Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Rosa Esman, 2009 June 9-16

Funding for this interview provided by Art Dealers Association of America.
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

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Rosa Esman on June 9 and 16, 2009. The interview took place at the office of Rosa Esman in Manhattan, New York. and was conducted by James McElhinney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Art Dealers Association of America project.

Rosa Esman has reviewed the transcript. Her corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JAMES McELHINNEY: Alright. This is James McElhinney speaking with Rosa Esman at her home at—

ROSA ESMAN: At her office.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Office, pardon me.

ROSA ESMAN: This is not my home.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I thought perhaps the home was in an adjoining apartment or something.

ROSA ESMAN: Down the block.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Down the block. Okay. Speaking with Rosa Esman at her office at 12 East Eighty-sixth Street in Manhattan, New York, on Tuesday, the 9th of June 2009.

Thank you for agreeing to this interview. This is a question I ask a lot of people is: What is the first memory you have, conscious memory, of being in the presence of a work of art?

ROSA ESMAN: Well, that's a very deep and puzzling question.

JAMES McELHINNEY: When were you aware of art as a young person?

ROSA ESMAN: I'm thinking. I was born and bred in New York.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So there you go.

ROSA ESMAN: And I went to a private school all the way through lower—through high school. And we did things like go to museums. And my parents took me to museums. And there was never a specific work of art. Although I will say, what I keep remembering is some Mesopotamian mosaic at the Metropolitan Museum [of Art, New York, NY] of a lion in profile in blue tile or brown tile, that I seem to keep remembering. And maybe that just struck me first, I don't know, when I was in third, fourth grade.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And what school were you at?

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, a little private school called Bentley School for elementary, which no longer exists. And Birch Wathen [Lenox, New York, NY] for high school. Then I went on to Smith College [Northampton, MA], Ivy League school for girls.

JAMES McELHINNEY: In Massachusetts.

ROSA ESMAN: Up in Northampton. They have a lovely museum.

JAMES McELHINNEY: They have a lovely museum.

ROSA ESMAN: They do.

JAMES McELHINNEY: What did you study at Smith College? What was your major?

ROSA ESMAN: I actually studied government. And government permitted me to take a junior year abroad the year World War II ended, which seems like a century ago but it was 1946-1947. Then I was able to go to Switzerland for junior year abroad, first junior year abroad after the war for any American group. And it was really to study political science and international relations. And I was interested in government. So that was my

major. I took maybe one Art 101 course, which was absolutely marvelous.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Survey.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. Well, all that art stuff came later.

JAMES McELHINNEY: When you were in Switzerland, did you—

ROSA ESMAN: Traveled a lot.

JAMES McELHINNEY: —explore museums.

ROSA ESMAN: Indeed. That was the most enlightening year of my youth, I would say. Or of my education. Because we landed in France in Le Havre. We took a troop ship over. Bunch of American junior-year girls abroad in our little bobby sox and camel hair coats, and we were so cute. [Laughs.] And we landed in Le Havre and took a train down to Paris, on our way down to Geneva, which was where we ended. And that was the most revealing trip for us. Not from an art point of view but from a world point of view of what Europe had suffered during the war and all the damage. And so the whole year was incredible. Then we moved on to Geneva and did a lot of traveling and went to lots of museums. We went to Florence [Italy] springtime and saw the [Lorenzo] Ghiberti doors that were still in the basement because they had been hidden during the war in case of bombing—if we'd bombed Florence—God forbid! But they were there to be salvaged and saved. And we went down in the basement. They were about to refurbish them. And they were still dark but glorious. And so we saw—we went to the Uffizi [Gallery]—we saw all those things and went to the [Musée du] Louvre in Paris. We went into Germany, but we couldn't get to see any museums there. It made me appreciate New York when I came home because I realized what a cultural center we are in and what a magnificent city this is, and how much if has to offer artistically and culturally.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, a lot of artists were here in exile during the Third Reich and Second World War.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And one could, I guess saying that Hitler single-handedly caused this exodus of intellectuals and artists out of Europe. All the boats came here.

ROSA ESMAN: That's right. There was a Renaissance of art in the fifties because of these German artists, people like Hans Hofmann, Joseph Albers were so influential on the American art scene. And then the Americans wanted to sort of counteract their influence in a way you know, which I think was the rise of Abstract Expressionism.

JAMES McELHINNEY: As a synthetic kind of response of sort of Surrealism and Cubism and a kind of American muscle, yes.

ROSA ESMAN: Exactly. Very well put.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Thank you. What happened after Smith?

ROSA ESMAN: No graduate—I was not one of those high percentage of people who go to graduate school. I got a job. Where did I get a job first? Well, government background, I went to the League of Women Voters. But I left soon after that and went to *Commentary* really as a secretary. But that was an intellectual magazine back then. It was very interesting. And then I found a job at Harper & Brothers in art books, in the art book department. It was just one editor and I. It was a brief period of time, but it was very interesting, I mean I enjoyed the art book aspect. They put out a series of books on various artists. I mean there was a whole series of books on—let's see, a [Albrecht] Dürer book. There was a series on classical art and drawings.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Historical artwork.

ROSA ESMAN: Historical artwork. But then we also—there also was a book that Sibyl Moholy-Nagy wrote about her husband [Laszlo Moholy-Nagy] which was interesting. And then I got married and left, and I had my first real job as the Museum of Modern Art [New York, NY], which was marvelous—after I was married in 1951. And I worked for René d'Harnoncourt as his—one would say now office administrator, which is much nicer than being a secretary. But he was the most marvelous man. He really was. And I felt the loss of his daughter so deeply.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That was so unexpected.

ROSA ESMAN: Because she had that same warmth and charm and openness and brilliance that her father had. And they were both—they both died too young. René died in an automobile accident I mean he was just hit one morning; he went to get the mail.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes.

ROSA ESMAN: And Anne [d'Harnoncourt] died too young. That was so sad.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That was a complete shock.

ROSA ESMAN: She was such a beautiful woman.

JAMES McELHINNEY: A minor procedure or something and then—

ROSA ESMAN: Is that what it was, a minor procedure?

JAMES McELHINNEY: It was unexpected, I know. I know some people in Philadelphia.

ROSA ESMAN: And she was in her early '60s or not even.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Nobody, nobody—everybody was just stunned when it happened because she was so indispensable to that whole operation. Had been part of the Philadelphia Art Museum for—

ROSA ESMAN: I remember her when she was 13, when she was Mr. d'Harnoncourt's daughter, who would come and visit him now and then. And she had long, long braids. She was lovely girl.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, it was a great loss.

ROSA ESMAN: It was. But that was a marvelous experience for me to work there.

JAMES McELHINNEY: How long were you working for René d'Harnoncourt?

ROSA ESMAN: I got pregnant right after I was married. So it really was about one year. And the [senior staff –RE] got very nervous about me as I got bigger and bigger. And back then pregnant ladies were not seen [laughs] in public as much. Or working as much. And they kept worrying that I was going to deliver on the director's floor or something. So anyway, that was the end of that position. And then I eventually went on to other things.

JAMES McELHINNEY: You had a child.

ROSA ESMAN: I have a child. Stayed home a bit with the child. We moved to Washington [DC] because my husband was in the medical draft during the Korean War. He'd gotten his medical education during the Second World War. And so he had to give back to his country. And we had this very difficult situation of his being sent to Washington, which was a cinch really. And he spent most of his afternoons at the National Gallery [of Art, Washington, DC], I've got to say, while I was home with the baby. But I got to the National Gallery now and then. And then we came back to New York and I had another child. And then I soon got into the art world.

JAMES McELHINNEY: How did that happen?

ROSA ESMAN: Well, this is a long story.

JAMES McELHINNEY: We're here to read it into the record.

ROSA ESMAN: Okay. Well, it happened in—first of all my parents bought a house in Stockbridge, Massachusetts in the Berkshires, which is a beautiful place to be. And at that time—we're now in 1954; I had my second child in 1954. So maybe the summer of '55—or maybe it was the summer of '56—my parents bought a house in Stockbridge. And my husband was a psychoanalyst—now retired. But he took the usual August off, but the rest of the summer he was working. So my parents went up around June or July, and I came up with the two kids. And he came up on weekends. And about the second year, about 1957 I think it was, I decided—that summer I had an au pair to help with the kids. And I thought it would be very interesting to do something up there. And a friend of mine and I decided—who also rented a house up there at the time—that we would think about opening up an art gallery, which was a lot of nerve because what did we know about business? We knew a little about art but not that much. And we found we could rent a room, and we rented a room on Main Street, which actually turned out to be Norman Rockwell's early studio when he was a young man.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh!

ROSA ESMAN: So it had a little history. And we started. Before we went up that summer, we started borrowing works of art from artists we had sort of known were around. We went to Milton Avery. More important, we went to the Museum of Modern Art, which had an art-lending service at that time.

JAMES McELHINNEY: An art—

ROSA ESMAN: Lending service.

JAMES McELHINNEY: An art-lending service. That was popular for a while.

ROSA ESMAN: It was very popular.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Sales and rental galleries.

ROSA ESMAN: You could rent a painting or a work of art for a month and hang it and enjoy it. And make yourself feel like an important collector for very little money. And you'd bring it back, take out something else. And they were willing and very happy to let us take a few pieces up for sale. And we took up a few pieces. And so among the early works that we had were young on-the-horizon artists. Like in about '58, '59 we had an artist named Tom Wesselmann who did little tiny paintings, very small, called *The Great American Nude—The Little Great American Nude* they were called. *The Little Great American Nude* paintings. I was able to get [Alexander] Calder, small mobiles, the kind that go now for a three hundred thousand dollars, and I was selling them for a few hundred, when I sold them, which—I think I bought one, but I don't think I ever succeeded in selling one. And a lot of artists and then a lot of printmakers, a lot of artists who really just made prints. They were not artists doing prints. They were printmaker artists.

JAMES McELHINNEY: You mean people like Leonard Baskin, that kind of thing?

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. Only I didn't have— But I did have—what was his name? Mervin Jules from Smith College who did musical woodcut prints. But [Clare] Romano—what was his name? Romano—I'm trying to remember all of them. There were a lot of them. Karl Schrag. Other people like that. Then I borrowed also from the Downtown Gallery [New York, NY]—we had George L.K. Morris because he lived up there. And I thought it would be interesting to have his work. Nobody had ever heard of George L.K. Morris. But nevertheless, we never sold anything of his. But we had those kinds of paintings. They were things that would be under a couple of thousand dollars. But mostly they would be $80 to 150, which is what the prints were. And we managed to make our rent, and we'd maybe pocket a hundred dollars each, my partner and I. And we had a wonderful time. I'd come home for lunch and be with the babies. And my mother was very affable about taking care of the children. I had an au pair. So that was the beginning of my getting into the business of art.

I should say, however, more important than all of this, is after I got married, my husband was an avid—he was a psychoanalyst, a doctor—but he was an avid lover of art. And he courted me by taking me to all the galleries on Saturday afternoon. And so he was very interested in it and very passionate about art. And actually before we went to Washington—no, after we were in Washington, I guess—I remember I was pregnant. And we saw a little [Joan] Miro drawing that we loved, and we just wanted to buy it. And then we realized we shouldn't buy it. We didn't know. He might be sent to Korea. Who knows? We ended up buying it, which was kind of wonderful. And that was the beginning of our collecting. So starting to collect art is what sort of drove me into opening up the little gallery up in Stockbridge called Tanglewood Gallery.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Tanglewood Gallery.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Now how did you actually physically organize it? It was a storefront in Stockbridge?

ROSA ESMAN: It was not. The first one was not a storefront. It was on the second floor, the Norman Rockwell studio. It was on the second floor, and we had a sign downstairs.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I see.

ROSA ESMAN: Put a sign in the window.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So you'd walk up the stairs.

ROSA ESMAN: We put a little ad in the paper. You walked up the stairs, and there we were in one room. Hardly bigger than this—a little bigger than this. But it was one room, and we hung the same stuff. And every now and then we'd change it or something actually got sold, we'd put something else up. We didn't need much space. And it was fun.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But you had a desk, and you had a phone.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And you took turns and—

ROSA ESMAN: That's right. That's right. I had a job. And it was fun. You'd meet people. I met some very dear friends there. And then we did that for a few years. And then it goes on— I decided to do something, to carry it on in the winter a little bit. And started commissioning editions and things for hotels. I think I worked with the Hotel Hilton, that went up on Sixth Avenue [New York, NY]. I remember we commissioned some prints for that. And so I did a little bit of that in the winter. But I never had a storefront or an office—or a space, a gallery [in those early days. –RE]

JAMES McELHINNEY: A gallery.

ROSA ESMAN: A gallery.

JAMES McELHINNEY: There was no—

ROSA ESMAN: No physical space in New York.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Public venue, right.

ROSA ESMAN: Right.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So how are you arranging these editions of prints? How did you find artists?

ROSA ESMAN: I would just go to some artists and get some, get a sample of their work to show to whoever was —I can't even remember; there must have been an overseeing group at the Hilton. And if something appealed to them, I would just ask the artist to try and, you know, to come up with a print that we could do an edition of 50 for 50 rooms or 150 for 150 rooms. So we did that with a few printmakers.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Who did you work with on any of these jobs?

ROSA ESMAN: I don't remember their names. Nobody was terribly famous then. But they were printmakers. And if I dig down deep and you really need this information, [laughs] I'll just, I'm trying to remember—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Just, you know, without being detailed, if it's available, if not, we'll just ––

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, I'll come up with it maybe before we finish with this.

JAMES McELHINNEY: We'll have another conversation in a week. So maybe—

ROSA ESMAN: Okay. I'll check it out. I'll ask my former partner whether she remembers. But that was sort of limiting anyway. And then I got into the idea of really commissioning artists I cared about to make art—that is art painters and sculptors and artists who we cared about. Because my husband and I started collecting a bit. And there wasn't much being done in—by now we're in the '60s. And there wasn't much being done in the way of printmaking by American artists. It was a European tradition. And printmakers of that time were printmakers, people who had studied—artists who had studied printmaking. And that was their primary expression, artistic expression. But there weren't many artists who were going into printmaking. And one of the wonderful things that Tanya Grosman did in the '60s when she emigrated—or immigrated—to the States from Germany was to set up her press and get all these American artists interested in real printmaking. And that happened in the early '60s basically. And I thought that could be interesting, to get artists. I was not a printer; I didn't know how to do that myself. But there are other methods of printing besides lithography. There was all this silkscreen stuff that was being developed commercially.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Intaglio, lithography.

ROSA ESMAN: Intaglio, then lithography. But silkscreen was much easier. It was a commercial craft. And it was the beginning in the '60s. It was not the beginning; it was the height of the pop art movement in the '60s. And we had Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. They were using silkscreens. Certainly Andy was using silkscreens. And Roy was using—adapted the silkscreen look to his paintings. And suddenly artists were using printmaking techniques. So I developed an interest in getting artists—to get into printing.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So at what point—I mean at what point were you starting to entertain the idea of a public venue?

ROSA ESMAN: Well, we had a friend who was a European psychoanalyst—also an art collector—named Hans Kleinschmidt. Wonderful man. Very European. And he always felt that—and he started getting interested in American art as well; he had a collection of German Expressionism. But he started getting interested in American art. And he knew I'd been interested in prints and printmaking, and he was the one who pushed me. Who suggested that I go out and get these artists to make prints so that people could afford to buy art. Because paintings were— I mean '60s people were— There was not a world of collecting like there is today. It was not the

chic thing to do. It was a very—you know few people, there were few collectors around, and there were six galleries in New York, you know. Every Saturday we'd go to the Leo Castelli [Gallery], we'd go to Sam Kootz [Gallery], we'd go to Sidney Janis [Gallery], Stable Gallery. And there were a couple of others. And every Saturday you could see—your artist pals would hang out with Leo and wirh Sidney and whatever. And you'd see them all. And so my friend Hans just really felt it would be interesting to get all these artists to get into printmaking. And he encouraged me. So I made a little corporation with him as a backer. And also a friend of mine Doris Freedman, who was cultural commissioner, the first, under [Mayor John] Lindsay; the first commissioner of culture, I guess, in New York City.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Here in New York City?

