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Oral history interview with Chuck Close,  
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**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Chuck Close on June 20, 2017. The interview took place at Close's studio in Long Beach, NY, and was conducted by Christopher Lyon for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

## Interview

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This is Christopher Lyon, interviewing Chuck Close at his home and studio in Long Beach, New York, on July 20, 2017. Thank you for agreeing to do this. As I mentioned, I have an itinerary of questions, but you should feel free to go on as you will. If something isn't interesting to you, we'll just move on to the next thing, and when you're tired and if you want to stop, that's totally fine.

Just to put this in context, your previous interview with Archives of American Art took place in 1987. Judd Tully was the interviewer. It's a long and very valuable interview. As we said at lunch, 30 years has now passed since that interview and something like 60 percent of your career has been since that time. So, it seemed more than worthwhile to revisit it and hear your thoughts on the intervening time. The most extraordinary thing in that period, in terms of your life, was "The Event," the collapse of the spinal artery—is that correct?—in December of 1988.

CHUCK CLOSE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: On December 7th. And you have—the rebuilding of your life and career since then has been a pretty remarkable story, and I wanted to talk about that a little bit, if you're willing.

There was— A number of subjects, quite a few subjects, are not touched on in that 1987 interview. And we were touching on one of them, I think, at lunch, a bit. And this is the question of the context in which you emerged, and the social—the larger cultural issues that surrounded that period of the late '50s, early 1960s, when you came up. One of the things that I found striking: There's a kind of nice video, a 1997 video of you. And your subject matter, as you put in that video, is "friends, family, and fellow artists." And I think we're in a time today, more and more, where the—that art is not only being looked at as a product of gifted individuals, but as, in a way, a social activity. Which I was struck with in the current Rauschenberg retrospective at MoMA.

CHUCK CLOSE: Which is beautiful, isn't it?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It is beautiful, yeah.

CHUCK CLOSE: I think it's one of the most beautiful museum retrospectives I've ever seen. Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And Robert Rauschenberg was one of your subjects in a number of pieces.

CHUCK CLOSE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And you knew him, I think, pretty well.

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah. And he hired two other—well, no, actually I never did paint those two other subjects. I never did paint Brice Marden.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really?

CHUCK CLOSE: Because he didn't want to be painted.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative].

CHUCK CLOSE: But I did paint Dorothea Rockburne and they both worked for Bob. And his studio was a block from mine.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh that's right. In the former orphanage, was it?

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right, right. Oh, I hadn't thought about that.

CHUCK CLOSE: And his storage facility was literally the building next door to mine.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I didn't know that. Did you see much of him?

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah, we—for 14 years, as a family, we went to Sanibel and Captiva at Christmas. And it was pretty great because we would—I would at least go see Bob every year. Sometimes my wife and children went, but often they didn't.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: One of the things about the retrospective that surprised me a bit, and I just felt enthralled by, is there are a number of reconstructions of his collaborations with dancers. And for one of them, and I'm forgetting which one, there's a collage of his photographs that repeats on a wall. And there must be dozens of photographs in this collection.

CHUCK CLOSE: Right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: They are so interesting. He was a wonderful photographer.

CHUCK CLOSE: And his son—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Chris.

CHUCK CLOSE: —is a wonderful photographer.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I didn't know that.

CHUCK CLOSE: And has kept the family tradition going. I just bought—somewhere, where was it? Two really terrific—I have more photographs in my collection than anything else, because I can't afford a great painting by Rauschenberg, but I can afford a great photograph by Rauschenberg.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The thing that I was going to mention about the show is that when the show was at the Tate in London, it was simply called *Robert Rauschenberg*, like a standard monographic retrospective. At MoMA, Leah Dickerman decided to call it *Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends*. And this shift to the emphasis on collaboration or cooperation or whatever, seems to me, a significant kind of shift in curatorial thinking. It made me look back at your work in a certain, somewhat different way maybe than I had, which was—you always, from the beginning, were including your friends, your family, and emphasizing other artists in your painting, almost as if you were—even though you were engaged in this very solitary activity for much of that time, your friends were with you, you know? And I wondered if that—what it looks like in—

