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Oral history interview with Jennifer Bartlett, 1987 June 18-September 28

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Jennifer Bartlett on 1987 18June-28 September. The interview took place in New York, NY , and was conducted by Avis Berman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

Interview with Jennifer Bartlett, Archives of American Art, on June 18, 1987, in her studio in SoHo, by Avis Berman.

[June 18, 1987]

AVIS BERMAN: Why don't you start with reciting your full name and your exact birth date?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: My full name. Well, this is very confusing. I guess my full name would be Jennifer Ann Losch Bartlett Carrier, but what's on my passport is Jennifer Bartlett. And what else am I supposed to recite?

AVIS BERMAN: Birth date.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: March 14, 1941. Are these just for taping? Is that the way they're presented or are they in transcripts?

AVIS BERMAN: They'll be transcribed and you can have a copy and you can also correct or add anything you think you want. It's not published or anything unless you say.

Now, what was your mother's maiden name?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Johanna Proctor Chaffee.

AVIS BERMAN: And your father's name was Edward?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Edward Coltman Losch.

AVIS BERMAN: This is the easy part. And what were their backgrounds?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: My mother's family. My mother was born in Washington, DC, and her father used to manage, I believe, the Old Congressional Hotel in Washington, DC, where, you know, the Secretary of State and his family would live, where different Senators would live. So he was a hotel manager, and his wife was a teacher. Then they moved. I don't know what happened. Either he lost his job or something and they moved to California where he managed, for a while, what's now the Beverly Hills Hotel. What's the one with the Polo Lounge? Yes, the great hotel. Then something happened there but he died very, very young and I think that his wife, my grandmother, stopped teaching in fury at the lack of insurance so that my mother, who was being educated as a fashion illustrator, commercial artist, at Chouinard, supported her mother probably, you know, most of her adult life. My father's background, his—I never knew what my grandfather did. They were all from Idaho Falls, Idaho, and his mother's father was a telegrapher, who did die, as in *The History of the Universe*, of a strangulated hernia. I never knew my great grandmother. So it was a western family and they moved to California and I think my grandfather, before I knew him, was very poor and he worked in a shipyard. But then I think they both inherited property and stocks and could live a modest life with not working. I know that my father had wanted to be a lawyer, but the money wasn't available for his education when he younger. He was in the construction business. My mother, after she started having children, stopped working in her field.

AVIS BERMAN: To go back to your mother, was there a sense that since they lived in these very fancy hotels while they were married, did she bring that with her as far as you were concerned? Was it a part of the family lore or the family myth?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No. One of the things that I think was rather sad about our family is there wasn't the lore. You know, either my mother would talk about it and my father wouldn't listen, but this happened so early in the marriage that it wasn't a part—we were more a Southern California family that was not really close, though we spent a lot of time together and lived at home. So I don't know really very much about it. My mother was deeply sad that her father, whom she was crazy about, died and I think her mother was a very difficult woman, a block Republican. I think that both of their parents disapproved of the marriage. My father's family was Catholic though I'd never known him to go to church until he died. And I think that my mother's mother felt that my mother was marrying beneath her. So I think it wasn't completely idyllic, but very typical.

AVIS BERMAN: Why did you say "a typical Southern Californian" family?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I think there's kind of an uprootedness there and that when I came to the East Coast it seemed to me that—I was probably twenty-one when I got here that I would have friends who were fifty, or have a conversation, or be at a dinner party where there would be different ages. In California it was very stratified. My parents went around with people their age and everyone's parents did that. The grandparents were grandparents and they either had their own friends their age or they didn't have any friends. Then I would go around with my age group unless it was for sexual purposes or romantic purposes—then I would go out with an older guy. So all was very much within your own age group and I think that's true still, to a certain extent.

AVIS BERMAN: Wouldn't you think, though, that that would be more of a middle-class phenomenon or a suburban phenomenon?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: That could be true.

AVIS BERMAN: As opposed to Bohemian.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: It was very, very, deeply and committedly and wholeheartedly suburban. I mean, the only, I think, difference is is that my mother read a lot and loved to read and she liked music.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you think that she would have wanted to have been a fine artist?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I don't know. I'm not that clear on what my mother would have wanted. I think that probably necessity and the times didn't encourage her too much to think about what she wanted. I have the feeling that my mother would have been happy as a movie star or something. Something where she got a lot of attention, had a lot of people helping her, and not a lot of responsibility.

AVIS BERMAN: I think that's a good fantasy for someone who had four children. You have to do a hell of a lot of work.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, but she always had help. From when I can remember, which is four or five, there was always a housekeeper who I remember coming a minimum of three times a week, and later on five days a week, and who also cooked the dinner and stuff. Though I think she did do a lot of work. Let's put it this way: I do not have a memory of my mother ever having baked a cake or baked cookies. So, it wasn't the kind of traditional "Hi, mom."

AVIS BERMAN: It's funny, because I think of those house images that you did at a certain point. That kind of all-American house—you would almost think of with mom in the kitchen with an apron.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Maybe that's why they crop up because I think that that was very much absent. You know, she'd do things that other women in town would do. There would be bridge club or garden club or a lunch with someone.

AVIS BERMAN: I got the feeling from what I was reading that economically things were more unstable because of, as in all construction business, the ups and downs that made a difference.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, that made a tremendous difference, but I think there were other differences, too. My father had—there were two things—a kind of gambler's streak where he

would misjudge a situation and overextend himself. There were health problems that entered into it at certain points. I think there was a period of time when he was drinking heavily. His father had been an alcoholic and I think that the time when he, I guess, went bankrupt when I was around thirteen that that problem was very much compounded by drinking. Which he stopped, and only went back to, but not in such a committed fashion, in the latter part of his life.

AVIS BERMAN: What other family dynamics do you think influenced you?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I was the oldest of four children and I had a brother eighteen months younger who had a disease called Legg-Perthes when he was quite young. Which meant through the age of probably three to thirteen he was on crutches, or in a brace, or in a full-length cast. I think that, obviously, it was extremely difficult and traumatic for him, but it probably had some sort of effect on me, too. I don't think that my parents made it easy for him to be crippled, which he was at the time, but it was always, you know, "Put on your brace. Put on the crutches," because this is a disease you can't feel. And that I resented having to take care of him. Mind you, he was the one that had the awful time but that affected me. I have a younger brother and sister and there was an eight-year difference there, so they were really like little children and I kind of enjoyed them.

AVIS BERMAN: So it wasn't competition, either. It wasn't the same kind of attention that your brother demanded from them even if it was them yelling at him or picking on him, but he was getting attention.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, early on did you find that art was a way that you could get attention? Or how did you look at it when you were drawing when you were a kid?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I think school was a way I could get attention. I always liked school very much within my own way. I also loved to read. And I don't know if it was an attention getting thing. I think it was more of a consolation. I just suppose that early on I always liked to draw. I mean, I don't remember a time of not liking it and not being interested in it and not thinking of ways to do it. And also being very nervous about what was natural to me and what was not natural, and what my interests were when I went into school. I got a lot of encouragement and a lot of discouragement: it was all mixed. I think that from, really, probably since my brother's birth, I was always pretty independent because I was the oldest. I had a younger brother with medical problems and then younger children started coming along. So, I think that my family life was—I don't remember long talks with my mother or my father. He was absent a lot at that time. He worked elsewhere, in Arizona, and would have to be away a great deal of time. So school was interesting to me. And then I became a teenager and school was not interesting to me and I was in a confrontational situation with my teachers. I think most of the normal—you know, I was always in trouble with my parents and just led a life that involved a lot of lies and sneaking out of the house at midnight. A normal California teenager's life. I think that probably my relationship to art and my confidence in it was much stronger in grade school, and as the values changed in junior high what I was capable of producing was different than what was admired. That presented some problems but not that many. [Laughs.]

AVIS BERMAN: I think around the age of twelve, kids begin to, it appears, get very interested in realism.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, and I either was not interested, I don't know, or I was bad at it, but it's not something that came first. I know in terms of painting I like, where I began looking at painting, painting of the Renaissance was extremely difficult to look at for me. I couldn't tell them apart. You know, they all looked virtually the same to me. I mean, I liked, I had particular tastes, I liked Raoul Dufy and Cezanne and Picasso and Van Gogh. I don't know whether it was something I felt I would be more capable of doing or whether it was a natural inclination for that form of expression. I think there was always something quite abstract in my interest, you know. I was very conceptual. That's what attracted me. I mean, you know, that story, endlessly repeated of drawing large undersea pictures with everything there. Drawing large Spanish ranches where the emphasis was not on a perfectly rendered figure or building, but in how much could you pack into the picture. Drawing 300 Cinderellas over and over again in different dresses. They were very schematic Cinderellas. So I don't know whether that was a lack of ability on my part, I don't know what it was, or a different

interest.

AVIS BERMAN: I just want to go back to what you said before about your being nervous about what was or what wasn't natural to you. Is that what you meant?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, I wasn't nervous about it then. I was anxious about it, you know, that it was something I was interested in. That I didn't seem to be good at drawing girls in profile, or horse heads, or pinstriping, or very elaborate kind of designs. I seemed to be good at making a picture.

AVIS BERMAN: When I read that when you were five years old that you were able to say that you wanted to be an artist and move to New York. I was wondering how you had both of those concepts so soon.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, because, you know, there were some art books around the house and at this time there was really no art life. That really didn't happen in LA with was it Nick Wilder and people like that? The first big art event I ever have any memory of in Long Beach was when I was in high school. That was a Van Gogh show at the LA Museum and I don't think that museum was very active. And certainly no one in. I had a friend whose mother was interested in art but they seemed to travel a lot to see art. Those were about the only people I knew that were interested in art. Other than teachers who didn't know anything about art but liked the idea of it and appreciated the fact that I did. So, all of my information was, I think, through a couple of art books.

AVIS BERMAN: You had also said that your atmosphere was cultivated; things were "available in a Long Beach kind of way." I was wondering what you meant by that.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I don't know. When did I say that?

AVIS BERMAN: Well, actually it was in several interviews. One of them was with me ages ago. So, I wrote it down and then I never really explored it. If there was an effort to be cultivated was it because it was an affluent suburb?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, no. I think, you know, one of my sort of defenses against high school and junior high school socially was to not get completely devastated by, you know, sororities and welfare clubs and prom queens and stuff was to be an attractive, intellectual, difficult person who wrote poetry that I would only read to certain people. So these things were accessible in a way. I had some very good English teachers in high school, and we had some books around the house, and I read them indiscriminately. I mean, I would give long lectures on—[phone rings; talking in background].

So there was great kind of value on, say, literature; less on music because that was my mother's area. And I still had a deeply committed teenage life, you know. So it was quite schizophrenic. But I think that my interest inwriting and my interest in art were all things that were a consolation when things got rough. And I always cared about it. I always really, really liked that.

AVIS BERMAN: So, you were really self-sufficient then.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. I was always quite self-sufficient.

AVIS BERMAN: But you seemed to be able to join the other kids when necessary.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. You know, it was playing a kind of double game. You know, I wasn't at all—

Hi! [To someone in background.]

AVIS BERMAN: Was there someone who was a mentor to you or encouraged you?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Several people in—There was a very strange art teacher outside school that I went to named Fran Saldini, who was very encouraging. There were several teachers in high school: an English professor, a social studies professor, another English teacher that all encouraged my writing and encouraged, really, the way I thought and I think must have been quite supportive of me getting into college. So, really, it would be those people.

AVIS BERMAN: And they recognized that you were bored—or ahead of most of the other

kids?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I don't know. That's hard to say at this point. I think they thought I had very distinct interests and that made me, for some teachers in that circumstance, an interesting student I think because I wasn't—I don't know—I went to a thoroughly middle-class high school and in Long Beach this is a very insular situation. There were no Blacks. There were two Jews in the entire school and that was it. Very, very few poor kids. It was almost solidly middle class, upper middle class and so I was more—And that community just all solidly happened to be that and other schools had more of a racial mix and a much more interesting situation. So, I think a lot of my life took place outside of school. You know, I had boyfriends that were in college, so a lot of things were compensated just through my social interests.

AVIS BERMAN: You were trying to escape such a WASP situation.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. Yes. Well, I mean, I didn't even know what the word WASP meant; but I knew when I met somebody different, someone Black or someone Jewish, something like that, I was deeply interested.

AVIS BERMAN: They were so exotic.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. And this was my preferred—

AVIS BERMAN: By the way, did your brothers or sister have artistic talent?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: My sister's a graphic designer in New York now, and really struggling with that. She's very good. She has her own company. I think both of my brothers I think my older, the one that was closest to me in his age, would have very, very much liked to have been a writer. I think that my younger brother, who has become a transsexual, would have very much liked to have been—he was an All-American swimmer during that time—wanted to have done something in the arts. I think that whatever the dynamics of our family life were, that it was tougher on the boys than it was on the girls.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you probably were just expected to get married.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Whereas the boys maybe had to be President, or something along that line.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. I think they were probably were more subject to pressure and were each handicapped to a certain degree. The older one by having so much of his young life taken away and the younger one in having my mother and father's expectations almost totally focused on him.

AVIS BERMAN: That must have been horrible.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. I think it was very difficult for him.

[Tape turned off.]

AVIS BERMAN: I was going to ask you, your mother's attitude toward you being an artist, if she felt ambivalent or positive given her own—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Very ambivalent. In the first place, though they very much wanted me to have a college education, I didn't do particularly well in high school. I mean, it was As or Ds, that kind of thing. I had an emotional relationship to education. And then I started doing extremely well in college. I liked it and wanted to go to graduate school. I only applied to one college and I ended up only applying to one graduate school. My father found the idea of me going to graduate school, even with a scholarship, I think, threatening. He wasn't happy about it and one of my instructors from Mills, Ralph Ducasse, was very, very helpful in getting my father to come to some kind of terms. He thought it was ridiculous. My mother wanted me to study something more practical where I could use it for designing for Hallmark cards, something I could fall back on. I was married when I was quite young, at twenty-three, and I think they were very happy about that, though his family was not happy about it. In this case, it was him marrying down by marrying me. When things started going bad, my mother very, very much wanted me to give up art if it was in any way threatening the marriage. But I never really took my parents that seriously.

AVIS BERMAN: It sounds as if they were a little against you being an artist. That was sort of the mold for fifteen years ago, not now.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I really don't think that they cared that much. My mother, at that time—she's quite content with what I've become. She didn't like the in between twenty years; probably even longer than that. But that's just the way that is. And I don't think that their approval or disapproval was of any real importance to me at that time. I mean, on an emotional level, certainly it was but in terms of affecting me in any way, no. I knew very young and very certainly without anything, that I wanted my own work. I wanted to support myself and I wanted to be my own boss.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I'm sure also if they disapproved of it that probably made it even better for you. That probably made it more attractive.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No. I honestly think at that time I would have preferred them to have liked it and supported me. I mean, I was in enough trouble just being a teenager, that's hard work, without making things more complicated. There were enough kind of issues that I didn't need another one.

AVIS BERMAN: I read that you went to high school with Barry LeVa.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, tell me what he was like. Was he an artist?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I think we were both in cartoon club or something together. Or art club. He was more of a hood and I think he went on to have a lot of trouble with drugs and he went straight on to art school. So we got out of touch, and my mother would say, "Oh, you know, Barry's an artist in New York," and I would groan. But then we got to know each other socially and, of course, I admired his work enormously. We've lost touch lately. I guess everyone gets to a certain point where they're moving around a lot. Which is sad. But Barry was always funny. I mean, people don't change that dramatically, I don't think.

AVIS BERMAN: It sounded as if you were sort of in contention or were the class artist.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, I wasn't the class artist. I mean, the high school I went to, as I remember, was rather big and maybe I was in grade school, Barry wasn't in my class then. Probably in my class, I would be one of the two class artists, but those distinctions broke down certainly in junior high and no one was very much interested in who was the class artist. I mean, I would say that there were absolutely no real art programs in either junior high or high school. In junior high I believe there was a cartoon club, and that was it for art. There was no art history. There was nothing; absolutely nothing about art. There was one art class, taught by a woman called Ruth Burdick, which I think I took. I don't know all three years or just one. It was an elective. It was completely and totally unimportant.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you think that handicapped you when you went to college? That you were behind or ill prepared?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I don't think I was behind in terms of the sort of college that I went to. I had my own interests that made it extremely easy for me to learn really fast. I mean, maybe not the physical things but I always painted and stuff. I'd just say that there wasn't anything in the environment that would encourage an interest in art. Where one did have English classes, which I liked a lot.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you paint only in school or did you paint at home?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I didn't paint at school because there weren't any classes, really, except for just that one I mentioned. So at home. I took it, you know, real seriously. I'd get books.

AVIS BERMAN: What did the work look like?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: You know, I can't even remember. I think there were a lot of things like wild colors of an interior of a coffee house that was kind of abstract, that was sort of reddish. And sailboats. But basically kind of abstract; not an attempt to be naturalistic.

AVIS BERMAN: It's interesting that you never went for rendering.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, I did that later.

AVIS BERMAN: And now I want to move into Mills College and why you decided to apply there.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I knew I wanted to get away. I don't think that my high school, or I felt that my high school grades wouldn't have gotten me into one of the East Coast colleges that I'd heard of. I think I was probably intimidated because I didn't know anyone who had been to Smith, or Vassar, or Wellesley or something. I applied to Columbia. Oh, no, that was for graduate school. I mean, in California you went to Pomona, you went to Stanford, you went to the University of California at such and such, you went to the University of Southern California at Santa Barbara. That's where everyone went, period. People never left California. People hated anywhere else. I mean, the idea of me even going up to San Francisco was totally shocking. I knew that I didn't want to be at a university where there were sororities and fraternities. I really had had it up to the neck with high school. I went and visited a friend who was going to Mills and I was, you know, I just thought it was fantastic. It was very, very beautiful and the emphasis was on art. I had heard of, you know, people there and I was impressed. It was a college that really represented, in California, the kind of things that I was interested in, which were really music, and art, and theater, and dance. So it was the only school I applied to. And I think I flunked, or got a D or something in chemistry, and my grades were jeopardizing my position there. But I said, "Look, I'll take those achievement tests in these fields," and my teachers in Spanish and chemistry just thought I was an idiot, but I did sufficiently well.

AVIS BERMAN: Wasn't it nice that real life has nothing to do with chemistry or algebra?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, now I know that I'd be very, very interested in math if I were young going to school now. And I know I'd be very interested in science and physics and things, but I think the way it was taught or how we looked at those bodies of knowledge people assumed that they were boring. They assumed that they were—I mean, you can't ever over-rate the sort of banal quality of attitudes and the rigidity of the values then. I mean, anyone interested in science was an egghead, they were peculiar, that's it. Everything had that touch to it. I mean, the most exciting thing that happened was fish sticks, or TV dinners. I mean it was such a rigid kind of teen culture and the adult culture that I was exposed to in the suburban sense was, before it was destroyed, it was absolutely, totally insular. You had no desire beyond wearing a wrinkle-proof linen sheath to the country club. That would be the most someone could aspire to. People were not traveling a lot in California, at least in the upper-middle class, middle-class suburban kind of thing. That was very unusual and the families that did that seemed terrifically exotic. I mean, they would travel on their boats to Catalina or they would go to Cabo San Lucas or something, or Baja California, to the Gulf of Mexico on their boats, but that was the kind of trip it was. Or there'd be a golfing holiday, you know, where they'd travel to different golf courses. I remember my parents taking a trip to the East Coast and my mother talking about it and she loved it. And that seemed like the most exotic thing in the world.

