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Oral history interview with Virginia Wright, 2017 March 22- 23

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Virginia Wright on March 22 and 23, 2017. The interview took place at Wright's home in Seattle, Washington and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution and the Center for the History of Collecting in America at the Frick Art Reference Library of The Frick Collection.

Mija Riedel has reviewed this transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Virginia Wright at her home in Seattle, Washington, on March 22, 2017, for The Frick Collection and the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is Card Number One. So firstly, thank you so much for making time to do this, it's much appreciated. I know you go non-stop. We'll start with just some of the simpler biographical questions. When and where were you born?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Seattle.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: January 1, 1929.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And you grew up in Vancouver though, yes?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. My family went to Vancouver due to the lumber business.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Okay. And did you have siblings, do you have siblings?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I have a sister two years younger than me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And did she get as engaged with the arts as you are?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Not so specifically, but she is. I think music is more her interest.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: She's also interested in art.

MIJA RIEDEL: What's her name?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Lee, [Eulalie Bloedel] Lee.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Lee?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Lee.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And then your father was Prentice.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you pronounce that Prentice?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Prentice, mm-hmm [affirmative].

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And your mother was Virginia also?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Were they art collectors?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, not really. I mean they bought a few things and I think that my mother was quite interested in art, but they didn't—it was not a primary interest at all. And I think that's, in a way, what I liked about it. I could seek out my own territory, you know, didn't have to share.

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Wide open turf.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So how then did you get so interested in art? Did you see a lot of it as a child? You said your mother was—did you see a lot of museums in Vancouver, were there —

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, I, you know, drew a lot.

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

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And my parents thought it was very talented. But looking back on it, it was far from talented. But—Anyway, they encouraged me and I think that's the way I got interested in art was because I was presumed to have some talent, which was far from the case.

MIJA RIEDEL: So did you draw as a child, did you paint, all of those things?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. I went to art school later on.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And, you know, took studio even in high school. So, yes, it was—but by the time of college I was no longer interested in making art, I was interested in history of art.

MIJA RIEDEL: And why was that?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, I think that maybe my mother sort of got me started. We had a book called—a children's book about art history. You know, starting with Giotto and it was—I think Hendrik van Loon wrote it. And it was—

MIJA RIEDEL: Hendrik van Loon?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I may not have that name right but he did write on art. And he wrote this children's book that, you know, got me started with the names, Giotto, et cetera, et cetera. So, I think art history more and more, through high school and then specifically in college was my main interest.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I felt so lucky to be able to major in something that was of such interest to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. We'll definitely get to Barnard because there's a lot to discuss there. Spend a little bit more time first in Vancouver. Did you have a strong sense of philanthropy growing up, or did you feel there was a real philanthropic practice in your family?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: That's just—I can't answer that. I don't remember it being a paramount interest of my parents, but they were always responsible and did their fair share, you know, that kind of thing. I don't—although again, then I was aware later on that my father bought a Henry Moore sculpture for a park in Vancouver. And so, I think they were increasingly as they got or grew older, they had philanthropic interests. And, of course, on Bainbridge Island, nearby, they left there—they moved back here in the '50s and bought a place on Bainbridge Island. Which now is a park.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And a very popular park. It's really very beautiful. And Bloedel Reserve it's called. And then so, yes, they were philanthropic in their—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Your father was in the timber business.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did your mother work at all outside the home?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. Oh, no, no. That was plenty.

[They laugh.]

It was before the days that women thought in those terms. If she had something that she pursued, it was gardening. And she was very involved and interested in gardens, creating them.

MIJA RIEDEL: And I remember seeing a picture of you I think, with a photograph of a painting by—is it Renoir? Maybe some apples, that was in your grandparents' house. It must be in the '50s, adjusting this painting. Does that ring a bell?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Could.

MIJA RIEDEL: Were there paintings—did your grandparents collect?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. I think that photograph came from I—when I— this is jumping way ahead.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. To—

[Cross talk.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Some things from Knoedler and Company.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So that was—so, it wasn't, there really wasn't an experience of art in your family growing up, it was this book and it was your mother's influence and something that just resonated with you?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: That's right. That's right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And was there—did you visit museums as a child?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you take art? You took art classes?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I mean the museum in Vancouver at that time was pretty primitive, pretty lean.

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

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So, and Seattle the same. So, no, museums were not a part of my life in growing up.

MIJA RIEDEL: Any travels at all to New York or Paris that would have exposed you or not until later?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Not until I was in my teens—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —did I go to—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —I went to a boarding school in New York.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, you did? I didn't know that.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Master's School, Dobbs Ferry.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, I know exactly where that is. I grew up in Tarrytown.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Really?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. So, you went to Master's in Dobbs Ferry.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. So that was—and so that was my first experience of seeing the Frick and other museums in New York. In fact, I remember writing a short story for some class about a visit to the Frick and this fictional visitor being overwhelmed by the portrait of *St. Jerome* by, who is it? By—

MIJA RIEDEL: Is that El Greco?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Exactly, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. So, it was a fictional story that you wrote?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: About someone going to the Frick and being overwhelmed by this painting.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Spiritual awaking kind of thing. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Do you still have it?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, I don't think so. No.

MIJA RIEDEL: So what inspired that story?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well it was an assignment, you know, we had to do a short story.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so that just came to me. I can't remember exactly how.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you remember what happened in the story?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, yeah. This character was kind of trying to be popular with her associates and trying to say the right thing and wear the right clothes and doing everything to be popular. And sees—goes to the Frick with a group and sees this painting and suddenly realizes how useless and silly it was to be chasing a notion of popularity when, you know, be the individual and be yourself. I think that's kind of the gist of it. But it was a spiritual awakening idea—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —to quit running after something that was meretricious, popularity.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And with people I wasn't really that interested in.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. That's pretty extraordinary. That's very telling in retrospect. Does it feel that way to you too?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: [Laughs.] Well, no, but I got, you know, a good mark on the assignment. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. So, were you taking regular trips into New York? I know the train, was the train running along then?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: To Manhattan? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. No, I don't think we did do regular trips but it was just sort of specialized, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Okay. So was really an introduction to New York and the Frick, and probably the Met and—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. But I guess the Frick really impressed me at that time because it was something that you could get your head around. I mean the Metropolitan was just kind of confusing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But the Frick is so special.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It would be wonderful to hear a little bit more about that, what about the Frick resonated with you. It was on a scale that was understandable. Perhaps the installation of the work as well, and such a beautiful setting made it accessible.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Yes. Yeah. I don't even remember if I did go to the Met. I must have.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But—and interestingly enough, I did not go to the Modern until much later. I had no interest in modern art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

[They laugh.]

That's terrific. So, you were in boarding school in Dobbs Ferry, that's makes a lot of sense. So then how did you decide on Barnard?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, a very good friend that I made at Dobbs was going to Barnard.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So but actually I went—after I graduated from Dobbs I went back to Vancouver—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —and went to the University of British Columbia for a couple of years. I was kind of—I'd been in boarding school for four years, a couple of different other schools, so I really was tired of being away from home and wanted to be in Vancouver, get to know my friends there, and go to school there. But I always knew that I would like to graduate from someplace like Barnard.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. I'm just going to stop and check this for one moment. Make sure we're recording you okay. There, that volume is a little better. Okay. So, did you go to Barnard then as a sophomore, or junior, or—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Junior.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So, you'd spent a couple of years in Vancouver—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: And then went into Barnard. Had you studied art history in Vancouver?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Not really, no.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Okay. So, what was the shift that when you got to Barnard you decided you were coming here and you're going to study art history?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Yeah. I knew that all along.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, you'd known all along.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. From days in Vancouver I knew I was going to hope to get into Barnard and then definitely wanted to major in history of art, knew that. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that seems like that was a really extraordinary experience for you. I know Julius Held was teaching.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And then there were the lectures that you attended by Meyer Schapiro.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And that was like the conversion of St. Paul.

[They laugh.]

As I said I was not the slightest interested in modern art. And this friend of mine that I'd known at Dobbs, she said "Well you got to take this course at Columbia with Schapiro, he is the most extraordinary lecturer." And so, because of her, really, I signed up for the course. And it was just oh, night and day. I mean from being not interested I could hardly see anything else after his lectures. They were—he showed how modern art really had its roots in the 19th Century and made a logical case that this was—what we were seeing in the '50s was a direct development that went far back in our history. So that made it legit for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And it made, you know, I have some kind of rationale. And I just—at that point I knew I was going to—hoped that I could, after I graduated, stay in New York and work for a contemporary art gallery.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And that was—but it was all Meyer Schapiro. I mean he was a huge influence. And of course, on many other people, many artists of course.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. Absolutely.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: He was legendary.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. I was wondering if you could say some more about any particular practices or insights that you took away. I know Julius Held was very interested in kind of stewardship and very close study of paintings. Meyer Schapiro had those—I can't remember what those lectures were called. They had I think specifically art from the 1900s, but I can't think of the name.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: But were their specific examples or specific artists, specific modern artists or early European masters that made that connection somehow significant for you?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, I think it was just the general developments that occurred. But one thing that I found very instructive and very interesting, both Schapiro and Held assigned their students to choose a painting on view in New York, whatever they chose, and write a thousand words on that painting. And more than anything else, that was a marvelous lesson to me that the more you looked, the more you saw. And you can't just take in a painting tripping by about 30 miles an hour. And to sit down and have to write a thousand words on a given painting means a lot of thought, a lot of looking, a lot of reflecting, a lot of analysis. And I never forgot that. That was a huge lesson in art appreciation.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. And so, when you would write those thousand words, did each of them have specifics that you wanted them to cover in terms of influences—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. You wrote on that painting without invoking any history, any place in the painting in the artist's overall oeuvre.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It was simply your take on his painting. Yes. I should have been clear about that. Because it was nothing about facts, nothing about research, nothing like that. Just you and the painting. What you noticed, what you thought it meant, you know, what you thought the artist's purpose was maybe, interpreting it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting, but without any research on the piece at all.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right. Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Or understanding even the artist in depth.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fascinating. And they both had you do that?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. It was a typical assignment.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I don't know whether other people in the Art Department gave a similar assignment, but both of those two gave that assignment and it was a total game changer for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting because I think of them both as so scholarly, but I think of them as coming from different perspectives, and the fact that they both gave the similar—the exact same assignment is curious to me.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Do you remember what you wrote about?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I wrote about—for Julius Held, I wrote—German Expressionist.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. This is why we have a second day, so.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's okay, we can come back.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. All right.

MIJA RIEDEL: But something about that—it's interesting because you were choosing to do a German Expressionist, you were not writing about—I know, a European master, but you were choosing something more contemporary.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: That's what I wrote for Schapiro. Then for Held I—now I can't even remember, it was a stupid —

[They laugh.]

—you know, primitive little Italian Primitive. And why I chose that, it wasn't, you know, an interesting painting particularly, I just chose it because it was kind of simple as I could get [laughs].

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly. Exactly. So, did they encourage you to talk about not only what you observed in terms of the paint and the surface of the painting and scale and that sort of thing, but also your emotional sense of it, your intellectual sense of it, all of that?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. How you interpreted it, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. So, it sounds like that—with the Schapiro, did you take the Schapiro class for a term or for a year?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: A half year.

MIJA RIEDEL: A half a year. Okay. And that was really a changing, that was a line drawn in the sand there where things really changed?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Fantastic.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Years later he came to Seattle. There used to be something at the University. The University of Washington used to be a very important part of the Seattle community. And the lectures there were something we all went to. And Meyer Schapiro gave a series of lectures at UW.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And it was just one lecture I guess. But he stayed with us, he and his wife. And he talked for like 48 hours.

[They laugh.]

I mean one thing led to another and we—and he, you know, couldn't remember everything that he'd ever done see. And we had some friends that hung out with us while he talked and we listened. And after he left, after this weekend, we received like a dress box full of paperback books that were brought to mind by what he talked about.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, my goodness.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. I'm not saying that very clearly, but every author he mentioned, or book he mentioned or everything, subject he talked about, this box full of books.

MIJA RIEDEL: He sent a mini library.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

[They laugh.]

About the conversations that had taken place that weekend.

MIJA RIEDEL: How spectacular. A teacher to the end.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what a mind.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I know. I know. I know. Amazing.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's an extraordinary gift. On so many levels I've never heard of anything quite like that.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. No. Yeah, it was. I mean he was legendary.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it must have been extraordinary too to have that experience, go from being a student to being some kind of peer. And it must have been fun for him to see how deeply engaged you had become.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well I don't know. I mean I saved a letter that he wrote. I can't remember what—oh, I think I asked his advice. I was trying to give a talk about abstract art. And I should hunt that up, I think, I still have it.

