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Oral history interview with Vera List, 1973
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Transcript

Interview

PC: PAUL CUMMINGS

VL: MRS. VERA LIST

PC: This is January 9, 1973, Paul Cummings talking to Mrs. Vera List in her apartment in New York City. You were born -- where? -- in Boston or Fall River?

VL: No, no, I was born in Fall River, 1908

PC: And you grew up there?

VL: Yes. As I an infant, we moved to Brookline, which is a suburb of Boston, and lived there until I married. Then I moved to Fall River and spent thirteen years there. Moved to Cleveland and spent a couple of years there. Came to New York. And then move to Byram, Connecticut, which is part of Greenwich.

PC: So you came to New York about --?

VL: In 1945.

PC: Right at the end of the war.

VL: Just at the end of the war. I remember, when I came to New York, the bomb had just been dropped on Hiroshima. That's why I remember that date so well. Most dates I forget.

PC: A dramatic date. Did you have an interest in art at home, or in school?

VL: Yes. PL: How did it all start?

VL: I guess a good number of people that are involved in the art field are probably to some degree would-be artists. I guess I'm one of those. I was always more or less interested in art, not in a very active way, but I was interested. It sort of ran through most of my life. My brother is an architect. He would liked to have been an artist but he was--

PC: What's his name?

VL: Samuel Glaser. He lives in Boston. I guess my mother was very artistic.

PC: So there was some kind of interest at home?

VL: Yes! It pervaded the household.

PC: Did you study art at school or anywhere else?

VL: When I went to school, I always elected art courses and did the charcoal drawings and the Greek plasters and things of that sort. Then I thought I wanted to go to art school. But I come from a poor family; at least, they couldn't afford many of these things. So I enrolled in a school -- I don't even remember the name of it -- but it was a fashion design school. I went there for a while. But it bored me.

PC: Was that in Boston?

VL: That was in Boston. You were taught that the head was a certain proportion to the body -- that was the whole approach. That turned me off. So I left that and went to Simmons [College]. Then after two years, I left school and got married. I always was interested in art. I used to send to the Associated American Artists, is it? They had a little booklet of their prints at five dollars apiece. I'd pick out prints and send for them. I made periodic visits to new York. That's the way I started.

PC: That's great. Boston had some galleries in those days.

VL: Yes. I used to get into Boston to the galleries. But I was primarily interested in sculpture. I liked the three dimensional much more than the two dimensional painting. Of course, at that time, I did buy some paintings.

PC: Did you ever make any sculpture?

VL: Yes, I finally got to that, oh, probably about twenty years ago. I had never tried sculpture. A cousin by marriage who is a very colorful personality -- oh, she wrote and she danced and she painted and she was sculpting. One day she said, "Why don't you come up?" And I did, to an artist's studio in New York; the name escapes me at the minute. There was the pot of clay. It was the first time I had ever taken anything like that in my hands that way, and it was a very thrilling experience.

PC: Oh, great.

VL: So I stayed with it for a while on and off up until I'd say about eight years ago.

PC: I've often wondered since you've been so involved with sculpture whether you had really gotten into it yourself.

VL: Yes. And I enjoyed it enormously. But I guess because of my background, I was too inhibited and apparently not jaded enough to perceive the more contemporary forms. I became discouraged with what I was doing and vicariously enjoyed what other people did.

PC: Once you came to New York did you start going to galleries and museums and things?

VL: Oh, yes.

PC: And taking a more active kind of interest in the art scene?

VL: Yes, I did. As a matter of fact, when I lived in Fall River, I'd come to New York at least once every six weeks and rush around the galleries and the Museum of Modern Art. Of course, I was buying art the whole time too in a very small way.

PC: Did you have friends or relatives or people who were also buying things?

VL: No.

PC: Or was it just kind of running around on your own looking at all the things?

VL: At the time, I didn't know anyone that was buying art or was vitally interested in art in any way.

PC: What about when you came to New York? Did you start meeting all those people that are -- ?

VL: No, it was very slow when we came to New York. I used to go down to the New School of Social Research and take courses there. And I took a couple of courses up at Columbia. I became interested in and involved with the New School. I'm trying to recall just when this all started. I can't tell you. At the New School, I became very friendly with Clara Meyers who was, I think, the dean at the time. She was very active and very dedicated to the school. I guess she was aware of my interest in art. She approached me on establishing an art center at the New School. The idea excited me very much. So that's how I became involved there. We established the art center. Then as far as the Jewish Museum goes, my father had passed away; I forget what year that was. One day in looking at the New York Times art page, which I read very conscientiously along with art magazines and stuff, I saw a picture of a group of statues by Albert Weinberg that portrayed three men, one holding the candelabrum -

PC: I know that piece.

VL: I was very excited about it, and I thought that this is something that I'd like to get and give to a museum. I inquired about it. Then I approached the Museum about accepting it. And of course, I guess they never had anybody come up and just say, "Here, I want to give you something." So that started my involvement there.

PC: So the New School was really the first kind of public -- ?

VL: I'm trying to recall. Well, it may have started in Fall River. I was naturally involved with different organizations there and with the Community Center. Fall River was a pretty poor city. The only thing they had was the Women's Club. In my involvement with the Community Center, I became involved with their program; I became program chairman. Eventually, I became chairman of the Women's Committee. I played a role in getting outstanding people in the art field to come down and lecture. I remember once we got the art critic who wrote at one time for the Christian Science Monitor -- she has since passed away --

PC: Dorothy Adler.

VL: That's right. I remember what excitement there was when we finally got her to come down. I guess I had this kind of involvement. Then there was like a discussion group that one belonged to. Each woman in the discussion group had to prepare an original paper once a year. I chose to do one on Picasso. I mean my interests were in this direction.

