

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
75th Anniversary
Oral History Project

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

SFMOMA 75th Anniversary

AARON BETSKY
SFMOMA Staff, 1995-2001
Curator of Architecture and Design, 1995-1999
Curator of Architecture, Design, and Digital Projects, 1999-2001

Interview conducted by
Richard Cándida Smith and Jill Sterrett
in 2010

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01-00:00:00

Betsky: —California, as a sequential construction of utopian and dystopian and heterotopian scenarios that actually are not just mirages, but that sell houses.

Cándida Smith: Right. [laughs] And other kinds of real estate.

01-00:00:17

Betsky: And other kinds of real estate, right. And are actually a constituent part of what's made California California. It's still a book I hope I can do someday. It's one thing I had all the research ready for, have just never done.

Sterrett: Was it a personal choice, or did it have to do with the [J. Paul] Getty [Museum]? Did you ever know?

01-00:00:34

Betsky: That, I don't know. I loved John Walsh, and John Walsh loved me, I think. But I really got along well, and Deborah Gribbin, the new director, never seemed quite to understand why they should be doing this or what this was about.

But it's also too bad, because the other show I was going to do here was the Diller Scofidio show. And David [Ross], when I left, cancelled that, and the Whitney [Museum of American Art] picked it up immediately. And so we wound up doing it at the Whitney, which was fabulous. That was really one of the more fun shows I ever did.

Cándida Smith: So you were going to start talking about the moment when you arrived, and the specialness of that moment.

01-00:01:24

Betsky: Yeah, absolutely. [comments of crew & among them about how they'll proceed] I arrived here in January of 1995. And it was a very particular moment. This building had opened two weeks before I got here. And suddenly, the museum went from having very little galleries, in a very difficult-to-find location, to being really an icon. And everything tripled or quadrupled. The visitorship, the staff, the space—everything just went through the roof. And before I got here, they had not had a curator of architecture and design for a while, so there were no real plans. So suddenly, I was faced with *tabula rasa*, an empty space, and people, most of the other curators, who were still running around opening the building and figuring out what to do here. And I just came into something. So I just looked around and said, okay, great, let's play. And so I started doing exhibitions. And we wound up doing fifty

exhibitions in the six years I was here, which is a fair amount of exhibitions. And what I really was able to do, I think, was tap into not only the traditions of this art museum and of this community, but also into a particular moment where San Francisco and the Bay Area became this Mecca for a particular kind of design talent. And of course, the thing that generated it all was the dot-com boom. I very distinctly remember being invited, about three weeks after I arrived here, to a TED conference. And the TED conference—Technology, Entertainment, Design—in Monterey, were, at that time, really the place where all the most interesting people in technology and in design and in entertainment came together. And it was very exclusive and very expensive. And someone managed to wheedle me in that time and one other time, and that was it. Since then, I haven't been back. But I arrived there and I get to the Conference Center in Monterey, where it's happening, and I see someone I know. And he said, "Let me show you this amazing new thing called a web browser. And it's called Mosaic, but there's this new start-up company called Netscape that is working on streamlining it and making available."

And I was, of course, instantly fascinated, and everything here changed. I very directly responded to that by spearheading the first collections of websites in an art museum—something that drove people here absolutely bonkers, because of course, I said, "Hey, they're free. It's easy." And then of course, the maintenance of them and keeping them current is *very*, very difficult, to say the least. But more than that, it also just created this incredible atmosphere of possibilities. And great designers suddenly had a chance to try all kinds of things. I keyed in very easily, for instance, very early on, to a group of people, including someone like Erik Adigard, who had collected around *Wired* magazine, which had just started the year before that. And they basically had liberty to try whatever they wanted to try, both in the magazine, in the website they started, and in whatever other ventures they could come up with. And so those kinds of energies started coming here. And then, of course, the capital that came here because of the dot-com boom generated many more possibilities for architecture and for design. And that, in turn, then fed all kinds of production that I was able to make use of and to show here at the art museum.

01-00:06:16

Conceptually, it was also a moment when there was a series of technological developments. Not just the web, but a series of connected developments in computer communication technologies. That ranged from telecommunications, cable, cell phones becoming much smaller and much more widely in use, to a break-up of the kind of media that people were seeing and watching, to distribution networks—very, very important. And all of those collectively meant that we were beginning to see a radical change in the landscapes that

we all inhabited. And I, in fact, collected a group of people to talk about that and to brainstorm about that, in a wonderful beach house up north of here. But it also meant that we could engage in a series of debates about what is it that design does to make visible these now invisible and widely dispersed technologies? What has it done in the past? How's it doing it now? How might it do it in the future? How does design in general take control of a society and a culture that is becoming more and more diverse and more and more difficult to understand, and how does it offer a critical contribution towards that? And it was something that my predecessor had already started, with a wonderful exhibition that was called "Imaginary San Francisco", and that looked at—oh, sorry; excuse me; it was called "Visionary San Francisco"—and that looked at what kind of new futures the Bay Area might have. But that really became a mainstay of a lot of the things that we did.

01-00:08:08

And for me, the culmination of all of this was actually an exhibition that I was part of right before I left, in 2001, called "010101: Art in Technological Times", which was an exhibition on what kind of art was being produced and what kind of design was being produced in this new kind of landscape, and how art and design were responding to this new kind of landscape. And we traveled around the world. Curators divided up the globe, literally, and I went off to Taiwan and China, for instance, to find the best art that we could that would represent the emerging landscape of the twenty-first century. And it was, of course, in some ways a flawed show, and in some ways a biased show; but for me, it was really a chance to take six years of experimentation that I'd engaged in here and really, in many ways, sum it up. When I say experimentation, I think that's an important—became a very important word for me. And it became so both from a theoretical and from a practical standpoint.

01-00:09:25

When I got here, I asked the question, how do you show design and architecture in an art museum? And this has always been a problem, for a long time. My predecessor had done things like shown process and collected chairs, and chairs by architects, which he felt was a way to look at how design entered everyday life. I took that and developed it, but also tried to ask more questions about why and what that meant. And I came to the conclusion that in terms of architecture, you can't really show a building inside a building. And the question then is, what do you show in an art museum? Especially since what you show has to compete with the [Pablo] Picasso or the [Henri] Matisse in the next gallery. And my criteria became that whatever we showed here had to be as good as that Picasso or that Matisse. What generated it was not uninteresting, but in the end, it had to be able to hold its own within these spaces, with those objects. And the second criterion that I developed was that if you cannot show a building within a building,

you don't want to show postcards of the *Mona Lisa*. You don't want to show photographs of buildings, you don't want to show drawings of buildings that no one understands. You don't want to show models, where in fact, what you want to show is a full-scale construction. So you want to show architecture and design in which the architecture and design inheres in the object you're showing. And my phrase for that became experimental architecture. Which is to say, work that does not confirm or affirm the reality as we know it, but that uses design as a way of questioning our reality—in my thinking, very much the way that art does. And that this kind of experimental design produces not so much finished objects that you live in or work in or that you use, but questions in form and in image and in space. And sometimes they take the form of site-specific installations—we did some wonderful ones here; and sometimes they take the form of perhaps prototypes or visionary ideas; and sometimes they just take the form of things whose weirdness is beautiful, maybe disturbing, but certainly asks you to ask the question of the image or the object or the space. So that, then, became the task that I set myself: to show experimental architecture and design here at the art museum. I don't know how that is as a beginning.

Cándida Smith: That's a great beginning. I wanted to come back to this idea of you can't build a building within a building, and how this is something that MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art], down in Los Angeles, did for the "Case Study" show ["Blueprints for Modern Living: History and Legacy of the Case Study Houses"]. And they probably have done it other times, as well. Maybe you could explore why you felt doing a full-scale replica of a building wasn't going to work.

01-00:12:45

Betsky:

Oh, well, of course, you can do full-scale replicas of buildings. And you're right, the "Case Study" show at MOCA was probably the most successful example of that. And I was very peripherally involved in that, and it was done by some good friends of mine, and I think it was an absolutely terrific show. First of all, you need a building big enough to do that. Second of all, I still have my doubts. What made the "Case Study" show work so well is that they basically used Hollywood techniques, so that when you stood inside the Pierre Koenig Case Study House Number 21, you could look out over a reasonable facsimile of the house looking out over LA, and get a sense that you were in the context. That takes a lot of Hollywood. Even if you get the building inside the building, you don't understand the building in relationship to its context. You certainly can create interiors and you can create environments. And we did that, and I think there've been some very successful other examples of that. But you will always have a disconnect between a building that was designed for a particular location, a particular set of conditions, particular kind of light, wind,

smell, and something that exists within the white walls of the modern art museum.

Cándida Smith: Okay. While we're in the galleries, and since we only have half an hour, the thing that we wanted, particularly for the gallery walkthrough, is to get a sense of what you, as a unique person, see when you look at these particular objects. Why are they important, or possibly, unimportant to you? Part of it is how you might've explained them to your colleagues, the director, the trustees. But also really, what is it that you phenomenologically feel as you look at some of these things?

01-00:14:42

Betsky: [comments of crew & among them] It's funny because I was just with Steve Oliver yesterday, and we were making fun of the fact that he was sort of saying the same thing: "Oh, I remember that you're rather glib." And then I said, "Yeah, except—" We remember very fondly Jack Lane, who I miss dearly, who is someone that was my best boss and who changed my life. And we always used to make fun of him because he always had this little note cards.

Sterrett: We know it well. [laughs]

01-00:15:28

Betsky: And he would always sort of read off these note cards and sort of fumble and stumble, but with incredible intensity and enthusiasm. And we got the energy of it, but—

Sterrett: When you finish today, try to go into the Koret Center, because there's a video, a short video, and it includes clips from other interviews. And Jack is in it.

01-00:15:46

Betsky: With little note cards. Perfect. That's perfect. [they laugh] Well, anyway, it's a great—well, as I said, when I got here, Paolo Polledri had started this idea of having chairs. Great idea. It is something that is very immediate. You can understand it because you put your behind on it. Doesn't get much more immediate than that. But then when you get a chair like the [Gerrit] Rietveld *Zig-zag* chair, it also become a complete abstraction. Four planes in space, composed, balanced, held in tension. The only thing beyond that is this tiny little triangle at the back of it that manages to give it some sort of structural stability. In this case, unfinished; just varnished with a light coat. Later on they became painted, but this is a very early example. And this was a very important part of the Boyd collection, Michael and Gabrielle Boyd, who I got to know about a year after we got here, and who had built up this incredible collection of furniture, starting literally from swap meets and junk yards and garage sales, and moving all the way up to Sotheby's and Christie's. And in fact now, they have become dealers

in this furniture. And they, in the end, donated a significant part of their collection to SFMOMA. And this was one of them. And to me, this really summed up what was so great about twentieth-century furniture. And it also had a particular resonance for me because I grew up in the Netherlands. I can actually pronounce Gerrit Rietveld's name with some precision. But I also got into architecture by visiting his famous house, the Schröder House of 1923, having tea there with Mrs. Schröder when I was in my teens, and realizing that this was a world I wanted to be involved with; and sitting on this very chair, and having this sense that so much about what you see in your physical environment is extraneous, and is in fact, keeping you away from understanding what makes your world work—what it consists of, how it works, what it's made of. And if you can get down to the very basic notion of back, seat, support, counterbalance; if you can get the sense of nothing but planes, but planes held in space in a very particular relationship to your body and to the way that your body poses itself in the world, you can begin to understand how you live in the world and what you *need* to live in this world. And if you can understand that, you can perhaps change that world. I'm very romantic and optimistic about the idea that art and design are about knowing where you've come from, where you are and where you're going. And being able to see with your eyes what something is, means that you can change it, very simply and very basically. So that kind of an essence—which of course, has all kinds of wonderful subtleties to it, like the very slight tapering of the base versus the tapering out of the seat to meet your legs—all of these kind of things are little design elements that make it work, that make it such a great and canonical piece of art. And to then see that next to Maarten Baas, almost a century later, burning one of those chairs. And this is an acquisition, I believe, of Joe Rosa's, when he was curator.

Or of Henry Urbach's? One of the two. So this was an acquisition under Joe Rosa's leadership. And of course, Maarten Baas has a slightly more cynical or humorous take on this great canonical piece. And exactly because it's so canonical, what else can you do? It's been done. So what do you do? You take a blow torch to the piece. And in so doing, you reveal its materiality. It becomes almost like a memento mori, like a remembrance that you, too shall die. And it also becomes something that has a sense of being of the past, of being a relic. So a whole set of cultural associations are loaded onto this very simple form, and you get the kind of optimism that we can know our world and we can change our world. The Dutch talk about the “maakbare samenleving”—the society that can be made and remade. And you then say, well, wait a second; it ain't that easy. And we need to be a little bit more relative about this. And we need to understand that things become icons and are sold as such, and it becomes big business and things become associated with a particular kind of culture and

generation. And all of those reverberations and echoes become part of the piece. And we need to add our own reverberations to that to make it work for our society, and for it to be a critical part of our society. And then of course, you get that kind of simplicity and you compare it to one of Frank Gehry's *Hockey Stick Chairs*, where you use the same notion of trying to get to the most basic form, the simplest way to house your body, to get your butt protected and elevated; and you use one of the canonical materials of twentieth-century furniture design, which you can see in several of the other chairs behind there, which is plywood; the Thonet Brothers, in the middle of the nineteenth century, discovered it could be bent, if you warmed it up, into almost any shape you could imagine, and would retain its strength. In effect, would be stronger, depending on how you bent it.

And so designers, for a century and a half, have been experimenting with how you can get wood, which is structural and rigid, and also for us, still has a connotation of nature, to bend into something that is fluid enough to create a continuous form and to support the body with comfort. And then Frank takes that tradition and looks very consciously at the tradition of chair design, and looks at the invention of the commodious chair, at the end of the eighteenth century, under Louis XIV and its further development under Louis XV and the rococo, and the kind of elaboration of the back that takes a certain joy in the form of the human body and its housing, and elaborates that into repeated curves and into echoing sets of shapes that return in the design over and over and over again, in dimensions and serially, and then transform from one shape to the other, and at the same time, become structural.