CHUCK CLOSE: Well, interestingly enough, the title of my print retrospective was *Process and Collaboration*. So, I love sharing the responsibility and the blame, if they don't like it, and I'm always willing to celebrate the pleasure if people do like it. And that nothing happens with only one person. You know? I was amazed at that Rauschenberg retrospective, because I had no idea that this happened, but putting a work by another artist on a show lets you know that something more has just happened. So there's a Warhol silkscreen painting. I didn't know that Warhol had taught Bob how to make silkscreens, and I knew them both.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There's the collaboration side, and you've had some amazing collaborators, especially in printmaking. There's also sort of the social interactive side. You mentioned, when we were downstairs, being part of that first generation that had gone to university. And that was a pretty extraordinary generation. I mean, your classmates. You mentioned Brice Marden. Vija Celmins, I think was there at that time, right?

CHUCK CLOSE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Janet Fish.

CHUCK CLOSE: Richard Serra, Nancy Graves.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Nancy Graves, right.

CHUCK CLOSE: Janet Fish was married to Rackstraw Downes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Huh.

CHUCK CLOSE: Richard married Nancy Graves. And the year right after ours brought in—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So you were working with an artist like Serra, helping him make pieces. And I think it's so

interesting to imagine artists like the two of you coming out of a milieu where you're talking to each other, where you're interacting with one another, looking at how one's solving problems and the other is posing problems. I'm wondering how important that was for you at that time.

CHUCK CLOSE: Oh, it was very important. Richard is a very difficult friend to have and an even more difficult enemy to have. I mean, I've been sued by Richard Serra [laughs], but I treasure those years that we spent together. And although he—I don't think I want to go into the whole [laughs] lawsuit with Richard.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] No, no, but in those years, I mean, you were watching him transform from an artist who is basically doing 1950s AbEx [Abstract Expressionism] kind of work, right?

CHUCK CLOSE: Paintings.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Paintings. To someone who was deeply engaged in process and materials. And that's the part that seems so interesting. And at the same time—

CHUCK CLOSE: If you're a sculptor, you ended up being a painter. If you were a painter, you ended up being a sculptor. I didn't, because I had never understood sculpture. When I would try to make a sculpture, they would—sculpture would confound me. I only worked on it from one side. I forgot to go around it, you know? Interestingly enough, Richard had the same problem. All of his work up through the *Prop* pieces addressed the wall.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHUCK CLOSE: Things were leaned against it, stuff was—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —thrown against it.

CHUCK CLOSE: And—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This is leading somewhere. One of the things that I remember, for some reason, most about Chris Finch's book about you is—I always come back to the passage where he talks about you and Leslie back in the '60s, you know, going out practically every night. You would be seeing dance or hearing music.

CHUCK CLOSE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And now, looking back on the late '50s, early '60s, it's seeming more and more like the performance component of what was going on in New York was really playing a big role.

CHUCK CLOSE: Absolutely. The cross-fertilization of ideas, of being exposed to work that was so different from what you do. Rauschenberg was such a wonderful example of how someone can breathe new life into their work.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah. I mean he's such an exemplar, because already in the early '50s, he's talking to John Cage and Merce Cunningham, and collaborating with Cunningham. I just find it really striking that Rauschenberg's Combine decade pretty much exactly tracks his activity with Merce Cunningham. The piece now are considered to be, by many people to be the first Combine, was made as a set piece for Cunningham.

CHUCK CLOSE: Right.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah. There's a funny story around that, but maybe too long to go into.

CHUCK CLOSE: Oh, come on.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] The piece that's in this big retrospective at the Walker right now was actually created in 1976, for a PBS dance special. At the Walker, it's presented as a work by Rauschenberg. But Rauschenberg had almost nothing in it at all. It was Walter Hopps got his group of installers at the Washington Museum, where Rauschenberg was having a retrospective, and he said, "Can you make a replica of this thing?" And they did and it's quite convincing, but it's not by Rauschenberg.

CHUCK CLOSE: The *White Paintings* at the MoMA retrospective were made by Brice Marden, because Bob had given these essentially blank canvases to Brice to use in his own paintings. I think most of the *Grove Group*, I bet if you take the proportions of those, I'll bet they are the *Grove Group*.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That makes sense, yeah.

