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Oral history interview with Michael Bierut,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Michael Bierut on December 13, 2011. The interview took place in the office of Michael Bierut in New York City, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Michael Bierut has reviewed the transcript. His 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

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Smithsonian's Archives of American Art with Michael Bierut in the designer's office in New York City, December 13th, 2011, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. This is disc number one.

Okay—

MICHAEL BIERUT: Oh, I need to warn you of one last thing. My phone might ring, and my partner Abbott's going to ask me a really short question, okay?

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. All right. If you just—

MICHAEL BIERUT: And then I'm going to ask him a short question, then I'll be done, okay?

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. We will—

MICHAEL BIERUT: That's the only interruption I'm expecting.

MIJA RIEDEL: We will pause that if—

MICHAEL BIERUT: It's not confidential.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: It can be committed to tape; it shouldn't be in the transcript probably.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. You were born in Cincinnati?

MICHAEL BIERUT: No, no, I was born in—

MIJA RIEDEL: There we go. [They laugh.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: I was born in Garfield Heights, Ohio—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —which is a southwestern suburb of Cleveland, in 1957.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was the date?

MICHAEL BIERUT: August 29th.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And would you describe your childhood and family background, what your parents did, with their names and siblings?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Sure. My parents were Anne Marie and Leonard Bierut. My mom was a housewife, exactly in the Donna Reed mold—went to a technical high school and worked as a stenographer and late '50s era secretary, and—until she married my dad. And

my dad went to Kent State on the GI Bill, got a business degree there and then did a couple of things and took a job selling printing presses actually—

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —and eventually started a business selling printing presses in Cleveland. And I—it's funny, it's—he died on my 30th birthday. And we had a lot of fights, but I was basically close to him. But as I matured, I got closer to him. There's an old joke about how much he seemed to pick up in a few years—[inaudible]—but—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Inaudible]—right?

MICHAEL BIERUT: —I came to appreciate, actually, that he was a real salesman. He had two partners. One of them was a finance guy. The other guy kind of ran the people inside. And he was in charge of the sales force. And selling printing presses is a complicated business. So it's, like, not everybody needs one—and it's a big, big purchase when people buy one, right? And one or two sales would make a whole year for him. And God bless him. He—I mean, there must have been a lot of worries and tension for his business in my house, but we were—me and my two brothers, twins, Ronald and Donald, three and a half years younger than me, must have been fairly well protected from all that didn't get a sense of him holding his breath waiting to see if that big Heidelberg sale went through so that we could, you know, move or go to college or stuff. [Laughs.] But he did.

So that was his life. I think he internalized all of the worry, which is why he died of a heart attack in his 50s on my 30th birthday.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, how awful.

MICHAEL BIERUT: It was August 29th, 1987 is when he died, so tough.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, that's awful.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sorry to hear that. Do you as a child have recollections of printing presses?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, and type and—interesting.

MICHAEL BIERUT: He had a company called Turner Equipment; he and his partners had bought it out from—I think from someone else who had given it that name. And Saturdays I would go down to Turner with him. And in the front where these front offices where he worked, where they had fun things like old-fashioned adding machines and things. But in the back were all these, just—a lot of presses. They'd buy a derelict press and rebuild it and then resell it as a piece of used equipment. They would get things in and do it.

This was the '60s. And so it was really like a physical, you know, business and still is to a certain degree. There's been a lot of computerization, digitization of the whole process, but still it's a manufacturing process that has an enormous amount of craft in it to a certain degree.

That said—well, so my childhood was—I went to Catholic school in Garfield Heights. First I went to William Foster elementary school for kindergarten. Then I went to four years of Catholic school at St. Theresa's in Garfield Heights. And Garfield Heights was sort of a lower, lower-middle class suburb of Cleveland with a lot of very small kind of postwar bungalows.

Then we moved to a slightly more upscale lower-middle class suburb—maybe middle-class suburb of Cleveland called Parma, Ohio, which is—it had such a large population of Eastern European immigrants that the word Parma in Cleveland circles was an acceptable euphemism for "Polack." So if you were—you can say, "Did you hear about these two guys from Parma"—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: —and know that you weren't giving offense while still giving plenty of offense. And in fact, my dad was Polish. His parents were Polish immigrants. My mom was Irish. Her parents were Irish immigrants.

And so in Parma, we lived in a 1960s split level, a development of identical—or very similar—split-level houses. So it was very kind of Steven Spielberg-y kind of suburban life, you know, except with Cleveland winters and I'd say a kind of underlying tone of almost everyone I knew was Roman Catholic and parents who couldn't speak—had grandparents who couldn't speak English. You know, I might have been past the age of 20 before I went to a Protestant wedding where they say "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God." I literally said, "Shit, I thought they just invented that for television. I didn't know that people actually got married with those words."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: And, you know, I didn't know any really poor [people] it was a real homogenous environment.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So I didn't know anyone really poor. I didn't really know any black or Hispanic people. I also didn't know anyone rich. I'd never set foot in places like Shaker Heights or Gates Mills or Hunting Valley or the—fancier—parts of Cleveland.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You know, so it was only when I went off to college that I started meeting different people, which was interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you take art classes?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes. Well, I was good at art, you know, as a—

MIJA RIEDEL: You drew early on, correct?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, I drew a lot. I was very interested in drawing and good—and could do realistic drawing, which is what "good at art" means actually.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: The other kinds of creativity aren't really revered quite as much as doing photographically realistic drawing, which I was able to get better and better at as I got older actually and sort of kind of got more and more kind of contemptuous of as I got better at it. It sort of—sort of seemed like such a cheap, easy-to-do—it just took time—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I sort of sensed that I didn't actually have real artistic creativity as I was growing up, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Why do you say that?

MICHAEL BIERUT: I remember, like, I had one cousin—I had sort of like a cousin, who I don't think is a real cousin, though. I think she was actually the daughter of a guy who worked at Turner with my dad named Donna Sindelar. And Donna went to, I believe, Temple—or Tyler School of Art, Temple. And so she was the one person I knew who was an artist. And she was already, I think, at Tyler. And I was maybe in first or second grade. And she would take me to the Cleveland Art Museum—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —which is downtown on the east side. I'm not sure my parents had ever been to the art museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so—but she would take me there and—you know, it's a great collection. It's—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. How old were you?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Seven?

MIJA RIEDEL: Six or seven?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, six or seven. And I just—it was flabbergasting. I still remember really distinctly certain paintings there. You know, they've got Turner's *The Burning the Houses of Lords and Commons*. And I remember that was like a Michael Bay movie for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: It just was explosions and stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But I also really liked the modern art—[inaudible]. I remember really being taken by Franz Kline, and they've got one really good Rauschenberg—what do you call it—one of those—like, an assemblage

thing. And the modern collection really stirred me, too, actually. And I remember seeing this Franz Kline actually and really liking it. And it was sort of an odd taste—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —I think, for an elementary school kid, but sort of like the big, bold black-white things just seemed really stirring to me. And I remember seeing at some point along the way, a catalog of Franz Kline's paintings and thinking, "Oh, shit, my god, they all look like this?"

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: Suddenly I realized—"Oh, so what he basically does is just keeps making things that look like this?" For the life of me, I couldn't grasp what in the world would compel someone to do that over and over again—

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —Do it—do it for a day or two till you think you've got a good one then move on, you know, not just sort of, like, for years.

So I had this artistic—both an artistic impulse, and then I have to confess I had a real eagerness to please too. I mean, better than—just as good as doing the drawings was someone noticing that I'd done the drawings and asking me to draw something for them, you know. So I have to admit I sort of liked the idea of just sort of, you know, feeling like I had something that I had to get out of me. I never [had?] that, but the idea that sort of you could get around in the world by knowing how to do this thing was something I did have.

And actually to a certain degree—not everyone would—not everyone would agree with me, but I think that's one of the things that differentiates designers from artists. Artists somehow are able to simply—I assume some of them are very calculating and kind of have their eye on the market and galleries and stuff like that. But I think at the end of the day you sort of have to be compelled to kind of create, right; whereas designers actually, they're more like nonfiction writers or journalists—they need a story to follow, and they need a subject.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And they can go find the subject that they want, but they—but they have to work with material to make it happen, right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so I think the trick is, for a designer—and in those days—I didn't know what a designer was, actually. I barely knew what artists were. But I remember even then sort of I'd get really enchanted by a couple things.

I liked looking at design things like logos and film titles and album covers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Those things really interested me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Logos as a—as a child?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, yeah, yeah. Oh, I remember really distinctly my dad saying—pointing out a logo to me on the side of a forklift truck. And there's a forklift truck company that I think might be regional, but they're called Clark Equipment. And the Clark logo—he said, "Look at how that's drawn." And the C and the L, and then the L sticks under the left leg of the A and kind of lifts it up. And so the A is sort of sitting on the L of the—of the—of the—of the second letter in the word. And he said—and I said, "What?" And he said, "Well, don't you see? It's, like, they sell forklift trucks, and the L was, like, lifting up the A like the trucks do." And I was, like, "Wow!" It was just sort of like someone had revealed this secret world to me. And I was, like, "Is that everywhere? And who thinks up something like that? And what a great thing that the world has these things in it." I just thought it was just delightful. I just thought it was really great.

And I'm not even sure I understood that that was actually related—that that was a kind of art. I didn't know what that was actually. I didn't know that people could have a job doing that sort of thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I didn't understand how something like that came to be. But at any rate, I remember seeing

that and thinking, "Wow, that's really cool," right? And I probably would have been an elementary school kid then, you know, when I—when I saw that. And so, like, you know, my friends would start a band in their garage, and I'd be recruited because I was a good artist—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —to, like, come up with the thing that would go on the drum or to do a poster that would be mimeographed to kind of put it around it. And as I'd approach that, somehow I was thinking, "Well, they need something cool like that Clark logo, something that has that kind of thing in it that"—

MIJA RIEDEL: That speaks to music or speaks to—[inaudible]—right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, somehow—right. And so—

MIJA RIEDEL: So early on, it was about collaboration and connection?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, yeah, yeah, interestingly enough, yes. I mean, to me, it's sort of like if you can't play an instrument, at least you can be in the band if you can be the designer, right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You know, there's a certain proud history of that, too, by the way.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: You've got, you know, Pedro Bell with Parliament Funkadelic and Roger Dean with Yes and—a great way to affiliate with that group—Peter Saville, my one-time partner with Joy Division and New Order. So that—I'm not sure I was actually—I was never that calculating. I just thought it was fun. Also a way to not get beaten up, too, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Very important.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You know, so I sort of had this skill—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —where—[inaudible]—could actually sort of see you had some ability and kind of make him do something in lieu of getting beaten up, so—

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you actually do any work on the printing presses that your father had? Did you ever work with them?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Well there's another interest in there. I was a really good student. I was, like, an effortless straight-A student. I'm not sure I'm that smart, but I really do know how to get A's in classes. And I knew how to take standardized tests. I knew how to do those things. Leaps of insight I'm not sure I'm that capable, day in and day out, but getting A's in a class—I know—I know what that takes.

And so I was a very good student, and the first things we actually did in the printing press were all magazines that I had, like, written and designed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So I was a real fan of *Mad* Magazine, so I had this fake imitation *Mad* Magazine I did called *Crazy*—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: —that was just like *Mad* Magazine—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —except sort of like this bizarro world, off-brand—probably, you know, actionably the un plagiarized, version of *Mad* Magazine that I had done all by myself.

MIJA RIEDEL: You'd done it all—the writing, the drawing, the inscription?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, I wrote it, I did it, and then I—I had no idea how to do typesetting, so I had an Underwood typewriter that my dad had gotten from a liquidation sale somewhere and brought it home. So I typed up—I

would map out these 8 1/2-by-11 sheets of paper with pencil, kind of indicating where the type would go and then type all that in, then draw around it—because I wanted it to have real type—it was really—[inaudible]. But if you—believe me, nerds have nothing—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: —ostracized nerds have nothing but time on their hands. I wasn't picked first to be on any teams, I didn't have a really active social life, and so this was a way I was able—and then I'd bring this home, and people would think they were funny too. So I remember my dad actually said I could, as a treat, kind of printed up some of those for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And that among several things was sort of the third element. There was, like, the collaboration part of it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And then, the other—

MIJA RIEDEL: Connection.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —the connection part of it—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —and then the idea of communication, I guess. You want to go with three Cs?

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure, I like that.

MICHAEL BIERUT: There's this great quote somewhere from Ed Ruscha, where he talks about opening up a box with, mass-produced—some mass-produced book he had done in it from back when he was doing, like, *Royal Road Test* and those things. And he said, "There's just something about a whole box of them that's just so great." And I have to admit, it is just great. And this is back before—back when if you wanted to Xerox something, you'd have to go to the library with some dimes and kind of put them in one at a time, going—[humming noise]—like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: To actually have a box of something like that was amazing.

And so my dad actually was able to kind of figure out a way for us to print—even in high school we started this underground newspaper, and we were all getting kind of long hair. This was sort of more based on the *National Lampoon*—we were ripping off the *National Lampoon* as opposed to *Mad* at that point in the '70s. And my dad mass produced it. And then because I went to this kind of half—this high school that actually had a big vocational program, we had a really good print shop there—

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —where students could sign up to be on the track to go into the printing trades in my high school. And I wasn't on that track. I believe my dad didn't want me to have any—could tell that I was getting good grades, and he'd been to enough print shops and seen lonely guys in the back of the print shops—it was blue collar work to my dad. He wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer or something, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: But he was willing to help produce these magazines nonetheless, right?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, yes, yes. God bless him.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And I just thought he was the biggest jerk, too, sort of—I thought I was so much smarter than him, you know, God help me. I got it sorted out before my 30th birthday, but he was just a great cheerleader—really encouraging, had the perfect combination of understanding just enough about what I was doing to appreciate it and not enough to really criticize it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Perfect.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, so it was perfect.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: So the—so all through—as I went through elementary school then junior high school, I sort of refined my skills at doing this stuff. And when I got to high school where they had this vocational print shop in the basement, I remember they'd say, you know, "Oh, Michael has to do the poster for the play." And I remember the very first one I did when I got to high school was for *Wait Until Dark*. And I still have a copy of it somewhere. And I remember I'd sort of handed in the artwork, which I'd done on a piece of, like, shirt cardboard with a felt-tip pen. And I think I did two things. I think first they blew it up; they made it bigger. And then they started to make a poster out of it. Then they—then they silkscreened it. And I came in, like—that was on a Thursday or Friday—I came in on Monday, and it was all over the school, the—[inaudible].

And I can't tell you what a thrill that was, just to walk in and see all these things I designed all over the school. And people would ignore them, people would put something over them. No one—you know, people would—just—it was just great to see. It was really thrilling.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And I remember then thinking,—people said, "Do you want to be an artist?" And I was sort of like, "Eh"—you know, I kept thinking about all those—you know, the guys in the museum just would kill themselves, I mean, just to get one, right?

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: Then they'd, like, put it up, and then people would come and look at it in the museum, and—but, like, my mom and dad would have never seen it whereas this movie—this, like, play poster—everybody in the school saw it. More people saw the poster than would actually see the play. And so I remember thinking, "Boy, you know, this is really a racket to get into."

So somewhere along the way I saw—I came across a book of posters that had been commissioned by Lincoln Center. And Lincoln Center had a habit of commissioning posters from artists.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And I remember—I—there's one that I could draw for you now that they'd done—that Frank Stella had done using kind of those half circle, overlapping geometric things—type on the bottom that I bet he didn't do actually. Really well-chosen though. It's a Lincoln Center festival, right.

And I thought this is the racket to get into—to be an artist but to do nothing but posters. Like, I knew—I dimly understood that Frank Stella did art, you know, but like—who cares about the art? What you really want is, like, for Lincoln Center to call you up and say, "Can you stop doing the art for a day and do a poster for us," right? And I kept thinking if there was just some way to do that and not have to do, like, the art part but just do the—you know, and it's funny because I didn't perceive it as selling out or I want to be an artist but I don't want to starve at it. Nothing in it had that element to me. It was sort of—I guess if I was going to really think it through, it was sort of like the choice was you could either sit in your garret waiting for inspiration to strike or Lincoln Center would call and say, "Okay, it's, you know, 24 by 36 inches. It has to say 'Lincoln Center Festival' somewhere on it. We need it by Friday."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: To me, wow, you know, game on. You know, I was just so excited about that, you know, like surf's up! I really wanted to get into that. And—but yet I was—so I sort of didn't quite know what to do. And then—and then a series of—in rapid succession this series of kind of miraculous things happened. I guess the number one was I happened to be in the Normandy High School career resource library, which was, if I recall, like a bookshelf in our high school library with books about careers, right. They didn't go—and believe me, it wasn't, like, fighting for a room to get access to this.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: It was a lonely little shelf that didn't get a lot of time. I don't even know what compelled me to look at it, but I went in there, and there was a series of books called, like, "Your Future In" books: *Your Future in Dentistry*, *Your Future in Floral Arrangement*, *Your*—like, literally, I'm not kidding—*Your Future in Janitorial Services*. No, it was the "Aim High" series.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: *Aim High for a Career in Janitorial Services*. And one was *Aim High for a Career in Commercial Art/Graphic Design* by S. Neil Fujita, attributed to S. Neil Fujita. S. Neil Fujita turns out to be—little did I know

then, but he's a graphic designer of great repute, had done the logo for Columbia Records, had designed the cover to *The Godfather* book that later—you know, the—that distinctive lettering with the marionette hand above it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: He designed the cover of *In Cold Blood*, I believe. You know, so really a great, powerful designer in his own right. And he had written this book that was called *Your*—and so part of the beginning, he says, "This is what someone in this career does." And then there were profiles of all these different people that did that. I've got it downstairs; actually, I bought it on e-bay just to have one, and it was, like, oh my God, these guys were doing exactly what I want to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And it has a name—I think Ivan Chermayeff might have been in there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You know, it was probably fairly dated when I got it, so it might have been circa 1969 or so. But it was just sort of like—all of a sudden to find out that that thing you wanted to do—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, yeah.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —actually had a name and people were doing it, right—so I just was thrilled.

So now it was called graphic—and so this thing was called graphic design. And I was really a library person, you know. Like, I used the library—you know, I was addicted to the library in those days the way people are addicted to the Internet now, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So there were things I really, really cared deeply about like the *Titanic*. I was really obsessed with the *Titanic*, way before anyone else was into it, way before it was a bestselling—a hit movie. And I remember I was visiting a cousin in Brecksville [Ohio], let's say, I'd figure out a way to go to the Brecksville library and go to the card catalog to see if they had any books on the *Titanic* that I hadn't seen yet, right.

So our local library was the Parma Regional Library at Snow and Ridge Roads. I went there and looked up graphic design in the card catalog. And they had a book actually called—with "graphic design" in the title. It was called *Graphic Design Manual* by a guy named Armin Hofmann, who I'd never heard of. Now if—do you know that book?

MIJA RIEDEL: I know the book. I don't know—well, I know of it. I haven't studied it anywhere near the way you have.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Okay, so the chain of possession that would have required this book, that particular book, which is basically a record of the coursework at the Schule für Gestaltung Basel—in Basel, Switzerland, published for what must have been an unbelievably specialized audience in the United States, or anywhere but Switzerland at that time, although influential in academic circles certainly, landing in Ohio—but not just Ohio but suburban Cleveland; not just suburban Cleveland but Parma, and in this, like, little kind of like tiny little library, there it was.

So I took it out, and it's—inside the book, of course, is—it's nothing like *Aim High for a Career in Graphic Design/Commercial Art*. This is, like, just a series of these unbelievably rigorous studies done with—for Swiss light bulb manufacturers with all black and white and dots and lines and just—but actually said "graphic design" on the cover, and not only that, but, you know, these dots—these, like, squares with, like, lines like this just like Franz Kline actually—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —but tightened up and straight—everything is, like, Swiss version, right. And we're thinking, this is just the best—it's just the best. So I have to admit, at this point, I was sort of the go-to guy for the print shop in my school. And they would come to me and say, "Do a cover for the sports banquet on Saturday night." And I would literally do things that were just—that looked like '50s Swiss posters—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: —my ideas of '50s Swiss posters, except it would say "fall sports" in my version of what,

lowercase Helvetica, with, like, a giant abstracted leaf in the background. These guys were expecting, like, crosshatched drawings of football players, and I'm giving them—[they laugh]—it was very funny actually. But everyone was very tolerant. I mean, they were getting it for free, and I didn't go on that much about my theories or anything. I just said, "[It was ?] the artwork." And they were, like, "Oh, okay. That looks like it will be easy to print."

And so then I had this book, *Graphic Design Manual* by Armin Hofmann. So I told my parents, you know, "Christmas is coming. I want only one book. I want this book, *Graphic Design Manual*, Armin Hofmann." So no Amazon, no Barnes and Noble, right, no real bookstore.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So my parents went to—I think my mom must have gone down to Halle Brothers or Higbee's in downtown Cleveland, where they had the most extensive book collection. They said, "I'm looking for this book *Graphic Design Manual* by Armin Hofmann." And they said, "*Graphic Design*—we have that book." And so they brought—they—my mom, Christmas, brings home a book, and it's *Graphic Design*, not *Manual* and not Armin Hofmann but Milton Glaser.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —which had just been published. So then I had this book, *Graphic Design* by Milton Glaser, which if—and you—like, that book is, like, the 180-degree opposite of the Armin Hofmann book.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: It's all color. It's all exuberant.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: It's all kind of shuffling among Victoriana and design history and art deco and all these different periods. I mean, just—and this was sort of like just going from, you know, sniffing a little bit of coke here and there to just kind of mainlining heroin for me. I was completely lost. I was just, like, so into this.

