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Oral history interview with Patricia (Trish) Bransten, 2015 October 5-6

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Trish Bransten on 2015 October 5-6. The interview took place at Bransten's home in San Francisco, California, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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: Okay. This is Mija Riedel. [Inaudible.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: Both are fine. Trish, or—

MIJA RIEDEL: Trish—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Trish is usually what I go by.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's what I thought, okay. This is Mija Riedel with Trish Bransten at her home in San Francisco, California, on October 5, 2015, for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is card number one. Thank you for making time today, in the midst of everything that's going on. You seem to have an incredibly busy life trying to even coordinate this place. [Laughs.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: It's the travel for the art fairs.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, yes, yes. And you do five or six a year, it seems.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes, I think so.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, yes. So, let's take care of some early biographical information, and then we'll move right into Viola Frey, and the gallery in general. When and where were you born?

TRISH BRANSTEN: 1959, San Francisco, California.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And date?

TRISH BRANSTEN: April 29th.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And would you describe your childhood and your parents, their names, and what it was like growing up?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Rena Bransten, mother, born March 8, 1933. John Bransten, father, born July 25, 1927.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Both incredibly engaged in the arts.

TRISH BRANSTEN: My father was—

MIJA RIEDEL: Your mother in particular.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —probably an intellectual, my father.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: My mother was probably more intuitive and less flawed as an individual, the way people are. Both very interested in the arts, critically. And my mother came here and was part, I think, of some auxiliary groups initially at the museum, and then maybe on the board; I don't remember. My father, and mother, both started collecting pretty soon after they were married and moved here. My—

MIJA RIEDEL: They both came from the East Coast, yes?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Dad was born here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay. And your mom—[inaudible].

TRISH BRANSTEN: His father, Joe Bransten, was married to Ellen Bransten. Ellen Hart was her maiden name.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And Ellen Hart actually ran, with Nell Sinton, and Ruth Armour [ph], the [San Francisco] Art Institute for a short bit.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And Ellen Hart Bransten was also an artist, a photographer, specifically.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And Joe Bransten, I can't quite—I'm not quite sure. Joe Bransten may have gone on, sort of, the European tour, and gotten Miró and a few other artists that I think are in the collection of SFMoMA.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: He brought a Rothko. He brought—he bought some very key pieces. Ellen Bransten was his first wife, my father's mother, and Ruth Armour [ph] was his second wife.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And he married her because—she was also an artist, a painter, so there was quite a bit of art engagement in the family, and I can't really say where that impulse came from.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So for as long as you can remember, it was there.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, yes. Your dad was president of the Berkeley Art Museum at one point?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I don't know that he was president—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —but he was certainly a board member. I'm not sure of everybody's roles. Mom was engaged with both SFMoMA and then Yerba Buena Center [for the Arts]—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —Berkeley, maybe, certainly CCA [California College of the Arts]. She had a lot of philanthropic and intellectual interests herself.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes; certainly. So, then, as a child, did you spend a lot of—she started her gallery in '74, so that was—as I recall—so that was quite a bit—you were fairly grown up by then.

TRISH BRANSTEN: She always collected. She always was interested. She always—I mean, I think for anybody that grows up going to museums, it—museums become a home.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: You know, they become—in any place in the world, you don't need anybody else; you don't need, it—you know—in these days, they always have a café.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: So it is—and a shop and a bookstore. It's an escape; it's a home; it's a place for engagement, intellectually and visually. And that remains true for me to this day.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. And so your childhood, it sounds like, was very much full of that.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It was very full of that. My parents divorced probably 1969 or so; they certainly separated then. But both kept up a very active engaged—engagement with visual art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And as a child, where did you go? San Francisco public schools? Were you in a public school?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I went first to Hamlin's [The Hamlin School], which was an all-girl's school, which was certainly something that informed how I think about education.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And then I went to public school, which was another step in how I thought about education.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. So you were in private school till what age? Through eighth grade or—

TRISH BRANSTEN: —eighth grade, ninth grade, I can't remember exactly how it went. I think it was through eighth grade, but it might have been through seventh at Hamlin School. Then I went to Roosevelt [High School] for a year, and then to Lowell [High School].

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Did you go to museums in the city a lot? Did you travel a lot to go to museums? How did that work?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think it was—

MIJA RIEDEL: What were your days like as a kid?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think—well, I rode horses. I had a privileged upbringing. It was—it was a time of enormous social change here, and my father was extremely interested in the freedom that came with the social student movement of 1967, which most people around the world know well as the Haight-Ashbury sort of movement. But it was an antiwar movement; it was a movement of activism. My—not only was my father engaged with it, but, you know, a couple of my friends' parents were engaged with it. Interesting time. It was a—what I knew then—and I'm going to put myself now in eighth or ninth grade—it was a fairly white movement because the students that came here were—you know, they came from everywhere. And it wasn't really until public school that I understood a broader universe—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: —with a whole lot of skill sets and voices and, and really important—it was an important time for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So that—so that was what my childhood looked like. Summers, we would go to my mother's farm in Chappaqua, New York, which were still farms.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. With Quakers, and that was another exposure, even mild and slight, but it was—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —it was there. You know, extremely old population of Quakers, so they—you know, Alice Sutton, who, I think, had also an April 29th birthday, so we always—I think she—God, she had to be 100 when I was a kid and lasted quite a while.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I mean, it was a fun—it was a very fun time. We would certainly go into the museums when we would go to New York. We would go to the museums here. I remember Mom mostly with the Museum of Modern Art—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: —but that's not necessarily accurate.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right. And do you remember the Met as a child as well?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Sure.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Sure.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, okay. Were there other travels as well? Did you get to Europe or other countries or—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Not, not then. You know, I don't think it was done quite as much.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And the world wasn't as small.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And so I think it wasn't until I was like 17, 16, 17 that—that—that started. But I'm not sure that's accurate either, actually. I think that might be close, but I'm not sure that's on the nose.

MIJA RIEDEL: Were you—looking at all this art, being surrounded by so much art, did you make art yourself?

TRISH BRANSTEN: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Not at all? No, drawing, no painting, no clay?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I drew. It never—I was very—I was much more interested in sort of the physicality of my body through riding—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: —and there is something that happens with horseback riding. I probably wrote more than I drew.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: That makes sense; that makes sense because I know the gallery has been so committed to publications for so long. You know, I can see that.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It's a very literary—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —they're very literary people, my father, absolutely, and my mother as well. And language was extremely important to us.

MIJA RIEDEL: How wonderful.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: It sounds like—was it—was it an idyllic childhood?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I loved it. I think it was.

MIJA RIEDEL: I mean, your parents divorced; that had to be difficult.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Even with the divorce. I guess that was difficult, but my father was so difficult that—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —you kind of could live with it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. So it seems as if you were really interested in horseback riding, and writing, perhaps—

TRISH BRANSTEN: —reading, certainly, I loved reading.

MIJA RIEDEL: So, and how did you decide—you decided to go to Berkeley, or—and then—

TRISH BRANSTEN: So I went to Berkeley—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —and I was going to—I actually—my degree was actually in economics. I started off—

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

TRISH BRANSTEN: There's a strong math part, component to me, so I started off doing abstract algebra and math, and I got to any applied math, and I realized I liked the abstract things, except for—I got very interested and finally took a second specialty in the economics of developing nations—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: —which is an extremely, to me—and I—they're probably not called that anymore, but it was extremely interesting because it is almost always—and even in developed nations—it's always a choice between long-term investment and short-term needs; always. And, I mean, we sat down to talk about water and parking and this and that. And so, yes, and that was without the stresses of a rapidly growing population.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And dwindling resources, of course, yes, yes. So, economics. Did you have a thought of what you were going to do with it?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I kind of wanted to go into the World Bank.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I was halfway playing around with it when, you know, I got out of school. I was playing around with it, and then, for whatever reason, I went to work for Anne Kohs and Associates. I went to work really to travel Viola's show, so she hired me as an adjunct in the office, and she was, basically—I think she would be considered an artist agent, except that, you know, that's not a fully developed conversation in the art world.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But I certainly did learn proper registration, proper file-keeping, and how to travel—how to develop a prospectus for an exhibition and travel it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So—

MIJA RIEDEL: We'll get to that. I don't want to just—I don't want to rush too much through Berkeley, though. It seems as if the social consciousness was very much a part of your upbringing and the direction you were heading in terms of the World Bank, and it seems that there's definitely that—those threads run through the gallery, and have all along as far as I can tell.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think that's probably right. I hadn't really thought of it that way, but I think part of what interests me and part of what I see my job is, is to give a platform to a voice that is, not a—not a commercial voice; it's an alternative voice to a mainstream thinking.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That makes sense. And when I talked with your mother, we didn't dwell only on that, of course, because there're certainly other things that are happening in the gallery, but that does seem to be something that has repeated over time, and hearing you talking about your upbringing—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —makes me feel like that must have been something that was just a natural part of your—

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think so.

MIJA RIEDEL: —nature from the start, yes, and a concern. So you were thinking about going into the World Bank; you graduated Berkeley in—it would have been, what?—'79, '81?

TRISH BRANSTEN: '77? I graduated high school in '77, so it would have been probably '82 by the time I finished —

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —the degree.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And was there anything especially significant about college for you? Were you working with you mom at all? How does one get from economics to becoming so engaged in the art field?

TRISH BRANSTEN: It was really through Anne, I think, Anne Kohs.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And in fact—

MIJA RIEDEL: But how even to Anne Kohs from a degree in economics?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I can't—I think I applied for the—I can't even quite remember, except that, you know, when I got out of school, I think we were starting to look at Reagan years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And the World Bank tends to be political.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: So it comes and goes with who the President is. And my connection at the World Bank was out.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: So I think that—I think that was part of it. I had certainly worked a little bit at the gallery, on and off over the years, of course.

MIJA RIEDEL: I was going to ask—

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I had worked at my father's company on and off over the years as well, which was MJB [Coffee].

MIJA RIEDEL: Coffee, right?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Coffee.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. What was it like as a kid when your mom had the gallery? She opened it in '74, so you must have been—what?—a teenager or early teens? Did you spend much time there?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Oh, yes. It was really interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Would you go to those dinners? Were there artists around the house?

TRISH BRANSTEN: There were artists—there were always artists around the house because my mother always bought things. And I definitely remember Bob Arneson carrying his bust up the stairs. And I was just—I was so amazed at his—just the craftsmanship of the piece and the playing-out of identity. It was just wonderful, a great piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: And how old were you at the time?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I have no idea.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. A teenager, still? Early-20s? [Laughs.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: No, no, it would have been earlier, I think, because we were still at 3232 Pacific.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And that might have formed, you know—that was a [Ernest] Coxhead House, and it was a house of architectural significance.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Any other recollections that were specifically significant in terms of art when you were a child before we move on to Berkeley and Anne?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I just—

MIJA RIEDEL: Pieces that stuck in your mind, other than the Arneson?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think—I think those things come and go.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I can look around the house in my head and see certain paintings. I can see a [Frank] Stella on the wall, and I can see, you know, somebody named Peter Bloom. Like, I can see, you know, Craig Kauffman and a lot of different people over the years. We had a lot of Los Angeles; there was a fair amount of Minimalism when my father was there. So I can see all those things, but to the degree that I would be completely informed by them, no.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I mean, I can't—I mean, it may be that there's a specific memory that sticks, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. It's more of a general backdrop, is what I'm hearing from you.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Okay. So, Anne Kohs: who was she, and how did this come about?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I don't remember that—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —except that it probably would have been around 1980-81.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And, I don't have a job, and I think I had a job at a hairdresser for a while. But I think—I know that really, when you travel an exhibition, there's an extra hands-on-deck that's needed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So I probably worked well for her and she for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. So, when and how did you first meet Viola? Do you recall?

TRISH BRANSTEN: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Do you recall your first thoughts on seeing her work?

TRISH BRANSTEN: [Long pause.] Not specifically. I think that, at the time, she would have been—all the work would have been at 663 Oakland Avenue, and it was really a feast, and it's sort of a visual feast and a lack of hierarchy, to some degree, in the artwork. She also was keeping several threads going of her—she kept several narrative and physical, visual threads going at the same time. So *Desert Toys* took place at the same time that, you know—the bricolage pieces took place at the same time that she made 25 plates for the Oakland Museum. I mean, so it was—it was a lot of specifics—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —that were taking place. And I remember—if I read Garth's [Garth Clark] essay, which was heavily influenced by Charles's [Charles Fiske] thinking—

MIJA RIEDEL: I think that, too, yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —if I remember. I do think that's true.

MIJA RIEDEL: I've heard that from few people.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I do think that's true. Well, I think—I think it's also Garth's thinking. But if you look at what Garth loved—and he did love Viola—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —he loved a vessel.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So going outside of that would have required input from somewhere.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: He also did not love the figure—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —until very late, I think it was even [Georges] Jeanclos in the '90s—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: He didn't show figurative work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So he would have had to assimilate the philosophical leanings from somewhere.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Because there is, with Viola—and you knew it at the time you saw it—there is a tying-in of what was happening in the contemporary art world with the craft, and with Viola wanted—what Viola politically wanted to say about the work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So Garth would have had to come up to speed with all those things, and I would assume the language came from Charles. Viola said it, but I don't know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, I've heard that. I can't remember who has said that, but I've heard that from someone else as well.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. So this would have been an extraordinary time to begin working with Viola and become familiar with her work. She was preparing for, I think it was, the '81 Crocker [Art Museum] Retrospective.

TRISH BRANSTEN: That was over.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that was over?

TRISH BRANSTEN: That was over.

MIJA RIEDEL: That had already happened?

TRISH BRANSTEN: That had happened.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you were preparing for '84 and the Whitney [Museum of American Art]?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Not even then.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So I probably joined—I guess was still in school, maybe, but our job was traveling the '81 Crocker Oakland Museum show.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: That was our job.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So—

MIJA RIEDEL: That's what I thought. Maybe I missed—yes, yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —so that was what we were doing. And we did travel it, maybe through—parts of it, though, like, '87, or so.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that long?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I mean, a long time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Maybe '86, but a long, long time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And the Whitney show was just a gift from heaven.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I mean—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: You know. And it was Patterson [Sims], really, supported by a very special group of people at the Whitney that just felt confident to reach out to a woman—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: —from California—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —who worked in clay—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —and made large tchotchkes.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: I mean, which is the real damning notion—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —when people talk about Viola.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: "I don't get it. They're just big figurines," you know. And I get that argument. It's just not my argument.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

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MIJA RIEDEL: When you first were looking at Viola's work, what about it interested you? Was it the color? Was it the form? Was it the fact that it was a woman making these huge, ceramic figures?

TRISH BRANSTEN: No, they weren't huge at first. Don't forget.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that's true.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So it was probably—

MIJA RIEDEL: But they were the large figures all ready when you started to travel that Crocker show, yes?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. Yes, they were.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But—yes, they were.

MIJA RIEDEL: But not monumental yet.

TRISH BRANSTEN: They were, and she was certainly doing the biggest—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —things around and—you know, very proud of that. I think it was none of those things. I think it was that Viola had developed—developed her train of thought so specifically. So what she always told me—now, I'm not sure it's exactly right, but somewhere around the time she was, say, 50 years old—maybe it was a little bit earlier—she decided to look back at the course of her work, look backwards, and pull out what she was investigating and specifically aim those investigations. So one of the big ones, at the time, was light and color. And that started that—I'm sure you've here this where she was examining how filtered sun colored—I mean, if I had to say it now, it would be the difference between the color of light and the color of substance, if I had to be really specific and more scientific. But she's really looking at how light changed colors, and that came through the garden.

MIJA RIEDEL: Someone told me she would go to like the Alameda flea market and take pictures or look at how light was falling on things there. Is that—do you have any recollection of that?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I don't think she—knowing Viola the way I do, I'm sure she took pictures.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I know she did because I saw them, and they are in the archives. But really what she did was look at light on her works in the garden.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Is what I remember.

