Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Romana Javitz, 1965 Feb. 23

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Romana Javitz on February 23, 1965. The interview took place in New York, New York, and was conducted by Richard K. Doud for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript that seemed relevant was added in brackets and given an –Ed. attribution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

RICHARD K. DOUD: This is an interview with Romana Javitz at the New York Public Library, February 23, 1965. The interviewer is Richard K. Doud. [Audio break.] You mentioned something about there being two sides to a picture file; I'd like to have you explain—

ROMANA JAVITZ: Oh, yes. I would like—I would like to begin and stating any views I have about any collection of photographs, or even about one photograph, I have certain basis for my point of view. And these are quite unlike the—that of photographers' or of museum staffs'.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: And I really like to sound off about it. First of all, whatever our private point of view is about enjoying a photograph, or its visual content or, let's say, its aesthetic meaning or the concept of the photographer, putting aside what may be your first pleasure in the photograph, as a librarian, I find that I want very much to read the facts in the photograph. I immediately turn the picture over and try to find out what, who, where, and when. That does not mean that I am looking at these photographs from a journalistic point of view, as history. I want very much to enlarge my experience of the image by adding as many words as I can find that came out of the circumstances in which the photograph was taken. And I do quite a bit of teaching in how to look at pictures, from the point of view of documents. And the thing—and the fact that amazes most of the beginners in picture work, is the way the image changes as you know more about the content in terms of words. I have a particular fondness for watching people read a paper such as *the New York Daily News*, which is one of our best picture papers. I mean best, pictorially.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: And from the use of words, to drag the readers eye into the picture and make him look at the picture. And no matter how crowded a subway or bus is, the reader reading the daily news will flip that paper back and forth from story to picture, from picture to story, until he has found everything in that picture that the story has told him to look for. Well, that is very much the way we look into a picture from the point of view of a library archive. In a museum, the same photographs have been absorbed by studying their outer—their visual content without worrying about who done it and why.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: And then they can be very selective because, after all, it is a museum; they are arbiters of taste. They have to decide, this is a great photograph by a second-rate photographer or a second-rate photograph by a super first-rate photographer. They have the great privilege of labeling the photograph has been expressionist, realist, or et cetera.

[00:05:15]

Now there's a third category of people who handle pictures, and that is a true archivist. Let's say like someone at the National Archives, they don't even look at the pictures. If they come to them in groups, they're very happy to keep them tied together as a group because each picture affects the next picture. And so, they keep it as a body of documentation, and they

never separate the photographs from anything that's in the words attached to them. If there's a letter or a diary that is all kept as part of the photographic document. So, you see, there are really three different ways of facing a documentary photograph.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: I think that the one I represent as a librarian is perhaps the richest in the—in its role because the way we handle a picture is the least narrow, the least prejudiced, and the least editorial. We do not judge—you're not supposed to argue with me or agree, right? Let's see, now where was I? In other words, we don't appraise the picture for its value; we accept it and try to organize such pictures, let's say, and add this one to the organization so they can reach the highest and widest use. And our main motto is usefulness. It may be immediate, or it may be in the future. Through the many years of experience that I've had with pictures, I find that no matter how ephemeral a material seems to be and has a very long life if it has been used. Once it is stored away, it seems to die. It is very curious.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: There is something about a photograph, when it is constantly used, that seems to give it life. And one reason that it seems to have life is that as different types of people use that picture, you who are issuing the picture and lending it in this case, you see all these new things in each picture. The scenic designer looks at it and designs an abstract set. Well, you never looked at that photograph again—before, in the point of view of its abstract qualities as a basis for a setting that would be authentic for the 1930s. And a psychiatrist picks up this picture and says this is exactly the kind of antagonism I was looking for. Well, you didn't even know there was any antagonism in the picture. And suddenly, all these photographs become part of our living. And that has really been our experience with the FSA photographs.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Could I interject something here?

ROMANA JAVITZ: You may, with pleasure.

RICHARD K. DOUD: This brings up a point that I think is well made or well taken by some people who feel that, particularly in the case of the FSA photo file—I say particularly because they're more concerned with it than other files—this business of certain pictures, perhaps living because they are in continued use or more often used, has served to more or less invalidate the remainder of the pictures in the file. And that whether or not the pictures that are used are any better than the others is of no consequence. Possibly they are considered better because they are more known and more accepted through repeated usage. Do you think this is a danger in any picture collection that people will not take the time to seek out perhaps different exposures of the subject?

[00:10:15]

ROMANA JAVITZ: They are extremely delighted to find that that chestnut is one of 400 different views that they could have been using, and they will go into those 400 other views. The chance that that one Madonna of the migrants was used over and over and over again does not blindly the eye to the others. In fact, I think that before we make a general statement, such as you have—and it's not your statement, I realize—I think that the people in the picture business—I mean publishers—have a perverted idea of what the reading public looks like. They visualize the reading public as being one big monster who always goes to the back of a magazine, never reads it in progression, et cetera et cetera.

Actually, that monsters broke out into many different types of people. As an influence on the artist in our midst—and I say artists in a very broad sense, I mean, the poet and a writer and so on. The so-called chestnuts, the skull in the sand, and the man with his son against the wind, and even the Dorothea Lange, while they have been overused, the artists who have seen them have always come back and said, aren't their others in the same series, because the—particularly Dorothea Lange's and Russell Lee's—you have a sense that every picture is just like one word of a sentence. It's not the whole story, and you have a very strong desire to see the rest. I have in my own experience—we had a detail of a [shaker –Ed.] of a little girl holding a rather cracked doll against herself. The doll looks pock-marked on his head.

Well, I often wondered what was happening all around, and it really wasn't until about two summers ago when I worked on *The Bitter Years* that we had at the time to go through

those. And everyone who was working on that file began to give forth with great excitement because they found the rest of this little girl. And everyone felt so much better because most of these still photographs were not taken as one picture. And as they were taken for a picture essay or a picture story, that these photographers were skilled enough and, I should say, were sensitive enough to story, so that they made no attempt to tell the whole story in one picture.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: And I think that one thing that comes over from FSA pictures are that there are no isolated images. The images are part of a long continuing linked tale. You meet the coal miner squatting, waiting for the bus. We see him walking toward his house, you see his children, you see him on the porch, you see him going to work, and you just feel this thing is a non-insolated image. And nothing will hurt that feeling or take away from it, except museum shows. The museums are—I have a prejudice, as you'll notice. [Richard K. Doud laughs.] I am trained as an artist; I have—my education as that of a painter, and of course, I couldn't have lived without museums. But I think museums are extremely snobby in their attitude toward the intelligence of the public. I really do.

RICHARD K. DOUD: I'm afraid you're right.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Any museum that would show an Egyptian mummy, a Renoir, and a cash register at the same time is confused. You drag someone in the Metropolitan Museum, the first thing you see is a nice shiny cash register in their shop. And then you're with a child, the child drags you over to look at a mummy, and then you want to go in to see Gothic art, or you want to see a Rembrandt. It's like—it's as if you went into a concert hall and the Beatles were in one corner and Beethoven in another corner and a guy with a jukebox playing I don't know what.

