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Oral history interview with Ross Bleckner, 2016 July 6-8

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Ross Bleckner on 2016 July 6 and 8. The interview took place in at Bleckner's studio in New York. N.Y., and was conducted by Linda Yablonsky for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic: An Oral History Project.

Ross Bleckner and Linda Yablonsky have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is Linda Yablonsky interviewing the artist Ross Bleckner at his studio in New York City. This is July—

ROSS BLECKNER: Sixth.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —sixth, 2016, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number one. Hello, Ross!

ROSS BLECKNER: Hi, Linda.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It's a pleasure to be here. And thank you for doing this. We are looking at rooftops of New York City. You have one of the best water tower views I've ever seen.

ROSS BLECKNER: [Laughs.] It's looking south from 26th street down to 23rd, adjacent to the High Line.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I would like to talk to you during the course of this conversation about all of the places you've worked and lived, starting with the first. So let's start at the beginning. You were born in New York City, is that correct?

ROSS BLECKNER: I was born in Brooklyn, NY in 1949.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which makes you 67 now.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. May 12th. I guess I turned 67 in May.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Is it odd to think of yourself as 67?

ROSS BLECKNER: Incredibly odd. I mean, it's just amazing, actually. First of you, you don't really think of yourself. But I mean, I kept journals since I was—since 1966. And I think one of the themes in my journal was I always preparing to turn old, or to be old. Actually—

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's an odd thing.

ROSS BLECKNER: I was obsessed with it since I was a kid, with a lot of things.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Obsessed with old age?

ROSS BLECKNER: Obsessed with getting older. Obsessed with mortality. Obsessed with obituaries.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Why is that? Did your family experience a lot of loss when you were a child?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, not particularly. We'll get into that. I suppose it will come out a little more, you know, I mean. But I think it has really to do with [laughs]—when I look back on things, I mean, you know, you don't feel 67. You forget so much. You know, I forget decades. I remember things now a long time ago, but I don't remember my 40s. I don't remember my 50s well.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I'll bet as we're talking today, it will all come rushing back.

ROSS BLECKNER: Maybe when I concentrate and focus on it, I might. I mean, because you can't remember everything. You know, like when I look at my journals—I think I stopped keeping my journal when I was 50, because I realized it was so embarrassing. It was like I read it, and I was like, what was I thinking? How idiotic.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, that's awfully harsh.

[They laugh.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, there's a lot of—there's a lot of—errr—I would say that, yeah, it's harsh.

LINDA YABLONSKY: We'll get into why you're so judgmental about yourself in a minute!

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, that's why—one of the reasons why doing of course for interview for so long, it makes me extremely nervous because I'm very well prepared to talk about my work and, you know, elaborate sound bites, really. You know, I've given—I've talked at every school practically in America. I mean, I'm a professor. I teach at NYU. I've taught at Columbia. I've taught at Yale—you know. And I kind of have, you know, you edit, and you project the facades of confidence and—among other things. But obviously if you keep going, some of those things deconstruct and a lot of—a lot of the way my mind works and the way my work works is to build things up and then to break them down again. So, I think that's a kind of manifestation of harshness, the breaking down process. And I kind of see it just as a path, really, and a way.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well it is the creative process. That's how it goes. It's not much different for writers.

ROSS BLECKNER: Right, no. I know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Anyway, what you've just said sounds like a good structure for this interview, building up and breaking down and weeding out. So you grew up in Brooklyn? Which neighborhood?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, I was born—my parents lived in Brooklyn before I was born. I was born in Brooklyn, but they moved immediately. They had bought a house on Long Island.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What year was that?

ROSS BLECKNER: That was 1949.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So right after the war, the big kind of postwar migration to the suburbs from the—

ROSS BLECKNER: They were part of the postwar migration to the suburbs.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you have siblings at the time?

ROSS BLECKNER: At that time, I had an older sister.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How much older?

ROSS BLECKNER: She's four years older than I.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Four?

ROSS BLECKNER: Four.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And what is her name?

ROSS BLECKNER: Her name is Susan.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay. So you moved—so you were an infant, when your parents moved.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, I was an infant. We moved—so all I know is Cedarhurst, Long Island.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's where they moved to?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, which is—

LINDA YABLONSKY: What kind of community is this?

ROSS BLECKNER: One of the Five Towns on the South Shore?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Why are they called that? [Laughs.] I mean I didn't grow up in New York. So I know where they are, but I don't know why they are called that.

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't know exactly why they're called that because they are predominantly a collection of small towns on the South Shore, a kind of middle to upper middle class Jewish.

LINDA YABLONSKY: All five towns were Jewish?

ROSS BLECKNER: All five towns were basically Jewish.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, so this was kind of a [laughs]—kind of a repost to the 400 of WASPS who settled New York?

ROSS BLECKNER: It was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The Five Towns? I didn't know that actually. They ghettoized themselves.

ROSS BLECKNER: They ghettoized themselves. Of course it's very, very similar to the exact opposite on the North Shore, which would be Great Neck, Roslyn, a group of town, where, you know, people left New York after their parents came and lived on the Lower East Side. And then—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Were your parents immigrants?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, but my grandparents were.

LINDA YABLONSKY: From?

ROSS BLECKNER: From Poland and Russia. My mother from Italy and Poland.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And did you know your grandparents?

ROSS BLECKNER: I did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did they live with you?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, they lived in Brooklyn.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Were any of them in any way inclined towards arts?

ROSS BLECKNER: Nobody—well, my—no, not really. My mother had four sisters and a brother. She was the youngest. Her older brother, when he was just married, moved to Los Angeles. And he was an artist, and he became—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Who is this? Whose brother? Wait, let me get this straight.

ROSS BLECKNER: My mother's brother.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Her—so your uncle.

ROSS BLECKNER: My uncle.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What was his name?

ROSS BLECKNER: My mother's maiden name. His name was Gus Ridley.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's not a very Jewish name. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Ridley—

ROSS BLECKNER: What?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Ridley sounds so Anglo.

ROSS BLECKNER: Maybe it was Anglicized.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Probably.

ROSS BLECKNER: Other than that, I don't know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, sorry.

ROSS BLECKNER: It's funny. It's talking about family and the past, I mean. Because the value of it shifts so much in your life of what it means to you. Sometimes it makes you very nervous. I mean, it's like—it's like recovered

memory. It's like I was in psychoanalysis for so many years.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Were you.

ROSS BLECKNER: So many years.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Starting at what age?

ROSS BLECKNER: Starting at 19. Starting at 18. But I went to analysis when I was in elementary school.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Why? May I ask why? [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Of course you may, because that's what we're doing here. Because I was—I got into a lot of trouble. I used to rally the students against the teacher.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you go to a public school?

ROSS BLECKNER: I went to a public school.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And this is still in Cedarhurst?

ROSS BLECKNER: I went to the school psychologist. They recommended a—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Because the teachers were complaining about you. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, because they recommended a private psychiatrist, which I did go to. And I went until I was a senior on and off in high school. And then I started—and that was psychoanalysis. And a lot of that really had to do with, I think, my parents, and the school's detecting my attraction to boys.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, my question to you was going to be: did you think you needed help psychologically? Were you in a terrible state mentally?

ROSS BLECKNER: I thought I needed help in high school.

LINDA YABLONSKY: High school, but this is grade school we're talking about.

ROSS BLECKNER: No, grade school, I just, you know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you think you should be disciplined or needed help from a psychiatrist?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, but—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean, that's kind of radical for a kid in the '50s to be sent to any form of, unless you were deranged obviously, to be sent into analysis.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, I don't know. I remember one incident that really kind of changed me in the fifth grade. It's so strange. I don't know what the teacher did to me. But, she upset me. The fifth grade teacher was named Mrs. Tohl. And somehow I talked a lot of the kids in the class to write on that book, the book, like a notebook or some kind of book, and put a piece of paper on the back of it "I hate Mrs. Tohl."

LINDA YABLONSKY: Excuse me, I'm sorry. Tool is spelled like T—

ROSS BLECKNER: T-O—no, it was T-O-H-L.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay. Go on please.

ROSS BLECKNER: And they all held up the "I hate Mrs. Tohl" sign at the time, when I gave them a signal. I don't know how I talked them to into it. And she cried. And then I cried. And then I went to principal's office. And actually that was an incident that just kind of made me a compassionate person in a way. I felt so bad I did it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's so interesting.

ROSS BLECKNER: And I do—I remember that very well.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's such a significant moment. Excuse me. [clearing throat] Did you have any—did anything like that ever happen in your family—where someone was humiliated—not necessarily by you. Did you get along with your sister? Did she bully you?

ROSS BLECKNER: I got along with my sister, but I think my father was a bit of a bully.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really?

ROSS BLECKNER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Were your parents older when they had children, or where they [inaudible] just average age?

ROSS BLECKNER: Average age. We were three in a row—

LINDA YABLONSKY: What was your father's name?

ROSS BLECKNER: My father's name was Fred.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And your mother?

ROSS BLECKNER: Ruth.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh yes, I know that from the first page—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —of your life in the *New York Times*, which we'll talk about. So you think he was somewhat abusive to your mother or—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, I do.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You do?

ROSS BLECKNER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: That could make you a compassionate person too.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, it did. I mean, it made—I was very close with my mother. When she would cry, I would cry. When she was sad, I was sad. I think that my kind of—she was depressed, I became depressed. She was—she held on to illusions. And the most important illusion to her, for her entire life, was the illusion of marriage and having my father in the picture when he wasn't really in the picture.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So they didn't have a good marriage.

ROSS BLECKNER: No, not really, no. My father was very loyal to her, but he always had girlfriends.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You knew that as a child?

ROSS BLECKNER: I sensed it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. Well, I can see how that could build up—create a resentment in you and feel protective for your mother.

ROSS BLECKNER: And my father was, you know, my father was a kind of a—he bragged. He was very insecure. And he was very poor when he grew up.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]. What did he do for a living?

ROSS BLECKNER: He didn't go into the army because of some—I don't know, some—he had done something wrong. He, you know, had a deferment.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.].

ROSS BLECKNER: In World War II, this is of course.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't know what it was. But he started working in a factory doing position machining. And then he opened up his own shop with a couple of machines. And he started doing machining for equipment that went into material for the government, which was, you know, war materiel.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So he had a government contract.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, somewhere, I don't know, but he had a little government contract. Or the company he worked for had a government contract.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: And he got some of the work when he opened up his own shop.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is in—before you were born.

ROSS BLECKNER: This is in Brooklyn. This is before I was born. By the time I was born, he was doing well enough that he was able to buy a house in Cedarhurst, Long Island, where we moved. And then from that point on he was like a workaholic. And he was always out on the "road." Well, that's that he said. You know, because—getting business. And his business grew, and it became pretty large. Electronic component and precision-machining business. So everyone in my family worked for him. His brother, his brother-in-law, you know, another brother-in-law—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But not your uncle, your mother's brother?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, not—he was in California. But all the ones in New York ended up working in the factory. Then he bought a bigger factory near JFK [airport].

LINDA YABLONSKY: So he was quite entrepreneurial.

ROSS BLECKNER: He was. He was entrepreneurial. And, you know, so from kind of nothing, he started to do well. And that's the circumstances under which I grew up. When I was 13 or 12, or 13, they bought a big house on the water in the other town of the Five Towns that was much fancier on the other side of the tracks.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which town was that?

ROSS BLECKNER: That was called Hewlett, Long Island.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Hewlett spelled H-E-W—

ROSS BLECKNER: L-E-T-T.

LINDA YABLONSKY: L-E-T-T.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which water?

ROSS BLECKNER: Hewlett Harbor. It's right by Long Beach. It's a bay.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Off of the Atlantic?

ROSS BLECKNER: Off of the Atlantic.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: On the South Shore, past JFK about 20 minutes, toward Atlantic Beach, Long Beach, out that-a-way.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And how old were you when they moved into this house? You said thirteen?

ROSS BLECKNER: Thirteen.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And did you have any more brothers and sisters at that point or you just—

ROSS BLECKNER: Two years after we moved there, my younger sister Flora was born.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Flora, F-L-O-R-A?

ROSS BLECKNER: F-L-O-R-A.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Were you—are you close to them? Are they still living?

ROSS BLECKNER: Both of them are still living. I was really—it was Susan I was close to, but I was much closer to Flora. We shared a room originally, in Cedarhurst, for a long time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: Because I wanted her in my room. She was in my other sister's room, and I used to ask for her to be in my room. And we were really, really close. And of course, when we moved to Hewlett, we all got our own rooms.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. It's almost—yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: Unfortunately, Flora, who was the smartest, most beautiful, most talented musician, became schizophrenic at twenty-one.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I didn't know that happens— that you could just become schizophrenic.

ROSS BLECKNER: It's how it happens.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Just like that?

ROSS BLECKNER: It's how it happens, really fast, if you look at the history of it. Now I know a lot about it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And I don't.

ROSS BLECKNER: It's a switch, and it always happens in the early twenties, between twenty and twenty-three.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: And it usually is—nobody knows really what provokes it. It could be drugs. I don't know. She was in college in Boston at the time. Thinking becomes delusionary.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: And you don't know if it's an incident or, you know, until you snap out of it. I mean, but she never snapped out of it. And it got worse and worse. And she eventually became one of the homeless people that you see in New York—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh my God.

ROSS BLECKNER: —who goes about their life with their shopping cart. And I would bump into her once in a while. To say the least, it was painful.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So I would think the whole thing would be—the whole switch and the illness would be traumatic for your family, for all of you.

ROSS BLECKNER: It was, I mean—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Especially for you, since you were so close.

ROSS BLECKNER: You don't realize what it is as first. You don't know. It takes a long time to really know it, or to believe it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, I understand. But your parents didn't want to—should she not have been placed in some kind of treatment?

ROSS BLECKNER: You can't place—she was twenty-one. You just can't place people—that's a whole policy issue. You just can't place people in treatment against their will anymore. Otherwise parents would not approve of their children's lifestyles and put them into—institutionalize them.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No, you would not—you would have to—

ROSS BLECKNER: So the point is it's a big, long legal process, that my parents spent a lot of effort, and a lot of time, and a lot of money, to find her and try to, you know, kind of instigate that process. Eventually, it did happen. And she has been living in an assisted-care facility for about fifteen years now.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, even then, were there not medications to treat—to control schizophrenia? Was she not on some kind of medication?

ROSS BLECKNER: If the person is willing.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: If they don't—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: She didn't think she was sick. She thought you were.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right. I understand.

ROSS BLECKNER: And her brilliance was that she could disguise it well for a while, until the stories didn't add up, or they became too outlandish. And somebody would question them or confront or point out contradictory facts in the story. But somehow for the first few years, she had an apartment. She lived in Boston, then she moved to New York. She had an apartment. And she always said she was a singer, and this was happening and that was happening. I mean, nothing ever happened, and what can I say? The stories just get more over the top.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: You know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Were you here when that happened, or where you in California? Or you were in school?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, I was back in New York. I only was in California—I went to school—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: So anyway, I went to analysis. And I—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh yeah, that's how we got into this. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: I wanted to continue my analysis, because I really was getting a lot out of it, not what I think my analyst thought I was getting out of it. But I was getting a kind of education out of it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. I understand. But let's—I'm sorry that's how all of this started. I lost track. So you were—what grade were you in? Eighth grade, you said, when you started—

ROSS BLECKNER: Fifth.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Fifth grade.

ROSS BLECKNER: After the Mrs. Tohl incident.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right. So you—

ROSS BLECKNER: I started seeing the school psychologist. The school psychologist sent me to a private psychologist.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you were sent there as a form of punishment for—which is odd.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, it was a form of punishment, but I think that they thought I was having problems adjusting to school. You know, I was also starting to fall back in certain kinds of understandings [laughs], which has always been the case with me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What do you mean by—you mean sexual?

ROSS BLECKNER: Class.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: I was put into slow classes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh!

ROSS BLECKNER: Because—and this has still been the case. I mean, I have—I'm a Luddite. What can I say? And that comes from if I were to go to school now, I would be diagnosed a number of ways but certainly it wouldn't be called dumb, but it would called be a learning disability. I could not learn math no matter how hard I tried, no matter how much I got tutored. I couldn't get it into my head. What's interesting, of course, is my father was completely mathematical. And an ex-football player. So the two things I could not learn were math and sports.

Those are two really important things at that point in your kind of education. But anyway I was put into slow classes because of that. So I wasn't ever left back. But I was put into, like—in sixth grade, I was put into a third-grade math class. So I felt left back.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, of course.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. So I felt dumb.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You probably just weren't interested.

ROSS BLECKNER: I wasn't—I couldn't. I still can't.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, it didn't—it wasn't important to you.

ROSS BLECKNER: And it's a part of—but it's also—it has other ramifications that have been interesting to me actually, like I was very surprised when I learned that music had some kind of mathematical rule—some relationship to the mathematical side of your mind.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: And I always wondered why I cannot literally listen to music. And I have never listened to music of any sort, of any kind, ever.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really?

ROSS BLECKNER: And as matter of fact, I'm kind of music-phobic. I know that sounds strange, but—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I've seen you at parties and nightclubs in the past, you know? [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: I know. Of course. I mean, there's music going on but I would never listen to music. I've never had any music ever where I live or work.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Fascinating.

ROSS BLECKNER: Huh?

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's fascinating.

ROSS BLECKNER: I've never been to a concert. I don't know what it is. I know—I feel like there's a certain region of my mind—which actually is one of the reasons why—even doing this interview makes me nervous, because part of—well, this is a whole other issue. Part of feeling like a success, or feeling like a failure, and the underlying feeling of being found out or the feeling the fraudulence I think always kind of runs somewhere within you and through you throughout your entire life as an artist. You know, you're projecting this kind of leap of faith.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which is a good thing.

ROSS BLECKNER: Which is a really important thing. Of course. You know, what I did, obviously, the part of my mind that did work well, I overcompensated for the parts that didn't work well. I mean, I still do that. We all do that. It's not a big deal. But when you're young—you know, I didn't have the overcompensating part of my mind, which all of this is the reason I became an artist. I became kind of—I moved away from sports. I moved away from numbers. I moved toward melancholia through my mother's sadness. And what always interested me was, I think, my mother—like once a week—she was a housewife. And once a week she would take painting class and she would paint in the basement, these little, tiny eight-by-ten-inch paintings. And it was really the only time I saw her happy. And I used to be with her when she painted these paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And what was her subject matter?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well they were all—well, now they'd be called appropriation—they were all Manets, Monets, Seurats, all Impressionist flowers—Renoirs. That that's the—the teacher would give them little assignments.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: And she'd be really, really happy painting with this little paintbrush, these dabs of paint.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So she was copying reproductions?

ROSS BLECKNER: She was copying. Yeah. And I used to love her little paintings. And I used to love being with her when she painted these little paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And were you painting too, with her, while at the same time?

ROSS BLECKNER: I would paint on the painting with her.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. Like she would say, come here. And you know, we would kind of do it together a little.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I would say your mother had an enormous influence on the person you became, at least professionally, but also personally.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, I mean, yeah. But I mean you learn this in analysis.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, I went through Freudian analysis, for god's sake.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you went every day?

ROSS BLECKNER: Four times a week, all through high school. And my mother used to drive me and wait for me and take me home.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So when other kids were going to football, you were going to the shrink.

ROSS BLECKNER: [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Interesting.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well—

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's wild. I've never heard of such a young person in serious analysis.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well—

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's quite a commitment.

ROSS BLECKNER: I also had another kind of trope. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes?

ROSS BLECKNER: Psychic trope was suicidal ideation. I wanted to kill myself starting when I was sixteen. And that's why I started my journal.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Even though—did you have any idea—were you good at writing? Did you have an idea about being a writer or—

ROSS BLECKNER: No, I had no idea of being a writer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Where did the idea of keeping a journal come from? Was it suggested by your analyst?

ROSS BLECKNER: It was suggested by my analyst, yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay. Got it.

ROSS BLECKNER: Like, why don't you write down things each day and write down dreams. It was kind of dream-oriented. So yes, I did start. But even before that I had written letters to God, and to different people.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Do you have those?

ROSS BLECKNER: I do.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You do?

ROSS BLECKNER: Because I was about—I was always thinking about doing a books of fragments, kind of an autobiography that's fragmentary, kind of like aphoristic, in the sense that it's a collage of things that I've written, and that other people have written, that I actually ended up doing, just taking one little segment of it, of things that people have written that I like in the *New York Times.*

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, this book that I have here, which I like. I brought it with me. It's called *My Life in the*

New York Times. Because there are clippings from the *Times*. There are drawings on the pages. Notes.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, it's an extension of my journal.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

ROSS BLECKNER: I also started keeping—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But they're significant things.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And that's why—

ROSS BLECKNER: They're little things that I read over the years and I put into my sketchbooks, that—they're inspirational to me—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —as an artist. They usually come from quotes from books that are being reviewed, a lot of them. Or other artists say them, or people are saying them about artists, or politics. You know those are the things I've always been interested in. Or obituaries.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I noted this one obituary. I don't want to get too far away from the chronology we're establishing here. But this one—I mean, I assume you read obituaries.

ROSS BLECKNER: I read the big ones—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And the small—

ROSS BLECKNER: —and the small ones.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is a small one. I'm assuming this isn't someone you know, but this is a wonderful obituary for Madeline Greenleaf Janes. Do you remember this one?

ROSS BLECKNER: I remember it from the book. It's not somebody I know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right. The radical Quaker librarian friend of whoever wrote this. Missed so much. A war of aggression. The death of the news. The legitimization of torture. The shredding of the Constitution. And the loss of rights guaranteed since Magna Carta. How outraged you'd be. We miss you, Mad. If you're reading this, call me.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, it's unbelievable the things you read, that people put in it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It's fabulous. It's not the usual—and I'm so glad you noticed it and put it in here. But I—this also spoke to me, just a personal note, because when—my mother died in 1973 and during—she was ill for about a year and a half.

ROSS BLECKNER: How old was she? She must have—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Not old. 53.

ROSS BLECKNER: She must have been young.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And at the time—it was the year of Watergate. But the person who outraged her the most was Martha Mitchell. Remember Martha Mitchell?

ROSS BLECKNER: Of course, I remember John Mitchell's wife, the attorney general.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, yes. So every time Martha Mitchell opened her mouth, my mother would go crazy. [Laughs.] Just hopping mad. After she died, it all got worse. And I remember thinking, "You would really have hated this." Maybe it's better this way, you know. Because my mother was—she was Roosevelt Democrat. She was not born in this country. She came from Germany as a child—as a persecuted child, and was also—grew up in terrible circumstances in New York. And terrible psychological circumstances. And she was always a very committed New Deal Democrat, and you know put a—really had a lot of respect for freedom of choice, and the separation of church and state and lots of things that went with it. Anyway, that's—

ROSS BLECKNER: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was my thought when she died. That was one of my first thoughts.

ROSS BLECKNER: Maybe it's better that you're not seeing this.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. Of course it wasn't better. [Laughs.] She would have been fine. Probably—my mother was a bit of an activist—in certain ways, and she would have done something about it. But, anyway. That really jumped out at me, that particular—

ROSS BLECKNER: I can understand, based on what you just said. It may not—

LINDA YABLONSKY: This may be your autobiography in a way. You are—

ROSS BLECKNER: It's part of it, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But it's quite meaningful. It's the same way your paintings are, you know, touch people on more than one level, not just superficially—visually or aesthetically, but emotionally.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well one hopes so.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, that's a whole other conversation.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So why don't you—you said you would like to read from these journals?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, yeah what I'll—

LINDA YABLONSKY: So I would like to hear you read from one of these journals that you have in little plastic folders here?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, I was looking for this letter actually. Very interesting, because—I'm going to have to look a little, okay? Where? Of course, I have to look a little.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But while you're looking, I just wanted to ask. So from this young age—so you were feeling suicidal as a teenager, which is not—you know, a lot of teenagers feel things that intensely.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And there is a high rate of teenage suicide. So that's kind of understandable. But that you recognized—you seem to have had some perspective on it. Like you weren't going to act on that feeling.

ROSS BLECKNER: I would like to read the—damn, now I can't. If I could—

LINDA YABLONSKY: What is that letter?

ROSS BLECKNER: What we were just—what you just said. This was 5/16/1970—Kent State. Same time as what you were just saying. Watergate, okay?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, I remember well.

ROSS BLECKNER: That's not what I was planning to read. I wanted to read—well, I can't—I guess I can't find it. But I could read another one that I actually think is pretty interesting. It's a little—it doesn't—I wrote it to a girlfriend.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you did have—you made an attempt to—

ROSS BLECKNER: Oh, I had plenty of girlfriends—

LINDA YABLONSKY: You did?

ROSS BLECKNER: —by the way, I mean, you know now it would be much easier for me I was on the spectrum somewhere. I was fluid sexually.

LINDA YABLONSKY: When did you recognize that you were attracted to other males?

ROSS BLECKNER: I never wasn't. I never came out.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But at puberty you must have had feelings for—

ROSS BLECKNER: Pre-puberty. I loved my friends. I used to hold to their hands. I was attracted to them. I had—I think one of the reasons why I had a lot of throwback in school is because I organized—in junior high school, I don't know exactly how old you are?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Me?

ROSS BLECKNER: One is in junior high school.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: Eighth grade? I organized a blow job club.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] I'm sorry for laughing.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean—so this is.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How many people were in this club. Everyone?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, like six guys.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's what you did with each other?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, I would talk them into it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, they did it. So you didn't have to try that hard.

ROSS BLECKNER: I was very good at talking young boys into not thinking anything that we do together was a big deal. I ever remember the discussion I used to go through. I mean—

LINDA YABLONSKY: If you remember it, what did you say?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, it started with the fact that we had a special friendship, close friendship. We would do anything for each other. And sometimes, and then somehow, I would get them to lick my finger.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: And then, from the finger, I would somehow get them to think or to believe or to accept the fact that licking a protrusion like the finger is really no different than—

LINDA YABLONSKY: You're quite a salesman.

ROSS BLECKNER: —to lick your dick, or to put your mouth there.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well—and these were the non-footballers, party types?

ROSS BLECKNER: And even some of them! I mean, Jesus, I was friends—when I was in Cedarhurst—and he would say this to me later in life. He became a very famous football player named Lyle Alzado, very famous in the NFL.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What, Lyle? How do you—

ROSS BLECKNER: A-L-Z-A-D-O.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And how do you—Lyle is L—

ROSS BLECKNER: L-Y-L-E.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, really? So you stayed in touch with some of these guys?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, because yeah, he—then I saw him after—he was very famous. He died of cancer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: I could read you my shrink's note to the draft board.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Please.

ROSS BLECKNER: That's where it helped me a lot not going to Vietnam. But let me read you something—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay—

ROSS BLECKNER: —to a girlfriend, who I did love. Jane Winkleman. She was girlfriend in grammar school.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Winkleman is K-L-E or E-L?

ROSS BLECKNER: K-L-E-M-A-N.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What year is this?

ROSS BLECKNER: This is 1963.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: "Don't mind my handwriting. I'm not in a good writing mood. I don't know why I'm writing you. It's A) like writing a stranger. And B) you never write. But I still love you better than anyone, and like you so much, to confine in you. I know we're not as close as I'd like to be, but I try not to pester you, because I realize your position and status." (She must have been a very popular girl.) " It's been about a month now that I've been in a fight with Gary, and I miss our friendship so much. I was so much more friendly with him than with the rest of the boys. I used to have so much fun with him. Now it's just a race to see who has more pride, and he does. I would make up, but all my friends would laugh, because they think I hate him. I fake it well. I know he hates me. And anyway, he likes Ricky so much—and he likes Ricky so much. He did, when were best friends. Jane, you wouldn't believe what a depression I fell into this month. I wish I were dead. Everyone hates me. I'm such a shit. People think I'm a little play toy. When they think it is convenient, they talk to me. And no one would go with me. I feel so much like this. But everyday everyone—but everyone seems to think that I think I'm great. It's the way I act. I hate it. I heard some things about myself: 1) that I'm a fairy 2) that I follow Freddy, which is false 3) I felt up and laid Meryl Gelber 4) I don't give a cute girl who's a carpenter's dream a second look. You know something that really irks me to death is when I look at myself, I'm as ugly as shit. I think out—I think out of so many boys God had to make me the one who everyone thinks is a fairy, and I forget I could kill myself. And also, about Glen. I felt when anyone, two people, look and talk about me, they're talking about it. Chris and all those kids think I do it to anyone. I gave my friend Glen a blow job, and he told everybody."