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah, so I think that sort of always happened with those people.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: One of the aspects of that that's interesting in relation to you is it's sort of—those two

pieces, *Factum I* and *Factum II* by Rauschenberg—you know, that look almost exactly alike, and—

CHUCK CLOSE: Well, when I saw *Factum I* and *Factum II*, at the time, I thought they looked identical. Now when you look at them, they don't look identical at all. They're really very, very different from one another.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's interesting, isn't it?

CHUCK CLOSE: Sort of like identical twins. Once you have identical twins, to recognize them, to know them, you have to look for the differences.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right, right. So, works like the *White Paintings*, like *Factum I* and *II*, and like these two supposed combines, all kind of undercut the idea of, you know, inspiration and of coming upon an idea freshly and everything like that. Rauschenberg was really undermining that in a really interesting way.

CHUCK CLOSE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I was wondering how—I mean, you eventually would say, in your famous comment, you know, "Inspiration is for amateurs" [laughs], which has been repeated a lot.

CHUCK CLOSE: Well, and, who said, "Mediocre artists borrow, great artists steal."?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I think it's sometimes attributed to Picasso but is not actually by Picasso. I can't remember who. [Laughs.] Somebody. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

To get back to your work—again, looking at it from this long perspective now, the decision to work with such an ancient genre as portraiture, at that particular moment in time, just seems extraordinary. You know? And it struck me that—

CHUCK CLOSE: Well—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yes, go ahead.

CHUCK CLOSE: Who had just said—oh, Clement Greenberg had just said, famously, "The only thing you can't do any more is paint a portrait." And I thought, "Ooh, isn't that"—I was already making portraits but I thought, "Huh, not that much competition."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

CHUCK CLOSE: So.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And the other thing that strikes me as being very conservative about what you were doing at that time, up to a point, is adopting this gridding system. And we're sitting in the studio with an in-progress painting of Fred Wilson, right, that's assembled as a vertical and horizontal grid. Is that—this is—the technique is a very old one, right?

CHUCK CLOSE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: At least to the early Renaissance and probably to the Greeks, I would imagine.

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah. Egyptians, I think.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Egyptian.

CHUCK CLOSE: Egyptians used it to blow up the images on walls in tombs.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: To preserve the proportions, right?

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. So the question is: At what point did you sort of realize that this useful technique was actually a conceptual door opening onto just an almost unlimited array of kinds of work?

CHUCK CLOSE: I don't know, if you look around my house, the only art that's in here is by Sol LeWitt. Sol certainly managed to milk as much out of a grid as anybody ever, you know?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

CHUCK CLOSE: But more recently, I've discovered—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You were—so, Sol's work was clearly very important, but recently, you've gotten other—

CHUCK CLOSE: Oh, yeah. The two activities which I have thrown myself into with reckless abandon—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

CHUCK CLOSE: —are tapestries and mosaics.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The new Second Avenue subway station.

CHUCK CLOSE: Right, Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Which is marvelous.

CHUCK CLOSE: Oh, thanks. I'm really happy with it. I'm very proud of it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really terrific.

CHUCK CLOSE: But I like the idea that something seems so moribund, exhausted, then, you know, again, who is going to make any of them, you know? So it was always—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So, mosaics and making things on a loom, with the intersection, those will be sort of precedents for your way of weaving a picture, so to say.

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah, and they seemed so used up. And I like the idea of finding a new way to breathe new life into something that seemed so used up, so finished.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So this is a kind of deeply conservative—and I mean that in the best possible sense—conservative aspect of your creative thought, that you have this—you've had this ability to find things that seemed played out, and give them new life. You did this in photography and you've gone back to daguerreotype, and more recently Woodburytype, which I don't think I had ever even heard of. [Laughs.]

CHUCK CLOSE: Me either. Me either. And for good reason. Boy, are they hard to do.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, really? But the results are pretty spectacular. Is it worth the effort? [Laughs.]

CHUCK CLOSE: Well, it's—fun is often found in things that are laborious.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You should know. [Laughs.] How many months did it take you to produce those large paintings of the '70s?

CHUCK CLOSE: Well, a couple of paintings took 14 months per painting. I tried to bring them in at being able to do a couple of paintings a year but I couldn't do it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: One of the things that strikes me as interesting about this is that what your efforts have done is to kind of remind everybody—well, let me back that up. Let me say it a different way.

