

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

GERALD NORDLAND

SFMOMA Director, 1966-1972

Interviews conducted by

Lisa Rubens, Richard Cándida Smith, Peter Samis, and Jill Sterrett

in 2007

Copyright © 2009 by San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Funding for the Oral History Project provided in part by Koret Foundation.



Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Gerald Nordland, dated March 20, 2009. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All copyrights and other intellectual property rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Excerpts up to 1000 words of this manuscript may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and the attribution below is included.

Requests for permission or questions should be addressed to SFMOMA Research Library and Archives, 151 Third Street, San Francisco, CA 94103 or archives@sfmoma.org and should include identification of the specific passages to be quoted, anticipated use of the passages, and identification of the user.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

“SFMOMA 75th Anniversary: Gerald Nordland,” conducted by Lisa Rubens, Richard Cándida Smith, Peter Samis, and Jill Sterrett, 2007, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; © San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2009.

Discursive Table of Contents—Gerald Nordland

Audio File 1	1
<p>Thoughts on Albers—time spent at SF MOMA prior to working at the institution—arrival at SF MOMA and description of the institution in 1966—problems at the SF MOMA upon arrival—attempting to build up the staff—making the museum more professional—transition to a collections based institution rather than a <i>Kunststalle</i>—not having a real model for the institution—work for <i>Frontier</i> and <i>Artforum</i>—approach for reorienting those magazines to the west coast— exhibition programs occurring upon arrival—Paul Klee and Robert Motherwell exhibitions—balancing local—national—and international artists—characterizing the board of trustees during the early years of his tenure—and the art exhibit at the White House during the Johnson administration.</p>	
Audio File 2	19
<p>Clement Greenberg and art criticism—Sally Lilienthal—the conservative nature of the board—and tension with the board over catering to local artists versus breaking onto the national art scene—the West Coast Now exhibition—Sam Francis—Edward Corbett—relationships to California artists and other galleries—concerts at the SF MOMA—relationships to other museums in the Bay Area—Frank Lobdell—photography and Van Deren Coke—Grace McCann Morley’s emphasis on the Pacific Rim—reproduction of certain works in the museum handbook—and Robert Frank and Raoul Hague.</p>	
Audio File 3	40
<p>Ruth Asawa exhibit in L.A.—the Franklin Murphy Sculpture Garden—the creation of <i>Artforum</i>—membership in the Museum Directors Association—comparing San Francisco and Los Angeles—war protests—James Rosenquist—why Peggy Guggenheim contributed to San Francisco—memorandum related to suggestions for the next director of the museum—and his relationship with Edward Weston.</p>	
Audio File 4	55
<p>The acquisition of a Piet Mondrian and description of the work—George Braque painting—the state of the cubist collection at the time of his directorship—the old building as a <i>Kunsthalle</i> and comparing exhibition layouts with the new building—<i>La Femme au chapeau</i>—description of priorities for collecting European works—Jean Arp and the development of the sculpture collection—Josef Albers—Rene Magritte and Mark Rothko—description of acquiring the Rothko—thoughts on Surrealist work—the SF</p>	

MOMA's Phillip Gustons—Clifford Still—acquiring his work and their relationship—discussion of the decision to dedicate permanent display rooms for certain artists—speaking about Rothko—Guston and Still's artistic generation—Jay DeFeo—Picasso's *Scene de rue* (Street Scene)—its significance and acquisition and the hidden painting underneath.

Audio File 6

69

Request by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco to change name—thoughts on works selection of five works—John Humphrey as a curator—his personal and professional relationship to Man Ray and other artists introduced to him by Man Ray—the reception of photography in San Francisco—Gaston Lachaise as an artist and analysis of his sculpture—and analysis of paintings by Guston - Corbett and Oliveira.

Audio File 5

83

More on his idea of the four rooms—the Diebenkorn room and more thoughts on the artist—Raoul Hague—the Twelve Americans exhibit—attempting to acquire *Elegies*—analysis and description of Gustons—Motherwell—Corbett and Oliveira—general thoughts on the development of American painting over the course of the last 40 years—de Kooning and paint selection and the long-term conservation problems inherent to incompatible paint selection—Mondrian—and developing a list of his most important acquisitions.

Interview #1: April 12, 2007

Interviewed by Lisa Rubens, ROHO, at Nordland's home in Chicago

[Begin Audio File 1 04-12-2007.mp3]

Rubens: We're in Mr. Nordland's lovely home, with a little bit of the art that he's been particularly well known for, showing up in the background of the interview. We'll talk about that later. I'd like to start with when you came as director in 1966, what kind of institution did you inherit?

01-00:08:25

Nordland: Well, I knew the museum rather well. I had spent a lot of time at the museum. I enjoyed San Francisco a great deal. I knew the work of Dr. Grace McCann Morley, the founding director and many of the wonderful shows that she did mount over the years.

Rubens: You would come up for the shows?

01-00:08:49

Nordland: I spent two years on debate tournament tours from USC. Whenever I got within striking distance, I would always get to San Francisco. I also came there while I was stationed at Fort Ord in the U.S. Army during the Korean War. I'd made it a matter to get in to find the good food and the good jazz and the wonderful works that were put on view by Dr. Morley.

Rubens: So you had familiarity with the site, you knew where it was.

01-00:09:34

Nordland: Yes. And incidentally, while I was working for *Frontier* magazine in Los Angeles, I had interviewed George Culler, the then director, the successor to Dr. Morley. I had written about the San Francisco museum and its program.

Rubens: Do you remember what you said?

01-00:10:01

Nordland: Well, I think I commented on the fine works that they had by Henri Matisse. I probably talked about the [Arshile] Gorky, the [Jackson] Pollock, the [Mark] Rothko. The Rothko was a very distinguished painting, which unfortunately, George Culler got rid of.

Rubens: What a sad story! Was that one of the reasons that Culler left?

01-00:10:35

Nordland: I never bothered to investigate that matter. I had enough to do, without worrying about old problems. I don't think so. I don't think people realized. Dick [Richard] Diebenkorn used to say, "The prime reason to go to that museum is to see that painting." I don't think people felt that

it was as great an affront to San Francisco art history as many of the artists and I did.

Rubens: That's quite a statement. Well, we'll get back to that. So you had familiarity with the exhibits, with the work, particularly that Grace did.

01-00:11:24

Nordland: Well, not all of them, by any means, but I did keep up with the *[Quarterly] Bulletin*, and I knew what was happening.

Rubens: What was it about being offered that job that attracted you?

01-00:11:36

Nordland: Well, I considered it one of the most desirable jobs in the United States.

Rubens: Why?

01-00:11:41

Nordland: It was quite thrilling to me. I revered the place, its heritage and its background. I loved the idea that the first Bob [Robert] Motherwell show was there [1946], the first Gorky show [1941] was there. They had a great deal to live up to.

Rubens: Did you have some vision of what you could do? I want to ask this in terms of, when you came there, there was a certain paucity of upkeep, and there were some real—well, I don't know, *problems*, but things you did want to do right away?

01-00:12:20

Nordland: The building didn't look fresh. It was somewhat run down. I think the shortage of money and the shortage of staff made it difficult. And of course, there were never a great many curators, so a lot of work had to be done by a very few people.

Rubens: But you felt you could get in there and—

01-00:12:40

Nordland: Well, I was in a museum that only had five people, including one of whom was our janitor. And we did everything.

Rubens: You mean when you were—

01-00:12:49

Nordland: At the Washington Gallery of Modern Art.

Rubens: You did some pretty amazing shows, which we'll refer to, because some of the people you showed then in San Francisco. So you had twenty people, I think, maybe a little less, when you started?

01-00:13:02
Nordland:

About twenty-eight. And you know, we didn't have guards.

Rubens:

No, I didn't know that. No guards. You needed to finish out your contract at Washington. I know that Evelyn Haas wanted you to come a little earlier, but you were willing to come out and help them plan their—

01-00:13:26
Nordland:

It would have been Elise Haas, her mother-in-law.

Rubens:

Elise Haas. To plan their exhibition schedule. She was concerned about—

01-00:13:36
Nordland:

Well, I didn't want to drop the balls in Washington, and I did take a little longer, perhaps, than she would have liked. I have a little problem with loyalty.

Rubens:

So tell me what it was like when you first came.

01-00:14:02
Nordland:

Well, I found a very able staff, wonderful people. John Humphrey was a particularly strong person. He found it very hard to write a sentence, but he was very close to the artist community, and he had a very good relationship, and positive, with many of the museums in the nation that would be capable of lending us exhibitions that would be beneficial to our program.

Rubens:

John Humphrey had been there how long by then?

01-00:14:37
Nordland:

Oh, I would think at least eight years.

Rubens:

What was it that gave him that ability?

01-00:14:47
Nordland:

He had been an artist, he had studied to be an artist. But many people find that they're better at interpreting or exhibiting or displaying, or generally supporting the arts than they are in originating it.

Rubens:

So you had him. Had you met him before?

01-00:15:12
Nordland:

I had met him. But just enough to know his name.

Rubens:

But you liked him, thought you could work with him, count on his connections?

01-00:15:21

Nordland:

Oh, I felt very pleased to have him. And Dr. Anneliese Hoyer was there. She was of retirement age at the time, and I asked her to stay on. Before very long, our registrar retired, or withdrew in order to get a better position for him across the bay, in Richmond. That was Hayward King. I had the opportunity then to bring in a trained registrar.

Rubens:

And that was?

01-00:15:54

Nordland:

I recruited Sue [Suzanne] Foley from the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. And she, for a year, worked as my registrar. Then when Dr. Hoyer retired, she became the curator.

Rubens:

Had you had connections with the Walker already?

01-00:16:15

Nordland:

I was familiar with the important museums that showed a recognition of a need to pay attention to modernism in America. I was familiar with its program without necessarily being close to anybody there. I had given a lecture on the Washington color painters at Walker, for Martin Friedman. I met Sue Foley there. She drove me around the city and did what needed to be done for a visiting fireman. I thought that she would do the job, and I think she did an admirable one.

Rubens:

So you recruited her.

01-00:16:58

Nordland:

Yes.

Rubens:

I wondered if you would just say one more thing about King. You said he had been an artist in his own right?

01-00:17:08

Nordland:

Hayward was an artist, yes.

Rubens:

What kind of artist?

01-00:17:12

Nordland:

I think he was a painter and a sculptor. Well also, he was a black man. He was related somehow, I think, distantly—you know, not an aunt—of the great pianist and arranger, Mary Lou Williams of Kansas City and the Walter Page Blue Devils [band], all those other great bands of Kansas City. He was very fond of talking about Mary Lou.

Rubens:

Then he went to the Richmond Art Center across the bay?

- 01-00:17:46
Nordland: Richmond Art Center, where he had I think two or three people to help him, and he put on some very good shows.
- Rubens: Getting back to the fact that you had just two curators, you were able to get a professional registrar. Did you also have a director of education? Was Bob Whyte there already?
- 01-00:18:14
Nordland: No, no. Claire Isaacs was there at that time. She was very vigorous. I think she got an opportunity in the university that she—
- Rubens: [UC] Berkeley, I think.
- 01-00:18:27
Nordland: —had to take advantage of that.
- Rubens: So she had hired Bob Whyte, or—
- 01-00:18:34
Nordland: I think Bob Whyte was her assistant, at the end.
- Rubens: So he was there when you came.
- 01-00:18:40
Nordland: No, I think, but shortly afterwards.
- Rubens: Alright. But you deferred to her—
- 01-00:18:46
Nordland: Oh, yes.
- Rubens: I didn't know if you'd hired him or—
- 01-00:18:47
Nordland: No, no. No, I didn't. I'm sure she did.
- Rubens: I believe Eugenie Candau was the librarian, and had worked under—
- 01-00:19:00
Nordland: No, I hired her.
- Rubens: Oh, you hired her.
- 01-00:19:02
Nordland: Yes. She also ended up being a registrar. There was a volunteer.
- Rubens: So when you come, despite the museum's reputation, the shows it had shown, it was not operating as a professional museum.

01-00:19:27

Nordland:

Well, if you think about what a museum is, what a museum's supposed to do, it's supposed to have a collection. It's supposed to study its collection, and present its collection in an educational context, so that the world can understand, benefit, and grow through it. Now, the collection not only has to be studied, but it has to be conserved. It has to be kept in the condition that the artist intended the works to be kept. Now, those are pretty heavy responsibilities. We didn't even have adequate storage space. The museum was really a *Kunsthalle*. It was an exhibition space. It did a lot of exhibitions—sometimes forty, sometimes fifty, sometimes sixty in a year—all very interesting, and very expanding. But the business of being acquainted and understanding clearly, say, the importance of your Gorky and your Pollock and your Rothko, and letting the world know about it, so that the world would beat its path to your door, was being let go. And publishing, the business about publishing, there had been very little done. I tried to change that.

Rubens:

How did you literally go about that? Did you have a model of an institution that would help you—that you keyed off of, to begin this undertaking of making a *Kunsthalle* back into a museum?

01-00:21:42

Nordland:

I don't think I did. After all, you know, I had grown up in Los Angeles, which at the time, was not very rich in art. I'd gone to USC [University of Southern California], across the street from the Los Angeles County Museum, which was a museum of history, science and art. Art was probably the least well supported of the three divisions. I knew about the Pasadena Museum [of California Art], I knew all the galleries in the city. I was familiar with The Huntington [Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens] and other resources. The Getty was a moribund institution at that time. I became aware of San Francisco and I focused on it. I was very close to the people at the Santa Barbara [Museum of Art]. I spent a couple of years at Yale University. During that time, I became aware of the museums in Boston and, of course, all the museums in New York and many of the galleries that I found especially interesting. I had focused on Philadelphia. Then after I came back to L.A. after the Korean episode, I spent ten years writing criticism for the *Frontier* magazine, out of Westwood.

Rubens:

Would you characterize *Frontier* for our—

01-00:23:23

Nordland:

Frontier was something like *The New Republic*, or something like the *Nation*. It was a left-leaning liberal paper that tried to express what needed to be expressed about the issues of its time in the western United States. Since most publishing in America is in the east, the

tendency is for the focus to be on the east. It's very hard to get attention to the west. That was the way it was when we founded *Artforum*. It was supposed to be a western paper.

Rubens: So *Frontier* had been founded—

01-00:24:02

Nordland: *Frontier* was founded probably after the war. Probably around 1950.

Rubens: And how soon did you start writing for it?

01-00:24:12

Nordland: I wrote for it from '55 to '64.

Rubens: So you're in on the beginning?

01-00:24:17

Nordland: No, no, but—

Rubens: Two years.

01-00:24:20

Nordland: Well, '55 to '64.

Rubens: Who is your editor?

01-00:24:25

Nordland: Kerby, Phil Kerby, a wonderful editor who later went to the L.A. *Times* and had a great deal to do with regenerating it and making it one of the leading papers in the United States. The director, the owner was Gifford Phillips. A wonderful collector and a member of the Phillips family of Washington, D.C. Born in Colorado, educated at Yale, resident in L.A.

Rubens: But he was an L.A. man?

01-00:24:49

Nordland: Yes, yes, yes.

Rubens: And what did he collect?

01-00:24:51

Nordland: Well, he collected Robert Motherwell, he collected Emerson Woelffer. He had an outstanding Picasso, a postwar painting. He had about a 1908 or '09 fauve Matisse painting. He had a wonderful sculpture by Marino Marini, a full-scale bronze. He had a distinguished collection, and he's continued. He's still alive.

Rubens: Where was that collection? How would one see it? Private invitation?

01-00:25:29
Nordland:

Well, at his home.

Rubens:

So you were invited to see it?

01-00:25:33
Nordland:

Oh, we were good friends.

Rubens:

This question's coming off of if there was a model of a museum—

01-00:25:45
Nordland:

Well, I think I based it on a kind of a national overview that I'd gotten from the opportunities I'd had to coast through the coast, and to be in the Northeast, and to evaluate what was going on. On the basis of my experience at the WGMA, I felt that I was ready to take this to a new level.

Rubens:

What did that mean doing, and what did you proceed to do?

01-00:26:19
Nordland:

Well, I thought it would be to reach a balanced program that would pay attention to the best work that was being done on the coast, but to balance it with what I felt were the most important influences that could be discerned on the national scene, and to salt it occasionally with international exhibitions and things that could be borrowed from sister institutions like the Walker, like the Museum of Modern Art [NY], like the Guggenheim [Museum], like the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, like the Corcoran Gallery, like the Detroit Institute [of Arts]. Those were all institutions that one could look to. And on the West Coast, I could send shows to Pasadena, or I could send shows to San Diego, and relatively inexpensively. I could carry the colors.

Rubens:

Could you also call on your friends, for instance, from *Frontier*, to borrow paintings, to show those?

01-00:27:23
Nordland:

I could, indeed. I don't think I borrowed significantly from the Phillipses, but there were certainly Southern California collectors that I'd come to know. For example, our first Clyfford Still exhibition [1967] was done with things that we borrowed from Los Angeles collectors.

Rubens:

So then tell me, did you have a game plan, did you have a strategy about what a succession of exhibits would look like, to start that movement to raise up the profile?

01-00:28:10
Nordland:

Well, as we moved out of '66, which is where I came in, in September, and the program, of course, was set.

Rubens: You inherited it.

01-00:28:23

Nordland: For the spring of '67, we mounted a whole series of shows that were national, international, and local.

Rubens: You want to speak about some that were your favorites? Also, if it's important to make a distinction between shows you originate and shows that you take from other—

01-00:28:47

Nordland: Well, for example, one of the shows we did was Paul Klee [1967]. We did it with the Guggenheim, but the Guggenheim needed a lot of help. They needed our help and they needed Pasadena's help, because the Galka Scheyer Collection at the Pasadena Art Museum was a very important part of that total. But the Guggenheim, of course, had world-borrowing power, and it was ideal for them to do it. We shared that show and with great success. There were people in San Francisco who said, "Well, we know who Paul Klee is." I said, "Well, wait a moment. But there's a whole generation that hasn't seen it. It's been fifteen years since there was a major Paul Klee show [1949], and this is going to get to all our universities, to Stanford and Berkeley and to USF, and all of these schools where these kids have never seen this. This is really important to do."

Rubens: And the [Carl] Djerassis were not in the picture yet in San Francisco.

01-00:29:50

Nordland: No, no. I don't think the pill was on the scene. The pill.

Rubens: Ah. Because that's where the money came from, the invention of the birth control pill. Now, is it your idea to do the Klee show? Or is it in the wind with Guggenheim? I just want to know how that kind of works. How are you talking to—

01-00:30:13

Nordland: Well, I had regular conversations with Tom Messer, who was then the director. I stayed in contact with the people at Pasadena because it was, after all, almost my hometown. When they started talking about it, I said, "We've got to have it." They were, of course, very happy to have an outpost that would share it, and understand it, and care for it with the concern we would.

Rubens: Does this mean phone calls? Does this mean meetings between the three museums? How does it get shaped up, if it's—

- 01-00:30:51
Nordland: Phone calls. Phone calls and letters. And occasionally, you'd—Naturally, when you are in New York for one purpose, you're there for twenty purposes, and you renew the contacts that you have.
- Rubens: So Paul Klee. Who else were you interested in getting shown there?
- 01-00:31:12
Nordland: Well, Robert Motherwell.
- Rubens: Ok, speak about Motherwell.
- 01-00:31:15
Nordland: There had been a Motherwell show at the Museum of Modern Art [NY], and a very fine catalogue had been produced. I couldn't afford to do that show. I had to do it on a shoestring. So I borrowed a few works—a couple of them from the Gifford Phillipses, come to think of it—and I rented a little show that the Modern had organized as a kind of a trailer to its big show, which was works on paper. I got that whole collection, and the things that I could add to it from the West Coast, and a few special necessities. We had Bob's second show [1967] at the San Francisco museum because after all, Grace Morley had given him the first one [1946].
- Rubens: That's so fantastic, to hear that. It was his second show on the West Coast, his third big show in the—
- 01-00:32:14
Nordland: Second big show. He had had a show at Paul Kantor Gallery in Los Angeles. But it was the second museum show.
- Rubens: Had he been shown at MoMA [NY]?
- 01-00:32:27
Nordland: Yes, the year before. I didn't publish because they had a catalogue, and so I used their catalogue.
- Rubens: Hadn't you shown Motherwells also at Washington?
- 01-00:32:45
Nordland: Only a few prints.
- Rubens: Had you already known Motherwell?
- 01-00:32:50
Nordland: Well, he was an influence on me. His writings were particularly significant. He wrote a piece for a New York show that was done at the Frank Perls Gallery in Beverly Hills, in about '48, in which he referred to the coterie of artists that were seeing each other and

respecting each other's work and were getting inspired by each other's work, as the "School of New York."

Rubens: That's his phrase?

01-00:33:27

Nordland: Yes. I was so touched by that piece that I typed it out, mimeographed it, and sent it to a number of my friends, because I thought he really spoke to what young people needed to know about how artists in New York at that time were getting their thoughts together in the production of what we later were to call the abstract expressionist period.

Rubens: Let me just get clear in my mind. Motherwell writes this as an introduction to an exhibit at the Perls Gallery? And this was something that you saw?

01-00:34:28

Nordland: It had Pollock, it had, I think, Bradley Walker Tomlin, it had [Adolph] Gottlieb, [Willem] de Kooning, Motherwell. I think it had a couple of ringers. I think it may have had a [Roberto] Matta, and it might've even had a Mark Tobey.

Rubens: Why do you say ringers?

01-00:34:49

Nordland: Well, they were of a different generation. Tobey, of course, was an internationalist already. And Matta was just sojourning after the war in New York. He was a South American who had made his reputation in Paris.

Rubens: But when you're at San Francisco, and when you're thinking about that, "We have to have a Motherwell exhibit, and I can't afford a huge one." You're going to put together this that you just described, what did Motherwell represent to you at that point, in '66? What was he going to do for the profile of San Francisco?

01-00:35:39

Nordland: Well, I thought that he was doing work that would be eye opening, that would be perhaps even a little upsetting, and that it would be part of the foundation balancing with local artists and international artists like Paul Klee, to give people a sense of the open-endedness of modern art.

