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Oral history interview with Gyöngy Laky, 2007 December 11-12

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Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Gyöngy Laky on December 11 and 13, 2007. The interview took place in San Francisco, California, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Gyöngy Laky has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, interviewing Gyöngy Laky at the artist's home and studio in San Francisco, California, on December 11, 2007. This is disc number one.

And we have decided to begin with what's happening right now, which is your current—well, your current big solo exhibition at Braunstein/Quay Gallery [November 15 - December 22, 2007] here in the city.

GYÖNGY LAKY: And for me and for my work, this is what I would call a large exhibition. I haven't counted, but I think there are some 26 pieces in the exhibition, several of them being what I would, again, call major works and a number of medium-sized works. So it's, let's say, a big window on my studio practice.

MS. RIEDEL: And there are large wall pieces; there are language pieces; there are baskets. So it's a variety of—it's an inclusive exhibition of the type of work you've been working on for quite a while as well.

MS. LAKY: Yes, it is a good portrait of who I am and where I am now. The other thing that has been interesting to me about this exhibition is that I feel as if I've found out a lot about myself, both preparing for it and in conversations with people. Now every time I make a statement that's really a solid statement—"Here's what I think"—I always find some contradiction to it. When I lived in India, every time I thought I understood something, I would find several contradictions. And every time I talked about India after coming home in 1971, I would find all kinds of exceptions to every statement I made.

So I want to be a little careful. But I would say this exhibition embodies a lot of both my current thinking and my past work. I've also been able to see more clearly than often in my studio life that there are themes that connect to my past, to my education, to how I grew up, to what happened to me along the way. In this exhibition, I've seen that very clearly and had some very interesting kinds of epiphanies about who I am and how I got here and why I do what I do.

MS. RIEDEL: Tell me one. Let's start—what are they?

MS. LAKY: Well, here we're talking about the end of 2007. And I was joking—well, let's talk about 2008. I'd say that's very characteristic of me, looking forward, but this experience, because it's in the framework of a war, catapulted me back to my early childhood. The—

MS. RIEDEL: You were born in Hungary, 1944?

MS. LAKY: Yes, 1944, in Budapest, and it was still wartime. It was a terrible time. And for the next few years, it was a terrible time. Essentially, when I was four years old, my parents decided that they couldn't stay in Hungary any longer. And so first my father left and then my mother left. That entire story is a fascinating one that has been covered in my Bancroft Library oral history at UC Berkeley [University of California]. It was one of those dramatic stories of escape: my dad was kidnapped and imprisoned by the communists as they were solidifying their control over the Iron Curtain eastern countries.

He had been working for the Americans; they drove him out of the country in the trunk of a car with only his formal attire, his tails, because he thought he was going to be going directly to the White House and debriefing people.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. LAKY: He had gone to school in the United States; he had gone to college here and he spoke English very well. So, of course, the Americans hired him in Budapest after the war, as we are doing with Iraqis now. Those who are smart and able and good with English, we're hiring them. And as now, as then, it puts these people

often in great jeopardy, so—

MS. RIEDEL: Your father was working with the Red Cross.

MS. LAKY: Not the Red Cross, with the American Legation, with the refugee issue, repatriating Hungarians, until he realized that this was crazy, that no Hungarian in his or her right mind would want to come back at that time, because it was so awful. So it's hard—we forget that history, and, in fact, somebody just gave me a book that I'm about to read which is about the '56 revolution in Hungary. And in '48, when my father left—

MS. RIEDEL: Laszlo was his name.

MS. LAKY: Laszlo Laky. He was in prison with a man he called the architect of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Hungarians thought the moment they stood up to the Soviets, the U.S. would be there to back them. But, of course, the Suez Canal thing, I think it was going on then. The Americans were nowhere to be found when kids were jumping on tanks with jars of jam to obliterate the vision of the guys driving them. So it was that kind of bravery and fighting on the streets that came later in 1956. But my father understood that the revolt was coming. Everyone did understand that the situation in Hungary couldn't continue as it was; it was getting worse by the minute.

So my dad got out in the trunk of a car, but my mom was left there with the three of us children.

MS. RIEDEL: Zyta and your brothers, who are Mat and—

MS. LAKY: Mattias and my older brother, Laszlo, and I. Just a little aside, we were given very Hungarian names—not so much my oldest brother, who was named after my father—so that we would always know we were Hungarian. We got typical Hungarian names so that when you say them, any European would probably say, oh, you are Hungarian—[they laugh]—just in case we got lost in the war. Now, you see the mentality? Would a mother and father think, oh, gee, I might lose my children because of the circumstances around me? We're not used to that here in the United States, but there, and I'm sure in Iraq, it's like that every minute; you feel like you're going to lose the people dear and near to you, so. [The difficulty we later faced, much like our Iraqi collaborators now, was that the U.S. did not make any effort in 1948 to allow my father and our family to immigrate to America. For the rest of this story, read my Bancroft Library oral history.]

Now, let's flip back to this exhibition—the dean of the College of Environmental Design made a little speech about my work at a reception for alumni we held in the gallery recently. His phrase was "ornery and elegant."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. LAKY: And all of us in the room said, oh, perfect. I think the "ornery" comes from this—irritation is not quite the right word. I'm very, very, very, very deeply troubled by the state of the militarized responses of the United States. And several people seeing this work have called it edgy, oblique, sharp. The descriptors are fascinating to me. I knew that was there, but I didn't know to what extent. At the same time, people do call the work elegant and luscious and lots of other—other kinds of words that are wonderful to hear. But if you just walk through and look around, there is an edginess, an irritability about circumstances that is conveyed by the whole.

MS. RIEDEL: There's also a great sense of humor that we discussed, too.

MS. LAKY: That comes out. Yes, there's humor, too.

MS. RIEDEL: There really is. There's a wit about it, especially with the globalization piece that's been spelled W-A-R and R-A-M and M-A-R. I mean, there's a cleverness that makes it fun—you're laughing and pricked all at once.

MS. LAKY: That is definitely there for me. I feel often that I am being slightly funny or humorous or pranksterish. I've never thought of myself as having a sharp or keen wit, but I know I enjoy reaching for that in my work.

MS. RIEDEL: Can you think way back to the piece called *That Word* [1989]?

MS. LAKY: *That Word*, exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: I mean, that's a lot of wit right there.

MS. LAKY: A-R-T, seven and a half feet high, three-dimensional, at a time—maybe much as we are in today—questioning, what is craft? What is art? What should we call it? How should we relate to it? Is it worthy? Is it not worthy? Is it part of our cultural tradition or isn't it? How—where does it fit? [Laughs.] And it's fun to play with that.

But also, the play—my love of language almost always feels like play. And I'm more often than not delighted by what I discover when I look at a word and then, suddenly, I think about what its origin might be and how it could have come about and what we did with it and what else it means. What if you turn it upside-down? The anagrams are really fun for me. I'm now eager to get into some anagrammatic activity that would be English and French, English and German. I've got a couple of possibilities, but I haven't worked out the sculptural format that they will take. But I love playing with them. "Reve" is "dream" in French and "ever" in English when reve is spelled backwards.

But then I also love things like "police" and "policy." Oh, dear, that's too close for comfort. So "rat" and "art"—when I did *That Word*—and "tar" is in it, too; I felt all of those fit the theme. It's fun to think about what those other words mean and how they apply to the original concept. Do they fit? "War" is remarkable; reversed it is "raw." When you flip the W, you get "mar" and "arm." They are all very much in keeping with the concept of what war is.

MS. RIEDEL: And it makes me think of your international background—you grew up speaking Polish and Hungarian?

MS. LAKY: I spoke Hungarian and German as a toddler up to, I'm sure, five or six years old. We left Hungary when I was four. In our household, my mother, being half-Polish, half-Hungarian, having come to Budapest as a young woman to study at the Royal Academy of Art there, was probably speaking Polish to her baby, I would guess, and Hungarian. She would speak Hungarian with my father. He did not speak Polish, maybe only a little bit. They both spoke German fluently. My father, having gone to college in the United States, I'm sure spoke English well.

MS. RIEDEL: Missouri, was it, Gyöngy?

MS. LAKY: Springfield College in Massachusetts. He, I'm sure, as a young, bright, up-and-coming guy, was interested in speaking English. I can just imagine him wanting to have English-speaking conversations all of the time.

MS. RIEDEL: And then he worked for the YMCA for a year.

MS. LAKY: Well, he thought of himself as a youth educator. And he was general secretary of the YMCA, I think, after he went back. But he also worked for an oil company. Then after the war, the Americans came in; then he was, of course, an obvious person to work for the Americans.

One of the things that I like that I found out more recently about him—I think it was in 2003, my first, yes, my first globalization war piece went to the Trennial Exhibition in Łódź, Poland, which I thought was so fitting, so wonderful for me. At that time, I met some of my mother's family, Polish relatives, a few of whom I had met before. In the conversations we were discussing family history. My father had always told a story that, as the Nazis took over more and more, Jewish people were not permitted to maintain their businesses and run their businesses and own their businesses. So the oil company he worked for, which had offices in Vienna and maybe other places in Austria, but Austria and Hungary, eventually turned the business in Hungary over to my father to manage because he was not Jewish. I wondered, oh, was that true? Maybe he was exaggerating to make himself sound good. He probably did good things, but I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure because he was a great storyteller.

But speaking with my Polish relatives, it turned out that he indeed did have that role. And he, indeed, did hang onto the oil company's assets in Hungary as long as he could, and then, finally, it got taken over. So he did do that and I felt very good about that. It was a nice piece of family history. There were other little pieces of history, too, that I found out. So this Iraq war has reconnected me to my own past in interesting and strange ways. I can't say that for most of my American life, which has been since the age of five, I've felt anything other than American, completely and totally.

I was always very privileged to be considered American. It didn't take me long to learn English, probably because of the four other languages swimming around in my brain. In high school, I became very fond of French and became fluent in French. I love languages. So my English, I think, soon was good enough that I didn't constantly have to refer to myself as having come from somewhere else. I even felt—

MS. RIEDEL: You went by "Ginger" for a long time.

MS. LAKY: Yes, had that nickname. I even felt as if Hungary was a piece of my past, but very much a part of my past that was history and gone. So the strange thing about these last few years is—including the 50-year celebration of the '56 Hungarian Revolution in 2006, with a big reception and program here in San Francisco—that all of these things, but I must say, primarily, the war in Iraq, have brought my roots into focus in a way that I had not anticipated. So that's been fascinating.

And I'm not surprised that it comes out in my artwork, because one of the things that I always knew, talked to

my students about, that creative work comes out of who you are. At its best, the integrity aspect, the honesty aspect of creative work, is that it comes from deep inside you. You express things out of what you believe, what you've experienced, how you understand the world, what's important to you, even down to the tiniest little decisions. I firmly believe this.

I knew this; I experienced it; I talked about it with my students, with other people. But I don't think I totally understood it until, I'd say, the last few years, the last four or five years. And now, I really understand that well; of course, I have to connect to this war and to my aversion to it because this is my very best voice. This is my way to be performing at my peak, doing the kind of work I do.

MS. RIEDEL: So the war pieces have really brought this home for you.

MS. LAKY: And I believe, then, that they have influenced the other work I do.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. LAKY: So the cent sign, for example, is—

MS. RIEDEL: *One Red Cent*, that piece?

MS. LAKY: Yes, *Every Red Cent* [2007]. Well, that's another part of what I'm upset about—[laughs]—the depletion of the treasury. What can we do about our children? What can we do about health care? What can we do about our aging? I hate it when I pick up the newspaper and I read about the huge sums of money—$2.5 billion a week now—and then, I have to read—the next article: we've cut back seniors' food boxes because there isn't enough money. It's very, very upsetting. So, of course, that piece has this influence in it. But it's bloody red, and I must say, I didn't even understand that I was needing it to look that bloody until I painted each little piece three, four, five times. Finally, the last two or three layers got it splotchy and slightly shiny here and there and started looking like blood.

I didn't even realize I was going there. I just slowly needed those pieces to look like that. Then, after screwing the whole thing together, I turned around a lot of the screws so that the very, very, very, very sharp points of those black screws would be pointing outward as often as possible, making the whole thing very prickly. On the other hand, it makes it look kind of fuzzy and funny. You can also get a little bit of a teddy-bear feel about it, like that earlier piece of mine.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. LAKY: The yes piece—which looked like a very prickly cactus—was not an easy yes, so I called it *Negative* [2003]. So these things sometimes happen in one's head, but not at the verbal level or the rational level in that regard. But they can be very precise.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting because these pieces could come across to people at first glance as very political, but they're also personal history. You fled Hungary at four with your mom and your brothers, went to Austria, really didn't know anybody there, and then were taken in by the family in Ohio. I remember the wonderful stories you told of making do with very little—your mom making oatmeal for dinner and putting a big top of raspberry jam or something in the middle to make it festive. To me, one reason these pieces are so powerful is because, more than political, they are personal. They really come out of such an intense personal knowledge and experience.

MS. LAKY: That's what I'm understanding now. The issue of background is fascinating to me because, slowly, over the period of studying at the university in Berkeley [University of California], developing my skills, studying the things that I studied, I am fascinated by what the little steps are along the way that then give me the tools and the interest to point in the direction of these very personal things.

It makes me think about one of the artists who I like very much: Robert Brady. I feel as if his work is intensely personal. Maybe many artists' work is intensely personal. But I think about work that really looks like it has individual experiences written into it somehow. And speaking of writing, language is fascinating to me and feels so comfortable to me, yet somewhere along the way, I must have been responding to letters as forms and shapes. Maybe when I was very young—maybe when I was five years old—as a new American, I was looking at these things in my new language, but not understanding them, so trying to grasp them, maybe visually. My mother being a painter, it would be perhaps automatic that I would have already been indoctrinated to work visually.

These are interesting things to think about—how we learn and how do we learn what we learn? And how do we become who we are? We have propensities. People, natural things—maybe it's genetic that someone can sing perfectly on key and so beautifully, that someone else can work with numbers as if they had them in their heads

when they were born. I don't know how these things happen. It's that nature-nurture question which is so fascinating. What do we learn and bring in along the way? And what do we already have in us to combine it with?

MS. RIEDEL: Let's jump back a little to give context and background. We were talking earlier about a mentor. Did you have a mentor, or did you apprentice with anyone? The first person that you mentioned was your mom [Zyta Udrycka Laky]. So let's talk just briefly about her. She was a painter, and you come from a long line of artists, musicians, composers. Both your grandma, your aunt, and your great grandmother, right?

MS. LAKY: I must say here that I have a great sense of gratitude and debt to the Archives of American Art. I had a large box of family papers that I had only thumbed through now and then, kind of shuffled and organized and repacked. Looking through it for the Archives, I found out that my great grandmother was a composer, and that my grandmother was a composer and pianist. They were both pianists, and published. And my mother was a pianist. I found little scrawled bits of music. I recognized her hand. I don't know if it was music she was remembering or music she was making up. I love music; I played the saxophone a little bit; I studied guitar a little bit, but, somehow, I did not become a musician in that line of females in my family.

But it was wonderful to find it in the box and have this look backwards at who these women were in my life, genetically speaking, but also just in terms of who my mother was. My mother loved her painting. She played the piano constantly. My mother could fix or make anything, it seemed. I remember that she fixed our toaster when it stopped working. She was also a dancer and did all kinds of things, but she loved the painting and she devoted herself to the painting. She's my early mentor; I studied with my mother because, of course, I was in her studio constantly and I was painting next to her and with her. And I was doing silk-screen printing and drawing and charcoal and everything else. But it was so common that it never occurred to me until more recently that it was part of my creative education.

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MS. RIEDEL: Let's go back to the beginning and just pick up a little bit. When you left Hungary, you spent a year in Austria, and then you came to the States. You tell the story.

MS. LAKY: The fortunate part was that, even though it was risky for my mother to leave Hungary with three small children, she basically snuck out. It was raining and we walked six days. People gave her help along the way. Some farmers got her across the border, and then she—

MS. RIEDEL: You walked from Budapest to Austria?

MS. LAKY: Yeah. We got to Vienna, and then, in daylight, the next day, she was able to find the oil company offices. And they, of course, knew where my father was. So we were very fortunate in that our little family was reconnected and whole again.

We came to the U.S. We started out in Lorain, Ohio, small steel town on beautiful Lake Erie. We lived right on the lake with a wonderful family, the Stocker family, three daughters about the age of the three of us. I'm still very close to the family. I see them now and then, especially the daughter who was six when I was five. [Laughs.] Her children, two of her daughters, live here in San Francisco. We see each other. It's really quite wonderful.

That first year was our sponsored year. Can you imagine a family of five taking in a family of five?

MR. RIEDEL: That's extraordinary in itself.