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

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: That sounds like a treasure. [laughs] What year was that roughly, do you remember? Like in the '60s?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Sixties.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Fifties or '60s.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think Matthew Kangas did an interview with you and he was talking about your ability to select key works out of early shows that went on to be extremely seminal or essential. And he mentioned Pollock and de Kooning and Robert Morris, di Suvero. And he had said that you had said "I had the sense to seek advice." And it seems like you were always—not always, but certainly very early on, very tuned in to people who really were very well versed in what was going on, where it fit in terms of larger art history and what was very current at the time, which leads us beautifully into Sidney Janis. And so, his gallery opened in '48. You graduated Barnard in '50 or '51?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: '51.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. '51. And then you went directly to Janis?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, I—

MIJA RIEDEL: You can tell that Betty Parsons story if you're not tired of telling it yet, but you had wanted to work there first.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: That's where it was all happening in 1950, you know, late '40s and early '50s.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Interesting, you know, women—women ran the best galleries in New York for contemporary art. Marian Willard, Betty Parsons, Eleanor Ward. I mean it's hard for me to get excited about women's lib because women were front and center in all the world that I knew.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: If they wanted to be.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you think that was also partially being a graduate from Barnard that you had a sense that women were able to do pretty much what they wanted to do?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well I just looked at the world around me and in the little world that I was involved with in the world. And woman, there were women artists and women were running the most important galleries. I mean it was—I don't know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Because there weren't many people who were willing to show abstract expressions of the men, in terms of what was most current, most avant-garde, there was very few. And certainly, Betty Parsons would have been the place to be.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Yes. And I heard that. That's where I wanted to, thought I wanted to work. And I, you know, I gave her all the wrong signals. I'd been told, you know, the galleries—people were advising me in Seattle and Vancouver that the galleries can't pay much so it would be a good idea if you looked like you could support

yourself some. So, I went, and I went in looking like, I don't know, this overdressed debutante [laughs], whatever. And Betty, you know, it was not Betty's style at all. And so, she just said, you know, "No, no, no, nothing is available here." So, Sidney Janis was—I'd never heard of him. And he was on the same floor as Betty Parsons.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: 15 West—15 East 53rd. But I saw this, you know, door, Sidney Janis Gallery, and I walk in. I thought "Well, I might as well try, maybe this is a gallery that I can talk to." Walked in and saw Mondrian, Leger, Brancusi, oh, my God. I thought "whoa." So, I talked to Sidney and he said "Well, maybe." He just had lost his previous assistant and—which was lucky. And so, he said let me think about it. And I thought—he wanted to know my background. And the fact that I had taken Meyer Schapiro's course I think was definitely a plus. So then, you know, lo and behold, two days later he said yes. And I was over-the-moon excited.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so—and it was really better in a way for me than Betty Parsons because Sidney had, you know, a huge range. It was not just contemporary art, he was really a secondary dealer for European, you know, works of the 20th Century. The Fauves, he did a show on the Fauves. And he was history minded.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so that was terrific for me. But at the same time, he saw that to get critical attention he needed to show contemporary art. That's where the reviewers were concentrating on. So, he took on de Kooning. And I think de Kooning came first, and then Pollock. And then, you know, ultimately all of them were there for a while.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So it was an amazing place to be.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. Absolutely. Betty Parsons was not in the least bit interested even though you mentioned Meyer Schapiro?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I didn't mention it to her. She just— "Get out of here."

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Not even a chance. So, you arrived at Sidney Janis in '51, and I just—this must have been such an extraordinary opportunity to just be around an extraordinary group of minds. I think of the artists coming through there and it must have been—stepping out of Meyer Schapiro's class into the actual world in which it was all unfolding.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It was extraordinary. Extraordinary.

MIJA RIEDEL: How many years were you there?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Fall of '51, and then married in '52 I guess.

MIJA RIEDEL: Or '53?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: '53 I think. Yeah. And then I worked for—and then I had twins in '54 and continued to work a little bit after that, but part-time.

MIJA RIEDEL: So '51, '52, '53 were the main years?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well '51 as I recall was a huge year there. I think that—didn't Pollock and Newman and Rothko and Clyfford Still all come from Betty Parsons over to Janis in '51?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Still never came.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, Still did not come?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, no, he tried and tried and tired.

MIJA RIEDEL: But Janis wasn't interested.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, no, no.

MIJA RIEDEL: Still wasn't interested.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Janis was interested, Still was not.

MIJA RIEDEL: Still was not?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, definitely not.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Okay. And there's a funny story that I read that you said when Janis took on Pollock he really wasn't sure about Pollock, he thought he was a little bit of a charlatan is what he said.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I can remember, you know, Sidney's wife, Hansi, worked at the gallery too. It was Sidney, Hansi, and their son, Carroll Janis, who's still around.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I can remember, it was when there was a Pollock show at Betty Parsons, and Sidney saying to Hansi "What do you think of Pollock, what do you think of Pollock?" And I can't remember Hansi's answer, but, you know, it wasn't "Well, he's the greatest." It wasn't that at all. And Sidney says, you know, "He seems like a charlatan to me." I mean I couldn't have made that up.

[They laugh.]

But so, the next year—and so it was so influential on me, I didn't even bother to go see the Pollock show at Betty's, right across the hall. Because Sidney said it was, ersatz, you know, I don't know, it's a shame. But then he was definitely not a charlatan and he came with Sidney Janis Gallery.

MIJA RIEDEL: That must have been extraordinary too, to see that turn around in Sidney Janis. I would think that that could be quite a learning experience in itself.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well Sidney, I think the great thing about him is he didn't have the ego that said, "I know what's happening in the art world, I know who the players are." He listened to the artists and I think that was the great lesson that I got from him. You know, he didn't have the ego that said, 'I have to identify." He sought out the artists, wanting to know what their heroes were, who they thought were the movers and shakers. And that was a huge influence on him. And that's the way it is. Artists are the first ones to sort it all out. And they're the ones to listen to, not really critics or, you know, tag-alongs, it's the artists.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I think that was the main thing I got from Sidney was that.

MIJA RIEDEL: And so he was willing to change his mind.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Absolutely.

MIJA RIEDEL: And clearly somebody said something to him and he went and looked at the work again and thought "Maybe I need to rethink this."

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, right, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: But he was also a pretty savvy business man too.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes, he was. He was. And he was really put down for that. But I think that he was—I think that kind of humility was really in his favor, that he wasn't, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But he was, you know, he loved to install shows and he was very good at that.

MIJA RIEDEL: And, yeah, he said that was something that was very important. I was reading some of the things that he had thought were important, and one was to—well, there—I think he had three stipulations about buying work that you had mentioned. Only purchase works by artists who have begun to attract serious critical attention and have market interest. Choose best available example, and take meticulous care about presentation of objects and impact of ensemble.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So, yeah. Well, that's very interesting. Because he thought a lot about the installation. You

know, he was quite a guy. I don't think he ever really—he was regarded as a merchant.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But Betty Parsons and Marian Willard were true art lovers. Sidney—but I think, I don't know, he was—he wrote books.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, he certainly did, two or three.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: With his wife as well.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, no, no. She was more music.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Rudi Blesh. She was interested in music. And I think folk music.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But I can't remember that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. Sidney wrote a book, I think a book on primitive art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: You know, he was, Grandma Moses kind of thing. He was interested in those artists as well as contemporary.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well I think in '51 he also had a comprehensive exhibition of Rousseau didn't he?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well he bought the great Rousseau *Le Reve*.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right. Was it *The Dream* that he bought? I can't remember.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Huge painting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Gorgeous. And that's in MoMA now?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes, yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MIJA RIEDEL: One of the pieces he donated I think much later.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: So he had an extraordinary eye.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes, he did. Yes, he did.

MIJA RIEDEL: And my understanding is that a number of artists left Betty Parsons because they really wanted somebody who could sell their work?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. That was an important part.

MIJA RIEDEL: Of being a dealer.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: The key thing about those artists in the '50s, the critics were writing about them, you know, and the *New Yorker*, and the *New York Times*. And everybody knew their name, you know, *LIFE* did a story about Jackson Pollock, I think. But they weren't selling. I mean Pollock's first show with Sidney, Nelson Rockefeller bought one big one. But that was about all. And I bought a small one.

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Good for you.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But that was all, the rest of the show did not sell.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And, yeah. And so that's what it was—you know, it's so different from nowadays.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It sells right before the gallery even opens but in those days the critics wrote about it. And it was obvious the pecking order was established pretty much by '51 or '50. Pollock and de Kooning were up here, and then the second tier was Rothko, Kline, Guston, so forth. But it was—I mean it's pretty much the same pecking order that still is true today. But collectors were buying impressionists and that kind of thing. They weren't buying contemporary art. I think Ben Heller was the first major collector.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ben Heller?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Heller, yeah. And he's, you know, Scull gets a lot of attention but Ben Heller was before Scull, and had a magnificent collection.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Pollock and which he hung in a Fifth Avenue Apartment. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was he a client of Janis then?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Must have been I guess. Must have been, but I can't remember interplay with Heller. Except I was able to see his apartment once and it was big mural-size Pollock. Yeah. He was a terrific guy.

MIJA RIEDEL: So he was really buying what was happening in the moment. Was that a little inspiring to you too?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Very inspiring. And I mean Scull was not even in the picture at that point. It was Heller, but that was the only one.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you remember—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: There was a show at MoMA, Heller's collection.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I don't know when that was, but it was really—show, you know, what a great eye he had. It was an important collection.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you remember any exhibits at Janis where you could actually feel a critical shift happening and people beginning to attend, or you had larger attendance or sales began to pick up, and people—something shifted and collectors began to —

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I think that didn't happen until maybe the later '50s, after I went to Seattle.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Because I remember there's a story of de Kooning having a show that opened at Sidney's, I think in '56, '57, and people were lining up outside the door to get in on the first day. Well that didn't happen in my—on my watch.

[They laugh.]

It was, you know, I think probably late '50s the collectors began to see the importance of what was going on.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it sounds like Sidney, he opened in '48, this starts to happen in the late '50s, about a 10-year run of building things up.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. And going from being a secondary dealer, you know. And he went to Europe every summer, bought works of art, you know, to sell in New York. And to do historical shows. I mean he would show—he had a Dada show that Marcel Duchamp —

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's talk about that, please. That was '53 I think.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Was it?

MIJA RIEDEL: I think so. Marcel Duchamp curated that exhibition, it was entirely his work; is that correct?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, it was other people, you know, and the catalog, or the announcement, the catalog, the printed accompaniment, was a big sheet of paper with, I guess, everything listed on that piece of paper. And then the paper was crumpled and thrown into a waste basket.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so visitors to the show would take something out of the waste paper basket and that was the list of the things in the show. And that was my job to do the crumpling. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That sounds like so much fun.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So how did that show come about? Had Sidney seen Marcel Duchamp in Europe over the summer and had a conversation, or Duchamp was in New York at the time, or the States?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. And he was definitely an art world presence. But he—and he frequented the galleries, and came to Sidney.

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But he, you know, he was kind of a familiar face around the gallery.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Visitors, and stopping to chat and, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: What do you recall of him or that show? What was memorable about that?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Honestly, I can't remember. I mean I think that we had some Duchamps in there. We had the wheel, the *Bicycle Wheel*.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, fantastic.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But that's about all I can remember. And who else we had, I really can't recall.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Does it stick out in your mind even amongst all the amazing shows that there were, as something that was special even at the time, or was it just another exhibition?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: In a way it was just another exhibition cause, oh, with an historical twist. And that is what Sidney was so good at and I think where his interests lay. But, you know, and he would do these museum quality shows where he'd borrow from museums and do a catalog, do a printed catalog. So, I think he, really, his heart was like a curator. I mean he loved to do shows that had a historical bent to them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Well I think he'd been very successful as a maker of shirts, I believe?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: He had a shirt business. But really just loved art and art history, and I think retired from the shirt business, was successful enough to be able to let that go. And decided to just open a gallery and make a living doing that. And it sounds like there was enough funding that he could continue to do the gallery and not be so dependent on that, but then he could really just follow his scholarship—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: —follow his interests and exhibit what was interesting to him.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I think, you know, his bread and butter was, you know, Bonnard and Derain and the early—and Picasso, and he did it. As I remember, he did a show of—Picasso's star went down a little bit after the war—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —I mean he was not—but Sidney did a show of late Picasso and, late then, that's the Picassos of the '40s, '50s, which was, you know, one of the first shows that made people look at Picasso again.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fantastic.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But, you know, I wish I could remember more of the exhibitions that he did because it was —

MIJA RIEDEL: Well if anything come to mind over night, that's the beauty of these two days—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: All right.

MIJA RIEDEL: We plant the seeds today, see what comes up tomorrow.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MIJA RIEDEL: This is fantastic though. Now Clement Greenburg, he came frequently to Sidney Janis did he not?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: You know I cannot—not in my time—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. How did you first meet him?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: More in the '60s.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. More in the '60s.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. He—I don't know what, really what he was doing in the '50s. He probably did come to the gallery but I wasn't so aware of him. And I can't remember why. But he was—I think he wrote for art magazines in the late '50s and '60s. And he certainly, I think, became involved in the art world in a major way in the '60s with Color Field painting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. So that would be more when you were coming back to visit after your—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: So was that also true for Richard Bellamy and for Andre Emmerich, that you met them both later, or did you meet them before you left?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Oh, no. Later. I mean both of them was. Because we left in what, '55, I think, back to Seattle. And that was before Dick Bellamy had a gallery.

MIJA RIEDEL: He had Hansa Gallery though, right? I think?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I guess so.

MIJA RIEDEL: That cooperative gallery?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: But that was not something you visited.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, it wasn't.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So yeah. So, then I think maybe the late '50s, getting established here—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —four kids.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So I didn't—I kind of took a back seat on the art thing, as I remember. Didn't buy much.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You moved here in '55, right?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you had Charles and Robin and Merrill and Johnny.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Charlie and Merrill were twins—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —that I had in New York. And then when I was pregnant with Robin, we moved out here, and she was born in '55, I think.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And then two years later we had Bing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. You were busy.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I was busy.

[They laugh.]

So, I don't think I was thinking much about art until maybe the '60s. And then I began to go back to New York. And I do remember Leo Castelli sitting me down, saying "Okay. Now you have not been in New York for, you know, quite a few years, a lot has happened. And this is kind of what is happening here. And these are the people you should be—these are the galleries you should be seeking out and these are the artists that are causing waves." And I think that was—he mentioned Dick Bellamy at that point.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so that's where I headed for.

