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Oral history interview with Gary Garrels, 2016 September 12

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Gary Garrels on 2016 September 12. The interview took place at the San Francisco Museum of Art in San Francisco, CA, 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.

Gary Garrels 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 Gary Garrels at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco, California, on September the 12, 2016, for the Archives of American Art Smithsonian Institution card number one. Hello Gary!

GARY GARRELS: Hello Linda!

LINDA YABLONSKY: So your official title here at SFMOMA is what exactly?

GARY GARRELS: I am the Elise S. Haas senior curator of painting and sculpture.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Now this is your second stint at this museum.

GARY GARRELS: Yes, it is.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It's—you're like the couple that breaks up and realizes they were meant for each other after all.

GARY GARRELS: Yes. Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So how did that happen? I mean—

GARY GARRELS: Well, no, I arrived here initially in the fall, I think it was around November 1, 1993, when the museum was still in the old building on Van Ness Avenue. I came at the invitation of Jack Lane, John R. Lane, the director at the time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Spelled, L-A-N-E?

GARY GARRELS: John R. Lane, L-A-N-E. Yeah. And I remained curator until May 2000, when I left to become the chief curator for the department of drawings at MoMA New York and curator of painting and sculpture at MoMA, where I was—held that position until the—I think it was again May of 2005 when I became—went to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, where I was the deputy director and chief curator, and an invitation was extended to me by Neal Benezra, the current director. Neal, N-E-A-L, Benezra, B-E-N-E-Z-R-A, who approached me in the winter of 2007—or no sorry, winter 2008, about returning to the museum. And I decided to accept that position, and in the fall of 2008, divided my time between the Hammer and SFMOMA and then was fully here by the end of the year of 08.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Just let me go over the dates again.

GARY GARRELS: Yup.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So '90, you started here, it was '93?

GARY GARRELS: Fall of '93, November.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And then you went to MoMA in?

GARY GARRELS: Yes, in May, I believe it was May or June 2000.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And stayed there for five years?

GARY GARRELS: Five years. And then I believe it was summer 2005—I know it was summer, June, went to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

GARY GARRELS: Where—and then again came fully back to SFMOMA in the late fall of '08. Yup.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It would seem to a lot of people, not necessarily myself included, that leaving the Museum of Modern Art, which is at the top of the museum world, to go to a small institution like the Hammer is a strange sideways move—backwards, almost because of—the Hammer's a wonderful museum, don't get me wrong.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So what went into that decision?

GARY GARRELS: I—when I came to MoMA, New York, I had some goals, which I spoke to Glenn Lowry about when I was making that decision, and he had extended the invitation to me to join the curatorial staff. I wanted to bring to New York a retrospective of Dieter Roth, a German-Swiss artist, and we're just—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Please continue, sorry.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. So I had two exhibitions that I wanted to have presented at MoMA. One was the Dieter Roth retrospective that was being organized in Basel by the Museum für Gegenwartskunst.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow. Can you spell that for me, please?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. G-E-G-E-N-W-A-R-T-S-K-U-N-S-T. Yeah, it means the museum of contemporary art, basically. And I wanted to organize a retrospective of the American artist Brice Marden. And so—and I did do both of those things while I was at MoMA, and I also—my goal was to strengthen the postwar collection of drawings to try to reach the same level of quality and depth as the pre-war collection. The first half of the—so the second half of the twentieth century would be commensurate with the first half of the twentieth century in the collection. And I think I did accomplish that. Made many major acquisitions, and brought some major collections to the museum.

So the things that have been most fundamental to me in going to MoMA, I did. My longtime partner, now husband, Richard Hoblock H-O-B-L-O-C-K, was living and working in Los Angeles, and we'd been commuting for five years between New York and Los Angeles, and I also wanted to just bring our lives a little closer together. And, you know, I would say MoMA, and I think this is not a secret to anyone, is a very difficult place to work in. And I felt that I would have more creative freedom at the Hammer. And I also—I think that I—anyway, I felt like I had achieved what I wanted to achieve at MoMA, and it was the right time to make a break.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How old are you now?

GARY GARRELS: I just turned 65.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you were how old when you left MoMA?

GARY GARRELS: I would've been, let's see, that was 2005, I would've been, is it 54?

LINDA YABLONSKY: So 15 years ago.

GARY GARRELS: 54, yeah. Yup.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Some people might say you were having a midlife crisis!

[They laugh.]

You had, I think, enormous success at MoMA. I think you're being too modest that saying you just—saying you accomplished your goals is, you know, no small thing. But I saw all those shows and I know what you did.

GARY GARRELS: Yup.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And more than that, it was—you got stellar reviews from everyone, and they were very well-attended shows, and they traveled. Well, did the Dieter Roth travel?

GARY GARRELS: No, the Dieter Roth came from—

LINDA YABLONSKY: The Marden did.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: Dieter Roth was we brought from Basel. And is in—and the Marden show traveled actually here to SFMOMA and to the—and to Berlin to the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How does one—I'm sorry.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, no, it's the Museum of Contemporary Art in Berlin.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How does one learn to be a curator?

GARY GARRELS: Well, I learned through experience.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh really?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Not through formal education.

GARY GARRELS: No, no, no. I may be one of the last—a dying breed maybe. No, I didn't—had not studied art history, I kind of—as I say stumbled in the back door. I began—I had gone to—started a doctoral program in sociology at Princeton in 1976. I very quickly felt that I was in the wrong place and—anyway, felt I had—I did not know what I wanted to do, but I felt like I wasn't in the right place or heading in the right direction. And a friend told me at the time about these new galleries that were opening in a neighborhood in New York City called SoHo. And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Let's—I just want to backtrack a little bit.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, sure. Yup.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was a doctoral program, so where did you go—what were your undergraduate and graduate studies?

GARY GARRELS: Well, I did my undergraduate degree at a place called New College in Sarasota, Florida.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you grow up in Florida?

GARY GARRELS: No, I grew up on a farm in Iowa.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really? Like milking cows and things like that?

GARY GARRELS: No, we didn't have to milk cows, but I cleaned out a lot of hog houses.

[Laughter.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow. I didn't know you were from—a farm boy from Iowa.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, no. I still joke if I shake my cuff hard enough a little chaff will fall out.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, did you have any art exposure in the middle of Iowa?

GARY GARRELS: My grandmother was a Sunday painter. And she was quite good. She painted still lives and landscapes and—basically, and I've—when I was a kid I would sometimes take my naps on the couch in her sewing room, which was also her painting studio. So anyway, maybe there was a little exposure there that—she was a wonderfully creative person and—so that—having it—there was a painter, a creative person, in my life early on, although she was really a, you know, the old-fashioned homemaker.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But did she live with your family?

GARY GARRELS: No. No, she lived a—she and her husband moved off the farm, and then he passed away and she was living in the town then by herself, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did she have books also? Art books?

GARY GARRELS: No. No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No, so it was only her own painting that you were exposed to.

GARY GARRELS: Only her own painting, yeah. Which were very modest-sized, and I still have a few of her works.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really?

GARY GARRELS: Yup.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What did your parents do? Oh, they were farmers!

GARY GARRELS: Nope, my father was a farmer, and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Thank you.

GARY GARRELS: And he also had what we call a grain and feed business. We lived seven miles out of town.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which was what town?

GARY GARRELS: The county seat was a little town in southeastern Iowa called Mount Pleasant, Iowa, about 7000 people, and we lived about seven miles out of town. And it was a very traditional Iowa farm of—grew corn and soybeans and raised Angus cattle and Hampshire hogs. And—but it was—you know, I mean I have to say, I had no affinity for farming.

[Laughter.]

And I was always drawn to books. I read voraciously as a kid, and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Public school education?

GARY GARRELS: Public school education and, you know, very decent, solid education at the time. My mother was more sympathetic to my reading. She certainly didn't discourage it. My father I think was frustrated. He hoped I would, you know, take over the farm, which is very clear to me by—certainly before I even went into high school that I was not going to take over the farm. And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you have siblings?

GARY GARRELS: I have two younger sisters. Yeah. Both of—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And did they stay on the farm?

GARY GARRELS: No, they both—they're both still in Iowa. My youngest sister is an organic grower and raises goats and does weaving and dyeing and that kind of thing, and my other sister became a high school English teacher in the suburbs of Des Moines. So.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see. So what happened to—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. So anyway, I started—I spent a year at Iowa State and had some idea that maybe I could study architecture, but I really didn't know anything about it. And then I transferred to the University of Iowa and after a semester there felt I had to get out of Iowa. I mean I have to say I'd had very little—I'd been to Chicago a couple times for a brief period—had very little idea of anything out in the world outside of Iowa. So I actually—in those days, you know, we didn't have computers like we do now, so I actually went to the library and started researching colleges at the library and found a few—I decided—I also decided I did not want to study in a college that was focused around, you know, a traditional grading system, because I found when I was at the universities in Iowa basically the other students were just simply working to get a grade. They actually had very little interest in what they were studying.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: And so I thought, well, to solve that, I want to go to a school that doesn't have grades. And there aren't so many of those. Anyway there were—I looked at a few places. Hampshire College had started, UC Santa Cruz was there, there were a couple—St. John's. Anyway, I ended up applying to this college called New College in Sarasota, Florida, and was admitted. So, I transferred there in the fall of '71. And finished my coursework in the spring of '74—I still had to write a thesis—and I moved to Boston. New York was too intimidating and there were some other students from the college had—were from Boston or I knew there, so there were a few people I knew. But I moved there totally cold—literally put everything in the car and just drove

up to Boston and found an apartment, and started finding a job.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What was that job?

GARY GARRELS: Oh, I did all kinds of odds and ends, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Odd jobs. This was 1974?

GARY GARRELS: This was '74, yeah. And so I realized that I really probably what I—my inclinations were academic and I probably should think about going to grad school. So I was interested in that. I started doing course work out of Brandeis in sociology. There was a professor there I was very interested in named Kurt Wolff, who was the American translator of the German sociologist and psychologist Georg Simmel.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wolff is with one F or two?

GARY GARRELS: Two F's. And Simmel is S-I-M-M-E-L. He's basically the founder of—progenitor of what we call social psychology. Anyway, I became immersed in social sciences, particularly sociology. And I'll just say, frankly, my—maybe this is getting too personal, but I was really struggling, trying to understand the world I was living in, because I'd grown up on this farm very isolated, and when I moved to Sarasota, that was like a city for me. And then moving to Boston was, like, a huge city. And I was—I found through the German, particular the German sociologists, they were describing the transition in Germany from small-town agricultural background to, you know, an industrializing urban society, and I found it very helpful in understanding my own situation and condition.

LINDA YABLONSKY: There was also a gay community in Boston.

GARY GARRELS: There was, but I wasn't out then. But I—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you weren't out, but you had relationships or not?

GARY GARRELS: No, I actually was living with a woman. We actually had gotten married.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, you were married!

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, for four years.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What was her name?

GARY GARRELS: Her name was Cynthia Martinelli, and she was from Chicago. And then she ended up—we split up, and she ended up kind of digging into her own background, and she had this I think lurking feeling that there were secrets that she didn't know, and she did find out after kind of pummeling her mother with questions that her mother's family—I think were largely killed in the Holocaust and that she was Jewish. And her mother had basically become a Catholic with her father.

LINDA YABLONSKY: There are many stories like that.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, but how long were you married?

GARY GARRELS: Four years. We got married while we were in college, so. Anyway, so it was a transition and I moved to Boston and then I realized I was gay and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: You didn't realize because you'd met somebody?

GARY GARRELS: No, I just was totally attracted to men [laughs]s

LINDA YABLONSKY: No one in particular. [Lauhing.]

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. But it was a very appealing idea! [Laughing.] So, anyway. So at the same time I was going through a process of coming out, and—this is the, you know, early mid-70s, so it's still all pretty new in terms of gay liberation, and so on. And—yeah, it took me a while to figure out that there were gay bars. I mean it was not—it's not like now, where everybody, everything is on the internet, you know. It was a very different time period. And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well—

GARY GARRELS: Anyway, I ended up having a boyfriend, and in fact he moved with me to Princeton. Then—so I

anyway decided to go to grad school, and I applied to some different schools. I got into Princeton with a full fellowship, and so in the fall of '76, I moved to Princeton with my boyfriend. And as I said, I did not like Princeton, and I realized if I got through and I did well in the program, I might get a teaching job at the University of Wisconsin, [laughing] or the University of Georgia or, you know, something like that, and I'd be right back where I started from in Iowa, and I just—I did not—that was not appealing. And I did not like Princeton and—anyway, a friend told me about the galleries that were in New York and the museums, and so I started going into New York City and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But wait a minute.

GARY GARRELS: Yup.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You hadn't studied art.

GARY GARRELS: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But the idea of galleries and museums was attractive?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, it was interesting. But I was not interested—I was interested—I have to say when I moved from Sarasota to Boston, which was the spring of '74, I stopped in Washington, DC and a good friend from college was living there. He was staying at his parents' house, which was near Dupont Circle, and on a Saturday morning he said, "Do you want to go over to see the Phillips Collection?" And I said, sure. I had no idea what the Phillips Collection was. But—and there was a room, relatively small room at the time, that had these four incredible Rothko paintings in them. And I will never forget that experience of seeing those Rothko's. I had no language for it, but there was something absolutely transformative, you know, just about that, and it wasn't something I've dwelled on overly at the time, but it was something that kept coming back to me. And so then when the—this friend of mine told me about galleries and museums in New York, that was pretty interesting. And of course, the—New College is adjacent to the Ringling Museum, so.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh I see, yeah.

GARY GARRELS: But I have to say, I didn't spend—I spent very little time at Ringling Museum when I was there because it was primarily figurative work and—and what I got excited about was that with Rothko, these were not pictures of the world. They were something that was an experience unto themselves. They didn't have anything commensurate outside of themselves, and that was really exciting. And so when I started going into SoHo and the museums, I was really fascinated by really contemporary art.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What year was this now?

GARY GARRELS: '76, fall of '76. And so I mean it was just, you know, in New York it was Sonnabend Gallery and Castelli and Heiner Friedrich had the Lone Star Foundation at the time. And—yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Heiner Friedrich, just for the record, was a collector and a dealer at the time.

GARY GARRELS: Yes, yeah. And was seeing these—again, I had no language for it. And I remember the—I went the—that was the year PS1 opened, and I saw the opening show, and that was, again, just—it was like this world opening up that had—was just completely new, and fresh and exciting.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I don't mean to interrupt you—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —but also, for the record, we should say that PS1 was a kind of alternative contemporary art space.

GARY GARRELS: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Now part of the Museum of Modern Art.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And was a very radical move at the time. It wasn't even in Manhattan—

GARY GARRELS: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —although it had an outpost in Manhattan. And I think just about every contemporary artist born since—in your lifetime, had his or her first show there—from everywhere.

GARY GARRELS: A lot, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Not just New York, but Europe as well.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. And MoMA itself was doing its "projects" shows. So I was really attracted to this, you know, I mean it was like seeing Vito Acconci at Sonnabend. I mean it was, you know, it was—I've forgotten the name of the name of the piece, but where had a plank coming out the window onto West Broadway, you know. And it was, you know, I mean it was the—it was a time of a lot of experimentation and new ideas, and it all for me anyway was incredibly fresh and exciting, and opening up a whole different set of experiences that were completely new to me.

