My work has always encompassed oral history from the first moment—makes sense—I’m from an oral tradition of southern Italian story telling, where every problem is described by [laughs] being told about another problem that was similar to it that had happened once before. And that’s how I made my work. And then my work—unbeknownst to me, I used that character work to do cultural critique. And then pretty soon I stopped having to do characters to do the cultural critique, I just started to do cultural critique.” (Arcade p. 25–26)

“...*Longing Lasts Longer*, which is the show that we’re touring now—we’ve been touring for four years. We’re kind of at the end of touring, which, I don’t think so, because it’s an extremely viable show and it resonates everywhere we do it, whether we did it in Lublin, Poland, or Sydney, or did it in Portland, Oregon, or did it in Miami, or did it in Edinburgh, or did

it in Ljubljana, Slovenia. This show resonates because gentrification is happening everywhere at the same time. Hyper-gentrification is happening. And that show is about the gentrification of ideas. I use the premise of gentrification, but it's really about the gentrification of ideas.”

(Arcade p. 29)

“...People always interview me about bohemia and always want to talk about the poverty of bohemia. Bohemia is not about being poor. [01:55:06] It's about having a set of values that are oppositional to corporate, capitalist values. You can no more be a bourgeois bohemian than you can be an atheist Catholic. It's a different set of values. There have always been people with wealth, and many of the most famous bohemians have been people of great wealth. The thing that used to be about downtown was you couldn't tell who had money and who didn't have money. And that's what the big change is now, because now you can tell who has money.”

(Arcade p. 30)

“Hilton Als called Semiotext[e] and wanted to review the book. They didn't pitch it to him, he pitched it to them. And then he reviewed it and said, “Penny Arcade writes about herself.” Well, that's not true. What I write about is my place in society. And that's a very, very different thing.” (Arcade p. 37)

“The thing is that people always call me a provocateur, but I'm not a provocateur. I don't set out to provoke. That's not what I'm doing. I am in a dialogue with my audience, which is like me. I assume that my audience is as intelligent if not more intelligent than I am, and that I'm the researcher. That's what my relationship is to the audience. I'm not there to talk down to the audience, I don't think I have something to tell you. I would not be successful if that was true. There has to be love. I'm a parrhesia; I'm a truth teller. And a parrhesia has three elements that have to be there: number one, you tell the truth from your own point of view, and you say that you do. Number two, there has to be loss. You don't win. The parrhesia doesn't win. The parrhesia is not rewarded for speaking truth to the king. It doesn't work that way. Three, you do it out of sense of duty, and contribution. So that's me in a nutshell. So that element of memory and memoir. Then, I am fascinated by my own life. I am not understanding what happened to me. Do you know what I mean? I'm somebody who had the choice to either go canoeing or go whitewater rafting, and I ended up whitewater rafting. Really, I'm somebody who would be more happy in a canoe, but I went whitewater rafting.” (Arcade p. 45–46)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Penny Arcade

Penny Arcade, known also as Susana Ventura, is from an immigrant Italian family and grew up in New Britain Connecticut. She left home at age thirteen and entered reform school, where she excelled academically and wrote her first play. She returned home at age sixteen but left soon after, ending up in New York City in 1967, where she was one of many homeless teenagers living in the East Village.

She became involved with the Playhouse of the Ridiculous and traveled to Europe in 1971 with the group after declining an invitation to participate in the production of Andy Warhol's *Pork*. She eventually left the theater company and settled in Formentera, Spain, where she was close with many of the local farmers from the region, established a school for the children of the ex-pats living in Formentera modeled on the Montessori method, and travelled within Spain with a political puppetry group. She left Spain after a mix-up with Spanish police, and for a few years lived in New England where she ran the local theater in Pittsfield, Maine.

In 1981, Arcade returned to New York and briefly resumed performing with the Theater of the Ridiculous before she left to pursue her own work and interests. She performed her work for the first time in 1985, an improvised performance at the Poetry Project. She soon became a regular performer at PS 122, writing and incorporating other performers in her work. *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* (1990)—written partly in response to Senator Jesse Helms's amendment banning the National Endowment for the Arts from funding art deemed “obscene” or “indecent”—featured two strippers from Tampa, Florida who brought pole-dancing to New York City for the first time.

Arcade's work has addressed the theme of gentrification since her first performances in the early 1980s, identifying the late 1970s as the beginning of the City's current phase of hyper-gentrification. Applauded for merging performance art and realism, and using in her performances the practice of story telling that was part her Italian immigrant home, Arcade remains largely under-acknowledged by critics and the art world in general. A book published in 2009, *Bad Reputation: Performances, Essays, Interviews*, offers a selection of Arcade's work, as well as critical readings of her many decades of performance and writing.

Compiled by Sarah Dziedzic

General Interview Notes

This is a transcription of an Oral History that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

The GVSHP Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Greenwich Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.

Oral History Interview Transcript

Dziedzic: Today is December 17, 2018, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Penny Arcade for the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. So, can you start just by saying your name, introducing yourself?

Arcade: Hi, my name is Susana Ventura, but most people call me, or many people call me Penny Arcade. I am a poet, a writer, meaning an essayist and a theater writer, and I'm also an archivist and oral history maker, videographer. And we're in my apartment on Stanton Street on the Lower East Side, where I have lived, in this building, since 1981, originally on the first floor.

When I rented the place, it was missing a wall [laughing] to the hallway. And I asked the landlord when they were gonna put the wall in, he said, "I don't put the wall in, you put the wall in." And then since 1997, I have had the top floor in this building, so for about ten, twelve years, I had two floors in this building. So one floor was, it became my studio and the headquarters of the Lower East Side Biography Project, which is the oral history that I have co-helmed with Steve Zehentner since 1999. And of course had all my theater stuff down there. I lived up here, and it was a much more thinned-out place. But since 2007 my landlord sold the building, and I had to give up the bottom floor in order to get a rent-stabilized lease for the top floor. And here we sit. I'm sixty-eight years old at this time. But I'm not gonna stay sixty-eight unfortunately.

So, I'm from an immigrant Italian family. I grew up in New Britain, Connecticut. I'm the first one in my family born in America. My mother is from the south, from Basilicata, the Appalachia of Italy. My mother's from a peasant rural background. My father is from a middle class background. His father was the captain of the port of Savona. And they met on a ship in 1947, when my father was being deported for coming into the country illegally, when he jumped ship in Panama and went to Tallahassee. And my mother was the, you know, perennial good girl, going back to Italy with chaperones to visit her mother. And I am the spawn of that union, which occurred in 1950, three years after they met.

And I grew up in a—I think I'm a very typical first generation child of immigrants, kind of person. Something I love about myself, I love being an immigrant. I love that dualness. You know, I'm not Italian, but I will also never be American in that sense of that comfortable niche. I have an instability, a duality at this placement. Which serves me very well as a poet, as a writer, and as a cultural critic. And so, of course my story's quite legendary at this point. I ran away

when I was thirteen. I got put in reform school with the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. Stayed there two years, wrote my first play there. Went back to Connecticut, back to my family, shortly after my sixteenth birthday. That lasted about six months, and then I went to Provincetown in a carload full of queens, and never came back, pretty much. And came to New York. After that summer I went to Boston, but hated it—too many students. Boston didn't do it for me.

[00:04:59]

I think because I come from a small working class factory town, I think the staidness—I think it was too, um, what's that word, not sanitized but sterile. I found Boston sterile, and too obvious, you know. All those students in September going to those fifteen universities that are in Boston. It just wasn't enough for me. And I heard that you could take, for twenty-five dollars, a shuttle plane to New York. And I had my first plane ride at seventeen and came to New York, and pretty much stayed here. It was the summer of love, 1967. Huge influx of homeless teenagers in the East Village. I had all the experiences that one can have when one is a homeless teenager, including rape, drugs. Managed to stay alive when a lot of other people didn't.

And then was taken in by Jamie Andrews, who I had met in Provincetown, who was from Lawrence, Massachusetts. He was ten years older than me. A gay man who was a photographer and an architect. Had just studied that at RISD. And he took me into his one-room studio, on East 9th Street. And that's what community is, by the way. People always talk about gay community, which really doesn't exist anymore, because it only existed when—it existed precisely because people were rejected by their families. And then created this sense of responsibility towards other people. Because I think it would be very, very hard to find a twenty-seven year old gay man taking a seventeen year old girl off the street into their one-room apartment. I don't think that would happen.

And Jamie took me to John Vaccaro of the Playhouse of Ridiculous, and that's how I got involved with Playhouse of Ridiculous. John Vaccaro himself was also first generation American, child of immigrants, and also just an extremely intelligent, well read person who I was really fascinated by because I was always fascinated by scholarship and erudition, and managed, even with my peripatic, is that how the word is said? P-E-R-I-P-A-T —peripetic?

Dziedzic: Peripatetic?

Arcade: Yeah, it means, like, unstable—

Dziedzic: Uh huh, uh huh.

Arcade: —lifestyle, to have maintained an intellectual life. Not like the photographer Peter Hujar, who was a friend of mine, and who I just went and saw a program about him the other day at the Tompkins Square Library, where I had been recently very surprised to learn that when he left home when he was sixteen, he continued to go to high school all by himself. Which was an amazing thing. I mean, that didn't occur to me [laughs] to continue to go to high school. And so, anyway, I entered into the Playhouse of the Ridiculous, and eventually was introduced—well, first Andy Warhol was introduced to my work in the theater, and then he asked me to be part of his company. And I worked with Warhol for a couple of years, and then made a film with him, *Women in Revolt*.

Then in February of 1971, was invited to go to Europe with John Vaccaro, so I went to Europe with John Vaccaro instead of going with the Warhol people to London, to do *Andy Warhol's Pork*. That would have changed my life in a very different way. And, of course not knowing what that would have done, what that would have been. Cause I was kind of on the brink of turning myself into a pop tart. There was that moment in New York in, like, 1970 when kind of a glam scene was rising up, and I was part of that. So I think my life would have been very different. I think I might have either had a band or gone to Hollywood, which everybody wanted me to do, or something much more commercial, I think I would have done if I had stayed in New York at that moment, if I'd gone with Warhol [00:10:10].

But instead I went with Vaccaro, and was just so amazed by 1970 Amsterdam. I mean, you could still smell World War II, and it was very—well, bohemian would be one word. But it's kind of what we associate with 1980s New York was already happening there. There was a dystopic post-war thing going on there, I think because of the casualty of war, and the *miseria*, austerity. So people looked like they looked in the East Village in the '80s in the early '70s in Amsterdam. And I stayed there. I only stayed with Vaccaro a very short time. The company had an insurrection, and I ended up leaving. And staying there, I met a Dutch guy, and I guess had an infatuation with him, and then he and I opened a shop together, in Centrum, in the center of Amsterdam, where we went to the flea market every day. I love flea markets and I love old things, and at that time in Amsterdam, you could just buy these treasures, art deco and art nouveau—it was heaven. So we would like buy things for like fifty cents and sell them for a dollar type of thing. And I lived there for a year like that.

Then, on a chance visit to Germany, to a girl who I had met on the plane coming to Amsterdam, who had come into my shop, and recognized that I was unhappy and invited me to come for the weekend to Dusseldorf. Went there, and she told me that her mother and stepfather owned a hotel in Formentera in Spain. And I had been told to go to Formentera like two years before by a friend of mine who had gone to Europe, Richard Hannemann. His girlfriend Sandy Sawyer had come into Max's Kansas City and said, "Penny, Richard says you should come to Formentera." And I didn't know what country it was or anything else. But any rate, she told me Formentera, and I was like, "Oh, Formentera." And then it turned out that my sister who's three years younger than me had come looking for me, having graduated from high school. And I went back to Amsterdam and got my sister Lorraine, and we went to Formentera. And Caroline, who was the person who was telling us to go there, ended up not coming.

So we ended up in Formentera, and I stayed there. And my sister stayed there till—that was in August of 1971—she stayed till November, and then fell pregnant and had to leave to get an abortion, and I stayed. And so I lived a very rural, very peasant, *pais*, as we call it, life there for the next three years. Two years later my mother came to visit me because she was terrified that I was never coming back to America, and was stunned to find me in this place that was extremely similar to where she had grown up. We had like packed dirt floors, you know, and beautiful *fincas*. I lived very close to the ocean. To live there now, it would cost you two million Euros to buy a house. To buy my house, the house I lived in for twenty-five dollars a month. But my mother was like, "I left a place like this." "Oh, well, I guess it suits me." [Dziedzic laughs] And so that was a very, very important part of my life.

I would say the things that formed me so far in our story were being born into an immigrant southern Italian family, and that culture, and then being an American school child in the 1950s, when it was a very progressive time in education, and then being put in reform school. [00:15:13] Definitely affected me in two ways: one, it gave me a reprieve from the working class factory town, because it was—what do you call them? They were contemplative nuns, so contemplative nuns tend to be the intellectuals of Catholicism. They're monastic, and they're different from ordinary teaching and nursing nuns, and so I did a lot of reading there, and I was introduced to a lot of high concepts there. Martin Buber, Kahlil Gibran, *The Little Prince*, not as a fairy tale, but as an ethical process, and of course wrote my first play there. And it kind of took

me out of that working class, very narrow expectations for girls. I was kind of lifted out of that momentarily.

There was a choice there too because I know that a doctor and his wife wanted to adopt me. To put me through university. And I think it was the doctor, Doctor Geiser who was the shrink who came once a week to this place, who I always had these long conversations with about art. He had grown children and was very interested in contemporary art. And they wanted to adopt me and put me through university. And I couldn't make that decision because it would have been very humiliating for my mother. Or at least that was the way I saw it. I was well indoctrinated into southern Italian peasant thought because just now, for the first time, as I'm saying that, I don't think my mother would have had any problem with that at all. You know? Someone putting me through university. But anyway, that's the way I saw it.

Then being homeless in the streets of New York had a profound influence on me, as well as being part of the criminal world. Which I was part of. And then I think, also early on, before I left home, being part of the gay world, and discovering that at the same time as I was reading Jean Genet, and getting the different context for the illegality of homosexuality and for the *demi-monde*, seeing crime from a different point of view than a straight ahead Catholic or Judeo-Christian point of view. And then, obviously, going into the Playhouse of the Ridiculous. Warhol, going to the homes of extremely wealthy New Yorkers, and there was a lot of that, and being part of the Warhol scene. Then going to Amsterdam, experiencing Europe. And then going to Formentera, in a way going back into my childhood, as if I had been raised where my mother had been raised.