Rubens: When you say upsetting, what was potentially upsetting about Motherwell?

01-00:36:21

Nordland: Well, I think that the *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* [1957-60] generally were found hard to take by the American community. They found them confusing. They seemed like the common phrase, "My son

could do that.” And they were a bit troublesome. But of course, it was not all that Bob was involved with. There were the Italian series, there were a number of other aspects of the work that were available. And there were all kinds of works on paper, including those that dealt with automatism. I felt that this would be beneficial to the community.

Rubens: Automatism is?

01-00:37:17

Nordland: Exploiting chance. As the Surrealists often did. I mentioned that Robert Coates had written a little phrase in the *New Yorker* that this movement might be called abstract expressionism. Now, he had taken that from a section on [Vasily] Kandinsky, in one of Alfred Barr’s books in the mid-thirties; but he was applying it for the first time to Pollock and de Kooning and Motherwell and Gottlieb and Bradley Tomlin and those people that we now call the abstract expressionists. So it was a new usage. Bob had written in the Bradley Walker Tomlin catalogue for the Whitney Museum [of American Art] that he thought maybe a better title would be abstract surrealism.

Rubens: Bob Motherwell?

01-00:38:31

Nordland: Bob Motherwell.

Rubens: Abstract surrealism refers to?

01-00:38:36

Nordland: The use of chance, and the use of spontaneity, and the not doing studies before you do your work, and trying to take advantage of the happy accidents that occur in the process of hard work.

Rubens: So tell me, was the Motherwell exhibit well received at San Francisco?

01-00:38:57

Nordland: Not very well.

Rubens: Could you get anyone to buy Motherwells to contribute to the museum?

01-00:39:05

Nordland: Well, not at that time. But I think I certainly improved my relationships with the New York galleries. Two of our trustees had died, and it was suggested that a work might be purchased in their honor. I was able to contrive to get a very exceptional Robert Motherwell, *Wall Painting No. 10* [1964], which served that purpose. It also served to memorialize those people. It brought a very significant example, not an *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, but a one of a kind work.

- Rubens: Who were the trustees who died, do you remember?
- 01-00:40:05
Nordland: I'd have to look them up now.
- Rubens: We'll look at the list. Was that a hard sell to the acquisition committee, to get that *No. 10*?
- 01-00:40:15
Nordland: In that it worked, I have to say no.
- Rubens: Was there a distance between the show and the honor? There must've been a few years.
- 01-00:40:24
Nordland: Oh, I would say sure, a year to eighteen months.
- Rubens: We've mentioned two shows that have a national and international resonance. Well, maybe let's speak to two more shows that you do those first two years, and then—What I want to get to is how you're working with your board to get some money and develop an acquisition program.
- 01-00:40:59
Nordland: Well, the first show that I did myself, that was wholly done, with a publication, was the Jeremy Anderson show [1946]. A sculptor, a Bay Area sculptor, who had been associated with the CSFA [California School of Fine Arts]. An artist of real distinction, who worked primarily in redwood, sometimes painted, but usually redwood which he just gave a particularly attractive finish to. Jeremy had surrealist overtones. He was obviously influenced by European art, as well as the contemporary scene. I think [Alberto] Giacometti was a person that had had an impact on his work. He worked in a variety of materials besides. He would use magnacite. Nobody was casting in those days because first of all, there was no casting facility easily accessible. It was terribly expensive. So one was forced to think in terms of alternative like working in wood. Redwood was durable and also relatively inexpensive.
- Rubens: When you say no one was casting, do you mean along the West Coast? Or do you mean San Francisco?
- 01-00:42:25
Nordland: The West Coast.
- Rubens: Not true in L.A. or Seattle?
- 01-00:42:28
Nordland: No.

- Rubens: Had Jeremy Anderson had a museum exhibit?
- 01-00:42:38
Nordland: Well, he had been exhibited in many group shows, but he hadn't had a solo.
- Rubens: How was that show received?
- 01-00:42:48
Nordland: I think that was well received, yes.
- Rubens: He was based here?
- 01-00:42:52
Nordland: His father was a Stanford [University] professor, and Jeremy taught in local schools, over the years.
- Rubens: Did the museum already have one? Or were you able to acquire some more at that point?
- 01-00:43:03
Nordland: I don't think we were able to acquire anything, but we did have one in the collection.
- Rubens: Why don't you speak about who was on the board, if you can recall, when you first—
- 01-00:44:23
Nordland: Elise Haas, Mortimer Fleishhacker, Jaq [Jaquelin] Hume, Madeleine Russell, Charles C. de Limur, Rudolph Peterson, California bank, the chief of the Bank of America. It was—
- Rubens: I also saw that Vernon DeMars was on, the architect Vernon DeMars.
- 01-00:44:50
Nordland: Yes. Yes, Vernon was.
- Rubens: I was wondering how that happened. How would you characterize the board?
- 01-00:45:01
Nordland: Well, they made minimal contributions. The people who were officers had a tendency to move the meetings as adeptly as they were able to. There were discussions about the maintenance of the building, there were efforts to work with the other tenant of the building, which was the American Legion and other Legionnaire facilities. The building was supposed to be—there were supposed to be three buildings: a music building, a war memorial building for veterans, and an art building. In fact, it started out as music and art, but it was going to be called a memorial. Then the next step was that there would be three

separate buildings, one for veterans. Once the building was built, the veterans took over three-fourths of it and used the entire entrance area, so we had to use a side entrance, which now seems like a silly solution, but in order to make peace, I believe that the board and Grace Morley said, "Well, we can have a side entrance, it'll be all right." People used to make small jokes about that side entrance, as we were kind of not fully entitled to our position in the building. But the whole intention had been, the whole thought had been, in the evolution of the War Memorial program, was that as we got further from World War I, there'd be less and less need for veterans for such a facility; and that presumably, the art program would expand into the space, and use it for its purposes. Of course, when we did the renovation, that is exactly what happened. We paid for having the veterans consolidated to floors one and two. We got the opportunity to enter by the front entrances, rather than the side entrance. We got to have a bookstore on the first floor. We turned the third floor into offices, conservation laboratory, classrooms, and library. Then the fourth floor could be used completely for exhibition space, with its skylights renewed, as it had been originally intended. The whole thought was that half of it would be in exhibitions and half of it would be in permanent collection. That was the thrust that I had hoped I could achieve from the very beginning of my tenure at San Francisco, which was to make use of its wonderful collection.

Rubens: By the way, was the painting school, the actual art classes, were they being offered when you were there?

01-00:48:37

Nordland: Oh, yes.

Rubens: And they kept going throughout your tenure.

01-00:48:40

Nordland: Yes. We were using space on the fourth floor for that.

Rubens: I wanted to talk about your board just for one more minute. Maybe if you would look here. This is '72; this is late in your [tenure]. Was William Matson Roth on your board from the beginning?

01-00:49:29

Nordland: No, but he came later. He had been an ambassador and had been in Washington. He came in as an energetic, thoughtful man. He also owned works by Jay DeFeo and David Smith. Gave a David Smith to the museum.

Rubens: The sculptor?

01-00:49:51

Nordland:

Sculptor, yes. And Madeleine Haas Russell, of course, is related to the Haases, was a wonderful collector. She had one of the greatest Picassos of the 1930s, a portrait of the great blonde Nordic woman, Marie-Thérèse Walter, that Picasso painted so often. Dan Volkman. Hunter Land was secretary, and he helped me a great deal with experiments in renovating the building, trying out new floors and new wall treatments that were expendable. That's a gift that is very hard to get.

Rubens:

How did they have money to—Where did their money come from?

01-00:50:45

Nordland:

Oh, I think they had an inheritance. He was a stockbroker. Susan Land was a Stanford graduate, an art person herself. They became very good collectors. They had a couple of outstanding Diebenkorns, one on the cover of the recent Whitney Museum exhibition, and an Ocean Park example; and works by [Frank] Lobdell and Bob Natkin; and a great David Smith sculpture, maybe twelve feet high. Mortimer Fleishhacker was my president for several years, a very thoughtful and able man. Mrs. Randolph Hearst was, of course, a member. Mrs. Wellington Henderson acquired a number of fine things, which she did give to the museum over the years. Moses Lasky had been a director, and there was a historian—

Rubens:

He had been in L.A., right?

01-00:51:53

Nordland:

Moses Lasky? No, he was a San Francisco lawyer, and a very serious collector, and a historian of the museum. He wrote a history of the museum, which is very valuable. Edmund Nash was a—

Rubens:

He collected what?

01-00:52:13

Nordland:

He collected mostly Bay Area things. And Mrs. Brooks Walker, associated with the Walker family of Minneapolis and the Walker Art Center.

Rubens:

When she dies, long after your term, Brooks Walker steps in and really makes a big contribution, in terms of the new building. How was she to work with?

01-00:52:43

Nordland:

She was very friendly to acquisitions because she had a more national viewpoint than most participants.

Rubens:

How often did you meet with your board?

01-00:53:06

Nordland: Once a month. We also had a Women's Board once a month. We also had an activities board [Membership Activities Board], once a month.

Rubens: You had all these meetings. Did you see it as a mission to educate your board about the need to change this profile?

01-00:53:29

Nordland: I think I did, and I think that I was less successful in it than my successors have been, because it's quite clear from the way acquisitions have gone in recent years and the way the development of the new building went. How that money was raised and how the building was paid off is very impressive.

Rubens: But it's a different era.

01-00:54:03

Nordland: Well, it's a different era, in the sense that there is a legitimacy, there is a prestige and a status for modern art today that it did not enjoy in the late thirties and in the forties, and in succeeding years.

Rubens: I think you were battling an uphill battle. Just as you do an important Motherwell show, and it doesn't have a lot of cachet in San Francisco, historically it's important. I think it says something about your community. But it also says something about the board. Let me stay with the board for a minute, and then I want to ask you what you thought was going on in San Francisco. I will tell you that I interviewed Sally Lilienthal in this, she's Mrs. Philip Lilienthal. She just died a year and a half ago. I was glad to be able to interview her. Do you remember her?

01-00:55:11

Nordland: Oh, very well.

Rubens: Why do you say it that way?

01-00:55:15

Nordland: Well, I met her when I came to jury a show at the San Francisco Museum. I didn't go to the president's art party in Washington, because I had made a commitment to this. And you know, you never turn down the president when he invites you to the White House.

Rubens: You mean, Eisenhower?

01-00:55:39

Nordland: No, no, no, Lyndon Johnson.

Rubens: Oh, Lyndon Johnson. This is in the sixties.

01-00:55:43

Nordland:

He had a wonderful art event at the White House, but I had agreed to be a member of the jury. I met Sally, and we got along very well. I was impressed with what she was doing, and she seemed to like what I stood for at the time. As the years went by, I think there was a certain drawing apart on both of our parts. She was particularly devoted to a collector in Southern California named Robert Rowan. He was involved with the Greenbergian point of view and was collecting things like [Frank] Stella and [Jules] Olitski and the then-current Greenberg pattern. I was a little less interested in that direction and more interested in filling in interstices that had developed in the course of the years, of things that we had overlooked and should have been filling in earlier, when they would have been less expensive.

Rubens:

Oh, well, that's exactly what I want to come back to, right, what others you saw of those interstices. But let me stay with Sally for one more minute, please. Did you say Greenbergian?

01-00:57:23

Nordland:

Clem. Clem Greenberg.

Rubens:

You're referring to Clement Greenberg, who was a critic.

01-00:57:29

Nordland:

An important influence in those years.

Rubens:

How would you characterize the point of view that he represented?

01-00:57:40

Nordland:

Well, I knew a lot of painters that got these penny postcards, or maybe they were two-cent postcards then, from him, telling them how to paint and what to paint, and what colors to use.

Rubens:

Greenberg would write to artists?

01-00:57:56

Nordland:

Yes. Yes.

Rubens:

I'm sorry, it's hard for me to understand this. Give me an example of who he would write to.

01-00:58:02

Nordland:

Well, to all of the people that I was associated with in my Washington color painters show at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art. That would be [Kenneth] Noland and [Morris] Louis and Gene Davis and Paul Reed and Howard Mehring and Tom Downing.

[Begin Audio File 2 04-12-2007.mp3]

Rubens: I'm going to ask you to restate that, that Greenberg sent postcards to people whom you had worked with and exhibited. For instance, Gene Davis?

02-00:00:33

Nordland: Oh, yes, sure.

Rubens: And he'd say, "Why don't you use green instead of red?"

02-00:00:37

Nordland: He's telling them how to paint.

Rubens: You said the Greenbergian point of view. He liked Robert Rowan?

02-00:00:51

Nordland: Oh, Rowan was a collector who was following this practice very closely, and was checking in with the galleries in New York and keeping up with the things that Clem was sponsoring.

Rubens: Did anyone protest this? Or did artists ignore it?

02-00:01:13

Nordland: Well, now it's very fashionable to spend a part of time in every essay talking about how terrible Clement was. But at the time, he was a force.

Rubens: Had you come up against him when you were writing your pieces for *Frontier*?

02-00:01:42

Nordland: When I was going to do the Washington Gallery of Modern Art exhibition called *The Washington Color Painters*, I called on André Emmerich, who represented a number of people in this school. He also represented [Helen] Frankenthaler and Olitski and Morris Louis and Ken Noland and whatever. André said, "Well, you better make a courtesy call on Clem in order to get his approval."

Rubens: To which, you said?

02-00:02:36

Nordland: So I phoned the Greenberg residence and made an appointment. I came hat in hand. He said, "Well, I don't think I want to have Noland or Louis in the show on an equal basis. One major work by each one, that I will choose, and then you can have, say, eight of each of the other six artists."

Rubens: And what did you say?

02-00:03:15

Nordland: I said, "Thank you, sir."

Rubens: How old was Greenberg at the time, roughly?

02-00:03:22

Nordland: Oh, I suppose sixty.

Rubens: And was he an independent critic?

02-00:03:27

Nordland: Yes. Well, he had worked in *Partisan Review*. He had worked for *The New Republic*. He published from time to time—he didn't write an awful lot—he did publish from time to time in other magazines.

Rubens: Had he known any of your writing? Did he know *Frontier* at that point?

02-00:03:51

Nordland: Well, he knew enough about me to tell me, the first time we met, that he had a bone to pick with me. I had criticized his job of jurying a show in Los Angeles, at the Los Angeles County Museum.

Rubens: So you said, "Thank you very much," and you went on and did what you wanted to do.

02-00:04:17

Nordland: I did the best I could, and I got a couple of pretty good pictures for each of those artists. Pictures that had never been shown before, and very, very large ones. Then I was able to give almost a room to each of the other artists—Davis, Downing, Mehring, Reed.

Rubens: And some of these people, you will show later, at San Francisco. Davis.

02-00:04:43

Nordland: Davis, I gave a solo show to in San Francisco [1968], and then later, we showed his prints [1970]. The other artists, I did show single pieces, and I think I got acquisitions of all of them. I did in Milwaukee [Art Museum], as well.

Rubens: I want to just sew up, because this comes out of Sally Lilienthal, but it opened up a whole new door about the role of critics. I have been asking you to characterize your board. One of the things that Sally had said to me was that she felt she was the only Democrat on the board. That was number one. And number two, she told me that her own interests—and you probably know this—had become more social causes; that she had really—

02-00:05:36

Nordland: Amnesty International was her thing.

Rubens: She had created this [group] called Guns into Plowshares [The Ploughshares Fund] or something like that.

02-00:05:48

Nordland: Catchy.

Rubens: I'm wondering if this is when you did meet her—she did have some connections to the NEA, I think, or in some granting agency in D.C. at the time. She had been to Vassar and she was on Vassar's board. Am I right? Is it Vassar [College]? It's one of those girls' schools. It may be Sarah Lawrence [graduated Sarah Lawrence, 1940]; I forget.

02-00:06:19

Nordland: I didn't know that she was at Vassar. My whole team in Washington was Vassar.

Rubens: I'll have to look this up for you. I'm pretty sure it's Vassar, but it could've been Sarah Lawrence. She remained on the board there so she would go back there. She had a little influence on their art, and then art school. She had a very good art teacher, art history teacher, who had educated her. Anyway, she had some connections in D.C., and so she had gotten money. But her other interest—let me ask you to stay with this for a second—her other interest that I knew about was the rental gallery. And was that under your watch?

02-00:07:05

Nordland: We had a rental gallery. It had a space in the far reaches of the building. It required a lot of time. It did occupy space that would better be used, when you realized that you had a members room, and you had a couple of classrooms, and then you had a bookstore, and an art rental gallery, all in these spaces that could be better used for exhibition space.

Rubens: So the rental gallery was closed for a brief while. My understanding is that she found space at Fort Mason.

02-00:08:03

Nordland: That's true. After I left.

Rubens: That's after you left. The other thing that she was very interested in—and I think this is going to happen after you leave, also—is that the city of—She was pretty good buddies with [William Matson] Roth, maybe he was the other Democrat.

02-00:08:34

Nordland: Well, as you say, he came in, like, in the last two or three years. First he came in, and then he became president. She and I were both very happy to have him as president. I felt very strongly that he was a man

who had his feet on the ground and had a national point of view. Unfortunately, it didn't overlap my own too well.

Rubens: Let me get back to that. He was chair of the San Francisco Arts Commission. Maybe that happened a little later.

02-00:09:23

Nordland: I think that happened later.

Rubens: Because he and Sally were particularly interested in the Neighborhood Arts Program. That's when I was asking if you knew Steven Goldstein. They were interested in diversifying some the art community.

02-00:09:44

Nordland: Well, Roth, you know, ran for governor.

Rubens: I forgot about that. That's right. So you had a lot of ambitious—Let's shift a bit. We've talked a bit about your work. So is it fair to say they represented a little bit more conservative San Francisco, or old-money San Francisco?

02-00:10:03

Nordland: Oh, I think that's very true. That's quite accurate.

Rubens: So their art collecting was more interested in either local or Californiana, or pre-1920. They weren't interested in these more newer people—Motherwell, Davis.

02-00:10:21

Nordland: That's true.

Rubens: Did you feel you had a San Francisco community that you had to appeal to? I understand part of your mission is to raise the profile of the museum. There's no question about it. You know, become a museum and have it publishing and initiating.

02-00:10:40

Nordland: And conserving, interpreting, publishing.

Rubens: And you're bringing exhibits, like the Klee, to educate a new generation. But beyond that, was there a local community? They become much more articulate later, in the late seventies. But whether it was gay or Hispanic or Asian, or young—I mean, how—

02-00:11:03

Nordland: Well, there was a fairly militant group among the Women's Board that felt that our responsibility ought to be to local artists and that this business of bringing in Paul Klee, or bringing in Bob Motherwell, or

bringing in Synchronism or Cubism or the exhibits that might be contrived with the Museum of Modern Art [NY], were less the responsibility than to serve the local artists. Maybe the ones that they were collecting, or the ones that they were most enthusiastic about.

Rubens: So that was a tension between you and the boards?

[Narrator added in editing: 1—Board of Trustees. 2—Women’s Board. 3—Membership Activities Board.]

02-00:11:55

Nordland: Yes. Despite the fact that fully 50 percent of exhibitions were local.

Rubens: A big essay that you write, I believe, and an exhibit that you initiate is “West Coast Now.” Did that come from the Portland Art Museum?

02-00:12:14

Nordland: Well, I was a contributor. In order to get a balance, what you do is you get somebody from L.A., somebody from San Francisco, and somebody from Portland and Seattle to contribute and tell you who the right names are. The exhibition gets developed that way. It’s like a four-man jury.

Rubens: Well, tell me a little bit more about some of the local, or if not Bay Area, California artists that you wanted to promote. You talked about the sculptor just a moment ago, that you had, the redwood sculptor. Who else were you interested in promoting?

02-00:13:00

Nordland: Well, you know, I had just done a Richard Diebenkorn show in Washington, which had traveled broadly in the United States. It went to New York City, to the Jewish Museum; it went to Newport Harbor [Art Museum]. I felt that I was always ready to do a Diebenkorn show, for example. But for example, I did an Elmer Bischoff drawing show [1971]. A colleague of Dick’s, and I think a very gifted artist. We were doing shows of people who were maybe a little less traditional, a little more—We were doing shows like Jerrold Ballaine [1970], the sculptor; we were doing things that covered other aspects of the coast, like the John Altoon show [1967] from Los Angeles. We circulated it back to Los Angeles and San Diego, also. A lot of these shows, we were able to minimize the expenses of the show by arranging contracts with sister institutions to share them with us and help us defer the costs.

Rubens: Now, was John Altoon controversial?

02-00:14:34

Nordland: No, I don’t think John Altoon was controversial.

Rubens: But he was pretty important, wasn't he? Here's the catalogue that you—Maybe you can just hold it up. [laughs] What date is that? It's a beautiful catalogue.

02-00:14:53

Nordland: Thank you. It was November, December '67, in San Francisco; and January, February, at the Pasadena, '67; and the University of California, San Diego, in March and April.

Rubens: So this is a show you initiated.

02-00:15:13

Nordland: Yes, yes. I would, when my week was over, Friday afternoon, I would get on a plane and fly down to L.A. I'd be put up in John's studio, and we would talk, we would work on what needed to be done, and we'd look at the works. Ultimately, we produced this product together, with sixty-six works that traveled to other desirable venues.

Rubens: Now, did the museum, did San Francisco have an Altoon?

02-00:16:00

Nordland: They didn't have, but they have the painting on the cover. [*Ocean Park Series #II, 1962*]. I tried to get a significant picture for every show I did.

Rubens: I want to get back to how your visions and Roth's vision differed. Let's name a couple of the other artists that you did shows, that you initiated the shows.

02-00:16:29

Nordland: Well, Sam Francis [1967]. You've got one right there.

Rubens: Let's do that. Right here? Yeah, Sam Francis, speak a little bit about him.

02-00:16:37

Nordland: This is an interesting thing because this is an original print. The catalog is wrapped in an original print, and stapled through. [*Sam Francis: Exhibition of Drawings and Lithographs, 1967*].

Rubens: Whose idea is this?

02-00:16:49

Nordland: Sam's.

Rubens: The show is?

