Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Alice Aycock, 2009 February 2-March 25

Funding for this interview was provided by the U.S. General Services Administration, Design Excellence and the Arts. Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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

Transcript

Interview

Interview with Alice Aycock
Conducted by Avis Berman
At Aycock's in New York, NY
2009 February 4-March 25

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Alice Aycock on 2009 February 4-March 25. The interview took place at Aycock's home in New York, NY, and was conducted by Avis Berman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the U.S. General Services Administration, Design for Excellence and the Arts oral history project.

Avis Berman has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman interviewing Alice Aycock for the Archives of America Art GSA Oral History Project on February 4, 2009, in her loft in SoHo.

Would you please state your full name and date of birth.

ALICE AYCOCK: Alice Aycock, November 20, 1946.

MS. BERMAN: And you were born in Harrisburg?

MS. AYCOCK: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. BERMAN: Did you grow up there?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, I did. I grew up just outside of Harrisburg in a suburb called Camp Hill, the other side of the river.

MS. BERMAN: And what kind of a town was that?

MS. AYCOCK: It was—well, I guess it was the more well-to-do suburb. To me it was just where I grew up. But it was a pretty white bread town, I suppose, at that time because that was some 60 years ago. So I would say it was pretty Protestant, pretty white, pretty—that kind of thing—where most of the kids went on to college supposedly. And no crime or anything like that kind of place. That changed—well, I don't know how much that changed. But do you want me to talk on and on a little bit about it?

MS. BERMAN: Well, you can talk about what interests you about it if you'd like.

MS. AYCOCK: Well, recently I reconnected with an old high school boyfriend, and I was remembering those days, which I still remember—sometimes fondly and sometimes not. But we were in high school from '60 to '64. And I believe that Kennedy was shot during the senior play, the afternoon of the senior play. That's what I remember. So we were very much right at the forefront of all of those things that made the '60s both euphoria and an idea of positive change, whatever the Kennedy mystique made us all feel. And then also the tremendous disappointment and letdown that occurred. And I remember that the group that I was friends with kind of spanned three years, three generations, of sophomore, junior, and senior. And we were very involved with music. We were involved with music that came out of the black churches in Harrisburg and was then becoming rock and roll. So there was a black band called the Aldantes, that we followed and that my boyfriend was a member of with his brother.

And we sort of began what was we were part of the change that came to that town. And I think we did it naively. Some of us went on to become very political and to be very much part of the anti-war movement. Made names for themselves in the movement, names that were people who really made names in that movement. I won't go into that too deeply, but some of those people who were part of my group. And I think it was something that was in the air, and that we picked up on while we were in revolt against who our parents were. I think the ones of us who went out and left that community and went out into the world were also products of maybe who our family were. Because some of our families were not just narrow-minded people. And so I was—when I contacted this friend of mine that I hadn't spoken to in 40 or 50 years, and he was right with me. We were really saying for the first time I [felt like it did] on inauguration day. But wow! You know.

Some of the things that we really believed in was the environment, or anti-war, or the civil rights movement, or I can't say that they were too pro-woman at that point; they were pretty much males, traditional males. But a lot of the things—then we went on to college and got involved in. And we were really—I really felt, and I think this friend of mine felt—yes, our youth had come back. That we weren't just stupid idealists or hippies or whatever it is they wanted to say. That we were really part of something that instigated something that's borne some fruit, the positive, wonderful parts of it. So I was very lucky in that sense that some of the people I hung out with in this little town, that seemed very far from New York and from the big city at that time, actually were hooked into things that were really exciting.

And then we all went our separate ways to college, and we all became whatever we became. And as I said, some of them became quite real radicals and made names for themselves. Got them in trouble. But the genesis of it was to really begin this movement, particularly I think in terms of civil rights and anti-war, that is just marvelous.

MS. BERMAN: You mentioned rebelling. It seems to me, from what I've read, that you grew up in a very fertile environment where imagination was really encouraged.

MS. AYCOCK: Well, in my family it was.

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. But that was separate. And then you joined the larger community. So in my family I think it was, although to me it was just my family. So they were who they were. They weren't the wackiest, though. Let me say there were some wackos, guys who had antennas in their backyard and all kinds of stuff, and were always making experiments. And we weren't like that. [Laughs] We looked kind of normal from the outside. But I think what was really great about it—and of course you make it in memory, it becomes something else—what was wonderful for me was that my father had a wonderful mind, and he was very curious. And he loved building things, and he encouraged me. And he was also, I think, very bright, very intelligent, and he was well-read. And so I was able to put those things together like the ideas with the making. And that one didn't take priority over the other. And he challenged me, he competed with me. He wanted to be the smartest at the table, and generally, of course, he was, as a child. But he encouraged my weirdness, I guess. But, at the same time I think I appeared to be like pretty normal. I mean, I don't know. I don't know. It's just who I was. But I wouldn't say I was a nerd.

MS. BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AYCOCK: I didn't come off as the nerd. Or the artsy-fartsy kid.

MS. BERMAN: So what kind of a kid were you?

MS. AYCOCK: I wanted to get really good grades. I wanted to be number one in the class. And I in that particular environment art was not—art in schools, the kids who were not particularly going to be on the college track, they're the ones that were in the typing classes and the art classes and the shop classes. So it was not something you wanted to be labeled with. But at the same time—so I didn't get a lot of art lessons as a child. I got a little bit. And I kind of put it down. I kind of kept it. I didn't talk about it with my friends. And I would do it secretly in the basement, pictures and paintings in the basement. And when my history teacher said, “You know, Alice, I think you're really talented,” [Laughs] I said, “No! I'm not!” No, no, no. I'm going to be a historian, I'm going to be a writer. I'm going to be a fiction writer. But I'm not going to be a visual artist. No, because smart people aren't visual artists.

MS. BERMAN: So you were drawing, and you were painting at that point.

MS. AYCOCK: I was drawing and painting. I wasn't building very much. But I was drawing and painting and writing and reading. And to me it was what kids do, normal kids do. Reading books, buying books. Reading things we weren't supposed to read. But even then if you bought the *Communist Manifesto* or something that was considered wrong. So I'd buy it and read it in the basement or something. It was a pretty repressive time. [Laughs.]

MS. BERMAN: The '60s didn't begin in 1960.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. I mean, you know—yes. But, it was in the—I had this wonderful grandmother whom I talked about in the book, who read all the time and painted and wrote poetry. Who took me to the Metropolitan Museum for the first time, and who would come frequently up north. And then it was always delightful because she always brought some fantastic thing. She told the most extraordinary stories from the time I was very little. And later I learned that she was telling me stories from great literature. And she made them—it's just wonderful to sit at somebody's feet and hear O. Henry and hear all these wonderful things that I would later encounter in school. But I'd already heard them. She just made—she was probably like a lot of people's grandmothers, I don't

know. I mythologize things. But she was the sort of—she taught the boys math. So when you're a math teacher and a painter and a reader, you get a lot of stuff rolled into one. And you're somebody's grandmother. So you're a woman, not—and so it was just wonderful. I always thought, oh, I want to be just like her. And she traveled as much as she could.

And so there were lots of wonderful things which—at least I remember them as being wonderful. And then you enlarge on that and you whatever it. I mean, it wasn't like growing up with Edmund Wilson or something. You know what I mean. These were kind of normal people. But they were curious, and they traveled, and they read books. And they weren't always in the museums or anything like that. There weren't very many museums in Harrisburg. We came to New York a lot. My parents had lived here before the war. They'd married here, and they saw New York as the center of a lot of culture. And so we came, and we saw a lot of theater. So in those ways I probably was very different from the kids I grew up with. When we went on our high school trip and we came to New York—this is my town; I knew it. I'd been here all the time. So I guess we were just different than a lot of the people around us.

MS. BERMAN: Let's do some housekeeping here. What were your parents' full names?

MS. AYCOCK: My mother was Alice Frances Haskins – her name before she got married. Her maiden name. And my father was Jessie Nelson Aycock.

MS. BERMAN: And that's Jesse without an I, correct?

MS. AYCOCK: That's right, without an I.

MS. BERMAN: And what were their dates of birth?

MS. AYCOCK: My mother was born on February 8, 1910, and my father was born—I always get it mixed up; it was either July 11th or July 15th, I can't remember which—in 1907.

MS. BERMAN: Just to place that. And I assume one reason you were living in Harrisburg area was that your father was an engineer and architect and helped design the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: So I assume he had to be near the capital and the political machine there.

MS. AYCOCK: Probably. But—yes. What had happened is he had gone to work as an engineer for the turnpike; that's where he met my mother. He came to New York to work on roads and airstrips and things for the war. And they lived here for a number of years. Then he was part of the Army Corps of Engineers, as you read. And when he came back from World War II, he felt I guess because he had known Harrisburg and he was going to be working on bridges—and also Bethlehem Steel was there. Not their big plant, but a very big plant was right along the Susquehanna outside of Harrisburg. So he started his construction company on the river right opposite really Bethlehem. It was a teeny little place. A shack by the railroad by the river in 1946 when I was born. And it grew, and it was just a good place because Bethlehem Steel was there. He was getting into bridge construction and bridge erection. And then he began to get into energy, hydroelectric, paper mills. He was in the—I always get this wrong—nuclear industry for a while and installing reactor vessels and doing various things to do with that. But mostly he was in hydroelectric, which is the big turbines and all of those kinds of things, which were a part of my childhood. But it just became—it was a good place to start after the war. And there was plenty of land and plenty of talent and energy and blah blah blah. So I think that's why it happened like that.

MS. BERMAN: And would you visit those sites and see those machines?

MS. AYCOCK: I did. As a child if we'd go on summer trips and things, I would do that. And it was just part of my background. Also, as the company grew, I grew. When it started, I was a little girl, and it was very small – it was one rented truck. And my mother worked for him, and he had an accountant and whatever. And he'd hired on people. Then it got bigger and bigger and bigger. And I took things for granted because it was just what was there. But it wasn't like I was a tomboy. I wasn't. I didn't hang out. I didn't go over to the office a lot. I'd just go over. It became what it became, and I got older, and it got bigger. And he moved from that one little place when I was about—how old? My brother was about five. No, we moved to the new house when I was six, and that's when he moved from the little shack by the railroad track to a much bigger place further away. And then gradually there were cranes everywhere. There were big overhead cranes. There was the yard, which got bigger. There were trucks everywhere. It was that growth after World War II, which he was building. And he began to do a lot more work outside the state in places like Ohio and Kentucky and all of that.

MS. BERMAN: So he was tremendously successful, in other words.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: And did you ever see any of his drawings while he was still doing them or anything like that?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And I have his sketchbook from when he was a kid going to architecture school and stuff like that. He went to Penn for a while. He went to different places. And I would see all that. But then gradually it became the guys in the drafting room. And so there were a bunch of estimators and drafters. Then he became more and more separate from that as you know—as things got bigger, he stopped doing that kind of thing and began whatever else you do as you begin to run a company. But I would certainly go over there and take advantage of things. And once I went—got—to college, I think that I realized suddenly [laughs] what this was! And I began to take advantage of anything I could. Oh, send me some this! Send me some that! You know, like, oh, oh! Can I have some of drawings tables. Can I have a whole bunch of blueprints? Can I have a crane? All of a sudden it was like whoa! Hey, yes. This is [inaudible]. [Laughs.]

MS. BERMAN: Right. This is a treasure house of materials and this and that.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Now your father designed or built your house that you lived in, is that correct?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: And what was it like having a house that would have to be different from other people's?

MS. AYCOCK: It was. And I'm going to see it for the first time in nine years, go back, go past it. Other people are living in it. You know I mean, again, I mythologize these things. But what was wonderful, as a little tiny girl, is that he would come home from work every night. My mother would be cooking dinner. And he would go straight to this table that he had set up, and he was working on this little thing. And he kept putting on the roof and putting on the sides and putting in the color of the brick and what would the roof would be: It was green shingles or something. And he'd work and work and then draw make drawings and stuff. And it was just happening. And I was literally four or five years old, and I would hang out because Daddy was coming home. Of course all girls love their dads. And I get to hang out, and he'd give me a piece of paper, and I would start copying him and drawing on the floor and then watching him as he made this teeny little thing that just kept getting better and better and more developed and kind of like magic for a little child. Then he set it in the center of something, and he made this big landscape all around it. I don't know what he set it in. Like I don't know what it is. Anyway, I have some Polaroids of this thing.

MS. BERMAN: Was it a paper or cardboard model?

MS. AYCOCK: That [inaudible] was little balsawood. And it was really about that big.

MS. BERMAN: Would you say about ten by ten inches there [inaudible]?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes. It was like that. And one of these pitched roofs. Then he started landscaping and everything. And then he built the house. And then we went and lived in it. So I always see that as one of those—it's a metaphor, but it was one of those rare wonderful things. Where I watched it from the outside. I watched this man dream this thing up. He gave me the model to play [with which I could] hold in my hand. And I could move all around it and hold it and see it from above and underneath and whatever. And then I went and lived in this thing, inside it. So it became a completely different thing when you're inside of it. And it's bigger than you. And you have all these feelings and emotions. And you live out your childhood with all of that. So that sense of something that had this geometry and this sense of formality and design and concept. Then it becomes filled with all that subjectivity and all that history and all that memory. And I had both. And I think I also had something, which is rare and increasingly rare, is that even though it wasn't that extraordinary a house, who gets to live in a house that their father designed? You know that's wonderful. That you can pick it up, and then you can bring it into being. For yourself. You're not ceding over the most significant part of your life, which is your own visual environment, to somebody else, to tell you how to feel and how to think, you know.

MS. BERMAN: How to live.

MS. AYCOCK: How to live. And so when I say I took these things for granted, I did. But I'm not saying that an architectural critic would say that this was extraordinary because it had lots of whatever. But what I am saying is that that notion of you can think it up, and you can build it, you can make something happen. And it comes out of your imagination and your mind and your visualization. It was just there for me from the very beginning.

MS. BERMAN: And also to see that you work on it, you change it, it's in increments, and really—you saw someone thinking.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: In the everyday process of thinking.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, thinking and changing and whatever, and bringing it into being. So it was just a wonderful gift. And, I'm sure a lot of people at one point, they had to build their own houses because there was no one around to do it for them. But, increasingly, again, we've gotten to the point where somebody else does everything for us—design. And we don't get to create our own visual environment very much anymore.

MS. BERMAN: Did your mother have input into this house?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. Because I mean she had to live there, so he obviously talked to her about everything. But then, you know, he had his own tastes [laughs] about what he wanted. He loved balconies, he loved cathedral ceilings. He loved bathrooms. He loved to have just stuff like that you could see, well, that was Daddy. He's got to have a bathroom downstairs and upstairs and upstairs. And had a little kitchen down in the basement, too. Whether we used it or not. You know these things. But the cathedral ceiling. It was a much more modernist '50s kind of house. And then he changed it. Somewhere along the line he decided to renovate it, and it was never as good. He put on all this paneling, and it was kind of awful. It would've been much better when he kept it much more modern. But we did, we had Mirò prints on the wall and things like that. Not, you know, they were reproductions.

MS. BERMAN: Posters or something.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. When I think about it, again, for this little town in the middle of what was really at that point—then, not now—nowhere, I mean relative to getting to the centers of culture. It was just this situation where nobody was going to come down on you for what you were thinking about or trying or being curious about or experimenting. You know what I'm saying? I mean my mother was pretty straitlaced, but nobody was going, Oh, that's crazy art! Or, oh, that's, you know.

MS. BERMAN: They were tolerant and liberal.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes. And curious.

MS. BERMAN: Well, and they were educated, too.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Now I know you mentioned your grandmother took you to the Met. Were there any other museums or any kinds of works of art that you remember even though you weren't thinking about being an artist? Is there art that you were drawn to during that period?

MS. AYCOCK: Well, she—there were just things lying around, picture books lying around. But the thing that she subscribed to, and I'm trying to remember his name, he was extremely important at the Met. He used to write these wonderful books, and I can't remember.

MS. BERMAN: Are you talking about Hyatt Mayor possibly?

MS. AYCOCK: No, it will come to me at some point. It's really—But John, John, John? God! And these were books at the Met you could—so they were histories of art, histories of certain periods. He was the primary writer of these things, and then they would be sent all over the place.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, was that John Canaday?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, John Canaday.

MS. BERMAN: Okay, John Canaday. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AYCOCK: And so my grandmother subscribed to all that. She would get that stuff sent to her little town in the South, which was really in the middle of nowhere. And then she would bring this stuff up when she would come to visit because she'd want to be reading and stuff. And then I would get moving through those things, paging through those things.

MS. BERMAN: Now was this grandmother your maternal or paternal?

MS. AYCOCK: Paternal.

MS. BERMAN: And her name was?

MS. AYCOCK: Martha Morgan Aycock.

MS. BERMAN: And I guess she was widowed?

MS. AYCOCK: At that time she was. I knew my grandfather a little bit, but not very well. And she had been educated; she had gone to college. So she really was the—I don't think my father would have been who he was—she was the one.

MS. BERMAN: She was the fulcrum on which every—

MS. AYCOCK: She was the fulcrum. She was really the intellectual. She was, you know—

MS. BERMAN: And what was your grandfather's name?

MS. AYCOCK: Well, he was Aycock.

MS. BERMAN: I just meant his first name.

MS. AYCOCK: Oh, his first name Frank, Frank B. Aycock.

MS. BERMAN: And how did they end up in the South?

MS. AYCOCK: Because on my father's side they came there out of the English debtors' prison and into the—cross the sea; they were there forever and ever and ever—or as ever as you can be in America. On my father's side. And, you know, around—I don't know. Every time you do the genealogical tree—which I think is a bunch of hogwash. But you know—

MS. BERMAN: So they came over in the 17th century.

MS. AYCOCK: Late—yes. Or early 18th century, depending on whose family line you want to follow. You only followed the male. But I think my grandmother's family was there a long time, maybe even before the Aycocks. But they were there a long time. So she was a real Southern lady but full of whatever. And the interesting part about her—they weren't—they were farmers, I think, primarily. But her father—and this is what was always interesting, and I tell this story over and over. Her father decided to become—and I don't know why, who knows why people do things—a Methodist minister for a while. And I don't know what he was before that. But he decided to become a Methodist minister. And he went to Japan to convert the Japanese. And she was born in 1883, and she went with him when she was seven. And so she grew up in Japan from the age of seven to 15, before the turn of the century.

So her world view was very different than the average Southern woman. And it, I think again, she was obviously a strong—her mother had died when she was a little girl. And so she was motherless. She was a very strong person. And I think being in that culture as a young woman—or child—radically changed her world view and her ideas about what life could be. So it influenced her from an artistic and from a whatever. And she was sent home when she was 15 to go to college—across the sea, across the Pacific Ocean. And then all across America before the turn of the century, or around the turn of the century.

MS. BERMAN: All by herself.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. Or somebody, maybe there were people watching over her. So she was a [inaudible] pretty amazing person. And I always think of that when people complain or this or that. So she went through all of that. She went through World War I. She went through the Depression. She went through World War II. She went through putting men on the moon. She died in 1985 at 102 or 103. And she just, you know, she was a pretty good role model.

MS. BERMAN: And she also saw your career flower up to that point.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, I think so, yes. Once I went to visit her when she was very old, and she said to me—because she had forgotten—you're going to be somebody someday. [They laugh.] By then I had started to show work and stuff like that. Yes, she did. But, you know, she was somebody where you would say, well, this is not somebody who gave in, gave up, who was going to be undone by the events in her life. And for a woman to go to college at that point and then become a teacher, which she did. And she had a career and ran farms and things like that. I mean, she was a tough person. At that time teaching was one of the few careers—

MS. BERMAN: That women could have then.

MS. AYCOCK: So she did that.

MS. BERMAN: Now, what about your mother's parents?

MS. AYCOCK: My mother's parents were—my mother is a third-generation Irish immigrant. And they went to the coal regions of Pennsylvania. My grandfather was the oldest of 16 children. He was sent to the coal mines when he was 12. These are all the stories. If you want stories, these are the stories. I have his little thing that he used to take down, his little lantern, into the coal mines. And then he was not well educated. He married an educated woman. When I say not well educated, I mean he was probably not literate. I'm not sure, but probably not. He did marry a very—an educated woman. I think we now know the Haskins were—I don't know how Irish they were. But they married Irish people. So they became Catholics. You know it's the old Irish thing, north, south, is that, set they all are. And then he had a—he became, he had real estate. He had a bar, as the Irish always do. He had a soft drink bottling factory. He was the town something-or-other—I forget what it was. And his children then became—he sent them to college and stuff. The young American Dream.

MS. BERMAN: Well, you have tremendous energy on both sides of your family.

MS. AYCOCK: We did. You know we also had sorrow and lots of stuff.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, of course. But again, it's upward.

MS. AYCOCK: People who were moving, yes. Who had what I would like to say courage.

MS. BERMAN: What were your maternal grandparents' first names?

MS. AYCOCK: Katherine Feeny—that was her maiden name was Feeny. He first name was Katherine. My grandfather I believe he was James Haskins—H-A-S-K-I-N-S, James William Haskins, I believe. That was his name, yes.

MS. BERMAN: And were you raised in a religion in your family?

MS. AYCOCK: Well, my father was not at all religious. He was not a believer. He was very much a skeptic. I don't know if you would call him a confirmed atheist. But to call him an agnostic would probably be calling him too religious. Let's put it like that. And my mother was a good Irish Catholic. She was not a what shall we say? It was religion her way, meaning she just wasn't obsessive. But she went to Mass every Sunday. She was a good Catholic. She had a lot of common sense, though; let's put it like that. And so she was flexible, very flexible. She also could see the fallibility of people and doctrine and things like that. But it was a great comfort for her. And I would say that she was much more a believer in magical thinking; let's just call religion magical thinking. I don't want to offend anybody, but—

So then my father was not at all a believer in magical thinking. He was rational. If he worshipped anyone, it would probably be classical Greece. And at one point in my life I went over to the so-called dark side. I joined his club and left my mother's religion that she raised me in. But I would say that I'm pretty—I'm very not—I'm grateful for having all of that pomp and circumstance and glitter and gold and magic. I think it was really interesting, and I'm grateful for having—I think it affected me. It allowed me to have – it enlarged my imagination and all of that. But I'm very much a nonbeliever pretty much.