MIJA RIEDEL: How interesting.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so it all started right there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Before we totally leave Janis, I just want to touch briefly on that wonderful story of Rothko *No. 10* and the fact that you needed to be interviewed in order to be allowed to—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —purchase it.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And I know you've told that story many times, but I just was wondering if you remember anything of that conversation.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, yeah, you know, I—Betty, who she hired instead of me—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —was David Herbert, who—well he's kind of an art world—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: A terrific guy. I mean he had enormous perception and enthusiasm for contemporary art. He knew much more than I did, he was really quite a guy. And had quite a career in a way. So he was Betty's assistant. And we became friends and he was fun, we laughed a lot. And one day he came over to see me in the Janis Gallery. And he said "You got to come over and see this Rothko that just came in the gallery. It is unbelievable." And so, I did. And I was just knocked out. I mean it was just staggering, beautiful. And so that was when I thought—you know, the art world, you could buy things on time, no interest payment. I mean six months to pay was perfectly okay. Because things weren't selling and —

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, how interesting. Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So funny, I thought "Well, I think if I can postpone payments for six months or more, I think I can do this." It was $1,000, the painting. And so, I went to Betty and she said "No. Rothko doesn't sell like that. I mean you'll have to be interviewed."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And you were kind of like "You should know that. Idiot."

[They laugh.]

And I mean —

MIJA RIEDEL: Clearly the paintings are not selling. Just to be clear, the paintings are not selling, nobody is lining up to buy this piece, but you have to be interviewed before you can buy it.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right. Right. And I think that's really is why the artists finally drifted over to Sidney because of that attitude, you know, that Betty had. You had to qualify for heaven sake.

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So clearly Rothko went along with it though since he then met with you to have that interview.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And do you recall anything of the conversation?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It was a very—I was kind of "Oh, my God." I was a little intimidated by having to prove myself. And so—but he turned out to be very nice and kind, and we had a good conversation. And he said "Now, it's fine. You may buy that."

[They laugh.]

"But I want to make two reservations. One being"—I'd said it was too big for me to hang in my little apartment I shared with a Barnard grad. But I said I have a friend who has a little bit more space, I'll hang it in his apartment. And he said "No, my paintings will go even in a small space." Well it took me years to realize that, because it's true, you know. But at the time it seemed almost like a mural.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Now it's, my gosh—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Domestic scale, absolutely. And he said, "You must not lend it to the Museum of Modern Art for at least a year." Well, okay, no problem, you know. The Museum wasn't asking for it. And the museum wasn't interested in, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —the Abstract Expressionists for, you know, until later. So—

MIJA RIEDEL: It's so interesting though that he was so clear about that.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I mean they all had kind of a prejudice against MoMA. Because MoMA wasn't really right front and center, in the '50s anyway, the early '50s.

MIJA RIEDEL: But it was expressing no interest whatsoever, so it is fascinating.

[They laugh.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, right. Right. No problem.

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That is a wonderful story. And that piece is now over at the Seattle Art Museum, right?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is it up?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes, it is.

MIJA RIEDEL: I look forward to seeing that. Well I would like to talk about Dick Bellamy, and also Andre Emmerich because I have a sense that, well I know that Dick Bellamy has really engaged with you in a number of different occasions—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —And a number of different venues over the years, and also Andre Emmerich. But we could also move on to Seattle and then come back and discuss them. Do you have any preference one way or the other?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Well it seems like you became more familiar with them once you started going back to New York, right?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: And primarily then in the '60s I would imagine?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Because Dick Bellamy had the Green Gallery from '60 to '65, I think.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And then Andre Emmerich opened in '54.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Did he open in '54?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, I think, through '98.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But I think he wasn't really—Andre wasn't front and center until the '60s when he began to show Noland.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So—

MIJA RIEDEL: So what made you decide to go back to New York and start looking so seriously at work again? Well, maybe coming to Seattle and seeing what was not here was the inspiration to do that? I mean you moved here in '55. I was amazed to read that you moved here in '55. In '59 you'd already made your first donation to the Seattle Art Museum. Is that accurate?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: You mean a donation of a painting?

MIJA RIEDEL: I think so.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well that could be. Because I always thought I wanted to work with a museum. That seemed to be the best of all.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you really had to be persistent in working with the Seattle Art Museum because that was not an easy—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: The director, yeah, the director, Dr. Fuller, founder-director, was not interested in contemporary art. But to his credit, he didn't want to close the door on it either.

And he was smart enough to see that a museum needed to encompass contemporary art as well as historic. And so, I think—I can't remember the painting that we—my first memory of offering something to Dr. Fuller was it was a big painting. I think maybe it was Stella, or I can't remember what. But Bagley and I wanted to test the waters in a way. Because we didn't want to give a painting and then have the next work of art rejected. So, we wanted to kind of see if we could—this would be the first of many gifts to the museum, and we wanted to kind of test the water. And so, we went to Dr. Fuller and said we'd like to give you this painting. And he kind of rolled his eyes, and he said, "It's so big." He collected, you know, Netsuke.

MIJA RIEDEL: Tiny things. Netsuke, yeah. And most interested in Asian art as I recall. Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. But he did accept the painting. And I guess gave us confidence that in the future he would accept more.

MIJA RIEDEL: So I'm curious, Ginny, because it seems early on you and Bagley were both very clear that you wanted to assemble this collection for the Seattle Art Museum. If you knew that already in '59 when you're giving that painting, how did you come to that decision that this was something that you both agreed was the way you wanted to spend your time and effort and funds?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I can't really remember. I was a docent, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —at the museum, so I was kind of active there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you had four children under the age of 10, to be sure, at this point.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Had to get out of the house. [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. Right, right, right. So, I don't know, it was, Seattle Art Museum it was the Henry Gallery, but Seattle Art Museum was really the museum. And I think that—I can't remember when I came to this way of thinking, but I definitely wanted to ally myself with a general art museum, not a museum of modern art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Because that just seemed—to me it was more interesting to see contemporary art in the context of world history art, history of art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So—and I now feel that more than ever. I mean modern art becomes historical art in five minutes.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so museums of modern art I think are—their function or their rationale is gone. I mean they're now contemporary art is totally accepted the minute.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It makes museums of modern art irrelevant. That art used to need defending in the '50s, modern art needed defending.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And most museums wouldn't accept it. Metropolitan wouldn't accept.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But now that story is not true anymore. And so anyway, I feel really strongly that—

MIJA RIEDEL: That's helpful because I've been thinking about this, wondering about it from a number of different angles. So, it's already helpful to understand that it was very important to you that it be in that larger context from the start.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'd like to take a minute before we launch into the whole Seattle era of life and that transition. I just would like to read a partial list of the venues for philanthropy and collecting art that you've started or participated in. Because I've spent quite a few weeks now preparing for this conversation, and the list is still extraordinary to me both for the sheer number of things you've done, but also for the variety, and for the number of innovative, non-traditional venues that you either started or collaborated to begin. So just for what we're going to discuss for the rest of the afternoon and then tomorrow, I want to have a partial list. So, in 1959 you were in Seattle and you made your first donation to the Seattle Art Museum. In '60 you joined the Museum's Board of Trustees. In '63 you joined MoMA's International Council in New York, correct?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MIJA RIEDEL: Then in '64 you became a founding member of the Contemporary Art Council in Seattle. In '67 you opened the Current Editions Gallery here. In '69 you embarked on the Virginia Wright Fund to donate art in

public places. In '75 you established the Washington Arts Consortium. We'll get into that. In 1996, you and Bagley created the Bagley Wright Family Fund. In '99, you opened the Wright Exhibition Space that ran for 15 years. In 2007, you helped launch the start of the Olympic Sculpture Park. And that's not an exhaustive list.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: [Laughs.] Whew!

MIJA RIEDEL: I know. It's not an exhaustive list. And the number of projects and efforts that you've helped to launch, I mean the Washington Arts Consortium. What an interesting collaboration that was.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And is now over, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I'm sure. But you just—it seemed that if you could not find a venue for what you wanted to do, you made one. [Laughs.] It's sort of the impression I've gotten in just reviewing what you've done over the past few decades. And I think in some ways Dr. Fuller's reluctance perhaps to get engaged in modern art, you just persisted. You just persisted.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, what happened was the World's Fair in—

[END OF TRACK.]

MIJA RIEDEL: '62. I think.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: '62, right. That was—there was several contemporary art shows. What's his name, that famous guy that was the head of the Stedelijk—oh, Sandberg, Willem Sandberg. [Art Since 1950, International]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And did the Art Since '45, or something.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: New York and Europe.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So, there was two contemporary art shows. I think Sam Hunter did the American one. [Art Since 1950, American]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Sam Hunter, I remember.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. And that was sort of groundbreaking. I mean that was the first time Seattle had seen any of those artists, de Kooning and Pollock and so forth. And I think, you know, I, at the time thought, you know, they've got it wrong because it's—New York is not Europe. I mean so what's going in Europe contemporary is quite irrelevant.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But anyway that's what they decided to do. But anyway, so that show just was the—turned a bunch of us in my generation on to contemporary art and having some kind of activity here in Seattle.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so, we started—we went to Dr. Fuller and said, "If we raise the money each year, can we then determine what contemporary art shows will come to Seattle?" And amazingly he said yes. So, this bunch of non-professionals, me and my friends, became the curators of contemporary art in Seattle for about 10 years. We commissioned Lucy Lippard to do that show here—the title was the number of population in Seattle, I can't remember.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: We commissioned John Coplans to do a show of LA Art. You know, it was totally unprofessional but we were allowed, given the ability to call the shots of what was shown at an adjacent building on the old fair grounds.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: The Flag Plaza Pavilion became our venue for contemporary art shows. And it was amazing. I mean a bunch of non-professionals was allowed to do that. But we had a lot of fun and did some fabulous shows.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now this was part of the Contemporary Arts Council; is that correct?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: That's it, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now if I understand this correctly, this is—there were a couple pavilions from the World's Fair that were transformed into year-round exhibition spaces and they became the SAM's Modern Art Pavilion, something along those lines?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Yeah. This one pavilion became the Modern Art.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's where all these exhibitions took place?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now was your mother or father instrumental in helping make that transition, that pavilion into an exhibition space?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I think my grandfather might have given some money.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Orville Bloedel is that? I read that someplace.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you couldn't just take this building from the World's Fair and then all of a sudden have an art exhibition there. It needed to be transformed, work needed to be done. So, I think there was about $65,000, a fair amount of money back then, that was used to underwrite it perhaps, and transition that to—.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Exactly. Exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now how did you all decide? Did you work as a commission or a committee to decide who would come?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. And on our Committee, was Joe Monsen, you know, the photographer collector who still lives here. And John Denman, a collector. And it was, you know, a bunch of us. And it was so much fun. We traveled together and—anyway —

MIJA RIEDEL: It was incredibly dynamic. I think I read someplace that in the first three years you had five exhibitions and sponsored 12 lectures or—I mean it seems like it was a very active dynamic group.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It was. And our first project was to—in 1964 we had I think sort of like our initial venture. We sponsored a round-table lecture at the University of Washington with Barnett Newman, Harold Rosenberg, Sam Hunter, and I can't remember who else. Gabe Kohn I think was to take the position of the younger artist.

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so we had this round-table discussion. You were not allowed to drink within five miles of the University of Washington.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so, we took some vodka to the Meany Hall, Meany Hall at the University of Washington. And the Meany Hall was jam-packed, people, they've never had so many people attend a lecture, I mean it was record breaking. And so, these guys were, I think, "Oh, my God," you know, taken aback by the attendance and interest in what they had to say. And so, they had, you know, a pitcher that looked like water but it was really vodka.

[They laugh.]

And they would pass it around, you know, to each other.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I've got a transcript of the, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Of that conversation.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. And it was—I can give it to you if—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that would be wonderful.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, remind me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. That would be wonderful.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But it doesn't—it's not all that great, it's very disappointing. Because I think they just didn't—they were just taken aback by the interest and, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —and intimidated, you know, "What am I going to say?"

MIJA RIEDEL: That was a huge transition, because I remember when you first came out in the late '50s you tried to get some group going, I can't remember exactly what it was called. But there just hadn't been a lot of interest in contemporary art. And then so the World's Fair just —

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Generated all of that. It changed everything. Everything. Yeah. Seattle, before that, I mean they had—they were very parochial. They had totally embraced, and "Thank you, that was enough. We're not interested, we want to support our local artists, and we're not looking elsewhere for." And [Morris] Graves and [Mark] Tobey were not so accepted in the New York, you know, limited acceptance in the New York art world.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Now I note that you had a number of artists and critics come talk here. Was this, the Contemporary Arts Council, was this the group that invited Thomas Harrison and Hilton Kramer and Harold Rosenberg, this whole group of people over a period of years.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: John Coplans you mentioned. And then dealers as well, Richard Bellamy and Mary Boone, Paula Cooper, Andre Emmerich came. Do you remember the exhibitions, which exhibitions you sponsored?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. I can—I have a list somewhere.

