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Oral history interview with Mary Lucier, 2011 Sept. 27-30

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Mary Lucier on 2011 Sept. 27-30. The interview took place in New York. NY at Lucier's home, and was conducted by Judit Olch Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Mary Lucier reviewed the transcript in 2019. Many of 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 Mary Lucier at her home in New York City on September 27, 2011, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number one.

So Mary, this interview picks up from a previous interview that you did with the Archives in late 1990. And at that point, the discussion focused on the beginning of your work on the piece called *Noah's Raven*—when you were planning the travel and the origins of the title, et cetera. So that's where we'll pick up in this interview, but before we begin, I wanted to just establish some basics. Are you living in the same place as you were in 1990? If you can talk about any moves—physical moves you've made of your home or your studio, we could start that way.

MARY LUCIER: Well, my whole life changed in the 1990s, and my work changed, too. I'm not saying they are connected. But in the '90s, I began to—well, I'm now putting the work first—but I began to look at the people who had experienced traumas—public or private.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But were you—sorry to interrupt you—were you living in the same place in New York City then as—

MARY LUCIER: Well, okay, I'll tell you about that then. The physical circumstances of my life were such that I lived down—two, three doors down on 20th Street, at 223 West 20th. And it was my home and my studio. It was a two-room apartment—one bedroom.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And how long had you been there?

MARY LUCIER: Oh my god—I mean, I still have it. And so it's been, now, 35, 36 years since I took that apartment.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you got that, were there other artists living around? Was that how you found it? [00:02:00]

MARY LUCIER: Oh, Chelsea had an old artist population, like José de Creeft. There's a whole list of people—oh, what is her name who just recently died, the painter who was married to Lawrence Alloway? You know who I'm talking about. [Sylvia Sleigh –ML] She had a studio here, lived here. Leo Rabkin across the street. A lot of, you know, older-generation Chelsea artists who, for the most part, are not famous.

And so it had that atmosphere, and it was also very Puerto Rican and very mixed other kinds of artists—theater artists, for example, and probably designers. So you'd get a building—you'd see a building where there would be half Puerto Rican families and half artists or half, you know, other, younger people who were involved, in some way or another, in publishing, design—like that.

And it was a little bit—a little dangerous back in the '70s. I don't know if you remembered what New York was like then, but this neighborhood was not considered to be entirely safe. I never worried much about it, but I had friends who didn't want to walk down the streets here, in Chelsea, if you can imagine that, in 1975. So it was quite a different place. Asia de Cuba, however, was on Eighth Avenue, and I think it might still be there—the restaurant.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is that the first place you moved after you came from Connecticut?

MARY LUCIER: No, when I left Middletown, I first moved to Riverside Drive—like 156 Riverside Drive—which was an apartment that had been held by a friend of mine who was a musician. And that was the first place I moved into, and then I lived briefly with Mimi Johnson uptown, sort of, you know, getting my footing. [00:04:00]

And I lived with a friend over in the East Side. And then finally, I found this apartment here on 20th Street, which

I just loved, and I'm still there, really. [Laughs.] I mean, I have lots of other places that I also live, but I am still there. It is still a studio for me, and I spend time there and I work there often.

Then the other major change, of course, that happened in the '90s was that I met and married Robert Berlind and suddenly acquired two new residences—this loft and the house in the country, in Cochecton—and two stepsons. [Laughs.] So that, of course, was a radical change. I had not ever been sure I'd be married again, and so it all kind of took me by surprise.

And I had to reorient a lot of my ways of thinking about things. And a lot of life habits changed. I was used to living alone—loved living alone. A lot of adjustments, but living here in this loft has always been comfortable for me because I had the studio down the street. So I just come and go every day.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's a funny coincidence you met somebody who was just down the street from your studio.

MARY LUCIER: Well, the amazing thing is that we hadn't known each other—we hadn't met before. A neighbor of ours introduced us, I don't know, in the late '80s, I think. And he had been here—he's been here almost as long as I have on this block—not quite as long, but almost as long. He's one of the old-timers in this building. But our neighbor, Barbara Sandler, introduced us. And he said, "Oh, yes, I know your work," because I guess he had seen the Whitney Biennial in '83.

So it wasn't terribly long after that that we started riding together up to Purchase, where he was teaching at SUNY Purchase. [00:06:00] And I started teaching there, and so he was my ride up to Purchase. And one thing led to another, and in a matter of a year's time, he was getting divorced. You can imagine the scenario. At any rate, by 1993, we were living together, and by 1996, we were married.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you had been married to Alvin Lucier, composer and much more. What's the difference? What's been the effect that you see in living with a painter? Or is it really not relevant at all?

MARY LUCIER: Well, the thing about my marriage to Alvin is that I was terribly young, and he had actually been a teacher of mine in college. I think I was barely 20 when we got married, and he was 33. So he was already somewhat established as a composer. He was teaching composition and doing the electronics studio at Brandeis. And I was, by the time I met him, I guess, a junior.

And hanging out with him was my introduction to the American avant-garde and eventually the European avant-garde of that time—the world of dance, Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Frederic Rzewski, Robert Ashley, David Behrman, et cetera, all the composers that I met. We traveled to Europe for a summer, and we slept under pianos in various places. So it was a kind of an internship, in a way, yeah, in the art world—in that aspect of the art world, which I think in many ways was the most interesting part of the art world at that time.

I was not a—so I was heavily weighted toward performance and music composition and choreography in my view of the arts, rather than towards painting. Even though I was studying sculpture as a student [00:08:00], I was not so influenced by painting at all at that time. And I still think, today, that the choreographers—you know, Cunningham and Cage and Morton Feldman—I think the composers, the choreographers, the dancers—Yvonne Rainer—all those people really, really were extremely advanced for their time in that they had so much to offer to the entire art world that people are still absorbing it.

That's why, you know, "Performa" is happening now. They're reviving a lot of old performance works, or they're reviving a lot of—they're sort of validating the conceptual aspect of the world of performance art, which had died out for a while. I mean, there was a time when Joan Jonas couldn't get a gig, I remember. And she said, "Well, all of you are doing, you know, installations now." This would have been the early '80s, maybe mid-'80s. Performance just was not happening. So I think it's very interesting to see how that wave has come up again and is being validated now by a lot of younger artists.

So that was my milieu at the time, in the '60s. I saw the *9 Evenings* at the Armory, for example. The only other person I think I know who actually saw it was Irving Sandler. [Laughs.] And of course, Alvin Lucier because we went together. But events like that, that are historic to most people are a part of my experience, and that was very formative, obviously, and very exciting.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you remember what year that was—the *9 Evenings?*

MARY LUCIER: *9 Evenings* must have been sixty—oh, and I know Irving and I have talked about this—I could Google it right now. It was, I'm going to guess, '66.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Of course, so when you met Robert—Bob—you were both mature artists. You were peers, as opposed to a very young student and a teacher, in a way. [00:10:00]

MARY LUCIER: Exactly, exactly. But Alvin and I collaborated. We did the *I am sitting in a room*, which is one of his most famous pieces. I did a Polaroid accompaniment to that, which has then gone on to become a piece of its own with the sound as somewhat secondary. We did a piece called *Hymn*—H-Y-M-N—this would be all in the previous interview—which was the building of a spider web in real time. I performed in his work. Frequently, I was a performer, as were the other women who traveled with that group called the Sonic Arts Union—Mary Ashley, Shigeko Kubota and [Barbara Lloyd Dilley –ML].

So that was one kind of life, and this was—I think that the other women, too, that were in a similar position to me—that is, Mary Ashley was married to Robert Ashley or Shigeko was married to David Behrman—even though they were older, they were probably having sort of a similar experience to mine because that was kind of the way it was then, still.

That was why somebody like Yvonne Rainer was so thrilling to see—you know, her amazing independence. So that was that kind of situation, and I enjoyed it a great deal and I learned a tremendous amount from Alvin and also through all those contacts. I met so many people, some of whom are still dear friends today.

But then it was important that I establish my independence from that. So when I left Middletown and came to New York and eventually found this apartment and studio over here, as I said before, I did it without any intentions of getting married again. But when I met Bob in the '90s and we would ride up to Purchase together, he was so intelligent. [00:12:00] It was just so much fun to talk to him because he knows—you know, he got a degree in art history, as well as painting. I think his degree from Columbia was art history.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And he writes, as well as paints.

MARY LUCIER: He writes beautifully. And he had gone to the Yale School of Art first in painting. So he had a very wide—and he was part of that amazing group of people who were there at that time, from Richard Serra to Chuck Close to Nancy Graves to Janet Fish, Rackstraw Downes—just an astonishing two classes of people, many of whom—Brice Martin—you know, are famous today.

So that was another milieu that I then tapped into, but bringing my own milieu, which was my experience in performance art and video and installation to that. So there was one point at which Bob and I rather arrogantly thought that between the two of us, we knew everybody in the art world, which isn't really true because the art world is so huge. I felt that we shared an interest in the natural world. His observation of nature and natural phenomena was quite similar, in many ways, to my observations of nature and natural phenomena.

My work has a more narrative aspect than his does, but it's astonishing how we look at the same things. Like, we'll both look at reflections and you know, you notice, like, "Oh, I can see the bottom of the pond." And you see these sticks. Then you see the surface of the water. Then you see the reflection on the water.

So there's all this depth in that image that I can look at by changing focal length, and I can just move among those three, or even four, layers. For him, it's another matter. He either—you know, he chooses one or he gets them all together. [00:14:00] And those are the kinds of things that we share. And I certainly have enjoyed meeting all those painters. It's just been—you know, Rackstraw is a wonderful friend. Janet and Charles are wonderful friends.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Janet and Charles?

MARY LUCIER: Janet Fish and Charles Parness. I don't want to leave anybody out. Certainly, meeting Irving Sandler and Lucy has been—just, they're just wonderful friends of ours. And then I brought a lot of my crew along with me, and so he's gotten to know a lot of performance people and musicians and composers.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think that there has been—can you say what effect, if any, his work or his response to your work has had on your practice since you met? And vice versa, if you think you've had an impact on his work.

MARY LUCIER: Oh, I've had a huge impact on his work. I'm a very severe critic. I can walk into his studio, though, and—I think it just amazes him a lot of the time—and I'll look at a painting and say, "Stop, stop right there. You're going to ruin it." And he'll say, "Well, I have a few more things that have to be done." And I'll come back the next day and it's either ruined or it really got better, you know. [Laughs.] I offer really off-the-cuff critiques. I'm sort of a wise-guy about it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you're welcome in his studio anytime?

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, almost anytime. Occasionally, he'll say, "Okay, I really want you to come up and see what I've been working on," and then I will invite him to come over and see what I've been working on. And the only thing that bothers me about his method of critique is that he isn't tough. I think he's so astounded that anybody

can make these moving images.

Because Bob is a very appreciative person. I mean, he is just amazed that people can do what they do, but he's not amazed at himself. [00:16:00] I mean, he has a very generous outlook on all forms of making things and doing things and making artwork. And so he's extremely generous and kind towards me.

Sometimes I'll say, "Well, you know, okay, okay, okay, I know what's wrong with this. Now, don't you think—?" But sometimes he's able to mollify some of my own self-criticism, which is a good thing, and other times, maybe, his lack of criticism about my work makes me more critical. So there's a curious interplay, but we definitely do share each other's work and studios. We could never work in the same building.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In the same building, even?

MARY LUCIER: We couldn't. He plays music. I cannot have any sound except my own. I can't stand it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Since we're talking about that, let me go to that subject. What is your preferred studio atmosphere, in terms of sound and light and anything else?

MARY LUCIER: Well, at the moment, I have a whole building up in Cochecton, which is an old house—not old, it's not an old house, actually. It's a relatively new house that looks kind of old. It looks sort of Adirondack-y. It has a very rough-hewn look to it. It's right across the street from our house. Neighbors of ours who are quite a bit younger than us built it for them and their family—their two kids. And then they decided to move up, actually, to the Adirondacks, where they built yet another house, which they liked better.

And the whole history of this house—I'm not going to detail it for you—but it's a very strange building, in some ways. It was built around a trailer. So the first thing was that they plunked this trailer down across the road and Bob woke up one morning and saw this trailer and thought, "Oh, no, you know, what's going on here?"

But they turned out to be [. . . –ML] interesting people, and they gradually, gradually built this house around the trailer and pulled out as much of the elements of the trailer as they could. [00:18:00] And that's not uncommon up there in the Sullivan County area. That's not an uncommon practice. You start with a double-wide—yeah, start with a double-wide and build your house around it and then pull out as much as you can, or you add onto it and then you eventually destroy elements of the trailer as you build rooms around them and so forth. It's funny. I mean, it's amusing. It also probably gives the place some weaknesses.

But it's a very extreme and curious-looking place. I went in and painted everything white that I could. Bob and I, you know, painted one whole summer to get rid of the brownness—the interior brownness of all that wood. So now I have many, many rooms, most of which are used for storage. I have one main room where I have a long table and a computer. I have more than one computer. I have many hard drives. I have six or seven or eight large monitors. I have a projector mounted on the ceiling. I can show my work, not in its finished fashion, but I can show better aspects of it than I used to be able to in that little space down the street.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So compare that to what you have in the space here, in Manhattan.

MARY LUCIER: Yes, well, that little space, yeah, that I'm talking about—the space down the street.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what's in that little space?

MARY LUCIER: Well, let's see. I used to have a projector up on the wall. I used to have something like six or seven monitors. They were actually televisions in the old days. I had very little—I don't like to live with a lot of furniture or furnishings, so most of what I had in my space were chairs and monitors, before. It didn't do badly, really, given the size of the space. I could make a pretty adequate presentation of my work. [00:20:00]

I had one very large monitor that I would show excerpts on and a fairly good sound system. But now it's much more comfortable, and I can have all of my storage—I took everything out of Chelsea Mini-Storage, which is lots of monitors, lots of laser disc players, lots of DVD players, audio, loudspeakers. Everything is out of Chelsea Mini. It was incredibly convenient to have things there, but it was getting awfully expensive.

It was up to like $500 a month. I said, "Look, you know, Bob, if we buy this house across the road and I make the big move up there, eventually that will all pay for itself." So I have everything—almost everything—there. Now, the studio down the street here is still quite full of my archives. And so my big debate now is, do I merge that upstate, as well, or when do I merge it upstate? Or do I bring some over here?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you have air conditioning upstate?

MARY LUCIER: No.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So would you need that for the archives?

MARY LUCIER: I don't think so because it doesn't ever—we have hot summers, but there are parts of those houses that just stay cool. We don't use air conditioning in Cochecton at all. I don't know anybody there who does. It's very cool at night, usually. And you may have, you know, a 95-degree daytime, but I don't know.

What I'm saving, mostly, are photographs, videotapes, slides, paperwork—lots and lots of paperwork. So you're onto something there, that maybe I ought to have temperature and humidity control. I probably have more upstate, though, than I have in this space down here, where it gets broiling in the summer and freezing in the winter.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You mentioned, at the beginning, that you needed silence, quiet.

MARY LUCIER: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's at all phases of your work—from the very beginning, thinking of your ideas, till the very end. [00:22:00] What about light? Do you want to have daylight or just artificial light, or it just doesn't matter?

MARY LUCIER: One of the things I love about being upstate is the light—the natural light there. We have so many beautiful views, and we have these two huge fields. I can look across one field from my studio on the big deck out back, look over to the west and below the foothills of the Catskills and watch these incredible sunsets.

And I will walk around there in the house or in my studio sometimes, and I'll just stand transfixed by a window or a door—at the beauty of the light and color. It knocks me out. But when I'm working, I'm actually sitting at my computer. The window behind me has shades on it. The front door, which I can still see, has shades covering it. I don't have a view to the outside when I'm working.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And the same here on 20th Street?

MARY LUCIER: Mm-hmm [affirmative], same here. Well, what could I see? I could see the buildings across the street. You know, there's nothing. The view here was not beautiful. It still is not beautiful, and I don't find the light that striking, although I think sometimes it's gorgeous. But you've got to go out in the street to really appreciate New York City light, you know. You've got to be out there and see the purple sky in the west and the pink in the east and the way that—you know, but that's a whole other experience. You go looking for it, or you go to the High Line now.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What about your work routines, now and if they've changed at all from 1990—I mean, in terms of how long a day you put in, how many days a week? Do you begin in the morning or not until the afternoon?

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, it varies so much. If I'm working on a project—for example, when—I'll jump ahead a little bit—when I was working on *The Plains of Sweet Regret*, I was editing here down the street at my studio over there, right here in New York, rather. Very confusing—[inaudible]. [00:24:00] When I was in the final phases of it, I took everything upstate and I was working there all day long, every day.

And I remember having Laurel Reuter, from the North Dakota Museum, who, in effect, commissioned the piece—had her come up to—take the bus up to Monticello. And I picked her up and brought her over and showed her—actually, I wasn't in my studio, yet. I was doing it in the house. I was using the living room as my studio at that time, but I would stay there for long, long periods alone and just work all day.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Because it was less interrupted? More space?

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, it's so quiet up there. It's so very quiet. And the aloneness is conducive to work for me—not that Bob wasn't there a certain amount. He was. But I'd still be working in the living room and, you know, he was over at his studio working, too. And then I would bring all that material back to the city and actually finish that piece in a professional post-production studio.

But the whole thing about having the quiet is that at whatever phase I'm working, if my mind is thinking, my mind just needs that space. I can't hear music or anything and think of it as background. It's not wallpaper. To me, it's like, who is that? What is that? And I want to listen to it or I don't want to listen to it, or I find it irritating or I find it compelling. And particularly when I'm working—actually editing, half of my work is sound.

So I can't have other sound. And I have good friends—Liz Phillips and Earl Howard—Earl is a composer and Liz is an audio installation artist—and they have a hard time because they are in the same building. He occupies the basement and she's got the third-floor studio, but still, you know, there's a lot of sound leakage there. [00:26:00] So you know, they have to negotiate and work things out. And in Bob's case, it would just be that he listens to

music, like most painters do.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What about assistants? Has that changed over the years? And how often do you use assistants, and for what?

MARY LUCIER: I primarily use assistants for production, and I've had some amazing assistants in my lifetime. The most amazing is the most recent, whose name is Noriko Koshida. And she's been my assistant—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you spell her last name?

MARY LUCIER: K-O-S-H-I-D-A—Koshida. And she's been my assistant in Japan. She was in 2009, and she was this last six months when I was there. She's brilliant. And what she does for me is she's my production assistant, as well as second camera. I did two cameras this time.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You know, when we talk about how you work, physically, let's get back to that because that brings up all kinds of questions about how you make your work. So maybe I should have saved that—

MARY LUCIER: Well, I just would say that other students—oh, students—good mistake there because a lot of my assistants have been students of mine. That's how you meet these young people who are eager to work for you for very little money and don't mind hanging around with you—in fact, like it. But I've had many, many assistants over the years, and usually, it's in production.

In recent years, I've also had a studio assistant who would work on my archives. I have a file—a huge file—that is a FileMaker Pro file of all the works and all the aspects of the work that I want to be recorded somewhere in one place. It's a big job. A lot of people, of course, are facing it at about my age. [00:28:00] And so that's mainly what I use assistants for. I could have more assistants, from time to time, doing physical things in the space upstate. But there's hardly anybody to hire up there. It's much harder than here.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sure, well, you have all these art schools here and young professionals.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, it's a breeze here, in a way.

JUDITH RICHARDS: One last question about studio before we get into other things: If we were sitting in your studio, what would we see on the walls? You can talk about either or both studios. And if that's changed or changing—

MARY LUCIER: In Cochecton, if we were sitting in the main room of my studio, you would see, at one end, a large, gray rectangle painted on the wall. That's my projection screen. And if there's an image on it, you would be seeing the image. On this wall, actually, there are two windows that are shaded. On the wall opposite, there are three monitors—LCD monitors—one 25-inch monitor and one 32-inch monitor. These are all CRT monitors—beautiful ones, though. Over here, ah, okay, I have—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Pointing behind you.

MARY LUCIER: Yes. [Laughs.] I have a photograph. I have a series of photographs of mine that come from a piece called *Wilderness*. And another wall has some shelving where I keep DVDs, digital tapes, anything that's current that I'm working on. And around the corner, there will be more images from my work. I have several compilations of, like, four images.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Those are images you just love seeing, or that reference something you're still thinking about?

MARY LUCIER: They're pieces that I made to sell. I haven't sold any, actually, but I've shown them a lot. And at some point, I can even show them to you because I've got images of them here [00:30:00]—framed photographs, many from an earlier time in video when the raster line was very crucial. So they have this—they are all interrupted by this raster. But for the time, the images—they were exquisitely done and focused, for that time.

Now, you want an image off-screen that doesn't have any evidence of video in it. You don't want to see pixels. You don't want to see lines—anything. So you want it to look almost as pure as a pure photograph. So a lot of my older work in photography was based on using those raster lines. So I have a number of large, let's say four-way images, maybe in different frames—old, rusted frames or beautiful black frames. Or I have one nine-panel piece—lots of things like that [. . . –ML] on display in my studio.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what about here in the studio?

MARY LUCIER: Here, I don't have any art on the walls, really. It's kind of small for that. I do have lots of shelving,

and there's a lot of stuff in my shelves—the archives, some books, of course. I have bookcases. I have, you know —

JUDITH RICHARDS: No bulletin boards with visual references and ideas?

MARY LUCIER: You know, yes, there is a bulletin board, but it hasn't been in use much lately, just because I'm not there very often. And the studio upstate is still developing its personality and its various locales.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You moved in there in just the last couple of years?

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, uh-huh [affirmative]. We bought it—let's see—it's only—we've only had it about three years. And of course, I wasn't there for the last six months, and I've slowly been moving things up there. So it's still taking shape, and I'm still trying to decide which areas belong to which activity, and that's very crucial. [00:32:00] Where is the real storage—I bought two metal filing cabinets—not filing cabinets, but storage cabinets—for videotapes and laser discs and all of this outmoded material.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Are they fireproof cabinets?

MARY LUCIER: They're not. They're not. I'm just not going to worry about that. The house is wood. The building is wood, you know. What can I tell you? [Laughs.] That's one reason I want to have this electronic archive be as complete as possible—because I really think there's no way—I work in an ephemeral medium to begin with. It always has been. It isn't getting any less ephemeral. It's a disappearing medium.

The work from my early days is hardly—you know, in some ways, it's hardly there—old tapes, old open-reel, half-inch tapes. You have to do something to them before you can even transfer them to another medium now. You have to have them cleaned. You have to get all those oxides wiped off. It's very delicate, and you learn right away that you shouldn't—there's no such thing as permanence in this art. And you can't try to create permanence.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Let's continue on that thought and talk, then, about the evolution of the materials that you've been using in the technology since 1990 and whatever you were using then—just a tremendous change over the last 20 years.

MARY LUCIER: Yes. Now, I have to try to remember what I was using in 1990.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Should I pause?

MARY LUCIER: Pause for a second.

[Audio break.]

MARY LUCIER: Right, and this may take us back a little into the previous interview, as well. But the arc of the change in video material has been vast since I started in the early '70s. [00:34:00] I started with half-inch, open-reel, black-and-white tape shot with a Portapak—a handheld Portapak and a deck that you carried around your shoulder.

And that then moved into color—from black-and-white into color; from open-reel tape into cassette tape; from a single-tube vidicon tube apparatus inside a camera to three-tube ENG cameras, color, all the way up to tapeless cameras that now store video on cards, similar to what you're using in your recorder there.

So my current camera uses—it no longer has tubes, for heaven's sakes. It has something called MOS sensors—and three or one of them, depending on the quality of the camera. And now you can have removable or interchangeable lenses, which was not so true in the older days. And now, the tapeless flow of production is vastly different from the tape-based production workflow [. . . –ML].

That's just a kind of overview, where we moved from these very clumsy, black-and-white, large, low-resolution implements up to film-quality, tapeless, computerized, high-resolution cameras and editing. [00:36:00] And that's in my life in video since, I'd say, 1972 to now. It's quite a span.

I don't think I know any other technology that has evolved quite that much. Of course, television has evolved along with it because they're interrelated, and so has audio recording, but in a way, not as much, although audio recording on tape, in some ways, might have been even superior to audio recording on discs and on cards. But that's a whole other topic.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It seems, in general, that all these changes have given you and other artists working in video an easier, more flexible—it seems like all kinds of plusses, but have there been any minuses amidst these changes?

MARY LUCIER: Sure. All right—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Are there things you can't do or have more difficulty doing now than you used to?

MARY LUCIER: Well, as a teacher, I have found there to be minuses in that when I learned to edit—and I taught myself, of course, basically—I was using tape, and I would have to log every minute of that tape. I would look at it. I'd draw a little picture—I don't have any of that material here. I'd draw a little picture, describe it, write down the time code, if I was working with a time code—if I was so fortunate, at that time—describe it, the sound, and do that for every piece, every scene that was shot. So I would have logs for some pieces that were—

JUDITH RICHARDS: A few inches thick.

MARY LUCIER: —a few inches thick. But then I would take those and I'd put them onto index cards. And then I'd start shuffling the index cards around, and I was able to get rid of a lot of material. This is without even touching the tape again. [00:38:00] Then, finally, one day came when I would have all these cards lined up. It's like a three-channel piece—boom, boom, boom, you know, synchronized in three rows down a page or down a big piece of cardboard where I would attach these index cards with pictures.

And then I would start actually making the edit. And of course, the linear form of editing—it's so hard to find your way around in a tape. You know, you might want to put something that's at the very end of a tape next to something that's at the very beginning of the tape, and that's 30 minutes of fast-forwarding or rewinding.

So that—but what that did was to really make you think really hard about the process and what you wanted to follow what—the storytelling aspect. Even if it's not a literal story, the construction of the narrative, if you want to call it that. And so I would have it first on paper, and I could run through that and review it in my head, so I could see what the edit was going to be. I could pre-visualize it.

Now, with nonlinear editing, you put all your footage into the computer and you can pull anything out at random. You can just pull things out and stick them together in a timeline, and you can make a piece—a student can make a piece—I can, too—that looks like a finished work in an hour with dissolves and fades and titles and all that. And it isn't really a finished work. It's a rough cut. But a lot of people don't get that.

A lot of people think they're making real work, and I look at some of that stuff and I say, "Okay, all right. It looks like it's a finished piece, but it isn't." So I think that's the major drawback—that the rigorousness of thinking—I often wish I could make students go back to the old way of doing it where they had to deal with tape that was not sequential [00:40:00], where they had to have some way of logging or organizing their material before they could actually make even a rough cut of it—and then to log that so that you could make your final cut, your final edit. And that used to be a very long and cumbersome process.

So I mean, I love nonlinear editing, and I'm so used to it now and I don't have to make those drawings anymore because every piece of footage has a little picture with it. So I don't make those drawings. I don't have to describe them anymore. I don't have to make index cards.

So maybe even I've gotten a little lazy. I don't know. [Laughs.] But that is the main change that is both wonderful and, I think, somewhat detrimental for developing minds. But it may turn out to be the biggest blessing that ever happened in this medium because a lot of people are making a lot of good work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Speaking of teaching, you did—before 1990, you did various short visiting-artist gigs, as well as you taught for a few years at SVA, from '79 to '83. During that time, would you have wanted to have a more full-time position, but they weren't available, or were you purposely just wanting to be—take these short, visiting-artist—if you even wanted to do that. Maybe it was just simply to earn the fee.

MARY LUCIER: Well, all right.

[Cross talk.]

MARY LUCIER: Did you live in New York in the '70s?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Starting in the '80s.

MARY LUCIER: Okay. It was easy to live in the '70s. It was cheap. One of the reasons people wanted to come to New York, believe it or not, is because it was cheap. My rental for that place over there—

JUDITH RICHARDS: It was cheap everywhere in the '70s.