MS. LAKY: There's a little piece of that history that I have found out more recently that fits the puzzle. And that is that I found out from Mary Ann Stocker, my friend, that her father had a wood shop in the lower floor where our apartment was, and also that one of his favorite wooden items was toothpicks. She even told me that one family vacation, he drove way out of his way to take the entire family on a tour of a toothpick-making company. [They laugh.] I have used toothpicks for projects in my classes, asking students to create large, lightweight structures like Buckminster Fuller would have loved.

I also have used them in some of my work. Think about a small child, seeing the handwork of a person—and he was a scientist, an engineer; he must have been a fine craftsmen as well. So I had to just laugh and say, well, I must have been hanging around his knees all the time, watching what he did. Maybe he even let me handle his tools and try things myself. I don't know. I don't know, but I could imagine. Unfortunately, Paul is no longer alive, so I can't ask him, but I would imagine that he had a big impact on me, as my love of wood is very profound.

We moved to Oklahoma City. Now, that was a big deal because—

MS. RIEDEL: What year was that, Gyöngy?

MS. LAKY: It was in 1950. Oklahoma City started feeling like the American West. And that was our image of the U.S.: cowboys, buffalo, Native Americans. We saw buffalo; my mother painted them. She painted the cowboys; we went to rodeos and watched horses. [Hungarians were fascinated by American Indians. On an island in the Danube River, a group of people recreated a Native American village, and each year spent time dressed as Indians, living as Indians. I remember a painting in our home by my mother's aunt, Erzsebet Vaskowitz, of those Hungarians dressed as a chief.] We felt as if, ah, now we're in America.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. LAKY: There was another funny little piece and that was that my parents opened an art gallery in Oklahoma City in 1952. And I don't know if there was even a museum in Oklahoma City then. Maybe there were. It must have been so minimal in terms of what we think of today as galleries and museums and the art world.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember what kind of art they were showing?

MS. LAKY: Yes, and the Archives have—and you see again, I was discovering my own family as these materials were being put into boxes and sent to you and sent on to the Archives. There was an announcement, a brochure from the gallery. The artists were generally, it seemed to me, from what I could tell, representational painters, as was my mother, in the Royal Academy ilk. I think there was an artist from France or somewhere there. I think there were a couple of Europeans, but they might have been Europeans who had been displaced to America. I don't know.

But my mother was particularly good at, anywhere she was, finding exceptionally good artists—painters, not sculptors. I don't know why I'm so interested in sculpture, but she was very good at finding painters and people doing drawings and etchings and things like that, as I'll mention later. She would somehow find these artists, and then my father was the business part. He would set up the shows and do the publicity and write the brochures. But the gallery didn't last too long, and I'm not surprised.

MS. RIEDEL: But they weren't discouraged because they—

MS. LAKY: Did it again! [They laugh.]

In between, however, we then moved to—well, what happened was, in those early days of the '50s, 1951 and two, we visited Carmel and we visited California. So that was a part of our westward migration. The next step, however, was to go to Dallas, Texas. This, again, was for the kind of work that my dad was doing at the time—I think selling stoves or, I don't know; later he sold insurance. But he was a salesman, and that moved us to Dallas, Texas, where we lived for a little while. I think that was in 1952, not very long because I think the switch to selling insurance allowed him to choose his place. By then, possibly, we had visited California once again. Our close friends, another family from Budapest, lived in Monterey. The dad was a professor in the Army Language School there. So that brought us here to California.

MR. RIEDEL: What were their names? Do you remember their names?

MS. LAKY: Maday, Bela and Marika Maday. My mother was introduced to Carmel, therefore, in the early '50s, and loved it, an artist town. It really appealed to her. When we were facing moving to California, which was in 1953, Northern California was definitely the area my parents wanted to be. Somehow they chose Santa Rosa. And I think, again, because it was a good place for my father's new business, selling insurance.

We still were what I would call a very low-income family, immigrant family. My mother had the job of finding a place to live. It was very, very difficult. Finally, she said to the real estate person she was working with, well, how about some old barn or some dilapidated building or something? We could fix it up. And this person said, well, there's an old Victorian no one wants; I'll show it to you. And at the time, no one did want an old Victorian. It was—what was it—ranch style, or whatever, that everyone wanted. They wanted modern and they wanted the new.

We rented this two-and-a-half-story, I think—it also had an attic—big Victorian, with huge rooms, huge sliding doors between them on the main floor. We had a music room. My mother had a studio; actually, it was upstairs in a kind of double room. We each had a bedroom. It was huge and had a big yard—it had palm trees; it had fruit trees—right on College Avenue. And no one wanted to rent this thing, so the rent was low and it was fabulous for us; we loved it. And it was very close to the school. It was a nice place to live. And I would say it was a very good situation for my mother and her painting career because she really did have a good space to paint in, and she launched her career. We were there only three years, but it was a good three years.

Then we moved to Carmel in 1956. Again, my father was in a position to choose where he wanted to live. What strikes me about this move is that my father was a traditional, domineering, European—the usual strong-minded European male. However, this move was for my mother and for her painting. That, I think, must have made a deep impression on me, because I have mentioned and remembered it along the way. As I sit here today, I think,

at that time, 1956, a pretty remarkable thing for a traditional domineering male. I appreciate that about him.

Carmel was a very good place for us to live. I know we all loved it and enjoyed it. And we felt comfortable there, not that we were that much better off financially, but we were more comfortable. The schools were very good and the place was exquisitely beautiful. I think that was a big piece of it. I would say I'm always a visual person. My environmental circumstances have been tremendously important to me. I think it made a big impression on me. I think the beauty of Carmel gave me a deep, deep sense of well-being and of engaging with the physical situation that I was in.

MS. RIEDEL: And of an environment.

MS. LAKY: Going to the beach, going to the rocks, poking around, collecting driftwood, collecting seaweed, crabs, walking in the forest, walking all over. I became very much an outdoorsy person at that time. And I'm sure it was the environment that had a big piece of that for me.

So, well, they did it again. In 1960, they opened another gallery. This one lasted and flourished, I'd say. It had its ups and downs. My parents were able to make a living for the family, but I would say a large part of that living came from the paintings that my mother painted and sold. She painted portraits, horses, dogs, cats, and florals, seascapes, landscapes, and did it beautifully and sold a lot of work. We had a dual-career couple in the family. The gallery was doing well, but it went up and down. And my mother's work was—

MS. RIEDEL: And your father didn't have to work in insurance, but worked completely in the gallery?

MS. LAKY: He did, not the first few years, but eventually he did. And so, that's why I know that the gallery did succeed.

MS. RIEDEL: I think it's so interesting that—

MS. LAKY: And did some very, very good things in terms of what they exhibited. My mother found all of the early California artists of Carmel before anyone was interested in them. And my parents showed their work. It was very hard to sell because no one was interested then. William Ritchell, Armand Hansen, Maynard Dixon—we had a large painting by Christopher Hill that I think is in a museum somewhere today—is it Bridal Veil Falls in Yosemite? I forget which one it is. [Laughs.] The list goes on and on.

Again, they did the same thing as in Oklahoma City, but it was in a place where it made sense. William Henry Clapp they found in someone's basement or attic. John O'Shea they discovered in a basement in Carmel; many of the O'Shea paintings were sitting in dampness and the bottoms were ruined, but some were able to be saved and many were in good condition, and my parents showed and sold them.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of that time in terms of my life was that—I can't remember exactly when it was—my parents got interested in showing Chinese paintings.

MS. RIEDEL: How did that happen?

MS. LAKY: Well, somehow or other, they met three Chinese painters. And I think this was in the early '60s, maybe '62, three, four, sometime. These painters came from Taiwan, but they were originally from mainland China. Now, we just refer to China as China, but, at the time, that was their trajectory to becoming immigrants in the U.S. My parents were introduced to them and became fascinated by them.

Now, a little aside is that, from what I understand, Hungarians are from Central Asia, from Mongolia. So I thought this was an interesting circle to have been made, that they would now become so enamored of Chinese painting. And they did. They went overboard. They then opened a gallery of Chinese painting in San Francisco. I was the person to open it and be the staff person for it initially.

MS. RIEDEL: How old were you, Gyöngy?

MS. LAKY: Twenty, or something like that. In 1963 and four, I lived in France for a year, which was a wonderful experience for me. This was after finishing my studies at Carmel High School. I kind of put my heels in the dirt. I thought I could educate myself, so I just said, no matter what, I was not going to the university, because I didn't know why to go there. And everyone was pushing me to make a decision about what to study; I wasn't sure. I loved art; I loved art history; I loved the gallery. My life was interesting. Why should I go to the university? So I did other things.

MS. RIEDEL: And so you came back and opened a Chinese gallery after your year in France?

MS. LAKY: Yes. And then, after that, we opened a gallery in Los Angeles for Chinese painting. I opened that gallery, and I lived there for a few months until we got staff, permanent staff for that gallery. It was just an

interesting episode in their lives and in the galleries' existence and in our lives. And it was very enriching.

MS. RIEDEL: Did they have three galleries all open at once—L.A., San Francisco, and Carmel? That's extraordinary.

MS. LAKY: They did. Yeah, it was too much, too, so after a while, they closed both San Francisco and Los Angeles galleries. I don't know which one closed first, but they finally expanded the gallery at Carmel and closed the other two, which I think was a very good decision.

MS. RIEDEL: And they were all called Laky Galleries?

MS. LAKY: Yes. And then, I guess subtitle would be, "contemporary Chinese painting."

MS. RIEDEL: All of them?

MS. LAKY: No, not the one in Carmel, but the one in San Francisco and the one in Los Angeles.

MS. RIEDEL: And exclusively Chinese painting?

MS. LAKY: Yes. And again, digging around, they found some of the recently dead and still-living Chinese painters who were moving Chinese painting from traditional forms to contemporary forms. Later they were beginning to show some younger Chinese painters who were really very abstract and were beginning to change the face of Chinese painting. Zhang Daqian was the most renowned artist at the time who they met and began to show. My parents were probably significant participants in the very early stages of contemporary Chinese painting developing and becoming an item in the West. It was an exciting time.

In 1967, in January, actually a little earlier than that, I began to think, I am not as good at educating myself as I thought I might be. [Laughs.] Maybe I'd better go to the university. I had been accepted to UC Berkeley. I had postponed my acceptance and then, I decided, well, maybe I should do this. I need a broader view. This isn't enough. I need to continue my education.

MS. RIEDEL: And just briefly, when you were in France, you were studying art, too?

MS. LAKY: I was, but I was doing it in a self-styled program. I was taking courses on my own at the Sorbonne [University of Paris], at the Alliance Francaise. I was perfecting my French. I was also taking art courses at the Alliance Francaise. They were excellent courses at the time, maybe still. The ones at the Sorbonne were terrific as well.

MS. RIEDEL: Drawing, painting, anything 3-D?

MS. LAKY: No, I was, at the time, more interested in studying art, the theory, criticism, history, traditions. I was going to the galleries on a regular basis, to all of the museums I could visit. I took courses in the museums, as well, in the Louvre and elsewhere. It was a wonderful education. At that point, I thought that my direction was to be an art historian or maybe some sort of gallery person or curator. I don't think I was thinking about my future and a profession; I was following what was interesting to me.

A painter at the time, Emile Lahner, who was being shown in my parents' gallery, was living with his wife in Paris. He became my mentor, my surrogate grandfather. Every week, he went through the newspaper with me and gave me my list, where I had to go and what I had to see. On Sunday—no, on Saturday, we would actually go to the galleries together. What was amusing to me was that some galleries he felt I should go see, but he would not stoop to gracing them with his presence. So he would wait outside the door while I would go in and look at the exhibition which he felt I should see. I would come out, and then we would walk on to the next place and talk about that exhibition. If he felt good about the gallery the next place we went, he would go in. But if he didn't feel good about the gallery, he wouldn't go in even if he felt that the current exhibition was important to see.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. LAKY: Isn't that interesting? He was a strong character. He was originally from Hungary. He got to Paris as a 19- or 20-year-old, possibly a 21-year-old. And he spent the rest of his long life, until he was in his mid- to late 80s, in Paris. He was a Parisian, part of the School of Paris at the time. So that was fabulous for me.

Also, an art dealer with whom my parents worked was involved with my education there. He explained things to me. He introduced me to artists, galleries, to museum shows; it was a wonderful education.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's interesting in the larger context of your career, because travel has been such a huge part of your education and your life. And so, very early on, here is a very significant year that's primarily travel and

education, inextricably interwoven.

MS. LAKY: Yes, and in 1962, I spent half a year in Canada, most of the time working and studying at the Banff School of Fine Arts in Canada, in British Columbia. Plus I had spent that time in Austria. I think my family was there for about a year before passage to America by boat, so that's a lot of travel in a young person's life.

MS. RIEDEL: And then, you were—

MS. LAKY: Moving across the U.S.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. LAKY: Different communities, very different attitudes and ideas in each one of these places where we lived. Now that you mention it, I can understand why I just kept wanting to travel. Also, I think—I said this to my students as often as I could: Travel if you can, because it is a way of expanding one's life and experience and ideas and understanding. And people are so different in different parts of the world.

MS. RIEDEL: And at this point—you said you've counted recently—and you've been to over 40 countries.

MS. LAKY: Yes, kept on going. [Laughs.] After my undergraduate and graduate studies at UC Berkeley, I went on a UC program, Professional Studies in India. Just as I finished my formal studies, I continued on in travel, so you're right. That was an important part of what I was doing. I was fortunate to get together with Tom Layton, my then-dearest friend from high school days in Carmel. When I returned from India, he had moved to San Francisco from Southern California. Soon after, we got married, and he wanted to travel. [Laughs.]

Meanwhile, when I returned from India that first summer, I went to Banff again as an instructor. Oh, I just happened to remember that on my way back from India, I stopped in Poland, Israel, Greece, and then came home. So even at that point, I was expanding my travel. Going to India, I went to—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember why you went to these places, Gyöngy?

MS. LAKY: Burma, I went to Burma. Leaving India, I went to Afghanistan by myself.

MS. RIEDEL: And Greece and Poland—such a different array of countries scattered all over.

MS. LAKY: Well, Greece, Israel, Poland—Poland because of my family, and also—I think it was Pan-American [Pan American World Airways] at the time—the around-the-world ticket allowed me certain stops with very little additional money paid. I took as much advantage of that as I possibly could.

Burma was fascinating, absolutely fascinating, but also depressing with its repressive government.

MS. RIEDEL: I would imagine. When were you there? It was 1970—

MS. LAKY: I was there in 1971. It had the revolutionary government of something or other; it was in a bad state of affairs. Things, I think, got better for a while. And now, again, it's a very bad state of affairs in Burma. So I wonder how all of that weaves into how I think and what I do. But I'm definitely sure it does.

A product of growing older and older is that I can reflect on these things and maybe work some of them out and figure some of them out. Probably, most of them, most of the experiences in our lives, we never really figure out, only maybe dream about here and there, which is a form of thinking, as I now understand it.

Leaving in 1972, I went to Afghanistan. I am now a little bit shocked I went there by myself. I was living in Kabul for two, three days in a little hotel. I felt safe.

MS. RIEDEL: Had you met Neda al Hilali yet?

MS. LAKY: No, not at that point.

MS. RIEDEL: She lived there, too, but she was not—

MS. LAKY: Probably for a slightly longer period of time, I would guess.

MS. RIEDEL: A year or two, I think, at least.

MS. LAKY: I did a little traveling, to a couple of villages outside of Kabul. Visually, physically, even now, all these years later, 36 or 37 years later, I can see it very clearly. I can see the buildings. The market in Kabul was astounding: the baskets, the textiles, the food, the textures, the colors, the jewelry, the cooking implements, everything was so wonderful and very different from India. I was also struck by that. The landscape was similar

to India in many ways, in that it was arid and desertlike, the western part of India where I had spent most of my time.

The richness of the Afghanistan culture was astounding. Also, I was taken by how mixed the population was. Now, I don't know if they were truly mixed, but what I saw was people who looked very Asian—Central Asia, Mongolia, China—and people who looked, oh, sort of even Turkish, and people who looked like people I had seen in India, but then people who looked very different. The skin tones were so varied. I saw blue-eyed people. I saw red-haired people. I have understood since that Afghanistan was, and is, a crossroads. And the silk route came through there. But certainly, that's what I saw. It was fascinating, especially in the marketplace.

MS. RIEDEL: We've jumped completely over UC, so let's go back and talk, at least briefly, about your studies there, and particularly with Ed Rossbach and Peter Voulkos.

MS. LAKY: And another person who was not on the permanent faculty there, but was there for quite a while, was Joanne Branford. And she was a big influence for me. There was another woman who taught there, Dumas, Mary Dumas, and she was a wonderful teacher, a real inspiration. She taught silk-screen printing and, for a while, I was very involved with that. I was also taking a lot of other classes in the art department, painting and sculpture. But I think the painting and the silk-screen printing then probably connected back to my time with my mother. But I enjoyed that quite a bit. I don't know if this is a good characterization, but Dumas was a free spirit, somehow. That's what I remember about her teaching and her work. The other thing that connects Mary Dumas to Ed Rossbach in my memory, even though he hardly ever showed his work in class, was the idea of being able to do anything one wanted to do, being able to move freely across disciplines, across ideas.