Certain kinds of cultural products get a monopoly on people's attention. You know, a certain kind of photography, today it's digital photography. A certain kind of performance medium, a certain kind of printmaking. And your work with early methods of printmaking and photography are partly a reminder that there was this vast diversity early on in these mediums, that all kinds of different directions were being explored. And I think that we—I mean, I think we suffer from this economically, you know, the tendency for things to coalesce and become monopolized. But I think maybe we suffer from it culturally, too. You know?

CHUCK CLOSE: I'll have to give some thought to that, see if that turns out to be true. It certainly sounds like it could be true.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Now you were quite close to Philip Glass. I think he even did some plumbing for you. Is that right?

CHUCK CLOSE: He plumbed my first loft. He was a better composer than he was a plumber.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

CHUCK CLOSE: The plumbing always leaked. There's a great story—and, you know, you're never sure whether some things are apocryphal or not, but I know this to be true. Philip supported himself, for all the early years, up to and including the years that he spent doing *Einstein on the Beach*, by being a cabdriver.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I didn't know that.

CHUCK CLOSE: So, Philip has—premieres *Einstein on the Beach*, and that was entirely supported by visual artists who contributed the money to rent—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: BAM? Was it—?

CHUCK CLOSE: No, it was the Metropolitan Opera.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The Metropolitan Opera. I didn't know—yeah, okay, well.

CHUCK CLOSE: So, you could—if you had friends who were artists, who believed—and a few collectors and critics or whatever—who knew what you did and were willing to go to bat for you, you could actually have a respectable career without making a lot of money. So, this woman is in a cab [laughs], and she's riding in Phil Glass's cab, and she's like looking over the seat, reading the name off of the hack license. And she says, "Young man, do you realize you have the same name as a really famous [laughs] composer?" He didn't have the heart to tell her, or maybe he didn't want to expose himself.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

CHUCK CLOSE: I don't know too many professions in which that is true, other than music, poetry and painting, all of which can be done for a reasonable amount of money and you can get to be known, really well known. If you're a filmmaker, it's pretty hard.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Novelists and fiction writers, I think can get a certain succes d'estime, without actually having a hit book. But these days, you know, everybody wants one. So, did you and Phil ever discuss his modes of composition?

CHUCK CLOSE: Oh, yeah. Phil is very close to Paul Simon, as am I, and we have lunches together. Not as often as we used to, because Paul is on the road so much, and they always get into process.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really?

CHUCK CLOSE: You don't really want to—I'm afraid everything is trailing off. Part of—you know I have—not—isn't it funny, I can't think of the name of it. When you can't remember anything, what is it?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Forgetting. I don't know. Is this a particular condition?

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah. The biggest.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, you have kind of an Alzheimer's thing?

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh.

CHUCK CLOSE: So, I was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and I went in for tests. They use this radioactive scope—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh yeah.

CHUCK CLOSE: —which can see into your brain. And the good news was that I didn't have Alzheimer's. The bad news was that I had a different form. Let's see if I can remember the name of it. Frontal temporal dementia.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHUCK CLOSE: Which, happily, progresses much more slowly than Alzheimer's. But ultimately, it can have a much more devastating effect.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm sorry to hear that. You've overcome so much up to this point. I wouldn't bet against you in this respect.

CHUCK CLOSE: None of my doctors think I have it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, you know, you have said many times, in different contexts, "Art saved my life." And it seems that it's still here for you. Maybe the most profound example of course, I think has to be your recovery after "The Event."

CHUCK CLOSE: Well, luckily, I mean, if I had been a violinist, I'd be fucked. If I had been a baseball player, I

would have been fucked, you know? But painting, you can strap a brush to your hand.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It wasn't just any painting, though. It was a particular approach to painting.

CHUCK CLOSE: But I was already painting that way.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Of course. That's the eerie part. It's almost as if you had created a structure for yourself, that you would be able to survive.

CHUCK CLOSE: Well, that's a nice way of putting it, because, frankly, I'm offended when people say, you know, I love your new work, it's amazing you were able to find another way to work, et cetera.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The amazing thing is you didn't find another way to work, you kept doing it the way you were doing it. That's what's so astonishing. On top of which, you were focusing on heads [laughs], and I wanted to ask you a little bit—I mean, there's a part of your life that's very much on stage, you know?

CHUCK CLOSE: Uh-huh.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Your head, and you've done—you've had an entire exhibition devoted to your self-portraits.