MARY LUCIER: I suppose it was, but people wouldn't believe New York was cheap, just knowing today. My rent was, I think, $165 for this nice, one-bedroom, kitchen, you know, Chelsea apartment. [00:42:00] And you know,

you could go around the corner to Asia de Cuba or something and get a meal for $5 or go to Chinatown and eat for practically nothing.

A lot of entertainment was free. You could go to galleries and you could go to Artists Space and you could go to poetry readings. You could go to all sorts of public events where a little bit was charged—maybe a dollar was charged or something. You know, Artists Space and all those places were very, very inexpensive. The Kitchen—you'd hardly pay anything to go to the Kitchen. And I rode my bicycle a lot, so I didn't even have to pay for buses and subways.

So honestly, I liked it here because it was cheap and because it was—you might say gritty, but down-to-earth, I think, is a better word—because everybody of the same ilk was doing the same kind of thing. And you did not have to live with five roommates. And just around this same time, of course, the whole wave of lofts opened up in SoHo. And people were living in, what, 2,000 square feet for $60 a month. And that was even better than I had here in Chelsea. But of course, that changed very much.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, and they didn't have a kitchen and a bathroom, obviously.

MARY LUCIER: No, that's right. They had to build everything. But still, I mean, that was the atmosphere at the time, and so to have a job, for me, was something—it was to pay the rent. So a part-time job, let's say, when I was working at SVA in—

JUDITH RICHARDS: '79 to '83.

MARY LUCIER: —right, I was also, though, working at a place called *Theater Crafts* magazine.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You talked about that quite a bit in the other interview, yeah, yeah. So through the '80s and up to 1990, you had these temporary, it seems—I'm looking at your resume—temporary positions. But then in 1992, you took what seems—you became a lecturer in the visual arts, a relatively permanent position, at Purchase, and you were there for several years. [00:44:00]

MARY LUCIER: Right. It wasn't permanent. I mean, what started to happen right around that time is that the—well, the temporary worker—you know, the temporary teacher, the adjunct—began to become the mainstay of these departments. And I know a few people—like Donna Dennis—a few people around that period who were teaching, say, at Purchase and wanted to have the full-time appointment and got it. I didn't—didn't want it.

SVA, I probably could have gone on there teaching one course for a long time. A lot of people have been there for years teaching one course, or maybe two. You know, sometimes you can go up. [Laughs.] And it wasn't really until—wow, I would say I've never really had a teaching job that was in the category of full-time teaching.

Now, oddly enough, when I went out to Wisconsin—to Milwaukee in 2005—for two years, I taught there in their film department as a professor in the film department. And it was a full-time appointment. And I was only there two weeks out of every month. That was sweet. And I really liked Milwaukee, and one of my dearest friends, the video artist Cecilia Condit, teaches there. And she's the one who helped me get the job.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you spell Condit?

MARY LUCIER: Oh, C-O-N-D-I-T. But jobs like that—a job like that was precious because it paid so well.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But by then, you had achieved such a level of recognition that they were obviously eager to have you.

MARY LUCIER: Right, they wanted me because they wanted to improve their rating in the Regents or whatever the regional committees that look at these schools and assess what they're doing and say [00:46:00], "You're on the right track," or "You're on the wrong track, and we're going to kick you out of this organization or that organization." And they had said, "Oh, well, you're not doing enough video. You're too film-oriented." So they went around and they wanted to bring in more video people.

And so I came in teaching installations, which was a real kick in the teeth—well, no, a kick in the pants—for that department because they were—it's a real 16-millimeter film department. But that only lasted two years, and part of the reason is that huge collapse—financial collapse—right at that time. And most schools began to fire people, and to have a position like I had in Milwaukee for that—you know, that wasn't possible.

Now, they were hiring full-time, and had I been willing to move there and had my husband been willing to move there, it's entirely possible I could have gotten a full-time job. But they could no longer keep up that level of visiting professor when they really needed the salary for people who would serve on committees and do all that stuff.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Most artists in New York would say that the last thing they'd want is a full-time teaching job anywhere, and especially to move out of New York.

MARY LUCIER: However—oh, I'm sorry. You're not finished.

JUDITH RICHARDS: No, that's enough.

MARY LUCIER: However—just a second. I'm going to get a drink. Okay, as far as a full-time job is concerned, if you look at the whole SUNY-Purchase faculty, at least when my husband was a professor there, they were all artists who wanted to continue living in New York but who also wanted full-time jobs. And it's true to this day.

So I want to—trying to name them. There was Bob, of course. There was a whole batch of artists, some of whom are better known than others. But Donna Dennis is there now, Nancy Bowen. [00:48:00] Well, Liz Phillips doesn't have a full-time job. She has two classes and is always afraid she'll lose them. But it's not entirely true that artists don't want full-time jobs, and these are people in different mediums, you know. Nancy Bowen is a painter or a mixed media person. Donna is a sculptor. And you know, it varies. There are printmakers. There are photographers and painters, as well.

JUDITH RICHARDS: All these years when you've been teaching, at least in recent years, you're teaching, you said, installation, video?

MARY LUCIER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Could you describe your approach to teaching? Your teaching philosophy, as it were.

MARY LUCIER: Well, okay. No, it's not a philosophy. The best way to tell you would, of course, be—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And it is always video and related subjects?

MARY LUCIER: Yes. I might start a class, though, at the beginning of the year showing my favorite slideshow that I compiled many, many years ago of American landscape painting on up through Earth Art on, you know, up to *Spiral Jetty* and all of that and then link video installation up to that—and Stonehenge.

You know, I had a whole panorama of kinds of work throughout history that I thought could be integrated with installation and video installation so that it didn't appear to be this strange offshoot. I guess I was trying to make it less ephemeral. So I often used that approach and would start with that kind of thinking, and then I would talk a lot about music composition or avant-garde music composition, and electronic music, as well. And I would always show work. And then I—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Your work?

MARY LUCIER: I didn't used to show my work. Then I got so I showed my work a lot because it was, you know, the easiest thing to do. And I debated whether it was a good thing to do or not. And I've encountered a few times when, you know, you get some snotty students who make nasty remarks about your work and you think, "I shouldn't have done this because that gives them an edge over me. Not a good thing to do." You know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I've spoken to other artists who have very radically different approaches. Never show your work. Always show your work.

MARY LUCIER: I know. I've done both—done it both ways. And finally, you have such a demand to show work—to fill time, for one thing. If you're teaching a course that's a one-hour course, that's easy. At Purchase, it was six hours—a six-hour studio. Now, how do you fill a six-hour—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Once a week.

MARY LUCIER: Once a week. But how do you fill a six-hour course if it's video? You either have to lecture. You have to show a lot of work. You have to get them to make work and edit work during class time. And so those are sort of the three things you try to set up. You know, you start out lecturing. Then you show a lot of work. Then you give them assignments and they start bringing them in.

But in that interim between when you give them the assignment and they starting bringing it in, what do you do with them then? You show them more work, you know, and you hope to set up some interesting strategies where they can respond to each other in ways that interest them, also, where they can critique, you know, and help one another. Or you get them into groups.

I've always found that particular time span to be really challenging, and I much prefer sort of a lecture time to show work, talk and then have out-of-class meetings with individual students. So they talk to you about their

project. You give them advice. You give them things to read. You refer them to paintings; you refer them to sculptures; you refer them to other electronic art. And that's always seemed, to me, to be the most economical and interesting way to go about it. [00:52:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: You're mostly teaching or only teaching graduate students?

MARY LUCIER: Let's see. I was teaching—at Harvard, I was teaching a mix of graduate students and undergraduates—primarily undergraduates. See, I'd have to look and see what was I doing where. SVA was undergraduates.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you have a preference?

MARY LUCIER: Well, you know, I have really liked my work with graduate students. I had a distinguished regents visiting professorship at UC Davis just before 9/11 happened, actually, and that was a mix primarily of graduate students but with a few undergrads thrown in. And the graduate students, I really thought, were—well, they were superior.

I just felt—well, no one is superior to the Harvard undergraduates. I mean, it's unbelievable. The Harvard undergraduates are so incredibly smart, it's scary. I'm telling you, it's scary. And at Wisconsin, I taught graduates. I taught the graduate seminar for a couple of years, and then I had an undergraduate class in installation.

So it was mixed. It was mixed. But the graduate students generally have more sense of direction. They pay better attention—not always but often—and they do what you ask them to do. And that's a crucial thing. Sometimes undergraduates, like freshman and sophomores, they don't really want to do what you ask them to do.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you thought about the impact that teaching has had on your own work?

MARY LUCIER: Well, it has had an impact on my attitude in that it makes me feel more fair-minded about other art and other artists because when you're teaching students [00:54:00] and you're looking around for references and you want to show them as much as possible about what's happening out there, you become very much less prejudiced. Sometimes your prejudicial attitudes do come out in class, but you put a little joke on the end of it.

But mainly, you're eager to show work because the student is interested in this genre and, heck, I'm going to show them this person's work who I never thought I liked, but I can see the benefits in the work now. And I found that to be a very helpful tool for me, just to get me to be more open-minded, myself, and less dug into a narrow channel of only being interested in what I do. And I'm not teaching lately.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is that because you prefer not to or because the right position has not appeared?

MARY LUCIER: No, I prefer not to. I did a workshop last year in Germany. I was invited over to do—in Kiel. And that was great fun. I don't remember whether they were graduate or undergraduate level, but that was fantastic because they really—what I do when I go in and do these workshops is to—and particularly, even if it's only a week, it's really intense because we start out with a little bit of lecturing, a lot of showing of stuff I want to show them.

And then they have to show me and bring in their stuff, even if it's poetry. And then they get an assignment and then they know that at the end of this week or two weeks, they're going to have a show. They're going to do a show. They're going to all make installations of some sort or another. And I have, I must say, been successful at doing this throughout my teaching career—going into a place for a short period of time and actually getting them to make an exhibition at the end of it. And sometimes the other teachers are jealous. I don't know quite how I do it. I just get them all fired up about making installations.

And you're sitting around in a room that has a lot of junk in it and stuff and you say, "Look, you could use that for this idea of yours, Baba." [00:56:00] And you have to be on your toes and have a lot of ideas about their work, too, to really get them motivated so they can see the benefits of what they're thinking about. Otherwise, they're very timid, you know. And if they know that they have a goal at the end of a week to make work and screen it and that the faculty is going to come, you know, that's real pressure. And it's big-time thinking, you know. And you have to clean up the space around it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And it's a great opportunity.

MARY LUCIER: It is. It is. So in Kiel, it was fantastic. I thought my students did wonderful, fabulous installations. At UC Davis, same thing. And I've also—at NYU, same thing was true. Oh, god, and in Milwaukee? Incredible. So I've developed this way of being able to show, let's say, 12 installations in one afternoon.

Now, how do you do that when you have a department that's got three projectors and five monitors—that's it? You put a piece up. You walk around. You all critique it. You take it down. You put the next piece up. So installing them becomes part of what they—now, they may have all gone earlier and picked out the spaces they want to use.

So you take this equipment from one small room with a glass window to another totally enclosed room, to an open stairwell, to—you know, so you move it around so you change the architecture of the piece, but you have to deal with this limited amount of equipment. And that, I find very exciting to do, actually. But also, it's very trying for me, you know, because I've got to make sure they're on top of everything, that they understand what all is involved. They really, really understand it, you know. Can you put this piece up by yourself with your friend's help? Do you know, you know, what goes into what?

JUDITH RICHARDS: You don't want them to come to the point of it not working.

MARY LUCIER: No, no.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Failure.

MARY LUCIER: No, no. [00:58:00] Well, even though sometimes there's a little bit of failure, there's also a way to make that work, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Let's move on to actually talking about your work.

MARY LUCIER: Hang on a second. Let's pause a bit. I have to—

[Audio break.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: So I wanted to talk to you about *Noah's Raven* and ask you to talk about the whole inception of the piece, obviously, as an example of how you conceive of works, and then, step-by-step, the process of creating that piece. And I have various questions that I want to ask you.

MARY LUCIER: How many hours did you say we have?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, let's do this quickly. Take an overview because I'm sure the same subjects might come up in other pieces. But how did you conceive of that piece? And if that's similar to how other pieces come into being, then that would be interesting to know.

MARY LUCIER: Okay. I believe the Toledo museum—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Commissioned you.

MARY LUCIER: —commissioned me to do it. I mean, I know they commissioned me. I believe they called me and asked if I wanted to do a piece, and I said, "Absolutely." And I guess I had—here's where my memory is not going to be so good because I would like to go through all the papers—the things I wrote—all of the material that went into the proposal, which was very dense and complicated.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So what they asked you to do was propose a work, which they would consider as a commission?

MARY LUCIER: No. Oddly enough—maybe I had this all written beforehand. Honestly, Judith, I can't remember. I'd have to go back and look at all the dates. I have stacks of paper.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But you're saying, then—you're saying something very interesting. You're saying it began with words on paper.

MARY LUCIER: Writing. All my work does, almost invariably. It all begins with writing. [01:00:00] *Noah's Raven*, for example—you know what? If you just turn that off for a second—

[Audio break.]

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, it is hard for me to keep the chronology completely straight because I have often gone from idea to idea to idea. And I write the ideas down. Then I refine those ideas as it becomes a proposal—the proposal for money or the proposal for sponsorship.

So I will write, in some cases—I think in the case of *Noah's Raven*, I probably wrote a 10-page essay about the ideas, how I was going to execute them, what it was going to become and a series of drawings that were entirely theoretical and lots of sketches based on—and so I have notebooks, for example. I have endless numbers of

notebooks with sketches, drawings and written paragraphs.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Would that 10-page proposal include exactly where you were going and how long you were going to be at the place?

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, often. Often.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So there's a lot of preconceived—there are a lot of preconceived elements in the work. Once you get to the locations and start filming, do you feel free to completely change all that?

MARY LUCIER: Mm-hmm [affirmative], I do. My ideas on paper look extremely specific, and they are extremely specific, but when I get to a location, anything can happen—and does. And sometimes, I don't know what I'm doing once I get there. Suddenly, like, the bottom falls out and I say, "Well, wait a minute," you know.

And in those cases, I have to hope for a very patient assistant because I'm not saying, "Okay, now set the tripod up over here and let's do that. And we'll wait until—ah, now the hour has come. Let's shoot this." It's not like that. It's much more, I set up this outline, this structure of where to go and what to do, and then I improvise when I get there, more or less. [01:02:00] But I do follow a structure—

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MARY LUCIER: In *Noah's Raven*, right, I went to Alaska for a month. I shot in the Midwest for a good three weeks or so in a specific locale right around Toledo, in fact—South Bend, the rust belt. It's right near where I grew up. And then I went to the Brazilian Amazon for a month, as well. So I had all of that, and in each place, I had literature about each one.

I had a lot of theories, a lot of thinking about the preservation of the landscape, the destruction of the land, the inhabitants who actually live there, the people who come in, in order to try to take advantage of the materials [. . .–ML]. I mean, and I read a lot of books, you know. So I read a lot, write a lot, had a lot of ideas, had a long bibliography. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: You haven't mentioned, yet, your mother's cancer and how that topic is interwoven with this. Did that come in later, after you had conceived of this piece? Or was it part of the initial thinking?

MARY LUCIER: Well, it started out to be a piece about scarring of land and scarring of body.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So it was always part of it.

MARY LUCIER: Always part of it. And I videotaped her—her physical scars. Also, Nancy Fried—her mastectomy scars. As somebody said to me, "Oh yeah, that was your essentialist piece." [Laughs.] It was. It was like, there's the female body; here's the scarred land. Mother Nature, blah, blah. But it's not that—it's not dumb, like that makes it sound [00:02:00], but there is, in fact, that connection of looking at the earth as an entity that is more than just a carrier for all of the stuff that we build, but also a living, breathing—almost an organism in itself.

And what the human being does to it is now becoming terribly apparent with global warming, and other things. I'm not 100 percent sure I believe in all of that, either. I mean, then there is another argument—I'm also interested in deep time, you know. And 65 million years ago, the dinosaurs were eliminated by an asteroid from outer space.

Most likely, that was the reason for them to—in the fossil record, you know, the dinosaurs—suddenly, they're like not there anymore. And that's a catastrophic moment. What happened to change the earth like that, you know? Anyway, so all of those topics like that played into my thinking about my mother's cancer and the condition of the earth as though it were a human body, as though it could be a human body—a sensate body.

JUDITH RICHARDS: If your mother hadn't been going through what she was going through, and Nancy Fried hadn't either, was that still an important idea that you would have just found other ways of expressing?

MARY LUCIER: And I did, too.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That connection between the human body—the woman's body and the earth.

MARY LUCIER: Right. I did, actually. I went to several hospitals and got archival footage, and I have archival footage of some very old, sort of color, 16-millimeter film—also some rather graphic footage of breast reconstruction and [00:04:00]—there was one other example of some kind of surgical cutting. So I think I could, as easily, have done it if I didn't have people close me who were willing to share their scars.

And in a way, there's something about the archival footage that somehow brings its own sort of authenticity with it. You can tell it's archival, for the most part—at least, the older footage, you can. And you feel a little bit of remove from it, and yet, there's still the same gory stuff going on, whereas with my mother and Nancy Fried, the gory had already happened and now, you know, they were sewn up. But the residue of that surgery is what I was interested in, in that case. And I think I would have done exactly the same.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you started out imagining—and I know it turned out to be a 26-minute cycle—when you began, did you have a sense that your piece would be about that long and you'd shoot a number of hours related to that, whatever is your custom, whether it was four times as much or 20 times as much or whatever? Did you have a sense of the scope of it?

MARY LUCIER: Well, I knew by that time, having already done *Wilderness*—that the pieces kept getting bigger and bigger. *Wilderness* was three channels, and *Noah's Raven* was four, and *The Plains of Sweet Regret* was five, you know. So yes, I knew pretty well—I did not know it would be 26 minutes.

The length of time always evolves throughout the editing, and it's very important that I let that happen because if you force it into a certain timeframe, there's going to be something out of sync or out of whack with the whole concept working [00:06:00] with the imagery and the sound. So 26 minutes, though, was a good length. Four channels. It's a tremendous amount of footage. I probably shoot—or used to shoot—my ratio was 40-to-1 or something really extraordinarily high. And the amount of footage that I don't use is vast. It's just incredible.

So that's always been true, but it got to be more and more true for *Noah's Raven*. Probably, in that case, I shot more footage than—although I'm shooting a tremendous amount now in Japan, and that's something we'll get to later. But yeah, I do shoot a very high ratio of footage—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Can you say why?

MARY LUCIER: Well, because I get to a site and it's kind of like I don't want to stop. And maybe that's because I didn't go there in order—you know, we don't say, "Okay, lights, camera, action," and a scene takes place and then, "Okay, cut," and we do it again. Since I don't function that way, since I'm just there, I'm looking.

I go to these places to look with the camera. I use the camera to look at the place. I examine the landscape. I examine it up close. I examine it at a distance. And I get so into the examination process that it's very hard to stop. And my assistant in Japan recently found this to be true, too. We were working in a lotus pond, and it was one particularly interesting phase of the growth of the lotus plants one afternoon.

And I was saying, "Well, what do you think, Noriko? Are we getting about done"—and she said, "I don't know. I can't stop!" [Laughs.] So she knew—you know, it was sort of contagious. And then later, you look at the footage and you say—well, you know, of course, a lot of it is redundant. But the thing is, you have to know that. And you also have to be brutal about your own footage.

The thing you think is the most beautiful scene you've ever shot and you think, "There's no way I'm leaving this out" [00:08:00]—that may be the very thing to end up on the cutting room floor because it has its own life in every phase. I mean, in the writing and thinking phase, it has a kind of life there, where it's really literary. Then, in the shooting and production phase, it's very open-ended and a little frightening to me because sometimes I think I don't know what I'm doing.

Then, the editing phase—that's when you have to be so—I have to be so brutal and nasty towards my own footage and just, you know, be willing to throw things away. And then it can open up a little bit again. But it has to have those three life energies, those three different energies, in order to get to be what it's going to be, at least for me. I think a lot of people are very much more economical than I am.

JUDITH RICHARDS: With that piece and others before and after, the soundtrack has been by Earl Howard. Speaking about this piece, or similar or related time period, how did you approach working with him? What did you tell him before he began work? What point in time did he begin work? How did you edit the soundtrack?

MARY LUCIER: Well, do you know Earl at all? You've never met him, never saw him? Do you know Liz Phillips? Well, they're married. And Liz has been one of my best friends forever. I met Earl I don't know how long ago. I wasn't even divorced from Alvin Lucier yet, so I've known him for a very, very long time—after he first came to New York. And he's 60 now. So anyway, Earl is blind. He was blind from birth. [00:10:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, you talked about him quite a bit in the first interview.

MARY LUCIER: Right, and so I explained a lot of how we worked together.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, yes.

MARY LUCIER: Right. He's a very fascinating composer. He is an extraordinary sound maker. He plays saxophone, but he also makes amazing electronic work. [. . . –ML] And Earl and I first worked together in 1983 on *Ohio at Giverny* and then so many pieces since.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And that—I mean, connected with this question is the idea that you were in charge of everything, except—this is my conception of it—except, he's in charge of that sound. Obviously, you reflect on it. You ask for changes to be made. It gets edited together with the visuals. But it's a piece that you're giving over to another artist, no?

MARY LUCIER: Not at all.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay, tell me about that.

MARY LUCIER: That's why I went with Earl. Because Earl says, "Hell, Mary wouldn't want to work with a composer that she just gave the thing to and they just wrote some music for it." He said, "As far as I'm concerned, the soundtrack is Mary's." And it's very gracious of him to say that, but it's really true. What happens is, we sit together. I bring him all the sounds I record on location, and I say, "Okay, Earl, I want this." And then I've got this sound. "Oh, yeah, an iceberg, huh? Hmm."

JUDITH RICHARDS: I remember this story from the previous—

MARY LUCIER: That story—I won't tell that story again. I'm trying to think of if there's a story to go with *Noah's Raven*, in particular. That's, in a way, the most complex, and I think in some ways the most beautiful soundtrack we've done together.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The icebergs? [00:12:00]

MARY LUCIER: *Noah's Raven*. No, that would be *Wilderness*. No, *Noah's Raven*. So anyway, I brought him so much material, and there would be some stuff I would just use.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That you recorded.

MARY LUCIER: That I recorded, like the howler monkeys in the jungle. There's nothing you can do to them to make them any better than they are. They're just amazing. So that kind of thing. What Earl does is he enhances the sound. We don't always distinguish between sound and music. I mean, some people might just say, "Well, that's ambient sound," but we make it music. And he can manipulate the sounds to make it sound very much more interesting, very much more atmospheric.

And whatever I want him to do to it, we'll sit together. We used to sit together so many afternoons down in his studio, and he's doing one thing or another to the sounds I bring him, and then he'll generate electronic sounds for me. Or, say in the case of *The Plains of Sweet Regret*, we took that George Strait song—actually, he didn't do anything to that. I did it all myself. He said, "Mary, you've done that. That's done." But the music leading up to it—but we'll come to that later. Anyway—

JUDITH RICHARDS: But obviously, you don't think the ambient sound is sufficient. You want what you call music to be part of the piece.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah. Well, there's one enormous section in *Noah's Raven* where we took an eagle cry that was probably 23 second long. He processed it into something that developed this rah-rah-rah, rhythmic sound and rhythm—a very pounding sort of rhythm. I don't know how he did it. [00:14:00] I don't know what the electronics underlying it was.

But he stretched the sound and expanded it into something that sounded like a machine. And I lay it under a huge section of *Noah's Raven* where you're traveling, traveling over bridges. You're going, going, going, and the sound just keeps getting—developing and developing and developing.

That's an example where we turned an ambient piece of sound into music that then works into a section of the piece that you might not ever have imagined that it would do that, where it suddenly gives you this traveling feeling, and so here's this footage of traveling, of, you know, you're going and going and going. And this music, then, along with it is going and going and going.

[Audio break.]

MARY LUCIER: Yes, so back to *Noah's Raven* and the sound and how it becomes music. But occasionally, Earl will say, "Okay, here, you really need music" because I'll describe to him what the situation is, what the scenes are, what's happening in the visuals. And he'll say, "Well, maybe this is a place where you really need music." And I'll say "Oh, really? Yeah?" So then he starts making a music for it. And very often, it's the right thing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Always, in some way, referenced by the ambient sound that is there?

MARY LUCIER: Not necessarily. Sometimes, he'll just straight out make a piece of, you know, electronic music. Or he has all these samples he's stored up. And he'll say, "I've got a sound for you." And he'll play me this sound that he's been working with for his own composition, and I'll say, "Wow, that's really great, yeah." And so then he figures out where it goes via my descriptions.

Now, what we did with *Noah's Raven*, after we worked for many, many months in this way and I had compiled all this stuff—[00:16:00] I went into a professional postproduction studio to post-produce the piece, the video. I do the video first. And then we went into a professional sound studio. And Earl came along, and he and my editor, Gregg Featherman, and the sound guy, whose name I can't remember, [Jonathan Porath –ML] sat in the studio and created this beautifully mixed soundtrack. So it had yet another phase to go through.

I have never put the final soundtrack on, myself. I've never made the absolute final soundtrack. I mean, I will make—well, that's not entirely true, but I mean, on these big pieces that Earl and I worked on together, I usually rely on and I like to rely on a professional sound mixer to really make it all go together. And Earl works with other [video –ML] people, as well, and they don't necessarily do it that way. They will end up working with him, and he will lay down the final soundtrack with them.

But I prefer, often, to do it this other way. I like to get another person in there. And sometimes, there are many sections that are not resolved, or we have several options. I don't know what to do. And you've got, you know, your editor who has just helped edit your visual stuff. And he's—and I really liked him. He was somebody I worked with for years.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What is his name?

MARY LUCIER: His name was Gregg—two Gs at the end—Featherman.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Spelled the same way?

MARY LUCIER: Featherman—well, one N at the end. I think he's out in California now working on one of those cop shows, those big TV shows. Homicide? I don't know. Anyway, he was just a wonderful editor, and he loved my work. And he understood what I was doing. And he was very proud of the results we got together.

So he was a very good person to work with, also. And then the sound guy. So that was a perfect combination of four people finally finishing up this project because sometimes, it's more than an individual can bear. [00:18:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you feel that the project is finished, do you take a break before you begin thinking of the next one, or do you always have another idea just waiting to begin? Is that good because you don't like to have a break, or do you want to have a break? How does one piece evolve after one is done?

MARY LUCIER: Sometimes, I have—

JUDITH RICHARDS: This would be *Oblique House*, in this case.

MARY LUCIER: Right. *Oblique House* came right out of *Noah's Raven*. Yes, it did because the footage was shot in Alaska. And it was uncharacteristic of the rest of *Noah's Raven*, so I think I knew at the time I was generating another work. And then—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was that a commissioned work at all?

MARY LUCIER: It became a commissioned work in Rochester.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh yes. The International Festival of the Image.

MARY LUCIER: Right. You might know Visual Studies Workshop up there?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah.

MARY LUCIER: Yes. They commissioned the piece. And I just said, "Oh my god, this is going to work perfectly." All this stuff I had shot in Valdez was going to work really beautifully. And that's a piece I worked on, I think, without Earl. But at any rate, it evolved, also, out of the same material as *Noah's Raven*.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So when you began that, did you also begin it as a lengthy, written description?

MARY LUCIER: No, not so much. It was a drawing because I had to draw the house. And then an architect had to realize the house for me. I had to find a space. So it was an architectural problem, to begin with.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And why didn't you need to write it down, the way you had *Noah's Raven*?

MARY LUCIER: Everything is written, but it's probably one page, whereas *Noah's Raven* was 20 pages.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is that because you knew, in advance, much more about the piece? [00:20:00]

MARY LUCIER: It's a simpler piece. It's kind of a one-idea piece. And it's—but what was complex in it is the house that had to be built. Finding the right location to build the house—I went through this for the Spoleto Festival, also, in Charleston. We had to find the right space to build this piece. Otherwise—and I went on shooting footage, not knowing where I was going to put the piece. And thanks, you know, to Nigel Redden, who came up with this amazing warehouse—but this is how things go for me, you know?

