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Oral history interview with Rachel Rosenthal, 1989 September 2-3

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Rachel Rosenthal on September 2, 1989. The interview took place in Los Angeles, and was conducted by Moira Roth for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

[Tape 1, side A; 45-minute tape sides]

MOIRA ROTH: This is a recording with Rachel Rosenthal in Los Angeles at her house, and it's a recording for the Archives of American Art for the Oral History Program, September 2, 1989. If we could begin with your birth, where you were born, when, and a context.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I was born in Paris in 1926, and my parents were both Russian Jews. My father was twenty years older than my mother. He was an emigré at age fourteen, which means that if he was born in 1874 he arrived in Paris in 1888, right? And went through "La Belle Epoque" [referring to Paris in the 1890s and turn of the century—RR] in Paris as a young man. He came penniless, and by the age of twenty-five he was a multi-millionaire. He had made a fortune in precious stones and Oriental pearls and became a wholesaler importer. The House, the business—was called Rosenthal et Frères, was himself and his brothers, and operated out of Paris; he sent his brothers all over the world to pick up these objects and bring them back to Paris where he prepared them for retail. And my mother was an emigré of the Bolshevik Revolution, so she came to Paris around, I think, 1920, '21, something like that. And she had had a very difficult escape from Russia with a very small child—my half sister Olga, from her first marriage. She had almost been executed and quite by chance managed to escape, so it was very harrowing. And they met, also quite by chance, because some person, a French woman, told my mother that my father helps Russian emigrés and she thought that (she had no idea who he was) and she thought he was like an agency, you know, and went to see him, and the concierge said to her, "But do you have an appointment?" and she said "No," and he said, "Well, you can't see Monsieur Leonard without an appointment." At that point my father was coming down the stairs—it was his mansion, near the Parc Monceau—and it was love at first sight! [laughs] They fell madly in love the moment they set eyes on each other. My father was married and his first wife wouldn't give the divorce, so he lived with my mother and built this absolutely lovely little "hotel particulier" for her where I was born. I was born out of wedlock and they married when I was seven years old.
[Interruption in taping]

MOIRA ROTH: What were relationships like, both with your parents and with Olga, your stepsister, no, your half sister?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I was a poor little rich girl in the sense that in those days a little girl of my class was not brought up by her parents and didn't partake of the life of the parents the way American children do, which I always envied, but was given over to a "nounou" at first and then a governess. Unfortunately those women were, most of them, really poor frustrated women who were taking it out on the children, and my case was no exception. And so I was pretty much abused by my governess, particularly, who systematically went about breaking my spirit. All my life I have been trying to undo the damage that this woman did. And I adored my parents, but it was always a relationship of being on show, and so I think that my performing skills were [chuckles] honed very early on, because in those days you didn't see your parents unless you were all dressed up and pretty and combed and clean and ready to be on show, like a little pink poodle. And I remember that my mother, because of the fact—consciously or unconsciously—because of the fact that my parents were not married, I think that she used me to keep my father interested and close to her. And so she pushed my father and myself into a very, very close relationship while holding back, and so my very early recollections are never of my mother. They're always of my father. And he took me to Le Louvre every Sunday. He was a wonderful, wonderful father, even though generationally he could have been my grandfather. But he was such a vital and youthful man that I remember nothing but fun and games and delight with him. He was really quite an amazing person. I was madly in love with him. I wanted to marry him. And we were a lot alike. And later on that created a lot of clashes in our personalities, but early on it was considered quite lovely to see the two of us looking so much alike. It was sort of a feather in my mother's cap.

MOIRA ROTH: Were you physically alike. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes.

MOIRA ROTH: . . . or psychologically?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Both, both. We looked alike and we had the same way of being, I think. And, unfortunately because I was a girl, all the things that he was, I wasn't allowed to be, and that was a real problem. Actually I address that in a piece that I called The Arousing: Shock Thunder, which I did in, I think it was '79. It was very much of a problem because he was my role model and I tried to emulate him in all things, and of course he was the totally wrong role model for the time because I couldn't be a man.
And my identification with him was such that for decades, I had a lot of gender identity problems. I just couldn't accept being a woman at all. And even as a child I couldn't accept being a woman. I hated having menstruation. I hated having breasts, pubic hair, et cetera. I was very much a tomboy, I was very male-identified, and yet I never became a lesbian, because I wasn't really attracted to women that way. I tried to be a lesbian when I was a girl, growing up. Particularly after the war in Paris, I tried to make love to women and it was wrong. It was just not a physical thing. It was a power thing. I wanted to establish power over someone. And so I was emulating men. And it was really a problem all my life: the fact that my mother was who she was. . . . She was. . . . In those days you called them "professional beauties," you know, that's all she was. [chuckling] And yet, here was a woman who was filled with talent, none of which was ever used, because as a child she was denied access to learning how to dance or how to sing or music—or any of the things that she really wanted to do—by her mother, who was jealous of her, and she never had the courage to stick up for herself in that way. And so all her life she got things through men and through being beautiful and charming and manipulating men with her charm. That was her whole life. And so it was a terrible thing for her to grow old because she couldn't use that tool anymore; it was a real catastrophe. Whereas for me seeing this, I purposefully avoided being fashionable and interested in clothes, and being all the things that she was, because she was never a role model for me. And, in a way, although I did love her very much, I also despised her, and that was a really terrible thing, you know. At the same time, when I grew much older, before she died, I realized what a tragedy this woman's life had been, which she would probably never have acknowledged. She had a very happy marriage to my father and it was a real, totally traditional marriage with him being very virile, with her being very feminine, and the two of them having a totally separate division of labor [chuckles] in the couple, and that worked very well. It was for me a pure example of a traditional marriage and how well it worked when everybody knew their place and their role and how those roles combined. And yet for a long, long time I despised the idea of marriage and thought that I would never marry. And when I married I did it really as a joke and it was a strange thing—but that's in the future. So about my relationship to my brothers and sisters (because my father had two sons and a daughter by his first marriage, and my mother had, of course, Olga by her first marriage): Olga was about twelve years older than I was, and she lived with us when I was little. She was the child of rape. My mother's first husband raped her on their wedding night, and my mother hated him and never loved Olga. Gave her all the material things that were available in those days.
[Interruption in taping]

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: In those days, of course, material things were plentiful, and Olga had them all, but the one thing that she really wanted—her mother's love—she never got and she was a very angry personage. She was both a remarkable person and a monster, and my relationship with her was very ambiguous because we sometimes played and loved each other and she was continually betraying me and trying to do me harm, which continued all [of] the life that she had to live.

MOIRA ROTH: Did she, as she was older than you, not have a governess in the sense that you did?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: When I was very little, she still had a governess. She had a governess until she was sixteen or seventeen, I think. But at age ten I said, "No more," and declared my independence. Shortly afterwards, she married, just to get away from the house. She hated my father and she was very, very jealous of me because I was obviously a love child. So that was that. And then the other side of the family? Because of the fact that my father had deserted his family for my mother and lived with my mother, they tried everything in their power—the whole tribe (because he had brought over his whole family from Russia, and it was a very extended family, lots of brothers and sisters and lots of nephews and nieces and aunts and, you know, an enormous tribe, and he was really the provider for everybody, because he had the money). They tried to really pry him away from her by every means at their command—and they tried very, very hard. They were even sending my father nude photographs of women, of other women, I mean just insane things. And when they saw that it didn't work, years later, they began to fawn on my mother and fawn on me and so on. So in my early days I don't remember any of these people at all. And certainly not the children by my father's first marriage, except for one, Pierre, who was the middle child and he was many, many years older than I was. I don't know why, but for some reason he made the effort and the gesture of bridging, and he came to the house and I remember him when I was very little. And he was very, very good to me and I was as madly in love with him as I was with my father. I adored the man. He was a musician, a poet, a very political, socially conscious person and just a very erect soul, a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful person. And he was killed in 1943 in the Sahara Campaign, and that was a big tragedy in my life. It was like, you know, "don't love anybody or else they die" kind of thing. A lot of the recollections that I have of him are just so, so intimate, and so loving and so wonderful really that even to this day, it's painful just thinking about his death. So. . . .The rest of the family I really had almost no contact with. And very early on I developed all kinds of nervous disorders. Probably from isolation, from a lot of anxiety

and fear and from all kinds of infant needs not being met. And I had nervous ticks and nervous disorders and insomnia and upset stomach and all kinds of symptoms of that nature. Of course, in those days, nobody could tell what was really wrong, which was very simply, “Pick up the child and love it for God’s sakes!” you know! But they didn’t do that, and so I remember being always on diets and being even more isolated for they wouldn’t let me play with little children my own age because that would “excite” me too much. And all kinds of things, which were so absurd. And then I remember that when I was about five or six I was the leader of a gang of little boys who were the sons of the concierges and of the shopkeepers in my quartier [neighborhood—RR]. Our house was in a cul-de-sac and there were no cars and they came to play in front of the house. I would go out and play with those little boys and I was always the instigator of extraordinary games. I was directing them, actually, in plays, and when I would go with my nounou on walks in the neighborhood there were always chalk graffiti on the walls saying “Vive Rachel!”

My first British governess came when I was six and put an end to that, and I couldn’t play with those little boys anymore, which was very, very bad and I had no friends at all. I went to school when I was seven and started to have little girl friends, and realized early on that being a girl was fun, but it was also very puerile and I had that sense of puerility, which comes from being with these little women. And it was true, let’s face it, because that’s how we were brought up; we were really little nothings.

MOIRA ROTH: Was this a girl’s school that you went to. . . ?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No.

MOIRA ROTH: A mixed school?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: A mixed school, but, you know, the boys were in the younger classes—I think, if I remember correctly—and then in higher classes there were no more boys. It was a private school. I remember things like there were big long tables in the center covered with green felt, with little sunken ink stands and pens and everything, and I loved everything about school. I had a real sensual take on it. I loved the smell of ink and I loved the smell of notebooks and I loved the sound of the chalk on the blackboards and I loved learning. I loved writing carefully, because we were taught penmanship and all of that. And I really loved every part of it except one part, which was that we were taught very early on when we had little tests to barricade ourselves completely with mountains and walls of books on all sides so that others couldn’t copy and cheat. And I never accepted doing that. I always got into trouble because I never put up these books and I would always show my stuff to the other little girls if they wanted to copy. And got into all kinds of trouble. I also got into trouble once because going down during recess in the stairs. . . . There was, you know, a spiral staircase I remember; for some reason my lips pursed and the air in my lungs came out my mouth and I whistled. They brought my parents to school and made a real big thing. And I remember having hot and cold flushes for days afterwards and not being able to sleep because I had nightmares of whistling in spite of myself. That’s the kind of nonsense that went on.

And other nonsense that went on: At the end of the school year there was “la distribution des prix.” We would get prizes, and according to how many times we were first or second during the year, we got first prize or second prize or whatever, and there were books and “des images” and I had a marvelous collection of images I remember. (When I had my Instant Theatre, whenever somebody did a good improvisation or whatever, I would always say, “Well, you get an ‘image’!”)[laughter] So I and another little girl were always contenders for first prize. When I was first she was second; when she was first I was second. And we never knew exactly how we stood until the end of the year when all was tabulated, and I turned out to be first, she turned out to be second; I probably had one more “first” than she had. So after the prizes were given out, she came back to her seat and her governess gave her a horrible resounding smack on the face in front of everybody because she wasn’t first. It just took away all my sense of competitiveness. It was so traumatic for me, and that little girl started to cry and it was just awful. She was a very good, good student and a good person. So then. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Then, in this context of a very strict school—in fact a very harsh school—what kind of teaching went on? Was it a very traditional French education?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes.

MOIRA ROTH: Racine, the classics. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: It was like grammar school, you know. It was very simple. We learned how to read and write and we learned arithmetic and we learned grammar and history and geography. And some home ec [home economics—Ed.], I remember. We had to actually cook things and, of course, I never did. My mother did, and she put salt instead of sugar in the chocolate. Things like that!

Later on I had tutors at home and actually those tutors taught me things which were way, way more advanced than my age, because when I came to New York to high school, even after a year of not learning anything in Brazil, I still was way ahead of my class. I really knew all the things that we were learning, and I should have gone into a higher class, but to tell the truth I held back and didn’t even try because I was enjoying myself too

much. I loved high school.

MOIRA ROTH: And the way that your parents lived, both before they got married and afterwards, on a public level, was very gracious, social, charming. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Well, we had a house which was a model of the gracious house. It was, first of all, filled with art and objets d'art—my father loved art. Although a businessman, he was really a frustrated artist, and he loved art. He collected, and had Impressionists and 18th century things, and the whole house was decorated by Jean Dunand, who was a very very famous decorator and lacquerist.
My father always had tons of people around him. I remember we never had a meal really with just us. There were always zillions of people. And my parents were very social. My mother, of course, was very, very social. My mother was always going to fittings, I remember. Her clothes came from Schiaparelli and Paquin and Patou and all the big designers. They were always going out and doing things. And I remember watching my mother take a bath and getting dressed and putting on her jewelry. It was absolutely like a religious ritual. And the life that they led. . . . My father was enamoured of creative people and scientists, and since he was rich he was accepted in all these circles. He was a philanthropist and gave a lot of money to these people. So there were always artists and musicians and writers and politicians and scientists, and they all came to the house. And when I was finally allowed downstairs, and didn't eat upstairs with my nurse, those were the people who were there—along with some of my mother's family who were always hangers-on and very charming ones at that. My mother's family, incidentally, were all in movies and theater, and they were very famous too. Granowski, Alexei Granowski, was her first cousin, and he was blacklisted by the Communists because he left Russia. But he was a very, very big director in France and Germany. And his brother, his younger brother, Leonid Azar, was a prizewinning film editor before and after the war. And the—I think he was the youngest—Boris Ingster—was a film maker, and he emigrated to America very early on and came to Hollywood and did a lot of writing, directing, producing in Hollywood—up to the sixties actually. American Immigration changed and Americanized his name. And, interestingly enough, in spite of all of that, I don't remember any talk of politics at the table—ever.

MOIRA ROTH: And no sense of impending Fascism?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No. No sense at all, and this is something which I used in my piece and in my radio performance, Charm, where I talk about the fact that they never discussed fascism; just as in my personal life, all the uglies were like swept under the rug and you never could really talk about them. I was always very guilty about feelings that were not fully sunny and positive and charming. The same way on the global level. I had no sense at all that my parents were either aware or even wanted to address the fact that this terrible thing was happening. And I remember that the same girl who was slapped by her governess said to me one day, "Those poor Czechs," and I didn't know what she was talking about. And I was afraid to ask, not to look stupid. But I had no concept of politics whatsoever. And that went along with the territory, because I think my parents. . . . They may have been concerned and they may have talked about all those things, but never in front of me. And I don't remember, as a child, being taught anything other than politeness. That was the main thrust of my education. I don't really think that anybody tried to teach me anything about how to relate to other people, how to behave in terms of ethics. I was repressed sexually, like all little girls. That was the idea of teaching morality, I suppose. There was no religion. My father was an atheist.

MOIRA ROTH: So there was no sense of being Jewish?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No sense of being Jewish at all. We were completely "assimilated" Jews. My first seder was here in California—and I had no idea of what it was to be a Jew. I didn't even know I was Jewish until I noticed that the little girls who took their First Communion had these lovely little dresses and little white hats and everything. I asked my mother, "When am I gonna do that? This looks neat," you know, and she said, "You can't. You're Jewish." And I said, "What's that?" [laughs]
So my background was a very strange one, because it really had only to do with the sunny side of life with my parents, and all the bad feelings with the servants. There were a lot of parties. There was a lot of dressing up. There was a lot of playacting. We would do little plays at home and things like that for our friends. And there were wonderful vacations in extraordinary vacation places all over Europe, and learning ballet and learning piano and sports and horseback riding and golf and all those things.
The ugly side was my life with my governesses and my nurses, and boredom, discipline, repression, isolation, frustration, anxiety—none of which I could ever disclose to my parents. And I remember that my mother's sister, who was a doctor who lived in Poland, came on a visit, and she said to my mother, "You know, I think that Rachel's afraid of her governess," and my mother said, "Don't be silly." And then she went and asked me and, of course, you know, with my pride, would I say, "Yes, I'm afraid of my governess"? No way! So my aunt sensed that, but my mother didn't ever and neither did my father, so I was really not protected by them in any sense of the word. And, interestingly, it got worse. My governess got worse and worse with me, and it turned out that she was pregnant from the gardener in the south of France. And we found out because she fell on the skating rink, and my mother called the doctor, and the doctor said to my mother, "She's fine considering her condition." And mother said, "What condition?" He said, "Don't you know?" [laughs] And my mother sent her down there to the

south, and there was a shotgun wedding, and she had this little boy who was like a little English lord, with the father who was a Basque gardener. And my mother told me later—which is an amazing thing—that Bridie, after her son was born, said to my mother, “Mrs. Rosenthal, now that I have a child, I must tell you that I can’t understand how women like yourself and others entrust your children to strangers like us.” After she had damaged me for life, right? [laughs]

MOIRA ROTH: So this childhood, this mixture of, what?—luxury and elegance as a veneer and everything else underneath—got very disrupted when you left Europe?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Well. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Or did it continue?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: . . . I was thinking that if one has to choose one major event in one’s life that colored one’s entire life, for me it was World WarII; there’s no question about it. It loomed as such an enormous event. First of all, because it completely broke the course of my life. It changed it a hundred and eighty degrees—and on every level. On every level. First of all, when we left. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: And you left in. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: We left in June, ‘40, right before the Germans took over Paris and France. The afternoon that we had left, the swastika was hanging on our villa in the south. We were really very lucky. But it was the first time that I had my parents to myself, because the three of us were alone in the world. We first went to Portugal and then we went to Brazil and then to New York.

MOIRA ROTH: Olga by that time was married?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Olga was married and divorced by that time, and she was in the north of France when we were in the south and the Germans cut us off so she couldn’t emigrate with us. And she accused us of abandoning her, of course. But she remained and we left. During that period before getting to New York I was thirteen and fourteen—in Brazil. That’s the period when you start to separate yourself from your parents, and with me it was just the opposite. I had found my parents for the first time in my life and I became a baby. The baby I never was. And that was, psychologically, terrible, absolutely terrible. And at the same time for me it was ecstasy. And I was babied by my mother, and I was close to my father, and it was just amazing. There they were all the time, all to myself! Then there was the fact that suddenly all of the constraints were gone, and particularly in New York when I started to go to high school and I realized what freedom was. I hardly ever had gone out in the street without either a governess or my mother until then. And suddenly I was totally free. I went to school on the subway all alone, with the kind of freedom people don’t realize here. . . . They just don’t. They can’t imagine what it’s like to be brought up in a European way and the contrast with the American way. And when I see little children, infants, and babies, very young children today, how they follow their parents everywhere and how they’re carried on their parents’ backs or chests in those carriers and how they go to bed whenever going to bed happens to be and all of that, and there’s such intimacy and this sharing of the life, I am jealous. I am absolutely physically jealous when I see that, and I hate those little kids! [laughs] I have a real sense of wanting to murder them. [laughing]

MOIRA ROTH: The first thing you did when you left France was you went to Brazil, and your experiences there are what the performance, My Brazil, is based on. Was that the beginning of freedom?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Well, it was part of it, of course. That whole period in Brazil was both such a contrast and such a change—first of all physically. The look of the environment. After the grayness of Paris, being in this tropical explosion of colors and explosion of sounds and rhythms and warmth and foods and naked people. Because I remember we had a black woman who was our maid, and her boyfriend used to come sometimes and help out and he would serve at table with a completely bare torso and just his pants on. And he was a gorgeous man, right? Beautiful man, and here I was thirteen and just looking at this Pedro! [laughs] (In Paris, our butler always wore a white jacket and striped pants.) And Pedro was so sensual, and it was such an awakening of the senses. And at the same time I was so unhappy. I had such nostalgia and such a sense of grief and loss for my country and for my home and for—mainly for my brother. I was grieving and grieving and missing him.

MOIRA ROTH: Oh, Pierre.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Pierre. And wanting to see him so badly. Every day I would think, when the war is over I’ll see him again.

MOIRA ROTH: Did your parents have that same sense of loss about France?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Oh, yeah, I think so, yes. I don’t know to what an extent actually; it’s hard to say. But I

know that they were very worried about their people and what was happening. Of course we had no news of anybody at that time. And so there was a big curfew on communication and a tremendous amount of worry. As you know, when the “drôle de guerre” was over and the war started in earnest, the news at the beginning was so dreadful that it really looked very, very bad. It was constant anxiety and constant fear.

MOIRA ROTH: You were in Rio de Janeiro.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes. And you know the reason we were there is because the Russians had invaded my mother’s country of origin, which was Latvia, and disbanded the American Consulate and so we couldn’t get the quota numbers from her country of origin, and so when we were in Portugal, trying to get escape visas to go somewhere—of course the first logical thing was to come to America because, again, my mother’s cousins were already here and we had sponsors, but because of that technicality, we couldn’t. We were not allowed to stay in Lisbon, because Lisbon was so full of refugees that it was closed at the time. At the border, when we took the train from Spain to go into Portugal, we were told we have a choice of three places, Coimbra, Luso, and Porto. And my father asked the train conductor, he said, “I don’t know these places. If you were me, which one would you choose?” [laughs] And so the train conductor said, “Oh, I would go to Luso, it’s a real neat place.” And sure enough we went to Luso, and Luso was a little spa. It was a lovely little village. And the Jewish refugees all banded together, the men, and they rented this little jalopy. Every night they would drive all the way to Lisbon to be there first thing in the morning, and then they spent all day going from consulate to consulate to try to get escape visas, because in three months we were going to be sent back. Next night they would drive back, spend a day recuperating, and then the next day they would do it all over again. So that’s how my father did it.
The three months were almost over, when he, quite by chance, met an old friend of his who had been a French ambassador to Brazil, and the man said, “Leonard, what are you doing here?” And my father told him and he said, “Well, come on, we’ll get you your visas,” and so we ended up in Brazil. That was total serendipity.

MOIRA ROTH: Did you father manage to bring money out?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Well, that was another interesting thing. My mother was reliving the horror of the Bolshevik Revolution, and she was vetoing all the ideas that my father and I had about smuggling things out of the country. My father was a super patriot, and he was probably the only rich Frenchman who had no money outside of France. [chuckles] He never wanted to take money and put it in the U.S. or Switzerland, because he felt it was unpatriotic. Because France had adopted him and given him his fortune and all that. And so there was nothing outside, except what we could bring. My mother was literally dying of fear. My father and I said, “Okay, we won’t even ask her anymore.”
[Interruption in taping]

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: So my father and I decided not to discuss it with my mother, and I hid three thousand dollars behind photograph frames. Father had a couple of emeralds and a couple of diamonds, I remember, and I put them in my paint tubes. My mother thought it was going to be just like the Russian Revolution; she said, “No, no, they go up your ass. . . .” because I wanted to put things in Kotexes. . . . So, of course, we got to the border and the people there were crying and hugging us and wishing us well and we could have taken anything we wanted. In the meantime, all of mother’s jewels and some jewelry that father had taken from Paris, he entrusted to a smuggler, a Basque smuggler, because my father was friends with all these guys. And we waited three days at the border when the tanks, the German tanks, were coming from Spain. And I remember my father and I—Mother was having a nervous breakdown—and my father and I would go every day to this bar, which was a real low-down dive, to wait for the smuggler, and the smuggler never came. After three days and three nights, and all the Germans at the border, we decided we had to leave. And much later we found out that the reason the smuggler didn’t come is that the whole border had been peppered with Germans, and they were patrolling all the mountains and the coast, the sea, everything; and there was no way they could pass. So he gave back all the jewelry to my father’s sister. And so we lived like that in Brazil from the proceeds of these things that we had taken out. And my father, who always saw very big, had extraordinary plans, which he tried to involve the Brazilian government in, and they were seemingly very receptive. One was about the diamond and emerald mines in Brazil. He had this idea: Since the problem was that they mined the stones and then sent them to South Africa or to Holland to be cut and then sent back, and all of this was very expensive, my father wanted to bring over some of the refugee cutters—which would have helped, you know, some of the families that were trying to leave Europe—and create a school and stone- cutting factory right there on the spot where the stones were being mined. And it would have been a great thing for them. Then there was a big real estate deal that he wanted to do with a lot of incredible virgin land south of Ipanema. And, of course, in subsequent years, that whole area got developed anyway, but he wanted to develop it then. And either of those deals would have made him a very, very rich man.
Well, what happened, of course, was that Brazil had been taken over by the Nazis, and it was a covert thing in the government. All of the techniques that they used for both taking over a government and suppressing the Jews had begun in Brazil, and a lot of the refugees were disappearing. They were being sent to the interior, or they were jailed. And this was happening and, again, as usual, my father was a real ostrich. Finally, as luck would have it, the American Consul—because by then we had gotten the quota number back—the American Consul

called him and said, “Mr. Rosenthal, this is off the record, but there’s a ship leaving in four days for the U.S., and if I were you, I would be on that ship with your family.” And my father perked up his ears, and in four days we were on the boat coming to America.
So he left all these big deals that would have made him very rich. But he was the kind of man—when later on he found out that somebody else had actually done these things, he was not sour about it at all. On the contrary, he said, “I’m very happy because this proves that I was right, that they were good businesses!” [laughs]

Tape 1, side B

MOIRA ROTH: So you came to America in 1941?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: ‘41.