So I was very interested and then—so I left Princeton and I moved back to Boston. I was looking for a job and I found—and back then, it wasn't posted, you actually had to go to a job board at, you know. So I would go look at the job boards at Harvard and MIT, and I saw a posting at MIT for a part time clerical support person for the contemporary gallery at MIT, which was the Hayden Gallery, H-A-Y-D-E-N. And I interviewed with the young—she was called special assistant to the director or something like—chairman of the committee on the visual arts. A woman named Kathy Halbreich.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, really?

GARY GARRELS: And Kathy had been there for six months. She has also changed her life course. She'd been working at admissions in various things at Bennington College where she had gone and decided that she needed to leave Bennington and moved to Boston and got this job. And starting her work as a curator—anyway I became her assistant. And, I mean, part of it was I typed 80 words a minute and Kathy didn't type.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you got the job.

GARY GARRELS: And I got the job.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was fortuitous, I must say.

GARY GARRELS: Well, we spent about three hours as I recall talking, and we talked about Rothko, but we also, you know, talked about Heidegger and we talked about, you know, politics and, you know, it was literature and all kinds of things, and obviously I was very, very eager and energetic, and typed fast. And anyway, I got the job and I spent a couple years doing that and then the registrar left and I became the registrar, which I was for two years, and then I became an assistant curator.

In the meantime, I went to Europe for the first time. I can't remember what year that must've been—'78 I want to say, something like that. And as I said discovered there was art before Pollock. I really was not interested in figurative work. I found it really dull, uninteresting. You know, I'd rather look at—out a window and see real life rather than looking at a picture of real life. But I—when I went to Italy for the first time it was, again, you know, like the scales dropped off my eyes, you know. I discovered Caravaggio and Bernini and Titian and the Florentine Renaissance, and it was just, again, like this incredible waking up.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But wait. You're working in this gallery.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And you had no inkling that the Renaissance had happened?

GARY GARRELS: Not really. Not really, no. I was—and so—but you know I was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And one other question before you go on.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you said you became, after a couple of years in the system as a curator, so what did that mean?

GARY GARRELS: Well no so I worked with Kathy's assistant for a couple years and then I became the registrar.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: So I took care of the collection.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

GARY GARRELS: MIT had a collection. I would say it was probably about 1000 works. And they by intention did not want to have a museum. The idea was to put the works out on the campus in public areas, so conference rooms, lobbies, libraries, and so on, so that people would be exposed to contemporary art in their daily life. Anyway, and I ran—I did that. And so I became—I had to talk about contemporary art to arrange from everything from, you know, the—an office administrator to department heads to professors and I also ran—there was a program lending prints and posters to students every fall, and I ran that program. So—and I was like an evangelist. I had discovered contemporary art and loved it, and I loved talking about it to other people. And loved this idea of the collection being out, you know, in the—throughout the university.

And—but anyway, I just—and then I went to Italy for the first time and discovered, you know, as I said, art before Pollock. And I came back to the States and decided to sign up for a night class at Boston University, with—in Italian Renaissance. And studied with a wonderful professor named Hellmut Wohl, W-O-H-L, who was a Domenico Veneziano authority/scholar. And I loved it. And the end of the semester, Helmut suggested that I take another class with the head of the—he was head of the—I think the graduate program, and he had suggested taking a class with the head of the whole art history program at Boston University, a man named Fred Kleiner. And he was teaching a class on Roman art.

So that was perfect, you know, having—after Italian Renaissance, then to go back and study Roman. So anyway that—and then at the end of that semester, in the spring, Professor Kleiner invited me to apply to the graduate program—the master's program in art history at Boston University, and they waived the requirements, because I had no art history background. And so I started then—it took me four years of doing seminars or colloquia or whatever courses on the side, and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mmm. I see.

GARY GARRELS: And MIT had a wonderful tuition assistance program for helping you improve your knowledge and background for your, you know, position. And meanwhile I was—I had a very, very good friend from New College who was living in New York in the East Village. And he had also come out—he was gay. And I had keys to his apartment, and I could stay at his apartment either on the couch, or often he'd be staying with his boyfriend, and so I'd have the whole apartment to myself. And I started going down to New York every few weeks.

LINDA YABLONSKY: While you—were you still working for Kathy?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: While you were taking all these courses?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, so I was studying very—Boston University had a very traditional art history program, emphasizing looking at works of art. It was not a theoretical-driven program. It was a very old fashioned looking at art objects. And they had some very good professors. And anyway, I was working very full time. I always stayed late and, you know, I did a—I mean I was completely dedicated to the job at MIT, and anyway in the midst of studying art history had—I—there were a couple, you know, like I want to say gaps in the schedule or some show would fall through, and I ended up organizing on the side a couple little exhibitions at MIT, and—while I was the registrar, and then I should've looked this up on my CV, I don't remember, but I ended up organizing my first sort of—the gallery was only 2,000 square feet, by the way. You know, it was not a big space. But it was right in the library, right across from the entrance to the library. It was hoping to encourage students to come in, but I have to say very few students ever visited the gallery [laughs]. But anyway, I organized an exhibition of an artist in New York named Agnes Denes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

Garr Garrels: D-E-N-E-S. And I had just discovered her drawings in a group gallery show in New York, and became very interested in what she was doing. And anyway there was a gap in the schedule, and I asked Kathy if I could organize the show, and she said yes. So I organized a show of Agnes. And I did a little show of contemporary self-portraiture and photography, but very unorthodox ideas of self-portraiture included Cindy Sherman, very early. Cindy actually was very leery about being in the show, because she didn't consider her work self-portraits.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's right.

GARY GARRELS: But they've—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: But I spoke to Helene Winer and she finally agreed that she would let me include the work in the show. And I did a little show of underground Boston artists too. Anyway—and then—anyway, so the assistant curator left, and I then became assistant curator.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So—

GARY GARRELS: And I was finishing up my master's degree at Boston University and working. It was crazy, I was work—I was—I had almost no social life at that point, I was just—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I was about to ask you about that.

GARY GARRELS: I was just studying and working. My one diversion was every Sunday afternoon I would go to the tea dance at Chaps, which was a bar. Not really, it wasn't a leather bar or anything, it was just a, you know, a kind of—a standard gay dance bar right behind Boston Public Library. There's a big shopping center there now. Anyway, it was kind of the cool bar in Boston. There were a few. But I would go to tea dance every Sunday afternoon. And that's where I met my now-husband.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Richard.

GARY GARRELS: Richard. And that was in the winter of 1982. And so we ended up living—the next year moved in with each other. And then in 19—I graduated in the spring of 1984 from Boston University. I got my MA, and I'd had a couple years as curator. And I got a job offer in New York to work at a gallery at 420 West Broadway, which was a new partnership formed by a couple women. Irena Hochman—that's I-R-E-N-A Hochman H-O-C-H-M-A-N. And Laura Carpenter. And I knew both of them. I had known both of them independently. I—for—I did a show at MIT called *Visions of Paradise*. And I invited Vito Acconci, David Ireland from San Francisco, and James Surls from Texas to do new work for this exhibition.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Surls is?

GARY GARRELS: S-U-R-L-S. And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Vito Acconci?

GARY GARRELS: V-I-T-O—

LINDA YABLONSKY: No, I know how to—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. And James Surls and David Ireland, who was from—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh David Ireland, yes.

GARY GARRELS: From San Francisco. And I'd become aware of David's work through Kathy, and came to San Francisco and met David and invited him to make a [. . . –GG] work. Anyway, it was my first sort of large major show. Anyway, through that I'd met Laura Carpenter and when Laura and Irena decided to open a gallery together in downtown Manhattan, they asked me if I would come and be quote the "director" of the gallery.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is what year?

GARY GARRELS: This is—this was in the summer of '84. The gallery opened in the fall of '84.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So—and you met Richard—

GARY GARRELS: In the winter of '82.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: By the spring of '82, AIDS was a fact of life already.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, well so.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And particularly gay life.

GARY GARRELS: Yes, absolutely. And I will say—MIT had a very robust program for public art on the campus, and whenever a new building was built, one percent of the budget had to go for either the purchase or commissioning of a work for that building. And sometimes, we would buy works and place them in the building, but in 1981, there was a new animal research laboratory that was built, and Kathy invited a young New York

sculptor named Gary Wiley to develop a proposal for that building. And Gary was gay, and he came up with this proposal for these crazy reliefs of butterflies that had alighted on the building, this animal research laboratory. And Gary I think was one of the first people to develop Kaposi's Sarcoma. And this was in 1981.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh. Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: And the piece was installed in 1981, and as I recall, Gary was very, very sick at the time that it was installed. And I think he passed away very quickly.

LINDA YABLONSKY: As people did then.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But what did you think he had?

GARY GARRELS: Well, you know, nobody knew. And then—but there was, you know, the little articles started coming out right then that, you know, there was something wrong. And I frankly don't remember when, you know, it was identified as AIDS and, you know. But my—Richard, who I met, had had a young friend at MIT who had died very abruptly of an—of some unknown cause. And it was a little, you know, suspicious about that. And my good friend from college that I always stayed with in New York, I believe he developed AIDS symptoms in '83.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So he was gay when you were in Florida before.

GARY GARRELS: No, we both came out later.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

GARY GARRELS: We both had girlfriends when we were in college.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see. Okay.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, yeah. But he lived in the—he moved to New York. He was the fellow that I had stayed with in Washington to go to—but we were not boyfriends, we were just friends, and he had a girlfriend and I had a girl.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And what was his name?

GARY GARRELS: His name was Larry Gurel, G-U-R-E-L. And his father was some kind of—I believe worked in government and was a professional—anyway, Larry moved to New York and, you know, lived on the Lower East—lived in the East Village on East 13th Street between Second and Third. And as I said I would go down and visit Larry and stay with him often, and I had this—I had a boyfriend then in '77, and we would go down often together, and he had a friend, another gay guy, who lived on Second Avenue between Third and Fourth or Fourth and Fifth. And I am sure that was the building where Hélio Oiticica was living at the time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. But I didn't know it then. I didn't—I was not aware of Hélio at that point.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No.

GARY GARRELS: But I'm sure it was that building. And anyway, I was, you know, we'd—I was going to New York a lot, and became very aware of AIDS very quickly. And then Gary Wiley, he died, and then there was another artist, a guy named James Ford.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Ford.

GARY GARRELS: Ford. Who had participated in a show that Kathy had done at the gallery in 1979, and I don't remember, James also developed AIDS symptoms pretty early on.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But did this curtail your—I mean you were in a monogamous relationship.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But gay men in monogamous relationships weren't always monogamous in that—at that period.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, well you know, I have to say, I, you know, I grew up on a farm and I—in growing up I was

alone a lot. I didn't have friends; we were—it was too isolated. And I wasn't—I'm just—I've never been a kind of—really social person. Anyway, I mean I, you know, had a number of little affairs or whatever, but I had a longest long term relationship for three or four years, and then—soon after coming out, and then broke up and had some little affairs and this and that, and then I met Richard, and that was in early '82, and I've—we've pretty much maintained a monogamous relationship for 34 years. And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: When did you get married?

GARY GARRELS: Three years ago, after the Supreme Court ruling, when it became, you know, really it was a national recognition of the rights of gay people to marry. And so that we decided then we really would get married. We'd been domestic partners before.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What did it actually mean for you to come out at that time? That—come out to your friends, to your work—coworkers, your superiors? What did it mean?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, well I—yeah, I came out to my coworkers. I mean we were a little office in the middle of MIT, we were all very—it was a very close office, and a very, you know, sympathetic one. So it wasn't a big deal. Again, I didn't have a lot of friends, actually. A few, but not a lot.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What about your family?

GARY GARRELS: And the thing was to my family, yeah, that was—and I'm trying to remember when I came out to my family. The thing about—I was planning to come out to my family, and I was scheduled to go back and see them, it was May, and three weeks before I was supposed to go back and see them, my father died suddenly of a heart attack.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I'm sorry, yeah.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. And I knew it was going to be hardest to tell my father. So—and it was going to very hard to tell my mother, so I think I waited then a little bit before I told her. But I have to say I—you know, I really—the—the spirit of gay liberation in the '70s I was very much part of, in Boston, you know, I always—I'd go to gay rallies, I'd go always be in the gay parade, I had—you know, my—the people I knew who were there were very out. Also, I was working so much and studying so much that I had—I didn't really have free time. I—you know, as I said, my indulgence was going to tea dance on Sunday afternoon generally.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right. But you did participate in these rallies and—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, absolutely. Oh yeah. No, absolutely. From after I came out, I mean I really—you know, I also—like New College was a very, very liberal, very progressive school. I mean I was attracted to things that broke with tradition. And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's important.

GARY GARRELS: You know, falling in love with contemporary art and not traditional—I didn't come at art through representation or historical art. I've got—fell in love with art because of contemporary art, because it completely opened up in different new experiences that earlier art just didn't do. And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you also—I mean you were on this farm in Iowa.

GARY GARRELS: Yup.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Or in Florida at a—in the 60s.

GARY GARRELS: Well, I graduated from high school in '69. And you know I—and again, I went to—started at Iowa State and then left after the first year, and then transferred to Iowa, so—and then I went to New College in the fall of '71.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But I mean in the culture in general, that was a kind of birth of radicalism in almost every area of culture of people who didn't do things the way they always had been done.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And the beginning of feminism and the gay liberation movement.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. Well—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And the anti-Vietnam War.

GARY GARRELS: Right. Well, I was very active in—when I was at Iowa State, that was, you know, the year of Kent State, the spring of '70, and was very involved in, you know, protests and peace rallies and so on. And you know, the Vietnam War was something that, you know, I think—we're all found just, you know, a horrendous—and it was, you know, it was the anti-war movement, but also the music at the time. You know, we were getting the, you know, the new rock, you know, was—San Francisco particularly, you know, and Janis Joplin and Sly and the Family Stone. And that stuff was—I was instantly in love with all of that. I think that's typical, you know, young people fall in—the music is really important as a, you know, embodying certain values.

And anyway, and leaving Iowa, the decision to leave Iowa was—that was a huge thing. You know, my parents were very—my mother was very upset that I—because I actually had dropped out of Iowa, the University of Iowa. I just said, "I've got to get out of here, I don't know what I'm going to do, but I've gotta get out of here." And so that was like the first big, transgressive break. And I have to say, when I got to New College, I basically hid in my dorm room for the first year, because it was just all so completely new and foreign and alien, and I didn't understand anything about—most of the kids who went there came from very sophisticated, very liberal, well-to-do families from suburbs from Boston, New York, Washington, Philadelphia, you know. It was a very radical, privileged group of young people. And I had absolutely no frame of reference to know how to relate to these people at all.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you did eventually?

GARY GARRELS: Kind of, but yeah. I had - again, I didn't have a lot of friends. I had a few friends. And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you've always—so you've always had this political consciousness.

GARY GARRELS: Yes, going back to Vietnam, absolutely. And I have to say, the other thing is my family were progressive Democrats. They were Methodists. So, I have a lot of empathy for Hillary Clinton.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: They believed in social good. Every summer when I was in high school, they would have a young black kid from Chicago come and stay on the farm for a week. We had a very liberal, progressive minister. He actually, when I was in high school, he took a group of us to Chicago for four or five days.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really?

GARY GARRELS: It was the first time I'd, you know, seen black people.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. We had—the janitor in our high school was the only black person I had ever seen. And anyway, but it was like—but we always had a kid from the ghettos in Chicago come and stay on the farm for a few days in the summer with us. No, they were very—they were progressive Democrats, and Methodists, and believed in social good and that people who were—and I mean, I have to say, we were very poor when I grew up. We had—it was—it was a struggle. We lived in a very old farmhouse. My sisters and I would literally have snowball fights in our bedrooms, because there was so much snow coming in under the windows.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh my God. Wow.