PC: Once you came to New York and got into the whole thing, were you collecting sculpture then?

VL: I started buying sculpture, oh, I think possibly -- gosh, I don't know -- probably in the early to middle forties was when I bought my first piece of sculpture. You asked me earlier whether I frequented the Boston galleries. Of course I did because we used to get to Boston much more frequently than I did to New York. And I remember I wanted to buy a piece of sculpture at that time. About the only thing I saw at the time that I wanted was like a bust, you know, or a head. My husband said no, he wasn't interested in having like dead things, dead people, around the house. He put his foot down on that. I guess that delayed my involvement in the sculpture field.

PC: What was the first acquisition? Do you remember what it was?

VL: As a matter of fact, I think -- I'm not sure -- but I think that this Moore here was the first piece that I bought. That's why I say that I probably started buying in the early forties because I think this piece dates from the late thirties or early forties. I always mean to look it up, you know. Then once I did that I

PC: Have you ever thought about what the appeal of sculpture is as opposed to painting? I always think of you as somebody who is more involved with three-dimensional objects than painting.

VL: Well, I've always felt that I don't relate or respond so much to color. And, of course, I think I'm just naturally more tactile. And even when I look at paintings, I react almost in a tactile way. I think that's why.

PC: You like the more dramatic forms in space that sculpture has?

VL: That probably is also very much part of it, yes. And I think it's the ability to see Maybe I don't have the kind of mind to enter into a painting and analyze it and have the color, the form, and the composition come to me, to be able to realize a painting in depth and in the round. I do believe that a painting, even a very two-dimensional painting without the artist having gone into any kind of depth, a painting can be read and felt almost three-dimensionally. But I haven't been able to do it very well.

PC: You like the real three-dimensional objects?

VL: I think so, yes.

PC: What about the activities at the New School? Because the Art Association was founded about 1960 or thereabouts according to what I've been able to ferret out.

VL: Yes, it was about twelve years ago. It probably would be about 1960.

PC: What was your particular idea in doing that? Was that just for the exhibitions there? Or building a collection?

VL: Well, I think it was twofold. Of course, the New School, as you know, is an institution of adult education. It differs from, say, other colleges and so forth in that courses could easily be innovated. If there was a field of inquiry -- I'm having difficulty expressing myself -- with a good deal of ease, they would introduce a course. The whole idea was that every field was -- oh, nuts --

PC: It was a very free and easy --

VL: Yes. At times, I have great difficulty expressing myself verbally. But it seemed to me that a school such as the New School that was involved in theater arts, in dance, music, and the textbook, that art was a medium of learning -- whatever the correct terms is -- and that the visual arts were as important as the textbook and the lecture.

PC: Right. Right.

VL: So as far as I was concerned, it was a natural; the art center was established with the idea of exhibits -- not one-man exhibits -- but idea exhibits and as another means of education. That was the reason that it was established. At the same time, we also thought of buying art and having art available throughout the buildings for the public, you know, the students to see. Here, too, was a need.

PC: It's part of their life.

VL: It's part of life and part of the field of education. And with the idea that once there was enough art, or all the

walls were filled, so to speak, all spaces and so forth, as we continued to buy and constantly having the art be a contemporary expression, that we would then give pieces to other institutions, say, in the Midwest or some place where they ordinarily didn't have it and didn't have the opportunities of seeing art; or if there were pieces that turned out to be of such importance to museums. In other words, the New School being in New York, there was no point in -- we could see no point in --

PC: In duplicating everything.

VL: Yes. In having another museum. We didn't feel that this was a necessity at all. So this is how that idea originated. We bought a few things. Then we ran into financial problems with the school itself so that moneys that had been allocated to this purchasing fund were redirected to maintaining the school, the other aspects of the school. But I liked that idea enormously. It was too bad that it didn't materialize.

PC: That's very interesting. It must have been around that time that you got involved with the Jewish Museum, too? Alan Solomon was there and all those things got going.

VL: Yes. I was trying to remember Alan's last name, and I couldn't.

PC: How did that all happen? I mean, you went there and said, "I'd like to give you this piece of sculpture."

VL: Yes. And there was hesitation in their accepting it. Because, you see, these were figures. And you're aware of that --

PC: Yes.

VL: So anyway, finally, they accepted it. As I say, I guess they had rarely been approached that way. Of course, they had others who had been buying for the Museum their collection of Judaica. I was invited to go onto the Board. I accepted; I went on the Board. I had been aware of the Jewish Museum, of course. I had been up there a number of times. I felt that if there was a place that was called the Jewish Museum I wanted it to have a degree of excellence and make more of an impact on the art scene both generally and as a Jewish museum. So I guess I got involved and so forth and so on and worked there.

PC: Was Alan Solomon there at that time?

VL: No, he was not there.

PC: He came a little later?

VL: Oh, he came a bit later. As I say, I don't recall the years and so forth. But, no, at that time, the Jewish Museum consisted only of the Warburg building.

PC: Right. They didn't have that new --

VL: No, they didn't have the wing. But they owned the Warburg building and the lot beside it that was just boarded up. When I was giving these sculptures, they opened up that lot and installed the sculptures there. And then, of course, the Warburg building wasn't very adequate. But as we developed, there was insufficient room for exhibits, so they came up with the idea of adding the building to it. Which we did. So that gave us much more exhibit space and much more space for the Judaica, the permanent collection that belonged to the Museum. The then Director, Dr. Keyser, was going off to -- they were transferring him to, I think, the House of Living Judaism -- I don't know the name exactly -- in California. And it was a question of getting a director to carry on. We looked around, interviewed a number of people and so forth and so on. Alan Solomon was the one that was decided on. And he was a very exciting personality.