CHUCK CLOSE: Oh my God, don't remind me of that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. [Laughs.] But you know, a person at some point in the future, who doesn't know your biography, could come at your body of work and really have no idea at all that there is any discontinuity between, you know, let's say, the self-portraits of the '70s and '80s and the ones you're doing now. Other than the fact that you're obviously aging.

CHUCK CLOSE: Well, my first wife [. . . -CC] said, "You are the most narcissistic artist in the world. Look at all the paintings of yourself that you've done." I said, "Well, what about Cindy Sherman?" So then I thought about it and —

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, let's put it this way. Of all the people that constitute your library of subjects; family, friends, and fellow artists, which is the one you spent the most time with? [Laughs.]

CHUCK CLOSE: Moi.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I think so, I think so.

CHUCK CLOSE: Well, so I'm sitting here, there's a photograph of my father-in-law and a drawing by my best friend, Mark Greenwold, in which there is an image of James Siena and his wife Katia.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: James Siena has been one of your subjects. You know, this is pretty interesting. I mean, it's a circle of people, and some people fall out of that circle at a certain point perhaps, and some people are brought into the circle, but it's—the thinking behind it is not that different from the metaphor you frequently use about the art world and style. You talk about there being this kind of amoeba form and it sometimes stretches out at a certain direction and sometimes pulls back. It's very organic, I guess is what I'm trying to say.

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah. Well, it actually goes out and forms a little blip that used to be inside and now it's outside. [Some things exist outside of the known art world in this amoeba. That which was outside, goes inside and affects the resulting outside shape of the art world, which is now different from the absorption. -CC] And then it starts making related work.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it. Sort of attracting related work and sort of changing the shape of the geography.

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah. I've always wanted to ask you what you thought the source of this pretty extraordinary determination you seem to have, to overcome. Where do you think that comes from?

CHUCK CLOSE: Well, I was 11 when my father died, and he was 48. And I was 48 when I became a quadriplegic, and I began to mark each year. I ended up celebrating each year—

[Phone rings.]

[Audio break.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, speaking of Mark Greenwold—



CHUCK CLOSE: Oh, let me just finish.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, yeah, go ahead.

CHUCK CLOSE: What was it that I was saying?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, I lost the thread of it, too, I think. What were we talking about? Oh, we were talking about determination, and you would celebrate each birthday.

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah. I would celebrate each birthday, not only one that I had, but . . . to celebrate the years that I have with my children that my father didn't have with me. -CC] So that made it especially personal and important.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah.

CHUCK CLOSE: And artists are by nature competitive. He wanted to make—you know, I look in the—who is it who says, "I get up and I look at the obituaries, and if I'm not in there I have breakfast."?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] Oh good, I'm not sick. [Laughs.] I've read that but I don't remember.

CHUCK CLOSE: I can't remember who it was either.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I have to say, my father did that in the last years of his life. The first thing he would do is turn to the obituaries.

CHUCK CLOSE: Oh, me too.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And it was like, you know—he'd find his former bosses from the bank, as they keeled over, one after another, and say, "See?" Yeah.

But still, so anyway, continuing on that subject, Mark Greenwold supposedly—when he visited you in the hospital, when you were first there, that you told him that you would spit paint onto the canvas if you needed to.

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah. That's true, I did.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Your mother was a very determined sort of person, I think. [Laughs.] That's an interesting look.

CHUCK CLOSE: See if you can describe that look in print.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That was sort of like a fluttering of the eyes and, yeah, you know?

CHUCK CLOSE: Raised eyebrows.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Raised eyebrows. You were sorry, at one point, not to have done a portrait of her.

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah. Probably not as sorry as I would have if I had done it. I look at the portraits that I've made of my wives, and they're very difficult to look at. In fact, I got a painting of my first wife back, from the divorce.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What did you do with it?

CHUCK CLOSE: I sold it. I'm glad. I mean, I wish I had it because it was the only early painting that I owned, and it would be nice to have one that I could use in exhibitions and stuff.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Of those early paintings, which ones—let's say through the mid-'70s—which ones really stand out for you, in your memory, as being particularly successful or something that you had a particular investment in?

CHUCK CLOSE: Well, I guess my favorite black-and-white, early black-and-white painting, would be *Philip Glass*. My favorite early three-color painting was *Susan Zucker* or *Susan Austad*.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh yeah, uh-huh [affirmative].