LINDA YABLONSKY:. Ah.

ROSS BLECKNER: "I'd do to anyone. On Friday nights, I'm going to sleep so I can hope to die. I love you, Ross." I mean, in 1963, 49, 59, I don't know how old I was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I'm going to imagine, of course I don't know her, how she might have felt reading that very private, open and honest—

ROSS BLECKNER: And maybe, obviously, I don't think I sent it, because I still have it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: But I want—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I understand. But you wrote it down, and you wrote it to her, which—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah I might have not even—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —made it even possible for you to write it probably, but even if you didn't share it. That's quite—it's very—it's a very poignant letter.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, I know, because it deals with wanting to die and being gay.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: It's like the conflation of that and how that was then a struggle, even though I actually, in reality, never had a problem coming out. So what's so interesting to me is when you translated it later in life into activism, and you get angry about political things. You have to understand, and you try to understand, why someone even like Donald Trump could become popular. You realize that all of us have a primitive mind.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: A really core—a solid nut that doesn't crack. And it's primitive. And it's internalized at these unbelievably young ages that you hate. How did I already hate myself for feeling these feelings? That I don't know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: But, you know, I kid around and I say, "You know what? It won't be so bad if Donald Trump becomes president. Finally, we can all be the homophobes." Like, I could just go around and say to someone, "You know what? I'm not going to talk to you. You're only a number three. I only talk to seven and above."

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: You know, that would be like the new normal—where you are on the beauty scale according to the new president. Now that's of course a joke I make, but there's—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, but it's actually a good analogy.

ROSS BLECKNER: But there's a weird thing of okay, even people who say they love diversity maybe, you know, I've been embarrassed a number of times, when I've been in a big store and I've asked a black person where the shirts are.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And they don't work there.

ROSS BLECKNER: And they say, "I don't work here, honey."

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, I've had that too.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean so, you know, just to be aware—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —of how these things, where do they come from so early? And do they ever really go away? They go away because we evolve, and we have consciousness, and we educate ourselves deeply, but there's a primitive mind in everybody, you know, and you see demagogues who have the ability to touch people, who did not have the wherewithal to become better educated, and it resonates with them, obviously, much more—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —poignantly and intensely. But anyway, to go back, I wanted to find this other letter, if I could.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well it's interesting when you mentioned Kent State a minute ago and the Vietnam war. We were all so intensely focused, our generation and more, on the politics of the moment. And I—in a way I can't imagine it happening now because we're all more involved in politics perhaps in this country than we have been in years, but it's all emotional. It's not about principles.

ROSS BLECKNER: What is not?

LINDA YABLONSKY: This political wave of involvement. People seem more engaged in this presidential campaign than even when Obama first ran, and the first time in a long time I would guess. I mean, even I just—I mean, I always vote, but even I just kind of dropped out. I was just when—after Nixon [laughs] really, certainly Regan. But now I'm—but it's all emotions. It's not like people who are engaged in a particular issue.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, that's what—that's why, you know, even after something like Orlando—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, exactly.

ROSS BLECKNER: You know, you really—you really say after a while, it's like, you know what? Enough of the prayers.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: Enough with the—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —you know, the logos and the prayers and the, you know, the gay flag with the We Are Orlando. We're not Orlando.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Orlando, just for the record.

ROSS BLECKNER: Where's the policy? You know, when—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —does it translate?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well also what—Orlando was a massacre in a gay nightclub in Florida recently for—just for the record.

ROSS BLECKNER: Forty-nine people.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How many people?

ROSS BLECKNER: 49.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It—what I was thinking was we can be very principled people, totally color blind, very accepting of gay marriage in principle, but if your son or daughter turns out to be gay, the parents or the family or other friends feel threatened by that no matter how intellectually advanced or evolved—you used that word, it's better—they are, so I think it is in there, in certain attitudes internalized.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well of course it's in there because nobody wants to be part of a group of people who, you know, seem to be marginalized.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: A parent would want—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —their child to be as centered in the, you know, the kind of general culture, or the kind of cultural discourse ,as possible, not to have to fight upstream or against all the time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: It's like you could support your transgender child, but you know from the get go that they are going to have a really difficult life.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: You know, so that's—I feel just a kind of a maternal and paternal instinct to try to hope that your children will somehow be accepted just for who they are. Now, sure if they're heterosexual and white and upper middle class, the—and mentally stable, their chances are the—and well-educated—the chances of them being accepted for who they are, are great.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: But then it kind of goes down from there.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: You know, by increments. So anyway let me—could I just have that over there? There's one—yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This one on top?

ROSS BLECKNER: And the other one. I'm just looking for something and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: All right.

ROSS BLECKNER: —I can't seem to locate it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I'm going to—

ROSS BLECKNER: —do this thing, like, I don't like a lot of clutter and stuff.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: So I always do the death edit. I always—

LINDA YABLONSKY: The death edit?

ROSS BLECKNER: The death edit, because I remember—

LINDA YABLONSKY: The one I called the rape and pillage edit? [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Is that what you're doing? Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: When I really just stand back and—

ROSS BLECKNER: Just merciless because—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yep. Ruthless.

ROSS BLECKNER: —after you're gone, someone's going to come in. Someone you're—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —friends with or you're close to and that's—a lot of stuff is just not going to be very useful and —

LINDA YABLONSKY: You've seen that happen a lot.

ROSS BLECKNER: I've seen it happen, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, it's true. Most people don't think about it because it's hard to think about your mortality in anything but the abstract, not the pragmatic day-to-day details of what actually goes on when you're gone.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, I always think about in the pragmatic day to day details like, you know, I should get this done. I should get rid of this. This is ridiculous.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What is it that you're looking for? I mean, what in particular?

ROSS BLECKNER: There's one particular letter that I saw just before.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Letter to whom?

ROSS BLECKNER: It's annoying me. To God.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, letter to God, oh yes!, Let's definitely find that [laughs] if we can.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, I can't.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That you wrote as a child or later?

ROSS BLECKNER: I wrote it very young.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You kept these journals until what age, you said?

ROSS BLECKNER: 45, 50.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh really. 50.

ROSS BLECKNER: And then I stopped. I kind of regret stopping.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Why do you think you stopped?

ROSS BLECKNER: I guess because I didn't have as much to complain about.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: And the gist of it was sadness, insecurity, fear, and feelings of rejection.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you never wrote when you were feeling happy or joyful?

ROSS BLECKNER: There's nothing to write about. That's boring.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, it's not your subject matter I guess. I guess it's not your subject matter, but there is—as much melancholy as there may be in your paintings, there is also a sense of joy and life.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well I know because that's—we'll that's the other side. That's the other thing that, you know, that I do have this—I'm actually a very [laughs] it's like a happy drunk. What can I say? I'm like a happy melancholy. I'm actually very optimistic [laughs] and I'm not a moody person. I'm just—is that on again?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: I guess I feel, you know, like when I was a kid. I was always happier.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Except you're not wearing the microphone so we should probably—

ROSS BLECKNER: I was always happier when I was sad.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You were happier—[Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: I felt more—

LINDA YABLONSKY: That is the contradiction of your life.

ROSS BLECKNER: I felt more at home with myself.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, it's familiar.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah so, you know, I feel like through a series of progressions, you kind of physicalize that into the way that you see the world and the work that you do. So hopefully I mean that's, you know, I always—well, anyway. Let's go back to—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, so—

ROSS BLECKNER: Forget the letter to God, because I can't find it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: If you come across it in the next day, fine. We can always go back to it. I'd love to hear it.

ROSS BLECKNER: I think this might be it!

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, I've just found it!

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay. Dated?

ROSS BLECKNER: Dated October, '63.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Same year as the other letter you just—

ROSS BLECKNER: No that was '64.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. "Oh, Dear God. Oh, I'm not what you think I am. Please, I need someone's help so badly. I need a person who I can cry with, a person who I could rely on. Oh, please, you know what I am. I need help. I really do. I wish I were dead. I really do. So many people hate me. I cry every night. I am such a fairy. People rank me out day and night. I can't take this world. Why can't people leave me alone? They think I'm made of iron and can take whatever they give. People are terrible. Please kill me. I'd love for you to take my life. You would be doing me a favor. God, people step all over me. That's my purpose in this world, for people to use me as a stepping stone. Tell me what you put me here for. I don't know. Do you? You think I am taking the chicken way out? Well, I must resolve to this way. I do have fun, but God, it's never real. I make it all up. I have to, God.

All my friends could drop me in two seconds. I don't have friends in my school. They think I think that I—something—them. They should know: I'm obnoxious. I don't know how to handle myself with people. When I begin acting obnoxious, I have to finish. I don't know how to stop. I know how and when I act silly, disgusting. People think I am dense and thick. I know what they say to me, and about me. I'm such a spastic. I can't do an athletic thing to save my life. I wish I were like—somebody—really just in that respect. I would really love to be friends with Robert. They are all really great kids, but do you think they like me? I don't. They talk about me behind my back, that I'm a fairy. I know they do. I care. I care too much when even Gary said this to me. Oh God, I'm so lonely. You can't imagine. I have no one to go with. No one wants to go with me. I hate this world. Please let me out of it."

I mean, it's really intense. I don't know. This is '63, '49, '59, '60, '61, '62. Fourteen.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well—

ROSS BLECKNER: Very intense.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, I think but at that age, people feel things very intensely.

ROSS BLECKNER: That's what you feel, very intensely. What's so interesting—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But it's like the other letter. You're convinced that people don't like you, or are talking behind your back derisively.

ROSS BLECKNER: Because of—because I'm a "fairy."

LINDA YABLONSKY: Because you were self-conscious about it? What—and yet you don't seem—you founded the blow job club, so—

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, that was the contradiction. I mean, I would do it and then I would—obviously people talked about me because of it or I would let out The Secret. So it was that dichotomy and then in this letter what's so interesting, it says, "I wish I was friends with Robert." Robert was somebody—he was a boy that I met when I was 13.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Before I had moved to Hewlett, when I lived in Cedarhurst—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —I went to a girl's bat mitzvah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: And we went in a bus to the reception, and Robert was a boy who was in Hewlett, lived in Hewlett and went to Hewlett High School. I went to Lawrence High School, Junior High School, but the next year I was moving to Hewlett, when my parents moved. I saw Robert on the bus and I fell in love with him, and I wanted to be friends with him. And when I moved to Hewlett High School, I made it my—he was very popular, very good athlete, and I didn't think he'd want to be friends with me because, you know, although I was kind of—I was popular, I wasn't a good athlete and people used to make fun of me. They thought I was a fairy and all this bullshit, but I made it my raison d'être to become friends with Robert. Robert became actually the love of my life.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, and we started having a sexual relationship.

LINDA YABLONSKY: At what age?

ROSS BLECKNER: Sixteen.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: And he was a twin. His parents were very working class. They lived on the Cedarhurst side of the tracks.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

ROSS BLECKNER: I had by then lived on the—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

ROSS BLECKNER: —Hewlett side of the tracks, and I didn't have a brother, and my parents thought he was my brother—my brother. The point being that he started sleeping over at my house every night, like almost every night, and we had a love affair that lasted secretly from when I was in tenth grade to my first year in college. He did better in school than me. He was very smart. He got me through math. He took all my tests for me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How'd you get away with that? [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, how we got away with that was—he had it first period and I had it last period, and he would write down everything and all the answers. Not only that, he would write it because she used to give four

different tests so you—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: —couldn't copy or cheat to, you know, if you're at the desk, people are around. He used to do it so fast that he would write down—looking—write down all the answers and I used to take out the piece of paper in eighth period, so I did well in math and I graduated. Then he got into NYU, and I wanted to go to the same college as him, so I couldn't really get into NYU, but through my brother-in-law, my sister's—my older sister's husband, they had some connections to people at NYU. Anyway, I got in through some kind of connection, but I—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Why couldn't you get in on the strength of your—

ROSS BLECKNER: Because of my math boards and scores and everything.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: But I had to go to remedial math before I went to NYU. [Laughs.] Which I did, and then I went to NYU with Robert. In our first year, we lived in the dorm.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which dorm? I went to NYU, too.

ROSS BLECKNER: When I moved to New York, we lived at the Brittany.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: That was the first place I lived. The 10th Street—

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's a former hotel on Fifth Avenue.

ROSS BLECKNER: No, that's 10th Street and Broadway.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: The Brittany was a boy's dorm then.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

ROSS BLECKNER: The Rubin is on Fifth Avenue and 10th Street.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right, the Rubin, that's right.

ROSS BLECKNER: The first semester we lived in the dorm. The second semester, we got an apartment in the East Village on Second Avenue, between 11th and 12th Street, over a Chinese store. At that point— he said to me at some point, "You know, when we were in high school, it wasn't an issue. We didn't really use the world gay." But suddenly when we moved to New York—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —guys would be after him and after me too. I had long hair. I was 18, 19 and he realized that there was, like, this culture. And he said, "You know what? This thing we're doing is gay, Ross, and I'm not gay." And I started to get really, really nervous. And I said, "Okay, we'll just do it for a little while longer." You know, like we were roommates by then. And then he met the neighbor, this girl named Trenny Robb.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Tranny?

ROSS BLECKNER: Trenny.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Trenny?

ROSS BLECKNER: Trenny Robb.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Trenny or T-R-E-N-N—

ROSS BLECKNER: T-R-E-N-N-Y, Trenny.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —Y, Robb, R-O-B-B.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, R-O-B-B. What was very interesting at that point— her brother was named Charles Robb.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh my god, not that Charles Robb?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah and he had just married Lyndon Johnson's daughter.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

ROSS BLECKNER: So Robert—and Trenny was a model. Robert was really beautiful. Remember, I fell in love with him on the bus when I was 13. So now we're 18 and they—he started not staying home in the apartment.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: So I had a *really* difficult time. Then he told me at the end of school that he was in love with Trenny, that we had stop this, what we were doing. And it was on my birthday, on May 12th, 1969 that we slept together for the last time and he told me that will be the last time ever, and that was also the end of school, obviously. He left and he quit NYU with Trenny. They got married. They moved to Vermont. They became hippies, you know, but, like, they were cool hippies. They went to the White House, stuff like that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: Eventually they got divorced, you know, he went to jail for drugs.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What? [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, that's his life.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you knew—you stayed in touch with him?

ROSS BLECKNER: After many years, I couldn't for a long time. I had a nervous breakdown that summer, and I tried to kill myself.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How? If that's—

ROSS BLECKNER: I OD'd on sleeping pills.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh. Wow.

ROSS BLECKNER: But I had a really serious nervous breakdown when he left with Trenny.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Despite all of your years of analysis?

ROSS BLECKNER: Despite everything. Well, that's what I was trying to avoid. I mean I realized. I mean I kind of was an—always kind of a hyper-emotional, borderline personality type. So that's when I truly, truly became an artist, after my first year in college. Because I remember saying to him, "You are going to regret this. You're going to wish one day that you knew me, because I'm gonna make something of myself." And all those paintings that you have of mine, because I used to give him like drawings and paintings and stuff, all the time as gifts—

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you were already making art.

ROSS BLECKNER: But I was doing it—I was at NYU in the first year, but I was at the Washington Square College.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Liberal arts.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. I didn't know. My father wanted me to go into his business, maybe. I'm the only son. I took some business classes. I hated them.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: I was really unhappy. He left and then I really became an artist, that summer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You made a commitment to art.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, to being an artist.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you—I'm sorry to interrupt. Did you have any art training other than being with your mother when you were in high school?

ROSS BLECKNER: I did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You went to—

ROSS BLECKNER: I took art classes all the time because of my lack of athletics and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

ROSS BLECKNER: —my fear of being called a fairy. I used to get from my shrink a note that excused me from gym, because I didn't want to be around locker rooms and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —you know; people would make fun of me. So I used to—I had a very sympathetic art teacher in high school, in the art class, who was also gay— I realized later was gay and kind of like was into me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: So he used to take me on little trips on the weekend.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] Really?

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean these—if it happened now, he'd be arrested.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: And he used to take pictures of me like with my clothes off—

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —with a bathing suit on. He never got me naked.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: And never tried anything.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: But he used to get me almost naked, you know, and like on Saturday we would take drives in his car and he—I'd always be in the art room, like, for study hall, for gym, for lunch.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did—were your other friends also art kids? Yeah?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, and they were art kids. What's so interesting is one of the art kids who was a—used to be in the adjacent room was [laughs] another misanthrope, was Donna Karan.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You went to the same high school?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, we were friends.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I didn't realize you'd known each other that long.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. My older sister was going out with the younger brother of her boyfriend. So Donna was going out with Steve Weiss. My sister was going out with Eric Weiss. Steve Weiss and Donna ended up getting married.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

ROSS BLECKNER: My sister ended up getting married—my older sister ended up getting married to a really handsome, beautiful guy who—they were married for a year and he committed suicide. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh my god.

ROSS BLECKNER: Then she got married to her lawyer, who helped her through the divorce and they're still married and they've been married for like 40 years.

LINDA YABLONSKY: They were divorced before he committed suicide?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, they—she got divorced with him.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: Because I—because he was gay, is what it was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow. Wow. Was Donna Karan into fashion already in high school?

ROSS BLECKNER: She was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. Very interesting, these relationships.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, because she was in the art class and they used to let her do things with textiles and stuff and he would let me do things, whatever I wanted. It's funny because, I mean, I got through school, you know, what's so interesting is that I actually kept my first—my—[laughs] I actually kept, or found when my mother died, my first—the things I did in high school, which were these kind of photographic collages.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And you took the photographs?

ROSS BLECKNER: That's—yeah. That's Robert. But I used to do drawings too. I mean, I kept those. Or I found them actually, when I was cleaning out my mother's house.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Your mother died in 2000-something?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well I don't—look in that book. I forget. Look in that book.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, 2008.

ROSS BLECKNER: So anyway, yeah. So then Robert—I lost contact with Robert after he left with Trenny, for maybe 20 years, and I went to Washington Square College for the second year. And at the end of the second year, I started doing paintings and I had a little—I had moved then from Second Avenue to another apartment in the East Village, to a studio on 12th Street and Broadway.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] So easy to do then.

ROSS BLECKNER: It was so easy.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What did you pay for rent? Do you remember?

ROSS BLECKNER: It was—yeah, I do, $400, and my father paid the rent, you know, because he was paying for me through college. That was—we kind of had a—my father was generous in a way, because I think he always felt bad that he was so absent. So, you know, he paid for stuff.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: He bought stuff.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But I'm guessing that neither of your parents had had a higher education, that you were the —

ROSS BLECKNER: Right, neither of them graduated high school.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: So the studio apartment was about this big, let's say, and in the end I started—I moved out all the furniture and I just had a little single bed and I was painting—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —paintings on the wall and on the floor, all the time, and I never saw anybody. That was my second year of college because I had had this nervous breakdown and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —I withdrew from people *completely*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really.

ROSS BLECKNER: I didn't—I couldn't talk. I cried a lot. I missed him so much.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well—

ROSS BLECKNER: I dreamt about him every night for 15 years.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow, that was intense.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, very. It was just intense.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But let's—just for context here, this is 1967-8?

ROSS BLECKNER: This is 1968, nine now.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: Second year of college is '69.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But so you were at NYU in these—you were in New York City. There was a lot going on here culturally.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, let me—let me—let me tell you something, what's so interesting. My second year, I was still at Washington Square College, but I started taking art—some art classes as electives.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: And I showed some of these teachers, like, my art that I'd been making at home. One of them was Sol Lewitt.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really?

ROSS BLECKNER: I didn't know who he was. The other one was Chuck Close. Up until that point, I didn't know that there was art, really. I lived in—and it was actually Chuck Close that said to me, and I'll never forget it because it was like a—somewhat of an epiphany, "You know Ross, there are artists alive and working—now." Because I was really consumed with looking at old art, Barnett Newman. By my second year, I was looking at books frantically, and going to the Museum of Modern Art.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: I wasn't really seeing people, you know, I was wanting to revenge Robert. So I had—I felt like I had a lot of lost time that I had to catch up for, like I wanted to show him that I can be a good artist. I don't know why, but somehow that was going to justify everything. Well maybe, I think, what my real fantasy is, is I'd get him back. He'd come back.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: He'd want me again.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But did you go to other museums or just the Modern?

ROSS BLECKNER: I went—basically the Modern and the Met.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But not galleries?

ROSS BLECKNER: I didn't know yet. Chuck told me there were galleries where artists who lived and worked now showed their work and he said they're only five or six blocks from here. I'll never forget that. He told me where they were. I went.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Like to 10th Street, around there?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, it was—SoHo was just starting.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, yes that's true, yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: The first gallery I went to was Paula Cooper!

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

ROSS BLECKNER: —up the steps!

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right, the first gallery in SoHo, really.

ROSS BLECKNER: Up the steps, two or three flights up, I forget. It was—I'm pretty—I was—my mind was blown.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] What was she showing? Do you remember what you saw?

ROSS BLECKNER: I do. She was showing an artist—I don't—and I actually sometimes Google him and I always wonder what happened to him. I liked his work a lot. His name was Doug Sanderson.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: And then I went to OK Harris.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] On West Broadway.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. And there was a show of Jake Berthot, which I thought was *fabulous*, kind of like Rothko, which I had seen at MoMA. And then I went to this gallery, Reese-Paley.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Wow.

ROSS BLECKNER: And there were these spray paintings by this woman, Jane Kaufman. I ended up being friendly with all these artists, but that's later. But Chuck actually, also, he liked me. He always still says that I was the best student he ever had in his whole teaching career, and he actually said—I told him I loved that work when I came back, and he said, "I'll take you to Jake's studio." And he did, you know?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Fantastic. That's fantastic. Did you go to Chuck's—what was Jake's the first art—working artist's studio that—

ROSS BLECKNER: Chuck. I went to Chuck's studio. He said, "Come to my studio." I think it was on the Bowery.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So then you knew immediately that it was possible to make a living and a life as an artist?

ROSS BLECKNER: That's—that was the epiphany.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you never went to the Factory or met Andy?

ROSS BLECKNER: Later, later, later.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Later, but not at that time. I mean it was you, you know.

ROSS BLECKNER: I'll tell you what happened. So that was my second year. I took—at the end of the second year—no, actually in the middle of the second year or toward the end, I took acid. Oh, and all this was going on, the Art Workers' Coalition, a lot of demonstrations, antiwar, Vietnam, right around Washington Square.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

ROSS BLECKNER: So I was there. I marched. I was—it was intense. I took photographs. I have them.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, really? Wow that's valuable documentation.

ROSS BLECKNER: Because I was taking a photography class.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Ahh. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: And it was, you know, about current affairs.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: So even though I was in my apartment all the time making art and I wasn't making friends, because I kind of was recovering, I was still participating in the beginning of my life at NYU as an artist and meeting these people. And then—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you switch school out of the Washington Square?

ROSS BLECKNER: So anyway, I took this acid trip—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah?

ROSS BLECKNER: —on a Saturday night.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Who gave you the acid?

ROSS BLECKNER: I forgot.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: I had—it was great. I was in Washington Square.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But were you by yourself?

ROSS BLECKNER: I was by myself.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh my God.

ROSS BLECKNER: I didn't have any friends. I was by myself in Washington Square and I realized I had this—I'm an artist. I am not just gonna be an artist. I'm not going to think about it. I'm not going to worry about what my father says about it. I'm going to do it. And then I went on Monday morning to the art department. I spoke to the chairman, Howard Conant, who was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Conan?

ROSS BLECKNER: C-O-N-A-N-T, Howard Conant, and I also spoke to Irving Sandler who was teaching art history there at NYU, and I begged them to let me transfer, and they did! So from—I went from Washington Square College to the art school which was then part of the School of Education, which by the way it still is. It's now called Steinhardt—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

ROSS BLECKNER: —where I teach. So then by the—

LINDA YABLONSKY: So that was where?

ROSS BLECKNER: That was at—it was—it still was on Washington Square.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: It was on the top floor of one of those buildings—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —across from Stern, top floor. They had nice studios. So by the—when I got into my third year of college, I was an art major.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And still living on Broadway and 12th Street?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, and I lived for the rest of the time there.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you go to openings and galleries in those—?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, I didn't.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No.

ROSS BLECKNER: I didn't really know anybody. I was kind of still, you know, I met—I was more student life.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you—how did you know which galleries to go to? Were you reading the *Village Voice*?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, that was—then I knew that there were listings and I would go.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: And what's so actually interesting is—not interesting, interesting, who knows? But I would—I was riding my bike around.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You had a bicycle?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean not many people did at that time. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: I had a bicycle, yeah. And I would ride my bike around. Because by my third year, I was, you know, I didn't have a girlfriend. I didn't have a boyfriend. But my second year I didn't have any sex or wasn't interested because of the thing, because of Robert.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: And I didn't want to—I couldn't go near anyone. My third year I started going and riding on my bicycle like to the piers and stuff.

LINDA YABLONSKY: On the West Side of Manhattan—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —where there was a lot of anonymous gay sex going on?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. So I would kind of partake in that. I did meet there someone who picked me up then, was Christopher Makos.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] Yes. He hung out at the piers? I guess everybody did.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What about the bars that were over there?

ROSS BLECKNER: I didn't go to bars. I was—I was too insecure. I never—I never liked bars. I actually never liked alcohol.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Lucky. Were you—but—and you didn't—

ROSS BLECKNER: Eighteen was drinking age.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You didn't take drugs? I mean this was—

ROSS BLECKNER: I took drugs occasionally.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But, yeah, socially.

ROSS BLECKNER: Like I've tried everything, but I never—

LINDA YABLONSKY: You did?

ROSS BLECKNER: I never got into taking acid. I hate—I hated pot.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Speed—a lot of people were taking diet pills in those days.

ROSS BLECKNER: I liked speed only because I could work and be up. I mean I still like speed. I mean, I don't—

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: I never became an addict. I never did—I only did crystal a few times, and I stayed up all night and painted.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean I'm—I still go to a psycho-pharmacologist. I actually think truthfully, to skip to the present, I'll go back to that—Adderall actually saved my life.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, I was—when you first said earlier that, you know, you'd been sent to the high school, junior high guidance counselor and that these days you simply would have been given Adderall or something like that, a pill to take.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, Adderall, I find to this day very helpful.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How is Adderall spelled? With two Ls?

ROSS BLECKNER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: Should I look on the bottle? It's not here. It's at home.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No.

ROSS BLECKNER: So anyway, yeah, I got into that. I met a lot of—I did meet older artists then at these marches where they were right around—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: —Washington Square. I couldn't help then—and that is when Nixon was president and Kent State happened.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: And there were strikes at NYU.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, that was 1970, because I was there, yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: So yeah that's already my third year of college, okay?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: And then in that summer, I actually went on my own to San Francisco. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really? What took you there?

ROSS BLECKNER: Because I had read about this. It's Summer of Love and all that and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you—it's not that you were going to visit somebody you knew there?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, I didn't know—

LINDA YABLONSKY: You just went blind, yeah?

ROSS BLECKNER: I didn't know anybody.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Interesting.

ROSS BLECKNER: I just went and I—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Where'd you stay?