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. A wonderful lady. She also died unfortunately young from something similar to Anne d'Harnoncourt. She had surgery and didn't come out of it, whatever, in her forties. It was awful. Anyway. So they encouraged me with this idea, and we set up Tanglewood Press, Inc. And I published a portfolio called *New York Ten* in 1965, which had ten artists in it, and it sold for a hundred dollars. And it had ten prints, all signed, an edition of a hundred: Roy Lichtenstein, Tom Wesselmann—I should have made a list before you came. I know them all. Helen Frankenthaler, Richard Anuszkiewicz, Nicholas Krushenick. I can put it all together in another interview.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So it was a combination of a certain op and pop.

ROSA ESMAN: It was op and pop. And it was just anybody who was around whom I liked whom I knew. I got to be friendly with a lot of them. So we put ten— Oh, and Claes. Oh, he was very important, Claes. It all started then the summer of '64. I was in Paris. And I bumped into Claes Oldenburg, and that's when this whole idea was percolating in my head. It was a very hot day, 102 degrees in Paris in August. And we bumped into each other, my husband and I and Claes, and we sat down and had a lemonade. And I asked him if he would ever— He was in Paris for some kind of a show, I don't know, with Ileana [Sonnabend], I suppose. Ileana Sonnabend. And I asked him if he would ever think of doing a print if I would put together a bunch of artists who were compatible with him. And he said sure. So I said, "So kind of fee would I pay you? What would you do this for?" And he said, "A bottle of whiskey." And I thought, well, that sounds easy. But, you know, we'll work something out. And I reminded him of this a few weeks ago. We had lunch—his Whitney show opened. And I reminded him when he said that. He said, "Did I say that?!" [Laughs.] A bottle of whiskey? Anyway.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Priorities change.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, priorities change over time, indeed. So that was the beginning of what became a whole new world for me.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So how did that sell? Was it very popular?

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, Jim Dine, another one, he said to me, "You know you're going to have all these port—do you have room in a basement somewhere?" He said, "You're going to sit with these portfolios forever." Well, in six months they were sold out. So we started—I started on the second one. That was called *New York International*. And it had Ad Reinhardt and Bob [Robert] Motherwell. But it also included Mary Bauermeister and Oyvind Fahlstrom, Arman [Fernandez], various European artists who were also in New York. So it was New York and friends, so to speak. Then I moved on. And I made, I don't know, must have put out 12 or 14 publications. I couldn't list them for you. So I started doing three-dimensional stuff for the first time, and that came out as *Seven Objects in a Box* [1966]. Which was a baked potato of Oldenburg, and an enamel painting of Roy Lichtenstein, and a Plexiglas standing image by Andy Warhol, and a George Segal chicken. And a wonderful little three-dimensional plastic nude by Tom Wesselmann. And a Jim Dine rainbow faucet. I think that was pretty much it. Well, that was fun. And then I did a box with ten from Leo Castelli for his tenth anniversary. He was really running out of money. And I thought for his tenth anniversary, and the only way I could get all these major artists to really do all of this again would be to do it with him. And we put out this wonderful box together. And I sold it in advance to get some money in for him. And *Ten From Leo Castelli* [1968]; that was in the early '60s I guess—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Who were your buyers?

ROSA ESMAN: —'68, '67. Oh, people I knew. I sent out—in those days we had a mimeograph machine. Nothing was easy like Xeroxing even.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Blue and white and you'd have to crank the little handle.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. And I had to type it up and whatever it. And I sent that out. That was my mailer. *Seven Objects in a Box*. I had a lot of fun with that. I made little photographs of each piece. And found a Japanese balsa wood box at Azuma. There was an Oriental store called Azuma in the '60s that had all kinds of Japanese, Asian

stuff for very little money. And so I bought these little boxes. And they had some kind of burnt wood design on them, and I had to sand them off—sand off the design. And then I stamped it with the name *Seven Objects in a Box*. And I sent out these little boxes with the photographs in them. So it was all fun. I had a good time. And everything sold right away. And I should have kept a lot. But of course I didn't because I had to move on to the next project.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So were you starting to reach out and sell to museums?

ROSA ESMAN: Allover, and to museums and to Europe and all over.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So how did you do the marketing? How did you do the research? Just with the mimeograph and the gelatin and typewriter?

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, and they found me. I mean you'd send the first—you'd get maybe friends or collectors whom you knew to get the first ten or 20. I always had a pre-pub sale price like *The New York Ten* was $95 until December 1965 or something like that, January 196[6 –RE], I guess. And then it became a hundred dollars. Well, you know, a five dollar difference in those days mattered.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, it's like—

ROSA ESMAN: Like a few hundred today.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Like a couple hundred today, yes.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, yes. And then they would be distributed, and enough people would hear about them. And I got requests from galleries in Europe. But then I reached out to the museums, and the museums bought. They were happy. That wasn't much money for them.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Where was the buzz starting to come from? Were you in touch with writers? Did you have critics and writers —

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. Well, I always had an introduction done. Bob [Robert] Rosenblum wrote the introduction for *New York Ten*. *New York International*—I don't remember who did that. But I always found somebody who would write a little introduction. And, no it didn't get—the *New York Times* did not have a major art reviewing staff at that time.

JAMES McELHINNEY: How about *Art News*, people like Tom [Thomas] Hess?

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, you know, this was sort of—they weren't big shows. This was a commercial venture in a way. It was for collectors. And I don't think I advertised. I didn't have an advertising budget. Goodness! You know, I couldn't do that. People just knew about it. And after a while so many people knew about it, that competition arose. And lo and behold—and I'm sure it wasn't just competing with me; they had their own resources, but Gemini [G.E.L.] came into the act.,Multiples came into the act.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Marian Goodman.

ROSA ESMAN: Right. And by 1970 I had done a lot of kind of interesting stuff. But I felt I [could not compete with –RE] the competition because they were offering hundred thousand dollar advances to artists. Which today is nothing, I guess. But [then –RE] that was unheard of! [Laughs.] I didn't offer advances. We just all did this. So I could see the writing on the wall from my point of view because I was just a small potatoes person. My backers had given me a thousand bucks each, you know.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So you created a paradigm, and other people basically—

ROSA ESMAN: I would not say that they copied me. I would say they put me out of business, but why not, you know? That's the nature of the game.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But it seemed like there was that period in the late 1960's, early 1970's, when multiples became very popular, you know.

ROSA ESMAN: They did.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Perhaps as artists like Andy Warhol became sort of the standard, the gold standard.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: The work that was being made like op, pop and the Color Field artists, and certainly

Minimalism, lent itself to the silkscreen process.

ROSA ESMAN: Absolutely. And Philip Morris [Inc.] came to me. That was the other thing. And we put out *Eleven Pop Artists* [1965]. That was their idea. But I coordinated it with seven or eight galleries to get 11 artists. It was going to be ten, but one of the dealers insisted that an additional artist of his be included. So we made it *Eleven Pop Artists*. But it was Philip Morris's idea to make these prints and distribute 50 [sets –RE] to different museums all around Europe called Pop and Op. But I worked on the pop part of it. So the *Eleven Pop Artists* turned out to be three portfolios in three different sizes, each [including –RE] by one of the 11 artists. So each artist did three. There was an edition of 200. And the way we worked it out [Phillip Norris –RE] wanted the 50; that was all. And they weren't putting up any money. And I said the only say this can happen is if we also publish 200 for sale to the public to finance the whole thing. So that happened. And that was a major thing. And it was after that, I think, that all the other publishers began to get into the act. And it became a very popular thing. No question about it. It lost its unique quality of great art for little money.

JAMES McELHINNEY: As you were getting into the publishing more and more, did you maintain the partner that you had up in Stockbridge?

ROSA ESMAN: No. She never was part of the press. She was just Tanglewood Gallery. And then we parted ways. She became less interested in it and studied the cello and was more interested in music. And I was interested in pursuing this, so it became Tanglewood Press. And then I had these two partners, Hans [Kleinschmidt] and Doris [Freedman], and I did buy them out for their original investment. But they got a lot of art out of it.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So you were a one-person operation?

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, a one person operation. And that was a problem. [Laughs.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: Were you hiring people at all? Did you have a staff?

ROSA ESMAN: I had my kids. They did a lot of collating. They were very helpful, indispensable. But I hired a few people. Like I have— What I dearly love is—and I have to give this to the Archives [of American Art, Smithsonion Institution, Washington, DC]—is an invoice from Philip Glass for work that he did. Assembling some box or something or other, you know. So, yes, I would hire artists who—

JAMES McELHINNEY: You hired him as a carpenter.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, carpenter. Artist as carpenter. And I had a lot of those who would make boxes or whatever.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

ROSA ESMAN: But it was always sort of piecemeal.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, just independent contractors, individual contractors, dollar here, dollar there.

ROSA ESMAN: I was running around to the printers myself.

JAMES McELHINNEY: At what point did you then decide—well, obviously you were up against a lot of competition in the publishing business in, you know, the limited edition print portfolio publishing business. And you saw the handwriting on the wall, to use your own words.

ROSA ESMAN: Well, then I made a move.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

ROSA ESMAN: Harry Abrams had learned about me and was buying— Every time I put out a publication, he would buy three or four or five for himself, for his family, whatever. And he always said to me, "Oh, this is brilliant, you know. Whenever you want to work for me." And I thought, well, this is going to need a lot of capital. So maybe I'll go talk to Harry. And I went and talked to Harry. And he hired me, and I worked for him for two years on a contract, to do editions for Harry N. Abrams, Inc. He no longer owned the company; it was Times Mirror. So I became part of Abrams—I developed Abrams Original Editions. It was very brief. We did a few wonderful portfolios. But I did not like the big business aspect of book publishing, which was always looking at the bottom line. And I was always having to project the profits, you know. I could make up wonderful profits. Something would cost so much, and I could project that each piece would cost such-and-such and therefore would bring— But none of it was real. It would bring in what the market would take. But we did a few good things. We did a wonderful portfolio with Saul Steinberg and with Jack [John] Wesley who had a big interview in today's paper.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, I saw it.

ROSA ESMAN: Not an interview, a review or something.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, the article. He's the artist this year at the Venice, you know, the Biennale. He's American, or is he—

ROSA ESMAN: No, that's Bruce Nauman.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, Nauman's at the Biennale.

ROSA ESMAN: He's at Prada.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That's right.

ROSA ESMAN: Prada gave him an exhibition. He's a wonderful man. And we went to Stuttgart, and it was his first trip to Europe, to do the printing for his portfolio for Abrams. He was totally in love with it. So what else did we do there? Oh, yes. I found that I was— Harry wanted to publish those artists he liked. I couldn't get Roy Lichtenstein. I tried. I tried to get Andy Warhol. They didn't want to work with Harry Abrams. By that time they were working with Gemini—at least Roy was—and Tyler Graphics. So I couldn't get the artists I really wanted to work with. And I found I was working with artists Harry had liked and bought a lot of paintings by and whom he wanted to promote. Which weren't necessarily my choices. So I, you know, the whole big corporate aspect of having to work for somebody else somehow—having them make the decisions that I wanted to make. I could understand it; they were putting up the money. But nevertheless that was— So I left after my contract terminated, and I left. And that was that phase of my life.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And what year was that?

ROSA ESMAN: Nineteen seventy-two. I worked there from '70 to '72. And then I thought, now what am I going to do because I needed to be doing something. My kids were getting older and whatever. And I thought I'll take my own space and see if I want to go back to publishing. And I took a small space off of Madison Avenue, which was in a big sort of office, like this in an apartment in a brownstone on Eightieth. And I was going to work with Christo. And I put out some tiles by Helen Frankenthaler at that time. And then I had all these walls. And I thought maybe I'll borrow some works and put up something. So I asked Leo [Castelli] if—it was getting towards Christmas. I said, "Do you have a bunch of drawings? Maybe I'll do a little show with you. Or with your material." And I did a little drawing show, and I sold everything.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Wow!

ROSA ESMAN: And I thought, hey, a gallery. So that was the idea, that was the beginning of the gallery.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So that was the opening door.

[END OF DISC 1]

JAMES McELHINNEY: We should probably just try to describe, you know, the room we're having the conversation in.

ROSA ESMAN: This room?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes. Because we're alluding to it in the conversation. How large is this room? Would you say it's like 12 feet by 20 feet, ten-foot ceilings. Fourteenth floor with a view south towards the Empire State Building.

ROSA ESMAN: Open view, beautiful. Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Open view. Sort of, you know, canyon-like heaps of apartment buildings with windows. And very much like canyons or rooftops in New York.

ROSA ESMAN: Nice.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And a leather couch. You've got a desk with a computer and printer. And shelves. It's interesting. The artwork's not hung. It's all resting on shelves.

ROSA ESMAN: So I don't have to have holes in the wall and constantly plug them up.

JAMES McELHINNEY: You don't have any holes in the wall. Two standing lamps and a flat file. Five drawers and a couple of shelves of books.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, there's not much stuff here.

JAMES McELHINNEY: It's very much— It looks like a sort of headquarters on campaign somewhere.

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, really!?

JAMES McELHINNEY: You can roll it up and stick it in the back of a truck and you're out of here in a day if you had to be.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. But there's some nice artwork. Beautiful [Sol] LeWitt gouaches, some little [Dan] Flavin ––

ROSA ESMAN: Pieces and—

JAMES McELHINNEY: But it bespeaks of activity. It doesn't speak about sort of—it's not decorated, you didn't have a decorator do this.

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, no!

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, you know a lot of galleries hire architects and hire decorators.

ROSA ESMAN: They hire architects; they don't hire decorators. And architects who are interested in them.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, not the better galleries.

ROSA ESMAN: They're interested in the purity of the space. All I wanted was sort of white walls—I got off-white walls because that's the way they painted them in this building. And I put up the shelves so I can put up anything that comes my way or that I own or that I borrow. Or that I whatever. Most of this is my inventory, I guess, or my material. Whatever.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So are any of these artworks your collection or—

ROSA ESMAN: No, not here. My collection is home. Here is what is for sale. Or that, you know, good quality pieces that are not part of my personal collection. I try not to—although I've sold too much from my personal collection and now I'm crying. But I try not to do that anymore.

JAMES McELHINNEY: How do you divide—how do you decide what's inventory, what's personala collection?

ROSA ESMAN: It's very interesting. I have— My husband, Aaron, is very positive about what he wants, and sometimes we look at something, and I say, "Oh, isn't that marvelous?" I'm thinking, boy I know who I could sell that to. And he says, "I want it. It's not for you to sell. It's for us."

JAMES McELHINNEY: I see.

ROSA ESMAN: That's one way we make a decision. [Laughs.] He makes it. And I don't know. When I had a gallery, which I did for many years, for 20 years, I worked with artists. And sometimes I would buy from the artists. But I would put up what they produced so there would be this one— And sometimes I bought from group shows that I would put up. And certainly from my artists and whatever. But it didn't overlap too much. A lot of dealers—I think a good dealer is also a collector. Although there are some collectors who say a dealer should never collect because it's in competition with what is his business, you know. And he'll take the best instead of letting his collector take it.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, a chef in a restaurant has to eat.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. But he eats at the end, you know, after it's overcooked. [They laugh.] I often would buy the last piece that was left, and it would turn out to be the best one. You know, who knows? I decided that my taste is better than anybody else's. I didn't know that at the time. But that would happen.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Let's talk a little about how you got into the gallery business. The door opened, and it became clear to you that people were willing to buy art from you. And what was the next step?

ROSA ESMAN: Well, I stayed in that little space on East Eightieth Street. This is my daughter.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: The door opened just as I opened the door.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That's all right. We can—

ROSA ESMAN: Accommodate you. You can listen.

JAMES McELHINNEY: We can include you in this.

ROSA ESMAN: We're talking about how I got into the gallery aspect of my life.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I should tell the tape recorder who just walked in.