RICHARD K. DOUD: That's a nice way to put it.

[00:15:00]

ROMANA JAVITZ: The museums are very confused, and when it comes to photographs they're so determined to make photography an art, but they don't know where they are. I mean, I think they're doing a wonderful job with photographers. But I do think that—I think the term documentary was very painful but necessary. It has hurt films, too. You know, this idea of a documentary film, there's great confusion about it: art films, documentary films, films for TV, films for advertising, films for entertainment. I think the whole image thing is so young. But we have fallen apart finding language for it, and I think it traps us. "These are documentary photographs," they tell you. Then suddenly, you go into a museum, and a documentary photograph hangs as art. Well, all of art is documents. I mean, Rembrandt's a document.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Daumier's a doc—all of Goya is a document. I mean, the horrors of war [*The Disasters of War*]. That reminds me, I was once thrown out of session at the museum. Not literally, but sort of sat on because they had brought out the Tarawa photographs. Have you ever seen those? [Inaudible.]

[Cross talk.]

RICHARD K. DOUD: [Inaudible] no, I've seen—

ROMANA JAVITZ: Well, these, I think, were the censored ones. They were terrible. So, I piped up, and I said, I just been to Boston and saw the—Goya's horrors of war. And it was very odd, I was able to stomach the Tarawa photographs, but I had to turn away from the drawings. That the realism through the artists' synthesis was much more terrifying than more analysts. When I mentioned that, heaps of abuse were thrown at me; nothing could be realer than a photograph, you know. That's not true.

I think I think it's terribly exciting to give each art its place, and I think that great photographs are as great as great paintings. I mean, I appreciate the museum place for photographs but I think they are—I think the field, even though it's 100 years old, is still very young.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: Now from our point of view, when the FSAs came—the photographs came to us, it just gave us a completely new eye. It was really a third eye for all trouble [ph]. You have no idea of what richness it meant to us. First of all, it was the first time that we had images that were clean cut. They weren't made to sell records or soap or whatnot. Before that, our records—our pictures of America were very tainted by commerce, the point of view selling. They were pretty pretty. They were *Saturday Evening Post*.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yeah.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Definitely *Collier's*, old *Harper's*. Remember that even the Civil War photographs that were available were slight. The best things we had were clippings from the rotogravure sections of the newspapers, which were tremendous. And still very important. I don't know what we would do without the rotogravures, that's your photojournalism before *Life* and *Look* [inaudible]. We had any amount of material on society because of the rotogravures and *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*, and *Vanity Fair*, all those magazines, and the inflation of the '20s. We can give you a what a society woman would wear in the Riviera, and what her dog looked like in South Hampton. But we couldn't find a sunbonnet.

Actually, the Index of American Design began when the first refugees came here, and they were extremely sensitive about America not having a "culture"—we're in quotes. And they would sort of say, Well, isn't there anything that's American? And we try to think, what is American design? Just as today, we're asked for Spanish design, and there is no Spanish design. You know, we have to use Moorish Spanish design.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:20:24]

ROMANA JAVITZ: We saw that ric-rac [ph] was probably the only really American [they laugh] design, or that our jeans and overalls were for—what do you call them? Levi's, aren't they?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Or Levi's. I get mixed up because my doctor's name is Levi [ph] instead of Leevy [ph], and I always have to remember that. So, Levi's, well, that was American. And then we had never seen our sunbonnets, really, the way our sunbonnets are cut is not common elsewhere. I couldn't find decent pictures of sunbonnets. I used to be very annoyed about what's American what isn't American because everyone has a tradition. It's a lot of nonsense.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yeah.

ROMANA JAVITZ: [Inaudible] have tradition. And I had worked very closely with the building up of our Negro history plates; that was one of my pet interests. Because this Negro from the West Indies had determined to show the Negro that he had a past. And he began this marvelous collection in which we have in Harlem called the Schomburg Collection of Negro History and Literature. It's a very extraordinary collection, and I helped from the very beginning, because he that that we could get pictures on the past of the Negro it would be important. And here we were working to give the Negro his past, you see? Which is terribly important. And yet, we could never say, Well, this is American culture. We did not have any museums of folk art then, no one except Miss [Edith] Halpert was collecting folk art. I mean, you would talk about American weather vanes and this and that, but there was nothing, nothing, nothing, and it's from that was born the Index of American Design. Now, at the same time, if you wanted a picture of an American farmer, you have to go to drawings by Frost. Do you know those at all, or—

RICHARD K. DOUD: No.

ROMANA JAVITZ: —Campbell. they're caricatures. And they have this right-angled beard, you know, it's wonderful. Actually, it was only in the work of illustrators that you had any concept of our countryside people. And if you go through our clippings before this really revolutionary step forward in our record of America, the American scene, you will see how paltry, empty, prejudiced, distorted are the pictorial records of our people. For example, if

you would pick up a comic magazine of the early '20s or the '10s and look at the drawings of American farmers. [Richard K. Doud laughs.] It's fantastic. You have to go into these cartoon quality drawings and *the Saturday Evening Post,* and *Harper's,* and *Century*, and so forth. Even go in the fashion magazines of the day you can hardly find a man—it's very hard for us to find what men look like for the first few decades. Although the camera was busy, you know, there were not cheap enough photomechanical methods for reproducing it.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: If you went through the rotogravure, which— which was our source, society only. Here was this democratic society, but the pages were society pages; they're really amusing. And the life of the movie stars.

RICHARD K. DOUD: What part could the old mail order catalog after the 1880s play in this business?

ROMANA JAVITZ: They're our only source. You know, they're all on microfilm, and they've all been preserved. You know the Sears Roebuck people have spent a fortune to preserve those pages, they are one of the depositories. I remember Shahn wanting something for one of the campaigns of the government, and he needed a pair of shoes for less than a dollar. And, of course, the only way to find that is to check the [Richard K. Doud laughs] Sears Roebuck catalog. Actually, without trade catalogs, you are lost.

[00:25:00]

The FSA, if it had only continued—if there had been a continuing history, we would really have a heritage of our visual—of the visual aspects of our lives. It is extremely empty. I had a man this—he's been working here about a week. Oh, we have somebody from the State Department working all last week here on trades that the Negro may have been active in. Now, if you want to find the history of the blacksmith and what he looked like, outside of very romanticized Longfellow chestnut trees, [inaudible]. Those local photographers who took pictures didn't know what to do with their negative, most of those were thrown away. Of course, many dedicated librarians, and particularly archivists in historical societies throughout the country, have rescued the work of amateur photographers.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: I know one day I was asked to go to Philadelphia to look at a collection of pictures—clippings. And they were offered to us for a very small sum of money. And I didn't want them because they just duplicated what we had; they were clippings from magazines. But in the corner was a stack of photographs all tied up, ready to be thrown away, which happens every day. We're offered photographs every day we can't accept. And so, I looked at them, and they were pictures submitted in an amateur contest in a boy's *The Youth's Companion* magazine in 1905. These are submitted for almost every state of the union. They're very small photographs. They are beautiful. And they are the best pictures we've ever found of the traditional farmer with his right-angled beard and wonderful covered bridges and baby carriages and a marvelous set of pictures of the Negro living in cabins. And I had one—a State Department is borrowing—it's a woman and her children with great big tubs in which she did the laundry. She was apparently a local launderer. And even the littlest boy is wearing a blouse shirt. A blouse, I guess, of its day, with embroidered frills. And here are these little tots in front of a cabin door with these starched frilled [Richard K. Doud laughs] shirts. It was just beautiful. She had black gloves on for some odd reason.