PC: Well, that was a whole radical departure, though, for the program, wasn't it?

VL: In a sense it was, and in a sense it wasn't. You know, it really and truly wasn't. As a matter of fact, Dr. Keyser had a couple of exhibits -- one that I think certainly was an important exhibit in the entire art field in New York; that was -- was it called New York Second Generation or something to that effect?

PC: Oh, yes. Right.

VL: That was Dr. Keyser's exhibit. I think that was the first time that Jasper Johns was exhibited. And others; I don't recall who else. And before that Dr. Keyser had other exhibits of contemporary art. But the thing is that the exhibits Dr. Keyser put on were very small scale. And this was it; it was like a whisper. When Alan came in, of course he had much more space, and of course, in a sense, he was much more forceful. I think his first exhibit was Rauschenberg, was it? I think Rauschenberg was the first exhibit. Well, whatever it was, he came in --

PC: It was one of those. Right.

VL: Although when he came in, there had been slated an exhibit for the opening; it had something to do with Art and the Bible. It had been already slated and was on its way, and that was the opening exhibit when Alan took over. As I say, I think Alan's first exhibit was a retrospective of Rauschenberg. And this was startling. Of course, he had much more space, and he wasn't whispering; he was bellowing. PC; How did his activities sit with some of the other trustees who were more traditionally minded? I've often wondered about whether there was some friction.

VL: Well, there was friction -- well, I won't go so far as to use the word "friction." They were all very well-behaved. But there were members of the Board that questioned exhibits; and not only the Board but the public; we would hear comments reflected from the public. There were many people that welcomed there exhibits. Many others said, "What is a Jewish museum? This isn't for the Jewish Museum. This should be done some other place." As a matter of fact, I think maybe it was Alan Solomon and the Jewish Museum which loosened up the policies of other museums in the City to become more more adventuresome and so forth. So, yes, there was that -- I don't want to use the word "friction," I'm trying to find a more suitable word -- there was a good deal of discussion about what was going on. The way I look at it, I do feel that the policy under Alan was not any different from what it had been before, but that it was all done on a grander scale. More money was available for catalogues and for the exhibits, so that the impact was that much greater. Of course, Alan was very bright. And very much involved in a very contemporary field. He was "with it". And he probably didn't have as much interest in exhibits of Jewish interest as Dr. Keyser had so that the balance was thrown off.

PC: You're no longer associated there, are you?

VL: Yes, I'm still on the Board. I haven't been as active there by any means. You see, at that time I was Chairman of the Board, and, as such, I felt a much greater sense of responsibility for everything.

PC: How many years were you chairman? Do you remember roughly?

VL: Roughly? Let me see. Well, I was chairman while Alan was there; and after Alan, I think we had Mr. Van Weeren-Griek; and after that we had --

PC: Karl Katz was there.

VL: Before Katz we had -- what's his name? -- he came out of Brandeis, I saw him just the other night.

PC: Sam Hunter?

VL: Sam Hunter. Thank you. I'm glad you know more about it I don't recall whether I stepped down during Sam Hunter's regime. I think it was during -- I think I was still Chairman of the Board when Sam came on. And then I think Ben took over -- was that it? Yes. It was after Ben that David became Chairman of the Board. Then afterwards, it was what's his name from Israel? You mentioned the name

PC: Karl Katz.

VL: Karl Katz. And then of course after Karl, we were without a director for quite a while, and everything slowed down there. So I've always been interested, but once I gave up being Chairman of the Board, I wasn't as active. Then I became involved in the Poster Program and that absorbed a good deal of my interest and time.

PC: Right. Just kind of looking back at what the Jewish Museum did while you were Chairman, what do you feel about its success or failures? Do you think it was successful in its activities?

VL: Well, I've read so many of the comments by different people on what the Jewish Museum should be, and what kind of program it should have. We had endless discussions on this. I felt, and I still feel, that in a sense it's immaterial to me if the Jewish Museum is to be a museum involved -- and I think this is what now exists -- primarily and only in any art expression related to Judaism and Jewish life. That's fine with me as long as it's excellent, you see, and maintains a certain standard. This is the way I have felt about it. Personally, I have no quarrel, as a matter of fact, I like the program at the Museum being involved with art of specifically Jewish interest, but also of general interest. I feel that as a Jew I'm no less interested in art, I am interested in artistic expression related to Judaism as a Jew and with whatever sensibilities I may have to bring to it. But also as a Jew, I'm also interested in art. And I feel that art is a reflection of life. However much the artist sets up limitations within what he does willy-nilly, it's just an expression of life. And certain limitations could not have been set up at other times, just keeping on the surface, you know. This was all part of the time. So that I found no difficulty, as a matter of fact, I welcomed the program as it existed at the Jewish Museum. But I also can understand the individual sort of dichotomizing his life; he has his own area, his religious expression and so forth.

PC: You know, one of the things that interests me is that once you become Chairman of the Board like that and were so active in very avant-garde art (you weren't showing the most conservative things that were happening), did you get more involved with the art world, with artists particularly, and dealers, and all of that other . . . ?

VL: Well, yes, I did get more involved in the art field. But usually, well, most of the time, I shy away from getting involved with the artists. And unfortunately -- maybe I'm too sensitive -- I almost shy away from the galleries. I can't go into a gallery as a man off the street to look around. If I see something and make an inquiry, it's very unpleasant, it's exceedingly unpleasant. And then sometimes you'll get a call, "Oh, come down and see my work, come down to the studio." Well, the only time I want to go to an artist's studio is if I already know what the artist does to a certain extent and have a relationship with the work, a feeling that I'd like to own a piece of his. Then I'll go. Then if I don't see anything I like at least I can walk out. I don't have a backbone. Because I know, I'm quite sure I'm going to buy something unless he changes and goes off or what have you. Otherwise, I find it very difficult. And they'll say, "Oh, just come and look." That's for the birds; that's ridiculous. So it becomes very difficult. Maybe if I had a stronger character or something I would become much more involved in the field with artists and dealers and so forth.