JUDITH RICHARDS: With this piece, *Oblique House*, you interviewed four people. Was that difficult, to find those people and to possibly interview them in the sense of, oh, if that person doesn't work, I'm going to find another person—reject them, as it were?

MARY LUCIER: I've done other interview pieces, and I have actually left some people out—that piece, *Migrations*.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But this was—was this the first time you interviewed people?

MARY LUCIER: This might have been the first interview piece, yeah. I know that I knew what I wanted. I think I probably interviewed at least one other person for it I'd have to go back and look at my notes. But I wanted four. I wanted a quartet of voices. I would have liked to have had two women and two men, but I ended up with three women and a man. And I just wanted them to be representative of the population, though each to be different. And I wanted them each to have a different vocal range.

JUDITH RICHARDS: As I understand it, when one listens to the piece [00:22:00], all their speech is intelligible, but when one looks at it and the video, it's less straightforward. There's a combination of levels of clarity and—

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, well, in this sense: No, listening to it is not necessarily legible, either, or credible or whatever you call it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And I guess my question is, explain what it was like and why.

MARY LUCIER: Okay. This piece actually not only came out of the *Noah's Raven* footage, but it was also very influenced by *Last Rites [Positano]*. These are the only two interactive pieces I've ever done. *Last Rites [Positano]* had a very specific structure that was interactive. And then it was an ideal setting—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Interactive in terms of the audience activating the sound.

MARY LUCIER: Audience activating the voices and deactivating them, also, by not being there. You know, you're there; you activate it. You're not there—a very simple off-and-on mechanism, not a complicated thing. But in this case—you've seen pictures, I guess, of the house—of *Oblique House*?

So you would come into this space with a very high-pitched ceiling, and on the ceiling are two projectors projecting images of—what the camera sees as it's walking over the site of the former town of Valdez because when the earthquake occurred in whatever it was, 1960-something, '61 maybe, the earth actually dropped six feet—six inches, rather, sorry. And they had to move the town of Valdez 20 miles in a different direction. But there are still—it's almost like a cemetery now because, you know, there are parts of foundations that rise up out of the earth and pieces of twisted metal that were obviously once part of a structure.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So they actually lifted the houses and moved them? [00:24:00]

MARY LUCIER: They either lifted them and moved them, or they just destroyed it all and rebuilt it elsewhere. But most of what was there—I think it collapsed. I think it was a wreck. I think that the earthquake was so powerful, and when the earth sank, I think all the houses were useless. But it's very creepy to be walking over what was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, earthquake in '64.

MARY LUCIER: Right, right—the remnants of a city and just having these ghostly reminders. You have to be very careful where you step, too. You have to wear thick boots. So at any rate, the camera is looking at the ground as it walks across the former site. So those images are [projected –ML] on the ceiling, constantly, and then the sound of rocks rolling, I think, is what accompanies that.

But in four corners of this house—now, the walls lean in at you—in the four corners, each of the four corners, is a 25-inch monitor mounted in the corner, each with its own face and soundtrack. Each has its own motion-activated device so that when you walk in, none of them is moving, but the stuff is going on overhead, quietly.

[Makes swishing noises.] And nothing else is happening. Because you can walk in, and the door is right in the middle.

So in order to activate one of them, you have to move over and pass by or go to them. Then they begin to speak to you. But the voices have been altered and processed. Ah yes, this is—Earl and I did the processing of the voices. That's right. I forgot that he developed this process that I used in a couple of pieces. So we'd put this process on the voice and decide how much process we wanted.

So we had process on one channel, straight voice on another, so I could actually mix them live and [00:26:00], you know, by just a simple turn of the dial, decide which you wanted more of in which case. So one would start speaking, and you could walk around and the next one would start speaking, and the next and the next. Finally, when they were, all four, talking, if you stood in the middle it was a kind of cacophony, but the sound was rather beautiful. Because of the process, it was a little more like singing than like talking.

But their faces were moving in slow motion. So you couldn't, by looking at their lips, discern anything about what they were saying. The only way you could really get someone's story was to walk right up to that monitor and be close to it. And then you'd be close to that loudspeaker. And that's also true in *Floodsongs*. If you were close to that loudspeaker, you could hear that individual's story. The farther away you moved, the less you could make it out.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What do you think brought this idea to you of using these motion sensors, as you did in both these *Last Rites* and *Valdez*?

MARY LUCIER: Well, for one reason, it was a way to structure a lot of sound, a lot of voices. I wanted to make a kind of chorus, or in this case, a quartet. And I didn't want to edit it so that one goes on, one goes off. I thought it would be more interesting, more free-flowing, more engaging for the viewer to realize that they could determine which ones of these would be on and they could determine which one they wanted to listen to. Or if they wanted all four going, then go stand in the middle.

And the interesting thing about that is when you're not activating any of them—they've all been activated. When you go to the middle of the room, nobody's activating anything and they stop at different times. So the texture gradually thins out, and finally, you might just hear one left [00:28:00], and then you can understand him or her. And so it's kind of like an indeterminate, sort of always-improvised chorus.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you're adding the viewer as an important actor in the entire installation.

MARY LUCIER: Right, right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And that, maybe, connects to the earlier—

MARY LUCIER: To *Last Rites [Positano]*.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And the earlier works that had been happening in the '70s.

MARY LUCIER: Uh-huh [affirmative], possibly so.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That kind of performative element.

MARY LUCIER: Right, right. Interactivity has always interested me, as a device to help structure work in a particular space. When you think of it as just a switch, they could be going up and they could be touching a switch, I suppose. Theoretically, it would do the same thing. But I like the sort of mysteriousness. People know that they can affect it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's almost like an open score, where the performer is playing the composition.

MARY LUCIER: Right, right. But it's quite simple. There are only four sound sources in this piece. But there are very many different ways that the whole thing can sound, depending on what the sequence is and what's going on all at once and what drops out. So the texture is dense, even though there are only four.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Both of these pieces became or started as commissions. If you hadn't had a commission at that point, would you say, "You know, I can't start a new piece. I have to go get a commission because of the cost?"

MARY LUCIER: Oh, frequently, that was the case. That is frequently the case. A piece like that—like *Oblique House*—I wish I could do it again. The house structure is amazing. But we tore it down afterwards [00:30:00], and they donated the materials to—what's Jimmy Carter's, the organization—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Habitat for Humanity.

MARY LUCIER: Habitat for Humanity. And I was so glad they did that. I love that, so there's no waste in that. But you would like to be able to see it again sometime, and this is the only time—it's one of my large pieces that's been shown only once, ever.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Let's talk about *Last Rites*. You talked about the connections between the two pieces. So how did that idea evolve, and how—and which things did you bring over from *Valdez* to that piece?

MARY LUCIER: It's the other way around.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Or actually, the other way around, okay.

MARY LUCIER: Right. *Last Rites [Positano]* was something I'd been thinking about for years. This was after my mother had died and before my sister got so horribly ill. She had two severe illnesses and eventually died of lung cancer. She was six years older than I. She had a different father.

She was born in—I don't know, maybe you know the story from reading about it—she was born in Italy. She was born in Rome, and they lived for a while in Positano. I was sort of appropriating my sister's story, in this case. Also—aha, now I'm remembering—my mother's illness does come into this because while she was ill, I interviewed her about her previous life. And I had maybe six, seven, eight scripts of interviews.

She only wanted to talk about her life up until she came back from Positano, and then she didn't want to talk about any more of her life. She came back when she was, like, 23, 24 years old or something, and she didn't want to talk about it because that's the part of her life she thought was interesting. But it was interesting.

It was an interesting story [00:32:00], and it involved Nazis and, you know, midnight escapes. I mean, it was a fascinating story, and I had always heard this story about my mother living her life in Positano and her former husband, Wolfgang, and my sister's birth and everything that went on. And so I had interviewed her, so I had her voice. And we put a process on her voice. I interviewed my uncle, Sam Beer, who is also now deceased. I put a process on his voice. The most extraordinary thing happened—

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you say you put a process, why?

MARY LUCIER: Because I liked—because it made it more like singing, and I liked the song quality of the processed voice. I just liked it. I liked the resonance.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you want his voice to be less specifically his voice, in that case, then?

MARY LUCIER: Well, it's still very much his voice, and my mother's voice was still—the character of each voice—my sister's voice, my uncle's voice, my mother's and this Italian woman—stayed very much the same. It's just that something was added to it. Really, nothing was taken away. And so, who knows? Perhaps this interest had been in my mind for a very, very long time. And again, it's only four voices—or for the first time, it was only four voices.

The Italian woman—a sheer miracle I found her still living in Positano, and she had been the one who had cared for my sister and had been my mother's friend. And so I got her side of the—it was kind of a *Rashomon* story, too. I got her side of the story; I got my mother's side of the story; my uncle's side of the story. He was supposed to be taking care of, watching over my mother while she was in Europe [00:34:00]—ha—and my sister, who sees it all differently, of course, because she was both the beneficiary and the victim of all these stories.

So the four of them together made for quite a contrast. Now, you only saw three monitors. You only saw three of the speakers because my mother was represented on loudspeakers only and on still images that hung on the walls—still photographs—whereas the other three—my sister, my uncle and Maria—were all on video. They also were slowed down. [Laughs.]

When my uncle, Sam, looked at it, he said, "I look drunk." [Laughs.] He said, "It makes me look drunk." And I've thought about that ever since, thinking, you know, he's right in a way. It really did make him look sort of drunk. And I've had occasion to question why I slowed their faces down so much but kept the voices at the same rate of speed so they would be understandable.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you come up with an answer?

MARY LUCIER: No. I haven't been able to see the piece often enough. It's only been installed twice. And so it's still something that I might wrestle with if I really were able to look at it. You know, but these pieces go up for three weeks—or no, four or five weeks—and then they're down. They're gone. So you can't spend a lot of time with them.

Anyway, this was a very intricate interactive piece because I think we had seven interactive channels going. My mother was represented by her furniture—the hanging furniture and the loudspeakers that hung near that furniture. So as you passed by, you would activate that voice, and it would be my mother telling a part of her story, whether it was the time her brothers threw her in the water and she couldn't swim. She went down, down, down, but then she came up again. [00:36:00] Or it was about Wolfgang and Nazis, you know. All three of them were her voice.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At what point did you think, "How much do I need to tell the audience about what's going on here?" And how did you answer that question?

MARY LUCIER: You always worry, when you're doing anything like this—and I'm sure documentarians must worry even more because they have to provide the rationale in the piece, itself. I don't, really. All I have to do is hope that it's interesting enough—people will get enough of it that they will find a place to hook in and be able to relate to it. And a lot of people said to me, "Oh, you know, families have these stories. It's so interesting, you know. I mean, your mother at that time in Europe and the Nazis and all."

Now, there was a moment when that also could become a great cacophony. That was six voices—six voices, plus a background soundtrack of water and then the sound of the water and the bells in Positano, very quietly. And I remember at the opening, there were lots of people in the room and it was just ruined. It wrecked the piece. Openings wreck video installations. And it was a real cacophony and I thought, "Oh, man, you know, this is"—but it was never that full again. There were never that many people in it again.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did people understand that was your mother's furniture? Did you need to tell them?

MARY LUCIER: How was that made clear? [Pause.] You know, I don't remember whether we had explanatory text or not.

JUDITH RICHARDS: One critic writing about it thought that—well, he found out that it wasn't obvious to the viewer. Somehow, he knew. Maybe it was in a press release that wasn't posted. [00:38:00]

MARY LUCIER: It certainly was in a press release, I think. That might have been Chuck Hagan. I always feel that, though I use documentary-like origins for a lot of my work—the ones we've been talking about, certainly extremely documentary in origin. And I'm just on the edge of—actually, I'm making a documentary and explaining it all.

But I don't want to explain it all. I want it all to be there in this cloud of possible meanings. And I want it to be interesting enough to be interesting without the explanations, you know, so that you can maybe start to make the connections between that image of the woman on the wall, you know, with short hair—that wonderfully dignified woman and that beautiful woman right next to her—that, that's her old and that's her young and that's her furniture.

Now, you know, also, I just think that it's like—it is like creating a cloud of some kind. It's like there's a spray in the room, and it comes from the three monitors and the three loudspeakers and all the imagery. And somehow, somehow it has to connect.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you're hoping that you're bringing in the viewer, the visitor, and captivating them enough to—so that they will definitely stay and listen and look and think.

MARY LUCIER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Now, not everyone will.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And pull something out of the cloud.

MARY LUCIER: And pull something out of the cloud. In Japan, for instance, I just recently went through this, where people say, "Oh, but well, how long are people going to stay here? How long is the cycle? How long is the piece?" I said, "That's not my problem." If some are interested, they will stay, and some are not, they won't. And you can't change human nature. [00:40:00] All you can do is build in enough signposts to get people into it so that—because the longer they're there, of course, the more they will begin to understand.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you remember how long—I don't see a notice—how long *Last Rites* actually was if you wanted to hear and see everything?

MARY LUCIER: Oh, everything? Well, I don't know because it depends at what rate—when things all come on. If you went around from one to one to one, you'd just have to add them all up. But if there were several going at once—it's impossible to tell. It's of totally indeterminate length.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you conceived that piece, you had a specific place in mind that it would be shown, so you mapped out exactly how it would be installed. That's been shown elsewhere?

MARY LUCIER: It was only shown once after that at the Aldrich Museum.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So that was a completely different space.

MARY LUCIER: Right, but I was able to also map out that space and make it work. It was big enough—wasn't as big as Jill's former gallery, which was quite huge, but it was good. I felt that it worked. The thing about that original gallery of Jill's and Tom's—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Jill Weinberg, yeah.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, on Broadway—it wasn't the second space on Broadway. It was the very first space they had, which was—[inaudible]. It was very large, at any rate. And I think that when I was installing it, as I was installing it, I was deciding where I was going to put things. And Tom was a big help with that—Tom Adams. He has a very, very astute sense of where things go and where things should be in relation to other things.

He was the one who convinced me I could show *The Plains of Sweet Regret* in their new Chelsea space. [00:42:00] I thought, "It's too small. I can't do it." But it was a very good space. He said, "I knew it all along." I said, "You did know it, and you were the only one who had confidence that it would work there." And he was right. It absolutely—so at any rate, those things often assemble themselves in the making, too. It's sort of like the shooting, which is improvised, somewhat. Often, the installation has to be somewhat improvised, too.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you were thinking—

MARY LUCIER: Let me just—excuse me—let the dog in.

[Audio break.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: At what point, when you were thinking about *Last Rites* or *Oblique House*, did the physical elements in the piece connect to the video and the sound? Does one piece usually come before another, or do they all happen together as the whole concept is being developed? So did you think of the furniture hanging at the very end, the very beginning, somewhere in between?

MARY LUCIER: That's a very good question.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And how you would structure the experience of the piece?

MARY LUCIER: Right. The furniture was always going to be in it, and I wanted it to be suspended. And we worked on—my assistant and I—worked on how to suspend the furniture, and yet, not damage it for a long time before.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you had a vision of what it would be like standing in this room?

MARY LUCIER: Well, yes. I had more a vision, maybe, of individual elements because I drew pictures—I drew the individual elements, like that orange sofa settee and the hanging chair. And the trick was [00:44:00] to assemble those things in that space so that they would all work together and that there would be some kind of a path that a viewer could follow.

When I think back on that, I think, "Wow, that must have been complicated because what's to tell you, here is where you enter?" You know, what's to say you go here next? Or where do you go, or does it matter? So it had to have a feel for it that was both airy, spacious and yet, coherent, in a way that you could sort of mark a path around the space.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You know, it's been remarked on by many writers that among the various themes in your work, there's a sense of loss and regeneration. And of course, you can think of *Valdez*. You can think of the *Raven*. You can think of all the pieces we've discussed. Was that consciously part of your thinking?

Is it just something that's unconscious, that just happens and then you become conscious of it? And then I wanted to start talking about *House by the Water*. Okay, again, you have this sense of history, a sense of the past, the present, how those connect, of course, memory. I mean, there's all these interlocking themes that are very consistent through the pieces, at least so far, that we've looked at.

MARY LUCIER: Well, this is something I'm loathe to give a definite answer to because I don't want to claim a causality for themes that happen to repeat in my work and say, "Oh, it's because of my childhood, or it's because of this or that or the other thing." [00:46:00] I have a morbid mind. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: I mean, somewhere, some critics have said that certain artists just do the same—

[Cross talk.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: But it's the same thing over and over.

MARY LUCIER: Well, I've said this, too, that yes, you do the same thing over and over and over again until you get it right. But of course, you never get it right. That's what keeps you going. There is a lot of truth in that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I mean, are you conscious of questions that are provoking a piece? As a painter might say, I wanted to figure out something?

MARY LUCIER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Oh I know he will consciously do a painting over and over again, as will, say, Alex Katz, you know. Okay, you did it once. You do it again. You know, that's a different process, I think. For me, I think there is a lot of whatever it is I'm working on, this theme of loss and regeneration and sort of a melancholy—maybe it's sad.

I don't know. Some people cried at *Ohio at Giverny* when it first showed in the Whitney. And I remember Laurie Anderson coming out, and she said, "Why is it so sad?" And Arthur Tsuchiya was in tears.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sorry, Arthur who?

MARY LUCIER: Tsuchiya—T-S-U-C-H-Y-A [sic], I think. Arthur, he used to be one of the program directors at the New York State Council of the Arts. And it used to make me sad once in a while when I would be watching it with other people, when I would be watching it sort of through their eyes. I'd be standing way in the back or something, and then it would kind of make me feel sad, too. Also, it was dedicated to an aunt and uncle who were deceased, so it was about them more than it was about a lot of things. [00:48:00]

But also, yeah, there's a word I'm looking for—not valedictory, not oratory. Requiem, I think—the idea of a requiem for something. And I choose different subjects, different literal subjects, but lately, those subjects have gotten to be all much more similar to each other than I ever would have imagined. From *Last Rites [Positano]*, where there are sort of—though they're my family and this Italian woman, they're very specific to that story, okay. But then in *Oblique House*, they're very typical of the people who live in this place. *Floodsongs*—very typical of the people who live in that place. Even in—

JUDITH RICHARDS: *House by the Water*.

MARY LUCIER: *House by the Water*. *House by the Water* doesn't have any talking heads.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right, but there are still people who live there—actors.

MARY LUCIER: Yes, there are actors and people, and they are, in their own way, typical. But so, I don't know. This is something about the common man, I don't know. You know, I can't really answer your question, and I don't want to keep stabbing at it because, you know, I might get ideas—I'll get ideas about what it could be about. All I know is that I do seem to repeat some of these themes. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Not in a noticeable way.

MARY LUCIER: I think it's very noticeable. And I'm doing it yet again—maybe not so much in Japan. [00:50:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you were commissioned by Spoleto to do this piece, *House by the Water*, which you did in '97—I don't know how much earlier than that it was first commissioned—

MARY LUCIER: Oh, it was pretty quick.

JUDITH RICHARDS: There's also a house, and there's all these themes. Did that—what I'm trying to ask is how you began to conceive of that piece. And were there threads that you consciously said, you know, "I want to take this element from a previous piece and keep working on it in this new piece?"

MARY LUCIER: No, actually not. I think at a certain point, you give in to the icons that keep reappearing in your work, like Robert Wilson and the chair, for example. There was recently an article about him and his collection of 2 million or 2,000 chairs or something. And I thought, "Well, I understand that." I could totally understand that, and I felt, in a way, I was referencing him in *Last Rites [Positano]*, hanging that Victorian chair upside-down.

I thought, "Well, that's perfectly fine." I, too, am somewhat obsessed with chairs, but not the way he is. But houses, I'm probably more obsessed with than chairs, per se, but chairs are an important part of houses. Now, none of these grab me, but that's not the issue. The house, as a structure—it's fascinating to me that—well, *Asylum*, a piece from, what, 1986, has a kind of house in it. It has a shed, and it's built of wood and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you thinking, also, of other artists? You know, you mentioned Donna Dennis. She has used the house form. Other artists at that time who you either knew or you just knew their work? Were there any artists whose work interested you and fed this—the visual—

MARY LUCIER: I'm sure Donna's work has had an influence on me. I've always loved Donna's work. [00:52:00] The influence, though, maybe sometimes is just to the degree that it gives you permission to do this. I mean, I have seen so many pieces that are structures in museums. It's just—

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JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Mary Lucier at her home in New York City on September 28, 2011, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number two. Mary, when we left off, we were talking about themes, but you had some comments that are more general in nature about your work that I wanted you to continue with.

MARY LUCIER: I was thinking about the big pieces in my sort of middle period—very large pieces that involved exploration to different countries or different territories that were new to me. That would include *Wilderness*, *Noah's Raven*, *The Plains of Sweet Regret*—big pieces like that, that end up being large in scope and scale and size. And I was thinking that—and they're all in sort of this big chunk in kind of my middle period, so to speak.

And what I find that's difficult to sort out from all of them, when I'm looking back on them, is, now, wait a minute, which piece? Did I do it this way? When? Which assistant was on that one? What were the dates? What was the—because there's something about them all that's similar in the kind of expedition that I would take into some wilderness, let's say—into the Arctic or, I mean, into Alaska or into the Amazon. And to separate all of those things out—the procedures in all of them—becomes hard in retrospect because it all kind of blends together.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In that regard, if we think about *House by the Water*, which was after you had already done a piece with a house in it in the couple years before—

MARY LUCIER: *Oblique House*?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, yes. When you think back to that work, in general—and as you've just spoken, it's hard to remember all the details [00:02:00]—what did you take away from that work as the kind of essential area that you were exploring? That's *House by the Water*.

MARY LUCIER: *House by the Water* is a convergence of actual weather and what I think of as social weather, social climate. The climate of history in Charleston is very radical, in a way, for a northerner to encounter because it was the center of slave trade before the Civil War—a major center of slave trade. And it's always been a very well-to-do community. And it's actually where the Civil War started, too, right out in the harbor. So it has a pretty laden history.

And you can't escape it when you go sightseeing there. The Aiken-Rhett House, for example, that we did talk about a bit yesterday, is a place where those histories—the history of the white owners and the African slaves—is preserved in the architecture—in the big building, the big house that is the house the white owners lived in and then the kitchen house, which is the house in back, out behind, where the kitchen was, in fact. And up above that were the slave quarters. And that's all preserved today. And it's kind of falling apart, but it's atmospheric and it's very historically true to fact. So it's quite shocking, in a way, for us really to come up against that and confront it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were there aspects of that project, as it ended up, that surprised you, you didn't anticipate, maybe because it was such a different climate or for whatever other reason?

MARY LUCIER: Well, the only thing that I found—when I went about looking for people to be in the video, I didn't really want characters. I just wanted almost abstract representations [00:04:00] of those various types. And to represent, sort of, the people who lived in the house, I had a young woman in a white dress spinning in front of a portrait of the madam—you know, the dame whose house it was.

There was a painted portrait of her, and this young girl is spinning and spinning and spinning and spinning. And she does it quite beautifully, and she's clearly young and all in white. And then she dissolves, or her image dissolves, into a geological image of hurricane—one of the really big hurricanes that was just making ground at Charleston, was just hitting at that point in the—you know what those weather maps look like.

And you have this big, swirling white thing that represents the hurricane with the eye at the center. And I'd hired

people to come and do various things, and finally, all I wanted them to do was spin. I think, you know, just somehow, those images worked for me. And the young girl was the one who seemed to embody it. And she, in her own way, appears completely innocent. Even though she's spinning and she's sort of out of focus, you get the sense that this is a picture of innocence, a very young girl dressed all in white.

And then I wanted African Americans to represent the original slaves in the slave quarters, and two people volunteered: Lindsay and Karen Washington [ph], who are local singers/entertainers in Charleston. And they perform in period costume. And they came to work with me in the slave quarters, and I said, "Well, does anything about this make you uncomfortable?" And they said, "No, not in this light. You know, this is all known. This has to be known."

And so they performed in this period dress [00:06:00], and there were things that I wanted them to do. A man was sitting—he was sitting in a chair with his, sort of, ruffled blouse. And I said, "You should have something to read," and he pulled out his Bible. And I think I told you this story, but I don't believe we got it recorded. And it turned out he was reading a paragraph from Ezekiel that was about floodwaters.

And when I moved the camera over him, looking over his shoulder, and I saw that, I was really quite struck by the way it lined up with the theme of the piece—the idea of the wave of water and the wave of water overtaking you. And then I had them running down the hall towards the camera, and each one would then—in the final video, each one would dissolve out before they reached the camera.

So they were rather like ghosts in that corridor. And I also like to think that they were running out for an assignation, maybe to meet each other, because they were running separately. They weren't together. Also, the idea that they had been reading—I think reading was forbidden to slaves, at the time. And in the sense of being surprised by any of that, I was surprised at the turn it took for me because, as I was telling you yesterday, when I get to the production process, a lot of it is improvisation.

I'm very structured until I get there, and then I start searching and improvising and looking for what's possible and relying on other people's help and suggestions. I like to have really sharp people around me—usually, only one person or two, an assistant—to sort of—people who I think can actually sense what's in my mind and guide me, in a way. I may be wrong about what happens, but—it may be that I'm just really making up my mind. [00:08:00]

At any rate, when the African-Americans appeared in that clothing and wanted to perform in those various ways, and they offered suggestions—he was the one who brought out the Bible. When they were running down the hallway, he wanted to duck into one of the rooms and come out with his hat, as if he was leaving. They did various things like that, that contributed to the piece. They seemed to understand that there was something I was after, and maybe they also understood that I was a little hesitant or shy about trying to actually get this image from them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was the first time you used actors in that way?

MARY LUCIER: I think so.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you haven't since, right?

MARY LUCIER: No, except—well, except for the interview pieces. And those are not actors.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But they're being themselves.

MARY LUCIER: They're being themselves—and also in *The Plains of Sweet Regret*, there are a lot of people. Actually, there are actors in *The Plains of Sweet Regret*. There are actors, but they're playing themselves as actors. And that part is curious. That part is very curious. And in this Japanese work, I used a young woman who we dressed in a kimono. Her mother dressed her, did the hairdo, all of that. And then I also had her in street clothing—contemporary, young Japanese street clothing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, this piece, like some others we touched on yesterday—you didn't really have a chance to see it repeatedly. You saw it once, and then you left. And you could hardly restage it, right?

MARY LUCIER: Oh, I could—well, the difficulties with *House by the Water* is that it was staged—it's very site-specific. I mean, that's one of the odd things about my video work. Video is supposed to be repeatable almost like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And so timely, some of them.

MARY LUCIER: Yes, right. But it's also supposed to be very restageable [00:10:00] because it's, after all, a video and you can play it anywhere. Well, not so with my work because of the sculptural components. And in this

piece, that house stands—I don't know if it's 20 feet high. I don't think it's that high. But it's on stilts, as though it were near the water or above the water, and it required a very, very high ceiling.

And so this old warehouse, which is probably four or five stories tall, turned out to be absolutely ideal with those kind of crumbling brick walls and this very, very reverberant space. And so this was a little bit like—I guess we talked about *Oblique House*, yesterday, being staged in that Chevrolet showroom. Where, again, could one find a place so quite perfect as that?

JUDITH RICHARDS: You know, lately there have been lots of discussions and debates about restaging performance works that had been created decades earlier. Had you thought about creating instructions for how these pieces could be produced decades from now if one wanted to see them and how much latitude you could give future installers and still have the meaning intact?

MARY LUCIER: Well, presumably, the space is abstract, to begin with. It doesn't have to be a period warehouse—a 19th-century period, southern warehouse. It doesn't have to be, you know, a 1940s Chevrolet automobile showroom. It just so happened that in the places where they were first shown, and commissioned, that those two sites and the piece were in perfect sync with each other. And that's such a rare thing.