And he looked at the Thonet chair, whose seats and backs were made with caning, with woven caning, and integrated that caning with the overall design of the chair. So you get this incredibly knowing object that looks back at a history of furniture design, but also looks at how that history could be abstracted, clarified and combined, to create something that allows us to read the impulses that went into making those chairs, and to just purely delight in the result, which is this continuous overlapping set of curves. So to go from the pure simplicity of the Rietveld chair to the kind of exuberance, but also very efficient exuberance of the Frank Gehry chair, for me, is a wonderful development. And you can see kind of variations of this desire to, at the same time, express materiality, the possibilities of elaboration, the complexity of construction, and the desire to make something as simple as possible. And it's all in something that we see every day, that we use every day, that most of us don't notice. And you put it on a pedestal, you put it in a gallery with white walls, you put a light on it, you put a guard near it, so that you know you can't touch it, and you are forced to look at it. And that's the most important thing that is

accomplished, I think, by putting an object of design in an art museum. You look at it. Very simply. It does to that object what the art museum does to the Matisse and the Picasso. It builds this elaborate frame, from advertising to guards to value, and says, look at this. Stop. Turn off your cell phone or put it on vibrate, and just look. And that moment of looking is, for me, crucial.

One of the things I collected here, which also I think drove some people crazy, was soap. I collected a bar of soap designed by a guy called Gary McNatton, who was then working for The Gap. And he said something very interesting to me. He said, “What I want to achieve with something as simple as a bar of soap is that someone who’s rushing to a mall notices something strange, something slightly surprising, something just that much out of kilter; or something that has so much of a spotlight on it that they stop, falter, and maybe even for a moment, look around and go, what is that? How does that work? What does that mean? And if I’ve achieved that, then I’ve been successful.” And for me, the art museum is nothing but a mechanism to make that happen.

Cándida Smith: Let’s go into the other rooms.

01-00:26:34

Betsky: Yes, let’s go look at some buildings.

Cándida Smith: About fifteen minutes for— [they walk; audiofile may stop & restart]

01-00:26:59

Betsky: Okay. So one of the first things I did when I got here and I, after a few months, articulated this notion of experimental architecture— I, of course, did not just make that up. Most of the things I do, I steal from other people. And in fact, the phrase experimental architecture was one that I had picked up from Lebbeus Woods, an architect living in New York. In fact, he had started something called the Research Institute for Experimental Architecture. And Lebbeus Woods is a very interesting case because he worked as an architect for rather large firms—he was project architect for the Ford Foundation building in New York, for instance—And over the years, realized that what he was really good at was imagining what buildings were going to look like. And so he became a renderer, someone who produced drawings for other architects that could be used to sell the client or the community, because they could see what a beautiful building it was going to be. And as he was doing this, his hands started straying and starting making drawings of buildings that weren’t really quite what the client had in mind or what the architect had proposed. And pretty soon he was doing these imaginary buildings and these utopian—or quite often, rather dystopian—buildings. And in the nineties, that

really became what he concentrated on. And he went from a project called *Centricity*, which was a kind of dystopian world that he had imagined, to a series of projects that started with one called *Underground Berlin*, which imagined a world under Berlin that might've existed in the past; might be going on now, we just don't know it; or might exist sometime in the future. A kind of mythical world, another place, where people were dedicated to figuring out the world, as he put it, through various mechanisms of knowledge. And he just had these drawings of these cave-like structures, with people measuring and thinking and looking, and trying to figure stuff out. And then in the last of his drawings, somehow it burst out of the ground in Alexanderplatz, and these forms became launched into the air and they floated off into a project called *Aerial Paris*, where he imagined another community floating over the earth in what he called an anarchitecture—meaning something that was not quite architecture, and also something that was an anarchist community. And then he imagined that community inserting itself into the war-torn areas of Bosnia and Croatia. His girlfriend at the time came from Zagreb. And he spent time there and saw the devastation, and was there when the bombs were falling, and made an “architecture of war,” as he called it, that was neither a pacifist answer or a solution nor a documentation, but a much more troubling attempt to try to trace what war does to buildings and to reverse or turn that around. And it was at that point that I said to him, “Come to San Francisco. See what's going on here. Things are changing radically here; what would you do?” And so he did a San Francisco project, which we showed here in 1996.

And of course, what fascinated him was the landscape, first and foremost. Fascinating to me, too, so I probably had something to do with it. Because when he came, I showed him around and loved showing him where the San Andreas Fault comes onshore or goes offshore, and pointing out all of the natural features that are the result of tectonic uplift and the such. And so his project became about tectonic uplift, about an earthquake that might've happened and we just didn't notice it, or might be happening in the future, that has created discontinuities and new fabrics or connections, and that in fact, is already built in, as he said, to some of the buildings. So these are earthquake buildings. Not in the sense that they resist the quake, but they are a sedimentation of the earthquake. And you can see the earthquake in these buildings and spaces and landscapes. They're ruins or they're building blocks. They're records and monuments, or warning points. And of course, they're rendered with the most absolute, beautiful, evocative style that makes them sing and really come off the page. And I was really happy to see that Henry Urbach, who has the position now, had spearheaded the collection of a series of objects by Lebbeus Woods from only a few years later, that contained some of the same research and some of those same formal properties within

them. So it's great to see that going on. It's also great to see these in contrast with Zaha Hadid's great painting, which is also a kind of tectonic investigation.

Cándida Smith: Yeah, let's go over there. Yeah. [they walk]

01-00:32:27

Betsy:

So it's absolutely great for me to see this great Zaha Hadid painting in contrast or in relationship to the Lebbeus Woods projects, because both of them are concerned with tectonics. One of the other great paintings that we acquired here when I was curator was the project called *Malevich Tectonic*, which was Zaha Hadid's graduation project from the Architectural Association in London. And it shows London turned into a kind of Suprematist construction, with no regard for gravity or for scale or function, but rather a kind of loosening up and reimagination of London. And it set her on a path towards an architecture that is not a translation of function into form or a reaction to a direct built context, but rather that is an attempt to unfold the landscape, to draw the landscape, to complicate the landscape, to unfold and open up the landscape; and finally, in the projects that came out of this and which she is actually building these days, to turn it into a set of continuous, bulbous, curving, spiraling spaces that move from that fractured landscape into a whole new set of spatial conditions. And there's a direct line between this painting and the Maxxi Museum in Rome, the museum of twenty-first century art that she just opened this month in Rome. So it was fantastic to be able to bring a lot of this work here for an exhibition and hang it here, and then to be able to keep some of the pieces here in San Francisco. Of course, now she wishes she hadn't sold them to the art museum, because every time that there's an exhibition, about two weeks before the exhibition opens, she remembers that the paintings are here and she gets in touch with SFMOMA and said, "I need those paintings for the exhibition." And SFMOMA says, "Well, we need a loan request, and this takes a little bit of time, and some of them have condition problems." And she gets all upset and calls me and says, "Do something!" Of course, not much I can do.

Cándida Smith: As a historian, I probably too often succumb to the temptation of genealogy. And I wonder about, okay, do you present this as something in and of itself? Or do you want to have the antecedents in a continuum? So I wonder, where's Peter Eisenman? There's work from before Eisenman, and so forth. Does it help the viewer to have that kind of continuity?

01-00:35:25

Betsy:

Okay, here's my historical theory. And I'm actually working on this for my PhD right now. There's a secret history of architecture in the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which is of those architects who are not so much interested in building the affirmation of the values of the social, economic and political status quo—which is what you wind up doing if you make buildings, because it is the people who have the power and the resources to commission you and who want to see what they believe in, what they think is right, how they think the world works, built, affirmed in form. To resist this, to say, I believe that perhaps how things are today socially, economically or physically is not right, means trying to find a way, through the means of architecture, to create something else than a functional building. And throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there has been a history of such utopian or dystopian visions, experiments in communal living or in non-functional form. They crop up continually and sporadically over time and in different places.

And until the Second World War, they generally had a utopian flavor because if you could not build the right thing in the here and now, you imagined a world in which you could build that and make that. And in fact, your architecture was a proposition of such a world—a heaven on earth, in built form. After the Second World War, when we realized that such visions, more often than not, led to the Holocaust and the gulag, and when we realized, not long after that, that any attempt to create rationally a better society got lost in the mire and muck of Vietnam and in the energy crisis of 1973, architects began thinking of their work not as a proposition of a perfect form, as a solution, but as an attempt, first and foremost, to break open what existed. The rallying cry became not architecture or revolution; revolution can be avoided. Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture*, 1921—I hope that’s right. But 1968, the students in Paris: “Beneath the paving stones, the beach—rip open the paving stones, find the landscape there, let the imagination run loose.” And the place where these ideas coalesced most coherently was, on the one hand, in New York, at a place called the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, which was founded by Peter Eisenman, and collected a whole number of people around it; and in London, around the Architectural Association [AA], under the leadership of Alvin Boyarsky. And a group of people—including Rem Koolhaas, including Peter Eisenman, including John Hejduk, who was actually at the Cooper Union; including later, their students, such as Daniel Liebeskind and people such as Bernard Tschumi, of a second generation, and then Zaha Hadid, a student of Rem Koolhaas—began working collectively and separately, and moving back and forth between London and New York and various other places, creating these kind of experimental projects. And we collected several of their works here at the San Francisco art museum; at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. And we also collected several of the people that came out of that movement. They educated generation after generation of designers. And it moved from there to people such as

Simon Ungers, whose work is also very prominently on display here, to the work of Diller and Scofidio; and then from Diller and Scofidio to the work of Lewis Tsurumaki Lewis, who worked with Diller and Scofidio or were students of theirs; and from Lewis Tsurumaki Lewis, it's then moved to further generations of architects who refuse to accept and rebuild reality, and instead want to open it up. My favorite phrase is by another very prominent member of this generation of '68 that started this movement—which is not a movement, of course—which started this idea of experimental architecture. And that's Wolf Prix, of Coop Himmelb(l)au, the Cooperative of the Blue of Heaven, who said, we want to make an architecture of the open heart, the open mind and the open eye. And that to me, sums up what a lot of this work is trying to do.

Cándida Smith: I think we should go downstairs now. And you probably want to have a muffin or—

Sterrett: Yeah, Ashley's going to bring something down.

01-00:40:45

Betsky: I still have a quarter to eleven. Am I slow?

Cándida Smith: Well, is there something else here you'd like to—

01-00:40:54

Betsky: Well, we can talk about the Steven Holl project, since that might be— [they walk] Where are the labels for all these things? I'm trying to remember what the date was on the Steven Holl. It is remarkable how much it calls to mind Constant's "New Babylon" project. Oh. Maybe this does all of them? Yeah, this is all. *Edge of a City*, '88-'91. Okay.

Cándida Smith: So the Lebbeus Woods or the sequence of—

01-00:41:35

Betsky: These two. And then maybe in relationship to Simon Ungers and Constant. I'm doing something that you're not allowed to do, but—

Cándida Smith: That's okay. [laughs]

01-00:41:48

Betsky: It's very nice, by the way, to see the use of Fin-Ply, which is something that I started using as pedestals when I was here. It's a wonderful treat for me to come and see something that I did in reaction to Paolo Polledri, and that was then picked up by Joe Rosa and now by Henry Urbach, displayed all around us—which is to look at visionary architecture for urban environments in a changed social landscape. And Henry Urbach, who collected this wonderful project by Constant, the Dutch Constant Nieuwenhuys, who was an artist who started, after

the Second World War, together with some of the members of the Cobra group, thinking about what this brave new world that was being created in the consumer society in the late fifties and the early sixties meant. And he created something called New Babylon, which was not quite a utopia. Babylon was not such a great place, in many ways, but was rather a commentary on where society was tending, taken to an extreme of free space, free society, free love, free form. And that was very much a model at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, and at the AA and at various other places.

And it certainly was something that was very well known and picked up on by Zaha Hadid, and also by someone like Steven Holl, who taught at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies and started their *Pamphlet* series. And the [works in the] *Pamphlet* series were central documents, together with the series of portfolios that were done at the AA. The real prime mechanism for dissemination of these images and ideas were the pamphlets in New York and the portfolios in London. And Steven Holl started these pamphlets by looking very simply at the component pieces of the urban environment and rethinking them, twisting them, turning them upside-down. And eventually, he did a project or a series of projects called *Edge of a City*, in which he looked at the fact that the traditional urban core was sprawling out into the far landscape. And how could you create coherent form in that?

And he looked at the edges between Dallas and Fort Worth, where this kind of miasma was appearing that was neither city nor suburb nor exurb nor infrastructural points of contact, but all of those things together. He looked at the edge of New York and its kind of monumental form that had become more and more symbolic as the city sprawled all over three states. And he looked—and that's one of my favorite parts—at Phoenix, which is the ultimate sprawl city; which at that period, was gobbling up something like an acre a week of desert and turning it into habitation. And there was one moment at the city's edge, where there was an Indian reservation. And because of that, nothing could be built. And so you would have tract homes on one side and emptiness on the other. And he imagined a future in which the city would densify itself into a series of super-blocks that were not the kind of towers for rich people that now become the ways in which cities densify themselves; nor the slabs in which we put poor people, which is what happens on the outskirts of, say Paris; nor just kind of anonymous structures that get made by developers; but form that is open and closed at the same time; that is high, but indefinite in its scale; that has a character that seeks to both border the city and point to future developments; that is completely plastic; and that might, in fact, at one point, come out of this incredibly energetic mess right in the center. And he proposed these projects in these wonderful models

and drawings, which we acquired back in the late nineties. And one of his students then was a fellow called Simon Ungers. And so it's great to see Simon Ungers' work—a fellow who unfortunately, passed away a few years ago, very young—here played out, obviously picking up on some of the same forms with which Steven Holl is experimenting. So to see the continuity through this whole table, from one generation after the other wondering, “What is our world going to look like? What *should* our world look like? How can architecture make form out of that?” And it goes all the way from the broadest and the grandest to really thinking about what could a habitation look like? What could a specific form, here in the case of this canal in Upstate New York—Can we imagine in the future, when industrialization has come to an end, when we have to rethink the canal that once created the industrial might of Northeast America, when sprawl is everywhere—can we think of what the building blocks might be for a future society? And this whole room really is a set of building blocks created out of past forms, by which we can understand how we made our world, and showing us how we can rearrange our reality. It's, for me, just an incredible joy to see all this.