I had a very big relationship with the *país*, with the farmers. And also had a relationship with the ex-pats that were living there, but my main relationship was with the *país*. And then I started a school there when I was twenty-two. I was friends with all of these four-year-old children, who were the children of some drug dealers—a lot of drug dealers, international drug dealers. At any rate, the parents were all in their, you know, bohemian chic fantasy. They were all in their twenties and thirties, and these children were—they were well taken care of but they didn't go to school, they weren't the focus of anything. [00:19:54] And I was approached by a four-year-old girl named Afra, who I happen to still know, who just came to me, said, "Susana, will you make us a school? I'm bored." And I never heard a four-year-old say they were bored before. So I went to the home of one of the oldest ex-pats, Bill Harriman, who had a library, he

was an American. Married to a French painter woman. And I went to him and I said, “Bill, do you have any books on education?” And he gave me the autobiography of Maria Montessori, who, I had no idea who she was. I read the book and I said, “Wow, this is fantastic. These are good ideas.” And I made a school based on her ideas.

I stayed there another year I guess. The school went on without me for a few years, and actually, a Swiss documentary guy, who was a young guy at the time—I understand he’s a well-known filmmaker now in Switzerland—made a documentary on the school. And I recently saw a little snip of it. I’m told that it still plays on Swiss television. But any rate, I went through the *I Ching* and it told me that it furthers one to cross the great water, it furthers one to see the great man, and I decided that that must mean Mallorca. [laughter] And I was using a book of Mallorquin fairy tales written by a man named Robert Graves and he lived in Mallorca, so I thought, oh, I’ll go see Robert Graves. Unbeknownst to me that he was an extremely famous poet. Do you know who Robert Graves is?

Dziedzic: Mmhmm.

Arcade: Yeah, so I didn’t know who Robert Graves was. So I went to Deia, and arrived there in the afternoon, a few days later, during siesta. And there was one house covered in paintings, and there was a man there, and I stopped to look at the paintings, and he was American, in his, I would say maybe seventies at the time? Late sixties? And we started talking, and he said, “What brings you to Deia?” and I said, “Oh, I came to see Robert Graves.” He said, “Yeah, you and everybody else.” I said, “Really?” I said, “Wow, so people are really interested in Mallorquin fairy tales.” And he said, “What are you talking about?” And I said, pulled out the book, he goes, “That’s what you know about Robert Graves?” And I said, “Yeah,” I said, “I’ve been using this in my school.”

He’s looking at me, and he sat down and talked to me for a long time, and then his wife came in, and it was her paintings. His name was Bob Bradbury, and I think her name was Dorothy. And we talked for a long time, and it became dark, and anyways, he, it turned out I hadn’t brought my passport, and I said, “Oh, it’s getting dark. I should go and get a place to stay.” And he said, “Well, I hope you brought your passport.” And I said, “Why would I bring my passport? I’m still in Spain.” He said, “Oh, no one will rent you a room without a passport.” So, they decided I should stay in their, in his studio. Which, I stayed for two weeks, cause it took

two weeks for me to write to Formentera, have somebody go to my house, get my passport, and mail it to me.

And then I continued to stay there, but the next day he sent me to the home of a man named Martin Tallents, who had a salon every day at 4PM that Robert Graves attended religiously. So then I spent the next few weeks going there and hanging out with Robert Graves and Martin Tallents. And I just recently revisited that, after, I don't know what it is—a great number of years, forty-three years or something like that. And went there cause I don't remember anything, really, about Deia except sort of living shots. I know that it was in a bowl of mountains. And I chose the hotel that I chose, a *pension* very up high in the village, and it was family-owned, which was the reason I chose it, because I thought maybe they would know, if they grew up there. And it turned out that the man was in his seventies, and he knew Martin Talens. He said, “You're just thirty feet from Martin Tallents' door.” I remembered the house, but I didn't remember walking up to the house. It was a very odd experience of revisiting.

And I was very close to Robert Graves' grave, and visited his grave. And then went down to the beach where Robert went swimming every day, and I had gone there with him. [00:25:29] And it's so funny. I walked down, it took me an hour and a half to walk down. Then, I swam for a while, and then I thought, oh my god, I was kind of bored. And my phone wouldn't work and I couldn't get a taxi. It took me two hours and something to climb back up, it was vertiginous. I kept trying to hitchhike my way out with all these tourists. It was like forty cars, and no one would pick me up, and only two people spoke to me, who told me that they didn't have room in their cars, which they did. And it was just very interesting because, you know, I'm clearly an older woman, and like, the only—if you've just driven down, you know why somebody doesn't want to walk back up. But I was very proud that I made it back up, and I thought, oh my god, I ran up and down here when I was twenty-one, twenty-two. Like it just didn't mean anything; I didn't think of it as a difficult walk. I had no thought like that at all. So, it does give one pause about the passage of time.

Then, so I started the school—oh yeah, I'm going backwards now. So then I went to Mallorca, and then in Mallorca—or it might have been in Sóller, which is a town near Mallorca—I saw a puppet group that was doing political puppetry with papier-mâché puppets of Faizal [phonetic] and, like, all the notable people of the day. And I started talking with them, and they invited me to visit them in Palma. And I went to Palma, and ended up joining their puppet group.

I did that for one year and lived in Palma with much older people, Pep Gomez and his wife Sarah. Sarah was an American, and he was Catalan, he was a Communist. We were doing very political, very dangerous theater work, but it was all shrouded. And it was in Mallorquin, which I could speak at that point, and at least to be in—I mean, it's very similar to my southern Italian dialect, which is Neapolitan dialect. Which was very influenced by Catalan in the eleven to fourteenth century when the king of Catalonia was the prince of Naples. And actually, the queen Marguerita was Mallorquin. So there was this huge Mallorquin and Catalan influence, and so that language came to me like that [snaps]. That's why I was so close to the *país*, because most of the foreigners didn't speak Spanish. Or if they spoke Spanish they didn't speak Catalan. And so that made me *una filia de la isla*, as they used to say, a child of the island.

So it's very synchronistic and weird because also, as a child, my grandfather used to call me La Española because of my temperament, because I got mad fast and got over it fast. And apparently my grandfather, who was born in 1878, that would have meant something to him. So these things, these mysteries, how they work. And my name, Susan Carmen is my real birth name. But because nobody could say the word Susan, and the word Susan sounds incredibly ugly in Italian—if you grow up speaking Italian and you have to hear a word like Susan, it's so ugly, and no one could say it. So they couldn't really call me Susan, so of course they called me Susie. But mostly they called me Asu, which is short for Assunta, which is actually my name. But on my birth certificate, my father wanted an American name. [00:30:18] And then they called me Susina, which means plum. But it wasn't Susan. So when I was in Sacred Heart Academy for Wayward Girls with the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, I had a Spanish class, and of course they give you a Spanish name in the class, so she called me Susana, and Susana made sense to me, so it's on my passport, Susana. I never changed it legally, but it's about as legal as it gets.

Dziedzic: Mmhmm.

Arcade: I have in recent time tried to embrace Susan, but it's like, I really had problems with that name from a very young age. But at any rate, I say that because I recently attended the fiftieth reunion of my high school graduating class, which of course I didn't attend that high school, but I guess through my achievements, I'm allowed to go, and I went. And of course many people there called me Susan. Which I thought was so weird. Because I don't think they called me—did they call me Susan? I guess I must have used the name Susan. I just don't

remember. I guess the teachers called me Susan. So I did try to sort of say, “I’m Susan. I’m Susan Ventura.” It’s just like [Dziedzic laughs]—but I do try to do it.

At any rate, so I joined that puppet group. That was very interesting to be involved with them, and, you know, basically live in the atelier of a sculptor, because he sculpted these amazing puppets out of papier-mâché. I went kind of quite below the surface of Spanish life, of Mallorquin life. I left out that a year earlier, I had joined a theater group with this Argentinian director and a bunch of Argentinians. It was I guess in 1972, after some kind of problem in Argentina. A whole bunch of Argentinians had moved to Spain and joined called *El Tribu*, that was kind of a movement theater group. And we had done shows in Mallorca, and I guess Barcelona. I have no memory of going to Barcelona, but there’s a photograph of me from a Barcelona newspaper, so I guess I did go. And so I stayed with them for a year doing puppet theater.

Then I was introduced by an American guy I met to drinking with sailors to make money. And, you know, I’ve always had this kind of altruistic nature, and this theater company was extremely poor. I think they really embraced that because it was kind of a workers’ rights kind of group, and we ate in the worker cafes, where for like thirty-five cents you got a three-course meal with wine. They were Marxists. I was never a Marxist but I was adopted by Marxists [laughs]. And so then this guy told me that he had an English friend who was making all this money, like five hundred dollars a week drinking with sailors. And I was like, “Oh!” So I guess that appealed to my *demi-monde* side, my criminal side. And I went there, and I thought, “Oh, I could save the puppet group.” I could go to work for one week, you know?

What happened was I ended up bringing home a twenty-two year old Marine, who’s from South Florida. All he wanted to do—they’re all coming back from Vietnam—all he wanted to do was get back to his truck and get a case of beer and drive around the panhandle of Florida. [00:34:55] Bobby Sparks. And I showed him this huge, like a block-through apartment in Mallorca, really a beautiful apartment. And this main little room that would have been a salon was Pepe’s workshop, and showed him all these puppets, and all these things, and he was just so enthralled and amazed. And spent the night with him, and the next morning I went to knock on the door to introduce him to Sarah and Pepe, and I knocked on the door and he was in camouflage stuff. He was a marine mechanic, with helicopters on the *USS Forrestal*. And Pepe, who was forty-two or forty-three at the time, grabbed his glasses off the nightstand, and looked

at him, and started screaming, “Yankee go home!” Really flipping out. And him and Sarah were so upset, and then he threw me out. And then I was like, “What?” I had just no idea, then I came back and he was like, “You smell like a whore.” And I was like, “No, it’s Kiehl’s. It’s Kiehl’s. It’s Rain by Kiehl’s.” [Dziedzic laughs] “You smell like a— ” “No, it’s Kiehl’s!” [laughter] And, any rate, long story short, I had to get out of there.

I ended up following Bobby Sparks’ boat to Menton, which I hitchhiked. I took this ferry, and I hitchhiked through Spain, through France, and got to Menton. and of course he was totally horrified and refused to see me. And then I realized, oh, like his friends must have been, whatever. And actually I had met somebody from my hometown, yeah, cause I was telling people real stuff about myself, and then that led later to a lot of problems with my brother. Who said to me when I came home, “What were you, semi-pro over there?” So then I was in France for a little while, knocking around, did a bunch of prostitution and drinking with sailors. Went into that life for a while.

Then went back to Mallorca and found out that the police wanted to see me. It turned out that the police had mistaken me for someone who was selling drugs to the *USS Forrestal*. Hashish. And I went in. First I called the—I’m always, you’ll notice in these stories, I’m like this edgy girl who’s always involved in something illegal, and then kind of this nice girl who’s checking in—so I went to the American Consulate and I spoke Mallorquin, and the consulate, after like twenty minutes, he said, “It was very interesting to meet you, but why are you here?” And I went, “Oh, because I just found out that the police are looking for me, and Spanish police don’t really have a good reputation, so I thought I’d come to the American Consulate first.” And he’s like, “Oh, well, of course, blah blah blah. Stay in touch with me.”

Then I went to the police, and then they presented me with these amazing looking mahogany or ebony ancient armoires, and pulled out this tray with all these drugs in it. And he said, “Do you know what this is?” And I said, “Yeah. They’re drugs. I’m an American.” And the guy said, “Well, we happen to know that you’re selling drugs to the *USS Forrestal*.” I said, “I’m not.” Cause I wasn’t. And we went through this whole thing, and he said they could send me to Madrid right then and there, to prison. And I was definitely afraid. Then he said he was gonna come to my house, which I thought, “This can’t be normal.”

So I left—they had somebody following me—and I called the consulate, and he said, “That is not normal that they’re coming to your house.” And that man, that detective, came to my

house and put a gun down on the table. He said, “I’m just gonna be completely transparent,” and I was like, “What’s going on?” And I showed him—he wanted to know how I made money, and I had been making clothes in Formentera with the *país* women, sewing. My mother was a seamstress, so I’d been making clothes to sell in Amsterdam and stuff like that. [00:40:12] I had all the patterns and everything in this big trunk. And then he told me that he knew that I was not that person who was selling drugs, because she was in her late thirties, so it couldn’t be me. And he said, but he knew that I knew Robert Graves. And they knew all this stuff about me. That I knew Robert Graves, that I had been in Deia, that I lived in Formentera, that I’d spent time in Ibiza, they knew all this stuff about me. And he said, “Robert Graves uses drugs.” And I’m like, “I don’t think so.” Cause he was old then. I said “Maybe in 1936 [Dziedzic laughs] he smoked some hashish, but he’s not using drugs now.”

They were connected with the US drug and blah blah, and they were being trained by them, and he told me that they wanted me to go undercover in Ibiza, and I was like, “I can’t. I can’t do that.” And they were like, “Yes, you’ll go to the clubs in Ibiza and you’ll tell us who’s dealing drugs.” And he goes, “And who in Formentera.” Everyone I knew dealt drugs in Formentera. They didn’t deal them there—they dealt them in Copenhagen, and in London, and in the United States. I was just completely mortified, and I just didn’t know how to get out of it. And then I said, “You know, actually, I’m an actress. And I could do that.” He said, “Of course you could do that.” And I said I could. And they were gonna give me an apartment. It was this whole thing, and I thought, how am I getting out of this? And I said, “Well, ok.”

I went home and I called my mother, and I said, “You need to get me an airline ticket and it has to be at the airport.” So then I went back to the guy, and I said, “Well, my sister’s getting married,” which she was. And I said, “I wanna go home for the wedding.” And he said, [clicks tongue] “Impossible. Cause I can send you straight to Madrid, to prison.” I said, “Look, I just wanna go for two weeks.” He goes, “No. Two weeks, no.” I said, “I haven’t seen my mother in three years. My sister’s getting married. I want to help her get prepared, and da-da-da.” He said, “You can go, ok. You can go for two weeks.” So I went, and I shipped all my stuff to the USA, and I never went back. And that’s how I ended up back in America.