GARY GARRELS: Anyway, but then—and then my father started—he started a little—what we call a grain and feed business, and was doing better by the time I was in high school. And so—but anyway, they believed that it was important to help people who somehow didn't have the—whatever our good fortune was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So interesting. I mean, that they—I mean you were in a kind of isolated place, and they had a very kind of sophisticated and well-reasoned outlook on life.

GARY GARRELS: Well it's—I mean it's a—they're—I mean the Midwest is very divided. You see it now in Iowa.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: Where the state is really split almost down the middle, and the eastern half of the state, which is where I'm from, has always been the more liberal side.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

GARY GARRELS: And again, it's—this kind of Midwestern progressive liberalism, you know, Democratic thing. You know, coming out of, you know, really out of the New Deal was very important. And then—and believing in the importance of education. That was very, very important. And I remember when I was in college, I read Thomas

Jefferson's writings, and Iowa was really founded and developed in the—around the time—Jefferson died in 1826, and his writings in the '20s were about the ideal agrarian community, and the organization of an ideal society. And Iowa was really—the whole state was founded and developed around Jeffersonian ideas about what the ideal state would be.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And do you think any of that still has an influence on your thinking, or has always, perhaps? I mean, you haven't exactly rebelled against it.

GARY GARRELS: No, no, no, I mean I basically, yes—those beliefs are my bedrock. But then I left Iowa and I, you know, I found, you know, it was just, you know, it was too constrictive and, you know, and so it was this process of discovery both at New College, when I was there, and then moving to Boston and discovering life in the city, you know. And I had a boyfriend for a while in Boston who—well, my first serious boyfriend was from outside of Boston and had graduated from Brandeis, and he was—I mean, part of the reason, I'm sure, I was attracted to him was he was very urbane and, you know, knew music and literature and he was a real leftist radical from Brandeis.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Was he Jewish?

GARY GARRELS: No, Italian working-class. And you know and developed—began to develop, you know, a more—and was very interested in art and, you know, and then I had a boyfriend who was a guard at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, so every Sunday morning I would go to the Museum of Fine Arts and just wander around in the galleries. And I was across the Fenway from the Gardner Museum, and I'd go to the Gardner Museum on Tuesday nights, because they had free concerts, and you know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You've been—you've had really good boyfriends. Fortuitous.

[Laughter.]

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. So anyway, it's—it was a gradual process. And then—and working with Kathy was very important. I feel very, very, very lucky—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: —that I stumbled into this situation where I had an incredible mentor. You know, I mean, there are—not everybody in the contemporary art world, you know, I mean—Kathy has exceptional social values and a belief in the integrity of the artist's imagination and vision and you know, as a curator you're there to be a supporter, a conduit for the artist, to make—help them make those—make dreams come true, to realize things, to show things, to educate, to—that there's a kind of moral purpose under art.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, I mean, you're speaking—as far as honoring the integrity of the artist, are you speaking—you're speaking of living artists—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —which, you know, you chose a field—

GARY GARRELS: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —where you work with living artists for the most part.

GARY GARRELS: Right. Yes, no, and so was that exciting to me, you know, not just looking at the object, although I'm very—I became very interested in art also by just looking at objects. And thinking about, you know, the meaning of those objects, and where they came from, and their significance, and their history and, you know. And how they're put together and so on. But I was also very interested meeting artists who were making these things. And the MIT program was very much, with Kathy, about having artists come there and, you know, oversee the installation of their work or make new work or, you know. Artists were very involved and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you kind of learned from them as well?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, yeah. And—but I would say Kathy was definitely the most important influence. Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Let me just interject, also for the record, that Kathy Halbreich is now the—

GARY GARRELS: —assistant director—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —assistant director of the Museum of Modern Art, and came from the Walker Arts Center, where you also spent some time.

GARY GARRELS: Well, yeah so it—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And so—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, no we connected at different points.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: And so I left Boston in the fall of '84 to work for this gallery—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —in New York.

GARY GARRELS: In New York.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So what else did you see in New York? '84 was kind of the East Village time.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: More than SoHo at that moment.

GARY GARRELS: Well I—no, I mean—well it was, you know. Mary Boone had opened and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: The same building where your—

GARY GARRELS: Well, no, across the street.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, she'd moved from—

GARY GARRELS: No, she started at 417 [West Broadway]. That was her first gallery.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, but she did have a gallery in 420 also.

GARY GARRELS: Right. So after—so I stayed with Carpenter Hochman [Gallery] for about nine months, and I have to say my great accomplishment there was I—as I said, I had commissioned Vito Acconci to do a project when I was at MIT. And I loved Vito. I thought he was just an amazing artist and person. And he had kind of dropped out of the gallery system at that point. He had been working with Sonnabend, who wasn't working with him any longer, and he was making all this new work I was seeing in the studio, and I—Laura and—Laura and Irena, I asked if I could do a show of Vito at the gallery, and they agreed and let me do that show.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

GARY GARRELS: And that was kind of reintroducing Vito to the—in his new phase, making these interactive objects. And so I did that. And I also, for the summer, got them to let me do a show with this performance artist named Stuart Sherman.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I remember Stuart.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. So Stuart was making sets for these funny performances, and he did these little like standup performances out of a suitcase, and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: So anyway, he did a show of small objects and a set for a Chekhov play, *The Cherry Orchard.*

LINDA YABLONSKY: I loved him.

GARY GARRELS: He was wonderful.

LINDA YABLONSKY:

Because the—I mean he was like a traveling salesman with his suitcase, you know, going to be a pitchman on a street corner. Wonderful.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. So I got to do a couple things in the gallery, but I realized I—it wasn't a good fit for me, and—but no. So I came to New York in fall of—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wait, may I ask?

GARY GARRELS: Yup.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Were you required to try to sell art while you were in this gallery? This was a commercial gallery.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, but you know, I didn't have any experience in that, and so I really wasn't—didn't have the background to go into that. Basically, what I did was kind of keep the whole—like, the administrative part of the gallery coordinated. And basically what I did was sit at the front desk, and whenever anybody of note in the art world came, to make sure that Laura or Irena knew that that person was in the gallery. And so I actually met everybody in the New York art world sitting there at that desk.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see.

GARY GARRELS: And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well you mean artists and collectors and critics, everybody.

GARY GARRELS: Artists and collectors and critics and curators and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: All kinds of people. And I talked to everybody, and I met incredible number of people sitting there at that desk. And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Well, you were also at the hot building, you know—

GARY GARRELS: It was, no, it was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Because everyone went to every gallery in that building, no matter what was the show.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, no it was—yeah. But so yeah. So anyway that was kind of my immersion. I mean with Kathy and being at MIT, I had gotten to know quite a few people in the New York art world. So when I moved to New York I had some kind of a little bit of a base, but then very quickly I, you know, met an enormous number of people.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And did you form professional or personal relationships with anybody you met that continued?

GARY GARRELS: Well, yeah. I hope—I don't think he'll mind, but Jerry Saltz was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And he was a critic, yes.

GARY GARRELS: —was the driver for Laura Carpenter. So whenever Laura would—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right, that's true. The—he trucked all the art.

GARY GARRELS: Whenever Laura would show up from Texas, it was Jerry's job to get the Mercedes out of the garage and cleaned up, and then to chauffeur Laura around New York. And—anyway, and Jerry and I would actually sit together at that front desk quite often.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So he met everybody in the art world then too.

GARY GARRELS: Well, he knew everybody or everybody anyway, a lot of people. Anyway, yeah, I mean I've—I don't know, I feel like I know—I have good relationships with lots of people in the art world, and some of it certainly goes back to those days, and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And did you go to the East Village galleries at the time?

GARY GARRELS: All the time. All the time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: Constantly.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you could leave the gallery and—

GARY GARRELS: No, no. I went on Saturday.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

GARY GARRELS: Or on—whenever I could get her out.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: You know, and then I left the gallery in the late spring of '84, and I'd been offered a job at Christie's to—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really?

GARY GARRELS: —Mm-hmm. To work in the contemporary art department. It was very small at the time. The auction house was not at all like what it is now. It was a little mom and pop kind of operation by comparison to today, and I worked with the woman who was head of contemporary art at Christie's, who was a woman named Martha Baer, B-A-E-R. And I would organize—my job was to organize the day's sale and to assist Martha on the evening sale and to work on big estate appraisals. So, I learned the market very intensively, very quickly. And I realized, again, it was—I realized that the commercial end of the art world was not the right fit for me, and I started looking around to see if I might find something that was, again, getting me back to curatorial. And I was offered a job to be curator at the Akron Art Museum in Ohio, and I stayed two nights, and they made the mistake of putting me up in a renovated grain elevator.

[Laughter.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: What?

GARY GARRELS: And I thought oh my God, I'm back in Iowa! So I didn't take the job, which—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But how did you even get offered that job? You don't have a degree.

GARY GARRELS: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did—you didn't get a graduate degree in any art related-

GARY GARRELS: No, I finished my master's degree in art history. Yeah. And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: In art—but you—not a Ph.D.

GARY GARRELS: No, no. I had a masters.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Just the masters in art history from Boston University.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. University. I mean yes, yeah. And I wrote my thesis paper on Marsden Hartley's German military paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh. Well, the—really interesting, yes.

GARY GARRELS: And because I thought they were—he was one of the great American painters—maybe *the* great American painter of the 20th century, and the German military paintings, I think, are among the most extraordinary paintings he made. And of course, it was all about his, you know, dealing with his own identity as a gay man. And in a time when that was very concealed and, you know, I mean it's—and so that's what I wrote my thesis about.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

GARY GARRELS: So—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did—with any of the shows that you did at MIT with Kathy, did you have to write anything?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, I wrote a little catalogue actually for the *Visions of Paradise* show, yeah. So it was—I've always been interested in the social frame around the art, but I've also been—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —very interested in the art itself, the object.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. I'm always interested in the social frame around the art, because it has an association to what's going on in the world at that time, and all the influences and how things are perceived and how those perceptions change.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So, I'm with you there.

GARY GARRELS: So, anyway—

LINDA YABLONSKY: What was your major influence at that time now, in the '80s? Well, in the mid—this is the mid-80s and now AIDS is becoming an even bigger fact of life.

GARY GARRELS: Yes. By the time I moved to New York, my friend Larry was gravely ill with, you know, HIV, and he died the first year I was there in New York. That was, you know, just—that was the—he was the first person I knew closely who died of AIDS. I mean, I'd known James Ford and Gary Wiley and, you know, I knew people, but Larry had been a very close, personal friend. Then he passed away, and that was very difficult. And—yeah, it was—and then I—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you and Richard feel you should be tested for HIV?

GARY GARRELS: No, I think—you know, we had started seeing each other in early '82, and we were both completely healthy, and we had a monogamous relationship, so we didn't get tested.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But in—as I recall—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —because we didn't know what it was or how you got it, and we thought maybe you could get it just from being in the room with someone—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, you know—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —or touching them—

GARY GARRELS: I didn't believe that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You didn't?

GARY GARRELS: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

GARY GARRELS: I thought that was all kind of hysteria, and it seemed pretty clear that this was being transmitted through sexual contact.

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

GARY GARRELS: And I have to say, by the end of the late '70s, early '80s, there was increasing sexually transmitted diseases of all kinds—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: —going on. You know, gonorrhea was rampant, and herpes and crabs and all, you know, just all kinds of stuff.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, that's true.

GARY GARRELS: And—you know, and I, you know, had a gonorrhea infection from a guy I'd been seeing—and anyway, I think there was also for me anyway, at that time, a sense that promiscuity had a lot of health problems already attached to it, and AIDS was just one more ratcheting-up of that, and it was very clear that it was a devastating disease, because I'd seen Gary—as I said, Gary Wiley, I think, was one of the very first people to be identified with Kaposi's Sarcoma and died very early. So—and Richard and I'd met, and we'd maintained a monogamous—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —relationship, and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you were with—in Akron for two days and then—

GARY GARRELS: [laughs]

LINDA YABLONSKY: —came back?

GARY GARRELS: Came back and—anyway, then I—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And what was Richard doing at that time?

GARY GARRELS: Richard was writing plays—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —and working as a waiter at a restaurant. He started—the first restaurant was a very cool, hip place on the Upper East Side on 62nd Street called Arcadia.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I remember that.

GARY GARRELS: Then when we moved to New York—that opened in the fall of '84 and he'd been working in a fancy restaurant in Boston, and he got a job opening that restaurant, and he'd worked there about six months. And then I was very good friends with a woman named Julie Sylvester—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: The Dia Art Foundation.

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

GARY GARRELS: She was very part of the core group at Dia with Heiner Friedrich—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: He was one of the founders.

GARY GARRELS: —was a founder of Dia, yes. And Julie had a good friend named Danny Emerman, and he and his boyfriend—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —were opening a new Italian restaurant in Tribeca, and Julie said to Richard—she said, "You've got to come work for Danny." And so Richard ended up being sort of the maître d', running the floor at this new restaurant, Barocco which opened, I would say, in '86, I'm thinking. Something—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And was completely an art world hangout.

GARY GARRELS: Totally. Hangout. And so, anyway, I worked at Christie's for nine months—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: —and then Dia went through a collapse, and Heiner Friedrich, who was a founding director, was ousted by a new board of trustees put in place by the de Menil family, by Dominique de Menil.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The de Menils funded the Dia Art Foundation?

GARY GARRELS: Yes. Well, it was the youngest daughter, Philippa—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Philippa.

GARY GARRELS: —Philippa's, who became married to Heiner Friedrich—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —and it was her fortune that was behind the Dia Art Foundation.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So then Dominique stepped in?

GARY GARRELS: Yes. The foundation went through a financial collapse in the end of 1984, and was in a—in '85 was in a consolidation. There was a new board of trustees—

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —that had been brought in, or really a board of trustees, which had not really existed, brought

in by Dominque de Menil, and an interim director who tried to settle the financial issues and sold off properties, and ended up selling off some artwork.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: And then a new director was brought in to figure out how to go forward, a man named Charles Wright.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right—

GARY GARRELS: And I—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —who's still there.

GARY GARRELS: He's still on the board, very involved, yes. And Charlie came in as director—

LINDA YABLONSKY: [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —and he was trying to figure out kind of how to move Dia forward and stop the sale of the one large building that Dia still owned in Manhattan, which was a big warehouse building on West 22nd Street, and was searching for someone to work with him at Dia. And a couple people recommended me to him, including Kathy Halbreich. So Charlie and I spent about four months talking about Dia, and when I first discovered contemporary art, Dia, P.S.1 were my two touchstones.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Can you talk for a minute about what they had in the—what the de Menil—Philippa and Heiner had collected?