CHUCK CLOSE: And from the second period in which I used three colors—Of the fingerprint pieces, *Grandma Fanny*. Of the dot pieces, which were earlier, *Robert*.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Now, am I remembering rightly? When you were making the early pieces, you didn't really even like talking about them as portraits. Is that right?

CHUCK CLOSE: True.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I mean you really were insistent on them being—their status as paintings.

CHUCK CLOSE: I would talk about them as heads.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Heads.

CHUCK CLOSE: But not portraits.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I'm wondering if the wonderful show you did for MoMA, what's it called? *Head-On/The Modern Portrait*. That show, in '91 I think. Whether doing that show sort of changed your thinking about the tradition, or had any impact on the way you think about it?

CHUCK CLOSE: Well, the celebratory aspect of it, definitely, because I had originally said, when they asked me to do it—[. . . -CC]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So the celebratory sort of memorializing someone?

CHUCK CLOSE: No. The fact that people found all these ways to make portraits.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Uh-huh [affirmative].

CHUCK CLOSE: Again, how many ways can you breathe new life into something that's so tradition-bound?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah. I was talking to—one of my neighbors in Brooklyn is Pete Omlor, who used to be the head of the preparators, who put those—he was one of the people installing your show. And he still remembers it as being one of the best shows that he was involved with and how much he enjoyed it, and how much he enjoyed working with you. You probably wouldn't remember him.

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah. Oh no, I do.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, Pete. We played pool together.

[They laugh.]

CHUCK CLOSE: He was sort of a co-conspirator with me on one thing.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Really? What was that?

CHUCK CLOSE: You know, the Modern has these ridiculous rules that only a union person can touch a work of art.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh.

CHUCK CLOSE: So an artist is not allowed to touch his own art. So I had these two plates, etching plates.

[END OF TRACK.]

CHUCK CLOSE: So, I wanted to clean them and spray new fixative on them, because they were all covered with fingerprints. So I was going to need to get them off the wall, get them into the stall of a bathroom, where they wouldn't smell the stuff I'm using to take the fixative off, or the new fixative I'm putting on, and get them back upstairs and install them. So he covered for me. He didn't know that he did, but.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's funny. That's a funny story. So, Kirk [Varnedoe] asked you to do that show, is that right?

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah. It was one of the great gifts that anybody gave me when I was in the hospital, because apparently there had been a great deal of conjecture as to what it was that I had, and was I still *compos mentis*.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. I'm glad to know that MoMA played a good role for you at that time. And then Rob went on to organize your retrospective show, right?

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah. When I was in the hospital, Kirk got me out of the hospital and got me to the museum to see, I guess it was an Andy Warhol show.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, okay.

CHUCK CLOSE: So I arrived. [Close is looking out the studio window at a building across the small street that runs beside his house.] You're wondering why I'm looking at that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, I'm just curious.

CHUCK CLOSE: I'm lining up things in the architecture out there, seeing if the distances between the windows is the same or not. I always play games like that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So, Kirk got you out to see the show at MoMA.

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah, and we went through the show together. They arranged for me to have lunch upstairs, at the trustee's room. We had a nice little buffet, and I was able to take a half a dozen artist friends.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, nice.

CHUCK CLOSE: So we got up there and—so, I was afraid. Well, it appears to me that it took me longer to make certain pieces than others, judging by—but that was a great gift.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

CHUCK CLOSE: And in comes—who was the director of the Modern then?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oldenburg? Dick Oldenburg?

CHUCK CLOSE: Maybe, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Because that would be—that would have been before Glenn [Lowry].

CHUCK CLOSE: Oh yeah, it wasn't Glenn. By the time I had the show, Glenn was—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. He was just starting then, I think, or a year or two into it.

So, now it seems out of character, for Dick to just show up at an event like that. He was more of a guy who operated in terms of—

CHUCK CLOSE: Well he comes in and he said—he took one look at me, and I guess I must have really looked near death, because he had a very shocked look on his face, and he says, "Oh, Chuck, how are you? Is there anything we can do for you, anything at all?" And I said, "A retrospective would be nice."

[They laugh.]

So, at the dinner for my retrospective, I told that story.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But you, you were talking to the Met first, about a retrospective, is that right?