I ended up back in America, and living with my mother for the first time since I was thirteen. And I ended up meeting a man named Bodan Suhulpar in Hartford, Connecticut at a leather shop, he did leatherwork. Whatever infatuation ensued, and he was going back to Maine.

He was part of a land trust in Maine, and he was a sculptor and musician, and so I ended up going to Maine with him in the middle of winter, February 1975. Went and lived in the woods with no running water, no electricity. Got there in like six feet of snow, a wood stove and fucking freezing, and sleeping under feather beds that were like this thick [indicates about 12” thickness]. Then I made a life there for the next—till May of 1978, so that was three years. He died in a canoeing accident, but I had left him at that point, just that month. I had moved out.

I was doing theater up there with a lot of former New Yorkers, filmmakers, poets, all kinds of people, and we did theater together, and it was a very interesting group of people. And then I had gotten a job. I’d gotten there in ‘75, and in ‘77 I’d gotten a job with Pittsfield, Maine [00:45:02]. It was a CETA program to run a theater that was inherited by Pittsfield, Maine, population four thousand. Inherited this theater for back taxes that was a fully functional, beautiful, three hundred seat theater with a beautiful stage, and thirty-five millimeter projectors. And I got the job because people from New York wrote about me, and I took over that theater, and I ran that theater for the next two years. And then, that spring, Bodan died in this freak canoeing accident and I continued to work at the theater.

Then I worked for the Maine festival, brought rock ‘n’ roll to the Maine festival for the first time. And then I started touring with this band, Peter Gallway, just kind of working with them, not really—I got involved with the keyboardist, and then I was just living with them in Orr’s Island, which is a lobster fishing island, and started coming to New York with them. So I guess we came to New York in ‘79, ‘80. And I went to show John, who I was living with, La MaMa. Took him to the East Village, and took him to La MaMa, and Ellen Stewart recognized me. And she said, [imitating Stewart] “What does this mean, that Penny Arcade is back? It can only mean great things for the theater.” And I was like, “Oh.” And then she got in touch with me and asked me to come back for La MaMa’s twentieth anniversary, which was 1981. I came back to work with John Vaccaro in 1981.

John Vaccaro treated me so abysmally. I had just started analysis cause I was very interested in analysis cause I had read all of Anaïs Nin’s books, all of her diaries. So I had become very interested in analysis. I was probably in analysis for, like, a month, and he was being horrible—he’s known for being horrible. He stopped me from performing whatever, I was performing this piece that I did. [imitating Vaccaro] “You don’t sound Japanese, you sound Iranian.” He made me sit down and had the girl who was arranging my imaginary robes do my

part. I was just sitting there and finally I just turned to John and I said, “John, I really want to be good in this. I really want you to direct me. I really want to show New York what the Playhouse of the Ridiculous was. But the way you’re treating me makes me feel angry.” He just couldn’t believe it. “It’s because you’re stupid!” And then I said, “You know, I’ve had a really long day, and if you’re not gonna use me anymore tonight, I’m gonna go sleep.” And he just starts screaming, “You’re fired!”

I left, and then the next day, the assistant director, John Albano, who’s my age, and had known me since 1968, called me up and said, “Do you want me to call John?” And I said, “No, I have to deal with this myself.” He said, “I just have one question,” and I said, “What’s that?” He said, “Why now? John has always treated you really horribly.” He said, “Why right now?” And I said, “I don’t know,” cause I didn’t know. And so I called John, and I said, “Hi, John, this is Penny.” And there was silence. And I knew [laughs] the first person who spoke was lost. [Dziedzic laughs] I didn’t say anything, he didn’t say anything. Then after a while he went, “You’re fired!” And I said, “Are you sure, John?” He said, “Yes, I’m sure!” And then he told everybody that I quit. Well, where it worked for him to say I quit, he said I quit. And where it worked for him to say that I was fired, I was fired. I was completely mortified.

I went to my therapy appointment, and I explained what happened. I said, “He fired me.” And Mrs. Williams, my analyst, goes, “Oh, dear. She just got fired.” [00:50:06] She goes, “Well, I can see that this therapy is just not working for you.” And I said, “No, it’s working just perfectly.” And then that night I went to the Ritz, which is Webster Hall now, and there was a play going on, a Tom Iron play. And I went up to Taylor Mead, who was a great role model for me as a young woman, as a performer and poet, and I said, “Oh, John fired me.” He said, “Fantastic! God knows what you’ll achieve now.” And I was like, “Really? I just got fired. I’m not in the show.” And then I saw Holly Woodlawn, and I went to Holly, commiserating, “John fired me.” “Fantastic!” What? And then Jackie Curtis. I said, “Yeah, John fired me.” Jackie paraded me through the VIP back room, the closed room, saying, “Attention, Penny Arcade has finally left John Vaccaro. Who knows what she’ll accomplish now?” And I was just like, “What?”

And so then I knocked around. I was working in an erotic massage place, a feminist erotic massage place in the West Village. I was making money, and I was studying different things. I was taking lots of different kinds of workshops and things that I was interested in. I

started to do small performances in the East Village cause it was the burgeoning performance arts scene. Then I worked with Charles Ludlam; Black-Eyed Susan lost her voice and I got to prove I was a journeyman actress and could go in and do things like that. And then, in that time, which I would say was kind of between 1981 and 1985, a four-year period, I started to make my own performances.

In 1985, I did my first performance of my own work, completely improvised, with a band, at the Poetry Project. And then that show was seen by Ethyl Eichelberger, who went to Mark Russell at Performance Space 122, and said, “Penny Arcade is a genius and you should book her before anybody else does.” And so Mark booked me. But we kind of butted heads a little bit, which I have a tendency to do with heterosexual men, and he wanted to know all about the Warhol scene, and I said it was boring. But I guess he thought that I didn’t think he was cool enough to know how cool the Warhol scene was. Which, it was really boring. I mean, there’s some really interesting people, but just generally, it was not—you know, I was coming out of the Playhouse of the Ridiculous, which was very high powered, political theater, and working, you know, I mean some of the scripts were super dumb and fun, where we made fun. But we were also working with the scripts of Ken Bernard, who’s still alive, who is one of the great, you know, post—what is that called? Existentialist playwrights. And just a whole other thing, it was just a much more fertile, intellectual landscape than the scene around Andy, because Andy was a very surface person, so the people were kinda there because he liked how they looked. I guess?

Although he had great antecedents into—he was very involved in the history of art. There was relationships with Charles Henri Ford, he was friends with Joseph Cornell. He had these relationships but the scene right around him was not very interesting. I mean, it just wasn’t. It wasn’t something that would hold my attention. Which was why I went off with John Vaccaro.

So let’s see. Now, I’m back, I’m doing my own work, and that’s how I started doing my own work. [00:54:56] And I did solo work until, from ‘85 until 1988, I think. I was commissioned by—or 1989—I was commissioned by Annie Hamburger, who had an organization called En Garde Arts that did site-specific work. I could choose, and I chose to make a work about the night Nancy Spungen was killed in the Chelsea Hotel. So the place was the Chelsea, and I was doing it in the Chelsea. And did this amazing, wonderful show in the Chelsea, where I ended up having to write for the other two actors. They didn’t want to just improvise. So I ended up writing for them, and that started me writing. And actually, I applied

for a grant, and Annie Hamburger helped me, and I told her, “I’m not a writer,” and she said, “Penny, you’re a writer. Just get used to it.”

I had written something in 1985, when Jackie Curtis died. Danny Fields recommended me to write the obituary for Jackie. He said, “You’re the only person who can write it.” And I had, in the downstairs loft, a futon way back there, and I don’t think I even had a table. I had a futon and just had some chairs. Oh yeah, and I had a little table that was like a typewriter table, and a typewriter. And I just was smoking cigarettes and walking around the typewriter. And I called Danny and I said, “I just can’t do this.” And he said, “What are you doing?” I said, “Well, there’s a blank sheet of paper in the typewriter, and I’m walking around it smoking cigarettes.” He goes, “Yeah, you’re writing.” [laughter] And then a few days later, I just sat down and wrote a nine hundred-word thing, and they printed it as is. But I still didn’t have any kind of emotional self-confidence, you know?

Dziedzic: Do you want more tea?

Arcade: I’ll take a little bit, thank you. And so any rate, then in 1990, I started to write large pieces. I always tell this story, when I lecture to young people, because in 1986 I wasn’t getting reviewed and I was running the show—I ran a show for four months. Like, let’s see, I think it was, I did shows Thursday through Saturday. And that was unheard of at that time. People would, if you were performing at PS 122, once a year you would get four nights. And I was running for four and a half months. And if I had been clever, which I wasn’t, I would have gotten my own theater, got my own building. But I really wanted approval, I wanted to fit in. So that was like an ongoing thing from childhood, that I wanted to be part of it, I wanted to fit in. And I wasn’t going to. And still haven’t. But I wanted to.

So in that way I worked against my own self-interest. Because I was always a critic of the politics of art, which did not make me popular, and I was always highly self-motivated. I had working class drive. And I didn’t expect to have things handed to me, so I was able to create quite a body of work between the age of thirty-five and forty-five. In 1988, *academicized Magazine* did an article on me, and “People Are Talking About”—so I was the first performance artist that they wrote about, and of course [laughing] that went nowhere. Which, you know, for other people it would have, you know, it would have meant something, but my ethnicity prevented that at that time. [00:59:52] Because with black hair, I was very, very ethnic looking.

Now I look white, which is so weird. And I only went blonde when I was fifty-four, so I had quite a many years of being considered not white. And which was what people would say to me when I would audition for things. They'd say, "Oh, you're so charismatic. We've never seen anyone like you! But, you just don't read as white." So it was very problematic. If I had been thirty-five in 1995, it would have been a very different situation, because that's when it was Jennifer Lopez and Jennifer Beals and all of a sudden people who looked ethnic were allowed to be in films and stuff like that. But I missed that. So I continued to make my own work, and then in 1992—

In 1988 I got involved with a guy named Mitch. I had married John Hardy in 1984, wanting to settle everything, which is very funny, and I thought it would, like, impress my mother, who was completely unimpressed, my getting married. I think she would have never married if she had the opportunity. I didn't understand that. I didn't quite understand her, and so I was with John till 1988. I was with him from 1979, pretty much around '88, I guess, '86 or '87. And then I was with this guy Mitch for a few years, and Mitch did sound for me. We did video together for my shows. Then Mitch and I separated in 1991. Then in 1992 I met Steve Zehentner. And I met Steve because—he came to me through Mitch, who was dating his roommate—to shoot live video for a series of plays I was doing with Bina Sharif in her apartment. She was the first person who did shows in her apartment. And I didn't really talk to him. He was this younger guy, who was shooting video. I guess that was in 1990. And then in the spring of '91, Steve came to visit me, to talk to me. And he brought me a pineapple, which I thought was very odd.

At that time, I was involved in saving all of Jack Smith's work. Jack had died in '89, I'd taken care of him. I've kind of left out that the entire '80s were about taking care of people who were dying of AIDS. Jack was kind of a crescendo in my life because I had known him since I was eighteen years old. He was a very large figure in my life, and in the life of John Vaccaro. He and John Vaccaro had been very involved in the early 1960s. And so it was kind of an adopted family that I had. So I took care of Jack dying—he died in my arms, actually—and I then undertook to save all of his work, which made me extremely unpopular with all of his friends, who thought that we were just gonna divide everything up. I was opposed to that. I had been taking care of him. I had the keys to his apartment, and I did bring everybody up there, and I divided his ashes, cause I had asked him what he wanted done with his ashes, and he didn't want anything done with his ashes, and he was saying, "Throw them in the garbage!" And I said,

“Well, how do you feel about your friends having them, and your friends scattering them where they had spent time with you?” And he was fine with that, so we did that, and then, some of his furniture I gave to people, but I wouldn’t separate the work. And people were very upset with me, and as I found out is human nature, people will accuse you of what they would do. So they all thought I was stealing everything.

I then went to Jim Hoberman, who was the film critic for the *Village Voice*, who had written about Jack’s work, and continued to write about Jack’s work long after Jack’s popularity and visibility had ceased. And, you know, Jack was an example of how people can be very popular during one period and then become completely invisible. [01:05:08] Because in the ‘60s, there were three art stars, and that was Jack Smith, John Cage, and maybe Robert Rauschenberg or something, you know—Warhol—1962, that’s when Jack was an art star, way before Warhol. And that can change. There’s popularity and there’s also who the gatekeepers become. And I like to say, the more popular you are, the more unpopular you become. Which has stood me in good stead, because I was never popular, so I’ve never become unpopular.

I went to Jim Hoberman and I approached him, and I said, “If you would be the face of this archive, I’ll do the shit work.” And I had given Jack Smith’s sister—through their lawyer, Jack had given me fifty thousand dollars in bearer bonds, which in 2010 were worth two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. And the sister was homophobic, had not seen Jack Smith since 1953. She was a born again Christian. I had let her know that her brother had died, which made a lot of people angry with me, but I felt that as his sister she deserved to know that he was dead.

She came to New York. She came to his apartment, which was a very poor place. I mean, artistically very rich, but it was, you know, a hovel, and I told her that I was trying to save the apartment as a museum. And to that end I had had Frederick Fisher, who’s a museum architect, and Bob Moon, who’s an architect for Rockefeller Plaza, come and examine the place and write me letters saying that it deserved—Frederick Fisher said it was the most incredible combination of art and architecture that he’d ever seen, that it deserved to be preserved. I told the sister this, and I said, “There are people from all over the world who would want to come here and see this.” And she said, “Well, they shouldn’t be allowed to.” And I looked at her, and I said, “They shouldn’t be allowed to want to?” Wow, that’s extreme, cause they shouldn’t be allowed to is one thing, and they shouldn’t be allowed to want to? And she said she didn’t want her sons tainted by the homosexual content. One son was there. He was at the conservatory, the classical

music conservatory in Boston. And I said, “Well, if you don’t want your son tainted by homosexual content, maybe he shouldn’t be at the conservatory.”