MS. BERMAN: A secular humanist possibly?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. I don't know what people mean when they say the word spiritual. I'd still like to have that defined properly. Do you know what I mean? It seems to be a catchall for everything—for a lot of things. But my mother would definitely do things like bless—She was kind of like she—she did what Malinowski says. Malinowski wrote about magic.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MS. AYCOCK: Like the early islanders would build the best boats possible. But when it came time to launch them, and you knew you were going into waters that you didn't know what was going to happen, that's when the magic would come out. And so my mother believed in medicine and all those wonderful things. But at the same time she was going to throw some holy water over you.

MS. BERMAN: [Inaudible.]

MS. AYCOCK: To make sure. And my father just let her. He didn't fight it.

MS. BERMAN: But the children were raised as Catholics until they—

MS. AYCOCK: Until they stopped.

MS. BERMAN: Yes. Until they collapsed.

MS. AYCOCK: Until they went on their own ways.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right. Yes. Now you had said in the beginning of our discussion that you had spoken to an old boyfriend. Were your parents—what was your parents' reaction to—did they know you had a black boyfriend?

MS. AYCOCK: Well, he wasn't black; he was white. He was just in a black band.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, okay.

MS. AYCOCK: He was a white boy, but a bad boy. And his brother. What was their reaction? Well, the other thing I did—because, again, it was in the air. I wasn't so special. It was in the air. Around my junior year in college—I mean in high school—I decided to go to Harrisburg and to actually work in what was then called the ghetto, in settlement houses. That's what it was called then. And they were the only really good social agencies, which happened to be Methodist, as a matter of fact. And it was Methodist centers. And they were in the communities teaching young children art and reading, after-school programs, summer programs, and all of that. And they weren't proselytizing. They were really providing the only real social services. I don't know. It was pretty good. And so I decided to do that. I did it in the summer, two summers in a row, as I recall. And I did it during the school year whenever I could. And then I met also—there were black people working there as social workers, and they came to my senior play and all that. And they were the only black people in the audience, as I just remember this. And it was more the community at large and less my parents. And I think that must have been—I don't know what people thought. I didn't really whatever. But they were determined to come. And to come to that community which did practice redlining or whatever that's called. No one would ever sell a house to a black person in that community. And to come over and cross the river, just to do that. I know at that point it really registered a big thing. And I used to go to their house. To us now that would seem like whatever. But it was something then. Because the North was as segregated as the South.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, yes. It was just de facto segregation: economic or something else. No, but the fact that this is now normal just means thankfully the world has changed.

MS. AYCOCK: Has changed. And then I would also go to their houses for dinner and things like that. And that was a new experience for me because I had never, except for the band. And the music was so good. And it was more with my parents that, oh, she's wild. She's running around as a groupie. I think they trusted me because I was very academically-oriented and very, very, very achievement-oriented from the get-go. Like, you know, driven, driven. More the worry about that, if she didn't get into the right schools and all the carrying on that I would do. [Laughs] Like, why can't this? Why aren't I in this? Why isn't this happening? Blah blah blah. But, it was probably more concern about me riding around with boys that were drinking and stuff like that.

MS. BERMAN: The usual.

MS. AYCOCK: The usual stuff. And I think the other thing I would say is that my father came north when he was 16, and he was extremely aware of the South at that time and what the South was like, and he was not like that. At all! He had, just as I had, broken with any kind of religious stuff. He broke very much with other parts of the South. He became a Yankee basically. But again, you have to remember this was the South. The segregated South. I think my father was as liberal as he could be under the circumstances and also carried the guilt of his forbearers.

MS. BERMAN: Who probably owned slaves.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And he made me, however it was, I don't remember anything, I was aware of the negativity of that and the burden of that. And the fact that that burden had to be—someone had to make amends for that—somewhere along the lines, amends had to be made. So in that sense we were also more liberal. But people weren't—he was not out marching with Martin Luther King or anything like that. Some of my friends' parents did, though. Again, which was unusual for that community, which was very conservative. And you were punished in little ways. You weren't a member of the National Honor Society even if your grades were better than anyone else's. Stuff like that would happen to you. In memory, I didn't know.

MS. BERMAN: But you were very high up in your class.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. Didn't matter exactly. Didn't matter.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Now what made you decide to go to Douglass? Assuming that since you could—

MS. AYCOCK: Well, I was rejected by Sarah Lawrence.

MS. BERMAN: I don't believe it.

MS. AYCOCK: And so I was just completely—I didn't quite know what Sarah Lawrence was, but I was told that's where I should be. [They laugh.] So I was rejected by Sarah Lawrence.

MS. BERMAN: Unbelievable.

MS. AYCOCK: I was rejected by Radcliffe, and I was rejected by Wellesley.

MS. BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AYCOCK: I'm being all very honest here.

MS. BERMAN: No, no, that's good.

MS. AYCOCK: And I ended up at Douglass. And you have to remember it was the Baby Boom Generation. There were hundreds of thousands of kids applying to college that had been born in 1946. It was really competitive. And then it got competitive again. But it was really competitive that year. Major competitive. So I ended up at Douglass, and I had applied because it was near New York, because it seemed like—I wanted to go to a women's college. It seemed like it had wonderful faculty and what I knew. But again, I have a son, so I know how we all deal now with it. No, back then, now you took your SAT scores, you didn't get tutored, and you figured out where you wanted to go, and you applied. You parents didn't write the application for you. You were supposed to kind of just do it, man. Do it! And not be whatever. When I went for my interview for Radcliffe, my father put me on an airplane, and I spent the night in a hotel in Boston by myself. I was terrified. But he said, “This is what you're supposed to do.” And I still blame him for why my interview was so bad. [They laugh.] Because it was your fault I was scared. You should have taken me. But at any rate.

And what happened, though, was that serendipitously, not only was Douglass 45 minutes from New York, which was my city where I always wanted to be. From the time I was six, I wanted to live in New York and be with art and culture and ideas and writers and thinkers—where the action was. But so it was really close. And then it turned out it had the most fabulous art department. And I was still wanting to be a great writer, a great fiction writer. In my sophomore year I took this course for the fun of it, and it was half studio and half art history. And it was supposed to fulfill a humanities requirement. It was taught by a guy named Sam Weiner. And he just taught the best course ever. He had us read John Cage, and he had us read Panofsky, and he had us read I think Piaget. And he had us read us read every wonderful thing in the world. *The Nude* by whatever—Clark, Kenneth Clark. And it was just—

So we would read all this great stuff. Then we'd have three hours of art history, and we'd have three hours of studio. And we'd be doing something in the art history, and then we'd go in the studio, and we'd try to put ideas and making together, and that was it. I was—there was no turning back. Because it brought the two things together that I cared about. And I was just—it was like falling in love. And there was just never going to be and my creative writing teacher was giving me a hard time for some stuff I was writing. And I got—screw this, man! [Laughs] I'm going to do this. This is wonderful. So I didn't know that you could do it this way, that you could put ideas in visual things together. This is what I've always wanted to do. And I'm in love. And I will never turn back.

MS. BERMAN: So what sorts of thing were you making in the Sam Weiner class?

MS. AYCOCK: Well, I mean I'm sure we did some clay. If we were studying Greece, we'd learn all about proportion. And the body. And again Kenneth Clark. And then we read this wonderful thing by Panofsky talking about how different cultures view the body differently; and even the system of proportions and how the body is a vehicle for expression not just one way. But then we would like, you know, carve something or sculpt something about the body. I don't remember it piece by piece by piece. And then we'd do some painting, we'd do some drawing. But what Douglass did—First of all, the Rutgers Graduate School was there, which became extraordinary because here you have these people who were very serious, and you could see them. It wasn't just girls in art school. Because really there weren't that many women taking art classes. But you could see how intense the graduate students were. There were a couple of women in there.

And in its kind of intensity and seriousness, so I could sit in on the graduate critiques. My teachers that were—taught on a very high level. It wasn't just, oh, here are these women. I don't know what they really thought. But all the teachers at Douglass taught us as though we were going to do something with it besides get married. So again, also, there was a lot of changing a little bit when I lived in this little town. But, boy, when I went to Douglass, everything changed. I'd never met somebody whose parents were socialists. [They laugh.] You know. I had never really walked around the Lower East Side and hung out, with you know, I mean—

MS. BERMAN: Were you living, yourself, though, in New Brunswick or Highland Park?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, New Brunswick. Or in the dorms. But on the weekends, I'd come to New York.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MS. AYCOCK: And the teachers would bring us to New York. And so for instance one of my assignments was to go to hear *The Nine Evenings* with John Cage. And engineers, artists, and engineers. And at that time the art world was very small. There were only a few galleries. My teacher—I had no idea what Fluxus was, but they were all Fluxus. We were having happenings every 15 seconds, I would say. But there wasn't a lot of emphasis on an academic training at all. It was more or less, how are you thinking? Which of course just jived marvelously for me because I was into the academics of thinking, but not the academics of you only make art a certain way, and here's how to do it with your hands.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Or it's not just something in a heavy gold frame.

MS. AYCOCK: Right. And of course they were experimenting. Experimentation was rewarded richly. Being just kind of doggedly whatever conservative was not. And I think the first things I made were just horrible. They were atrocious.

MS. BERMAN: What were they?

MS. AYCOCK: Oh, I made these big plaster trees which were bigger than me. I just can't make—people were just horrified. [They laugh.] You know. I sprayed them. I painted them pink and gold. And I remember the teacher—it was still like Minimalism was really still very, very, very strong. And the teacher just walked in like this and didn't know what to say. [Laughs] And I would just leave it there then.

And then, yes, but everybody was kind of nice. I saw that at school today. I don't know like that's so [inaudible]. But anyway, I mean it was really humiliating stuff. The first couple of things were just awful. They were awful. And nobody shot me down. Or I don't remember them shooting me down. I don't know what they said to each other. I wasn't a very good painter at all, and we started painting in class. And you have to remember that Don Judd, Frank Stella were doing their thing. Frank Stella had just made, and Ad Reinhardt had just made the last painting. And Frank Stella was making shaped paintings. And Donald Judd and Carl Andre decided to become sculptors because no more paintings could be made, and the shape painting was coming off the wall. So I made a couple of paintings. I mean I remember we had a still life with garbage cans.

MS. BERMAN: That was the setup, in other words.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And so I painted the garbage can, and I painted the deep interior of the garbage can. And I thought—it was a terrible painting; it was terrible. It was muddy, and I was just throwing all the colors on and everything. Whatever. And I thought, I want to make a garbage can. I don't want to paint it. I want to really see what that real space is like. And so I just started making, with the permission of the art world theoretically, the shaped canvas, then you become a Don Judd. I started making shaped paintings. At first I did flowers. And I'd cut them out of plywood. And they were really ugly, the first ones. And then I got much more three-dimensional and better with my cutting. I think all this—who cares about any of this? But at any rate, much more better with my cutting. And I would follow the graduate students around and get them to show me how to use the saw, the band saw, and all this sort of stuff. And I produced these huge flowers, 3-D flowers, about which I remember John Goodyear said, “You know I think you should show these to Walt Disney.” [They laugh.] Then I was embarrassed because they weren't really serious.

So I started then to make enclosures that were made out of wood, that were shaped, that were constructed and nailed. And they got bigger and bigger and bigger and more and more minimal, more formal, less—they didn't have so much content. But they would have deep space, and you could stack them, and you could build them. They very much looked like minimal things. And I remember struggling and fussing, just like I do now, worrying about them. Worrying about the construction of them and everything. And then there was another man there who taught painting. And I was still taking the painting courses, but I was making sculpture. And they just let me. No one said you have to make paintings in our class. Everyone just let me go. And I started really working all the time.

MS. BERMAN: So you learned you wanted to be an object maker.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And I just went off in that direction. And they would just—I had a little place up in the attic near where the graduate students were, and I would just be down there working all the time. And everybody just let me go. Then this one man at the beginning of my senior year—then I knew I wanted to go to—it all happened very fast. It was like, okay, this is it. I'm going to do this. This is what I want to do for the rest of my life. This is what I've always wanted to do. Now you put the two things together: ideas and art. And I'm doing it. I am off to the races. No holding back. So I was going to go to graduate school. There was just no ands, ifs, and buts. So I didn't want to wait. And this one man—I can't remember his name—he said, “You know you should go to Hunter

because that's where Bob Morris is." That's where So-and-so is. That's where all these people are.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, I think I know who it is. Let me get his name right. I think he's German, sort of a Bauhaus guy. And he ended up the University of Iowa Museum [of Art]. It will come to me, but you know—that's the guy.

MS. AYCOCK: Absolutely.

MS. BERMAN: Yes, he's very interesting. He was born in Germany.

MS. AYCOCK: Right.

MS. BERMAN: And he came to this country. But that's the guy [Ulfert Wilke].

MS. AYCOCK: It's something H, and I can't pronounce it. But as soon as you remember, I'll know. And I think what people did is once they saw whatever, they just gave me space. And I would get critiqued, but people were just—and it was also a great department. We all know that.

MS. BERMAN: Right. But you didn't have—Did Reggie Neal come into this at all?

MS. AYCOCK: He was there. But he didn't—he stayed to the background. And these guys were just doing their thing. Bob Watts.

MS. BERMAN: Right. did you have Bob Watts as a teacher?

MS. AYCOCK: Uh-huh. I had him as a sculptor, sculpture teacher. And I had John Goodyear, and I had Jeff—who I ran into the other night. And I had this guy, the German guy, and Sam. I had just about everybody, one way—Mark Berger.

MS. BERMAN: I want to say there's a word—Ulrich? Anyway, I'll think of it eventually.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. So it wasn't that people weren't hard on me as I got better. You know then I got tough critiques. But people were very encouraging and very supportive, I think.

MS. BERMAN: Well, what was his—the person whose name we will remember eventually—what was his reason? Why did he say you should go to Hunter?

MS. AYCOCK: Well, some of it was the kinds of shapes and things that I was making that were more minimal. And I think it was really—And what I would like to say is that had I gone to Sarah Lawrence or Radcliffe or Wellesley, it would've taken me a lot longer. I ended up in exactly the right place. It was probably the luckiest thing that ever happened to me in my whole life. I ended up in the very best place I could be. And I think it was more, this is hot. I mean in my mind he was—because I was still not really—I wasn't getting it all. I was absorbing information quickly, but not—Yes, I was still learning a lot. So I didn't quite know who all of these people were. But he was just saying this is the place. This is where all the people are: Tony Smith, Bob Morris, Gene Goossen, you know, you name it. This is where you should be because this is where the action is. I think it was more like that.

MS. BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AYCOCK: And I think it was more like—you would have to ask them what they really meant. But I wasn't going to be staying making what I was making. This was just a period of whatever. But it was the heyday of Minimalism. And Bob was one of its foremost practitioners, and he was this great teacher. And so essentially by the end of my senior year, I knew a lot about Bob Morris. I'd really come up to speed. And I was coming up to speed all along. You know because Mark Berger was a pretty good teacher, too. They were all good teachers. So I was writing papers, I was seeing the art, I was really just catching up fast, fast, fast. Then I applied to Cornell, I applied to Yale, I applied to Ann Arbor. I was rejected, I think, at all of them.

MS. BERMAN: Yale, too?

MS. AYCOCK: Oh, yes. Yes. And I was accepted at Hunter. And that was great because had I got to any of those other places, it would have been the exact wrong place for me.

MS. BERMAN: Don't you think Yale? That was so fertile at the time.

MS. AYCOCK: It wouldn't have been for me. I went in there, and I remember whoever was running the department said, So-and-so's done just—I mean, I was really ambitious. I still am. But I was like one of those people that I hate to teach. And I remember he said—it was a very, I don't care it might have been very fertile and everybody was coming out of there, but it was very conservative. You just had to do it their way or they

were not going to buy into your thing. And he said, “Somebody is just—Carl Andre's just loaded a series of bricks across a floor at a gallery in New York.” And he said, “If that's where you're at, and you're coming up here just to be finished and turned out, don't bother.” Or some words to that effect. That's the impression I got. And I thought to myself, no, I'm going to school so I can be the most famous artist I can be. [They laugh.] And I want to be where the action is! I'm not coming up here to just have you tell me how to do it your way. So when they turned me down—I went later on to teach at Yale, and I think Yale's a wonderful place, by the way. Bu they turned me down anyway. And then I mean I went to New York. And I studied with Tony Smith, and I studied with Bob, and I studied with the wonderful art historian—I mean all of them were there.

MS. BERMAN: Well, let's see. Leo Steinberg?

MS. AYCOCK: I studied with Leo Steinberg. I worked in the slide library for four years—three or four years. I studied—I had the art historians every day. And Leo was at his best. Linda Nochlin was just teaching. So I got to audit her class. The great, great art critic, art historian, who's now at Columbia. Who's that? You know she was—she was *it*.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, Rosalind Krauss.

MS. AYCOCK: Roz, I studied with. Roz was a young woman then. And, you know, just finding her way. But teaching there. I mean, it was just the best—it was the best. And you were really, again, to sit in Linda Nochlin's class at that time! Or Leo—because he hadn't decided yet to like abandon contemporary art. And have him mix and match. And you start with—you walk in, and he's got a picture of the Parthenon up. And at the end of an hour and a half, he's talking about Jasper Johns. So you just got a whole wonderful stew of things. And then because I was working in the art history—as the curator of the slide library—I had books coming in all the time. Looking at picture of every period. Talking architectural history with a guy named Richard Stapleford who was really great. And then everybody was running up to the Institute all the time. You know it was just wonderful.

MS. BERMAN: Yes. Just because you had so much art history, maybe more than many artists, and you had the slide library, do you feel that it affected—I guess I should ask you how it led you, if it did, to play the present against the past?

MS. AYCOCK: Well, I always loved history. And one of my other fallback things would have been—I loved history. I don't do it like I used to. But I was a good history student. I love playing with ideas and reconsidering, looking from a distance, figuring how things fell together—fall together. So I wanted to know about everything that came before and how it got that way. It was just a natural thing to like art history because I loved history. I can't explain it any other way. So I loved following the trails of how something might start at some place and end up somewhere else, and what that consciously or unconsciously could be. And Leo was great at that because he was always pulling at the threads of the past and showing how it reconnected in some way. And he was at that time, he approached it a little bit like a detective. Like he wanted to kind of prove. He didn't always follow his own whatever. But it was sort of like you had to make a case, you had to look at the work and make a case as to what you were saying. It wasn't just formal art history. It was this you know. And he would go far out with some of this stuff. But you'd assemble the evidence, so to speak.

MS. BERMAN: You had to have rigor.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And I was also falling back in love with architecture, which is really—I mean I love art, but architecture and architectural history and archaeology and all of that stuff, it just was stimulated in some way there. And I just don't believe that ideas just appear. I know they come from somewhere. and I think that goes back to my childhood and the emphasis on reading and thinking and—it isn't just about what happened yesterday.

MS. BERMAN: Reading and thinking, but also building and making.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, and making. And I think I made a decision. And by the way, Bob Morris was very, very—he was reading, reading, reading, far-ranging and applying something that would have been happening. And it was not only him, the whole art world was much more invested in ideas. And some of the art was great, and some of it was silly. But you would be reading systems theory, or you would be reading something that didn't seem to obviously have to do with art, but yet did, would, would feed in. And Bob was great at that and throwing out a reference or this or that. So studying with him was extraordinary. Because it was as much about what are you thinking? What are you reading? How are you pulling these things together as it is what are you producing at that moment? But you had to produce. And he was also at a very exciting time in his career. But he was making a real shift. And that's when Richard Serra was young, and you had process art. And Eva Hesse and all of those things were happening. And [inaudible] and earth art. And he was all plugged into all of that and wide-ranging. Being influenced and influencing. It was a very dynamic, extraordinary time to be in New York City and be a young artist. And a very small world.

MS. BERMAN: And the idea of sculpture was really changing then, too.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: I mean, I think certainly.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. You weren't—it was constructing. It wasn't clay form, bronze, blah blah blah.

MS. BERMAN: Carving and modeling.

MS. AYCOCK: No, none of that.

MS. BERMAN: And not precious materials either.

MS. AYCOCK: Right.

MS. BERMAN: Certainly Eva Hesse was involved in showing that—among other people.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. So it was just all falling together for me again. Oh, yes! And then you have the stuff I grew up with, with the way the art world was moving.

MS. BERMAN: And where were you living at this moment?

MS. AYCOCK: I lived first on the Upper West Side for a year in an apartment. No one would come up there because it was not cool. [They laugh.] I remember, "I don't go above Fourteenth Street."

MS. BERMAN: People still say that.

MS. AYCOCK: I know. I do. But it's not snobbishness. It's just I hate to leave anywhere. And then I lived down in the Wall Street area on a place called Dutch Street for six years which was between Fulton and John. It was one little street.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MS. AYCOCK: In a loft. And I think I lived there from like '69 to '75 or something like that. I was married, and then I moved here in '75—bought it in '75 and moved in '76.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Well, before we get there—and were you able to support yourself on the slide library salary? Or were your parents helping you?

MS. AYCOCK: I had the slide library job. I was married. My husband worked at MoMA. I spent 20 hours a week at that. My family paid for my graduate school, which was extremely little. It still is, but it was very little back then. I used most of my money for my art supplies. And he fed me and housed me very generously. Again, we lived on a shoestring because of what it was like—and will be like again perhaps. And we stayed married for ten years, and he was a great supporter emotionally and helped build things. He also went to graduate school, went to NYU studying film making. We were constantly talking about ideas, and he would sit in on classes, graduate classes with me. He was my college sweetheart, as they say. He was really, absolutely fundamental to my ability—not just financially but emotionally.

MS. BERMAN: So he sounds like a very supportive person.

MS. AYCOCK: He was very supportive. He gave me a safe place to develop as a young woman in New York City.

MS. BERMAN: This was Mark Segal, correct?

MS. AYCOCK: Right.

MS. BERMAN: And just when were you married?

MS. AYCOCK: Right out of college. My mother went batso, I'm sure. '68 to '78 we were married.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MS. AYCOCK: And we're still very close friends.

MS. BERMAN: And does he still live in New York City?

MS. AYCOCK: He lives in Easthampton.

MS. BERMAN: Yes. And is he still in the museum world?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. He's working at the Parrish, actually, out there. He's gone in and out. But I'd say he's really back in now. He's been working at the Parrish for the last couple of years. He's always stayed aware of the art world, and his wife is an artist. And he's never really left.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Okay. That was, as I said, just to keep some of the housekeeping here. So, let's see, at Hunter, what sorts of things are you making here?

MS. AYCOCK: First I started making—I was always making some kind of sculptural thing. But I got into the process stuff, you know, things that were trans, that didn't hang out—What's the word? Not transcended. But transient, ephemeral. And so I worked with—I never made paintings. I made a lot of—started making drawings. And I began—in school I think it was—there was a lot of experimentation. Oh, and then towards the end, I began to construct things. I remember once I had this big steel trough that went right through the middle of the loft with water flowing through it. Different things like that. And then at the very end I began doing—I did a lot of photographic conceptual work. And then I started my real work.