Cándida Smith: In our interview with Jack Lane, he talks about how he understood that the architecture and design department in particular had to deal with very heavy, dense ideas that he didn't care about, didn't understand; but what he wanted was killer objects.

01-00:47:50

Betsky:

[laughs] And I agree completely. I always say— And it drives some of my curators at the Cincinnati Art Museum, where I'm now director, crazy as well. They will propose work because it's important. It's important because of an art-historical moment, because it led to somewhere else in the painter's oeuvre, or because it is illustrative of a series of ideas; and of course, in the twentieth century, because it is a record of a performance or an action. And I always say—and I learned this from Jack Lane—where is the killer object? Where is the beautiful image? If it don't work in an art museum— I'm not saying it doesn't work on an art historical level; I'm not saying it doesn't work in someone's private home; I'm not saying it doesn't work in someone's life. I'm saying in the particular mechanism of the art museum, with its white walls and its skylights and its spotlights and its guards, you need an object, an image, or a space that is worth someone stopping and looking at, that's worth that whole framing mechanism. These are killer objects. And because they're killer objects, you can start here and have a very long and very important discussion about the future of the American city.

Cándida Smith: So just in the few minutes we've been talking about this, you've given us an introduction to a whole set of very dense ideas. Which can go as

far deep as they probably could. Well, when you're showing the objects, how do you convey those ideas? Or do you?

01-00:49:32

Betsky:

Well, that's an interesting question because I don't think that just by showing, you get there. But I also think that you don't get there by telling people what they're looking at. So you try to create installations that begin to evoke what is going on in the object. And the oldest trick in the book, of course, is contrast and compare. So having these objects—and I think Henry did a wonderful job with this—allows you to see those reverberations. Now, where would you take that from there? If this was going to be an exhibition about sprawl, you would maybe start working with photography. You might start working with art that tries to deal with sprawl these days, of which there is a lot. And then you could work all the way from Sara Sze's installations to Julie Mehretu to someone like Mark Bradford—a whole series of people thinking and talking about sprawl in their work. But it has to be done with the objects. And I'm not sure how effective it is, but I think that you can do it, also by the way you show things.

One of the most popular shows I did here was a show on sneakers, called "Design Afoot" ["Design Afoot: Athletic Shoes, 1995–2000"]. And we basically just lined those sneakers up, one next to the other. And because we didn't tell you what they were intended for or any of the technical properties, and because we arranged them purely visually—so not by manufacturer, not by year, not by sport, purely visually—I just stood in the galleries with boxes of these sneakers and started arranging them to create patterns. My hope was that you would begin to look at these patterns and wonder, why are they here? What are they doing? You have to make your own conclusions. I am vehement about the semi-fascist nature of design that tells you what to see and what to understand about an object. I do not walk into a museum, I do not want my children or my friends to walk into a museum, and to be told to laugh here, to cry here, to think this, to do this. The whole point of art, for me, is that it doesn't tell you what it is; that it forces you to open your eyes and to think about what's going on.

Sterrett:

Another thing you did, though, in that show, which you did a lot, is you introduced touch. You introduced other ways to experience things.

01-00:52:23

Betsky:

We took some of the shoes out and we made them so you could touch them. We asked the manufacturer's permission so that you could touch them, absolutely. I think that—

Sterrett:

You did that with fabrics, you did that in a number of instances.

01-00:52:37

Betsky: Absolutely. No, it's very important that you try to engage people's sensibilities in every way you can. I even did an exhibition in Rotterdam with Herzog & de Meuron where they designed— They worked with a perfumier to design the scent of Rotterdam, as a special art project. And we had it available in the gallery so you could scent what their intentions were.

{Sterrett?}: How would you describe it?

01-00:54:04

Betsky: They said it was a cross between harbor water, wet dog, dog poop, and hash. So it was not a particularly attractive scent.

Cándida Smith: Sounds like an accurate description, from what I remember. [they laugh]

Sterrett: And I have to tell you something, too before we leave the gallery, because this is the [Solomon R.] Guggenheim [Museum] incident. Do you remember that these were mounted probably in a charrette. They were just slapped onto a backing?

01-00:53:33

Betsky: [over Sterrett] Right, just— Right, yeah.

Sterrett: It was falling off.

01-00:53:37

Betsky: I know, I remember that whole thing.

Sterrett: But the ending to the story is so great because when the treatment finally got done, there was a secret drawing underneath.

01-00:53:47

Betsky: Oh, you're kidding!

Sterrett: And Henry gave it back to Zaha Hadid, just as an ovation to— Listen, sorry about all that, but here; we found this.

01-00:53:47

Betsky: Oh, how nice. Of course, how did she react? Who knows?

Sterrett: Henry knows.

01-00:54:02

Betsky: It looks better than it ever has.

Sterrett: It was such an exciting moment because finally, when you get the backing off, suddenly there was this other drawing.

01-00:54:10

Betsky: That's so great. I still, when I think about the things that we collected here that I feel, God, that was great, that we got into an art museum, this and the *Malevich Tectonic*, especially, the *Sixth Street House* drawings— There's a couple of things that, man, we got them.

[interruption]

01-00:54:38

Betsky: How far back have you gone [with these SFMOMA oral histories]?

Sterrett: Every living director.

01-00:54:43

Betsky: Yeah? God!

Cándida Smith: And Allon Schoener, who was a curator in the 1950s.

Sterrett: I don't know if you know, Allon Schoener started the museum's television programming in the late forties when television started. And Grace McCann Morley {inaudible} really two television programs. [And] he did that in New York, right?

Cándida Smith: Right. He moved back to New York as fast as he could, and is famous for, or notorious for, "Harlem on My Mind".

01-00:55:17

Betsky: Oh! He did that?

Cándida Smith: Yeah.

01-00:55:20

Betsky: Interesting. Sorry, let me just take a quick—

Sterrett: Your breakfast is waiting for you.

Begin Audiofile 2 01-22-2010.mp3

[preliminary conversation as tape is changed]

Cándida Smith: So I'd like to begin at this point with a little bit of your personal background. So if you could tell us a little bit about your family, where you were born—

02-00:00:30

Betsky: My family?

Cándida Smith: Where you grew up, those sorts of things.

02-00:00:34

Betsy:

Well, it's a long and sordid tale. It actually is a bit unusual. My family is, in some ways, what I think of as all-American. My father was a nice Jewish kid from the Bronx, who went to City College [of New York] and then to Harvard [University] and became a professor of English and American literature. My mother was a girl from Detroit, whose parents were Wobblie [Industrial Workers of the World] organizers in Detroit, who went to Wayne State and then NYU and met my father, and was a painter, already had her MFA, but also became a professor of American and English literature. They wound up teaching at Wellesley [College] together. My sister was born at Mass [Massachusetts] General [Hospital]. Then they moved to Missoula, Montana, because the University of Montana, in the early fifties, was quite the place to be for creative writing and for literature. They taught there together, with a guy called Leslie Fiedler, who became quite well known, and had a wonderful time. My father, the Jewish kid from the Bronx, became a great fly fisherman. And I was born in 1958, in Missoula Montana. [comments of crew; audiofile stops and re-starts]

Cándida Smith: What was your father's specialty?

02-00:02:07

Betsy:

My father's specialty was, he was an F.R. Leavis disciple. So he worked first on Matthew Arnold and various people like that. But the work that he spent the last ten, fifteen years of his life preparing, which he never finished, was a book on Saul Bellow. And that was really his great interest. One of the things he did was to bring a broader view of popular culture into a study of literature. So when I was growing up we were very popular because we got all the Grateful Dead and Bob Dylan albums, because my father would teach the lyrics for those albums and teach them as poetry, as did my mother, so— [interruption] I was born in Montana and spent the first four years of my life there. And then my parents got a Fulbright [scholarship] to come to the Netherlands for a year. And while they were there, [President John F.] Kennedy was assassinated and Missoula was also undergoing a kind of late McCarthyite spasm. And they were offered professorships at two different universities, my father at Utrecht and my mother Leiden, and they decided to stay a little while longer. And they kept talking about moving back to the United States and never did; lived there all the way until they both passed away. So I misspent my misspent youth in the Netherlands. Mainly in a small town called Bilthoven, which is a suburb of Utrecht; a rather fancy suburb with a fabulous school called the Werkplaats Kindergemeenschap, which was started by dissident Quakers and was quite radical before the Second World War, until the current queen and her sister went there and it

became more fashionable—but still was much more open to the arts and things like that. And I became interested in the arts there.

But then I went to college back in the United States and went to Yale University]. And arrived at Yale thinking I was going to be either a classics scholar or a history major, and wound up in a program called HAL—History, the Arts and Letters—which was an interdisciplinary program which they’ve since gotten rid of because it was so expensive. And it was so expensive because there were six of us that went through all of sophomore, junior or senior year together, with four tenured professors at all times, a changing cast of characters. Very intense interdisciplinary humanities studies. I became fascinated by architecture there.

There was a wonderful professor there called Vincent Scully. And I also became fascinated because I got to know some people in the architecture school and would go running around looking at buildings with them. When I graduated, I had applied to art history graduate schools and got into the Institute [Institute of Fine Arts], NYU, in New York, and Harvard; and architecture schools, and got into Yale and Princeton [University]. And had applied for jobs in television news because that’s what I thought I *really* wanted to do, and didn’t get any of those.

So then I finally decided to go to architecture school at Yale. After the first year, took some time off and worked as a research assistant for Brendan Gill and did various other strange things, worked at the Museum of Broadcasting. And then was one of the first editors at *Metropolis Magazine*. Went back to school, graduated. I thought I had a job working as an architect. It was a bad time economically—this was ’83—so the job fell through. The only job I could get was \$12,000 a year working for Skidmore, Owings and Merrill in Washington. And then I got a call from this guy with a wonderful British accent saying, “Hello, you don’t know me, but my name is John Meunier. How would you like to come teach at the University of Cincinnati?” So I said, “How much do you pay?” He said, “\$16,700.” I said, “I’ll be there.” Moved to Cincinnati, which to me was like a foreign country, and spent two years really discovering America. Bought a very cheap car and basically drove the grid of Ohio and Indiana and explored the hollers of Kentucky and had a great time. And every couple of months, I would run into, one way or the other, Frank Gehry, who had been one of my teachers and had become a friend and a mentor. And he would say, “When are you going to stop all this silliness?” Because I was also doing some writing by this time. “And when are you going to stop all this and learn how to be a real architect?” And I would say, “Well, when are you going to give me a job?” And he would say, “Oh, I have no work. Things are so bad,” all this kind of stuff. And then

finally, we went through this routine and he said, “Okay, when can you start?” So I loaded up my little car and move to Los Angeles and worked for Frank Gehry for two years—which was a great time to be there because it was right when he went from having an office of seventeen, eighteen people to, by the time I left, having over forty people. The Walker art museum [Walker Art Center] show happened while I was there, and that really let the public know who he was and what he was capable of. So it was really an incredible time, and it was a great time to be in Los Angeles. I got a research grant to work on a book that I’d been working on for a while, on an architect called James Gamble Rogers, which eventually became my first book, *James Gamble Rogers and the Architecture of Pragmatism*. Came back and the office had become sort of regularized and corporatized. And I said, “Thank you,” and went to work for a fellow called Craig Hodgetts and Ming Fung, his wife, Hodgetts and Fung Design Associates. Did that for a while and then thought I had my own jobs, started my own office.

Cándida Smith: As an architect?

02-00:08:35

Betsky:

As an architect. Started my own office. The jobs all disappeared and I kept myself writing and teaching, and taught at various schools in L.A. and did a lot of magazine and newspaper writing and did books, and started something called the LA Forum for Architecture and Urban Design, which was a kind of discussion group, which is still going today. And also became more and more involved with the Southern California Institute of Architecture, which was the best independent architecture school there, which is really the focus for what some people have called the L.A. School of Architecture of the late eighties, early nineties, focused around people like Thom Mayne and Michael Rotondi, who have since gone on to greater glory. And I became involved with organizing their exhibitions, running their summer programs, getting them accredited and doing exhibitions. And then through that, I guess, I got this call one day from Dr. John R. Lane. And he said, “Would you be interested in being a curator here?” I’d never been a curator, I wasn’t quite sure what it entailed; but came up here and thought it might be an interesting thing to do. And Jack did a lot of research about me, I found out later, and felt that the risk wasn’t too great. And so I moved up here, and as I said, found myself with this incredible opportunity and with the best boss I’ve ever had. And I’m not sure the rest is history, but the rest certainly was a fun time.

Cándida Smith: What projects were you working on at Gehry and Hodgetts and Fung? And what was your position in the chain of production?

02-00:10:31

Betsky:

[chuckles] Very low. The main project that I worked on for most of my time when I was at Frank Gehry's office was the Yale Psychiatric Institute, which was a fabulous project that's not such an incredible building. What happened was there was a very visionary psychiatrist who ran it, who believed that one of the ways in which you can get people who have become unhinged from what we think of as acceptable behavior and normal reality into some form of synch or relationship with that bigger world was to reinforce basic clues and basic environments, and to have them find their way through them. And that's why he had come to Frank Gehry, to create an architecture that would be, if you will, exaggerated, that would have rhythms and forms that would be strong. And he wanted it to be like a village, where everything would be open. There would be no Big Nurse sitting behind a desk viewing everyone. His attitude was, if someone is going to try to kill themselves, they actually will time it so that you can get to them, because what they're trying to do is get you to pay attention to them. So no, we're not going to make it so everything will be seen all the time. So it was absolutely fantastic.

Midway through the process—we were already beginning on construction documents—he was fired. There was a big brouhaha. I never quite understood what all there was, but he was out. And the new person came in and he wanted it to be a regular psychiatric institute, and he wanted Big Nurse to be able to see everything that was going on from one central location, and the whole thing became much more standard. That was my main thing.

But the great thing about working for Frank in those days—for us; not for Frank, but for us—was that it was complete chaos. And I literally would go from doing reflected ceiling plans or working on the blueprint machine, which are about the two lowest things you can do in an architecture office, to running projects, to going on client meetings. And one of the things I specialized in was running competitions. I ran two competitions in the office—none of which we won, but which were fantastic projects. It was a lot of fun.