At any rate, the lawyer had called me and said that he knew I had this—I didn’t make any secret that I had the fifty thousand dollars in bearer bonds—and he said that the sister was willing to trade Jack’s work for the fifty thousand dollars in bearer bonds. And I said fine. And I traded it. But I never got any kind of a form, because nobody was interested in Jack’s work. Jack’s work had no value. When I called the NEA and said that Jack had died, they said, “Well, a lot of people have died of AIDS, and I see it was Jack Smith, and we had a lot of problems with Jack Smith.” And I said, “Yes, I understand Jack was very difficult,” and I said, “but he’s died, and he’s left behind thirty years of work.” “Well, we still have a bad taste in our mouth from dealing with Jack Smith.” And I said, “Yes, but the beauty of it, you see, is that Jack Smith is dead. And the work is here.” And they weren’t interested. They wouldn’t give me any money.

No one would give any money to store Jack’s stuff, so I kept all the stuff in the apartment, and I was able to keep going to court because the owners of the building were suing me. They had found out my name, and they were suing me instead of suing the estate of Jack Smith. And so, each time I went to court—like, I had a bad experience with a Republican kind of Chinese woman judge, who was on the side of the landlord, but it would be continued. Then the next one was like a New York Jewish woman lawyer, who was, “Do you want the apartment?” And I’m like, “Yeah” And she goes, “Well, you can have the apartment.” [01:10:02] But it would be continued because I wasn’t gonna perjure myself. But as long as I could walk that line, and keep the apartment going—and I was able to do that from 1989 until August of 1991.

And during that time, in 1991, the landlord for the building had called me. Up until then they had told me it was a corporate thing and there was no landlord to talk to, but this man called me. His name was Lou, and we both liked each other’s voice—there was like sort of a flirtation there, immediately. So then he wanted to meet me, and I met him. And I used feminine wiles on him. I never slept with him, but I never acted like I wasn’t going to. I learned a lot that year. I was forty that year. And I just couldn’t believe—it was so remarkable that he could said, “Now, Susana, I admire your devotion to Jack Smith, but I must have that apartment back.” And we would be in a bar. There’d be football, and I’d go, “Lou, can you explain football to me?” And the entire conversation about giving the apartment back would disappear. Or we would be at dinner, and he would say, “I have to have that apartment back.” And I’d be wearing a bolero, and

I'd go, "Well, you know, Lou" [imitates removing bolero]—and he'd say, "Nevermind!" [laughter] And we went along like that for about seven months. And then he would say, "What does it take to turn you on?" And I would say, "Not much, really." You know? [laughs] I just stayed in that realm of unavailability, and he was addicted to it, and so on we went.

That's when I met Steve, and he came to my apartment with the pineapple. I had had a guy come in—I needed to have my floor tiled in the bathroom, and the guy had kind of frightened me. I have this rape background that had happened to me as a homeless teenager in the East Village, and the guy was both giving me this estimate for tiling my floor and hitting on me at the same time, and I had become very, very uncomfortable. He was very aggressive, and I was frightened. I finally got him out of the apartment.

About a half hour later, Steve came. And I was still kind of shook up, and so I told Steve what had happened, I said, "I'm just really nervous, cause this happened." And Steve said, "Oh, well, I could tile." The guy had wanted like fifteen hundred dollars to tile my bathroom. And I said, "On top of it, he wanted fifteen hundred dollars to tile my bathroom!" And Steve said, "Oh, well, I could tile your bathroom." He said, "I'd do it for five hundred." And it turned out, I said, "You do tiling?" He said, "Well, actually I'm trained as an architect." And I had been that entire year walking around saying, "Why isn't there an architect who's a carpenter?" Because Bob Moon had done an estimation of what it would cost to take down Jack's apartment, to save it, if we had to take down the apartment. And it came to thirty-six thousand dollars. I knew I couldn't—where was I gonna get thirty-six thousand dollars. So here's now Steve saying he's an architect. I'm like, "You're kidding me." And so he did some work for me downstairs. He built me a kind of window seat that I wanted and he tiled my bathroom, and then I paid him to go to Jack's apartment and measure everything, take paint chips, and take out a wall where Jack had written on that wall, so that we had that wall in case it had to go. It was crated up there.

That was at exactly the same time that my marriage with Mitch ended. So, 1991? So now, '92, Steve came to shoot live video with me. And in 1992—in '91 I'd gone to Tampa, Florida to do a solo show. And I have night terror, from these experiences. I've never really dealt with my PTSD. I think it's kind of a really overwhelming thing for me to deal with, and so I just sort of live with it. [01:15:06] And in Tampa, [laughs] I guess they thought they were doing me a great favor: they put me on a lake, sharing this house with this man who worked for the post office, on this lake, where, like, there were like forty-seven windows that were screen windows with

nothing—there was like a latch—so I was just out of my mind for like five days. I mean, I couldn't sleep all night, and I was reading *American Psycho*. So I was like completely out of my mind, and I ended up accidentally having an affair with somebody because I didn't want to go home. I mean, it wasn't really anything more than that, and I was very honest, and I told Mitch, and apparently, I think really he just wanted to be out of the relationship, because that was enough to end that relationship.

The following year, I went back to Tampa and they wanted me to do *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* And I brought one dancer with me, a Black dancer named Leta Davis. We drove down there, and then we went out to the strip clubs, and tried to get strippers who would be in the show with me. And we got two amazing strippers, and one of them, when we were gonna do the show in July '92 in New York—that show had been done with two strippers in 1990 as my solo fellowship audit for the NEA during the Helms NEA censorship crisis and had turned downtown New York on its ear, because you could pretend to be, you know, if you were at Wow Café or some lesbian theater group or whatever, you could pretend to be a stripper, but you couldn't actually be a stripper. And so I said that I thought that stripping was the most powerful feminist art form, because it's the only thing devised by women that controls men, unlike the myriad of things men have devised to control women. And so this was a really—

Also the show was improvisational. It was pro-sex during AIDS. It contained my history with gay men, and my history with AIDS up till that point. It was a critique of separation of church and state. It was just something that was, you know, it just hit the zeitgeist in a certain way. And it was the first queer show—we're generically queer, small Q—not what it's become. It was all about, what is that called? Coalition. And everyone was included. Heterosexuals were included, everyone was included. It was a very powerful message in July of 1990. And it just kind of was an outrageous moment in art history.

Then, in '92, I did it in Tampa, and then Mark Russell wanted me to bring it back to keep PS 122 open during that summer—cause they'd lost funding—to keep the place open. And I had promised that I would bring those strippers from Tampa to New York. And one of them, Shelly [Calcott?], I can't remember her last name right now, but I will, Shelly, I had gone to her house, and she had a little boy, and she had a pole in her kitchen. And I said, "What's that for?" And she goes, "Oh, I do pole work." I said, "What's that?" She goes, "I'm training my little boy, on the pole." Like, he was like three years old or something. And so then when I called her to come to

New York, she said, “Can I have a pole?” I was like, “A pole?” I said, “Ok.” She goes, “I want two poles.” I was like, “Ok.” So we put these poles up, and then she came up, and I said, “Ok, what do you do with these?” And she’s this amazing pole dancer. So we were the first people to bring pole dancing to New York.

Dziedzic: What!

Arcade: Yeah, yeah. And we actually did pole dancing classes. I did a workshop with Shelly just for women that included pole dancing—cancer survivors, all kinds, women who’d been abused, it was all different kinds of women—in Tampa that year, and then we did it in New York.

[01:20:21] And I can tell you, she was never reviewed. And it became an issue with me. I would do a monologue in the middle of the show after she’d performed, and say, “Can you believe that no one in the press”—I said, “I know when you leave here you’re gonna be talking about this show,” I said, “and you’re gonna talk about me,” I said, “but the other thing you’re gonna talk about is what Shelly just did up there.” Cause she was phenomenal. And she could go up there like sixty feet in the air, and she would hold on by her inner thigh. She’d be like that, with her inner thigh. I mean, she was crazy—it was, like, unbelievable.

And so at any rate, we did that show, and I paid to fly her back and forth from Tampa, and put her up here. Then in August, this guy, Ratso Sloma, who used to be the editor of *National Lampoon*, he brought Art D’Lugoff from the Village Gate to see the show. In the middle of the show, Art D’Lugoff came backstage, which was very weird. [laughter] I had a couple of breaks in the show, cause I had a lot—by that point I had put boy dancers in the show, and we had, like, you know, ten dancers, and there was a big audience dance break in that show. And I would change, and smoke a cigarette. And this old guy is backstage, and I said, “And you are?” And he said, “I’m Art D’Lugoff, and I’ve seen Lenny Bruce, I’ve seen George Carlin.” He goes, “all the greatest have been in my club, and you are a comedic genius, and you belong in my club, and I want to bring this show to the Village Gate.” And so we closed on whenever, and re-opened a week later, September 11, at Art D’Lugoff’s Village Gate, and the show ran there for one year.

The last show was with Marianne Faithfull, who had come to see the show twice and then came backstage and asked me if she could sing in the show. And I said, “Well, that would be

impossible.” And she was like, “What?” [imitating Faithfull] And I said, “I’m just kidding.” Who would say no to Marianne Faithfull? And so she sang in the show. That closed the show.

During that month of July, Lois Keidan had come from the ICA in London. She’d seen the show and she wanted to bring the show to London, but she didn’t have the money to bring us, the company. And she said, “If you could get yourself to the UK, I can book you all through the UK.” And then the next week, Marianne showed up, and then because of the show with Marianne, we were able to pay our way to the UK, and then I did the same thing with the dancers that had been done with me with John Vaccaro when I went to Europe with John Vaccaro’s company: we all had to pay our own flights, and have our own spending money, and John had provided the housing, and that’s what I did with these younger people.

We went and we took Edinburgh by storm, and I got an amazing review by Michael Billington, who’s the most respected writer in the UK, where he said “Penny Arcade has a mind like a steel trap,” and—what’d he call me?—“the silver-tongued Penny Arcade.” He gave me a review that I had never would have gotten in the United States that acknowledged my writing, it acknowledged my thinking. It acknowledged that in *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* I offered what could only be called the naked polemic, because at the end of the show I strip to Lenny Bruce’s rant on obscenity, and then I am nude for twenty minutes on stage—or ten minutes, it depends, I guess—and I talk about feminism, AIDS, politics, family, language. [01:25:03] And then the last line of the show is, “Well, I guess by now you’ve forgot I have my clothes off.” And of course the entire audience has forgotten, and then it’s a blackout. So people are just sitting there stunned, going, oh my god, I forgot she had her clothes off.

The point of that show always was to prove that sensationalism and content cannot co-exist. It’s impossible. If you’re really talking about anything, it doesn’t matter what it is, it cannot be sensationalistic. But plenty of things are sensationalistic without content. And that was kind of my big problem with the downtown arts scene was it was a lot of sensationalism without any content. Very little content. I mean, I don’t want to insult other performers, but it’s very easy to get people to see nudity—not so much if you’re talking [laughs].

But at any rate, we then went to the UK—we were in the UK—and then that show was seen by lots of people, invited us lots of places, and that began my international touring career. I had already been seen that July by Christopher Hunt, who was curating the Adelaide Festival, which is one of the more—what can I say?—high-minded festivals. It’s not a fringe festival, you

know, it's a curated festival. And he brought me to Australia and of course when they read about it—strippers, this and that—they were expecting a very lowbrow thing, and instead got hit over the head with my very articulate work. That made me a mainstream figure in Australia, which has remained all these years, even though after '95 I didn't go back to Australia till 2005. But I do have that quality that my star doesn't dim, which is interesting. I never become [laughing]—it never goes over the horizon either, but it never dims. People remember me and they remember my work, which is also what happened in New York when I left in 1971, different people told me that—years later, Lee Black Childers, the photographer. Other people told me that when I left in '71, people said, "She'll never be heard from again." But then I came back ten years later and re-established myself. In no other way than just because I did my work.

Dziedzic: Can I ask why you think that it was so hard to get recognition, and a little bit more about your critique of the downtown art scene at the time and the politics of the art world that you mentioned.

Arcade: Ok, well, for one thing, Andy Warhol helped usher in the concepts of celebrity, fame. See, the thing is that what's called the avant-garde, which is a timeframe, you're only avant-garde in an avant-garde time period; it's not a style like American colonial or art deco, which is how people treat it. There's an avant-garde. The avant-garde has never been separated from the culture. The avant-garde is part of the culture. It's the forefront of the culture. But in the '70s, there was this dislocation, so that there was the dominant culture, and then there was this thing called the avant-garde. But it was—well, see, people went to university and then they either walked away from what they had learned—it was your basis, and you continued—or you stayed within that academic thing. Well, what happened in the '70s was the arts became academicized, right? So, in 1914, now, I'm told that this isn't true, but I had found it, and I wish I could find the—what is that called?

Dziedzic: The citation?

Arcade: The citation, yeah. [01:30:03] That Gertrude Stein had said the avant-garde is in opposition to academia. Right, but we know that, from the secessionist movement—if you're

gonna go to the history of modern art, you start with the secessionist movement—that said we will no longer allow the academy to say what art is. But in the ‘70s, the arts became really academicized, and, you know that saying “they that cannot do teach,” that was that—everybody who wanted the comfort and security of academia also wanted to be kind of cutting edge or something, you know? Which has just increased and increased and increased to some completely absurd position now where, you know, half of the academics are performative. It’s like, no, you’re not a performer! You stupid cunt, you’re not! You’re an academic, so stop—isn’t it bad enough that there’s no room for people who are actually making work that you’re gonna come in there and take up this entire swath of money that could be for artists? So, any rate, what happened in the mid-‘70s was that people who read the *Village Voice*, people who read the *Soho News*, who were in universities around the country, and identified with this kind of, I don’t want to call it a punk sensibility, because it was partially that, too—

Dziedzic: Can I move your microphone quickly?

Arcade: Yeah, sure.

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

Dziedzic: Please continue.

Arcade: I’m also trying to figure out what I’m saying. See, I have no way of knowing what 1970 to 1980 meant to people who were observing it from outside. Right? Because I was on the inside. So Danny Fields and Lisa Robinson and Danny Goldberg—I lived with Danny Goldberg. Danny Fields was doing a magazine that, um, uh-oh, I can’t remember the name of it—we’ll have to fill that in [*Datebook Magazine*]. Danny Fields was editing, it wasn’t *Hit Parade*, it was something, *Teen* something. Then Danny Goldberg became the editor of *Crawdaddy* and there was some other, there was another magazine, which I can’t remember, called *Circus*. There were these rock and roll magazines that were fan zines, that started in the early ‘70s. And because all the people who were writing them were our friends, they started putting—like they let Patti Smith write. I could have written for them. I could have if I wanted to. I had thought about it but then I went

away. So they were writing about the people that we knew, sort of establishing those people in the teen mind of America. So, that's one thing that happened.