02-00:16:52

Nordland: This show, August, September, 1967; then it went to UCLA.

Rubens: Had you known Sam previously?

02-00:17:08

Nordland: Well, everybody knew Sam. But whether Sam knew me is another thing. Sam was, along with Tobey, one of the few people that made a reputation without building it in New York. He went first to France, started making prints in Switzerland, and had a show, a retrospective in Switzerland before he had one in the United States. He was married to a Japanese woman, and he became very much involved with Japan and had a great success there so that he didn't have to pay his dues in New York. It was very common for a Tom Hess or a Clem Greenberg or a Harold Rosenberg to say, "You can only make it in New York. You have to come here and pay your dues and scuffle and do your damndest, and, eventually, maybe you'll be lucky." But Sam didn't do it, Tobey didn't do it, Dick Diebenkorn didn't do it. This was the first American museum show for Sam. Very shortly, there was a show in Texas. I think in Houston. I think it was done by James Sweeney. But this was a sterling show of his prints and drawings, and one great painting. We were very fortunate that Mrs. Wellington bought the picture for herself, and gave it to the museum. It's a wonderful example of the classic bleeding of form, shapes, of Sam Francis, in a glorious pink, with a little touch of red, and a *marvelous* little nuance of yellow. Great painting.

Rubens: Great story. Who else? Who else do we have here that we want to talk about, you initiated? And I know that others you shared—

02-00:19:51

Nordland: Well, how about that Edward Corbett [1969]?

Rubens: Yeah, let's talk about—

02-00:19:55

Nordland: I saw a show, *Fifteen Americans*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, in 1951. It was a show that was just an all-star show, made by Dorothy Miller at the Modern. It had Pollock, it had Rothko, it had just a distinguished group of New York painters. But there was one ringer. There was a fellow named Ed Corbett, that did these absolutely marvelous chinks, charcoals, and pastels. I was there for the opening, oddly enough. I ran down to the front desk and said, "Is there a price list on this?" They said, "No, no price list." I was back the next weekend from Yale, and I said, "Is there a price list?" They said, "Oh, yes. They're all sold." Anyway, along in those years, I was able to acquire a wonderful chalk and charcoal drawing.

Rubens: Describe Corbett.

02-00:21:09
Nordland: Corbett was on the faculty of the California School of Fine Arts, at the same time that Dick Diebenkorn, Clyfford Still, David Park, Elmer Bischoff and those other distinguished California artists were.

Rubens: Do you want to open up the—?

02-00:21:40
Nordland: Well, they're not going to reproduce well. That's his, too.

Rubens: You have one here in your house. You know what? Let's stop for one second because, you know what? I just want you to hold the Sam Francis, because I don't think that showed. Then we'll come back to Corbett.

02-00:22:11
Nordland: This is the Corbett that I acquired.

Rubens: For the museum? What's it called?

02-00:22:15
Nordland: Then I acquired one, a more modern one, too.

Rubens: What is it called?

02-00:22:21
Nordland: I bought this from a curator at the Oakland Museum [of California].

Rubens: Do you have the name there?

02-00:22:30
Nordland: His name?

Rubens: No, the painting's name.

02-00:22:32
Nordland: Oh, it's called *Number 3, 1950 [Untitled # 3, 1950]*.

Rubens: You acquired that for San Francisco?

02-00:22:36
Nordland: Yes. But vintage works like that were rare. Hard to come by. It really had to come in the secondary market.

Rubens: Hold up the Sam Francis, and I'm just going to have to have you repeat it. Now just restate what you said. This is?

02-00:23:14
Nordland: This is an original offset lithograph that was made by Sam Francis for us. He worked on the offset press to produce it, so each work is clothed in an original Sam Francis, by that inexpensive process.

Rubens: And what would that have cost to buy at the time?

02-00:23:39
Nordland: Oh, I imagine two dollars.

Rubens: And what would this be worth now?

02-00:23:44
Nordland: Well, I saw one recently at a gallery in New York, at \$150. But you know, it's not a fine art print and it isn't signed, but it was using the offset press for a fine art purpose and trying to get the color that he felt was not possible to get otherwise. You notice that there's no color in the book. So that was the only way to get a little color in. There he is in his shop.

Rubens: Did you come to know him?

02-00:24:37
Nordland: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Well, I was able to get that—

Rubens: Beautiful one we talked about.

02-00:24:42
Nordland: —the great pink painting at the time, I thought it was probably the last of its kind. So I felt particularly lucky that it was possible for Mrs. Wellington to acquire it.

Rubens: This last show we talked about—

02-00:25:15
Nordland: Corbett?

Rubens: Yeah. Was that well received?

02-00:25:21
Nordland: I think there was a kind of indifference at the time.

Rubens: Any others of these that—We spoke just a little bit of your Gene Davis show [1968].

02-00:25:37
Nordland: Well, I think that the fact that he worked in stripes of color, that he produced works that engaged your mind with what seemed like less than the full palette of availability that artists have, people found

striking. The main critic of the *Chronicle* wrote about it, with some joy. He said—

Rubens: Is this [Alfred] Frankenstein?

02-00:26:25

Nordland: Yes. He said, “There’s something a little heroic about an artist who sticks to a single theme and works out all the possibilities.” It’s remarkable how many painters of recent years have elected so rigorous a course—Rothko, Noland, [Larry] Poons, [Josef] Albers, Fritz Glarner. And he put Gene into this, and gave it a good deal of respect. But I think it was among the aficionados, the cognoscenti, that one got this sense of acceptance, rather than in a wide spread of folks. But we did acquire that great painting, *Cool Staccato* [*Cool Buzz Saw, 1964*]. It was on exhibit as long as I was in the museum. So I’m sure it made a lasting impression, like the great [Ernest] Briggs did, like the great Rothko did, and other important works that had been shown for years in the institution.

Rubens: So let me ask you, who were the cognoscenti in San Francisco during your tenure?

02-00:27:41

Nordland: Well, first of all, of course, are the artists.

Rubens: Who were the artists you liked?

02-00:27:47

Nordland: There were different levels. I unfortunately never knew David Park, but, of course I knew Diebenkorn. I knew Bischoff and Nathan Oliveira. I tried to stay in touch with what seemed to be happening, and I tried to see what other institutions were doing. I tried to spend my Saturdays in galleries, to see what was happening there.

Rubens: What were the important galleries in San Francisco at the time?

02-00:28:24

Nordland: Well, the Quay Gallery, which also used the name Ruth Braunstein, was certainly one of the them. The Dilexi Gallery was certainly one. Dilexi had started pretty much contemporaneously with the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. They shared a point of view, a philosophy and attitude, there was a lot of overlap between those two galleries. There has been a kind of a memorial show to the Dilexi.

Rubens: Where was the Dilexi?

02-00:29:10

Nordland: Addresses are hard for me to keep up with.

Rubens: So that was an important gallery?

02-00:29:15
Nordland:

It was.

Rubens: What else? Was [John] Berggruen —

02-00:29:23
Nordland:

Well, Berggruen was thinking about getting started with a gallery. You know, he's the son of Heinz Berggruen, the German. His mother was a Fleishhacker. He indicated that he was thinking about starting a gallery, and I said, "Well then, you'd be smart if you'd go work for your dad for a year and have him get you a job with Marlborough or somebody in London for a year, and then come back and start a gallery. Because otherwise, you'll just spend your money, and it'll not amount to anything." He's certainly been a very good, very successful businessman.

Rubens: But was not a gallery person when you were [with the museum]?

02-00:30:07
Nordland:

He was just starting. He had a little second floor space on Geary, I think.

Rubens: [Charles] Campbell was the one who had been a framer, is that right?

02-00:30:18
Nordland:

Campbell had been a framer, yeah.

Rubens: Then did he become a gallery owner when you were—Was he someone you worked with?

02-00:30:25
Nordland:

He was showing things in the frame shop. He was very much on the scene, yes. He had managed jazz bands for a long while. He was very au courant with the musicians of the city. He'd been involved with the Lu Watters band and the Turk Murphy band, and all the offshoots that came of that.

Rubens: I didn't know there were offshoots. Wasn't Diebenkorn in a band? No.

02-00:31:03
Nordland:

I can show you a picture of Elmer playing cornet.

Rubens: Elmer Bischoff?

02-00:31:10
Nordland:

And [Bill] Napier playing clarinet. Dick was fooling around with the trombone, and hoped that he would—But he didn't. He had too much

on his plate to deal with drawing and painting, to spend his time on learning the trombone. David Park played the piano.

Rubens: David Park. And then is it Brown? A guy named Brown. Not Joan Brown, but someone who was at Berkeley. Brown. I think he was in a band. Did you attend any of these performances?

02-00:31:47

Nordland: Oh, yeah. I even played in one of them.

Rubens: What'd you play?

02-00:31:50

Nordland: Drums.

Rubens: Fantastic.

02-00:31:53

Nordland: Doug MacAgy played drums.

Rubens: Doug MacAgy was at the—

02-00:31:57

Nordland: He had been a curator for Grace Morley, and then he went over to be the director of the California School of Fine Arts. He was the one that hired Clyfford Still. He hired Ed Corbett. He hired Diebenkorn, and he put that team together.

Rubens: Where was he when you came?

02-00:32:15

Nordland: Oh, he was in New York, working for a Cleveland gallery that moved to New York, and doing a variety of things. And his wife, of course, had been the curator and acting director of the [M. H.] de Young [Memorial] Museum.

Rubens: I was going to ask you what his relation—

02-00:32:35

Nordland: Not the de Young, I guess it would be the [California Palace of the] Legion of Honor. Jermayne MacAgy was her name. He was at the SFMA, with Grace. And then at the CSFA. Then in '51, he was fired—or maybe it was '50—and Ernst Mundt came in, probably in June of '50.

Rubens: Why are you so clear about that date?

- 02-00:33:08
Nordland: Well, I have a couple of things at press right now that relate to this. I did the recent Jack Jefferson show for Hackett-Freedman, and I have done a variety of things in this area, in recent months or years.
- Rubens: Fantastic. We'll get to that. Just to recap, when did you learn to play the drums?
- 02-00:33:38
Nordland: Oh, kid. I didn't have lessons, I just started banging away.
- Rubens: So when you came to San Francisco, there was sort of a *métier* for you, is that right?
- 02-00:33:48
Nordland: Well, I tell you, the Lu Watters, Turk Murphy, two-cornet big traditional jazz band, in the manner of King Oliver, was my ideal. And Grace Morley, too.
- Rubens: Say it again. As well as Grace Morley?
- 02-00:34:12
Nordland: And then the San Francisco Museum.
- Rubens: Well, did you have concerts at the—
- 02-00:34:18
Nordland: No. No, but in Grace's time, Rudy Blesh, who wrote a book about jazz, or two books about jazz—one about hot trumpets, I think he calls it, or something like that, [*Shining Trumpets*], and one about ragtime piano jazz. And he did the books with Harriett Janis, Hansi Janis, of the Janis Gallery in New York City, Sidney Janis Gallery, which was an important art emporium. After all, they were representing, at that time, Rothko and Still and de Kooning, all at once. They were second generation, after the Charles Egan stable gallery, Betty Parsons, and Sam Kootz galleries. But Sidney picked up all these people and was running a very important gallery. Anyway, Hansi and Rudy did shows of music at the San Francisco Museum. Rudy Blesh did a series of lectures. I think in those, he used recordings, rather than a jazz band.
- Rubens: Did you consider doing music at—
- 02-00:35:55
Nordland: No, no, there was a jazz revival going on. Lu Watters was playing, Turk Murphy was playing.
- Rubens: But you didn't have them at openings or—?

- 02-00:36:07
Nordland: No. No, no.
- Rubens: Nothing was going on like that at—?
- 02-00:36:09
Nordland: But I had Bobby Timmons in Washington. He was a more contemporary person.
- Rubens: The museum was really not a factor when you were on the scene; it was just coming online, they would say.
- 02-00:36:36
Nordland: You might say, yeah.
- Rubens: The same with the Berkeley Museum of Art?
- 02-00:36:42
Nordland: Well, it was built during my period there.
- Rubens: During your period, that modern building?
- 02-00:36:46
Nordland: The brutal building. Peter Selz was there.
- Rubens: What was your relationship with Peter Selz?
- 02-00:36:56
Nordland: Well, I'd known him for a long, long time. I knew him when he was at Pomona [College: Museum of Art], and before he went to the Museum of Modern Art [NY]. I've always had high regard for him.
- Rubens: Would you have meetings or interactions? Was there a Bay Area art museum directors association?
- 02-00:37:17
Nordland: We would see each other from time to time, but we didn't have that kind of a thing, like we did in Washington.
- Rubens: Were you competitive? Would he have thought of your museum as competition?
- 02-00:37:29
Nordland: Well, it's the question whether we would think of his museum as competitive, I think would be the—
- Rubens: Indeed. After all, you were showing Bischoff, you were—
- 02-00:37:40
Nordland: He did have [Hans] Hofmann.

Rubens: Did you ever show Hofmann?

02-00:37:45

Nordland: Well, individual works. I did a big Hofmann show in Washington, but not at San Francisco.

Rubens: Let me just check the time here.

02-00:38:15

Nordland: Lobdell is a local artist, too.

Rubens: Tell me about Lobdell.

02-00:38:27

Nordland: Well, Frank Lobdell was a student at the California School of Fine Arts. He was a very serious and good painter. We had a couple of examples of his work in the collection. He had a Tamarind [Press] grant and went down to Los Angeles and just got drunk on art. He spent all day making prints; and then in the evening, he'd worry about what he'd done. Then he'd work on the proofs. He would paint on them, draw on them, God knows what he'd do with them. Then the next morning, he'd do some more prints. When he came out of this particular experience, he had a suite of maybe a hundred works. There were the prints themselves, and then there were all the works that he had embellished. They all had to do with themes that are developed in a particular painting. We put this little show together [1969], of those works that were in that show, with the big painting as the kind of climax to it. It was a wonderful example of how an artist works and fertilizes his own product to make it more and more meaningful, and deeper in significance. It was a great satisfaction to do that. Of course, we couldn't afford a catalogue, but we did this ephemeral little paper thing that somehow has survived.

Rubens: Was material acquired from the show for the museum?

02-00:40:19

Nordland: I think a number of prints were. The painting was held in the museum and was exhibited from time to time. I think the ownership remains in Frank's estate. Frank, of course, is still alive. I'm expecting to see him in July.

Rubens: How nice. Let's talk about, also, photography and Van Deren Coke. Because it's you who really cultivates him, yes? Corresponds with him?

02-00:40:55

Nordland: Well, John Humphrey really kept the fires burning for photography at the San Francisco Museum. With very little money, and just charm and commitment, he kept a show of photography on view for many

years at the San Francisco Museum of Art. I was very happy to see this work done. Occasionally, I would do a show, like the Dina Woelffer show [1968] or the Fred Sommer show [1969] or the Edmund Teske show [1963], where I was closer to the artist than John was. But generally speaking, he was responsible for the photographic program. I think he did it with great excellence. After I left, really, I think, we started to get photo criticism in San Francisco. I think the real recognition came to John at the very end of his life, for what he had done there, to carry the colors and to keep things going. He showed many, many, many wonderful artists over a very, very long period of time, to great effect. Now as you know, we used one gallery, one of the hallways in the old building, for graphics and one for photography. So there was a show up all the time. When we reopened the museum in its new guise, with half the museum devoted to the permanent collection, we had four exhibitions. We did a major show of the work of Richard Diebenkorn's Ocean Park period [1972]. We did a show that exhibited the eighty-five foot sculpture of Peter Voulkos [1972], and we acquired an earlier, more modest, and more handle-able example of his work. Then we did a recognition of Ansel Adams, and we did a show for Ansel [1972 and 1974]. Then the surprise was—we're doing sculpture, painting and photography—we did a show of a collection of what had been happening in ceramics in the last twelve to fifteen years, from the Joseph Monsen Collection [1972], of Seattle, Washington. So we were trying to say, "This is what seems to be excellent on the coast, in these immediate past years." We were saluting this. But at the same time, we were opening one, two, three, four major galleries that would be devoted to the permanent collection. Downstairs, we had the conservation lab. And we published four catalogues on that day we opened.

Rubens: This is in seventy—

02-00:44:17

Nordland: This is '72.

Rubens: And you would never fully close, while the renovation was going on.

02-00:44:22

Nordland: We never closed. We never closed. It's fashionable to buy a new building in Queens, or to do something like find an alternative space, as they did in Minneapolis-St. Paul. But we did room by room, and got it so people wouldn't forget that we were there.

Rubens: This was your statement about what's important, what's happening. It went well with your board, right? And particularly with Roth.

02-00:45:04

Nordland: Well, they'd already given me my walking papers.

Rubens: Let's talk about that. Why do you think they gave you—?

02-00:45:10

Nordland: Well, Roth said that he thought that people should only be in the top position, the decision-making decision, for a few years. Four or five years. There ought to be a turnover, there ought to be a change. I guess that generally speaking, there's been a tendency to not let it get very long. Seven years, after all, was pretty long.

Rubens: But there's something else going on, and we should talk about it, because you alluded to it earlier. I think you were saying that your vision of the Modern, of what's important, in terms of the balance of national, international and local, didn't meet with Roth's vision. What was Roth's vision, or even Lilienthal's vision of what was modern, versus yours?

02-00:46:08

Nordland: Well, they never told me. I think they decided that they needed a change. I mean, Sally was very interested in Walter Hopps and wanted—I don't think I even had him on my list. I did give a list of people. I wouldn't have put Walter on the list, because he never got anything finished.

Rubens: But you had said earlier, now—I don't have my notes right here—we were speaking about something specifically, when you said, "That was not the view Roth shared about what was modern." And I'm wondering—

02-00:46:46

Nordland: Well, we certainly had areas of overlap. Since he had interviewed me in Washington, at a party—

Rubens: Roth?

02-00:46:57

Nordland: He had done that for Elise, I know. I didn't know it at the time, but I figured it out subsequently, that—When he was still in his ambassador suit.

Rubens: He was ambassador to England, wasn't he? No.

02-00:47:14

Nordland: I don't think England. It may have been one of those plenipotentiary things that, you know, you go on assignment here and there. It wasn't necessarily that he always lived in Nicaragua or always lived in London, but that he was working for the State Department.

Rubens: I'm going to have to look in my notes.

- 02-00:47:37
Nordland: We had many overlaps. His enthusiasm for Smith and for [Jay] DeFeo and for others.
- Rubens: You liked DeFeo?
- 02-00:47:47
Nordland: Oh, I was crazy about Jay.
- Rubens: Did any come in while you were there?
- 02-00:47:52
Nordland: Oh, we acquired one. And also, \$3,000 solved her dental bills at the time.
- Rubens: Maybe it's when we talked about Altoon? Maybe not. Bischoff? You said, "Well, that's where Roth and I had a different view about art." That's all. You were specifically speaking about what he thought was modern and what—National point of view. You were talking about the national point of view.
- 02-00:48:25
Nordland: I felt that he did have, and I felt that Sally didn't. Sally, as I say, was captivated by the Greenbergian swindle. I didn't feel that that was—I obviously had to pay some attention to it, but I didn't want to have it affect collecting in a terribly significant way.
- Rubens: I wanted to ask you about—Grace McCann Morley had a particular interest, also, in Pacific Rim. You know, showing Mexican and Latin American and—
- 02-00:49:06
Nordland: Well, you know, she was close to the Rockefellers. And remember, Rockefeller was an ambassador to South America for Mr. Roosevelt. That was something that we all became aware of. She had acquired a few very powerful works. She had the Riveras, and she had the work of Rivera's girlfriend—[wife] Frida Kahlo. [pause]
- I can't either. But Morley also had works from Brazil and from Venezuela. They were, of course, acquiring at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, left and right.
- Rubens: She also showed *Guernica* for the first time. [1939]
- 02-00:50:09
Nordland: When it traveled. You know, it was showed in a private gallery in L.A., the Earl Stendahl Gallery.

Rubens: So did you have any urge to reflect that original impulse of hers? I don't know, did you show Riveras, any of the Riveras, or the—?

02-00:50:28

Nordland: Well, I put them in color in the HandBook, when we did the handbook. But no, I didn't feature them, because I was trying to tell the European-American story, rather than the relationships, say. We had a [Rufino] Tamayo. You know, Tamayo had come over the border illegally and was on WPA for a while in the United States. We got a WPA Tamayo. [laughs] So we didn't have the characteristic high-colored example that I would've wished, but it was still a worthy thing to have.

Rubens: Should we mention the handbook, just since you did? I mean, there's so many things; we can't talk about everything. The *Four Americans in Paris*—

02-00:51:22

Nordland: Shall I get it?

Rubens: —the “Untitled '68.” Let me get up and get it for you, so that you don't get tangled. I can get tangled. When did this catalogue come out? This is the handbook. Because there had been no real catalogue of the—[pause] I think I have a date here.

02-00:51:57

Nordland: '70. We did it with Bruder Hartmann, in Berlin. I think we did it the least expensive way we could do it. We ganged all the color in the middle of the book, in alphabetical order. But Rivera, for example; Pollock, Picasso, Ray Parker, [José Clemente]Orozco.

Rubens: Had this been a goal of yours since the—

02-00:52:32

Nordland: [Henri] Matisse. Only two. But then *The Girl With Green Eyes* [1908] was also on the cover.

Rubens: Is this your choice?

02-00:52:43

Nordland: Matisse.

Rubens: Was that your choice, to put it on the cover?

02-00:52:46

Nordland: Oh, indeed. Indeed. It's one of the great, great works of the collection.

Rubens: You had had the goal of having a handbook, yes?

02-00:52:58

Nordland:

Well, I would have liked to have done more. The only picture I had any trouble with was the quality of the color in the de Kooning. I stood in front of that picture with Bruder Hartmann, and he made notes. I told him that this pink had to be pinker, and this yellow had to be yellower. He made the notes and he said, "*Ja*, we'll do it." And he didn't do it. It was something like ten dollars a copy for the book—expensive at that time. It was very expensive. It's gone now, of course. We're talking about thirty-seven years ago.

Rubens:

I dropped Van Deren Coke. I want to get back to him. So he did not come and take office during your tenure?

