

Interviewee: Emma Wilcox  
Interviewer: Kristyn Scorsone  
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Vetted by: Adiana Perez  
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*Kristyn Scorsone:* Okay, today is January 18, 2017. My name is Kristyn Scorsone, and I'm interviewing Emma Wilcox at her home for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Thank you for doing this with us. First question, I just wanna ask when and where you were born.

*Emma Wilcox:* I was born on July 25, 1980 in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Who raised you? Did you grow up in once place with the same family members?

*Emma Wilcox:* I'm hesitating here. My parents left Cambridge when I was about nine months old, and we went to Florida. Something that I've always thought was interesting is my father's from New Jersey, and my mother's from Florida. It was like they tried one person's place of origin, and then, when I was still pretty little—I think I was about seven—we left and came to New Jersey.

When I was little, I wasn't really sure if Reagan was a real person. He seemed like he was kinda like the tooth fairy or one of these other, possibly, fictional characters that children are spoken to about. 'cause it was like, "Why are we leaving?" "Reagan." It was an economic motivation. My dad transitioned from carpentry. There was the construction boom down there to *[inaudible 00:01:35]* the levels to working with computers. It was this sort of migration.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do you have siblings?

*Emma Wilcox:* I have a stepbrother who's older than me.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* What kind of child were you? Were you like—

*Emma Wilcox:* *[Laughing]*. When I compare notes, say, with my partner, I don't know. There's degrees of tomboyishness, the same there's degrees of butchness, but I definitely was an artsy weirdo, very self-entertaining and, obviously, destined/doomed for some kind of artistic activity.

When I think about getting a little bit older, by the time we were living in New Jersey, you can see incipient dykedom, but it was more incipient

being an artsy weirdo. That's my primary identification. I feel like I should say that that's part of why this feels like improper poster child here because my primary identification is really as an artist and as a freak more than anything.

*Kristyn Scorstone:* When you moved to New Jersey, where in New Jersey did you move to?

*Emma Wilcox:* We were in various towns, and I think it's interesting because, especially with New Jersey being so densely populated and having such a uniquely high number of separate municipalities, it's kind of a tribal place. Everybody wants to know where you're from. Where you're really from, right? You're jockeying for things like class identifiers. You're tryin' to figure out what someone's experience was. I think what's relevant is, if you move around even a little, you don't have that experience of being with the same people through K to 12. That gives you a little bit of a different perspective. I've met people that were Army brats, and that's obviously an incredibly unique experience, so nothing like that but I felt like I could pick a place to root. That's part of Newark is trying to choose a place and commit to it.

*Kristyn Scorstone:* Do you recall any events or turning points in your early life?

*Emma Wilcox:* That's a pretty general question. *[Laughing]*. Sorry, I gotta think about that. I'm tryin' to keep my queer lens on here.

*[Pause 00:04:29 – 00:04:39]*

*Emma Wilcox:* I don't know. Let's jump from childhood more to adolescence, but the thing with being from New Jersey, I think, most of the time—I can't speak for everyone. Maybe people in western Jersey, it's different, but when you're so close to the city, **[00:05:00]** as it's called, you're close, but not close, so there's this idea—I couldn't wait to leave. Again, I think it's quite funny that I'm back in this state and have committed so fully to it 'cause I couldn't wait to leave. Not turning point, but just turning points, like discovering this earlier generation of artists and writers and performers, many of whom are queer, who really contributed in some way to this canon of outsidersness. That's significant. Again, that's some sort of blending between an artist's identity and a queer identity where you can't really separate one from the other.

David Wojnarowicz—a lot of early female performance artists, people like that, including a lot of people who died, and I never got a chance to see perform. I feel like I got to see a glimpse of things a little bit, like seeing David Wojnarowicz's solo exhibition at the new museum when the new museum was still this little storefront downtown. I'm just old enough to have seen a glimpse of another way of being. That seems significant, is discovering this whole generation of people.

*Kristyn Scorsonne:* Is that when you were in high school?

*Emma Wilcox:* Yeah, yeah. Sometimes we have to figure out, how do you find out about these people? Do you find them in the used bookstore? Does a friend tip you off? But that seems really significant. That was formative exposure. If I was a little less tired this evening, I probably could drop a few names, but it's interesting to me that so many of them were queers, but they also were just outsider people. It's like you can't take one from the other. The state of being is like a whole package. You're an outsider; you're an artist. It's just presumed. You have this cultural role. It's a very specific queer identity. I don't know if that's gonna exist forever.

*Kristyn Scorsonne:* Were the spaces that you found these people, were they all museums or different—

*Emma Wilcox:* No. I was really into zine culture. We're still in the world of the physical. We're still in the world of taping things off the radio and cassette tapes and zines.

*Kristyn Scorsonne:* Like the '90s?

*Emma Wilcox:* Libraries. Yeah, I was born in 1980, so that puts you right in the middle of a lot of different shifts in media and approaches to information access. I missed a lot of stuff, but I saw the glimpses of a lot of things before they disappeared. Like the Tower Records, magazine rack, libraries, used bookstores, junk shops—places like that. I mean the new museum is something I mentioned, but by no means were most of these cultural experiences in a very sort of white box kind of space, if that makes any sense. People mailing you things, the idea of this diffuse network of weirdos everywhere.

*Kristyn Scorsonne:* After high school, did you go to college?

*Emma Wilcox:* Yeah, I always joke about finding photography instead of Jesus in high school. The search for inacceptable public self is this basic thing that most young people go through and I'm certainly mining from that a little bit when I think about youth programs at Gallery Aferro. I don't wanna draw exclusively from my own experience, but you can start with the personal. Photography's a way to be there without being there. It gives you a job. It allows you to mediate in a space with other people, but, again, you're not really there. Photographers are weirdos. There's a sort of archetype of the lurking pervert, and I think it's okay to embrace that. So that was really crucial. I got really, really into photography for—I have, in many ways, in addition to the world of books and bookshops. I had a wonderful teacher in high school, who just met the right person at the right time. So I got really interested in going to art school. It was just the full-bore project. I don't know what on earth I would've done otherwise. I really was not particularly motivated in any direction prior to that. That was a really wonderful time. I'm really glad I got to do that. A lot of my friends dropped out halfway through, but I actually got to finish, **[00:10:00]** which was awesome.

*Kristyn Scorson:* In high school, was it a dark room that they had there? Did you work—

*Emma Wilcox:* Yeah, it was a pretty primitive dark room. Having a job, needing to set up the dark room and looked after it, having something to tend to was always so very significant.

*Kristyn Scorson:* When did you come to Newark?

*Emma Wilcox:* I lived in Bushwick for a year after graduating. I was so thrilled that I had managed to graduate with a job that was enough to live on 'cause there's all those stereotypes about people that go to art school. So I was pleased that I was able to just manage effectively. I'm sure if I had stayed in Bushwick, I probably would've gotten involved in something or another. I'm very project oriented, good or bad. I'm into throwing myself into things. I was definitely looking for something—I don't know—life altering to do. My friend Sebastian had moved to Newark after art school, and I think he was just old enough that he moved a little bit earlier. It was this sort of convergence of factors. Something that fascinates me is when people talk about how they came to Newark. If you speak frankly, that you were looking for cheap space, it renders the story inauthentic. But

on the other hand—and I’ll probably get into this more later in this interview—we’ve always tried to push back against these unbelievable offensive and limited conversations that aren’t really conversations at all that we are constantly being drawn into as transplants and small business proprietors where it’s all about the real estate. It’s not really about art, ideas, community, or anything else.

That’s just white washing and dressing. It’s a funny thing to talk about. We were looking for cheap space, and we is two friends from art school, Danny Breda and Evonne Davis. Danny was from Newark. His family, like so many people here in the Ironbound, come to this country from Portugal. I think, maybe, Evonne was looking for something, too, like looking for a big project. It’s funny. I do have family roots here. A couple generations of men in my family have worked or gone to school in Newark, goin’ back in all sorts of directions. Ma Bell, the Clark Thread Works, the Hahne’s Building. Again, I think it’s funny. A lotta times, people who move to a space, there’s this rush to prove your bonafides, and you’re usually gonna name check the earlier generation.

Even if those stories are totally true and authentic, it’s almost like you’re presenting them as your credential so you don’t have to have any more uncomfortable conversations about things like equity or gentrification. It’s kind of a complicated conversation. There’s layers to it. There was this convergence of factors. We rented 10,000 square feet. It was the top floor of a warehouse here in the Ironbound. We got a five-year commercial lease. When I tell you what happened next, I don’t wanna pull some Pollyanna nonsense like, “My goodness, how did we end up in this situation?”