PC: Have there been any dealers over the years you've been particularly interested in or associated with?

VL: Well, it's not a matter of being particularly interested. Yes, this happens because there are certain galleries that show the artists and the kind of art that one has more of a leaning to. I personally am interested in the things that are very current. Maybe age has something to do with that. Maybe that's the way that age has affected me. It's being in contact with the younger -- not necessarily younger -- but, in a sense, spiritually younger artists I find exciting. It makes contemporary life

PC: More fascinating.

VL: Exactly.

PC: That's fascinating. In doing the interviews, I've noticed that certain people have reached a point, and they'll stop, and they'll either go backwards or be active in a very narrow area. Don't continue, you know?

VL: Well, if they continue to be active in a very narrow area maybe one shouldn't be critical of that. Maybe this is good. Maybe it's a developing and becoming more deeply involved, intellectually involved. Maybe this is a failing on my part in that I haven't done that. I often think now that I should buy only sculpture -- of course I like drawings -- I should only buy drawings and sculpture and not buy any paintings. But maybe I'm fickle. I see what I like, and it excites me, and I go on.

PC: I think it's important to the artist when somebody who is an established collector will buy an artist who is twenty-eight years old or something. It sort of gives him some sort of mystical push.

VL: Well, I don't know what effect it may have on them, but I personally have been turned off so frequently when I go into a gallery and look around and the manager or the owner will come along and say, "Oh, yes, and Nelson Rockefeller bought this." This immediately turns me off; I feel as if I'm being sold. I don't want to buy what someone else likes. I want to buy what I like. I want to respond to it. I'm human, and I'm afraid that I'll be affected, you know, influenced by this kind of gab.

PC: Do you think there's been more of that high pressured selling in the last few years than before?

VL: In my experience, I think the art market has changed quite a good deal. At least, there hasn't been that sense of excitement from the point of view of the art that is shown. And I think that's reflected all the way through.

PC: Yes. Right.

VL: You had said something before, and I had a thought in responding to it -- well, it wasn't important.

PC: It may come back to you. One thing I'm curious about: in the selection of work, do you and your husband agree on pieces? Do you buy them, or does he buy them?

VL: I buy them. But he responds. There are certain things he likes very much. And with other things, he's just very good-natured and goes along with me. Oh, you said something about changes and so forth. Well, I have quite a different collection of paintings. I've given very little sculpture away. But of the paintings that I've had and reached a point I'm not the kind of collector that has a storeroom -- I mean I have a storeroom, one of the maid's rooms in which we have paintings and so forth that we have put away. But I'm not one to take a warehouse and store paintings. I'm not that kind of collector. As a matter of fact, it's reached the point where my husband says, "Fine. Buy whatever you want but only buy what you're going to use. If you're going to put it

up in the maid's room, don't buy it." In the past, I've given paintings I've had to the children. I have four married daughters. So I've given to the girls and sort of started over again.

PC: Keep on going.

VL: Yes. The children said, "Mother, there won't be room for people with all the sculpture around."

PC: You know, talking about the sculpture. I notice the Nevelson back there. You've been a great patron of Nevelson's over the years?

VL: Well, I wouldn't say that. I like Nevelson very much; as a person very much, too. No, I don't have that much Nevelson. I have a Wall of hers which is wonderful to live with. I had a large New York apartment which we gave up. We have a large home in the country. I had her Wall in the living room of the other New York apartment. It worked beautifully. That's another thing: in my view, I like work that works well, that I can live comfortably with. Happily, the Wall is installed very nicely in the country house. So I have a Wall of hers. I have something of hers that hangs on the wall -- I don't know what you call it; it's not a major piece. I have Boxes of hers. Those are the only other Oh, yes, my youngest daughter bought a piece of hers in the plastic -- whatever you call it.

PC: Oh, yes.

VL: A fairly good-sized one. I have admired pieces. I probably would have bought more, but I buy on a particular budget, and sometimes when things become too expensive, I'll do with other things. I rarely buy something that was created numbers of years ago. There are very few things that I --

PC: All quite fresh.

VL: Yes. There have been a couple of occasions where I've wanted something very badly and turned to my husband and said, "Instead of an anniversary gift, you'll buy me this."

PC: I get the feeling that the collecting has been really a kind of continuing intellectual and emotional adventure.

VL: Mostly emotional. I'm not very intellectual.

PC: But you've never had a particular plan of buying this kind of sculptor and that kind of painter?

VL: No. When something provokes, stimulates my interest, I buy it. We've been in this apartment for a little over a year. And I bought these just last year. I'm in this room all the time. I sit here, and I look here, and I look here. I rarely sit there and look up there; there's a blank wall and I want something there. But I want what I want. I've been wanting very badly to get something for there; when I do sit there, I find it so empty. Frequently, I like a blank wall but not this blank wall. This needs something for me. No, I buy when I see something Like when I bought this one here I was completely confused, completely confused. I guess I was especially confused when I bought it. I look at it a great deal. It has started to fall into place for me. I've enjoyed living with it. I guess I like the juxtaposition of that visually with the Brice Marden which I'm mad about.

PC: They're the opposite of each other.

VL: I know. They're a wonderful foil for each other. And I think the Brice Marden, of course, is absolutely brilliant.

PC: You have really quite a large collection of sculpture by now, haven't you?