Then the next thing that happened was that with underground comics and underground newspapers, which flourished from the '60s into the '70s, all over the country, people were reading them. So people were reading the *Village Voice*, people were reading the *Soho News*. People started wanting to—and then also with the whole Warhol thing. People were fascinated and intrigued by the whole—they all wanted to be Warhol superstars. So all of that converged so that there was a break in actual lineage. So, it used to be that you came to New York and you might end up in the underground, like people are always saying, “Oh, I wish I could be in the underground, but I'm not cool enough.” Like, the underground's not about being cool. It's about being willing, it's about having that interest. You know, it's not a cool thing. It's not like: you, yes, you, no. It's not like that at all! You know? It's the opposite of that. It has to do more with endurance and persistence and interest. So it's very eclectic. You find your way into the underground because of your own eclecticism. You're interested in certain music, certain film, certain painting, certain theater. You go to see those things. You're reading certain books. You meet people at these events who are like you who are interested in more or less the same kinds of things, and that's the underground. [01:35:23] And that's always been the underground, and that's the way it is. The underground is where bohemia intersects with the criminal world, so there's also criminality there, there's prostitution, there's drugs, there's drug addiction. There's some kind of outsidersness, some kind of opposition to the status quo, some kind of opposition to the dominant culture. And—but what happened in the '70s was people started knowing these things existed, and specifically coming for that.

The thing I can liken it to is the difference between somebody just becoming a performance artist because of their interest in two or three métiers. That's what performance art was about. Performance art was not a métier in itself, it was in different—it was as specific as the different people. Like me: I'm interested in photography, I'm interested in portraiture, I'm interested in individuals, I'm interested in oral history, always have been. My work has always encompassed oral history from the first moment—makes sense—I'm from an oral tradition of southern Italian story telling, where every problem is described by [laughs] being told about another problem that was similar to it that had happened once before. And that's how I made my work. And then my work—unbeknownst to me, I used that character work to do cultural critique.

And then pretty soon I stopped having to do characters to do the cultural critique; I just started to do cultural critique. That's the difference between someone who goes and studies performance art and then you go and see them, and you know that they studied Karen Finley, and they studied John Kelly, and they studied Leigh Bowery—and you see the work of all these people plastered in this person's work. And there is nothing authentic, nothing original, except the ego drive to be in front of an audience. You know, for me, the ego drive to be in front of an audience is not enough. I don't really have a performer's ego. People who meet me in this context are never ready for when they see me on stage because I'm a very high-powered performer, and over fifty years of performing, I've become prismatic. Because the work just—it's not about me, it's about the work coming through me.

And so what happened in the '70s was all these people started coming here because they wanted to be involved with Warhol—and that was all over already! It was so over already, and so unavailable. And they wanted to be in the East Village. Well, they wanted to be in the East Village because the Talking Heads lived in the East Village. All of a sudden, all of this was being promoted. It was a generation of people who came in the mid-, well, not mid-, but like later '70s. I'd say, post-'77, who were really the first hipsters. They were the original hipsters. Not the people in 1990. And they were the people who were around Club 57 when Club 57 was extremely suburban. It was like a rec room of artistic possibility for people who missed Andy Warhol. They were doing what they thought The Factory was. And it was not that.

Meanwhile, the underground was in parallel with it. The underground was continuing. The old was continuing, but was being eclipsed by these younger people, because with these younger people also came people who wanted to be journalists. And wanted to be curators. [01:40:08] And that was the break in lineage that occurred. That was very powerful and very painful for many people. It wasn't painful for me in the same way, cause I was young. I was thirty, you know? But when I saw Jack Smith, who was fifty, and Peter Hujar, who was fifty, and those were—Peter Hujar, the great photographer, was supplanted by Robert Mapplethorpe. Which was absurd! I mean, Robert was talented, but Robert couldn't print a painting. Couldn't print a photograph if his life depended on it. Peter was a master printer! And who was not aware that Robert was deeply influenced by Peter Hujar? I mean, there's no question of it! But as late as a year ago, when they did an article about Peter Hujar in the *Times*, I had to write in a letter to the *Times* because the woman who reviewed the Peter Hujar show, she was writing about Peter,

but she talked about Peter and Robert being peers. Which is absurd! [laughs] Peter Hujar had been a photographer for fifteen years before Robert picked up a camera, and Peter was famous! Peter was famous to us, to me and Robert. Peter was this legendary photographer in 1970, already. You know? It's really distressing.

I was in that milieu with Jackie Curtis—all these people who had really created things in the '60s and early '70s were being eclipsed by people who were just now starting, really, based on what these other people had done, which was like the Pyramid Club. I watched these people suffering—Jack Smith—and the anger that these people had, and the arrogance of the younger people. It was just a different time, you know? Like the cat had been let out of the bag, so to speak. You know. As well as, the Kool-Aid was put in the drinking water. All it took was AIDS to completely disseminate what had been. And then all it took was the invention of the Internet to completely get rid of all city space. All of that kind of disappeared.

But, I mean, right now, I'm still involved in that underground, you know? I am now an elder stateswoman in a scene that I started out in as a seventeen year old. And there are other people like me, people who didn't die. I mean, a lot of people died, you know. It's an interesting thing, because in the early '90s, I asked Quentin Crisp, who I was very close to, he chose me as the woman he most identified with, and the *London Sunday Herald* did a portrait of the two of us, as soul mates. And when they asked him why he chose me, he said, [imitating Crisp] "Most people would be horrified to be publically identified by me as their soul mate, but Ms. Arcade is impervious to embarrassment." Which is not true. It's just that I move through embarrassment. I'm very easily embarrassed, actually, and I'm always in a fight with myself through that embarrassment.

But any rate, I had asked Quentin about bohemia in London, and if it had been gay. [01:44:56] And he said, "A bohemian is someone who"—how did he say it? "Is indifferent," yeah. "A bohemian is someone who is indifferent to sexual orientation." And I knew that also from the criminal world. The criminal world, nobody cares what color your skin is, nobody cares where you went to school, nobody cares who your parents are. Nobody cares what your religion is. And that is also what bohemia was. And if you go back, and the idea of what bohemia was, you would find that it was, *dégagé*. It was considered, you know, criminal. It was considered not to be spoken of in polite society. Bohemia is very influenced by the criminal world. But Quentin also said to me, he said, "Bohemia is a place where someone almost wrote a play, and almost

painted a painting.” And I was quite offended when he said that, cause I believed that I lived in a world where people made art.

What I came to understand is that the greater art scene is a place like that, where there are people who will be artists from the age of twenty to thirty-seven, and then they—or, as the great sociologist Al Orensanz at the Orensanz Center on Norfolk Street said, “Bohemia, someone is”—he goes, “people used to be bohemian from day one to the day they died.” He said, “Now people are bohemian on Friday and Saturdays from seven PM till midnight, or from twenty-three till twenty-seven, when they go into something else, they go into the Internet, you know, world, blah blah blah.” And so I’ve come to realize that what the art world that I came of age in, I’m still in it, but it is not—it’s parallel to this other scene that’s going on right now, which is: we’re at one of the most trying times in human history, without a doubt, and in many ways one of the most dangerous times in human history, and are young artists making work that speaks to that? No. It’s all huge popularity contests. It’s so middle class. Most of the work that’s being done is so middle class, or, in certain cases there is some very refined work that’s being done, but it’s still not—people don’t feel a responsibility to really address what’s going on. Or the unaddressable. And also it’s a time of great consensus. So that if you stand out in any way—

Like the gay world, which I grew up in, where you could discuss anything. Nothing was—no subject was verboten. You can’t discuss anything now! And it’s gotten so absurd that you’re not allowed to speak. You’re not allowed to have an opinion on things, even though they’re in your world, and you’re forced to deal with that. Like, if you’re not trans, you can’t have an opinion on being trans. You can’t have an opinion on being Black. You can’t have an opinion on anything. Oh yes, you’re allowed to criticize Trump. And people don’t understand—they have no idea why Trump’s in power. So there’s an incredible dumbing down of culture. In a place like downtown, where people were more savvy about what was going on—politically it was more European, where people can have multiple viewpoints. That doesn’t exist anymore.

I just recently posted something about Obama’s record on human rights, cause I’m so sick of people writing, “I miss Obama. I miss Barack and Michelle.” It’s like, really? You miss them? What the fuck does that mean? Barack Obama was really put in power by white people with Black guilt, or people who took Black Studies. The thousands and thousands and thousands of white middle class people who took Black Studies, who, they don’t see further than the color of his skin. [01:50:06] They don’t see his policies, they don’t see that he completely abandoned

the underclass, the working class and the middle class. He's just like the Clintons. They're all about—the “sad people” who only make a \$150,000–\$250,000 a year are kind of allowed at the outskirts of their vision. But it's really about this fantastic wealth.

You know, I would say, in the '60s, I never knew anybody who was for the Vietnam War, but I do know people now who think that we belong in Afghanistan and in Yemen and in Syria. This is, like, outrageous to me. It's outrageous to me! And there's just this tremendous dumbing down of culture. And so, *Longing Lasts Longer*, which is the show that we're touring now—we've been touring for four years. We're kind of at the end of touring, which, I don't think so, because it's an extremely viable show and it resonates everywhere we do it, whether we did it in Lublin, Poland, or Sydney, or did it in Portland, Oregon, or did it in Miami, or did it in Edinburgh, or did it in Ljubljana, Slovenia. This show resonates because gentrification is happening everywhere at the same time. Hyper-gentrification is happening. And that show is about the gentrification of ideas. I use the premise of gentrification, but it's really about the gentrification of ideas. Sarah Schulman wrote her book, *Gentrification of the Mind*, based on my idea. I mean, I would never say anything more than that. I definitely gave her an idea. One that she was probably formulating, but that I gave her a hook for it. I'm not the person who wrote the 250-page book, right? But she does acknowledge me in the book, you know, which is gratifying.

I think this is where we are right now. We're living in a world where every problem is solved by the appearance of the next problem. We all know it's a really big problem that Monsanto makes these pesticides that are destroying man's ability to save seeds to plant again, and that, even to go one step further, that these poisonous glyphosate, or whatever it's called, these poisonous substances actually interact with our own ability to detox. We can't even—and they're in food like Kashi. Kashi is supposed to be—the presentation is that it's a health food, that is positivity. I mean, we're living in this snake pit. We're living in a snake pit, and now, glyphosate is out of patent, and it's being manufactured in China. And they're putting it on everything. And the check comes at the end, you know? Like, as I've learned, as a person who's sixty-eight, I had a really fun time smoking packs and packs and packs of cigarettes, but at sixty-eight it's effected my lungs. The bill does come at the end, and it's a horrific reality for the future, someone like you—how old are you?

Dziedzic: I'm thirty-six.

Arcade: Yeah. Ok, well. You're gonna be paying that bill. It's really frightening. And so the whole role of Greenwich Village, places like Greenwich Village, which are not—people always interview me about bohemia and always want to talk about the poverty of bohemia. Bohemia is not about being poor. [01:55:06] It's about having a set of values that are oppositional to corporate, capitalist values. You can no more be a bourgeois bohemian than you can be an atheist Catholic. It's a different set of values. There have always been people with wealth, and many of the most famous bohemians have been people of great wealth. The thing that used to be about downtown was you couldn't tell who had money and who didn't have money. And that's what the big change is now, because now you can tell who has money. You know, with the appearance of all these so-called luxury buildings, which are pretty much not luxury buildings. Honestly, you've got a concrete lobby with an empty desk—hmm, not seeing a whole lot of luxury there. But, these people are paying \$5,000, \$6-, \$7-, \$8-, \$9-, \$10-, \$12-, \$15-, \$25-, \$30,000 a month rent. And a lot of them are paying rent, they're not buying. They're paying rent. I mean, that's outrageous. When you're so rich that you don't have to buy the place, and you're gonna still be paying eight thousand dollars a month rent? That's very weird. That's like supremely weird to me. But it denotes a shift, and a shift that has to be noted.

It's so interesting, I went to the Armory the other night to see a William Kentridge piece, which was about Africa, which was an incredibly fascinating piece. And I looked at that audience, and that audience is my audience. There are people in that audience who come and see me, but there are a whole lot of other people in that audience, who have never seen my work, who would adore my work. Because I make work for smart people. You know, not educated people, not rich or poor, just smart people. Engaged people. And I really wanted to stand up and say, "Hello everyone, I'm Penny Arcade! You've heard my name, I think. If you haven't seen my work yet, you should come. I'm sixty-eight, I'm not gonna be here that much longer." But I didn't do it. I wish I did, but I'm just not that person. But I am the person who thinks that.

In terms of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, I think that along with the preservation of architecture, the architecture also preserves a way of thinking. And I think that's the most important thing about it. I think a lot of people might think that the GVSHP is for rich people, or that their goals are for preserving something for people in better circumstances, but it is to preserve a way of life. There is no city planning. There's no urban

planning. It's impossible. Because true urban planning would have to account for people who can't pay \$5,000 a month rent. So we don't have any of that. Steve, my collaborator, every time he passes a new luxury high-rise going up, he like snarls, and he goes, "Ugh, more affordable housing!" [Dziedzic laughs] I love the Greenwich Village Society for Historical Preservation. I think Andrew Berman especially should be noted for his incredible tenacity, and ability to get things done. It's really mind-boggling what he's been able to accomplish. He has the back up of the GVSHP, but you could have somebody in there who's just, you know, kind of a token person, kind of la-di-da interested in architecture and stuff. But the focus on zoning is so important. It's a drop in the bucket for what's happening, but it's that drop that's so needed. [02:00:12] Do you have any other questions for me?

Dziedzic: Yeah. I wanted to ask about why you think your work is so kind of perennial, and is still relevant—

Arcade: Right. Oh, and you wanted to ask me why I have problems with my work being more recognized.