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah, that was really—well, no, I actually talked to the Modern first, but the Met expressed interest and I went up and I saw them.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Who would have curated that? Gary? No. Who would have curated that?

CHUCK CLOSE: I don't know, because the only person I spoke to was the director.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Philippe?

CHUCK CLOSE: And he had originally—Arne [Glimcher] and I, and Nan Rosenthal, and the head of the Contemporary Department.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Bill Lieberman was gone by that time, wasn't he?

CHUCK CLOSE: No, it was—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It was Bill?

CHUCK CLOSE: No.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. [Laughs.]

CHUCK CLOSE: So you know, off of the trustees' dining room there's a door.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay.

CHUCK CLOSE: And that door went to the director's dining room. And I guess because he was British, he handled everything as if it were lunch with the Queen. Each of us had a waiter standing behind us. So anything we wanted, they would go get it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Putting on the dog, huh? [Laughs.]

CHUCK CLOSE: So, he promised me the sun and the moon and the stars.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Got it.

CHUCK CLOSE: Bill Lieberman said—whispered to me when we got in there, he said, "I've never been in this room." [Laughs.] So I went to the Modern and I said to Kirk, I said, "I just was offered this by the Met." And the amount of space I was getting at the Modern would have been about a third of the space that the Met was going to—the Met was going to give me the last seven galleries on the top floor. You know when you go in and you go to the left?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

CHUCK CLOSE: And you know, they would hang—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Where they have their really biggest shows. Yeah. Like that big China show is in there right now.

CHUCK CLOSE: Vermeer was in there, everything was, you know, you name it. So they were going to give me all those rooms and I said, "I don't want you to have a room where you sell books. I said you can put the books in a bookstore, you can put the books in the hallways, you can put the books anywhere, but not as you exit the show." He didn't like that, but he agreed. So, Nan started a two-year, traveling around the world, looking at every single piece. So then—what's his name, the director?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Philippe de Montebello.

CHUCK CLOSE: Philippe started eroding away. First thing he says, I'm really sorry, but we have a chance to do—I think it was a Spanish show or something, and it's the only time we can get it. So that was the first thing that I lost. And one after another, another aspect of the show was eroded away.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: A little bit of bait and switch there.

CHUCK CLOSE: So, it was getting to the point where there wasn't going to be a whole hell of a lot left, and I went back to the Modern and I said, "I should have known better. They have no real commitment to contemporary art." So, Kirk said, "Look, they're offering you something we can't match."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What did he mean by that?

CHUCK CLOSE: The space.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The space?

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah, and the prestige. They had already moved me to a by far inferior space. So, I went up there.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHUCK CLOSE: And I told him, told Philippe, and I expected him to—but he didn't really sweeten the deal at all, so I said, "I don't think I want to do the show."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: In a situation like that, and just pardon me for asking, is there any kind of written commitment on the part of the artist? So, you can just walk away.

CHUCK CLOSE: And certainly, no written commitment from the museum.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Apparently not. Yeah, yeah. What was it like working with Rob?

CHUCK CLOSE: He was pissed because it wasn't his show. He was forced to do Kirk's show. The show—this you can't ever tell anybody. [Kirk was supposed to do the show and he got ill. I think it's clear now that Rob really didn't want to do the show but was more or less forced into doing it. He resented it so much that the night of the opening of the MoMA retrospective, he invited me into his office for a drink and presented me with a 2-3 page

list of everything I had ever done to piss him off. -CL]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So, was Rob's speech, just the usual celebratory thing? Or was it barbed?

CHUCK CLOSE: Well, no. So I 'forgot' to thank Rob.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, what did you think of the show [organized by Robert Storr -CL]? Did the show please you?

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Good, good.

CHUCK CLOSE: But, my good friend and former student, Debbie Wye, managed to get me the print department. Otherwise, there would have been no prints in the show.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [... -CL] I'm looking forward to Debbie's show of the Bourgeois prints, which opens in September. I just got an advance of the catalog on PDF. It's beautiful. It's great that she had—that she did that for you.

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. But prints are so central to your thinking. And they always have been, right?

CHUCK CLOSE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I mean really, since practically the beginning of your career.

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There's that story about you taking a class with [Egbert] Haverkamp-Begemann at Yale, and sort of coming up with a possible solution to Hercules . . .