Ed used the textile collection extensively in his teachings. I remember it was a little bit like going to the market in Afghanistan. Rossbach would take us into where these items were stored, because it was a study collection and they were in Wurster Hall [UC Berkeley] in a small room. He would open the drawers, and it was like treasure boxes being flipped open. They were so wonderful; the things in them were so complex and fascinating and beautiful, interesting. We learned by looking at them and loving them. And they were very diverse; they came from a lot of different cultures. It connected us to many different people in the world. I had already traveled a little bit as a child, and Rossbach's interest in other cultures encouraged me to try to travel more.

MS. RIEDEL: Were they mostly flat?

MS. LAKY: Yes. Native American examples were largely three-dimensional.

I did a little fling in philosophy. I moved into anthropology and cultural anthropology, and there my interest in other cultures—Mexican, California Pomo—grew. I had already begun to appreciate other cultures—Africa—through those study experiences. I did move out of studying anthropology, because I think the pull to practice was always very strong.

MS. RIEDEL: The pull to practice?

MS. LAKY: To working creatively with my hands. Because I was a 23-year-old freshman, I was a little worried about the demands of scholastic, academic courses, wasn't sure I could take a heavy schedule and do well, because I had been out of school for a few years. So I softened it by taking studio art classes. [Laughs.] Since I had been doing studio art from childhood, it didn't seem like a big deal to me. But what I appreciate, appreciated later, working with my students, is these are not easy courses, the studio courses. They demand a great deal of attention and time and worry and commitment. Over and over I experienced students coming into my UC Davis studio courses thinking, okay, I'm just going to have a good time and it'll be easy, and in a week or two finding out that that was not the case. Research had to be done, experiments tried, ideas worked on and figured out, a lot of very demanding work.

We all laugh about the language, you know, the Mickey Mouse courses. Well, no studio course I have ever been in, taught, witnessed, observed, visited, or heard about is a Mickey Mouse. Even when the teacher doesn't pay much attention, the students must. For me, having done so much studio work, I felt I knew the vocabulary. I had experience. I had ideas. I wasn't afraid. I wasn't afraid of working hard. I knew that sometimes you have to do something over and over and over again to get it right. So it didn't feel as difficult as reading several books and having to go to the library and distill the most significant information and write the papers. Even though I was fairly good at writing papers, it was always a daunting procedure for me.

So what happened in that process is, I moved toward the studio art practice more and more and more. I think I was still an undergraduate; yes, I was still an undergraduate when I had as a roommate a painter, Judy Foosaner—she and her partner at the time, John King, were both painters. They were in the graduate program at UC Berkeley. They encouraged me to consider my interest in creative work a serious possibility. I know that they were a major influence in steering me that way, but I also know that Ed Rossbach was, as well. He was an academic that was a little bit different. He was an artist and a scholar. That appealed to me.

I would describe him as much more of an academic than Pete Voulkos. Now, Pete became a part of my life later, as I did graduate work. I think one of the things that appealed to me about his work was that it was so deeply rooted in clay and craft. It was hands-on. It was hands-on in a way that was powerful and also so sculptural. When Voulkos tore his plates, it made them more three-dimensional. I think that resonated with me. It was physical. It was—it was muscular. Somehow, that always appealed to me.

I would not describe Ed Rossbach's work that way. I would describe Ed Rossbach's work as much more poetic and philosophical: physical, in that he translated his ideas into objects. Even then, the ones I was most attracted to were the three-dimensional ones. One of the earliest I remember was newspaper-plated boxes. They were in *Craft Horizons*, in black and white.

MS. RIEDEL: So you were looking at *Craft Horizons* even back then?

MS. LAKY: Oh, yeah, and that was a fabulous magazine. We all loved it and we did look at it. But there wasn't much visual. People didn't show slides all the time in class the way they did during the '80s, '90s, and now PowerPoint. But Ed did by bringing in all of the examples; he did show us work. So it wasn't his work, but he showed us work. These two people were very different from each other.

Joanne Branford was teaching the history of design and textiles, but she had a very strong component of studio work. This made a big impression on me and I loved the class. When it was just purely theoretical and purely informational—remembering dates and names and places when I left art history—looking at a lot of slides in a dark room was somehow so divorced from what art was that I couldn't hang onto it. Joanne Branford was brilliant. She brought the material goods right into class and then asked us to interpret and make our own things. It dovetailed with Ed Rossbach's approach.

MS. RIEDEL: How so?

MS. LAKY: Well, because we were looking at past items, but making contemporary things. She didn't ask us to repeat a past item that she would discuss in class like, let's say, an embroidered shawl from India. She wouldn't ask us to embroider a shawl and learn those stitches. We had a lot more freedom to interpret plus—

MS. RIEDEL: That was an art history class?

MS. LAKY: It was in the design department. It was textiles—design and textiles, a combination. But some of those textiles were works of art, as opposed to utilitarian objects, so she was also very good at bringing in the art component.

[END MD 01 TR 02.]

MS. LAKY: The other thing that Joanne Branford did was that she brought in a lot of three-dimensional objects into her subject matter, whereas sometimes the study of textiles is basically flat cloth and fabrics.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. LAKY: And I'd say Lillian Elliott also brought in a little bit of that, even though, at the time, she was doing more weavings and patchwork and things like that. But she also was interested in basketry early on, though she didn't do as much of it at that time.

Joanne Branford brought in the basketry. Somehow that and my earlier anthropological interests, plus being around architects, had a really a big impact.

MS. RIEDEL: And your brother—

MS. LAKY: My brother was an architect; he was studying architecture. So through him, many of the people I spent time with were architects.

When you put up an office building, and there's just that grid hanging there in the air—[laughs]—it looked like the scaffolding, and it looked like the basketry, and it looked like the fences, and it looked like the hand-built houses, and it looked like the nets. And so I know that formed my approach and the things I was interested in making and handling and doing and studying.

One of the things I did—well, let's now bring in what was going on at UC Berkeley at the time. Sixty-seven, '68, '69, '70, those were the war years. I call that my time of coming to age because even though I was a little bit late and behind, being a little older when I went to the university, it was really the time when I became an adult, a little on the late side—[laughs]. It was in that environment of the free speech movement that was there before I came to Berkeley, then the later demonstrations against the war. The people I loved and cared about, the guys, were worrying about being drafted, because we had the draft then. If we had a draft now, maybe we wouldn't be

in Iraq.

So that was the environment; People's Park, the demonstrations. It was also a time of rising concern about the Third World, about people of color, about humanity, about human beings, and it was, in a way, the counterpoint of what the government was doing. The government was being the militaristic bully, and so I'm not surprised that people on the street and in the universities were thinking about humans and what we were doing, and that we couldn't do it that way anymore, and that something had to change.

With the Cambodia crisis, we took our studios and turned them into poster-printing factories. We worked all night. We were silk-screen printing, and people were creating new posters, and we had a terrific distribution system. We had people going out on bicycles at five, six in the morning, with their piles of—they got computer paper from the computer labs, because the computer thing was beginning to burst on the scene. Those papers, with holes along the sides, fan-folded down into a box. They were all practice sheets for the folks studying computer science. So we would go to the computer science labs, grab these big boxes of paper, print it on only one side. A double sheet would make a larger poster; a single sheet would make a small poster; three would make even a bigger poster, but mostly we could only post the doubles and the singles.

And by the way, I ran into these posters in Amsterdam [The Netherlands], in the museum [Stedelijk Museum]. And this was, what, 2001 or '02 or '03, or 2000—I can't remember when we were in Amsterdam, but I walked into the—was it the Stedelijk? And they had an exhibition of Berkeley posters from the '60s, and I said, Tom, we printed that one; we printed that one; we printed that one! They were all there; not all, but many of them.

I didn't keep a single one. I have turned into a pack rat since then, but not at that time. I did not keep a one. And I didn't keep most of my work from classes at UC Berkeley. I don't know; I was in a clearing-out mode in my life then, probably because I was heading into a year abroad.

The architecture aspect of that time for me was important. Sim Van der Ryn was very important. I took a seminar, or some sort of strange course, with him; we went out to his property in Inverness and built geodesic domes, upside-down baskets. I think Buckminster Fuller would agree with that description. That was eye-opening for me, plus it was—

MS. RIEDEL: This was grad school, yeah?

MS. LAKY: No, I think it was still undergrad. I think it was '68—'68, '69—because it was still in the midst of Cambodia and the war, and we took over some large rooms downstairs in Wurster Hall. We made them into an alternative classroom; I remember Sim Van der Ryn was involved with that. I built a big, netted sculpture in the middle of that room. A couple of friends and I were supplying food.

The university got very anxious about this, and after many meetings, during which we demanded healthy food such as whole wheat bagels, yogurt, and fruit, we created Ramona's Café; Hayden Valdez, my friend, named it Ramona's Café.

But what we were doing there was we were discussing the state of the world and the role of designers, and what we, as architects, designers, and photographers, and landscape architects, could do about it. It was a very important aspect of my studies, as was everything going on in Berkeley at the time. I marched in a lot of demonstrations and ran from a lot of tear gas, though I can't describe myself as having been up in the front. A lot of it was frightening to me, but it just seemed like an important societal change that I needed to participate in at the time.

MS. RIEDEL: How do you—we're not talking about this in greater depth, of course, because so much of this is covered so well in your Bancroft Library interview. But what was inspiring your work then? And when you look at what's inspiring your work now, do you see similarities? Do you see vast differences? Do you see both?

MS. LAKY: More than earlier in my life, I am seeing the continuing threads. I am seeing how that engagement with others—it was more interdisciplinary than one might have had, had the circumstances been different—I was around people in other parts of the university; we were interacting.

Students have the courses they have to take. They take those courses; they see the students in those classes; they hang out in those parts of the buildings. They have some breadth requirements, so they occasionally go take a chemistry class, or physics, or history, or whatever it is, but most of the time they are channeled into the courses that the majors require. The pressure to do only that work is enormous. I saw it at Davis [University of California, Davis] constantly. The students in English never interact, or rarely, with the students in American studies or in chemistry or in art studio or in history of art; they just didn't cross paths that easily because of the demands in each major.

So with the great turbulence of the time at UC Berkeley, it threw us all together. The faculty, bless their souls,

were great. They responded, many of them. They altered their curriculum a bit; they opened up courses; they had special seminars. They had gatherings; we sat on the floor. We had our alternative situation there, so we could think differently. And it was interdisciplinary in a very, very strong way. I know that became something extremely important for me.

Now I can speak about that much more clearly today than I could have 10 years ago. I recognize it more clearly today than I recognized it 10 years ago, 15 years ago. So that's what I mean. I think what I'm discovering is these channels, these themes, these threads; these early experiences funneled me in certain directions, stayed with me, became more important over time.

Now, of course, there are probably things that fell away at the side. I don't know what those are; I'm not as interested in thinking or talking about them. But, for instance, the role of language in my life I now understand much better, maybe not totally but I understand it much better; whereas 20 years ago, it was simply like, oh, I love French.

And, let's see, when did I do that piece? In '89 I did *That Word*, the freestanding art piece; '89, '99, 2009, that's almost 20 years ago. It was the conversation around me that catapulted me into making that piece, but at the time I don't think I could have had a very interesting discussion about the role of language in my life. Today I feel that I understand the role, and I'm more intrigued by the role, and I'm learning more and more about it every day as I work on new pieces and progress with the kind of work that I'm doing. Whereas, when I made that piece, I don't think I could have said much about it other than the prevailing art vs. craft arguments; the ascendance of craft media into the realm of art provoked then.

MS. RIEDEL: Last week, you were talking about the physicality of language—words, and of the shapes of different letters, which refers so much to *That Word*. But you're talking about it now in relation to these pieces, which are much more two-dimensional, that you would have a much more evolved awareness of how that's playing through your work.

MS. LAKY: Yes, I think that's correct. Plus, I'm planning some freestanding ones. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, you are?

MS. LAKY: But even the ones that are hanging on the wall I think of as very dimensional. I think of them as a three-dimensional letter or a word. Like, the very large Q, to me, is very dimensional; it feels like a piece of architecture to me. So even though they can be described as two-dimensional, wall-related works, to me, they seem very three-dimensional.

MS. RIEDEL: They are, though in comparison with *That Word*—

MS. LAKY: That's right. The R is four feet by four feet by seven and a half feet tall; that's very three-dimensional. The A is a big pyramid, so, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: It also makes me think of the concept of play that we talked about briefly last week. Now that you've retired and you have more time to work in the studio, all these complex interests and influences—you are able to play with them more in your work. And all these different influences channeling through your life, I feel them in this current exhibition. There's a fluidity which combines different travels, different influences, different concerns, and then texturally, materially, two-dimensional, three-dimensional, baskets, abstract forms, word pieces—there is a huge, fluid jumble of all your influences.

MS. LAKY: [Laughs]—I'm going to have to quote that, "a fluid jumble"; that's like "ornery and elegant," you know.

MS. RIEDEL: But there is—

MS. LAKY: Plus I had to laugh, with Jonathon Keats's "wood whisperer" ["War." *San Francisco Magazine*. December 2007].

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, exactly.

MS. LAKY: And I do love wood deeply. I've fiddled around with bronze casting a little bit, and I'm sure I'll go there one day soon. However, photography's getting very interesting right now, so I don't know where I'll go next. And I love the idea that it doesn't matter that I don't know, and that I'm free to go anywhere I want to go.

MS. RIEDEL: And the not knowing is really the important thing, and has been to you for a long time.

MS. LAKY: Oh, now Pete, got to tell you about Pete Voulkos and not knowing.

My favorite thing that he said to me along the way was, "I just make sure that every day, there's something I

don't understand." I thought that was so great, it resonated so deeply with me.

MS. RIEDEL: I agree, yes.

MS. LAKY: Then, you know, later Robert Hughes said it in a different way about the Surrealists—

MS. RIEDEL:—and preparing for the—

MS. LAKY: "How does one prepare for the unexpected?" And I feel that that's something I did learn along the way. I try to keep it open; I try to surprise myself whenever I can. It's very hard because I've gotten skilled. I developed my manual dexterity. Over all these years I've gotten good at it, which gets in the way sometimes. I'm good at it, so I just plan it out and I start making it, and I know how it should go, and I know how to do it, and I do it pretty well, and I clean it up if I have to do it better.

But then, you know, every now and then I just try to mix it up—[laughs]—a little bit—and what's interesting is I have to do it quickly, and I have to do it when I'm not paying close attention—sometimes when I'm tired. I learned that also from Stephen De Staebler, who had a very nice phrase in one of his catalogues about how he would sometimes hang out in his studio until two or three in the afternoon, after going there very early in the morning. He would get so frustrated with the fact that nothing was happening that he would decide to go home, just as he was about to leave, something would start to happen.

I think we have to trick our brains sometimes because our culture prepares us for the mundane, the redundant, for being a good individual, the standing-in-line part, the behaving properly, the keeping-it-organized part, whereas creative work is different—you've got to open up sections of the brain that are not that section, parts of the brain that make a little lightbulb connection. I think it might even be the result of real electrical impulses.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, interesting.

MS. LAKY: I mean, look at that lightbulb phrase. We say, oh, yeah, this light went off in my brain. Well, why do we describe it that way? It happens when we're waking; it happens when we're falling asleep; it happens when we're dreaming. We put things together that we'd never put together in our waking lives. So, that's a—

MS. RIEDEL: It's that peripheral vision, I think.

MS. LAKY: Oh, yeah, that peripheral thinking—[laughs]. Yeah.

And how do you keep yourself fresh? Henry Miller said something wonderful about working hard all our lives so to get to the place where we can do the things the way we did them when we were children. And we've heard that coming out of other people's mouths, too—how to see things in a fresh way; to see them as if for the first time, even though you've seen them before. So I think that's a critical piece of all of this, but, again, it's something that I feel I've gotten better at over time. Not always; I have to go back and do the sketching, the freehand, the freewheeling, the exploratory thing that sketching is.

MS. RIEDEL: So you bring that in, it seems to me, by experimenting with new materials, for example the charcoal.

MS. LAKY: Sometimes that, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Or the little plastic babies that went into the *Dada* [2007] piece.

MS. LAKY: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And those are—you really have worked exclusively with wood—I mean, there's been toothpicks and then screws, but I've—

MS. LAKY: Screws, nails, wire—actually, wire has been important along the way. I've been intrigued by using things like copper pipe and nuts and bolts; I've used a little bit of that. Hardware, I love—I love hardware stores and I love hardware, and so I get intrigued by such items.