Dziedzic: I mean, just as one example, I was looking for your book, and I couldn't find it in the New York Public Library!

Arcade: Yeah. That's really weird.

Dziedzic: It is really weird.

Arcade: Yeah, I should actually write to that guy, because I'm coming out in an anthology that the Public Library's putting out. I'll write to him today, I'll remember to write to him.

Dziedzic: Hmm. Maybe it was under Susana Ventura, not Penny Arcade?

Arcade: No, it's under Penny Arcade. Yeah. It could be stolen. Oh, but it's not in the—

Dziedzic: In the catalogue.

Arcade: In the catalogue.

Dziedzic: I didn't find it in the catalogue.

Arcade: That's very bad.

Dziedzic: It's very bad! [laughs]

Arcade: It's very bad.

Dziedzic: We'll both write them. [laughs]

Arcade: Yeah.

Dziedzic: If I could just say, it sounds like, connecting it to the idea about the gentrification of the mind and where you started pinpointing a shift in the late '70s, people want to be sold the top idea, top-level idea. And your work, and your interest in stories, and listening to people speak, and listening to people that have come before you, and now you speaking to other people, that's sort of like coming up from the bottom.

Arcade: Mmhmm.

Dziedzic: And same thing true with, you know, bohemia or the underground, is that it's a generative thing. It's a process, it's there, it's not about, at the end of every day you show what you've made and it gets bought, or sold, or branded, it's—

Arcade: Yeah, that's a good point. I think that Sarah Schulman—I'll read it to you. Let me get it.

Dziedzic: Mmhmm.

[BREAK IN CONVERSATION]

Arcade: Oh, I might have given away my last book! That's not so good. I think I might have given away my last book. Sarah Schulman wrote an essay in my book where she says—oh! Here it is. There's one left. Did you turn that off? You're just gonna have a big dead space.

Dziedzic: Oh, there's some dead space, but that's all right.

Arcade: Ok. [reading from *Bad Reputation*] “What differentiated her as an artist was her background. Very few performance artists were Italian-American, only some were from working class or poor backgrounds, and I would guess that fewer than half were from cities. Also she was among the small group of artists who were nurtured in the previous generations but working in contemporary forms of the '80s, so she was a bit older than many of her colleagues and critics. I have always felt, and wrote this at the time in the *New York Press*, that these were the reasons her sold-out shows were functionally ignored by the critics and producers who could and should have made her a public icon instead of an underground one.” But what I will say to that is that I write from a working class perspective. And an independent perspective. I'm living in a middle class art world.

The '60s were spearheaded by working class artists. John Vaccaro, Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, Larry Rivers, I mean, you can go on and on and on and on, the people who created the culture—Jonas Mekas—were working class people. The '70s started being spearheaded by a middle class. So the '50s to, I'm gonna say to the early '70s: working class. The '70s to the mid-'80s: middle class. Mid-'80s to like the end of the '90s: upper class. [02:05:11] Then it's the children of rich people, you know? Right now we're living in a period where the access is really by where you went to school, who your family was, blah blah blah. So for me, the number one thing [speaking louder] and the number one thing that has made me—[laughing] has not given me the visibility that my work deserves is that I'm a woman. Which has taken me thirty years to accept. I was unwilling. I was never the person who was saying, “This is happening to me because I'm female.” Never. I never said it. Never! I didn't believe it. I didn't believe it. But it is so true!

The other reason why my work has been—had this problem—and this is from Stephen Bottoms, from the UK, from Leeds University wrote the main essay on my work. And he said, let me see if I can find it here. [Pauses] God, this is a fucking long essay. [Pauses] Ok. Seriously? Where the fuck is it. God. Oh, here it goes. All right, so, let's see. "Why Arcade remains one of New York's 'best-kept secrets'"—which is, you know, always used about me—"having never achieved the degree of public or critical exposure accorded to some of her peers.

"How does one account for this blind spot around Arcade's work? It's easy enough to see that her voice is too explicitly confrontational to have been welcomed by the American media mainstream, in the way that figures like Spalding Gray, Bogosian, John Leguizamo"—all men, by the way—"have been. Yet equally, despite an academic climate that tends to champion the marginal over the mainstream, my database searches reveal not a single published scholarly article that discusses Arcade in anything more than a passing reference. [02:09:59] This dearth of response, I hasten to add, may be as much a sin of omission as a sign of her being willfully ignored: I myself have admired Arcade's work for fifteen years, but never written in any detail about it until now. Still, the fact is that Arcade's 'otherness' troubles category distinctions in a way that has made her difficult to pigeonhole. There is something unquestionably 'queer' about her work, for example (and she is often programmed in queer arts festivals), and yet, Arcade has never been much celebrated by gay and lesbian critics, as have been performers such as Holly Hughes and Tim Miller. As a self-proclaimed 'faghag,' but not a 'dyke,' she appears not to"—but a bisexual; he didn't say that, it should be there—"she appears to not fit the profile to championed on the basis of sexual identity. As she wryly remarks" 'I'm so queer I'm not even gay.' (Rather, Arcade"—oh—"identifies openly as bisexual in conscious resistance to any suggestion that she should limit her options). Similarly, despite her forthright insistence on discussing the rights and experiences of women, she has often antagonized feminists. Her insistent use of erotic dancers in her performances, for example, sits uncomfortably with widely-held feminist views on the objectification of women's bodies. While it's true that some unlikely figures, such as former porn star Annie Sprinkle, have been retrieved as (post-)feminist performance icons, there has often been a degree of condescension in such appropriations: 'we can read into Sprinkle, but don't ask her to speak for herself.' In Penny Arcade's case, such revoicing is more difficult, given that outspoken articulacy is the defining feature of her work."

I love that sentence!

“Indeed, Arcade’s insistence on speaking for herself seems to be one of the factors that has prompted active disdain towards her from some quarters—a disdain that, she firmly believes, is linked to a certain class prejudice. Take, for example, the *Village Voice* review of her 2002 show *New York Values*.” Quoting: ‘Like the amusement of her adopted name, Penny Arcade offers a reasonable amount of razzle-dazzle and whizbang for the buck. In *New York Values* (P.S. 122), she delivers her raps and rants ringed by a chorus of go-go boys and girls illuminated by spots, magnified by live video, and backed by a rock ‘n’ roll soundscape... Of course, discussing Arcade’s material is almost beside the point. She’s attracted a following not for what she says...but for who she is: a dizzy autodi—I can’t say that word—‘autodidact with big boobs and a mean streak. Even at fifty-one, she still looks devastatingly cute in décolletage and mouse ears...It’s a pity her repetitive material isn’t aging as well as her rack.’

“This poisonous blend of sexism and snobbery in these comments hardly needs underlining. Would a similarly forthright male performer—a Lenny Bruce or Denis Leary, say—be accused so disparagingly of having a ‘mean streak’? Yet Arcade is dismissed here for her repetitiveness (actually a highly-structured aspect of the *New York Values* script), for her ‘wrath and raving,’ and for being a dizzy autodi—autodidact.” Can’t even say it! “That is, for lacking a college education. (‘Dizzy,’ of course, is also a decidedly gendered insult.) Anything that the ‘low-rent’ (i.e. low class) Arcade actually has to say can thus be safely disregarded, even as her ‘big boobs’ offer visual interest: like little girls, it seems, that middle-aged working class female performance artists should be seen and not heard. The fact that the critic, Alexis Soloski, is also female only underlines Arcade’s point in *Bad Reputation* that women can sometimes betray other women with depressing fervor. Soloski, moreover, tellingly fails to acknowledge the fact that in *New York Values*, Arcade explicitly targets the *Village Voice* as having betrayed the progressive values on which it was founded. ‘Our typical reader,’ she quotes its editor saying, ‘is a thirty-two year old computer executive with a vaguely bohemian drift.’ It’s a line that neatly accounts for the attitudes apparent in Soloski’s review, but it’s just one element in the show’s multifaceted critique of the ways in which capitalistic notions of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ have superimposed a process of bourgeois gentrification over the ‘footprint’ of downtown Manhattan’s older, bohemian art world.” [02:15:16]

I think that pretty much [laughs] covers it. And where’s Alexis Soloski? She writes for the *Times* now. Right? And the *Guardian*. So a lot of it has to do with being female. Some of it

has to do with being working class, and also that people perceive any woman—I mean, if I was disguised as a male, then I would be being received in the way that David Sedaris is received, you know? But the problem is, everybody had a mother. And the minute a woman speaks an opinion, people perceive it as they're being told what—I mean, how many times has it been said to me that someone has, like, a critic or journalist brought another journalist to see me in Australia. And he said, every three minutes, the other journalist kept going, "There she goes again, trying to tell us what to think." And he asked me, the journalist asked me what I thought about this. I said, "Well, I'm just curious, what is it in my expressing my opinion that makes him think that I want him to agree with me?" Why can't he see that I'm expressing my opinion?

Now, in *Longing Lasts Longer*, I do this funny thing—cause I always talk to the audience before the show, cause I really love to be with the audience—I say to them, I say, "I've got to warn you that a certain amount of people in my audiences always get very angry at me during the show." I said, "And it's because they think that I'm talking directly to them." And I said, "You see, you need to understand that the show is already written before you got here. It's really not about you. If you're identifying with it, you need to take some responsibility for that." So what I find, in the history of my work, is that people who feel supported by my values love my work and demand to see my work, and literally stop me on the street and ask me: when are you doing a show? I need to see one of your shows. Because my work is about empathy. My work is about triggering empathy. And my work is about the human condition. We're living in a period where it's so difficult to get any kind of real support that's not being sold to you on some level. And people who feel criticized by my values—that's like a really big deal. People get really, really, really angry with me. And it doesn't help that I'm a woman because they just automatically go to their mothers telling them—people have such problematic relationships with their mothers. And, so that's the answer to that. And what was the other question you were asking me?

Dziedzic: Um—

Arcade: The first question you asked me—because one was about my work and me, and then the other one was, what was it?

Dziedzic: Well, I think that you answered it, by talking about why the work has been—

Arcade: Oh, why the work's perennial! That's what we didn't answer. Well, the work's perennial because it is a unique point of view. So, anybody's unique point of view is going to resonate with people. But I think that because I talk about difficult things—I use myself as a laboratory; it's all coming from me. It's me.

Cause some people have tried to say, oh, yeah, you should read the review of the book that—Hilton Als called *Semiotext[e]* and wanted to review the book. They didn't pitch it to him, he pitched it to them. And then he reviewed it and said, "Penny Arcade writes about herself." Well, that's not true. What I write about is my place in society. And that's a very, very different thing. Can you believe that he wrote this piece on me, in the *New Yorker*, with an extremely ugly caricature? [02:20:02] And people were so jealous. People were like, "[gasps] You got a caricature in the *New Yorker*!" But it was—I already had been blonde for at least five or seven years. The caricature was done with me with black hair. The only thing they didn't do was put me on a broom with a wart on my nose. And I'm a pretty person, you know? [laughs] I've always been pretty. I just have a pretty face, you know. But you see that picture, it looks like somewhere between *Terry and the Pirates* and, I don't know, just some kind of witchy thing. And we sold no books. How do you get a review in the *New Yorker* and sell no books? Because the tenor of the review—and this is what's so weird: many, many, many, many people told me, "Wow, that was a really positive review." I read the review and burst into tears. It was such an opportunity for me, and it was lost. It was a lost opportunity.

And then, on top of it all, when I saw Hilton Als, who I didn't know—and I didn't know I knew him, I guess he had interviewed me about Dorothy Dean for his book ten years before—a Black man said hello to me at a party and I said, "Hi!" And the guy kept walking, and I said, "Who's that?" And somebody said, "That's Hilton Als." And I went running up to him, and I said, "You're Hilton Als." He said, "Yes, and you're Penny Arcade." I said, "I want to thank you for writing about my book." And he looked at my hand, poisonously, and he said, "You don't have to thank me for writing about your book. It was brilliant." And I almost said, "Why didn't you say that?" Why didn't you say one word about my writing? There's not one word about my writing in that review. It's all about me. And he says things like, "not model tall." I mean, it goes on and on, and that I had a chip on my shoulder, and what it took to crash New York's class conscious arts scene. No, darling! In the '60s, the walls fell between the classes. It was super

easy! I was luxuriating up at Fred Mueller's apartment, that used to be Gloria Vanderbilt's apartment, with his room full of Louise Nevelsons. No, I didn't have any problem. There was no problem, you know?

One could just ascribe it to karma, that I must have done some really horrible—maybe I was Pope Joan. What can one say? It makes for a good biography. It's not like, oh, and everybody just threw money at her, you know? Also, I know something about myself in that it's the continuation of this outsider thing of my childhood. And of my junior high school, of being the person that everybody said horrible things about that weren't true, that ruined my life, that stopped me from the trajectory I was on, which was going to Sarah Lawrence, or Harvard, or Bennington, or wherever I was going as an honor student since I was in first grade. Maybe I am a bodhisattva, which John Giorno often says that I am. You can't see her, she's kind of hidden [gesturing to shelf]. Guan Yin, my favorite deity, Guan Yin is—she's there—in white and then in green.

Dziedzic: Mmhmm.

Arcade: She's a Buddha figure who is actually transsexual, which is kind of weird. I didn't know that when I became interested in her, but the story of Guan Yin is that it was a very compassionate man, who, on attaining enlightenment, refused to go. And he said he would not leave the planet until every person had attained enlightenment. And was then transformed into a woman, because of his compassion. Maybe it's that. Maybe there's something in me that needs to go through this process. [02:25:04] But I've always believed that I am going to be vindicated. And I am vindicated just in the fact that I'm the only person from the '60s who went on to create their own work, to create their own genre. I created a genre of work. And I'm the only person from the '80s and '90s who's still working full time. And I don't get grants, and a lot of it is because I am outspoken. But I can tell you that if I was a man being outspoken, it would not be a problem. It's really a problem. And it's a problem because of women, because women also don't support other women.