So now I must be, like, 16 years old and so I'd never met a graphic designer. I'd never had a conversation with one. The only images I'd ever seen of them were, like, people in these books basically, right. And I decided that's what I wanted to do.

And so I go to my high school guidance counselor. I say, "I want to be—I want to go into graphic design. I want to go to a university. I don't want to go to an art school. I need a university; I want to take classes in other things that they have at universities, and I want to go either in Ohio or a state that touches Ohio, okay?" That was—so I very—and I can't describe—and I had really good SAT scores. And my teacher said—or the guidance counselor said, "Oh, you could get into a really good school, and you can get into pre-law and pre-med with these scores, you know."

And I remember—I don't think—I might have been, like, enough of a jerk that I would have said this out loud, but I might have said something like—I remember thinking really clearly and explaining to my then girlfriend now wife Dorothy that—I said, "I bet all the kids in pre-law are smart. But I bet not all the kids in art school are smart. [Inaudible]—I bet a smart designer could actually figure out some angles that the other ones wouldn't." And that turned out to be true in school, and it turned out to be sort of like true in general, I'd say.

I applied to, I think, Carnegie Mellon, maybe Indiana University and the University of Cincinnati. And then I had this very hip—I was the art director of the college—of the high school newspaper. And then this guy, Ray Sposet, gave me—who sort of saw it as his mission to save smart kids from lives in Ohio, called up a previous person he intervened with who was now working as an art director in an ad agency in Manhattan, Cunningham and Walsh, Jonathan Lafelice—he called up Jonathan Lafelice and said, "What's the best art school in the world?" And he said, "That's Pratt Institute in Brooklyn." And so Ray Sposet said, "Well, you have to apply to Pratt too. He didn't say, "You have to get out of here," but I think—[whispers]—"You have to get out of here."

And so I applied to Pratt. And I forget—I might have gotten into Pratt, too, but I remember I took a trip to—a high school trip to New York in 1974 as part of a field trip, go see Broadway shows and whatnot.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And there was one afternoon free, and everyone else did something else, probably tried to buy liquor. And I decided to take the train out to Brooklyn to see Pratt. And this is—were you living in New York in 1974?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Okay, so I was staying in what was then called the Royal Manhattan, then renamed the Milford Plaza.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Now it's nothing, I think. So nearest subway is Times Square. Go down to Times Square in 1974, and I say, "How do I get—I'm looking—I want to go to this address." And I remember for years afterwards—they held me I had to take something to something, change—at Hoyt Schermerhorn—Pratt. This is probably like maybe this time in late November, 1974. So it was gray. It was—it was just like, you know, *French Connection* meets *Taking of Pelham 123* meets *Fort Apache, the Bronx*. It was just too much for a kid. It might be February, actually. It was way too much for me to handle. And, like, I thought, you know, "I just don't have what it takes to go here."

Plus, I remember going to Pratt and thinking, "These kids are all acting like a bunch of artists"—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: You know, they're all lounging around. I saw a lot of long-haired people acting really blasé and kind of with crap all over the place. And I wanted to see real—I wanted to see people doing cereal boxes. And I didn't see enough of that. I wasn't reassured. And of course I didn't have the brains to ask for a tour or present myself as a student who was considering going to Pratt. I felt like I was this interloper who was going to get discovered and kicked out at any moment.

And so Pratt just seemed too scary to me. My dad actually decided to visit Pratt and kind of reaffirmed all that, and I was kind of relieved.

Then I got this very modest scholarship to go to the University of Cincinnati, so that seemed to decide it for me. Meanwhile, my then girlfriend, now wife Dorothy got—went to Ohio State, and I was in love with her, I was so in love with her, the idea of going off to college in New York just seemed too painful, so I—[inaudible]—we'd go to college in the same state and see each other on weekends, which is what we did.

Next question? [They laugh.] This is your chance to redirect this conversation to something more relevant.

MIJA RIEDEL: If you think back on it now from this perspective, is there anything in particular that motivated your interest in design? From what you've said, it sounds as if there really was never any interest in anything else in particular, that that has just been from the start—from the time you were young really your main focus.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, yeah, yeah. And what's funny—because, I mean, I liked writing, and I was good at writing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And I—and I liked—there's a lot of other things I liked too, but it seemed like—I have to admit I made a discovery that I think a lot of people don't make till later. And some of them, I think, might not make it at all or might not take that much pleasure in the discovery, which is that design is one of those careers that if you do it a certain way you get to do all sorts of different things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I mean, you get to go into worlds that you wouldn't be invited into.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You get to experience things that you wouldn't experience. And your capacity to kind of take pleasure in that sort of trespassing is what actually makes you a better designer.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I've learned actually since then there are certain things that I just really can't make myself care about that much, certain kind of professions or kinds of—you know, or messages—[inaudible]—I just can't get myself that excited about that. And I never do particularly good work for those things. On the other hand, it doesn't have to be something I even know that much about or I can be—[inaudible]. But if all of a sudden I found myself kind of getting interested in it. I become a fanatic about it and get really, really interested. All of a sudden it's at the top of my reading list and I'm sort of making time to kind of, like, you know—it could be professional football. It can be motorcycles. It can be all these things I—like, you know, six months before I

might not have even known that much about and suddenly people are saying, "Why do you know about this stuff —[inaudible]?" [Inaudible]—doing a project that involves that, right?

I have to admit, you know, partly because graphic design involves words and pictures, and I love magazines—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —and I remember even—one of my grandmothers—my Irish grandmother's—my Irish grandmother had a brother named James, my Uncle James. And he had a subscription to *Esquire*, which I just loved. And I loved—and that was when they had those—it had these covers by this advertising art director named George Lois that were, like, really—I remember he did this famous cover that was called *The Final*—imagine someone doing a cover these days on a mass-market magazine, doing a story even called this and putting it on the cover—it was called *The Final Collapse of the American Avant Garde*. And he persuaded Andy Warhol to—he did this image that was a photograph, composite photograph, that made it look like Andy Warhol was drowning in a can of Campbell's tomato soup shot from above by this great photographer named Karl Fischer.

And I remember seeing that and getting the joke and thinking, you know, this is—to be able to kind of work on a —so, I think about—think about, like, this guy is—he must live in New York, he must actually, like, know Andy Warhol—[inaudible]—commercial artist, too, by the way, and of course—he's able to kind of come up—some writer would say, "Well, here's the story"—he reads a story, he reduces it to this image, has a picture taken of Warhol, he has another picture taken of the can of soup, works with people who have the ability to put those two things together.

And then one thing leads to another and then one day he gets up and is walking down the street and walks by a place where they sell magazines and there it is. There's somebody reading it on the street. Can you imagine? I mean, what higher calling could a person have? I mean what is that skill anyway? I mean, he didn't draw anything the whole time as far as I knew. There's no drawing ability required.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Instead, he was kind of coming up with this idea, just being paid to come up with an idea then persuade a lot of people to do it. Wow.

I mean, so, I have to admit, coming up with ideas and persuading people to do it was sort of the thing that actually seemed interesting to me, right. Even in high school, I could tell that there was, like, other kids in my high school class. No one could draw more realistic than me. I was the most realistic drawer in the entire school district as far as I knew. In all three Parma high schools, I was the most realistic drawer. But I'd never win the Scholastic Gold Medal because they were—the people who gave—*Scholastic* magazine used to give this, like—it had this art contest—still does actually—for writing and for art. And they would give medals for things. And I'd always get on the show, but to get a medal, you needed to, like—it had to have this kind of transcendent level of kind of inherent creativity. It wasn't just, "Jesus, that took a long time" or "Wow, did you trace that?" or "That looks just like a photograph"—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —you know, "You draw that freehand?" You know, these were all these questions that I would always answer with, "Yes, actually, yeah."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: They weren't impressed by that. They wanted actual emotion and creativity.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And as I got better, I made it more and more technical. But where I was able to be create was someone would say, "You know, it's a poster for *Man of La Mancha*." And then I would do this actually very detailed drawing of a windmill—of a dragon turning into a windmill or something.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I was able to sort of say, "Well, this is the whole thing. It's about"—you know, and that was, like, "Let's take this whole thing and reduce it to one thing"—it just seemed really, really exciting to me. So—

MIJA RIEDEL: You went to the University of Cincinnati?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Correct, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Would you describe the strengths and the weaknesses of that program?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes. Yes. University of Cincinnati oddly enough—and this is another, just, thing that happened by accident—there were only a handful of schools in the United States that taught, I would say, a really faithful version of, like, Swiss-based—Swiss/Yale School of Art graphic design program based design at that time at the university level. And Cincinnati was one of them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MICHAEL BIERUT: The department head there who had been there seemingly forever but had only been, I think, six years, named Gordon Salchow—he retired, I believe, last year. So he'd been there for 40 years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

MICHAEL BIERUT: He was the department head. He had gone to Kansas City Art Institute, then got an MFA to Yale.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: He—the foundation teacher was a woman named Ruth Geschechter, who I've lost track of but who was a new graduate from Basel. She had all of us beaver away, as one did, with these special black and white gouaches imported from Switzerland called plaka, P-L-A-K-A, that I thought—so it was like our school, Philadelphia College of Arts—now University of the Arts, PCA though in those days—Cincinnati—or Indiana University a little bit. Yale had—Yale had, I think, Armin Hofmann as a visiting professor at that point and Paul Rand and [Bradbury-MB] Thompson—all those guys were there. They were all distant celebrities to me, though. Everyone we studied with were—most of them seemed to be out of Yale or out of Basel or out of some combination thereof.

So it was a very rigorous, formal education, perfect for knocking all the bad habits out of buckeyes from Ohio, which is what we largely were—didn't have, like, an international following. It was—Gordon—in a really fascinating way, Gordon Salchow never had—there was no portfolio requirement to get in. He did it on SAT scores alone because he—because he thought—it's really interesting—

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —he thought that—he thought anyone could learn the technical side of [design.-MB] He just thought it was hand-eye coordination doing that part of it. What you had to do was to be able to think to be a designer.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And in fact, at Cincinnati you got a bachelor of science and design not a B.A.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Isn't that weird?

MIJA RIEDEL: Very.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes. So—and there was a work-study program. Oh, so the strengths were—if it had a weakness, it was that it was squarely in this kind of formal exercise [basis-MB], not rote exactly but real skill-based sort of sequence of things, where you would do—just learn how to do these very technical things, spacing of letters—this kind of funny thing that was a real iconic Basel-based project, where you take an object and learn how to render it in black and white, paint in a high-contrast sort of way really reductive way that kids from all over the United States would be doing for some—without—it was just supposed to be good for you. It's like going to boot camp doing a hundred pushups or just learning how to kill a man with your bare hands, I suppose. You weren't going to have to do it maybe ever, but it was a good thing to know and made you sort of a tougher person.

And any affection you might have had for Milton Glaser or the *National Lampoon* or, Mort Drucker and Don Martin and *Mad Magazine* were supposed to be sort of more or less obliterated from your consciousness through this process. And so that was a strength.

And then there was both the strength and the weakness, I would say. And in those days, it was compared to the way you study now; it was amazing how relatively content-free it all was. I mean, the idea that the words actually said something that an author might have something they were trying to communicate with this message and you were supposed to be facilitating that communication, the idea that people were supposed to

be persuaded to take action based on graphic design, I guess it didn't need to be dwelled on, but it was just the formal clarity of the solution that was always kind of upheld—it seemed to me at least—in favor—above sort of the persuasive quality of it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, that's interesting because given the fact that one didn't need a portfolio to be admitted—

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —it seems like a very strange flip.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, it's—yeah, yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But there's some logic to it in that—in that the function of the pedagogy was to teach you those formal skills.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so, I mean, it's interesting—there was a great drawing teachers. There was sort of—these three guys all finally retired in the past couple of years, a guy named Joe Bottoni, who was a great American designer, and then—he is a great American designer, who was really a favorite teacher of generations of students who go through there; and then Heinz Schenker, who had studied in Basel and—I remember I had my copy of *Graphic Design Manual* by Armin Hofmann, and Heinz said, "Oh, I did that one," you know pointed at one of the exercises that he had actually done. That was, like getting analyzed by someone who had been analyzed by Freud, you know. It was like one step away from the source.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So at any rate, yes, there was—it was strange, but I have to admit, I don't remember—what has happened is you don't think it's strange—it's the only thing you know. And indeed, in the '70s, as I explain to kids these days, how would you know what was happening anywhere else? Like, where would you—I mean, where would that information be found?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: There was hardly any information about anything. If someone had managed somehow to have an expensive coffee-table book published on their work like Milton Glaser, you could examine that. If you could manage to obtain a copy of an incredibly expensive trade magazine, they could be *Print* or *Communication Arts* on one hand, which was frowned upon at Cincinnati because those were considered fairly impure—

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —and much more of favor were things like *Typografische* or *Monatsblätter*—which didn't have questionable or kitschy sort of things like illustrative-based design or eclectic design that would look like historical things, which people liked—you know, people were doing all the time. Pushpin [Studios] were doing nothing but that.

But at any rate it was kind of a pure—a purist sort of design approach. But oddly enough, Cincinnati is famous really as a university for one thing above all, which is early on, they started a cooperative education program, whereby many programs in the school, you do a work-study thing that extends your time to get a degree by one year.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so I went to school for five years. And the reason—

MIJA RIEDEL: That's '75 to '80?

MICHAEL BIERUT: '75 to '80. And in my second through fifth year, I only went to school six months out of the year, spent the other six months out of the year working. And that actually in a way—sort of similar to your earlier question about not having a portfolio—that freed the program to be even more abstract and theoretical if you ask me, because there was a sense that, you know, no need to teach anyone anything practical because

they'll get a dose of that, you know, every other three months, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. I see.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So the very first place I worked was a place called—so I—that's why I had a series of co-op jobs. I had three different ones in my career. The first was a place called Pitt Studios in downtown Cleveland. That was a flat-out, old-fashioned commercial art studio—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —in—the kind of which I do not think you could find anywhere in the first world anymore or the second world. I assume they might exist in, like, emerging economies somehow—it was, like, really just plain old commercial art, where they would do everything from lettering certificates for employee of the year to logos for things—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —you know, to, like, stuff that was horrible, stuff that was good. But it was—it was all people working in commercial art, basically, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And best of all, they had a library that had, for instance, I think, New York Art Directors Club annuals going back to the '30s. And so every day at lunchtime, I would sit eating a sandwich my mom had packed for me. I'd take a bus to downtown Cleveland to the Engineers Building right off Public Square, go off to Pitt Studios, and they—and spent all my down time looking at these art directors annuals.

So by the time I left, I actually, like, could tell you who the art director on Volkswagen was Doyle Dane Bernbach in 1965, not Helmut Krone, but, like, the guys that went after him. I could tell you the name of the copywriter. I was compiling all this, like, completely, essentially worthless knowledge about ad agencies that are all now defunct.

On the other hand, I just kept thinking, well, there's this real world in New York somewhere that I—that I visited in high school, I could tell was there, you know, and it's all here documented in these books, and this is where things were really happening.

And so my second co-op job was my big gamble, where I decided to see if I could live away from my girlfriend over the—how far could I get away from her; "it's time for us to be independent. Honey, I think we should, like, live—be separated for our careers for a while." And so I went to Boston to work for WGBH—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —in what was probably the best job they had—the best job in the whole program of graphic design, which was to work for a guy named Chris Pullman in the art department at WGBH. Those three months actually as much as—among many other things really I can point to as something that made me as a designer, because for one thing, Chris had taken a staff and recruited some people and built a staff that was so smart, so funny, so fast, really eclectic, irreverent, and just took so much pleasure in what they were doing that it was—I sort of wasn't getting that from school, that this was supposed to be fun, you could make a joke about it—you could do it fast, you could—all of this was just sort of—like, I just thought it really was more like a bachelor of science; it was like doing bench work in a lab—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —just endless hours of staring at centrifuges and writing down columns of figures. That's what design felt like there. Important—it felt like it was important.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You know, you were advancing your own—

MIJA RIEDEL: Holding things together.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But, like, it didn't feel like—the spiritedness of it that I got working at WGBH, and this would

have been '77 or so, '78—was just unbelievable.

So it was—Chris was the head there. They had a guy named Jack Foley, Tom Sumida; Doug Scott, who's a faculty member at RISD to this day. Chris was a Yale graduate, who had worked with Dan Friedman there and was one of the most—is one of the most funny, laconic guys I know. He's just great, so smart, so funny, and so undogmatic in terms of design. You know, and if you think—and WGBH—their job was to service the in-house production people. So if *Crockett's Victory Garden* needed a set of "tune-in" ads, they would do those. If *NOVA* needed a teacher's guide, they would do those.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: If *Masterpiece Theater* needed an opening title sequence, they would do those.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: If *Julia Child & Company* needed a book design, they would do that. So the products were all great and really diverse: cookbooks, gardening, science; you know, all this different stuff. And they had two interns, and I was, like, the junior to the—there was another intern, who was the superior intern, who was Lorraine Ferguson, who was a Yale MFA. Lorraine's married to Adam Weinberg, director of the Whitney now, good old Lorraine. And she was just my fellow intern back in those days. And so she got all the plum jobs. I got her leavings, I think. And she went to Yale. I just went to the University of Cincinnati.

But it was just—two things—being—[inaudible]—and just hearing how they—just watching and hearing how they worked and how much fun it could be and how energizing the content could be—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —the idea that people would come in and this was—the producer for Julia Child would come in and say—I never met Julia Child, but, she'd come in and say, "No, no, we need, you know—we've got more of a budget, and we need a lot more color pictures of food, so here are the"—it just was, like, sort of seeing all—what all—there was this huge ecosystem of people.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And again, I think I had never heard of Julia Child. I didn't know anything about French cooking. I didn't know anything about any of it. I was a college kid just like my daughter Martha, who's finishing her first semester of her first year at college she said, "Dad, I haven't watched television—[inaudible]. I have no idea what's going on in the world," you know.

And that's how I felt. I mean, I sort of felt like that all of a sudden you're in the world—[inaudible]. And the other thing was to be in Boston in the late '70s—that's the era of Design Research [the legendary Cambridge-based retail store.—MB]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I remember I got for my last meal, I got taken to Harvest, I think. That was when Faneuil Hall had just been opened. They had this great 16-screen slideshow called *Where's Boston?* And they had all this great—the Charles Hotel had just opened up, Cambridge 7 [had designed—MB] the aquarium downtown—it all just seemed like this was a town—[inaudible]—really understood both; it was brainy, and it had this design thing happening. It was so urbane and fresh and smart.

And I saw you could live like a designer. I would go to the houses of the people that I was working with, and they would have framed posters up and kind of carefully chosen coffeemakers and things. And I started thinking, "Oh, this isn't just this thing you do; this actually affects sort of like what your house would look like." And I was just so naïve and provincial and stuff. So every single thing—I just was struck by lightning, like, four times a day—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —like, for so long. It just was amazing I survived. At any rate, that was really transformative to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: That was really great.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But the worst part about it, though, was that I was yearning so desperately for my girlfriend Dorothy that I just—I couldn't take it. I literally walked around sighing the whole time—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: —in these heaving sighs about Dorothy. And then I finally went to my boss Tom and said, "Tom, I know I'm supposed to come back in January, but I'm getting engaged to my girlfriend and I can't do it; I have to stay in Ohio." And then Chris came—Chris Pullman said, "I hear you're leaving us for a girl." And I said, "Yes." He says, "Well, good luck to you, but really, I hope you know what you're doing." [They laugh.] And he was being sarcastic, but it was—he was being ironic or something.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But it was—"you're leaving us for a girl."

And so at any rate—so then I got—there was only one guy I worked for in Cincinnati, and it was this guy named Dan Bittman, who was the best designer in town. And I said, "I will"—by then I sort of knew my way around. Cincinnati seemed like nothing to me. I'd lived in Boston for three months, right, a real town.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So I got back to Cincinnati. I said, "I'm just going to get a job working for this guy, Dan Bittman." Anything I'd see anything decent in town, I'd figure out—I'd find out who did it; it was always this guy Bittman, so I'd get a job with Dan.

So—and I did, and I was his right-hand person. I worked for him for, I think, a total of three co-op sessions, maybe four. And so I was, like, his—

MIJA RIEDEL: That's nine months or a year or something?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, it might have been a full year, nine months or a year, yeah. And he had just taken this job for an ad agency called Sive Advertising, S-I-V-E. And Sive Advertising was a branch of Young & Rubicam. I think Young & Rubicam had opened up Sive thinking they'd get some Procter & Gamble business in Cincinnati. That never panned out. So Sive just had all these kind of funny accounts like Hudepohl Beer and these funny little local accounts.

And then Dan was hired to be, like, the design maven there and sort of would just make up his own projects there. You know, Kenner Toys was a thing, and he just kind of came up with this whole way of repackaging their infant toys. It just turned into this huge project. He would come up with, there's some, like, belt—like, belt accessory company that he did—you know, he designed this catalog for. They got—won an award from the—either New York—[inaudible]—AIGA. I remember it was a big—he was really ambitious, way beyond Cincinnati borders—still is, God bless him. He seemed like such a grownup to me then, but he's still working today.

And I remember the thing I learned from him was that idea that the thing they're asking you to do might not be the thing that you should do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, and it was—you know, and so it sort of was—I was kind of servile as a—I was very eager to please as a designer. And he just had this real knack for, you know, I still remember to this day he sort of got this—we were supposed to be designing this package for a doll that Kenner sold, Kenner Toys sort of like Chatty Cathy. And the assignment was come up for a new box for this doll, right. And that was the only assignment. And I remember thinking, well, how do you do that?

