

The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 videorecorded session of an interview with Julia Rooney by Cynthia Tobar on September 6, 2014 in New York City. This interview is part of "Cities for People, Not for Profit": Gentrification and Housing Activism in Bushwick. Julia Rooney has reviewed the transcript and has made minor corrections and emendations. The reader is asked to bear in mind that she or he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Julia Rooney

[Start of recorded material - 00:00:00]

Cynthia Tobar: It is Saturday, September 6, 2014. We are at the Appalach-Wick at The Lot. Can you state your name and occupation?

Julia Rooney: My name is Julia Julia Rooney. I'm an artist. I'm a painter. I also work in art administration, arts programming, art spaces, art education. I teach. I work freelance. I work as a painter.

Cynthia Tobar: Have you ever been a Bushwick resident?

Julia Rooney: Yes. I grew up in New York and finished college in 2011, moved back to the city. I lived off of De Kalb stop on the 'L' when I first moved back to New York. I lived there for about a year. Yes. That was my first post-growing up residence of my own.

Cynthia Tobar: As an observer of life in the city and then upon your arrival in Bushwick, is there anything that you can describe to me about what the living conditions were like, the neighborhood feel, anything you'd remember that you mind sharing?

Julia Rooney: In Bushwick?

Cynthia Tobar: Yeah.

Julia Rooney: I was off of DeKalb. When I was living there three years ago, it was pretty residential. I was living in a building that my landlord owned. I was renting from her. She lived in that building which was a really nice dynamic because it felt more like a house than it did a landlord situation. What do I recall? I guess, music. There was a lot of music. That was really something that was an essential feature of my experience there. We were close to the border of Queens.

Sometimes, I would wander in that direction. I found that the streets and feel of the neighborhood changed very, very quickly. I mean also kind of wandering down Wyckoff. You get to the end of the block, I think, at the intersection of Wyckoff and I can't think about it. It becomes very industrial. I found that the rift between blocks were very, very kind of sharp. The section I

was in was primarily residential. I really found a lot of families and just people living their lives.

Cynthia Tobar: Tell me a bit about how you compare that to living in other areas in New York City, other neighborhoods.

Julia Rooney: I feel like there are certain neighborhoods where it feels like street life and residential life are separate spaces. A lot of what's contained on the street ... well, no. I guess it's more what's contained in the home would stay in the home. People don't really consider the street their space. One of the great things about Bushwick was that I felt like outside of someone's door was still their home. It was still a place that they saw people, met people, hung out.

There was this sort of porous nature between the internal and the external that I don't think is the case in a lot of other parts of New York, maybe most, you could say, Manhattan. I'm sure there are other boroughs and sections. I mean New York's so huge. I felt like there was a lot of activity on the street which was really unique to the neighborhood.

That maybe has to do with also the music I talked about, the sounds of the street. Those were as much a part of living inside the home as just being there. People would play music, just treat the street as though it was an extension of their home. That was really pleasant for me, especially as someone who hadn't grown up there in that neighborhood.

Cynthia Tobar: How did it fit with you and your developing role and your career as an artist living in Bushwick and taking in what you did take in and your experiences? How has place affected your work as an artist?

Julia Rooney: Place is huge in my work. I guess I could mention in a specific project that I did that had to do with place ... sorry.

Cynthia Tobar: Somebody's cell phone.

Julia Rooney: One of the things ... let me just wait until that stops. Can you actually say that again?

Cynthia Tobar: How has living in Bushwick and this whole idea of an artist being affected in his or her space affected your art work, your take on your work?

Julia Rooney: I'm very sensitive to place. One of the things that I actually consider to be a part of my practice is the commute. How do I get there? How do I leave? Midway through that year, I was there in 2011 through 2012. I sublet it out. I was living in an apartment. It was at a railroad. I, for the first part of that year, was using it as a living space and a studio space. I was using it both as a working and a living space.

Then midway through that year, I subletted part of it for someone to live in. Then, I kept using another part of it as a studio space. I moved out, so I didn't actually live there. I just was using it as a studio. I moved back home for a few months since I grew up in the city. I would commute out to my studio to work. That really changed my relationship with the neighborhood and with the place because I was going there only for the purpose of work, at that point. I was no longer going there to just live and to hang out or go to work. It was only basically to paint. That became a new incentive for that commute.