MIJA RIEDEL: All right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And the Alameda flea market was, generally, information for Viola. She had a huge category—you're smiling because you've heard this—she had a huge category she called "information."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And when—and it could be anything. Everything was information on some level. Ursus Books and jewelry and jade drawings—

MIJA RIEDEL: —figurines. Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —figurines, absolutely, earlier.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Industrial pottery—you know, California Pottery, industrial pottery, fine china, all of that was information. Magazines, dresses, aprons, it was a vast amount of material that was information for her.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So I feel that the specificity of her intellectual objectives and her—obviously, her artistic and creative objective—the fact that she had written them out so specifically was one of the first things that I was fascinated by. I hadn't really met anybody who had done that. And Viola, on top of that, had a nonstop work ethic. I mean, she had a work ethic anyway, but Mom used to call it sort of this primitive urge. And I—there—so all the artists that we work with, I think, could do nothing else. It's one of my joys. They don't really have a choice. They're makers. But Viola took—there was not the other balance that a lot of our other artists enjoy. There was no family life; there was no boyfriends. There was no—it was about—it was all about her making.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. And that has be reinforced by pretty much every single person I've spoken with.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was with what she wanted to do.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And if there was—you know, I talked with Neil Williams who was her assistant, you might have known very early on. And I'm saying, of course—just about everybody I can speak with had mentioned this—or worked with her talked about the fact that, if you weren't directly engaged with her about work or about art, then she really just wasn't interested, not in a way that was harsh, but that was her focus; that was what she was interested in; that was where she came alive; that's where she wanted to spend her time, and she was very conscious in that choice.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It was an absolutely conscious choice. I would say that she and I shared science fiction readings. She had boxes and boxes of science fiction and we would trade them and discuss them. And every so often, you could get her, you know, riffing, but the big part of her life was this other part. Absolutely.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's the first time I've heard about science fiction. I've heard about romance novels.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Oh, huge science fiction reader.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really? Interesting.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Huge. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was there an author in particular that she liked, or she just across-the-board loved science fiction?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, it's hard not to just love [Robert A.] Heinlein.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: That was—I mean, and—but she would—she was just a massive reader of that stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: What sort of—were there books in particular that were influential? Did she talk with you, for example, Levi-Strauss or—let's see, there are a few others here that they were curious about. She talk about theory? Did she talk about gender studies? Did she talk about anything like that?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes; yes, yes, and yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Structuralism? Feminism? Feminist art theory?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think—you know, gosh, 1980, you were here; you were starting to feel, sort of, this Marxist notion of—I mean, everything was—seems to be, was being filtered through a Marxist kind of a lens. And of course, she would have known feminist theory. I mean, she worked with Suzanne Lacy closely and—but I think that she really, really, while wanting to comment on politics and did, I think she had a very, very, very strong desire to illuminate and expose and provoke thoughtfulness about certain political structures: male/female relationships, consumerism, resources dwindling, and otherwise.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: As she went on in the world, it became more humanist.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So the—it's not that the issues got more abstract, but they got more basic.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. That makes a lot of sense. Do you think that they went through a personal lens at all? She was trying to personal narrative in conjunction?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Often. Often.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But again, as she went on, meaning as she moved through her own life, I would say the interior narrative of being a woman in Lodi was less issue-driven than being a person of the planet.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right. Did she talk with you in depth or regularly about books and things she was reading?

TRISH BRANSTEN: No, we would go to—when we were in New York together, we would go to Ursus, so we would have that conversation, but she had enormously Catholic tastes, so they went—you know, it could be anything there.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's—did you travel with her?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I did.

MIJA RIEDEL: Often?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think so.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I can't remember, but I think so. I tried to because there is no better education, as far as I can tell.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes. And so when you did travel with her, where would you go? What was your path?

TRISH BRANSTEN: New York. It was New York almost always.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And would you go to particular galleries, particular museums, particular shops? I certainly heard about the Jain drawings from a few people.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Ursus was big. But God, we would plug through SoHo, and we would have the same happiness at a, you know, jewelry street mall that we did, you know, at Ursus or anywhere else. We—you know, she liked consuming.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: She was—I mean, when they—when you see those drawings of her as a collector—I don't know if you've seen them—but they usually show somebody on a wicker basket—a wicker chair, sorry, with, you know, just piles of shit.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: You know, that—that's real. I mean, that's her.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that she—I've also heard that she would collect *en masse,* that there wasn't necessarily a lot of discerning going on. She would buy a mass of drawings or a mass of figurines.

TRISH BRANSTEN: She did, but I think it was very discerning, actually. That would be my—I think she had a—I think she knew how to cut her eye at—

MIJA RIEDEL: So when she saw a collection of things she wanted, she would by that en masse. But it would be a specific collection she would have chosen over something else. Yes?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Absolutely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Absolutely. She had things attracted her and things that didn't.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you ever go to the Alameda flea market with her?

TRISH BRANSTEN: No, before my time, I'm sorry to say.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: She probably ended the big Alameda trips in the early '70s I want to say.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Okay. Okay. I think it was either Sam or Neil who would talk about opening a closet that would just completely filled with figurines.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Oh yes. I've got a drawing—I've got a photo of her with that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. That would be great to see.

TRISH BRANSTEN: In front of her closet. It was done—the photograph—and it might have been Lee Fatheree that took the photo, but I'd have to double check. But it was used for a poster for some exhibition. I mean, everybody knew this was something special.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Everybody. The fact that a California woman artist who worked in clay got to the Whitney indicates how special that is—she was.

MIJA RIEDEL: I want to go back and—if you're done with that thought, I want to go back to something you said earlier. You talked about her writing down, being very clear that she wanted to look at her work in terms of light and color and writing down what she had done in the past as a trajectory—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —of where she wanted to go in the future.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Could you say some more about that?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I wish I could. I think if I had—I think she started notebooks about it, and when I say started, that's probably what she did because I would—I think that somebody who makes learns though making, rather than learns through sort of intellectually processing. And I see the difference between myself and somebody who knows how to actually do things.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Oh, Trish.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Where I'll sit there and spin out. I'll put this here first; then I'll [nonsense sounds]. [They laugh.] Whereas somebody else just gets right to—you know, just problem solves manually, physically, in a three dimensional universe. And I'm going to guess that's what Viola did. But I also am certain that she set out specifically to accomplish what I think were formal investigations: light and color and composition, rather than thematic or political or theoretical investigations.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But Viola was, at her core, commenting on the world.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: That's who she was. It's what—it's how—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —she navigated.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, and when I think about some of her most significant teachers I think of [Richard] Diebenkorn, and I think of Rothko, and then, of course, I think of light and color.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: So I'm not surprised that that would filter through, at some point in time, and then surface in her own work through—in her own way.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think absolutely, and then, of course, you know, you go through that extra step of not seeing the color you're applying, right?

MIJA RIEDEL: For the glaze you mean?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Because you're not going to see it till it's fired.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And one of the things I remember her saying about Rothko was not really formalist, or it was his work ethic, his own work ethic, and it also had to do—God, I'm not going to get this right, but it had to do with how he treated his canvases early on, how he either stretched them or—there was a lack of preciousness, and I'm not positive I've got this—my memory is holding. But it had to do with her respect that he was working more than he was sort of preserving or being precious about his canvases.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is interesting. That's interesting.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And that would be, I think, something that she set herself up for as well.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. That's wonderful. I haven't heard anything quite like that yet. And many people have given variations on something that we—you know, we've heard about Viola from different people, but that's especially interesting.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It was interesting, and I remember it carries through. So you have to remember—I mean, and you've probably heard this from everybody, that the sort of the gestalt of clay and porcelain is a certain

wholeness like a—you pick up as bowl, a Ming Dynasty, and you ping it, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —it creates these harmonics. And all of these guys were people that were bucking that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But Viola, I remember we went to—and this was when the Asian and the fine arts were conflated—and we were talking to somebody about a bowl, one of the curators who was talking about that. And saying, you know, the tension, something about the tension of a thrown, this, that was not broken. And Viola, after we left—and Viola was very mannered; she was very polite woman. After we left, she and I both looked at each other and we were like, "Nah."

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Not what she was interested in at all.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well—or what she believed to be the expression of the artwork. She didn't believe—the fact that it hadn't been repaired or restored wasn't, for her, a significant—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —event.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly. Exactly. It almost brings to mind a little bit of that wabi sabi sentiment, but do you think she would have had any interest in something like that? That sense of repair and imperfection?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think she would have accepted anything that advanced getting the piece made, period.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And if it meant certain things blew up and she remade them with kiln cement, it meant that.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's right. Do you remember—you don't remember when you first met her?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I don't. I wish I did.

MIJA RIEDEL: No sense of—yes, yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Of her? What I remember about her is her beautiful voice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Have you ever heard her speak?

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Her voice is soft; it's melodic, and it was very sing-songy.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Yes, nobody—I haven't heard anybody comment on that.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It's her voice was beautiful, and I remember that certainly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. [Laughs.] Okay. How did you relationship with her change over time?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think it just deepened. It just deepened. So I had a respect for her from the very start, and I think—I think as I grew confident enough to push back on what I thought were not great decisions, she grew confident enough—I mean, it just—we just grew up together a bit.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: She was certainly grown up, but we gained the ability to talk to each other more honestly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Well, so I do want to go back and look at the transition from working with Anne Kohs and traveling that show to working more and more with the gallery. I have written down that you became a director at the gallery and started working there more formally in 1980. We can more or less sometime—

TRISH BRANSTEN: I'm going to say more or less.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It probably was a little later. But—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And then the Crocker show was '81?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yep.

MIJA RIEDEL: You traveled things after that till '86, '87.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think so because we still were taking a—we took a bit of it and sent it to Emily Carr. We took another bit of it and sent it to—we sent it to two museums in Pennsylvania. The Moore College of Art was one, and I can't remember what the other one was.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So you were coming—you were becoming more and more involved with the Rena Bransten Gallery—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: —as I believe your mom was choosing to show Viola—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: —because I have in these records, anyway, and I think that was correct with your mom. The first show was about—[inaudible]—

TRISH BRANSTEN: She chose—yes. Yes. She chose—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: She chose Viola, and I entered, and afterwards, I came onto the gallery.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So Viola was already a member of the gallery, and I think, as I say, there would be impatiences that Mom and Viola would have with each other that I didn't get into.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It did no—what was on Viola's mind didn't bug me; what was on Mom's irritation with Viola didn't bug me. None of it bugged me because, you know, yes, it was irritating if Viola would agree to a show and then call us and say, "Well I don't actually want to do the show." And it wouldn't be with us; it would be with somebody who came through or, "I want to sell it. No, I don't, really." I just knew that that was a built in. If somebody went to the studio and looked at a work that I knew Viola still needed information from and wanted to buy it, and she said yes, I would—I would—Mom would go "Okay, yes is yes" because that's Mom. And I would meditate it a bit little more like, "Well, we'll talk about it when we get to the gallery." It just—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So I had a greater latitude, also, maybe because of the economics, whatever Viola did not sell was like a savings account, so I also recognized that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I mean, and you need both, right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: You need present sales.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But you also need—you also need to retain material.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So I was aware of that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. It makes me think of two things right away. It makes me think of what you just mentioned about she was very mannered person. So maybe, politely, she's going to say, "Of course you can buy this."

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the second thing Gyöngy Laky who taught for years at UC Davis, she—many years ago, I did an interview with her, and she talked about, especially for young artists, the importance of mulling things over, and that mulling is very much a part of the artistic process. And that just makes me think that that might also have been part of this.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Oh no, completely, she needed—and in fact, as Viola went on, the way she would retain work is not to finish it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Interesting.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. And sometimes they were pieces that didn't quite work and sometimes—and then one time, I remember she—we had sold a piece that was for sale, and she did—and was new and should have sold, which was *Figurines as Three Graces*. So they were very pretty figurines, and it was a small piece, and I think the figurines were made up of spoon heads, but I don't quite remember. And it sold, and she missed it. I mean, she wanted it again. So she made herself one. And I went, and I looked at it, and it was ugly. And I was like, "Wow, Viola." And she was like, "I don't know." [They laugh.] "I don't know what happened there".

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Interesting. Did she—

TRISH BRANSTEN: You can't control everything.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's true and especially with the kiln.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And that was—it wasn't the kiln. It was her.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And in fact, years later, we were having trouble—she was—you know, Viola always showed. I mean,—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —from the time we started. She took like an eight-year hiatus before we showed her very intentionally.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Between Wenger Gallery and us or Hank Baum, and—.

MIJA RIEDEL: Because she wanted to collect the work and look at it as a body, correct?

TRISH BRANSTEN: She also said—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —that she lost money on that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, she did.

TRISH BRANSTEN: By the time she rented the car, by the time this—and the things were—what?—three and $400?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: You know, just—at any rate, so we squeezed a show into the gallery because—and we decided to make it really easy: a plate show. So, we get the plates up, and they're not very good. They're not great. The red has fired out somehow, so it's—it literally is snot colored, like clear.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: And Viola and I are looking at the show. And we knew what we were looking at, right? And Viola was very good about self-assessment, which not everybody is.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's true.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And she's looking at the show, and she goes, "Well, it just goes to show you." And I'm waiting. Says, "That artists are not machines." I was like "Yeah. Pretty much."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: That's right. Just because you're doing a show doesn't mean it's going to be a home run every time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But it was beyond that because this easy plate show that was supposed to happen, like, "Oh, you just make the forms and then plop on the figurines."

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I can't remember what had happened, but it had been a headache from the start, this plate show. And—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —cracking, and I don't even remember what, but it made us laugh.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is interesting, too, because I have had the experience of an artist making a piece, and then somebody else wanting something like it, and they try to make it again, and it just is not—you can feel it; you can see it immediately. It looks, more or less, like it should be the same, but there's—it's just not there.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Oh, and this was so clearly—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —you know, now, I assumed—because Viola and I both liked a certain ugly factor. I assumed Viola had—I mean, I think, when it was Viola's, it just took its own life. Right? Ugly and not quite—it wasn't a bad piece at all. Don't get me wrong. It was just not graceful and sweet.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It was harsh and discordant.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: So what happened with the plate show? Did it stay up?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Oh yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: It did stay up.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Oh yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It wasn't a bad—it wasn't like a terrible show. And it's the joy of a gallery that you can show—it wasn't bad. If a show was bad and you know it's going to be bad, you don't do it. Right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: You know it's—you know it's going to damage the artist's reputation in some ways. You watch yourself.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: This wasn't that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Yes. I have her—I can't remember, I think it was Garth Clark; I won't say anything on record because I don't remember if it was him—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —but I do remember a gallery dealer and a very well-known clay artist, and one show was just bad. And I think they had to have the opening because they had to have the opening, but I think, after that, they boxed it up and sent it back.

[Telephone rings.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: How amazing. Excuse me.

MIJA RIEDEL: You need to take that?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes I do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let me pause this. What was the public response to her work? Was it—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Always great. Actually.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's what your mother said, too, and I just find that extraordinary.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I mean, there was certainly people that said exactly what I'm saying to you about, "I don't get it." "These are big figurines. What's special?" Why—you know, "They're no different than the big ceramic Dalmatian that people put by their fireplace." And to those people, that's right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And why?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Why even have the conversation?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Interesting, but for the people who came to the gallery and the people who—

TRISH BRANSTEN: For the people who got it, they got it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: The people who didn't—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —they didn't.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Have—has your own response changed to the work at all over the years? Do you see anything that you didn't see initially, or was it, because you talked about having her being so specific, perhaps you had a very clear sense of what you were looking for over time?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think just the appreciation for what a groundbreaker she was, not even the ceramics and this and that. Going back to the photography and arranging the figurines that she bought and then photographing them, that's years before almost any other artist did that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And yes, she's working out a personal narrative, but it is—I mean, I remember she—I remember talking to Viola about them and saying—and having a big argument in the gallery because there was certain things that Viola described as source information, this information, but source information.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Exactly. What would source information be? What would be an example?

TRISH BRANSTEN: It could be anything.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I mean, really, it was what she used on the—

MIJA RIEDEL: Figurines or whatever?

TRISH BRANSTEN: —on the tax—on her taxes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But really, it was anything.

MIJA RIEDEL: Material. Raw material.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And source information is also what Gyöngy Laky—you quote her as saying, "Mulling things over," things that you need to produce other work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So if a blank studio—an empty studio is like a blank piece of paper to a writer, Viola, you know, would start a series of work based on other series of works, naturally.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So what she had done is she had photographed a lot of the figurines that she bought in vignettes. And they were sexual; they were male and female; they were, you know, nature versus whatever. And then for years—maybe 10 years after that, that was really the language that she lived in. And always in—graphically, she returned to that language almost always.

MIJA RIEDEL: So the figurines in relationship to each other as well as the color, I take it, and the light and the formal composition?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was true whether she was working on three dimensional work or two dimensional.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I would say.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I would say.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Did she talk with you about her work at all in terms of art history or other artists?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Sure.

MIJA RIEDEL: I mean Manuel Neri and [Lucio] Fontana and [Jean] Dubuffet—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Not Fontana. Not Fontana. Definitely Dubuffet.

MIJA RIEDEL: Not Fontana. Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Definitely Dubuffet.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Somebody else told me the exact opposite. Not Dubuffet and definitely Fontana.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, she made a piece called *Homage to Dubuffet.*

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. There we go.

TRISH BRANSTEN: You know, which was very specifically about Dubuffet, and she loved—she had a word to describe his oeuvre—and I don't remember what it was.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: She loved COBRA [Copenhagen Brussels Amsterdam]. No, we talked a lot about her understanding of art historical lineage. She had a very, very clear notion of where—what she was taking from and what she was adding to.

MIJA RIEDEL: Can you say some more about that specifically? That would be wonderful.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well Karel [Appel], COBRA, Dubuffet. I didn't hear her talk about Fontana, but I know that she would have enjoyed that kind of creative moment.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I don't remember her talking about it.