So Dan went to the toy store and came back and said, "You know, all these dolls are all packaged the same way. They're like sarcophaguses; there's, like, a thing, and there's, like, a little window where the little face looks out." He says, "What would be cool would be a box where the entire front was transparent, so let's design a box like that so you'd see the whole doll."

And then we came—he came up with this structure, sort of folded back, so he designed—figured a way to print on the front of the thing. And I remember then he presented it. And I mean, instead of saying, "Here's that doll package I designed for you," he said, "You know, here's the problem: You go to the store, and you're looking to buy a doll, you can't see the doll. What if I came up with a box that would be the only box in the store where you could actually see the doll?" And at that point do you even need to see the solution? You know, I mean, like, those people were all saying, "Please solve this horrible problem that one minute ago we did not know we had," right.

And I just remember thinking, "Wow, you know, that's how to do it."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And this—and he was spinning—it was interesting—at WGBH, everything was—they were making gold out of gold. Dan would be able to spin gold out of lead.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: He would take these—like, no—these hopeless projects and make things out of them, which just was great. So I really learned a lot from him too, as well as my teachers, as well—those co-op jobs.

So—

MIJA RIEDEL: If you look back on all of these—and then we'll talk about—we'll move on to Vignelli after this, but is there a particular singular experience that stands out as the most rewarding of all of these, or would you really say it's a conglomeration of the things that you learned from WGBH, from Bittman?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Well, I remember in my college career, I managed to sort of jockey my way around into the dream thing that I wanted to do, which was to be the art director of the university magazine. And I just loved that. For years, that was kind of my idea of what life could be. So they had a university magazine distributed free on the campus three times a year. And I did three issues of it. And my lovely girlfriend Dorothy was the business manager of it, because she was getting her—she had gotten her degree at OSU in three years, and I was taking five years to get mine, so she got an MBA at Cincinnati and became business manager of the magazine. I was the art director of the magazine. I remember I had two helpers who were younger kids in the graphic design program. And I was really trying to copy *Esquire*, which I really adored in those days. The inside was by J. C. Suarez; he was the art director then. And he had this great kind of like straight—interesting way of illustrating stories, and I was just really trying to rip him off.

So—[inaudible]—stories with ideas and content and how to bring them to life and everything. And we would do these things, and then, you know, you'd send them to the printer, and then the box would come back, and there they'd be. It was just so great. It was the best.

So it wasn't a single thing, but that—I was able to kind of take all the stuff I was learning—I was very deferential in my co-op jobs. I sort of can't say that I was—I never had any—I mean, I was working for good people, and good people don't get to be good by having college kids do their work for them. I was taking whatever direction I could get. And then I'd come back to working on this magazine and doing what I thought was the right thing to do. I guess, you look at it now, and it's just a debacle, of course. But I remember at the time, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: It allowed you to put all of these different things you'd been learning—

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —ideas you had—to test them out.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes. And also, I have to admit, in those days—there was an element of risk in fun that kids today will never experience, which was that you'd kind of like do the design and you'd send off the artwork, and you really didn't know for sure whether it would work, because it wasn't like you were previewing it on a Mac or printing out something that was, like, virtually identical to the way the—that would get results.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You'd sort of build these things out of you know, acetate overlays and cutting little masks and sort of saying, "Well, if this prints over that, this should come through like that, and I think it will look like this." And you'd do it and it would—it was just, like, amazing; it was so cool.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You know, and you wouldn't know it till you actually, like, opened the box and looked at the magazine. You'd have no idea.

MIJA RIEDEL: And did that—that sounds like that sense of experimentation—did you also then learn from things that didn't work?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Oh, yeah, actually much more.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, obviously, you know, much more than that. And I'm, like, really known as a prolific designer—well, I'm not known as a prolific designer; I am a very prolific designer, but I'm not known as one because I sort of suppress all these things that have gone wrong, that continue to go wrong actually.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: So some people, every single thing they do is a jewel, and they really just polish them till they're really shining. I just need to—I need a lot of at bats until I connect with the ball. So—

MIJA RIEDEL: Is that what is in those 90 notebooks?

MICHAEL BIERUT: No, not really. The notebooks are all more like—well, here's one just in case.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I even—

MIJA RIEDEL: Ninety-three.

MICHAEL BIERUT: They're—look, these are actually drawings of things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You don't see that that much in here, but it's like—these are—people are saying things in a meeting there. They're trying to describe—oh, I'm explaining to someone that the competition was going here but our client is going to go there in the middle of that pyramid. These never went anywhere. This actually did go somewhere. Oh, this one—this was lettering for the signage—that we're going to do for Governors Island, actually—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —changing that—well, we didn't win on—we didn't get to change that—[inaudible]. We wanted too, though, to alter these letters—but you see, it's—a lot of it is just, like, conversations—like notes I'm taking during meetings. This one actually has a lot of design—[inaudible]—a lot of sketches of things that look like things that might be designed, but lots and lots of me writing down phone messages. Sketch by Renzo Piano.

MIJA RIEDEL: Pretty nice.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so—and so—and so another 93 of these things. So I just have to write things down, or else there's a danger I'd forget them. And so—

MIJA RIEDEL: How did you come to be working—it sounds like the year after you graduated—in New York for Massimo Vignelli?

MICHAEL BIERUT: That's a very simple story. When I was at WGBH, the guy who I worked for directly and supervised me was this guy named Tom Sumida. Tom Sumida was a Yale MFA. His roommate at Yale—or classmate at Yale in his class was a guy named Peter Laundry. Peter Laundry had a job—at one point Tom said, "You know, Peter—my classmate Peter works for Vignelli. If you're ever in New York, you should look him up, and it's a pretty cool job." I'm like, "Wow, okay," because I knew who Vignelli was then.

So at the end of the summer,—that's my last summer before I graduated, the summer between junior year and senior year, I had been working in Cincinnati, but I took a trip to New York—I got off a week early for some reason, made a trip to New York to visit a bunch of classmates who all were working in New York. And I was staying with one of my classmates, a girl named Peggy Wollenhaupt, and Peggy's apartment was on East 62nd Street between 1st and 2nd. Vignelli's office was on East 62nd between 1st and York.

So I remember I—among other things, I'd been one who would just—my favorite thing in the world—I have several favorite things in the world when it comes to kind of pleasing people. One is taking standardized tests, which I do very well because I can guess what the answer is—I can guess what they want me to say. And I also used to love showing my—I still love showing my portfolio to people. I love—I'm considered a good salesman here at Pentagram just because I take so much pleasure in showing our work to people. But I used to love going around—going around with my portfolio. And so I took my portfolio, and I was thinking, well, you know, it's the summer—last summer, and should just see if I could get some people—get in and see some people and show them my book and see what comes of it.

And so I—so Tom said, "Yes, call Peter." So I called up Peter Laundry, but he was busy and didn't have time to see

me. And he said, "Just drop off your portfolio." And I said—I think I wouldn't have said this, but I remember thinking, "Well, I'm a busy man; I'm not sure I've got time."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

I didn't say that though. "Oh really?"—I don't know what I said. But so I visited a couple places, and eventually I went there to drop off my portfolio. And—oh, this was—this was a nice moment. I remember this as if it were yesterday.

So I go to 410 East 62nd Street. There was a friend I had in New York whose name was Barbara Anes. Barbara was with me too. I'd met Barbara because I'd gotten this scholarship from the Graphic Arts Technical Foundation, which sent kids from all over the country to get some technical printing training in Pittsburgh, just as sort of like some—on some level some gassy reiteration of, like, part of—it was, like, we're getting tours of printing plants. And it was just sort of like, "I know that smell," because of—that was my dad's smell.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: It was the way all that ink and grease used to smell all the time. And so I met—Barbara was the School of Visual Arts kid from there. I was just on the train yesterday morning with Steve Mignogna, who was the PCA kid from that class, so I still know these people. So I was—I, like, had lunch with Barbara, and I said, "I've got to go pick up my portfolio at Vignelli. Want to see what the lobby looks like?" And she says, "Ooh, yeah, Vignelli—let's go look."

So I go up there, and I was really a bad dresser then. I mean, I—[inaudible]—it was the '70s and I was in college. I was, like, wearing hiking boots and blue jeans and a flannel shirt and I just looked like hell. And so I went in to pick up my portfolio and—black office, white cube of a desk—I just remember an Asian receptionist. And I say, "I'm here to pick up my portfolio; I dropped it off yesterday for Peter Laundry." And the woman said, "And what's your name, please?" And I said, "It's Michael Bierut." She said, "Michael Bierut?" I said, "Yes." And I could tell there was something—something was, like wrong. And so she—[inaudible]—murmured—[inaudible]—sort of stuff.

Then all of a—then, like, before I knew it, wheeling around the corner comes Massimo striding out and sings out, "So this is the kid! You're the kid from Cincinnati! Fantastic! Fantastic!" he said—"you're one of the best ones I've seen—best one I've ever seen maybe! It's just fantastic! Where've you been? How—why—Cincinnati"—[inaudible]—and he's, like, patting me on the back, pumping my hand. This—[inaudible]—Peter's over there and says hi. And then I'm, like, "This is my friend Barbara." "Oh, Barbara! [Inaudible]—I'll show you around the office! Come on, you've got to see—got to see!"

So he took me around the office, and this was all happening, like, in seconds. And then he says—he said, "No, wait—you're still in school now?" And I said, "Yes." And he says, "Okay, after you graduate, you just give me a call and you can come here; we'll find a place for you." I'm, like, "Okay, what?" And so—[laughs]—so I remember kind of like literally hours later or seconds later, we're standing outside the door, and Barbara says, "Well, that guy really liked you." And I said—I said, "I—Jesus, I guess."

And now I learn after that that Massimo was prone to great abrupt enthusiasm. One time I saw him declare that M&Ms were the best food in the world.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: From now on, we were to—we were to have huge bowls of M&Ms at, like, the reception area for—because they're the perfect food. And he was just ranting about it. And I remember, like, someone, like, listening, like—and then—[inaudible]—[they laugh].

But so he's prone to enthusiasm.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I have to admit, the—I did have a good portfolio, one. More importantly maybe I had included, as we were told to do, some sketches of projects. And the way I sketched was identical to the way he did it—inadvertently, but it just was, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And most of the stuff in my portfolio was, like, good. Like, I could draw like an angel. I was getting this really rigorous Cincinnati-style education, so it was all Helvetica and good typefaces, the kind of things he liked.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And I drew just like him. So he must have been in some great mood or—who knows what other nice things had happened that day to predispose him to be really nice to the next person to walk in the door, who happened to be me.

And so, I was flung out there, and went—and my mom still remembers me coming home from Chicago and saying—from New York and saying, "You know, I met this guy, and I think he—I think he offered me a job in New York." And, like—my mom said, "What's his name?" And—all sounded very strange to my parents, you know, New York and an Italian guy—didn't understand the whole thing. I remember my dad pulled a Dun and Bradstreet report on this business to check it out.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: Which he would do—if he was selling someone a printing press, he would do that actually. So—and I remember him giving it to me. It said, like, "Premises were inspected and found clean and good order," like—I guess. [They laugh.]

So I went through my senior year.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And I remember, Massimo actually agreed to be a visiting critic for a week in—that year, partly—I was told—by, like, the—[inaudible]—you know, made quite an impression on Massimo Vignelli when you were in New York evidently. You know, we called and invited—[inaudible]—and he mentioned you. And I was, like, "He mentioned me?" He said—he said, "Well, he didn't—I—he might not have remembered my name, but who's that kid—there's some kid who was there." He says, "You know, I think he had a name like Lebanon or something." He says, "No, it's Michael Bierut."

And so—anyway, so he came, and I barely said anything. I was so intimidated. I couldn't figure out how to talk to him, what angle I would get or whether I'd just go say hi. I wasn't that kind of person. So I finally write a letter to Peter Laundry saying, "You know, about that job"—then he sent back a letter saying, "We're not sure we've got a position." You know—of course it was funny—it was, like—this would have been early 1980, which we're—and we hear a lot these days—if you look at those charts of the economy, the last—between now and literally the '30s, the big dip was, like, in the early '80s actually—Carter, stagflation. It just—the economy was really bad right then. They weren't fulfilling promises—impetuous promises made to hire people—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —six months in advance for jobs that might or might not—positions that might not be available was probably something Peter was managing on a daily basis.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Who knows. So he sent me back—I think I sent him a letter, he sent me back a letter. We were corresponding by letters. And he said something like, "We're not sure that we're going to have a position available for you, but just in case we do, please stay in touch." And I was really crestfallen. And I thought, "Well that was fun while it lasted, but now I'm back in the real world."

But then actually someone resigned in the spring, and they held that spot, and that's the spot I took when I was there. So somebody resigned, this guy named Sandro Franchini. Sandro is, I think, to this day the art director of Crate and Barrel, the design director of Crate and Barrel. He had replaced Lorraine Wild, who's a legendary designer and educator based in California. And I inherited the rolodex that both of them had maintained. He inherited Lorraine's rolodex, and I got his rolodex. So—I still have it downstairs actually.

So that's why I got to Vignelli. I started there the week after I graduated, June 1980.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what were—what were the significant projects that you worked on while you were there, or what did you take away from those 10 years that—

MICHAEL BIERUT: Oh, okay, so—again, this was sort of like—you know, despite all the seasoning I'd received at the hands of my teachers in Cincinnati and my encounters in Boston—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —with Dan Bittman and everything, I was still really, like, a kid from nowhere. I was a hick. And—

MIJA RIEDEL: That's a huge leap to—

MICHAEL BIERUT: Oh, yes, it was a huge leap. Yes, yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —as an undergraduate from Cincinnati to—

MICHAEL BIERUT: Now, mind you, I was doing—you know, there was work available to be done at a place like that, that doesn't exist here today.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: There were levels of menial tasks that needed doing that no one here, like, would know—even know how to do. It'd be like churning butter or making—it's just like these senseless, like literally mixing buckets of rubber cement or going into a stat room and just making—spending literally the better part of two days in a—in a tiny darkroom just enlarging things to different sizes, printing them out and delivering them to a real designer outside in the daylight.

And so I did—and that's what I was doing there. I had no illusions—I was just there to please them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And Massimo would eventually say—I mean, I remember the very first day I was there, I pasted up a price list for—I did a mechanical for a price list for Heller, the manufacturer of that melamine table—tableware. It was actually a product called Hellerware, which was his bid to compete with Tupperware—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —better-designed Tupperware. And so I remember working on that. And I slowly—and so there were a couple things I took—10 years—I took—I obviously took away a lot. One was just the sophisticated world outside. I just had to keep faking it till I made it and then just kind of, like—I can't tell you how many steps I fell behind and how aggravating I must have been to some other staff members. Massimo really doted on me, and I think I was just seen as being this kind of classless piece of shit from nowhere—I don't know—but—and didn't know nothing either. I remember that very first summer I worked there, Massimo went to Milan, for three weeks or something, and I was left to do a mockup of this magazine called *Skyline*, which was going to be the house [organ ?] of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, led by Eisenman and edited by Suzanne Stephens, editor at, you know—*Architectural Record*.

And I [didn't-MB] know who any of them were, and I didn't know what any of the stories were about. It all just seemed baffling to me, right. I was also putting together a catalog for something called *Collaboration: Artists and Architects*, where hilariously, Peter was actually designing that book, and he just [said-MB] these people all owe us art, and you have to get the images out of them so we can put them in this catalog. And I was, like, "Get right on that, chief."

And I was given this list of phone numbers and names, and I was supposed to call these people and demand their artwork. And so the project, which was spearheaded by Barbara Diamonstein on behalf of the 75th anniversary of the Architectural League of New York was to commission these collaborations between, like it says, artists and architects. So it was, like, Frank Stella and—maybe Richard Meier—I've got the book downstairs; I can look it all up—Alice Aycock and—Frank Stella, Richard Meier, Alice Aycock and—maybe she was with Peter Eisenman—[inaudible]—it was like 25 artists and 25 architects, almost none of whom I had never—I was dimly aware of, right.

So I'd literally say, like,—you know, "Michael Graves, please," and then say, "I'm—[inaudible]—Michael from Massimo Vignelli's office." And [then I'd-MB] say "you know, Mr. Graves, look, but your work was due Friday"—[laughs]—just beat the shit out of these guys. I had no idea—I really barely knew who they were. I wasn't impressed. You know, they were just names on my list, you know, by God, and I was going to get that artwork or die trying.

But that was very typical of what my world was like there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And I wrote a—went on—when what's-his-name—that famous photographer died, I wrote that essay about it—famous black-and-white portrait photographer, my conversation with—it'll come to me in a second—

MIJA RIEDEL: Avedon?

MICHAEL BIERUT: No, no, no, it's—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, black and white?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Huh? Yes, black and white—there was, like—a famous picture of Kennedy, famous picture of—I used to remember everything. Now I just can look it up. But I remember Massimo was—I was doing a real estate catalog with him, and he said—and one of the pages—it was, like, to promote a building, I think, in Miami—a new office building in Miami, and they were trying to get people to rent space in the building. So you'd do a brochure, and then that'd be given to people looking to rent space. And they'd look at the brochure, even though the building was under construction—must have had a serious architect—one of his architect friends was doing it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so the building would be some high-profile, iconic star architecture building that would need a fancy brochure designed by Massimo, where I would help—I would help him assemble it—Arnold Newman.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so he said, "We should—we should get a really good photographer to take the picture of, like, the developer. Why don't we get someone like Arnold Newman?" So I wrote that down, Arnold Newman.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right, right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And then—so I remember, okay, you know, off I go. And so I looked up Arnold Newman in the white pages, and sure enough he's listed—it said—I think it said Arnold Newman Photography. I just called the number, and I got him right on the phone right away. And I just was able to say, you know, "We're interested in hiring you to do a project. Do you take portraits?" And he was, like, "Yes—yes." Like, I can't believe he still—he talked to me all the way through. And I said, "Now, we're thinking about a—and I just want to warn you, we're thinking about doing a black-and-white portrait. Do you take black-and-white portraits?" And he says, "Yes. Yes. Yes, I do, black and white, yeah." And I said, "Okay, could you—could you send over some samples of your work, please?" And I wrote an essay about it that's in the book.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. I—[inaudible].

MICHAEL BIERUT: And I'd like to think at least he sort of with a little bit of malice, kind of put, like—let's put the Kennedy one on the top and then let's—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so I was having lessons like that delivered viciously to me daily.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so—but it was—it was—but I swear to God, I only needed one of each of those.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And bit by bit, I started kind of like getting my shit together. So I learned that definitely there, you know, how to live in a larger world. Everyone that came through there was interesting. Massimo worked with the best people and also was able—you know, Massimo in one person was able—is able to combine sort of the rigor and seriousness that I associated with my education in Cincinnati—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —the fact that things just had to be unbelievably precise or else—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —The basic universe would be knocked off its axis somehow on one hand. But then the thing was just filled with such exuberance and energy and joy on the other. And people that don't know him miss that second part, right—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —because he can come off as a kind of like—you know, that's the Italian side, right, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Or—I don't mean to characterize people just ethnically, but I mean, I think there's a combination of rigor and joy that he sort of combines. And that's sort of the two things that really inspired me in my college years. I'd get—you know, and he sort of had—if I wanted to put a third leg on the stool, he had sort of this force of personality that was similar to what I was getting—that I got from Dan Bittman in Cincinnati, right, so it was sort of—you know, the fact that it was on you to make this thing happen—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —that was definitely part of Massimo's thing; also that it all had to be absolutely perfect—that was what I sort of learned in my five years of study, and the fact that it was about giving people pleasure and fun and somehow had an intuitive quality to it. That was definitely, like, the WGBH side.

So I went there intending to work only for a year and a half, thinking that I was able to succeed all the way through my career because I sort of was such a good mimic of—I'd sort of see something and I was able to kind of play along with it pretty well. I was able to get it down pretty well.

And in Cincinnati, I sort of saw, oh, they're really going for that Armin Hofmann thing; I know how to do that. And it sounds really facile—and it is facile; it's facile to a fault actually. But I was good at that. So I sort of figured out what each of the teachers wanted and how they wanted it done. And for the most part, I was able to deliver it and pretty much, you know, almost like as a game. I don't have much of an opinion in this. I just—you know, this is your class. You know, you want it that way? I think I know how to do that. Then I would do it that way better than anyone else, right.

That—I don't think it's actually good design, to tell you the truth. And there were better designers in my class at Cincinnati than me, better pure designers who had more heart in it. But I sort of had this facility and this kind of —this ability to kind of extract what the requirements were and deliver them in a really efficient, you know, targeted way. I was able to do it at—it was a little bit harder at GBH, because there was all that content and stuff. And it was more fun.

And then—but when I got to Massimo, I understood right away that he had a certain way of working. There were people that sort of—smart people who had been there before me—and after me probably—while I was there, who sort of would get there and kind of start to chafe under that. And I always wondered why go to—you know, if you've got a taste for egg foo young, what are you in a Mexican restaurant for?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You know, I mean, that's not what you come here to do. I don't think progress is made by people surrendering to their fate the way I'm prone to. But there's a certain pleasure to be had in it too, and particularly as a way of learning, which is how I justified it; that was sort of how I learned while I was there, right.

And when—over those 10 years, some things gradually started to happen. I gained Massimo's trust, he would let me—leave me alone to do things. As I was left alone to do things, I would take some deliberate risks and try some things out that might not be right out of his Vignelli canon. For some reason I think I had an exact—a really good intuition about exactly when to make my moves as far as that went. Had I done it too fast, he would have thought I was a loose cannon and couldn't be trusted with things. Had I done it too slow, I wouldn't have found my own voice in this whole thing.