RICHARD K. DOUD: [Inaudible.]

ROMANA JAVITZ: But it's things like that are—it's not a great photograph. It hasn't—it doesn't belong in the museum collection. From the point of view of an archivist, he would be unhappy. We don't know where that is. We don't have any idea where it came from. But for an artist, for a writer, just seeing a picture like that is exciting.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Very often, artists and writers will take a flock of material—let's say they'll take a folder of FSA photographs. They will just browse through them and never take one. Well, they just want to immerse themselves in a period or in the lives of some families like this. And you don't know what it's going to come out at; it may come out as abstract art, Pop

art, or a poem. What's the difference?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yeah.

ROMANA JAVITZ: In other words, you have—it's a sort of a yeast. It's a very, very rich and important element in—for—in the lives of all those who have looked at them. We have had young men work here—artists, writers, we had a composer—who handle them just for filing. And when they leave, you know one of the things they say always is, I'm going to miss handling those FSA photographs. They have felt that there was a sort of a "it cannot be believed" element in them.

RICHARD K. DOUD: I think I know what you mean.

ROMANA JAVITZ: And it cannot be believed.

[00:30:00]

I want to tell you that the Negroes who have used this file—and I must say it's earlier than this Negro revolutionary movement we're living through, this was some time ago—have studied it very carefully. And one sociologist told me that while he came here, he was trying to arouse an interest in a group of young Negroes he was teaching. He wanted to arouse an interest in them to see their own past; it's very difficult for them, even the educated Negro, to fight within himself something that was pounded into him: that the only past he had was a savage past. I've worked with many Negroes, and they had this feeling. And he was determined, with this group, to show them that much of what they thought about themselves—about themselves, that had been pounded into them as being Negro was not Negro at all, it was because of circumstances. So, he wanted to know whether, in the FSA archives or files, he could look for material showing white people doing things, living as—that Negroes have been told they do because they're Negros. And he found wonderful things. Dirt, filth, children neglected, children full of flies, a drunken white man, families all messed up. And he took no pictures of Negroes, he took all white people. And I think that was a very exciting use for those pictures.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Powerful expression.

ROMANA JAVITZ: [Inaudible.]

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, could you sort of give us an introduction of your first experience with this whole thing? What you were [inaudible]? This is sort of historical, I suppose, so.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Yes. Well, let's say in the beginning, right?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: In the beginning, we knew that several of our public—we can call them that—people—artists, and others who use the library picture files were now working for the government on governmental projects involving pictures. One of the first was Walker Evans, who we knew as a photographer, and had always been interested in the potential of photographic files in the library. And Walker Evans and Ben Shahn began to tell us about this project. And then Roy Stryker came too, they brought him here to see a picture—documentary picture file in action.

At that time, we were serving many public projects. Those making murals—and we had letters from all over the country, wherever murals were being painted, we were supplying the pictorial research for them. And very soon, several conferences were set up, particularly on how the pictures should be taken care of after they were photographed. I remember going down to Washington and making a plea to Stryker that the subject content of the pictures must be analyzed as soon as they were made, so that immediately you could find any subject, for example, privies, or sheriffs, or some crops such as cotton. And the subject analysis must be handled at the same time as the photographs being made and the importance of the gathering of data with each picture. And we had very regular reports on how the project was going from the men on the project, whenever they came from New York, they would come by and discuss particularly the subject— the problem of the organization of these pictures after they were gathered.

[00:35:10]

Somewhere along the line, I don't know when—I do know because the bill—Johnathan Daniels, right?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Sign—put that—you know this story—how they were saved from impounding. I'm sure Stryker told you that story.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Well, two weeks before that—so don't make me look up the time. About two weeks—two or three weeks before that I received an enormous package of photographs. Actually, before that, whenever I saw Stryker, he came here, and we all had lunch together, I would gripe about certain things I could never find pictures of, such as ice cream cones and other Americana.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: Privies and so on. And I would complain, and very shortly I'd get a picture of that [Richard K. Doud laughs], you know, someone would take a picture, and it was delightful.

When this package came, we opened it out, out poured these treasures, all these beautiful prints. And the next day, more prints came, and the next day more prints came without a single sign of where they came from. And one day in great triumph, Mr. Stryker appeared in person, and said, "It's all right now, we can tell you. But we had a meeting and decided if Congress was going to impound all these pictures"—as you know, some senators were eager to have it done—"at least a duplicate file would be available in New York."

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: "But we didn't dare send it to you officially until the decks were clear. And now"—and then he told me how he slipped—Jonathan Daniels put this memo on top of all the other letters on Roosevelt's desk so he'd sign it first, you know that.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: And so, they went to the Library of Congress. Well, then we were all clean. We could admit where they came from. By then, we had an extremely good file. And rather than make it a file of a—a precious museum file or an archive file, we decided to handle it very freely. There are many duplicates. Many were unlabeled, many were labeled. And today, of course, we have about 400,000 of them. We have taken the time to take out every Negro item because of the need. And they have been used up, in about last three months those have been used by everyone, from filmmakers to government—because they find them more easily here.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: It is an extraordinary collection when seen by any one subject. The mere fact that they were here made it possible for Steichen to handle about 150,000 pictures by hand before they put up an exhibition. The film—we do not own the film strip due to Mr. Vanderbilt's attitude toward the New York Public Library, which I think was unfortunate at that time. There is very little understanding of the library's role in the community when it comes to material like photographs. We are the only place where the Democrats and the Republicans—where Pop artists and realistic artists, where the amateur and the professional all get together. In other words, you will see at our desk, at our table, the same material being used by both sides of the fence. And the—our greatest artists, easel artists, sculptors, love this file because it is not selected for you.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: So, you must always have a library file. You must have your material somewhere in a library. Otherwise—you see, you can never help the artist because he's ahead. He's ahead of the museums. He's ahead of publications. The artist is always a step ahead. It's just like the artist went to the moon before we did. We had pictures of flights on the moon, people imagined flights to the moon.