MIJA RIEDEL: What about Neri?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think that Viola did not always have a huge conversation about contemporary art—about her contemporaries.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Again, she was polite. She did have a notion about her contemporary women artists, female artists in the Bay Area, which were—they all had proceeded though their career due to the fact that they had been sleeping with another—a male artist. The exception, who she didn't like either, was Ruth Asawa. And she really felt Ruth Asawa—she was very, very dismissive of these Play-Doh things. And I—I mean, Viola is a very competitive woman. But I don't think that was only competition. I can't—I can't—I don't really know where it came from.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting that she was so competitive with the women. Was she equally as competitive with the men?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Oh sure.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. So she was competitive with—just in general. Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Oh sure. But she had them all trumped because, I mean, think of—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: She made things larger—in terms of the clay guys—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —she made things larger than any of them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I remember one—I think it was the sendoff for the Whitney party, which would probably have probably have been '83 or at some point before it had all goes east. She had a big party and, you know [Robert] Arneson was there and [Richard] Shaw. Everybody was there. I don't remember Ron Nagle, but they all got there, and then they all looked, and then they looked at each other, and they're like, "I don't know about you, but I feel like we should be back in the studio."

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. [They laugh.] I have heard a variation on that, as an artist and saying to Shaw or something.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. It was that.

MIJA RIEDEL: "I think we're not working hard enough". [They laugh.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: "We need—I feel like we should get back in the studio."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Yes. Yep.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did Viola ever talk with you about teaching? Her approach to teaching? It affected her work?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: She said, "Don't tell them anything. They'll suck you dry."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Did she really?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Oh yes. And I think she purposefully kept her—kept it obscure. I would think.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Could you say more about that? Was she serious?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Huh.

TRISH BRANSTEN: You see, because Dennis taught with her for a bit, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —that was her advice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow. Wow.

TRISH BRANSTEN: That—"Don't give away too much. They will suck you dry."

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Interesting.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think she believed that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: That was not funny. That was—am I the first person that's said that?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, you are the first person who's said that. [They laugh.] Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And it was very arbitrary. She would let the advanced students up when she decided.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I mean, it was a very arbitrary part to her. But it was very protective.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Of her own work and her own process.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Her emotional life.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Can you say a little bit more about that?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, that—I think that was it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: "Don't let—don't give—don't tell them anything. They'll suck you dry."

MIJA RIEDEL: Don't get overly engaged?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: They'll just—and she's right. An art student will take and take and take and take. And this was before emails when they were badgering you though the computer. You know? I can't even imagine what it's like now.

MIJA RIEDEL: Office hours. [They laugh.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. But—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: She was just—everything—she wanted everything to go to the work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: She did not want it to go the students. She did not want it to go to the family. She did not—she wanted it to go to the work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Her emotional strength.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And at the same time, somebody else mentioned—and you would probably agree with this. I think it's a different kind of generosity. Somebody talked about how generous she was as a teacher, that she

would pay for her students to go an exhibition that they couldn't afford to go to, or she would take them all on a field trip down to see something. She would pay for them all to have lunch. She would have them over to the house. So there was a different kind of generosity. But it is different than—

MIJA RIEDEL: That was probably still relatively protective, I would think .

TRISH BRANSTEN: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Interesting. So it doesn't sound like the teaching was at all helpful to the work. Somebody implied that—also that she might see her students doing something that was interesting; she would take that home and try that out.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think that—teacher—that's the—

MIJA RIEDEL: Norm?

TRISH BRANSTEN: —reality of teachers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: You know, I remember I was on the board of the Arts Education Project, which is an arts provider in public schools in San Francisco for many years, and we had Larry Rinder and quite a few people talking about, you know, why arts in the schools? Why is it important? Why is it necessary? And I think somebody asked Larry, you know, why—you know, why do you think art was important to you and teaching art? Because he was a teacher. He goes, "I don't know about them, but I took away a million ideas from my kids."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Interesting. Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And I've talked with Squeak [Carnwath] a couple weeks ago, and she was saying how, you know, they would banter back and forth, mostly good naturedly, about who saw something first or—you know.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: The candelabra image or whatever.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: And then, "Oh, I had that first. You took it from me." "Oh no, I had that first. You took it from me."

TRISH BRANSTEN: Right. Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes. Okay. Do you think teaching was at all important to her development as an artist?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I don't know. I don't know. I wouldn't think so. I think it was important to her place in the world.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But I don't know that it was impactful in terms of advancing what she wanted to say.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. And just based on the vast amount of information that she collected and that you've confirmed again today, it does not seem like she would need input from there. She would have so many sources of input.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And see also had Charles—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I mean, Charles was huge.

MIJA RIEDEL: So let's talk about Charles because we haven't really at all, and that would be wonderful. Not many—many people have little fractions of stories, so it would be great—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well—

MIJA RIEDEL: —to hear as much about that relationship and the role it played for her and her work as you are

able to.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, what I remember is Charles—and I don't remember how they met—but he comes back from France and Viola goes to New York. She's working in New York.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And they—he waited for her to get off work every day, snow or rain or whatever.

MIJA RIEDEL: This was when she was working at Macy's in New York?

TRISH BRANSTEN: No. No, no, no. Macy's was here, I think.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh Macy's was here. Oh right. She worked at—in MOMA in New York.

TRISH BRANSTEN: She worked at MOMA in New York, and she worked at Port Chester in—

MIJA RIEDEL: Port Chester Clay Art Center, right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And she may have worked—I was looking for that letter, and I'll find it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So he was waiting down the block, like four streets down the block for her to get off work almost every day.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was San Francisco, here? New York?

TRISH BRANSTEN: New York.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: He arrives with $87.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And she had what she had and—so for—and then Charles—this letter—which, again, I'll find—talks about where everybody moved from and to, how soon after Viola came back to California Charles was able to follow, and where he went, and it sounded like, on Divisadero Street, everybody traded apartments for a bit. So Coykendall, Viola, and Charles, and then there was a shift, and Viola bought—I think there was a woman who was selling a house or a flat. And I think it was a house—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I'll get you the address. She didn't like realtors. She didn't really like men. And when Viola came to buy it, it was—it fit with the seller as well as the buyer, which was Viola.

MIJA RIEDEL: 1335 Divisadero I think. Is that possible? We'll check.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I'll check because, again, I have this letter from—I'll check before you go. And Charles wrote that their relationship was the fullest, most complete relationship that he ever could have wanted.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really? You have that letter?

TRISH BRANSTEN: It's not a sexual relationship. I mean, he's—

MIJA RIEDEL: No, I understand.

TRISH BRANSTEN: He's making that quite clear, right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: By saying, this is not something that either of us needed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: More or less.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Or to me, that was the implication.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But he definitely says, "It was the most complete relationship I could have ever wanted."

MIJA RIEDEL: How extraordinary.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Right?

MIJA RIEDEL: How lovely. I've heard some many people talk about that relationship from so many different perspectives, and pretty much everybody agrees that they were fiercely protective of each other and great champions of each other. But to have the relationship described that way, nobody's put it quite like that. And this letter was—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, that was his. That was from him.

MIJA RIEDEL: And who was he writing to?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, he was writing to you?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

TRISH BRANSTEN: He starts the letter, "You asked how it came to be that we moved from 1335 to 1336 Divisadero. You asked how that came to be." And then he goes on the answer it. He then goes on to answer it with a lot of Charles Fiskian asides.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But in the end, that's one of his comments, is, "This was the most complete relationship that we ever could have had."

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you remember when he wrote that, roughly?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I—

MIJA RIEDEL: He died in '99—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Probably '90.

MIJA RIEDEL: —I would think. Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Probably 1990, somewhere in there.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what had prompted to you to ask?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, we were probably together, and, you know, I was trying to—I think I had driven by because I was always fascinated by what had happened to the bathroom that Viola did the tiles for on Divisadero Street. So she completely redid this bathroom with her tiles, painted the bathtub. In my head, there was a lot of purple and gold, but I don't know if that's a real thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you see it, Trish?

TRISH BRANSTEN: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: You never saw it.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But I found the house. I drove by the house, so I probably was bringing it up to him at dinner.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I was like, "How?" And then he goes, you know, "Well, was that the 1335 or the 1336?" And I was like, "Wait a minute. How did that happen?" So that prompts the letter.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's extraordinary. That was a wonderful detail, and I look forward to seeing that letter.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: It would be wonderful to get copies of that.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Scan it into the—yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. That's terrific. So over time, I've heard, you know, that she was not—she was not—words were not her forte, and he was very articulate and very eloquent and that he would help put into words thinking about her work. And places that she—

TRISH BRANSTEN: He organized the thinking.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: He organized the theory around the work. He directed you to look at this if you were considering that. You know, he had a big library that related—that, you know—if you wanted to say, well, "What? Where does this come from?" and he would go "Well, Frey blah blah blah." He had access to all the books. And he had a, you know, very sharp mind.

MIJA RIEDEL: He taught art history I think.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: As I—ceramic art history.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes he's a really, really abstract thinker.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I mean, have you read any of his stuff?

MIJA RIEDEL: No, I've never seen any of his stuff.

TRISH BRANSTEN: All right. I'm going to go to the bathroom, and you—

MIJA RIEDEL: Architectural historian—

TRISH BRANSTEN: —can—you can take a look, so that—there's Charles calling—

MIJA RIEDEL: So we're back to Dennis's—we're looking a couple letters from—that Charles had written to Dennis Gallagher.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, this one was to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, this was to you. Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But I remember Dennis—Charles—Dennis telling me the story that Charles had called to complain about a mistake that had been made in an art history book or an architectural history book, and he gets somebody on the phone in Chicago. And he's about to launch into it when he said, 'To whom am I speaking?" because Charles was very formal. And they said, "This is So-and-So Fiske." And he said, "I hung up because I was almost certain it was a family member."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: Just hung up the phone.

MIJA RIEDEL: But this letter that we're—you're looking through has this note that we'll look for.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: About his thoughts on the relationship with Viola.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Oh, it was clearly—he waited for her after work every day, right down the—every single day when they were in New York.

MIJA RIEDEL: And why did he do that?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think he loved her.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Because we were also saying that your also quite clear that Charles was gay and that he was in a—we thought perhaps he was in a relationship with Vernon Coykendall.

TRISH BRANSTEN: That's what I've understood, too. But I think that—

MIJA RIEDEL: He never talked with you about that.

TRISH BRANSTEN: No. And I didn't know Corky at all.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But I can tell you what he says here. "Viola worked all day. I worked all night. Between us, we caught a world. And Trish, it was so comical, so fun."

MIJA RIEDEL: "Between us, we caught a world."

TRISH BRANSTEN: Right?

MIJA RIEDEL: How fantastic.

TRISH BRANSTEN: "You, Trish, have no idea of the intimacy and affection that existed between people at that time. We were delighted with each other, and that was enough, an end achieved."

MIJA RIEDEL: And was that specifically about Viola, do you think?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. Oh, I know—"We were delighted with each other." So the whole thing—his—the whole thing is Viola. I mean, this whole letter is Viola. His whole life was Viola. I think he loved—I think he loved, you know, teaching, and I think he loved Dennis, and I think—you know, but he loved Viola.

MIJA RIEDEL: What did he love about her, do you think, Trish?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think he probably knew he could be helpful.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: He had a purpose.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And he had a home and a place.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: What—and he had approval. What we all—I think what we as humans look for.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Acceptance, approval, respect.

MIJA RIEDEL: And an ability to be of service, that he could really supply her with something that she wouldn't have had otherwise.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: Which is when I think about her work—a huge champion of her work.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, and an amazing ability to speak about her work, to believe in her and where she would go.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I agree.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I agree.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fantastic. Thank you for that. That was extraordinary.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes, he was also rather complicated.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But I think he was—he wore his heart on his sleeve, and he was a passionate man.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes. How long did you know him for?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, as long as he lived.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you met him in mid '80s?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Early. I met him when I met Viola.

MIJA RIEDEL: Viola, okay, so say—

TRISH BRANSTEN: He was always there. He was a big part. And you know, don't forget, you know, as a dealer, you're calling the artist a lot.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Particularly when somebody is in demand.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So there's no cell phones. There's no—so we would call the house, and if you did not have phone etiquette as Charles saw fit, he would yell at you and hang up on you.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: And Calvert and I lived in fear of calling the house, you know? So we always were like, "Hi, Charles, this is Trish. Is Viola there?" Because if you said, "Hi, is Viola there?" that is—or even, "How are you?" is—and then, you know, he would, "You want to speak to Frey?"

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: Character.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Those were two large people.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I think their fights were large, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. I did hear that.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I never saw one, I'm happy to say.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Do you have any specific details or insights into the different ways Viola worked and how the drawings and the paintings and the sculptures, the constructed pieces influenced each other?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think, initially—you know, so you watch as Viola, from the start, sort of goes through sort of these global investigations and environmental, so, you know, endangered and non-endangered species—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —and space ships and different large fluctuations of politics of the time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And before that, of course, it was a lot of portraits of her family and whatever, what was

around her. With the Alameda flea market and those figurines and a lifelong conversation with consumerism and the importing and exporting of culture through figurines, she starts a language of—to explore these things. And she explores a lot of different things. She explores sexuality. She explores—you know, male models, and I'm sure you've heard the whole G.I. Joe thing by now.

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So G.I. Joe was a plastic figurine.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

TRISH BRANSTEN: A solider that boys played with, and in—so when the Americans made G.I. Joe, there were—the body was six head measurements.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: When the Japanese made a version of G.I. Joe, it was four.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So different ways—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —that the culture investigates their own value system through figurines.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I mean, that—this is a—this was something that she would have thought about, the different way stereotypes, racial and gender stereotypes, express themselves. I'm sure you've heard about the empty-headed women—you're looking at one—and the perversity that she found in this.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So Viola—and again, I—just stop me if I—

MIJA RIEDEL: It's a vase with a—it was a vase with a woman's head is the hat, is empty.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So Viola—just stop me if it's been said by a million people.

MIJA RIEDEL: No, it hasn't.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So Viola had an understanding of women's role being moved around through consumer stuff: advertising and objects and a cultural push, first, into the workforce during the war—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —and then a retreat from the workforce—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —when the boys came home. So this would have been part of the way that women were being asked to be put to sleep. So these—this particular figurine, true or not true, this was Viola's conversation about him. So the eyes are closed; the head is empty; there were little skirts that girls had where they—they'd be picking up their pinafores and where, you know, their sexuality would be or—right in the middle would be an open spot for flowers. So, you know, in Viola's world—again, true or not true, this is Viola's narrative—this is the antithesis of the Rosie the Riveter—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —advertising. This is go back to sleep advertising. But there were a million little historical continuations or explanations that Viola had like that: the sleepy Mexican under the cactus.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: That, to her, was an American notion of a Mexican worker that would get exported to Japan to be fabricated and then reacquired in America. So that notion of exploring a racial or sexual stereotype cross-culturally became fascinating to her. And as—your question was, what was the interrelationship between three-dimensional and two-dimensional works? And it was both physical—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —and conceptual.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So physically, she would get bored, really, with building, and she'd be ready to glaze, and then when she was done with glazing, she'd be done with glazing, and she'd be ready to draw. And that was the physical manifestation of what is the interaction. But the theoretical investigation was what happens when you take some of these figurines and make them triple, quadruple, a million, life size. What happens when you—when you make the sleepy Mexican with the cactus the exact same size or much smaller as the flying horse or the—what she called—the Henry Moore Monkey, which you've seen, I guess? So the—every figurine had a—had a layered narrative, every single one. So she uses a monkey that is probably, to Viola's way of thinking, a popular, culture, consumable way of understanding Henry Moore's negative space. That was the monkey.

Mr. and Mrs. Wedgwood was a—again, stop me because I'm sure you've gone through all of this. So Mr. and Mrs. Wedgwood had a layer meaning for her in the sense that Mr. Wedgwood, Josiah, was disabled. He and his wife ran the company. They provided healthcare to the workers. They hired artisans, so a good company, and then, over the years, Wedgwood, the company, would buy companies like Josiah started and simply put them out of business. So it became a—I don't think it's fair to call it an international corporation or a multinational corporation, but it had that same—it had that trajectory of starting off one way and ending up sort of antithetically against it. Everything she used, these guys had that for her. Everything—

MIJA RIEDEL: So she talked to you about this?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Oh yes. I think she—

MIJA RIEDEL: Nobody else has mentioned this at all.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So—

MIJA RIEDEL: Nobody has been so specific about these pieces—

TRISH BRANSTEN: They are very, very—

MIJA RIEDEL: —as having these layers of significance.