02-00:53:53

Nordland:

No, no. We had a very vigorous photography program; comparable only to two other places in the country, the [George] Eastman House in Upstate New York and the Museum of Modern Art [NY]. As I say, it was done by John Humphrey with very little help from any of us. We were acquiring constantly. Pictures were unbelievably inexpensive in those days, compared with the astronomical figures that we face today in buying, say, an Ansel Adams. We had many gifts. We had the friendship, I think, of almost all the serious art dealers in the country so we always got a discount and we always had help. When I left, I went to UCLA, I started a photography program there immediately. Bob Heineken was on the staff, and we worked together and built a rather sizeable collection.

Rubens:

Oh, I want to make sure we get in this, what is the catalogue that you said Robert Frank did the photographs of?

02-00:55:21

Nordland:

Oh, that's the Raoul Hague show, right here.

Rubens:

And say who Raoul Hague is and how you got Robert Frank.

02-00:55:28

Nordland:

Well, Raoul Hague is this little man walking across, beside that great big piece of American walnut. This is a catalogue of a show I did at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art that didn't travel, didn't get to other cities. But all these photographs were made by Robert Frank.

Rubens:

And how did you get Robert Frank to do that?

02-00:55:54

Nordland:

He was a friend of Raoul's. He did it out of admiration and respect.

Rubens:

So did Robert Frank and Raoul Hague come into SFMA under your tenure?

02-00:56:10

Nordland: A major Hague was purchased about two years after I arrived, yes, and was shown constantly during my tenure. I'm sure that there're a number of Franks in the collection, though they were getting very pricey even then.

Rubens: What I can't remember is, at some point, there was a decision to sell the nineteenth-century photographs that SFMA had to the de Young. I don't know if that happened under your period.

02-00:56:54

Nordland: It certainly didn't.

Rubens: No. Because people were very upset about that. Did you do the [Edward] Weston at SFMA?

02-00:57:06

Nordland: No, I did that at WGMA.

Rubens: OK, then I don't want to talk about that right now. Let me make sure I get what you'd like to say were your greatest accomplishments at San Francisco.

02-00:57:25

Nordland: Considering the period, I think I sensitized people to aspects of unfolding American modernism and world modernism that they might not have been able to get to so quickly. It takes time, and it's very hard to poll your viewers. You just don't know what they're getting. The ways you measure things is, Are more people coming than used to come? Are there shows like the Paul Klee show, which got 25 per cent of the attendance that year? People wondered whether we should do a Paul Klee show. I said, "There's a whole generation that doesn't know who he is." We did the show, and the fact that 25 per cent of our attendance was—made me feel that we had succeeded. And they didn't just see that because there were four other shows that were going on simultaneously. I felt that we were infecting them with the disease of modernism.

Rubens: And that '72 show, when you were able to really refurbish and spiffy up the museum, was that those four simultaneous shows?

02-00:59:00

Nordland: They were all four on at the same time, and the permanent collection in half of the space. Actually, there were some selections from the drawing collection in the east corridor.

Rubens: Were those highly attended?

02-00:59:14
Nordland:

Very, very well attended. But of course, we had the drama of the reopening, the new face. People want to see the space. And you know, we'd spent some money on furniture; the floors were all new, the walls were all fresh. The place looked clean. We had a new system of labels. We'd really evolved. Fortunately, the underpinning, the fact that we had a conservation lab, that we had gotten our classrooms downstairs, that we had gotten our offices off that space—Those spaces were then available to be used for what they were designed to be used for, which was to exhibit art. I felt that we'd made a lot of progress. But you got to look at it now. That new building is just so classy.

[Begin Audio File 3 04-12-2007.mp3]

Rubens:

I do want to mention that after you left as director—we mentioned about the Lachaise book, but also an important exhibit opened that you had initiated, and I believe wrote for the catalogue, the Ruth Asawa [1973].

03-00:00:29
Nordland:

I did that from L.A.

Rubens:

You did? You curated that?

03-00:00:39
Nordland:

Well, Ruth is easy to work with.

Rubens:

Tell me, but had Ruth had a museum show before?

03-00:00:44
Nordland:

I don't think she'd ever had a solo, but she'd been exhibited everywhere. She'd been at the Brooklyn Museum [of Art], she'd been in the Museum of Modern Art [NY], she'd been at the Whitney. Always in groups. You know, groups of contemporary sculpture. People didn't know how they should treat her work, really, as—They could see it as experimental, but they didn't exactly see it as the high achievement that I felt it was. And I had forced her to sell me one. She's a funny woman.

Rubens:

Was that a successful show?

03-00:01:22
Nordland:

Well, you know, I wasn't there. I came up for the opening and gave a little talk. I visited friends and went home. But I was working on my Lachaise book. It took me a year-and-a-half to get that done. We were building a building, too, at the same time at UCLA, the Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery.

Rubens: And we spoke earlier about the fact that you basically built the Frank Murphy—

03-00:01:57

Nordland: Franklin Murphy Sculpture Garden. Well, this was a combination of David Bright and Franklin Murphy. David Bright wanted to give a collection to UCLA. Franklin Murphy said, “You know what? Why don’t you give us your sculpture? Give the paintings to the L.A. County. That would start us on building a sculpture garden in the north campus.” Then I was able to add Dimitri Hadzi and Fletcher Benton and [Joan] Mirò, Richard Hunt, [Aristide] Maillol, and a major Alberto Burri.

Rubens: And that wonderful [Peter] Voulkos. Two Voulkoses.

03-00:02:47

Nordland: One had been given earlier.

Rubens: Which one do you think is—you’re saying is one of his best?

03-00:02:50

Nordland: *Gallas Rock*, 1960. It’s the back cover of the first book that was done on Pete. And the way I did it in the garden—There were planters, and I put it inside a planter. We, fortunately, have such a benign climate in L.A. that the worst thing you’re going to have is a spider, or you’re going to have something fall off a tree. It’s not going to be any problem at all.

Rubens: You know, one of the things we didn’t mention—I’m cutting you there, because I think back to the museum of San Francisco, do you think we should just mention Jules Bissier? Was he pretty important?

03-00:03:36

Nordland: Well, I don’t think you hear much talk about him right now, but don’t underestimate him. His pictures are going to be the same price as Paul Klee’s.

Rubens: And did you acquire him for—

03-00:03:53

Nordland: Two. I think that because several people purchased things—The president of the Women’s Board bought one, and I think she gave it later to the museum. But as you know, I’m not exactly in contact with people there.

Rubens: Well, I wanted to ask you, Bissier had shown first at—?

03-00:04:17

Nordland:

Well, he has shown in the Venice Biennale, and won the grand prize at the São Paulo Biennale. He was the toast of Europe. He never had a one-man museum show in the U.S.—I mean, a one-man show at LeFevre Gallery in New York, but never any shows at the great museums. The place it belonged was the Guggenheim. So I said to Tom, “I want to do that show. Would you help me?” And he made me wait for a year or so, but we did it. And I did the same thing with Alberto Burri.

Rubens:

Yes. But just finish Bissier. So he began—it was shown first at the Guggenheim?

03-00:05:04

Nordland:

No.

Rubens:

First at San Francisco? [1968]

03-00:05:06

Nordland:

Yes.

Rubens:

So the first ever shown in the U.S., you did, and was there. That needs to be said.

03-00:05:12

Nordland:

And you notice, I write the foreword. But because Tom had German, he was able to use—Madame Lisbeto Bissier let him use—he was the first person to read and use the notebooks of Bissier. And so he was able to write the essay. And I had him give a talk in San Francisco.

Rubens:

But you told me there was also a reverse, where you made a decision that you wanted the Guggenheim to show it first, and not San Francisco.

03-00:05:46

Nordland:

Oh, that was the psychoanalytic drawings of Jackson Pollock.

Rubens:

Speak to that.

03-00:05:52

Nordland:

I said it had to go to the Whitney. Oh, well, there was a gallery, Maxwell Gallery, in San Francisco, that made an acquisition of all the drawings that were done for the Jungian psychoanalyst who had worked with Jackson Pollock in New York. When the analyst left New York, he moved to San Francisco. When he died, he had this material, which was sold to Maxwell, and Maxwell hired this man Wysuph to write a piece on it. [C. L] Wysuph came to me and said, “Could I have your help?” I said, “Certainly, I’d be anxious to help you. And I’d like

to show the work first.” They all agreed to that, and they produced the catalogue. We didn’t have—

Rubens: “They,” meaning?

03-00:06:57

Nordland: The Maxwell Gallery did it. I said to myself, “If this goes over as a corridor show at the San Francisco Museum of Art, it will be a tree that didn’t fall down in the middle of the forest. Nobody will know about it, and it just won’t matter.” So I spoke to the folks at the Whitney Museum, and I said, “There’s a wonderful show going to—It’s not a huge show, but I think it’s going to get you a lot of attention. I’d like you to have it first, because I think New York is where the presses are.” And of course, it got into *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the cover of *Psychology Today*.

Rubens: What year is this?

03-00:07:41

Nordland: Would you hand me that one?

Rubens: Here it is. Maybe put it in front of your face for a second, just to show the—

03-00:07:56

Nordland: 1970. Copyright by Fred Maxwell.

Rubens: When did it come to San Francisco?

03-00:08:02

Nordland: I would guess ’71. But by that time, it was a household matter. Everybody knew about it; there was a word of mouth. We had a tremendous attendance. Oh, and of course, Jackson Pollock is not easy to get. And very, very expensive. It’s a nice piece of work.

Rubens: Well, but it’s an interesting strategy on your part, that you would say, “Well, let’s premiere it in—”

03-00:08:29

Nordland: Modesty had to be one of the things we worked with.

Rubens: I would like you to just say something about *Artforum*, about how you came to be involved in the creation of *Artforum*. [est. 1962]

03-00:08:52

Nordland: Well, it’s a long time ago now. I guess it’s—

Rubens: Was it a successor to *Frontier*?

03-00:09:00
Nordland: Oh, no, no, no. I was writing for both. In fact, I was the L.A. editor for a while.

Rubens: Of?

03-00:09:07
Nordland: *Artforum*.

Rubens: When does *Artforum*—?

03-00:09:09
Nordland: And I was still writing for the *L.A. Mirror*.

Rubens: Energetic.

03-00:09:14
Nordland: And occasionally teaching, and working as the dean of the school. But it was like this. A fellow named—[pause] I can't even think of his name.

Rubens: Oh, but he came from San Francisco, didn't he?

03-00:09:31
Nordland: It started in San Francisco.

Rubens: It starts in San Francisco.

03-00:09:34
Nordland: There was a combination of three or four people that were trying to do this. The man was from Shaker Heights, Cleveland. His name right now escapes me. I only met him once or twice.

Rubens: Did it start when you were director of SF?

03-00:09:58
Nordland: No, it started when I was in Los Angeles, in about, oh—

Rubens: *Artforum*?

03-00:10:10
Nordland: Let's see, early sixties [1962]. I was at the Chouinard Art School, and I was writing for *Frontier* and the *L.A. Mirror*.

Rubens: And they come to you.

03-00:10:24
Nordland: Yes. John Coplans and this man, Irwin—[John] Irwin was his name, from Cleveland—and Philip Leider who was at Berkeley, became the editor. We talked about what to do, and I introduced them to wealthy

people that I knew who might give monetary support. I agreed that I would give them articles from time to time. After about a year and a half, they were foundering. I brought John Coplans down to teach for me at the Chouinard Art School.

Rubens: Where had Coplans been?

03-00:11:23

Nordland: He had been kind of the star writer for the magazine in San Francisco. Then there was the editor, Phil Leider. Then we brought the magazine down to L.A. We had a center on La Cienega, over the Ferus Gallery, we had our offices. I edited the L.A. part of the paper for, I don't know, a year or so. And then I got my opportunity to go to Washington. I resigned from all my things—Chouinard, the *Mirror*, *Frontier*, *Artforum*—and packed up a station wagon, and took my two kids and went to Washington. And only subsequently did they go to New York.

Rubens: Now, when you were at San Francisco, did you regret that *Artforum* was not in San Francisco? What could you do?

03-00:13:01

Nordland: Never thought about it. When I did my Gaston Lachaise for the County Museum, I gave them the text and they published it. When I did the Diebenkorn for Washington Gallery, I gave them the text and they published it. I just constantly tried to feed them things that I felt were important and were—

Rubens: Did you feed them information about what you were doing at SFMA? You must've.

03-00:13:33

Nordland: I'm sure. I had a very able PR person named Mary Miles Ryan, who probably kept on closer touch with that than I did.

Rubens: You know, and I didn't ask you about your membership in the museum directors association [Association of Art Museum Directors]. Was that an important vehicle for you?

03-00:13:58

Nordland: Oh, yeah. That gave you opportunity to see people in social situations and non-competitive situations, attending lectures and conferring afterwards, and at dinner and whatever, that I felt was very meritorious.

Rubens: Did it ever meet in San Francisco?

03-00:14:20

Nordland: Once.

Rubens: While you were—

03-00:14:23

Nordland: Yeah.

Rubens: Later, it would spend some time setting up standards for exhibitions and—

03-00:14:33

Nordland: Oh, yes. Yes. And they had published all kinds of things. I have a whole half a shelf of stuff that, over the years, they contributed to the lore of museum practice.

Rubens: So I just wondered if, during your tenure, '66 to '72, if there's anything specifically to say about them?

03-00:14:55

Nordland: Well, see, in Washington, I wasn't a member. I became a member at San Francisco. I continued at UCLA, and I continued in Milwaukee. So I was associated with them. I never missed a meeting, all those years.

Rubens: So you had a lot of contacts, plugged in?

03-00:15:18

Nordland: I felt that was very important.

Rubens: So therefore, that's where you would see Henry Hopkins and Jack Lane and Harry Parker, who went to the de Young [FAMSF].

03-00:15:34

Nordland: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Harry had been at the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art]. Then he went to Dallas, and then he went to the de Young/Legion.

Rubens: I also wanted to ask you if you, while you were at San Francisco, if you were a member of the Bohemian Club. Did the directorship of—did not come with a Bohemian Club membership.

03-00:16:00

Nordland: No, no, no.

Rubens: Henry Hopkins said that he'd never been to so many black tie events as when he was in San Francisco. How would you characterize social life—

03-00:16:10

Nordland: Well, Washington is all black tie.

Rubens: Well, yes, of course. But I wanted you to compare L.A. and San Francisco.

03-00:16:19

Nordland: Well, it's all different now. People don't dress any longer.

Rubens: No, but I mean when you were there.

03-00:16:25

Nordland: Well, of course, L.A. is my home town. I feel very, very warm to it. Actually, I feel warmer than I actually behave when I get there, because I find the experience of driving there is so hideous that I don't want to go back. I have wonderful memories and you know—what'll I say?—heartfelt experiences that I savor. But I tell you, I did a show for the opening of the new Gehry building [Walt Disney Concert Hall] that is the symphony hall. And it was awful. It was just terrible. There were meetings that I never made; there were appointments that I could not get to.

Rubens: Because of the traffic?

03-00:17:26

Nordland: The traffic, it's just—And it doesn't matter when you travel; in the middle of the night, it's the same.

Rubens: And what kind of show was this, in the lobby?

03-00:17:33

Nordland: It was in a little theater—or not a theater, a little museum space called REDCAT—Roy and Edna Disney Chouinard Art—[pause] REDCAT. And I did an Emerson Woelffer show, and a book.

Rubens: You know, with your oral history, we'll put in your vitae and bring everything up to date. But what context did you keep in San Francisco? Any particular people there at all that go back?

03-00:18:16

Nordland: Well, I'm having an eightieth birthday in July, and I've hired a jazz band. It's going to be at my daughter's house in Los Altos. I find that Nate Oliveira has to be driven to the thing.

Rubens: Let's hope he makes it.

03-00:18:40

Nordland: Adelaide Bischoff will come. She's happy to come. Mrs. Land of the Land family will be coming.

Rubens: Still alive.

- 03-00:18:52
Nordland: Oh, she's ten years younger than I. I've also invited her beautiful daughters, but she'll probably come alone. Anyway, it just seems like I don't have very many contacts left. Charlie Campbell will come, of Charles Campbell Gallery. And Glenna, his wife. He's ninety-two. It will be a cornet, clarinet, banjo, and tuba.
- Rubens: And will you play drums?
- 03-00:19:31
Nordland: There won't be any drums. You know, if you had to go to a club and play drums, and just do the pedal on the bass drum for three hours, if you're not practiced you can't do it.
- Rubens: Was it *Artforum* had an office above Ferus?
- 03-00:20:10
Nordland: Mm-hm.
- Rubens: And Hopkins was running a gallery across the street? Did you know him at the time?
- 03-00:20:26
Nordland: Oh, sure. I knew him when he ran the gallery, and I knew him when he was the education person at L.A. County. Rick Brown tried to hire me to be their personnel officer, but—
- Rubens: LACMA?
- 03-00:20:42
Nordland: Yeah, somebody on the board didn't like the idea. Because, you know, I was personnel officer of the L.A. County Public Library. I knew how to get around the rules of civil service. Rick felt that he was at the mercy of civil service. So I could've stayed in L.A., if it had gone right.
- Rubens: I guess so. But the Ferus was [Ed] Kienholz and—
- 03-00:21:21
Nordland: Kienholz was the mainstay. Walter Hopps would come in on Saturdays only. Five days a week, Ed ran the place. Then later, Walter eased Ed out and brought in [Irving] Blum.
- Rubens: My only mention is that those aren't the people in L.A.—they're not the art world that you're drawn to; that it's almost—I mean, that's—
- 03-00:21:52
Nordland: Well, I spent a half-a-day a week with Kienholz for years.
- Rubens: Did you?

- 03-00:22:00
Nordland: Yeah, he was a very close friend.
- Rubens: Oh, afterward, when you went back to L.A.?
- 03-00:22:06
Nordland: No, no, no. Before I went to Washington Gallery of Modern Art.
- Rubens: Did you show him in San Francisco?
- 03-00:22:14
Nordland: I just showed you the *Portable War Memorial*, in that one called *Untitled '68*.
- Rubens: In *Untitled '68*, yes.
- 03-00:22:39
Nordland: First showing of the piece. In addition to everything else, the people with the business of mounting the flag and the *Portable War Memorial* here, and the hotdogs, and the lighted and working Coke machine, there was a large garbage can over here with that famous person that sang “God Bless America” in the thirties and the early forties, during the war—Kate Smith.
- Rubens: Was anti-war protest an issue that you had to deal with while you were director? There are the marches in—
- 03-00:23:45
Nordland: Well, I think that activity was all over, in Berkeley.
- Rubens: That didn’t influence you, anti-war stuff? That’s not a main—?
- 03-00:23:50
Nordland: I don’t think it became a problem. And again, we were in the War Memorial, and we were on the fourth floor.
- Rubens: This is an important exhibit, though.
- 03-00:24:00
Nordland: We were somewhat remote. Oh, it was a tremendous exhibit.
- Rubens: You had Joseph Cornell, Willem de Kooning, [Mark] di Suvero, Frankenthaler, [Robert] Irwin, Donald Judd, Jasper Johns, Larry Poons. Larry Poons would be very controversial later on. James Rosenquist. That’s an amazing exhibit. And it’s a nice catalogue.
- 03-00:24:38
Nordland: The piece I wanted to buy out of this was this.
- Rubens: And say what it is, so that—

- 03-00:24:45
Nordland: It's a Mark di Suvero sculpture in wood timbers. It was bought by Bob Scull, the famous taxi magnate in New York. I think it's been sold to the Whitney Museum.
- Rubens: What did you buy out of that?
- 03-00:25:07
Nordland: I don't think we bought anything. Oh, wait, wait, wait. I think we got the Jasper Johns *Mona Lisa*.
- Rubens: Big?
- 03-00:25:21
Nordland: It's a print.
- Rubens: No, I'm saying it's a big acquisition?
- 03-00:25:26
Nordland: Well, it was. And just before I left, as you know from this publication, Hunk [Harry] and Moo [Mary Margaret] Anderson gave us the Johns and a [Robert] Rauschenberg.
- Rubens: You turn around so you can see it. And let's make sure we know what we're citing, because that'll be in the historical record, too. It's a *California Living*—
- 03-00:26:00
Nordland: This is the *California Living* for December 10, 1972.
- Rubens: And right when you're leaving, it features what you had acquired.
- 03-00:26:10
Nordland: An article that I wrote about how I looked at my tenure. And it shows the Albers, the Davis, the Rauschenberg, the Altoon, the Al Held, the Frankenthaler, the de Kooning, the Gaston Lachaise, the Giacometti, the Hague, the Motherwell, the [Piet] Mondrian, the [Philip] Guston, and the Sam Francis, and last of all, the Morgan Russell, *Synchromy*, from 1912.
- Rubens: All those that came in under your—
- 03-00:26:44
Nordland: And then in the back, three sculptures.
- Rubens: And they are?
- 03-00:26:51
Nordland: There's, reading from top to bottom, Gerald Walberg, Alvin Light, and Peter Voulkos.

Rubens: You said that article didn't necessarily have all the things you thought were the best. We've talked about other things.

03-00:27:06

Nordland: Well, it left out Diebenkorn. And out of the most recent show, I had acquired *Number 43*, which I considered the best of all the Ocean Parks, at that time.

Rubens: That was the one that the board surprised you with? But there's a little story about that.

03-00:27:28

Nordland: Susan Land, when she came to the museum, I showed her the show and I said, "Now, look at this. This is a painting he hadn't promised me, and it's not in the catalogue. But he got it finished, and he sent it to me. I said, "That's the one we've got to have. I've got \$15,000—or \$20,000 from the National Endowment. All we have to do is match that, and it's ours." And somehow, nobody ever acted, and then it finally turned out that they bought it. They just bought it for the museum.

Rubens: As a surprise to you?

03-00:28:15

Nordland: And it says, "In honor of Gerald Nordland."

Rubens: Let me fire a couple other questions for you. Peggy Guggenheim. Why did Peggy Guggenheim contribute to San Francisco?