AVIS BERMAN: Almost like "Leave it to Beaver"-ville. I think it's true. I think you're right in just thinking about the food, and the clothes, and everything and the homogeneity. Well, in retrospect about Mills, do you think it was the right place for you?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, absolutely.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, what was the art program like that you were in?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, who really ran it in art history was an art historian called Dr. Neumeyer. I don't know how much he achieved in terms of his own scholarship. He wrote a small book on Cezanne, but he just loved art and he was an extraordinary teacher and a very demanding teacher and absolutely passionate. Then there was Ralph Ducasse, who was very sensitive, who really ran the painting and drawings, and he was marvelous in his own way. And there were sophisticated people. I think there were things there that made it easier for me to develop because—though, still I made a lot of friends. You know, I'd take huge groups home on holidays. I always wanted to do things really my way because I didn't want to show I didn't understand anything. I wasn't really good in class. I would have to find my own way and they really, simply let me do that. So, at a certain point I remember doing an independent study for drawing where I would just draw. That, to me, was better training than having to take fifty life courses and getting stuck on certain things. You know, I just

developed something else and I was put up into the graduate school, which is where I met Elizabeth Murray when I was in my junior year or senior year. So it had a structure which could be revamped or changed and it valued that kind of thing.

AVIS BERMAN: I don't know if you were using it as an example or if it was true. If you had a drawing course, because I don't know if this is again, the myth or not, but the story is that with The Garden, you never really had drawn so you had to teach yourself to draw. Calvin Tomkins said that you had never learned to draw before.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, I've never learned to draw in the way you draw. I have drawn from a model. I drew from a model at Yale and I drew from a model a couple of times at Mills, you know, three years of figure class. [Phone rings.]

AVIS BERMAN: We were just talking about drawing.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Talking about what?

AVIS BERMAN: Drawing.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh. So, well, I'd done all of those things. I just hadn't done them at great lengths, and I don't know how they teach drawing in other places because I haven't been taught. I did have a kind of formal training. I had a drawing class but it was that kind of teaching then where you do little problems or something. It just wasn't formal in a particular sense. I wasn't trained in perspective. I knew all the different kinds of perspectives and you'd have one or two classes that would cover different perspectives. I had no rendering courses. I had no application of basically theoretic skills. I had no classes in shading—the kind of education my sister would have gotten at an art center where you have to render a bush and you have to draw a straight-line free hand, and you have to draw an object from the inside out. The teaching methods were different and this was the era of Abstract Expressionism, and I think much of the information was about a kind of gesture about where two lines were on a page and what is the weight of a line. A different way of looking at drawing.

AVIS BERMAN: What did the painting courses stress?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, they'd be different problems each time. I can remember doing a painting of a figure. I can remember doing a landscape, but then very quickly I was just doing my own paintings which looked rather large, clumsy, Arshile Gorkys with maybe one corner of De Kooning.

AVIS BERMAN: How large?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, they'd be big sometimes. Seven, eight feet square, which for college, at that time, was a big canvas. That's 1962 or '63.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you always worked large.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: You've always enjoyed filling an environment, I guess.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: So the atmosphere was progressive.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Absolutely. And I mean it was really quite marvelous because it was a very political school. It was a women's college and had a real diversity of characters. I mean, I used to hang around with a group—one of my best friends was Japanese, and with a Chinese. My best friend was going with Chiang Kai-Chek's grandson, so it was a very international kind of crowd. I think in my dormitory at the time was Pia Lindstrom. You know, they would just have anything. Jean Renoir would come to give lectures. Darius Milhaud was artists in residence and Luciano Berio was there. Kathy Bavarian was there. Luciano Berio would run off with one of the girls from my dormitory and cause a scandal. Students and teachers were having strange alliances and coming from Long Beach it was a great relief and absolutely riveting.

AVIS BERMAN: How did Elizabeth Murray end up there?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: She had gone to the Chicago Art Institute and that's where she decided to go for graduate school. I would guess, I've never discussed this with her, that it was supposedly the kind of creative thing and actually she got a scholarship, too.

AVIS BERMAN: What did her painting look like then?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Terrific. Lots of little things poking through a kind of crusty surface. You know, it went through many stages, and then I went back to Yale. So we intersected really one year and shared a place one summer, the summer after I graduated. Then I went off to Yale. We always kept in touch but I missed a lot of her work. When I knew her, it was much more abstract. Then it went into a kind of cartoony figurative thing that I wasn't really so much around for.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it seems from what I read that she made this enormous, tremendous impression on you.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Absolutely because she was a woman and she was absolutely serious. She was not compromising. She was not an easy person. Temperamental, dramatic, furious most of the time and this just suited me to a tee.

AVIS BERMAN: What was the source of this fury?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Whose? Mine or hers?

AVIS BERMAN: Elizabeth's.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, I don't know. I think Elizabeth should be the one to answer that about herself.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, eventually I hope to get to her, too. Were there any other people at the school who have stayed with it and became professional artists?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, sure. Carlos Villa was there and works and lives in California. Don someone [Hazlitt], I'm sorry, I can't remember his name right now. I have trouble with names. He did all the palomino horses and was very well known. Showed with Ivan Karp during the—what was that? Was it called new realism?

AVIS BERMAN: Photo.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Photo realism. I think a lot of the people did quite well, but I really just don't keep in touch with places, you know, so I forget. But I knew a lot of the people from the Chicago Art Institute and met them and, of course, they're all working and continuing to work in California.

AVIS BERMAN: Did a professor encourage you to go on to graduate school?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Absolutely, yes. Ducasse. He was the one that actually was very helpful in telling me about schools. I think he wrote a recommendation for Yale. I think a friend of his wrote a recommendation. He contributed greatly to that. Why I ended up picking Yale, you know, all the other schools would ask for a drawing of a chair, and what Yale wanted was slides of paintings and some original—

[END OF SIDE ONE.]

AVIS BERMAN: Did you like the East Coast?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: —delicious pastrami sandwiches and bagels and lox. These were all—It was complete exoticism to me. I remember my first night in New York was spent in a tenement, I suppose, over on 3rd Avenue in the Seventies. It was an old Hungarian district or something; thousands of cats and it was so seedy I just thought it was sensational.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, the reason I was going to ask you that, is that recently talked to Mary Miss and she said, "My orientation is based on the way I look at things and I keep looking at things as a Westerner." I was just curious if you felt that anything like this the geographic impact, the fact of growing up in the west, the landscape.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I think that the landscapes there and growing up on the ocean,

that's still absolutely beautiful to me and when I go back to California there are things that I just think are wonderful, but I feel like someone visiting. If I'm there for a long time, I get depressed. I find California depressing. I find it heartbreakingly beautiful in its nice places but I find it profoundly depressing.

AVIS BERMAN: Why is that?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I don't know. I always have. I think it's dumb in the end. It doesn't seem positive to me. It almost seems like trading comfort and pleasure for something else that life offers and I'd much rather, for instance, if I live in a place which isn't central to my work, I really like the style better in Europe. I mean, I enjoy it more in the end. I spent so little time there since I grew up, since I came to the East Coast, and I really have never been tempted to go back and take a house for the summer or something. I mean, maybe that would be an interesting thing to do with my husband, who's in movies. I always think "Oh, this is so great", the first two days, "I want to move back" or "I want to be here" and the feeling doesn't last. I mean I get absolutely sick of New York but I like it. So, what Mary says I just didn't think of myself as a thing. I don't think of myself as an Easterner. You know, there are certain things that seem factual. I was born in California. I was educated primarily in California. I am a native Californian who lives on the East Coast. I've never done any more soul-searching about it than that, and that I prefer it.

AVIS BERMAN: It's very bound up with Mary and it's not bound up with you.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, it's not the same way. I mean, I think that the whole western landscape, you know, New Mexico, all of it, is just absolutely sensational beyond belief and for that kind of experience, for the landscape, I think you can't beat it. It's a wonderful and clean feeling. Whereas I'm not so crazy about the country here. I only like it in seasons like fall or something when it's doing something but doesn't involve bugs or ticks.

AVIS BERMAN: Miserable weather. Well, at Yale, who were the fellow students that you noticed immediately?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I don't know how immediate it was. It took a while and I had—I mean, I knew Chuck Close. He was a year earlier. I certainly remember Richard Serra tormenting me. I remember Nancy Graves very well; Ken Fleder. You know, then I had many friends—Jenny Snyder, an artist today in New York, whose sister was married to Joel Shapiro so I had a contact with them. An artist named Jack Spellman, Jon Borofsky. The list is practically endless. Brice Marden, I guess had just graduated. Sylvia Mangold was still there. I think Bob Mangold was still there. I'm trying to think from my class who is working. Bill Carlin was there. William Williams, the painter, was there. I'm trying to think who shows a lot. Those are all people who were in my class. Jan Hashee was there. Michael St. Martin, who is really based in England, was there. Victor Burgan was there, the Conceptual artist. I mean, you know, it really is a kind of long list.

AVIS BERMAN: All pretty hot stuff. Were you intimidated when you came?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: That's hard to answer. I think I was really scared, yes, my first semester, but I tend not to experience—I just wanted to be with people that were good and that—And I wouldn't have really allowed myself to feel intimidation.

AVIS BERMAN: Were you good then?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I think I got better quickly. I think I was awful my first semester because I just had no idea what I wanted to do and I didn't know how to develop what I had already done. Then I think when I just started working really, really large, that I was feeling more comfortable and things began getting more interesting during my second semester.

AVIS BERMAN: So, you were working even larger than in college.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you have any of that work anymore?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No.

AVIS BERMAN: And who were some of your teachers?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, Jack Tworkov I liked very much. The teachers that were teaching there like Bernard Chaet, Louis Finkdlstein, I don't think I had any real classes from them. I had one from a figurative painter whose name you would know, Paul Georges, and I liked him actually. If I have the name right. And Irving Kriesberg was very good; very encouraging. But the staff that had been there at Yale a long time I didn't—It was not a marriage made in heaven so that those people were important to me: Irving and was it Paul Georges? No. Oh, we'll just forget that because I should remember his name. I'm just terrible about this and I will remember it. But Jack was also to become important to me later. I was supposed to be there for three years, you know, because that was the arrangement, and they suggested I get out in two which was nice.

AVIS BERMAN: I was going to ask you—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Then there were all the great visiting instructors, you know, like I remember Jim Rosenquist very well; Jim Dine was marvelous. It was all real heavy stuff and all the students were very lively and very vivacious and I thought that was great.

AVIS BERMAN: I was wondering if you'd talk about Tworkov—not as an influence on you or not just as a beacon, just what kind of person he was really.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I was very impressed by Jack. I think he was an interesting, often kind man and very passionate about art. You know, I just liked other artists. And I got to know Jack better later, after I'd been in New York some time and he had come to my first exhibition. And I got to know his wife and I rented an upstairs studio from him in Provincetown during a summer where I wanted to be out of New York. So then I got to know him even more, and their daughter Helen. I got to know them quite well. But that relationship happened a number of years after I had been at Yale, at least five. There, at Yale, he was really an encouraging and good teacher and was later to become a friend.

AVIS BERMAN: In the later time, when you were friends, did you find any affinities between his work and yours?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, at the time I think, you know, that I was using a lot of his counting systems that he was interested in. I don't think influence works in quite that one-to-one way and it doesn't work in that one-to-one way with me. I can admire and like a person's work for years and years, and prefer it to my own, but not find a way of absorbing theirs and turning it into—appropriating it. I have confidence that I'll cover everyone sooner or later, but I think that that influence thing, it's so peculiar, and it's the one question that's always asked and is almost meaningless to me. I mean, it should be assumed that if you're studying art, you know, you're going to be influenced by Mondrian, you're going to be influenced by—But that I take as a given. It's a way of learning. I know what you're trying to get at, like asking a writer if there's any particular book that he likes. But I think it's hard in a student-teacher relationship unless you have that kind of mind. I've always rather blocked out that kind of thing and just try and get on with making my own work than sitting around moaning about how wonderful someone is. I like them—I find myself, my passion for an artist increases with their distance and age from me, and if they're dead. Then I can rave about them quite unashamedly and without any defensiveness.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I will only say that I purposely didn't use the word "influence." I said "affinities" because—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, I think there are. But I think it was more the difference. I think that Jack was a little horrified by the kind of ambition I had so that the dialogue—you know, I remember him saying to me once, "Can you ever conceive of a painter who wants to do something quiet, who wants to do something modest?" You know, so it was this kind of thing. And we traded paintings at one point. I was doing a series of black and white pieces, so a lot of my work is quite quiet and would have certain affinities with what he was doing at a particular time. And I like his work.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course, his work went through many changes, too. The retrospective at the Guggenheim showed that.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. It was very lovely and very gentle, and something quite clear about it. But, you know, certainly, really at that time I would say that Rosenquist was more of an influence on me. Or even Jim Dine was more of a direct influence, or Jasper Johns, or Robert Rauschenberg. In terms of really actively putting to use a kind of vocabulary in my

work, I would say that those were certainly more sources.

AVIS BERMAN: Rosenquist? That's interesting. Why do you say that?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, they were big and I don't know if you remember his paintings at the Greene Gallery where he got canvas on the wall and then there'd be a kind of dead tree standing in front of it and then something with a light. He had a very cool sensibility that was erratic—different than Warhol's and different than someone like Roy Lichtenstein, which was harder for me to follow. I mean, there's always been something very strange about James Rosenquist that appealed to me in particular.

AVIS BERMAN: Why did you say that Richard Serra was tormenting you?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, I can just remember something about the thirdyear students were in a building of their own and the first-and second-year students were all in this ghastly (for the purposes of trying to make work) [Paul] Rudolph Building. And Richard would just come cruising around, you know, with a couple of other of the older students, mocking what was being done. [Laughs.] I'm certainly sure that I wasn't the only source of it but as I began to paint and I wouldn't know if Richard—And then Richard also was a teaching assistant in a color class I had and he used to pop out from behind bookshelves and yell something at me: "You're not going to get away with it!"—because I wouldn't do any of the assignments. I just would do free studies and he'd say, "You're going to flunk. You're going to flunk."

AVIS BERMAN: Quite the authority figure.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I didn't seem to have very much of a reaction to him.

AVIS BERMAN: When you were there, is it true that only the men would get teaching assistantships and the women wouldn't?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I think my job was polishing brass pots, but no, I don't remember a woman teaching assistant.

AVIS BERMAN: I think it was the time when the school thought that the men "needed" the jobs but the women didn't.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, because I worked outside in the library or something to earn extra money.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I think it was that you were married so you wouldn't get one.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I don't know. I wasn't married my first year and I was on a partial scholarship, as I remember. I don't know whether that lasted my whole time or not. I just don't remember. But I did get a big prize, I remember at the end. The same one Chuck got for excellence or something, which was our name engraved on a perpetual trophy. So, you know, that kind of thing was in the air, I think. I felt very clear that people that who came down like Rosenquist, and Dine, Jack Tworkov, paid absolutely as much attention to me as they paid to any of the men. I did not feel, in that situation, particularly threatened. And Nancy Graves was a very strong figure there. She was one or two years older than I was and she was certainly very, very serious. And I felt myself to be serious.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess Janet Fish was there, too.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. I didn't really know her at all. I mean, I probably would have been more interested in what Nancy was doing at that time.

AVIS BERMAN: She was painting.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: I don't know what any of that work looked like.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: They were nice. I mean, I don't have a real strong—they were abstract and they were very nice. Chuck was doing huge Abstract Expressionist paintings and just in his last year there I remember him at the end of the term doing a huge, long nude. So that was when the figurative stuff started entering. You know, Brice had really begun what his work was to be.

AVIS BERMAN: It's astonishing that people really were—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Jon was doing his crazy things down in the basement. You know, sort of rabbits, you know, very much what his work has turned out to be.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you think that it makes a difference if an artist can enter into his or her key work early or later? Since you had quite a period of always working, but maybe it took you longer to reach maybe a key image or theme.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, see, I don't know if I've really reached it and I think that I have a different attitude towards work. Of course, people that I admire a lot are like Elizabeth or Joel Shapiro. I mean, you know too many to even mention who have developed and refined an idea that has a kind of natural evolution and growth and it would be pretty easy with any familiarity with their work to organize it in a chronological manner. I think that in terms of sensibility that I share much more with an artist like Jon Borofsky and there are many pieces of his that I admire, but oddly enough, they're the more minimal ones like the *Counting Stock* and things like that. And he's always been an interesting artist to me. So, in terms of my immediate good friends, I think that early I was probably involved in a different way of development, and I don't see any chance of that stopping right now.

AVIS BERMAN: I asked that because, of course, it's in your novel and obviously you have an artistic license, but one of the themes seem to be inability to work or frustration with one's work.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, that was really about one's first three months in New York. I got over that relatively quickly and that book should never in the remotest way be taken as a document of anything. I had no interest in writing an autobiography when I wrote that book and there's no attempt at including things. Some things are deliberate lies. I mean, not to trick anyone but they just didn't happen or I wanted to fill out something so I'd make something up that seemed plausible to me.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I wouldn't read it as a straight document, but it is to me so much of a roman à clef.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Sure, sure. But I'm saying what you're bringing up, when I came to New York it was really very difficult to know the kind of work I wanted to do. You know, and I just finished a body of work in New Haven that I was leaving. But that's happened to me since and it will happen to me again, and as you get older you develop different kinds of working habits. I mean, I think in that first year, even though there was a confusion, within six months I had the first plate. So, I mean, it's not like a—

AVIS BERMAN: The first plate was '68.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I came to New York in 1968.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I see. Okay. I was thinking about '65 from when you finished at Yale. So you were in—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I was in New Haven. I was married. I had a studio there. I was teaching all over Connecticut and then my husband—then I couldn't stand it in New Haven a second longer and I just got a loft in New York and the deal was that I would spend some time in the middle of the week and then we would live in the country and New Haven. Oh, it was a mess. It was the beginning of the breakup of the marriage but I wasn't fully conscious of that. I just knew I couldn't stay another second in Connecticut. And I had finished a body of very, very large paintings that were kind of—I'm not even going to describe them because it's too boring. They were very hard-edge like Al Held. Oh, Al Held was there, too. He was terrific. Tough—they were all tough in their own way.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you think that besides teaching you about painting, did they prepare you to be an artist, too?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I think it's just watching somebody. You know and going on the weekends to New York and seeing all the shows. You know. The nice thing was Yale's proximity and I think it was a very special time for Yale with Jack Tworkov there because what he did was just open up the school to practicing artists who would not come and accept a full-time teaching job anywhere in the United States. They wanted to be in New York City.

But they could make it down on the train once a week. So, that was fantastic. So, you were dealing with people who had committed themselves to painting, or sculpture, or whatever, who were artists. Not to people whose primary commitment was as a teacher. So, you just learned a lot from that. It's not conscious. You know, I would never dream of asking Al Held, "What do you think being an artist is?" You know, I knew what it was! I knew what I wanted! I knew where I wanted to show! I mean, there was nothing mysterious about it. It was, you know—

AVIS BERMAN: And also I guess by their example not only would you know where you wanted to show but, you know, you felt you would get there eventually.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Maybe sooner than what happened but, you'd just whip out your skills and there you would be. Also, it sounds as if though everyone expected you to go to the galleries every weekend and you did it and it was a discipline.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No. It really isn't—You wanted to. I mean, I think the thing is that I wanted to be an artist. I don't feel I was ever taught in that kind of a way how to be something. It just wasn't like that. And I don't see teaching in that way. I don't have a sentimental kind of view about it. I don't know how to explain this. I just wanted as much information as I could get, and I didn't care if the information was about what kind of shirt you wear, what kind of paint you're buying, what's the cheapest paint. I wanted all of the information and I would get it from anywhere, from other students. And I think that's what makes a good art school, where those divisions—it's people of different ages and different skills practicing for the same thing. So, both Mills and Yale were structures that I could bend. In other words, all I had to deliver was work and if the class extensively was about this and that and I didn't want to do it, no one could make me do it and I could still graduate. So, that's the kind of place that I picked to go to school. I mean, the only thing I wanted is I wanted Jim Rosenquist or whoever came down to think I was really promising. You know, that was sort of the lift.