Now, the interesting thing in some pieces in this exhibition is that a couple, or two or three or four of them, are pieces that I have been wanting to do for quite some time. One of them, five or six years, another one of them for eight or 10 years that I've been planning to do them. So sometimes I can't do them until I get to a certain point where I want to say I've figured it out, but it doesn't quite happen that way, although it has to be a precise thing in my head before I can actually make the piece I am trying to reach.

For example, *The Nocturnal Venture* [2007] is manzanita [western evergreen plant], a very distorted grid-like piece for the wall, with little orange dowels that pierce it, very much in the way that I use nails to pierce pieces

of wood in other works. Let's see, when was it, I think in 2002 or '03, when I first began to work with manzanita. I saw the contorted, fabulous lines in the thinner branches of the wood; I loved them. I wanted to make a grid out of them. I could not make a grid out of them that looked like anything one would want to keep. [Laughs.] I tried and I tried and I tried, and eventually I used up all that wood in other works. I couldn't make a successful grid.

So this round, a year and a half or so ago, when I went out and harvested more manzanita for this exhibition, I again cut those pieces something like 24 inches long, about the circumference of my fingers, smaller fingers. Because of the difficulty of the growing circumstances they're under, they get very wiggly as a line; they're curly and move around, and they're very beautiful and startling. So I had the pile of twigs ready to go, I just couldn't make it happen. For about a year, I had the pile, moved them here, moved them there in the studios. They were oiled, the ends were sanded and colored; the ends I colored black. They were ready to go. I could not get them together. I knew I wanted the orange piercing through it. I had made a sample, sitting my studio since 2003 as well, so eventually I knew those two things would go together. I just couldn't make it happen.

I had a couple of student interns working with me, so I was trying to lay it out on the floor, because it's fairly big, four feet across and, I think, about six feet high now, including six separate sections. I laid it out, but we were preparing for the photographer. We had to clean stuff up; we had to get this off the floor. We put it on a table; the table was just barely four feet wide. So as we cleaned up and prepared, it got shifted around and distorted a little bit out of the grid that I was trying to make. I glanced at it, and I suddenly realized that the fault I had been making over and over again, the mistake, was that I was trying to make a cleaner grid out of it and it wouldn't do that. So when I let the lines move around on their own, and added some in for structure, the six sections instead of four lines, each row has five lines or six lines in them. I added to the complexity of the lines rather than trying to diminish the complexity of the lines, and that did it.

So you see, somehow I couldn't get there prior to that time, and I don't know why I couldn't get there prior to that time. It took all that other fiddling around.

MS. RIEDEL: I also remember—when I came up to Davis with you a few years ago and sat in on one of your classes—and I remember you talking to your students about mistakes. And you got really excited because you said they [mistakes] can take you places that you just could never have gotten otherwise, and here's just a great example of that.

MS. LAKY: I know many people have said that to their students; I've heard other people say that. It is true because that's when you keep your eyes open. Mistakes—there are such things as mistakes. Not every mistake is of value to be repeated. But that's what I used to say—just take your mistake and repeat it and see what the pattern is. But, rather, it's just keep your eyes open for the unexpected.

Sometimes a mistake is just something that happens; it's the way you put something down. It's not in the right position, but take a look, because there may be something notable in that occurrence. Let's say I broke one of those sticks I was using. That would be a mistake. It would be good if I could stop for a minute and look at those two pieces as short components, because this whole time I've been working with longer components and I was set upon the fact that they should be longer. But what happens when they're shorter? Maybe that would end up somewhere else in another piece. So that's where you try to keep your eyes and ears open all the time and just let things happen.

MS. RIEDEL: And it sounds like that's where you find, occasionally, ideas for the next piece.

MS. LAKY: Well, speaking of language, there was a moment—this was way back; it might be in the oral history, I can't remember. I was asked to participate in an exhibition to show a few artists' work in depth and to have the artists create some sort of title board with their names. The people who organized this exhibition just said, make your name anyway you'd like. Right, wow. Okay. [Riedel laughs.] And you know what? I don't even know if this was before the big A-R-T piece. It might be interesting to try to figure that out. Yes, it was in 1983 or '84

I happened to be working with some twist-ties that florists use, that has wire and paper or plastic going along them. Sometimes they're red, they're green. I was using some of those to keep a piece together while I was trying to figure it out. And as I was working on it, I dropped the red twist-ties on the floor. Walking back and forth in front of the wall I was working on, I mashed them down flat, and I looked down and I thought, oh, I can make letters out of those. I saw letters in them, so I took them to my local copy place, put them in the copy machine, and I started making G and Y and O and N. I never finished that; I don't remember what I ended up with for my name, but I couldn't get the size right with the lettering. It was much better on a big scale, if each letter were 12 to 15 inches high, but on a smaller scale they didn't work as well, so I abandoned that. But it was fascinating, and the lines were lively and wonderful and kind of messy.

MS. RIEDEL: When did you start the ampersand series, and when did you get interested in symbols?

MS. LAKY: Oh, the ampersand. Which was the first ampersand?

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like it was 2002, 2003. That was the first one I saw; I don't know if there was one before that. No, 2003, 2004.

MS. LAKY: All right, I can remember which was the first, but let's see; 2003, because I had a couple of them, or at least one that I can remember was in the Braunstein/Quay Gallery exhibition in 2004. I, in my favorite little junkshop, down on Grant, Aria—

MS. RIEDEL: Right. A source of inspiration.

MS. LAKY: I found—source of inspiration; oh, wonderful source of inspiration. The cabinet de curiousité, superbe. That's what Bill Haskell's store is like.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MS. LAKY: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I'll have to go.

MS. LAKY: You have to go.

Anyway, Aria has all sorts of interesting things, including small plaster letters from, maybe, old store signs. He had lots of them. I found an ampersand about 2 inches high that I liked. I brought it back to the studio. I think I must have purchased that in 2001 or '02. It was hanging around the studio, and that was the model for my first ampersand.

However, at that same period of time, CCAC, the California College of Arts and Crafts [San Francisco and Oakland], knocked off "crafts." But they left the "and" sign in place for quite a while. One of the young students I had working with me at the time had a photographic slide of it. I thought to myself, huh. The Museum of American Craft is now the Museum of Arts and Design [New York City], the "and" being an important piece of that. They didn't say the Museum of Design; they didn't say the Museum of Art. Couldn't do that. They needed to do something. They needed that ampersand, the "and" sign, in there; it was critical. That was fascinating to me, the "and" sign on the California College of the Arts. The S is interesting, too. The S is important in that instance, but the ampersand was sitting there. I thought, I have to make that "and" sign.

I think I was doing those simultaneously, the ampersand from the old plaster letter and the ampersand from the California College of the Arts. So they got me started. As I was working on them, I started thinking about the meaning of an "and" sign—the kind of connector it was, the kind of continuum it suggests, the collecting of ideas that it suggests, the linkage that it is, the past, present, and future, the way we use it. We use it in so many important ways. Also, when shortening the name of something: B&B Italia. I don't know what B&B stands for, but I do know B&B Italia. The "and" is significant in their logo, the way it looks. B&B Italia is one of the ampersands in this exhibition, the blue one, the one called *Estuary* [2007].

So I was thinking about its meaning and its role, and then someone told me that it was the end of the alphabet, even presented as the 27th character of the alphabet, that it used to be something like, X-Y-Z and, per se, that children, I guess back to Grecian times, did repetitions of letters in order to learn them, so repeating X-Y-Z and, per se and, became slurred into ampersand. I looked it up on the word detective and the word detective gave me that description, too, so I think it's possible, but it's also that E-T, the "et" is French for "and" and people think that that's the origin of the symbol for "and," maybe, the way it looks; the et cetera or the French et. So all of those, I think, are part of what I liked. It connected to French, and then to Latin; I liked that. I picked up a little Greek along the way in my 20s; [laughs] I couldn't help myself. I have yet to study Latin.

So, the "and" sign to me became an individual—it was very like a letter, but it carried more power than a letter; it carried more meaning than a letter. It extended the meaning. It had a role much more significant than just a letter or a sign. So that's what I think then moved me into just a single letter. The Q became a prominent letter in my work that way. I found a Q I loved down in Bill's shop, too, and that Q is an elegant and beautiful shape.

MS. RIEDEL: Is this the one that is part of the current exhibition?

MS. LAKY: There are two Qs for the current exhibition.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, the very large one [*Big Question*, 2007]. The other Q is *Q with No A*, [2007].

MS. LAKY: Yeah. Both using the same plaster Q letter shape from Aria.

[END MD 01 TR 03. MD 01 TR 04 is skipped; interview resumes on MD 01 TR 05.]

MS. LAKY: We're finding out about more and more learning difficulties and the differences from one person to

another person, how people learn, how the brain works.

I believe as if we're learning a tremendous amount right now about the brain. That also comes into my thinking about my work. When I'm using letters and symbols, but possibly in the other work as well, when people see something and recognize it, I think there is dual activity going on. There is the intellectual activity of recognition and meaning that sets into motion in one's brain, and there is the visual, physical look of the work, the aspect of the work, the shape and color and texture that the viewer is also soaking in, and understanding, and using as the viewer participates with the piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. It's almost experiential learning.

MS. LAKY: Experiential.

MS. RIEDEL: It's happening on different levels.

MS. LAKY: And when it's a symbol or a letter or a word, it's not just the physical experiential.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. LAKY: It then hooks into the intellectual activity of the brain, the definition of the word or the symbol, the meaning, the circumstances within which one has seen that letter, word, or symbol before, what it has meant in those other situations, what it means in a sentence, what—how people are responding to that particular letter or word today, for whatever reason. The Scarlet A. We know what that was—you know, it has so much meaning. So I think these two things happening together are potentially enriching to the viewer's response.

My students were all kinds of people. Some learned more audibly. Some learned more visually. For some, when I wrote down the project, it was better. For some, when I spoke about the project, they understood more easily. I found out that there were many different ways of learning and responding. They were all at the University of California at Davis. They were all smart people. But they were very different from one another.

UC Davis has actually been doing a great job about dealing with people with all kinds of learning abilities and differences. We often call it learning disabilities, but I think it's learning differences.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. LAKY: So I came into contact with various students who would come to me with a description from the counselors saying, here's how this person functions best. It was fabulous; it worked well.

One person I worked with had a very hard time with multisyllabic words: education, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, whatever it was. If it was a longer, more complex word—for example, "derisively"—how do you understand a more complex, multisyllabic word? Along the way, she found out that if she formed the word in clay, she could use it, spell it, remember it, understand it, speak it.

MS. RIEDEL: If she formed the word in clay?

MS. LAKY: The letters.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. LAKY: Each letter.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. LAKY: Formed in clay, it became hers.

MS. RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

MS. LAKY: Now, isn't this fascinating? It never dawned on me until just now—that this story—when I heard it a few years back in the mid-1990s—this story really had an impact on me and on my work.

MS. RIEDEL: Of course.

MS. LAKY: But now what I'm thinking, as a five-year-old in my new country with a new language, what were all of the things in my brain that I was using to get involved in my new place, and to learn the language, and to respond to the language? At five years old, one is reading in school, looking at books, right? That would be kindergarten. Kindergarten and then first grade?

MS. RIEDEL: That sounds right. Exactly.

MS. LAKY: So isn't that interesting?

MS. RIEDEL: It is. And there might have been block letters. I mean, who knows?

MS. LAKY: Who knows?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, exactly.

MS. LAKY: I'm happy making three-dimensional letters. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And another thing that is interesting—you were describing seeing and coming upon your letters as both an intellectual experience and a visual and physical experience. Then there are the materials that you use and the associations of those materials, be they different kinds of twigs, or tiny little plastic babies, or burned pieces of charcoal. Then it goes onto a whole other level.

MS. LAKY: On another level, right.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. LAKY: And that has been intriguing to me lately. For instance, the charcoal cent sign—I call it *Nonsense* [2007]—has the little plastic soldiers in it; they are all painted black, and charcoal is mesquite black. The whole shape is rounded, and so it looks like a baked bread to me, and yet it also looks like fitted bricks or stones, like old stonework. The soldiers are lobbing hand grenades, but you can also interpret them as lobbing stones. It starts to be a kind of primordial, primitive, militaristic stone-throwing, ancient, carbonized—it then functions on a lot of different levels, in addition to being a symbol about money.

MS. RIEDEL: And then, of course, they are tiny toy plastic soldiers.

MS. LAKY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, let's talk a little bit about your sources of influence, how you've been inspired, who has influenced you over time. We talked briefly last week about Louise Nevelson and Martin Puryear.

MS. LAKY: Louise Nevelson is, in my mind, a wood whisperer also. [Laughs.] That is such a funny label, but I am intrigued by her strong response to material. And then also what happened with my interest in teaching in the last few years before I retired in 2005 was that I was introducing environmentally conscious courses, specifically very purposefully calling them that, using the word "sustainability," using the word "environmental," using "eco"-whatever and "eco-design," and things like that, for design and art, because of my increasing concern—as the '90s went by—about global circumstances, global warming, the environmental crisis we have upon us.

It seemed to me—even though I would bring these issues into my courses using recycled materials and talking about the life cycle of objects and so forth—that none of our courses were specifically, primarily about environmental issues.

MS. RIEDEL: Wasn't it the School of Environmental Design? That was at Berkeley when you were there, right?

MS. LAKY: At Berkeley?

MS. RIEDEL: And that closed. So perhaps that—

MS. LAKY: Well, the Department of Design closed in the College of Environmental Design. But even the College of Environmental Design at Berkeley was slow to bring in courses specifically addressing environmental sustainability. I think maybe now they are starting to have more courses that would be with the label, environmental consciousness, or environmental crisis, or sustainability in the city, or whatever. I'm sure they have much of that now. We didn't then, even though back in the late '60s, early '70s, it was a time of environmental consciousness-raising.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. Sure.

MS. LAKY: We were beginning to get into recycling and understanding that planned obsolescence was a bad idea, and it's turning out to be a really bad idea, and polluting and using up all of our resources, and so forth. So in the late '90s—I think I started working on it in 1997—I started creating such courses at UC Davis. And students really responded. They were very, very interested. So environmental concerns became a motivating piece of my excitement about teaching in those last few years. [I titled the courses "Critical Issues in Design and Art: Environmental Consciousness," "Environmental Issues in Art and Design," and "Environmental Issues in Textiles, Clothing and Design." I taught these courses on all levels, freshman through graduate.]

Now, a couple of those courses are continuing, so I'm pleased. I was doing them on my own, and I was even getting a little criticism for my initiative. Pieces of it were in other courses of mine and of other faculty, but the subject hadn't been taken head-on as the central subject being our environmental condition. I think artists and designers need to start thinking about this early on, first and foremost, especially now. We are in a crisis situation. We need to reorganize our heads around how we design things, and what we're designing, and what the role of those things will be in our lives.

Now, the funny part is—I was talking about this the other day—I gave a little visiting seminar at Davis again recently—the funny part is that I suddenly realized while giving the lecture that a good work of art is perhaps the most ecological of products—[laughs]—I think I mentioned that to you—in that if a creative work is loved, it will be cared for and maintained; it will be passed on to future generations; it will be possibly given to a museum, or at least it will be kept and passed down to a son, a daughter, a grandchild, and stay in a home. It will be a good life cycle. It will never go in the trash.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. LAKY: It has to be a good piece and it has to be loved, then it will be protected. Otherwise I don't know how many things there are in our lives that are kept forever. I don't know. I mean, stamps; stamps are. If somebody is interested in stamps, they collect and save them. Maybe the collector is the ultimate end user of products and things.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. LAKY: I don't know. It has to be a good object—it has to—it has to be stuff we love.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. LAKY: Now, that comes right into the question of craft, I think. It's the hands-on, the individual, the creative thinking, the originality, the spirit in an object. Functionality—I think you can find it in any artwork, whether it's a painting or a plate.

MS. RIEDEL: I agree.

MS. LAKY: But we have our language to hold us back. Language is freeing and it's also controlling, because it does label things; it does make distinctions in definitions that tend to hold us somewhere. But we're constantly changing our language as well.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. LAKY: I think we've got the possibility to change all of this, but it is very, very difficult. So I think creative people now need to start out with an understanding of environmental consequences to our choices. We should start with our students early. Children are using recycling here and there, and they're making, you know, masks out of stuff they find in their parents' drawers and wastebaskets at home. We're beginning to bring that into kids' lives, but we need to do it more purposefully. And the respect for materials that I think is inherent in the craft field dovetails right with that concern.

So my piece called *Cradle to Cradle* [2007]—title from the book by William McDonough and Michael Braungart. The book itself is compostable, which I think wonderful. Why can't all books be compostable, paperbacks anyway? You know, some are, some aren't. But this book particularly is, and easily so.

I loved a phrase in their book, and I used it to advertise my new sustainability classes. It was a "fabric safe enough to eat." It's actually possibly damaging to human beings to sit on upholstery, moving around on it because tiny particles break off, and we inhale them while we're sitting, and it's not good for us, especially if those particles are not safe enough to eat.

