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Oral history interview with Lowery Stokes Sims, 2010 July 15-22

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Lowery Stokes Sims on 2010 July 15 and 22. The interview took place in New York, NY, and was conducted by Judith Olch Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the the Elizabeth Murray Oral History of Women in the Visual Arts Project, funded by the A G Foundation.

Lowery Stokes Sims reviewed the transcript in 2020. Her corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards, interviewing Lowery Sims in New York City on July 15, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc one. Good morning.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Good morning.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I'd like to start by asking you to talk about your family background, as far back as you know or you want to talk about, and certainly including your grandparents, if you knew them, and your parents and then getting to where and when you were born.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, actually, I know a lot about my family because on my father's side, there was a family Bible that was kept. So we can, for sure, you know, start our knowledge of the family with my great-great-grandfather, who was Simon Sims, born in 1828, and he lived to be 108. So that meant he was alive when my father was young.

And he then, his son Isaac [ph], I think—he had several sons—but Isaac was my great-grandfather. And then, his son Ben was my father's father, and he was married to Rachel [ph] Lowery. So it was Ben Sims marrying Rachel Lowery. And that's where I get my first name.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where did your family live?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: All right, the—according to what we know from the family, that Simon Sims was probably born on a plantation in Holly Springs, MI. Some of—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is Holly Springs two words?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, I think it is. And I've never figured out how they got to Humboldt, TN, but, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Humboldt?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Humboldt—H-U-M-B-O-L-D-T—after the explorer. But that's where my grandfather, when I was growing up, had a farm. And that's the farm that my father grew up on.

So I'm never sure how they got from Holly Springs. But Simon was probably freed after the Civil War and got there—and I never sort of picked up that part. So, anyway, we know the Simses, you know, fairly well, and certainly I knew my grandfather and grandmother growing up. They died—my grandfather must have died when I was about 20, and my grandmother a little later, maybe when I was about 30.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's Ben?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Ben, yes. And we used to see them—we didn't see them often—but they came to New York [NY] every couple of years, and then we went down to the farm every couple of years. So we kind of grew up there and in the same town my father's oldest sister lived with her foster children. And then he had another sister, Aquila [ph], who married a minister, Perry Henderson [ph], and they lived in Dayton, OH. And they're both dead now, but my cousin—who's about my age, Perry Jr.—is still a minister at the Baptist Church where his father was pastor.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What kind of farm was it?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I think it was kind of a general farm. It was about 200 acres, so they did a lot of crop rotation. And I think when we were kids, we were more, you know, engrossed in the animals rather than the

produce—[laughs]—the cows and the chickens, you know.

And my grandmother raised the chickens and sold them. And there's a, you know, funny family story of my sister sharing a cookie with a chicken that ended up on the dinner table—[laughs]—and how she was traumatized by, you know, that kind of fact. But you know, like I remember seeing my grandmother just grab a chicken and wring its neck, and then bring it in and pluck it, you know.

So—but we were like city kids, you know, and coming down to, you know, to the farms. But—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So your grandfather, Ben, and his wife, Rachel—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —ran the farm.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Ran the farm.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was what they did. And your—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: That's what they did. And then the farm next to his was his brother—and I'm going to forget his name now—it's terrible, his—you know, how you're forgetting these names, because they haven't talked to them. Henry, his brother—his cousin Henry—was it his brother or his—brother Henry and his wife—oh, jeez, I'm going to remember their names, but the first cousins who were Howard, Julius, Henry Hugh and—I'm going to forget the youngest one; he's the only one who's still alive—I'll sort of remember these names. These were cousins that we used to see. They all, after the Second World War, left farming and went to the city, and all those four brothers, except for Henry Hugh, who went to Pulaski, TN. There was another brother Julius who died early on—[inaudible, cross talk]—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Those are your father's first cousins—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: —first cousins. They were all in Cleveland, so we kind of knew those cousins also because we would see them every so often; they'd come to New York. So that's, you know, essentially the sort of Sims half.

The Lowery half, we have—[laughs]—it's really kind of—it's sort of like growing in kind of interest because their origins always seemed a little shrouded in mystery.

My father used to talk about—there were—I think there were three sisters, and they supposedly were from eastern Tennessee. And when I grew up, I realized that there were three different Tennessees. So if, you know, my family was in west Tennessee, near Memphis, and then there's middle Tennessee, and then there's east Tennessee. So there's no connection necessarily between the Tennessees because it's a long skinny state going from east to west. Anyway, they were supposed to be from Saltillo, TN.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you spell that?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I think it's S-A-L-T-I-L-L-O. And they obviously—you know, like trying to figure out the sort of racial mixtures in my family. I mean, clearly on my father's father's side, Ben's side, there was white and black. And there seemed to be the same with my grandmother.

But as I've grown older, there were just little kinds of clues that have led—that there probably was some Native American blood. But it's a very kind of interesting story because the Lowery name is very prevalent among the Lumbee Indians who are now based in North Carolina.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What do you—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: L-U-M-B-E-E. And they're sort of named for a river. And they're state recognized, but federally recognized, and from the research that I only did more recently, it's seems as though that this was like an Indian tribe that really married on—early, early on—with white and Africans, you know, from the early settlements in the 17th century.

So the name comes down—there's another branch of the name that's L-O-W-R-I-E, who are well known brigands and thieves—[laughs]—according to, you know, the research I've done.

But the Lowery name was in a census in states like Virginia—because, you know, it's North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia—you know, as early as the late 18th century, like 1790. How that would relate to us, we haven't, you know, figured out. So I sort of really, you know, like sort of came to that, and it wasn't till recently—my father's been dead a while—that my stepmother revealed that he let on to her that his mother was Indian.

[Laughs.] I said, "He never said that to us."

But, you know, certainly they—you know, like when you look at my aunts—my father's oldest sister—I mean, you looked at her features and, I mean, it clearly looks something—it wasn't African, it wasn't white—I mean, there was a kind of character to it that was, you know, like you could have characterized as Native American. So that's, you know, sort of like the colorful side of the Lowerys.

Now, on my mother's side, our family was from Virginia, two counties in Virginia. I think it's—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was your grandmother's maiden name?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Okay. The grandmother's maiden name was Stokes, so that's where my middle name comes from. And she married Arthur Banks, who was from the next county over.

But when you go to Prince Edward County, as we did a couple years ago, there are histories of Prince Edward County, and you can sort of figure out that there was a—I think a Robert Stokes, who was sort of like "the white man"—who's sort of, like, is the progeny for the family. And my mother's done a lot of research on that family. And she has now cousins that are descended from her mother's generation—there were like 32 kids or something. And one of the kids, Lester, has had kids that come down. So that if I'm fifth generation, from his line comes the eighth generation; so there's two more generations after me.

So these Stokeses—again, in the way that race is told, it's kind of very murky—but at some point, the family owned a lot of acreage around Farmville, Virginia. And in Farmville, Virginia, there's actually a road named after the family called Stokes Road. It's all been sold off since because, like many of my grandparents' and parent's generations after, you know, a while they didn't want to be farmers, they wanted to be professionals. So they sold off the land, and I remember going to see the land. You know, my cousins would drive me around, and jeez—we just didn't have land, we had, like, vistas—I mean, it's beautiful. So there was, like, countryside.

We have—I don't know if she's done that much with her father, Arthur Banks, but he was a—both he and my mother's mother were college graduates. She graduated from Hampton University, and I don't know where he got his pharmaceutical degree, but my grandfather—my maternal grandfather—was a pharmacist, and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where did he practice?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: In Cleveland, OH.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So it wasn't segregated? He was the pharmacist.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: He was a pharmacist. And the thing is, is that my mother's parents split up when she was young, and he moved—because by that time my mother had—they'd come to New Jersey, and then they split up, and then my mother came to New York. And then my mother grew up, during the Depression, in New York. But she was supported—she and her brother were supported mostly by her mother.

So it's really kind of interesting because I remember, you know, meeting my grandfather before he died; I didn't see much of him. My mother was—didn't see that much of him either and so, you know, a lot of this is sort of, like, you know, some family history.

But my mother's brother went to Johns Hopkins University where I later got my degree, and I think he was the second African-American to get his doctorate at Johns Hopkins in political science. And then he taught in Atlanta and in the black colleges there—Atlanta University, Morehouse—and then probably, if I remember, in the late '60s, got an appointment as president of Hartford Community College. So he moved up there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Hartford?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Community College.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Connecticut?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, Hartford, CT. So, he had two sons—my cousins Arthur and David—and those were sort of the two cousins we saw the most, you know, when my brother and sister and I were coming up. So my mother and father met in New York in the USO—[laughs]—during the war. He went off—he was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How—what brought your father to New York?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Just the army. He had—he was drafted fairly late in the war because he was older, and he was the only son. So he never really saw any action, but he was part of the occupation troops in Okinawa after the bomb was dropped.

So he came back to New York, and then he and my mother went to Washington [DC], where he studied architecture on the GI Bill. He already had a degree, I think in English, and he had taught English—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So he left the farm, went to college—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Went to college, yes—all his—he—all his—he had three sisters, he and his three sisters all went to college, Lane College in Tennessee. I think they all went there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You said they weren't actually the first generation to go to college because your grandfather—your—on your mother's side—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, on my mother's side—I don't think my grandmother—I don't think my father's father went to college but—[inaudible, cross talk]—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was that remarkable in that community that this farming family sent all their children to college? That they all had the ambition and the focus to do that?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I don't think it was—by the time my father went to school, I don't think it was unusual. I think that, after the Civil War, there was this kind of sense in the black community at large that, you know, the kids would do better and, you know, education was really kind of a very strong focus, you know, so I don't think it was unusual. But the fact that they, you know, like, were able to move and disperse. You know, my father, after he finished his second degree in architecture, he came to New York and started getting jobs in architecture firms, which was still—it was kind of interesting because I've talked to younger African-Americans who are architects and it's still, you know, kind of dicey getting jobs.

And my father never—he studied for and took the whatever architectural test there was—he never passed, and one suspects there was some politics, because my father was really kind of smart. But, you know, like he was able to get a job in New York after the World—First World War because there was a lot of federal money going into buildings. So it was almost like an early phase of the sort of affirmative action and minority hiring that came, you know, like much later in the '70s, that sort of got—[inaudible, cross talk].

JUDITH RICHARDS: You mean after the Second World War?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: After the Second—this would have been in the early '50s. And I was born in Washington when—[inaudible, cross talk]—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So—sorry—your parents met at the USO?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: USO—he went off to Japan, came back, they got married in Washington, I think.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what was your mother doing in New York? I mean—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Now my mother is a totally fascinating creature. Because her mother, despite her degrees, could not get any other job but domestic jobs. So all of her—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What were her—what were her degrees in?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: It was sort of English and teaching. And so she—but she raised my mother, you know, with a sense of, you know, having culture in her life.

So my mother grew up in a number of, I guess, rooming houses and different residences. But her mother would not let her go to work when she got to be a teenager, where many young teenage kids would be—particularly girls, would be jobbed out.

So she—[laughs]—she always says, though, she kind of lived like a princess in poverty. And she went to several schools in Harlem, I can't remember which ones now, but she did go to Julia Richman high school. And then she went to Brooklyn College, where she majored in biology. And then she later, before she met my father, actually got a job in the lab at Mount Sinai Hospital. And she thinks she might have been the first African-American to sort of get a job that way.

But you know, it's interesting because, you know, like, by the time that we got to the '70s with affirmative action there was a lot of emphasis on who's the first this, who's the first that. But you know, in my parent's generation I just get a sense that they were just pursuing their jobs and following, they weren't sort of keeping those kinds of statistics.

They were just, you know, like, sort of people who had passion for what they did. My father certainly loved architecture, and, you know, I learned a lot when I was coming up through grammar school and high school from—you know, I used to read his architecture books, we used to look at architecture. My parents took us to museums. We went to, you know, the symphony, to ballet. We had to have a library card. I mean, we were really encouraged to really pursue culture.

So it's kind of—[laughs]—it's not a mystery why we all ended up, you know, sort of in the cultural fields. My sister took classical ballet and fought her way through, danced in Europe. She first left the school on Long Island, had a scholarship at the Harkness. When she got out of high school they sort of said, "Well you should—need to go to the Dance Institute of Harlem." She said, "No." Went to Canada and then to Switzerland and Germany, came back to New York, danced with the Eglevsky company for three years.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sorry, the name of that company?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Eglevsky. He used to be one of the smaller companies that was—ballet companies. I forget his first name, was it Andre? Was it—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was—what is your sister's name?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Anne. Anne Benna Sims. And then—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You said Bennett?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Benna, B-E-N-N-A. She was named for my grandfather, Ben. And she then got a job with ABT [American Ballet Theatre], and danced with ABT for three years, and then went off to the Cleveland ballet. And then, I guess by this time she's in her late 20's, and at that point decided to quit.

And over the last, I guess since about 1980 so it's almost 30 years, really worked her way into the costume world. And worked for several costume firms in New York, most prominently I think was Parsons and Meares that was doing the—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Parsons and what?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Meares, M-E-A-R-S, I suspect. They were doing the costumes for *Cats* when *Cats* was first getting together and she got a job knitting, you know, the legwarmers and the sort of big costumes, you know, for *Cats*. And that, she did that for a long time and then she worked in other, you know, costume companies. I forget the one that the Brizzi sisters, whatever it was called, when I think about it—

JUDITH RICHARDS: The what sisters?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: B-R-I-Z-Z-I, just two Brizzi sisters that took her in. I forget what their company was called. But, you know, she gradually, you know, got into—you know, like, working with designers working with costumers, working—she learned millinery. You know, worked with different projects. And it was on one of those projects she met people from Disney in Orlando.

And I guess sort of after 10 years, from like about 1980 to 1989- '90, she was thinking about going back to Europe and working. And she had—her former ballet master had started a company up in France. And so she said, "Well, Alfonso why don't I just, you know, design your costumes?" And they—she had gone over—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you remember Alfonso's last name?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Cata, C-A-T-A. And the name of the company was the Ballet du Nord. And he had been her director when she was in Geneva, and they stayed friends. And so she went over and worked on costumes. When the company came over here she road managed, you know, their trip. And then he fell ill, and the company in France invited her to come teach, and then he subsequently died.

But in the meanwhile she had gotten word that Euro Disney was hiring people. She knew that they were hiring mostly Europeans, because it was all part of the European Union, but through her contacts with Disney she sent a letter. [Laughs.] Somehow the letter got from Orlando to Anaheim to Paris. And literally two or three days before she was leaving for Europe to go teach she got a letter from Disney saying, "Come talk to us."

So when she got there she used the job of working with the Ballet du Nord to get her working papers and then in, I guess around April of 1991, started working for Disney. They opened in 1992 and she's been there ever since. And she's done things as varied as their costumes, she was in charge of makeup, you know, the makeup crew. And more recently has been involved in what they call global sourcing, which is finding ways to get products produced cheaply and, you know, dealing with customs and tariffs, you know, things like that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sounds like you're close to her.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yeah, no, no, we're very, very, very, very close. My brother was—[laughs]—kind of, like, the science genius, he's in the—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where are you placed in the family?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I'm the oldest; my brother's in the middle and my sister's the youngest. So my brother—[laughs]—my siblings are just—[laughs]—you know, much more fascinating than me. My brother was kind of like a science genius when he was in high school. And he did a—when he was in undergrad—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Now, let me just understand where you were living. You said you were born in Washington.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Washington. Okay, we moved—when I was two we moved back up to New York, we lived in Manhattan and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So after the war your parents were in Washington briefly.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: We were in Washington for four years while my father worked on his degree. Then we moved to New York when I was around two.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Quonset hut up in the Bronx. [Laughs.] And then we moved to Harlem River Houses when they first opened. And we stayed there until I was six, and in the meanwhile my brother and sister were born. And then when I was six and my brother was four and my sister was two we moved out to Queens. And that's where—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What part of Queens?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: What they call Kew Gardens. And we all went to Catholic school. We went to Bishop—St. Nicholas of Tolentine Elementary School.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sorry, St. Nicholas what?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Of Tolentine. T-O-L—[laughs]—E-T-I-N-E. And then my brother went to Archbishop Molloy High School and then my sister and I went to Bishop Reilly High School. And then my sister went off to dance, and my brother went to Hamilton College where he finally graduated, upstate New York. And I went to Queens College.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay, back to your brother.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Okay. So my brother, I think when he was about in the eighth grade he won a national science prize for a weather station that was then featured in *Time* weather books—magazine used to do these series of books on things and so his was on the weather.

And then he went to high school and got more involved in—[laughs]—acting. And sort of went to college and sort of, you know, got through college. Majoring in English and doing some acting, but didn't know what he would really do. And he sort of left school and with a buddy of his decided that they would start building houses.

And he had always done building with my father. And my father was always kind of like this enigma because when he was in Tennessee and teaching, on the off-seasons when he wasn't teaching and when my grandfather wasn't farming, when they were turning over something, they would build houses. So my father was a builder as well as an architect. Which confused people who had, like, very strict ideas about, you know, blue-collar—[laughs]—and white-collar work.

So my brother took the route of building houses and he worked upstate New York around sort of the Kingston-Hamilton area, then moved over to Ithaca. And then the same friend, they went to down to Arizona, built a couple of solar heated houses, and then I think hung out for a minute with Paolo Soleri.

And then he moved to San Francisco where he had a construction firm for, I guess, over 20 years. And then about 12 years ago sold his tools and took the exam and became a building inspector. And that's what he's been doing ever since.

But still, you know, like, kind of creative. He's taken up—[laughs]—photography. And goes on these fabulous trips where he does that—so, you know, like there's always been this kind of—I was the person who drew, you know, in high school. I did a lot of fine arts. And found art history when I went to Queens College.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Let me go back to your earlier years. So you were living in Queens. Was there something that was your favorite subject when you were in elementary school?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I had several. I liked history a lot, and art of course. And I liked English and I got very involved in writing and journalism through grammar school and into high school. So when I got to Queens College looking for a major, that was a great way to sort of combine all those things. Even though I had done a lot of studio art, I didn't think I really had the chops to be a studio artist.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you have any particularly important teachers in high school who supported your interests?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, Sister Claire Vincent [ph] who was the art teacher.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sorry, the name?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Sister Claire Vincent. She was especially important in terms of art.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You said that you visited museums.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, you know, the family, you know, that's what we did. [Laughs.] We went to museums and historical sites and, you know, things like that. And later when my parents said, "Oh, we don't know why you didn't become doctors and dentists and lawyers," I said, "You didn't take us to lawyer's officers, dentists—[laughs]—offices or doctor's offices, Mom, you kept taking us to museums and symphonies and, you know, things like that." So, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you do anything particularly on a regular basis in the summer?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I'm trying to think. Well, we did a lot of—you know like, before we were old enough to sort of have, you know, the first high school jobs we did, yes, we took a lot of family trips together. And, I don't know, my parents always found ways to keep us busy, you know, doing something.

JUDITH RICHARDS: They were very industrious themselves.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: [Laughs.] Yes. And then we were, you know like, all involved in scouting. And my mother was, you know, like, both a den mother and a sort of Girl Scout leader. So scouting I think took a big part of our lives, you know, at a certain point also.

But I don't know about, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you go to camp, summer camp? Scout camp?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, my brother had better luck with that. With me with summer camp I used to go for weekends because I was asthmatic, you know, and tend—I have environmental allergies so I get out in—[laughs]—nature and, you know, have an episode or something. There were always these kind of dramatic rescues. [They laugh.]

As I got older I sort of realized, you know, like different kinds of strategies. Like I would get up in the morning and build the fire because the heat would draw, you know, the dampness out, you know, it was always—you know like, when you went camping it was always the cool dampness that would sort of aggravate my asthma. But—so I think tried to go for a week once—[laughs]—and I think lasted a couple of days.

But I did enough camping, I mean, I still could, you know, build a fire from absolutely nothing and do a bonfire, I'm very good at that. You know, so I liked camping, I loved nature. My mother think's its totally hysterical because I love nature, I love being out in nature but, you know, now I sort of manage my allergies. You know, with my allergies I take—you know, give myself shots and, you know, use inhalers and stuff.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: It's kind of funny because I hate the city, I love being out of doors but I'm very allergic to everything out there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So I guess you needed warm, dry, southwest—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Warm, dry. Yes, I probably should have—[laughs]—we should have moved. We always used to joke, "Maybe I should move to Arizona." But then I found out that they were doing so much planting in Arizona that everybody's getting allergies, you know. [Laughs.] And when I get allergies people go, "I have allergies."

I go, "You're not supposed to have allergies, it's supposed to be the desert," you know. So—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right. How did you pick Queens College?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well. [Laughs.] I think my—since my mother had gone to Brooklyn College and my parents were middle class and didn't have a whole lot of money, they essentially told us that we had to keep up our grades to get into Queens College, because this was the days before open admissions. So you had to have a certain grade point average to get into the city colleges.

And they said—[laughs]—if they were going to pay for anybody they'd pay for my brother. A little slightly sexist but it was the times, it was the '50s and '60s, what do you want? You know. So the irony is that, you know, I went to Queens College. Spent a brief time in graduate school at Johns Hopkins, I got a fellowship there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you were at Queens College, what were your major areas of study?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Art history. I found art history.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you—did you know from the very beginning that that was going to be—[inaudible, cross talk]?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, I didn't know it existed until I got to college. We had to take art survey courses and there was a choice of taking a one-semester or two-semester survey, so I opted for the two-semester survey. I said, "Oh, you can major in this stuff?" [Laughs.] And so, I sort of—really within my freshman year, I sort of—[inaudible, cross talk].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you have any sense of what kind of job you could get?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I think at that point I'd thought I'd do the standard thing of going through school getting a doctorate, and then becoming a professor in school.

And I sort of, even though I went to museums a lot when I was 16—I mean, besides my parents taking me—when I was 16 I got a job at Woolworth's, and with my first paycheck, I took out a membership at the Metropolitan Museum. [Laughs.] I was a weird kid. And so, through that membership—you know, you get invited to openings at the museum and stuff. And so I would be I'd schlep in from Queens, and if I couldn't get a current boyfriend to sort of go with me to openings, my father would meet me. And—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you feel about the—obviously, you loved the Metropolitan. You used that precious income for the membership. I imagine there weren't too many African-American—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Uh-uh. [Negative.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: —visitors, members, staff.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, I think—I didn't sort of focus on that. I just focused on what I was interested in. It didn't, you know—all those kinds of things were—you know, my parents never made a big deal about it. My parents used to tell us we could do anything we wanted. And then I think it was later, when you got out into the world, you would meet some people who would sort of say, well, maybe you can't do what you want. And then we'd go, "Oh yeah? Watch us," you know.

So I guess I kind of knew it, but, you know, I went to Catholic schools my entire life, so I really grew up in a very white environment. And then I—you know, I had my black experiences when we went back to Tennessee, and I'd meet my cousins, and, you know, we'd go to Catholic church on Sundays, and then we'd spend the afternoon in the Baptist churches. So I got a kind of balanced, you know, point of view. I had a lot of friends who was—I remember one of my closest friends who I've sort of reestablished contact with was Joan Kaufman, whose mother was a Holocaust survivor, and I used to go to Seders.

So you know, I—you know, because I grew up in a family—my father's family was Baptist, my mother was Episcopalian but she was raised Catholic—I sort of—even though we went to Catholic school, which, you know—and we went during the period of Vatican II when there were a lot of changes and opening up of the church, and a kind of liberalization in the church that of course, you know, like, since then, you know, the church has tried to sort of snap back on to.

So I grew up in—even though I was raised Catholic, I grew up in an era of Catholicism that was much more open, to a certain extent, to alternative practices, to political engagement, and that type of thing. And I grew up in a family where—and a neighborhood where there was a lot of stuff going on.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What kind of stuff?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, I mean, like—you know, the neighborhood I grew up, we had people from Dominican Republic, from Mexico, from Pakistan, we had Polish people, we had Puerto Ricans, and we all played together, you know? And so you got a taste for, like, different cultures, different foods and—you know, so it was like—it's never been a big deal, as far as—[inaudible, cross talk].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think it was important to your parents that you not live in a black neighborhood?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, actually I think—you know, the interesting thing about the little neighborhood that we moved into was that blacks were some of the first to move into the area. And in fact, there were some houses that were built by black contractors in the '20s and '30s.

And my stepmother, who lives about six blocks from, you know, my mother's house where I grew up, she grew up in Harlem also. She was originally from Trinidad, but she remembers coming over to that area of Flushing, Kew Gardens, in the summer to summer retreats. And my mother went—we moved into that neighborhood because of a woman that my mother knew from her work in hospitals and labs who lived down the street.

So our going there was because of black people, and it just happened that the neighborhood was very—that it—you know, I mean, it was literally an area of maybe 10 square blocks. You can go either side of Parsons Boulevard, Union Turnpike, Jewel Avenue, and 164th Street, which is the area I'm sort of really defining, and you can find that the neighborhoods tend to be a little more segregated. You know, like, I mean, people clumped together in groups. But where we were, it was a kind of odd little sort of corner of the world, you know?

And, you know, there was a very active civic association, so they used to meet in different people's houses and deal with civic—or as we used to have big barbecue on the Fourth of July in one of the vacant lots.

So there was, you know, a lot of stuff. I mean, my mother had rules that we couldn't play in the playgrounds, so we had bring all our friends home and things like that. So, you know, like, we used to, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was the playgrounds dangerous?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, no,—she just thought you could get in trouble, you know, in a playground in—I think it's because it wasn't within her eyesight. [Laughs.]

So we used to play. I mean, in one of my—funny stories my mother tells is, we were playing—I guess we must have been playing cowboys and Indians and she came out and found me tied to a tree, and everybody's dancing around the tree. My mother says, what are you all doing? And Raffi Mohammed, whose mother was Mexican and his father was Pakistani said, "We're playing cowboys and Indians, and Lowery is the captive white girl." [They laugh.]

So, you know, just—you know, we—I mean, we just—you know, it was—I mean, we knew who we were. I mean, we weren't, you know—I didn't think I was white, you know? You know, my parents did a lot of reinforcement about race and, you know, that type of thing, and we knew our families, but, we just, kind of, like, played it off, in different kinds of ways, because we were just, like, into our thing.

I mean, I don't remember the larger world really touching us until high school. And when I was a freshman in high school, that's when Kennedy was assassinated. And that's really the first time that I had a sense—I mean, we used to watch news on TV and we were aware of the civil rights movement and the struggles in the South, and sort of, you know, the brutality against blacks who were trying to sort of open up things.

But we went south too, and so we also knew—because my father's family had a certain amount of stature, we knew we had to be careful to behave in a certain way, but we also saw white people who, you know, were not deferential but sort of respected, you know, parents. And when we drove down to Tennessee—I mean, we flew one time, we took the train a couple of times—you could sort of see the changes, you know, like in the train and the positions in the cars and stuff. And when we drove down, my father would be very careful. If we needed to go to the bathroom, he would make sure he bought gas and things. So, you know, they could—we had a sense of it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But you were aware of the segregated society?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: You're aware of the segregated society, but I didn't live in it every day, you know, to a certain extent. And up here in New York, and—you know, like, our parents just really encouraged us to be very involved in our own thing, but I think we had a very strong sense of who and what we are and what our background was, the history of our family, what slavery was all about, where we were in the kind of continuum of black progress. I mean, that was very much a part of our growing up.

But, you know, but—we did kind of live in this kind of bubble, you know, where we just did what we wanted to do.

And then—I think by the time you get to high school, then, you know, sort of the realities of life, the '60s—because I went to high school in '62, so it was the end of my freshman year that Kennedy was assassinated. And then, right after that, it was Malcolm X, Martin Luther King who got killed [ph].

JUDITH RICHARDS: I didn't ask you exactly when you were born, what was your birth date?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Nineteen forty-nine.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And the date exactly?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: February thirteenth.

So, you know, that's—you know, I guess we just sort of—I think because we had a strong family unit, and we had a strong network of friends and neighbors, you know, we could observe a lot of different things. We could observe how the West Indian blacks interacted with the blacks from the South, you know? [Laughs.] You know, you sort of learn the foibles of different people, and you go, oh, okay, and then you sort of, you know, basically move on.

But the '60s, I felt, was a really interesting, challenging decade for me personally. You know, I mean, I remember reading *The Feminine Mystique* [Betty Friedan; New York, W.W. Norton: 1963] when it first came out. I kept thinking that it would sort of ameliorate relationships between men and women, because women could take their responsibility in the workplace, and men wouldn't have to work so hard to—boy, was that dumb.

And then you'd sort of, you know, live through the extremes. I was aware of Martin Luther King versus Malcolm X versus Stokely Carmichael. So we knew all that stuff, because it was on the news, and when I got to college, you know, there was, you know, a kind of coalescing around that in the social life. I don't know if it was necessarily reflected in the courses, although when I was studying contemporary art history, I would ask why black artists weren't represented. And Robert Pincus-Witten, who became really a close friend and mentor, and I still consider like my second father—

JUDITH RICHARDS: With whom you studied at Queens?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes. I took my first course with him, and he saw me through my doctorate, and that was a total of maybe 20 years. Yeah. [Laughs.] And so—no, wait, it was more than that. [Laughs.] It's 30 years, because I went—I started in the summer of '66 in college, and I didn't get my doctorate until 1995. Robert was—[laughs]—sort of like the consistent, you know.