03-00:28:41

Nordland: Well, she was a friend of Elise Haas. I think that was the contact. I had a copy of that book, *Out of This Century*, the first volume of Peggy's memoirs, which I loaned to Elise, and she lost it. I've got a second edition, which is not nearly as good as that first edition, out of this.

Rubens: Did Peggy give very much, or a few things?

03-00:29:15

Nordland: Just a few things. A handful. But most importantly, the Pollock. That's a wonderful painting. It's where he was going to go.

Rubens: Just for the record, say which Pollock it is.

03-00:29:33

Nordland: It's called *Guardians of the Secret* [1943]. It's an early Pollock. It has figures on left and right, and a sleeping animal. It doesn't look like what we expect of Jackson Pollock, except that there's a center panel that involves the dripping and the pouring and the manipulation, occasionally, of brush that shows the way he was going to go in the

next period of his work. It's a very key and central work, and it has to be in any retrospective.

Rubens: You told me, when we were talking before the tape began, about Pollock's evolution. I was asking you—

03-00:30:31

Nordland: Did he work with Gorky?

Rubens: Yes. Let me preface this. There was a house painter that showed Jackson drippings, that he worked with. Was that a house painter in L.A.?

03-00:30:49

Nordland: You're thinking of Knud Merrild? He was doing it before Jackson. And incidentally, Man Ray and Max Ernst tried it too, in the teens. Merrild is a very interesting artist.

Rubens: Did you acquire any Merrilds during—No?

03-00:31:17

Nordland: Never saw one that was available for sale. I did, however, write a text for Logan, Utah, the State University of Utah. They have a collection that includes one.

Rubens: Now, then we were chatting about Gorky and—

03-00:31:37

Nordland: Reuben Nakian. They were very close friends. They were both Armenians, though Reuben didn't speak Armenian. He spoke a little bit of Turkish. But they were just very close friends, and they ate a lot together, and they visited together, and they visited each other's studios. And Bill de Kooning was often along, too. I do believe that both of them got a lot of their whip line drawing from Gorky.

Rubens: You also, in your oral history for the Smithsonian [Archives of American Art, 2004], art archives, mentioned Charlie Egan. He's the gallery owner in New York. You said he was the first to show de Kooning in the U.S.?

03-00:32:32

Nordland: That's right. Charles showed the black and white paintings that made Bill's reputation, in '48. At that time, you know, he was already forty-four. It was his first one-man show.

Rubens: Now, you talk about when you're at Washington, that you show Anthony Caro, you have a Caro exhibit. Am I saying—

[material deleted]

03-00:44:33
Nordland:

One of my early exercises at San Francisco was to talk to Dr. Anneliese Hoyer, a retirement-age curator with a German Ph.D., who I wanted to do some graphics exhibitions in the coming year. I gave her three or four names, and I suggested that she come up with a couple of her own from the Bay Area, so that we had a very balanced kind of review of what was going on on the West Coast. Two of the artists that I recommended to her were Ynez Johnston and Leonard Edmondson. She didn't know their names, but she responded to the effort with great interest, made a trip or two to Southern California, interviewed them both. So she made etching shows for both of these artists [Johnston, 1967; Edmondson, 1967]. She got Ynez to write a little passage that, when I recently made a talk at the Pasadena Art Museum, the Norton Simon Museum, I read part of this because it was such an accurate expression of her intent. And Anneliese was able to elicit that with her Germanic scholarship. I'm very proud of that.

[material deleted]

Rubens: I know that you wrote a memorandum when you left SFMOMA suggesting what the successor director should do, even who might be considered. Why'd you do that?

03-00:49:36
Nordland:

I wanted the place to be taken care of. I wanted the best possible person to see what I'd done and to take care of it, and use it for its highest purpose.

Rubens: I think you told me when the tape was off that you loved being there.

03-00:49:57
Nordland:

Oh, I did. I thought it was the best job I could find.

Rubens: You did a wonderful job. There's a last little piece I forgot to ask you. There was somebody you told me you knew during the war? You had been in the military together. A photographer.

03-00:50:17
Nordland:

Edward Weston, I knew. I was at Fort Ord, which is right by Wildcat Creek, and that was where Edward's little place was. I ran into this woman, who just died within a few months, Ruth Bernhard, a wonderful photographer, too, a famous photographer. We had such a good talk. She said, "You'd like to meet Edward, wouldn't you?" I said, "Are you kidding? I'd like to be in his presence once." She said, "I'll fix it up." And so I got to meet Edward. He took some things out of his lockup, his safe. He showed me little four-by-fours. And he said, "Can't show them anywhere. Can't even put them in the mail. They're considered pornographic." I said, "Someday I'll be able to show

them.” He said, “Well, I hope so.” Anyway, I showed them in the Washington Gallery of Modern Art.

Rubens: Did you ever do a Weston show at SF?

03-00:51:34

Nordland: No, Humphrey did [1966]. When I was there.

Rubens: When you were in San Francisco, did you know him or see him?

03-00:52:07

Nordland: No, I didn’t see him thereafter. Only in those days when I was in the Army, in 1953-55.

Rubens: So it so happened you did do a show of Weston in Washington.

03-00:52:27

Nordland: Yes, I did.

Rubens: And if you hold up that cover, we could just show this cover. And then it’s kind of a cute story you have about—Now tell me the story about that photograph.

03-00:52:41

Nordland: Well, he showed me a number of four-by-four photographs that he’d done with a special camera, a different camera than he usually worked with. And he said unfortunately, the pictures were never going to get shown, that they couldn’t even go through the mail, because the government considered them pornographic. And I said, “Well, maybe I’ll get a chance to show them once.” Of course, I did later, with his sons; he was already dead. The interesting thing is, Chris Charis, who was his loved one for a period of years when he had the Guggenheim, the first Guggenheim that was given to a photographer, was a very beautiful, very lithe young woman. Subsequently, I was sent this photograph of Chris Charis as a somewhat older, equally lithe and attractive older woman, holding my catalogue from the Washington Gallery in her hands. You’ll notice the front cover and the back cover. She seems to be studying it with some interest.

[End of Interview]

Interview #2: July 11, 2007

Interviewed by Richard Cándida Smith, Peter Samis, and Jill Sterret at SFMOMA
[Begin Audio File 4 07-11-2007.mp3]

04-00:00:54

Cándida Smith: The first thing we wanted to discuss was this [Piet] Mondrian [*Church at Domburg, 1914*], and how you came to acquire it, and why it was important to you to bring it into the collection.

04-00:01:24

Nordland: Well, we had an important example of de Stijl work. We had a very important van Doesburg that was given by Peggy Guggenheim, through Mrs. Haas's contact with her. I would have preferred to have gotten a *Trafalgar Square* or something, a very late and important big canvas by Mondrian. But of course, they were prohibitively expensive.

Cándida Smith: Which at that time meant?

04-00:01:58

Nordland: Oh, well, probably \$750,000. This was an important early work, where he had become independent of Picasso and French painting. He was home in Holland, about the beginning of the First World War, where he was stuck for about five years. He had gone home because his father was dying. He went back to a theme that he'd been dealing with, the church at Domburg, which he had painted and drawn in earlier years. This was a schematic analysis that has ended up being classified in the world of art history and cubism as "plus and minus cubism." It was such a fine example, even though many people who saw it at the time felt that it was only a work on paper, and that it was a little smudgy, and not as finished and complete as they might have hoped. Anyway, between exchange and cash, we were able to obtain this from the Paul Kantor Gallery in Beverly Hills in—What was the year? 1970.

Cándida Smith: When you look at it today, what leaps out at you?

04-00:03:43

Nordland: Well, of course, you can see the vestiges of the windows, you can see the construction of the Domburg building here. But you're also seeing that he's examined its energies and its shadows and its dynamics as an architectural thing, which he has transferred into a work on paper that is a reflection of his response to it. Now, he'd been responding to this now for probably nine years. This was a very affectionate piece of architecture for him, something that he had a grand feeling for. And it was a translation into his own impression of cubism, which of course, relates just around the corner, to the [Georges] Braque.

Cándida Smith: Shall we go look at the Braque?

04-00:04:43

Nordland: Why not?

Rubens:

Well, when you say he had an affection for it, could you just say how you know that? Does he talk—

04-00:04:51

Nordland:

Well, he drew this building so many times, in different periods of his life. And he painted it as a realistic rendition, as well as this very impressionist rendition of just positive/neg—verticals and horizontals, which ended up being the pluses and the minuses.

[interruption]

04-00:05:33

Here we are.

Cándida Smith:

This Braque [*Violin and Candlestick, 1910*] was acquired when?

04-00:05:50

Nordland:

This is '89.

Cándida Smith:

'89, okay. So after your time.

04-00:05:53

Nordland:

It was given by Rita Schreiber, in honor of Taft [Schreiber]. And they're Los Angelenos. That was a real coup for San Francisco.

Cándida Smith:

What is it that you see in this particular work?

04-00:06:12

Nordland:

Well, of course, this is an earlier work. It's the kind of work that Mondrian was very sensitive to. It gave him an idea of a kind of painting that—For one, he admired it. But he didn't want to paint that way. He was looking at a still life, and he was considering the way each stroke went down. He was respecting the flatness of the canvas space. All of this was a part of his own self-tutelage. He was, in a large measure, learning from [Pablo] Picasso. Now, he never met Picasso. He didn't *want* to meet Picasso. He was afraid he would be dominated by Picasso. So he was in the Paris milieu in these years, but he kept his distance. But he knew very well what [Jacques] Villon and [Juan] Gris and Braque and Picasso were up to. He would've known a picture like this very well.

Cándida Smith:

What was the state of the cubist collection at the time that you were director?

04-00:07:32

Nordland:

Well, I used to have my Braque etching on the wall quite a lot, because there wasn't something representing cubism in the collection at that

time. I had to separate myself from that, because I had two children in college. And at some point along the time, I had to lose my Albers and my Braque, and a number of other things.

Cándida Smith: Did you have ambitions to acquire some cubism?

04-00:08:12

Nordland: Oh, of course, of course. But again, it was beyond our consideration at that time. We were very happy to get the Mondrian.

Samis: These two paintings were, if I'm not mistaken, in the collection at the time.

04-00:08:32

Nordland: Sure. They were.

Samis: So in some sense, there was a reference to later stages.

04-00:08:37

Nordland: Oh, yes, but these are much more mature statements. Yes, much more. And they don't do that analytical or synthetic cubist that the other Braque is involved with and— They're much more easily understood, I think, and admired. The analytical are a little more academic.

Cándida Smith: You had these up all the time?

04-00:09:11

Nordland: Pretty much always. Now, you realize that in the old building, that we were more a *Kunsthalle* than we were a true museum. Our permanent collection often was in storage. It was used to balance the general exposure, so that prints and drawings and photography, paintings and sculpture, were in a constant flow. We often had fifty shows a year. Often. There was a constant hurly-burly of activity. We didn't have what you would call a permanent installation of the things we owned in an organized fashion until we did the renovation and reopened with half of the museum devoted to permanent collection. Again, we cannibalized ourselves, in the sense that we had taken space that was meant for exhibition space and used it for other purposes, including education, and including storage.

Cándida Smith: Let's go take a look at *La Femme au chapeau*. [Henri Matisse, 1905]. Can you remember the first time you saw this painting?

04-00:10:51

Nordland: Well, of course, it's one of the most famous paintings. It ranks up there with the *Mona Lisa*. I had known about it, of course, from the great Matisse show at the Museum of Modern Art [NY] in '51 that Alfred Barr did, "Matisse: His Art and His Public." Mrs. Haas felt that she didn't want to have it reproduced very often. She wanted to be very

careful about it. She didn't want to cheapen it or make it omnipresent. She had a great reserve about this painting, which she got from Sarah Stein. It was used, also, when we did the big show of the *Four Americans in Paris [1971]*, Gertrude and Leo and Michael and Sarah, which we started here, and the Museum of Modern Art kind of took over for us and from us, in the course of the evolution of that important show. It is a great and memorable example of a fauve painting. It was the leading piece in that famous show that Louis Vauxcelles made his statement about the "wild beasts."

Cándida Smith: You would see it from time to time in the Haas residence?

04-00:12:28

Nordland: And occasionally, we were able to borrow it to show here, when there was a sufficiently good reason.

Cándida Smith: Did you have hopes that it would come to the museum?

04-00:12:40

Nordland: Oh, Elise promised that it would. And of course, she elicited other gifts. She elicited the Bliss gifts, and she had promised the *Joie de vivre*. And we, of course, were also looking forward to the [Constantin] Brancusi.

Cándida Smith: In terms of your priorities for collecting European work, was it primarily the classic period, up to 1940? Or were you also looking to acquire post-World War II work?

04-00:13:20

Nordland: Well, we found it very difficult to get the early material. But it was considerably easier to acquire post-World War work. Works by [Edward] Corbett and [Ad] Reinhardt and Diebenkorn were things that were very important, in my mind. We were successful, to some extent.

Cándida Smith: But actually, what I was wondering is your interest in European, whether it was [Nicolas] de Staël or [Pierre] Soulages or [Alberto] Burri.

04-00:13:56

Nordland: Well, again, the Burri came to us through one of the Skidmore, Owings and Merrill architects—again, a friend of Mrs. Haas—who helped us with the Alberto Burri. I was quite a fan of his. I did a book on him and organized a show for UCLA and the Guggenheim, which I also traveled to the Milwaukee Art Museum. De Staël would have been somebody that I was extremely anxious to acquire, but had no success in that department.

Cándida Smith: Because?

04-00:14:47

Nordland:

Well, he died in '53, I think [d. 1955]. He was a suicide. Or maybe it was '54. His prices were very high. Knoedler sold a show out twice. They had so many examples that they were able to—When people acquired the works, they went out and they put up a new one. A very novel way of working. I've never seen it happen before. But he was a very hot number in those days.

Cándida Smith:

Were you interested in [Jean] Dubuffet?

04-00:15:35

Nordland:

Yes, as a matter of fact. On my first trip to Paris, I had a chance to get a *Corps de dame* for \$12,500. An enormous and important work. But I had nobody who was willing to join me in my enthusiasm for that particular work.

Rubens:

Are you saying that the Dubuffet, you were interested in for the museum?

04-00:16:17

Nordland:

Yes.

Rubens:

But you couldn't get any of the—

04-00:16:20

Nordland:

No, nobody thought it was worthwhile.

Rubens:

And you just couldn't educate or goose or twist?

04-00:16:27

Nordland:

No, no.

Cándida Smith:

That's a contrast to Chicago.

04-00:16:32

Nordland:

Yes, the Culbergs and Joe Schapiro and many of the people were acquiring them left and right.

Cándida Smith:

I have read, George Culler, in *Artforum*, wrote something to the effect that this was the single piece that he was the most proud of having acquired for this museum. You had mentioned when we were preparing that you displayed it in a very different way. [Jean Arp's *Human Concretion*, 1933]

04-00:17:05

Nordland:

Yes, I used a much larger pedestal and had a glass case over it. The reason being that I didn't want to have it constantly being polished and constantly being touched and constantly being aggravated. I felt it was better to get it up to a representative brilliance, and then cover it. It

seemed safer to me, and it seemed to be a proper kind of conservative way to display it. I think that the preparators today are thinking that they'll let it go to a kind of a peach surface, and not worry about that shininess that was so important to Arp. Not bother, and don't worry about the certain amount of touching that inevitably goes on, even if you have efficient guards.

Cándida Smith: How do you personally feel about this piece?

04-00:18:22

Nordland: Oh, I've always thought it was one of the stars in the sculpture collection. I acquired probably an unusual number of sculptures for the collection because I felt that sculpture had been neglected to a degree and tried to remedy that as best I could.

Cándida Smith: Were there paintings or other pieces that you like to contextualize this work with?

04-00:19:02

Nordland: Well, it would be particularly attractive to add a Sophie Täuber-Arp to the collection, particularly a relief if possible, because that would add to the dada aspect of what the institution owns. And after the brilliant dada show at the Modern recently, why, it's quite clear that Sophie was a major figure.

Cándida Smith: Of the works that are up in this main gallery, the historical gallery, how many of them were in the collection? How many of them were familiar to you?

04-00:19:53

Nordland: Well, the Matta [Roberto Matta, *Invasion of the Night*, 1941], from Gordon Onslow Ford, the De Chirico [Giorgio de Chirico, *The Vexations of the Thinker*, 1915],—well, again, from Gordon. The Albers [Josef Albers, *Study for Homage to the Square, in May 1960*; *Study for Homage to the Square*, 1972; *Homage to the Square, Confident*, 1954; *Homage to the Square*, 1969], of course, came to us because of the *Josef Albers in America* show that I did at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, which came to the San Francisco museum. Mr. Albers put it in his will that we would be honored with a gift at the close of his life. And it's a wonderful educational quartet to have on view.

Rubens: How so?

04-00:20:44

Nordland: Well, look at the upper left. You have the four squares, and the upper right, the four squares. But in the lower left, you have A, B and D; and then B, C and D, in the lower right. He was trying to give us the gamut

of what could be said with color in four examples. Maybe they're a little close together, because they tend to associate. But it's a stunning group.

Samis: When you say A, B and D, are you talking about the red?

04-00:21:31

Nordland: The four colors. The four interlocked squares. A-B-C-D, A-B-C-D, and the three, A-B-D, and B-C-D. When I did the original show, I had planned to have a small room within the first gallery that was only yellow pictures. He couldn't finish them. But I did have a little pad, where he had worked on heavy watercolor paper. He laid out all of his yellows, and he did one little square on this pad that kind of enunciated what he thought were the possibilities he could do with yellow. It was quite brilliant. He confiscated it after the show. [laughs] It didn't come to San Francisco. It didn't go on the road. It was only seen in Washington.

Samis: What about *Tenayuca* and the study for *Tenayuca*, the two-pad? Was that also at the same time? Was that part of this same bequest? It's a more horizontal—

04-00:22:49

Nordland: That had been owned here for a long time. Yes. That was here when I came, yeah.

Samis: Richard was actually asking about other pieces that were here when you came. I imagine this Paul Klee *Fragmente* [1937] probably was?

04-00:23:06

Nordland: Yeah, I think it was.

Samis: This goes back to '64, Wilbur May.

04-00:23:12

Nordland: Sure. Sure.

Samis: And then of course, the—

04-00:23:15

Nordland: The Riveras. But not this nice little González [Julio González, *Petite Faucille (femme debout) ca 1937*].

Cándida Smith: As we look down this way, there's the very nice Magritte [René Magritte, *Les Valeurs Personnelles, 1952*], and then there's the Rothko [No. 14, 1960]. I imagine those were two artists that you would have liked to have acquired.

04-00:23:38

Nordland:

Well, I visited with Mark just before he killed himself and said that we needed to get the *Slow Swirl* back. He told me that “Jerry, it’s only money.” And that means to say that he would’ve been willing to sell it to us. But when he took his life, of course, his wife gave the work to the Museum of Modern Art, where it would be seen by more people. And it’s a splendid thing. I’ve said this to Miss Rubens, that Dick Diebenkorn used to say that the prime reason he had for coming to the San Francisco Museum was to see the *Slow Swirl*. He felt it was that important to him. He associated it with the Bayeux tapestries and with the kind of work that he had seen as a child, and just admired it immoderately. It was a great loss to have it go. But it’s wonderful, of course, to have this grand Rothko.

[material deleted]

04-00:25:30

Nordland:

As I understand it, Katherine Kuh convinced George [Culler] that he ought to have a late, *real* Rothko, not this very, very large, kind of unclassifiable example of Mark Rothko’s work. I think that was a disservice to San Francisco and to the museum. I wonder that a responsible [person] would have given counsel like that because it was, particularly from the point of view of the artists in the Bay Area, it was considered to be a super-treasure, a work of enormous value and influence, in the minds of artists and artist/teachers in the Bay Area. So it was unconscionable behavior on Katherine’s part.

Samis:

It was on a par with the *Guardians of the Secret*, for Pollock.

04-00:26:56

Nordland:

I think *Guardians of the Secret* was probably not as well understood then as it is now. But for some reason—perhaps because of Dick’s association with the Bayeux tapestry—he just saw it as a tripartite story, a big story in the middle, with renditions above and below that kind of carried the sub-stories and subtext of the great work. It is a wonderful work. And you notice that it’s *always* on view at the Modern. And I don’t think they lend.

Cándida Smith:

In terms of Magritte, what was the state of, shall we say, the surrealist collection at the time you were director.

04-00:27:52

Nordland:

Well, we had, of course, works by Matta, De Chirico, Mirò, Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst. We weren’t, by any means, ignoring this sphere. We had contemporary people who were representative, like [Lee] Mullican and Gordon Onslow Ford and Wolfgang Paalen, who fitted in and extended it because they were very influential artists in jumping the Atlantic between Paris and Mexico and the U.S. We were offered

the Magritte show by the Museum of Modern Art, and it seemed beyond our capacity to handle that show. This is a particularly fine example, I think, of Magritte's work, for many reasons [*Les valeurs personnelles*]. The fact that, you might say, his whole vocabulary is expressed there in the work. Some of the aspects like the way he turns the corner there in the sky and lays the comb against that left corner and puts a shadow in, he's using his vocabulary in a new way. And he changes the scale so remarkably that—I think that's just an outstanding example. There are larger works.

04-00:29:52

There are larger examples, like in the Art Institute of Chicago, but I don't think necessarily better ones. This is just a stunning work.

Samis:

Could you make the point again, pointing out the corner.

04-00:30:09

Nordland:

Well, the way the sky comes, and the way the comb has been laid in there, with the shadow behind it; and then the business of a match being half the size of a bed, and a comb being double the size of a bed, and a glass being the size of a human figure. It's startling contrasts and juxtapositions.

Cándida Smith:

In terms of your own personal interests, did you value surrealist work?

04-00:30:47

Nordland:

Well, Max Ernst, May Ray, and Marcel Duchamp were part of my educational system. I grew up with May Ray. He introduced me to the others, so I had a steady diet of that as a young person, so that yes, I felt that they had great significance. It may very well be that Marcel has had *too* great an influence, but that's not an opinion I necessarily have to share with you.

Samis:

Was this Tanguy on display? [Yves Tanguy, *Arrières-pensées*, 1939]

04-00:31:26

Nordland:

Oh, yes. We used it all the time.