We knew there was an element of risk; we just didn’t realize that what was actually gonna happen is we were gonna make all the improvements to the property ourselves, all sweat equity, and get eminent domained by the state of NJ. That was, you roll the dice, but you don’t think it’s gonna come down that hard on you. The element of risk and who gets to risk and who risks what and how that works is something that continues to really fascinate me.

That’s probably where my life with Aferro and my art practice converged, is what people’s expectations are for their lives, what information they use to make choices, what is expected for them in terms of what’s reasonable. I remember, one time, a friend of ours told us, “You need to adjust your expectations,” and I thought, “Why? Why are we each pegged a level?”

**[00:15:00]** The avant-garde arts are usually talked about with risk-taking and being out there and the cutting edge. It’s also important to

acknowledge that, sometimes, being able to take risk is because you have access to an element of resources.

You can really jump out there if you think you're gonna fall on a net. I find that kinda stuff fascinating. For us, it was a total loss. It was devastating. Eminent domain is not a pretty or clean process up close. Anyone who tells you otherwise is a liar. But by the same token, even when we were going through this pretty horrendous process, I did have enough perspective, even then as a younger person who was pretty clueless and definitely not radicalized about land use politics, to realize that the people who were truly getting ground up in the process were Newark home owners, mostly older people of color. They truly, I think, came out of it the worst. We had comparative youth, our health. We came out on the other side. So that was a very short period of time in my life that was so intense and filled with all sorts of beautiful and amazing adventures and experiences. So even though it wasn't that long in my life, it was just this very vivid time that I could probably carry on at great length about. It was immensely instructive.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Around what year did that happen?

*Emma Wilcox:* We got the lease in February 2003. The entity doing the taking was, at the time, known as the New Jersey School of Construction Corporation. It's actually really great to say that into a tape recorder, to say New Jersey School of Construction Corporation. Later, there would be a report that Corzine had done that was thick enough to beat somebody with that would bring all the facts to light about the corruption and the waste and whatnot. I didn't even know what eminent domain meant. Most people only become radicalized when something comes to their doorstep.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* How did they even tell you? Did they send you a letter, or did somebody come there to you—

*Emma Wilcox:* Now, we're talking about the gray zone, and the gray zone is where so many of us live and work and live out our entire lives in. But it's funny how, for some of us, our lives—or God help us, I'll say it, our lifestyles—are this is abstraction, but it's not abstract when you're living it. It's just your life. It's as real as anybody else's. We were renters, and we were living illegally in a commercial space, which, at the time, there were a number of pretty notable and, in some cases, extraordinarily beautiful

artist buildings in Newark. I think it's a really important thing to think about in terms of what's changed and what hasn't in the arts community. Most of those buildings are gone or on their way out. The nature of what we call the art scene has shifted pretty radically. February 2003, and I think it was—I don't know. You think I would know this now, but it was about a year or so—maybe a year and a half—'cause we had spent a year doing the renovation. It was a really intense process doing it all ourselves and just investing everything into it. I would leave my job, go there, and then work all night, and then go back and get on my job again. I got a phone call from somebody I didn't know, and he said, "Your house is comin' down." I was horrified, and I was tryin' to figure out what that meant and how to access information about that. Nobody would talk to me because I wasn't a homeowner. I'm not even sure they were really talking to the homeowners. I mean the way that these processes are handled are anything but transparent or equitable. The next mechanism of what is usually called rather innocuously community consent or community buy in is you'll see this tattered flier stapled to a telephone phone. Community meeting. Because the taking was ostensibly for a new school.

That was one of the painful ironies of the process is I never wanna get in the way of building a decent school in a neighborhood that desperately needed one. That's not who we would conceptualize is the enemy. By the time you get to the community meeting, everything's already in motion or done. That was [00:20:00] incredibly instructive, seeing this pantomime of community engagement. That was incredibly instructive. All of this really prepared me for what we ended up doing, running a nonprofit. Gallery Aferro is really this dream of artists helping artists. We lived there. It had some formal structure. We figured out you need to monetize the exhibition space. We were renting live/work space, and it was this sort of neat package in terms of functioning. Even as a pretty nascent, more an idea than an organization, we had this idea of how you would run something stable and basically try to turn nothing into something, try to create and sustain resources. That's been a theme ever since for me.

*Kristyn Scorson:* So you started Gallery Aferro right after this happened?

*Emma Wilcox:* The plan, roughly speaking, was—and Evonne and I really, I think, started this intensive partnership at that point. You realize you have this total commitment. It's like joining the Army or something. It's this total way of life. Danny left our nascent partnership. He lives in France now. I think the vision was this big beautiful gallery, so presenting space where you'd

run programming, the studios, and Danny actually gave us our name. It's a Portuguese idiom.

The name Gallery Aferro existed, and we actually had several exhibitions. Which, looking back, even with so much time and being so much younger, I think they were pretty strong. We had some public programming. When we were able to return to Newark in 2006 and reopen, it was incredibly moving having people come up to us and say, "I visited you guys once. I came to that film screening. I came to that exhibit." We just figured people didn't notice or forgot. That was really moving.

*Kristyn Scorsona:* Oh, so you had a space, and then you ended that space? You closed it, and then you came back? Is that what you're saying?

*Emma Wilcox:* We got eminent domain. It was where we lived.

*Kristyn Scorsona:* Oh, so the warehouse was—okay.

*Emma Wilcox:* It was where we worked. Yeah, yeah. That's what I mean by total loss. It was the loss of living space, a total investment, and this nascent dream, which, I think, it was actually pretty well conceptualized as a business plan. I think like thinking about that. Even without a lot of prior experience, I think it was pretty stable. I think it would've done well had we been able to stay. I feel like I'm gettin' in the weeds a little bit. But on the strength of that, those initial couple of shows and programs and just having made the gallery really beautiful, we had made a few connections. In 2006, we got a call—I met this guy. It was a free building. I almost hung up the phone. It was like, "You've gotta be kidding me." We had been through so much. We were just trying to rebuild our lives and figure out what to do next. There was this opportunity. Everyone always thinks these things come through the public sector, and that's an important point to make is that a lot of arts activity in a lot of communities is done through the private sector. There's some advantages to that, but that means that it's not necessarily a transparent RFP, not that governments really work that way in practice either. So the mechanisms by which resources become available, again, is this constant fascination for me, just broadly speaking. We were able to reopen Gallery Aferro June 2006. We were told we might expect to be in the building that we're in now, 73 Market Street, for about a year, so we planned accordingly. This past June, we celebrated ten years, so we've been there a long time.



*Kristyn Scorsona:* That's awesome. What is RFP?

*Emma Wilcox:* Request for proposals, the idea of meritocracy, where it's not about who you know. It's about being able to access an open application and have a fair shake at competing for some kind of resource. That's the way things are supposed to function, but then they very rarely do in practice.

*Kristyn Scorsona:* Do you [00:25:00] consider yourself an entrepreneur?

*Emma Wilcox:* Broadly speaking, in the sense that part of keeping what we're doing together involves being strategic and—anyone who owns any kind of small business knows what it's like to haggle with your vendors and get eaten to death by paperwork. I don't necessarily have a very strong identification with this rhetoric of entrepreneurship that you see branded sometimes because it's part of this—I don't know—crazy neoliberal myth, everyone should own and start their own business. I got a wonderful e-mail recently. We made these friends out in Detroit. They're—I don't know—anarchist hippies. They're so tough and so cool. They run a space called Alley Culture. They saw we were hosting an event at the gallery recently called arts co-ops 101 with The Cooperative Development Institute. I got this terse e-mail from our friends in Detroit. I'm paraphrasing here, but she said, "Just so the young people don't confuse things." She was trying to make sure that we understood the difference between, say, cooperative or democratically organized business and organizations and, again, some of this hyperbole about entrepreneurship saving us all. In the most strict sense of the word, yes, that's what we do. We generated something that didn't exist, and we're trying to sustain and grow it. Broadly speaking.

*Kristyn Scorsona:* I forgot to ask you. What did your parents do for a living?

*Emma Wilcox:* My mom is an RN, and my dad went from being a carpenter to working with computers. He was a technical writer. My mom worked her way up from RN to home healthcare to managing. I was thinking about it. Some people come from families of artists, and some people don't. In a strange way, I feel like the idea of materials and resources and duty of care and salvage and things like that did come across to me in a early childhood from both of their respective professions. They were both

extremely hard working and kind of project oriented, in the broadest possible terms. That's something Evonne and I share is just being extremely project oriented. Again, possibly to a fault, but everything's a project, and projects usually are big projects.