02-00:13:01

When I went to work for Hodgetts and Fung, I had a bit more experience. And part of their idea was that I was going to help organize them better and make them more efficient, and come between them and the kids right out of college that they liked to hire—or right out of architecture school that they liked to hire. I failed on that level, I will say. They had a particular way of working and they could not stand for that kind of a clear organization. But we had a great time working on all kinds of fun projects, the most memorable of which was a low income housing project in Hollywood—again, a competition, which we lost, but which I still think, in my mind, was a

project that allowed me to think through a whole series of problems in architecture and come to quite a beautiful proposal. So that was a good time.

Cándida Smith: Before you came here, had you already basically come to the self-understanding that maybe you weren't going to be an architect, but were going to be a writer, an idea person? A practicing architect, I should say.

02-00:14:17

Betsky:

I had come to a realization that I was probably going to be a failed architect. Now, you have to understand, though, in the period in which I was educated—and to a certain extent today, though I do think it's changing—if you went to architecture school, you were not a real man, even if you were a woman, unless you made buildings. Architecture schools are very intense experiences. They are very communal, quite often. And the methods of evaluation are public and grueling. So it's a little bit like going to see a shrink. And part of what you are inculcated with is this myth that you're only a true architect if you build, and you're only building worthwhile things if they are institutions—which is an old Beaux-Artes idea, where the architect is the person who designs the central institutions of the state. Then, maybe the palace of the ruler; now the museum, the theater, opera house, those kinds of structures. And of course, it needs to be as big as possible. So still somewhere in the back of my mind, I am a failed architect because I don't make buildings.

However, perhaps as a result of that, I have spent a lot of my career—including most recently in the Biennale in Venice—making the argument that we need to go beyond buildings; that buildings might be the most succinct and complete way in which architecture can appear, but for that same reason, they are very difficult to produce, expensive, time-consuming to produce. They are more and more defined by codes—building codes, safety codes, financial codes, behavioral codes—so that architecture has less and less to do with them. They also are quite often the tomb of architecture, of the original intent and idea. And you actually find much more exciting, experimental, critical architecture before the building, in drawings and models and images; inside of the building, in interiors; beyond the building, in landscapes or in films; and that maybe we need to look beyond buildings to find great architecture. So I do honestly believe this, but I also realize that that might just be a way of justifying everything I've done with my life.

Cándida Smith: Were these ideas already pretty well formulated by, let's say, '94, '95, at the time this offer comes?

02-00:17:08

Betsky:

Well, I had written a book in the early nineties called *Violated Perfection*, which looked at some of this experimental work and catalogued them. And I was certainly doing a lot of writing and thinking about people such as Lebbeus Woods and these kind of movements. It's an interesting question, because I actually now am in the process of selecting for a publisher in Australia, of all places, my kind of collected essays. And so I'm going back to some of them from the late eighties and early nineties and trying to decide how articulate I was and whether I knew what I was talking about then, or now, how coherent I was. So I'm not sure I have enough self-knowledge to say that.

Cándida Smith:

So you get this call from Jack Lane. What did he tell you, what he was looking for?

02-00:18:05

Betsky:

That's a good question. I'm not really sure that he said much, beyond that he was looking for a curator of architecture and design. I probably, in my usual manner, did all the talking and came up with all the different ideas that I could imagine doing there; talked about loving these kind of beautiful models and drawings, which obviously reverberated with his own prejudices, shall we say. And I don't think that he told me, "I need someone to do this." So in that sense, I was relatively free. The great thing I always found about Jack was that if you walked into his office and you said, it's really important that we buy this, or that we do this exhibition— And he would say, "Why?" And if you were able to clearly and articulately ground why this should be done, he would support you. And support you 100 percent. And that's one of the things that made him really a great museum director.

Cándida Smith:

Okay. What kind of opportunities did you see for yourself and for the kind of growth that you could make while the institution's growing at the same time?

02-00:19:27

Betsky:

Well, for me, it was a wonderful opportunity to be given an institutional framework to talk about and display, most importantly, the things that I thought were important. I had always, and have always operated just out of this incredible enthusiasm about what I think is beautiful and important—which, as far as I'm concerned, are the same thing. And I have this great desire to show it to everyone and talk to everyone about it. And so I do it, or I was doing it, by writing about it, by lecturing about it, teaching it, taking people to look at it, and trying to make my own drawings that would do it; but felt somewhat marginalized. And it's very interesting, because in L.A., there also is this culture of a self-marginalizing avant-garde going back

to the sixties, in both art and in architecture, where there's a lot of people who thought that they could've been contenders or that they were really important and talented, and never got the chance to build anything. Or if you were a painter, yes, it was shown at Ferus [Gallery], but no one in New York knew about it. And of course now, everyone in New York claims that they knew all about it and how important it was. But there was this real sense then that people in the center of the universe did not know what was going on there. And so there was this kind of chip on your shoulder that was very part of the SCI-Arc, Southern California Institute of Architecture culture.

And part of what attracted me about SFMOMA was here was a large institution with a big building, with a strong place in this community, that would give me a podium, a framework in which to show the things I thought were important. And it was interesting; after I'd been up here for a couple months, old friends of ours from L.A., Elyse and Stanley Grinstein, wonderful collectors and the people who founded Gemini GEL, were up in San Francisco and looked me up. And I walked them through the galleries. And Elyse Grinstein—who's about this tall—at the end of it, looked up at me and gave me a big kiss and said, "This is perfect. You are standing three inches taller and talking with so much more confidence about this work." And she was right. I had been given this incredible frame, all these white walls and wood frames, and they just made everything that I thought was important that much more of a focus, focal point. So I don't think I had this very coherent idea about—I'm sure, I know that back then I had a whole series of things; I said, "This is what I'm going to do and this is important." But mainly, I just knew that I wanted to have a place where people would take what I thought was important seriously. And by the way, those had also been some rather not-so-great years in LA. I moved there in the mid-eighties, when it was fantastic there. I had a great time there. Early nineties, we had an earthquake, fires, economic collapse. Just about everything that could go wrong had gone wrong. So there was a real sense that maybe now was not such a great time to be in L.A. Whereas San Francisco, you got the sense that something was going on there. So that certainly was part of the attraction.

Cándida Smith: Did you talk to friends of yours who were actually then architecture and/or design curators in museums, like the people at MOCA? What kind of networking—

02-00:23:29

Betsy: That's a good question.

Cándida Smith: [How did you] figure out, what does an architecture and design curator actually do? Or did that matter?

02-00:23:37

Betsky:

You know, that's a very interesting question. That's a very interesting question. I don't remember the answer. I'm sure I did some of that. The idea that it might be something in my purview had happened a few years ago, when the whole Deconstructivist show at MoMA happened ["Deconstructivist Architecture"]. And I was involved at the conception of that, the inception of that. And there certainly was an idea at one point that I might find myself at MoMA. And I had certainly done some thinking about that, and probably talking to people about that. But I don't think I actually went around, when this job came up, asking people, how do you do that? How do you curate? I just learned on the job.

Cándida Smith:

One of the things that's come up is that apparently— I should've looked this up, but I didn't. But it's been mentioned several times that you wrote a critical review of the [Mario] Botta building, which people thought was pretty gutsy for someone being considered for the job. I wonder, maybe you could talk about the review and [Betsky laughs] how you felt about the space that you were about to become responsible for, at least partially.

02-00:25:09

Betsky:

Yeah, I think I actually wrote the article before the interview and things like that had taken place, and I warned them about it already. But look, I've had a long history of being not too politic with my opinions and words. And actually, I think being in San Francisco helped me to learn how to word things in a slightly more circumspect manner. But of course, from my perspective, I wrote the review of SFMOMA and I talked about it being iconic as an object; I talked about it being a cross between a church and a department store, which is a line I repeated quite often after I'd been here; and I talked about the fact that it's the intersection between the kind of display of expensive and important things and the hallowing that a church provides and the community focus that a church provides; and that in fact, art museums have the ability to get you to focus on beautiful, expensive things; and in the end, you walk out not with the object, but with what's more important, which is what you've learned from or seen in that object. And I talked about the spaces being not perhaps as flexible as one would hope for in an art museum, and this not being the most progressive translation about what an art museum should be. But I thought I'd couched very carefully. And working for an American magazine, especially a professional magazine, a trade publication such as *Architectural Record*, which is where I wrote the article, from my perspective, you can't really be critical. You have to be critical in the margins, and ever so slightly. So I never perceived it as being a slam, as some people later described it. I thought it was a description with some gentle questions asked.

Cándida Smith: Yeah. Actually, it seems quite mild, compared to the sort of larger philosophical perspectives that you were preparing to explore.

02-00:27:42

Betsky:

Absolutely. In the end, do I think that this is a beautiful building? No, not particularly. It has some beautiful spaces in it. Do I think it was the right building, and if I had been commissioning it, would I have done this? No, probably not. But this building was absolutely right for how this institution saw itself. And there's the great anecdote about when the committee, search committee for the architect was traveling around Europe looking for an architect. I don't know if you've heard this story. And they went to Lugano. And they arrive there, and the person who was going to take them to see Mario Botta said, "Oh, we have a few minutes. Would you like to go by this bank building that we just designed along the way?" And they said sure, and they went by the bank building, and the members of the committee looked at each other. And I think it was Brooks Walker, who then walked to the pay phone across the way—because of course, this was before cell phones—and picked up the phone and said, "Stop the search. We've found our architect." Because they saw that building and they said, "That's who we are." Or, "That's who we want to be. That's how we see ourselves." And Botta, whether consciously or not, understood that.

From the way the galleries were organized and appeared to the materials of the building to the way it was placed in the landscape, if the board of directors and the management of SFMOMA had been able to visualize what they wanted to be, this would've been it. And the community, the arts community, San Francisco, reacted very much in the same way. When it was opened, it was one of those, that's it. That's exactly what SFMOMA should be, what it should look like. That's how it belongs, that's where it belongs. And it transformed this whole area, together with Moscone [Center]. So it was one of those moments where I can't say that I ever felt like I could talk about this building as being a masterpiece of modern architecture; but I could use it very much as an example of the malleability of building types and how they function. And in fact, it became a star element in my Icons: Magnets of Meaning exhibition, because it did have that iconic quality. *Does* have that iconic quality.

Cándida Smith: Did you have a sense of what the peer institutions were that you were going to be referencing? Was it MoMA and MOCA? Were there other institutions that might, for the kind of program that you wanted to develop—

02-00:30:49

Betsky:

When I got here, the department here was quite young. I was only the second full curator of architecture and design. And this was really the

second full-fledged department of architecture and design as part of a modern art museum in the country. So the mother ship, the temple, was the model, MoMA. As in everything here and everything in modern art, MoMA was and is the model. They even know it; it's great. If you look at their mission statement, their mission statement basically says, "We define what modern art is." "We're it, you know? If you want modern art, MoMA, we're it." Stop. That's it. And SFMOMA always has been, we're the second oldest modern art museum in the country, and the second-largest modern art museum in the country, and, and, and. And part of it was we were also going to be the other department of architecture and design. So whether consciously or unconsciously, I think that MoMA was always a model. And I would guess that it still is, to this day. Now, of course, there aren't a lot of counter-models. You mentioned MOCA earlier. Of course, MOCA, until about five years ago, did not, in fact, have a curator of architecture, and has no curator or collection of design. The Walker has a design collection mainly focused on graphic design, but not much else. And most of the other departments in the country are decorative arts departments that have grown to have a design, and perhaps even architecture component. But there really isn't that much competition. And so part of the fun was, in fact, defining what an architecture and design department with a museum of modern art was and should be.

Cándida Smith: Well, I suppose the baggage of being the mother ship is that you become very conservative, or you *are* very conservative. So the classic example of that is that MoMA has its first Abstract Expressionist show in 1953, whereas both Chicago and San Francisco had Abstract Expressionist shows in '45. And one might say that San Francisco, I think, despite its reputation—or perhaps there's a schizophrenia in San Francisco, that the community is maybe [not] as anarchist as its reputation.

02-00:33:49

Betsky: It's a very conservative city.

Cándida Smith: The cultural institutions are actually extremely conservative, for the most part.

02-00:33:56

Betsky: Yeah. San Francisco is definitely about: we're here; we came here because it's beautiful; we love it the way it is; don't change a single thing. I did an article for *SF Magazine* when I was here, proposing how San Francisco should be developed. And I was very concerned about this because one of the things it did, for instance, was propose that both Golden Gate Park and the whole waterfront below upper Broadway should be lined with tall, thin towers, in the mode of

Vancouver. And I asked Elaine McKeon— I showed the images that we were coming up with for this article and told her what we were doing. I said, “You know, I hope this is not going to be a problem.” And she said, “Oh, don’t be silly. It’s such a ridiculous idea it would never happen anyhow. Go ahead. Who cares?” There was such a sense that these kind of things just don’t happen in San Francisco. I moved here, of course, in the period when you still couldn’t make any tall buildings in this city. So very, very strangely conservative city, indeed, in all kinds of ways. So the nice thing about architecture and design is, of course, that it’s slightly in the margins. So I could collect things that in other places, might be understood as radical or taking a chance, that here, wouldn’t really bat that may eyelashes. Like the Daniel Libeskind *Micromegas* very early on, or something of that sort. So I didn’t really have that much of a problem. The worst problem I had was that Don Fisher, obviously one of the most influential members of the board, did not think that architecture and design belonged in a museum of modern art. And so just didn’t want to have anything to do with me, the department, wanted Jack to get rid of this. So that was probably the worst problem that I had.

Cándida Smith: Yes. Yeah, I understand that at one point, you and Sandy Phillips, I guess, and Bob [Riley] were excluded from the acquisitions committee proceedings.