MS. BERMAN: Well, you were really—You were really versed. But there was some sort of thesis on highways?

MS. AYCOCK: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. BERMAN: Now was that a written thesis or—

MS. AYCOCK: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.] We did not—at that point we got an MA at Hunter. They didn't have an MFA program, and so we didn't have to produce a show. We had to produce a paper. And so I—it was a two-year program, and I stayed an extra year because Bob went on sabbatical, and I wanted to study some more with him. And so when he came back, I audited that year, and I wrote my thesis then. And that's when I did a lot of real serious foundation work for everything —mentally and research-wise—for everything that I did later. And I really allowed that thesis, which was *On the Highway*, but I let it take into psychology, experimental psychology, systems theory, all kinds of philosophy, phenomenology. I let it take me—it was this sort of thing that allowed me to go in all different directions.

MS. BERMAN: It was the information highway.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes.

MS. BERMAN: When people used to use that term.

MS. AYCOCK: Right. And again, because I had grown up a little bit and that, and my father was working on the interstate, building bridges and stuff. And the interstate was just really beginning to kind of sprawl and be its thing. And so I did this vast, what seemed vast, research project. A lot of intense reading and writing and thinking and playing. And then that kind of—

MS. BERMAN: Was that on the American highway?

MS. AYCOCK: Mostly, almost completely. Yes. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And then I started to—and I was making art. And a little piece called *Sand/Fans* was done in '71. That was probably done during my thesis period. And I was dealing with transient—what seemed to be transient—things. Oh, I think I had, oh, I smoked-up walls. I'm remembering things I did, you know. But lots of process type art.

MS. BERMAN: Well, *Sand/Fans*, had moving parts, and it had—it was a fan. It was also the idea—the circle, the mechanism.

MS. AYCOCK: Right.

MS. BERMAN: It, in small, had ideas that you would enlarge and permute as well.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: So you really were on your way.

MS. AYCOCK: Right.

MS. BERMAN: I'm going to ask you about the *Maze* [1972] in a minute, which was the first big thing. But just to return to this idea of art history, was there any way that you ever felt it impeded you or inhibited you as an artist?

MS. AYCOCK: Not really. No. I also went to Greece in 1970.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, well, that's important.

MS. AYCOCK: And took Vince Scully's book *The Earth, the Temple, and the Gods*. And we went all over, sort of proving or disproving that book. And looking at each, as many temples and sites as we could find. It was a great book. No, I don't think I felt it impeded me. I did feel that a lot of my contemporaries weren't in the same head space as I was in. That was for sure. But, no. I think at some time I felt I was working—there were points in which I said to myself, you know—everybody was making Stonehenge and things like that. And at a certain point I said to myself, enough! You can always get a good ah hah! if you do something that's primal. And so let's get out of there. I had had enough of that. But for me—and then I think we'll talk about the *Maze* and then we should probably bring this to an end.

MS. BERMAN: Sure, sure.

MS. AYCOCK: I was curious and adventurous, and I liked to travel, and I liked to suck things up. But I wasn't the kind of girl that would hang out all night at the bar and go off to play with somebody I'd never met and have an adventure. I had adventures—I was kind of shy and timid, and I wanted to make sure—I was pretty safe, and I was married, and I didn't hang out with all the wild kids during those ten years when the art world was really crazy. I knew about it, but I was so—my adventures were I would read and think everything I could possibly think. But I was pulled back from it all. And later that wasn't quite so true. But as a young woman, I was into taking—I was pretty safe. And I always felt that through books I could adventure anywhere I wanted and think anything I wanted and take, go on any crazy trip with something that had happened a thousand years ago—or two thousand years ago. But I wasn't ready to do it in my own backyard. [They laugh.]

MS. BERMAN: I guess what I also wanted to get to is that inherently an art historian, unless you're extraordinary, can't do this. But when artists look at other artists, it's not so much analytical, but somehow they can reach across time and they can see the other artist as another maker. Almost as someone who does things with his or her hands. And were you able to have that feeling with other artists?

MS. AYCOCK: You mean from the past?

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes. But I would sort of go both ways, you know what I mean? I knew when I was perverting it and misreading it. And I would always say I have permission to do that—to misunderstand this for my own resources, to do whatever I want with it. But I do know that there might be a correct way of reading it. But I'm going to take it off in another direction and screw around with it. But the wanting to be right, getting the right answer, in me would make sure that she read the book first. But I suppose what I saw this as is a vast treasure trove of ideas for me to steal. And I tell my students that. You know, you have to steal from other artists. And at that time for me it was like walking into a big candy store. Oh, I can—oh, yeah, look what that person did! Why don't I take that and try that! Mix it up and whatever.

So this was this big source of stuff to play with. And in case I just, you know, to stimulate my imagination. And artists are always afraid they're going to run out of steam. So this was always the place to go to when you needed to be whatever. And it was also just the whatever in me. I still don't understand—I'll be honest with you. When I'm sitting in a room with a bunch of artists, and they don't seem to know anything about art history, I don't understand. This is their club. This is their people. Do they really think that these people were so different from them? I mean, this is what we carry on. These are our friends. These are the people that were different from everybody else for always and always. Even if they were just craft people. You know they weren't the normal people.

I don't understand why artists are so dumb about art history. It still shocks me. Why they don't love it. Why they don't—I would collect if I had more money. I would be a huge collector of Islamic rugs and great pottery. You know what I mean. I don't get it. I really don't. What the hell, I am going off. Who do they think they are? The only people that have ever. I mean, yes, they'll talk about their friend from 20 years ago, who they used to paint with and blah blah blah. But, why don't they love—why don't they? And why don't they know about it? I don't know. I don't get it. But anyway.

MS. BERMAN: No, no, I obviously agree. I have a lot invested in that point of view. [They laugh.] But I also don't make anything. I agree. I couldn't stand not knowing other cultures, what happened in other cultures.

MS. AYCOCK: Produced. And it's so extraordinary. Sometimes, especially because they were so cut off from everybody else, and then they'd just go their wonderful, crazy way. You're dazzled by it.

MS. BERMAN: Yes. And then you see there's not such things “progress” in art. [They laugh.]

MS. AYCOCK: No, no.

MS. BERMAN: Never, never. Anyway, we should get to *Maze*, which was a really important work for you. Now what was this Kirby Farm? Gibney Farm [New Kingston, Pennsylvania], sorry.

MS. AYCOCK: It was land that had been purchased by my father. At some point he decided that he'd buy up some of these farms where the land was cheap and people were not farming anymore. And it was an investment for something. Who knew what? But that was one of his ideas. And so there was a period in the seventies, late sixties and seventies, in which he must have owned two or three hundred acres of land. And I don't remember when it was sold exactly. But it was different places, too; it wasn't all in one whatever. It was supposed to be—maybe it was investment for us or something. And it was there, and there was a farmer. Once again, there it was. And Bob Smithson was using what's her name—I have to really stop forgetting everyone's name. But at any rate, everybody had some access to somebody somewhere somehow. And I just thought, golly, there's this property there. So why not go try to build something on it? And so I just went out and used it because it was just sitting there.

MS. BERMAN: Did you build it largely yourself? Did your husband help you?

MS. AYCOCK: I hadn't—Oh, yes, he helped, in the summer. And I built one piece a summer. He helped, and I got a carpenter on loan from my father that showed me how to construct things and build things. And, yes, that's how it happened. They'd show me how to—it was really built like a fence. How to line things up, how to survey, how to make things level. I taught myself carpentry. And also we had these lofts that we were moving into. We had to build our own walls and stuff, so you learned all that stuff anyway. And I think every—yes. And then Mark would come out every weekend from the city.

MS. BERMAN: Did you have the idea that it was going to be a maze from the beginning? Or was it a process? Because it almost looked like it could have been a stockade or a fort, too.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes. It was supposed to be all those things. I was thinking about Native American stockades and also stockade dwellings. And I really wanted—what had happened is I had come home, and I was thumbing through a book at home. And I was thinking about the highway and how I could make a highway. I was thinking of the highway as this vast labyrinth. And I was thumbing through *World Book* or something. All of a sudden I saw a plan, view of an early labyrinth which was supposed to be the first prison ever in Egypt or something, historically. And I looked at it, and I thought, that's it! A highway made small. You move through it. You get lost. It becomes a system of paths. And there were a lot of things that came together for me suddenly, like, minimal art was just this shape that sat there. And I wanted to make something that really affected you physically, that was bigger than you, that you would be inside. And it was just all of a sudden, I knew what I would say, very simply, what the next step was. The next step was to make sculpture into architecture. And I knew what to do because of all the information I had gotten. And it was like ah hah! That's the next move on the chessboard. And I did it. And Bob did not do it first—I did it first. I'm sorry. But whatever.

MS. BERMAN: No, no. Don't be sorry. I'm here to take testimony. There's no—

MS. AYCOCK: Take testimony. Most people who care about that stuff know that.

MS. BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AYCOCK: And I put a lot of things that had been told to me and I had studied, people I'd studied with in art, seemed like it was that putting it all together. And going ah hah. So I knew exactly what I was doing.

MS. BERMAN: Now did he—Bob Morris—come out to see it?

MS. AYCOCK: No, I brought him pictures.

MS. BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And what did he say?

MS. AYCOCK: He said, “Oh, isn't that interesting?” But I knew exactly what I was doing. I was not a naïve, stumbling around, and someone else had to walk into the studio and say, Oh, look! No, no, no. It was, yes, that is exactly the next move. Just like Frank Stella's shaped canvases, the whole—because art was very directional and linear at that point. So you knew, if you could figure it out, what the next step was. And that's what interested me about the whole process, too. Was winning the place on the chessboard. Not just, I mean that was the prize.

MS. BERMAN: So you had learned a tremendous amount from this sculpture, I could say. But was it publicized—getting people to come—enough for you so people knew you did it?

MS. AYCOCK: It got publicized a lot.

MS. BERMAN: Then.

MS. AYCOCK: Then. And even still, I think.

MS. BERMAN: On, absolutely.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes, it did. Almost right away. And I took to Bob Smithson and showed it to him because he was sitting there at whatchamacallit down at—

MS. BERMAN: Max's Kansas City.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And he thought it was interesting, too. [They laugh.] Everyone thought it was interesting. But the thing that the locals said that I didn't want to take in at that time was, oh, yes, it's just like something at Coney Island or Hershey Park. And all that. And then they started playing with it and taking it off. I kept thinking, this is the art world. This is the next move. This is minimal art made blah blah. No, I don't want to talk about Coney Island or whatever. And then later I said, Yes.

MS. BERMAN: It was actually the locals that—it must have meant they liked it because there was some sort of human accessibility for them about it.

MS. AYCOCK: Oh, yes. They went there. The kids, they loved it. The kids adored it. And there was no way to control them because this was off in the middle of a big farm, and you couldn't stop them from going.

MS. BERMAN: So it inadvertently became a public art project.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, it did. And the aerial view was taken by the town police in their helicopter. I guess flying over, and also figuring out what those kids were doing down there and the whole thing. But it immediately became something, yes. It did.

MS. BERMAN: Well, I think that we should stop now, and we will continue the next time. This is a good place to stop. Thank you very much.

MS. AYCOCK: Sure.

[END OF FILE 1]

MS. BERMAN: This is Avis Berman interviewing Alice Aycock on February 11, 2009, for the Archives of American Art and GSA Oral History Project in her loft in SoHo. There were just a couple of things from last week that I forgot to ask you. So I'm going to backtrack and then we'll go back to the early seventies and your earlier sculpture. Which was when you were at Douglass, you became friendly with Keith Sonnier and Jackie Winsor, is that correct?

MS. AYCOCK: That's correct.

MS. BERMAN: And they were graduate students.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Can you recall either of them at that point? What they were like and what they were doing and what you gleaned from them?

MS. AYCOCK: Well, I think Keith—it's hard for me to remember exactly because things kind of, you know, I might say something, and Keith would say, “no, I was doing thus” and so. And we all moved to New York within a couple of years of each other. So it could be early work that I saw. I know that Jackie was making work that had a little bit of a sexual connotation to it. It was not the work that she, as a graduate student or this show that I saw that I remember fairly distinctly, was not the work that she did a couple of years later, that became her—that she was known for. But the point of the matter is that for both of them, they were—Charles Simmons was there and several other young artists who maybe did not become as well known. Ted Victoria was there. There were some others. Mac Adams was there. And I don't remember—I do remember Ted was doing work with sound, and his work was installation, and it had some movement and things like that. I think that Keith was doing his flocking pieces, where it was things that were anti-form, if you will.

But mainly, I would say, that the significant thing for me was that there was a group of very serious young artists in graduate school that I sat in on the critiques, and that were role models for me that I could see that there were people who were pursuing art as a career in a very serious way. And had they not—had the graduate school not been there—I don't think that the level of work that I saw—it was pretty good work, looking back on it and comparing it to all the graduate work that I've seen. And everyone was very serious, very intense and

serious, and achievement-oriented. And that was a terrific role model. And had it not been there and it was just a couple women in an art class, I don't think I would've been able to see how I could move to the next step quite as clearly, and have, as I said, I had to make the transition to respect art as a valid and viable career. And they helped me do that. And it would have been more difficult in a women's college where it was just women screwing around taking an art class.

The teachers were very serious because they had these people who—and the teachers were pretty young, too, at the time. So while it was a stepped thing, I mean when you have young energetic teachers who are pursuing their career, they have very eager, exciting graduate students. So for me it was just really great. It was just—I hit it at the at just the right moment. And of course with Keith, it was the whole—there was a group of them from the South, from Louisiana. And that's a whole other sensibility, the Louisiana sensibility. It's not like the South, the traditional South. It's not at all like the Northeast. It's a whole other wonderful, magical, mysterious sensibility. And there were some other people that had come north with him. I can't remember—John Geldersma. And they were just exotic. It's a whole thing. And that was marvelous. People are more— I don't know, they're just, it's just—I could go on about it.

And then Jackie was of course a woman. So there were one or two other women in the program. But not many. And here was this, again, young serious, very attractive woman. And I could look up to her, as I've told her on a number of occasions. As again, it was very important to have an older female role model. It wasn't something I got, oh, okay. No, you know. It was just there. It was very encouraging. And she was my own gender instead of just a bunch of guys, who were nice to me and encouraged me. But they were a bunch of guys, and I was just this little girl. And so it was almost like, well, here is this little girl, let's be nice to her. But I'm not sure.

MS. BERMAN: You had very angelic looks. Do you feel that you were—also it looked like you probably looked very young for your age.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Did that tell against you? Or did people—

MS. AYCOCK: Probably it told against me. Sure, when I went to graduate school, I had teachers telling me I should send men around with my work. It was a period, too, when women weren't being taken seriously. I remember Jackie saying to me—I'll never forget it. She was very tall, and slender but very tall. And had a real presence. And I was making a piece of art somewhere. Maybe they'd brought her in to look at my work or something. Because we were all kind of—we were really close. It was a very small building, small group of people, and I had a studio off to the side or something. And I think she said, “Well, if she'd put a little meat on her bones, she'd be a lot better off.” Because I was really skinny, kind of almost anorexic, I guess. I was anorexic. And just kind of tossed that off. She was tough. But the whole world was like that. There were the guys, and they got to do everything. And then there was us, and we didn't do much.

MS. BERMAN: Or supposedly. Was Jackie sculpting then?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, she was. But she was not—in graduate school, now she could clarify this, but the shows that I saw were not the shows that she saw. It was not the work that she did when she moved to New York. And her work changed when she moved to New York.

MS. BERMAN: Well, so long as we're on the subject of teaching, I thought we might explore that a little bit, too. You taught at Hunter, and what were you teaching there?

MS. AYCOCK: Just studio art.

MS. BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AYCOCK: With a lot of reading and things like that. But I was teaching primarily a basic foundations studio course. And they were all taught in a classroom. We did not have even at that time access to—maybe there was a sink in the classroom, but that was about it as far as I remember. It was a very traditional classroom, not like an art room, in my mind. Hunter didn't have a lot of facilities for anybody for art. So, you give them cardboard projects, hot-glue projects, stuff like that.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, that's interesting, considering you're telling me it was so great a place to be for you. But not maybe for undergraduates?

MS. AYCOCK: The facilities in both places—both at Douglass and at Hunter—were very crude and nonexistent. And facilities do not make a great art school necessarily. In graduate school we were—there were no facilities. There were no studios. We had to go get our own studios. So as soon as we came to the city, we could stay in our little apartment and try to do stuff, but basically you were forced to go out and find a loft and a studio and

set things up and get on with it. I always thought that was great, too, because nobody was holding your hand or whatever. You had to—as I think Donald Judd said, and it's one thing I love: “Root, hog, or die.” And of course the difference was New York was bankrupt. There were tons of empty spaces to move into and colonize. It isn't like it is now. So you could do that. We had art history courses at Hunter. But basically our studio work consisted of visiting each other's studios and have critiques.

MS. BERMAN: And you taught at Williams College in about '74.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: And was that summer or for a year?

MS. AYCOCK: It was just a visiting artist. I went up visiting. As a visiting artist. And I was there for the whole semester, I think. Maybe it was just a six-week or an eight-week gig. I don't know. I did a piece, I had a show, and I taught classes.

MS. BERMAN: Well, that's pretty good, really.

MS. AYCOCK: So that was great. And I got—so they helped me, gave me some money to build a piece. Yes, it was a really nice thing. And I think that originally Nancy Holt had been invited. She couldn't do it. So she said—she suggested me. So it was one person—she was better-known than I. And so. And I also taught, in the late seventies, at Princeton. So I was sort of I don't know what. I moved in and out of teaching.

MS. BERMAN: Then you were at SVA for quite a while.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, then I started at SVA in '78, and I quit SVA, I believe, in '81. And I taught for three years at Hunter on a tenure track. Then I was not to be a tenure. I was never—I was going to teach all my life for all kinds of reasons. But I was never going to be able to be a steady “teacher.” And the notion of having to be at meetings and—they basically at Hunter put me into this tenure track in which I was a junior faculty who was expected to attend humanities meetings and all these things. And I say this for the record. And at that time I was more famous than most of the people on the faculty with the exception of Bob Morris and a couple of others. And it was a ridiculous thing to do to me. And they knew it was going to be impossible. And so I would fly from Japan or fly from Europe or whatever to make a class. And then I would miss these meetings that were of no—certainly if you were going to be a tenured faculty in the traditional way. But they misused me, and they knew they were going to do that. And they knew essentially that they had to hire a woman, and people wanted me because I was famous. But they were going to force me to do things that made it impossible for me to carry on my career and do the stuff they wanted me to do. And they knew eventually—meaning the chairman and those various other people who were teachers, they were not artists. And that's fine. But I'm still angry about it. That he really didn't want me there, and he knew he could manipulate it so that I would fail.

MS. BERMAN: Or be so miserable that you—

MS. AYCOCK: That, I certainly wouldn't do. So that was that. And after three years I didn't get tenure, which was whatever. But he was going to make me do something that he would never have made one of the guys who had the reputation I had do. Never. You know. So they did what they wanted, and they ran and they taught however they wanted. But in any case, you can see I'm still angry about it. But it went the way it went. And that's life. And I got on with, I stopped teaching there and went back to—no, where did I go? I took some time off, I had a baby. Then I started teaching at Yale, and Yale was much more accommodating. And I was doing—they were extremely accommodating in that way. Then eventually they invited me to run the department, to be tenured to run the department. And it would have only been two days a week and making my own hours. They were going to accommodate it, and they were marvelous about it. It's what a smart institution does if they have somebody that they value. However, it just was too difficult for me to run the department and do my work. And so I am an artist first and a teacher second—or whatever it is you want to call me. And so I made the decision to leave Yale and to go back to SVA. And SVA was very good accommodating real artists.

MS. BERMAN: And do you still teach at SVA?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, I teach on Monday nights, like six hours on Monday nights.

MS. BERMAN: When you said you were going to teach for all kinds of reasons, what do you like about teaching? What do you get out of it?

MS. AYCOCK: Well, it's stimulating because you're forced to confront your own ideas, or you're forced to confront the ideas of your students, and to internalize it and to verbalize it. And you're always in a fresh way engaged with your practice. And you're also engaged with young people. It's easy to retreat into your own universe, especially as an artist and be in this kind of introverted world. And so it's stimulating. It can be

stimulating intellectually. It's also a way of providing a certain kind of basic foundation for continuing your practice in lean years. And so both those things. And then you have the faculty that you can talk. You can talk to your peers. And again, if you're not the kind of person who's always out at parties, it's another way to stay—and I teach with Jackie, and Jackie and I have known each other all our lives as students and as teachers.

MS. BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Jackie Winsor.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. So it's a way of just keeping within the club. And so it's—sometimes it can be boring.

MS. BERMAN: Do you ever feel like a squeezed lemon, there's too much taken out of you?

MS. AYCOCK: No. But sometimes it's just boring, and I don't want to do—I'd like to just deal with my own ideas. And it's tough because a lot of times kids—It changes with the times. It depends on really what's going on in the art world. Sometimes you will get a batch of extraordinary kids that you just can't—you really enjoy being with them. They're not doing what you're doing. They're not thinking what you're thinking. They're thinking other things in terms of their culture and the time and place that they're in. And you—again, you come out of yourself, you know. You stay—you come up to speed and you engage them with issues that are stimulating and exciting. You just have a wonderful time. And they can sometimes do things that you wouldn't do at all yourself. But that you find really—last semester I had really great students. And they were doing video stuff and all kinds of wonderful projects. You know you hit it, and it's just great the kinds of conversation. You look forward to it. And then other times the kids are without energy. They don't know why they're there. They mirror the art world and its value system. And the art world is really—very much mirrors the larger culture. Totally! Artists think they're so independent whatever. They just so much seem to mimic what's—and it's depressing. I mean, you get kids that just seem to be soul-less. There's no light in their eyes. And they get dumped into the art world—or the art thing—because I guess they don't know what to do with themselves. And that can be very debilitating to be confronting that week after week. And attitude. Everybody's defensive, and they have bad attitude. It's just a lot of nonsense that you have to deal with.

MS. BERMAN: Do you keep up with a fair amount of you students after you see them?