*Kristyn Scorson:* Evonne is your partner in the business and also your wife?

*Emma Wilcox:* Yeah, so, again, the wonderful malleability of language. I've given you a hard time about the word entrepreneur. Yeah, I would say, as best I can tell, the idea of couples running arts nonprofits is not all that unique, boy/girl couples and boy/boy couples and girl/girl couples, and everything in between. It's an incredibly challenging way to live, but it doesn't appear to be that uncommon. We claim our artistic forbearers and our tribal elders all over the place. A lot of them are here in Newark, and they're people that we've been incredibly privileged to meet and work with. Exit Art, which was one of these legendary countercultural spaces in NYC that I was exposed to in a formative time in my life, that was run by a couple. Exit Art is really interesting because it's a nonprofit that died when one of the founders died. It had a life, so that was sort of a very different approach to succession plan. Aljira, obviously, is another space that was really powered in a very specific way by partnerships. Then there's the upstate ladies. There's Women's Studio Workshop and Time and Space Limited. Those are two instances where we can see older lesbian couples who have been doin' this since the dawn of time. I will never forget when the woman who's the ED of Women's Studio Workshop took us aside as part of a mentorship program that we were in. She's like, "Well, one of you has to be the ED," and we were ranting [00:30:00] and raving about equal partnership and dual directorships and not being down with hierarchical models. She just kinda wrinkled her eyebrow and is like, "I get that. I get that. I'm from the hippie days, but essentially, someone has to be listed as an ED to do grants." It's actually quite difficult to mediate with the world on your terms.

*Kristyn Scorson:* Is that executive director?

*Emma Wilcox:* Yeah, yeah. The problem with that is, even if you keep telling yourself you're just putting it down on paper, is people will automatically think of that person as the CEO. That was something that just my own naivete just shocks me now thinking about it. That seems relevant to the idea of lesbian entrepreneurship is the world is not going to work with you on

your terms all the time, and it happens in these very subtle and weird ways. The model is still the pyramid with the guy on top. That has not budged barely a wit. That was this weird moment that sticks out in my mind as her being like, “You’re gonna have to figure that out.”

*Kristyn Scorsonne:* How did you tackle it between you two?

*Emma Wilcox:* It’s funny, I do do most of the grants. The thing that’s interesting about being two women is, what labor is gendered and how head labor and hand labor are valued and the idea that, are you interchangeable—the issue of trying to escape from hierarchies. Even though my dad’s a carpenter, I have zero useful hand skills whatsoever. I’m just gonna say that. Evonne’s very multitalented. She can write things and strategize with people and do that kind of person-to-person work, and she can build everything and fix everything.

You kinda figure out by default who’s gonna do what. I’m probably a bit more patient when it comes to mindless bureaucratic nonsense, but everyone has to contribute. Everyone has to contribute. It gets a little funny when it’s also a partnership in that other sense. It’s like the domestic economy, but everyone has to pull their weight, and everyone has to contribute. I started being down as the ED on paper. We started calling her the artistic director.

Now, in some ways, the artistic director, conventionally, has a lot more cred because they’re the idea person. They’re the art person, the curatorial person, but there’s also this weird, oh, well, the artistic director’s just one of those weird artsy types. The ED is the CEO, the no nonsense leader. There’s all these weird—there’s all this baggage, even with the language, and then use the language, and then the language becomes real. That was really complicated and difficult. I know I’m super rambling here—

*Kristyn Scorsonne:* No, that’s okay.

*Emma Wilcox:* - but let’s talk about femme invisibility and the extremely raced and classed nature of the so-called progressive art world. It was immensely painful for me seeing how, because—I mean I don’t wear makeup, but just being—I don’t know—skinny or being the one that was wearing pantyhose or whatever you wanna call it—whatever my verbal presentation—people acted as if Evonne was invisible sometimes, and they were most comfortable with the situation where they were dealing with one person.

We got hit with that, and then we had to figure out how to come back at the world with something that would allow us to deal with it in a more reasonable manner. It's not like we figured out the perfect solution, but, again, no one really tells you this. If you're young and naive, you don't know it's coming. You just start seeing it functioning. You have to figure what to do. That's a real issue that seems, to me, to be unique to your topic is, how does the world deal with you? Even in these lefty artsy spaces, people are most comfortable with he or she who does hand labor must not be— **[00:35:00]** they're the person you wanna talk to, the important person. Or the girly one, which is funny because you still need a penis to get anything done so you would think that the butch person would have an easier time of it, but go figure. I don't have the solution, but it feels important to draw attention to the functioning of these processes.

*Kristyn Scorsonne:* Do you get that from vendors as well as, maybe, artists are coming to try to exhibit? Is it coming from all different people or more business people that you deal with?

*Emma Wilcox:* That's an issue. We deal with arts colleagues and arts organizations and cultural organizations, but we also—at this point in my life, with everything that we sacrificed and put into the gallery, it's—and I never was in this to be some pokey regional art center. We've always had this really big vision, so that means that you wanna put yourself out there and try to get into those rooms that you don't usually get invited to. Evonne, in particular, has just pushed relentlessly to try to be the person that gets on the committee, invited into the room. Again, let's talk about language. Who's at the table? I wanna be difficult and say, is the table real? Is the table metaphysical? Who built the table? In order to be at the table, you need to be in the room, which means you gotta know where the door is. It's just very difficult. So when you start working outside of your sector, and you start dealing with people whose organizations are like \$5 million a year organizations, or you wanna try to do state level or even regional advocacy, you're dealing with a wider range of people and their expectations about what a leader looks like come into play. I do wanna call out the cultural sector broadly for, sometimes, subscribing to things that really are very much connected with the status quo, so it's worth mentioning.

*Kristyn Scorsonne:* What's the layout of Gallery Aferro? You have the exhibit space, and then you said you have residents, too?

*Emma Wilcox:* Yeah. It's 20,000 square feet, and I think, at this point, certainly, in terms of our constituency, the building and the gallery and us are all sort of, I'm assuming, thought about as one body, or they're very associated with each other. Aferro's this idea, and then our relentless labor keeps that idea existent, and the contributions of everyone who participates in every way, whether it's visiting or other kinds of participation or like developing programs or donating or the artists—like absolutely everyone—they make it the gallery. Without it, there is nothing. Then there's the building, and the building is necessary to house all of this energy. I guess what I'm trying to say is, if it was 5,000 square feet or 500,000 square feet, it would expand to be—it's an ethos as much as it's a physical space, and that ethos is constantly mutating as people contribute to it. It's not fixed or stable. You can see a lotta people's fingerprints or DNA on it. As much as Evonne and I have given a great deal at this point, it's really this—you know what Victor Davson would call a social sculpture at this point more than anything. The current building is 20,000 square feet. It's got four floors and a basement. About half the building is artist's studios. They're work-only. I suppose we could've tried to live there illegally, but after everything we had gone through, we felt like it might be, maybe, easier to mediate with the world if we kept it really tight in that way. Again, you're evaluating risk. How much do you have to put out there, and what will the consequences be if you lose your gamble? The rest of it is exhibit space. And then we have all these different wonderful aspects, too, like the community book room, and we have a permanent installation that's a vintage freight elevator. Every corner of the building gets used. It's an old building, and we really put it through its paces. It never gets a break.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* How did you get so much business know how in order to figure all this out?

*Emma Wilcox:* *[Laughing]*. [00:40:00] Something that I've talked about a lot, when I think about Newark, I think about learning in public. I just keep coming back to that. I was 22 when we started the gallery, and it was just this total commitment. That's the only way you learn is by doing. I think about that a lot. What are my actual credentials? You look at that with people that will sell themselves as consultants. What are your credentials? I've done all sorts of things, but, really, all of them trace back to the gallery. That, pretty much, is—that's it.

We made our credentials. What does that mean, and what are the implications of that? Absolutely everything is instructive, just absolutely everything, even the difficult things like eminent domain. You learn as you go, and you draw on different parts of yourself. I think that's what's been really interesting, and I see that a lot with my partner. You draw from every aspect of your life experience, and you have to become whatever the gallery needs, which is a really intense thing. Sometimes I don't wanna give that much, but you do. It's demanded of you, so you do. You have to figure it out and become what is required in that moment. But I'm just thinking about learning in public 'cause I'm really proud of the fact that it's been this dynamic process that so many people have contributed to. And why I'm okay with that is it feels very reciprocal.