But of course, there have to be ways to show these, other than that. [00:12:00] And all you need, really, then is the height, the width, the darkness and the ability to build the structure. That's really all you need. I mean, you don't need to have an atmosphere surrounding it that dictates part of the meaning of the piece. That's really not necessary; it was just fortuitous.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Moving to the next work you did, *Floodsongs*, which obviously has so many connections to those past works, speak a little bit about how that came into being. And what were the special qualities of that piece that you thought were the most challenging but rewarding for you?

MARY LUCIER: *Floodsongs* came about—I don't know if you've heard this little story—the image of Grand Forks, North Dakota, underwater and on fire, had appeared in the New York Times arts and leisure section. And it was a very dramatic photograph. And I had been staring at that picture, and it was giving me chills.

I thought, "I feel like an ambulance chaser, but this is sort of my thing, right. This is my topic." And amazingly, about a day later, the director of that museum, Laurel Reuter, called me. She said, "I've been following your work for years. Would you be interested in doing a commissioned piece about the flood?" And I said, "Wow, I'm just sitting here looking at this."

And then I opened the rest of the paper, and there's a picture of Laurel and the inside of the museum, which was not damaged during the flood. But they left the same exhibition up for months and months, and they housed a lot of meetings, concerts, rehearsals and things in the museum because it wasn't damaged. And it was one of the few undamaged civic buildings in the town. And right away, we struck it off, we hit it off, Laurel and I. [00:14:00] Just, something really clicked. So I began to go out there and visit and look at the sights and take pictures and pick up scraps of paper.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When that commission came to you in that surprising, but timely, way, was there something else you were planning to do or was it this moment when you really didn't have something else on the horizon? You had finished *House by the Water*.

MARY LUCIER: Right. Well, in my recollection, those two things have to have overlapped because—we talked about this yesterday—the strange coincidence of, it takes me three years to do a piece, then how come *House by the Water* and *Floodsongs* are just a year apart. Does that make any sense? So I think clearly, I was at work on—the flood happened in '97, so what I still don't quite understand in recollection is how I produced the piece in one year. That, I don't—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, you talked about liking deadlines.

MARY LUCIER: I worked very hard on it. And I guess the Charleston piece was produced, maybe, over a longer period of time because they were planning the Spoleto events, you know, quite a while in advance. And so those two kind of segued into one another in an interesting way because, of course, they were both about flood and water and all the physical and psychological damage that that involves.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you first got that call and you started thinking about the piece, and then you made a visit, do you remember how the ideas came together that produced the final piece—that you would use these voices, that you would interview these people, that you would start with images of the mold and the houses?

MARY LUCIER: Yes, it goes back a little bit to both [00:16:00] *Oblique House* and *Last Rites [Positano]*, where I interviewed people and also had projections going, simultaneously. And the interviews were, in those cases,

were interactive. That is, the audience would pass by the sensors and activate the speech of one of the or another of the participants.

In *Floodsongs*, I was following a similar path, except I did not make it interactive. And when I first arrived in *Floodsongs*—in North Dakota—I began meeting these astonishing people there: Marlene Styles, the one who sings, "Oh, Precious Lord, take my hand, Precious Lord."

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were these people that the museum put you in touch with or somebody—

MARY LUCIER: These were all people probably connected to the museum, friendly to the museum in some way. They had a lot of volunteers, and the people worked very hard. Marlene Styles was one of those. Father Sherman, who was a local Catholic priest—a charming, Irish priest.

And he was the one who said, after the piece went up and there was this cacophony of all these voices speaking simultaneously, he said to Laurel, he said, "You know, I think Mary had it right. After the flood, everybody wanted to talk, but nobody wanted to listen." So that's the process that, in effect, was being enacted in the exhibition space by all these voices going simultaneously and none of them pausing. They're not pausing to hear each other.

Now, a piece called *Migrations*, for example, also had two voices—two figures projected on the wall opposite each other. They'd come up together and one would speak, and this one would just sit there, hang there. [00:18:00] Then this one would stop speaking, might fade out, and another one would come up, and this one would start speaking. So it was, in a way, as though they were listening to each other, and rather than speaking together or overlapping each other's words.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did the—when you first presented *Floodsongs* and these people who had spoken came to see the piece, did they—how did they react to the fact that you couldn't hear, or it would be difficult or demanding, to try to actually hear one of their stories clearly and that they were interrupting each other?

MARY LUCIER: Well, I think that's when Father Sherman said what he said. He was one of the participants, and he was obviously very aware that it was very hard to hear individual voices. On the other hand, I had a couple who would get down on their knees right next to the loudspeakers. The way it was shown there, there were large pedestals with big monitors on top, and then sort of down on the bottom, recessed, were the loudspeakers, so their voices sort of rose up from below. And they were getting down on the floor to hear their own stories. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: You said the way it was shown there. It has been shown other times?

MARY LUCIER: *Floodsongs* has been shown three times, first at the North Dakota museum, second at the Museum of Modern Art here in New York, and third, at the Huntington Museum of Art in Huntington, West Virginia.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So there, they would have had floods, and there would be a lot of, I assume, connection between the viewers and those people they're listening to. But what about in New York? You didn't have that actual, visceral connection. How did it affect the presentation, do you think?

MARY LUCIER: Well, what I find about all my presentations in New York—and this is probably—you asked what surprises me, and I think this is one of the things that surprises me most—is that I bring in these pieces that are very parochial. They're very regional in their focus, or would appear to be. [00:20:00] I put them in the Museum of Modern Art, or you put them in Jill and Tom's gallery, and suddenly, they're sort of transformed and become—I hate to use the word—universal.

And I'm always shocked by that because I think of them—when I first see them there, I think, "Oh my god, it's too personal or it's too specific to a group of people or it's too specific to somewhere else in the world or in the country." And then I find out that there's something that resonates in them for a public here. And I was particularly thrilled with *The Plains of Sweet Regret*, how that happened.

But it also happened with *Wilderness* and with *Floodsongs*, although I think, to me, *Floodsongs* was difficult because of that mass of sound. But when you got the levels just right to be in that bath, that wash of sound, it was like being underwater. And coming from the projection up front, there was a mix—what Earl Howard called a bed—of those voices that would just kind of wash right out at you.

And meanwhile, the voices on the side are speaking individually, but all together. But a lot of people commented that it was like being underwater. It was like being dragged underwater. So I would go in, sometimes, to the museum and I'd find people lying on the floor, looking at the projections just, you know, awash in the sound. And the projection itself would always be something I really worked hard on.

I really wanted it to articulate all the things that the voices didn't. And so in the projection, the camera is swimming through these houses at a very slow rate, and you see a lot of decay and destruction. It's got a lot of stuff in it. And really, I think the meat of the piece is in that projection, and then the individual voices are the stories that break out of that. But in the projection is, like, the story as a whole, really [00:22:00]—you know, the picture of destruction and desolation.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you were filming it—you talked about how the camera moved—were you consciously thinking about moving as if you were in water?

MARY LUCIER: Well, I knew I was going to slow it down. And so I just—the way I always move when I move with the camera. I mean, I have certain—you know, there's a Mary-cam, and there's certain ways I move that are important for whatever I'm going to do with them later.

And in this case, I think it was already like being underwater, but then when I slowed it down, it was even more so. So the camera would then literally float into these houses. And the destruction was pretty ugly. You know, I used to be known for making really beautiful work. Well, this—it's really ugly, you know. It's extremely ugly. And so I think there's hardly any way you can call it beautiful.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, *Noah's Raven* isn't—there's mostly ugliness in the destruction.

MARY LUCIER: That's true—destruction of the forest, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And the scar.

MARY LUCIER: And the scars of the women, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You talk about being surprised at the broader reading of your work—the fact that it can touch people who aren't necessarily personally connected to the events, that you think of it as parochial. But it's surprising to me that after all this time—after all this time, I would think that you'd have a sense that you knew that, just like many other artists, while you're looking at your reality, it's something that is going to be read in a much broader way [00:24:00] and that, in fact, intuitively, that's why your subject matter has sustained you and continues for so many decades.

MARY LUCIER: Well, I think this is the point at which we talked about artists really making the same piece over and over and over again. And I said, "Indeed, you do make the same piece over and over again, hoping you're going to get it right." Fortunately, you never do get it right, so it keeps you going on and making those pieces. That's very much how I feel about it.

I am sometimes shocked to realize that such themes, like, reiterate again and again, and yet, every time, I'm doing it in a slightly different way. And I'm not saying, "Well, I'm going to use this again or this is going to happen again or, yeah, this is about this the way that was about this." It's not like that at all.

Each idea grows out of its own source and expands to fill the space and the space in my head, as well, so that the similarities and thematic connections just sort of happen. They're not really placed there. It just kind of comes about, and I go with it. I just go with it because, you know, after so many years, you can't say, "Oh, I can't do this again," because it doesn't even feel like you're doing this again.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you think you develop that kind of trust in yourself and your voice?

MARY LUCIER: That's a really good question because I was explaining that to my assistant in Japan. I said how, you know, I ask people's advice. I like it when an assistant helps me in certain ways. I said, "But I really do know what I'm doing, even though I don't look like I know what I'm doing. I really do, and I also know that things are going to work. [00:26:00] Things are going to work somehow."

She said, "Where did you get that confidence?" I said, "I don't know. I think I've had it all my life." And I remember one of the very first pieces I did here in New York—it was a performance piece at The Kitchen—The Kitchen on Wooster Street—oh, no, The Kitchen on Mercer Street—the original Kitchen before it moved to Wooster Street. And of course, now it's over here on 19th Street.

But back in the days when Woody and Steina Vasulka ran The Kitchen, and Shigeko Kubota and I and two other women had a group called "Red, White, Yellow and Black." Cecilia Sandoval was Navajo, was the red one. I was the white one. Shigeko, being Asian, was the yellow one. And black—there was a black woman who was a good friend of ours who was a poet. And so the four of us decided to put on a multimedia concert at The Kitchen two nights. We had two nights. And Nam June [Paik] was helping Shigeko and Alvin was helping me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This was in the early '70s.

MARY LUCIER: The early '70s—'72, maybe, '71 even. And I had a piece—collaboration—with Cecilia Sandoval. And I had recorded her dreams, some of her dreams. She was telling me about what her dreams were as a kid. And so I created this piece that had music in it and a narration, and I was reading the narration. And then she would come onstage—and we had some sets and things—and she would dance with people and speak Navajo to them.

And hardly anybody has ever heard Navajo, you know—[laughs]—and it was, like, startling to them. So there was a very mysterious element. And I'm reading lines extrapolated from her dream. And then at the end, however, I had a feeling that it verged on corniness and that it wasn't working. [00:28:00] I went home that night. We had an apartment in the East Village, and I went home that night and I stayed up almost all night. And I wrote notes again and again, and I changed the piece in ways I can't fully describe to you now.

But I think the main way was to take out almost all of the music, except at the very end, which I'd play this country western song. And I'd just play the one song. And by taking out all the other music along the way, which had sort of led to, you know, a rhythm kind of like this, that was just going along and then it ends, in this way, it built up to something. And then when it ended and the lights go out and the song plays, then it transmitted the meaning that I wanted the song to give the piece without this prolonged use of one song after another, which I had—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you're saying that you had this trust in yourself, this confidence, that you could make those choices just out of a kind of intuitive understanding.

MARY LUCIER: I felt—and I cite this example because I think that was one of the moments when I got that confidence, when I said, "I can fix this." And you know, usually, you don't have to do that in public. I mean, people do. Dancers sometimes do. Musicians do. You have to rearrange things and change things. And they have more rehearsal time.

We didn't really rehearse. You know, it was avant-garde performance; it wasn't theater. But that was a big example, to me, that I could fix it. I mean, I could either have slunk home with my tail between my legs and said, "Oh my god, that was a failure. I did such a terrible job." But feeling that I could fix it gave me an extra, added momentum. And it was important.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Speaking of this question, if you do encounter moments at any point in a work where you think it's just going the wrong direction—it's a failure at that moment—have you found that you always find a way to resurrect it, to change it [00:30:00], either slightly or totally, or do you just abandon sometimes and know that it's the wrong direction?

MARY LUCIER: Oh, no, once I'm into a piece, I don't abandon it. I mean, if I get a certain distance into something, I might have an idea that's pretty well-described—like, I have a lot of ideas that are written down in notebooks that are pieces I haven't actually done. And it may not be because I don't think it's any good. It's just that the right opportunity hasn't come up, perhaps. And so it just sort of sits there. Oh, I have so many things like that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: On the same vein, have you found that encountering this moment of temporary failure has actually been very positive—that you've found new insights, new ways of addressing that stage in the work that you wouldn't have found if you hadn't reached a kind of temporary dead end?

MARY LUCIER: Oh, absolutely. It's a moment of revelation, and it's also a moment of humility for me. You cannot—I, at least, cannot be arrogant about my work. I can be proud of it. I can be satisfied with it. But I cannot be arrogant. And I think my mother's words echo in my ears: "Pride goeth before a fall." So I like to level myself out. I like to cut to the basics.

That's why I was telling you yesterday about having a lot of footage and having some huge ratio of shooting to what I use and being cruel about what footage you eliminate and what you keep. Being realistic to yourself could appear to be cruel, too, you know, and I like that process. I like to just cut to the basics and say, "Pfft, yeah, this is crap." [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Speaking of going to the basics, I guess shortly after you did *Floodsongs*, you did a very different kind of piece—*Summer, or Grief*. [00:32:00]

MARY LUCIER: *Summer, or Grief*.

JUDITH RICHARDS: A single-channel, simple, seven-and-a-half-minute piece. Tell me how that came about. Was that a case of having tons of footage you had to reduce, or was it a different process?

MARY LUCIER: Well, this process was much more pastoral and much more domestic. I was interested in

domestic subjects—things around the house—in Cochecton, that is, in the country, where you have—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And in contrast to all the other subjects, very personal. You're looking to yourself and your own reality, and not all these other realities.

MARY LUCIER: Right. There wasn't a grand idea, a large theme. Bob had been encouraging me for years to just go out and shoot stuff—just go out and shoot stuff that's out there, sort of the way he goes out and finds a site to paint and paints it on board, brings it back to the studio and he might make a larger painting out of it or might not.

So I'd been collecting a lot of footage of things that are quite interesting—you know, like an abandoned shed and, you know, the horses across the road tossing their tails—and simple-but-beautiful things in nature. And I decided at one point, "I have a lot of this stuff. I think I'm going to try to make a piece out of it."

I think part of the motivation was that Jill was going to have a summer show. She said, "Mary, do you have anything that has to do with summer?" I said, "Huh, well, maybe I do." So I edited this footage together in some sequence or progression that made some sort of narrative sense to me. And then as I was looking at it, I thought, "Gee, this is awfully nice. This is not really what I mean about summer. It's all too pretty and happy—not happy, happy, but comfortable." [00:34:00]

So I wanted to interject something that would undercut that happiness or that—not the happiness but the beauty—something that would be closer to my real sensibility. How do you portray your own apprehensions? Very hard to do. You know, the fact that on the most beautiful day, you may be thinking tragic thoughts, or you may be thinking, "Oh, god, this is all going to end," or a variety of thoughts that do tend to undercut both the beauty and the joy of that moment.

And so I was reading an old professor of mine, his poetry—Allen Grossman. And I came across this poem called *A Conversation*. And in it—it's about a man and a woman sort of not arguing so much as talking about the universe. And he's saying something to her—"How dare you go out, run out into this beautiful summer night with my smells on your body."

And she answers him—because apparently, it would appear in the poem, that something has happened. Something has stricken both of them with grief. And her answer is, "Grief is an irresistible wave, higher than the stars. Its springs were before the world. Its stream never ceases. Age after age, mothers and lovers weep without sound. Darkness, when the wave is past, wastes the human shore."

I thought, "Wow, that is so beautiful." And so I had to break it up. I'm showing you, now, how I broke up the lines to appear in the video so that you wouldn't have, for example, that whole first stanza: "Grief is an irresistible wave, higher than the stars." You have "Grief is," and then a video image and then [more text –ML].

JUDITH RICHARDS: And I recall each of these words are white type on a black screen.

MARY LUCIER: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That comes amidst all these images of summer.

MARY LUCIER: Right, so you have "Grief is," coming up right near the beginning, and then "an irresistible," and then the word "wave." [00:36:00] And the images that accompany or precede or follow the words—in some cases, people are interested how the word 'wave' is associated with the camera, at a very low angle, going through the grass as though the grass were water, a wave of water. Or "higher than the stars"—at that moment, the camera is actually looking at a poplar tree.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I noticed one thing I wanted to ask you about, in terms of where the camera is—that often, when not only walking through the grass but other scenes, you feel like the camera is at your ankles, at a very low level. What did you want to convey by shooting from that spot?

MARY LUCIER: That's a camera angle I love. I don't love it in all instances, but I feel that it makes the small larger. When you're very close to a blade of grass and the camera is on the ground, the blade of grass becomes very large. And you can rise up out of that.

Another thing I like to do is to start on the ground and then raise it, then have the camera just sort of come up in a very natural way as if it's arising to, like, human stature. And if it's down, it has to come up, and if it's up, then you can come down again. More than that, I can't tell you. I use it—in fact, I've bought a special tripod—something called a high hat—that's only about this high.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's about 12 inches high.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, and it's a big, sturdy thing with a nice, fluid head. And I did a lot of shooting with that tripod close to the ground in Japan. I think one of my favorite filmmakers is Ozu, and his camera angles are often —[low like that –ML] [00:38:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you spell Ozu?

MARY LUCIER: O-Z-U—great Japanese filmmaker. And his cameras are often very low to the—not to the ground, so much, but say to the hallway or to the floor. And you see people coming and going, in the distance, coming up and going into rooms and coming out of rooms, and the camera is just sitting there, still observing. And it's not like it's looking at your ankles. It's seeing most of the people, but it sees different parts of them, depending on where they are in relation to the camera.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So did you finish the piece in time to have it in the gallery?

MARY LUCIER: *Summer, or Grief*? Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And does it end up conveying that kind of ambiguous sense of summer that you hoped?

MARY LUCIER: I'm not sure. It does to me. Yesterday, I said to you that one shot of—first, you don't know what you're looking at. It's just a blob of color. And slowly, slowly, slowly, the camera pulls focus on a lounge chair—an old, orange-and-green lounge chair sitting down near a tree at the end of a walkway.

And my first response to that is, "Who died?" [Laughs.] So I have no idea how other people read this, but to me, the images of death throughout that piece are very strong. And I think of it as—well, it's a little requiem, but I don't know for whom.

JUDITH RICHARDS: There wasn't a particular instance when you needed to do that?

MARY LUCIER: There wasn't. And that's one of the things that keeps amazing me, is that—now, sometimes I get scared because Bob's image is in it. Usually, it's either just his hand or his jaw. But one scene I love is when his brush comes in like that and it disappears. And again, all throughout, he's making this painting. So in a way, he's creating the world. And I get a little bit scared [00:40:00], and sometimes I think, "Oh my god, does this suggest that he died because he's the only person in it?" The only other creatures are animals and—a cat.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But then again, one doesn't necessarily interpret it that way.

MARY LUCIER: Well, I keep looking at it and seeing those intimations, and so I find it rather—sometimes, I find it disturbing. And the other instance—other image of death in there for me, at any rate, is the cat, who is sort of drowsing in a chair. Suddenly, he opens up his eyes and looks, and then the next thing you see is an image of a hand looking over a cat's skull. And I thought, "He saw his mortality. That's why the cat looks so startled. He sees his mortality."

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you made this piece, did you have any thoughts at all—obviously, very secondary—about the fact that this was a single-channel video, relatively short, you were going to show in the gallery, that someone would want to buy it, maybe? It's something, unlike other pieces, that you could actually sell. Does that ever come—how does that kind of thinking play into your choices at that time, or at any point? And is it a reality that people are buying single-channel video pieces, that it's even useful to think that way?

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, people are. I've been in collectors' homes where they have work playing on monitors. I have sold some single-channel—I don't think *Summer, or Grief*. Well, yes, all right, I've sold it to NYU. I've sold it, you know, to the library. I've sold it to schools and libraries and things.

But to sell to individuals—I don't believe that piece has been sold to any individuals. *Arabesque* has, on the other hand. *Arabesque* was very popular. And yes, not only to individuals, but I mean, to individuals who have a business in which they—like a hotel, in which she puts a different video in each room, that kind of thing. [00:42:00] So that stuff, yes, is absolutely possible.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you do a work that's single-channel video, do you have an idea in mind of how many copies you'd make? This is getting into a discussion of the gallery and your relationship to the gallery. Or does the gallery—do you rely on them to make those kinds of decisions?

MARY LUCIER: Well, we usually work it out ahead of time. And it's kind of lax. I don't know how many editions *Arabesque* is. I think it's 25. I don't know if we even settled on it for something like *Summer, or Grief*, and here's part of the reason: I mean, single-channel video exists in this funny limbo right now where, let's say my work is being distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix for certain, very set rental fees and purchase fees.

Jill, on the other hand, if she wants to sell it, can she, you know, do more or less than EAI does? I think that's a

tricky thing. Now, one could withdraw all rights other than educational rights, let's say, from EAI so that it could only be sold to schools and libraries. And then Jill, I don't know, I think maybe would have the freedom to sell for any price to whomever she wanted. But even that, I think, is still a gray area. I don't know if EAI is—I know that Bill's dealers sell his work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Viola.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah. And I don't know—I mean, I think his single-channel work is—you can buy it off his website, even.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you try to control the presentation of your videos—your single-channel videos—beyond people screening them at home, people who own them? Or even schools [00:44:00]—whether or not they can charge for presentations, or if anyone can put it on their own website—a school website or a buyer's or collector's website, which then—and how could you prevent that from then going viral?

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, right. Well, you know, the world just keeps changing and this whole situation is wildly evolving as the Internet keeps changing. I don't pay a whole lot of attention to some of those things. I know we have a contract of sorts for Arabesque, and you buy the piece for the life of the disc, let's say, if you buy a disc. Or if you buy—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What does that mean—the life of the disc?

MARY LUCIER: As long as the disc lasts. If the disc dies, if you haven't bought a tape master to copy it from, it's too bad.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And does it have something on it that prevents it from being copied?

MARY LUCIER: No, there's no copy-busting on my discs.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So why wouldn't someone just copy it onto a new disc?

MARY LUCIER: Well, they very well might. And in some cases, there are provisions for an owner being allowed to copy the piece for their own uses only. For example, I sold a number of single-channel *Ohio to Giverny: Memory of Light*, which is different from the installation, slightly different. And I sold one to a woman. I sold her a one-inch master—a one-inch sub-master, which in those days was quite something, and probably a VHS copy at that time.

And I gave her the rights to make copies for herself—for her own use, only—from that one-inch tape. She died, and many, many years later, her son called me up and said, "I have this one-inch tape of yours. I would like to transfer it to another medium, and I'd like to have it on DVD. May I do this? And how do I go about it?" And I think he was at Duggal. He had found his way to Duggal, uptown. [00:46:00]

And I said, "First of all, I want to make sure it's one of the good copies, so have Duggal run off a VHS copy of it for me and send it to me." He did, and it was a perfect copy. I said, "You have an excellent sub-master of *Ohio to Giverny*. Hang onto it." Because there were some that were not as good as others. They had little jumps and imperfections. And I said, "What you should do is remaster it—just make a straight copy—to DigiBeta, digital betacam, which is still considered an archival medium. And then from that, you may make DVDs for your own viewing."

And I said, "And don't lose that one-inch tape. So you save it all. You have the one-inch tape, the DigiBeta, and you might even make a mastered DVD disc that you never play except to make copies from." And so that's actually the way to handle it, and that's the way it should be. But to buy a sub-master tape is a lot more expensive than just to buy a disc. And so if you want to make it possible, people say, "I just want the disc."

JUDITH RICHARDS: Given the financial issues involved in being a video artist—not only how much it costs to produce a work, and an installation on top of that, and the difficulty in selling all these pieces, what was your experience when you first started looking for a gallery? I know that you showed in '89 and '91 with Greenberg Wilson and then joined Lennon, Weinberg. But just speak briefly about that period in your life when you were trying to find a gallery, or a gallery found you.

MARY LUCIER: Well, yeah, the gallery found me. Sarah Greenberg or Mark Wilson—one of the two—called me up and said, "We're very interested in your work. Come down, and let's have a conversation," or whatever. I forget whether they came to my studio or I went to the gallery. And they said they wanted to show me, so I said, "Great." [00:48:00] So over the next period of maybe three to four years, I had two very successful shows with them. One was of *Asylum*, and the other was *Wilderness*.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you say successful, I assume the first measure of success is the people saw it and you

received positive critical response.

MARY LUCIER: That's actually the second measure of success. The first is that it goes up and looks good in my eye. That's, you know, "Okay, yes, this is good. Now if people don't like it, that's their fault. That's their problem, not mine. I've done the best I can do." So that's first.

Then second, people like it, enjoy it, find it interesting. And good reviews. Good reviews really are surprisingly affirming. Bad reviews are surprisingly ignorable. [Laughs.] No, but it's true. If you get a batch of good reviews from respectable people, it does make you feel that, yes, people are getting something out of it and they're, quote, "getting it." They're understanding it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What about sales, as a video artist? And how does—that must affect your relationships with your gallery, with the whole effort to find a gallery to function in that way.

MARY LUCIER: Well, Mark and Sarah did sell *Wilderness* to a private dealer. Now, this was in the '80s, mind you, at sort of the peak of the hot SoHo scene. And they sold it through the help of another gallerist who was down the hall from them, [. . . –ML] who is deceased.

And we don't know what's going to happen to his collection. And there it is, with all that outdated equipment and those beautiful, faux-neoclassical pedestals. And so anyway, we don't know what will happen to that. They sold it for quite a decent sum—quite a decent sum. Well, all right, so you wanted to know the sequence of events. [00:50:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: You had the two shows there, and then they closed.

MARY LUCIER: I called them successful for the reasons I just cited—because, you know, they looked good. They sounded good. They got good reviews and good word of mouth. The word of mouth on the streets is really important. The word of mouth in SoHo the day of my opening was "Greenberg Wilson, Mary Lucier installation," and so it was kind of hot. And it was unusual. It was an unusual piece because it has this narrative quality to it, and yet, it's an installation.

It's the very quality that sort of makes me a little—you know, I sort of cover my eyes. I'm putting my hands over my eyes because I think, "Wait, are people in New York really going to like this, or get it?" And then surprisingly, they often, usually do. So those were those two successful-in-different-ways shows. Oh, and we also sold some photographs. We sold a bunch of—a whole edition of images from *Ohio to Giverny* or *Ohio at Giverny*—whichever you want to call it—to Reader's Digest, for example. So we made some sales.

So with that under my belt, so to speak, they closed, unfortunately. And they were just two young kids, you know, trying to make a go of it. And you know, Sarah is a wonderful person. I love Sarah. And Mark has sort of disappeared. But you know, Sarah is Clement Greenberg's daughter, yeah.

Anyway, so when they closed, I thought, "I'm actually going to try to get another gallery on my own." So I sent out a few letters—not very many; a few—and mentioned my, quote, "successes," with Greenberg Wilson. And one of the responses was from Jill Weinberg, and she had come to see *Wilderness*. Cora Cohen, in fact, brought her to the gallery. And they were very interested and wanted to take me on.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Cora Cohen, at that point—she was a curator—

MARY LUCIER: Cora is a painter—abstract painter. Kind of, you know, I don't know what generation Abstract Expressionist, sort of. She's my age. [00:52:00] And I liked Tom and Jill very much, and I liked their gallery. And they had a very big space at that time, which was not in the same building as Mark and Sarah.

But later on, they were in that—Dean & Deluca building. The one before that, farther up Broadway had this very large space, and I knew I could—I knew it would be a great place to show. And it was a great place to show. And then they moved to the Dean & Deluca building, which was still a good place to show then.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Broadway and Prince.