[00:40:00]

Optical illusions have been in our files; now they're in the galleries, now the museum whatnot—we've always had optical illusions here. We are not telling you what is good and what is bad. And the nice part of it is this: that after a few years, our material becomes extremely valuable because by then the museum decides this is art. We have had—I bought at Atget's immediately. I've had Atget's here for 30 years. When Miss Abbott was very hard up and I discovered that she had all these Atget's I went down and bought a few. When a young photographer comes in with pictures, they're of interesting subjects, I buy them, and a year later he's a salon photographer. Now, we have the work of many young photographers I buy for their subject content. Well, some of them can't get a foot into a museum, you see? But they will walk into a library because they don't feel the material has been labeled.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: And hence our FSAs—whether it's a Dorothea Lange, or a Ben Shahn, or an unknown photograph—are there for the public to use. You have a file here that is in use every day of the year. Even though we have had no money to house, and we've had no money to care for you. We've had no paper to mend them with. But there has not been a day that they haven't been used. And one whole group was used to a frazzle practically, because it was used for—by the WPA at this—at that time, for painting murals and posters and—in other words, a duplicate file such as we have here is a file for use rather than preservation. But we have discovered—and this is just really amazing if you were a mystic or something—that the material that's in use seems to have more light than the material on the shelf. There's something about something not being used that it atrophies.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: And I have one picture here that's been used and used and used for such a myriad of purposes. And I really should quote Dorothea Lange for you, because she said, of all the places in the world where she'd rather have her material, it would be in a library.

RICHARD K. DOUD: That's saying quite a lot.

ROMANA JAVITZ: And she made us a collection of photographs, which have appeared and have been used in TV and for all sorts of purposes. She's had more inquiries from her pictures here than from anywhere else. It's true, it maybe someone who wants to design a cameo using a Dorothea Lange on a cameo, or it may be for a hairdo in a dust bowl style. [Richard K. Doud laughs.] But—

RICHARD K. DOUD: Could I interrupt just a little? [Audio break.] [Inaudible]—

ROMANA JAVITZ: Did you want to say something?

RICHARD K. DOUD: No.

ROMANA JAVITZ: I thought you were going to say something. Are you [inaudible]?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes—

ROMANA JAVITZ: You found the plug?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yeah, we're in business.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Want some heat?

RICHARD K. DOUD: [Inaudible.]

ROMANA JAVITZ: [Inaudible.]

RICHARD K. DOUD: If you don't mind talking about people or personalities along with photographs, I'd like to have you say something about some of the artists involved. There were a couple about whom we know very little because we haven't had an opportunity to see them, and we may not get to see them. Particularly Walker Evans, who's been quite a figure in this whole business and then seems so unavailable.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Now, Walker Evans—you want my appraisal of these photographers?

RICHARD K. DOUD: If you'd care to give it, comments.

ROMANA JAVITZ: I have very strong feelings about the work of many of the people. Of course—look, I'm not a museum curator. You want to know what I thought of the photographers. Why is that? Just for fun?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, I think you're as good a judge as anybody in the country at this point [Romana Javitz laughs] on visual material.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Are you cold?

RICHARD K. DOUD: No, mm-mm [negative]. So, if you could just sort of—

ROMANA JAVITZ: That's [inaudible]. Now, you say what could be done and so forth. Oh, assessment? Of one photographer after the other?

RICHARD K. DOUD: No, I don't think—

ROMANA JAVITZ: Particularly Walker Evans?

RICHARD K. DOUD: I'm interested in Walker because I haven't seen him and may not get to.

ROMANA JAVITZ: He's in Europe, yeah.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

[00:45:00]

ROMANA JAVITZ: Walker Evans undoubtedly set the pace of the entire collection. Off the record, he didn't agree with Stryker, but it's on the record now.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, everyone knows that anyways.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Here was a man of exquisite taste. I'm saying that advisedly. Neither Shahn as a painter or Dorothea Lange as a photographer or any of the others on a Project had the complete assurance of his aesthetic taste. There's no question about that. His eye was the purest. It was never diverted by story. And yet, he was a word man. He earned a living since then, but with words as well as photographs. He was an extremely swift and decisioned, and very deliberate when he began to work. In other words, he took loads of time. For instance, I would say here that I watched him work. And he seemed to be taking so much time that you were sure that nothing would come out of it. But when he was ready to shoot, there it was, one-two-three. And it was so sure, and he had selected the most beautiful elements. Of them all, I think he had the greatest sense of beauty. And his pictures are immediately recognizable for their beauty, no matter how bitter the scene, or maybe sorted. There's great beauty in it.

And I know with young photographers today—for example, I had a visitor from—I had a group of students and visitors from Philadelphia photographic school, that included a young boy from Ecuador who had been educated in London and was a sophisticated young person. And I had arranged for them to go through our photographic collection by—which is arranged by the name of the photographer. And when this boy—this young man—reached the Evans', he jumped out of his chair and ran around and tried to show everyone what he found in these pictures.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: And there was one picture of a girl. These were in the streets of Cuba, by the way, these are not FSA photographs, these were the Cuban series. And there was one of a girl—or a young woman on the street. And this boy just became completely ecstatic and couldn't speak about this picture, because of the spirit in it and the sheer beauty. And he was just speechless about it. Now he had gone through Dorothea Lange and even Helen Levitt, whom I admired greatly—he had gone through Abbott's, Atget's and whatnot. And these Evans' just drove him mad.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: And many of us have felt that, when you plow through many, many files of the FSA when you're looking for something. Every time you meet an Evans, you stop. We don't know it's Evans. Now, this sounds like a cult, but it isn't. There is, in him, such a drive for perfectionism. He is the most fussy person on Earth. That when he takes a picture—or when he takes a picture, he's put everything in it.

RICHARD K. DOUD: What was his background? What would there have been that would lead toward this type of approach?

ROMANA JAVITZ: Well, he's sort of a born aristocrat. I don't mean that his background is aristocratic, but he's quite born.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. A New Yorker?

ROMANA JAVITZ: Well, the person who knows more about Evans than anyone else is George Layton [ph], who happens to be a friend of mine. Evans can see through nonsense.

[00:50:00]

He doesn't stand for any nonsense. He doesn't stand for red tape. He doesn't stand for all the mishmash of forms and conforming, et cetera. I think the best testament to Evans is the Agee book.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: You know, Agee was a very close friend of his. And he's—when I say he's a born aristocrat, I don't mean that in the family [inaudible], he's extremely—he's extremely the creative artist. He's—among them all, he's an artist with the camera.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: And he's an unsmiling person. [Knock; inaudible side conversation.] Walker Evans was the only—as far as I know, was the only dedicated photographer at the very beginning. The others came from other fields. And when given a camera and sent out to photograph, they were economists—Rothstein was an economics major at Columbia. Shahn was a mural painter. Bernarda Bryson was a drawer. Some of the others were writers, fundamentally. I think we have more writers and painters on that first route. Rosskam was a painter. Ed Rosskam was a painter. Ed Locke was a writer.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: I think you had a kettle of fish there with this one photographer on top. And here was this man, as I say, who was blue blood as far as art is concerned, with these extremely high standards, which he maintained throughout. And here he works with all these people don't even know a camera from the end of a horse.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Particularly his boss. After all, Stryker was not a photographer, he was a entrepreneur.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: And Walker Evans never could take being told what to do. In my only experience with him once, he was on a *Harper's Bazaar* assignment—which I think was lucrative—and I didn't know anything about it, I got a telephone call from our public relations department saying there's a completely mad photographer here, he said that he would not take photographs in this building if we accompanied him. Said he wouldn't mind if you came along because that wouldn't count. So, I say, Very well, I'll go along. The point is, he had to be alone, he had to brood. He knew exactly what had to be done, and he did. But he was a prima donna. And I think it was extremely painful for him to have all these characters who really knew more about setting up projects, I'm sure, than he did, suddenly telling him how to take photographs.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Sure.