That's because of our commitment. So if white people who are not from "around here", there's this thing that happens where people come into communities, especially communities that have experienced a lot of disinvestment, and they're able to access resources sometimes through a variety of means, the pattern tends to be they leave. There's the leaving. In some ways it feels like the most radical thing you can do is not the words coming out of your mouth; it's the commitment to stay in a place. I am committing to show up here every day. I'm committing to being here year after year.

As much as a lot of people have contributed to my learning, it feels like a good exchange. The thing where it gets problematic is if you have figured it all out through trial and error, and a lot of people have helped you with that process, and then you just take it and go somewhere else. I think that's where it becomes a problem. Then you're sort of making the community your guinea pig. We have this very commitment based relationship with the city. It's not always the easiest place to be, but it's like, I'm going to continue to be here.

*Kristyn Scorson:* Are there challenges that are specific to Newark?

*Emma Wilcox:* You know, I had all these ideas of things that I might wanna say, but, in some ways, I've grown up with the gallery, so I haven't really done a ton of business anywhere else. Our original vision for Aferro was very nomadic in nature, and I still think that's a part of who we are and our dreams. Doing the Aferro mobile portrait studio was incredibly gratifying. Newark, there's this lingering outside, this hallucinated image of the city. People calling up saying, "Is it safe to come here?" I think if we were interviewing in 2006, I would've given you a different answer.

Now, the change is not just in press releases and this hollow rhetoric of the renaissance. Change is already coming, and, as always, the issue is, who is that change for, and this using of the arts image to power economic development, how is that gonna function? We know we are part of these larger cycles, so adopting a pose that you're outside of that cycle is willfully naïve and ridiculous. You just have to try to be as conscious of what you're doing within those cycles as possible. But I'm deeply concerned about whether the gallery will be able to stay and stay downtown and whether arts in general, especially people centered arts and artist centered arts. And what's interesting is wanting to stay downtown is not because I'm not interested in serving people from all the wards—I actually think that I'm best positioned to serve, truly, everyone 'cause our mission is connected with this endlessly challenging idea of, who are we not serving? Let's try to serve those people. It's a very dynamic practice. It's not like you're like, "I'm done with my inclusion. I'm done with my outreach. Okay, next task." It's a way of life. It's a practice. So if we are the healthiest organization we can be, if we have access to transit and to people from outside of the city, if we're easy to get to, if people are willing to invest in us, then we can serve people from out of the wards. Again, let's go back to all of this stuff about land use politics and who has agency and who gets to make decisions in communities. Where is an arts district, and who decided that it was an arts district? Was it because people took it upon themselves to access the resources they could and create value, or was it decided for them? There's a lot of pretty crazy stuff happening right now, and we're gonna have to see how it all shakes out. I love working in Newark because it's challenging. I want a lot of things for the people that I meet and the people we serve and for ourselves. The city's people are really this amazing resource, and I want that resource to actually serve them.

**[00:48:07]** Let's harken back to an earlier, younger, and more naïve self. We had just reopened the gallery in 2006. We're very excited. We're still this very nascent organization. Whether you're a nonprofit, an arts nonprofit, or any kind of small business, when you get a media or a press inquiry, it's very exciting. There's definitely something on the line. You know that your job is to get that exposure for your organization or your project. There's definitely implicit and explicit consequences if you don't hop to when you're told and give the right answers.

This is, again, where a lot of arts entrepreneurs, I think especially nonlocals, get in trouble. There's this pressure on you to say whatever you're expected to say. I could laugh at my younger self now. The hockey

stadium had just opened, so this is TV news. They got the lights and the cameras, and I'm thinkin' we're gonna talk about art. Don't laugh, but I really thought we were gonna talk about arts and culture and all these big dreams we were having. The question is, "Are you seein' new people move in? Are you working with *new* artists?"

You're supposed to do as you're told and say, "Oh yeah, yeah, lots of new people are moving in, white people, people with money, and these rents are really cheap, but I know they're gonna go—," that's what you're supposed to do. That's one of those moments where you have to decide if you're gonna go get that exposure for your project or whether you're gonna try and have a different conversation or disrupt that conversation. That's what I mean **[00:50:00]** by the idea of the arts being used to advance this completely other agenda. I try to pay attention to how people use language.

Especially with the status that—again, I speak only for myself, but this status of having lived here and worked here and committed here in a really intense way, but not being from here, so being this neither nor status, I feel like this position that I have where I sometimes feel caught between these two poles. And the way of describing them would be this calcified hyper localism where the only things that are legit are people who have been deemed—you're born here, or whatever it is, it's hyper, hyper, hyper local, and there's no trace of the outside.

I say calcifying because it's like something really positive, which is like authentic local identities, but it becomes a sort of trap. What's funny about that is, eventually, it becomes a trap because the people who are deemed authentic get kinda—they age. It's like there may not be room for, literally, new, young ideas, including even from the community. I deal with a lot of older artists and older arts administrators, and I can even see that, as you get older, are you still open to new ideas? Are you listening to the young people in your community? I'm so grateful that we have our interns and the young kids that visit the gallery because you see how you can become isolated and, frankly, a little bit set in your ways. The other pole, the other extreme is just as extreme. It's the erasure, the erasure and the complete devaluing and, literally, almost the failure to see this kind of willful blindness to anything that isn't deemed new. New is white, and new is moneyed and heteronormative and commercially oriented.

I've seen that happen up close, and it's not pretty. These are the two extremes that we're trying to mediate between, but trying to rise to those challenges is part of what galvanizes our work. This idea of erasure, the fear of erasure, and the erasure and the destabilization of the cultural



authority of people of color in communities like Newark is a real thing. I feel like anyone, like me, who doesn't speak about that honestly and see it and interrogate their own work, again, you're just participating willfully and blindly in the process that you'll probably benefit from. I've learned from everyone around me.

Some of this language is from mentors and colleagues and some of the elder artists in the community who have taken it upon themselves to tell me stories and talk to us about things. You have to be curious. You have to stay curious, especially if you're new to a community. Your job is to become informed and not to only know what's right in front of your nose. That's another mistake that I think people make sometimes.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Was the Newark Community welcoming to you guys when you first opened up?

*Emma Wilcox:* There's the opening up in the sense of—it's hard to explain now. It sounds like millions of years ago, and it really wasn't that long ago. When there were more loft buildings, there's this way of being that's unique to—I don't know—loft life. I'm not talking about willful bougie bohemia, but these are our tribal elders. Like I said, artists are my people, and that's my primary identification. So this is not new, but you look for lights on in windows and commercial buildings and people- I don't know. We were kinda isolated because we were working constantly, and we didn't know anyone.

We had this incredibly peculiar way of life. We met Jerry Gant who lived below us who's this legendary Newark artist and spoken word person. We met a woman named Kelly Pinho who's a performance artist, and an artist who was working as a waitress, at the time, at the all-night diner. That was one of our few human contacts. **[00:55:00]** We had this funny way of life. But we met people and people took it upon themselves to visit. It was a smaller artist community in some ways, and it had the quality of a small town a little bit. There's a certain functioning of nostalgia. I'll just be totally transparent about that, but, I think in some ways, it was a bit more inclusive of a community. It wasn't about making the scene or these ideas of bohemia. That's kinda like the second-tier stage of a scene is the people that show up to make the scene.

It was a little harsher. You had to be a little tougher to manage. I think back. It was kind of an interesting, but pretty small group of people, but a lot of them took time out to meet us. Really, for me, was that June 2006 reopening. We had, really, no idea what to expect. It was a pretty modest

crowd by the standards that we have now. We have 200, 250 people at a good Aferro opening now. We probably had 40 or 50 people, but they showed up. They showed up and they said that what we were doing had value and that they were glad we were back. That was everything. I can't even explain what that felt like.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Was that like a ribbon cutting with the mayor or just a regular—

*Emma Wilcox:* You're jokin', right? That's another thing. Maybe if we were more savvy entrepreneurs or had a different orientation to the world, then the process would've been come to a community and figure out who's got the juice and who's connected and making those in-roads. That's not the way we did things. On the other hand, I have to say, I've been vindicated quite a few times. We don't always appear to always be doing it right, but we get things done. Frankly, some of that has to do with—I don't know whether it's being a child of punk rock and the '80s, but you just have very low expectations of official capacity resources.

Frankly, then, you're not disappointed. DIY and punk and that kind of stuff is a huge part of our DNA. It's just shorthand. Some people say hip-hop instead of punk, but it's this way of being. It can become a trap, though. It can become isolating in its own way, but it's a way of approaching the world and trying to get things done. People were incredibly welcoming. I loved the absence of indifference with what I would call the typical Newark gallery visitor.