So I seemed to have kind of really deliberately picked the right pace. Lella Vignelli was really instrumental in that too, because she was always quick to sort of say, "Look, the—look, the kid—Massimo, the kid already understands how to do this; let's let him—let Michael do it the way he wants. Please, Massimo. Don't you have something better to do than to—than to change his thing to look like the thing you've done a million times before? Really." You know, so—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so God bless Leila too. So they were both—and then as surrogate parents, you know, you couldn't ask for better ones.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So I was—I really relished that, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Can you think of a particular project or two that's a good example of this?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Oh, I mean, I can think really clearly of key moments that happened to me, that I learned

really specific lessons there.

In the early '80s, there was a fashion client, who was for—it was—it was like Esprit. They sold to teen girls basically, in California. And I had this kind of very postmodern kind of thing that I'd come up with on my own that—Massimo said, "Let's sit down and talk about this." And I said, "Well, I actually have this thing I've been working on."

I showed it to him, and he—and I remember Lella was there, and Lella said, "This is—Massimo, this thing is perfect. Let Michael do what he wants." He says, "Go ahead."

And so I remember I ran that job myself. It sort of—it is not something worth memorializing now, although it's in the big Vignelli book actually. And so—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, really? Which one?

MICHAEL BIERUT: It's called Santa Cruz. That was the name of the client.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: It's in *Design Vignelli*, the big one. And it was a fun, very early '80s looking program with—very influenced by the—by a bunch of California designers like Michael Vanderbyl and Michael Cronin—a bunch of designers named Michael who were all working out there the same time—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —Michael Manwaring. But it was very kind of California, very imitative of a different genre that Massimo indulged me in. But I remember that being sort of like, wow, that was my own thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And then there's one particular project that I always remember really distinctly. I had a sole responsibility for a client called IDCNY, the International Design Center of New York. And at the very outset of that, Massimo and I determined that we'd use one typeface, which was Bodoni—typeface that he liked, that I liked too—and two colors, black and red, that he also used a lot. So my ability to kind of throw myself with absolute relish into that was one of the things that made me last there that long. And part of it was that I—I remember thinking, oh, who cares—picking typefaces, who cares? No one gives a shit anyway. I mean, it was just the opposite of Massimo's point of view. Massimo thought, you know, anything but Bodoni and, like—you know,—it was a crime against humanity, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Yes. Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And I would sort of think—[inaudible]—Bodoni and Bembo, so how much time should—if the real people out there don't care, let's just pick ones that we like and not—and move on.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so for a good five years, I did every single thing this client needed, from newsletters, brochures, business cards, signs, every little thing they needed. Fern Mallis was my client there, and Fern went on to be the head of the CFDA and started the tent shows on Bryant Park and then Lincoln Center. And now she's on—she's been on *Project Runway* and stuff, and so I'm still friends with her, but—so I met her back in the early '80s starting on this thing, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So I remember Fern was my client, and were having events at this place. It was a furniture showroom, basically. It was out in Long Island City in the renovated Chiclets factory.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: The theory was, like, the Merchandise Mart in Chicago, they would take all these furniture showrooms that were scattered around the Upper East Side and house them in a single building—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —and charge big rents and kind of run it as a real cultural and education center for the interior design and architecture community at a moment in time where that just seemed like the most exciting thing in the world. And Vignelli was, like, the default person you'd go to for that. And, you know, you had Mario

Botta designing showrooms. You had Stanley Tigerman and—Michael Graves designing showrooms. Charlie Gwathmey was the architect for the building. It was really great. And then this was at a point where I was all—where I'd gotten my muscles built up and I knew all the names. I was totally into it. I was, like, totally psyched about this.

And the firm called me up and said that, "We're having this great event for designers on, you know—you know, a month from today, and it's—we're having the Progressive Architecture Furniture Awards here, and we're going to have all the winning furniture here in a symposium." And I thought, "Well, that's great."

And so I started doing this invitation for that thing, thinking that I had this really great idea—this was the height of the Memphis movements, so all this avant-garde furniture and stuff, right.

And then I got a call saying, "Oh, one more thing. We need an invitation for this lecture we're having by these scientists from NASA talking about designing, you know, spacecraft interior and the [ergonomic ?] things that go into that." "Wow, these are great jobs!" So I started designing that.

And then she called up after I was under way—[inaudible]—and said, "Michael, bad news—we've got the budgets cut, and we have to do those two—you have to combine those two invitations." And I remember literally being, like, who's going to come to something—like, come to this or come to that—it's like—you know, the things don't go together at all. I said, "This is truly a—and this is really bad—it's a bad marketing idea. It's a bad design idea. Everything about it is bad." And she said, "Well, complain all you want, but unless you can figure out a way to get more money to do this, it's going to be one invitation, and that's all we're going to do," right.

So I remember I literally hung up the phone and took out a piece of paper and said, you know, "Fuck me, this thing has got to be one thing—it's got nothing to do with anything else, you know. I mean, it would have to be something, you know—funny coffee table, vase of flowers on top like that, right." And so I said, "What if it says 'Progressive Architecture Furniture Awards' there and then here it says 'lecture by scientists from NASA'?" Right, so it's a rocket ship, and it's a little end table with a pot of flowers in the top. And I remember I looked at that and thought, wow, this reminds me of my dad pointing out that—the L in the Clark logo. You know, it was, like, this little thing that wasn't—a second ago wasn't there, and now it's there.

And the cool thing about it was—you know, make this red, make this thing white, make all this black and make this type Bodoni. So it went exactly the Vignelli program, but it didn't matter if it was red or Bodoni or any of those things. And it also didn't matter I drew that thing. It was just kind of like a pure idea that existed—didn't have anything to do with craft or anything to do with anything. So of all the things I've designed, that's sort of like the only really old thing that I still show in my portfolio, because I still remember thinking—and, like, and knowing when I did it that this—that, you know—that I was going to call up Fern and say, "I hope you're sitting down; I'm about to send you a really nice present, okay. Just enjoy it and figure out how to thank me later." I just—you know, it's just so great when you know you've got it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: It's just so great. And sure enough, it worked. She printed it—the thing is only that big. It's, like—it's maybe six by 12. It's been reproduced—and most people think it's, like, the size of a subway poster. They have no idea it's like this miserable little thing that went out as—it's a self-mailer; got a stamp and address on the back. But I remember at that time thinking, wow, this is the coolest thing in the world, and this is what design is all about, right. You have to know the names of the typeface. You have to know the names of the colors. You have to go resolve all the formal things. But just to be able to kind of, like, make a leap and connect up things like that were just so exciting.

I remember that really, really clearly. And kind of looking for that moment—it doesn't happen all the time, and some projects actually don't require it. Some projects can't sustain it or can't provide it. But somehow that little moment of surprise and joy and just synthesizing something that wasn't—combining two things in a way to create a third thing just—I mean, when it happens, it's just so nice.

And what's great about it is that it requires some kind of craft to achieve, but people don't need to know anything about the specifics of that assignment. If they like that thing, it's not because they know anything about the client. They don't even know who the client is usually. They don't even quite get what the two lectures were.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: It helps that they sort of know that in the Memphis period, furniture really did look like that—you know, not exactly but more or less. But normal people can think it's funny.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So it seemed really accessible in a way that I thought was really nice, too. So I remember that really distinctly. I remember where I was sitting. I remember what time of day it was. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Vignelli was so clearly focused on modernism and paring down to the essentials. At some point, did you want to experiment and try something else, and that was the reason for moving on?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, well, what's funny is that Massimo would probably—he wouldn't have been excited about that like I was. He would have thought that was corny. And he sort of thought, "Eh, corny—it's kind of a— it's a corny, cute thing."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And he sort of was always suspicious of things that were cute.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: The other place I really was trying to get an interview at and also failed to get an interview at—back when I hit the jackpot at Massimo's—was at Chermayeff & Geismar. And so Ivan Chermayeff was sort of another really iconic designer, still with us to this day. But his *métier* was much more like posters and logos.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so, you know, he did all those—I knew his work when I was at WGBH. His work was—he did all those *Masterpiece Theater* posters—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —for—back in the days where it would be a poster of *War and Peace*. It would be—and the poster would—it would say *War and Peace*, be a pyramid of cannonballs with a dove on top. Bang. Done. It's, like, painted with a sloppy paintbrush. And it was just done. And there was something called—some—*Churchill: The Lost Years*—that was another *Masterpiece Theater* thing—just a face, cigar and smoke obscuring the face, right. So it just—it was maybe *Churchill: The Lost Years* and just was a nice—[inaudible]—so great.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And his logos, the same thing. He just did really beautiful, concise logos. And Massimo was never the best for doing—Massimo did—was great doing systems—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —systems that had logic that kind of made them work: a subway map or an identity system, the national parks program—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —you know, things that could kind of go—that had such strong kind of architectural kind of—no, it wasn't mechanical—strong—[inaudible]—character that they could go—they were like perpetual motion machines; they would just kind of work forever.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And I have to admit that that's—I mean, that came to attract me quite a bit too. So it wasn't so much—I wouldn't say it wasn't so much the modernism of that—of the Vignelli way that started chafing, because I liked modernism, and I sort of still admire all his work, and can still be excited about it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: He just was sort of—this was someone else's rules, and I'd been playing by someone else's rules for 10 years. And I was—whatever I was, 32, 33 by then—and had spent, you know, one-third of my life on earth in this single job—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I remember doing all the—I'm kind of working out all these figures in my mind—wow, one-third of my life under—and thinking well, either I commit to stay here for the rest of my life and sort of make that plan—this is my chance to do something new.

So actually—and I'd actually come to the thought that I was going to do something new, but at that point—all

the obvious options had evaporated for me. My friends who wanted to go off on their own and start their own offices had done that, you know, done that by five years or six years or seven years before when—before they had mortgages and kids, and also when there was a certain kind of daredevil joy in kind of flying solo, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I had sort of gotten used to having a lot of people around. The idea of just kind of, like, me having nothing to look at except the thing that I was designing just seemed like, Jesus, that's—it's terrible. And if someone comes there to see me—even the prospect of having to design my own business card—it all seemed exhausting to me. I sort of liked the idea that stuff was going on.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Collaboration, yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And also—and that's—it's still about the collaboration and the connection, too—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —this idea of kind of being isolated—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —and pursuing my vision, again, that's like too much like a garret. I didn't want to be in a garret.

And so I happened to be invited to give a talk at Pentagram by another one of my heroes, Woody Pirtle, another guy who Massimo really thought was great. And Woody was interesting because he was sort of a combination of Ivan Chermayeff, Milton Glaser, and Massimo; had really great, precise design chops like Massimo; had—could draw an idea like Ivan—or could draw like Milton and could come up with ideas like Ivan. He just was, like, really a great designer. He was working in Dallas, Texas, at the time that we first heard about them. And I remember Massimo was working on a project where he needed—Woody had sent up a copy of his work, and I remember spreading it out and thinking, wow. I'd known about Woody since I was in college because I applied for a job in Texas actually because I liked his work so much.

So Woody called me up and invited me to give a talk at Pentagram. I didn't know it then, but this is sort of how they audition potential new partners—sometimes. Sometimes he just wants someone to give a talk.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: So don't get excited. But I didn't know. I just was going to give a little presentation of my work, right.

So I came to give a presentation of my work. It would have been July-ish 1990. I remember the first day—I was supposed to it on July 10th, 1990, but then my son was born that day, so I couldn't do it that day. So I had to do it later.

So I came in, did that presentation, got taken out to dinner by Woody afterwards, and we went to Steak Frites, I think, down on 19th Street. And he said, "Well, are you thinking about what you're going to do? Are you going to work at Vignelli forever?" And I said, "You know, it's funny, I've been thinking about doing something different." And he said, "Well, would you consider coming to Pentagram?" And I said, "Like, as what? Like, as a designer, like, as your designer?" He said, "No, no, as a partner."

And I was, like—like, I literally was, like, kind of like, "Wow," because I knew about Pentagram. Colin Forbes, one of the founders, had spoken at the University of Cincinnati when I was a senior there. And it's like a legendary thing, and not only that but they'd done this book called *Living by Design* that really made this case that designers could do anything and it's better if they do it together, it's better if they collaborate and it's better if everything is kind of conceived as a lifestyle. It just sort of seemed like utopia to me, just like sort of everything I loved about working at WGBH, everything I loved about working on a magazine—and not only that, but the five founding partners were all legendary superstar designers. It was like going from a monotheistic society to a polytheistic society, I guess, where there were, like, multiple gods in a pantheon, right.

And so I was just blown away by this. But of course as guys are repressed going, "Hm, interesting," you know, so I didn't—I didn't spit out my drink or kind of knock over the table, as I should have because I was losing my mind. And I remember—I remember I was, like, peeing my pants—[inaudible]—sort of shook hands. [And we were like, -MB] talking—You know, [we'll-MB] talk a little bit more about that thing, all right. Okay, yeah.

And so I sort of, like, said goodbye to Woody, "thanks for dinner," and everything. Then I remember I just sort of, like, threw myself at the next payphone, shoved quarters into it, called my wife and said, "Dorothy, you'll never

believe what just fucking happened. I just can't believe it."

And so it is funny because if I—I would have never guessed that I would have been considered for that—a position like that, because every other partner who had joined at that point—almost every one that had joined Pentagram by 1990—and you know the Pentagram structure is, it's originally five guys who were partners—one architect, one product designer, three graphic designers. They have—it's like a confederation, where each partner manages his or her own projects—[inaudible]—and has his or her own staff.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But they work in tandem on certain projects. They work on—[inaudible]—projects where—[inaudible]—projects, but they manage their office together, share the cost, share the things, and work under an umbrella named Pentagram, which sort of becomes a collector of all the collective good will so that the footprint you're able to occupy ends up being bigger than anyone could do individually.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: That was the theory. Still is the theory.

So they—so if you were, for instance, in a situation where you wanted to be independent but you still wanted to be part of a group; you wanted to do your own thing but had the ability to—[inaudible]—occasionally collaborate, you start making those specs. And there's only one place that does it that way, only one place, and that's Pentagram.

And so all of a sudden—again—[inaudible]—it was really strange. At a moment of time where I was susceptible to it, Woody called up and kind of made this offer. So I was friends with another designer named Paula Scher. Paula that week called me up and said--

—Hi.

MS. [unidentified person]: Hi.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Is Steve here?

MS. : Steve is here.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Okay.

MS: : I think—[inaudible]—basically—

MICHAEL BIERUT: So you're going to stay for lunch, right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes—

[End of disc.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Michael Bierut at the designer's office in New York City on December 13th, 2011, for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is disc number two.

We just finished talking about your move to Pentagram. And let's spend some time talking about some of the—there have been hundreds of projects.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Clearly we're not going to cover all of them. But I thought if we talked about a sampling of projects over the past 15 years, each of which focused on a different type of design—

MICHAEL BIERUT: Right—yeah, sure.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. So the first one that comes to my mind is in '96 in Celebration, Florida. But if there's something else you'd prefer to start with, by all means we can.

MICHAEL BIERUT: No, when I came to Pentagram in 1990, I only had one client, that was someone I'd been working with when I was at the Vignellis, who they had never met and sort of didn't—you know, just figured, "You take this—you can have this client and move on." But I didn't presume to—I didn't want to take any clients from there—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —so I was happy to kind of be on my own. And I had only one—I was sharing one designer with Woody Pirtle—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —who was one of his designers. He sort of lent her to me to work with me on certain projects. And the one client I had actually is a guy—was a guy named Peter Joseph.

MIJA RIEDEL: I know him.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I don't know if you've ever heard of him.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But he was a banker, a financier, who had this real passion for art, specifically—a couple different things—American—he loved American craft furniture and so became an early enthusiastic collector of Albert Paley, Wendell Castle—and eventually opened a gallery on Upper 5th Avenue called the Peter Joseph Gallery, where he showed a lot of this stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, exactly.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And at the same time, he also loved ballet and became—was chairman of the board of the American Ballet Theater. And he was also kind of—when I met him, he was—finance is one thing I don't quite get, but he was—he had an investment bank that was affiliated with the Bass family in Texas, and he was running it here in New York—I think—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: I mean, I don't want to—I slip immediately out of my depth when I'm describing stuff like this.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So you might want to correct that all out of the record.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But his real job was doing that, but his passions were doing these other things. And so—and he was my one client when I joined.

And so after I joined, I did, like, a brochure for his investment bank. I ended up doing two brochures for the investment bank. He started another venture; I did the identity for them. He started the gallery; I did a whole bunch of catalogs for the gallery, got to work with a lot of the artists there. And he also really wanted—great guy—from the point of view of the archives, it's kind of interesting, because he sort of had this dedication to—if he was putting on a show by an artist, he wanted to have a catalog that kind of memorialized that show.

MIJA RIEDEL: For every show?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Every show. Every show. They weren't—some of them—some of the major ones were perfect-bound catalogs with, you know, 50-64-plus pages, let's say. Some of the more modest ones were 16-page saddle-stitch affairs. But every single one of them got something; and usually, frequently, almost always an essay of some sort, often by Arthur Danto, you know, and it was kind of amazing actually.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is extraordinary.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yep. And he—and he had the same impulse at American Ballet Theater. He sort of—it fell onto —[inaudible]—the souvenir program with the "compliments of our friends" ads printed in it at one point. And that thing turned into, like, a hardcover book with the—you know, so he had a way of making design— [inaudible].

He unfortunately died young, really young. And I still work with his wife, who's a lady named Wendy Joseph, who's an architect. And so I'm on the board of the Architectural League of New York with her and some other things.

So that was my first client when I joined, though. And surprisingly, it led to a lot of interesting work. And I think my second client was this guy named Terron Schaefer, who then worked for Brookstone, but now he's the senior vice president, creative director of Saks Fifth Avenue. So he's my client in that capacity now. So that goes back to 1990.

So step by step, I kind of would build up my business. And it usually happened the same way. At Pentagram, we don't have salespeople or account executives. And so any work that we do is generally because one of the partners has some connection with someone or someone's come to think that, you know, one of those partners can help him, you know, help—the client's going to think that a partner can provide some advice that would be useful and will come around seeking that advice.

And in the case of Celebration, Florida, that was a combination of a number of things. I had started working with the architect Robert Stern when he was a client of Massimo Vignelli's.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I did—I worked on a letterhead for Jacque Robertson when he was Peter Eisenman's partner back in the '80s. And Jacque and Bob—Jacque Robertson and Bob Stern were co-planning this—master planning this town for Disney called Celebration—it was to be called Celebration, Florida. And there's a whole history about how Disney came to decide that they would go and—briefly go into the business of residential development. But the key thing was, is that this corresponded at a time when Michael Eisner was considered perhaps at that moment the country's greatest architectural patron. Stern sat on his board of directors, and he was commissioning work from, you know, Graves, Gehry—you know, all sorts of people.

And this real estate project they had was developing this town in Florida. Now, this was also a moment when new urbanism was first coming to the fore. Coincidentally, I—there was a guy I knew through the Architectural League of New York named David Mohney with a woman, Keller Easterling, had done a book called *Seaside: Making a New Town in America*, that I designed—I think I started it at Vignelli and finished it at Pentagram, I think. It was right in the 1990s when it came out. And it was basically a survey of all these buildings done in this town, Seaside, that was the—really the first ambitious town built on New Urbanist principles, with Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk as the town planners in the Florida panhandle, famous to the world because it was the set for—it was the site for the exterior shots in *The Truman Show*—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —perfect storybook town. But actually interesting is they have a lot of good architects working there in different genres, including some interesting modernist buildings that sort of just were—fit the scale of the town. So it's really an interesting sort of place.

So I did this book that just documented all those buildings. And then I got this call saying I'd be interviewed by Disney about doing the graphics for this town they were building in central Florida near Orlando. I was able to go into that interview with a great deal of enthusiasm, partly because I knew so much about new urbanism already.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And it so happened that the people who were doing the project were really true believers, very idealistic actually. I'm always quick to contradict anyone of—[inaudible]—anyone of the idea this was some sort of sinister, Disney-esque sort of thing. These guys really wanted to build the model town sort of—you know, which Epcot was originally supposed to be the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So they were going to show how one could be built based on kind of 1990s New Urbanist planning principles. And so Stern and Robertson were the master planners, and we got the commission to do the—originally just to do the town—just sort of do the town graphics, but we—then we ended up doing all sorts of things, including consulting on paint colors for the undersides of interstate highway underpasses. We did pattern books for the home—books that the homeowners could use to kind of, like, design their houses out of, kind of classic revivals in a way of early—late 19th-century, early 20th-century homebuilders' pattern books—you know, this kind of window, this kind of, you know, cupola or front porch or things like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: We ended up doing a—with my partner, Jim Biber, we did a sales center there. And so we did all this stuff. And what was really great was it was a huge, complicated, sprawling thing where we were working with the Department of—Florida Department of Transportation; the gas, power and electric companies; this huge supreme court of designers, who were—it's not just Stern and Robertson but Graves, Johnson, Venturi, Pelli, on and on—good landscape architects in—[inaudible]—good lighting designers, so it was really this great multidisciplinary thing.

And also sort of—it was funny because it was—it's actually hard to design—you know, the new—that kind of design solution, you know, new urbanism, requires sort of a willingness to kind of be a storyteller or—it's not

about imposing modernist principles on things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You had to figure out a way to kind of create something that will provide a little bit of comfort and sort of look like it's always been there. And especially daunting when the client is Disney, and they really are masters at that sort of thing. But in a way, it was useful that the client was Disney somehow, because that also provided kind of a check that they were—they took a hand in doing, where it couldn't quite be—they weren't really trying to make a stage set or kind of create the little-town-America part of Disneyworld. It had to be authentic and lasting and well-built and everything.