TRISH BRANSTEN: They do for her.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I want to say—and I could be wrong—that Jan Butterfield tried to—so we did a catalogue very early on, and Jan Butterfield tried to extract some of the symbolism of the figurines. And I don't—I don't remember the essay well enough, but I remember Ed Marquand did the design of the catalogue, and we could find it, I'm sure, in the gallery archives. So the drawings are a more complicated way to spin out these narratives. You know? They combine the figurines; they alter scale.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: They layer it. There are certain other elements that you'll see in the drawings: a glove or a hand, which always is her hand or, just as significantly, the hand of a creator, which the bird face also—the bird head that appears also is the All-Seeing Eye. There's lots of—there is a lot more latitude and flexibility in describing the narrative in the drawings and paintings than, of course, there would be in the sculpture. There just is, with the exception with some of the huge sculptures that she did. One of which Mom gave to the—it was the family grouping. Huge. And that has a lot of interrelated aspects.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And the other was—Rene di Rosa [Foundation] has, which also has a lot of—and then there is a third one, which is that big wall that, I think, the Artists' Legacy Foundation still has. So those three are a massive, personal exploration of the world, of her—so the studio and the world and her view. So she called this enormous series— and I would say artist mind, studio world view. That was the series.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And when that series began and ended, you know, I think was a moving target, and, you know, Viola's titles were always moving around.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But generally speaking, that is, to me, the interrelationship.

MIJA RIEDEL: And, Trish, did this information, for example, be—for the hand being the maker and the bird being a reference to the All Seeing Eye, are these interpretations of her work that Charles would discuss with you?

TRISH BRANSTEN: No. No, no she—

MIJA RIEDEL: Viola—

TRISH BRANSTEN: I would sit there, and I would go, "What does this one mean?"

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, and she would tell you specially?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. And if she didn't want to, she wouldn't.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But you know, she knew I was not going to let it go. So she folded, and she knew it wasn't from a place of—she knew I needed to know this information.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It wasn't from a place of, "And what do this mean, if you're so smart?" It was more like, "Okay, so how does this fit in?" and, you know, you need to know these things to sell them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right. In all the conversations I've had so far, nobody has ever reported—discussed her being so specific and so open with them about thinking—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well—

MIJA RIEDEL: —so specifically about imagery and significance.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So she was that specific about imagery. There was another paper, and I don't know if you can find it, or maybe are—but *Homage to Dubuffet*, which we sold to the Santa Barbara Museum, Calvert nailed her down so hard on every specific element in that piece—and it's a very weird and complicated piece of a Barbie-looking—

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—larger-than-life-size figurine with a big, pink skirt, a wall, and then an abstract dog figure on the other side. And there is no way to really understand what that piece means without—and Calvert nailed her, screwed her down so specifically, that it was the first time I had heard her talk about the rabbits screaming and the dams that she made in the sluices or the irrigation systems.

MIJA RIEDEL: It sounds as if she really needed to have a long-term relationship with someone like you or a Calvert, and a lot of trust and also to understand there was a real need for this information to come out, for her to be convinced to come out with it.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, you know, but if you're sitting there going really directly, you know, I need this to write it down, she wasn't adverse, and she knew she had to get things sold, and we—I mean, it wasn't like she worked against you. It was that it wasn't volunteered. And I remember being shocked because we were at a studio visit, and Margy Boyd had run some, you know, doctor's wives' group over to her studio.

[Side conversation.] Hold on. I'm going to take this out of the thing.

And, you know, it really was—it really was a doctor's—it wasn't fancy people. It wasn't anybody that was going to help with anything. It was just—it was just—it was just a group of ladies that used to—there were more of them. It was—it was from a time where people didn't—the women didn't work. And, you know, so maybe there'd be a convention, and Margy would do something with the wives. So they were all over there, and they turned a switch for Viola, in the sense that she told them everything. And I knew it. She told them absolutely everything: her brothers, the irrigation systems, the rabbits, the—you know, things that I don't remember, and things that I

never heard before, and things that I've never heard since. And it started from a question of, you know, sort of, "What makes you make the things you do?" A really very honest question and a very humble question, and not a threatening one. Not a, like, "Well, I don't get it. Tell me." It was a very authentic question. And she looked up, and she said, in her very melodic voice, "Well…" And then—and I was like, "Of all the times not to have a movie camera," right, because it was all there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Extraordinary. Extraordinary. And so the personal narrative of her brothers, and growing up on the farm, and the sluices, and the irrigation system, all of that was figuring into the work, then, as well?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, she drew always. And the—as far as I can tell, the resources of the family went to Viola.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right. Did she ever talk about her family with you?

TRISH BRANSTEN: No. Only in the sense that she had figured—because Viola had her own way of figuring. And she had figured that, or she kind of rationalized, that if she spent four hours a week talking to her family members, this would happen and that would, and by the time she had finished explaining it to me, you know, four months of the year would be devoted to the family. So she couldn't, you know, so she just had to shut the door on that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I don't know what—I don't know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I honestly think they don't know why she shut the door on them, but she did.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: She certainly did.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Somebody described that to me as using her accountant background.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: She just added up the numbers on the side of why that would make sense, and what it would it would take away from life.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And she would make—and she totally made that up. And Mom said that when they were in, like, Crocker or Oakland, Viola pushed her into the corner and said, "That was my brother." And then Dennis said that Viola told a story where the doorbell rang at 663 [Frey's studio at 663 Oakland Avenue –ed.], she goes down; she looks; it's her brother, and she doesn't answer the door. And yet, they moved her around, you know. I mean, you know this. They moved her from college to college; they packed her up. I think they may have even moved her from New York here, but I don't—I don't know that part.

MIJA RIEDEL: In terms of funding or actually physically showing up?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Physically showing up with a truck and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Because she didn't drive?

TRISH BRANSTEN: She didn't drive.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Interesting, huh?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Do you still represent her work?

TRISH BRANSTEN: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, okay. Well, I think that's wonderful about Viola. I know—how are we doing time-wise?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I have to go pick up the dogs.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, okay, so we will stop this for today and pick up again tomorrow.

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MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Trish Bransten at the Rena Bransten Project on Market Street in San Francisco on October 6, 2015 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is card number two. So before we jump into anything else, let's just continue with what you were remembering from yesterday that we haven't had a chance yet to get on tape.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So what I was talking about a little bit—I think, at one point, we were talking about trying to define the relationship with Charles and Viola, and I forgot to mention that Viola did a series of paintings about them, and they were literally paintings of Viola's studio at 663 Oakland Avenue with Charles Fiske holding a lamp, lightbulb, or lamp with a bulb at the top, and it was illuminated, and he was in the center of the paintings, for the most part. So I think that's—it doesn't get clearer than that, I would say.

MIJA RIEDEL: And this was a series of paintings called *Studio Views*?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. *Studio View—Fiske Holding Lamp*, but again, Viola's titles changed, and I was looking at one of the catalogues, and I don't—I think the galleries would sort of half name something and it follow a work rather than Viola specifically naming something.

MIJA RIEDEL: Trish, could you also just mention the name of that catalogue and the year that it was from, so anyone who's interested in tracking down those images would know what to look for? So it's *Viola Frey: Paintings, Sculpture, Drawings at the Quay Gallery*, Q-U-A-Y'

TRISH BRANSTEN: Correct. Published during a show, 1983, spring show in 1983. And we had Jan Butterfield, I think, do the writing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes, who had been married to the director, Henry Hopkins, at the San Francisco Museum. I don't think she was when she wrote this catalogue.

MIJA RIEDEL: Anything else that popped out overnight that you recall?

[Background conversation.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, I remember you were surprised to learn that each figurine had a—

[Side conversation.] I know. It's hard.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I remember you had been surprised to learn that each figurine had an associated and layered meaning with Viola, and I reread Jan's essay, and it wasn't really—she didn't really parse each object, which I think, over the years, Calvert and I came to because the layering became more obvious, and it wasn't that there was a narrative told through the placement. It wasn't about narrative; it was about relationships.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Let's pause there for just a second.

[END OF TRACK branst15_2of3_sd_track01.]

MIJA RIEDEL: [Side conversation.] Yes. That's much better. They wouldn't have been able to separate the two voices, I don't think. Okay, so maybe we should just repeat that. Do you mind?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Not at all.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, we have relocated upstairs. A little bit quieter and you were saying that you had reviewed Jan's essay, in the catalogue I believe.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes, and what—in some ways, I was right. She parsed the paintings visually, but in other ways, the figurines that Calvert and I came to know so well and Viola used, you know, to represent, a sort of, a symbolic language, she didn't really hit on. For example, the Josiah—Mr. and Mrs. Wedgwood, I didn't see that in the catalogue, and *the Greek Hag* was another one that Viola was very taken with, which was at the MET, and she used to go see it. And it stood in for an artist being interested in an everyday market woman.

So the—I don't know. I don't think it's out anymore, so it may not be a real—it may itself have been a copy, but Viola was very interested in the notion that, at a time when artists were only taking commissions from wealthy patrons, somebody would have thought to make a peasant or a market woman. And in fact, she was an older woman on top of that. And that interested Viola as—in a number of different ways. And she used that symbol, and she even made that sculpture several times.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So there were a lot of things that, over the years, moved in and out of use and layered over time. But I think it was really not to create a narrative as much as it was to create a relationship of sort of a cross-cultural conversation. And she did get specific. We were talking earlier about Charles Fiske. I would say she got incredibly specific in a series of paintings that she did that the gallery and her loosely-titled *Studio View—Fiske Holding Lamp*, and it was literally a picture of Charles holding a table lamp where the light bulb is turned on. There's no lamp shade, and it's in the center of the maelstrom that she represented as her studio. And I don't—I think that is pretty darn specific if you're looking for a narrative or the way she saw Charles.

MIJA RIEDEL: The other thing that's interesting, too, is that these specific figurines and these specific images that you've been describing as layered in the specific meetings weren't necessarily spelled out in any one place. It's something that you and possibly Calvert, over years and years of conversation with Viola, probably picked up on here and there and began to understand a larger general narrative that she was referring to.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Definitely; definitely. How could you really understand that a seated woman in the hoop skirt and a standing man, you know, stood in for the Wedgwoods, the founder of a company, unless you're sitting there, and Viola is going on about her feelings about Wedgwood and certain porcelain companies. And so there were a lot of sort of relationships that Viola would—relationships with figurines, with the symbolic nature of the figurines that Viola would illuminate over time, but not necessarily in one fell swoop.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, and sometimes, I imagine, they weren't related to necessarily a narrative at all, but they were just strictly used in a formal concept in bricolage piece or something along those lines, as a form, as a shape, as something that could be a canvas for—

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think so, but I think they all—they were part of her language so—and they had to do with notions of western civilization and sort of our fascination in western cultures and the sort of conflation of western and eastern cultures as we have talked about as seen through a lens of consumables through these figurines. So I think—I don't think it was formal. I think it was specific. Now, did that mean that everyone told a story every time as you looked at a painting? No, they told the story of Viola, really. And I think that everything, for Viola—the other thing I was thinking about is you said, "What's the—you know, what's the movement between the sculptures and the drawings and the bronzes?" And I'm almost positive—and I think she may have said it in an interview or two—they were one thing; they were her studio; they were her mind; they were western civilization. So, yes, I think, technically, she would get tired of glazing or drawing or building and would migrate, but I think it was not about an interrelationship between those separate forms as much as it was all part of the clay, if that makes sense.

MIJA RIEDEL: In terms of something that could be formed and reformed and reformed.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And out of the clay, you know—when she used to—or every so often, and you know, I knew Viola for a long time, so she would—you know, things would change but.

MIJA RIEDEL: Twenty-five years, yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: A long time. So, things, of course change, but there was a point where ceramics was different from clay for her in a way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Could you say a little bit about that?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I'm not sure I ever got it exactly, but clay did not have a hierarchy for her, but ceramics did, and that would be, again, a Viola kind of thought, but ceramics would have delimited a description of the work, whereas clay sort of included everything. It was out of the earth; it was out of the studio; it was a big mess. I mean, and that was—and if you look at the paintings, particularly the earlier ones, where, again, she's really hitting the vernacular that she wants to live with. So 1980, she starts cutting and pasting things on canvas, and you know, she used that technique on clay. She used it on—you know, to make the plate; she used it on drawings; she used in on canvas. It was a mess; it was all part of it.

MIJA RIEDEL: When you're talking about cutting and pasting, were these actual paper elements that you're describing.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Paper and canvas, and yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, so not stencils or anything like that. They were added and left there.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Added, cut out, left on the paper, burnt out. And you'd have to ask Sam about—Perry about the firing techniques, but it all went into that. And also, she used a notion of incising the paint, so she would—

black gesso, then—she would black background, white gesso, and then scratch through when it was wet. And that is also a clay-like notion.

MIJA RIEDEL: Like a sgraffito, right. Absolutely. Yes. It's interesting that you make a distinction between clay and ceramic because I think of, first, about the long ceramic history, which she certainly was very interested in. I think—

TRISH BRANSTEN: A new well.

MIJA RIEDEL: —right, and her residency in particular in Seive [ph], I think, twice, and then as well in the Netherlands. That, to me, strikes me as a very ceramics sensibility in the history of ceramics.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It was—

MIJA RIEDEL: As opposed to clay, which would have a lot—would have a much more open sensibility—

TRISH BRANSTEN: For her, it did at that time in the early '80s. Whether she maintained that or not as her own hierarchy, I don't know, but I understood what she way saying. One was specific and material-based, and the other, for her, was a notion of process and how things were created.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. Was she referring, do you recall, to any books she had read that had that sort of idea, or was this something you think she formulated on her own?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think it was something that came out of her actual making. That's my guess because I've never really seen it anywhere else.

MIJA RIEDEL: I haven't either.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I remember around this time, I went to listen—and I can't remember if it was an NCECA conference or a—what the heck it was, but Matthew Kangas was interviewing her on stage, and he really, really wanted her to address sort of the humble notion of the media. You know, he really wanted her to say how that politically fit into what she made and the content of what she made. And Viola just wouldn't go there because I don't think it's what she was thinking at the time, and I'm not positive it's what she ever thought about. But I do remember he pushed, and he came at the same question a number of different ways, and finally, Viola said to him, "Well, Matthew, dinner plates are made of ceramic, and my work is made of ceramic, so I guess you could say it's the same thing." And that was, again, Viola's very polite way of completely shutting down the conversation because, of course, where can you go with that? The work didn't have anything to do with our dinner plates. Very interesting, she was—and again, very polite.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: [Side conversation.] Oh, excuse me.

MIJA RIEDEL: No worries. No worries at all.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, I think she was drawn to clay because it was happening, you know, she always said that, you know. There she was at CCA, and everybody knew that what was happening was in the pot shop, with Voulkos [ph].

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right. So it was very much of the time, of the place.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Of the time, of the place, and she was extremely aware that her conversation, conceptual underpinnings of the work had to relate to what was happening in the art world. And she used to say, if I ever heard her talk to a student who was clay focused, I do remember her saying, "You'd better know what is happening because contemporary artists will turn to clay and steal your ideas. They'll just take it. You better know what's out there."

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. So she was—she was not in any way to be mistaken for somebody who was in a backwater working in a ceramics studio.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely not. I don't think that comes to mind very often. It might have back then at some point.

TRISH BRANSTEN: No, but I think—I think it did because I think the whole world was so marginalized back then.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, that's great, Trish. I think those are wonderful additions that we didn't have, specifically

yesterday. Anything else that—any other thoughts that—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, I think that you probably—again, stop me if you've heard this from other people. So there was big shifts when she went from Divisadero to 663, obviously.

MIJA RIEDEL: What did you see? That would be interesting.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Scale and content. I mean, huge scale—

MIJA RIEDEL: Scale for sure, how content?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Verdon—[ph; inaudible]—she's in—she is now in a garden back where she was familiar. She was experimenting with actual sunlight on the work, which starts some of this. So a lot of content, some formal, some meaning scale and color, some content meaning, the use of things that brought in nature, that brought in animals, and just the environment allowed for a different kind of hierarchy because she had so much space, and she had vertical space. Then another huge, huge shift was when she moved from 663 to Third Street. And do you have that in the can? That story?

MIJA RIEDEL: No

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, she had it a number of different ways, and she had—she kept a painting studio one place and her ceramic studio another place, and finally, she left the 663 Studio almost completely.

MIJA RIEDEL: This was 1983, I think?

TRISH BRANSTEN: No, no, this was later.

MIJA RIEDEL: Later, okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: This was much later.

MIJA RIEDEL: She moved to Third Street, I think in '83 to a larger store, no?

TRISH BRANSTEN: But when she moves to Adeline [Street] is really another huge—because, again, the content shifts because she no longer is able to riff off the dining room studio. Whether she's just not seeing it in the same way or she's exhausted it as an interior, she has to come up with another device. And the device—what she ends up doing is bringing in live models. Oh, so you know this. You've got this.