ROMANA JAVITZ: I mean, it was painful. And then he had to really show them what was

meant by the photograph. And it took Shahn many years to give him the credit for it. And in his biography by Rodman—

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: —is a very good paragraph about what he owes Evans.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes, I remember.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Which would—I thought was long overdue. Evans is the only photographer I've ever met that didn't talk about photographs. He doesn't talk about photographs, but he does talk about the subject of the photographs, and hence he's much more interesting than most photographers. I remember he was telling me about early railroad stations, you know, that are left.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: Well, he did a tremendous amount of research before he went off to photograph anything. He was a reader. He studied up everything he possibly could about these old stations, and then he went out and photographed them.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Did he do a thing on the Long Island Railroad one time? Commuter, or something?

ROMANA JAVITZ: He did a beautiful series of old stations for *Fortune* magazine, in color. Just beautiful. The colleges he did, the Wheaton College, it's a beautiful portfolio.

[00:55:15]

I think that the standard he set probably gave the flavor to the whole project. I may be exaggerating it, but it seems that almost all the photographs that we have were made possible by this great chance of high standards. It is amazing that—considering the purpose for which the project was set up, that such a high standard was maintained. And you certainly can't say it was due to the content of the picture.

RICHARD K. DOUD: No.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Because in some other hands, that same content would have been either razzle-dazzle journalism or sentimental and drippy kind of pictures. It could have been very corny pictures, and they were not.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, in that case, don't you feel that a lot of credit is due to the other people who could meet these standards, and to the people who would insist upon these standards of—that perhaps, Walker having been set up, insist that they be met and appreciate the value of the standards that were set.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Well, I think it was—that the spirit of it, however it was engendered, is what made that so extraordinary. And I think as we go through the files, the conformity of standard, which is a good conformity, is outstanding. You don't find it today, even though you can recognize the life attitude in photography. It's interesting that you don't have that sort of a homogeneous sort of state all through it. I think it's very outstanding in these photographs. But though they were done here, they are [inaudible], that you can spot—you can spot an FSA photograph.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: And it isn't only the subject.

RICHARD K. DOUD: It's probably not fair to ask, but do you feel that any of the pictorial outlets today are maintaining standards anywhere near the level of the Farm Security thing? Maybe this is too much—

ROMANA JAVITZ: They can't afford it. They can't afford the out of the amount of, let's say wastage, that was possible then. There is another thing, I think that the picture magazines are lost because they had to wallow in advertising, and the reader has to wallow in advertising. I had an extremely interesting meeting with the picture editor of *Look* a week ago. We had a very good talk. Mr. Herbert [ph], do you know him?

RICHARD K. DOUD: No, I don't.

ROMANA JAVITZ: He's knowledgeable, very good taste, quite extraordinary person. And one reason I was with him was to discuss the future of pictures. But the reason I was happy to see him was that I found in the—since he changed *Look*, that curse of the photographs—there's much less of the advertising, there's much less—Did you ever see *Look*?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Well, you know it's infinitely better than *Life*. There's no comparison. And he has done—actually by physical manipulation, rather than contents of the photographs. I do not think that there is a lack of good photographers. I do not think that there are—they were better photographers among the FSA than I see among the young photographers today. I do think that the use of photographs, the production of photographs only for commerce, limits the field dreadfully.

[01:00:00]

In other words, there is no government-sponsored photographic project to speak of. Most of the younger people in photography have one dream, and that is for the FSA to come back. I have had many artists see me and say, Oh, for those days. Imagine working for the government and recording what you see. Now the reason they say this is not the greed of going to work for what might be a cinch. The young people today—I'm speaking of those in their 20s—are seeing so much happen that someone should record without wondering whether it would sell a girdle or a cigarette. That they don't know what to do. Paper is expensive, film is expensive. They itch to photograph what they see, and they can't afford to. They have to make it sell. And I hear this every single day. The young man who worked for us finally skipped away and was able to go abroad. He's a Negro. And never before had he been anywhere without being afraid. On his first day in Paris, he learned what it was not to be afraid. First time in his life. I have his daily letters. In London, he looked at all the camera magazines and decided there was only one good one. He earned $25 in Paris so he could get to Lucerene, he went to Lucerne, went into the office of what he thought was the best camera magazine in the world, left his photographs of American Negroes there. And they offered, immediately, to publish them. In fact, they wanted him to do a book. He wouldn't have a chance here, anyway, really. He would have to pitch it towards selling.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Certainly.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Well, now he's back here. I have his photographs, he hasn't money enough to print what he took in Europe. And he went to an agent here, and they tried to figure out how he can make a living with the photographs. On the other hand, he is torn. Because he wants to do what he's seen, and there's no way of doing it. If he were writing, he could sit around and write without any tools. Well, I mean, a pencil and pen.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: But a photographer is so expensive. And he's taken beautiful things, he's extremely un-bitter, and he has an extraordinary view of white people that comes out in his photographs. Well, here's a young man, 24, he's just went down today to get a hack [ph] license, he's going to drive a taxicab to make enough money to make his prints.

RICHARD K. DOUD: [Inaudible.]

ROMANA JAVITZ: But that—I can multiply this by hundreds? In other words, we have no—I mean, I've written a hundred projects for Charlie Pratt [ph] and others to take this to [inaudible]. I've been the anonymous writer of more projects than you can count. The thing is that there should be—either local or national support for a minimum recording of our own time. That was such a "blazing the trail" program and one that uncovered claims that we can't believe about the United States. It also uncovered—

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RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, do you feel that either state or federal government should mount a photo project for the sake of recording our times as well as for the benefit of the talent that otherwise might go to waste?

ROMANA JAVITZ: No, I don't think the purpose is to encourage our talent. I think government patronage is important in many fields, but I think this is more than patronage of the arts. And I think it's beside the point that it uses talent. I think it's very important support, but I think that America showed, in two programs, to the world that we're not afraid to look at ourselves, we're not afraid of recording what we look like, and also that we should show the world that we have a sense of history. We've been scorned so often about being so young, not having a past, and all that rot.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]

ROMANA JAVITZ: [Coughs.] Nothing is as important today as a knowledge of the past, and we have certain records of the past that are constantly available but they're distorted because so little of it is true, and so little is contemporaneous. And more and more we know —we can learn more about our past from better sources. And nothing excites people more than to go to the place where the thing actually happened, and the reality of it is very exciting. Now, we are barely teaching our children through visual documents. Though when you think of the really poor pictorial material that's dished out to children, it's disgusting. They see events on film, and they see it on TV, with great clarity and vividness. The funeral of Churchill, or the funeral of Kennedy, or the atomic bomb, has been shown to them photographically, it's as much a part of their heritage as singing the “Star-Spangled Banner.”