02-00:36:24

Betsky:

Oh, I don’t remember that, but there was always a very sort of tiered thing, where there was the main acquisitions committee, which is where all the important work happened, which was painting and sculpture, obviously; and then there were the baby acquisition committees in photography and in architecture and design and in video. And we got little drippings from the main accessions committee to play with. And I then built up my own funds, with a very aggressive campaign of getting more accessions committee members and getting them to contribute more. So by the time I left, we were being able to spend a little over \$100,000 a year, if not more—which, again, sounds like nothing, but in architecture and design, you can do some things. But it was always we were the junior, baby committees. But unless I’m really fading something from my memory, we were always expected to be there at the main accessions meeting. And I learned a lot from seeing Gary Garrels and then Madeleine Grynsztejn present big important paintings and talk the committee through them and get them bought. I remember Gary getting the committee to buy the *die Lesende*, the Gerhard Richter, which at the time, just seemed like an insanely expensive acquisition, and now of course, turns out to be very visionary. Or Madeleine doing this incredible job when we bought the pile of rocks, and going through a whole set of slides, showing how

everything in twentieth century art led up to this pile of rocks with mirrors stuck in it.

Cándida Smith: Oh, the [Robert] Smithson.

02-00:38:26

Betsky:

The Smithson piece. And then talking about Smithson and talking about other comparison things, and then showing how everything that had happened since then in art history was based on that pile of rock with a bunch of mirror stuck in the middle. And by the time she was done, you just couldn't vote—whatever—against how many hundreds of thousands of dollars it was, to have this pile of rocks and mirrors in the art museum. It was just so obvious. And I just watched her and I said, "That's how you do it. That's how you—" And not only for the committee, but also for yourself. And one of the things that I've done in Cincinnati is—I had curators who were used to saying, here's a painting; I think it's really important; let's get it, let's get it. And they would sit down, and because they were the curator, the committee would go, oh, oh, okay. And I make them propose it to me first. I make them write it down, I make them argue it through, I make them do all their homework. And then when they present it, I make them do the same thing. And that's something I learned here.

Cándida Smith: How do you think your goals related to what Jack Lane wanted to see happen with the museum? I understand that he was pretty upfront about his interests—his passions were painting and sculpture. He supported the other, the baby departments, as it were, but didn't want to spend much time worrying about them.

02-00:39:57

Betsky:

Well, I think that Jack realized that in the nineties, the whole field of painting and sculpture was becoming much broader. He knew the field. He had certainly worked on it, and a long time. And he understood that, for instance, the action was in photography, more than anything else. And with Sandy Phillips, he got *the* best curator of photography in the country, bar none. And one of the most brilliant things he did was to hire her and to let her build up that department. Just spectacular. He found Bob [Riley], he found me. He found people who were perhaps working in what you might think of as other fields, but who really were part of the sprawl within the modern art world. And I don't know whether consciously or not, but certainly he, at the Carnegie shows and at the Whitney Biennials and all these things, saw the much greater interaction between different media, and the extensions of the visual field into all kinds of other media; and understood that if you were going to be a successful modern art institution that would address that field, that you had to include these things.

Cándida Smith: But he began having his difficulties with the board pretty shortly after you arrived. So did that affect your working relationship with him, his working relationship with the curatorial team? Did it affect, in any way, how you were going to proceed?

02-00:41:41

Betsky: It certainly created some interesting, and at times, unpleasant curatorial meetings. A lot of the unpleasantness at board level was kept out of sight from all of us. I think Gary Garrels is the one who might've seen a little bit more of it, because he was more closely involved. We obviously knew some of what was going on, but we had much less experience. The only time that we were confronted with it on a very immediate level was when there was a board retreat, to which the curators were invited. And a lot of these issues came out. At the end of that meeting, it was obvious to most of us that Jack was on his way out. It just was obvious that there was a disconnect that had somehow occurred. And we all, also among ourselves, began to sort of say, geez, this is not going right. This is going to go somewhere else.

Cándida Smith: How did you perceive what the issues were that were leading to, ultimately, a total rupture?

02-00:42:54

Betsky: Ego. Like every board, this is a board of very powerful people, who are used to getting their own way. And they have fiduciary responsibility for and are asked to give a lot of money to an institution whose day-to-day operations they do not control. And they either get irritated by that or try to interfere. And usually both. And Jack Lane had managed to get the building built and get the collecting community much more focused around this central institution; and in so doing, had stepped on the necessary toes, and had to work very hard to get all these people to work together. And after ten years— That was a long time to do it. And then he did it again in Dallas [Dallas Museum of Art], with incredible success. But I think there's only a certain amount of times you can do this. It's difficult for me to be—if there is such a thing as—objective about it, both because it's a long time ago and because I have a situation right now with the art museum where I'm director which is so much *worse* than that—it's getting better now—but which in some ways, was so much worse than that that it seemed like, God, what were we all so upset about? It was no big deal.

Cándida Smith: Yeah, it's a very common—

02-00:44:23

Betsky: Yeah, it is standard, it's kind of—

Cándida Smith: At least in the United States.

02-00:44:27

Betsky:

Yeah. And we went through the other thing that we did—and I'd done a little bit of this before, previously—but there, we really went through the whole organization doctors and the retreats, the meetings. The, where do you fall? Were you the eldest, middle, or youngest son? If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be? Fall down and get other people to stop you from falling down, and all that kind of stuff. One of the other things that was fantastic for me was that it was a spectacular group of curators. I can say that now, especially that I'm a director and half of my curators can't be bothered to do anything because they have a show that's opening three years from now and all that. And I'm sure there was some of that. My office was right next to Sandy. And to be able to go back and forth and just sit in her office and have long philosophical conversations, and have her basically teach me about modern and contemporary photography; to have Bob there, bringing all this craziness from the world of media; to have Gary there, with basically the whole art world market at his fingertips—to have all these people together at that time was *really fantastic*. And I think that's one of the things that Jack also was very good at, is getting really good teams of people together and spending a lot of time finding the right people for those positions. So that was part of what made it all click, as well.

Cándida Smith:

It does seem like it was a very unique and special moment, in terms of the camaraderie and the talents of everybody, and the interesting way in which each of you kind of came into your positions in a kind of tangential manner.

02-00:47:07

Betsky:

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. No, it's true. It's true.

Cándida Smith:

Which meant that each of you brought something really uniquely creative.

02-00:47:14

Betsky:

Yeah. Which doesn't mean that we were all like best friends and all that kind of stuff. Especially towards the end, there was a lot of tensions. But boy, they were incredibly creative, bright people. It was really quite something.

Cándida Smith:

And you would float ideas for your shows with the other curators and they would float their ideas?

02-00:47:37

Betsky:

Yeah, yeah. The good thing was, I had my little galleries and I just exploited the hell out of them, made sure there was always stuff going on there. And one of the things that Jack did—but apparently, that was a tradition here—was also that we as curators never saw budgets. And

I never knew how much my shows cost. I had an idea, but I never really knew. And he would just go do it. And then of course, I competed for the big space, one of the big spaces, with all the other curators. And I only got that— Well, when I got there, the William Wurster show had been planned, which I hadn't done. But it was up. That was one of those grit-your-teeth-and-act-as-if-you're-very-proud-of-it [moments], even though you didn't do [it] and might've done some things differently. But then I did the "Fabrications" show, and I did the "Icons" show. Those were my two big shows while I was here.

Cándida Smith: On the fourth-floor galleries, the fifth-floor galleries?

02-00:48:40

Betsky: Fifth floor, yeah. And then I worked on "010101", collaboratively.

Cándida Smith: Did you run up against any resistance of the sort of, well, the people who come to museums aren't really interested in looking at architecture and design stuff; they're here to see the paintings.

02-00:49:01

Betsky: Oh. Oh, absolutely. And I knew that, we all knew that. People came here to see the Matisse, to see the paintings. That's always what it was. And we could be no more than pleasantly surprised if we did something like the sneaker show, that suddenly got big crowds looking at the A&D galleries.

Cándida Smith: You inherited an architecture and design forum, right? The support group, some of whom were trustees, most of whom weren't?

02-00:49:36

Betsky: Well, yeah, it was a community outreach group. And I spent a lot of time building it up. I think when Paolo started it, he got it up to thirty or forty people. By the time I got here, it was seventeen or eighteen. By the time I left, it was 137, I remember distinctly. So we had really grown it. And I really turned it, also into the way to tie this department to the community. And so we did a lot of collaborative public events. We did a lot of sort of community action. We started things like the SF Prize, the San Francisco Prize. I used it as a way to really bring a lot of the most important professionals into here. Someone like Mark Fox, who then also designed all the things, Michael Vanderbyl, all these kind of people. And then I used it as a way to create a real— a posse, mainly by taking trips and going to various places around the world. And my trips became incredibly popular, because I would just take people to places, show them things they otherwise might not have noticed, or things that were hard to get into, and work them from eight o'clock in the morning until eight o'clock at night. And I would brook no lateness and no slacking.

But on the other hand, you stayed in great hotels and we had fantastic food. Always prided myself on that. And people loved it. And this is one place where, as a result of that, I really built up—and I think I can say that without exaggeration—a kind of a following. And I think there are people here who will say that, to this day. And I'm having dinner with them, in fact, tonight. We're going to have dinner with Rica Lakamp, who became one of the heads of the A&D forum; and Miranda Leonard who became an important part of it; and Gary Dexter; and Andy Cochran, landscape architect. These were part of the gang. And people like Rica would go on every single trip and would come to every event. And that became the group that told all their friends how important architecture and design was. And it was through them and through the activities we did with them, but also just through their enthusiasm, that I think the department in those days had an impact way beyond the art museum, and really became a very important part of the design environment in the Bay Area in general. And I'm very proud of that.

I think other than the fact that we collected stuff here that we got and no one else did, that's important. And that we did great shows here. That, to me, is the thing I'm most proud about, is that we created this group of people who cared about architecture and design. I acted as the figurehead and the kind of motivator, and used my glibness to try and articulate what was important, and inspire people. And we actually did some fantastic stuff. Now, some of it—we got the Federal Plaza built, and those architects launched on a very successful career. It was value-engineered a bit, but it's still good. We had a competition for Union Square. In the end, it was a disaster, and what's built is a travesty; but it was worthwhile. We were very active in the Bay Bridge project, and were getting somewhere until that all turned into a big money issue and political issue. We worked on Harvey Milk Plaza, which is still ongoing. I can't say that I'm proud about—I can point to things and say, this is what we did.

But in terms of the level of debate and the interest that this community took in design, and the respect that designers got in this community, I think that if there's something that I feel like I got done here, it was that. And that group was a big part of it. And I also love and miss them a lot, because that happened to be a really good group of people. And to me, a typical example of that was Helen [Hilton] Raiser, who at first had no interest in architecture and design, who was good friends with some of the ladies who came to these events, were interested in it. Because of that, she came to one of the events, became very interested and inspired; joined the accessions committee after she joined the forum; eventually, the board picked her up and she became a board member. And when I announced I was leaving, she called me, rather distraught, and said—because we'd been asking her to fund, endow the

position— “If I endow the position today, at the full amount that you had wanted, will you stay?” And I said, “No, but if you think what we’ve been doing is important, you should still do that.” And to her great credit, she did exactly that. And that’s the kind of thing I feel proud about, that we got that kind of level of support.

Cándida Smith: I guess I’m getting a sense that you are distinguishing between the architecture community and the design community—or communities, probably, in both cases. And I wanted to sort of check in on how the—

02-00:55:30

Betsy: Oh, no, no—

Cándida Smith: The variety of communities that might be considered interested in architecture and design, what the topography of that might be.

02-00:55:38

Betsy: Oh, no, I thought that I kept saying architecture and design. I’ve tried to be fairly consistent about that. I think, in fact, one of the things I did was create a forum where industrial designers, graphic designers, architects, landscape architects could come together and could mingle, and these things could be seen also in relationship to each other. Obviously, my background was in architecture, so one of the other things I did here—and what I appreciate, in terms of my personal growth about this job—was that I got here and I had very good friends who are graphic designers, and I certainly had talked with them and knew something about graphic design, but I felt, boy, I really need to know more about graphic design. And really spending time with people like Lorraine Wild, who was a good friend from L.A., but then also with the people I met here—the Michael Vanderbyls, the Lucille Tenazases, all these kind of people—and really having them help me try to understand what graphic design was and what its elements were and what was important there. And that, for me, was one of the great things, to really learn much more about graphics and industrial design, and start to then also write about that and teach that, as well.

Cándida Smith: Maybe we should talk a little bit about some of the graphic design that you’ve asked to have pulled. I presume this is material that you collected personally.

02-00:57:12

Betsy: Well, now, what’s interesting is that these posters were here when I got here. And in fact, one of the strengths of the collection was that we had almost a complete set of what’s called the numbered series, which are all the posters that were done for the Fillmore and the Avalon—Fillmore East and Fillmore West and the Avalon—Bill Graham productions and all the other people who were doing things. And one of the first things, when I got here, when I saw that collection of

absolutely crazy, out-there graphic design sitting here, I said, “You know—” And I distinctly remember that I said when I got here that one of the first shows I wanted to do was about the sixties, and design in the sixties, because that’s what San Francisco was famous for in the design world. In architecture, Charles Moore, Sea Ranch, Joe Esherick—all those kind of people. Halprin, Lawrence Halprin. In graphic design, all of the rock posters. The *Whole Earth Catalog*. This was the Bay Area, right? All of the firms that came out of tents that were designed here, were then still headquartered here, tent design that came out of geodesic domes and all those kind of things. So I said, “We need to do a show about the sixties.” And people sort of nodded.

And then when I started talking about it more, I got this kind of frostiness. And I realized that people didn’t really take that seriously. And there were also a fair amount of people who had been good hippies then, but did not care too much to repeat that. Although when we eventually did do the show, it was wonderful; one of our trustees showed up very quietly and said, “I thought you might want this for the show. I’ve kept this. Haven’t used it lately.” And it was this beautiful, jewel-encrusted hash pipe. And this was a very proper lady. But of course, the sixties; that was what it was like. But so it was not something that people felt that they wanted, really, to concentrate on. So it became clear to me that it was not going to be a big show. So then I said, “Well, we’ll make a more focused show.” Then I found that we had the numbered series. And first of all, you have to ask your question: well, what is interesting about them and are they good design? Are they great art? And of course, one of the interesting things about them is the refusal to accept the machine-made, and yet the ability to create mass-produced images out of that. And the second is their calling back very consciously on the Art Nouveau and late nineteenth-century aestheticism. And the third is the integration of Eastern cultures. And in all of these things, it turns out that they become part of an experimental tradition in graphic design. So I had to spend some time thinking that through and asking that question and trying to figure out what was interesting and important about them.