ROSA ESMAN: Who walked in?

ABIGAIL ESMAN: Abigail Esman, Rosa's daughter.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Abigail Esman, Rosa's daughter, just walked in.

ROSA ESMAN: The youngest of the three. The third one came along, along the way. I told you about the first two. I didn't mention you.

JAMES McELHINNEY: She was about to start speaking about you as you walked in.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: No, she wasn't, because if she's already up to the gallery part, I was already there. [They laugh.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: So where did you open your gallery?

ROSA ESMAN: It was 24 East Eightieth Street. I should add that my father owned the building. It was a little brownstone. So it made it easy for me to find a nice little space there.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSA ESMAN: And that was where I had this first show around Christmastime where I borrowed the drawings from Leo Castelli. I put in a two- or three-line advertisement in the *New York Times*, drawings. And I mentioned a few names. I had Christo, I had Wesselmann, I had—I can't remember who. And people started coming up to this—oh, was it the fourth floor?

ABIGAIL ESMAN: Third or fourth floor.

ROSA ESMAN: Third or fourth floor. And this rickety elevator.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: But there was the elevator.

ROSA ESMAN: And it was marvelous. I was so pleased, you know. It was so unexpected. And I thought, hey, I could do this. And so I started. Then Sol LeWitt gave me a show of his folded drawings that sold for a hundred dollars. I said, "Well, if they're a hundred dollars, how much is it to you?" And he said, "Well, it's a hundred dollars to me, and they're not allowed to sell for more than a hundred dollars." So I figured, well, how do I pay my month's rent on this show? And I thought, well, it doesn't matter. I'd like to show Sol LeWitt, but I thought, ah, I'll frame them. And the frames were $20, but I charged $40. So, you know, I sold them framed for $140, and I made $20 a drawing. I think we sold out. So I made a few hundred. [Laughs.] Paid my rent.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Paid your rent.

ROSA ESMAN: Paid my rent. Yes. So that's the way it worked. And then somebody told me about a space on Fifty-seventh Street, at 29 West Fifty-seventh Street. Somebody who was in the building thought it would be great for me to come down there. And it meant I had to pay four or five hundred dollars more rent per month, and that was a lot of money in those days. But I did it. I didn't do a big renovation job. I just— The building was falling apart. I didn't know that. But there it was, 29 West Fifty-seventh Street. A very good building, a very good address. And Virginia Zabriskie [Gallery] was there.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: Tibor de Nagy.

ROSA ESMAN: Who?

ABIGAIL ESMAN: Tibor de Nagy.

ROSA ESMAN: Tibor de Nagy, thank you.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: You're welcome.

ROSA ESMAN: Good. I'd forgotten about that. So there were two good galleries. Little did I know. I think I was on the 11th floor there. Little did I know that most of the time the elevator wouldn't work. [Laughs.] However, it got me through for the next five years or so. And then I moved to SoHo.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So—

ROSA ESMAN: By that time I think that I figured I was on the map.

JAMES McELHINNEY: What I think probably a lot of people will be interested in, in the details of, you know, the business, listening to this interview or reading it, would be, okay, you go to 29 West Fifty-seventh. You get the key, walk in the door, what happened from that point on? How did you move from turning the key and walking in the door as a tenant to actually opening the gallery for business?

ROSA ESMAN: I bought a rug, [They laugh.] a carpet. Built a wall to cover the windows. And I guess I put an ad in the paper, and I guess I sent out— By this time I had a mailing list; I'd worked at Harry Abrams. And I had opened—had my own gallery for a few years or my own space on Eightieth Street. So by that time I had a few names and addresses. And I sent out a mailer. And I think I probably put in those little tiny ads in the *New York Times*; it cost a lot of money, you know, for a little tiny ad. But I sent out mailers. And I started seeing artists and going to studios a bit. And having artists contact me. And so I developed a roster of artists whom I showed. And then every month we would have a show, and a lot of the artists' friends would come. Every now and then we'd get a collector.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So you painted the walls. You hung the lights.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Did you have an office or were you out in the middle of the floor with a desk?

ROSA ESMAN: No, it had an office. It had an office, and I didn't have to build any walls; that was all part of it. There wasn't enough capital there for that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: As you explained, the wall over the windows.

ROSA ESMAN: I put the wall over the windows up. Put down a rug, painted the place, and there was a separate little room.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: You hired an assistant.

ROSA ESMAN: I did hire an assistant at that point. I hired an assistant.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Was that the first employee you had?

ROSA ESMAN: She had what was the kitchen, which was a tiny room— No, because I did have a part time—I had a part-time assistant on Eightieth Street, too.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: And when you were publishing, you had people—

ROSA ESMAN: Gaylin Kerns. She was married to one of the artists that I eventually showed, Ed [Edward] Kerns, who was wonderful. He's now director of the art department at Lafayette [College, Easton, PA], if he hasn't retired, I don't think he has.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So what was the first show that you had at 29 West Fifty-seventh? What was your inaugural exhibition?

ROSA ESMAN: In 1975—what was my inaugural exhibition? I don't remember.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That's a question to write that down.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, I'll look it up. I'll look it up. Is that my notebook? You can take it.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I will ask you next time.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, I'll look it up.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I was just curious because it's one of those, one of those questions. Well, let's say—the first year who did you show?

ROSA ESMAN: Probably a lot of young people that nobody particularly heard of and didn't necessarily come forward. But I did have some interesting other shows. I did eventually get very involved in Russian Revolutionary art. Not at the beginning, but I think a few years into my Fifty-seventh Street—maybe the second year I was there.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Like El Lissitzky

ROSA ESMAN: Exactly.

JAMES McELHINNEY: [Kasimir] Malevich.

ROSA ESMAN: And [Alexander] Rodchenko and Malevich.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Tatlin, and Rodchenko.

ROSA ESMAN: [Lyubov] Popova and [Aleksandra] Ekster. And I went to Europe and found some material. And there was a dealer in Paris I worked with. And bought some material and borrowed some material. And I had a very—I mean that was a big part of my early exhibition history, I think, and my passion; I got very involved with that. And that was interesting.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Who was the dealer in Paris, do you remember?

ROSA ESMAN: Jean Chauvelin.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Chauvelin.

ROSA ESMAN: Right. And he had an interesting gallery. I would not say everything he had was necessarily totally authentic. But we ran into a lot of problems at that time with Russian art. I mean the Soviet Union was still strongly the Soviet Union. And the Russians were not letting this material out. And they only let it out when they wanted the money. And then they made their own—I think the government made their own fakes. I don't know. But a lot of stuff was passed off to be the real thing. So it became a real problem with provenance. And when we'd want to ask the provenance, they'd say, "We cannot tell you what family this came from in the Soviet Union because they will go to the Gulag." You know, if you hear—if they learn that these people had been—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Smuggled this artwork out.

ROSA ESMAN: Smuggled it out and even owned it, you know. It was all in the basements. The museums kept it, but they kept it in the basements.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: Didn't you have a contact?

ROSA ESMAN: Did I have a contact in the Soviet Union? Yes, we did. Who was that?

ABIGAIL ESMAN: You had someone who was moving stuff out for you. Because I remember you flying and there were something in diplomatic pouches in Belgium.

ROSA ESMAN: I don't think so. But I never did that. Oh, well.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Cloak-and-dagger art dealing.

ROSA ESMAN: Probably. Probably. I've managed to obliterate that from my memory. [They laugh.] Cloak and dagger, yes. Well, there were ways that things had to be smuggled out. I think Chauvelin knew how to do that. He smuggled for me. [Laughs.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: So what inspired you to concentrate on this area of early Modernism?

ROSA ESMAN: I just loved it. I just loved it. And then I got into early Americans ––

JAMES McELHINNEY: Always, your whole life, or you just—

ROSA ESMAN: No, I—something. What happened? It was before the "Paris-Moscow, 1900-1930" show because I went over to the [Centre] Pompidou [Paris, France] just to see that. It must have been a show here. Must have been some kind of exhibition here. But I mean I always liked abstract work. I mean it was sort of—before pop came along, abstraction was it. You know. Abstract Expressionism was certainly different from Constructivism. But there was something always so harmonious about— And, you know, the [Piet] Mondrian-pure, the Mondrian, the purity of Mondrian.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Neoplasticism.

ROSA ESMAN: Neoplasticism of Mondrian and Malevich, and that whole group of—There were a group Americans, too, American abstract painters who were—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Burgoyne Diller and Ilya Bolotowsky.

ROSA ESMAN: Exactly. Then in our collection we have Bolotowsky, and we have Diller. And we have an appropriation of a Mondrian by Tom Sachs. That's the closest we've gotten to a Mondrian. And I have a Malevich drawing that I love.

JAMES McELHINNEY: There was that wonderful Mondrian show here in the early '70s, I think.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, at [Sidney] Janis [Gallery].

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, but I mean there was a big—

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, a museum show?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right, a museum show ––

ROSA ESMAN: At MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, NYC].

JAMES McELHINNEY: A museum show at MoMA. Yes. I remember that as a kid.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. And then there was a Malevich show here, too, I think.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

ROSA ESMAN: So that became a big interest.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So that was during, you know, the first year of—

ROSA ESMAN: That was the first—during those five years I was on Fifty-seventh Street; I would say the second year.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So what—

ROSA ESMAN: I had two or three shows.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So you found artists, they came to you with their slides or other artists.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, they'd hear about through friends. You know Christo had a friend who did trucking for him who did wonderful paintings, James Yuschick [ph?]

JAMES McELHINNEY: Or built crates, you know.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. There was another one, Bill Fares, who did wonderful things. And Steven [Gwon]—I've got to get his last name, because I have a drawing of his home that I really like. Or maybe it's here. But I think it's home. A lot of young people who were really interesting. And I showed them. And I think a lot of them didn't make it big, and some did. Tom Nozkowski—I showed him for many, many years. He's now at Pace [Gallery].

ABIGAIL ESMAN: Mary Miss.

ROSA ESMAN: Pardon?

ABIGAIL ESMAN: Mary Miss.

ROSA ESMAN: Mary Miss I showed. Oh, a teacher of sculpture at Yale [University, New Haven, CT] now. A woman.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: Hannah Tierney.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, I know who you mean.

ROSA ESMAN: With the burnt wood.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: Oh, oh, Ursula von Rydingsvard

ROSA ESMAN: Thank you. Thank you. I'm glad she's here. Did you see it? Ursula von Rydingsvard. I did a wonderful show of hers. And I remember Mrs. List coming up, Vera List, would come up and buy. I remember she bought one of Ursula's small pieces. So it was fun! It was. And then I moved to SoHo. That was the big time.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So did you establish relationships with collectors there? Did you acquire sort of a loyal collector base, a collector following?

ROSA ESMAN: I discovered there's no such thing as a loyal collector base. I certainly managed to meet a lot of collectors. Particularly I was interested in drawings. So I found there were other people who were interested in drawings. And there were people who would always come and visit me and think I had wonderful shows and would admire me for that. But they went to every other gallery also. And they went and bought everywhere else. Why not? You know I did. [Laughs.] Why wouldn't they?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right, right.

ROSA ESMAN: So the loyal base is— Sure, on a Saturday afternoon one went to the galleries if you were interested in art. And the '70s was not exactly an expansive period of time. There was a recession in the '70s. That's when I decided I was going to into business. So, you know, I struggled. Everybody struggled. I wasn't the only one. But I could never say, you know, I could never feel or would want to feel or expect to feel that there were collectors who would only come to me for advice and to sell them things. The important thing was to get the reviewers in, to get John Russell to walk into my gallery to do a review on Friday was a big thing. And then Roberta Smith. And it would happen, and it was very exciting. And I would feel very good about it. And I remember rushing to get the paper at eleven o'clock Thursday night to see if I made the Friday morning reviews.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So were you aware of them if they came in? Or did they like to sort of sneak in?

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, you never knew. Oh, if they came in? I generally did, but I learned to let them alone.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Not notice them.

ROSA ESMAN: To let them know I was available if they had questions. It was not a good idea to badger them because that is not the way you're going to win friends and influence people. You have to let the work speak for itself.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And what were the duties at this point in time of your assistant? And were they specific?

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, they were secretarial, I think. You know I don't think today I would need an assistant so much. Yes, I would because look at that, galleries have 50 people on their staff. But that was previous to email so there was a lot of letter writing and a lot of bookkeeping.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: It was previous to self-correcting computers.

ROSA ESMAN: I'm sorry?

ABIGAIL ESMAN: That was previous to self-correcting computers.

ROSA ESMAN: Self-correcting, indeed. Yes, it was.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And it's still changing.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: No, I mean, you know, the regular typewriters that you would push—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, I see what you mean.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: You push the reset button or the backspace, and it would white over it.

ROSA ESMAN: I never even hard of that.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: Yes, you had one of those.

ROSA ESMAN: I never had one of those.

JAMES McELHINNEY: IBM Selectric.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: That's the one.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Okay.

ROSA ESMAN: I don't remember that. Well, I didn't use them.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: Well, you had assistants.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, I didn't use those.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: You had Barbara [Caporole].

ROSA ESMAN: I had several.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So you moved to SoHo in the late '70s?

ROSA ESMAN: Eighty.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Eighty.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. I moved to what was Ileana Sonnabend's space on the corner of Spring [and Greene St. –RE]

ABIGAIL ESMAN: Spring and Greene.

ROSA ESMAN: Spring and Greene? Well, okay.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: 121 Spring Street.

ROSA ESMAN: It was a Spring Street address. Oh!

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, there's a picture. Okay, we're in—

ROSA ESMAN: Somebody sent me this. I think it's so beautiful.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, there you go. Yes, Spring Street.

ROSA ESMAN: It is Spring, but what's the corner?

ABIGAIL ESMAN: It's Spring and Greene. And then you moved up Greene Street to 70 Greene.

ROSA ESMAN: Okay.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Great.

ROSA ESMAN: I moved down—I moved down.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: Yes. Because you were at 121 Spring, was at Greene Street you were across from Annie Plumb, and that was where you started with Roland [Hagenberg] because you worked Ed at Annie Plumb. And then you moved to Seventy Greene, which was across from Annie Plumb the other way.

ROSA ESMAN: That's it. I need a kid to do this interviewing certainly.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: [Laughs.] Want to know anything else about her life?

JAMES McELHINNEY: So how did you approach the organization of that gallery? You'd learned the lessons of Fifty-seventh Street.

ROSA ESMAN: I started getting interested in outsider art.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Tell us about that.

ROSA ESMAN: I can tell that my first show was there—I guess it was there. Pascal Verbena. How did I get interested in that? Oh, one of the other shows I had on Fifty-seventh Street was Eileen Gray. I did some rug design. I had rug design drawings in watercolor. They were almost like little constructivist drawings. They were beautiful. A friend—well, she wasn't a friend of mine when I first met her—but a woman named Monika Kinley came from London and sort of was going around the galleries when I was on Fifty-seventh Street. And she walked into my gallery, and we chatted a bit. She was a very charming woman, very attractive, very smart. And it turned out that she was a close friend of Prunella Clough, who was—was, because she's no longer living—a painter, a British painter, and was a niece of Eileen Gray's. And on behalf—And Prunella had inherited maybe a couple of pieces of furniture, but this stack of beautiful drawings of rug designs. And when Monika came to my gallery, I don't remember what show I had, but we talked a bit. And she told me she had this group of drawings.

And I had just become aware of Eileen Gray. I didn't even know about her. But the season before there was a show at the Victoria & Albert [Museum, London], I think, in London that I saw, and it was really marvelous, of her furniture basically. And when she mentioned Eileen Gray to me, I perked up. And, you know, not that many people had heard of Eileen Gray, in America. So she was pleased, and she liked me. And she said, "Well, would you like to do an exhibition of these?" I said, "Oh, boy!" So I mean occasionally I would get this kind of unique opportunity to do unusual stuff. So Monika and I worked on this Eileen Gray show, sold a few pieces.