AVIS BERMAN: Now you destroyed that work that—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, actually a lot of it. I think I destroyed a lot when I left Yale. Then I had this studio. Oh, Neil Welliver was there. He wasn't a teacher of mine but when I got my—I had a studio beneath him in New Haven while he was still in New Haven. And he was great fun. I mean, a very, very funny man and he always predicted I would become a figurative painter, though I still don't think I am. [Laughs.] So, it was just completely engaging.

AVIS BERMAN: I have to jump on this. Why don't you think you're a figurative painter?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Because I'm really—you know, if you look at all the work carefully, I'm really not too interested in landscape. Either that or I have very, very peculiar taste. In all of these paintings, you know, that's from a fence that I made. I doubt in ever walking by it in real life it would look quite like that. So, it's undergone a process of [inaudible]. I don't think I'm too interested in the landscape or since the only thing that anything remotely close to a figure has appeared is a little cement cast, you know, that appeared a number of times, probably like Cinderella. I don't think that figuration is my interest. I think that it's providing me at this point, and since the point of about 1980, which is a relatively short time in my career. There was a career that existed—a substantial one that existed before this period of work, and I think something else will be coming.

And I think the new pieces don't, in the studio, if you were looking, do not have to do with being a landscape or a figurative painter at all.

AVIS BERMAN: What do you think they have to do with?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, nothing in particular. I think that the problem of light is interesting to me. I think I'm interested in repetition and variation and all those kinds of things. I think I'm interested in the kinds of things, like, I don't know if you looked at the ones in the studio, but—

AVIS BERMAN: Only as I passed through.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, basically what they are is two years ago when I was pregnant with Alice I wanted a problem that would just get me painting a lot. That was a group of paintings that were totally, really for myself; just doing them with no reason. And I did forty-nine canvases from one foot square to seven foot square and all the variations within that horizontal and vertical with a one-foot increment. And I built the house and the fence and the boat as the thing that I was going to paint in this natural landscape. So, I dumped them in the house that we had, in the yard of the house that we had for the summer, and I thought that 'they would be white so that anything that happened with color—you know, I wanted them to be nonspecific. And they seem real stupid to me now, but this is what I did. So I did those forty-nine paintings and I put them up in the back of Paula's gallery and they were not very good. I wasn't still quite sure when I was going to Europe and I knew I wanted to do a large series of pastels, which was—I don't know if you saw this recent show at Paula's—those were taking, like In the Garden, when I had to leave where I was and couldn't paint from the thing I took thousands of photographs and those drawings were based more or less on peculiar juxtapositions of those images. So, now that I had in mind what I wanted to do next, which doesn't have to do with this. It has to do with something else. But I wanted to finish that work off with something relatively substantial because it seemed such a stupid, long thing to do for two years. So, these paintings are where the image gets big and the size I'm comfortable with, so it takes on that everything is bigger, considerably, than the original objects, or smaller. But they are not the same size as the original things. Then I decided well, what if we say the painting is true and we saw a lot of [inaudible] things but using the painting as construction documents. So, it totally takes it in a full kind of circle to me. That seems funny to me. And there was also something I wanted to do in painting with these. That each painting I want to repaint a minimum of ten times because I want to see something: how the information changes, how the surface. Because I tried at the beginning of the project to kind of just paint in plein-air and slobbing it on and I really wasn't happy. So really now I'm searching, probably quite consciously, for a way of painting in oil that means something to me. And I don't know if I'll find it. I never learned how to draw from the drawings that I did but I always set these tasks. Hope springs eternal.

AVIS BERMAN: Sounds like a good place to stop. Why don't we continue next time?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Okay

[END OF INTERVIEW SESSION.]

[July 8, 1987]

BERMAN: As I said, I was going to ask you about teaching. I was wondering if you thought you were a good teacher and it was useful to you as an artist?

BARTLETT: I think off and on I was a good teacher. I think I was sort of a bizarre teacher and had a lot of ideas that were strange. I remember I was not teaching studio courses. I taught art history at the University of Bridgeport, beginning art history, and I taught an art appreciation class at the University of Connecticut and that was the kind of class that I had no idea what to teach, actually. I suppose it was teaching someone to like art and I'd do it differently now, but I relied a lot on what was going on. I mean, I would show I don't know if you have ever seen the series of movies, there was one on Jasper Johns, one on Jim Dine, one on Roy Lichtenstein.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I saw those.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: They were black and white or something. They were quite good. I'd show those. I'd have other younger artists in talking about their work. I think I had them write—I can't even remember this assignment. There was just one paper: one assignment was to write a novel, but it was a novel having something to do with some kind of art, and I can't really remember how it worked out in the course. Only a very few students did that. So, a lot of my problems reflected my own interests, and then when I was teaching it also was in the early '70s and there was a lot of political activity in all the schools and I was quite sympathetic to that to a certain extent. Then I continued teaching. I taught for thirteen years. I think I was an okay teacher. I think I wasn't a great teacher. After I started making some money, which was when I was about thirty-six, I continued teaching for a year after that just to be sure that I could take care of myself. After that I was able to stop, and I'm not sorry. By that time I think I was pretty burned out by teaching, because I was good to the extent that I took it seriously. You know, you take it home with you. It's hard to get people

interested in doing their own work. I mean, it's a difficult thing.

Probably as a teacher I was happier when I was teaching at School of Visual Arts and felt that I was teaching more. I was happier teaching older students rather than beginning students.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, at SVA were you teaching painting?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. I would teach beginning painting and then I also taught what was called third year painting. At that time, people were doing everything. I mean, the work would go from somebody doing comic strips who was being forced to take this painting class to people were doing certainly deeply, conceptually oriented art. So I don't miss it. And I did thousands of those visiting artist things which I actually like, again, better than probably teaching a continual beginning course. I never found it hard to respond to students' work and articulate what I was seeing, or the directions in which I felt they could move or develop.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you said you weren't a great teacher. I was wondering what you felt made a great teacher of art.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I think probably that you have to be as interested or more interested in the students in their development than you are in your own and teaching was a way for me to earn money to support my work.

I preferred that to doing carpentry or being a house cleaner or something of that sort, but teaching was not my primary goal. It wasn't my primary interest.

AVIS BERMAN: But do you think you got anything positive out of it for your own art?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: It's one of those questions I feel I should say yes to, but I don't really know specifically. I think, you know, that if I would go to the Chicago Art Institute as an artist, as a visiting artist, and this was certainly before I was showing widely or anything like that, I would go as an artist and probably it helped to give me a sense of identity. But I didn't ever have, though I liked many of my students very much, I was not the type of teacher who would go out after school and have a beer. Say someone like Jon Borofsky, I think, might have really gotten a lot because he enjoyed being around young people. I tended not to see my students socially.

AVIS BERMAN: I was just curious. It seems to me sometimes that when you talk to people who teach and they're saying, "I think you should try to do this or that," and then all of a sudden you wonder, "Well, why am I telling them to do that?"

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, well, I always have so many rules and regulations for making work that I had more than enough to share. [Interruption.] So, I think that the ideas that I'd get from student teaching would have found expression anyway. I mean, in my circumstances I saw teaching more as driving three hours from New York at five o'clock in the morning to be there for an eight o'clock class and then struggling to get done and driving at five o'clock three hours to get back to New York. So, what I remember positively was when I had to go to 23rd Street.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, at a certain point there in the mid-sixties, I guess from about '65 to '68, it didn't seem that you were painting much.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I was, but I was married and my ex-husband was still in medical school and that was the reason that I was in New Haven. I had a studio there and I was working all time. It's just when I left New Haven I left all of the work there. I didn't bring it to New York.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you destroy it?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: It eventually got destroyed. It was stored in the studio. Then I went back and photographed it and it was destroyed. But I was working all of the time. You know, I would go to the studio every day.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, was that what we might call some variant of Abstract Expressionism?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No. Actually the paintings at that time were—oh, I just remember a couple of them were very sparse in their imagery, very minimal, actually, completely minimal. There would be one that would be say ten by twenty-five feet long and it would be

a gray sprayed surface with just six very shiny brown painted sticks coming up from the bottom with a steel chair in front. Or another one was a painting I can't remember, was it ten by probably sixteen feet? That had one foot by three-inch rectangular bars equidistantly covering the surface and every bar would be a different color, a different mix.

AVIS BERMAN: When did you begin to do—I haven't seen any reproductions—it was just mentioned briefly in the Calvin Tomkins profile, these things like exposed bowls and other things like that?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: When I came to New York, about 1968. And that was really a short period of time of work. I really don't remember the sequence of events very clearly, which I didn't remember for Calvin either, but I did those when I first came in. When I was first coming in, it was the same time I was really only in here three or four days a week, and it was sort of a compromise thing with my ex-husband where we lived in the country outside New Haven. I'd be teaching at Storrs, Connecticut, and then I'd come in here to work. So, I was really in New York three or four days a week, so that was when I was doing those pieces and there were a lot of them. A lot of them involved metal plates, where different objects would be defined in the way it would be gridded off and there might be a rope or a bowl—. I can't remember the different objects. And underneath it would be written what they were and then maybe it would be the same objects all painted red, or maybe the rope would be red and it would say "red" and the bowl would be painted blue and it would say "blue." And I was doing a lot of pieces using webbing, webbing and grommets where things would sort of come out from the wall, billow out. There'd be a great structure that, say, was made of elements each six feet by two inches long that would just be stretched over nails on the wall. Then the next stage in the piece the length of those things would be doubled, then tripled. That kind of thing. So I was interested in that time about—

AVIS BERMAN: It was repetition and variation.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Repetition and variation and when one thing works one way and then by changing one aspect of it, you change what the meaning of that object is. There were things that were—gosh, they were all so ugly. Where I cut squares, you know, two-foot squares of canvas, and I'd draw as carefully and accurately as possible a pencil grid on each one. Then I'd try and sew them together as accurately as I could and so they'd, of course, all be off a tiny degree, but in a strange way. I can remember being interested in that house that I've never seen in California that someone built, you know, just as a sort of their own personal preoccupation, where everything was off, oh, a thirty-second of an inch, you know, so the errors began compounding and having effects that you couldn't imagine. And the thing that characterized most of that work was that some of the ideas were interesting, some of the things could have looked nice as things. This was the old "push pin on wall" era, but there'd always be something wrong. Do you know what I mean? For instance, with gridded pieces, there was absolutely no reason for that ever to be canvas. You know, that just made the thing infinitely more complicated and cumbersome and had nothing to do with the kind of quality of the idea. It would have been just as easy to buy even ready-made graph paper and cut that and I'm sure I would have come up with the same thing, work on paper. So, there was always something that I didn't really understand that I was frustrated with. It was out of using these metal plates that I developed the idea of the plates that I was to use for many years. I don't know how many. Oh, I mean, I still use them every so often.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, that was in '68.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. So, all this that we're talking about is really when I was at Yale. They were large, minimal paintings and there were a lot of them and a lot of drawings. A lot of things that involved three dimensional pieces that really never got off the ground. And then there was a tremendous amount of work. I guess it covered many, many things for the first six to eight months in New York.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I'm going to skip to the plates. I'm not going to ask you really the story of how you saw them in the subway because I think that's been covered. But you said they were easy to manipulate and handle and they were portable. Did you feel at the time that you were renouncing a lot because you were suppressing paint handling?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, because really there had been quite a long process from, say, graduating or leaving graduate school and that point in which the way paint was manipulated and handled was not of interest to me. That that had left my work really very

soon after I left Yale and that the surfaces, though they were using paint, there wasn't much importance to it. I mean, you know, it would be the difference between matt and shiny, that kind of thing. I think that very much the impulse there was kind of to erase that way of making a painting, which has always been uncomfortable to me. You know, do you move the blue over here, or leave it there? I was never really very, very comfortable with the Abstract Expressionist tradition. It wasn't something I would have invented for myself. I was speaking to a painter that I know, Jan Hashee, the other day and it still is funny that people really—our conventions are so strong that frequently what they call painterly now still today remains thick paint. That was another thing, like the division between figurative and abstract, that I could just never quite grasp, you know, because I always thought Manet was a painterly painter of sorts, but it's thin paint. I think all the Renaissance painters, they were making paintings, so I thought they were—it's like I sort of understood, but I didn't quite understand, this distinction which was very much with the people that I saw and knew, very much of an issue then. You know, I was close to Elizabeth Murray and there were lots of different kinds of painters that I didn't respond as much to who were painting in different ways. Jan said the other day—I mentioned something about painting and how I was painting these things and she said—"You have a very oblique way of getting to a painted surface," and I said, "Yes." She was saying, "Oh, Elizabeth just only wants you to paint thick," and I said, "Yes, I know. I have no affinity for it." She said, "Well, I paint thick because I just get too impatient. I want a lot of stuff on there to start and then I can start doing the painting." So that I don't think that that kind of very direct manipulation of paint was something always that I really felt that I had to do through peer pressure, but it was not ever a comfortable way for me to approach a painting. I think it was a process of unlearning or finding that that approach as a painter was not necessarily necessary for me to follow like a religious canon and find a different way. So, that really disappeared quite early. So, on the contrary, a short answer to your question is, instead of feeling restricted I was absolutely delighted. You know, I found when I was doing the dots, doing these things, and I'd be limited to, what, six colors: white, black, yellow, red, blue, green, an enormous sense of freedom. You know, I was happy as a clam. I would work twelve or fourteen hours a day. I wouldn't feel guilty. I wouldn't feel bad. I wouldn't have to worry about that style because I just would dot away.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you think of them as mosaics?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No. No. I think it was really on the simplest, my way of painting and I think that people who I've thought about that were painting at that time that I felt probably the greatest affinity for would be somebody like Sol Le Witt, Richard Artschwager, certain of Frank Stella's things. I mean, I would say that Frank Stella's black paintings and things. I don't remember when they were done but I think in the late '60s.

AVIS BERMAN: I think actually the black ones, those original ones, were about '59, '60.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, were they?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, but they certainly—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: But there were a lot that followed that were still using, you know, the raw canvas and one color or something.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Those I think were paintings that I had really been looking at in, you know, the early and middle '60s, when I was getting to Larry Poons, if you remember. And I remember that seeming to be the work that I was interested in at that time. I like Jasper Johns' work very much, but I didn't know quite how to appropriate that, you know, and I still haven't figured that one out. [Laughs.]

AVIS BERMAN: Well, to me it's amazing because the dot paintings are always described in a very dry, mundane way, the sequence or whatever, and they're always so visually arresting.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, that's nice.

AVIS BERMAN: But you always seem to discuss them almost in a pseudo-scientific way instead of a visual plastic way.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I really have never liked talking about my work. I don't think I liked it when I was in college and I don't think I like it any better now, so I take a rather

remote point of view from it. Also, I'm never quite clear how my work even looks to me so I'm doubly uncomfortable. I just really I like to talk about everything else, but that. It's not that because it's particularly precious to me. I'm someone who likes to talk because I think it's fun, like some people who like to swim, but I don't necessarily like the talk to have a lot of content and I don't like it to be taken too seriously. So I think that I do have probably quite a dry way of looking at it. When I look back, working with that plate unit still seems incredibly peculiar to me. I mean, it seems like the most peculiar thing. It seems peculiar and very significant that I would have stuck with it so long. I think had another artist developed it, it would have been an element in a whole body of things. But I do think that the plate itself is a very direct, very tangible object. I never changed the size of it, though I thought about it. I never changed the size of the grid. I can remember even Artschwager telling me, "If this was my work, I'd be experimenting with the size of the plate, the size of the grid, how far it stuck out from the wall, how close it was to it." I didn't want to do that. I can't explain that to you and it's something that, as I said, I don't really enjoy talking about, but it seems curious to me that I would have done that, insisted on that so much. I think in my work that it's very slow work and there's a great deal of stubbornness and unexamined problems. So I can remember something that Alex Katz said when he talks about a painting. That he looked across the room, that the subject of that painting is the fence, the beach, a part of a house, a tiny part of a boat and water, but it's not the content. The subject of the plate pieces would be making a numerical system where each number expands in a certain kind of way, which is a dry thing. That was the subject matter of that painting. Or, you know, alternatively turn around and do forty-eight intersections that are selected randomly—do this, do that kind of rule. Again, that's the subject matter, just like if I were painting a nude. I mean, this is the thing that's always been hard for me to understand. That people looking at art, if they look at an abstract picture a square is as much subject matter as a vase is, as a rug is. I mean, there intellectually is no difference. You know, you may prefer the figure but the square is certainly not a poor cousin to the figure in terms of reality. But the content of the plate pieces was not the numerical system or not the devices of things to make the dots on that would generate the rules, but the fact that I had one-foot square metal plates with shiny paint, with no layering, with this and that, that went on the wall in certain ways, where each one was autonomous, yet part of a whole. And that there was nothing that was absolute about these things in a way. No one really knew why they had to be that size or any of those questions. So, in a way I was turning, unconsciously, against that notion that is written about so much with Jasper and Robert Rauschenberg of the painting as an object. In my case I think it was getting very much dematerialized and that wasn't a goal that I consciously was interested in. It's nothing I could tell you anything about now, but that seems to be what I was doing. I can remember Paula Cooper—

I had shown with Reese Palley and that gallery closed and Paula had come over to the studio and had found herself very disturbed by my work because she thought it was completely nihilistic. That I set up these systems and then I would have a compulsion to set up systems that were just on the verge of generating into something else so that they would destroy themselves. I think also the content of that kind of work was an elaborate stratagem to get stuff to make a situation which I could respond to, that I could think around like an object of contemplation or something, or an encyclopedia. I remember Sol Le Witt coming over once and I don't think that Sol liked the work but he thought it was—and you could see the part of the idea that he would appreciate was that it was something I could do virtually endlessly and to the abyss. And he thought the same way about my writing. He said why you decided to write about this is that I could go on endlessly doing it and it would have some interest, which is true. And another piece that had that quality that I liked very much that I may have mentioned last time, was Jon Borofsky's *Countdown* piece. I always felt close to Jon in terms of interest, you know, and maybe less close to Elizabeth Murray and Joel Shapiro in how I was able to do them, because Joel and Elizabeth were pursuing traditional, I'm not saying conventional, means of expression, and they were very good at it. You know, they were terrific. And I was just doing something else and it caused me discomfort at times and I was never really very clear of what it was but I did so much of it that it became an absolute statement. I still don't know, you know, about it. I mean, I like seeing the plate pieces now.

AVIS BERMAN: I thought it was really interesting. I guess the paradox of decisions.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: It was also simplified.