VL: No, it isn't that big. I don't know how many pieces there are. Of the sculptures and the paintings that we own, there are some that I think are great. I don't care what anybody else thinks. I have a lot that I don't think are great but that I enjoy living with. And I have some that I wish I didn't own.

PC: Are there many pieces that have lost their interest in that way?

VL: Not many. There are a few that have. But when it comes to sculpture even when I look at it and it's fallen flat, the fact that it's three-dimensional it still has a place in my heart, so to speak. But with paintings, it's quite different. Once a painting has weakened for me, I find it very irritating, and I want to get it out of my sight. I'm annoyed that it's in my possession.

PC: Have you given things to museums?

VL: A few things.

PC: Or sold things?

VL: No -- yes, I have sold some things but very few. I've sold a Modigliani that we owned. I've given some of the paintings that we had to the girls. But the Modigliani and a couple of others we kept but then they just didn't hang with what I have. If I want to look at the Modigliani I can go to the Museum and see it very readily. So that I sold a couple of years ago as a matter of fact. There are a couple of things of that sort. And there have been just a few things that we have given to museums. And a number of things I loan out that I just don't have a place for. Eventually, they will be given away.

PC: Another thing that comes to mind, of course, is you've been collecting for quite a number of years.

VL: Slowly, yes.

PC: Well, slowly; but things obviously have appreciated greatly in value in some cases.

VL: Yes.

PC: How do you feel about that? Did you anticipate when you bought, for instance, that Moore the tremendous difference in the current market?

VL: No. When I was buying, you know, in the forties and I guess in the fifties, I don't know just at what point this happened that the market value of objects became so enhanced. I first became aware of it -- well, I can figure it out fairly roughly -- it was, say, about twelve years ago, maybe in the late fifties or early sixties. I was asked to loan a piece -- and it may have been the Modigliani -- well, whatever picture it was that I was asked to loan, and there was the question of evaluation. And it had accrued so in value. And for me, in a sense, it spoiled it; and in sense it hasn't. But I guess I was naive enough to buy things and just enjoy them. Well then, one became aware. You know, it was spoken about and written about how the art market And of course it is pleasant to buy something because you like it and then, say, to read a month later an article in a magazine where someone is discussing this artist and speaks of the piece you bought or what the artist generally is doing, you know, that he's getting recognition. Of course, it's pleasant to feel that I guessed right, or my sensibilities are as keen as I think they are, or something. My husband has always said that he can do better in business than I can in art so "buy what you like. When it comes to making money I'll make the money." And I think he's right.

PC: That's interesting. I remember in his office there are lots of paintings and things. Does he keep paintings in the office much?

VL: Oh, yes, he's always had some paintings in his office and one or two pieces of sculpture. At the moment, he has very little. It's sort of messy. He moved last year, and he hasn't redecorated. The rug is the wrong color. Nothing goes with anything else. It's very disturbing, but he keeps saying that's he's going to make a move and doesn't want to develop this. He does have paintings in his office.

PC: You were very involved with the American Federation of the Arts at one time, weren't you?

VL: Yes. I was asked to go on the Board, and I was on the Board for a while. That was a very stimulating experience.

PC: That's a much more national Board than the Jewish Museum's.

VL: Oh, yes, definitely. Oh, absolutely.

PC: People from all over.

VL: Oh, absolutely, there's no question about that. Oh, yes. They're involved. What they do is quite wonderful. I forget how many years I was on that Board. But I have a limited amount personally -- I'm not talking about financially, I'm talking about as an individual -- I have a limited amount to give there personally. I think they have an excellent Board. Alice Kaplan has done a tremendous job there which I admire. And I admire her enormously. She's very alive. She's involved. She's terrific.

PC: How did your Poster Project start?

VL: Yes. The Poster Project started because one day my husband told me that he had made a very large contribution to Lincoln Center. This was when it was going up. Mr. Rockefeller had approached him, and he had made this contribution. I was horrified because I guess the idea -- I'm not averse to contributing for a building -- but, oh, I just felt that there was so much wealth involved in this project that I couldn't see his having made so large a contribution to the building. And I questioned it. We discussed it. Finally he gave me the privilege of allocating how these funds were to be used. And that was great. So I met with Mr. Rockefeller. Here these buildings were going up, and they were going to house music and drama and theater, and dance, all of that. This was marvelous. I guess I felt the same way as I did about the New School that, well, the visual arts should be there. I've always believed that one's environment is what stimulates people. It's what stimulated me as a child.

My mother was very dramatic. We were the poorest of the families around, and of the relatives, but we had the most beautiful home. This was it; and it was a very essential part of living as far as I was concerned. Well, I felt that there should be visual arts there. He went along with the idea. A certain sum was set aside to buy painting and sculpture. Of course, I used to go to Carnegie Hall -- for a minute I thought my mind had gone back to Symphony Hall in Boston -- but it's Carnegie Hall here in New York where they had those big three-sheeters, all very ugly. The little traveling I had done -- you'd go to Paris and see all the exciting posters around there which were very colorful and stimulating.

PC: Columns of type set up.

VL: Yes. Great. But you walk around New York, and you see the three-sheeter. They gave you the news, but this was it. So that gave birth of the idea of allocating a certain sum for posters. The idea was to commission the fine artist, the creative artist of the time and order a design. This is not to say that the fine artist will create a better poster than a good designer will, not necessarily at all. But to bring to the general public -- they walk down the street, they see an image, something would attract them, and something would happen. Of course at the time, there was much talk about what was happening to the city and so forth. I always felt that if people's sensibilities were awakened, they would seek to make the whole city a more amenable place in which to live. So that's how that started.

PC: Those were done in limited editions and then unlimited?