MIJA RIEDEL: It would be interesting to know.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. It is interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: And were they solo exhibitions or group theme exhibitions?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: As I remember, it was all of the above. We commissioned, John Coplans to do a show. But, yeah, it was—we were the modern art department. We acted in a professional way and —

MIJA RIEDEL: And you all agreed. It sounds like you all agreed, it didn't sound like there was in fighting and somebody wanted to do somebody and somebody else wanted to do somebody else. But there was some kind of consensus.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Very much of a consensus, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, yeah, yeah, it was. And it was, you know, very good of Dr. Fuller to allow that to happen.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Because, you know, we were just amateurs. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you think he must have realized though that this was a movement that was going to happen whether he was on board or not, and was better to have Seattle Art Museum engaged in some way?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I think what he saw was, this is the future. He was—you know, he's my father's age. So, I think he thought if the museum was going to have support in the years to come we need to encourage these young people.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So I think that was probably what was in his mind as much as anything.

MIJA RIEDEL: And this exhibition space, it stayed open for 20 years, is that right, from the mid-'60s to the mid-'80s? It closed in '83, '87, I think, something like that?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Gosh, I can't—

MIJA RIEDEL: It was there for a long time though, I think a couple of decades. I'll double check the dates.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think that's right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well that could be. Yeah. Because when the museum moved downtown in the '90s—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —it made the Flag Plaza Pavilion —

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Closed.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And Seattle Center was kind of, in the later years it became kind of not so front and center as it had been.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So it was better to have it all in one building anyway, as far as I was concerned. Because I didn't like that separation of here's modern and here's the rest of it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now at the same time that this is going on—and how long did the Contemporary Arts Council, how long did that go on for? It started in—and it still goes on.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, it still goes on in a very limited way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Are you still engaged with that?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, but it doesn't do—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. It ran its course and did what it needed to do?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, our job was over, really, when the museum finally hired Charles Cowles—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —as our first curator.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so our aim, all of us, was that we wanted to have a professional curator—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —in place. And as soon as that happened our function was, you know, watered down a bit. We were not so—it was the curator's job. And we were in professional hands.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you really kept that fire burning I think for about 11 years. If you started in '64 and he came on I think in '75.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Okay. Okay. Yeah. So that time's about—for 10 years we were the curator.

MIJA RIEDEL: How much fun. [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It was.

MIJA RIEDEL: So that must have been a wonderful excuse then to go back to New York?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right. And would you go back annually, quarterly, half-yearly?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I'd say—I can't remember, but maybe two or three times a year, something like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Okay. And that's when you really became more familiar with Leo Castelli and Dick Bellamy and Andre Emmerich.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'd really love to talk a little bit about, starting with Richard Bellamy. Everybody called him Dick, as I understand.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: But the Green Gallery and what you remember of that. Because that ran from '60 to '65, was showing first Pop and now and then Minimalism and Color Field. But he seemed to always have his finger, from what I've read, on the pulse of what was most interesting and cutting edge within those schools.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. I mean I think that he was very quirky. And that was, I guess part of what made him—he was a sort of a mysterious figure, he wasn't straightforward for us.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But people like Leo Castelli, you know, said he's worth listening to.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And we, Dick and I put together this collection of *Works on Paper* for the Washington Art Consortium.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And that was I think an occasion where the two of us really worked, you know, more in tandem than ever before.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so Dick—I would be sort of for a straightforward historical approach. I mean a consensus approach.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: The tops, Pollock and de Kooning, then Kline, Rothko. And that would be my take. Dick's was much more maverick, you know. "Let's put in Myron Stout," for example. And so, I think that made the collection, gave it a little personality that it would not have had had I been calling the shots. I would have made it just very textbook, these are the top players and these are the secondary ones. Dick introduced something a little bit different. So, I think it was a good combination.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. We'll definitely, we'll spend quite some time on that Washington Arts Consortium because I think that was an extraordinary project. But you knew him also during the Green Gallery days, right?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. I mean—

MIJA RIEDEL: You bought pieces from him there.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Didn't the Robert Morris *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —come from—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. And if you're going to the museum, it's installed there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, good.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And it's the most borrowed piece in the whole museum collection. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. And that piece is 1961.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Really. And it was marked "Not for Sale" in that first inaugural show of Robert Morris.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. And I mean it was clearly, you know, an amazing piece and idea. So, he did allow it to be sold, thank goodness.

MIJA RIEDEL: You seemed to spend a fair amount of time persuading people to sell you things.

[They laugh.]

That they weren't prepared to sell.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: That's right. Please, please, please.

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: You were pretty committed I guess. But did Dick also introduce you to Mark di Suvero?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. And that was, I mean the combination of Dick and Mark, that was, you know, kind of typical for both of them. I mean they were both maverick, independent—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —scorned the ordinary approach to things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so we, through Dick we commissioned di Suvero to do a piece for us in the '60s.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I had seen a piece he did called *Love Makes the World Go 'Round*. It was something that kids could ride on.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. And I think it still exists. I think an eastern collector has it, and I can't remember the name of the collection. But that's the piece I wanted. And it wasn't available. I can't remember why. I think that Dick had given it to Mark's children or something. I mean Mark had given it to Dick's children, something. It was not available, so Dick said, "Well why don't you commission Mark to do a piece for you that can be ridden on by kids." And so, we did, you know. That was—so Mark came out and spent the summer in our house.

MIJA RIEDEL: '65 I think, yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: We had a house on Bainbridge that we would summer on.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So he took over the house in town and we were over on Bainbridge.

MIJA RIEDEL: And was this the Highland's house?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. It was a summer house on Bainbridge Island.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: The house in town was on 56th Avenue. It was the house we had before we moved to the Islands.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so Mark would, I mean he'd go down—some of our friends would invite him out for dinner

and he would go down to Bagley's wine cellar and select a nice bottle of wine to go.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Oh, my God.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And then we'd come into town periodically and Bagley would go, you know, check on the house. And Mark would say "Say, you know, I haven't seen that Pollock around, what's happened to that?" Well, he'd hidden it.

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Bagley must have had a great since of humor.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Oh, well, it tried anybody's sense of humor.

MIJA RIEDEL: I was going to say. But you were just completely happy to hand over your house to Mark di Suvero for the summer?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I know. Crazy. It was crazy. God knows…

MIJA RIEDEL: The '60s—it was completely different.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I'll never forget, he was having trouble trying to figure out what to do and hey, Labor Day was coming around, and we had to get back in the house, and school was starting. And still he was kind of fussing around. And so, one night we went—Bagley and I went out for dinner, I don't know where the kids were, maybe they were still on Bainbridge, I can't remember. But anyway, we came back from dinner, and it was obvious that it was a big party going on.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Panties and bras were hanging up, yes. I mean it was—this is just over dinner he'd—and he finally figured out what he wanted to do, did it, and invited everybody to come over to celebrate that he'd met while he was—

MIJA RIEDEL: In the time it'd taken you to go to dinner? Amazing.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Bagley was furious. He took the bras and panties and "Get out of here." And so that was—

MIJA RIEDEL: That was the end of that commission. Was that the first commission that you did?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: First and last.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I think—I mean commissioning is—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I mean that taught me a lot about commissioning. Thank you very much. I'd rather—the artist would rather have a commission because it's something new in the world and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But to the extent you have an idea what you want, and to the extent that it differs from that, you're disappointed. You know, maybe you could be thrilled, but you could be disappointed.

MIJA RIEDEL: So were you disappointed in what this final piece *[Bunyon's Chess]* was

as opposed to *Love Makes the World Go 'Round*, it was not at all what you had—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes, exactly. Yeah. And finally, he made us take down the swing. This piece that is now in the sculpture park had a swing element that he later wrote and said, "Take it down, it's too dangerous."

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So it never was anything anybody could ride on.

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So it lasted for a few years with the kids and then he said okay, that's it, it needs to come down?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, it lasted for about a few months.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Then we take down the swing. And actually, the piece looks better without the swing so we could see the reason of that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But the first idea had been something entirely different —

MIJA RIEDEL: So he made a sculpture he liked and then added a swing? [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: But clearly you must have gotten over that because you've gone on to do quite a number of pieces with him so—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And this is what Mark—I mean he left and this was his gift to us. [Referring to small sculpture on her desk.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh my gosh.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It's got the names of our four kids on it.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's like four links almost, four links and a heart.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, yeah. And it's a four leaf clover with names—and so I think, I can't remember, you know, what we paid for this piece that he did for us [*Bunyon's Chess]*. But maybe say it was $10,000, something like that. These pieces, this size of Mark's, not that we'd ever sell it, but they have a market value of like now maybe 30, 40. So in other words he paid us to do the commission. I mean he is so generous. He is such a sweet and noble guy.

MIJA RIEDEL: I've heard that about him. And I'm actually going to speak with him in a couple months.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Really?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I mean, you know, he and [Richard] Serra came from the same place in California. And the flip side of the coin, I mean everything that Serra is, Mark is not.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I mean kind and generous, he's an amazing guy.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I—you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: What is the name of, did the piece he made for your house have a name?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: *Bunyon's Chess*.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, right, okay. That's that piece. Got it. When did you start to visit Andre Emmerich? He was showing primarily Color Field at this point—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and that became the core of your collection, the Color Field work, yes? For a period of time? No?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well I guess so, yeah. I mean it was—yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: You look somewhat regretful.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. And we sold a lot of our Pop art works.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I mean Lichtenstein's *Drowning Girl*, you know, went to MoMA. And we had a Warhol *Do It Yourself* painting from, you know, the '60s. There aren't any of those in this country. And we sold that, ours, it was a huge regret.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So yeah, and I think, you know, probably Clem Greenberg had an inordinate amount of influence on us at a certain time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-mm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I think he brainwashed us. And I have my regrets there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But we have some beautiful—I mean there's two, in the dining room, two Morris Louis paintings.

MIJA RIEDEL: I look forward to seeing those.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, yeah,

MIJA RIEDEL: You can't regret those too much.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, no, no, I don't. I don't.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But I do regret losing some of the Pop art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. And I read a couple articles where you said that that, over time, is really what has resonated with you. That's where you felt your own generation and your personal relationship coming to the work. Do you still feel that way?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, of course. And that was true about the Color Field painting too. Suddenly these artists were my age.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Before that, Abstract Expressionists were my dad's age.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So suddenly in the '60s these artists were contemporaries.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I felt, you know, at home with them. Rauschenberg and Johns, and I think that made kind of a difference.

MIJA RIEDEL: So generationally you could really feel a difference, that there was something that resonated for you personally with the Pop and the Color Field that wasn't there with the Abstract Expressionists?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I was in awe of them and at home with the Pop and Color Field.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's an interesting way to put it.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: In awe of them and at home with the others.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: It sounds like I almost hear Meyer Schapiro and Julius Held coming into the room. It's a great way to describe them.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But now I'm looking at what's going on now and they're like my grandchildren. Oh, yeah.

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That is a wonderful way to think about them. That's helpful. So, you didn't really meet Andre Emmerich until you moved to Seattle, you met him once you started coming back to New York in the '60s?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you continue—his gallery had such a long run. Did you go throughout the years that he had it, the '60s, the '70s, the '80s, until it really closed, or did you frequent it more in the '60s and '70s?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Probably more in the '60s, '70s.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, I would think.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. I can't remember. Yeah, I can't remember much.

MIJA RIEDEL: You mentioned him I think as a mentor of sorts. And I —

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. He came out a lot, and I've got a wonderful picture of Andre and Leo. And, you know, the —Robert Morris did a *Steam* piece for Western Washington University.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And they're standing in this area with steam rising all around them like creatures from the—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —nether world.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But, you know, Andre was a good friend.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: We bought a lot of pre-Columbian—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —things from him.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, you did?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. Bagley did.

MIJA RIEDEL: But that was earlier. Didn't Bagley stop collecting pre-Columbian, or did you collect it all along?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Oh, probably stopped, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I can't remember. Well, Al Held I think got —

MIJA RIEDEL: He would have been from Andre.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: There is a quote of Anthony Caro talking about Andre Emmerich, and it made me think of you and the Virginia Wright Fund. And I wanted to ask you. He said—he was talking about Andre and "It was amazing how he got on all of our wave lengths. He tried to do a hard thing, bringing difficult to the public and never worrying how it was received. If it didn't go, he stuck with it." And was Emmerich a mentor of sorts for you in this example of persistence at all? Especially in terms of—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. I would have not have said that about Andre.

MIJA RIEDEL: How interesting.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: He was much more of a merchant, I thought.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. That's interesting. Good to have a different perspective.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I mean he's a little bit like Sidney Janis. He—I remember him saying that ideally, he would like to ally himself with the critics so that would sort of legitimize an exhibition that he would have. If he could say that Clem Greenberg organized this—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —he would do that rather than organize it himself.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: He thought that that legitimized the operation in an important way. So, I don't think he was like a mentor.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: You know, more like a merchant.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. I'm glad that I asked that. There was another quote of him saying art has much more to do with the gut than anything else. And he didn't approve of buying art for investments. But it sounds as if you're saying the exact opposite. It's good to have these conversations and hear your experiences.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, well—well maybe I'm not being fair to Andre but I would—Sidney Janis is much more of a scholar and a student.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I think Andre's heart was in pre-Columbian, I do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And he wrote a book about that I think.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. And I think the modern art, contemporary art, was a way of getting critical attention and being front and center in the art world. But his heart would be in the pre-Columbian.

MIJA RIEDEL: I wonder if he was in some ways trying the same way that Sidney Janis would to validatethe contemporary work through the European masters. I wonder if through the contemporary work Andre would try to bring attention to the pre-Columbian? Does that sound possible?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I think that—yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Especially if that's what he really loved.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: You said pre-Columbian. Was it sculpture, was it textiles? I don't think a lot of painting to be sure.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, no, no. Objects.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Interesting.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So how are you holding up?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I'm all right.