MOIRA ROTH: At age?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Fourteen. On the boat we met some people, and befriended them, Americans. A dentist and his wife. They told my mother about the High School of Music and Art. Because they saw, everybody saw, that I was always drawing and sketching, and they said that that would be the place for me to go to school. So when we got to New York—it was in June, I think—and it turned out that it was too late for the entrance exams, the group entrance exams, but because of the fact I was a refugee and I had shown them my portfolio, they made an exception for me and gave me an entrance exam all by myself and I was accepted. So that summer we came to Beverly Hills and my father wanted to see if he’d prefer to live in New York or in Beverly Hills, because family was here; my mother’s family. After the summer went by, he said, “I love it here, but if I stay I won’t do a stitch of work, so I’m going back to New York.” [laughter] So I ended up going to the High School of Music and Art.

MOIRA ROTH: Did you quickly adjust? You said that, for instance, you went to school by subway. Did you make a lot of friends? Did you act “American” as a teenager?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: At first, I was very, very different. First of all, I had a British accent, a very strong British accent. Secondly, I acted like a little European girl, and I prided myself in my differences. I never tried to be like others. And so I didn’t wear makeup. I didn’t date. I didn’t do any of the things that American girls my age did. I was a real bluestocking. I loved to learn and I was always very interested in the arts, and of course we continued being close to artists. My parents had known, for instance, people like Jascha Heifetz and Vladimir Horowitz and they knew Sol Hurok very well, and so Sol Hurok would let me in with my little girlfriend at the Ballet Theater at the Met for free, in the “standing room only.” And I remember that during the season, it was total hysteria. I adored, adored dance. I adored ballet and so. . . . (When I was little, I learned, of course, ballet with Olga Preobrajenskaya, and I was always dancing at my birthdays for the family.) We waited, when all the people were in, and Sol Hurok would give us a very, very subtle sign with his head like that [demonstrating—Trans.] through the glass doors, and we would dash in and try to get the best standing room we could! Every night we were there during the season, and we saw all the big openings of all the big ballets, including Fancy Free, you know, with Leonard Bernstein’s music and I remember everybody in all the big ballets. It was just so intoxicating. It was just so great. And, of course, the old Met was wonderful too. And my parents knew a lot of really lovely people. [Marc—Ed.] Chagall was one of their friends and we were always very close to Feodor Chaliapin’s children. Lydia [Chaliapin—Ed.] was a singing teacher and she was a very, very funny woman. She was a lesbian, and she lived with this other woman who was also a singing teacher. And the older brother was a painter who did. . . . Do you remember in the old days, Time magazine always had painted covers. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Um hmm.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: . . . which were very realistic, and he, [Boris—RR] Chaliapin, was one of the painters who did these. And Fedya [Fyodor Chaliapin—Ed.], the youngest, was an actor, and recently I saw him in several movies. He’s still going strong. He lives in Italy and he was in The Name of the Rose. He played the blind monk—the bad guy. [Later he was in Moonstruck!—RR] So we had all these friends who were Russians and some who were French. The years of high school were very interesting. It took three years for me to change. In my last year the reason I changed was from a dare, in a sense, a challenge. One of the teachers said to me, “Rachel, are you human?” And that was a shock to my system. Apparently, it wasn’t human for me to be interested in learning, to always have straight A’s, not to be interested in dating and partying and smoking and all of those things, and to be devoted to the arts as I was. That was not human. And to be human meant to be popular, to go to parties, and not be a straight- A student. And so in the last year of my high school days, I decided that I would show them that I could be human just like the next fellow, and so my grades went down and I became the most popular girl in the class, and I did it totally in a lucid and very willful way, to show that it could be done just as easily as not, you know. [laughs] I still won the Gold Medal of Art, but it was one of those things, you know, where. . . . And a lot of things in my life were done like that—very head-motivated. I lost my virginity in the same way, in a completely . . . a real head-decision to do that! And. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Is that true of your art?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: [pauses] I think my art is a really good blend, because I'm very, very intuitive and impulsive also, and a great deal of it is extremely intuitive and a lot of it is very manipulated by the head. So I think it's both. But that I reached only much, much later, many, many years later. For a long period of time, I had a lot of problems in my art because I just was not integrated between my emotions and my head, or between my unconscious and my conscious, or whatever you want to call it. And, as a matter of fact, I was so conflicted because of my upbringing that I remember when I was, when I first came to Beverly Hills when I was fourteen, a graphologist looked at my handwriting and said to me, "My goodness, how can you live with yourself? What a terrible thing it must be to be you, because you are in such conflict with yourself." And it's true. All my life it was like that. If I said "Yes," the next minute I said, "But it's no." And I could see just as clearly the two sides and be completely in one and the other and not being able to put the two together, you know. So. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Well, to get back to the loss of virginity.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Oh. [laughs]

MOIRA ROTH: I meant that as an example. I don't mean that you talk about it on tape, but that period of your life, when you had become the most popular girl in the class.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: That wasn't when it happened. It happened afterwards in France, when I went back to France after the war. See, what happened was right after the high school days, my parents wanted me to become an American, and I could do that very easily. Having gone through high school, it was almost automatic. And so I got naturalized. As a result, I couldn't go back to live in my country of origin longer than a year at a time. And my nostalgia for France was such that I wanted badly to go back and to be French, and I couldn't anymore. When I did go back after the war, it was a very, very traumatic event for me, I must say, because I realized that just as I had not been integrated as an American, I was no longer a French person either. I was a DP [displaced person—Ed.] everywhere I went. I was just totally the outsider. I was not accepted, because I had not experienced the Occupation, and people were rejected who had not been part of that. So it took a while, and what happened then was that for eight years, I went through this business of going back and forth between Paris and New York. I stayed a year in Paris, two years in New York, or two years in Paris, a year in New York, you know, when my father's lawyer could get me an extension, and every time it seems that I would put in roots, it was almost like a knee-jerk reaction. I would pull up and return overseas. And there were several reasons for that I think. One was because the scene in New York was the arts scene, and it was flourishing. It was opening up, as you know, and establishing New York as a great art center, and that was a very new thing for America and for New York.

MOIRA ROTH: And did you have access to it?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Well, yes, I did. I was pretty close to, not the very first wave of Abstract Expressionists, although I knew them; I knew [Paul—Ed.] Guston, and I knew [Franz—Ed.] Kline, and I knew [Jack—Ed.] Tworkow, quite a few of these guys. But not intimately. I just knew them peripherally. It was the second wave that I was close to, with Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, and all of those people, through my association with John Cage and Merce Cunningham, so I was really into all of that. And in Paris was the flourishing of theater, the Absurdists, and Antonin Artaud, and Jean-Louis Barrault, and all those people. And that whole. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: And you also had access to that?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I had access to them, because I was going to school there. I was studying under Roger Blin, who was the creator of Waiting for Godot, the first production. And a lot of others. It was agony, because I wanted those two places to be one. It would have been much simpler in my life. [laughs]

MOIRA ROTH: Did you also want to combine being in theater and being in art?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Well, this was another thing. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Which had split between two continents?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: It was just like everything else in my life. It was a split. Because in those days you really couldn't afford to have two loves or more, or you were a dilettante. I'd always felt terrible that I just couldn't chose between one or the other. And it wasn't just theater and art, it was music, and it was dance, and it was literature; it was all the things that I loved. I realized that I was always flitting between one thing and another thing, because I just couldn't decide where I wanted to alight finally. And it's only when I read Antonin Artaud's Le Théatre at Son Double, I think it was 1947, that suddenly it came to me, I came to my senses, and I realized that the kind of theater that he envisaged was an integration of all the things that I loved, and that it can be done through the medium of theater. And so that's when I decided, "Okay, I will be in theater, because through

theater I can use all those things and I can put them all together." And that was for me a tremendous liberation and a tremendous opening up, because it led eventually to my doing Instant Theatre and all my performances. And I don't know if one can even realize today what a revolutionary concept that was at the period, at the time, because, particularly in France, theater was so literary, and was so built on words.

MOIRA ROTH: Then, of course, Artaud's Theater and Its Double got picked up by Cage, I mean when it was translated here in 1960.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: My friend M. C. Richards translated it in '57 but I had, of course read it in French, and when I started my workshop in 1955 and '56 here, nobody had read it and there was no access to it because it hadn't been translated yet, so a lot of the concepts and ideas that I brought with me were totally new for people. You see, I had had long discussions with Robert Rauschenberg before that—like in '54, '55, when we lived together below SoHo. We had one of the first lofts down there. And he and I had wanted to collaborate on certain things, and we talked at length on these matters, and then eventually, of course, Bob started to do his own Happenings, after I moved to California in 1955, and a lot of it was influenced, I think, by some of those concepts. And then, and only then, M.C. [Richards—RR] came up with the translation.

MOIRA ROTH: Maybe you could talk a little more about that period, and how you met Rauschenberg, Cage, Cunningham, Johns?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Okay, well, I met Merce and John in Paris, because Merce came to do a master class there. Now I had been a tremendous fan of Merce's long before that, when he was still with Martha [Graham—RR]. And I had followed him very closely when he split from Martha, when he and John began to do their collaborations. Merce began to perform recitals of solo works with John at the prepared piano. I was totally taken by their work, and was a big fan from afar. And then when I went to Paris I started to study there at that school, and suddenly there he was, coming to give a master class; for me that was a biggee. Well, it was great for him too. because I and Marianne [Preger—RR] (who also ended up in his company later) were the only Americans there, and so we could speak English with him. And so we struck up a friendship. And then when I came back to New York, I continued the friendship with him, and for some reason got really included in their circle, which was mostly made up of gay men. There were very few women. There was M.C., who was a very wonderful creature actually. She was a poet, a potter, and a philosopher. She lived with. . . . Oh god, I always have name amnesia.

MOIRA ROTH: We all do! Mr. X?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: The man who worked with John and Merce all the time; he was a musician.

MOIRA ROTH: David Tudor.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: David Tudor. Thank you, thank you. She lived with David, and so there was M.C., and there was Sari Dienes, and Sari Dienes was a real pushy Hungarian, and people couldn't stand her. Yet she was always there, you know, part of everything. [laughs] And she was madly in love with John, but of course John was not at all interested.

MOIRA ROTH: Do you know that my mother had a love affair with her ex-husband, Paul

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: You're kidding?

MOIRA ROTH: No.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Really? Ah!

MOIRA ROTH: I'll tell you about it some other time!

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Okay, well, it's a small world. So there were very few other women. Fance Stevenson was another. We would all spend weekends at her place up the Hudson. Bob was still married at the time, and sometimes his wife would surface, but not often. And his kid. Anyway, I was part of this whole thing, and then I ended up (I was studying with Merce) I ended up in Merce's Junior Company, along with Marianne and with Remy Charlip and a few others who eventually became part of the real company. I was always going off to Paris and coming back, and so there was no way that I could integrate myself into a company. But when I was there I was there. And Bob was like John's "find," you know, from Black Mountain College, and when I came back from Paris during one of my returns, Bob was the new addition to the circle. He was John's fairhaired boy. And my impression of Bob and his work was very, very strong. I identified with his work totally. Particularly at that period, I thought it was. . . . At the time, he had just finished the white and black paintings. He was going into red paintings.

MOIRA ROTH: And he hadn't done The Bed yet.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No, no. At the time, he was with Cy Twombly, and he and Cy had gone to Italy, and Bob came back with a lot of these extraordinary objects, of which I'd bought a few. And I realized, you know, that had I stuck to visual art and had I had the "balls" to do what I felt I should be doing, that is the kind of work that I would have put out. I felt totally identified with it, and I was both jealous and at the same time extremely admiring and very impressed with Bob. He was very impressive and sometimes bewildering. You know, he would dazzle you with his double talk. He was a marvelous double talker. He could talk you into anything, and you never knew what he said or why and what had happened and you did his bidding. He was a big charmer. And then again I disappeared [chuckles], and the next time I came back suddenly Jap [Jasper Johns—Ed.] was on the scene. And Jap was on the scene because Bob had discovered him. He had discovered him when he had a job at the bookstore. I forgot the name of the bookstore now, which was at Carnegie Hall—Marlborough? It was a kind of big art bookstore there, and he was a salesman. And apparently he did some secret drawings—his famous potato drawings—and he had this little coldwater flat somewhere, and every night Bob would wait for him when he ended his day, around 57th Street and 7th Avenue, and then brought him into the circle. And, for reasons that I can only guess at psychologically, perhaps Jap's fear of getting involved in a homosexual situation, he made a play for me. And I knew he was gay—he was very obviously gay—so at first I was very surprised. And then that summer my parents were away, and. . . . I was alone in the apartment which we had.

MOIRA ROTH: So you would still live with your parents if you were in New York?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: For a while I had an apartment in Greenwich Village, and then because of the fact that I was always leaving and coming back I would end up living with them, because it was difficult not to. And at that period, I was looking for a loft. I wanted to find a loft downtown, and when I got involved with Jap, we decided to look together because he—very much encouraged by Bob and by me—was going to become a full-time artist. And so we decided to look together and that summer, with my parents away. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Which summer was this?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: That was '54.

MOIRA ROTH: Johns had been doing the flag paintings?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No. No, no. That was still in the future. No, he was just doing these. . . . He had done a lot of drawings, and he was just beginning to do these little shredded newspaper type things, which were painted over. You know, he would shred them in certain ways and then paint them over in a single color. And he did that in his little flat, and he did that work of me with my face, you know, in his flat. So I fell in love with him and . . . was very. . . . I don't know. There was something about him which was unbelievably mysterious and compelling. He was a beautiful, beautiful young man. He was younger than I was, and at the same time I was so stupid in such matters, you know. If I knew then what I know today, I probably would have been able to pursue a relationship with him. But I was not able to because of my sense of male-woman relationship and romance. The whole politics of those intercourses were so colored by totally traditional ideas—and by my mother's "tapes" in my head and by my own inhibitions and by my own gender ambiguities, and by my "volonté de pouvoir," as they call it in French, which was, you know, my need for power. All of those things just made it impossible for me to ever have anything resembling a true abandonment to love or lust or any of those things. So it was one of those real head things as usual, where I really had kind of glommed on to the "idea" of Jap. And so. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Did you share a place briefly?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No. That summer he came to the apartment because my parents were away, and so we had a very brief affair, and then we found lofts in the same building. I had the upstairs and he had the downstairs. By that time, I think he and Bob had totally decided to be together, and this was, of course, never stated or said. But actions spoke louder than words anyway. And I went through a kind of replay of infant abandonment [laughs] and a lot of grief. Really bad, bad, bad period. And I was doing a lot of sculptures, and he was, of course, becoming Jasper Johns. And doing all these wonderful things with Bob. They did windows, earning a living doing windows then. And then he started to work with encaustic. He had found the book at the bookstore where he worked, about artists' materials and he discovered encaustics, and that's how he started with the flags and the targets in encaustic. And, you know, I saw the making of all these masterpieces [chuckles], and I have a lot of photographs of us in the loft and of him having breakfast. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: So the three of you would see a lot of one another?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: All the time.

MOIRA ROTH: On a daily basis.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Daily basis, yeah. First of all, I was the only one who had a bathtub, and I had. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: [laughs] What a hold on them!

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: And I had a hold on that whole group! [laughter] My facility was extremely popular. So, I remember everybody in my bathtub.

MOIRA ROTH: And what sort of work were you doing at that time?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I did a bunch of sculptures that were made of metal and tar. Metal and other things actually: metal, wood, glass, and tar. And they were black. They were kind of elegant, and they were really interesting in terms of concept. They were conceptual and sensual, very much like Bob's objects were. And I. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: And did you show them?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Interestingly, Jap and I showed at the Tanager Gallery in a group show, and I got a better review than he did. [laughs]

MOIRA ROTH: And you had the bathtub!

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: And I had the bathtub, so I was on top of the world. Anyway, so that went on for a while, and I remember that winter. . . . See, my parents had these parties, these mad Russian parties, where they invited all their Russian friends and they would sing gypsy songs and dance and have Russian food and all of that, and I invited my people to those parties, and I remember at first I thought, "Oh, it's never gonna work." I remember Merce and John adoring these parties, and Merce dancing with all my parents' Russian friends and everything. It was just marvelous. And I remember that during the winter it was very, very cold, as you know, in New York. And my father gave Jap one of his overcoats, because Jap was so poor he had no coat, and he was freezing, so my father took pity on him and gave him one of his overcoats. [laughing] So anyway, it was a strange mixture of worlds, and. . . . And I always, again, I felt the two major things, two major thrusts, in my life were, one, where do I belong? And two, how can I make myself ingratiating, how can I be accepted? So the performance aspect was part of not only my daily life, but minute-to-minute life. And it was exhausting because I was always "on," and I amused and entertained, and this is how I thought—since I had no sense or belief that my accomplishments would be enough to sustain anybody's love or admiration for me—I had therefore to earn their friendship in some other way. And so through my personality and through the way I performed my life, I felt that I could have a reason for being accepted. And so I was always pushing that out. And, as I say, it was totally exhausting, and I was easily depleted and easily went into total depression because of this constant effort and pressure to be "on."

MOIRA ROTH: Did anyone know that, or was that something that happened to you in private?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I was not encouraged to have therapy. At one point, I felt that I needed it, and I went to a therapist for a very brief period, and he was a Freudian, and he was stupid as hell and I realized early on that it was ridiculous, you know, and so I stopped and didn't pursue that at all. At the time, I was too proud and too afraid to try to get help from peers or friends, and so I didn't really delve into those things, nor did I disclose these things, and so they were always there eating at me. And I remember writing a lot about them in diaries, but never really taking care of business to try to find a way out of my dilemma. And my other big, big thing was "Am I an artist?" And the problem was always, "If I'm a woman, I can't be an artist because women are not artists. Men are. And if I'm not a woman, then what am I, you know? If I'm an artist, then I must be a man." So the whole thing was tied together and very confusing and very disturbing. And so for a long time I felt incapable of really producing. The other thing was my father's prejudice toward theater. He was so old-fashioned that he felt that women in the theater were whores. So I had internalized some of that, and I was very afraid of getting into theater. And that was my real talent. My talent was as a performer. And for a long time, I just refused to give in to that, and I tried to be a visual artist, but I wasn't temperamentally suited for the life of a studio artist, alone, working with an object, even though I was talented in that direction. But temperamentally I just couldn't cut it. And so I never had a body of work, because I could never stay long enough with what it took to make one. So I was very much down on myself because of that and felt very ashamed that I wasn't coming through with the expectations of what I was capable of doing. And so there was an inordinate amount of guilt in my life, because of that, and that lasted a long time. It's only when I started Instant Theatre that I began to feel that I was beginning to put out some of what I was capable of putting out.

MOIRA ROTH: Did you have women friends at this time or were you mainly mixing with the Cunningham and Rauschenberg circle?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I never had women friends really. I had lovers in Paris but, again, there was this thing of wanting to lord over them. It's only much later that I discovered women as friends, so mainly it was the gay men that I was friends with. And what happened was that I got so confused that at one point I remember going down Fifth Avenue and seeing a handsome man and saying, "Oh! What a pity I'm not a man." [laughter] And so at that point I said, "Time to leave."

MOIRA ROTH: And so you left for Los Angeles?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Right.

MOIRA ROTH: Which year was that?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: That was ‘55. My father died here in Beverly Hills. My mother moved here.

MOIRA ROTH: Your father had moved to L.A. first?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No. He just went for the holidays, for the vacation, the summer. But he had had a bad heart for many years, and so he had the final heart attack that killed him here, and my mother, after he was interred here, wanted to move to be close to his grave, and every week go to the grave and all of that, so. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: And that must have been devastating to you, his death.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Well, it was interesting because for about three months before he died, I had a total intimacy with him. It was very lucky. I’m so grateful that it happened. What happened was that over the years my mother—probably unconsciously, and certainly, until I realized it consciously, I wasn’t aware of it either—had so maneuvered that she had intercepted our relationship to the point where in order to relate to my father I had to pass through her, and in order for him to relate to me he had to pass through her, and she was always in the middle—as though we couldn’t reach other directly.

MOIRA ROTH: Although you had when you were a child?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Of course. And. . . . Because we were always clashing naturally, she had interceded, in ways which I think were really well-meaning of course, but totally wrongheaded, because had I been able to deal with my father directly I would think that I would have learned some harsh lessons which would have been extremely beneficial to me. And because that didn’t happen, there was a lot of muddy-headedness that went on and a lot of gray areas that were never really cleared up and a lot of really slovenliness of action and thought that could have not been. But anyway, after I realized that, I said, “No more, I’m going straight to my father,” and I did that and he and I began to relate to each other directly. And the result was incredible. First of all, he and I became total friends and no longer father and daughter. And my mother had a nervous breakdown! And it never was really laid out on the table, and I never found out if she realized what had actually happened. But it was like the carpet was yanked from under her. She no longer had her reason for being. And she just became absolutely like crazy. And in the meantime, he was mainly in bed, and he was writing a book at the time, dictating a book. And I sat on the bed, and we talked and talked and talked and talked, and we had a real true adult relationship for about three months, and then he left and he died here. And it was both a big loss, and at the same time total liberation for me, and I realized what a liberation it was at the time. As a matter of fact, as a result of that liberation, I was able to create Instant Theatre. And the same thing happened with my mother’s death, because as a result of her death, I started my. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: And when did she die?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: In ‘75, twenty years later. And as a result of her death, I started to do my performances, so both of their deaths liberated me on different levels.

MOIRA ROTH: Tell me about Instant Theatre, or the first time that you did Instant Theatre, because you’ve done it twice.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Right. The first time was the heroic period.

MOIRA ROTH: You’d just come out to L.A.?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I had come out to L.A., and I had taken a job at the Pasadena Playhouse, and they just couldn’t handle me. [laughs] They couldn’t cope at all. I came in, you know, with all my ideas fresh from France, and it was like whoa! [laughs]

MOIRA ROTH: Including Artaud.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Everything, you know. Everything I did was too much for them, and I did some really good work. I directed some shows and of course I was teaching the classes. And my shows were very avant garde, and they were very interesting and they were well directed—I mean, for somebody who had never done that before. I was faking it all the way and doing great work, you know. But they just couldn’t handle it. The students adored me, but it was the old guard. The faculty, just couldn’t take it. And, also, I was teaching in. . . . I had black culottes, black tights—because in those days, of course, you didn’t have panty hose—and denim workers’ shirts—because in those days you didn’t have the denim that you have today, you know. So I bought workers’

shirts, in order to have denim shirts. And that was how I taught, because I was doing a lot of movement, and I didn't want to have skirts that they could look up at. [laughs]

MOIRA ROTH: I see.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: And I was called in by the dean of women and told that I must not wear what I was wearing, and I said the equivalent of "fuck you," you know. And that was not well received. So it was just one of those things. I was asked to resign by the dean who had hired me, and a few months later he was asked to resign, poor man. And at first it was devastating, and then I realized it was all for the best. So I started to look around. I was doing photography at the time, and as I was in a store on Santa Monica Boulevard buying supplies I ran into this photographer, this young photographer, who became very famous later—and, again, I have to remember his name. With Magnum or one of those big agencies. And he gave me some of his old paper, I remember, and he's the one who mentioned Vanessa Brown's Salon. Vanessa Brown was this old—well, she was not old, but she was old comparatively because she had been a Quiz Kid. Remember the old Quiz Kids? She was one of the Quiz Kids, supposedly very intelligent and stuff, and an actress, and she had married a very rich doctor or dentist or whatever, and had this absolutely palatial, beautiful glass mansion north of Sunset [Boulevard—Ed.]. Every Wednesday afternoon she had a salon. And all these stars and starlets and people in Hollywood would congregate there in their bouffants! She had one of those architectural jewels, you know, the place where the outside comes in, all the plants were coming in to the house, and the house was filled with birds. But they were not in cages; they were just flying around. And all the starlets in their bouffants would kind of, you know [laughing], duck [gesturing—Ed.] every time the birds would divebomb them. [laughs]

MOIRA ROTH: Seeing a nest!

