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Oral history interview with Diane Waldman, 2010 June 8-9

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview with Diane Waldman on June 8 and 9, 2010. The interview took place at Waldman's home in New York, New York, and was conducted byJudith Olch Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Elizabeth Murray Oral History of Women in the Visual Arts Project, funded by the A G Foundation.

Diane Waldman and Judith Olch Richards have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Diane Waldman on June 8, 2010, in New York City, 38 West 26th Street, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc one.

So, Diane, let's start with your family background. Tell me what you know about your parents, your grandparents – starting from the grandparents and working forward – or elsewhere, if you want.

DIANE WALDMAN: [Laughs] I don't know too much about my grandparents. I grew up in the Bronx [NY], and my mother's mother lived with us. My father came from Russia when he was three years old, but I never met his family. My mother –

MS. RICHARDS: What was your father's name?

MS. WALDMAN: It was Anglicized, so his name became Robert Deleson – D-E-L-E-S-O-N. My mother's name was Beatrice Rose Albert.

MS. RICHARDS: Spelled the way it sounds?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. Family life – I have a younger sister –

MS. RICHARDS: And so you're – sorry, what did your father do for a living?

MS. WALDMAN: He was a salesman.

MS. RICHARDS: And your grandfather?

MS. WALDMAN: My mother's father was a druggist, and my family was extremely secretive. I never knew very much about them.

MS. RICHARDS: Why do you think they were secretive?

MS. WALDMAN: Both of them were older than they led me and my sister to believe.

MS. RICHARDS: Both your parents?

MS. WALDMAN: Both my parents. And everything in my family was very secretive. My father had been brought up in Providence and Newport, Rhode Island. His mother remarried, and although my father had a very good business selling wholesale food products to the navy, he claimed that he disliked his stepbrothers and sisters, and so he moved to New York. He met my mother and –

MS. RICHARDS: Your mother was Beatrice.

MS. WALDMAN: Beatrice. He met my mother and immediately fell in love. Both of them, extremely good-looking people. My father had determined that he would make his second fortune - he had a very good business in Rhode Island - and until then, they waited for several years before they married.

My mother became pregnant, before me, had a miscarriage, and then I was born –

[Audio break.]

MS. RICHARDS: What did your mother do before she was married, or while she was married?

MS. WALDMAN: She worked for a judge, very briefly, and she said she worked at the New York Times. In what capacity, I have no idea. But she – for Jewish women growing up around the time of the Depression, marriage was the option.

MS. RICHARDS: Her family was in New York?
MS. WALDMAN: Yes, yes. Her family was in New York. She had a sister, a younger sister, and they were comfortable people, but not well-to-do.

MS. RICHARDS: What did her father do?

MS. WALDMAN: Her father was a druggist.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, I'm sorry. You said that.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, her father was a druggist, but much older than my grandmother. And they lived with us. And my grandfather died –

MS. RICHARDS: In the Bronx.

MS. WALDMAN: In the Bronx. And my grandmother continued to live with us. In the meantime, my father was in a succession of businesses, all of them failed, ultimately. He was in a used car business, and his business consisted of Rolls-Royces and Mercedes. He sold to people like Jack Warner of Warner Brothers., a number of Hollywood people, and my father fancied himself a man about town.

What happened was that his business failed because of the world war – World War II - and factories were bombed in Europe, and that was the end of that business. So that was business number two. He then went into real estate. I think my father was pretty naïve, but he was cheated by the person he was in partnership with.

In any event, he was a dreamer, and a part of the beauty of his dream was that he dreamed about art a lot. So he would take us to museums. He was always drawing with me when I was a kid. So I grew up loving art.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did his love of art come from?

MS. WALDMAN: I have no idea,, except that at one point, he said he would have loved to have been an architect. So I really don't know. But you know, one never knows where art springs from, where their creative impulse comes from. So anyhow, I grew up, went to public school –

MS. RICHARDS: In the Bronx?

MS. WALDMAN: In the Bronx.

MS. RICHARDS: Which school was that?

MS. WALDMAN: P.S. 28 was the first one and then junior high, 115. And then Walton High School. But in those days, "special ed[ucation]" meant that you were a bright student. So I skipped three terms, and I graduated from high school when I was just a little bit past the age of 16.

MS. RICHARDS: You skipped three semesters?

MS. WALDMAN: Three semesters.

MS. RICHARDS: Like a year and a half?

MS. WALDMAN: A year and a half. And I was accepted into Hunter College [of the City University of New York] as a student of painting. I have a studio degree from Hunter College.

MS. RICHARDS: So let's go back to your early years. When you were in elementary school, was your favorite subject art?

MS. WALDMAN: My favorite subject was illustrating history, and drawing. It was an escape because my family life was in turmoil in terms of finances. As I said, my father was having a hard time making a living. He had great ambition, great goals, having grown up near Newport. He fancied himself becoming a millionaire, which in those days – being a millionaire meant something, not like today. [Laughs.]

In any event, he still had his auto business. So as kids, we summered out on Long Beach, Long Island [NY], and he had the Rolls-Royce, which he brought out to take the kids in my neighborhood in Long Beach for a ride. I have photos of us standing on the dashboard of the beautiful Rolls-Royce, and I like to say that we ended up with a Rolls-Royce clock – [laughs] – which I do have somewhere.

But the Rolls-Royce went along with everything else. I was very fortunate to be able to get into Hunter because school in those days, I think, was $22 a semester. So I was in college at 16 and a half.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were in high school, did you have the ambition to be an artist? I mean, were you thinking about that?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes,, I was.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you have influential art teachers in high school?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, I did, actually. The chairman of the art department at Walton High School was enamored of abstract art. So she had the kids in my class and me drawing to music – drawing abstract art to music. She talked about [Wassily] Kandinsky. We made a [Laszlo] Moholy-Nagy light machine in the basement. Moholy's daughter was in my class, if I remember correctly. So from a very early age, I was totally immersed in art.

MS. RICHARDS: And in the most advanced kind of thinking –

MS. WALDMAN: And very advanced art. I went to Hunter, which was then still – it was becoming coed. That was the first time Hunter was switching from being all-girls to a mix of girls and boys.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have a brother or sister?

MS. WALDMAN: Sister, younger sister. She wasn't interested in art. She went to Science High School [Bronx High School of Science]. And my mother wasn't particularly interested in art, but my father was.

MS. RICHARDS: So you'd go to the Metropolitan [Museum of Art]? MoMA [Museum of Modern Art]?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, Metropolitan and MoMA, yes. And I had a student membership at MoMA, which was – I don't know, something like 90 cents – [laughs] – in those days. It was a wonderful museum. So I spent two years up in the Bronx campus and then two years down at Park Avenue. My teachers included William Baziotes, Robert Motherwell, and for art history, which with a studio degree was only minimal, William Rubin.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know Robert Barry? I think he might have overlapped with you at Hunter.

MS. WALDMAN: No, but Bernice Rose was a classmate of mine.

MS. RICHARDS: Also in studio?

MS. WALDMAN: No, she was in art history, yes. And I left college – I was 20 – a little past 20. I went to work at Gimbels [Gimbels Brothers, department store], and I met my husband, Paul Waldman.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to just a couple of things more about Hunter. So you were up at the Bronx campus, which is where Lehman College [of the City University of New York] is now?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: For a couple of years.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And then you automatically go to the Manhattan campus for the second two years?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: At what point did you switch from being a studio major, or did you?

MS. WALDMAN: I didn't switch.

MS. RICHARDS: So you graduated with a B.F.A.?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And what was your painting like?

MS. WALDMAN: Not very good.

MS. RICHARDS: How would you describe it?

MS. WALDMAN: I felt – I was too young. I was enamored of the Abstract Expressionists. I'm talking now about the '50s. I entered Hunter in 1952 and graduated in 1956. I knew about the Abstract Expressionists. I already knew which artists I thought were the greatest of that group.

MS. RICHARDS: Who did you think was the greatest?

MS. WALDMAN: [Willem] de Kooning, [Barnett] Newman – de Kooning and Newman at the time. I think it was more or less de Kooning, Newman – I'm trying to remember because of that, I'm sure. It may have been [Mark] Rothko, and it may have been [Joseph] Cornell. But those were my favorite –

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever have a chance to meet any of them? Go to the openings?

MS. WALDMAN: Not at that point. I didn't go to openings until I met my husband. And he said he wanted to be an artist.

MS. RICHARDS: So you graduated, and you went to work at Gimbels. When you graduated, did you imagine you would be an artist?

MS. WALDMAN: No, I think at that point, I already felt, sort of, that I didn't have the skills. I also had no money, so I had to make a living.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you living in your own apartment?

MS. WALDMAN: I was living at home in the Bronx. I had no money. I couldn't afford an apartment. When I was at Hunter, I worked Saturdays and summers at Lord & Taylor [department store] to make some money. But as I said, college was cheap, $22 a semester. It was a wonderful education.

I minored in French – the French language. I had an amazing teacher. I took two and a half years of French, read everything from [Guy] de Maupassant to [Marcel] Proust, and fell in love with French culture. But I really didn't know what I wanted to do with my life except – [laughs] – I knew that I wanted to leave home, but not how to get out of there, not what to do, you know, because as I said, the family life was unraveling, and it was very difficult at home. I met my husband, and we got married three months after I met him.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did you meet?

MS. WALDMAN: At Gimbels. He was working as a layout artist.

MS. RICHARDS: And what department were you working in?

MS. WALDMAN: I was working in the advertising – we were both in advertising.

MS. RICHARDS: Advertising design?

MS. WALDMAN: I was running off layouts, the most basic job possible. I think it paid $45 a week. He was a layout artist, which was several levels above me – he was doing the ads – he was one of the people in the advertising department doing ads for the newspapers.

MS. RICHARDS: You know, I forgot to ask you on the recording when you were born and where you lived when you were born.

MS. WALDMAN: I was born in the Bronx and lived at 231 Echo Place, off the Grand Concourse.

MS. RICHARDS: And what year was that?

MS. WALDMAN: Nineteen thirty-six, February 24, 1936. So in a way, I was a product of the Depression. Money was a very critical issue for people who were growing up then in a not-very-secure environment. It was a largely Jewish neighborhood. My family was not religious. I have very little religious – no religious training whatsoever. So I'd say my identity was really art from the time that I was a kid, because of my father.

MS. RICHARDS: And every summer, you went out to the beach?

MS. WALDMAN: While he could afford it; it wasn't every summer. It was a few summers. Otherwise, we'd spend summers in the Bronx, yes, which was not so bad then. I mean, it was a decent neighborhood, but I hated it because it seemed – because of my father and his great ability to dream and imagine, I kept thinking about escaping.

By the time I was a teenager, I wanted to travel. There were no funds. But I had friends who lived across the street who at age – in high school, I guess. They were a little older than me. At age 18, they were going to Europe. I just couldn't afford to go, but I wanted to get out. And so getting married early was a way for me to find a new identity, so to speak.

My husband had an apartment on Morton Street in Greenwich Village, and he soon took a studio on Wooster Street, and I continued to work. I also freelanced as a fashion illustrator. But it was not a career that I wanted. We got married in 1957. I was just barely out of college.

I worked for a number of years, and in the meantime, he and I were making our way around the galleries and the art world. And because he was a painter, he met any number of artists and became friendly with them.

One of the artists that he met was the sculptor Robert Mallary. Just to back up a little bit, Paul joined the Allan Stone Gallery in 1961. So he met Robert Mallary and –

MS. RICHARDS: Through the gallery.

MS. WALDMA N: Through the gallery.

MS. RICHARDS: You were married in '57, so we're talking about four years after you're married; during those four years, you continued to work at Gimbels.

MS. WALDMAN: I worked partly at Gimbels and then partly freelancing, yes. But by the early '60s, as I said, I was really discontent. And Robert Mallary offered to make an introduction for me to Tom Hess, then the editor of ARTnews magazine, which was then the most important art magazine in New York.

I saw Tom Hess, and he asked me to write three reviews of gallery exhibitions. I remember two of them. [Laughs.] One was Lucas Samaras, who was having a show at the Green Gallery. Another was – I'm trying to remember that.

MS. RICHARDS: Did he assign you, or did someone assign those to you, or did you select them?

MS. WALDMAN: I selected the Samaras, because I liked the work. I don't remember – I'm actually not sure if the other one was Richard Anuszkiewicz. But I picked two very different types of reviews, to give Hess an idea that I could write about different types of art. The reviews paid four dollars a review. Each one took me at least a week to write.

MS. RICHARDS: Had you excelled at writing at some point? Was it always a strong subject?

MS. WALDMAN: No, not at all.

MS. RICHARDS: Did it come easily, or was it difficult?

MS. WALDMAN: It was difficult, because I was always fussing terribly about words.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you a regular reader of ARTnews?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, to a certain extent, but what I was able to do was to put my feeling for art into my writing. And that's what came across to Tom Hess. So he hired me as a reviewer and then – I should backtrack a little bit, because – I'm going to figure this out now – this is in the early '60s. By the time I was at ARTnews, which was I think 1964 –

MS. RICHARDS: So you had become a staff member?

MS. WALDMAN: No, freelance. A freelance writer for ARTnews. But I had determined that I wanted to work in a museum, that I loved art, that I felt that I was not cut out to be an artist. And money was an issue, continued to be an issue, because my husband and I had very little money when we got married. So it seemed impractical for me to be an artist. And I really didn't feel that I was competent to be an artist.

But I determined, with the help of Tom Hess, who said to me – one day, he said, what would you like to do with the rest of your life? And I said, I would like to work in art, but I would not like to work in a gallery. I wasn't interested in selling as much as working with art.

So he called the director of the [Solomon R.] Guggenheim Museum, Tom Messer, and he called the director of the Whitney Museum [of American Art], Jack Bauer, and arranged for me to interview with both. At that point, the Whitney was behind the Museum of Modern Art on 54th Street. And Bauer, who was very nice, said to me that they were moving to their present location, and that they were going to upgrade the position that was then available, which was assistant curator, to associate curator.

I didn't have professional qualifications to be an associate curator. Tom Messer offered me a job at the Guggenheim as a research fellow, where I would work for two years. And at the end of that, he would determine whether or not to hire me as a full-time staff member. So I was very happy – [laughs] – to have that job.

I should mention that before I entered the Guggenheim Museum, I did have a job working at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts. It wasn't my field, but I did want to be in the museum profession, and I worked there for 10 months while I waited and hoped that a job would open at one of the other museums.

MS. RICHARDS: What did you do at that museum?

MS. WALDMAN: I assisted the director on a number of exhibitions. And –

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, so it was a good introduction to museum work.

MS. WALDMAN: It was. It was. It wasn't my subject, but nonetheless, I did have a nice exposure to working with objects. And that is something that I love – to this day - love doing.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you get training on handling objects, and the whole –

MS. WALDMAN: I went to graduate school.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, at the museum, not ––

MS. WALDMAN: Not at the museum, but I enrolled in NYU's Institute of Fine Arts. I was accepted there on one recommendation, that of Raymond Parker, who had been a teacher of mine at Hunter.

MS. RICHARDS: What year did you start at the Institute?

MS. WALDMAN: I think it was 1963.

MS. RICHARDS: What kind of teacher was Ray Parker?

MS. WALDMAN: I had him for a six-hour drawing class in which we did five-minute figure sketches. It was a very intense and very good learning experience, but again, that was one of the things that sort of dissuaded me from becoming an artist. I didn't feel that I really understood the figure.

I also had a sculpture class, and I had – at that time, I think I felt very uncomfortable. I felt too young. Some of the students in my class were older; they were already looking towards a career in the arts. They were running around to galleries, trying to get into galleries.

I hadn't really developed to that point. So – and I really didn't have the skills. I needed more time and more training, and perhaps I could have become an artist, but you know, it wasn't –

MS. RICHARDS: It wasn't your passion.

MS. WALDMAN: My passion was art, but not necessarily drawing or painting. And –

MS. RICHARDS: What made you decide to go the Institute for that program? That was a master's program?

MS. WALDMAN: It was a master's program. They also had a degree in museum training, and I thought that it would be good training for me to have both if I wanted to go into the museum profession.

So I was accepted, even though I had less than the minimal art history credits, but they accepted me because I had the studio degree in painting, with Ray Parker's recommendation, provided that I make up some undergraduate courses in art history. And I did that at Columbia University one summer. I took two courses in art history. So it was a wonderful time at the Institute. But when I was at the Institute, I did my master's thesis on the work of Joseph Cornell, and that's when I met him, in 1963.

So to fast-forward a little bit, again, Tom Hess said to me, I'd like you to write an article on Joseph Cornell, because he was much admired, even though he was little known, by the staff at ARTnews. Many of them, like John Ashbury, who worked at ARTnews, many of them [were] poets.

There was a whole circle of poets that adored Joseph Cornell's work. So that was my first article for ARTnews, on the work of Joseph Cornell. I did my master's thesis on Cornell, my first article, and after two years at the Guggenheim, from '65 and '66, I was asked to do an exhibition on Cornell's work. So it's my first exhibition ["Joseph Cornell," May 4 - June 25, 1967].

MS. RICHARDS: So you started at the Guggenheim after you had your master's degree? That was '63 to '65.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: I read somewhere that you did an internship at the Metropolitan.

MS. WALDMAN: I did. It was part of [the] museum training program.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. While at the Institute.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. The museum training course consisted of three semesters, and after two semesters, if you qualified, you were accepted as an intern at the Metropolitan Museum. And I think, of a class of 22, four of us were accepted at the Metropolitan Museum.

So I went to work in the Department of European Paintings, where I shared an office – was put into an office with Philippe de Montebello, who was then a young curator. And really, because they were not terribly interested in modern art, they really didn't know what to do with me.

So they put me on projects like studying all of the paintings that [Joshua] Reynolds did while he was at the Royal Academy [of Arts, London] – [laughs] – and all sorts of things that had nothing to do with my interest in art, but nonetheless, it was wonderful to be in that museum. It was extraordinary. But they didn't really have a department of modern art at that time.

MS. RICHARDS: You said your main love was art. Was it always modern art? Were there times when you were thinking, if you went into museum work, you might not focus on modern art?

MS. WALDMAN: No, because of my husband and our activities, I was so totally enmeshed in the art world, and it was so exciting. It was small; it was not terribly commercial. Things were happening quickly. I came in at the tail end of Abstract Expressionism, at the beginning of Pop art, so I saw events as they were taking place. I saw the first Pop paintings being made. And I'm of the generation of the Minimalists, so I soon met them and became friendly with them.

So everything was – it was so dynamic. I can't really say it more emphatically than that. It was the most exciting period I've ever lived through, because you had three generations and they were all still going strong. I met Barnett Newman. My husband, Paul, became very friendly with Roy Lichtenstein, who coincidentally in the early '60s had a studio in the building right next door to where we live now.

And through Roy, we met George Segal, who used to invite everyone out to his chicken farm in Rutgers, New Jersey, on Sundays for chicken dinner that his wife Helen cooked, and to swim in his above-ground plastic swimming pool.

So I met Larry Poons; I met Billy Klüver; I met Claes Oldenburg. No one had any money. I mean, that was also the wonderful – it was all about art. So I was in my element. I mean, it could not have been better for me. I never even gave a thought to the early 20th century, really, except that I admired it. But it wasn't present; it wasn't contemporary; it wasn't happening. It was on the walls of the museums, but I didn't know the artists.

So I never really gave a thought to the early 20th century. I sort of backed into it after years at the Guggenheim.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were taking courses at the Institute, did you begin to form an idea of what kind of approach you would take to being a curator? Was there a certain kind of methodology taught?

MS. WALDMAN: No, there wasn't a methodology taught. Yes, there was a methodology. The methodology was connoisseurship. The emphasis was on connoisseurship. The museum training program was run by Colin Eisler, who was a wonderful teacher and wonderful in heading that program.

And so basically, what the class had was an introduction at the Metropolitan Museum; the Institute's Certificate of Museum Training program was done in conjunction with the Metropolitan Museum. No other museum was offering anything like that then. They are now, but this was the lead program.

Every week we were introduced to another curator at the Met, and the objective of that class was to look at objects with an eye towards connoisseurship. So to give you an example, Tom Hoving was then in charge of medieval art. He was at the Cloisters at the point in time.

So he brought into the room in which we gathered at the Met two silver censers. One was medieval, and one was a 19th-century copy. And we were to determine which was the original and which was the copy simply by looking at the object. And that was the whole purpose of connoisseurship, to train your eye to understand quality, authenticity, beauty. That was the training.

The same was true in the Greek and Roman department, in the Egyptian department, all the way forward to, I'd say, the 19th century. There was no 20th century to speak of then. And I loved it.

MS. RICHARDS: So the main thrust of the program was to teach you how to be a curator in the sense of taking care of a permanent collection and expanding a permanent collection, not doing the things that curators now do a lot of, creating special exhibitions.

MS. WALDMAN: No, the exhibition program was not part of their interests. It was about conserving, protecting objects, with an eye to acquiring objects. You know, you're talking about –

MS. RICHARDS: The fundamental –

MS. WALDMAN: – the Metropolitan Museum, which at that point was really, and still is I suppose, to a large extent, dependent upon gifts, and to a certain degree, purchases. So the whole training was to teach you how to buy the right object, how to study it, and how to conserve it, and how to protect it, and how to present it to the public.

It was really through training your eye that you could develop a skill and fulfill your job of curatorship. I, on the other hand, was really interested in exhibiting artists' work. So when I got to the Guggenheim Museum, I was really in my milieu.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, after you spent two years being a researcher, Tom obviously promoted you?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. When I was working with Tom Hess at ARTnews and he arranged for me to see Tom Messer, he said he thought it would be a good place for me to work, because Lawrence Alloway was then the curator. He said Lawrence Alloway was a wonderful writer, and I would learn a lot from him.

Tom Messer assigned me to assist Lawrence Alloway, so I assisted him on a couple of shows, one of which was Barnett Newman's Stations of the Cross, which was a beautiful exhibition at the Guggenheim ["Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross: lema sabachthani," April 23 - June 19, 1966] which practically no one saw. In those days, the audience at the Guggenheim was very small, and it was mostly limited to Europeans who would come over to New York to see the Frank Lloyd Wright building or to see the Kandinskys in the collection.

It was not a museum that really attracted a very contemporary crowd. And the other thing was that Tom Messer was really, as a European, very interested in showing European artists. So there wasn't much of a program there for American artists, except the few artists that Lawrence Alloway showed in the time that he was curator there.

I got promoted after two years to become an assistant curator – Alloway left. I did the Cornell show, and then I was more or less on my own. I was –

MS. RICHARDS: Were you – you were asked to do the Cornell show, or you proposed it?

MS. WALDMAN: I was asked to do the Cornell show by – I'm trying to remember – H. Harvard Arnason. Tom Messer was the director, but Arnason was had a title that was something like Art Administrator. He was like a – slightly above Tom Messer. Arnason was very knowledgeable about American art.

As I said, Tom Messer was really most interested in European art. Arnason was very interested in American art. He adored Cornell. I think he suggested it to Messer, who suggested it to me. I had three months in which to do – [laughs] – the show, which was a nightmare. No help, no assistance.

But I knew Cornell, and I had my master's thesis as the basis to use for writing a text – a small text for a small catalogue for a two-ramp exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum. And that's when my career really took off. That's when I became independent. I didn't work for a curator. I began to do my own series of exhibitions.

MS. RICHARDS: When you first met Cornell, how did you approach the selection of the works for the show, in terms of his having input or not?

MS. WALDMAN: I called him up. Well, I had known him, of course, because I did my master's thesis. I used to go out to see him once a week, to Utopia Parkway, in Flushing [Queens], to study his boxes and to write my master's thesis.

When I approached him about the show, he thought that it was going to be a show of new work. So he agreed to lend me a series of recent boxes and mostly collages – by 1965, he was very focused on doing collages. And what he had told me at the time was that the boxes were taking a lot of strength, and so he had shifted a bit, to save energy, to his collages. He never knew that I was planning to do a retrospective, and I never had the courage to tell him. So he –

MS. RICHARDS: You thought he would be displeased?

MS. WALDMAN: He was intimidating, in a way, because he was so involved in his own fantasy life that when I would visit him to do my master's thesis, I would ask him if I could measure his boxes because my then-professor, Robert Goldwater, wanted facts and figures and dates. And he would say, oh, no, my boxes are of this time. And many of his boxes he had left undated.

So he would leave the room. I was sitting in his kitchen. He would bring a box in, and then he would leave the room. I brought a screwdriver – [laughs] – with me and a ruler. I'd unscrew the tops of his boxes while he was out of the room looking for dates. And in some cases, I found the dates inside the top of his boxes.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean, he had actually written the date but decided to hide it?

MS. WALDMAN: In some cases, in some cases, yes. He was a surrealist, you know? His whole concept of time was ephemeral. And he – it was quite exhausting to be with him. So when I would leave, I would – he'd give me a token for the subway. I would take the bus to Main Street, Flushing. Then I would take the subway to Grand Central.

I would get out, I'd have a frankfurter and a beer, take an aspirin – [laughs] – and call my husband and come home and take a nap. He was the most amazing, wonderful, and, for me, at the time, very difficult – he wasn't what I would call a normal artist, you know? I could only say that the closest I can come to identifying him is by saying that when I read [Antoine de] Saint-Exupéry, I knew exactly where Cornell was.

He really thought in another time and space. He lived in another space. He once accused me of being very practical when I said I needed dates and dimensions. [Laughs.] So I didn't think that he would accept the idea of a retrospective. A lot of artists then - I don't know about today – felt that a retrospective meant that their life was over.

So I proceeded to contact his dealers, his collectors to try and find as many dated boxes as I could because, to tell you the truth, no one had written anything substantive about his work. There was no chronology. There was no real understanding of his work from the late '20s, '30s, '40s, '50s, up to the time at which I first met him, in the early '60s.

So that was what I wanted to do with my – I had to do for my master's thesis. Robert Goldwater would not have accepted anything less than a really good chronology.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there an issue in selecting a living artist for your thesis?