GARY GARRELS: Dia had focused on a relatively small number of artists. They were very interested in minimal artists like Don Judd, Dan Flavin, Walter De Maria, artists including Andy Warhol, also Fred Sandback, and then John Chamberlain. And I loved John Chamberlain's work. I was absolutely in love with John's work. And then German artists, Joseph Beuys, Imi Knoebel—Beuys, Imi Knoebel—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —that's K-N-O-E-B-E-L—and Blinky Palermo.Blinky Palermo.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: And for me, one of the transformative experiences when I was first discovering contemporary art was seeing an exhibition that Heiner did on West Broadway of Blinky Palermo work.Blinky Palermo work.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: I did—and I didn't have any language, any conceptual structure, to analyze or talk about the work, but I just remember I walked in and was just transported by Palermo, and now I can say, you know, it's a very tender, poetic, beautiful work. And I was very lucky in 1979—again—so I was coming down from Boston, all the way from—so I discovered contemporary art in 1976 while at Princeton and then, when I went to Boston, I came down to New York constantly and I would spend—there were very cheap flights on People's Express. I could get a $29 ticket, or I would take the train—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —and I stayed on the couch or, again, if my friend Larry wasn't in his apartment, and I had keys, so I had a free place to stay, I had a cheap way to get down there, and I have to say, I didn't know—I knew almost no one, and I would just spend the weekend by myself, looking at art. And I'd eat at one of those cheap Indian restaurants on East 6th Street and make notes about everything I'd seen that day. Then I discovered the gay dance clubs, and so—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I was going to ask you about that.

GARY GARRELS: And so I would—

LINDA YABLONSKY: On the West Side?

GARY GARRELS: Well, first I discovered Paradise Garage—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.], which was a Saturday night disco, basically.

GARY GARRELS: Right, and you had to have somebody be—get you in.

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

GARY GARRELS: I met a guy at a dance and he would get me in, and then there was 12 West, which was on 12th and West Street. That was the best club. I would dance all night. And I'd be by myself—12th and West Street. That was the best club. I would dance all night. And I'd be by myself—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really?

GARY GARRELS: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And everyone there was on drugs—

GARY GARRELS: I know, yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —poppers and other drugs—

GARY GARRELS: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —speed, and not you?

GARY GARRELS: Not me, no.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really?

GARY GARRELS: I did a little—

LINDA YABLONSKY: You just—

GARY GARRELS: I did a little marijuana, maybe the occasional popper, but not much. I just loved dancing—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —and it was just this wonderful—it was the mix of people, and also there was a great dance club in Boston called the 1270.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: Which was in the Fenway, and I lived just a few blocks away from it. And it was a dance club where, you know, it'd be Harvard students and black guys from the ghetto, and working-class guys from Dorchester, and everybody just mixed and danced. It was the most democratic, ecumenical place. It was just people—it was like this—you know, it was this moment of gay liberation, where there was this incredible elation and liberation about being gay and being out, and not hiding, and not covering it up.

And it was a time of tremendous exuberance and optimism. It seemed like, you know, it was all—it really was a sense of real liberation. And then, as I said, by the—and so I'd go to the 1270, but it wasn't an all-night club. Then I discovered the all-night clubs in New York, so I'd literally go dance all night, and then go back to Larry's apartment and sleep for two or three hours, and then get up and have, you know, coffee and orange juice and go to museums at 10:00, and then get back on the train or the plane at the end of the Sunday night, and fly back to Boston and go to work on Monday morning.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I would say you were very consumed with art, not just gay—the freedom of gay life.

GARY GARRELS: I was. It was just this, you know, constant discovery—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: I—yeah. And working with Kathy and at MIT was a wonderful, great place to be working.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you have any idea about—or have any faith or suspicion that there was something you could do in art that would have the same kind of exuberant, democratic, attractive energy to it, that it could be bigger than the art world?

GARY GARRELS: Yes, I would say yes. And no.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: Because, again, as I said, I fell in—I discovered historical art and fell in love with the Italian Renaissance and then with Caravaggio and Bernini, the Baroque, and that was art that was like the contemporary art that was at Dia—that it was a total immersive experience.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: And the art and the architecture and the situation were all completely integrated. It wasn't like seeing historical pictures in museums, seeing Italian art in situ in Florence and Rome and Venice.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, I see.

GARY GARRELS: And that for me was commensurate with the experience I was getting from places like Dia or P.S.1.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, I understand.

GARY GARRELS: And so, art for me was this, about some kind of experiential, transformative, you know, situation, that it was something outside of the ordinary, out of, you know, ordinary daily existence. It was—I mean, you know, it was often a kind of transcendent experience.

LINDA YABLONSKY: As was Saturday night at 12 West.

GARY GARRELS: As was Saturday night dancing at 12 West, right. And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you became director of Dia?

GARY GARRELS: Well, no. What had happened was then—so I spent four months—and Charlie and I talked a lot about the building on 22nd Street—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —and came up with this program that we would—and so, then Charlie offered me the job to be what—we had to come up with a name. He didn't want a curator—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —so I became director of programs at Dia. That was the title. And the main—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Are programs something apart from exhibitions?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. Well, then we started the Discussions in Contemporary Art.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, uh-huh. Very important.

GARY GARRELS: And that was really Charlie's initiative. He had grown up in Seattle with Hal Foster—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, yes?

GARY GARRELS: —a very eminent art historian and critic.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: And Charlie and Hal were good friends, and then there was a fellow named—what's his first name? Bailey, who had a small publishing company in—outside of Seattle. Anyway, the three of them had grown up together, and so Hal and Charlie and—I'll think of his name—sort of together started this Discussions in Contemporary Culture, and Hal helped organize the first couple of those. I then organized one on Warhol. And I was very interested in Warhol.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: And I'm—I know because he—of his gay identity for sure.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.] Did you meet him when you came to New York?

GARY GARRELS: I met him in passing just a couple times with his entourage—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: —but I never—

LINDA YABLONSKY: You didn't go to the Factory?

GARY GARRELS: No. And when I started at Dia, we also—there was a small space on Wooster Street, and Charlie had started a program there. It was still—well, actually, I don't think Charlie started it. I think—anyway, there was a show of works by Warhol from the collection, and the first—

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is—did you seen the Heiner Friedrich *Shadows* show?

GARY GARRELS: Yes, I did in 1979, I'm pretty sure.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Warhol's Shadows, which are now in the—

GARY GARRELS: Warhol's Shadows.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —Dia collection.

GARY GARRELS: Right, which was on—yeah. No, I saw many shows there that Heiner did—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —the Cy Twombly show, Blinky Palermo, an amazing Dan Twombly show, Blinky Palermo, an amazing Dan Flavin show.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —and then *The New York Earth Room* and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: *The New York Earth room* is an installation of dirt, basically—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —that—by Walter De Maria—

GARY GARRELS: Walter De Maria, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —that the Dia Foundation—the Dia Art Foundation still supports.

GARY GARRELS: Has maintained since 1978, I believe.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. Amazing, for New York real estate prices being what they are.

GARY GARRELS: Absolutely. And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And the *Broken Kilometer*. Is that still there?

GARY GARRELS: Since 1979. Yes, it is, absolutely.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It's another Walter De Maria work. It was always amazing to—that's really an oasis. It's—

GARY GARRELS: But those were the things that were really exciting me—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: —and inspiring me. And then I remember, also, Fred Sandback made an extraordinary installation at P.S.1. I remember that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: I mean, there were many things at P.S.1 that were, you know, wonderful.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, so—

GARY GARRELS: And I also—I was very lucky; when I came down from Boston one weekend, there was the Joseph Beuys exhibition at the Guggenheim. And I had heard of Beuys. I knew a little, tiny bit about him, but I decided I would start at the Guggenheim and then work my way downtown. So I went there first thing on that Saturday morning, and it was the first time I'd ever found contemporary art where I absolutely had no clue what it was about. I was completely baffled by this work and I almost—I never rented a headset, but finally I was

halfway down the ramp and I said, "I'm going to have to get the headset because I do not understand what this work is." And the headset was the narrative, I'm almost positive it was by Caroline Tisdall, and it was extraordinary. And again, I got about halfway down the ramp with the headset and then I took it off, because it was like Saul on the road to Damascus being thrown, and the light of God coming down, you know. It was a completely different understanding of what art could be, and I couldn't look at anything in another gallery that day. It completely—I just couldn't look at a picture.Beuys exhibition at the Guggenheim. And I had heard of Beuys. I knew a little, tiny bit about him, but I decided I would start at the Guggenheim and then work my way downtown. So I went there first thing on that Saturday morning, and it was the first time I'd ever found contemporary art where I absolutely had no clue what it was about. I was completely baffled by this work and I almost—I never rented a headset, but finally I was halfway down the ramp and I said, "I'm going to have to get the headset because I do not understand what this work is." And the headset was the narrative, I'm almost positive it was by Caroline Tisdall, and it was extraordinary. And again, I got about halfway down the ramp with the headset and then I took it off, because it was like Saul on the road to Damascus being thrown, and the light of God coming down, you know. It was a completely different understanding of what art could be, and I couldn't look at anything in another gallery that day. It completely—I just couldn't look at a picture.Tisdall, and it was extraordinary. And again, I got about halfway down the ramp with the headset and then I took it off, because it was like Saul on the road to Damascus being thrown, and the light of God coming down, you know. It was a completely different understanding of what art could be, and I couldn't look at anything in another gallery that day. It completely—I just couldn't look at a picture.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I understand.

GARY GARRELS: It was just something of a different order altogether as art.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What year was that show?

GARY GARRELS: '79.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I saw that show.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I didn't know anything about art, and it was—I was taken by the mother of someone I later lived with who was a painter, and she knew all about it, and that was the first—yeah, that was —it was formative experience, although not directly. But I never forgot it; that's for sure.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I still remember it quite clearly.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. So that began my—an obsession with Beuys, and of course—Beuys, and of course—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —Dia—actually, Heiner Friedrich was the main funder of that exhibition and the—it probably was still the Lone Star Foundation at the time; I don't recall, but there was—the Lone Star Foundation was the predecessor of Dia.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I didn't know that.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, and—but Lone Star—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —was set up to collect art, and the Dia was set up to support artists' projects, and then Lone Star was subsumed by Dia. The collection came into Dia. Anyway, Charlie and I—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —developed a plan, a program to develop a series of exhibition spaces in this warehouse on 22nd Street. Charlie had had that plan and was already working with Richard Gluckman, an architect, to renovate the space. The space had been used as the warehouse by Dia for the collection and the Gluckman, an architect, to renovate the space. The space had been used as the warehouse by Dia for the collection and the Menil Collection was opening the new building in Houston.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: I think that was in '87, and Charlie worked out an agreement to transfer the Dia collection to Menil, so Menil would hold and take care and store the Dia Collection, which opened up the 22nd Street building to be developed as an exhibition space. That's when I came and I saw the building—it had been cleared out already—and just saw the raw building, and then Richard Gluckman started the plan—the renovation. And we had this other small space down on Wooster Street, where we did a—there was a series of three exhibitions of Warhol's work. The first one was the hand-painted paintings from '61/'62, and Donna De Salvo organized that.Gluckman started the plan—the renovation. And we had this other small space down on Wooster Street, where we did a—there was a series of three exhibitions of Warhol's work. The first one was the hand-painted paintings from '61/'62, and Donna De Salvo organized that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Donna de Salvo? Yes.

GARY GARRELS: Yes. And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Who was—

GARY GARRELS: Who was at Dia. And then—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —and then she had let—when—when Dia was—I can't remember whether spring of '84, probably, or—I don't know—yeah, or fall of '84. Anyway, that was when Heiner was shut out of Dia and, again, an interim director came in, and the staff had all left. Basically, there were very few people who remained. Donna was sort of carried over for a bit. It was a skeleton staff at that point, and Donna organized this—in this Wooster Street space, the hand-painted pop Warhol works.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —and then there was a "disaster" paintings—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Of Andy Warhol—

GARY GARRELS: Of Andy's, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: And then I got to Dia and the last—the third of the shows was to be an exhibition of the Skulls—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —which were the paintings Andy did in 1976. Andy was—had been going to make a new wallpaper for it, and he died, and so I got to Dia just after Andy died.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which was 1987?

GARY GARRELS: That was 1987, right. And so, the first thing I had to do was come up with a plan to hang the Skulls without Andy. I have to say, I was terrified.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah!

GARY GARRELS: But I did it and it turned out, I think, well, and was very well received. And then Charlie and I decided to convene a group of people we respected in the art world to meet with us to talk about artists that we might work with at 22nd Street. We brought in Harold Szeemann and Kasper Koenig from Europe. Harald Szeemann is H-A-R-A-L-D, S-Z-E-E-M-A-N, maybe two Ns. I can't remember.Szeemann and Kasper Koenig from Europe. Harald Szeemann is H-A-R-A-L-D, S-Z-E-E-M-A-N, maybe two Ns. I can't remember.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And Kasper?

GARY GARRELS: Kasper is K-A-S-P-E-R, Koenig, K-O-E-N-I-G, and Kathy Halbreich, and Dick Bellamy—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

GARY GARRELS: —and Yvonne Rainer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, my God.

GARY GARRELS: And we met for two days—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —and each one of them brought forward the name of three artists they thought would be important, potentially, to work with at Dia. We decided rather—Heiner had always wanted to do permanent installations, but—we couldn't and didn't want to do that, but we decided that we would invite artists to do projects and they would be on view for a year, or nine months and have a whole floor of this warehouse we were renovating. We opened the building with the three German artists in the collection, Knoebel, Palermo, and Beuys, and Imi came over and supervised the installation of all those works. Frankly, I felt he had misinterpreted Beuys—Beuys, and Imi came over and supervised the installation of all those works. Frankly, I felt he had misinterpreted Beuys—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really.

GARY GARRELS: —and he definitely misinterpreted Palermo, who had been his friend, and I rehung the whole thing over the Christmas break [laughs].

LINDA YABLONSKY: What—so—I can imagine that he would privilege his own work—

GARY GARRELS: He did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —of course. So what's the most important thing? I mean, to organize a show.

GARY GARRELS: Let me tell you, the other thing was that Yvonne Rainer—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.]—choreographer.

GARY GARRELS: —choreographer—had suggested three artists and one of—the three artists were Martha Rosler —

LINDA YABLONSKY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —Group Material—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

GARY GARRELS: —and a filmmaker whose name I do not remember. I met with the filmmaker, the woman and she didn't work. It just didn't make sense.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: And with Group Material and Martha, the 22nd Street building didn't make sense, so I proposed to them that maybe they might develop projects on the Wooster Street space, which we ended up doing. Of course, this was—at this point, AIDS was rampant.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So where—yes, this is—

GARY GARRELS: This is now 1987.

LINDA YABLONSKY: 1987, yes. That year Andy died and—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, and it—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And Jean-Michel died and—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —although not of AIDS—

GARY GARRELS: Those were not AIDS-related, but—

LINDA YABLONSKY: No, but still—

GARY GARRELS: But there were so many—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Peter Hujar died that year.

GARY GARRELS: So many people were sick and so many people had died or, you know, were struggling, and so Group Material—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: You know; AIDS really became one of the primary topics of the installation that they were doing.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And—so the artists who were—the Group Material was really a collective?

GARY GARRELS: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So—

GARY GARRELS: It was a collective.

LINDA YABLONSKY: From Canada.

GARY GARRELS: Well, no.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No?

GARY GARRELS: No, they're—they were New York.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I'm thinking of General Idea.

GARY GARRELS: General Idea, right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, sorry.

GARY GARRELS: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay, Group Material.

GARY GARRELS: Group Material.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So that was Felix?