I learned that early on with the riot grrrls, cause I was involved with riot grrrl. I was, let's see, I was forty-two, involved with twenty year olds. And I was very involved in it. I met Kathleen Hanna and the Bikini Kill girls, and the girls from Bratmobile, you know. Even though

Tobi Vail, who was one of the people who created riot grrrl, she had worked on my show in Boston, on *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!*, and she came to me and said, “We need you in Olympia. We need you to lead the revolution.” And she told all those girls about me. They buried me. I mean, if you talk to Kathleen Hanna and you bring me up, she’s gonna say, “Oh yeah, Penny Arcade’s incredible.” But she’s never promoted me to her audience. To me, that’s the failure of feminism, is how women betray women. And I talk about that. I have no interest in Gloria Steinem, or any of those people. They’ve never done anything for any powerful woman that is not acknowledged by the so-called patriarchy. I don’t believe in the patriarchy either. The patriarchy was, like, you know, men with long white beards. The patriarchy is made up of women. Women are in the patriarchy. So stop the bullshit.

And in my latest show—I have two new works in progress that I’m doing. One is called *Old Queen*, which is about how I was on a trajectory to become an old queen and now I am an old queen, and is really about the ‘60s and about how I came into the gay world, and about what that world was, because that world is over now. And the other one is called *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*, which was my response to the Me Too movement, which got me a full glass of water thrown at my face in Joe’s Pub by a thirty year old girl. Because she didn’t like what I had to say about rape, or my definition of rape does not include somebody looking at your breasts. [laughs] Just doesn’t come into it. But one of the things that I say is that if you want to talk about gender non-conforming, then you need to talk about a woman who looks like me who doesn’t act like a girl. The whole idea, it’s all gotten so dumbed down. And my problem’s always been that I don’t act like a girl.

I am defensive because I have PTSD, which I didn’t really understand till this year. That was one of the things that I understood with the Me Too movement. Like, of course I always know that I have PTSD, but when the Me Too movement started, first I was really gratified, and kind of excited. Then it took this sharp right into a kind of no man’s land, a kind of, I don’t know, apologist—you can’t wear whatever you want and walk down a dark street. You can’t, because we’re animals. Someone like Madonna, doing her sex book, where she’s seen hitchhiking naked on the highway, that photograph does not show the ten security guards that are there. So this has created a really hypocritical and lying situation for young women, who think that they’re supposed to dress like Madonna does, or did, and go to the local pub. [02:30:12] You can’t do it. There’s a reason for the burka, you know? Obviously, I’m an anarchist, and I don’t

want anybody telling me what to do, but I understand why women wear it. And many very intelligent Muslim women who I've spoken to say that that they wear it—that it makes them comfortable, it protects them. There's just so—I mean, do I have to say people are stupid again? I mean, I hate repeating it, but there's just things that people are unwilling—

Dziedzic: It's like that movement isn't protected from other issues, like entitlement.

Arcade: Right.

Dziedzic: And, from having a single story, that is easy to understand, easy to digest.

Arcade: Right, right, exactly. And, you know, it's very interesting. I did something called The Sex Workers' Art Show Tour in the year 2000, and I had been asked to go to Olympia, Washington, where they did this show every year. And I went, and of course everything that I said was in complete opposition to what everybody else was saying. Oh, and I had done the first Ladyfest, where I had also totally critiqued them, which kind of blew everybody's mind. Ladyfest—you know Ladyfest, what it is, yeah—so Ladyfest, before the four days ended, no one who was involved in Ladyfest was speaking to each other. It was like a complete collapse. It was like a nightmare. Then I went back for this Sex Workers' Art Show Tour thing. It was like fifteen hundred—packed audience—and I just started critiquing the whole Olympia scene. It's such bullshit, you're not all that, you know? And people just couldn't believe it.

But then I went on the Sex Worker Art Show Tour. Because this really kind of awful girl, Tara, who put it together, used my name to book the entire thing across the country to thirty venues. Without ever asking, she asked me would I be willing to go on a tour, and I said, "Sure, let me know about it," and then next thing I found out, from Ladyfest LA—cause I wanted to be booked into Ladyfest LA—and they said, "Well, you're already booked with the Sex Workers' Art Show." I'm like, "What?" I thought, oh this—I'm so naïve. There's a way where I have a great innocence. And I called Tara, and I of course thought there had to be a mistake. And she goes, "Oh, well, oh, didn't I tell you?"

But at any rate, she had two people on the tour who I recently just saw again for the first time since 2000. One was an intersex woman named Emi Koyama, who's a very, very heavyset

Japanese woman. And the other one's Leslie Bull, and Leslie Bull was a former crack whore who had been on the street for seventeen years. At that time, just stopped, just gotten clean. And so, every single week, they marginalized these two more. Because they were depressing. Their stories were depressing. And actually, somebody came to me to do an interview for their thesis on this Sex Show Tour thing, and I started telling them—she goes, “Well, that's not possible.” I said, “Yes, it is possible,” I said, “it was horrible.” I said, “I wrote about it at the time, I never published it.” I said, “and I videoed the entire time, so I have it all on video.” I said, “And Emi tried to kill herself on that tour, and Leslie Bull was completely marginalized, till she was able to do five minutes.” And there was the films of this of Canadian Native American girl, Ariel Lightning Child, which were never shown, because anything that was critical about prostitution, or—cause I kept saying, if prostitution is so great, why aren't any of you doing it? [02:35:07]

I have nothing against prostitution. I understand why prostitution exists. I think it's a wonderful service; prostitution exists because of menopause. Which, I knew that as a younger woman, because many clients didn't want to be in relationship with anybody. They loved their wives, but their wives had stopped being capable of intercourse. So I knew it. And then when I went into menopause, then I really totally understood it. And then I really thought how weird it is for poor women whose husbands take Viagra, and then they have to participate in what can only be an incredible physical brutality. Because it's a reality. The vaginal canal atrophies after childbearing. So it's a really interesting thing. But any rate, I just see this everywhere I turn, you know.

There's also something I understood about myself, which is about striving. I'm a striver, I need—I'm a researcher, I'm that kind of a person. Now that I'm in my sixties I realize that I just could have skated on my looks. Never occurred to me! You know? Because my looks were always danger to me. When we toured Australia for two years, Australian *Rolling Stone* assigned a photographer, a very famous Australian photographer named Peter Milne, to tour with us and photograph us. And every time he went to photograph me, I'd make a face, and he'd say, “Why can't you just be beautiful?” And I'd say, “Because being beautiful never did anything but cause me pain and danger.” But now I realize, like, oh my god. Quentin Crisp used to say to me, in the '80s, [imitating Crisp] “Ms. Arcade, you should make less work and go to more parties.” [Dziedzic laughs] But I didn't really understand that.

But I think I'm in the trenches, you know? That's where I belong. I belong in the trenches. And I know that my work has influenced a lot of people, and that my work is meaningful, and actually useful, which was a concept Jack Smith had, [imitating Smith] "Could art ever be useful?" And I know that my work has been of great use to people. People are able to pull themselves out of situations through my work, and can rethink who they are, and how they are, and who they want to be, and I'm very excited about that. And now I'm sixty-eight, so how long will I live? My mom lived to eighty-seven, and she didn't live the kind of lifestyle I lived, which is a very hard life. She went to bed at the same time every day, had lunch, breakfast and dinner at the same time every single day, stayed up till midnight twice a year, [laughs] you know what I mean?

Dziedzic: Yeah.

Arcade: So, you have any more questions?

Dziedzic: Well, I know you've shared a whole lot, so—

Arcade: No, I mean, I'm perfectly—I have nothing else to do, so.

Dziedzic: Ok. [laughs] I wanted to ask about when you started to talk about memory and cultural amnesia in your work. Just looking at it in a very cursory way, you do a lot of autobiographical work, and then work that's reflecting on the city, and on change.

Arcade: Right.

Dziedzic: And I wondered what sort of caused that? Is it aging, is it AIDS, is it—

Arcade: No, the memory work—all art is based on memory, whether it's a memory you had two seconds ago or a memory of two seconds ago, or a memory of a million years ago. You don't really make art in the moment, not if there's any conceptual element to it, cause you have to think of it first. So, it is connected to memory. It's connected, memory being—your own thinking

is memory, right? So when I started making my own work it was all biographical. There was no autobiographical, at all, none, zilch. And I was talking about gentrification, 1981, when I started making my own work, because I came back to a New York that was vastly changed [02:39:58] from the New York that I left, in '71, for the reasons that I mentioned earlier. And when I tried to talk about what was different, people became very annoyed with me. So the new people who were here didn't want to hear it, cause I'd ask, why is this happening, why is that happening? And people didn't want to hear it.

Actually, my work was created through one single element, which was my imitating Andrea "Whips". And Andrea "Whips" Feldman was part of Andy Warhol's Factory in that she was in several of Warhol's films. She was a girl whose mother had married into money later, in her teens, I guess. And she had access to a lot of wealth but she had mental illness. She had problems. She was schizophrenic, whatever, but any rate, her family gave her money for everything except mental health; she would get thrown in state institutions when she would decompensate. I had met Andrea out before she really got involved, I think. Well, before I knew about Warhol, I had met her. And I loved to imitate her. I would imitate her for her amusement.

The problem with—the reason why I didn't go to London with *Pork*, which was being directed by Tony Ingrassia based on tapes that Andy Warhol had, cause Andy taped everything. I wanted to play Andrea. Now, now years and years, fifty years later, I now realize that it wasn't like that. They had specific people that they were playing. They were playing Bridget Berlin, and they were playing Ingrid Superstar, and Andy was in it, and, whatever. I didn't understand anything, but I had my own idea about it. They wanted me in it, and I said I wanted to play Andrea. And Tony Ingrassia said, "Are you kidding me?" He goes, "Isn't it bad enough we have to deal with Andrea every night at Max's Kansas City doing 'Showtime'? You want to perform her on stage?" And Andy was the only person who thought it was a good idea. He thought it was a fantastic idea. Anyway, so because of that, I did not do *Pork*, and I went with Vaccaro.

In 1981 when I was back, Andrea had died. She killed herself in 1972. It's documented in, um—oh, god. Jim Carroll's book, *Basketball Diaries*. Andrea's the girl who tells four different boys who she's dating to meet her on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Twelfth Street and then she jumps from the building. So, Andrea was quite dead, and I came back '81, and I would say these things about people. I had real instant problems with the kind of hipster-ish people. And I would go, [imitating Andrea] "Who are those young Republicans with purple hair? You

know, the ones who keep telling us how ‘fab’ everything is? Couldn’t they afford a longer adjective?” When I would do it as Andrea, nobody got mad at me, and I could vent. And so that was my first character. So, Andrea, the first character, was talking about the end of the Warhol scene and the new downtown. “It’s like a mall out there, darling!” I mean, if you read that monologue, and you realize that I wrote it in 1981, it’s really scary. It’s really a funny monologue. “They keep maligning homosexuals, darling, why why why? It’s the roam-osexuals they should be worried about, the ones who roam the streets, darling. Not the homosexuals that stay home.” [02:45:01] And it just would go on. “It’s such a small world, but not if you have to clean it.” Which was stolen from my show by Guerilla Girl—whatever her name is, ugh, I can’t remember her name. The one who does the big graphics. You know who I’m talking about?

Dziedzic: Yeah. But I don’t remember their name.

Arcade: Red and black and white? Yeah. She stole that, and I took it from Jackie Curtis. It’s a line Jackie used to say to me. And that person made it into a blah blah blah.

Dziedzic: You’re not talking about Barbara Kruger?

Arcade: Yes I am.

Dziedzic: Oh, ok. Ok.

Arcade: Barbara Kruger.

And so then I did her, and I did my Aunt Lucy, who lived on the corner of West Broadway and Houston, who was working class. What I saw was passing away was the old downtown art scene and the old working class downtown New York. These people didn’t see these people anymore, and I still saw them. And I did Margo Howard-Howard, who was a famous drag queen, junkie drag queen. And I did Girl, who was a homeless street whore with AIDS. I did all these real people that I had met. So from the beginning, my work was about gentrification. I didn’t know that. It was about memory, because it was about my memory and my observation of this passage that was kind of frightening to me, and it was already less. It was

already not as good as, you know? That's why someone like Fran Lebowitz, who's the same age as me, she and I have a lot of the same opinions. I always say that Fran Lebowitz is the male Penny Arcade. [laughter] But I should say the butch Penny Arcade. But, for instance, Fran has said, all these things that people are so sad about losing, I already hated those things! In the '70s! There's so much other loss that people are not aware of. So memory's always been involved in my work.

Then, I started being autobiographical in the moment because I was the person who—Sarah Schulman, in her essay, says that I'm the person that brought realness to performance art. Realness, I don't know what she calls it, there's another word for it. But I would talk directly to the audience about what I was experiencing in the moment. So I always talked directly to the audience about anything that's going on with me in the moment. And I started doing that, and that's when my work started to turn more into the autobiographical.

Also, many people were doing autobiographical work that was about nothing! You know, and I was going, "And I'm not doing it," cause I'm too discerning to just talk about myself, you know? [pauses] Oh. "What Penny Arcade did was take the confrontational, high-energy style of performance art and bring urban realism to the package. Since she had come from Warhol—the original flat, affected stylist—I'm guessing that the glib thing of the next generation did not strike her as exciting." Yeah. Because she says here, a propos to what I was telling you, she said, "Before her, downtown performance art, which was known at one point as talking dancers, often had a slightly glib, ironic tone to its stylization. Even though I was surrounded by it, part of it, and fascinated by it, this particular aesthetic always alienated me. There is something almost suburban, something cartoony, about the presentational style of many of downtown's most prominent artists." So there you go. I brought this very kind of gritty—edgy because I was being honest. [02:50:03]

But the thing is that people always call me a provocateur, but I'm not a provocateur. I don't set out to provoke. That's not what I'm doing. I am in a dialogue with my audience, which is like me. I assume that my audience is as intelligent if not more intelligent than I am, and that I'm the researcher. That's what my relationship is to the audience. I'm not there to talk down to the audience, I don't think I have something to tell you. I would not be successful if that was true. There has to be love. I'm a parrhesia; I'm a truth teller. And a parrhesia has three elements that have to be there: number one, you tell the truth from your own point of view, and you say

that you do. Number two, there has to be loss. You don't win. The parrhesia doesn't win. The parrhesia is not rewarded for speaking truth to the king. It doesn't work that way. Three, you do it out of sense of duty, and contribution. So that's me in a nutshell. So that element of memory and memoir. Then, I am fascinated by my own life. I am not understanding what happened to me. Do you know what I mean? I'm somebody who had the choice to either go canoeing or go whitewater rafting, and I ended up whitewater rafting. Really, I'm somebody who would be more happy in a canoe, but I went whitewater rafting.