MARY LUCIER: Broadway and Prince. And then they moved to Chelsea, which is quite a bit smaller but has its own interesting intimacy as a space in which to look at video work. So I've been fairly content. I mean, I have to say on some level, I'm not that ambitious about selling my work. I would like to sell more. I have been extremely fortunate in getting grants, fellowships, residencies.

I mean, this year alone, I got a USA Artists fellowship. I got the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission. I've had Guggenheim. I've had many New York State councils. You name it, I've had all these wonderful grants and fellowships. And I just feel that—I don't know, it's just good luck, good luck. I've had a lot of good luck and a lot of support, you know, from certain areas. And I've never had any money, otherwise. No money in my family.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you think about applying for any commissions or grants, is it something you really would rather not do but you just do—I mean, in terms of the paperwork and the thinking—or do you find it fairly painless [00:54:00]—you talked about writing before—fairly painless to write the kinds of descriptions, proposals that you need to write, assemble a budget, figure out the deadlines? Is that something that's not so difficult or it's really a nail-biting kind of situation?

MARY LUCIER: It's both. I mean, I've been writing these proposals since my first grant—my CAPS grant in 1974. Could it have been?

JUDITH RICHARDS: We could look it up.

MARY LUCIER: Look it up.

JUDITH RICHARDS: '75.

MARY LUCIER: '75, my very first CAPS grant, right. Oh, CAPS—Creative Artist Public Service. Doesn't it say that?

JUDITH RICHARDS: I just copied a general—no, I don't have that right here in front of me.

MARY LUCIER: I don't think the date's actually on the CAPS. I think I just listed from between such and such and such—

JUDITH RICHARDS: It was '75 to 2001.

MARY LUCIER: Right, so '75 is probably the CAPS grant, yeah. And I really sort of think that the whole skill of proposal writing hadn't developed yet—because I was—shortly after I got the CAPS grant, I was on a panel a year or two later.

And I got to see what people were submitting, and since, of course, I've been on many, many, many panels. And I really believe that I and my colleagues are responsible for the development of proposal writing, as it has turned out to be today. I look at people's proposals today and I say, "They mastered that language."

[Audio break.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: A couple other questions about relationships with galleries: When you do have a show coming up, how much do you want to be involved in the kind of marketing aspects of the show, the decision about announcements, press releases, anything else that has to do with getting the word out?

MARY LUCIER: Well, I always—as I told you, I always write a lot about my work. And I write before I make the work. I write a proposal. I write a description afterwards. So I always have a batch of really succinct—I'm a very good writer [00:56:00]—I always have a really succinct statement about a piece.

And Jill Weinberg is also a really good writer, and she always looks at my language, takes my language, makes her own press release—which are usually excellent because Jill is very smart—and often, between the two of us, we'll select an image for a card. That's not hard to do, to find out what the most—I want to say succulent, but that's not the word—[laughs]—the most, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Gripping.

MARY LUCIER: —gripping image is for a certain work. Or she'll decide on a different design entirely. And we just feed it back and forth to each other, and she usually comes up with something really good. And she's often got somebody working in the gallery who's very good at it, too. And so somebody will put in a lot of time on Photoshop making a really gorgeous card.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is it an issue for you that you're in a gallery with few, if any, other video artists?

MARY LUCIER: No.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is that a positive, in fact?

MARY LUCIER: I think maybe it is a positive, in a way. Because I look at other galleries that are more media-oriented—there's a gallery called Bitforms. There's one called—it's a guy's name. I don't remember exactly his full name. And he shows a great deal of media work.

Now, I would think that a gallery that featured media work would either have to be independently supported by a patron or, in some way, have independent money because I don't think that media art alone [00:58:00] is going to support the operations of a gallery, you know?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right. At this point in time, it seems that video has been well-integrated into all the contemporary art mediums, even in MOMA, finally—the installations. So it seems that it's completely logical that your work would fit comfortably with artists who are doing—using any other form.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, well, Jill had a show last year—I think maybe it was actually curated by Stephen Westfall. Isn't that a nice print? [Looking at a Westfall print on the wall.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY LUCIER: Beauty. I got that for Bob. That was a birthday present. All the other artists were doing—they all were abstractions. You know, particularly Stephen's, you know, is very kind of eye-popping abstraction.

And that's where I showed some of the mandalas because I said, look,—you know, I've been interested in this idea, too, lately, of how you take those forms and, you know, repeating forms and mixing them with each other and colors and so forth. And I felt that the mandalas were more like painting than certain other pieces of work that I had done.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right. I don't think we recorded this, but yesterday you were talking about the show you had at Lennon, Weinberg in 2000, was a show that you actually put together as a show. You weren't bringing something into the gallery that had already been commissioned and shown in a museum.

MARY LUCIER: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you did, in fact, several pieces for that show. I wanted to ask you if you would talk about those, particularly a couple of them that were the most interesting.

MARY LUCIER: This was back before they moved, so they were still in the Dean & Deluca building, the corner of Prince Street. [01:00:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: In a huge space.

MARY LUCIER: Wasn't so huge—big, but not huge. Their first space was huge. This space was nice—two rooms, basically. If you remember, there was a nice, large room here as you walk in, and then in the back, there was another room with two windows—a smaller room. Well, I got both of the rooms. In fact—now I'm trying to remember exactly if I didn't, in fact, even come out a little bit into the hallway as you walked in. The piece *Forge* might have been right there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The piece *Migration*—let's start talking about that and *Portrait John Lado Keni*.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, that's *Migration 2000*, is actually the name of that. It's a piece extracted from this much larger piece called *Migrations*. *Migrations* and then *Migration 2000*. *Migration 2000*—now, why did I call it 2000? Because Migrations, itself, was made and shown earlier, and I extrapolated this part that I had not used in that piece. And it was shot in a particular way with this man, John Lado Keni, who had been deaf from birth and who was a refugee from the Sudan.

And I added an element. It was a round screen with a Monarch butterfly on a man's hand. And it falls off, and then it flies off. It's just a cycle. And John, meanwhile, is telling these lively, active stories in his own particular sort of pantomime—sign language and guttural, non-speech. A very, very interesting man. He was the centerpiece. In the main room, that piece was the center of the show. And as you walked into it, you first went through the *Forge*, and then into John Lado Keni's space [01:02:00]—so into *Migration 2000*—and then on into the back room, into a piece called *Nesting*—

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MARY LUCIER: —which, again, was images that I had shot around my home in Cochecton but farther into the woods—not domestic images, necessarily, but images of the woods and [pond and insects –ML]

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you think that piece connected to *Migration 2000*?

[Cross talk.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, let's say *Nesting* fit with—

MARY LUCIER: Okay. *Nesting* is about making a home. Nesting was also a technology—an aspect of the technology, where I was nesting one image inside another. I don't know if you've seen any of these. Yes, no?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes but not recently.

MARY LUCIER: Okay, so all of the images in the piece called *Nesting* were images of nature nested inside—and nested and nested and nested, on and on and on inside. And then spread out in front of it was a table—a low table at the same height as these four monitors—with an unpainted Russian nesting doll that was about 21 pieces. So it went from this big down to like that. So there was sort of a literal nesting object. Then there's the technological process of nesting, and then there's a reference to the idea of home—that these creatures in the woods, in these various places, are building, are finding places to nest.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you think that the video of the deaf man creating the story that is—you have to struggle to understand—connected to your previous work with all the voices that overlap?

MARY LUCIER: Sure, yeah. Absolutely, it did—it does. In some ways, he's easier to understand than the people whose language you can understand. He's so forceful. And I mean, he's been called a griot by lots of people who've observed it. [00:02:00]

You know, they say, "This guy's a storyteller from the word go." And the things that he mimics, the sounds that he made, his emphasis—you know that he knows he's telling a good story. You just don't know quite exactly what it is. But there's a little bit of American Sign Language in there. I don't know if, by now, he can speak perfect ASL.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Would you ever be tempted to have him retell the story in a more articulate way at this point, a decade later, and attach that in some way as—

MARY LUCIER: Well, the articulateness, though, would only be sign language. So I don't know how—

JUDITH RICHARDS: I guess that's text. In other words, you'd see the video, and then you'd read the text of the actual story. Or would that really undercut so much of the power of the story?

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, I think we know the story. I think the man I worked with on this was sort of an interpreter. He was the one who was teaching John sign language. And his name was Forrest Corson [ph]. He was a social worker in Des Moines, Iowa. They have a lot of refugees there. You know the "Lost Boys?"

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY LUCIER: Well, John's one of them, basically. And so Forrest pretty much knew John's background because the Lutheran Social Services goes to these refugee camps. And they interview people. They find out about their background. They sort of test them for who's going to be able to make the transition out of the camp and into an American town.

And then they bring them over. They make sure they get jobs. It's not always successful. I don't know. I haven't been in touch with Forrest lately, so I don't know what's happened to John. I'm almost afraid to find out. I was in touch with him for a while, but I worry. You know, I don't want to get bad news. [00:04:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: In some ways, while this does relate, as we just discussed—the legibility, the intelligibility—in other ways, it's a very unique piece in your work that stands separate. Were you aware of that when you made it, that it was a special opportunity to use this man with extraordinary skills? Or in fact, did you expect your work to be going in a different direction than it ended up going?

MARY LUCIER: Well, as I said, this came out of the larger piece, *Migration*, where I went to Des Moines, Iowa, and selected I don't know how many people—12 people, all together. Also, there are a bunch of New York artists in it, too. I've got Robert Ashley. I've got Ellen Langan. I've got Nancy Spero. I've got John Moore—the African-American John Moore. And I think there's one other New York artist. [Leon Golub –ML]

And all of these people are actually all pretty much Midwesterners who came to New York. And they talk about the meaning of home and what is home. So theirs is a migration, of sorts. And then on the other hand, I have all these refugees. There's a Vietnamese man. There's John Lado Keni. There's another African who comes from another African country. There's a—a Mexican man.

And there was a way in which I shot all of them that made all the interviews more or less similar, in that the format was similar. But John—the part of John that I used for *Migrations* [00:06:00], I think, is quite different from the part I extracted for *Migration 2000*. I think it's less animated. I'd have to go back and look at that again, too, because I haven't seen *Migrations* for a very long time.

I've seen *Migration 2000* because people show it a lot. It was shown in Germany not too long ago, and it was shown in Boulder. It has a bit of a following. It was shown in San Francisco. So it gets around a bit. So I see it more often. So I know John's rhythms, but I don't remember his section very well from *Migrations*. Yes, and this

was different.

Well, okay, here begins the series of things that, when Mary says to herself, "You can't do that." And I say, "Well, of course I can. I can do anything I want to do. I can do anything I want to do. What do you mean I can't do that, and particularly at my age?" This started back in 1975, when I was doing *Dawn Burn* and I moved the camera, heaven forbid.

And I called up my friend, Liz, and I said, "Liz, I've ruined the piece. I moved the camera." She said, "Mary, you made the rules. You can break them." "Oh, all right." And ever since then, there have come these moments when I say, "You can't do that." And some people are a little flabbergasted. They don't know what to think. They see a deaf man. They don't know whether, I mean, he's being made fun of. No one is laughing, of course. They don't know quite what to think.

Is he being put on display, you know, like a sideshow act? That's up to them to decide. I don't ever present anyone that way. I think John has a great deal of dignity in this piece. But if other people have such prejudicial notions about what you can and cannot show about people, let them think it. But I don't think, for the most part, people respond that way. [00:08:00] But that was a fear I had. "Uh-oh, you know, you're manipulating this guy. You're taking advantage of him."

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did those fears actually end up being a reality, in terms of any critical response?

MARY LUCIER: I don't think I heard anybody say that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I haven't read anything of that nature.

MARY LUCIER: No, I certainly haven't read anything. I've seen puzzlement on some people's faces, though, as if they—and I think I might have had a few conversations where people said, "Well, did you feel confident that you could use this? Do you have his permission?" And that kind of thing—of course I had his permission. He knows about it and, you know, I mean—so at any rate, but I do occasionally encounter moments like that. And there's another one in a piece coming up that we'll talk about when we get there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And after that show, shortly after in 2001, you put together a compilation of—actually, a three-disc DVD set of works from 1975 to 2000. What prompted you to do that? And is it something you'll do again?

MARY LUCIER: Well, I don't know whether it was to my good or not to my good because I included lots of pieces in it that are actually installations, like the excerpt of John, where I make it *John Lado Keni: A Portrait*.

And it's very watchable, and it's just a single-channel portrait of this guy. It doesn't have to be projected as an installation. So in a way, I undermine the installation. I have a four-screen version of *Noah's Raven*—all four screens simultaneously. In a way, that undermines what's a very large [spatial –ML] installation.

JUDITH RICHARDS: However—I mean, this may have been your thinking—one, there are countless people who, obviously, this is the only way they could see it. [00:10:00]

MARY LUCIER: Sure. I mean—what is good about it is—and why I did it—I thought that I needed to get more circulation out of my single-channel work. And I thought, "I don't know if this will either help or it will hurt." And it could hurt in that, say, my distributor, Electronic Arts Intermix, rather than distributing each of these pieces individually, if they're on a single disc—what they do, for example, is to distribute or rent or sell each one individually.

But I thought, "This is a package of three, and it has a price." Jill has a price for that package of three, and she's sold—I don't know how many of them we've sold—maybe only four sets, but to museums, invariably, to museums. I feel good about that. Museums or universities, both. I feel good about that because that means that that work is going to reside in an important library somewhere. And it may not be John Lado Keni, you know, the installation, but the work is there anyway, existing in another format.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you imagine the possibility of including still images of the installations as almost part of the DVD?

MARY LUCIER: No, because I really wanted these to be program DVDs. I wanted them to be a program. And when they were first shown, I think the very first screening of them was at Hamilton College—that catalogue, I know you have a copy of it. But it was dedicated mainly to—it came about, really, as an accompaniment to the three-DVD set. And so we got someone to write about the three-DVD set. Deirdre Boyle does a good job of writing about the set.

And then we also said [00:12:00], "Well, let's"—you know, this was a show at Hamilton College, and the gallery is

called the Emerson Gallery at Hamilton College, not Emerson College. So what we presented there—and this was the first time we had shown the three-disc set. And there was a man—a guy—who wanted to fund the show, and did. And he funded the catalogue, as well as the three discs. We projected them in a room all by themselves, large, so that you could walk in at any point and you'd be at some point in one of the three DVDs.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I see, three rooms, each of which had one of the DVDs?

MARY LUCIER: No, alas, one room. One room, unfortunately, but they would keep changing throughout the day. And they would be projected large, and there was seating of some sort. And then forward of that would have been a room with my photographs, and forward of that was *Asylum*, which is installed, as an installation, and then the hanging piece—the hanging piece, you know. My memory is terrible, isn't it? *Aspects of the Fossil Record*.

And so I believe that was the entirety of it, but it was very nice to have this three-DVD history of mine, [. . . –ML] at least 12 pieces in the whole set showing continuously while the photographs and the installations were also there to accompany it. And this catalogue, then, was designed to incorporate other installations, as well, to sort of surround the discs and everything and kind of give it more meaning. [00:14:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: So are you looking forward, if you—ideally, you had someone fund this past compilation; perhaps depending upon if you find someone else in the future—but would you like to do that again?

MARY LUCIER: I think I would. I think I would like to do another one. I'd like to do one of the aughts—the 2000s. Because there have been a number of single-channel pieces. The only trouble is this issue of undermining—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Cannibalizing.

MARY LUCIER: Cannibalizing or undermining the single work. And do you, in fact—if it exists as part of a compilation and the compilation is, maybe, too expensive for somebody, are they then going to bother to go find the individual one that they want? You know, I don't know how it really operates and whether it's a good idea or not, but I do have a lot of single-channel work since then that I would like to put onto some kind of compilation. I think that would be a nice thing to see.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Would you ever think about just simply offering them—making them available on the gallery website, or if you created your own website—just sort of free?

MARY LUCIER: You know, once, they were on the gallery website, or pieces of them, anyway.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But I mean actually giving away access to these single-channel pieces.

MARY LUCIER: Oh, like YouTube? I hate YouTube. I'm sorry. I hate YouTube.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why?

MARY LUCIER: The quality is so pathetic. Now, Vimeo is better, but the quality on YouTube is just so bad, I can't stand the bad quality. I like my work—I like it to look the way I want it to look. And this is another story: When Elizabeth Streb and I were doing our series of collaborations—I made a piece called *In the Blink of an Eye, Amphibian Dreams...If I Could Fly, I Would Fly*. And it was aired on PBS. [00:16:00] In fact, it was funded partly by Live From Off-Center, which was the funding in those days. Oh, and also prior to that, I had—*Ohio to Giverny* was shown on Channel 13.

But I think it must have been this other one because Elizabeth was saying to me, so people were saying, "Wow, you know. This is going to be broadcast, right, in Washington and Boston and New York?" I said, "Yeah." And Elizabeth took a look at me and she said, "No, Mary, you cannot go around to every single house and tune all the monitors." [Laughs.] Because it was, like, so apparent in my face that, that's how I felt about, ooh, broadcast. You don't know what it's going to look like. So anyway, yes—I'm jumping ahead to another subject—but yes, broadcast is okay, but you really don't know how it's going to look on somebody's [television –ML].

JUDITH RICHARDS: At this point in time, if you had the opportunity to have some of your single-channel pieces broadcast—actually broadcast, not on the Internet—would you want to do that?

MARY LUCIER: Well, now, it would—yeah, but it would have to be under certain conditions. For example, I don't really want to show a 3-by-4 [ratio] image on these 16-by-9 screens. You have to black off two sides. Well, you can do that, but a lot of people will just expand it and stretch it because they don't want to see those. [. . . –ML] But then for people who still have 3-by-4 televisions, it would probably get squashed.

So the problems of how something gets shown increase as the technology changes more and more. What I would rather do is be in Art 21 and be interviewed and have my work shown in a context, rather than have it just

simply screened or aired in a conventional fashion. I mean, I wouldn't mind, [00:18:00]—what I would like most, I think, is if it were a project for which I would specifically create some works or choose works, and not just one, five-minute piece, you know, at five past midnight or something like that.

I made a piece for the Times Square—for a Creative Times billboard—a 59-second piece. And it was quite a thrill to come up out of the subway and look up there and see my butterfly, my Monarch, you know, hanging in the air. That was quite exciting. But you know, it gets lost in the hubbub and in all the stuff that surrounds it.

And so rarely does something emerge out of those kinds of contexts, though I did really enjoy that. And that was the most public, sort of, context I think I've ever had work seen in—and they said they got lots and lots of compliments. But what does it do, really? You know, people don't really know who it is, what it is. Television is, in a way, better because there's a surrounding text, you know, and your name is there. But museums are the best, in a way.

JUDITH RICHARDS: We talked about this compilation you made in 2001. Were you here on 9/11?

MARY LUCIER: Absolutely.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you feel that, that had any impact on your work and maybe on—obviously, impact on you as a person?

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, well, that was powerful, of course. I actually did a bunch of 9/11 photos—some post-9/11 photographs. I don't show them to people. I worked very hard on a bunch of them, and I think some of them were quite good. But I'm sort of retiring about certain aspects of the work that I do that stays private forever.

I went around and photographed some of the residual things [00:20:00], like I went down to Ground Zero in November and shot some interesting images. I went around to Union Square and I shot some of the memorials, but I did certain things with it and moving the camera, doing things in a certain way so that they weren't regular photographs.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you said you want them to stay private forever.

MARY LUCIER: No, I don't, really. It's just that I'm not one of those artists who can, like—who is really functioning on five engines at once. I may have a lot of stuff going and lots of other ideas, but I'm slow to get things out.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This show that's at PS1 now that refers to 9/11, in which you have a very early piece, did that curator know about these photographs? Or would you have thought you'd show them if you had been invited to?

MARY LUCIER: I don't think they are pertinent, really. And he wasn't really showing any work that's directly related to 9/11.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I read that, yeah.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, all the work in the show sort of echoes or somehow, you know, shadows 9/11. But this piece of mine was 1975, and it's—and I think it was a stroke of real intelligence. I'm just not thrilled with the surrounding context of the piece and how it comes off in that context.

JUDITH RICHARDS: One question I meant to ask you when we were talking about galleries, but it relates to this comment about your feelings about showing these things: You maintain your own archives. You don't leave it to the gallery, is that correct?

And you talked about having an assistant who has been doing this updating and putting everything on a database and managing all of that. Do you think, also, at this time about leaving [00:22:00]—stipulating, instructing future presenters or owners on how to recreate an installation, how to show a DVD, what to do with these photographs that you took right after 9/11?

MARY LUCIER: I printed out one of my sample manuals for *The Plains of Sweet Regret*. And in it, it—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How many pages is that, for the record?

MARY LUCIER: Oh, it's 24 pages, but one side only. It lists the project description and then the elements: video equipment, audio equipment, control equipment, other elements. Then installation requirements and options.

And then examples—two configurations—the original museum configuration and the gallery version. Then technical setup, basic wiring diagram, sample exhibition plans and elevations, exhibition history, bibliography,

crate/box list, contacts and notes. So here's the description.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's remarkable.

MARY LUCIER: Here are the elements: the video equipment, the audio equipment, control equipment, other elements. Exhibition space, dimensions, variable. Equipment control room. Here is a sample floor plan from the Lab at Belmar. Here is a museum configuration.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It was at the Lab at Belmar?

MARY LUCIER: Yeah. And here is a gallery configuration. And here, equipment control room connections, how everything connects to everything else. And then here's a wiring diagram—kind of a cute one—another floor plan that's different. I redrew a floor plan every time this piece was shown. Yet another floor plan. Here's an elevation. The two different formats as they appear in the 6-by-9—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were there any examples—

MARY LUCIER: Wait, I'm not done, yet. Exhibition history, selected bibliography, publications. Okay, here, finally, a word about the technology [00:24:00]—current media and future media—which I've come to think is really important to include in these things. And more pictures, contacts and then a crate list so you get an idea of the size and weight of everything. But that was for the piece when it was touring, and it was touring under the aegis of the North Dakota Museum of Art.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That is incredibly complete. Do you think that—were there any sources that guided you to make this, or do you think this is really an exemplary—well, it is—

MARY LUCIER: Everybody makes them. And some are probably much more detailed than this.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Everybody who is creating video projects.

MARY LUCIER: Traveling video installations.

[Cross talk.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Because of the chances for disaster if it's improperly installed?

MARY LUCIER: Well, everybody agrees that all of these things need manuals. And we can call it the book. It's the book, you know. Every installation pretty much has to have a book now. And I think one of the flaws with *Dawn Burn*, regarding my relationship with SF MOMA, is that it doesn't have a book.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is that something you'd undertake at this point?

MARY LUCIER: I think maybe I will have to. I think I might have to, with the cooperation of the preparators at PS1, while it's still fresh. I mean, I really see how valuable it is, now, because what happened out there—so this is just a little digression into presentation and representation of old works—what happened at SF MOMA was they showed it once, quite a while ago. It was pretty good. You know, it was good enough. It was good enough I was happy.

They showed it a second time. I don't think I actually saw that installation. And the third time they showed it, it was magnificent and beautiful. It was in a huge room all by itself and absolutely quiet—dark, quiet room, well-tuned monitors. [00:26:00] Off to one side, through a door, was a Gordon Matta-Clark film. It was a show—double-feature—Mary Lucier and Gordon Matta-Clark. And I was very pleased with that screening, that showing at SF MOMA. And I thought, "Well, they've really got it down."

Well, it turns out they don't have it down enough to send it to another institution so that, that institution can follow and really do it well. And so what it appears to me is that there's one guy on their staff who is the tech guy, has been maybe since either the first or the second time they installed that piece. He's not going to be there forever. Right now, Steve Dietz [ph] is the guy who knows how to put that piece up out there, but he's not going to be around forever, and neither am I. So we've got to get it down. I think we've got to get it down.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you should work with Steve to do that.

MARY LUCIER: I should work with Steve Dietz and the preparators over here because they made some excellent notes, and we made some good changes—things I hadn't thought of, things nobody's thought of, I'm sure. So you really have to anticipate. It's very hard to predict, of course, how things are going to change, but you really have to be able—and in my case, where I call for monitors of different sizes—there's supposed to be a regular increase.

Well, the guy at PS1 figured out exactly how to make a three-inch increase across those seven monitors. And instead of going inside the monitor and trying to shrink the image on the tube—because these were all old tube monitors—they shrunk the disc, itself. Put it in an editing system and just shrank it, and then they could put that up on the monitor and just mask it in closer. I mean, there's some brilliant things like that, that are possible now with the technology that you would not have imagined in 1975.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So that can go in your manual.

MARY LUCIER: It has to go in the manual, yeah. So there's a job.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Are there any—

[Audio break.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: [00:28:00] I wanted to continue this train of thought with a few other questions about working issues. Are there any other questions about preservation that—do you feel you've covered that, those issues, pretty well?

MARY LUCIER: Well, I think the most serious aspect of preservation with video, of course, is the changing media, the changing formats. And if you take a piece like *Dawn Burn*, it was made on—it's black-and-white, to begin with, fairly low-resolution. It was made on open-reel, half-inch tape, which was the first tape anybody worked with who wasn't a professional in the broadcast industry. They were working on two-inch tape. So half-inch tape.

Think of all the mediums that have come and gone. You have half-inch tape; then you have three-quarter-inch cassette; then you have half-inch cassette; then you have two kinds of half-inch cassette, Beta and VHS. VHS won out. Then you have—I mean, in the meantime, you also have one-inch tape, and two-inch lived on for a little while. And then you have mini tape, DV. And then you have high-definition DV. Then you have discs that are not high definition. Then you have memory cards that can be high-definition.

And it just doesn't end, you know? You have a hard drive, where a work can live on a hard drive. A work can live in this computer and you just plug it and play it, you know? So those things are, in a way, the scariest because how do you keep a work authentic to itself and intact, and yet be able to upgrade it, you know, to the next technology so that it stays alive? And for a while, people were saying—I don't know if they're still saying this—but that the Digital Beta [00:30:00] was the means of preservation and that there should always be that kind of hard copy.

And then you could migrate it to whatever other form of copy for exhibition. Exhibition is one thing; what's in the vault is another. Then there's another problem, though, and that is the monitors themselves—the display itself. And I happen to have made a lot of pieces that required specific-sized monitors, which, of course, you can't find anymore.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you explicitly forbid or discourage them from being projected large because they should be seen on a monitor?

MARY LUCIER: A lot of these were meant to be monitor pieces. They had to be. They were—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right, I realize. So now if someone wants to project them, they really cannot. They need to be—

MARY LUCIER: Well, why would you? I mean, well—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Let's say you wouldn't have the right monitor or you want a full wall.

MARY LUCIER: But suppose there are five different images and they all have different sources and they all go into a sculptural format, and it's supposed to be arranged that way. Or like *Ohio at Giverny* is, you know, A, B, A, B, A, B, A, and that's supposed to be that way.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I guess I was just referring to the single-channel.

MARY LUCIER: Oh, single-channel is another thing, but I don't usually so easily make a single-channel installation. But I'm thinking the multiple-channel installations where, you know, images interact with each other, and often across a whole swath of image [displays –ML].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Speaking of those kind of complex installations, has your method of editing changed over the years? I mean, I know you talked about the index cards and all of that, and maybe you've really covered this subject. But I just wondered, is there any other—currently, do you feel that, when you think about how you edit pieces, that, that's changing? Or is that really [00:32:00] a core element of your practice that's like a painter—

they're not going to change how they do it?

MARY LUCIER: No, no. You know, I was known in the very beginning as somebody who did not edit. *Dawn Burn* was not edited. *Paris Dawn Burn* was not edited. *Equinox* was not edited. Those early—*Fire Writing*—laser-burned pieces were not edited. I had a reputation as being someone who didn't edit. And then, you know, like any normal person, I started editing at some point.