MS. RIEDEL: That is interesting. I, for one, have heard designers talking about environmental issues on and off for a long time, but I recently heard the executive director of a group—called, I think, Zero Waste—talking about design in waste, and he said, waste is not unavoidable; it's simply the byproduct of bad design.

MS. LAKY: [Laughs] That is wonderful.

MS. RIEDEL: And bad design can be changed.

MS. LAKY: Well, that is wonderful. It's a little harsh. I think there is some good design that I wouldn't want to eat. I wouldn't want to eat this chair that we love here.

MS. RIEDEL: No, no.

MS. LAKY: The way anything is made, if we could think about it right in the beginning as all of it always having value, then you would design cars so that when you took the door off, you could pull it all apart and use every bit of it again, and again and again and again. And use every bit of it, creating as little damage to the air and the water and the land as possible.

Right now, in China, when they take apart a discarded computer to get all of the metals and everything out of it, it's polluting the water and the land, and making the people sick. So we need to then make things from the outset with ultimate respect for absolutely every last inch of it. If we did that, if we cared for it all and knew that we would need it all in the future, then we would start out differently. That is the concept of *Cradle to Cradle*. Not cradle to grave; you never want to throw a thing out. And composting is a wonderful way to continue the use of anything that can enrich the soil.

Or just make something that will be able to be used forever, like a work of art. [They laugh.]

[END MD 01 TR 05.]

MS. REIDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, with Gyöngy Laky at the artist's home and studio in San Francisco, California, on December 13, 2007. This is disc number two.

We thought today we'd start with a discussion about how your life has changed since you retired in 2005. Now you're not a full-time professor but a full-time studio artist, and you've noticed the differences in your working process, in your work, and your experience of being an artist working every day, full-time in the studio.

MS. LAKY: It's really wonderful; it makes a huge difference.

A couple of times recently I've said I've never had this kind of time in my studio, but actually there was one time earlier; I believe it was 1983 and '84. Some collectors got together and funded a year for me to take off from teaching and work full-time in the studio. Since then, this is the only time that I've had that kind of time. Yes, I had that kind of time in the summer—because our classes at the university tended to go nine months. Of course, there are summer sessions, and the regular full-time faculty may teach at those times but often don't. We don't have a year-round curriculum yet, although I think it's maybe coming sometime in the near future; I think it would be excellent to have year-round schooling in all schools, all levels.

The last almost 30 years were as a professor at the university. I just—well, first of all, the university: we jokingly call it my Medici, because I got my paycheck every month. It was wonderful, wonderful to be associated with such a good institution and be supported in that way, and to get research funds, and to also enjoy the acknowledgement that a university's professors must excel in their fields, and therefore given the requisite support and time.

However, it's also what I call a pressure cooker, with constant pressure and stress, with so much going on, that to do the job as it should be done, one is extremely busy. I remember early on in my career, there was a study that was being done about how many hours professors spend a week on their university activities. It was well over 60 hours a week; it was something like 65, 67 hours a week. Almost scared me out of being a teacher at that point.

MS. RIEDEL: And that's separate from studio work or studio time for your own—

MS. LAKY: No, I think that includes everything. However, that's still a pretty big workweek.

MS. RIEDEL: It is. It's huge.

MS. LAKY: But yes, the university is wonderful in that way. It's set up with the acknowledgement that scientists need time in the lab; historians need time to research and write; artists need time to research and produce. And so it really was a wonderful situation. However—

MS. RIEDEL: And you felt very supported, which isn't always the case for artists with teaching positions.

MS. LAKY: No. I think in the hierarchy of the systems, the, sort of, first-tier research universities do recognize the need to support faculty with research time and funding. They're criticized for it, as well, because we all want them to focus well, completely and thoroughly, on educating our young people. But the top-tier universities are research institutions and think of themselves that way, especially when we're talking about graduate students and faculty, and the kinds of things they're doing.

So that is across the board. The recognition is that a musician in a research university is going to need time for that career in order to excel and in order to make an impact on the field. Then, if you step away from the universities that are research universities, you get less and less of that. Art schools, I think, are beginning to look at this more. Hopefully they would acknowledge the need for that kind of development for the faculty.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. LAKY: But here we are talking about my new life, which is wonderful in a very different way. I know I've talked about this before, but the brain is such a fascinating, complex instrument; we don't know the half of it, if not the three-quarters of it. I'm constantly aware of this, because the kind of thinking that seems to be happening in my brain in the studio is so different from other kinds of thinking. I've heard other artists talk about this; of course, the right-brain, left-brain Betty Edwards books [*Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. Los Angeles: J.P. Thatcher, 1979; *New Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. New York: J.P. Thatcher/Putnam, 1999] on drawing from the right side of the brain, et cetera. One of the fascinating things, to me, is that in the back lower part of the brain is where the two sides come together—I think it's called in the commissures [commissural fibers]—some people think the highest levels of brain activity are occurring.

I do know that coming to the studio every day, and spending anywhere from eight to 12 hours here, makes a big, huge difference in terms of how I think, what I do, the freedom I feel. It's interesting; in some ways, I can play more readily; I can be more free; I can take more risks. I suppose that's partially because that's how I'm thinking. I'm thinking in the mode of form and textures and shapes and ideas and concepts, but also I think I've got expansive enough time and space to allow for that kind of freewheeling. It's very important; many things happen when I can let ideas float in the air; I can see, out of the corner of my eye, a pile of things. I can start something; I can let it sit if it needs to sit. Sometimes I say, actually, to my student interns and to myself—

[Telephone rings.]

[END MD 02 TR 01.]

MS. RIEDEL: You were—say you say to your interns and your students.

MS. LAKY: That sometimes I have to let the work sit until—and the language I use is interesting—until I figure it out. I don't sit down and make a list and try to figure it out. I don't—what happens is—and this is that thing I was saying about peripheral thinking. What happens is sometimes just being around the idea and around the work, and being in a preparatory mode will allow things to happen in my brain. I can feel that the wheels are turning, but it would be very difficult for me to make a list of what is actually happening in my brain or to sit down and tell you.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. LAKY: I have to just let it go until I have figured it out. So this process to me is just fascinating. I use that language. "I am figuring it out."

MS. RIEDEL: Mulling it over.

MS. LAKY: Mulling it over. I can't do it right now because I don't have all of the pieces in place that I need in my head to understand how exactly I should go about doing something. Let's see if I can think of some examples. All right, let's take the cent sign that is made out of charcoal that to me looks like a loaf of bread in the shape of a cent sign. I had made a dollar sign out of charcoal. I put the charcoal together very loosely and roughly, so there were many spaces. The charcoal was chunky. The chunks showed. They were attached to each other and sometimes screwed down, but it was chunky and had spaces. I knew that I did not want to do it that way for the cent sign, but I didn't know exactly how I wanted to do it.

Now this is a little bit of a funny aside—I had to launder the charcoal pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. LAKY: When you get a bag of mesquite charcoal, it's been thrown on a truck, packed in a box, put on the shelf, dragged around; whatever happened to it creates a fine powder in the bag. Charcoal is very dirty because of that fine powder, but not if you scrub it with dish soap—[laughs]—and rinse it. [Laughs.] Then it's a lovely clean material. [Laughs.] So that process, selecting the pieces out of—

MS. RIEDEL: And these are rough pieces of charcoal; they are not briquettes; they are rough pieces of mesquite.

MS. LAKY: Mesquite.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. LAKY: Which also seemed important.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. LAKY: Briquettes, or hardwood charcoal, which is milled lumber cut up into little pieces and made into charcoal, weren't working for me, because the mesquite really does connect to nature, to a tree, to a branch. You can see the bark. You can see how things grow in those chunks of mesquite charcoal. So that was a very purposeful decision.

I sorted through—I don't know how many bags of charcoal I finally had—10 to 15 bags, different companies. They had a little bit different sizes and different kinds of trees. I sort through and select out the ones that seem to fit, the ones that appeal to me—the ones I like—the ones that speak to me in some way and speak to the piece and the concept.

That process—I have to take another little tangential moment here. I think my speaking process right now is paralleling my working process.

So the tangent is that I believe I've recently—I've begun to understand that I need thinking time. For instance, I have done more pieces in parallel than I have ever done before. I had four or five, six pieces going at once at varying stages, some just in the computer, some preparing the templates—and we'll talk about those later—some gathering up the materials and cleaning them up. I freeze all my—

MS. RIEDEL: Wood?

MS. LAKY: Sticks. All of my wood. I have to launder the charcoal. I have to wait till it dries, et cetera, et cetera. The other cent sign was an elaborate process of painting five, six coats on each little piece. Suddenly, speaking about this now, I had the thought that this—all of this process, which makes it so long for me to make something—I have to sand—I have to drill the hole, I have to sand it; I have to sand the ends; I have to oil the wood. There are a lot of steps involved, a little touch-up here and there. Whatever it is—put the screws in; turn the screws around, as I had to do in one piece. I believe that my protracted process is also thinking time, both thinking physically with the activities and thinking mentally with the time. I hadn't really thought about that before. It may be that I make pieces more complicated in order to slow down.

MS. RIEDEL: Mmm.

MS. LAKY: Now, isn't that a weird idea? [Laughs.] Some time ago—

MS. RIEDEL: There's that hands-on time, too, that I imagine brings out all different ways of thinking.

MS. LAKY: Absolutely. I know it's very important that I handle my materials. It's very important that I get huge branches that I have to trim up, cut down, look through. I put the little ones here; I put the bigger branches there. I put them in piles; I tie them up. I move them up here; I move them there. All of that time is a time to get to know those materials.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you fall in love with them a little bit?

MS. LAKY: I do—a lot. I fall in love with them a lot. [Laughs.] Not just fall in love, but I also get to know them. I get to know a lot of very specific things about them, the texture, the color, the way the bark behaves, the color of the interior, the weight of the wood, the nuances of how the surface shape happens, the branching, the way it tapers, whether it goes quickly or slowly.

While working on a recent piece—I realized in the middle of the process that I liked pieces that weren't just a straight rod. They were short pieces. They were three to four inches long, some two inches long. The ones that had nothing happening on them were too boring, did not participate to the extent that the odd-shaped ones did. If they had a little branching or a little odd knob or something happening on them, those—when I put the piece together, those participated much more actively. So things like that happen, whereas in another piece, I might love the nice clean cylinder with a big diagonal wedge cut on the end.

So the working process is a kind of thinking process, too. As we talk, I'm becoming aware that I might have done this to myself purposefully. Some years ago, I said for the first time, and I have said it many times since, if it's worth doing, it's worth doing. Sometimes I think if a piece of mine sells, I might have subsidized it 50 cents an hour maybe. [Laughs.] I've maybe gained something to go against expenses, but long ago, I said to myself, if it's worth doing, it's worth doing. I have to do it even if there is no way in the world that I could possibly put a price tag on it that would equal the amount of work time in it.

And again, I have to thank the university. I got that paycheck. I had the luxury of making a decision like that; whereas if I knew I had to sell 10 pieces a month in order to pay my rent and pay my bills, in order to continue to be an artist, as many artists do have to do, my artistic life would have been much more difficult. So I have to make this a personal statement, and say that, for me, it has been wonderful to have that kind of freedom, wonderful to be able to say, if I feel it's worth doing, it's worth doing, no matter what it takes to do it.

MS. RIEDEL: So then, coming back full circle to *Every Red Cent*, and how that evolved from the charcoal dollar sign—you knew that it was going to be different, but you didn't know quite how, so it just sat here for a period of time while you worked on other pieces, until it became clear to you how exactly to proceed and how it's going to be different.

MS. LAKY: Yes, exactly right. I had the small plaster form for it that I found in my favorite store, Aria, but I didn't know what size, what material. I knew—now, the red—*Every Red Cent* turned out to be much more crisply geometric than my model, but that evolved out of just looking at it, putting it in the computer, putting it on acetate, projecting it on the wall, looking at it.

What is nice about projecting it on the wall with an overhead projector, which now you probably can't find in any classroom—I bought mine for $10 because the university was de-accessioning overhead projectors. I love it. I hope it lasts forever. It's wonderful to be able to project something on the wall so easily, because I am able then to reduce the size or increase the size just by pushing the projector closer to the wall or further away.

Then sometimes I have to make a paper pattern and look at the paper pattern, because it becomes more concrete with the paper pattern. Then I can make a decision about how the shape feels and looks and how I want to change it or whether it's the right size or not. And paper patterns are cheap, and I can reuse the paper for scratch paper. So I can make three of them; it doesn't matter. And, again, that luxury of time is what I have now, able to be in the studio and not be distracted by other commitments and teaching.

I love the teaching. It was inspirational. I felt I was privileged to be in a classroom—in a laboratory—where I had a number of very creative people working away like crazy. I was able to look over their shoulders, watch, and learn. So that's—that's why I loved it. And that is why today I do like going to my colleagues and inviting some of their students to be interns, working with me in my studio for the experience.

MS. RIEDEL: And you have interns now. You have three or four?

MS. LAKY: Right now I just have one, because the exhibition is up in the gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. LAKY: It went up in mid-November, and they work on a semester, or quarter, system, so that is coming to an end. One is spending just a little bit more time with me. But then next semester and next quarter I will reach out for maybe a couple more. It seems to be a good experience for the students.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. LAKY: I like to be very open about my process and my thinking and how I manage my artistic existence. So I think it's valuable to them. Anyway, they say so. [Laughs.] They say they get a lot out of it.

MS. RIEDEL: Does it facilitate the whole process of play to have them in here working with you?

MS. LAKY: Absolutely. Absolutely. That, also. I love having people come visit, because of the occasional remark or conversation. I feel like a sponge. I feel like when people walk into the studio, I turn up my antenna, and I turn up my—I don't have hearing aides yet, but I turn up my hearing—[they laugh]—and I tune in. I tune in in a more alternative way.

Something I have said to my students in class, "While we're studying this subject this quarter, see if you can't direct your attention more to our subject and interests. Look for grids, look for structures in architecture, in the landscape."

I give the example of walking down the street with a friend. The friend says, did you hear that bird? No, I didn't hear the bird. I heard nothing. I did not hear a bird. The moment that person points it out, I listen; I hear the bird. So I know that we can point our attention toward things.

I think what has happened to me is that those moments, those events with other individuals in my life, in the classroom, as well as when I show my work and what people say—and someone might come up to me or send me an e-mail or note—those are all very, very valuable bits of information for me. So I have tuned up all of my receptors when people—[laughs]—come into the studio or when I'm in the gallery and someone comes in and feels like talking with me. Very interesting things can happen.

I know for a fact that my work has been altered my some of these conversations. I have some actual examples. One I might have mentioned, which is an architect came in, Darryl Dobras. He married the woman who was my age in our sponsoring family when we first came as refugees to Loraine, Ohio.

MS. RIEDEL: One of the Stockers.

MS. LAKY: He married the youngest Stocker daughter, my friend. So, again, this is catapulting back into the past. At the time, I was using a lot of nails. The nails—it'd be interesting to go back and deconstruct the advent of nails in my work, which I have actually done. We'll set that aside for a moment.

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible]—baskets, is that you're talking about.

MS. LAKY: The yes piece [*Negative*, 1998] is studded with nails, for example. Also the piece [*Spike*, 1998] on the cover of Howard Risatti's *A Theory of Craft* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007].

MS. RIEDEL: From the Renwick [Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.].

MS. LAKY: From the Renwick. That piece is studded with nails.

MS. RIEDEL: *Spike*.

MS. LAKY: *Spike*. And the name then fits. Darryl came to visit at that period when I was doing more of the nail pieces. He said to me, oh, if you love nails, you're going to absolutely go crazy about screws. [Laughs.] Now, this is a very practical conversation. He said there are blue concrete screws, which I have now used in *Globalization IV* [2006]. He said there are black screws, gray screws; there are now designer colors for deck screws, which I have also used. He said that there were amalgams of various sorts that made brass-looking screws and all kinds of other screws. Some had square drivers and other kinds of shapes, Phillips of course. He said, you're going to love screws.

Well, it turned out I did fall in love with screws. I went to my local hardware and hardware stores all over the area, and I found fabulous screws. They are like gems, jewelry. They are like—they are so beautifully designed. They are fantastic. And they are such brilliant little indicators of our ingenuity as human beings. They are also very structural. So I'm getting a lot more out of them than the nails. They still will allow for some movement, so that there is flexibility in the forms. That is pretty critical, because otherwise my forms—if they are too rigid, they could break more easily. As it is, they are very strong and resilient due to the structure and the built-in flexibility.

Which then gets us into the architectural concepts that I'm so intrigued by. The flexibility in our buildings allows them to not crack and break apart in an earthquake, for example. And a bridge needs flexibility. If it doesn't have it, it will have problems, and the structure will be undermined. So out of that little conversation came these other connections and a big influence on what my work is like and what I'm using to make it, and how big I can make it, the kinds of structures I can make.