People ask you why the hell you're doing something or tell you they really like it. People are engaged and enthusiastic and curious and critical, and that's really, really different than, say, your typical jaded gallery audience elsewhere, I think. The work that we do can be really hard, so sometimes all that it takes is one person telling us that it was meaningful, and it makes your whole day. It's just the greatest thing. Again, it feels like—it's not like you earn your bonafides, and then you can stop thinking or working, but we have been here. There's definitely this maturation process. We hit a decade, and it's just, after a while, every day, you sweep your sidewalk and open your door. It accumulates over time.

It's like building coral or something. It's these tiny daily actions that start to eventually add up to something. My other favorite thing is I'll be walking down the street and somebody will yell, "Hey, gallery lady!" which usually scares the hell out of me, but it's a designation that I appreciate that I feel like came earned with time. It's not an instantaneous thing. I would've liked a ribbon cutting, but maybe next time.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Are you connected at all to some of the other arty business, like Artisan Collective?

*Emma Wilcox:* Absolutely. The other metaphor is the ecosystem. You could say it's a constellation if you wanted to get artsy with it. To me, one of the most useful ecosystem comparisons would be like a mangrove. [00:59:37] There's a lot of different entities and organisms of different size and composition. You have to think of yourself as being within the system. The idea of exceptionalism, that's nonsense. You are actively within something. [01:00:00] We're talking about Newark's challenges, but Newark is a really important place, I think, because it has this long, long, long history of cultural activity and also of activism. Something that, again, I have to thank a lot of cool people in my life, including a lot of older people who clued me into this, is Newark's status, historically, as the place almost where artists would gather internally to work on their stuff or play for each other. In the jazz era, you might go and perform in New York City, make some money, but jazz is where there were these really—in Newark would be these really cool clubs. That's a very unique role. I'm doing a bad job of talking about it, but it seems like this place where really important stuff got made or fermented or the framework got laid out. But a lotta times, larger cities will get the credit. But you look, if you scratch the surface, Newark is this incredibly important place, whether it's the black arts movement. That's really different than, say, if we were conducting this interview in—I know Dr. Price said you're not supposed to call them rust belt, you're supposed to call them legacy cities. Some places try to reinvent themselves with culture. I think there's creativity and creative people everywhere, and I take great for hope in humanity in that fact. There are some places where there isn't much of a tradition of artistic activity, and they're trying to graft it on. But that's not Newark's story. Anyone who starts using Prairie or frontier language with Newark—again, that's my duty as a white person is to be like, "We're gonna stop right there. Do you see me wearing a bonnet? Are there cattle being branded?" Resisting that language, absolutely resisting prairie and frontier language. We have amazing colleagues like Artisan Collective and more people than I can possibly name check on this tape. You also have almost your historical colleagues, people that are dead, people you'll never meet, but they are part of your inheritance and this cultural transmission. You wanna plug into that, and then you figure out what your unique contribution is.

I think we came to Newark 'cause we felt like we could contribute something, but that wasn't because there wasn't anything here, I guess, is an important point to make. I'm also really happy that those ladies were able to hold space on Halsey because that's no mean feat as the city gentrifies. Being able to hold space for collective activities and for small-scale entrepreneurship and for creative people, that's serious. I hope they're able to maintain that space 'cause that's very significant.

*Kristyn Scorsona:* How do you choose which artist to exhibit?

*Emma Wilcox:* It's interesting. I feel like there was this crux very briefly in the early days of Aferro where we almost might have become something that strongly resembled a collective. You look at the legacy of membership and co-op organizations, and there's this whole history of women's galleries, which we don't identify as. Then the moment passed, and that's not the exact model that we went to. It's fairly hybridized. Evonne is our artistic director, is really responsible for creating the framework and coming up with these overarching thematic plans that we work within. I feel like the process is still fluid enough that we can be very responsive. The thing of it being a small and broke organization is you can be—sometimes you're not as nimble as you wanna be because of lack of access to capital, but, other times, you can move quickly because there isn't that bureaucracy. I like it that we can be responsive, that somebody can come in and say, "I have an idea for a program," and we're like, "Okay, let's try to make that happen," and really, really interested in seeing more and more community originated programming. Sometimes we have guest curators. Sometimes stuff is curated by the gallery. Sometimes artists curate their own stuff. We do a lot of open calls because that's a way of continuously keeping the door opening and counterbalancing the tendency when human beings gather in one place, good or bad, to form a tribe. Tribes are wonderful, but then they become cliques, and that's a problem. You wanna be [01:05:00] really careful with that kinda stuff. After a while, you start associating only with the people you know, and that becomes an issue. So it's pretty fluid.

*Kristyn Scorsona:* Could you tell me about the mobile portrait studio?

*Emma Wilcox:* How are we doin' on time, too? Are you doin' okay?

*Kristyn Scorsona:* Yeah, yeah. I'm good.

*Emma Wilcox:* Oh, man. I did this whole Tedx Talk about the mobile portrait studio, so I should try to remember some of those points 'cause I worked pretty hard on them. So there's this sort of deep history with Aferro, the idea of nomadism and repurposing objects. There's a level of agency that goes into being mobile. That's something that is part of our collective—Evonne and I's collective combined interests and being able to build things, being able to repurpose things. No matter how hard we work as a daily practice on addressing barriers to cultural engagement and making the gallery a truly welcoming place, there's still just these inherent power dynamics with space.

Even if it's space that you're killing yourself repairing the toilet on and sweeping, it's still your space, and space is platform, and platform is power. You're inviting people, yes, to cross this threshold into the gallery, but there's still, sometimes, this hesitation to do it. So looking at this sort of power dynamics with that, if you take the gallery, if you take this project to the people and to the street, you're reversing those power dynamics. It's like reversing the polarity on something.

You're either on their turf, or you're on the shared turf of the street, and people can choose to engage, but, really, they're doing it on their terms a little bit more than on your terms. The mobile portrait studio is significant, also, because it's something that offers an immediate tangible and even very practical product and an enjoyable experience in the short term. The project was tied to Newark's 350<sup>th</sup>, so photographing hundreds and hundreds of people, those portraits will gain meaning over time. That's my favorite part of the project is this short-term value and long-term value. People can look at themselves whenever they want. It's like an open time capsule. You can look at it a week after it was taken. You can look at the portrait five years after it was taken. You can look at the portrait 50 years after it was taken, and it gains meaning. We really loved the idea of this visual civic archive, and that archive came out of a noninstitutional space. Gallery Aferro is not a government entity or a large university or anything of that nature. It's this little artist-powered operation. It's in a 7 by 12-foot cargo trailer. We went out into the part of New Jersey where you can see animals and found the cheapest deal we could find. It was this crazy junkyard that we found in northwestern New Jersey, I guess. There were horses. That's all I can say. It's powered with a generator. I'd love to see it powered by solar someday, but I was very pleased when it looked like the

brand of generator that we got is the same brand of generator that a lot of the vendor guys at Broad and Market use.

It's a really durable—it's a really, really good quality brand of generator. The idea is to offer the highest possible quality experience within the parameters of it being this funny repurposed object. People really participate on their terms. They are who they want to be in there. They're seen how they wanna be seen. It's this very intimate experience between photographer and subject, and it's free. It just kills me. People are so conditioned, myself included. You're lookin' for the catch. Free isn't really free. There's some bullshit to it. It's a scam. It's a hook. [01:10:00] I'm really, even at this point in my life, sort of a world-weary nonprofit person.

That's my most idealistic self, talking is the idea that we can actually have a world where everything is free and everyone is welcome. It was a really unbelievably satisfying project to do. The only thing I'm kinda mad about is we got so many requests and got drawn along deeper and deeper into different communities by word of mouth. We did 15 dates in a couple months, and it was just totally grueling.

There were a couple people that we just couldn't work out the dates with that I still would really like to have the portrait studio come visit. We photographed a pretty decent number of infants and young children, and there were a couple expectant moms and expectant families that were photographed. For Newark's 400<sup>th</sup>, those infants or folks that weren't born yet, they'll be like 49, 50, 51, and I think about that a lot.

*Kristyn Scorsona:* Do you think you'll do it again, then, at that time—an update of these people?

*Emma Wilcox:* Well, I'll be, what, like 86 years old.

*Kristyn Scorsona:* Oh, yeah. That's true.

*Emma Wilcox:* In all seriousness, succession planning is a real thing, and we draw incredible amounts of wisdom and strength from our tribal artist elders, but you also see a lot of really differing outcomes. This is not a life where you get a 401k. I certainly don't think there's gonna be Social Security for my generation. I'm not really sure. We don't have a succession plan all worked out. I would be lying if I said I did.