GARY GARRELS: And we started—well, yeah. It was Julie Ault—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: —was kind of the backbone of it, and Doug Ashford—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —and Tim Rollins. They were the three primary under-pinners, but there were—often many other artists got involved. You know, it was a kind of a flexible, shifting kind of collective. But—and when Tim—we started the project for—; Tim was really accelerating his own art practice with the students, the Kids of Survival in the Bronx, so he decided that he would step aside from Group Material and Felix Gonzales-Torres was then invited in as kind of the fourth person, and he really kind of took Tim's place in many ways. And they would meet almost nightly at the Dia offices, which were in SoHo on Mercer Street, and I always worked late. I mean, I was usually there till 9:00, so I'd always see them at the beginning of the evening, and usually they would be there until midnight or after.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: And I had hired a young woman as an assistant named Karen Ramspacher, R-A-M-S-P-A-C-H-E-R, and Karen became almost a surrogate member of Group Material. She was so intensely involved as they were developing the Dia project for Wooster Street. So that's how I first got to know Tim and Julie and Doug and Felix, and Felix was just starting his own art career. He had his very first show at a little, tiny gallery called INTAR, I-N-T-A-R, over a Puerto Rican theater company on West 42nd Street almost, I think, between Ninth and Tenth. It was way over on the West Side.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, I—a friend of mine was the director—

GARY GARRELS: Oh, I—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —I mean, administrative, not the theater director, but—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —I was there a lot.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. And so I went to see Felix's first show.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow, I didn't know—I just—I completely forgot they had an exhibition space there.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. They had a little, tiny exhibition space. That's where—

LINDA YABLONSKY: What was in his first show?

GARY GARRELS: Little, tiny puzzle pieces—

LINDA YABLONSKY: The puzzles.

GARY GARRELS: —and little—I think there were little, tiny Photostats, maybe.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: It was all small and it was very mysterious work, and it felt so—I mean, this was—you know, I mean, expressionist painting was still, you know, Julian Schnabel and, you know, all this was going on—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, big and brash and bold.

GARY GARRELS: Bold, yeah, you know, and Mary Boone was, you know, kind of queen of SoHo—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: —and, you know, Leah was—and Ileana and, you know, it was—but it was—it definitely came out of the East Village, you know. But anyway—

LINDA YABLONSKY: What about the whole punk thing, or post-punk, New Wave—?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —music, culture, really. Film—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. I wasn't—I didn't really hook into the punk—

LINDA YABLONSKY: No.

GARY GARRELS: —thing, but I have to say—so, also, I was going to all the galleries in SoHo—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: —and in 1985—I can't remember, I think it started. But a very good friend of mine was a woman named Susanne Ghez, who was the director of a wonderful exhibition space in Chicago called the Renaissance Society. And I'd met Susanne when I was still at MIT because her daughter ended up going to MIT.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

GARY GARRELS: And she was friends of other friends of mine who moved from Chicago to New York in 1984, and so I met Susanne through them as well. Anyway—and Susanne and I became friends, and she had an exhibition that fell apart on her at the last—at the end. We were having coffee or breakfast or something in New York, and she said, "Do you have any thoughts about an exhibition?" and I said, "Yeah, I do. I've been seeing all this interesting sculpture. There's this guy named Bob Gober and a guy named Jeff Koons, and there's this other guy named Haim Steinbach." And I said, "They're making these sculptures that are about ordinary objects." So I proposed—and Susanne said, "Oh, let's do a show." So in spring—and I was working then, I think, at Christie's—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —by that point. I think it started when I was at the gallery, but I was working at Christie's, and I'd done the show with Vito, and I'd done the show with Stuart Sherman. And, again, Stuart was this wonderful, delightful gay guy, but very—you know, he wasn't—he was a very private person and, you know, didn't have a flamboyant gay lifestyle at all. Lived in a very modest little apartment in Chelsea, and—anyway, I did this show for Susanne at the Renaissance Society, which we called—and I brought this in—I hadn't looked for this for years, but—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, my God! It's so historic, to me even! I mean, I was just reading something about this

show very recently.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. Well, anyway, for me—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And I'm thinking, you know, "Wow, these artists together in one show, at that time!"

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. And so I talked to Bob—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Amazing.

GARY GARRELS: —about the sinks, because the sinks, you know, was about the AIDS—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: It was about the AIDS crisis.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: And—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I saw that today downstairs in the museum—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —Jeff Koons's basketball.

GARY GARRELS: Anyway, pulled the show together—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: —very, very quickly—

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is worth a lot—

GARY GARRELS: —and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —this catalogue.

GARY GARRELS: —and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you write the text?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, I wrote the text. I wrote about the sinks and AIDS—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: —at the time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So—there wasn't a whole lot of—I mean, was there a lot of art that directly—I mean, for Bob Gober to do those sinks that existed as this really moving, to me, metaphor for what was happening—

GARY GARRELS: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: —other art—well, what other art addressed the loss, or the fear, or the danger, or the transformation of our society because of this disease?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, I—you know, I don't know. Bob's work was the work that spoke to me—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —most deeply and profoundly.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: And—but of course Jeff Koons and Heim Steinbach were not dealing with that at all.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No.

GARY GARRELS: But Bob's work was the more psychological work—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —the more—the introspective work, the kind of work finding the meshing between the personal and the social.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And they're just—let's just—can you describe—they're not actual—they look like real sinks, but they're not.

GARY GARRELS: No, they were—they're sculptures that are handmade—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: —traditionally with, like, plaster and, you know, wire mesh, and made to look like sinks, but they're sculptures and they're hand-wrought, but all of the functional aspects of the sinks had been removed. Instead of a drain, there's a hole, and instead of the faucets or the—not the faucets, but the—I don't know—you know, what you turn to turn on the water, turn off—all those hardware elements had been removed, so they're almost like ghosts of sinks. And they were very handmade, so very textured surface and like—almost like flesh—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: And they were very anthropomorphic—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: —and very ghostlike, and they were like surrogates, and—I mean, I saw Bob's first show at Paula Cooper and it was just very, very, very moving work for me. And then I met Bob. The downtown art world—I mean, I probably met you then. I don't remember.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I don't—

GARY GARRELS: But anyway—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I think I met you later—

GARY GARRELS: Probably later.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —because I wasn't really in the art world then.

GARY GARRELS: Oh. Okay, well then—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I was just on the edge—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —unless I fed you, because I was working in some of those hipper restaurants—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —doing the cooking. That's how I met a lot of artists.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, anyway, I met a lot of people, you know. You know, the downtown art world wasn't that big still, and—I mean, I didn't know—anyway and—yeah, so—and meeting—again, then Felix, Group Material, and Martha. I met—oh—anyway, the AIDS thing was becoming—you know, by 1987 it was just so pervasive, you know, and so devastating, and I had already lost my friend Larry in—I think he died—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —in early 1985. I know it was in 1988, but I can't remember whether it was spring. It probably was spring. It had to be spring. I was very good friends with a guy named Tom Sokolowski—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —who was the director of the Grey Art Gallery at NYU.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: And at that point, the Dia offices were on Mercer Street, right around the corner from the New Museum which, at that time, was on Broadway. And I'd gotten to know Bill Olander—and then Bill was sick.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: He had AIDS symptoms.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And who was Bill?

GARY GARRELS: Bill—he was curator at the New Museum.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, right. Okay.

GARY GARRELS: His name—O-L-A-N-D-E-R.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. I never met him.

GARY GARRELS: I think we had started—I'd started working with Group Material. I think that was in '87. Anyway, Tom and I—Sokolowski—thought, "What can we do in the art world that would somehow deal with AIDS?" And so Tom and I, and we invited Bill and a critic named Robert Atkins—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —and we met in my office at Dia and said, "What can we do?" We said, "Well, let's get a bunch of people together," and we all put names out, and I can't remember—we invited maybe 25, 30 people, and I don't remember now where we had the first meeting—might have been the New Museum, I just don't remember—about what can—in the art world, what can we do to somehow address the AIDS crisis? This was—ACT UP was starting, but I have to say, we felt like—we wanted to do something that was within the frame of the art world.

It was not activism per se. I was working on the Group Material project and, by that time, I had also invited Francesco Clemente to do a project at Dia, and he had started working on a series of paintings called the Funerary Paintings, which were definitely his kind of response to the AIDS crisis. Anyway, it—we brought people together and decided, you know, what—we started talking. We got like 25, 30 people together, and I can't remember—I think we met—our first—that big meeting was at the New Museum, and I can't remember if it was the second or third meeting, but decided to do—to launch something called A Day Without Art, which I believe the first one was held on December 1, 1988. I'm almost positive—I'm positive it was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I don't remember, but when I talked to Geoffrey Hendricks—

GARY GARRELS: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: —who was also very much a part of the early Visual AIDS—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —he thought it was late 1990, but I sort of remember it was earlier.

GARY GARRELS: No, I'm pretty sure it was 1988.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: But it was much smaller, and it was called—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: —A Day Without Art, and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And can you tell me—just describe—

GARY GARRELS: Well, I think—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —how people participated?

GARY GARRELS: Well, the idea was to either not—like, to close a gallery—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —or to remove a work of art, to do something—I'm pretty sure at that point I was working with Group Material on their project and we did something at the Wooster Street space. But I have to say, I'm a little fuzzy on that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But Day Without Art—people got on the—

GARY GARRELS: It mushroomed. It was unbelievable—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: —how quickly—it started with—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Now World AIDS Day.

GARY GARRELS: Yes, exactly.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But—that first year.

GARY GARRELS: It started in my office at—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Really? Wow, I didn't know.

GARY GARRELS: —at Dia, and Tom Sokolowski was very much an instigator. Anyway, it just took off. I mean, it was like a brushfire, just whoosh, because people were so—

LINDA YABLONSKY: How did you get the word out about it to the institutions and galleries?

GARY GARRELS: We just started—you know, people called people and it was like a network, you know, just one person calling another person, calling another person, calling another person.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And you didn't see this as activism?

GARY GARRELS: Kind of, but it wasn't like the—it was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean, you weren't chaining yourselves to somebody's—

GARY GARRELS: No, we weren't—it wasn't—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —fence.

GARY GARRELS: It wasn't civil disobedience.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: You know? It was calling, recognition to a crisis. And Group Material then did—when they did—they did a series of four installations at the Dia space on Wooster Street, and the last one was about AIDS, and art that was dealing with AIDS issues. And I think, you know—I mean, a lot of people questioned whether you could really be—do anything effective as an artist, and so many artists became activists and felt that civil disobedience was essential and necessary to call attention to the AIDS crisis. But I have to say, you know, I—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Because of so much prejudice at the time.

GARY GARRELS: Oh, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You could not get proper treatment. Nobody was spending money on research—

GARY GARRELS: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —for medications, or even to figure out what it was about.

GARY GARRELS: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you experience any of that? I mean, not that you were sick, but if you—

GARY GARRELS: Well, I was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —with friends who were—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. I mean, I think there was, you know, an incredible amount of anger—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: —but I have to say, I—I don't know—my—I don't know. I guess my own temperament is—I'm not a radical activist.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: And—although, I totally was sympathetic to what ACT UP was doing. But—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you didn't join?

GARY GARRELS: I didn't, no.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Go to ACT UP meetings?

GARY GARRELS: No, I didn't go to ACT UP meetings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But that's okay. You did something really unbelievably important, and also presented the Group Material show.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, and then Bob did—I asked Bob [Gober] to do—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —a show early on at Dia, and he was starting to work on that and think about it, then he was invited to do a big survey show in Europe at the Boijmans Museum.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I love that museum.

GARY GARRELS: And so he asked to delay and defer the Dia project.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mmm. I see.

GARY GARRELS: And, I mean, he had by that point become aware of a work—then, actually, for that show he resuscitated a work called *Slides of a Changing Painting*—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Ah.

GARY GARRELS: —from 1984, which was the very first work he showed in a three-day event at Paula Cooper Gallery. But it was like a—just a private thing, you know, that—and I didn't see it then, but became aware of it. It was first shown then publicly in a big way in that survey show at the Boijmans, and that piece is all about the AIDS crisis, really very early, you know. I mean, it's a haunting, haunting, beautiful piece. And then that got delayed, and then in 1991, Kathy Halbreich became the director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and asked me if I would come there as the senior curator—or chief curator, I guess. So I left Dia and Bob's project had not been realized. He was kind of working on it, but it didn't happen then until later, and I can't remember now what year Bob's project opened. But it, you know, was very much—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mid-90s? Something like that?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, 1993 probably. 1994, maybe. No—yeah, 1993 or 1994 probably, yeah. But anyway, at the Walker, Kathy and I bought the *Slides of a Changing Painting* for the Walker collection, and then when I came here to San Francisco—I came here in the fall of '93 and—anyway, my predecessor, John Caldwell, had bought a couple—some of the elements of the installation at Dia, and then we talked to Bob and added more newspapers and things, and had it executed in the new building here, the old—the Botta building. Anyway, Bob's someone I'd stayed—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wait—

GARY GARRELS: —have stayed in touch with and worked with.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Who was the curator of his retrospective at MoMA?

GARY GARRELS: Ann Temkin.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, Ann Temkin.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How long were you at the Walker?

GARY GARRELS: I was there about two-and-a-half years—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Just two years?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you—was Richard still here in New York? I mean, not here; we're in San Francisco.

GARY GARRELS: No—my husband Richard? No, no, he—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: We—he had been working at this restaurant, Barocco—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

GARY GARRELS: —as kind of the maître d'. It was a crazy, intense place, I have to say. I would work almost every night till 9:00 at Dia, which was on Mercer Street, and then I would walk down Greene Street or Mercer Street to Barocco, and sit at the bar, or sometimes get a bar table, and have something to eat and find out what was going on in the art world. [Laughs.] And it was a very intense time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah, it's so weird, because of AIDS and—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —no one escaping—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —the effects of it -

GARY GARRELS: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —either emotionally or actually physically.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And *that* was going on, which was like a party every night, and yet information being exchanged—

GARY GARRELS: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —also, and relationships forming.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So where was Richard when you were in Minneapolis?

GARY GARRELS: So, we agreed—he really was so tired of working at the restaurant—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: —and so I got enough of a raise, and living in Minneapolis was so much cheaper than living in New York, that he would not have to keep working, so he could write full-time. So we moved—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Gosh, I wish I'd met you early!

GARY GARRELS: So we moved to Minneapolis and he then could become—could write full-time, and he was still working on stage plays—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —but he started getting interested in film—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —and got interested in the idea—he began to think that plays were kind of out of date, that film

really was the—our contemporary language, and began thinking about writing screenplays. And I think that was actually part of the reason I decided to leave the Walker and move to San Francisco, was because it was pretty clear to me that Richard was going to end up moving to Los Angeles.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So—but when you left New York at this point, which was—

GARY GARRELS: I left in the—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —in this cauldron of activity, and Minneapolis—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —must have seemed more like going back to the farm by comparison.

GARY GARRELS: Well, the Walker is—has always been an extraordinary institution.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I agree; it is.

GARY GARRELS: And Kathy—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But it's in Minneapolis.

GARY GARRELS: Right. And Kathy is an extraordinarily—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: —dynamic, creative director—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —and we still had a—when I left MIT, I have to say I think Kathy was—she was hurt and angry. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

GARY GARRELS: But we had, you know, mended that, you know, over the years, and were still very close, so she asked me if I would come there to work with her. So—and Richard and I were living in a 700-square-foot apartment on the ground floor between Tenth and Eleventh Avenue, and it was really—I mean, living in New York was hard, and I made very little money, and the idea that he could quit work and write full-time, and we'd have a little bit nicer place to work, and I was going to be in this incredibly creative environment with Kathy and the Walker—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: —was very appealing.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But it also took you away from the constant dying—

GARY GARRELS: And I—it did, and I have to say, I was very kind of emotionally strung out at the time, for a lot of reasons. I'd had a pimp try to attack me in Hell's Kitchen where—I mean, I was terrified. It'd been very traumatic. And I'd seen a guy go under a bus on his bike on my way home one night, and there were just—I mean—and there were a lot of people sick, and it was—I don't know. I was kind of burned out and strung out. I mean, I have to say, I was working at Dia—I mean, every day was a 12-hour day, and as I said, Richard was completely burned out on the restaurant work. I have to say, I just—I have enormous admiration for Kathy, and the Walker was always one of these beacons in the art world about a kind of wonderfully open, creative environment where artists were at the center of the institution, and that was really Dia.