For instance, the *Big Question* [2007] could not be that big, with such thin materials, if I were not using screws. The impact is concentric circles of impact from just one conversation. Sometimes the conversations will be more psychological or emotional, and those also might have a profound effect, depending on what the conversation is. Sometimes I don't understand until several years later that a particular conversation had an impact on my work. I sometimes don't know for several years that what I saw a student doing in class I then found influencing a work of mine much later. That makes it lots of fun.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. LAKY: So having the interns here in the studio I love, because we talk. They tell me things about their own work, about things they have seen. They ask me questions. Sometimes the questions are great, particularly the questions I can't answer. Someone might ask me, well, why are you doing it this way; it seems harder. The answer might be, "I don't know." So that will sometimes be very interesting because maybe I'll know later. But maybe I'll keep thinking about the question and ask them, "Well, is there another way?" Sometimes I respond by asking, "Look, would you just work on it a little bit and see if you can come up with something else?"

MS. RIEDEL: You have, throughout most of your career, worked alone, but you have periodically had interns and groups of people working with you, not as a collaborative effort, but certainly in here assisting.

MS. LAKY: Yes. I have had research assistants. I have had graduate students working with me. I have had interns throughout my time as a faculty member at UC. I've also had people contact me from elsewhere in the world and say, "I'm going to be in San Francisco; I'd love to work with you." That's sometimes a little hard to work out because I don't know the person or don't know anyone who knows the person, but occasionally it has worked wonderfully. In fact, most recently I had a graduate from Cornell [University, Ithaca, NY], the daughter of friends, who began to communicate with me through e-mail. A wonderful young woman, Jenny Leary. She is studying in London now. I think we'll all hear from her in the future. So these opportunities come up if I'm open to them, and I am open to them. I enjoy them.

Also, in various works that I have done, temporary, site-specific, outdoor installations, I have done this very

purposefully. It allowed me to respond to an invitation that was short-term. These are usually a few days or a week or two-week situations; they are not five-month situations. Maybe some could be, but I was not in a position to do that during my life as a faculty member. I would ask if people could work with me. Almost always these invitations came from sources that did have students and community people associated with them and did want to have projects that could somehow be a sort of artist-in-residence, where the individuals around would be able to participate, or at least observe. I always wanted participation.

An example is a piece that I built in Austria—I think that was 2001 or '02. I knew I had a week to 10 days that I would be able to work. It was a piece meant for outdoors in an ecologically concerned farm community. I knew it had to be somewhat sizeable to be enjoyed or perceived. I was working with local organic orchard prunings. They did not have people to work with me. So I contacted a former student of mine, Brett Christiansen, who was at the time traveling around Europe after studying at UC Davis. He had been an assistant, a student intern, with me. He had taken courses with me. He and his girlfriend came and worked with me. They got lodging and food, and I had my helpers that way, a wonderful experience for us all.

MS. RIEDEL: And you have done that—

MS. LAKY: Not easy, but wonderful when it works out.

MS. RIEDEL: We should talk a little bit about the recent Bulgaria installation, because that—

MS. LAKY: Yes, Bulgaria I handled in a similar way, and also earlier I did a piece in the Louvre for an exhibition [*Falling Up*, 1985. "Fibres-Art 85," 1985]. At that point—

MS. RIEDEL: That's been a long time, though, to Falling Sticks—

MS. LAKY: Yeah, back in, I think, the mid-'80s, but that is where I learned that I could post a poster all over my area of the campus at UC Davis and do some advertising, just explaining a little bit to students that if they wanted to join me in Paris, they were welcome. They could get unit credit. They could get work experience. I had five or six students show up in Paris. It was lots of fun. I found them little, inexpensive student hotel rooms around town. I think I ended up feeding them. You have to feed young artists. They are always voraciously hungry. [Laughs.] And the Headlands pieces [*The Blue Piece, Red Piece, and Yellow Piece*, 1984. "Landmarks Exhibition," Headlands Art Center, 2004. Marin, CA] students from UC Davis worked with me on that. The work was very hard so we had major picnics in that magnificent landscape.

For Bulgaria I did the same thing. Bulgaria was a little trickier. I got several inquiries by e-mail or by phone, but only one of my students actually signed up, met me in Bulgaria, and worked with me. Again, a fascinating, fascinating, wonderful experience for us both.

MS. RIEDEL: This was where? [Off-mike.]

MS. LAKY: This was the fall of '05, after I had retired. Bulgaria being an Eastern European country, a country that had been locked under Soviet domination for all of those years, a country struggling to become a participant in the world today, it was not an easy place to find students eager to go.

Kim Ocampo was the student who traveled with me there. I have to tell you a little bit about her because these experiences often bring about surprises that are quite wonderful. She is a very creative person and did well in the class that she took with me, and did very well at UC Davis in general. We get quite a remarkable population passing through our hands.

Kim somehow also had a great talent for language. She brought a Bulgarian dictionary and a Bulgarian phrase book. Her family was from the Philippines. She was born here in the U.S. She, I think, spoke a bit of Tagalog and maybe Spanish. She picked up Bulgarian so quickly, pronunciations so impeccable, that she had people in stitches constantly, joking in Bulgarian. Her charm and wit brought the group together immediately.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. LAKY: There were something like eight or 10 artists from various countries, mostly Eastern European countries, one from Italy, I think one from France. Kim would speak at the dinner table. It was very funny. She combined some of the phrases that she had learned during the day—[laughs]—and created very sweet, charming, funny jokes. So you never know what to expect when you're dealing with young, extremely creative people.

MS. RIEDEL: And what was the installation? What was the project in Bulgaria?

MS. LAKY: The project was fascinating. Again, the format—interesting—many of my invitations for outdoor, site-specific works in Europe have been about sustainability, about environmental issues. I believe the U.S. is a little

bit behind Europe and other countries in this regard.

MS. RIEDEL: In terms of installations?

MS. LAKY: In terms of exhibitions addressing the subject of sustainability in art and design and environmental, ecological issues. Somehow, my perception is that there is more going on in Denmark, in the Netherlands, in England, even, I'd say, in Asia and certainly Eastern Europe—let me see—I've heard about a few—Hungary, yes; Poland, yes. So I wasn't surprised that Bulgaria was with that framework.

It was an art place in a small village in the Rhodope Mountains, very close to Turkey. We were about 150 miles from Istanbul—made it even more fascinating. The art center was small. It had a fairly large yard. The village was small, surrounded by forest, rivers, ravines, rocks. It was in the mountains. We were invited to do whatever might be ecologically oriented. Some people—

MS. RIEDEL: Specific to that site, Gyöngy, or—

MS. LAKY: I think that was the idea. One woman worked with burrs—the tiny little seed-pod burrs—making nude figures, very beautiful. A man worked with photography. Another woman worked with prints. Someone worked with drawings. People worked with pinecones and sticks and leaves, various kinds of work.

I worked with tree branches, prunings from the local trees, and leftover used wood from building renovation in the village. The wood I selected was fairly small-scale. It was milled wood, kind of roughly milled—small slats. I worked with screws again.

MS. RIEDEL: Those you brought with you?

MS. LAKY: Bought there. It would have been very hard to bring three, four boxes of screws—you know, 15 pounds of screws. I think security never would have allowed me to go through. [They laugh.] Couldn't bring any tools, of course. Maybe if I checked it all, but then you risk that it doesn't arrive. It was better to get it there.

The project was a very large, freestanding arrow, about seven or eight feet high. The idea was moving upward. I think I called it *Connect* [2005], the idea that you would use what you have for upward mobility. Those were vaguely the kinds of ideas I had in mind. The piece was three to four feet wide, maybe a couple—two, two-and-a-half feet deep. Children could actually crawl into it if they wanted to and stand up in it.

The really fun part was that the village people were gathering around and were probably wondering what was happening here, what this would become. A couple of the men lent us tools. Of course, Kim was figuring out ways to communicate with them. I was also trying to learn a little Turkish, a word here and there, because most of the village was actually Turkish-speaking or bilingual. We began to understand some of the cultural tensions that were arising. It didn't seem bad, but it seemed like something people were trying to figure out.

When the piece was finished, the day was coming to an end. This was our last day. I was waiting for the other artists to come back. A couple of them were there at the art center; others had taken a walk. Some of the students working with us were there. Some of the kids from the community, I would give them the tools, especially the girls, let them drill holes, put in screws. All the parents and 20- to 50-year-olds were gone, working in the city. But the high school, grade school, little kids were hanging around, very sweet. And the grandparents, that's who were in the village. That was an interesting demographic situation.

So the grandparents were watching out of the corners of their eyes. The kids would come in, of course, and they'd want to know things. So we would just hand them the tools and show them and hold a branch in the right place or a piece of wood, and they'd drill the hole. And somebody else would put in the screw. It was great. We had a lot of fun with them.

So the piece is finishing. It's very heavy now. We need to move it across the yard and stand it up. One man showed up with a digging tool, a metal digging tool, and began digging where we needed to dig the feet in a little bit. And of course, everyone else was giving comments about how to do it—[Riedel laughs]—in Turkish and in Bulgarian. Several of the men came around. I thought I had to wait until the other artists got there, because we didn't have enough hands to really lift it up in to place. However, it was beginning to get dark—not dark yet, but the sun had gone down, or was just going down.

Several of these men finally came up and let it be known to me that they wanted to stand it up right now. They grabbed it. They heaved it up. They put it in position. They fixed it in place. It was up. It was fantastic. Then the rest of the time we had a little bit of light; we took turns taking our photographs in front of the piece. [Laughs.] So sometimes these situations not only are wonderful in terms of working with students and community artists, but also the interaction that's possible around them with the town's people.

MS. RIEDEL: The community at large, yeah. And so did this become, then, a permanent piece, or was there—

MS. LAKY: Well, they asked me that, too. I had said that I would give the piece to them, that there was no way I could—of course—take this away with me. I hadn't planned for that. It would have been very difficult. They might have taken it down. That would have been fine with me, maybe put it somewhere else. I don't know. But I left it for them to whatever extent they wanted it.

MS. RIEDEL: And you've done this on and off for 20 years, in different countries all over the world.

MS. LAKY: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: I want to bring this back to the discussion we were having when we started, about working in your studio now. One of the things that we talked about in closing yesterday, or two days ago, is the idea of the conversation that happens between your pieces now in the studio, as opposed to the long lags that used to separate one from another. Now you're working on three or four at a time. You say there's a conversation often happening between the pieces. Would you talk about that a little?

MS. LAKY: It's a good question at a good time. In a way, it's parallel to what I've been describing, that those interactions with human beings, I know, are tremendously important to my development and thought process, even the slightest ones. Now, having this time in the studio, I mentioned that I was finding it was working well for me to have multiple pieces going at the same time. I did not do this much earlier. Occasionally, I did, very seldom.

I also even had a kind of—I don't know what the word is that I would use for it—a kind of—I was propelled to work, work, work, work, work, to finish a piece; maybe because I knew that something would come and interfere with my working process in the studio. Course preparation, meetings, various things that were going on at the university. I was always on a couple of nonprofit boards—things would interrupt. So I felt a compulsion to work fast and hard and finish a piece, feeling as if I couldn't start a new piece before I finished that, because what if I got interrupted and didn't finish?

So the working circumstances now promote working with multiple pieces. It's a physical conversation. Somehow I feel as if there's more going on in the studio if I've got multiple things working at once. They do seem to talk to each other. Something will happen with one piece that will then give me an idea about another piece. The influences are there. I think that's one reason why I'm doing more painting on the wood. I did a little bit. I painted the ends of pieces—the cut ends. Then I started painting whole branches and altering the color. That was fascinating to me. I've always—

MS. RIEDEL: It's—not—[inaudible]—but the other basket piece, all red and black in the current show [*Red Limbs*, 2005-06].

MS. LAKY: Yes, every one of the pieces in that is painted. The eucalyptus is painted red and the apple is painted black.

MS. RIEDEL: That seems different. I remember you painting on commercial pieces of wood, but not so much on the twigs themselves.

MS. LAKY: Yeah, *Estuary* [2007], which is all apple, is painted. The first number piece I've done—I've been wanting to do numbers for years, for, I'd say, 12, 14 years. Again, a conversation—someone said, have you ever done a number one? And I thought, oh, boring, it's a straight line. I didn't say that out loud, but I said, oh, very interesting. However, it stayed in my head. I had been wanting to do a five for all these years. I'm not sure why I wanted to do a five, but I wanted to do a five and never did a five.

The moment I responded with, ooh, I don't know. One is boring. How can you make a one interesting? Sometimes things that happen here in the studio turn into a challenge. I then think, oh, I can do this. I know I can do this. If I really work at it, I'm sure I can do this. Then I worry about it and suffer over it for a while. And finally, sometimes, I'm actually able to come up with something. So I did a one—*One and One* [2007] I called it, because it actually has parts of all three letters. Unlike other word pieces, all three letters are connected in a single scripting line.

MS. RIEDEL: It's spelled out, really.

MS. LAKY: So it's not the straight-line one. I still have the problem of doing the numbers, the five as a five. See, I skirted around it and did it as a word.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, one. Five is different. It has the ampersand qualities to it.

MS. LAKY: It does. It's a very beautiful shape. Oh, gee, I cheated. I did not really do a numeral. Okay, that's still

on the list. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Can you give me an example of a conversation that was happening between pieces in the studio? Anything come to mind?

MS. LAKY: Oh, let's see if I can think of something. Oh, well, there is the piece *Nocturnal Venture*, in the current exhibition. We talked about it, I think, a little bit, that distorted grid, the manzanita branches, the longer ones that were thin, with the long dowels painted orange. That, I had a sample in the studio, have it still, for several years now—manzanita with an orange dowel through it.

I also wanted to do an apricot grid with nine panels. I knew I wanted to do that. I chose nails that are as long as the orange dowel. I think what happened was—looking at that orange dowel, knowing it was coming—when it came to making the other grid, [*Laura's Quilt*, 2007], which I made while I was trying to figure out *Nocturnal Venture*, which was so hard to do; I made the other one because it was easy to do. [Laughs.] And it was like, I need relief. Also, I thought, if I make the other grid piece, maybe I can figure this out. Maybe I can freshen it up in my mind, see how to approach the manzanita grid. It didn't help that much. But I am almost certain that the size of nail came from the orange dowel. So that would be how they interact.

The charcoal cent sign, I knew it was going to be charcoal. But it was rather hard to do. It was not coming so easily. And somehow, having it—I made the template for it—maybe we can talk about templates now. I made the template for it; the template sat here until it seemed I could do it. The piece that I think allowed me to do that was the small soldier with the tiny plastic babies in it. The babies are glued in with a mosaiclike approach. *Nonsense* is made similarily.

MS. RIEDEL: Is that the *Dada* piece?

MS. LAKY: The *Dada*, the child soldier, composed of the plastic babies of all kinds. Handling the plastic babies, I feel like I could look back. I've used the GI Joes, the little GI Joes, before. It seems to me that I was able to look at them in a different way, slightly different way, because I thought, well, I've used them before. They've got all the guns and the radios and this and that. They don't seem to fit. Then I went back to them. I even thought for a moment I would include some of them with the babies in the small soldier piece. So I think somehow that connected. Then I was able to use the ones lobbing the grenades in *Nonsense*, because, also, that made me think of throwing stones. I liked that it could be seen from both of those aspects.

MS. RIEDEL: Should we talk about the templates and how the computer has helped you evolve them, or how working on them on the computer has changed the process?

MS. LAKY: Yes. I am a person coming out of a craftsmanship artisanry, hands-on approach. I work with wood. I work with wire. I work with nails and screws and toothpicks and—

MS. RIEDEL: Plastic babies. [Laky laughs.]

MS. LAKY: It's a very hands-on, building of things approach. Can I remember exactly how I got to using the computer? I can't, because the early templates—let's see if I can remember how the earliest template happened. I think it happened with—I made two pieces which were nos, both three-dimensional—one with wire, only wire, and one with commercial wood and branches.

The one with commercial wood and branches—the N was commercial wood—little pieces of molding cut up and reassembled into a solid block, that was an N shape—very difficult to figure out the geometry. I made a flat N, which I used as a kind of pattern piece around it constantly, to see how to build it. I had to build it from the inside-out so I wouldn't paint myself in a corner, so to speak, because I needed to get my drill—my portable drill—in there to put it together. To get the drill in there and work was something I had to keep in mind, because the center was open. The O was solid, again. It had holes piercing all the way through it in one, two, three directions, top-down as well, which was kind of a nice geometry thing. But it looked like an O with a hole in the middle. I couldn't make a pattern for the O; I had to just form it by sight. It was quite difficult. I might have been able to make a cutout of a circle that I could have held near it, but somehow it didn't work. I tried to make a sphere, but I couldn't make one out of paper or cardboard.

MS. RIEDEL: Because normally you work within a cardboard format.