MS. WALDMAN: They made an exception because, again, Goldwater loved Cornell's work, but it was not really accepted at the Institute at that point in time. So I was very fortunate. And –

MS. RICHARDS: Did you anticipate it being published as a book?

MS. WALDMAN: No. I had no idea. I wasn't thinking that far ahead. I was thrilled to be in the museum, thrilled to be doing an exhibition. Cornell didn't come to the opening. A man who was then director of the Jewish Museum [New York, NY], named Alan Solomon, who I knew, came to the opening, looked around, and said, you have all the right people, because, of course, through my husband and my contacts in the art world, I knew, even then, all instinct, not training, who I wanted to be invited to the opening.

Cornell didn't come; he was too shy. He came, I think, a week or so later and told Tom Messer, not me, that he liked the show. [Laughs.] So that was how – [laughs] – I did my first exhibition.

MS. RICHARDS: But there was a lot of interest by younger artists in Cornell's work.

MS. WALDMAN: Oh, yes, yes. He had enormous influence in a very limited art world.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, well, there were a number of artists who were making boxes at that time.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, there were. And he was admired by museum people. He was admired by writers, both literary writers and art writers. I think I had my first and probably best review from Hilton Kramer, who was writing for the Times then, who adored Cornell's work.

So the audience was small. The collectors adored him. And I really loved working with objects in the Frank Lloyd Wright space; it was amazing. And one of the bays – each bay was about 23 feet in length. I installed just one box. And you could see it across the ramp. It was absolutely amazing.

And one of the collectors, [Edwin] Ed Bergman, from Chicago [IL], who owned the biggest collection of Cornell at that point, many of whose works are now on view at the Art Institute of Chicago, he came to see the exhibition, and he said he was moved to tears. So my career got off to a wonderful start with a great artist. And Tom

Messer was wonderful in allowing me to do what I wanted to do, and that was how it progressed over the years.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it challenging to first figure out how to use the ramps and the bays and the configuration there?

MS. WALDMAN: It was, in some ways. On the other hand, having grown up in a home where there were – my grandmother, my father, my mother – five of us in a two-bedroom apartment - my grandmother slept in the living room - I was the one who was always creating spaces and rearranging the furniture and reorganizing the few objects that we owned.

So it was in – it was me, and it was something that I had. I don't know where it came from. So while it was challenging, it wasn't frightening. It was exciting to be able to install the Cornells. Most of the Cornell boxes I had seen in, for example, Eleanor Ward's Stable Gallery. She was one of his primary dealers in the '50s.

Many of the boxes were simply placed on shelves, very casually. But I could not do that in a museum. So the museum's organic, informal-formal structure really dictated to me how the boxes had to be displayed. And since Cornell's boxes often had paper and writing on the backs, I determined to have them freestanding, on bases made especially for them, rather than placed on shelves or on the walls, which is how they were displayed in most of the galleries or in the homes of the collectors.

So from the very beginning, I understood the Guggenheim's space and wanted people to walk around the boxes. There was no question then of too many people and the danger of the boxes being damaged, because the audience, as I said, for modern art at the Guggenheim was pretty slim at that point.

MS. RICHARDS: When you finished that show, I think the next show you did was a [Adolph] Gottlieb show ["Adolf Gottlieb," a joint exhibition: February 14 - March 31, 1968, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and February 14 - April 7, 1968, at the Guggenheim Museum].

[Audio break.]

MS. WALDMAN: Given – so where were we?

MS. RICHARDS: I was asking about the show after that. I think it was Gottlieb.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, the Gottlieb was a project that Alloway left when he left the museum. He left two exhibitions. One was a Paul Feeley show and the other was Gottlieb's pictographs. And since I, early on - I think even when I was in college - decided that I loved Surrealism, I opted for the Gottlieb pictographs. But that was an assignment, so to speak. It wasn't really something that I had picked.

MS. RICHARDS: When Lawrence Alloway left, did that mean you were promoted in any way?

MS. WALDMAN: No. It had nothing to do with – no, because I was simply a research fellow. He was a full curator at that point. So I would never have replaced him, [in] any event.

I should mention that, at the time when I first came to the Guggenheim, I think there may have been 50 people on staff. It was a very small museum. It was wonderful in the sense that everyone knew everyone else. It was very easy to work in that type of environment because there were no departments like there were at the Metropolitan Museum. So I always thought of it as a family.

Alloway and Tom Messer had a disagreement, and Alloway left. So he left these two projects. And I opted to do the Gottlieb show, but it was a nice experience because I liked the whole pictograph period. He had a studio in Lower Manhattan, and he was very gracious. His wife at that time, while I was in the process of doing the show, Esther Gottlieb, came to volunteer at the museum.

The show was very, very nice. I did the show – I should say – in conjunction with Robert Doty, who was a curator at the Whitney Museum. Doty did the later work. Gottlieb, in effect, had an exhibition at two museums, which was pretty remarkable for those days. Not too many artists could say that, even today, that they have –

MS. RICHARDS: Especially today.

MS. WALDMAN: - especially today - [laughs] - a show running concurrently in two museums in Manhattan. But that was not something that I arranged. And why they broke it up that way, I really never understood, and I never really asked. So that was an assignment.

By that time, I knew what my next project would be, which would be a Roy Lichtenstein show ["Roy Lichtenstein," September 19 - November 9, 1969], because as I said, through my husband, Paul, I had met Roy and became friendly with him.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have to get permission to do that show, the Lichtenstein?

MS. WALDMAN: Well, yes. I had to get permission from Tom Messer. The beauty of the museum being small was that I could simply talk to Tom Messer, tell him I wanted to do an exhibition. If he was interested, he said yes, and the trustees rubber-stamped. I never had to defend an exhibition. I never had an exhibition turned down. There was no bureaucracy then at the museum.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you need to create an exhibition budget? Or did that come later? How were you involved in terms of the expenses that were being incurred?

MS. WALDMAN: I wasn't, you know, and I have to say that the museum was run on such a casual basis that I had never really had to do a budget until much later on. I think the show – the Cornell show cost $25,000, and we bought a work from Cornell. I think the Lichtenstein show cost $50,000 – that, including the catalogues. And we bought Preparedness [1968], Roy's great painting from the late '60s.

MS. RICHARDS: But you mean, included in the $50,000?

MS. WALDMAN: No, I think it might have been $25,000 for that beautiful painting.

MS. RICHARDS: So if you chose to borrow work from some distant location, which meant it needed to be crated and shipped, you just did it?

MS. WALDMAN: I did it.

MS. RICHARDS: You had no idea that there would be a limit to those kinds of –

MS. WALDMAN: In those days, it was all very inexpensive. The Guggenheim had a wonderful backup facility, great art handlers who are very capable of building crates. We had a very good conservation department. So all the works were handled in the most professional way possible.

I don't think the costs were huge in those days. And I don't think the shipping costs were terrible. Did I bring some works from Europe? Certainly not with Cornell. In many cases, with Cornell, I hand-carried work. Oh, I have a wonderful story. [Laughs.]

Marcel Duchamp lived on 10th Street in the Village, and I went to visit him because he owned some Cornell boxes. I arrived – my knees were weak, because Cornell had told me that Duchamp was the most brilliant man he had ever met. And of course, I really was so intimidated by these older artists. They were heroes for me, and I worshipped them.

[Duchamp's wife] Teeny Duchamp opened the door. I got there at 10 o'clock. They weren't quite ready. She was in her housecoat. She said, dear, come in. She said, Marcel is not quite ready. They lived in the front half of a brownstone on 10th Street. So she showed me into the parlor room.

And then Marcel came in and sat in a chair similar to the one that I'm sitting in, a French Provincial chair. And she gave him his cigars. And I could swear to you that I saw the cigar smoke as a halo. And I thought to myself – [laughs] – for a moment, should I curtsy? [Laughs.] I was so intimidated.

He was so charming and so nice. I asked for – he had a great box – a pharmacy box – a great box – there were two boxes that I wanted to borrow. He said, you can have anything you want. His wife put them in shopping bags, and I carried them up to the museum on the subway.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you talk to him about Cornell?

MS. WALDMAN: It was a very general conversation. He told me that he had really admired Cornell. He thought he was a wonderful artist. He didn't really talk very much, and I wasn't there very long. My objective, which was one of the reasons that I was so nervous, was also, would I get the loans? That always made me anxious whenever I went to visit a collector, because I never knew whether a collector – to this day – would part with work or not.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have the official loan forms to give him to sign?

MS. WALDMAN: I might have brought them with me, you know. I might have. I don't remember. The whole system at the Guggenheim was so informal, as I said. In those days, I probably didn't bring them with me, in which he case he just signed off on it, or his wife did. But transporting Cornells in those days was by hand-carrying. So if you're talking about expense, not much. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: In the subway.

MS. WALDMAN: The Cornell – Cornell's own work – to bring that stuff back from Flushing, the art preparator and I went out in a rented station wagon with cardboard boxes with cardboard fillers in between and brought everything back in one trip. So you can understand why an exhibition cost $25,000. With Roy's work, '69, I don't think his paintings cost more than a couple of thousand dollars then, [$]10,000 maybe, I don't know, [$]15[,000]? So you're not talking about a big budget.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm not familiar with all the other exhibitions that were going on at the Guggenheim in the '60s, so I don't know if doing the Lichtenstein – doing a show of a contemporary artist – a relatively young contemporary artist, was a departure for the Guggenheim.

MS. WALDMAN: It was.

MS. RICHARDS: I thought it might have been.

MS. WALDMAN: It was. The exhibitions focused a lot on Kandinsky, [Paul] Klee, [Egon] Schiele.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, there's an American.

MS. WALDMAN: No, no.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. I thought you meant the American [Charles] Sheeler.

MS. WALDMAN: No. Egon Schiele.

MS. RICHARDS: So Europeans, as you said, his main interest.

MS. WALDMAN: European. Exhibitions were, for the most part, not – I was the first one that introduced the idea of a wholemuseum show. Before that, the museum was often subdivided – the ramps were often subdivided so that there were several shows going on at one time or else a collection show and a temporary exhibition.

MS. RICHARDS: It sounds like you initiated a major change in the program of the Guggenheim.

MS. WALDMAN: I did, I did.

MS. RICHARDS: With ease. It sounds like it just – Tom was very open to it.

MS. WALDMAN: He was very open to it. He told my husband that I introduced him to contemporary art. And I think that he felt quite content to have me work on the Americans while he worked on the Europeans. There was no conflict. And as the audience grew in New York for the exhibitions that I was doing, I think he was flattered, because the museum became much more prominent.

I insisted on bigger catalogues. The Cornell catalogue that I did [Joseph Cornell. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1967], for that catalogue, he said I could have four color plates. The signage then at the entrance to the museum was in bold type for the Europeans and in light type for the Americans. And I said, no, no, that's not democratic. So I kept pushing and pushing and pushing. And he – for whatever reason – it seemed to amuse him.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there a discussion about being in competition with, say, the nearby Jewish Museum, which had become known for its contemporary –

MS. WALDMAN: No, because I think, at that point, it was phasing out. Alan Solomon was out. Kynaston [McShine] was there.

MS. RICHARDS: When was the "Primary Structures" show [The Jewish Museum, April 27 - June 12, 1966]?

MS. WALDMAN: I think middle '60s, maybe '66, and we're now in '69.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MS. WALDMAN: They had a period in the early to mid-1960s when they were doing very good shows. The Modern had lost William Seitz, and it had lost its contemporary emphasis at that point. I did exhibitions that could and should have been done at the Modern or at the Whitney. For some reason, they weren't picking up on this stuff. So the Guggenheim then became a focal point for avant-garde American art.

MS. RICHARDS: So you set out and filled the whole museum with the Lichtenstein show?

MS. WALDMAN: No, that was later. It was a smaller show at that time, four ramps, I think.

[END DISC, 1 TRACK 1.]

MS. WALDMAN: [In progress] The first time that I used the entire museum was in 1971, when I did a show called the "Guggenheim International" ["Guggenheim International Exhibition, 1971," February 12 - April 11, 1971].

I was assigned the exhibition. The Guggenheim International had precursors. It was something that Messer had instituted. And it had been fairly conservative up until the point at which I got a hold of it.

But I was assigned to do it with [Edward] Ed Fry, who was working with me at the museum at that time and –

MS. RICHARDS: Was he your peer or assistant?

MS. WALDMAN: I was an assistant curator, and Fry came in, I think, as an associate curator. But we shared an office. We worked together.

But Messer divided it and gave Ed Fry Eastern Europe and gave me America and Western Europe. So Ed Fry, in effect, had next to nothing to do with the exhibition. I made it a full-museum show. It was the first time one artist had a ramp. Dan Flavin had a whole ramp.

MS. RICHARDS: There was a Minimal, Conceptual emphasis to that show, so –

MS. WALDMAN: By that time, I was moving forward in time from Cornell-Abstract Expressionists era, Roy-Pop era, to the newer generation – my generation, Conceptual era.

So it was a startling show for the New York art world and for the Guggenheim Museum. And it was the first time that the entire building had been used for [one] exhibition. And it sort of set the stage for the other later exhibitions where I used the entire museum.

MS. RICHARDS: With that exhibition, how did you begin planning it and making the selections and conceiving of the structure, the – I assume the division, sections or themes, or – that would dictate, give you a criteria for selection?

MS. WALDMAN: I think part of it was based upon my own experience traveling. The first trip that I made to Europe was for the Guggenheim Museum. As I said, I never had any of my [own] money to go there. I was able to travel for the Guggenheim.

In my travels, I focused a lot on Düsseldorf, which was a very active art scene at that point in time, with Joseph Beuys and with a number of the American Minimalists working in Düsseldorf and showing at a wonderful gallery run by Konrad Fischer [Galerie Konrad Fischer]. So what I was able to see in Germany was an avant garde scene that I thought was far ahead of what was going on in New York. And it dovetailed with my own knowledge of the Minimalists.

But I was also introduced to artists like Hanne Darboven and artists who were really not known very much at all in the United States, in New York. So as I traveled, the concept developed of bringing some of those people over and emphasizing the most current events that I thought were worthy of a museum exhibition.

MS. RICHARDS: At that point, did you have any thoughts about the issue of women artists not being represented as much as they might have been in museums? You mentioned Hanne Darboven, who was one of the few Conceptual, Minimalist women –

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. In all of my time in the art world up until then, there weren't that many women that I met or got to know who had access to galleries or who were really showing, whether it was in London or Paris, New York – I mean, there were certainly people like Helen Frankenthaler, you know, Grace Hartigan, working in New York.

MS. RICHARDS: Lee Krasner.

MS. WALDMAN: Lee Krasner. But I have to say that the mindset was mostly male. And the women – the men didn't talk very much about the women. The women were not very evident. Robert Goldwater, my professor, was married to Louise Bourgeois. She was very much in the background then.

So women were making art, you know. They always have been. But they hadn't, I think, asserted themselves as artists as fully as they came to assert themselves later on. And I don't know if it was because Düsseldorf was a bit more freewheeling, but I met the Bechers – Bernd and Hilla Becher - and Hanne Darboven.

I don't even know that there was any question of women in the arts, you know -- I guess perhaps because of the war, World War II – so that when Germany became a democracy again, there were no boundaries, so to speak. The women seemed very free. But the proportion of women in the arts to men up until that time seemed much reduced to me. I never gave it much thought, because I was looking for quality. I wasn't looking at gender.

And I have to say, then, in my own profession, when I was at the Metropolitan Museum, it was male-dominated, in that Department of European Paintings and elsewhere throughout the museum. In the Department of European Paintings there were two women who were doing a lot of wonderful research, for which they got less credit, perhaps, than they should have.

So you know – I'm talking now about society in the '50s and '60s. In the '50s women were completely submerged – almost completely. I wasn't a feminist. I was simply trying – I was trying to prove myself in a profession in which I had to work twice as hard as most of the men in the museum field in order to prove myself as an equal.

So I was really focused on making my own way and not on the other issues, the issues of feminism. But certainly the women were regarded as "less than" at that point in time.

I knew Eva Hesse. But she even – even she in the '60s was, in a way, working quietly, while her husband Tom Doyle was the one who was really front and center. And I think it was after their marriage broke up and with the encouragement of Sol LeWitt, who was a great friend of hers, that she came into her own.

I mean, that's my take on the situation. So did I know very many women in the arts? No.

MS. RICHARDS: Lynda Benglis?

MS. WALDMAN: I knew her slightly, but I knew [Robert] Bob Morris more than I knew Lynda Benglis. Did you – do you know what I mean?

Bob Morris was getting more attention within this small art world in which we were all involved then. Now I read or hear about women I never even knew existed in the '50s and early '60s.

My core group was the center of the – that I was involved with - was the center of the art world. And in that center there aren't – weren't - that many women.

MS. RICHARDS: Being at a major institution, and looking down the list of names of the artists who had one-person shows, did you feel that you needed to select the most prominent artists to give them the recognition, to present them at the Guggenheim, that it was more appropriate for the Guggenheim and for the public to have – rather than a lesser-known artist who you would champion, who hadn't achieved recognition yet?

MS. WALDMAN: No, not at all – the reverse. I was championing what I thought were cutting-edge artists. When I proposed the Carl Andre show, Tom Messer didn't really know who Carl Andre was. He was barely visible. [Robert] Bob Ryman – they become prominent later on.

MS. RICHARDS: That was 1970s, Carl Andre ["Carl Andre," September 29 - November 22, 1970], yes.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, barely visible. No, I was pushing what I really believed were the important artists of the day.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you – how did you approach doing, let's say, the Carl Andre? That was on a couple of ramps?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you involve him, in terms of your decisions about which pieces to select?

MS. WALDMAN: Always. I involved every artist, Cornell excepted. I would pick work that I thought was important and then go over it with the artists. And I would say that every one – most of them - said, you're the curator; you do your job. Roy, for example, said, you're the curator; you make the selection.

Most of them were extremely trusting of me and really did not want to get into the business of curating an exhibition. I can't think of any instance in which an artist said, I have to have this work; I have to have this work; this collector's important to me –

MS. RICHARDS: Or deciding which years you would present.

MS. WALDMAN: Not at all. It was my – as I said, I had a free run in the museum; I had a free run with the artists. The only time that anyone questioned anything was, Carl questioned, I think, the way in which I phrased a few things in the catalogue. That was it. Because he had been an editor, and so he was as fussy as I was.

The other thing that I did that was unusual for the time was that I let artists make pieces for the museum. The great floor piece that Carl made for the rotunda floor was created for the space of the ground floor.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the title? Do you recall?

MS. WALDMAN: 64 Pieces, I believe, it was called.

MS. RICHARDS: And that was 1970, the year of the show?

MS. WALDMAN: Mm-hm. Yes. There was an absolutely great piece, which I tried to buy for the museum. But the negotiations got too complicated, so we didn't end up buying it.

One of the great frustrations for me at the museum was that the budget for collecting was never as good as the budget for – so-called budget - for exhibitions, so that, whereas I had free rein in doing an exhibition, it was much more difficult to get the money from the museum to buy works of art.

So I would go to galleries, or I'd go to artists' studios, and I'd see works. But I ran up against a budget limitation that made it very, very difficult.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it ever suggested that if you found the money yourself, then you could use it?

MS. WALDMAN: Well, eventually I did, but –

MS. RICHARDS: But not in the early years?

MS. WALDMAN: Not in the early years, no. And it – Messer's – the one good thing he did do was he figured, for every exhibition, we should buy a work. And the Andre was the exception because he wanted the piece. And I don't know – it got very complicated with the gallery. They quoted one price, and then they changed it. They doubled it.

MS. RICHARDS: What gallery was that?

MS. WALDMAN: John Weber Gallery. And then they came back, and they changed – upped it again. So there was a misunderstanding. It should have been an inexpensive piece, which we could have acquired. And so it became a problem, which, happily, was later solved when Tom Krens purchased the Panza Collection. But at that time it was a bit of a problem.

But we would buy a work from every exhibition. I realized that, in order to have an important collection, it would be good to be able to collect in depth. But it was very frustrating.

MS. RICHARDS: Who made the decision on which work would be acquired from each exhibition?

MS. WALDMAN: I did, for the most part. I think Tom Messer picked the Cornell that he wanted. But the Lichtenstein, I picked with Roy, and Messer agreed. I think for the most part I picked the works, yes.

So it was – as I said, the only shortcoming to working at the Guggenheim was the lack of funding for collections. The Modern had a much bigger pool of collectors and much greater access to money. They've always been able to buy a lot of work, either in connection with an exhibition or independently of an exhibition.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think that's partly because they have a wider purview in terms of their established areas of collecting than the Guggenheim?

MS. WALDMAN: In part, yes. I mean, because they have a department of architecture, a department of drawings, so they had –

MS. RICHARDS: Design, photography –

MS. WALDMAN: They had a much more structured program to begin with. My understanding is, when the Guggenheim first started, it was with a certain collection in mind – Kandinsky, abstract art. And when Sweeney became director, James Johnson Sweeney, he emphasized sculpture.

So it was never a departmental breakdown. The Guggenheim has a drawings collection. It's not a big one. It was only some years ago that they developed a department of photography.

It was a small museum, in which you could do anything you wanted. I could have done a show of architecture if I wanted to. There was no hierarchical breakdown and, for that reason probably, no structured budget for each department. And large sums of money were not set aside for acquisitions.

MS. RICHARDS: You did a show for the Venice Biennale, I think in '69. Is that correct? Moholy-Nagy?

MS. WALDMAN: I participated in it. It was a Moholy-Nagy show which came to the Guggenheim ["Laszlo Moholy-

Nagy," organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; shown at the Guggenheim February 20 - April 19, 1970]. I installed it. And the Guggenheim was invited to bring the Moholys to the Venice Biennale because the theme of the Biennale was abstract art of the early 20th century.

Because I had been the coordinator of the show, I was invited to go to the Biennale with this group of works. It was quite a wonderful experience.

MS. RICHARDS: At that point, did the Peggy Guggenheim Foundation of Venice exist as a public institution?

MS. WALDMAN: It existed as a private collection. It was Tom Messer's great achievement to get Peggy to agree to let the Guggenheim become the foundation overseeing the Peggy Guggenheim collection.

She was really short of funds and was not able to maintain the palazzo. Our conservator really restored that palazzo enormously. And so it became a part of the Guggenheim Museum.

Messer was the one that made a rapprochement occur between Peggy and Harry Guggenheim. And it came under our umbrella.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to the museum, after you did the big international in 1971, you did a [Robert] Mangold exhibition ["Robert Mangold," November 19, 1971 - January 2, 1972]?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. My idea initially had been to do a three-person show with [Dan] Flavin, Andre, and Ryman. Flavin at that point in time was having a one-person show in Canada. And because he was having a one-person show in Canada, he wouldn't agree to a three-person show in New York.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that ego?

MS. WALDMAN: Partly. [Laughs.] So I at that point got the brilliant idea of substituting Mangold for Flavin. And then I got the more brilliant idea of breaking them up and doing three separate shows. [Laughs.]

Yes, I think – I suppose Flavin was the one that planted the idea in my mind. So I did three separate shows.

MS. RICHARDS: What was your thinking about the benefit of having all three artists in the same show? I mean, the advantages of that.

MS. WALDMAN: I think I thought they were young, and I wasn't at all certain that I was ready for the responsibility of showing each of them individually. But the more I thought about it, the more – I did go off to Canada to see the Flavin show. And I thought it was magnificent. And then I thought, why not?

You know, as I said, traveling in Düsseldorf made me realize that there was a larger world outside of New York and that perhaps I was being a little bit too cautious.

MS. RICHARDS: They were probably in their late 30s or something then?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, yes. And it was a big step. I mean, there were people who came to the museum when the Guggenheim International was on and asked for their money back because they didn't see anything on the walls. Fifty cents was the admission that we charged then.

And so – you know, we're talking about a very different point in time, where the public was simply not used to seeing that kind of material in a museum.

MS. RICHARDS: What was your position in those years about education, about wall text, about explaining to viewers why you thought that Ryman ["Robet Ryman," March 3 - April 30, 1972] and Mangold and other artists' work was important for them to look at?

MS. WALDMAN: We didn't do much with wall text. But I thought that the catalogue was – my essay was my attempt to explain to the public how I felt about the art. And if they could relate to what I was saying and look at the work, that they would understand the significance of the artists. I felt that the wall text would distract from looking at the works of art, and I didn't like the Acoustiguides, the machines that people would take around the museum and listen to.

But we did do some of that. I did interviews, and I did radio programs. The museum had a radio program, so I would talk about the exhibitions then. We did try outreach, but I think the museum's point of view was that the exhibitions spoke for themselves.

And I think Tom Messer's feeling, which I agreed with, was that if the public could relate to the art, and they were interested in the artists, they would read the essays or go to the galleries and learn more about the art.

So the primary experience was to be one of visualization. And I think that was the educational approach that we took in the beginning.

You know, I think as museums have grown, wall texts have become more important.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean in terms of their audiences?

MS. WALDMAN: In terms of their audiences and also as the shows have – as the work has become more located within an historical context. People are more interested in context now. There's been a greater attempt to explain a little bit about the artists and where they come from and where they worked and how they worked and what they did and when they moved, you know, so that the – the kinds of wall texts that you would get at the Metropolitan Museum, which are wonderful – I think museums have adapted, to a certain degree.

But we had a good lecture program, which was open to the public. And we had gallery tours. So we felt that we were educating the public. But signage was never a big part of the museum's display.

It's sort of interesting now because I think very differently about signage. And if I were to do an exhibition now – I mean, I actually did a text for a little Kenneth Noland show that's up at the museum at this point. I did write a wall text. They asked me to write one.

So I think it was – it is important. But then, it was about just the presentation. That seemed to suffice. And the catalogue text.

MS. RICHARDS: As you were working at the museum in the '70s and meeting artists – on your own and with Paul – did you start feeling any kind of tension or pressure, in your position as a curator at a major museum, having artist friends and obviously not being able to pick the people you knew – all the people you knew who you might have thought they were deserving – to give a show to? That kind of situation where you were in a position of power –

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. I guess I never thought of myself as being powerful. It's very funny. To this day, I still don't want to acknowledge that – I mean, I always thought of the museum as being all powerful, not me.