AVIS BERMAN: Decision, you make the original decision and then you follow it and it's almost as if you get to abdicate. You get to step back, which was very interesting, too.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: See, I've been thinking about this recently because I just went to see *Full Metal Jacket* and I always get scared every time there's a Kubrick movie, but I can see I'm no longer scared. There's no necessity because for some reason in terms of the idea of content, to me, Stanley Kubrick as a director and as an artist, is really light years ahead of other people. And I don't even think I mean ahead. I just mean the difference in his mentality is something that is extremely interesting to me and that people see it as cold. They see it as impersonal. They see it as this. They see it as arbitrary. They see it as passionless and to me it's the opposite. I find myself comfortable with Kubrick's vision and you think of the kind of movies that Kubrick has done, you know, the sort of comedy that was *Lolita* from Nabokov, whose apparent subject matter is always something to just irritate people, but whose real interest is language or something else. You have *Barry Lyndon*, which I think is one of the most staggering movies that's been made. You have *2001*, which no one has yet made a science fiction movie better than. You have *A Clockwork Orange* and no one else has made a recent, near-future science fiction movie better than that. You have the *The Shining*, which is I think a classic in the sort of horror-fantasy genre. On and on, and here you have *Full Metal Jacket*. So, they're very different subject matters. What characterizes them to me is this stepping away, of having a kind of genuine curiosity where something—you look at something. This really interests me. What people, I think, are more comfortable with is the expressive point of view: you have an idea in you and you want to express something. There has never really been anything particularly I want to express. I become interested in things and I like to order that information or put things together to look at. Say, so it brings an entirely different sensibility, say with Kubrick, to the work that's almost empty in the center. I can walk out of a Stanley Kubrick movie, as I did the other day, and not know if it's a good movie or not. But the more I think about it, the more I get interested. If anyone says anything bad about them I hate them, you know, and would kill them. There's something in that point of view that is stepping away, that is dispassionate, that to me is passionate and interesting. So, I'm not interested in expressive work. I think I would hate to be an actress, hate, hate, hate. I remember because I have a natural, loud voice that can project three-hundred miles easily, you know, and I can move around and do things, but the idea of interpreting is annoying to me. It's not something that I have a lot of interest in doing. I'm not very—We're just doing a book of a recent exhibition of drawings, Abrams, and they wanted to use a literary writer and I would have liked to have picked a woman right now. I read a lot of detective fiction and so what kind of interests me is what if I take something that instead of trying to get a writer who's making a kind of intellectual bid, if I had as a text in the book something that I read a lot for my own pleasure and relaxation. I mean in many ways that's what one's art is to other people, something that they go and look at in their leisure time, that they think about. I mean, I read a lot of other things but I read a lot of detection fiction, so my list, my sort of short list, of people would be—I like V. S. Naipaul very much, so that was one. There was Coetzee from South Africa. There was, who else do I like? And there was Le Carrè seemed a little too involved and emotional to me and a little too personal. And who I ended up approaching was Elmore Leonard, who is all dialogue, no explanation, sort of all bad people. I have an unpublished manuscript up on my bed which is to be his next novel, and I thought "Why did I pick Elmore Leonard, who I have a lot of respect for and I find the writing very lively. What does this have to do with me?—and I still have no idea. And that interests me. So, I'll think about that for a while. But that is the kind of thing that would interest me. And when we talked to Elmore Leonard, he said, "Well, what does she want me to do, what does she want me to do?" I said, you know, I don't care if my name is mentioned. You know, it doesn't have to be written. Maybe we could use an excerpt. But he's very busy now, you know, since he's gotten so famous. This wasn't always his condition. So, I don't know if this will work out or not. But in my work at this point I've been more comfortable with a non-expressive kind of view; it's more fun for me and it's a lot more interesting for me. And it gives me a way of working in which I can switch all the time. That's been important to me and I'm curious whether I'll continue doing that or not; I don't know. Was that too confusing?

AVIS BERMAN: No, it wasn't confusing at all. It's a lot to digest. Your take is interesting about Stanley Kubrick, because I always leave his movies utterly confused.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: To me they're crystal clear.

AVIS BERMAN: But, I mean, like *Barry Lyndon*. I sort of loved it, but I wondered what was there. But I always think of it. I remember it very distinctly. I mean, they get clearer as time goes on to me. But certainly *2001*—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: But it's interesting because, you know, I enjoy movies but I don't like

them that much and I'm married to a movie actor and I have to be dragged most of the time. It's interesting to me if you just take people as artists, whether it's in the area of dance, movies, literature, anything, to me the quality of thought in Kubrick is the most interesting to me, more than people in my own field. That doesn't mean that—I have no aspiration to be a film director. I would find it very frustrating. I don't want to do it and I think that I don't want to do it for a very particular reason. I don't like the fact that you can see through film. I don't like the fact that it's light on the screen. I don't like the fact that it doesn't stay still. You know, they're very sort of atavistic, primitive kind of reasons why I wouldn't like working with so many people. But, if you just take the quality of thought, or a direction of thinking, that that's something that can free float around. I mean, the difference between a composer like Bach and a composer like Mozart and a composer like Beethoven. They are really such radically different temperaments and there's an approach to the world, or a kind of—and I like Beethoven the least. I mean, the last quartets are beautiful and I say that the kind of thought expressed in the last quartets, or even the Bartok quartets would be very close to what Elizabeth Murray is attempting to do or Jasper Johns is attempting to do. It's very internal and it's anguished and it's dignified and it's complete and it's perfect, but it is something that is closed to me at this point. It's not ever going to be my way, I don't think.

AVIS BERMAN: I want to back track to when you mentioned before that Paula Cooper came to your studio and was very upset that you didn't hold the system. That to me was very—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: She was just confused. She wasn't mad at me or she didn't think I was terrible. She just couldn't understand why I would set up this very logical looking system and then just turn around and destroy it and make it much harder for the viewer. She didn't really understand what the point was. I can see her point and I don't have an answer for why I would want to do that. But, like you said your reaction to Kubrick was you'd come out frequently confused or not sure what you saw. Usually in Kubrick you haven't been directed emotionally in one way or another. There's not a cozy grandmother that's waiting in the wings that's going to tell you who did good in the movie and who did bad, and who's the evil one and who's the good one, and this and that. It's not an exposition of manners or values. It's a look at something peculiar where a pen floating out of a pocket can be as strong as an idea as the person who's wearing the pocket. This has always seemed a natural way of painting to me. I think that there is a kind of—you said scientific or pseudo-scientific interest.

AVIS BERMAN: Pseudo-mathematical, maybe.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, and I wonder if the word I know what you mean by pseudo because one isn't trying to be a mathematician, but you think of somebody like Mozart writing all of those obscene little canons, or you think of him writing for the most peculiar instrument of his time, and I'm sure wasn't just a sarcastic thing, the piece for the glass harmonium, which is very, very beautiful. But I think he has qualities that I think it's no accident—that didn't Mozart really write the first opera that was sung in German, in his language? That was against the conventions. There was a reason for it being done and I'm sure the reason seemed very, very strong. I don't think radical thought ever seemed radical at the time, it seemed something different. So, it's okay, we do it this way. Why not do it? What happens if we do it this way? After going to see the Kubrick thing, we were having a little discussion and a friend said, "But don't you think it's wrong work, like most of the people over there are Black" and I thought, "Well, yes." that a lot of the people that were killed were black and why were there so few Black people in this unit.

I just turned around and said, "I don't know the answer but I know there's an answer," you know, that the composition of that squad, the elements in it, there's an answer. Then we thought later maybe it was because the Marines are a special kind of corps and they have different attitudes and ways of selecting than the Army, they have different criteria. But what I'm sure of is that when Kubrick picked his story, or picked his subject matter, that perhaps he broke it down into parts: what it looked like; where it was going to take place; what were Marine training bases; is there one in California; is there one in North Carolina; is there one here; which one did he want to use or both. The basis of it would have probably been something that existed in a sense, and going further, I would think maybe that's how a platoon's made up; how many people in a squad; how many people are in a dormitory; how many people are in a thing. It wouldn't be just like, "Oh, I'm going to have it and there's about—" The research would be a big part of the work. Now, Kubrick is not going to write a thesis on the Marines' training. He's not going to write a sociological study. He's not going to write an effectiveness report for the Marine Corps itself he's making a movie. So, in art, like in anything else, there are ways of doing things. There are people who like to research and

there are people for whom that is completely beside the point and not in the least interesting. I'm sure that you could take an idea like that and trace that into all sorts of areas of art, because in the end the kind of art we're talking about is object-oriented. If it's big, it usually has a place to go. You know. So, it has to be on a wall or it's not on the wall.

There are so many givens in a situation before something is done. I think that's what makes easel painting interesting to people, or drawings interesting, because they're sort of out of nowhere. I just think that people think differently. So, a pseudo or a scientific approach or using numbers or not using numbers that on some level, to me at least, it is all the same. I think there are other things. The effect that Seurat had, I don't think the color ever worked that well, which was "the scientific reason" that he did it. What it did do, what those little dots did do, was make the picture absolutely still, almost sculptural. But at the same time quivering, the entire time, like molecules or something. That's an effect. Or if you look at Seurat's drawings, I think they're some of the most beautiful drawings. They are so sculptured. You'd think those drawings were really done by a sculptor rather than a painter. I don't know why I say that, but that feeling of volume. The kind of thing of classical camera obscura and those drawings are sort of like a still version of a Caravaggio, you know, the way they come from those intensely dark areas to the light.

AVIS BERMAN: Heavily molded in charcoal.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. And then you take Van Gogh, which is a completely different series of—

[END OF SIDE ONE.]

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I don't know. You get such ridiculous ideas about other artists. I mean, I think basically that all other artists are geniuses, you know, and I'm left behind in my own sort of corner doing what I'm able to. But it was very interesting to me to see that beneath most of Van Gogh—the drawing got very nervous, very immediate, very passionate, very crazed. All of the stuff that we know about Cèzanne—underneath all of those drawings was a very careful pencil drawing. Have you noticed that? With the houses laid out, the fields are laid out and then there's an immediate sort of thing. That just interests me. So everyone uses a kind of analytical approach in their work to a greater or lesser extent.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I also think, as you said, with dots Seurat's work moved, and the different colors of dots obviously made your work move, too. It had that—when you put the plates together—.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. Sure. But it was a very—I remember thinking a lot about molecules at that time and I think I had an interest, at the very beginning of the plates, in astronomy. And I had lots of ideas for pieces that would involve that that never saw the light of day because my sort of more content, more subject matter-oriented pieces, at least at that time, were always disasters and they were things I abandoned. That the simpler the idea was for me, whether it was counting, or making a house and rotating the house, or doing this, seemed to have more than when I put the burden of a kind of overt subject matter on.

AVIS BERMAN: At the time, did you think of yourself as just fitting somewhat squarely into minimalism?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, because at that time there was a lot of dialogue between artists. It wasn't like now and it wasn't like the '60s. I think that artists at that point tended to see artists. I didn't meet a collector, I don't think, for years. You know what it was like. There wasn't much money around. People weren't very interested in art. It was that time of process art and things like that. It was a different situation. There was very little media interest and there was a lot of talking at different bars and stuff and people were very interested in who fit into who. And the painters didn't basically think I was a painter and the Minimalists and the Conceptualists didn't think I was a Conceptualist. So I didn't want to have to defend myself all the time, so I just kept doing it, you know, and stopped thinking about it. So, no, I would say from my point of view I was dealing with the same things, but I think what I heard from the outside world that, in fact, no, I was violating many of the strong traditions of Minimalist thought.

AVIS BERMAN: Funny how quickly things can harden and get rigid.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. I look back at that time and that was a rigid time. I mean, I can

remember huge fights with somebody I didn't know very well, but I thought was very bright, Robert Smithson or Brice Marden. Everyone had an opinion and every opinion was absolute but there was a kind of passion then and it wasn't pluralistic. I mean, it wasn't that pluralistic, but there were all the discussions: so many people were doing so many different things. And much of the new work that's being done today, say the generation younger than I am, goes right back to 1970, 1972. Bob Barry's work, many, many people's work. I think that was a new thing at that time. I think that the reason there was so much talk was because it was new and that there's not so much talk now because it's not so new, which does not take away from what it is, but it's just different. But people tend to become didactic when they're the least sure of their ground.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, at the time, about '70 or '71 or so, Nancy Graves was doing those weather map paintings, too.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I thought those came later. I thought in the '70s she was still doing the camels.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I guess '69, '70 was the camels and then after that I think she—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: But the camels are just as good an example as the weather maps. I mean, I don't think the weather maps were as interesting as the camels. As I remember the pieces from that time—sometimes the camels would be all put together, sometimes the camels were in categories of different kinds of bones and organized in that and there was certainly the way—. And I would think Nancy did a lot of archeological reading, a lot of different kinds of reading that was just interesting to her because of those certain forms that she was using.

AVIS BERMAN: She's certainly a researcher in her ordering, and naming, and sequences, and also—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. So was Jasper Johns. That was very much in the air and I think it was in direct relationship to the kinds of things in abstract expressionism and maybe it was breaking some of those things down again and reordering them. There were lots of different ways of doing it. And performance. You can't leave out performance art, because I have a feeling that that was very important at that time, too. That the theatricality of Abstract Expressionism, and the mythology about Abstract Expressionism; the lonely artist facing the canvas and not reaching the masses, free-form emotion, and then going out and getting drunk and possibly dying in an accident. That became institutionalized in a way. It was being studied and you have the example of so many artists beginning to do different things. You have Don Judd doing his sculpture, but also writing about other art. It was a great time for artists writing about art in a sense. You had Claes Oldenburg and Jim Dine doing sculpture and Dine doing painting with the objects and then doing performances. You had a real ferment of activity that was just taking a new look at all of these elements. Then, also, the extension with the earthworks and that kind of work.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, did you see your readings of Cleopatra as performances?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I'd even forgot I did it. Well, I suppose in a sense I did. You know, I saw it as reading the writing and the impulse was the writing first. It wasn't that I saw them first as performances. I also was playing two games because the people that were encouraging to me as a writer at that time were the poets that were associated with St. Mark's Peter Schjeldahl was there, Ron Paget, who had also been very close to Jim Dine. There was quite a lot of interchange. Red Grooms was very involved with a lot of those people. So, to a certain extent, the impulse was writing and then I would read it and that was really the way that writing got out because it wasn't published a lot or anything like that.

AVIS BERMAN: It seemed to be from—I've read some excerpts of stream of consciousness, or association and progression of one thing.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Where did you read this?

AVIS BERMAN: I think I read some excerpts. I think the Museum of Modern Art has some in the files.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, it isn't. I mean, that book—the book that a lot of things came from is called *History of the Universe*. It's published now in a form, and I would say, no, it's not

stream of consciousness.

AVIS BERMAN: No, I didn't mean that. I meant Cleopatra. I thought it was. I didn't think *History of the Universe* was.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, I don't think it was—it didn't have—it was really like the plates. It wasn't a sustained narrative, you know: Cleopatra was born; her parents were so-and-so; she went to school and did that. It was reading. You know, there's very little actual anything written about Cleopatra, which is quite interesting because really whatever existing documents were totally destroyed. There's almost nothing. I mean, there are some references two-hundred years after her death in Roman works, but there isn't anything. And so I just read a lot of what was and I would say it was more like a variations on a theme kind of thing. I would just think in different situations.

AVIS BERMAN: I thought that *History of the Universe* was almost like a California Compton-Burnett, in which all of these little details would be piled up and that they were really ordinary one-by-one, but by the time you got through twenty of them it was absolutely harrowing, and it wasn't that different from everyone else's life.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, I don't think it was different at all. Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And then looking at it from different points of view and approaching it from another character, another time, so to me it seemed to be not crafted from different facets.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. I would have a very specific idea in each aspect of the writing, how I was going to approach it. And, I mean, this is my great curse. You know, I can conceive of a situation where I put a canvas on the wall and the rule is that I'm supposed to be spontaneous. But then, I get to thinking about, well, what is spontaneous, do you know? Then I'm just off on this other sort of track. This friend of mine, a painter, Jan Hashee, said the other day something that really struck me. I mean, you can know someone twenty or twenty-five years and you don't think about much and then they say something one day that makes you just: "Oh, my God, they've thought that of me all this time." I was saying something about "and then I'm going to put fifteen more coats on this, but I'm going to do it this way and this is only the third coat on this." You know, it's the same thing but you find in interviews with me that I describe what I do, not how I feel about it, or something like that. She said that I was the most direct person that she had ever met in her life but I had the most oblique way of getting there. There was something very true. There's a criticism in that too, that the obliqueness isn't a plus. That my way to that light on the pillar is not a simple thing of going over and doing it. It involves maybe ten or fifteen years of working my way into the position where I can go over and do something.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you think it's a criticism? I think it's a real insight.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I think it's an insight but I think it's a criticism. I don't mean a criticism in the sense of I mean like a criticism in the sense of a critical essay. That it's a description of something that could be done in many, many other ways and the way that I've chosen, to this person, is extreme and amusing. That the thing that I want is this blunt, blatant directness, yet the way that I chose to get it is the most complicated, the most obscure, the most oblique. There are other recipes, you know, for—

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you know, maybe setting up all these rules, situations that "I'll do this and this is what I'm going to do" and it's like speaking of another movie, this is dreadful, Eddie Murphy movie *The Golden Child*—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, I hate Eddie Murphy.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, what they have is they want him to be funny or do something and they have him go through an hour-and-a-half of other things to get from A to B. This is a failure; it's not fair to compare you, but it was that kind of thing. It's like in order to have a cup of coffee he had to go to Tibet to do it.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. Yes, this is familiar to me.

AVIS BERMAN: Since reading and writing don't exactly show up in your work, but when you compose it looks like you do work from left to right—certainly in a lot of the plate in *Rhapsody*.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: All of the plate pieces are from left to right. Any of the panel paintings, which I'm not doing anymore, are always from left to right. Left is always one. Right is always two, three, four, five, six. Even more than that, in the plates it was left to right, then you drop down and you go back to left. It's like reading. That just seemed to me when I was doing the plates, it's really the most straightforward way of doing it for a Western culture. Like, I don't know, I get involved in these things. They're amusing. I remember, and I think this has been written about, but this is the old left and right problem, too. Like some of my decisions in the plates were: how small is small, how large is large. Like I wanted something that was large enough to do things on but that was the smallest unit within that thing that was large enough, so I decided on one foot. Then I thought one foot, you know, I know we're going to be changing to the metric system, because if you remember, in 1968 it was right around the corner. We were going to do it the next September and I thought, "I bet we don't change into the metric system. I guess that we don't. I'm going to stick with feet and inches." Because that unit is a graceful size to me, where twenty-five centimeters doesn't seem important to me. It really is a portion of a meter. The centimeter and then the meters are the two units that are interesting in the metric system, though I think it's a wonderful system. I like the feet and inches because an inch is a thing. It's, "Oh, about an inch. Can't see an inch in front of his nose." You don't say, "I can't see a centimeter in front of my face." So, that system of measurement is something that's so imbued in or so deeply weathered into the English language and thought, that we as a culture, I think both Americans and English, seem to express a lot of things by measurable distance, which is interesting because the French don't express themselves that way, which is another topic. You can see I can be distracted easily. So, the foot seemed good and it also seemed neutral. Like I have a great love, and I did at this time, of the average. You know, what is a kind of normal thing. It doesn't look too big or too small—and which is why I've made such appalling objects sometimes because I've looked for this kind of average size that doesn't have anything to do with average because it was wrong, do you know? I'm rethinking all of that now. That gets the size taken care of. Then there was—What was your question because I got off, because it was the same kind of decision.

AVIS BERMAN: It was about composing, from left to right.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, right. Then, if I was doing a system that had a reading, it had a beginning point and an end point and it had ten plates. Do I put it in a straight line? Do they read from left to right? Can I put it in a square because it's a more economic use of space? If I put it in a square, say it's nine plates, is it read like in a book? Three plates, then three plates, then three plates, then one at the bottom if it's ten, that's the start of a new row. I decided that that was the most conventional way of doing it and easiest. If I tried to work from left to right, then drop down and work from right to left, it would be confusing to people. I was trying to be clear. That was the most normal way of approaching it and even if the reading in Japan would be completely the opposite of that, it seemed to be better to me than violate

So, I guess what I was dealing with is how limited our perspective is from the basic, basic, basic point of organization. When I hang a show, I am convinced that as people walk into a door they look that way first. Now, I don't know. I keep trying to find if they really do. I'm sure it's conditioned very much by the quality of the space and stuff, but I do. I look for a beginning. So, yes, it was left to right. All of the paintings continued left to right and any of the decision making in my pictures, and the pieces I'm doing right now is still those sorts of things. I guess that there's so much I take for granted that when I start trying to figure out I realize that the point of view is so specific, whether it's a cultural convention, a convention of my own or someone else's. Those entertain me. I don't have any messianic instinct to substitute them with something else unless I just don't want to do it that way and then I'll do it a different way.

AVIS BERMAN: I would add, I think most people, by the way, have a right turn bias, given most people—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I'm left-handed.