ROSS BLECKNER: I checked into some place that I thought was a hotel, but it was actually a bath house. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Just coincidentally?

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, I really didn't know these things. I was very, you know, you're innocent. You really are.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean I remember somebody coming into my room in the middle of the night and like trying to like do something with me, and I left because I got so nervous seeing all the people walking back and forth in the halls.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: I didn't know what—it looked like a bunch of zombies to me, so I left and I walked around and I stayed in Golden Gate Park that night for the rest of the night.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You stayed there all night?

ROSS BLECKNER: I did. After—now this is the middle of the night when I left the bath house.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: And the next day, I bumped into the girl who I wrote that letter to when I was 14, Jane Winkleman.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh my god, what are the odds of that? [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: And we—she was staying in an apartment in Berkeley and so I went over to Berkeley and stayed with her. And I stayed that whole summer and then I ended up taking class—two classes, art classes, at California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I have to ask you: when things like that happen, like your bumping into Jane at that moment, do you feel that, you know, you're being looked after? There's someone taking care of you?

[They laugh.]

ROSS BLECKNER: No, I didn't. [Laughs.] I mean that is—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean you wrote a letter to God when you were young. Did you have a religious education? Was your family religious?

ROSS BLECKNER: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You—

ROSS BLECKNER: My family, my grandfather was Conservative.

LINDA YABLONSKY: A Conservative Jew.

ROSS BLECKNER: My parents were—started out Conservative. They became Reformed.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: I was bar mitzvahed, but I had no religious inclinations or interest.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But to be bar mitzvahed, you have to have a religious education.

ROSS BLECKNER: I went through—I went through it. I went through the Hebrew stuff.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: I hated it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: It was misery.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: I—they—my parents became reform because I could not get through the stuff for Conservative bar mitzvahs.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: So they changed temples to go to—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: —Reform temple, where I only had to memorize like five lines, and then I had a bar mitzvah, which was miserable.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] What do you mean, the party or the actual ceremony?

ROSS BLECKNER: The whole thing. I have my bar mitzvah book here, but we can't translate that into—

LINDA YABLONSKY: No.

ROSS BLECKNER: —verbally, but my whole bar mitzvah album is here.

LINDA YABLONSKY: All right, so you didn't have this sense of the universe, the benevolence of the universe in a way when—

ROSS BLECKNER: When I bumped into Jane and the scene we ended up—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah and then you had a place to—

ROSS BLECKNER: Because we did. I moved. She went to Lawrence High School. I went to Hewlett High School.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: We did lose touch. Then I bumped into her and we had a very—really, really nice relationship that summer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And you—

ROSS BLECKNER: And then I thought I wasn't gay after all.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And you were—this was in the summer when you went to the college?

ROSS BLECKNER: To San Francisco, when I took classes and I was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you think you would stay there? I mean, and not come back to New York?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well no, I wanted to finish NYU.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: So I was just there for the summer, and it was interesting. There were riots in Berkley.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The Black Panthers were very active then.

ROSS BLECKNER: Everything was going on, and that's actually when I really got interested in the news.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Because, you know, you saw—I didn't understand like, you know, I'd be walking home from Oakland to Berkeley. I didn't understand like why the cops were blocking off the roads, and why windows were suddenly broken. So I started reading the newspapers a lot.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Up until then, you hadn't been?

ROSS BLECKNER: A little bit.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: But I became very—I actually became—I always liked looking at papers, but I became a news junkie.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you know Mary Heilmann then?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, I didn't know Mary until I moved back from Cal Arts in the later '70s, and I met her.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Because I think she was in Oakland or Berkeley then. She was at Berkley for a while. Just thought maybe another coincidence. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: No, we became friendly later. I revived her career, she'll tell you.

LINDA YABLONSKY: She has told me. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Did she ever tell you the story? It was very funny, when I called Pat Hearn.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, she did when I did an interview with her last spring.

ROSS BLECKNER: And I said to Pat Hearn, "I have a great idea for you. You show all these young, hip artists. Why don't you show an older artist?" And Pat Hearn said to me, "What's his name?"

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: I said, "Pat. It's a woman." [Laughs.] She said, "Oh."

LINDA YABLONSKY: How did you know Pat?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well because that was the early '80s. This is—we're skipping ahead a little.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, all right, we'll cover that.

ROSS BLECKNER: But I, you know, I was kind of—I had a show at Nature Morte. I mean—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, right, a very important show. We will talk about that. I mean that was a show of one painting, as I recall.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. What was that painting?

ROSS BLECKNER: One big stripe painting.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Alright. So you come back to—well we definitely will talk about that. You come back to NYU.

ROSS BLECKNER: To finish school.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Was it hard—was it hard to leave San Francisco—

ROSS BLECKNER: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —now that you had this relationship?

ROSS BLECKNER: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No.

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't remember that or why, but it wasn't. I wanted to get home to New York. I liked New York.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And did you come back to the same apartment?

ROSS BLECKNER: I sublet it, and I came back.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, and then I applied to a bunch of—I realized that I did—I still—I wanted to take my art and my being an artist seriously and go to a—I felt that I actually felt like I kind of missed out on the "art school experience," because I was going to kind of—at that time, NYU was an urban commuter school.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

ROSS BLECKNER: Really a commuter school.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: And by the way, it wasn't as good a school as it is today.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No, I know.

ROSS BLECKNER: I would never have been able to get in based on my boards and my grades and my, you know, math stuff now.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: I would never have been able to get in.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Was Chuck your teacher throughout this year?

ROSS BLECKNER: No just one—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Just that one semester, or one year?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, one semester. He happened to be teaching there, like a visiting thing I think, and we became friends and our friendship continued. You know, he kind of advised me a lot. He advised me to apply to Cal Arts.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Ah.

ROSS BLECKNER: In my senior year, he said, "You know, there's this really cool place that's just started. Why don't you try it?" And I'd been in California so I thought, well, maybe it'd be nice to get out of New York for a few years. Which I did, but I also applied to these other schools, like right here.

LINDA YABLONSKY: To Yale?

ROSS BLECKNER: Like Yale, and I forget what other schools were popular then, but I'm sure—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I don't think it was all that usual for people to go to get an MFA at that time. I mean now everybody does it.

ROSS BLECKNER: No it was, it was standard.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It was?

ROSS BLECKNER: But it wasn't because of the networking. It was because an MFA is— was what you thought you needed to teach.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, but did you intend to teach?

ROSS BLECKNER: I did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, how are you going to make a living?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well you work for other artists, or you get a waiter job [laughs] you know that sort of thing.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well I didn't think about working for other artists. I was kind of a little, I don't know. It was not something I wanted to do.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, okay. So you went to Cal Arts this is when it was still very new. Were you in the first class?

ROSS BLECKNER: First class, I had just started the year before. I was in the first graduating graduate class. So yeah it just started; it just opened; it had been in downtown L.A. first and moved to that building in Valencia. And I was the first class in that building.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And it was a really different school? This was founded by Disney, Walt Disney.

ROSS BLECKNER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] It was founded by Walt Disney.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And it was sort of cross-disciplinary, am I right in that?

ROSS BLECKNER: It did disciplinary; I don't think they were expecting it to become what it became. Basically, they had a very large animation department. They thought it would be kind of a training ground for their own purposes. But, you know, they threw in the other schools too. And I got myself a van—and I was a hippie by then, by the way; I had very long hair. And I drove across country that summer; the summer of '69 with a friend of mine.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wait, this is the summer of?

ROSS BLECKNER: '70, '71, two; '68 to'72.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: I drove across country. It took a long time, like two months.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Two months?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, I camped and went everywhere.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You were again alone? You made this drive alone?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, two different friends, two different women.

LINDA YABLONSKY: From school?

ROSS BLECKNER: From NYU, who I knew from NYU. And I remember driving up the freeway from L.A.. I was in L.A.—I forget where I stayed. Then I drove up the freeway to school. I rented an apartment as soon as I got to L.A.; that's what I did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Near the school?

ROSS BLECKNER: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Or somewhere else?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, I didn't want, not near the school. I wanted to be in L.A.. I didn't realize how far the school was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, it is far.

ROSS BLECKNER: I didn't realize. You know I wasn't really— I guess I was, like, New York scale. It's so funny because I rented an apartment, like I stayed in a motel; and I rented an apartment. And I didn't know how to make friends.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Where was the apartment?

ROSS BLECKNER: In Venice.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, you were a long way.

ROSS BLECKNER: So long. It didn't last long. So I went down Sunset Strip and I went into a clothing store and I made friends with the salesman; the first salesman, Joey Arias.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, no! How amazing.

ROSS BLECKNER: He was 17 or 18.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did he grow up in L.A.?

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't know but he lived there. And then we became friends, and the other guy who worked in the store, and the owner of the store, and I became friends with the three of them. I hung out with them in L.A. all the time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And they were all demonstratively gay?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, definitely.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean there's no mistake with Joey.

ROSS BLECKNER: Not her, her name, she owned the store, was Janet Charleton, she became a big columnist for like *The Hollywood Reporter*. But she started out owning a clothing store on Sunset Boulevard, right on the Strip.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Amazing.

ROSS BLECKNER: Then I would drive up to Cal Arts every day and I would be in my studio, and it was too far, so I moved up, and knd of lost touch with them. And, you know, I got more into Cal Arts—into being up there.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You moved to the school?

ROSS BLECKNER: To right near school, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Who were your teachers there— the first teachers?

ROSS BLECKNER: John Allan Hacklin, Paul Brock was the Dean. You had a mentor, so he was assigned to me. Or I was assigned to him.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And John Baldessari?

ROSS BLECKNER: And John Baldessari was there. But I didn't take—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And Allan who?

ROSS BLECKNER: Hacklin.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Hacklin?

ROSS BLECKNER: H-A-C-K-L-I-N.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And Allan spelled?

ROSS BLECKNER: A-L-L-A-N.

LINDA YABLONSKY: A-L-L-A-N. Okay, I'm sorry.

ROSS BLECKNER: He had a kind of he must have been about 30; your sense of age I think when your 20 is distorted. I thought he was older, an older artist. He seemed to have a kind of big career.

LINDA YABLONSKY: As a painter?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. Very boisterous, very self-confident, very encouraging. But there were a lot of visiting artists too, who came through the studio too. Robert Irwin, I remember, in particular.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And so you met David Salle there?

ROSS BLECKNER: Of course, that's when I met David, Eric.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Eric Fischl?

ROSS BLECKNER: Jim Welling, Barbara Bloom, Matt Mullican, Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I guess it speaks very well for that school that all of you had an impact.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, yeah, you know how it is. I guess, you know, the kind of— it had a lot of momentum, being new, and by the way it was Disney-funded, so everybody—when you got in you also had a scholarship, and a fellowship.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow.

ROSS BLECKNER: You know, you were a teaching assistant right away. So I think that gave it a lot of—that pushed it right away into a, you know, a desirability level. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: What kind of—well, I mean, you're all very different kinds of artists.

ROSS BLECKNER: And we were then as well.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But there is a very definite conceptualist bent to—well certainly around John.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, out of that group that I just mentioned me and Eric Fischl were for sure—we were the only ones actually making paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What about Troy?

ROSS BLECKNER: Troy was making drawings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And Jack Goldstein? He made films and records.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. I don't remember David, what David was doing. He was making videos, David Salle. I remember him painting when we got out of school and he invited me to his studio in New York. I remember seeing his paintings for the first time but I don't remember seeing them there. What's interesting is the show at the Parrish.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The one that's coming up.

ROSS BLECKNER: It's coming up. It's me, David, and Eric, based on our work from Cal Arts.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, really!

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, Terrie Sultan, or the curator—oh, what's his name? The critic for the *L.A. Times*. I'm blanking out on his name.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, me too.

ROSS BLECKNER: Pagel, David Pagel. She thought it was interesting that we moved to New York at the same

time from Cal Arts, and that—just coincidently around the same time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But David was also a New Yorker to start with?

ROSS BLECKNER: A midwesterner.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And he came, and Eric I don't know where's he from.

ROSS BLECKNER: He's from Long Island.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. So you and Eric were kind of tight at Cal Arts?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah,

LINDA YABLONSKY: You came from the same place.

ROSS BLECKNER: But I was the most tight with a painter—somebody who was painting— his name was Gary Brown. He was a wonderful painter. And he was in undergraduate school; I was in graduate school. He was a senior and he went to Yale. He was the best painter of anybody there. He ended up killing himself.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, that's why we haven't heard of him

ROSS BLECKNER: That's why you haven't heard of him.

LINDA YABLONSKY: A lot of suicides in your world. There are a lot of suicides.

ROSS BLECKNER: And I fell in love with Gary. And we had a very intense relationship. He was really, really intense; obsessed with Bob Dylan. Obsessed with Bob Dylan.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And you couldn't listen to music.

ROSS BLECKNER: Bob Dylan was the only one I could listen too. But now I can't listen to him because it makes me cry, it's so intense for me—that time, the words, Gary. You know, that's the problem with music, I can't deal with it. It's the hyper emotional part of any old music. You know, my mind is a trap for a lot of things. Like about eight years ago I had a music-related incident that was so horrible. Every morning exactly at 3:00 a.m., I'd wake up, sitting up, singing Jingle Bells.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] I'm sorry for laughing.

ROSS BLECKNER: It's funny. It was horrifying.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It's so random.

ROSS BLECKNER: It was so random. That's the problem for me with music—the random tunes. The randomness of words and the trapping of it— getting it trapped in my mind, and then it doesn't go away, and the emotions. I can't have random music on, and I never know what to choose. Anyway—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I don't mean to skip ahead but you just opened a door here that I want to pursue. In the course of your very good, successful career, you have had your share of criticism, like everybody, and one of the things you've been faulted for—although I don't particularly think it's a fault, personally— is for over-sentimentality.

ROSS BLECKNER: [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: I think it's a good thing if art has an emotional component, you know, that doesn't all have to be dry, minimal, strictly conceptual to have an impact.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, if you're a dry, minimal, conceptual artist then that's what it is then great, then you're good.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How do you respond to something like that? I mean I don't—

ROSS BLECKNER: I respond to it very simply by saying—and by the way we could come with a criticism even having to do with activism, but I'll hold that thought and say that I feel that I've been so afraid between the kind of destructive love that made me feel like I wanted to kill myself, that segued into my own feelings or ideations of suicide to begin with, starting when I was 14, when I was talking to God—I feel that I've had a very tentative—and well, the history of mental illness in my family conflated with that, I feel that the only thing I could do as an artist is follow how your mind works.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: And sometimes you know you are very sentimental and you know it's like the polarities. You know I've tried to represent— if I'm representing anything it's, like, the hopefulness or the emotionality of things and the way the mind works, and also the rationality. A lot of my work, just the whole idea and the way I feel like distance myself from sentimentality is the kind of the conceptual component in my work. You know, in the end I actually do feel that I'm a conceptual painter, because I'm not a representational painter. I don't really know how to paint. And I only can paint based on the ideas about things that I have. And those ideas of things that I have, I try to keep the flow as large as possible. So that, you know, it goes from current events, which are something that I'm interested in, to states of mind, which is consciousness.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: And I think that my first paintings that actually [dealt –RB] with consciousness are those stripe paintings. I wanted to deal with the loosening of states of consciousness, when you see things and they appear and they disappear. And you can't tell quite where they are, so that the real energy isn't in you and isn't in the painting, but is in this kind of space based on a kind of opticality.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: So the opticality was really a romance that creates this relationship to the viewer where things kind of converge and disperse continually, always. You know, I painted those paintings because I wanted to conceptually say, "Finally, these aren't subjective. These paintings do what I day they do. They fuck with your eyes."

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: Like, if you look at them they'll move, and they'll keep—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes—

ROSS BLECKNER: —what's in them will appear and disappear, and go into the background, and go into the for— and after a while, it just all becomes like, this blur, and that blur, metaphor, that blur of consciousness, which for me has to do with, you know, the idea of holding on to your reality, and how tentative that holding on is, essentially, when you boil it right down, just like health, just like mortality. You know, that's the blur.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's your subject.

ROSS BLECKNER: That's my subject. That blur, and where we are in relationship to it, how you hold on to it, how you let it go, how close you are to it, how far you are from it. And I've kind of come back to that again and again, you know, in different ways. And, you know, I try to do different bodies of work that are emotionally different. That are conceptually different.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: That are sometimes harder, sometimes softer, sometimes I feel, just like in life, you know, you are at your work is so much just like you are in life. Sometimes you don't want to get as close to something as you are and you need to move away, whether it's a subject, an idea, or a feeling, or a person.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: And you know sometimes I feel my work is getting too decorative. You know, it's like part of my mind is always fighting another part.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Too decorative for what?

ROSS BLECKNER: For me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, okay. What were you painting at Cal Arts?

ROSS BLECKNER: I was painting dark corners of rooms and beams of light.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Is that what we're going to see at the Parrish Museum?

ROSS BLECKNER: One of those. It covers the period from leaving Cal Arts and moving to the Hamptons, which was from '75 to '85.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah—

ROSS BLECKNER: Cal Arts.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, but '75—I'm sorry.

ROSS BLECKNER: Because we all came to New York, like '74, '75. '76.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So New York was in terrible shape in 1975, '6 and '7. I mean, it was dangerous, it was bankrupt.

ROSS BLECKNER: But you know we weren't living in a globalized art world yet. Nobody, nobody thought of staying in L.A.. John Baldessari said, "You do not stay in L.A. if you want to be an artist." Okay? That was his advice. That was everyone's advice.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, everyone—

ROSS BLECKNER: There are only two artists in L.A., Ed Ruscha and I forget the other one, That was it. Maybe you'd come to L.A. for a few months, if you can. Nobody would think of going anywhere else but New York then.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, so you all left and came to New York.

ROSS BLECKNER: And that's all you did the whole time you were there.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So did you start teaching right away?

ROSS BLECKNER: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Now you have this MFA. What did you do when you landed?

ROSS BLECKNER: One of the years that I was at NYU, the year before I went to San Francisco, or the year after, I forget—I have to look— I went to Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, in Maine.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, in the summer?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes. I met a girl named Lizzie Borden.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I know Lizzie, yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: We became best, best friends. She moved to New York; she went to Wellesley, graduated Wellsley, and became an art critic right away. She was brilliant, brilliant. She started writing for magazines in like two minutes. She was 20. But she also wanted to be an artist. She didn't know what she wanted to do, but she wrote criticism. She got a loft. She said, "I want to split it with you." She got a loft on Broadway. We each paid like $300 for a big loft.

LINDA YABLONSKY: In SoHo?

ROSS BLECKNER: Broadway below, between Walker and White, where the Whitney program is now the building.. And we lived there together. And that was my first year back from Cal Arts, back in New York. I moved in with her. We built a wall. She had half and I had half.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, the only people living down there at that time, just about, were artists.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So did you start to meet—

ROSS BLECKNER: I did, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —members of this community?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, through her, particularly. She went out, or she became friends, with Vito Acconci. She went out with him. I helped him and her do his *Seedbed* installation at Sonnabend.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You built the ramp? [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, helped, you know we helped put everything together. I remember it was a big rush. And also, [laughs], oh God, I hate to say this, but I always felt like I was doing these really minimal corner of a room

paintings and drawings with a paint stick.

LINDA YABLONSKY: With a paint stick?

ROSS BLECKNER: A paint stick.

LINDA YABLONSKY: A paint stick, like an oil stick?

ROSS BLECKNER: Like an oil stick. So she started doing these big, single-panel things with paint stick that was kind of creating some tension between us. She wasn't really into the physicality of making art. She just wanted to be an artist, so she kind of did whatever I did. It kind of irritated me. She started going out with Richard Serra. The next thing I know he's doing these big things with oil stick. She stopped doing them, and she became a lesbian.

I moved out of that loft, because I see on the corner of White Street and Broadway, right in a building, it says, "For Sale" on it. So I walked in, a guy is sitting there. The building's empty. Empty. The guy's sitting in his office, you know, he just had, like, bolts of material on each floor. It was, you know, storage for textiles. That's what people did down there then. Every building was a textile manufacturing building, or a storage. I said, "Is the building for sale?" He said yeah, he said, "There's four buildings. I'm selling all four on the block." He owns them all.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, my God. Yeah?

ROSS BLECKNER: It just so happens, coincidently, he came from Hewlett, where I grew up.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And you don't think you have a charmed life?

[They laugh.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Well my father and he knew each other, so I called my father and I said, "You have to buy this building." My uncle was a real estate broker, and my uncle told my father, "You can't buy a building in New York. New York is a piece of shit. It's falling apart. It's terrible." I said, "Please, I'll run it. It's a great investment."

LINDA YABLONSKY: You understood that already, without having any—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes! I understood that. I mean, after all, I did come from a business background. My father, where I grew up, Jewish, Five Towns, the values are just horrifying. That's a whole other story. So my uncle said no, so my father finally negotiated for the guy who owned the building to split it, just to sell the one building and then sell the three other buildings separately. So my father—the building was a six story building. It cost $125,000.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] This is 77 White Street?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes. So my father lent me the $25,000 that I had to pay down. I didn't have to go to a bank to get the mortgage. The guy who owned it, I paid off the mortgage to him. That was the way it was done then. So yeah, I bought the building. And I moved into the building. And I rented the floors.

LINDA YABLONSKY: To other artists?

ROSS BLECKNER: To other artists, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Who were they? I mean, where they people you already knew?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Who was living there? I mean, were you—

ROSS BLECKNER: Over the years, a lot of people.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Were you living there?

ROSS BLECKNER: I started living on the top floor. I took the top floor. And I rented the other floors.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But did you rent them as studios or work spaces? I mean live and work spaces?

ROSS BLECKNER: Live and work.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Live and work?

ROSS BLECKNER: There was no legal— not legal. No one gave a shit then and I never even knew—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But did it have hot water?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, you had to do it yourself. Each person moved in and it was an empty thing. You put in one of those big heaters that blew.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And it was a walk-up or did it have an elevator?

ROSS BLECKNER: It had a freight elevator.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh. So now you've learned how to make friends.

ROSS BLECKNER: [Laughs.] So this was 1974.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So '74? I thought you said you came back in '75?

ROSS BLECKNER: I came back in '74, sorry. So this is '76, okay?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow, so prescient of you.

ROSS BLECKNER: What?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Prescient, you know—visionary.

ROSS BLECKNER: My father regretted not buying all four buildings. Oh, did he, because I sold the building in 2006.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I know the guy who owns it.

ROSS BLECKNER: Owns what?

LINDA YABLONSKY: The building now.

ROSS BLECKNER: He turned it into a co-op condo.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, I know.

ROSS BLECKNER: Anyway he owns parking lots or something. But, you know, over the years, Meyer Vaisman, advisement Julian, McDermott and McGough, Troy, Ray Smith.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Julian Schnabel, you mean. He lived there?

ROSS BLECKNER: He didn't live there. He had a studio there for a while. Who else lived there?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Because that's when I met Julian, in '77 I think or yes, '77, because we were working together. And I remember you from then, even though I barely had met you.

ROSS BLECKNER: Where was he working? Ocean Club?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, we both worked at the Ocean Club, but not at the same time. But at the Locale. After the Ocean Club we worked together.

ROSS BLECKNER: I remember the Locale—down the steps.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, that's where I first saw you.

ROSS BLECKNER: And he traded art. Julian talked the guy into trading art for food.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, Mickey [Ruskin] had already established that. But long before—

ROSS BLECKNER: Right, but before Mickey owned it someone else owned it. Or, after. I think after.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well it wasn't, when I went to NYU, that was a hangout.

ROSS BLECKNER: Me too. Met too!

LINDA YABLONSKY: In the basement. Well,, we were there at the same time. But then Mickey bought it and it became the local.

ROSS BLECKNER: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But I remember Julian saying that you were neighbors. He introduced me to you one night when we were there and I knew who you were. I went to your first show, actually.

ROSS BLECKNER: Oh, my God.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Even thought I wasn't in the art world then. I was on the periphery but I went to all the galleries, because I liked art and I liked artists, but I wasn't part of it. But that's how I met everyone—by feeding them. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: That's a good way.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Anyway, but I remember him talking about you and thinking, you know, that you were so smart to own your space. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Julian and I became best friends then. Really, really close.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Was it before?

ROSS BLECKNER: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: He rented the studio?

ROSS BLECKNER: Before, he was living down on Beeckman Place.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So how did you meet him?

ROSS BLECKNER: Because Julian was so aggressive with everybody—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: He just came up to me and introduced himself at a restaurant. Because somehow we met at an opening, and he said, "Let's go to each other's studios." And "You have to see my work. I'm such a great painter." And I thought, oh, God. This guy is crazy.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's what I remember him saying too. I just—I hated working with him, and he wouldn't stop talking about what great a painter he was. And it turned out he was! But, you know, it was annoying.

ROSS BLECKNER: It was so annoying that I stopped being friends with him.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Eventually, yeah. You can only hear the same story so many times, I'm sorry. But that's a whole other story.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you meet Jeff Koons at that time?

ROSS BLECKNER: A little later.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you already know him? Because he came to New York about that same time.

ROSS BLECKNER: A little later.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And was in that crowd downtown, not with these people.

ROSS BLECKNER: So where are we?

LINDA YABLONSKY: The Mudd Club. You rented the first floor.

ROSS BLECKNER: So anyway, '76, I moved in. Oh, that's what happened—I rented to people that I didn't know for a while, just random people. But the rent was very low, and I paid off the mortgage. It was very easy. And then Diego Cortez, who I let stay when I went to Europe, he stayed in my loft for the summer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You went to Europe when?

ROSS BLECKNER: One summer, I forget. '78? He stayed at my loft with this guy Duncan Smith, I remember.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, the two of them.

ROSS BLECKNER: The two of them. I think they were, like, together.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Duncan, I guess he died of AIDS.

ROSS BLECKNER: He died.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So Diego was a curator then, more or less?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, yeah kind of, I don't know. Diego was always kind of,—even then he seemed very slippery to me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: You know?

LINDA YABLONSKY: What were you painting then had you met any dealers? Mary [Boone]? Or did you know Peter Nagy already?

ROSS BLECKNER: Not yet. No, I didn't know anybody younger yet, because I was still younger. They were just, like, hatching by then.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: What I did know, when I came back and I moved into the loft with Lizzie. In the building lived John Walker, this English painter. And he was nice. He showed at a gallery called Betty Cuningham that was over Fanelli's on Prince Street.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] The bar, restaurant. Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: I went around with my slides.

LINDA YABLONSKY: To Betty.

ROSS BLECKNER: To Betty, Paula, and Bykert.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Bykert was Klaus Kertess's gallery.

ROSS BLECKNER: Klaus, where Chuck was showing, Chuck and Brice.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And Brice Marden.

ROSS BLECKNER: And Dorothea Rockburne, and a few other good people. And Mary was the secretary at the desk.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's right.

ROSS BLECKNER: She took the slides from me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see! [Laughing] Okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: So she came over, Mary, Klaus came over. Oh my God, I gave the slides to the secretary at Paula Cooper, and it was Roberta Smith.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs]

ROSS BLECKNER: She came over, Betty came over. Through Roberta, Paula came over, and through Mary, Klaus came over. My first group show—the first time I ever showed was in a group show at Paula Cooper.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, really?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And when was that?

ROSS BLECKNER: I have to look.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is the first show? Betty Cuningham. That's your solo show.

ROSS BLECKNER: But before that I had a show at Paula Cooper, which I'm sure I have—

LINDA YABLONSKY: What year was this? It just says March 9th— or February 12th. That's my birthday. It doesn't say what year it is.

ROSS BLECKNER: It was '78.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Who was in this picture?

ROSS BLECKNER: It was just a group of kind of masculine women that I liked. I just used the picture.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. Oh, it's an old picture, it's not one you—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, no, it wasn't one of my paintings.