MS. LAKY: For these template pieces, yes. About that time, I believe, I made an OK. I wanted the K to be crisp. The O, I figured I could do it again freehand. The template pieces I am doing now, they're really relief pieces. They're basically flattish, but the OK is freestanding. It's about four or five inches thick, and I don't know how high—20 inches, 18 inches high, something like that. Somehow or other, on my table, I made a paper pattern K to try to guide me, because I'd had that paper pattern N. Then, somehow, I made a box around it, and it seemed to me if I had these boxes, that I could make it a little more crisp. So that got me started with working in

template boxes.

Soon after, I made a piece that was actually a commission for someone commemorating a death. And it was a very moving process altogether. I wanted to make a large urn like an olive oil, ancient Greek urn. Big—it was almost—I think it was 30, 36 inches high—out of twigs, yes. I worked very carefully on that shape. I remember I had a paper pattern. I'd gotten a slide. I projected it on the wall with a slide projector. I made a paper pattern. I shaved off here; I added there. I worked on that shape. Again, the process of thinking is interesting. In fact, it was the first piece made in my current studio. I made it in my studio before the studio was torn apart and renovated.

I knew that, on that scale, I couldn't make it the careful shape I'd finally gotten. I couldn't be that careful working freehand. I can, but it's extremely difficult. I thought to myself, I need to make it inside a shape. I can't make it inside an urn, because then I have to break the urn. How do I get inside an urn to make it? Then, I'd have to make it in a 10-foot high urn, if I was going to work inside the urn. This was going on in my head. Finally—

MS. RIEDEL: It's a three-dimensional urn we're talking about?

MS. LAKY: A three-dimensional urn.

MS. RIEDEL: Fully 3-D, not flat.

MS. LAKY: Not flat; fully 3-D, with a large cavity inside; a thickish wall, but a large cavity inside.

So out of cardboard, and then with the kind of plaster that is used on—or was, I don't know if it's used still—casts, like when you break your arm, this thin strip of plaster-embedded material. I made the cardboard—I made—oh, I don't know—70, 80, 100 shapes of cardboard that were the silhouette I needed. I put them together in a kind of three-dimensional, fanlike, half-urn. I coated that with plaster strips, sort of adhering all of that to a large piece of plywood. So the whole thing was an interesting, concocted form about four feet by four feet, with half an urn in it.

Then, I started building the piece. Quickly I realized I had to build it in the traditional way of building a basket, bottom-up, spiraling upward, because if I went too high, I wouldn't be able to turn it and work behind—again, I had that problem of working behind a big form, into a big form. So I taught myself the process along the way. That was, I'd say, the most interesting template I've made to date. It did clarify for me how building within a box would help me make the kind of crisp, geometric forms I would like to make. The ampersands—many of them, most of them, not all of them—have been made in these templates.

Following the paper pattern then, I will cut a cardboard pattern that size. The cardboard gives me, then, enough of a depth so I can put sidewalls all around that shape. I make them however high I would like the piece to be. If I want the piece to be two inches deep, then it's two-inch-high wall. If I want it to be four inches, then it's a four-inch-high wall. A four-inch-high wall on a smallish piece would be very, very difficult, because working down into the corners, it's very hard to make the shape. But two-inch wall for a smallish piece is easy to work.

I work within that box; I've built the box. I work inside the box.

MS. RIEDEL: And how does your computer tie into that? [Laughs.]

MS. LAKY: I work inside the box. I think inside the box. Now, I should maybe try thinking outside the box. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: I think you've hit a good balance.

MS. LAKY: I just want to add that *Estuary*, that very elegant B&B, ampersand, that the box template part is the interior negative space. The exterior of that ampersand shape was left open because I liked the edge free and rough and messy. So the inside is very, very carefully formed, using the walls of a box. The template was basically used to identify the negative space.

[END MD 02 TR 02.]

MS. RIEDEL: So we were talking about how the computer then played into the templates.

MS. LAKY: Yes, that's been quite exciting. First of all, I have to say that I'm doing quite well with computers these days. A student intern working with me in 2005, Julia Schwartz, was instrumental in developing my use of the computer. I, of course, use it a lot for e-mail, a lot for just typing. But I'm intrigued by the fact that the computer, to me—speaking of the complexity of the human brain—the computer brings visual and verbal together in a way that we have not had, other than, say, listening and watching TV.

Using the computer made me realize another piece, which I believe has huge repercussions in terms of art and craft. And that is that it is, indeed, visual and verbal, but it is not tactile, not physical. We need the physical, tactile. We need it desperately. We need to understand that in our computer age, we need to compensate for missing sensation and touch. I don't know if that's one of the reasons why in the art world sculpture is on the rise—it seems to me that sculpture, hands-on activity, is more prevalent now.

MS. RIEDEL: Craft, for sure.

MS. LAKY: Craft, installations, outdoor art events seem to be increasing. It may be partially due to this limitation of computers. I don't even understand it, but I know that we need the physical. Our students need this. In a way, I was emphasizing studio practice, hands-on work, more in the last few years of my teaching career because I was so concerned about their separation from the [tactile]. They weren't building forts as much. They weren't braiding hair as much. They weren't making their own doll clothes as much. They weren't making their own lanyards and building boxes. And whatever hands-on kids were doing before, they were doing less of it in the last 15 years of my teaching.

So that's just a preamble, because I do love the computer. I want to learn more. I'm beginning to create with it, which is what's fascinating to me, and I'll tell you about that in a moment. This is how I use it in the current body of work. With the templates, I now will find a wonderful ampersand on a paint can. If I'm careful, I don't scratch up my scanner by holding that paint can on the scanner—capturing that ampersand, that "and" sign. Jack Larsen wrote me a letter—"Dear Gyöngy & Tom"—the "and" symbol between our names was so magnificent, I put the letter right away in the scanner, scan it into the computer, increased the size. Of course, you can't recognize it as the same ampersand now, because I altered it to fit my purposes. But that alteration process using the computer was wonderful.

I can easily use the computer and look at it and alter the form—this part is a little too fluid, a little too frilly. I need to change it. I need to thicken this straight line here. I need to do these things to it so quick with the computer. Now, just an aside—I use the language, "I need to." This has always fascinated me. What is it in my brain that is so precise that I know I have to thicken that line? And I work at that line and the angle until my brain says, ooh, that's it. Wait, wait, no, a little bit more—okay, that's it; got it. So precise—it is something in my head that is so clear when I recognize what I'm looking for in a shape. With a computer, the process is condensed and it's concentrated, and I can experience and understand that I'm making judgments right then and there in front of the computer. I spend a few hours doing such alteration, with the conversation in my head that says, no, not quite. I don't know. Maybe that circle needs to be larger. I'm going to move that circle down actually, oh, good, yeah, that's fine.

MS. RIEDEL: So you're doing all this on the computer, yeah.

MS. LAKY: On the computer: here's the history behind using the computer to develop new pieces. I am now working on my fifth War piece, which I began early in 2007. We are just heading up to the fifth anniversary of the war in Iraq. So I had a cardboard template for the war piece number four. I have some new ideas about what I want to do with that word. I wanted to change it.

I asked Jenny Leary, who was assisting me then, to cut it up and do this and do that with the cardboard template, taping it back together again. Finally, she turned to me and she said, "Gyöngy, this feels so old-fashioned." [Laughs.] I laughed, of course. Oh, okay, Jenny, what are you thinking of? And she said, I think we could do this on a computer so much more easily.

This is another example of how people who wander into my life can have an impact on who I am and what I do. Oh, okay, I said, okay. Well, let's try it. But I was hesitant. I said, there's something visceral, physical that I love about cutting up the cardboard. I can then tape it up on the wall and I can see it. She said, well, wait, wait, wait. Let's start with the computer. Okay, so we sat down with the computer. Unbelievable what we could do, unbelievable. I know there are some letter language pieces coming that are in process right now, breaking up letters into abstract shapes, letting them hover near each other. I know that this is going to be intriguing. Now, maybe only intriguing to try to figure out—who knows what final works resulting from this experience will look like.

That then allowed me to work more freely with the ampersands, the cent sign, the dollar symbol—as I put them into the computer, I could then work more freely with reorganizing them. So that's the first step now with much of my work.

Along the way, some photographic pieces are beginning to emerge that are going to come from photographing either the templates or my actual pieces, because I'm also using the computer for installation guides, for explaining pieces. It is sort of deconstructing to show somebody how to put a five-part piece together, for example. I'm beginning to have ideas about some flat photographic digital imagery I'd like to do. [Laughs.]

That reminded me that I've had a few photographs that I'd taken early on in my life, earlier in my career, that I've been wanting to print for years. I've only printed one. It was not in the exhibition. I don't know if it will ever be exhibited. I have a second one that has been prepared now on the computer, not printed. Very expensive to print these. I don't know what's coming. And it might be very interesting, as a result of using this new high-tech tool. I've now got Adobe CS3 on my computer. I can hardly wait to fiddle around with it.

I don't really know how to create a website, but I'm learning little bits and pieces. Not knowing what's coming is, for me, the best state of mind.

[END MD 02 TR 03.]

MS. RIEDEL: We now are starting a conversation about influences, and we're talking about Suzi Gablik and *The Reenchantment of Art* [New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991].

MS. LAKY: That book, I thought, was remarkable, because, for me, it articulated so clearly what I have believed my whole career, that creativity and art and design and craft, probably all arts, including poetry and dance and so forth, but I'm most familiar with visual arts, are tremendously important to human existence. Basically, she was saying, art isn't just an abstract thing that is in museums and doesn't relate to our everyday lives; it relates to our everyday lives. Making art as if the world mattered [Gablik's chapter 7]—I want to make that into a different kind of statement, which is more directive, "make art as if the world matters."

I used to use some language that pops up in my head every now and then, and that is that I'm an artist-participant. I care about what's around me, and I work out of that care. That is who I am, and in a funny way, the craft tradition background that I came out of is that, too. It's much more closely associated with human, everyday experience, and that is something very poignant and powerful.

In that regard, Martin Puryear and Ann Hamilton, both of whom I have met and talked with, are important influences in my thinking. Each one of them began with a thread, and both Martin and Ann began with textiles. I remember somewhat recently, in the last few years, a *Newsweek* or *Time* magazine piece about Ann—maybe when she was at the Venice Biennale—in which she says that she started out as a weaver. She once described her response to materials, and the way she puts her ideas together, as "tending," and that she learned tending from her textile background.

One of the early works of Martin Puryear that I fell in love with was his hand-spinning. He made a few very long lines, strands, hand-spun; it was almost like a line of writing, handwriting. You could see the variety in the strand, and I think maybe that's what he responded to; it was very beautiful. Then, of course, his wire-net bag and his five-foot- or six-foot-high, bottle-shaped basket. He is an individual who has a real understanding of the haptic, hands-on physicality of material that can be then molded, twisted, or formed or sanded or cut or somehow shaped. So that, to me, ties into the sort of hand-eye-mind experiential aspect of the tradition I come from.

Both of them do wonderful work that I find is so basic, so beautiful, so well done in terms of craftsmanship and worksmanship, but at the same time so elevating, so cerebral, and so into your head, contemplating things. I've responded very strongly to their work, and I like the fact that they're two artists who move so easily across borders and boundaries. I think that's one of the things that I feel fortunate to have in my work, and in my career, and my existence, is a sense of great freedom to cross over boundaries and yet take all the hands-on skill that I acquired along the way with me.

The tie-in to human technology and human ingenuity, for me, is very, very important. I got that way back from studying anthropology, that connectiveness, and then getting more and more information about Native Americans here in California. I could see the things they had made; I could see—

MS. RIEDEL: Those Pomo Indian baskets, that's—

MS. LAKY: Yes. They are extraordinary, but also when you go up into the Sierra foothills and you see the tepee-like buildings made out of bark. They're magnificent, and they're big, and they were so well thought-out for, probably, people who had to be easily on the move, who needed to use whatever was around them; I think all of that is part of the culture and tradition I have adopted. So, you asked me earlier, what's the connection to basketry? It was a way for me to learn how to use this technology, this human ingenuity, in putting things together. Basketry is three-dimensional and sculptural. The numerous methods of constructing them are ingenious.

Somebody said the other day that "constructions" is probably the best term, single word, to use to describe my work. That's true, just in terms of how it happens.

MS. RIEDEL: You took a lot of crafts skills and put them in the service of big ideas.

MS. LAKY: Hopefully big ideas—[laughs]. A big Q, that's for sure. [Riedel laughs.] A big question—[laughs]. That's interesting; one of the other larger, earlier pieces I did was a big question mark.

MS. RIEDEL: I remember, yeah.

MS. LAKY: It always felt emblematic to me, for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Do you see the craft field in America going in any specific direction? We were just talking about CCAC becoming CCA, and Museum of Art and Design having dropped "craft" from its name.

MS. LAKY: Well, I don't know. For one, I've been very pleased about the huge public response. In the '60s and '70s, many artists in California were working with traditional craft media, enjoying how wonderfully expressive these media were for a new approach to art and sculpture. It was an opening up; it was an exciting time. Ideas could flow.

The craft art movement ushered in to everything else in our culture, and to people of the Third World and to other cultures and countries, so it was a very enriched attitude about studio practice at that time. Pete Voulkos was one of those people who catapulted us forward; Katherine Westphal, Ed Rossbach, and Trude Guermonprez who was at the California College of the Arts—then Arts and Crafts—these were all people who jumped into the fray with a kind of delight and openness that, as a student at the time, I did not experience so much in the traditional fine arts. It seemed like the traditional fine arts were a little stuck at that time.

These artists worked in ways that fit with the times, because if you think about the '60s and early '70s, it was a back-to-the-earth, back to real value, hands-on, broader acceptance and not just the Western, white, European way of doing things. These new ideas were influenced by ancient Peru and Japan and China and African Americans.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you see parallels between that and the whole DIY movement now?

MS. LAKY: DIY?

MS. RIEDEL: Do it yourself? That whole do-it-yourself—

MS. LAKY: I've heard of that with hip-hop. This is interesting. Okay, now I understand. All right, okay—

MS. RIEDEL: And maybe having worked in universities—

MS. LAKY: Well, maybe we're having another handmade renaissance. I like the word "renaissance." William McDonough might love the word "renaissance." "Cradle to cradle," it's constant rebirth, never death. It's a nice word. But it could be that we're again at a time when there is enough upheaval for us to get out our shovels and dig around and explore and cross more easily over boundaries and try new things, but also to reconnect. I think each time these sorts of renewal times occur, a reconnection to humanity, it seems to me, is part of it. When you reconnect to humanity and to how human beings live and behave and to the everyday value in our existence, it seems to me you get back to these hands-on traditions very quickly.

I have been happy with the public response, that there have been increasing numbers of people who have wanted to show and collect and buy and live with all of this work. More and more museums show and collect art from craft sources. I think that the art world has expanded tremendously. But with the expansion, commercialization has taken over in major ways, and we are constantly having to battle that as artists. I think we have to constantly battle capitalism, because it is so voracious. And it is voracious in the exploitation way in which it performs. Success in the art world can turn quickly into a market surge, demanding greater production. So that's a risk.

Artwork emerging from craft origins is particularly vulnerable to becoming just another commodity. I like the fact that artists and creative people will question such things. You will get artists making things that can't be bought, for example. Now there's a way to really counteract the commercialism. So I like the exploratory nature of current creative work. I would again use Martin Puryear and Ann Hamilton as really good examples, because their work is so exploratory, and it does reach into so many aspects of human life and activity in a multitude of ways. Their work is very different from each other, but I think that aspect of their work is similar. They both started out with early human technologies—spinning and weaving. That's maybe not by accident.

MS. RIEDEL: I always remember you talking about the computer having its roots in weaving, and the jacquard loom. And the Golden Gate—bridges, suspension bridges—having their roots in fiber art. And so you see a history.

MS. LAKY: The Golden Gate Bridge is what Martin Puryear was working with early on with the spinning of multiple

fibers; the friction and the funneling spiraling shape are two of the aspects that, from an architectural engineering point of view, create strength with flexibility. We couldn't have large-span suspension without that technology. Computers come directly out of the punch cards that were used on jacquard looms, making it possible to move each thread on its own in order to create a very complex design. Computers are based on that binary system—the digital components. Here is the continuum on which that technology developed.

MS. RIEDEL: How has the response to your work changed over time? Or has it?

MS. LAKY: I think I've been very lucky to ride the wave. I've had a strong response to my work. One of the interesting things is that I've had a lot of response from out of the U.S., as well—Canada, France, Denmark—

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly, I mean, early on, a lot of the response was international.

MS. LAKY: I did a number of outdoor projects in England with Littoral, an environmental projects organization. And I had a solo exhibition in Barcelona.

MS. RIEDEL: Two thousand and one, yeah.