So, and then—you know, like, on campus, I was part of the students who started the Black Student Union. And then it was kind of interesting because there was a guy who was working on that—named Phil [ph] Luciano, who then—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sorry—his name?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: His name was Phil Luciano at the time, and then he found his calling working with the Young Lords of East Harlem, and he reverted back to Felipe Luciano. And he was a well-known newscaster for a while there in the '80s.

So, you know, like, you really sort of began to get a burgeoning sense of politics, race and gender. I mean, I used to hang out with the Black Student Union, then go hang out with the women's group. I never caught on with the Students for a Democratic Society much, but, you know, like, I realized that hanging out with the women's group was sort of mutually exclusive to hanging out with the Black Student Union, because what was expected of me as a black woman—[laughs]—was totally opposite of what I was expected of, you know, in the context of the women's group. But, you know, you just—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did that play out in terms of your growing dedication to art history and to the idea of being in the field and what goals you might have—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, I think I became, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: —as an academic or curator, in terms of the African-American responsibilities versus the women's?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well I think that, you know, like I sort of absorbed both. I sort of realized very soon that they were both neglected communities. And I don't know if I acted upon it so much when I was an undergraduate, but I was aware of the demonstrations that were happening at the Met and the Whitney.

Oh, and I'm forgetting the most important thing. When I was a sophomore in—by the time I was a sophomore at

Queens College, they had started the "SEEK Program," which was the open admissions remedial program. It still exists today. And I got a job teaching and tutoring in the program. And there I met Benny Andrews, who, of course, was an extraordinarily important political person. And Benny and I became friends. And so working with the SEEK [Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge] program—

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's an acronym—S-E-E-K?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yeah, I forget what is—it's something about searching, educating, something or other in knowledge. You can find it on the website of Queens, you know.

So, through that, what I was—what I was doing there was that, through that job, I was given an opportunity to both observe, through very dedicated teachers, and actually to sit in on courses that sort of amplified what I was learning in Queens College. I mean, I took my first course on black literature sitting in with Sam Floyd, who was teaching it for the SEEK program.

I'm going to forget her name—I have to sort of remember the name of the teacher. She was—God, I'm really ashamed of how I'm forgetting names. But she was a very dedicated leftist white woman who was teaching the basic art course, and it was all about African and black art. And I'll think of it in a minute, because we did sort of find each later.

And so that opened me up to, you know, African art. So I was getting this kind of—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why were you taking those?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Because I was interested. I give my—I was teaching and tutoring, so I'm sitting in on the classes because I have to tutor. And so, like, I'm also, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was this a kind of a work study while you were an undergraduate?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No. It was a basic job because at Queens College you didn't—if you had the grades you didn't pay any tuition. And I had everything—I was like, you know like, in gravy. I had a Regents scholarship. So every semester I get a big $134. And by the time I paid for, you know, I think your courses and fees were $34 a semester, I used to have a hundred bucks to play around with. And I used to—I remember one year I got contact lenses and—[they laugh]—you know. So this was just—this was a straight up job. You know. I had worked in the library, I had worked the slide library, and then I got this job, you know, teaching.

So it was a very, you know, looking back on it, it was a way in which my whole sort of sense of academic resources really expanded greatly to sort of, you know, learn about authors who were then either considered crackpots or on the margins of sort of canonized scholarship and things like that.

And it gave me a chance to, sort of, hang out with a, like, a greater number of, you know, black and Latino students and, to form, like a kind of a community that—and to sort of really, I think, get the germs of what my career in the art would be. And what my, I call it my mission, in the art would be.

Probably, you know, I would say, came there in undergraduate.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was that—you were in Queens; you got your B.A. in 1970. So '66—'70. Was this teaching in the "SEEK program" happening in the last year or in the whole time?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Last two years.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Last two.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: '68 through '70.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: And I graduated early. And through one of the teachers, Bill Sales, S-A-L-E-S, he hooked me up with his then-wife Joy who was working at the Brooklyn Museum. And—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Her name was also Sales?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Her name was Joy Sales, yeah. I think she's—died. Joy was working at the Brooklyn museum and they had gotten—somehow, I don't know how—Michael Kan, K-A-N—he says "Kan;" some of us say "Khan" [ph].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Michael—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: K-A-N. He was head of the African—I guess it was African/Native Americas/Oceanic section of the Brooklyn Museum at the time. He was Chinese but African art specialist. Go figure.

And he went on to Detroit and he was a very interesting character. So he hired me to work with Joy.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is this after you graduated?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, this is like from—yes, I graduated February of '70, so this is between February and June because June I was going to go to Europe for the summer and then start graduate school in September.

So I'm schlepping out to Brooklyn—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You had already applied to, and been accepted at—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: At Johns Hopkins. And so—well, they came and recruited me because then they were recruiting—

JUDITH RICHARDS: I was going to say, how did you pick?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: They were—you know, like—well, it was interesting. They were going to recruit me, they recruited me, and I was attracted to it because at the time—so I was recruited by Johns Hopkins, who—and I was put on their radar screen by my friend Leslie King-Hammond who has been—we've been friends since Girl Scouts. And Leslie was at Queens College, but she went to night school because she worked in the day, and she was in the fine arts department. And somehow they had—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You mean studio?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Studio, that's what I meant, studio department. So we used to see each other at the end of the day. You know, my day's finishing, her day's starting. And she went off to Baltimore a year ahead of me and she had been recruited by Hopkins. And I can't remember how she came on their radar, but you know, there used to be databanks—[laughs]—of students.

And she said, this is, you know, like really interesting, because at the time their doctoral program was very much like England's. You didn't have to take a number of courses; you were in residence for a certain number of time, you passed a certain number of exams, you decided on your topic and then you went off and did your dissertation.

Michael Brenson was there a few years ahead of me, Arlene Raven—that's when I first met Arlene, she was a little, ahead of us, like, also. So Leslie and I arrived and there was this kind of, like, strange anomaly: There were 30 people in art history—[laughs]—most of us were black. [Laughs, claps hands.] Which I think is a total hoot.

And so—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You weren't all from New York?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You were all from New York, the six of you?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, no, no. We—one was from New Orleans, one was from Jamaica. Our friend David Boxer who later then became director, he's now director emeritus of the National Gallery in Jamaica.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So they were doing terrific recruiting.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: It was kind of interesting, yeah. It was—you know, we just didn't think about it; we were just, like, living it. You just, you didn't analyze anything. It's so funny to think of, how the hell. And then I think there was a guy named Cedric [ph]; he was from—he might have been from the Baltimore area.

So let's see: me, Leslie [King-Hammond], Cedric [Ware], David [Boxer] and Raymond [Dobard]. Maybe it was just five of us.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Raymond?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yeah, Raymond Dobard who's teaching at Howard University.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Delbar [ph]?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Dobard, D-O-B-A-R-D.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was Cedric's last name? Sorry. [Laughs.]

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I want to say Cedric White, but that seems too easy, but it might be. I can find that out. [Laughs.] When I get this transcript I'll be calling, "Leslie, who was—" [Laughs.]

So before I get to Hopkins I graduate in February of '70. By some fluke I was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's based on grade point average, mostly.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Mostly, but it's other things too, because I didn't have the grade point average—[laughs]—given my grades in physics and stuff, I don't think—but one of the professors, I think it was William Clark [ph] sponsored me for it. I mean, I was stunned—[laughs]—because I had no idea.

But I went right off to work at Brooklyn. You know, what had happened was that—I don't know if Mike Kan had done it, but somebody got the idea that Merton Simpson, who is probably still one of the oldest and most venerable African-Americans who were dealers in African art—I mean he started back in the '40s, '50s. Merton Simpson had donated a group of African art objects that were meant to be taken out into the public—[laughs]—schools to talk to kids about African art.

So Joy Sales and I would pack this stuff up in a suitcase, get on the subway and go to whatever school called. I mean, that whole experience in itself was worth the Brooklyn. First of all, I'd gone to Catholic schools all my life—[laughs]—you know, I was not prepared for the chaos in the public schools. And secondly, I was not prepared for the total lack of any kind of black self-image on the part of black students.

For them Africa was Tarzan, whatever Tarzan's chimp's name was. Africans were monkeys. You definitely did not want to be like them. Went into these art rooms and they were filled with pictures of Ursula Andress—[laughs]—"She," and all this, you know, like, white imagery. And we're sort of trying to talk to these kids about African art and, you know, like these little African art sculptures with big bazooms and big schlongs and—[laughs]—I think today, you know, like the Christian right would probably have us up on, you know, moral charges—[They laugh].

And you're trying to sort of like—all right, how do I get through to this, like, little kid? I mean, we used everything. I mean, we tricked them, we lied to them, you know, we took every assumption that they had and we just tried to sort of destabilize it. Like when we showed, you know—so I said, "Well let's get slides of, you know, like, African children their age."

"Oh, look at them, they're all little monkeys." And they you hold a mirror up to them and they go, "Oh my God, they look just like me."

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Or they would make some things, statement like, "Well flat noses and big lips are ugly." So we put up a Yoruba Gelede mask, and I said, so that's ugly. "Yeah." And then you'd put a picture of a woman from the Sudan, who had thin lips, a thin nose, and was jet black with kinky hair. What about that? "Hmm."

You know, so it was constant. I mean, we had to sort of talk to them about how black people got here from Africa, and I remember one little kid said—

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's a real remedial course in African—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I said, "How did black people get here?" And they say, "By canoe?" And I said, "Did they want to come?" And they said, "Yeah." [They laugh.]

Like I said, they were all—and it was down to everything, like, if you showed them pictures of, say, the Masai with cows and talked about them getting milk. The kids had no idea where the milk in the supermarket came from. "Where does the milk come from the cow?" "Well, it comes in the carton out of the cow," and I said, "Wouldn't that hurt the cow?" [Laughs.]

It was just, you know, like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was this just at the public schools or at the Catholic schools too?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Just in the public schools. It was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Because there weren't too many black kids in the Catholic schools?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, I think he just wanted to do something for the public schools.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, I see.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: So I did that for six months. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: What about the teachers? Were they supporters of what you were doing, or—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, I think, you know, mostly we went to art classes and art teachers love anything you bring into the class. And most of them were white; they didn't know what the hell they were doing—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you were actually potentially with a group of kids who would be more open to this than—I mean, they were taking art class.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: You'd think. But they were drawing white images.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This must have been—this was a shock to you, that these kids were—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: It was a shock. And later when I was at the Met in community programs, I worked with Northside Center for Community Development for a while, which was started by Kenneth Clark. And I think I read a study that Kenneth Clark had done looking at little black girls interacting with black and white dolls and the preference they had for white dolls. And, you know, Whoopi Goldberg in her very, very, early, early, early standup would sort of talk about that. So, you know, I just sat down and went, "Okay, let's see now we deal—[laughs]—with this one."

Sure. So all along the way, you know, if I'd sort of look back on it, I guess the course of my life—[laughs]—was, you know, sort of being set by all these experiential situations that I was in where I realized that there was a lot to be done. You know, particularly in the visual arts. And I also, you know, began to sort of have a sense that the visual arts were, any kind of creative arts, were not on the forefront of black middle-class—what's the word I want?—menu of jobs to get into, sort of to achieve, you know?

And I think that stayed that way a long time, through the 1980s, because—like, I think of the number of interns who would come and work with me when I was at the Metropolitan Museum and, they had—it was kind of like this secret guilty pleasure that they had to do before they'd go out and get a real job. And I remember when Thelma was coming out of school, Thelma Golden, she had a job working with Richard Clarke, who is a former board member of the Studio Museum [in Harlem] and he was on the board at the Metropolitan Museum. He's a long-time collector of African-American art.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sorry, what was his name?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Richard Clarke, with an E. And he sent her to sort of talk to me because she wanted to work in the museums, and so essentially her father felt it was more productive for her to become a buyer at Bloomingdale's. So we engineered a meet at a fundraiser where I would come and present myself and Mr. Golden could see that there was a black woman who was working in the arts, working in museums who had, you know, clothing on—[laughs]—a roof over her head and, you know, a fulfilling life.

And—but I said to them, I said, "Thels [ph], you're not going to make any money on this. And you really have to understand that this job is about having a mission." And I remember once she got established in the—[laughs]—in the—at the Whitney, on one or more occasions she'd call me up and go, "God damn it, why did you fill my head with this mission nonsense?" I said, "Because that's what it is, Thelma. It's not about making money. It's not about—I mean, you're an art star, but it's not merely about being an art star because you can't be an art star unless you sort of drag a couple of people with you."

This is what the job's about. I mean, it's about—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What did you mean, "drag a couple people with you?"

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, you know, you have to sort of—I always believed in, you know—who's the whole one? You know, you learn something and, you know—learn one, teach one or something—I always believed that you bring people along with you. You just never go through your life by yourself.

So, I mean, that's part of—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You mean mentoring?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mentoring? Yeah. Mentoring and sharing. And sharing because I think that, you know, for a while there, you know, when I started at the Met and I was doing—started doing outside jobs and stuff, people would call me all the time. And then I kind of said, maybe you should call Kellie Jones, or maybe you should call Leslie King-Hammond. Maybe you should call other people.

And right now it's perfect. I mean, you know, I can sort of—you know, what I sort of see is the sort of culmination of my career. In the next couple of years I'm going to retire, I'm not going to do this until I'm 94. But I love the idea of mentoring because I've done pretty much—I've had a great career, I've done everything that I've wanted to do. I mean, you know, like I have my big global Africa show ["The Global Africa Project" [2010-11]] that's opening in November is maybe an unfulfilled thing, and maybe there's a Colescott book, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, we'll talk about that—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: We'll talk about that—

JUDITH RICHARDS: [Laughs.] We're still in 1972, I think.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I know, but I basically have had a terrific career, so I figure, you know like, it's incumbent on me. And also I was very much—I've been very much involved in my legacy. I don't have kids, but I need to feel that I have a legacy in the field. That, you know, some people who I've mentored are ready to take up the reins and, you know, move on.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Let me ask you, okay, so after this amazing experience teaching at these schools—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Okay, went to Europe for two months.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You went to Europe, what was that—how was that trip? Where did you go? How did you plan your itinerary?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: [Laughs.] Didn't. I mean you were supposed to just go over. I mean the biggest plan that I had is that I had a round-trip ticket on a charter plane and a tentative appointment to meet my friend Leslie Cohen who I had gone to undergraduate school with.

JUDITH RICHARDS: C-O-H-E-N?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: C-O-H-E-N. But then, was Leslie in school with me, or was she a friend—I don't know, but we had known each other. We were supposed to meet the first day I got there at the National Gallery overlooking Trafalgar Square.

So I take the plane over, and you know, it's like all the stuff you did. You took the plane, you took the train into town, at the train station you went to the kiosk, you found your—

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LOWERY STOKES SIMS: —hotel room. You went to the hotel, called bed and breakfast, you met other people, you figured out what you were going to do. Once I get over there, then I realize that I'm freaking terrified. And I don't know what I would've done if Leslie and I had not met each other. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was terrifying? Being alone?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Being alone, and to—and you know, try—I mean, it was kind of scary, you know? I mean, you know, I'm not the bravest person in the world.

And so we hooked up. And she was traveling with a bunch of girls and we went from London—did we go to—no, London, then we went to Italy. And then, at that point, the group started breaking up. And then Leslie and I met this, you know, American hippie, called himself Captain America, and we went with him to Greece.

We stayed a couple of days in Athens, and then we had to do the islands. So we went to Mykonos first, and we were supposed to stay there three days. And we met up with a group of kids from Scotland who were going to go on and hitchhike to Afghanistan. So it took us 11 days to decide whether or not we were going to do that, but we decided not to. I'm sorry I didn't.

And then we went back, and we decided to go to Samos. And in every place you went, there were, you know, like, ways that—you know, like all these hordes of college kids could go to American Express, sort of the town square, find somebody who spoke some English, found you a room. And we made great relations.

And then we got on a boat, headed for Istanbul, but only got as far as Izmir, Turkey with these two Turkish guys—two German guys. We were then sort of picked up by three Turkish guys who took the four of us in. And so we were the talk of the casbah—these two women with four men, ha ha. And after the German guys took off, the Turkish guys would not let us move around the city, except on ships. They would, you know, take [ph]—and one of them—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Because they felt you had to be accompanied for safety?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Oh, yes. Yes.

And—but when the—when the eight of us were—the seven of us were together—[laughs]—and we walked in downtown Izmir, people brought out their chairs to watch us. [Laughs.] You should imagine: Leslie is, like, there in this, you know, bare midriff and stuff; I'm, like, in this color—you know, all these colors, like, seven shades darker than I am; these tall German guys who wore white clothes that were always spotless, which you would never figure out how they did that; and these three old Turkish guys—I mean, we were a spectacle. We were a total spectacle. But, you know, again, you know, like, you just—in your thing, you know, just doing your thing.

So I guess—what did we do? I don't—we—somehow, Leslie and I—what did we do? Maybe we went back to Rome, and then flew to Amsterdam, because that was where we were going to catch the charter flight back home.

And we arrived in Amsterdam just in time for the premiere of the movie on Woodstock. [Laughs.] This is like the summer of '70. And I didn't go to Woodstock, she didn't go to Woodstock, so we said—we had picked up some Americans, we said, "Oh, let's go to Woodstock." So we're sitting there, and we're like this little enclave of Americans in this Dutch audience, and everything was, like, subtitled, so we would laugh two minutes before they laughed, you know, the whole thing. And we watched it.

And then I flew back home and went down to Baltimore to start graduate school.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you got to Baltimore, was your place to live established? Did you—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, because they had apartments. You were assigned an apartment.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So, it was this system as you described it of no structured classes.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Uh-uh. [Negative.] No. No.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Independent study. You're deciding what papers to write?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Kind of. [Unintelligible]—I'm sorry. Okay.

So what happens—that's where we meet David Boxer. So Leslie had been down there for a year. We meet David Boxer, the other folks, and—[laughs]—David Boxer is, like, nothing short of a genius. This man had come out of Kingston, Jamaica, where he had gotten a doctorate—not a doctorate. He had gone to Cornell, he had been a producer on the TV station down there, he was a concert pianist and a fine artist. We hated him. Oh, God. And just, you know, like, totally literate in everything.

And what happened was that David and I decided, on a lark, that we would take the comprehensive exam just to try it out, so that we could see what we were up against.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What test was that?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: This was the comprehensive exam. This was the exam you would take after you'd been in residence for a while that would jettison you to the next phase, where you probably would do your dissertation proposal, and then you'd be released into the world.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So what—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: We took it the first semester. Most people take it the third semester.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At which point you'd get your master's? Was there a point where you—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, here you'd get a master's.

JUDITH RICHARDS: After you pass this exam?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yeah, it was kind of weird, you know, with—at the time, the master's was kind of considered the dropout card, like they decided that you couldn't do it. I guess they gave you a master's along the way, but the master's was kind of like, hmmm, you know, like, the teachers looked at you and evaluated you and blah, blah, blah, blah. So I had to sort of—I later manipulated that system.

So anyway, David and I take the exam the first semester and we score the two highest marks, which threw everybody into a kind of quandary. And we didn't understand quite why.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It was a test of art history knowledge?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] From soup to nuts.

And if anything, I found, when I got to Hopkins, frankly, that I had had such an incredible education as an undergraduate that Hopkins was a breeze. There was nothing, no concept that I didn't know. Some of the teachers were better than others. You know, I was also—I guess in my feminist way—in our feminist way, Leslie and I were just two smartasses who didn't—you know, we didn't hesitate to take on something, you know, if we thought we disagreed or something like that.

And so—[laughs]—we said, "Oh, okay." So then I said, "All right, well, let's let it settle down and sort of do it." Along the way, I—you know, I took a lot of courses. [Inaudible, cross talk.]

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: So was there an impact of taking this test and passing it with flying colors and scoring so high? Did that affect your—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes. The teachers were, like, slightly intimidated, I think.

So we said, "Okay, fine, we'll just settle down, and we took our—and I took a lot of different courses. Penelope Mayo was teaching there at the time, and she was the Byzantine expert. And I really liked Byzantine art.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Is that Mayo, M-A-Y-O?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mayo, M-A-Y-O.

And then Phoebe Stanton, who was sort of a 19th century art, architecture art historian, was there. John White was head of the department. Did I take a course—I think I might've a taken a course with John White. And Richard Lanier, who taught abstract expressionism—he always jokes—[laughs]—that I gave him such as a hard time in that course. Mary goes, "You ruined teaching for him, Lowery"—I said, I did not. I just argued with him a lot.

So in a, like—I took courses for two years, and I also kind of thought that what I should do is have the number of course equivalents for a master's in case I want to transfer so I wouldn't have any problems. So I took the equivalent of 30 credits.

And sort of like the spring of—what would that have been? The spring of '72. And it was time to go.

I think—you know, I was watching people—I mean, they were taking ten years to do their dissertations and the—so I said, "Oh my God, you know, this is all very nice, but, you know—"

JUDITH RICHARDS: You had written a thesis by then, or you—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Ah. The story.

So, I said to them, I said, "Well, I think I'm going to leave. I'm going to take a master's, but I've taken 30 credits and I want to write a master's thesis." So you know what? That's how I manipulate the system.

So they said, "Okay, what do you want to write it on?" I said, "African architecture," because I think I had gone to Hopkins with the idea that I could do African art as a kind of independent study. It didn't really work out because there was nobody who could really guide me.

And I sort of filled in by introducing myself to Warren Robbins, who was then the director of the Museum of African Art in Washington. In the summer of '71, I sort of had a curatorial assistant position there. And I worked, you know—they sort of gave me my first taste in sort of day-to-day working as, you know, giving tours, doing research. And I sort of basically, you know, like, formulated the internship to sort of get what I wanted out of them. It was kind of amazing, you know, because it wasn't like a formal one that they would let me come, and they didn't need—they didn't need to pay me, because I had my fellowship, you know? I had actually not a fellowship from Hopkins which I could've had. I had my separate Ford Foundation fellowship because it was more money.

And so they said to me, well—oh, Creighton Gilbert did Renaissance, he was the Renaissance guy. And—so they said to me, "African architecture, that's not a topic. It's just, you know, branches and leaves." And I said, "Well, let me fool around with it and see what I can come up with."

And this is before—I think some—I think, like, right about this time, unbeknownst to them and me, Labelle Prussin was starting to sort of publish some of the newer articles on architecture in Africa in, you know, in a kind of art context. Because when I started doing research, I was looking at anthropology, cosmology, I was reading

Frobenius, you know, sort of really, sort of the old line sort of ethnographers. There wasn't really a kind of art, you know, focus on this stuff, and so I brought an art focus to it.

So I ended up with a 40-page master's thesis that divided it—I found it recently—and I started out with a basic description of types of materials and how they distribute themselves in Africa. Then I had a chapter on who was the architect in different contexts: Sometimes it was a woman, sometimes it was a man, sometimes it was specialized people, blah, blah, blah. And then I did one on sort of, like, the cosmological beliefs, you know, like, the Dogon village laid out like the human body, cases where, like—the importance of establishing the four corners of the village, you know, all that kind of stuff.

There's nothing in—[laughs]—this 40-page paper that all of sudden, they were—or there's nobody here qualified to read it, and what—would you tell me it was twigs and grass? I mean, you know. So they finally got their act together.

And I finished in time. I finished and completed all of the paperwork in time to be in the graduation program book. I did not go to the graduation—[laughs]—but there I was.

And so then—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And at that point—so you had had some experience working at the Brooklyn Museum?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: And the Museum for African Art.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right, so then you—what were you thinking about in terms of a career path?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: So a career path, I felt, was in museum education. So that same spring, while I'm torturing them about my master's thesis, in 1972, even at that point, they said, you'd have trouble getting a job in New York. So I said, "Okay, I'll look in the Baltimore-Washington area." Leslie and I had done a project at the Baltimore Museum of Art, and we had sort of worked in there, so I didn't think that they would be so open. So I went to the National Gallery and the Walters and—where else did—maybe the Corcoran.

And what I did was I sent out my resume and then I waited a week and then I showed up in person. I didn't know how you got a job, but I wasn't going to wait around. And so at the National Gallery, I met with Margaret Bouton, who was head of the education department. And she took it, like—the whole department's in there looking at us, and I had on my favorite black and white dress and my white gloves and my black, you know, hype, you know. So she said to me, "You have excellent resume, you have skills, but you have to take the civil service exam." And I said, "Okay," because I never hated that. I think I did okay on my SATs. My GREs, I just, you know, like, colored in randomly, because I knew that recommendations were more important. I'm never good on those standardized tests. I went, oh, jeez, standardized tests, here we go.

So I think I did 85, which is okay, but they took me over other candidates because I had passed two language exams at Hopkins—German and French. So I got an invitation to come and work at the National Gallery starting in September.

In the meanwhile I worked with Ellen Davis, who is an old professor of mine at Queens, in prepping her dissertation.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In Queens? You went—you living at home then in the summer?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, living at home. And I accompanied my sister over to Europe where she had gotten a job dancing with the Geneva Ballet Company. And one thing I didn't mention was that in my second year of Hopkins I also interviewed for a job at the Metropolitan Museum through a classmate of mine who was working there. And it was for high school programs.

And Philip Yenawine was the head of the department, and I came in and I talked to him, and he sort of said, well, it's all fine and good but I think I really want to hire an artist. So he hired Randy Williams. And Phil and I—[laughs]—still friends today and at some point I sort of said, "I am the success I am today because Philip Yenawine did not give me a job." [Laughs.] You know?

So I think I was on the radar for the next thing that happened in my life. I'm getting ready to pack up, go back to Washington and I get a call from the Metropolitan Museum of Art because they had my resume on file. Now, how do I tell the story of my getting into the Met?

Essentially what it was was they—the Met, in the wake of *Harlem on My Mind* [Allon Schoener; New York, Random House: 1969] which we all remember well, had started a Community Programs Department. There was a young African-American woman who had been hired where, I guess, in the best way you could say it, there wasn't a fit. So they had to let her go.

However, being sensitive to the fact that they might be accused of racism if they hired a white person—[laughs]—they were on a hunt for a blacker. [Laughs.] So, ta-da! So I didn't know this at the time. [Laughs.] So I came in and I interviewed with Harry Parker, who's still one of my favorite people in the world, and Susan Badder, who was head of the department. And so we sat and talked about what the job was and we talked about all the kinds of situations, and he sort of said to me, "Now, Lowery," he said "you know, if anything really happens or you suffer any slights or insults here at the museum, I hope that you feel comfortable coming to us before you go to the press or something."

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: So I said, "Oh, okay." And then I thought for a minute and I said, "And if I say anything that's inappropriate, you know, that's racist or anything like that, I hope you'll say something to me." [Laughs.] And he looked at me and I said, "What? You think black people can't be racist? " I mean—you know. [Laughs.] So there started my long, convoluted career at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And that was the program through which the museum was reaching out to the boroughs, to the institutions of the boroughs.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Exactly, exactly. So I fell into my assignment. There were lots of things they were doing. They were doing workshop programs, so they had a lot of—they had people to coordinate the workshop programs and they hired a lot of artists to sort of do the programs and then, you know, like, the community group would then come in and sort of see collections of the media they were working. So if they were doing ceramics, they'd come and look at Greek vases—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So your title was what there?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Assistant museum educator. So—and I sort of fell into two programs. One was called "Borough Exhibitions," where I worked with the newly emergent Bronx Museum and sort of worked with museum staff who were getting the Queens Museum together, and any other kind of community organizations who had the facilities to bring the resources of the Met to there. So we would organize exhibitions.

And that program had started before me; they had already had several—Irv [Irvine] MacManus, who was sort of then moving over into dealing with sort of like the Latino program, he and Bill Miller, who's now deceased, who was the first director of the Bronx Museum [of the Arts], and then went over to Newark.

You know, I say all these names and it's just—you know, Irv's still around, but there's so many people whose names you're saying, they died of AIDS. It's just, you know, the '80s were a tough, tough, tough decade.

They had done some things with the Bronx Museum which was then in the rotunda of the courthouse before they got their space on Grand Concourse. So I would sort of coordinate: I would sort of, you know, have a discussion with the organization and then, you know, like—essentially I would curate or co-curate—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Who was the director of the Bronx Museum when you were doing that?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I think—was Bill—either Bill was still there or maybe Luis Cancel had moved in.

JUDITH RICHARDS: There was a woman named Judith—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Oh, you know, you're right. Judith, you're right. You've got a good memory.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I was there.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Ah, no. What was Judith's last name?

JUDITH RICHARDS: I'd have it in my records somewhere.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes. Oh God, I can't remember.

JUDITH RICHARDS: A kind of English name or an M-C [ph] name.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, right. Right, and then Luis came after her.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, there was a man in between.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, see, I'm forgetting all this. Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Duwack [ph].

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Oh yeah. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: And then Luis.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Then Luis, yes. Judith—oh God, it's on the tip of my tongue. She went out to Hofstra [Hofstra University]. We'll think of it.

So I was doing that. And then at some point we were contacted by the—I guess, it was the Association of Senior Centers. And they were interested in a program, programs for senior centers. You know what I mean, the senior centers by then were just, I mean—you know, not even beginning to touch the kind of program we have now. Now it's kind of like—now I'm dealing with my 90 year old mother I'm back in, you know, into this kind of system.