MS. AYCOCK: There have been so many that I do a little bit and if I see them on the outside or occasionally they email me. But it would be very hard to keep [coughs] a routine of—what I like to say about it is kids come in, and you can almost tell within a little bit who's got it and who doesn't. And you don't mold them. You take what they come in with, and you help to grow it, fertilize it, and expand it. Then you send them out, and then it's their problem. I'm not there to be the big mother. They're launched. They find their way and hopefully they find it in a —

MS. BERMAN: Is there anything from what you learned at Douglass or Hunter that you still teach or that you teach to them?

MS. AYCOCK: Well, there's a book that I finally have felt, that I read at Hunter many years ago. I think it was at Hunter, and I'm starting to give it again. It's called *The Shape of Time* by George Kubler.

And I think they just need it so badly. And even though we could disagree with Kubler, or he has come to be art and invention and tool-making and all of that, what's useful and useless, that that edge has been blurred, it is an extraordinarily significant point of departure and to have a conversation. And if nothing else, these kids do not seem to have a point of departure to organize the vast chaos of just information that keeps coming at them. And so I am asking them to read it now, the last couple of years, so that they can find some ground to stand on as they begin to work out what their position is. But sometimes they won't even do that. They won't even read it. Then you're really stuck.

MS. BERMAN: Well, that is—

MS. AYCOCK: But there is a difference, there's a major difference between teaching, I don't know when this is. Yes. You know if you're teaching at Yale, well, I don't know. Undergraduate at Yale was extraordinary. It was extraordinary. I don't know how many of the—well, Matthew Barney was one of my students. I did not teach Matthew Barney to be Matthew Barney. But he did what I did, and that's what I loved about him. Here he was, this undergraduate, who attended every graduate critique. He was hungry. He was going to show up for every visiting artist. He was going to put his pieces up and try to get somebody to talk to him about his work. He didn't have some kind of crazy defensive attitude, where it was like he was going to do a number on your head every time you tried to have a conversation with him. He was just, okay, fill me up. I want to try this, I want to try that. Here's my new idea. Blah blah blah. And he reminded me, honestly, of the way it was for me when I was an undergraduate. And it was just wonderful to see that.

But all the undergraduate kids were great. You'd tell them a book, and they'd go read the book. Then they'd bring in the next week five more books by the same person or somebody else that had been in the list—the

footnotes or whatever. It was just extraordinary, the excitement, the enthusiasm, because they loved knowledge, they loved ideas. They were there because they were just stimulated. And so, it was wonderful, particularly the undergraduates were great. That's a pleasure. That doesn't happen all the time, believe me. It's a struggle sometimes. It's a big struggle.

MS. BERMAN: Now, when did you reach the point when you could live off your art, so you didn't have to utterly depend on teaching?

MS. AYCOCK: I don't know. [Laughs] [Inaudible.]

MS. BERMAN: Disregarding the last six months. [They laugh.]

MS. AYCOCK: It was just a gradual, gradual thing. But I still depend on it as a base for certain things. And I operate—yes, I'll sell some years. I was selling a lot of drawings or I was selling a sculpture. But it's always many pieces of the pie. And all the little things come in, and they add up. The way I—I guess it just happens that you go, okay, I can teach less hours, less the big deal. I can make this up. And within a couple weeks doing thus and so. So then you start to do that. And then I began to do these big public pieces, and I'd get commissions. But those pieces are—it's distinctly different from what happens in the art world, where you might do work which has a certain fabrication value. And then you sell it for twice the amount that it cost you to make it, or five times the amount of whatever. What I do is more like being an architect. You design it, you get your design fee, and then I job-manage it, and become like a contractor, and you get your 10 percent or your 15 percent if you're lucky. And if the job goes south, then you're screwed, and you have to eat it and go on to the next one. And so it's—I live differently. I live in the real world, which is different than the way a lot of artists live—lived.

And the rewards for what I do are significantly less than—and I'm not complaining. I'm just saying that to pull these big sculptures off, you have to engage the world as a grownup. You have to bring in engineers, fabricators, big erectors. You have to interface with bureaucracies. You have to do a lot of stuff to get your 10 or 15 percent. But if you make a drawing or a painting, you can live in your fantasy world.

MS. BERMAN: And a one hundred percent of the time is spent on that, too. As opposed to what you're talking about: coordinating and putting a project together.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: It's the way, as you say, an architect has to.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, I work much more like an architect. Now, I don't know if artists spend 100 percent. When I left there, I remember the idea was you 10 percent—this was going around the art world—you spend 10 percent of your time making art, and 90 percent of the time networking. So believe me, I may spend more time making my art than I do networking in the way of making the connections to the collectors and the this and the that. But I just lead a slightly different life than the typical—

MS. BERMAN: An easel painter.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. Or even Jeff Koons.

MS. BERMAN: Well, I think he lives in some different universe.

MS. AYCOCK: He lives on a planet.

MS. BERMAN: Different from most other artists anyway.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, he does.

MS. BERMAN: In terms of what goes on.

MS. AYCOCK: But we use him as an example. He does have a factory, and I don't have a factory. But I think what became the last couple of years, people would say, I visited so-and-so; he's got 40 people working for him.

MS. BERMAN: Kostabi probably had that many at one point.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. Exactly. But at the same time, we end up with one sculpture after a couple of years or I don't know. I don't want to be whatever. But I will say it's different. And I also would say that I probably would be happy to spend a couple of years in my studio making art and just having it sell. And not having to always be out there in someplace where all you can do is take a picture and bring it back, and no one really sees it. No one really experiences it. Do you know what I'm saying?

MS. BERMAN: Well, the people at the location are experiencing it. But it's not—I mean it must have been great for you when you could make an outdoor piece, a big piece, in New York. I mean that must have been very satisfying, to make the waterfront piece just so it was that you exsisted.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. But more people are seeing the piece at the Modern right now, and understanding it as art and getting engaged in it and getting reengaged with me as a significant artist than ever got in engaged in the way that I would have liked with the waterfront piece. And that's just the truth. Because when you go to an art museum, you go to look at art and to think about it in a certain way. And I'm not saying I regret anything I've done. I'm just saying that the kind of people who would be talking about me, that would help me to reemerge as a significant player, are going to be doing that at the Modern, and they're not going to be going to the East River piece and thinking about me. And that's been proven in the last 15 years—or however long that piece has been there.

MS. BERMAN: So we are slaves of the art world.

MS. AYCOCK: We are. And we're slaves to the notion of that if it's in the museum, it must be art, it must be important. Not that that piece isn't one of my favorites. And also slaves to commodification. And the piece on the East River cannot be bought and sold. And therefore it is not of great interest to dealers because they can't do anything with it. And therefore it's not hyped, it's not advertised, it's not—there's no pages in *Artforum* or whatever for it. That's a big problem because I think there's been a lot of art that's gotten done in the last 20 years; some of it is of no real value. But there's been a lot that is quite valuable and interesting, and no one knows about it.

MS. BERMAN: And you're thinking of in the realm of public sculpture, public art.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Right. I want to get into this idea of public art. But what I first want to do is kind of go in—go into some of these early pieces of the seventies and define them. We began to talk about *Maze*. And I don't know if you approached it from the idea of—as a puzzle or fun idea or more of the idea of being disoriented or losing yourself in some way.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. It was not fun. It was supposed to be disorienting, losing yourself, getting lost, feeling some anxiety. And then finding it. You knew you weren't going to be lost for very long. But just to have that sense of anxiety and being—not quite knowing where you were. And when you came back out, you had sort of lost your sense of orientation.

MS. BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AYCOCK: For a brief moment. So it was very much about that and not about fun.

MS. BERMAN: But definitely engaging an audience physically that way.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: And then also at Gibney Farm you did this piece—the*Low Building* [1973], which was kind of an actual structure?

MS. AYCOCK: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] It's a little house on the ground.

MS. BERMAN: Almost like a low sod house.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And that was really about feeling in my mind, I mean, the sense of weight. I put seven tons of earth on it. And I wanted you to go inside and feel the weight of this earth roof on top of you. And what I found in the process of doing these pieces was that there was this kind of duality, which I find fascinating and I still experience in my life. Of a kind of ambiguity: at one moment you feel safe and secure, and in another you feel claustrophobic and imprisoned. And that work had that duality, that kind of what's normally called approach-withdrawal or something. And a lot of the work I did that had that quality to it, and I found that really interesting.

MS. BERMAN: Although I think that's a quality that persists through quite a bit of the work.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: It draws you in and then it pushes you back, especially if there are moving parts.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes.

MS. BERMAN: But they could be circular, which is an enclosing form. But anyway.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, it's seductive and mesmerizing. And at the same time it can be terrifying or sort of brutal and somewhat provocative or intimidating.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right. And then you had—it's almost like *Modern Times* about the machine, you know; it's not quite that primitive. But that sense of being mesmerized by it. But of course you're going to be caught up in the toils.

MS. AYCOCK: I watched that movie over and over. And used it as a basis for a little book I published at a certain point. And I've had stills from that book. And I thought it was just delightful the way he dealt with the power of the machine and then the stupidity of the machine, the mindlessness of it. And how, yes, we're just a cog in the wheels. And all that stuff. So it was a very much *Modern Times*, you hit it, hit the nail on the head.

MS. BERMAN: Well, I think that how you use science is—you pretend to be rational, it's pseudo-rational. But it's really odd and kind of crazy? [Laughs]

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And, you know, I could go on and on about that. I think what it was—the root of it was a simple question. Sometimes you can ask simple questions, and they are—they lead you on a long, long, long, long journey. And this is the anniversary of Darwin, and I guess he asked a simple question that had phenomenal answers. But the simple question that was at the back of my mind at the time was; If science has so changed our lives, and if we are so able to move around the world so well because of it, then why is it that people survived without it for so long? And the answer was that they didn't. That the scientific method was always present. I think we talked about this before.

I found that by doing the reading of people like Claude Lévi-Strauss, where in *TheSavage Mind* he asks that very question. And his answer was that all the things, whether it was the domestication of plants of animals or the invention of pottery, all these things were done using a rational scientific method through experimentation—they did not just happen by accident—or by using observation, rational observation. So that it was always present. It wasn't something that just emerged out of nothing. But that at the same time, you reached a point in which you could no longer solve something using the scientific method or powers of observation. He went on and on and on with it. Then you used magic to solve the problem.

It seemed to me that—and that maybe a certain—the balance shifts depending upon the time period that you're in. But neither disappear completely. And that made perfect sense to me. Coming out of my only experience of having to be brought up as a Catholic where you're sort of steeped in all this meaningful thinking. So there was that, which I equated—I basically equated religion with magic. People who are religious don't want to. But that's the way I see it. It's magic thinking no matter how you try to whatever it. But I started—I was also thinking, well, okay, so you had this period… Now, why was I thinking like this? I don't know. It's just the way I think. But you had this period in which people seem to—

Like if you look back in time, who do we most feel a sense of sympathy with? Well, with the Greeks? They feel like us, I think. Our sense of democracy, our rules, our sense ofyou think through something. You know, you observe, you discuss. I mean, everything in basically Western culture goes back to the Greeks. And that marvelous period in which people were just whatever. And then it disappeared. So that to me was really interesting. It was curious. What happened during this long sleepy time when everything seemed to go into the Dark Ages? What were people doing during that time? They were being religious. And magic thinking seemed to rise to the whatever.

So I was just—I was musing about all this stuff. And now I've lost my train of thought. But I suppose that what I was basically saying to myself is we're in a period in which rational thought and science has the upper hand. But where did magic go during this time? Well, that was in the sixties and the seventies. Now I know where magic thinking went: it's back. Right? It's back. So I was just playing with these ideas. And to this day, what I find fascinating for myself and for others, somebody living in a very non-Western, Third World society where you don't have a lot of clothes and you're on your horse somewhere, the mountains of Pakistan, you still have CD's, and you still have your cell phone. You may not quite know how it works, but you know how to make it work for you. So you've got your—there are just all these ways that things kind of fall together now, especially with the big mix of a little of this, a little of that. One foot in the Middle Ages and one foot in the twenty-first century. So I was just picking up on all that. I don't know how my TV works. I turn it on. I don't. And I'm stupid. I should sit down with books and books explaining it.

We rely on the magic of technology, all of us. Who knows how their radio works? Who knows how their cell phone works? We know that it's bouncing off a satellite. But basically most of us don't know anything about most things that we use. And for all intents and purposes, it might as well be magic. And it's set off this whole series of, okay, let's go back to the Middle Ages and see what was going on there. And it seemed like there were these intense states of desire—I want to fly, therefore I'm obsessed by angels. I want to find gold, I want to feed

the masses, I want to read people's minds, I want—all these things. People felt powerless, and all these had was their desire and their belief. And magic is really desire. You want it so badly you're going to do something to make it happen, whether it happens or not. I want to solve diseases and all these things.

Then they would concoct these magic acts whether it was in church or in the Kabbalah, which is a lot of little puzzles you do to solve problems, which just magic thinking as well. And blah blah blah. And just how it all was sorting itself out. How is alchemy becoming chemistry? How is the desire to fly and you're putting angel's wings on everything, working out blah blah blah. It just was interesting to me. And that mix. And also that balance. I would say.
So I don't now if I'm being clear. And I'm also remembering. I'm trying to reconstruct it. But I was interested in following the threads of things as they moved, appeared and disappeared. And as I said, at the time we were living in a very—what appeared to be—a very rational world. We could solve everything with the scientific method. And I would say that at the present time, we, for whatever reason, magic thinking has reemerged.

And so I find that interesting. And I was also interested in the fact that, even thought it can be proven or it can be inferred, that at that particular time on the outer edges of physics, people were beginning to have to posit irrational things. In order to explain phenomena, you had to posit something that did not make sense. And that was fascinating to me. So, I don't know.

MS. BERMAN: Yes. Well, just the difference between how people thought about neuroscience thirty years ago versus today. It's perfect because everyone who was a pariah then is accepted now in that particular science.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And there are things that—there was this gap, I think, between philosophy and Freud and the Freudian method and the Jungian method and all that, and then experimental psych. There was a huge gap. And that gap seems to be closing. But as somebody who's had a lot of experience recently with all of that, I would say it's barely closing. I would say that we are really far and a way at the beginning of understanding any of these things to do with the brain. It's just at the very, very beginning. They don't know dip shit. And that's too bad. So that you can take off the tape. I happen to know firsthand how really crude. It's like trying to solve a problem with a—trying to throw an atom bomb at a whatever, frankly, most of the time.

MS. BERMAN: Right. I was talking about some of the pieces of the seventies, and then you have the *Documenta* piece in '77, an outdoor piece. At that moment, you were doing outdoor sculpture. The major pieces were outdoor sculpture. Was that public sculpture to you?

MS. AYCOCK: No, it was art world sculpture. And the difference was simply not so much the work. I don't think the work was made for a public—I don't think the work that I've done—well, I'll qualify that. I just think it could be in the world in the context of the art world, and it was going to be perceived and discussed and evaluated and critiqued in terms of the art world discourse. Not in terms of the discourse of the larger popular culture. And that was fine with me, and that's where I was directing my focus. And really and truly, that's still where I direct my focus. There's a sort of irony where there was a bifurcation at a certain point. So that people like me, who are making these large-scale pieces—and I don't know what would have happened had Robert Smithson lived or any of these people, who knows? But were forced in order to continue to do work on that scale, they were siphoned off into the so-called public art world. Because the museums weren't going to— I mean when MoMA got the piece they have on view right now, that was one of the biggest pieces they had ever bought. That's not true now, but it was then. And somebody like—people like Smithson. There's a guy who's been doing, who is a big piece out in—Walter De Maria and those other guys. There's one guy who has this big sort of—

MS. BERMAN: Jim Turrell?

MS. AYCOCK: Jim Turrell. But there's another one.

MS. BERMAN: Michael Heizer?

MS. AYCOCK: Heizer. You know in order for them to continue to do their work, they've had their own little magic mountain or something. And I guess they get collectors to help them but I don't know how much. I think the museum bought *Double Negative* [Michael Heizer, 1969] when it was sort of falling apart. I think one of the West Coast museums bought it. But they didn't really support that kind of work. So we had to find other ways of supporting it. And it was convenient when the whole Percent for Art came along as a legislative thing. Naturally that was the way to go. And you could do that. And so there was this bifurcation. And I think that then other people stayed in the art world pure and simple and made work. And we were considered outside that zone. And what happened in interesting ways as far as I could see is at a certain point the art world dropped, for whatever reason, its high-end art theory, and it did what it always—what it was sort of in some ways destined to do, which was to veer.

If I was to say there was a paradigm right now that was holding forth, it's pop. And Pop Art everybody understands. The man on the street understands it. The untutored whatever understands it. Likes it. It feeds right into the capitalist whatever. You can get it. I'm not denigrating it. But I'm saying in a funny way they became even more massed Nielson rating conscious than we did. But we were left outside in part because we weren't commercially viable. I mean that is the sole reason, I think, no matter how you look at it. And so it was one of those things. But, on the other hand, I think we were left outside the discourse. But I don't know that our work is any more or less attuned to the mass culture than what's going on right now in the art world. Don Judd was not attuned to mass culture; he will always be an elitist artist. And I would say that I'm more in the camp of Don Judd than I am of Jeff Koons. I'm an elitist artist, but I'm working in the public zone. And so there's a kind of weird irony. And Jeff—I mean constantly referring—is a popular mass artist. And that's why he's so successful. But he's working within the art world.

MS. BERMAN: He's a total art world product.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. So it's a really weird sort of thing. He is not my—I would do my ancestral tree—he may be in it a little bit, but not much. But that's just the way it went down.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right. Because what I was going to ask you is what, you know, what makes public art public art? And because it's outdoors. And you're saying—I mean you made a very interesting distinction. So is it public because it's accessible to people? Is it because of a patron, a public patron? Or is there something in its essence?

MS. AYCOCK: I think there's all kinds of public art. And I think this has been debated over and over and over. And it's being debated even more as just are we now. It's moved into other fields. At the moment it's being debated very highly. But, yes, I think there's public art that appeals to a mass audience, and that is supported by taxes, and that everyone gets. And there is also art that's done in the art world that is supported by private money, by collectors, that everyone gets as well. And then there's art that people make that is not so easily understood and that for whatever reason—it's like NPR, I guess. I don't know. How am I doing this? Public dollars support NPR, but most people don't give them any money. It's a select audience. And I would say I'm NPR art, public art. There's a select audience for what I do. And it's not something that everybody gets or understands or really appreciates. But for one reason or another, I've still been able to do it. And I do. I gave a talk in Baltimore to the Maryland Art Institute last week. And there's a big piece down there, we all know. And a young man said that he'd seen the East River piece, and he said that for a couple of times that he saw it, he kept going, what is that? It must be like an amusement park or it must be—what is that? What is that thing doing? He was somebody who wasn't an artist. And what's that about? And then gradually it dawned on him that it was a piece of art, that it did nothing. That it—he got it. And he got it exactly the way I would like my audience to get it.

You're in the world. You don't go, oh, that's a piece of abstract art. I hate it. You don't, oh, where's my tax dollars going? You're in the world; you're an observant, visual person. You start to notice something in your environment that doesn't quite fit with everything else. That's visually if not attractive, curious. You begin to wonder about it. And eventually it's something that you enjoy. And you come to like art because of taking that journey. You begin to say, oh, I'm having an art experience. Just like when I'm driving along the road and I see some marvelous concrete factory, with all of the stacks and the ladders and the chutes and the this, and I look at it. Or I'm driving down the New Jersey Turnpike, and all of a sudden I come to the refineries, and I go, oh God, this is the best work of art I've ever seen. It's whatever. So that that's the way I like people to encounter my pieces if they're working properly in the world—in the world, not in the museum.

MS. BERMAN: It's interesting. You said, it's art; it has no use. Can public sculpture have a use other than what we hope would be the main use, which is spiritual or creative or empathetic?

MS. AYCOCK: Well, architecture has a use, and I love architecture. And it can be—it can just be a bad old building that we use. Or it can be an aesthetic experience every time you walk into it. Every time I walk into City Hall, I'm in heaven. I have an aesthetic experience. But I don't necessarily have that when I walk into I don't know, some other really banal building. So I think that's the difference. And I think that I've gravitated to architecture because it really hovers in that zone. It's useful, but at the same time, it can be an extraordinary experience again and again and again. Why does Grand Central Station never fail to—at least it never fails me. And if I went there every day it would still not—it would still be a marvelous event. Port Authority does nothing. So, you know.

MS. BERMAN: Now at that point in the seventies, looking at these pieces, there was also a mud piece at the Aldrich Museum. But most of the time you seem to be doing were using fairly natural, organic, or some industrial materials. Did you have a position on materials then?

MS. AYCOCK: No. I was in my, I was really being influenced by process art, I was being influenced by the notion of things are ephemeral, that you don't make objects, you don't make solid objects that are supposed to last

forever. And that was a notion that was going around the art world. I was very interested in systems and things that were in transition, that were moving from one condition, one state, to another. And I was really trying to make art that would embody that, those ideas. And I used to say—and, again, I stole the idea from Lévi-Strauss—the necessary structure and the contingent event. And you would set up the situation which was the structure. And the event would be either the viewer's interaction with it or whatever process would take place.

MS. BERMAN: Isn't that the theory of the event? Is that also Deleuze? Am I wrong?

MS. AYCOCK: I don't know. By the time I got to him, I began to—

MS. BERMAN: You were already there.

MS. AYCOCK: Or just fade away with it all. I mean I would read it, but I would struggle with it all. But I do know—Lévi-Strauss was very important to me because he was an anthropologist, so he thought about things that I like to think about. And he asked really interesting questions. And I don't know, I just—

MS. BERMAN: And he really came into a zone in America on campuses in the sixties and seventies. It was one of the in—I mean, they're a group like Merleau-Ponty. Phenomenologists were really important. They weere something that people were reading then.

MS. AYCOCK: That, yes. And I was reading all of that. And I read Merleau-Ponty and over and over and over. But Lévi-Strauss because he would make some sort of philosophical statement, and then he would back it up with all of his research and his marvelous journeys. And he was just—and he seemed to cover so many different bases—linguistically. And he was just asking really curious questions. And it was the notion that things that you took for granted suddenly you sort of said, but why? Why do people speak different languages? Why do people have in one culture one name for snow, and in another culture 30 names for snow? Why do you call certain people who are non-Western primitive? What's primitive about them? It's the same thing as was the scientific method: did we suddenly discover it in the eighteenth century or seventeenth century or during the Renaissance? Or was it always there? You know. Blah blah blah. So he was taking these sorts of certitudes and just like, Hey, let's you know—and I, because of my academic tendencies and my interest in history and all of that, I just really liked him a lot.