But I know what you mean. I was very good at avoiding people unless I was interested in them. I wasn't all that social. For one thing, I did so many exhibitions and wrote so many texts that I was really working 24/7. My vacations were about writing catalogues.

My social life really consisted of the artists that I was working with. But I have to say, in the '60s the loft parties were wonderful.

What was awkward for me was befriending someone whose work I didn't care for. I found it very difficult, because I felt it was amoral. So I wasn't about to wield any power or flaunt my position, you know? I just wanted to work with the art and the artists that I liked. And as soon as I finished one project, I went on to another.

MS. RICHARDS: I could see, when I'm looking at the record, that there was what must have been a major exhibition almost every year.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there any way around that? I mean, could they have assigned other people exhibitions? Or did you see it that that's just what you needed to do?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, I did, you know. Because I worked in advertising and then went to graduate school, I felt that coming into the museum in 1965, when I was 29 – I felt that I was old. [Laughs.] And I felt, partly because of my background, that I had to prove myself, and I had to catch up.

I was so in love with art, the museum, the experience, that it never occurred to me to slow down. But I also felt that I had to keep proving myself.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked a little while ago about it being– because you're a woman.

MS. WALDMAN: I always felt that I had to keep proving myself, and there was competition within the museum – lots of ego. As the museum grew, it became a less comfortable situation. I think that I felt that, in order to keep moving, I – I think it goes back to my childhood. My father would look at my report card and say, what's this B? Why not an A?

So that was in me. And males were authority figures to me. I had Tom Messer, then Tom Krens. The trustees were mostly male. There weren't many women on the board in the beginning.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there other, perhaps female - maybe not curators in the field - at other major museums who you felt were important supporters or mentors who you could call and discuss an issue or problem with?

MS. WALDMAN: No. It was always a competitive field. Always. Because all the women were vying for the attention of the men. [They laugh.] The men were in power. Women could not become directors, for the most part. So it was a field that was unfolding but at a very slow pace. So it was a tough – it's a tough profession. And my mentors were always men.

MS. RICHARDS: Who were they –

MS. WALDMAN: Tom Hess at ARTnews – the first one. Tom Messer, Colin Eisler at the Institute. Those were my primary mentors.

I mean, I tried – I wanted nothing more than to have discussions about art with people. But it became very difficult. The discussions that I could have were with the artists, not with colleagues in the field, for the most part.

I could if I could travel to Europe, because it was another territory, a different terrain. But there again, in those days it – they were all men.

It was easier working with dealers because they had the immediacy of being with art and artists. They could pick the artists they wanted to show. It was easier to talk to them about art. They were admiring of the profession – the museum profession. They were eager to help their artists, so they were open.

The museum profession – it's a funny place. [They laugh.] I don't know if it's changed, but it's – it was a funny place.

I mentored a lot of people –

MS. RICHARDS: I want to get to that a little later, certainly.

You talked about using the whole space – at first, I think, in '71, the Guggenheim International. Then you did, I think, a retrospective of Chamberlain's work ["John Chamberlain: A Retrospective Exhibition," December 22, 1971 - February 20, 1972]. In '71 he was pretty young still – in '71.

MS. WALDMAN: He was very young. The work was very unknown. It was a beautiful show. And it was trashed by the critics – absolutely trashed. He was devastated. I was devastated.

But the beauty of it was that it – the interest of the Pace Gallery resulted, and he was able to make another career that has been wonderful for him as a result of that show. It was just an absolutely breathtaking exhibition.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there support in the artists' community, too? That excitement and interest that might have somehow made him feel, or you also feel, better about the criticism from the press?

MS. WALDMAN: Well, I knew there was a big divide – yes. I mean, Jasper Johns was a collector of his. Donald Judd was an admirer and collector of his. So there was a real art world that admired him. I certainly was not alone. But the critical perception was very negative.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that reception an issue for the museum, for the director? Did it –

MS. WALDMAN: No, he liked the work. Chamberlain was a little bit of a bear in those days. What he wanted on the main floor was to create a foam piece that was a couch. And he would come in in the morning and start cutting into the foam. I had not told my director, Tom Messer, that there was going to be this couch on the main floor. He would see Chamberlain working on the couch – or sprawled out on the couch – and it offended his sensibility.

He was, I think, probably more annoyed that I hadn't mentioned it to him. And at the opening there were people piled on top of one another on the couch. [Laughs.] So it was not a good moment in time. But otherwise, I think he – he certainly accepted the exhibition.

That was the closest I came to having a little bit of a run-in with him.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you – did the museum purchase a piece from that show?

MS. WALDMAN: Did the museum purchase a piece from that show? I think we did. You know, I don't remember. I think we did. Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that the first one-person retrospective that you organized?

MS. WALDMAN: One-person retrospective? No, because he was only a decade into his career. The Lichtenstein show in '69 was a survey of Roy's work from '63 to '69.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, retrospectives involve –

[Cross talk.]

– because they're so young.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. I mean, you can't call the shows that I did of Andre, Ryman or Mangold retrospectives. Cornell was a retrospective. It covered four decades of his life.

MS. RICHARDS: When you did the [Kazimir] Malevich in '73 ["Kazimir Malevich," November 16, 1973 - January 13, 1974] – how did that come up? That was a departure. Not a living artist.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. I was still handling loan exhibitions. And this was a loan show that Messer arranged with the Stedelijk Museum [Amsterdam, The Netherlands]. It was their collection of Malevich. And I said to him that it wouldn't quite fit on the two ramps that were assigned to the show. I would like to borrow a few works to augment them. And he said, fine, so I did.

But the catalogue was from the Stedelijk. So it wasn't mine, but it was a magnificent exhibition. I installed one of the Cubo-Futurist collages by itself in a bay, and – as I had done with Cornell - and it was very effective. The paintings were beautiful. There's a beautiful little exhibition at the Guggenheim now of Malevich, with loans from the Malevich heirs.

But that was a loan show, as the Moholy show was a loan show. Mainly, I did my own exhibitions. Every couple of years I got promoted –

MS. RICHARDS: How did those promotions happen? Did you go into the office and ask for them?

MS. WALDMAN: No, Messer – I'd do an exhibition. Messer would like the exhibition, then he said, I'd like – I'm promoting you. That was – you know, it was a very casual – in many ways a very casual museum in those days.

MS. RICHARDS: Each promotion – did they mean a salary increase?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. The money was negligible, but it meant a salary increase. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: So you never had to campaign for that kind of move?

MS. WALDMAN: I campaigned for the staff, not for myself. I would – as I campaigned for larger catalogues, I campaigned for staff salaries, because the Museum of Modern Art was unionizing. People would bitch to me about the salaries at the Whitney. So I would see him and campaign for staff raises for the entire staff. I worked very hard on getting salaries raised to a decent level.

MS. RICHARDS: How many people were you supervising in those – early in the '70s?

MS. WALDMAN: Well, I wasn't supervising. I mean, it was Messer's show. It was still a small staff. He had as a deputy director a man named Henry Berg. And when Henry Berg left the museum, I proposed to Messer that rather than having someone who would have an administrative background, he would be better having people with curatorial backgrounds.

So I suggested that he make me director of exhibitions and Margit Rowell director of collections. When she left after a few years, he said to me, I suppose I can make you deputy director. And that's – at that point I was – I really started working on salaries, because I wanted to keep the museum – you know, it had been such a wonderful – wonderfully fluid organization. I wanted to keep it as informal as it could possibly be, even though it had grown a lot.

So at one point I'd say – before Tom Krens came – I was then overseeing about 250 people on staff, which is a huge jump, from 50 to 250. Went from 50, when I first started at the museum as a beginning curator, to 250.

And then I had an administrator, who worked on budgets. He and I worked together to get the salaries to be reasonable for New York City. But you know, it was still in some ways a mom-and-pop store. [They laugh.] And that was the beauty of it – it really was, you know.

I was director of exhibitions, but I never really said no to anyone who proposed an exhibition. If it was a good project, Tom Messer and I would discuss it, and we said yes – as simple as that, you know. And the trustees were very agreeable. It was a small group of trustees. We never had many committees for collectors. There was never any trustee interfering with the program of the museum. So it worked the way it should, as a professionally run, curatorial-directed museum - to my mind, the ideal museum situation.

In today's world, with the expense of exhibitions – it's a very different world. When I left in '96, the last exhibition that I did – an Ellsworth Kelly exhibition ["Ellsworth Kelly: A Retrospective," October 15, 1996 - January 15, 1997] - was budgeted around a million dollars.

A very different prospect then, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you decide to do an exhibition of 20th-century American drawings ["Twentieth-Century American Drawing: Three Avant-Garde Generations," January 23 - March 23, 1976]? You did this string of solo exhibitions, and here was a thematic –

MS. WALDMAN: I love drawings. I guess that goes back to my training. And the museum, as I said, had a small collection. I was interested in working with – there had been a drawing show – European master drawings - but never an American master drawings show. And I thought, a-ha, here's a very nice opportunity to do 20th-century American drawings, to work with the work of artists like Georgia O'Keeffe, that would normally fall under the purview of the Whitney.

And for me – I should say that every exhibition's been about learning – a learning experience. I want to grow. I want to try and bring that experience to the public, to expose them to new art. You'll notice from my record that I never stayed in a rut. It would have been very easy to keep refining and redefining a moment in time, to have decided to work with Pop art, after Lichtenstein to do [Andy] Warhol, to do Segal, to do [James] Rosenquist.

I wasn't interested in that. It wasn't that I didn't like the artists. It was just that I felt that I could refresh myself by switching gears. It sort of kept me on my toes.

And I had never really done much with drawings. The museum – because of its skylight – did not lend itself to a lot of works on paper. There was too much light in the museum. But I determined that at a certain – the lower ramps in the museum – with the proper lighting, with the diminished lighting, we could get by with a couple of ramps of drawings.

Basically I wanted to work with the early 20th-century American material that I wouldn't have worked with otherwise. You know, I would not have chosen to do a Georgia O'Keeffe retrospective nor an Arthur Dove retrospective. But this was an opportunity to see these artists, to show them at their most intimate. It was just a – and to meet artists like Cy Twombly, that I wouldn't necessarily have an opportunity to work with on another scale, in another context.

So it's a great experience. I mean, I can't tell you what it's like to go to museums - because for the most part the drawings are not on view. And yet museums have some of the most outrageous drawings that you can imagine.

Recently I freelanced, as you know, an exhibition for the [Joan] Miró Foundation in Barcelona [Spain] of collage [catalogue: Diane Waldman, Donald Kuspit, and Carter Ratcliff, Mestres del Collage: De Picasso a Rauschenberg. Barcelona: Fudacio Joan Miro, 2005]. I was in seventh heaven at the [Centre] Pompidou [Paris], looking at [Henri] Matisse, at [Pablo] Picasso and [Georges] Braque in Berlin [Germany]. I mean, I had everything I could do in Berlin not to look at the Leonardo [da Vinci]s – [laughs] – in the card catalogues – just unbelievable. And these are things that the public rarely, if ever, gets to see.

So for me it was looking at all these great drawings, going to Georgia O'Keeffe's assistant's home in Manhattan –

MS. RICHARDS: Was it mainly, then, a loan exhibition? Most of the drawings were not part of the Guggenheim collection?

MS. WALDMAN: No. Some of them were, but most of them were borrowed. So in order to show, for example, five Georgia O'Keeffes, I must have looked at 100. It's very time-consuming, and it's wonderfully exhilarating.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that critically a successful exhibition?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, I think so. It's not exciting for critics because it's not big; it's not dynamic; it's not extravagant. But it was a nice exhibition. It was a beautiful exhibition. It traveled to Baden-Baden [Germany]. And so I got to go to Baden-Baden and to see how they install – you know, so a lot of it's just – it's wonderful to look at work that you pick for a museum in New York in another context because that's where the connoisseurship comes in.

You look at the works in a strange setting, and you see if it still holds up. So you say, okay, this was a good one;

it's this one you slightly missed on. You could've perhaps gotten a better example. And as I said to you, you keep learning that way. You keep refining your eye. And that's part of being a curator. Or it was. You know, I'm not so sure if my younger colleagues see an exhibition the same way that I do. I would hope they would.

MS. RICHARDS: After the number of exhibitions you did of, basically, your contemporaries and young artists, you did a show – de Kooning ["Willem de Kooning in East Hampton," February 10 - April 3, 1978] and then Rothko ["Mark Rothko, 1903 - 1970: A Retrospective," October 27, 1978 - January 14, 1979]. Why did you choose to look back at – not so far back – but look back at the Abstract Expressionists?

MS. WALDMAN: Because I love the Abstract Expressionists, and I felt that the Modern had done so many important shows that, at the time, I didn't think the Guggenheim in the '60s, early '70s – the '60s mainly – I didn't think the Guggenheim could do them. But by that point in time, I'd sort of come up to my generation. And I felt it would be good to go back a little bit.

MS. RICHARDS: Was any of it because you were hearing from the artists' community that they wanted to see this?

MS. WALDMAN: No, but I felt that the reception for recent de Kooning was not good. I thought the work was spectacular, but his critical appreciation was not good at all for the '70s paintings. And I had never met him. So it gave me a chance to go out to the Springs [East Hampton, NY] and to meet him. It was one of the best experiences in my life.

He was sitting in his studio with no light on – just natural light. It was a gray day. And when I came in – I brought my assistant with me because I always wanted – as I mentioned a little bit earlier – to mentor people who were working with me at the museum. I thought she would probably love to meet de Kooning, you know. And she was in awe, as I had been when I was her age.

So he said to me that – he welcomed us. And he said he had just been thinking about the word "to draw." He was still as – even though he had lived in America for such a long time – he still thought, in many ways, in German. And he was looking at the word "art."

MS. RICHARDS: You mean in Dutch?

MS. WALDMAN: Well, he was looking – he was talking about the word "kunst," in this case. And he was looking in the dictionary to redefine for himself what the word "drawing" meant – "to draw." And he said that the dictionary said "to drag." And I thought it was the most amazing experience to see this master looking at a term as though it was the first time he had ever seen it and to rethink the whole process of what it meant to draw.

It was astounding to me. And I borrowed drawings. And I borrowed the paintings. I think it was Princess Beatrix, or Queen Beatrix, from the Netherlands, who came for the exhibition. De Kooning didn't. And it was such a beautiful –

[END DISC 1.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Diane Waldman in New York City on West 26th Street, June 8, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc two.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there anything else about the visit with de Kooning that you can think of that you'd want to talk about?

MS. WALDMAN: Just that he was – oh, yes. The other thing that he showed me that was wonderful was he had just uncovered one of the very first works he had ever done as a young artist. It was a painting of a jug, and it looks like a [Johannes] Vermeer in the sense that it had that wonderfully precise rendition of a jug, and the light was beautiful, and the pattern on the jug was beautiful – but not to de Kooning. [Laughs.]

To de Kooning, the lip of the jug was not done in the proper perspective. The oval was not perfect. That's all that he saw, was – [laughs]. And I thought, you know, that it was – he was so lacking in pomposity, in ego. He was just the artist. And it was such a genuinely pure experience that that's what I came away with – the definition of "to draw," "to drag," and the fact that he was really – he still lived for art, and that his focus was really on making paintings.

I say that because there had been talk even then about the fact that he had – I don't know quite how to say this – that there were – well, there was gossip and there were rumors about the fact that he had the beginnings of Alzheimer's [disease].

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] And questions about whether he was doing his own paintings.

MS. WALDMAN: And questions about whether he was doing his own paintings. And I saw none of that, you know? Even the paintings of the '80s. I mean, I was not convinced. I didn't see – I didn't know him at that point. I did my exhibition; that was –

MS. RICHARDS: Seventy-eight.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. And so – and then the market for those paintings took off, and all of a sudden everyone wanted those paintings, where previous to that, it was hard to even sell those paintings.

I'm not sure, but I certainly know that he was making miraculous works at that point, and the paintings that I saw later on in the early '80s were spectacular. The last show that I saw of his paintings at Gagosian [Gallery] looked radiant, absolutely radiant.

The reason that I did the exhibition was because I had always been so aware of the light in paintings. I remember on my trips to Europe, I would remark on the light, whether it was the gray light in Paris or if it was the – whatever, the light near the sea in Haarlem, in Holland.

And artists would say to me, "Really?" And they'd look around, and they'd say, "You're right." And the thing that struck me about the de Kooning paintings was the paintings that he made in New York had so much more dark and light, in many cases. And the paintings that he made in the Hamptons were based upon the light out there, which is so very different.

I thought it represented a facet of his work that hadn't been seen in New York since his exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, and I thought it would make a wonderful exhibition, which it did. And of course, the Guggenheim, because of the skylight, has its own amazing light, so it enhanced the light in his paintings.

There was very – one very funny situation, though. Philip Johnson, an admirer of de Kooning's, had seen the show. And he wrote to Tom Messer, and he said he loved the exhibition; the lighting was terrible. [Laughs.] Because in those days, the Guggenheim had fluorescent lighting, which consisted of pink bulbs and blue bulbs. That was the way most fluorescent tubes were sold in those days, warm and cool.

He said, "If you change the lighting," - and he recommended a certain kind of newer lighting - "you will see how much more vivacious the color is, how much more it brings out the warmth," like the de Koonings looked in East Hampton. And we changed the bulbs, and sure enough, it enhanced the way the paintings looked. But that was because of Philip Johnson.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that at some point midway in the exhibition, or he saw it before it opened?

MS. WALDMAN: I think it was pretty much – I think it was at the very beginning.

MS. RICHARDS: So maybe he had a preview?

MS. WALDMAN: No, I think he came when the show was up, and we changed the bulbs. It was just changing tubes. The light fixtures would – they were still fluorescent lights, but they had newer bulbs, newer tubes that were closer to daylight, not pink or blue. [Laughs.] And not cold, the way these lights were. So the newer bulbs were much closer to natural light.

So that was another moment of clarity, which I enjoyed.

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you - there came soon after, in 1980, the first of the Exxon exhibitions. I think 1980 was the "British Art Now [: An American Perspective, 1980 Exxon International Exhibition," January 11 - March 9, 1980], which was called an Exxon International Exhibition. That was a string of exhibitions that were focused on different countries, as well as the U.S.

Did you begin that project mapping out what the program would be, knowing there'd be a string of them, or did you feel, well, it might just be one exhibition?

MS. WALDMAN: No, it – and it started because Tom Messer was interested in encouraging younger artists. He had gotten a grant, years before, for an exhibition that was called the [Theodoron] Exhibition, which was funded by a private individual.

I did the first one with Ed Fry, and that was when I first showed Richard Serra and Bruce Nauman ["Nine Young Artists, Theodoron Awards," May 24, 1969 – June 29, 1969]. It was in 1969 –

MS. RICHARDS: I noticed that Theodoron --

MS. WALDMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Where does that name come from?

MS. WALDMAN: I think it came from some Greek term that this gentleman – it represented something; I really don't remember at this point without looking it up. I don't know. It may be in – I think there was a catalogue for the exhibition.

But it enabled us to show artists that were not even on the radar at that point – Nauman, Serra – in the late '60s when they had really just started showing. But the gentleman who funded the show, I think, might have had a divorce, and stopped the funding.

Messer wanted to continue the series, so he found an Exxon corporate sponsor. They were also giving money to young composers, I believe. Exxon was. So he and I went to see them; they agreed to do the exhibitions, and Messer's thinking was that we alternate between one European or one non-American and one American, and then the rest he left up to me and to the people that I then suggested do the exhibitions.

So –

MS. RICHARDS: You mean the people you suggested would collaborate?

MS. WALDMAN: [Inaudible, off mic] – no, on the staff.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. WALDMAN: Because, at a certain point, I wanted to do other exhibitions, and I didn't particularly want to continue in the series, even though the series was continuing.

So we started with the British, then an American, then an Italian, then an American, then I think maybe a German, then an American. Then Exxon phased out their corporate sponsorship of the program, and then it ended. But it was a very nice experience.

I think the problem, to a certain degree, was that we were trying to keep it so far under the radar that it really – it didn't really register with the art critics, the critics in New York.

MS. RICHARDS: What do you mean by keeping under the radar?

MS. WALDMAN: Well, in showing younger talent, it became – not like a Whitney Biennial, not a big show dedicated just to showing new talent, but a small show, in which most of the artists, after the Serra-Nauman, were hardly known, or not known at all in New York.

And I think the critics at that point were not particularly interested. I think they were leaning more towards conceptual art, more towards photography. We were still showing painting and sculpture by artists in L.A. or San Francisco who had not had any exposure here.

I did a show of young Australian art, and it was sort of – I think we were a little bit too ahead of the curve in that regard, so the critical interest was not there. I think the public was interested in seeing it, but it didn't really achieve any much momentum of its own.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think there was a suspicion in the art world about the shows because they were funded and labeled "Exxon"?

MS. WALDMAN: I don't know. I mean –

MS. RICHARDS: Did that undercut their credibility in any way?

MS. WALDMAN: I don't think so. I think that the artists were not in sync with what was going on in the galleries in New York, and so the perception was that this stuff might be a little dated; it might not be as avant-garde as some of the things that were going upin other words, I don't think the work was judged on the work's merits as much as it was judged on a New York-centric point of view.

So even the Italian show - and there were artists from the Italian show like Penone, Giuseppe Penone, who now shows with Marian Goodman. But he didn't really register at all when I showed him in the Italian show, and yet he's a wonderful artist, and he's shown quite a bit in Europe now because of Marian's devotion to him. He's still under the radar in New York, to a certain degree, but his reputation in Europe has increased enormously, where he was a local Italian artist from Turin before.

MS. RICHARDS: Right. Did you –

MS. WALDMAN: So I don't know if the timing was wrong for some of these exhibitions or – I don't know what it was.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were showing – I'm trying to see which year that was. Oh, in 1982, "Italian Art [Now: An American Perspective, 1982 Exxon International Exhibition," April 2 - June 20, 1982].

MS. WALDMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: How far back did that go? I mean, did it have the Arte Povera, or was it the contemporary, very new –

MS. WALDMAN: It was new. It was –

MS. RICHARDS: Penone was part of - wasn't he marginally part of –

MS. WALDMAN: He came out of the Arte Povera, but he was a younger artist. He wasn't part of the Mario Merz generation.

So he was within the sphere of younger, emerging artists that –

MS. RICHARDS: Some of whom were painters, right? So that was –

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, and then there was Sandro Chia, Enzo Cucchi, Gilberto Zorio. Zorio did show with Ileana Sonnabend, but again, it wasn't – some of the artists simply did not register with the critics, whereas to go back [to], say, the [Theodoron] Exhibition in which Serra and Nauman were in, they were – they quickly became part of the New York art world inner circle.

And so there was a certain critical acceptance of them that was lacking with some of these other, younger artists that we showed – showed later.

So it was a good series. It wasn't a particularly successful series, but it was a series – to my mind – but it was a series that was dear to Messer's heart, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: Well, it certainly filled a gap in the New York art world.

MS. WALDMAN: It did. It absolutely did, but – [inaudible] – and the Australian artists never caught on here. They did go on to show in Europe. They have a – had a presence at the Biennale in Venice.

But, you know, as the West Coast artists would say, New York just doesn't register unless it's a New York-based artist. And that was true for Europe – or, from certain areas of Europe, like Italy.

French artists didn't show well here, either. The Brits did, and continue to. But there's a funny dynamic that was operating in New York to a certain degree.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Most of the exhibitions that you were doing – [inaudible] – were showing what was going in New York or in Europe. I don't know if - other than the Exxon, did you do an exhibition, a solo exhibition of a major California artist? And, if not, why – did you think about it and then reject it?

MS. WALDMAN: No, I was –

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, I know most of the museums. None of them were showing California –

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. No, I mean, I suppose if I were to do anything, I would have shown Bruce, who I knew, Bruce Nauman. But I think I was focused on Europe, you know, that those early trips to Germany made such an impression on me. I was asked in '68 or '69, by Richard Morphet, who was an editor for – I think it was a Penguin paperback series –

MS. RICHARDS: You said Morphet?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. He was a curator at the Tate [London], but he was an editor of a series of paperback books on avant-garde artists - to do a book on Joseph Beuys. And I went to visit Beuys in his studio. He didn't speak English, much English, at the time. I went with Hans Strelow, who was a critic for the Frankfurter Allgemeine, who –

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell Strelow?

MS. WALDMAN: S-T-R-E-L-O-W, Strelow. He offered to interpret.

MS. RICHARDS: What year was this?

MS. WALDMAN: Sixty-eight or '69. And I knew about Beuys's work. I thought it was wonderful. He wasn't really seen much in New York. And – but, one, they were paying, I think, $750 to write a book, which meant a year, but, two, I thought the language problem and the fact that he was in Germany – he was in Dusseldorf, and I was here – would make it – after I met him, I thought it would be impossible.

Anyhow, I went to his studio. He was wearing his coveralls, his hat. I met his children, his wife. And the three of us sat down, and then he got up, and he walked over to his cupboard, and he came out with a box, looking very serious, and we sat down. And I couldn't figure out what in the world was going on. He proceeded to take the plastic binding off it very slowly, looking up, looking down, lift the cover off. It was a box of chocolates. And he burst out laughing. It was such a drama. [Laughs.] It was wonderful. I mean, it was a performance that he was doing.

But I said to Strelow after that, "I don't think I can possibly do it." You know, and I told Richard Morphet that I didn't think I could do it. And then, 10 years later, the Guggenheim did the Beuys exhibit ["Joseph Beuys," November 2, 1979 - January 2, 1980]. But I – you see so much of the avant-garde. So much was happening in Europe at that point. And I had caught up with what I thought was happening in the U.S., [so] that I was focused a lot on Germany and Britain.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, I noticed you did – well, in 1986, you did Richard Long's show.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. I had always liked his work.