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: It was very funny. And she presided over all of this, in the middle. There was a big circle, and then there was this chair in the middle, with a tape recorder, and she appeared with curlers and a bathrobe—a dirty old bathrobe—and slippers when everybody else was really trying to spiff up in order to be seen at their best and all of that. She would just talk and sound off and . . . bore everybody. So this went on for a while, and apparently she also had a workshop, which at the time was directed—or at least managed by a young starlet or an actress, who was just beginning in pictures---never made it. . . . And we met in some place, I forgot where. Then we moved to the banquet room of. . . . What was it called? The Gaiety Delicatessen or something like that, which was across the street from the Chinese Theater [now Groman's Chinese—RR/MR]. And so, as we were working on scenes, we could hear all the click-clack of the waiters carrying stuff.

Tape 2, side A

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: So we were in this ridiculous place trying to do scenes, and I said to her, "Vanessa. . . ."—I have to say that very soon I was, for some reason, elected to conduct these meetings—I said to her, "We have to find a decent place to work in." Because she was always saying how we would form a company and we would go touring and we were always going to tour to Israel, for some reason. There were a lot of people like, you know, Vic Morrow and all those young, aspiring actors. People like Mark Damon, who made it in spaghetti westerns, a lot of young directors, who became big directors since then. So I started looking and I found this place which turned out to be what is now called the Cast Theater and was at the time the little workshop space adjacent to the Circle Theater on El Centro. It belonged to George Boroff. And George Boroff had just had some problem. He was in the hospital, and he had to rent. So it was this wonderful little box. Do you know the Cast Theater on El Centro?

MOIRA ROTH: [shakes head negatively—Trans.]

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Just a little box with risers, just perfect. And so I came back and said, "Vanessa, we've got this real great place." I told her what it was, and she said, "No." I said, "No? Why?" And she wouldn't tell me why. And only in a totally round-about way did I find out why, and that was because a lot of the people who had worked with Boroff at the Circle Theater had been blacklisted. And she was, of course, a Republican, and was completely into that McCarthy scene, and this was the mid-fifties. I said, "Fuck that shit. If you don't want it, I'm gonna get it." And I rented it. And I stopped seeing her, and half of the people came with me and half stayed with her. And some did both. And so we continued meeting at the Circle Workshop. And, of course, I was so incapable of dealing with money issues that I don't think that anybody ever paid me to do this. They would come and get these long, fabulous workshops with me for nothing. So. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: And how did you support yourself? Did you inherit money?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I had not very much because my father told me that he would give everything to my mother, and I said that's fine. But I had insurance [policy—Ed.], and I remember that I cashed that insurance. I think I had about $10,000 insurance money. So until the money ran out, I just paid no attention whatsoever to either earning or whatever, you know. I was never really taught how to live in this world in a practical way. I began to run the workshops in the traditional way, with people coming in with scenes. But then you know how

lazy people are, and they wouldn't come prepared, and so I gave them exercises and improvs which I would think up. And these were so fascinating to them that after a while nobody was bringing in scenes and they all wanted to do my exercises. And this is how little by little the work became Instant Theatre. And little by little I developed this whole notion of lighting, for instance, which was completely unorthodox, with people carrying the lamps and very slowly moving lights over the action and being integrated with the action. And then I started to color the lamps with gels, which nobody did at the time. It was always straws and pinks and blues and, in a sense, I did the first psychedelic lighting. Very strong colors and strobes and things like that. And we used all kinds of objects and things that we found in the garbage in the alleys. In those days they didn't have garage sales, so we would find real treasures everywhere. And the use of objects was not like props. They were really like extensions of ideas and conceptual ways of handling everyday objects. The look of the work we did became the parallel of the sensibility of the visual arts of the period, which was assemblage and collage and all of that stuff. More and more I got into costume and, again, people would donate scraps and with these scraps we would take safety pins and assemble these things on ourselves. Again, creating the most extravagant costumes and then just taking off the safety pins and going back to scraps, and using the same things over and over, but never the same way twice. And using space and time, using voice, using movement, using sound. We worked a lot with records, and with found sounds, just noise sounds and really pushing the form. And we created a dream world on stage, which was really magical and astonishing. And the kind of thing, again, that when it works it is so extraordinary that it's like the best theater you'll ever see. When it doesn't work, it doesn't work. It's just not blessed. And so it was an improvisational theater, and it was remarkable. And there people like Vic Morrow, as I said, and Tab Hunter, Anthony Perkins, Dean Stockwell, Susan Harrison—all these people were there, and the upshot of it was that one day I see this group thing happening on stage and it was. . . . I just can't tell you. It was just intoxicating to watch, and after it was over, I got the group together and said, "You know, I think we've got something here, which will revolutionize the history of theater and we have to go public," And everybody left. They all left.

MOIRA ROTH: Because they were scared?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Because their agents told them that they couldn't be seen in anything so weird. And, you know, at the time it was a big heartbreak for me, and at the same time I thought, "Well, to hell with it," you know. Three people stayed, and they were non-actors. One was Lee Mullican, the painter, who teaches at UCLA now. His wife, Luchita Hurtado, was in Mexico, and so he was sort of playing hookie. And I had a little dancer [Sally Ann Linton—RR/MR] who was a leftover from my days at Pasadena Playhouse. And this guy who was an Israeli. . . . No, he was a Jew from India who had studied. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: [laughs]

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: . . . who had studied at MIT as an engineer [_____—Ed.].

MOIRA ROTH: A great trio to begin with!

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: And they were all wonderful, you know. They were not actors, but they were wonderful theater people. And Lee was wonderful! He was really great. And the MIT guy was real little, and Lee was real tall, and between the two men and two women we all looked so weird! We were just four people, and I said, we'll do Instant Theatre, just the four of us. And we did! So we started to do the weekend shows and the people who came were the Ferus Gallery. And all the guys. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: This is now. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: '56. All the people of the Ferus Gallery came, because I was friends with them. I knew Ed Kienholtz and Walter Hopps and Billy Al Bengston and [John—RR/MR] Altoon and Wally Berman and, you know, Ed Moses, all these guys who were showing there. And we were the only places—Ferus and me—where you could find the avant garde in Los Angeles. There was nothing else. It was a desert. And so we supported each other in a sense. The people that they knew who were not in the visual arts were poets and musicians, and everybody was high on pot and getting stoned. And I had no concept of that whatsoever. I never did it. My consciousness wasn't in that at all. But low as this consciousness was, I allowed people to smoke in my theater. And I took out all the chairs from the risers, because the risers had carpeting on them, and I got as many cushions as I could and the people would lie on those cushions and watch this dream-like theater and get high. [laughter] It was like an opium den!
There was this cloud of smoke and who knew what that was! It smelled good, you know, and, of course, we probably got high on the smell of it, but I had no idea of that and nobody wanted to believe that we did this work without being stoned. Nobody. And that went on for the ten years that we did Instant Theatre. Nobody wanted to believe us when we said that we were straight, because it was so crazy and "way out" and people couldn't imagine that a straight mind would come up with that stuff. But of course we did.

MOIRA ROTH: Did your group shift from the original members?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes. First of all, at the end of ‘57, after a year, I quit. All the personalities had gotten totally out of hand, as they are wont to do, and I bought a little house in the hills, and I said, “I’ve had it with all this bullshit. I’m taking my cats and I’m leaving.” So at the time I had maybe seventeen cats and I got this little rickety house in the hills, and I looked around and figured, “Well, maybe I’ll do some directing.” And that never came through because I really didn’t know what I was doing in terms of the practicalities. I didn’t know how to get financing. I didn’t know how to deal with Equity [the theater union—RR/MR]. I didn’t know anything, you know. All I knew was that “I want to direct.” Well, great, now what? So in one of those moments of lucidity where I wanted to direct, I had chosen a Ionesco play. And I had cast, among other people, my ex-husband, King Moody, who was a very good actor. And so during the rehearsals that led nowhere with the Ionesco, during the breaks I would tell him about Instant Theatre. He got very excited about it and begged me to start it again. And I did. And then he and I became partners, and eventually we got married. And we mortgaged the house. We did everything, you know, to keep going, and I, unfortunately, sold my beautiful collection of [Jasper—Ed.] Johns’s and Rauschenbergs for peanuts. And we just did it, you know, every which way we could. We did it in storefronts. We did it in lofts. We did it in dance studios. We did it in homes. We did it in garages. We did it all over the place. Of course always in an underground way. And the work was remarkable. We had many different companies. It was always the two of us—the core—and then different people came in and went. And then, after having done it in Venice for a while, we decided to transform our own home into a theater in the hills. And it was really amazing, because we lived where there was no parking within two miles, and people really trekked, you know, in the hills. I don’t know where they parked, somewhere way up on the mountain, and trekked down, to come and see these shows every week. And sometimes it was so full that we couldn’t even accommodate the people who came, and they would stand in the stairwell. They couldn’t even see. They would just listen to what was happening during the entire show. It was really amazing. And we found these old abandoned car seats, you know, and we had all these car seats on the floor. We lived in a theater—virtually. Our own home was no longer our home, you know. So that went on for a while and finally we said, “Gee, we really have to do something about this.” And, again, we mortgaged the house, and we went legitimate. We got the Horseshoe Stage Theater on Melrose [now called the Zephyr—RR], which was a ninety-nine seater. And in those days there was no “Equity Waiver.” And so we had to work around that, and that was very difficult. At the end of the run, it created a situation which was ridiculous, where we needed a bigger theater because our audiences had grown so much, yet in order to get to the next rung we would have to pay two more Equity salaries and we couldn’t afford that. So we were right in the middle. We were not big enough and we were too big at one and the same time, you know.

MOIRA ROTH: The theater was called the Horseshoe?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Horseshoe Stage Theater. And it was a horseshoe. We lived there, virtually, for three years. Every weekday we had workshops that started at seven, after people left their jobs, and lasted sometimes until two, three in the morning. And every weekend we had two adult shows and four children’s shows, four matinees. So when I emerged from that in ‘66, I felt like Methuselah, because for me life had stopped. For years I did nothing but Instant Theatre. I hadn’t seen any art. I hadn’t seen any shows. I hardly ever read the paper. I didn’t know what was going on. I was reading fairy tales continually in order to prepare for the next fairy tale that we did. When I emerged, I was forty, I think, and it was like, where’s it all gone? [laughs] But it was an extraordinary period, and the work we did was really amazing.

MOIRA ROTH: Did your husband emerge too?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Um, yeah. Actually. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: What sort of marriage was it?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Aah! Must I talk about that? [laughter]

MOIRA ROTH: No, you certainly don’t have to.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Well, no, I’ll tell you what it was. When the partnership in the theater existed and the relationship was really a triangle where we worked toward this goal of the theater, it was fine. When the theater was no longer there and we were left to just this short-circuiting between two people, it didn’t work anymore. And yet we remained together really because of the children, the fourleggeds [meaning their cats and dogs—Ed.], and it should have ended. We pursued very different directions and, of course, when the feminist thing came it was very rough. But. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: So why and when did your Instant Theatre end?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: It ended in ‘66 for the two reasons: One was the Equity situation, and the other reason was my knees. Because in the late fifties already, they had begun to deteriorate very badly. As a matter of fact, I was told that I would be in a wheelchair by the end of the year if I didn’t stop and I kept going. I paid no attention. Actually they didn’t even say wheelchair. They said I would be in bed, lying horizontal and not being

able to move. Of course, that was pure bullshit. But I remember the nurse looking at the x-ray and saying, “I’ve never seen such old knees on such a young person.” [laughing] And it’s true. They were in terrible shape. I was in such pain that I. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: What was it?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: It’s degenerative osteo-arthritis. And I was just in too much pain. I just couldn’t continue doing the kind of activity that Instant Theatre demanded. I just felt that I couldn’t continue, and I needed the change. It was enough. So, much to our chagrin, we stopped. It was a loss, a big loss. So we stopped, and King began to. . . . Well, he had an agent, and he started to try to get work in the industry, and I got a few jobs myself. And I began to do a lot of visual art again, went back to visual work. And in ‘71 we moved from Laurel Canyon because the house had become too small and we had too many animals. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Did you have a lot of animals?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yeah, I always had tons of animals. Lots and lots of cats, lots and lots of dogs. And it was both a blessing and a real difficulty because we couldn’t ever leave together. We never went on vacations together, because one of us would stay home and take care of the animals, usually me!
So we decided that we needed a bigger place, and the only place that was still affordable and that had big properties was in the valley, so in ‘71 we started to look and we found this place in Tarzana, which was pretty far away. But in those days there was still a lot of big cornfields there, and it was really lovely. We had two-thirds of an acre and a lovely house. It was just perfect for us. And it was not on the street. It was up a driveway behind another house. So the animals weren’t close to the road. And this was a big concern because in Laurel Canyon one of the reasons why we left was that all our animals were getting smashed in the street, and everybody else’s too. Because people were dragging the cars up and down. It was absolutely awful. So we moved on this one day, and all our stuff was in boxes and we had the mattresses on the floor, and we slept on the floor. The very next morning was the big earthquake of 1971! It was so funny because, you know, that whole area was barnyards. And so I remember just before six waking up because of all this squawking of the barnyards, and suddenly this big silence—not a peep—and then this noise under the house, this rumbling, deep rumbling, under the house, and I go, “What is this? Is this a subway under there?” And then I thought, “No wonder they sold it to us so cheap! Every morning we’re gonna get that noise?” And then the house began to shake, right? [laughing] And King jumps up, says, “Earthquake!” And I grabbed my cat, because Dibidi was paraplegic, and whenever we had any kind of emergency, first thing I’d do is grab her. And I remember not being able to stand, having to sit and lean against the door. And I remember looking out the door and seeing the whole yard move. It was unbelievable. But, of course, all our stuff having been in boxes we got no breakage. We were very near the epicenter. We thought we were going to be told to evacuate, but we didn’t. And all the cats were freaked out, and all the dogs were running around the house barking at the big giant who was moving their house. It was insane. And I was genuinely frightened. I had a real visceral fear, you know, and I’m never afraid of anything, but that really, you know. . . . The heart was going, and oh! But it was exhilarating at the same time. It was wonderful. It was like riding a big serpent, particularly after the initial shock, the aftershocks. It was really like being on this huge, marine monster, and just going [makes a growling sound] like that. It was really amazing. And in ‘72, Dibidi died, my cat. And she was so important in my life that later on I called all my business DBD. And then in ‘72, a little bit after that—I think it was the fall of ‘72—Cal Arts had this big conference of women artists from all over the nation.
[Interruption in taping]

MOIRA ROTH: We’re looking at the book by Faith Wilding, which is called By My Own Hands, and it surveys the Southern California Women’s Movement from 1970 to 1976. And a photograph that Rachel took of this very special West Coast conference of women artists. What do you remember of the conference?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Here’s a photo by me also, the first Womanspace. It was another event that changed the course of my life. And that’s another one of my photos. It was a really, really important time, because that conference was about women artists. It was a national conference. Women came from all over the country, and they were hundreds of women. It was, again, a total shock for me. It was a total surprise that there were so many good artists among women. They showed slides continuously during three days. And either the artists presented their own, or there were slides and people talked about other artists. Apparently Mimi [Miriam Schapiro—RR] and Judy [Chicago—RR] had gone in the field and gathered all these people. They had gone into people’s kitchens and pantries and garages and all of that where they worked and just ferreted them out. And I was astounded, because I was still under the very sexist notion that there were no women artists. I was still going round and round with my own insanity. “What am I? Am I an artist? If I’m an artist, I can’t be a woman. If I’m a woman,” you know, “What is this?” And then during those three days my head was just turned around. And it became very clear to me that I had been totally deluded and that I had to reassess all my beliefs. And it was aided and abetted by the fact that Judy organized us into CD groups, and I started one in the area that I lived in in Tarzana.

MOIRA ROTH: CR? Consciousness-raising group.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes, I mean CR. I said CD—my head is elsewhere obviously. [laughs] Here, you want another piece? [They have been eating candy—Trans.]

MOIRA ROTH: Thank you.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: And then I was brought into Mimi Schapiro's art discussion group [eating while talking], which met pretty often. My connection with Mimi was from years back when she was learning engraving with William Hayter. I was also there at Atelier Seventeen. So our connections were from the late forties. We renewed our acquaintance, and she was at the time just turning around her art from very male-oriented kind of art to a totally female-oriented style, which I thought was extremely risky and extremely courageous. And she created beautiful, beautiful art. [To a cat:] C'mon, darling. Come on up. Come, come! There's a good girl.
[To MOIRA ROTH:] So at that conference several women who became very important in my life subsequently were there. One was Josine Ianco-Starrels. The other one was Barbara Smith. Betye Saar, whom I had already known before from living in the Canyon, was there. June Wayne, with whom I did "Joan of Art" subsequently. ["Joan of Art" were seminars offered free to women artists by June Wayne, to teach them to become professionals—RR/MR] And of all of them the one that impressed me so much that I really wanted to get close to her was Barbara Smith. Mostly because she was a performance artist. And because I admired her concepts and her approach to the form. I was already beginning to toy with the idea of doing some performance myself because, having seen some at the time, I realized that a lot of Instant Theatre had been performance art, only under another name and another aegis, and that it would behoove me to do that. So I wanted her as a friend and as a mentor. And the other woman I connected with was Bella Feldman, with whom I had gone to high school. She had been in a younger class, but I remembered her from Music and Art [High School in NYC—RR].

MOIRA ROTH: You said you'd also gone to school with. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Allan Kaprow.

MOIRA ROTH: Morton Feldman and Allan Kaprow.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Right.

MOIRA ROTH: Yeah.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: So I became very close to all of these women, and today I am still very close to Bella Feldman, to Josine, to June Wayne, and some of the other connections that I made through the woman's movement have remained with me. Bruria [Finkel—RR] is a woman that I knew in the early sixties. I think I met her in '61 when we were doing Instant Theatre. Somebody brought her. I think Jack Hirschman brought her to see our shows, and so I knew her then and I'm still very close to her. Gilah Hirsch I met through Joan of Art—and quite a lot of other women actually through Joan of Art too.
So that whole period was a real turnaround for me. I began to question all my notions. I began to read all the feminist literature.

MOIRA ROTH: What did you read?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Well, everything, you know. . . . [laughs] From The Feminine Mystique to all of the books that were. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Adrienne Rich?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Adrienne.

MOIRA ROTH: Susan Griffin.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes, right. All these women. Mary Daly and. . . . Whoever, you know. All the ones who were writing. And Deena Metzger also, and. . . . And it became very clear to me that so many of my problems that I had considered were really very personal problems were really not. And I think that this influenced very much my approach to performance and what I did subsequently, because when I began to do performance in '75 I embarked on a quest for redeeming my life. Because it had been so distorted by my problems, my angst about "Am I artist? What am I? Is this. . . ." Aaah, you know.

MOIRA ROTH: Right.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: That I felt that I had really missed the boat and that I had not fulfilled expectations, that I had not become what I should have become, that I had just taken too many wrong turns and wasted too much time, and I felt. . . . I was very down on myself and felt that I had sinned, in a way, against talent, which to me

was the. . . . Since I had no religion, talent was always the thing that I held up as the “ne plus ultra.” When you hear the call of talent and you don’t answer it, then you really get punished, and I felt that way. I was feeling very guilty and punished. So I think that getting into the feminist movement lifted a lot of that weight from me and made me realize that it wasn’t all my fault, and that indeed I had been a victim of the kind of society and beliefs that were prevalent. It was a political issue. And because of that I was able to do in my performance work what I had never been able to do in my life, which is to reveal myself, to disclose, to air, to put out all this garbage and turn it around and make it into art, and in a sense reveal all the dark secrets that I had kept locked up all these years. It was redemption and exorcism. And this was the direction that I took during the first part of my career as a performance artist.

MOIRA ROTH: Do you think that was a strong motive for other women at that time in L.A. making art?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I don’t know if they were redeeming their life the way I was redeeming my life, but I know that most of the women did take the stance that the personal was the political and vice versa, and I was really going in step with that belief and that philosophy. But at the time I didn’t realize that. It was all very unconscious.

MOIRA ROTH: Did you have a sense of California feminist art as opposed to New York feminist art?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No, because I really didn’t hook into any New York stuff, you see. Again, I was aloof and didn’t dip into a lot of the stuff that was happening. I think that my pain, which I never really acknowledged, my pain at never having been recognized as a creator, neither locally nor nationally by New York publications or whatever, was such that it was not easy for me to expose myself to the knowledge of what was going on elsewhere, which was being so highly publicized and so adulated and so recognized and so talked about. I think that I did a lot of hiding and sulking at that time, because I felt that for ten years I had pioneered so much and that none of it was left. I had no documentation. I had no proof.

MOIRA ROTH: Except people’s memories.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Except people’s memories, you know, and who were these people? How do you get to them? Surely, if I had had any brains I would have tried to find people and interview them and recorded them, to have something. But I didn’t do that, and so nothing was left of it. It seemed it was absolutely like ashes in the wind. And when I would hear about all these great things that had been done in New York, and when I read about them, I would say, “We did that,” you know. We did that even before, long before. We did even better than that. We did that repeatedly—and more, you know, and nobody recognized it, nobody paid attention. So I think that very possibly I shut myself off from a lot of that. And now that I speak to you today, I’m able to say that. I’d never said that to anybody or in any interview, but I think that part of my hiding was that it was just too painful. It took me years to be able to talk about Instant Theatre and toot my own horn. I never did it. I never did it, because I had nothing to show for it, no proof. At the time I did it, I was so imbued with Zen Buddhism, which was a very big thing in my life—which I should have mentioned before—that it seemed that the ephemeral and the now and, you know, doing things just for the doing and all of that, was part of the philosophy. It was important to keep it that way, and it’s what fueled Instant Theatre. That was the philosophy behind it. And it’s only afterwards, when I stopped and when I looked around and saw the world and realized how people were cashing in on any little pissy thing they did. And it was all hyper documented. People didn’t fart without having it on tape, you know! And it was like everybody was—particularly on the East Coast—everybody was adulated and getting rich. On what? On things that were nowhere near as interesting as some of the things we did. So I think that a lot of that really hurt me, and I just never wanted to acknowledge that, because it was part of my upbringing, of never acknowledging the bad feelings.

MOIRA ROTH: Um hmm.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: You certainly don’t acknowledge the feelings of regret and envy. . . . So that was that. And the other thing was, again, part of my makeup where I never felt that people were justified in loving me just for who I was, but only for what I did. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Or performed.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Or performed. But when I wasn’t performing, since nothing was left of it, there was nothing left to love, you see? And so there was a lot of that going on with me, and that was what was happening at the time when I met Barbara, so I was very vulnerable at the time and had a bit of hero worship for her. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: You were telling me at one point the story of how you became close to Barbara by getting involved in a performance she did.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes, yes.

MOIRA ROTH: A Week in the Life Of.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes, which is interesting because it's sort of symbolic also of our relationship that it should have happened through art, you know. She did this wonderful auction, where she auctioned off pieces of her life—pieces of time in her life—and I wanted so much to get close to her that I went to the auction and spent a lot of money bidding against people and got three of the. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: . . . best times.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: . . . the best times, and one of them was a doggie walk and one of them was a correspondence of three letters each, and the other one was two or three—I don't remember—kind of show-and-tell things where we had to show each other some very unusual, extraordinary sights.
And so we did that. We went through all that, and I don't know, you know, what she did with all of that. She was going to put it in a book but I don't know if that book ever happened.