MIJA RIEDEL: One or two more things and we'll stop for the day. I wanted to talk about Current Editions Gallery and where that came from because that opened in in '67, and as far as I know that was your one sole commercial venture into the art world. Is that true?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right, right, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: So what inspired that? Was there a desire to get—well, let's talk about it.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well I think the thing that got me going a little bit was—there was sort of an explosion of print

making that was happening. And Marian Goodman, you know, had multiples. And there was somebody published some Vasarely prints that were so sexy, I mean they were beautiful. And so, I thought well, you know, that'd be a good gallery for Seattle. They are not going to spend money for a painting by Vasarely, but they might buy a print. Same with Rauschenberg. And then at that same time in California, a print maker—oh, God. [Gemini]

MIJA RIEDEL: It was probably not Crown Point Press yet.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. Before that I think.

MIJA RIEDEL: In the '60s?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Late '60s.

MIJA RIEDEL: Southern California, Northern California?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It was in LA.

MIJA RIEDEL: LA.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Oh, God. That's driving me nuts.

MIJA RIEDEL: We'll come back to it, we can add it.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Because they were very active making prints with important artists.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But in order to get their stuff, and get it at a dealer's discount, you had to subscribe to the entire production, which was a little difficult, you know, unfortunately. Anyway, I did do that and they were—that was sort of my mainstay. They were producing prints and—but then I dealt, had multiples. I got their things. But it was mainly this outfit in California.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. We can add that.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. Why can't I remember?

MIJA RIEDEL: So this was open from '67, I think to '73, right?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you have a desire to sort of make this work more accessible to a larger audience too?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well that, I was thinking they wouldn't buy the paintings but they might buy the prints. Well I was totally wrong. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: They didn't?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Not really, some did, yeah. And there was great things—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —you know, Jasper Johns and then there was ULAE in Long Island.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, right. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And that was, I can't remember who the person was that ran it, but it was a woman, and she was very meticulous about who she would and would not sell to.

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

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And she—I don't think she liked dealers particularly, and so we had to qualify to buy her things at a dealer discount.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And nothing on consignment, it would all have to be —

MIJA RIEDEL: My goodness, wow.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Oh, yeah. That was true with the California.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh. That's quite an investment. That's quite a commitment.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Yes. I mean it was. And when I closed the gallery and I sold it to some friends—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —for the inventory at cost. Which I can't remember what the amount was, but that was the thing that kind of sank them because the inventory that I had at the close was all the dogs that I couldn't sell, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So, it was a learning experience, but it didn't go over big in Seattle although there was a few things that —

MIJA RIEDEL: How did that work? Did you have rotating exhibitions, monthly exhibitions?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, we had something like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I did, I had a Bob Ryman show, I had Alfred Leslie. So, it was—I did some other things too.

MIJA RIEDEL: And would the artists come out for the openings? Sometimes, not always?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I can't remember. I can't remember. But I really enjoyed it, but I kind of enjoyed things like the bookkeeping. I mean surprising things that, learning how to do double entry bookkeeping was very interesting to me. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: I imagine. Now would do you—do you think that in some way was an inspiration for what would happen later with the Washington Arts Consortium, seeing all those works on paper and how much wonderful work there was, or were they really two separate animals?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I think two separate, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. The Consortium was—it was not born from a mission, it was born as a strategy to get a grant out of the NEA. So now that it's closed. I think there's no mystery that the Consortium never was copied, you know, there was never anybody else who formed a similar kind of consortium because it had its own building problems from the beginning.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well the sheer number of players was extraordinary. We'll definitely get to that. But I think before we go there if you don't mind I would love to talk about the Virginia Wright Fund.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well that was—well I brought this, you know, if you want to take a look.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, good. How fantastic. Oh, so is this a list of everything that was pledged?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Everything that we spent. My dad started it.

MIJA RIEDEL: '69.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It was in '69, yeah. And it was with a million dollars. And it had to be spent on works of art for —outdoor works of art. It was, you know —

MIJA RIEDEL: For public places.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Exactly. And that was when there was a big vogue for outdoor sculpture. And so—and that's when people like Clem Greenberg and Andre Emmerich would come out and help advise.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So, it was—and it was just the heyday of public art. I think people now learn that the maintenance for outdoor art is significant.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I think that's why you don't see so much of it anymore. The vogue is over.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But there were a few great things that we were able to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well you did it for 30 years as I understand. Yeah, it's extensive, '69 to '99. Well I'm also just stuck on how prescient this whole idea seemed from your father and also it was such a gift. Not only a gift to you and a vote of confidence to you, a million dollars, go out and place art in public places. But also a gift to the community, the larger community. And I am just struck by the spirit of philanthropy that is so present in the entire Fund, its premise for being and what was accomplished. It wasn't like you built a private sculpture park, it was go out and give away a million dollars' worth of public art.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, yeah. Right, right. And so, it was, you know, really kind of my dad to think that up. I mean he had sort of the whole idea worked out, would be for Western Washington, and that would be the area of focus.

MIJA RIEDEL: How did it come about? Did he sit you down and say, "Do you have any interest in this?" Or did he present it to you and say, "This is what I'd like to do?" How did—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I mean "This is what I'd like to do." I mean I think my sister had problems, she divorced and moved to Europe. And I think he helped her. She needed help, I think he—and so I think this was his way of evening it out. He gave her a million so he did something for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But it was all very carefully thought out and we had a, you know, a little board of directors, had meetings, and it was—

MIJA RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, it was, it was.

MIJA RIEDEL: You said of the Fund, and this was a quote, you were quoted. I can't remember the publication where I pulled this from. But "The Fund provided opportunities to express myself in ways that would not otherwise have been possible. It gave me a purpose and changed the course of my life."

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well maybe that's a little—

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: I was going to say, what did this make possible that your multiple other efforts didn't?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well I think that it would be, you know, that it was a formal organization—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —that was one aspect of it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so I think that probably was as much as anything.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well with the Creative Arts Council you were having exhibitions, you were having lectures. Then the Washington Arts Consortium you were assembling a collection. So, this—I mean it seems different to be sure, but it seems like just another venue in which you were channeling your energy and passion for art for the public, for the broader public.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. Yeah. Oh, I see what you're saying. I think that was in that book and I sort of wanted my dad to see it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that's nice.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. So, yeah, in the beginning I dedicated it to him.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Okay. Yeah, I'd love to have a look at this, and maybe we can talk about it in greater depth

tomorrow. But this is terrific. So, this is the Virginia Wright Fund from 1969 to 2001, or 2004 perhaps. It was presented in 2004. And I think the Fund ran for almost 30 years, right? And then maybe the funds were exhausted.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. Yeah. And that was the idea.

MIJA RIEDEL: So some of the larger scale sculptural donations went more smoothly than others, to be sure. Are there are certain pieces or locations that you feel are more successful or personally gratifying? You gave away 270 pieces if I'm

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —is that right?

MIJA RIEDEL: I think that's right. I read that someplace. Does that sound right to you? Here's the book, I'll take a look and let you know tomorrow.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I think —

MIJA RIEDEL: A couple hundred at least, right?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well you count the individual pieces in the Consortium collection and, yeah—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —maybe, yeah. Yeah. And, you know, some were just like giving it to the Seattle Art Museum for something they wanted to buy.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I didn't want to do that too much. I wanted to be initiating things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So—

MIJA RIEDEL: A lot of these went to Western Washington University; is that right?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And that is something that I think had a great outcome.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: They had, you know, they've got some wonderful things. It's a beautiful site for it, and that's what turned us all on.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I wanted something that wasn't just all in Seattle, something in other—

MIJA RIEDEL: This is in Bellingham, which is about an hour to the North; is that right?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. And so, let me see. I think that [Isamu] Noguchi gave a piece of Bellingham, to that campus. And the campus itself, you know, all the best architects at that time in the Northwest, many of them did works on the campus there. So, it was kind of a hot place back then.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I think our idea was maybe we'd have a collection of the best sculptors working at the time. And Serra did a piece. The second commission in this country was the commission he did for Western.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. The first being in St. Louis.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And then this wonderful *Steam* piece that Robert Morris did out there. But then the president

was amazing. I mean he—I mean this is a hick town, for God's sake. And having these artists come in, do these, you know, pieces. Di Suvero, it's one of his best pieces and it's huge. The president was amazing to let us, you know, do these things. But then the wonderful president retired and the next president came in. And he could care less. And after the Richard Serra piece was installed I went up there some many months later and that piece was so covered with graffiti that you couldn't detect the underlying metal. It was just covered. And, you know, the administration had to sanction that and it was just horrible. And so that was the behavior, you know, that was very depressing. But times change, they hired a curator, Sarah Clark-Langager, who had worked at the Seattle Art Museum. And in her hands, everything was much improved, everything was fine. And she retired last year. And they just hired a guy, Hafþór, and don't ask me to pronounce his last name [Yngvason]. He's from Iceland. He applied for the job of head of the Art Department because of the sculpture collection. And he's very educated, very smart, very, very professional. It's like I just can't believe it.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's super.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, it is. It's like the happy ending to a dream—come true. I mean it's just terrific.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is extraordinary. So, this collection that has struggled on and off, I think it started in the '70s, right, when the first piece or two went there. The Virginia Wright Fund started in '69. I think already in '70 pieces were going to Bellingham.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right. Right. Right. Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: So here it is, what, 40 years later. And somebody has come from Iceland.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well he actually had worked in the East at some—

MIJA RIEDEL: But he was interested in that position because of that sculpture collection.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Exactly, exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you know offhand how many pieces are up there, roughly?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It's in there I think.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'll take a look.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, the thing is--that won't tell you because some, the school commissioned on their own, there's a Do Ho Suh, and they used one percent money.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: For commission. So, there's other things. And then we gave, when we —

[END OF TRACK.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Virginia Wright at her home in Seattle, Washington, on March 23, 2017, for this the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art and the Frick Collection. This is card number two. Good morning.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Hello.

MIJA RIEDEL: And before we start, did anything—did you think about anything last night that was sparked by our conversation that you wanted to mention?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. I actually did. [Laughs] So I wanted to ask a question. It struck me as remarkable in all of the extraordinary collecting that you've done, especially for all the diverse venues, was the di Suvero for your backyard—was that really the only commission, and after that, no more?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, the pieces at Western were commissions.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, they were commissions too?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. The di Suvero—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Richard Serra was a commission.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Donald Judd was a commission.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And these were all the sculptures at Western Washington University?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right, right, right, right. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So just—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And there may have been more, too. They would be in that, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: And I was mentioning to Virginia—so I will have it on tape—the Virginia Wright Fund publication or report that you put together in 2004 describes everything that the fund accomplished. I'll send this copy to the Archives of American Art.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Maybe we will talk through how we will work that, and it is a wonderful reference for anyone who would like to get more specific details. There's quite a bit of information here. It is wonderful.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Okay, great.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's see. So, we were talking about the Virginia Wright Fund yesterday, I think, when the CD—when the SD card ended, so I just wanted—I had a couple final questions about that. As we mentioned, there were a few controversies. Was there anything particularly valuable that you learned about those controversies early on that affected how you proceeded moving forward?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: At Western, you mean?

MIJA RIEDEL: Or just with those initial public art donations, when you started to make donations of public art. I mean, the commissions clearly is one thing. Did they get more specific after that first di Suvero? Did the requests get more specific?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: How do you mean, specific?

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, when you—my understanding is when you first commissioned Mark di Suvero to do the piece for your backyard—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MIJA RIEDEL: —it was based on the idea of *What Makes the World Go Around*, but it didn't seem to progress in that direction very specifically.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you get more specific in the commissions or—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Just—you know, the budgetary constraint was, they knew going in what that would be.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. I think that was—

MIJA RIEDEL: They came—all the commissions, the Serra, the di Suvero, and the Judd, did they all visit? I imagine they visited Bellingham to see different sites before they proceeded?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, definitely Serra and then definitely di Suvero, he made the piece in Bellingham.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But I don't know—

MIJA RIEDEL: di Suvero did?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: di Suvero, yes. I don't know that Donald Judd did, and the piece there is—it's not really his greatest moment, I don't think. It's good; it's fine, but it's not—the di Suvero is super.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And the same for the Serra.

MIJA RIEDEL: Serra. Is that the—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I think—Judd was not that interested in doing a commission.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: He didn't believe in it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Okay. The images I saw, that seems about right to me. The Serra, was that the *Wright's Triangle* piece?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. That looks terrific.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, it is. It really is good.

MIJA RIEDEL: So Clem Greenberg and Dick Bellamy, these were the primary sort of conceptual advisors for the fund, is that right? It seems like you other people who were very well skilled in legal aspects, financial aspects.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Yes. Right, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: But in terms of artistic vision, they were the main two that you worked with.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And we will get—okay. So why don't we just move right into the Washington Art Consortium? So, this was an entirely new kind of sponsorship as far as I understand it. Is that your experience of it, too? Had you ever heard of anything like it? This collaboration between the Virginia Wright Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts, and this new consortium of five museums in Northwestern—in Washington.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, it was, you know, the idea was born in the—at the office of the NEA.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And David Ryan and, I think, Michael [Richard] Koshalek was—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It was way back then when they were just youngsters. And I had this idea of forming a collection of works on paper, a sort of portable collection that could be circulated throughout the state, that was the idea, a traveling show. And so, I figured that it would cost maybe, like, $200,000, and so I would—the Fund would put up [$]100,000, and I hope I get a grant from the NEA of [$]100, matching grant.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so I went to Washington and met with these two guys, David Ryan and Koshalek, and told them my plan, and they said, "You know, the NEA doesn't give grants of [$]100,000. They—the max kind of grant is [$]20,000, so—for this kind of a project"—and so then they said, "but what about if we—if you find, you know, five museums, we could give, you know, a grant of 20 to each of those five museums and you would have your [$]100,000."