Dia is a Greek word that means "through." It's not an acronym for, like, you know, an abbreviation of something. It's a Greek word that means "through," and the idea was that Dia would be an organization to allow artists to create things that perhaps they couldn't do in other situations, to be supportive of artists in such a fundamental way, and to stay true to their creative vision, and to be a catalyst for that, and the Walker was the closest museum, I think, that was—that had that same kind of affinity and ideal. And so Kathy's invitation to come work there was also—for me, I was also interested in objects—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: —and I was interested in the idea being at—and Dia had a collection that was no longer an active collection, that we weren't acquiring work, and so to be at an institution, to work with artists, but also to

be acquiring work and to be kind of dealing with the history of contemporary art, if you will, was appealing. Then, personally, it was just—I have to say, our day-to-day existence was just kind of really wearing us down. Yeah. So, for all those reasons, ended up going to the Walker, which was—is—was and is an amazing, amazing place. That kind of—that's what got me into, like, "museums" and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: But—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And an invitation to come here to San Francisco—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. So I was quite close to the curator here at the time, a man named John Caldwell. We had lots of comparable interests—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: I met John when I was at Dia in the '80s, right when he was still at—he was at the Carnegie with Jack Lane then, and then they both came to San Francisco here in '88, and John was one of my closest colleagues in the field. And John died very unexpectedly of a heart attack in March of '93. The new Botta building was being built—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Botta?

GARY GARRELS: Botta, B-O-T-T-A.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, Botta.

GARY GARRELS: The Mario Botta—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

GARY GARRELS: —building, the new building—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

GARY GARRELS: —for the SFMOMA. Anyway, Jack Lane approached me about coming to San Francisco at that time, and I knew that it was only a matter of time before Richard wanted to move to L.A., and so it was a very tough decision, but I decided to leave the Walker and come to San Francisco, and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Another city with a large gay population—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —and a serious AIDS crisis.

GARY GARRELS: Absolutely, yep.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: And one of my colleagues here, a man named Bob Riley, had done a project with General Idea—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Ah.

GARY GARRELS: —in the old building.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Riley spelled—

GARY GARRELS: R-I-L-E-Y. He's—he left the museum many years ago, been living in Maine—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —I'm not in touch at all.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Okay.

GARY GARRELS: But in 1989—so we started Visual AIDS, which we started as A Day Without Art—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right. It wasn't called Visual AIDS—

GARY GARRELS: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: It was just Day Without Art.

GARY GARRELS: It was just A Day Without Art, and the idea was simple, you know, just to, again, remove a work of art from a gallery, or close a gallery, or that something—that it was to establish the idea of the missing—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —that something vital was removed for the day as symbolic of the loss and devastation of AIDS in the art world. And then it became—you know, just got bigger and bigger and bigger, and became A Day Without Art—no, became Visual AIDS, and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Because your conversations continued?

GARY GARRELS: Oh, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean—

GARY GARRELS: I went—I started—you know, kept going to meetings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: We had been—we had, like, regular meetings and there were about a core group of about 30 people—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

GARY GARRELS: —in New York, and then it started going beyond the art world. You know, it kind of mushroomed very quickly. And so—and in 1989 I was—I think it was called president of the advisory group for the Public Art Fund in New York. A woman named Susie Freedman—her mother Doris Freedman had started the Public Art Fund, and then she had died and her daughter Susie took over. And I became friends with Susie and she asked me to be the head of the advisory committee. We wanted to do something to commemorate the Stonewall Rebellion in 1989.

I'd gotten to know Felix [Gonzalez-Torres], so I asked Felix if he would do a billboard for Sheridan Square under the auspices of the Public Art Fund. And we ended up doing that, and we didn't have—we couldn't find any funding for it, so Felix agreed that he would do a print, an edition of 200, that would be the same image that was on the billboard, except the billboard would have one incident that was public and the print would have one incident that was private to Felix's personal life, and that was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: And what was the image—

GARY GARRELS: It was just a black—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

GARY GARRELS: —black backdrop and then a, you know, a string of references and dates which, you know, something Felix did very frequently in different manifestations. And so we—I got—found somebody to do the printing. I actually talked to a guy named Ted Bonin, who was in Alexander—no, it was before Alexander—he was working with Brook Alexander, who did a print—it was a print gallery, basically—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —and Ted was working there. And I asked Ted to recommend a printer, so we got a printer and Felix did the piece. It was a very inexpensive silkscreen process, if I recall correctly. I did—organized a sale at the Dia office, and invited everybody I knew in the art world to come for a glass of wine and to try to buy prints. We only sold about 20, maybe 30 of them. They were $200 apiece. And so we still—we needed to raise a lot of money. Andrea Rosen had the idea—she said, "Well, I'll just take all the leftovers and make a stack out of them and sell the stack."

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh! That was her idea?

GARY GARRELS: That was her idea, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The dealer—she was Felix's dealer?

GARY GARRELS: Was Felix's dealer, yeah. So she got the idea and that's how we ended up funding the billboard.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What—I thought the Public Art Fund was paying for it?

GARY GARRELS: Well, no. We had to raise money, you know. It was an initiative, a new project. It wasn't part of the regular program. Anyway, then—so that's—I remember—I think it was Andrea's idea. I don't think it was Felix's. I think it was Andrea's, but it might have been Felix. But I think it was Andrea's. But I became very close friends—or not—I wouldn't say "close friends," but Felix had joined Group Material, and as I said, Group Material—they met every night in our offices and they'd start, I don't know, about 8:00 and they'd work till midnight, or maybe they started at 7:00, and my assistant Karen basically became part of the group. Anyway, that's how I got to know Felix, and Felix had his show at INTAR. Anyway—and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you stay in touch with all of them—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —after you went to Minneapolis?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, yeah. And for the opening show of this—of the Botta building, I invited Felix to—we put—placed four stack pieces. That was the opening of SFMOMA Botta building in '95 and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Of poster stacks?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, his print stacks. Yeah. And Felix came and did a talk, and I think we had 25 people in the audience.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, no.

GARY GARRELS: It was kind of sad. But after the project, I came back to my—I came into my office one morning at Dia—this was in '89. We did the project, the billboard in Sheridan Square, in '89, and I came in one morning and Felix had left from the night before a framed puzzle piece on my chair. It was a framed puzzle piece of a cropped photo he had taken of the headstone of Oscar Wilde at Père Lachaise [Cemetery in Paris], and it just said "Oscar." You could see the graffiti on the headstone. At that point—right now there's a big barrier to protect the tomb, because it's been vandalized so often, so you can't even—you can't get close to it in Père Lachaise, but at that point it was still unprotected. So Felix got a beautiful photograph of it with all the graffiti on the headstone, and made this piece, puzzle piece and—which he gave me, which my husband Richard and I have now committed as a gift to SFMOMA art galleries, because I felt it belonged here.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's very generous because it's extremely valuable.

GARY GARRELS: Yes, it is.

LINDA YABLONSKY: In every sense of the word "value." Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: But it felt like it should be here, and it was a gift from Felix. And I also thought I should feel a little bit of the pain that I was putting all of our donors through.

[Laughter.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: What year did Felix die, do you remember?

GARY GARRELS: He died I think in '96.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So, a year after the opening of this building.

GARY GARRELS: That's what I'm recalling. I might be wrong on that. It was right on the cusp of finding, you know, the drug, cocktail.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. For treatment.

GARY GARRELS: For treatment. Yeah. I think Felix died just before, around the time that that was first introduced.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You know, almost no conversation I have with other artists, and particularly younger artists who never met him—

GARY GARRELS: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: —seem affected by his work, and his whole life, really, and what he did and his attitudes.

GARY GARRELS: Yep.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I mean, now—I mean, we lost a generation of people—

GARY GARRELS: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —to AIDS.

GARY GARRELS: I know, it's horrible. And so actually at Dia we also invited Francesco Clemente to do a series of work that he developed these beautiful large paintings that he called the funerary series and those we showed, I think, also in '89 and they were—they were really his evocation of the loss of AIDS.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Were they portraits?

GARY GARRELS: No. They were long landscaping kind of very abstract and dreamy but definitely like about loss and they were called the "funerary" paintings. And I asked Jenny Holzer to do an installation and she did the *Laments*, and that was all about AIDS loss.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Were they the benches?

GARY GARRELS: She did—

LINDA YABLONSKY: They were like the gravestones?

GARY GARRELS: Vertical LED signs that went up all the columns at Dia in the third floor, and then she made 12 sarcophagi.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

GARY GARRELS: And with the—I believe it was the 13th sarcophagi, for a child.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right. Sarcophagi.

GARY GARRELS: Sarcophagus, for one child.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: But they were these sarcophagi arranged along the end of the building in one kind of space, and the rest of the space was open except for the LEDs that were mounted to the columns just running in the dark there—

LINDA YABLONSKY: But the sarcophagi had text also, yes?

GARY GARRELS: Yes. So all the texts that were in the LEDs were on the sarcophagi, so you could stand and read each sarcophagus with the full text and so that was called the *Laments*. So at Dia, we ended up—I did the *Laments* with Jenny, and the funerary paintings with Francesco and Bob was going to do the installation, but then that got deferred until a little bit later. So it was just, you know, it was just so pervasive.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But these are all very historic research shows in terms of both art and history.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So there are—that generation disappeared, your and my generation.

GARY GARRELS: Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And the artists who've come since, what I call the '90s generation and then millennials, who were not around—

GARY GARRELS: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —at that time, and are yet affected—at least by Felix, that I know of—but what can you do—do you think it's important or necessary or essential to communicate that time and what kind of art came out of it to artists who have no idea what it's like to live through something like that? But who sees the results in the art.

GARY GARRELS: Right. It's—Helen Molesworth did a very good, and I think important, show at the Wexner Center in—oh, what year was that? I'm going to say about 2012 called *This Will Have Been.*

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: Which was a review, an overview of the '80s and not the kind of Go-Go market of the '80s—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

GARY GARRELS: —which was how, I think, publicly people think of the '80s.

LINDA YABLONSKY: As excess.

GARY GARRELS: Excess, exactly. And it was the moment of Julian Schnabel and Jeff Koons, who came into his own then, and, you know, a lot of things, and renewed interest in kind of big painting. And it was the introduction of the postwar Germans into the New York art world. So you had Kiefer, and Richter and Polke, and so on. But Helen did this wonderful show, which I didn't see, I only have the catalogue called, *This Will Have Been,* which looked at the '80s in terms of the social issues of the time, and of which AIDS was very, very important. And there were many artists who were dealing with the social issues of the time. They just weren't in the public notice in the same way. And the New Museum—Bill Olander, who was there—was very important, and then Brian Wallis—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: —and looking at a different kind of art being made in that time. But it's also the time, you know, post-Pictures artists, or Louise Lawler and Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince were all coming into their own and —

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. It's a big world.

GARY GARRELS: The'80s was—

LINDA YABLONSKY: It was an everything time, for sure.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. So, I think, like, right now, there's an interest in an understanding some of those issues, as you know. We have our own different set of issues right now, by which of course is about economic inequality.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: That's the driving issue of our time. This was called, you know, the Culture Wars.

LINDA YABLONSKY: In the early'90s.

GARY GARRELS: Late'80s, early'90s.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And they really were.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. They really were.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Everything was a battle to be won—or lost.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. So for me I think Joseph Beuys—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —is hugely important as an artist, for me personally, because he opened up contemporary art to the social as well as the formal in a way that I don't think any other artist—for me he had the most impact.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And how did he do that, from your point of view?

GARY GARRELS: Looking at the, you know, one's personal history and the social history just cannot be separated from each other. They end up being completed tied up together. And the psychological and sociological are completely fused—

LINDA YABLONSKY: In his work?

GARY GARRELS: In his work, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Can you give me—it would help to have an example of—

GARY GARRELS: Oh, God.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —of a work, or an exhibition that for you that did that.

GARY GARRELS: Well, the exhibition we did at Dia was called *The Fonds*, F-O-N-D-S, which means the kind of base. And he did seven different versions of that, as I recall and—it's hard to speak about it. They were about, you know, silence and isolation.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But they were sculptures?

GARY GARRELS: Sculptures, yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you organize that show?

GARY GARRELS: Well, I facilitated it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Who installed the show in the space?

GARY GARRELS: Imi Knoebel did.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, right.

GARY GARRELS: This was after Beuys had died.Beuys had died.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, right. But then you redid it? Is that the one you redid?

GARY GARRELS: No. The one I redid was Palermo.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, right. Oh, okay.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. No, the Beuys thing was too impossible to reinstall, but it—anyway it's too technical to get into what the problems were, I think.Beuys thing was too impossible to reinstall, but it—anyway it's too technical to get into what the problems were, I think.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Actually, the technical thing is what I am asking for.

GARY GARRELS: Well, what Imi did was—one of the Fonds is called—what was it called? It's these enormous, horseshoe-shaped piles of felt, and there were four of them. And Imi made them in a very rigid row against the back windows of the gallery and that's the way Imi's work—he always approached his work—was very frontal and very theatrical, and it took away—what Beuys had done originally was to place them so they were more like the hooves of a horse, and they were, you know,—Beuys had done originally was to place them so they were more like the hooves of a horse, and they were, you know,—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —in a more dynamic relationship to each other. And so Imi basically interpreted Beuys work and Palermo's within his aesthetic, rather than let each of those artists keep their own voice, and that's often a problem I have found when you ask an artist to interpret another artists' work. It ends up being, you know, the way that artist approaches his or her work, not the way the artist—that other artist would. And so, anyway, Beuys work and Palermo's within his aesthetic, rather than let each of those artists keep their own voice, and that's often a problem I have found when you ask an artist to interpret another artists' work. It ends up being, you know, the way that artist approaches his or her work, not the way the artist—that other artist would. And so, anyway, *The People of New York City* he installed in reverse, because he wanted the final panel to be sitting between the windows—

LINDA YABLONSKY: What was the—

GARY GARRELS: It was called, *To the People of New York City*.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The whole show?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

GARY GARRELS: Which was just one work by Palermo.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oy, yoy-yoy.

GARY GARRELS: And he reversed the order of the panels in the installation, so he could get that last the panel

sitting between the windows, and it totally broke the rhythm and internal relationship of the piece. It was like—so anyway, we closed building over the Christmas holiday and I reinstalled it. But all of the installation photos show the Imi installation.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, dear. I hear—you said in the very beginning when we started talking, of honoring the integrity of the artist.

GARY GARRELS: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And the work, whether he's around or not—or she's around or not.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But then do you not as a curator also have to think about its relationship to the space and also how other people are going to experience the space and the work?

GARY GARRELS: Absolutely.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So does this come to you naturally? You just learned by doing? This understanding of space?