We've seen a lot of older artists take a lot of hits where they're a life of service and generosity and knowledge sharing didn't "pay off". It's really,

really hard to see your future peers and wonder, “What did this all amount to?” I’m sorry to be gloomy, but it’s really hard to contemplate but nothing would make me happier than to have that happen. We wanna set up a Wiki where people can figure out how to do their own mobile portrait studio. Knowledge is power. Anybody should be able to set this up.

*Kristyn Scorsona:* I just have a couple more questions if that’s okay with you.

*Emma Wilcox:* Yeah, totally.

*Kristyn Scorsona:* One thing, just to back track for a second, with the eminent domain when you were at that warehouse space, I saw, on your website that you took photos above. Can you explain that? Did you drive the—is that a thing you can do? Or did somebody rent a helicopter?

*Emma Wilcox:* How to compact all this. It is funny, the interactions sometimes, or the noninteraction, between my Gallery Aferro life and my artist life. They do and they don’t touch. A really pivotal moment in my practice, in my fine art practice was—I mentioned the photographer as lurking pervert. That’s a real thing. There’s some pretty serious ghosts in the history of photography, especially documentary photography. We were drawing on, you know my partner and I both studied photography, and I think we were drawing on that knowledge of some of the ghosts and some of the lurking power dynamics with photography, like with the mobile portrait studio. Certainly, in my own practice, I always had a supreme interest in place. I never learned how to drive, so I was always walking around everywhere, taking the train. You really have to commit very intensely to a place. I’ve always been really interested in local history and contested history. But ultimately, I was more or less working within a conventional street photography paradigm where you’re looking at the houses, workspaces, and environments of strangers. I’d be there with my camera. I shoot with a view camera, so it’s a very [01:15:00] slow process. It’s not exactly like the photo safari that documentary photographers and street photographers often participate in, but you’re still out there. You’re setting up. You’re looking. You’re doing that in someone else’s space or in this space of the street and the sidewalk. Sometimes strangers would come up to me, and they’d be angry, and they would say, “You don’t even know what you’re looking at.” I was photographing, sometimes unbeknownst to me, some space of trauma, like a factory that had closed

down that had devastated the tax base of a community or something, ruined porn and urban poverty porn—stuff like that.

It's important to talk about these things. These are very real things active in even contemporary photo practice. The real turning point was photographing my own house that I was about to lose and feeling that craziness where you can feel this irrational rage bubbling up in you. Somebody asks you about what's going on or says, "Oh, no one used to live in that building. Nobody was there," which artists sometimes do to other artists. They want the mythology of the frontier. "We came here, and we wrestled this place from raw rock." Some of that I think is legitimate pride in DIY renovations, but it also functions as erasure.

"There was nothing before me", whether that's artists talking about a prior generation of artists or artists talking about the sweatshop workers that preceded them. I kept having these dreams. We knew we were gonna lose the place. We held out as long as we could. Things just got worse and worse, and I think if I had had superior access to capital, we might've been able to mount a defense. When you're living there illegally, especially if you have kids, it's very difficult to mount a long defense.

Interestingly, another one of Newark's important artists originated spaces, Sumei, they fought eminent domain for the better part of a decade from the stadium. I don't know how they did it because we almost lost our minds after a year of fighting. It's a really awful process. I kept having these dreams, and it was a dream of what, I think, now you would call a drone, but drones were not really part of the popular culture at this point. I kept having these dreams about a brick with wings, this sentient embodied object that could go on these kamikaze missions. This is after we had had to leave, and I missed the place so much.

I just couldn't believe that we had lost this beautiful dream of freedom and self-determination and access to this spatial freedom of having all that space and having it laid out with the way that we wanted with our hands and having more space and more beauty than we were supposed to be able to want based on our income level. I'd have these dreams. It was like a dream of flying, this brick—a very violent image, a brick going through a window, but it was something with wings that could move and fly and somehow had some kind of sentients.

I knew the weak spots from the windows 'cause we had repaired almost all of them. We had to replace an incredible number of the windows. When we rented the property, there was literally snow leaking in from a huge hole in the roof. I think to myself, "I know the weak spots. I can tap on the glass and break back in and go home." I kept thinking about this



embodiment beyond the body. My body's pretty poorly coordinated and not especially strong and has very significant limitations.

So I kept thinking about flight. I had worked for an architectural photographer who was kind enough to let me photo assist on a couple of helicopter aided shoots, so I knew that that was possible. I knew that you could hire a pilot and wear a seatbelt and take the doors off. One of the last things that I did before we had to leave was write those words **[01:20:00]** on the roof. It was so funny. I'm no one's idea of a graf writer. I've met guys who really know what they're doing with the lettering. I'm not exactly Revs Cost or someone like that or ESPO or some of these legendary writers from my teenage years.

I actually screwed it up. I screwed up the phrase. It's slightly grammatically wrong in my haste. I was so angry. When people are mad, part of what means is they lose credibility in things like eminent domain proceedings, they're able to be dismissed because they're incoherent. It's the same way there's an interoffice memo is a kind of genre of writing and communication. There's this genre of this incoherent, usually, profanity filled, rage filled missive that people will spray paint on ply wood or maybe on bed sheets or something. It's usually connected with some injustice that they can't fight. It's not a fair fight in terms of the scale of the adversaries. They're losing their home or something. I'm interested in these different genres of writing. One of the last things I did was write on the roof. I was so angry I couldn't find my own language. I had to steal, or borrow if you wanna be nice about it, somebody else's words. There's this Afghani poet who is, in fact, paraphrasing language from Tacitus, and Tacitus was supposedly writing what a Roman general had said. It's this language that's been mangled and borrowed and transmitted.

It seemed so appropriate, which was "my memory gets in the way of your history." I just didn't feel that I had any means of communicating the dissonance between this official line about the eminent domain proceedings and our lived experience. There was no recourse to try to talk about the difference between those two things. Again, realizing that this was a huge taking that had swept up land owners and—imagine having worked all your life to buy a house, and around you, the entire neighborhood destabilizes, and you're staying in your home because, if you leave your home, you definitely will lose it. You have to hang on and hold out.

Then, what you're offered in exchange for your home, is something that will not ever buy you that back again. It's just such an ugly process. That began this rooftop writing. It's just a really important turning point

because this idea of involving my own life and drawing on my own life. I've continued to draw on other people's stories. It's this hybrid process. Sometimes the stories are shared with me. Sometimes they're my own. Sometimes they're from legal proceedings or local legend. Sometimes they're borrowed or stolen.

Involving my own life, that was really a turning point in my practice. Some of the drawings have been photographed by helicopter or by me. Some of them I didn't get to in time. It's very expensive to hire a helicopter, and you have to find a pilot that's on your wavelength. Some of them ended up in Google Earth, the rise of Google Earth and the rise of drone photography—all of those things. This has all become very mainstream, and it was in its nascent period when I was having these crazy dreams about this brick with wings. I'm not really sure what the future of the project is.

I'm always pissed I didn't get to do the Hahne's building when it was still a ruin. That would've been a big one. That would've been a good one. You have to think about, what does this project look like as Newark has changed and as this technology has become more mainstream. A lot of innovative technology comes out of warfare first, but then it trickles down to the consumer level. What does it mean? I didn't use a drone. I experimented with building my own with helium balloons and crappy cameras, but I've never actually used a drone, per se. I sort of made of myself a drone. Certainly, a helicopter is not a neutral choice. Helicopters are the tools of state control and repression. That's not a neutral choice at all. I mean really, essentially, there's no choices that are neutral. It's just what you're doing with them. Helicopters are the tools of surveilling, which is itself a form of control. **[01:25:00]**

I also did writings in flour. I wanted to find a way to not further degrade Newark's already pretty degraded water table. Again, I had these very violent dreams of writing in gasoline, but I don't really wanna enact violence on this landscape. Enough has already been enacted. We're sitting here in this living room. This is environmental justice, ground zero. This whole neighborhood, the Ironbound. I thought about—it's funny. It's very biblical or Roman era, like salting the fields, but ended up settling on flour. That was another project where I had to use my body to write these enormous letters.

The last one that I did was a survey text from Newark's original survey when it was a colony. It's a beautiful piece of language, a broken piece of colonial language that is a taking. It's a legal document justifying a very specific relationship to a landscape and to capital, but it's very poetic on

the surface 'cause it talks about these beautiful trees and the river as a way of understanding the landscape.