So they were interested in having, like, lecturers come. And so somehow, I don't know whose idea it was, we also had a population of teachers who wanted to volunteer at the Met but they weren't socially tony enough to be part of the docents. So we came up with the idea of putting this teacher population together with the senior centers.

So that meant—and so the population of teachers who were interested in this were very savvy, well-traveled and stuff but, you know, the museum wanted them to train, train them. So at first it was thought that I would train them. But then I just realized with all my administrative duties I couldn't do it, so we hired a guy named Robert Friedman who trained them. And—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was that Freedman, E-E?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I-E-D-M-A-N. And he would sort of do lectures on art history. And then he and I, we worked with them to sort of identify their topics. Each one would get a topic. And we would work with the slide library to coordinate everything so that they would have their slides kept in their little carousels and things like that.

And then we hired a guy who was, I can't remember the names, who was the husband of one of the administrative assistants. And he would schlep, when we got appointments, he would schlep the slide projector out, because at that time you couldn't be sure that the senior centers had slide projectors. It was quite a production.

But that program was really, really important. And it was really important also for bringing in another audience because I think encouraged by these people going out and talking to them, then the directors of the centers would organize trips and they would sort of come in. And so it really started, all these things really started expanding, you know, sort of like the audience. That's what we were there for; just sort of expand the audience.

And then we would do other things like, you know, random individuals who would come in who had projects. Like I worked with a lot of community organizations organizing exhibitions of their works like black photographers, Goddard Riverside; and we would organize exhibitions of work from the organization.

And where the education department is there used to be the junior museum. And they had, like, the little cafeteria and you had the exhibition on materials and techniques, which was one of my favorite exhibits. And so we would install in there and then along the entrance to 81st street, which precipitated—[laughs]—an article by Benny Andrews, my best pal, about how the Metropolitan Museum was relegating the work of minorities and communities to kitchen art. And I was like, "Oh God, Benny, thanks a lot."

But, you know, it was all part of the process. You know, when they started doing the renovations all that stuff kind of went away. But you know, it was important for me because it was like the beginnings of my establishing relationships with individuals in the organizations that I continued to work with even after I became a curator in terms of this larger enterprise that I had to really diversify; the whole kind of complexion and representation of exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum.

And you know, it sort of helped curatorial skills too because you were choosing art, you were putting it up, you were learning, you know, doing a lot of hands-on work and that type of thing. So it was a great moment of growth and sort of, you know, gaining knowledge about the art world and the art scene in New York.

So I did that for about two years and then, you know—I may not have been a Black Panther, but you know, like—I liked some of the no-nonsense ways they had about, sort of, defining what your job should be as a black person in contemporary America. You know, seize the time, you know, you get up in the belly of the beast, you have to sort of work to undermine it.

So there I was in the belly of the beast and I'm trying to look around. Okay, I'm sort of doing community programs and going out, out, out, out. But I kind of realized, because I think it was even evident by the mid-'70s,

that community programs would come and go depending on funding and the will of the institutions and, you know, you kind of would outgrow it. Or it would become diluted as it was absorbed into the larger body politic.

So I was always looking around to sort of see, you know, what can I do? You know, to train my skills.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was there—did you have a sense that the Metropolitan was a leader or a follower in terms of other museums doing these kinds of activities, perhaps just in New York?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: That's a good question. I suspect that if the Met wasn't the leader, it was close to the leader.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So part of your satisfaction might have been, even though your programs might be phased out or vulnerable as a last priority or a lower priority, that they would have spawned other kinds of programs in different institutions that would take on those kinds of issues.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, kind of. I mean I think that, you know, we did a lot to sort of help institutionalize a lot of community organizations like, for instance, El Museo, while I was in community programs. You know, Irv and I sort of worked with Marta Vega who was then the director. And we did a big exhibition on Jose Campeche, sort of one of the few Puerto Rican—18th-19th century Puerto Rican artists who, you know, studied in Europe and came back and had, you know, a thriving clientele on the island.

But to do that because, you know, he worked on wood panels, the museum had to be renovated and climatized and stuff so the Met, you know, participated in that. And then after that then El Museo was in a position to do other kinds of shows. So it was, like, again, you felt you were in a period where you were involved with and exposed to people who were writing and rewriting history and expanding art history specifically.

So that was always very exciting. And then at that point I was, you know, working with a lot of different groups and we would help out, and we create exhibitions and do that type of thing. And I guess because of that I kind of sort of said, "None of that's happening here; what's happening in the Met? So how can I make a change in the Met?" So I came to the conclusion that I should become a curator. [Laughs.]

So I started applying for jobs in curatorial departments. And—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Throughout the country?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, just at the Met. And, you know, research assistant here, assistant curator there, blah, blah, blah. And I'd always get, "Ah, you're so great, you're so smart, you're wonderful. But you don't have any experience."

So I said, "So who's going to give me the experience?" Because, you know, when I told the story later on I said, you know, at that point I said, "You know, I didn't major in black studies. I majored in real white people's art history and I was Phi Beta Kappa," so it was like, I knew this stuff. And I could have gone historical, I think; I could have gone contemporary, you know, at that point.

So—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you had been dedicated to museum education, you saw that as your field. But as time went on, thinking about your own personal mission, and what—where you could make the most difference, you realized that—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Being a curator was—because then you would be building the collection that would go down in history, that would be seen. I mean, I later learned about deaccessioning—[laughs]—but we don't need to worry about details like that at the moment. So I figured, well, you know, that's really where I should be.

So—

JUDITH RICHARDS: At that point, was—Henry Geldzahler was at the museum?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Henry and I became friends. We used to see each other in the staff caf. And I don't know how, exactly, we became friends, but we did. And we would sit and we would have coffee and we'd chit-chat. And I guess I talked to him about, you know, what my ambitions were and at some point he said, "Well, you know, I have a curatorial assistant who's going to be leaving me." He said, "It's about six months from now, and maybe you should apply for that job."

So I said, "Oh, okay. That sounds good." So this was late '74 going into '75. So here's where outside politics kind of intervened and influenced my personal situation. So by that time Philippe de Montebello had come back from Houston and he was the deputy director.

Now, Philippe and I got to know each other—[laughs]—I guess because he had heard that I was the smart-ass in "Community Programs." And he was trying to sort of figure out how to mediate a proposal from the Menil Foundation to do an exhibition based on the series of books they were doing at that time called Blacks in Western Art [The Image of the Black in Western Art series [Jean Vercoutter and Jean Devisse; New York: W. Morrow: 1976], so it was representations of blacks throughout—it was like a three-volume.

Understandably, there was a lot of sensitivity because of *Harlem on my Mind*—[laughs]—it was a community thing. So we had a lot of meetings.

JUDITH RICHARDS: "We," the two of you?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: The two of us with Dominique de Menil, the formidable Dominique de Menil. She was amazing. I got to know the de Menil family through this kind of experience there for a minute.

And so I could see that it was kind of a quandary because, you know, she's a rich patron, it's the Met, she supported him in Houston, you know, he feels personal obligations. So because of my work in African art I knew there was a book called *The Exotic White Man* [*The Exotic White Man: An Alien in Asian and African Art* [Cottie A. Burland; New York, McGraw-Hill: 1969]]. So I bring the book into one of the meetings and I say, "Look, why don't we do an exhibition of a specific time period and we compare how Africans look at the Europeans as well as Europeans looking at Africans."

That stopped everybody cold. And it was kind of interesting because what it did was it leveled the playing fields. You know, like nobody could be superior. You know, like you could be—[laughs]—I think some of the African and Asian—some of the depictions were kind of hilarious.

You know, some of the—you know, the rubrics of western art, you could sort of have this kind of like—sort of, kind of elevated if highly stereotyped romantic view. But you know—[laughs]—the Asians and the Africans sort of—because of the stylistic rubrics of the cultures, I mean, they always look like these kind of really funny stereotypes, like caricatures, you know. So I think that sort of tabled that project for the moment.

So Philippe and I, you know, we would chat every so often. He would call me up and ask me about something and blah, blah, blah, blah. So after I had my conversation with Henry, somehow he must have expressed his plan on the administrative end to [Thomas] Hoving and maybe to Philippe because this was the moment when Percy Sutton, who was the then borough president of Manhattan, was making a run for mayor.

And the Met is one of the cultural institution groups that get operations as well as capital money from the city, and this is based on a long-term contract and arrangement with the city. It's like a line item in the budget. And at the time before the charter changed when [David] Dinkins came in, it was the board of estimate that determined the allocations to the CIGs [Cultural Institutions Group] and to cultural institutions.

And the board of estimate at that time was made up—I guess some of the members of the board of estimate were the borough presidents. So I guess to curry favor, Hoving wrote a letter—somehow, I got a copy of it—saying that I was being seriously considered for a position of assistant curator at the Met. First.

At the same time—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What do you mean "first"?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: First African-American.

JUDITH RICHARDS: After they wrote that letter, you'd obviously have to be—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: In addition, Eleanor Holmes Norton, who later went to work for the Carter administration, was head of the Human Rights Commission at the city and she essentially had an affirmative action lien on the museum, like "You've got to do something. You have to not just have black guards; you have to have blacks in important executive positions in the museum."

So with those two pressures these things happened. Oh, I don't know, how should I tell this—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you get that copy of that letter?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I don't know, I can't remember. Somebody gave it to me. I can't remember. I might still have it, I don't know.

Anyway, I—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did this make you feel? Did you feel like a tool being used, or—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, I felt—I was not happy about it because I, even though Henry had encouraged me, I knew something else could happen. And indeed something else did happen where it looked like he might have to hire somebody else.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have to, what do you mean?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, it just, you know, it was sort of curatorial needs. I think this part of the story I'm going to gloss over because the person and I are now good friends, so you know, I don't know if I want it on the record. But the—because the most important part was that there was, after this information had gone out, there was a chance this would not happen, which was fine by me, but I didn't appreciate the fact that this information had gone out.

But, you know, in assessing the situation, to Philippe's credit he sort of said, "Well, Lowery, if you have a copy of the letter, you know, there's not much they can do. So just sit tight."

So I said, "Okay." So the other situation went away because the person moved and changed the situation.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The idea was that perhaps they needed someone who was a specialist in some area.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Something—some other area. So that didn't work out. So this brings us to June of '75. I'm sitting in my office—sitting at the front office at the Community Programs Department, phone rings, it's Henry. Henry says he was looking for somebody else. And I say, "Well he's not here, I'll take a message."

And he says, "Oh, you know the position of assistant curator is going to be posted next week." And I said, "Oh, you know, I'm on my way to Jamaica." I said, "But can I—I'll be there a week. When I come back, can I apply for the job?" But he said, "Well, then I'll be in Europe." And I said, "Oh, Henry, what are we going to do?" And so he said, "I'll make some calls."

So then, you know, a half-hour later the personnel department said, "Henry says you can come up and, you know, we have an early post for the job and you can interview with him." So I went up and interviewed with Henry for the job. And went off to Jamaica, he went off to Europe. Then I got a call back and they—and Henry offered me the job.

'Course, I teased the guy in personnel—I said, "Well, let me think about it and I'll get back to you." [They laugh.] And the guy went, "You know very well you want this job." I said, "I know, but I don't want to seem too easy." So that's how Henry and I started working together.

It was fascinating and rocky.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Who else was in the department? How big—that was—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: It was me and Henry and an assistant, and we shared three technicians with the American department.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And it was called the 20th Century Art Department?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: It was then the 20th Century Art Department because it had been started at the time—it's been started just before the centenary in '70 and then they turned it to 20th century art. I think it was called contemporary arts first and then they changed it to 20th century.

And so I worked with Henry back and forth, and it was kind of rocky, you know, because frankly a lot of my curatorial colleagues would just come up to me and say, "You know you just got the job because you're black." And I was like, "Oh."

You know, so that—

JUDITH RICHARDS: People said that to you?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Sure. So that was kind of tough. But then, you know, the cosmos works in weird ways. In 1977 when [Edward] Koch was elected mayor he asked Henry to become commissioner of cultural affairs. So Henry went off to do that, and in the meanwhile I picked up on a project that he had been working on that was part of this group of exhibitions the Met was working on in exchange with the Soviet Union.

And it was an exhibition of realist painting; when I look back it was probably the first exhibition of realism that probably had, you know, happened since the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. And we were sending it over —

JUDITH RICHARDS: American realism?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: American realism. And so—

JUDITH RICHARDS: In the museum collection?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, no. It was from all over. Thomas Garvey was then up in Madison, Wisconsin, was the co-curator. And we were taking, you know, this exhibition to Russia. And they brought in Tom Hess to be a consulting chairman while they figured out whether Henry was going to come back or not.

And Tom and I established a very good working relationship, and he was there for about five or six months. During that time I was in Belgium taking a show over to the embassies—we did a lot of things with art and embassies at the time—and had, you know, a month long trip to Russia. Came back and one July day he had a heart attack and died in the office, right in the office.

So yours truly was appointed assistant curator, acting in charge. And for the next two-and-a-half years until they hired Bill Lieberman, I ran the department. So that kind of took care of the naysayers—[laughs]—I think. Because it was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Could you hire someone then to be your assistant?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I hired, actually, a classmate of mine and long-time friend, Ida Balboul, as a kind of research—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you spell her last name?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: B-A-L-B-O-U-L. As a research associate, and so she took up the slack with cataloguing and sort of managing the collection and we had, you know, an administrative assistant or two. And we carried on with the department.

But it was very interesting because, you know, again, you learn these kinds of weird lessons that they never teach you in art history. At some point during Tom Hess' tenure the American wing was preparing to open. And one of the continual points of controversy was where our department began and ended with regards to the European and the American art departments. For American art we had all the artists born after 1975, both Europe and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Born after—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I'm sorry, 1875. But in European painting it was like1869 or something. So it's like weird stuff that, because John Marin was born in 1970 he was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: 18[70].

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: 1870, sorry. You know, like, he sort of bounced back between the two. So what happened was that, you know, that it meant like the Ashcan School really got screwed. Because half of the Glackens and people like that were in American and half of them were, you know, here. So as a way to sort of solve that problem, Jack had talked to Tom about borrowing 13 masterpieces of realist—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Who talked to them?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Jock—John Howard, who was the curator of the American—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, he's called Jack, you said.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, yes, Jack. And he had talked to Tom about borrowing them just to sort of round it out. And I was in on those discussions and we knew what they were, you know. They're all like Sloan, you know, Hopper, and we'd just sort of go, O'Keefe, you know, blah, blah, blah.

So they would—when they did their installation of American painting, it would go up to about 1950. So I go away and then I come back and, all of a sudden, after Tom dies, I'm being handed a list of 285 paintings that they say he subsequently said that he would lend. So I'm looking at this thing—

JUDITH RICHARDS: He would lend?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: —to the American departments. I said—

JUDITH RICHARDS: He? Tom Hess?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Tom Hess. I said, "Hmm." So I looked at this, and I say—and I'm looking at it—I mean, I'm not a fool—but it was tantamount to dismantling the department. So you know, there'd always been a question, after Henry left, because the department was really created as a showcase for him—what would happen to the department after Henry left? So I'm no fool, I'm sitting there going, "Wow, this is a lot of paintings."

So we had a lot of discussions. I stonewall; I'm waiting for instructions from on high—[laughs]—and not getting instructions on high and, you know, it was like—you know, like classic corporate politics. You know, I'd be summoned to meetings, and I'd say, "Well, you know, I just don't have anything in writing—a memo or anything." Then they'd say, "Well, you know, Lowery, this is all a gentlemen's agreement." And I said, "Yes, but I'm not a gentleman; I need something in writing."

So at some point, the frustration grew, and—you know, like, what? And I'm like, "Philippe, hello?" [Laughs.] Nothing's happening. So, at one point, the—Jack and—I guess it was—you know, his curator, a little sharky [ph] guy.

You know, I get a call from Jim Pilgrim, who's the deputy director, who informs me that this is all a matter of policy and that I'm holding up, you know, an important action. And I said, "Oh, policy? Oh, why didn't you say so? Send me a copy of the policy, please?" So, after that, shortly, I didn't hear anything from them. So shortly after that, I had a meeting with Philippe. You know, and I'm a little annoyed at him because, you know, I really didn't think that this was something that I should make a decision about.

So I looked at Philippe, and I said, "Philippe," I said, "if you want me to, I will authorize the transfer of these paintings over to the American wing, but I need a directive from you, in writing, and also I want to know what's in it for me." I don't know what made me say that, you know, but it was this kind of corporate maneuvering. And Philippe looked at me and smiled like a Cheshire cat, and the matter was finished. And then, he began in earnest to sort of recruit, you know, a head for the department. It was very—I mean, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You think at some point in—his low level of interest in contemporary and modern art is well known. Do you think he partly thought it might be a good idea to dismantle the department?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I think—you know, I'm sort of like, oh, Jesus, I don't know if I should say this, but I mean, what the hell—unrestricted. [Laughs.]

I think Philippe was the consummate—he developed into the consummate director for an institution like the Met where you had strong department heads, and there was no way that you could assert your will over them and get things moving.

And people always used to say, "Oh, you work at the Met? It must be so Byzantine." And I said, "No, it's feudal. Philippe's the king; the department heads, the vassals. Philippe gives the vassals autonomy on their realm in exchange for their fidelity to him."

He was skillful, absolutely brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.

And so what he sort of recognized with me—and I think what he recognized with me was that I understood how the system worked. And you know, maybe—I don't know if—I had no idea what he was thinking or what the trustees were thinking at that point. But it was a perilous moment for the 20th Century Art Department. It could have gone either way.

So you know, maybe they were sort of nervous about what payoff I wanted—I don't know, maybe—you know, or maybe I was a knowing pawn in helping to push the decision one way or the other. But, you know, again, I'm just being, you know, like this kind of dumb-headed bureaucrat that I don't do nothing without a piece of paper telling me so I can cover my ass. You know, I mean, I knew enough about that type of thing. We don't do loosey-goosey—not at a place like the Metropolitan Museum.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So it ended, and you could go back to thinking about the department?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: It ended. But, in the meanwhile, I had to carry on two exhibitions that Tom Hess had made a commitment to. One was on Ellsworth Kelly ["Ellsworth Kelly: Recent Paintings and Sculptures"], which we went ahead with, and I think it was very—

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was in 1979.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS:—nine, yes. It was very successful. But the funny story of it is just to sort of indicate the state of awareness of 20th century art. You know, talking about the show, you know, Ellsworth wanted to show paintings and wall sculptures. And some of the wall sculptures were the same shapes as the paintings, but they

were in COR-TEN steel.

And we were showing it up on the second floor of the European Paintings Department where the walls were very old; they had like centuries of layers of paint on them. So I said, "I really think we ought to think this out with the riggers and make sure we have the pointing, and we're hitting the right spots to support, you know, these COR-TEN steel sculptures on the wall."

So Ellsworth and his workshop made templates of the paintings in brown paper, and then we just pasted them up with tape, you know, just—and then they would go around, do the sounding system to make sure they were, you know, in the right place. [Laughs.] One of the guys walked up there one day—we had the galleries closed—[inaudible]—came out from behind the screens—and one guy says, "Ms. Sims, you know, I've seen a lot of stuff coming out of your department, but you guys are really rocking it. Who would think, brown paper shapes pasted onto the wall with tape? That is so radical." [Laughs.]

I said, "That's not the—[laughs]—the show!" Man, that's—I thought it was so—they were like, "Anything can go"—[laughs]—you know, "in the 20th Century Art Department." So that was rather amusing.

The other was a show with Clyfford Still.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was 1979 too. But there were three shows I see on your bio before that. Robert Beverly Hale?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, those were kind of like smaller shows that I did with Henry. You know, like, you know, we were—Hale was reaching a significant birthday party, and we decided—it was more like an installation out of the collection, just sort of, like, really looking at, you know, what his contribution had been—and we really wanted to have—I think we had a dinner—we recognized him, you know.

Because he really was the one who stood up for 20th century art, back in 1950, you know, and held fast, and he was the one who brought Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* [*Number 30* [1950]], which is—you know, that type of thing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes. Anyway, so you also had the Clyfford Still.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Clyfford Still. And that was a saga because, at the time, Thomas was to do the show. He died.

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JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Lowery Sims on July 15th, 2010 in New York City for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc two.

LOWERY SIMS: So the other exhibition that I worked on, you know, to finish up for Tom was on Clyfford Still ["Clyfford Still" [1979]]. And we knew it was going to be a prickly—we knew Clyfford's whole game plan. [Laughs.] You know? He says he's going to do a show, he becomes dissatisfied with the curator, he writes the catalogue with the same chronology that he always does and he picks the paintings.

So we're sitting there, and I think at the time—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And who is we? You had a team working on it?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, it was like Philippe and John O'Neill who was the editor, you know, our editor, and moi. And so at some point they were saying, well, who should we get to write the essay, you know, and they were thinking about Tom Albright who was a critic at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, or out in San Francisco somewhere.

And, you know, they'd gone back and forth and I'm just sort of sitting there, and then all of sudden they turn around and say, "Oh, Lowery, you can write the essay." And I'm sitting there going, oh God, please no.

So I make contact with Mr. and Mrs. [Patricia] Still. And I go down—I'm trying to think; this is kind of coalescent stuff. They lived in New Windsor, MD. And my going down there—I was going to go down for like a week or so and interview and talk and be doctrinated, I guess.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you concerned about taking on this assignment because you thought that they, or he, would change everything you wrote?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yeah, well, we knew he was difficult. You know, like, I mean—so, you know, and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You were interested in the subject, but—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I was interested in the subject, but you know, like—and I also knew I was a peon. You know, like, in his eyes, you know. So I remember—I'm trying to remember because I think it kind of coincided with this kind of family trip because it was one of my last—sister's last performances with Ballet Theater and it was *The Nutcracker* in Washington.

And from there I went to Baltimore and drove out to New Windsor, MD.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What is that, New—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Windsor, MD. But I think we had done, Philippe and John O'Neill and I, had done a trip before. No, no, that might not be true, because I remember I went down there—yes, in Baltimore. And then I think Philippe and John O'Neill came down, I picked them up at the train station and we drove to the Still's to have the preliminary conversation. And then I must have driven them back and they'd gone back to do research at the Still's.

So I stayed in the house, ate with them, you know, going down to the local diner ever night because she didn't cook. And in this old Victorian house, with a good portion of his paintings rolled up in the living room, and on each of them was a little schematic of the painting that Mrs. Still had done.

JUDITH RICHARDS: On the back of the canvas?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, it was like on the canvas because they were all rolled. So she had a piece of tape and she had like—so you could tell which canvas it was. Because he never had titles, it was always like letters. So I spent a week there talking, interviewing, looking.

And at some point I kind of realized that he had an issue with Rothko. And it stemmed from the time when Rothko was out in San Francisco teaching with him. And I think he wanted to—me to make the point that Rothko had moved on to his planes after interacting with Still in San Francisco.

And I think I sort of said, damn, that in all good conscience as an art historian I would have to rely on visual evidence to establish what the stylistic relationship was, but I could not state categorically since I wasn't there. [Laughs.] I was born in 1949 after this all had happened. And it would be irresponsible for me, and Mark Rothko was dead, and there were no other eye witnesses that I could—

So I remember there was a big snowstorm and so I was about to leave. But the Stills and I knew it was time for me to leave. And so I somehow—the trains were all blocked up and stuff, but I somehow found a route from New Windsor up to the Pennsylvania Turnpike. And I drove back to New York.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It was New Windsor?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: New Windsor, MD. And I—we found a route through Gettysburg, Pennsylvania onto the Pennsylvania highway and, you know, I had to leave. You know, like—it was like we had reached an impasse.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you spent time talking to him about his work, was she a part of that conversation?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Oh, she was always there. She didn't talk, but she was always there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you feel that he was actually eager about this exhibition?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Oh, I think so, I mean, I think there—I think there was a, you know, apocryphal story that he, when he first came to New York, he went up to the Met, took a look around, didn't see anything that interested him and left. You know, so the Met had sort of figured—so this was like a way to sort of come back to the Met and sort of show 'em.

But you know, like, for him—I mean, he wasn't primarily motivated by money even, you know, like, at that point. And it was really about control over his legacy.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did the Met own any of his work at that point?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I'm trying to think, I think we did. Yes, Henry had bought an early one from the '40s.

JUDITH RICHARDS: He was included in the big show Henry did?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, I'm pretty sure, and so—yes, because it was the early one from '46.

And so when I got back, within days I was summoned to the director's office to say that I had been fired from the project. That John O'Neill was going to take over editing the catalogue with Mr. Still. And that although I had to do the logistics of the show, I was not ever to be in the presence of Mr. Still when he was in the exhibition, in the museum.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you scream or cry or—it sends chills down my spine just hearing you say it.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I don't know, I think I just looked at him and said, "Oh, Jesus Christ." I was pissed off. And at one point when he did come I did make a point of showing up. But then there was a kind of—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So who curated the show?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: He did.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Clyfford Still.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, he did. There was an interesting sidebar because he had one or two works where he had a central sunburst. I could have talked about how he stole that from Adolph Gottlieb or—you know. And he—but the "bursts" were sort of—you remember that old kind of construction paper, colored construction paper? That had been applied to the surface of the canvas.

So one day I come back to work on a Monday and there's an interdepartmental mail envelope on my desk from security saying that this had fallen off. When I open up the envelope, because it was like about this big, somebody had actually folded it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The piece that had fallen off?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: The piece that had fallen—and so there was there big crease because it was old construction paper, so it just went into a crease. So I made a report to conservation, made a report to the director's office. And then I get a call from Jim Pilgrim again who—I think I was home. You know, I was taking a day off, I might have had a cold.

And so he calls me, and he says, "Lowery, I want to talk about the Clyfford Still mess." And I said, "Yeah." I said. "I can't figure out what happened," I said, "but, you know, that stuff was put on with, you know, glue that was kind of old. It just probably fell off and probably who ever stuck it into the interdepartmental envelope did it kind of carelessly, and that did it."

And he says, "Well, you know—" like, "I know you're very angry at the way things—situations happened. And you know, like—you know, like, we don't—we really have to resolve this situation." And said again, I said, "Jim, are you accusing me of deliberately snatching that off the painting and folding and sticking it in an interdepartmental mail envelope to hide the fact that I did it?"

And he said, "Well, didn't you?" And I said, "Jim, let me tell you something. If I—I am pissed as hell. At you, Philippe—[laughs]—John O'Neill and Clyfford Still." I said, "But you know if I wanted to make a statement, I wouldn't, like, scrunch a piece of construction paper. I would arrange for several canvases to be brought to the front of the Metropolitan Museum on the steps and I'd slash them in public after calling the press. Okay?"

"Oh."

I said, "Is this issue solved?" And he said, "Yes, it's solved."

My revenge was *Flash Art* let me publish my essay and let me do that. And Clyfford Still died a few months after the show opened. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: What do you think about this museum now in Denver for his work?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Oh, God. Lord help 'em because I'm sure that the daughters are keeping all the stuff. I mean he—they were very devoted; he's lucky, he had very devoted people. I just—you know, and I understood his point. His point was always that when he gave the paintings to us, you know, like they were always supposed to be shown together and all because he felt that the public should not just see one example of an artist.

That it did—and I see that point, you know? I just got caught, you know, like, in this kind of political thing. Because we all kind of knew it was going to end up this way and I didn't need to be put through it. The other nice thing that happened was that Lee Krasner, who used to live around the corner the way I used to—she called me up one day, she said, "Come on over for drinks and dinner." Said, okay, fine.

So I went over and she poured me a drink and she just looked at me and she said, "Now, I know that you think

that Clyfford did this to you because you're a woman, or because you're black." She says, "None of those things matter at all. He did it because he's a son of a bitch." I said, "Thank you, Lee."

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was nice of her.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: It was lovely of her.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was that during the show or past?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: It's just, you know, around the time of the show, when it was going on.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did she know him?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Of course, clearly.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I mean, well.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes. [Laughs.] So that was the loveliest thing that somebody—I mean, I didn't sort of feel it was any deficiency on my part, I knew he was just a tough old bird. But you know, I just—you know, like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: But you might have felt vulnerable in your position there. And you were acting, and—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: And I didn't think—I didn't think it would affect my position, I think—you know, I was pissed off because it would have been an interesting curatorial position for me to sort of do. And I just hate passive-aggressive behavior. You know, like just tell me out straight: You're a junior curator, I want somebody important. Fine, I can deal with that, you know. But doing—just stringing along, stringing along. And I think he thought that he could manipulate me intellectually. And you know, no.

No, I mean, I had my, you know, art historical ethics and I knew what I could truthfully do or say and things like that.

So then that brings us to Bill Lieberman.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Now you also did a show of—from the collection. Black artists of the Metropolitan collection?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Oh yeah, that was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was that just 20th century?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: It was just 20th century and that was for Gordon Davis when he was commissioner of parks. And actually that was the second one I had done. I had done one in '76 for Bed-Stuy [Bedford Stuyvesant] Restoration Corporation, and then Gordon and I started talking because—why did Gordon and I start talking? Well I guess, you know, African-American, African-American.