ROSS BLECKNER: Here it is. Anyway, Paula Cooper It was Joel Shapiro—

LINDA YABLONSKY: They're all wearing riding clothes [in the picture –LY].

ROSS BLECKNER: I know. That's why I loved it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Joel Shapiro and you in the same show?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. And Jennifer Bartlett. It was in June and all the gallery artists and a few young artists.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Joel Shapiro and Jennifer Bartlett—is that the first time you met Elizabeth?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes. Elizabeth Murray, Joel—Joel came over, Elizabeth came over, Roberta Smith came over, and she didn't like me from the minute she saw me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: She hasn't been that kind to you, I must say. I don't understand— I never understood her attitude toward you.

ROSS BLECKNER: From that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But she had some role in your showing with Paula's artists?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, she just handed the slides. No, she didn't have a role. They both came over. She had to give the slides to Paula. And Paula sent her, but Paula was going to come over anyway. Because Paula was making studio visits then. So were they all. It wasn't like—

LINDA YABLONSKY: It was a smaller world then.

ROSS BLECKNER: It wasn't that hard—

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was part of the deal.

ROSS BLECKNER: —to get the people over. I mean, they would cancel a few times.

LINDA YABLONSKY: There weren't any art fairs to distract them. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Right. Roberta came to my loft—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —yeah?

ROSS BLECKNER: —and I did say something about my work being melancholic.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, she was into Donald Judd, so—

ROSS BLECKNER: Well yeah, but as I said, I dealt with corners of rooms, you know, a kind of shyness, or fear. I told her that. I remember her saying to me all she could focus on was the fact that I owned the building. And that I have nothing to be sad about.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow, that is the most presumptuous thing I've ever heard.

ROSS BLECKNER: I remember her saying that to me. She said, "Why would you be melancholic? You own this building, don't you?'

LINDA YABLONSKY: I think you actually revealed the core of what I think is wrong with her criticism, and I think she's a wonderful writer and critic.

ROSS BLECKNER: I do too. I do.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But she's a moralist.

ROSS BLECKNER: Totally!

LINDA YABLONSKY: And she does, like Jerry [Saltz], jump to conclusions before— I mean, it's not that she doesn't' consider things—

ROSS BLECKNER: That's what I said, I said, "You don't even know me!"

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, that is really a harsh thing to say.

ROSS BLECKNER: I remember this discussion so well, because I remember her first review of a show of mine in Art in America, in 1981, which was my first show at Mary Boone, she mentioned something about me being a rich boy. And it was so upsetting to me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What's that got to do with anything? Wow, I never saw that. You know, life is about dealing with other people's pathologies. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, I know. I mean, let me go the bathroom just a little break.

[Audio break.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: So your first show—your first appearance in a New York gallery is this group show with Betty Cuningham?

ROSS BLECKNER: Paula Cooper.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Sorry, excuse me. Paula Cooper.

ROSS BLECKNER: Then Betty had come to the studio, and she offered me a show kind of like the year after, which I think is '78, so the first show, I guess it's in there— I could look— it would probably be '77?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Where's the bio part here? The Guggenheim—this show—when was the Guggenheim show?

ROSS BLECKNER: '95.

LINDA YABLONSKY: '75.

ROSS BLECKNER: '75?

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's what it says. Cuningham-Ward, in those days. Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: Okay. So that was quick.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, so were you the first among your particular generation of—among the other artists your age,, to have a solo show?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. Well, I don't know when they had theirs, but it was all around then, at different little places. Some maybe not even here, some maybe in other cities, or—I remember Julian had a little show in Houston, because I went down with him for it like oh, kind of a projects room in the arts museum in Houston, I remember.

LINDA YABLONSKY: At the MFA?

ROSS BLECKNER: What?

LINDA YABLONSKY: At the MFA in Houston? That's where it was?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really? Wow.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, he was living in Houston before New York, so he knew people there.

LINDA YABLONSKY: He did know people, yeah. Did they all come to your opening?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, I don't remember that. I don't remember what happened. I wasn't really friendly with them again yet. We didn't reconnect.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you had just come back to New York.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really the year before.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. but some of them weren't even here. For instance, Eric went to Nova Scotia to teach. That's when I was really good friends with Julian. I met him right away.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What about David? You already knew him.

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't know if he was even here yet. It might have been another year after me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And Barbara Kruger?

ROSS BLECKNER: Barbara, I met right after that and we became really close. I actually think I met Barbara, because somehow I met Jane Kaufman. Because when I was at NYU I saw her show, and I liked it and then I must have talked to her somewhere along the line. And she was very friendly with Barbara.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And Richard Prince? Did you know him?

ROSS BLECKNER: Not yet.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Or Cindy [Sherman]?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, they were all in Buffalo.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Still in Buffalo. Oh yeah, they came later. Okay, so you got reviewed, I saw that in there, at least in *Art News*.

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't remember the review. I don't remember anything. I'd have to look at my journal.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did anything come—any relationships, professional or personal, come of that appearance in the group show at Paula Cooper?

ROSS BLECKNER: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Because that was quite a good company you were in there with.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, it was nice. You know I was friends a little with Joel. I remember Elizabeth coming over, '72?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you have any—were you in any group shows that—?

ROSS BLECKNER: When was that show?

LINDA YABLONSKY: That Betty—that Cuningham had?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It was '75.

ROSS BLECKNER: Okay, I have—

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Reading] October to November, 1975. It looks like you had two shows with her, and then Mary Boone in 1979.

ROSS BLECKNER: Okay, I did write something. I wrote, in 11/ 25/75.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right after the show closed.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes. "Your show has hurt you deeply, left you with nothing. You got nothing."

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is you addressing you?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, in my journal. "And although within my heart there is a supportive spirit, there is no nourishment now. The people you have been conducting silent relationships with have not rescued you. No reviews, reading the *SoHo News*, I'm not even there and you have no friends. Although on some level you seek out approval, you know that some people aren't ever gonna be there. I continue with empty gestures that put me in a vacuum and the dialog is zero. My worst fear is tuning sixty and realizing all you've done is told stories about your work. There is nothing there. You are mediocre. Sometimes I feel like I'm sixty."

LINDA YABLONSKY: What does that make you feel now? What kind of—who were you then?

ROSS BLECKNER: [Laughs.] It makes me laugh. I think it's funny.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean here you are this very self-confident guy who knows enough to buy a building and take his slides around, and gets a show right away, and then you beat yourself almost to death with this internal club.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, yeah that's what we all have, I think. I mean I could even look at—from '76: "I'm all the things that I hate in this world. I've run away from people to run away from myself. I can't distinguish between honesty and manipulation. I never really question my need to continue to paint. It's just blind necessity. My confusion starts there. Trying to maintain the purity, whatever there is of it, and getting embroiled. Wanting to cut my hair, to eat a lot, maybe even to cut my arms, because I feel trapped into my own mechanism. Into the need to be depressed. My uselessness and loneliness. I don't the difference between my paintings and everything else I see. Not between everything I see. Nor between everything I see. And I can't understand how this happens, because I feel the opposite."

I don't know what I mean. But, you know, obviously there's a lot of psychic turmoil. And that's why I've always said and thought myself to be a kind of a modernist in a postmodern shell. [Laughs.] Like searching for the kind of purity, the clarity, the universality of something that I don't necessarily believe in and know because I'm searching for this shifting identity that is, you know, kind of moves around. So it's like not knowing who you are and searching for who you are, and that is in the end what being an artist is all about. It's not about knowing. And I clearly didn't know. I pretend to know, you know, you become good at pretending to know, and that's the shell that you grow as you grow as you get older so you don't get crushed by your insecurity, by your vulnerability, by the very things that drove you to be an artist. Which is the love, the fear of rejection, the looking for yourself in something that's real.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Why do you think, in that other piece you just read, that you were so fixated on the age of sixty?

ROSS BLECKNER: [Laughs.] I don't know. Sixty was very old to me then. [Laughs.] It''s interesting, I mean, you know—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean, did you know 60-year-old artists?

ROSS BLECKNER: Not really, no.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, actually you had a success. You got a solo show in SoHo, very early, and yet—

ROSS BLECKNER: And actually.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —then you— the response, which is normal, or was then for a first show, when people were just getting acquainting with your work—

ROSS BLECKNER: That is true.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —there wasn't a huge response. Why would you have been expecting something different?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, no, I didn't expect anything, I just expected, all I really expected, was a kind of—to open up, when I say no dialogue, or no friends, what I meant was I hadn't settled in the friendships that subsequently yet, obviously. So I was hoping that somehow having a show would kind of create a dialogue with other artists.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Not extreme jealousy? [laughs] Rivalry, you know?

ROSS BLECKNER: But there was some of that and I didn't realize it, and I think some of my friends from Cal Arts were very dismissive of me, like, thinking I kind of—I don't know, I— Because I was already established, or

starting to establish myself.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You were the point man, but it will be easy for—

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, I introduced a lot of them to other people as it came along. I mean, yeah. I liked everybody's work. I wrote an article in 1979 in *Artforum*—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really?

ROSS BLECKNER: —yeah, and it was the first time Julian's work was ever in *Artforum*, David Salle's work was in *Artforum*, Eric Fischl's work was in Artforum.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That—because you wrote about them.

ROSS BLECKNER: I wrote about them, yeah, but I used their work as illustrations of this really—when I look at the article, it's so opaque. It's so ridiculous. I mean—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well—

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, it's what I was thinking.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You are very self-critical, that is for sure. Were you also—

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, I was reading Lacan and a lot of—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: What? yeah. Foucault, and I was really—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Where all of you—that was '79. Were all of you showing or about to show with Mary?

ROSS BLECKNER: About. Then I have two shows at Betty's.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wait, wait, hold on, excuse me. The first show, what were? What paintings were you showing? The ones—

ROSS BLECKNER: Kind of like the paintings, like geometric, constructivist paintings, a lot kind of look cool now, but—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I bet.

ROSS BLECKNER: What?

LINDA YABLONSKY: I'm sure they do.

ROSS BLECKNER: They look very constructivist. I was into Russian constructivism, and I left—like Cal Arts, corners of rooms. Light beams, I was into light, and darkness, light out of dark, you know? Anything—

LINDA YABLONSKY: That is practically the sound bite of your career.

ROSS BLECKNER: I know, but you know, it's like—I never really painted on a canvas. I always turn dark and make light, as opposed to start it light, empty, and make it color. I mean, even when I painted color paintings, I always thought of them of as kind of black and white paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] Funny.

ROSS BLECKNER: I'm not a formalist in that way. I'm kind of searching for light in some way.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: I just—all the ways of doing it are almost like place holders for me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Where these paintings like acrylic paintings put on with a brush?

ROSS BLECKNER: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Or how were you making them?

ROSS BLECKNER: I was making oil paintings. I started out—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —oil, but with a brush?

ROSS BLECKNER: Brush, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Not a stick or a sponge or whatever?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, squeegee or brush—some areas were very layered. I was actually, I was, besides using oil stick, I was starting to use a lot of pigment. I always loved pigment, mixing the pigment—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, you said earlier that you make your own paint. You've always done that?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, I mean, I never could get the kind of darkness and lightness, even though my paintings were black and white, but I wanted them to be more than black and white. So I started using a lot of graphite and black paint, and mixing it together and, you know, kind of creating these varying densities or thicknesses, I never could get it—I just wanted more surface control, really.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You remind me—you make me think—last summer I went to Moscow for the first time and I saw the first Black Square and I was—which is in terrible, terrible condition, because the Russians didn't care about it for so long/ I mean there are others in good condition, but the first one, it is so cracked that you can see what is underneath and it is a riot of color. It is almost shocking, and very illuminating, to see how much color went into that black square.

ROSS BLECKNER: That's interesting. Well, I think maybe it's also just a lot of frustration went into finally putting the black square over it all and saying, "Fuck this."

LINDA YABLONSKY: It was a genius move.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, but a lot of these moves really come out of frustration and failure.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes of course. Some of the best things come out of failure. So you understand this and jet you can express this really dark, sad, self-loading kind of things about yourself. [Laughs.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, I mean listen, I've always said—there is nothing—I have to say, there is nothing wrong with a little self-loathing. All this kind of bumper-sticker, pop culture, you know, like Oprah-driven, you know, kind of psychology optimism. So like a little self-loading kind of makes you change yourself, makes you want to change. Yeah, it's something I feel, like, you know, like I said of my work—if it does anything—attracts where my mind goes, and I feel like the only thing that exhausts me is, you know, luckily I've learned to control a lot of things through psychoanalysis, through self-examination, through Buddhism.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you are a practicing Buddhist?

ROSS BLECKNER: I am. But, I became a practicing Buddhist when George Bush got elected, and I start to do meditation paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.].

ROSS BLECKNER: That's another story.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, we'll get to that.

ROSS BLECKNER: Just the way the mind works, the constant, you know, to be fully aware, to be fully present in the machination of the consciousness, the ego containing consciousness, every day it goes from over inflation to under deflation, every day. I mean, you feel grandiose on the one hand and you feel worthless on the other. And the movement of your ego, based on the littlest things, I mean that's where a lot of anxiety comes from, that what a lot of—you know, the psychic tensions we feel is like, you know—you have so many things. Part of Buddhism is about acknowledging it and being present with all those things that go on in your mind, and being present with it. You know, that you do go from feeling grandiose to feeling like it's all useless. I don't get angry. Some people get angry. That's wonderful, and this is a subject for the activism. I was never a front-line activist. I never wanted to throw myself in front of the Federal Drug Administration and lay with kind of fake blood on my body, but I got really sad.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: And I used my art practice as a contemplative practice, and I withdrew into it to help me to figure it out what direction to take that would satisfy the way I wanted to be an activist. And in the end I wanted to be an activist through being involved with longer-term prospects, in another words, the idea of a cure through research, you know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So important.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, well for me was the answer.

ROSS BLECKNER: This is already; I'm going—that is more—that's the '80s and '90s.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You were just taking about anger. Do you mean a sense of outrage? I mean, there was a lot of fear.

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't feel like, I don't get angry, I get, I get sad. I get hurt. You know, when George Bush becomes president, I was angry, but the way you express your anger—some people externalize it, and some people internalize, you know? Some people—you just have to find the right balance. So neither one is destructive, between internalizing it or externalizing, these things that you feel about the symptoms of our system that are so disruptive, and so corroding and so corrosive, that affect us all, so we're all political in that way. I mean, how—my question was always, through the '70s and through the '80s, how can I be—how can a have a kind of studio practice that I have, and kind of express my relationship to the world outside of me, not just me, not just about me. But me in the world around me, and that world too. It's not an easy bridge to cross really, and people are very dismissive of studio practice, because, you know, in that way, but, how it can be political, if—I don't make overtly political paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No.

ROSS BLECKNER: No, but I just feel that the arc of them, even sometimes the sentiment in them, is a kind of a way of dealing with the things in the world. What is the word I'm looking for? I forget.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I can't help you. [Laughs.] I'm sure.

ROSS BLECKNER: [Laughs.] Sublimated.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, oh. Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: You know?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, you said you went to Europe for the summer, in there, somewhere in there in the 70s?

ROSS BLECKNER: [Laughs.] I've been in Europe many summers, yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No, no. I mean, when you sublet your loft.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, I did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Where did you go? Was that a vacation or work-related?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, that was—actually I went with Julian.

LINDA YABLONSKY: On an art tour.

ROSS BLECKNER: We went a little on an art tour, but we went on a vacation. We looked around in Italy at paintings and then we went to Ibiza, a friend of ours was there. And it was very funny, because a little magazine piece just had come out on Julian. The first thing ever written about him in a magazine. And they asked for an artist statement, and he didn't know what to write, so I wrote it for him.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Boy, he was lucky to have you as a friend.

ROSS BLECKNER: So I talked about his work as being like Keats, and I talked about negative capabilities, and I remember he walked the whole time in Europe with the magazine under his arm.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] Which magazine was this?

ROSS BLECKNER: It was *Domus*, an architectural magazine.

LINDA YABLONSKY: *Domus*, yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't know how I remember that, and again, back memory. He showed to every woman, everybody, he drove me so crazy.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] It's funny. It's funny if you know Julian

ROSS BLECKNER: I had to get rid of him and we have—well, actually, it was interesting. We did go to Barcelona, and we went to see the Gaudis, and we were staying in this little tiny hotel room. And we had just had lunch, and we came back to the hotel room. It was a hot day and we both were lying in a single bed and there was this big closet between us. And he said to me—he was, like, nauseas, throwing up—he says, "I just feel like I just want to take those plates and break them, it was so awful, that meal," and then he looked at that big closet, and he said, "Maybe I need to make a painting of the shape of that closet and put all the broken plates on it."

LINDA YABLONSKY: He said that? Already conceptualized it without actually doing anything?

ROSS BLECKNER: And he made a little sketch of it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Interesting,

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean, I thought that whole thing just came out of just working in a studio.

ROSS BLECKNER: I said, "That is the best idea."

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah

ROSS BLECKNER: Because really what I thought, so laughable! Am I going to get a kick out of this! Because he was driving me crazy.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Very funny. So you came back—

ROSS BLECKNER: We came back.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —and Mary gave you—after—what was the second show?

ROSS BLECKNER: Betty Cuningham. The following year.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which paintings you were showing there?

ROSS BLECKNER: The same as the year before, but a little more refined, I think, a little more centralized. The first ones were more spread out, geometric, and in a funny way, I mean, I don't know what they look like. They look like Picabia, and Malevich-ish. I looked at a lot of Picabia.

Where are they now? I don't know. They're around.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: I have 'em.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How did the show with Mary [Boone] come about? Did she approach you? Or she left Bykert and decided to open her own gallery?

ROSS BLECKNER: She said, she called me and she said, "I'm going to go out on my own and do a private thing, maybe I could sell some of your paintings." I said, "Great." Betty hadn't sold any after two shows. Or she sold one. I said, "Great." I don't remember if she sold one but she might have. And then, you know, then she asked me, Do you know any artists? And I introduced her to a lot of different people. She was showing Gary Stephan. He's kind of older, a little older, and more formalist.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You introduced her to Julian and to Eric?

ROSS BLECKNER: To David

LINDA YABLONSKY: Or David [Salle].

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, because Julian wanted to have a show at Holly Solomon. Holly had asked him to have a show. [Laughs.] He was going—he wanted a show. "I don't think you should show at Holly's, because your will look too kitsch there. Show at Mary. She is more serious." She was after serious paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Except her gallery was so much smaller.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I remember it was a tiny gallery, sort of tiny, small.

ROSS BLECKNER: Not sort of, it was tiny. It was. With the office in the middle.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So did she open the gallery with a—what show she open with? Was it a group show?

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't remember. I don't even remember if I was in it..

LINDA YABLONSKY: I remember seeing your show there.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So this time the show opened and the response was pretty strong. Is that correct?

ROSS BLECKNER: Basically negative.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It was negative?

ROSS BLECKNER: Basically.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But a lot of people were talking about you. I remember that. Iit wasn't negative.

ROSS BLECKNER: Barbara always used to kid me around—we were very close friends by then. I introduced her to Mary. And Anina [Nosei] was around, and I think Anina started to show Barbara.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And Anina Nosei, yes. Mary's rival. So do you mean the critical response? I mean, it seemed to me that you were a big thing, suddenly.

ROSS BLECKNER: Not then. No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No?

ROSS BLECKNER: No. What was a big thing then, that was really a big thing then was—it starts then, the neo-expressionist moment started, because Francesco [Clemente] came around.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You know I met Francesco on his third day in New York at the Mudd Club. Renee [Ricard] introduced me.

ROSS BLECKNER: Really?

LINDA YABLONSKY: At the bar in the Mudd Club, on the ground floor of your building.

ROSS BLECKNER: Renee and me had a fight long time before that, and he hated me for the rest of his life.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Renee Ricard? Silly.

ROSS BLECKNER: The reason being that he thought that I was trying to steal his boyfriend Louie, who happened the doorman at the Mudd Club.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, Louie—Louie Chaban.

ROSS BLECKNER: He always said the meanest things about me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you ever go to the Mudd Club?

ROSS BLECKNER: I did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The Mudd Club was *the* club of the moment—I'm just gonna say this for the record—that opened I think in 1979.

ROSS BLECKNER: '79. [phone rings] Phone's not supposed to ring. Forget it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And, it was the nucleus of everything that happened downtown in every— all of the arts, not just visual arts. And it really formed a community.

ROSS BLECKNER: But it only lasted for three years.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, all the things that burn brightly and fast.

ROSS BLECKNER: —'79 to '80, '81, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It was eclipsed by other clubs, I guess—

ROSS BLECKNER: After it closed, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It got too big for the space.

ROSS BLECKNER: Then it kept moving up!

LINDA YABLONSKY: I know; it was two floors.

ROSS BLECKNER: Then three.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Was it?

ROSS BLECKNER: Then four.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I didn't realize that. I'd stopped going there by that time. Anyway, that's where I met a lot of people that I—who later became extraordinarily close friends. Or around that period—we all went together—who were artists.

ROSS BLECKNER: I did too.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You did too. So you did go there. There was a lot of music, live and recorded.

ROSS BLECKNER: I had to— I had to deal with it. That time in my life I didn't know what was gonna happen. When Diego—to go back to 1979—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh yes, when Diego rented your loft.

ROSS BLECKNER: He didn't rent it. I let him stay there. I come back and he says—he introduced me to Steve Maas, and they said to me, "Is it okay, would you let us— we want to open an artists' bar." And I thought, "That's such a great idea."

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: No, this was before the summer. I met Steve Maas, then I went away—that's what happened—for the summer, and Diego was staying in my loft. Before the summer I met Steve Maas, we hung out. It's going to be an artists' bar, community, like a local place. And I thought, "This is great. I can just go downstairs and have a beer, and talk to my friends." No music—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —in the beginning—

ROSS BLECKNER: —he said to me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Diego said, "No music?"

ROSS BLECKNER: And Steve Maas.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: Just gonna be simple, quiet. And I came back, and it did start like that for, like, a month.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: And then my friends started coming, like local artists. Barbara came and Joseph Kosuth, Sarah [Charlesworth]. And then suddenly they moved in these huge speakers. I said, "What the fuck is going on?" And the next thing I know, you know, it becomes this music venue. And there was nothing I could do. So I was really upset. So I just kind of—I mean, if you can't fight it, you join it. So what I used to do, I used to sleep late then, which I never really like to do, but then I slept late. That was my little coke period.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: And I used to start working at like, eight or nine o'clock at night, and after I would eat and work until like, two, and then go to the Mudd Club. Or people would come up.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did they? People you knew, I'm assuming,

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, people I knew.

LINDA YABLONSKY: People you already knew.

ROSS BLECKNER: Like, Joseph used to come up all the time—with coke!

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Michael Oblovitz I become very friendly with—a filmmaker then. Amos [Poe]]

LINDA YABLONSKY: I know I met Michael around that time— and Amos.

ROSS BLECKNER: Eric Mitchell, Bette Gordon, Ericka Beckman.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, so you basically survived that period without succumbing too badly. What was going on in your personal life?

ROSS BLECKNER: My personal life was—in 1978 I met a guy, and I had my first serious relationship after Robert.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow, that was a long time coming.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, I couldn't until then.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Another artist?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, he was a textile designer, and we were together like, for a year, and then I met a young artist going to the Whitney program. I think a met him when I came to the Whitney program to look around, because I was friend with David Diao.

LINDA YABLONSKY: He was teaching?

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't know if he was teaching there yet, though. Somehow I just went to look around.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Oh, I met David Diao— he helped me with Betty Cuningham, by the way, because his was teaching at Skowhegan that summer I was there, as was Brice Marden. So I met Brice and Helen [Marden] that summer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Interesting.

ROSS BLECKNER: Then— what was I just saying?

LINDA YABLONSKY: David.—You were looking around the Whitney program. Looking at what?

ROSS BLECKNER: Oh, when I met an artist, a young artist and I fell in love with him. It was my first long-term relationship, Izhar Patkin.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I didn't know you were together with him. I know you both completely independently of one and other, so I didn't know that there was this history.

ROSS BLECKNER: I was 30.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I didn't know he was in New York then, even.

ROSS BLECKNER: I was 30—He had just came to New York. I was 30 and he was 24. Or I was 29 and he was 24. It was five or six years' difference between us.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Another guy with a sensitivity to good real estate. Was that your influence?

ROSS BLECKNER: Hello! When we broke up, after seven years, I said, "Buy something"

LINDA YABLONSKY: That place is amazing, what he has.

ROSS BLECKNER: What? I've never seen it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh. Well, it's a—

ROSS BLECKNER: I've heard about it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I believe that he bought the building with other people.

ROSS BLECKNER: He got a group of people together.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, and they developed, I mean it's a developed building, but with cool people living there at various levels of cost. I've only ever been in couple of apartments in that building. They're nice pied-a-terres for some people, but his place is incredible—

ROSS BLECKNER: I've heard.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —it's like not being in New York. You feel like you're in some palazzo somewhere. Because it has an outdoor space—an interior outdoor space.

ROSS BLECKNER: I know. We didn't break up in good terms, because—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, that was good advice you gave him, anyway.

ROSS BLECKNER: I gave him good advice, and I helped him do it too.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. Okay, so you have this—during this period when you have your first show with Mary, and all this basically cultural fever of the moment—

ROSS BLECKNER: —should we go to the end of my relationship with him and then back? You—because you asked me about my personal life.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, but, but—having this serious—Was he living with you on White Street?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, he moved in with me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So, how did that—did it affect your working life as well as your social life?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, he moved in with me right after the Mudd Club opened. He worked—first he worked somewhere else, then he worked, like, on another floor. I gave him part of a floor to work on. And I also started to rent a house upstate, and we go upstate in the summer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Where was that?

ROSS BLECKNER: Up in the Catskills, a little farmhouse I rented.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: For $2000.

LINDA YABLONSKY: For the whole summer? [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. And when I started showing then, after that—that was after Betty—Mary hadn't started yet—when I started showing with Mary, somehow he met Holly Solomon, I don't know—I don't remember— but nothing really happened then. I think there was some tension between us. I know it—when there was real tension, when a lot of younger artists started responding to my work. That's when the real tension—

LINDA YABLONSKY: How you were aware of that? That younger artists were responding?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, my first show with Mary was 1981 and I showed all the stripe paintings. Nobody was interested.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wait, '81?

ROSS BLECKNER: I think so.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It think it says something different in here. "Mary Boone, 1979." December—January. It went into 1980.

ROSS BLECKNER: Okay, then the second show was '81, the stripe paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. So what was in the first show?

ROSS BLECKNER: More kind of waxy, dark paintings, still of spaces, geometric things. I mean, I don't know if any are in that book, but in the beginning— look at the beginning— you can see— with grids on them— I was really into—that one. This one.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] But there are objects—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, like—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —in this. Not just grids.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, they were kind of hovering around between representation, abstraction— the rooms, still, I was into.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, I see. There is always, well not always, but often this architectural element in your work.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, a lot.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So these are oil and wax?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Were you already making your own pigments then?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is, what is, why is this, why this like conch shell?

ROSS BLECKNER: It's a conch shell. [Laughs.] Well, I was trying—

LINDA YABLONSKY: It's the figure in the room.

ROSS BLECKNER: I was trying kind of create an object in a room. You know? You can see, if you see the paintings, it's a lot of objects, things erased. It's a lot of cool things.

ROSS BLECKNER: It's a very cool painting which, I know how the paintings look, so I know—it's hard to reproduce the kind of luminosity that's actually in this very dark painting. I love this kind of rain on the side here.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. And I then I started doing, like those—

LINDA YABLONSKY: These stripes?

ROSS BLECKNER: I got rid of everything. "Enough," I said, I'd had it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What do you mean?