In a certain way, I feel like that deepened my attachment to the neighborhood. When I was living there, I kind of always felt this push and pull between the neighborhood I grew up in and this new neighborhood because it was a process of me reacclimating to a totally different environment. I always felt this, "Where is my home," that question of, "Where do I belong?" Do I belong in this new place, or do I belong in the place that I grew up? When I transitioned into just using that as a studio space, I actually felt a much more deepened sense of belonging to that area. I felt like I had a purpose there for some reason.

Cynthia Tobar: Where did you relocate after that?

Julia Rooney: I moved home with my family. That was in downtown Manhattan for a few months.

Cynthia Tobar: What were the reasons for you relocating from Bushwick?

Julia Rooney: I was commuting to a different city for a job. I wasn't in New York for a few days of the week. I really couldn't justify paying rent that was so high when I wasn't even living there for half the week. I figured I still need a studio space. I also do need a place to live, but I should cut my costs and just pay for the studio space and move back with my family. It just didn't make sense to be spending all this money when I wasn't even really using space for most of the week. It was financial, and it was kind of logistical.

There were a few reasons I would come back to Bushwick. One was to work. The other was to check my mail because I was still getting mail out there. Mail, at that point, became a really important medium for me. It became a really important element in my practice. I was struggling with painting and not really knowing if I wanted to paint. The space I was working in wasn't really a fitted painting studio. It was hard for me to paint. I ended up doing a lot of writing and work on my commutes and subway rides. I would just do a lot of work that wasn't so studio-based.

The mail, what it became for me was it gave me a huge sense of belonging that something had been delivered for me, something was waiting for me out

there. It was like having a pet that you have to come home to and take care of. It's also this thing of curiosity. When you get an email, you're like, "Oh. I got an email." It was so much intensified with actually having a physical piece of mail. It also started to, I guess, be a factor in the studio work I was making because I was doing work that was writing-based. It was based on [these] sent out to another party.

At the end of my time at Bushwick, I did a project. I moved my studio to Long Island City. That was what that move was at the end of that year. I did a project where I mailed out items to people, items that I had saved for some reason. I mean random things, receipts, tickets, things that you would throw away. I mean not even those kinds of things but strange objects that I kept. I asked people to either mail it to my old address in Bushwick or my new address in Long Island City.

When I was transitioning between these boroughs, I was getting mail at both of these places. I had a kind of window of time where I was still picking up things and moving out of Bushwick and also moving things into Queens. It was a project that was a sort of a celebration of my old residence and an initiation of my new residence. It was this very, very small way of loving a place and claiming ownership over it.

Even though I was leaving, it was a way of embracing it and embracing an address and embracing a sense of belonging in a place where I think it's a question New Yorkers always ask, "Where do I belong when we constantly are getting kicked out," or you're constantly moving because of jobs or whatever it is. I think that's the condition. It's like the nomadic condition that really classifies, not classifies but sort of epitomizes on conditions here right now in 2014 more than ever, I think.

Cynthia Tobar: What has been the public reaction to that project?

Julia Rooney: It's a project that was really important for me to do. I haven't quite decided on the context in which I'd like to share. I think maybe printing it into some form as sort of a documentation of it. I could imagine possibly exhibiting it in a space. There's something about the mail that I also think is really a beautifully private type of performance. It's really between me and someone else. It's a kind of exhibition or display, but I think it's essentially either one. I loved that it's between two people. I don't know if it should be exhibited in any way. I produce work out of it. The actual items, I don't know.

Cynthia Tobar: How does that align with any kind of outreach you've made to the community or to your neighbors when you were in Bushwick? Did you have any type of community, local involvement in the neighborhood when you were a resident? Have you had any kind of community involvement with the neighborhood since you left?