And sometimes I would go—I think he wanted to show that they were doing an exhibition project in the Arsenal, and I think he wanted an exhibition, but sometimes I'd go down there and he'd start complaining about every other thing that he, as the park commissioner, every other gripe he had against the museum. And I'd go, "Gordon, that's not like—that's not my issue, thank you very much." So—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So that exhibition wasn't in the museum proper?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, that was at the Arsenal.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So Bill Lieberman. Story.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: So Bill Lieberman. So Bill Lieberman has me down to lunch at MoMA and we get together, you know, like very cordially. I don't know if I had ever run into Bill before.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you have any sense that he was thinking or—the idea of his going to the Met?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I think there had been rumors running around, you know. I knew they were going to hire somebody, you know. It wasn't going to be me, you know, so. And, you know, I can only say that Bill and I had a very loving, fond, volatile relationship because Bill was very controlling and had, you know, very specific ideas about things and didn't like systems, and my job was to sort of really protect the systems so that we could have an efficiently running department. So, what I mean by systems, people having individual responsibilities for specific jobs.

He liked to just give it willy-nilly, and I go, "Well, no, that's not my job, that's her job," and "That's not her job,

that's my job." And, you know, so we tussled with that until they—till I left.

We tussled about that. And he finally just—he would have lunch, you know, with me, and he'd go—[sighs]. So I made dah, dah, dah—we'd go over all things he needed done, and then he'd go, "So you're going to delegate most of that, aren't you?" And I looked at him and I looked at the list, and say, "Yeah, about 75 percent of it."

You know, we'd just—you know, it was just that bone of contention. But I learned a lot from him, and he was very supportive, you know, like on that sense. We worked on the wing together—and in that sense, he was like really, very supportive of my having a voice there. It was like me and 12 dudes, you know.

So Bill and I used to have like a kind of system. If I wanted to say something, I'd go—[Clears throat]. And he'd go, "Lowery has something to say." And then I would say it. And then they'd have to listen to me, you know? They couldn't just dismiss me.

And a lot of the architectural details that we tried—and, you know, I don't know if in the end we won—I really got with the advice of my father. I would call my father up and go, "Listen, I'll buy you dinner; I need to go over these plans because I'm having problems with this, and they're telling me that, and you have to tell me if that's true or not." And he would sort of, like—he was my secret weapon, you know—[they laugh]—in all this.

But Bill—Bill was—I don't even know how to sort of talk about Bill. I mean—you know, he had a way of teaching, and the way of teaching was, he would go off on a trip, and it would be time for us to do a gallery change or something. So he and I would make up a list of, you know, make a checklist of possible things to go in. And what I would do is schedule a sort of layout of the galleries—say a day or two before he came—and when he came back, he would go and review it. And according to how many changes he would make, I would know how well I did.

One of the funniest ones was that—was, you know—and this would be for all the galleries—one of the funniest was one was just for one little teensy-weensy gallery on the first floor where we were going to do a selection of works by European artists that came from the Alfred Stieglitz gift. So I—you know, I mean, it was like mostly works on paper and little sculptures—and it was just a little, little gallery. And you know, like, he arrived back when we finished the layout and so I said to the technicians, I said "Let me call him up." So, you know, by this time it was kind of like, "Okay, if you want to have anything to say about this gallery, you'd better get down here now." [Laughs.] So—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You could talk to him that way.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yeah, but you know, we got to—"Come on down, Bill." "Okay, I'm coming." Came down. He looked at me, "Oh, this is wonderful. Oh my. Oh. What a brilliant juxtaposition." And then he sort of said, "Permit me?" And I said, "But of course," and he went and changed everything. [Laughs.]

And my colleague got so mad—"How could you—" "But he said it was good." He wants it his way. I mean, you know, he's the department head, you know. So—[laughs]—it was that kind of thing. You know, again, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you think he had a good eye and in fact—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Oh, he has—you can't—He had an amazing—

JUDITH RICHARDS: —in fact it was an improvement, or it just is him asserting his own ego onto it?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Both—which he had, you know, a right to do. I mean—you know—[sighs]—I was always in the process of learning and I never had any problems.

He used to grumble the whole time I was—because it was during his tenure at the museum that I, you know, was working part-time on my degree—and he used to bitch and complain every time I left to go to class and stuff. And then he told everybody, you know, "I'm responsible for her getting the degree." [Laughs.] You know, it was just, like, he was just that kind of person. He was a very frustrating man.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I was going to ask you when you decided that you'd go for full-tilt—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I just—

JUDITH RICHARDS: —on getting the Ph.D.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I decided in the late '70s. I—and it happened because one day I was walking to work, down 78th Street, and I ran into Margaretta Salinger, who lived at 78th off of Madison Avenue.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Margaret.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Margaret—was it Margaret or Margaretta? Margaret Salinger, okay. And we kind of knew each other, we see each other in the lunchroom and blah blah blah. And she, you know, had really bad arthritis, and she had a big—she was carrying a big bag, so I crossed the street and I said, "Hi, Margaret." I said, "Let me help you." I said, "I'll carry your bag, take my arm, let's walk up."

So we walked up and we were chit-chatting, and then all of—she said—she said to me, "Lowery, when are you going to go back for your doctorate?" And I said, "Well, funny you should say that," I said, "because it's been eight years since I've been out of school, and I've been thinking about that. But I just, you know—I don't know whether it's worth it."

She said, "Let me tell you something." She said, "I did not finish my doctorate because I fell in love with a man"—it was Henry Robinson [ph], who was like the deputy director of the museum; they had like this kind of a thing—and she said, "Let me tell you something, Lowery. When you get older, you want to have a credential, so that nobody can really dismiss you." I said, "Done deal."

And it was a surprise to me because I had never discussed it with her, I never knew that she knew where I was, you know, in my academic career or anything, you know. So that was—I mean, if I had been wavering, I said, "Okay. That's it." So I decided to go to the City University—go back home—because I had—oh, I forgot—because when I came back first in New York, for about a year, I went to Columbia. I transferred, like, over to Columbia. But it got to be a real conflict because they wanted me to go full time.

JUDITH RICHARDS: After you left—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Hopkins.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Hopkins.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I went to, you know, Columbia, and I—you took a few—

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's while you were working at the Met?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: While I was working at the Met. And I was teaching too; I mean, I used to have these insane schedules. "Go to Columbia, work, teach at Queens College, come back," you know.

So I just think that, you know, they wanted me to go full time. They just said I couldn't be a serious student going full time [sic], and I was not—I said, "I have a lifestyle to support," you know, at that point. So I dropped out, and I went back because the City University could—they encouraged—they not only encouraged part-time, but they also really respected professionals.

So I was there with Benjamin Buchloh; I was there with Abigail Solomon-Godeau; I was there with Maurice Berger, you know—we were all, you know, working and publishing and teaching and all at the same time. So it was a much better environment for the professional, you know, who was going back to school. So—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Who did you end up working with?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: [Robert] Pincus-Witten. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Pincus. Was he at the CUNY? He was—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, well, what happens is that at CUNY, professors in the system can have a joint appointment at their home college and at CUNY. And then I think there's a certain number of professors who are full time, you know, at the Graduate Center.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So how soon after you made that commitment did you determine what your dissertation would be on?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Fairly quickly. Let's see. I started in the fall of '80. Spring of '81 I had—did I start, what did I start working on—in spring of '81, I took a course—yes, I was taking like one or two courses a semester, and I had surgery in '81, so I didn't finish, but I had cloned in [ph] or homed in on Wifredo Lam.

And I can't remember when I had first become aware of his work, other than, you know, *The Jungle* [1943], at MoMA, which was perennially when I was younger. You know, like in that sort of main foyer in the old building.

And I don't know if it happened while I was in graduate—it may have very well happened while I was at Hopkins because, you know—or starting at the Met—because, you know, one of my favorite things to do was to just sit and go and trawl in the stacks. I mean, you know, just pull out books at random—I mean, you know, you'd be doing research for something, and then you'd see something else, and go, "Oh, what's that," you know.

And I remember picking up Marcel Jean's *History of Surrealism* [*History of Surrealist Painting* [Marcel Jean; New York, Grove Press: 1960] and flipping through the book and, all of a sudden, there was this gentleman of color. And I said, "Whoa. What are you doing here?" Because, you have to understand this has been after all of these years of fighting for it—you know, the fact that black artists have a place in American art and contemporary art, and all this other—and there's this guy already in the book, you know? And so I got fascinated, and I started doing research, and I started chatting about my new find, and Eliot Nolen who's a big donor—she and her husband are big donors up at the—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Noland [ph]?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes—they're—Wilson Nolen—they're big donors at the Botanical Garden, and she's on the board of the Met, but at the time Eliot was a docent, and she would volunteer for me. And she said, "I want an interesting project," and I said, "Okay, go down and look in the art index, and pull up every article you can find on Wifredo Lam."

So she did, which then sort of, you know, like, introduced me to his whole career exhibiting in New York when he wasn't here, in the '40s, and sort of really rounded it out, you know. So I went to Cuba for the first time in '84. And you know, I was really sort of doing that. So I honed in on Wifredo Lam fairly early, and in the fall of—the spring of '82—and then I was—then I went around town talking to everyone, "I found—" Wifredo Lam this—I talked about Wifredo Lam everywhere. And there was a guy who used to work for Grace Borgenicht at—named Roberto White from Texas.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Light? L-I-—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: White.

JUDITH RICHARDS: White.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: And Roberto White knew the curator at the—where was that show?—it was in Spain—was that the—wasn't that the—was it at the Reina Sofia? I don't know. In 1982, they were organizing a centenary exhibition for Lam, and he told the team working on there [ph] this, you know, American girl who was interested, and they told Mrs. Lam.

So in the spring of '82 I'm sitting at my desk, and the main information desk calls up, and they go, "We have a Mrs. Lam here." [Laughs.] They put her on the phone, and she said, "This is Lou [Laurin-] Lam. I understand that you're interested in my husband's work." And I went—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What's her first name?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Lou.

JUDITH RICHARDS: L-O-U?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: L-O-U. And I went, "Yeah." You know, so I went down and she was with Suzanne Garrigues who had done a dissertation on Lam's Cuban years. And I had already started formulating the fact that I would do my dissertation on Lam's post-Cuban years into the '50s, '60s, and '70s.

So I got to know Lou. I missed seeing him alive; he died—I was going to go to Paris the following fall, and he died in the meanwhile—and then I continued my research, you know. We were working on the wing and, you know, so lots of stuff going on. And in 1984 I was invited to the first Havana Biennial, and gave a paper there and sort of hung out with Lou and a lot of Cubans. I think I was the only North American at the convention there. There was supposed to be somebody—Miguel Algarín, who was a Puerto Rican poet, was supposed to come, but he— So it was just me and the rest of the world—it was kind of interesting.

And so I just worked on it. And, you know, like every chance I got—a courier trip to Paris—I would go, and do research and interview and—you know, it was kind of, was kind of kismet things, you know? Like, I said it took 15 years to finish, but it took 15 years—

JUDITH RICHARDS: No, not 15 years. Since 1990—no—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Ninety-five, sweetie pie.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Ninety-five—sorry—yes.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Listen, honey, I know how long it took. [They laugh.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: You did, in between, get this—another degree at CUNY?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, that's—when you finish your coursework and your dissertation—

JUDITH RICHARDS: They give you—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: —you pay $25 and they give you a Masters, M. Phil.—so I figured—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Why just be ABD? It's just—[laughs]—pay the 25 bucks and get extra, you know. So, when I look—if you look back on it—Okay, I'm starting back to graduate school in 1980. Mary-Anne Martin is starting Latin American art in '78. So, my research on Lam is coinciding with the development of this Latin American market. And, with this Latin American market, the emergence of a lot of material on Lam from places that never, you know, happened—particularly from Barcelona—for his early days in Spain in the '20s and things like that.

So it seemed like every time I would arrive in Paris, there'd be somebody important I could interview or sort of talk to or do that type of thing. And it all sort of really came to a head in 1992 because, by then, I think, in 1990, I finally finished my coursework, did my last orals, and wrote my proposal.

And so I was writing the dissertation, you know, sort of—but I got sidetracked because it was also, you know, between '90 and '92, there's all these preps for the centennial [ph]. So everybody's doing Latin American shows with Wifredo Lam, so I did at least three important essays. I did one for the Studio Museum show that I co-curated with Julia Herzberg and Giulio Blanc; I did one for—what's his first name?—[Charles] Merewheter—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sorry, going back to co-curator, the show that—Studio Museum—Julia Herzberg—and who else?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Giulio Blanc.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Giulio?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: G-I-—G-U—G-I-U-L-I-O B-L-A-N-C. And then Meriwether—what is his first name? Not Peter Meriwether, not David Meriwether, not John Meriwether, what is his first name. Anyway he did one at the—

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's in here, I can look it up.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: —America Society. And then Valerie Fletcher did four masters of Latin American artists at the Hirshhorn. And Lam was one of them. So I did essays for those. And so that was kind of like a prep.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you feel you wished you had finished before those happened? Because you obviously were becoming one of the primary authorities on his work through all your years of research. If you had already published your dissertation, would you have then been in the position to have curated one of these exhibitions and not just been an essayist?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, I did co-curate the one, and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, I guess curate, not co-curate?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I don't know, and I don't think I did. If I looked back on it, I would sort of say, yes, it's kind of weird it took so long. But I also know that it took that long for everything to unfold. I don't think I wasted time—you know, I was sort of caught up in this kind of, like, cosmic rhythm of the universe where I was carrying on a full time career, dealing with my life, with the dissertation, the market was unfolding, knowledge of Lam's work was unfolding.

And here's the kicker. I guess in 19—so we got through all the '92 stuff, so '93 I said Okay. You know, like—and Pincus-Witten's going, "You got to finish the big book report." That's what he used to call it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: So okay, fine. So I took everything I wrote and put it into one file, and I had 150 pages and I looked good. I mean I never used any of this—I mean, I didn't use that stuff in that format, but it was kind of like this psychological boost, you know? So I sat down to sort of seriously write—you know, I had the outline.

And then in the spring I was asked to courier a Matisse, remember the big Matisse show that was at MoMA, and I was taking a piece to Centre Pompidou. And I was traveling on an open ticket in a cargo plane. So I get there, you know, do all my courier stuff, and I settle down at Lou's. Lou's used to have—Lou had a—[laughs]—room at the top where I used to stay, and she had her room downstairs for things and I would just kind of, you know,

work. So her son—so I'm settling in—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What part of Paris was that, that she—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: She was one of the first to move into the Bastille area. She renovated a ground floor on this old building and had everybody in a panic that she was knocking down all the support walls. And she made like a New York loft. And that was like—when did she do that? She did that like late '80s, when the Bastille was just, you know, coming back.

So I'm sitting there having lunch. Her son comes down, he's on his way to Bali with his girlfriend, soon-to-be wife, and he says, "You know, there's a big box of clippings upstairs you should take a look at." And I went, oh wow, I forgot about those clippings. I had seen those clippings in 1984 which she over in her old apartment in the swanky—by the Bois de Boulogne and I remember looking at it, saying, "I'm not ready for that yet."

So this was the point where I was ready. Because the other thing was that she was reaching a completion—the whole time through the '80s when I'm going back and forth she's working on a catalogue raisonné [*Wifredo Lam: Catalogue Raisonné of the Painted Work* [Lou Laurin-Lam and Wifredo Lam; Lausanne, Acatos: 1996]]. So the catalogue raisonné is nearing completion, but she wanted to have a chronology and she wanted me—she asked me to sort of like just do the chronology.

So I'm sitting there, you know, trying to ask her questions—when, what happened when—and I'm realizing that's not what you do—you don't start from like point A to point B to point C with her, you sort of let it grow more organically. But then I realized with the clippings, you know. So I called my office and said, "Hi, I'm taking a month vacation," which I had, "and I'm going to be working here for a month. Don't call me."

And I went upstairs and sorted through the articles, all the while making notes for chronology, put them by year into portfolios; I remember we went out to find the right kind of portfolios. Because he had a clipping service from like the '20s and it was all the stuff that it would have been impossible for me to have figured out—all the little Italian newspapers that probably didn't have an archive or an index where, you know, the source material would be.

I knew that I had hit the mother lode in terms of being able to sort of like just expand the whole thing about this career. And I worked from 10:00 in the morning to 1:00 at night every day. And what they did finally with all my work, I had a—I came away with a bare-bones of a chronology, lots of information that I xeroxed. And they then xeroxed everything and put it into portfolios so that if anybody else wants to use it—but it was in Italian, Spanish, Swedish, German, French—I mean, it was everything, you know, that you needed, you know, for his career.

And that's how, you know, I sort of built on that, you know, to finish my dissertation. It took another—two years. And then I sent it right away to University of Texas Press, I didn't even revise it. And they sent it back, and then I —

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why the University of Texas Press?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Because they did a lot of Latin American stuff and I figured that would be the best—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Unsolicited, you—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I just sent it, yes. I don't think I knew anybody down there at that time.

JUDITH RICHARDS: No.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: And then I had two readers, I think it was—I found out it was Edward Sullivan and Juan Martinez—and they, you know, they gave some very, you know, like, constructive criticism.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sorry, Edward Sullivan and who else?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Juan Martinez, who teaches at Florida International University. And I set out to revise it, you know, from there. And that took a while. And it was finally published in 2002, because again, you know, it's like life.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But you were awarded your Ph.D. in '95.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: In '95. It was published in 2002. And—but it took a lot of revision. I went from five chapters to 11. And the whole thing was how to organize the chapters because the chapters really were to reflect the—it was to reflect the chronology but also to reflect what parts of the world were functioning at his life at that point, so that there's two chapters on the states, two chapters on Cuba and Latin America and two

chapters on Europe. And then the final two chapters, one is sort of summarizing him in a kind of multicultural sense and then the last chapter was to sort of put him, you know, like, for where do we go.

So I'm really proud of it because I don't think anybody's come up with anything new since. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: And at the same time or before '02 you finished the chronology for the catalogue raisonné?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Oh yeah. Finished the—and wrote an essay for the catalogue raisonné too. And left the Met and became—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Whoa, wait, wait, wait, we're not there yet.

[They laugh.]

Wow. So I asked you how you came upon your dissertation topic.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: You asked.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, and that was a wonderful story.

Going back to the Met, working with Bill Lieberman, were there changes in the department that you saw as time went by with Bill in terms of what the department did in relationship to not only 20th century, but contemporary art? And how did you establish your goals and your own personal initiatives there in that department?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, I think first of all, Bill took the department and really, I think, institutionalized it. He was able to very carefully, scrupulously and copiously bring in a lot of—close a lot of gaps in the survey of modern art that we had, particularly from the school of Paris.

And I must say he was very judicious not to impinge on commitments he had made for MoMA, you know, while he was there. He was very good at that. I think that our entry into very contemporary art in the '80s was very controversial because we didn't take the road mostly traveled and there was lots of complaints about that.

Bill—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So in 1980 you became associate curator.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did Bill initiate that promotion or was that kind of automatic as you had been acting for two years?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I think Philippe did. It was kind of like a recognition of the whole thing. And I have to say in '95, you know, the promotion to curator came mostly from Jennifer Russell. [Laughs.] Bill was a strict but stingy father.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In '80, though, you became associate curator and you were in that position until '95, as you mentioned.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So I guess, before we delve into the specifics of what you did during those years, in general, how did the department evolve and how did your own personal curatorial goals evolve?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Right. Well most of the '80s, you have to understand, we were involved in planning and building the wing. So that was really the focus. And that gave us an opportunity to sort of really, you know, like, expand the collection and sort of think about the collection. But our entry into it was not into the sort of what was then SoHo, you know, Mary Boone, Gagosian, you know, like, sort of Sonnabend nexus of the art world.

Bill—I think a critic once characterized it as Bill's "lingering infatuation with magic realism." So there was a lot of figurative stuff, some abstract things, and to tell you the truth I just went along with the program. And sometimes I did, I mean, I got Gary Stephan into the program and, you know, I could sort of do certain things, but I sort of went along with the program to sort of see what I could do in terms of advancing the agenda around women and also artists of color.

But—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You're speaking about acquisitions mostly.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Acquisitions mostly, yes, because we didn't do much in terms of exhibitions. I mean, we did, but they were small exhibitions, they weren't like—and a lot of the exhibitions Bill did were more historical like Picasso and, you know, sort of like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Henry Moore.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, Henry Moore. And then the Gelman Collection, you know, to sort of signal that type of thing. What else did I do in the '80s?

JUDITH RICHARDS: John Marin from the collection.

MS. SIMS. Yes. That was a funny thing, it was one of those things where we had had an exhibition and installation on the other side of the stairway—you know, when you came off the grand staircase we were to the left and European paintings was to the right. [Laughs.] And I don't know if we—we might have had a recent acquisitions or something in there—and it came out and there was no action. And I said, "Nobody's filling up those galleries; let's put something." I said, "Let's put up the Marins." And he said, "Okay." [Laughs.] So I put up the Marins.

And it was just kind of like, you know, to sort of be territorial and they got a huge review in the New York Times. [Laughs, claps hands.] Which I thought was hilarious. We were just like being territorial—grab it, nobody's claimed it, let's—[claps.]

So that was fun. But you know, yes, so a lot of it was from the collection or very kind of collection oriented.

JUDITH RICHARDS: There was a show in 1988 called "The '80s: A New Generation" that you curated?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes. That was, again, that was also, you know, sort of the recent—acquisitions—that was our announcement of our take on the '80s. So it was like David Reed, Frank Brown, you know, Stone Roberts—you know, it's all these people who are not the hotties. You know there was no—we may have a Schnabel because we did get a Schnabel through the Spiegels, Emily and Jerry Spiegel.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why would it have been just in the collection, why not borrow works?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I don't know, because we had so much. We had a lot that we hadn't shown and I think Bill wanted to make a statement.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, I see, about what you'd acquired.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Right. I mean, mind you, I am like prowling through the art worlds, seeing all the other alternate stuff and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And I'm sure under a lot of pressure. I mean, here you are at the Met. How did you handle that?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Just floated through, la, la.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Tried to dodge the bullets?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes I mean, I never felt that it was anything—I think people understood what the situation was. I mean, if I sort of thought about the people who I really hung out with, you know, like at that time who were—you know, like I really was sympathetic to the agendas. You know, you keep your eye on sort of like the hot '80s, you know, stuff that's going on.

Then there's Bill doing his stuff with realism and, you know, certain kinds of abstraction. But, you know, I was very fond of Phyllis Kind, Bernice Steinbaum—I mean, these are places where I felt a kind of natural, you know, sort of affinity. Who else—where else did I go a lot? To a certain extent Mary Boone, I went there a lot. You know, Mary and I had a fairly good relationship just—Nancy Hoffman. And Michael Rosenfeld —well, maybe Michael was more towards a little later than that. But—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Not that these galleries particularly showed more women or African-Americans than other galleries—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: They showed a kind of multicultural, you know, like, sort of—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You said Michael Rosenfeld?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, with Michael I think it was more in the—I think Michael and I got closer in the '90s.

But in the '80s it was certainly those galleries. I'm trying to think where else I—Paula Cooper. It's interesting they're all women.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In the '80s—except for Michael. [They laugh.] In the '80s, did you have artist friends and who were they?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Oh yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's hard to divide friends into decades, I don't mean that, but it isn't necessarily '80s, but around that time.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I was really close with Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Amalia Mesa-Bains—gosh, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: A more general question—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you—did you feel that you were learning through these relationships with artists how to approach the issue of bringing more artists of color and women into the institution?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, we certainly—we certainly shared it because I think that, you know, like, I was on committees with these artists, you know. So we were sharing—these are, the artists were, as much activists and sort of cultural instigators as they were artists themselves so it was like a kind of common dialogue.

I mean Leslie King-Hammond, you know, like, was my friend who we always knew was an artist but, you know, she certainly was close in the '80s. Linda Bryant, you know, who had Just Above Midtown gallery. Kaylynn Sullivan TwoTrees, she's now Kaylynn TwoTrees. I did a lot of work on performance art so I was seeing a lot of Faith Ringgold. I did a lot of writing on performance, William Pope.L, you know.

And there, you know, and it was kind of like a luxury because, you know, like, what was going on at the Met was going on at the Met. So it gave me a great deal of freedom on my personal time to sort of like do what I wanted to do.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So there were no restrictions on what you did in your personal time in the field. I mean, that's—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I just did it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I can see that you did tremendous amount of curatorial work elsewhere in the '80s.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I did it elsewhere, right. Because, you know, like, I wasn't getting that much—you know, and I knew I needed to sort of exercise that muscle. So I did develop a very active—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And writing.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: And writing, yes, I did. And it was so funny to the point that it took until 1988-'89, and the show ["Stuart Davis: American Painter"] was in '91, for me to get Stuart Davis. And at the time that Stuart Davis was being installed—

JUDITH RICHARDS: To get Stuart Davis, you mean—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: As a project.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You mean—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: My major exhibition by Stuart Davis.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —that you would solely curate at the Met?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes. But even there I curated it with Bill Agee, which was fine, you know. And even at that point—and so at that point, that same year, that same moment that the show was opening I was awarded the Frank Jewett Mather award for distinction in art criticism—[laughs]—by the College Art Association and kind of like, Philippe's going, "And what did you get that for?" I said, "All that outside work that I did."

But to his credit he embraced it; he boasted about it, he really supported it. And then after that I didn't have that much trouble, you know, sort of getting projects. You know it was all within, you know, the context of what Bill would approve and what else was going on at the Met, but you know, like, I've always had to sort of really figure out a way to get what I needed done done. And it was not necessarily through my main job. Let's put it that

way.

But the interesting thing about it was that in the '80s anytime I did something, you know, Michael Brenson or somebody would be reviewing it and saying, "Curated by Lowery Sims, associate curator at the Met." So the Met kept getting a lot of credit. I mean, I never hid who or what I was, you know. I worked like a fiend.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I would say so.

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JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Lowery Sims on July—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Oh, wait a minute—Today's the—

JUDITH RICHARDS: —22nd, 2010, in New York City, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and this is a continuation of disc two.

Lowery, I think we left off some time in the '80s while you were the associate curator at the Met, and I'd like to ask you, first of all, about the exhibitions—you did a series of exhibitions with the AFA [American Federation of Arts] and the Met—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Mm-hmm.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —in the '80s.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Tell me how those came about. What was the interest in the Met collaborating with AFA in that way? And not only collaborating on a show at the Met, but a touring show.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, I think that—actually, none of these exhibitions were ever shown at the Met. It was exclusively for touring, which I thought was interesting. I think it came about through the normal relationships that were established between institutions and the AFA, you know. There were a number of museum directors at the time who were on the board, including Philippe. And the Met in—you know, even from my days in the '70s in community programs—it was always this sense that we had a national—at least a national responsibility to share the richness of our collections, so.

So we came up with, you know, three prosaic—[laughs]—you know, subjects: the figure, still life and landscape. I think the figure was first, then landscape, and then still life. And it was kind of interesting because I worked on it—I think the figure I worked on by myself; landscape, I worked on with my colleague Lisa Messinger; and still life, I worked on with my colleague Sabina Rewald. And it was kind of interesting to—you know, it was over a period of years, maybe over almost, like, a decade, that those three exhibitions were organized and put on the field—put on the road—and so one got to sort of see how the collection had grown, one got to see how the collection sort of reflected a kind of historical perspective—because we basically started at the beginning of the 20th century and went up to the present, you know, in all the exhibitions.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was—not only was it—was there an interest in not only sharing the resources of the Met, but creating earned income in this way?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I think—I think to a certain extent, but I'm not even sure that the Met got all that much income, you know, per se. I mean, you know, the Met is a kind of behemoth in terms of, you know, institutions. And these were the kinds of exhibitions that, I mean, I don't recollect correctly, but I doubt that the rental fee was more than about $20[000]—$30,000 at the most.

They went to about five or six or seven—somewhere between five and seven venues. So in terms of the cost of in-house cost, in-kind costs, you know, to sort of organize the exhibition, and then also the AFA getting revenue—I really don't think it was really a big moneymaker for us. I think it was really more about getting the collection out.

And I think that also when I was at the Met and formed the loan policy also, I mean, wherever possible we would lend things. We had—you know, the registrar's office had their requirements—you know, enough lead time—and we would always negotiate loan fees, you know, before they sort of came to be the practice. We would, you know, negotiate with organizations who paid insurance, who paid framing and stuff, but we—you know, in the sort of quarterly board report that went out—and when you read it—I mean, the museum really lent out a lot of things, and I think it was a way to sort of keep the face of the museum on the national and international, you know, situate—you know, like, scene, and so I think that mainly it was really more about projecting the museum as a member of a museum community and also really sharing the collections.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Each of these exhibitions was a fairly traditional survey of 20th century—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Right, right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you welcome the opportunity to do those or did you wish you were rather spending your time on something more personally gratifying?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I don't know, you know, I'm such a curatorial fiend, you know. I like curating anything, you know, and I think I rather enjoyed the disparity between the more conservative things I would do at the Met and perhaps the opportunity for something a little more off-centered, you know, that I would do outside of the Met.

But I think that, you know, because each exhibition offered an opportunity to sort of find and do things—I mean, I love research and I guess that's really sort of my real passion. So it was—you know, I could take one thing and just sort of, like, you know, pursue it to the end.