VL: A sum was set up at Lincoln Center -- it still exists -- to underwrite commissioning of artists and publishing the posters. The sum was \$200,000. The idea was to keep this fund alive. And also a sum was set up to create stanchions, to have the stanchions designed. And so the idea was to publish the posters and publish a limited edition signed by the artist. At that time, a good deal of money was spent because we do a separate edition for the poster and a separate edition for the limited edition. The poster might be an offset, or the poster might be a silkscreen. And depending upon the artist, if he wanted to do an etching or a lithograph, he could do that. Of course in essence, it was almost like doing two posters, you see. Well, this was the way the whole thing started and the idea of selling the posters and the limited edition to replenish the fund so it could always be ongoing. And hopefully and possibly that if the fund accrued then there would be money to then go off and probably develop another creative idea.

PC: Has it worked that way?

VL: No, it hasn't accrued, but it is maintaining itself quite well.

PC: So that you really gave the seed money, and it just carries itself pretty well now?

VL: Yes.

PC: Oh, that's terrific. How many people have made posters for that? Have you any idea?

VL: Here I'm involved, and I don't know how many posters. I'm no good at keeping records. That was set up for Lincoln Center. They were making very few posters at that time. They were just getting started. Being very impatient, I finally induced my husband to set up another fund which would be just List Art Posters. I was on the Board of A.F.A. at this time. The A.F.A. liked the idea, and they undertook to administer the List Art Poster Program, and also turn to Lincoln Center so they would administer their program also because they didn't have a special department to handle all this, and so forth, and they were kind of struggling with it. So A.F.A. did administer it. I believe it was for two years. So we were making posters and trying to merchandise them. Now, merchandising posters and/or prints is another special business, especially posters when you're doing, say, 2,000 or 3,000 posters. What are you going to do with that? That becomes quite a specialized business. We were making posters and spending money, and there was very little coming in. My husband sank more money into it, and more money. Finally he said, "Look, this is it!" He said he felt it was a great idea, terrific, but that it was demanding more funds than he felt it deserved, and that these funds should go into other areas that he felt were more demanding and more worthy. And the A.F.A. had administered it for two years and felt that they had made their contribution which they had. It ran beautifully under their administration. So the A.F.A. gave it up. And my husband said, well, he would run it. So he tried running it for a year; he engaged someone to run it and so forth. It wasn't moving. Finally my husband said, "This is it." He was giving it up. I said, "Well, let me take it over." I took it over for a year. And that year I didn't buy anything, not even a pair of stockings because I was determined. Of course no one was getting a salary. It was a completely philanthropic kind of venture. I went down to Washington and tried to get at least tax deductible status. I had to be in business for a certain length of time and I hadn't been in long enough to qualify and all this and that. In the meantime, I met these girls in Boston. I was running out of money, or after a year's time, I was getting tired of underwriting this. I felt, well, I've had it. I really didn't feel that I should be putting all that money into it. So then we switched it to a straight business venture -- well, not a straight business venture -- but to a great extent. We set up a corporation. I have these two partners in Boston, and we continue today but to a smaller degree. A cultural institution could

approach us for a poster and if we feel we wanted to do it and so forth we did it; the institution paid nothing and received 50 or 100 posters for nothing. But then we tried merchandising it to make money. Well, that went on for a while. For a while, we had a warehouse in Boston filled with a lot of paper, thousands of sheets of paper, thousands of sheets of paper. And then we had to have another little office from which to distribute. Things were moving. But they weren't merchandisers. I'm not a merchandiser. And really it takes a merchandiser. So we discontinued that. We sold out our entire stock. We are still making posters. In the meantime, Lincoln Center has gotten going, and we make, oh, six or eight posters a year. At the time, our idea was that we would make, say, eight or ten posters a year. Lincoln Center makes around eight posters a year. I do all their work for them. I've become interested in their progress; I want to keep it going, too. So I do all of that -- of course in conjunction with my partners -- as to who the artist should be and what happens and so forth. Then we merchandise, we distribute for Lincoln Center. And in addition to Lincoln Center's posters, we do a few others. If we're approached and we feel we want to, we do those. But now instead of doing a poster edition of, say, 1,000 or 2,000, we don't; we do enough posters for the institution that wants it, and we will give them up to 50 or 100 for nothing. If they want more they have to pay the per unit cost for it. And then we just have the limited edition. My partners do that distributing. They have a print gallery in Boston. So that's how that's set up.

PC: I see.

VL: I feel badly in a way because I would have liked the poster editions to have remained larger. After feeling uneasy about this last period, what I now do is, when we are doing the poster, I will approach one or two galleries, poster distributing galleries, and show them what I am about to do. If they are interested in this poster, I will make it available to them. They can have 100 (before it was lower than that but the girls said "this is ridiculous; there must be an order of 100"), but they have to take it and they have to prepay or pay for it within a month or two. Of course, they get it at publication price. It's way below wholesale but in order to have posters . . .

PC: Oh, that's terrific. In your collecting, you've been very open to all sorts of styles and ideas and schools. There haven't been any particular dealers or curators who've been particularly influential, have there, you know, in developing interest in people?

VL: Well, if I am reading your question correctly, I think that what you're asking me is have any particular dealers or critics, or what have you, influenced my choice of purchases. My immediate answer is no. But I think in a sense that would be less than honest because I'm human and I am influenced. I have not sought out and asked people, "Who do you think I should buy? What do you think I should buy?" If someone mentions an artist, I will look at that artist and sometimes will buy that artist; sometimes I don't. In the little reading I do, I guess there are some critics that I like better because I understand them better, and they're saying things that I acquiesce to, where as others don't. I may well be influenced by this.

PC: But there's no continuing -- ?