And I thought wow, what a great idea, and hats off to the NEA and these youngsters for thinking of it, and I went home just, you know, on a cloud, and because—and there was enthusiasm here for the project, and our lawyer here got working on it because it would be consortium, and—but they were all different kinds of organizations. The Tacoma Museum was a private museum, for example, and the Henry Gallery is a university museum, so—with funding from different sources. They all had different bylaws and organizational setups that were different—so it was complicated.

MIJA RIEDEL: I imagine.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And it took a long—you know, it took many months, but anyway, it was accomplished, and we had our money.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And we went about, Dick Bellamy and I, went about, you know, forming this collection. But so the important thing, I think about it is that the idea of the consortium wasn't a mission-based thing. It was a strategy to get a grant, purely. I mean, if I had done it without doing it that way, I would have, if I could have gotten my hundred. So when the consortium, then, recently—and there were built in problems right from the beginning because to the extent that—there were heads of small museums in the state. The Seattle Art Museum was not part of the consortium.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that an intentional choice—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, because they were engaged in so many other levels.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, and this would be, you know, a group of similar organizations, you know, had a lot of similarities.

MIJA RIEDEL: And smaller groups that not necessarily have had an opportunity for anything like this otherwise.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right, right, right. So, to the extent that the heads of these small museums were spending time on the consortium caretaking the collection of drawings, they were depriving their own trustees of taking care of their primary responsibility, which was their museum, and that didn't ever seem to be a problem because Sarah Clark-Langager just made it her baby, and for years, and she—the collection was housed up there in Bellingham, and she never complained. She just took care of things, storage and maintenance and all of that. So it didn't really become—the fact that the consortium didn't become an issue until fairly recently, and Sylvia Wolf, who is the head of the Henry Gallery was in charge, and I can't remember some of the issues, but she found herself spending an inordinate amount of time on the consortium. And then the question arose, do we need it, and is it serving a purpose or not? It did. I gave them a grant down the line, and we got another grant of $1 million from a local funding source, so they had an endowment of sorts.

MIJA RIEDEL: The consortium.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So that helped.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: The group was having to spend their own money on some of these issues and—of restoration and taking care of works on paper.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But, anyway, it still wasn't—it just wasn't working, and I am so impressed they spent a year—they had consultants, national consultants meeting with themselves, and discussed the future of the consortium and whether it should continue or not, and if not, how would they disperse—by that time, they had a number of other collections.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, interesting.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it went on to—you had the photo collection, that you also did in '78.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: But—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And then they had a collection of prints that—from a local collector.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And then Safeco Company was divesting themselves. They had a collection of Northwest art, corporate collection, and they were divesting themselves of that. I think they were moving their headquarters or something. I don't know, you know, what the reason was, but anyway, so that collection came to the consortium, so they had a number of assets to distribute, which they did.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I think everybody, you know, was totally pleased, and it's worked out wonderfully.

MIJA RIEDEL: So the consortium dissolved itself and the different art objects were distributed among—by then it was up to eight museums or—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, no, no, no. I think five.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, it stayed five.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And the only collection, you know—the only thought that I felt strongly about was that first collection of works on paper.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I'd formed—as a collection, as a way—as a didactic kind of collection to, like, take a picture of a certain period of American art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So it had a cohesion that the other collections really didn't have, I didn't think.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So I expressed the hope that that collection would stay together someplace.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And which has turned out it is staying at Western.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, fantastic.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Which is great.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, which is just how it should be.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So I am happy as can be, and I think that it was interesting, this idea of the consortium really impressed a lot of people. It sounded so noble and so great, and so people were really interested in that, but, you know, sharing, it doesn't work. It doesn't work.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: You take care of what your own first. That's your first priority, not something that you share.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So it was right that it did dissolve, and I think it's interesting that throughout the country, it—such an organization has never been copied. There's never been a consortium number two, and yet people knew about the consortium. I spoke one time to the NEA about it, and I think it was in some publications, but it was never copied, so I think that's telling.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. I was struck by that when I first read about this. I thought what an extraordinary vision to have, and what an extraordinary route to make to create this thing that you wanted to create that didn't really exist. Was the NEA completely open to your coming and having this conversation or did you have to spend a

little time convincing them that you had an interesting idea and they should listen to you?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, no. The idea came from them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, when you first—when you want to talk to them about getting funding—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that a normal thing to happen back then, that a philanthropist could go to the NEA and say I'm looking for matching funds, do you know?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I think so.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So that part of it was not uncommon?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, I don't think so.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It didn't seem unusual.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I can't remember, you know, what else had proceeded my going, but it was very open. It was a whole different situation. It was wonderful.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Enlightened and well run and—it doesn't exist anymore.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Well, and I am struck by how open it was and by the idea that instead of saying, no, we don't do that—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MIJA RIEDEL: —they said how can we figure this out?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Which is such an entirely different perspective.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: They were—you know, they went on to be distinguished museum directors themselves.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so their heart was in the right place.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. And somehow the government, or the way they were running the NEA and the government was willing to figure out how to make that happen. [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Unlike a later chapter in my life when I was on one of these NEA panels, and—I think it was in the '90s, and we approved grants to artists, and so it was—I can't remember—I was part of a panel of say five—three or five, I can't remember—and we approved—well, at that time, Radice—do you remember that name?

MIJA RIEDEL: I don't.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, this is so—she was the head of the NEA.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Radiche, R-A-D-I-C-H-E. [Anne-Imelda Radice]

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And she had overturned the decision of these panels. Their approval was unquestioned.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Whatever they said went, and people that were on the panels were supposed to be

responsible and knowledgeable and so forth.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, she overturned one of the panel's decisions, which seems a very high-handed action, and it was seen as undermining the effectiveness of these panels that were—the decision of the panel was supposed to be unquestioned.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And this made a mockery of the whole idea of a panel. What was the point of it? So, our panel resigned in protest of this act of Radice, and it was a big deal.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It was a big deal. I came home, and it was headlines in the paper here—

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: This was in the '90s?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Where was—was this the panel you were on—was it in Scottsdale, something like that?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. It was in Washington, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: It was in Washington, D.C.? And do you remember who else was on the panel with you?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, but I can—that information is—I've got a whole file on it.

MIJA RIEDEL: I do remember when the NEA decided not to follow the recommendations—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It was the Mapplethorpe period.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, exactly.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I think, in a way, it was sort of the end of the greatness of the NEA. I mean, now, it's ho-hum, who cares what it does?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Of no interest whatsoever.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And this is so weird and interesting. She was gay, but she was not self-proclaimed. Recently, she married the head of the Tacoma Art Museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] interesting

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: A woman.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And, I mean, the whole thing came back to me—since then, since that period in the '90s, she's gone on to be—I think she was the head of the [American] Folk Art Museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Some other—she had a career. She was fine. And I'm sure she's—I'm sure she was under huge pressure from the government to not let these disgusting things happen. But anyway, that's all, but anyway, when that—this is a recent marriage. This was in the last year.

So I went back to my files and looked up—it was the same person.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Anyway.

MIJA RIEDEL: It is extraordinary to see just the extremes in which you've interacted with the NEA, from one extreme—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Positive, creative, moving forward to the other really much more creative shutdown.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, exactly. And it was such a great period with Nancy Hanks and—and in many cases, I think we—I can't remember whether there's any collaboration with the NEA and Art In Public Places Program. I can't remember whether we collaborated with them at all on projects.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I did read someplace that a number of either the—I think the Wright Fund—that also there had been some other things that had been funded partially with the NEA.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So there was some other collaboration.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MIJA RIEDEL: I don't know the specifics on that, but we could maybe look into that.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, it's probably—yeah, in there [referring to The Virginia Wright Fund report], I think.

MIJA RIEDEL: I didn't see it in there, but I'll take a closer look. I think it's just fascinating that—so $200,000 was spent on living artists because that was one of the conditions of the NEA grants.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right, well—and we got around that a little bit because we spent the NEA's money on living artists—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —but my money could go for non-living.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So we got around it that way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And then I donated some things to that collection that I had, so we got around the living.

MIJA RIEDEL: It seems like you were pretty good at getting around things.

[They laugh.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, because that was an issue.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Well, I read that—I think you almost doubled the amount—$155,000 went to other artists, at least, that you were interested in having as part of the collection, and then there were donations on top of that.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: How did you decide on Dick Bellamy to be a collaborator? You've worked with so many different people. What—how did that collaboration come about, and how did that work?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, I think quite well, and I thought—I think—I can't remember what I was thinking at the time, but I think I would pick, say, Dick over somebody like Clem Greenberg, or Andre Emmerich. I mean, because they would be, you know—have their own point of view. Dick was a lot more open. He wasn't so doctrinaire as Greenberg. So it seemed like the right choice, as far as I was concerned, and as I think I said yesterday, Dick, I had a sort of straightforward, textbook approach, get the main artists and the secondary artist and, like that. Whereas Dick would kind of bring in somebody from left field that didn't have such a strong

reputation, but was worthy nonetheless. I think I mentioned Myron Stout, and there were others like that. Artschwager [Richard], I think, was another of Dick's—so I think that gave the collection, you know, something so it wasn't just predictable choices.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Give a little color.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. And did you envision this almost as a teaching tool or did you envision it—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: You know, a didactic kind of—yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right. And a snapshot of what was most interesting and most respected at this particular point in American art.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. So, it took a year and a half, I think, to put this together, you went to Washington in '74, I think you got funding in '75, and I know it was about a year and a half to put together, I think, it was 51 pieces, right, prints and works on paper—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, uh-huh [affirmative].

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. How did the photography collection come about?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, that was sort of, I thought, the next step. Our son, Bing, was passionate about photography, and I thought, well, this would be an opportunity for Bing to kind of make some input and—so I thought let's do a photography collection, and I thought it was great, great idea. Not so the other professionals in the consortium.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, they said, that this grant is going to each one of us, not to you. We make the decisions, alongside me, and we have our own expertise. We don't need Bing.

[They laugh.]

So, Bing had already given me a list of who he thought were the movers and shakers, you know, the textbook collection of photography that would sort of mirror the works on paper collection, kind of a didactic appraisal of the greats in photography. And so what happened was they nixed Bing and me, and said, "Thank you very much, we'll tell you who the overall curator will be," and it turned out—I can't remember—well, Rod Slemmons.

MIJA RIEDEL: Rod Slemmons was one.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —From [unintelligible] and there was a second—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, and I can't remember—I think it will be in there, but—so—and it turned out that they decided that they would have just a collection that revolved around one decade of photography.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, '70s and '80s, I think, or 70 to 80.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And the money would be better spent with more focus than a general—.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So that's what they did, and I don't think the photography collection is all, you know—it's just one decade and why that decade is no more pivotal than any other decade, so anyway—but there are some nice

things in it and it turned out all right, but in that book—I have Bing's—

MIJA RIEDEL: I did see that in the list.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. And these were—is this the list that he originally compiled, or was this the list put together by the other two curators and then he commented on it, do you recall? Bing's response to list of candidates for photography.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right, so—but then there's his list for what collection he would put together, I think.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So, it was Rod Slemmons and Terry Toedemeier —

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Hunsicker [ph]?

MIJA RIEDEL: Toedemeier.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Toedemeier, yes, that's right.

MIJA RIEDEL: And then let's see. I see your speech to the NEA. That's—a copy of that is in here, from 1979, and I'm not—let's see if I have Bing's list. Bing's outline and then Bing's response. These are both—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Okay, okay, okay yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, good. That will be interesting to take a look at how that evolved from the original idea to what it actually ended up being.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And was that okay with you or was that a little awkward?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. I mean, I saw their point. I mean, you know, they were the pros, and so I went on with it. I was disappointed, but—because the main thing had been to involve Bing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And now he was totally out. But I went to all the meetings, and it was interesting to see, you know, how the collection evolved, but I still think it isn't, you know, what it could have been. If it had been more general and had a wider focus than just one decade.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It sounds like the way you and Dick Bellamy collaborated on the other one, what was lacking, perhaps, in the photo collection was that combination of views, one who had the straightforward sense of the main—the most significant players, and then somebody was bringing in some of the outliers. It sounds like this collection fell a little flat, in your opinion. It was missing something.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I think so. It was a little too narrow. I mean, one decade, it's not as if it was a key decade in any way. It was just a decade.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting to find out why they were so interested—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, it was the current decade.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, I see. So, in the moment, yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, in the moment.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, that's certainly in the spirit of when you were collecting, in some senses.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: You were in the year. I guess that makes a big difference.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: I want to ask some questions about your children, but we will come back to that. So, I wanted to move on to the Bagley Wright, or the Bagley Wright Family Fund.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MIJA RIEDEL: This was founded in '96, and this ties in beautifully to what we were just talking about, that Bagley was quoted as saying "Government's support for the arts is drying up. The private sector has to do more." I wonder how he would see the private sector, you know, today, how he would see the situation today, and what do you think the private sector could do to be more successfully, civically engaged in the arts today? Do you have thoughts on it? It's such a different situation, but you've seen so many different situations.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, you know, I think that it's much more professional, at least here. It's much—I mean—and so I think—and in a way, that's good and in a way—we've lost something. I mean, it was—when we, our group of friends, were running the contemporary department of the Seattle Art Museum, we were having a ball. We were totally involved, and we got our tax deduction by giving, you know, a donation to the museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But we did projects like—there's a Michael Heizer piece here in Seattle, very early. Our contemporary art council joined with the One Percent legislation for art here in Seattle.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And commissioned that piece of sculpture for Seattle. It had nothing to do with the museum. It's not on the museum premises. Museum has no ownership of it. It's a city project, and our little group of Seattle Art Museum contemporary art council involved our money in a project that was for the city.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's a lot—that's those five large rocks placed along the shoreline, right?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right, right, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: I can't remember the title of that right now. I'll have to check that.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: *Adjacent, Against and Upon*. It's a terrific piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh [affirmative] Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But that was totally kind of illegal, really.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I mean, the museum could have claimed it was illegal—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, but they didn't know. They were wise because—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And—

MIJA RIEDEL: Please.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, they also did— [brief interruption.] Okay. We also did a project at the Henry Gallery.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Big monumental sculpture.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Was it Tony Smith—I can't—and again, it was the Henry Gallery, not the Seattle Art Museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Our group was in this project, so we were—I mean, it was so freewheeling and unprofessional.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Couldn't do it today.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. What do you think is lost by not having that looseness or that—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, I'm all for the professional.