MIJA RIEDEL: I've heard of her working with models, but I thought that was something that she did consistently.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think she makes it a big—you'd have to—you'd have to—much more focal point. You'd have to talk to Squeak about it because she not only hires these models, but she—it's a little later. I think it's past '83. I think it's closer to '90 or '89, but somewhere in there, she shifts, and she brings the models into the studio. She invites artists to work with the models and her. Squeak was one of them, and I think there's a few other. And whether she does this with Flo, I can't even remember, Flo Allen was still alive then or not.

MIJA RIEDEL: I know she started to do more nudes in the early '90s. Do you think maybe it started with that?

TRISH BRANSTEN: That was then. So, that's my recollection. And that's when this next big shift changes, including—she uses one or two models pretty consistently at that time, and one is an African-American model who could hold an erection for the entire session, 40 minutes to an hour. I can't—and those—that marks a new—not quite a figurine, but a new person in the language, a new group of things in her visual language. And that was what I noticed then as well.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting because, when I think about her work, and I know she said multiple times, that you always think about the female nude as being the place of powerful woman. But the man was often portrayed in the suit, the blue suit, occasionally the red suit. And I don't think of very many nude males.

TRISH BRANSTEN: No, and they're by—so the nude male became, actually, one of the most vulnerable of her cast of characters. And the—so if she moved as part of the conversation of power from the grandmother—which I know you have, the Lodi grandmother as a power figure and her dress and her handbag, and this is in National Geographic and those kinds of conversations—the nude woman occupied the most powerful place. The nude man came at a time when people around her were dying of AIDS and so, as you see him, he occupies one of the most vulnerable, I would say, of her vernacular. And the one possible exception is that grouping at Rene di Rosa's [Foundation]. It's a very awkward grouping. I think it was maybe one of the biggest hand-built things she had made to date. But he, to me, is actually just more, like with the drawings, just part of the conversation, part of relationships with other objects.

MIJA RIEDEL: I now that her first studio assistant—I think he—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Neil.

MIJA RIEDEL: —even proceeded Neil. Even before Neil. Kevin—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Kevin Anderson

MIJA RIEDEL: —had passed away from AIDS and that, at least according to Neil—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Oh, it was all of them. It was her very close friend; it was Kevin; it was—

[Side conversation.] Can you stop for a second?

[END OF branst15_2of3_sd_track02_m]

TRISH BRANSTEN: It was Art Nelson.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It was his partner Phil [ph], I think, ultimately.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And we were watching the world here just shrink, contract.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It was very, very hard.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I think—we did a show in Fresno at the time. I think she had won the woman's award, which I can't remember what the name of it is, 100—the Committee of 100, I think, something like that. And it was specifically to give a woman a show. And Viola did the show, and we sent down—because they had such a short timeline between the request and the exhibition, we had to give them what we had—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: —rather than her making towards the show.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And she had two female nudes standing—two female nudes and she had two standing male nudes. And the male nudes, the hands are up, and they are almost like—almost paused, the little hands. And I think if you—if you didn't figure it out before that show, you certainly got it during that show what the male nude, you know—sort of the assault. And then, she—

MIJA RIEDEL: The physical decline.

TRISH BRANSTEN: The physical decline. And she did a series of them. And then I don't know that they ever fully regained their status, actually, in her language, as power brokers in the western civilization.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. That's great. That's really helpful, Trish, and very insightful. And I think there's a lot of material there that hasn't turned up in other interviews. So, that's really terrific.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I'm trying to think if there's any other specificities. Everybody knows about the gloves.

MIJA RIEDEL: I don't think we can assume everybody knows about the gloves.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, so the gloves that show up in the paintings—there's certain, again, repetitive symbols. And I don't—I don't remember if anybody's written on them, but the gloves, again, have a very layered—hand of God, hand of the creator, workman's glove—again—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: —the work ethic. And then, she threw them as demos in the early days of her—so I think, until Bob Arneson, when ceramic artists went to give a lecture, they were expected to also build something. And then

Bob was like, "Do you ask Wayne Thiebaud to do a little sketch? I don't think so." And so, I think the dynamic changed, but one of her sort of stock demos—I think you could ask all of them, but I'm pretty sure they all had like a little trick that they would do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Viola would throw 10 small vases and then two big ones and then put them on her hands like gloves.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And you may have seen a picture of her holding them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But very few people really got the layered nature of that as well, sort of the whole thing of the craft, and of the guild, and then of the workman's gloves, and then of—or worker's gloves.

MIJA RIEDEL: There's a real cartoon quality to some of those gloves as well, yes?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, I mean, they're pot gloves.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: They're—and Viola did like a sense of humor.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

TRISH BRANSTEN: No question. And she liked—she liked knowing—and it didn't bother her if certain things were dumb—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. No. Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —or lacked intelligence or lacked beauty, as we spoke about—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: —earlier. It—the point of them was sort of how they fed into what they told her they were about, those symbols, those languages. That if—the way you have something at home that you are uncertain about.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think it was Neil who also mentioned the whole concept, it might have been Sam, but one of them mentioned the whole concept of her using that idea of dumb in class. And then she would give as an assignment to her students to make something dumb.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that that was—they all—I can't remember. I think it might have been Neil—found that a very useful and helpful tool and a great assignment. It was actually harder to make something dumb than you would think.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I would think so. I would think so because you—I think we all get stuck in trying to head towards perfection.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, trying—and refine this vision, so trying to find something that does the opposite for you must be challenging.

MIJA RIEDEL: And I think that sense of dumb, in my mind anyway, ties into that whole concept of ugly and embracing those things as opposed to running away from them.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, I absolutely agree. I think—I think, again, it was important that it all fed in rather than—and that, if I remember, she used to talk about the figurines as emerging for her, like they had to speak for her at a certain point.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: Like the funny little monkey that became a stand-in for Henry Moore's very, you know, erudite ideas of negative space.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Interesting.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: That she would choose that monkey.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Exactly. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, if you feel like we have covered this to a degree you're happy with—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Her studio. I think so. I'm trying to think, was there any other big shifts, addition to the language from one time to the next. I think, you know, as I see the world there's the Alameda flea market sort of end and her use of creating narratives that still talk about the world and western civilization. And then you go to the '80s. Then you—where she further refines. And then you go to the '90s where she's brought in nudes, and the scale is altered, and the issues are more humanistic than specific, perhaps. And I think that's—

MIJA RIEDEL: Starts to be more clusters of pieces in the mid-'90s, too, as I recall.

TRISH BRANSTEN: The big ones?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. But clustering more than like a single figure or then double figures, a group of figures.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think she did do that—I think she always did that—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —with the cast figures, the plates, the bronzes, even though they are discreet pieces, really, if—I remember we did a show of them in '83, the one where she would come in and rearrange them all the time because they had a very specific notion of conversation for her.

MIJA RIEDEL: But they were each individual pieces at that point.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Those happen to be, but not really. In the end, not really. Yes, they were sold that way.

MIJA RIEDEL: In her mind—I see what you're saying. Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: They were definitely sold that way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And she created them that way, but really, they were part of the studio.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: Which is why she would come in, and you know, some days they would be here, and some days they would be there and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Relationships and conversations. Adeline studio, I think, was '96, '97.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. So, it couldn't have been later.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, that may be—and you think that the nudes show up in—

MIJA RIEDEL: Earlier in the '90s.

TRISH BRANSTEN: On the Third Street. And that could be.

MIJA RIEDEL: But you would know better than I because you were there.

TRISH BRANSTEN: No. That's about—I think that's about right where she's really lost the 663, so that carpet, that pattern carpet, those doors, the desk, the porch outside, Fiske.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: You know, all that—all that stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, that's when the nudes, I think, start coming in. And by the '90s, they are part of the conversation, really.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you think that those nudes really tied into to when she began to have a model more regularly in the studio.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I do.

MIJA RIEDEL: That makes sense.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I do. Or needed it, needed it to come in.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did she talk with you at all about why she felt compelled or interested, curious to try bronze?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Let's see.

MIJA RIEDEL: I know she was—if she felt that was successful in the long run, something she was happy with. There weren't all that many of them.

TRISH BRANSTEN: No. They were expensive to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I don't know that she ever found her feet in—with them in terms of color—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —was part of the problem because the alkyd oil that she used on the bronzes did not have that same saturation. But she was extremely happy with putting the gold on them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think if she could have made all of them gold, she might have. I think she—I think—I think that, if I had to do it again and I understood at the time in 1983 what she was starting to do, I think I would have assisted her as a dealer slightly differently. And, instead of having them discreet one of six, blah blah blah, I would have really gone for an assemblage of them. I would have pushed towards having her ideology spelled out more completely by talking about them in advance with her like, "These five should be one piece."

MIJA RIEDEL: I see. Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: "These five objects should be one piece."

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: "And that should be one of six."

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And so, why did she go to bronze? I don't know. My guess is partly competition—

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —because she would have had to have known that everybody was casting in Walla Walla.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And so, she wanted to, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And maybe I say that because part of me remembers some little bit that I can't—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: But that would be my guess, is that—

MIJA RIEDEL: It was logical progression at the time, to be sure.

TRISH BRANSTEN: That would be my guess. Bob was doing it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I don't know that anybody else was, maybe Manuel [ph]. I don't know that anybody was really exploring full on, full on, but she did it a bit. And I think—

MIJA RIEDEL: And Voulkos did bronzes, too.

TRISH BRANSTEN: He did. And I—and then they all moved to Art Foundry, which was in Berkeley or—and still is I think. But, again, as a dealer I probably would—if I came across her now with my experience and what she was thinking about, I probably would have had a slightly different conversation with her than we had at the time, that spoke of intent a little bit more.

MIJA RIEDEL: Less experimental; "let's see where this goes;" and more focused from the start.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, for example, the small Portland vase that appears over and over that we did one of six, it really is supposed to be—it should have been done 15, 20 times because it's the center of the two men—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —holding the pot. It's the thing that her brother's pushing over on the table. She's supposed—she's throwing that pot. It is one guy gazing into the pot. And, you know, it—we really should have—you know, it was an experiment. We all did what we did.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But I think I would have tried to understand it in advance a little bit more.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Looking back on her entire body of work at this point in time, do you think about it any differently now or about her differently now than you did, say, 10 or 15 years ago? For example, I—that David Pagel essay that came out about—I don't know—six month ago or something, maybe not even. I don't know if you have had a chance to read it yet, but it's certainly one of the most interesting, I think, and most thoughtful, most interesting pieces that has been written about her work. I don't know if it could have been written 10 years ago.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Tell me—tell me why you think—tell me.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think—I think there's a sense of retrospect that comes with time. And that's—of course, seemed obvious, but—

TRISH BRANSTEN: What do you think his points are that you think might have been missed at the time?

MIJA RIEDEL: There's something about fragmentation that comes to mind immediately. I mean, I'd have to go back and look at that again. Right now, I've just been reading an essay he wrote or a conversation he had Joseph Raffael. So that's foremost in my mind right now—on beauty, which is also amazing. I think he's a wonderful writer. I think he's very insightful and very bright. There's something he talks about—yes—I'd have to go back and look at that again. I have not read it in a month or so—about fragmentation, about multiple things happening at once.

He just—in his essay, he presented her as being much more specific and conscious about all the chaos and fragmentation and anarchy going on in the work. And is that—almost being prescient, I think, of modern day, digital, fragmented life. And so, when I look at what's being written now about how we're struggling with that reality, I wonder if anybody even understood it enough back then to think of that that was what she might be doing. And if she were here, she might say that wasn't what she was doing at all. But it's certainly—that's one thing that comes to mind.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, she definitely—I mean, I remember always having to correct sort of the notion that the *Desert Toys* came before anything else.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: They didn't. It was a simultaneous exploration.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I don't think those have ever really—people—it's kind of like the third rail. Nobody likes to talk about them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Why, do you think?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think because they don't know how it fits in.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And do you have a sense about how that fits in?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think it fits in because it's all part of her world.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: I really do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: I mean, to get more specific than that, I think it fit in because she probably wanted to experiment what—with what not color was. She always wanted to—she always, always, her whole life, wanted to leave a show white.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Never did. That was in her power.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: She—I mean, she did do a show with Nancy where some of the things were white, but that was really because she died. And that was—she left—we did a show where she—I did push her on that. I said, "You've always wanted to do it. Leave these white then. Let's just see how it goes." And we did a show with that wonderful—her show on family grouping in the center of the small gallery with small, white cups and saucers. And when I say "cups and saucers," they were really bricolage saucers with a small cup.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: One's showing right now at the Michael Benevento Gallery in Los Angeles. And quite extraordinary, absolutely beautiful objects. And when they went back to the studio—we bought one or two from the show. But when they went back to the studio, I'm pretty sure she glazed them, or she glazed most of them because it was hard. You have a—I mean, I—if you saw her work, she had a brush in her hand, and there'd be a little thing here and a little thing there. And before you knew it, it was glazed. But yes. I think it was an excuse to leave things uncolored. I think it was an excuse to experiment with forms. I think it was an excuse to make dumb things. I think those *Desert Toys* were really a—really a way she has of playing—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: —in some ways, which was a lot of her work. But it, to me, showed Viola at her most experimental. I mean, she—

MIJA RIEDEL: The *Desert Toys* pieces?

TRISH BRANSTEN: All of—all the work. I mean, she went off in a lot of directions and chose what she wanted to do. But those *Desert Toys*, nobody really has analyzed what those are about.

MIJA RIEDEL: We can go a few different directions from here, but I would like to take a little time and talk about the gallery because it is such a transitional time for the gallery. And this is such a transitional time in San Francisco art world. Before I move on to that, though, I want to make sure that there's nothing—we're not leaving any stones unturned in reference to Viola.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, I don't—I mean, I think we are leaving a lot. But the only thing I wanted to say, and—is, personally, I found her brilliant, funny, charming, eccentric, wonderful company, well-read, thoughtful, mannered, polite.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I found Viola a joy.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you—did you have a sense about her relationships with other artists? Did she ever talk with you about other Bay area artists?

TRISH BRANSTEN: The—well, I told you the thing about women.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: You know, she—I would say she had been so marginalized that that formed her relationship.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: You know, she was the weird woman who didn't have a boyfriend in the art world. She was a powerhouse, and I would say—it wasn't that she was dismissed by the time she was in her mid-'50s. She certainly wasn't. But earlier than that, I don't think she had a place in the conversation at all, so I would say that that probably formed a lot.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: Although, every show that we showed, say probably after the early '80s, all the artists would come in to see, and all would pay respects. But it is also possible that you—your trust level has been formed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. And those—I mean the Crocker show was '81, so she was already close to 50, I think 48, probably, at the time.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So that's a long time when you're excluded. And she—I know Art Nelson, who often called Viola "Madam," Art would say—and so would Charles. "Oh. You didn't see her going off to Macy's in her lipstick and the girdles and the high heels," and this and that. But by the time I knew her, she would identify not with a—being a beautiful woman that was sexually attractive. She would identify with being a worker and a maker and an artist.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And those became the things that she wanted to be identified as and how she would—that was her persona. And there wasn't a lot of place for that here or anywhere.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: I mean, the fact that she got—that Patterson Sims could reach out and see the work for what it was, was quite extraordinary.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Okay. So, Trish has very graciously agreed to discuss, at least in brief, the current state of Rena Bransten Gallery, now Rena Bransten Project—Projects?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Projects.

MIJA RIEDEL: Projects. Because it's an incredibly transitional time for the gallery. It's a hugely transitional time for the art world, especially the gallery world in San Francisco. And I think it would be really insightful and significant to just talk about that briefly. I can give some background, or you can just jump right in. Whichever.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I'm—I think I'm going to jump right in, and it's not going to be completely organized—

MIJA RIEDEL: Of course.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —because I have not really put thought to being articulate about this moment, but I'm going to do my best. So, it's—I would say San Francisco is experiencing a cultural upheaval.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Which is fine. It's—it is what it is. And the United States might be experiencing, at least in terms of visual arts, an upheaval. And one question that comes to mind, "Is this a real estate conversation?"

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: Which is what has forced us into a small project space, although we are heading to a large gallery building that is supported by philanthropists in town. And we'll have a gallery back again, which will allow us to have a more expansive conversation, to allow our artists to have more—a more expansive conversation in

a space at a time where fewer and fewer people are looking at that conversation.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, I'm 56 years old. And the way I grew up was understanding an artist by exhibitions and decades of exhibitions. And galleries offer a more experimental ability than museums because we are more willing to take chances. We don't have—we don't have to show the perfect work at the perfect time in the perfect—we can show a bookend moment of an artist's production, which we have. And, with Viola, I think I told you about that plate show last—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes. That was wonderful. That was memorable.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, I think, with fewer people going into the galleries—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —more interaction is taking place online and at art fairs.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And this is having an impact—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: —because the world is trending towards—because of this, towards more branded notions, branded, heated notions of what everybody is looking at.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, in the same way that you don't go to Walmart to find your 501—you know, to find the newest, best, hippest version of whatever the Levi brand is, you go there to buy the Levi's. And the same—I think the same reductive notion happens on the internet.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And it happens at art fairs. It's easier to consume something that is—everybody knows what the continuum is. So, for our artists, it's the best known artists, the Vik Muniz, where they have looked and have gone online, and he's the most searched. Or it's the—you know, Candida Höfer. Do you have a Library, or the—it's things that people already know, so it's not things that people are learning about often.