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Yet we have no governmental program to produce source material of our own day, from year to year, all the changing America and our customs, and what has been and what has gone. And all the glory of our art, such as the glory of our architecture, has barely been recorded by government. Here we have one of the greatest arts of all time, we have the work of our artists and our engineers and our architects, great work. And that is not recorded systematically at all. We build the Verrazano Bridge and you depend upon free enterprise to photograph it, and free enterprise does a very good job. We have whole migrations of people here, we have disasters and we have good things, we have the absorption of immigrant people, we have changes of customs, we have the whole story of teenagers, which is a fascinating, amazing, exciting story.

Has anyone recorded their revolution in clothing of the teenagers? How they revolutionize everything we wear? You try to find that in pages of fashion magazines, it's very difficult. I think, minimum investment would pay off very well. In other words, we need documentation of our times. And what we need is governmental records instead of their making six carbon copies of every senator's speech, they should only make no carbon copies [Richard K. Doud laughs] and put that money into making a photographic record of our times. It upsets—you can't even talk about certain living because the buildings are destroyed, we can't prove that anyone lived that way anymore.

[00:05:00]

We can't—our industries—the photographic history of our industries is just dead. The photographic history of labor doesn't exist. There are about two pictures of Triangle fire, of course you can't have hindsight and know that's going to be an important step. But we pride ourselves on labor, and even the labor unions have not sponsored an intelligent, consistent program of any continuity with recording—

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]

ROMANA JAVITZ: —the scene. And this is something we could do that no other nation has done. You know, the European nations have envied us, the Index of American Design.

RICHARD K. DOUD: [Inaudible.]

ROMANA JAVITZ: I read quite a blurb in an English paper on how disgraceful it was that England never thought of doing something like that.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Do you think people would appreciate or understand if it were being done? What I'm really trying to get you to tell me now is whether or not people, at the time the FSA was operating, appreciated or understood what was being done?

ROMANA JAVITZ: Well, the Agee book explains that pretty well. The intellectuals who were

taking part in it were ashamed that the people they were photographing were hungry, is what it amounts to. People resent photography and feel it is prying, but I don't think that that's important because if you are making documentation of that kind, you are making it as a record for the future. I think TV is really beautiful in certain areas, except that they are conscious of their sponsors. I think the job of the—I was supposed to go see it—of the town in England, called “The Strangers”—you see that by any chance?

RICHARD K. DOUD: No, I—

ROMANA JAVITZ: The effect was—Smithwick [ph], I think, was the town where the East Indians were living, and the entire town was prejudiced against these Indians and voted for this extremely reactionary man who got into Parliament, on the basis of a very racist attitude. It's a beautiful videotape. Just beautiful, and very sensitive. You see, business uses a rounded talent in that they would use the best writer they can get, and the best photographer they can get, and the best editor, whereas a governmental project is set up like this—well if it's set up foundation is money, I guess. They will have a top photographer and hire a second-rate writer.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: If you really wanted to have powerful documentation of our times for the future, then you'd have to get a top writer or a poet to do the scripts for—to really do a good job. In other words you need writers, and artists, photographers. And it could be done. And I think if it were done on a pilot basis at first, with one community and one project could be set up for the rest of the country. And from the point of view of using a town—of course Dorothea Lange has done this, you know, she's written this all up.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]

ROMANA JAVITZ: I think [we all (ph)] worked on it. I think the use of the human talent—of our talents of artists, is a secondary although terribly important factor. I think the most important factor is that we do with it—having this tremendous, powerful, new tool of education, we do nothing to use it to record our own history. And I have seen—I've just been given a—[inaudible]—*American Heritage* just put out pictures, history, cards. And they did take contemporary drawings. But here is a whole period of pioneer life and they show it with one covered wagon rolling around with two oxen, or something. You have no field of people working on anything. Whereas of course—if we want—well look at that little film you saw, what a heartbreaker.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: That's education [inaudible] material. You have the music recorded, you have literature recorded, and you have the visual there.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, this sort of brings up the point now of the uses of this type of material, specifically the Farm Security material—

[00:10:09]

ROMANA JAVITZ: Would you evaluate the total FSA photo projects? Is that what you want me to do?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Uh, that's probably too broad a question, maybe not specific enough—

ROMANA JAVITZ: I'm going to evaluate it. I think the body of FSA photographs is one of the most precious treasures in the Library of Congress. I feel it is not appreciated there for a historical reason which I'm going to sound off about. There is a tradition that prints, per se—that is the rare engravings and woodcuts and lithographs and Currier & Ives—have more intrinsic value, and literal—and monetary value—

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: —than photographs. And as long as you have the museum mind taking care of print collections that include photographs, you will find the photographs are considered as just photographs, and they're not looked at as works of art naturally, but they're also not respected sufficiently. I feel that the FSA photographs at the Library of

Congress need a new stature. I think that a foundation or a source money should be found, and they really should be put into better shape, physically. They should really be analyzed, duplicated, made available throughout the country. I think selected groups from them should be published. I do not think it would make a negative picture. I think somebody could go through there and simply use them for their photographic merit, portfolios of 50 pictures or 100 should be made available to every school in the country. I think that groups of them should be published for—as an historical comment of the period. And I do think that they are —that as a whole, they are an extremely indestructible influence. And have been a very deep influence, and will continue to be a very deep influence on many thinking people. There's a whole generation who have not seen them at all, and they get terribly excited when you see them.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]

ROMANA JAVITZ: And they're not supposed to be available, they're only available in a very selective, and to what we call refeened [ph], rather than refined, super-refeened [ph] selection, you know? [Inaudible.] That is, I feel they have not been exploited sufficiently by the government. [Inaudible.] I think they ought to be published in nice, inexpensive publication, and well printed.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, could I just project in a question along this same line? You mentioned some of the uses to which the file has been put through your own pictures here. Could you talk some more about that? What I'm after is whether or not interest has been increasing or decreasing in the use of these pictures.

ROMANA JAVITZ: It has not—it has been increasing, has been extraordinarily increased. One, because, to quote a term I've used—I've used in a thing that's coming out in [inaudible], the parallel of poverty, because it's such an even kind of parallel, so that all the attention on poverty today immediately recall the poverty of that day.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: And everything's been dragged out in those files, and then there is the same old poverty. We were amused—I don't been amused in the funny way—we were amazed, I should say, because I discovered, in checking through, that the tatters and the worn clothes, and the worn blankets, are just the same, they don't seem to—there's no change in fashions.

[00:15:07]

RICHARD K. DOUD: No progress in poverty then.