AVIS BERMAN: Aha! Most people seem to turn right as they walk through a museum show or gallery.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, it's interesting, you know, since I've been showing at Paula's space so long, really, it's the only space I ever think of. If I think of having a show it's always

at Paula's, and if you walk into Paula's to the right there is that window and that sort of undefined area with all the junk on the wall and the radiator and here is the wall.

AVIS BERMAN: It's like: here's where the art goes.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. The art starts here.

AVIS BERMAN: Maybe she's left-handed.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, she's not, but we do have the same birthdays.

AVIS BERMAN: Really?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: In *Rhapsody*, were you actually able to say that the first set you worked on was really the first set? Or did you—did what you made first end up on the left-hand side of the piece?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, absolutely. I did it in order. I had a kind of rule, which I used again in the "In the Garden" drawings, that if a piece was to be dropped it had to be dropped within one or two days of the working sequence. Do you know what I mean? In other words, I didn't—I never saw *Rhapsody* together before it was shown. It filled my studio three times, but I didn't, say, get to plate 362 and then decide that I didn't like plate number 10. If I had let that go by—but say if I got to plate 15 or 20 and I saw plate 10 didn't seem right, I would rework that whole sequence of plates. So, it was worked by that, but there was a time limit to me. It wasn't like twenty-four hours and sixteen minutes, but it was, say, a week or three or four working days. If any of it didn't work by then, then I didn't disturb it after that because it would have been an exercise in futility, you know. I think the piece, which no one writes about too much, was about moving somewhere. It was probably the piece that I found that is the closest to something—and it's not an accident that it's a musical term. It's a name which John Russell now just hates. He can't stand to hear the word "rhapsody," which was given to me by a friend. But I remember when I was trying to name it, it had something like that. Either the names that were related to encyclopedias or names that were related to music. [Someone talking in background; tape turned off.]

AVIS BERMAN: You were talking before about, I guess, looking for the average. Is it sort of a look to get through to the purposely ordinary, or the dull, or not having something in too good taste?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I think it involves all of those things where the thing is neutral a little bit to begin with. It is not excessive. I was going to say like in "Rhapsody" when, you know, I was saying sort of at the very beginnings of a piece you can have these elements in art: things can be big, small, medium. Well, what does that mean? In my case it meant large in relationship to the space that it was occupying. So, figuring out things like that and average, neutral—you know, in the house section when I was dealing with houses, you could have castles or hovels. What is a house? When I was using—because I wanted one area of them to be very specific like someone's house, I wanted a house that anybody could aspire to or anyone could fall to and not be devastated. It seemed like in this country, tract houses —. basically two bedrooms, living room, kitchen that you could work your way towards or if you had a lot of money you fall down and that's what I mean by neutrality. Like I wanted an average mountain range. Now, what I meant by that was not what a person who studies mountains what do you call that person? I mean, not just a geologist but there must be people who study mountains. Not what they would consider average and typical characteristics. What I wanted was if someone wanted to buy a picture of a mountain anywhere in the world that basically they would pick the same one. And to me it seemed to be the Alps and probably because pictures of the Alps have traditionally appeared in so many works. Whereas the Brooks Range, which I much prefer aesthetically, was a little too idiosyncratic, you know. So that's probably what I was trying to do in that first house piece that I did in 1970 or 1969, when all the work was number systems. I decide well, I wanted to do one. What if I do use an image, but I still am applying the same kind of numerical to it that I am to the rest of the plates. Isn't that just as good because logically they're identical, except one happened to be this house. When I was picking the image for that I thought, well, I want sort of, if you needed a picture for your wall and you went into a dime store and you wanted to spend five dollars or something, anywhere in the United States, what would be a picture that you would be the most likely to get? A little red house in the country with some

hills behind it? I don't know why I didn't put any trees in it. I don't think I liked trees at that time. With, you know, a fence and maybe a pond with ducks. I thought that was sort of the radical part of it. So that's how I would think, and that's what I mean by average. And also I think that they're images that children would draw or that if you were trying to explain something to me and you had to use a pictograph, you'd probably draw a house like my houses in a way. You know, this is already an abstract image. It is not a specific house belonging to someone. It carries nothing about money or position. It carries nothing about comfort or beauty. That it somehow, whatever the generic—it's like a generic brand. The way you think of things. Like we have products that exist that have become generic names. Like Kleenex, or Kotex or—

AVIS BERMAN: Q-Tips.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Q-Tips. Aspirin must have been, because it was always Bayer Aspirin, it wasn't just Bayer. Names like that, that's what I mean by neutral in a way. It's the common denominator. If you mixed high and low, and beautiful and ugly together you'd come out with that.

AVIS BERMAN: You're right, you didn't really want a social message.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: It has an emotional kind of tone to it already. I don't want really the emotional tone to come from the subject matter, I guess is what I'm saying. So I do try and neutralize it unless I want to make it extreme. I don't know if you know the *Luxembourg Garden* painting, where I go to the opposite sort of thing.

AVIS BERMAN: I could ask you one more question and we can stop.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Sure.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. How did you get invited into that show in Alan Saret's loft?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: It was really more of an idea—Alan is a very interesting man. I haven't seen him in a long time, but I keep intending to call him. But at that time he had a loft. I think Alan was trained as an architect, too, so he was always doing kind of interesting loft renovations that were part of his work. He just had an idea of opening his studio. I don't think there were really so many galleries then. I mean, what was there at that time? There was Paula Cooper, period. Then a year or two later Ivan Karp moved down.

It wasn't like now. There were very, very few galleries. What were the galleries? It was Janis, Castelli. I don't think Sonnabend was around at that time.

AVIS BERMAN: No, because then I think she was probably married—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: To Leo. There was the one uptown, the woman who showed all the interesting stuff. You know who I mean, don't you, where Walter DeMaria showed?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I know, but I cannot think of her name at the moment.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: There was that gallery. There was Dick Bellamy's gallery which then closed quite early on, but the Greene Gallery was a great gallery. And there was Andrè Emmerich. He showed Ken Noland and that group of people. Jasper, Rauschenberg, Warhol, those were Castelli's.

AVIS BERMAN: Which was not in SoHo then.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, uptown. There really was Paula, and Bykert Gallery with Klaus Kertess, who was showing. But there were really, what, five galleries. So, Alan had the idea—and there were a lot of artists and people were using alternative spaces. If you remember Paula, there were constantly concerts and performances and Phil [Glass] was playing at different lofts and stuff. It was a very different kind of thing, but think how few, few, few galleries. I mean there was that other one where Alex Katz showed and those people showed and, you know, there really weren't many that showed contemporary art. That is incredible to think of how different. That single fact would be interesting to research. There weren't any alternative spaces at that time like P.S.l. Alana [Heiss] was just coming into town at that time, which was, again, a radical idea that she had.

AVIS BERMAN: That was when the idea of alternative spaces was beginning.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: So Alan had just decided to, you know, have shows at his loft. So that was it. And he had picked me and there was someone else and he was going out with Laura Dean at the time, who was just starting dancing. So, I guess he knew me and we were hanging around a bit together, not romantically or anything, but as friends, and that was what it was. So it was his thing. I guess I picked up on it and took it very seriously and tried to do a show.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you get much response from it?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I think that—I mean that you have to realize I'd only been in town for about a year and I can remember people whose work interested me like Keith Sonnier being there. You know, Paula came and saw it.

AVIS BERMAN: Is that how you got into Reese Palley's Gallery, with that show?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, you know, it was a small community and I think that Reese was opening a gallery and, again, there weren't many galleries and I wanted a show. I suppose someone recommended me. I can't remember who was there at that time. There was a good friend of mine, Barry Le Va. Now, I don't know if he said something, or if he was there or that I was there at the beginning, but I was offered a show by Reese. Then a new director, a man from the South whose name I don't remember, came and said "Oh, you can only have the bottom space." So I just said, "No. I don't want it." Then a woman named Carol, and I'd like to find her name—she was terrific—came and took over and then she gave me back the top space so I had a show there.

AVIS BERMAN: But you only had one?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, the gallery, I think, only lasted two years. I mean, I don't know the story, but I think it was some kind of a tax thing. They had some kind of interesting people hanging around there. Joe Zucker had a show there. When Carol, whose name Paula would remember—. We should find it out because I do this all the time. I think there were interesting shows there but she just stayed a short time. Then a woman took over who was later to have a gallery across the street over Fanelli's. Do you remember that gallery? And she showed David Diao.

AVIS BERMAN: I don't remember.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, there's a whole history of people who—

AVIS BERMAN: The pioneering days of SoHo. But you got into group shows at the Whitney and the Modern, or the Modern and the Whitney, so people were coming down and looking.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. I think people were interested and though it was just very different then but it was the same thing, a kind of word of mouth. And I think it probably is still exactly the same. I'll hear about certain artists, younger artist, I can hear forty names and read forty articles and somehow I know by who it is that tells me you should see this work and I see it right away. There is a strong word of mouth in the artistic community and I think artists traditionally feel a great deal of—

Daddy's in his office, Alice. [To child in background.] Okay. Just let me get her.

AVIS BERMAN: People looking and—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Recommending people to each other. It was Lynda Benglis and Joel Shapiro who suggested that Paula look at my work and I think it was over a year before I was with the gallery. But I gave a reading here and she showed a piece. And I think probably Joel and I recommended Elizabeth Murray and I think Paula had always shown pieces by Jon Borofsky.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you think that most of the artists in her gallery, or a goodly number, came through other artists' recommendations for her to be on the lookout for these people?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I think it was a combination of things and I think it's still happening. You know, you'd say, if I saw someone who attracted me I would say, "I saw a piece that I really liked." I mean, Bob Goldberg is with the gallery now and he was an assistant there. I think she showed one piece and then a year later showed another. I think

that probably she likes a lot of time to think about things, but she'll listen. I mean, that's the old story of— Wasn't it Rauschenberg that brought Leo Castelli down to see Jasper's work? Yes, I think that's always been a strong part of the art of world and I think probably one of the nicest parts.

AVIS BERMAN: You also think of today as being so competitive that no one would do that for someone else, but people do it all the time.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: They do it all the time I think. I heard about a young woman artist called Meg Webster, whose work sounds interesting to me, maybe from six different people all of a sudden, one of whom was Bob Goldberg and I tend to listen to Bob. You know, we don't agree on everything, but I happen to like his work very much. So I've already started making an effort to go over to people who have shown her and at least see photographs of things if I can't see real things. So, I mentioned to Paula, "Do you know Meg Webster? What's her work like? What do you think?" I mean, it's interesting. Any new work is interesting.

AVIS BERMAN: I think that kind of intelligence is fascinating.

Thank you. This is all for today.

[END OF INTERVIEW SESSION.]

[July 22, 1987]

AVIS BERMAN: The last time that we talked we had begun to talk a little bit about *Rhapsody*. A couple more questions: Why do you think that you have set such store by systems in your work?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: They're a way of getting somewhere. They're a way of correcting something that I don't feel I can do ordinarily. My systems aren't ever very accurate. If you want to get to A and Z there is a way of organizing the problem. If I give you a system of these clouds drifting across the window, I would like to know that they're composed of water. That somehow they exist in air. I like to know how things work and we don't know all the answers of how things work at all. There's been Diderot. Then there's the dictionary of how things work—there's an actual encyclopedia about that. There's the Encyclopedia Britannica. So, the systems come out of a kind of curiosity, a sort of analysis. (We mayhave to do this again.)

AVIS BERMAN: Do you think that although the systems are allowed to break down if necessary, it's a way of being less reflective once you set the system up?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, without question. I'm much more comfortable responding to something than I am initiating something. So, in my work I'm both partners: I'm the person who initiates the response and the person who responds, who takes up more time than the person that initiates.

AVIS BERMAN: I think that's an interesting thing you said—that you can respond. I think Roberta Smith said that was why she thought that you were good with commissions. Especially if people want something, there's something there to react to.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, there's a building, or themselves. Something that's also on a much larger scale usually. I mean, if people can afford commissions, they're usually corporations, so it's usually on a larger scale than I would imagine in my studio.

AVIS BERMAN: I would have said from looking at *Rhapsody* that you would have been ideal for large commissions because you seem to have a real understanding of scale. You just don't take something little and blow it up. You seem to understand size and dimensions.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I've always been curious about the Great Wall of China. I'm curious about all those kind of things that a group effort does for a larger thing. Like in *Rhapsody*, I think the way that we think as human beings is totally complex. We hate something, we like something, we're very sad, we're very this, our time here is very short. Everything is very fast and you can slow it down or speed it up but it is it. It's the it that I'm basically interested in.

AVIS BERMAN: The four images of *Rhapsody*, did you really free-associate them?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: I'm not convinced about that because they're so basic.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I did, but I decided to free-associate them.

AVIS BERMAN: I don't get that.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I said I'll pick four images and I'll pick the four first things tha.t come to my mind starting now—and those were the four first things. No, it wasn't real calculated. Why did you think that I wouldn't have done that?

AVIS BERMAN: Well because they're so basic and they're so useful. Of course, you made them so, but it could have been a house, candy cane, ocean, mountain or something.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: But that's interesting why you think that I didn't because there could have been other things that would have been as convincing. Like if I had chosen a boathouse and fence like I'm doing now, wouldn't that be as convincing?

AVIS BERMAN: Possibly. I mean, yes.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: There.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it could have been but it was almost like the elements of earth, air, fire and water. They're so close to something like that.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Because I think that would have been more interesting. I didn't pick those. So, what's more associated with fire? The house? The tree?

AVIS BERMAN: Well, okay, fire is a difficulty but, certainly I guess what I thought is that you've got earth, you've got something man made, you've got something of the land, and you've got something of geology, the mountain, and you've got water, too. It was very archetypal, I guess. I mean, in other words, they just seemed to be so basic.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, what I'm suggesting is there are other archetypes, too. I mean, I could have taken a plant.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, the tree.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: A human being, a fauna. I mean, it's not really complete, is it?

AVIS BERMAN: No, but it's interesting that you didn't take a human being. But the house could stand for the human presence.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, it does.

AVIS BERMAN: One would think it does. Well, I guess the choices seemed to be so good that it was hard to believe they fell out of nowhere. It seems to me that you would have to free-associate five, or six, or ten things to get the four that you really wanted.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I got them right away and I was impressed about the tree.

AVIS BERMAN: Why was that?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Because at the time I didn't like trees really very much, and it didn't seem like anything I could do much with. Of course, that's turned out to be the opposite.

AVIS BERMAN: By the way, I guess the mountain could have been fire, formed with fire.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: As you say, it was unconscious, but it's just the four seemed to be so basic. They could expand so well.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. Well, I think I'm doing another piece on just the house.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, the other thing I was interested in along that line is working out the plan, is to have done this when the literature says it filled your studio three times and you

never saw it all at once. How did you keep it in order and work through with it all spread out?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Numbered the plates. I made all the decisions, which I think I told you a while ago, where a mistake wouldn't linger past a day or two, and just stored them. You know, it was exciting for me to do.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, do you think there was a purpose, a purpose for you not seeing it all at once and not being able to go back and look, was this useful? It was part of the working out of it?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I wouldn't have had the idea and been able to carry it through if I got an idea of seeing everything at once. So, sort of the question and the answer's the same. I think.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, have you worked like that since—of just not seeing something or now when you work on anything can you see it all together?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No. I almost never have any idea of what I'm doing. And somehow, like with the last group of drawings, which was a very circumscribed group of work, where I sort of executed things, I had no idea what the collection would mean or anything like that. And in these works, particularly the one I'm doing now, I kind of know what I want to do. I want to do very serious painting with very, almost silly, three-dimensional pieces. I don't know what I mean by that. I don't know how to get to it. I had three people here and I'm paying—I mean, I'm going slowly broke on this. I know I'm learning something from it. I'm making myself rules about painting paint, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten times. I don't know if I get ahead or behind in doing that. So I basically don't really know.

AVIS BERMAN: So, almost part of the composing here is keeping the "I don't knowness." It's helpful.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. It's creating an environment in which a lot of judgments aren't made and where there is experimentation and where I can fail, but with a good reason.

AVIS BERMAN: Well when you say "fail," how do you edit your work? When does the editing begin to come in?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Early. I mean, really whatever you see that I put in a public situation, that I've decided to let that be in a public situation, whether it's good or bad.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, if it's bad, why do you let it be in a public situation?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Because I didn't know what else to do. That I felt that one needed, which is me, "one" is me, that particular piece of information. That that's how it came out. That's how it is. So, the one that looks good maybe is an accident. I don't know.

AVIS BERMAN: When you're saying that, in other words, you almost have to see them to sometimes know something's good or bad, you have to see it out of the studio and in, say, the Paula Cooper Gallery? Because works do look different.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: That helps. But what's good in terms of a public consensus, you know, can sometimes be bad personally or not important. And what's bad in a public situation is a thing you keep trying to work with.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course, we're not defining good or bad very well. There was an interesting quote, what you said about *Up the Creek* and *To the Island*. You said, "Probably there was as much wrong in that as anything I've done but they're still to me the most interesting things I've done."

JENNIFER BARTLETT: That was what I was thinking of when I said that. They didn't look good. They're the wrong size. They're profoundly silly and they're just repellent from my point of view in every way, but there was something, you know, that I was very deeply interested in.

AVIS BERMAN: What do you think that was?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Something I think I shouldn't be interested in. Where things are all confused. That everything stands for itself even though it's wrong or inappropriate or that

you'd used a lot of different sentences to define a situation. Like I say, "Oh, it's so light and airy in here," and you say, "It's so rectangular with all the beams going this way." And I say, "It's sort of cool" and you say, "It feels sort of warm." It's that kind of situation where we have—. I think it was the most clumsy way of saying we have different ways of looking at things and different ways of perceiving them and all of those things are fairly large and small depending on when we're standing in a certain place. A place to me like the Stony Point, the *Up the Creek* thing, is a place utterly depressing in my mind that I had a kind of a feeling of joy just looking at light through the trees or getting away from who was there. Probably those pieces are the closest in a very broad and not very attractive way to how I think. Which was just saying, "Well, let's see the different ways we can look at that." The "we" being me.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, maybe it was also a way, as we discussed last time, that you wanted to get away from taste, good taste, and try something different that way, too.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, if I heard myself saying that, which I have said on occasion, I don't think that's my primary motive.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I think what you said about taste was that if you chose on the basis of taste that you chose the same thing over and over again instead of doing something differently. That was a statement you made for a Whitney show. I'm not trying to hold what you said against you. I'm just using it to—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, no, no. I remember saying that.

AVIS BERMAN: To guess at some of these things. Well, also, in the *Up the Creek* that you actually did try a swimmer, the face and a person—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: That was my husband. I think that probably he was the first person that impressed me so I put him in the painting, and it didn't work so I took him out.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, does that mean that that painting is destroyed or you painted the face out? Or you just stopped doing those figures? It's a big head, you know, it's almost like—It's huge.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I wanted a person in those pieces so I put Mathieu in. And I still sort of basically like those pieces, but I just can't see much from an artistic way to defend them.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, there's another thing I wanted to ask about. Just to go back to *Rhapsody* again, this is what critics or people looking at it were saying. I don't know how you felt it was conscious or if you agree with it, but there was a lot of commentary on how it was a just a compendium of art-historical styles. Did you feel at the time you were playing around with that? Or was that a kind of an extraneous read on it?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: That was just something that happened. It wasn't what I was interested in.