And so if you go there now, I think it's still—it feels fairly convincing, actually, as a place to live. It's not for everyone.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: If you've made up your mind you're going to live in central Florida anyway, I'm not sure, even if you're everyone, how many options everyone has. And if I was there, I'd—this place at least you can get around on foot. If you have a family, it's a nice place—there's—real outdoor life is possible there. You don't need to have a car to go.

So it's actually—it's really nice. And sort of again, to go down for the grand opening and to walk on streets over manhole covers you had a hand in designing, under street signs you had a hand in designing; you know, past fences you had a hand in designing, it's actually, like, sort of really—architects, I guess, do it all the time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But what's interesting—I think architects design buildings that are kind of like, you know, whoa, it's a building. There's something insidious about—not insidious, but there's something—there's something more interesting to me about inserting this thing into people's lives. And it's not the thing really they're looking for necessarily.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: It was like when I described what George—the thrill that I assume George Lois would have felt when a new *Esquire* would come out with his work on its cover. You know, the thrill wasn't that the—although on some cases, he would say the entire city would stop and talk about one of his covers, because he did—he did astonishing covers for them, really gutsy covers. But a lot of times it just was satisfaction of sort of seeing this object take a life—integrate itself into everyday life in a—in the world.

And I think that's one of the nice things about Celebration is that I've never heard anyone say "I love the signs down there." I—there's been two—at least two full-length books written by sociologists about life in Celebration, neither of which, I believe, comments at all on the signs. I think one of them will say—[inaudible]—on the logo, and we actually designed more of a seal for it than a logo, because towns don't have logos, they have seals, right. But that was just known to kind of reinforce sort of the idea that it was a synthetic Disney place, which I think on one hand it is, but on the other hand, any manmade thing is synthetic. And the aesthetic question is how you find your way to making the formal choices you have to make to have it fit into the world.

So that was satisfying. It took a long time.

MIJA RIEDEL: How long did it take?

MICHAEL BIERUT: I would say we probably worked on that for maybe five or six years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes. It involved so many different elements. And the client was great. They were just a great, great client. And I remember saying in those early days, "If I can just get"—you know, vowed that I would really try just to get, like, a half dozen really good clients and just do whatever they—just do whatever it took to kind of, like, keep working with them. You know—

MIJA RIEDEL: You've written extensively about what makes a good client.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: But what in particular about Disney early on did you identify—

MICHAEL BIERUT: They weren't cynical at all about this project. They were quite clear about it on one hand, weren't cynical on the other. They—like I've often told people, they're much more idealistic than some of the nonprofits I've worked with—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —in terms of just what they thought—

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —yes, I mean, the idea they had about what they were doing and the impact it could have on American life, you know. Once a real model for this sort of housing was built, the thought was people would see it and they wouldn't be building these kind of, you know, fossil-fuel-consuming automotive—

MIJA RIEDEL: Suburban sprawl, yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —automobile-directed cul-de-sac, you know, developments with McMansions off big lawns but instead would do these more compact towns a little more suited to the way—

MIJA RIEDEL: Multi—right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I think it did have an impact. I think the impact it had, whether Disney made it more convincing for most people or not is an interesting question, but it was exciting to be—you felt like you were involved in a great, stirring enterprise of building something that's going to last. If you're a graphic designer—I do a lot of things that don't make it to sunset. People get it in the mail, they look at it, they register whatever it's supposed to be, and they throw it in the garbage can or just click the—you know, the "delete" icon sometimes these days and that's that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: To build something that you think, you know, is going to see people from kindergarten through high school graduation and then be around every time they come home from—for Christmas and, you know, everything else, is sort of interesting, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So that was fun that way. But on counter—at the same time I'd be doing that, I'd be doing stuff that literally—I mean, that you could literally do in a few hours in an afternoon. And that's its own kind of satisfaction, too, right. So—

MIJA RIEDEL: This was '96. I want to just touch briefly on Yale as well, because you started teaching there in '93, is that right?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. How did that come about? I think of the three—I think of the sort of three pillars of your career; I think of Pentagram, and I think of Yale, and I think of *Design Observer*—[inaudible].

MICHAEL BIERUT: [Laughs.] That's—yes, that's weird, isn't it?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So, I mean, Yale was—you know, I didn't go to Yale, or I—far from it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I went to the University of Cincinnati. And I—although some of my teachers were from Yale. And I remember when I worked for Vignelli, a couple times I went up there and visited Chris Pullman's class. Because he was a teacher there, he'd have me come up as, like, a real designer working in the city come up and talk about what that's like, right.

Then—I forget—I forget the exact date, but in the early '90s, there was a real changing of the guard there. The guy who had been the department head for decades, Alvin Eisenman, retired, and a lot of the stable of teachers he had built up kind of—who were all—a lot of whom were his age or older, kind of decided they'd move on at the same time. So that was a whole pantheon of people like Paul Rand, Armin Hofmann, I think were teaching there, right.

And so Sheila started—Sheila Levrant de Bretteville then was brought in to be the new department head. She was an alumna of the program. And she started to put together a new faculty. And it must have been shortly after—and I think she and I knew each—you can delete all—I mean, this is in the interest of completism—I mean, where else would—[inaudible]—I think.

Okay, so I had this other client called Mohawk Paper. It's a business-y kind of client these days, but—or always was. But they're like one of my earliest most favoritest clients in the world, who I work with to this day and just love them. And I could name projects I've done for them that I'm as passionate about as any of the other ones I'll name. And there's a client there named Laura Shore who's trusted me to do so many different things through the years. I just answered a little questionnaire about a series I did that I might have actually named as something else I can talk about. Laura asked me in the early '90s if I would do—they said, "We need a mailer just to send to designers to show the different things we can print on the different kinds of paper we have."

But this is what's called an open brief, and so I think most designers love this sort of thing because they're artists and they have artistic ideas. But I'm not an artist, all right, so I'm, like—it has to be on paper and it has to be sent to designers, okay. That makes me despair actually.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: It's, like—it's not inspiring to me at all. So luckily I had this—I had this impulse where I thought, okay, so I've got nice things, right. And what most designers will do is I'll do this cool-looking stuff, print it a million different ways and create the biggest orgy of eye candy yet [printed-MB] paper and send that to designers, and they'll just be dumbstruck by my virtuosity, by the printing techniques and how great the paper looks, and then we'll be predisposed to specify this paper—[inaudible].

So—and if that works—I mean, people seem to pull that off, so more power to them. I said, "I can't do that. So here's my idea." Those things, I think, a lot of times I throw in the garbage can, recycled or put in a file somewhere. I said, "I'd like to do something that would end up on someone's bookshelf. So what if we published this little journal of design thinking?" And that hadn't really been done that much. This was before *Design Observer*, before a lot of—you know, there were, like, the trade magazines. Then I think there was, like—you know, there was, like, *Design Journal* published variously from, like, MIT, then from—I think [Ohio-MB] State University published—[inaudible].

At any rate, so—but there was no real, kind of what I would thought would be an accessible, interesting, literate thing about design ideas.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So I decided I would design and edit one myself. So we published this thing called *Rethinking Design*. It ended up having five issues that came out probably over seven or so years that have—and each one was a completely different design. They were all—you know, each one sort of had a basic sort of theme.

The first one was about what we now call sustainability but then was kind of called environmentalism, I would guess. The second one was about the future of print in the digital age. The third one was about the future of the book. The fourth one was about the different ideas of media or—it's called "Medium." It's just about the different ideas of what—of how people were communicating at that point in time. And the last one was about popular culture or subcultures in design, rather, specifically.

And so we did these five series. And we did these five book things. And I've done a lot of other stuff for Mohawk through the years, too, three different logo identity programs for them, all these different great things. They're a great company, and they're run by family up in Cohoes, New York, and—called the O'Connors. And they've always had traditionally a lot of connections to Yale.

And one of the connections they had was—there's this famous paper they make called Mohawk Superfine—[inaudible]—a little not—it's kind of greenish, this paper. They make this paper—beautiful printing—book-printing paper called Mohawk Superfine that supposedly was mixed and tinted exactly to a certain hue—soft white, it's called—at the instruction of Alvin Eisenman, who is Sheila de Bretteville's predecessor at Yale in that program. And so there's always been this sense of, like, Yale and Mohawk have this special connection. I think maybe the O'Connors, like, traditionally went to Yale. I don't know. But it's like this Yale thing.

So they started—Mohawk started convening this designers advisory council for a few years back in the early '90s. And I was on it, and then someone else who was on it was Sheila de Bretteville, who was the chair of the Yale School of Graphic Design. So I met her there, I believe. And I think I met her there before she asked me to come teach.

And so I started teaching there back in '93 in the school of art, in the graduate graphic design program. And I

tried—for a few years, I taught, like, a normal—I tried to teach this normal class. And I was not good at teaching the normal class. My attention span is too short, and I just don't seem to have a knack for it. Another designer there who was a visiting—or another teacher there, who was a visiting adjunct professor named Paul Elliman, a British guy, who was there for several years—and he was a great teacher, a beloved teacher—said to me, "What are you planning on doing this next semester?" And I said, "Well, you know, I think I was going to [do-MB] the thing I did last semester, I didn't want to do that but I really kind of cranked it up and described this, like, five-week sequence of escalating things that would get more—you know, actually more boring and taxing for me and the students and everyone else until we all just surrendered."

And he said—well, I didn't put it in those terms. I sort of put it in, you know, my visionary, idealistic terms. He said, "Well, you could do that, or what if every class you just showed up and—you showed up, like, exactly what you are but play it up more, like, you know, I'm this guy who works down in the city; last night I grabbed the thing I was working on off my desk, and I'll just throw it on the table this morning, and let's all just have at it, spend a day, see what we do; and then I'll just take it away, and you'll never have to worry about it again."

And I said, "Like a series of one-day projects based on real-world situations?" And he said, "Yes, exactly."

So that's what I started doing. I realized this one-day project was actually more healthy for me. So that was the first thing I did. So I had this whole series of one-day projects I did, which were really a riot, and I had two kinds of standby things that I did. One was to design an illustration for the op-ed page of *The Times*.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And I was able to work with the editors of *The Times* and get live editorials that hadn't run yet and hand them out, and the students would actually illustrate them. And then I would drop them off the next morning at *The Times*. And one year I had three different editorials, and I went three for three. They all ran with illustrations from my class actually. And these are students who are used to doing it Yale—you know, the classic way that I was taught, where projects take—if a project doesn't take three months, it's not really a project. So this is sort of like—and I would say, again, "There's only one requirement for success, and this project has to be done by 5:00. It doesn't have to be good; it has to be done by 5:00. It doesn't matter how great it is. If it's not done by 5:00, it doesn't work. It has to be done by 5:00. You got it?"

And people all pretended they got it, but even then they'd think, "let me game him and say I can't get it done by 5:00." "No, it has to be done by 5:00." I would do that. I'd have them design book covers—so I'd just would do different things that literally should—things—the kind of the things that could be done in a day. So I did that for a year.

Then I came up with this other—I got bored with that, and I came up with this other idea that was the 100-day [project-MB] it was sort of the opposite, but it was still—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —a little bit the opposite, but a little bit the same in a way. What I was trying to do is make design seem something you could habituate and do easier, do it almost without thinking—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —you know, stop kind of, like, over-deliberating it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so that was amazing, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And part of what was amazing about that was that, you know, you give it as an assignment; half the class, at best, would make it through to the end.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But almost every single one of the people that made it to the end had something that was kind of amazing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And some of the things were really amazing. You know, so I did that for a few years. But I just decided last year—I told Sheila I couldn't—, I didn't want to do that anymore because I'd done it for five years in

a row, and I thought it was played out. And I was really pissed at last year because, they weren't just bailing on me, but they were being babies and not confessing they were bailing on me.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: They'd tell me at the last minute, "Oh, I stopped after number 37." Well, that was months ago. I'm not going to punish you or hit you. Just tell me. I—[inaudible]—stop emailing you about it, okay, those kids—boy, those kids today, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: So at any rate—so that was—so I started teaching that class, and I'm still—now I'm scheduled—I'm trying to do some new thing that I'm still trying to work out in my mind what it's going to be. But luckily I only go up in these, like, little short bursts now. I don't have to go up and spend a week there, which I'm not—it'd be interesting to see what would happen if I had the luxury to do that, but I just don't. I just go there one day at a time.

And in the midst of that, me and Bill Drenttel—more on him later—got asked to—well, I think Bill got asked whether he'd be interested in teaching a class in the school of management about design. And he asked me whether I would do it with him. So he and I have done that now for going on four years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And that's completely different. So those students are all MBA students, so what we do is we sort of try to teach some cases in design in different things that will help MBA students. That class is hard. You have to really prepare.

MIJA RIEDEL: What do you try and teach in those classes? What do you hope they'll take away from that?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Actually, if they sort of get—well, I mean, I'm not sure—I'm not sure how—if we can get them all the way—what we're trying to do is actually start them on a—start any of them on a journey so that, assuming that each one of these guys in the class is going to be successful in one way or another, there will come a time where they're going to be asked to get involved in some sort of design process or at least a design decision. And having sat on the other side of the table so many times with people that are in that process and who are not equipped to—who don't feel they're equipped to do it—They don't have to go to five years of design school. So—they just have to sort of understand what the nature of the process is and how they can best contribute and what kind of contribution they can make that'll make it—that will ensure—or at least it'll make it more inclined towards success, right.

And so basically that's what we—I mean, part of it is—a lot of it is just kind of straight unfamiliarity. So some of what we'll do will just be simply to introduce some of the idea of how different designers have worked on things, how different clients have worked on things. We'll have guest lecturers come up and talk about specific situations.

And then a lot of times—I mean, for three years in a row, we've given this thing called—we've done this assignment called the "merger project," where we'll ask them to imagine—to propose a merger between two companies. And it can be—it has to be plausible, but it could be—it doesn't have to be watertight as a business case. It just has to not be random, right.

And then assume that the merged company will go out and do business as a merged entity. And assume that they need some sort of new kind of identity going forward. Do they need a new name? Do they take on one name, or do they name one of the partners or the other? What aspects of their visual or experiential expression do they have out there that needs to be considered in terms of what the merger would be?

And so we have them more or less write the kind of thing that would be a brief for a designer in that case, right. So I've had the woman at Citibank who was responsible for leading the design work that moved Citi and Travelers come up and talk. We had a consultant to Miller Beer come to them talk about merging Miller and Coors, which had happened, like, the year before. This year I think the plan is—if it comes off; everyone said yes, but I worked for United Airlines for 15 years, and I can talk about that too—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —but at the end of those 15 years, they merged with Continental.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And United invited three different firms to come and make a proposal about what they should

do coming forward. I was one of the firms, and I know the other two firms. So I persuaded all three of us to come and make those presentations to the class. So none of us have ever seen the other one. So it'll be interesting to see whether that comes off, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that's great. Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So it's interesting, because somehow if it's just, "Oh, I need a new logo," that's not that interesting, or I think that's too hard to do or it's—it can be too anything. But the idea of, you know, like, two known things coming together, creating something new, it's sort of—you know, it's—that's what—that's how life goes on, you know, parents come together and give birth to children all the time. And so it's—the idea of—the metaphor is for that in terms of heredity and experience versus what's innate and what's learned. All these things kind of—what is that offspring go off and do is sort of a nice thing. So that's what we teach in that class. And—it's not only that, but it's other things too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sounds like a coffee table on a rocket ship sort of—[inaudible].

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, a little bit—yeah, a little bit—potentially. It'd be nice if it was.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So anyway—so—then in the midst of all that—just so you know, in the midst of all that, I somehow got a reputation of a good graphic designer who knew Yale enough that I could also work on projects there. So the school of music—or the school of drama, rather, was trying to put together an anniversary book for a big celebration they were having. They were having trouble doing it, and someone said, "Oh, why don't you maybe have Michael Bierut come in and look at it." So I helped them with that, did all this stuff around the drama school's hundredth anniversary a decade or so ago. I did all the stuff around that.

The school of medicine was doing a fundraising—or an admission—they needed an admissions brochure, and a lady up there interviewed—had heard that I had worked for the school of drama, so I ended up doing this stuff for the school of medicine. I've done all the stuff for their latest capital campaign. I did all the admissions stuff that the Yale College sends to prospective students.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Some—I don't have it—[inaudible]—taken a single class there.

MIJA RIEDEL: And then the school of architecture and the posters.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes. So then in the midst of all this, Robert Stern from Celebration called me up and asked me if—he was appointed dean of the school of architecture. He's a very, very notable alumnus of it, was a prodigy there in its glory days when Paul Rudolph was a teacher there and was there in the early '60s with—where it was really—

MS. : Attention—[inaudible]. In the third floor, you will find the—[inaudible]—party. Please join us for cookies and beverages.

MICHAEL BIERUT: We collect a bunch of stuff to give to needy families, so we're ramping up—

MIJA RIEDEL: I was just talking about the galas at lunch.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: She was explaining it.

MICHAEL BIERUT: We do that every year.

MIJA RIEDEL: Watch out for the cookies, though. [They laugh.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes—no conversation; I would just be grabbing.

And so Bob had been appointed dean. He was on the search committee, and somehow as happens sometimes, his name came up, but I think they had assumed he wouldn't—this is just speculation—my guess is they assumed he wouldn't be able to do it because he has such a thriving practice in New York. And he had an interesting career trajectory. He had started out, I think, as sort of almost an experimental architect who was doing this daring and very—what's the word for it—it was sort of like overturning the modernist paradigm by doing these projects that were overtly introducing these historicist elements, right. And this was—this was before Philip Johnson on the AT&T Building with the Chippendale top. He was doing these projects very

influenced by—well, influenced by Venturi. He had caused *Complexity and Contradiction* to be published in—I think to be published in *Perspecta* at Yale and he was the editor of it back in the early '60s.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, right, that sounds—

MICHAEL BIERUT: I think—now, these are all—I say these things as if I know what I'm talking about, but I'm not picturing being published by the Archives of American Art.

But so anyway, he sort of started out there and, I think, almost in spite of himself to a certain degree became a very, very successful commercial architect, you know, everything from private hands for really wealthy people to whole towns like Celebration to corporate office buildings and all this other stuff.

So I had done a series of monographs for him—picture books of his work. And so when he—so he got appointed head of the Yale School of Architecture and called me to his office and said he wanted to commission a graphic program for them. And he said—he said a number of things that were really exciting to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Like?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Like he said something that I think is—I think it's so blindingly obvious, but it's amazing how many—how few people actually commit to it. He said, "The school—the school does things all the time, and no one knows about it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And we're going to do even more, but I want everyone to know about it. I want—every single time we do something, I want to make sure the world knows."

And what this actually translates to is—you know, so we publish—you know—[have] you ever been to a presentation there in the auditorium?

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

MICHAEL BIERUT: It's not a big place.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You know, the mailing list they have must be sufficient—I'm guessing is sufficient to fill that auditorium 10 times over. So they're not sending out invitations to the events that they have there because they will consider it a disaster if you don't attend the event.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: They're just putting it out there because they want you to know that stuff is happening up at the Yale School of Art, that more stuff is happening there than's happening anywhere else. He said, "I'm going to make sure that people know that this is where stuff is happening. I'm going to absolutely make sure that they know that."

And which—and it's just funny how everyone sort of thinks, oh, yeah, of course, you know, that makes sense. But it just—it takes work to keep that torrid pace up.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You know, you have to be unrelenting. And he—and Bob is, and his staff is. And so more power to them. And they've done—and they do—and then, you know, they'll do a symposium on Eero Saarinen that'll lead to an exhibition on Eero Saarinen that'll lead to a major catalogue raisonné on Eero Saarinen, so then they'll just keep pressing and kind of deriving more and more value for things, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Saarinen has a Yale connection, but he's—he could say he studied at Cranbrook, didn't he—so built a couple of buildings at Yale but built buildings at Harvard too. You know, so—but then Yale then comes to own Eero Saarinen. They had a similar thing—they had a big event on the—on *Learning from Las Vegas*, the seminal book by the Venturis, you know, that—and the Venturis did teach a—did teach at Yale, but they were—I'd say they're much more associated with Philadelphia and probably Penn, right, but there goes Bob again. You know, he's able to kind of figure out a way to make Yale seem like the center of the universe. And he does it just because he makes sure that he's getting that word out there all the time. And that word is—[inaudible]—graphic form, and that's where someone like me comes in, right, so that's exciting to hear.

The other thing he said, which was really interesting, was my single-sentence brief I got, which was, "I just want to surprise people." And he was surely aware, because he's a smart guy, that when he arrived at Yale, there was much concern up and down the ranks of the other—of the Yale community, of the artist community, that he was just going to impose his own personal vision of architecture upon the place. And I think he rightly kind of resented being underestimated and wanted to confound anyone who thought they knew where they were coming from.

And so I remember I had this—my first presentation I did, I had this simple—I remember I had a lot of pages where there was theories, and he got bored with it, actually, like what I'm showing—but then I remember I said, "I think people think it might look like this." And then I just laid out the words "Yale School of Architecture" in Trajan-style lettering, looking very neoclassical and formal, not unlike the covers, say, of his—the monographs that he's done, the—[inaudible]—he's published, right, as if the whole thing would be made over in his personal image.

And I said, "Or you could do something like this." Then I just took a whole bunch of phrases about architecture and just set each of them in a different typeface. And I said, "What if the only consistency was a complete lack of consistency, and what you do is try to do is make—hold a couple things constant but vary everything else as wildly as possible? And just so anyone thinking that they were going to know—so the very first thing you get from the Yale School of Architecture that comes after you arrive there has to be the last thing people would expect.