Julia Rooney: I guess it's kind of more of a question of since I left. I feel like I was there for such a short amount of time that I ... and in so many different capacities. I was there as a resident. When I was there, I was just kind of working. I feel like it's sort of been like the time after that I developed this other relationship with this part of the city, coming out here for exhibitions, coming out here to see studios of friends, coming out here for specific things. That's actually been more of ... that's felt more substantial for me, actually, than when I was first here. I think I was just experiencing so many things that I just wasn't fully immersed at that time. I don't really feel like I integrated in that first year. Now, three years later, we're at this lot.

I think part of the reasons it was interesting and it was important to me was because it was like a waiting to reengage with this environment and with the space. The project that I've done here and which is in the midst of being worked on and it's come at the end of the six-week run is through a mailbox and to give this lot a box which can collect items and collect objects and collect memories of what the artists here have done or what ideas of what can be yet to come. I don't know if I've really answered that question.

Cynthia Tobar: What are your thoughts now having a few years past since you were a resident and seeing the issues that people are struggling with in order to stay in the neighborhood and how you effectively were also priced out? What are your thoughts on gentrification in Bushwick and what people can do to involve themselves to address that as artists and relationships with long-term residents who are being displaced as well as new residents?

Julia Rooney: Artists, I feel like it's part of what they do. I mean it's like everybody follows the artists. Real estate people follow the artists. It's sort of like the fact that we're doing what we're doing makes it desirable as a money-producing location. It's such an important question that it's so hard for me to provide and answer in the way of solutions.

Cynthia Tobar: Even if residents encountered this in their own, small way.

Julia Rooney: It sort of puts me in a speechless place. I experience this in my own neighborhood growing up also. I have to think. I'm sorry.

Cynthia Tobar: No worries. We could always come back to it at a later time. What are some of the challenges that you encounter as an artist when people start talking about affordable housing in New York City? What are some of your thoughts on that?

Julia Rooney: That it's not an affordable place to both live and make work. That's my thought on that. I think that New York is prohibitively expensive. Even if you weren't paying for both a studio space and a residential space, residential

space alone is often over 50 percent of someone's income. That's not okay. That's really not okay. It's more than 50 percent in a lot of cases also. It shouldn't be even that high. That's just residential space.

It sounds so pessimistic. I just don't really know the solution. I don't know how this is really going to change except if artists really get together. I don't know. I really don't know. I know what I see. I know what I've experienced. I know that it's not a city like it was 40 years ago when you could work some and work in your studio and live and not be constantly worrying about how much of your income, what's going out to pay rent. We're not even talking about supplies.

We're not talking about any of those other elements of living and making work. We're just talking about bare existence. For me, one of the things that as a result of having grown up here, moving back home is something that I have a strange relationship to as an idea. Part of me thinks that I'm an adult which, in a way, I could move back home. On the other hand, I'm like how much money would I be saving? What would I really be losing?

It's not just about that. It's about all the other reasons why you're here and how you're here and where you are. People from both sides, some people say, "I can't believe you're not living at home." Other people say when I have been back, "I can't believe you are living at home." Everyone judges whatever decision you're going to make. I don't think there is an ideal situation. I don't think there is an ideal solution to the puzzle of how you can be here.

I think sometimes you're basically just cobbling things together and kind of living month-by-month and living maybe year-by-year. Hopefully, at every stage of that, you're saying, "Does this work for me? Does this work for me? I'm going to change this element if it doesn't work for me," or the location is wrong or if the rent's too high. I think that's just something that people who live here have to really be able to do is to change their expectation or constantly ask, "Is this working for me," basically. That's the question that we have to ask.

Cynthia Tobar: Do you believe that there's an active role that artists can play in community collaborations and community activism to help address these issues of displacement in affordable housing in New York especially as it pertains to Bushwick? It seems to be a nexus following in the footsteps of Williamsburg. Now, we encountered this moment where there may be hope with enough community involvement by not just longer-term residents but artists. As an artist, what are your thoughts on that?

Julia Rooney: Describe 'community' or define 'community' as you're using it, I guess.

Cynthia Tobar: Community-based activism. There are local organizations located within Bushwick run by local residents who have been dealing with issues of landlords trying to displace them to charge market-rate rents in apartments. Many of the issues that these long-term residents have been dealing with are ones that artists are also dealing with. What are your thoughts on that? How can artists become more actively involved in that struggle to help address their needs in regards to affordable housing, a right to be able to afford to live and work where ...