And some people were quite amazed that I was editing. "What? Mary Lucier, editing?" [Laughs.] Well, now I've become quite a good editor, actually, partly because I worked with pros over the years when I didn't do my own editing—not when I was not editing, but when you did not finish your work in your own studio.

In those days, you couldn't. I mean, I think I talked about this yesterday—about how you'd get the rough cut just to a certain point where you could take it into the professional studio. And then it was basically, you were reading off a list of time code numbers and deciding on the transitions. And you've got a professional who's pushing the buttons and helping you. You know, you don't touch it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Over the years—this recent, last decade—have you seen a change in how ideas come to you, how quickly or how slowly they percolate, decisions being made, if there have been any changes in that regard?

MARY LUCIER: I think, gee, that's very hard to say. I think that if you look at this chronology of works [00:34:00], well, from 2000—no, 2004—sort of the enormous expedition pieces, I think, are getting less frequent. I say that and then I look here and I see, well, I just went to Japan for six months. So maybe that's not true anymore.

But for a while, that's the only way I could think, was to plan a piece that really was like an expedition, where I would go to, you know, where the icebergs are or go to Alaska, go to the Amazon, actually go to France, go to Giverny, you know. And I guess I just did that again. I went to Japan. But I did have a moment of worry I remember a few years back that, that era was over for me and that, you know, as one ages, you require more help of different kinds.

And camera work is very exhausting. Good camera work is really hard. The equipment is heavy. A good tripod is heavy. And you have to carry batteries. You have to—everything has gotten smaller, but still, you have to be very organized and, you know, you've got to be strong for a day in the field of shooting. And I'm not just, you know, a director sitting there and commanding somebody to do something.

So I was kind of worried, thinking, "Well, eventually, I'm going to have to find a camera person, you know, who can actually look through my eyes and shoot the way I shoot." And I sort of have found her, but she's Japanese. [Laughs.] And she's an artist in her own right. And usually, the best assistants are also artists. And the trouble is, they want to go off and do their own work. They don't want to be forever identified with you and your work.

So I still wonder about that as one of the major changes that I'm still looking ahead to, here. My life in technology has been terribly physical. If you were to go into my studio upstate [00:36:00], you would see this storage of equipment that I have there—you know, the amount of stuff that gets delivered and sent out. And it's just very physical. One needs to be a workshop, an industry of some kind, you know, so that you can—so that you have other people doing some of that stuff for you.

And a lot of people actually develop those systems early. I think Nam June developed it very early. He always had helpers, always had people who—he didn't pay anybody, either. But he had, like, you know, guys helping him for years and years and years. And other artists, too, have always found ways of, you know, getting—some people teach; they use their students to do a lot of physical labor and a lot of the studio work and all that. I always feel honor-bound to hire people. So if somebody works for me, they're going to get paid, normally. [Laughs.] No, invariably.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is that really more the norm among artists who you've met who work in a somewhat similar way—that they do pay their assistants?

MARY LUCIER: Well, I think so. I think people with conventional studios, so to speak, who hire, you know, people who actually do the painting for them and things like that—Bob Gober's studio is over here, for example, across the street. And it looks like he's got about six assistants, or maybe not so many. I see maybe three or four at once. I'm sure he pays each one of them individually and pays them decently.

JUDITH RICHARDS: No, I'm thinking of other artists who work with video, who travel, who have complicated projects.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, do they have—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is it the custom right now, would you say, more likely to pay all your assistants? I mean, I actually have heard, mostly, people paying them. Maybe it's more in the past that those kinds of situations where you really need some technical expertise, you need some level of knowledge [00:38:00]—you're not just stretching canvases if you're an assistant.

MARY LUCIER: Right. Well, what I did, for example, in Wisconsin—I shot a three-camera piece, which is part of the *Wisconsin Arc* but not the whole *Wisconsin Arc*. And I used the best [of –ML] my graduate students. I think I only paid—there was one guy who was my chief assistant. I think he's the only one I paid. I think the other people worked for nothing. I'm quite certain they did. I took them all to dinner. And I don't remember how the negotiating was—you know, whether it was easy to get them. I think it was easy. They all wanted to participate.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, that was truly a learning experience for them, as students.

MARY LUCIER: I'm sure. But you know, that kind of thing goes on in universities a lot. George Kuchar, who just died, right—he's famous for recruiting his students as talent, you know, as extra camera people, as costume designers, everything. I doubt—I don't know—but I doubt that George Kuchar ever paid anybody to work with him.

But people did. It was just fun. They were having a good time, you know. That's the impression I get. I didn't know George well, but I always got that impression, that it was just kind of one big party after another and that there's a certain style of artist who does work that way. And that used to be, probably, even more common, I'll bet, in years past.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right, when it was cheaper to live.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, cheaper to live and people wanted to—well, you know, I think it has a lot to do with students and students being willing to participate and help out.

JUDITH RICHARDS: A slightly different question: At what point do you decide on the title of the piece? I mean, often, you're writing proposals for commissions. You probably feel you need to attach a title to it that may or may not be the final title. [00:40:00] But is that something that comes to your mind very early on?

MARY LUCIER: Occasionally, and occasionally not. Occasionally, it's—I think *Floodsongs* was sort of immediate, as a title. *House by the Water* was originally *House on the Water* because I have a bunch of proposals back here on my computer where it says *House on the Water*. I like *House by the Water* much better.

I don't know. I'm just looking at these. *Last Rites [Positano]* came very quickly. It's hard to say because—I think maybe *Summer, or Grief* was a title that came later, came maybe after the piece was done—after I was more immersed in Grossman's poetry and started to get something of his syntax as well as his content.

JUDITH RICHARDS: As you're recollecting these things, it occurs to me to ask, have you ever kept diaries or notebooks or visual, verbal recordings of your thinking, in the studio or just about your work?

MARY LUCIER: I have hundreds of notebooks. I don't often write down my thoughts. And I'm not a diarist. I don't like it. I have a lot of notebooks, but I also have other kinds of writings. I would just sit down sometimes on my old typewriter, I remember, and I would just write out a description of a piece or a lot of ideas, one thing coming after another, put a date on it and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you kept all these notebooks, and they're in chronological order, and—

MARY LUCIER: Yes, they are.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So they form a kind of a record of your development of your thinking.

MARY LUCIER: In a way. Some of them are very thin, and then some are jam-packed with stuff. You know, they're just notebooks like this one, for example. [00:42:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you talk about your travels in the notebook or strictly your art ideas?

MARY LUCIER: Well, they're very fragmentary, mostly. They're usually not sentences. They're names, books, sometimes little sketches. I don't have a good one here. I wish I had the one from Japan, which has some good sketches. Some of them—I did do an Alaska/Amazon journal, and I did detail it day-by-day. It is more of a journal.

And that's, I think, the only time I've done that, where I actually—well, the Japan one—I have two from Japan: one from 2009 and then this current one. But it's sort of a mix of laundry lists and dates and what I did on those days—just, what temple did we go to where we were shooting, what were we shooting. And then there's a couple of really nice little sketches. And they're very partial, you know. They're not complete records of my thinking, nor

are they complete descriptions of where I was or what I was doing.

But I know Melinda Barlow found them very useful when she was supposedly working on a second book that was going to be—and I don't know what's become of it. She was writing a book about me, rather than just editing—and I don't know. But at any rate, she found them extremely interesting because she could trace the origin of the thought—or she could trace a thought that she found here back, you know, 25 books ago—like 15 years ago—same thought.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So these notebooks are incredibly valuable.

MARY LUCIER: To some degree, yeah. Yeah, they are.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you're not working, are there any consistent, long-time activities that you enjoy doing, whether or not they feed your work? [00:44:00]

MARY LUCIER: Well, when I'm not working—it is easier, yet it's harder. It's easier to go to museums and galleries, in a way, when I'm not doing a project because when I'm doing a project, I sometimes don't want anybody else's images or sounds in my ears or my eyes.

On the other hand, if I'm not working, I sometimes feel I'm falling behind when I go to see other people's shows. There's so much competition. Whether it's actual competition—it's not hand-to-hand combat, but you know, it's a world in which people's reputations compete with other people's reputations.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It sounds like you're a fairly conscientious gallery-goer or museum visitor.

MARY LUCIER: I'm not. Bob is. And I can't go to museums and galleries the way he does. I just cannot do it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you're thinking about shows to see in galleries, are there any particular areas of current artistic production that most interest you?

MARY LUCIER: Well, I still like to look at sculpture a lot. I was a sculptor when I was a student in college, and I still find sculpture of all sorts very intriguing in the ways that people are using space.

On the other hand, I might more go to a gallery because of the gallery or just because an artist—you know, like the Anselm Kiefer show was not about the medium. It was about seeing Anselm Kiefer. The Richter show was about seeing Richter. The Serra show was about seeing Serra. I'm trying to think if certain galleries outweigh others in interest for me, and that's hard to say, also [00:46:00], because there's no great consistency there, either. So, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you noticed, thought about, artists who you feel have been influenced by your work?

MARY LUCIER: Well, I think I see it around. I don't know if anybody owns up to it. I think I see it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you get people writing you, emailing you?

MARY LUCIER: Well, I have lots of people telling me how much they love my work. But I mean, I see certain trends, let's say, among big-time artists that I feel very well have come from my work—but maybe even secondhand from my work, maybe not even directly. And you know, some things are just in the air, and they get in the air and they don't have attribution any longer. They're just there. It's just part of a medium, like how many channels of video, you know.

Is it just sort of in the air, or is this indeed influenced by somebody else's three-channel piece or whatever? So I don't know. I find influence and attribution and all of that very, very, very odd to try to sort out because, you know, you just look around and you see—that after a period of time, it's like everything has happened, you know. Everything has happened, and people are bound to repeat themselves. So you look for originality. Particularly in an artist's work whom you follow, you look for originality—I do.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, you were just talking about criticism earlier and saying how great reviews are wonderful and you really can kind of ignore bad ones. Is that really the case? I mean, I can't even think about any bad ones you've had, but when you have—

MARY LUCIER: There's one notable bad one, I think. [00:48:00] It was a Brooks Adams review of *Wilderness* in *Art in America*, and it was the lead review in *Art in America* that month. I was on my way down south to do a show in Virginia at a space, and also on to Raleigh. And in Virginia, they had taken that review and put it on the pedestal.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Without reading it, perhaps.

MARY LUCIER: Without reading it. And I said, "No, why do you have this review here?" I said, "It's terrible." They said, "Oh, but it's Brooks Adams and it was the lead review." I said, "Did you read it?" "Well, no." I said, "Please."

[Audio break.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, you were talking about the Brooks Adams. When you've encountered such a review like that, that was bad, was it because the reviewer didn't get it? They made some error in understanding your work and, in fact, this is an opportunity to set the record straight?

MARY LUCIER: Well, what I thought, in Brooks Adams's case—I don't know if you know the piece *Wilderness*. It's impossible to show it to you. I don't have a version of one screen [showing –ML] all three.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I'm sure I saw it, but just—

MARY LUCIER: Yeah. At any rate, there's a lot of stuff in it about—it's the one that's on the faux-Neoclassical pedestals. And it has something to do with—well, the title *Wilderness*—

[Audio break.]

MARY LUCIER: Let me just say that I think he did misunderstand something because of who he is and that the piece was about the wilderness, as you might understand the early formation of the United States of America or as you might look in regard to, say, 19th-century American painting, which was really what it was about.

It was based on certain [00:50:00] 19th-century American paintings that I actually went back to the site [which it depicts –ML]—this followed *Ohio at Giverny*. And as I did these [scenes –ML], I put in certain things that were close to clichés about those places. One of the things I did was to videotape a foxhunt. And it was a heck of a lot of fun following the fox and the horses and everybody, you know, through the brush and all that, in really good scenes, I thought.

And he wrote he thought—oh, I can't remember his wording, exactly, but he thought it was—I don't know if he said disgusting or something like that. He said, "While I'm as big a sucker as most for the flash of a red coat"—and I thought, "Huh?" He totally made the mistake that it was about those things and the grandeur of those things, rather than about the development of empire as connected to those things.

He, himself, WASP that he is, probably was too much taken in by the illusion that this was a positive image of those things and that he could not see it as, in any way, a critique or look at it in some other way as simply realizing an image—recreating [. . . –ML] an old image from a painting of the 19th century.

And so why would you do it? Because it's there, I would do it. And also because there was a certain implied critique. And the faux-Neoclassical pedestals are really quite funny, in a way. But I think he is one of the few persons who absolutely took it literally.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Great.

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JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Mary Lucier at her home in New York City on September 30, 2011, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card three. Mary, we left off around 2001, 2002, when we were talking about your work last. And we come to a major project, *The Plains of Sweet Regret*, which I know you finished in 2004. It's dated 2004-2007 on your chronology. So I guess first question: Does that mean that you were further developing it over those three years?

MARY LUCIER: Well, what it really means is that I developed a slightly different version of exhibiting it. And it isn't that any of the internal material changed. The video didn't change. The audio didn't change. But the arrangement of the room was radically different, since I was now projecting five images, instead of just four, I had put the monitor flat on a wall that used to sit out in the middle of the room.

And it seemed to me, certainly at the time, that that was a significant enough change to warrant a note as though it were, you know, further development of the piece—and also because I contemplated offering it in two forms, since I discovered that the form it showed in at the gallery turned out to be quite potent. And I thought, initially, that the larger spaces would be the more potent, impressive spaces. [00:02:00]

So I thought, "Well, there's clearly something really significant going on here. It's not just a rearrangement of monitors." I'm not sure how valid that really is, as a marker. I do present it as, quote, "a museum version" and "a gallery version," and those are the two things I refer to—Lennon, Weinberg, and most of the other spaces, which

all conformed to a certain large size that we requested. So it may be a red herring. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, let's go back, then, to the development of that piece—what instigated it and how it evolved.

MARY LUCIER: Well, I was in Moscow in—what year would that have been—2000, perhaps. I'm not quite sure—right around there. And I was in a hotel in Moscow and got a telegram from Laurel Reuter saying, "How about another big project?" And so I wrote back, "Of course, I'll go anywhere with you, Laurel"—something to that effect.

And I think she'd had this notion for a long time of this theme of the emptying out of the plains and was very concerned as she found that a lot of people who lived in that area of the plains were very worried about the fact that they were losing population. They were losing youth. It was getting to be—I wouldn't say a sedentary culture but a less lively culture, in certain ways, because young people were leaving and not coming back.

I think that may have reversed itself, now, because they have very successful oil and natural gas drilling out there. But of course, that's a phase that may not be permanent, either. But in a few short years, really [00:04:00]—you think, 2004, when I finished that and now it's only seven years later.

And certainly, the economy of the place has radically shifted. It would be interesting for me to go back now and look and see exactly what's going on and find out how people feel about this notion of—[strangers coming in –ML], for all I know. I mean, maybe total strangers come in for a few years to [get a job on a drilling rig, and then they go back –ML] or they go down to Texas and get a job there. I mean, these may be itinerant workers, too. I really don't know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So she established, in some way, the parameters of the project, in terms of the basic concept she proposed to you?

MARY LUCIER: Yes. In fact, she commissioned a photographer. She commissioned a filmmaker, another photographer, me. There might have been a fifth commission, based loosely around this theme of the emptying out of the plains. You know the photographer—Robert Polidori. Well, she commissioned him. He went there, and he got one of her young assistants to take him around. He hated it.

And the food—he hated the food. He's French, I guess, and he couldn't stand it. He couldn't eat. So after he left—he had gone around, and I guess he had made a lot of pictures, but he never came back. And he never did [finish –ML] his project. So he went on to places like New Orleans and so on where he could become more famous, I guess, and Versailles. But there was [also –ML] a really kind of wonderful photographer named Jim Dow, who's known for—

JUDITH RICHARDS: D-O-W?

MARY LUCIER: D-O-W. For photographing some of the oddities and the quirky architectures/signage. [00:06:00] He had done a series over a period of many years, and it was a very nice series of work. Several of the other people were local. And so—instead of doing all these projects at once, she did them sequentially.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was the process? When she called you and you said yes, you then developed your concept, wrote it down, sent it to her with a budget? Or did she actually say to you, "Look, this is how much space there is. This is how much money we have, and this is the completion date that I need it by?"

MARY LUCIER: Well, we probably would have talked soon after I got back from Moscow, I knowing the space and the place and all of that, and she knowing my work pretty well. By that time, maybe we were just talking about where we could go for funding. We shared the funding on this. We split it so evenly that when we finally dispersed the piece, I got the DVD players. She got the projectors. I got the two monitors. I got the audio system. You know, it worked out that way, and we truly split things.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you accustomed to that kind of arrangement?

MARY LUCIER: I had had arrangements as wildly different as that and the Toledo Museum of Art, where they had purchased all this equipment for *Noah's Raven*—eight immense monitors, four laser-disc players with four backup players, paid for the discs, all of that. And they gave all of the equipment to me. They also [paid to build –ML] the pteranodon replica, which hung over the piece.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you ever encountered a situation, which I know sometimes happens, where a museum pays for all that and then they say to the artist, "When you sell this work, you would reimburse us a certain amount?" [00:08:00]

MARY LUCIER: No. Actually, I haven't. The Toledo Museum was an outstanding example of the heyday of the

Ohio Arts Council. They raised a great deal of money, and I think the ruling was, at that time, that a museum was not allowed to keep the equipment that it bought for a specific commission. It used to be true in New York State if you bought equipment—well, it happened, in fact, at "Montage 93" with *Oblique House*.

I bought four monitors and four disc players from the money that had been given to me—and I kept them. Visual Studies Workshop wouldn't have kept them. So it was quite a real sharp change from the Toledo Museum, where they—claimed they had no use for the equipment.

And that was a little bit careless on their part because what they really should have done, of course, is buy the piece for a little bit more money and have kept it in their collection. But I think they just you know, they had never done a video piece before. And Toledo has a very fine collection. It is an excellent museum. They have Neoclassical arts. They have Greek, Roman, Asian. And their collection of contemporary is very small.

So they did not want to have to conserve this piece. I know they didn't. And so they just literally turned everything over to me. Now, the other time that happened was in New England, when the New England Foundation for the Arts helped raise the money for *Wilderness*, with which we bought seven monitors, three players, audio, et cetera, et cetera. And they handed all that equipment over to me. [00:10:00]

So that would have been—well, *Wilderness* would have been '86, I think, and '93 was *Noah's Raven*. So at least up until then, people were divesting themselves of that equipment. They actually were not—these not-for-profit agencies were not supposed to hang onto that equipment. I guess it was better to give it to the artist. And so I acquired quite a vast amount of equipment from that.

Of course, I did sell *Wilderness*, and somewhere all that equipment is moldering away, never being used. But with the North Dakota Museum, it was—museums were already poorer. We had raised a lot of money; she had raised her sources of funding and so had I, so we figured some of this had to be split somewhere.

And so the things that they had literally bought, they kept. The things that I had literally bought, I kept. Somebody just asked for the piece the other day, and I wrote back, I said, "Well, the elements have all been dispersed since we retired the piece." And I said, "It looks like a heck of a job to bring it all back together. The tour went on for about five years or more."

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah. So describe how you developed that piece. There's different footage all across the region, and of course then the rodeo. How did that piece evolve?

MARY LUCIER: It's a journey, the way a lot of my pieces have been journeys. Certainly, *Noah's Raven* is a journey through Alaska, through the Amazon. *Wilderness* was a journey up the East Coast and into the icebergs and various other waters. [00:12:00] I often think of these pieces as journeys of the camera.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Someone wrote about the piece and talked about movements, as if in a musical score, or you could think about acts, as in a play. Do you think about these pieces dividing into successive parts in a kind of a fluid narrative?

MARY LUCIER: Yes, I do, as a matter of fact. I think of them as grand poems, in a way, and I also think of them as musical compositions. I'm not a composer, nor am I a musician. [Although –ML] I've hung around with musicians and composers all my life, and I've been greatly influenced by music.

And yes, though, I do think of them as [sequential –ML] elements that are joined in some way. And okay, now, you're going here. Now the camera has been there and you're going here. And that's so that the journey is not such a random journey. It's usually to somewhere, or it turns out, in retrospect, to be to somewhere.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And at what point did you decide that the rodeo—the metaphor, the actual rodeo—would be an important part of the work?

MARY LUCIER: Well, what happened was we set out from Grand Forks, which is in the east, with an assistant who lived way out in the west almost in—what's the bordering state? Wyoming? Could be. Almost on the border, where the land is quite different and it becomes very Western out there.

And in the east, it's more—I want to say—it's not flatter. Of course, there are a lot more rivers. There's the Red River of the North, which happens to run north. [00:14:00] And that has shaped—the border with, I guess, Minnesota, Wisconsin—it's a different landscape. As you head west, you pass through a lot of very flat land that is not—doesn't appear to be farmable at all—and eventually get to a more rugged, more beautiful, Western landscape, which I think now is where all the oil drilling and gas fracking is going on.

I would say, "This is the things I'm interested in. I'm interested in falling-down houses, for example, that people don't clear away. I'm interested in, you know, 'ghost towns.'" Ghost towns was one of my early ideas, you know,

[thinking –ML] that I would find a lot of ghost towns, actually, still standing because a lot of towns were built along the railroad. [There are a few years that they have in which to flourish or not flourish, and they kind of fell flat because there's not that much happening on the railroad anymore, I guess –ML].

So we would sort of follow—[the railroad, so there was maybe one line that we were tracking all the way across the state. And my assistant knew a lot of the areas, and the farther west we got, the more she knew. –ML]

She had mentioned the rodeo. I said, "Well, I would love to go to a rodeo. I would love to shoot a rodeo." [Our original purpose was that we were going out to her family farm for calving season –ML]. It was late winter, early spring, and the cows were all giving birth or were about to give birth. And that was the hook on which we hung this particular journey.

So we went out there for that, stayed in her family's house, got to know them and did, indeed, capture the birth of several calves and the whole process with the farmer intervening and all of that, which was really sort of touching to watch. And we'd be prepared. We'd run out and think something was going to happen, and then nothing would happen. And so finally, on this one day, we really got the whole thing. And in the meanwhile, they kept putting me onto other sites that I should go visit.

[Audio break.]

MARY LUCIER: Okay, so [my assistant –ML] had suggested—and somewhere in a notebook, I probably have all these things written down—spots, locales she knew, the names of towns now disappeared, or now fallen into ruin that she knew. And so a lot of what you see in the piece—there's a sod house, for example—she knew where to find that.

There was a sod house that had been built for a movie called *Northern Lights*, I think, and we found that. And that was partially still furnished because it had been furnished, I guess, for the purposes of this movie, and then maybe a lot of other things had happened in the meantime. It was on some farmer's land who she knew. So she was an invaluable guide.

The rodeo came about in a very natural way because I had said, "I'm interested in rodeo." And she said, "Well, it just happens that in Minot" [. . . –ML]. That there was a regional championships of some sort happening. There was some special event happening. I think maybe it was on our way back east. It doesn't matter.

But we went to a rodeo. That was really exciting to get that footage. [00:18:00] The sound of the rodeo is horrible. You hear a rodeo, you don't ever want to see it because it just sounds awful—loud voices blasting and blaring and then all of a sudden, dah-dah-dah, a guitar, some [electric –ML] guitar chords that don't make any sense and then more blasting, very loud, over these loudspeakers—not appealing.

So the great thing that I was able to do with this, of course, was just knock out all that sound, slow the material down and then decide, "What sound do I want to put with this," you know? And are you ready for that story?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sure.

MARY LUCIER: My dear friend, Robert Ashley, had just sent me—I think he and I might have been talking about rodeo. And he had just sent me a CD of George Strait. Bob and I have always listened to various kinds of music together, shared things. I didn't know he was interested in George Strait. I wasn't, particularly, myself—[laughs]—but I really liked this album. And that's where I found the song.

And when I heard it, I had one of those reactions: "Oh, Mary, you can't do this." You know, "Oh, I can't make a country western music video, or something that looks like that." And of course, I worked with it and worked with it and worked with it—the timings. I looped the voice and the track so that it layers, sort of, in a similar way that the images layer as they—[are mixed –ML].

[Audio break.]

MARY LUCIER: So as I was saying, I layered the vocal track in a similar manner [00:20:00] as the visual track so that you would have voices overlapping itself. And although the images were flopped so that they came together in the center and formed this kind of classic Rorschach, if you want to call it that, the music [is overlaid –ML]—and what I found about that song is that anyplace you laid the track over itself, it works.

It's just amazing. And so the musical track becomes very, very dense, at a certain point. And I've had kids who are working in museums, for example—I'd say something about the sound and they'd say, "Yeah, it's all messed up." [Laughs.] "Yeah, you mean that sound? That's all messed up." I'd say, "Oh, no, that's the way it's supposed to be." To them, it sounded all messed up, as though your CD player was skipping and doing something wrong. But it was an interesting idea, that it was all messed up.

So actually, the section that is *Arabesque*, that is also the part that ends *The Plains of Sweet Regret*, is the part I finished first. I made that seven-and-a-half minutes before I had edited the rest of the piece. It just happened. I got this footage out. I color-corrected it. I laid one track on top of the other. I got this song that Bob Ashley had sent me, just started to put things together.

And first thing I knew it was getting tighter and tighter and tighter, and I had a small piece. I did know that that was probably going to be somewhere in the larger piece, but I also thought of it almost immediately as a piece that could exist on its own. [00:22:00] And then I realized that it could be the conclusion of the installation, that it would, in fact, be the ending.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So what was the response in the community to that piece? Did it end up being read the way you expected and wanted it to be read by—

MARY LUCIER: You mean in North Dakota?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, in the museum, in the community there.

MARY LUCIER: From what I gather, people loved it. And Laurel Reuter loved it. And nobody ever tired of hearing the music, either. That's the other funny thing. Even when it played here in the gallery on 25th Street, Tom Adams couldn't get enough of it. But some people—now, here's where the New York reaction that you might anticipate actually happened. Somebody walked in and walked out immediately and said, "I can't believe you can live all day with that music!"

JUDITH RICHARDS: What about the issue of sentiment and sentimentality? And we talked about emotion in your past pieces. Is that something you think about modulating while you're creating the piece? Is it something you expect to be there in the way that you want it to be, or do you feel it's a dangerous element, or something you need to build up because—

MARY LUCIER: All of those things. I mean, everything you mentioned goes through my head. I'm looking right now for the little brochure that has the printout of the song on it. I can't find it. But if you just kill that a second, maybe I can find it.

[Audio break.]

MARY LUCIER: [In progress]—[Laurel Reuter has –ML] written about this piece, about the whole piece. *The Plains of Sweet Regret*. [00:24:00] But then she comes to the end and emphasizes the lyrics. And there's a whole paragraph here where she writes about it.

She says, "Laced with melancholy, with heartbreaking longing, with loveliness, The Plains of Sweet Regret nudges the viewer into remembering. What is it about this life that one cherishes? What must not be lost as we move into this new century? A calf is born. The rancher's large hand gently reaches in to help. The empty landscape mutating from fall into winter against a haunting electronic score is achingly beautiful."

"Then, in the last six minutes, the work explodes into dance—the dance of the bucking horse, the bull, the clown, the rodeo rider. This is the resplendent West, but Lucier undermines its glory with loss. Brilliantly, the artist sets her choreography to George Strait's country western song, "I Can Still Make Cheyenne." The music and the images cascade back over themselves, folding, repositioning, repeating, alive with rapture and again with longing."

And then she quotes the whole song. I like that take on it because it does tackle the—well, I don't call it sentimentality—but the actual longing and perhaps all the desire that is contained in that song. People who ride the rodeo are obsessed with it. And there's a huge amount of failure—a huge amount of failure and a lot of physical injury and [. . . –ML] broken homes, as well. It's not a stable profession.

And so this whole thing [in the song –ML] where she's saying to him, "Don't bother coming home because by the time you get here, I'll be long gone. There's somebody new and he ain't no rodeo man." He says, "I'm sorry it's come down to this. There's so much about you that I'm going to miss. [00:26:00] But it's all right, honey. If I hurry, I can still make Cheyenne."