Monika herself had a collection of outsider art, and we became very good friends. And I went to London and visited her and saw her collection of outsider art. So that I knew plenty about, and particularly—not plenty; but I knew about it. My husband knew about it and was interested in it because we had seen—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, yes.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. It was from the psychoanalytic point of view. So this was pretty much 20th century outsider art that she had.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Like Adolf Wölfli or—

ROSA ESMAN: Right, right. Well, Wölfli was already quite well known—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

ROSA ESMAN: —and was not really contemporary. But she had Henry Darger. She is the one that learned about Henry Darger. And I gave Henry Darger the first one-person show in this country. Nobody knows that. [Laughs.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: So they were mostly European outsider artists.

ROSA ESMAN: They were mostly European outsider art. People didn't know that much about American outsider art. But there were a couple of galleries here. In Philadelphia, Janet Fleisher [Gallery].

JAMES McELHINNEY: Janet Fleisher.

ROSA ESMAN: Fleisher Ollman; it's through Ollman, it's really the Ollman Gallery. He was interested in it, and he brought it to Janet Fleisher, I think. I think in Chicago.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Phyllis Kind [Gallery] in Chicago.

ROSA ESMAN: Phyllis Kind in Chicago and here, yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

ROSA ESMAN: But she never had a Darger show. Anyway, through Monika, I met all of these people. I didn't meet these people. I met—I became aware of the artists. And I introduced it to a friend of mine who was a collector. And he became really taken with it. And he and I together mounted—this is Sam Farber, who is quite well known now. Now he's on the board if not the head of the board of the American Folk Art Museum [NYC]. But he hadn't known anything about outsider art, and he learned about it through Monika and me and became a major collector. And he and I went to visit Henry Darger's studio. Darger had died, but the estate was left in the hands of Nathan—it'll come to me later—in Chicago. And Monika knew him. This was a man who was—Nathan Lerner—who had been a photographer, professor at the New Bauhaus [School of Design] in Chicago. And Darger was his tenant in a building, a little brownstone next to his in Chicago.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh.

ROSA ESMAN: And when Darger died— Darger was this sort of, you know, insular janitor at a hospital, and nobody knew what went on in his room. And he died. And Nathan opened up the room, and there were all these incredible drawings. And Monika learned about them. And I don't know how— She had been with an important curator in London, Victor Musgrave, who had done a major show of outside art at the Hayward Gallery [London, England]. And he was the one who got Monika involved in it, and they knew about Henry Darger. So I learned about all these people from Monika, and I started. And I got my friend Sam involved in this. And together we brought over a lot of the stuff and did the show. And then we did the first Henry Darger show. I had, before Sam was involved, an outsider art show because of Monika. And through her I became interested, and I found stuff here. So that was another— Couldn't be farther from Russian Revolutionary art—[laughs.]. But there you go.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But nonetheless a peripheral kind of niche, taste, nobody else was really paying attention to it.

ROSA ESMAN: Right, right, right. This is the sort of thing I did. [Laughs.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, this seems to be— A lot of people, I think, a lot of dealers have a genius for this kind of thing. They're attracted to an idea. And they're able to get a lot of people excited about it.

ROSA ESMAN: Well, that is the problem. I'm not sure I got everybody else excited about it. I was excited. And then the second time around—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Abigail [Esman] was excited.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. She hardly had the budget to buy out my shows.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, excitement's free. You don't have to pay for excitement.

ROSA ESMAN: That was free. And the next time around, you know, two or three times later, it all happened. And I mean Henry Darger, my God! Today he's [Pablo] Picasso. The Picasso of the outsider world. So that was— I think Pascal Verbene was—is—a postal worker in Marseilles [France]. And he does these marvelous kind of folk carvings. I don't know whether you'd call it more folk art than outsider art. But we slipped it into the outsider thing. And Pascal himself became a friend, a very charming man. But not an art man. He was not in the arts. He was delivering letters and carving wood. And he'd carved driftwood pieces. And we brought these over from France. And I did a little show at 121 Spring. I think that may have been my first show there. And then a bigger gallery opened up down the block, and I left 121 Spring. My landlord had said anytime I wanted to leave, he would break my lease. Then when I told him I was ready to break the lease, he said, "What!?" Well, we did it somehow. I found him a substitute.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So you were able there just basically to walk in. You get the key, just walk in, there's a gallery waiting for you.

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, yes, Ileana Sonnabend's place. Absolutely. And the one down the street had belonged to another gallery that went into—that closed. So I just walked into it.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

ROSA ESMAN: I never did any major—except once. Yes, once I did a major renovation, and that was designed by Maya Lin. So that was my big architectural involvement.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Where was that?

ROSA ESMAN: My final gallery on Broadway, yes. I did get involved with architecture, too. I did architectural drawings—a show of architectural drawings on Fifty-seventh Street. So it was kind of—it was not only the young artists. I did as many interesting group shows as I could. And I got a lot of more important, you know, more important or, shall we say, better-known artists involved in those.

JAMES McELHINNEY: As the galleries grew with each new address, or as the business morphed into a bigger or more complex operation, did you add a registrar, did you add a preparator?

ROSA ESMAN: I added a preparator, and I added a—I don't know. I didn't call her— I had three people working on Greene Street, at 70 Greene Street. At that point Pamela Freund was my director. Robert Young was my preparator who eventually worked with Yoko Ono, and subsequently died—too young. And I had an assistant. [Pamela Freund joined my staff in the mid-80s and was a remarkable, efficient and charming director. Robert Young joined shortly thereafter as Preparator, and his extraordinary talent and capability contrinuted enormously to the efficient running of the gallery. –RE]

ABIGAIL ESMAN: Sarah [last name?]

ROSA ESMAN: Sarah, yes. Thank you. Sarah. So they were on Greene Street with me, and they came to Broadway with me when I moved in 1992—above the Guggenheim on Broadway, 575 Broadway.

JAMES McELHINNEY: 575 Broadway.

ROSA ESMAN: Right. And the Guggenheim was there before it became Prada. But Prada moved in, and took over SoHo. So the Guggenheim and I moved out. [Laughs.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: But we're approaching a point where it would be useful perhaps to wrap up today's conversation, and we can address a number of questions next Tuesday morning when we meet again. So summing up, you've had three sort of major domains of taste and interest: one being the Russian art, the other being outsider art, and overall drawing. What attracted you to drawing?

ROSA ESMAN: Minimal conceptual.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Minimal conceptual?

ABIGAIL ESMAN: Pop, you can't leave out the pop part of your career.

ROSA ESMAN: Well, we talked about the prints.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, we talked about the print portfolios.

ABIGAIL ESMAN: But that's what you're known for. That's what she's known for.

ROSA ESMAN: Well, because a lot of my publications were pop publications. So that's another, yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: What's your own taste, though? What's with your own taste?

ROSA ESMAN: I would say I'm quite eclectic. I mean my taste is still exactly what I've told you: outsider art, maybe I'm a little less involved in that. Well, I'm less involved with a lot of it because I don't have a gallery. But I still like outsider art. I love the Russian stuff. And then I got into Dada. I mean there was a— And I ended up at Ubu Gallery. So it wasn't— The end of it is not Rosa Esman Gallery, but it's 1996 to 2000 when I was part of a three-ownership deal at Ubu Gallery. And there came more of the Surrealism, Dada.

JAMES McELHINNEY: You're alluding to Alfred Jarry.

ROSA ESMAN: Indeed, indeed. And my two partners were—particularly Adam Boxer who now runs Uvu Gallery by himself or with a partner in Berlin; he was very interested in Surrealism and into Dada also. And I had always been interested in Dada. Less in Surrealism, although I became involved in that and really enjoy it. Find it quite stimulating, to say the least. But Dada is certainly another part. And then I had a major Dada show. So that has to be part of it, too. When I moved to 575 Broadway, I opened up with an exhibition of Hans Kleinschmidt's collection. My former partner at Tanglewood Press. He had acquired a collection of Dada, books and prints and some drawings and some photographs. And German Surrealist paintings; but that he had sold at auction, but he still had a lot of drawings and prints. And I had a marvelous show to open up the gallery at 575. I guess it was in the fall of—summer, spring? I don't remember. I have to work that one out. But that was very successful, and that got me into that field. And so I was then—I got a lot of requests over the years in terms of Dada material. So, you know, it really touches on all aspects of 20th century art.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But each one's sort of a niche, too, you know. Each one is sort of a niche.

ROSA ESMAN: And Minimalism is important to me. Why do I like drawings best, you asked. I don't know. Because they are the quintessential bit of the art, you know? First of all, there's a lot of—there's a sensibility in drawings that kind of leads to the painting somehow. They're ideas that are in drawings that are quintessential to art.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes. Some people have said painting is a form, sculpture is a form, drawing is a language. And in a way, to move from painting into drawing, you give up something in the way of possibilities. So there's a kind of a directness or a kind of immediacy in terms of channeling the artist's idea or the experience.

ROSA ESMAN: Right. That's right.

JAMES McELHINNEY: On the marks, on the page, in the graphic realm that is so immediate and so exciting. But one will often hear people say that there are fewer collectors for drawing, it was more challenging, it was more of a.

ROSA ESMAN: But doesn't that make it more exciting?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Or more of an elite kind of—a more educated taste.

ROSA ESMAN: Well, all the reason why I would do that. [They laugh.] But also just because— I don't know that it's elite. But I think it's more of a sensitivity to the thinking of the artist.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Maybe a refinement of taste, and it's not just going for the—Earlier in the conversation we talked about how now, today, for the past ten to 20 years, a lot of people have been acquiring art collections as a way of trying to find status, inclusion socially ––

ROSA ESMAN: Absolutely.

JAMES McELHINNEY: in the world. It's not about the art at all. The art becomes an instrument of social mobility.

And you're talking about a love of the art, what the art really stands for.

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, I think the drawing sort of expresses that a bit, you know. I mean you take—Conceptual art really is the thinking of the artist. And that's expressed in drawings. I mean I think Sol LeWitt's best work would be drawings. He did structures, he did marvelous structures. But they are the results of his thinking process which relates to putting it on paper and then—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right. A lot of so-called painters who are really draftsmen like [Cy] Twombly or Agnes Martin or Sol LeWitt.

ROSA ESMAN: Agnes Martin, her drawings are fabulous.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, yes.

ROSA ESMAN: And I love the mark on paper.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And Ellsworth Kelly does marvelous drawings.

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, yes. Yes, absolutely. And it has to do with the tactility of—I love the tactility of paint. There's a word for that—painting sensitivity, the brushstroke. Factura [ph]?

ABIGAIL ESMAN: Bravura?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Bravura?

ROSA ESMAN: Bravura I don't like. The factura [sp]. I think it's a sort of touch. Just a little touch, that little sensitive mark of a brush stroke.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Facteur is how it's made.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: The tactility, the physicality of the materials.

ROSA ESMAN: Right. And you get that in a drawing. So—

JAMES McELHINNEY: This would probably be a good time to—

ROSA ESMAN: To rest?

JAMES McELHINNEY: To pause in our discussion because—

ROSA ESMAN: Want some lemonade?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Love some lemonade. Thank you. And we'll speak again next week.

ROSA ESMAN: So I have my homework.

[END OF DISC 2]

JAMES McELHINNEY: This is James McElhinney speaking with Rosa Esman on Tuesday, the 16th of June 2009, at 12 East Eighty-sixth Street, in New York City, her office. It's Bloom's Day, did you know that?

ROSA ESMAN: I do know that. It's Bloom's Day. I was just thinking I should be in Dublin.

JAMES McELHINNEY: We should all be in Dublin. Well, we can pretend.

ROSA ESMAN: You're a real McElhinney, you certainly should be.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I have real Irish DNA going on here.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So I have to have a whiskey later.

ROSA ESMAN: I don't have any of that, but I have a strong interest.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I'll have to go to the beach and wander around all night.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, in the bars and out.

JAMES McELHINNEY: There you go. Last week there were a couple of questions we had, and one of them was the inaugural exhibition at your gallery on Fifty-seventh Street.

ROSA ESMAN: Really? On Fifty-seventh Street, not on Eightieth Street? My very exhibition, which were those drawings that I borrowed from Leo Castelli.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right. That you told us about.

ROSA ESMAN: That's one I didn't write down. But I did look up—I don't know why I don't know that. Okay.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, we don't have to include that exchange in the transcript. But—

ROSA ESMAN: No, let's keep it out. There's a list here of names of the printmakers. But, you know, that was in the very early days.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, but that's of interest, yes. That's of interest. So could you please perhaps speak to us about the artists with whom you worked in the realm of printmaking?

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. Well, some of them were just printmakers. Some of them were artists making prints. But there weren't many artists making prints in those days. I think some of the bigger printmakers were Gabor Peterdi, Karl Schrag, William Condon —do you know that name? George Morrison, I think he did paintings. He was an American Indian. Do you know him, that name?

JAMES McELHINNEY: I don't.

ROSA ESMAN: He was part American Indian, very interesting guy. I don't know that I had his prints. I know I had some of his paintings. Will Barnett?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Of course.

ROSA ESMAN: Right. Mervin Jules, who was a Smith College professor. I. Rice Pereira. I don't know whether—I think I had a painting of hers more than any kind of print. I also had some sculptures of George Rickey, some small pieces of his. Because he lived up there. And Ilya Bolotowsky made prints as well as paintings. I mentioned George L.K. Morris as a painter. Louis Schanker. Do you remember him? He was a printmaker back then. We had some prints by John Ferron, silkscreen things.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Of course. Of course.

ROSA ESMAN: Dorothy Dehner did some sculptures. She was married to some—another major sculptor. I can't remember who she was married to. [David Smith]. I would have to dig deep. But we had some sculpture, of course. Adja Yunkers, woodcuts.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes.

ROSA ESMAN: Kurt Seligmann who did these realistic—Surrealistic—prints; I'm sorry. Karl Knaths, another American, sort of part of the American Abstract School, I think. Yes, we had a few Frasconi prints, Antonio Frasconi. Sort of discovered Bob [Robert] Indiana's little paintings, little tiny paintings that nobody knew about them. And I think I had a couple of prints that Grace Hartigan had done with Tanya Grosman, just as Tanya Grosman was starting. Oh, Robert Goodnough. He was a painter. We had some small paintings of his. And then I think we had some paintings of other—kind of new people on the horizon, which was Allan D'Arcangelo [sp] and Richard Anuszkiewicz. And that's about what I recall. And a lot of lesser known people, but there were a lot of things. And prints were going for $40. That's what we were selling, 40 to 75 dollars. I remember I bought a secondhand Hudson car to use that summer, or it was a Kaiser, one of those things. And I think I paid $75 for it. And I thought this is what made me independent. And that a print was worth a car seemed to me incredible; that a print should cost as much as a car. [Laughs.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: What year was this?

ROSA ESMAN: Nineteen fifty-seven, '58 and '59, for three years, maybe into 1960, and then we stopped that gallery. But it was fun. And it certainly launched me into the business and gallery world, so to speak.

JAMES McELHINNEY: When you said up there in terms of George Rickey, you meant up in the Berkshires, up in the Taconic Berkshires.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: He lived in Chatham, Old Chatham, New York?

ROSA ESMAN: He lived in Chatham, Old Chatham, which was 20 minutes away, half an hour. A wonderful man. Wonderful man. And his wife, Edie, was a hoot, is the only thing I can say about Edie. She was kind of wild and hysterical and quite marvelous. Very tall. And George was tall, but Edie was taller, and she would wear George Rickey earring that whirled all around. [Mr. McElhinney laughs.] She looked as if she was going to take off any moment. He was wonderful. We got to know him quite well.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Could you speak a little about actually what it took to become a print dealer as opposed to, you know, just a regular art dealer; dealing with genre of object, a form that perhaps many people weren't as prepared to see as valuable or as—

ROSA ESMAN: The prints?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, the prints. As something that's multiple.