MS. BERMAN: In the seventies, people came up with the idea of—they didn't want to do something with the same old commidified object. That really was important to them. It was anti-materialism.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: As you look back until about '78 or '80, most of your important pieces that you made were destroyed for various reasons. So probably all you do have are photographs. Does that bother you in retrospect? Did it bother you then?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. Of course. It bothered me, it made me very depressed. And I had a very difficult time with that. I went into prolonged periods of depression, which I just simply don't allow myself to do anymore. But I would say that if I look back over things, and I try to confront it, it's still extremely depressing. I don't know—most of the things I do, I don't know who's taking care of it or what happened to it, whether it's out in the public or not. And I don't know whether people are valuing it. And the more you work in the public domain, the more you realize that you leave yourself open to that. Because it's not in a museum. But, on the other hand, I don't know who bought the drawings and what they're doing with it half the time. And whether they kept it or cared about it. So I think it looks like there's a huge body of work, which there is. But what's really going to be left for how long is an open question. And when I confront that, it's very depressing.

When I was a young girl, I used to have this dream that I was building things. And then just as I would begin to get it together, literally with concrete blocks, it would all fall apart, and I'd have to start all over again. And I think that that is true. And so I think that probably, like the Russian constructivists, and I didn't make endless multiples of things, you're going to be left with a lot of photographic material that will have to be reconstructed or attempt to reconstruct it.

MS. BERMAN: How do you feel if someone took one of your drawings and reconstructed it without you—

MS. AYCOCK: I think that would be great if someone would do that.

MS. BERMAN: You'd like—

MS. AYCOCK: I'd like [inaudible] like reconstructing the monument to the Third International. Reconstructing like a land artist stuff all the time. I think in the end what's going to be left is a bunch of photographs and some rolled-up drawings that people will have to piece together. And they'll have to ask Andrew.

MS. BERMAN: [Laughs] For the tape, Andrew Ginzel, your assistant for many years, because we talked about him off tape. Now you also had said—last time you mentioned this trip to Greece as being very important. Were there other important trips that you were making or travels that were influential to you during this time?

MS. AYCOCK: I think I went to Greece in 1970. I went out West in '69, looking for all the earth art pieces. I couldn't find them, but I found wonderful landscape. It was a wonderful trip across America before it changed. Regionally America was still very much a series of zones with all kinds of regional flavor. It wasn't just a kind of carpet that it is today where you land somewhere, and you might as well not have left. We did verify—I'd just read *Learning From Las Vegas*, so we went down The Strip. And then we verified that it's a great book. I think it became the blueprint for America, and I verified that, going into that. It was a wonderful trip to go and—got lost in national parks. Slept outside under the stars. Just experienced the West, the South. Oh, it was a fabulous trip. Then I went to Greece, did the same thing. Like doing the research—they were all research projects. Okay. I read about this. Let's see if it's true. And the following year—we took a trip every year—the following year I think we went to Europe and the same thing: I was going to visit all the art history places. Went to England and France, and I was absolutely—I mean everyone hated me, I'm sure my husband, I took my brother. Because we were going to see everything on that. If that church was there, goddamn it, we were going to see it. I made all these things. If there's a castle, we're getting out, and we're going to see it. Whatever. And all up and down the coast of England and Wales because I did some sort of—I was doing a photographic piece about erosion on the coast. And I don't know. It was also the period of conceptual art.

[Telephone rings.]

MS. BERMAN: I'm going to pause it.

[Audio Break.]

MS. AYCOCK: So that was basically—I think it was England and France. And then—so each year. Then I think the following year I went to Mexico. And again, to see every—by car—every marvelous archaeological. Went to central Mexico, not into the Yucatan, just central Mexico and then back up the coast to see all the Aztec and pre-Columbian sites. So each year it was a different trip to see architecture primarily.

MS. BERMAN: Let's say, when you went to, say, England and France, was part of it also seeing the real thing from all those slides you'd seen? Or are you someone who only needs the image? Or do you need to see the—

MS. AYCOCK: I wanted to see the real thing. But there was this irony that I was probably—which every tourist confronts—you're just there for a minute. So you take your picture, and you leave. But you do get the experience for, and you have to carry the memory of that experience. But in the end it's still a two-dimensional photograph that you fantasize about. And then I think that the introduction of the photograph was just an extraordinary thing, it really—half the time it would be like—and this is the way tourists are, too: Where's the postcard? Where's that good postcard? I've got to get that because that's all you can take back with you because you're never going to go there again, or hardly going to go there again. So I was always aware, I was always taking pictures, and I was always really aware that this would be what I would take back.

MS. BERMAN: I just didn't know how much of a museum rat you were then.

MS. AYCOCK: Oh, well, I was in the museums, too. But the same thing. If there was a painting that you wanted to see all your life, and then you saw it finally, how long could you stay with it? Unless it was your field, and you were going to go back and back and back again. But otherwise it's a moment. And, yes. So I was really just sort of sucking everything up, taking huge amounts of information in, and gobbling up as much as I could of the world, the visual world. I think what happened is that somewhere between '75 and '76 and '77, I began to travel for my work. And I stopped traveling for research because I would be living in Germany to do a big piece. Or I would be living in Italy to do a big piece. Or being in Switzerland or wherever. And so I no longer took those types of trips because I was going to. But certainly I would incorporate, after I finished doing the Venice Biennale, I would travel through Italy for the pure pleasure of it. And I never lost that sort of tourist thing. But it's a very different experience to go to Venice as a tourist and go to Venice as somebody who is going to be working every day.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right. And then also if you want to see something, if you're a visiting artist, the treatment is much better anyway. Different.

MS. AYCOCK: It's different, yes. You're with the people who help you understand the culture. You're not just outside of it. They're explaining things to you and all of that. So that began to happen, and I took less of those types of research trips and more just traveling by the very nature of my work. And I really traveled a lot in the late 70's and throughout the 80's back and forth to Europe.

MS. BERMAN: And back and forth to Hunter, as you said. [Laughs.]

MS. AYCOCK: Well, yes. Flying in from Japan, and then being disciplined for being late because, you know, I'd just flown from Tokyo that day or whatever.

MS. BERMANIt's about 5:30.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, I think it'd be a good time to have a break.

MS. BERMAN: Okay, great. Thank you very much. I think it's good time to quit—

[END OF FILE 2.]

MS. BERMAN: This is Avis Berman interviewing Alice Aycock on March 11, 2009, for the GSA and Archives of American Art Oral History Project.

And, as I was saying, we had left off about 1979 when your work began to change. And I had asked you, among other things—there were certain outdoor sculptures, and I had asked if they were public, and you had said they were art-world sculptures. And then we discussed the materials. Then at this moment, for various reasons, your work begins to change, and you begin to use—you begin to invoke the machine and industrial materials.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: And other metal materials.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And I think also the one—I don't know whether I said it before because I can't remember. But to some degree, I think that there was—or is—a misconception about materials. Because while a lot of the work was in wood and especially things that happened in museums, there was a lot of other work that was in concrete—not so much steel, but certainly concrete. And concrete block and that type of thing. And I think that work actually was produced elsewhere and photographed and shown in galleries or museums or books. But we always—everyone always says, “Oh, I really love your wood pieces.” Forgetting that some of the earliest work was this underground tunnels and wells which was all really concrete block. So, you know, it gets—I just want to clarify that in case I didn't.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MS. AYCOCK: And I think that what was happening for me was—and again, I probably said this but just to reassert—that when I would fly, I was doing a lot of museum shows and gallery shows. And you would fly into Holland or Switzerland or wherever, and it was easy to find lumber and get a carpenter onboard and whip something up in two or three weeks for an exhibition. That was another reason for using wood. But the vocabulary had already started to change. And I was already wanting to work with the wheel, which for me was the signifier. If the pitched roof was the signifier of house and domestic architecture, the wheel was the signifier of the machine and industrial architecture. I had pretty much begun to introduce that imagery sometime in the ‘70s, late, mid- to late ‘70s. And so as I was stepping back a little back from maybe doing a lot of rapid-fire museum shows or gallery shows, I decided to change material. Or I had more time, and I hired people who were more fabricators or whatever. I think the imagery had been there for a while. But the material I just said to myself, enough is enough. You can only make wood do so much in terms of curves and twists. And metal will just do so much more.

So it was just a rapid shift in a way. I think this piece—that believe it was drawn in 1980. And a little maquette was made for it. And I could get up and read the title. It's called *Rotary Lightning Express* [1980]. And there was a piece called *The Machine That Makes the World* [1979] and another piece called *How to Catch and Manufacture Ghosts* [1979]. Both of those had wood and metal elements in them. And they were in that sense one foot in one area and one foot in the other. But the *Rotary Lightning Express* was when I just jumped feet first into this other kind of vocabulary and began to do the pieces that were totally referencing the so-called Industrial Revolution. And I was really thinking of things like all the nineteenth-century factory architecture, where you have all these spinning belts and spinning wheels. So it could be a factory that—sewing factories—when things really, let's say, mechanization really came forward. To me the factory architecture or factory paraphernalia was extraordinarily interesting from the point of view of sculptural forms. I also was very interested in the notion—the relationship between the way something looked and what it had to do, how it had to perform. And that in the same way—that was some of the early work—I was trying to create a situation and then step back and let—this was the very early work—step back and let the piece make itself, like the structure and the event.

With the more machine things, what I was interested in is removing maybe the sense of, oh, of aesthetics for a moment and stepping back and saying, Okay, this ended up being this way, compositionally and visually. Because that was the only way it could be if it was going to perform the function it needed to perform. So I became interested in that connection between form and function. And that a tool had to look a certain way

because it had to do a certain thing. And then that—then of course I re-aestheticized it. But it was like, how could I find all these other forms and these other compositions for making sculpture that had another reason for being besides a preexisting aesthetic of art? You know that art said it had to look that way. So I was always trying to kind of find another way of making that took me outside of what I knew from the way the art world was—I'm not being exactly clear—but designating it. To this day—and I probably said this, the oil refineries on the New Jersey Turnpike are just like, you know, I could probably get down on my knees and worship at their feet. To me they're extraordinary visual experiences. Architecture that is just astounding. And the same way with the all the kind of granaries and cement factories with all of this sort of sheets and ladders. And it's all there to perform a task. And at the same time it has a very striking visual presence.

So I guess I'm going on and on. And I started with the nineteenth century, eighteenth. Well, I started with the seventeenth century. I started as far back as I could go back when technology was beginning to reassert itself as something important in the culture.

MS. BERMAN: One of the early pieces reminded me of Arkwright's spinning jenny.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes. So I also had and still do books and books and books on the history of technology going back to some—it's been a while since I've looked at this stuff. But there was a guy named Hero of Alexandria. And he would do these little drawings for different types of machines. So you'd be going back through—I mean starting with the Greeks and the Romans and then moving through. And I think that—and going through alchemy and the marvelous, marvelous imagery in alchemy, which still I find astounding, the relationship between the natural and these various flasks and apparatus that all look like distilleries. And then there's Diderot, who has an encyclopedia. And the Diderot encyclopedia is just wonderful. The drawings plus all the apparatus. So I bought lots and lots of books which primarily consisted of drawings for these different apparatus. And then I would use them to construct these sculptural pieces. And if you were an historian of technology, in some cases you could look at these pieces, and you could literally find, oh, there's an electrostatic machine, which was an early attempt to capture electricity.

The piece that is right now at the Whitney is called *Untitled Shanty* or *Medieval Wheelhouse* [1978]. I subscribed to *Scientific American* back then. And I remember getting in the mail an issue of *Scientific American*. And on the cover was a manuscript—a picture of a manuscript—of a little, very early windmill. And it was drawn in a very kind of tentative way, very—not at all representational. But it was from a Medieval manuscript, I guess. But it just struck me, this wheel, which is very iconic. I think a wheel is something that you look at. I think it's why that Church uses it a lot. Because wham! It's just like one of those gestalt images that you pay attention to. So there it was with this little shack. And then it was an article on the history and the invention of—the history of inventions by a man named Lynn White. And that's what I made this piece at the Whitney out of, that photograph, that manuscript print.

Then reading Lynn White, about these major inventions that changed the course of history. One of them was the stirrup, and one of them was the plow, and one of them I think was rotating crops. But at any rate, how something like that could happen. And unconsciously it would sift through the culture. And over a period, a slow period of time, completely reorient the cultures on the earth.

MS. BERMAN: The stirrup revolutionized warfare.

MS. AYCOCK: And it allowed people to travel.

MS. BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AYCOCK: They didn't fall off their horse, so they could travel much farther. And, yes. And so I began then at the same time to be really intrigued by, okay, what is it beyond art? So it was both a search for other forms of—other visual forms—and other ways of putting things together in order to make art; and then also this notion of how does tool-making and inventions affect the course of history and therefore the course of art? And at the same time, I think in this article on—maybe it was another article—they had the Hieronymus Bosch, *Tower of Babel*. And the *Tower of Babel*, when he painted it, he painted in the most advanced technology of that period in time. So there were all these Medieval cranes on the different levels of the *Babel* and all these things. And I thought, well, the good artists have always been cued into the period in which they live.

So he wasn't painting the Tower of Babel from the Bible. He was painting the Tower of Babel as it would have existed in the period in which he lived, if somebody was constructing that today, in that time period—I don't know, the fifteen century of the sixteenth century, I forget which. This is what the machines they would have used to make it. And so that idea, I kept thinking, well, the artists I really am interested in were always knowledgeable beyond just being the artisan. So that now began to speed me up, and I began to say, well, kiddo, got to get out of the nineteenth century. I've got to get into the twentieth century with this work. And like start thinking about what's going on in my culture that is affecting or infecting us. But how is that going to inform my work? And, I guess we've talked about *How to Catch and Manufacture Ghosts* [2002], did we?

MS. BERMAN: No, not yet.

MS. AYCOCK: So, I'll go back to that. What happened—you can see right up there is an electrostatic machine. And that's what I do. You take something. It's old, and it doesn't work. But you take that, and you—What happens is those wheels spun and the little wires that would hit against little brushes, metal brushes. And it would hit against that spinning wheel, which is kind of like a rotor with a little bit of whatever. And it would make sparks. You would have—it would have some friction. It would make sparks, and then the sparks would get stored in those two glass jars. Well, you imagine that spinning sort of wheel, and just imagine that ten feet in diameter. Or twenty feet in diameter. And you've got a real whammy sort of machine [inaudible] dynamo. Of course somebody like Fritz Langand *Metropolis*, all of that fed into—because he was playing with the same ideas.

MS. BERMAN: Sure.

MS. AYCOCK: So I looked at *Metropolis* I don't know how many times. And I looked at the Russian Constructivists because they were doing the same thing. And I looked at the futurists. And it wasn't a German that I took by myself. I looked back at all the artists in the early twentieth century who had made that journey, and tried to suck it up as fast as possible and synthesize it. But I was astounded, and I still am, at how brilliant the artists of the early twentieth century really were. And how stupid the last century has been. [They laugh.] Sorry. You can take that out.

MS. BERMAN: No, no.

MS. AYCOCK: But, in a sense the last ten years maybe especially of the twenty-first century have been a kind of a backward pedaling relative to the brilliance of the beginning of the twentieth century. I mean these guys just like they went—they took a quantum leap. They just left the nineteenth century, and they went, I don't know. And just the way they broke with everything. And really, again, sucked up their influences and then understood the implications. So anyway, I was mulling all this stuff over and mulling it and mulling it. And trying to create my own vocabulary out of it at the same time. I can't tell you how many times even to this day, some of those Lissitzky drawings and used them as a basis for constructing sculpture. They were also very anti-gravity. They were saying, Hah, we're off the earth. We're into some other zone and some other gravitational force.

MS. BERMAN: Because they were trying to break up the object, too.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. Break up the object. And I think there was a play they did called *Victory Over the Sun* in which they were just saying, “We're not going to be locked into this solar system or this, you know, planetary”—but whatever. But they were so plugged in. And I think it was the last time that artists were really plugged in to the philosophy and the science and the literature and the whole thing. But back to *How to Catch and Manufacture Ghosts*. When I was still working through the nineteenth century or the eighteenth century—and I would really approach it like that because the art historian or whatever in me or the academic or the student, whatever you want to call it I would go that way. It's like, Okay, I'm going to look at the seventeenth century now or the whatever. And so what I found is I think there was somewhere in the eighteenth century somebody, when they were discovering electricity, had decided that—and they were discovering magnetism, which is also extraordinarily important to the development of technology, that maybe you could bring people back from the dead; if you just filled them with a little electric current, you could shock them back to life, which of course we do. We do! But they really thought they could make the dead whatever—really—after they were pretty dead.

So there was all this stuff that they were doing around that: magnetism, and then curing people and whatever. And so there was this book that I thought I saw somewhere—maybe I made it up—in French called *How to Catch and Manufacture Ghosts*. And I thought, well, my machines can't be—they're not really going to make anything. So I've got to give them a purpose for being or to organize all these different things around. But what's their function? What makes them—why did I bring all these things together? And their function is going to be to catch and manufacture ghosts. So they're a whole group of works that were about that. And in my mind they were about—in this case I was trying to reinvigorate someone's brain. And that they were really objects almost. They looked scientific. But they were really magic objects. Like the way an African mask would function or something. Because the only thing that they could do is hope or desire, wish real hard. But they actually couldn't produce anything.

MS. BERMAN: But also it does interest me that from what you're telling me, a lot of it was based on other art, be it someone like Lissitzky or these illustrations you saw.

MS. AYCOCK: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. BERMAN: Although you may have real machinery, had gotten models, you really were taking off from the image someone had organized up to a point.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes. Up to a point. And then I would throw something else in and throw something else in and throw something else in. And in this one I think that the major organizational point is the sewing, the threading machines, that are the central part. And then I threw in, I think, a couple—there's probably something that's trying to make some electricity and has some galvanic action somewhere. And there's a battery, and there's all these things. But they don't quite actually hook up the way they should. In this particular piece, if it were made the way it looks, you would keep pulling on it, and it would clang back and forth. And I like the notion of that sort of mindless—the way a kid will just bang and bang and bang. And so that thing was just banging back and forth. And kind of like if you did it long enough, maybe you would raise the dead or get something to happen.

And then also I began to think about—and who knows why or where? You know I was also, as I was investigating this stuff, the seventeenth century and the eighteenth century, and I was reading Foucault and Foucault taking institutions—he would take a particular type of idea, he would sort of see how it changed over time. So you take the notion of the jail, let's say, imprisonment, and you watch how it changes over time. You take the asylum, and you watch how it changes over time. So I was reading all this stuff, and I love Foucault as a historian because what he shows is the transformation of an idea as it literally becomes something else. As opposed to so-and-so did this, and so-so-so did this. No, it's how things can shift, depending upon the culture. So I was reading about the asylum, and I was reading about the prison. I was reading these things because he was also talking about the architectural forms that these concepts generated. And I became very interested in the asylum, and then I became interested in the notion of madness. And so some degree the dunking of people in water in order to cure their madness.

And again—and I'm just saying this all very fast—I got interested in the fact that the early machines developed out of fairs. So there was something called St. Bartholomew Fair. And in the fair, they would bring all these people together to exchange goods. And then they would have something to entertain people. So they'd put people on the wheel to torture them so they'd entertain people. Then they'd torture people. Then they'd feed people. Then they'd do all—and then gradually the wheel became part of the wheel that they used to grind the grain and blah blah blah blah. And so I was interested in that point in time when everything was still like that: close together before it had separated itself.

MS. BERMAN: Just for the tape, you're putting your hands together and your intertwining and clenching your fingers; you're knotting them.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. I'm knotting. And that cluster before things then began to separate and go on their sort of—it's kind of like the node in evolution. And then there's a separation, and things begin to develop their own separate paths. But the Medieval fair had it all. So you might put some mad person on display for entertainment. But at any rate—so again, I would look at the images of Medieval torture instruments and Medieval whatever technology they had.

Then eventually the fair became the amusement park. It became, I don't know, Disneyland for us. [They laugh.] The Super Duper Looper. But so I guess what I'm trying to explain, as rapidly as I can, how my mind was working and why I would've hip-hopped from one place to the next. Because I would see these things, and then I would follow that; and then see something else and follow that. And these pieces had all of that in them.

And it happened very rapidly. Like there was this sort of transition in '79. And then by '80 it was completely blast, full-blast on. And then I began to look at amusement parks for ideas, and this kind of Super Duper Looper truss came out of that. So the later pieces that are very large-scale and have this kind of curvilinear truss came out of that investigation. But in the sense, later on, they were freed from the—

MS. BERMAN: They're certainly less earthbound.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Less heavy.

MS. AYCOCK: Less heavy. And maybe less referential.

MS. BERMAN: Now they were more cosmic [inaudible], they're reaching for the sky. They're going—they're coming up. Whether or not you mean it to be, they seem organic in a different kind of way.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: It's something that's happening. By the way, did you know that *Scientific American* was founded by an artist?

MS. AYCOCK: No.

MS. BERMAN: Rufus Porter. He was a folk artist—well, they called him a folk artist—He was self-taught. He was from New England. Painted all these landscapes and moved to New York in the 1840's.

MS. AYCOCK: Oh, wow!

MS. BERMAN: To found *Scientific American*.

MS. AYCOCK: Wow, that's fantastic!

MS. BERMAN: And he wrote articles on science and on art. He knew how to paint tempera and fresco, and he wrote about how to paint, how to draw. An instruction manual for paintings was in his first years of *Scientific American*.

MS. AYCOCK: Oh, no.

MS. BERMAN: He could do anything. And he was an inventor. He was like Morse, one of those people.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: In the nineteenth century it was expected that you might be a painter, and inventor, add three or four other things. A publisher, a journalist.

MS. AYCOCK: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. BERMAN: Just, you know, that was something—

MS. AYCOCK: Right.

MS. BERMAN: People other than someone like, say, Moholy-Nagy, that we can think of, a lot of people who were creative moved more freely among different things.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: It was easier or just happened.

MS. AYCOCK: I think probably the culture was more permissive that way. And I think it's very unfortunate that we've now become more boxed in. I really do. I think scientists who are thinking in marvelous ways are very separate from us now. It's hard to have access to them. And at the same time, I think sometimes they've become so pigeon-holed, so in their own little cubicles and their own specificity.

MS. BERMAN: Right. It's true. A lot of things are too specialized for other people to understand.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes!

MS. BERMAN: If you need a Ph.D. in biochemistry to understand something, it's a difficulty.

MS. AYCOCK: It's difficult. Yes, yes.