MS. RICHARDS: By about 1980 – so you'd been at the Guggenheim for 15 years – I mean, it sounds like an ideal situation. Messer sounds like a wonderful boss. Did you ever think, though, that maybe I should go somewhere else, that something would offer me more opportunities? [Laughs.] Did it ever cross your mind?

MS. WALDMAN: No. First of all, my husband was in New York. I couldn't see leaving New York. Too much of the art world was here. Someone spoke to me about the possibility of a job in Washington, but I simply couldn't see it. Besides, I knew I had the best situation in the world at the Guggenheim. And I knew that I would have to make presentations. I would have to defend exhibitions. I'd have to start over again with the politics of another museum. And I didn't see the point to it.

I really – you know, I had what I wanted in New York, which was a great opportunity to do exhibitions. As I said, the museum never said no. Messer never said no. The only time I didn't get an exhibition - I spoke to Cy Twombly about doing an exhibition, because I thought his work would look beautiful in the museum. And he said he couldn't adjust to the curve, to the ramp. He felt that he needed his work to be on the plane, in the rectangle, and that he could not see his canvases being installed on the ramps. So that was – I thought that was not something –

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. WALDMAN: You know, I mean, almost everybody jumped at the opportunity to show at the Guggenheim. What happened to me was that after I did the Guggenheim International – and there was so much –

MS. RICHARDS: What year was that? Oh, you mean –

MS. WALDMAN: Seventy-one.

MS. RICHARDS: - '71, yes.

MS. WALDMAN: There was so much conflict within – difficulty within - that exhibition, with artists vying for spaces, with one another for exhibition spaces. I had not planned, for example, to give Dan Flavin an entire ramp. I started off being very democratic and inviting artists and planned to give them exactly equal amounts of space. And once Flavin took a ramp, that meant that I had to bump the people who were on that ramp down. And that then kept bumping and bumping and bumping.

In any event, I determined after that that I would be better off getting a little bit out of the contemporary era. That's when I did the Max Ernst show "Max Ernst: A Retrospective Exhibition," February 14 - April 20, 1975]. That's when I did de Kooning, [Mark] Rothko, [Arshile] Gorky ["Arshile Gorky, 1904 - 1948: A Retrospective," April 24 - July 19, 1981]. It sort of refreshed me, and then I came back into the contemporary sphere. But it wasn't a question of leaving the museum. It was simply a question of figuring out where I wanted to go at a certain point in time.

MS. RICHARDS: When was it that another position for a curator was added – as the staff was expanding – so you weren't curating every exhibition?

MS. WALDMAN: No.

MS. RICHARDS: At what point – who came on who was also doing important exhibitions as you were, and with whom you'd need to collaborate and make decisions?

MS. WALDMAN: The only collaboration occurred with the director –

MS. RICHARDS: I didn't mean working collaboration.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: I meant –

MS. WALDMAN: Margit Rowell came to see Ed Fry. She had his name. He told her there were no job openings. I thought it would be – I looked at her. I thought she looked like a very nice person. She left the office. I went out to see her. I said, "Wait a minute." Messer was next door. I went in to see him, and I said, "There's a very pretty woman outside that you would like to meet." [Laughs.] So he hired Margit. So she came in, and she did any number of exhibitions. The first – one of the first was an exhibition of his favorite artist, [Jean] Dubuffet. She did "The Planar Dimension [: Europe, 1912 - 1932," March 9 - May 6, 1979]. She did a number of very interesting shows, and then she left.

Angelica Rudenstine came in, but she – her assignment was not to do exhibitions per se but to catalogue the Peggy Guggenheim collection. So she was part of the museum, but not part of the exhibition program. So there was Fry, there was me, and then there was Margit. My first assistant was Linda Shearer. And when I was offered an Eva Hesse show by a friend of mine, I had already done so many of the Minimalists, I suggested Linda doing that. She then did a Brice Marden show and a couple of shows before she left the museum.

So I was sort of – Messer and I were the constants, and there were other people that came in. But he didn't really replace Margit for Ed Fry as much as, sort of, he would take – he always took exhibition packages that came that he thought were interesting to complement what he was doing and what I was doing and what some of the younger curators were doing. So it always remained a very small staff with a very ambitious program.

MS. RICHARDS: I want to take a detour away from exhibitions for a moment and talk to you about being married to an artist –

MS. WALDMAN: [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: – Paul Waldman.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about when you met him and you married him. And he's been a fully engaged, active artist his whole career. How did that impact your work as a curator? And anything else you'd like to mention.

MS. WALDMAN: I'd have to say he was my greatest mentor, because he was the one who introduced me to artists, but he was the one who also encouraged me to show them. So when I got cold feet about meeting Cornell, he pushed me. "Call him up. Go meet him." Roy, I didn't need any pushing; you know, I was just introduced to Roy, and I liked the work.

But he was always there for me when I discussed the artists that I met, the artists that I wanted to show, the problems that I might be having in the museum, catalogue texts, the scale of the show, the installation, whatever. I mean, he was always my sounding board, so to speak. You know, and it's been a great relationship because we complement each other so much.

When we were first married and he was a young artist showing at the Camino gallery down in the village, every Saturday, which was the day that you went to the galleries, we would go up Madison Avenue to see the exhibitions. So we were always talking about art and about the best art that we were seeing. So he was someone I could trust and someone I could depend on and someone who, I'd say, I could test my ideas, you know, about art and about artists and the size of a show; if I had problems with collectors, talk –

MS. RICHARDS: When you say the size of the show, what do you mean by that?

MS. WALDMAN: Well, I mean, I would tell him what I was doing. I was pushing Messer in this direction or that direction, that I thought it would be great to show – use the whole size of the museum for an exhibition. And he would say, "Go for it." You know, I mean, he, as an artist, didn't have the kinds of questions or fears that non-artists would have. He could envision what a body of work could look like in that museum. And if I got a bad review, he was there to support me. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: What about as you – learning – it sounds like learning on the job – the art of installing and – not physically, but creating a three-dimensional reality of an exhibition? He was used to doing that with his own work. I mean, you were always looking together at exhibitions, at his art, as it was installed in galleries and museums. And that's a whole piece of curatorial work that one has to – one can excel in, or one could not.

MS. WALDMAN: It was something that I always loved to do. In fact, I helped him with his installations. To me, it's just the easiest thing in the world to install an exhibition.

MS. RICHARDS: So is it kind of an intuitive eye you have?

MS. WALDMAN: Totally. Totally. I had one wonderful experience when I was working with Lawrence Alloway on Barnett Newman's Stations of the Cross, and the paintings were laid out, the high gallery off the main floor, and then the ramp adjoining it. That was the entire sequence for the exhibition of this limited body of paintings.

I would walk past the installation, and I'd start to hum, because I – there was a certain rhythm to the stripes in the paintings. And I mentioned it to Barney one day. And he said that he often painted to music.

A lot of artists in those days were painting to classical music. Cornell would listen to classical music while he worked on his boxes in his cellar. And so I like to think of the fact that I learned how to measure spaces, but it was all intuitive. And it was – it's also all from looking at paintings.

If you look at a Matisse still life, with the fish in the fishbowl and then the window looking out on the Mediterranean, it's all been measured, you know, to create the sense of a room, not the actuality of a room but the sense of a room, so that you feel you're looking at a real room looking out on the Mediterranean.

And I would take a bay in the museum, look at the work of art, and determine what the space – what space it needed, so that it would speak to me, the work of art would speak to me. And that was all intuitive, you know, and I just adore doing it.

I had a call from a gallery not too – a few years ago. It was the Gagosian Gallery. They were showing an exhibition of Lichtenstein sculpture. It had been shown at the Gagosian Gallery in London. And it was here at one of the galleries in Chelsea, and they didn't know what to do with it. So they asked me if I would consider coming over and installing the exhibition. And I said sure. I'd never worked in that space. But I had no problem with it.

You know, usually what I will do in a space is take the dominant work of any given period and key everything off the dominant work, so that if I go into a museum in New York, and I see an exhibition where the art is too close to the corners of the room, which happens more often than not at some of the museums in New York, I sense it before I even think about it.

If the height's wrong, it bothers me. And it was always intuitive. I never measured anything. The Guggenheim Museum had to measure a certain eye-level. Well, sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn't. You know, but there are no formulas for hanging, from my point of view. So I just – as I said, I take what I consider to be the key works of art and arrange everything else around those works of art.

I saw the most amazing exhibition in Paris years ago. It was a [Alberto] Giacometti retrospective. It was installed, I think, by two artists. In one room, they had a Giacometti that was about, I'm guessing now, five or six inches high in just one room – breathtaking, because what it does is, it forces the viewer to stop and look at the work of art.

If you bunch things together, if you hang them too close to the corners, people – they're not going to focus. They're simply going to go through a gallery and keep moving, thinking there's more to see, and they have to – they're not going to stop. And so they come out with an experience that's really half-baked. They don't determine which works of art register more, which are more important, which they care most about.

You know, I'm not trying to say, "This is it; this is not it; this is" – it's not a didactic experience. It's – I want the public to feel that they are enjoying the experience as much as I do. And for me, that's – I mean, maybe I've developed it into a bit of an art now, but it wasn't. So I just love to install. I do the installation here. [They laugh.]

MS. RICHARDS: Were there other relationships with artists that were important to you as a curator, not necessarily because you were doing a show of their work?

MS. WALDMAN: Well, my relationship with Ellsworth Kelly started in '68. I had liked his work, and Paul said to me, "Why don't you call him up and tell him you'd like to do an exhibition?"

So I did it cold. I called him up, and I said, "Ellsworth, you don't know me. I'm an assistant curator at the Guggenheim Museum. My name is Diane Waldman. I'd like to do an exhibition of your work."

And he said, "Come on over." [Laughs.] He was living at – had a studio, and he was living at [Cafe] des Artistes in New York.

MS. RICHARDS: On West 67th?

MS. WALDMAN: [One West] Sixty-seventh Street.

So I went over and looked at his paintings. And then he told me that he had just been approached by [William] Bill Rubin to do an exhibition at the Modern, but would I write an article on his work, which I did for ARTnews.

So I had a long friendship and relationship with him that was based on the fact that we liked the same artists, I liked his work, and he liked the article that I had written on him for ARTnews.

Years and years went by until the subject of an Ellsworth Kelly show came up at the Guggenheim from Tom Krens. He knew Ellsworth because he was in Williamstown [MA], and Ellsworth was now in Spencertown [NY]. And he had been talking to Ellsworth about an exhibition, and Ellsworth suggested me.

MS. RICHARDS: That's Spencertown, Connecticut, right?

MS. WALDMAN: Spencertown, New York.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. WALDMAN: It's up near Chatham, near Hudson, New York.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. WALDMAN: So that was an ongoing relationship with an artist whose work I followed over many years.

I did an installation of a Motherwell loan show, in 1984 ["Robert Motherwell," Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, NY; at the Guggenheim: December 7, 1984 - February 3, 1985]. I got to work with him because of this exhibition. And he – as I said, he had been a teacher of mine. And I always respected him.

And so I got to talk to him a little bit, and that was sort of out of the blue. But he was very much like de Kooning. He was talking about his drawings and the fact that one of the most impactful experiences that he had ever had was to see the caves at Altamira [Spain] – the caves of Lascaux – no, the caves of Altamira.

He had been to Spain. And his drawings are very much like that, you know, and I kept thinking – "to drag" – you know, very much the same. And the course that he taught at Hunter was based on Guernica [1937, Pablo Picasso], which was then at the Museum of Modern Art.

So you know, I was able to sort of bridge that teaching experience with a chance to get to know him a little bit. And it was a wonderful experience, late in his career, for me.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. WALDMAN: But as I said, I mostly work very intensely with an artist.

I knew Richard Long for many years before I did an exhibition with him, because, as I said, the circuit in Europe was a circuit that a lot of the artists were on. So I would meet them at a documenta. I would meet them at an exhibition in Germany, in Düsseldorf. And we would chat and talk.

So it was a very nice experience for me. But my most intense experiences were when I was working with an artist on a project, because it was – it was purpose-driven in a way. You know, it was a beginning, a middle, an end. And there was always a nice product, so to speak, that came of it, an exhibition and a catalogue.

So I had a document that was sort of – becomes a record of my history in a museum.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were working on exhibitions, what was the process of creating the catalogue? And if you could generalize, in terms of the decision-making, what would be the contents of it? What kind of piece would you write? Who would be the other contributors? All those kinds of issues.

MS. WALDMAN: I was very jealous about guarding my catalogues. I wasn't too happy about having other contributors, because I really thought of these exhibitions as my baby. And for the most part, I didn't have other contributors.

The Rothko show was an exception, because that was a project that Messer initiated. He mentioned to me one day that – asked me if I would be interested in going to Rothko's studio.

MS. RICHARDS: That was 1978.

MS. WALDMAN: He had thought about the idea of doing late Rothko, so I said sure. And I had – we went to Rothko's studio. Rothko was not well at the time. I thought the work was amazing. He had a lot of large paper pieces. And he didn't know how they would be hung in the museum.

I said, "No problem." I said, "Worse comes to worst, we can just tape them to the walls, but I'm sure that our crew could figure out a more temporary/permanent way of installing them." And then, a week later, he suicided. And that was the end of that.

And the show – and then there – it – the whole thing with the Marlborough [Gallery handling Rothko's] estate developed, and lawsuits, and the family, the heirs – the children suing Marlborough. And it became an absolute mess.

Every once in a while I would approach Messer. I would say, "Is it okay yet?" And he would say, "No." And I would say, "Is it okay yet?" And he would say, No." And I thought, "I can't let this go," because by that point in time I really, desperately wanted to do a Rothko show.

Well, it came to fruition. But he said that he had asked a writer to contribute to the catalogue. I can't remember the writer's name, but it's in the – a literary person, to write a piece.

MS. RICHARDS: Not an art historian?

MS. WALDMAN: Not an art historian.

And then he said he was thinking about some other people. And I said, "Absolutely not." I said, "Either we do it this way, or we don't do it, or I won't do it." So that was it. You know, I did – I did the catalogue.

For the Gorky show, I think, there had been –

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, you did – you did a major retrospective of Gorky.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, Gorky – there had been an art historian working for years, on a Gorky – perhaps a Gorky catalogue raisonne, who had spoken to Messer about doing a Gorky show. And I said, "Absolutely not." [Laughs.] And that was the end of it.

I felt very possessive at that time and perhaps a little insecure, I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever – thinking about feeling insecure, what goes through my mind is – maybe it's irrelevant, but that you didn't have a Ph.D.?

Did you ever think that, "You know, I really should go back, and even though it would take me a long time – because I'm working full-time – to get the Ph.D."?

MS. WALDMAN: What happened was that, because of the museum training program, I had a number of credits towards a Ph.D. And it was suggested to me at the Institute that I study for a Ph.D. So I said fine. I took more course work. And, but it was interfering with this – I had a really great career going at the time. Most of the curators in my profession were not Ph.D.s.

I ran into a conflict with my professor, because I proposed doing Rothko as my Ph.D. thesis. I was told that it wasn't possible, that there was nothing to say that couldn't be said in a page – I didn't understand the criteria – and I said, "Well, if that's the case, perhaps the thesis could be built around the difficulty of establishing criteria for abstract art."

Then he admitted that he had been asked to write a book on Rothko, and therefore I couldn't do the Ph.D. thesis. And I think that the – I was disillusioned, and so I said, the hell with it. I had all my coursework done for my Ph.D. So I left the Institute. I figured, I don't need them; they don't need me. They wanted me to give up my job to work – study - full-time for the Ph.D., and I said no. No way.

So that was the end of it. I don't see what I would have gained What I felt that I never had, because the education system is so erratic, I never felt that I had a really thorough grounding in art history. The courses that I took at the Institute were basically from, with few exceptions, Impressionism forward – up to the point that they considered Modern.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. WALDMAN: And my unrelated minor for my Ph.D. was Greek and Roman. It made no sense to me, absolutely no sense. And it was a huge gap in terms of what I would have liked to have studied, which would have been Renaissance art. So it seemed to me that the education that I was getting was piecemeal, and that I was getting a better education being in the museum and learning 20th-century art, even though my field was postwar art to the present, that I would get a better education learning about the early 20th century from what I could study in the museum, and fill in the gaps where necessary.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were – going back to the catalogues, when you were developing catalogues for the various exhibitions – I'm thinking about the '70s and '80s – did you have to think, as you know people do now, about how many copies would sell and other marketing issues? I mean, what contents would make a catalogue more attractive to a larger audience? Or did you – was it just purely scholarly concerns that drove your decisions?

MS. WALDMAN: It was purely scholarly concerns. What happened as the catalogues got somewhat larger and more appealing to an audience was that Abrams became a sponsor for the Guggenheim Museum, as they did for many museums in New York. So they would guarantee a certain number – that a certain number of copies would be published. So you had the advantage there of having a hardcover edition as well as a softcover, and the potential for it to reach a wider audience.

But I think in the 1960s and early 1970s most catalogue editions maxed out at 2,000. That was the audience in those days, you know? Abrams took over the Rothko catalogue, I think it was – I think it went into at least 10 reprints, because the audience had gotten much bigger for art at that time. So the museum was not really making money, and the concern was really to produce quality catalogues. The aesthetic at the Guggenheim in those days was what determined the end result.

I was asked years ago, when I was doing my master's thesis and I was working at the library at the Museum of Modern Art, because it had the best library in New York - I was asked whether the Guggenheim was a "gate" museum, meaning, was the museum concerned with how many people came in, and did that determine the exhibitions? And I said, "No, not at all." And he told me that was a concern of the Modern's, that they were very aware of attendance.

It never determined the museum's program, you know? It was almost as though the museum was defiant, the Guggenheim, in a way, because the core collection was never – the European art that was most admired by the public was French art – for many years, Impressionism, and into the early 20th century with Picasso and Braque and Matisse – and it was not these crazy Russians –

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. WALDMAN: – the Russian avant-garde, and Klee, and the Bauhaus. It really wasn't. I mean, that was – it was too abstract, and the museum was considered esoteric and really – the Europeans would understand, but it wasn't really for the American audience.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, just the emphasis on nonrepresentational –

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, it was very much out of the mainstream.

So I think because the goal of Hillay Rebay was so particular, that the museum for many years, certainly during the time that I was there, really followed that sort of concept, you know, and it was really – it was really whether an exhibition – the idea for an exhibition - was one of quality or not that determined whether it was done. That's all. You might disagree with Messer's choices, my choices, Margit's choices, and Fry's choices, but each curator – and I speak of Messer as a curator – really exhibited only what he or she thought was important, to them and for the museum. And that was why it was such a wonderful working experience for so many years.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you about your experience at the museum when the Hans Haacke exhibition was cancelled. I don't think you were the curator, but in your –

MS. WALDMAN: No, I wasn't the curator. Ed Fry was the curator. He had done a very beautiful David Smith show, and then, in part, I think, because of our experience working on the [Theodoron] exhibition of young talent, where we had gone to Richard Serra's studio, and we had gone – included him in the exhibition, he determined that he wanted to show – we went – I think we went to see Haacke to consider him for the [Theodoron] show. I'm not absolutely clear. In any event, I went with Ed Fry to Haacke's studio. But I wasn't involved after that.

So he developed this concept, and he proposed the exhibition to Messer. Messer said yes. And I – what happened, to my mind, was that Haacke was planning to grow a number of plants as projects in the museum. The plants did not grow.

In addition to that, he was planning to show a number of exhibition-related material that was very critical of landlords in New York.

I think when Messer got wind of the content of that, he objected and the trustees objected, and there was a standoff. I wasn't involved in that situation, but it was very unpleasant to be there. I felt that, to a certain degree, Haacke was at fault in terms of these other projects that were not working. And to my mind, the show was not going to be successful because these other plant projects were not working.

I never really took part in these landlord proposals, but, of course, they were controversial, you know.

And on the other hand, it seemed to me that the museum overreacted, because unless they felt – and I don't know if this was the case – that they could be sued for the for the content of these exhibits – I really don't know if that was the case, but I think that Fry was asked to remove these and wouldn't, because by that time he had in a way become radicalized, and so he sided with Haacke; the museum took the opposite position, and they fired him over it.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. That's a point [where] we could stop today.

[END DISC 2, TRACK 1.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Diane Waldman on June 9, 2010, in New York City for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is the second continuation of disc two.

While we ended up talking about other things, I wanted to go back and ask you a question about Cornell. On reflection, thinking about your time working on – in studying and writing about his work, why do you think you kept going back to it? I mean, you did your dissertation and thesis, and then you did the exhibition at the Guggenheim, and you did a book [Joseph Cornell. New York: G. Brazillier, 1977], and then you did a later book [Joseph Cornell: Master of Dreams. New York, Harry N. Abrams, 2002].

Maybe you just became the expert that people would go to, and they would initiate these further discussions. But I was wondering if you ever thought about, why did this artist end up capturing your interest so strongly?

MS. WALDMAN: I think because he captured my imagination, both as a person and as an artist. And there was so much wealth of material that he put into his boxes that it – for me, it was like an unending story. It had no beginning and no end. So if I studied the Medici boxes, I could study the Renaissance. If I talked about his color relationships, I could relate to Vermeer.

If I thought about his influence on younger artists, I could see how he connected, through his use of repetition, to Warhol, on the one hand, and how his use of materials influenced [Robert] Rauschenberg, who made early objects that really owe a great deal to Cornell, as he himself acknowledged. So he was like a history of modern art for me, all wrapped up in one–in the person and in the box.

He was also fascinating for me because he loved ballet, and I loved ballet, so to a certain degree our tastes overlapped. And although I never really spoke to him about the ballet – but he did talk to me about Allegra Kent and about the many ballerinas who he saw and admired. And it was also interesting to me, as a lover of dance, to know that he knew Balanchine – George Balanchine.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you mean he knew him?

MS. WALDMAN: He met him at a gallery opening in the '40s. I believe it was through the artist Pavel Tchelitchew. And as you know, in the '40s, the art world was small, but it interfaced very nicely with literary people, with poets, with playwrights – Tennessee Williams was part of that scene – with theater, with dance. So there was this commingling that, I think, appealed to him, and it certainly appealed to me.

MS. RICHARDS: When you went along doing these various projects, do you feel that, at this point there's still more to learn about him? If you were asked to look again, in terms of an exhibition or a book, are there still areas to explore in his work?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, I think something that you touched on earlier, namely his origins, his family life, and what that was really like to grow up in Nyack, New York, in a Dutch household among family that had once been very prominent in Nyack - and to talk about his very complex personality – I mean, I did not delve into that in any great detail, because I was really writing about his art.

But I think today I would be fascinated to explore a little bit more about his psychology. I think it could also provide, say, a reader – the mythical reader – with some insights into his character. I mean, there are people who have studied Cornell, who have come after me, who've made studies on Cornell and the dance, for example – Cornell and film, because he was an early collector of films, and he made a few of his own films with the help of people like Rudy Burckhardt.

But there are so many threads out there. I mean, he was so multifaceted in some ways, and yet so withdrawn, and lived such an interior personal life, that it would be so interesting for me to examine this very interior person who nonetheless touched so many different facets of the arts and the people in them. You know, I mentioned to you that I went to see Duchamp, to borrow some of Cornell's boxes. I went to see Sandy Campbell and Donald Windham – Windham died recently. They lived on Central Park South. Windham was a poet.

So to talk to people – the other person I saw was Lincoln Kirstein, who founded the magazine Dance Index, and who was an important part of the founding of the Museum of Modern Art. So to meet those people and to see how they respected and admired Cornell, from their own very different disciplines, was something that I probably could develop more if I were to do another book. But it would be more of a – I'd say as much about the person as about the art.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think that curators and art historians writing about artists over the period of time you've been in the field – have studies of artists evolved more toward including the psychological, the personal, the family information?

MS. WALDMAN: I think so. I think that, certainly, in the museum profession. You know, I think when I was starting out, it was important to simply establish a record for an artist. In most cases, as with Cornell, when I did my master's thesis, as I said earlier, there was no record of his chronology. And with people like Roy Lichtenstein, I mean, they were young artists, so there was really no prehistory that had been printed.

So I was really at the beginning of a dialogue about an artist. And the people who have come into the profession since then have had a certain advantage in having information that I produced, or others of my time produced, that they could build on. But it was impossible to do all of that at one time. Put simply, there wasn't time.

And the purpose, of course, being an exhibition, which had its own dynamic, and each exhibition had a sense of appropriate timing. So if Pop art were in the air, so to speak, and if I were to select Roy Lichtenstein, it would not have had the same impact had I spent 10 years doing research on Roy Lichtenstein or 10 years doing research on Joseph Cornell. So there's a certain finite time frame in which you work when you put together an exhibition.

And I was establishing a lot of criteria. I established chronologies for catalogues, so the catalogues got bigger. I established as comprehensive a bibliography as I could manage for each of these artists. So pulling all that material together was very time-consuming, and it didn't leave enough time to really develop the plot, so to speak, about the artist, his psychology, the context in which he or she worked, beyond a certain, sort of, skeletal time framework, I would say.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you carve out time in your day to write, think, research?

MS. WALDMAN: I worked five days a week at the museum – on museum stuff – and I would stay at the museum after work and write, research – do research and write. And then I would write on weekends. So I – [laugh].

MS. RICHARDS: So the answer is, work 12 hours a day, seven days a week?

MS. WALDMAN: That's right. I mean, I really worked very, very hard.

MS. RICHARD: So it could – it was impossible for you to just – to say, every afternoon, three to six, I'm going to do this research because, after all, it was for an exhibition at the museum?

MS. WALDMAN: No, because I was also going out to galleries; I was going to artists' studios. I wasn't necessarily in the museum all the time, but I was doing other museum work all the time. I was visiting collectors; I was travelling. As the shows grew in scope, or in framework, I'd go to Europe. I was travelling to look at collections.

And in many cases I was met by disbelief when I visited people in other museums. They would say to me, we never see curators. We think of most Americans as armchair curators. This was mostly from collectors. And they said they expected some gray-haired, old lady because they thought art historians equate to someone who's been doing research for many, many years.