CHUCK CLOSE: Seghers?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Seghers, yes.

CHUCK CLOSE: His Hercules Seghers book just came out.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's right, that's right, I had forgotten it, yeah.

CHUCK CLOSE: Which makes it one of the longest times to write a book anybody has ever spent.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I studied with him at the institute, Haverkamp-Begemann. We almost were going to go on a trip to Russia, to see collections, that included a trip to Kiev, and that was just at the time of Chernobyl [laughs] so the whole thing was canceled. That would have been exciting to see things with him though. He was such an intimidating guy, to me, but a good guy I think. He helped found the Drawing Center, I think, Haverkamp-Begemann.

CHUCK CLOSE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But this is an early example of you looking at neglected, you know, forgotten techniques, and really bringing that inventor's sensibility to this, like, Okay, how can this—how am I going to do this? Is that a bit of your father, that kind of mechanical curiosity, technical curiosity?

CHUCK CLOSE: No, I think it had to do with—I was Gabor Peterdi's assistant.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, okay.

CHUCK CLOSE: And he required that I know every print process inside and out, and I wanted to anyhow.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So, even before "The Event," you had explored all these print techniques, woodcut, and a big linoleum cut I think.

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah, I did the world's biggest linoleum cut.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] Is that the print of Alex? No?

CHUCK CLOSE: No. No, it was nonobjective.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh that's right, that's right.

CHUCK CLOSE: I had done it at the Yale summer school.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh really, that early? Wow.

CHUCK CLOSE: Mm-hmm [affirmative], 1961.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: My goodness.

CHUCK CLOSE: I always wanted to make something the smallest or the biggest, nowhere in between.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There's a wonderful picture on your website. I really love it. I think it only goes up to 2013, but I really like your website, with all the works laid out. It's beautifully done. I don't know who did it. But there is a wonderful picture on there from a recent woodcut, that has elements, and the forms that are carved into the wood abstractly look like Hebrew or something, laid out, they look like—

CHUCK CLOSE: [Laughs.] Or backwards.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] Exactly.

CHUCK CLOSE: I love thinking upside down and backwards. That's one of the things that we discovered when I was being checked for learning disabilities and stuff. I could write backwards and upside down as fast as I could write forwards and right side up.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So you can visualize a print, how it's going to work, just as easily as looking it in reverse, right? Wasn't Leonardo famously able to do this?

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I wonder if it has—I mean he—

CHUCK CLOSE: He was learning disabled. One of the astounding number of left-handed artists, like 90 percent of artist printmakers are left-handed. Of course, learning disabilities are much more often—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Like [being] dyslexic?

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah. So this awareness of your disability, I think has made you a pretty important advocate for kids who have learning issues and so on. I didn't know about this. You were involved with something called Turnaround.

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah, Turnaround Arts, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah, and this had to do with Obama?

CHUCK CLOSE: Yes, with the Obama administration. It's one of the best things I've ever been involved with.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And these are schools where there are kids that are failing or they're having difficulties, and the idea is to use the arts to turn them around. Is that right?

CHUCK CLOSE: And, we would have a school that had a 60 percent truancy rate.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Geez.

CHUCK CLOSE: And then, we would end up with zero. It was amazing.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I saw a newspaper piece about you, welcoming the kids to a show at Pace, I think. This was a school in Bridgeport?

CHUCK CLOSE: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

CHUCK CLOSE: We picked within geographic limitations, the ten most—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Challenged? [Laughs.] Troubled? Yeah.

CHUCK CLOSE: The ten most—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: At-risk schools?

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah.

CHUCK CLOSE: The lowest performing schools in the ten most challenged neighborhoods. So we—and we had better luck in the poorest performing schools than we did in the reasonably well performing schools.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Hmm.

CHUCK CLOSE: Well, because we were offering them, I think—this is my theory: We were offering them something that made them feel special.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And doesn't that reach back to your schooling, where art allowed you to feel like you were valuable and special, that you had something to contribute?

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I don't want to drive you into the ground with this assignment here, Chuck.

CHUCK CLOSE: No, I'm just, I'm just in rough shape.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, yeah. But this has been a nice conversation.

CHUCK CLOSE: Yeah, it's been good for me, too. I have really stopped doing this because—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah. Why don't we stop?

[END OF INTERVIEW.]