MS. BERMAN: I want to go into a few of these wonderful pieces. Because first of all, I just want to ask you, when you were mentioning the clang, how did you feel about bringing sound or noise into your work?

MS. AYCOCK: I thought it was a great idea, but it didn't always work because it could get annoying. You know, going on all day. And sometimes the motors would act up and make noises that I didn't expect. Or the noises would sort of preempt the visual. And so—a lot of times you would do something, to find out that there wasn't a lot of extra time between when you finished the piece and you put it on exhibition. [Laughs] So, yes, there wasn't a lot of time to tidy things up. But sometimes I thought it really worked really well. And at other times it was annoying. [They laugh.]

MS. BERMAN: I wanted to just find a fairly early one which I happen to like: *Savage Sparkler* [1981].

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: I don't know if this is correct or not, because now it said there were hot coils. Does that mean that there really was heat in terms of temperature coming off this work?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. Yes, there was a little bit. And then it got a little bit too much. We had to kind of bump it down. But there were. And on the little model there are, too. But we sort of disconnected that for whatever reasons. But in general what we ended up doing was—so, this is where the hot coil rack was. And again, I think if

I were to rebuild this piece and I had more time, because I didn't have a lot of time—although that's the way I like to do things, to be honest with you. I might say I've got this idea, let's try it out. And then everyone goes, “Well, how are you going to do that?” And then we start trying to do it. And like we kind of skid in at the last minute. And we get it in there, and then certain things don't work quite right. But it's like we push the envelope a little bit. So I think if this were redone, this whole hot coil thing would have to be definitely figured out so it doesn't short itself out and various things like that.

MS. BERMAN: Yes. It's certainly another element of danger if you've got hot—

MS. AYCOCK: Yes! Yes!

MS. BERMAN: Which I thought was—[They laugh.]

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, it is. And these were ceramic. So it would be more like how would you get the ceramic to be warm? But the notion of danger, just a little bit of danger—

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MS. AYCOCK: —is always there.

MS. BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And you're always kind of just a little bit—I don't ever want something to be truly dangerous. I just want it to actually maybe even just suggest but not deliver.

MS. BERMAN: Well, if it were a real machine, there would be a danger if you did something stupid like walk into it.

MS. AYCOCK: Exactly. Exactly.

MS. BERMAN: And I think—Then there's this other one, I'm just looking for, about 1980, which was the flyers. Oh here it is.

MS. AYCOCK: Oh, yes.

MS. BERMAN: *The Game of Flyers* [1980], which was for the WPA in Washington.

MS. AYCOCK: Right.

MS. BERMAN: That almost looks— I guess it did have a game-like quality, or you were trying something different at the time there.

MS. AYCOCK: Well, for the first time—I'd say this is still a little bit in the Medieval period. This is the transition.

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MS. AYCOCK: And you see you've got the wood, and you've got these sort of wheels and gears. But you're there. And you've got the carousel.

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MS. AYCOCK: And the carousel was actually taken from when the knights would joust, and they would go round and round and tried to knock each other off their horses. Eventually it became a playful thing. But originally it was much more. Carousel I believe means—somewhere the etymology of the word is “little war.” So I decided—and then it was Washington. And I thought to myself so—I never had the—this was a space that was about 100 feet long and 25 feet wide. And it had the a fence around it, and it had a chain fence. And it was downtown Washington. And Washington in 1980 was pretty down and out. So, you'd go a couple of blocks from the White House, and it was pretty—the neighborhood wasn't so hot. Meaning that things were run down more than anything else. And so the WPA had a lease on this land with a chain-link fence around it. And the chain-link fence was kind of unsightly, and I guess this was their building. I don't know how we managed to pull this off. And I don't know who owned this building. I think why we managed to pull it off is because nobody cared about this space right then and there. It was kind of abandoned. Except that WPA leased this part.

And so I decided here's Washington. Washington is, of course, whatever, power. But it's also been the source of the center of—I was thinking about the Civil War really more than anything. I was probably somewhere inside me thinking about what it was like in the late ‘60s when the cities were burning and all that stuff. So I just thought, okay, we're going to take the 25 wide by 100 and we're going to create World War I. [Laughs] Because

that's my favorite war because it's got trenches, but we're going to mix in some other wars. So and I really love trenches because you dig underground. The fortifications for World War I were just, I thought, really, really neat. And I was at that point looking at war diagrams as compositional systems of how you set things up and then—okay, so you put a piece here, and you put a piece here, and you put a piece here. And then they interact or maybe they don't.

What was great about this is you could do this huge piece with all these parts, and nobody could get in there and hurt themselves because the fence was around it. So they could just look in. And then I could—it would be like this gigantic stage set for a couple of months or weeks. And I could get some of the people from the WPA to go in and perform on it, but nobody else could. So you could kind of do something very public that had a lot of drama and that was perfectly safe because of the chain-link fence. So I had no idea how we pulled it off. But we made these metal troughs, and we lit fires in them. And we had performers climbing the wall. And the trenches were there, and we dug everything out, and we just did this whole, huge thing.

[Telephone rings.]

MS. BERMAN: Shall we pause this?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

[Audio break.]

Yes, and I think I was talking about the performance and being able to do it in that situation where essentially it had all the excitement, but it was safe.

MS. BERMAN: Was Jock Reynolds the head of WPA then?

MS. AYCOCK: No, a guy named Al Nodal.

MS. BERMAN: Yes, okay. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Then let's follow—unless you have something you want to comment further on this—maybe we should talk about *Hoodoo (Laura)* [1981], because that is—

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: I think that's a very important piece. And that was also installed in Washington.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, that was at the Hirshhorn. I guess that with a lot of these pieces this idea of wind: solar wind and turbine wind, windmill wind, something that creates this kind of energy and this air has been really important to me. I think it started out with a fascination of the forms as much as anything. And also this spinning whirlpool movement. So, in this case, it was really taken from one of those spinning ventilation devices that sit on the roofs of restaurants and things like that, and that will spin in the wind. And I used that as the kind of central element. And I was thinking, again, that this in this particular case, I think it is motorized. But normally this form is not motorized; it just moves because the air, wind in the air, makes it spin around. And I particularly love—I will often take something that on a small scale is just whatever it is on a small scale. And when you enlarge it, it becomes iconic and significant. And I think it was the curvilinear pattern of these things that I found particularly beautiful and seductive.

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MS. AYCOCK: And so that is where the ghost—part of the ghost resides. And I guess I would also say that in my fantasies, if there were ghosts—which I don't believe there are—they really would be like just a little bit of a movement of air past your cheek or past your body. It wouldn't you know—it's there, but it's barely there.

MS. BERMAN: A zephyr.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. So anyway, that became the central element. Then I specifically looked at some drawings that Marcel Duchamp did. And at that time I was looking a lot at Duchamp's drawings and notations. And I designed a lot of the piece around his drawings. So it's got a lot of stuff in it. And I was sort of—I almost always—what I would say is I think all artists start from something. I think if they told you that their creativity just came out of the—they were hit with it—they're out and out liars because you always start from somewhere, a reference or whatever. For me, I like—I will sort of say, yes, there's this drawing that I become attracted to. And for one reason or another, this drawing, this composition, this two-dimensional thing, or this picture, or this painting, whatever, begins to obsess me. And then I begin to fantasize on top of that and layer on. But there usually is a preexisting diagram or drawing that for whatever reason is my point of origin. And it's almost for me as though it has—it's like a pollen zest, I guess. It is as though someone else has traced something on the ground. And it's just barely there, but it allows you to begin. And then you begin to fantasize and fantasize and fantasize and three-dimensionalize from that. So in this case it was Duchamp. And then I added all the things

that I could whatever think of.

Then there was this other image—I'm remembering back now—by a man named Maret [ph], and he was sort of a contemporary of Eadweard Muybridge. He wanted to study the movement of birds, and he did also these photographs that were motion studies. So what he did is he built this machine, and then he connected the bird to the machine. And he was trying to study how the bird flapped its wings. And of course the bird couldn't fly anymore. But at any rate, so I put that in the piece as well. And I thought it's part of that machine enlarged. And I thought, okay, the ghost—because I was thinking birds and ghosts together. That's where the ghost goes or gets stuck or hides out or does whatever they do. And I guess I think birds and ghosts are similar because no matter what we do, we can't fly like a bird. So they've got us. We just can't, no matter what machine or technology we develop. And they can just fly away. So to me they are magical, and it's just—so anyway, they've got us. I think they've got us. They're the one anyway so whatever. I'm just running at the mouth.

MS. BERMAN: No, no. That's okay. Because of course, looking at these things, it's all disguised in there. It's not as if there's anything literal in any of these. It's definitely work of imagination. It's the cloak of imagination on this. So that is very different. When you went forward in the twentieth century, did you ever start looking at the machines and what you were using to build these pieces and incorporate that sort of thing in any of them?

MS. AYCOCK: You mean that there was a back and forth?

MS. BERMAN: I'm just saying when you finally got to what you were doing, did you look at any fabricating tools or machines or anything that you were using to make the pieces and decide, oh, I'm going to incorporate that kind of technology?

MS. AYCOCK: Oh, there was a little bit of that. There's one piece called *Waltzing Matilda* [1997], and it's a drawing machine. And I thought of some of my drawing tools and the scratching, and the way that you have this very pointy sort of tool. And there was certainly feedback in the computer wire frame, a language where we would be drawing on the computer. And we'd do all the wire frame before you fill it out as solid. All of a sudden, I looked at that, and I said, No, no, no. I'm going to build something that is like the wire frame because that net structure is really beautiful and interesting. I think that any kind of turbine—turbines—will always fascinate me. And they will be—there was a little of that. I think the saws; there were sometimes saws would get into the piece, the cutting tools. And I would get saw blades in and stuff like that.

MS. BERMAN: Yes. Well, *Waltzing Matilda*, was that about '87 or so?

MS. AYCOCK: *Waltzing Matilda* is way late. And I don't think—it's maybe in the book; I don't know. That was done in the nineties, sometime in the nineties, I believe. I'd have to find—But it's much later [1997].

MS. BERMAN: Right. You also did something, really very consciously about science. I'm looking at this Case Western Reserve exhibition about—you were clearly a natural choice for this Michelson and Morley experiment?

MS. AYCOCK: Oh, yes.

MS. BERMAN: Yes. And then one of the pieces was *Universal Stirrer* [1984]. I don't know if that was too literal for you or not. But—

MS. AYCOCK: I was thinking a lot of—in fact I'm thinking about it again—of form that changes its shape. And in that sense can't be contained. And *Universal Stirrer* was a combination of a lot of— again, they're always, oh, let's put this in and this in and this in. But it has to start with one simple core. And the core was this shape that as it spun, it expanded and contracted.

MS. BERMAN: It looks like a spiral shape in the middle.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And it's really a mixer like something you would use to make cake. But it's used—the *Universal Stirrer* is used in some kind of chemical experiments. And it does—I found it in one of my books of scientific apparatus. And it does, the way we built it, it's elongating, and then as it spins it contracts. So it does change its shape. And I'm actually going to talk about this piece—I'm glad you brought it up because I'm competing for something, and I'm going to talk about this piece. Because I'm trying to suggest that there could be forms that do change shape. You know. So, anyway, yes.

MS. BERMAN: A little, a different, slightly different kind of shape was the *Nets of Solomon* [1983].

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: It's got the circular forms. But it's almost as if it was coming undone. Or you were opening up. It looks as if you were opening up the piece on that one.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. The room was very long and narrow. And I decided—and I'm always making more than I should. I'm always taking on too much. And this was another case of that. But I wanted to make something that was a little bit like a sentence, I think. And this piece had been built, this one, had been built for somewhere else originally. So I brought that along as the beginning. And then this part—and there are other views of this—I was looking at the way an atom is when it's put into a cyclotron or a cloud chamber. And it's smashed. It makes all of these curls and ripples. So I decided, well, let's see what that would look like if we made it into a three-dimensional sculpture. And so that's what we did with that. You're looking at the back of it. And then there was another part that I added in. What happened was this was it was the beginning or a reference to all the Super Duper Loopers and the curls and the whirls and the sense of this kind of ribbony chaos. That I'm really interested in. I'm still interested in it. So this was just one of those. But at that point I was literally looking at a particular drawing of an atom that had been smashed. Or the electrons and how they squash.

MS. BERMAN: Now at this period you are also making or building these big pieces that are being installed in Europe, too. Was the reaction of audiences—was it different in Europe? Or I don't know if there was a differential or not.

MS. AYCOCK: It's hard to say. It's hard to say. I always thought, but I had no proof, that because the Europeans were a little more broadly educated, and that they understood better, but that could have been just—[Brief conversation regarding the dog nipping Ms. Berman.] Okay. So, yes, my imagination said that they understood things, and they were more broadly educated, so they understood the relationships between things better. But, as I said, that could have been just a projection. I think that Europeans at that—it's alwayscontextual. I have no idea what they would be like now because I haven't been over there. American pop culture has been so broadly exported that they probably like Mickey Mouse just as much as everybody here does. But at that time they weren't quite as—they understood things that were less obvious, less representational, less figurative, less literal than Americans seem to. But who knows?

MS. BERMAN: Right. Because there were certain kinds of museums like the Stedelijk that were always ahead of the game. And in Sweden, too.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. But that could have been, as I said, my imagination.

MS. BERMAN: Right, Well, speaking of being ribbony, maybe we should talk about *Leonardo's Swirl* [1982], *The Tempest*, because that really seems to almost be that sense of unwinding or looking at ribbons or looking at just scrolls of paper.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And I was basically—Leonardo [da Vinci] had done all these drawings about the deluge and about the movement in water and explosions. And he was trying to understand that. So I looked at it, and I thought why don't I try to make sculpture out of it. So that's really what that was about. Again, I was looking for a kind of compositional system that was more chaotic, more asymmetrical, I guess you'd have to say more like chaos theory. And Leonardo, who had always been a good model, so—and I, still—a lot of these things, in certain ways they're not—they haven't gone away. They're coming back in some of the work that I'm doing now.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, there's a tremendous consistency throughout. But I just have to hand them to you in a linear fashion.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes, yes.

MS. BERMAN: I should also ask—just going back to the late ‘70s, early ‘80s—in terms of an influence or direction in your work—did you relationship with Dennis Oppenheim affect your work in any way?

MS. AYCOCK: It did. The way I kind of saw it is—and he could say it in a different way. And of course if you got that book, there are some pages on that. And there is something he wrote which I told—which I thought was very good. He was talking, I believe, about the glass factory?

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MS. AYCOCK: And he wrote a lot about the machine and stuff. And I think in a certain kind of poetic way, it explains it better than any other way that it could be explained. But I liken the relationship—and I always did, but it's left to other people to figure it out—as the kind of relationship that perhaps Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns had at one point in their career. Or Jackson Pollock and de Kooning had or [inaudible] and what's his name. Well, Donald Judd and a variety of artists that were working at the time. But that Dennis was a little older than me. He was the generation ahead of me. So there were certain things that were in the air that I sort of picked up on in conceptual art and that interested me. And I think that some of those things were the broad—that they looked outside the immediacy of the art that was being made to the world at large and the environment and the landscape and everything like that. Particularly in Dennis's work, that he would take anything that interested him and pull that in to make the work. I think it was less the way the work looked and more the mind that

thought about art that intrigued me. As Vito Acconci the same way.

Then I think that when we got together, I don't know what Dennis was making at the time exactly. He had finished the puppets, and he'd finished the conceptual body art stuff. And he was using motors to make these sort of videos. So I think that we sort of found each other at a certain moment, and we influenced each other, and we had a very—Dennis, I don't know what Dennis would say about this, frankly. So I'm just giving you my take. We had a kind of rapid-fire dialog. We were living together. We were seeing each other. And we talked about art all the time. And we did this extraordinary exchange that was like reading each other's brains and picking each other's brains. And feeding off of each other's ideas. And we just came together. And then it was over. But it was extraordinarily exhilarating.

When people say who influenced who? Well, who influenced Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg? Or what would you say during that short, very creative burst that they had together in which they did some extraordinary work? Or Morris and Richard Serra or Carl André by Donald Judd. I mean, come on! And so I guess what I would say is give me a goddamn break. A, Let's cut out the bullshit. I don't think it was one one, or the other one or whatever. I think it was the same kind of creative that scientists get when they interact with each other. And that very creative people have when they interact with each other, it's phenomenally exhilarating. It can be extraordinary. And then it's gone.

MS. BERMAN: You're looking for the Picasso-Braque mode. For a while you're roped together. Then it's over. But you've got it forever.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. Picasso-Braque is another good example. And that's exactly the way I thought of it. And it's not that one or the other came out on top. Although I guess you'd say, well, Braque didn't have the whatever that Picasso did. But, I'll leave that for other people to decide. But I think it was always couched in this sort of feminist discourse of who was better, who was this, who was that? And to me that is just absurd. He's gone on to do what he's gone on to do. And I've gone on to do my thing. I think Vito was very much in the mix. And I think that very much in the mix. And if you were to see the relationships from me, there was a cluster of people. It was just one of them I lived with for a period time. And the others, I either saw their work or I had a—I'd say Vito was the person that in certain ways—in a funny way, Vito's still the artist that I most, I feel most soul-connected to.

MS. BERMAN: Interesting.

MS. AYCOCK: Because I—Vito just does the next thing that he needs to do. Yes, he's smart, and he's strategic. But he does what he's driven to do, not what he thinks is the right thing to do at the right time. That doesn't come first. It's like I've got this idea. I've got to think—I'm not saying that afterwards it isn't strategic or whatever. But I'm saying there is this—he can't help himself. I'm not being clear.

MS. BERMAN: You're talking about an inner necessity.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. Not that Dennis isn't driven; he is. He just—sometimes he loses himself, he loses his own sense of self.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Well, artists are people. You have to be the man or woman you have to be.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. But it certainly was at that time placed into some sort of feminist thing. And it was not—I was never going to be Elaine de Kooning. And I was never going to end up being Dennis's wife. I never gave up my house, my loft, my separate existence. I was never going to be—I was never going to take care of some guy. Just wasn't going to happen. So I don't know why anybody worried about it because it just wasn't going to happen. [They laugh.]

MS. BERMAN: No, you weren't set up for victomology. [They laugh.]

MS. AYCOCK: I may have wanted to be, but I just couldn't—and when he figured that out, is when it kind of—when he realized that actually I wasn't going to be—

MS. BERMAN: The artist's handmaiden.

MS. AYCOCK: No, I wasn't. [They laugh.] And then that's when it kind of fell apart. So there you have it for the Archives.

MS. BERMAN: There can only be one artist in the family. That's the deal. [They laugh.]

MS. AYCOCK: But I do admire him, and he happens to be one of my close friends.

MS. BERMAN: Well, that's another thing. Sometimes if you're friends with someone, and then when it goes into that other sphere of lover or husband, then it doesn't work. We all have crazy people who we really like, but we

don't get involved with them. I'm not saying he's crazy. But, you know what I mean. Some transitions are not good. Okay. But I think it's true. I think we're talking about one of these relationships where both people really get a lot out of it regardless of what we're talking about. And also, Johns and Rauschenberg had a sexual relationship. And you're absolutely right; no one frames it in the same way.

MS. AYCOCK: Not at all. It's just they're both whatever. But maybe it will—But I think we're far enough away from it—Dennis and I—now that we can enjoy it and play it up if we need to.

MS. BERMAN: Right. And even let's say you or someone else got together today, that other person wouldn't necessarily expect you to be the nurse or the cook or whatever.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: That's another thing is whether feminist or not, is that people tend to break out of the molds, and people have had more experience in that sense.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, they have, they have.

MS. BERMAN: And probably would really like to have the other person have a separate place.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, I would think so. But, you know, who knows what?

MS. BERMAN: Companionship has evolved significantly since then.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes.

MS. BERMAN: At least I hope—we hope—in enlightened circles.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes. [They laugh.] Now I'm going to have to go fairly soon. Because I have to go to something tonight.

MS. BERMAN: Okay. I was going to ask you about *The Hundred Small Rooms* [1984-86], or we can wait ‘til next time.

MS. AYCOCK: So that's sort of the mid-‘80s.

MS. BERMAN: There were a couple of things to do in the eighties. And then what I want to do next time is go a little bit into the '90s and do the GSA commission, and then we'll be done.

MS. AYCOCK: Oh, right, right. Yes, let's do it the next time because in a way *Hundred Small Rooms* goes go back to the architectural stuff. And there is sometimes a swinging back and a looping back to something that I started that I didn't get to finish.

MS. BERMAN: I just think that's an important piece we should discuss.

MS. AYCOCK: Okay. All right.

MS. BERMAN: And then we'll go into the nineties, and we'll do the GSA commission because it starts then.

MS. AYCOCK: Right.

MS. BERMAN: And then I can stop torturing you.

MS. AYCOCK: Okay. [Laughs.]

MS. BERMAN: Okay. Very good. Okay. Thank you very much.

[END OF FILE 3.]

MS. BERMAN: This is Avis Berman interviewing Alice Aycock for the Archives of American Art and GSA Project, on March 25, 2009, in her loft in SoHo.

And today we are going to talk about your GSA project. But I think I wanted to lead into it with some of the other projects of the early 1990s because, as far as I can tell, this began in the mid 1990s, even though it wasn't installed until 2004. And I'm not trying to pigeonhole you neatly into decades. But I was certainly looking from about 1992—just you almost go into flight. Things are lighter, more fantastical. They're going skyward. You're defying gravity. And the machine—it's lightness. We get the incredible lightness of being in these sculptures.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And I'm not really sure exactly why. I do think that—I would also say that the work begins to more non-referential. And I don't think it's abstract—ever. I would never say that I make abstract art. But I do think that where some of the other work was a bit more literal, or some of the imagery could be construed is a little bit more literal, this just becomes—the form becomes more significant, or the form becomes purer in the ‘90s. One of the things that happened probably was that I just had the opportunity—I was presented with the opportunity to build a work on the East River. And it was a roof, and it was an open roof structure. And certain things—there were just certain conditions that were presented to me. And therefore the way I solved the problem—and part of the problem was to make something that had, it had to register on the New York skyline; I wanted you to see it from a distance. Because it was a kind of cruddy industrial site and it's still in the process of transforming itself all these many years. But at that time it was really a cruddy industrial site.