MOIRA ROTH: I don't think so.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I don't think it ever happened. I know she works on it or worked on it a lot.

MOIRA ROTH: Yeah.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: But it never did materialize. I still have some of the correspondence that we did together, and I think that some of it is really interesting. I could have used it, but anyway. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: What attracted you to her? Her sensibility? Her aesthetic?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Mainly what I felt I lacked, which is the conceptual side. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Meaning. . . .?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Meaning that I had a sense of conceptual art and I had a lot of admiration for it, and I felt that a lot of my work was very visceral and theatrical and sensual and was not sufficiently conceptual. And so I naturally gravitated toward somebody who had what I felt I lacked, and I tried to observe and analyze and understand how she was working in those ways. And did learn a lot from her, actually.

MOIRA ROTH: Do you feel that the performances that you've done since the mid-1970s are conceptual? Is that a word you'd use about them?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No, I think that there are conceptual components. As total pieces, they are not conceptual statements. I think the only one which is possibly a strong conceptual statement is KabbaLAmobile. [And perhaps also Soldier of Fortune—RR] But I don't think that my performances are simple enough. . . . And when I mean simple I mean that their components are minimal enough to create one strong conceptual statement, which I think you need for conceptual art. Mine are so layered and they're so intricately structured and have so many components, you see, that it's a different kind of approach. It's more the assemblage sensibility. That's a carryover, I think. But I think that, within that, parts are conceptual.

MOIRA ROTH: Something you've also mentioned. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Before I forget, I think that to be fair with myself, I think that I may have done a lot of conceptual work in Instant Theatre that I didn't recognize as conceptual, because what later on was called conceptual, I used to call "collision." And collision comes from Artaud. A lot of the stuff that we did was collision of totally disparate things put together as two ideas that created a resultant. That was part of my work, but I didn't see it that way at the time.

MOIRA ROTH: I was going to say that I was curious about what else you were seeking out at that time.

Tape 2, side B

MOIRA ROTH: Continuing the conversation, on third of September 1989, with Rachel Rosenthal. We'd ended the last conversation with my asking you, in addition to your contact with Barbara Smith and your interest generally in performance and its conceptual aspects. What else were you thinking about at that time? What else was going on in experiences of the mid 1970s?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I was at that time, if I remember correctly—and you know I never reread my journals, which is a stupid thing.

MOIRA ROTH: And you keep journals?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I keep journals, and I never reread them. [laughs]

MOIRA ROTH: Oh.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: It's sporadic, but I have kept them over the years. And, at that period, if I remember correctly, I was very dissatisfied with my life, because I lived in the big house in Tarzana and King was making a lot of money, and things were materially better for us than they had ever been. But I still was not comfortable with myself as an artist, and I felt that I was wasting my time being a housewife, taking care of the animals and the husband and the grounds and the food and the marketing and the cleaning and everything. And I just felt buried. Tarzana was pretty far away from things, so that even though I remember that there was a period—and I don't remember exactly when—there was a period when I was in Tarzana where I was really trying to see everything and would take the car and go to, you know, as far as San Diego, Newport Beach, and all the outlying shows—Downey Museum—all the shows that were not only in town but peripheral. . . . But I still felt like an outsider so that when I got involved with the women it was really my entry into the art world.

MOIRA ROTH: So that happened simultaneously, being involved with feminism and. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: And entering. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: . . . .becoming part of the art world.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes, yes. And I credit the women for my entire career, actually, because—and I've said that in many interviews—because there was no other way for me to get into the art world, and I did it through the women and the woman's movement. And that was not my primary intention for getting involved [laughs] in the movement, but that was the result in the long run. My first audience were women, when I started to do my performances. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Which was where? The first performance.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: At the Orlando Gallery in the valley. They asked me to do a performance in '75. When I was at Womanspace, I had gotten. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Could you describe Womanspace, the origins of it? You'd once said that as an activist and organizer you just automatically got involved in creating things.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Right. It came out of that group that was the discussion group that Mimi and Judy [Chicago—RR] had, and there was a consensus that what was needed was a space. As we all know, the art market was sewn up by men, and there was no entry really for women, and so it was important to create a space where women could show their work, come, discuss, listen to lectures, become involved and so on and so forth. And so there was a search for a space and, and I really, as I remember it, I think it was Fran Raboff's husband, whose place that was. He had this space which used to be a laundromat or something like that on Venice Boulevard. On the west side. A woman called Lucy Adelman donated a year's rent. A lot of the younger women then got involved in fixing it up and painting and doing all that work. I was a member of the board, as we all were. Eventually, after a few chairwomen, I ended up co-chairing it with the woman who ran Cart and Crate [Eugenia Osmun—RR].

MOIRA ROTH: What kind of exhibitions did you put on? Did you put on one-person exhibitions or group ones?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: We did everything. You know, the space was really remarkable, if I may say so myself. Because, first of all, it was so diverse. Secondly, it gave a space and a visibility for groups that were really disenfranchised in those days, like lesbians and black women and so on. It wasn't like today where everybody's talking diversity of backgrounds and ethnic mergings and all of those things, which are à la mode now. When I think of it, we were so in advance of our time. So the shows that were put on were at first group shows and had themes. They were theme shows.

MOIRA ROTH: Such as. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Such as women's sexuality, of which I was a part, amazingly enough! And there was Opulence. There was Taboos, which was curated by this really strong, strong woman [Jessica Jacobs—RR].

MOIRA ROTH: Great topic.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes. And then there were groups, such as lesbians and black women. There was a lovely black show. All these different kinds of groupings which no other space would have shown. And they were always coupled with events, talks, question and answer with artists, lectures, shows of slides, and shows of videos—whatever. And so the space was extremely active and drew women like a magnet. There were always tons of women, and the upshot of it was that we created a new vocabulary in art because the work was so

different from the mainstream male work. Specific. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Specific meaning gender-specific?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Gender-specific, for the period. It was specific because later on the men began to do works just like we did. But in those days it was very revolutionary because the emphasis was on all the things that men eschewed and did not want to deal with. And there was no sense at all of having to do a certain kind of art in order to be shown, and so it really opened a dam to all this outpouring of really exquisite work, some of which was decorative, a lot of which was collage, a lot of which was personal and autobiographical, some of which was illustrative, some of which was very expressionistic, long before neo-expressionism. A lot of it dealing with imagery that was central, you know, part of Judy and Mimi's theories—which were applicable for a certain kind of art, but not all. A lot of it was political and even shocking. And using materials and means which were not mainstream. And a lot of it was diaristic, like pages out of personal journals and using mementos and all the things that were really at that time never seen. And some of it was really exquisite. And so it drew a great deal of attention and then controversy, and in the meantime within the organization were all of these clashes and poles in different directions and disagreements and tremendous conflicts.

MOIRA ROTH: That doesn't surprise me!

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yeah! These were part of the development and growth. But for me personally this was such a strong "learning experience"—in quotes—because again I had to fit into a very democratic mold and deal with all this diversity, whereas I had been so isolated in my own work as a loner or as the head of my company, which was a completely fascistic company. . . . [laughter] You know, what I said went. In a sense it was a paradox, because Instant Theatre was totally improvised and we never did the same piece twice. It was a very spontaneous form and spontaneous collaboration. Everybody worked together for the piece, so that in a sense it was extremely democratic—as democratic as one can get I suppose. But in order to get to the point where a company was able to perform like that, consistently, the grueling workshopping and studying and practicing and exercises and continual classes that I had to give, was extremely disciplined and. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: And fascistic!

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: And fascistic. There was definitely a feeling of whip, because you had to get people to do certain things in a certain way. Otherwise, you couldn't function like that. And so it was a real mixture between total freedom and total discipline. And, as I said, I was the artistic director and what I said went. So when I got into the women's movement and I realized that there was no acceptance of leadership, I was first of all appalled at the waste of time, at the pussyfooting around and at the continual beating around the bush and turning around the subject. My impulse was always to say, "Okay, girls, let's cut the bullshit. Let's do this and that and the other," you know. And that, of course—just like the term "girls"—was not acceptable and it drove me nuts. I would come home from those meetings to my house and scream, just scream, and tell my husband, "I can't stand it anymore. I'm never going back," you know, and of course I always went back.

MOIRA ROTH: How long did Womanspace continue for?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I think that it moved, if I remember correctly, with the move from the west side onto the old Chouinard Building on Grandview Street and then became more and more engulfed by the so-called Woman's Building, which became the dominant force. Grandview held its own for a while.

MOIRA ROTH: And you were involved with Grandview, too?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I was involved with Grandview, and. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Which was another space for women.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes. It was, it was a more specialized space, because it didn't have the diversity that Womanspace had. It was just a gallery. It was a collective, so it was no longer open to everybody. There was a definite roster of women who were the collective that was called Grandview. And that was it, and that's who we showed. There was double the amount of women as exhibition time and so two of us would double up for each exhibition time, and we had two big galleries, so one of us took one and one of us took the other.

MOIRA ROTH: Who was in the collective?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Barbara and Sherry Brody and. . . . [pauses] You'll have to look at this. Wanda [Westcoast —RR] and, you know. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: The group!

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: The group, the usual, Judy and Mimi and, you know, and. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Was that seen as elitist?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Nancy Youdelman. And Janice Lester—and Faith [Wilding—RR], Suzanne [Lacy—RR]. . . . You know, just a bunch of the old. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Yeah. How was that viewed by women who weren't in the collective?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Not with great happiness, and, you know, we were criticized at the time for being elitist. The problem was that you couldn't include everybody, and this happened to be a collective of this particular group, and the point was "make you own collective with another group" and the more the better, you know, the more the merrier.

MOIRA ROTH: Had you helped organize Grandview?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: We all did. You know, it was always a group effort, and I was part of that. And we all took turns doing specific things, publicity and. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Gallery sitting?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: . . . gallery sitting and mailing and whatever, you know, so it was the same old stuff. It was a collective. So Grandview got very good reviews, and the shows were excellent, very high caliber. And that was another thing, you know, which was always the question about the quality. What is quality? Are we going to be like the male establishment, blah blah blah, or are we going to show everybody? And that was the big bone of contention in the whole feminist movement, always, and particularly in the art movement, you know. Is everybody welcome, no matter who and what? Or are we going to be selective and be part of the art community? And the two were really mutually exclusive philosophically, you see, and so there was always a great deal of contention about that. Grandview tried to somehow solve that dilemma by saying, "Well, galleries like this one are like groups that feel affinity and that feel that we're in similar places in our careers and in our development and we want to show together and be in the same space. We can have many of these developed." Well, no others developed. So, because of that, we remained in the spotlight and probably became target of a lot of people's resentment. But, in the meantime, Judy [Chicago—Ed.] and Cheryl Swannack, who were very instrumental in making policy, were really kind of blocking out the Woman's Building, and the Woman's Building became more and more prominent and more and more all-inclusive and did open its doors to almost everybody in some shape or form. So that answered that need, you see. And being in the same building sometimes was difficult, because there were a lot of clashes and a definite kind of class distinction—in a weird way, you know. Most of the people in Grandview were sort of bourgeois white girls, and. . . . Except for Betye Saar. I think she was in it, if I remember correctly. . . . But Betye was the token everywhere, you know! At the time there were no other black women who were really accepted or who were in that category, so she was it. We were all European-style ladies, you know. And there were quite a few actually who were of European descent. . . . The other part of the building, then, was "The Proles"! [Rhymes with role—Proletariat!—RR] There were quite a few carryovers, you know, because I remember, for instance, a performance that Barbara did, which included a lot of people behind white masks and that she did in the courtyard. The courtyard was like the hearth, the hogan. [laughs] And a lot of people participated in some of those. And then there were public speaking and a lot of events and feasts and potluck feasts. And then there was that auction, You Art What You Eat, which I chaired, you know, and more or less helped to create, which was a really lovely event and. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Which was what?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: It was an auction. It was for Womanspace, which was in big financial trouble, and people brought in edible art. And there were some really exquisite food art done, and there was a lovely exhibition and first everybody got to see it and then it was auctioned off and eaten. [laughs] And we got some money out of it.

MOIRA ROTH: Tell me about the Joan of Art seminars, because they were very key for you, but also for many other women.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Oh, yes, they were so amazing. Well, June Wayne was really a remarkably generous person, not only with her time and her money and her space, but with all of her know-how.

MOIRA ROTH: Her space being Tamarind [Lithography Workshop—MR].

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes. She perceived the lack, you know, which was so apparent in women artists, who really were like babies. We were babies. We didn't know how to go about doing anything in terms of marketing our art or being professionals. We just had no sense whatsoever. All we knew is that we liked to draw and paint and sculpt, you know, and that was it. And so, having herself been through all of that and having the expertise and the knowledge and everything, she decided to spread it around. She had sent a release to the paper, and there was this little item, you know, that I saw in the paper—and I didn't see the first one unfortunately, but I saw the

second. And what she offered was a free—I mean it was totally free—a free seminar of six sessions, and each session was about a different aspect of marketing. There was budgeting, and there was your relationship to the gallery, your relationship to the collector, how you behave—and there was a lot of roleplaying—how you behave with a buyer, a collector, a gallery director. How do you sell yourself? How do you make your own publicity? All of those things. And she taught the first one, and then her idea was that out of each session one woman would come out and teach that particular session and she (June) would supervise. And then the second one would be that the women who had taken the second one would teach the third, etc. And it was a great idea, but, of course, by the time the, you know, whatever that session was. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Third generation!

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: . . . yes, it was really like xerox; it lost a little bit of sharpness. But she would be there to pick things up if we floundered. So the one that I attended was already taught by the other women, rather than June, but June was there, and she would barge in and pick up and talk. I remember that I, of course, being a performer, thrived on the role-playing. I played Leo Castelli, to everybody's delight. [laughter]

MOIRA ROTH: Did you costume yourself for the occasion?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No, no, but my art was such that the illusion was perfect! (This is ironic.) [laughs] So anyway, June had coffee and tea and coffee cake for everybody, and there were about, I don't know, maybe fifty women.

MOIRA ROTH: Oh, fifty!

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yeah, thirty to fifty. A lot of women! And I remember that when we started out we were totally ignorant and out of it and none of us had any career worth talking about. And I think that most of the women who participated did make very strong careers and their work began to appear in galleries like LAICA [Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art—RR/MR] and a whole bunch of others, and they made a name for themselves. So there are, I don't know, how many dozens of women out there who can really trace their emergence to June, and who have to be totally grateful to June for their professional lives. So then June didn't have time anymore because she got involved with her lawsuit and a lot of other things, and some of us—Bruria Finkel, Gilah Hirsch, and myself—decided that it was such a great thing to do that we continued doing it, and we taught the course in different places and we went to San Francisco at one point also. So that was Joan of Art.

MOIRA ROTH: How would you characterize the mood in L.A. in the early years of the feminist art movement? I mean, among the circle you knew. And presumably you were, as it were, right in the center of things.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I think that it was like a dam breaking. There was so much dissatisfaction, and the dissatisfaction was very amorphous, and the movement gave everything a direction and a meaning. It was like that in my own life. It was like that in everybody's lives. There was so much perception of sexism and discrimination and putdowns and "ignoring of" and all of that, in women's personal lives and in their professional lives. And such a sense also—a growing sense, which was something new—of our own worth and the fact that we didn't deserve that kind of treatment. This was something new, because for so many years we had absorbed the message that we were nothing. And that, you know, was really like the parallel (or equivalent) to "black is beautiful" in the sixties. And we really began to see the beauty—not only the real beauty of women, but the beauty of our work and of our lives and the meaningfulness of aspects of our lives that had been denigrated as being female. And some writers and artists were carrying the message home very clearly to all of us and to women in general, and these women were saying things that we had dimly felt but could not articulate. So there was a crystallizing of all of these feelings. There was a direction to the political thrust. There was a meaning to our lives. And I think that that's why, in spite of all the pain and the difficulty, I stayed, you know, and tried to understand and tried to adjust, whereas it was so difficult for me and it was difficult for all the women, I think, some of whom had problems which were the opposite of mine, but really similar, because they were just the other pole of the stick—women who were not assertive (and I was too self assertive, you see). And so there was a gamut, there was a spectrum of difficulties that women had in dealing with each other: Like women who had never dealt with other women before, and who never gave other women the time of day or any respect or importance because they couldn't give it to themselves and society didn't either. So that was such a change in our lives. It brought about tremendous personal upheavals—eventually my own divorce, and the separation or divorce of many women that I knew, both in marriage and in relationship. And so there was a great deal of feeling of unrest and perturbation and very strong currents, some of them contradictory and some of them carrying us along with a great deal of strength. We all helped each other in some way. It was the heroic period, you know, and I really have nostalgia for it. At the same time, I wouldn't want to go through it again. [laughs]

MOIRA ROTH: Where did Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago situate themselves in this?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Well, they were really at the helm of everything. They were very strong doers and they had devised programs that encompassed all the new thinking and that made manifest whatever it was that was

fermenting and moving under the surface, and I think that what they did at Cal Arts was remarkable and the crowning achievement was Woman House, which came out of that program.

MOIRA ROTH: Did you see that?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes.

MOIRA ROTH: What were your memories of that?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Oh, very clear and very sharp. I remember all those rooms and the works and the performances that I saw very, very clearly. The whole gestalt of the place was a very strong statement and totally revolutionary and, at the same time, I thought very touching. Some of the work was almost childlike and like first steps, you know. It was like taking first steps in a certain direction. And because of that it was moving, and it was the first time that we had seen this kind of statement by women and also that kind of sisterhood, with everybody making it happen together and working together—with the usual clashes, but still it was very very impressive. And I thought that the performance works of people like Judy and Rita Yokoi and even some of Suzanne's earlier works were extremely rough and raw and very obvious and very. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: You mean like Cock and Cunt and Waiting?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yeah, yeah, things like that. Waiting was different. Waiting was a more subtle and poetic kind of piece. I loved the piece of the girl who was ironing the sheet. Thought that was wonderful. And again because we had done so many real-time things in Instant Theatre it wasn't the big surprise for me that it must have been for a lot of other people. But then again that was a problem with Instant Theatre, that we did "everything," and so it was hard to surprise me with almost any kind of theatrical performance. However, the meaning of the piece and the politics behind it were indeed revolutionary and totally new. So a lot of the performance work I was critical of because of my background. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Which included, just to go back over it, included Artaud in France, Cunningham—and also Piscator. You hadn't mentioned him, by the way.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Uh huh. Piscator was a very interesting period. First of all, I was interested in directing and not in acting at the time, and he was very Brechtian, and his whole thing was Epic Theater. It was always political. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: And he was in New York in World War II.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes. He had immigrated because he was a communist, not because he was a Jew. And it was amazing that he managed to do what he did in New York. Eventually he went back to East Germany. He definitely ran that place like a dictator. It was a very difficult place to be in.

MOIRA ROTH: The place?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: The Dramatic Workshop. Marlon Brando had been a student—maybe a couple of seasons before me—and when I was there people like Tony Franciosa and Ben Gazzara, John Sargent—people like that were part of it, and were students. And I was in the directing program, and I did everything: sets and sound and stage managing and lights. I tried to learn all of it. I became Piscator's assistant, so I worked very closely with him on several productions. One of the things that—and probably one of the things that made it very hard for me in the woman's movement—was that as a role model he was a total dictator, and the way he ran that, that school was by guilt! The guilt rained down like from a pyramid. He was on top and then there was the faculty and then the lower rungs were the peons who were the students. And the lower you were on the pyramid scale, the more guilt was coming down from the top, because everybody passed the guilt down like the buck. And so we poor students felt like in Greek Hades, you know, the poor people who were pushing the big rocks up a hill, for all eternity. We were really in hell, and all of us went around feeling the guilt of the world on our heads, and there was a great deal of anxiety and stress and misery in the atmosphere of that place. And at the same time there was this extraordinary ferment, a tremendous amount of energy and creativity. And Piscator's approach to theater was, as I said, political, didactic, and epic. It was really the Brechtian way, and he hammered the ideas home—visually and verbally and in action and in every way—and I think a lot of that carried over in my own pieces later on. But they were mitigated, of course, by the decorativeness of my French training and by the conceptualism of the American way. Still it had a strong impact on me; there's no question about that. And when I studied there I also learned the total dedication to theater that some theater people have. I don't know how it is now in the professional theater because everything's become so based on economics and the unions have taken over completely. But in those days there was still a possibility, both in France and in New York, of doing theater for the love of it, and the dedication and the monastic kind of purity that went with the territory was really touching.

MOIRA ROTH: And that was true of Piscator's own character.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Absolutely. He was a really dedicated theater man, and he wanted perfection and he wanted it his way. His way of directing actors was pretty amazing. He directed them by demonstrating. He played all the roles, and he wanted line readings, you know—which is of course totally antithetical to any kind of acting pride today. You know, you can't tell an actor, "Do the line reading like this." But he did that, to men and women. He got up on stage and showed them the kind of face he wanted. He would say, "I want stupid eyes," and he would show stupid eyes, and then he would play it. And he performed women, and he had this totally feminine thing that he would do, and then come on as a burly peasant and then as an aristocrat. He was absolutely amazing. He played all the parts and he played them perfectly, and then he expected the actors to just get up and imitate him! Well, the funny thing about the Dramatic Workshop is that it was the place that spawned the Actor's Studio, and The Method! Because Lee Strasberg was one of the teachers. The people who were teaching actors how to act were Method people, and he was Epic Theater. And so he would get these actors who would come to him and say, "What am I, what do I really feel here," you know, "and what am I thinking of and how can I play this, this moment without knowing what I'm really doing?" And he would look at them and go crazy and start screaming at them. [laughs]

MOIRA ROTH: Thank you. I thought we should include a discussion of Piscator. Now we probably go back to the context of the woman's movement. At the time that this was happening, you were getting divorced. Your mother was getting sick also.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yeah, well, it was all later actually, because at the time this was happening we're talking more '73, '74. My mother died in '75. That's when I did my first performance. And I divorced in '78, after the revival of Instant Theatre. We haven't got to that yet. So it took several years of brewing, you know, and of getting all of this under my skin to break away and to make the change in my life. My revival of Instant Theatre was a sort of a last ditch stand to save my marriage—and I realize that, of course, today, which I didn't realize at the time. It was a totally impulse kind of thing where King and I were in his MG on the freeway, and suddenly I said, "Why don't we start up Instant Theatre again?" And he almost swerved off the freeway with glee and delight, and we did it. But there were too many mistakes made, although some of the work was really great and there was very many wonderful new connections made with the people who entered the company and the workshop.

MOIRA ROTH: When was the revival of Instant Theatre?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: '76, '77. And at the end of '77 when we had to fold, by that time King had fallen in love with this young chick, and I had been really, really hurt by the fact that it had failed. And I realized why it failed, but it was still a terrible feeling. And I went through real depression, and that's when I did Grand Canyon. I went to the Grand Canyon. When I'm depressed, I go to spend time by myself in the Earth. I went to the Grand Canyon in January by myself and spent a week there and then did the piece. And that was the beginning of total change in my life. I went to Ed Wortz's group therapy and to Overeater's Anonymous. I shed 60 pounds and my marriage. So that was all in '78. And. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Then maybe we should now go back to talk about the time when you did your first performance, the context of that.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Uh huh.

MOIRA ROTH: And then come back to '78 a little later.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Okay. Well, in '75 my mother died in March and I was asked. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: You'd become very close to your mother before she died?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No, that was with my father.

MOIRA ROTH: But you'd seen a lot of your mother?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Oh, yes. I always saw a lot of her, and on the superficial level it was always fine.

MOIRA ROTH: Because you once said that at the time when your mother was becoming sick, King was also sick, and you were going back and forth between your two homes.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yeah, right. I was what they call a "good daughter." And I really put myself out and dedicated myself a lot to her and to her welfare and to her happiness and all of those things.
But, again, what she truly wanted from me I couldn't give her, which was real intimacy and real love. And it was a love which was there, but it was not. . . . I don't know, it was. . . . It was an affection, but it wasn't the kind of

love that she craved. She craved for real passionate love, you know, because that's apparently what she felt for me.

Tape 3, side A

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I told you what happened after she died in terms of trying to get rid of her.

MOIRA ROTH: Maybe you could just mention that again.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Oh, that, was that lost? [a portion of the interview had not been recorded—Ed.]