So it was a funny concept that they had – that many of these collectors had. Not the museum people so much, but nonetheless, the museum people were surprised when I showed up on their doorstep. And I found it very important to make direct contact with people in order to get the loans. I have one very funny story when I did the Max Ernst exhibition in the mid-'70s.

I went to visit a collector in Paris who had written to me that he couldn't – he would be happy to show me his paintings, but he wouldn't dream of lending them. And so I had really not much hope of finding those paintings available to me – for loan to the exhibition. I was in Paris; I checked into a hotel; the next day I went to visit this collector. And in those days, because the dollar was so good, I was able to buy nice French clothing, like [Yves]

Saint Laurent. [Laughs.]

So I had on my very beautiful, purple Saint Laurent suit, which came with a beautiful blouse by Saint Laurent that was based on a Matisse motif – and I adored that suit. I arrived at this collector's door; he opened – his wife opened the door; she was wearing a red Saint Laurent suit – [laughs] – and she said, "Ah, I see you're wearing Saint Laurent" – and I got the loans. [Laughs.] I am convinced –

MS. RICHARDS: Not only do you need to speak French, but you need to wear French. [Laughs.]

MS. WALDMAN: I am convinced that I got the loans because I was wearing Saint Laurent clothing, which would never have happened had I simply formally requested the loans and accepted the fact that he said no. Her husband said no. So I have many stories like that, where I – the one-on-one contact has proved to be very, very helpful.

For the collage show that I did for the Miro Foundation a few years ago, I wanted to borrow some Picasso works. I wrote to the Picasso Museum, and I was told that I could come at such-and-such a time and look through their books and make a selection, but they couldn't promise that they would lend anything. And I saw one of the curators, and she said to me, well, we might make available X, Y, and Z.

X, Y, and Z were not what I wanted. They were very small works and not really greatly representative of Picasso at his best in his early – in the formation of collage movement.

MS. RICHARDS: Is this – I thought you mentioned Matisse before, but Picasso?

MS. WALDMAN: Picasso. Went through –

MS. RICHARDS: Picasso Museum in Paris?

MS. WALDMAN: In Paris. Yes. So I told her, well, here's my list. [Laughs.] I had prepared a list – I said, a category of, I think, four works – major works from the Picasso Museum. And here's the B list. The B list were the works that would still be good, but they weren't as great. So she said she would think about it. And then she wrote to me, and she said I could have both.

MS. RICHARDS: All the works from both lists?

MS. WALDMAN: With the exception of one that was too fragile to travel to Barcelona. And that, again, was simply because I talked to her; we had a very nice conversation. It was so important to me to see who these people were. It's so wonderful to go into the storerooms of museums, because the treasures are unimaginable. There are so many works of fabulous quality that simply don't make it onto the walls, either because they're fragile or because there's simply no room in these museums.

So a part of my – the pleasure for me of doing an exhibition was always to do the legwork, to do the research. I like to think of myself as a detective – [laughs] – tracking down these absolutely wonderful works of art. I went to a museum for the same collage show – a museum in Berlin – to look at some of their 20th-century work, and I had all that I could do not to ask to see the Leonardos – [laughs] – that they had in their collection.

I mean, so for an art lover, it's a feast. It's an absolute feast. I mean, the reality of putting together a show is something altogether different. Then you're talking budgets, condition, competing loans, museum collection shows that might interfere. When I did the collage show for Barcelona, for example, there was a Dada show that was being formed that did travel around the United States. So I had a great deal of trouble getting Dada material because of a conflict with a Dada exhibition.

But nonetheless, it is absolutely critical to see these people, to talk to them, and really also to interest them - to let them know how interested you are in your subject, that you're not simply saying, okay, here's – here are these famous Picassos that I've seen reproduced all the time – these famous Matisse collages that I've seen reproduced all the time. Can you send me some of these? Can you send me some of these?

The reality is that you really don't know until you see works whether they're as fabulous as they look in reproduction, whether they've aged badly, you know, whether they work with other works that you've seen, because you're handling objects, and they have to really go together nicely, or they don't make an interesting exhibition.

MS. RICHARDS: Have there been any collectors with whom you met and through their knowledge were able to learn something more about the subject you were researching? I mean, collectors who went beyond the role of collector for you.

MS. WALDMAN: There are some collectors who are really students of art, but it's usually been the other way around, where they hope to learn from the curator, so to speak. And they're usually rather modest about what they may or may not know. But there's a collector in Chicago, who I visited for the Cornell show in 1967 that I did at the Guggenheim Museum, who was an older gentleman, but he and his wife used to visit Picasso.

So I would get some of these wonderful stories, not so much art history or factual information but stories about how these collectors met the artists that they became enamored of.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have to deal with more challenging kind of issues where collectors wanted to persuade you to borrow something you didn't want to borrow? Or you encountered issues that connected to the institutions' interests and acquisitions, which might have been in conflict – [laughs] – with the works you wanted to borrow – those kinds of sticky professional situations? And how did you get around them?

MS. WALDMAN: Well, there's always the reluctant lender. And in Cornell's case, I did run into collectors who are afraid of the fragility of the boxes – afraid to lend them. There had been an exhibition, I think, perhaps on the West Coast at Pasadena. I think it was at the Pasadena Museum of Art when it was a very contemporary museum.

And the then-assistant director – I'm not absolutely certain of his title – [James] Jim Demetrion had gone to visit a collector in Chicago to borrow some works. And as was the case in those days, those works were not handled in anything other than a very casual way. So Jim got the loan of some works, got into a taxicab, and got into an accident. So it made it somewhat difficult for me to then follow him into an environment in which the collectors were a little bit nervous about it, but ultimately I succeeded. I did get the loans.

I didn't get one box from a Chicago collector. She was afraid that the work would get damaged during an installation.

In the case of the Rothko exhibition, some of the Europeans were afraid that because of the lawsuit that took place when Rothko – after Rothko's death, when the Marlborough Gallery was sued because of the price structure of the Rothko paintings that they sold - the collectors were afraid to send them to the U.S. because they – some of the collectors thought that they would be attached by the family.

So there were a couple of paintings that I wanted to borrow that I couldn't because of that. So you know, there are life circumstances that do interfere with that. In another case, with Max Ernst, there were collectors in Europe who did not want to acknowledge the full value of the work, because then they would have to pay tax. So they wanted to send the works to the museum – for example, for – and put an insurance figure on the work for $20,000, and when the work was here in the U.S., to have the real insurance reassigned for $200,000.

So I knew it would be difficult. I wanted the work. I spoke to our registrar, and he said we can't do it, because we'd be liable in the event that there was – the government in Britain, in this case, found out about it. So I mean, there are these tricky, financial, emotional, accidental problems that come up that you simply can't foresee.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever have a situation where someone close to the institution, either a major donor or a trustee, had a work that they wanted you to borrow that wasn't really appropriate, and you had to deal with that kind of pressure?

MS. WALDMAN: I think there might be that pressure at other museums, but we didn't have a very big board at the Guggenheim, and the board, for the most part, were not major collectors. So as a consequence of that, they were really – I didn't have that kind of pressure, but I can understand that it could have happened at other institutions – where you asked to borrow A, and you get B.

In another case with the Rothko exhibition, I went to visit a well-known woman in New York to look at her Rothko. I asked to borrow it; it was a very beautiful painting. And she said, oh, dear, I can't lend it to you because it's the social season coming up, and I need it for when I entertain. It was in the hallway of her apartment. I couldn't imagine that she was entertaining in a hallway. But the one thing that I did notice was that on the front of the painting, the lower right-hand corner, she had attached a brass plate that said Mark Rothko.

MS. RICHARDS: On the surface of the painting?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. [Laughs.] And I thought, here she is telling me that she can't lend this, while she's really basically damaging, or has damaged, a painting. So you run into these oddball situations –

MS. RICHARDS: Did you advise her of that situation?

MS. WALDMAN: I don't think so. I think I sort of made a hasty exit out of there because I – it would have upset her. She was a very socially prominent woman who was absolutely certain of her role in life – [laughs] – and I don't think she would brook any comment. I never did, and I simply don't know what happened to the painting. Presumably, the label was removed and the canvas was mended, which is entirely possible.

You do run into funny things like that, you know. In certain cases, paintings have been damaged, and something that looks beautiful when you see it in a reproduction, when you see it in reality, you know you can't borrow it. Or it's been re-lined, and the surface has become flat and dull, so you know you can't borrow it. But fortunately, most collectors are pretty careful about works of art.

You know, they – I'm not talking, now, about the kind of world we live in now where paintings are so priceless, but I'm saying that they cared about the works of art. It wasn't about the money. You know? Or the retail value, so to speak, of a work of art. But they cared about their works, for the most part.

MS. RICHARDS: In the '80s was – and into the '90s, until you left in '96, did you and Messer discuss – sort of, in general, outline the program? You did American artists, European artists, the assemblage show ["Aspects of Collage, Assemblage, and the Found Object in Twentieth-Century Art," March 29 - May 22, 1988], you did a variety of exhibitions. Was that in part because he, or the two of you, established a long-range program that would carefully mix someone like Richard Long with [Jack] Youngerman or [Jenny] Holzer and [Georg] Baselitz – this variety?

MS. WALDMAN: It wasn't really so much my mix, as how my mix – my selection - would fit into the larger museum program. So if it was a Dubuffet show, for example, you would not want to show – if we did an exhibition, we would want to find a subject that was different enough so the two exhibitions might complement one another, but they wouldn't compete.

MS. RICHARDS: What you're saying is that you had to think about all these decisions in relationship to all of the other programming going on at the museum?

MS. WALDMAN: That's right. So if Margit Rowell, for example, had an exhibition called "The Planar Dimension," we would integrate that into the museum's program.

MS. RICHARDS: So did that mean that you might propose to do a Richard Long exhibition and realize that, instead of being able to do it when you wanted to, you needed to wait until 1986 because it would be a better fit?

MS. WALDMAN: Right. Sometimes we'd bump something, and the other – the other reality was that Tom Messer – sometimes when he was traveling, which he did quite a bit, he'd see an exhibition that he thought was fabulous, so he would come back and plug it into a program that had already been established, which meant that something else got bumped.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that difficult for you – [laugh] – and the other staff?

MS. WALDMAN: Well, it was difficult in the sense that I was in charge of coordinating the exhibition program, on paper, in any event. So it meant that I was constantly redoing and doing and redoing the exhibition – the program. And it also means that once you move an exhibition, you have to write to every collector, every museum to tell them that the dates have changed, so it gets to be a lot of work.

And the museum was small. There wasn't much backup staff, so you end up being curator-secretary, as well, sometimes. You know, because you're doing a lot of the stuff yourself. It means that the – every backup department in the museum, whether it's photography or art handlers, they have to adjust their schedule, as well. So there's a lot of coordinating, even in a museum that was as unified as the Guggenheim was and not as compartmentalized as other museums. So it could be lot of work, absolutely.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you approach doing the Jenny Holzer exhibition in 1989 ["Jenny Holzer," December 12, 1989 - February 25, 1990] - in terms of thinking about commissioning new work, about what you'd install, how it would fit into the space of the Guggenheim? Selecting her to begin with?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, I thought she –

MS. RICHARDS: She might have been the first woman whose work you focused on as a solo exhibition?

MS. WALDMAN: She was, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: So that was a – was that consciously a big decision?

MS. WALDMAN: No, it wasn't. As I mentioned to you earlier, my battle as a female, a curator, was that of establishing my own authenticity in a male world. I mean, the museum profession was dominated by men, and so I really considered myself the feminist. I never really looked at art in terms of gender as much as art in terms of quality. And when I had seen Jenny's work I liked it a lot; I thought that she was of a younger generation that I hadn't worked with before. And I thought her work would look beautiful in the museum.

And because she had, early on, been a painter and been influenced to a certain degree by Morris Louis – her work appealed to me from the point of view of pure color – texts aside. And because I had done so much work with installations in the Guggenheim, with the Flavin installation for the Guggenheim international – I thought her LED [light-emitting diode] signs would look spectacular in the museum. It turned out that - at that point, Tom Krens was the director who replaced Tom Messer, who was –

MS. RICHARDS: What year was that that it changed?

MS. WALDMAN: Tom Messer retired, I think, in '89.

MS. RICHARDS: That was the year of the Holzer show.

MS. WALDMAN: Was it? Yes, I'm not sure of that date – so just after that. Tom Krens was a great fan of hers. I had initially thought of the show as being simply installed in just the lower part of the museum and with the main floor, the high gallery, which is the big gallery off the main floor, and one ramp possibly. And he kept saying, why don't you enlarge it? Why don't you enlarge it?

MS. RICHARDS: Krens said that?

MS. WALDMAN: Tom Krens. So it ended up being a very full-museum exhibition, and it was spectacular because it made the whole – it surrounded, or enveloped, the whole building.

MS. RICHARDS: When you first approached her, what was her response? Did she have any concerns about working in the Guggenheim, or did she immediately get excited about it?

MS. WALDMAN: She immediately got excited. I don't know of any artist – [laughs] – who had any concerns when I approached them. To a –

MS. RICHARDS: Fear, maybe? [Laughs.]

MS. WALDMAN: Every one of them loved the Frank Lloyd Wright building, and for them, it was not a challenge but an opportunity to really strut their stuff, so to speak.

MS. RICHARDS: You must have, though, also been approaching artists whose work you thought would look fantastic in that space?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, I mean, I had –

MS. RICHARDS: You wouldn't approach someone whose work you loved, but you thought would be very difficult to –

MS. WALDMAN: No, no not at all. But, you know, I think that because I had worked since 1965 in the museum, I really knew what it felt like to look at work from across the ramp; and what it looked like to look at a work from the sixth ramp down to the rotunda floor and to see how exciting the visual experience was. So you're absolutely right. I mean, I didn't pick the artist because I thought they would look well; I picked the artists because I liked their work, but I knew they would look well in the museum.

There were a couple of issues having to do with height. The Baselitz show, the Georg Baselitz show ["Georg Baselitz," May 23 - September 17, 1995], for example, was a bit of a problem because his paintings are quite tall, and the Guggenheim's ceiling height is not. But we created artificial walls, temporary installations – which I noticed that, if you go to the museum now to see the current exhibition that's on, they're using some of the same ideas.

MS. RICHARDS: Which exhibition are you referring to?

MS. WALDMAN: There's an exhibition of photography from the collection that's on right now. I think it's called "Haunted" ["Haunted: Contemporary Photography/Video/ Performance"], if I'm not mistaken. But the – you know, the museum – when I first came there, the art objects that were shown were very discreet. [Laughs.] So if you showed an easel-sized painting on the ramp, it was not a problem. But if you're showing mural-sized paintings in that museum, you had to overcome the height limitation – not the width as much as the height.

The other thing that you have to adjust is the fact of the slope because you're not on a plane, and there's a very nice way of mitigating the illusion by adjusting – if the ramp slopes down, for example, from left to right, you hang the right side of the painting a little bit higher than you would normally if it's on a flat wall.

MS. RICHARDS: So there's level, and there's Guggenheim level? [Laughs.]

MS. WALDMAN: That's right. So it – a painting looks like it's true square, rectangle, while the slope – [laughs] – continues on its merry way down. I mean, in those days, all the exhibitions started from top to bottom. Now there's a tendency to work from the rotunda up to the top. But our program always consisted of going from the top of the museum to the bottom, where the space was very – [laughs] – dramatic. I'll put it that way. So it was like you ended with a big bang for the most part.

So you had to sort of negotiate your way down the ramp, given the different size and scale of works of art. I had that problem with Rothko, to a certain extent, because his paintings – many of his paintings tended to be tall verticals, rather than broad horizontals. But I simply moved the paintings forward instead of their hanging on the rear of – wall of the bay.

They were placed at the front of the shoulder, so to a certain extent, the paintings would float. But the effect was dynamic and very nice. And it's been used over and over again. But you know, it was a question of adapting – adapting the museum to the size requirements of the artists you were working with.

MS. RICHARDS: How was it to work with Jenny Holzer ? What part did she play, and you play, in deciding how to use the space for her work?

MS. WALDMAN: I think she was very easy to work with. And once we had determined that we would have a certain number of benches, which we would place on the lower ramps and leave the upper ramps for the LED, it really became, for her, a question of working with her engineers to see how to make this work, because she had never done it before either.

On the other hand, she had been used to doing a lot of outside signage, in Times Square, for example. So she wasn't fazed at all by the fact that this was a new type of installation for her. You know, it was really a problem to be solved, that's all. Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there – I'm trying to remember the dates – was there major renovation work done when you were there? When they first built the new space on the north side of the building?

MS. WALDMAN: The annex? Yes, I was there when the decision – the decision was made to hire Gwathmey Siegel [Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects] to do the plan. And it was wonderful working Gwathmey and Siegel because they were total professionals, and they were very easy to work with, in addition to which they had done a very thorough study of drawings that Frank Lloyd Wright had made because he, too, envisioned an addition. So they had access to all of the Frank Lloyd Wright plans in connection with the museum. And as admirers of Frank Lloyd Wright, they were very respectful of the building.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you a strong supporter of that extension?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes and no. I mean, I thought that it certainly was necessary to have the additional space, and I think they did a wonderful design. But the building, I felt, had the potential to be slightly compromised on the 89th Street side because the annex – the annex made it impossible for the driveway, which went from 89th Street and connected to the rear of the building – you could circumambulate the building – the small building that was part of the Frank Lloyd Wright original.

There's a small building to the left, which used to house the administrative offices, that's now housing galleries. The bigger museum to the right – and in between the two there was a driveway, and it had, as with all of the structure, a very round concave form, and that was somewhat truncated by the addition of the annex. I don't know whether Frank Lloyd Wright had envisioned that, or whether he thought this new third addition – the Gwathmey, Siegel addition –would be further back on another bit of property that really is where the apartment building is next door.

But that's – that was my only qualm about the way the structure worked out. Now I don't really – I don't think anyone thinks about it. And I think the idea of having high ceiling, large rectangular spaces, which is what the Gwathmey Siegel addition provided, was so exciting, because we were showing so much contemporary art that was, in some cases, simply too big for the ramps. So, I mean, that was the great positive. And as with anything, I suppose, you get the positive, and you get a little bit of the negative. But the positive, for me, far outweighed the negative.

I didn't have anything to do, really, with the actual working out of the structure. I was there to – as part of the curatorial team, to just simply look at the works and to raise any arguments or have any discussions if we disagreed with anything. But the rest was really left to, I think, Tom Messer's then-deputy director, Henry Berg, who was put in charge of overseeing the completion of the building. And it's worked out very well.

The unfortunate thing is that, as the museum has grown in size, the space off – the backup spaces have shrunk, so that the curators are now no longer in the building. They're elsewhere. And I was very fortunate to be really in the museum, working in the museum, so that I could go into the galleries any time I wanted – not necessarily look at my exhibitions, but to look at what the museum was showing by other people.

MS. RICHARDS: Or look at the response of the audience?

MS. WALDMAN: Look at the response of the audience, check to see what Hollywood actors were coming through – [laughs].

MS. RICHARDS: Where are the curator's offices now? None of them are at the Fifth Avenue space?

MS. WALDMAN: I think a few of them are in the annex at 89th [Street], but most of the staff is working downtown now.

MS. RICHARDS: On Broadway.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. Not on Broadway anymore, on Hudson Street. We did move down to Broadway and then out of that building, because that building on Broadway was envisioned by Tom Krens as an alternative gallery space, but that was just around the time that SoHo was becoming a mall for clothing.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. WALDMAN: So they – and the art world, the galleries were starting to move out. So it turned out not to be a good destination.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the transition like for you from Thomas Messer to Tom Krens?

MS. WALDMAN: Well, it was, you know, a different dynamic, a totally different dynamic. Tom Krens was very involved with MASS MoCA [Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, MA], and we all went up to look at the building, which ultimately the trustees did not want to take on as their project. He engaged a number of new curators. So as with any transition, it could be unsettling, but I have to say that when I was working under his directorship, I was able to do some really good exhibitions – Holzer, Baselitz. I did another Lichtenstein show ["Roy Lichtenstein," October 7, 1993 - January 16, 1994], and I did a wonderful Ellsworth Kelly show, which was the last show that I did.

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you about the Baselitz. How did it come up that you decided to do that show and what was involved in getting his interest in doing it?

MS. WALDMAN: Tom Krens and Michael Govan had done an exhibition of contemporary German art, which was Tom Krens's introduction as a curator at the Guggenheim Museum. He didn't really do as much after that because he was – basically had so many other projects that he was engaged in.

But from that exhibition, he became – he was really enamored of Baselitz. So he proposed that to me and –

MS. RICHARDS: If you had been asked to do a show of one of the contemporary German painters, would Baselitz have been the person you'd pick?

MS. WALDMAN: Baselitz was one that I was interested in; [Anselm] Kiefer was another. I went to visit Kiefer in his studio in Germany. I managed to buy a painting – find funds to buy a painting. I found funds to buy a Baselitz. So I'd say those were the two painters among the newer German artists that most interested me.

And so I went to visit him. He was living in a castle outside of Hanover, Germany –

MS. RICHARDS: Baselitz.

MS. WALDMAN: Baselitz, Georg Baselitz. And the only problem that I had was that he didn't speak much English, and my German is – [laughs] – nil. But he was a lovely person to work with. Absolutely wonderful to work with. Unfortunately, the reception for his work in New York was not as great as it's been in Europe, where he's absolutely adored and admired.

So I don't – there's always been a sort of love/hate relationship with German artists,;the German Expressionists were welcomed and then forgotten. And I think within the larger context of German art, it's – German artists have had a bit of a problem. Not Beuys, not Joseph Beuys, because he fit in very nicely to the whole Minimalist aesthetic that was all the rage here and because the American artists adored him so much and thought of him as the superb artist that he is.

He was sort of separate. He was more international, but these younger artists were German, and I think that Baselitz's reception was not as good as it should have been, because the show was beautiful.

MS. RICHARDS: When you started planning that exhibition, knowing about this issue of American audiences and New York art-world audiences and Baselitz, how did you decide, then, with that in mind, what to include? Did it have an impact on what years to include, what works to include, how to install the exhibition?

MS. WALDMAN: No, it didn't. I tried to do a comprehensive survey of his work from the '60s to the then-present. So from each period, he and I made a selection of the work that was available. In his case, collectors were very generous. They were – the devotion to Baselitz was astounding among the European collectors.

So I never had any issues with the collectors, with lenders. The only real issue I had was what to eliminate, because there were so many good works. And the transition was basically a three-part transition from the early group of works, which he called the Hero paintings, which were done when he was still living in East Berlin. They are amazing mythological figures from an era in which World War II still had – and the Communist regime – still had a great impact on the type of work that was being done.

So we had that phase; then we had his transition to the upside-down, the use of the upside-down figure, and then we had his next, later phase in which the work becomes, I'd say, more – has none of the angst that the first body of work from the '60s, the Hero paintings had. They're hedonistic, sensually beautiful paintings with the figures still upside down, in many cases.

But nonetheless – and his introduction of a lot of white into his palette. So it went from dark to light. But I think that was a bit missed by the critics. And perhaps they were mystified by his use of the upside-down figure. You know, I don't know.

But it was a great pleasure working with him. We had a wonderful time, and it was a nice addition to my collection of artists, I should say – [laughs] – in the sense that while I had shown the young Italians in the Exxon show, some of the younger Italians who were then breaking onto the scene in the '80s, I really had not been able through the Exxon formula to show the young Germans.

So by the time that Krens proposed this exhibition, or he did his own German show, the Germans had really grown up a lot and expanded, so that an Exxon show would not have been appropriate at that point. They were not the young, new talent that the Exxon show was meant to showcase. So Baselitz was at that point a formidably recognized artist in Europe and a real –

MS. RICHARDS: That was 1995, you did that show.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. So it was – I was dealing with a major artist at that point, but again, from a part of the art world that I hadn't really worked with before. So as I mentioned earlier, when we first started talking, it's always been a learning experience for me, and it was wonderful to have that opportunity.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you experience a difference as an American curator, maybe as a woman American curator, working with European institutions, collectors, and artists versus American? Obviously, you didn't work for a European institution, but you met European curators.

So I guess I'm asking you to reflect on the position of the curator there versus here.

MS. WALDMAN: Well, some of the European curators were very fortunate because they worked in government-sponsored museums. They did not have the worry about budgets that the American museum curators had to deal with. So they were much freer to be able to show anything that they wanted without any financial constraints whatsoever.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it also an issue that they didn't have to worry about audience response because there was no membership and fundraising and counting of attendance to think about, whereas American museums in some ways – to different extents, maybe the Guggenheim less than MoMA, as you mentioned earlier – had to think about audience?

MS. WALDMAN: It's possible. They had none of those outside concerns to think about. It was purely the exhibition, the presentation, the catalogue. And they also had no time pressures either, so they could take five years to do an exhibition, you know? Things in Europe tended to move slower than now. I mean, the Tate has a very – the Tate Modern now has a very active exhibition program.

But Europe was more leisurely, let's put it that way, in the '60s and '70s, perhaps even into the '80s. The one thing I can say [is] that the collectors were very different. They were all extremely knowledgeable about art. They all respected culture.

With the exception of that French couple that I told you about, my uniform in those days used to be jeans and a T-shirt. It didn't matter if I showed up at someone's home, no matter how formal a house, no matter how aristocratic the collector. I represented art, and I represented a museum that was revered, in part because of the Peggy Guggenheim collection, which they knew.

So they had – they saw the Guggenheim as a European institution in some ways. And there was – for the most – in most cases, there was no monetary – no discussion which I would find in America about, do you think this painting is valuable? Do you think that it will appreciate? There was no interest in the financial worth of the works of art that these collectors owned. They bought the art because they loved it; they loved art; they loved culture. It represented a tradition that they knew and understood.