We were trying to make it into a park. They didn't want me to place something in this space that would be obstructionist and that would be on the ground level, because they wanted to have a lot of open space. And there was this open roof truss, and I just decided to problem-solve by making a piece that used a truss, an open truss work, that could get a lot of height, and that could attach itself to this roof and support itself that way. And therefore it didn't need a lot of vertical columns or poles to hold it up. So it could become more—appear to be more anti-gravitational. And I was also—had been interested in the ‘80s in the whole formal structure of Super Duper Loopers and roller coasters and things like that. That had already been an interest of mine, and I had done several pieces that referenced amusement parks. And I had been obsessed by amusement parks. And therefore it just came together on the East River, that I could free it. It was unbound, so to speak.

Another thing with the open truss form, which suggests bridges and it suggests movement and the Super Duper Looper, you could “draw in space.” And you could get a lot of bang for your buck, so to speak. Meaning in terms of length and height, you could create something that had—it didn't have a lot of mass, but it enclosed a lot of space as it moved through the air. And so, it came—I mean, it had been an image that I had used. I used it in Philadelphia at the ICA in the early ‘80s. I don't think that's a piece that's been illustrated very much. But it had been in a big installation in the early ‘80s at Protetch-McNeil Gallery. But it really came into its own on the East River. I also had a sufficient budget to make something that—and engineer it and all of that—that had a real presence.

So that was, in a sense, the prototype for—I did another piece in Sacramento that had that open truss and was like a circus act. And it was the prototype for the piece at GSA, which really was probably proposed and accepted in the late nineties. It may not have been completed and installed until 2004. But those drawings I think were made in '98—that you have there, I believe. We could tell you for sure.

MS. BERMAN: Right. I have in my notes here that the project began in 1996.

MS. AYCOCK: Wow. Okay. So in terms of its conception, it wasn't that far away from the East River in years. It's just that it really didn't get completed, for a variety of reasons, until 2004. And what I did, and in fact I'm giving a lecture tomorrow night, or a talk, at the Drawing Center, and I'm going to include this piece. By the time I got to the GSA piece in Baltimore, I was thinking about the flight of birds. I had always used a lot of diagrams. I would use dance—diagrams of dance. And at the East River I saw a chalkboard diagram of Fred Astaire dancing, teaching somebody a routine. And I used that diagram to build the East river piece. So diagrams of movements that were ephemeral and that were hard to concretize, war diagrams, all those kinds of diagrams have always been interesting to me. And in this case I came across diagrams of hummingbirds in flight. And the diagram itself was just visually very interesting to me. And it did have curves, but it also had pauses. And it moved differently than a machine on a roller coaster. Because the hummingbird can just—its movement is different; it's not a machine. And it also—it's freer. And a hummingbird does something which a lot of other birds can't do, which is it just—because it flutters, it moves its wings so rapidly, it can stop in midair and just not fall to the ground.

And so this diagram, which was just atypical of the kind of movement that I had been working with—and I'd been working with the movement of acrobats and all sorts of stuff—but this had, it'd stop, veer off; it had some straight edges, whatever. Which is really fascinating to me, and that's the diagram I transformed into the GSA piece. I used that movement and then played with it to make the truss and the curves and all of that. And since I'm thinking about this right now, and I'm going to give this talk. One of the people I'm giving the talk with is an architect, and he said to me when we met, he said, “Something we have in common is we're both interested in turbulence.” And I thought, you know, that's very accurate. And I think what I've been interested in for a long time is things that are, yes, turbulent. But also are not predictable. That is, a system which has energy or information coming into it that can't be predicted. And therefore you can't design it. In other words, the kinds of diagrams I look at, if they're dance diagrams or war diagrams or diagrams of birds in space or diagrams of turbulence, airplane wake, or even the flow of drapery or the flow of wind, all of that, fluids, the movement of fluids, they have a particular kind of look. But you can't exactly—you can't predict precisely what it's going to do. And I think that has always been very interesting to me. Something where chance intervenes. And if you go back to the sand piece—I don't know if we talked about that in the very beginning.

MS. BERMAN: We did.

MS. AYCOCK: Where the wind movement creates. You can predict what's going to happen, but there's a lot of chance occurrences there. So I think that the flight of these birds, though, is another one of those things that is not predictable in the same way that walking from A to B is predictable or other things in life. And it has a pattern which can expand as opposed to closing down. And I'm also interested in the kind of irony or trying to sort of visualize something that is really all about movement, but you can never really control it into anything. And I think I'm just conscious of the fact that I'll go—I'll take something like a Fred Astaire dance, which is just a performance that takes place in time, that can never happen again exactly the same way, and use that diagram as the basis for making this sculpture that sits there, that is frozen in time; and there is a kind of paradox there. But I think that I'm always conscious of the fact that I'm making—I personally know I'm making something that is less than that thing. If you know what I mean.

MS. BERMAN: Right. But the idea of motion is very much implied in this piece, in *Swing Over* [2004], whether or not it can move or not. There's no doubt about it.

MS. AYCOCK: Right.

MS. BERMAN: Because of the swoops [inaudible].

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. I mean it really feels like—you certainly take a journey with your eyes. In order to really understand it, you do a mental, visual journey on that piece.

MS. BERMAN: Right. And because you can see through it as well. That makes a huge difference, if you have air currents through it. Now, just to start on the idea of the research, of course you're telling me about some of the ideas that interested you at the time. But when you went to this—I mean, you had to have gone to this building first.

MS. AYCOCK: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. BERMAN: And seen it. And what was your reaction, I mean in terms of problem-solving or what to do? And how that might have influenced it—the site.

MS. AYCOCK: Well, I was very conscious of the building as being almost like a blank canvas in a way. It's a very minimal building. I think it was done in the ‘60s. It's just got this kind of sheer mass. And it's got a very strong grid structure. A very rectilinear right angle. Everything is very on alignment and repeated, the windows. The repetition of everything basically from the ground floor up. And so I saw it almost as a blank canvas upon which I could put something which would be a counterpoint, a reaction to that almost minimal—basically I saw it from one point of view as like a minimal piece of sculpture, period, you know. Or a monument. And of course these buildings are like that when they make the scale models. They're just like monuments. But this piece could react against that and give something else that literally comes in from left field and diverts it in a different way.

It seemed to me that I could make a—that the portico was in certain ways just like the roof on the East River. There was, I could attach to it, it's already a support system. If you want to call it a pedestal in some ways, it is. But they're architectural pedestals to which I could then enact this sort of anti-gravitational ballet. And I would say that that's true with the GSA piece, with the East River piece, and the piece that I did in Nashville many years later, where there was already a preexisting concrete sort of crane abutment or whatever there that I could then attach to. And so when those things happen, and they're already a given, they're already in the world, then they allow me to begin a point of departure for a conversation and also an actual point of contact and support. In the case of the GSA piece, we very much had to design supports. And the roof was fine and all of that. But we had to beef things up. It wasn't just—there was a lot of serious engineering that went into that. And we beefed up part of the roof. We beefed up part of the wall.

MS. BERMAN: You mean strengthened.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes. And put in some more structure inside the wall of the building. As I recall, we put in some structure I think in one of the lower columns. There was a lot of consideration given to supporting that piece. More so I would say than on the East River, in the sense that the roof on the East River needed a lot less structural work than we had to do to the building, in the end. Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Who uses this building?

MS. AYCOCK: The building I believe—it's a government building, and there are a number of tenants. I think the Veterans Affairs is in there, the IRS is in there for sure. The GSA for that area, that district, is there. I don't know who all else. But I do know that the IRS is very present. And there are certain times of the year in which we couldn't work because of it being extremely busy with long lines and things like that. And it's also situated where

there was a theater. I don't know what's happened with that theater, but it was a theater that I think was designed in the ‘50s and was somewhat a landmark of cast-concrete architecture. So I, at one time, saw this—and there's a big plaza and a fountain, and I forget what other, there were other office buildings located around this plaza. So I saw this as a place where a lot of people would congregate—and they do, have lunch on nice days, sit outside as a really public space. When the theater, and I don't know—over the years I've gone back, and the last time I saw the theater, it was undergoing some kind of rehabilitation. I don't know what was happening. But I did imagine when I first proposed this piece as it being a kind of active public space. And that I was putting something not right on the plaza, but something to enliven that public space and engage you in a way in which just that—the buildings were rather mono-, they just didn't have a lot of visual interest in a way. And that this would enliven things up and give you something to really look at while you were doing whatever you did in that space. And if you were going to the theater, all the better to have something like that around.

MS. BERMAN: Yes, very much. Because it's called *Swing Over*, and you're thinking about dance, but you think about music and horns. Almost like fog horns? That kind of movement?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. Now I hope that they rehab the theater and that it is being used. Because it was a little bit of a landmark.

MS. BERMAN: How were you selected?

MS. AYCOCK: Well, it's hard to remember. So I imagine that would be—I could say something and then historically it could be not quite true. As I recall, the GSA does something that a lot of programs don't do. And that is that they just pick the artist. Now I guess there's a panel that comes together, and they look at the site, and then they recommend an artist from probably a group of slides or visual material. And then you don't do a competition and get chosen and go through that. They've got to buy into you. You're the one that's picked. Now, come up with an idea. And you're given a fairly nice design fee—as I'm recalling; and you should check on this. But I was given a really nice design fee to make a proposal. But it wasn't like I was being told, okay, here's—which I'm often told now—you're competing with five other artists. Here's a 5,000 or a 2,000 dollar design fee, and this is all the information we're going to give you. Now come up with a wham bam super project. And dot every I, and we won't give it to you anyway.

So I do think that the way the GSA goes about it is at least for a mature artist is a good—we like it because once we're chosen, and then we're given time to really think about what we want to do, and really develop it. And we're given enough budget to do that. You just—obviously you work better than when you're one of five, and you're, you know, whatever. So I don't know if that's the process that they still do. But I do think it was the way it went for me. And I think that they just got behind me. Meaning it is a big project, and I think that there could have been people who would have been scared, and they weren't. For whatever reason, they stuck with it through a long haul. And I think that the building—there were lots of things that intervened during the process of the fabrication.

So it became a long process. It was fabricated. I think the engineering was finding the right engineer. Everything's a learning curve. And even though you know a lot when you come into something, you always learn more. And I think initially I didn't have the right engineer. I needed imaginative engineers who don't want to just pull something out of the drawer and who will work with me. So it took a little bit of time to find that engineer, this Robert Stillman [ph] who is here in New York and in Washington. And I had worked for Robert before, and he tends to be interested in these kinds of projects—or his office does, let's say. So once I found them, things got on track. And they worked with me and worked out various ways of doing it. I gave a lecture, and I showed all these pictures of works—and then somebody raised their hand and said, “Well, how do you know it won't fall down?” And I thought, well, how do you think I know it won't fall down? I mean, do you really think that I do these things like, okay, I cooked it up in my brain, and then I walk up and I put it up? No. I said, “Well, I work like a grownup. You know I may cook up an idea in my mind in my studio, but then I have to go out into the world, and I have to hire real people who do real calculations, who really do do what you would do if you were an architect or working in the world like a grownup. And you have to go through a process. Like an architect goes through a process with signed drawings and all of that.”

So in the process of doing this, we had to look at the structure of the building. And they were also—it just took a long time. But they were also doing their asbestos removal, which is what started it.

MS. BERMAN: Started?

MS. AYCOCK: Which is why the project began. Because it was actually a renovation project of the building and asbestos removal. That's where the opportunity came up. And then as we were working, they were working. And sometimes we wouldn't be on the same timetable. So it was hard sometimes it probably—if we had been somehow on the same timetable when they were stripping part of the building, we could've done some of the structural work. But we weren't; like when they were where they were, we were in a different place. Then they

started tearing up the plaza, and that went on for quite a few years. There weren't moments when—and that was a separate contractor. So you have all these different things. And there were points in time where we couldn't even get into the plaza to work on this sculpture because —to install it—because it was all torn up. And there was no right-of-way. Then we had to deal with that. And then the building would undergo more changes. So eventually the piece was built, but the structural work may not have been done. Then somehow the structural work got done, and then how were we going to install it? Then I think we had an issue there because I believe that—and then there would be different people who would come onboard.

But I fabricated it in Utah because I found—I thought to myself, well, this looks like a Super Duper Looper. Let's see what somebody who makes Super Duper Loopers would do with it. They could give me a price and design it really carefully and be very accurate. Because something of this magnitude, if you want to have a tolerance of a quarter inch, which you have to have—I'll explain that by saying simply that parts of this piece get connected to the wall of this building. We had to connect to real structure inside the building. We couldn't have something that ended up here—was supposed to end up there but ended up there and was going to hit the window, and you had to tie it back.

The other thing about the piece is that it's three-dimensional. It's in the air. And you have to—you have to have a very strict tolerance. And part of these connecting tubes were at an angle. So that angle has to be just right or you'll end up somewhere where you don't want to be. And so—and this was an older building. So we didn't know—and this is getting into the nitty gritty of it—there's something called the way the building was to be built, and then there's as-built. Which means that in the process of building it, you make changes. And the building was so old, that we really weren't sure what was in the building, what the structure was inside the building. So you'd have to do tests. And we'd have to do a survey. And all those things are costly. And some of that hadn't been budgeted for. And surveys—a really good survey.

So all of this took time. And what we would do is as the building changed and work had to be done to it in addition to the asbestos removal and all of that, then we would thread—we would find little bits and pieces of money to continue on with the project. And I think at a certain point—I'm not sure about this—but I believe the Oklahoma bombing may have occurred. And then that changed everything. Because the security in buildings like this became completely different. So, anyway, to make a long story short, whoever was going to install this piece was a little nervous because, A, half the time they didn't know how they were going to get inside the plaza because it remained under construction for years because they had lots of problems. And so we never knew what kinds of cranes we could get in. It just went on and on and on, and then anybody would be leery of, well, if I take this job on and I think it's going to take me three days, and a piece isn't welded where it's supposed to be and I end up not where I want to be on the building. Then I've got to stop the job and redo a whole bunch of stuff.

So it just took a long time to get everything whatever going. And there were lots of different reasons why it went the way it went. But it was a complicated—in the meantime, it was really complex. And I think ultimately everyone was afraid that the math wouldn't be perfect. And it had to be. It had to be. The fabricator had to fabricate this exactly the way it was drawn. And the building had to be—the structure of the building—had to be exactly where the drawing said it was. And everything had to kind of come up right. And eventually the confidence was such that it worked out. Had it been a new building, I think it would've been easier.

MS. BERMAN: Yes. For the fabricator, did you use the Super Duper Looper people in Utah?

MS. AYCOCK: I did. And they were very accurate, and they were very good. So in one way they were the easiest part of it. They have to be, right—accurate—because they have, as they say, live loads. And if as you're careening around these turns, if something at an angle is not exactly at the right angle, the car will fly off the track. So I knew—I had pretty good confidence in the fact that they were going to find that point in space, and it would be exactly where it was supposed to be. We must have drawn this thing over and over and over and over and over, and we must have—it was like I don't know what. Approach-withdrawal, approach-withdrawal, approach-withdrawal. And then finally it's just that you just do it. And in the process of doing it—I think things lined up pretty well. And then you just fix it if it doesn't. You just solve it.

MS. BERMAN: Did you have to fix a lot?

MS. AYCOCK: I think we had to fix—I don't think we had to fix the truss; I think we had to fix this a little bit. I think that was made by someone else, and it was just—So there were aspects of the big kind of form element that were also tricky. And, yes. We had to beef up the roof because wherever we were putting these big structural poles to hold it up, we had to have something in the roof that was going to be able to support it.

So what I would have to say is the engineers were great. Then I got a project manager, Trudy Wang—is that Trudy? Let's get that correct. Let me see if it says. And she was extraordinary. She simply did not—she just understood. She had enormous patience. She understood how to sit and wait, and how to keep the project alive.

I think there were a number of occasions where people were saying, Let's put it in the storehouse with the Richard Serras and *Tilted Arc* [1981]. Trudy just found a way not to let that happen. She was just one of the best project managers in terms of just having patience and understanding how to keep something moving forward in the face of many different roadblocks. And eventually the light just appeared, and things opened up, and we could do it. We could—and there were roadblocks. Some of them were minor officials—not officials—minor people working who could block things in the worst possible ways. They were low on the totem pole, but they could manage to just stop everything up, which I found astounding and terrifying, given all the other more significant things that go on—that go on on a day-to-day basis. And if everyone was like that, how terrifying government could be. But at any rate, she was magnificent and just whatever. And then a whole group of people came in and started to run the building. And they had a lot of energy, too. They just wanted it. So then it moved forward. But it was eight years. It was eight years.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Do you think the change in administrations—does that impact on things? I don't mean the president himself. But people who come in, if there are new people who come in in the GSA, if that happens?

MS. AYCOCK: I can't remember. We must have started in the Clinton Administration, and it went into the Bush Administration. I have to say that I don't think it had anything to do with that. I think it initially, if I might put in my two cents for the Archives—who knows who will ever hear this. I think that the fallout from Richard Serra, the damage, not done to Richard. And I want to be very clear about this because I think that Richard not only survived but he thrived, and he may have even thrived—some people are done in by things, and they go away. And other people, for whatever reason—which isn't to say that I don't think Richard's a very talented person; I do. But they thrive on adverse circumstances.

MS. BERMAN: Well, and controversy.

MS. AYCOCK: And controversy. And I think he— I think it was to his advantage and to everyone who came after's disadvantage. He was the martyr, and he got off scot-free. And everyone came to his rescue. And I'm not saying he's not talented and he hasn't worked very hard for it. But he damaged the program enormously. And by—he could have whatever. But at any rate. And what I think was the most damaging—whether the work was appropriate or not for the situation; and I think ultimately it was not an appropriate piece for that particular place—the notion that controversy can cause right at the starting gate something to be removed put the GSA in a position where they were on shaky ground. Because then they were always managing the audience. And the audience always knew that they could up-end things. It's like they have the ace, the crowd held the ace. And I think that had it happened later in the program it could have been dealt with. But because it happened with one of the first—I think it was one of the first—pieces, it was high profile, it was a high-profile artist. And in all sorts of ways, I think the fallout was just there. And I think that every artist who works with the GSA encounters that.

MS. BERMAN: Do you feel that the artists are trusted less?

MS. AYCOCK: I think the artists are trusted, obviously, because of the way they choose the artist, and they don't make the artist compete. They put a lot of trust in the artist, which I find extremely good and very counter to what a lot of public art programs do, where you're competing and competing and competing. And therefore the most boring project is the one that often wins and the most obvious project, as opposed to the breakthrough project. I'd like to say that I think the GSA allowed me to do one of my best works. They got behind me, and they supported me. And they didn't back down. They didn't back down. But it did initially—the fear of the public being not totally positive, I think caused the project to go—to lose time that probably we could have used. We could have interfaced with the building structure better if we had been able to get started earlier. So I want to be—I think that the GSA does a remarkable job and does a really good job. I think I'm just saying that Richard did a lot of damage, and that he has remained the martyr, and no one has really assessed the damage that he did to the program. And that he has gone on to do—

MS. BERMAN: He exploited it.

MS. AYCOCK: He exploited it, and he's been able to do pieces all over the world, precisely what he wanted. And to this day, every time we talk about public art, we have to talk about Richard. And I'm doing it. And that's too bad.

MS. BERMAN: Well, it had a huge effect, as you say. And I think another thing that happened maybe for artists is suddenly if they suggested something that worked with the community and people liked it, then suddenly it's, oh, you're soft. You're not—you're corny or you're not breakthrough.

MS. AYCOCK: And a lot of times it was soft and corny. That was the other thing. And, you know, I'm not faulting the GSA for trying to put one of their most avant-garde artists up first, which they did. But I think that then they were burnt. And it was such a bad burn, that it became that everybody's afraid of public ire. And of course now, thank God for small favors, art is the least of public ire. [They laugh.] At the moment. Finally the public is actually focusing on where their real tax dollars are going instead of this teeny little bit to art. But in any case, I

don't want to put my foot in my mouth, which I think I have. But I guess I would have to just say that the truth is I was able to do one of my most ambitious and experimental and large-scale, big, big projects. And the GSA got behind me and supported it, supported it for eight years, and we got it done. And I am very grateful for that. And when we had to—when it turned out that it was, that it needed more funding, they found the funding to keep it alive. And not a lot of people would have done that.

But when we first started, I think there was fear of public—I'll tell you what happened. I said that one of the sources was the courtship patterns of hummingbirds. And the paper got hold of that, and they said: “Art for the birds!” “Art for the—” And that is what caused everybody to like freeze up and pull back. And that loss of time cost us, because that's when we could have interacted with the building under deconstruction/construction and perhaps done some of that structural work. Blah blah blah. And I think the fact that we have to be fearful of some stupid journalist who writes this—I can write the article in my sleep. I might as well send it to them. I hadn't. Pay me. Pay me their salary. [Laughs.]

MS. BERMAN: Right. You know if you had said something like, “I looked at Leonardo da Vinci's journals on the flight of birds,” that would have been—

MS. AYCOCK: Maybe.

MS. BERMAN: No? Okay.

MS. AYCOCK: Maybe, I don't know. I think we get birds or we get anything in there, and it just—no matter what you say. I mean, as I said, no matter what I say, they'll pick something out of context.

MS. BERMAN: It's true.

MS. AYCOCK: And run with it. As they are doing—that's all they do. I don't know. So now I'm spending too much time on this. It cost us a little bit of time. But after that I would say that everybody was, one way or another, they kept this thing alive and they should all be commended for it because they worked very hard.

MS. BERMAN: Clearly you're satisfied with how the piece turned out. Is there any way that you would, at this moment, looking back, want to fix it, improve it, change it?

MS. AYCOCK: I think the only thing that I would want to do is—it's a very hard piece to photograph. Go down there and probably spend—and you'd know what time of year to go because it has to do with the sun and how the sun hits it. I guess you have to do it mid-summer when the sun is highest in the sky. So that it's in bright sunlight, and it shows up—you really see it against that gray façade. And I don't think I would paint the piece. I have painted other pieces. Maybe if I had painted it white, it would show up more. But I rather like the aluminum quality and everything of it. I just think that getting the photograph exactly at the right time of day with the light, that's about the only thing I would really do differently.

MS. BERMAN: Now in terms of using aluminum, in terms of using materials, was that your first choice?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And it remains my first choice whenever I can. It's a really good material. It lasts a long time. It doesn't rust. It's lightweight compared to steel. When it does patina out, it doesn't cause stains. It's just durable. It, on the whole, is a really good material, and I must prefer it to steel. I think we do have some steel in there because we need steel poles and things like that. Steel is stronger. But on the whole, yes, I really like that material.

MS. BERMAN: This was unusual, but in this case you had to come in way after the fact, after the building was built, as opposed to working on it from the beginning. So you had to, shall we say, to doctor a space that needed it. Was the original architect around? Or did you work with any building architects there?