MOIRA ROTH: Yeah.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Oh, okay. Yes, after she died, even though I had not had the real intimacy with her and I had tremendous anger, I still felt like a forty-seven year old orphan—or whatever age I was. But at the same time, I needed to get rid of her so badly that I got rid of all her things in ways which were totally stupid and that I lived to regret bitterly, to the point of obsession and losing sleep over it and having cold sweats in the middle of the night and trying to retrieve the things that I had virtually given away instead of selling properly. And when I think about the stupidities I did in terms of economics, like selling her home, which was so stupid—I should have rented it—but even if King had advised me at the time not to sell, I think I wouldn't have listened. And I was really hellbent on just eradicating her from my life, while at the same time feeling such guilt and such attachment and so much unfinished business between us, you know, so it was a real murky area. And I went through maybe two years of that, of really feeling terrible about the whole affair. And at the end of '75 I did a performance for the Orlando Gallery [Replays—MR].

MOIRA ROTH: You'd been asked to do something.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes, the boys asked me to do a performance, and at the time I had seen quite a few performances and I realized that so much of Instant Theatre had been performance-like and that I had been actually doing performances under another name and another context, for years. And so between that and the fact that I really had a need, first of all, to go back into performing because I really missed it; secondly, I felt the need for control. In Instant Theatre, although I trained the people with an iron hand, once they were on stage I had no control whatsoever over the finished product. And, of course, there's nothing more wonderful than performance because you control everything from A to Z. And I decided then to do that, and I immediately started in as a soloist, and did a piece about my knees because my knees had so flared up as a result of my mother's death and my state of mind, that I could hardly walk. My knees were hemorrhaging inside and they were so swollen that I was like crippled. I began to see a lot of specialists and they were telling me that I needed this or that operation and, of course, in those days who knew about holistic healing? I certainly didn't. After the performance, I had one of my knees operated on, which I bitterly regret ever since. And the piece was very successful. I had a very good audience, a mixture of the people that I had known through Womanspace and all the friends that I had made, and the following of the gallery. As a result of the piece my swelling went down and I was able to walk and function. And the success was so satisfying that I immediately went into another piece, which I was asked to do by Double X in Westwood.

MOIRA ROTH: Double X was another one of the collectives?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes. But that collective didn't have a space. We did curated exhibitions which were then shown in existing spaces. And one of the spaces was that big lobby that had just been built at the corner of Westwood and Wilshire. And it was for Thanksgiving, and so I did a Thanksgiving performance called Thanks. That one was audience participation—and solo by me. And then in '76 I started the workshop in preparation for the company, the revival of Instant Theatre. And in '77, with the members of the company, I created two pieces, and those were group pieces because I felt that having workshopped with them I could work them into my pieces. And it was like getting their feet wet for subsequent public performances in Instant Theatre. And so we did Charm at the Mount St. Mary's and The Head of OK. Head of OK was very successful at I.D.E.A. in Santa Monica, and then we did it again at UCSD [University of California at San Diego—Ed.], and my mistake was that I didn't put the people through their paces again. Some time had passed and they had lost the sense of improvising, and so it was not successful in my opinion.

MOIRA ROTH: Could you talk about Charm, because that's when you wholeheartedly took on memories of your childhood in Paris?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Um hmm.

MOIRA ROTH: And with Head of Olga you also wholeheartedly take on the theme of your stepsister.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Um hmm.

MOIRA ROTH: Half-sister?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: With Replays, which was the first piece about the knees, I began to touch upon the childhood, and Thanks was a piece that also used people and animals that I had known and with whom I had had dealings that required gratitude, both sincere and ironic, and that for one reason or another I had never had a chance to thank. And so I used people in the audience—gave them a lit taper and turned them into the particular recipient of my gratitude and then I explained what the reason was for the gratitude and I thanked them and I gave them a little present each. And with each instance, of course, some relationship or some event in my past surfaced. But, as you say, Charm was really the first one where I really tackled my childhood. And I think it had a great deal of impact on an audience because it was so unlike any childhood they knew [laughing], that people didn't even think that I was telling the truth. I had to repeatedly assure members of the audience that everything I said was true. And I don't know if they were happy or sad about that. . . .
[Interruption while RR's cats play—Ed.]

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: So in that piece [Charm—Ed.] I tackled two important things in my life. One was my childhood, and the other was my. . . . Well, what in French we call "boulimie." Here bulimia means something else; it means eating and inducing vomiting. I never did throw up, but I was a compulsive overeater. The piece was visually separated into two parts. One platform was my space and then the other platform was the space of these nightmare figures—which I studiously ignored, but the more active and the more horrendous their activities became, the more I would gorge on pastry. And I had bought fifty dollars worth of French pastries, which was a lot of French pastries because fifty dollars was a lot of money then. And little by little throughout the piece I ate these pastries more and more compulsively. I had an androgynous servant come and bring in more trays of more pastries every time I rang the bell, and I never let him take away the old ones. They were on this little tiny secretary, and so he would just pile them one on top of the other and you had this pile of half eaten pastries—and more and more and more. And each time more pastries came they were increasingly elaborate. And finally this seven-layer chocolate cake covered with cream and cherries made an appearance and I buried my face it it. And when that cake came it got a hand! And at the end of the piece, the most interesting thing was that after I took the curtain calls and started to mingle with the audience, people actually swarmed on stage and finished up every crumb of that stuff that I had been gorging on and stuffing my face with, and with the crumbs falling off my mouth and really disgusting! And they finished everything, and there wasn't a crumb left. And that absolutely blew my mind. [laughs]

MOIRA ROTH: Well, was this an enormous shock to the L.A. performance scene? I mean, here you were with all your skills in theater and your commitment to feminism. That must have been such a surprise.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: In what way do you mean, my commitment to feminism?

MOIRA ROTH: Well, that you were coming out of theater. I mean extremely professional experimental theater, which seems to me there wasn't anyone else in L.A. performance circles at that time with that kind of background.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Um hmm.

MOIRA ROTH: But that you were also totally part of the woman's movement, and the material was something that would be a very—not your particular childhood, but the idea of doing, exploring oneself, and one's autobiographical material—familiar idea in terms of feminism.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Um hmm. Yeah, that was not so out of the way, you know. I think that what made an impact was the presentation, because the piece was really a good piece, and I had a young man who did the sound—and totally improvised it, as he did in Instant Theatre years before. His name was Mike Craden. (He died of cancer in Canada since.) King was part of it. He had a voice-over thing that he did before each movement. The subtitle of Charm was A Sonata in Three Movements. I think six people were involved. Maybe five people and the servant. I forgot now. And the work of these people was really beautiful. It was real ensemble work. It was improvisational, but within a structure. Things would happen on the other platform and I would react at a distance, but in a way that didn't show that I was aware, but like an unconscious reaction to inner events. And all of that must have looked really great, and the lighting was Instant Theatre type lighting, with moving handlights and a lot of colors. So it was very unlike what most performance art was like. It was like a piece of theater. And I imagine that people like John White, for instance—whom I had seen at Mount St. Mary's do a very wonderful piece in his own form and his own vein—these kinds of performance artists must have felt that I was an interloper and a big fake, because I was coming in with theatrical material and at the time that was total anathema.
And I was aware of some of that, although people didn't come to my face and create a confrontation. But I was aware of all those things and there was always some, you know. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Did it help in terms of explanation or acceptance that Barbara Smith wrote the review of Charm in

Art-Week?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes, I think it was a very good thing for me, you know, that she did it. And apparently it had been a big thing, a big deal for her, and I didn't realize it until a correspondence we had years later where she told me that it was a big hardship for her to write that review, even though she loved the piece. And I was not aware of that at all at the time, and she could have said no, but she did it anyway.

MOIRA ROTH: You had asked her to do it?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes. Yes. I said, "Would you. . . .?" Because I knew that she reviewed and wrote, you know. And since we were friends and since she was aware of my background and all of those things, I felt she was ideal to write the review. So I asked her, "Would you be willing to do it?" And she said yes, and I didn't realize that at the time she felt really put upon. And if I had had any inkling of that, I certainly would never have asked her or let her do it. But for whatever reason she did it, and it was a very good article. She did, I think, mention that the parts that she liked best were the most personal and the least theatrical. Because I did play a persona, a kind of persona, a sort of grand dame, you know, who was in that kind of a world. And at that time nobody played personas. Everybody just were themselves doing things in real time and in real space. And my space was highly theatricalized and conceptualized. It was an inner space and an outer space, a space of memory and a space of the present. And all of those things were really not dealt with at all in performance at the time, but was done much more like musique concréte. So. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: And if it was a persona, it would be more like Eleanor Antin being a ballerina and then a king, that kind of character more than persona.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Well, let's say that she also came from theater, and she was sort of an actress manquée and always had a hankering for being a theater personality, so she probably would have understood better than anybody what I was doing and I was a big, big fan of her Boots. I thought the Boots series was just so brilliant.

MOIRA ROTH: To get back to what happens after Charm then, the other almost companion piece, which also used the Instant Theatre participants was the Head of Olga or the Head of OK.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: The Head of OK? That was a piece which I created very shortly afterwards.

MOIRA ROTH: And "OK" stands for. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Olga Klein.

MOIRA ROTH: Yes.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: She. . . . She was a real thorn in my side, and I had grave feelings of guilt and unfinished business about her. So it was also an examination of our relationship, of her as a person, and also the fact that were it really not for circumstances and the grace of the Goddess, who knows but I would have become like her, you know. I played her and I played myself, and I had King read from a correspondence that we had for a year after my mother died before I stopped writing her altogether. And the piece was divided into what I called cantos, like Dante's Inferno. And. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: So, like Charm, it was in three parts?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: That was a sonata in three movements.

MOIRA ROTH: And now cantos.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: And now it was cantos. And I always liked to divide my pieces like that. The Arousing was a hexagram in five parts. [laughs] Because I had thrown the I Ching coins.

MOIRA ROTH: I Ching.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: The I Ching, and I had a time of great stress, I got the hexagram, The Arousing: Shock, Thunder, and that's the name of the piece.

MOIRA ROTH: So in The Head of OK, it's in cantos. King is reading the letters . . . and?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: King's reading the letters, and he and I are working together very closely, because we had, you know, such a close relationship on the stage through Instant Theatre. The piece was extremely improvisational. What happened was that we had very little time after Charm. My next gig was almost right on top of it, and so I had no time really to prepare as I did for Charm or to memorize a text like I did for Charm. And I rehearsed the group and myself, and we were to play Sunday night, I think. And on Saturday we rehearsed, and

we rehearsed late into the night, and I knew it wasn't working. And King and Jerry Harper and Sandy Harper and myself, maybe Stuart Miller, I don't know, went out afterwards to have coffee, and I said, "Guys, it's not working. Let's throw it out. Let's start from zero." And that was Saturday night. And they said, "Sure." You know, they were all old Instant Theatre hands. They said, "Terrific, let's just go with such and such and you," King said, "You and I will work in and out of the letters, and you'll just stop me when you want to and do something, and then, as needed, I will come back." I said, "Great." Jerry wasn't in it. Jerry was on lights, I think, and Sandy was one of the women who were the thin, beautiful 1920s- and 1930s-looking ladies. And it was fine with her, but they said, "How are the others going to take that?" And I said, "Well, I'll call them first thing in the morning and find out." So first thing on Sunday morning I called the rest of the people and I said, "We're going to throw out everything we did, and we're just gonna go free." And they screamed in the receiver! [laughs] And most of them were delighted, because they felt that I trusted them to do that. And they felt empowered. And, sure enough, that night was magical—you know, that's why it was so good that first time. And it's usually impossible to redo those things.

MOIRA ROTH: You'd never redone Charm?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Oh, Charm, no, no.

MOIRA ROTH: Right, that was done once.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Charm was done once. And then, as you know, lately I did it as a radio show. But I reworked it with different people. And the food was missing! About The Head of OK: That was a piece that had the kind of timing and the kind of magic flow that only blessed improvisation can have, and so it was very successful and very, very moving. And it really stated very clearly the problems of both the personal and the whole political and societal thing that went around it and so on. And it was a sort of unique and kind of freak piece because of that. One, because of the fact that it was an improvisational piece, and secondly because of the subject matter, which is definitely not something that I would ever want to do again in that way. You know, some people felt that I ripped her [Olga—RR] off, Nancy Buchanan being one of them.

MOIRA ROTH: Because of the use of letters, photographs, and all?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Well, because of the use of her. It was all about her, and she was still living. She wasn't dead. Nancy Buchanan was vocal about that. Maybe other people felt that who didn't tell me. And I felt at the time that I probably did. I accepted that. I didn't argue with anybody about it, but in my own self I felt, yes, I probably did rip her off, and there was a sneakiness about it because I was afraid to use her name and I kept worrying that somehow that would get out in an article that would be seen internationally, and at the time she still lived in Africa. And there was fear of that, you know, and a real queasiness about the whole thing. But the need to do the piece, I suppose, was so overwhelming that I did it. And it didn't help much. It didn't make me feel any better, actually. But it was a real good piece that one time. And what was interesting about the piece, I think, was that its structure was really quite wonderful, when it worked in Santa Monica, because of the fact that there were so many components and all these components worked so well together. There was the reading of the letters, there was me going in and out of being Olga and being myself, of both playing out some of the things which were symbolic, like motifs, like the breaking of the eggs and so on—and other things which were more specific, more narrative. And having the chorus of beautiful women of the twenties and thirties come as each canto was announced by one of the women, and each little section then became a completely different statement in time and I was moving around it chronologically. And there was a cellist who played a cappella, barefoot and in tails, and who wove his music in and out of canned music of songs of the period and things like that. There was a continual barrage of images of Olga at different times of her life projected, and at the end a sort of a . . . a very poignant kind of epiphany where Olga asks the cellist to play Bach, because in her letters she says that living in Africa, the one thing that keeps her going is listening to Bach and Mozart. And so he plays Bach, and then little by little the African beat music comes, wells up and then completely overwhelms the Bach. And at the end she's. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: And that was with live drummers?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No, that was canned. No, that was My Brazil with the live drummer.

MOIRA ROTH: Oh, I was just trying to remember at UCSD. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No, there were no live musicians.

MOIRA ROTH: There were actors as Africans in the piece?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes, oh, yes. That's another thing that I forgot, yes. I had two masked men with Afro wigs and big African boubous [robes—RR], and they were helping me with my changes of costumes and all of that, and they interplayed with me. . . . Her relationship with Africans was really a love-hate relationship, and she

despised them. She was a racist, and at the same time she was very drawn to Africans, sensually. So at the end, she says that now her only hope in life is to move to Israel, and there was a letter sent to me by my cousin in Israel saying that the government didn't let her in. . . . And my cousin wrote me a letter saying, "I told her to go to France and to just forget it" and so on. And there was a feeling of total despair and total disappointment and futility in her life and everything, so it was very, very sad at the end. It was a rounded portrait of this human being who was a failed human being and a monster in so many ways and just a very pathetic person, you see. But it was very, very rich. The structure of the piece was very rich, it was very intricate, and at the same time very clear. Each component was very clearly what it was, it had its place, and was structurally very obvious. It was like a good weave, with all these strands going through all the way. And the timing was great. The musicality of the piece was great. And so, in that sense, it was very successful.

MOIRA ROTH: Did you feel that that was taking care of things both psychologically and theatrically? Or did you feel also that you were developing a way of doing things that was beginning to absorb you, in addition to it being autobiographical?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Well, I was concerned with structure pretty early on, and I think that Charm and OK were the first two pieces where structure became very important. And what I was interested in was using a lot of "collision," a lot of elements that seemed conflicting and disparate and yet were completely right for the metaphor. And I was interested in metaphor always, you know. [For example, there was a "canto" in OK where she wears an army uniform, and she dunks a doll's head in a water bucket while the pretty ladies are trying on hats, because Olga had served in the army in Vietnam—or Indochina, as the French called it—and had participated in "interrogations" of the enemy.—RR]
On the psychological level, all of the pieces that I did between '75 and '81 dealt with my life and experiences. And the purpose, the pretty conscious purpose, of doing that was really exorcism. I really wanted to somehow redeem my life for the reasons that I said before. I don't know if you have them on tape. [Question is because a section of tape was not recorded and so had to be redone—MR]

MOIRA ROTH: Yeah, I did.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Okay. So it was a very concerted effort to do that, and each one of the pieces approached another aspect or another chronological era in my existence and presented it as a work of art. And somehow through art I wanted to redeem my life. Of course, by the time '81 came and I had played that phase out, I realized I didn't redeem anything really. That I just had a body of work. However, the doing was still very healing, in a sense, because my life stopped haunting me after that. And that was the big result, the big benefit that came from it.

MOIRA ROTH: And that included My Brazil, which was about your age-thirteen-year-old experience.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes, that's when I immigrated, and it was about Brazil and about my brother. And then there was The Arousing and also Grand Canyon, about my mother and about myself. The Arousing, Bonsoir, Docteur Schön!, which was about power and Nicole, my cousin, whom you met. And The Death Show, which was about, again, the food problem and about death. And then the two last big ones in '81 were Leave Her in Naxos, about love relationships and about the fact that I was very suicidal, and it was a sort of a "Will body and soul part?" type of thing. [laughs] And then Soldier of Fortune, which is about my relationship to money and a very funny piece.

MOIRA ROTH: Well, Leave Her in Naxos was also about growing older. That's how I remember it. I mean, it had a sense of "what do you do now" as well as what had you done. I had a sense of it coming into the present.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Well, it did, I suppose. That's when I shaved my head.

MOIRA ROTH: There was the young man—there was a slide of him—and you talked about. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Oh, yeah.

MOIRA ROTH: . . . your feelings about him, and then he appeared.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Oh, yeah, right.

MOIRA ROTH: That had a kind of present tangibility.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Right. And I said that I wanted to be him, have his body, look like him. Right. The two pieces were very contemporary, because I had just been swindled out of all my money. And I had a gig for LAICA, which I couldn't do because of my depression, and I had to cancel it. And that was the only time I ever cancelled anything. That a very horrendous episode, and then the two pieces that I did after that, which were Naxos and Soldier of Fortune, were a direct result of that event. Naxos was about, as you say, "Now what?"

MOIRA ROTH: Um hmm.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: And also with the ritual of the shaving of the head, it was letting things die in order for new things to grow. And Soldier of Fortune was about money. It was about the whole story of how I was swindled.

MOIRA ROTH: This was investing an enormous amount of money and then someone taking off with it. . . ?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No, it was really giving. . . . Yeah, it was investing it, but also having entrusted all of it to this one financial whiz, who then absconded with something like twenty million dollars—not all mine! [laughs] Mine was in the vicinity of $180,000, and it was all I had. It was all my savings. And, you know, it was one of those very stupid things. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: In Soldier of Fortune, you do have this wonderful ending, the ending with bravado and wit and. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Right.

MOIRA ROTH: . . . .transformation.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Right, well, I play the whole thing as a sort of a grande dame in tiara and wig and a Nile green gown, and then at the end, after I eat this seven-course gourmet meal and drink this magnum of champagne. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: With the waiter.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I did the piece three times, and in Newport Harbor at the museum I had two waiters and I was gonna have two waiters at the Tortue Gallery, but one of them got lost downtown and never showed, so I only had one! At the end I'm really dead drunk, and I can hardly stand, and this wonderful rock 'n roll song comes, which is called "New Clothes," and I take off all of these clothes to this song. And underneath I had my fatigues and my bald head, and I put on a few more Soldier of Fortune's garbs and I did some karate chops, and then I climbed a ladder to the top of the roof at the Tortue Gallery—because the performance was in the courtyard—and when I got to the top of the roof, I pelted the audience with pennies. I had gone to the bank and got these hundreds of pennies, you see. And that was the end of the piece. So it was really great, because the music was perfect and people just adored it and the shots of the audience with their beaming faces and their hands grabbing for the pennies.

MOIRA ROTH: First they got the cakes in Charm and now they get the pennies in Soldier of Fortune.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Now they got the pennies. Well, I always had little things for the audience in most of my pieces. Like in Naxos, I had a lot of things for the audience. I had "dirty postcards," but they were really drawings from the Kamasutra. And then there were cookies, and the cookies were in the shape of lingams and yonis [Indian and Tibetan vulva and phallus symbols—Ed.] and. . . . [laughs]

MOIRA ROTH: I remember that. What was the affect of having done Soldier of Fortune and Leave Her in Naxos?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: That was the end of that whole period for me. I felt that I had played everything out, up to the present, and from then on I stopped doing the autobiographical pieces—but still used the personal in my pieces—because I felt that the way to touch an audience was to bring them into the issues through the personal. But the primary thrust of the pieces was no longer autobiography.

MOIRA ROTH: By this time you had a very strong following in L.A., so there must have been a lot of people who had seen a number of these autobiographical performances.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Uh huh. Yes, I used to say. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Including myself.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: [laughs] I used to say that, you know, if you really saw all these pieces, you would have the whole autobiography, the whole history of my life, and it's true. There were few aspects that I didn't touch on. I never touched on my marriage, though. I mentioned it in passing a couple of times, in a phrase, you know.

MOIRA ROTH: What was the reason for not doing your marriage?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Because he's here, you know, and I can't really deal with anything unless I'm truthful and I would have had to say things which would have been hurtful to him—as well as nice things, by the way. But, you know, in order to be as truthful as I had been in all my other pieces, I would have had to talk about things. The reason why I did performance in the first place was that both my parents were dead. It was only after my mother died that I was able to tackle my life in my performances. I would never have done it with her alive, so certainly I

wasn’t going to do it with him.

MOIRA ROTH: In addition to your marriage, are you very aware of other large subjects that you haven’t taken on in that performance mode?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: You mean in my own history?

MOIRA ROTH: Yes. I mean, were there things. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: During that period?

MOIRA ROTH: Yeah.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I think that I probably didn’t ever touch upon my continual torture of self- doubt about myself as an artist. That was really never quite brought out in any of my pieces. And I think I just didn’t get around to it, you know. By the time I was through with that series, I just never had gotten around to it. I don’t think there would have been too much more that I would have wanted to turn into performance because a lot of the stuff is just not conducive to performance. I think that most of the stuff that I chose to do was pretty conducive to performance. Later on in some of the pieces which were not primarily autobiographical, I did touch upon certain things like in Traps, the story with Zato (my dog), with him falling, and all of that. That was a leitmotif in many, many years of my life, where I had realized what the mechanism of Traps was about, and I had recognized so many instances where I set up my own trap and then fell in. That was touched upon. And more of the relationship with my mother was touched upon in Gaia, Mon Amour, as you remember. So there were still leftovers that I used. And probably will continue using.

MOIRA ROTH: Is there any, I think we should probably have a break, but is there anything else we should add to this period? You’ve now moved up to 1981.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes. I do have a few things I’d like to say about my leaving my husband and going on my own. But that’ll take a little time. Let me call and find out if she’s [friend with whom Rosenthal had left a wounded stray dog—MR] ready for me and the dog.
[Interruption in taping]

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: After the summer of ‘78, when I left my husband, I went to live in a little apartment on the west side, and it was the first time I had been alone in twenty years. And at that point I knew nothing about taking care of myself in the world, because he [King Moody—RR] had been very compulsive about doing all the checking and the banking and the money and the taxes and all the details of the material world. It was a big effort for me to do that and to learn little by little how to behave in the world as a single person, on the practical level, particularly since I’d never been good at it in the first place. And I was, what, fifty-four, I guess. No, was I? No, I was fifty-two. I was about fifty-two I think, in, let’s see, ‘78. Yeah, I was fifty-two. And so I had left him the house. . . .