I went to visit some collectors in Brussels when I was doing the Max Ernst show, and the collectors had owned work that began with Cycladic figurines and ended with Carl Andre. And you know, it was mind-boggling to visit these people. They had such a love of art, and they were readers of art. They studied art. You know, it meant something more than its being a possession that might have a monetary value.

[END DISC 2.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Diane Waldman on June 9, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc three.

Diane, while you were at the Guggenheim doing all the exhibitions that you did, do you recall any projects where you set out specifically to change previous perceptions, either public or of art historians who had developed exhibitions or books on a certain artist's work and you felt that a new interpretation was necessary, or a new focus? That you felt that you would really be establishing a new direction in the approach to that artist's work and understanding of the work?

MS. WALDMAN: I don't think I really looked at how –

MS. RICHARDS: So that there was a challenge in changing perceptions. I mean, sometimes some exhibitions have that kind of agenda.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, I never had an agenda. I mean, my ambition was to show artists that I thought were extraordinary, and at a time when I didn't see other museums in New York doing very much of anything.

The Museum of Modern Art had been very dynamic at a certain point, and then when William Seitz was no longer with the museum, it seemed to slow down a bit and become a little bit more conservative.

I always thought that it was ironic that the American artists that I showed, who should have been shown in New York, weren't. So I had no competition, but I wasn't competing with them, with the Museum of Modern Art. I just felt that the Guggenheim had two assets: an extraordinary building and a wonderful collection of early 20th-century nonobjective painting.

I simply wanted to expand the audience for American art – contemporary American art – and then bring to American audiences European art that I saw in Europe which wasn't being shown in the U.S. So, that was my ambition.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there artists who you always wanted to give a show to and you never got a chance to do it?

MS. WALDMAN: Well, Ellsworth. I had wanted to do an exhibition of his work in 1968, and I didn't get around to doing it until 1996.

MS. RICHARDS: Did that period of time change the way you ended up approaching the work, besides the fact that there were so many decades more of work? Did you do it differently than you would have done it in 1968?

MS. WALDMAN: Well, in 1968, Ellsworth had a much smaller body of work, and he certainly had an approach to scale of some of his paintings. You know, he was really staking out a certain amount of territory, but in certain ways, it was still the European influence, in terms of its proportion and because of the influences upon his work when he was on the GI Bill in Paris after World War II.

So by the time – so that exhibition of mine would have been much – had I done it then, like the exhibition that he did have at the Museum of Modern Art – which Bill Rubin ended up by not doing, but the museum gave it to, I think, Eugene Goossen, who was the curator for that exhibition, as a freelance project.

The exhibition was tame compared to what I was able to do years later. So, in a certain way, I was fortunate because I was then able to use the idea I had developed of the full-museum exhibition, and where his color really radiated out across the ramp, up and down the ramp, so you could look up and see those early works that I would have shown in the late '60s or early '70s. But then there was so much more to see.

So I benefited from that, but he was an artist I couldn't get, in the beginning, to work with me or to work in the museum. His sights were set on the Museum of Modern Art. That was because he had studied in Paris and was so enamored of French artists. Because the Museum of Modern Art's focus was on Picasso and Braque and Matisse, Ellsworth's dream was to show at the Museum of Modern Art. He felt that that was – he felt that that was the greatest compliment he could achieve at that time.

And because the Modern was the domineering factor in New York in terms of art, I'd say from World War II to that particular period, through the '60s, and it really didn't change. Well, they had no competition at that point in time until the Guggenheim began competing with them. You know, it wasn't meant to be a competition; it just turned out that the Guggenheim had a great program of exhibitions.

MS. RICHARDS: You mentioned Eugene Goossen. Wasn't he at Hunter when you –

MS. WALDMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know him them?

MS. WALDMAN: No, I think he must have been at Hunter after I left. I didn't study with him. He was also a writer – if I'm not mistaken – for Art International magazine. I mean, he was a very well-established, highly regarded critic, and he may have done some other exhibitions. I'm not certain because I don't know his record. He did a very nice, very credible show for Ellsworth at the Museum of Modern Art.

MS. RICHARDS: So he – Ellsworth had that show in '68 approximately, or –

MS. WALDMAN: No, I don't remember exactly when it took place.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MS. WALDMAN: I met Ellsworth in 1968, and I asked him if I could do an exhibition of his. That was my introductory phone call to Ellsworth Kelly. I didn't waste any time of getting right to the point of wanting to do a show with him.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. WALDMAN: I had seen his work in the galleries and loved it.

So even though I didn't get to work with him on an exhibition, I did a book of his collages and drawings [Ellsworth Kelly: Drawings, Collages, Prints. Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1971], and I wrote an article for ARTnews, as I mentioned earlier. So, I maintained a professional working relationship as well as a friendship with him, and was always aware of the work that he was doing throughout that time, between the first time I met him in '68 and the exhibition in '96.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you take a different approach to that catalogue than you might have in the past because of how careful he is about color reproductions?

MS. WALDMAN: No. I think that we worked very closely together on the drawing and collage book.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm thinking of the Guggenheim catalogue.

MS. WALDMAN: The Guggenheim catalogue – no, I mean, we had very good people on staff at the Guggenheim in the catalogue – department of catalogues, books and catalogues. I think by that time – now, in terms of color printing, there is more of a formula by which one can measure color, and there's an attempt to make it more accurate, so to speak.

But in terms of earlier reproductions, I think it was really about trying to approximate the feeling of color rather than trying to actually get the color correctly, because it's almost impossible to do that with a printing process – with a mechanical printing process.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Did any of your exhibitions at the Guggenheim provoke unexpected controversy of any sort?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, the Guggenheim International that I did in the early '70s, because I had invited, as one of the participating artists, a French artist named Daniel Buren. And as with the Haacke exhibition, this was a time of artists testing the establishment, so to speak, and museums were the establishment, in their eyes.

And the proposal that that Buren gave me made no mention of a curtain hanging down the middle of the museum. We had talked about a banner hanging outside on the street between buildings, between the Guggenheim and the apartment building on 88th Street. And for that we had to get permission from the city to put the banner out, which we did.

He came in, and what happened was he started to unfurl this very big banner, which he was going to put right down the middle of the museum, which by itself would have looked quite beautiful, but the reality –

MS. RICHARDS: You mean vertically from the skylight?

MS. WALDMAN: Hanging from the skylight down to the main floor. But –

MS. RICHARDS: A striped banner?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. And the reality was that it interfered with the artists' work on the ramps. And one of the first artists to protest was Dan Flavin - who, as I said earlier, had been given an entire ramp for his fluorescent - and you couldn't see the entire ramp from one side of the ramp to the other because this banner would bisect it.

MS. RICHARDS: It wasn't actually hung; it was just going to be?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: He imagined it would be hung by Buren.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. And so the artists were protesting, and that was the reason that I was able to say, this is not going to work, because I had the artists on my side – one artist withdrew his work, and that might have been Sol LeWitt. He was supposed to be, I believe, on the main floor, and I think he withdrew his work in protest. But every other artist in the exhibition –

MS. RICHARDS: In protest pro- or con-Buren?

MS. WALDMAN: Pro-Buren, so Lewitt said, but every other artist stayed – stood firm and said, "This is simply not going to work with our work." So it was really artists against artist. It was not artists against the establishment, curator against the artist.

So I had the support of the artists, and nonetheless, it took Buren all those years until he finally got – after I left, he persuaded the Guggenheim Museum to let him install that banner in the museum as an independent exhibition.

MS. RICHARDS: So during that '71 show, he had to back down and withdraw from the exhibition.

MS. WALDMAN: And withdraw from the exhibition, and Messer was very much supportive of what had happened, which was he was very much against what Buren had tried to pull off.

So it was the aesthetic version of, I'd say, what Hans Haacke wanted to do, which was to create some sort of a rupture in the museum, which made no sense whatsoever because Buren was creating this antagonism with his fellow artists, who he professed to like.

You know, he was very happy to be in the exhibition, and he knew the artists that were going to be included, but he didn't take responsibility for his own determination to put a banner in the museum, interfering with the way in which their work was seen.

So that was the one experience that I had with working in a difficult situation, you know, at a time, as I said, when the whole concept of censorship was a hot-button issue in the art world.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MS. WALDMAN: And I think, to a certain degree, that's – the complexity of that exhibition made me think about working with older artists for a while, and that's why I started looking at de Kooning, Gorky, and Rothko. It wasn't only a question of my liking –

MS. RICHARDS: Ernst.

MS. WALDMAN: – yes, their work, but it was also a question of, you know, maybe I should try something else for a while –

MS. RICHARDS: Take a break.

MS. WALDMAN: Take a break from some of these young contemporary ones.

MS. RICHARDS: But then you went to Charles Simonds, who was quite young then.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, but Charles' show was a loan show, and for the Guggenheim he did an installation ["Charles Simonds," Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, traveling exhibition; at the Guggenheim: September 23 - October 30, 1983, with installation "Age"].

MS. RICHARDS: Is that the piece that's still there in the lobby?

MS. WALDMAN: No. No. It was a very big piece. It looked quite nice on the main floor. But Charles was very sweet and was very easy to work with, but it was not – you know, it was not my show, so to speak.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. WALDMAN: I worked with him. I did a little catalogue essay, but I think there was a ready-made catalogue that came with the exhibition.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you surprised and pleased by the great success – popular and critical success - of any exhibition that you didn't expect?

MS. WALDMAN: The audience started to grow, not with the Minimalist shows, per se, because the New York public really didn't know what to make of Minimalist art. And the Cornell show drew a small crowd. The 1969 Lichtenstein show drew a bigger crowd because the media was already interested in Pop art. So, you know, Roy's show had a slightly sensational aspect, but the audience was bigger.

And then with each successive show that I did, the art world grew, and the public grew. The word – it's always word of mouth. The word of mouth got out that the Guggenheim was doing exciting new things that – so the contemporary audience grew and grew and grew.

But the thing that put it over – the exhibition that put it over the top really was the Rothko show. And that really had less to do with the exhibition and more to do with the notoriety of his life and unfortunate death, you know, because I would get notes from people saying that they looked at the last paintings, and they could understand why he was suicidal, because they were dark.

And I would write them back, and I'd say, yes, but when I went to his studio, when we talked about showing just the late paintings, many of the works were these brilliant, beautiful pinks, and he had a lot of color in his late work. There were some red works.

So I said, from my point of view, I didn't feel that you could attach dark color to depression and suicide, but that's what drew people to the exhibition, and just as people are drawn to the play [Red] that's on Broadway now.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you, did you see the play?

MS. WALDMAN: I haven't seen it yet. People have told me that it's quite wonderful, that the acting –

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you what you thought about the representation of Rothko.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. It sounds pretty true, but I haven't seen it yet. I simply haven't had a chance. I plan to, when I'm back in New York, to go and see it. But it's – you know, as with [Viincent] van Gogh, as with any artist who's had a very dramatic life, the curiosity about the artist and who he was and how he lived draws people, and it's not just the art.

So the audience expanded enormously for the Rothko exhibition. Abrams printed the catalogue for us in hardcover, and I think they did at least 10 reprintings. Now, that was unusual. Most museum catalogues would sell a nice, tidy 2,000 copies, and that would be the end of it.

So, that whole exhibition turned out to be a resounding success, none of which I anticipated. I mean, I was just happy to show a great artist, and delighted that the show looked as good as it did.

I do have one wonderful story, though. When I was doing – you know, because the museum is so visible to the public, the few times available to staff to do trial installations were on a Monday, when the museum was closed.

On one particular Monday, I had some of the Rothko paintings out, and they were balancing against pogo sticks, because we hadn't installed the show. So these sticks were attached to the ceiling and to the floor on the edge of the apron in front of the wall on the ramp, and the paintings were just leaning against them.

And the woman who was the development or press officer at the time came up to me, and she said, "We're expecting a visit from a delegate of Chinese mayors. They are at the Metropolitan Museum now." It may have been around the time when the courtyard was being laid at the Metropolitan Museum, but they were coming from the Metropolitan Museum to the Guggenheim. She said, "You might have to speak to them for a few minutes." I thought, what am I going to say to them? She said, "They have an interpreter with them."

So they left the Metropolitan, and they came to the Guggenheim Museum. They were in the space where the Rothkos were placed, not hung. And she came up to me and said to me, "There has been a problem. You have to detain them." I don't remember what the problem was. I don't remember if it was a problem with security. I simply didn't know what was going on.

So I thought, what in the world do I say to these people? They have no idea what abstract painting is. Behind the paintings on the wall were some Picassos from the Guggenheim's collection, because it was summertime, and the collection was on view. So I figured maybe they would know something about Picasso.

So I'm talking, and the guy, the interpreter, is translating, and they're looking blank. So I had with me the cover of the catalogue, which had magenta, yellow, these wonderful colors. So I figured, well, they're supposed to know about nature. So I told them a story that when I went out to my house in the country, I brought the cover of the catalogue to show my husband, and he had made a bouquet for me, which was on the kitchen table, of dahlias from our garden, and they were the exact same colors as the Rothko colors on the cover of the catalogue.

And all of the – it was translated, and the Chinese mayors are nodding and nodding, because they understood nature. And then the press officer came up to me and said, "It's okay; they can go now."

MS. RICHARDS: So they were nodding because of their familiarity with nature.

MS. WALDMAN: With nature, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: That was quick thinking.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. I mean, it was really quick thinking, but it was just a coincidence. So I had that nice little – you know, nice little moment to relay to them, and they were nodding, and they seemed perfectly satisfied. They had – you know, it made them less unsure of what they were looking at in Rothko.

And so, I mean, it's moments like that when you realize that, you've become, in a way, sort of an ambassador of art, and when I wrote texts, I always tried to write to explain to the reader what I felt about the art, in as clear – you know, no historical terminology, no need to make myself sound terribly intellectual. I wanted to make Mark Rothko understood to a visitor from the Midwest, should that visitor chance into the museum.

And I would get notes from people saying how lucid my text was. It always made me very happy that my writing was approachable, and so much art writing that I read is simply not accessible.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that the approach you also took over the course of the years that you've written for art magazines, starting with ARTnews? Has that been the approach you've taken also with writing for those art journals?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, absolutely. I mean, it's really the only approach that I know. I feel that, although I was not – I didn't become an artist – that because I loved art and studied art and hoped to be an artist and was married to an artist, that I have some understanding of what an artist is trying to communicate.

And so my approach to my writing was to try and communicate that by making it as accessible as possible, and not to write reams about a work of art but simply to try to enter the work of art and make it available.

Writing is not easy for me. You know, one of the movements that I was most attracted to, which led me to Cornell, was Surrealism, and André Breton, the founder – the leader of the Surrealist movement, would talk about his struggle to find the right word and to put the right word into an association with another word.

And he talked at one point about how long it took him to write a poem, something like six months. That's what I used to do. I used to sit there and puzzle over a word, to think about whether or not it was a good representation of what the artist was trying to do.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever want to, and actually did, show something to an artist that you were writing, about their work, to ask them if you got it right?

MS. WALDMAN: I would show them an essay when I was finished with it.

MS. RICHARDS: But only when you were finished.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, not – no. I would ask for clarification if I was uncertain about a technique or about an image, if it was meant to represent something and I thought it might, might not, or if it had a spiritual dimension.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you, as a usual part of your research, interview each artist and ask about their intentions and their processes?

MS. WALDMAN: I did a fair number of interviews. Most of them were quite good, because I was not – I was easy to be with. In one instance I brought an artist into the museum's auditorium, and we sat in the dark because he was nervous. And I figured maybe he'll relax if I talk to him and I tape him – tape recorder. And he loved the interview.

Very often when I had the interview, I would sort of junk the first part of it because it would take awhile for me to get into the subject and for the artist to get into the kind of response he or she would make.

MS. RICHARDS: Who was it who needed – may I ask who needed –

MS. WALDMAN: Well, it was Ken Noland. And I did an interview with [Chamberlain] and I did quite a – I did an interview with Roy Lichtenstein.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm talking about, who was the artist in the dark?

MS. WALDMAN: Ken Noland.

MS. RICHARDS: Nobody else did that?

MS. WALDMAN: No, I didn't do it.

MS. RICHARDS: But that sounds like –

MS. WALDMAN: It was a wonderful – I mean, I probably should have done it with more of the artists, but I didn't.

MS. RICHARDS: It's almost like talking to yourself. You can't really see the other person so much.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, so you can sort of mull over something without feeling the pressure to say – make the perfect sentence or to say something perfectly, you know. It's relaxing. It's simply relaxing. And maybe it relaxed me, too, I don't know, because I'm not a skilled – I was not a skilled interviewer. I had never prepared a series of questions. I would just go for it.

And so then I would give them the interview, and they would correct it if there something factual that needed correcting. And I think with all of my essays, the only artist that corrected anything, as I mentioned earlier, was Carl Andre. And he, years, later, apologized to me, saying that because he had been an editor, he had become very much a stickler for the right word – [laughs] – the right use of words. But none of it – you know, it was all helpful, the kinds of comments that I got – the feedback that I got from artists.

But in just about every case, they said to me, "You're the curator. You do the exhibition. I'm the artist. I do my work." I never had any real disputes with any of the artists once we were actually installing something. On one or two occasions, if an artist wanted to hang his work a certain way, and I disagreed, we'd try it my way, and then we'd try it the artist's way, and then we'd go back to my way, and that's the way it was hung. So I felt that I knew what I was doing.

I'm not saying that I was always right, but it was – I had nice collaborations with artists, you know? We really worked – the same way I worked with my husband, you know? He'll ask my advice if he's in the middle of painting something, do I like it? If he's uncertain about something, he'll ask my advice. If I have a comment, I'll tell him what I think needs to be corrected or adjusted.

So it doesn't upset me or concern me to have to approach an artist that way. I'm very comfortable doing that. And when I've been to young artists' studios – artists that I've shown, artists that I've not shown – I used to find in those days that many artists who were sort of at the beginning of their careers were a little timid about scale. And while the concept might be interesting, very often their canvases were a little bit conservative in size.

So I would say something like, "Have you tried, you know, enlarging your canvas? It might give you greater freedom" – without saying freedom to do what. I would never say that. Or I would never say, if there was a figurative painter, "Have you thought about adding three figures" – I'd never say that – "instead of one?"

But I'm always aware, because of all the installations that I've done, when the proportions feel comfortable to me, and if only to get an artist to look differently at his or her work – not necessarily take my advice, but just I always felt that a pair of fresh eyes would be helpful; whether I was right or not, it didn't matter.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you involve the artists in thinking about what images would be reproduced in the catalogue and what would be on the cover?

MS. WALDMAN: Oh, yes, always. Always, yes. And sometimes if the artist was not living in New York, I would have one of the designers in the museum do several covers. I know in the beginning we had a freelance designer – we didn't have designers on staff – and it could be difficult working with them.

For the Max Ernst catalogue, for example, I had a designer who was so involved with abstract art that when I wanted to put a figure on the cover, he said, "No." So the catalogue cover, to my mind, is a disaster. And what he did was to take the proportions of a very beautiful painting and emulate the proportions and the color so that the canvas was subdivided, with a small rectangular band at the top and a larger rectangle at the bottom, and then insert his graphic idea of a Max Ernst frottage, which was a rubbing that Max Ernst used to –

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs] Oh, so it was his design, his art.

MS. WALDMAN: So it became his design, and I couldn't prevail upon the museum to understand that Surrealism was so much about imagery. And Tom Messer defended the design. So it was a cover that I've always hated. [Laughs.] But inside, we had a nice reproduction of the painting, the actual painting that [the designer] used to make his cover.

So there have been instances where I haven't had – Max Ernst was alive, but he was living in the south of France, and he, too, was not involved in the – in the catalogue cover. He came for the opening of the exhibition and approved the installation, for the most part.

We had an alcove at the entrance to the top ramp in which I had some paintings dating to, I think it was, 1919. And he looked at it – looked at them, and he said, "Ah, the sins of my youth." [Laughs.] And then we went through the museum; he looked at the paintings.

We got down to the main floor, and it was such a big installation, and there were so many sculptures, and we had not had time to lay out the sculptures. They were lined up in front of the Fifth Avenue side of the building in two rows. He looked at them, and he said, "Move the sculpture," and he left, which is what we were going to do.

So, I mean, I have all these wonderful memories and experiences, but, for the most part, it's very easy to work with artists. You know, it's sometimes other people who give you a little bit of a hard time, like the designer in the case of the Max Ernst catalogue.

MS. RICHARDS: What about your relationships with commercial galleries while you were there, as lenders and as representatives of artists who might, in some cases, be a kind of a gatekeeper?

MS. WALDMAN: All easy to work with; all excited, loving of the museum.

MS. RICHARDS: I guess it's natural. Their artists having a show at the Guggenheim. What could be bad?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, it's so prestigious, you know, but they were good lenders. Many of them were collectors, are collectors, good lenders, very helpful in providing lists of collectors for me to visit. It's always been wonderful to deal with dealers. I've never had a problem with any of them. They've been extraordinarily helpful and made the job of getting around to look at work much easier for exhibitions.

You know, they've benefited enormously because the show – a big show, paintings – you know, they have a nice market there for people who hadn't really looked at a certain artist in a certain way but, having seen the Guggenheim show, made a beeline for the gallery.

So, the de Koonings that I mentioned earlier, which were not selling well prior to the exhibition of "de Kooning in East Hampton," all of a sudden started selling very nicely. And his late work took off, but it was as the result of that exhibition.

So I think dealers understand that just as we need them, they need us. And it's not – you know, it's not a compromise situation. There's nothing underhanded going on. It's simply to do the best for the artist. So it's been a good experience all around, for me.

MS. RICHARDS: Just a couple of other questions about writing. It seemed, when I looked at your résumé, that you had the opportunity to write some reviews in art journals – ARTnews and Arts Magazine– while you were at the Guggenheim. Was that something that you sought out, that was permissible? And was that an opportunity to write about an artist's work when you couldn't present an exhibition? Or was it specifically to expand upon or to focus on someone whose work you had been able to present?

MS. WALDMAN: A bit of both. You know, I continued my affiliation with ARTnews after getting an introduction from Tom Hess to Tom Messer. I continued writing for them.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you find time to write reviews?

MS. WALDMAN: [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Plus I wanted to ask you – the second part of that. You did a number of books, I think mostly monographs, with other publishers, not the Guggenheim, that weren't related to exhibitions.

MS. WALDMAN: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you decide on which projects to do? And, again, how did you find time to do that? And was that always okay with the museum?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, the museum, it was happy to have its staff expanding their horizons. We could lecture; we could do whatever we wanted, unless there was an apparent conflict of interest. I think it might, you know, have been difficult for me to slavishly copy the stuff that was being shown at the Modern or something, you know, to make it so apparent that while I was working at the Guggenheim, my heart was at the Museum of Modern Art.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, that would – [laughs].

MS. WALDMAN: I mean, that kind of obvious thing. But, for one thing, the salaries in the museum profession in those days were lousy, and writing was also an opportunity to make some money.

MS. RICHARDS: Even though it doesn't pay very well either.

MS. WALDMAN: It doesn't pay very well, but it was still some more money. And I don't know, I was just so excited by art that – and they were artists that I wanted to be involved with that perhaps were being shown elsewhere and that I knew were not accessible to me.

It was just really trying to keep searching in the art world for things that I admired. It's only been through my writing that I really determined that some artists are really not as exciting as I thought they would be, and some really stand the test of time for me.

It wasn't really just the exhibition; it was really more about my writing, because my writing was me. It was private. It was something that I did. It was not my interpretation of the artist per se as much as an expression of how I felt about art. And –

MS. RICHARDS: It sounds like it was totally essential, then, for you to do that, in addition to exhibitions.

MS. WALDMAN: It was, you know, and it would always baffle me that there were some curators who can't or won't write, because I think it goes – writing goes hand in hand with an exhibition, and writing around an exhibition of a project also illuminates things that you feel about art and ideas that you have about art.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you go about making these connections to the different publishers for your different projects? For example, would you think, oh, I want to do a book – you did a book on Anthony Caro [Anthony Caro. New York: Abbeville Press, 1982] – who would be interested in publishing it, and submit a proposal, or did the publisher contact you and ask, what are you interested in writing about?

MS. WALDMAN: I think the publisher contacted me, or Anthony Caro contacted me. I knew him because of Ken Noland, you know, and the group that Clement Greenberg lauded. And I met him also – met him in London in my first trip to Europe, I think, again, in 1968, and at a [David] Hockney opening.

I went with a friend, colleague of mine, [Elizabeth] Betsy Baker, who was an editor in ARTnews, to the opening, and met Anthony Caro, and, of course, always followed up if I was interested in the art. I went to visit him many, many times at his studios. Whenever I would go to London, I would go to his studio to see what he was doing, because I had seen works of his like Prairie [1967], early work, and it related to the Minimalists, even though he was not a Minimalist – part of the Minimalist so-called movement per se.

So from that early period I kept sort of following him and watching his development. But I think it might have been Caro. And it was a bit of a torture writing – working, not with him; he was very easy to work with, but working with Abbeville, because I think they had changed designers. It was not the neatest arrangement. With Abrams, it was an easy arrangement. I had an editor assigned to me.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that Margaret Kaplan?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, Margaret Kaplan. As I mentioned earlier, Abrams took over a number of catalogues for different museums –

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MS. WALDMAN: – and it became a – because of Harry Abrams, it became a part of the Abrams publishing enterprise to work with museums and publish their catalogues. And the woman that I worked with at Abrams was Margaret Kaplan. So she and I would talk about books, and she would say, "What would you like to do for us next, dear?" So I would present a proposal, and that would be it.

I don't even know if I ever asked Tom Messer whether he would okay a freelance project or just went ahead and did it, which was my style in those days. [Laughs.] But I mainly worked for Abrams, and it was comfortable working relationship. I was, at one point, talking to Harry Abrams. He asked me to do a textbook for them, but that became way too complicated for the time that I could allot to a publication aside from doing an exhibition and an exhibition catalogue.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. WALDMAN: And then he died, and the whole thing fell apart. But, you know, I had a nice working relationship there. George Braziller was very good to work with. He loved Cornell. He had an editor who I worked well with. There was never any issue there. But it was just easier to keep – to maintain a relationship with Abrams.