AVIS BERMAN: It's hard for me to believe sometimes how much artists do or do not intend to evoke other styles. It sometimes seems to be a function of critics who like to put in references to things. It seems to be very hard to imitate styles for so long. It would seem to be very difficult while you're doing something visual, sensual and also cerebral, to be thinking, "Okay, now here's my turn at—."It seems to be a very difficult kind of feat to keep in mind, with all of these other things one is doing, especially on a work like that.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: What's a difficult feat? I don't understand that.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Well, this idea that you were just going down the line in art-historical styles.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, no. I never did that. My answer to that was if I had done that I would have done it much more thoroughly. No, I had absolutely no intention, and that's completely wrong. All that happened was just accidental in terms of the ideas that I postulated and the way of solving them. But, no, are you kidding? I mean if I had done *Rhapsody* as an art-historical piece I certainly wouldn't have limited it to part of 1920 on I mean, we don't have anything of Cèzanne. We don't have anything of anyone. There isn't really anything—*Rhapsody* may have some things that look like a Sol Lewitt or a Frank Stella, or a Delaunay, or something like that but you don't have anything that looks like

anything. You don't have anything that looks like Russian constructivism. You just don't have anything that looks like anything. If I had set out to copy art history, which might be an interesting and fun idea, which I'm not going to do, it would have been infinitely more fun than that. And I don't think my material would have been plates. How would you get, like, a —oh, who's the guy? Family of painters, Renaissance. Bellini. But Bellini when he has a certain nude woman next to him, and an open window which has a duller sky than the woman's flesh. I mean, how would you ever imagine that? And if you were going to copy it, you wouldn't do what I did. And if you do Fra Angelico in San Rocco—those continuous totally developed fragments of cloth—you would not use plates. Though you might get the idea from them, you wouldn't do it. So all I was trying to do was find a way that I could work a lot and that's it. But, believe me, if I was trying to do art history there wouldn't be the *Rhapsody* you see.

AVIS BERMAN: You could have done it with slides. [Laughs.]

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, not even. I mean, everything that's so interesting about art is if I look at these four green things [points at vases and plates], two from Japan, one from America, American cheap and they're all working along the idea of Celadon, that color and that way of working, they're completely different to me. They feel different. They look different. Everything's different. I mean, that's the kind of thing that's a burden for us. All of the writers have written about it. You know, the Japanese writers write this way about how things are very fleeting. So, they'll have beautiful, red, weeping cherry trees and put sand around it, which even the image in your mind is totally extraordinary. You have Balzac, who will just try to write everything down and burn himself out and die very early. Or, you have Flaubert, who holes himself up and does this or that and writes perfect prose. And you have Dickens who will walk himself to death and write in full-mouthed prose. And fabulous when it's fabulous. And they're sort of all making things. I don't think there's a direct route to it. I guess I think all artists are alternately terrified of life and just astonished by it. In *Rhapsody* probably what I was trying to do was organize things. To be able to see it clearly. To allow myself the chance to do different kinds of things. To do the little picky things that I would copy from a photograph and do things by using big brush strokes, and to do things by small brush strokes. That was a very small attempt. I think it's what I wanted to do before I got too tired to do something else or had to go to things more deeply. To just plot out a course of action. So, it wasn't about art history, but then it was.

AVIS BERMAN: It's interesting that you just said, "before I had to go on to things more deeply." Do you think you went into things more, say, broadly than deeply in that work?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: In *Rhapsody*, yes. It was totally broad. It wasn't deep. It was like a very large sketch for thinking but then it has a physicality so it's become a thing, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: But you had been able to work out several different aspects of it. You worked out of it. Besides the house paintings you tried to get the—well, the image, since the 1970s, certainly that idea of working in a sequence and having the house break up and be rendered or not, or just appear four, five, or six different ways was interesting. One after another but working horizontally.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I didn't think that was so interesting after *Rhapsody*. I think that was what I thought was interesting then. And you were talking about those plate paintings like—

AVIS BERMAN: The addresses paintings.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. That was more about painting in a sort of shy way. You could do it sloppy. You could do it neat. You could dot. You could do this. It was quite a difference with using an image of *Rhapsody* to find out something in a very tentative way about painting. I didn't find out that much. Can I just—

AVIS BERMAN: Sure.

[Tape turned off.]

AVIS BERMAN: You were talking about the house paintings as a way into painting.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, I basically thought that I would do, you know, ten or twelve paintings from every sort of theme that I'd raised in *Rhapsody*; or two; or one. And I just got stuck on the houses. I totally got stuck and things like what if you were driving down the

street, your house always looks larger. So, with the plates I had the opportunity to do that. What if you have an ideal picture of a house and everything else dumps on it. I could do that. What happens if the house is primary colors? Yellow, red, blue and then all secondary colors. It was just like a way of taking that further and asking questions. So, I got totally stuck on that and I intended to do the same amount of work about the lines; or about the mountain; or about the ocean. And it just hasn't come out that way. I mean, the questions that I can raise in my work would take me forever to answer. So I never know if I'm making the right decision. I never know if I'm doing the right thing, but I do like doing it, basically better than anything I could ever imagine doing.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, whether it was purposely or not, you did go on to the ocean, certainly in *The Swimmers*.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, I guess so, but I didn't think about that, either. I just did it. I remember when I was in New York in the summer Elizabeth Murray gave me her studio for, oh, a period of time when she was going to Europe for the first time, and that's when I painted a painting that I call *Graceland Mansion*. I painted about three or four there and what I had never had in my studio on Green Street was a view back from the painting fifty feet. And if you sat on the toilet in Elizabeth's place you could really see the painting from an extraordinary distance. I remember Elizabeth coming back and I'd done those paintings there, which were basically about the size, being long or something. Then I went to someone else's, Carl Throshi's, and did a tall one. These were all in the house series, *Day and Night*, *Graceland Mansion*. I was at Elizabeth's when I heard that Elvis Presley died and I was working on a painting and that made me sad, but I thought the name he gave his house is quite beautiful. So, that was *Graceland Mansion*.

I remember when Elizabeth came back we bought two bottles of champagne and all we could talk about was, she had seen Italian art for the first time, is all the people flying through the air and the absurdity of that. And then we talked about how the difference between a really good painting and a bad painting was so much. And you really know when it's a good painting, or a good idea. But then, I'd add something to that. You just know from the arthistorical position whether something is good or something is bad. So, my real desire in all of these things was not to be smart and not to—I wish I had had a kind of natural gift of painting, where just if I drew a hand it would always look good. I don't have that. What I have is a mind. And really all I want to do is make art. And then reasons or sources, or—you're getting me at a weird moment, so you can just have the whole thing. I want to do it because it's quiet. There are so many different kinds of talent, even within that field whether it's an intellectual talent, whether it's guessing what can happen, whether it's talent as we can see from people who could do things technically that we'd never dreamed of, but we don't look at their art anymore. The chance of us being known or not known is as bizarre and strange as it was in the fourteenth century. That basically art communicates something about life that is still and it's a distillation of something. I think we'll all live or die in terms of that in whatever time period we are. I don't think that most artists do it for money or do it for fame. But it is a way the people that do do it or want to want to define themselves in a certain way and that way is different from singing a song, than composing a tune, than going into government. It's a contemplative life. As aggressive as you get, you are not all over in art. It's also a like where you do not have to make decisions about the contemporary issues. You do in your career about the career. The career is not very important and it never has been and every artist knows that. No matter how much they try to beef up their career that that is not the important thing. So, I think we're left in a very small, idealistic, rather a silly world to celebrate something which may be just sort of being I mean, I think of Richard Serra's piece of tossing that lead in the corner. To me that's a very beautiful contemporary piece. I guess what art does is make us think in a kind of way about what we have. So, what was your question?

AVIS BERMAN: It doesn't matter.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, but what was the last one?

AVIS BERMAN: Well, actually I had just mentioned *The Swimmers* as the part of the ocean that you had gone back to that we talked about.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I can answer that directly. I guess *The Swimmers*, unfortunately, meant human beings, whatever bad points we have and however we got here, which we don't know, prevailing in some sort of an obscure way. All the swimmers are sort of being crashed

down in those paintings, or they're floating benignly on the surface for a minute.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, there was something to—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: See, talking is so bad because I could refer you to East Coker by T. S. Eliot or any number of writers who have expressed in language something that I'm unable to. I don't even think of *The Swimmers* as anything but a painting I could paint at a certain time. I had sort of technical problems with plates and canvases and that was funny to me so I did it. What something means—I think the only thing that means anything is if you do one thing rather than another, and I chose to be an artist. You know, whatever that means is time and it's a way of slowing down about life. And it's a way that where your work might be very much slower than your perceptions of what's happening in life. One hopes it's truthful about it. The work on the houses was very perky to me.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I want to ask you some very banal nuts-and-bolts questions about *The Swimmers*, which is just because it was a commission. Just how it came about and what the stipulations were.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I got everything wrong. I thought Atlanta was on the ocean. I wanted to do the commission. It was hard for me to do. I can remember sitting in the back corner of that studio doing the drawings in desperation. I can remember hiring people to draw the straight lines for me. You know, that was basically an opportunity and I wanted to pursue it.

AVIS BERMAN: Did they come to you?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: You didn't have to enter a competition or anything like that?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No.

AVIS BERMAN: I'm just curious how government commissions work nowadays.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Basically all I had to do was present a proposal. I went down and I made the proposal.

AVIS BERMAN: And did the preliminary look like the final work?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. It was a lot bigger.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Well, it seemed to me, though, that that was really the first time that you began to use splashier brush strokes.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No. No, I used that much earlier.

AVIS BERMAN: But dispersed all the way through like that?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Were they upset that you were applying plates and canvas and stuff? Did that bother them?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, because they had most of the [inaudible]. They hated the other work. Nothing much touched me except getting it done. It was totally passionate. So, I sort of had started it one way and then I had to throw away everything like even the first three or four paintings and do it another way. And how I did it was copying my drawings. So all those great Expressionist things were not Expressionist. I mean, I just gridded off the canvases and figured out how the brush stroke would go and did it.

AVIS BERMAN: So, the copying from your drawings sounds like something that you either hadn't done very much or didn't like doing as a rule.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No. I'd never done it. I'd never seen that as a possibility.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess before you'd always worked directly.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. But this was no less direct in a certain way.

AVIS BERMAN: Why was that?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No. I said that just wasn't less direct.

AVIS BERMAN: It sounds like you panicked in it. It sounds like it was beginning to go wrong.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: It did go wrong, totally, at first, because what I did was I did proposal drawings and I drew them in sort of a fever. I did two sets of then. I thought I could do the paintings that way and I just had no idea about the paintings. It just didn't work out. By the time I got to the second or third painting, I junked it. I thought I'd be much better off following what the final drawings were that I presented and really trying to do those; to realize those and take them seriously. So that's what I did and that was a happier solution for me.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you finish on time or was it late?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. I usually finish on time.

AVIS BERMAN: It sounded as if you had lost a lot of time.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I did but then I guess I make up for it.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you work in spurts or do you have a rhythm or do you paint a while and then stop for a few weeks?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I try and work all the time because I need to work all the time. My ideal idea is to work eight hours a day moving my arm. And I don't do that very often. But that's what I try for. I don't even know if that's right.

[END OF SIDE ONE.]

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I didn't get so obsessed with it. It's really—I can't imagine my life without doing art. I mean, I can imagine life if I were a different person. It does give me the greatest pleasure.

AVIS BERMAN: After *The Swimmers* mural then you did the commission in Philadelphia for ISI. You worked with Venturi, is that correct?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, but not very closely. He would have liked to have—who's the Viennese artist that used a lot of gilt?

AVIS BERMAN: Klimt.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: He always thought it was a Klimt-like situation because basically his conception of building was all the money that they were going to put in and an open-plan construction. I didn't understand architecture at this point. Venturi doesn't like to work with artists that much. I mean, I just got an award, so I saw all those guys. They think they can all do it better than we can and they're probably right in terms of the building. But what I decided to do there, after Venturi in a sort of perfunctory way met with me and told me his Klimt idea and I said "great", was I took drawings from *The Garden*, five of them, lined them up, filled the space he left for art. He had an overhang, so I went up into the overhang where the painting was. You couldn't even see it all unless you walked up to it and thought of filling that space. Then I did, in my studio, an exact version of the same painting. So, I did two paintings at the same time that were supposed to be exact but they were both very loosely painted. This was so boring. I mean, but I always had the idea that the second painting would be split up the way they split up information, and just be hung as itself in one panel, two panels, in the toilet—.

AVIS BERMAN: I thought it was interesting that it was dispersed throughout the building.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: That was a good idea.

AVIS BERMAN: That was your idea?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, absolutely. That was the idea of the piece, with two versions of the

same painting. One which was together and one which was not together. So, when you perceived six of an original 300 panels, that that would be a real thing. That was it. Then you would see the [inaudible] something else. I hate to talk about myself. I mean, actually that piece is totally close to me. It's how I think and I just hate talking about it. But, I think it was a good piece for that situation.

AVIS BERMAN: I think so, too. Well, it's interesting what you said about Venturi. Architects, to quote Frank Lloyd Wright, he always said that architecture is the "mother art" and all the other art should be subordinate to it.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Do I think that?

AVIS BERMAN: No, I didn't say that. I said that's what architects think.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I think they're having a lot of fun now.

AVIS BERMAN: Was it Venturi who chose you for that commission?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No.

AVIS BERMAN: Or was it someone else?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No. It was this very nervous man who was the head of ISI and that was what interested me. He was just a sort of complete sort of latter-day hippie that collected yarn drawings from the Peninsula, like from Guatemala and didn't trust anyone. Always thought everyone was taking him for a ride. Then his commander-in-chief was a guy named Calvin Lee, who was actually fantastic. He wore a kind of [inaudible] in the middle of his head. We had bizarre conversations. Basically, I was recommended through the Whitney Museum because I was fireproof.

AVIS BERMAN: Isn't that amazing.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: And I kept telling them that I was the wrong person for the job and, of course, they wanted me more.

AVIS BERMAN: Isn't that the funniest consideration?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: And he has a lot of other work there by other artists that he prefers.

AVIS BERMAN: But they weren't fireproof?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, but they're actually there.

AVIS BERMAN: It's always interesting to know, even though these are banal questions, no one ever knows how these things come about unless you ask them. Only the people involved and you know that they wanted something fireproof.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, yes. That's what I think.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, did they insist on visits to your studio when this was being made and all of this and did they try to—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No. Actually, they were great. Whatever I decided to do, they went along with it. They did what I said. I'd be interested to know if it's still there.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, you don't think that you would have heard?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No. I think this whole thing of art, in public spaces is interesting.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, of course, this may qualify as a collection because it had other work by other artists. Was there anyone called the curator who took care of the artwork?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No. I don't think so. There was someone who did do it, but it's not like you think. It was that one percent law. So, they went with it. They wanted a known artist and somehow they sort of sucked me in like they did, because it was an interesting company. You know, the company—this is how I get depressed—is still very interesting to me and the guy that invented it was a librarian. Like if you were a wealthy heart transplant patient and

you wanted to research all the literature all over the world, you would subscribe to his magazine. So, what that company does is review all information coming out of different fields. I don't know how it's doing now, and it spews it out in an organized fashion.

AVIS BERMAN: I'm sure they're doing even better since computer technology is even more advanced.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, I just don't know.

AVIS BERMAN: And in terms of the scientific think tank -

JENNIFER BARTLETT: But the idea is interesting.

AVIS BERMAN: That's probably why there were so many hippie types, because there were more scientists. They were researchers, as long as they produced they could—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No. I don't even know if they were hippie because of that. I really don't know. I mean, I still don't know. All I know is that the people I did that for, which was Venturi —

Hi! [To daughter in background.]

[Tape turned off.]

AVIS BERMAN: This is still a little bit on the commissions. I'm going to talk about a very successful one from the pictures, the Saatchi commission.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: That's a confusing question because I met the Saatchis when they bought pieces from me first and the only thing I ever heard about it from the gallery was that they wanted to carry one home on the plane. So, I had this idea of these very small people and kind of quite old. Then a friend of mine, Max Gordon, gave a party when I was in London and the Saatchis came, who were sort of completely au courant and they were wearing black leather and we became friends. I always thought they offered me the commission, but basically they think that I suggested that I do it. And it was all right. The room doesn't exist anymore.

AVIS BERMAN: What happened to it?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, they moved, and Charles and Doris always had the idea that anything that couldn't be removed should be able to be replaced. I don't think that I did that as carefully as I could have, but it could be. The whole thing could be reconstructed. But basically that made me think about a commission that was like that and moving something that was in one place to another place. That was an idea of one of my commissions which was *At Sea, Japan* when I did a show that filled every space in that gallery and I knew it would be moved somewhere else. But, basically, I don't like the idea of commissions.

AVIS BERMAN: Does that mean that of the Saatchi commission, was some of that left behind or did they take it all when they moved?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Because Charles and Doris were very canny about this thing, they have all the pieces to take with them but it will never be in that shape room again except artificially. It'll never be with that view. It'll never be in that situation so the work is meaningless.

AVIS BERMAN: So, in other words, it was a site-specific kind of piece?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: But they didn't attempt or the new owners of the house to keep it the way it was.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, I don't think you could—you know, I mean, the history of man denies that happening, right? So, I should—I understand what I'm doing when I do it but it was an attractive and thrilling idea.

AVIS BERMAN: So, now, in other words, it would almost have to be reconstructed in a gallery or a certain room built to that proportion but it wouldn't work because it doesn't echo the

view.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. I don't know whether it would work or not. I mean, it's not a totally stupid piece of work.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I guess what I meant was that it seemed to be so integrated and built around a certain place.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, I was thinking of another question.

AVIS BERMAN: Which was?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: What happens when you have work—if you have work in the fourteenth and fifteenth century that was meant for a chapel or what if the great, great paintings are split up; the National Gallery has one. I mean it happened a lot with what's his name who was so involved with perspective? Uccello. And you have that with Fiero Della Francesca. It would be nice to see them in the regular place. I don't know what we look at when we look at art. I simply don't because if we look at art like we look at—Who's that asshole's testimony?

AVIS BERMAN: [Oliver] North or [Admiral John] Poindexter?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, North is just hopeless. I mean, he's like a teenager, but Poindexter, who's more of an adult, and consequently is more unnerving. Basically, you know, we just don't know that much. It's nicer to see things in the place that they were intended to be. I suppose if there's quality in art, we don't know what it's about in some kind of way. I mean, do I know that Fiero Della Francesca's good because he's in the National Gallery? Do I know he's good because I read an article on him or do I know he's good because of myself? Basically, all of it is learned. The part that's not learned and that you look for over and over again, and you see more times than you'd ever dream of, is someone who has a passion for doing something inappropriate or explaining something or—. Let me put it this way. I have much more confidence in art than I do in the American government as being a truthful avenue of—So, what was your question again? You should record all these. You should write this down: what was your question?

AVIS BERMAN: I don't have to write it down, it's all in there.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Good. I'll learn something about myself.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I guess what we were looking at is now getting into received ideas. Just dealing with if someone says it's good versus how you know something is good.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I don't know how you know, but that is so interesting to me. Like, how do you know when the Manet painting with a frog in the corner is good enough? It's a terrible painting in some ways. But then on the other hand, the one in the boat [Boaters] is a good painting. I don't know if anyone would agree with me. I don't know how you know a Cézanne painting is good or not. But you do know. You feel certain artists are under rated. Like I do think Monet was quite under-rated his day.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, also the idea that it shifts with the times. I mean, there are certain people who are in the canon, but there are always this idea of rediscoveries.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Do you think that's true? Do you think we always reinvent history?

AVIS BERMAN: I think our perceptions change. I think we have to because of the idea of under-rated, or overrated is obviously—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: What if you go to that museum I thought of going to the museum in Milan. What's the big museum?

AVIS BERMAN: The Brera?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. I think it's basically second-rate paintings. Is it or not? Who's in there?

AVIS BERMAN: Well, the great Mantegna is in there, *The Dead Christ*. But that's probably the best one in there.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: What else is in there through those rooms and rooms? Because there's a lot of paintings. What else do you remember?