02-01:00:51

So then I said, “Well, we need to find the stuff that goes with them.” I had this vague idea, knew from some magazines that there was going to be great furniture, there were going to be great objects, there was going to be other great graphic design. And I started having trouble finding it. And it turned out that first of all, when people became interested in making their own things— And the importance of the late sixties, for me, became it as a revival of the arts and crafts tradition; and a revival of the notion that we’re going to go out into the country and create a community that will use nature to create beautiful objects of everyday use; and the making of those things themselves will be what creates the community.

This is John Ruskin, two paths in art [*The Two Paths: Being Lectures on Art, and Its Application to Decoration and Manufacture*]; William Morris; C.R. Ashby—this goes all the way back to that tradition. And it had its moment in the Bay Area and people starting their communes and making all these things. And you can still find some of the highly decorated houseboats in Sausalito and such.

But it turns out that when people started doing this, most of them were not very good at it. This was not trained designers going out into the country; this was young kids saying, we want to do this. And if they were serious about it, it took them five or six years, at a minimum, to really begin to produce interesting things. So that in fact, most of the interesting objects were from the early to middle 1970s, if not later, and had then very quickly become commercialized. The other thing is that the people who had made beautiful things were out there hiding. Or the stuff was hiding in people's attics and they didn't want others to know about it. There was a sense that that was an era that had ended in an ugly and bad manner, and that had focused on things that we now consider illegal (drugs) or unacceptable (free sex), and therefore, is not something you display and want people to know about. So we had to do a lot of research. And I spent a fair amount of time going up north of here and going to visit old hippies and seeing what they had. But in the end, we collected a nice selection of this kind of work in an exhibition called "Far Out" that even had a great soundtrack to it. And we had the numbered series ringing the room, and then we had great clothes and yes, the jewel-encrusted hash pipe sitting in the middle of the space. So it was interesting because it was an attempt, for me, to really tie into what I thought the roots and character of this community was. And I misread it, to a large extent. It was not, at least, how this community saw itself.

Cándida Smith: Or that portion of the community.

02-01:03:59

Betsky: Yeah.

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Cándida Smith: No, I tell you, with David [Ross], it was, I think— If you think of the board of trustees like Congress, there's two wings and then the center. [chuckles] And the center had shifted towards the wing that had brought David, which was very much committed to maximum progress as fast as possible; and then shifted, virtually within a matter of two months—

03-00:00:30

Betsky: The other way.

Cándida Smith: The other way. In that case, it was largely fiscal responsibility questions, which were partly directed at David—he became the physical symbol of it—but were really directed at other trustees?

03-00:00:44

Betsky: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Cándida Smith: [comments of crew] So another—

03-00:00:53

Betsky: Yeah, Lucille Tenazas. Lucille Tenazas became, for me, the kind of emblem of what was great about the graphic design world here. San Francisco has by now an old, venerable and very good tradition of graphic design. And it really was producing fantastic designers by the mid-1990s. Part of it was the economic ecosystem, where you had firms such as The Gap and Levis to support them. Part of it was the tradition of fine-art printing, Arion Press and places like that. Part of it was also the changes in technology that freed designers to experiment in all kinds of wonderful ways. And they came together in a very productive manner in the mid-1990s. And one of the first people I went to see was Lucille Tenazas. I remember when I was moving up here, I asked Lorraine Wild—who was, as I said, a good friend and as far as I was concerned, the most important graphic designer, certainly [of those] I knew—“Who I should go see up there?” And she said the first name on her list was Lucille Tenazas. And I got here and Michael Vanderbyl was the big dog in town. Michael had really established a very important firm here, branched out into furniture design and the such. And I went and I had lunch with him. And he was terrific. And it’s one of the things I always loved about Michael. He said, “Okay, graphic design is really important and there’s great working going on here. My work is not important; I’m doing commercial things. So don’t look at my work, but look at these people.” And guess what? Lucille Tenazas was at the top of his list.

And so I went to see Lucille. And little did I know, she was also married to Richard Barnes, a great photographer, who Sandy wound up collecting, as well. And of course, who made his life, his living, by photographing architecture. So I wound up working with him in that way, as well. But Lucille was doing these absolutely beautifully calibrated constructions, is all I can call them. And it comes a little bit out of what Lorraine Wild and people like that had developed, first at Cranbrook [Academy of Art] and then at Southern California, which is to take the basic building blocks of Modernism, simple blocks of type and clearly articulated grids, and then the elements that communicate core pieces—pull quotes, top of paragraphs, headlines—and use those to anchor a composition; and let it slip, open it up, delaminate it, let it float, overlap it. Not tear it apart, as had been done in the 1920s and

then had been painstakingly reassembled by the Swiss and the Germans, but allow the internal contradictions to appear and find a beauty in things that are just too long and that change size and that overlap and go right to the edge of things, and keep them in this very tenuous balance. And there's just such a sense of a layering of effects going on, as if you're looking at one layer of graphic elements and then another layer of graphic elements; and then a set of photographic elements behind that, which in turn, are not all in the same plane; and then a abstraction of a volume that moves through that; and then a very strong mark, piece of advertising, that then also plays with its superimposition on the photograph; as does the text below it, where the full name then breeds all of the little details that fall underneath that line. There's so many carefully worked-out relationships between all these little bits, and they all come together [snaps fingers] to have this very clear sense: it's about books and it's about how beautiful books are, how fragile they are, and how therefore, you need to take one. When I saw these things, to be able to do all of that just by arranging typography in relationship to photography. And of course, then when you have a powerful, almost difficult-to-look-at image like that, how you can hold that image, to me, also became just astonishing. And a lot of the work that happened, not just with Lucille, but with a lot of the other designers, was this interest in just the pure play of type, of just letting type scroll across the page and continue almost beyond the page, by implication; and being able to make an abstract composition out of that free-floating type. To me, there was a sensuousness like this.

I'd seen a lot of these kind of techniques in Southern California—and of course, also in New York and all that, but I'd really gotten to know them in Southern California. The difference with Northern California was there was a sensuality about them. There was that particular Northern California smell to it. It's almost difficult to describe. But I think it's even true in the kind of coloration that was used a lot, that made it all so much closer to our bodies and to the landscape around us, that I really appreciated. So it was great. I did shows with her, with Jennifer Morla, with Mark Fox, with Vanderbyl in the end, with [John] Bielenberg, with all these people. And it was just such a joy to have these great graphic designers. And then to get to use them, to commission them, because I could get them to do catalogs and I could get them to do things for the museum. Something I got to continue when I moved to the Netherlands, which of course, is home to some of the greatest graphic designers in the world, and I got to be a serial user of all the different greatest graphic designers in the world. So it was really a fun thing to do.

Cándida Smith: Jack, in particular, was very dismissive of anything that was local. That was part of his program for transforming this museum. Maybe it

also reflected his own personal set of tastes, his own personal history. And I know that some of the other curators did have trouble when they wanted to put some attention on local artists, local photographers, local people, because he kind of assumed, oh, if they're here, they can't be very good. Or it's provincial. What about in your case? Any resistance to—

03-00:00:16

Betsky:

I never had that issue. Now, part of that is because I was doing them in my little nest and showing local people. And I know that at times, Jack would cite some of those as, yes, we are paying attention to local things, so maybe I gave him an excuse. It's also, of course, true that no matter where you are, the local arts community never thinks you do anything for them. To me, it's hilarious when local artists come up to me in Cincinnati and say, "You never show local art." And I say, "Okay, here are the local artists whose work we've shown in the last three years." And they shut up fairly quickly, but there's a sense that it's still never enough. But I never had a sense that that was an issue. I collected and showed work that was international. We collected, very early on, a lot of things from Southern California because part of my thing when I got here was, okay, so I have some money to collect things, and it's important to preserve these things. And I just came from Southern California, where there's all this great work, and it's just gathering dust and no one's doing anything with it. So I just went up there and Hoovered up a whole bunch of graphic design and architecture and design and brought it up here. But I also got here and found, as I said, all of these incredibly talented people, especially in graphic design, industrial design, that were just waiting to be collected. But I also collected and showed Lebbeus Woods, Steven Holl, Zaha Hadid. It was pretty international. So I never felt like Jack or anyone was saying to me, show more local, or show more international.

Cándida Smith: Okay. Shall we move on to this?

03-00:11:08

Betsky:

Yeah. One of the first things I bought there was Thom Mayne's *Sixth Street House* project, which I had loved from the first moment I saw it. Thom Mayne was an architect in Los Angeles. He had a firm called Morphosis for many years. His partner was a guy called Michael Rotondi. They together had helped found SCI-Arc. And he had been the kind of founder of what I called the dead tech movement in L.A., which was a movement of architecture that was fascinated with the omnipresent and often-ignored technology of Southern California. Southern California is an economy that's built on cars, Hollywood and aerospace, and then of course, on real estate. So it's all about lots of cars running around, about lots of aerospace, and about lots of special effects. But what you see instead is endless sprawl that's fairly

anonymous. And these architects became interesting—and again, they picked up on the Light and Space movement in the art world—in the kind of technological effects and elements of the city, and the kind of layering of unused technology in Los Angeles. And Thom Mayne gave me this great answer when I asked him something in a very early interview I did with him. It’s something that he told me later he wished he’d never said it because I always quoted it and he got really tired of hearing it. But I was asking him about the relationship between their work, which foregrounded a lot of technology, and the high-tech architects of London, as they were then called. Now, we call them the high-tech lords: Lord Foster, Lord Rogers and the such. And he said, “The difference between them and us is that they’re the lab technicians with the white coats on, and we’re the grease monkeys in the garage, with the dirty overalls.”

And that really characterized their work. Their architecture was all about going to a space or an empty lot and bringing a bunch of steel together and welding it together, and creating an almost ad hoc collection of things. By now, of course, they’ve gone on to great things. Thom Mayne won the Pritzker Prize, he did the great Federal Building here, et cetera. But the *Sixth Street House* really summed up a lot of the interest because it started out as a project for a private house. His own house, Thom Mayne’s own house on Sixth Street in Santa Monica. And it was a kind of a nothing bungalow. And his original idea was to strip the building back to its lath, sort of in the manner of Frank Gehry in those days; just take it down to the bare bones, reveal all the structure, which you can see around the edges there, and build that back out; and then to find ten pieces of dead tech, of unused metal, and to insert that into the building and turn those into a shower and a chandelier and a whole set of other objects. I’m not even sure anymore what all the different uses were. So this building would become stripped down to its skeletal essence, and then would become infected with this detritus of the past that would turn it into a kind of hybrid monster, a monster that would condense the technological nature of Los Angeles and make it inhabitable. Now, in the end, that turned out to be too expensive and too complicated, though the house was used for— What’s the movie with [Robert] De Niro and Dustin Hoffman? *L.A. Story*, I think it’s—no, not *L.A. Story* [*Sleepers?*]. Well, it’s a great movie. And the De Niro character is sitting in this Sixth Street house, and his wife finally turns to him, “I’m sick of you. I am sick of your stuff, and I’m sick of your dead tech house.” And she storms out and that’s the end of it.

Anyhow, the architecture of the *Sixth Street House* now lives on in this set of drawings that Thom Mayne did. Because the building is the building, and not much of it’s left. But the architecture, the investigation, lives on in these drawings that were done. They were

commissioned by a gallery in New York. They were turned into prints, limited edition prints. It was one of those attempts to try to figure out how to make money doing architecture: make limited edition prints. And the idea was to catch the energy, the life, the complexity of L.A. in *the* most refined mode they could think of, which was the drawing style of [Denis] Diderot's encyclopedia. And even the typography refers to that source. And so he worked with this guy called Andy Zago, who's one of *the* world's great draftspeople, to make these amazing pen and ink drawings that are a series of section cuts with superimposed axonometric elements drawn out of them—none of which explain the house, really, but which try to get at what the architecture of the house was to be. And the drawings were made, the prints were made, and the drawings were lying around, and I just went there and said, "How much for all the drawings?" And we got the whole series, which he still regrets, to this day.

Cándida Smith: Did you have to get the funds?

03-00:17:38

Betsky:

No, there were accession funds. And I forget what it was. I'm going to say—it'd be interesting to look at the record—that we paid \$16,000 for all ten of them. Which was a sizeable amount of money, but for what we got was quite extraordinary— By the way, the other thing I did which was *really* fun, I went to Max Protetch's gallery in New York. And he had been the one who had, during this period— He didn't commission these, but he was the person who started a gallery saying, "Well, I can make money selling architecture drawings." And did that for a while, never went anywhere, and now was a much more normal gallery. Though he still occasionally dabbles into architecture. But basically, it's a standard gallery. And I went there and said, "Do you still have any architecture?" And he said, "Oh, yeah, somewhere in the back files." So he just let me loose in the back room, and I started going through these files and started finding these Rem Koolhaas drawings and Aldo Rossi drawings and all this kind of stuff. And I would sort of pull them out and go, "How much for this one?" And he would say, "Oh, I don't know. \$500? \$400? What do you say?" And I would, of course, give a low-ball offer. And I think I just collected six or seven of them right there and made off, I think, like a bandit.

Cándida Smith: Shall we go over to the Mark Fox?

03-00:19:00

Betsky:

Mark Fox, yeah.

Cándida Smith: Out in the street? Cinema vérité—

[Interruption]

03-00:19:14

Betsky:

I'll be up at some point. [off-topic comments between them; audio file stops and re-starts]

Mark Fox was a great guy, a very, very talented graphic designer, who is one of these people who got here and, in the early nineties, figured out that the most effective use of his time and how he could make the most money was to come up with marks; to come up with something that was not quite a logo, and not quite an advertising campaign, but something in between; something that was a logo, that was at the same time, expressive. And he did it for restaurants and for small companies. And it was incredible because he would sit in this little studio up in—oh, God!—northern Marin County, and sit there and doodle away and doodle away, until he produced one single image, and that would be it. And for a while, he could get very well paid for it. And did it in such a wonderfully refined manner. And he became involved with the A&D forum.