MS. RICHARDS: As a writer, did you find a particular copy editor who worked well with you, and you tried to stick to using that person?

MS. WALDMAN: No, and that's always been very different – I have had very few editors that I have really respected. There were a couple of people who freelanced for Abrams, a brother and sister who I worked very well with. I had difficulty sometimes with the editor in my museum.

MS. RICHARDS: If you could define it, what was the major cause of conflict with the editor? Did you feel they were changing the tone of your work? Do you feel that they were not being thorough enough, or being too thorough or –

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, I think they – in a certain way, I think editors like to tidy up the loose ends that you might bring.

MS. RICHARDS: Conceptually – ideas?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. Yes, and in tidying up something they sort of miss the original - originality, or they miss what's really behind what you're trying to say. You might not necessarily state it as clearly. But in order for an editor to really, it seems to me, to really do a wonderful job, they have to be on your wavelength. You're not supposed to be on their wavelength.

And the problem I found with a lot of editors is they're not on your wavelength, you know? They either don't understand the artist; they don't understand what you're driving at. I had the hardest problems explaining Surrealism to one of my editors because she was very pragmatic.

MS. RICHARDS: Would that happen more frequently at a big publisher than at the Guggenheim where –

MS. WALDMAN: No, both – both.

MS. RICHARDS: Because you would think that at a museum they would have an editor who understood Surrealism, for example.

MS. WALDMAN: It was not shown at the Guggenheim Museum, and I – you know, I don't know. The problem at Abrams was that there wasn't any consistency. There should have been. I mean, they had, at one point, a very good staff. And you're absolutely right; they should have assigned an editor. But for each project there was a different set of people. There might be a different designer, a different editor, so it's like starting from scratch.

When I did the Cornell for Abrams, I was introduced to an editor at lunch, and I said to Margaret Kaplan after lunch, I said, "Margaret, this is not going to work." We had not even done any work. I knew, because of my intuition – which, as I've said to you, I rely on – I said, "This is not going to work." Well, it was –

MS. RICHARDS: What do you think you picked up on at lunch that caused you to say that?

MS. WALDMAN: She was bright, brash, and young, and I – I really don't know, you know, whether it was her – she was a little bit abrasive – whether it was the personality that rubbed the wrong way. You know, not – I like a mellow person, someone who says, "I dig you." You know, "I dig what you're trying to do. Let's see if I can" – you know, "I'm having a problem with this paragraph. Let's see if we can talk it out." What's the rush?

So I would get – she would send me parts of my chapters back where she took out entire parts of the text. She didn't cross them out; she eliminated them. So I would have to go back to my original text - because the meaning was not there, and the content was stripped - look at the text, reinsert – try and rewrite it, reinsert it. It was a nightmare. And at the end of that project, the lady was fired, or soon after that.

And of course, I was right, but, you know, it's hard when you're dealing with an institution and an establishment with their own problems, whatever the needs were to prevail. I have to say that the editors I worked with at ARTnews were the best, absolutely the best, and no one since then has been as good as those editors. Now, whether that's because of Tom Hess - because they were really so immersed in art all the time and so enthusiastic - I really don't know, but I never had a problem there.

MS. RICHARDS: Speaking of art criticism, have there ever been times when a critic wrote about a show you curated and really misunderstood or in some way made some errors that caused you to reply, either a published reply or just to reply to them personally to say, you know, you got this wrong?

MS. WALDMAN: No, I haven't. I mean, I've gotten a lot of bad reviews and some really nice reviews, and I just – the bad reviews always hurt, but I just went on. My feeling was, why bother, you know; how could I explain what my intention was when the critic clearly either wasn't interested or had his or her own tack to take?

Many of the critics are either told not to speak to the curators, or they don't care to. So they don't get an understanding of what the curator is trying to achieve, which seems to me sort of funny – a funny way to approach criticism.

And so, knowing that, my feeling was, move on. If you respond, you'll get a counter-response, because in almost all cases they have to prove they're right. And here you are enmeshed in something that is painful.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. WALDMAN: You know, why not move on to something that gives you pleasure rather than – another exhibition; go to a studio. Enjoy yourself. So I haven't. You know, I never got involved with the battles between curators and critics. I never did.

MS. RICHARDS: When you decided to leave the Guggenheim in '96 – and I guess I read – it said that you were retiring. You'd been there for a little more than 30 years, although you weren't really so old that you would automatically be assumed to be retiring. What made that the point at which you would leave?

MS. WALDMAN: I resigned; I didn't retire. I felt that it was difficult to work with Tom Krens, and it was becoming such an obstacle to fund-raise for an exhibition, which I felt was not my real responsibility, but it became a responsibility.

MS. RICHARDS: Did that happen as soon as he arrived, that suddenly the curators would have fund-raising –

MS. WALDMAN: Well, it happened as the budgets for exhibitions grew larger and larger, and as the need to find funding grew. And –

MS. RICHARDS: Was there something that you were doing that was causing the exhibition budgets to grow?

MS. WALDMAN: No, but the more prominent you make an artist, the bigger the price. So you end up becoming a part of the problem, not the solution. So what started out my being slightly ahead of the curve in the art world and showing artists who were not yet fully recognized and therefore not terribly expensive, the art world became much more public, much more – it had a bigger audience. It became more expensive to buy paintings, and then the costs of shipping increased –

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. WALDMAN: – and the cost of doing catalogues increased.

MS. RICHARDS: All these.

MS. WALDMAN: So the Kelly show, I'd estimate, cost a million dollars.

MS. RICHARDS: When Tom Krens came – and if this whole change was museum-worldwide, or at least the U.S.

museums, that everything was costing more, there had to be fund-raising and increase in special exhibitions, then it was a kind of a change that everyone was going through. But there were particular stresses working with him, it sounds like.

MS. WALDMAN: There were definitely stresses, but there was another reason. I felt that I was starting to repeat myself, that I really had done so many exhibitions I was getting a little tired. I had never taken a break.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you, had you ever taken a sabbatical?

MS. WALDMAN: No. I thought about it, and I thought that I might lose my momentum if I did, you know, and there was always that struggle to stay on top. And –

MS. RICHARDS: So it was a grind. It was a huge –

MS. WALDMAN: Well, it was becoming –

MS. RICHARDS: – working –

MS. WALDMAN: – it was getting wearing. It was getting very wearing. I felt that – I had done a second Lichtenstein show. You know, I didn't feel like doing another Cornell show. I kept looking around, and at that point in time I didn't see anything that I wanted to – that I felt would enhance – would enable me to grow.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel also, since the staff had expanded, and there were other curators who were covering parts of the art world, perhaps more of the contemporary, up-to-the-minute work, that you were, in a way, defined by your generation, the artists? I mean, it was broader than that, I know, but that there were limitations on what you could do because of what other curators were responsible for?

MS. WALDMAN: No. Tom Messer would say that I would reach a point where I would no longer be au courant and able to keep up with what was going on. I never felt that, and I'll relate something to you in a minute about that. But I felt that there was this struggle going on in the museum between the new director, and the people that he brought in, and the people who were in the museum. And I felt that there was a conflict there, where he didn't really want some of the older staff around. He wanted to put his imprint on the place, to have his staff in place.

And so I felt a certain amount of tension and pressure, and then there was all this vacillating going on about who to put, who to show, how to show it, where do you find funding. You need the money; otherwise we can't do the show. Maybe we'll do the show this year. Maybe we'll do the show a year from now. There was so much uncertainty and so much – it was like –

MS. RICHARDS: And a lot of that was publicly known, too.

MS. WALDMAN: A lot of it – I didn't know how I could continue to work there. It happened from the time he came, but I managed to get these projects going that ultimately were very satisfying, but there was a lot of meddling in my Ellsworth Kelly installations. Several of the curators apologized to me a couple of years ago when I was in Venice for the Venice Biennale. They said they were forced to interfere in what was supposed to be my exhibition.

I didn't see what good would continue to come from that. And the thought of doing another big project where I would have to find even more fund-raising and then never know whether that funding would be taken away from me and used for another project, which was also a possibility - I thought, what the heck; I don't need this stuff, you know. I knew that I would leave at a certain point.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you imagine leaving to go to another institution, or did you look forward to the moment when you would be free – [they laugh] – and could do independent projects?

MS. WALDMAN: I looked forward to the moment when I would be free, when I would have some private life, when I would have some time for myself, when I could look around and decide what I wanted to do next. It was becoming – I was sort of beginning to disappear in that museum, and it was a new experience for me, because I hadn't had to disappear before then. So, I left. I advised two collectors, which was a new experience for me and quite enjoyable.

MS. RICHARDS: Before you left, did you plan –

MS. WALDMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: – what you would do?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, I didn't think about working in another museum. I thought perhaps I might try to freelance some projects, but I thought freelancing was the way to go. I wasn't certain exactly where I was going. But I had spoken with – Joe Helman had just broken up with his partner, Irving Blum, and he wanted someone in the gallery who could do some exhibitions that would give him a certain amount of credibility which perhaps he lost when Irving left. I don't know.

I thought it would be a nice small space, and I made it clear to him that I was not interested in being a salesperson, that I would not work on commission, that I wanted to do one or two exhibitions a year, knowing that I was not going to stay there for very long.

And I was able to do a couple of lovely little shows, one of which remains very dear to my heart – "Poets" – the works of art by poets and composers, which was a completely different experience for me than anything I had ever done in the museum. And I was also able to make a nice sum of money working for the two collectors and the Helman.

MS. RICHARDS: How did those two collectors –

[END DISC 3, TRACK 1.]
Did they contact you, or did Helman say, you know, "I know two people who might" –

MS. WALDMAN: No, no, an architect friend of mine – Rick Franzen – introduced me –

MS. RICHARDS: Tell me his name again?

MS. WALDMAN: Ulrich Franzen – Rick Franzen – introduced me to [Leonard]Len Riggio, who was the head of Barnes & Noble, who wanted an advisor for his collection. And then I advised another collector. So I worked with the three of them, made a reputable amount – a decent amount of money for the first time in my life, after 31 years of being at the Guggenheim – [laughs] – and making peanuts.

It was on a trip to Europe – this was just after I left the museum; I'd say a year or so after - that I went to visit a friend in London. He's an American who lives in London, and we have a very nice arrangement. He drives me to galleries, and sometimes I buy him dinner. But we're good friends.

MS. RICHARDS: What is his name, may I ask?

MS. WALDMAN: John Burrows. He was introduced to me by Betsy Baker. The two of them met at Harvard [University, Cambridge, MA] when they were both undergraduates. John works on his own, and he buys and sells 18th-, 19th-century paintings, totally out of my area. So I would take him to galleries, introduce him to contemporary art, and he enjoyed it. And he would drive me around in his car.

I said, "John, is there anything new in London?" And he said, "Yes, there's a new alternative space about half an hour out of London." So we went to the alternative space, and Pipilotti Rist was had an installation there.

MS. RICHARDS: What's the name of the space?

MS. WALDMAN: I don't remember. I think it was in Hackney. And she had a wonderful installation. She had a living room set of furniture – a couch, perhaps a chair, a lamp, all of them over life-sized. So if you crawled onto the couch, you were in – you felt like you were in some fairy tale.

MS. RICHARDS: I think that was – I've seen that.

MS. WALDMAN: Have you seen it here?

MS. RICHARDS: I think it was here somewhere, yes.

MS. WALDMAN: And there was a video playing, and I was in seventh heaven. John and I were laughing. We were – it was wonderful. I came back to New York. I said to Joe Helman, "There's an artist I think we should show at the gallery. Her name is Pipilotti Rist." And I said, "I think you will like her work because it relates to Oldenburg." He was – he's a collector of –

MS. RICHARDS: This was way before she had work shown at the Guggenheim SoHo? [My Ocean, 1996].

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, way before any of her – way before she had a gallery in New York. You know, I don't know if she had any exposure in Europe, presumably in Europe. But in London, somehow, she made it into this alternative space, and somehow I happened to be there when she was showing.

So I came back, and I said, "You have to go over there." No interest. No interest, but I mentioned that only to indicate to you that I hadn't lost interest. I felt just as contemporary, just as related to contemporary artists as I did when – 30 years earlier, you know? I knew she was wonderful. I saw that great installation at the Modern [2008]. And I thought, you know, if I had been at the Guggenheim, it would have been easier. I would have shown her –

MS. RICHARDS: Twenty years – when – you had a different director?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, when Tom Messer there, I would have shown her at the Guggenheim Museum, and she would have looked wonderful in that space.

MS. RICHARDS: Absolutely.

MS. WALDMAN: So I haven't lost interest in contemporary art. I just found that, without the venue, there's very little to do except to enjoy the experience. So I will go to Venice Biennales. I will look around, look at art. You know? I'd go to the galleries. I'd go to the museums.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you – are you very – you still go to all those –

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, but what has happened in the meantime is that since 1998 – that's two years after I left the museum - my husband and I have traveled in India every year.

MS. RICHARDS: And tell me how that started. Why did you go to India in the first place and –

MS. WALDMAN: I always wanted to go. After years of going to Europe, we thought about whether to go back to Italy, which, of course, one always wants to go back to Italy. And my husband, at one point, had an artist contact – he had spoken to an artist who had spent time in Japan.

And my husband said that he would like to go to Japan and do some prints. The artist said he would arrange it, and he never did. It fell through. So we had talked, then, about going to Japan. So that fell through, and I had been talking and talking about India. My sister was – was married to an Indian who's a professor at Columbia University [New York, NY].

And I had always been enamored of my idea of India. So Paul said to me, "Well, how about India?" So I said, fine. And I put all of my obsessiveness –

MS. RICHARDS: So you're the trip planner.

MS. WALDMAN: - I'm the trip planner [laughs] - into organizing a trip to India. And we were so stunned by that experience that we didn't go back the next year. We were just – how one would do it.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you travel all around or just stay in the north or the south?

MS. WALDMAN: The farthest south we got was to Bombay, now Mumbai. We did the north, mostly.

MS. RICHARDS: And how many weeks was that trip?

MS. WALDMAN: That was three weeks – a little – about three weeks.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the – could you define what it was that was so striking about that experience?

MS. WALDMAN: First thing – we landed in Delhi. We left the hotel, and we went out, and I said, "Heat and Dust" [film, 1983]. I thought I was in a movie set. The smell is different. The air looks different. I've never seen so many people – so many bicycles, so many tricycles.

Cows sitting in the middle of the road, and they want to cross. You cross. They look at you; you look at them, and you say, "Okay, you can go, cow." [Laughs.] They sit in the middle of the road watching the traffic. I've never seen – I said to Paul, "It's like the Bible." I've never seen so many animals. I'm a city girl. I've never seen so many animals interfacing with people in my life.

The Indian people love children. The women who work in the fields, they wear the most beautiful saris. They wear makeup. They wear gold earrings. They wear gold bangles. They're fully dressed, working in the fields. The women work on highways. They break down rocks into rubble, one dollar a day.

It's a spiritual country – it's not about to going to church on Sunday and praying. It permeates every aspect of their life, and you feel it. So you're in a spiritual environment. You're in an environment that is totally visual and colorful. You see buses stacked high with people.

You see people with totally misshapen bodies. Some of them have been broken by either their families or rings of these gangsters, so that they can beg. You see life at its most basic, and it was somehow so enriching. And it was so nice to get into something where I could feed the goats. I could be with the cows. I could watch the water buffalo. We're driving by – there are water buffalo going by.

The elephants, the camels. But the pigs – the pigs are garbage collectors in the streets. The wild dogs running around. The ducks – [laughs] – the geese, they're everywhere. I mean, there is no distinction. Apparently, the cows in the big cities know their owners, and they go home at night. They're free to go wherever they want during the day, but they go home to their owners at night.

Who knew? So there's this other society that's organized on very different principles. And I don't know, you sort of get spoiled in the art world because you start dealing with all these rich objects and these wealthy collectors and these expensive exhibitions. And here you are sitting in a field, having lunch for three – your driver and you and your husband, and lunch is four dollars, and lunch is delicious. And all of a sudden, you know, you're back down to the earth. There's so much beauty around. So what happened was that we started collecting old Indian miniature paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: Had you both been interested in that? I could see from Paul's work that he would have been interested.

MS. WALDMAN: Well, that came – his paintings came after our trips. We started –

MS. RICHARDS: He had used the figure.

MS. WALDMAN: He had used the figure all along, but the ornamentation came, and the color – the rich color came, I think, from – had a lot to do with India. And it's a society that's changing rapidly. It's wonderful to see it change, and yet something's getting lost. The highways – you could not drive without making all of these detours around these potholes. The roads were a horrendous mess.

One night, we – and what happened was your flight would get delayed by fog in Delhi. In order to get to Agra, two hours away, you could either wait overnight and wait for the fog to lift, or you could get a car and drive in the fog to Agra. So we opted to get a car and driver and drive to Agra because we were supposed to be there that one night.

And we're driving along a road, and the road ends, and the car was crossing a field. [Laughs.] Or you're driving on a road, and it's – the highway – the road is going in one direction, there are cars coming on your side of the road. They still do. Why? I don't know. I mean, it's chaos. So for me, growing up in a grid system in New York, in a society that's very organized, chaos was – it was so appealing. It is so appealing.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you – you said you had started on the first trip to collect the art?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, we did. But we didn't know what we were buying. And as Paul would say, the Indian dealers are very experienced. So Paul would say, we'd like to look at some old paintings. So they would bring them out, and they looked old – the paper was worn. Paul learned to say, this is old paper, but the image – because he, as a painter, can tell whether the paint is new.

They would say, "No, no, they're old paintings." Then they'd say, they're old subjects because they keep repeating the same gods over and over again. And then the old paper, new paintings. Finally, in almost every instance, they'd bring out these pieces of paper wrapped in rags – wrapped in cloth, which they would have in their shops. And you finally get to see what looks like an old painting, some of them –

MS. RICHARDS: But you don't really know.

MS. WALDMAN: No, I never really knew. But we were introduced by one representative. Because for each time we traveled, we were met by an agent – a local agent.

MS. RICHARDS: What kind of agent?

MS. WALDMAN: From the travel agency based in Delhi. So the agent would make sure we got to the hotel, that we were comfortably situated. Paul would say to them, "Do you know any dealers in old paintings?" And in one place, he said yes. He took us to families – three families. And we bought paintings that had come down from generations.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you know how much to pay?

MS. WALDMAN: They'd offer you a price, and you bargained. Paul was very good at bargaining. You don't know what price to pay. Then we'd say afterwards, "Do you think this is really old? Do you think we paid too much?"

MS. RICHARDS: Have you ever had the works looked at here by a trusted expert who could tell you how far off you were?

MS. WALDMAN: I'm going to, but I haven't done that yet. But part – it's part of the pleasure of the trips, is finding these beautiful things. Our two elephants are our newest acquisition.

MS. RICHARDS: Had you collected any other kind of art during the time that you were at the Guggenheim?

MS. WALDMAN: Contemporary art, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: That wasn't considered a conflict? Did you have to go through some kind of protocols to –

MS. WALDMAN: No, no. I never did. I mean, it was never a conflict. Messer owned works by artists that he showed at the museum that he liked. It was never considered a conflict. And I had acquired a number of things. I had a Cornell box – Cornell gave me two collages. Artists have gifted me with works in appreciation for the exhibitions that I've done, but Paul and I have also bought work.

And so we had a contemporary collection, and then we decided to build another collection. You know, it was really based on where we were at a particular time, what we were interested in at any given time. So –

MS. RICHARDS: So you've continued each trip, explored a different area?

MS. WALDMAN: No, now, we keep going back to some of our favorite spots, because some of them are just so beautiful. The ones that I mostly like are on or near water. And it's very peaceful and very soothing. And so it's a bit – a mix, you know? We always fly into Delhi and fly out of Mumbai.

And then it's whether we go to the south, whether we go east to Kolkata, where we've been a couple times. We've been to Bhutan. We've been to Kathmandu [Nepal] and Chitwan [Nepal]. We're going back to Bhutan, back to Kathmandu. In almost every place now, we've been at least twice, and in some cases – in Mumbai, the last time we were there, they said it was our 10th year at the hotel, so they upgraded us. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Finally.

MS. WALDMAN: Finally, yes. So it's – and we know people, you know? We have a rug dealer that we love in Udaipur.

MS. RICHARDS: I was admiring your rugs.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, and a jeweler who makes jewelry that Paul designs for me in Udaipur.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell Udaipur?

MS. WALDMAN: U-D-A-I-P-U-R. Rajasthan. It's in Rajasthan. And in fact, I was telling Paul today that we got a message – I got a message, an e-mail from a young man who was working in a hotel that we stay in in Cochin.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell that?

MS. WALDMAN: C-O-C-H-I-N. It's in the state of Kerala, and it's in a region which is famous for what they call its "backwaters," many canals around which villages are situated. You can get on houseboats or boats and just cruise the canals, in addition to which its west coast, Arabian Sea. Cochin is a very big shipping port.

But there's an area that's very historic called Jew Town. It's where the Jewish merchants settled, and they were traders. There's a beautiful synagogue. It's also a state which is has quite a big Catholic population, because the Catholic Church was there. Some beautiful churches. And it's the most literate state in India. I think 98 percent of the public is literate.

MS. RICHARDS: So it must be one of the wealthier –

MS. WALDMAN: No, it was a communist state, and they really pushed education. And so – I lost my train of thought about Cochin and what we were doing there. Oh, there was a young man working in the hotel that we stayed in. And Paul likes to clown around with some of the staff.

So the young man would walk with him, and Paul would start doing a dance, you know? So the young man became very enamored, and he thought – Paul wouldn't tell him his name, so at one point, Paul – he asked his name, and Paul said Anthony Hopkins, because he looks – people in India think he might be Anthony Hopkins - looks a bit like Anthony Hopkins.

He left the hotel. The next year we went there, he was not there. But he continued to e-mail us because many of these are interns. They are studying for hotel management. And he kept saying that he was hoping to come to America. Well, he just e-mailed me and said he's working as a chef in Biloxi, Mississippi.

And I thought, isn't that wonderful that he is living out his dream? The dream, of course, of many of the Indian people who are not well-to-do is to come here to America. But he actually made it here to America. He finished his management course, and I – you know, I had no idea that he would turn out to be a chef. So he's still in touch with us.

We met a lovely young – a lovely family - when we were in another hotel in India near Cochin, and Paul started talking to the father and mother, and he said to me, "There's a very bright" – one of their daughters was very bright – "Why don't you ask her to work for you as an intern?"

So I said, I don't know. She's young. You know, she was at Vassar College [Poughkeepsie, NY]. And I said – because they were an Indian family from Connecticut - so I said, oh, I don't know. But she did. I ended up – she just e-mailed me the other day. She's getting married. She's moving to Copenhagen [Denmark]. She graduated from Vassar.

When she was at Vassar, there was a collage exhibition which consisted of works by a collector here in New York. She knew that – she had helped me on the collage show - she knew that I was interested. She thought I might not know this guy's work. She asked me if I wanted a catalogue.

I said, "Yes." I borrowed a couple of his works. So I mean, you have all of these – the first time we were in India, I ran into the Italian fund-raiser for the Peggy Guggenheim collection. We were in Chennai once. I ran into a gentleman who has an art foundation in New York. Another time, we were in our hotel in Delhi, I – I ran into two dealers from Los Angeles. So –

MS. RICHARDS: Well, more and more people are traveling to India.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. I mean it's – and there's such excitement, you know, when people go to India, because it's so different from our Western experience.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. You talked about working for Joe Helman – it wasn't Blum Helman Gallery? It was just Joseph Helman?

MS. WALDMAN: It was Blum Helman – Blum Helman. Then it became the Joseph Helman Gallery.

MS. RICHARDS: And you did that for a few years.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And you talked about the Miró Foundation exhibition. What else have you been doing since you retired in these last years?

MS. WALDMAN: I've been doing a lot of traveling.

MS. RICHARDS: I know you did the new Cornell – the other Cornell book [Joseph Cornell: Master of Dreams. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002].

MS. WALDMAN: I'm writing fiction – trying my hand at writing fiction.

MS. RICHARDS: Wow. Is that something you had always thought of in the back of your mind that you'd like to do?

MS. WALDMAN: No. I'm writing detective stories, and it all started because when I was traveling with Betsy Baker years ago, she used to carry sacks of paperback books, and they were all detective books, which I had never read until that point. I thought they were not sufficiently intellectual.

So I started reading them, and I was hooked. I later found out that some of the museum people were equally hooked, you know? [Laughs.] But I actually found that it helped me with my writing style, because in order to present a plot, detective plot, they're always so clear, you know? And as I told you, I always looked for clarity in my writing, and I found detective stories very helpful.

In any event, what happened to me was that when I was doing the second Lichtenstein show, I was going out to L.A., and I find L.A. a very depressing community. It's too bright. [Laughs.] It shuts down at 10 o'clock at night.

There's too much driving. There are not – I don't know – it's not – it's not an area in which I'm comfortable. So I had decided before I left for this latest trip to California, that I would have to put myself in character in order to survive there. And I –

MS. RICHARDS: When was this?

MS. WALDMAN: Ninety-three? Sometime – early '90s because the Lichtenstein show, I think, was in '93?

MS. RICHARDS: Correct.

MS. WALDMAN: So it was sometime around there. So I decided, what was my image of California? I decided it was a blonde bimbo in a bikini with a headphone on, on rollerblades, skating in Venice. So that got me through a good part of that trip. [Laughs.] But what happened was, because I'm a New Yorker and I didn't drive, I had to hire a car and driver, and the driver that I hired –

MS. RICHARDS: Wait a second. You don't know how to drive?

MS. WALDMAN: I do now, but I didn't then.

MS. RICHARDS: You didn't have a license?

MS. WALDMAN: No.

MS. RICHARDS: When did you get a driver's license?

MS. WALDMAN: After all of the museum – '96, maybe? Two thousand, maybe? I think I've had a license 10 years, maybe 2000.