So in other words, he still prefers the rodeo over her and over any attachment that would be permanent or longstanding, even though he says, "I'm coming home." And she just says, "Don't bother," because she knows that his first love is the rodeo. And it's sort of like somebody whose first love is gambling, you know, or alcohol or whatever.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Risky behavior.

MARY LUCIER: Addiction, opium or something like that—not only risky behavior, but highly destructive. And so

the people who live in the West know that this is true. The people who know rodeo people know this is true.

This is something [in the east –ML] we don't know a lot about, for the most part, because we don't live around rodeos or rodeo people. So I find this song to be—true to life and true to a certain sentiment that pervades the whole culture of rodeo, that is one of tremendous loss and, well, damage, as I said before—personal damage and damage to home and culture.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was there any response from that part of the community to—

MARY LUCIER: From the rodeo community? I don't know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you know if they even saw it?

MARY LUCIER: I have no idea because it went to so many sites, one of them being the Lab at Belmar, in Denver. And he scheduled it during a time when there was some big rodeo thing going on. We have no idea if any of them went to it, you know. One just doesn't know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: After you finished that piece, do you remember what you took away from it, in terms of ideas for next works [00:28:00], things that you glimpsed that you started in that piece that you thought, "Oh, that's something I want to take on into something else," or it's something you did that you say, "Well, that's great. I did it. I don't want to do it again?"

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, it might be a little more like that. That piece took up more than just the several years it took to make. Maybe that's another reason—I'm being very frank here—that I put 2007 on there. Because several years went by, and I was editing like mad, it seemed. I was making these mandalas. I was doing lots of other things.

I was shooting stuff around upstate New York, where I lived. Oh, I even was doing funny things like my uncle's 90th birthday, which I quickly edited into a little [piece –ML]. I was doing little, incidental things that were rewarding to others—you know, the things you give as gifts and stuff like that. But I wasn't working on a major piece, and I didn't really know where I was going to go next.

And I was becoming quite concerned about it. 2007 was when [*The Plains* –ML] showed here, at Jill and Tom's gallery. And that gave me kind of a new lease on that piece, anyway—a new lease on its life—because I got such a terrific press response, terrific public response to the piece, itself. So it validated it for me. Once again, even though it's a piece with a Western theme and a country song, you can play it in New York. It works. People get it. So that was validating, [though –ML] that didn't push me on into anything new, yet again. So it wasn't until—

JUDITH RICHARDS: I think *Koshoin*.

MARY LUCIER: *Koshoin*, perhaps—till I started the Japanese work, that—[00:30:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: You must have started that a couple of years before you finished it.

MARY LUCIER: No, wait a minute. No, you know what happened? I was spending a lot of time in Wisconsin around then because I was teaching. I was a professor at the University of Wisconsin for two years. And during that time, I was fascinated with the Calatrava museum there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In Milwaukee.

MARY LUCIER: I love the spaces. I just loved the space. I really fell for it. It's right on the lake. Lake Michigan is so gorgeous. Have you been there?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY LUCIER: Well, Lake Michigan is really one of those beautiful places. And during the offseason, the beach is so beautiful. It goes right along, almost up to the museum. It's a great waterfront. Milwaukee, itself, is just a terrific city, I think, in so many ways—other ways, not, but in many, many ways, particularly the way they use the waterfront and the way the museum is situated. That absurd thing of the "wings" going up and down. I was fascinated with that.

So I used to go shoot in the museum. I'd go in there, and I'd sit on the floor with my camera and I'd shoot for hours. And finally, I decided, "I think maybe I'm actually making a piece here." So I set a day and I got together a whole lot of people to come and perform in the open Calatrava space. What do they call it? Windover Hall, I think. And Joe Kettner was [the chief curator –ML] there, then. Do you know Joe?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY LUCIER: Joe was 100 percent behind this and such a good help. And we roped off that section for a whole Saturday. I got three cameras—three identical cameras—and used three students to shoot camera, We did not allow the museum guests to come in unless they could sign a release. And they understood, [and all the people I called, had to –ML] come dressed in black [00:32:00], and my idea was to have them be quite silhouetted against this magnificent window.

People came, and they'd perform. And they did a variety of things, some of which was interesting and some of which was not interesting. I turned out to be not a very good director, when it comes to telling people what you want them to do. But we worked a wonderful day—six hours—on that piece. Six hours times three cameras—that's 18 hours of footage. That's a lot of footage for one staged event in one setting, you know. [. . . –ML]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Before *Wisconsin Arc*.

MARY LUCIER: [. . . –ML] I was working on all this Wisconsin footage for over a very long period of time, and I couldn't decide what it was going to become. Now, it exists in, basically, sort of three parts.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I mean, it says on the video, part one, part two, part three.

MARY LUCIER: I think maybe that's overstating, and it still isn't entirely resolved.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But three is the longest.

MARY LUCIER: Yes, three is the long section. I have had other ideas because I still have all this extraordinary footage absolutely synched on three cameras. So the three camera angles are quite interesting. When you see someone move into the space on one camera, and you might see them come in but you see them from a rather low angle here, and then you'll see them at a higher angle here and you see them at yet another entirely different angle from this other camera.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you use three cameras on the beach, as well, on the outdoor scenes?

MARY LUCIER: No, no—did not. That's one camera.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's all through editing and evolving.

MARY LUCIER: Yes, yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's not overlaying one camera on another. That's an interesting thought, though. So it's as though all that overlaying was like adding other cameras.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, I didn't think it was. [00:34:00]

MARY LUCIER: But it's an interesting thought because I did so many layers, so many, many layers on that piece. So I worked and worked and worked and worked and worked and worked. And I had people say things to me like, "Yeah, put that on the back burner. Go on to this Japanese stuff," which I did.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So that's what you did.

MARY LUCIER: That's what I did. I put it on the back burner.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And how did you end up going to Japan? Was that something that you had long wanted to do—and specifically this piece, which is so different, in a way, than previous pieces? Almost a documentary.

MARY LUCIER: It is almost a documentary. I had always wanted to go to Japan. I always felt there was some connection between the way I looked at nature and the way the Japanese regard nature. And I just felt there must be some sympathy between me and the Japanese. [Laughs.] And the Japanese garden, which can be so amazing. You know, it ranges from Ryoan-ji, which is the driest thing on earth.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Tell me what that—

MARY LUCIER: Ryoan-ji—R-Y-O-N-J-I [sic], Ryoan-ji—the one John Cage loves so much. That's a Zen garden. To these beautiful, flowering gardens, with a different flower every season and different flowering trees. And some are dry, like a dry river bed, and some have real water in them. They're just all incredibly different, but they're all incredibly astute about nature. It's just, they're so—the best gardens in the world.

I mean, they're really thought out. They're really intellectual gardens. [00:36:00] And of course, some belong to one Buddhist sect and some belong to another. I mean, Ryoan-ji is Zen. The one I go to so often, Hokkeji, happens to be Shingon. And they have a traditional garden. They also have a wonderful sort of wild garden that's got the lotus and lots of other plants in it. I'm not expert on the relationship of the various Japanese gardens to the sects, but different sects do develop different gardens.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was that a commission, that you did that, *Koshoin*?

MARY LUCIER: *Koshoin*. Okay, I got—I collaborated with a friend who's actually a curator. Her name is Leanne Mella. I don't k now if you know Leanne.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, I do.

MARY LUCIER: And she is the one who got the idea that we should get this Asian Arts Council Grant because she wanted to go research young Japanese artists, and she just thought that a piece of mine in actual context would be—wouldn't that be perfect? And she wanted to create an exhibition that included some piece of mine and pieces by these other people. And she was also interested in architecture and looking at a whole range of things.

And so it was kind of an odd idea that we would apply to one of these grants together. And so we got—what did we get? We got $20,000—so she had 10 [thousand dollars] and I had 10. And we figured we could go to—we wanted to go only—well, we went to Tokyo, but then we went and stayed in Kyoto for—over a month the first time. And one of the very first things I videotaped was this ceremony at Koshoin Imperial Buddhist Convent.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How much did that differ from the footage you used in the final piece? You said the very first—[00:38:00]

MARY LUCIER: The first thing I shot when I was in Japan was that. That was the very first—no, it wasn't the first thing I shot. I shot something in the gardens at I-House in Tokyo.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I-House?

MARY LUCIER: International House in Tokyo, which is where—well, yeah, complicated. But so we went to this—we were given an opportunity—I had already made contact with Michio Katsura and Monica Bethe. And Barbara Ruch had put me into contact with all these superb people. And they were arranging for me to go to these various places. They were being very kind.

And they arranged for me to videotape this particular ceremony at Koshoin Convent, which is part of the Jodo sect—the "pure land"—Jodo. And what was called—Founder's Day. And it's also a flower ceremony day, where students who have been studying flower arranging sort of make their final presentations. And it also is in honor of their founder. And I forget who their founder was or when Koshoin was founded, but it's not that old. It's only like 12th, 11th century or something like that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, is that all?

MARY LUCIER: Yeah. And it's presided over by one abbess. There's only one nun there, and it's Abbess Nakashima—Shin'ei Nakashima. Shin'ei is S-H-I-N-'-E-I. Nakashima is pretty much what it sounds like—N-A-K-A-S-H-I-M-A, I guess, Nakashima.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you went to videotape the ceremony, which is presumably just a straightforward documentary mission [00:40:00], how did you—did you think of that as potentially a work of art for you, or did you think of it as something that you just put on the shelf. It's interesting. You'd look at it and think about it?

MARY LUCIER: Well, I had several purposes in each of these cases, and this became my routine, which is that I didn't know, for sure, what this footage was going to yield me for my art in the future. I wasn't 100 percent sure how I would be able to turn it into something that would be applicable in the body of my work—to the body of my work and to a Western audience, a New York audience. But here I am, yet again, in another culture.

I mean, being in North Dakota was being in another culture. All my pieces have been about, in some ways, sort of examining other cultures—even those that are not so different from mine. This is pretty much just the most different. And as far as the whole documentary aspect, I thought of it as documentation, not so much a documentary.

Because documentaries tell you what's going on, and they tell you what to think. And there's usually a cause or a [specific point of view –ML]. I thought, "This is just a presentation of what I'm seeing. This is what I see." And then I would do these cut-aways to aspects of the garden and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Architecture.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, architecture and the garden and the various shrines and ornaments that are—they're not really ornaments but other items and things that exist in and around the convent and the gardens. And I saw how to do it immediately. After I videotaped it—now, I videotaped it with my assistant, Noriko Koshida [00:42:00], and after we shot it that day, I remember saying—maybe to Leanne—I said, "I know exactly how to make a little, like, documentary out of this. I know just exactly what to do." Because the sound recording was

very good.

So I said, "I'm just going to run the sound all the way through." I did not edit the sound. That determines the length of the piece. And then I just went through the process of using the footage that I thought was good that synched with the sound and then cutting away footage that I couldn't use—visual footage—but keeping the sound always the same—progressing her chanting—"namu amida butsuh."

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, spell that, please.

MARY LUCIER: Namu—N-A-M-U—Amida—A-M-I-D-A—Butsuh is really B-U-T-S-U-H. It means Buddha. And this is the chant that the "pure land"—the Jodo sect—chants. Namu amida butsuh—and you know, you find men of the Jodo sect doing it and women, also. It's one of the biggest sects in Japan.

I was interested, while I was doing that, in the way the women behaved—the women in their kimonos, the young women, the older women. I was very interested in the young woman who looked a little uncertain. To me, there just seemed to be a lot going on. And then toward the end, there's the tea ceremony and I also like the part where they all come out and they're looking at the flower arrangements.

Two abbesses come out together, and they're laughing. [00:44:00] The one is from Daishoji, and the other is the one from this convent. And so there's actually a lot going on if you want to read it in, but [I'm not able to explain it to anybody. I'm not the world's expert. So once you consult a real scholar –ML], it might get more interesting or it might get really boring.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what about the quote at the end?

MARY LUCIER: Oh, gee, wait a minute. I wonder which quote you saw.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I didn't write it down. I just remember reading it. Well, in general, you mean different versions have different quotes, but there was a quote at the end with a black screen that ended it.

MARY LUCIER: I was particularly interested, though, in watching this woman in the pink kimono eat her sweet. She looked like she was very hungry.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY LUCIER: And she had been working all day—and so she was getting to eat her sweet, and then she took her tea and bowed, and I fade out on her. And then I bring up the poem. Now, the poem—you may have seen the version that has the wrong poem because I took a poem out of a book called *In Iris Fields*, which is an abbess who was a very much-beloved abbess at Daishoji.

JUDITH RICHARDS: *In Iris Fields*.

MARY LUCIER: That abbess was at Daishoji, and people were saying to me, "Well, you know, Mary, we love the piece, and we don't know how you—how did you understand all of this? How did you get it? It's just beautiful. How did you know?" You know, but finally, they decided, they said, "But I don't think the poem is right. [00:46:00] It should be a poem from someone who is associated with Koshoin, not with Daishoji."

These are the little details that you and I would never notice. I said, "Ah, can you please find me one?" So I'm not sure which version you saw. You might have seen one with the old poem. They finally sent me a new poem, which I'm having a hard time remembering in English. There appears a scroll and the scroll appears on the poem. Is that what happens in the one you saw, or you said it was just a black frame?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY LUCIER: Okay, so then you saw one of the earlier versions, and that's the main reason I have to keep the new versions around and get rid of the old ones. And that poem is about burnishing—she polishes her heart until it's as clear as glass. It's about devotion. I don't remember what the other poem was about.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You know, I didn't ask you about the mandala pieces, and now I'm thinking about the relationship between those and this piece, in terms of a kind of meditative state. Otherwise, they're totally different. But the mandala pieces, you were making before and after?

MARY LUCIER: Yes, I have another—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You have them dated from 2004 to 2010.

MARY LUCIER: They're not all on here. Actually, there's one that I haven't yet come to terms with that I think is a three-channel version of a mandala, and it's a procession of Buddhist monks coming down a pathway towards me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I was wondering if—so the images that you used in that mandala piece, you actually took in Japan? [00:48:00]

MARY LUCIER: No. None of the ones you saw here. None of the ones you saw. There is one, however, called *Procession*. And I have not yet considered that finished, and that was shot in Japan.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I didn't mean to stop you from speaking about Koshoin, but I did want to ask you about the mandala.

MARY LUCIER: I mean, certain—I mean, the mandala is not as common, certainly, in Japanese Buddhism as it is in, say, you know, the Rubin Museum.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Tibetan.

MARY LUCIER: In Tibetan, of course. It's not nearly as prominent, and they're not quite as obvious as circles, usually, but there are mandalas that do exist in Japanese Buddhism, as well. So it was—that's probably just a coincidence, that those two things crossed each other's paths.

But this piece, *Procession*, if I ever get it finished—I feel that it's very delicate because there are ways of making this mandala forms in the computer. Some are just awful, and then some hit the right tone. And this has to hit the right tone, and I can't explain to you what that's all about without showing it to you. And that's another interview.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The pieces that I saw look like a kaleidoscopic effect, and I couldn't quite tell what the source material was. In a couple of moments, on the edges, you think you see something that you can understand what's the basis for this. But what was your motivation to create those and continue to create those mandala pieces, which are completely abstract, to me [00:50:00], and involve a kind of time frame where the audience has to just watch and kind of not look at their watch. [Laughs.] Just sink into it and—

MARY LUCIER: Very psychedelic.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, and not at all narrative, not at all any of the themes—or at least on the surface—any of the themes you've previously explored.

MARY LUCIER: Well, did you notice they had names, though?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY LUCIER: There's *Mandala #1(Corinth)*.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I saw that one.

MARY LUCIER: *Mandala #2 (Grand Forks), Mandala #3 (Lewis and Clark), Mandala #4 (Lignite).*

JUDITH RICHARDS: I think I saw number one and two, but I didn't see the references, so much, to those titles.

MARY LUCIER: I'll tell you that the reference is the location where each of these was shot—this footage was shot. So all that footage was shot in North Dakota; and then one in this place called Corinth, which is an abandoned town; one in a Grand Forks—actually, it was in a theater, upstairs back in the costume department.

Lewis and Clark was out in that—there is a preserve where Lewis and Clark purportedly had gone through, and it's near a state park. I just called it Lewis and Clark. And then Lignite is the name of the town that we got to—the farthest-west town that we went to in North Dakota, which is where my assistant lived and where her father's and mother's farm was—Lignite. What a name, huh?

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you install those pieces, are they presented on a monitor or are they projected? [00:52:00]

MARY LUCIER: Oh, so far, I've shown them on monitors.

JUDITH RICHARDS: One at a time or do you like to have more than one?

MARY LUCIER: Oh, I would love to have—I've been playing with having a bunch of them, and then, of course, it

gets really psychedelic. And then I don't know quite what to do and I sort of stop because—I'm a little bit at loose ends with what to think about them. These are, like, small things, you know. They're small pieces.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Silent pieces.

MARY LUCIER: But they don't occupy, like, a vast part of my oeuvre, and yet, they're something I did spend quite a bit of time working on, so they deserve to be mentioned. And they have been shown. And some have been sold. And in a funny way, there is some kind of bridge between that and the Japanese work. I mean, if you think of Buddhism and mandalas, I suppose there is, somewhere in there, some connection.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you finished *Koshoin*, did you leave—when you finished the work here, I'm sure—did you immediately imagine going back, which I know you did, or did you immediately continue working on *Wisconsin Arc* and only later decide you wanted to go back to Japan?

MARY LUCIER: Well, I don't know when I applied for that grant—the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission. But that was a fairly long process of well over a year. And so, while that was in the works, I was still working on *Wisconsin Arc*.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So *Wisconsin Arc* wasn't a commission. It was an independent piece.

MARY LUCIER: No, it was a completely independent piece. It was totally, completely independent. I just got it in my mind that I had to make something of this [00:54:00] space that had come to mean something to me and that the way that this huge—interior space somehow relates to the huge exterior space. And I wanted to bring the inside out and the outside in.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you about the sound in that piece because the first part—it's not that noticeable—but when you get into the second part, you have this very loud, almost disturbing kind of mixed sound. And then in the third part, you have a rather melodic, musical sound. Could you talk about that middle section and that kind of sound that you put in there that's—

MARY LUCIER: The middle section mostly comes from the performances that took place in Windover Hall the day that we shot. And there were kids bouncing balls. There were the squeaks of sneakers. There were vocal sounds. There was a lot of stuff that was echoing around. It was a very reverberant space. So there was—and I think—I have to go back and actually listen to it myself—but I think that's the primary sound. In the beginning, the sounds are the outdoor sounds of the water and the lake.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, the sea gulls.

MARY LUCIER: The sea gulls. And it's very quiet, in a way. And then the second part, then, when you're indoors with that heavy, reverberant sound of that space. And in the third part, it's a mix between the more or less natural, ambient outdoor sound of that area and one of my rhythm and blues overtures. [00:56:00] I've done this with a number of pieces. I take the beginning—just the beginning of it, before, say, the vocals start—and I just edit it seamlessly into a repetitive fabric.

And so if you know—if it finally occurs to you that you might know the song and you're waiting for it to start and it never starts, or you don't know the song and all you know is that it keeps repeating and repeating and repeating, there's a quality of irritation in that. It might test your patience. But then also, you know, like, you're not sure what you're seeing. You're not sure where people are superimposed on whom, on which layer is what happening. And you know, it just keeps going down the beach.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I was intrigued by the fact that you kept that piece with a man looking at you in a kind of, you know, somewhat irritated way, and that is repeated again and again. So the viewer is constantly encountering this man.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, what did you think of it?

JUDITH RICHARDS: It was a little disturbing that there was this kind of tension at that moment, and it kept repeating. And so you wondered, well, how important is that in this piece? It's not going away. You could have changed it. You could have—

MARY LUCIER: Right, I know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —included someone else walking by who didn't look at you and look at you with that kind of expression.

MARY LUCIER: But there was another example in that piece where somebody looks at me. There's a group of Asian teenagers who come through, and that one girl is so beautiful. And she knows she's beautiful.

JUDITH RICHARDS: With her heels on the beach.

MARY LUCIER: Yes, and she knows she's—. Yes, I guess she's wearing heels. But she really is cute. She's very cute. And she casts a sly look at me [00:58:00], but then the big guy—all he does is eat, and the women are all, like, falling all over him—at one point, he looks when he's walking out of the frame, and he waves goodbye. And you know, those are things I wouldn't normally leave in. Both of those things, I wouldn't normally have left in.

And why did I leave them in? I don't know. Because somehow, I was really there. I was really—and I really made some sort of contact with these people. And I thought that the trio walking down the beach—there was something—they were sort of stylish looking and blasé. Was he eating, too? He was chewing on something, might have been. Whereas the young Asian group were very excited, and they were making a movie.

And then they saw me making a movie, so they made their movie in my movie. And I thought they were very sweet. I really liked them. But this other group—there's something ponderous about them, also, at the same time. But finally, they just move down the beach, and in the interim, you see this mother with two children who come running up the—beach several times.

You see this—we call him the green guy—there's a guy with a green shirt who walks across. So each one is a different marker, and almost in some way, this is sort of a return to like really avant-garde New York practices where it doesn't matter what the footage is. When you start repeating it in that way, and you're placing it in different places and you're layering it, then how the layers build is what it's about and not about the people and what they do—are doing—or how they look at you. So I'm a little betwixt and between in my methodology there. [01:00:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what about the fact that you—the way you use that ambient sound, as you've talked about reverberation and the balancing and everything, and put it up to a very high level of intensity, it seemed to me? I mean, were you trying to—

MARY LUCIER: Was it very, very loud?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, I guess I'm comparatively speaking. It was a contrast to—

MARY LUCIER: What did you listen to it on?

JUDITH RICHARDS: A computer. Is that the problem?

[Cross talk.]

MARY LUCIER: Well, it could partly be because what that would do would be to make a lot of high-pitched sounds sound terrible.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, you had the sea gulls and the kind of ambient sound at the beginning, which is mostly a natural sound mix. And then at the end, you have the musical sound. But in the center section, there was a kind of grating, a kind of a toughness to the sound, that—and I was wondering how that relates to the images, which are more beautiful—well, not as beautiful as the third section, but an interesting mixture of the indoor and the outdoor and the beach and the architecture and the people moving, slow motion and—

MARY LUCIER: Well, first of all, the people are very distorted in that segment. I couldn't even begin to describe to you quite how I settled on that particular form of distortion or what to call it. It's a number of different things that I worked together or reworked. So they're already quite distorted.

At certain points, there was quite a racket in that space—that reverberant space—with kids, with balls bouncing. There were a bunch of jugglers who had come. And so all of those sounds—I'll have to listen to it again—but I've always liked those sounds a lot. And you're really kind of captive in the museum. [01:02:00]And that's the sound a museum can have. You know, like if you go to a dinner in Windover Hall, it's a racket.

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MARY LUCIER: It is. I mean, it is a racket. Now, it could be a good racket too, you know, or a bad racket—and it should be played through good loudspeakers so you can distinguish—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Of course.

MARY LUCIER: —you know, one sound from another and everything because everything kind of flattens out on a computer and you don't hear anything very well. Headphones are the best because that puts you right in the

space.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So—well, I was using headphones on the computer.

MARY LUCIER: Oh, uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Well, if you have the really tight headphones—oh, it doesn't matter. We don't need to—[they laugh.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay. Well, and then my last—my last question about this piece.

MARY LUCIER: Whoops, that's the old version, the scratchy version. [Music plays.] I thought I had a clean version.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay.

MARY LUCIER: I'll get out of this. I do a lot of, well, fooling around with sound as well. I'm not all that great at it I don't think but sometimes I hit upon something that really interests me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah. The question I wanted to ask is: almost like a painter—when you were working on *Wisconsin*, how did you know when you were finished? I mean, the last section is very long. It could have ended at many different places. How did you decide—what was that process like in deciding, okay, this is it, I want it to be this length.

MARY LUCIER: Finally let them walk down the beach?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah.

MARY LUCIER: I don't know. Maybe it isn't finished.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You could re-edit it.

MARY LUCIER: I don't know. I mean, maybe yes, I could re-edit it. I could add. I don't know, maybe it really isn't finished. I don't know. I did so many versions of that piece, so many, many versions of it. [00:02:00]

And what I'm aiming for now is to get a piece of video, meaning this piece, that can be projected very large, like 16-feet-by-9-feet on a wall and with monitors arranged in various ways out from that wall. And as those various sections play, other footage from that same time will jump out into the monitors. So particularly in the dance sections where they're performing.

I had so many other things that were happening at the same time as that that I would like to pull out—into the monitors that might just be sort of helter-skelter on the floor. And so that there's a whole other dimension then of activity that goes on. It's not just confined to the wall projection. And to that degree it's not finished.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So as you were working on that, though, you said you were applying for this new funding to go back to Japan which you succeeded in doing.

MARY LUCIER: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So tell me about the piece—the *Two Monzeki Spaces* and in addition where that's leading.

MARY LUCIER: Okay.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But I haven't seen that so you'll have to—I can see what you're written, the description of it.

MARY LUCIER: Okay, *Two Monzeki Spaces*. Would you like to turn that off and see a little bit of it?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay.

[Audio break.]

MARY LUCIER: All right, the *Two Monzeki Spaces*. Did I already tell you the origin, how that all came about?

JUDITH RICHARDS: No. I don't think so.

MARY LUCIER: Well, when I was going to go back to Japan, I of course reconnected with my team there. Michio Katsura [00:04:00] and Monica Bethe and Noriko Koshida, who had always said she would assist me again and—they were planning and I was saying, "Okay, can you get me schedules of when there are ceremonies." I had also arranged through Barbara Ruch here in New York that I would—we would work in a certain way that would benefit all of us.

That was a very important concept that this whole project be reciprocal, that if I'm shooting a ceremony, a very important Buddhist ceremony performed by a 91-year-old nun who could die next year, that there's a record of that, a good record of it. So part of what I was doing with the two cameras is providing a good record—a good, well-produced record of that ceremony.

And in each case, then, I had something to give not only to the convents but to the institute who would preserve these things for subsequent generations. And so that was our agreement. And therefore they were happy to help me because they were getting something back and I was happy to give it back to them because I was getting so much from it. So we really had a very nice and balanced relationship.

And if I went to any ceremonies where there was money, any, you know, white envelope involved, I would make sure that I—I had deposited a certain amount with Michio at the institute from which she would draw when we would go to certain ceremonies. Bob would come along and normally one would have to pay a little, you know.

And so I sort of prepaid and drew on my account with them for a lot of events. [00:06:00] And it made us all very much more comfortable because then there wasn't this question about, "Well, can I help you with the gas." It's like, "Okay, it's all set, it's all set," you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, right.

MARY LUCIER: So that we worked out. Really I was very proud of us for working that out so nicely. My goal in being there was to shoot as many ceremonies—in the Buddhist convents as possible, as many of the nuns and the interiors of the convents and the ceremonies of the convents.

And for that Michio and Monica would set it all up for me and accompany me with my assistant. My assistant was perfect because she is a very well-mannered young Japanese woman, speaks pretty good English, speaks, of course, very fluent Japanese naturally, and actually is from Kyoto originally.

So she was just absolutely the perfect person. And sometimes she would tell me if I weren't doing something quite right. You know, like if we were about to leave, she'd say, "You should go say goodbye to *gozen-sama*."

JUDITH RICHARDS: Tell me who that was, gozen?

MARY LUCIER: Oh, gozen-sama is just a term for abbess. Gozen—G-O—it's the Japanese term, G-O-Z-E-N-hyphen, sama, S-A-M-A, and that's what the abbesses are called, gozen-sama. And you know, she would say, "You should go say goodbye to so-and-so," or, "Have you said goodbye," so very, very, very useful.