ROMANA JAVITZ: The tatters—no, the tatters are just the same. You wouldn't know [inaudible]—one never thinks about the rags are just the same, in other words. I mean, yeah, 25 years go by, and the rags take on the same shape. And then, the whole Negro—the tremendous waves of interest in the past of the Negro, which you can't begin to keep up with. Forget about this [inaudible]. We have just been overwhelmed by every type of agency —in government, out of government, in churches, on TV, on radio, on film—for material on the past of the Negro. It's beyond our capacity to meet the requests at all. And as I've told you, we've taken the time to go through the geographic material and we have drawers upon drawers upon drawers upon drawers just filled with Negro record, and it is very painful. Very sickening. And extremely dramatic [inaudible]. It's a very important record for the Negro. If you want to want to be bitter, there's the seeds of bitterness right in those pictures. And right next door is the record of white people, and that is bitter, too, it's unbelievable. The thing that rings at you all the time is, this is America, and you can't believe it.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: It's just so hard to believe this is our country, the poverty, the—it's just unbelievable. It's a terrific experience, going through those. And this is—if anything, they are more useful today than they've ever been. I think they'll be more and more and more useful. And it is true that the one or two shots that have been used over and over again, but I don't know. Some of them wear, and some of them don't. Some of them you just can't bear to see anymore, others you don't mind. Some of Dorothea Lange's, one could bare to see over again. We know by our own experience what we—we've seen them so many times, and some of them you don't mind and some you mind. The FS—after a while—as far as early use,

there is a use that is not intended, but which I've enjoyed very much. For example, I've used them for one of my own ends in teaching. For example, if I want to show a group of students that the urge for beauty or the urge to add an unnecessary, un-useful thing in their home is universal, I have collected many pictures of FSA miserable homes, and there isn't a single one there that hasn't either a little paper flower hung over the mantelpiece, or pictures taken out of newspapers and put up.

If anybody wants to do a study of the décor in these terribly deprived homes, it's very interesting material. The arrangement, the bizarre beauty on walls. A study of the children and the children's reaction to the photographer. There's loads of material to study there. Different aged children in the groups, and these children with very old grand—the grandparents, the feet, the diseases, the clothes, the artifacts in those poor homes. The table—we've been asked about the eating of food for these poor people.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]

ROMANA JAVITZ: Amazing collection of facts. They have not begun to be explored. I mean, if you want to be real scholarly about this stuff there's plenty of material to explore. Visually there's lots to be studied, architecturally, some of the only records we have of certain types of homes. And farms, farm buildings. Garbage. A good study of salvage and junk. Also the urban dwellings are interesting, urban life.

[00:20:07]

I think it's a terrifying, in some ways, picture, because it's still. It's something about seeing endless quiet photographs, [inaudible]. I know on the back of Shahn's photographs he put down what they said sometimes.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: You remember that one little child—little baby running, with the long dress?

RICHARD K. DOUD: No, I don't recall, I—

ROMANA JAVITZ: [Inaudible] mud, and on the back it says, “but it isn't a cow, it's a bull.”

RICHARD K. DOUD: [Laughs.] That's pretty good.

ROMANA JAVITZ: It's very nice.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I can of two specific projects, bigger projects, that you have put together from your collection of photographs in the last few years. One was the *Bitter Years* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, and the other is that wonderful film I saw this morning, Mr. Sipherd's [ph] *Years Without Harvest*—

ROMANA JAVITZ: Oh, you just saw it today?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes, just this morning.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Did you give them my best?

RICHARD K. DOUD: I certainly did. I was wondering if you could point out other projects of this nature that might have been—might have relied heavily on this picture file? I think there's something going on now, some movie you mentioned—

ROMANA JAVITZ: Oh, there are plenty, I couldn't name them. The Negro thing, of course. Our things—these have been used over and over again, not as publicly. For example, I use a film strip in teaching how to work with pictures—documentary work with pictures for librarians, that's a postgraduate course, established [inaudible] Masters of Library Science. In addition to that I give a seminar in pictures which is the only one of its kind. And in training them, I use many FSA films, pictures, from the point of view of classification. And I've also shown this filmstrip to an audience—a very miscellaneous public, and the underlying purpose of this talk—the filmstrip—is to show you that pictures is another language, and we ought to learn to use pictures as we do words. And I suggest to these mothers and teenage that they can take pictures out of newspapers and learn to use them.

Well, the last time I showed this filmstrip we had a pretty large audience at the Darnall [ph] Library. Really miscellaneous people drift in from the street, those are wonderful audiences. At the end, so many people want to speak to me, I couldn't handle them all. Several of them were women, sort of housewife-ly, and one woman came to me, and she had tears coming down, she said, I never saw pictures that way. She goes, This is going to change my life, looking at magazines and showing them to my children.

You see, everyone has babbled about photographs as art, and these great photographers and the picture story, but no one has bothered, as yet, to teach children and teenagers to look at pictures and see what they can find in them. They learn a lot about the aesthetics of art and you go to a museum and, you know, you learn the dates. My very first job in the library, when I was at college—I was studying to be an artist and worked at the library. And on Saturdays—we were asked to work [inaudible] very short of people. So my first job was in the library's children's room. And when I arrived, this librarian looked ancient of days to me, she was about 30, I think. [Richard K. Doud laughs.] I was about 15 or 16. She pointed to a round table at which children were looking at books, little bitty children who were too young to read books, it was called Easy Picture Books. And these children sat, and they were turning over pages of the picture books. And this librarian said to me, Now you go over there and make them look at the pictures. I thought she was crazy. These children were having a wonderful time turning the pages of the picture books, so I couldn't imagine what I was supposed to do. But I trotted over there, sort of wondering, and I discovered the children not looking at pictures, they were turning the pages—

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: —and having a wonderful time. [Richard K. Doud laughs.] So, I tried to make them stop and look at the pictures, and I looked at the pictures with them. And most people did not look at pictures. And if you take the opportunity and take a group of FSA photographs, as I've had to do, and discuss each picture from the point of view of its content and what you can find in it, it becomes a very exciting experience.

[00:25:17]

When I've finished talking to one group of teenagers—who are extremely progressive and went to a progressive school—I was a little bit nervous, because they were very questioning and restless. And a week later they call the library, wanted to know if they can come see me. They had decided to do a wall [ph] newspaper with pictures, which is something I suggested they could—cut pictures magazines and things, take out pictures that interested to them, and try to use them after studying them, and see if they could make their own picture stories. Well, the committee came to see me, and said they had decided to have an exhibition on pornography, what is it. So, you can imagine [Richard K. Doud laughs] the situation.