Samis:

You mentioned Gordon Onslow Ford and Paalen, and the Dynaton. I think they're often forgotten.

04-00:31:40

Nordland:

Oh, I think they are, I think they are.

Samis:

I was wondering if you could talk about their presence and their importance in the art scene at that time.

04-00:31:48
Nordland:

Well, people don't remember this so well, I think, but Dr. Morley did shows that had featured the work of the Dynaton group, quite often. Sometimes it was just a little pickup show and no publication. But she was very concerned about the work, and I think that she had a personal friendship with Gordon and with Wolfgang Paalen and with Lee Mullican. I think there were additional people, like Richard Bowman, who lived in Redwood City and who had been a graduate at Iowa and had been at the Art Institute in Chicago and had developed a work with a different kind of paint, paints with fluorescent aspects, which were shunned by most artists, but he studied and worked with and tested and developed. Of course, that's prophetic about the way things would go with paints that we see in the Washington color painters and the acrylics that were evolved in the fifties and sixties and seventies and have now become very much a part of the standard material of the art school discipline.

04-00:33:27

Tanguy, of course, came from France. He was doing mature work in the late twenties. His work has, I think, a kind of magic realist quality that transcends that of Salvador Dali. These wonderful dreamscapes and these fanciful imagined creations are unlike anything in world painting at the time. His wife, Kay Sage, provided a kind of hostel for visiting surrealists in Connecticut. There were galleries in New York that were specializing in surrealist work at the time. Pierre Matisse, of course, would do it, but there were a number of other galleries, as well. Tanguy is, I think, growing in importance. I understand a catalogue raisonné is in process right now. I think that we'll probably be seeing shows that will give us an entirely new view of Tanguy, because he was a very creative and active and productive person.

[material deleted]

Sterrett:

I was wondering if you had any thoughts on *The Tormentors* [Philip Guston, 1947-1948].

Samis:

You talked about *Guardians*, could you talk about an abstract Guston in that period?

04-00:35:36
Nordland:

I was a great admirer of Phil. I spent a good deal of time with him, from the forties on. I visited him in Woodstock. I think this is a picture that he intended to keep for his family. Since it was given by him to the San Francisco Museum, it's a real indication of his admiration for San Francisco and this museum's program. I know that there were some purchases that furthered the four acquisitions that I was able to make of Phil's work. But this one I think was a particularly important

work, because it was a kind of a transitional painting, where he had moved from figuration, in the thirties, into this tormented work, which he gives the name *Tormentors*. It must have been a great shock to him to produce this work. He reserved it, he didn't let it be seen too many times. He kept it in his own holdings, and then gave it at what he felt was the appropriate time, to San Francisco. A later picture, the *White Painting [White Painting I, 1957]*, was one of the paintings that I was most proud of acquiring for the institution.

Rubens: Would you mind just explicating this just a bit, in the sense of would this have been accessible to a public? And what are we seeing here?

04-00:37:37

Nordland: Well, the three-dimensional figure that he was working with in his mural period and in his Piero della Francesca moment, has all been very flattened, has all been reduced to kind of cardboard cutouts. His color is—He balances his reds across the face. His drawing does not become volumetric at all. It's all flat on the surface. He's become an abstract painter. He didn't feel, somehow, that he could. It was something that was new to him. I think it was one of the reasons that he kept this painting in a kind of a special space, and didn't use it in a number of shows.

Rubens: So who or what are the “tormentors”?

04-00:38:41

Nordland: I don't really know. I think he found it a tormenting painting. Tormenting to make it. You have an essay right there.

04-00:39:07

There was a collector in Los Angeles, Mrs. Betty Freeman, who owned one of the great Clyfford Stills, and owned wonderful works by Sam Francis, and two important Gustons, the white one, and the one called *For M*, and a couple of drawings. There came a point in her life when she wanted very much to place these properly. We worked out an arrangement where we were able to purchase one of the works, and she would give us the second work and the two drawings. That was the foundation for the Philip Guston works here at the San Francisco Museum. This was a work that has been written about and talked about a good deal. Harvard Arnason talks about it in the Guggenheim catalogue. It's a work that he established after *The Tormentors*, that he was going to give himself a certain amount of time to do this painting. He was going to use these close valued colors on a white ground. And when Ray Parker came to visit him and honked the horn, he cleaned his brushes and went down and went away, and that was the end of that painting. He had given himself a kind of a time limit, and this was a surprising work to him. It was, again, I thought, a revelation that he could do so much with so little.

04-00:41:03

The *For M*, of course, has been given the slang title of abstract impressionist work. It has the wonderful touch of a [Claude] Monet, and something of the memory of the quality of the paint stroke that you saw in the Braque picture a few moments ago. But it has also, refulgent, wonderful pink and pastel colors that give it so much warmth and loveliness.

[material deleted]

Cándida Smith: Did you have any Stills at the time that you were director?

04-00:42:25

Nordland:

This painting, of course, was in the collection [Clyfford Still, *Untitled* (formerly *Self-portrait*), 1945]. We used it as often as we used probably any painting in the collection. It had the title of *Self-Portrait*, which was always a disputed title, but nevertheless, is connected with this particular work. I was particularly anxious to have a Still collection here. I spent time with Mr. Still in Maryland—a couple of weeks—with the idea that—I even suggested that I would take off a year to do a book that would arrange the full history of Clyfford Still and his relationship to the San Francisco Art Institute, which was then the California School of Fine Arts, and the importance that he had for art in the Bay Area. That didn't work out for me, but it did work out for Henry Hopkins. And of course, the major gift that balanced the gift that was made to the museum in Buffalo, the Albright-Knox [Art Gallery], where again, more than twenty works were given, with the idea that there would be a permanent room devoted to the work of Clyfford Still. As I recall, the vault gallery was redesigned to provide storage and space for continued exposition. It had been my hope that I would end up with, in the four corners of the old San Francisco Museum of Modern Art building, a room devoted to Mark Rothko, a room devoted to Clyfford Still, a room for Robert Motherwell, and a room for Richard Diebenkorn. The four corners would've made it a wonderful, and I think exciting balance, for their significance to the city and the museum's art.

Cándida Smith: Well, as you look at these works in this room, what is it that you would want to point out to people about what they contributed to post-war abstraction, why they're important enough to warrant a permanent dedicated room?

04-00:44:57

Nordland:

Well, of course, the same pictures are not always here. Because you do have such a deep resource, it's possible to devote a room to Clyfford Still, at the same time that you provide variety and interest, and a kind of constant level of attention. I think of what Diebenkorn said about Clyfford Still when he was invited to go to the studio in the bottom of

the California School of Fine Arts. He said, “Well, his stuff was very austere. It wasn’t surrealism, it had nothing to do with cubism, it didn’t have anything to do with European painting. It was fiercely independent. It was not seductive. It was very American. It was trying to be original and itself, not something else. It was rejecting influence.” Well, that’s a lot to say. And it’s a lot to undertake. I think that Clyff stood for that. And at any given moment—There’s a very important deposit now at the Metropolitan. And they are perhaps not as deep and not as well selected as the ones that are owned here or are owned at the Albright-Knox. And that’s a wonderful thing that Clyff made possible with his gift.

Samis: You said you visited the artist and his wife in Maryland, you spent time with them. Could you talk a little bit about him?

04-00:47:11

Nordland: Well, I thought we were in great harmony, and that he felt very positively about my enthusiasm for his work and my devotion to telling his story in an important way. But when I got back to San Francisco, I had a telegram from Mrs. Still that said that all bets were off. So somehow, I offended her, or somehow I didn’t express quite the right thing to her.

Cándida Smith: In this painting over here [Clyfford Still, *Untitled, 1951-52*], maybe you could talk about what you think is going on with the yellow spot that’s up in the—

04-00:48:11

Nordland: Up in the upper left edge?

Cándida Smith: Yeah, why is that there, do you think?

04-00:48:15

Nordland: Well, it reminds me of the great black painting at the Art Institute of Chicago that has that little bit of orange that forces you to consider the entire surface, that forces you to realize that you’ve got to give every square inch of this picture its proper attention. It makes you grasp the breadth and height, and consider all of it together, not to find some favoritism or to think of it as simply wallpaper; that it’s all important, every single square inch. He’s trying to compel your attention. And I think he does it.

Samis: We’ve got another black painting of a similar sort right here. [Clyfford Still, *Untitled, 1951*].

04-00:49:21

Nordland: Yes. Interesting about that black painting at Chicago is that it was in a show of four or five big Stills at the L. A. County [Museum]. And the

trustees were considering a purchase. I was advocating for the big black painting. Somehow, Chicago sneaked in in the middle of the night and bought it, [laughs] and it was gone. I think it was a great loss. This is about the size of paintings that Clyfford showed when he had his show at the de Young Museum, and when he had his show at the San Francisco Museum years and years ago. Some were around six, six-and-a-half feet, some were around five feet wide [1943].

04-00:50:33

Nordland:

They were not the enormous size of the widescreen canvases we see elsewhere in the gallery. This was considered, in those days, a *big* canvas.

Samis:

We've looked at Rothko and Guston and Still. You've evoked, I think, really beautifully—I wonder if you could make a generality about this generation, and what they saw as painting's project. The drama of what they were doing and how they were trying to reinvent a vocabulary. You talked about Dick Diebenkorn going down to Still's lair. And trying to disenfranchise themselves and free themselves from what had come before, and reinvent—

04-00:51:28

Nordland:

Dick also went further to say that he went to see the show at the museum, and he didn't get it. He went back later, say within two weeks, and spent a good deal of time there before he was able to say what he said to me about the independence, the being free of French influence, of not being trammled by the problems of the European artist, of facing the issues that Clyff was bringing forward. I never felt that Clyff had a big influence on Dick's work, but it may very well be that some of the applications with the trowel came from that. [John] Elderfield has a tendency to think that Clyfford was an important influence at that time, even on Dick. But I still see the Matisse. I still see that sense of looking for some kind of a sweep that will hold the whole picture together. The word that Matisse used for it was "arabesque."

Cándida Smith:

He did not like to be compared with other artists. Mrs. Still was more rigorous, even, in enforcing that. Do you think that your idea of the four corners might have been—

04-00:53:26

Nordland:

Oh, I didn't share that with her. No, no, I wouldn't have thought of sharing that with her. I've only occasionally revealed that dream I had. It would've been a very exciting thing.

[material deleted]

[Begin Audio File 5 07-11-2007.mp3]

05-00:00:03
Nordland:

The de Young and the Legion had been separate institutions with separate directors, but they were still the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The director at the Legion called in an adviser from the Brooklyn Museum in New York City to help him think about joining those two museums. The recommendation of that advisor was, "You ought to be called the San Francisco Museum of Art, at your two locations." So they proposed that we give up our name and they become the San Francisco Museum of Art. Well, I couldn't think of considering it. The idea. San Francisco Museum of Art was the best name I could possibly think of, and why would we relinquish it to these many long-named institutions that wanted to join? So they compromised by saying that they would call themselves the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco at these two locations, with a common director. But they tried to sweeten the pot in this idea by saying that they could provide us with space in the park, free space in the park to build a new building.

05-00:01:59

Well, the renovation of the building cost less than \$2 million. The building of the Pasadena Museum, which had just occurred in Southern California, cost more than \$7 million. We had had a fundraising advisory group do a study; it said that we couldn't raise \$7 million. So I figured that we were better off staying with our name and renovating the space. And that's what we did. It was a different era.

Samis:

Were they proposing that you actually join them, as well?

05-00:02:48
Nordland:

Oh, no. Absolutely not.

Samis:

So you said you would've been even closer to them in proximity, but with a different name and a space in the park. And then you would've had to raise the money to build the building in that space.

05-00:03:01
Nordland:

And raise the money to build the building. Our financial advisers had told us that it wasn't likely that we'd be successful in doing that.

Samis:

And you would've given up the name.

05-00:03:15
Nordland:

And I do think it's a pretty nice name. Well, shall we go from left to right?

Cándida Smith:

If we look these five works, how do they represent the range of your aspirations, as well as the practical constraints that you faced as a director?

05-00:04:37
Nordland:

The five works—actually, we’re talking about four, and the Gaston Lachaise, which is probably off camera. [1—Gaston Lachaise, *Floating Nude Figure*, 1924; 2—Philip Guston, *For M*, 1955; 3—Edward Corbett, *Untitled # 3*, 1950; 4—Nathan Oliveira, *Adolescent by the Bed*, 1959; 5—Man Ray, *Untitled (Rayograph)*, 1950]. This was the painting and photography of my lifetime. The sculpture, of course, represents an artist that I had been particularly devoted to. I had devoted a couple of years to doing research at Yale and in the Northeast, on Gaston Lachaise, so he represented a kind of historical figure. The works by Guston and Corbett represented the mainstream of American painting. Oliveira represented what I thought of as among the very best painting that developed on the West Coast during this era. Man Ray, a photographer, he went into photography in order to get good photographs of his paintings. He was also an object maker, he was an inventor. He was a very fertile and remarkable person that I spent probably a day a week with for three or four years, in Hollywood, where he was hiding from World War II. I asked him to make me a rayograph, and he did make this rayograph. It is a photogram. That is, it’s made without a camera, in a darkroom, with obvious accoutrements—little things he got from the kitchen and things that were available around the studio. I felt that photography was an exciting aspect of contemporary life. I placed Edward Weston as *the* great photographer of the world at that moment. I saw Man as a very exciting, creative figure, but I much admired his painting more than his photograms or his photographs. The San Francisco Museum had been devoting space on a consistent pattern for years, and John Humphrey had been doing a terrific job as curator. He wasn’t trained in that area, he had just taken it on, the way Beaumont Newhall did at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and convinced Mr. Barr eventually that it ought to be a department. John Humphrey, in a sense, made a department that did not exist, function and exist in real time. So I felt it was something that I should encourage John, by giving this Man Ray. My then wife and I made a gift to the collection. But I think photography has become an essential part of the program. This was probably the second or third museum in the country to do that. And of course, as history has borne out, why, photography has become a kind of ruling aspect of contemporary art in the new century.

05-00:09:18

Looking at the paintings, let’s start with Philip Guston.

Samis:

Before we leave Man Ray, were you actually with Man Ray when he made this photogram?

05-00:09:29
Nordland:

No.

- Samis: Oh, you asked him to make one for you, but then—
- 05-00:09:31
Nordland: No, I think Lee Miller was the only person that went in his darkroom. No, that was—
- Cándida Smith: This was in the 1940s, then.
- 05-00:09:42
Nordland: This would've been somewhere before 1951, when he went back to Paris.
- Samis: I'm curious about just one more little thing on Man Ray, how you came to know him in Los Angeles.
- 05-00:09:56
Nordland: I was introduced to him by Jo Kantor, Josephine Kantor, the wife of Paul Kantor, and by a fellow named Copley, Bill Copley, who was a painter and an heir to the Copley newspaper chain. I spent a lot of time with him, I acquired a number of paintings from him, and one rayograph, and one watercolor. We just spent a lot of time together. As I say, I visited him almost every week for a long, long period of time.
- Samis: How old were you at the time?
- 05-00:10:43
Nordland: I was around twenty.
- Samis: So these are college days.
- 05-00:10:46
Nordland: Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, something like that.
- Samis: What kinds of things do you feel you learned from him?
- 05-00:10:55
Nordland: Well, he introduced me to Max [Ernst], to Marcel [Duchamp], to all of his friends. I acquired examples of his books and examined, studied and learned from them. As I say, I got a significant part of my education from that experience.
- Cándida Smith: Did you know the Arensbergs as well?
- 05-00:11:28
Nordland: I didn't know them, really, but I was in their house; I saw their collection two or three times. They opened it one or two days a week. I think it may have given them some kind of a tax advantage. I'm not quite sure what that's all about. Edward G. Robinson opened his house that way too, every once in a while. Vincent Price was very friendly and helpful and shared his collection. There was a little gallery called

the Contemporary Institute of Art, in Beverly Hills, that all of these people and more contributed to the evolution of a museum of modern art educational function in Southern California, during my college years. Somewhere '47, '48, something like that.

Samis: And just for the record, I want to connect the dots here, because Josephine, Paul Kantor were dealers. Paul Kantor I think was the source of the [Mondrian] *Church at Domburg [1914]*, is that correct?

05-00:12:46

Nordland: Yes, and the female de Kooning portrait [*Womand, 1950*]. Now, those were purchases, they were not gifts.

Samis: I understand. Didn't Jo later end up coming up north and marrying Wright Morris?

05-00:13:02

Nordland: Yes, she married Wright Morris, the novelist and photographer, very, very fine photographer. And Jo died just recently, or comparatively recently. And she didn't reach eighty.

Cándida Smith: Did the museum collection have other rayograms at that point?

05-00:13:22

Nordland: None. At that time.

Samis: Could you talk a little bit about the reception for photography, the atmosphere for photography, in the San Francisco public?

05-00:13:34

Nordland: Well, I think Ansel Adams was very greatly respected. I think photography was looked at as semiprofessional, not quite right somehow. It was made with a machine, you know. It wasn't actually art. It was close, but it wasn't art. I developed a program at UCLA. We had a school, and we had a fine professor of photography, Bob Heineken. He was an activist. I developed a collection there, a permanent collection. Then I put it in Hollinger boxes and put it in the library, where they could be studied by individuals. You could check them out, the way you would a box of [Albrecht] Dürers. At Milwaukee, the attitude was it's not art at all. When I started a little gallery that was devoted to photography, it was considered foolish. But it's become more and more important, and it's been better regarded. I think there are fairly few people nowadays that take the attitude of forty, fifty years ago, that it was made by a machine and not by a person. Because there is a difference between an Edward Weston and a Moholy-Nagy. It's done with a machine. But you have to be able to control it and figure out how to make the print right. Ansel used to say that the photograph was the score, and the print was the performance.

You've got a piece of negative there, but what do you do with it? How do you make it produce the wonderment of a perfect photograph, a perfect silver print?

Samis: And during your directorship, you found visitors were receptive to photography?

05-00:16:04

Nordland: We improved. When we did the great Fred Sommer show [1969] with Philadelphia, why, I think that was maybe a turning point. Now, Sommer was a person who was related to Max, Max Ernst. He had surrealist overtones, and he certainly had the imagination and the intellect that we associate with Man Ray and that aspect of contemporary art. But we had a continuous photography. There was *always* a photography show on. And there were occasionally two. But there was always at least one. And I think that was an educational impact. When we started *Artforum* magazine, there was a commentator in the Bay Area. A woman, McCann, was it?

Samis: Cecile McCann?

05-00:17:02

Nordland: I think.

Samis: Cecile McCann, she later became editor of *Artweek*.

05-00:17:06

Nordland: That made a great deal of commentary and helped a good deal in improving the climate for photography.

Cándida Smith: Did you visit local photographers while you were director?

05-00:17:21

Nordland: Well, we made a show for Wynn Bullock [1969]. Now, actually, Humphrey did it, but I raised the money for the catalogue. Oddly enough, in that case, we went into a second edition. The only time I can remember we had a second edition. It was that successfully received. Wynn was a terrific artist. I wrote the catalogue for the Fred Sommer show that was organized by Philadelphia. I had previously done a photography show of Fred's at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, and shared it with the Pasadena Art Museum. So yes, I met with photographers. And have a good number, like Ansel and Edward and Wilfur and Ruth Thorne-Thomsen, in my own collection. Edmund Teske. We did a Teske show [1963]. I think we acquired a group of Teskes. I can't swear to that, but I think we did. We certainly—

Cándida Smith: There's one of Teske's photo albums.

05-00:18:28
Nordland:

We certainly did at UCLA.

Rubens:

When we were upstairs, you mentioned Edward Weston. I wondered if you have a particular favorite of his.

05-00:18:38
Nordland:

Well, in the Korean War, I was working for the judge advocate in Fort Ord. I ran into a recently deceased photographer, Ruth Bernhard. We had a wonderful visit. She said, "You know, I'd like you to meet Edward Weston. I think you'd like that." I said, "I'd like that." So she set up an appointment, and I met him at Wildcat Canyon, Wildcat Creek. And that house smelled of cats. It was really almost unpleasant. But it was great to meet him. He started showing me photographs and we went on all day. Finally, he showed me a group of four-by-fours that he'd done with a Hasselblad. And he said, "These are not exhibitable." There was pubic hair. Such a problem. I said, "Well, you know, maybe I'll be able to show those someday." He said, "Let's do it." Well, of course, he died. But I did work with his sons, and I did do a big Edward Weston show at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, my first museum post. And it was not considered unsuccessful at all. Those little four-by-fours looked awfully good. He just went around the nude Chris Charis, exploring and taking an elbow, a breast, a leg. He just explored her body and came up with these fantastic anatomy shots that were almost abstract like [Francis] Brugiere, but you suddenly figured it out. It suddenly snapped into focus.

Rubens:

And Bernhard, did you collect Bernhard at that time?

05-00:20:54
Nordland:

No. No, never.

Rubens:

She became very popular later.

05-00:20:57
Nordland:

Oh, she's a terrific artist. Terrific artist. Within a year or so, she died. I think she was in her nineties.

Samis:

She was 101, I think.

05-00:21:07
Nordland:

101? Good for her!

Cándida Smith:

I want to deal with the Lachaise because that is another artist with whom you're personally very closely connected.

05-00:21:29
Nordland:

Well, I was exploring the galleries of Southern California. I was in school. I went to a great big gallery on Little Santa Monica, in

Southern California. It was a two-story building full of art. And on a balustrade kind of thing that shouldn't have been a sculpture stand, there was this sculpture. I asked the director, who was a man named Frank Perls—Now, this was not the Frank Perls Gallery that became famous, this was just a gallery that was showing Americana. Joe Jones and kind of ordinary 1930s, early forties kind of material. But somehow, he had a Gaston Lachaise. I was just thrilled by it. It felt it was just so remarkable, so exciting. I went off to the library and found the Lincoln Kirstein book for the 1935, '34 show at the Museum of Modern Art. Because it's the first sculpture show given to an artist, European or American, at the Museum of Modern Art. Subsequently, I learned that Kirstein was writing a book. There was a show at Knoedler in New York, and he was going to be doing a book on Lachaise. I wrote to Kirstein, and we carried on a correspondence for two or three years. Then he said to me, "You know, I'm kind of falling out of love with him, and I think you ought to do it." Somehow or other, that rang a bell with me. I graduated from law school and took a little job and raised some money, and went to Yale and to the East to work on that book. I had a couple of years in that before I was drafted into the Korean War, in the Army. When it became possible, because Helen Crocker Russell had died and people wanted to create a memorial for her, I suggested this sculpture. I spoke to Madame Lachaise, [whom], of course, I knew. She arranged for this cast to be made. Posthumous. They're limited to, I think, nine, and we were able to acquire one.