MIJA RIEDEL: Of course.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And that's what our aim was all along, was to get a professional curator of contemporary art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So I don't know. I don't regret the way things turned out.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But it was just—we had so much fun.

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: It does—I know what you mean, because sometimes when things—and, of course, you want a very professional situation, but there is—maybe it's like—do you think perhaps it is the spirit of collaboration that brings in unexpected points of view or unexpected artists? The collaboration that you had with Dick Bellamy brought in some of that. I've been struck by the amount of collaboration throughout your different efforts on behalf of the arts, and it does seem to have made for a very rich, alive set of choices.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Maybe. I had never thought about that, but I think it was because I wasn't a professional, and neither were my friends—

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you think that kept you especially open to learning and seeing—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And collaborating. Yeah, you know, I think if I was a professional, I'd think, I can do this.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It's my job.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But so—but not being professional, then, you wanted—and we always sought professional advice, but never, I don't think, acted like we were professional.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. It comes back to that quote we started with so early yesterday: I had the sense to seek good advice.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Yeah. And it does seem like that's something you've done throughout. It's actually been a practice, it seems, almost your collecting practice was to educate yourself regularly through visits to galleries and museums and then talk with critics and curators and—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right, right, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: —be very informed.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Ah, yeah, yeah. I guess that's—I like the learning process.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. The Wright Exhibition Space. Now, this opened in 1999. I read an article, I think, right before it closed, maybe 2011, so a few years before it closed, where Matthew Kangas was talking about it as a private museum. Did you ever envision it as a private museum, or what was the intention behind the space, and what did you hope to accomplish?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, I think maybe just—I can't really remember, but I think more or less just play curator.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And, you know, do the shows that were on my mind as, you know, good ideas, and then—but then, you know, I ran out of ideas, and we looked to other people to commission other people to make shows, and so there was a lot of that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And it was a lot of fun.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It was a lot of fun for a while, and then each of our kids did an installation.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Which was pretty amazing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. Can we talk about some of those shows? I'd love to talk about some of the shows you curated that you found most interesting and then if you'd like to talk about any of the kids' exhibition, that would be great, too. Not that they are little kids. [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I can't remember—I remember I did one on abstract art, how it's a tough sell, in a way—.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —and how people, given their druthers, will tend to prefer subject matter. I mean, abstract art is still, I think, a bit of a challenge.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting, isn't it?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Particularly for outsiders, people just getting acquainted with art, the art world.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It's not their first choice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So I did a show of abstract art, and, you know, wrote an essay about that.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what was the framework for it? Was it the wide range of abstraction art, or did you narrow it in at all?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Honestly, I can't remember.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. We can probably find one.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. Well, we have, Jan [Jan Day, Virginia Wright's assistant] documented every show we did, so we got complete documentation.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, wonderful, okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: We should talk about that. I'll make a note to talk about that afterwards. So, why was there a decision to open the Wright Exhibition Space? Why not just give the collection earlier to SAM? It seems like there was something you wanted to do with it. Did you want to look at it?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. It was not about our collection. It was about me playing curator.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: That was the—and it was about creating a space that I thought was, you know, good for art, with daylight coming in, you know, daylight galleries, and we had an architect from New York—

MIJA RIEDEL: I can't remember his name right now either. We can look that up. [Richard Gluckman with James Olson]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. So, he helped with the floor plan.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And then we had this daylight gallery, so it was a lot about creating a space that—I didn't think there was enough of in Seattle: good, beautiful, daylight galleries.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So that was very important.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's interesting now that you mention that because you have been very engaged with

architects over the years, I think, from designing the first—the Modern Art Pavilion. Is that Paul Thiry? I can't remember who did that one. And then you designed your home at the Highlands, then that was designed very much as—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: A house for art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, as a house for art, and so it seems like you have—I think you were involved in the selection of the architect for the new Seattle Art Museum downtown?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

MIJA RIEDEL: So that is something you thought about a lot?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, yeah, I have.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So that was really a good part of it, the idea of having a space at Dexter [Dexter Street] in order to have a classic, beautiful exhibition space.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. It makes me think of the fact that, you know, one of the first museums you were so taken with was the Frick, which was so much of a home setting rather than a museum setting, but it was—it makes me think of—was it Sidney Janis who talked about how the pieces were installed and how they worked together? So, it seems like you were thinking about space, architectural space and how an exhibition—how pieces worked in a space from the very beginning.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes, I guess. I think—

MIJA RIEDEL: Is that true?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes because the house in the Highlands—and even the house before, installation was something of great interest to me—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —because I could see what a difference it could make to the way the art looked. I mean, things that were hung in a hall were never as great as the things that were hung in the bigger living rooms and that kind of thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Did you install everything here? Did you decide where it was going to go?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Because it is clearly so thoughtfully installed and thought out.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. Yeah, that was always the fun, I think.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you learn anything in particular while you were curating those shows at the Wright Exhibition Space? Were you surprised by anything?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, maybe, but I can't recall now, but for the first few years, it was great fun.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And then the energy wore out a little bit, but we had fun inviting people to come in and do things. That was—well, and then, to mention the kids—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: They—all four of them did, you know, amazing things that were very typical of their own outlook.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Charlie did something—an installation of poetry, so it was all very literary, and Merrill did—it was probably the most amazing of all. It was—she invited, sort of, individuals, quirky individuals in the city to join with her and make an installation of whatever they wanted to do, whatever they wanted to do, and it was—and she herself, Merrill herself made an installation of stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And it was original, amazing, a tour de force, and everybody responded to it. It was really—we've got pictures. It was unbelievable.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'd love to see that.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And saying that her exhibition was a real tour de force is saying quite a lot because all your children are quite engaged in the arts.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: We were just talking that Charlie was the head of Dia for quite some time.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Bing's a photographer—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Bing's—yeah. Robin is involved in—

MIJA RIEDEL: Down in San Francisco, San Francisco Modern [Museum of Modern Art].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, but their exhibitions were good and straightforward and reflected their interests. Merrill's was more off-the-wall, creative, crazy, unforgettable.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. She was the Dick Bellamy of the group.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Bringing in the outliers.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Oh, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Was it important to you that your kids be engaged in the arts?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. I mean, that's—you know, I said before, I was glad that I was the only one in my family that was interested in art. I didn't want to share, you know, or be in the shadow of somebody else.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So what I—my kids, I thought, you know, I don't want to, you know, brainwash them on art. I let them find their own, so as a result, they all chose art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, I can't remember which one of them it was, maybe it was Merrill who said that growing up in your home—art was the fifth child.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Art, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Instead of Arthur, art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, exactly. So, they always—it was just part of—it was almost like having another living, breathing person in the house.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, it was, something that they could—and then they—I think they found they had to defend it to their friends who said what is this. So they had to figure out a way to defend it.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] It would be interesting to hear how those arguments evolved over time.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So, last but not least, moving on to this final venue I'm thinking about for your collecting,

philanthropic efforts: you and Bagley were so deeply involved with the Seattle Art Museum from the beginning, from that first 1959 donation, you became a docent right away, you joined the Board of Trustees, I think, in '60. Bagley served as the president for two or three years, I believe?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, mm-hmm [affirmative].

MIJA RIEDEL: You were involved in the push to move the museum downtown, and you were part of the sculpture park—I think there's a great quote from Bagley saying that the needs of SAM were always directly considered when you purchased art. "Jinny was specific about buying things the museum didn't have." Why did you choose to donate to SAM, do you think, rather than to set up your own museum? Was that not an option then? Would you do it differently now?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. I mean, it was never an option, and—because, as I said, I don't believe in museums of modern art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: You know, and if I'd had my own museum, it would have been a museum of modern art.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I always wanted to see modern art in the context of all art, and I think that's turned out to be the right approach. Modern art needed defending, so that's why you had museums of modern art. The classic museum wasn't buying.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So I thought—that was always my idea, that the Seattle Art Museum should have contemporary art alongside of of its' historic art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And anyway, a private museum is—well, there's the Frick, which is great, but a lot of them are just vanity efforts of—and it's always been interesting to me—still is—to see what the curators do with our art. I mean, I know what—I like to do, you know, how I like to install things, and then to see the juxtapositions that they make are things I wouldn't have dreamt of. So that's huge pleasure. And I wouldn't have gotten that from a private museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. How do you think the relationship between philanthropy and collecting has changed since you started assembling a collection for SAM?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I don't know that I could answer that. I mean, the whole contemporary art scene is so totally different from—in my experience, where, you know—in the '50s, the art wasn't selling. Now, it's selling off the—from students just entering the art world. It's a huge vogue, which it wasn't in the past. So it's just a new ballgame. I'm not—I find myself not really interested in following contemporary art anymore. I'm just—I am curious about the period that I remember, but I'm not interested in what's new. And I don't go to the galleries that much anymore, check it out. I mean, it just seems—there is no pattern, there's no style that prevails, it's anything goes, and it's too confusing. It used to be so simple.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It was all happening in New York.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No place else, not Europe, and now—realizing how wrong that was. But still, that's where I came from. It was all very simple and one style led to another. The artists were sorting it out and painting—what was happening. Now, it's—

MIJA RIEDEL: Much more diverse.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How did your decision so early on that your collection was going to go to SAM affect your collecting, do you think? Do you think it brought a different level of rigor to the collection, and do you think it made it in any way less personal?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: That's a good question. Well, I like to think that it was personal in that—okay, I didn't—I accepted the museum's pecking order, lists of artists. So I would be guided by that, but then when I looked at a Stella or whatever, Morris Lewis, it had to be something that turned me on.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So I thought I didn't choose the artist. I chose within that list of artists their best work—I mean, what I thought was their best work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So I tried to be—and I can remember Charlie Cowles saying, as a good exercise, whenever you visit an exhibition, you should not leave a gallery until you determine which is the best picture in the—in that gallery. So you should be exercising judgment and taste all along, and I think that was a good advice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So I didn't pick the artists, but I picked the examples.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did he tell you that once he was the curator at the Seattle Art Museum, or was it even before?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I can't remember, but it was at that time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It must have been a pleasure, then, to work with him.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. He was kind of an amateur.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But he did—I mean, that—he got that great Elvis Warhol [*Double Elvis*, 1963/1976]. There was Charlie Cowles' decision.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And I know that you did give up some of the paintings that you really loved or some of the pieces that you really loved, in order to get different pieces for the museum. I think you gave up a lot of the Pop pieces that you may be what have personally kept, if I'm understanding that correctly, that you let those go in order to buy other pieces that the museum needed for his collection? For example, the Warhol you were talking about—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: The *Do It Yourself*?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. I mean, why let that go? [laughs] Sorry.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: God only knows. I mean, it was—yeah, it was a terrible lapse. In fact—well, I think a lot of the collecting was financed by a little bit of buying and selling.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I mean, I just didn't have a few that I could spend—you know, I wanted to take care of my children.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Because my parents had taken care of me and gave me the opportunity to make a collection.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So I didn't want to spend, you know, an inordinate amount of money and like-kind exchanges, buying, selling, works of art was a lot of the way I financed what I ended up—it was very much a kinetic collection. And I made big mistakes, but at the time, I thought I had to finance some of these purchases by sales.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Now, you say it was a kinetic collection. What do you mean?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, it was changing a lot.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Coming and going?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Coming and going. And I put things up at auction I—we had a Pollock. I sold that. It wasn't a great one, but—yeah, I think a great collection would be the things I let go, but I felt I needed the money.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. To fund something else?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Which ones, really, besides the Warhol and the Pollock, anything else that really sits as sore spots?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, we had a wonderful Wesselman.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: With a sound effect. It was a hand pouring juice, and there was a glug, glug, glug sound, and —we had a Tinguely that was pretty terrific. I can't really recall that, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you find your loves and your tastes have changed over time, or have they stayed fairly consistent? I know you said that you grew into really appreciating and feeling a kinship with the Pop artists in particular.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MIJA RIEDEL: Is that still true or have things changed, again, with time?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, I think definitely I'm more interested in the historic—yeah. The Abstract Expressionists and then—and then Pop and Color Field, and—I'm not interested in what's going on—I'm interested in the shift in now looking at European postwar art, which we never—

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: You know. I didn't even—I never heard of Polke or Richter or Kiefer or, you know—that all changed, and then—in the '80s, —'70s, '80s. And so that interested me a lot. That was probably the last time I was really engaged in what was happening in the art world. Now I just—I mean, it's too open. I mean, art from every country is valid—

MIJA RIEDEL: So much more to follow.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: But—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It's impossible to follow, I would say.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. The Germans from the '80s and '90s, that really shifted the balance of your collection. That really was the single opening up—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: That's right. And I was selling things, I guess, to buy some of those.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So—

MIJA RIEDEL: And you got some extraordinary pieces.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. And so, win a few, lose a few—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So I'd like to move on to a couple final questions about the collection in general and collecting particular. You've assembled a superb collection of postwar art: Abstract Expressionism, Color Field, Pop art, Minimalism, Hard Edge Abstraction, New York Expressionism, the Europeans we just mentioned of the '80s and '90s. Is there a way you describe what you've collected or a way that you think of it?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. I mean, I think, just, art as it happened along, you know, until a certain point.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative] When do you feel like you really sort of stopped?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Probably early part of this century.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Now I definitely don't.