And what's interesting is Bob had come from—he was affiliated with Columbia, with their school of architecture and planning and preservation—what's it called—the graduate school of—whatever it's—is had had graphics done for years by the—[inaudible]—under Willi Kunz. Willi had done it all in a single typeface family that he owned—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —Univers Condensed, bold and light, like relentless. And so you could be on your way to take a pee in any architectural office in America—but certainly New York—and you could see one of Willi's posters hanging up by the coffee machine. You could tell without reading a single word—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —without even reading it, never mind looking at the logo—you could tell it was a Columbia poster, which was in that typeface, right. People who didn't know the names of typefaces could tell that just because they all—they all just kind of, like—[inaudible]—same place.

And so I was thinking, well, we could pick our own typeface for Yale, but no, let's do this other thing instead; let's own all of them, right. And so there we embarked on this thing of designing these posters, which—I think we're nearing a hundred now. We must be. We're easily above 75, I would say, at this point. And it's just—it's really been a fun thing, partly because, again, they're a tough client.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: They won't accept just the first idea we send. They come up with great subjects that are really interesting to work with. And the kinds of posters come in three basic flavors. There's the—there's pricier—they do lecture series posters. And that's just sort of like a problem type. You know they're going to have a list of names. People are speaking about different things. But basically it's a schedule poster, where you look at it and you think, oh, I'd love to hear Zaha Hadid talk about this, so I'll put that on my calendar, right.

Then there's another kind of poster that's a symposium poster, and that's generally on a single topic that could range from spirituality in design to lighting in design to the legacy of Saarinen or Charles Moore or James Sterling to psychoanalysis in design—all these different things they've done through the years. And so those things require their own kind of thematic approaches so when you look at them you can kind of guess what they're about, right, even if you don't know.

And then finally the last thing we do are these open-house posters that just go out to potential students. And that's usually just some sort of thing about—sometimes, like, a little visual pun—[inaudible]—opening or something. So—and they're always the same size; they're about 24 by 36. They're always one color—black. And they have—the logo is a "Y" and a circle, but the "Y" changes every time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So it's about theme and variations to a certain degree. As I'm talking about it, I just realized I've come a long way from working my way down that list of people I was calling about the collaboration artists

and architects thing—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —having no idea who any of them were to just being able to reel them off as if they're my oldest friends in the world. And it's a reminder that—sometimes I have interns working on these things, and I'll start briefing them, and they're just sort of taken aback by this torrent of information that's a lot to take in that you have to know to be a good graphic designer actually. People underestimate that. But—and it takes a while to amass the information, so—but it's been a really great collaboration. Bob only calls me in the direst of circumstances, either when he's worried that something's not happening fast enough or if I've sent something and he really think it's missed the mark.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But other than that, he's been really, really supportive. He's got a great team of other faculty and staff that assist in putting the whole thing together. And best of all, if you go visit the architecture building, he's got, like, a whole wall's worth of these posters all framed. They're all the same size, so you just make this—the worst of them—the misses are completely redeemed by the ones that are hits. You know, so it just makes this great wall.

It sort of is a testimony to his—it achieves exactly what he wanted to do. You—if you're touring that place and you see those posters, you think, oh, my God, this is a place where things really do happen and anything that happens here, they really mean it—they take it really seriously.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it sounds like the project for you has been one of really extraordinary continuity; it's a theme and variation over years and years and years—

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —which isn't always the case with—yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Right, not always the case, yeah. And not only—but what's funny is it doesn't seem like years and years. I mean, it really—I swear to God, it seems like—I remember the original presentation like it was yesterday. Every once in a while someone will say they want to exhibit one of the posters, and I can never guess what year they were done. Sometimes I'll think, well, who worked on it with me, and I'll sort of be able to kind of puzzle out the fact that it is this designer who left here in '98, so it must have been done before—I really have to, like, figure it out, like, in this really, like, kind of like laborious way.

But it all seems like one kind of continuous thing to me actually, so it's really been satisfying.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you think about your different projects as—do you think about them as unrelated series, or do you see sort of a thread of continuity connecting them?

MICHAEL BIERUT: I think of them as unrelated series.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I really do. It's funny, because I know having worked for Massimo for 10 years, he really does view his body of work in a similar way that an architect does. He was trained as an architect. But having worked with a lot of architects, I know for a lot of reasons—and their temperamental disposition is just one of them—they tend to conceive of each project as being an extension of an ongoing body of work, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure. Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And some people just lay that down to hubris in a way or just if you go to X architect, he'll get a piece that looks like X architect did it. But actually when you sort of look at the forces that—what it means to actually design a major building, let's say, how long it takes to do, what changes along the way and how long it's going to last afterwards, a lot of the concerns that you face when you're designing a poster, let's say,—some of my projects where they have to be done by 5:00, that's the main thing, right—architects never have anything that has to be done by 5:00. It has to be around for 50 years or 500 years or something, right.

And there's this great book by Richard Meier called *Building the Getty*, which I do not think is sold in the Getty bookshop because it sort of is considered a little bit of—he's an apostate; he sort of is, like—he's not—doesn't

appear in the book to be towing the party line, so I've heard it's not sold in the bookstore. But it's really this amazing account of building that museum. And you really realize he's constantly getting his hand forced by the—I don't know, the Brentwood Homeowner's Association and this particular director and this curator and this board member, some of whom—and meanwhile, the whole dang thing takes 16 years to do or something. And at the end of it, he says, "When I started this project, my daughter was three. Now she's a junior in college."

You really realize, you know, reacting to—if the idea of what's going to go in the museum is going to change, if the people who are commissioning are going to change—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —if—[inaudible]—going to change, what are you going to be true to? You know, you have to be true to your own vision, right.

And so that's why so much else is in play. Why shouldn't someone like Meier have a commonality in the way he approaches his buildings—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —that actually gives him a starting point for some new exploration but also locates a starting point in a place, which is understandable to him, the people that work for him, the people that commissioned him, and everyone else. I think graphic designers don't have—some graphic designers actually work that way as well. Massimo does.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Even ones whose work is very different from Massimo like someone like David Carson or—[name inaudible]—or people like that, I think, also work that way, where they think they've got a certain way of working.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And a client who comes to them is going to expect the exploration to start from that point. I've never felt that way. I have this thing where I really try to go into each project as a blank slate. I think I have certain bad habits that I fall back on that I try to resist about ways that I do things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Like what?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Oh, there's a—there's a—well, my kids are very good at identifying bad habits. I like to chop off—I like to chop things up actually.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So—and that's actually—there's at least—the program I did for [Brooklyn Academy of Music—MB], the sign I did for BAM, the sign I did for—

MIJA RIEDEL: Saks.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —yeah, the sign I did for the *New York Times*, Saks—those are all things that are, like, chopped up.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But I love doing that. I don't know why I love doing it, but I do—and it's funny, because in that portfolio that Massimo saw back in 1978—[chimes]—is that this?

MIJA RIEDEL: That means this is going to stop, yes. So you want to just hold that thought?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, sure.

MIJA RIEDEL: If you'd like to finish that thought, we'll probably get through it. We've got a minute or two.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Okay. No, in that portfolio I dropped off there in '78 or '79, whenever it was, there was a project that I did that was exactly like that, you know, that sort of was the same thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Chopped up.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And it's just something that I've just always liked to do. It's just this compulsion with me. In a

way, I try to parcel that out a little bit and not do it too often or over and over again or something. But on the other hand, I could see—someone could, I suppose, make a whole thing out of doing that all the time over and over again. But I—

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it makes me think immediately of two things that you've talked about, is the importance of listening first to the client, and that leads immediately to the actual content that the client's trying to work with.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And those are both two things that you've really highlighted as having an increasing effect perhaps on your work?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Let's switch this disc.

[End of disc.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Michael Bierut with the—in his office in New York City on December 13th, 2011, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. This is card number three.

You had a final thought about content or listening or—

MICHAEL BIERUT: Oh, yes, what I was going to say was—hang on one second—I did, I did, I did—hang on—yeah, I go—I had something really good I don't think I'd ever said to anyone before. So I was really thinking this is good stuff. Hang on, it'll—so I was saying that—the thing I just said before—

MIJA RIEDEL: Chopping up and—

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, they—I have certain bad habits and—oh, you know the other thing I do that I consider sort of a little bit of a bad habit is a lot of times as I'm working on something, I'll really be thinking consciously, how am I going to explain this to the client? How am I going to sell this to them? All my designers can vouch for the fact that I'll say, "Ooh, ooh, I can really sell this one. I can really sell this one." I have almost no—I just as a matter of course have—make no assumption that people will see something that's good and intuitively respond to it just like that, right.

Instead, I think what people need are bridges and buttresses and all sorts of ways to kind of feel secure in making this passage across a gap that sometimes requires a leap, where they just have to feel like they're not being tricked into something unfamiliar. And it's not necessary all the time, but I've had—even my partners have kind of, like, said, "Oh, I can't believe that they"—they wouldn't say, "I can't believe they bought that," but they're sort of like thinking—they'd say, "Oh, I'd never thought that they would go with that one." I said, "Oh, I knew"—I said, "I knew I could—I knew I had it this time,"—

MIJA RIEDEL: So would this be clients that are long-term clients and so you're familiar with—

MICHAEL BIERUT: Oh, yes, sometimes—yeah, oh, yeah, sometimes, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I mean, sometimes, I sort of, like—you know, there's a client I'm working with right now—unnamed—where I've worked with this client in the past, and we've been—and me and the designer I'm working on it with—we have—we have this idea that really is good. And I can tell it's a good idea; it's just not the good idea that this client wants.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: They want a different good idea. And I keep telling them—and I know—and not only that, but I actually think I know what the different good idea is. And my designer keeps—my designer has spent so much time kind of crafting this square peg that's just perfectly square, every corner is so crisp; it's just squared off so nice that she won't acknowledge the roundness of the hole we're trying to force it in, right, and, you know, just thinks that there's not an immutable rule somehow that the most beautiful square peg will fit in a round hole, right. But it doesn't matter—it doesn't matter how beautiful it is. It's just not—but I'm—one more shot on this one tomorrow, and we'll see how it goes.

So part of it is being able to anticipate that sort of thing is not great for using your imagination and making creative leaps. A lot of times you sort of—when you can sort of see it coming a mile away, it's—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —It makes for efficiency, but it doesn't make for invention, let's say, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But by [being] able to sell it too—sometimes I've looked at, like, a solution for something, and I say, "I really like that, but I can't figure out, like, how to explain it, like, what does—what does it mean, like, I mean, why would you pick that?" Now, certain things—if I was doing a business card for you—if it's just your name on a card and a typeface and a color and the paper has to be colored and the type has to be colored and the type has to be a certain font, that can sort of be anything. That's like picking out earrings or a fabric for a— it's like buying shoes sort of. You have a kind of general shoe you want, but then they can come in all these different versions, and they all sort of do the job of covering your feet while you walk around, right. There's no idea behind the shoe, right—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —it just is something, right; whereas with certain things there's ideas and there's certain solutions that I really revere just because they seem to be so buttressed on every side that I just think—I just admire them. There's a famous logo that Malcolm Greer, a designer affiliated with Rhode Island School of Design—has worked in Providence all his life—designed for the Presbyterian Church that you've probably seen even if you've never registered. But it looks sort of like a—it looks like a cross with a lot of detail inside it. Then it says "Presbyterian Church" underneath it. And sometimes it'll say—you drive into some towns—"Presbyterian Church welcomes you," and there'll be this logo that Malcolm Greer designed.

And there's a breakdown of that logo that just must have taken the congregation he was presenting it to on day one and blown them away, where he says, "It looks like a cross, but I'll show you what else it is. And it's a dove, it's a book, it's a lectern, it's the flames from Pentecost, it's a preacher welcoming the thing"—it's, like, all these—every—like, it's got, like, 10 metaphors actually explicitly built into it all at once.

That's got to be a fun presentation to make. [Inaudible]—Kevin Roche showed us a presentation that he did to the client for the building he designed for the Rockefeller—for the Ford Foundation up on—up in the west 40s. You know that building?

MIJA RIEDEL: No, I don't.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You don't? [Are] you a New Yorker?

MIJA RIEDEL: I have—I live in California—[inaudible].

MICHAEL BIERUT: Oh, okay, yes. The Ford Foundation building—famous building. It's got—it's got a huge internal atrium designed in the days when no one had ever heard of such a thing. And, you know, so there were no—there were none of those hotels with atriums and stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So it has, like, this—the offices all look in, and they face this enclosed room that has plants in it, right. And you've seen that before, right. So this was the first version of that, version one.

And he did a presentation that both reminds you what an unfamiliar idea that was and builds a case for it that was just so irresistible and must have made a fairly—the Ford Foundation couldn't have been, you know, a crazy and visionary client by a long shot. It must have—they signed off on this thing, and not realizing they—by the time they agreed to it, they must not have realized it was the craziest thing in the world. There was this guy named, I think, Robert Propst, who designed Action Office for Herman Miller. And it—that was the first—I might be wrong about both—I might be wrong about every single two-word proper noun I just named—Propst—Robert Propst, Action Office and Herman Miller—no, I'm right about Herman Miller. I think I'm right about Action Office. I think I'm right about Robert Propst, too.

Yes, and that was, like, the first office that was going to be designed—first modular office, the thing that in its sorry end led to Dilbert-style cubicles. But at the beginning, it was going into a world where every single prominent executive had invented a world filled with Chippendale breakfronts and long things and silver coffee sets and huge upholstered leather chairs—all the signifiers of—from gentleman's clubs that were supposed to indicate to the visitor you've come to the position of authority—to convince these people that what they really needed was something different. I saw the brochure for that, too. This is early '60s. And it sort of like says—it shows things, like, here's an airplane cockpit. And it sort of made—it was so great, because it kind of, like, had—changed these guys from thinking that they were receiving people in their club, stinking of cigars with spittoons

at the ready. Instead, they were, like, fighter pilots for the new economy. What they needed was ruthless efficiency, everything pared down, everything within reach.

And meanwhile, he's depriving them of all the stuff they love, right, mahogany and leather. It's all gone! To me, I think that's part of the design process that fascinates me, that really fascinates me. And part of it's just because I—in terms of my work, going in that—when you asked that innocent question about the continuity of the Yale stuff,—I go into these things assuming that I just have no faith if the thing itself is sufficient to at first glance speak for itself.

Now, I think that a lot of things—you know, the thing you can argue, of course, is that in the long-run, people don't—all the people that encounter this stuff don't have the benefit of that elaborate back story, right.

But one thing that Massimo always said was, you know—he never put it this way, but he always—he had this philosophy, I think, that was sort of, like, things that exist have their own authority. If you're a designer—like, if something already exists, no matter how bad it is, it has the authority of existence, right. And so people are always asking to redesign logos. And his first impulse was always to keep the old logo and to figure out some way to work with the old logo to kind of redeem it, right, because otherwise you just were—[inaudible]—giving up and saying, "Look, let's go back—let's go back to square one, and I will [just-MB] compete with every company that's starting up on Monday. You know, we'll have new logos that day, right."

And so there's the fact that—you know, once—if you can get it to exist—people start to accept it. And so thus it was with the Ford Foundation building, which gave birth to a bunch of atrium buildings. Thus it was with the—you know, Herman Miller's modular office system, which define the way offices look to this day. But the moment of their births, they were considered these crazy, crazy things that didn't look like—I mean, they didn't look like an office because there was no offices that looked like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: There were no office buildings that looked like that. I find it really fascinating actually. Yes, part of designing things is kind of helping people imagine a world where the thing you're showing them isn't brand new but something that's part of people's lives, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Sometimes in terms of Celebration, Florida, you designed it so it already looks like it's part of their lives, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Because all the cues are familiar, right. I think in the case of Yale, that was sort of all meant to be purposely disorienting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And I can't tell you—I get calls from other schools of design, who sort of want a Yale-type program. You know, and they're not even sure what that means. What they actually want is they want Yale prestige and think that failing [that,-MB] they can't buy that, but they can somehow buy a series of posters, you know, that will get them that, they think.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But it's actually—it's hard to do, because I don't think you would—you wouldn't do it the same way for anyone else—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —because there's a different prerequisite for every one of those problems.

MIJA RIEDEL: On that note, how would you describe your working process, and has it changed over time? How has it changed over time?

MICHAEL BIERUT: In—yeah, my working process is building on some of the things I've already said. I think I go into things with my mind really blank. I actually purposely try to keep my mind blank as long as possible. Occasionally I'll make some notes in the very first meeting, like, some visual notes almost. And sometimes surprisingly, they—the final thing—when we're done with the design, the thing actually resembles those notes. And sometimes I actually secretly find that disappointing. It sort of means, oh, you know, really? It was that all along?

MIJA RIEDEL: It didn't evolve through the process, right?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes. I've known sort of things that I thought were really good solutions but kind of didn't quite have that element of surprise. And I've also gone through processes that were really frustrating and miraculously at the very end found myself dumped out head over heels, landed on my feet exactly where I had hoped to end up. And you sort of are—you kind of can't figure out quite what happened, how you ended here, so I try to go into it with a blank sort of mine. I tend to be, compared with—certainly compared with Massimo and compared with my partners here, I tend to be much less directed often when I'm meeting with a client. Sometimes in a first meeting, I'll say, "I think I've got something really cool for you." More often—sometimes I'll say I—sometimes I have no idea if any of this stuff works. The thing you hate least may give us a clue about where the solution will lie, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Again, I think a lot of times, depending on how well I know the person—and, like, certain of my clients that I've worked with for years like Laura Shore at Mohawk or Terron Shaefer at Saks or these guys, I'll literally—they'll call—I'll say, "I'm going to send you a PDF in a couple hours. Take a look at it and just call me and either it's right or it's"—I'll just do something. I'll just kind of, like, say, "How about that," and, "Let's just—let's start, and I'll make the first move. Here it is. What do you think," right.

If it's a bigger, more complicated thing, a lot of times it sort of will—as we're doing it, we'll be—I mean, sometimes you sort of know where you want to end up, and you start—and the first time you go with the client, you'll kind of go into that process knowing that. Sometimes you don't know and you sort of have to go in kind of a little bit more cautiously.

And so—and it's funny, sometimes you come to the solution that really—sometimes you come to a solution really quickly. Sometimes a solution you feel, like, is really a good solution. Sometimes when you show a solution to the client, they'll agree it's a good solution, or you'll convince them that it is. Sometimes no matter what happens you can't make them think it's a good solution. Sometimes they're so irritating and wrong you kind of get mad at them. Sometimes they actually—sometimes—usually I sort of think, you know, I—the one thing that's changed in my career is I've gotten better at avoiding clients that I'm not going to like. And that's partly because of a variety of vows I made about working with people that I don't like along the way, where I just decided if I can afford one luxury, it's the luxury to sidestep that.

I remember everybody had their own reaction to 9/11, I suppose. And one of my more trivial ones was, you know, if it can all end that fast, I don't want to be talking to some asshole on the phone when it all goes down. I just don't want to have my fingers white-knuckled around a receiver, listening to someone I don't like trying to talk me into something I don't want to do and don't care about, and—it's just—life's just too awful.

At any rate, so most of the people I work with, I sort of, like, like or hope to like. And so you can kind of go into a process that has some trust with it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Sometimes I'll go in with a fairly wide exploration, you know, fill a table with things and say, "What do you think of these things?" right. Other times we'll do a more—sort of depending on who the client is, we'll do something more structured. Sometimes when you ask about the design process, what people are imagining are happening in the studio where the stuff is done. And I always think the design process is actually part of the give-and-take you have with client, too. Not everyone'd agree with me about that, I don't think. But actually, I mean, I sort of think an initial presentation, sort of how you stage that and what you're trying to get out of it is really useful, is interesting to figure out, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it goes back to the raw materials we've been talking about all along.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: The raw materials, whatever they are, and what the specific needs of that client are—coming to you with a problem that needs a solution—

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —which is going to be different for Saks versus—[inaudible]—versus Yale School of Architecture.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes. Yes. Yes, for instance, if I was going—like, with Yale, let's say, when I came back to Bob, I just said, "These are the ingredients, and this is what we'd make"—and I didn't even have any examples of what we'd make things look like. I just said, "If you agree with this, the first few things I'll make will take these

ingredients and—take this theory and deploy it. Are you with the theory?" And he said yes, okay. And it was never—that—we'd never look back, .

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MICHAEL BIERUT: With Saks, for instance, that process was interesting, because it was, like—I have to admit, it was an intimidating project. That's one where—if you do something you don't like, you're going to be seeing stuff you don't like everywhere you look for a while, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And, you know, Massimo had done the packaging for Saks—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —back in the late '70s, right before I joined. So it had this great heritage.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You know, and then it was, like, one of my—one of my oldest clients in the world, Terron Schaefer, a guy I'd worked with even back in my Vignelli days—I knew him from back then, so this was a guy who was really trusting me. And then Terron also has a way of sort of saying, "Michael, this is really important—don't let me down." You know, it's just, like, don't say that. Don't say that, please.