That is art fairs and, in some ways, the internet, although there's also slightly different things that are happening on this reduced space, this sort of virtual space, which is the notion that the hierarchy between design and art isn't really important to a lot of people out there. So, the fact that Viola makes things out of clay instead of steel isn't really that important. If you want a brightly colored thing, the fact that it's out of clay is okay. The fact that Ruth Asawa is—you know, was dismissed as a craftsperson with wire and crochet and a lot of—you know, it's less important to the design community than it is—or than it used to be to the art community.

And I think that is with the rise of design being expensive, for one thing. So, Privé [ph] as—you know, as I've looked at his work and—gosh, we used to have it through Michael Benevento, as a matter of fact. At art fairs, he used to lend us, you know, Privé tables and chairs. And then, Sonnabend had an amazing show. And the work goes up and up in value. And the notion that it is less valuable is moot. I mean, it's just a different audience.

So, there's—the fact that there's more cross over, I think, between people looking at design and looking at art, I think, has been a very good one. And I—I'm—I mean, it wasn't that long ago when Kenneth Baker just couldn't figure out clay, and he couldn't figure out photography. And, in fact, with the first Viola Frey show that we did, I remember his comment was, "Viola must have an oven as big as"—something. I can't—and, you know, it—that's no longer part of the conversation. You now have to accept the work how it's made, what it's made with, what the—you have to accept it as—with the notion of intent.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: That said, I think the real estate story is affecting the artists as well.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, I would speculate that you are going to have more artists working in media and material that is not familiar, whether it's [David] Hockney making iPad paintings or Wade Guyton, you know, who enjoys a

printed painting and the mistakes that happen in that. I think that studio space is going to affect what is being made, and that's a real estate story.

MIJA RIEDEL: Are you seeing any of that in the artists that you represent, or are you seeing that in artists you're interested in representing?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, one artist that we have recently started a relationship with is named Tomika Norris.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And Tomika has been located in a number of American cities and now divides her time between Berlin and New Orleans. And some of the work is performative and some of the work is media based. But if and when we start to put together a certain kind of show for the gallery, we will be looking for studio space, you know, because the Berlin—she'll either be looking at a residency or renting a studio—so, that's a different notion than building up the way Viola did, buying a building or renting a big facility and really building up and accumulating a lot of work over time.

MIJA RIEDEL: So, you are thinking about acquiring a space that could be used as a residency space?

TRISH BRANSTEN: She will—no. I think—what I'm thinking about is, in the same way there's popup galleries, there's going to be popup studios.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I think that will change—that will have a huge impact on the kind of work that's made and how it's conceived. And it will push everyone, in a way, who is under this kind of real estate siege to operate, conceptually, more and more heavily, I would think.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I mean, imagine trying to make what Viola did—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —in a temporary studio.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: It can't be done.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: It couldn't be done.

MIJA RIEDEL: What do you see—what potential or what goals do you have for the gallery in the new space? How—what sort of similarities and differences do you see from where you have been to where you would like to go or where you think you might be able to go?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, I think what I'd like to do is really expand the reach of certain artists that we show.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: Tony DeLap—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —to me, being one of the unsung heroes of California art, both northern and southern.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think his paintings, one of which is there—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —his language, I think, is extraordinary.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And he's—

MIJA RIEDEL: And you've carried him for years—decades, yes?

TRISH BRANSTEN: No. We actually haven't, but I've certainly known him—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —from the time—as a little girl, I knew him.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think—

MIJA RIEDEL: I know your mother talked about him, yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think his voice is vastly, hugely underrepresented.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, I would like to expand that. I would like the young artists like Tomika to—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: —I would like to find a way to support that voice—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: —those performances, that notion of making what she wants to say.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And that work, because she's—you know, has a foot in a few cities, is also fragmentary. It's just that I don't know if an artist is going to have the luxury anymore of a teaching job that helps support sort of a notion of living, so that you can make work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I think Viola—she had a funny way of putting it, and I always botch it, but it was something like, "At first you survive, so you can make art, and then you make art, so you—and you survive." Meaning, "You feed your career, and then your career feeds you."

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Is the—would be the hope.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But that space, from emerging to established enough that sales will happen, is a very long space.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And how to get there is really—that, to me, is the—is the area I'd like to explore because, in the conversation about real estate, you know, Los Angeles is opening up mega-galleries. And I have to ask, "Is San Francisco going to open up a 50,000, 100,000 square foot space?" I don't see it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But I don't know that it's not. To support that kind of space, you have to have artists that are, as Paul Schimmel put it, well into the six figures. Every artist must be well into the six figures. And that is not an area that has always fascinated me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Well, we talked yesterday about one of the goals of—one of your goals and one of the goals, arguably, of the galleries for a long period of time was to help give a platform for lesser heard voices—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: —who are not usually in the six-figure realm yet.

TRISH BRANSTEN: No. So, I mean—so it's a lovely trip to take with artists. I mean, certainly, we started out with Viola with $900 plates, or maybe they were $1,800, I can't remember. And, by the time she passed away, they were—the figures were $100,000. So, that's, you know, six figures. And it's a lovely trip to take with artists. It's a—it's gratifying. It's not one directional.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And it is a long time to get there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And Viola was unusually prolific artist.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, it made it easier to do that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But you don't have the teaching jobs you did that are supporting these guys. And you don't have—I mean, my husband was a—he taught, but before he taught, he was a—worked in a warehouse. I mean, you don't have that job exactly here easily.

MIJA RIEDEL: Dennis Gallagher, we should just state for the record—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Dennis Gallagher. Yes, who—

MIJA RIEDEL: And you have two kids, too, right?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I do. Sam Gallagher and Rena Gallagher.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you ever imagine the Rena Bransten Gallery being a three-generation business?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Neither of them seem so interested. My daughter is interested in urban planning. And my son is interested in beer craft—craftsmanship. I'm not sure what the—what the word—what the name of it is, which would also be a snapshot of the time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. [They laugh.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: I would say very specifically. So, you know, I spoke with an independent curator named Natasha Boas, who I admire a lot. She's done a lot of interesting shows, and she's very articulate and, I think, an incredible asset to the area. And she was pushing for a 20,000-square-foot space here. She said, "That's what needs to happen here." And it might. I just—I just don't know how. I just don't know how.

MIJA RIEDEL: This new Third Street space is going to be multiple galleries under one roof.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is that correct?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, it'll look a lot more like Santa Monica used to look back in the day.

MIJA RIEDEL: Maybe like Bergamot Station sort of thing?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: As large as that?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. It's not going to be as large as that because Bergamot was a city-owned railway station that—was it Wayne?—and one other person, Tom, developed for galleries specifically. And the city had more land, more real estate at hand and more will.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, I don't—I don't know. I'm hoping—

MIJA RIEDEL: How many galleries will be in this space, Trish?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think 10.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I'm—and they're smaller.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Bergamot was like 35,000 a gallery, I think.

MIJA RIEDEL: Will it be—will it be as large as your old space or about the size of this?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Not quite. I—no. It'll be—it'll be more than double this.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I don't—I don't quite know how it all shakes out because, for the first time, there are cooperative spaces for packing materials, pedestal storage, some art storage, so that not everybody needs discreet square footage, which may be what needs to happen in this time when the tech community is really scrambling for square feet themselves, as well as the workers who are employed by those companies.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's probably worth stating in the interview, because we have not said, that you lost your space of 27 years on Geary Street because the tech company in the building wanted to expand.

TRISH BRANSTEN: That's exactly right. And—

MIJA RIEDEL: And offered more money for the rent.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Oh, triple.

MIJA RIEDEL: Astronomically more—

TRISH BRANSTEN: And itself doesn't make money. So, MuleSoft is a supported company, or it was by the time I left, and it was 14 years of continual funding by venture money.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, that is a very hard thing to compete with—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —unless there are more people willing to fund an art gallery, which I can't imagine why if the payoff is not going to be what Uber is, for example.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: At any rate, so that's—and I think—I don't know. I was reading some article where the—somebody called and asked about, "Will this make money?" And I said, "I think so. You know, how do you know? But I think that's about right." And he said, "Well, when I invest in a company, I'm hoping that the return is 40 percent."

MIJA RIEDEL: Forty?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Forty. And I was like, "Is that one year, or is that like 400?" I mean.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: You know, and how many companies do you have to invest in to hit one? I mean, the metrics are just a different thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, I think what I really am looking for in 2016-2017, I'm really looking for leadership from SFMOMA and Berkeley. And, hopefully, the fine arts museums find their feet because they have had one

upheaval after another. And the leadership I would hope for would be, with the Fisher Collection [at SFMoMA], a greater investment in telling the area's story.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I think it's not something they are familiar with exactly because there's—they have had to jockey for attendance the way everybody jockeys. So, a Faberge egg show or a [Alexander] Calder show is—the attendance will be higher than a Northern California design show.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: However, the Northern California design show is incredibly important. And, I remember seeing a show at the Museum of Art and Design, and it was called *Crafting Modernism*. And so, you start, and it's sort of all the classics, Bauhaus and this and that. And then, you fully expected it—I did—end with Charles and Ray Eames in Los Angeles. That's, like, just straight on down the line from Bauhaus to Eames. And, instead, it took a very weird left turn to come up the coast and show Ruth Asawa, show Grateful Dead posters, show this notion of the '60s here, which was sort of Northern California that has not really been told well here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: The other story that I think is just missing is the conversation of activism in Oakland. That's just a missing story in visual arts. So, I'm hoping—and I know Oakland does a little, tiny bit, but it's not—it's not present. It's not loud the way—the way the Hammer takes up—Hammer [Museum] and The Getty, you know, take up the Southern California story.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: It's so new. I'm hoping to see more of that. And, actually, the fine arts museums did an extraordinary job with Asian American. And I know that's a funny name, and they acknowledge it's a funny name. But getting another voice into the institutions, I think, is going to be critical.

MIJA RIEDEL: It actually makes me think of another question, which is, when you're talking growing the careers of these emerging artists, do you see in the future that that will happen in the way that it has happened often in the past? You're trying to get a museum exhibitions and traveling exhibitions? Or do you see all sorts of new possibilities for doing that online, through the art fairs? Or do you feel like the—that there's nothing that's really replaced the credibility that comes with museum exhibitions and catalogs and—

TRISH BRANSTEN: I—I think what I have seen—and really it was in conversation with Madeleine Grynsztejn when we were trying to travel Ruth Asawa's show—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: —beyond fine arts museums and the Japanese [American National] Museum in Los Angeles.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: Madeleine said, you should really go to the university art museums because they are taking the most—the largest—the biggest chances now.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, I'm also aware of that need, the—to keep the attendance numbers, you know, very high, which requires a certain number of blockbuster shows, if not all of them. So, I think nothing has replaced the curator. I think biennials and triennials have come in a bit to augment—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: —university museum shows. But I have this feeling that, because of the scale and because of the public nature of the biennials and the triennials, it is creating its own kind—or it is fostering and encouraging the exhibition of a kind of artwork—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: —rather than an interesting voice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right. I do hear that. That ties into something we were talking about earlier. Coming back to this space, because I know we have limited time, how significant was it to keep the

gallery open when the Geary space was being closed? And how hard was it to find a space?

TRISH BRANSTEN: It was brutal. And it was—sometimes things just come together. And in this case—I don't know if you know him, but everybody in my world will know somebody named Knight Landesman. And Knight Landesman sells ads—or used to sell ads, which is why we all know him, for *Artforum*. And, now, he's publisher/editor of Artforum. His brother has the master lease on this space. So, when I was looking around in some desperation, because we just were not ready to call it a day, which did happen with a lot of galleries.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was the decision to stay open? You just weren't ready to quit? Because they—

TRISH BRANSTEN: We weren't ready to quit.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I mean, we have a lot of—we show, in my opinion, brilliant artists. I mean, we have really brilliant artists that we work with. And to give that up would have been—it would have been a real loss for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: Maybe not—I think for mom, too. Even at 82, she has a lot of things she wants to explore and say. But to give up working with this—these powerhouse people, powerful, brilliant makers and thinkers would have really, significantly impacted my pleasure in life, and maybe not permanently—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —but enough so that, when this space—when I found this space on Craigslist, speaking of the internet, it was—it was worth it. It was worth it. And closing up a gallery, I think, is a long process anyway.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, we have a lot of archives. And I'm still sad we threw away as much as we threw away in terms of archives. But we have—we have stuff now in storage that is probably gold—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —but in terms of what you are asking about Viola, in terms about who we showed, what San Francisco looked like, who we wrote to, what curators were interested in what.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So.

MIJA RIEDEL: It seems that most of the—the vast number of the half dozen, eight, 10 exhibitions you have had in this space have focused on local artists.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is there a reason for that?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, we decided to make the—so, because we never knew what was happening—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —all the shows have been, at the most, with the six-month time lead and, frequently, less than that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, the notion of projects really is that. It's a spontaneous, small, immediate exhibition that has as much to do with flexibility as anything else. And a more scholarly exhibition where one might have critical discourse, I think, is much harder to present in this space.

MIJA RIEDEL: What did you go size wise from the last space to this space?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Three-thousand to 1,200, or 3,400 to 1,200, something like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And we're not going to have that scale again. Our back room is going to be much smaller.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: But at least we will be able to set up a conversation that is a place where people can come in and look at a series of artworks that have a relationship with each other and think about it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think we are going to have to build in some kind of back room because that's how—not everybody is here to see what's on the floor.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Trish, I know you do five or six shows a year and a range of shows. Are there any that you feel are particularly interesting to you right now?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, there are two or three I'm really excited about. One is—Dawoud Bey has done a new series about real estate and about displacement, to some degree, and about himself, which—on Harlem. So, he's revisited Harlem. I'm looking forward to seeing Tony's paintings because, at 89 years-old, he is making as good a painting as he has ever made in his life, which is phenomenal. I'm looking forward to Tomika's show, which is a young artist. I'm looking forward—we had a Doug Hall show, and he had a brilliant show at the San Francisco Art Institute.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I'm looking forward to seeing what Hung [Liu] wants to do. I'm looking forward to seeing what Rupert [Garcia] wants to say because he's ready to talk about his experiences on a secret base in Thailand during the Vietnam War when they were passed off as Australian soldiers. So, there's—I'm looking forward to watching Marcy [Washington]'s development.

There's so many artists that—and I'm only naming, you know, a small handful. John Waters, who has a huge connection here; Fred Wilson, who, I think, is one of the most brilliant on institutional frameworks that you can imagine. One after the other—Hank Wessel, who is brilliant beyond compare, as far as I'm concerned and has humor in the work, which is almost a fifth—a third rail in art. So, really, I think—there are also artists like Fred Wilson or Vik Muniz, who get to explore their oeuvre at a lot of different galleries. And that—maybe our part isn't as critical, but—you know, the Marcy Washingtons, the—you know, these artists also need context. And—

MIJA RIEDEL: You did a fair recently where you showed her work exclusively, yes?

TRISH BRANSTEN: *Yes,* we did.

MIJA RIEDEL: VOLTA, I think? Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: We did. It was VOLTA, New York. And Jenny [Baie]—that was her and Marcy. They worked together—Jenny Baie, the director, worked together with Marcy to create an installation. And the show traveled to Japan. So, these kinds of connections are extremely important.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: And, you know, you watch Ron Nagle, who mom showed since 1974. And, now, he no longer shows with us, but is represented with an amazing show at Matthew Marks [Gallery] in New York. I mean, these are—these are extraordinary sort of movements through time. I think Nathan Lynch has some things, a ceramic artist has something to add to the conversation. There—so, there's a lot of artists who occupy midcareer the way we occupy probably mid-tier.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And it's interesting because you've been in it long enough that I think of Nathan Lynch as sort of a next generation of Kim Price and Ron Nagle. Absolutely.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, he certainly—he certainly was the last person to work with both artists.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, there are no more Nathan Lynchs.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, at a certain point, when does he take—get his moment, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Where does it go from there?

TRISH BRANSTEN: You know, he will get his moment, maybe not for years. Luckily, he's got a teaching job. So, there's—you know, but there's a lot of artists that we show that don't. So, how do we get those artists supported? This is a big deal.

MIJA RIEDEL: How do you?

TRISH BRANSTEN: It's a big question because it doesn't happen often for art sales in their younger years. It just—it can't.