I'm no one's idea of a graffiti artist, but I like the idea that the images of these rooftops have gotten loose on the Internet. Another one of these early artistic heroes where people like John Fekner who wrote false promises in Spanish on those buildings in the south Bronx in the '80s. They would show up in Reagan's TV press conference. Big language. A lotta the stuff is from these art heroes of my youth. Some of these really amazing women text artists that came to play in the '80s, like Jenny Holzer. Those are some of my inspirations.

*Kristyn Scorson:* At Gallery Aferro, being two career women that own this place, do you feel like you have to live up to some sort of expectation of a mission statement that has to do with women or career people or anything?

*Emma Wilcox:* Okay, so I speak only for myself as always. As one half of Gallery Aferro, we've had a lot of really interesting experiences. I think sometimes if you're new in a community, queerness is a means to understand people. People sometimes extended us a certain level of fellowship or kinship, and I appreciate that a lot. We're really proud to have been involved with some of the very nascent activities of Newark Pride and thinking about its early origins and a lot of the women involved with that. It's very meaningful to me. Those were some really good early Gallery Aferro experiences. We host a ton of school groups. One time, it was this group of summer students at Glass Roots, and it was mostly girls, even though I don't think it was a gender specific program. They said, "What's it like running a women's gallery?" My mom is a lesbian as well and was very involved with the women's movement and, also, just having worked with a lot of different generations of artists and being deeply, deeply interested in this larger history of the alternative space movement in the U.S. and elsewhere. Like I said, there is this tradition of women's galleries. There's the broader tradition of having—I don't know of separative spaces is the right word, but of specifically holding and claiming space for groups of people to draw power. That's a really important part of subcultural and activists' traditions, broadly speaking. So when I say that we don't identify as a women's gallery or a queer space, it's not wanting to somehow reject any of that identity or that lineage. It's just that I think we want to be a lot of different things to different people and to have a lot of freedom within the mission statement to be constantly evolving. This makes it very hard on our board.

We have a very broad mission. The nicest thing I've ever had a board member say to me is, "You guys are like a hydra." That's kind of a crazy comparison. We chop off the heads of hydras, but to have something that's constantly mutating [01:30:00] and shifting. Then it shifts beyond your own capacity. You give to it everything that's good about you, but, ultimately—it would be incredibly limiting if it was this sum of our life experience. That would be very limiting, I think, for the public as well as for us.

Informally, though, and maybe we should be more explicit about it, but, informally, I feel like we definitely are a queer space in the sense that we've got a couple generations now of teenagers who have just found their way to our door, and they intern, and they hang out. They participate in programs. It's pretty clear, when you enter our office that we are who we are. It's not about hiding your identity, but I want that power to constantly shift. Again, speaking personally, my own fine art practice, I have not really participated in a lot of women's shows or women's things. I'm surrounded by amazing and talented women artists, and I draw a lot of strength from that, but there's something about the labeling that is very reductive. It doesn't really work for me. My work isn't particular relational. It's not domestic. I don't do interiors. Maybe I just haven't laid claim to that particular tradition.

Honestly, one of the most powerful things that we can do is just persist in existing to say, two women can run this space, and this is a space where queer people happen to run it. We can be things to a lot of people, including queer people. I feel like that's powerful and significant. But it is funny how we have this other life as a place where, if you're a queer youth—perhaps, some of the power in its informality is that it's not like they're telling their parents, "I'm going to the LGBT center," 'cause a lot of them aren't necessarily out, or they're questioning, or they're in that whatever stage. It is a kind of power. It's subtle, but it's there.

There's no question that women are leading and that women accomplish things at the gallery. We're trying to create this parallel universe where you don't even have to claim it. It just is. It manifests. It exists. Talking about some of the issues that we've had with equity and representation—as difficult as some of those issues have been, they help us understand where our own blind spots are, where we need to work in terms of increasing our commitment and actions towards equity and representation. It helps us learn and grow.

Something that I think is specific to arts entrepreneurship, broadly, whether it's a commercial gallery or running a nonprofit or being an

independent curator, is—I'm really airing the dirty laundry now, but I think, whether you're queer or straight, the expectation is that you will find—it's called assertive mating. You're gonna find a partner who has a more stable form of income, whether it's an inheritance or what they do for a living, and that'll stabilize the operation. That's usually where you get your health insurance, and it allows you to then have this pose of charitable work or avant-garde practice.

It may, in fact, not be a pose. It may be a very dynamic and profoundly committed activity, but there's this other resource of who your partner is that's making it possible. In terms of our identities to women running a space, as two queer women, that's a choice. We have a domestic partnership, but neither of us has health insurance. It's not like there's any benefit, per se. I think that's significant. We have chosen to go it alone and commit to each other and commit to the gallery. That can be very difficult. I take a lot of pride in it, but I do think it's important to examine where these systems come from and how we get resources within them. It also makes the artisan collective interesting. The idea was that, in many, there is power; in few, it wouldn't work [01:35:00] that way. That's really hard. The conventional mode, again, it has very little to do, I think, with being queer or straight, but it has to do with capital and with class.

The conventional mode is one person in this relationship would be an investment banker. That would be the way to do it. I knew I wanted to say that this evening on tape, and it's really hard to talk about because you'll be in the room with your colleagues, and they're wonderful people. You never wanna think that people are attacking what their husband or wife does for a living, but, if we're gonna talk to young people about careers and the arts or lives and the arts, we have to talk about what that's gonna look like. That traces back to even things like, who runs art spaces in Newark?

Who's able to? Who's able to go off on a residency? Who's able to sink everything they have into a space and what that looks like? It is very painful sometimes when people start throwin' the carpetbagger word around a lot because I think we're both very, very comfortable talking about the really fucked up functioning of resources and white washing and art washing and gentrification. I have to say, in many ways, our lives have been marked by forgoing resources and putting more in than you get out, whether it's salary, healthcare—things like that. Some of that has to do with the choice to be together and to be with the gallery.

It's hard sometimes to talk to young people because I think saying, "Oh, yeah, you can do it," that's doing them a disservice. I often say to people

thinking about entrepreneurship, I'll say, "Look in the mirror. Think about it for a while. If you think you would be more comfortable within a large company, that doesn't make you a bad person. That doesn't mean you don't have it in you. You're not as cool. Maybe that's the right choice for you. Starting a nonprofit might destroy your own art practice. Think about that for a little while," but it's their choices.

*Kristyn Scorsona:* Do you find you still have time to make art [*inaudible 01:37:22*].

*Emma Wilcox:* Another question that, if you get a bunch of artsy ED's in a room together, it's gonna be a little bit interesting. If it's a public room, there is a certain pressure to smile and say, "Oh, yeah, I'm balancing it all really well, and it's so rewarding." If it's a more private room, people may say, "Oh, that was the most painful thing in my life." Kinda similar to like what I saying about how if you talk about cheap real estate, that somehow is supposed to render the rest of your story inauthentic, which is funny. We're not allowed to talk about money and resources and capital. If I say that it's been one of the most painful things for me is seeing the toll that doing the gallery has taken and seeing what could have been, but I made other choices, does that render inauthentic my next statement, which is that this is profoundly rewarding working. It's taught me everything, and it's incredibly nourishing and generative and creative in its own way. Both things are true. One thing doesn't devalidate the other. I damn near started crying at Victor's retirement send off at NJPAC. I think the people next to me were just waiting for the coffee and dessert to be brought out and for him to stop talking. I damn near lost it because—

*Kristyn Scorsona:* Who's Victor?

*Emma Wilcox:* Victor is the founding director—he recently stepped down—of Aljira. This is the preeminent alternative space in Newark and, arguably, in New Jersey. Everyone we've ever known who's been a mentor or quasi mentor—Lawrence Brose is a really interesting character. He is the ED of an organization upstate called CEPA. [01:39:17] He's an avant-garde filmmaker, long time ED, and was arguably framed as a gay guy under what are probably false charges of possessing child pornography. There's a queer story there and a queer arts nonprofit story there. We met him, and it's like, "You make movies that much these days?" "No." I don't know. It gives you everything, and it also takes everything away from you. It's really complicated. It's really hard to talk about. I've talked

about a life of service a lot. It's a commitment to stewardship. [01:40:00] Aferro's really kind of a workhorse in a lot of ways, and I didn't quite realize we would end up with that identity. It's not that we don't have other roles or identities. We've very proudly screened a lot of censored work and been a home for censored artwork. That's also part of that queer and art identity, where the place you call when you borrow a ladder or a table or figure out how to build something or, "Can you help us out?" That can be hard sometimes. A life as a workhorse and an incubator. It's an incredibly important role in the universe, but is it seen, or visible, or is it valued? You wanna talk about women's work, that's an interesting role, helping artists realize their dreams. There's usually a lot of people behind that.