VL: Oh, no. I'd rather make my own mistakes. It's like when you're rearing children. You know, if you give advice and if someone takes your advice and it turns out well, then they feel that it's their decision. If it turns out poorly, it's the other guy's decision and his mistake. So there's no point to it.

PC: Yes. END OF SIDE 1 SIDE 2

PC: This is Side 2. Well, the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art, which is another activity. Or is that not much of an activity?

VL: No. I'm not really very active. I truly am not. I was invited to join, and I did. Again, it's an institution that I feel I have so little to give to. I mean I support it, and I belong to it. I'm rather reticent and timid. I remember one time -- it's always a question of money every place, and I felt that they should just raise the membership dues. And I noticed that after a while they did; and now they're raising it again. I think this is as it should be. And, strangely enough, it's the institutions from which I can derive so much that I have so little to give to them that then my interest falls away from that. That's why I was really very active when I was in Fall River. Not that I consciously felt that I had something that I could give, but apparently, I did have something, and I did give. I was involved in the Community Center, and with our Temple in starting a cultural program there, a lecture program, being involved in a program with Hadassah, bring in dance groups and things of that sort. But when I came to a big city like New York, who am I? When you talk of the International Council, I have no ideas or anything that I can give there. I'm not that knowledgeable and my whole involvement is a very, very personal chemistry.

PC: Is it the same way then with the Whitney through the Friends?

VL: It's the very same thing there. I'm very grateful that I've been asked to be on the Purchasing Committee or what ever they call it. Each time I have been, I've enjoyed that enormously. I've enjoyed and been stimulated by the conversations. This has been great for me.

PC: That brings up the point: what has all this done for you in the sense of bringing all these people into your life, and these institutions, and all of these activities? It's such a variety of points of view and certainly an enormous number of people.

VL: Well, it's a contact with what's going on. It's a contact with

PC: Life today.

VL: Yes. I think it's like having ideas and not expressing them. It's only in expressing ideas that ideas give birth to other ideas or actually become ideas. One has thoughts, but until one expresses them, one really isn't thinking through at all, right? So that to just go about and see and collect -- I mean that certainly is enriching to the person -- but I think one has to get more involved. There has to be more of an exchange. At least, there has to be for me.

PC: You know, since you've been Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Jewish Museum and on the Acquisitions Committee at the Whitney, do you like doing committee type activities like that?

VL: No, I hate it. Committees depend upon the committee, you know, the involvement in the committee. Like I say the Purchasing Committee of the Whitney when you're on it there are about two or three meetings a year. They've been stimulating because when there was discussion on "shall we buy this painting from the exhibit?" and so forth. It's the comments that are made that are stimulating. You view the painting one way, comments are made, and you have an opportunity of seeing it with other eyes. And I think this is an exciting project. The involvement with the Jewish Museum was very exciting for me. It was a growing institution. Alan Solomon, I must say, was for me the most brilliant contact I've ever had in the art field. I thought that he gave that much to me but he allowed me, he opened up to a good degree with me. It was a most thrilling experience to see with his eyes -- my capacity to see with his eyes was very limited -- but at least they stretched my ability. And his sensibility was so keen, and he was so demanding that it was a fantastic experience.

PC: So he was a kind of key person around there?

VL: Oh, yes. And more stimulating than anyone that I've contacted in the art field, artists and curators and directors. Of course, there have been others. Like at the Jewish Museum, they had Kynaston McShine who I thought was as keen, but wasn't as full-blown a rose as Alan was, and so forth. But I'm happy to see that he's moving back to the Museum.

PC: One thing that I was going to ask you about: George Segal made a sculpture with you at one point?

VL: Yes.

PC: How did you like that whole experience of getting covered up with plaster in that way?

VL: Oh, it was interesting. I wanted him to do my husband. My husband and I were somewhere and happened to see him. And he said, fine, he'd do it but he'd only do it the way he wanted to do it. My husband wouldn't go for that. I said, "Fine. If you won't, I will." You know, I'm a would-be sculptor, and every contact I have is a vicarious kind of creation of mine, I guess. So he did the sculpture of me. But what interested me was that at a later time I remember there was something in Time magazine where he had done Ethel Scull, and her reaction was that it was a kind of horrible experience. I didn't see it that way at all. I couldn't understand -- well, something may have happened with hers. I remember it was in wintertime. I went out to New Jersey or wherever he lives. I had on a pair of slacks and a sweater that I adored. He started laying on this wet plaster. Of course when he first put it on it was chilly. Of course then it gets warm. But there was nothing unpleasant about it. Of course my sweater was ruined as you can imagine. But no, I was very interested in just the experience. I like having the piece of sculpture, but the experience itself was an interesting one. And it was worth getting to know George Segal.

PC: Do you think that you look at his other work differently because of that? Did that change your attitude toward his work in any way?

VL: No. No. I had seen it at the Green Gallery. And that was a gallery that was terrific. Too bad. I guess they had an exhibit of George Segal's work. There was one piece that I liked enormously. It was a couple of figures on a bed.

PC: Oh, yes, the reclining --

VL: Yes. And, oh, I looked at it, and I wanted it so badly. But I didn't dare, you know, buy this thing. I asked, "Could I have it without the bed?" They said, "This is the concept. You have to have it with the bed." I said my husband wouldn't go for this at all; he will go so far and no further. At a later time, I finally was accepting the thought that, well, my husband will just have to put up with the bed. I went back, but it had been sold. I liked

what George Segal had done. I don't like everything equally of course; they don't equally move me. But this is one that has.

PC: I was just wondering because of the experience of being turned into --

VL: Oh, the fact that he had done it this way? That he worked this way? No. Artists particularly today just take and twist a wire, but you have to have that creative and imaginative talent to twist the wire. Anybody can twist the wire, shall we say. Anybody can take this But, no, I think he gives to it a great degree of his sensibility, the way he sees.