MIJA RIEDEL: Have your collectors changed much over the past number of—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Enormously. In—there used to be a core collecting group in San Francisco.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And in the old days, you could see it in people's collections. They would have—they would support local artists. They would go to the local museum. They would go to the local studios. So, people had a [Kehinde] Wiley, and a [Richard] Shaw, and a [Manuel] Neri, and a—and maybe that was too provincial. But sometimes it can swing too far the other way, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, one of, I think, our great collectors—we have several great collectors, but Nancy and Joachim Bechtel, who are really focused on California, and Robin Wright, who is in a dynasty of collectors and art people who focuses on conceptual art and ephemera and can put local artists—and the hierarchy isn't local or not local, although she really supports, goes out of her way to support local artists and the galleries.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, I'm seeing really wonderful things. And I see wonderful galleries, but I don't see that core—I don't see that sort of mentality that sort of came up where you went and consumed locally, and you started adding nationally or internationally. But really, you knew your place was—there was a place. There was a geographic place. And I think the sense of geography has diminished, even though—what is that?—"All politics are local?"

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I don't know that that's true of art collecting anymore.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: Not to mention the auction houses.

MIJA RIEDEL: Please do. [Laughs].

TRISH BRANSTEN: Which has also changed our business quite a bit, both in terms of resale and in terms of the rapidity which things get—go from the primary to the secondary market at an auction house.

MIJA RIEDEL: Has that been a helpful thing in terms of building a clientele or building a—

TRISH BRANSTEN: No. I think it's been very harmful.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think it's been extremely harmful.

MIJA RIEDEL: How so?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I don't think—auction houses are a wonderful mechanism to operate as a clearing house when you need something sold.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Amazing. They are not a career developer. And it is, I think, harmful on a career to show up at auction before it's a solid universe.

MIJA RIEDEL: Makes sense. Any of the fairs you do that have been especially interesting or have—

TRISH BRANSTEN: I really like all of our fairs.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: You know, I am really enjoying what Clara Kim is doing with Frieze Masters this year where she really is—has made a huge point to get voices that are not part of the canon, so to speak.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So, she asked us about Ruth Asawa at Frieze Masters. She, I notice, has Betty Woodman with Salon 94. She's really made an effort to create a platform of sort of multiplicity, rather than kind of a reductive nature.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's great.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It is great. It is great. I'm a big fan of hers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Have you all done much with commissions?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. I like—I love commissions. They're really fun.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really? Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think they're really fun. They're pretty permanent, not totally permanent, but they're pretty—and they're always a million widgets to them. The municipal commissions have started to be slightly less interesting, on some levels, because the arts commission selects the manufacturers, which ends up, I think, creating a certain ubiquitous-ness in the finished object. But, all in all, I find them interesting. I like looking in the airports. I like, you know, I like them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. We have got a few minutes left—[inaudible]—so, we were talking about commissions, and you were recalling one of Viola's.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I was recalling because this—I mean, both Viola and the commissioning developer, Doug Stitzel, have passed away by now. But Viola is unique as a public artist because she works in clay, which is—can be broken.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And because she hand-builds everything. So, most things of that scale would be fabricated in—

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MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So—but this one developer named Doug Stitzel was doing something in Pasadena, and he was there—because he was building, he was very engaged in hiring artists that would talk about the notion of developing, building, constructing as part—as part of it, and Viola did a piece that was probably her largest single figure, and it was a man kneeling with a hammer, and he was wearing sort of Viola's notion of construction stuff. He was very handsome, as I remember, and kind of a hunky construction guy stereotype, and Doug Stitzel came to the studio, and he was a sort of stereotype himself of sort of the fast-paced, really hardnosed, wheeler-dealer development types who were around at that time. And in fact, the contract we got on the piece had been like a 240-page contract that was more appropriate to an office building construction than it would be to an artwork, but God bless my brother Peter Bransten, who is an attorney. He worked through it, although I've got a funny story about that, as well.

So he comes to the studio, and he looks at the maquette, which is a guy who is a—[inaudible]—looks like he might just have finished hammering something, and his wrist—and so he is on his one knee, one leg up, it seems to me, and one hand is on the ground, and then his one arm—I think his right arm—has a hammer and his arm in one long line, you know, down on the ground. And Doug keeps circling and circling this piece and, you know, really tense developing kind of way, and he goes, "Something's wrong. Something's really wrong. I can't put my finger on it. Something's wrong." And Viola looks at him; she looks at me. And the clay is wet, and she takes the guy's wrist and moves it up so that the hammer is erect, so to speak, and the guy goes, "That's it. That's perfect."

And you know, so I—and then I looked at her like, wow, and she looked back and very, very slick read of this guy, but the funny part of this contract is he was determined that he wanted to make copies of the piece, which is something that the gallery will not do, obviously. You know, you're not going to lose your copyright, but he really wanted a copy, wanted a copy, and he went back and forth, and he went back and forth with Peter and I, his attorney did, and God, they were so tough and ugly, but—and we were like, "No, no." So I was talking about the problem with Viola, and Viola said, "Give them the ability to make a replica, as long as its life-size and out of clay," which nobody, of course, but Viola could do and so it's like—and she's like, "If he does it, I say more power to him." And of course, you know, the idea that somebody could do what she did is absurd.

MIJA RIEDEL: How brilliant. How strategically brilliant.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. She was—and it was a detail she just knew wasn't going happen, so it's a lot of posturing —

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Give him what he wants.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —like the need for an erect penis as opposed to a—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: So for me, public commissions always have that kind of really nuanced, wonderful part to them, and they are complicated because it is somebody else's vision to a certain degree. So, that was the one story I wanted to circle back with on why I enjoy doing public commissions.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you find all those details and all that nuance exhilarating and interesting rather than annoying.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, it's sort of my best role, which is as a translator, from what somebody wants to what somebody wants to make, and finding a methodology through that can be interesting, and sometimes it doesn't work, and sometimes it's just fascinating. And—but going back to the shows in this space, they have, by necessity, been primarily local, primarily short-term, with the exception, in some ways, of the show we are doing now, which is Jun Kaneko, and he is, to me, another artist that—he has a practice unlike any I've met, really, because it's all so monumental ceramic stuff, sculpture. It is probably—looks more production-oriented than anything—than a lot of things I've seen. Ed Burtynsky might come close, actually, but if you get a chance to see *The Magic Flute* which I would encourage, this guy's vision is just phenomenal.

MIJA RIEDEL: So he's designed the sets.

TRISH BRANSTEN: He's designed—he is the production designer.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And he's in Omaha.

TRISH BRANSTEN: He's in Omaha. He is a Japanese ceramics guy who somehow stumbled into being the production designer for several operas.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. I didn't know that side of his work.

TRISH BRANSTEN: No, and it's massive. In fact, *Magic Flute* takes seven years of his timeline, and it is extraordinary.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is it being done here, San Francisco Opera?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. So you know, you look at Jun, and you know he is solid in the work, definitely grows, and changes over time, but just not part of the cultural landscape at all, in a way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. True.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Now, is that Omaha? Is that clay? Is it the fact that he is Japanese born? I don't know, but you know, I get a pushback on these large, bear-like ceramics. They are called Tanukis, and I'll get the same pushback I used to with Viola, "Well, I don't get it. They are just big tchotchkes, you know? Why shouldn't I—it's just as good to have a—again, the same Dalmatian—ceramic Dalmatian by you fireplace." Well, you know, you don't quite get from him—although it is obvious to me, and it is probably obvious to everyone—that Tanukis are —not only they are a Japanese mammal that they are familiar with, but they are—have been used, and I don't know, anthropomorphized, zoo-morphized and every other -morphized in Japanese mythology, so they occupy a very big place in ceramics and in Japanese mythology, and they generally are depicted as holding a wine flask and sort of a farming hat and with huge testicles that are almost to the ground, and you know, you just have to go to the place of, what does it mean that all that—all those cultural signifiers Jun has taken away and put these

in its place, so rather than sort of these big tchotchkes, I kind see them as a signifier for who he is and what he has to abstract and how he has to fit in. These are—and the ones we have in our show were made in Mexico, so what does that mean? So these, again—it's that kind of, what does it mean to have these abstracted, emasculated, Japanese, mythological statuary by Jun Kaneko? I mean, what—I—and you know, I could ask him, and I will. It's that same thing with Viola. It's a buildup of trust and conversation over time.

MIJA RIEDEL: How long have you worked with—[inaudible]— ?

TRISH BRANSTEN: We have known him, again, forever, since 1974 or 1975. Our first interaction was Mom bought, I think, 12 small plates that he made in Japan and outright purchased them, and then I saw him in one of the art fairs, walking with his wife, Ree Kaneko, and—who is a powerhouse. I mean, there's very few people I know like Ree, and she ran—she was extremely—[inaudible]—in the ceramics world for a long time, actually, and then ran the Bemis [Center for Contemporary Art] project in Omaha, which is a residency, very, very important, and she and Jun got married I can't remember when, and Ree has built—has under her and Jun's control probably 500 or 600,000 square feet of downtown Omaha, which, think about that; that's 10 or 12 car-dealership-sized things that she's developed, and renovated, and made his painting studio, and has this studio, and that studio, and now, they're doing a creative space called Kaneko for just thinking, so quite a powerhouse.

At any rate, I saw them walking, I think, when I was at the Pulse fair with Jenny, and I ran up to them because I like the work, and he is important. He is significant, and he said he was working on this big project called *The Magic Flute* that was going to debut in San Francisco, and I said we should do something, and we did. This is the second year that this has shown, so this will be our second. This is a project, rather than a full exhibition. It's a slice of what he does, but just to be around these surfaces and these materials and these colors and the sense of play is wonderful. I mean, it's wonderful.

MIJA RIEDEL: There's a real sense of play to that work that I think is unusual in general in the art world. When I think about the gallery, I think about, occasionally, a sense of humor, but those are really playful, unusually playful.

TRISH BRANSTEN: They are, and I think we all really like—and, I mean, you can't get more playful than Ron Nagle, in some ways, and Viola, too

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Viola, absolutely.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And Ron, I mean, you know, *Grand's Canyon* that was vaginal, I mean, one pun after another, which is a bit out of the ceramics world. I mean, I think one critic said it comes from John Chamberlain's school of titles, but really, if you look at the Northern California legacy, there is this sense of, I guess you'd call it disruption now, and we would have called it subversion or humor, which just doesn't go over that well in the art world and did not go over in New York at all, and in fact, going back to six ceramists [*Ceramic Sculpture: Six Artists*; 1981] of the Whitney, I think Hilton Cramer called it sophomoric, and, I mean, it went on and on. I don't think I've read, before or since, a review that badly, although I will say that Kenneth Baker wrote a review of a beautiful Nagle show that we had, and he called it—he looked at these sculpturing and said that they were barren of sculptural intelligence, and of course, Ron was thrilled and anointed himself the baron of sculptural—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

TRISH BRANSTEN: —intelligence, which I told Kenneth at some point, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. That sounds exactly right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And it was exactly right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you think of yourself and this gallery as part of a community?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. I love—I love my colleagues. I—I mean—

MIJA RIEDEL: And who do you think of? Do you think of the dealers? Do you think of curators? Do you think of the San Francisco Art Dealers Association?

TRISH BRANSTEN: All of that and more. Now, the truth is, you only really get that level of interaction when you are at art fairs and you see your colleagues, and it's because you're away, right, because now, I'm here. I have to go to an opening, and there's a lecture tonight. I'll, you know—kind of, I'm strategizing walking the dogs or a dinner party or something else that has to take place. At an art fair, you are on, solid on, 11:00 to 8:00, and it's—then during that time, there's some lulls, and there's some not, and you are looking at art because it's a feast for you, too. You're talking to colleagues that you see three to four times a year. So I have to say I miss the artists most at this space and maybe period. I don't—I—

MIJA RIEDEL: Was there more interaction with them in the past?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think so. I think so. And also, I'm up here, and that's down there, and it's not quite a space, and you—it has to be a destination to come see us only, which, before, we were part of a geographic continuum: you see Paule [Anglim]; you see everybody at 49; you see us at 77 [Geary], and now, we will get a bit of a return to that, which is lovely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Which is lovely, so you know, and I like the art students, and I like the artists, and I like the artists who are showing at other galleries, and I like my colleagues, and I like the curators, and everyone has some piece of what we are all trying to do, which is present something alternative to what is basically consumer society.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you see it as an alternative to resources?

TRISH BRANSTEN: In some ways. In some ways, I do, that unique, discreet, individual creative thought.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TRISH BRANSTEN: I do see that.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting. That makes more and more sense now.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And now, as you look at—you pointed out, when the tape was off, that you saw a bit of politics and social justice commentary and environmental conversation, and that is why it is an alternative to that. Sometimes it becomes that, so there's a big article right now on Theaster Gates. Can you really—can you really be a subversive element when what you are trying to subvert is who is supporting you? And that is not for me to worry about, and I think he is amazing, and I think anyway that story gets told is an interesting one, but I think that is probably the difference, in a way, of what I see young people thinking about who work for Google or for Uber or for a company that is also creating consumer goods, a big—excuse me, public goods on some level. It is a public good that we can find information on the Internet and find a car when we need it, and—but it is also a consumer activity. There are ads that flash up. There's—if you visit that site, when you next go to this other site, there will be "have you seen the," and there is information that is collected on us as we reach out to our own social network through Facebook, and that is not—that is a different—that notion of public good is a different one than what I think happens here, even though like that, this is, you know, set up for people to buy things at. Just different enough. It is exactly what you see.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it's an antithesis of the reductionism we were talking about earlier. It really is the antithesis of that. What qualities first attract you to a piece of artwork or an artist?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, I think it depends. So one of the first things is the question mark, right? So it hits you in the eye, and it hits you in the heart or the gut, and it hits you in the head because you've got an intellectual question mark, and some magic about those three things, and then sometimes you meet someone who puts it so out there that they are a force unto themselves. Viola was one of those. Then, you have somebody like Dawoud [Bey], who has such precise control over his image and the way he thinks about it, that, you know, he has thought a marathon while you're in a 100-yard dash about it, and so often, for me, it'll be an eye thing. It'll be a—it will hit me in the eye, but there needs to be enough question that it is enough that I want to follow up on.

MIJA RIEDEL: And I think of Dawoud also, of course, something like *The Birmingham Project* with such incredible content.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Not only control, technical control, but historical, social, profound content.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Exactly. Exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Has the gallery transitioned to really include more and more media that's technologically driven or technologically engaged intentionally, unintentionally? Something you look for or try to avoid?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, we did that. We did that earlier, partially because I was very interested in it, so we showed Sarah Charlesworth. We showed—we always showed photography, which has, you know, a trajectory of media and digital generations and interrelations. Dara Birnbaum to me, you know, is one of the most amazing artists that work in time-based material, but Chip Lord, Doug Hall, and really, it goes on. They tend to be expensive to produce and exhibit so—and expensive to migrate to the newer platforms.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you feel like yourself?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: How do you balance your own collection with the gallery collection?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, really, my collection is—revolves strongly around the artist that we have been receptive with, so I have a large number of Viola Freys. I have a large number of Dawouds. I have a large number of Henry Wessels. It revolves around that because I believe in these artists, but that doesn't mean that I won't be looking. I also Tony Cragg and Pete Voulkos, and sometimes I round out a collection, like Pete, I thought, was just incredibly important for me to have, but often I find a piece of Viola's, and you know what? It is a bit of my own history there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. Are there particular artists or dealers, teachers, who have been the biggest influence on you?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Certainly Viola, Ron, Dawoud, a painter who I also have in my collection named Oliver Jackson, who is, for all intents and purposes, unknown here at this moment.

MIJA RIEDEL: Where is he from?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I don't remember where he's from, but I did—we did show him for a little bit of time—

MIJA RIEDEL: We can add it.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And he lives in Oakland. He has lived in Oakland for 40 years or so, maybe more, and I—the gallery showed him; he was also represented by Anne Kohs for a while. He's known—he—his work is much, much, much better than you would expect, given that so few people know him or collect him. Also, his paintings are huge.

MIJA RIEDEL: Are there shows here or in the older space that you feel particularly proud of?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Sure. Yes. Of course.

MIJA RIEDEL: What comes to mind?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Well, I love this show that's here now. I thought Rob Minervini's show was terrific. I thought that was just everything you would want about an artist that can tell a story that is of the area, and where do we sell to? We sell to London and Italy on the Internet. I mean, it was the craziest thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: His work does seem so interesting. It does seem to embody much of what I think of at the gallery. There is a real sense of local and place and history. At the same time, there's a sense of layering and multiple different things happening at once, things that are implied rather than stated. They're beautiful.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes, I think the craftsmanship is unbelievable.

MIJA RIEDEL: And they were done in conjunction with a program that had the most bus shelters in the city. I mean, fascinating, so now—[inaudible]—world, too.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It was a great project. We were thrilled to be able to show it. I thought Doug's show was—I loved that show. It was conceptually very difficult to bookend, and yet, somehow, it just all worked together. It was the largest intellectual reach, and sometimes—and Doug is an artist who is extremely funny, but because of the rigor that's required to parse them in the way we have always presented them, they are—it's not the first thing people come to when they see it, is his emotional connection, and he's very—he—the work is very emotional and looks very austere, and I love that show.