ROSS BLECKNER: I had it—with *stuff*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You got rid of—

ROSS BLECKNER: —with imagery.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So it become more severe.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah also, because—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But there's a landscape on this.

ROSS BLECKNER: I know. But that's what it is. It's kind of—it's also a stage.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is *The Arrangement of Things*, from 1982.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. Kind of lights.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, there are lights behind a curtain, or a veil.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, well, it's kind of like that. But I—everybody—I just felt like—

LINDA YABLONSKY: There's a lot of color in here, aside from the black and white.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. I felt like it was—that imagery was overly cathected—there was already so much abstract, neo-expressionism. I was already sick of it and I wanted to pull away from all kind of imagery and do abstract paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And what did Mary say about that—did she respond? I mean, did she care?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, she didn't love them very much. She didn't like them.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But these were the paintings that everybody responded to.

ROSS BLECKNER: Not then.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Not then?

ROSS BLECKNER: A few years after. That's when Peter Nagy and Alan Belcher said, "You know what? Nobody really liked that show. We loved it." And then I had a show at Nature Morte in '84—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which was their gallery.—they're two artists who operated a gallery.

ROSS BLECKNER: Right. And then everybody loved the paintings. I don't know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: These paintings. They went back?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So Mary didn't sell these right away?

ROSS BLECKNER: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow, I have this completely wrong, backward. Because it seemed to me—I responded to them! Not an artist, not even that smart about art yet. And I thought it was a great show.

ROSS BLECKNER: I know, but they were very out of sync too.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I remember those stripe paintings. I remember the whole—I can see— I see it in my mind's eye in the gallery, because I responded to it.

ROSS BLECKNER: That's nice. Can I take this off please— get some water?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. That show at Nature Morte was '84, did you say?

ROSS BLECKNER: '84.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, that was '84. You're in a monogamous—you're still in this relationship with Izhar?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay. So you're in a monogamous relationship.

ROSS BLECKNER: I wouldn't go that far.

LINDA YABLONSKY: All right. So you were a little promiscuous.

ROSS BLECKNER: Slightly.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But look what happened in 1981—"gay cancer."

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And you were not going to bars?

ROSS BLECKNER: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Or those clubs, so you weren't exposed the same way—

ROSS BLECKNER: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —a lot of other people were?

ROSS BLECKNER: No. In that way I feel lucky because I did go—I never, this is a whole other subject, but I never enjoyed the gay world. I was a—I was a kind of—you know something? Tony Kushner put it really well in *Angels in America*. He said about Roy Cohn, it came out of Roy Cohn's mouth, but it was so interesting, "I'm not really a gay man because gay men are too marginalized. They have no power. I'm just a man who like to have sex with

other men."

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, I remember that

ROSS BLECKNER: So. I've always had an ambivalent relationship to, not being gay, but—so strange—

LINDA YABLONSKY: The gay culture.

ROSS BLECKNER: —the gay culture.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I understand.

ROSS BLECKNER: I've always thought it was a little—actually, I really did like woman. I always sensed a certain misogyny somewhere in it that I didn't like. And a certain homogeneity obviously, that I didn't like. I just thought it was odd.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, I share that same ambivalence.

ROSS BLECKNER: I just thought it was odd. Like, I never—I can be in a room with a mixed crowd like the Mudd Club, or a club, or a place, or a party. I could always figure out who's gay. I don't care if they're gay or not. I'll talk em into it if I really want it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] The founder of the Blow Job Club can talk anybody into anything! [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, you can up to certain age—until your shelf life expires. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Now I can't talk anyone into anything, believe me. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: I don't know that that's true. I mean, listening to you and you are a compassionate person, you have a lot interior and exterior experiences, and you're very articulate it about it. I'll bet you're a great teacher, even an inspiring teacher. I can hear it when you talk about your work, and what you really believe—what your core beliefs are, that you would be a great teacher.

ROSS BLECKNER: I think, yeah, I enjoy it. I do. I enjoy it. I just try not to let my skepticism, my cynicism—I don't have a cynicism, but I do have a skepticism. I certainly feel that it's really hard now.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah?

ROSS BLECKNER: I feel the art world is really difficult. It's just so symptomatic, but it's symptomatic of everything in the world. It's not in and of itself. It's not a separate entity, you know? It's our minds, our ways of life, are kind of post—, like, neo-liberal kind of capitalism, that so values competition—all these things that sometimes are really difficult for young artists, to get their head around, even for older artists, you know? I mean not just for young artists, for people. You know? It's like, how do you manage with some kind of equanimity your ambivalence about a system that you need, that you want, and you also loathe? That's a real question—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —that, you know, I think we all deal with—at least the more aware people that I know, you know, the system that you're part of, that you want, that you loathe—the ambivalence that you're feeling—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —and be able to continue to make your work, in the spirit you that need to make it—you know, sometimes you have to separate yourself. It's a question of how you turn down the volume, you know? Which is why I don't read your column. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: I hope it's a little more than social.

ROSS BLECKNER: It is. It's sociological, but—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I try to make it so—no, no. I try to make it critical.

ROSS BLECKNER: I tell you this. I don't know if it should be, but the thing amazes me about your column?

LINDA YABLONSKY: What?

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't know anybody anymore.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, well.

ROSS BLECKNER: Because you're out there on the front.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I don't really know them all. I mean, I know some of them, but I need to write down names.

ROSS BLECKNER: These names, names, names, names. I'm always, like—it has to do with the kind of globalization, the expansionism—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —it has everything to do with it.

ROSS BLECKNER: —the hyper-festivalism, but not things that kind of benefit me. So I go, "Oh my god," like, you know? You get artists who are good, but their work is so much about the spectacle of the festival.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I don't think it's about anything. I mean, but we can get there tomorrow. This lack of subject matter. Or that it's all about one thing. Okay, when you had that show at Nature Morte, you showed one painting. But it was a tiny space.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, but one big painting.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Big.

ROSS BLECKNER: Big, big, big.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Is it in this catalogue I'm looking at?

ROSS BLECKNER: It was like that painting, but not that painting.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It was Op-Arty?

ROSS BLECKNER: It was up Op-Art-ish.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, of stripes. I didn't see that.

ROSS BLECKNER: Okay.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Because I was working every night.

ROSS BLECKNER: [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: In those days I didn't see much art.

ROSS BLECKNER It was long time ago. It doesn't matter.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, it matters, because it made a difference to your career. And I guess the East Village scene, the gallery scene—

ROSS BLECKNER: The East Village scene was starting then, and it was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —and people were dying every day then, from AIDS—every day—that we knew, that I knew. And yet there was this whole, you know, the drugs— the street drugs scene in the East Village was very active, but that's where artists could afford to live.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, I didn't know about that. That was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But there were always people in the street is what I'm trying to say.

ROSS BLECKNER: That is true. I didn't obviously—I mean, if you want to get into this tomorrow, we can. The first time I noticed really AIDS was a friend of mine who lived on White Street, who lived right down a block from me —he wasn't a good friend, he was an acquaintance, a very handsome older guy—so if I was 30 by then, in 1980 I guess I was 29 or 30, he was let's say 40. And he would be called, he would have been considered, in the language of gay culture then, a clone—you know with the body, the mustache— there were a certain kind of, you know?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: And he went out to all those clubs I didn't go to, like you go out, you take drugs, and you dance all night—it was, like, the Mineshaf then, and I would see him on the street in the late, like '77, when I was living on White Street, he would always tell me about it, how fun it was, how hot the guys were. He would always say, "You should come with me one time. Come with me, come with me." But I wasn't interested in that. I was more interested in, you know—first of all, I was with Izhar, and just, we didn't do that. Then I saw him—I think it was 1979 or 1980—he looked really, really bad.

LINDA YABLONSKY: In 1980?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was early.

ROSS BLECKNER: He was one of the first people. He died, I think, in '82, but he looked really bad already. People were getting sick through the 70s, and not dying until the early 80s. They didn't die like that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: All the people I knew—

ROSS BLECKNER: They were sick before.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Do you think?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Maybe.

ROSS BLECKNER: It still took a few years. That's what happened, and then suddenly, you know, the symptoms materialize bigtime. They little things—scratches, itches, colds, this, that, and I knew people who kept getting things, and didn't think anything of it and, the doctor said, "Don't worry about it. It will go away."

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, take two aspirin.

ROSS BLECKNER: What?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Take two aspirin.

ROSS BLECKNER: But he starts looking really bad, like, in 1981 and he died in 1982. But I remember saying, "What has been the matter with you? Everytime I see you, you're looking so weak. I feel bad. " He said—I remember him telling me he had to give a cat away, because he got parvo, parvo disease he caught from the cat. I thought to myself, "That is weird," I remember thinking. The next thing I know, Boom, he's dead. And I read about AIDS. And other people, friends of mine, who I was very close with then— this really, really nice, cool painter named Larry Stanton, who had been a boyfriend of David Hockney— really good-looking young painter.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Kind of painted like, gay paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: [Laughs.] You know, guys together. They would be very popular now.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: He calls me up, says he's in the hospital, has pneumonia. And I said, "How the hell did you get pneumonia?"

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: "It's okay, I'll be fine. I just got a bad cold." Boom!

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you say—you said—when you said younger artists were starting to respond to your paintings, did you mean younger, like Peter and Alan being younger than you.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, if I'm 30 they're, like, 24.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I keep forgetting you were only 30. So were you aware of this— this creeping shadow of

darkness—you who were always drawn to darkness— on your radar at all—I mean, in your consciousness? Because the rest of your life is going really well, its sounds like. You had a relationship, you got an income from the building, you're showing in good galleries.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. I would say that's true. But I'd really become aware of people—less at the beginning, because I did always keep a little distance from the gay culture.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right. But you've always had this melancholy, and sense of tragedy and loss.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's been part of your work.

ROSS BLECKNER: And I think the first painting I did, I did very commemorative paintings—

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ROSS BLECKNER: —after the stripe paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Why did you, so you just stopped painting stripes—

ROSS BLECKNER: I was actually commemorating ideas—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: Ideas that were interesting to me. I did a painting commemorating the loss of my sister's mind.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. When was that?

ROSS BLECKNER: 1980—

LINDA YABLONSKY: In that period.

ROSS BLECKNER: —'83, maybe.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Is that in this [catalogue]?

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't know if it's in here.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And what— was that part of another body of work?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, it was a body of work like this.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I like this—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is beautiful, *Delaware*.

ROSS BLECKNER: And then it was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: These are all amazing.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, that, but that—

LINDA YABLONSKY: The skies.

ROSS BLECKNER: This painting right here is called *Flora and the Future*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: That's her name.

LINDA YABLONSKY: '83, yeah. These are amazing. So you did these after this? You were done with the striped paintings when you did these?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Or are these—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, these were after I did the striped paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And what sort of technique did you use to make these—

ROSS BLECKNER: Just a—

LINDA YABLONSKY: — I would say really surreal looking paintings.

ROSS BLECKNER: They are very light out dark.

LINDA YABLONSKY: They are sort of like black and white Turners.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, that is what I thought about.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: But what I thought about was also, like, what was the main component that I wanted to express in my stripped paintings? And what it was, was a kind of a pulsating—a pulsating light. It was like this enveloping [pause] throbbing, a quality about throbbing. So the light that was in them was both kind of optical but emotional, so I just took the stripes away.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: In my mind—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But is this, how are you getting this—

ROSS BLECKNER: Like this.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —this kind of stippled effect? Oh. It's not scraped.

ROSS BLECKNER: Scraped, brushed, undone, done—you know, a lot of layers. This is gonna be in the Parrish. I have to pee again [interference]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Maybe we can stop. Oh god, this one. *Monday Fever*. That's a little throat, heart in the throat.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah well, and then it really hit me, you know, hospital room. Memoriam].

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. Alright

ROSS BLECKNER: Why do they want it [the interviews] over two separate tapes days? It's interesting?

LINDA YABLONSKY: I don't know, I guess it adds some perspective.

ROSS BLECKNER: Right. Reflection.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I'm looking through this list of your exhibitions. And I see here that, after— with this show at Nature Morte of this one painting that you got—you did did get a lot of press. And from then on, every show, there was a lot of press.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So that did seem to light a fire under your career, that one painting in that one small gallery in the East Village.

ROSS BLECKNER: It did. Absolutely. I think what happened was that for some reason being out of that kind of SoHo—SoHo was kind of becoming so establishment, that the appeal of my work that was kind of non-expressionistic—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —was setting—a setup, and allowed to be contextualized with a lot of younger artists who were not interested in that kind of heroic, what they considered—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —Right—

ROSS BLECKNER: — a kind of machismo, you know, gestural expressionism. They were much more—it's kind of a different thing came into play, which was more, you know, kind of step back from that. I mean that's like— I met Peter Halley, for instance, then and, Ashley—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Ashley Bickerton.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, I was going to ask you if you, so those International with Monument [Gallery] group, and Meyer Vaisman—

ROSS BLECKNER: And Meyer became a really close friend of mine.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And did you know Keith Haring then?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, Keith Haring I knew, because he worked at the Mudd Club.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, so were you cognizant of the scene around him, which was slightly different?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Even though in the East Village—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, I did. I was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: with the Fun Gallery stuff. And Jean-Michel [Basquait]—did you, was he, on your—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So was this exciting? I mean this was like another turn of the wheel, in a way, for the art world. There was a lot of energy in these shows.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. I mean the whole East Village. I mean, that's like when— I mean I remember then meeting Philip [Taaffe] through Donald Baechler, and Philip Taaffe, and Pat Hearn, and Colin de Land. And they all started opening galleries. But for me, it was basically Nature Morte.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And Donald Baechler? How did you meet him?

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't know how I knew him. Just—he was always kind of around. He would be the type that would just ask— I remember going to his studio at some point a little before that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you went to other artists' studios?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, I loved to. I was very close friends with Troy Brauntuch. Before Izhar, but yeah, even during Izhar.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What did Mary think, when you— I mean you were still—she was still representing you in this period. I mean your next show was with her again.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, I was really— I don't think she thought much. At some point—at some point she didn't want to give me another show. I forget exactly when.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, she did give you show right after that one, according to this. You—

ROSS BLECKNER: She did but—

LINDA YABLONSKY: You had another show—well, actually it was three years later.

ROSS BLECKNER: No. No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh no. Same year.

ROSS BLECKNER: No, but she didn't want to. She did give me the show. But, you know, I was kind of like [growl] —her gallery started to get hot.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, very.

ROSS BLECKNER: And I wasn't. So she—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Even after the show at Nature Morte?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, before. In the first two shows—that was the third show I had with her.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, yes, yeah you were eclipsed by—

ROSS BLECKNER: Oh yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Some of the others—

ROSS BLECKNER: Everybody!

[They laugh.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, Jeff [Koons] felt the same way. You know, he was supposed to show with her in 1980—

ROSS BLECKNER: I know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —and pulled out, because he thought he would be overwhelmed. Because he wasn't doing neo-expressionism either—

ROSS BLECKNER: I know, he was doing vacuums in Plexiglass boxes. I thought they were so cool. Anyways, so do you want to end there? Because it was just—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —getting to the point at which the AIDS thing starts, really, and the paintings take—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Changed.

ROSS BLECKNER: Changed, because of it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It seems like the painting that you made about your sister, hat we were just talking about, almost was the bridge into the technique and subject-wise—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —was the way into what came in 1985 and 1986?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, it wasn't outside of my oeuvre, so to speak, the idea that, you know, these feelings or this kind of sense of loss couldn't be approached somehow in painting, or through you know— I mean, I don't know why but mortality was just always something that was on my mind. And then when it got close to me, really close, it became a little bit like a cultural rupture.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: You know. Like I felt like business—I couldn't really go—the striped paintings, the abstract paintings. I couldn't really go on with business as usual. I had to address more specifically what that light said—whether it's sad, or sorrow, or melancholic or commemorative, what it is. You know, so that was when I did, you know, the paintings—hospital room. I did a painting I found in there, *Memory of Larry*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: You know, and I wanted to be a little more specific about the reality that, you know—just one of those times in your life when you know things change. You know, your sense—that sense of industrial optimism that was held over from our parents and the postwar generation suddenly broke, and the idea of early mortality was our own reality.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I was going to say you were 30..

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I'm thinking about this.

ROSS BLECKNER: So, you know, it's like the idea of progress, even, kind of comes to a halt, because there's no cure. What kind of progress is that? And then, you know—

So should we leave it there?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, yes. Tomorrow we will make more progress.

ROSS BLECKNER: [Laughs.]

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LINDA YABLONSKY: This is Linda Yablonsky at the home of the artist Ross Bleckner in New York City on August the 8th—oh, sorry—

ROSS BLECKNER: July.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —scratch that, it's July the 8th, for the Archives of the American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number two. So we're back. We started yesterday to talk about the '80s. When did you meet Thomas Ammann, the Swiss art dealer?

ROSS BLECKNER: He came to my studio in 1981.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And how did he know about you?

ROSS BLECKNER: I met him through a woman who had become a friend of mine by then, after I had my first show at Mary Boone—should we get that—the Guggenheim book out, so I can go through the—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, probably, if you have it handy.

ROSS BLECKNER: I do.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That would be good. That'd be for the catalogue for your [retrospective]— what year was that?

ROSS BLECKNER: That would be 1995.

LINDA YABLONSKY: '95, okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: After I had my first show at Mary Boone in 1979—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, through that, I met people, and one of the people I met who was friends with some of the artists in the gallery then was Barbara Jakobson.

LINDA YABLONSKY: A collector in New York.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, a collector in New York. And through her, she had Thomas Ammann come over to my studio.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see. And he was—just for the record, a Swiss art dealer—

ROSS BLECKNER: And collector.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —and collector in modern and contemporary art in Zurich, Switzerland.

ROSS BLECKNER: Right. And he—I was doing these kind of gridded paintings, with kind of layering and black and grids and runes and objects in them. And he really liked them, and he bought a couple of them. And that, in fact, was my first—the first real sales that I remember.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, really?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah— to a kind of major, international collector besides from, you know, like—I don't remember. From the first show, Mary did sell the paintings, but I don't remember to who, you know? I mean, the prices were pretty low—

LINDA YABLONSKY:Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —and she was just getting started, and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And so were you.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, and Thomas was a high—already considered a pretty high-profile collector/dealer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right. He was a friend of Andy's, and collected Andy's work?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes?

ROSS BLECKNER: —in depth and he was known to do that. And actually, from really, one of the first people who started really collecting artists in depth.

LINDA YABLONSKY: American artists?

ROSS BLECKNER: And European, I mean—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —you know, because—yeah, but American artists. And he started becoming—he became very supportive of my work. And we became really close friends. Really close friends.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you go to Zurich in that people to see him? Or—

ROSS BLECKNER: I didn't go to Zurich yet because the friendship—I think—let's say if that happened in '80, '81, I think we became really good friends by like '85, '86. And actually, I remember, first time really traveling with him, when he invited me with him to St. Bart's. We went on a sailboat.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Like for Christmas?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, something like that. And on that trip was Bianca Jagger, who he was very close friends with. And we got along really well, and I became really close friends with Bianca, and I've remained really close friends with her ever since.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Who else did he introduce you to?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, over the years, I mean, he introduced me to— oh, through him, actually. I met Andy before that—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: —Andy Warhol. But through him, I hung out with Andy.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And this is all in the '80s, not in the '70s?

ROSS BLECKNER: Right. This is the '80s.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Hung out with him in what way?

ROSS BLECKNER: Like, dinners that Thomas would organize. He was very—you know, he liked to bring people together. He introduced me to curators, and it kind of—[laughing] he was very good friends with Elizabeth Taylor —

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, really?

ROSS BLECKNER: —He introduced me to Elizabeth Taylor. [laughs]

LINDA YABLONSKY: How did you meet Bob Colacello?

ROSS BLECKNER: I met Bob through Thomas, I'd say, yeah, around that time. And we became very good friends as well. And actually, it was Bob—somebody's birthday party. I forget what year it was, but around the early '80s, where Bob, Bianca, and I all had birthdays at the beginning of May, so Thomas made a party for the three of us. And a lot of people came to that party.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Where was that?

ROSS BLECKNER: Some restaurant in SoHo somewhere. And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: This sounds like you're becoming more social than you've ever been before.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, it's kind of changing. What was interesting, as—up until then, I was friendly—I was very close, before Thomas, I would say, between 1980 and let's say '85, my closest friend at—the Mudd Club closed, I

was working on White Street, I was really close friends with Barbara Kruger, and from the Mudd Club days, Gary Indiana. And Gary and I were really close friends. Actually, I did a theater set for him—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —when he worked for—did something with Richard Foreman. And we would speak every day.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: And Barbara and I would speak every day. And I was also very close with Troy Brauntuch.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Then I—you know, was—through the whole Mary Boone thing, more David Salle again, and Eric Fischl again, you know, kind of reestablishing our friendship.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: And yeah, and so I started kind of, I suppose, socializing—I'd only really—what was interesting for me was I only really liked to socialize. In '84, remember, my show at Nature Morte.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: So I knew a lot of younger artists then, too. Peter Nagy and Alan Belcher, and Meyer Vaisman, and Peter Halley, and Philip Taaffe. But I started socializing more—I never liked to socialize outside the art world. I always—I didn't feel really comfortable. But I kind of opened up to that, kind of a little kicking and screaming. [They laugh.] Thomas would, you know, kind of tease me and kind of drag me around, you know—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you have a sexual relationship with him?

ROSS BLECKNER: No. Never.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No? It was really a friendship?

ROSS BLECKNER: He had a boyfriend from the time I met him—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: —to the time he died. The same boyfriend. And I also became really good friends with his former boyfriend, Matthias Bruner—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —and all the people he knew. And I think through Thomas and Bianca I became friendly with Calvin Klein.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Through them, not through Donna Karan?

ROSS BLECKNER: Right. No, not through them.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, that's interesting.

ROSS BLECKNER: Actually, I re-became friends with Donna through Calvin.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, that's funny. [They laugh.] So all of this is in the early 80s?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So, some of these people—Bianca, Andy, Elizabeth Taylor, even Gary, definitely Calvin, they're—they were on a scene. They created a scene in New York of—or were considered, to use an antiquated term, fast company. You know, people who live large and fast, and burned bright. And some of whom burntedout, but not these people. And did any of them also—were they collecting your work?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, besides Thomas, no. Because, I mean, they're not collectors.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Barbara Jakobson is.

ROSS BLECKNER: She collected—I think, not really. She didn't. She never—maybe she bought a drawing or a

couple of works on paper around that time, I kind of remember.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And did you ever trade work with any of the other artists you mentioned? Eric or David or Troy?

ROSS BLECKNER: Eric, David, Troy, yeah. Julian. I did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So, you all have little art collections.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, something—you know, things.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean, it's a way of supporting your colleagues.

ROSS BLECKNER: Oh, absolutely. And yeah, I bought some work too, from younger artists, when I first—you know, kind of had extra money, because I started selling my work more regularly after—not before—the stripe paintings. After the stripe paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: After '84? After that show at Nature Morte?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, after that show. Like, that—the painting from that show sold. Like, Mario Diacono, who was an important Italian dealer then, and was living in Boston, and opened a little gallery in Boston, where he would just show one painting—took that painting and showed it there, and he sold it to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Whatever happened to him?

ROSS BLECKNER: He's still alive, still around. Very old.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I think I met him recently. I think I met him—did he also show Jannis Kounellis?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I met him with Jannis Kounellis not long ago, because I remember the Boston gallery.

ROSS BLECKNER: He must be in his mid to late '80s now, so I'm sure he's slowed down. But he formed the collection for Maramotti, in Italy, who now has a museum. They have that company—a fashion company. But the—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —big collectors in Italy, and they have a museum, and they do shows. They have a lot of my work through Mario Diacono.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So, is it safe to say that now, you're making money on your art, and a sufficient amount of money to give you a good life?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, it is, because in '87 and '86, different people who I rented studios to in my white building on White Street, they all left—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, because they didn't have—you know, it was not—it was very easygoing, those days.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. You could come and go.

ROSS BLECKNER: And there was no leases. They were just friends. And Meyer Vaisman had a studio there, for instance. And McDermott and McGough had a studio there. A lot of different people worked there, but they all left and I actually—I left the building for, like, half a year, and had it renovated so that I could move back in. So I must've had the money. [laughs]

LINDA YABLONSKY: And where did you go in that time?

ROSS BLECKNER: I forget. I rented a studio—that's when I first went to the Hamptons, and I rented a studio there.

LINDA YABLONSKY: In East Hampton?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. Rented.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mmm-hmm. And did you meet another group of people out there? Artists, I mean, or collectors?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, I did—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Or the same people?

ROSS BLECKNER: More or less the same people, but kind of expanded a bit. You know, it kind of keeps expanding. I became more friendly—more friendly with—I would say Hollywood types. Like, through Calvin, maybe, I met Sandy Gallin and David Geffen. And through Sandy, I met a lot of Hollywood types, because he was a kind of a high-profile talent manager in Hollywood, and he managed people like Dolly Parton and Michael Jackson, and Cher—

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's big. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —and Mariah Carey. You know, when their careers were peaking.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And did you meet—I know you met Dolly Parton.

ROSS BLECKNER: I met Dolly Parton. She came to my studio, in fact.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's kind of amazing.

[They laugh.]

ROSS BLECKNER: That was—that was great. That was actually, I must say, unreservedly terrific. She asked me if she could come to my studio.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you met her at a dinner party, or some other kind of party?

ROSS BLECKNER: I met her at a dinner, yeah. At Sandy's. And she wanted to have—come downtown, see an artist studio, and Sandy showed her a painting of mine, and she said that she loved it—she's not—she had never bought anything, but she said it reminded her of angels.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And what was she looking at when she said that?

ROSS BLECKNER: She was looking at a blurry painting that I did, called *Hands and Faces*, which was just kind of spots and blurs on a big surface. You know, light spots out of dark, but many of them.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And this is mid-80s, or later?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, now I'm jumping ahead—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: —that's later '80s.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, still in the '80s. Well, I would say your social life was now on a new level.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, what's so interesting is because I felt like it—it was—affected some of my friendships.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Of your previous friendships?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Were you in a relationship at this time? I'm trying to remember.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. Let's go back. So I broke up—Izhar and I broke up—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

ROSS BLECKNER: —in 1986, after seven years of kind of on and off. And he moved to where he presently lives in East Village. I met another artist—I was teaching at SVA, actually. I was teaching at SVA then.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The School of Visual Arts, yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: And I actually saw this kid in the hallway the first day of class. And I was teaching a senior class. And he was really the most beautiful boy I'd ever seen. So I got kind of weak-kneed, and I said to him, "Are

you in my class?" as he was coming down the hall. And he said, "I'm not an art student. I'm an illustration student." I said, "No, you're not. You're an art student, and you're in my class." That's Alexis Rockman.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh! Okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: So I started hanging out with Alexis, and that kind of—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —a heterosexual person.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, but I—you know, I said, "Come to my studio." And I did—he did change from illustration to art at my suggestion, because I was telling him, "You know, you're really good at drawing. All you have to do is just kind of do the drawing like an illustrator, and then fudge it up a little." You know, smudge it, and it'd be art. [They laugh.] So, anyway, yeah. He—I kind of "hired" him, quote on quote, and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: As an assistant—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: In your studio, not your class?

ROSS BLECKNER: In my studio, but yeah, we started hanging out. A lot, a lot. And that was the final straw. Izhar sort of had it—gone.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: And it was just one of those relationships that should've been over probably two years before anyway, so it was good that that happened. But—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But Alexis is not a gay man, or did you have a sexual relationship with him?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, well, we did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I only know him as a married man, so—

ROSS BLECKNER: He was married. He had a girlfriend then.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, he did?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, and we were friendly all year. And he was always, you know, he was living with his girlfriend. And I had this house, remember, upstate.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: And I was going upstate for the summer, but I wasn't with Izhar anymore now. So I was going upstate to paint, so I asked Alexis to come upstate and paint as well. So we spent the summer upstate, painting. The girlfriend was French, and she had gone to France for the summer. So, yes, so that summer, it turned.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: And in fact, in the fall—it was '86 or seven, I think, we came back to New York, and he broke up with the girlfriend, and he moved in with me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, really. Good for him.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, he couldn't handle it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No.