Tape 3, side B

MOIRA ROTH: You had left him the house.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I had left him the house for the simple reason that I no longer wanted to live in Tarzana and I felt that I also wanted to leave him the animals. The young woman that he was in love with had been living with us, and I groomed her to take care of both him and the animals. And so I felt that I could leave. I still was immensely guilty about leaving the animals. It was very, very hard for me to do that. It was really like abandoning my children. For a while I went back every so often, and seeing their eyes looking at me and not understanding what was happening was just too much and I felt that it was bad for them; they should just forget me and so I stopped going. I began to live the single life, not on a sexual level but just practically. And it was absolutely exhilarating, a total liberation and a total delight. Just the feeling of being somewhere at any time of day or night and knowing that nobody knew where I was or cared was wonderful. And nobody was waiting for me at home, and that lasted a very short time actually, because I soon acquired new animals! But it was a difficult period. It was a very difficult period. It was difficult because the ties to King had not been totally severed. And then he had a heart attack in ‘79 and something really terrible happened, which was that after the operation. . . . He had a bypass, several bypasses and a valve put in. And after, when he was in intensive care, something apparently happened which is not unusual, but nobody warns you about that, which is that he had a bit of amnesia. When I called he thought we were still married. He thought that I was in Japan, where I had been in 1970, and he treated me with the same tone of voice that he used when all was well. When I said to him, but we’re not together anymore, he said, “Don’t say things like that. Don’t frighten me.” Then I said to him, “But you’re with Jackie.” And he said, “Who’s Jackie?” And that was something that was. . . . I can’t tell you. It just destroyed me. It was really, really a bad, bad thing. And I told the doctors and the nurses, I said, “You know, this is terrible. You should warn people about that.” And so, again, because Jackie was taking over, I stopped going

to the hospital, so it was a double abandonment. And little by little he got his marbles back, of course. But that period was very difficult, and I had done The Arousing, which was about leaving and about going on my own and about finding my authenticity. And I realized how all my life I had been on show and playing a part, and in The Arousing I dealt with a very interesting psychological complex—which apparently a lot of people feel, because I've talked about it in talks and audience members relate to it. It was this business of having placed this persona between myself and the world, but this persona was just like myself. It wasn't a different persona, but it wasn't me. I was behind it. And the effort of always holding up this image in front of me and letting her do the business and the show and the running around and the relating and all of that and hiding behind her was exhausting. And I talked about, in that piece, how I was so much like my father.

MOIRA ROTH: Which piece?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: The Arousing. And I enumerated all the things that he was that I admired, and I said, "And what if I was all those things, but not as myself, but as another?" And anyway, had I been authentically these same things, I would have lost his love because they were all things that I shouldn't be, being a girl. But little by little I was finding this authenticity, and I was finding my own voice and I created these pieces which were most of them solo pieces.

MOIRA ROTH: Which included once more. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: The Arousing, My Brazil, Bonsoir, Docteur Schön!. And in all three of these pieces I think I was really searching for my own voice and trying to integrate myself with myself, trying to get rid of that double image.

MOIRA ROTH: When was Bonsoir done? Because there you had that juxtaposition of a video tape, where everyone is saying how wonderful you are and there you are covered with. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Ropes.

MOIRA ROTH: Yes.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Bonsoir, Docteur Schön! was after I had already bought this building here, and I had begun my workshops. And it was after the five months that I spent downtown, living in Barbara's studio, after I'd been evicted from my beautiful apartment because they were tearing it down to make condos. And that whole period was about doing a lot of work and teaching. I was teaching in universities and I began to develop my workshop, The DBD Experience. The DBD Experience was inspired by a woman who had been part of Instant Theatre. Nancy Glen is her name now. Then she was Tyan Cyrano. And Ty had been very involved with some of the big workshops such as EST, and I forgot the name of the workshop that was for gays (because she was a lesbian). And she advised me, she said, "Look, the kind of work that we did in Instant Theatre was so transformational—even though it was just a technique to learn how to do this theater work—it was totally transformational for everybody who took it, and so you should develop a curriculum that stems from the Instant Theatre exercises, but that would be a workshop a little bit like EST in the sense that people would come not necessarily because they wanted to do theater, but simply for the experience." So at first I hemmed and hawed and then I said, "How can you put Instant Theatre in a weekend? Well, okay, a 35-hour weekend maybe." And so I developed the format and started to do DBD and it was good. It was hard to start, hard to get people to want to be the first guinea pigs! And still I really was successful in getting that started. And as people were taking the workshop, and as I was developing my teaching of the workshop, I realized that I was being treated in a very different manner. Then when I started Espace DBD and I was the director of a performance gallery and I had the power to choose and not reject people, people were giving me so much power, treating me as though I were a very powerful person, that I had to deal with that, because it was difficult for me to accept that new role. And that was what Docteur Schön was about.
And so I decided that, as the audience files in, for about forty-five minutes—actually it's about thirty minutes and then another fifteen minutes at the beginning of the piece—I would have this video: a parade of people who were my friends and peers and students. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Admirers.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: . . . .—admirers—who for a minute, two minutes, would praise me, as though they were talking to me, but talking right at the camera. And the only stipulation that I had was that everybody should be honest. They should say something that they really believe. And so I got everybody on that tape. Everybody, Rudy Perez and Josine [Ianco-Starrels—Ed.] and Cheri Gaulke and, you name it, you know. All the people who have since become very important—perhaps 40 or so—and it was very funny. That tape was both funny and at the same time very touching, some of the things they said, and also it was repulsive. And I knew that an audience sitting there and watching this would want to throw up after a while, and that was the idea. And so I had to think of a way of counteracting that kind of input with something as vulnerable and nonpowerful as possible. And the only thing that really came to mind was to be naked. And for me, you know, to show my body

even to one person is almost impossible [laughs], and so to go naked in front of an audience was abominable. And I kept saying, “No, not that. I can’t do that. Please don’t make me do that,” you know. But performances take care of themselves. They just dictate what they want, and there was no way that I could avoid that because there was nothing else that could really show the other side, just as powerfully as this tape was. So I said, “Okay.” And it was for Halloween, and so there were a lot of jack ‘o lanterns all around. The audience came and they couldn’t believe what I was showing them! And they were embarrassed and twittering and everything. And I was lying in a wheelchair under a shroud all this time, and they didn’t know it was me on stage. I had an assistant wheel me out in the wheelchair and then take the shroud off and there I was and I had this mask on—a gold mask of my face. And I was completely wrapped in this big rope and underneath the rope I was naked. I was stood up and then unwrapped, and while that was happening the tape was interrupted at one point with a slide of the moon. A voiceover of myself said that I was like the moon: I was always showing the same front view and behind—on the other side of the moon—or myself—behind me—were all these craters and all these uglies and all these beasties that were burrowing into these craters. And I talked about my governess a little bit, when I was little. And I said, “The trouble was that now the beasties had burrowed all the way through the body, and they were coming out the front.” During this time I was just shaking my head from side to side under the mask and saying, “I don’t want to do it. I don’t want to do it.” Then the mask was taken off, and I continued, “I don’t want to do it. I don’t want to do it.” And then the two woman assistants showed the audience all my bad points. All the flab and the saggy breasts and the cellulite and all that. And every time they would show this, and take the audience in to witness this, one of the assistants had red tape and pasted big red crosses on the ugly parts of my body. Then they had these vermin-type rubber toys, you know, like bugs and snakes and all of that. And they taped all these things to my body. Afterwards, they covered me with orange cream and poured pumpkin seeds all over me. So that evened out the tape [meaning the positive messages of the videotape—Ed.]. And then further on I had different things happening: three aspects of power. I had three masks during this show. And the first two masks were powerlessness and power and the third mask was myself. And then I took all the masks off and. . . . I had a beautiful image at one point. (Joan Gemmell, who was an incredible pianist, was doing the music for that.) I had these three eviscerated pumpkins, and a big kitchen knife, and I cut them as I was turning them, so that what I got was this big spiral. And I hung each one of these things on the wall so that the tail was hanging down, and I put the mask on the head, so that the three masks with these tails hanging down looked like three cobras on the wall. They were very beautiful. That piece had a lot of problems with it. Apparently the slides, the projectors went bad or the dissolve unit or something, and I couldn’t get my slides going properly. That threw me, and there were moments which were not good improvisation, but still the piece got very good reviews for some reason. And so a lot was happening with that whole period where I was beginning to find my voice. I was finding my authenticity. I was finding myself. And at the same time, there was a great deal of sorrow and pain. And then the business of having my own space, Espace DBD, which was. . . . As soon as I had this building, it became invaded, you know. And, as a matter of fact, this is something that I realized very strongly in the last few months, this space has never been my own. It’s always been owned by others in some way. [laughs] I need solitude and silence so much that it somehow got to the point where I just couldn’t stand it anymore, and I had to recapture my own space. But in the early eighties, it became within a very short time a very important performance space, and was known internationally. We presented at least two performances a weekend—every weekend—and we had gallery shows in the front of either documentation of performances or works by performance artists.

MOIRA ROTH: Who did the work, the organizing work?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I did, with assistants. I had two people working for me. At first I had Tyan and Stuart Miller, who did all the physical aspect of the space. He designed the flyers, he prepared the space, he did the tech-ing for performers, the lights, etc., and he was an extraordinary caretaker. And then I had Emily Hicks. She was a brilliant, smart, erudite, crazy girl! And, unfortunately, Stuart couldn’t get along with women, and so he had a blowout with Tyan, he had a blowout with Emily. It was always this problem with everybody, and finally I had to fire Stuart and at that time the problems with a neighbor became so acute that I had to close the space anyway. But the space was a very interesting thing for me to do. It established me in the community, and showed me how artists are really nothing—that only gallery owners, agents and powerbrokers are the people who have the clout. Suddenly I was thrust into this position, which I wasn’t at all interested in, and I realized that I was making a name for myself as the director of the gallery, rather than as an artist, even though I had a lot of good pieces out, including Taboo Subjects, Traps, and so on. And so when I was obliged to close I was. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: How long was it open for?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Three years. When I was obliged to close, I was furious because I don’t like being told what to do, but deep down inside I was relieved, because being a gallery director was not what I wanted to do. It was an extraordinary space, and I was very lucky because in ‘81, as I said, I lost all my money, and—just as I was building the addition for the performance area—and I was bailed out by a personal friend who gave me a huge sum of money! That saved my life and it saved my space and it saved everything. It enabled me to create this space, which at the time was unique here for performance people.

MOIRA ROTH: This is ‘82?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: 1980 through 1983. So that period was so interesting for me, because it was also in ‘81 that I shaved my head. It was also in ‘81 that I got my rat, Tatti Wattles, who was Kim Jones’ rat and that I saved from Kim. Tatti was the first animal that I had after leaving all my animals to King. And he was a wonderful animal because he was always with me. I could take him everywhere; he went everywhere with me. And I became immensely bonded with Tatti, and he was really my little soul-mate and we slept together and we ate together and we did everything together. And so when he died, it was very, very painful because they live such short lives, you know. He died at two, two and a half, something like that, so he was shortlived. I’ve only had one rat who lived to three years. I started to wear my fatigues, simply because I had no money left to buy decent clothes. That whole combination created an image for me, which was not thought out or done consciously to create a provocative image. But it turned out that way, you know, and everybody thought that I had done it on purpose.

MOIRA ROTH: I remember the cover of the LA Weekly with you and the rat and your bald head.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Um hmm.

MOIRA ROTH: And a long story on you that presented that part of you.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yeah, Richard Stayton wrote it. And it was one of those weird things, you know, where the image just jelled. I felt for the first time that I looked like how I felt inside, and it was immensely liberating. So that whole period, the gestation between ‘78 and ‘81, which was the severing from my life as a married woman, had finally culminated in my divesting myself of all my money [laughs]—in some weird way—and starting completely new, not only with no money, but also with a look which was totally different from my past look, and which created an identity and an authenticity for me that I never had, and that also was commensurate with the kind of work I was doing, and it helped me in the direction that I was going in in my work. Because somehow the physical image worked from the outside in. There was a good feedback loop there between who I was and how I felt and the look that I put out to the world. So all of this was creating an entity, which was Rachel Rosenthal that I had never felt before was a true me or that was authentic or believable or comfortable. And suddenly there I was, at my age (which was getting more and more advanced!), and yet it was as though everything was new and opening up for me and indeed it was. My career was opening up, and I was getting better known. And my work was both difficult and easy to do, to put out somehow. It flowed, you know, came from a real source, and. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: What were the pieces that you were doing during this period of time?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Well, after Soldier of Fortune, I did Taboo Subjects, which was one of those freaky, fluky things, because Emily Hicks, Sue Dakin, Giuditta Tornetta, and I were talking one day, sitting right here on my bed, about the possibility of doing a panel on taboo subjects, and. . . . Giuditta was of Italian descent, and she was a very interesting performance artist, and she became my assistant after Emily left. She was both administrator and artist. She was doing a lot of her own work, presenting it at Espace DBD. So we were discussing this and thinking about this possible panel, and I was saying how panels bore me to death. And so little by little it developed into doing a three-way performance, where each one of us would do a solo. And at the time, I had picked up the Semiotexte [a journal from NYU (New York University)—Ed.] issue on sadomasochism, and I was reading it avidly. It was an absolutely abominable and very compelling issue. And I was very impressed with it, and thinking about how that whole psychological complex can apply to performance. And so I decided to do my piece about masochism and performance, and Sue wanted to do a piece about madness, and Giuditta was really impressed at the time with that little girl who was a killer in San Diego. I forgot who she was, but she one day opened fire on a bunch of kids with a gun. And so she wanted to do it on that. Those were our three taboo subjects. And we developed a real interesting look. When the audience came in there was a table, which was covered with things: I had a lot of dildos, my hooks, and alcohol and cotton and things like that. And Giuditta had a lot of guns and little soldiers and things. And Sue had pages from a sketchbook where she had done collages and drawings that related to madness. And she had a whole series of slides of her work, which were collages, all of which dealt with images of violence and eroticism, and they were really quite beautiful. So we sat there, and all of us had our mouths bound, and we were bound in some way. I think Sue was like this [demonstrating—Trans.], and I was like that. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Sue’s hands were over her head?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes, right. And my hands were behind my back, and I forgot how Giuditta looked, but anyway it looked like a real bondage scene. And the audience was encouraged to come and browse and look at what we had on our table when they came in, which they did, and looked at us, you know, up close, at close quarters. And I wore a very long black gown with a beaded top and long, long gloves, and I had this beautiful turquoise ostrich feather fan, and rhinestone finery and my bald head. So I really looked like. . . . As I said at the

time, it was a combination of Beatrice Lillie and an S&M queen. A really weird image. So that piece was taking masochism in its three aspects, sexual, religious, and art. And I used three dildos, and three examples from men. And one of the examples, the sexual one, was taken from Semiotexte. And the art one was Stellarc. And the religious one was an anonymous Lakota Sioux that has himself pierced by hooks and hoisted up, you know, for the Sun Dance. So all three examples had to do with being suspended and pierced by hooks, and one point of my piece—and it was like a lecture, like an illustrated lecture, but it went beyond that—was the fact that performance artists are masochists. What we do is not only dangerous, both physically and psychologically, but it's difficult in every way. We disclose things that don't show us in a good light. We do things that turn people off. What we do is expensive. We don't get remunerated. I mean, all the things that go into performance.

MOIRA ROTH: Um hmm.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: And then I talked about masochism in general and what it's about, and how it is a kind of a distorted mode of spirituality, where the soul somehow pierces through the membrane in order to, to dissolve into the cosmos and into Oneness. And how the pierced skin has to do with that and so on. Then I asked members of the audience if they wanted to pierce my skin with these hooks, and in one performance, two men came up and tried to do it. They did it very badly, but they did it anyway. But otherwise, I had Stuart come up and do it. And once the hooks were in my wrists, they were attached with nylon fishline, and I was pulling on the line and asking the audience if they wanted to pull. And, of course, everybody was falling into dead faints. And then after fiddling around with these tiny little hooks, I showed images of Stellarc, which was the real McCoy, the big ones [laughs], where he suspends himself from sixteen huge fish hooks. And that was a big eyeopener for a lot of people who didn't know his work. Then the other two people went on. I was the middle one actually. Sue started and then Giuditta did hers. So we—when I say "we" I mean Giuditta, Stuart, and I, and Tatti Wattles—toured Canada with that piece. We did it in quite a few spaces in Canada, after we had done it here at Espace DBD.

MOIRA ROTH: Had you shown in Canada before?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No, no. That was our first time.

MOIRA ROTH: That was the only art they'd seen of yours?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I premiered Traps there, because I had prepared Traps, and Traps came out in Canada. So I was really touring the two pieces in repertory.

MOIRA ROTH: Had you toured before?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Not really officially. I had played in other places. I had played in Santa Barbara, where I did Naxos the first time and. . . . Where else? Did I play in Sushi, was that the first with Taboo Subjects? I think Taboo Subjects was the first time I was at Sushi. So that was really my coming out as a touring artist. And it was kind of exciting. We had a lot of fun. And it was exhausting and interesting. And so after that I did Traps here at Espace DBD. And after Traps I did. . . . That was a weird year! I did four major pieces that year.

MOIRA ROTH: Which year was this?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: That was '81. That was the two pieces that ended my series of autobiographical pieces: Naxos and Soldier. When I lost my money. Also, that was when I did Taboo and Traps. And then at the end of '81, that's when Zatoichi came, my first little dog after leaving King. And so I was sort of into animals by then. And in '82 I toured Traps and. . . . (Did I tour Taboo again? I probably did a little.) All over the place. [meaning she did Traps all over the place—Ed.]

MOIRA ROTH: As far as New York?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yeah. I did Traps in. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Franklin Furnace?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Franklin Furnace.

MOIRA ROTH: At this point, were people interested in your work in New York?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No, they didn't know my work at all, so it was a big eyeopener. As a matter of fact, the people from NYU came . . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Richard Schechner?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Schechner had seen it and liked it so much that he eventually had me come and teach at

NYU. This was a big surprise for me because I was afraid of New York. I was afraid of going back and showing my work in New York. I was not really sure that it was of the caliber or the kind of work that would find an audience or be well received. And because of my previous connections with New York, I was really queasy about that. And when Traps was so successful, I was really surprised and, as a matter of fact, every time I bring a piece to New York, I'm surprised. [laughs] I still can't get used to what a great reception I get there.

MOIRA ROTH: [laughs]

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: So since then I did L.O.W. in Gaia in New York at The Kitchen, which got a terrific reception. And I did Rachel's Brain, which got an Obie at the Dance Theatre workshop, DTW. And I did Death Valley, which got a very good reception, too. And every time I'm surprised, you know. And so are they, because there's always some critic who says, "Even though she's from California, she's good," you know! [laughs] But anyway, so that was '81, a very eventful year. And in '83 I decided to produce myself. I didn't use my own studio as a public performance space anymore, and I decided to produce myself. At the time, of course, the space was The House, in Santa Monica. So I rented The House, and I did all the publicity. I did everything myself.

MOIRA ROTH: And that was an alternative space, primarily. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: It was really a dance space, you know. I think that they had connections with UCLA, and that was run at the time by a manager, Gilberte Maunier, who is a dancer/choreographer, and a couple of other people were managing the space, too. And so people rented it to do their thing, and sometimes an organization would present something. But in my particular case, I was my own presenter. And so I did that, and it was a real good experience for me to have done it. I didn't lose money.

MOIRA ROTH: And what did you present?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: That was Gaia Mon Amour. So I worked on Gaia Mon Amour all that year.

MOIRA ROTH: Could you talk a little about Gaia?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: My pieces—from Taboo, I think—began to be very closely related to literature or the written word. For instance, I was very influenced in Traps by Lyall Watson's Lifetide, a wonderful book, and the concerns of Traps were fed into by reading this book. And then I read The Time Falling Bodies Come to Light," which is an extraordinary book by William Irwin Thompson. And Thompson is. . . . What is he? He's really a synthesist of many things, of history and of myth and of comparative religion and of the history of culture, art, everything. He had a foundation. . . ? There again, my amnesia takes over: Lindisfarne. So I read this book, and some of the things in that book were really important to me. His view is feminist, and I'm sure that as a person he is a total sexist, just like they all are, but in his writings, which is where it's safe to be a feminist, he really is. And his view of myth and prehistory and—more than prehistory—even the ascent or descent of human beings, whatever you want to call it—and it's really of woman!—is totally colored by this view. And so it felt like a really comfortable place to go looking for inspiration. And I had also read [James—Ed.] Lovelock's book on Gaia and was very, very impressed with that whole hypothesis. It felt so right and so perfect, and exactly what I had been feeling, you know, about the planet. I had been developing more and more of a sense of identification with the Earth. I was becoming very interested in the Goddess, even though my inclination was always away from religion of any sort. But I had become involved in Shamanism by going to Michael Harner's workshops. In the sixties I was very much into Zen Buddhism and. . . . Fifties and sixties. I had quit meditating because I was so frustrated that I couldn't do za-zen because of my legs. And then little by little I quit being involved in Zen Buddhism, and for a while there I was just floating in a kind of an amorphous non-denominational spirituality, which was emerging for me. And then when I got involved with Shamanism, both the idea of it and the practices felt very right because it dealt with animals and with the Earth and with an identification with the Earth in a very creative and imaginative and artistic way. "Journeying" seemed to just wake up those centers of creativity. I was never very interested in healing. I didn't feel that I was a good healer of persons on the physical level, although more and more my workshops became very therapeutic and healing. But it didn't seem that the thrust of my Shamanism would go into a healing mode. And it wasn't about "power" either. It was more about creativity, I think. And playfulness, and working with the animal spirits. And my animal spirits were rats, and they were unbelievable. They were just wonderful. It wasn't 'Rat.' Many people who do Shamanism have animal spirits who are the generic, of a species. They have 'Coyote' or they have 'Bear' or they have 'Eagle,' and it's usually one animal that helps them. But with me, it was 'Rats,' and there were like thousands of them, and I would get enveloped by these rats, and they would come and swarm all over me and kiss me and envelop me and it was just such a great feeling because I loved rats so much. I also read Jonathan Schell's Fate of the Earth, about nuclear power. So when I started on Gaia, I was into all those things, and I wanted to do a piece that dealt with the Goddess, with the Earth, with the Great Mother. Also in a parallel way with my personal mother. And how we relate, as a species and a society, to all those things. So that's what the piece was about, and in it there's a lot of ambiguity because I play Her, I play the Goddess. I relate to the ailing body of the Earth and to the ailing mother, who was my own mother when she was ill. And sometimes it's hard to tell who I am, what I'm relating

to, and things meld into each other in an ambiguous way. And yet, every now and then there's a punctuation mark, which makes it very clear who I am, where the Goddess is, where my personal mother is, so the piece, I think wafts in and out of clear identities and mergings.

MOIRA ROTH: Um hmm.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: And at one point, I think I very clearly state what my relationship with her is, and it was very hard to do and make it concrete, you know, to say what I said, which was, if I remember correctly, the fact that I accept that I didn't love her and I weep no more, or something like that. It's giving me goosebumps when I say that. So in that piece I also play a kind of funny character with a Groucho nose, and she's a sort of Greek chorus-type bag lady and. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: I saw the piece in San Diego.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Oh, right.

MOIRA ROTH: I always thought of her as Crazy Jane from the W. B. Yeats late poems, that kind of character.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Uh huh. Yeah, she's an old lady who emerges from garbage actually. And this piece. . . .

Tape 4, side A

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: . . . piece was very difficult to do because I had to hide under a pile of garbage at the beginning while the audience came in. And then there was a very long section which had slides and a voiceover before it got to me, and then came the atom bomb, and only then did I emerge from the garbage. Again, the ambiguity was that there was a shape which was covered by a black shroud on stage also, and people thought that was me because it was shaped like a real body. My assistant actually sculpted that out of earth for every performance. And they expected that that would be me, and then the surprise was when the garbage began to move and I emerged. But that long, long wait on stage without moving and almost without breathing, while the audience was there and while the beginning of the piece was going on, made it very hard to play because in order to pick up the energy and go right into high energy was very difficult. Usually, I have a chance to do a lot of physical movement and churn up energy before I begin. And in this piece, it was just the opposite. I had to go almost into alpha for a long period of time. [laughs] And it was an interesting piece to do because I had all these components and it was very hard putting it together because there were so many facets to it. I played this old garbage woman, and I played myself and I played, Gaia, the Earth, and I played this man.