*Kristyn Scorson:* I'm sorry if I cut you off before, but you were saying that he was retiring and people were just sort of—

*Emma Wilcox:* Oh, he spoke in his remarks at this really beautiful event that was very fancy at NJPAC. He spoke about...He was talking to his partner. He was talking about not giving up on his own belief in his own art practice. This is someone who originated something and looked after it and grew it and made it what it is today. It's a life of total dedication. You put everything into it, and artists do this. Artists originate spaces and sometimes stay with them for decades. In alternative space years, Aljira is quite old. Honestly, Aferro is reasonably old. Most alternative spaces collapse, combust, or sometimes they're deliberately abandoned. They're kind of a thing, and then that's over. It's not necessarily a tragedy, but, often, they just fall apart. They don't tend to last. Usually, if they've lasted, it's because someone has given everything to sustain them. I think that's the reality of it. Time and Space Limited and Women's Studio Workshop are both incredible in that they're definitely interesting examples of women creating these alternative spaces and sustaining them, essentially, the length of their lives. You'll find a photo of somebody in their office, and they're in their 20s, and you're looking at the, and they're in their 60s. That was their life. That's what they did.

*Kristyn Scorson:* Do you have, I guess, anxiety or contingency plans in place in case something, like a medical emergency happened or something like that?

*Emma Wilcox:*

Nope. Not a fun thing to talk about, especially on the eve of an incoming inauguration. Something that I have recently been thinking about in my own practice of learning and thinking about equity and representation and participation and recognition, which there's this tidal wave—it's such an exciting time to be alive for in terms of the absolute refusal of this whole generation of culture workers to be silent about the absence of representation of voices of people of color. It cannot be more exciting. The late life, or posthumous recognition, of all of these artists of color, that part is really bittersweet and really painful, recognition denied for so long. I've been thinking about things accumulated, familial capital, I guess, would be the word. The choices that my parents made that then allowed me to spend down whatever shreds of capital I had doing this unbelievably non lucrative thing with my life. Just for the record, there is no hidden money propping up Aferro. There's no institutional, familial, or corporate lineage. It's originated from nothing. I think both of us—both of our mothers are involved in contributing towards the gallery.

You draw on your whole life. You draw on the traditions of your childhood. [01:45:00] The way that we do our fundraiser, I think, owes a lot to these old sometimes—you see them in a rural or urban working class contexts, but I think they're just old American traditions of festivities and fundraising. We're drawing from that. That's part of the DNA that we've contributed to Aferro's even way of doing the fundraiser, the fact that we have an annual potluck every year. You're working within a family vernacular as much as you're picking things up from the community that you're in. it's definitely a spending down process.

You put everything that you have to put in. If something really bad happens, you're gonna draw on those resources until they can't be drawn on anymore. Recently, we've actually been called to service by a couple elders in our community, and I think that's why I'm in a slightly melancholy state of mind about this, is seeing how quickly people can lose that security that they've amassed.

A lot of women artists in the community—maybe it had to do with economic self-determination, maybe it had to do with caring for children, but they would be artists, and they would be educators. That work constrains what you can and can't do in some ways, but it stabilizes your life. Maybe you're able to put a down payment on a home or something, but what happens if you lose that home? It's an incredible fragile ledge of security. I don't know. That's a hard question.



*Kristyn Scorstone:* Do you feel pressure to ever do heteronormative ideals of living, like buying a home?

*Emma Wilcox:* I don't know if that's heteronormative or not. I definitely have massive problems with crazy gay consumerism and rainbow credit cards. It's so painful and difficult because I don't wanna willfully ignore what generations of my queer forbearers worked incredibly hard to pull off or take any shred of marriage equality for granted. I'm a freak first, and the conditions that we have in this country where we're still framing insurance within employment or your domestic arrangements is just really troubling. You shouldn't have to get married. Evonne said to me one night a long time ago, she's like, "What if you could just marry your friends? Why does it have to have any particular form? Why do these things have to take the form that they do?" We actually don't have a very bohemian standard of living. We work really hard. We might as well be going to a plant. We go to the gallery, and then we come home, and there's often casseroles made, and the two of us share a home. I don't know.

I don't really think about that as heteronormative. I think about it as women, especially older women, tend to not occupy a very high rung in the economic order. Who's gonna take care of us, and who's gonna help us take care of the people we love? Homeownership, mortgage means death vow in French, but home ownership might be a very practical if aspirational goal in terms of just taking care of ourselves. Nobody else is going to. I'm interested in a lot of these women I've met in Newark, regardless of their partnered or not partnered status. They work towards that home ownership as something stable.

There's a tradition of cultural gatherings within those spaces. If you own a home, maybe one room is your studio. Maybe one room is an informal gallery. That's a very important tradition, I think, just that I've seen in Newark. That's a tough one. I really hate the word wife. I don't relate to it. It's like a four-letter word. In fact, I do wear dresses and fuss over things and make casseroles, so it's funny, but I don't much care for the word personally. I would never criticize anyone else for relating to it. It's just personal.

*Kristyn Scorstone:* Do you have a word that you prefer or just nothing?

*Emma Wilcox:* Just girlfriend. Partner is very neutral, and you have to create space for that part of your life because the business part of your life, [01:50:00] when you work with the person that you love, it will entropically take any

space required and crush everything. You have to claim some other space that isn't just about work, and that's very difficult.

I love how this new generation of kids—they'll put their Facebook status to be they're married to somebody, and it could be their friend, or it could be their crush. I love how free they are with that language. I think it's not just the frivolity of youth. I actually think it's *amazing* and fascinating. I'm very cheered by that. I think it's interesting. It's marriage equality mutating, which is a good sign, I think.

*Kristyn Scorsone:* Do you have any particular favorite, I guess, memories of the gallery or events that really stood out to you or you're proud of?

*Emma Wilcox:* Oh, my god. There's so many. It's like my whole life that we're talking about here, really—my entire adult life. It almost feels shameful to pick one out 'cause I'm leaving so many good ones in the dark. Definitely, the mobile portrait studio sticks out in my mind, not only because it's recent, but also just because it was this culmination of our earliest dreams of what the gallery could be, but also all of the learning, some of the hard won learning and some of this community informed learning of the past decade. It was this synthesis of everything we wanted to be and everything that we've learned. That was just exhausting and beautiful and amazing. Evonne and I talk about this a lot. You see people visit the gallery or maybe stop by the window. We're night people, and we're always running around to big box stores after dark. We're in the Home Depot right before closing or something. You deal with a lot of folks who are second shift that are just working some kinda retail gig. It's not one moment. It's multiple moments over and over again. Evonne always makes sure, give them her card, come visit the gallery, and you just hope those people will show up. When people show up and they have a really good time, that's the best moment. It's just the moment that you wanna replicate over and over again. A couple years ago, there was this little girl who dragged her mom into the gallery, and it was an opening reception. There was performance art and food and all the good stuff. She spent like two hours there just having a ball. By the time you're an adult, you're much more watchful. You're concerned about doing it wrong. You're concerned about being judged or running out of money—all the things that can go wrong. Kids are just inherently, I think, a little bit more open. You could see her mom start to relax a little. That's the whole point. That's the moment. That's what you

want. That hopefulness, like will they come? Will they show up, and will they come again? Will they visit again? Those are the good moments.

*Kristyn Scorson:* Is there anything that you wanna add or that you wish I'd asked?

*Emma Wilcox:* I don't think so. Jesus, that's a hell of a lot of rambling.

*Kristyn Scorson:* Not at all. That's really fascinating.

*Emma Wilcox:* I don't think so. I feel like sometimes I come off as very bitter and cynical, but it's like when your mom cleans your face with spit for company and hurts you a little, like scrubs the shit outta your cheek. I fret 'cause I care 'cause the stakes are high. I think that's where it comes from is just seeing possibility.

I wish both Evonne and I could stop seeing possibility everywhere because it's exhausting, and you can't—if you see something broken, she's gonna wanna fix it. Or if you see some crazy thing that's on the government surplus website, you think about buying it because you could turn it into something cool. It's kind of a curse, but if it's the way you are, it's the way you are. I've never really known anything different. I think that's it 'cause it's gettin' a little late here.

*Kristyn Scorson:* Yeah, yeah, yeah. Thank you. Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

*Emma Wilcox:* Cool. I hope some of it is useful. What I did not say on tape is that—

*[End of Audio - 01:55:13]*