I remember we were purchasing a piece—we were thinking about it, I don't think we ever did—by Glenn Coleman, and it was this very interesting interior that he had done in Paris. Now, Glenn Coleman is not the best-known American artist, but the Met already had a piece by him in the collection. And I remember I went to the archives, found early reproductions of it, you know, got the—you know, the story of where Coleman was at the time. And then, you know, one can do, like, a stylistic comparison, say, between, you know, more conservative artists and, you know, more avant-garde artists.

So, you know, that's the kind of thing I always do. I sort of see something visually; you start pursuing it and then you just take it to the nth degree and see what you can do. You know, like, I'm sure my files were just full of—you know, like these kinds of—lots of times they, you know, the research didn't go anywhere specific. But you learn different things and then when you tackle another project, you know, perhaps there's something in your sort of database that says, "Oh, I remember when I was looking for the Glenn Coleman, I sort of found this and maybe it relates to that," you know, that type of thing. So no, I really—any kind of curatorial project I got, I really enjoyed.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Talking about projects you did elsewhere—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes—

JUDITH RICHARDS: —during the'80s, you did one I wanted to ask you about at the New Museum called "Art & Ideology," Kaylynn Sullivan and Hannah Wilke [1984].

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, that was a case where—you know, I'm always surprised. [Laughs.] I was always surprised when people who were sort of much more with the more cutting-edge aspects of the art world ask me to do things because I always thought of myself as, you know, you're at the Met—you know, it's very kind of staid and things, so this is very exciting.

It was—Marcia invited five of us—it was Benjamin Buchloh, Donald Kuspit, Lucy Lippard, Nilda Peraza, who was then head of the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, and myself—and so that's, you know, that's pretty heavy company that you're in. And we would each allowed to choose two artists that sort of reflect some kind of aspect of art and—art, politics and ideology.

So at the time, I was getting to know Hannah Wilke very well, and I had—also Kaylynn Sullivan, you know. And here were two women artists, you know, who sort of approached the body arts from different, you know, like, perspectives. And so, with Hannah, I really sort of enjoyed the opportunity of taking her very controversial—[laughs]—reputation as sort of like the sort of nudist—like, feminist—who was never afraid to pose nude, you know, and to sort of take her Duchampian sort of strain in her work through—straight through.

And I remember I surprised her because she had—you know, we've looked at everything from sculptures to photographs to videos and, you know, like whatever we had at the time. And I remember there was a photograph of her—she had taken of her mother, after her mother had had a mastectomy surgery. And there was a kind of pattern of nodules, you know, like on her mother's scar on her chest, and I went, "Gee, Hannah, those look like your little bubble gum scarification things." And she's sort of, like, shocked, and that, you know, gave rise to—I said, "Maybe for the exhibition we could do a photograph of you next to her, so that if you can sort of really talk about real scars and symbolic scars and things like that." So that was like, you know, very interesting, very intense, because Hannah was a very intense, sort of all-engulfing, you know, kind of personality.

And then Kaylynn—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was that the first time you had worked with her?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, that was the first time, yes. But we were getting to know each other, and we spent a lot of, you know, personal time together with she and Don Goddard and I. You know, we sort of really became friends.

Then Kaylynn Sullivan I had met through Linda Bryant, who had Just Above Midtown gallery, and that was sort of, attracting, you know, a whole community of multicultural artists who were working on more conceptual edge of the art world, you know. We sort of think about the '60s and '70s, there was this kind of split between artists: between blackstream artists who did highly political art, you know, heavy-duty messages and then artists who were more involved in abstract strategies.

By the '80s, there was a sizeable number—because this is the moment when David Hammons's moved to New York and is establishing himself, Senga Nengudi—Kaylynn was another one. And there was a whole group of artists that Linda showed, both on 57th Street and when she moved the gallery to Tribeca. She was one of the first galleries on Franklin Street in Tribeca back in the late '70s who were sort of really dealing with issues of race, gender, and identity on a much conceptual or performic [ph], you know, installation ways.

So, Kaylynn was—came from Iowa. She had found out after her—she was raised by her grandparents and found out later that her father had been Lakota, and her mother was white, you know, white and black, you know—one of those kind of mixtures you find in the Midwest. So she was really at the time reconstructing her—beginning a long process of reestablishing contact with, you know, her family members and sort of looking at her origins and sort of like really making different kinds of contacts and sort of finding ways to sort of deal with the sort of murder-suicide that, you know, had formed her parents', you know, destiny.

And so one of the things that she did was she did a reenactment of the Charlie Starkweather-Caril Fugate murders. I think it was 1958, and I guess Caril's parents didn't want her to see Charlie. So he came over one night, and they shot them. And then they sort of sat up in the house with the dead bodies and ate junk food and then sort of went on a killing spree, and I think they ended up killing about eight people. He was sent to the—I think he was executed, and he got the death sentence—and I think she was in prison, and the interesting thing was that—this was '84—and in '88 Kaylynn did another version of her meditations on Caril Fugate for a show that Leon Golub and I had juried for the Contemporary Art Center called "Oppression" ["Oppression/Suppression"]—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was it?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: "Oppression/Suppression" [sic]?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Which contemporary art center?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: In New Orleans. And so we found out that, just about that moment, Caril Fugate was getting out on parole, if I remember everything correctly. So this was, you know—so we had Hannah who had, you know, videos; she had photography, you know, like sort of being set up. And then with Kaylynn, what she did was she did a kind of enclosure where she created—recreated the room and sort of got animal blood to sort of stain everything, had the TV, the rifle, the sofa, and then enclosed it in a chain-link fence.

And then one day, like—[laughs]—at—when, you know, she was putting up the installation, I said, "Well, is there anything I could do to help?" And she said, "Yeah." She brought out this huge bag of Twinkies that we had to sort of unwrap—uncover and then break in half and stick into all the holes in the chain-link fence. [Laughs.] That was sort of like—turning point for Twinkies because I realized a month later they hadn't changed—[laughs]—I never ate a Twinkie ever again.

But it was from the sort of historical story of the Fugate-Starkweather murders that Dan White's lawyer could make the Twinkie defense for him when he killed Moscone and Harry [sic] Milk [Harvey Milk] because he had been allegedly the night before sitting up, eating junk food, you know, in his frustration over whatever political things there were. So I think she was trying to make those kinds of connections also because there must have been the time—I don't remember the dates, you know—of that—and remember that was one aspect that we sort of were discussing. So that was a kind of interesting experience. It was certainly not anything that I would do at the Met. [They laugh.]

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JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, to have food in a gallery would be—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: But it's interesting because during the '80s while I was working at the Met I was doing tons and tons of studio visits, and interviewing artists, and finding things out and it was like, you know, that

moment where—you know, sort of deconstructing the canon and sort of bringing in diversity and multiculturalism was really hot and I was like right in the thick of it, even though I was, you know, working for another kind of institution.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you felt that that was one of your key career goals, your professional goals, is to bring to public view artists who hadn't been recognized, to really write—rewrite history, to be engaged in all that.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Oh absolutely, absolutely.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And the Met supported you, in terms of spending all that time and effort outside—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, they didn't know I was doing it. [They laugh.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: You told the—you told all these institutions, leave your name off of it as curator. [Laughs.]

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, I mean, it was certainly perfectly reasonable for me to make studio visits as part of my day-to-day work and all the kind of writing and, you know, work I did I did on the weekends and at night. And —

JUDITH RICHARDS: The answer is always work twice as long.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, that's it. That's totally it. You know, I mean, they knew it was going on because another—you know, like, when I do these exhibitions and they were reviewed, I mean, my name was mentioned; they would mention I was associate curator at the Met, you know.

So it wasn't, like, a secret or anything. But, you know, like, I was going to school, going back to graduate school too. But I think that I was really interested, you know, not only in sort of—I always used to say, I'm really committed to the inclusion of women artist, artists of color, and overlooked white men artists—[laughs]—you know?

I was just interested in, you know, intellectually how you contextualize them within history and I knew that, you know, getting involved in these projects you're contributing to the footnotes of art history which then sort of begin to sort of seep up into the art history. So for me—and I loved, you know, writing and curating. So I mean that's what I did.

And at the Met, you know, you had 19 curatorial departments, over 100 curators, and even though they did a lot of exhibitions a year it wasn't—you weren't going to get something to do all the time. And it was the moment where we were primarily, in 20th century, really involved in building the new wing, you know, from about—let's see, Bill Lieberman came in '80, so about 1980 as head of the department after Tom Hess died. So between like about '81-'82 and '87 when we opened up the wing, that's when the building was going on, we were planning, you know, the installations and I was very involved in that.

And so, you know, this was also a way to sort of really keep that curatorial muscle flexed. And I knew, I'd had an experience—I don't think I mentioned it the last time we spoke. Early on in my curatorial career when I was first started in 20th century art—again, this was sharing the collections—the museum had a very close relationship with Robert Kennedy, who was then involved with the *Bedford-Stuyvesant* Restoration Corporation.

So they asked the Met to sort of put on an exhibition of black artists from the collection. And I did—I guess I did about two or three of those over my career, this must have been about 1975 and then I did another one in '79—I think I did talk about it—for Gordon Davis when he was commissioner of cultural affairs at the Arsenal.

But what happened with the first one was I put together this selection of artists, and it was really interesting to sort of see how this art had come into the collection. You know, some of it came through the WPA. Some of them came through this big 1942 exhibition "Artists for Victory" where the Met sort of opened up its doors to various artists' organizations to sort of give them support during the war, and then they made available some of the Hearn funds, which were sort of—which to this day are the mainstay of these kind of endowed funds, for purchases. And then there were a lot of gifts and then, you know, some continuing purchases.

So I wrote up this essay, you know, where I was sort of analyzing the situation of black artists in contemporary society and what it would take to bring them into the mainstream by setting up this kind of network of collectors, critics, art historians. I mean, I was very clear on how the system had worked. I had figured it out. And I knew that you needed to have all these legs, you know.

And at that point, you know, the black artists didn't quite have the critical acclaim; they didn't have the collector base; they did have some institutional traction but not much. And so—and there was some art historians who were, who had always been involved in—and you think of James Porter, David Driskell, Graham—I'm sorry, Carroll Greene—I mean, this was the moment in the '70s where people—black shows were proliferating, so we

had the scholarship.

So I was saying, okay, what would we do to sort of like really push this over the edge so that you could sort of do that? So I did this whole paper, right, analyzing it. And it was so interesting because the museum administration and Henry and them read it and then they told me it was unpublishable. That—and they tried to intimate that there was a problem with my writing. And I sort of like jerked my head back, because one thing I was always sure of was my writing, you know. And then I kind of got it. I said, "Okay, it's too political." So then I wrote this kind of—I rewrote this kind of very inane, bland, you know—maybe it was two pages instead of, you know, twenty pages, and I tucked that essay away. And I read it later and I went, wow, this is like, you know, pretty smart.

But that experience was also one of the impetuses for me seeking and accepting outside work because I knew that at that moment at the Met that there was an institutional voice I would have to adhere to, and then if I wanted to establish my own voice I would have to find another way to do that.

And fortunately all those contacts that I had made through my work in community programs, going out there and working with alternative museums and galleries, and all my colleagues out there, they gave me those opportunities. So that was, you know, like, really one of the biggest impetuses, and I realized that that was the only way I was going to be able to fulfill that mission, you know.

And I guess I took as my model the fact that very often in the United States, American painters or American singers would have to go to Europe and then get, you know, their chops, sort of establish themselves and get their reputations. And then they could come back in triumph to the United States, so I figured I would go outside the museum and sort of do that.

And that's the way it worked because in 1991 the College Art Association kindly awarded me the Frank Jewett Mather Award for distinction in art criticism. [Laughs.] And all my colleagues at the Met were going, "What are you getting that for?" Because it was—I mean, the Stuart Davis show was really the first show I had established and I had been at the museum for over—almost 20 years. And that was the first big show that I had.

And I said, "You know, for all that outside work I did." [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you, thinking of your writing, how did you make time to write and how did you choose which writing proposals to accept, which to go after yourself? I mean, you ended up with a huge list of essays and articles, and what kind of writing was most satisfying?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, for a while there it was mostly writing about things that I knew about, that I had an experience—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Before, would you—if you had to prioritize, would you first spend your time writing an essay to be published in a catalogue or would you rather write an article in a wider-circulation magazine?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Didn't matter. I don't think it really mattered. I think it was really whether the project interested me and what I could do. And for a while, you know, like, I usually worked with artists that I knew and I had some experience with because then, you know, there was a certain way I didn't have to do it.

You know, on occasion I've done things that I have no knowledge of and I have to sort of research, but for the most part I had had such a rich interactions with different artists in different situations and they were the ones who were asking me to write, because they didn't have anybody, you know, who sort of really was interested in their work and sort of, you know, who would know their work in that sense.

So that was the kind of constituency, I guess, I had, you know, and it was everybody from Agnes Denes to Kaylynn Sullivan and Hannah Wilke to, you know, *Romare Bearden to, you know, Richard Pousette-Dart*, you know, because these, you know, everybody—it was just amazing to me how many people would just go to the same artist because, you know, like, you sort of gain a kind of credibility because you're in the community of scholars and thinkers who're sort of dealing with that.

And, you know, I wasn't interested in that. I was really interested in going out and finding something new to do. And people who really sort of could use, you know, my skills in that sense.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I think there's an exhibition that you co-curated for MICA, Maryland Institute College of Art, called "Art as a Verb," ["Art as a Verb: The Evolving Continuum: Installations, Performances, and Videos by 13 African-American Artists" [1988-89]] again focusing on works by African-American artists of a certain kind. Could you talk about that? Why did you want to do that and how did you approach that exhibition? Making the selections and—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: You know, that was a—right. I wasn't—I did that show with Leslie King-Hammond who was—she's a dean emerita of graduate studies at MICA now, is the founder of the Center for Race and Culture. Leslie and I have been friends and colleagues since Girl Scouts. [Laughs.] And we were in Queens College together, we were in Johns Hopkins together, she stayed, I left, you know the whole thing.

But Leslie and I have really collaborated on many projects and throughout our careers and I would say she's probably my closest professional confidante and colleague, and we think alike. And what had happened—I'm trying to think about what had happened. We had been, you know, like, pursuing sort of parallel investigations.

She was—I was looking at black women artists who were doing performance and installation and it came about because during the '80s I used to joke, I think once in an article *in ARTnews Magazine* I said, "Oh God," I said, "the most frustrating thing about my job is that people organizing shows now, then at the last minute they realize that they don't have a, you know, like a Serbo-Croatian hermaphroditic artist, so who do they call? Me." You know? [Laughs.] And I said, you know, and I said, "It's a little annoying because, you know, they've already put the show together so, I mean, why stick them on?"

So we get these requests for black women painters or something like that and I noticed that when somebody would call me up, I would think about it and I'd say, "I don't know any black women artists who paint." I mean, I know who they were, but, you know, like, in my circle of coincidence I sort of realized that a lot of the women were doing performance work, installation work, and so I went out to sort of really, you know, explore that.

So I was putting together this body of research, which I later published in a book on feminist art that was edited by Arlene Raven, Sandy Langer and Joanna Frueh. And—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sorry, what was the last name?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Joanna Frueh, F-R-U-E-H. [Laughs.] And in the meanwhile I got a call from Richard Mayhew who's, you know, one of my favorite black painters, you know, who was teaching then at Penn State University. And Joe Jacobs who was curator of the gallery there had just put together a show called "Since the Harlem Renaissance [Fifty Years of Afro-American Art"]. And it was a show of contemporary black artists and they were having a symposium. And he sort of basically went, "You have to come and participate."

And I'm going, oh God. I didn't even know where it was. We got to Philadelphia, I thought we were going to the University of Pennsylvania, next thing I know we're on a small plane out in the middle of Pennsylvania. [Laughs.] I didn't even know exactly where I was going but thank God Benny Andrews was with me, and said, "No, Lowery, this way." [Laughs] It was very kind of funny.

And so they had, you know—I mean, it was like a great symposium. They had *Romare Bearden there, they had Elizabeth Catlett there, they had Ernie Critchlow there, so they had the venerable, you know, sort of pioneers of African-American art. And they were doing all these things and they were doing the panels, like, chronologically. So of course the contemporary panel is late, you know, like we're the last ones, so I realize I can't read my gorgeous paper, but I had my slides so I start showing the slides of Joyce Scott doing the Thunder Thigh Revue—[laughs].*

JUDITH RICHARDS: No, what was the piece there?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Thunder Thigh Revue, Joyce did—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Thunder thigh?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Thunder Thigh Revue, she did this sort of performance piece with Kay Lawal, L-A-W-A-L, who was an actress in the '80s. It's just talking about being a black woman of certain girth, you know. And Joyce is hilarious, you know, totally hilarious. And Candace Hill Montgomery's work and Kaylynn's work and, you know, just a whole group of, you know, like, stars. And I remember I looked out and Joyce had come with Oletha DeVane from Baltimore straight to the—and I gave this—just showing the slides and talking about the slides.

At the end, there was an uproar. People were furious. Why was I showing this work? It's not "black art." And what were these women doing? And Liz—you know, people, Elizabeth and—[inaudible]—were saying, "You're ruining black art. You have to have objects to sell and blah." You know, I was—[laughs]. I was like totally stunned.

But the young black women in the audience, they came and they gave me a big hug. They said, "We've been trying to do this stuff and our professors are not relating to this at all." So I sat there and went, "Oh, my goodness."

JUDITH RICHARDS: You had no idea that that—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No idea. And—the investigation starts as—because—I mean, that's the way stuff

happens with them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think the response would've been the same in New York City—a similar audience?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, in the same audience, yes, yes, because it was really about black artwork. It was really—and, you know, like, in the '80s, I mean, it was just, you know, like, the market was just picking up. So for the—so in their sense, like, people doing ephemeral things was just, like, tantamount to causing the downfall of, like, black economics—[laughs]—in the art world as we know them, you know?

You know, and plus it was new. It was like—it was like a kind of generational shift. It's always considered a little threatening, you know?

And there were these women, you know? I mean, and there was enough of a, I think, a hangover, because probably all of the sort of male-dominated black male artists who did political art were now getting positions in art schools, black and white. And so they were carrying over this kind of, you know, very Black Nationalist point of view, that art had to celebrate blackness and black people and all this other kind of stuff.

And part of that was that, you know, women were submissive. [Laughs.] And you know, like, the women I was talking about, they were dealing with subject matter that was anything but submissive, you know? So there was a kind of gender tinge, you know, to the whole thing also.

But, you know, it was kind of interesting, to sort of see how all this stuff sort of came together, you know, like, in the '80s, you know?

Oh, okay, so, long story short. So Leslie had been looking at new genres of black art, which included painting and things, but people who were moving into different kinds of subject matter. You know, very often, instead of doing political polemics, doing cultural polemics, you know, sort of in that sense.

And I think that somehow, if I remember correctly, she called me up, in one of our midnight phone calls—we used to singlehandedly support AT&T—[laughs]—we would always usually call each other around 11 or 12 o'clock at night, and then we'd do a lot of business and then go to sleep, you know? And so she had an opportunity to do a show at MICA's gallery. And she says, "You've been doing this research, I've been doing this research, let's put it together and do a big show, okay?" And I said, "Okay, terrific." And she had a great grant writer who worked with her. We put together this whole thing.

And then it was kind of a question of what to call the piece of the exhibition. And so I thought about it, and I guess—you know, because—I guess I had, you know, like—when I did the CAC show with Leon Golub, on the way to the opening with Kaylynn Sullivan, sort of flew to New Mexico, picked her up. We drove across to Birmingham, Alabama, where they were having an exhibition of Igbo art that was curated by Herbert Cole.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Herbert Cole?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Cole, C-O-L-E. And Alyson Pou, who I knew, P-O-U, who I knew from the New Museum was working down there. And she wanted—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sorry, I've—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The curator of the Igbo art?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Herbert Cole.

And then just—I think Alyson was working at the Birmingham—Alyson Pou was working at the Birmingham Museum.

Anyway, she was organizing a symposium and she wanted to include contemporary manifestations in African-American art that were similar to the Igbo art. And in the '80s, a lot of scholarship around African art switched from just objects into performance, because these things were used in rituals and ceremonies and things. And there were people like Margaret Drewal and Herbert Cole and Henry Drewal—and all these people were sort of, like, you know, sort of really changing, you know, and—how can one forget Robert Farris Thompson? You know, they were changing the whole way that you looked at African art. You know, they're mining, you know, like, an aesthetic point of view. Rowland Abiodun, who was one of the, sort of, first influential Africans in the field in this country—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sorry—how do you spell his name?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Rowland is A-B-I-O-D-U-N. Abiodun.

You know, these people were sort of really, you know, like, breaking it open from the Eurocentric point of view and sort of really looking at it from a kind of Afrocentrist kind of thing.

So they wanted—so Alyson knew I had been doing this research on black women performance artists, so she invited me to sort of, you know, do a performance there. And the title of the exhibition, which I thought was fabulous, was "Art as a Verb". Or, you know, with the whole thing. It was like, "Igbo art"—"Art as a Verb".

So I said to Leslie, I said, "Let's steal Herb Cole's title and call our exhibition "Art as a Verb." Because it was really—it was the whole idea that art was not a noun—a static thing—art was a verb, it was, like, a moving thing.

So we put that together, and we had it at the Rinehart Gallery at MICA. And then it came to New York, and it was split between the Studio Museum and the then-Metropolitan Life Gallery that was at that building down on 26th and Park.

I mean, it was, like, an interesting experience. I mean, poor Leslie had, you know, like—I'm coming up with the concepts with her and the whole thing, but she had the burden of dealing with the installation, and I would get this call and—goes, "So-and-so wants 200 pounds of cornmeal." And I went, "Oh my God." You know, because it was really one of those exhibitions where you, you know, you weren't borrowing objects, you were—if you like, it was really about process. So I guess that's why I ended up here at Met. I'd always been involved in process.

And so we had—you know, Kaylynn Sullivan was doing a kind of installation where the cornmeal was, like, grass. Senga Nengudi, who had been doing—did a wall—a room, where she sort of covered the wall with newspaper, and then at the top, stripped it down so it looked like the top of those little crowns they put on lamp chops. It was beautiful. And sprayed "bulimia" on it to sort of really talk about—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sprayed what on it?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: "Bulimia," to sort of talk about this kind of, you know, fusion of verbiage that comes at us.

Then, Jorge Rodriguez reconstructed a[n] installation he had done with George Abramson [ph] who had died recently. It was based on the Santeria religion. So it was like, you know, kind of—again, a kind of, you know, square space with candles and sort of symbols for the orisha.

But the installation had to have a live rooster. So Leslie, the night before—[laughs]—the opening, happened to do a television interview in Baltimore. It was making appeal for anybody who had a white cock. [Laughs.] I said, "You didn't—didn't you say rooster, Leslie?" She said, "No, I said white cock."

So this guy showed up with Rudy [ph], who stayed at the installation, and they put him in an enclosure with some dirt. And Rudy proceeded to crow incessantly, because the way—I have a video where I'm being interviewed, and at the moment I'm interviewing, Rudy is crowing—[laughs]. So I'm, like, in between the crowing going, "Okay, Rudy." But what he did was so interesting, was that, because, you know, he was deprived of his hen harem, he—in his frustration, he scratched the dirt. And when we took him out, we realized he had scratched the dirt in a perfectly symmetrical star formation. Multi—[inaudible]. I mean, it was just—

But the most interesting piece that had the longest history of controversy was David Hammons' piece.

Now, David—you know, we would—used to him selling snowballs, you know, creating, you know, like, these kinds of installations with hair and the whole thing. He comes and does this huge pastel drawing on the wall of Jesse Jackson as a blue-eyed blond man and puts in an American flag next to it, and has a legend that says, "How you like me now?" [*How Ya Like Me Now?* [1988]] Because it was the moment, it was '88, and Jesse was making his second run for the presidency. And everybody had an excuse why Jesse Jackson was not the "appropriate" black man to run. I mean, he was not Barack Obama. And largely it was because he wasn't Ivy League, he was a bootleg preacher, you know, and he talked in rhymes. [Laughs.] But the thing that was interesting was that I had a lot of even white friends who were more lefty who supported Jesse because he brought up things like outsourcing, the plight of the farmers. I mean, you know, he had a viable platform for this.

So I guess David was creating a piece that says, "Okay, I have eliminated, you know, the last objection you could have, you know, to a—I'm white now, so how do you like me now?" Well, that piece went on.

When we got to New York, the Studio Museum would not allow that piece to be shown. So, David, in his inimitable way, at the last minute, literally before—maybe the night before the opening, snuck into the Museum late while they were doing the installation and did a little wall piece that was made up of Kentucky Fried Chicken and gold chains, and hung it on the wall. [Laughs.] And we sort of said to the—[inaudible]—I said, "You should

have let him put up the Jesse Jackson, then you wouldn't have to deal with the fried chicken on the wall." [Laughs.]

He later—when Rick Powell did a show at the then-Washington Project for the Arts, which I understand is coming back—that was a great art organization. Remember, they were the ones, under the directorship of Jock Reynolds, took the [Robert] Mapplethorpe exhibition that was—you know—anyway, he did it in metal. And they put it—tried to put it—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What did he do in metal?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: He did the—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Are you talking about the Kentucky Fried Chicken—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, no, no. The Jesse Jackson piece. He sort of rendered in a kind of metal. And the idea was to put in the black community on a wall as a kind of three-dimensional mural. And the black people, you know, didn't understand the irony and they, you know, sort of it tore it down. So it was a kind of a notorious piece. And I've written about it, you know, very often because I think the whole kind of conceptual origins of the piece were absolutely brilliant. And then, you know, like, the kinds of reactions to it were even more telling, because I think what David Hammons did at that point was he hit at one of the key elements that sort of, you know, framed how black subject matter, you know, has fared in the contemporary art world, because in the black community, there is not much of an appetite for ambiguity and irony.

And so, you know, that sort of really—and that sort of came up, you know, when Jerry Saltz reviewed the "Black Romantic" show that, you know, I had suggested to Thelma to do when we were up at the Studio Museum, because that kind—you know, and Thelma, you know, was very upfront about, you know, her discomfort with it, but she—there was a kind of recognition that this art had a lot of traction in the black community, because it was self-affirming, it—you know, it fed into romantic, you know, aspects. We would call it kitsch, but, you know, within this—in the context of postmodernism, it was perfect, you know, like, in that sense.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Let me ask you—going back to, I guess, the late '80s, early '90s—so you're talking about all this involvement of doing exhibitions outside the Met.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Right. Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Women, feminism. Then, first exhibition that you did at the Met that was really your own—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: —was Stuart Davis.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —was Stuart Davis. [They laugh.] So why Stuart Davis? And what approach did you take? What was the—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Stuart Davis was—yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was this key piece of research you were trying to develop for that exhibition?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Stuart Davis was an assignment.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was a what?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: An assignment from Bill Lieberman. I don't know why, you know, Bill thought about Stuart Davis. But at the time, Bill Agee and a team of scholars was working at Salander O'Reilly Gallery on the catalogue raisonné. So it was, like, Stuart Davis' time.

And Davis—so when I got this assignment I thought about it and I said to Bill, I said, "I really don't think I need—I should do this by myself." "Well, why not?" you know. I said, "Because there's too many Stuart Davis scholars around." I said, Diane Kelder, you know, who wrote one of the first books on Stuart Davis is my professor at the grad center, Agee has his whole team of scholars working on the catalogue raisonné, and I'm just going to step into the floor and say, "Hi, I'm doing the Stuart Davis show." I said, "I don't think so."

So I suggested that Bill Agee and I co-curate the show. And I was always interested in Davis because he was one of those kind of white male artists who didn't fit in anywhere. And I remembered seeing his work in—when I was in grad school in 1970 when Henry [Geldzahler] did the centenary show, New York Painting and Sculpture was it 1940-1970 ["New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970"]. And you know, you had the sense that Davis didn't, you know, fit in.

And then of course I knew that he was very involved in jazz and, you know, he'd hung out in the barrel houses in

Newark. So his contact with black culture was very interesting to me so I figured this would be a good, good, good project. So—

JUDITH RICHARDS: To curate on your own?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, no, to curate—to be involved anyhow. But I was never going to curate the show on my own. It just—you know, I'm always very sensitive about wading into, like, other scholars' territory if you don't have, you know, your credentials.

So Agee and I—you know, I started meeting with Agee and we got to be really great friends. And what happened was that we made the decision early on that we were not going to curate this exhibition from books, because there plenty of books. Karen Wilkin had just published a big book, we had Diane Kelder's book, there was—oh, and John—Jack—John Lane had done a Stuart Davis exhibition back in 1978 ["Stuart Davis: Art and Art Theory"], but this is now 10 years later, at the Brooklyn Museum.