MOIRA ROTH: Oh, the young boy from Frazer's The Golden Bough?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Right. Well, it really wasn't from The Golden Bough. It was from [one of the volumes of The Masks of God, I think—RR]. I think I read it in [Joseph—Ed.] Campbell. But that was the connection, of course. He was a Year King in Neolithic times who refused to be put to death at the end of the year in fertility rites, and he tells the story of how he witnessed, as a little boy, how his mother made him witness the immolation of the then Year King. When I wrote that piece, it was really strange. It was absolutely like channeling—like I was there and I was actually seeing that happen. Because I had read this tiny paragraph in one of Campbell's books about how in India some of the Year Kings actually immolated themselves by cutting off little pieces of themselves until they died. And I was very struck by that. So I wrote this whole section all in one piece, absolutely like an eyewitness account. I could see everything, and I could smell the smells, and I could hear the sounds. As a result, it had a real reality to it, that passage. He tells this with his eyes closed. And then when he opens his eyes it's obvious that consciousness and ego have taken over, and that the realization of his own power makes it impossible to go along anymore with that rite. And then, of course, in the piece comes the big battle between the Mothers and the Sons. The Mothers lose and the Sons win. And the last part of the piece had shamanic drumming in it, and then the mandala with Gaia again coming out and begging the audience to heal her and not to destroy her, saying to the audience that the human race has now taken over evolution, that evolution is now happening through the human brain and so, in a sense, the human species is Gaia now. This is what she says at the end. "You are Gaia now." And it's really like putting it in the audience's lap, and I try to do this. And since that piece, I've done that in different ways in other pieces also, making an audience feel the responsibility of that whole development. I went on the road with it and I played it quite a lot of times. And that period, '81, '82, '83, is really the turning point for my developing pieces that were no longer the magical ones that you do once as a performance artist, but pieces that had to be repeated many times as in a theatrical run. And that was a very big step and transition for me, because I had never done that, you see. All the time I had the theater, since it was improvisational, I was always dealing with a one-time-only situation. And so I would give all in this one burst of creativity, and that was it. That was the end. You couldn't touch it. It was like sumi drawing, you know, you couldn't retouch it.

And the same thing was with performance, particularly in the early days where you just did it once and that was it. I realized that it was no longer economic or made any sense, you know, to never repeat these pieces. It was difficult. Some pieces I did not repeat ever, like Doctor Schön. Other pieces I repeated a few times, like two,

three times at the most. But then starting in ‘82, ‘83, I began to tour, and so the pieces had to be repeated over and over again. And how to keep them fresh and real and in the moment, and how to keep up the magic and the ceremony aspect of performance and not fall into an “acting” mode. And so that was a real effort and focus at that period, and I’m still developing that capability.
And what transpired from that is the fact that I became a better actor and that I understood what acting is. Before every performance, I do an invocation to the Goddess—and to my cat Dibidi, whom I should talk about because she was so important in my life. And I ask, among other things: “Let me find new things. And let me have fun.” And when I do a performance I’m in the moment, I have fun, and completely new things come all the time, that’s when the piece is working, you see, and that’s the trick. That’s the secret. So it is always like the first time. And now I enjoy doing that, whereas before it was really like, “Oh, my God,” having to do it again was terrible. But now I really enjoy it.

MOIRA ROTH: I think we should have a short break.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Okay.
[Interruption in taping]

MOIRA ROTH: What did you do on Labor Day of 1984?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Funny you should ask, Moira!

MOIRA ROTH: [laughs]

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I did KabbaLAmobile for the joint sponsorship of the Mark Taper Forum and MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles—Ed.]. And how that came about was that a year before I had an idea. I had gone to a workshop, which was an all-night dancing and drumming thing. And it took place in Calabasas in a lovely property that had a big tennis court. The leader of the workshop had prepared a kind of a ceremony in the middle of the night when we were trying to keep our eyes open with matchsticks. That ceremony dealt with the cabalistic Tree of Life and consisted in doing certain formations on that tennis court involving people and votive candles. I found that very lovely, and for some reason I thought, “Hmm, wouldn’t it be interesting to do these cabalistic formations not with people but with cars on a large scale.” Years before, when I was married to King, and King was doing Ronald MacDonald, his stand-in was a man called Tom Anthony. Tom Anthony was moonlighting with the MacDonald shoots, because his true business was a thing called the Tom Anthony Precision Driving Team. He had something like twenty-two drivers, men and women—and cars—and they did all the commercials, the stunts and all the driving for Hollywood—both film and television—and internationally. So I went to Tom and I said, “Would you be interested in doing something like that?” And he had no idea what I was talking about, but he said, “Well, you know, when you’re ready, talk to me.” So I went to MOCA and talked to Julie Lazar. Over lunch I explained to her what I was thinking of doing. And then nothing came of it for a year, and I had forgotten it. Then one day she gives me a call and says, “Rachel, do you remember that automobile piece you were talking about?” I said, “Well, yeah.” She says, “Well, do you still want to do it?” I said, “Yeah, sure.” And she said, “We’ve got the perfect context because we’re opening MOCA with a car show. And we’re going to have the weekend of Labor Day as three days of performances relating to cars, and we’re gonna call it Carplays and let’s have your piece as part of it. So I said, “Okay, terrific!” So I started to work on it. And, it came to pass, and it was a huge success, and it was very, very wonderful. You didn’t see that did you?

MOIRA ROTH: I did.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: You did, okay.

MOIRA ROTH: Do you want to describe it just briefly for the benefit of the tape?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yeah, sure. It took place in the parking. . . . Oh, I remember you. You came, you definitely came, I remember. You came with Lynn Schuette from San Diego.

MOIRA ROTH: I came up for it.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yeah, right. So, it happened in the Department of Water and Power parking lot downtown, and we had that whole parking lot and one end of it had the audience on risers. And in front of the audience—I think it was something like fourteen feet or so—was this big tower made of scaffolding where I performed. I crossed the whole parking lot at the beginning of the piece with the music, and then I went up in the tower. And there were seven cars: three white, three black and a red. And the piece was approximately half an hour long or so, and the music was by The Dark Bob and was canned. It was electronic music, and it went out through the speakers. It was mixed by The Dark Bob with my live voice miked, and I had a text which was a combination of automotive magazine copy and cabalistic poems from the twelfth century. And interestingly enough the two worked together so well and seamlessly that sometimes you couldn’t tell which was which, because both dealt

with numbers and both were completely esoteric. Nobody could understand either unless they were initiated. So that was what I wanted to put out. And the piece was very powerful and was a lot of fun. The cars did formations and stunts all around me and then the last car, the red car, was driven by one of the only four people in the world who know how to do this: At the last moment, which was the big climax, the car goes off on a little ramp on one side and ends up on two wheels and went around the parking lot twice balancing on two wheels, before alighting finally on its four wheels right by the tower. Then I came down and sat on the hood and all the cars and I spiraled out of the parking lot. That was great! I did it three times. We rehearsed it once that morning, Saturday morning, because there was no way to get the parking lot empty except that very morning. And it was a great collaboration—between three of us actually. Tom Anthony had really given that project to one of his drivers, a young woman, and she was the mastermind behind the thing. I gave them the text. I broke it down for them, and I told them what parts were what and what kind of mood and what kind of thing I wanted in each part. They had to figure out what stunts applied and how to do them. And they also had to figure out spatially how to handle the parking lot, because in the center they had these cement warts [laughs], so it wasn't a completely empty space, and they had to deal with that. The parking lot has a kind of underpass. I waited under it in the garage, and as soon as the music came up all the fountains in the DWP [Department of Water and Power—Ed.] came up. That was arranged with the guy who turns on the water. And it was just beautiful, because as soon as that beautiful music came on, [makes sound imitating a gush of water—Trans.] whew, all that water came up. And I emerged from the garage and I walked in my shamanic costume in a sort of serpentine way for two hundred yards, two hundred and fifty yards, something like that, and then went up the platform and started my text. And then the cars came out, and it was very spectacular and exhilarating, lots of fun I think. After that I was commissioned to do a piece for a series called The Art of Spectacle at the Japan America Theatre. And I had something gnawing at me, which was that I was very, very devoted to animals for years to the point of idiocy, and my problem had always been that my identification with the animals was such that I just couldn't deal with animal cruelty of any sort because it was as if someone were attacking my body. And I felt at the time of KabbaLAmobile that I had reached a point of visibility and success which was such that I really had a podium from which to preach. I knew that I should address the animal question and I should put out a piece about animals because I would have an audience—and it was a responsibility and a duty. And I feared that so much, because all these years I had been sending money to animal organizations, sending them checks, telling them, "Do not send me literature," because I could not deal with it. I couldn't cope—at all. And so when I decided to do that piece as a "spectacle," I decided to use live animals. And I had to find out what is going on, so I started reading books and literature and data. And the upshot of it was that I got ill in 1985 as a result of it. But I did the piece and it was strong. It was considered too didactic, I think. However, it doesn't matter to me because the piece was about that. It was about consciousness-raising. And it comprised around forty animals.

MOIRA ROTH: It was called The Others.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: The Others. And when I decided to use live animals, I put out an ad that said, "Wanted: you, and your traditional and/or exotic pet for a performance," and I got something like eighty replies. And out of these eighty replies I worked with approximately thirty-five people and their animals.
And I had everything. I had a horse. I had farm animals. I had, of course, the traditional companions, dogs and cats. I had every kind of bird, from birds of prey to little birds and beautiful parrots and pheasants and doves. And I had rats, rodents of all kinds. I had wild animals, monkeys, farm animals. I had deer and goats and reptiles. Two huge python and boa. It was really a remarkable piece in the sense that I presented these animals without having them do anything. They were not trained animals at all. I had the companion people dress in beautiful black formals, and the animals just had their beauty. I did, as usual, my mixture of dramatic and factual information. A lot of it was personal. I played a couple of personas, and the piece I think had a lot of value and strength. I don't think that I played it well enough at the Japan America Theatre. When I played it again, particularly in North Carolina, I had it under my belt much more and was able to perform it better.

MOIRA ROTH: And you also played it in La Jolla.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yeah. I played it in La Jolla. And I think it was better there than at the Japan America in terms of my performance. But I think the best performances were the ones in North Carolina.
In North Carolina the interesting thing was that I had hooked up in the meantime with Tom Regan, who is the man who wrote The Case for Animal Rights that got nominated for a Pulitzer. He's a professor of philosophy at the university there in Raleigh. And he's a very, very big animal activist. He goes all over the United States with talks and lectures and videos, and he really has changed the whole academic scene where that issue is concerned. And he and I fell in with each other beautifully, and he brought me over. So because of his position, with some Pharisee-like people in the animal rights community, he was worried that my piece would be seen as exploitation. And, as a matter of fact, those pharisees did see it that way! There's a point during the piece where I'm sitting at an operating table, and I have these two Ninja-like characters who are putting masks on me, taking them off, putting them on, taking them off. And each time a mask is put on, I discuss how we talk about animals. The piece was divided so that there were the five big differences that people say exist between ourselves and animals: We have sentience; they don't. We have language; they don't. And so on. So the piece was divided into those five categories, and each section was marked by a slide with that word. So the slide "Language" came on,

and I was at this table, and was talking about euphemisms—all the euphemisms that we use when we talk about animals and particularly the business of cruelty, lab animals, food animals, euthanasia—all this stuff which is couched in language which makes the horrors that we do totally whitewashed and acceptable.
I did this part with toys, and there was a video cameraman who was shooting my hands working with these little toy animals and the videotape was simultaneously projected on a big screen, so people could see what I was doing. So among some of the things that I did, I had this toy cat, and I was talking about experiments that they do on cats in labs. I had hamburger and I was covering that cat with hamburger. And the pharisees didn't like that—that I was using meat. They didn't understand at all the metaphors of performance or theater. But knowing how touchy they were, Tom Regan decided that the animals that were used in the piece would all have to have been abused by people and rescued by people, so that each animal had a bio in the program and a history. For instance, the horse had been abandoned in a barn, where all the animals were starving. And there was a pig who had been saved from being slaughtered. Many different stories, and some wild animals who had been hurt and either hit by a car or whatever, and taken to a rescue house, healed, and then adopted. Each animal had its own story, and the dogs and the cats all came out of the pound and were up for adoption. And at the end of each performance I brought them all on stage and I made a speech about adopting them, and thanks to the performance they all got adopted. So that was quite wonderful. People come up to me to this day among those who saw it in Los Angeles and say that it changed their attitude, their food habits, and their lives. And even though they had been nice to their pets before, they looked at animals in a new light and, you know, that makes me feel really good. But the upshot of it was that this, combined with a personal thing that I had happen that same year in '84, did me in. The combination of those two things triggered myasthenia gravis, which was diagnosed in '85.

MOIRA ROTH: Which is an eye infection?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: It's not an eye thing. It's an autoimmune disease of the nervous system, and what it amounts to is that the chemical which creates the communication between the nerves and the muscles is blocked by the autoimmune system, and that the brain can't tell the muscles what to do. And in the most basic version of it, it attacks the eyelids and the focus of the eyes, so I was seeing double and I couldn't keep my eyes open. It can be, it is a life threatening disease. That's what Onassis died of. It can paralyze respiration. So that didn't make me very happy, and apparently it comes from stress and from emotional upheavals, so I figured that's what did it. And so, as a result, I had to really be careful, couldn't fool around and stress myself out too much. So I had an interesting remission, which came as a result of a very, very strong and emotional kind of contact with the Goddess. Saying things like, "You're such a beauty, and I want to see you. I want to be able to see you," you know. Because for me the Goddess is the planet. There's no difference. I say 'Goddess.' I could say "Earth" or "planet." I don't think of it as a personal deity at all. It's not that kind of thing. It just makes it simpler to seem to be praying to a personal deity. Anyway, I went into remission. And just like that; I mean, I stopped the medication, which was really awful because of the side effects. And things went very well since '85 until this year, when my stress level got to be really high and the symptoms came back. At the end of '84, December, was The Others. In '85 I did a piece called Foodchain for Visions/Interarts, and it was my first choreography, if you want to call it that. And I did it also at the Japan America Theatre. And in 1985 I also did the ritual for the Woman's Building. Do you know about that?

MOIRA ROTH: Yes.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Okay, the end of '85 I did A Ritual here, which was a benefit for the Woman's Building. They had a show called The Artist as Shaman, and they wanted me to do a performance. And I said to them, "Look, I am not a shaman. I don't want to be identified as a shaman. I think it's absolutely preposterous and presumptuous that artists try to pass themselves off as shamans. I don't think it's true at all, and I wouldn't be part of that. So I'm going to do a ritual, and I'll do it as a benefit for the Woman's Building, because I don't want to take money for that." So, great, they were very happy. I said, "I'm going to do it in my own space and it'll be for you guys." Terrific. It was in November for my birthday. It was the dark of the moon, and it was about going into darkness. I was fifty-nine. It was very meaningful. The book that inspired it was. . . . You see, there's always a book somehow, right? The book for The Others was The Case for Animal Rights. And the book for this one was The Descent of the Goddess. The whole Sumerian myth of Ereshkigal and Innana, et cetera, et cetera, and going into darkness. And I felt that's an area that, one, is so important for women, two, is so important for the human race, because we are going into darkness. And it was the end of the century, the end of the millennium, and perhaps the end of barbarism, if we play our cards right. But there's a big resurgence of barbarism at the end of the millennium, a sort of a "soubressaut." How do you say that in English? Like the last death throes. A very strong activity of barbarism was going on. And so I wanted to do a kind of exorcism, going into that space. It was a real interesting piece, I think. As the audience came in, they were stopped in the front gallery. And, you know how between the front and the back there's this little room under here? I asked Peter Shroff, who was one of my students—he is a very interesting and good performance artist, and he works very conceptually but also very visually—I asked him to create a labyrinth, a black labyrinth, in that little room. So we had people go one by one inside the room, and they were serpentining around in all kinds of labyrinthian ways, so that they completely lost all sense of space. And it was completely black, covered with black dropcloth. There were three things to

see in that space; they were the three aspects of the Goddess. I had a young woman who was the Virgin, and she was in this tiny, tiny space, and there was an audio tape for each viewing, and the viewings were done like a peeping tom through a little hole. And then there was the Mother—or the fruitful and erotic aspect—two people, a female and a male naked, who were making love. And then the Crone. She was sitting on this chair with her long grey hair over her face. And then, to come out into the large studio, people had to pass through the double doors. I opened one of the doors, and there was white sand over the steps. The opening was that high [gestures: about 30 inches—RR/MR], so they had to crawl on all fours. They crawled in the sand and as they went in they noticed that they emerged through a woman's legs. A woman stood there with her legs apart, and they had to go through her legs. And as they did that, somebody flashed a photo flash in their faces, so that they were blinded by the light and completely helpless. And then somebody picked them up and maneuvered them into their seats. There were pillows all around the room, around the walls of the room, and everybody one by one came into this room which was completely dark. Nobody was allowed to talk. And there was a tape of a swamp, the sounds of a swamp. Crickets and frogs and bullfrogs and nightbirds and water. While they sat there, myself and two other women were going from one person to the next who came in, and I had my little rattle made of deer's feet, and I had each person open their hands and I touched their hands and their heads with the deer's feet and whispered in their ears, "These are deer's hooves." And then they were offered a bowl of earth, and they had to put their hands in the earth. After that they were offered a bowl of water and they washed their hands of the earth. And then another person came with a towel and dried their hands. And that happened slowly, you know, while everybody, one by one, came in. I was on a big carpet with all my drums and my rattles and all my goodies. And I talked about the darkness, and I did a chant and had everybody bring stones to make percussive sounds with. And there were also rattles which people could use. And so we did a collective chant and then I did a dance. I could still move in those days. And I did it with two huge branches with leaves on them. And then came the story of Ereshkigal and Innana. Marian Scott was Ereshkigal. She was a wonderful crone, a darkness figure. And Innana came, who was a student of mine, who had a beautiful body. According to the myth, she comes down in the Lower World, and has to shed all her clothes and all her jewelry. There are seven gates, and she had to pass through them. I had these black satin ribbons which were on the floor from one side of the room to the other, and with each "gate" the people who were sitting at opposite sides just picked up the ribbon and created the gate. And so Innana was stopped at each gate, and then she had to shed part of her costume and then they lowered the ribbon and she came through the next gate, etc. And then finally, you remember in the myth how she's hung by a peg, a meat hook, and left to rot, and her flesh rots like a piece of meat. And it was really incredible. I had another student of mine, a German man, very, very thin, and very wiry, and he was the meat hook! He was completely naked, and he lifted her naked body with her legs around his neck and her long hair on the floor, and she was hanging on his back, you know, like that for about fifteen, twenty minutes while things were happening. And very slowly he was turning on his axis, because that was in the myth also. She's twisting on this meat hook. And while this is happening Ereshkigal goes through moaning and groaning thing, this grieving thing, and we brought in this big, big bowl of water. And we told the audience that they can bring their tears and put them in the bowl and state what they are mourning and what they are crying for. And many, many women got up, and that's why it lasted fifteen, twenty minutes while this woman was hanging from the hook! At the end of that, Innana is revived and a huge crystal is brought in. One of those, you know, big pyramidal crystals. The woman brought it in, and then it was put on the floor, and I had a pin spotlight on it, so that suddenly it looked as though it started to just glow from inside. It was really magical. And then there was a lot of renewal and rejoicing and dancing, and then we did a spiral dance which. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: How many people participated?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Oh, maybe sixty, seventy-five, I don't know.

MOIRA ROTH: So you did a spiral dance?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: So we did a spiral dance at the end, and when all was over we turned on the lights, and everybody brought food and we had this big, big carpet in the middle of the room and everybody had brought platters of food and it was really a celebration. It was really wonderful. It was a lovely piece, and everybody was happy about it. And then that was the end of '85, and in the beginning of '86 I had four free weeks. I decided I hadn't taken a vacation in years. I can't even remember when I had taken a vacation. And so I decided I would rent a van and go to the Mojave Desert, during January. So I did. I left everything with Linda [Sibio, my assistant—RR], and I took this trip. And it was during that trip that it really hit me that 1986 was the year I was turning sixty, and it was very funny because all these years time had gone by and I never really felt or experienced the fact that I was growing old. It was still me, and I was just going through changes, but the changes were never associated with the actual process of aging. And suddenly that year it hit me: "I'm going to turn sixty." And I decided that the piece I was working on would have to deal with that. And the piece was about that trip in the Mojave, and I was again reading a lot of stuff about the Earth, about toxic waste disposal, and how they're using deep injection of toxic wastes into the Earth. Also the business of the desert and the whole mood of this solitude and the realization of my own aging. I brought the Crone into the picture.

MOIRA ROTH: Did you read that book by Barbara Walker?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes. I had read that book. And I was working on my piece during the vacation. And at the end of the three weeks, I had to cut it short because I called and found out that King was no longer doing MacDonald's. They had fired him, and my alimony was contingent on it, so from one day to the next there was no alimony! And I had banked on it to pay the rent and everything. So I realized I had to come right back and revise all my finances.

Tape 4, side A

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: So without actually saying what happened, I incorporated that into the piece: the fact that it was not a four- week vacation; it turned out to be three weeks. And how I had to come back to LA and I was not ready for it. I had paced myself. And I had counted on this extra week to do it for me, because I had invested so much into that vacation. It was really going to be the time where I was going to connect with the cosmos, right? Well, I didn't quite connect with the cosmos, but I connected with enough stuff anyway. So when I came back I worked on that piece which I called L.O.W. and Gaia, which you saw, I think.

MOIRA ROTH: Yes.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: And then I began to tour it. I toured it many places, and it was actually never shown officially in Los Angeles, except that I did it as a fundraiser for myself in my own studio in December of that year, I think. Or was it the year after? I don't remember. Maybe it was '87. And in '86 I did another piece, actually here in Los Angeles, which was commissioned by Visions/Interarts and it was done at the John Anson Ford Theatre. It was called Was Black. You didn't see that, did you?

MOIRA ROTH: No, I've just seen its documentation.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Did you see the video I did of it?

MOIRA ROTH: Yes. It was a piece about. . . .

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Chernobyl.

MOIRA ROTH: Right.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I did it with four other people, who were naked and covered in white, very much in 'butoh' [a Japanese theater form—Ed.] style. And my head and face and arms and hands were also white and I was in black. It was a virtually nonverbal piece because the only words were in Russian and I was screaming them and it was a very strong sound and visual piece about Chernobyl.
And I called it Was Black because in Russian, 'cherno' means 'black' and 'byl' means 'was.' And that's what I called it. So that's what I did in terms of work in '86 besides the touring and the workshops.
In '87 I was commissioned by the L.A. Festival to create a piece, and that was a direct result of Was Black, because Tom Schumacher, who was Bob Fitzpatrick's right-hand man had seen the work and he really flipped over it and decided that I should be in the festival. He really lobbied for me, because Fitzpatrick didn't know my work and, you know, people were afraid of performance art and I was the only performance artist and the only soloist in the whole festival. So they also gave me the Bradley at LATC [Los Angeles Theatre Center—Ed.], which is the big theater at the LATC, and it was really a wonderful opportunity. So I'm forever grateful to Tom for that. I was also invited that year to do something for documenta 8 in Kassel, West Germany. And it happens that I also was invited by the Festival du Théatre des Amériques at Montreal. And all of this was to happen before the L.A. Festival, so I asked permission from the festival to premier the piece out of the country and just use the festival as the U.S. premier, and they thought that was okay. So I actually premiered the piece in Montreal, then I went to Germany with it, and then did it in the L.A. festival. I then toured it—it was Rachel's Brain, by the way. And toured it ever since, for two years everywhere. And Rachel's Brain was really interesting because it dealt with the human brain, and it was a culmination of all that I had been thinking and feeling and reading about in terms of what are we doing. What are we doing as a species? What is happening? How are we affecting the Earth? Well, we're affecting the Earth very badly, and where does it all come from? It comes from the human brain, so let's look at the human brain. So that was the thrust of the piece, and I started to read about the brain and, of course, it was overwhelming. First of all, there's a lot of literature and I really didn't have time to do enough research. And also it's a mystery, you know. A lot of it is totally mysterious. Every day there are new discoveries and contradictory ones. As I was working on the piece I realized, I could only skim the surface, and I felt frustrated even before I began. So I figured, well, you know, the hell with it. So it's not the totally comprehensive piece that I'd like it to be, but I'll do my best, which I tried to do. I played several personas in that piece. I played myself. (As I do in L.O.W. and Gaia.) And in Rachel's Brain I was Marie Antoinette to begin with. Marie Antoinette is the symbol of the head, you know. She had a wig, which was two feet high with a huge three-mast frigate on top of the wig. And those were the Louis Seize [XVI—Ed.] fashions, of course, straight from the history books, but it still looks ludicrous and insane. And yet that was the inflation that happened in the so called Age of Enlightenment where the cerebral cortex was considered the most important part of the whole body . Logic, intellect, and rationality were made into a religion. And great, you know, for what it is, but look where it's taken

us and what has happened since! So that was what the piece was about. I also play a scientist: I play Koko the gorilla and her trainer. Koko is taught American Sign Language.