MS. AYCOCK: There was a building architect, I think, who was in charge of the structural—of the removal of the asbestos and all the other things they were doing to sort of modernize the building. But no. We just had this old set of drawings, and that was part of the problem. We knew that what you get on a set of drawings, it's not always what ends up being built. And so that was another kind of stumbling block initially. Getting the survey, and then doing the borings to see if what the drawings said was there was really there. And so because it was an older building, that also made it a challenge. I don't even know who the architect was. I guess I should. But there was no architect of record for the building that I could get involved with.

MS. BERMAN: Yes. Let me see here. On the idea of the design. In other words, so you would have submitted, in the beginning, drawings? And anything else that you would have had to have done?

MS. AYCOCK: I submitted drawings. We did a big set of drawings which I still have. And they were computer drawings to start out with. And that was when I was just getting into designing in the computer. Which was the

other thing: The technology was becoming pretty exciting. Where you could take what you believed to be the true dimensions of the building and the true structure behind the walls, and then you could design on the computer to that. And you could really detail the heights and the curves and really place things. And so the first concept was done in relationship to the building on the computer. And then we kept developing it more and more and more from there. And then those drawings were given to the fabricator as well to do a set of drawings. So it looks to me like you have some—

MS. BERMAN: Here, take them. This is what GSA sent to me.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: You can actually keep those if you'd like when we're done. If you don't have them.

MS. AYCOCK: That's not a bad picture. That's Trudy.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, okay.

MS. AYCOCK: And she was really fabulous. She's just—I mean everybody was really good. Trudy was my project manager. And here you see—what the tolerances were and how you had to come down. This was a hole in the roof. And you had to come down exactly through that hole. And if something had been one way or another, you can't rebuild this aluminum and send it back to Utah. And then all through the roof we had places for cable and supports. And once again, we had to do work to the roof to keep it—make it strong.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Now, this is in the middle of downtown Baltimore, I assume.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes. And this must have been—I came down to give a talk or something. And then it took a while to light it, too. So again, Trudy just kept working and working. We had other drawings, and actually these are all blurred. I could give you—I wonder why they're so blurred. But we did drawings like this for the presentation, to get the commission. And it's huge; I mean it's a huge piece. And the fact is that, you know, they let me do it. It's enormous. So it's pretty fantastic that that happened. I mean, you know. And we couldn't do the neon. I had this idea with the neon. We couldn't do that, and there was one other thing we couldn't do. Because at a certain point we just didn't have all the money. But certainly we had to keep—we could build the piece. But then all the other things – we were having to keep coming back and getting little bits and pieces of money to keep moving forward. It was a big—really big undertaking.

MS. BERMAN: Right. There was another artist who did work inside the building: Jean Shin. Was there any coordination with her at all?

MS. AYCOCK: She came much later. By the time she came onboard, the piece had been installed actually for a while. And I think she came onboard because of the high security, the security changes, they actually then had to rebuild the entrance and do a lot of things in addition. And so there was money to invite another artist to do some work. And I think we were also—I'm not absolutely sure about this—but I think that allowed us actually to install the piece.

MS. BERMAN: Because by now we're after 9/11 as well.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes. And so the security was even greater. But Baltimore, actually, was—I mean Oklahoma was the thing that had the biggest impact on that.

MS. BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. Let me just—

MS. BERMAN: Just to follow up on this being such an important piece in your oeuvre because of the size and the ambition, how have you been able to build on that?

MS. AYCOCK: Well, that's a funny question. I'm not sure what the answer is to that. Because sometimes I feel as though people look at these things, and they don't get it. [They laugh.] And by that I mean, it's like the woman after I showed all these pictures, who raised her hand and said, “Well, how do you know these things aren't going to fall down?” They're not really taking in what this stuff is and why it is that I have been able to do it and what that means in terms of what I can do in the future. So there are times when it feels to me, rightly or wrongly, as though I'm always starting from scratch. I might as well be doing the first thing I ever did when you stand in a room—a committee—full of people, and they don't really—it doesn't really register. And I don't know what that's about. Or if that's just my fantasy. I don't know whether it's, quite frankly, about being a woman as opposed to a man. I mean they make jokes about Mayor Bloomberg couldn't be president because he was a short, Jewish man from New York. And I don't know whether I have to be—every time I present a piece because I am a small woman. [They laugh.] Do you know what I'm saying?

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MS. AYCOCK: Is it that comes into the room with me? Or counter to that, is it now they look at these things, and they say, Well, they're just too big. Therefore, we can't give her this particular project because we don't have enough money. Yes, I get that. I competed for something recently that I thought was enough money. Well, blah blah blah blah. So, it's just a weird thing. It's I guess that from my vantage point—and I would say it could be true of other artists, not all of them. And right now I'm not getting billions of commissions. I mean, it's difficult. I'm competing for a big commission in Toronto. I'm talking probably off the record. And even though I've done all this stuff here and in Nashville and in the East River and all over, you know what? They probably won't give it to me because they don't want to. Because it just won't happen. Just like Mayor Bloomberg can't be president. [They laugh.] And just in that way, you know what I mean? So what does it mean? I don't know what it means. It feels like I start from scratch every goddamn time. Even though I have an enormous—I feel like I have a lot of knowledge, I have a lot of people who have worked with me and trust me, whom I trust. That I can bring a great team. All of those things. They would rather give it to the inexperienced guy. How's that for an answer?

MS. BERMAN: Okay. [They laugh.] Why not? I want to segue into something a little different because I think this is a wonderful commission. And it was unlikely, but you did it. And this is about 1992 when you did this piece on the rooftop of a police department in Queens.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes.

MS. BERMAN: And did you run into—

MS. AYCOCK: A lot of trouble?

MS. BERMAN: Or misunderstanding? But it's there, and how did—

MS. AYCOCK: And how did it get there? Well, apparently, I've been told, and again, this should be off the record probably, but I was told by somebody that the police had never commissioned [they laugh] another artist [inaudible]. Now I thought that I was really working with the architects who had made what I thought was a classically—a classic modernist building that referenced work that would've been done in the twenties and the thirties in Eastern Europe, and Russian constructivist. And in fact the architect was, I believe, an architect from Eastern Europe. And I thought he made a very tasteful and well-constructed building for the police. And that the profile and just the detailing of it, given what you're up against in terms of the budget and all of that, that worked out really well. And I liked the building—I still do.

I felt that I would make this counterpoint, again, that we position it on the roof, and that the imagery was drawn from certain types of imagery—I always look at Russian constructivist architecture for inspiration. I still feel that that period was monumental —it made an enormous break with the past. And that everything that has happened since owes great debt to that phenomenal period in which they just went from A to Z like overnight and just laid it out for everybody. Laid it out for everybody. And so I was building this counterpoint in this piece that had all these different angles and had—it also referenced satellite dishes, which I happen to love. When I see satellite dishes, I just go, oh, wow! Man! And every now and then I'll come across a satellite yard where they're storing all these things. And they just looked like things that come from Mars or like they're just scanning, scanning sky. I just think they're fantastic!

So I thought, well, I will make something that's this big bowl in the sky. And that's the way I was thinking of it. Because again, I had made things that were pans in the sky and vessels in the sky. It would just be like that. Then have all this other stuff. And just be this little visual sort of signification up there. It was also out of the hair of the police. I mean, they didn't have to tangle with it at all because it's on the roof. You don't have to worry about people. And apparently—I don't know why—I didn't think there was any problem. But apparently there was some kind of a problem. I think some people in the community thought that it was affecting their pacemakers? [They laugh.] There's nothing about it. There's no movement, there's no real antennas, there's nothing. But it was spying on them. I don't know.

MS. BERMAN: It was emitting radioactivity that annoyed their fillings? [Laughs.]

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, stuff like that. And of course in my heart of hearts, in my imagination, I would've thought, “Oh, wow, gee! I hope it does emit a little bit of something.” But, you know. But I don't know why the police never wanted to commission any more sculpture. Or any more art. I can't imagine that it was really because of that piece. But somebody said that. Now again, we have that for history.

MS. BERMAN: That's more in the Guiliani era. I can see the Brooklyn Museum show having a lot more to do with it than anything you did or anything.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, I guess.

MS. BERMAN: In that era, in terms of the police.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, yes.

MS. BERMAN: What did the police department think of it?

MS. AYCOCK: Well, I think at the time all they thought was it's not in our hair. The people won't be hanging out inside of it or around it. We won't really have to maintain it the way we would if it was sitting down in the plaza, deal with it. So I frankly thought that it was okay. But I don't know. I actually, luckily, don't really know. [Laughs.]

MS. BERMAN: I think it was that the police got a new building. Most of the time they don't. So it's not that they're really commissioning for the older buildings anyway.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. But I would think—they are getting new buildings now because—And they're getting them. Because I sit on the New York City Design Commission, we do see new police headquarters, and some of them are quite good. We're getting some really good architects to design them and giving them awards. And for whatever reason the police, there's no Percent for Art connected to it. The firehouses are also—we're getting some beautiful firehouse designs by some good architects. And they do occasionally get works of art. So I don't know what—I guess I should delve into it more.

MS. BERMAN: Also I thought was very successful was the piece [*Star Sifter*, 1993] at JFK [International Airport], which came after that.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. In retrospect, I think that people have been very—when I go through my little rant about how so-and-so's going to get it and I'm not and everything, which is a typical artist's rant—that if you look at these pieces, you would say that people have really extended themselves and given me permission to do some very ambitious work. And I forget that, though. And I just feel always like I'm starting from scratch. And I think that things are—I am feeling a little bit more like that sensibility where you look at something and go, yes, let's go for it. That people are being more conservative. I just get that.

MS. BERMAN: Right. And I also think in the eighties and nineties, there was more of a run for this. And at this moment the pie is smaller, and not just this year. And it has these waves. The developers were more and more interested in this in the '80s and '90s as well.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, they were.

MS. BERMAN: So I think that there are probably fewer—I don't know if there may be fewer corporate opportunities.

MS. AYCOCK: There are. And I think people want things that are a bit more literal. I've noticed that. That they really want something that – and that's happening with me a little bit. That actually the formal quality of my work is not as attractive to the committees as things that are a bit more literal. That's my sense of it. But who knows? Who knows? IThese things come in spurts.

MS. BERMAN: Right, right.

MS. AYCOCK: And—

MS. BERMAN: Yes. I will say that some of the other artists I've interviewed for this project are saying, I've nothing to do. I'm waiting for one thing, and I'm not getting it. So I think this is a little—

MS. AYCOCK: Oh, so this is common.

MS. BERMAN: Again, among mature artists who have said things. And they're not exactly sitting around. But they're not as busy as they would like to be.

MS. AYCOCK: Well, Dennis is really busy. He's getting a lot. Which is another reason why I don't think we need to talk about him. [Laughs.]

MS. BERMAN: Right.He's not one of the ones on my list at the moment anyway. [They laugh.]

MS. AYCOCK: When he becomes one, he'll tell you all about that. “Everyone else is suffering, but I'm not.” [They laugh.]

MS. BERMAN: You also mentioned that you had wanted to put neon in the *Swing Over* piece. But because of the budget and other reasons, it was not possible. And I think we should think about the notion that also in the time between when you started and when you finished, it seems that you began to use color more in your work. I

think that's a very important development that came into your work, and it really looks like saturated color. And kind of a lot of organicisms in your form, more than—

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And I think it's because it's become more curvilinear, a lot more, and the color is also coming in. And I'm enjoying that. I think one of the reasons why the color is coming in is because when I'm working on the computer, color just comes in. You have to use it frequently to distinguish parts of things. Whereas when I was drawing just on paper, it's just paper and pencil, and then it feels like an add-on. And in the computer, as you're working, it just comes in. It's not so much an add-on. And you can also play with color; whereas you do a hand drawing, and then you color it, and then you don't like the color, and then you've got to start all over again. In the computer, you do a drawing, and you try it, and you can say, make it blue. Oh, I don't like that. Oh, okay. Let's make it green. Oh, I don't like that. Oh, then let's make it white. And, you know, you also then feed in the background.

[Telephone rings.]

MS. BERMAN: Do you need to get that?

MS. AYCOCK: Maybe I do.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

[Audio Break.]

—Computer and how it lent itself to experimenting with color.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes, it really does. And then often I will, when we're working, put in the context to start out with, the building and the grass and whatever else is there. And that has color. And so it just became part of it. But you can really, really change your mind. You can try all sorts of things. And then sometimes I don't always, though, keep the color that is in the—sometimes, once it's fabricated and I see how beautiful a metal is, then I go, I don't want to paint that. You know why take away that quality with just paint? So it's always a process.

MS. BERMAN: And that's something you can do, especially if you have said in the commission previously, oh, it's going to be blue, and then you change your mind?

MS. AYCOCK: I just honestly at a certain point, I figure that there's such a thing as artistic license. People are going to get often a lot of what they think they're going to get. But if they were to tie me down so that in the process I can't make changes like that and use my artistic judgment, then I would feel very constricted. Because ultimately it still is an ongoing process. And it's like making a film. I would liken it to that. You know what you want to do. You have your script. You've laid it all out. You've priced it all out. And then in the cutting room things change. And then the dynamics of the actors doing what they do or the shooting, things change. And you cut it differently. And/or something happens that you didn't expect, and you need more money.

MS. BERMAN: Yes. I guess in the public arena, I guess it's one of the few things that can be changed because of the scope of what you're doing. Because so much precision is needed, that—

MS. AYCOCK: Color is one of those things. You can't change, once you've said this is where it's supposed to be and they start working on it, you can't go in and say, I don't like that. I don't like that point. Because you've committed X amount of dollars and time to it. Though sometimes they don't do it right, you can say that. But color is one of those things you can change, and it really is one thing in the computer, and it's one thing in reality. And what I did with that piece is I made the blue apron—I made the apron which is silver this beautiful blue. And I made the yellow horn. When I saw it, it was all this beautiful spun metal. So I kept it spun metal. Because why paint something that look—you literally see how it was made. And I thought, oh, no, I just can't wreck that.

MS. BERMAN: Just for the tape, what is the name of the piece that you're discussing?

MS. AYCOCK: That is called *The Uncertainty of Ground State Fluctuations* [2007]. But it was a piece that I made for Clayton, Missouri. And it was a fairly low budget piece. Took a couple of years. And it's one of my favorite pieces that I've done in the last three or four years.

MS. BERMAN: Because?

MS. AYCOCK: Because I love the curves that we got on an apron. I love the big curve. I say love. And this notion of this vessel, this horn, which people keep referring to as a flower, but I see more as like a musical instrument or a vessel. I don't get tired of staring into that, you know, and that form. It just feels formally like everything fell into place, and it's this beautiful —I think of these things a little bit as a ballet, like a ballerina or something. And as she takes certain poses, then you move around it. But I will say that I'm talking about these pieces now

formally. And in other years I would've talked a lot about the stories that went with them and the content. I'm thinking more formally in the last ten or 15 years. Things are a big purer, and content is there, but the stories are falling away.

MS. BERMAN: It's a funny thing is that I see someone a hundred years ago who made a similar journey. And, how, Calder began with wire and used the circus. And then eventually moved into color and became more—I mean different artists, different affect. But I see a thought process on some level that was similar. I mean completely different artists, but do you see what I'm talking about?

MS. AYCOCK: Well, I think I keep trying to move. I mean, not every piece can do everything that I want it to do. It can't contain everything. But I think that I'm trying to hone in on—I wish that that notion of the necessary structure and the contingent of that that we talked about, I wish I could bring that back a little bit more now because I think that's significant. But I do feel that what I'm trying to get from the viewer is the same thing that I was trying to get in the beginning; which is this sense of I was always saying almost like you're drawing a breath and you see something you didn't quite expect to see. And you're a little bit undone by it. You're a little bit destabilized. You're a little bit—you feel just a little weird. And a sense of sometimes turbulence or disorientation. And maybe in the beginning it used to be that people—you would move through it and have that feeling. Now it is just looking at it and mentally journeying in it and you have that feeling of the world is just not quite as predictable or quite like what I expected it to be. I'm just a little bit—I think what Noman referred to as you're reaching out into—you expect the bottom step to be there, and it's not. That feeling.

And as time goes on, I'm trying not to beat around the bush because I don't feel like I have all the time in the world anymore. And I like to edit better. I may not always succeed, but I don't feel like just doing something for the sake of it. I'm tightening things up in terms of—if that looks like it shouldn't be there, then let's not put it there anymore. Let's just—I guess that I have to cop to the fact that I am interested in something. It's my concept of formal beauty. I have to cop to that, for what it's worth. And it's like you know it when you see it, and it's not necessarily what you expect to be. But when began that piece, I really love to look at it. My eyes just take it in like it's a—

MS. BERMAN: Yes, it's absolutely visual. You don't have to have a story about it or know it's a horn or if it is or isn't.

MS. AYCOCK: Right, right.

MS. BERMAN: You know it just does—

MS. AYCOCK: And so it's like a beautiful dress or a beautiful flower or a beautiful you name it. You know that something just presents itself. And it's working, so to speak. So I'm—

MS. BERMAN: Do you do studio pieces anymore?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. And I'm going to do more. If I could right now—I just proposed something that I really want them to build, and I'm afraid they won't. It's the next thing I really want to do. And it has a lot of curves, and it has a vortex, and it's suspended, and it's hung from an arch. And it's very asymmetrical and curvilinear and streamlined and ribbons of activity. And I just look at it and I, oh, I really, really wish I would win—really do. But after that, I would really like to spend time in the studio playing with forms and playing with ideas and playing with different kinds of plastic and playing with the computer. And really, really stretching the formal language and stretching the material. And really playing with that notion of turbulence—as somebody said. And having like a little think tank for a little while. Doing the research to see what would happen if you could just push the envelope. And then go back out and build something. I have all these pieces that are translucent and that—I don't know. But I just don't really have the—I could have the time. But you need a grant or something like that.

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MS. AYCOCK: I just did a whole series of new drawings, which I think you saw in there. And I really love doing that. And they were informed by the computer. I mean in the sense that they were composed, and I took—things were drawn in the computer and then composed. But they were translated and done by hand. And I really enjoyed working on something like that that I had every day to do. And that wasn't just, again, trying to win a competition. Trying to convince people that I'm credible and that my ideas are good. That gets tiring and hard after a while. You just want to say screw it. I earned my own vision. I earned the right to just—

MS. BERMAN: Right. Isn't that why I'm here?

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. But it just—it feels like it never is exactly. But the thing I think about, and I always set up little goals for myself. And by the way, architecture is as interesting to me as art. I look at architecture as a visual—like pieces of sculpture, not really like what they do. But I have lately been thinking about the late Goyas, and

that you don't quite know whether what is in the Prado is exactly what he did. You know what was lost when they took them off the wall? And whether he was collaborating with his son. And whether other people did a few things to it to whatever.

MS. BERMAN: You're talking about the *Black Paintings*?

MS. AYCOCK: The *Black Paintings*. And you don't quite know exactly. That's my feeling. But there's enough information, particularly if you go through the Prado and you look at his early work, you see his hand. You see his sensibility. You see his style one way or another. And I was very moved by those—by the *Black Paintings*. And I was also moved by the fact that we don't really know. It's like we're never really sure who wrote Shakespeare, whatever. We just know we really like this stuff. So what I feel about the Goyas is that at the end, when he was no longer working for the king or whatever, he did—he summed it up. And he said something about the time and place that he found himself in that was extraordinary. And I mean the dislocation, the dislocation of scale. I don't think anybody has conveyed—and it's not literal, not at all. He conveys a psychological state of mind. You stand in front of one of those paintings, and you really feel what it's like to be in a world of terror.

MS. BERMAN: Right. And also a world of—he was deaf, and so that also impinges on it. I mean they're really the first modern kind of existential paintings, I think.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: But, modern in some of the flatness and some of the technique, too.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. The collage and the shift in scale. The place where you're in the landscape, but you're really in the dream as well and that sense of the reflective consciousness. Not just what the eyes see, but what the inner life is like. And that real sense of psychological terror. Or just psychological—even if it's not always terror, it's a sense of—

MS. BERMAN: Well, there's unease there and unknown.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes. Unease and unknown. That's a better word. And I think then as you go down through the Prado, you see when he's painting beautifully, but for the court. And I guess that in a way I started out doing things that were about that kind of thing. And now I feel like I'm contradicting myself. But there's work I want to do. And I don't care whether some commission or the public likes it. I just want to do it. And that means retreating back into this other place. Not that the public work is not my work or that I'm doing it for the public and softening it or anything. I'm not. But there is just a part of me that does not want to be judged anymore.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MS. AYCOCK: I'm tired of it.

MS. BERMAN: And part of what you're talking about, this idea of economizing or editing or—I mean you're simplifying but you're getting freer? That's what I'm taking away at the moment.

MS. AYCOCK: I think. I mean I hope. It's like you begin to feel at ease with your voice. And you know what to pick up that you haven't used up completely. And what to leave out, that it's just going to get in the way. And then where to go to find something new. You're more comfortable with yourself. But, it's still hard. I want to make it hard. I don't want to be just doing the same work. I want to make it hard. But I want to get at—there's one piece. It's an image that I got from a book. And I have looked at it for years and years and years. And each time I say, I don't know how to do this yet. I don't know how to do this yet. And I began to get I can't do this yet. For one reason or another I can't. And I take it out every couple of years, and I look at it. And actually when I came back from MoMA I had seen the Serras, the circular pieces, I pulled that image out again. Because I do relate to certain aspects of Serra's work very much. But this piece is one I really want to do. And I keep thinking, okay, I'm there now. I figured it out. But I'm not quite there. So there's those things. There are those images that at a certain point I will—like you decode something.

MS. BERMAN: May I ask what that image from the book is?

MS. AYCOCK: It's a more or less a weird geometric figure. You don't know whether it's hollowed out, whether it's a shadow. It is oval, but it's three-dimensional. And it throws itself on the floor.

MS. BERMAN: I don't want to talk it out if you're not ready for it.

MS. AYCOCK: Right, right.

MS. BERMAN: But I just thought someday [it would be good to know] what this will be.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: It makes me so curious.

MS. AYCOCK: It is—in certain ways it's very simple. But anyway.

MS. BERMAN: Well, I think this is a good time to end.

MS. AYCOCK: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: And thank you very much.

MS. AYCOCK: Sure.

MS. BERMAN: This has been superb.

MS. AYCOCK: Who knows what I've said that I shouldn't have said? I'm sure a couple of things.

[END OF FILE 4.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...October 7, 2015