ROSS BLECKNER: That lasted about a month—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: —and he moved out—I think he moved to the Chelsea Hotel, and you know, went back to his girlfriend. And it was, you know, kind of a drama—you know, a lot of drama, a lot of emotion. That ended. While my career kind of was ascending, my romantic life was descending, precipitously.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you had what sounds like a very glamorous social life at a time—well, maybe you can help me characterize this scene, or—that's the wrong word.

ROSS BLECKNER: But you know, because of this, I felt like I lost my friends because I got so involved with Alexis —

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —I kind of stopped dealing with friends. And then my friendship after that, with Bianca [Jagger], who was very, very understanding, and very kind of nurturing—like, people, I remember, like Gary Indiana, who I was very close with, hated the fact I was friendly with all these people. I mean, he just wouldn't have it. And he actually became very abusive.

LINDA YABLONSKY: As I know he can be. But he also— I guess, that was too bourgeois for him?

ROSS BLECKNER: It was too bourgeois for him. Bianca was a socialite.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: And I said, you know, you don't even know her. She's really very political. And she's very committed, and she's very intelligent. I mean, he was just, you know. I said, you just believe everything you read in the *New York Post*?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: And anyway, he kind of had a kind of a hold on me, in a way that—and I just couldn't deal with his drinking, actually, so—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, he has a very forceful personality, and he's one of the most intelligent people who ever lived, and—

ROSS BLECKNER: He is.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —his brilliance—

ROSS BLECKNER: We had a wonderful friendship—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —until he drank—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. Did he ever write—

ROSS BLECKNER: —or was angry.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, I know. Did he ever write about your work?

ROSS BLECKNER: He did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Because he was a critic for the *Village Voice* for a while, and *Art in America* as well.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, well, guess what? I said to Gary, "Gary, you're the smartest person I know. You write great. You can—you want to get well known? Start writing about art. Become an art critic."

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow, you have started a lot of careers, Ross!

ROSS BLECKNER: So, I mean, he'll verify this—I said, "Just start writing. Submit it to the *Voice*." And he did. And he got hired—or he had written other things for the *Voice*, but never art criticism. And they hired him as an art critic. And one of the first reviews he wrote was of me, which was 1985, maybe.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So that would've been a show at Mary's?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, I actually curated the show. I was a visiting artist at the Studio School, and I curated a show there—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Ah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —called *From Organism to Architecture*. That was the name of a painting of mine.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: The painting with the shell in it—in the room.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, with one of—yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, that was the name of that painting. And I curated a show there. I forget exactly who was in it, but it had to do with the kind of interface between representation and abstraction, with things that aren't what they seem. And Gary wrote a glowing review in the *Voice*. And he even prefaced it by saying that I was—that he's impartial—that I'm a really close friend of his, but then went on to talk about the show and my work. That was actually the first really good review that I'd ever had. So, yeah. That was nice, and I would take Gary around, and I would show him different artists who were just starting, and he started meeting a lot of artists then, obviously, and kind of had a kind of, you know, Gary likes to lash out, and also kind of cuddle up to people at the same time. Like, for instance, right after that, I saw the first show of the Starn Twins.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Doug and Mike Starn.

ROSS BLECKNER: And I'd really loved it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was at Sonnabend?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, that was at a new gallery called Stux Gallery.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Stux? Oh, okay. Oh, wait, they showed at Castelli, not Sonnabend.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, that's later. Well, way later.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: And I showed Gary, and I told him, you know, this is really great stuff. And he wrote an incredibly glowing review. That was, like, his second review. And that kind of started, really started the Starn Twins' career, and also really started Gary's career as an art critic. And then, of course, he loved the attention he was getting.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: So. But my friendship with Bianca?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, what happened?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, that was too much for Gary.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh. But what else was going on at the time, or culturally, that you—I mean, by the mid-80s, AIDS was a daily fact of life, cutting through all of the arts.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And was anybody making work about that?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Other than you.

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't know. I mean, I can read something—well, this is '88.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: But it's definitely a concern, because I don't know who I'm talking about, but I'm saying, "My love affair, constant melting, absolute sex, complete dizziness. My entire psychic system is completely rendered mute. There are no symptoms. There is no libido. Just the passage of chemistry through my body. All, that is, all I can respond to. We don't talk, except with eyes, and it feels so complete. He takes care of me with only a glance. I try not to think too much of AIDS. Could this be the moment of entry? And any laughter is out of control. Giddiness seizes me, and I remember, or I'm reawakened by the pounds of laughing that I want to release. That fun is complete happiness."

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you don't know who you're talking about?

ROSS BLECKNER: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Were you—

ROSS BLECKNER: I was having little love affairs.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you were having safe sex, for lack of a better term?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Protecting yourself?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, I was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you—did you know people who refused to do that?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, I—it depends on what year we're talking about. By the late '80s, I didn't—getting tested started in the mid '80s, okay?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: Because I remember anything that happened with Alexis. After Izhar, I had gotten tested. That was the first time you could get tested. And I remember that I thought that I probably had AIDS.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You did?

ROSS BLECKNER: I thought so.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Even though you'd been sort of monogamous?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, sort of, okay? But in the last few years, it was kind of winding down, and we were kind of doing our own thing, in a way. But I didn't, and I was all clear. And therefore, I remember because Alexis—that was a concern of his, by then. There was still a lot of confusion.

LINDA YABLONSKY: A lot of confusion. Also, a lot of fear, and I would say a lot of anti-gay activity because it was identified as a gay virus, even though it wasn't. And did you experience any particular prejudice, or any form of bigotry, or it's—you know, people refused to consider you—your work—

ROSS BLECKNER: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —because you were a gay man?

ROSS BLECKNER: That never—that, I never felt. You know, I think people were somewhat—there was somewhat—kind of a hysteria—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, a lot hysteria.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And there were doctors who would not treat—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —HIV positive men and women.

ROSS BLECKNER: I remember hearing all this—I mean, the only real thing that happened to me is I had a dentist who didn't want to work with me anymore, and I was kind of shocked, and you know—I found another dentist! But no, nothing overt happened like that. I remember kind of my own sense of it was kind of a denial, kind of—like, again, retreating to work and running—in a way, running from people, you know. Actually, yeah. I mean, I spent—was spending a lot of time with Bianca.

LINDA YABLONSKY: In New York, or elsewhere?

ROSS BLECKNER: In New York. She lived in New York. And I hadn't met anybody—so I just didn't meet anybody for a while.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you go to Europe at all in this period?

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, you could've gone, outside of exhibitions—

ROSS BLECKNER: No. I mean, yeah, I'm sure I did. I don't know—I'm sure I had—I don't know—I think my first show, really, in Europe, was in 1988, in London.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Where was that? In a gallery— oh, Waddington. I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: At Waddington.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, with an essay by Peter Schjeldahl.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you—were you acquainted with him, or did the gallery—

ROSS BLECKNER: No, I was acquainted with Peter. I was acquainted with Peter from the early '80s, because, you know, he was friends—he had written about other friends of mine, like Julian and David [Salle]. He was kind of around already, and I think he was writing also for the *Voice*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, he was the *Voice* art critic, but I can't remember when he became the *Voice* art critic.

ROSS BLECKNER: Before Gary, and then Gary became it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —because he wrote for the *New York Times*—the *Sunday Times*—

ROSS BLECKNER: Long time before—way before.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, that was before. And then there was *Sseven Days*—a short-lived magazine. And I guess after Gary, he went to the *Voice*?

ROSS BLECKNER: Before Gary.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Before Gary, oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: And Gary, I think, came after him.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No—

ROSS BLECKNER: Or something like that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —I know it wasn't, because Jerry Saltz replaced Peter [Schjeldahl] when he went to *The New Yorker.*

ROSS BLECKNER: Right. Then Peter came after Gary.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah—so anyway, he was on the—

ROSS BLECKNER: Anyway.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —he was definitely writing about art. So—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. And he wrote a piece about me in '86, after a little show I had, I think at Mary Boone in *Art in America*. That was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. So, that's where I kind met him—I mean, I knew him from around, you know. I mean, you forget how you meet different people, but you know, I was going to openings and stuff then—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —more than I do now.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This show, 1987, at Mary Boone— what was in that show? Because you got a lot of critical attention for that show, I see, including a review by Roberta [Smith] in the *New York Times*, Kim Levin in the *Village Voice*, Kay Larson in *New York* magazine, all major critics at the end—or I don't know how major was Roberta was, but she was at the *Times* at that point. Michael Brenson at the *Times*. That's a lot of good attention. So what were the paintings?

ROSS BLECKNER: Those were the paintings that dealt with the AIDS crisis.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So were you—you were one of the first artists to address it directly without being literal—

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, actually I was alsobeing literal, because—

LINDA YABLONSKY: At that point?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, at that point—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes?

ROSS BLECKNER: —at that point, the first painting I did, I think, was 1985 or six. And so, I'm not sure about—and well, it had the number of AIDS—the number of people who had died of AIDS, as of the point that I did the painting, which I remember was 8,000 people. So—

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's not the one you showed me yesterday—

ROSS BLECKNER: No, that was a—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —it was a much bigger number.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, I did those paintings for a few years.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So, you were like the On Kawara of the AIDS crisis.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, yeah. I mean, I kind of thought I wanted to document this, somehow. But—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And did you know people who were sick, or dying?

ROSS BLECKNER: I did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Close friends?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, not so many close, close friends, but close friends, and I obviously knew what was going on. And it was scary, and everybody was scared. And gay men, particularly, were frightened, because there was so much misinformation, and such a lack of government advocacy.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I would say it was advocacy in the wrong direction.

ROSS BLECKNER: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This was during Ronald Reagan's presidency.

ROSS BLECKNER: It was—they were stirring up homophobia—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —actually.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And the Jesse Helms—

ROSS BLECKNER: The Jesse—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —thing was starting in Congress.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. But I did realize that, you know, for me, it was a kind of a not only a crisis emotionally—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —but it was like a cultural crisis. It was like a fracture in the cultural landscape. And it really kind of signaled the end of, in a way, my ideas of abstraction as a kind of—even as a way to deal with—how do I say this? As a way to deal with issues that are kind of held in common in a discourse of civil people amongst each other, over time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: You know, I thought that abstractions still had, like, these possibilities to raise a level of discourse about, well, future potential, about possibilities, about hopefulness. About, you know, like construction

of a world. It's almost like going back to Mondrian.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: And that's when my work became, like, more overtly representational. Because I felt like I had to be here in the world. You know, the world—the day world—the day-to-day world. Even—I mean, I said it. I said, I never imagined—I actually thought of myself as an abstract painter, because I really thought that the possibilities of abstraction could be opened up again to new meanings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: I never thought I would paint flowers—like, if you would have told me in 198—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Like your mother did.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes. That I would be painting flowers in 1986, I would have thought you were crazy. Like, "Are you crazy?" That's not what a real artist does. That's kind of kitsch. Well—

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was also a world away from your previous paintings and those numbers paintings.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes. The point is, is then I started—I don't know, it was like, the offering—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —of something to somebody in distress, that would stay in place, that wouldn't die, like a flower—you know, a flower that wouldn't die. I was afraid to give someone a flower that would die.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's a good point. They do die.

ROSS BLECKNER: You know? And painting, like, *One-Day Fever.* You know, it just had—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Is that the title of a painting?

ROSS BLECKNER: A painting on the cover of this book.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: With the body going out of the picture.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. That's a very frightening picture.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, that's because that had to do with the confusion about how fast people go from having a little sore to being bedridden with sarcoma—Sarcosi [Kapozy], sarcoma.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This picture—so this picture is—it has flowers in the foreground, the legs of a man that seem to be—you don't see anything but the lower part of his legs.

ROSS BLECKNER: Flying out of the picture.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. Disappearing into the top edge of the picture, there's a—what is this?

ROSS BLECKNER: A psychotrophy.

LINDA YABLONSKY: A trophy, an urn, and light, or, like, a veil of light, or—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —something that almost looks like a rain of light that the man is ascending to, and that's coming down on the flowers. So these were your first—is this—it's a black-and-white—

ROSS BLECKNER: Black-and-white painting.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —painting, not color. And these were the first flowers that you painted?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. The first group of paintings with flowers.

LINDA YABLONSKY: With flowers.

ROSS BLECKNER: The other ones were called *Hospital Room* and *Memoriam*, *Memory of Larry*. They were

specific.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But did they all have flowers in them, or they were paintings of flowers?

ROSS BLECKNER: Not all of them. What? They all had flowers in them.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: Just in them. You know, I wasn't really interested in painting flowers.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —or a still life, even.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —if anything, I was painting a kind of—you know, I actually didn't know what I was painting. It was kind of like a bit of the fog of war.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. That's a good analogy.

ROSS BLECKNER: So I kind of—it was just in a—I tried to—not lighten the situation, but give a certain dignity—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —to the people who were sick, you know, that almost had to do, and dealt with—against my prior belief—almost a certain idea about ascension to a space, or a place of spirituality.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] But these paintings also connected with the public in a way—

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, that's why.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Why?

ROSS BLECKNER: Because they were—they were paintings that dealt with—and ongoing and pressing, contemporary panic.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, I think that—

ROSS BLECKNER: —in a way that kind of contained a certain level of emotion, but also represented what was going on in some way. You know, I mean, a lot of artists—ACT-UP! You know, I did it from the point of view of a painter. People would do—were addressing it from the point of view of graphic art, and posters, and fliers, and banners, and—and I don't know if the quilt—the quilt hadn't started yet.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No.

ROSS BLECKNER: That was later.

LINDA YABLONSKY: ACT-UP! and General Idea contributed largely to this graphic representation and protest.

ROSS BLECKNER: So I think, you know, I felt like—I mean, I became friends at that time—through my gay friends, you know—I kind of very compartmentalized my life. You know—the art world friends, and the kind of Hollywood thing, and the gay thing. There's some overlapping, but actually, a lot of the artists—most of my artist friends, which is why I kind of left my art friends behind. Actually, they were surprisingly ungay, and surprisingly unsympathetic.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, at that time, the people I knew in the art world—my generation—none of them were gay.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, of the people you know, maybe.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, then. The people I knew then, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Do you know, you didn't know Peter Hujar or Robert Mapplethorpe?

ROSS BLECKNER: I knew them to meet them.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. I mean, they're your generation.

ROSS BLECKNER: I knew Robert and Peter from around, in gay venues or places. They were—we were never friends.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: And Robert never actually even—he always had, like, a weird attitude with me. I mean, he just didn't talk to me. You know. When I got a little more well known, he was a little friendlier, but he was already pretty sick by then.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. He got sick in 1987, I think.

ROSS BLECKNER: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And Peter died in '87.

ROSS BLECKNER: So I only knew Peter, like, a tiny little bit before that. And David Wojnarowicz, I only knew slightly. I knew him through Gary Indiana.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right. Yeah. David was kind of in Gary's crowd.

ROSS BLECKNER: But yeah, I did know them. But my friends—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —who didn't—and even the ones who were gay, I mean, if—I don't remember who they are, even. You know, they didn't identify—you know, there was—people started identifying more as gay artists then. You know, I would have said in 1983 that I was just an artist. Yeah, I happened to be gay, but what of it? Big deal.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

ROSS BLECKNER: In 1988, I would have said, "Yeah, I'm a gay artist."

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, that's when the gay movement—

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, because it was all to do with identity politics—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —came—started to kind of coalesce around, and because of, the issue of AIDS advocacy.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. That's when it became—the gay movement, politically—became politicized by the protests, because of the bigotry.

ROSS BLECKNER: So through that group, I met a good friend—I became really good friends with this guy—a gay guy—named Michael Goff.

LINDA YABLONSKY: G-O-F-F?

ROSS BLECKNER: G-O-F-F. And he was a writer, and he knew a lot of writers. Sarah Pettit.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: But more in the mainstream, not in the art world.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: He didn't really know about art. And he was starting a magazine, and I helped him start the magazine. Actually, I was the first financial backer—the first money—I helped him, I gave him the money.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And we're talking about *Out* magazine?

ROSS BLECKNER: Out. And Sarah Pettit and Michael Goff were the two editors.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

ROSS BLECKNER: Michael Goff was the founder.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right, I remember now. Sarah, I knew.

ROSS BLECKNER: She died.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I wrote for her.

ROSS BLECKNER: She died of cancer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, she didn't have AIDS.

ROSS BLECKNER: Huh?

LINDA YABLONSKY: She didn't have AIDS-related cancer.

ROSS BLECKNER: No, breast cancer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I know. She was very young when she died.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, very young—very wonderful person.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: And through Michael, I met people like Dr. Joseph Sonnabend—who was one of the first people with Larry Kramer—who I also met—who started Gay Men's Health Crisis, and were founding members of ACT-UP!

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: And were talking about safe sex. And even people in the gay world were kind of doubting them, saying they were hysterical. I mean, there was a lot of confusion.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I think that there—I was going to say about your paintings—because of that panic and confusion, they kind of, in a way, made sense of things, or made what was happening real—what people were feeling—mirrored what people were feeling.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes. I also because, you know, I was there and I was part of it, and I was gay, and I was feeling all those things. The melancholy, the panic, the confusion, you know, so—you know, it's not like anybody really knew where to go or turn yet, and hadn't really—like, the protests hadn't particularly started yet, you know, in terms of the FDA and Reagan, who wouldn't say the word. Even Mayor Koch, who didn't, you know, who was obviously secretly gay, but—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —so hidden that he couldn't deal with the whole idea of helping the gay community. So there was—that was building up, and I met a lot of these people who were advocating in a lot of different ways—Adam Moss.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Adam Moss, yes. Editor.

ROSS BLECKNER: Who was editor of *Seven Days,* then *New York Times* magazine, then *New York* magazine.

LINDA YABLONSKY: He was involved in this as an activist?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I didn't know.

ROSS BLECKNER: He grew up where I grew up.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: His father worked for my father.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Another one! [laughs]

ROSS BLECKNER: So his father, actually, always had a kind of—was a figure in my life, but that's another story. His father was like my father's—vice-president. My father was the president of the company. Yes, I've known Adam a long time. And so through all these people, they were—and Larry Kramer, and they were starting GMHC,

and Dr. Sonnabend was one of the first doctors who started to really identify, and kind of document, the cases over a period of time, and call for gay men to restrain themselves. And he started American Community Research Initiative on AIDS.

LINDA YABLONSKY: American. That would have been American.

ROSS BLECKNER: At first, it was called Community Research Initiative on AIDS. That's what the name was. So it was CRIA. After I became board president—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which was when?

ROSS BLECKNER: 1992.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: And I was the board president till 2014. So through Michael and Joseph Sonnabend, I became—I went—I started going to CRIA meetings. Then I went onto the board and we—and then I became board president. They started it—it was informal around 1988, 1989. It got, you know, more formal as a non-profit, you know, and soliciting board members from the gay community. And I went on the board and became the board president pretty quickly. And that was my second job. That became a job.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You also could rely on some of your social relationships for contributions to this—

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, that's, you know, I felt ambivalent about—to go back to Gary Indiana.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: I felt ambivalent about the entry into the art bourgeoisie, so to speak. You know, it didn't—it's not really—when we were younger, we really didn't have a definition of what it meant to be a successful artist. But you know, I just was a little more bohemian and unstructured. By the late '80s, it was a little more structured, and it didn't revolve around money and shows and, you know, the art world had already kind of expanded. And, you know, there were more players.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, they came into the—I know when they came into the art world, because I've researched this—but it was in 1982, from Wall Street. The money started coming into the art world from Wall Street, and created a new class of collectors, and made stars out of several members of your generation because of the money.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, yeah, absolutely. I mean, there's no—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And there was a lot of celebrity and glamour attached to that.

ROSS BLECKNER: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And you were in that group.

ROSS BLECKNER: Later.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: Not at the first part.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you already had these connections.

ROSS BLECKNER: Later.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: It started in 1982. I kind of got on board in, let's say, 1986.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, a little later.

ROSS BLECKNER: A little later. But it seemed like a long time to me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But in the '80s.

ROSS BLECKNER: Because all my friends were flying by.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. Your straight friends?

ROSS BLECKNER: All my straight friends. But, you know, I was already involved in something else, too, which was—my gay life was much more pressing, you know, and—actually, you know, through Barbara Kruger I met, like, Craig Owens.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I was going to ask if you knew him, yes. Another writer.

ROSS BLECKNER: Who died pretty quickly.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: And even though I knew he didn't like my work, because it just wasn't his thing. You know, he was—they already started, that whole Pictures thing had started, Douglas Crimp—.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Artists Space, I think 1981.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, something like that, yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: So, you know, I felt like I was fighting, kind of, a couple of fronts. Dealing with critics and people who thought painting was dead and couldn't do anything.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: And I was trying to emotionally respond, or the only way I could, through something that was going on, and also fighting this kind of—kind of, you know, my—like I described, I kind of kept my distance a little from gay culture. I didn't like it before AIDS, but when AIDS happened, I felt like, you know, I didn't want to be one of these people who did nothing.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You had to stand up somehow or other.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes. I just knew.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: I had to kind of put down my marker, somewhere, somehow. And I just had to figure out for myself how to be an activist, even though I have a studio practice that doesn't really literally translate. You know, so I was kind of fighting that little battle with myself, and I just felt like using whatever little bit of teeny celebrity I had by that time—or connections—to bring in to the cause.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Why would you say—what was attractive to you about CRIA, more than any of the other associations you could have made, or ways you could have participated?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, one thing is that I didn't really know about ACT-UP when it started.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: Okay. I knew about CRIA. That's where people I knew were forming, because it was an outgrowth also of Gay Men's Health Crisis, and I didn't really—I mean, I did participate—I forget—I mean, there was a march on Washington. I went. There were a few things I did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: But I thought that the research part—you know, there were two parts. There was—and then there was TAG, which was Treatment Action Group.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: Peter Staley and—he's dead now, what's his name, he was so nice. I'm blanking on his name. Anyway, I just had to be dealt with in many fronts. You can't do everything. I just felt like the one that I can think more clearly about was the research, to try to do the research, and find—you know, I was always kind of like a little into a cure. You know, whether it was a cure for my sister, when she went mentally ill.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: Or a cure for, you know, love affairs broken. And now I just—it kind of, like, fit with me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: To look for something, you know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, also, as you said, there was panic, confusion, and no funding. Or very little funding for research into treatment or medication.

ROSS BLECKNER: So we were trying to raise money.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: And do funding for doctors who were starting to do clinical trials to see what it was, and how it spread. And, you know, that's what, you know, education, treatment and research, you know. So yes, I tried to bring a lot of people into the organization. And I did. That's what I did. That's what I spent a lot of time doing.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: From 1991, to when I became president in 1992, to 2014.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I will come back to this. We have touched in the last few minutes on some of the work you were making. Was there—would you say there's a difference in your painting technique or approach to making a painting from those rooms with objects to the numbers—very abstract, or nearly blank, numbers paintings, to the—or the striped paintings—to, like, what's on the cover here? The paintings that directly respond to the AIDS crisis?

ROSS BLECKNER: To the painting from the middle '80s?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. So were you using different techniques?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, I was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What were they, and how did that come about? Nuts and bolts stuff.

ROSS BLECKNER: Okay, the nuts and bolts goes back to—you know, there's a, like I was just saying, there's a compartmentalizing—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —that I've always—it's always been the way I've thought about things. And I've always compartmentalized that sense that if there's any way I could discover—it's like I didn't believe in the power, really, of the narrative or the image. I actually believed more in the dissolution of the power of narrative and image. Like, to take it apart—or repression, actually, seemed more interesting to me than expression.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Ah.

ROSS BLECKNER: It's almost what was underneath the surface. How things bubbled up and percolated and, you know, manifested themselves in different ways. So I felt like, literally, that percolating translated for me into a chemistry. I always thought if I was going to discover anything about painting that could be new—because remember, you know, I went to Cal Arts, it was a very post—it was just very conceptual kind of ideologically conceptual, anti-painting atmosphere that I was always trying to deal with. And I just felt like, if I could just come up with some concoction, some literal chemical concoction, like a scientist does.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Like, do this experiment, let it mutate a hundred times, and out of that constant brew of chemistry, maybe some little, new thing— new life will pop up. So I always started playing around with, like, breaking down the chemistry of painting and trying to make it myself in different ways—some which were kind of correct, some which were incorrect in terms of, you know, conservation. But almost, like, boiling it and blending it and mixing it, and finding pigments to put in it, and hoping that I can make the same old thing new again. Just by a chemical mutation. Like, just pray for the right mutation.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I would say part of—one part of your—the studio I saw yesterday was part-kitchen. There were a lot of pots and pans for mixing paint, I mean, making paint there.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, there's a lot of pots and pans—

LINDA YABLONSKY: You were like the mad scientist, but with a kitchen.

ROSS BLECKNER: You'll notice that there's none here.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, I did notice that.

ROSS BLECKNER: I can't deal with pots and pans once I leave my studio. I always say, I've cooked enough today. I'm cooked out. You know, the heating, the straining, the cleaning, the mixing, the oils, the looking, the research for material.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Anyway, you came up with—

ROSS BLECKNER: So anyway, I felt like I had to go almost back to the Old Masters to paint those paintings. I had to figure out how they express this kind of aspirational—this kind of—like, the artists I always loved. Also, I didn't want to give up. You know, how could I make my work have this kind of political resonance, but I'm still a painter. Maybe I just should try to learn how to paint better. You know, so I studied all the formulas—of Greco and Titian and Goya—to try and make these paintings kind of almost—the imagery and the idea of not being able to identify our time as modern any more, the rupture of modernity which abstraction represented—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —to me had to do with a little bit like medieval imagery—like the Dark Ages, like the Plague.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: Those artists somehow represented their fear of all the things that could happen that they had no control over. Because they had no medicine then. And I began to think—and I still think, actually—that all the ideology around the discourse—the critical discourse around art is all so silly, when all of this stuff in real world is going on. I mean, if you read David Foster Wallace—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: -you know, it's like, he gets back into the sticky humanity of not being ironic. It was actually important for me not to be ironic, you know. It's kind of—it doesn't mean anything to most people, but it meant something to me. And actually, it still does, you know, it's kind of like—you know, it's like, "Let everyone else be ironic. I'll not be ironic."

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, it was certainly kind of the defining characteristic of '80s art.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. And I just felt like it's just not the time. It's the time for—it's almost like, "Why did these people call this a post-modern time?"