MIJA RIEDEL: That was *Love and Architecture*?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. Weird show. Great show.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Great title to it. So moving forward into this new space—

TRISH BRANSTEN: We have not booked our new—our first show because, in part, we don't know where it's going to be, when it's going to be. We know where. I don't have the gallery—

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MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Trish Bransten at the Rena Bransten project [inaudible] in San Francisco,

California on October 6, 2015 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, card number three. We just started to talk about your move to the new space and future plans or visions for where that will go.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So it's very interesting. The way I think is somewhat inspirationally. So it—the project space has worked well for me for that reason, because traditionally a gallery space has a two-year exhibition schedule.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Two or three years. Which is great, and—interestingly we have not booked our first show at the new space, because I don't know what the gallery looks like. I don't know when it will open, and I don't know who it will—I just—when we moved—the first show that we opened with in 77 Geary was a show called *Bay Area Collects*. And we went to all of the collectors, and brought in just key wonderful amazing things. [John] Chamberlains and David Smith and it—

MIJA RIEDEL: This was the very first show.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It was the very first show.

MIJA RIEDEL: Twenty plus years ago, almost thirty.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: This time, I don't know what—which way we'll head. And you know again I just hope something magnificent falls onto me, because it would be nice to have a signifier, but maybe that sorts itself out as we know who—what other galleries are in the space and what kind of event and programming is going to be happening around it. Maybe we feed into that or they feed into something that we do. All—so we've looked at two architects, one are these brilliant architects that we show, who also make artworks known as Lead Pencil Studio.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Annie Han and Daniel Mihalyo. They are brilliant. I don't know that they are going to work to design the space, which we had initially talked about, just because they are swamped and they are in Seattle. So a very brilliant architect whose name is Addison Strong had really pulled back from designing anything because he was contemplating a huge career shift. Maybe going to Ethiopia where he had spent time as a child, but it gave us a real—it gave me an opening with really a first class architect, who didn't have a job. So I think that's very exciting. And I've been looking at sort of amazing designers for the interior of the space, and just—I'm in love with a older fellow from Brazil. At any rate I'm hoping that all this sort of plays out, you know, with great finesse and elegance and fun and celebration. Because to be in business for fifty years is a big deal. And to have the level of artists that we have is a big deal. So this is a opportunity I think that I don't know exactly where the world is going in terms of small mid-tier galleries, or medium sized—whatever you—but I do know that the artists that we show have a lot to contribute and a lot to say, including an artist that's new to us named Lava Thomas. So I'm—all these guys I'm—you know, I don't get a lot of—you don't get a lot of opportunities to work directly with thinkers and makers of this caliber. And it's exciting.

MIJA RIEDEL: And will these architects and these interior designers be working on the entire space or—?

TRISH BRANSTEN: That's the—that's actually the idea. Addison Strong could do that, because again, he has—he pulled everything off of his decks so that he could go to Ethiopia.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And the fact that he took this on really opens the door to—and he's just a solid designer, very, very good.

MIJA RIEDEL: And was this—this new space is on Third Street? Is that right?

TRISH BRANSTEN: It's on—it's off of Third Street. It's Minnesota and 24th.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And it is the old Grateful Dead prop shop.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is it really?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: How fantastic, what great history.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I know, I'm thrilled.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the opportunity to design and to have a space like this in San Francisco at this point in time, this scale, of this quality, is extraordinary.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It couldn't be done without the Rappaports.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Could not be done without Deborah and Andy Rappaport. They are huge risk takers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And visionaries I guess you would say. And hope—

MIJA RIEDEL: Is there any precedent for it that you're aware of?

TRISH BRANSTEN: None that I know of.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, it sounds completely new to me too.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And that's what Andy was saying too is it's sort of a one avenue in cities where the real estate pressure is what ours is. And I don't know what other cities those are, but our real estate is—the pressure is extraordinary. And if Brooklyn is sort of a pressure valve for Manhattan, Oakland for whatever reason doesn't operate that way, possibly because it's not one city.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So.

MIJA RIEDEL: And this would be opening in spring of 2016 right now is the general plan.

TRISH BRANSTEN: The general plan. The space will be delivered to us more or less spring of 2016.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I don't know when everybody has their—

MIJA RIEDEL: So when you design a gallery going forward for this 21st century, this digital centric San Francisco area, well and also what has become a city that is increasingly visited, I mean, people certainly have come here forever, but it seems that there are more and more people coming here all the time to visit and then to stay. What do you think of? What are concerns that you have? What do you design for?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think these are really good questions, but I think what is pleasing to me is simplicity. And it tends to be the most expensive because you can't hide anything in anything. I can't even begin to anticipate what kind of WiFi needs to happen, because I would imagine at a certain point the time-based media will be the platform for showing a time-based piece will be different. It may be through WiFi. It, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —among the other ways that we know. So I'm going to have to kind of fuss with the way you do, you know, what are the likely walls where there will be projection, can I, you know, can I make it so that I can grab power and put it to a projector and the Mac mini or whatever the iteration is that you're fussing with. So that's part of it. I'm—the trickier things for me is if people are coming less frequently to a gallery space.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: What do they want to see? Do they want to see the show? Do they want to see the backroom? Do they want to see, you know, do you bring things in for a particular client? You know, only when they call you up and say what else do you have? These are questions about how people like to look at artwork now. So we were talking about—a little bit about, you know, sort of alternative voices to a consumer culture and art is of course in a gallery for sale. But the vast, vast majority of the people who come to see your shows, to the order of 99 percent are not going to buy it from that show. And possibly 100 percent are not going to buy from that show. So the notion of the marketplace is just different than it was.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. Absolutely.

TRISH BRANSTEN: But I'm going to go back to Viola for the last visitation because we talked about the stages of her life in practice and when the work changed, and maybe the reasons it changed. But we didn't really talk about what happened after she died. And that's a big part of the story. And I was sitting on the board of what is the Artists' Legacy Foundation.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I became the executor, which meant as I transitioned off the board of the Artists' Legacy Foundation, because I wanted to continue showing her work, I had to deal with some 2,000 objects that I had to codify and register—you make those decisions of year, of time, of date, of place, possibly of importance. And then her archives or source information at one point you should know there was a mountain of Viola's information in the middle of her studio, literally. So that I think was when Sam Perry was at his very lowest because—because it was—it was a heap. It was a heap of aprons and shoes and clothes and articles, and I had an amazing team helping me with the registration. We found a program that we liked. The less fun part was somewhere in that mix the people that I had been very friendly with on the Artists' Legacy Foundation, I became very adversarial with. And it got—it got really, really unpleasant. And so on the one hand I had the great privilege of seeing, you know, all of the work and what went into it, and what she was articulating. And how the career built. You asked how my—not the career, how the artwork built itself. How she built her artwork or the—her practice. And on the other, I have rarely been engaged with such unpleasant negotiation as I was with that particular estate.

MIJA RIEDEL: Were there differences of opinion about how the work should be treated, what should be maintained, how it should be maintained?

TRISH BRANSTEN: I don't think so. I don't think so. I'm not sure where the adversary came from. It started really almost immediately or—where I'm wrapping my head around it because we now have a house to collapse, and we have everything in the house, and we also have a studio to collapse.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you were the sole executor.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I was the sole executor. So of course I want to work with the Artists' Legacy Foundation closely, because everything I do impacts that.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you would assume Viola would want that as well as she's set things up this way.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Absolutely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: She's set things up this way, and when Viola was alive, we started talking about it, because I have no fears talking about end of life decisions. I think they should be done. I like to talk about it with my artists now, what they want for the—I believe in it. I think it's an important conversation to have with everyone. But particularly with artists. And the first thing I did notice, and maybe this set it up it badly, maybe not. First thing I noticed that was that Viola had left the building to Sam, but all the objects were to stay there in perpetuity. As—so I sat down with Viola—

MIJA RIEDEL: When you say objects, do you mean artworks?

TRISH BRANSTEN: All of her works. All of her works.

MIJA RIEDEL: But not her personal belongings?

TRISH BRANSTEN: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So—

MIJA RIEDEL: But all of the work was to stay there in perpetuity?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. So I sat down with Viola and I said you are not giving him an asset, you are giving him a liability. You are giving him a building that he has to pay taxes on and he has to maintain, but he can't rent space out. So you're going to have to make some decisions. And I said do you want—if you want your work here forever, give it to the Artists' Legacy Foundation. If you want to give the building to Sam, give him the building. But you can't get both things accomplished the way you've set up the—your will or—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. And just to clarify, when you say the work in perpetuity, I would assume that she would also would have wanted to be sold to significant collections that it would not have to stay in this location.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes, but she wanted—she never wanted anybody to have to pay rent on—to store this bay.

MIJA RIEDEL: I see.

TRISH BRANSTEN: To store her work. But the fluidity of that conversation was, you know, you could have—it just didn't make sense. It just didn't make sense that the two notions were in competition.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I pointed that out and she made up her mind to give the building to Sam outright. And she said you know, the work will either make it there, you know, and it will generate enough for rent, or it won't.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And she had of course her house and she had retirement and she had, you know, other assets besides the artwork that would have sustained renting a building.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So Gary Knecht said, "I want this in 4,000 square feet" or—I can't remember, but he had a number that he was going to do. But other than that, everything was a fight. Every single thing was ugly. And there were a fair number of accusations that I was selling things out of her—out of the warehouse. Or—I mean and I had—you know, you sort of foresee some stuff, so I had asked that everything be written down. So Viola was scheduled to have a show with Nancy [Hoffman], so I asked Nancy and Viola to come up with a contract, because that—you know, she was getting—it was getting to be the end.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And they did that, and I—Nancy sent a contract back, and I was like, "Nancy," to Viola, "that's—that gives her too much latitude, let's shave it down," and Nancy worked with that. But when the show went to Nancy Hoffman Gallery, it was exactly as Viola had stipulated. And an executor's job is to carry out—is to execute the instructions of the deceased [ph]. That's it. That's all we have to do. We have to do that and we have to produce a tax return. It's all we have to do. In Viola's case that was a big job.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Because you also have to inventory everything and you also have to assign a value to everything. But how it got so ugly, I don't know. It just, you know, I had accusations that I had given a show to Nancy Hoffman Gallery that I was hiding. I don't know what, that I was taking stuff. And the consignment conversation, because at that point I was off obviously the board, and it was massively disruptive, the initial consignment agreements. No discount, you couldn't even discount to a museum unless the museum was in a city where the population was over, you know, 500,000. I mean it went on and on and on and on. And finally we decided to terminate. And you know, and that was good. I think it was good for all of us, and sadly the people who had gone on the board, because we now—the Artists' Legacy Foundation was going to be vested, right. It was going to have the—it was going to have Viola's—the money on hand, and it was going to have all the objects. So it was going to be vested. And they had put on Betty Woodman, an old friend of Viola's; Patterson Sims, another old friend of Viola's, and it was so unpleasant for them that they called me and said, "You know we are both resigning; we had a conversation and the conversation with Gary was so unpleasant that we have resigned." So—

MIJA RIEDEL: What—do you have any idea what the—what caused the issue? What they were?

TRISH BRANSTEN: What the issues were? I can only guess. And I would think—I think my only guess is that the feeling of being out of control with this much responsibility might have been terrifying. I don't know. But I can't really speculate beyond that.

MIJA RIEDEL: And as a result there was some need to control as much as possible in as much minute detail whether it made sense or not.

TRISH BRANSTEN: "How many ladders did she have," you know? "When I was here on one inventory, there was two ladders, now there's three ladders, where did the—" or, "There were three ladders, where did the other ladder go? I thought there were two bookshelves and now you have said here three, what's the matter with you?" I mean it was endless. It was honestly endless. And I think it informed—it informed the start—the true start of the Legacy Foundation until frankly Pauline took the helm, Pauline Shaver. And when we parted ways with

Diane, Diane Frankel, she came into the galleries—she came into the gallery with Atthowe [Fine Arts] to clean up the work. And we had talked about—and I was ticked off because she had just asked us for $20,000 to go into the bigger better more catalogue that had been done. And within two months she was terminating the consignment. So I was ticked off. So I said, "Look, you know, that seems—that seems ill mannered." And she said, "I looked at it and it came from the Rena Bransten Family Foundation, it didn't come from you guys." I was like—"okay."

She came in with at—with like three guys from Atthowe to collect the rest of the goods. We had talked to her about us buying a plate. And she came in and she said, "So you have bought the plate, I want the check." And I said, "I have not received an invoice, Diane," you know. How—and she said, "I have been instructed not to leave here without a check or the plate." And I said, "Are you calling us thieves?" And she said, "These are my instructions." And I said, "I don't want you in the gallery; you have to get out of the gallery; you're calling us a thief, you're—" you know, after 30 years of— "I don't like this conversation, I'd like you out." And she looked at mom like—and mom was like, "I think Trish asked you to leave the gallery." And of course, you know, the Atthowe guys were thrilled with this because, you know, it's like front row to throwing out somebody from a gallery which—when does that happen? But that was that story. And there may be more nuances to it, but that was that story that probably—probably would not get told easily. And I think, you know, for me it is the conversation now that I understand it from a living artist to a posthumous career that people have to look at. And I think artists' estates and legacies, these are very important things and I spoke at great length to the people I knew that were managing them. Joel Waktering [ph] of Los Angeles who manages—who worked with the Warhol estate, you know, all over. And in particular there was a—there's been a very successful one that Kevin Konsi [ph] runs. And he's a Spanish artist, and they've built a museum to him in his hometown. They had a five-year plan that they executed. So I had asked everybody what they felt the success—a successful formula was for developing the career and the management of it and the—and to a person, it was the people involved. So I think there are now really good people involved in Artists' Legacy Foundation. I think Pauline is a million blessings on that—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: —on that place she gets along well with Squeak and Gary. She has worked with them for years. But that was that story.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well I really appreciate your telling that because I think it is important to think about especially in the context of American art for artists, dealers, anyone involved and it's something that probably is not talked about very often, not understood, and it's an unwieldy beast to try and manage that.

TRISH BRANSTEN: It's—and it's interesting, and it is unwieldy.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And if you are friends with them, or in my case, you know, a widow, you have emotional constraints. So Patterson had been on the Joan Mitchell Foundation. Betty had brilliantly managed her daughter's career, right, Francesca.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: So these were two people that had navigated huge turbulent seas to create mega careers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And the fact that they were forced off the board at that time meant I had very little back and forth I could go to for guidance as the executor.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it sounds as if there really needs to be something in place for some cohesion or some strong relationships between the executor and the foundation board.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I would think so.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I would think so, absolutely.

MIJA RIEDEL: You would think so.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Working together.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Any suggest—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Or—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Or moving forward. I mean [inaudible] give to—

TRISH BRANSTEN: How would I do it?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I think you try and get the artist to name the people.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Who will be on the board as well as the executor?

TRISH BRANSTEN: Correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I think Viola had worked with Squeak and Gary, but after she passed, I also had learned that if Gary drove by, she would hide. You know, she would like pull the truck in, so he didn't—you know, he wouldn't stop by, so there was something there already. So she must have known.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it sounds as if some plan needs to be set in place.

TRISH BRANSTEN: That's workable. That's—

MIJA RIEDEL: That could also anticipate problems that are not anticipated at this point in time and how they would be resolved.

TRISH BRANSTEN: I would do it while you are well. I would do it while—I would collect people as you progress in your career. I would probably make sure that a curator was engaged.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. It sounds like the more specific you can be ahead of time—

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes. And so Squeak as an artist and Gary not experienced at all and it made—and the two people that could have experience basically withdrew.

MIJA RIEDEL: You're saying with Patterson—

TRISH BRANSTEN: And Betty.

MIJA RIEDEL: So at one point it was just four people on the board.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Steve Oliver was there as well.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right, right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I looked to him for help, but I think he—it was just so contentious, this. Who would want to dial into that?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. And that does seem especially sad given your long, long 25-year relationship with Viola incredibly successful both personally and professionally. And that you are interested in continuing to represent her work for years. It seems as if that had to come to an end.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And I do think you always want to make changes as the art world grows older. I mean God love Nancy, she's not going to live forever.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: And you want context, maybe you stop—you want maybe a different context or maybe as you say the work is seen more in a post-modern context than it was, and you want a gallery that represents that, or maybe you want to go towards, you know, the Peter Saul kind of career. So all those things make sense to me. So the fact that our association came to an end was not in and of itself a shock.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

TRISH BRANSTEN: What was the shock was how miserable the experience was.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it sounds like from our whole conversation that that was the antithesis of what Viola would have wanted.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Absolutely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

TRISH BRANSTEN: Maybe. She had a perverse streak. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Well Trish, I very much appreciate your time, and this has been really insightful both for Viola's work and career and what she was thinking, a lot of things that I had not heard before, and then, you know, the trials and tribulations of trying to manage an estate afterwards. So I thank you for your candor and your time.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]