I think that one of the—not goals of life, but one of the jobs of life, of everybody's life—is to understand your own life. You know, the end of life is very important, because it's about the completion of character. I've always been interested in being older, also. I've always known older people. When I went back to Mallorca this year, for the first time in eight million years, and I went to revisit where I had been, all those different things that I did in Mallorca, when I was in Deia, I was talking to this man who owned the *pension* where I was staying, and I said, "Do you remember the Indonesian woman?" There was an Indonesian woman. I said, "She had a long gray braid." And he said, "Oh, that was Ola." He said, "She used to live down here," and I never knew where she lived, and I had become friends with her. For the four or five weeks that I lived in Deia, I saw her every day, and we went for walks together. And she was seventy, and I was twenty-three.

I've always looked for where I'm going, for what's possible. What can the future be? Which is why I'm gonna be seventy soon and I'm like this. You learn to be old; being old is a thing. It's like figuring out your own life. To me, writing a memoir would be to understand how I became who I am. It's, I think, really fascinating. It's a very interesting thing, but I think it's really something that's given to everybody because most of us don't have real ownership of our lives. It's very hard to have ownership of your life when you're young because you're shunted from so many different things, from your family, from society, from the people you know. Very few people can carve out an amount of time for themselves to—like, I know that I made very few choices in my life. I didn't make choices. [02:54:57] Cause I didn't have options or I didn't know I had options.

For instance, it never occurred to me to go back, to go to school. And I always wanted to go university. I still want to go to university. And I'm very much a person who's kind of like a twenty year old. Which I think is also what happens if you have a real investigation into your

own life. Life is so short—you're thirty and then, you're sixty! I mean, it is, really goes by in a flash. And then you're like, really? And then you're out of it? Then you're not viable anymore? On a sexual level, on a social level, on a work level, on any level? You're not viable? How can that be? You're just figuring out what you're doing. So I think that's one of the interesting things about life, is that it's not what most of us think life is: that you have this life, and that you're gonna make these choices. Cause you don't. Most people don't make their choices. People end up with children, or they end up without children, or they end up in jobs that they never intended to get into, or they end up in marriages that they never intended to be in.

I've only just very recently become very—and I can't say "very" because I'm still unable to stop being a social worker in my community—but more selfish with my time. But I don't have the focus and energy that one would have in their thirties. Just don't have it. I can do one thing. I can do this today. So this—and I like you, and I like doing this, and then you're gonna transcribe it, which means I will have a copy that I did not write, which is really, really good. And, and I'm enjoying you, as an intellect, which is nice. And I think that's also part of the reason why I make the kind of work I make, is because I want to make the kind of people that I want to be around. And also gather those people, cause those people have nowhere to go.

It's really interesting, because, like with the concept of fame, a few years ago, I think two or three years ago, the *New York Times* did this piece called "They Made New York." And I was invited to be in this photograph that they were gonna recreate a famous photograph from the '40s where there were all these jazz artists on a staircase somewhere in Harlem. So, you know, I trundle off to Soho, and I walk in, the first thing I see is Fran. A long table, at the end of the table is Fran Lebowitz talking with Susan Sarandon. And I started to walk in that direction, and Susan Sarandon suddenly just looked like a deer in the headlights. Like someone was walking—I thought, "Oh, fuck this." So I went the other way. And there was a row of men sitting, and one of the men said, "You're Penny Arcade." And I said, "Yes," and he said, "You're famous." And I said, "Well, not really." And he said, "Yes, you are." And I said, "What's your name?" And he said, "Edmund White." I said, "Edmund White?" I said, "No, Edmund White, you're famous. You wrote the Jean Genet biography! Like, you're Edmund White!"

Then the guy sitting next to him said, "Penny Arcade, oh my god, you're so famous." And I'm like, "I'm really not." I said, "What's your name?" He said, "Larry Kramer." I'm like, "Larry Kramer?" I said, "Are you kidding me?" And then sitting next to him was Brad Gooch,

who I didn't know. And I didn't even know who Brad Gooch was, and I said, "What's your name?" And he said, "Brad Gooch," and I said, "Oh, I'm sorry, what do you do?" And he said, "I'm a writer." He didn't like that too much, but any rate, you know, I walked away, and then, got around, and they were gonna form this group. And they put me next to this man, and I said, "Hi, I'm Penny Arcade." He goes, "Oh, Penny, yeah," he goes, "I know all about you." I said, "Oh," and he says, "I'm friends with Jim Hoberman." I said, "Oh great." I said, "what's your name?" He said, "Art Spiegelman." I said, "Oh, Art Spiegelman, of course." [03:00:02] And he goes, "Why do you think we're here?" I said, "I don't know why I'm here." I said, "I know why you're here. You're Art Spiegelman!" He goes, "No, but really, he said, "why are we here?" I said, "Apparently, we're the only people who didn't go away for the summer."

And so they had all of these people there, and afterwards, at the end of the day, I sat down. I was sitting at the table, and there were two men there and I introduced myself. I said, "Hi, I'm Penny Arcade." And one was Fab Five Freddy, and he goes, "Oh my god, you're so famous." And the other one was Tony Schafrazi, and he goes, "Oh my god, Penny Arcade. Wow, you're so famous." And I'm like, really? I don't know what to say. Two days later, I was doing a performance of *Longing Lasts Longer*, and as usual I talk to the audience before the performance. And I recounted this story to the audience. I said, "This is so bizarre. So all these people think I'm famous." I said, "but it makes no sense. None of them know what I do, or have ever seen me." And a man was in the audience named Shuki [phonetic] who's a brilliant Israeli psychiatrist, and he said, "But Penny, that's the definition of fame." I said, "It is?" He said, "Yes, everybody has heard of you; no one knows what you do." So in that sense, I am famous.

The woman who was one of Obama's prime PR people for his original campaign, Laurie Glenn, I met her in Chicago. She told me that I had the highest name recognition for anyone she had ever met who was not a household name. So because I've been involved in so many things, people know my name, from different things, either from Jack Smith or from Andy Warhol or from the Playhouse of the Ridiculous, or from Jeff Buckley, or from riot grrrl, or from Quentin Crisp. There's all these streams that people know me, so I assume I'm going to be quite famous when I'm eighty, if I live that long. That's kind of how they do it. You know, Louise Bourgeois did not have a solo show until she was seventy-eight years old. So that's kind of it.

What else do you have on your list?

Dziedzic: Well, I want to talk about the Lower East Side Biography Project.

Arcade: Sure.

Dziedzic: It seems to have a lot of overlap with what you're saying about—just the way that people are reading what you do from the outside is different from the people that you knew. The sense of, like, characters, and sharing those characters, and making sure that many other generations don't forget.

Arcade: Right. Well, the thing with the Lower East Side Biography started by Rick Jungers, who's a public access advocate who worked for Manhattan Neighborhood Network, coming to me and saying that he was trying to get more artists. They were trying to get more artists involved in public access to make the work—to kind of raise the standard on what was on public access. And I said no a bunch of times. Then, he came to me again, and I thought, wow, maybe I would do it, because we were already working with video. Steve was a videographer, and I've always used video in my work. I thought, oh wow, maybe we can train artists of my generation to use video. Because all these younger people had all this access to stuff. So I approached a bunch of different artists; none of them were even vaguely interested. I was sort of gobsmacked. So then I opened it up to young people. It was an opportunity for young people, without paying any money, to learn to shoot and edit video. We got a small amount of money, like fifteen hundred dollars, from Manhattan Neighborhood Network, and we used it to buy a camera.

At that time, I said that what I wanted to do was that I wanted to collect source material, because people were dying. People were disappearing. [03:05:01] And I wanted to interview people to get these this oral histories to be able to preserve this history. So the Manhattan Neighborhood Network, you had to make programs for them, so we made twenty-eight minute programs. Steve conceptualized the idea of giving these—all the interviews were with much older people—giving it to young people to shepherd these histories, to learn this and work with this material and shepherd this history. So my idea was to re-insert an intergenerational experience into what was becoming now a mono-generational scene. And also by presenting it without me in it. We edit me out; I'm not in them, you know. What happened that was kind of interesting is that first we did—seven years we did the trainings, and then they just became just

too much work for Steve to do. And I kept saying to Steve, “Steve, there are millions of students here who have been editing video since they were fourteen. Why can’t we go to the universities and give these to these kids?” Cause anybody who worked with us would get an editing and a directing credit, you know? Steve was very, very stubborn about that. He just thought, no, it’s gonna be more work for me. Of course he found out that’s not true, it’s less work because these people have studied this and whatnot.

What happened with that project—because we have broadcast every week for nineteen years, and I’ve gotta say, that’s because of Steve. Steve provides the stability. I’m a very grounded person, but I wouldn’t say I was stable. I’m erratic because my mind goes in a million different places, and basically I’m the retriever. I bring everything to Steve. It’s a true collaboration. And now, after twenty-six years, except for the fact that I am definitely the performer and I am definitely the writer, everything else is created symbiotically between Steve and I. What happened was so many people saw the program, and it changed their minds about me. Because people had no way of thinking about me cause one of the things that happens, and that is human nature, cause I experienced this myself, that if you’re not written about, and you’re not spoken about, but you are in the public arena, people develop ideas about your worth and who you are. So there must be something wrong with you if you’re not being reviewed and if you’re not being celebrated.

I know this myself because when I was in my thirties, in the *Village Voice*, there was always this very small ad for someone called Brother Theodore. Have you ever heard of Brother Theodore? He’s kind of this like kind of Beat era stand-up comedian. And I had never—oh, look at that big—

Dziedzic: [laughing] Squirrel!

Arcade: I’ve never had a squirrel come here before.

Dziedzic: Oh, there’s a cat out there, too.

Arcade: Yeah. Well, there’s always cats. Cats have always come up and down, because the old guys who used to leave here used to have seven cats. They had three apartments. And they had

cats in each apartment; this apartment had seven cats. And then they had two in the front, and they had, like, two cats upstairs, and then they had some cats downstairs. And then they used to feed all the stray cats. That was a big thing in this neighborhood: certain artists have a propensity towards feeding stray cats. They take great care of the stray cat population. Anna Magnani used to feed stray cats. Seems to be a phenomenon. I am not among them, but anyway, I do like the mood of the cats climbing up and down the fire escapes.

Dziedzic: Yeah!

Arcade: I do, I like it. When I lived on the first floor, it was much more evocative, because it wasn't a ladder, it was steps, so they would come slinking by. [03:09:58]

But any rate, what happened was a lot of people started seeing these programs. People like Richard Foreman and John Jesurun, and people who previously had no relationship to me or my work became very enamored with the programs. Thing is that we've never gotten any money to—Steve makes money by editing video projects for Columbia and other universities. He should be getting that money to do the Lower East Side Biography Project.

Dziedzic: Do you remember the dates when it was started?

Arcade: Yeah, 1999. And did you do all those interviews in just a few years?

Arcade: Well, the thing is—this is the problem—we still do interviews. There are many interviews that have not made it into programs, that's the problem. Because we don't have the time to put into editing them, and then we don't have the time to put into overseeing other people to edit them. I was just thinking about this the other day. So most of the programs that are in rotation were done between 1999 and, I'd say 2010. And now, we still do interviews, but we don't make them into programs. But now I've just gotten a really good idea, from talking to you just now—just what I said, that we need to get the money to complete the Lower East Side Biography Project. It's a really important thing to do. I guess that's all I have to say about that. I just noticed that, when we started, oral history, unless it was from primary people, was not

respected by academia. And now everybody's doing oral history with everything. You know, it's endless.

Dziedzic: Mmhmm.

Arcade: So there you go. I'm always twenty years ahead of my time.

Dziedzic: [laughing] Yeah, it's true. I would say that in my experience, I haven't learned from anything else like I've learned from that [Lower East Side Biography Project interviews] about who the people were, and, like you were saying, not just their autobiographies, but the context in which they existed.

Arcade: Right. And the thing that's really interesting is that sometimes we'll show four together, publically. And the people will be so diverse! And yet, their underlying values are exactly the same. So we're preserving the values of that, of this downtown way of life. That's a serious issue of loss. And there are people who come here for that. They come here because they think that that's what available, and then they find out it's not available. Well, it is available, but you have to make it available to yourself.

Dziedzic: Mmhmm.

Arcade: What other question do you have?

Dziedzic: Well, I wanted to ask about what you'd said about aging. You did talk about that, though, but I—

Arcade: Yeah, just tell me what your question was.

Dziedzic: Well, I didn't so much have a question as I wanted to ask you about this—well, it relates to the Biography Project, actually. Which is, did doing that project and interviewing people in that way—which, from what I've seen is kind of formal, a little bit like what we're

doing—did that change the way that you wrote your performances, or improvised your performances?

Arcade: No. No, I think I was bringing a great deal of my performance—what goes into my performance is research, research, and research. I'm a researcher. I should have been a librarian, I mean, that's my real sort of base. Being a performer is not my most pronounced character trait, yeah? I have a great deal of ability as a performer—I'm actually gifted—but the stuff that's close to me is more, more of a researcher, writer, philosopher, social worker, reformer. [03:15:09] Those kind of elements. So I think that what I brought to the interview process, it was first and foremost my curiosity, which I always say is my most elevated character trait. I'm a deeply, deeply curious person, a deeply interested person, and I always say you become an interesting person by being an interested person. Right? So I'm deeply fascinated by people. That has always been—my curiosity is uncontainable when it comes to other people. I want to know things about them. I'm very hungry to know about the way other people live, and their ideas, and how they live, and who they are. And all about me—it's really about me, to see different mirrors that I could look at myself—oh, is that something I hadn't thought about, or, oh, how would that be? Examining myself from multiple angles, through my interest in other people. So, yes, I brought my—I approached the interviews the way that I approached creating my performances. Yeah, definitely. Yeah.

Dziedzic: It's really interesting to hear you talk about research in that way.

Arcade: Mmhmm.

Dziedzic: I think that's all my questions.

Arcade: Good, can I have your page if you didn't make notes—you can email it to me, cause you made notes.

Dziedzic: Yeah.

Arcade: Email it to me, cause I'd love to see the questions.

Dziedzic: Oh yeah, absolutely.

END OF RECORDING