So we said, let's sort of like survey the terrain, figure out what we want to put in the show, and then if there are any pieces that we want to consider that haven't seen the light of day for a while we should go see them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you know why—well, you said Bill Lieberman assigned it because of the work on the catalogue raisonné. Were there also paintings that he was trying to acquire for the Met by Stuart Davis?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, no.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Any works that hadn't been on view—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, we had some Stuart Davis in the collection already. No, it wasn't that. Who knows, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: He was someone overlooked at that time.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, I think so. And I think it was probably—I'm trying to sort of think—you know, an interesting moment, you know, to sort of talk about an artist who was interested in this liminal space between abstraction and figuration. And Bill had a way of, sort of, really picking up on the sort of the distaff [ph] side of the art world. Who knows? I mean, you know, he never shared anything but, you know, I got the assignment and I ran with it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you were talking about how you and William Agee decided to approach the project.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: So we, you know, sat down and we spent hours going through the catalogue raisonné and sort of really starting to create a kind of checklist, what we really needed to have and what we didn't. And in the middle of it, you know, like, in one of our meetings Bill said, wouldn't it be fun if you could get a complete record of all his murals? So we said, okay. [Laughs.] And we did.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Bill Lieberman said that?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Bill Lieberman said that. So we said, oh, okay. [Laughs.] So we knew that the Williamsburg mural [*Swing Landscape* [1938]] was in Indiana, we knew about the one in Des Moines [*Allée* [1955]], then the Carnegie one he had done for the Carnegie Institute—no, no, I think it was for the Heinz Corporation [*Composition Concrete* [1957]], was now in the Carnegie thing. So getting some of the—and then we had on loan, long-term loan, which I think it's still on long-term loan, from the city the WNYC mural [Untitled [1939]] and MoMA had the mural from Radio City [*Men Without Women* [1932]], from the men's lounge in Radio City.

So we just went and we looked at everything, and a lot of the stuff was not on view, you know, so it would be a chance to sort of really, you know, bring some of the stuff, you know, out into the sunlight that hadn't seen it in a long time.

So Bill and I, Bill Agee and I, you know, we traveled all over the country, it was great, between 1988 and 1990. It was a great time. And we almost hit an interesting snag because the show was originally scheduled for 1990 and was at the same moment that Kirk Varnedoe was organizing his "High-Low" show ["High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture"]. So I kind of realized in a flash that all their great Stuart Davises would be in that show. And I was like, "Oh, damn." So we eventually changed it.

But I have a funny story, which you're going to like; I like to tell about the story. This was also the moment when the Andrew Crispo affair had sort of come to light. And Andrew, you know, finally, you know, had sort of been put in jail but mostly for taxes, not for all the gory details. And there were at least two paintings; I think it was an *Odol* [1924] painting—

JUDITH RICHARDS: A what?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Odol, O-D-O-L. There was—you know, one of his early advertising things. Odol was a cleaning—I think it was a cleaning substance. And I think it was one of the Paris paintings. But I mean, really key paintings were in his collection. So I said to Bill, I said, "Well do we know where the paintings are? I mean we have to have them for our show. You know, curator-man, for our show. "

So Bill said, "Well, they're kind of in receiverships and they're administered by a lawyer" and then some other guy, I forget what they called him, and I said, "Well, you've been in touch with them?" and he said, "No." And I said, "Oh, well, give me their names and addresses." And I'm kind of feeling, you kind of sit down there for a minute and you sort of have this kind of Catholic school moral crisis and then you say, "Damn it, I'm a curator. I need those paintings." [Laughs.] So I typed these letters to these people, got a response and said, yes we'd be happy to do it. Even got a call from Andrew Crispo in prison—[they laugh]—saying how happy he was to have the paintings there. It was a riot.

So I can't remember why Kirk Varnedoe called me. It must have been about "High-Low" and maybe some loans from the Met, you know, because our Stuart Davises, blah, blah, blah, blah. So Kirk says to me, very casually, "Oh, I guess we're going to fight over," I think he said Cincinnati or Cleveland, you know, like my memory's not really good. But there's another version of *Odol*. The one that Crispo has was a very iconic, centralized image.

But there was another version of *Odol* where it was kind of like this outline-y kind of still life with other elements. You know, not quite as dramatic. And it was either Cleveland or Cincinnati, I remember a C museum. He says, "Well, we'll have to fight over the other *Odol* painting because the Crispo one is not available." And I said, "Oh, no, we don't have to fight over that. I have a commitment to the loan of the Crispo one." I heard Kirk Varnedoe go, "You do?" and I said, "Yeah." [Laughs.]

So then, when we decided to move our thing, you know, like, back, you know, I sort of left a message for Crispo—for Kirk, and I said, listen if you want the contacts, you can have it for your show and I can have it for my show, we're going to postpone it. And we do. But it was like, kind of like key moment when the little peon curator at the Met, you know, how you've gotten this loan.

You know, I mean, that's the kind of person I am. I mean, if I need to get something I will find some way to do it that, you know, try to keep within the bounds of the legal system, you know. [Laughs.] But it was like, you know, it was so interesting because you know, that's the kind of aspect of curatorial work you don't learn about in school. You know, how to do that.

So anyway Bill Agee and I go, we romped, we—oh God, we went everywhere, Chicago, we went to New Orleans, he went to Dallas, I went to Norman, OK, we went to Reno, Santa Barbara, L.A.—did we go to Seattle? I mean it was—I mean we really covered it; maybe we did something like Virginia. Of course we went to Indiana, you know, for the Williamsburg mural.

So we put together this show. And so what I decided to do was that, you know, like, what I looked at in his career and looking at the expertise in different period, I realized I could engage, you know, about six or seven scholars to write different essays. So Robert—I think it was Robert Hunter who wrote the early work, I forget who did the—you know I'm just—'20s—get this stuff.

I decided to take the '30s because I was interested in this whole thing of the political art, you know, and going through—you know, I was just talking to Michael Brenson who's working on David Smith, and he was—somehow Stuart Davis came up, and I said, "Ha, I have files for you, I was just about to throw them out." So I shipped him like a lot of files.

But we were talking about the fact that, you know, for such a prolific artist, Stuart Davis, you know, getting involved with the American abstract artists and the Artists' Union at the time and, you know, like, really fighting against all the conservative influences in the art world. We never knew when he had time to paint. [Laughs.] Because the writing is prolific, the thoughts, the sort of like the political positions, the different types of things. It was really a fascinating kind of topic, and you know, we had lots of contact with his son Earl, we went to—Earl still had the studio intact on 67th Street. And—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Earl Davis?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Earl Davis. Yes. And it was really quite a project. And we ended up with all the murals. And there were two murals on the *History of Communications* [1939] that I think he had done for the '39 World's Fair, that didn't exist but we had the drawings for those.

So we had all the murals and—[laughs]—I remember at one point Philippe said, "175 works, that's too big." and I said, "But you just had a Degas show that had 356." He said, "You counted the pictures of the Degas show?" I

said, "Philippe, that was a big show—yeah, I counted the pictures."

Because there was always this sense that 20th century could not be, like, as important as European paintings or even American paintings. So, you know, there was a kind of way in which I was very conscious of scale, as a way to sort of assert the importance, you know, of something.

And so we put the show together and I have to say, you know, it was, like, one of the—I think it was like the Stuart Davis exhibition to kill all Stuart Davis exhibitions. And I'm surprised there haven't—at this time there needs to be another one, somebody else looking at in a different way. But we had seven essays, seven chapters, and then I worked it, I did entries on all 175 works. Each work had its own entry. It was quite a production.

And I was doing this in between having surgery. [Laughs.] And I remember I was timing my surgery. I said, "Okay now, listen. If I have the surgery then, then I have to work all summer on this and I need to finish that and then I can have my surgery and then I can work on that." You know, and, you know, it was just like one of those Herculanian, you know, types of situations.

But when we put the show together it was really kind of fantastic. And I think one of the most gratifying things was that recently somewhere somebody called me up and in one of those *Time*/CNN websites, they had—somebody had asked a series of young designers what publications had really influenced them. And one of them said my Stuart Davis catalogue. Which I thought was great, because, I mean, there are a lot of Stuart Davis things out there. So that was kind of nice, that 20 years later, you know, somebody, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's fantastic.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, it really is kind of fantastic.

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JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Lowery Sims in New York City for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc three.

We were just finishing talking about Stuart Davis, and I wanted to go to another big project you did in—or that opened in 1997, on the work of Pousette-Dart. And tell me how that came to be.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: The Pousette-Dart exhibition ["Richard Pousette-Dart, 1916-1992" [1997-98]] was really a long-simmering project, because I had met Richard in 1982. And we—immediately, Richard and Evelyn and I got on like a house afire.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Evelyn is his wife?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: His wife, right. And you know, I was interested in, you know, his whole relationship to abstract expressionism. I was still interested in the whole way that, you know—I think, again, it sort of feeds into—you know, one of the sort of intellectual exercises that I was—I had been concerned with in my career is how people get, you know, like, into the books, and into the canons, and into the whole situation. And I mean, we haven't even talked—did we talk about Wifredo Lam? I mean, you know, my—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, we did. Okay.

And I think that—you know, it was another thing. I mean, here's this guy, you know, starts out one of the youngest of the group, did a painting in 1942 that is acknowledged as really setting out the parameters of abstract expressionism in terms of symbolic image and scale—I mean, painting bigger than Pollock was painting at the time—but has ended up shunted really to the backwaters of abstract expressionism.

And so we then began a very intense, you know, kind of 15-year project, that, you know, like, of having a dialogue of trying to get Bill Lieberman, like, interested in his work, particularly to purchase this one painting which was called *Symphony Number One, The Transcendental* [1942-42], and to sort of talk to Richard and Evelyn about a substantial contribution of his work, you know, to the museum. And I mean, the dialogue went back and forth and back and forth and back and forth.

And I kind of realized, after a while, that, you know, Bill was very much firmly associated with Jackson Pollock. And I, you know, I guess I—it was the first time I guess I was a bit simple-minded about these things that, you know, that the struggle for placement in the firmament of the sort of postwar American art scene was very pitched. And I had faced it with Clyfford Still, you know, so this is my second go-round with the abstract expressionists. And, like, for me it was—I guess, naively, I was in puzzles why at this point in time, say, 30-40 years later, it was still such a big deal in that, you know, we had to be intractable about these things.

So it took a long time to sort of really have this negotiation. In the process, I just, you know, went up to Suffern and hung out with, you know, Richard and Evelyn. We talked a lot about art, about his philosophy about art, had lots of dinners of pasta primavera, you know? And that went on until about, you know, until he died in 1992.

And then I think—you know, I said Evelyn, I said: "You know, we've got to, like, you know, get serious about this. We've got to really sit down and figure it out." So with her and, you know, her son Joanna—I mean her daughter, Joanna Pousette-Dart and son, Jon Pousette-Dart, we sort of, you know, like, came up with a proposal, you know, for the Met, a kind of purchase gift proposal that sort of went through, like, '96, '97, when the museum did purchase the painting. And there were several paintings and works on paper that were promised as a gift. And Bill and I decided that this would be a great time to really do a show focused on the gift and what was in the collection and a few other things. And it was a moment when, you know, Richard was having a little bit of—his work was generating a little bit of interest and the Whitney had done a kind of reconstruction of his studio, so the time seemed right. And we put together, you know, the show.

And I think that one of the things that I really enjoy about being a curator is the installation process.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: You were the sole curator on that show?

JUDITH RICHARDS: I was the sole curator on that show.

And I think that—you know, like, you learn so much about art, you know, by putting it into a kind of public context. Like, I learned when I installed the Horace Pippin show ["I Tell My Heart: The Art of Horace Pippin"] that we took from the Pennsylvania Academy that even the smallest little self-portrait could take up space on a wall, that you didn't have to cram things. I learned that, you know, with Stuart Davis, that when I had late work, and I had the works that were in two distinct palettes—one was orange, green, black, maybe some yellow, and the other was red, white, French blue and black—that you don't hang the paintings, like, according to color palettes, it doesn't work—that you just hang them the way in the sequence he painted them. And then it all falls together.

You learn in—I mean, for me, it was like learning, in an installation when you're doing a show like that, to allow the artist's logic to guide you. And it's not always you as the curator. You know, and that's a very kind of interesting, humbling, learning experience, but one that, you know, I've sort of really benefited from.

You know, and you know, like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you learn that intuitively?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: It was just intuitive, because you like—[laughs]—we kept arranging, arranging. That's like, jeez. This is not working. Why is this not working? It just looks like crap. And then you sit there and go, "All right, let's just do it chronologically." And so, you know, like, my technician, by this time, was through with me, and they go, *plum, plum, plum* [ph], and then they go—[sighs, laughs]. It works.

It was the same thing with Pippin. I mean, he had done two series: one on John Brown [1942] and one on Abe Lincoln [c. 1943]. It was only about six or seven paintings. And I was trying to put all the Lincoln ones together and all the John Brown ones together, and it just didn't make sense. And then—because they weren't painting in a series like Jacob Lawrence did. I mean, Jacob Lawrence, you paint it in a series, you hang it in a series.

And so I just, you know, like, did it chronologically—he did this in '42, '43." And it worked; it was like—because, you know, you sort of begin to sort of see almost like the artist's mind, how, you know, working on one painting informs another one, and it sort of goes, even though it's a different subject matter, you know, in that sense.

So that was really, you know, something that I'd learned with Pousette-Dart is that you don't crowd the paintings, you know? So, I mean, you'd have—we'd have, like, you know, like, one painting on a wall. We also, you know, chose a very daring color: Instead of putting it on this sort of gallery white, we put it on brown walls, which worked. And I think, when we went to the back, we sort of changed the color to white.

And it was just fantastic, because I think that, you know—and then the other thing I got to do was I decided—we had, you know, discussed with the family a topic around this work that hadn't been covered, so we hired Stephen Polcari to write about this whole idea of the sacred.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Polcara [ph]?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Polcari. P-O-L-C-A-R-I. Stephen had done a book on abstract expressionism. He had sort of shunted Pousette-Dart off into the corner? And he was having—he was repenting his ways. [Laughs.] And so he did a fantastic one, just sort of tracing all those currents and ideas about the sacred and totemic, you know, in the '40s, and how it related to Richard's work.

And then I got—I took about 100 of about 200 notebooks that he kept that Evelyn, you know, pulled out for me,

and did a[n] essay on his writings on art. And it was, like, the most interesting experience, because most of the time the notebooks were not dated, these were not individual—this was like one long 40-year meditation that went on. And certain different ways that things were put and, you know, like, and things—but you know, pulling out his writings on abstract expressionism, his writings on color field painting, and his writings on photography, his writings on the use of symbols and things like that.

And so, it was, like, you know, really, you know, kind of interesting experience, and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where are those now? All those notebooks?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: They're still in the estate waiting for somebody to do something with them. I think I'm the only person who's really, actually—I mean, other scholars have quoted from them here and there, but I'm the only one who has sort gone through, you know, that many, you know. And I think it's kind of interesting, because I think he's, you know, sort of like the quintessential artist's artist. And so many, you know, like—I think art students even today, when, you know, he might be considered old-fashioned, could learn a lot from just listening to him.

So that was like a really important exhibition for me, because it filled in, I think, a spot in the—at the Met's: you know, a really excellent representation of abstract expressionism.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Moving a little bit in a different—going to the roof—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Right. Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Tell me about the—you did many roof installations, but there was one in '99. Was it the first? The [Magdalena] "Abakanowicz on the Roof" [1999]—that wasn't the first?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, no, no. I had been doing the roofs since '87.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, right, right, we had talked about that. Yes. With Ellsworth Kelly and all that.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay. What about that installation? Did you pick that artist? And if so, why?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, I didn't pick the artist. I think Bill had sort of really—chose it.

And it was interesting, you know, because I really admired—I had admired and loved her work ever since I had seen it in 1970 in a wall-hanging show at MoMA, where, you know, like, those big sort of—Abakans, I think they call them—she called them. Oh, God. I mean, they changed my life, you know, in that wall-hanging show, because, you know, at one point, I did some weaving, you know.

And so I was very excited to sort of work with her. And being an artist and a very strong opinion, she really determined what could happen, and what, like, what would do. And it was—you know, getting into, like, the politics of it, because I went with—I went with Bob Buck, who was working at Marlborough —we went over to Bologna, Italy, where she was having certain things—some new work cast, and she wanted to show it to me, and we had—well, we had such fun, I mean, it was just a fabulous time. I mean, not only did we eat well, but we went down to the countryside and saw some of the smaller Italian villages around Bologna. And there was one place, whose name I'm forgetting, where there's a sculpture garden that had her work. It was just absolutely, you know, a totally fabulous time.

And we sort of, you know, like, sent her, you know, like, our design. And once we identified the works, and we had the dimensions and everything, we sent the—one of the designers at the Met did a kind of layout of the piece. She would not be able to get to New York until right—like two or three days before the opening. You know, so we worked it all out.

And one of the greatest pieces, we were going to have a long pedestal—I'm trying to think—it was huge, it was, like, 30, 40 feet, with this army of small figures, you know, like, in close formation, you know, that was going to be sort of like the capstone, and then these huge animal heads she had cast that were being sent from Bologna, and then some smaller pieces.

I mean, it wasn't a whole lot of things. But then, you know, like, this was an interesting experience, because she was, you know, ferociously—she's ferociously protective of her work. So when she got to the Met, two, three days, we've built all this stuff, it's all installed, and then, you know, like, she—you know, it was like this moment, she wanted to change, like, the—there was too much space between the feet of the kids and the edge of the pedestal. You know, maybe it was, like, six inches, and she wanted it flush. I mean, there's no way we could've built it.

And it was like this whole kind of negotiations that one had to do, and getting the administration on the side, and sort of very delicately sort of negotiating this with, you know, with an artist, because it was just not economically nor logistically feasible, and, like, dealing with her feelings, and dealing with, sort of, like, the bureaucracy of the Met. I mean, that was a very interesting, you know, kind of experience.

Like, one of the things—you know, this is an interesting transition to the Studio Museum, because one of the things that—when we did shows with living artists, and Bill Lieberman did a lot of them, from Lucian Freud, to Ron, R.B. Kitaj, who are people that he knew for a long time, but he would not let them in the installations at all. Whereas MoMA and Whitney it was the artist did their installations.

So when I got to the Studio Museum and I hired help, Thelma and we hired Christine [Kim], you know, like, and we were dealing with a lot of living artists, I used to sort of hear all these things—oh, God, so-and-so's just being, you know, just impossible. So it was always interesting because I would go down and I'd go—you know, because I knew the artists, you know. And since I was a little older, you know, I was kind of like this kind of mother figure. So I go down and I go, "So-and-so, I hear you're giving my staff a hard time." I said, "You know, we really got to get this going."

And I remember, you know, one of them said, "Okay, Lowery, okay, okay. Just one diva act, just one." I said, "All right just keep that diva act to—" [laughs.] And my staff was, like, looking at me astonished because, you know, they came from institutions where you never, you know, sort of question the artist. [Laughs.]

And, you know, that's sort of the one thing I sort of learned, that—you know, this kind of interesting balance between institutional capabilities and capacity; and artistic needs and demands. And you always have to sort of, you know, like—I mean, it's important; you always have to be clear and have everything laid out before you get there because otherwise it's unhappy.

And now it's like economic straits, you know. Like, working on this show of African art ["The Global Africa Project"] there's one particular artist I had to sort of let the process go to where he was going to go and say, "Okay, we have now progressed from something that I budgeted this much for, to something like this." I say, "You know in this economic environment I have to be responsible to my institution and I cannot go over budget. So what are we going to do?"

And we find a solution, you know. But, you know, like, this whole idea, you know, that you can negotiate with artists I really think is kind of very interesting. And, you know, I have a friend, Amalia Mesa-Bains, she always goes, "Oh, Lowery, you know we artists. We're going to like push it to the limit." [Laughs.] I said, "I know, and it's the job of the curator to sort of, like, sort of dampen it down a bit." And, you know, I've been in instances where I tell the artist, you know, like, this body of work is not working. You know, like, I'm sorry if you're pissed off that I don't like it but I just don't. And—but I'm sure you'll find another curator who'll think you're a genius and everything will be fine.

And I'll get a call a later and they go well, you know, you might be right, I have a new body of work. And I'll walk in, I go, this is much better, you know? I said, because I tell people, I said, "Look. I have a databank of 40 years of images; I have enough of an artist's sensibility to understand how you put things together and when form and color balance, when scale is appropriate to the subject matter and stuff. And I have very strong opinions about it. I don't necessarily voice them all the time, but if you ask me I will give you, you know, my opinion. I'm not going to be Clement Greenberg coming in and telling you to cut your paintings in half and do all that kind of stuff. But if you ask me, you know, that's the way it's going to do.

And you know, I think that's really the, kind of, fun. And I've had some really good collaborations with artists that call you and go, "I hate to say it but you're right." You know, but I think they also know that I've done enough hands-on art that I'm not talking from an uninformed, you know, position.

I've had to grapple with, you know, how do you balance that, how do you do that, what's the difference between the day where you have, like, this kind of like burst of creativity and then you have to sort of settle down into the day-to-day working, you know, working out of, like your compositions and your pieces and your works of art. So that's always, like, kind of fun.

So, in the—when we got to the Studio Museum it was really, you know, about that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Tell me about that transition from the Met to the Studio Museum. Why did you do it then and why did you do it there? To there.

MS. SIM: Right. It was kind of interesting; the Studio Museum transition was very interesting. It sort of came at a time, I call it my mid-life crisis job—[laughs]—I had turned 50; I had finished my doctorate, I was five—four or five years past my doctorate; I had achieved the rank of curator at the Metropolitan Museum and I had really achieved everything that I had set for myself.

So I didn't know quite what to do. You know, I did have sort of like a kind of postpartum crisis, which very often people talk about that. So, you know, so I'd finished my dissertation in '95 and then it was sort of eased a little bit because then I immediately began preparations for, you know, trying to get into a book and it was finally published in 2002. But, I was sort of doing little projects here and there and, but not really knowing where I was going because I'd had these goals and I didn't have anything past it.

So it was like the fall of '99, and I knew that Kinshasha Conwill was leaving the Studio Museum and there was immediately a buzz in the various corners of the art world about what was going on. And it was a moment also when, you know, Max Anderson had come and Thelma Golden didn't have a portfolio in his new scheme for the Whitney and Peter Norton had hired her to sort of coordinate things.

So I knew Thelma was, you know, really available and I had assumed that they would hire Thelma because I never wanted to a museum director. I had always said that I would never get married and I would never be a museum director. [Laughs.] And so when I got the call I said, "Okay, so who are your candidates?"—you know, I got a call—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You got a call thinking that they were asking your advice?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Right. And they said, "Well, we're actually wondering if you're interested." And I said, "No." I said, you know, "What about Thelma, what about—" you know, I mean, there was any number of people who could have, you know, taken it at that moment. And they said, "Well, we want Thelma to come and work and—but we, you know, like, we think we need someone who has a little more experience." I said, "Well, I don't know if I have that much experience."

And so then I thought about it and it coincided with a moment when my father was dying, so I was dealing with that, and I kind of realized that when I had come to the Met in—when I was 23 years old I was sassy, you know, I was—nothing was going to stop me, I took big chances, turned down one job on the premise I would get a job at the Met. So this was like a time to take a chance again.

So I said, "Okay, I'll come but, you know, I'm hiring Thelma, that's my first hire." And we set out to sort of take this institution—I mean, we had lots of conversations about what the Studio was, had been, what the role of it could be now, you know, in this sort of post-modern age, was there a need for, you know, an organization any longer that dealt with black art.

And we just decided that, you know, we would let artists self-define, you know, in terms of projects, that while there was greater representation that—you know, in the art world as a whole of African, you know, African artists and Caribbean artists, that we could afford them a place 24/7. When Sandra Jackson was brought on to do education she just created this programmatic aspect that was just amazing in terms of it.

And I had specifically said to Thelma that she wouldn't just be curating, that she would be a deputy director for exhibitions and programs because I really wanted those two aspects of the museum to be closely aligned, because I had worked so much at the Met where we planned for exhibitions and education was always like a kind of throw-away, you know—an afterthought.

I mean, even though it was very active, but I—you know, you never got the sense with the exhibitions—it was only because I had been in education that I was always, "Is education coming to the planning meetings?" You know, blah, blah, blah, you know, "How are we funding the exhibition program?" you know.

So it always—you know, like, I really wanted them to be, you know, together. And together the three of us really sat down and thought about how we could just, not only energize the museum—because certainly we could do the programs and Thelma, you know, being the fabulous curator she was, and she had her fingers on all the hot things going on, and Sandra did too. But also to sort of give the museum programmatically a structure, you know, in the public's mind so they would come to sort of expect when the museum would have a shift-over.

So we decided to put the museum on a quarterly schedule and that would be the basis for when we—and then we wanted to sort of have a regular publication which grew from a foldout, you know, to a full-blown magazine, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Very handsome.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: And, you know, it was really Thelma and Sandra who sort of put that all together. I just kept saying to them, "Just tell me what you're doing and I'll find the money for it," you know. People always kept saying, like, "Well, what are your plans for the exhibitions?" I said, "I don't plan the exhibitions, I really give that to Thelma and Sandra does the programming," because I kind of realized that the Studio Museum, there was always this kind of, you know, like the Met, there was this generic kind of institutional identity.

But I think by the '80s and '90s, you know, like, we were getting used to the fact that there were strong curatorial voices. So I wanted people to sort of have a sense that this was the golden, like, sort of, you know, era of exhibitions and things like that. And also, I just didn't have time to micromanage everything.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You were heavily involved in fundraising?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I was heavily involved. When I got to the museum—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was it what you expected?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: It was worse. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: And had you said to them, the board, when you came to the museum that you would be there for any particular length of time only?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, I sort of basically thought five years. And then, you know, like, when I found out that their—then I realized their accreditation, the reaccreditation would be up in '97, so I said, "Okay, seven years at the most." And then when I found out they had gotten a two-year extension, I said, "Oh, you know, this is it."

So it was an exhausting process, you know. Walked in, there was three-quarters of million dollars of just vendor debt. So the first year was sort of really working through several organizational things. You know, first we start the program together. Then we had to sort of negotiate with long-time funders that things were not going to be the way they always were. I mean, it never—it used to blow my mind that they were shocked that we were going to do something new. I said, "Well, isn't that what happens when you get a new administration?" But there was a surprising amount of resistance.

Then we had to sort of figure out how to get the museum technologically into the 21st century. When I got there people had personal computers, there was one computer in the commons area that had access to the Internet on AOL [America Online] and nobody could use it without permission of the director. So I sat down—and then there was a woman who had been functioning as an adjunct curator who I found out was really a computer—conceptually, a computer whiz.

So I said to her, "I know you want to be an adjunct curator, sweetie, but I need you to do the computers," because, you know, she was—there was this program that was with Columbia and what was then Bell-Atlantic. And they had given monies to, I think, four organizations in Harlem—it was us, the Y [Young Men's Christian Association], I can't remember the others—to sort of be centers that would sort of deal with what was then called the digital divide; you know, the lack of access to technology in poorer neighborhoods.

So I found out that, you know, like, our, you know, participation had been dismal; we had wasted a lot of time. So I had to, sort of, you know, find out that, you know, Bell-Atlantic was not inclined to, sort of, give the third installment on a $300,000 grant, because the deliverables had not been met, ay-yi-yi. And then—but, you know, at the same time we had to sort of, you know, figure out how to do it.

So Deirdre Scott , who was the technology person, she went out and found some technology consultants and we—I had innumerable meetings with the staff to sort of figure out what kinds of connectivity we needed, what kinds of computer programs would solve those—because, you know, like, they were younger than me. I mean, most of my colleagues at the Studio were 15 to 20 years younger than me so they knew much—a lot more about than I did.

But it's funny because even at the Met when I was chair of the forum of curators and conservators, I did the first survey of computer programs in the mid-'80s, you know, just to sort of—or maybe it was the early '90s—just to figure out what programs we were—yes, we must have been mid-'80s.

And then I was a guinea pig for a program that a volunteer had brought in. That volunteer happened to be Pam Sanders, who was the daughter of Emily and Jerry Spiegel, who were very important collectors in the '80s. And I was, like, the guinea pig for Jay Hoffman's Museum System, which was then adopted by the whole museum.

So even though I don't know a bit from a byte and still, like, have the most rudimentary of computer skills, I've always been involved as a catalyst—you know, like—I—which I think is totally hilarious—because one knows what needs to be done and, you know, you find the people to do it.

So we conceived of way to sort of give everybody computers on a kind of lend-lease program. We leased everything, you know, and we made the painful transition of the finance from—remember the Y2K thing? Well, we found out that, you know, ours kept snapping back, and then finally the consultant who was charging us an awful lot of money admitted that we were—should have gone on one system than on the other system, and they

hadn't told us, and so I fired them and—you know.

Then we spent a long time sort of getting a new financial system, you know, like altogether, and getting a handle on the budget because very often the museum would get one big grant and then that would be used for operations. So I had to sort of start doing budgeting that sort of, like, you know, broke down curatorial, education, collection expenses and stuff, and very often that involved me very personally taking payment orders—POs, forms—for a year and just sort of making them in piles and sort of seeing what was being charged for what task to sort of come up with a kind of budget—I mean, it was just—[laughs]—because no one else would do it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You didn't have any financial person on the staff?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: They wouldn't do it. [Laughs.] Because they couldn't, you know, like—and it took me about four years to find the right financial person because when you put out a call for—you know, you realize that people nowadays take jobs according to how they feel it's going to advance their careers.