And I enjoyed occupying a position of some humility. I tried not to be conspicuous on the scene [00:08:00]—there we were, two cameras. It could be conspicuous but we tried to be as discrete as possible. And now I have to try to remember how many ceremonies we actually did shoot.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It turned out to be perhaps your longest piece, 39 minutes, I see here. Is that the longest? It's the longest single channel.

MARY LUCIER: What's 39 minutes?

JUDITH RICHARDS: *Two Monzeki Spaces.*

MARY LUCIER: Oh, *Two Monzeki Spaces* is three channels. And it's 30 minutes, a total of 30 minutes. It's three channels. All right, let me now describe it, what it looks like to you. It varies slightly with each venue because the venues that they have given us in the Takashimaya department stores vary widely with each city.

So there are four cities where this show is happening. And I'm sorry I can't tell you the title of the overall exhibition. I don't know if it's called—I don't think it's called *Amamonzeki* because that was the title of a previous show. I'm just not certain. Maybe it's called *Three Monzeki* something or another. I'm not positive.

But the whole exhibition [consists of –ML] valuable Buddhist objects, tapestries, all kinds of amazing—lacquer—all sorts of just amazing beautiful objects from these convents. And eventually at some point you come to my room which has the three channels of video playing back, basically a ceremony and an intermediate image. Okay, now, I have to show you this. This is—this was in, I think, Yokohama. [00:10:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY LUCIER: It was a 52-inch monitor on one side and a 52-inch monitor on the other. That's quite large. And in the center should be a much larger but already quite a large 16-by-9 projection from the same site. Now, this happens to be Hokkeji convent.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY LUCIER: And this is during the ceremony called Hinaeshiki. What the camera is looking at in the center throughout all of Hinaeshiki is the slow development of the lotus pond and the lotus garden from April to August. So you get a whole range of changing compositions and vegetation [over the seasons –ML] in that center projection.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you said the piece was 30 minutes, did you mean that if a viewer stood in this room and watched the three images from beginning to end they would see everything in 30 minutes?

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, pretty much. In other words, all three add up to 30 minutes together.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, yes.

MARY LUCIER: And but what it is here, the *Two Monzeki Spaces*, since I ruled out the third which would have been Enshoji. So here we have Chujugi and Hokkeji which are the two Nara convents, these being the oldest of all of them. They're all eighth century [. . . –ML]. And, okay, now here's another picture of—this is all frame accurate, synchronized from [00:12:00] [. . . –ML] two different cameras.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But the action is simultaneous? It's the same?

MARY LUCIER: Simultaneous, synchronized, yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Images of the ceremonies on the right and the left with the image—

MARY LUCIER: Right, from two different cameras. Camera one was positioned in the right, one was positioned on the left.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And in this what we're looking at is a huge lily, water lily.

MARY LUCIER: This is—no, it's not a water lily. It's a lotus.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sorry, yes. [Laughs.]

MARY LUCIER: It is a lotus that's just part—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Of course, yeah, leaves a different shape.

MARY LUCIER: Part of the whole—there's a water lily for you.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah. [They laugh.]

MARY LUCIER: Me and water lilies. Let's see.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And the images of the nature were all taken at the sites where the ceremonies were taking place?

MARY LUCIER: Absolutely. This is the Hokkeji lotus pond. This—and all right, so let's say this actually lasts more like 15 minutes, this one, and then the second one—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And is it all the ambient sound as it was in the previous piece you did there, Koshoin?

MARY LUCIER: It's similar to that. We tried to get the best recordings possible of the ceremony. And I'm not using any sound in the projection.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah.

MARY LUCIER: I don't use any natural outdoor sound because we wanted—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So all the sounds of the ceremony

MARY LUCIER: The ceremonial sounds to come through as clearly as possible without any interruptions. Now, at some point after these—then there's another ceremony.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Now, what you're showing me, am I understanding correctly, you made when you were there very recently.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you've completed it. It's a finished piece. It's on exhibition. That's very quick, isn't it?

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, it is.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But it doesn't sound like you were stressed about that. [00:14:00]

MARY LUCIER: Well, don't ask me why not because I'm so calm when I'm in Japan. Also I have so much help from such intelligent and well-meaning people.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You also had a very firm context you said within this exhibition of lacquer and a whole range of museum objects.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, beautiful, astonishing objects. Well, these are—not museum objects. They're all things that live in the convents that are rarely seen by anyone. And this is a great loss if you're not seeing it, a great loss, you know, to Japanese culture.

And so there's been a push lately to exhibit these objects. And I'm going to see that you get a hold of this book called *Amamonzeki*. It will blow your mind. The beauty of the objects is just mindboggling.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you were making this piece, could you envision a life beyond this context in the department stores with all of these objects, if the video being seen in New York or someplace else?

MARY LUCIER: Yes. My original idea was to have one object from each of the convents. And that object, as you walked into the exhibition space, that object would be there with a down spot, right? Then you would pass by these two large monitors and then at the very end the projection would fill the entire wall.

So it would really, really be an environment, not a flat presentation as it has become here. So I had a completely different idea in the beginning than it turned out, at least spatially, okay? [00:16:00] But this was what I had to do. Finally this was how it had to work itself out and I became very agreeable to those things because none of it, none of it makes the work look bad.

And it's much easier for an audience to apprehend given these small spaces that they're able to put it in. So I don't feel I lost anything. I had nothing to lose by that. Let me show you—this is a face from one of the other—

JUDITH RICHARDS: I assume the reception has been wonderful.

MARY LUCIER: It has been as far I know. This is Fudo, whose—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you spell that, Fudo?

MARY LUCIER: F-U-D-O, and he is one of the gods or deities—angry deities who surrounds—

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's a painted wooden carved piece.

MARY LUCIER: I think it might be partly metal. I have not been able to get that close to this one. It hangs on the wall in the back of this room here. He's back here somewhere and this is where they do the fire ceremony and Fudo is always—[surrounded by –ML] fire.

He's not so much the god of fire but he's one of [the main deities. . . –ML]. But he's always angry. He's got a rope and he's got a knife and he's always got fire around him.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you study Buddhism before you went in preparation for all this or was this all learning as you regard?

MARY LUCIER: This is accumulated learning, thanks to Monica Bethe, who was a—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you spell her last name?

MARY LUCIER: B-E-T-H-E. And of course while this is going on, there are six people sitting outside the area chanting and that's why—I'm just sorry I can't put the whole thing together for you in some better fashion. [00:18:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you have any prospects for it to be shown outside of Japan when the tour is over there?

MARY LUCIER: Well, I'm going to rework it. This is the piece for Japan. I'm going to rework it to be shown here. It's going to be—a different thing. It won't be the same. I have so much material. This is all part of it too. That's the gozen-sama, 91 years old, can you believe it? Her hands look better than mine. Okay, now wait a minute. Now, wait a minute. Let's see here. Well, here's part of the process of shooting.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think that there'll be a translation issue to audiences—non-Japanese audiences in terms of the understanding and appreciation of the Buddhist ceremonies that you're depicting?

MARY LUCIER: Probably, probably but then maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe there's a way—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you're thinking about what to do, if anything, about that?

MARY LUCIER: Yeah. I don't want translation running through all this. There's going to be something more interesting to do than that. I'm just not entirely sure what it is yet. That's me shooting the Hinaeshiki and that's the Higuchi-sama, the second in command nun at Hokkeji. And this is what we had with just the two cameras, without the [projection –ML] in the middle.

JUDITH RICHARDS: We're looking at two side-by-side images of the ceremony.

MARY LUCIER: The right camera saw them coming down the right side, and my camera, which is way over in the left, saw them coming towards—as they were coming towards the left side. And so the procession as it comes around, you get it all eventually on the two cameras. All right, here is an example of [00:20:00]—this is an example of what the approach to my—

JUDITH RICHARDS: We're looking at installation view of the exhibition of objects.

MARY LUCIER: Part of the—just part of it. This is the part leading up to my piece which in this case ended this particular exhibition in Nagoya.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's in Nagoya.

MARY LUCIER: Nagoya. I gather that now in Osaka it's more in the middle of the exhibition and because they had a larger space and they did it differently. So this incense burner was the object of my choice for this particular [convent . . . –ML] for Chujugi and of course I would have done it differently but they—you know, at least they put it here and it's right next to all of my didactic material on the wall.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] That's your didactic material?

MARY LUCIER: Right, which shows excerpts, image excerpts from the video and explains it. It gives my title and timing and so forth. So then—okay, now, okay, here's another image of inside. This is a different space. [. . . –ML] where the width of the rear wall was not long enough to put the monitors on the same [plane –ML] as the projection. So the monitors are on two facing walls.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Side walls.

MARY LUCIER: Side walls, right. And this, on the other hand, is the other arrangement.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was the—you talked about how in fact smoothly the whole production went. What would you say was the biggest challenge with that project? I mean artistically, if there was one. [Laughs.]

MARY LUCIER: Well, just knowing that it was going to—that it was actually going to happen or not because I came down to the very last week in August not knowing—no, no not August but July [00:22:00] not knowing for sure what they were going to do. Bob said, "I think you just ought to come home with me."

JUDITH RICHARDS: What do you mean not knowing what they were going to do?

MARY LUCIER: We didn't know. I didn't know. Monica didn't now. We didn't know what—it's too hard to describe this but it's part of trying to relate to the Japanese who are businessmen in a Japanese setting when you are used to the United States.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is the role of the Takashimaya department stores?

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, partly, well NHK [the Japanese broadcasting company –ML] and the department store.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you knew that you had the objects from the convents.

MARY LUCIER: Convents, those had been selected.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You knew you had the tape—the images, your video. But what you didn't know is whether you had the installation commitments and spaces?

MARY LUCIER: Right, right. I mean, I knew what I had, though I wasn't finished and that's one of the reasons I had to stay through August, so that I could finish. And then I could help install the first one.

So there was a lot of uncertainty due to bad communication and other things. This is a really sweet picture. Here are two of the nuns and this image is from their ceremony. And this is the younger [nun –ML] is fanning the older one.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was your production or anything you did there affected by the earthquake?

MARY LUCIER: Nothing. The only effect of the earthquake I would say that was even remotely close was that my assistant was in Tokyo and really even that it didn't affect her that much. She was glad to get out of Tokyo and come back to Kyoto where it was safe. So I think we had no effect whatsoever. [00:24:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Now that you're here and that's all set and it's going to go along, you're thinking now about reworking this piece, reediting and redoing the piece. Is that the piece that is most in your mind right now?

MARY LUCIER: No, it can't be because there's something—because there's a project due in February at the Brooklyn Museum.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Tell me about that.

MARY LUCIER: And that is a piece called *Genealogy: The Dutch Connection*. I was invited by Betty Woodman, who collected this group of women—myself, Betty, Anne Chu and Ann Agee—to do an intervention in the project rooms at the Brooklyn Museum. We'd been working on this for a couple of years already before we got final dates and we still haven't got a budget but they've set—they set the date anyway for February 27th.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So how can you even start if you don't have a budget?

MARY LUCIER: That's the way things are these days. I mean, that's the same thing in Japan and I thought it was just the Japanese. But no, it's happening everywhere. It's really quite—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you may at any point be going into a hole and not have any idea.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, yeah, that's the fear.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And to finish by February obviously you have to be very much in the midst of it.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, everybody's quite worried about that. Obviously all four of us are very concerned. I mean, those women make objects and they're all proceeding to make their objects. I haven't shot any video yet but what if I say, "Listen, I'm not going to shoot until I have some budget."

JUDITH RICHARDS: So what is the genealogical—the *Genealogy: The Dutch Connection*?

MARY LUCIER: When we were asked, we went up to the floor where the period rooms are [00:26:00]—we walked through them and took pictures in all of them. And I had ideas for a number of them, things I could do in various of those rooms.

We all sat down at a table at Betty's and said, "Okay, what's your first choice, second choice, third choice," and we went around the room and we found that there were only a few conflicts. There was a space I wanted that somebody else wanted too and I knew she'd do it better. And finally, I said, "Oh, it's so obvious. Nobody else wants these Dutch houses and it's so apparent because I have this Dutch heritage."

JUDITH RICHARDS: And the houses.

MARY LUCIER: Huh?

JUDITH RICHARDS: And the houses.

MARY LUCIER: And the houses. I have to do these, these two rooms, these two houses.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So the project is called *Genealogy*: and then something different for each of you? You're the Dutch connection?

MARY LUCIER: No. The whole project is called *Playing House.*

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, then what is the Dutch connection?

MARY LUCIER: My piece. *Genealogy: The Dutch Connection* is the name of my piece.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, that's what I meant.

MARY LUCIER: And so because—. And I had just happened to have been reading this amazing book called *The Island at the Center of the World.*

Let me make sure you get this right—yes, *The Island at the Center of the World*, which is by a guy named Russell Shorto and in it he describes how the New Netherlands, that is New Amsterdam and on up the river, were settled in—according—well really, just about the first ship of Dutch settlers to come was 1624. And my ancestors were on it. [00:28:00] Joris Jansen Rapelje and Catalina Trico.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Tell me those names again.

MARY LUCIER: Oh God.

JUDITH RICHARDS: [Laughs.] Or spell them.

MARY LUCIER: Okay, let me see, Joris Jansen—let's see if I can find it here. Yeah, this book is fantastic. It takes a different view of Manhattan and New York than most histories do and it takes a different view of Manhattan and New York than most histories do. And it takes a different view of the settling of America—of this part of North America, at any rate—than most histories do too.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So your relative is the Joris Rapelje?

MARY LUCIER: Joris Jensen de Rapelje and Catalina Trico, his wife. They were about 18 and 17 when they came over in 1624 on a ship called the *Eendracht*.

And they first came into New York Harbor—which then I don't know what they called it then—and then went up the river then called the North River, now called the Hudson River, went up the North River to what is now Albany and they started to make a colony there which would later become Fort Orange. After, in 1625, their daughter Sarah Rapelje was born, the first white child born in the New Netherlands.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you can actually trace your heritage aback to that person?

MARY LUCIER: Oh yeah, absolutely. I have the family tree and all that stuff.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you had to take that room.

MARY LUCIER: I had to take that room, although the people who lived in those houses were named Schenck, S-C-H-E-N-C-K. And they didn't come over until, oh God, I don't know, something like much later, much, much later. At any rate—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you're creating a video piece that's going to be in that room. [00:30:00]

MARY LUCIER: It's going to be in six rooms and in the big outside room, the space outside it. Do you picture what I'm describing?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sort of.

MARY LUCIER: Sort of, okay.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I can picture a room near the elevators.

MARY LUCIER: A big room?

JUDITH RICHARDS: No, I guess that's not a big room. And then I can picture the smaller ones. It's been some time since I visited those spaces.

MARY LUCIER: I know. That's part of the problem. People don't—visit them. They're very popular but nobody goes back. So now they're trying to do this series of—what do you call them—interventions in order to get people—maybe I can start giving you the picture here. Okay, that's it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You said you haven't started filming yet.

MARY LUCIER: No, I have not.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you written extensively, as you do sometimes?

MARY LUCIER: I have written a certain amount, maybe not as extensively as usual but—well, this isn't the best but if you ever remember walking into the room with that house in it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I think so. It was a red house.

MARY LUCIER: It's a red house and then there's didactic material here on this wall and then the facing wall the roof goes way up into the museum roof and then there's a—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay.

MARY LUCIER: This image you see here, here's the edge of the red house.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY LUCIER: Here's the beginning of the other furnishings that they have in the room that's outside the red house that they like to keep there forever. And then as you go around to the left you encounter this other shingled house. This is the Jan Martense Schenck house.

The next one is the Nicholas something or another Schenck house. [00:32:00] Maybe this is not really that important. It's just detail. At any rate, the first Schenck house has two rooms that I'm using plus the whole area outside it that I'm using in a different way.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What aspect of this project is really exciting you and feels like new territory or something that's—

MARY LUCIER: Well, the first thing I'm going to do is to go into these individual rooms, you know, open up those doors and get inside and shoot material—from the same point of view that a person would see it standing at the doorway but things will be happening. It won't be just, okay, the table with a bunch of fruit and so forth. It will be the table and the fruit and somebody will—somebody will be there or will come through.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you'll going to have actors.

MARY LUCIER: Yes. Something is happening outside the frame of that picture. But that frame doesn't move to show you anything. It's just going to show that one and the rest is just empty space. So if you see someone move through, they disappear.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Will these people moving through be obviously contemporary or historic?

MARY LUCIER: I hope to have period costumers to some degree. All right, so I have six rooms like that to deal with, two in the Jan Martense Schenck house and four in the Nicholas Scheck house and plus the outside area all around the Jan Martense Schenck house and a stairwell in the Nicholas Schenck house. It's a tall order.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It sounds very challenging.

MARY LUCIER: It is very challenging. And just in terms of quantity of time and equipment.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you have a preconceived idea at this point of how many minutes you feel you need in total to complete the entire project?

MARY LUCIER: Well, I don't know because whatever is shown in any one room, let's say, will of course repeat. It will be looped. [00:34:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you have a sense, though, of how long you want—you expect a visitor to stand in each space?

MARY LUCIER: Well, the viewing spaces are tiny.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So a matter of—

MARY LUCIER: I don't know. I don't have an idea, no. I don't. The answer is I don't have an idea because I haven't yet gotten that far. I'm used to people being able to walk into a larger room, right, and they peek at something and they see it and they get closer and then they sit down. In this case no one will be able to do that. There are windows there where people can peek in.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is there a reason why all the artists—the four artists commissioned are all women?

MARY LUCIER: That was Betty's idea. These are four artists—three artists that she liked. She thought it was a good mixture and she thought it might as well be all women.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right. [They laugh.] So you said that will be finished in February?

MARY LUCIER: Yes, yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Now, that piece sounds very site-specific. It sounds like it's a piece—will that then belong to the museum if they pay for it?

MARY LUCIER: [They laugh.] Well, I think they have some issues. Well, first of all, they haven't paid for anything yet and secondly, we haven't discussed any issues of ownership and copyright and all of that. And what I'm accustomed to is owning the copyright to all of my work and even if they put in some measly budget like $5,000, that doesn't mean they own the work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right.

MARY LUCIER: That's not—that doesn't pay for a work like that. And so we haven't even discussed those things yet. And so it's a little hard.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What department is this based in?

MARY LUCIER: Department?

JUDITH RICHARDS: I mean, yeah, the production.

MARY LUCIER: It's really decorative arts.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So the decorative arts staff is the one who's—

MARY LUCIER: No, we get the whole staff. We get the AV person, we get—

JUDITH RICHARDS: But I mean, the department that it comes out of—that's commissioning, that's supervising this, responsible for the realization of this is—[00:36:00]

MARY LUCIER: I'm not sure. No, no I'm not at all sure about that. I think there's a committee that has decided on doing these interventions but that Barry Harwood being the curator of that department—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Barry Harwood?

MARY LUCIER: Barry Harwood, yeah, being the curator of—well, whatever. I guess he curated decorative arts. This is his primary territory. But as I said, other people have been involved all along the way and we speak to other people and when talk to someone, I get AV, I get art handlers, "Are you going to come in, are you going to move anything on that day because if you're going to move anything on that day we have to be there."

You know, it's like that. You just don't go charging into those rooms and do what you want to do, although I did once before. Once before 19—before *Wilderness*, I went into one of these Schenck rooms and I videotaped inside it for *Wilderness*. I went into actually two rooms in this house and those images appear in *Wilderness* and they're very nice.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So this piece you hope will be done in February.

MARY LUCIER: Absolutely, yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Which is only about five, four months away. [Laughs.]

MARY LUCIER: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Could you say what's on the horizon or a dream project that you'd really love to do that may be not quite on the horizon yet.

MARY LUCIER: Other than the Japanese work?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, yes, I guess, other than redoing the Japanese—reediting the Japanese.

MARY LUCIER: It's not redoing—it's not reediting the Japanese work. It's making a new Japanese piece.

JUDITH RICHARDS: With the footage you've already—

MARY LUCIER: Believe me, it's remaking—it's making an entirely new piece. That's—and so I—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So that's the next major project.

MARY LUCIER: I look forward after February to be able to sit down with all my Japanese footage again and say, "Now, what do I really have," you know. Not what do I put together for NHK Takashimaya [00:38:00], given their constraints. I'm not ashamed of that work. I'm still quite proud of the piece that I made for them. But I have so much—so much broader, bigger possibilities with the amount of footage I've shot and the diversity, the variety of the footage that I've shot. It's not only limited to the convents even. I was shooting at other places as well. So there's a lot of stuff there and a lot of stuff from 2009 when I was [first there –ML].

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you imagine one of your goals is to create another exhibition at Lennon, Weinberg?

MARY LUCIER: I would like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sometime soon. I mean, obviously you're going to create another exhibition.

MARY LUCIER: Sometime soon. Well, I have a couple of ideas for her. [Laughs.] [. . . –ML] Nobody's going to hear it or read it. I mean, I would like to—by the time somebody reads this, it'll be old history. But I would like to do a version of *Wisconsin Arc*. She and I talked once about closing off their back—what do you call that—skylight?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

MARY LUCIER: Which though it's a beautiful little space, we talked once about closing it off and having a huge flat wall I could project on and then coming out from that, these monitors I spoke about in differing positions and angles and attitudes.

And I think that's something I'd like to do there. I mean, I'd like to do it there soon actually because if I wait for this whole Japanese thing to take shape, it'll have to be yet another partial piece because they don't have the space, I don't think, to show what I probably will come up with.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It sounds—that makes sense, unless they possibly could get a different space for you temporarily.

MARY LUCIER: Oh yeah, I don't see them doing that. They can't do that. I think they're not ever going to move again. I mean, they're well-situated.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right. [00:40:00]

MARY LUCIER: The space is too small. But they are well-situated and the shows work well. It's a good—it's a good scale format for, you know, Steven [Westfall –ML] and others.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY LUCIER: And it worked very well for the *Plains of Sweet Regret.*

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah.

MARY LUCIER: I was shocked how well it worked. In fact, I took—the piece went down to the Amon Carter—you know, that museum in Fort Worth.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, yes.

MARY LUCIER: Where they're never shown a contemporary video installation before. And one of the curators from the department of photography who had come to see it in New York [Jessica May –ML]—when we put it up at Amon Carter, four big beautiful walls, the two monitors in the center the way they're supposed to be, the chairs scattered all around.

[One of the curators –ML] was disappointed because he liked the way it was at the gallery better. He said it was more intimate. You were really in the middle of it. And I was quite surprised because generally people like the large open expansive. But he loved the gallery setup.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So did he refigure it so that it was more intimate?

MARY LUCIER: No, after I had set it up the way I set it up and the curator I was working with in the photograph department— [Jessica May –ML].

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you're working on the—you'd like to create installation with *Wisconsin Arc*. You're working

on the Brooklyn project. You'll then turn to the new work with the footage you've made in Japan.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, exactly.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Thinking of all that, what's your biggest challenge now as you continue to do your work?

MARY LUCIER: A retrospective. [00:42:00] I think it's time, seriously time. It probably looks like a jumble and an expense to anybody who would look at it but if you look at the individual works and see how interesting and varied and yet similar they are, anybody who really, really wanted to push it through, it could be a gorgeous show.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And obviously a catalogue to accompany that covers all of your work which I don't think exists.

MARY LUCIER: That's right. Oh no, there's no catalogue raisonné.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Or even something not a catalogue raisonné but something comprehensive.

MARY LUCIER: Right, something comprehensive, exactly. So that is really—you said my biggest challenge and I think of that because I think of all the works I have to do as challenges up through the next five years, who knows. But what other really large challenge—that's a major one to me. That really—it seems to me it's been time for a while now but that—the next few pieces are kind of going to seal that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What about the continuing changes in technology and having to make decisions about what you'll be working in in the future, even in the next few years?

MARY LUCIER: Well, I've just made a switch to an entirely digital camera of very high quality. That should last me for a while. I'm a little worried about 3-D.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Worried in the sense that you feel pressure to use it?

MARY LUCIER: Well, I don't know—I'm curious about it and it looks like 3-D is coming on strong in lots of ways. And I'm just wondering if it's going to get to the point where—you know, things become the norm after a while and you just kind of didn't realize it was happening but then it happens.

And so some people always get the jump on it because they have more money. They're better funded, for whatever reasons. And some people, you know, are languishing behind thinking, "Oh God, I had that idea two years ago." [00:44:00]

But I look at 3-D as maybe as the only thing. I'm not much of a visionary when it comes—to technology. So I'm not saying something, you know, fantastical where images dance around a room all around all by themselves. But I see 3-D as being a possible because it could evolve in a lot of ways, I think. I think until they lose those glasses though there may be a problem with it. But we'll see. We'll see. Other changes—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You were talking about being frustrated by DVDs.

MARY LUCIER: DVDs are a terrible medium. They really are. I was recently on a very important panel and I don't know how many DVDs we had that simply wouldn't play. It wouldn't play on this computer and will it play on that one. Oh and then the labels are coming off.

And we were bitching and moaning about the horrible quality of DVDs and also DVDs now are—they're not high resolution now. Blu-ray disc is high resolution. There's another step up but that's still a DVD. It's still a disc. And I'm thinking the best way to show one's work is straight out of a computer. So the Mac Mini has certain advantages there.

There are also these digital systems that people are making now where you take a little card like that—in fact, that's what they did for this piece in Japan and you encode it with the imagery from the—that's going to be in the installation.

You synchronize through—yeah, three boxes and it's all synchronized. There are some flaws in that too. But it could be that that solid-state digital will improve a great deal. But that's just for exhibition, of course. I've heard about a camera that you shoot first and focus later. [00:46:00]

JUDITH RICHARDS: I have too, and you can choose your focus.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah, because there's something like the equivalent of 24 lenses built into it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So many choices.

MARY LUCIER: Wow. That's wild, isn't it? So I imagine there are a lot of things that are going to surprise us down the line. But what I would rather do right now, I—welcome the challenge of representing my old work because I've just seen how bad it can be at PS1 with *Dawn Burn*.

And I think also that if I had this retrospective I'm thinking of that maybe once and for all at least for the present moment, though some of those issues would get solved so that I could feel more at ease about them and about those pieces.

Even *Ohio at Giverny,* which the Whitney has done pretty well by, they haven't been able to show for quite a few years. I think those monitors that they have are probably defunct. I think they haven't figured out how to bring it into the present time and that seems like a fairly recent piece. It was only 1983.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So those are a lot of issues to deal with.

MARY LUCIER: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, and in fact if you had the retrospective you could have them all—

MARY LUCIER: That would be the moment.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —documented and described.

MARY LUCIER: Yes, yes when all of these pieces—when that solution, there'd have to be a whole department, you know, in whatever this great museum is.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MARY LUCIER: I'll just continue saying something about future media and the work itself because one of the big mistakes is that people begin to think the work is the technology or the technology is the work, that is what you play it back on.

Now, in the beginning of video a lot of people were exploring the technology, including me, burning the vidicon tubes and creating situations that the layman wouldn't understand because they just wanted to use everything to get the best result [00:48:00] and I wanted to reveal the flaws in it.

So in that sense, older work was about the technology. But today when you list a bunch of monitors and list a bunch of playback equipment and all that and you say, "But wait a minute. Wait, that's not really the piece. Don't confuse the work of art with the equipment." Therefore, the equipment has to be allowed to change as time progresses. The equipment has to be variable. New equipment and new discoveries have to be put in place to give these things a future life.

Now, there are a lot of people talking about, you know, the Sol LeWitt [light –ML] tubes. You can't get those anymore. How about those little-bitty slide—how about those little-bitty video projectors? How about—you know, lots of things and people are stockpiling tubes and stockpiling slide projectors and all of that.

I agree with that authenticity of research and scholarship in the field. But I have a contradictory view at the same time which is that the work has to be allowed to live on in a contemporary form somehow. And that the antiquity of it, the daringness of it, can come through anyway regardless of how you've decided to display it, perhaps with new media, different media. That's all I have to say.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Thank you very much.

MARY LUCIER: You're welcome.

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