GARY GARRELS: I mean, I have to say I've always had, somehow a very good sense of space.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: And I—actually, it's very easy for me to move between two and three dimensions, mentally [laughs]. And I know my husband, Richard, has almost no capacity to do that—he has a very bad sense of direction, and if I've gone someplace once I can almost always get back there. So anyways, I somehow have a very good, general sense of space and how things work in space.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That must be why you are in such a longterm relationship, because you fulfill—what one can't do the other can do.

GARY GARRELS: [Laughs.] Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —and you are in perfect harmony.

GARY GARRELS: There are many examples of that in this relationship.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. What's the—I mean, it's unusual, heterosexual or not, to have such long-term—

GARY GARRELS: Richard makes a joke we've been together now, I think, 34 years and he said that's something like 117 in straight years.

[Laughter.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: To what do you owe the success of this relationship?

GARY GARRELS: We're both very patient, persevering people.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Important to know.

GARY GARRELS: And was also allowed each other our own space. Many times in our lives we've had different kinds of schedules or whatever. We commuted between LA and New York for five years, and that was the pits.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: So, anyway.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did you do any shows when you got to San Francisco in '93? Did you do any exhibitions at the museum that involved gay artists, or that addressed the changing world that we were living in then?

GARY GARRELS: Well, the first show we opened here was called *Public Information* when the Botta Building opened, and there definitely a lot of social issues embedded in that exhibition.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: And as I said, I invited Felix to do—to install a group of the stacked pieces for that show.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Did people take—

GARY GARRELS: Oh, yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: These were stacks that people were free—they didn't have to pay for them—

GARY GARRELS: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: They could take them home.

GARY GARRELS: Oh absolutely.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I meant to ask you, before we leave the Beuys thing, what was the social aspect of that show? The social history aspect that you were talking about?Beuys thing, what was the social aspect of that show? The social history aspect that you were talking about?

GARY GARRELS: With *The Fonds*—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: I think for Beuys that was about the weight of history, and the weight of life.Beuys that was about the weight of history, and the weight of life.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —and how—the kind of perseverance, you know, that one has to have to—that to get—that living is not an easy thing, you know? There's—and for Beuys I think, you know, my sense is that he could never escape the devastation of the second World War, you know. It was a constant effort to heal the wound but that would is something that is intrinsic in Western society, which is why we continually have wars, and constantly trying to find a way to heal those ruptures.Beuys I think, you know, my sense is that he could never escape the devastation of the second World War, you know. It was a constant effort to heal the wound but that would is something that is intrinsic in Western society, which is why we continually have wars, and constantly trying to find a way to heal those ruptures.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: And *The Fonds* were about that kind of—the felt is a material to insulate, and to protect—to protect oneself from that wound of history.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which he participated in?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. I mean, one of his great works is the piece called *Plight* that's at the Pompidou, which is these bound up coils of felt insulating a room with a piano inside of it. Beuys is a very complicated artist and subject.Beuys is a very complicated artist and subject.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: But he's always been deeply meaningful for me, since I saw that show.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Have you ever done another show of his work?

GARY GARRELS: No. But I have right now for the opening of this building—[by Snøhetta]

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.?

GARY GARRELS: —I asked three trustee collectors here to commit works by Beuys to the museum, and I've made a room of Beuys works here, which include drawings and blackboards and vintrines, and other elements and I think it's a very strong experience in Beuys' work.Beuys to the museum, and I've made a room of Beuys works here, which include drawings and blackboards and vintrines, and other elements and I think it's a very strong experience in Beuys' work.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And this building opens this year?

GARY GARRELS: This year. Yes, we opened this year.

LINDA YABLONSKY: This is the Snøhetta designed- building.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. The Botta and Snøhetta buildings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What happened to the other building? They tore it down?

GARY GARRELS: No. It's all here. Just we took down—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Absorbed within this building?

GARY GARRELS: No. Basically they've been paired with each other.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh. I was trying to figure that out.

GARY GARRELS: Snøhetta has really completely linked their building to the Botta building, and I think very successfully, and I think enhanced the Botta building by things that they have done.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you've added quite a bit to this collection. Which is—

GARY GARRELS: Oh, yes. It's been something I've worked very hard at it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How do you feel that institutions, and I won't limit this to American institutions, but you can if you want to, how have they changed since you came into the museum world? How do you feel they changed for good or ill, or both?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah, both. Museums have become much more responsive to their public. In some cases, I feel that's to the detriment—that issues of spectacle have overtaken introspection, and that they become places of entertainment. I think—for me my discovery of museums was about places of introspection and contemplation, and memory and history, and a way to dig deeper into the potential of the human imagination.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: I think maybe that was part of the reason I was so attracted to Dia, because it had such—it privileged the integrity and the authority of the artist, and that the—and it wasn't meant to entertain. It was meant to, and I would still say this, enlighten—to open up one's sense of experience and one's understanding, and one's place in the world, and history, and it does tend toward the intellectual and toward the introspective and—anyway but I'm also a proselytizer. You know, I grew up—as I said, my family were Methodists, not exactly evangelical but there was definitely a sense that it was important to engage the rest of the world. And so—I'd say for me the art has been so profound in how it's opened up my sense of history and place in the world that if I can bring a little bit of that to other people, I will have achieved some success.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How can you as a curator making a show in a very particular interior space that comes with restrictions of light and space—

GARY GARRELS: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —and angles and sight lines, how can you—how do believe you can achieve that sense of enlightenment for the public, or maybe you only need to work for your own eyes in order to do this—just by the relationships between the objects in a show?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. I think it's something I've been able to do with the building here and expansion is I would say one example is the gallery I created for Agnes Martin's paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which I did see earlier today.

GARY GARRELS: Yes. It I hope, even if someone comes into that room and has never seen an Agnes Martin painting, they will *feel* something in the presence of those works that will make them stop and reconsider their experience, and I know that's been happening with the Ellsworth Kelly.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I did have that experience in the Ellsworth Kelly room, but I always do with his works. He's one of my favorite artists.

GARY GARRELS: I've had many, many people tell me including people who have had no interest in Kelly that it's been a revelation walking into that room, the room with the large, colored panel paintings, you know. I think if you create—I want the experience of the work to have primacy, and then if you're engaged, dig deeper and get into analysis or background or history or whatever, but if you don't get the experience first it's never gonna to open up to you. That's why I decided not to be an art historian as such, because it gets too far away from the experience of the work—and that's why I'm a curator.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Tells me everything.

GARY GARRELS: What's that?

LINDA YABLONSKY: That tells me everything. Have you ever done a show where you felt it did not work for whatever reason, and do you know why it failed? Or maybe it's your own feeling. Or did the public misperceive it—take it the wrong way, because it seems like every show of yours that I know about was very successful within the institution—

GARY GARRELS: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: —and has had some resonance since then, either through the catalogue or people talking about it. Have you come up with a situation that just didn't work, or with the artist that just didn't work, or you had some major disagreement with a colleague or a trustee or, you know, when things go wrong, what are they? What are the things that can go wrong in the making of an exhibition?

GARY GARRELS: Oh, there are lots of possibilities to go wrong.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I'm asking this for the benefit of curatorial assistants who want to know how this goes in life.

GARY GARRELS: I don't know. I'm trying to think back. There have been some—I actually feel very good about all the exhibitions I've done.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You've done pretty well. You did de Kooning also.

GARY GARRELS: I did the late paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: He was not a living artist at the time.

GARY GARRELS: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That was a different kind of experience.

GARY GARRELS: Yes. I stumbled on the late paintings—again when I was still—when I was at MIT I'm almost positive, and I was coming down to New York and Xavier Fourçade, he had a show in 1984 of those late paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: The dealer

GARY GARRELS: A dealer.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Another well-known dealer.

GARY GARRELS: Yes. On the Upper East Side and I saw those paintings and was just in a sense of exhilaration.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: At seeing an artist at such a late point in his life have such incredible openness and such an incredible sense of beauty and light and space. And many people had that experience. I know Brice Marden, that was a transformative thing for him—that he stopped doing the monochromes and started doing the calligraphic paintings.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You can really see it in the work.

GARY GARRELS: And that's the way I've hung the gallery upstairs too, so that you see the 1984, or maybe it's '85, de Kooning, and behind it in the next gallery is one of the ribbon paintings of Brice and it's the yellow one, *The Sisters*—and it's very staged.

[Laughter.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: But that show—that show you did [at MoMA]—that was Rob Storr, you did together?

GARY GARRELS: Kind of.

LINDA YABLONSKY: At MoMA. Which got really mixed—

GARY GARRELS: It got very mixed reviews.

LINDA YABLONSKY: People didn't know what to make of those paintings. They were suddenly empty, where they had been so full in the past.

GARY GARRELS: Full. Exactly. And I think—

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's an example of a show that really wasn't embraced entirely.

GARY GARRELS: Well—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —of a very well-loved artist.

GARY GARRELS: Many people did respond. But I have to say it may have been too early. But when John Elderfield did the more recent retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: He devoted the last two galleries to those late paintings, and I think *finally* people understood how extraordinary they are, and what an achievement they are, and how they are a great last chapter of one of the great painters of the 20th century. Yeah. In its time—but I felt really good about the show, I have to say. I felt very, very good about the show. And I know it had mixed response, critically.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I think they were shocked, even though Xavier Fourçade had already had that show, not many people saw it compared to the numbers that saw it in the museum show.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: For SFMOMA here, Sol LeWitt—you also organized that show?

GARY GARRELS: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: This was your first go-round at SFMOMA or the second?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. It was one of the last things I did here. It opened in 2000, as I was making the transition to go to MoMA New York. I mean, I'd been working on it a long time, but it opened here in 2000 and then went to the Whitney in New York.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

GARY GARRELS: And it was at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And did the same show get a different response in different physical circumstances?

GARY GARRELS: Well, it looked different. With a show like that, I planned and organized it for the galleries and the spaces here in the SFMOMA, in the Botta Building.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

GARY GARRELS: And then it had to go to the MCA, which is a somewhat problematic set of galleries, and then to the Whitney, which really reduced—which is half the size that it was in San Francisco.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow.

GARY GARRELS: But, you know, you still try to keep the key moments and the essential points are still made even if the show is smaller or, you know, in a different kind of space. But, no, there is usually an optimal place where you see an exhibition. But not always. Sometimes it can be transferred. We did the Brice Marden show at MoMA in New York, and it looked extraordinary here in San Francisco, because I was able to do galleries alternating between drawings and paintings, and have skylights open on the paintings gallery and have them closed on the drawings galleries, and so they were much more tightly linked. And then I did it in the huge, cavernous spaces of the Hamburger Banhof in Berlin, and it was much smaller, but it was *incredibly* dramatic.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Because of the space.

GARY GARRELS: The space, yeah. It was tighter and linear, but it looked fantastic and it had an incredible response from people in Germany.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You've talked about shows that had a transformative effect on you. Have you ever seen one that you wish you had done?

GARY GARRELS: Oh, yes. I just saw one. The Doris Salcedo retrospective at the MCA in Chicago. I've been a fan of Doris for a long time, and I did a small show with her here in the '90s, and then my successor, Madeline Grynsztejn, who also worked with Doris at the Art Institute of Chicago.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Your successor?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. When I left here in 2000, Madeline Grynsztejn came, yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, the first time around.

GARY GARRELS; Yeah. Anyway, Doris Salcedo was an artist we were both interested in, and she brought more work into the collection here, and then I brought in more work more recently, and anyway she did a spectacular, to my mind, almost flawless retrospective at the MCA in Chicago. And we were closed, or otherwise we would have shown it here.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh.

GARY GARRELS: But she organized it, and I'm a little jealous.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

GARY GARRELS: But she did—it couldn't have been a better—could *not* have been a better retrospective exhibition. It was absolutely pitch-perfect in my mind.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That's very nice to hear.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. Oh no, I mean, it's wonderful to—I am always thrilled when I see a curator and an artist have that kind of relationship, where it really becomes a hand-in-glove kind of presentation.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: They don't always happen.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No. You're an exception.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What is this *Inside-Out: New Chinese Art* at the Asia Society? How did that come about?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. I knew Vishakha Desai—she was curator for South Asian Art at the Boston MFA, and I met her when I was in Boston, and then got to know her when I was in New York. She was at the Asia Society, and then when I came out here in the fall of '93, I realized that this museum had had almost no relationship with Asia, and so we very quickly brought in a show when we opened up Botta building that Alexandra Munroe organized at the Japan Society, I think it was called, in New York, called *Scream Against the Sky*—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —which was a show of the postwar Japanese avant-garde, and then—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I saw that show. That was pretty interesting to me.

GARY GARRELS: It was a great show. But I approached Vishakha—I was in New York and had lunch, and said I'd love to get the museum more involved with contemporary Asian art, and maybe we can work on a project together. And she said, "Well, I'm working right now on organizing a show of contemporary Chinese art with a guy, Gao Minglu—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Can you spell that please?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. Gao, G-A-O, Ming, M-I-N-G-L-U, Gao Minglu, who is now professor, I think, at the University of Pittsburgh, I'm not sure. Anyway, he had left China in 1989, after the Tiananmen Square uprisings and—anyway, she was starting to work with him on a show and so we decided, let's do it together. And Minglu did not know very much about contemporary Western art. I knew nothing about—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Right.

GARY GARRELS: —contemporary Chinese art, and there was a curator at the Asian society named Karen Smith. And there are two Karen Smiths who had been involved with Chinese art—Karen Smith, who lives in Beijing and now in Shanghai, who has been involved in contemporary Chinese art, and then a Karen Smith who was a curator at the Asian Society, who studied Song—S-O-N-G Dynasty art. So Gao Minglu and Karen and I met for days over many months looking at this *tremendous* archive of material that Gao Minglu had of artists he knew in

China and either worked with, our Knew or whatever, and we would discuss it, and if we all three agreed that the art was interesting we knew we had something.

Because Minglu often was very excited about work that looked totally derivative to me, because it was just too close to some Western precedent. Karen would sometimes see artists that still had a toehold in something of the history of Chinese art. And Gao knew all the circumstances of why this art, what it meant to the artists who were making it at the time. So when all three of us said this is something good and interesting, it came into serious consideration. So I think it was the bringing all three of us together that I think we got actually a very, very strong overview of contemporary Chinese art at the time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes. But do you think—I mean, that sounds like a really copacetic situation.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. It was.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But often group-curated exhibitions are both difficult and not successful..

GARY GARRELS: That was, I felt, a very successful and very collegial thing. I mean, recently, there's the Bruce Conner retrospective that's at MoMA New York. And that was my colleague here, Rudolf Frieling, who is head of our media arts, and then at New York MoMA, Stuart Comer, who is the chief curator for media arts there, and Laura Hoptman, who is a curator in the painting and sculpture department. And Laura and I had worked together when I was head of the drawing department. She was a junior assistant curator in the department, and we developed a very good working relationship then, and I think the four of us worked on this Bruce Conner retrospective, and I think because the four of us were involved we each brought some different strengths to it. And I think it is definitely a stronger exhibition because all four of us worked on it together.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I think it's one of the most successful exhibitions that MoMA has had in its current building

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which is not an easy building—

GARY GARRELS: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —to make shows for.

GARY GARRELS: And Laura and Stuart really oversaw the plan and the installation at MoMA in New York. And Rudolf and I are going to do a very different installation here. It's going to be denser, more theatrical, more experiential.

LINDA YABLONSKY: More theatrical in what way? So you can entertain?