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Who said it's post-modern? You know what? We're not even modern. We're actually living in a Dark Ages. In 300 years—or 500 years now—people are going to look back, and they're going to say, "Are you kidding? They put themselves—they gave themselves poison to cure themselves of a thing called cancer?" Chemotherapy is going to look like a leech stuck on your skin. They're gonna think—when I walk around the streets of New York, and I hear the nerve-wracking noise, people are going to think like when we thought, "All those people in the Victorian Age lived with all that horse manure on the street, How could they have done it without sanitation?" People are going to look at us and think, "They lived in those polluted cities with streets, with these spewing machines that basically shortened their lives by fifty years, and that's what they called modern life?" You know, so all of this kind of came very much into focus, and the kind of—the only thing that was ironic to me was the irony of calling it post-modern, when we haven't even come up to modernity, really. You know, if you think of women's rights and gay rights, and all of the things that might represent something. And medical, I mean, it's just, it's so—our modern life is so infantile now. It's just starting. You know, the nano-technology.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: You know, the kind of—the gene-splicing. The ability to eliminate the things that have been scrooges all throughout human history, might be 300, 200, 500 years away. But religion won't stop them, because they'll happen. You know, religion is always the thing that tries to stop things.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: But anyway, so, therefore I kind of wanted to make paintings that were Old Master-ish, that were emotional, and that had subject matter that kind of had to do with my confusion about these issues, and being gay.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, you've given me the kind of theoretical and philosophical framework of this work. What about the actual technique of painting them?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, it depends on which paintings. I mean, I'm also—you know, the compartment now that talks, you know, the places in your mind that have the constant conversation? The compartment in my mind says, you know, "I really just want to be a painter." I started out that way. I'm surprised it's stayed that way. I had no real—I found this identity through this chemistry.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: So the way I did it depends on the ideas of what paintings. I look around, I mean, sometimes I just use straight paint out of a tube, and make it oily and smush it around so that it's fuzzy and kind of foggy and out of focus. These particular paintings were very layered with—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which?

ROSS BLECKNER: These paintings from the middle '80s. Very layered with under-painting and under-painting.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And these paintings have flowers and other imagery.

ROSS BLECKNER: Dots, flowers—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Streaks of light.

ROSS BLECKNER: Streaks of light.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Dots of light.

ROSS BLECKNER: Things coming apart, things—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —coming together. You know, I've always thought of the different layers in a painting kind of like a body.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Like, there's things that happen underneath the skin.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: There's things that emerge from the skin. There are things that are on the skin. And then there's a kind of a dressing, which is the accoutrement. So I kind of—you know, there are these things under the painting that are covered up.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is a chilling title, somehow—*Deathlessness*—from 1987. I mean, that's deathless in lifelike—they somehow carry two entirely different emotional meanings.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, they do.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: But then, you know, you want to keep things open. Because in my mind, that's, I mean, you know, I mean, I'm sure you and anybody, when you think about it, you think in two completely different ways. You know, a lot of my thinking, you know, comes up—I come up with a thought or an idea for a painting, and then right away I'll do the painting. But then I'll say, but on the other hand—and I'll want to think of another kind of painting that kind of contradicts the work I'm doing. So, like, a lot of times if I feel like I'm getting too flowery, I suddenly want to contract. So it's the expansion and contraction, you know. It's also like the chemical flow, like, kind of like water, ice, steam—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —liquid. You know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But were you torching the canvas?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: In the '80s? The way you showed me yesterday?

ROSS BLECKNER: I was. I started out by kind of painting it and scraping lines or grids, and then kind of torching it, like—you could see where there's openings—like, here, for instance.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: It's an opening, it's like trying to make openings to look back into the making. You know, I was always kind of like—

LINDA YABLONSKY: It looks a little like you scraped it, but you didn't. You torched it.

ROSS BLECKNER: I didn't, I torched it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: There's scraping and torching. Torching—I just wanted to—and it had to do with kind of making the image, and ruining the image too.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What about this? *The Gate* from 1985, which looks almost Baroque, compared to some of your other work. Or Victorian, like a Victorian garden. I mean, it's a gate to a garden, but it has these—

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, it is. It is a gate, and then you'll see—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Heaven's gate.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, that's kind of what it is. And I did another painting called *Gate*, which is the opposite.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is one of your striped paintings.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, with a gate on it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: With a gate too.

ROSS BLECKNER: So I just wanted—

LINDA YABLONSKY: So this is like an iron gate.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is a very interesting painting.

ROSS BLECKNER: It's painted so differently.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So differently.

ROSS BLECKNER: So differently. And that's the idea, that, you know, I used—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean, this is flat. It doesn't have the same—well, it has the sense of depth, I take that back. Between the bars.

ROSS BLECKNER: And then the striped paintings kind of started relating to the representational paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —in the mid-'80s too. You can see by that title.

LINDA YABLONSKY: *Reef*, 1986. Which is much more colorful, brighter colors, striped.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But there's a lot of spots of colored light underneath.

ROSS BLECKNER: And this one is one that I really liked.

LINDA YABLONSKY: *Circle Of Us*. Why? I mean, what's that particular—

ROSS BLECKNER: It has to do with coming and going in and out of existence.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: It's the circle of people—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —connected. And gay—it was the circle of us, and then I was actually thinking about the circle of us gay men.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: And women.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And so there's—just, there are these—

ROSS BLECKNER: a tree.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Vertical bars. There's an image of a tree behind them.

ROSS BLECKNER: Behind them.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And hummingbirds very clearly on the tree, and kind of bleeding—

ROSS BLECKNER: Spots.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —spots of colored light—

ROSS BLECKNER: Light.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —that come in and out between the bars. They're almost like a bamboo fence. Yeah, it's beautiful. How large is this painting? 72 x 108 inches. It's pretty big. So when did you bring the hummingbirds—or these birds—into your image vocabulary? You're very well-known for those paintings, with the birds. Did they come later? Like, the painting you showed me yesterday that's going to the Dallas Museum of Art.

ROSS BLECKNER: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: When did you start doing those?

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't remember exactly when they—they kind of flew in.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What about this one that you made for your—in regard to your sister Flora, In the Future? Was this a torched canvas?

ROSS BLECKNER: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No. So that was 1983.

ROSS BLECKNER: But you can see that there were all kinds of arrows—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —underneath the painting, kind of directing up and down, like wondering which way it's going to go, the kind of landscape, and the world—

LINDA YABLONSKY: It is a—I mean it looks like moonlight on water and this is like Casper David Friedrich, just the light.

ROSS BLECKNER: It is. I mean that's what it is. I mean it also, you know, I've looked at the same artists my whole career.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: I've never not painted a flower from an actual flower. I've only, only painted a flower from the same picture that I hold in my hand from 1985, when I first started doing them, till now.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You mean from a reproduction?

ROSS BLECKNER: It's the same reproduction.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which is?

ROSS BLECKNER: A Manet.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, of course. Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: *Glass Flowers*. That's his last painting, *Glass Flowers*. I just, I need to hold it in my hand. I don't really have that much of a good imagination. I really don't know how to draw very well. But if I hold something in my hand, I could kind of get in the area.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I understand that. I have a Manet flower painting on my computer that I just love, that he painted at the very end of his life. I don't know what it's called. It's a white flower.

ROSS BLECKNER: I just love the way the paint sits.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: The way—there's a physicalness and a beauty and a—a longing and the feeling of loss, and you know—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —it's like a—it's silly, but how can a little piece of paint—and this is a big question that most people think is already answered, and the answer would be no, it can't.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: But how can a little piece of paint carry some weight, emotional resonance? I mean, it seems silly on the face of it. But, you know, if you put it together in the right way, anything can. So that's my answer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] What do you—

ROSS BLECKNER: So, to go back to your question about the techniques—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: —depending on the period and the techniques, I've gone from very simple geometric techniques right out of, you know, the tube very complicated, you know, formulas that I write down like a scientist. But then I forget, like, the next day and I have to, you know, basically it has to do with what period of work I'm at. Or, you know, where I am and what the idea for the painting is, and I do the research, and I try and hopefully paint different bodies of work that are different from each other.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What do you mean research?

ROSS BLECKNER: What?

LINDA YABLONSKY: What do you mean you do the research?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well to try to figure out the paint—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: The actual paint, the imagery, like—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Do you make drawings? Or I saw a number of small studies in oil.

ROSS BLECKNER: I do studies, I do—I don't really do drawings. But I look—I kind of try to find imagery that I like, usually from magazines and papers—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —like, you know, these paintings are—oh, here you can see. These are burnt.

LINDA YABLONSKY: These paintings from the '90s, which are really of cells.

ROSS BLECKNER: This is clinical—this is a painting called *Clinical Trials*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. This is a really different aspect of living in the era of the AIDS crisis.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, and then you can see where it came from.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's—oh, that's like a medical illustration?

ROSS BLECKNER: Of a T-cell.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: Getting infected.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh. Oh, God.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, to me, that obviously was a mesmerizing image.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. Wow. So from that came this painting, *Internal Medicine*, '91?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which is almost like a misshapen honeycomb—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —of cells?

ROSS BLECKNER: Of cells, and dividing and proliferating.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. That are simultaneously kind of beautiful and peculiar and bewildering.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, that's—that to me is the real, the kind of intersection between us being people with consciousness and awareness, and us being vectors for virus. That always has fascinated me. And that our skin is very fragile and protects us.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: And we're basically one thin cell membrane away from destruction.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow. Yes. That's scary.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, it's scary but you don't think about it. But it is—I mean, you know, we support colonies of bacteria and virus—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —and keep them in check and it's a checks and balance system. And that's the kind of scientific side of my work that I just find fascinating. It's, like, even—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —you know, when my father, you know, when my father showed me, you know, when he had cancer, and he showed me, you know, people get very concerned with their sickness.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, it's very consuming.

ROSS BLECKNER: And they research it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean all the pictures of his particular cancer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which was what? What kind of cancer did he have?

ROSS BLECKNER: Prostate.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: I said, "Oh, they're beautiful." And he was, like, "Are you crazy?" He showed me all these beautiful pictures. I said, "Well, Dad, you have to realize it's scary, but they're beautiful." And what's so interesting— and then I did a whole group of paintings called *Overexpression*, which had to do with dividing cancer cells. And that's when I did all these kind of cells, and molecules. They're not in this book. They're in another book.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right, but they seem to have been made by a different technique entirely.

ROSS BLECKNER: Completely different.

LINDA YABLONSKY: They're much more opaque. These are translucent.

ROSS BLECKNER: No, I learned a whole different way to do them. I did them with air.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right, with an air gun.

ROSS BLECKNER: With air. Yeah. I was really interested in just blowing the pigment and the paint to create these pools of cells that blob onto each other and connect and disconnect, and mutate.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: I kind of wanted them to be that organic process, you know. There's something that I put— actually, I'll show you, I'll read to you, which kind of always—I read it during the AIDS crisis. It was in a magazine. But it—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Is it in this? Oh no, this is the *New York Times* [book].

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. But it stuck with me. "It's the perfect seducer. It's patient. It's versatile. Endlessly changing and regrouping. And if acquiring it were not so deadly, we would probably call it brilliant." And it's true when you think of all those things, you know?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Now, was that talking about the HIV?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And who wrote that?

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, you don't know?

ROSS BLECKNER: It was just in a kind of gay magazine.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: It's on my Instagram.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But did you—this looks like somebody—a painting or a poster or something or some graphic. That's the way it appeared in the magazine, like that? Like—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, like on a page.

LINDA YABLONSKY: On clouds?

ROSS BLECKNER: It was like, you know, a magazine like *Adbusters*, you know that magazine?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: My favorite magazine.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] This painting, *The Seventh Examined Life,* from 1990—

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, you could see whether it's burned. The images—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I'm looking at the imagery. I mean, it does seem to have a celestial aspect. It's got some of your birds in it and has a—what looks like the Star of Bethlehem at the top.

ROSS BLECKNER: Like a chandelier.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But underneath, I mean, this almost looks like an airport seen from above.

ROSS BLECKNER: It is.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean, what you see a plane coming in—

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, they're very layered. They're perspectival—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —they're about space. Some of my paintings, when I do paintings that are really about the flatness of space, and I want to do things that, you know, like going back to my early work that kind of have different planes and different things going on, on different levels. Whether they're, you know, metaphorically or physically, you know, like that idea of under the painting, over the painting, behind it, in front of it. Also space in it. Now, what year are we on? Let's take a break.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, okay.

[Audio break.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: I was—ah, CRIA.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, maybe you'll be living on the West Village.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, we'll see. Unlikely. Maybe Harlem. I like Harlem.

ROSS BLECKNER: [Laughs.] It's very nice. I like it, too. I'd live there.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It's beautiful. But it's also being developed. CRIA, '90s. So you become, at this point, early '90s, you have a big career. Is that a fair statement? As a painter.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, things are going well.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And some influence.

ROSS BLECKNER: Things are going well.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And you become involved with ACRIA.

ROSS BLECKNER: I was doing these paintings, called "Examined Life" paintings in the early '90s—.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —which kind of brought a lot of the elements from my painting from the mid '80s and even from the early '80s, the black-and-white—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —the layering, the burning, the scraping, the images and that kind of dissolution of image. You know, you could see that how the white image just becomes like white light in different parts of the painting?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. So—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, so.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you became fairly consumed, or maybe that's too strong a word, with the work you did for ACRIA? At the same time, maintaining this very disciplined, it seems to me, painting practice?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. Well, yeah. The ACRIA thing took a lot of energy and a lot of time. And my main kind of job there was to basically help run the organization, which we grew from the beginning, from $100,000 a year budget to a multi-million-dollar budget, and kind of were able to fundraise through my, you know, knowing the people I knew, and expanding the board with doctors, people from publishing and media who I met. I started doing—asking artists, you know, I kind of made—I tried to make ACRIA very integral to the art world's response to the AIDS crisis—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —by asking many artists to give work. We started out by doing benefits where I would ask artists to make, like, fifty or I mean, I remember, I think the first one, I forget exactly when it was. We actually did a book, I'll show you, that documented it all. You know, I mean—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I'm sorry, excuse me. ACRIA book?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What was it called?

ROSS BLECKNER: Art Against—hold on one second. Let me get it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: All right. I didn't know about that. *Unframed: Artists Respond to AIDS*. Okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. So—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Who published that book?

ROSS BLECKNER: With a forward by Manuel Gonzales.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Who published it? Let's see. Powerhouse Books.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Ah, okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: So—

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was published in what year?

ROSS BLECKNER: This is 2002. [Reading] "Ten years documenting from 1993: a chronicle of art sales benefitting the AIDS Community Research Initiative."

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see. So they started in, I mean, though the—when did it start? 1997? The benefits?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. No, 1993.

LINDA YABLONSKY: 1993. And that was your idea?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. [Reading] "We would especially like to thank—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —our board president, Ross Bleckner, for his unparalleled commitment to finding a cure for AIDS. ACRIA would have unquestionably been a much different and less effective agency without his contributions of artwork and his request for donations every year from friends and colleagues within the art world."

LINDA YABLONSKY: I have to say— I remember Bob Colacello brought me to one of the first benefits, if not the first. I don't remember now if it was the first or second. But maybe there was 100 people there?

ROSS BLECKNER: Right. The first one—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And when I went again a few years ago, it was *huge*. It was huge.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, well we grew it. We were very—we really worked on things like that. Between fashion and art, we really thought there was a place that we can, you know, make our home. And essentially to help raise the funds, it's a single—[continuing to read] "ACRIA to study new therapies for HIV diseases. The $1.5 million in funds generated have enabled us to examine nearly forty treatments that had the potential for improving the lives of many hundreds of thousands of people across the United States. Seven of these therapies have been approved by the FDA and have in turn made a tremendous difference in the quality care for the disease. There's no doubt today that countless individuals are healthier today."

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: So—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Tell me what happened in the more recent years with this as AIDS, you know, was no longer a crisis—is still an epidemic for sure in the world, but in this country, you know, more education, now there are medications that keep it under control. People don't have to die from it, at least not immediately, the way they used to. So was it harder to raise money when it became less, you know, instead of making headlines every day?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, now, ACRIA is a very well established—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And it's ACRIA, not just CRIA?

ROSS BLECKNER: ACRIA, yeah. It's very well established, and, you know, part of what they do actually, they've done the biggest clinical trial and investigation of people living with HIV long-term. And the consequences of long-term HIV treatment and care.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's good—which nobody knows about, really.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, which has to do with people over the age of 50.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

ROSS BLECKNER: People who are living longer and how they can stay healthier and a lot of what ACRIA does now is they also go into minority communities and hold, you know, like you know, do research, education and prevention clinics. So their reach is far, and they just actually expanded to San Francisco. So actually it's been growing, ACRIA.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You must be awfully proud of the work you did with this organization.

ROSS BLECKNER: I actually am. I feel that whatever it was that was in my studio, that was in those paintings—I mean, I know it's corny to say this— that kind of light I was looking for—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —to help me through the darkness also kind of pushed me out my door. And although I'm a studio artist, I became—my practice really became a social practice before it was called "social practice."

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's so interesting.

ROSS BLECKNER: But if it wasn't for the painting, I would have never had the kind of way to move forward.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: You know, if I wasn't able to clarify myself through the articulation of images and express my own kind of emotional response to these kind of—kind of deep-seated cultural shifts. Plus, also, I always thought that there was some kind of, not fraudulence, but fakeness to the cult of celebrity that surrounds, like, certain artists that do very well. And I feel like the egotism and the—the level of discourse is always about who they are, and the projection of their persona. And you get so tired of those personas just being meta-personas, you know?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: They're like meta-personas.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: They only are about themselves.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yep.

ROSS BLECKNER: And when I started doing well in the art world, I wanted to myself to include this other world [sneezes]—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Bless you.

ROSS BLECKNER: —that I was also part of. And to somehow join them, and to try to leverage whatever success I had to move forward some organization that could have a concrete effect on people living with HIV and AIDS, and ACRIA really was the one for me.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: So in a way, my abstract ideas that were kind of fuzzy, and sentimental, and confused, and

emotionally driven ran all the way through to something that was very articulate, and very specific, and very medical.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: So,I felt like I went the whole kind of arc, you know, from a confused identity to a kind of specific effect. And the thing actually that upset me during that time was the criticism I got from the art world.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What?

ROSS BLECKNER: I found that very upsetting.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Criticism for being an activist?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, this was before the '90s, okay?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, before the '90s.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, in the early '90s—

LINDA YABLONSKY: You mean criticism of your art or your public persona?

ROSS BLECKNER: Both. Yeah. My public persona. Heavily criticized.

LINDA YABLONSKY: More so than some of your peers—

ROSS BLECKNER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: —like Julian [Schnabel] or Eric [Fischl]?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. I mean, I was called—I mean, I remember a few things that really upset me. I mean, I mean, when I had my show at the Guggenheim, Michael Kimmelman wrote a really bad review.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I was about to bring up the show at the Guggenheim, so let's go there.

ROSS BLECKNER: Michael Kimmelman wrote a really bad review—

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was the '90s, though—

ROSS BLECKNER: What?

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was the '90s, not '80s.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, that's the mid-'90s.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: Okay, but even before that, people, critics were implying that I'm a socialite, I'm more of a socialite than an artist. A party boy. And, you know, I never really like going out. I actually—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I know, it's so not like who you are. But there was this idea about the Velvet Mafia, which was you and Calvin [Klein] and David Geffen—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —and yeah, that was a negative—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. But I mean, I also think that was a kind of—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —characterization.

ROSS BLECKNER: —negative. First of all, it was untrue.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, it was kind of like a little bit of a media fantasy that there's this thing going on.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, we used to kid around, like, "I wish! It would be so easy." But—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. But why do you think that is? Just because—where did that—what was the root of that? Did it come from Page Six or was it something in the art world?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, for me, it started in Page Six, but then went to the art world and vice-versa. You know, it's like you get, somehow, the art world gets dismissive of anything that they don't invent themselves.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: Or discover themselves. Or say themselves. Or—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —I mean, yeah. Michael Kimmelman said that I was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wait, let's start in the beginning about the—your retrospective at the Guggenheim. Who was the curator of that show?

ROSS BLECKNER: The curator was the director, then, the chief curator at the Guggenheim was Lisa Dennison.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, right. I keep forgetting she was it for a long time.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So she brought the show in with—yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: She approached me. I was surprised, out of the blue.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How many years before—

ROSS BLECKNER: Like, 1990.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow, it took five years to get that together? Did it travel?

ROSS BLECKNER: It did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Where did it go after the Guggenheim?

ROSS BLECKNER: It went to Europe. It went to Spain, to—

LINDA YABLONSKY: To the Guggenheim? Oh no, there was no Guggenheim—

ROSS BLECKNER: It wasn't open. It went to—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Like the Reina Sophia?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, it went to IVAM.

LINDA YABLONSKY: IVAM in Valencia.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, and then it went to—was it Denmark or Norway? I forgot.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Scandinavia. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Scandinavia. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, great. Okay, so this was a big moment, then for you. The opening at the—the fact of the show, actually, at the Guggenheim, which, you know, I mean it's one of the most important museums in the world. And it's an international platform, not just American, even though it's in New York. And what were you feeling? You know, this is still—you're involved with ACRIA, AIDS is still a huge fact of life and—

ROSS BLECKNER: Well yeah, it's good for me. It's good for ACRIA. I'm really being able to bring things to ACRIA. You know, like, like for instance Martha Nelson, who had come forward during one of our—to underwrite some of it. She was the editor of *InStyle* Magazine.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

ROSS BLECKNER: Then she became the editor-in-chief of *Time*? Time, Inc. But, you know, I got her on the board.

All the—you know, I just used to basically look around for people to get on the board.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, I understand. You made some very good choices.

ROSS BLECKNER: I got Bob on the board.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right. Colacello.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, I literally need to look at who's on the board.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Was Donna, or Calvin, or David Geffen, were they ever on the board?

ROSS BLECKNER: They all contributed, not on the board.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: Donna gave very generously.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: So did Calvin through his foundation, so did David, actually, through his foundation. Mrs. Cisneros, Beth DeWoody, Aggie Gund.

LINDA YABLONSKY: They were on the board? All of these women?

ROSS BLECKNER: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: Adam Lippes was on the board. Who else did we get on the board? Francesco Costa.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: You know what, I have to look at the board to see.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It's okay. I get the picture.

ROSS BLECKNER: But you know—

LINDA YABLONSKY: It was a mix of art and fashion, I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Very—

ROSS BLECKNER: Art, fashion—

LINDA YABLONSKY: A very functional mix.

ROSS BLECKNER: Art, fashion, and media was our target audience.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: You know, because we thought that was a very good combination. You know, to get the proper coverage for the treatment, for the research, and doctors, and the medical community.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So, what happened? I mean, there was some controversy after Michael Kimmelman's review appeared in the New York Times.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, because he—

LINDA YABLONSKY: There were a lot of people who wrote opposite, opposing opinions.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, the best thing that happened was Herbert Muschamp—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —who was a friend of mine, who was the architect critic at the New York Times, wrote a full-page rebuttal—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: To Michael Kimmelman. And he had never written about art in the New York Times before.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What was Michael's chief complaint?

ROSS BLECKNER: That I—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Because you were this social gadfly?

ROSS BLECKNER: That I was a social gadfly—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —who didn't deserve a show? I don't remember

ROSS BLECKNER: Something about that. And that I had exploited the AIDS epidemic for my—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Personal gain?

ROSS BLECKNER: For my career.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's insane.

ROSS BLECKNER: Oh, I thought it was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Why would he assume that? Well, you can't speak for him.

ROSS BLECKNER: I can't speak for him.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But that is wild. Well, no wonder. That must have really stung.

ROSS BLECKNER: It stung, because I had been working really hard—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —for a long time and, you know, yeah. It was kind of weird. You know, there's just—you know, Jerry Saltz wrote something—that if I would spend more time in my studio and not so much time at parties, maybe I'd be a better artist. You know, all these parties I organized— I fundraised like crazy. You know? So, sure, it's like every time I went out, I guess there was a picture of me somewhere. You know, because I was the face of ACRIA—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —for, like, 15 years, almost.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You also appeared with a speaking role in a movie. In a Hollywood production, *As Good As It Gets*.

ROSS BLECKNER: I did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That seems, like, so unlike you. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, what happened was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you were good. You weren't playing yourself, or were you?

ROSS BLECKNER: No—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —I played a lawyer. I mean, that was just a kind of coincidence. Through my friends in Hollywood, I happened to meet James Brooks.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] The director.

ROSS BLECKNER: The director. Who also had bought a painting of mine somewhere along the line.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: So, he knew me. He knew who I was. And we met personally. And he actually asked me if Greg

Kinnear could come to my studio just to get the vibe of being in an artist's studio for a few days.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see, that's how it started?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. And then James was with him—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —in my studio. And James thought that I was so authentically New York and the movie was, like, about an artist, and New York, that he just asked me would I be in the movie. So I said sure. [Laughs.] I thought it was fun.

LINDA YABLONSKY: When was that? Was that in the 2000s, or still in the '90s?

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't remember.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I can't remember. Anyway, alright, so Michael writes this stinging review and then Herbert Muschamp—

ROSS BLECKNER: Wrote a rebuttal.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —rebuts it. I also remember reading letters to the editor, which, you know, there weren't that many letters to the editor related to contemporary art, so that was unusual. There was a lot written.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But what do people think? That a museum like the Guggenheim wouldn't know what it's doing when they pick an artist for a retrospective?

ROSS BLECKNER: What do you mean?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, it's like Jerry Saltz saying you'd be a better painter. Well, you were good enough for the Guggenheim.

ROSS BLECKNER: Right. I mean, yeah, better than who, what?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, exactly.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, yeah. Of course. I mean, I'm—depending on what kind of work you're doing, you know, do I paint a figure like John Currin? No. Was my work—did my work have a particular relevance at the time that I had a show at the Guggenheim? Obviously, and clearly, yes. And hopefully it still does, by the way.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: That's another issue. So, yeah. The reviews were mixed, obviously. But I imagine they're always mixed in a big show—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: —that some people think you deserve, some people think you don't deserve. Some people are championing other artists and they think they deserve it way ahead of you.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, that's true, there's always this carping and jealousy.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, you know, I would expect that, you know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you could weather this storm easily?

ROSS BLECKNER: No. I weathered—that stung a little, that particular Michael Kimmelman thing.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: The idea that I was exploiting something that I was a part of.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. Did he ever write a review of any of your subsequent shows?

ROSS BLECKNER: No. Well, then he became the architecture critic soon after. Not too far after.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No, he was well, maybe.

ROSS BLECKNER: Way after?

LINDA YABLONSKY: It seems—that was '95. I don't think that happened until 10 years later.

ROSS BLECKNER: You know, it's like funny. When you have a show at a museum like that, it's like, I don't remember anything about it. I mean, I kind of remember the opening. It's all so—you—I think it's so overstimulating that your mind shuts it out to some extent.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: I've spoken to other people who've had big shows at major museums in New York, particularly where your home is anyway.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: I can remember other shows in other places perfectly well. But here, I blanked out on most of it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How old were you in '95?

ROSS BLECKNER: I was 45.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, there is this—I don't want to call it—wel,l there's an idea, there's always some talk about mid-career retrospectives, how they can—that there's nowhere to go but down after that. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: I know. But you know—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —how they interrupt a career rather than carry it forward.

ROSS BLECKNER: I agree. And I worked really hard to get around that. I changed my work.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. Yes, you did.

ROSS BLECKNER: I did really new work.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How did you change your work?

ROSS BLECKNER: After that retrospective, I looked it over. I thought, you know, some of the criticism, I take to heart as well. There are some things that, you know, nobody could write criticism that's as damning as the artist thinks about their own work, anyway. I mean, nobody could out-criticize me when it comes to criticism of my work.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: So, yeah, there were some things that I took to heart, like I wanted maybe to loosen up a little, a little more. I thought that kind of a little more color, or a little less morbidity, in a way.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Morbidity, yes, I understand.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you were moving away from using any black-and-white?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, so I kind of started doing more these kind of puffy, colorful, blobby paintings, which I enjoyed making and which I thought were, you know, beautiful and interesting. But they were only interesting to me in the sense that I wanted— after I did them, I kind of peeled them back and started doing them under a microscope. And then I started doing all these kind of microscopic paintings, which were totally different, a whole new body—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, you don't mean microscopic paintings. You mean you—

ROSS BLECKNER: Paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The subject matter, not that the paintings themselves were tiny.