MOIRA ROTH: And you played both roles?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: I played both roles. And the idea behind that section was, of course, that we want to communicate with other species, but the only way we know how is to teach the other species how to communicate with us. And they perhaps have things that they need to say which are more important, but we don't understand them. And then it ended in a way which I love. It was a very ironic ending, where for a minute there is a glimpse of the possibility of connecting to the planet and shedding all that bullshit and really going down and finding out what's down there. And then I take fright. I play ourselves, including myself, because I'm no exception. I play the fear of really getting into the body. The fear of getting into the subconscious, into the dark places, into the lower depths. And the continual pull of the upper regions, you know. God is up there somewhere very high behind the clouds, and everything that is beautiful and lovely is up there. It's sunny; it's not dark. And the sun is wonderful, but without darkness there's no living. The idea of spirituality being high, looking up, the whole business of pulling away from the viscera and denying the body and so on, and the fact that the brain is located somewhere in the head, all this means up, up, up! Well, we're finding out, much to our dismay, that the brain is really diffused throughout the body and that hormones go from the brain to the body and the body to the brain and you don't know which comes first. And there are centers throughout the body that are connected through the nervous system to the brain. And so it's really an organ which is diffused throughout the body. And so this whole business of wanting to go up, up, up, up, up is the human condition—so I had an airlift put on stage, and I go into it and the airlift takes me all the way up 30 feet, and I'm looking for this deity who's up there. I'm gonna be saved and I'm gonna be chosen. All of this bullshit was a sort of a tweak at the fundamentalists. You get up there and "Whoa, you know, where are you?" and there's nobody home! And you're stuck up there. And at the very end of the piece, I see the Earth once and then it disappears. I say, "Well, now you see it, now you don't." And I end by screaming, "What the hell am I doing up here? Put me down, put me down!" As the lights go down, my voice echoes into the void. . . . I was pleased with that. I was really pleased with the way that went, because it was ironic. It played well. It was fun to play, and I think that it brought it home. I think a lot of people got it, you know, which was what I hoped. And so Rachel's Brain is a piece that grew on me. It was an acquired taste. I had problems with it at first and it really created itself little by little. And now I love playing it. And I had worked with two musicians, the one who created the piece, Stephen Nachmanovitch, and then when he couldn't go to New York I worked in another musician, a woman, Leslie Lashinsky. Steve was a violinist, Leslie was a bassoonist, and both of them worked with electronic devices. And the piece is very different as I play it with either one of these musicians, and it's interesting to have these two versions. [Airplane obscures conversation temporarily—Trans.]

MOIRA ROTH: And now the present?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yeah, the present, right. I did another piece in the meantime for Art Matters in New York—or for Creative Time. I forget. I think it's Creative Time. They had a series at Central Park during the summer, and I created a little piece for them which was also done with Steven Nachmanovitch. It was called Death Valley. The text was taken from the voiceover in Soldier of Fortune, which I wrote in '81, and had never played live. And so I decided to play that text out and do it to music—and added some text to it. Now, meanwhile, I have grown more and more interested in sound and in music, and I want to do pieces that are very heavy in that direction. It really started with Rachel's Brain because Rachel's Brain is operatic in many ways, and the musician and I work together in a duet. So I decided to continue experimenting in that way, and I started reading about another aspect of the Earth, which is plate tectonics and continental drift, and I thought that that was just totally sexy. And I got really excited over that and decided to do a piece called Pangaean Dreams, Pangaea being the supercontinent that existed 250 million years ago, and out of which all the continents split and started to roam around, until we find them where they are today, and they're still on their way to form another Pangaea. So I did a first version of that last year in '88, with Leslie Lashinsky, and it is like a sound version. And now I'm in the process of making it into a performance and a videotape. In the meantime, I want to do a CD, which I've started, a recording with another musician called Ron George who's a percussionist. And I have a commission to do a piece for the California Ear Unit, which is a very good group of musicians here in Los Angeles who do very contemporary music. That's supposed to happen next year. The Pangaean Dreams piece is supposed to be sponsored by the Santa Monica Museum of Art. And there are also two other potential sponsors, the Jacobs Pillow people and The Kitchen in New York. [It ended up being co-sponsored by the 1990 L.A. Festival—Ed.] [To the cat in a high-pitched voice:] Batakeeti!

MOIRA ROTH: Rachel is talking to the cat. [laughs]

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: . . . and the one that I want to do after that is called Zone, and what I'm interested in doing in that one is working with chaos and nonlinear dynamics and finding out everything I can in that area, working with scientists and computer persons—having computer graphics and computer stuff right there on stage, projected on a screen. It would be a group piece with several other people. And what I call Zone is that

area between a static state and a turbulent state when it goes into chaos. What happens in that zone? At that moment. . . ? What turns something from being static into “spontaneous combustion”? And it’s something that really interested me for quite a number of years, this business of waiting in this dormant state with the potential for an eruption of chaos or turbulence, and what happens in that state and why suddenly it shifts and goes over into this other state. So I want to look at that from different points of view—from the personal, the emotional. I mean this is what falling in love is. And also political and social events and so on. So it would be an interesting piece to work on.
Those are basically the big projects. I’ve started my nonprofit company, and I want to do some outreach, you know, through either videos or workshops or talks or whatever, into the community, which I haven’t done much of up to now. And I’m really interested in that, have been thinking about it for quite some time, that I would like to outreach places such as women’s prisons and rehab centers, centers for battered women, for aging people, things like that. There’s a project which is being funded by the Cultural Affairs to do a collaboration with a group called the Latino Ensemble. They are Hispanic actors in a theatrical group. I would be giving them a workshop and then we would work on a collaborative performance, which would be a public performance. There’s all kinds of things happening.

MOIRA ROTH: Wonderful. This is maybe a shift in our discussion, but I’m very struck as I’ve now stayed here several times—and you’ve stayed with me; we know one another well—I’m very struck by the way you live, and I wondered—unless you think it’s too personal—if you’d just describe, for instance, your rhythm of the day when you are at home.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Can I first ask you a personal question?

MOIRA ROTH: Yes, of course.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Why are you struck? Because, of course, to me this is like “doesn’t everybody live like that?” [laughs]

MOIRA ROTH: Well, no, everyone doesn’t live like that, and I was struck that it, it feels to me very much in accord with what you do in public, and often people behave very differently in public and private. And I’m very interested now in the fact that Allan Kaprow practices Zen very regularly. Suzanne Lacy also does it, and, though it’s not Zen, that you have your own spiritual exercises each day. And I’m just struck by a number of people who I’ve known well for years, that they’re all, both in private and in practice, trying to hold their life and their art together.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes, well, I think you’ve said it because this is how I feel. I felt for a long long time that there was no difference between the two, and now that I’m not married and I’m not in a relationship and I’ve been really living by myself for so many years. . . . Of course, I have my non-human relationships, which are very meaningful to me. But there’s no other human relationship on a very intimate level. I feel that everything I do is part of my art, and there’s really no demarcation and no difference and I try very hard to live what I preach. I don’t always, because it’s very, very hard to achieve that, and I preach some things which are difficult to do—at least in my workshops, you know. One of the problems that I have in my personal life is that I never find enough time to do things which are purely and solely for me for my well-being physically, for my healing, for my maintenance. This is very hard for me to do and to find the focus and the time. It comes last, you know. But in terms of activities, I’ve always loved lofts. This is not a loft, but as you can see there are no doors, and there’s one big space which is the living room and one smaller space where I sleep. I have a big altar. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Which is in your bedroom.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Which is in my bedroom and takes about one quarter of the whole room. In the morning, I wake up between six and six-thirty and I take my dogs to the park. I do that early because of the dog catcher. I never put my dogs on leashes and they get to run. And then we come back and I feed them and the cats. And before my own breakfast I do my ritual, and my ritual has a lot to do with sound. I have drums and gongs and cymbals and little bells and things like that which I use. And I also have rattles and other things, and I use my voice. And I meditate. And I have a lot of stones around me, not only the stones you see there, which are arranged with crystals and more organic objects, but I also have stones in all these boxes, and I change them around, and move them and work with them and so on. I’m very, very attached to stones. I love stones and rocks, always did actually as a kid. I was a rockhound. And my father was always upset because it was just stones and not precious stones. [laughs] I never cottoned to precious stones! And I find that it makes a complete difference in my day. If, for any reason, I can’t do my morning ritual, I’m not centered and I’m not feeling well the rest of the day, and I feel this kind of lack, I feel more anxious and stressed. So it’s really important for me to do that, and I do.
I also once a week go to a drumming circle in Topanga. There’s a lovely woman there called Amanda Foulger who started that every Thursday evening. After going to Michael Harner’s workshop in shamanism, I found her name in his newsletter and I have been going ever since. And sometimes nobody else comes but me, and so she

and I do our own little shamanic drumming together and journeying. And Barney Bear and Hytoo come, and they love that. They just love Topanga and they love the drumming and they're very good about being totally quiet during the shamanic sessions.

MOIRA ROTH: I should explain for the benefit of the tape recorder that those are the names of Rachel Rosenthal's dogs.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Right. So after breakfast I feed the birds on the adjacent roof, and they are the neighborhood pigeons, doves, and little wild birds. There's also a flock of wild parrots who live in the neighborhood and sometimes congregate in one of the adjacent trees. And I am very, very honored and grateful that after all those years of hearing and seeing these parrots, I finally found a parrot feather on the ground, and I'll show it to you. It's this one [displays feather—Ed.], which is absolutely gorgeous with green and blue and the little curl of green on the side. I'm usually rescuing animals. It's rare that too many weeks pass by without some kind of rescue going on. And, as for the rest, I do a lot of reading. I teach private workshops. I do a great deal of touring, and I work on my pieces. A piece requires a great deal of research, so I have to read many books and articles. And there's never enough time. I find that I have to take it easy. I have to be careful about managing my time, about not putting out too much energy. When I go on tour now, it's not much fun. I have the enjoyment of the performance, but the rest of the time I have to rest. I can't just visit and sightsee and party and do all those things because I need all my energy for the piece. My pieces are so high-energy and I put out so much that if I don't do that I really deplete myself. So it's sleeping and performing and sleeping and performing when I go out on tour, which is really not much fun! But sometimes I go on residencies, and those are more exciting. And through the touring, I have seen a lot of places that I wouldn't have seen otherwise, met a lot of people. I don't politic very well, and because of that I've missed out, I think, on quite a few grants. I have woman friends now, very few male friends. Just a couple of students or ex-students who have been, over the years, close. And I'm now in the process of changing a member of my staff and getting to see a lot of people and interviewing them. Meanwhile, I'm still fighting fat, which is the problem of my life, and because of the myasthenia I have to take cortisone, and I suddenly realized that I just got extremely overweight very fast, and it suddenly occurred to me, "Oh, my god, what's this?" And now I see that I have to go on a diet, and my girl, Hytoo, has hip displasia, and she was put on cortisone at the same time!

MOIRA ROTH: That, again for the benefit of the tape recorder is a very, very small dog.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: No, Hytoo is the big one.

MOIRA ROTH: Oh. Then a very large dog.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Right, right. No no. The little one is Princie.

MOIRA ROTH: Yeah.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Princie has cancer, but she's in remission I've decided. And Hytoo has hip displasia, even though she's only four, she's really young. And they gave her cortisone every second day the same way they gave me. So on the same days we both take our cortisone, and we both put on weight! So we both have to go on diets. [laughs] So it's a pain in the ass frankly, because I hate to diet and I hate to have to think about these things. There was a time in my life when if I'd looked the way I look now I would hide. I would not show myself. I would not perform. I would not go out. I would hide under the sheets and nobody would see me. And I knew, deep in my heart, that I could never be loved or appreciated or even considered as part of the human race if people could see me with these pounds overweight. And now I thank goodness have gotten past that. Interestingly enough, I've played my performances being overweight and nobody seems to mind. [laughs] I mean they still like the piece and they still like me.

MOIRA ROTH: They do indeed still like you.

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: And that came as a big surprise and a big eye opener, you know, and it occurred to me, hey, you know, maybe everything doesn't hinge on that. So I am no longer hiding. I can go out as I did last night with you and my cousin and I can show myself even though when I look in the mirror I want to puke. But it is still a problem, because I know how good I look when I'm thin and I feel so much better too.

MOIRA ROTH: Is there anything else you'd like to add to the interview before we finish?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yeah, I want to talk about my cat Dibidi. As you know, I called my workshops The DBD Experience, and I called my space when I had public space here Espace DBD. And Dibidi is part of my daily ritual, and she is such an important person in my life that I do want to talk about her. Dibidi was a cat who came in my life in 1954, in New York before I moved. And I had another cat, Tioutik, then, so the two of them lived in my loft. And when my father died, Dibidi and Tioutik were left in the loft and were taken care of by a friend. I came here for his funeral and it was three days and three nights. And when I came back Dibidi had been missing, and I

looked and looked and couldn't find her. Well, on the morning of the third day, I was on the roof of my building and I was just leaning over a chimney and crying and looking at my tears going down the chimney, and then I saw this little disc of light way, way down there and I looked again—and in those days I called her Fifille, which means little girl—and I said, "Fifille?" and then I saw two little discs of light. She had fallen down the chimney, and it was about six hours before I was able to get her out. It was a Saturday afternoon. Nobody came. I called the SPCA and nobody came. The cops came and laughed at me. I had to figure out just by conjecture where she was in the building, because all the fireplaces had been bricked in, and I had to actually break and enter into a place in the building and then break through the brick and work my way into the wall, and even then I had miscalculated by about six feet or five feet, I don't know.

The shaft was completely vertical and then went into an incline, and she was holding onto that incline for three days and three nights. And all that time I was talking to her and running up the roof and talking to her and saying, "Hang in there"—in French because we spoke French to each other. Finally I got her out; she hadn't eaten or drunk all this time, and she wouldn't take anything until she had really thanked me. She had a way of just sending her little ass up in the air with her head down and she was trying to do this and falling over because she was so weak. It was like a death and resurrection, and it was connected to my father, and that bonded us completely. When we came to Los Angeles, Tioutik was killed by a car, and Fifille was my only cat for a while. And because of my stupidity at the time and my ignorance, I didn't have her spayed, and so she had many kittens and I kept the kittens. She hated that. She hated me for having other cats around. And by the time she had a few litters, I had all these millions of cats; I didn't know what to do. And she just despised me for that. She wouldn't talk to me, and I was absolutely devastated. We lived in the hills and I tried to go up the mountain usually when it was hottest like at noon, because she would not even come down into the house, and I trekked up there and spent about an hour with her in the brush just to be with her, and without the other cats—who were home in the cool.

She was so intelligent that anything I told her she would understand. I told her not to go across the street because it was so dangerous, and she never went again and she used to go crossing all the time. There was a woman who was our neighbor and she slept on her doorstep and this woman became senile and very dangerous, and threatened to tell the authorities I had too many cats and all of that, so I told her—Dibidi—that I didn't want her to go there anymore and she never went again. And then when we were really, really poor and five dollars meant a lot of money, I decided that once a week I would take her with me to a motel, spend five dollars a night. We would spend the night in the motel together with a grilled chicken, and we ate the chicken together and we slept together. It was just Dibidi and I. And it was great because she understood what it was that I was doing and she forgave me. Then when she was six years old, she was chased by a dog up a trellis—our house was cantilevered—and she was hanging on and then she fell three floors down on a rock and broke her back. And it was touch and go for a few days. She was in a cast for three weeks—body cast—and the doctor hoped that she wouldn't be paralyzed, but she ended up being a paraplegic and not able to move her hind quarters or her tail. And the doctor said, "She won't make it through six months because cats can't live like that."

She made it through another twelve years, and she died when she was eighteen! And, as a result of this accident, she had me exactly where she wanted me. I was her slave night and day, twenty-four hours a day. When she was in a cast, I had to turn her around every two hours night and day. She went everywhere with me. She was. . . . I can't tell you. She was so happy. She was always purring. Whenever she wanted to move or to jump up on anything I just put my hand under her stomach. She never even knew that she was paralyzed. She went over the toilet bowl. She was an absolutely remarkable animal, and she and I understood each other so well that everything she needed, you know, she would show me. She showed me where she had a flea because she couldn't scratch. And I would take the flea out with a flea comb. She let me know what she wanted when she wanted it, and at the same time she gave me so much. She showed me how to have courage within limitations, and I just adored her. And we had moments together that were so intimate and so precious, and I had perhaps thirty names for her. Dibidi was just my . . . my soul, you know. And I used to say, "If she goes, I go."

And then we moved to Tarzana, and when she was nearly eighteen, she began to wane, and as she did so she began to free me of her and allow me to go on without her. I know that it was a process where she was very active. And so finally she caught pneumonia, and it was obvious that she was going to die, and I said to her, "Where do you want to be?" and she said, "I want to be with you," so I said, "Okay." It was in the afternoon and I lay on the bed and I put her in her little bed next to me and she said, "No, no, I want to be with you." So I put her here (on my chest), and for an hour I just talked to her and caressed her and said, "Without pain, real easy," you know. And she was completely relaxed, and she had put on what I used to call "the soft furs"—because she had these different fur coats that she put on for different occasions and when she was very happy she had on the soft furs. So she had on the soft furs, she was purring, and she was breathing more and more heavily. And I was weeping, but I was talking to her during the entire thing, and then every now and then she'd look up at me and go, "Ah," and I would answer her. And then finally she looked up and just stretched her four limbs and went "Ah," and just stayed that way. And that was her death. And she showed me what it is to die in ecstasy, you know, and how death can be so beautiful. So she taught me how to live, and she taught me how to die. And so that was in July of '72, tenth of July. And I never had an animal, no matter how close I was with an animal. . . . I had some very close dogs and I had Tatti. Tatti Wattles was a very close rat, but Dibidi was totally special. So I called all my businesses by her name! And, of course, it was D-I-B-I-D-I, and I couldn't go around, it just didn't seem very serious to go around telling people, "Well, that's the name of my cat," you know, so I figured I would

use the letters as initials and call it “Doing By Doing” because this is what I was teaching anyway. Actually, somebody else came up with that slogan and so it turned out fine. When I teach my workshops I usually give the esoteric meaning of the name as well as the exoteric!
[Interruption in taping]

MOIRA ROTH: Is there a way you can summarize or characterize some of your main concerns in the present?

RACHEL ROSENTHAL: Yes. [said with a smile—Trans.] I would say that both in my workshops and in my performances I am increasingly trying to see what I call the “big picture” and to try to enlarge the tunnel vision that I feel is prevalent in our dealings with each other and with other species and with the planet as a whole. And because of that I feel that both in my workshops and in my performances over the years, I’ve been coming to a place where I try to see what I call the Gaian perspective and impart that.
This would include such things as seeing the Earth as endangered. The threats to diversity of species and the balance of gases that make up the atmosphere, the health of the oceans, the health of the atmosphere as a whole with the problems of the ozone layer, and, you know, all of those degradations which we’re familiar with now are symptoms of a larger illness which is that of anthropocentrism. And at this point I feel that it’s really the duty of people like myself who are in the public eye and who perform and who reach a lot of people to do works that somehow, without losing the art aspect, communicate this clear and present danger and open people up to a higher consciousness of the awareness of the big picture and of our position in the cosmos and in the planetary system. Naturally there will be “smaller” issues—”smaller” in quotes—such as the nuclear problem [laughs], overpopulation, and that of the extinction of species, of waste materials—both toxic and radioactive as well as the simple problem of solid waste—and all of those other issues which are simply symptom of the larger picture, which is that we’ve lost our reverence for our mother the Earth, and we just do not understand that we are part of nature, that we’re not on her, but in her, that we are completely connected with everything on the planet and within the creation of the Earth, and that it is both in our interest and the interest of the planet itself that we change our philosophy but fast, and that we see ourselves as children of a larger organic body.
[I would like to add here that I am a vegetarian, a non-smoker, that I consume no caffeine, alcohol, or sugar. I characterize myself as an eco-feminist and an Earth worshiper. I recycle, conserve water, use no heat or air-conditioning in my building, and contribute several thousand dollars every year to animal rights and ecological organizations. I still feel that nothing is enough and am guilty for not doing more.—RR]

MOIRA ROTH: Thank you.

[End of interview]

Addendum
This interview was recorded in 1989 and the final proofing came in late 1993. I would like to add a little information since the time span between the beginning and end of this interview was after all rather long: four years!
I was rather amazed and amused that I spoke so little about my knees, except to refer to them on about two occasions: the end of Instant Theatre and Replays, my first piece which was about my knees. As it happens, they were one of the important factors in my life and my worse years were around the time of the interview: a couple of years before and after, during which the deterioration was so severe that I was in continual pain, night and day, could hardly function, had a very bowed right leg, couldn’t put any weight on my right knee, couldn’t stand in place (for that reason I stopped viewing art), suffered pains all over my body because of the skewed alignment of my spine as a result of always standing on my left foot, couldn’t extend or bend my right knee beyond a small arc, etc.
When I performed, I managed to fake it so well that few people noticed my limp until after the show ended and I took my curtain calls. The excitement and endorphin production that sustained me while performing meant that I felt no pain while on stage. Thus I damaged myself more every time I performed.
In December 1990, I was operated on and my right knee was replaced with an artificial one. That operation changed my life. I was no longer in pain, and after a few months of assiduous rehabilitation, I was able to move almost normally again. I never thought I would, and that was a miracle. I didn’t realize how warped my character had become from constant pain. I am now a much happier and easier person.
All the projects I described in 1989 came to pass and more: I did Pangaean Dreams for the L.A. Festival 1990, that has toured internationally and is still touring. In 1990 I also collaborated with the EAR Unit on Amazonia, which we performed three times: at the L.A. County Museum, at the Ojai Festival, and in Aspen, Colorado. In 1992 I created another solo piece, filename: FUTURFAX, for the Whitney Museum in New York, which also toured internationally. I am now preparing Zone for the UCLA 1993- 94 season at the Wadsworth Theater for next February.
I will pick up another award in February given me by the Women’s Caucus for Art. I still have no time to sit down and write that book about my teaching methods although Routledge wants to publish it. Johns Hopkins University is bringing out a monograph about me, edited by Performing Arts Journal and with an essay by Moira Roth!
I have been lecturing and teaching continually. My workshops are better than ever. I did the one with the Latino

Ensemble and another with a group of multi-ethnic students. I give weekly classes whenever I'm in town long enough, and otherwise offer my weekend intensive, the 35-hour-long "DbD Experience." I have begun special ones for people with AIDS and for battered women.
My main musician in no longer Leslie Lashinsky but Amy Knoles of the EAR Unit. I have two wonderful office assistants, Kirk Wilson and Tad Coughenour, both gay and terrific guys. They often follow me on tour as projectionists, and Kirk is in my current company. It seems that I am getting busier and busier, and we three have hardly the time to accomplish everything.
I have several videos of my work, and this year was featured in a Hollywood movie coming out in 1994 called The New Age, written and directed by Michael Tolkin (The Player) and starring Judy Davis. I was also guest starring in a sitcom (!) called Frasier and have an agent. Perhaps film work will give me more money with which to produce my real work. . . !
Princie is dead, but Hytoo and Barney Bear Dogs and KabbaLAmobile and Batakeeti Cats are still with me. A family of street rats decided to make my little courtyard their home. When a neighbor began to poison them, I trapped (humanely) 27 rats one by one and relocated them in the Topanga Canyon wilderness. I hope they survived the great fire of 1993. There are still a few left but they are too smart to get trapped. . . .
I turned 67 this year, seven years after L.O.W. in Gaia! The Crone is getting older, feistier, takes more risks than ever, is jollier, and continues to work at being the best artist and person she can be.
Rachel Rosenthal
December 2, 1993

[Ms. Rosenthal added the following postscript:—Ed.]
Thank you for including this addendum to my saga. I didn't know, by the way, that I said "gonna" instead of "going to." I'll have to watch that!

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *May 19, 2003*