ROSA ESMAN: Well, it was—I felt that the prints would be much more accessible to people who were on a summer vacation and not looking to invest in big things. As I said, prints would sell from $25 to $100 or $150. I mean—and that was in those days a nice amount of money. It was not—it was no giveaway by any means. And I thought that there would be much more of a market. On a vacation people would be walking in. They'd see something they liked, they'd be more willing to buy something at a somewhat affordable price range, than to have to think about a bigger, expensive $500 for an Alexander Calder sculpture, which we also had. So it was more— And it was a realization that prints are original artwork, particularly when they were done by those printmakers. That was their own expression. Instead of using oil paints, they used copper plates and etching techniques and lithographic stones and sometimes silkscreen prints. But they did those originally. So that when I finally went into publishing prints, I wanted to make sure that the artists actually worked on the prints. That I wasn't doing reproductions of paintings.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

ROSA ESMAN: So I always felt they were just as original. But because they came in editions, they were less expensive. In all cases we got to meet the artists and we generally went to their studios, my partner and I. And it was kind of a lovely, informal time. They just let us sign and take a bunch of prints up on consignment, and hopefully we brought them money at the end of the summer.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, how would a young lady in Stockbridge find Adja Yunkers? How would you find—

ROSA ESMAN: You know I'm trying to remember all that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: —Gabor Peterdie.

ROSA ESMAN: I think I went to galleries. I went to like Weyha. Weyha Gallery was a bookshop/print sales place on Lexington Avenue.

JAMES McELHINNEY: W-E-Y-H-A, right?

ROSA ESMAN: W-E-Y-H-E.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Weyhe, E, right.

ROSA ESMAN: And I think she was Gertrude Weyhe was the woman who owned it and directed the gallery and the bookshop. And they had some wonderful prints. And we just borrowed them. And they either gave us a discount, or they—or we got some of the names of the artists from those prints and contacted them directly. Milton Avery was a major artist that we had. I didn't mention him now, but I think I mentioned him last time.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, you did.

ROSA ESMAN: And we had a lot of his wonderful little woodcuts and etchings and small paintings, which we did sell. And at that time they were kind of living hand to mouth, Sally and Milton. They did have a brownstone they lived in, way over on the East Side somewhere. And things were hard. It was the late fifties, and it was—things were better than they had been in the forties. I mean it was the [Dwight D.] Eisenhower years. But art was not part of what the world was about then. The world was still recovering from World War II.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Sputnik, Cold War.

ROSA ESMAN: All these.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Just after the [Senator Joseph] McCarthy era had just passed.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, yes. So things were a little austere, a little frightening still. But art always has its place. And people came and visited us. I mean you'd go for a weekend or several days up to the Berkshires, you'd go to concerts at night, and then where do you go in the daytime, you'd shop around Main Street and look around and see what there is. We had a decent amount of attention, and it was always a challenge. It was always fun.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So apart from George Rickey, were there any artists who actually were in that part of the country?

ROSA ESMAN: George L.K. Morris lived up there, but I never saw him.

JAMES McELHINNEY: He was in—

ROSA ESMAN: He lived in Stockbridge.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, he lived in Stockbridge.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. And there's a marvelous—his home was a marvelous modern kind of Bauhaus style house that was built by an architect from the Berkshires who never did anything else. But it is a white house kind of—well, I say Bauhaus, but it also looks a little like [Richard] Neutra. And it's in the middle of the pine woods. And it is so outrageous in the Berkshire Mountains, you know, where you expect something to be a big country Victorian mansion of some kind, or Federal mansion. This is this modern house. It is now open to the public in the summer. It's called the Morris-Frelinghuysen House. And their whole art collection or part of their art collection—their original artworks—and their collection is open as a museum tour. And I recommend it to people who are going up to the Berkshires, to visit that house. It's kind of an unusual experience and not on the beaten track.

JAMES McELHINNEY: A lot of houses up there like in Vermont, not far away, you've got Robert Frost's house, and then you've got Edith Wharton's.

ROSA ESMAN: Well, we had Edith Wharton up there with us in Lenox. And we have Nathaniel Hawthorne, and we have Herman Melville.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. And Melville.

ROSA ESMAN: So we do have our share of literary stars and artists, but not necessarily visual artists.

JAMES McELHINNEY: The birthplace of baseball, Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. Big minor league—what are they? They're a training camp for the minor leagues. They take it very seriously.

JAMES McELHINNEY: They found a document somewhere in the town records from the 1790's referring to an ordnance against playing baseball within a certain amount of space from the glazed windows, or something like that. I don't know.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. Pittsfield is big in baseball.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Big in baseball.

ROSA ESMAN: It's a nice little city that's trying to get, have a resurrection now. I mean they're redoing some of the old movie theaters and turning them into kind of little palaces.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And they've got a museum there.

ROSA ESMAN: They have the Berkshire Atheneum, I think it's called. But it is a museum. And it's mostly natural history and children's stuff. But they have a collection. They have the [A. E.] Gallatin collection, part of the Gallatin collection there. I mean most of it is in Philadelphia, but there's a little bit up there. Gertrude Greene, Byron Browne.

JAMES McELHINNEY: It's Crane Paper, I think.

ROSA ESMAN: Crane Paper was big there.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That was the money that basically started—

ROSA ESMAN: So you know that area well?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, yes. Yes, I've got some roots and history.

ROSA ESMAN: And now it has Norman Rockwell. Let us not forget the hero of the town: Norman Rockwell.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Norman Rockwell.

ROSA ESMAN: Big museum, there are now. And you see any car with a license plate out of Massachusetts, tootling down Route 183, you know exactly where he's going to turn left, and they always do. Always go to the Norman Rockwell Museum [Stockbridge, MA].

JAMES McELHINNEY: His works got legs. You've got to give him that.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. He was an interesting guy, and interesting painting.

JAMES McELHINNEY: He and I share a birthday by the way.

ROSA ESMAN: Do you? Oh.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes. Not that that's a significant thing. [Laughs]

ROSA ESMAN: I think Winston Churchill and I share a birthday. What does that make me? [Laughs.] A great leader.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, I'm sorry I had to give up smoking big cigars, or I'd ask you for one.

ROSA ESMAN: [Laughs] I never do smoke cigars.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Good for you.

ROSA ESMAN: But I did smoke Schimmel Pennicks.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, those little—from Holland, yes. Well, so what was it like—what kind of things did you have to say to collectors or to buyers in order to sort of make them aware of your concerns, and the fact that these are not just multiples or not just reproductions; they're original works of art.

ROSA ESMAN: I don't think those were concerns back then.

JAMES McELHINNEY: No?

ROSA ESMAN: No.

JAMES McELHINNEY: You like it, you buy it, that simple?

ROSA ESMAN: Pardon?

JAMES McELHINNEY: If you like it, you buy it?

ROSA ESMAN: I think so. You know I don't think they even asked about the rarity. They might ask what does this number mean? And people didn't know very much.

JAMES McELHINNEY: AP [artist's proof]?

ROSA ESMAN: Or six out of 175. Or 40 or whatever. And I would explain. And sometimes we had to tell them what the printmaking process was, you know. Etched on plates or whatever. So there was sometimes explanation. And we think we had—we didn't frame everything up, and we had sort of bins, I guess. Tables or drawers. I don't remember even how we did that. But they were pretty loose. Yes, I think they were in portfolios, matted.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, how did you exhibit them? Were you in kind of bins or were they in drawers?

ROSA ESMAN: I think so. I think we had one big bin with a hard portfolio. But we had stuff on the walls that were mostly paintings that had been framed, you know.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

ROSA ESMAN: And those drawings and Avery paintings and drawings. George L.K. Morris paintings. I'm remembering— and we didn't change them very much unless they were sold. And then we'd put something else up. But mostly the same people did not return unless they came back to buy something, which we hoped would

happen more often than it did. But we did all right. We had a good time. The fun about it was meeting the artists, that was the best part. I mean it just opened up the whole art world to me.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So all of the artists whose work you carried at some point were in the gallery? Were you able to meet everybody?

ROSA ESMAN: I knew a lot of them.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes?

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. I knew Yunkers, I certainly knew Milton Avery. I knew Karl Schrag. We used to go pick up the prints from him every June and get them up there. So I knew most of them, and a lot of them—I think we did our research at Weyhe Gallery. I'm not so sure we got so many pieces from them. But we got to figure out which printmakers we wanted.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSA ESMAN: And then we tried to reach them directly. And in those days, you know, the art—there was no real art world. And anybody interested in taking their work to show in a gallery, it was an opportunity for artists. So they were quite easy about lending us pieces.

JAMES McELHINNEY: There was no problem if you were interested in an artist who showed at Weyhe approaching them on your own? You didn't have to split commissions or anything like that?

ROSA ESMAN: No, that's why we tried to get them directly. Printmakers in those days, they didn't belong to any gallery. They had a lot of prints, and they'd send them out to different galleries to sell.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSA ESMAN: So they were happy to have another outlet. Particularly in a vacation spot because New York City, generally people went away in the summer.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

ROSA ESMAN: Some people came into New York, but they were crazy. [Laughs.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, there are a lot of them here today.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, but it's not quite summer.

JAMES McELHINNEY: A lot of tourists in the city at all times.

ROSA ESMAN: There are. That's because the dollar is fairly cheap based on the euro and the pound. So it's convenient and beneficial for them.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So when you made the move to Fifty-seventh Street—

ROSA ESMAN: That was a big thing.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That was a big thing.

ROSA ESMAN: That was a big thing. My husband said, "What are you doing? How can you afford that rent?" Well, it was a pretty good rent actually. And I just figured I needed more space and it was an opportunity. So I moved there into this sort of falling-apart building, 29 West Fifty-seventh Street, where the elevator mostly didn't work to get you to the 11th floor. But I hung out there and developed a roster of artists whom I represented. And I suppose you want a list of those.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, just off the top of your head in the first year or two of the gallery.

ROSA ESMAN: Well, one of them was Tom Nozkowski, who is now at Pace. Ed Kerns who's a wonderful painter, a wonderful guy. He's been director of the art department at Lafayette College. Used to send me a lot of interns afterwards. A guy named Bill Fares, James Juszcyck. A lot of them were recommended by other artists. I remember Christo recommended James Juszcyck. He made a living driving a truck, trucking art. Bill Fares painted walls, you know. They all did something else.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSA ESMAN: I had a nice group of artists. I think I have left with the Archives some samples of my mailers with

all their names, but I can give them a batch of that. I can give them a whole batch. That's my computer telling me what time it is.

JAMES McELHINNEY: It's three o'clock.

ROSA ESMAN: It's on the hour so I don't hang out here 'til midnight. So I have all those mailers, which kind of recalls everything. But the most exciting things I did, I think, were the theme shows.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSA ESMAN: I did a show, which included [Isamu] Noguchi on wall sculptures, I think it was. And then I think I did a show on designs for playgrounds. One of the people I showed was Chris [Christopher] Wilmarth [sp], I remember. Do you remember Chris Wilmarth?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSA ESMAN: What a wonderful sculptor he was. And a wonderful guy. Totally impossible. I mean really, talk about not psychotic, but, you know, manic-depressive. It was really sad. But when he was fairly even, he was really a neat guy. But he could get so mad at you. And he helped me organize a few sculpture shows. And then I did an architecture show, which is when I showed Louis Kahn. And eventually just did a Louis Kahn travel drawings exhibition.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That was wonderful with sketchbooks.

ROSA ESMAN: Wonderful drawings. There's a woman on 57th Street who now shows them. And then I got involved in the Russian Revolutionary avant-garde stuff, and that became a major interest, and went traveling in Europe and picking up pieces. And then I got into the outsider world, and I got involved in outsider art. So it was all those different thematic things that made my history, my life's work exciting for me, doing research in that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, we talked a little last week about how it seems like your interest in, you know, the graphic arts and Conceptual art and outsider art and, you know, the Russian Soviet Constructivism, etc., would sort of—you know you're in these sort of niches that are not any of them really right in the middle of a hot trend, but all really interesting.

ROSA ESMAN: Cult stuff.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Cult stuff.

ROSA ESMAN: Realism, Dada, you know, cult stuff. Yes. That's true.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But very loyal adherents all of those, very passionate.

ROSA ESMAN: Absolutely. And it sort of doesn't make sense if you talk about outsider art and Russian Constructivism. I mean the other end of the—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

ROSA ESMAN: —line, you know. But the validity as art in all of those instances I don't doubt at all. I mean they just appeal to me.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Have you seen this new film, you know, the documentary about—the name's escaping me. I'm having a— Someone and Dorothy, the two—

ROSA ESMAN: *Grey Gardens* [HBO, 2009]?

JAMES McELHINNEY: No. The husband and wife who collected, who just gave—

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, the Vogels, Herbert and Dorothy.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, the Vogels, that's right, *Herb & Dorothy* [Arthouse Films, 2009].

ROSA ESMAN: No. When is that? It's opening this weekend?

JAMES McELHINNEY: I think it's open.

ROSA ESMAN: It's open already. I've got to go. I mean I've known Herb and Dorothy for years. My daughter's— Maybe I should talk about my children and how this has affected their lives. My oldest daughter worked for 30 years as curator and special representative of Sol LeWitt and Bob [Robert] Mangold both. And she's very close to

Herb and Dorothy. They speak every week. Very fond of them.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So can you speak about them a little bit as collectors? Would they be worthy of an anecdote or two?

ROSA ESMAN: My daughters? You bet. [Laughs.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: Herb and Dorothy, too.

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, Herb and Dorothy. Oh, definitely. My goodness! Herb and Dorothy—I think I first met him when I opened my gallery on Eightieth Street. I mentioned this show of Sol LeWitt, folded drawings. And I could only make a profit by framing them at net price and selling them at retail price for the frames. And Herb came up, and he kept telling me how great these drawings were, these folded drawings were. And he knew Sol, and he had a bunch of them. He was going to get all his friends to come. And by George he did! [Laughs.] So I mean we did sell them out, and I think Herbie helped me do all that. He got everybody up there. Of course he knew all the artists, and the artists were buying them. And he was this sort of whirlwind of enthusiasm for art. And Dorothy, also. Except it was always Herb who was everywhere. But Dorothy was following him, but she was often busy working in the library, and he had his time off sometimes from the post office. So he'd been doing things a little bit on his own. But they were passionate about Conceptual art and Minimal art. And they knew everybody. They knew all the artists, and they were close friends. And they bought everything, you know. But they bought it at very special prices for them because I think the artists were really touched by his passion and enthusiasm. And they wanted him to have what he so appreciated and wanted.

And then I went to their house, which was unbelievable. You know that is worth a—talk about Grey Gardens. The collection of art was under the chairs, under the sofa, under the bed, hanging off the ceiling. You couldn't move in their apartment. And then they had all their animals: their turtles and their fish and their cats and whatever also. And this one bedroom apartment was pretty jammed up. And it would all be tied together in paper with string, you know, and they'd untie it. I don't know that they knew—I'm sure they knew everything they had. I don't know whether they knew where it was. So it was inevitable that the National Gallery [of Art, Washington, DC] or some such important collection should eventually receive them and take care of them. Anyway, it was just absolutely unbelievable. And apparently even though they've given to the National Gallery or sold, whatever, they're still under the sofa and under the chairs. I mean there's still more. I don't know how much they're acquiring these days because they're now very old and somewhat ailing. Herbie's ailing.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That's too bad.

ROSA ESMAN: But they are— Did you see the movie?

JAMES McELHINNEY: I have not seen it. One of my students at the Art Students League was involved in it in some way.

ROSA ESMAN: Where is it now?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Cinema Center or—

ROSA ESMAN: I think my daughter's in that, Susanna. Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: It's—yes. I've spoken to a couple of people who've seen it, and—

ROSA ESMAN: Did they like it?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes. I think everybody seems to really be— Well, yes.

ROSA ESMAN: It's a very kind of poignant, touching situation. How often do you find people like that with this incredible passion for artwork coming from really kind of limited educational background?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, in a world where art has been recently linked to just status and glamour—

ROSA ESMAN: They had it before then. It was always there.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right, right. Which is always an aspect of the art world. But here these people who are just very enthusiastic about—

ROSA ESMAN: About art.