Cándida Smith: Why this particular Lachaise [Gaston Lachaise, *Floating Nude Figure*, 1924] out of the universe of—

05-00:24:45

Nordland:

I thought that this small—not the eight-and-a-half foot heroic woman, [*Standing Woman*] from the garden at the Museum of Modern Art, not the 1912, 1927 *Standing Woman* from the St. Louis or the Chicago Art Institute—that this small, relatively affordable example told the story of Lachaise's contribution to world sculpture. As you're enjoying right now the Matisse sculpture show. Look at it in terms of a fragment; that many of these torsos, many of these figures are incomplete. When you start seeing them in their three dimensions, when you start seeing them from the back, the way you ordinarily do not see them, all of a sudden you realize that Lachaise was there along with [Auguste] Rodin and [Edgar] Degas and Henri Matisse and Picasso. He wasn't a painter, but he was one swell sculptor. For a long period, he was considered the greatest sculptor to have worked in the United States. Which I think he's lost that to somebody named [David] Smith. But he's still a large figure. I did acquire the heroic woman from the garden at the Modern [MoMA] for UCLA campus, and for the Milwaukee Art Museum. So if I had thought that I could've swung it, I probably would've gotten a

larger work; but I had a limited capacity, and I tried to get the best that I could get for the available cost.

Cándida Smith: Oh, so it was budget rather than exhibition space?

05-00:27:07

Nordland: Oh, yeah. Yes, it was budget. It was budget. It was something that could be sold.

Cándida Smith: You did not have a sculpture garden at the old building.

05-00:27:18

Nordland: No. No, certainly not. Certainly not.

Samis: Maybe you could take us around this sculpture a little bit, and talk about how you see it encapsulating Lachaise and his work.

05-00:27:30

Nordland: Well, he did a lot of things. He was a wizard of portraiture, and he did portraits of the great figures of American modern art, the Georgia O'Keeffes and the Alfred Stieglitzes and the Lincoln Kirsteins and the John Marins. He really did something unique as a contribution to American cultural history. But his real concern was the woman. And the standing woman, the floating woman, the fragment of a woman, the torso, the knees, the breasts. He just explored the possibilities, very much in the manner that Edward Weston did. He was transfigured by the woman. And of course, it was Madame Lachaise, Isabel, who was somewhat older than he, and of course, lived much longer than he, because he died of—[pause] Leukemia, at only fifty-three. He did not produce anything like what he was capable of doing. He just had gotten fully started. For example, the heroic woman in the garden at the Modern is the only cast of that that was made in his lifetime. He was very proud of that, but he sold it to Winslow Ames for a thousand dollars. A thousand dollars wouldn't pay for the casting. Why did he do that? He did that because he owed a thousand dollars on the casting, that he hadn't paid. They wouldn't take another work from him that he had a commission for, from Mr. Rockefeller, until he paid off the first one. He was known to take things to a hock shop to get \$25 to take Madame Lachaise to dinner. Of course, he lost the little tab, and never went back to get them. So you should look in those hock shops. Good things. It really is his complete statement of the woman. Now of course, there is a seven-and-a-half-foot version of this, which is beautiful and impressive, and used to be against the ivy covered wall at the Modern, in the garden. But it hasn't been shown since the next to the last renovation of the building, when it was shown at the top of the staircase. But I really think this is, in small, a more successful and more satisfying piece. And there's plenty of room for it. Shall we talk about paintings?

Cándida Smith: Let's move on to the paintings.

[interruption]

05-00:32:22

Nordland: This is the style that somehow *Artnews* characterized as Phil Guston's abstract impressionist manner [Philip Guston, *For M*, 1955]. And of course, they were making reference to the idea that he has a kind of a brushstroke that would recall the work of Monet, in the great water lilies pictures, and in some of those great church façades and such. It is an abstract painting dedicated to his wife—*For M*. It is saturated, strong and wonderful color. It's a pretty picture. But it's also a glorious piece of paint. He's enjoyed himself. This was no torment. This has been a pleasure. There's a kind of a sensuous enjoyment in the way he's applied the paint that—He communicates with enormous success. He was much admired by younger painters. But he is so self-indulgent in works like this that they became afraid to try to follow him, because it really is verging on the impossible.

Cándida Smith: What do you mean by self-indulgent?

05-00:34:03

Nordland: Well, he's just lavished and slathered this paint on with such a joy and such a sense of pride and satisfaction that it'd be a hard thing for a lesser person to try to pursue.

Samis: And yet there's also scraping in the center there.

05-00:34:30

Nordland: Oh, that doesn't mean he doesn't make adjustments, sure. Because I'm sure that he built up too much and felt he had to show a little sign of restraint. But even in the so-called background, there's the wonderful touch, the sensuous quality of the pigment itself. And he doesn't bother about perspective, he just slathers it on. A very, very wonderful picture. And what a balance to the *White Painting I*, with the austerity and the simplicity and the restraint that it had, and the abandon that this has. Why isn't this up?

Samis: You know, there's a finite number of works that are up at any given time.

05-00:35:30

Rubens: I want to ask you about how you feel Guston has held up.

05-00:35:39

Nordland: Well, I was talking to an artist at a party the other night, and he said, "When he"—He couldn't even think of the artist's name. He said, "When he went to doing those shoes"—and he was talking about the late period of Phil Guston—he said, "I couldn't stand them." And he

said, “It’s just funny how much better his pictures have gotten as I get to be smarter.” He finds him, I think—And this is the artist community talking, not the ordinary bus rider. The ordinary artist feels that they have learned something from Phil Guston about integrity, about responsibility, about holding himself to his own standard. He eventually decided that while he’s not unhappy with this work, that this was not telling the story that he needed to tell. And he went back to dealing with the Ku Klux Klan and with some of those things that he’d suffered with in the thirties. He went back to some of the themes that had been a part of his political and social vision as a young man, and wanted to express those as a mature person, about dissatisfactions with contemporary life. And they’re *very* powerful works. Now, the three works that you have at the head of the stairs [Philip Guston, *Red Sea*, *The Swell*, *Blue Light*, those are on another plane. That’s a spiritual statement, I think, about nature and about response to landscape. But those figurative things are quite wonderful. Are there examples in the collection?

Samis: Absolutely.

05-00:37:47

Nordland: So from the four, we’ve gone to maybe ten or twelve? It’s a delight.

Samis: And the same palette, and much the same brushwork. But with all of that re-injected subject matter.

05-00:38:03

Nordland: Absolutely.

Rubens: This, I thought, at some point, was considered sentimental or—

05-00:38:10

Nordland: Pretty.

Rubens: Pretty, that’s right. Pretty.

Samis: So I’m interested, because you talked about the abandon, the lush abandonment of the brushwork, and how many people would dare to do that? I think actually, what came to mind immediately was the Joan Mitchell that’s on the wall up in that gallery [*Untitled*, ca. 1960], right by the Rothko.

05-00:38:30

Nordland: Joan’s a great artist. Terrific artist. I saw five at the de Young yesterday. The estate has finally been straightened out. I guess the French government has been paid off.

Cándida Smith: So the Corbett.

05-00:39:04
Nordland:

Corbett was born in 1919. He was a little bit older than the average soldier, sailor in World War II. He'd already been to art school, at the California School of Fine Arts. He'd been around a lot. He'd done a lot of traveling. He was an Army kid. And as a result, he'd been to the Philippines and he'd been all over the US, and he knew a lot. He'd been in New York, and he had friends like Ad Reinhardt. He was teaching at, I think, San Francisco State [University]. And he met Clay Spohn, who was on the faculty at the CSFA. He was introduced to Doug MacAgy. Doug MacAgy was looking for a painting and drawing teacher, and he came aboard. He took a cut in pay. He was kind of in the environment that he felt he ought to be in. The California School of Fine Arts had that kind of morale at that time, with MacAgy, with faculty that included David Park and Elmer Bischoff and Clay Spohn and, I think sooner or later, Ansel Adams and, of course, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, Richard Diebenkorn. Ed felt very good about that. Now, in '46, '47, he had been painting in a manner related to Piet Mondrian. Now, this [Edward Corbett, *Untitled #3, 1950*] is a work that shows some geometry, which was, generally speaking, non grata to this environment. None of these painters ever would do geometric things. But he still had one foot in the Mondrian camp, but he was looking for something more emotional. And there was all kinds of color underneath this. But by the time he finishes, it's just darks, grays, black, and a little bit of color there in the left-hand band. But you have the feeling, as you do in some of the Stills, that there's a color that's leaking through; that somehow it's coming through.

I did a show for Ad Reinhardt at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, and he told me at the time, "You know, I got the idea from Ed Corbett. I was out there in California, in 1950, and he was doing white paintings and black paintings. I thought to myself the black paintings, there's something in there maybe I can explore." At that time, Ad was making red paintings and blue paintings. But he suddenly started to do the black things. And then he wrote a note—which is published now—to Ed in 1967, before Ed died, that says, "I got it from you. I borrowed it. I took it away." Anyway, I thought this was an unbelievable and wonderful work. It had an authenticity that I felt partook both of the Mondrianesque and this emotional, sensuous painting surface. Quite different surface than Phil had. But he's covered it all up, but he hasn't done it. He somehow lets it leak through. He's provided a filter. And I think it's quite wonderful. We did a Corbett show here [1969]. And as a result, we not only bought this from Fred Snowden, the curator at the Oakland Museum [of California], but Ed and his wife gave us a couple more. So there are Corbetts to be seen here. And I'm hoping that his secondary market is holding up, because I think he's a very strong, important painter,

despite the fact that he died at fifty-one, which is entirely too young.
[pause] Questions?

Cándida Smith: Well, since you were based in Los Angeles for so many years, were you also interested in work of the abstract classicists, John McLaughlin and Lorser Feitelson?

05-00:44:11

Nordland: I wasn't much interested in Lorser or Benjamin. I thought very highly of McLaughlin. While I've written about McLaughlin a little, I feel very guilty that I never did a McLaughlin show. I owed it to him. I really feel I was irresponsible in that. He should have been given the proper recognition, before his untimely passing. Yes, a great artist.

Cándida Smith: Did you try to acquire any of this work for this museum?

05-00:44:56

Nordland: I don't think I did. I don't think so. McLaughlin was a very isolated kind of figure. And as you can see, there's a lot of paint handling in this context here.

Rubens: How was Corbett responded to? Were the shows successful shows, in terms of the public?

05-00:45:30

Nordland: I think it was maybe a little bit too early to get the response that one would hope for. The show did go to the Corcoran Gallery in Washington. Ed and his wife lived in Washington, and he was reasonably well regarded there. He's represented in, I think, all the museums there.

Cándida Smith: You did the show in 1970, or '69?

05-00:46:02

Nordland: '69, I think. I think '69.

Samis: So this was after he had died.

05-00:46:09

Nordland: He died in '71?

Samis: Yes, '71, okay.

05-00:46:11

Nordland: Yes. He stayed in my house, and set my daughter's bed on fire. He smoked.

Cándida Smith: To what degree were—Because if we think '69 and '70, we would be in Pop art at its apex; and conceptual and the new political art of the

seventies would be just entering into view. Was there still interest in this kind of work?

05-00:46:49

Nordland: It wasn't a perfect time for Ed to be shown.

Samis: There was also color field painting.

05-00:46:57

Nordland: We did do Olitski, and we did Gene Davis. All of my color painters that I'd had in Washington were represented in the collection by gift.

Samis: So there might be a little bit more of a pathway in, but this still feels much more sober, somber.

05-00:47:24

Nordland: Well, this is '50, you remember.

Samis: I know. Going back to Richard's question of how it would've been received in 1970. Is there anywhere in the field that gives people kind of the hooks to get into art like this?

05-00:47:39

Nordland: I don't think [Corbett] has been given much exposure, so I'm not sure that people *are* responding. And this is not on the wall upstairs. That's one way to get a response, put it up there in the right context, say, next to the Ad Reinhardt. I didn't see the Ad Reinhardt, either.

Sterrett: It's not up right now.

05-00:48:29

Nordland: Well.

Samis: We need more space. We've got a new building, and we need more space. Let's go to the Oliveira [Nathan Oliveira, *Adolescent by the Bed, 1959*].

Cándida Smith: A 1959 painting.

05-00:48:54

Nordland: Nathan had been in a show at the Museum of Modern Art called *The New Image of Man*. I think he made a very, very big and important impression on American art at that time. It was the period that struck me as most desirable. As his work evolved, I came to feeling that I didn't want to get something that was of this moment, of the moment of the purchase, but of the earlier era. Nate didn't have them to sell; they had really gone. So this was acquired from a dealer by trade, in a strange situation where we had an experimental abstract painting by Oliveira in our holdings, and we were able to trade, on an even basis,

the experimental abstract painting, which we didn't use much, for this iconic example of his most desired period at that time in his development, *Adolescent by the Bed*. He's obviously using abstract expressionist paint technique. But he's also evoking geometry, figuration, environment. His color is very carefully tempered. It's not very rough, but he's used mostly the grays, a little black, and the red. We have to remember one of his major influences was Max Beckmann. He studied with him at Mills College. He got an idea of composition from Max that I think was a very sophisticated one. And even though it's very subdued, it's a powerful and effective statement.

Cándida Smith: Of the Bay Area Figuratives, you've pinpointed Oliveira and Diebenkorn, of course. I wonder—

05-00:51:27

Nordland: I don't really put Nate in that group. I see Nate, even though he touches on that, and you might think that he's associated, he's not Elmer Bischoff. He's not David Park or Dick Diebenkorn, or any of that group of people that Paul Mills showed in the show at the Oakland Art Museum. He was a different person. He really came more from Beckmann in the European tradition, but with the American accent of paint.

Rubens: I was going to ask you earlier to be more specific about that. Do we see that here? What is owed to Beckmann?

05-00:52:22

Nordland: Well, I think it's in the balance of the color. It's in the way he's used that black with the blue, up there in the bed, and the red on the floor. His color has a kind of a symbolic ring. It's as if he's trying to say something that's emblematic. And this indifferent application over here is—He wants you to look at that figure. He's focusing you. He's not commanding your attention to the left side, the way Clyfford Still would. He's got another handle on things. But I was very proud of this picture. I thought it was an acquisition of real significance to the collection. I'm happy to see that it's been reproduced and loaned and used a great deal.

Samis: To follow up on Lisa's question about Beckmann, I think also the centrality and the verticality of that central figure, that kind of axis right dead center feels like a Beckmann, if you think about Beckmann's self-portraits or things like that—along with the black. But then this is all something else again.

05-00:53:57

Nordland: Oh, absolutely. And how he conveys the face with just a suggestion of an upper lip. He gets that face to you, and you believe it.

Samis: And the shadow. I think that also evokes what you're talking about, in terms of his interest in European antecedents and symbolism. People like [Odilon] Redon are coming through that face.

05-00:54:26

Nordland: Well, you think about his lithographs. We did do a show for his prints, for his lithographs [1969]. I think John Humphrey did it. And I think a small publication. I've written a couple of catalogues for galleries for Nate. When you go to his house, what do you see? You see African art, you see prints by Beckmann. He carries his heart on his sleeve.

Samis: And yet there are these moments like that, of just the unbridled color. There's so much else that's muted. Then you have these explosive eruptions from here down.

[Begin Audio File 6 07-11-2007.mp3]

06-00:00:00

Cándida Smith: You mentioned that you wanted to get an *Elegy [for the Spanish Republic]*, by Robert Motherwell], but you didn't think you could.

06-00:00:30

Nordland: Well, again, the *Elegies*, unless they're awfully good, are just examples. See, this is not just an example, this is a unique work. It belongs in that wall painting series. This [Robert Motherwell, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic, No. 57, 1957-1960*] is more like the *Voyage* that's owned by the Modern. In fact, it's the same size.

[interruption]

Cándida Smith: You've mentioned, both in the interview that you did in Chicago with Lisa and just now upstairs, that you had this idea of the four rooms and you would have a Diebenkorn room. I wonder how this painting [Richard Diebendorn, *Ocean Park # 54, 1972*] was going to fit into your conception of the Diebenkorn room.

06-00:02:04

Nordland: Well, this is a picture I had not seen before the shipment arrived for the big Diebenkorn show in the main gallery at the reopening of the old space on Van Ness. We had written a catalogue, we had gone to press, and we had seventeen pictures in the show. But when the shipment arrived from Diebenkorn's Santa Monica studio, there were eighteen works. This was, to my eye, the best example of recent work that he had yet produced. I immediately told a couple of board members that it was something that we should definitely arrange to get. This is what, #54? 1972. Dick usually worked three months on a picture. Sometimes a picture would come fast, but generally three months; and he would not exhibit until a year had passed and he felt he

could let it leave the studio. This was a situation where we had chosen what we wanted, the seventeen, which was about twenty-four months' work. Somehow, this work got finished, and he just—I think he felt pretty good about it, too. So he just, against his normal rule, sent it right along to us. Anyway, it was, from my view, the star of the show. I had a National Endowment grant, and I thought I would be able to buy it with that. All I had to do was get it matched. Somehow or other, people were not being cooperative. I later learned that Susan Land had contrived a group to buy the picture and bring it to the museum. I was very pleased about that. It's the Ocean Park period. It's even grander in scale. This is the largest size that you could get out of his then studio. That was how he worked out the limitations of it. You couldn't get it down that long, long, long flight of stairs and out the door. This was the absolute maximum size.

Cándida Smith: So could you explain a little bit what particularly about this painting was so luscious to you?

06-00:04:55

Nordland:

Well, I guess it's the combination of the scaffolding and the attractive color and the balance and surprise that come from some of these combinations—the violet and the blue, and the green and the yellow above, and the leaking at the edges of the green at the bottom. But the scaffolding is not anything like a Piet Mondrian, but it's there palpably enough that it forces you to respect it. It forces you to see this as a flat work that isn't that far away from the abstract expressionist pictures that he had made in Berkeley, in Urbana, and the wonderful things that he did in Albuquerque. He was in Santa Monica. He had gone down and taken a studio in which he had no daylight. So he was only drawing. Once he got, six months later, into a room with daylight, he started to paint. There were only a couple of pictures that came out figurative. He found himself making abstract paintings again. And of course, he called them *Ocean Park*. All that means is he was in a section of Santa Monica that was referred to by locals as Ocean Park. It had nothing to do with ocean or park or even his looking out at landscape. It was just the location. If you want to see blue sky, or if you want to see sand or whatever, why, you can. But he didn't put it in there; *you're* putting it in there.

Cándida Smith: You've referred to Mondrian multiple times this morning. I wonder if there is a narrative that you have that you convey to people about the story of American art that puts Mondrian in a particularly central place, maybe more so than the School of Paris.

06-00:07:27

Nordland:

Dick was very aware of Mondrian's position from the time that he went to the Gallatin Collection in Philadelphia, during his Marine

years. When he saw the great, masterful 1930s paintings at the Museum of Modern Art [NY], he knew there was something important there. But I think he got more from a Mondrian drawing than he did from a painting. He got more from the smudging and the correction and the overworking and the touching up. Because there're all kinds of overworkings and touching ups, there are all kinds of pentimenti that are hiding, lurking, that he enjoys that underpaint. He thought it was going to be final. But it wasn't final, he had to correct it. But he doesn't mind leaving the evidence of how the work evolved right there on the surface for you to see, to enjoy, to think about. And the pentimenti, he never plans them. They're always corrections; but he had the idea that if you overwork a thing, you can lose it. The idea that if he made it perfect, if he got rid of that pentimenti, that might be really the thing, that charm that keeps the balance of the tension across the whole surface of the canvas. He said he learned over and over again that by trying to correct too greatly, it ended up not being right at all, and then he had to go back in. Sometimes when he looked at the canvas, he didn't exactly know how to get back into it. Those had to be destroyed. He had to have a way to get back in that would let him be fresh. He felt that if he wasn't fresh, it wouldn't be honest and it wouldn't end up right anyway. But because he had so many years of being poor, he was very frugal about canvas. He could be very contemptuous and rip up a paper, but he tried to save a canvas. One of his ways of saving a canvas was not to overwork it, not to try to make it perfect; but when he got the idea, to leave it. Just leave it. And he got the idea and left it.

Samis: It feels like such a balance between structure and improvisation. I can imagine that getting it just right would lose that improvisation.

06-00:10:57

Nordland: You really have to stand back and look at that one. It was on the right side of the vault entrance, at the end of the great gallery. It just sang, like it does here.

Samis: Can you talk a little bit about his palette?

06-00:11:26

Nordland: Well, there was a fellow who wrote a book called *Sunshine Muse*. I can't think of his name right now.

Cándida Smith: Peter Plagens.

06-00:11:36

Nordland: Peter Plagens. He writes for a magazine now I think, like *Newsweek*. He said he thought *we*—he said pretentiously, about all artists—thought of Dick Diebenkorn as “Mr. Beige.” That is to say, he painted sand-colored pictures. Well, that's one of the things that I find

very hard to understand, because each picture has its own set of chromas. Each one has its own identity. They don't blur from one to another. I saw a very handsome picture, given by Phyllis Wattis to the de Young, yesterday. It's a very handsome *Ocean Park* picture given, I think, in 2000. It's in the family, structurally; but color-wise, it's an entirely different experience. That kind of search is what Dick was about. If he had thought that he had a palette that was recognizable, it would've changed. One of the things that I think gives you a little insight into that is that almost every year, up until the last few years, when he had to give up canvases, he did a black picture. Almost every year. You look at those abstract expressionism pictures; there's *always* a black picture. It's as if he cleared his palette. He got himself into something again, and he was going to start over. He was prideful of that, I think, that he didn't have a default palette. As colorful as Matisse is, there is such a range from canvas to canvas. One of the things that Matisse wrote that I think Dick adhered to was, "If I were doing it again, I don't think I ever would paint a picture again the way I did it. It isn't that I disapprove of that, it's that I'm working on something new now." And he said, again, "I've never been afraid of being influenced. But I think I triumph over the influence and make it my own." I think that Dick took sayings like that, writings like that, as the discipline that he had to live with himself. His standards were very high. I think it shows in the work. I'm not sure I answered that question at all.