And so on the other hand, deceptively simple. I have to admit, it's, like, not one of those things where you—where you have trouble figuring out what the solution is supposed to be. The solution is a way of writing "Saks Fifth Avenue" that can go on all these bags and packages, right. So it's not—sometimes we're even stumped about that—we have to do something. What exactly is—you don't even quite get what specifics of the scope are. This is—specifics are, you know, here are the before's; these all have to be changed to something new and better, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So I remember exactly the process we went through. I sat with the designer named Kerrie Powell, and Kerrie and I said—I said, "Okay"—like, this is—it's funny because this is one where I didn't think—it's not like there'd be an idea. It was not like a rocket ship coffee table idea that's going to save this one. It isn't some clever idea. It's too big, and it has to be too fundamental of a thing to—it has to go too many places and live too long—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —to sort of, like, be based on some clever, like, little one-liner, right. So I said, "Okay, let's take the word 'Saks Fifth Avenue' and set it in a bunch of different typefaces and just see how that looks." So we did that, and I have to admit, how it looked was really discouraging because you just sort of felt like you had pulled the plug on it and taken it back—instead of it being exciting, it just sort of looked—it just was unnerving. You'd set it in Helvetica, and it would look like J. C. Penney. You set it in Bodoni, and it'd look like Armani or a bunch of other things. You set—you know, you just—all the typefaces seemed to be taken in a way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You know, it was really weird. And so sometimes it's really invigorating to, like, kind of do that exercise. This time it just was deflating in a way. Not only that, but it just made it look like, wow, Saks and—you're just kind of like saying—there's that thing where you're sort of sending it back to square one. Now you'll have all the heritage of—you'll have exactly the same amount of heritage as the next little store that opens up anywhere in New York, right. They'll have a new logo; you'll have a new logo and lots of luck, right. So there's that, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I can't explain why I looked at it that way and other people would look at it as if, wow, the most exciting thing in the world, the new logo for Saks, right. So at any rate, that's that then.

They—Terron did—Terron did give us a couple of, like, random clues. They really like squares.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: They like making their catalogs out of squares.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And I remember we sort of, like, said, "Oh, maybe it has something to do with squares." And so we did, like, designs that were based on checkerboards. Then there was also a kind of conversation about this funny balance between heritage and modernity and maleness and femaleness and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Black and white.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —stuff like that. And I remember we did this exercise where we just found a bunch of stuff that seemed to be walking that balance between, you know, feeling organic and expressive and feeling confident and urban at the same time. And I remember we found some—there were some, like, geometric expressionism or geometric—I guess it's abstract expressionism, geometric—from, like, the early—from the '50s and early '60s, Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly, a little Franz Kline in there in honor of me. And I remember we had one meeting with Terron and his team, where we just actually took this stuff up. And this is stuff that people in the milieu understand—it's like mood boards.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Next season will be all about Ellsworth Kelly, you know, or something.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so we had—we had these things spread out, but with a bunch of other stuff, with, like, you know, Berenice Abbott photographs of old New York, so you'd sort of, like, pull in these things and just—and they'd say, "Oh, no, this is too old." And then they kept pointing to those things, saying, "You know, it's interesting—these don't—these are modern, but they—they're modern, but they don't look futuristic. They're clean and crisp and abstract, but you can still have the sense that a human being did them. They're dramatic, but they're not kind of—they don't feel embarrassing or hysterical; they feel sort of cerebral." And those all seemed to be things that everyone kind of was agreeing was about what Saks was.

So we had that little thing in there, squares, and the fact that when you surveyed both their history and their current reality, although they hadn't used this cursive logo with the handwriting in, I think, 10 years—it had been replaced by this logo and typeface now called Peignot, which is identical to the style that, among other people, Nordstrom uses, there just aren't that many different, you know, things. The Boston store still had a big cursive logo on the side of it. The stores in Florida, [the] stores in Cincinnati did. You know, it takes a while to make these signs. And those signs—which was from the '70s, early '70s, were still around.

And so I remember Terron just sort of saying without—neither forlornly or meaningfully, "Oh, a lot of people still really like that cursive logo," you know. And he wasn't saying it dismissively. Nor was he sort of saying, you know, "Take note."

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: He just sort of, like, dropped it in a meeting. And I remember, like, saying to Kerrie, you know, "Show me the cursive logo again," you know. And it really—it sort of like is—and we—and I remember we—I think what happened was—this sounds like a little Cinderella story, but we didn't have a good copy of it, and I said, "Blow that up, and just kind of clean it up a little bit. You know, kind of make it big so you can kind of make all the ends crisp and everything."

And so she was—she had it up on our computer and was, like, blowing it up and had zoomed in just on part of it. I saw it on her computer, and I thought, wait, what's—and I went down and said, "This is—this looks just like—this looks like an Ellsworth Kelly painting this—or a Franz Kline painting, you know." It had that same kind of—it's a big gesture, and it's—and it feels contemporary, but—but I said—but I said, "But here's the great thing. It's actually based on something that's actually really traditional. It's based on Spencerian script."

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But you blow it up this way, and suddenly you're getting it both ways. And I remember—I remember having that thing that I—thinking, "I can really sell this." [They laugh.] And not only that, but I remember thinking—I remember the thing I was really saying was—and we kind of worked on it for a day and realized you could take the logo, break it up into the 64 square-grid squares—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —and then each one of the squares made a cool package. You'd mix the squares up, and it'd make a cool pattern. I remember saying to Kerrie like, I said—I said, "I've never designed"—I said, "There's no way to do this wrong. It always works. Every one of these squares work. When you put them together, they

always work." It turns out you can—you know, if you try hard, you can do anything wrong.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But I thought it was as foolproof as a thing as could be. And part of it—it needed to be foolproof, because so many different people manipulate it throughout the store system, right. And I said, "Plus it can be personalized." I said, "Every single person can have one of these pins that has a different square." I said, "It's just so cool."

At that point, we'd been working on the project long enough that that next meeting was something where I just felt like—just like when I sent that little rocket ship coffee table to Terron's friend Fern, I knew that—I said—I knew we had it that time. I knew we had—like, I sort of was—[inaudible]—positive about anything in the world. Of course, it can always go wrong, but it didn't that time. He knew it too.

It was complicated because we had to then sell it to his CEO. Then that CEO changed. The new CEO came in. This was invented by somebody else. He was reluctant to inherit someone else's invention. But he actually was interesting because Steve Sadove, who was the new CEO, having not been in the process, he was able to look at it a little bit fresh. And he's—he comes from a business background—he'd been great for the company, by the way—but—and he was one—he actually asked one question. He said—we had designed this whole thing, where there was—where we, like, never showed the actual logo. We just thought people will kind of assemble it in their minds. Or who cares about—I think we actually wrote "Saks Fifth Avenue," like, in its plain typeface actually.

And he said, "Well, where's the logo?" And I said, "Well, this is the"—I said, "Everything is the logo." He said, "No, I think we should actually show the logo." He said, "There's no fun"—he didn't put it this way, but what he meant was it's mean to show people a puzzle with—to just show—keep showing people the puzzle without actually whispering the solution somewhere.

So now all the bags on the side have the full logo. Then you get the impact of the big one. I think he was right about that, actually, you know. And it's funny because we wouldn't have—I think we would have had Terron going without the logo and the thing would have been a little—would have functioned—you know, for that store at that scale, it needs that sort of populist gesture, I think.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I think there was—you know, there's another kind of store, where you wouldn't need that at all—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —where, in fact, kind of keeping it enigmatic and unknowable was part of the allure. But Saks is supposed to be a lot of things, but enigmatic and unknowable isn't—aren't two of the characteristics, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: It's supposed to be something where you kind of—[inaudible]. So that's not an atypical design process. It had, like, a happy ending and exciting twists and turns, and not every—I can't guarantee that in every single one I've done—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —but I think that idea of iteration and having a couple accidental discoveries along the way—and sometimes you don't make—I mean, that eureka accidental discovery, "wait a minute—what is that?" you know, it makes for a fun story—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —a very entertaining story. It's not necessary to actually do good work to do it that way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Sometimes I've just deliberately inched my way along a path and got to the finish line, ta-da, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: I want to be sure we talk about the Museum of Art and Design.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Okay, want to—[inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Oh, so that was—that was one—that's another process where I came back from the first—you know, we knew—I knew—I think—I'm trying to think—I think maybe Holly—Holly had actually—Holly Hotchner, the director, had brought us in early to talk about the project. I think they had hired someone else to work on it, and then that didn't work out, then they called us in again. They had a logo that was designed at the time that they changed their name from the—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, American Craft—

MICHAEL BIERUT: —American Craft Museum—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —to Museum of Arts and Design, which was based on the acronym MAD, which people weren't positive—even then—even when I was—[inaudible]—weren't positive about that. And our original agreement—our assignment didn't include the logo. We excluded it partly because it—everyone sort of still remembered all too well agreeing to the previous logo. They weren't eager to embark on another such process. And frankly I—we had two other big things we were doing. One was we were doing all the signage there; and secondly, we were doing all this interactive media stuff there. So I thought that was enough to keep us busy. So I said I'm going to keep the identity out of it for now.

But sometimes actually, I have to admit, I'm not a particularly good businessman, because my tactic always was to—I just didn't want to get hired to do the logo. So I thought that'd be a distraction, and then I'd have to come with something. And I wasn't sure I could, just because the—you know, I thought the bandages were still waiting to come off the old new logo, the existing new logo. I don't want to say bandages, but it's so—it felt very tender to me, that logo, and I didn't want to go, like, poking at it, because I thought people would yelp in pain, okay.

So I deliberately said, "Look," I don't want to mess with this. And people really—they didn't want to mess with it either.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: They said, "Do you like it?" And I said, "Oh, it's not what I would do, but that's neither here nor there; it's a logo, and I don't think the logo's the most important thing in the world, right." So we moved on.

Unfortunately for everyone involved, I had a really good idea for a logo, a great idea for a logo. And it was based on the design for the new building that Brad Cloepfil had done.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And if you know the building, what he was proposing to do was to take the Edward Durrell Stone building and do a number of things to it. But the most daring and prominent in the design scheme intervention was to cut sort of a continuous slot through the—through its façade, through its floors and through its ceilings, which would integrate these small floor plates, bring light in the galleries where none had been before and kind of activate the façade in an interesting way. And he had this great diagram to kind of show this line snaking through the whole building turning at right angles, going up, going down, cutting a—cutting holes here and there. And I just—I thought it was just a brilliant solution.

So I said, "Of course the logo has to be based on that." So we worked and worked and finally came up with a great solution. And unfortunately, the great solution doesn't work with MAD.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So it works with "A plus D". So we said, "Okay, here's what you've got to do. You've got to change—first of all, you know, Museum of Arts and Design, it's—you're emphasizing 'museum' too much. You're really about arts and design, and you're also about the combination of those two things, arts plus design, 'A plus D.'"

It was a two-stage bit of persuasion that was required. First I had to convince people that—the name is still Museum of Arts and Design, but instead of falling back on the acronym, MAD, which I also had heard rumblings that there were, you know, staff members who thought it was undignified, saying, "I work at MAD," et cetera, et cetera. Before I could figure out whether I agreed with that or not, I came up with a non-MAD acronym that I wanted to pitch that made it to my advantage to agree that that—you know, I didn't quite agree, but I said—you know, I knew that that was a sentiment there that could be perhaps exploited.

So let me see if I can still draw this goddamn thing. Okay, so it's all one continuous line—how does it go—Jesus—

something like this—Jesus—it does this, there's the D, there's the plus sign, and I think it did this here. Ah, fuck—no, no, no, then it did this. And there's a—I'm sorry I swore on tape—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Inaudible]—habit.

MICHAEL BIERUT: No, there's got to be this little cutback that happens here that does that. Then it does that. Okay. So there's, like, a little slot that opens—so forget about that—there it is, A plus D, all one line, all interconnected. I thought—I thought, here it is.

MIJA RIEDEL: There it is.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Bang, okay. You look at Brad's design, you look at this thing—who's going to say no?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So I went to present it—and, you know, it's funny. It's not like people were saying—no one said, "Ick, get that out of here—I hate that." Some people would say, "I can't—what? Show me why it's a D." And I was, like, "Oh, come on. If you look at it long enough, it's a D." And then we write "Museum of Arts and Design" and everything; people get it. So everyone sort of tentatively nods, and I said, "Well, look, we'll show it to you applied to some things, and you'll really like it."

So we took this thing away and made all these, like, shopping bags and stationary and catalog covers and stuff and moved it along a little bit further. And more people liked it. And then we had to show it, I think, to the—we didn't show it to the board in the first meeting—or I think we were showing it to, like, a smaller task force on the board and then we escalated from there.

But I think every time someone new would see it, they'd have the same sort of, you know—"I can't read that. A plus D—why does it say A plus D? I thought our name is MAD. What?" You know, and so this—and so in this case, I was cradling and just kind of romancing the square peg. And I think to the astonishment of Joe Marianek, the designer that was working on this one, I came back from the last meeting and I said, "I'm through with this thing. I think at the next meeting we're just going to come in and show them—that thing we were showing before, forget about that; here's another thing." I said, "Even if we come back to this thing"—because we both still liked it—I said, "We just need to take a break, and let's just go the other way."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And I said, "You know, why don't we just do something that just is MAD really straightforward and just something like"—I said, "The building is shaped like this, right—here's Columbus circle, here's the building—what if we just kind of, like, did an M that's like that, an A that's like that, a D that's like that, that's all made out of squares and circles?"—the most simple thing in the world, right.

So we went back—so we went back, and we sort of, like, said, "It's a square and it's—it's a square building on a circle. It's got three flat sides, one round side." And then we actually had this little—this thing resolved as a diagram and into those three letters, right, like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And then some board member—it might have been Nan—I forget who it was—someone actually said, "What if you drew the M like this?" It was a board member, you know, so you actually took, you know, sort of, like—took that thing and put it here and there. And that's basically what the logo ended up being.

So finished by a board member—in the end was suggested by a board member, because what was funny is that this thing actually looks a little like a weird kind of—some funny shape that people would say looks like a sarcophagus actually. It's funny—we saw a lot of them. It would look like these are the feet, then this is the belly, and this is, like, the head, another circle. Some dead king or—I don't know.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so—but if you do this, it actually does. And then also what was nice about this thing was that I think it kind of evokes the—you know, the Edward Durell Stone lollipops in the lobby, which I don't think Brad Cloepfil was eager to have invoked. But it still had—it was still a nice kind of, like, connection back to the thing, right.

And then we were able to make a whole alphabet out of that, write things in the alphabet, do all the stuff with that. And it was sort of, like—just like—just like the Saks thing. And by the way, once we had this, we never re-presented this again. And it was—it was funny because this thing—you know, square pegs in round holes—you can get one in—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —but it just takes a lot of work and a lot of grinding away. If you've been doing that for a while—if suddenly then—you play the piano at all?

MIJA RIEDEL: I—as a child.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You know if you're playing—if you're practicing a piece that's really hard and then you sort of take a break and you play the one you really know well, when you cut over to the one you really know well, you play it better than—it just feels so great to play; your fingers know exactly where to go. It just flows out. I mean, if you just sat down and played that without having placed the hard one first, you wouldn't appreciate it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: But somehow kind of, like, trying to grind away at this one and then have something that—you know, this thing just—you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —you'd just—every minute we'd come up with more things we would do with it—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —and just worked—if it was good big, it was good small; it'd make great patterns; it would make great t-shirts, and you could write things with it, you could do stuff with it. You know, the whole alphabet kind of designed itself. It was just great.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So it was—that was a case, I'd say, where we—a different process—again, sort of designing before the client's eyes. I'd dare say—I'm not sure if you polled people around there that anyone has a very clear memory of logo number one—I would guess that about half the people there forget that we ever showed an earlier logo.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Although I think we went to three separate meetings with that as the solution, trying without success to sell it, right. But that sort of is the—you know, that's kind of how design goes too. And then the thing we fell back—you know, and the other—I think—you know, designers tend to be very—well can be really arrogant about clients; clients are dumb and need to be educated and I'm just the person to do it. And particularly if they're—the way that this dumbness is often made manifest is their inability to appreciate my genius, right. I mean, I got all this out of the way with my dad, I guess, so I don't have to reenact this with every client that comes along. But I actually think that's not true. I think the most irritating son-of-a-bitch client in the world is trying to tell you something when he or she says, "That thing you designed—I hate it," right.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: I'm not sure what they really mean by that, but they're trying to communicate something to you, and it's your job to figure out exactly what that something is, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Has technology affected your work in—

MICHAEL BIERUT: Oh, yeah, enormously, yeah. So—I mean, that's almost a dull story, but when I started at Vignelli there weren't even fax machines.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so it was—it was a beautiful time, you know. It was—everything took forever. And every decision was high stakes. You'd send off a manuscript to be typeset. You make one false move and you're out \$8,000 back when that meant, like, a lot of money.. You'd work with a client in California, as we were we that—my first big Vignelli job—I remember you'd go to the post office and get the most expensive U.S. post office service; it would take three days to get to south San Francisco. They'd open it up, they'd look at it, make an expensive long-distance call, describe to you haltingly over the phone what they're looking at. You'd be taking notes on your end. Then they might send it back to you so you could kind of, like, fix the thing that you sent them, because it was too expensive to make another one.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: You know, so it's, like—it'd just take, you know, weeks. I mean, there was no FedEx when I started. FedEx was an '80s invention. I remember once having to mail something the night before—it had to get there the next day—and that was considered just the most monumental screw-up of all time, you know, that it had come to that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Someone had misplanned everything, and now here we are negotiating with, like, the expeditor for Lufthansa, you know, to get it there the next day.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL BIERUT: You sort of felt like it had to be treaties or something, right, instead of this mockup of some logo, right. And then all this stuff came along that just made it faster and faster. And now, you know, shockingly, one of my old favorite clients sent me an email probably on a Wednesday and said something like, "I need to talk to you about something. Can you call me?" So I called her up, talked to her Wednesday night. She described this sort of slightly complicated situation—it might have been Thursday or so—described this complicated situation, where—it almost sounded like what they needed was, like, a little ad campaign.

I said, "Well, could you send me this background information?" I got that on Friday, took it with me home over the weekend. Monday morning I sent her an email, where I sort of described thematically what the tone of voice of the thing we would do—I said, "What if we did three ads and the first one had a headline like this, and that was about this, the second one was this—[inaudible]—was that?"

She signed off on it. Tuesday, I—I remember I had a moment where I sort of really decided I wanted to set the headlines in a funny typeface. So the most complicated part was finding the right kind of odd typeface. And I sort of knew the client actually wouldn't care about the typeface, not the client who cared—who I—who, if all goes well, the client won't even comment on it; the typeface is irrelevant—you know, that's just something I'm doing for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: We found the right typeface, we sent the thing—and this client's not in New York, by the way—we sent the—I wrote text for it—I can still sit down and write short things every now and then in those situations—I wrote all three ads. My designer set them all up, made a PDF, sent it; they needed one day to think about it, called the next day and said, "Everything's approved; here are the sizes." The day after that—this is less than a week after getting—not knowing anything about it, we sent out everything to the magazine.

So—and we can do it faster than that. It was the weekend that actually interfered with everything, so—

MIJA RIEDEL: We haven't touched at all on *Design Observer* yet—

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —which seems like a big communication leg of this stool.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that started in 2003, is that right?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, correct, 2003.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, okay, and would you just describe how that's evolved and what role that plays in your—microcosm?

[Audio break]

MIJA RIEDEL: All right, so we were going to talk briefly about—

MICHAEL BIERUT: *Design Observer*.

MIJA RIEDEL: —*Design Observer*, yeah.

MICHAEL BIERUT: I always liked writing. I always—I like talking about design. And I started writing about it early on. And people found out I could write well about it, so I started getting commissions from editors to write about it. And the very first one I got, I actually had a false start, where I tried to write in some kind of formal essay—[inaudible]—short essay version, and then I started, like, rereading it and thinking this is just unbearable and it's

no fun. And then I decided, "Why don't I just write the way I talk if I'm with a friend?"

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And so then also a lot of it has to do with assuming what your imaginary reader already knows about it. And if you're involved in writing or editing at all, a lot of it sort of, like, you know, how much you have to qualify every reference. And I've always—most American design writing at that point came in two flavors. One was sort of the trade magazine version that was, you know, "Upon entering Michael Bierut's splendid office, the first thing you notice is his genial demeanor and the array of awards on the desk behind him," you know, et cetera.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Then the other one is, "As Foucault observed in his essay about the Panopticon, you know, the gendered gaze of"—you know, just—I mean, like, whatever—you know, just this kind of, like, academic stuff

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —that just is, like, piling on familiar—[inaudible]—catchphrases and stuff that don't really have anything to do with the subject at hand, right.

So there was one guy who was my favorite design writer, an English guy named Rick Poynor. And Rick had done some writing about design that's very typical of British kind of critical journalism, where it's—you know, if you read *The Guardian* or *The Independent*, you just—there's a way that they can write about popular culture, if you consider design popular culture. And it's true with film or books or anything, where it just is sort of on a[n] entirely different level. It doesn't have any of that American on this hand and then on the other hand, you know, kind of thing. It just is clearly opinionated point of view, assumes a certain intelligence on the reader's part. And I just remember thinking, you know—you know, I started reading his stuff, and he was the editor of this magazine called *Eye*—when it first launched, I remember thinking this is really—this is just great.

And he started commissioning me to write some pieces—was a great editor. I learned—getting edited by him was a fantastic experience. And so I liked doing that. And then I wrote for Chee Pearlman at *I.D.* magazine, and she was a great editor. And Steve Heller is also a great editor. So I've had really good editors.

The thing that was tough about writing for print, though, was that I would procrastinate to the last minute and really torture myself about deadlines. Like, these commitments I made would, like, literally be ruining whole weeks of my life, weekends, dates with my wife. I really should be writing that thing. But being a graphic designer—and the thing is—a print thing, you just know the deadlines are all artificial, right. You keep wondering, when is it really going to go and—you know, they—you know, if it comes out then, they must—even if they print it in Japan—so you're working all the math and you know how much you really have, you think, so you just keep procrastinating. Then finally you write the thing.

Then months later you keep going to Hudson News at Grand Central to see is that *Eye* out yet, and, like, finally it shows up. You flip to the back. There it is. You see your piece, you know, and then—but it's, like—it's three months later sometimes. It's really a long time later. And then maybe you run into someone who says, "Hey, I read that thing you wrote, and—ah, but was it? I forget now." And so you get some acknowledgement that someone read it, okay.