JAMES McELHINNEY: About art. About what they love.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, extraordinary. But there are people like that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Were there any other collectors with whom you worked who leap to mind?

ROSA ESMAN: Well, I mean just the opposite with the same passion would be somebody like Werner Kramarsky. Wynn Kramarsky. Do you know him?

JAMES McELHINNEY: I don't know him.

ROSA ESMAN: Oh. He has a fabulous collection. And he opened up a sort of gallery space just to show his drawings, never to sell them or anything. But showed them in SoHo, oh, about 15, 20 years ago. Tjhen he eventually closed it. But he is a man of means. I think he's an émigré during the war from—is it Belgium? Holland? Holland, Holland. He's of Dutch background. And his family had van Goghs. And he came here, and retained the family wealth or remade it—I don't know. But he has the same passion, and I'm sure he's friendly also with Herbert and Dorothy. And it's just another element of this passion. But he always had the money. But he bought people who were, again, not on the—not the big names. But young emerging artists he would buy in depth directly from the artists. He didn't like dealing with galleries too much. He enjoyed the dialog with the artists and meeting them and knowing them and buying their work from them and knowing he was helping them develop. And he ended up with a fantastic collection of stuff.

JAMES McELHINNEY: What was his taste? What was his particular direction?

ROSA ESMAN: Drawings. Always drawings. I have his book, which is a collection of—a book of his collection, which may be home and may be here, I don't know.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That's okay.

ROSA ESMAN: But it's a wonderful book. And he has Eva Hesse in depth. He has Sol LeWitt in depth. He has Bob Mangold in depth. But drawings. And I think most of them black and white. So that is his particular connection. But I mean he's somebody that should be interviewed for the Archives. He has some wonderful anecdotes, I am sure. And there are many such collectors.

JAMES McELHINNEY: What do you think makes a collector a drawing collector, apart from the fact that that's what they—

ROSA ESMAN: I think a very strong interest in kind of the roots of what makes art. I think drawing is sort of the—Maybe it's an interest in the concepts of the artists. An interest in the artist's thinking in developing an artwork. Because I think more than anything, the drawing expresses the incipient thoughts or the direction that artist wants to go. And it's more intellectual. I don't know. It's more cerebral. I happen to love drawings myself. And I am very partial to them. And more than anything, more like— Printmaking is a little complicated. You have to consider technique. You have to—it's a more arduous task. And painting also requires additional stuff. But drawing is thinking on paper.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I think, yes, that's right.

ROSA ESMAN: And I think it has a great appeal for certain people who appreciate the thought process.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So in your experience, though, what kind of—could you sketch out a profile of a drawing collector? Say what kind of wine do they drink? Do they drink white or red? Are they vegans? Do they eat sushi?

ROSA ESMAN: I would hope red. No, they are not vegans.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Do they ride horses? I mean is there any way you could, in your experience, just sort of characterize?

ROSA ESMAN: They go to galleries, they go to exhibitions all the time. And they get to know the artists. I think they like the personal experience, I think, maybe of knowing the artist also, which is one way of getting— They like to get into the mindset.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I see.

ROSA ESMAN: That would be my guess.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I have heard that some artists don't want to meet collectors. They don't want to be—

ROSA ESMAN: Probably. But it depends who the collector is.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Or the artist, yes.

ROSA ESMAN: Or the artist. But I think specifically the collector. If it's the kind of Wall Street financiers that have hit the market so big at the beginning of the 21st century for eight years, let's say, and it was merely a question of vanity and being chic and being ahead of everybody else, I don't think artists are particularly interested in those people.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I don't think so.

ROSA ESMAN: But the collector, I think, Wynn and the Vogels have enormous friendships, many friendships and sincere friendships with artists because they appreciate what the artist is doing, not the value of the work. So I think they're more thoughtful people, that's all I can say. So would they drink red wine? Thoughtful people drink red wine. I prefer it. So I like to think thoughtful people drink red wine.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So we know you like red wine.

ROSA ESMAN: I like red wine, yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: A very salubrious drink, they say.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: It makes you feel good.

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, I don't know, but I like it. [Laughs.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: And good for you.

ROSA ESMAN: Dark chocolate's good for you, too.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And the list goes on.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. All those sinful things.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So of all the genres that you've dealt with, whether it be Soviet art or outsider art or drawing or Conceptual art, each one of them I would expect has a different, slightly different kind of collector.

ROSA ESMAN: Mmmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: In dealing with all of those different genres, which did you enjoy the most—or do you enjoy the most? Which do you recall most fondly?

ROSA ESMAN: I think those collectors who care about the things that I care about. So it could be—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Any of them.

ROSA ESMAN: —any of them. Most specifically I think—I think Conceptual art and some of the Russian Constructivists works or all of them require a certain kind of thought process. And I like the intellectual challenge of those works. And I think those collectors who feel challenged are the ones—they're more interesting people, you know. They're thinking people.

JAMES McELHINNEY: They're people who want to learn about what they're looking at.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, yes. Absolutely.

JAMES McELHINNEY: They don't just—

ROSA ESMAN: But then sometimes you also get an Ah! Sometimes you get that with a painting or particularly I used to get that with Russian works of art, which I guess I know so well now. But it used to be an Ah! You know I'd see a Popova paintings or Malevich or Lissinzki, and I would go oh! Maybe because they were so rare you never saw them. I mean the experience! There was a show in Paris, the Paris-Moscow show, which was in the early '90s, I think. And I went to Paris and saw that many, many, many times. It was just like every time I went, oh! [They laugh.] They were so gorgeous. There was something so gorgeous about those paintings. And maybe there's a certain kind of restraint. I mean I can appreciate Expressionism, particularly German Expressionism. In fact I really like German Expressionism. But I think it's the restraint of the other paintings that really moves me. I get really emotionally attached. It's kind of funny.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And these are the Russian abstractionists, yes.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. Constructivists and Suprematism and all that stuff.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, unlike the Conceptual artists with whom you worked, or unlike some of the printmakers, it would seem like the Russian Constructivists art, being mostly historical art, you would have no contact with the artist. You would have a different kind of insight.

ROSA ESMAN: Never, unfortunately.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So did you ever meet anyone having to do with any of the people, like El Lissitzki's granddaughter or—

ROSA ESMAN: His grandson. He has a grandson whom I hear is very difficult to work with. I've never met him.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Is he in Russia?

ROSA ESMAN: I did—I met Rodchenko's son. I did. I saw the family, and his son and daughter-in-law and the granddaughter. We visited the family in Moscow. They were lovely people. I mean that was an experience. We went there one evening, my husband and I. And he lives, the son, lives in the same studio apartment on Kirov Street, No. 2, or something. Kirov Street. I can't remember what it is in Russian, but it was Kirov. In the same studio that his mother and father, Varvara Stepanova and Aleksander Rodchenko lived in. And he had a notebook, a big fat notebook, that he pushed over for us to look at on the table. And we turned it over page by page. And each page had a gorgeous watercolor work of Rodchenko. It was like his thought process. It was mind-boggling. It was better than being in the basement of a museum in that we had it in our hands. These were things that, you know, had never seen the light of day. They were all in a book. And how many people had ever seen them? That was like one of the great art experiences of my life, I would say, just sitting there. He was a lovely man. His English was quite good. Other than that, I don't think there was anybody around.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So there was no contact with anybody who had any kind of personal link to the work in terms of its making?

ROSA ESMAN: No, nobody that's still alive. Unfortunately.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I heard a wonderful story from the art historian Robert Herbert, who worked on French paintings of the 1880's and '90s, like [Georges] Seurat.

ROSA ESMAN: [Laughs.] Pretty good.

JAMES McELHINNEY: He said he was at a conference in Arles, which was obviously on van Gogh. At some point in the proceedings, this scholarly event in some auditorium, there was a ruckus in the back of the hall. And this woman comes, an elderly woman, a very big woman with I think he said a fur coat and hat and a hair-do, a rose, red lips, comes up. And they try to— You know guards are seeking to calm her or eject her. And all she said was, she said, " C'est moi. Je suis ici, c'est moi l'enfant Roulin—in French]." So it was the baby—

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, of the postman.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, the postman's baby. She comes stumbling in. It must have been the '60s.

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, my God!

JAMES McELHINNEY: She must have been in her '80s then, or more. Just a little baby. There she was.

ROSA ESMAN: Just this historic.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So it's this historic, across the centuries. So it seems like working with the Conceptual artists would have been, at that time, very exciting because it was so new, it was so much outside of the normal kind of paradigm of painting and sculpture. Posing a lot of questions about meaning and content abiding within.

ROSA ESMAN: And the works were a lot of drawings.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

ROSA ESMAN: That expressed these concepts.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, drawing almost becomes the logical medium because it's the form in which art is the least object it can be. You know if it's art that's not about being an object then it has to have something.

ROSA ESMAN: Then they become objects just because they're there and they're in the market they become

objects. But you're right. They are a thought process, which is what drawing is about, I think.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, intellectually I think you take something like Sol LeWitt drawings that you exhibited, you know, the folding drawings.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, about folds.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Or you have a [Robert] Rauschenberg erasing a De Kooning drawing. And all of a sudden that changes the whole context for all other drawings future and past.

ROSA ESMAN: Exactly.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So it's an interesting—

ROSA ESMAN: So everything builds on everything else. That's the other exciting thing about the art world, I think. The building up of art history and how every step affects the next step. And how that next step is influenced by if it's only as a contradiction to. Like American Expressionism being a breakout from the European kind of controlled abstraction, and the New York School sort of a breakout from that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, the New York School is certainly a hybrid.

ROSA ESMAN: And then into pop and then from pop into that kind of neo-Expressionism. And it's like fighting, fighting your fathers, it seems to be.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, I think that's true. But it's also—

ROSA ESMAN: In many instances.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes.

ROSA ESMAN: Sometimes a development, but sometimes it's a direct contradiction to, an effort to overturn what was learned in school and to become your own master.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes. A lot of people felt, both in the world of Conceptual art and also, you know, the return of representational painting sort of happened at the same time.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Was a reaction or at least a fatigue or disgust or weariness with sort of the tyranny of taste represented by "cultureberg"and institutional Abstract Expressionism. But what's interesting about how this conversation is emerging for me at least is that you're dealing with— (They discuss briefly closing the windows and turning on the air conditioning.) Just as a dealer, you're sort of an intermediary, you're sort of the manager of that tissue that allows artists to interact with collectors and museums and a public audience that's unknown or is just out there in general, the people who walk in the door off the street. And it would seem like as a dealer you would develop a certain kind of style or a certain kind of bedside manner, a certain kind of skill that would sort of lead you into a niche. But here you are, you're dealing, you're right in the trenches with these guys on the one hand, you know, the case of Sol LeWitt or, you know, the Conceptual artists; and then on the other hand you've got—or, you know, the printmakers. And on the other hand you've got Soviet Constructivism, abstract art from the twenties, which is a remote historical thing. And then you've got outsider art, where you're interacting with these sort of—it's almost a kind of schizophrenic—

ROSA ESMAN: Mish mash.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, there's a polarity there. It's like you've got the sort of—

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, it's the extremes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes.

ROSA ESMAN: The extremes, yes. It's much more interesting.

JAMES McELHINNEY: How do you manage that?

ROSA ESMAN: I don't know. Just things that I became passionate about at different times in my life. But I've maintained passion over the years. I suppose some of those passions are more important than others. But nevertheless, I would say I'm perhaps a little less interested in the outsider art. Yet I love discovering new pieces and things like that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

ROSA ESMAN: Also looking for something new all the time. And I must say in recent years I haven't found anything that much exciting in what is new. So then you have to reach back. So I found things that were not so well known about. I mean they weren't—there hadn't been so much interest in that early stuff, the Russian stuff, even in Dada in the '70s or '80s.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Is it safe to say that a lot of what you've seen in the past let's say ten, 20 years that's new is too much about—

ROSA ESMAN: The market.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Novelty.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And not enough about—

ROSA ESMAN: I wouldn't say 20 years.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Ten years?

ROSA ESMAN: Well, yes, I would say the past ten years, I haven't been grabbed. I've been grabbed by individual artists maybe. But there isn't—I haven't found a consistency, or I haven't found a niche, or I haven't found a particularly contemporary thing that pulls me. And part of my problem is that if I open up an auction catalog, contemporary auction catalog for a future auction, I don't know any of the names, and they're bringing in hundreds of thousands of dollars. So there's something wrong with me, I guess, that I haven't kept up. But I don't think I have an interest in it either, so—

JAMES McELHINNEY: But I don't suppose you know the names of horse races either or racehorses.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, if it doesn't interest me, I don't know about it. Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Or greyhounds or anything like that either, which also sell for a lot of money.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. But art is supposed to be where I am. [Laughs.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: My analogy is that, you know, a lot of—

ROSA ESMAN: Some of it has to escape you, and you don't like all of it. So you can't concentrate on all of it.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And a lot of the art that has been in view in the last ten years as being important and new and important is, well, who knows what will actually stand the test of time?

ROSA ESMAN: Well, that's what I doubt, you know. I think what I've been interested in does.

[END OF DISC 3]

ROSA ESMAN: And my daughter told me I should talk about certain episodes, specific things. She had one thing in mind—Abigail, whom you met.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Abigail, whom we met last week, yes.

ROSA ESMAN: She said I should talk about the time Leo Castelli fainted in our house. Do you want to hear about that?

JAMES McELHINNEY: I think it's all good. Let's hear it.

ROSA ESMAN: Well, it was sort of an unusual time, and I would say it was in the '80s? No, it was more like in the '70s. And I decided to have a New Year's Day party sort of last minute. And I was amazed that—I think New Year's Day was a Sunday, and nobody had planned anything. I started calling people up to come over on New Year's Day, you know, the week before.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSA ESMAN: And I think there were art people or some artists and some colleagues of my husband, who's a psychoanalyst. And some art dealers. And I asked Leo to come over. And Leo arrived, and it was late Sunday afternoon, we're having a cocktail party, and everybody—there were maybe 30 people around and it was all

quite convivial and everybody was having a good time. And Leo was pontificating about something or other, very interesting. Every time he talks, it was always interesting. He had a glass of wine in his hand, and suddenly his knees buckle up under him, and he collapsed on the floor. And there was this party of 30 people watching him do this. You know nobody could even catch him it just happened so quickly. And it was really very frightening.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I would think so.

ROSA ESMAN: It was very frightening, and a lot of his artists were there. Well, we called an ambulance. They came, and a bunch of medics kind of hung around and took his shirt off. And they're sort of working on him. And he suddenly sits up and he looks around, and he says, "Oh," he says, "I'm so sorry. This often happens to me when I drink white wine." Everybody laughed and said, Wow! We don't think it's just something because you just drank white wine. And they said, "I think they need to take you back to the hospital and check you out." And he said, "No, no, no, no! This always happens to me. I get a little faint when I drink white wine." And then of course they insisted that he come to the hospital, and they took him in, and they gave him a pacemaker, which he lived with until his 93rd year or so of life when he died, a few years ago. But that was sort of the sensational episode in my history when Leo Castelli almost left this world in my house on New Year's Day. So that was just an episode that had everybody terrified. Particularly when he said, "Oh, I don't have to go to back to the hospital. This happens to me all the time"

JAMES McELHINNEY: I guess the carpet was happy it was white wine.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, I think the carpet was happy it was white wine. I didn't notice whether it spilled some, but it must have. I think he managed to put it down [laughs] as he went down because he's very punctilious, you know, he was a very proper man.

JAMES McELHINNEY: The sign of a true adept, you know, to put the drink down before you collapse. [Laughs.]

ROSA ESMAN: There were very few episodes like that in our lives.

JAMES McELHINNEY: What about memorable artists. You spoke about working with Yoko Ono.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. Well, I worked with Yoko Ono when I started—when I was at Ubu Gallery after I closed my gallery. We did a drawing show, at least one, I think maybe two during my time there. And she was a lot of fun to work with. She's very quiet, very shy, very generous woman, very withdrawn. But she's out there, she's plenty out there. And, you know, we had a lot of success with her work. And she has a very strong history, another interest of mine, Fluxus. So she was a Fluxus product. A very serious artist on her own. And has a wonderful history about her, and she's still quite close to the gallery and my former partner, Adam Boxer. And we were quite friendly. And it was—we had a good time working with her.