PC: How do you like living with yourself as a piece of sculpture?

VL: It's interesting. Originally, I had it in the other New York apartment. Now it's in the country. It's in a certain place in a hall -- it's a very large hall. It stands there, and I accept it. I place my own sculpture; what I buy, I place. As a matter of fact, it has a relationship with the Nevelson Wall which is in the next kind of hallway. It's black. And also beside it I have the Morris Louis. This whole area works so well. Now it just happened that recently I pulled up the rugs. My youngest daughter has two dogs, and it got so stained. I didn't mind because I loved the dogs. But the rugs were so stained I simply had to -- it was a shame to have anybody come into that house with the dog stains. I pulled up the rugs. The sculpture was on the rug. I moved the sculpture and put it sort of in the middle of the living room. And just about ten days ago I put down rugs. Now I have patent rugs for when the dogs come back, heaven forbid! But anyway, when the sculpture was sitting there in the middle of the living room, it startled me. Every time I would go by the door it would startle me. I guess I became aware of the sculpture in and of itself; whereas in the place it was before, it was an object in relationship to -- you know, it became one object, one kind of experience because of its relationship. Whereas in the living room, I saw it as itself. And it is a startling experience. The housekeeper I used to have when I'd go out she'd say, "Well, I'll speak with the sculpture." And my children were horrified by it.

PC: Really?

VL: Yes, they were. And my husband, too.

PC: Oh, really? What did they say about it?

VL: Well, I guess they felt it was almost like there was a mummy sitting there, as if I had gone (you know, not mummy for mother), but that it was a mummy; it has a certain quality like that, there's no question. But they've gotten used to it. But for quite some time they'd walk into the dining room -- when I had it there -- and shudder.

PC: Really?

VL: Oh, yes. And I couldn't understand it. But, as I say, when I just saw it sitting there in the living room I felt the impact of it as startling -- probably there's a better word.

PC: I've always been intrigued in asking people about those experiences with Segal when he's done a sculpture, you know, where they live with the piece, or the artist uses them as a model, and they see it occasionally. And it's such a broad range of reaction.

VL: Well, he had me sit down. I sat in a very comfortable way. As it happens, Mother's hands were like mine. I wasn't aware of this, but now when I see myself, I also see Mother -- not that I see her, but I feel it --

PC: The gestures and the --

VL: Yes. No, I reacted to it. But now that I've put it back where it was, I don't react to it, you see. Because, you know, you go about, and it's not too often that you see what you live with. It's only at moments.

PC: Yes. When you change it.

VL: Oh, and you change it, and then it takes on its personality again, and you become aware. That's why I like to change things around. Everything looks different when it's placed in relationship to something else.

PC: Right. Have you had any other works made like that? There are no paintings of you or anything like that?

VL: Oh, I've had paintings made when I lived in Fall River.

PC: No, but I mean recently, in the last few years.

VL: No. There is an artist whose work I like. I have a couple of drawings of his. It's -- what's his name? -- Alfred Leslie.

PC: Oh, yes.

VL: I liked the portrait he did of Scull, Bob Scull. I wanted him to do a portrait of my husband. I happened to contact him about something else -- I forget where it was -- some place in Connecticut, I guess. And I asked him about that. He said, he'd do a portrait but he'd have to sit maybe weeks and weeks and all day long and then when it's all done if he doesn't like it you can't have it. Well, of course, I couldn't ask my husband to do that. Devoting three or four or six weeks to that -- well, that I couldn't do either. But I think it would be an interesting experience. I think he's a good artist. I like his work.

PC: They're incredibly impressive those --

VL: Yes.

PC: Do you have any idea what's going to become of your collection? Will it go to your daughters? Or to museums?

VL: Oh, well, some will go to my daughters. And of course, some will go to museums. Like in this maid's room, I have a number of things. Just recently, I'm painting down there so I took stuff off the walls, and I'll repaint others. I went up to the storeroom and looked through what I wanted to take out. And it's horrifying because there's nothing in there that I would hang in the house or live with. Now I won't sell them. First of all, I won't sell something that I don't like. And I won't give it away if I don't like it. Heaven forbid! I don't want anybody to know that I ever bought the thing. Of course, the children will take some of the things. As it happens with my purchasing, I've bought a number of things for myself, and a number of things I've bought out of trust money for my daughters. But they just can't live with them. My youngest daughter owns some of the biggest sculpture, and some of the best sculpture that isn't even the big ones that I own that she'll be able to live with and the style of life is different and, I guess, will continue to become different, hope, anyway. But she won't be able to live with these things. She'll be able to maintain them if she's lucky. But I don't think she'd want to. And of course, they'll go to institutions. As a matter of fact, there's something that she owns now, and there's an institution that would like to have it. I feel they should have it. I'm going to speak to her. I'll be amazed if she says no. And certainly the more important things I think should be seen and enjoyed by many people. Just by the grace of God I've been able to have that; I'm lucky. That's one reason I loan things out. Everything always comes back damaged, really damaged and yet I feel -- well, you should loan it. So it goes. So it will be distributed.

PC: You have a Bob Indiana Love ring that you're wearing.

VL: Oh, yes. Well, that's one thing I've been buying a lot of is -- you know, you run out of wall space, and you run out of space for sculpture. I've been buying a lot of jewelry designed by artists. As a matter of fact, I don't have jewels. And this I've enjoyed. I wear them and abuse them a great deal. I put them on and just wear them.

PC: That's such a classic image.

VL: Yes. Some I like better than others. END OF SIDE 2 END OF INTERVIEW