So, I said, Well what is the problem? They told me they had dug up an essay by D. H. Lawrence, and they had been reading all kinds of references to when is a picture pornographic. They had found nude art—in art, they had found pictures they thought were nasty and so on, and they were all [inaudible], but what they came to see me about was, that since their school had youngsters in it below teenage, could I advise them how to have an exhibition on pornography that would not injure the very young. Now, I thought that was extremely exciting, because they had learned to use pictures, you see?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: And the same thing with these grownups that I used FSA photographs with. At first, they would not look at them. And then, when these pictures are presented as for what's in them, see, what the implications are, what's going on too, and it's used in history, too. Just as the daily news says the girl to the left is really a dope addict who murdered the man to the right, and so on. In other words, these newspapers feed you [enough so that you can go back to that picture and dig out –Ed.].

But there's nothing done very constructively with these same photographs. In other words, you could go through the FSA photographs and do a tremendous essay on the Negro in America, in the 1930s. Who's first to be fired, and last to be hired, and so on. Or you could go through and say this must not happen in America, on the other hand you could say these are the people you never see in a city, who have never owned anything. I mean these homes,

these beds made out of cartons that come out in these pictures. In other words, how can you explain that? What is there to learn in all these pictures? In other words, there is no body of information on how to use pictures in teaching [inaudible]. There's some interested historians in this, like Doctor—Professor Hazerd [ph] at Penn U and others, who are very concerned with this, but nobody can afford to have photographs for use in classrooms. Take American industry. We are a free enterprise country. If you want to show the influence of one factory in a town, or go back to some of the causes of the Civil War, the cotton industry, you can go mad trying to find pictures. Even the history of our industries. It just isn't.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: Companies are throwing this stuff away. I wrote to one company— wrote a letter to a carriage company, which we found listed somewhere, and a man wrote back and said, Yes, his grandfather had this carriage making company and now he had oil wells in Texas, and he dug around and got early scrapbook photographs of the first carriage. Beautiful photographs. But much of industry hasn't kept its own records. You know that, we get calls all the time. We had a call from Ford company, one of the earliest known factories was somewhere in Brooklyn, but they never been able to find a picture.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Oh, for goodness sake.

ROMANA JAVITZ: This is something we really ought to get Xerox people to support.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, I think we've sort of talked through or around most of these questions and—

ROMANA JAVITZ: Why don't you think now of anything I may have left out while I try to reach this call.

[Cross talk.]

RICHARD K. DOUD: All right,

ROMANA JAVITZ: I have to—you want to turn—

RICHARD K. DOUD: [Inaudible]—

ROMANA JAVITZ: I don't have to sign this?

[00:30:05]

RICHARD K. DOUD: No, in fact you'll have a chance to edit this, if you want.

ROMANA JAVITZ: I don't want to edit it, none of it matters to me. [Richard K. Doud laughs.] I'm not an expert anyway, I'm a—[inaudible]. Where were we?

RICHARD K. DOUD: You were going to tell me what you really think.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Oh, about this business of some great photographs being the earmark of the entire collection. I think that the importance of this collection is not the importance of the few so-called great photographs. What happened is this: that curators of photographic collection—and I'm going to include Steichen—tried very hard to present photography as art, but actually, photographs as documents is a much more exciting subject. For years, curators of rare prints in museums would publish in their annual reports, which I checked from the early part of this century on—this is in the British museum and other museums of that caliber, every year in their annual reports it said people would come to look at prints by Rembrandt, Whistler, and Durer, but what they really asked for were engravings of cats, engravings of the Madonna, and other subjects. It discourages me very much as a curator of the prints that the essential interest is in the subject of the prints. Now we're talking about rare prints.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Now the greatest authority on prints, Hind of the British Museum, who has written books by the dozen—he's the great god of the printmakers—kept complaining because people always saw the subject in a picture. Now what are you going to do? We have eyes and the first thing we do is look at the subject. Well now the aesthetic boys want you

not to look at the subject of the picture, but just enjoy it for its aesthetic content.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]

ROMANA JAVITZ: My background is completely that of an artist, by the way. Among all these people I work with who are curators of museums, their background is art history, my background is that of a painter, so I have a right to speak. I feel that the importance of subjects in pictures is a very valid importance. That if there is a subject in the picture you have a right to enjoy that picture, that it's very stupid to try and put a veil over the picture and say, Look, pay no attention to the subject, just drink the picture in. That's nonsense, you keep people away from art by telling them they mustn't see the subject. It's just ridiculous. Now the photographic aesthetics people decided the subject was unimportant. We had tremendous battles at the Museum of Modern Art—I served on the council for a while—because we were divided on whether the subject mattered, or the subject did not matter. Meanwhile, Steichen went into the war and took documentary photographs—he was in charge of documentary photographs.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROMANA JAVITZ: Including that beautiful movie of the aircraft carrier, do you remember that?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Yes.

ROMANA JAVITZ: Beautiful movie, it had tremendous aesthetic quality. A documentary, by the way. It was so beautiful that you were breathless. Just beautiful. It was a Japanese attack on the ship, but you could enjoy it aesthetically at the same time it was documentation. Suddenly, the museum decided that it was all right to recognize subject. And they did the *Family of Man*.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]

ROMANA JAVITZ: How dreadful. Renegade [inaudible]. Now, beginning about 20 years ago, museums also decided that they couldn't fight it, let's get with it. People will look at subjects. Now, the subjects were to drag the public in, and once the public began to look at the subject, you gave them much written material so they could enjoy the aesthetics of it. But the first impact and the real excitement came from the subject. And the *Family of Man* was the first time that the Museum of Modern Art faced the fact that the subject might be more important.

[00:35:07]

And that exhibition was the most successful exhibition of its sort that the world had ever seen. Now the subject could be looked at, really, and not apologized for. However, in order to take the sting out of having to have subject shows, they had to, within the subject, pick out only the best work, that is the best aesthetically.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Sure.

ROMANA JAVITZ: So a little trap was formed. They would only take great photographs, and who was to decide they were great? They had to be decided they were great photographs in spite of the subject. So there became a whole aesthetic creed, which is very hard to accept because it's unsound. Many of these photos that are considered great and beautiful photographs are great and beautiful first because of their subject content, and secondarily because of the skill of the photographer.

And I will stand up for the art of the photographer. However, I think the museums confused the people, and I would like to go back to what I said before, and I don't know whether this is commonly established. But I told Mr. Dahl [ph] before that I felt that, in going through FSAs, you never felt it was a one picture deal, and that you always wanted to see the rest, and you had this sense of drive that you want to see the rest, that you want to see more, and haven't we sort of driven ourselves—I know I've said to you, I know there must be more of this man, I remember him, he appears again and again and again. And the subject content is so overwhelmingly important in this type of documentation, that no amount of little blue ribbons saying this is better than that can give you any feeling, Oh well, I don't want to look at the rest. That is museum life and I'm against it, really. I think it's a false premise.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well good [inaudible]—

ROMANA JAVITZ: Now I've spoken my piece.

RICHARD K. DOUD: [Laughs.] Well, I should let you go about your business, I guess.

ROMANA JAVITZ: I'll have to find it. Are you happy?

RICHARD K. DOUD: It's much later than I thought. Yes. I certainly appreciate all you've given us, thank you very much.

[END OF AAA_javitz65_8702_m.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]