Julia Rooney: That's a huge thing, living and working in a space. I think there's two kinds of rents we're talking about. We're talking about studio space which is, frankly, probably just as expensive per square-foot as residential space at this point. Is there really a difference? I think there's a lot of scenarios that artists have to make for themselves living and working in the same space, having two separate spaces, not having a space at all. What can artists do?

Cynthia Tobar: Another way to phrase it, do you think that there's a way to merge the needs of all these cultural, distinct populations in Bushwick that would allow artists to live and work and create local jobs in Bushwick? Do you believe that there may be opportunity for collaboration there? If so, as an artist, would you ever get actively involved in such efforts?

Julia Rooney: Absolutely. I think that one place that artists can really use their capacity ... and this is the other thing. I think that artists aren't needed the way that other jobs are needed. I think they're needed in this incredibly underlying way for society. If you immediately take out an artist, you're not going to see acute effect of it the way you would see it if you took out a doctor or a teacher or something that has a direct effect on something.

If you took out artists and you looked at the long-term effect on how that affects culture, how that affects community, how that affects just the way of life, living, you would see the effect on a grand scale if you took out the arts. I think what potentially employable places need to see is what value do artists, as a collective body, have? I think teaching is a really huge place that that produces.

I think it's not like an artist selling himself at a job he doesn't really want to do. It's, in a lot of ways, related to your practice, I would imagine. Teaching is like a form of art in itself. I think the engagement with a community is incredibly creative. It's calling from all the same types of skills that you are using in the studio practice. I think there needs to be more positions where there's a call for artists. I didn't really word that very well. I guess, education.

Cynthia Tobar: You mentioned the mailbox project you had set up for Apalachawick. What else would you like to accomplish during your time here at Apalachawick as an artist?

Julia Rooney: Because this box was installed so late in the span of this project here, what I would really like is for it to be kept here for the duration of this year as all these other projects come into this space and get realized here and as some of these projects move out and possibly see lives in other locations. I really want that mailbox to be a collecting space for things that have happened here and things that can happen here, something that keeps a symbolic presence for the artists who have had projects going on. If they want to mail something to it, they can. There will still be a place that this material or this idea or this action will be caught.

My hope is that in a year, we will have a ceremony opening all this work. There's something about the mail that already is a delayed art form. It's a delayed form of communication. It takes you probably at least three days to actually read it by the time the person's wrote or sent it. Extending that duration by keeping all the work that gets sent here but not opening it is a form of also patience and a form of letting time do its work. I think that's a really essential quality to any visual process, any creative process is letting time do its work. As a painter, especially, I feel that. You have to be patient with your medium.

Cynthia Tobar: How is working within this model at Apalachawick in regards to this community-based effort, how has it engaged you with your art-making practice with the Bushwick local community?

Julia Rooney: Again, because it was so late in the weeks that I got this up, I feel like it's more about what's yet to come as opposed to what I can already reflect on. What I would hope is that the box can be a collecting site for anybody who walks down the street if they want to put something in it, if they want to put an idea, a letter. I would really like to collaborate with some local venues, possibly some restaurants.

I toyed with the idea of having it be a box where recipes or food-related items are collected, possibly having a theme every month where it could be put into the box, extending it beyond also Bushwick but to other cities in this country. Other international cities have this main address where people from many geographies can send things to. That kind of puts Bushwick on a map even if they've never been here to this spot. It is an idea.

I think the idea of that for Bushwick is what's so special about it is that it's the spirit of collaboration, the spirit of engagement and production of work which is so rare to find. It's so rare to find an empty lot that's not empty but to find a lot in the city where space is such a valuable resource. It's a really rare, special thing to have an open area for production.

Cynthia Tobar: Any final thoughts before we wrap up?

Julia Rooney: I don't know. I think it's great that you're documenting this as part of what this project is.

Cynthia Tobar: Thank you.

Julia Rooney: Thank you.

Cynthia Tobar: Thank you for your time.

[End of recorded material - 00:29:36]