MS. LAKY: I would connect that to my constant interest and focus on environmental issues, and that I worked with natural materials, and that aspect of my interest, that that was one of the things that connected me to the European—and, oh, I was in an exhibit in the Philippines, and so it's been a little broader than that—

MS. RIEDEL: When was that?

MS. LAKY: And in Colombia, Austria, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Hungary—I may be forgetting some others.

MS. RIEDEL: The Philippines?

MS. LAKY: Early on, I think, in the late '70s. Columbia, I think, was in the '80s.

MS. RIEDEL: You had just came back from something in Lithuania too, yeah?

MS. LAKY: I didn't go; I wish I could have gone. But one of my war pieces went. I was very pleased that *Globalization III* [2005] was in that exhibition. I believe it was a government-sponsored exhibition, so I like that.

MS. RIEDEL: The Lithuanian government.

MS. LAKY: The Lithuanian government. [They laugh.] Well, Christopher Hill who is now our chief negotiator with Korea, gave me my award in Poland for my first war piece, *Globalization* [2003]. It is now in the museum's collection there. I love the fact that I have a photograph of Christopher Hill handing me my award and congratulating me. He has been working on efforts to make us safer and more peaceful, so I appreciate him, though I don't appreciate our current government's increasingly militaristic approach to the world.

MS. RIEDEL: You've mentioned Susan Sontag as an influence; anything in particular?

MS. LAKY: Yes, Susan Sontag. Her death was such a profound shock, because I liked her so much for her writings—because she was such a strong intellectual. And she was strong-willed and willing to speak up. I think one of the things that I need most today is to hear strong voices; well, I've got to say—strong opposition voices. [Laughs.]

But from the point of view of art and our subject here, two other writers on art, Lucy Lippard and Janet Koplos [senior editor, *Art in America*]—one of the few art critics writing seriously about textile arts—and Suzi Gablik. Suzi Gablik I got to know at a conference in Chicago. She gave the keynote address. I was the person who made the introduction, so I spoke with her quite a bit and spent some time with her at the conference.

The parallel I see between Suzi Gablik and Susan Sontag is that they both think of art-making as requiring responsibility. They both understand that visual arts have an extraordinarily profound effect on the society and the culture within which they occur—and sometimes in others, as now with our globalizing world. We certainly are responsive to what artists are doing in India—contemporary artists—and they are beginning to influence U.S. artists, et cetera, so not just our culture and our society, but beyond borders.

Susan Sontag has spoken eloquently about the role of artists and visual arts in our society, most recently and poignantly regarding the war atrocities in Iraq. Howard Zinn—the historian—writes similarly about artists and their responsibility to speak out in his 2003 book, *Artists in Times of War and Other Essays* [New York: Seven Stories Press].

MS. RIEDEL: You have, over decades, worked on different commissioned works. I think the early ones were

discussed—we mentioned the Louvre in 1985, the Marin Headlands piece [*The Blue Piece, Red Piece, and Yellow Piece*] that you did with William Wiley in 1984. More recently, you did the Art Master Plan for the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] in Maryland, yeah? I think that was 2002.

MS. LAKY: Yes, and in a sense, the FDA project was a commission. I worked with two other individuals, landscape architects—I would say landscape architects / sculptors. The three of us met several times and talked about concepts for the new Food and Drug Administration's campus. The Food and Drug Administration had been scattered in 49 different locations and will be occupying about 150 acres with 10 or 12 buildings when it's all finished—a campus essentially, bringing it all together.

The idea that artists would be working around and with scientists was very exciting to me. I think we came up with some wonderful concepts, and I know that the art for that campus and for the buildings as they're coming online is progressing.

I love the fact that the concept about the art was broad-ranging. We tried to write it that way so that artists could develop their concepts in a very open-ended way. They could move in and out of the buildings. Works could have a broad reach, from being seated in craft traditions to very conceptual and installation-oriented ideas, and that the site could accommodate that kind of breadth.

So I'm hoping that that's what will happen on the FDA campus.

MS. RIEDEL: You've mentioned commissions—I think yesterday, or during one of our conversations—as one of the things that catapults your thinking. That's a different way of talking about commissions than artists often do. Do you remember what you were thinking?

MS. LAKY: Yes. That, for sure, happened every single time I was asked to do temporary, site-specific, outdoor installation. I felt as if I was handed a laboratory each time, just to do basic research. [Laughs.] Maybe we were talking about basic research, as opposed to applied, when we discussed this earlier. Maybe it felt like basic research because it was temporary; whereas if I make a piece in my studio, then I know it's going to an exhibition, and then possibly it will end up in someone's home or in a museum. That's applied. [They laugh.] I think it's a weird way of thinking about it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MS. LAKY: I did feel, in these invitational circumstances—and maybe perhaps because of how open those institutions, individuals and organizations, were—that I could come up with ideas that were very different from what I was doing in the studio.

A thought just flickered into my head. I think even before I created any language pieces, I was using the reference of words and language in my head. I thought that some of my abstract pieces were actually like unrecognizable letters. I just remembered that I named a couple of earlier site-specific works using the word "language."

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, *Forms for Language* [1989] was—

MS. LAKY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: The one with the string around the tree.

MS. LAKY: Other kinds of commissions were an early work [*Inner Glyphs Out*, 1976] for the Federal Government [Art-in-Architecture Program, Social Security Administration Building, Richmond, VA]. That was a major experience as a young artist early in my career; and then, more recently, a piece for the city of Sacramento [*Language Formation*, 1998. Sacramento City Council Chambers, CA]. Let's see, I've done a couple of corporate commissions, but not so many. I possibly could have found other opportunities. It was a more difficult thing to do commissions while being a full-time faculty member, because usually the time limitation put a lot of pressure to work within a given few months period of time. That was harder to arrange, given teaching schedules.

Another thing that I found out along the way doing a few commissions for individuals is that I really like the freedom to make what I like to make and not feel the pressure to make something that might have to fit a circumstance. Now, you see the difference between the commission to do a temporary site-specific work is that it's ephemeral. And if I were asked to make a piece—let's say for, well, there was a hotel in Los Angeles—I think I did work that I cared about and that expressed something I wanted to do at the time. But the mental circumstances were much more difficult for me, because I felt a huge responsibility to do something that worked for that hotel, not knowing anything about that hotel, really. I mean, in a way, nobody asked me to make a purple piece to match a wall. But the same sort of external pressure was there.

So I think I preferred to be in my—what I would call my laboratory, on my own, freewheeling whenever I could while being a full-time faculty member.

MS. RIEDEL: How has it been to work with dealers over the past few decades? You weren't relying on your work to make a living because you have the university. And your work doesn't fit neatly in the craft or the art category. Was it difficult to find places to show? Was it easy, because you were ranging all over the world and so there was always somebody somewhere that was interested in what you were doing?

MS. LAKY: I had and continue to have many, many opportunities to show my work. Sometimes I'm even surprised, because sometimes my work looks kind of strange to me. [Laughs.] But I've had a very good response. I've worked with some dealers and galleries I've loved very much that have been very supportive of me and very encouraging. Also that have been—

MS. RIEDEL: Anyone you care to mention?

MS. LAKY: BrownGrotta Arts [Wilton, CT], absolutely wonderful. Currently, I'm working more with Braunstein/Quay Gallery and Ruth Braunstein in San Francisco, an excellent and wonderful place to be working.

MS. RIEDEL: She's been doing it for a very long time.

MS. LAKY: Since 1961.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, something like, and she's doing a great job.

MS. LAKY: [Laughs] She has done more in what I would call the craft-related area, and artists coming from that: Richard Shaw and Pete Voulkos—Pete Voulkos early, early on—Robert Brady, Thomasin Grim, the weaver—

MS. RIEDEL: Year after—she has just been—

MS. LAKY: She does it so brilliantly and easily.

And I must say, in a similar way, BrownGrotta Arts has that broad view. Both of these—I'll call them institutions—[laughs]—have personality, character, point of view. The combination of work they show makes sense. I want to say it's as if they each have a theme, but it's more a character and a purpose than a theme.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

Is there a particular community that's been important to you? You've actually had a lot of different communities, but is there a particular one that's been important to you as an artist, to your development as an artist?

MS. LAKY: What do you mean by community? A group somewhere, or an identifiable—

MS. RIEDEL: Like-minded people. It seems like there have been different communities in different places that have really supported you at different points in your career—from the university to the group of collectors that allowed you to take that year off, the people you've met internationally, your students.

MS. LAKY: Yes, and those that you listed, I would say those are all groups, communities—

MS. RIEDEL: Fiberworks.

MS. LAKY:—that have had a big impact. Yes, my early, wonderful community was Fiberworks. I made my own community—[laughs]. That's kind of interesting, although even in the university, when we were creating alternative classrooms and the café, that was also creating a community, participating in a community there. It happened all around us and with us, a group of people there. That was certainly significant for me at Cal in Berkeley.

The university, yes. Joanne Branford introduced me to an organization, to two people who put together Littoral in England, that I mentioned earlier. Littoral is a really interesting word, meaning that space between high tide and low tide, the fluctuating space, which I think is a wonderful metaphor. I would say that was another community— people in England who were attracted by what Littoral did and does. I had a wonderful time with the projects we did.

I think it was through Littoral that I met some people from Denmark. I did a little work there, and that, I would say, is a very different community but also a community that participated in forming some of my ideas. I am in touch with some of those people still, who then remain friends.

Other than that, I would say my artist friends here in the San Francisco Bay Area. The San Francisco Bay Area

has such a huge population of creative people, I feel very, very lucky to be living here. It's a constant source of inspiration.

The American Craft Council and the American Craft Museum [now Museum of Arts and Design, New York City] seemed like a constant, in terms of, obviously, supporting what I was doing and—

MS. RIEDEL: You served on the ACC for a while, didn't you?

MS. LAKY: Yes, I was on the board. They are what I would call my professional communities, as is UC Davis.

MS. RIEDEL: What year was—

MS. LAKY: Early 1990s, as I recall. I was on the board because I felt like I should give back, and I should use whatever I'd learned to pay back into the pot and help as much as I could. It was a time full of change and turbulence; it was just when the American Craft Council was splitting off the museum, so there was a lot going on, but it was very interesting and I met some wonderful people.

I also tried to spend time working on recruiting new board members for ACC, and diversifying the group. That's still something that needs work in this field, and on the boards that service this field.

[END MD 02 TR 04.]

I became aware of the ACC early in my career. American Craft Council was busy supporting, encouraging, exhibiting, publishing, and having conferences about my field as I was beginning to engage in it.

MS. RIEDEL: From the time you were a student.

MS. LAKY: From the time I was a student. I remember those early magazines; I remember *Craft Horizons*. As I mention that name, into my head comes an article—I'm pretty sure it was that, or maybe among the very first *American Craft* magazine articles—on hand-built houses out of sticks and branches and mud in India; it almost certainly was India, as I recall. They were upside-down baskets; they were extraordinary; they touched me deeply.

It's interesting to think about how my work has changed along the way, and what these little pieces and influences have been, mentioning the hand-built houses reflecting my interest in architecture. At UC Berkeley and the College of Environmental Design, I was around architects all the time, and I know that I learned a great deal from that association and was influenced by it. I actually refer to my work as the architectural end of textiles—[laughs]. That comes from my love of the trellises, fences, grids, scaffolding, basketry, lattice-grids and netting—

MS. RIEDEL: Bridges.

MS. LAKY: Bridges, et cetera. Oh, the handmade rope bridges in Peru from my early anthropology studies at UC Berkeley. So these things along the way do influence work, and do alter the work. My early interests and early concerns seem to be continuing through my career, but the form those interests and concerns take change develop.

There have been some tangents and side roads along the way. For example, shortly after Fiberworks started, we got involved with handmade papermaking in a major way, introduced by the artist Chere Mah. We had courses in it; we had events for the public where we had a three-year-old making paper; we had an 80-year-old person making paper, and it was such fun, so inspiring. Of course, I had to try handmade paper myself. I was molding handmade paper, the pulp, around rope constructions, rough, gnarly rope constructions, and I was, at that time, also embedding twigs and wire in paper. There are some interesting pieces from that period, but I then moved away from paper-pulp work.

MS. RIEDEL: This was in the early or mid-'70s, then?

MS. LAKY: Yeah, I think then, yeah. I think maybe '74, '75, '76, around there, maybe '77.

I would call that a period, and a certain kind of work during that period. A little later—late '70s, early '80s I believe it was—just the spun strand became intriguing to me. I have to think of Martin Puryear. I had a period of making handmade rope, individual strands. The individual strand became the work itself, became the final piece, as with Martin's. I think he had three or four strands horizontally across a long wall.

I started with a very fine strand of two-ply, which then I added material into until it became a huge, fat strand, almost like a snake swallowing a rabbit, the fat part being three, four inches in diameter, then thinning out again. I was having a great time with including whatever I wanted into the rope: paper, plastic, ribbons, shreds

of cloth, casting fibers, all kinds of things, cotton fluff. Understanding how this funneling structure could swallow all sorts of materials into it was very interesting. That I would again characterize as a specific period.

I made some paper rope pieces, as well. So this was a rope-making period—[laughs]—which began with a piece made in Hungary of straw, titled *Milkman Knows the Ropes* [1980], composed of three large, truncated ropes of twisted straw. These are in the Savaria Museum's [Szombathely, Hungary] permanent collection.

MS. RIEDEL: And when I went up to UC Davis with you a year or two ago, you were having your students in that green design class; they were making a rope out of plastic bags. Do you remember?

MS. LAKY: Yes, yes. I did use these ideas in the teaching.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, and they had a great time. One was making a necklace, and the other ended up with a crown. I remember they were all sort of sleepy; it was right after lunch and kind of dark, and you showed slides. And you could tell they were all just trying to get their bearings, and then, boom, they were making rope out of plastic bags, and they just came to life.

MS. LAKY: That's a very good example, because they were able to connect to so many things in their lives, suddenly. They've seen rope; they know what string is, and then the reuse of a waste material, that was important to them. We also borrowed an idea from another artist, John Garrett, which was to make the rope using electric drills for the drilling.

MS. RIEDEL: Electric drills, exactly.

MS. LAKY: That woke them up—[laughs].

MS. RIEDEL: I remember one got so excited she checked the drill out over the weekend.

MS. LAKY: Yeah. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: She wanted to go home and make rope.

MS. LAKY: So, technology comes in again.

The interesting thing in so much of the kind of work I do, and how it dovetailed with my teaching, is that I feel very closely associated with principles of architecture. For example, the strand itself can function as a cable, so then we have all the cable kind of constructions. Some of my rope-making days ended up with grid structures made by plying rope and creating a grid, simultaneously. The other small no piece I did, *Affirmative I* [1996], I called it—[laughs]—is a three-dimensional wire grid. The grid was composed as the wire was being plied.

These ideas, then, can be directly related to ideas that exist in architecture and engineering. The architecture aspect of my life was a very strong interest. I found principles in it that not only enlivened my work, made it fun for me to play, as you put it, but also was a major tool for me in teaching.

MS. RIEDEL: We were talking earlier about how you began weaving—taking something that was primarily a flat, two-dimensional practice, and making it very three-dimensional—and finding examples of that throughout time and different cultures.

MS. LAKY: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MS. LAKY: Weaving a fabric is really a grid, if you pull it apart, if the lines separate from each other. I always love this idea that scale can increase, depending on how much air you put into a bunch of lines. Buckminster Fuller's idea of the tensegrity sphere. He proposed to send a bunch of struts and cables out into outer space to create a mile-wide sphere. Now, those struts and cables would be a small batch of materials compared to the size of sphere that a small batch of materials could become, given how much space there was between the struts and the cables. These were tension structures. An artist by the name of [Kenneth] Snelson actually first started these, but again, they are principles that come out of architecture and engineering.

Kite-making; kite-making is string and struts. My students and I would make kites. I even made a piece in Canada, a temporary outdoor piece, using the kite idea, with a cloth membrane on a three-dimensional skeletal structure. Basically, just struts and string and membrane; I like simple ideas like that.

MS. RIEDEL: And it makes me think of your baskets, too, especially some of the twig baskets—I always think of them as being as much about space and about air as they are about twigs. There is something about defining space, much of which is negative space.

MS. LAKY: Yes, negative space. I love that idea—such a useful one—that linear elements put together can create something so much bigger than the pile of little linear elements to begin with, and that the resulting structure can have tremendous strength.

I always enjoy thinking about how we got much of our language from the textile tradition. Strength in numbers, that's spinning, and it comes into the grid ideas, but also that strength in numbers—when linear elements are connected to each other, each line added creates a much stronger piece. One could build, as Fuller imagined, a huge structure with lines. It would be very strong. Plus, the resilience in it, the little bit of flexibility, adds to its strength, protecting the form from being rigid and possibly breaking. So here we have a wonderful concept around which to work or talk.

[END MD 02 TR 05.]

MS. RIEDEL: Great. Well, I think that is a perfect place to end.

Thanks so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]