MS. RICHARDS: Anyway, so when you were in L.A., you had to have a driver.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes and so I hired a car and driver and the driver was an actor who had worked at La MaMa [experimental theater] in New York. He decided that his family would have a better life if he went out to California, but he was having a hard time breaking into Hollywood. He was not young. And so he was going to drive me around in L.A., and then we were going up to Santa Barbara to visit some collectors. And I had him with me, and I – there were some people in the trip that I took a dislike to.

MS. RICHARDS: What do you mean, people on the trip? Were you with –

[Cross talk.]

MS. WALDMAN: – that I went to visit, who I decided – I didn't think were terribly nice people. And so when I went back to New York, I decided, this makes the beginnings – I decided to murder this one particular guy – [laughs] – collector that I met on the trip, though I did like. So I think –

MS. RICHARDS: This is – [laughs] – you could fulfill all the fantasies over 30 years of being in a museum.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. So I mean, since I had started with this fantasy of being the blonde bimbo, which I'm not, I decided that the whole thing was such a surreal experience. After he left, for some reason –

MS. RICHARDS: He, who?

MS. WALDMAN: The driver. After I was finished with my tour and came back to L.A., he was finished. And for some reason, I needed to go out to Pasadena. But he wasn't driving for me anymore. So I hired a cab to drive me out there. I mean, most people thought I was crazy because I wasn't driving.

He turned out to be a writer – [laughs] – who was a little bit crazy. So I had the first driver's life story. I had the second driver's life story. I had this collector who I disliked. And I had all of – some of the Hollywood excesses. So I figured, what the hell? Try and make a story out of it.

MS. RICHARDS: So this is in '93. This is before you left. You were already thinking about writing fiction.

MS. WALDMAN: Fiction. Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: What gave you the confidence to do that?

MS. WALDMAN: [Laughs] Stupidity. I don't know. I thought it would be fun.

MS. RICHARDS: You had read enough of the books to feel that you could write it that – in that way?

MS. WALDMAN: I could, yes. I don't know if I can, but I could. So I wrote this up.

MS. RICHARDS: As an outline, you mean? You wrote it up?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, I wrote it up as a book, but a small one, you know? It wasn't –

MS. RICHARDS: You wrote the book?

MS. WALDMAN: I did. Yes. I worked on it.

MS. RICHARDS: Like a short story, you mean – small?

MS. WALDMAN: No, a longer – a short novel. And I showed it to one or two people. And they said, "It needed work. It needed work." And I then – I think because I was working with the two collectors and with Helman, and I dropped it because it wasn't center stage.

Then after I did the Cornell book, for Abrams, I had –

MS. RICHARDS: 2002.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. I had ended the book with a line from Cornell's diary that I liked a lot. The editor took it out. And I was so irritated that I started another detective story based on Cornell as a detective. And now I'm working on a third story, which was actually a story that I started when I was still at the Guggenheim Museum with a colleague who worked with me.

So I have, like –

MS. RICHARDS: Are you working on it with that colleague again?

MS. WALDMAN: No. I'm working on it myself now.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you created a detective who's the same person in each of the –

MS. WALDMAN: No. No. Because the Cornell-inspired thing takes place in the 19th century.

MS. RICHARDS: Ah. So you have the whole other challenge of describing –

MS. WALDMAN: The time. And the Paris – the period.

MS. RICHARDS: And the time.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. And it's about a ballerina. So it's about Cornell. And so I keep going back and forth. But I'm working now on the third story, which was the first, really. So I've had this interest for quite a while.

MS. RICHARDS: Has your reading evolved so that you have different favorite authors than you used to have?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. My new favorite author is – [laughs]. It's just right here; I have her new book.

MS. RICHARDS: Sorry – Donna –

MS. WALDMAN: Leon – L-E-O-N. I think she's a wonderful writer. She has a detective who is in every book she writes. And it's all situated around Venice. She's an American living in Venice. And she's a wonderful writer. I picked up a mention of her in the Times some years ago, because she had not been published in the U.S. And they said she was very popular in Europe.

They mentioned it because –

MS. RICHARDS: But she writes in English.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, because her book was about to be published in America. And it caught on immediately.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you ever wanted to, or in fact, have you used the art world or aspects of the art world in the stories?

MS. WALDMAN: Oh, yes. Very much in this one that I'm working on – museum, art world. Yes, in this one, and as well as the one in L.A. – is about the L.A. art world, as well. You know, but –

MS. RICHARDS: Have you ever spoken to other art-world people who write detective stories?

MS. WALDMAN: No, but I just clipped something from the Times about a writer who was a longtime editor of Art in America who I did not know, who has a new book out which sounds wonderful to me. So I might speak to Betsy about him and – because I don't know him, but I'm looking forward to reading his book.

But it's a lot of work. And you know –

MS. RICHARDS: Do you have an editor who you always use?

MS. WALDMAN: No. I'm working on my own. I self-edit. I have a friend – she's a critic, actually – who is also developing her own series of books, one of which is based on the emperor and empress of Turkey. So we are both sort of – she was interested in writing movie scripts, so I've been reading her movie scripts. And she's been reading what I've written – the first one that I've written, the one that takes place in L.A.

I was supposed to meet her for lunch today, but I simply couldn't do it. So she said to me, "How is your – [laughs] – latest detective story coming along?" I said, "It's coming." I said, "Next time I see you, I'd like you to read it." You know, because she's been very helpful.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you had anything published yet?

MS. WALDMAN: No. I haven't. I got rejected by two editors. And I stopped. So you know –

MS. RICHARDS: That must be an enormous effort to put your work out to editors, or to try get a publisher.

MS. WALDMAN: It is – to find editors, you know. I made a mistake years ago. I had a friend, a colleague, who works at an artist foundation. And I met him for lunch one day. He told me that he thought I should – I had never had an agent. He said he thought that I should get an agent.

MS. RICHARDS: A literary agent.

MS. WALDMAN: A literary agent. I've never had one. I always worked directly with a publisher because of the Guggenheim Museum. So he said he'd speak to her on my behalf. I went to see her. She was very lovely. She said, "What art book would you like to work on?" She would be happy to represent me. And I said that I'm interested – [laughs] – in writing a detective story.

And she said, "Fine." She was handling two writers who were just broken out big-time. And I got cold feet. I felt that I was not really ready, that it was not good enough. You know, as sure as I was about what I was doing in art, I was that unsure in terms of writing detective fiction. So I never contacted her. I dropped that first L.A. story. I never showed it to her.

Years later, I called her. Well, she wasn't too friendly at that point. Or else she wasn't simply – wasn't looking for people. I don't know. You know, but it was stupidity on my part – or naiveté, you know? Or fear – it was really fear-based.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, that's kind of reasonable. You were new to it – [laughs].

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. And she's actually a lovely woman. And I think I made a huge mistake. But there are other people out there. It's just not so easy to get to them. I know a very big-time agent because he's an art collector. And I said to him – I said, would he look at something that I've written? And he said, "Yes. But I'll rip it apart." I'm not used to that kind of dynamic.

And now, of course, the publishing business is not so fabulous.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. WALDMAN: But nonetheless, I'm having a wonderful time writing these things. I know it would be best to have a consistent person being the detective in all three, but – and in all probability, the West Coast one and the New York one could –

MS. RICHARDS: Meet. [Laughs.]

MS. WALDMAN: - meet. Yes, midway someplace.

MS. RICHARDS: Become partners.

MS. WALDMAN: So they could be a central character, but it's not working out that way for the moment.

MS. RICHARDS: I just wanted to go back to museum work for a minute and ask you – since you began, the field of curating has changed, or evolved. And now we have all kinds of curatorial study programs that do or don't model themselves after the one you – the early one you studied under.

What do you think, or what do you say to a young person who's, let's say, an art history major who has a B.A. and wondering should she – or he – continue to get a graduate degree. And if so, should it be in art history or in museum studies or in curatorial practice? What do you think is the best path to take for curatorial training?

MS. WALDMAN: Oh, it's really hard for me to answer. But you know, there was an article in the Times not too long ago about some of the hot new young curators working at museums in New York. And I was struck by the fact that several of them were studio people like me, that they came from an art background and not from a Ph.D. program.

And I thought, a-ha. Isn't that wonderful? We're getting back to a point in time where these people are intimately involved with objects and not approaching it from the art historical point of view, which can be very dry and very unfeeling, in some ways.

So I don't know. It really depends on the programs that are being offered. The museum study program that I took at the Institute suited me perfectly because it was about connoisseurship. And it enabled me to develop my eye for objects. I still think, ideally, that that's the way to go.

MS. RICHARDS: But that was also based on your solid art history background, that you acquired there, as well as –

MS. WALDMAN: Well, it was a bit spotty. You know, as I said to you, I had 60 credits in studio work. And I think – at Hunter – and 12 credits in art history.

MS. RICHARDS: So that's about four courses.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes. Which was next to nothing. And I had to take two other courses to get into the Institute. Whether they still have that as a minimum, or whether they've made the requirements tougher or not, I don't know. I had a painter recommending me, not an art historian. So I went into a system that wasn't rigid.

And in my years at the museum, I found that, so often, the best curators were not Ph.D. people, that the Ph.D. people were too academic in many regards; that they were too interested in interpreting the symbols in a work of art; that they were really not able to deal with color, shape, form, technique, surface; that they really didn't understand how an artist approaches his or her work of art.

And of course, the art world has become very much more conceptual lately. And you – once again, you're dealing in terms of an art world, now, to a large degree, with people who are approaching art as theory. In my day, art was not theory. So there was a little bit of a disconnect between the academic Ph.Ds who were trying to develop theories, and those of us who were looking at the art for what it was meant to say.

So I don't know. You know, today's art world – today's museum profession might demand something else. But a good many of the best people in the profession, some of them never even had a master's degree. I don't consider that a condition for being a curator. So I would say to a young curator, if your heart is in the profession, go for it. And find out what program seems like the best fit for you.

There are people who are theoretically bent. And that's fine. I think they should go into programs in which that is – and those would be laid out in any catalogue. If your main objective is to work with objects, check out the museum training programs. And whatever you do, see if you can go to as many galleries as you can, and try to go to studios, because that's where the art is being made, and that's where you'll find out what you really like, not what you think you may like.

You may approach art from a point of view of what you've seen around you, but it may not be what you ultimately will like. So why not work in a gallery? You have very good access to art and artists. It's much more immediate than working in a museum. The time process is much faster.

I had, as an intern, Matthew Marks, when he was 16 years old. André Emmerich, the dealer, called me and said, "I have this wonderful young man. He's the son of a friend of mine. Do you think you would hire him? He's young. Would you hire him to work as an intern for you in the museum?" I said, "Absolutely. Send him up." And he came up. And I hired him. But he was on another track. He wanted to be in the galleries.

I'm told he had been collecting, buying things for his father. He didn't have the patience to sit and do this nit-picking research for me on a subject that probably wasn't even of interest to him. He wanted to be out and around. And so he was – he has this wonderful gallery, and he's made a great success for himself. But he needed to find where he fit.

I had another young woman who was 18 years old, Maud Lavin, who came to work with me as an intern. And I thought she was wonderful. But she ended up teaching. You know, museum work was not something, I guess, that she – that was ultimately her path. But she's published. She did a book on Hannah Höch, the German Dada artist [Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993]. You know, so – she went in another direction. It really depends on the individual.

But my position, when I was at the museum, was to encourage them to do as much as they could, to give them as much responsibility – I love to delegate and to see where they would take it. I have – Sabine Rewald at the Met worked for me. Susan Taylor, who was director at the Princeton Museum [Princeton, NJ] worked for me. Lisa Dennison, who is now at Sotheby's, worked for me.

I've had wonderful assistants. And they all started as I did, as beginning museum people. Doug Crimp worked for me, now a very good writer. So you know, I –

MS. RICHARDS: It's a great list.

MS. WALDMAN: Hmm?

MS. RICHARDS: It's a great list.

MS. WALDMAN: [Laughs] It's a nice list. It's nice list, and I'm very – and Linda Shearer was my first assistant, curator at the Museum of Modern Art, director of the Williams College Museum [of Art, Williamstown, MA].

So you know, it's wonderful, because they give you so much back that you – when you try to give them something, they give you their youth, their energy, and their particular take on art. And every one of them had different tastes than mine. You know, so it's – it's all – it's been very fulfilling for me to have these young people working for me.

MS. RICHARDS: At this point, you're traveling, and you're writing – and reading – [laughs] – detective novels – do you still want to be engaged in curating or writing about art, contemporary art?

MS. WALDMAN: I still toy with the idea of doing an exhibition, but I do not want to get involved in museum politics, in fund-raising. And I see that as a bit of a problem in a lot of museums.

MS. RICHARDS: Could you imagine proposing it to one of these major galleries that have a pretty good budget, and work with independent curators who do museum-like exhibitions?

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, you know, I'm not as hungry as I was. So if someone approached me, I would entertain the idea. The director of the Miro Foundation, Rosa Maria Malet, approached me to do the collage show because I had written a book on collage for Abrams, and she had seen the book and liked it. So she approached me, and it worked out very nicely, and while their budget was not big, collage then was not terribly expensive. So it was a nice fit.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it in the Miró Foundation in Barcelona?

MS. WALDMAN: In Barcelona, yes. It was an absolutely beautiful exhibition.

MS. RICHARDS: Beautiful space.

MS. WALDMAN: Beautiful space, beautiful exhibition.

MS. RICHARDS: And she's lovely.

MS. WALDMAN: And she's lovely to work with. But there aren't too many perfect situations out there, you know? So am I going to go out there and solicit? No, I don't think so.

MS. RICHARDS: Are there particular kinds of work – is there a particular kind of work going on now that would be something you'd want to look at if you were doing an exhibition?

MS. WALDMAN: Not any particular kind of work. I mean, if I found another artist like Pipilotti Rist, who was, again, flying under the radar, that would be very intriguing. What to do with it? Something else, you know. I suppose I could approach a gallery, but it's not something that – I'm not that hungry anymore. I don't feel that I have to do it. The question is, do I want to?

Right now I think that, since I never had a vacation in 31 years – never, I never took time off – I'm enjoying the time that I have for myself to do my own stuff. Whether detective stories pan out or not – I don't have to prove anything with the detective stories. So it's made it much easier for me.

I'm, by nature, a nervous workaholic. So for me to sit and be quiet is very difficult. I can do it when I'm traveling in India because the whole pace slows down, but it's not too easy for me to do that here. I have to be engaged in something, but I don't have to be – I don't want to be on a deadline again. I don't want to be struggling with collectors over loans.

I mean, I cannot imagine what it would be like to do a – the work to do an exhibition of a prominent artist. You're talking about multimillion-dollar paintings. You need a huge budget for that, and, yes, I have ideas. I do. I can't help thinking about them, but in terms of contemporary art, I haven't seen that much that intrigues me, and a lot of the stuff in the galleries I find repetitive of what I had already seen in the '60s.

So unless there's that rare jewel, I'm not going to be prompted to do something. If there was something that was really drop-dead knockout and unique, I imagine I'd get excited again and perhaps try to find a venue.

MS. RICHARDS: When you – as you're working on the detective stories now – and you'll use your name - you won't use a pen name? [Laughs.]

MS. WALDMAN: Probably. I could use my maiden name, but that was the thing I thought of.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you thought of getting together with other writers? There must be some in Manhattan, some kind of club or gathering of detective writers who kind of help each other and encourage each other.

MS. WALDMAN: I don't know. I've always been a solitary writer, a solitary curator, because I've always been thinking and mulling over what I've seen, what I want to show. I've always been mulling over my work and whether I like my writing or whether it needed to – I needed to change it.

So I'm, in a way, like Cornell. I need to internalize an awful lot in order to externalize something. But I mean, that's a great idea that you have. Of course, I should get out there more and speak about my ideas, but I have to clarify them for myself first. And for me to clarify them for myself, I need to get – I don't write with an outline in mind. I never wrote a text with an outline in mind.

I sit down like an Abstract Expressionist in front of a blank canvas, blank piece of paper, a computer with a blank page and start writing. And I used to say to myself, let the plot take you. So I started with this one line, for example, of Joseph Cornell's, which had to do with the fact that at three a.m. in the morning, he went down to the basement and had a slice of lemon butter cake. [They laugh.]

MS. RICHARDS: His cake diet. [Laughs.]

MS. WALDMAN: Right, his cake diet. I started with that, and now I've got [Eugene] Delacroix – I'm working on Delacroix, 19th-century Delacroix, ballet, Marie Taglioni, one of Cornell's favorite ballerinas from that period. I'm writing about Paris as it was before [Georges-Eugene] Haussmann developed the plan for the city and what it was like.

So I'm having a wonderful time, but I still haven't gotten to the end, right? Where I left off, was I'm in Algiers – Tangiers, rather - with Delacroix at the moment. Now, I had no thought of that when I sat down – [laughs] – to write this.

MS. RICHARDS: So that it sounds like one of the pleasures of it to you is not having it planned, of letting your imagination just take you.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, yes, it is. It is. So that's how I've written my – you know, with art, writing about art is different. You have a beginning, a middle, an end. You have the artist as a young artist, the artist mid-career, the mature artist. So you have his or her structure to work with. But I don't necessarily begin at the beginning either, you know?

I have to sit down and say what it is that the artist means to me before I get going. So if it's color for Ellsworth, I might start with something like that. If it's ballet for Cornell, you know, I might start – I'm just saying – I don't necessarily do that, but that's how my mind works.

I had no training, really, in – as in studio work or even in the graduate programs that really gave me that rigid program to follow. I was a bit of an outsider. I was – at the Institute, it was pretty conservative when I was there. The men all wore – the students, male students, all wore suits and ties.

I came in in my blue jeans and my boots, and I had literally three people to talk to. One was a Ph.D. student, Indian, who planted the seeds for [my interest in] India, who was studying – getting his Ph.D., and he was doing it on Malevich, [Piet] Mondrian, Malevich, I think, and maybe Kandinsky. And I worked with him because he wanted someone who spoke English to read his doctoral thesis to make sure only that he was clear in his presentation.

There were two people who were interested in contemporary art besides me. No one else there. So it was – you know, I sort of my made my way and developed my own system, so to speak, which was entirely intuitive.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, it's fascinating how it comes back to your life as a studio artist.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And to the artists who you're working with.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, I mean, it's been a great career. It's been a wonderful adventure. I got to travel. I got to meet some absolutely amazing artists. I got to see extraordinary works of art. I got to present them, these great works. I got to show artists the way they needed to be shown and to write about their works so that –

[Break.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Diane Waldman on June 9, 2010, in New York City on West 26th Street, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc four.

So please continue what you were saying.

MS. WALDMAN: Well, as I said, it's been a wonderful journey for me, and there are always ups and downs. There are always difficulties and disappointments, but I like to think that I made some contribution to the art world, and as a woman, in some ways, establish the fact that women could be curators and not just secretaries and not just researchers, that they were really just as good as men in finding art and writing about it and researching it and seeking out artists.

And I hope that my profession continues to grow and that curators really surround themselves with young people and bring them into the profession and work with them and give them opportunities, because it seems to me the more open people are in the museum profession, the better for the whole profession.

I really feel that the whole notion of individual identity is wonderful, but there should be a greater sense of collaboration and among curators. I think we would all certainly benefit from working with one another, but I think the museum profession is fabulous.

I hope that the financial problems that museums are undergoing at this point in time do not prevent museums from being forward-thinking and from being creative in the exhibitions that they present, and, you know, in the past, in my own life, the fact that I had so many barriers to overcome only made me that much more interested in working harder, seeking out more, learning more, exhibiting more. So whatever was negative about the situation when I entered the museum, I made into a positive.

MS. RICHARDS: What do you think was the most difficult barrier that you broke down?

MS. WALDMAN: Being a woman in the museum profession. When I would meet with these business types, who were very often the people we depended on to get grants, they saw me as this cute little thing to try and seduce. They didn't take me seriously. I wasn't the scholar, you know. I wasn't the curator. I was just some little trifle that happened to be working in a museum.

There was absolute absence of respect for women in the profession, in many instances, in the '60s. I don't know when it started to change. I think as the numbers grew. But basically, there were very few women, far between. Marcia Tucker at the Whitney was my – of my generation. All the directors were men. The boards were mostly men. I don't know that there were many women on the boards in most museums.

MS. RICHARDS: Except for some of the founders.

MS. WALDMAN: Except for some of the founders, yes, exactly. And so I think that was the biggest difficulty. The difficulty – it was not in working with art. The difficulty was overcoming the notion of being a woman, therefore you are less than. And I'm happy to say that that has changed a lot. Like the present staff at the Guggenheim is mostly women now, you know, and they're doing a terrific job. There are a lot of women at the Metropolitan Museum, a lot of women now at the Museum of Modern Art. There's a woman who's director at the Frick [Collection, New York, NY]. It's changed enormously.

But in my day, it was really very tough. And I think that because of my husband and my access to the art world, I was able to enter in a way where otherwise doors might have been closed to me, had I entered in a more – had I tried to enter the museum hierarchy in a more formal way.

I might still be doing research in some department at the Metropolitan Museum. So it's changed dramatically, I'm happy to say. And I think the situation for artists has certainly changed a lot. They're no longer sort of sitting on the sidelines in a gallery – in a gathering of artists in a studio. You know, that has changed –

MS. RICHARDS: Like that famous Irascibles painting [Nina Leen, The Irascibles, photograph, 1951] with one woman in the back [Hedda Sterne].

MS. WALDMAN: Exactly, one woman. That's what it was about, you know. And so to be a woman was to be very lonely in that profession. And you know, you had mentioned earlier - in terms of the detective stories - about the possibility of seeking out other people. And I've talked to you about women working – curators working more together, but that wasn't the case then. I mean, even the male curators didn't accept the few women that were in the profession.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever get involved in with AAM [American Association of Museums] and the Curators' Committee at the AAM?

MS. WALDMAN: No, I never did. It's for the reason that you mentioned – I was working 24/7. I never had time for committees.

MS. RICHARDS: Or the International Council [of Museums], ICOM?

MS. WALDMAN: No, I'm a member, but I never really sat on committees.

MS. RICHARDS: I mention it because if one has the time to be part of these organizations, it puts you in touch with your colleagues from other institutions, and then you have someone to commiserate with, if nothing else.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes, yes. But I didn't – it was available then. I didn't avail myself of the opportunity, you know? I think that, in part because the museum was so European-oriented, I had very easy access to people in Europe, and I could talk with them. I think the difficulty was more about not having enough time to spend to seek out relationships in New York, and it was encouraged, particularly. You know, each museum sort of was very careful about –

MS. RICHARDS: Competitive.

MS. WALDMAN: – its own turf, yes. So it didn't make it easy for people to get together. Everything was sort of held very close to the chest. You didn't dare tell someone what your exhibition program was. You were supposed to find out what theirs was – [laughs] – in order to see what you could do to compete with them, or whether you were –

MS. RICHARDS: Was that in the early years or just when fund-raising became such an issue?

MS. WALDMAN: A bit of both, a bit of both. More as fund-raising became an issue, because everyone was seeking out the same sources of income.

MS. RICHARDS: Over the years that you were at the Guggenheim, you talked about the change from being able to walk into the galleries and into any museum and have very few people there, to a very crowded situation, even in '96, and now even more so.

MS. WALDMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: What did that – did that have an impact on the way you approached doing exhibitions or the kinds of shows you planned?

MS. WALDMAN: No, not at all. But I – the only thing I wonder is, as a visitor to an exhibition, in situations where it's so crowded, whether you really have the chance to – whether the visitor has a chance to stop and reflect and look. I have seen people going through museums like making a beeline – [laughs] – to get in and to get out.

I used to time people when I would go to the Museum of Modern Art, when they had the great Picasso show, to see how long people stayed in a gallery. Surveys have been done. I'm not unique in doing that. Maybe a minute per gallery?

MS. RICHARDS: It's so off-putting when you encounter a crowded gallery space. You almost give up the possibility of really enjoying the experience.

MS. WALDMAN: Very. Yes. But one of the ways to get around that, which most museums don't take advantage of, is to slow down the viewing process and not crowd paintings together.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, you mean by having fewer works.

MS. WALDMAN: Fewer works of art, greater spaces between the works of art, so that the paintings or objects don't run into one another. And that's why I mentioned to you early on that wonderful little, tiny few-inch-high Giacometti in a room by itself. That's to slow down the viewing experience, not to have 20 Giacomettis in a maze so that you look, and you're out.

I was recently in Madrid this past September, and I must say the museums in Madrid - the Reina Sofia, the Prado, and the Thyssen collection [Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum] - were all crowded, but no one was rushing through. The pace was quite leisurely, and it was a very heartwarming experience. And I noticed that the installations were not crowded.

There was enough room so that people could stand in front of Picasso's Guernica [1937] study it. You could wait, look at something else in another gallery. You'd still have access to see part of the Guernica, wait for this group to move, move up, study it, move on, move back, look at all the studies for Guernica.

They're doing something wonderful in Madrid right now, and I don't know, the city seems, art-wise, at least in the museums, to be really very much there. You know? It's become very dynamic, and it's crowded. It may not be as crowded as our museums are, but nonetheless, it's not quiet like it was at the Guggenheim years ago. There are plenty of people going through these museums.

So again, if I were to do a show, I would try to make the experience a slow one and leisurely one. So I probably would show fewer works than one would need in an exhibition if I were to do that. You have to adjust to the situation.

We created the crowds. Now we have to do something about the public to make sure they continue to look at art, not to look at someone else and have this – the other visitors, what they're wearing – [laughs] – and how much their handbags cost and how high the heels of their shoes are these days. We have to make sure that these people look at the art and not at the crowds. And that's not so easy, but it's a give-and-take situation.

So I'm hopeful for the future. I think New York has lost a little bit of its edge, but it's natural that places like London would develop. The Tate Modern is doing wonderful things. Madrid's doing wonderful things. It's exciting to travel and to have these experiences, and I've been very fortunate in being able to do that.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, thank you very much.

MS. WALDMAN: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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