So torture about the deadline, endless wait for publication and then kind of irregular response of—it's sort of, like, a vague sort of sense that people may or may not have even read the thing; you don't know what they thought about it, right.

Okay, so 2003, Bill calls me up and says, "Hey, you know what a blog is. Me and Jessica and Rick Poynor are thinking of starting a blog—are going to start a blog about graphic design together. Do you want to write for it?" And I said, "Sure," and—without knowing what I was getting into. And so I—Jessica said, "Just do what"—Jessica claimed to have been advised you just do it as if you're, like, writing a letter to a good friend about something you thought was interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Okay, so—because I sort of was trying to figure out what the tone of voice was—it was slightly confusing me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Tone, right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So I'd said, "Okay, I'll do one by this weekend." And then that week, the *New York Times*

changed all their headline fonts to Cheltenham, the same typeface we used for Celebration, Florida, by the way. And I wrote this essay about that and about the letters they received in response. And it was—it was, like, fun. It was a fun thing to write about, and it was a fun—and it's really weird. In 2003, I wrote that, and I almost could tell that I was writing that for me and maybe 20 people. You know, who would care—who really would care about this, you know? But who cared, you know? I mean, who would care, and why should I care? You know, I'm just going to write it for fun, we'll put it on this thing, we'll see if anyone reads it, all right.

And meanwhile Bill and Jessica and Rick were all writing things too. And so we just kind of kept writing these things. And it was the four of us writing this very crude blog thing that had just a single column worth of stuff that the top—the new thing would always go on top. We didn't even have illustrations really because we kind of couldn't find how to do them. I don't think I knew much about links either.

I did make one fatal mistake in that original essay, though, which is that it had—as I've always said later, it had a beginning, middle and an end, right. It wasn't like, "My cat did something cute today; more later," you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: It just was—you know, and good bloggers actually don't commit to that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Like, the Andrew Sullivans of the world know that you can do something that's just kind of a quick three-sentence observation, in and out, right. And instead, this thing was an essay that probably had six paragraphs that were sufficient to set the context, could explain enough background if you were unfamiliar with the *New York Times*—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: —you know, but, like, assumed that you were a literate person, that you knew what Cheltenham was, that you kind of found. And then I kind of was amused by the way that The Times had justified this leap into modernity by going to a typeface designed in 1898, I believe.

And so—at any rate, so it was fun to write, but it was sort of, like, a real essay. It wasn't a long essay, but it was a real essay. And Bill and Jessica and Rick had all sort of made the same decision, that we were going to write real essays. And that meant that from that—I've tried since then to kind of write a different sort of thing, but it just seems like it has to be real essay. And when the readership started growing, I started getting more and more self-conscious about who was—who was reading these things. And that one probably took me—probably wrote it after dinner one night. The bigger ones I was writing, you know, five years on and more were probably—would take me, like, a whole weekend to write.

I remember I wrote one about the—and I loved writing about things that I didn't think anyone else would care about, like when they abandoned the old AT&T logo—[phone rings]—[inaudible]—again?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: When they abandoned the old AT&T logo, I really—I heard they were going to get rid of it, they were going to replace it with something else. And so I wrote this piece about it and—but, like, sort of to do it I had to kind of give the whole history of the Bell telephone system; had to describe how Saul Bass, who designed it, had designed an earlier version back in the early '70s; had to describe the other [striped ?] logos he had done. I really felt like it was incumbent on me on behalf of all the readers that we'd accumulated on *Design Observer* to really kind of, like, be—make this sort of the preemptive authoritative essay on this subject, even if no one—even if—[no one cares?].

At the same time, more and more people were caring about this stuff. That's what was weird. If the *New York Times* changed its typeface today, there would—there'd be a lot of buzz about it on the Internet. And you have, like, these—it's funny, I think that, you know, there's—I know there's a typeface—there's a blog called kottke.org—he has this interesting—it's really like a—it's one of those—you know, he'll just kind of find links and connect to them with some commentary. And he's always called it Liberal Arts 2.0.

And it's very much sort of what Steve Jobs champions in his—in that Walter Isaacson book, where it's about the intersection of the arts—of the humanities and science in a way. And I think things like typography sort of is seen to be somewhere in there. You know, pure art is the humanities, but there's something—you know, it's—there's my bachelor of science in design again. There's something about that world that's of interest to people in a way that it wasn't just five years ago and really wasn't 10 years ago.

And so as we've worked on it, it sort of got more and more daunting. Then at the same time, Bill particularly has

taken a lot of care in kind of expanding what it could be and merging other things into it. And I have to admit, I responded very well to the pressure of those early days. If, like, something—you know, that things—you know, it's my turn to write something. That thing's been there for two days. Everyone's getting bored. I've got to write something, like, now to—so there'll be something new on the site, right.

You know, I'm embarrassed to say I hardly write at all for the site now. And it's not because—well, part of it's—part of it's two reasons—three reasons. One, new stuff shows up there that I don't have to worry about; two, it's—I think it's actually—well, more than three reasons—one is that it sort of, like, is—it's the pressure of kind of, like, "if I don't write it, no one else will" or "it's my turn to write something and I have to step up." It's not there anymore.

Number two is that a lot of—a lot of stuff you'd want to cover is sort of—gets covered quickly, and a lot of stuff I write about kind of gets written about really in kind of a cursory way but broadly real fast. It was fun writing about things that I didn't think anyone else cared about. The more that people care about the stuff, the harder it is to feel you have an interesting angle on it, right.

Number three is that—I mean, the long essay form of blog journalism some people say is dead. I actually disagree. I think there are some interesting sites that are doing it. And when it's done well, it's sort of jaw-dropping. It's amazing how you'll find an essay on something in the most unlikely place. And a lot of times it just has that stuff that I like.

There's this—there's this website called The Awl, A-W-L, that a bunch of people, like—Alex Balk, who's a long-time blogger and gadfly started—but they—all these writers write for it, and they'll write really long essays.

And there was an essay written about the McRib sandwich at McDonald's. And it's not like the McRib sandwich did something funny today or "God, I hate the McRib sandwich," "God, I love the"—it was this long sort of really thoughtful essay about how it came to be invented, whether or not it actually is subject to the fluctuations of pork prices and whether or not its continuous discontinuation and reintroduction is based somehow on McDonald's doing a kind of arbitrage with a pork product, you know,—so it's about economics on one level and about this stupid bit of popular culture written in this hilarious way that just kind of, like, had one great turn of phrase after another. I read the whole thing out loud twice to different people over Thanksgiving day weekend actually.

So it just shows it can still be done.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MICHAEL BIERUT: And I have in my notebook one, two, three, four, five different ideas for stuff that I'm going to sit down and write as soon as I get a chance. But the procrastinator in me has kind of overwhelmed the guy who felt the pressure to write things.

MIJA RIEDEL: It seems to, on that point, that humor and—has been a huge part of your work from the very beginning.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: There's been an ebb and a flow of it. Is it something you consciously try to bring into the work? Does it depend on the client, the project?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, it's funny because I think people wouldn't say that I'm that funny of a designer. I think sometimes I do things that are funny that people don't pick up as being funny. Other times the work—there's nothing really funny about Saks. There's something slightly funny about MAD, only—I mean, I actually think the fact that it looks like the—it's not funny really, but I think there's some, like, enjoyable discoveries to be made and it gives pleasure giving discoveries, let's say. I think when I'm talking about it, I'm almost always funny. I'll be funny in presentations.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Inaudible]—

MICHAEL BIERUT: I've had very few very, like, beginning-to-end dead-serious presentations with clients. I get very rattled if I think they're just grimly listening to me talk about dead-serious business. It really freaks me out.

And so I use humor as—a lot of times just to make people more comfortable in things, just to—and also to show that this is—I mean, when it goes well the time that people spend with me is a fun time of their day. I love it when I feel like people are really looking forward to having a meeting about the project that I'm working on. And I actually try to make it so that—

[audio break, disc 4 of 4]

MIJA RIEDEL: Mija Riedel with Michael Bierut. This is disc number four for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, December 13th, 2011.

MICHAEL BIERUT: So sometimes I'll have occasion to spend some time in a client's office, where I'm going to the kind of meetings they have day in and day out, and I'm astonished at how dull it is. And it's not just dull because they don't know the subject matter, it's dull in a way that you'd expect things to be dull--you know, if you're getting paid for a job, there's a reason you get paid to go to work and you don't get paid to go to the beach. The second thing is much more pleasant than the first thing.

But what people put up with is amazing. I remember one time I made a presentation, and as I was leaving, after I left I said to the colleague I was with, well, that was fun. And they said, well you know, can you imagine how many meetings I have all day long? And then you come along, and you have this stuff to look at it, and you're kind funny. And you're talking in an energetic way.

I think it's a moment where that's a way to dramatize what design can do. And I've always been surprised when certain designers, who I think are fairly dull, actually manage to be successful in spite of themselves. Their work is obviously very strong. But I think there's probably a whole world of people out there who like their design, and their design is relatively dull, so more power to them.

MIJA RIEDEL: A couple of questions from this list from the Smithsonian, just to make sure that we cover. I can think of the Voting Booth Project, The Library Initiative, The Green Patriots, do political and social commentary figure into your work in terms of clients you may choose? Or do they figure into your work in any way that resonates with you?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes. I don't see my fundamental--well let me put it this way. If I'm working with people that I like, who are involved with something I'm interested in and are trying in some way to make part of the world some slightly better place, I respect that. And I like getting involved in that kind of work.

I think a lot of the work that designers do on behalf of political causes is a form of self-therapy in a way, and not always the most effective kind of self-therapy. Or maybe it's good self-therapy, but doesn't actually have that much of a repercussion in the real world. And so I'm lucky because as a principle here, and having largely like-minded partners, or perhaps even entirely like-minded partners politically, I've never felt that I had to pull any punches in terms of my feelings about where I stand on the political spectrum. And I haven't concealed that from clients.

I certainly, if I felt that I had a client who was--a couple times I've been asked to have roles in literally political campaigns for candidates that I didn't like, and I turned that down. Also there have just been clients that I just sort of temperamentally that I just don't like as people. And I avoid them.

I sort of think that part of the luxury of being--well, not a luxury -- part of the thing you can do, which is great, if you're as successful as [inaudible] through that thing that I learned way back when, which is you can integrate your life and your work. And I think that means that, to compare with again, a lot of the people that I'll see on a day to day basis who are going to work, getting paid to do something at work and then going home, they really have to live a double life in a way. There's this thing that they're doing in order to make money, and that's funding the stuff that they really want to do, which could be buying nice things, or going on vacations, or maybe buying food so they can live. It's stuff that they can do.

And if you've started in a position where you can be choosy at all, or even not. You know, I think the more you can try not to separate the work you're doing from the way you, from the way you perceive your responsibilities in the world, the better off you are. And I think you can actually act in a responsible way in all sorts of situations. That doesn't mean just going on strict diet of only worthy nonprofits, I've worked with nonprofits that I thought had worthy goals and were horribly mismanaged, and were wasting any little bit of money that they had. And certainly all the time I was giving them.

At the same time, I've worked with the project we did with Disney and Celebration. I thought was truly idealistic and inspiring. And it wasn't just because there was a plenty of Kool-Aid to be had to get everyone on the same page. I mean, I felt that way going into it. And I thought it was a chance to do something significant, and I still think that.

And so I think the litmus test that a lot of designers are putting into stuff-- and by the way, the litmus test for a lot of designers is that they want to hire, they want to work with only people that have good taste and high morals. And the best demonstration of good taste and high morals is their willingness to hire me as a designer, right? So it's this sort of self-defining circular thing that works out well for everyone.

I haven't been asked to design things for cigarette packaging, or deceptive packaging, or stuff for political campaigns that I disagree with. Those thrilling moments where you think you're going to make your big stand

just don't seem to show up that much, as long as you don't attempt to conceal your attitude about things. So I think really it's just a matter of trying to integrate all the things you're doing.

I mean, I've known designers who actually kind of fancied themselves as Robin Hoods, where they would do high-paying jobs that they really didn't believe in at all, to fund personal work that they did believe in. I think that actually kind of also, as romantic as that sounds, it eats away at your soul a little bit, too. Unless you're able to really--I actually don't know how you can do it. I think that there's something really compromising, regardless of how much you're getting paid, about doing that work.

And early in my career I used to take on projects now and then, just because I thought--I didn't want to do them. I just never did anything I disagreed with, just sort of, I don't really care about this, or I don't really like that person, but it pays well, so I'll do it. And there's always a point where you think, no matter what it was they were paying you, it's nowhere near enough. And you really start to suffer then.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that seems to be a point that has come through in all the different things that I've read that you've written through the 79 Short Essays book, through design book. Is it contrary to the opinion that objectivity and distanced professionalism is the place to begin. That there really is some authentic enthusiasm and personal interest and passion for whatever the project, or product, or organization might be has actually been very helpful in your work.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Yes, absolutely. And that's partly because of the kind of practice I've been able to do here. If I was running a huge firm, and had the livelihood of hundreds of employees and their families dependent on my ability to bring work in, I don't know what my attitude would be about it. But because I sort of had to be first involved personally in every single project that my team does, I have nowhere to hide from these things if I don't like them. I can't just hide and count the money somewhere; I have to be in there, working with the stuff.

And I actually don't think I'm particularly effective. Part of it is I just have seen that I'm not effective at doing things when my heart's not in it. So call it laziness, but I just try to avoid it. Yes, Tamara?

TAMARA: Colleen's here.

MICHAEL BIERUT: Really?

TAMARA: Yes. I told her to come a little early.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is there a community that's been important to your development as a designer, a community? I'm thinking of AIGA, I think of Pentagram, I think of fellow designers--

MICHAEL BIERUT: Oh yes, no, absolutely. I've often said I love design, I love designers. I mean I really do. In a way, for as much as I respond to-- I'm always an advocate, I think, for listening to clients and being responsive to clients. I really feel this sort of allegiance with designers in a way.

And so those are classmates that I had back in school, people that I've worked with in every job I've had. All the designers that have worked for me here, the partners I've had here at Pentagram. The larger community, Bill and Jessica and all the people at Design Observer I worked with. The larger community of people I've met through the AIGA.

And also, I have to admit, one time I got to Grand Central and a magazine that I had-- I believe I actually subscribed to it because I liked the idea of it, but I thought it was not really well--designed when I got it-- it has been redesigned. And it was the best magazine redesign I'd ever seen. The magazine was *Brill's Content*. Steven Brill had published it, and it was supposed to be a media critique magazine. Great idea for a magazine.

The original design of it was very ordinary. Then all of a sudden, one day I arrived and at Hudson News at Grand Central, all these new covers were there. And it just knocked me dead. I opened it up and I was breathless. It was so beautiful. And it had taken something that I think-- the same editor, same editorial team as the last one-- just through sheer design it transformed to something much more powerful.

I figured out from the masthead who had designed it. In Grand Central, I believe maybe using quarters, I got directory assistance, got the number for the firm, called the person, got the designer on the phone, I said, I just had to call you right now and tell you what a great job you did on the redesign of this magazine. I said, it just is unbelievable. And that guy's my partner today. It's Luke Hayman, actually, who's a partner here today.

But back in those days he worked for Ogilvy, who had the account with Steven Brill. So I have to admit, I literally will sort of think, oh, I have to call that person up right now and tell them how great this is. And I don't even know, I mean, why am I doing that? Do I want them to like me more? I just get so excited about it. Someone managed to work a miracle in the face of God knows what odds.

And I have to admit that community really is sustaining for me. And I've come to the perfect place at Pentagram, where it's really designed to provide that at the professional level. It's worked out really well for me. And it's a small world. I'll just mention, the guy I had lunch with, Steve Kroeger, he once used to say that design is incredibly important to an incredibly small number of people. That's not so true anymore, actually.

But part of it comes from memories, I think, of what it was like caring about this thing back in Parma, Ohio, and not knowing a single living--never having been anywhere within 100 miles, to my knowledge, of a single human being who actually did it for a living. And suddenly seeing something and thinking it was great, and being able to talk to the person? That's like the best thing in the world.

MIJA RIEDEL: Two final questions, because I know we're short on time. What do you see as the similarities and the differences between your early work and your current work?

MICHAEL BIERUT: I think the similarities are that--I mean, I don't have a vast attention span. So there's certain kinds of design work that require lots and lots of weaving and knitting and making it more and more complicated. I mean, to me, what makes me clap my hands and get really excited is something that just seems, oh, this is so simple. This is simple that no one can do it wrong, this is so simple they'll get it right away, this is so simple I can really sell this.

I just thought love that kind of thing. And I know that not every kind of good design is like that. I was at the Met on Friday looking at the Islamic collection. There are no ideas--I guess there ideas to that work, but a lot of it just has to do with this mesmerizing ability to master intricate detail, all for the greater glory of God. That's the idea, quote unquote. But it doesn't work simple. You can't boil it down to a one-liner and have it be effective. It only works when you show, when you're demonstrating that kind of commitment.

So I've never been good at that part, demonstrating any kind of commitment. Laughing, parenthesis, laughing, close parenthesis. But I think the simplicity of the things that I've done that work well has been a constant all the way along. I do think that as I've gotten older I've been able to take on things that are more complicated in terms of their messaging. Things that I would've been overwhelmed by earlier on.

MIJA RIEDEL: Such as?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Well, like the very first kind of complicated project I did was the worst piece I've ever done in my life, and I still have a copy of it today. It's a catalog for an exhibition by Robert Wilson at the Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center in 1979, 1980. It's awful, it's just awful. And talk about--what I would do with that today, I can't even [imagine.--MB]

Robert Wilson, this is right after *Einstein on the Beach* had come out. And there's scenes from *Einstein on the Beach* in this book, and I treat them as if they're nothing. I treat it all like nothing. You don't get any sense at all that there's anything-- this is epic not even with a lowercase e, it's epic written in four-point type. It's just, there was a problem to be solved, and that problem wasn't in conveying the spirit of what Robert Wilson's vision was, the problem was, how do I fit one 1,000-word essay, one 2,000-word essay, and 45 rectangular photographs into these 72 pages.

And have everything line up nice and be well-composed. Which I did. So that part I was able to discharge at that tender young age of 22, or whatever it was. But getting to the essence of it, and knowing that before you read anything had to feel a certain way, I was really bad at that then. And now I'm better at that, actually. I have to admit, I'll sort of be looking at something and think, it's not enough that it actually works. It actually has to somehow communicate something in this subconscious sort of way first. Or work on these different levels.

The Capital Campaign I worked on for Yale, which was designed to deal with very wealthy people, a world that I don't know all that well. We have an institution I didn't attend, and language that seem to resonate with them really well, is something I couldn't have done earlier. I could have done the typography, I could have picked out nice pictures, but figuring out how to get the right tone of voice for it. To have it feel confident, but still have the ask in there somewhere, that takes a kind of funny mastery.

You have to master a certain thing that I don't think is something you learn in school. That you just have to be attentive to the work as you're doing it, and seeing what works, what doesn't work, and listening carefully and getting that tone right. That's taken a long time, I'm still halfway there, I suspect.

MIJA RIEDEL: And finally, what is the essence of design that has held your attention all this time? What is it in particular about the field that keeps it interesting and fresh to you?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Oh, I think it's the ability to be a voyeur in all these different worlds. I just love that. Did I say that earlier?

MIJA RIEDEL: You might have referenced it, yeah.

MICHAEL BIERUT: --another conversation I had days ago. I mean I think the--oh, that's what I said. If you wanted to do a lot of different things, it's a great way to. In my capacity as a guy who doesn't really in theory, he just knows how to do this one funny thing that people occasionally need. That's not a matter of life and death, that will not withstand some apocalyptic last-days event on earth. Graphic designers won't be called to the fore to design logos to help us survive. I don't know how to make a fire out of sticks, or how to kill an animal and cook it and eat it. That might be important.

I just know how to do the thing I know how to do. But occasionally that thing gets me in a room where I'm talking to people that are--it's a world I don't know at all. Whether it can be a white shoe law firm. It can be a bunch of architects talking about building a new town. It can be the owner of an NFL team, it can be some guys that are curing cancer. It can be all kinds [of-MB] things, and I really do love that part.

And the fact when I'm able to make a connection, make a contribution to those worlds, I feel like in a way I've moved through them. Not just as a voyeur, but inhabited them briefly and in a way that will leaving a lasting mark. And that's the best part.

MIJA RIEDEL: One final question. You're mentioned a lot of people in the last few hours. Is there anyone we haven't mentioned so far that you would cite as an influence, or anyone you would like to cite?

MICHAEL BIERUT: Well I mentioned my lovely wife, Dorothy, over and over again. And she's actually--I started dating her when I was 15 years old. First girl I ever kissed, I've never kissed another girl. And because she's not a designer, and because she's funny and sort of not afraid of me, and able to be sarcastic. I go to conferences with other wives of designers, and I'm always impressed by how sometimes they're former students, and they really clearly are impressed by their husbands and their Titanic creative forces.

Dorothy has none--Dorothy's known me for way too long, and will roll her eyes and say, well, that's not very good, is it? Or haven't you done that before? And that's kind of nice. Or I don't like that one as much as the other one.

And she just is like this emissary from the real world, who sort of keeps everything in perspective. I can't tell you what an influence it's had on my life. And that influence has also gone off on our three kids, who are all similar in temperament. They both have this great enthusiasm for, and affection for creativity and the creative world, and the work that I do.

At the same time they don't have the--they don't buy it all hook, line, and sinker. They've become pretty smart consumers of this stuff, actually, as I think people have to be in the 21st century. So my wife and my family have been--this sounds awful, a hideously corny note to end an interview on. But I think it really is the truth.

MIJA RIEDEL: Final thoughts? Or should we end it right there on that note? Thank you.

[End of interview.]