And in the beginning there wasn't much to commend the Studio Museum. I mean, I had to sort of talk to the trustees and the staff about how we were pushing our financial future in front of us because if we didn't take the chance to put out certain kinds of expenditures to change things and sort of create excitement about the museum, we weren't going to attract the right funders, additional funders or staff. It took me four years to find the right development person and also the right CFO [chief financial officer].

JUDITH RICHARDS: How was it to, for the first time as a director, be dealing with the board? Was that—that must have been somewhat of a learning curve to help them understand what their roles were, to be clear in your mind what your role was, make sure that nobody's stepping over, which could be problematic, especially into program areas. And the key thing that directors often have the greatest struggle is to get them to do—help you with fundraising.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Right. It was kind of interesting because when I got to the Studio, I mean—I didn't have a freaking idea of you know, like how to be a director—but I realized that I'd had all these experiences of the Met that let me know what—how things should be or ideally could be—and I'd had enough of an experience dealing with trustees because, remember, I had that period for almost 20 years when I was running the 20th Century Art Department, so that meant I was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: For two years.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: For two years—so that meant I was going to board meetings, to make—to do acquisitions; I was sitting in on staff, you know, like on board meetings and things. So I kind of, you know, like, had a sense of what, you know, needed to be happening.

And also, I think I was just old enough and experienced enough that I was close to their age and maybe older than some of them, so that they, you know—we were able to sort of have, you know, like discussions to sort of really deal with ideas.

Like, for instance, when I came, there was this kind of vague capital campaign that was supposed to be about matching a grant from the Ford Foundation for stabilization. It was $750,000 of a million dollars. Two-fifty [$250,000] had already been spent, you know, for administration, and there was reams of paper, and there was a consultant, and nobody was—and I said, "Well, who's calling?" No, there was scripts, and all this kind of stuff—and I kind of went—"You know what? There is no capital campaign." [Laughs.]

It took me about six months to talk them down from that. I said, "This has to be raised from individuals; haven't we identified individuals?" So, you know, like—and I had to sort of talk them down from things that had to be covered by the staff. But, at the same time, I had to have the right staff in place so that they would feel confident that their work was being done. And what happened was that, you know, I made friends with a dynamic woman who—named Gayle Atkins—and that's G-A-Y-L—[laughs]—Atkins.

JUDITH RICHARDS: G-A-Y-L-E?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: G-A-Y-L-E.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Atkins.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: And she later became a trustee, but she came to me—I sort of—we sort of got friends just as I was coming to the Studio Museum, and she arrived the second day. I was at the job, and she said, "What can I do?" And I said, "You can run my gala."

And I knew she had run the gala before, and the Studio Museum Gala was sort of like, you know, on a downwards

spiral in terms of you know, gross income, and everything like that, and so—gross and net income. And so we worked on it together. I mean, it was like—you know. I mean, she taught me, you know, like, how to close a deal to sort of do the—she opened up her Rolodex, and the last gala had—before I came—had grossed $350,000.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And net?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I don't know. It was—you know. With Gayle, we grossed over $600,000 and netted $500,000, and it was like a total shock to everybody.

And then I began to sort of say, "All right. We have this $750,000, and everybody seems paralyzed in matching. I'm going to take $100,000 of the gala income and poured it towards the match because what was happening was that there were two grants that people kept shuffling money back and forth, so that you weren't adding any money. When a report came due, you'd shuffle the money from that bank account to this one, so that they—you know, the whole idea was to give you a match, give you more money. And when I kind of figured that out, I went, "God, I'm out a million dollars, aren't I?" And then they said, "Yes."

So I started doing that and, you know, putting it into the account, and it was individuals, so I made sure—you know, it wasn't from corporate—you know, like support and all that kind of thing—and I did that for two years in a row, and then I went—I said to one of the trustees, "We have to go out and raise this money."

And I got a real lesson on how much people felt the Studio Museum could get from individuals. I went back, made a report to the committee, and then Gordon Davis and I went out, and in three months matched all the money. And Ray McGuire, who's the chair, came with the last amount. And it was just sort of activating this stuff, you know, instead of—I mean, that's—you know, like, you know, I hate stagnation. [Laughs.] It drives me—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Ray McGuire was the chairman of the board?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: He's the chairman of the board at the time. He was on the search committee who had approached me, and then he became chairman of the board when I came, a year after I took—you know, started at the Studio.

So the great thing about the Studio is—it was that we had this board that was committed to change, committed—they added a lot of people on the board who were, like, Ann Tenenbaum, Anne Ehrenkranz, and there was a group of them—Carol [Sutton] Lewis, Kathy Chenault—you know, like, so we had, you know, probably one of the most affluent boards for a black institution maybe in the country. And these people contributed—they contributed time, they contributed resources—and they were very committed from the very beginning.

I remember the first—I never had, really, a kind of interview. I sort of basically said to them, "Look. You know who I am; you want—you know, like, you guys have been—I, you know, I knew a lot about the—you know, like, how the Studio knew—worked because I was very involved with them, like, as in a consultant and I'd do programs; I was friends with things; I said, "You people take forever." And I said, "Here's the deal. You want me as the curator? You go to the meeting of the board next year—next week. You figure it out; you say yes or nay; and then I come. I am not doing interviews, I'm not doing anything; you know why you're calling me—the whole thing—and then I'm hiring Thelma. That's it."

And so they did that. So my real interview was a staff retreat, you know, so three weeks into my tenure. And they had had Reggie Van Lee, who's a man who works for Booz Allen Hamilton—B-O-O-Z—Allen Hamilton.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Reggie Van Lee?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Van Lee. And he is fantastic because he would do lots of—help us with like, lots of issues around governments and management. And so they had done a survey of the trustees, you know—there was this kind of PowerPoint, you know—and it showed that the trustees were uncomfortable with the name "Harlem" in the museum's name and also "Studio." And so I'm listening to this kind of conversation, and they're going back and forth, and back and forth—

JUDITH RICHARDS: As retreats are—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: —and then—as retreats are—and then they turn to me and say, "Lowery, what do you think?" And I said, "Well," I said, "Harlem is now the hottest neighborhood in New York, so it seems silly to take Harlem out of your name. I think you're going to get past the stigma of Harlem, and the studio program—the AIR [Artist-in-Residence] program—is one of the signature programs in the museum; I intend to position it as such. It makes us unique among museums because studio programs are disappearing fast in museums. So I think the name should stay the same." [Laughs.] And that settled that; we went on to the next topic. [Laughs.] You know.

So it was really, you know, like, about—you know, then we spent like four years really assessing what the

museum was, what our competition was, you know, how—you know, like what kind of structure we had, how we could sort of get more members, how we could attract more money. And it was kind of a screwy time because, you know, almost a year and a half into my tenure, we had 9/11. And it was so interesting because there was—we had been in conversation, you know, with a foundation through Bobby Short, who was also on our board, and the Sharp Foundation and, you know, we had—

JUDITH RICHARDS: The Sharp?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Sharp—the Peter Jay Sharp Foundation. And I had—we—I went to a meeting at City Hall, where the mayor and—[Michael] Bloomberg had just been, you know, elected—and it was so funny because I—like, you know, the Studio Museum is part of what they call the Cultural Institutions—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Group.

MS. SIMS. —Group. And so I had sort of like, pushed myself, onto the steering committee. And so with 2001 being an election year for the mayor, we would have meetings, and we met with all the candidates except Bloomberg, because everybody knew the Democrats but nobody knew Bloomberg. But I happened to know Jonathan Capehart who was running his campaign. So I said to them, I said, "I think we should talk to Bloomberg." I mean, he was like practically an unknown, and they all said, "All right." And they let me have that meeting of the CIG's up at the Studio Museum, and then Bloomberg, you know, got elected, you know.

And I had known him because, when I first came to the Studio, I was invited by Patti Harris, you know, who ran the cultural things at the program and who I had known since she had been at the art commission—I mean, this is how, you know, your long-term relations—to do a lunchtime lecture for the staff. Then he invited me to dinner at his house twice, we had a chance to talk, and each time I brought somebody who knew him—a woman who grew up with him and then Mrs. Atkins, who—her husband [Charles N. Atkins] had worked with his partner, Diane Lane, that married him [ph]. So he was just like, "Oh, who is this?" You know, like, I knew all these kinds of connections.

So we had this meeting where, you know, they—it was a great meeting because, in the midst of everything, they thought about the cultural institutions. And Kate Levin and the mayor just sort of wanted us to know that the city understood, you know, like, things were going to be tough, and they were going to do things to sort of help us, and that they, you know, we had their support. And I went straight from there to a luncheon meeting that we had been trying for a year to get with the Peter Jay Sharp Foundation, and Norman Peck looked at me and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Norman what?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Norman Peck, P-E-C-K. He looked at me and he said, "Well, if we were to support you, what could you do?" I said, "I could sure use operating support for a three-year period." And they—we came up with Mary Sharp Cronson who I had served on the state council with in the late '80s and early '90s—I mean, this is where your relationships come. And afterwards, he called me back, after the visit to the Studio and said, "Okay, three years, $450,000, and—" You know, it was like—

Then I get a call from Clifford Alexander who I knew—you know, vaguely, I'm not—you know, I wasn't like, into like, the whole kind of social scene. But he was a chairman of Moody's, and he called me up, and he said, "Lowery, Moody's has had a good year, despite 9/11, and they're allowing me to give $350,000 each to four organizations in Harlem, and the Studio Museum is one." And I remember—he said, "Lowery, are you breathing?" I said, "No." [Laughs.]

And then the Mellon Foundation came in with stabilization grants. I mean, it was an extraordinary time where public and private and individuals really came to the rescue of cultural institutions, and the Studio Museum—we were like really positioned to sort of take advantage, you know, like, of all that. I mean, Cliff, you know, allowed me to sort of match a challenge grant that was pending from the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] that I wanted to complete so that we could apply for another challenge grant.

You know, all of this stuff—that the Mellon Foundation allowed us to put in security apparatus that we needed, you know, like, as a public institution, because not only did we have the Studio Museum, but we had—we were renting our top two floors to the College of New Rochelle—so we had a college on campus too. So, it was an extraordinary time, you know, in terms of finances. And it was a great time to sort of have incentive from—and the board just really, you know, sort of responded fantastically.

We had, you know, terrific programs from Sandra, you know, like, bringing in particularly families and high school students and senior citizens, which had really been overlooked. Thelma was, you know, like—and Christine and their crew were electrifying the Artist-in-Residence program.

And we, again, already—always been great artists in residence at the Studio Museum, but what happened under

their initial tenure and continues today—

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Christine Kim?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Christine Kim. What happened under their tenure was that the Artist-in-Residence program almost became a feeder to the art world, of the next hot stars, you know. I mean, during our tenure we had Sanford Biggers, Kehinde Wiley, Julie Mehretu, Deborah Grant, Adia Millett—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was that? Okay, Adia—?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: M-I-L-L-E-T. I mean it just, like, went on and on and on, you know. Since I've left Leslie Hewitt has come through. It just has been, like, so totally exciting, you know, about the artists. And what we did was—it was interesting because we moved the Artist-in-Residence program from the office level, where they were; gave them 24-hour access to their studios. And I remember talking to the building manager and I said, "Now, we own the building, right?" and he says yes, and, "I have—we have 24-hour security?" He said yes. I said, "Is there any reason why the artists can't have 24-hour access to their studio?" and he went—I said, "Why don't you think about it over the weekend, and then let's initiate it on Monday." [Laughs.]

And I remember they wanted a slop sink so we went up to the—

JUDITH RICHARDS: They wanted a—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Slop sink. That was very important. So the third floor, I think it was the third floor—I'm trying to remember the floors, was it third or fourth floor? Third floor—the museum had a long-time tenant, the Legal Aid Society. They had moved out, so it became a storage place because we had a construction accident because we were building the new façade, in January the pipes froze, emptied into the basement where we kept the art, which had always been a problem, so everything got moved out—I mean, fortunately the staff was still on—like, in the building. I was, like, off at a meeting. And they moved the art up to the third floor and that became a storage area, and then the front area, we just stripped it bare and made the new AIR studios.

And it really, you know, it was just—you know, like, a lot of this stuff was just sort of common-sense things, you know, to make a more efficient, visible institution. You know, it wasn't rocket science or anything. People kept—I remember one of my trustees kept saying, "Oh you're working a miracle."

And I said, "I'm not working a miracle, I'm doing my job," I said, "A miracle is like when I, you know, I am taken up in a mandala over 125th Street and the skies open and God speaks; that's a miracle." What I'm doing, what Thelma and me and Sandra are doing, we are doing our jobs. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, those—all those big grants were a kind of a miracle.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, it was but, I mean, because I think, you know, like, it was an extraordinary time when, you know, culture could have been allowed to slide. You know, and people understood. And we noticed that people would use the museum convening. Like for instance, one of the—I think one of the few if not the only, artist to die in 9/11 was Michael Richards, who had been an artist in residence at the Studio Museum.

And I remember, I'm forgetting her first name, Thompson who was running it—was it [Liz] Thompson? —who was running the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, she came to me and we had the memorial service for him in the museum and it happened to be the period in between shows so it was empty.

The museum was packed. I mean, it was like the art world—this was our chance. I mean everybody was mourning firemen and restaurant workers and Wall Street and stuff, but this was like the art world's, like, moment to sort of have that. And it was, like, magical moments like that during those five or six years that I was there—it was really impressive.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes. During that time you actually even still had a—time to curate exhibitions? We can't talk about all of those, but tell me how you in fact decided that you would take time to curate both at the Studio Museum and elsewhere?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I don't know, because—you know, it just was a habit. [Laughs.] Well, at the Studio what happened was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: That you couldn't break.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Right. At the Studio the exhibition that we had the NEA grant was this exhibition called "African-American Modernism," and it was like soup to nuts, from Palmer Hayden up to, you know, David Hammons.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sorry, Palmer Hayden?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: To David Hammons. That's the way the original grant was written. And I said, "God," I said, "I'm not doing this show, it's dumb." [Laughs.] So, if it's called African-American modernism then we're going to do within the period that we call modern is. So I sort of realized that we could do, say, 1925 to '45 and call it "The Challenge of the Modern, African-Artists from '25 to '45" ["The Challenge of the Modern: African-American Artists 1925-1945" [2003]].

I went down to the NEA and Saralyn Reece Hardy and David Bancroft were kind enough to sort of, like, say, "Okay, you can sort of recast your grant, you know, the proposal, and we'll sort of look at it." And it was funny, again, Saralyn Reece Hardy and I had known each other because I had agreed to one more venue for one of the AFA shows because she wanted it when she was the director in Salina, Kansas, you know. So it's so fabulous how these kind of relationships, you know, like, sort of really do—

So what I did was I put together a curatorial team. Helen Shannon had done a dissertation on the reception of African art in the African-American community. Then I had Leslie King Hammond, my stand-by buddy who's like probably one of the best scholars of Afro-diasporic arts. Then we got a young scholar, LeRonn Brooks, who was working on his degree—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you spell his first name?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: L-E-R-O-N-N. And I also asked Rocio Aranda-Alvarez, who was at Jersey City [Museum] but I had sat on her dissertation committee and she done the thing on modernism comparing Harlem and Havana in the '20s and '30s.

And we had curatorial meetings and sort of outlined what we were going to do, and at one point we decided that we needed to sort of really, like, include architecture because it never is included. And so Leslie King-Hammond's partner Jose Mapily was an architect so he consulted with us on that.

MS. RICHARD: Can you spell his last name?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: M-A-P-I-L-Y. And we put together this exhibition. And, you know, like, it—what happened was that Rashida Bumbray, R-A-S-H-I-D-I-A B-U-M-B-R-Y, had just come on as a curatorial assistant. And Rashida and I sat down with this and, you know, made the checklist and then I started calling, and called in every chit—[laughs]—and favor that I had to commit, because we did like in six months because we couldn't get the money to sort of do it. And, you know, I was the only one who could have done it, you know, like on staff.

And, you know, I wanted to do it—come on, it's curating. And, I mean, we found terrific things. I mean, you know, like, just looking for leads of things, found out about a woman named Strawberry Lucas whose parents had been landlords to Malvin Gray Johnson and after he died found paintings of his in the garbage, which they rescued and she still had.

You know, and Leslie had done a lot of work on WPA printmakers, African-American printmakers. So she knew about, you know, finding in libraries, you know, like, where the works had been distributed where things could happen. I mean, it just went on. We had stuff from—we had Edna Manley from Jamaica. We, you know, like, had, you know, like, all these kinds of—you know, we really made it a kind of global, you know, sort of exhibition. So that's why I did that one.

The second one, the Fred Brown show ["Frederick J. Brown: Portraits in Jazz, Blues, and Other Icons" [2002]] I had already curated before I came to the Studio Museum as a consultant to the Kemper Museum. So we just became a venue for that exhibit.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So as the five-year mark is approaching you're thinking, I want to leave and focus on curating again? I might want to stay? How did you—what was that decision like?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, I think the decision was like, it's five years, guys. And we had done a retreat in 2003 on the permanent collection where we had the whole staff talk about—because we needed to come to some consensus about the permanent collection. At that time the permanent collection was considered less than stellar. We had 1,800 works, probably of which, I wouldn't say half but close to half were, you know, not so great. Including, you know, like a collection of African art that was here and there, you know.

And most of it had been—if it hadn't been, you know, like a kind of government grant—remember the NEA used to give acquisition grants—it was all donations. And we were—Thelma had worked with Nancy Lane, one of the trustees, to start an acquisitions committee, so we were starting, you know, to sort of be a little more proactive in our collecting.

But still, as I was refining the budget and pulling out the costs from collections and management from exhibitions, you know, a budget figure was beginning to emerge and, you know, I said, "Well, this is a fine moment where we sort of show them what we need in terms of storage, what we need—how it figures educationally, curatorially, technologically," and we did a whole, you know, sort of presentation.

And so at that point they said they were going to start a strategic planning and a year passed and nothing happened. So 2004, you know, I was pretty exhausted. You know, it had been a very intense four years. And we had gone through the—you know, so we had another board retreat and it was just me and the board and, you know, I sort of talked about the collection.

And we finally came to grips with—because we had an opportunity and we had some, you know, like really important works of art that we could have sold to sort of buy younger things, did we want to keep them, and finally, you know, like there was some consensus we would have the collection. And then I sort of said, you know, "It is really time if you want to build a building or do something—that you really have to think about where we're going to go and sort of do something on it."

So at that point we—they began a year-long, you know, strategic planning and so it was decided that as of the end of fiscal '05, I guess, that Thelma would become the director and I would stay on for a year, and I said, "Well, just make me like a curator-at-large." You know, and it's no, no, no, you have to have a more important thing because you have to be president, so—okay, fine.

And I was sort of like, it was like, also complete—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is president part of the board?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, definitely part of the board.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So they would change your status from staff to board.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, I wasn't president of the board; I was president of the museum. And I would work on special projects, like I did preliminary research on the building, and I was filling out—and sort of continued research on the permanent collection—and I was sort of filling out the second year of my chairmanship of the CIG. So we were like going through budget things and, you know, like, oh my God, that was just incredible. The first year we had—they had in place a—no, no.

Just as I was becoming chair of the CIG it was the election with Miller, Gifford Miller and Bloomberg. And we had a lobbyist who was firmly in the camp of Gifford Miller. And so the election was like in November and then, you know, we would start the budget process immediately after that.

So as I came—no, no, no, this was in the summer. So this would have been the summer of, what is it, summer of '04. And so what I did was I essentially fired him. And I fired him for a lot of different reasons but I just sort of said, "We cannot be taking sides." So we worked because the whole thing of our—

JUDITH RICHARDS: He was an employee of CIG?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Of CIG, yes, because it was a loose confederation and, you know, like, what we had to do was sort of mediate the budget dance. The mayor would cut; the city council would replenish, either through budget or line-items. It was, you know, a very dicey situation, interesting situation, because institutions were working as a group but then they all had their own little private, you know, arrangements with their respective City Council people. So it was, you know, like, pretty intense.

You know, like, so I learned to times when you back off and you don't have anybody, when you need to sort of get somebody and what kind of person you need. So I remember for the first year, the second half of the fiscal year, we got two people who were communications specialists and they helped us on communications so that we wouldn't, you know, be antagonizing, the mayor's office or the City Council.

But the second year when it got really tight, we got a hardcore lobbyist and she saved the money for us, and we also had Domenic Recchia had taken over as chair of Cultural Affairs.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you spell his—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: R-E-C-C-H-I-A, and he was, like, a fantastic, I think he—he's head of another committee now. He was a fantastic proponent of the CIGs and sort of literally saved us from an onerous cut because at the time, this current city budget, they knew about this back in 2005-6 because they knew about payouts for pensions and stuff. I mean, nobody sort of talked about, you know, like, financial squeeze for the banks and stuff. But they knew that we were doing it.

So, like, we were all—

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LOWERY STOKES SIMS: [n progress]—who's playing against this, you know, type of thing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So after that year as the president—position of president, paid position, president of the Studio Museum, then I see you were called the adjunct curator.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes, continue.

JUDITH RICHARDS: One of the things that I'm curious about is the fact that—the fact that you were completely comfortable with taking what someone else might think was a demotion, or—you know, going from curator to director to curator, working at small institutions while you were at the Met, it wasn't—there wasn't—you didn't have any sense of, you were too—you were in a different world and you wouldn't work—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I was too fancy to do such a—no.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You wouldn't do an exhibition for a tiny institution. There are a lot of curators who, in fact, wouldn't work for a tiny institution, even as a guest curator, if they were at a major institution. They would think that just wasn't right.

But you have a completely open sense about that. And so I'm not surprised, although with someone else, one might be, that, after being the president, you were adjunct curator.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes. Well, essentially, what it was, I didn't know what I was going to do. But I had lined up some teaching gigs. I had a fellowship at the Clarke for a couple of months. And I had been hired by the National Museum of the American Indian to be editor for a publication they were doing on Fritz Scholder [*Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian* [Truman T. Lowe and Paul Chaat Smith, Lowery Stokes Sims [ed.]; New York, Prestel: 2008]] .

JUDITH RICHARDS: Now, how did you go about lining those things up? You're leaving—just as a kind of a question of strategy—you're leaving the Studio Museum—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, what happened was that sort of a year before I was leaving, I was talked—Bill Agee came to the museum with a group, and he said, you know, "So, what are you up to?" And I said, "Well, you know, I'm thinking about leaving the museum, and, you know, maybe I'd like to teach for a bit." And so, next thing I know, I was teaching. [Laughs.] But I started teaching the fall before I left.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was that the one at Cornell?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, that was the one at Hunter. It was Hunter.

So I lined up for Hunter to sort of teach, you know, like, you know, in the falls. And then, the Cornell thing came the next year, and I don't know who nominated—oh, two friends of mine, Kay WalkingStick and Buzz Spector, who were in the art department, nominated me to be A.D. White professor-at-large, which—I've only done one or two visits. I'm supposed to do, you know, another one, because they have to get organized to bring me up.

And then—how did I get to Queens?

JUDITH RICHARDS: But did you feel that this was a freeing moment? I mean, you'd been in a huge institution at the Met, then you were at a smaller institution. This is the first time you were actually going to be free.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Free, yes. And I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I thought academia might work. But come to find out, you know, like, you're disadvantaged in academia if you've been a museum person, unless you find the right institution, because some of the times they get hung up on, you know, like, how much teaching you've actually done. And I had done teaching here and there, but, you know.

You know, and so, you know, it got to be—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So in terms of getting a permanent appointment at an—at a university—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: It was a bit of a—you know, like, you know, like, a struggle. I wasn't surprised, because I had served on the CAA board, and I knew that there was a whole big rift between academic art historians and, you know, like, museum art historians. And I mean, I was always, like, pissed off. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Though you had your Ph.D.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Doesn't matter.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So then you started to think about going back into the museum world?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Academia. Well, I didn't think I would be able to go back in museum work. I was of a certain, you know, age and experience, that I thought, people would think I was too expensive, too old. And, you know, I was still struggling with the teaching thing.

I mean, I had enough lined up for, like, two years, and then I had the visiting scholar thing at Minneapolis, you know, that I had worked on with Tom Rose [and Clarence Morgan –LSS] And of these came through people who knew me, who knew I'd be free, who thought it'd be interesting for me to come. I accepted them not only just for the money, but just because I thought—you know, I'm a sucker for an interesting experience. [Laughs.]

You know, and that's why, you know, like, I've never sort of seen going back and forth as being anything, because when you're in the reality of something, you know—I know it's—being a museum director is a lot of hard work, and people think it's like really fancy, you know, but—hey, you know, it's a lot of hard work. And so, I'm a sucker for what the project is, not the status of the situation, because I know that changes, you know, like, back and forth.

So I was sort of grappling—I did have, like, support from William Clark, who was chairman at Queens, for a permanent position, which I thought was interesting, because I'd gone to Queens and stuff. And he was making, you know, he was making a big effort. He had been a professor of mine when I was an undergraduate, you know, and he was, like, really supportive.

And I liked teaching, and, you know, I loved working with the students, and it was a different kind of experience. I got to sort of, like, do research, and you know, like, you feed yourself in a way to you didn't when you were a museum director. It was a great transition period to get my head back into, like, scholarly, curatorial, you know, sort of think.

But to make the transition, they downgraded me, you know, like, from, like, a visiting associate period to an adjunct associate professor, and cut my salary, you know? And it was kind of, like,—[groans]—because the salary had been set by Hunter, you know, who sort of paid me on a certain level. And so that was getting kind of cranky, you know? So I was sitting there going, Oh, jeez, this is like, you know, and then I found that, you know, sometimes my academic colleagues thought I was going to be this way, like you said, snooty, and act like a princess, and not pull my own slides, you know, look down—I was just, like, I mean, it was just, eek, eek, eek, eek, too much, too much, too much, too much interference.

So I had had a conversation with Holly, maybe a year, or, you know, like, sort of right after I had become adjunct curator. And, you know, we were—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Holly—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Holly Hotchner, you know, who's the director.

And, you know, through Barbara Shuster, who was a friend of mine, long-time friend of mine, who had been on the acquisitions committee at the Studio Museum—she's been a big supporter and had helped with the gala at one point. And she was a trustee here. So she was sort of, like, you know, she's doing a little matchmaking.

And Holly and I had a general conversation about, at some point, maybe I would sort of do something and work on a project and something like that. And I guess there was somebody, you know, like, as they were, you know, rebranding—they had rebranded the museum, they were coming into the building. And they wanted to have, like, an art person, the right art person, to sort of work with the staff, which was really sort of more, you know, mired in curatorial work, and also to complement the work that David McFadden had begun, because David was really breaking boundaries with a lot of the exhibitions he was doing, you know, "Radical Lace" ["Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting [2008]] , "Pricked" ["Pricked: Extreme Embroidery" [2007]], you know. I mean, David was really expanding out from the craft decorative arts, you know, into a larger art world.

So I got a call in August of 2007. I'd started teaching at Hunter—no, I wasn't teaching, I was going to—on my way to Minneapolis, and I was going to teach one day a week at Queens. So I was going every other week, Minneapolis, and then teach. So she called and she said: "You know, we really need someone who—the person who was in the position didn't work out. We'll take you part-time for the project, full time, whatever." So I said, "Oh, okay. That's interesting." I mean, I never thought about working—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Part-time for what project?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: For whatever. It was very open. It was very open.

So I said, "Well, maybe I'll work part-time to teach." [Laughs.] And then suddenly, my friend went: "Why do you want to do that? I mean, that's an awful lot of work. Why don't you just, you know, take a full time position and go back to curating, you twit?" [Laughs.] So I told her, I said, "I'll take the job, and I don't want any V.P. or nothing, no administrative work, just want to be a curator." So she said, "Okay." So I said, "But I can't start until January, because I have this commitment in Minneapolis." And she said to me, "Oh, no, no, we need you immediately, because we're working on our opening show, and we've got a year to go." And I went, "Oh."

So I started this mad schedule where I would commute to Minneapolis for four days every other week, come back, teach at Queens every Friday, and then alternate weeks, work here. It was a total insanity. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: For, like, 80 hours a week.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Right, exactly. [Laughs.] You know, again, my workaholic tendencies.

And then, the meeting—you know, in the middle of this, I'm dealing with my deteriorating knees, and, you know, the whole thing. And so, literally after I started in January of 2008, full time, I said, "Well, we got to get—I got to get the catalog essay written, because I'm going to have to have my knees done before we open the thing. [Laughs.] So, it was, like—it was a totally insane period. But that's the way that all happened.

So we were working on "Second Lives" ["Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary" [2008-09]]. And the great thing about being a curator here is that we have—our secret weapon is Dorothy Globus, who is our exhibitions curator. And she, being—the funny thing is Holly says that David, Dorothy and I have all been museum directors. You know, she was director at FIT [Fashion Institute of Technology]; she and David worked at Cooper-Hewitt together. So Dorothy sort of really is the person who takes care of all the details of the exhibitions, design and installation.