I went up to see him, and I looked at his work and said, “This is incredible work.” Because he did more than just these marks. And had a show, and he became involved with the forum. He designed the forum’s mark and did all of that. And he also just became a good friend. And he was doing this kind of experimental work along the side. And some of it was very explicitly political. This piece was done, obviously, when Newt Gingrich’s “Contract with America” was first [proposed]. But others were much more abstract. And I believe both of these two pieces—and I hope I’m not misremembering this—came about in relationship to the “Icons: Magnets of Meaning” show that I did, and in which he was also involved. And this one, which was in the show, was his idea of a completely abstract, almost Rorschach test-like blob. And I wish I could remember, but it came from one very particular form that he kept blowing up, until it became completely abstract. And it becomes this completely enigmatic form that is so strong and awakens so many associations that you keep looking at it. And that’s sort of what the “Icons” exhibition was all about. And similarly, this *Enigma* poster, which I think was actually done for a company.

The idea was to take a map, to blot out all of the names, so you’re looking at a map that is perhaps generic; but beyond generic, also is like those maps you used to see in the *Lord of the Rings* book. They are *the* map of a fairytale kingdom that you always imagined, but will never actually enter. And then of course, it’s an enigma. And so to use that as the background and the form for the name that you then replace the *I* just with a *I*, is part of the trick. But against the kind of incredible subtlety of Lucille Tenazas, the forcefulness of Mark Fox’s work, which turns out to be just as complex, I think was fantastic.

Cándida Smith: A conservation question.

03-00:23:19

Betsky: Ah, yes.

Cándida Smith: Aluminum is obviously doing bad things.

03-00:23:22

Betsky: Well, Jill just noticed this. And she immediately said, “Hm, we’re going to have to take a look at this.” This has not been taken out for a while. Oh, I created all kinds of conservation nightmares. It started when— Well, it actually started with Paolo, who collected spaghetti boxes. And Jack Lane famously took one of them home and ate the spaghetti, which he said was pretty decent. As I said earlier, I collected soap. And at one point, we couldn’t get it in in time. I said, “Okay, this is ridiculous.” So I went around the corner to a Gap store and bought the soap for five dollars or whatever and plunked it down right here in this space. And the conservators all went, “Oh, my God!,” and brought up their white gloves, and I had to sign a form, and suddenly it had gone from something that I picked up five minutes earlier in a store into a work of art that had to be handled with white gloves. And then they, of course, were all upset because they said, “We don’t know what’s in this soap and it’s not going to be stable,” and all that good stuff. And in fact, apparently it isn’t.

But the thing that *really* caused them problems, and about which I feel somewhat guilty—but at the same time, also feel proud about—is that we collected websites. There was this wonderful moment, after the web really came to become something that we all understood and used, in ’95. And then a series of technologies had to develop, and develop very quickly—Flash, Adobe, all these kind of things. And then in about ’97, ’98, there was this Precambrian explosion of form and everyone just experimenting with all kinds of stuff. And I knew it was over when I found myself at one of these conferences sitting next to Jeff Bezos of Amazon. And I knew that he himself was a graphic designer. I said, “You know, I’m sorry to ask you this, but I wonder. I know that you’re a graphic designer, and I have to say that the interface for Amazon is not the most attractive.” He said, “Oh, are you kidding? It’s horrible. But you have to understand that on a standard thirteen-to-fifteen-inch monitor,”—which, in those days, was what displayed Amazon pages—“every pixel is worth a hundred-thousand dollars. So you can’t do anything.” So in between that moment and when the web was invented, there was this moment of incredible experimentation, and all the money in the world to do it. My favorite example was there was this company called Razorfish that was invented in ’96 or ’97, and within two years, was worth a billion and a half dollars; and then got folded into another firm and disappeared;

and it was finally just closed down this last year. And they were busily doing all this stuff, but they had so much money and so much talent that they created a subsite, which was called RSUB. So there was Razorfish and the Razorfish subsite, RSUB. And on RSUB, they said, “You are free to do whatever you want and we’ll post it.” And all these incredibly talented graphic designers just started playing and doing stuff, and making games and just visual experiments. Spectacular. So I selected some of these sites and we collected them. And then our conservation department pointed that, “Okay, now we have them.” I said, “Well, they’re cheap. We just get a disk. We didn’t have to pay for it.” They said, “Yes, but now you, by putting it in the permanent collection, have said, ‘This will remain that way for the ages.’ And that means that you have to be able to maintain the equipment and the software. And you have to make sure that it doesn’t get corrupted, which means you have to have backup copies running continuously, so that a hundred years from now, someone will still be able to look at RSUB.” And that, they calculated in— right before I left, so it would’ve been 2001, cost about \$20,000 a year per website. So not a cheap thing I saddled them with. But very important, I think, to have preserved that moment, because most of those websites don’t exist anywhere now except here.

Cándida Smith: That *is* important.

03-00:28:09

Betsky: Yeah.

Cándida Smith: Okay. I think we could probably wrap it up at one-thirty, if we can sit down again.

03-00:28:21

Betsky: Sure. I just want to— I thought I heard someone— [audio file may stop and re-start]

Cándida Smith: Okay. Again, every time you talk about this work, there is such density [Betsky laughs] of the ideas that are involved. And also a very broad set of contexts that aren’t going to be obvious to anybody except the expert. [Betsky laughs] So I suppose one of your tasks as curator is thinking about not only how you present it to the public, but what are the formats that you use to educate the public? So I wanted to just talk a little bit about the way in which you thought about using the education department, on the one hand. And then on the other hand, what were your options and opportunities for catalogs, for a sort of in-depth literary presentation of both visual material, in juxtaposition with adequate text.

03-00:29:33

Betsky:

Right, right. I wish I could be more enthusiastic about how we worked with the education department. But even though Jack had been careful to make John Weber curator of education, and to find in John Weber, someone who was an art guy—and John is a great guy and was doing interesting things—he still was working within a context, and also with a staff that saw themselves as education professionals. And I had the same problem at the NAI in Rotterdam; I have the same problem in Cincinnati. It's an insular field. And it's very difficult to get out of this kind of client/contractor relationship, if you will. In other words, it's still the fact that you as a curator make an exhibition, and then after—It's like the interior designers. You make the exhibition, and then the education people show up and try to come up with fun stuff for the kids to do. That's very insulting; I'm sorry. But that's kind of what it feels like a lot of the times. Now, certainly, it was not quite that simple here. And the education department worked on doing some great programs. But there still is the kind of basic after-the-fact-ness of that relationship. And that's something that I'm working to change in Cincinnati. I'm not there yet, but working on it. Which is all a very long way of saying that we didn't do nearly as much with the education department as I wish we could have done. And if I felt it was important to do public programs, I did them. And I did them mainly with the forum. And we did a lot of our own lectures and conferences and meetings about the work.

And we started something at the end which was really fantastic, which was the award for experimental design, which was modeled on the SECA [Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art] Award, which I've now copied in Cincinnati, as well. And the great thing about that is when it works, you go around and you look at studios—Well, first of all, you look at lots of images. So your group really gets a sense of what's going on in the field. And then when you select the people that whose studios you go to see, it creates a direct connection to the artist. And it's also just a fun thing for that group to do. And then when you have the discussion about who should win the award, you manage, quite often, to get a large group of people to have a fairly articulate discussion about what the issues involved are. It certainly happened the one time that I did it, the first time, when Tom Foulders won it. And I really thought that was a fun process. Those are the kind of things I wish I had done more of and could have done more of.

In terms of publications, I also think most of them were fairly standard. The one that I think was most effective—and in some ways, was even more effective than the show—was the *Icons* catalog, which was designed by Bob Aufuldish, which was a great compendium of all of these things. And also it was one of those essays where I feel that I got a lot of things that I was thinking about together, buttressed with the

right footnotes and into a coherent narrative, working with Kara [Kirk] and the whole publications department here. And I notice, for instance, that when I moved to the Netherlands, and I went to go see Rem Koolhaas, who, of course, is the big dog in town, so you have to go pay your respects. And I walked into his office and he had a wall of books behind him, a huge wall of books. And of course, what do I do? As I'm talking to him, I'm scanning the bookcases, looking for any of the books that I've written. And then right behind him, like right within grasp, was a copy of *Icons*. That was the only thing that he had. So that made me feel like that really reached somewhere. The rest of the publications, I think, were more or less documentations of what we did. Quite often beautifully designed, because we got great graphic designers.

Cándida Smith: In addition to the architecture and design communities, did you think about reaching out to other communities, or broader communities?

03-00:34:56

Betsy:

Oh, yeah, absolutely. No, the whole point was to make architecture and design part of the everyday discussion; to show that graphic design was posters, as well; to do these competitions for public spaces in San Francisco; to get involved with discussions about the landscape of San Francisco; to really see it as part of a broader continuum; and also for me to take my seat in the collection of curators, and when we had events, to be part of the discussion, and to not feel as if I didn't belong there. And that's actually part of what gave me the confidence, that made me think, several years later, that I could be an art museum director because I could be part of these discussions about art and feel as if I was participating in it, and that we were part of a larger visual arts community.

Cándida Smith: The other curators have talked about the surprises that happen when they present shows and they haven't adequately explained the work, or the public responds in ways that they didn't anticipate. The two kinds of artists that—the two artists, in fact, who continually are invoked on this, but for very different reasons, were Jeff Koons and Richard Tuttle. And I wonder if you had any experiences where—

03-00:36:44

Betsy:

Oh, absolutely. *The* most obvious one was “Icons,” which is something I worked very hard on and was a failure. I don't think anyone got the show. Not *no one*, but it certainly did not communicate in the way I'd hoped to. And we knew we were in trouble when the show opened and the paper came out, and there was Kenneth Baker's review. The good news was that it covered the whole front page of the art section, above the fold. The bad news was a headline, “Who Does Icons Con?” And he thought that I was trying to glorify second-rate

consumer objects. And the really amazing thing was that he thought that I was doing this at the behest of Don Fisher, to try to justify Don Fisher and the Haases' world, because I was showing blue jeans and stuff like that. Whereas of course, Don Fisher hated that show and hated all that kind of work. So it was really bizarre for me to see that kind of a critical reaction.

Cándida Smith: Okay. Well, this raises the sort of larger question of, well, who really is the public for a museum like this? Who do you target with your marketing, from a sort of cost/benefit analysis point of view?

03-00:38:24

Betsky:

Well, the question is not, who do you target from a cost/benefit analysis; it's, who is your audience, and who do you think your audience should be? Who your audience is, here, in Cincinnati and everywhere, is most easily described by saying the average *New York Times* reader. They are overwhelmingly white, older, skew female, highly educated, upper-middle-class, with a predilection for what they perceive as culture. That's who your audience is. Which is great when you're making the argument to get sponsorship for certain things; terrible when you're trying to make the argument that you are a vital part of your city, or of your local economy or anything else. So that means that what you want to do is hold onto that audience, and at the same time, broaden your appeal to reflect more broadly the community you serve. I changed the mission in Cincinnati from a very complicated statement to a sentence: "The Cincinnati Art Museum brings the people of greater Cincinnati and art together." Period. Who are the people of greater Cincinnati? And actually, I think it says greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, because that's the official Chamber of Commerce definition of where we are. So then you have to start pulling that apart into target audiences and working with demographics. And in fact, right now in Cincinnati—one of the country's largest back office call center operators is based there. And they're doing a pro bono study for us, where they're doing a phone survey study and a web study of perception, predilection, bias, and points of potential interest that people might have in the art museum. And I think the same thing, you have to do here.

And one of the things that I found frustrating, and one of the reasons why eventually, I got out of architecture and design and into general art, is that I thought that architecture and design would be a perfect way to broaden your audience because it's where art enters everyday life. It's where art becomes part of the chair you sit on, the space around you, the book you read, the screen you look at. Art becomes all around you. And allowing you to see the best of that would allow the art museum to integrate itself with a much wider aspect of popular culture. The reality is that if it's part of your everyday life, you don't

notice it. And if it's part of your everyday life, it can't be worth that much, literally or figuratively. And it turns out it's much harder to get people to look at a book or a building than it is to get them to look at a framed painting or a sculpture on a pedestal.

Cándida Smith: Right. Unless the building is Notre Dame or something like that.

03-00:42:07

Betsky: And even then. And even then.

Cándida Smith: Yeah. Or the Getty, I suppose.

03-00:42:11

Betsky: Well, there you go.

Cándida Smith: Another, I think, issue, in terms of the development of museums during your own professional career is the continuing professionalization of museum work. So if I look at the trajectory, when [Grace McCann] Morley, [Gerald] Nordland, and [Henry] Hopkins were directors, basically, probably a BA in enthusiasm was sufficient. [Betsky laughs] Then in Jack's tenure, professionalization had already begun big time.

03-00:42:53

Betsky: You had to have a PhD, and an MBA.

Cándida Smith: But in a way, SFMOMA is kind of a little off the beaten track, because each of you comes with good professional credentials, but offbeat credentials. And now increasingly, it seems that a PhD is really the expectation for any serious institution. What do you feel about that trajectory? What're the pluses, what're the negatives?

03-00:43:26

Betsky: Degrees are swipe cards. They get you in. They get people to take you seriously. And that's why I've always regretted not getting a PhD, because I've had to struggle with people taking me seriously, because I don't have a PhD. And it's my parents' fault. I'm the only one in my family without a PhD, and my parents always said, "Don't spend all your time going for a PhD. It's nothing but a meaningless credential, and people hide behind them." Yes, they hide behind them, but they also use them to get done what they want to get done. So in terms of a degree, I think it's valuable to have that swipe card.

In terms of the knowledge that it presents, I do think that at the level of curator, the knowledge of art history is obviously very important. The problem is that the definition of a curator has changed, as has that of the academic. But the training is still basically an academic one. So the notion that a curator is a community figure, and is someone who

operates in a commercial realm—at a distance, but still—and is part of a much more complex social/economic framework than the hallowed institution of academia or the museum, sometimes creates a disconnect in not necessarily knowledge or background, but bias and mode of operating. I swore that I was not going to be one of those directors who complained about his curators, having been a curator. And now all I do is complain about my curators because they can't be bothered because they're working on a show two years from now, and it has to be a scholarly show, it has to be well-grounded, and they have to spend all their time in the library.