GARY GARRELS: No. Theatrical in the sense that it's going to be a very immersive experience. It's going to be less—it's going to be—like, each gallery is going to have a different paint color.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

GARY GARRELS: And it's going to be —like, you're going to walk into a gallery and it will be very intense and immersive as an experience.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You can change and make it more immersive as you say, or change one's experience through color and lighting?

GARY GARRELS: And density and installation, and each group of works will have—in New York, MoMA the show has—it has a very nice flow.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes, it does. I agree.

GARY GARRELS: It kind of keeps it all very even keel.

LINDA YABLONSKY: That is true except for the interruptions of the films.

GARY GARRELS: Of the films. Yes.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: Well, I want the non-film works here to have the same kind of intensity as the films.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah. They are pretty intense, I have to say.

GARY GARRELS: So like—I'm going to make a gallery of just black wax-related work and it's going to be painted black, which is the way Bruce originally installed those works in the early 60s.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

GARY GARRELS: So the—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Now, I kind of wish they would've done that in New York.

GARY GARRELS: No, no. I think it's great for New York, and it's and very MoMA. And I think the work is so diverse and demanding that it's a lot to take in for someone who is not familiar with the work. Anyway, It's just gonna be a different thing. I mean, MoMA New York always has a more intellectual attitude towards the presentation of work, and I think here in San Francisco I think there's a little more emphasis on the experiential character of the work. Not always, but I think—at least that's—again, I want the person who doesn't know anything about this work to walk in and *feel* something.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: And then they can dig in deeper if they want.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Another technical question—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —for curatorial students or people who are interested. What goes on—when you have a big show like this, with a lot of objects and you have media like film to be projected, in different—some of them are projected from projectors and others are digital—

GARY GARRELS: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: —projections, and very delicate, hard-to-travel sculpture and drawings—

GARY GARRELS: —yeah—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —what's involved in traveling? Tremendous care and shipping and insurance and how do you get the lenders to agree to let this go? This is all the curator's responsibility.

GARY GARRELS: Yes, and no. We have a wonderful team here of registrars who oversee how the work is handled and installed and, you know, have very, sometimes very detailed instructions on how the work should be handled and installed. We have amazing conservators who deal with the materials and, again, how they should be treated or handled or so on, and if things need to be repaired and restored or so on, and we have an amazing crew of what we call preparators, who are people who actually handle the work and get it into the gallery and up on the wall. And those people—the registrars, the conservators, the preparators—are the people who make a curator dreams turn into reality. And you've got—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I like the way you put that.

GARY GARRELS: —you've got to have that team of people. And I have to say, I love—part of the reasons why I was interested in coming back to SFMOMA is because most of those people who are here when I worked here in the '90s are still here, and they are an amazing group of people and it gives me confidence that I can ask somebody to borrow something that I know is incredibly fragile, and I know it will be handled and treated—

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

GARY GARRELS: —with incredible care and respect, and feel very confident that it will return to the lender in the same condition it was when they lent it to us. A very prominent collector I know who says, when you lend a work you know it's not going to come back better. [Laughs.]

LINDA YABLONSKY: I've heard collectors say that as well. Always damaged.

GARY GARRELS: Right. So—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —Something happens.

GARY GARRELS: So it's a huge responsibility for me to take—to bring into our caretaking a work of art that someone has in a collection, whether it's another museum or a private collection or the artist, that it becomes a huge responsibility that we are going to take care of that work and that it will be in the same condition when

leaves our museum as when it came into it.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How would the logistics differ between a show you did at the Hammer—let's name one?

GARY GARRELS: *Oranges and Sardines.*

LINDA YABLONSKY: *Oranges and Sardines*, which was an abstract painting show.

GARY GARRELS: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How would that differ in organization, or logistics, or approach, or would it differ, say, from the Richard Serra drawing show you did for the Metropolitan—that appeared at the Metropolitan. It was also here.

GARY GARRELS: Right. And the Menil.

LINDA YABLONSKY: And the Menil, in Houston.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. That was a much more—you know, it was a subjective and playful exhibition.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Which?

GARY GARRELS: The *Oranges and Sardines.*

LINDA YABLONSKY: From the title, one can infer that, I guess.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. And it wasn't about a scholarly rigor—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GARY GARRELS: —or trying to create a historical understanding. You know, it was, again, very experiential. And it was bringing things together in a way that would give you greater insight about a particular artist work, and also give you a new lens for looking at something that might have been familiar. So putting things together in very unorthodox ways. So, you know you put—like with Mary Heilmann, she wanted a Joseph Beuys felt suit, she wanted a fiberglass Nauman sculpture, she wanted a David Hockney painting—what else? Anyway, it just created a whole different frame to consider any of those works, including Mary's.Beuys felt suit, she wanted a fiberglass Nauman sculpture, she wanted a David Hockney painting—what else? Anyway, it just created a whole different frame to consider any of those works, including Mary's.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow. Yes.!

GARY GARRELS: Charline von Heyl wanted a Malcolm Morley painting. She wanted a Rosemarie Trockel ceramic. She wanted Carla Accardi painting. She had a little Paul Thek. You know, it was creating fresh ways to think about works of art that were familiar, but also introducing works by artists that were probably not familiar. And with Richard, it was—it's an attempt to try to create an understanding of the development of work over an entire career, and where there was a continuity and where there were ruptures—where there were new ideas or new ways of working introduced. But seeing the whole arc of a career at the same time, and that's just a very different issue. So the next big project I'm going to work as my own project—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes?

GARY GARRELS: Which I'm actually going with Sheena Wagstaff at the MET, is going to be a Vija Celmin's retrospective.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Vija Celmins!

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow. And that will be the two institutions also collaborating?

GARY GARRELS: Yes, working together. And Sheena and I are doing—

LINDA YABLONSKY: —from the Metropolitan [Museum of Art]—

GARY GARRELS: Yes. It's something I initiated. I actually introduced the idea in 2008, when I came back here, and it's taken a long time—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Wow. Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: —for Vija to feel just sort of totally comfortable with it. She said, "I need time to make some new work also."

LINDA YABLONSKY: She needs a lot of time, as I well know, to make a work. She is so painstakingly slow.

GARY GARRELS: Yes. Anyway, so that will—

LINDA YABLONSKY: So that will be at the [Met] Breuer—

GARY GARRELS: It will open here February 2019 and then I'm hoping go to Europe that summer and then be at the Met Breuer in the fall of 2019.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You mention Europe. Have you made trips to Asia? Art-related trips that weren't a holiday?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. I just was in China last fall, meeting with the—at the invitation of the Guggenheim. Because we're going to bring the Guggenheim—again, Alexandra Munroe who is now curator of the Guggenheim for Asian art is working with a guy named Phil Tinari, who's an American but is head of the Ullens Center in Beijing, and Hou Hanru, who is a curator/museum director—he's the director of the MAXXI in Rome.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How do you spell—

GARY GARRELS: H-O-U—

LINDA YABLONSKY: H-O-U.

GARY GARRELS: H-A-N-R-U. And Hanru and Alexander and Phil are organizing a big overview of contemporary Chinese art but from 1989 to 2008, and it will be—you know, so I did this show with the Asia Society called *Inside-Out: New Chinese Art* with Gao Minglu, and that opened here 1998 or '99—I can 't remember. Anyway, this will be sort of being moving that forward, and looking at the work through a different perspective, and I think complementing that first iteration of contemporary Chinese art. Anyway, I'm not involved as curator in that. I will be involved in the installation here and the presentation. But anyway, they put together a two-day conference symposium in Hangzhou in China last fall, which I went to participate in.

LINDA YABLONSKY: How do you spell that?

GARY GARRELS: H-A-N-G-Z-H-O-U, I think. There might be an S in there. That's just where—it's the most important Academy of Art has been—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, I see.

GARY GARRELS: In China for a long time and it's where the G-10 conference was just held.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Oh, where Obama—

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. Obama was just there. Hangzhou is one of those most important cultural cities in China, and they have a very large important art school there.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Do you think you travel more now than you used to, and do you feel—?

GARY GARRELS: No.

LINDA YABLONSKY: There are certainly more biennials around the world now.

GARY GARRELS: I'm actually—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Do you go to many of them?

GARY GARRELS: I don't go to as many as I maybe would like to. I have to say I don't think I'm traveling quite as much. A part of it is San Francisco. It's a long way.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Except to Asia. Or South America?

GARY GARRELS: It's 11 hours to Tokyo. It's 11 hours to Sao Paulo. It's 11 hours to Frankfurt. And it is a long way.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

GARY GARRELS: And I do feel that. When I was in New York, it was so easy to go to New York—I mean, to go Europe and, you know, you can go for three days and it's not that not that big a deal.

LINDA YABLONSKY: If you were asked to the be the—

GARY GARRELS: Sorry. That's my office phone that I can't turn off, because I'm not hooked into the computer. It'll just go away automatically.

LINDA YABLONSKY: We're just about done.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: If you were asked to be the director of the next Documenta or Venice Biennale, what would you do? That would be a lot of travel back and forth?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. I'm not sure at this point is that—

LINDA YABLONSKY: They're curatorial plums.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. I don't know. I think it takes—I certainly don't think I could do a Documenta. I just turned 65 and I have to say I'm really feeling that difference in my energy level and stamina and, you know, when you're doing overnight trips halfway around the globe, I certainly don't spring back the way I did 15 years ago.

LINDA YABLONSKY: No more dancing all night?

GARY GARRELS: No more dancing all night and then going to see galleries all day, the next day. Right. I definitely found out when I was 28 there was definitely a change. I couldn't stay up all night and then go look at museums or galleries all day the next day.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You and Richard now live here, in the same city?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But you're still—you do travel a lot, even if not to foreign lands.

GARY GARRELS: No, I do. I usually try to go to Europe two or three times a year. You know, I'll occasionally go to South America or occasionally go to Asia. I go to New York almost every month, sometimes three days, sometimes a week.

LINDA YABLONSKY: But here, even—but in San Francisco, I imagine you have a lot of social obligations to lenders, collectors, to artists.

GARY GARRELS: Sure.

LINDA YABLONSKY: When do you have time for a personal life?

GARY GARRELS: Well, it's not as intense here as in New York. I mean, there are certainly lots of things going on, and I certainly do a fair number of things. But it's much easier to have some nights to oneself. New York, that is very difficult. You have to really be rigorous and stringent about creating time and space for yourself apart from your profession.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I have one more question. What—what would you say to a younger person who—I mean, there are a lot of star curators, like star conductors, symphonic conductors who travel the world doing these biennials and seem to hold down institutional jobs and yet—

GARY GARRELS: I know.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —do other shows in other places. And so there is a kind of star system—

GARY GARRELS: Oh yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: —now for curators.

GARY GARRELS: Definitely

LINDA YABLONSKY: And so-called advisors—

GARY GARRELS: Right

LINDA YABLONSKY: —to important collectors.

GARY GARRELS: Right.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Or people who are judged to be - have some power.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Like the François Pinaults of the world.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

LINDA YABLONSKY: What would you say to a person who wants to - who loves art and artists and wants to—would you encourage them to work in institutions? You can function perfectly independently now as a curator without that affiliation.

GARY GARRELS: You can. But I think it's still—I think it's, you know, it's—you know, you have to build up that career slowly and, you know, to gain that recognition and to be attractive—to have the next invitation. I don't know why, but I have been very interested in continuity of relationships with artists. I guess a lot of curators who do these—who are kind of on the biannual circuit, have a group of artists they tend to work with over and over again. I'm very interested in history and memory. And museums are places that are locations for history and memory. And building a collection, to me, has been as important as organizing exhibitions. And that's a very different thing.

And having a relationship with an artist over a long period of time like with a Bob Gober or a Doris Salcedo where they feel like there is a real commitment to them and to their artwork and a lot of the artwork is sort of in your care and it's going to be part of a discourse with part of a historical continuum rather than being—again it's the question of whether these exhibitions have much—to what extent they have an historical grounding and to what extent are they just purely contemporary and that's—again, there is a shifting in balance between us sometimes. I don't know. I think each person has to find where they feel they most comfortable and where they are most excited and satisfied. I love organizing exhibitions, but there's something deeply gratifying about the long-term relationship with the objects and with the artists so—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Do trustees or patrons of this museum who give generously—do they try to pressure you into helping them buy artwork?

GARY GARRELS: I give a lot of advice.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You do?

GARY GARRELS: Oh, absolutely.

LINDA YABLONSKY: So you don't feel that's a conflict of interest?

GARY GARRELS: Nope. Not at all. You know

LINDA YABLONSKY: Unpaid advice?

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. Absolutely.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see.

GARY GARRELS: And you hope then that there will be collections built where those works may end up in the museum and they say we focus on the reopening here we've done this thing called "The Campaign for Art," where we've asked supporters and trustees other patrons and collectors and artists to commit works either as gifts are promise gifts to the institution, and I've spent the last three or four years with a lot of attention to that.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I saw some of the results of that upstairs.

GARY GARRELS: And some of it has been longer. Some of that are things that I started working and putting in place back in the '90s when I was here.

LINDA YABLONSKY: I see. That must be very satisfying.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. No, it was. It's coming back as part of—we have a very exceptional community here. It's a very old-fashioned city in some ways where people—where the institutions of the city have great meaning and significance for the people who live here, and they're supportive and generous to those institutions. And there's a sense of—it's a small enough city that I think people feel a sense of community.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Do you—

GARY GARRELS: And history.

LINDA YABLONSKY: You're talking about history and memory, so do you feel the presence of that loss that we suffered in the '80s and early '90s, the cultural conflict? Is it present in your life and work today?

GARY GARRELS: It wells up, you know. There are times I will think about an artist who is gone, like Felix, you know, or a colleague who is gone.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yeah.

GARY GARRELS: I think about, you know, yeah. I mean, again, when I came out—when I recognized my identity as gay in the '70s, it was such an exhilarating celebratory time.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Yes.

GARY GARRELS: A sense of open, endless possibilities. And in the '80s, that sort of came crashing down and I don't—you know, we live in a much more sober time in lots of ways and it's not just, you know—it's climate change, it's economic inequality, it's, you know—you feel the crisis in so many ways at different aspects of culture and society that are not working the way we want.

We see the issues of terrorism, you know, you know, we don't live in that exuberant celebratory time and that will never be recovered. I feel very, very lucky I had those few years to experience that and I think in the '80s, we really did go through an extraordinary—and'90s, a period of loss and mourning and reconciliation, and rethinking what had meaning and value for us and, you know, again I came from a pretty conservative background and—

LINDA YABLONSKY: Conservative progressive [laughs].

GARY GARRELS: Yeah. But you know, there is—I think growing up on the farm, you know, you get a different sense of time. You recognize there is a slowness in time and the idea of cycles and seasons and, you know, and also the vicissitudes of nature, you know, I think somewhere that's grounded me and it's somehow—you know, I have to say I can say sit with Jasper Johns, having coffee and neither one of us have to say anything at the same—we can sit with nice long pauses and it's not a hardship.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Thank you, Gary Garrels. You have been wonderful and informative and poignant, and also that exuberance is still with you despite the grief and, you know, the future is still with you, as well as the past.

GARY GARRELS: I feel very very, very, very lucky that I stumbled into this and I have to say I operate very intuitively and always have. And I feel very, very lucky that I somehow have had the luck to meet a lot of the people I've met and the artists that I've been able to work with. I really treasure, you know, those experiences and it's been an incredible privilege to have had those experiences.

LINDA YABLONSKY: Thank you so much.

GARY GARRELS: Yeah.

[End of SD01, TR01.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]