Samis: Well, I was thinking in terms of palette, not of his whole universal palette across his whole work, but in the—You mentioned that there was a window, but there was no view of—My understanding is there were transom windows up at the top of his studio.

06-00:15:26

Nordland: Well, there were skylights, skylights built in, as there were skylights in the old Sam Francis building that he rented from Sam. But in the one that he built, the architect put them in the top, yeah. And you could always open doors and go out on a deck. But he was so busy painting that he never seemed to ever get out on the deck.

Samis: I think of the *Ocean Park* series, and even some of the *Crown Point* series, like the green or the blue surround and things like that—it just seemed like he was so enamored, and even sometimes inebriated, with blue and with shades of blue.

06-00:16:14

Nordland: Yeah, yeah. There was that fellow [Henri Matisse]. That was, too.

Samis: Like the *Notre Dame* painting from 1910.

06-00:16:22

Nordland:

Oh, yeah. Well, the *Notre Dame* blew Dick out. He saw it at UCLA when Fred Wight did the big Matisse show. He saw it, I think, like I saw it, as a Motherwell. Not as a Matisse. It was something else altogether. It *couldn't* have been done in 1914. It's not *possible*. Except H.M. signed it that way, you know? And then there was that hotel room window, which is about as austere as the Corbett. And they were both in that show. The family had held those back as being unexhibitable. The climate was right, they let them be seen, and they were electrifying. At the right moment. Poor Ed didn't get that, did he?

Samis:

Should we talk about the Raoul Hague [*Walnut Mink Hoillow, 1961*] now?

06-00:18:02

Nordland:

Well, Raoul Hague was born in Turkey, an Armenian American, who worked in the military in World War II. He was in the cavalry, and he took care of horses. They didn't use too many horses in the cavalry, and he didn't get into combat, but he did serve his time. He'd been a student. He came here when he was in his teens, to study at Iowa, the University of Iowa in Iowa City, and at the Art Institute of Chicago. He went to New York. He got in with a man named John Flanagan. John Flanagan was an exponent of direct carving. He worked on stone or wood. He saw in a piece what there was sleeping in there, a sculpture. And with the fewest number of strokes that he could manage, he would liberate that figure. That was the influence that Hague lived with. After the war, Hague came to Woodstock. Woodstock of the famous rock and roll event. But he came there not because of the fact that it was considered an art colony, that it had been so for a hundred years. He went there because there was wood. He got to know all the people that harvested the trees. He would say, "You know, there's a tree down there in the south forty that has just what I want. I'd like to have the middle part of it." They would pull down this tree, when they finally got around to doing it, and they would save him the part that he wanted. He would use that part to reveal perhaps a female torso, perhaps a fragment of a figure, in order to develop what he was interested in as a sculptor, working in direct carving. His works are always named after the source of the wood. It's a walnut, it's from Millbrook area, It's *Millbrook Walnut*, and then a date. [pause] No, it's not on rollers.

Cándida Smith:

Is the finish the same as it was when you acquired it?

06-00:20:45

Nordland:

It feels a little waxy. It feels not as fresh as I like to think he looked for. And it has some scars. But when it was acquired, it was the first

Hague to be acquired west of Chicago. He's in the great museums. He's in the Hirshhorn [Museum and Sculpture Garden], he's in the Met, he's in the Museum of Modern Art, he's in the Whitney, he's in the Albright-Knox, and Art Institute of Chicago and such. But very often, the works are not seen. Because somehow or other, wood sculpture is not fashionable. I think that he's one of the most fascinating and powerful sculptors of the post-war period. Oddly enough, another one that I place very highly is a steel sculptor, a fellow who works in—we have an example here—I imagine, aluminum, that involves paint. And it's very curvilinear. José de Rivera.

Samis: Maybe we could go back to the Hague for a minute. So this was the first of his sculptures west of Chicago. How did you select this piece? And how would you have presented it, let's say, to the board or the docents?

06-00:22:50

Nordland: I did a show at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art. I got to live with them for a good period of time. This was one that I felt was particularly successful, so I had it in my mind. I borrowed it from the Egan Gallery for an occasion, for a show, and then tried to keep it. And I was somehow successful.

Cándida Smith: And how did the trustees respond to this, the acquisitions committee?

06-00:23:30

Nordland: I think there was a lot of warmth for the piece at the time, that people seemed to feel that—Well, I think there's a response to wood that they wouldn't have for, say, stainless steel. There's a kind of a humane transfer that seems to work, where plastic wouldn't have it. You know?

Samis: He was one of the artist in Dorothy Miller's *Twelve Americans* show, I think.

06-00:24:13

Nordland: One of those shows. It might not have been "Twelve," it might have been "Fourteen." One of those. He was in such a show, right. As was Guston.

Samis: As were Jay DeFeo and Wally Hedrick. And Rauschenberg and Stella. They were all featured right around the same time. Actually. Guston was earlier, but I think that—

Cándida Smith: *Twelve Americans* was '51 or '52, as I remember.

- 06-00:24:41
Nordland: *Twelve Americans* was '51 or '52, yeah, I saw it. That's what Corbett was in.
- Samis: Oh, Corbett was in it, too.
- Cándida Smith: But not everybody Miller selected went on to fame. I wondered if she selected some of the people in order to contrast, as part of the story she wanted to tell, about what she really thought was the most important work.
- 06-00:25:03
Nordland: Well, I was going east in '51. I drove through Albuquerque to visit Dick, and bought three little pictures, and I told him, "Save that painting for me. If I ever get to Yale, I'll sell the car and buy this." My first day in New York City, I saw the *Twelve Americans*. Corbett was in it, Pollock was in it, Reinhardt was in it, Rothko was in it, Still was in it. The only person that wasn't known was Corbett. I raced down to the front desk and said, "How much are the Corbetts?" They said, "They're not for sale." The next Saturday I was in. I said, "How much are the Corbetts?" And they said, "They're all sold." [laughs]
- Samis: Got to reserve those for the "important collectors."
- 06-00:26:10
Nordland: Well, I think probably, they just didn't have a list, you know?
- Samis: But at that time, in those shows, those Dorothy Miller shows, the museum was actually making them available for sale?
- 06-00:26:23
Nordland: And taking 10 percent.
- Samis: Amazing. And did SFMOMA do that at all?
- 06-00:26:28
Nordland: Sure.
- Samis: In your time, was it still doing it?
- 06-00:26:30
Nordland: Sure.
- Samis: Well, what would they have done? Would they have gone to the desk, if they wanted to inquire?
- 06-00:26:36
Nordland: Probably gone to a curator and said, "What'll I do?" And we'd say, "Well, we got these from Betty Parsons," or "We got these from Sidney Janis. The price is on it. We could help you."

Samis: But someone who has access to a curator is already someone who's in the museum family, as opposed to you coming into New York your first day and going to MoMA's desk and saying, "I want to buy this," right?

06-00:27:08

Nordland: Well, I just figured that there would be a price list, you know? Because he wasn't known, he didn't have a gallery. But he got Grace Borgenicht out of it, and she did very well for him.

Cándida Smith: So we have the Motherwell ready. Which, as you said, is a unique Motherwell. I think that was the adjective you used.

06-00:27:42

Nordland: This is called *Wall Painting #10*, 1964. It is a work that has aspects of the famous *Spanish Elegy* series, but it's independent of it and doesn't carry that title. It has this emphasis on ochre that the *Elegies* do not ordinarily partake of. I associate it more with the painting called *The Voyage*, which I think is about 1951, that's owned by the Museum of Modern Art, which is, again, among the first of the wall paintings. He thought of them as being large. This is the same dimension as that painting. This was used in a show that we did here of Bob's work. We acquired over the years, from him, twenty-four *Lyric Suite* sheets, which we did a little show of, too [1971]. This was quite a star. Again, we were able to buy it as a gift of the trustees, in honor of Mrs. Crocker Russell. It was, at the time, considered a pretty sizeable price; but now prints sell for about as much as we were able to acquire this work for at the time. It has a capacity to stand by itself and symbolize the artist's life work. It really is a summary picture. There's a certain suggestion of overpaint and pentimenti here, too, but it's not the kind of thing you saw in the Diebenkorn. It's not easy, it's not kind of something that he likes to do. He likes to do a thing spontaneously and leave it. He doesn't like to correct, he doesn't like to mess with it or touch it up. He's got a kind of diffidence about handling. He doesn't have the professional poise that Dick had about his paint handling, or that a guy like Philip Guston will have. He was an automatist. His attitude was I will do it richly and boldly once, and leave it. And I will accept it that way, because it's my belief that that will be a more eloquent and true statement of what I'm about than I could possibly do by finesse. [pause] But he's trying very much to get away from what he might consider to be a cliché of the period that we think of as the *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*. I think that the wall paintings are that kind of an effort. Maybe that was his way of cleaning the palette, like Dick's black paintings were. Incidentally, they were good friends.

Cándida Smith: You mentioned in the interview in Chicago that you would have liked to have gotten one of the *Elegies*, but it just wasn't feasible with the budget that you had.

06-00:31:55

Nordland: Right. True.

Cándida Smith: Were there particular *Elegies* that were available?

06-00:32:00

Nordland: Well, I think the Hemphill picture, if I hadn't heard about its questionable chemistry, would have certainly been one that would've been very satisfying.

Samis: Maybe we could talk one more minute about this, and then go over to that one and talk about how you this as a response to kind of getting out of the straightjacket or the cliché of the *Elegies*. And then we can go look at the *Elegy* after that.

06-00:32:29

Nordland: Well, I think that the ocher is an effort to get back to the *Voyage*, get back to that early masterpiece, and so say something about—But he didn't want to echo it. He echoes it in the color, but not in the form. He doesn't play with anything in the horizontal. He's only working with the vertical. Then he plays with the textures, he plays with the openness within the ocher. There's charcoal here too, you know, in addition to paint. So it's probably been—it was fixed right at the time, because he was very—He was one of those people who was chronic about everything had to be just right—until all of a sudden, he would violate all the rules and do it all wrong. On the backs of some of his pictures, you'll see a seal that says, "This is done with," this, that, and the other thing, and he's very careful. Then all of a sudden, he stops. He was very impulsive, very involved with automatism. If he thought it was OK, then he broke the rule. But then he would have kind of a conscience fit, and go back to being very careful about his adhesives and his glues and all the things that he worked with, and be sure that he did the paints in the right order, and there was no acrylic underneath.

Samis: Could you talk a little bit about these kind of floating or dangling figures?

06-00:34:15

Nordland: Well, I think those are new inventions. I don't think you will find those unusual images in other works. They are not peeking through to the back, they're not going to another plane, they're on top. But I think he was searching for another way to detract our attention, not like the white panel in the *Voyage* that moves across, or the vertical that

contradicts it. He's trying to find another way to give it the variety and give it the visual interest that he felt it had to have to survive.

Samis: And they give it almost a sense of movement from right to left, as opposed to left to right.

06-00:35:16

Nordland: They do, they go right to left.

Samis: And also depth. It almost feels like, to me, when I look at it—and I'm sorry to get in the frame here—but it almost feels like a mobile, because this stripe that he's separated out, bifurcated and allowed to remain outside the field, feels almost like this is—

06-00:35:36

Nordland: Hanging from it.

Samis: Without being too figurative, it has a figurative reference, because of its verticality and its outstretched arms at the same time. It almost feels like the same thing then, just rotated a quarter turn over here. So there's a sense—Or it could even be a running figure, seen from behind, almost, like this. With one leg up, hidden by the other. There's this feeling of motion coming from here and moving almost back into depth there, when I look at it now. I haven't thought about this before, but I'm just looking at it.

06-00:36:14

Nordland: And you notice he balanced that?

Samis: And the figure on the right is clearly in the front.

06-00:36:28

Nordland: Sure. He wants it to be. He wouldn't leave that white halo if he didn't want that. This is a little bit of a surprise. But maybe like Dick, he felt that if he neated it up—He certainly didn't want to put white paint on top. So then he would have to make that black a bigger area. And he didn't want to do that.

Samis: So there's this flatness, but at the same time, there's not, because there's the sense of something moving into it. Because this, for me, is on top.

06-00:37:11

Nordland: Yes, but it's on top like the wine label is on top of the bottle. It's there, but it's just barely ahead of it.

Cándida Smith: You acquired this in the late sixties?

06-00:37:38

Nordland: '69, I think it was. Maybe '68. '68, '69, somewhere in there.

Cándida Smith: Perhaps you could help reconstruct how people would have viewed this painting in '69. Was this an austere painting, as opposed to the things that Diebenkorn or Oliveira were doing? Was it viewed as luscious?

06-00:38:07

Nordland: Well, there had been, I think in '67, a major solo at the Museum of Modern Art. He was riding a wave of acceptance. This was sufficiently unusual *and* representative that, again, I think it felt to the audience here that it was an important thing to acquire. As I've said, while it was a substantial sum, it was not a million dollars. And again, it was in honor of the founder of the Women's Board, a long time trustee, and a person who had supported the institution for a long time. And with his vogueish position in contemporary art, why it ended up being approved without difficulty.

Cándida Smith: I was interested in what kind of emotional registers the painting would have. Would it be viewed as classicist?

06-00:39:31

Nordland: Yes, I think it would be. Yes, I think it would be considered a rather strong, clean, pure modern painting. While he would've thought of it as being much more emotional than the audience received it as, at that time.

[interruption]

Cándida Smith: So here we have a *Spanish Elegy [Elegy to the Spanish Republic, No. 57, 1957-1960]*, which you can see the unfortunate effects of time on it. To me, this fits more with the classic image of Motherwell. But what are the similarities between the two paintings and what are the differences?

06-00:41:39

Nordland: Well, there's the obvious verticality of black elements, the squeezing of other elements within the parameters of the verticals. In this case, of course, there is no ochre, there is no kind of rhyming balance of black against ochre against black against ochre, with some white. Quite a different combination. I remember the first show he had at the Samuel Kootz Gallery of these *Spanish Elegies*. I bought one, a small one, for myself. About two feet. He thought he was talking about the agony of a democracy succumbing to a fascist regime. He thought he was talking about the social issues of the time. He was seeing repression,

he was seeing thought control. He was sensing that the ideals of modern man were being challenged by forces that seemed to be uncontrollable. I think that's what the *Spanish Elegies* were about. There were people that found that offensive; that somehow or other, abstraction was not a proper tool.

Cándida Smith: Well, wasn't one of the things that Frank Stella was doing in his paintings that were in '59, the *Sixteen Americans* show, was basically saying all that is B.S.; that "what you see is what you see."

06-00:43:54

Nordland: It was a design that if it were two-inch divisions, why, he'd go those two inches all the way across, and repeat them. If it was an X or if it was—Well, whatever the configuration was, it would be unrelieved all the way across. We acquired a silver Stella—

Samis: *Adelante* [1964].

06-00:44:28

Nordland: *Adelante*, that was a pretty good example of that. I think the black ones are considered more desirable, but the silver one is a representative one within the, like, two years of the ideal period of that original show.

Cándida Smith: Most of the stuff that you've walked through today, most of it is representative of sort of very classic works of the period of, say, '50 to '75. And the older works are, in a sense, important antecedents to that classicism.

06-00:45:10

Nordland: That help people to establish their standards.

Cándida Smith: I wonder if you could help—How has the way you've looked at paintings, these paintings, how has it changed in the last forty years, after Andy Warhol, Bruce Nauman, Sherrie Levine—? The drift in American art, in a sense, against painting.

06-00:45:43

Nordland: Well, after a truly great period, there's always a let down. In some ways, there's almost been a collapse. The quality and the idealism that was a part of that heroic moment in American art has devolved to commercialism. It's devolved to a level of irony, of vulgarity, commercialism, which I find reprehensible.

Cándida Smith: In 1967, was this a more difficult painting for people to look at, to understand?

06-00:46:41

Nordland: Well, remember that he painted 154 of these. One of the difficulties of that is that to continue your rush of sincerity is very challenging. There

are obviously more successful and less successful examples as you go through. My memory of this picture, without the blemishes that it now suffers from, was better than I feel today about the work. I remember this picture in half a dozen shows. It was a well-traveled, much seen painting while in Mr. Hemphill's custody. What are its plans for repair?

Sterrett: Well, let me speak to this because it's interesting. You talked about a kind of honesty and sort of strength to this technique. But in fact, there's a lot of change going on here.

06-00:47:55

Nordland: Yes, there is. There is. But I wonder how much of that is chemistry?

Sterrett: Well, he used incompatible paint.

06-00:48:03

Nordland: That's what I mean.

Sterrett: These are the incompatible paints. It's a house paint, essentially, used with oil.

06-00:48:17

Nordland Interesting. De Kooning, in the period when he did his first black and white paintings, was so poor that he couldn't afford to use tube paint, so he was using sapolin, a paint that he had become aware of when he was a student in Europe. As a house painter in America, he tried to use good paints, too. He found himself coming to the point of having a can of black and a can of white. If he needed a little red, then he would go to the store and get himself a tube. *A* tube, not six or eight tubes or twenty-four tubes, or like Arshile Gorky had a whole cabinet full of them. He was *really* poor. The thirties were different. Anyway, Bob was not a trained painter. He really taught himself. He had lessons and skill training in etching and lithography, but he just went by the seat of his pants on canvas and with paint. And as I said, he would, at one point, be very, very careful about—and the next point, he would throw it out the window in favor of some experiment that might or might not turn out. Sometimes he had these seals, as I say, on the back of his pictures that showed everything that you'd want to know and more, or anything a conservator would want to know. He was an unpredictable, impulsive artist.

Cándida Smith: You just said that this particular painting perhaps doesn't hold up as well for you.

06-00:50:27

Nordland: Well, maybe the—

Cándida Smith: Aside from the chemistry.

06-00:50:33

Nordland: Somehow—[pause] I guess I don't remember it perfectly. But I do remember that I had great enthusiasm for this picture on several of its exhibitions in earlier years, yeah.

Cándida Smith: Were there other paintings that you've shown us today that, looking at them today, seem even stronger than they did, more important, more successful than they did when you acquired them?

06-00:51:05

Nordland: Well, both of the Gustons are ravishing, I think. I'm still quite thrilled with the Motherwell. The Corbett looks grand, and I understand it's been repaired. I think the Oliveira looks good.

Cándida Smith: But these now look to you even more—

06-00:51:31

Nordland: I wish the Mondrian had more completeness. But it is what it is, and I think it's a treasure. No, I think they hold up, the ones I've chosen. You understand, I made a list of about a hundred, and I winnowed it down to nine. I had a Sam Francis in there that you couldn't show me. The one Mrs. Henderson owns, the pink.

Cándida Smith: Part of what I'd like you to help us do is see how these paintings looked to you. Do they feel differently today than they did in 1967?

06-00:52:22

Nordland: Well, this is the only one that doesn't have the same kind of impact that I felt it used to have on me, or that I recall. No, this is—I think that's as good as they come.

Cándida Smith: I wonder, to what degree would the Motherwell there have been a more difficult painting for viewers when you acquired it than it is now? A painting that might emotionally confront people with things that they have a hard time putting together. So it might feel more like one of the anti-art pieces that get shown in a museum today. Not because it's anti-art, but because it, at that moment, was pushing people in terms of what they thought a modern painting was supposed to do.

06-00:53:31

Nordland: You've asked me a question I can't answer.

Samis: I've got another question. It's really about the nature of abstraction and its ability to convey the kinds of ideas that Motherwell said these paintings were about in this project. We know there's a story about these paintings, the *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*. Many people

come in and don't know that, and don't know how they come together. They see the paintings as the masses of black on white, abstract works that they are. What's your take on that?

06-00:54:29

Nordland: Well, don't you put a little legend beside each work? Main title, date, measurements, and materials, and a little passage?

Cándida Smith: But even still, the students I teach today, many of them have never heard of the Spanish Civil War. I can explain it to them when we get to that part of the class and we're dealing with the 1930s and the importance of the Spanish Civil War at that time, but even after I've explained it to them, it still doesn't mean anything to them particularly. It doesn't have a resonance. It's not the story of democracy lost; or the utopian aspirations of the thirties betrayed; or a generation that was willing to sacrifice itself for freedom, revolution, whatever the buzz word. You can't convey that experience of having been alive in the post-World War II period.

06-00:55:42

Nordland: In one short paragraph.

Cándida Smith: But shouldn't we be able to appreciate this painting without knowing its story?

06-00:56:03

Nordland: I think people often do, just because of balance, just because of tension, just because of the austerity of the command of the whole. But not every work is successful that way.

[material deleted]

[End of Interview]

Lisa Rubens is an historian with the Regional Oral History Office. She directs projects on California Culture and the Arts, Architecture and Land Use development, University History and the History of Social Movements.

Dr. Rubens earned her Ph.D in History, as well as a Masters in City Planning, at UC Berkeley. She has published monographs on women in California and on international exhibitions and is currently completing a book on San Francisco's 1939 Worlds Fair. Dr. Rubens created and directs ROHO's Advanced Oral History Summer Institute.

Richard Cándida Smith is professor of history at the University of California, Berkeley, where he has directed the Regional Oral History Office since 2001. He is the author of *Utopia And Dissent: Art, Poetry, And Politics In California*; *Mallarme's Children: Symbolism And The Renewal of Experience*; and *Claiming Modern Culture: Artists And Their Publics In California*. He is the editor of *Art And The Performance Of Memory: Sounds And Gestures Of Recollection*; and *Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Feminist As Thinker: A Reader In Documents And Essays*.

Peter Samis is Co-Acting Director of Education of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Jill Sterrett is the Director of Collections and Conservation of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.