So if you don't want to, you don't even have to be, because she'll sit down and work with you, work out all the things—if they're working with an outside designer, and she coordinates all the things, you sit there and say, "I want that to go there, there and there." You can come down and refine, but she will take care of all those details, which is totally fabulous, you know? She's our secret weapon.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So the first exhibition that you curated here was already in the works, or—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: It was already in the works.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was it your idea?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, it was already in the works. And then I came and brought, you know, my perspective to it. And then we went on from there, you know, to sort of do it.

And then, after that—"Second Lives"—I didn't do much last year, but I was preparing for taking a—being—us being a venue for the Viola Frey show, because I wanted to do a show of Viola Frey, and I told them—and then I found out the show ["Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey" [2010]] was being organized by Racine [Art Museum] and the Gardiner Museum in Toronto. So I negotiated to bring that here, and then we sort of added a few things to sort of involve some East Coast designers.

And then one of the fallouts from our discussions about "Dead or Alive" [2010]—from "Second Lives" was that we had—you know, the whole idea was sort of, like, you know, the second-life use of various objects. And there was a clump of artists who were using natural materials. And I, you know, I'd made the suggestion, "Maybe we should just, you know, hold them to the side, and sort of really focus on the artists who are using manufactured goods." And we sort of discussed the fact that, together, that would be a good contrast between the permanent collection, which is mired in the history of the studio craft collection, where people take raw materials and make things, whereas these artists at "Second Lives" were taking existing things and making them into something else. So it was nice—

So we found out that we had an opening this spring, and so, like—[laughs]—like, last summer, we started organizing "Second Lives," you know. David and I started working with Elizabeth Kirrane, who is my wonderful assistant, who is really one of the younger curators coming up. And one of the joys I had is sort of mentoring Elizabeth, who I sort of inherited as an assistant, and nobody knew if I wanted to keep her, and we had a conversation and, you know, like, she just became, like, the quintessential project manager. And then, when we were doing "Viola Frey," the suggestion came up that maybe she would do a show from the collection to sort of complement the whole thing.

And it was great, because we said: "All right, you could do—Elizabeth and me. You could do Viola Frey's associates or something like that." And she did her research and said, "Nope, I'm doing—California [ph]—ceramics in the '50s and '60s." And the show, I think, is still up now. And we've had inquiries about the show.

And so it was really exciting. And so, I made sure that the press release gave her credit and all that kind of stuff.

And then we moved into "Dead or Alive," where she was given a curatorial credit also, because she really—I mean, she's not only a project manager. I mean, she was—you know, I was encouraging her to sort of—I said: "You know, act like a curator. Go to galleries. Get to know artists," and that whole thing. So she brought a lot of artists, you know, to just mix.

And now, we are sort of really rushing to get our catalog to the printer for "Global Africa," which is a huge exhibition.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right. So how—let's talk about that show. How did you develop that idea?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, the idea was—you know, again, it was, like, "Lowery, go and do a show on Africa." Because the—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Wait, wait. You said you wanted to do a show?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, no. They said that they felt a show should happen on Africa, which turned out to be—you know, because this is what they first said when I first came. I said, "Okay." [Inaudible, laughs.] But I was doing a lot of things, you know, like—so you're thinking about this in the middle of everything else, and I thought about it. And I, you know, like, was aware of, you know, Okwui Enwezor's *The Short Century* [*Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994*; New York, Prestel: 2001]. I was aware of "Africa Remix." I was aware of the Studio Museum's "Flow" [2008-09].

And I was also aware of a show that was put together by the French government and shown by the Museum for African Art called "Design Made in Africa" [2004-07]. So, you know, I was looking at all these things, and I said, well, we need to sort of, like, really focus on design craft and, you know, art and architecture and whatever we did to make it different from the other exhibitions. And then I, you know, thought about it again, and I think I wanted to get past this idea of people's thoughts of Africa's being bound by the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean because all the African artists I knew were being born in—[laughs]—you know, Europe with African families, you know, going to school in Switzerland, moving to Trinidad. So I said, I think I want to call it "The Global Africa Project."

So I just started, you know, doing research, e-mailing colleagues, working from whatever I could find on the Internet. And it was interesting because a lot of these artists don't yet have the great monograph or the great retrospective exhibition. And a lot of the information on them exists in blogs, websites, and vehicles like the Creative Africa Network, YouTube, Facebook, and things like that. So that's how we sort of proceeded.

So the show, it was—it's been a very interesting process. Of course, I drew in Leslie King-Hammond as my co-curator. I like working collaboratively.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Obviously—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: You know, like I'm—

JUDITH RICHARDS: —so many of your important projects have been co-curated.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's something that is—nourishes your work, that—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I think it nourishes work, and I also—I don't want to take the full responsibility. [Laughs.] Well, you know, I didn't pick that artist—I just think it's, you know, it's kind of great. I mean, like last year, for instance—I'm doing the yeoman's part of the work, as you know. This is the institution, and Leslie's feeding me stuff, and we're putting stuff together. And then we're trying to sort of, like—I'm trying to figure out how to organize it thematically because it was going to be very dispersed. You're going to have, like, basket-makers, ceramicists, people who are making furniture, people who are designing architecture, people who are making fashion. So how do you put all this stuff together?

And, you know, at the end of that, we're having people from Europe, Africa, the United States, the Caribbean, Japan, now India. And so I sort of realized I could stick in—which Holly likes—some painting and photography and sculpture where it complemented the work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But it wouldn't have been your original intention to include—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —quote, "fine art."

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: No, not at all. But, I mean, one of the things that we're talking about is these kinds of bridging. So, you know, we will have some painting, and we'll have a lot of photography. Because a lot of the stuff that we're talking about, in particular, fashion, is going to be video and photography. We're not going to have a thousand mannequins, you know, thank god! [Laughs.]

So, you know, this is where Leslie came to New York. And Leslie is working on a manuscript, she has her life, that whole thing. She comes to New York, you know, we're both working for the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], for their Academic Olympics, judging kids. She comes for, like, a week, we meet—you know, set times to meet. And we just hash out thematic things, just—it's like this kind of quick synergy. And then we go away, we have our tasks, and then we sort of come back. And I think one of the key things that I was really interested in, aside from who you pick and who you don't pick, is how to organize this show so it made sense. You know? And we were thinking about things like interventions, scrambling and riffing. Sort of thinking about Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe's exhibition "Unpacking Europe" [2001-02].

So anyway, you want to talk about how there are things that are admired in African traditions, and how Africans sort of take things and, in a postmodern way, do these kinds of pastiches over it. And then, at the same time, just sort of say that there is a kind of conceptual end to the whole thing.

So we came up with "interventions," and there were interventions between artists and designers, and da-da-da-da. Then there was "scrambling and riffing," you know, people sort of doing, you know, sort of like, pastiches of things. And then there was "cargo," which became an overarching thing for recycling, which is so rich. But you know, there's still art. Then I sort of went back to things, like, "All right, let's clean it up. We'll do"—what did I say?—"contemporary tradition, cosmopolitanisms, and conceptual futurism." I hated that—I just, I was just, like, ay-yi-yi, and this—you know, this PowerPoint, you know, like everything is moving around over it.

So, by chance, one of the designers in Senegal that I'd been corresponding with, with French, with Reverso, until we got to the end of Reverso, and he said, "You know, you can communicate with me in English." [Laughs.] I said, "Oh good!" [Laughs.] You know, Reverso.com that does the translations. You have to be careful because—and I thought I knew my French well enough that I could customize. But at one point he went, "You're using Reverso.com." [Laughs.] Just like that, a funny—so, he sent me a PDF of an article that had appeared in a magazine published in South Africa called *Design in Formation*.

JUDITH RICHARDS: *Design in Formation*?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: *Design in Formation*. And they had a section called "[African Thought Leaders." And in this particular issue [Number 13 [2009]], they interviewed 12 individuals involved in design in Africa. And they were, like, graphic designers, fashion designers, furniture designers, government officials involved in culture, academic deans and teachers and stuff like that. And I read it, and I e-mailed it to Leslie. And we got on the phone, and we read it together, and I said, "I think these are some of the themes that we can organize the show around, and it will be coming from the field. These will sort of express their concerns."

So it was things like competing creatively, sourcing locally, updating tradition and artisanship—what's it—community impact. And then we sort of added one because I said, "I really want to have one about the content of design because there are so many of these design works that are coming that are dealing with AIDS, and apartheid, and things like that, you know, that tone of thing. So now we feel comfortable, you know they say you start over with your PowerPoint, you do your little, you know, title pages. And it's just like *zoop-zoop-zoop-zoop-zoop-zoop*. And I'm like, "Ah, perfect."

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: You know? Because I think that, you know, we have a hundred artists.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's going to take up all the exhibition space?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: We're going to have two and a half floors. And I think that the great thing is that they understand that even though this is—seems like it's one of those essentializing shows, it isn't. And very often my, you know, colleague says, "I mean, what is this show about?" I mean, you know, they want the one sentence. I said, "There is not one sentence. There are a hundred sentences about this show. But generally this show is about design, craft, and architecture made by African people who are of African origin, who are living in the United States, you know, Europe, Africa, and then"—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Living globally.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Living globally. And so it's really showing how identity is very migratory and nomadic in

these days. 'Cause I would find out things like, "I'm looking for Kossi Assou in Togo."

JUDITH RICHARDS: Say that name again?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Kossi—K-O-S-S-I A-S-S-O-U. "I'm looking for him in Togo. He was in 'Design Made in Africa'." Use the—you know, like, Google him. Use whatever context. "Can't find him. How do I get his e-mail from Christopher Kozier, who's one of"—K-O-Z-I-E-R—

JUDITH RICHARDS: K-O-Z—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I-E-R. Who is one of the sort of conceptual people in Trinidad who we're going to have in the show. Because Kossi Assou he met in Haiti, working with the metalworkers in Haiti, you know, and so he—[laughs]—and then my favorite was Algernon Miller, who designed the *Frederick Douglass Circle*, like two months ago. And so we're putting the catalogue to bed, he says "Lowery, I have a piece I want you to put more consideration for the show," and I say, "Oh, it's too late, I have closed the checklist." "Come on up and see this." So I go to his house, and it's this gorgeous, like, wall-thing [*Change* [2010]]. It's like a textile made out of beads made out of paper. And it's gorgeous. And it is made by women in Uganda [Kwetu Afrika Women's Association Angels]. So he tells this story about meeting this American woman, Kathy Kelec, at the green fair in—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Kelec?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Kelec. K-E-L-E-C. At the green fair in March.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where is the green fair?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: It was in the new jazz center [New York City]. I guess it was "[Go] Green Expo" [2010]. And she's showing these bags made out of recycled paper by these people. His imagination gets fired. He wants to work with this group. He doesn't go to Uganda. He starts, he—Kathy puts him in touch with the artist who is working with them, the designer. And they start negotiating with iPhone, email, phone, and they get this thing done.

What's the interesting part is that the beads are made out of discarded Obama campaign literature that Kathy saw once being—people were going to just recycle, she says "No, no, no, I'll send you to my friend in Uganda." So I'm sitting there going, "Well, why would they think about making beads with paper." Well because, I find out, that the guy who's the designer working with the women is Sanaa Gateja, whose necklace made out of recycled paper I had seen in the catalogue in "Design for Africa," ["Design Made in Africa"] and I couldn't find him. My—all my leads—they're dead. So I had found Sanaa Gateja.

I emailed him and I went, "I found you!" I says, "I want one of your necklaces." The next week he sort of sends me FedEx one of them—[laughs].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Great.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: And the thing that's so interesting about this is that you think about people, I mean, there's a couple of other things that are coming from it: how people distribute their wares in the global market, how women's collaboratives have become important social-economic sustainability vehicles, and how these artists are moving around globally. My artist in Japan is from Cameroon. He makes a line of kimonos made out of Dutch resist dye fabric that's made by Vlisco in the Netherlands.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Vlisco?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: V-L-I-S-C-O—that has been supplying the African market for the last 150 years.

This show has been a gas to work on. I think—I just wanted to say, I think one of the interesting things about the "Global Africa" show is that it's the first time an exhibition has gotten me involved in production and distribution in a different way because it's very different from the art world. You don't expect production and distribution. I mean, you expect production, but the distribution, you know, we go, "Oh, no, it sort of happens in that kind of magical way that, you know, when things sort of come together." But when you factor in design into it, and the expectations that designers, across people, have, it's a very different sort of point of view and sort of, really sort of getting into, you know, how they are grappling with that. You know, as I said, in the global arena it's really been very interesting to me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm hmm, yes. Now, all through the—your career, you've done pro bono work, you've volunteered, you've been on this task force and that committee for private and public institutions, and I wanted to focus particularly on three foundations or organizations for which you've been on the board and ask you about those involvements: ArtTable, Art Matters, and Tiffany Foundation.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Okay.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did those involvements come about, and how did—what is their meaning to you?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Well, ArtTable is interesting because I was one of the founding board members. And it was a rollicking group of about 12, 13 women in Houston, you know, around 1980-81, when we started meeting. You know, just—and the whole idea was to create a, you know, network for professional women in the artists—in the arts, excluding artists, you know, for the sense. And Patricia Hamilton sort of called me to sort of be involved. And I used to joke at the time, because people said, "Well, how did you get involved?" And I said, "Well, you know, sometimes I think they just wanted a colored girl." [Laughs.] Just to—you know. Who knows?

But I think that the sense of needing another perspective and representation, I mean, you know, it's not a bad thing, but it's kind of like a joke. And the organization grew very quickly. And I have to sort of say that after about the first five or six years, my involvement with the—you know, because of my workload and, you know, different things—my involvement with the organization—my active involvement—really waned. And I sort of, basically—it was like the annual luncheon. But I knew I had a network, there were people who would contact me because we were establishing this network and we had this directory of members, and so it provided, like, this kind of national sort of resource for different women.

I decided to become more involved I guess about five years ago, when I was asked to join the board again. And it was at, you know, like, a kind of critical juncture for the organization. They had just celebrated their 25th anniversary, but it was followed very quickly by a very awkward change—an, let's say, alleviation of executive leadership, which then plunged the organization into great turmoil, because, you know, there was a lot of conflict on how the situation was handled, and there was an interim director, and, you know, like, we sort of came in onto, like, "Oh my God, what are we going to do?" And, you know, what exactly is going to happen to the organization?

So I remember—I guess that must've been about, like, around 2006—you know, going to these meetings. And we would—I think they were in the process of doing some strategic planning, and we had—you know, came up with a plan. I was also asked to do a kind of ad hoc group, sort of talking about diversity, which has been a continuing concern.

And so I worked with Nancy Lane again, Claudine Brown, who was then at the Cummings, and Carol Enseki, E-N-S-E-K-I, who was, I think, just retired director of the Children's Museum in Brooklyn, but I also knew her from my days with the CIG—that's how we had met.

And we essentially had a sort of, you know, breakfast or luncheon meeting at the Odeon and just sort of sat down and said, "You know, there's no rocket science to this." I mean, you just reach out to people, you do programming that sort of indicates that you have a diverse—you know, like—so, we came up with a five-point—and made the report. And that got subsumed into the strategic plan, you know, that sort of really came.

So then, soon after that—[laughs]—I was asked to sort of be—to take on the presidency by Diane Frankel. And at that particular moment, I just couldn't, because I was leaving the Studio Museum, and I was, you know, frankly exhausted. So Peggy Voorsanger took it on and Peggy really did a lot to sort of clean up a lot of the administrative and human resources and policy things, so I worked with her on employment policies and, you know, different things.

And then, when her tenure came up, she asked me again. I sort of said, "All right, fine. I'll see you through"—you know, because I was one of the younger members of the founding board. I was struck by the fact that I joined the board when I was 30, and I was now 60. [Laughs.] And so I said, you know, sort of my parting salvo—not parting—[inaudible]—was, "All right, I'll see you through the next 30 years—next two years to the 30th anniversary."

And in the meanwhile, they had hired a dynamic, young, you know, executive director. And I'd sort of, like, you know, like, done—I mean, the first year I was on the board, back in 2006, when everybody was, like, whoo, I said, "Well, look." I said, "Everything seems like it's falling apart. The New York chapter is going to do its programmings, but we have to really do that kind of uplift thing. At least we should just go to continue and have the—you know, spend the money, and let's have a national luncheon. And although I'm totally insane, I have experience running galas; I will be a co-chair at the luncheon."

And I went to Amei [Wallach –LSS], who was a friend of mine, to sort of see. I said—I think we really need some professional help to sort of get this together, because we don't have the staff. And was two expenses for us, but she hooked us up with Cybele Malone, who I think is now working at the New Museum. And Cybele had worked for her, so Cybele, you know, sort of was like our point person.

And we got—I persuaded Emily Rafferty that she needed to be honored by the luncheon. And it gave the

luncheon the lift that it needed, because Emily is, you know, an extraordinarily charismatic and just wonderful member. And she's always been very committed to ArtTable, and actually had been all—one of the members of the committees who started the annual luncheon, I think, 14 years previously. And because she was being honored, it brought back some disaffected people, and also she really sort of got her friends to sort of come—it was a table of Met ladies and trustees and things, so it was really terrific.

And then the following year, we got Vishakha Desai, you know, to sort of do it. You know, because I wanted people who sort of understood what this whole occasion was about, because I think that one of the interesting things about ArtTable is sort of moving it from a, you know, like, a professional organization of peers into a national networking organization that moves beyond the familiar to sort of embrace a large organization.

And we need to do that, number one, financially, because we won't get more members, and number two, because we are in a stage, we did a survey, and, you know, like, our demographics are we're an aging organization. And if we're going to attract young women, we have to sort of figure out what the relative—the relevance of the organization is to their lives and their professions. And I tell you, I am totally astonished at the number of younger women who think it is a privilege to be part of ArtTable. I think that is the most encouraging thing that we could—that we found—there goes the founders, I sound like Odo on, you know, [*Star Trek:*] *Deep Space Nine* or something.

But anyway—so what we've been doing over the last year is sort of looking at ways that we can open up the membership application process, because one of the things we noticed—ArtTable has, because of population demographics, and the way the art world works, we have chapters in New York, D.C., Northern and Southern California which means L.A. and San Francisco, and then we have a series of regional alliances based in Seattle, Santa Fe, and Houston. And Dena has been very active in sort of recruiting groups of women in Atlanta, most recently in Atlanta and New Orleans.

But what's happening is that, you know, because of the structure, and because of the way that programming is done, and how we sort of share the membership resources to four membership services, we've had to cool back on having each area having individual accounts, because we did have some unfortunate incidents about inappropriate use of funds.

And so now, what is coming up is a situation that I describe as states' rights versus federalism. [Laughs.] And that is, how do you sort of preserve the regional individuality, you know, of the different chapters and give them a certain amount of autonomy over programming, while you are preserving the ArtTable brand? And that is, you know, like, the next year, that's what we are really going to be working on.

But over the last year, we've done—raised some—even the board has made some fantastic decisions. We instituted a policy of direct application so that people don't need to have nominations anymore. And that kind of relieves, you know, the members who are writing out membership, you know—it got to be a bit much, you know. And people are so, like, life is so much fast-paced. But, you know, like, the people are vetted in the same way, and this last time, I think we had 21 new members to present to the board meeting yesterday, and 14 among the direct, you know, membership.

And what it does, also, is it takes care of people, like, in Wisconsin, who would call me—you know, I'd met them once on the—"Hi, you met me once on the plane, would you nominate me," you know. [Laughs.] So, it just allows, you know, like, you know, a wider group of people to sort of be able to participate.

We also instituted a board policy that each board member would commit to giving or getting a thousand dollars a year just to help with the finances. And I think it—by putting a financial responsibility on the board, it sort of changes their perception of who and what they are, and how they—it removes the dilettantism, you know, like, from the board, to a certain extent. And it makes them more conscious of how they are—the responsibilities they have to the organization.

And then, lastly, as a kind of pilot program, toward the 30th anniversary which we are celebrating over 2010 to 2011, we came up with an idea for professional affiliates membership, which would accommodate people who wouldn't ordinarily be eligible for membership, like, say, a lawyer who's very much involved in the arts, or a collector, or men, you know? [Laughs.] And it's been very controversial, you know, we've lots of discussions, we've had yeas and nays, but we all sort of realized that this is ways of sort of—you know, really expanding the networking possibilities for ArtTable and stuff.

And I sort of took the presidency because I said, you know, the new board members have to be young. You know, I want to make sure that there are members of the executive committee who can take over after me, who are sort of representing a new generation change and succession. And so that's really sort of working out pretty well. We've got some really vocal younger people there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's great. Speaking of access and this whole question: Taking a broad view over your

career, and you've worked so hard to give access to artists of color to the history books, et cetera, what changes can you see have occurred over your career in terms of the opportunities and the achievements—institutionalized achievements of artists of color?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: It's been tremendous. I think that—but it's interesting. It's been tremendous, there's a certain way in which certain artists assert—you know, like, particularly coming out of the '80s and '90s, and then almost institutionalized, you know, to a certain extent.

But I'm finding with, you know, like the younger artists, there still needs to be a kind of consciousness that this has to be on the front lines. And you know, and I think that that may have to do with economics or just, you know, that we've had memories stretch and it's like a rubber band and they'll snap back if you don't keep it, you know, like, there.

And I don't think you have to do it in the same way that you—you know, like you did it before, because I think these artists are coming out of mainstream organizations and, you know, that type of thing. But you just, you know, you still have to, you know, keep your eye on things, you know, to a certain extent.

But I think the most important thing is that—you know, I remember I talked about that paper that I wrote that was kind of kiboshed at the Met—is that the other legs to the coalition that had to be formed to support these artists is happening. There are a lot more critics and writers and there are a lot more collectors. And that's been the really most important—because you always had the curators and the museums who would do things for whatever reason, if it was Black History Month program, or whatever reason, they're always there. But having, you know, writers and also collectors has really made a big change in the worlds of artists.

But funny—and I think that—I think particularly having the collectors has made a difference, because I remember in '87, the Guerilla Girls came and visited me at the Met because we were just opening up the wing, and they had a famous, like, piece, that—"At the Metropolitan Museum, it's opening its wing, certain number of artists, only two percent are women." And they came, and they sort of, like, you know, on mask—[laughs].

And so I sat down with them and I said, "You know what?" I said, "You're absolutely right." I said, "And we probably have more in the collection than we have on the walls." I said, "But you know, the people who sort of really influence that are collectors, because they're the people that museums get money from and as they go."

And you have a lot of women collectors out there who don't collect women art.

But there are now that—I can think of Jeri Waxenberg who is the niece of Micky Wolfson. She has a whole collection of American women modernists. And there's a woman from Philadelphia whose name I'm going to forget, and I see her all the time at DC Moore. Oh Jesus, I can't, you know—I'll see if I can find it, you know, for the transcript and everything.

These—you know, like, you do have some people who are sort of, like, really into—oh, Linda Lee Alter in Pennsylvania.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Linda Lee—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Alter. A. She's in Philadelphia. But there's another woman I can't—I'm just sort of forgetting her name.

So, you know, like, the fact that they're doing it—and then the women's project at MoMA, you know, really has made, you know, like, a difference. And sort of, like, the celebration of, you know, feminism, you know, in 2000—I mean, 2007 was woman's year. You know, you had, you know, WAC [Women's Art Collective], you had global feminism, you know, so that really made a difference.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What about the fact that there are still very few curators and museum directors, museum professionals of color?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: That's a tough one. I mean, it really is a tough one. You know, I thought that it was going to be break open, you know? First, in the '80s, when I would sort of talk to parents and say—you know, because that was like the moment when college tuition, like, escalated, you know? So you had parents investing a $100,000 in education so their kid's going to come out and get a job as a curator, making 24-5 [$24,500]? I don't think so.

And in fact, with Thelma, I had to go and meet her father. [They laugh.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: You mentioned that.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: You know, you remember, then.

So, the thing of it is is that, you know, there was, you know, like a kind of flurry in the '80s and '90s when people did—but there was something about museums that really made a lot of the people who particularly went on to get their degrees to go back to academia. And I'm not sure exactly what that is, if it's a certain specific kinds of socializations, or comfort, or just the nature of the beast.

Thank God we have Thelma; thank God we have Naomi Beckwith, Tumelo Mosaka, Franklin Sirmans, Valerie Cassel; then we have Andrea Barnwell; we have—and you know, and a lot of the sort of curatorial—and Michelle Wilkinson in Baltimore at the Reginald Lewis Museum; Aaron Bryant, who's at Morgan State University—but the interesting thing is that a lot of the curatorial and director staff are in history and culture museums, not visual arts museums, because that's what most of the museums—I mean, the Studio Museum, Spelman College Museum, some of the college, you know, like, Morgan college museum, some of the college museums—they are the exceptions, you know? Like, it's—a lot of the big national institutions are arts and culture museums.

And then you have Laurie Cumbo who is at MoCADA [Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts] in Brooklyn. And they do a combination of visual arts and history and culture. I'm trying to think if there's anybody —

But that's still, what, two hands? That's still two hands.

I mean, you know, people joke that, you know, when—oh, Ros [Roslyn] Walker, in Dallas. And—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Hamza Walker.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Hamza Walker, yep, exactly—almost forgot him. And then you have Sandra Jackson now, who's doing education and external affairs at Seattle.

It's really hard. I think Patricia McDonalds [ph] is still at the fine arts museums, you know, in administration. It's really hard.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Speaking of challenges, and moving to you: What would you say are your—a two-part question—your greatest challenges now, and is there a dream project that you haven't done yet that you hope to do?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: My biggest challenges now? I think my biggest challenge now is sort of keeping myself mentally alert and open, you know, to new things, and so that's why I've been, like—collaborations, you know, and getting different perspectives. You know, it's not that I'm frozen in certain things, but I have—you know, everybody has their comfort zones, so it's always nice to—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sure. It's like going to galleries with someone else, and you don't go in own beaten path, you're going there as—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Right, exactly. So I think that's really it, you know, at this point.

I'm raising money—[laughs]—to do the projects that I want to support.

And I think the project that I haven't done—

I tell you, "Global Africa" goes a long way, and the "Global Africa Project" exhibition goes a long way to sort of being the dream job.

And the only other sort of big project that I want to do is I really want to do my monograph on Robert Colescott because I, you know, did a lot of research on it. We were dear friends, and unfortunately, he died, you know, two years ago. And I really feel I owe it to him, to sort of—and I have lots of notes and it's just finding the time to write. So I'm hoping, next year, once I get past "Global Africa," I'll be able to do that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where would you do that? Oh, right, a monograph, I'm sorry.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Do the monograph. You know, like—is there—I think it could be time for another show, which would be really great, because the last big retrospective I think was in '87 ["Robert Colescott: A Retrospective, 1975—1986" [1987-89]]. So it might be interesting, because I mean, I think, what happened in the—and he's had smaller, you know, shows that have concentrated on things, but I think another—I think a retrospective that not only talks about his work but really contextualizes his work within things—like, nobody's ever talked about the '70s work into what was happening in the '70s in, you know, San Francisco, you know? And things like that. So I think—and showing his legacy.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Artists he's influenced.

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Whether they like to admit it or not. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Would you say that, basically, though, it's more gratifying for you when you do a thematic exhibition and include many artists rather than a solo or—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: I like both. Both are—you know, like, I feel that sometimes, with thematics, you don't get to delve enough into the individuals. You know, I realize that, you know, writing for "Global Africa," we tried to sort of use the publication, and when we use the installation to sort of tell of the individual stories within the overall overarching things that we wanted to do—but we felt it was important to establish the overarching themes because then that gives the art world, as it moves in, you know, like, as I hope this project will spool on other projects, you know, like, a kind of sense of what, you know, like, the real issues are in the field, not just some vague, you know, thematic ideas.

JUDITH RICHARDS: With this "Global Africa" show, you're—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: So what we did is we complement that with, you know, features on the artist where you have the photograph, very importantly. I mean, that became an issue with the publisher. What we pay for extra pages of—we can remove the photographs. I said no. We have to have a photograph of the artist, an artist statement, an artist biography and at least one Web contact so that people can contact the artist. And they can sort of do that.

And we also had somebody who created a overall bibliography and also chronology of exhibitions on African art, craft and design from 1990 to 2010. And I think that's an important resource. Nobody's ever done that. So we're trying to sort of make this both—it's not a record of the exhibition, because a lot of the works were just not available, but it's a record of who was in the exhibition, what kinds of things we were interested in the exhibition, and then we hope it'll be a resource, you know, to sort of really come.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is this catalog going to be published solely by the museum, or is it co-published by a commercial publisher?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Commercial publisher. Presto.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And so obviously, they think and you think there's a much broader audience, which makes me ask: Has there been any discussion of this exhibition being presented elsewhere as well?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: You know, we've talked to several, you know, venues. The thing is, economics, at this point, you know, and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: But it's not a giant show. Even two—

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: But it'll cost around—it's a show that's going to be [$]75 [000], $80,000. And for a lot of museums, you know, like, I mean, that we've approached, I mean, they've frankly said, "You know, we're going to use money to support what our in-house curators are going to do, you know, rather than do traveling exhibitions." And that's a choice that you have to make, you know? And I think we probably will have, you know, a couple of venues, and it will materialize, you know, like, over, you know, before the show opens, you know?

But from the beginning we've, you know, approached people, you know?

JUDITH RICHARDS: In the U.S. as well as abroad?

LOWERY STOKES SIMS: Yes. Mostly in the U.S., because, you know, like—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]