JAMES McELHINNEY: What was it like organizing the drawing show with her?

ROSA ESMAN: Well, it was easy. First of all, she does have an agent, Jon Hendricks, who is an old, old friend of mine, and who also works with a major Fluxus collector in the Midwest. And so he has a strong interest in Fluxus, but he's also specifically involved with Yoko. And he came to the gallery one day and just liked the layout, and asked us if we were interested in maybe showing some drawings of Yoko's. And that's how it all happened. So it was easy to work with her because Jonathan—Jon, excuse me—Jon Hendricks—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Is that with an X—Hendrix?

ROSA ESMAN: C-K-S. Jon.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Jon and Jonathan.

ROSA ESMAN: He is the brother of Geoffrey Hendricks who is also a Fluxus artist.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Okay.

ROSA ESMAN: And it was good. We had a good time with her. It was most enjoyable.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Who exhibited in that show?

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, that was just a one-person Yoko show.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, it was a Yoko show.

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, the Fluxus show. Then we had a Fluxus show.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right. Well, I was just asking because just to sort of read some anecdotes into the record about working with Yoko Ono curating the show.

ROSA ESMAN: She didn't curate the Fluxus show.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Oh, she didn't. We did.

ROSA ESMAN: We did a show on her drawings.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Her drawings.

ROSA ESMAN: Her drawings.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That was a solo show. I misunderstood.

ROSA ESMAN: A solo show of kind of pointallist drawings: quite simple, beautiful black-and-white drawings. Fluxus show was a separate show of all the old Fluxus artists from the '60s. And we did that in the late '90s sometime. And it was good. And we got an interesting crowd of people who remembered the period and were collectors of that material. And all very international. A lot from South America. So that was good. So that's another niche. [Laughs.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes. So how do you—

ROSA ESMAN: Another kind of cult niche.

JAMES McELHINNEY: How do you do it? Do you sort of Monday, Constructivism; Tuesday, outsider art; Wednesday—

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, No, [laughs] no, it's more like a year devoted to one thing. And another year or two devoted to another thing.

JAMES McELHINNEY: No, I think it's a valid question because I'm sure that some of the people reading this interview will be curious about how you managed to husband all of these separate strains that don't really have a whole lot of overlap. They're really very individual.

ROSA ESMAN: To me they're all kind of wonderful—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, you're the intersection.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. I just think that they're all kind of wonderful areas I mean that have a particular—they each have their raison d'etre. They're sort of each is integral to itself. I don't know. I just—I suppose I didn't love them all at one time simultaneously. You develop, you evolve, and you discover things. I mean I may not— I discovered each one, each section, separately, you know.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Is there anything that you've outgrown over the years?

ROSA ESMAN: I don't think so. I don't think so.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Just expanding your—

ROSA ESMAN: I mean I think I still went to any exhibition of anything of this period. Well, listen, I look at art all the time that I can, you know. Sometimes I spend too much time in front of my computer, and I wish I were out at the galleries. But I try to get out, and— I mean that's my—outside of my own personal life, that's my raison d'etre.

JAMES McELHINNEY: How has the computer changed the way that you—

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, incredible! I wish I'd had a computer all those years [laughs] that it didn't exist. Oh, it's incredible. I mean I can sit here alone and go around the world and touch things and find things.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Sure.

ROSA ESMAN: And, oh, my! Yes, incredible!

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, you know, the whole ease of—

ROSA ESMAN: Communication.

JAMES McELHINNEY: —emailing announcements, remembering stuffing envelopes and licking stamps.

ROSA ESMAN: And the money.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And the money.

ROSA ESMAN: Reproductions and oh!

JAMES McELHINNEY: The jpeg's versus transparencies.

ROSA ESMAN: And you had a mailing house that you sent, and you had to clean up the mailing list because you had duplicates or people were dead or they'd moved. And it was oh—You'd have interns just to do stupid things like that. [Aside to assistant:] You're lucky to have a good job here.]

JAMES McELHINNEY: So how much do you actually do online now? Are you—

ROSA ESMAN: I'm online all the time, constantly.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So that's the primary—

ROSA ESMAN: If I'm looking for artworks for different collectors all the time. I'm either doing email or I'm online. It's why the phone doesn't really ring that much.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So you don't have a gallery per se. So let's say if you—

ROSA ESMAN: I don't have a gallery.

JAMES McELHINNEY: No, but you've got art on the walls here.

ROSA ESMAN: Four walls.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right, four walls. But if I'm a collector, and you have a piece I want—

ROSA ESMAN: Well, I'll go find it for you if it's not here. And how do I find it?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes?

ROSA ESMAN: On the Internet.

JAMES McELHINNEY: On the Internet.

ROSA ESMAN: Well, also connections, know people who maybe have certain things. But if I don't, I'll try to find it. And I'll try to be esoteric to find sources that nobody else can find on the Internet. How true can that possibly be? But, you know, you work it to the limit.

JAMES McELHINNEY: The Internet, I guess, is like any other part of the world; its secrets will be revealed to people who pay attention in the right way.

ROSA ESMAN: Right. So I do the paying attention and hope that the person I'm offering something to hasn't paid as close attention as I have, and therefore it will come as a novelty.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So would a collector view a piece here if they're interested?

ROSA ESMAN: Well, they would get it as an image. And then probably not here because this is a small space. But I could always arrange for something to be shown somewhere. There are a lot of ways that can be done. Or sometimes in locus if it's in a private collection or something.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Do you—

ROSA ESMAN: Generally, if it's small, I certainly bring it here. It's here. If it's a drawing or something like that. But if it's of a major size, no.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Do you do a lot at auction?

ROSA ESMAN: No. But I keep up with the auctions. I used to maybe buy some pieces at auction, but not major pieces.

JAMES McELHINNEY: You know the computer has also changed the auction world enormously with online

catalogs.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, yes. I don't get catalogs particularly—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Email notification.

ROSA ESMAN: —unless I notice there's a lot of stuff in one auction that I am interested in. But I can dismiss them easily by going through it. And I was just doing that this morning. There's an auction coming up in Amsterdam with a couple of pieces that I thought might be interesting. But then I did a little investigating, and I decided no. So that makes it easy. I didn't have to write for the catalog and wait and get it and then worry about it.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, we spoke about Yoko Ono and your working with her. And she's a person—is she still a person with whom you work?

ROSA ESMAN: I haven't stayed in touch with her, no. But I think Adam does from Ubu Gallery. I haven't, no. But she has a whole world of her own that, you know, I'm not an active part of.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right. And—

ROSA ESMAN: I would be happy to see her.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Adam Boxer, is he also—

ROSA ESMAN: Pardon?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Adam Boxer, he is he—

ROSA ESMAN: He's active at Ubu Gallery.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Active at Ubu Gallery.

ROSA ESMAN: They were at [Art] Basel [,Basel, Switzerland]. And I don't know that he's had an exhibition of hers, but I think they've stayed good pals.

JAMES McELHINNEY: What can you share about some of the artists over the years who that you've worked with who would have been perhaps your most memorable solo exhibitions? At your gallery.

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, solo exhibitions at my gallery.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, I know you did a lot of theme exhibitions.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. That's one of my favorite things.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So there was never—

ROSA ESMAN: I had a bunch of very nice artists that I worked with that, you know, I couldn't hold forth any particular one as being a favorite. I could talk about other artists in the art world whom I thought were particularly generous and warm and wonderful. I mean like Tom Wesselmann. He was a wonderful man, a very generous, warm person. So was Roy Lichtenstein. They were kind of very authentic people. I also sort of really enjoyed Andy Warhol. I loved talking to him because he had such a kind of fey way of seeing the world. We had lunch once—you know there was a period of time I worked for Harry Abrams?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, you told us last time.

ROSA ESMAN: And did I tell you about my lunch with Andy Warhol?

JAMES McELHINNEY: I don't believe so.

ROSA ESMAN: We had lunch together. I was trying to get him actually to do a portfolio of prints. And we sat at—One thing good about working with Harry was he—if you were seeing an important enough artist, you had access to the Pavillon Restaurant. Do you remember the [Le] Pavillon? You're too young to remember the Pavillon.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Probably. Yes, I'm afraid so.

ROSA ESMAN: Pavillon was on Fifty-seventh Street and was like the best restaurant in New York. And it was a real treat to go there. And I was there with Roy Lichtenstein once, and I remember specifically with Andy. We

were sitting there, and he looks around. He says, "Isn't the world wonderful? It's a costume party. Everybody is wearing a costume. Everybody is all dressed up. It's just so wonderful." And he had this kind of—I always think it was really genuine. This kind of childlike joy in everything that went on around him, you know. That people were dressed up it was like just to entertain him. [Laughs.] There was something very unreal about that. So I really enjoyed all those people. And I knew them, you know; they were—Probably with Jasper [Johns]; I think he was there when Leo fainted to the floor. Bob Rauschenberg was another very happy person. He was very bon vivant. Well, Jasper's still around. The rest of them are gone, you know. Roy, Tom, Bob.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Can you share an anecdote about Wesselmann? You characterized him as like a generous guy.

ROSA ESMAN: No, I just liked him a lot. I would meet him sometimes. He had an analyst I think who was uptown on the East Side. I'd sometimes meet him on the street. He was just lovely, and he had a lovely wife. He has, his wife is still around, Claire. They were just good people. And I don't think I have an anecdote. But early—I knew him from the fifties because I had some small pieces of his.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, you said that he had—

ROSA ESMAN: At that gallery in Tanglewood. Nobody had ever heard of Tom Wesselmann. His stuff had been at the art lending service of the Museum of Modern Art.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, we talked about that last time.

ROSA ESMAN: And Bob Indiana I had gotten to know. I'd met him somewhere. And I had been at his studio at Coenties Slip [New York, NY]. And he gave me some of his stuff directly. But Tom I'd known maybe the longest.

JAMES McELHINNEY: They both made names, I guess, during pop era, you know, the Wesselmann, of course, known for *The Great American Nudes*, and Indiana for his *Love, Forever Love* print and sculptures of Love and his numbers.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. And his numbers.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Like child's blocks.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I met him once, Indiana.

ROSA ESMAN: He's not easy, but he's—

JAMES McELHINNEY: It was a social event; he had to behave. So I don't know.

ROSA ESMAN: He was quite bitter over the years, he was quite bitter..

JAMES McELHINNEY: That's unfortunate when you see that.

ROSA ESMAN: Well, because he hadn't made it as big as the others did. He has in later years. But he didn't back then. And he never had copyrighted his *Love,* and it was taken up, and he lost that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, wasn't there a big to-do? I'm reaching back 30 years now, but I remember a picture of Rauschenberg sort of having an argument with a collector at an auction house over royalties —

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, that was—I was there, with Robert Scull.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Tell us about that.

ROSA ESMAN: Bob Scull.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Robert Scull, right.

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, that was something. That was an auction house. That was at Sotheby's Parke Bernet on Madison Avenue and Seventy-sixth Street, right?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Now home of Gagosian Gallery, right? It's upstairs.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, but I think that whole building was Sotheby's then.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes.

ROSA ESMAN: Gagosian's on the top there. And Bob Scull put up a wonderful painting of Bob's that he had probably bought from Leo for about six, seven thousand dollars, I would guess, which was a lot of money. And it went up for auction, and it was sold at $50,000, which was a lot of money. It was like 25 million or something today. It was a lot of money. And when the hammer came down—or maybe it was after the whole auction was over—Bob Scull sort of walked up the aisle, and Bob was walking down, and they met each other. And Bob said, "Well, I'm very happy you're so rich on my work." Something very edgy and somewhat derogatory that he was making money that didn't really belong to him, it belonged to Bob. And there was something almost to that because at that point— Well, that was the beginning, I think, of the upward swing of the art market, but it hadn't happened, and artists were still kind of struggling. And Bob was not that well off at that point in life. And I think he felt it very keenly. And then he began this whole movement of trying to get artists' commissions on resales.

And there was a whole strong artists' movement to try to get it. And it was too difficult a thing to enact. Although the State of California passed it as a law. And as a result, the state—all the galleries in Los Angeles sort of made their deals out of the state in some other gallery or something, so that they wouldn't have to give a commission on resales. It was only for resales when there was a higher—a profit that the collector and the gallery made—

JAMES McELHINNEY: They'd have to share the profit, yes.

ROSA ESMAN: —there'd have to be a percentage that went to the artist, which isn't such a bad idea. But was very difficult to enact at that point. So it never really happened. But it was a very strong movement, and there was a lot of collector-artist friction over that issue.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I think these days with art selling for such insanely high prices in some cases—

ROSA ESMAN: On the first—on the primary market.

JAMES McELHINNEY: On the primary market. But that I even heard a story—unconfirmed—about a gallery in Chelsea that had a show hung with all red dots on the wall, and none of the pictures were actually sold. Several of them went to museums or collectors as sort of bribes, and then the whole thing got warehoused. And two years later they started making calls saying we've got this—just come available—pretending that it was being sold for the second time.

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, really!

JAMES McELHINNEY: They hadn't sold actually the first time.

ROSA ESMAN: The first time, yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But since that's not really illegal, it's alleged—

ROSA ESMAN: And did it work? It's not illegal.

JAMES McELHINNEY: No, it's not illegal at all.

ROSA ESMAN: It's immoral.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That is a different matter, yes. But I'm happy to hear you say that because I think—

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, there's a lot of, you know, questionable morality among art dealers. There's no question. I don't like them all to be tarred with the same brush.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, as a person who has been in that world on the other end of things, yes, I think many people do assume that out there among all of the dealers, many of whom are honest, many of whom are wonderful examples of how to conduct a business, how to love art, how to appreciate art—

ROSA ESMAN: Absolutely.

JAMES McELHINNEY: There are people who are doing their own little Ponzi schemes on selling a painting from one artist to pay another artist and so forth. It's as old as the hills, that tale.

ROSA ESMAN: Well, sure. And I mean it isn't always easy for certain dealers, you know. They sometimes don't get to pay their artists because they're paying their rent, and that's not fair either, you know. It's not fair to the artist. On the other hand, they've got stay in business. So it's tough.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Have you ever heard of galleries being, using or— How shall I put the question? A gallery's running on—

ROSA ESMAN: On money that doesn't belong to them?

JAMES McELHINNEY: —on money other than sales that the artists, some of the artists in the gallery, put in as investors.

ROSA ESMAN: No. But those are co-op galleries, I think. You mean real galleries?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes.

ROSA ESMAN: Where the artists are investors?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, the artists are investors with the dealer.

ROSA ESMAN: With the dealer who theoretically owns it? Could very well be possible, but I don't— Do you know of such?

JAMES McELHINNEY: I do. Or at least I've heard of such cases.

ROSA ESMAN: Well, are they reputable?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, yes. It's just an interesting model.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. Well, back when I had a gallery, I don't think those artists were that rich. Or at least my artists certainly weren't.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, I guess the point is that that whole effort to try to create some kind of a residual income for artists on the basis of resale isn't being spoken about nowadays because artists are making so much money.

ROSA ESMAN: Of course.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So nobody feels sorry for them.

ROSA ESMAN: Some artists.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, some, some.

ROSA ESMAN: Those who make it to galleries and have their first shows often have their first shows, maybe at a small price. But once they sell, they up their prices soon. I don't know how this is going to be true from now on, in 2009. It had been true up until early 2008. But it's a different economy now.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, in the early '90s there was another collapse.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, there was. That's when I closed my gallery.