And [maybe] I have an interesting guest who comes in, or there's a high school class that shows up unexpectedly and I need my curator to go out there and get them enthusiastic for art, and the curator says, "I can't be bothered. I have to go off to the library and work on my show two years from now." From their perspective, absolutely correct. From my perspective as a museum director, you need a different set of priorities and different set of skill to be able to do that. Now, art history programs know this very well. And I've been part, in several cases, of discussions where they are asking, what do we need to do in our training to make our graduates more capable of acting in this very changed role that the curator plays in this day? So that's one level.

And on the level of museum director, I wondered whether an MBA would be necessary. I've found that understanding organizational structures and financial issues is not rocket science. The thing that I did not have enough experience at, but which I don't think you get with an MBA, but you do get from the business world, is exactly the dynamics of corporations—which again, are very different from schools, academia. And perhaps I had a little bit of experience, having worked in architectural offices, and that was my advantage. And again, I'm not sure that business schools teach you this, although more and more business schools are beginning to ask these kind of questions. How can we understand that a corporation is not just an abstract thing, but is a social animal with its own peculiarities and irrational behaviors? But if there's anything that I think museum directors need to understand—and some of them obviously understand it intuitively very well—it's how you get what by now have become fairly large organizations to work as a group of people? You can learn how to make it work financially and organizationally on an abstract level. And that's, from my perspective, not all that difficult. What is difficult is how to get an organic sense of the organization that is working as a business, but is made up of people who are working for a nonprofit institution.

Cándida Smith: Yeah. Which nonetheless, still has to balance its books.

03-00:48:34

Betsky:

Yeah. Exactly. That peculiar balance. So a bunch of people with an academic outlook, who are doing it because they love art—and most of them, including often the guards and people like that—who are work— And I'm dealing with it now. One of the reasons I was late this morning, I have a situation between a curator who's brilliant, but can't understand why there are all these rules and regulations and limits, and people on the other side of it who don't understand why he doesn't understand that he has to do P.O. orders. And the rules and regulations are clear, what should be done. But getting these people to work together, that's something that takes a surprising amount of my time.

Cándida Smith: Well, not surprising to me. [laughs]

03-00:49:21

Betsky:

Yeah, well.

Cándida Smith: What is surprising is that you've been able to be as productive in your scholarship, since you left this museum, as you appear to have been.

03-00:49:35

Betsky:

As I was saying to someone the other day, nature abhors a vacuum, and so do I seem to. I've never understood why it's so difficult to not just keep writing and looking and— Mainly to keep looking, and then looking translates into exhibitions, into articles, into lectures, into whatever it does. But any opportunity to look, I'll take.

Cándida Smith: So I did want to ask you, as we wrap up, what changes you expected from Jack Lane's leaving, and what you personally interpreted his departure to signify. And then sort of secondarily to that, or subsequently, what David Ross's advent was going to mean. But I think they're actually two separate questions.

03-00:50:32

Betsky:

Yeah. Well, as I said, when I was hired by Jack was one of the best things that happened. Not only did I find this great situation, but I also found the only Republican ex-Marine sergeant who became a friend of mine, and someone that I just grew to love dearly. Obviously, things had gotten unpleasant in the last year he was there. It just wasn't working. And so when he finally left, we sort of all knew he was going to leave. And so you were disappointed, but you knew it was going to happen. It was interesting because when David came, he was very careful to seek me out. And we had several mutual friends in common, especially David Resnicow, an old friend of mine who's also a friend of his. And we got together and we shared a lot of enthusiasms and backgrounds and interests and all that kind of stuff. It took me quite a time to get over my missing Jack; I'll readily admit that. And David had a much more assertive and aggressive style. And that, of course,

created its own tensions. I don't mind boxing with anyone, so I loved it. And when he came up with "010101," that for me, was a chance to really run with it, so it was great. It was not as much an unalloyed pleasure as it had been when I first worked with Jack, purely because David created tensions all around him. That's how he operates. And when they work, they're creative tensions. But it wasn't the Jack Lane [approach]: "If you're good and you work hard, I will support you." Jack Lane is a little bit—I have it worse than him, but he's, as they say in the management consultant business, a maximizer. If you're enthusiastic, talented, work your tail off, he will give you his full attention and let you do whatever you want. If you don't, or if you're not very good, he can't be bothered with you. And David was much more all over the place. So that was— It was difficult. Some things were more fun. It was a much more exuberant, extravagant time, obviously. David came here, saw all this money and all this collection coming in and just said, "Let's have a blast. Come on, people. Let's do this."

Cándida Smith: And did the things that fell your way increase, as well, in terms of your ability to mount bigger level shows, buy more stuff?

03-00:53:51

Betsky: I don't think— No, not anything that he did. We were going to do the Diller Scofidio show, but I think he was always somewhat skeptical of that. But by then, I had sort of built up my own support system, so that just kept going.

Cándida Smith: The show that you were talking about at the very beginning, earlier this morning, about the California utopia—I guess "Utopia/Dystopia"—show that you were going to do jointly with the Getty, and how that fell apart suggests that— Here you had two very highly regarded, well established curatorial figures, yourself and your Getty counterpart, and yet the institutional ecologies are very—

03-00:54:48

Betsky: Well, it was a little different, because remember, the reason that that project had started was that John Walsh had contacted me.

Cándida Smith: Exactly, yeah.

03-00:54:58

Betsky: John had sort of seen what I was doing, liked what I was doing, knew me a little bit—I think he knew my sister before he knew me—and just invited me down—and that was, of course the way things were then at the Getty, fly down here; we pay for everything, da-da-da—and said, "Let's do this." So it was a director-to-curator thing. I think by then, David was here, and I went to David. So it was a little lack of balance. And it was really being pushed from the Getty, and I think that David

and the other people's attitude here was, well, the Getty really thinks this is a good idea, and obviously, they're going to put some of their resources in it; this could be a lot of fun. When the Getty fell away, it was me pushing it and not a director. Plus, I was on my way out.

Cándida Smith: Okay. Well, talk a bit about your decision to leave in 2001. Was that something you arrived at, and then you found a job, or a job found you [Betsy laughs] and it just seemed the right time to go?

03-00:56:06

Betsy: Oh, I wouldn't say that I wasn't impatient. In fact, when I moved to the Netherlands, I found that they have this rule for top-level bureaucrats, that they're only allowed to be in a position for five years. It's like term limits. So that was natural.

Here, Peter, do you want a chair? This is Peter Haberkorn, my partner—

Cándida Smith: Hello.

03-00:56:39

Betsy: —who experienced this all fully.

Cándida Smith: We have two minutes, maybe.

03-00:56:44

Betsy: Actually, if you want the real dirt, he probably [laughter] could give it to you. Yeah, exactly. The real commentary.

Cándida Smith: Some of this is official transcript, and—

03-00:56:56

Betsy: [laughs] Okay. So there certainly was a sense, by 2001, that I'd done a lot of things here and what else was I going to do here? And gee, if there was something else interesting, that wouldn't be so bad. Plus, of course, remember 2001, things had imploded here. It was quite a cratering that had gone on. What happened was I did the show on Dutch design. And when the show was up, I got a phone call from the Dutch Culture Consul in New York, who had helped fund and things like that, and said, "The director general of the culture department," which is the top bureaucrat, "is coming to San Francisco and would like to meet you to see the show." I said, "Okay." And he showed up and we walked through it. And I said, "Are you having a good time?" He said, "Oh, yeah, it's so great. They picked me up in a limousine and I'm staying in this suite at the—" whatever one of the big hotels is. And of course, I found out then that not only was he the top bureaucrat in culture, he also was the vice chair of the Dutch bureaucrats pension fund, which is one of the most powerful, richest pension funds in the

world. So he would be treated by all the financial institutions with great respect. And I also then subsequently learned that he was, as they called him, the pope. He had been director general of the culture department for fifteen years, meaning that he had also managed to avoid getting reassigned, et cetera. Anyhow, a few months after he'd been here, I got a call from the same culture consul. He said, "Did you hear that the director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute has left?" I said, "Yeah, I heard that. God, that could be an interesting job." And he said, "Good, because we've already recommended you to the minister, and that's why the consul general wanted to meet you. And would you come to the Netherlands for an interview?" So I came to the Netherlands for an interview. And it seemed like a great time to go there, because the best design in the world was being produced in the Netherlands. And I'd grown up there, so I knew the language and thought I knew what I was doing. Little did I know, but—

Cándida Smith: Okay. And then of course, that's a very different thing because it is an architecture museum. So presumably, then you could focus on precisely the things that you wanted to focus in on. But what happens with the synergies that might develop when you interact with other departments?

03-00:59:50

Betsky:

Well, obviously, I knew that I was going to miss being in the world of art. And I worked very hard in the Netherlands to insert myself into the wider world of art, trying to do projects with my neighbor across the way, Chris Dercon, the head of the Boijmans Van Beuningen. And then I was chairman of the museum advisory group for the Museum Committee of the Arts Advisory Board to the Amsterdam city council, their funding council. In the last year I was there, I was chairman of the City of Rotterdam sculpture collection. So I certainly was trying to be part of that much wider debate. And also I was redefining architecture and what architecture was, in a much broader way. But yes, all of that was because I did feel that architecture was rather limiting, in that sense.

Cándida Smith: Then you go to Cincinnati. I think all along, you've been answering the question of how SFMOMA prepared you for [Betsky laughs] your current position. So I don't know if I need to frame the question, other than as we're wrapping up, how you have personally reflected on where you think museums are going to be going.

03-01:00:20

Betsky:

Oh, my God! [chuckles]

Cándida Smith: When SFMOMA's 100 years old, in 2035—

03-01:00:29

Betsky: What will it look like?

Cándida Smith: Yeah, what is it likely to look at? Which is a very different question from what does it want to look like.

03-01:00:36

Betsky: Well, it is something that I'm grappling with right now, as we also try to reinvent the Cincinnati Art Museum. And I think that the answer is twofold. We can talk more about why I went to the Cincinnati Art Museum and how it's relevant. Because of course, one of the things that interested me about the Cincinnati Art Museum is that it was founded out of the Arts and Crafts movement, with as its model, what we today call the Victoria and Albert Museum. And so what I have tried to do there is also to make design a much more integral part of the art museum. With limited success, because there's not much of a support community, surprisingly enough, and the curator is not very much interested in this. But one of the most important things that art museums offer today is refuge; is that all of those complicated frames I talked about—not even starting with the museum itself, but the ecology of the art market and the aura of the artwork in our society, the marketing and publicity campaigns that breed on that; then the building itself, the white walls, the skylights, the lights; the frames on the works of art themselves, the labels—all have as their primary focus, as far as I'm concerned, getting you to look at that beautiful object, image or space, and letting everything else fade away. And in that sense, I'm rather conservative. I think that art museums are one of the few spaces left in our society that have that kind of slow space, that kind of sanctuary quality. And I think it's a very important function and a very critical one, in every sense of that word, for our society to have that space and to allow that kind of experience. And that also means that children should shut up when they're in the art museum.

At the same time, the art museum also has to be an active community center. And an art museum will only survive if the community perceives it not just as an important historical asset, but as a vital part of their lives, as a place where they can socialize, where they can be entertained, and where they can learn something. Survey after survey shows that's what they come to art museums for. And that then means that you have to be more able to fit yourselves into the social structures of the family with the kids who, on Saturday, when they might come to the art museum, have soccer practice and everything else; into a school system that has no possibility for anything except learning the ABC's, if that.

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04-00:00:02

Betsky:

Okay. So the museum also needs to be this place where you're an integral part of different social groups and different social structures, everyday life. You need to be part of the schools, you need to be part of people's weekend rituals. You need to be the place where you go on dates, you need to be the place where you learn things that are actually valued and tested for. You need to be the place that's a natural gathering place, a place of refuge. We did things at Cincinnati like put the inauguration on our theater and invite everyone in. And we do swearing-in ceremonies at the museum, which is fantastic. And I have to say, my model is a little bit moving from what I started out with, which is that the modern art museum is a cross between the cathedral and a department store, to the fact that maybe the model is the new kinds of mega-church, which have that moment of concentrated, heavily-framed holiness; of getting you to see something beyond your everyday life, something amazing—in their case, the truth of God—but that make that part of a complex of experiences that include coffee and daycare and a gym and counseling and job search and hanging out and drinking coffee with your girlfriends and all of that, dating. And that, for me I think, is much more the model; that you preserve that moment of concentrated, awe-inspiring, knock-your-socks-off beauty, within a mechanism that makes you a central part of the community in which you're located. I think that has to be the model.

Cándida Smith:

Gee, you sound an awful lot like Graham Beal. I'm wondering if this is a bit of influence from the west [Betsky laughs], the acculturation factor.

04-00:02:24

Betsky:

Who knows? It's entirely possible. And certainly, I think that his reinstallation is something that I have found inspiring and want to build on. And I want to go it even better, and maybe even more intense than he's done it, but I think he's done one of the most interesting experiments in moving the basic building blocks of the museum experience, the gallery show, to a new level.

Cándida Smith:

Yeah. Well, I have completed my questions.

04-00:02:59

Betsky:

Oh, my goodness. Okay.

Cándida Smith:

But if you have anything you want to say in conclusion, or we can just end it where you last—

04-00:03:08

Betsky:

No, I think again, as I think I started out, I feel that we were very lucky to move up to San Francisco in that January of '95, when everything started changing here. The museum was, to all effects and purposes,

brand new, like a new place. San Francisco was reinventing itself. The visual landscape in which we all lived was reinventing itself. And I felt like someone handed me the keys to this open space and said, okay, all this is happening; make something of it. Show us what's good and beautiful and troubling and crazy and scary about it. Show it to us. Collect it. Talk about it. Get people excited about it, get people interested in it. And I got to do that for six years. And it is still one of the greatest experiences of my life. And whatever the problems might've been with staff or whatever has all kind of faded away, because it was such a great moment to be here.

Cándida Smith: Great. Let's cut it there.

[End of interview]

Richard Cándida Smith is professor of history at the University of California, Berkeley, where he teaches the intellectual and cultural history of the United States and directs the Regional Oral History Office. He is the author of *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California*, *Mallarmé's Children: Symbolism and the Renewal of Experience*, and *The Modern Moves West: California Artists and Democratic Culture in the Twentieth Century*, and the editor of *Art and the Performance of Memory: Sounds and Gestures of Recollection*.