AVIS BERMAN: Just probably that one.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes. But then you go to—in Florence you go to—what's that museum there?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, the Uffizi.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: And it's—You get hit, don't you? Well, why don't we get—what's the difference? I mean, you were asking me this question; I'm asking you. I don't know the difference. Are they just images that are recognizable? If the images in the Brera were publicized and we learned them in art history, would we be as attached to them? Then you get into the old question of what do you believe. Do you believe in everything you learn or not believe? What are people's interests in getting you to believe a certain thing or not believe a certain thing? Do they want money? What do they want? I don't know how to answer these questions. I know that say there's a piece of history that I like and then I'll make my own decisions. I can't live in another time so I don't know about it. I don't know who's contributed and who's not, which makes me very anxious. Do you see, if we know Fiero Della Francesca—who's the guy that had the big house in Italy that sold a lot of things to the gallery that's so famous?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: His granddaughter was in the *Barry Lyndon* movie by Kubrick. His granddaughter.

AVIS BERMAN: Bernard Berenson.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, and who's the dealer?

AVIS BERMAN: Duveen.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Duveen, yes. See, I read all these things. Okay. That art was a wild question to us before those guys. We read these books. We read these biographies.

AVIS BERMAN: It was wild but actually—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Look, the paintings are good, but we all know there is a dark side of the Pillsbury Doughboy. And they're like you and I sitting on this couch now. You're sort of interested in the artist thing. I'm interested in being an artist. I am passionate and ruthless about it. I look back to sort of Renaissance paintings and I feel like an absolute shit and I want to achieve something like that in my life. I don't know what that means when I look at Oriental art. How the Japanese art and how the Korean art and such and such. There are different kinds of cultures. I'm told what to think of the different cultures. I'm told one's good. Is the American Indian good or bad because he was annihilated by us? I think we live in confusing times and probably times have always been confusing.

AVIS BERMAN: Don't you think it's better to be uncertain of these things than think you're certain?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, I don't. I think it makes absolutely, and this is the one thing I want down, that it makes no difference. I think we need people like me that are uncertain and I think you need people that are certain. If you're recording things, I don't know what you need. You just need a story.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you do need judgments, but I just don't like the certainty that doesn't admit uncertainties.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: How do you know how to? How do we know how to? We're like a little flash. I mean, I can turn and look at the television, which I've been doing constantly and look at what's his name?

AVIS BERMAN: North and company. Poindexter.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Poindexter and know what he's like every minute. It makes me hate North more because he doesn't even know when he's lying. This guy knows when he's lying and it's not even lying in terms of them. They shade a little bit here. They shade a little bit

there. Within what they have defined as the truth there can be no truth. Do you see what I mean? If you have deniability, there is just—

AVIS BERMAN: They don't think they've done anything wrong so that's their position.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, it's not wrong or right. It's really not that.

AVIS BERMAN: They don't see what all the fuss is about. They feel they love their country and this is how they're expressing it.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Do you?

AVIS BERMAN: No, but I don't think—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: What do you think you'd do in that situation?

AVIS BERMAN: Well—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: From the point that you meet what's his name in the toilet and he says, "Hey, I've got an idea." No, I won't start with that, but what do you do when you get drawn—I'm making a parallel with art, actually. That we all in our lives, whether we're Poindexter, we're North, we're Reagan; whether I'm me, Jennifer, or you're you, we get drawn into our lives and we believe the mythology of our lives, which means that we're living in an apartment that costs such-and-such; we're working for such-and-such a person; you're doing this tape for someone; I'm an artist and I am successful or not successful and I'm doing this. What does that all mean in the end? What? I mean, I can totally lie to you on the tape or I can tell the truth and to tell you the truth, probably what I want to do the most is entertain you or say something significant. I have no hope of that, really, in any real way. At the same time I kind of look out the window and see all the white on the different roofs. Then these flowers are still blooming and I haven't tended them and that's quite nice. I think of my daughter or my husband, how I'm not doing as much work—It's just a confusing mess. You're going to have trouble with this tape.

AVIS BERMAN: No. This is how you felt on a certain day, a certain time.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: This is how I actually always feel. I just hope that I'm making the right decisions in terms of what my innate talent is, whatever it is. I think I'm probably good at thinking and not so good at relating hand to thought. I hope I can do that.

AVIS BERMAN: I see a lot of your art as being purposely against relating hand to thought too easily.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: That's probably because I can't do it so I've taken another kind of route.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you know, I think in the proverbs of whoever, I think it was Nietzsche who said, "the minute you begin—"

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Nietzsche or the proverbs?

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, Nietzsche's proverbs.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh.

AVIS BERMAN: He said that the minute you rebaptize your faults as virtues, that's the beginning of when you begin to make something of yourself.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, God. If it's from Nietzsche I hate it.

AVIS BERMAN: Why?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I hate those German thinkers. They are absolutely brilliant, but—It's not just Nietzsche, it's what's his name—Goethe?—who wrote *Young Werther* and it's also Rilke and it's also all those guys. Give me your asshole French expatriate like what's his name, *Of Burning Boats*? You know what his name is. Had an affair with the guy who wrote the poem about snow. Who is it? Who is it? You know, the guy that went away when he was twenty-nine, who wrote—Avis, you know this as well as yourself. French. Oh, God. Nothing comes to

your mind. Well, I have to remember.

AVIS BERMAN: Rimbaud.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: So, you've got that guy going off. He gets a big reputation but we never hear from him again.

So, what do we do work for? What do you think we do work for? Who do you like? What artists do you like? Truthfully. Who's made any difference in your life as an artist?

AVIS BERMAN: Rembrandt; Brancusi; Cézanne.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: More contemporary? Who would you faint when you met? Who would you get shy around? Who impresses you?

AVIS BERMAN: I love Martin Puryear's work. I find it very moving. I find someone like Noguchi, the morality of Noguchi's work inspiring. I see all these people looking at me through a window with hands waiving at me. I love Giacometti. Actually I think I really like hundreds and hundreds of artists. I usually never choose because my own outlook is such that if someone is doing something seriously and believes in it I just tend to search for the merit. I mean, some things appeal to me more than others, but I tend to try to give anyone who I feel is working, a fair hearing. But it's true. I mean, there's some I like better.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: So, what you are trying to do by the tapes is give people a fair hearing?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes or find out what their point of view is. I mean, my job is to be neutral.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I was just doing it. I think if you do something, you can't necessarily talk about it. When you ask me questions about things that are very personal to me it's as difficult for me to answer as it is for you.

AVIS BERMAN: I have the easy role. I wasn't prepared to be the answerer of questions.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, but drunk or sober I would have come on— I mean, say, the difference between us is that I decided to be an artist and you decided to do something else. So we could both be interviewed about those things that we did and you can find out from me sort of secret things about what I am, but it is really the same that I can find out from you. So, do you want to know how we're different or alike, or what? This is where I get to be a difficult interview.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, does it matter in terms of the interview of how difficult or how alike we are? Different, not how difficult.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, it doesn't make any difference. I think what I was trying to say by using that example or by drawing you out is we're both the same, but we've made different choices and as we've talked about earlier, when I asked you who do you like and what you did, I would have a totally different set of artists. The point of these interviews is to show that someone's more or less involved in life and has more or less an opinion about this and is passionate about that.

AVIS BERMAN: In that particular example you are very used to thinking about who are artists you like and I have that up to a point, but when I think about likes and dislikes and real passions, although my subject is art, I certainly do have opinions if someone asked me about writers or something like that.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Who are the three greatest writers writing in English at this point and who are the three greatest 19th century authors of no language? Who do you like best in the 19th century; three; you only have three? Any language.

AVIS BERMAN: George Eliot, Hardy, and which Russian to pick? I love twenty-five English authors.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Pick, pick, pick. I want you to pick.

AVIS BERMAN: Dostoevsky, who half the time was really awful, but had a great vision.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Let me name you some other names. Gogol, Tolstoy, what's his name

that wrote that great book from—

AVIS BERMAN: Turgenev.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Oh, Turgenev was perfect. What about the other guy that just wrote the two books? Oh, I'll think of him later. But let me just bring to mind, Flaubert, Balzac, Dickens.

AVIS BERMAN: I thought about Dickens. I love Dickens, but you gave me three.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Balzac's great.

AVIS BERMAN: George Meredith is great, too.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Hardy, I agree, is great. Hardy is great. See, that's what you probably should know about me. I'm a total devotee of the 19th-century novel and I do think the best book that was ever written, the book that I would like to write, is really *War and Peace*. I do think it's great. I do think Tolstoy, as fucked up as he was, as we know just—I also love Turgenev. I can read every Turgenev and I forget every one like those detective stories. You can quiz me on Turgenev, which I've read every single book, and you can quiz me on Elmore Leonard and I just don't remember anything about any of them, but I read omnivorously. For me writing, people writing, and I even am quite a good writer. I actually know that if I had to —this is a terrible thing to say but I'm going to say it—turn my energies to writing I think I'd do better than most people are doing. Because the thing I like to talk about the most is writing. I really do, and second movies, but not so much. But if I could do in painting what I imagine some of my brighter friends, who it's easier for me to think about, could do I'd be, not happy, but content. I mean, I do think that the gift of our life is so miraculous. I mean, I really think this though I hate every aspect of it. I think it's confusing and terrible and awful; I really think it's just sensational. [Phone rings.]

[Tape turned off.]

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, but that's what I'm talking about literature. It's basically much easier for me to talk with some passion about what that does. I know when you interview me you're basically a literary person and that your real passion is not—if you like art, when I was questioning you before, I don't think most people really like it unless it's really part of their environment. It's not like getting a book to read, or buying a tape, or buying a video tape to see a movie. I don't think it's successful to us. I don't think we're going to be heroes of modern fiction. If you look at that painting it looks nice, but that's a whole book. That's like a little Folderol by Balzac and there should be enough in that to interest you. But it's not in language; it's not in time; it's not in music; it's not in time. Art is our oldest art. We have little squishy things that are phallic symbols or matriarchal symbols that people slapped their handprints on the walls. That all of our children do. I don't think we know how to regard art. I think it's a wild card. You can't compose an evening of people to go to hear a painting. We can in opera, which I like very much, too. So, these interviews about art are weird to me because I think there are sort of moments of cultural history we should treasure. Whether it's Einstein and what he did. He changed our thinking. Or Freud, who I guess died gasping with cancer. That reinforced the Catholic Church and that go to confession or you have Tolstoy who did this. Or you have the artists we like, like George Eliot, who I think just was brilliant beyond belief. Now, I would challenge you to name, outside of France, two artists whose work moves you in the 19th century.

AVIS BERMAN: Thomas Eakins, Turner, Constable.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: You're right and all of them do. You're right. So, I think what we're trying to do, what an artist is trying to do, beside what pieces I've done, or what my thinking is about them, is that I guess there are people that are confused by life; that value it; that are horrified by it. I mean, all I can think of now is Conrad saying—

AVIS BERMAN: "The horror of it all."

JENNIFER BARTLETT: And that's how I feel right now. That it's so confusing that I can never think I can get on top of it. Then I read a Japanese novel and know that if I don't appreciate it it's over. I can die tomorrow. I can die today. I can say this to you or I cannot say this to you and I don't care. I think the basic reasons people make art is because they're just absolutely passionate about being themselves, about living whatever span of time they have to live out of; banging up against other people; feeling it. Good or bad, you know, I think the base that

an artist has made is some sort of a statement and the more they want to be heard—. Tolstoy absolutely wanted to be heard. I mean, he wrote *War and Peace* which to me is a perfect novel and I don't know how a novel in translation can be an aim of mine when it's not in my language. I just don't understand that but it is. Damn, he talks about Anna Karenina and I don't know whether he had a good translator or what. What are we then? All happy families or happy in the same way and all unhappy families are unhappy in a different way. I think this is good. You read that novel and you know it's brilliant and it just is devastating. Then you have Balzac, and even Henry James, who wrote a really great novel which was—who was the girl who went to Europe?

AVIS BERMAN: Well, there's Isabel Archer.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Isabel Archer.

AVIS BERMAN: *Portrait of a Lady*.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: *Portrait of a Lady*.

[END OF INTERVIEW SESSION.]

AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman talking to Jennifer Bartlett on September 28, 1987.

We can talk either about your novel or what you feel in general is the relationship of your writing to your painting.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I don't think there's any real relation emotionally to me. When I was doing it, I was just doing the plate paintings, and I guess I needed something else to do. And I enjoyed writing. As things went on, I started doing other things on top of that, and the writing needed more concentration than I was able to give it now. Because I only wrote two things, *Cleopatra* and *History of the Universe*, I think all they have in common with my painting is that I like to organize certain kinds of information in certain ways. Neither one of them is traditional narrative, although *History of the Universe* in its published stage has been edited to suggest a sort of narrative. Other than that, I'm sorry I'm not writing more. But I'm not. I don't keep journals or anything like that. Everyone always thought *History of the Universe* was a journal, but in fact, I have never been able to keep a journal more than one day.

AVIS BERMAN: So that wasn't based on a journal?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, some I would put in journal form. Each section of the book had a different kind of form.

AVIS BERMAN: It seemed to me that certainly the method (wherever it came from) was preceded by accretion and then doubling back and looking at the same story in a different way, which was part of a piece like *Rhapsody*.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I think, unfortunately, that I'm stuck with that mode of thinking. Everything turns out to be that.

AVIS BERMAN: To go back to when you were doing the plate paintings, you didn't think that the writing fed into what you were doing?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, I think that I just did both simultaneously. But I tend to have a resistance to thinking that way. I never make statements about my paintings, and I just had a recent horrible thing with Bard where I was tricked into doing it, and my choice was saying, "No comment,"which sounds a lot more aggressive than I would like it to be. Or I could just cave in to these jerks and put out a line or two. I've always been real reluctant since I first began painting, to draw comparisons between things. I don't really enjoy explaining my work. It's not a pleasure for me. I don't think of it like that. Do you know what I mean? I do think that that is someone else's job.

AVIS BERMAN: But when you say that, sometimes the meanings of things become clear many years later. Maybe you didn't see it in relation then, but your views may have changed now.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I think that anything that one person does at any time in their lives has a relationship to something else. Whether it's a very big thing at one time that becomes a

very small thing later.

All of those things are there. I would say fundamentally, my way of looking at the world, though it changes from year to year, is consistent and probably hasn't changed much since that period of time when I was writing a lot. *Cleopatra* seems like a stranger wrote it, but I feel relatively familiar with that stranger. Again, even in my thinking, it's not like I'm harboring deep secrets of great philosophic weight. I just like looking at it like you'd look at the window frame and say, "Oh, that's that brown window frame", and just leave it because the way of over-intellectualizing is something I'd rather do in my personal life than in my professional life. I usually look back and think how I could have made something better. So I must accept the idea, and now I look back and think that some of my bad ideas at that point are exactly like some of my bad ideas today. But in terms of spelling those out, my viewpoint about my work—I'm in the same position towards my work as someone else is. I have no idea what other people are seeing when they look at it, none whatsoever. I could try and make something I would think everybody would like—you know, take the components and put them together in something to make something that people would really like, and I'd fall flat on my face. I have a sort of dogged attitude towards these things. I'm aware of them, and I notice them, but my relationship's to saying, "Oh it's Monday, not Tuesday", something like that, which makes me not such a great interview sometimes.

AVIS BERMAN: In doing *History of the Universe*, was there a plan though? Did you start at the beginning? Or did you write in sections?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I wrote the autobiography section first. What I wanted to remember without trying to be chronological or complete in any way was just remember things and write them down no matter really what I thought of them. Then I organized them sequentially and developed them that way. Then I'd decide, "That's enough of that person, why don't I write other people." I didn't want to write just stories of people who I found interesting, I wanted to become interested in something that maybe hadn't interested me so much. So I wrote about a hundred or fifty names down and shook them up in a coffee can and just threw one out and would write about that person. All of them were roughly the same length. Some are short, some are longer. I applied the same kind of structure to those that the whole section of the autobiography by letting my mind remember in the way in which it wanted instead of saying, "Tim was born to Sara and Joshua, and then he broke his leg". But just to see what I could remember about what the person told me and go off on tangents as they occurred to me. That method is very much present in all of the work that I do. There is a notion about something, and then there is a method to get it out and down and a further organization. I'm probably getting to the point where I want to reverse the process somehow. In *Cleopatra*, for example, I wanted one section to sound like very didactic little essays, I wanted one section to be absolutely lurid, purple prose, and I wanted one thing to just be anecdotal and very straightforward.

AVIS BERMAN: Here it seemed that you didn't really change the prose style as much—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: In *History of the Universe*?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, in the one I was interested in changing the prose style.

AVIS BERMAN: This was sort of a shifting focus. Of course you did start, and you talked about a family which presumably resembled your own, although obviously you interpolated and made-up things. Then as you went on, there were also these portraits of people. Had you always thought that it might be a roman à clef?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, I didn't think of it that way because whenever I used real people, I would always substitute a name, and now I've forgotten even myself what the real name of the person that I used was.

AVIS BERMAN: They were always very funny names. The one for William Wegman—that was certainly funny, and you called the dog Duchamp Villon instead of Man Ray. Depending on how hard one worked, you could figure out Paula Cooper or William Wegman, and possibly David Plante, but that's just a guess. I don't know if these were people in your circle or not. Did you feel you had to ask them?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, I asked everyone except people that I wrote about that existed

(that I gave a new name) that I barely knew, maybe I'd spent ten minutes with. I didn't ask them, but anyone that was involved read their thing first before I ever even read them.

AVIS BERMAN: That's probably a difference between you and a standard prose writer of disguised or not so disguised fiction.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: That was always the relationship. What I wanted to be was a painter, and that was always my main focus.

AVIS BERMAN: Also, the accretion of detail was very humorous, but it was also very harrowing at the same time. I don't know how much your intentions were, but the part out in California most of it seemed perfectly normal which is what made it so terrifying.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I was aware of that, and then the way I had decided to write it was to just level all of the information, just as it happens in life. It seems to me that people were tending to go on in monotones about this disaster, whether it's staying on a pair of Maude Frizon shoes or the death of a parent, that in some sort of psychological way they seemed to be taking up the most time. But with the repetition of things, different things will build up underneath.

AVIS BERMAN: It was not stream of consciousness, but it was like something like *Ulysses*—the voice of the citizen begins to level everything. It's like a newspaper.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, I did have some newspaper accounts actually occurring in the book, so that was a kind of tone that I wanted.

AVIS BERMAN: Were you to have the time and the energy to write again, what kind of thing do you think you'd like to attempt?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Fiction. And I may write something about gardens, I don't know.

AVIS BERMAN: I'm just amazed that there was no diary beforehand because it recreated a diary texture.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: That's just all made up. There were some good ways, like the part on the love affair, that was the most efficient way of writing that particular one, it seemed to me.

AVIS BERMAN: I was wondering if writing ever started a painting, or vice versa?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you do it at a certain time, or did you find that you had a pattern in which you wrote at a certain time of day or night, or that it was part of an activity that happened after you were done with your regular work?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, sometimes I'd write at night, and sometimes I'd sit down and write a whole day. It wasn't a regular kind of thing. When a section of the book began developing, maybe I would just write for a couple of weeks, and not do so much painting. I took a long time on doing it. It was about five years.

AVIS BERMAN: You didn't rev up or use it like a beginning: I'll sit down and do this before I do this other thing.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, it would more likely happen after I was through working for the day. Then I'd probably write down everything in sort of a note form, then I'd type it up, and I'd rewrite it when I was typing because I was writing in long-hand first. Then there were periods of time when I was getting it together as a whole thing, I'd just sit down and write all the parts that I needed. Eventually they'd all get chopped out. I would write like anyone would write anything.