JAMES McELHINNEY: After the '87 stock market crash. It took two or three years to actually hit the art market. But how do you think this '08, '09 economy compares to the—

ROSA ESMAN: I can tell you I'm happy I don't have a gallery now. Very happy! For a long time I missed it. But I'm very happy not to have it now. Yes, I think it's a bad time. I think a lot of galleries are going to close, and they have to have other resources besides their art. And it could be the investors who are willing to keep them going in order to—investors being collectors also, you know they get good prices on whatever they want from that gallery. But I think everybody's suffering. I mean Larry Gagosian knocked off 40 people from work, and everybody took a cut. Pace— I don't know if it was 40 people. Pace cut something like 30 or 40 people. I know that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That's what I heard.

ROSA ESMAN: Reduced the prices on some artists.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I imagine after the failure of the Modern sale or auction, one wonders the outcome of the Picasso show at Gagosian, if that was—

ROSA ESMAN: He didn't have that many for sale. He had some for sale. And I think they sold a couple. I think they managed to make ends meet.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Right.

ROSA ESMAN: I don't think they made money on it.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So it was probably not a wildly profitable undertaking, but they—

ROSA ESMAN: Well, I'm sure the [Piero] Manzoni wasn't either. Did you see that? That was an incredible show. I mean I think it's impressive that Gagosian has finally gotten around to doing these really historical exhibitions that are not necessarily— There's always something for sale in the backroom to make it worthwhile. But these were, I mean this it Richardson, John Richardson? It was a very impressive show, and it had an incredible catalog. And the Manzoni was another one, and not many pieces for sale. So I guess he managed to sell the one or two that would be that would make the money to make the whole show worthwhile and profit from it.

JAMES McELHINNEY: It might be a good way to segue back into the whole idea of sort of the ethical conduct of a gallery. One of the things that I think one expects of a gallery, when it evolves into a certain realm of establishment and longevity, is that it doesn't follow necessarily the same kind of mercenary agenda. That they actually do undertake exhibitions that are more scholarly or more—

ROSA ESMAN: One would hope they would do that if they can do that, yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: If they have the means.

ROSA ESMAN: But they are— If they have the means. They have to be a very rich gallery and a very successful gallery.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So it's a function of noblesse oblige.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes.

ROSA ESMAN: And I think maybe Larry's been doing that a bit. But I frankly don't think it was from noblesse oblige. I'm sure there was some hidden agenda that there were a couple of pieces that would be for sale. But nevertheless, he produced this year two marvelous historic shows that we should all be grateful for. They could have gone to museums.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, a museum, one might easily have a look at a museum exhibition blockbuster, another King Tut experience, and say, Oh, this is just, you know, to pack people in and make money.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But somebody working at the museum would say, Well, just because we're not-for-profit doesn't mean we can't make money. It's just how we spend it.

ROSA ESMAN: They have to make money.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That have to make money.

ROSA ESMAN: They have to make money; they're not that much not-for-profit. They only get a certain governmental support.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But what kind of—as a person who's spent over a half century in the art business—what is your ethical credo? How would you like to be dealt with, and how to you deal with people? And where do you drawn the line who you'll deal with who you won't deal with based on how they conduct their business?

ROSA ESMAN: Well, I think I would deal with anybody who deals with me fairly. I mean if I know somebody—I suppose if Bernie [Bernard] Madoff walked in here to buy something, I would throw him out. But if he really had money in his pocket—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Out the window, right?

ROSA ESMAN: Well, maybe. But if he opened up his wallet and showed me not a check but cash, I don't know that I would refuse just because he's a crook. [Laughs.] It's not going to happen, but I don't think— You know I wouldn't deal with Adolf Hitler. But I don't—

JAMES McELHINNEY: He had lousy taste anyway.

ROSA ESMAN: Pardon?

JAMES McELHINNEY: He had lousy taste anyway.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, he did. He did. I don't think I have the artwork that would appeal to him. I don't think I'd show him. But I think anybody who is— You know I've dealt with people— Actually I did have one collector like that who really ended up being a real crook, not with me. But he was a dealer in classical Greek material in London, and he apparently smuggled stuff out of Greece. And, you know, all this stuff.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Probably a lot of pot hunters and that kind of—

ROSA ESMAN: A lot of what?

JAMES McELHINNEY: Pot hunters. The sort of archaeological thieves.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. But I mean real sculptures, Greek sculpture, Greek works of art that were taken out, smuggled out from the archaeological sites and things like that, that belonged to the country of Greece. And he got into a lot of trouble with that. I remember that he bought— I don't know that I knew that when he bought some paintings of a contemporary artist I showed. I do know that it took him a long time to pay. It was just a few thousand dollars, and he was dealing with, at that time, today it would be millions. But then it was hundreds of thousands of dollars in material.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSA ESMAN: And I was very annoyed with him. And I don't think I would sell to him again because he was so irresponsible about paying, which he did eventually. But if I thought somebody came in who I didn't know, who had not been an out-and-out crook with me, who had maybe a bad reputation that I wasn't really sure about, who was going to treat me squarely, I would, I think, both for me and for the benefit of the artist I was selling—unless it's on the resale market, which is just for me—I think I would do business with him. I would have to know for sure that— But I certainly would not want to deal with any out-and-out crook from my own point of view.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Did you ever have—

ROSA ESMAN: Money on the table is hard to turn back.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Did you ever have to run—

ROSA ESMAN: I never really was—

JAMES McELHINNEY: —like a credit check on anybody, D&B [Dun & Bradstreet]?

ROSA ESMAN: No. I've never— It was interesting. I think only once in my life did a check bounce. And then I took the guy to small claims court and got my pieces back. It was like $3,000, and I think it was after I closed my gallery. It was a private sale. The guy bought something, and his $3,000 check bounced. I was outraged. It just had never happened to me before. I think it once happened, and it was a mistake. He called up the collector, and he said, "Oh, you know, I just transferred my money from one account to another." It was an honest mistake, and I had money in 24 hours. But in all those years I never got—nobody ever sent me a check that wasn't right.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Is that because you're—

ROSA ESMAN: There were dealers in Europe where I sent work for shows that I never got the work back; I will say that. I remember that now suddenly. It was about 30 years ago.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Is that because you think you're a good judge of character?

ROSA ESMAN: No. I think that people are basically honest. People who buy art are basically honest. Except for the guy who stole from me. That's another story. Stealing art.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, tell us that story.

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, the famous Philadelphia thief.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Dr.—yes, actually. I know of him. Dr. Stein or—

ROSA ESMAN: Was he a doctor? I don't think this guy was a doctor.

JAMES McELHINNEY: What was his name? What is his name? Oh, I tell you, I knew the FBI agent who arrested him.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes, yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Because he lived in Philadelphia. I had sold a painting to Bill Mennich [sp] who was Gwyneth Paltrow's uncle actually. And he had a violin repair shop, very high end. Everybody—Isaac Stern would drop in when he was in town. And they lived one floor above this guy. But this is the guy who picked up a Henry Moore at Weintraub [Gallery] and stuck it in his pocket. Is this the same guy?

ROSA ESMAN: I think it's the same guy.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Tell us this story.

ROSA ESMAN: He took— There were several things that would be missing in my gallery. I would pull them out, and maybe they were out and I wasn't careful enough. So I left them out, and then I didn't realize that I hadn't put them away, and then I couldn't find them. And I realized they must have been stolen. And I collected insurance. One was a Claes Oldenburg ice cream pop. One was a Helen Frankenthaler tile, which is something that I had published with her. They were hand-painted tiles. Oh, there were several things, several things. And then apparently this thief was in and out. He stole from Virginia Zabriskie. He had a way of doing things sometimes. Sometimes he would see something around. He'd come in with a coat over his arm, pick it up, and walk out. Sometimes he did it as he did it with Virginia: He would look at one. He would ask to see a sculpture of someone like [Abraham] Walkowitz or somebody that she carried. And they would bring one in, and he would say, "That's nice. What else might you have?" And then they'd bring in another one, and then they'd show him another one. And then maybe something a little bigger. And show him another one. Then they'd go out, and when they went out to get it, he'd stick one under his arm. By that time nobody would remember how many were out particularly. Because you don't expect the art collector to be a thief. He might want to—his check might bounce, but you wouldn't expect him to pick it up. And so that happened to Virginia.

And then one day the story was that this same guy went to California, and he pulled the same thing in California, about bringing things out. Took one. And before he left the gallery—and this is something that I always did, too—the dealer said, or the secretary or, you know, whatever—said, "Tell me, what hotel are you staying at? Just in case we need to be in touch with you?" And he told them the name of the hotel. I don't know if he gave his name. But he did mention the name of the hotel. Right after he left, they saw something was missing, and they called the cops. And the cops got him. And whether he had also left his name or it was just—you know whatever. They traced him to the hotel. And they got him. And then about a month later, the FBI called me, and they said, "Now we have found these things in this person's apartment, and they have the label of your gallery on them." And he reeled off all these things that had been stolen from me.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes, he lived on the corner of Eighteenth and Rittenhouse Square.

ROSA ESMAN: Sounds something like that.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Just down the street from Henry McIlhenney, across from the Barclay Hotel, right on the corner.

ROSA ESMAN: And he had invited Anne d'Harnoncourt to his apartment. He was active at the museum in some way.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Yes. I remember all of this, yes.

ROSA ESMAN: And there was Jasper Johns's *Flashlight* [1958] in lead Sculpmetal on a base. Very famous object belonging to Ileana Sonnabend. And Anne d'Harnoncourt said to him, "I never knew you owned that piece." He said, "Oh, yes." And that was the end of that, you know, because she didn't know that it really belonged to Sonnabend and whatever. So they found that there. But he invited the director of the museum who would presumably be able to identify these. That happened to be a very major—small but major—Johns's piece.

JAMES McELHINNEY: I'm hardly an expert on art thieves, but it seems like this kind of hubris and sport is a hallmark of these characters. There's another notorious—

ROSA ESMAN: They're unrelated to reality.

JAMES McELHINNEY: —another notorious art thief, former art thief, from the Boston area who's become the talking head on TV shows about art thievery. And when he was an object of fear to collectors in the Boston area, he had a reputation for imagining himself, I guess, as a professor—Moriarty type mastermind, a criminal mastermind. I think the same profile of character applied to this doctor who lived—

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. They can get away with anything.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But at the end of the day, some of these— I know what—Bill Mennich's wife said that he had a John Robie complex, the man from—the Cary Grant character from *To Catch a Thief* [Alfred Hitchcock,

1955] [Rosa Esman laughs.] A John Robie complex.

ROSA ESMAN: Oh.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And I remember that. That must have been in the early '80s when he was caught, '82 or '83, around that, '83, '84. I'll have to look up his name. But any other art thief encounters?

ROSA ESMAN: Oh, well, I mean I'm sure there were things that were stolen, but—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Well, how did you keep track of your inventory? Was it just simply—

ROSA ESMAN: Well, you know, however. You know you check things in and send a letter out. And you kept a carbon copy of it in your—in our files. We didn't—generally if we had a one-person show, after the show I would keep a couple of paintings and send most of it back. So it was generally—the carbon copied sheet of the consignment, copy of the consignment, was mostly it. I don't know that I had a—I didn't have a huge inventory on site. But there were a lot of little things that I had bought or that I had not, whatever. I don't know.

JAMES McELHINNEY: But there was not a registrar on the gallery per se? Or it was just a—

ROSA ESMAN: No. After a while, when I got a little bigger, I had a person who did a lot of that kind of registrar work.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Also that kind of thing.

ROSA ESMAN: But mostly it was informal, but there was a record.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Did you ever have artists' contracts?

ROSA ESMAN: I sometimes did and sometimes didn't. I decided they weren't worth the money. I wasn't going to sue an artist because he left. I was not. What could you do about it? It was sort of a handshake, and I knew that's what Leo used to do, a handshake. But of course Leo gave money. He gave monthly stipends to his artists. So it was very commendable.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Did you ever do that?

ROSA ESMAN: I couldn't afford to do that. He couldn't either, but he did it. [Laughs.] And he had the kinds of artists in the long run who he had to keep on. You know I had artists that I didn't sell enough of really to do that with. Some of them did well, but a lot of them had to do other work to maintain their art profession.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So what— Oh, yes, we're—

ROSA ESMAN: Is it getting to be time?

JAMES McELHINNEY: I think so.

ROSA ESMAN: I'm going to have to—yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Someone reading this couple of decades hence, a hundred years from now—

ROSA ESMAN: I won't be around to answer the questions.

JAMES McELHINNEY: A couple of decades probably.

ROSA ESMAN: A couple of decades?

JAMES McELHINNEY: But how would you like your work to be remembered? You're a woman, an art dealer.

ROSA ESMAN: I don't know. I just—I'll tell you when I am very gratified—now this is all —I'm very gratified when I'm introduced to somebody or I meet somebody new, and they say, Oh, you're Rosa Esman. I remember your gallery. I loved going there. You had wonderful things there. And you had good taste or what a good eye! Or whatever. I just feel totally redeemed and pleased and happy. In a few years there isn't going to be anybody else who'll remember walking into my gallery. But that has made me feel very good.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Do you hope you might be a role model to other women?

ROSA ESMAN: Well, I hope I was a role model to my daughters. I think there are other women gallery owners who have done a wonderful job. We've got Paula Cooper, Virginia Zabriskie, Marian Goodman, Barbara Gladstone—she got into it later, but she's way up there. You know even Mary Boone's done a good— I mean

there are good dealers. I'm not the role model. I don't expect to be the role model. But for whatever I did, I love hearing that people enjoyed visiting my gallery and appreciated my eye. So it was worth coming to visit.

JAMES McELHINNEY: What advice would you give to a young person—younger person?

ROSA ESMAN: Get a lot of investors with money, which is something I never did. [They laugh.] To bide you over the hard times, who are willing to be generous with you. Have a good eye, you know. And be careful what you show. And enjoy it. You have to love art. First of all you've got to love art. You've got to love what you're doing. I really loved what I was doing. But I had a lot of headaches. I must say I never had a headache since I've closed my own gallery. Haven't had one headache in all these years.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Did you have to pay a price for following your passion or your passions?

ROSA ESMAN: No. I think that when I followed my passions, I did pretty well, you know, if I could do that, you know, if I was able to travel. I think my husband would say I wasn't home enough, you know. Or whatever. All that stuff. But in terms of my gallery, I think it was very rewarding.

JAMES McELHINNEY: So you weren't a conventional housewife by any means.

ROSA ESMAN: [They laugh.] I don't think so.

JAMES McELHINNEY: And how about your daughters? I guess—

ROSA ESMAN: My daughters are not conventional housewives. They've all got their own careers. They're really quite remarkable. The oldest was the one who had been working with Sol LeWitt. She's now working on the catalog resumé of his wall drawings. My middle daughter is a lawyer in intellectual property, and she is now director—

JAMES McELHINNEY: That's interesting.

ROSA ESMAN: —of the American Civil Liberties Union in the State of Louisiana. So she is a hotshot and very busy doing her stuff. She's remarkable. And our youngest daughter is a journalist/writer who writes both about the art world and about Islam. She lives in Holland. She got married last summer, and she's married to an Australian, and they both live in Holland. That's Abigail.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Abigail whom we met last week.

ROSA ESMAN: And she is writing a book at the moment that is to be published in March on the Islamization of Europe. So she's—

JAMES McELHINNEY: Big topic today.

ROSA ESMAN: Big topic. And she's also interested in Islamic art, contemporary art. So the three of them are very busy, all married; two of them are mothers. Nevertheless they're— I hope I've been a good role model. But they're great girls.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Thank you.

ROSA ESMAN: Thank you.

JAMES McELHINNEY: We could keep talking for hours.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes. We can. I'm going to have to get out. I have an— What time is it? Okay. I need to get to a gallery and look at something.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Great.

ROSA ESMAN: Thank you.

JAMES McELHINNEY: That sounds like a wonderful thing. Then we'll end the interview on you leaving to go—

LINDA: Leaving to look at a work in an art gallery for a collector. How do you like that?

ROSA ESMAN: Hmmm.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Still working.

ROSA ESMAN: Yes.

JAMES McELHINNEY: Good luck. A pleasure, a pleasure.

ROSA ESMAN: Thank you. Thanks you both.

[END OF DISC 4]

[END OF INTERVIEW]