ROSS BLECKNER: The subject matter, yeah. Of cells, of plants, and people under electron microscope. You know, different mutations, and different diseases, and different molecules, and the formation of DNA, and the breaking apart—it's called over-expression, you know? Which I like. I like the idea that an artist could be, like, telling too

much. And could, you know, there's repression, there's expression. And actually in medicine, overexpression, which just means when a cell overexpresses itself it mutates, you know, into cancer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: Which I always thought—you know, all that kind of—I kind of rejected all that kind of bravado and, you know, machismo of a lot of painting.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, my painting is the painting of a gay artist.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I—

ROSS BLECKNER: Even though I don't necessarily think of myself as a gay painter. So, you know, figure that one out!

LINDA YABLONSKY: But those paintings, I mean, some of these I can sort of get that sensibility. But those cellular declensions, let's call them, they don't necessarily—they aren't gender—or sexual preference-specific.

ROSS BLECKNER: No, it's not sexual. It's—I don't think a straight artist would do the body of work that I've done, that's all.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: It has to do with the fragility of identity. And that kind of fluidity of ideas. I think that I'm much more open even to kinds of sentiment—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —that I don't really see, you know?

LINDA YABLONSKY: You also did this series—it's so brilliant in the book, in the other book—*Our Lives in the New York Times*—which are the page three, basically, of the New York Times.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which has an international news story always next to a Tiffany's ad. And the juxtaposition is sometimes, you know, throat-grabbing. I mean, it is so awful.

ROSS BLECKNER: I know. I just noticed that over the years, and I had been doing it for years.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: And I started it actually. And I love photojournalism. And there's always actually beautiful photographs.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: Really great photojournalistic disasters on page three. That's where the main international photograph of the day usually is. And obviously, Tiffany always has the top upper right corner—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —on page three. When you put them together and you see that you're reading the paper and this is the news, it's like all the news is contained right in that juxtaposition.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: The luxury, the tragedy, the poverty, the wealth, the disaster, the beauty. It's like—it really popped out at me—popped out to me. That famous photograph of a vulture hovering—this is a—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I saw that picture. It's heartbreaking, God.

ROSS BLECKNER: —hovering over a starving child. Literally waiting for this little child in Africa to die. And the Tiffany is this $10,000 elephant, which could basically be in the same landscape—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: —facing the child as well. So you have the vulture, the elephant, and the child, you know? And I just couldn't believe it. I actually thought it's, like, a goof. Whoever put this together is very subversive.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I often think that about the photo editor at the *Times*, because the things they choose to put on the front page next to what—it's very telling.

ROSS BLECKNER: That's what I always thought.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you're right about that page. That was particularly striking.

ROSS BLECKNER: That was very—he won the Pulitzer Prize for that photograph, and he ended up committing—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Who was the—

ROSS BLECKNER: The photographer, I forget his name. And he ended up committing suicide.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Seen too much that he couldn't bear, probably.

ROSS BLECKNER: Huh?

LINDA YABLONSKY: He's seen too much of the unbearable.

ROSS BLECKNER: Too much. It's unbearable. I mean—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I have a friend who's a photojournalist now, who's a conflict zone photographer. And he's—I mean, I've worked with him, because he couldn't stand it anymore. He wanted to do an art story. He'd never done any art stories. He wanted to do a fashion—he was a fashion photographer before he was a war photographer. But he couldn't live with what he'd seen. He's still having trouble.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, there's no reason why a photojournalist wouldn't get post-traumatic stress as well. They see the sights, they hear the noise. I mean, that's what does it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And their lives are threatened in the same way.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. I could understand them coming back with that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. So what do—now, the reason I'm mentioning this— when Richard Prince, not a gay artist, did those Tiffany paintings, it seemed like he was cribbing from you.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, those were just painting—.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This was, like, ten years later.

ROSS BLECKNER: I know, but those were just Tiffany paintings about Tiffany. Mine were not about Tiffany. Mine were about the juxtaposition of our lives.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right. But he used the same ads. I mean, not the exact same ads, but—

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, he used the Tiffany ads, sure. Maybe he saw—

LINDA YABLONSKY: He used the newspaper page, but without the—

ROSS BLECKNER: —without the photojournalist—

LINDA YABLONSKY: The meaningful photographs.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, which I thought weren't that interesting. It's almost like—what's so interesting to me about so many artists—and what I actually don't quite understand—is why artists who celebrate pop culture and who are considered the people, or the artists, who most represent this American moment would be so popular. This American moment is not interesting. This—the level of discourse at this American moment is so debased that you get reality television, you get Fox News, you get the polarization of the right and the left—equals Donald Trump.

So tell me what is so interesting about American pop culture now. And why do people fetishize it and celebrate it so much through—I mean, even, you know, Jeff Koons is a really terrific artist at times. That part of his work I don't—I just—ideologically, I don't get why. Because people who run hedge funds want to see their values expressed in their art, you know?

And that goes back to it, what you said in 1982, how the audience expanded in the art world and changed things, it proliferated throughout—from then until now.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Till the art world itself is—

LINDA YABLONSKY: A corporation.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, it's a symptom. It's all it is.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It's a corporate culture, it's not a creative culture.

ROSS BLECKNER: It's a symptom of the system that it's a part of, a system which, hopefully, one day in the future another generation—clearly not ours—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —will figure out how to change. You know, I kind of want my work to emotionally relate to that future by kind of being a little pessimistic about this present. You know? Like, American pop culture doesn't interest me. Just like a lot of artists in my generation who wanted to do institutional critique called—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —wanted to—they used to say "subvert" the, you know, the kind of popular discourse from within. When all they did, really, were enabling the system to expand and incorporate them. And it helped expand the system, not contract it and change it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I think that the whole pop cultural fixation is partly due to a lack of subject matter that's bigger than the artists. And I think that great art comes with something that's both extremely personal and bigger than that artist. And it's a form of escapism. And it's totally infantilizing, so that you feel protected by this stupid stuff in our popular culture. A lot of music is regurgitated—

ROSS BLECKNER: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —very calibrated—calculated, I mean—overproduced stuff from the past, when music was good. [Laughs.] Not that there isn't still, but there's nothing revolutionary happening in the arts.

ROSS BLECKNER: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Maybe in television, in terms of subject matter only, not in the way it's done.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, certain parts of television. But not the part I was talking about.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No.

ROSS BLECKNER: But anyway—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, so, anyway—

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't want to talk about individual artists because I'm being recorded.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You don't have to. Yes. Anyway, so, you—but you are—I don't know if it's true of your generation, but it's certainly the one that came before you—there's a certain kind of thread of philanthropic ambition that has been—artists like Jasper Johns.

ROSS BLECKNER: I think that's really important. I actually think that that was kind of outlined by some, you know, like groups of writers and artists who really thought that the changing of popular culture will come about by the artist really becoming a citizen, too.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, and I think Robert Rauschenberg—we're talking Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, gay male artists who both established foundations that supported other artists to carry on with their work—

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, particularly Rauschenberg, who was doing social activist stuff.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, he also did that. And for me, he's the model—the model artist-citizen.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yes, now there's this thing called Blade of Grass, which I'm actually on the board of advisers

for.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, what is that?

ROSS BLECKNER: Which was set up by the people who started the Rubin Museum, Don and Shelley Rubin. And they give grants to artists who are doing community participatory work, which is work that involves other people that, you know, like they just did— I have to look. I have to look online. I blank out. But, you know, we gave grants. I mean, Anne Pasternak's on the board, and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Who's now the director of the Brooklyn Museum.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, but she's always been very socially—social activist-oriented.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, she has been.

ROSS BLECKNER: In her tenure.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And a crack fundraiser.

ROSS BLECKNER: And her tenure at Creative Time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. But it just seemed—I mean, there has been this philanthropic thread, and certainly artists have gotten together in support of AIDS—various AIDS organizations and—

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, certainly there's always been—one second. I want to get one thing.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, what is this that you're looking for?

ROSS BLECKNER: Just something I've read.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What is this?

ROSS BLECKNER: It's just—I've been—you know I write sometimes stuff. And I was writing about—when I was saying post-ironic?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: I was saying post-ironic artists, even writers like Dave Eggers—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Eggers, yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: [Reading] "Eggers, David Foster Wallace, have tried to craft, in its place, a relatively open ethos that includes philanthropy and the act of construction of alternative institutional structures, like publishing houses, collective art spaces, tutoring and charitable foundations." That's all. I just wanted to—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, there doesn't—it seemed like in the '90s, that disappeared—that impulse or that desire to do something for your world that wasn't about you. And very few artists who had huge successes in the '90s seem to have established foundations.

ROSS BLECKNER: Like who?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Jeff Koons is an exception, because he has this foundation. But did Damien Hirst establish a charity? Did John Currin establish a charity? Did Richard Prince? Well, he's an '80s artist, but, I mean—

ROSS BLECKNER: He's a '90s artist, actually.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, he started in the '70s. He's your generation—

ROSS BLECKNER: He's my age, same age. But he was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: He became a force later.

ROSS BLECKNER: He became a force recently.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But he was making art. I mean, his success came later. That's true.

ROSS BLECKNER: I mean, to me, it's funny straight-man art is what it is.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, so that's why I brought this up, because you were saying you made work that you

don't think—that only gay man would make. So maybe it's true. You also have this other impulse, it seems, to run also among gay male artists of this philanthropy. Other artists give very generously to other charities, but they haven't established them except, like Robert Mapplethorpe did before he died, But that was part of his estate. Or Andy Warhol. So that's different.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's, like, your legacy rather than what you do in your lifetime.

ROSS BLECKNER: Right, I mean I feel like Rauschenberg was always, you know—I mean, a lot of this actually started when we started this conversation, when I went to NYU, the Workers' Coalition ,and the political activism of, you know, people—some of the minimal artists, [Robert] Smithson and [Carl] Andre—oh, Andre.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, he was very political. Just like, anti-war. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] That—when you carried that—so you were the ACRIA board president till 2014. When did you become this United Nations—what was it called? Cultural ambassador?

ROSS BLECKNER: Good Will.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Good Will. That was amazing. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: That was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: When was that? 2000s, right?

ROSS BLECKNER: That was—no. That was seven years ago, so what is that? It was my 60th birthday.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, I remember that. So seven years ago? So that was 2009?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So how did that come about?

ROSS BLECKNER: 2010!

LINDA YABLONSKY: 2010.

ROSS BLECKNER: Six—seven, did I say seven?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: My 60th birthday—I'm 67. Yeah. It was the day of my 60th birthday that they had—that I organized the event at the UN.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But the commitment was for a year? How long?

ROSS BLECKNER: The commitment was ongoing.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You're still doing it?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I didn't realize. So what does it involve?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, it involves working with the people at the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, because that's the office, and the undersecretary, who I met—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Michel Sidibé.

ROSS BLECKNER: No, his name—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Isn't he the undersecretary of the UN?

ROSS BLECKNER: There's like seven of them.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: The different, you know—different areas they cover. Blanking on his name. I'd have to look at one of my little books to remember all the right names.

LINDA YABLONSKY: All right. So what—how did it start and what is involved in the—in your being—

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, strangely enough I had a show at Mary Boone, and after I was doing the cell paintings, I think. Then I forget what I did. Let me look at my book.

LINDA YABLONSKY: In the '90s—

ROSS BLECKNER: Let me look in my book. One minute.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Ah, forgetfulness.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You have a willful forgetfulness?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. So I could go in. It's like a zen thing, to try to keep my mind, you know—to try to want to do something new.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. God, that looks beautiful. What is this—when is this from?

ROSS BLECKNER: This is 2003, these paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: These are cell paintings? They look different.

ROSS BLECKNER: Blood cells.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, so that accounts for their bright color.

ROSS BLECKNER: Oh, and then I did—

LINDA YABLONSKY: They're turning into flowers.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, they did turn into flowers.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. Talk about mutations.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, that's what happens.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Or transformation, I guess.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. So anyway, they turned these paintings were—I started—when did George Bush become president?

LINDA YABLONSKY: 2000.

ROSS BLECKNER: His second term was?

LINDA YABLONSKY: 2004.

ROSS BLECKNER: Okay, so I started doing meditation paintings...

LINDA YABLONSKY: I'm sorry, not 2000. That's Clinton.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, it's later. I thought so.

LINDA YABLONSKY: 2008?

ROSS BLECKNER: Eight years ago.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Eight? 2008.

ROSS BLECKNER: No way. That's eight—before Obama. Obama's the president eight years. So it's eight years.

LINDA YABLONSKY: 2008. Just figure—

ROSS BLECKNER: 2008.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Sent us crashing into a recession.

ROSS BLECKNER: I got really upset. I just thought, like what we were just talking about—the dumbness, the dumbing down. The—everything just seemed wrong. And I kind of started taking Buddhism more seriously then.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see. You mentioned that. But I thought you said you picked that up in—around the beginning of the 2000s. Earlier.

ROSS BLECKNER: I did. But I started taking it more seriously.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh. Okay, I understand.

ROSS BLECKNER: You know, and I wanted to bring it into my work, this kind of Tree of Life. I wanted to—like, this is like looking down at all this kind of interconnected—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which painting is that?

ROSS BLECKNER: They're called meditation paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, and it looks like—yes, you're looking down into leaves.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. Kind of circulating—

LINDA YABLONSKY: A canopy of leaves.

ROSS BLECKNER: —circulating around, floating and coming and going and just the interconnectedness of, you know, life and nature and things. I just kind of withdrew. You know? I didn't know—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But they're very irradiated.

ROSS BLECKNER: Huh? Yeah, they are.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Color-wise.

ROSS BLECKNER: They are.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Like they're something either wrong or supernatural about them.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, but I also like to keep in the kind of optical element to keep—you know? Give them a little sense of life and movement, because, I mean if you notice, like each one is painted four or five times and like a trace. So it's like shadow images, you know? And shadows and then finally it makes itself there at some point, kind of connected and disconnected?

The reason I'm—what was your question?

LINDA YABLONSKY: About how you became the good will ambassador at the United Nations.

ROSS BLECKNER: Oh.

LINDA YABLONSKY: To Africa in particular, right?

ROSS BLECKNER: Right. So a friend of mine, who was a human rights lawyer, who I had met through friends, through ACRIA, named Michael Kennedy, who died recently of cancer. But he'd been around forever. He defended the Chicago Seven.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I know—and he has that house in Sagaponack.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The famous house.

ROSS BLECKNER: The famous house.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I don't know why it's—it's just by itself in a way that stands out.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, because it's iconic. It's iconic. It's right stuck out there. It's the perfect old authentic shingle house, not one of these fake things.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, but he was a very important lawyer, it's true.

ROSS BLECKNER: Wonderful, wonderful man. I mean, he defended people, you know, who no one would defend

—terrorists and drug people who were convicted of minor drug infractions, he would defend for free. I mean, he defended the people who own *High Times* magazine. And when they couldn't pay him—a long time ago, when it was worth nothing—so they gave him *High Times* magazine. So he owns it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I didn't know that. [Laughs.] That's funny.

ROSS BLECKNER: Anyway, he knew the Undersecretary and he took him to see my paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

ROSS BLECKNER: And then the Undersecretary of the UN had this idea, and he called me and he said, "Would you ever think of working with us to help philanthropically?"—because he had known my work with ACRIA and AIDS— "To work with children, to rehabilitate children who have been kidnapped and made into, you know—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Soldiers.

ROSS BLECKNER: Soldiers. Kidnapped child soldiers by this kind of rogue maniac wandering around Sudan and Northern Uganda named Joseph Kony.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What—Kony?

ROSS BLECKNER: Joseph Kony. K-O-N-Y. And he had something called the Lord's Liberation Army. But basically he's just a drug dealer who kidnaps kids, turns them into drug addicts, brainwashes them, uses the girls to turn into wives and sex slaves.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, god.

ROSS BLECKNER: And then a lot of them escaped and they are in—they were interned in internal displacement camps and, you know, they're trying to kind of rehabilitate them, get them over this trauma. And he asked if I thought—you know, art can be—facilitate them expressing themselves. I thought—I said it was a great idea. I would love to do it. I would raise the money. We would go to—me and these people—would go to Africa with the UN. And then I stayed there, like, two weeks. And, you know, I was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Stayed where?

ROSS BLECKNER: In Gulu, in Northern Uganda in a refugee camp. And we set up, you know, our little place to make art to get them to open up about what happened there to them. And it was very successful. The kids just loved it. And I made a book with all of the children. I took their photographs, and made a book with their art in it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What was—I remember seeing that book. The United Nations published it?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Does it have a title?

ROSS BLECKNER: It's called *Welcome to Gulu*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How do you spell Gulu?

ROSS BLECKNER: G-U-L-U. Gulu. And then what I did was I had organized a big event when I came back here. And I had a show of all the drawings in the United Nations, at the United Nations. You know, with Ban Moon-Ki showed up and gave me the thing—

LINDA YABLONSKY: The Secretary General?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. And we sold their drawings. So that—supposedly in Africa, the schools are free. But they're not really free, because the kids have to buy uniforms and books and pay the teachers, you know? Everything is very laissez-faire.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

ROSS BLECKNER: So the kids—this was a fund to get all of these children back into school. So—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Brilliant.

ROSS BLECKNER: Huh?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Brilliant.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, so that's what we did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Sorry about that interruption. Okay, we're fine. Okay, so this is—so have you been back to Uganda since then?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, I haven't been back. But what I've done is, you know, I've worked with the people at the UN, and I've been on panels. The most recent thing I did was a panel on human trafficking. So I'm kind of like a spokesperson, a little bit.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow. This is so far beyond Five Towns. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is amazing that you've been—I mean—

ROSS BLECKNER: So I did—

LINDA YABLONSKY: It's very important to be involved with your humanity—

ROSS BLECKNER: So I did at the UN a special panel, which is in the conference room at the United Nations headquarters, the role of the arts in helping to end human suffering, which was award-winning author Patricia McCormick, Ruchara Gupta, founder and president of APNE AAP Woman Worldwide.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wait, can you spell her name? The first one was McCormick.

ROSS BLECKNER: R-U-C-H-I-R-A. Gupta.

LINDA YABLONSKY: R-U-C-H-A-R-A.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, and Gupta—J-U-P-T-A.

LINDA YABLONSKY: J? Not a G?

ROSS BLECKNER: G, G. Sorry. She's the president and founder of fighting against human trafficking, it's called Apne—A-P-N-E—Aap Woman Worldwide.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Go on.

ROSS BLECKNER: H.E. Sarah Mendelson, United States ambassador, Oscar-winning director Jeffrey Brown.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So they come from all over the world.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, contemporary pianist Chloe Flower. Artist and UNODC Good Will ambassador Ross Bleckner.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I'm sorry, who was the one right before you?

ROSS BLECKNER: Pianist Chloe Flower.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Flower spelled like flower?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. With special guest, award-winning actress Gillian Anderson. Do you know who that is?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. She's great. I love her.

ROSS BLECKNER: She was on the panel, too, so.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: See, that's it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So this was—when was this?

ROSS BLECKNER: March.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, this year.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This just happened. Oh, wow. And what was—who was there? I mean, what was the audience for this?

ROSS BLECKNER: UN, UN diplomats. It was actually interesting, the German representative to the UN, a lot of the ambassadors come.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did they ask questions?

ROSS BLECKNER: They asked questions. I gave a talk. I wrote it out. I gave it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow, fantastic.

ROSS BLECKNER: You know, about what the arts can do to help rehabilitate and how—you know, individual artists can be citizens and work on behalf of NGOs and establish philanthropic efforts and foundations, you know? And help, you know, both administratively, artistically and financially, to raise money.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Do you talk about—all of these things that we've been talking about today—irony, postmodernism, modernism, medievalism, philanthropy, politics, AIDS—do you talk about this in the classes you teach? I mean, I assume they're studio classes, but—

ROSS BLECKNER: They're not studio classes, because—

LINDA YABLONSKY: They're not?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, I've been teaching at NYU, I guess, ten years. So I'm a professor at NYU, Steinhardt School, and it's the graduate program. So the graduate program is not, per se, studio classes. They all have studios in a building on 10th Street, 2nd Avenue, the Barney Building.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Barney? It's called?

ROSS BLECKNER: It's called the Barney Building.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: You know, right on Stuyvesant Square, across from St. Mark's.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I thought it was just Steinhardt. So, all right.

ROSS BLECKNER: And, you know, we meet in a seminar room, and we talk about issues.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, so it's a seminar. It's not a painting class.

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, no, because there's only—there's 20 graduate students in the program and they do what they do. Most of them are post—quote, unquote—"post-studio" artists. Some of them paint. Some of them paint part of their practice. Most of them, in my experience, are not painters. They do installation. They do performance. They do sound. They do video. They do it all.

LINDA YABLONSKY: When you taught at School of Visual Arts before NYU—when did you start teaching?

ROSS BLECKNER: I taught at Columbia before.

LINDA YABLONSKY: First?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Your first teaching gig was at Columbia. When did that start?

ROSS BLECKNER: Sometime before NYU. That was just a visiting kind of thing for—

LINDA YABLONSKY: but when did you start, you know—when were you a member of the faculty, not just artist in residence.

ROSS BLECKNER: I was never a member of the faculty. I always did visiting artist things.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, and SVA as well?

ROSS BLECKNER: I was a member of the faculty for, like, two years, back then.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which was—I'm just trying to get where it fits in your timeline.

ROSS BLECKNER: eighty—that was '87 and '88, when Jeanne Siegel asked me to do it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: All right. So how did—how do—do you involve your students in some of these philanthropic activities? Do they become assistants in your painting studio, or—

ROSS BLECKNER: They do. Some of them do. But not really. I mean, because I don't need assistants in my studio, really. I have an assistant. I just have an assistant and then someone who will be part-time doing, you know, more manual stuff. And I have kind of administrative assistant who just runs my studio. But yeah, I mean, I look at their work and I go to their studios by appointment after, like, a seminar and studio visits.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So they're crits.

ROSS BLECKNER: They're crits. But I invite other artists to the seminar—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: —is what I do, really. And I tell the other artists that it's not—they don't need to give a rap or a schtick about their work. Everyone's sick of that. Just answer questions and talk to the students like artists, or will-be artists, or soon-to-be artists. And it's worked out very well. The kids love it, and, you know, it's a very—New York. You don't have to travel. I only have them stay an hour. You know?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROSS BLECKNER: I invite a lot of different types of artists. I mean, I invited everyone from Martha Rosler to Jordan Wolfson to Cecily Brown to Tom Sachs to Mickalene Thomas to Catherine Opie.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wait, wait. Gotta catch up to you. What do you most enjoy about teaching—if you do? How does it figure into the rest of your professional life, or not?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, it does, in the sense that it's—you know, in the—in some sense, it's—you—it's hard for an artist who's been practicing and doing their work for 40-some-odd years to remain current. As a matter of fact, I don't have that much interest in remaining current.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But—you mean in the market? Are you talking about the market?

ROSS BLECKNER: Who's interesting, who's around, what new artists, the galleries, everything. Looking, looking. I'm not as curious as I used to be about looking, about going to openings, about going—being socially in the art world. I don't—luxury to me is kind of—I always kid around, it's like *Groundhog Day*, the movie.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.] Such a brilliant movie.

ROSS BLECKNER: I work until I'm exhausted, you know? I exercise. I go to the gym in the morning. I go to my studio, work until I'm exhausted, come home, rest, go for dinner, watch the news and read, go to sleep. Repeat. And, you know, I did this painting with a German word—Torschlusspanik, which means—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wait, I have no idea how to spell that, you showed it to me yesterday.

ROSS BLECKNER: I don't either, but it's on the painting. It just means, you know—and I'm very concerned, obviously, as you've heard and you can see about how much time we have to do the things we want to do in our life. And I don't know if I've actually proved to myself yet if I'm the artist that I feel that I could be. So I actually feel I have a lot of work to do, so I better hurry up and cut out the bullshit.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What is that word—the meaning of the word you told me yesterday?

ROSS BLECKNER: It means you have to get things done in your life as soon as possible because—

LINDA YABLONSKY: No, but you told me it was like, panic at the gates—

ROSS BLECKNER: The literal meaning is "gate-closing panic."

LINDA YABLONSKY: Gate-closing panic, that's what it—okay.

ROSS BLECKNER: Now, I've felt—I've always felt I had a little bit of that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, who doesn't? [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Everybody does, right?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

ROSS BLECKNER: That's why I thought it was such an apt word, and beautiful, and the painting—

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is one of your newer paintings. You've also been painting some architect—like the domes that you painted in the '90s?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah. But I go back—you know, my work is very elliptical. I kind of have things, then I have ideas and shoot off, because I need to fulfill the idea that's new, but I need to come back to finish the idea that I had that I didn't feel I completed yet. So it becomes very elliptical, like, you know, like I could do a dome painting and then ten years later, I think of a new way to do these dome paintings that I really wanted to do. But I had another idea that seemed more pressing to get out at the moment.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But by dome paintings, we're referring to interior of domes like the Pantheon, which was the original inspiration?

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah, or mosque.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Or a mosque. So not the exterior, but the interior architecture.

ROSS BLECKNER: The interior. I always think of just the point where the light touches, the architecture touches the sky. That's why I call them architecture of the sky.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] How has your Pantheon—your personal Pantheon changed since you first came across the Pantheon in Rome?

ROSS BLECKNER: Which Pantheon?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I assume you meant the Pantheon in Rome.

ROSS BLECKNER: And the Hagia Sofia.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, what's it's called—

ROSS BLECKNER: In Istanbul.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, those. Okay. So how has your personal conception of the Pantheon changed since you brought those two domes into your paintings?

ROSS BLECKNER: Well, what's interesting for me is, again, it goes back to the idea that it's a way of like kind of looking back into the painting, you know? These holes bring in and bring through the light from underneath the making of the painting. So it's like a grid, but what I think is so interesting is just with a tiny little curve, it becomes an image. But I actually think of it as a grid, in a way, to make a painting that has this invented surface, this beautiful painterly surface with light coming through it. So that's how I see them, you know, kind of conceptually or formally.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What—if you could—I'll rephrase this. If you could make a personal Pantheon of figures that are meaningful to you, either artists or philosophers or spiritual leaders or political leaders, who would the—who would be on the Mount Rushmore of Ross Bleckner?

ROSS BLECKNER: The Buddha, Dalai Lama, El Greco, Barnett Newman, Samuel Beckett.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, we haven't talked about him. [Laughs.] Go on. If—are there any others?

ROSS BLECKNER: David Foster Wallace.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What about Monet?

ROSS BLECKNER: What?

LINDA YABLONSKY: Monet? Monet.

ROSS BLECKNER: Manet.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Manet.

ROSS BLECKNER: Manet. Manet would be on it. So would Roland Barthes. I mean, you get into philosophy, I mean—Richard Rorty.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Rorty?

ROSS BLECKNER: R-O-R-T-Y. Who else do I love to read? He's a kind of pragmatist American philosopher died last—there's a whole thing on him in here.

LINDA YABLONSKY: In *My life in the New York Times*, which I haven't had a chance to read.

ROSS BLECKNER: His obituary.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Ah, yes.

ROSS BLECKNER: I would say Michel Foucault, but I don't understand Foucault well enough to put him in there. I like reading more about him than reading him.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay. I think there's—that's a good—that's a good number.

ROSS BLECKNER: A lot of pessimists.

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: Oh, Freud for sure.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. [Laughs.]

ROSS BLECKNER: The three people I like the most now who I think about a lot are Mike Kelley—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Hmm. Why?

ROSS BLECKNER: He was so, so brilliant. I mean reading him—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you go to school with him?

ROSS BLECKNER: No, after me. But I knew him. Brilliant. And I didn't really read him until after he died. David Foster Wallace, I love.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You—so both of these people committed suicide.

ROSS BLECKNER: I know. That's the weirdest thing. And who's the third? They also committed suicide. I forget. I'm blanking on them.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I think you have a particular sympathy with people who choose to end their lives early.

ROSS BLECKNER: I could understand why. Let's put it like that.

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