AVIS BERMAN: It seemed to me that writing, on a certain level, would be very disappointing to a painter because the materials are so unsensuous. It's not the same as paint and brushes.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, I read a great deal, so I like writing. But it's not the way in which I prefer thinking. The nice thing about painting is that a lot of the thoughts don't have to be

articulated. To me it's a more complex way of thinking in a certain way, or it appears to be more complex to me. That could probably be the greatest criticism of my writing [laughs]. For some reason, I think it's extremely difficult to write good novels right now. I don't know why, but I haven't read a good one. I mean a really, truly good one in a long, long time. I've read some interesting ones, but nothing that's just completely bowled me over. Probably the most contemporary thing would be the Japanese writers like the last books of Kawabata and Tanazaki and things like that I found quite interesting.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you find them interesting, though, not just for the prose style, but they deal with a culture that's fascinating in a way that you may not know about?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, I think that's true, but I could certainly read American history, which I know nothing about and which I'm actually thinking of doing. No, I'm very committed to the novel form. I think it's fantastic because it does some very specific things. I think a lot of our novels are a more journalistic, including mine.

AVIS BERMAN: I think what happens in a lot of novels is it's difficult to write something with great force. It's either force or you go into a small precision. You take a novelist like Anita Brookner—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, it's little and it's beautifully done but it is very claustrophobic. The novelists that I really like are not like that.

AVIS BERMAN: She doesn't attempt much.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, I don't think so really, do you?

AVIS BERMAN: No, but I think that's—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Sort of like a Barbara Pym.

AVIS BERMAN: I want to go back to the New Image show at the Whitney back in 1978. Roberta Smith wrote that piece in the *Times* this summer. She looked back on it. At the time, was this regarded as any sort of show out of the ordinary by the painters involved in it?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No. But that's me, though. I don't take those things too seriously.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, but you probably knew everyone in it quite well.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, I didn't actually. Was Joe Zucker in it?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I knew Joe, and I knew Michael Hurson and Bob Moskowitz. Who else was in it?

AVIS BERMAN: Susan Rothenberg.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Didn't know her well at all.

AVIS BERMAN: Neil Jenney.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Didn't know Neil too well. I'd known his work for a long time.

AVIS BERMAN: Denise Green.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I met her once or twice. David True, I didn't know him at all.

AVIS BERMAN: When the show was being organized—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: It didn't make much sense. That wasn't of concern to me because I'd been using that house image since 1970 or '71. This was really a continuation. *Rhapsody* was a continuation of things that I had already started using in my work some time before. The closest I got to understanding the New Image at that time, but maybe I was included because it was different, is you have a flat plane of color and you put something on it. But I think Richard Marshall's definition was much broader. I think he probably was signaling the event of a return or more interest in imagery, which we would see develop in the '80s.

AVIS BERMAN: Is there a general resistance on your part to be included in any kind of thematic show which in any way draws a line around you or sets you off in any way?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, because I'm sometimes included in shows that are abstract and conceptual in nature; sometimes I'm included in the most peculiar landscape shows; sometimes I'm included in figurative shows. If you're going to be irritated about being in a show (I'm in a show right now that I'm profoundly irritated at and really feel that I'm being pushed into it), then you shouldn't be in it.

AVIS BERMAN: You figure that once you say yes, you're in it and that's it.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I don't think a lot about it, and I don't know a lot of the shows I've been in because that would be arranged through the gallery, and they call and say, "Do you mind if they use this drawing?" They check it out.

AVIS BERMAN: Also, once your piece is in a museum, they can lend it anywhere?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes or install it in any way they want.

AVIS BERMAN: Let's just talk about maybe the integrity of the work and the artist's right. Is there anything you can do, once your work is sold and out of your studio, in protecting how you want something saved?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: You do have a copyright thing. You do have certain relationships with certain collectors, but there's nothing defined. I think you could get someone in trouble if they repainted it. But I've seen things installed in ways I just can't bear looking at them. I tell the person that that's wrong, but then it's their choice to do something about it. Like putting the plate pieces up on gilded boards for example, or framing them, I think, is truly weird and completely against their nature and absolutely destroys those pieces for me. Or someone who hangs a pastel on a bright sunny wall, is not going to have a pastel past a couple of years. There are things like that. That is really dependent on the attitude of the collector and their attitude towards art. Art is something that you have for a while and that you own, but do you plan it to have a life to go on after you or you hope it does, than you take care of it and respect the work. Collectors that are collecting for other reasons, whether they're social or it's fad with them or for investment, I don't think you can. That's where a good dealer comes in, to see that the people who really want the work and care about it get it, rather than those who really don't.

AVIS BERMAN: I was wondering how much of an effort you might make once the work isn't yours anymore to try to persuade the collector to respect the work or show it a certain way.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I haven't run into anything that has really offended me. I really don't follow my career real closely, that part of the work. Take the shows I don't want to be in because I don't trust a place, I'm making them use Lebron to take apart the stretcher and put the painting together there, and to do the same thing at the gallery. I'm asking for one of my assistants to be present whenever the work is moved. So I do go to some effort if it's something that's the immediate thing. But things that have been around a long time, you have condition papers and stuff like that you get from museums. So if something doesn't sound right, then I'll go and fix it.

AVIS BERMAN: To get back to the New Image show, when you saw that show, did you find it provocative yourself?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I would've included different people. I think it would have been a more interesting show if some of the people were left out and Joel Shapiro was in and Richard Artschwager was in, but those were opinions and questions of taste. So the answer is no.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess what we're saying is that having a museum show of contemporary art probably is never much of a surprise to the artist.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, I don't think so. It probably is different for the people, but more than half of the people weren't people I was close to or even thought of myself close to in my work. There were many others that would exist that were not included in the show that I would feel closer to my ideas. Like Borofsky, like Joel Shapiro. To a certain extent Richard Artschwager or like Elizabeth Murray, even like Sol Lewitt.

AVIS BERMAN: Borofsky would have been great in that show.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, but I think that probably Richard was trying to make a statement about a larger group of people that weren't necessarily related in any way at all, maybe, and this was popping up all over.

AVIS BERMAN: It could've been a zeitgeist idea, rather than artists closer in sensibility. I guess a museum is kind of like the sports page—it's always yesterday's news for the people involved.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, unless they're having a one-person show or a historical show. It's always a surprise when you see a large group of one person's work together.

AVIS BERMAN: Also, presumably, a lot of the better artists—now I think museum curators are always looking all around—but it used to be that they got the best ideas from artists anyway, or their ear to the ground from listening what other artists have to say.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Or from dealers and things, and group shows that people might put on.

AVIS BERMAN: Now I want to go to where we vaguely left off which is that commission for Volvo. What I'm interested in is it looks like the first time that these little objects began to come in in front of the paintings, or they were pieces for the first time? There was a table or a playhouse or something there?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: It wasn't a playhouse; it was just a house.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, well the way it's photographed, it has a playhouse look in the catalog.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: It's small. You wouldn't fit a family of four in there. I'm trying to think if that was the first time. Yes, I think it probably was the first time. It was just trying to solve a problem with that particular building and what would be interesting to do there. I liked the architect very much, Alto, and I like the chairman of Volvo. It was really ideal working circumstances in which there was probably quite a bit of give and take and complete freedom at the same time. It just seemed interesting to have two-dimensional works inside. It was originally paintings for each dining room, and the dining rooms were really too perfectly crafted and small, and the thing that was the picture in the room was the window already, and I didn't want to put anything more in the room. So I got the idea of doing the pieces for each one outside, and then the paintings making some reference to them. The pieces are cited in the front of each dining room. The first paintings are just about the landscape in pastels and the ones in the end room have all of the objects painted in one way or another. So all of the objects reappear again in a different altered scale or on a screen.

AVIS BERMAN: You translated it. In the last show at Paula Cooper you had objects, and I can see you're doing it here, too. They're almost mock-ups for the painting or something.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, that's not how it happens at all. It can happen both ways. In this case, the three-dimensional pieces come directly out of the painting. There were original objects that I built, a white house, fence and boat, that were then taken out and I did fifty small-scale, all different size paintings from life of these objects, then did a big final painting that went with those objects, then I did series of 33 pastels with two to four or five panels each. That was just shown recently, last February. Then these are the final pieces in that whole series. This time the objects are being rebuilt but from the point of view of the painted image. So they're all built totally in crazed perspective because that's how they appear. Before I left the country, I photographed. I took about five or six hundred photographs.

AVIS BERMAN: They seem to be very much objects as opposed to anyone pretending that they're a real house or real fence.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Here. Yes, I don't know if you saw the show in Brooklyn, but there was a granite house, and we're having a real granite house. There was a glass house, I'm building a real glass house that will have function. I'm building a copper house which I had done in Cor-ten steel, and I'm building a tile house, but I've never done that before. So these things shift around and find different ways. I don't think I'm really clear on why I want the three-dimensional images. I'm still not clear. The way I was doing them before, which was rather straightforward, and varying the materials and the grouping of objects; what was in it, a granite house, a granite boat and thirteen boulders as opposed to a Cor-ten house, a bronze

fence and a copper boat. They're not about the materials anymore. All these pieces are the same material. They're all wood so they're about something else. I seem to still want them in.

AVIS BERMAN: They're about the obsessive images that you're going to take apart.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Sometimes I'll build the objects first and then put them in the painting. And what's going to occur in the painting is sort of secondary to the thing that was built. Sometimes they get painted in first and then built. That was how they used to happen. So there was a real trading back and forth. There were really three big groups, creek paintings and island paintings and pieces and Luxembourg. So it was hard for me to say. Sometimes I didn't know which piece went with which painting. Or it would get referred to only in a drawing. I think that line of thinking is probably going to continue for a while yet. Then I suppose another extension is the sets that I'm doing now. But having done the set, doing the real thing in real space, it's a functioning thing. I still want to do these things. They're different to me than a notion of a stage set or a small version of a real thing. So I probably haven't made it clear yet.

AVIS BERMAN: What are the sets for?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Janacek's *House of the Dead*, directed by Volker Schlondorff and [inaudible] conducting. That's at the Opera Comique in Paris. That's a western Europe premiere for that. Heinrich Boll's last work, *Women in a River Landscape* and that's a theater piece in Munich.

AVIS BERMAN: In doing these, did you do some of your usual 200 or 500 studies first? Were you able to work the way you want to work with the stage sets?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, I did exactly what I wanted. I'm not at all sure how they're going to look. I wanted it sort of more conventional and a tiny bit elegant. But I also did costumes and lights. I'll be working on that this fall. It's too much work.

AVIS BERMAN: Is it a comfortable kind of thing to do something like a stage set?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I won't do it again. Now the garden, I'm really loving doing it and I think it'll be fantastic to have had the opportunity to do that. I'm glad that I've tried stage sets, but I'm not interested in doing any more even if they turned out real well, because you have to work with a lot of other people on these projects. It's usually just time consuming; it's not that it's different. But the projects drag on and on and I really prefer working in my studio. So I won't really be doing much of that or I won't be doing commissions unless it's a situation that really is quite extraordinary—like a garden, getting to build all the buildings and a lake and learning about plants.

AVIS BERMAN: I was just going to say that you seem to have much more of studio sensibility than not so much a public artist but that kind of theatre sort of thing with different elements that you have to take into consideration.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, I get irritated if the actors can't walk on the stones I want to put on the stage. And I don't care about the actors. [Laughs.] Or I'll make them new shoes. I care about the limits of a problem, like you can't have something that's going to make the singers choke. I like them to look nice in their costumes and not be constricted and have something lightweight that their bodies can move freely in. I have very strong attitudes for their comfort. Again, I was lucky in this because the conditions of working with Volker were quite ideal. He picked me because of who I am, not just because he needed a set done. He wanted something of a collaborative nature.

AVIS BERMAN: You seem to have a lot of friends in England. There seems to be a very strong connection with a lot of English friends.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, that's because some really good friends of mine, Jan Hashee, a painter, and Michael CraigMartin were married, and I'd met them at Yale. They went over after graduating from Yale, and I kept making trips to see them, or I had boyfriends there or whatever. I just got to know a lot of people. Also through a man who is head of Columbia Child Psychiatry, David Shaffer, who is now married to Anna Wintour, who took over House and Garden. I met a lot of people through him and his first wife. They just seem to be friendships that have continued.

AVIS BERMAN: I just wondered because I thought you may have done a play set or something over there because you have a big network of people over there that you know.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, I do know a lot. And now I know quite a few in France, too.

AVIS BERMAN: That was a more obvious connection. I would like to discuss this Battery Park commission, not because it's enormous, but the leap between painting gardens to making a garden is—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: See, I never thought of myself as painting gardens. There was one specific image I used, but it was only that one image, and it's been over and over and over. And I did the one Luxembourg painting, but that was more of a name. It just seemed that if you have two and a half to three acres in New York City on the waterfront that there is only one thing that's interesting for it to be where people can be outdoors. I just tried to do it in a way of not trying to duplicate a little, tiny section of Central Park because the scale is so small and do something quite different to bring the idea of a private garden, a very highly complicated, private garden to the public. To have a kind of garden than maybe they wouldn't ever get to see or know.

AVIS BERMAN: The question is in getting this commission, why do they think they asked you instead of a landscape designer?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I wasn't asked as a landscape designer. I didn't want to do it because I'd never before been in competition for a commission. I'm asked, and I present an idea, and it's usually been accepted or always. In this case, there was almost a competition, which I don't like to begin with. When I saw the site, I thought that that would be something I would propose doing. I really didn't think they'd do it. So I went in and said, "Here is what I'd do. I would design it in a way where I don't have to worry about the security of loose seeding. I want it to be an utterly civilized place." I said exactly what I wanted to do. The architect was on that committee that I'm working with, Alex Cooper in full collaboration. I said it would be enormously high maintenance. It'll be an expensive project; it'll have to have its own staff; I don't want to worry about people being barbarians. I want to design for someone who's capable. Everyone voted for me. But when they saw what they were getting with me and Alex working together, they were pretty shocked. I think they are really behind the project now. A landscape architect I don't think would have done anything anywhere near as radical, which conceptually is what this garden is like. I think a lot of landscape gardeners will absolutely hate it. I think several already do. I think others will be intrigued and curious to see if we fall flat on our face. We will have a landscape firm working with us as a consultant and a horticulturist.

AVIS BERMAN: Why are you using the words, "They were shocked at what they were getting?"

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Well, it's incredibly complicated for that space. The garden units are small; there's an incredible amount of detail. You know they would have been much happier if I'd have said, "I want a concrete plaza". You know, have an armada of steel boats, and then Alex and I would discuss maybe see how we would want to do it. We could just hose it down. But this is going to represent a lot of care, and I don't think there is any place like it. I don't think it exists except in a very, very grand form, but not in a public space.

AVIS BERMAN: Not in this country.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, but even in England, the smaller gardens are all private gardens. They're all out of the city, and then the great gardens you know. But that's something planned on an entirely different scale. The closest thing that would be some of the gardens within Central Park, but even their scale is about the size of our whole thing. So we're designing it into little, tiny spaces with the idea that with these overwhelming buildings on one side and the river on the other and that's nothing to compete with, what you do is make the space so dense and so complicated that you're looking at that. My interest is in a set of changing experiences. You literally, using the path system, could walk probably for a good hour and a half in a small space that you could cross entirely in three minutes.

AVIS BERMAN: It's little pocket gardens all over.

[END OF SIDE ONE.]

AVIS BERMAN: What is the total dimension of the perimeters of the space that you're working with?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: That's hard to say because you can see it's so multi-faceted. I would say it's about two and a half acres, maybe closer to three.

AVIS BERMAN: In the cost of the maintenance, what kind of commitments do you get? Do you get them, or do you have to go out and raise money?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No, we'd like to do it through the Battery Park Authority which is a state-run thing. I'd ultimately like to see an endowment that will generate enough income for a year and have a Board of Directors who will run the garden. Because the entire Battery Park City reverts to the city in 2020. So that's what we're aiming for is to make it an institution on top of being a public space.

AVIS BERMAN: Will you have to be on the Board of Directors?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I would want to be on the Board of Directors. I think if it works out, I'd like to be there forever. If it's a disaster, I'll probably leave the United States [laughs]. Because it's going to be a very visible disaster.

AVIS BERMAN: Were there certain gardens that you studied?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, I probably spent ten thousand dollars on books. I bought every book, and this summer I went to some gardens here. In England, I've been to all the obvious ones like Kew and Hyde Park and all of those places in London. Then I've been to Hidcote, Sissinghurst, Stourhead, Versailles, Courance, Bagatelle, Rose En-laye. I've been to Hidcote several times, which in my opinion is the best 20th century garden. I think that it's a sensation. There is much in this garden, I hope, of Hidcote. I showed the head gardener, the one that's in charge of maintaining it (now it's a National Trust property), and he said, "Yes, a lot of us here." [Laughs.] I want to go and see Villandry. There's really a lot of gardens that I still want to see and will continue seeing and going back and seeing the ones I've seen at different times.

AVIS BERMAN: I would ask you then, did you think because of the difference in scale, did it help in synthesizing ideas or seeing colors?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I just lifted like mad from everything I could see. So it's all information. I did it deliberately. I hadn't done that before. I had never been interested in gardens.

AVIS BERMAN: Now you want to write something?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, I think I might. I don't know. I think Alex and I might do a book together on just the making of it, and would have different drawings, and how the idea developed, and why we did certain things.

AVIS BERMAN: To me it looks just spectacular. I think the fact that there is nothing like it in New York will contribute a great deal to it.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I don't think there's anything like it in the United States. There are wonderful, great gardens, but this really isn't a garden, it's the collaboration of an architect and an artist, really.

AVIS BERMAN: Just the fact that it's not concrete—New York has too much of that already. Usually in the United States we're not so civilized about places for people in cities. They expect them to be in the suburbs or in their own garden or out in the woods. It's a different attitude. It's like laundromats. The middle class doesn't need a laundromat, they have their own machines so the owners don't make them nice here.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I think it would be a real treat to sit down in the middle of New York City right by Wall Street on a blue and white striped lawn chair. It would be an experience you don't have or be able two of you to move two chairs over to sit by the wall looking out an arch onto the water.

AVIS BERMAN: Just any kind of greenery, people fight so hard to keep even that little Shearson Park they're taking away. People want it desperately.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Yes, I think people are desperate for that. I am. And I want to make this interesting in all seasons so it's something that could be used. Even that greenhouse. You could go in the dead of winter, that wall is going to cut some of the wind because shutters can go in; you can walk around the gardens (some of which are evergreen). There'll be a sculpture in each garden that you only see in the winter because it'll be arranged so that the plants will grow immediately up over it, and they'll be completely hidden. Then you can go and sit in the greenhouse, and there'll be a fire.

AVIS BERMAN: It is very sly. It is as much of a garden to have illusions and tricks for different times of the year. Will you be able to have patrol or security?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: We have security. The maze isn't going to be in now.

AVIS BERMAN: That would be almost too ideal for New York City to build a maze. It would be a wonderful idea to have just hedges like that.

JENNIFER BARTLETT: I hope it works out. We'll be in real trouble if it doesn't.

AVIS BERMAN: If you were asked as a public commission to design another garden as opposed to a stage set, would you consider doing that?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: Probably not.

AVIS BERMAN: Suppose everyone sees this and all sorts of cities want their own?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: As I said, these are forays into the unknown. I have no idea. It's not just me. It's a real collaboration with Alex and me working. So there'd be two people to ask.

AVIS BERMAN: Have you worked this closely with anyone before?

JENNIFER BARTLETT: No. On the theatre working with the Director, Volker Schlondorff, who's a fine director, is the closest I've ever worked on anything, and the garden thing's been going on for two years. No, I haven't worked anywhere in a collaborative way with anyone as long as I have with Alex.

AVIS BERMAN: You're probably at the moment, fed up with the M.O. of—

JENNIFER BARTLETT: We had some internal problems for a while (which I don't want to go into and not between me and Alex) that were slowing the work down, and then some exterior problems. That's frustrating. Now everything's back on board. It's fun to design it. I'm in the design-development stage so there's a way to go. We're supposed to be breaking ground in March. How long have we been talking so far?

AVIS BERMAN: I think it's about time to stop.

[END OF INTERVIEW SESSION.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]