MIJA RIEDEL: No more buying?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No more buying.

MIJA RIEDEL: No more selling?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. And actually, this Hammershøi painting, Dutch—

MIJA RIEDEL: Which one?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: That painting over the chest there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It's by Danish, 19th-century artist, Hammershøi, and he's—I had—he is, like—if Ibsen could paint, you probably would like Hammershøi.

MIJA RIEDEL: What a great description.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so I've sort of been collecting postcards of his art. I see them every so often, and we were in Denmark and saw a museum devoted to him, and he just stuck in my imagination, and Chiyo Ishikawa is Danish.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so she sort of shared my interest in this artist, and every so often she would send me an image of a painting that would be coming up at auction, and—that didn't do anything for me until I saw this one, and that was the—I guess maybe I bought that maybe three or four years ago, something like that, five.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And that is definitely the last painting—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It came up at auction in London, and I was on the phone, and I kind of love that the last thing I bought was from the 19th century, going back to my art history roots.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly, coming full circle.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. That is perfect. I'll have to get a closer look at that.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. I had—you know Vik Muniz did a sort of a tribute to Hammershøi, and I bought that work. It's now at the Henry Gallery, but so that was as close as I thought I would ever come to this artist that so caught my imagination until I had that opportunity.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. So, you were waiting for the right one, yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, no. I just thought it's kind of fun that she was sending me these images, and he's a very uneven artist. There was a show here at the Frye. It was, you know, not—he's not—he needs to be vetted.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But when I saw this painting, I just—everything fell into place. I thought oh my God. It was possible for me—I think I sold things to buy that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, it seems to be part of your style of collecting to wait for the one specific piece, and I think a lot of the best collections were made that way.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Something I couldn't let go—couldn't not do something about—

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So I'm trying to get at the essence of your philosophy as art collectors, and I think Regina Hackett said that you summed it up, or maybe Bagley did—about collecting art when its current, ideally the year it is produced, collect intuitively, respond to what moves you, and then buy art with the ultimate—

[END OF TRACK.]

MIJA RIEDEL: —goal of making a public contribution. Does that still feel accurate? Does this feel accurate? Not still.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. I just—you know, I definitely wanted the art I bought to go to a museum. That's—because it is fun to see what they will do with it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And a lot of collectors say, you know—I don't want to give it to a museum because they'll just put it in storage. Well, yeah. But that's—they have it, it is part of the richness of the museum, and every so often, it comes out of storage. So, I don't—it doesn't bother me that I give things and they sit in storage. It's part of the fabric, the richness of the museum, to have holdings and—you know. They don't always hang.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is such an interesting perspective. You almost never hear that anymore.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I think it's wrong-headed of collectors to say that. I mean, what is the museum supposed to do? They can't hang everything all the time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And anyway—

MIJA RIEDEL: This whole concept of making a public contribution, why is that so important to you?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, I guess it just is identifying with something bigger than myself. You know, being a part of a grander enterprise than just me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And so, if that means some of the paintings or sculptures sit in the storage for a while, then that's fine?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's interesting to think about. I'll give that some thought. It's almost—it's an incredible resource to know that it's there to be drawn upon, and it doesn't always have to be there, but knowing it's there is something that can always then, in the curator's mind—in somebody's mind, connect to something in a new way and be brought out again with a new perspective.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Right, and another—different arrangement that I would have never anticipated.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. We think so much about having everything on view all the time. It is interesting to think about if there—what value there is to not having it all on view all the time.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Just part of the wealth of the museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Wealth on many levels, if I'm understanding that.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And, okay, if they deaccess, that's okay. I'm all for that.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's unusual.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Because, well, I did that myself. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly. Exactly, and so it's fine if they do as well.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, you understand that it's a changing tapestry, as you were saying earlier.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Kinetic.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. So, in assembling your tapestry—assembling your collection, your practice, you visited galleries where you regularly—you went to make—went to New York on a regular basis. Did you start going to all the art fairs when they became—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I did. In the beginning, I thought it was so much fun. I mean, to see so much art in such a small—relatively small space.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But now, I don't know—I mean, that I just don't have the energy anymore, but partly because it's just, you know, the whole scene is so confusing to me now that I don't go. But in the beginning, I went to Miami and—in December, it was so great to see that fair. Yeah, and great to have Seattle have—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: We'll see how that works out.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Anything else besides Miami that was a regular one?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, some in New York.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: That's about it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I went once the art—to Basel.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: That was great.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But, yeah. It's a terrific way to see a lot of art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you buy much art at any of those fairs?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. Not a whole lot, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But, yeah. Every so often.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Well, they didn't really become in vogue until probably—the lion share of your collecting happened in the '60s and the '70s, yeah? '80s as well?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: '80s as well. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: I've known these two to be sure, but—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, it was petering out—

MIJA RIEDEL: Slower, perhaps, right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: We've covered quite a bit of this yesterday. Do you still feel like the core of your collection is Color Field or would you describe it another way? Or is there not a core? Has it become more diversified and more spread out over time?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, my impression is that it's more diversified, that there's no one area. But, you know, looking at it scientifically, maybe Color Field does predominate—I don't know. I wouldn't have necessarily—maybe because Color Field didn't sell either. When I needed to sell to finance something else. I wouldn't pick the Color Field painting because that wasn't going to bring in—yield much profit.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So, I think it's pretty hard to say what the heart of the collection is because it's so fluid. It's changed so much over the years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It certainly has.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So, you know—and every decade, it was—it would have had a different character.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Who did you collect in most depth? I mean, I think of Olitski to be sure. I think of—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Noland. There are a fair number of di Suveros. Those may have been part of the Virginia Wright Fund, and Morris Louis, it sounds like. Who were—who was best represented, do you think, by multiples in the collection? Barnett Newman? Not anymore?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, only one painting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: You know, and then they went up [inaudible].

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I—that's—I suppose, you know, Olitski probably had more.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Not that I sort of programmatically set out to do that. And, you know, it may have been that Olitski didn't sell, that it was never could have been—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. So those are the ones that have stayed.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Those two Morris Louis in the dining room are exquisite.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Couldn't stop thinking about those.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, uh-huh [affirmative]. Lucky too—

MIJA RIEDEL: Maybe it worked out that—

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: —nobody wanted to buy them because they are still here. Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: In the late '80s, you and Bagley also put together a collection of traditional Japanese textiles.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, that was purely Bagley.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: He had those interests. He had—he put together the Japanese textile collection, pottery, lots of Japanese pottery.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: You know, from the five kilns, and he was, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So yeah, that was totally his interest.

MIJA RIEDEL: Because he'd been interested in Japanese textiles or pre-Columbian, something when you first got together?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. No.

MIJA RIEDEL: No, okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: That came later.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: That came later.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But he was—you know, when he found an interest he would go into it in depth and read a lot, get a lot of books, and study.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So, that was sort of his approach.

MIJA RIEDEL: When you two were collecting together—I realize I haven't asked you much about that aspect of your collecting. Did you always buy things that you agreed on, or did you take turns allowing each other to disagree? [Laughs.] How did that work?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, I mean, I think, you know, I was spending my money. You know, it wasn't—I didn't have to ask—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So—and he was okay with that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And his collection was, you know—that was totally his own project, so I think we weren't—you know, there was no—

MIJA RIEDEL: So, the art collection was really pretty much your calling. Certainly the Virginia Wright Fund and your personal collection as well.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Pretty much. Yeah, I think—I mean, I think, in later years, he would pay half, so we would—it would be a joint acquisition.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. In later years, you mean the '80s, the '90s?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, the '90s.

MIJA RIEDEL: The '60s and '70s, it was pretty much your focus—well, he was busy doing quite a few other things [laughs].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, right. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But I remember, he—I was, like, the investor and the client together—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: —because I think they kind of are, like, bookends for the Abstract Expressionist, you know, arm movements with Kline and finger movements with Guston.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And he went to New York in the, I think, early '60s and came home with his painting.

MIJA RIEDEL: The Kline? Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And it seemed a little raw to me, and, you know—that's Kline.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And so I was—I bought the Guston, and I think—I was thinking, you know, his and hers. [referring to two paintings, by Kline and Guston, hanging side by side on the wall behind her]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Macho and more quiet.

MIJA RIEDEL: I wouldn't call [laughs] that quiet. Does that feel quiet to you? That feels very lively and colorful and energetic.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, but—I mean, I don't want to say masculine and feminine, but in a way, there's something like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. I'm glad you pointed that out.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And it was definitely his choice, the Kline. He got—and I'm so glad we have it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So—

MIJA RIEDEL: When did you start to hang those two side-by-side? Is that new in this house or have you had them together for some time?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I think in this house. Yeah. I can't remember, you know, I don't—it wasn't in the Highlands. I can't remember—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So, I think we've done a very excellent job covering this group of questions. I've been thinking about how engaged both your parents were in helping you get started in the art field and really encouraging you and supporting your interest, from your dad's initial grant for the Virginia Wright Fund. And your mom helping to underwrite or being involved in the underwriting, I think, with the Modern Art Pavilion. But it seems there has been a family affair involved. And we talked about how all four of your children have gone on to be engaged in the arts. Your granddaughter, I understand, now, is studying art history at Barnard?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No. She's graduated.

MIJA RIEDEL: She's graduated?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And she's—but she's working in the art department. She just had a baby, so she's doing that now, but she was working in the art department.

MIJA RIEDEL: At Barnard?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Amazing, amazing. And your grandkids engaged in the arts as well? How many do you have?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Ten. She's a grandchild.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Ten grandchildren, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Goodness, yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Three great-grandsons. Four.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh my goodness [laughs], wow. And do you see an engagement with the arts going on with them? Certainly, your four children are all actively engaged in art.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I don't see it with the grandchildren.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Except for that one.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: I don't—I think that—they've got other things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Food, being sort of a main—

MIJA RIEDEL: That sounds like a good choice.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah [laughs].

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it's an extraordinary collection. It's been such a joy to sit here and have this interview surrounded by so much of the work you've collected, and it does seem like you've managed to keep parts of it that you want to live with. But the lion share has now gone to SAM, right? A couple of years ago, is that right?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Over the last few years, as we moved out of Dexter.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And sold that space.

MIJA RIEDEL: The Wright Exhibition Space?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, right. Then—so, that was three years ago.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And at that point, we had a lot of things in storage at Dexter.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And that all went to the museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Do you have any idea how many pieces in total have gone there, roughly?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, it's interesting. Hundreds, of course.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, hundreds.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. But the lion share has been more recently over the past three years?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yes because of closing out of Dexter.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: We had to do something—everything was in storage.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Now, we have made a little bit of a change, too. The photography is going to the Henry Gallery.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So, that was a new decision, about a few years ago.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is that the collection that was put together with the consortium?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: No, that was—

MIJA RIEDEL: This is your own?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: What I had.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: On my own. So, that—

MIJA RIEDEL: You have—there have been donations to a few different venues. I remember reading maybe something about Princeton. Did anything go to the Whitney? It seems like there have been a few donations that have gone to other places. Why would—why did that happen rather than the SAM? Did they fill out gaps or—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, I guess so, and we gave a Bruce Conner to SF MoMA. I was on the board for a while.

MIJA RIEDEL: Of SF MoMA?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And your daughter is now?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: They just had that fantastic show of his work.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And they hung that—

MIJA RIEDEL: Which one was yours?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: It's a little sort of a wax relief with a little mirror in it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah. It's small, but it's—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I think Bagley gave things to Princeton. That was his alma mater.

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

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: And I don't know. I can't remember any other museums.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, MoMA with the Lichtenstein.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Was not a gift, it was a purchase gift.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: But—

MIJA RIEDEL: You've really—

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Here and there, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But you've really maintained that initial commitment to transform the art scene or the art collection in the Northwest, in particular the Seattle area?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Northwestern Washington?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you have any interest in how the collection is viewed over time?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Well, I don't think it would be viewed as a collection. It will be integrated into the museum holdings in whatever—Pop art and Abstract Expressionism, will be part of that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: That collection.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: So, I don't—it will be—it won't be our collection anymore, I assume.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you're fine with that?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, because our name's on the label, and that means a lot to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: That means a lot.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it seems to fit into your larger vision of it becoming part of the larger fabric of art history over time.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: Yeah, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, this has been terrific. Any final thoughts?

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: [Laughs.] No, you've been A-plus [laughs] interviewer. I have to say, you could have done the whole interview on your own.

[They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: I hope not. You added quite a bit. It was actually—it was very interesting to see how different things fit together and get some different perspectives on things, so it's been—very much appreciate your time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Great.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT: A lot of fun for me. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]